The Canopy of Time

Brian W. Aldiss

THE CANOPY OF TIME

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The Canopy of Time

Brian W. Aldiss

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For Tony and Am Priet with love

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Author's note

If these stories are read in the order they are published here, an observant reader may notice certain links be-tween them. They are in fact all slices off the enormous carcass of the future, arranged chronologically from a date a century or two ahead right up to the end of the galaxy.

The short notes between stories are intended as tenuous connecting links, which may be ignored. Each story was written to stand by itself and has been revised since its original publication in magazines or anthologies. Acknowledgements and my thanks are due to the editors of Authentic for "Visiting Amoeba" (previously "What Triumphs"); Infinity for "Who Can Replace a Man?"; Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction for "Secret of a Mighty City" (previously "Have your Hatreds Ready"); Nebula for "Gene Hive" (previously "Journey to the Interior") and "They Shall Inherit"; New Worlds for "O Ishrail!", "Incentive" and "Three's a Cloud" (previously "Unbeaten Track"); Pick of Today's Short Stories 9 and Nebula for "All the World's Tears"; Science Fantasy for "Blighted Profile"; and Star Science Fiction and Science Fantasy for "Judas Danced".

Three's a Cloud

Just by accident, Clemperer had shaved when he got up at noon. Consequently, he was looking not too much the tramp when he drifted into his destiny at Karpenkario's, the Greek place on the waterfront, at nine in the evening.

Clemperer knew nobody at Karpenkario's place. That was its attraction for him. He was alone in the world and he knew it. He hated the bars full of false friend-ship, where acquaintances who had seen him only half a dozen times before in their lives, slapped his back and cried, "Come on, old pal, haven't seen you in a long time; how about a drink?" Equally, Clemperer hated loneliness. But at least loneliness was clean and honour-able.

He bought a double whisky at the bar. He had already downed four elsewhere. Instead of drinking where the other people were drinking, he carried the glass with him, pushing through the crowd, which consisted mainly of sailors, and made for the quiet restaurant behind. The air was clearer here, reminding

Clemperer of his stale old wisecrack about his not being able to see unless the atmosphere was full of cigarette smoke.

Only one of the restaurant tables was occupied. A man and woman, strangers to Clemperer, sat at it.

That was the beginning of everything. Clemperer did what he never did: he went and sat down with the man and the woman, instead of choosing an empty table.

"You might like a look at the menu," the man said, handing him over a typed sheet smilingly, "Fortunately the food here is better than the typing."

It did not hit Clemperer all at once, because he was partially drunk, but the sensation he felt was as if he had arrived home. That was odd: Clemperer had no home. Four years earlier, on his fortieth birthday, he had flung up the bachelor flat he had hitherto called home, and the Motivation Research job which paid for it, and had gone out into the world, wandering from town to town in search of what he privately called his destiny.

He raised the whisky, paused, lowered it again, setting the glass with ponderous care on to the table.

"Your coffee sounds good," he told the girl. "I must have a cup. It'll help to clear my head."

He had meant to say "smells good", not "sounds good". It was the sort of slight verbal slip he often caught himself making, much to his annoyance. In this case, it rudely implied that the girl was drinking noisily; yet by her smile she appeared to have grasped his real meaning. How seldom you found anyone like that, Clemperer reflected.

He ordered a big jug of coffee, offering the others a cup, which they both accepted.

Meanwhile, he looked them over carefully. There was nothing extraordinary about them. They looked faintly unhappy. One sat one side of the table, one the other, and their hands met on the polished oak. The man was about Clemperer's age, but better preserved, obviously more prosperous. He looked as if he might still have a hope. Behind his spectacles, his grey eyes held a wealth of friendliness.

The girl was more striking. She was not pretty, but neat enough to be very attractive. At a guess she was twenty-one. Her dark hair was short, without curl, while in her long, squaw face was set a pair of the darkest, saddest eyes Clemperer had ever encountered. In her was some unguessable grief, as thick as fog—yet now she was happy.

At some time, then or later, he found their names were Spring and Alice.

It occurred to him that he might offer some sort of apology for sitting down at their table without invitation, little as that apology seemed needed. When he spoke, his diffident tongue again betrayed him.

"I didn't mean to intrude," he said, "I know very well that three's a cloud."

They took it as a trouvaille.

"There you have it," Alice said, peering at him through the wigwam of her vision. "What's more homo-geneous than a cloud?"

"Off a cloud of unknowing," Spring said, "floating along in a mystery."

"I really meant to say 'cloud'," Clemperer admitted, making his slip again. Then he gave up. Perhaps the dark side of his mind knew best; perhaps he really had intended to say "cloud".

From the Greek waiter, he ordered a dish of Arab Kuftides, with spaghetti and chile sauce. It was not the kind of thing Clemperer usually did; he rarely ate after midday—it was just throwing good food away on a bad ulcer. His current theory was to try and drown the damned thing in alcohol.

That reminded him about the untouched whisky; he called the waiter and got it taken away.

"I'm sorry if I smell of whisky," he said. "Once you start drinking whisky you smell of it all through. I'll sober up soon."

"There's no hurry," Spring said.

Spring did not speak much. He did not eat much, though occasionally he stirred the dish before him with his fork. Alice was stubbing out her cigarette ends in the mashed potato on her plate. Now and again she mopped her forehead with a tissue from the carton of Kleenex beside her. Both of them seemed to be ... waiting.

"They're odd people", Clemperer thought, feeling once more that warm sensation of being home. He had been aware of his own oddity for too long.

"Drinking's only a way of trying to get under the normal hard surface of loving," he said apologetically. He had intended to say "living", not "loving", but again he sensed they both understood what he meant. "Some people only know that way of doing it. What I mean is, you can go right through life without really becoming intimate with another person, without really touching their identity with your identity—true identity. When you're stewed in drink, you at least swamp yourself in your own identity, and then you don't need anyone else so much."

And he thought in startlement, "Why the hell am I talking this sort of stuff? I've never talked like this to anyone, never mind to complete" But he could not bring himself to think the word "strangers". Whatever they were, they weren't strangers, not now he had once met them.

"When you're drunk or when you're dead you don't need anyone so much," Alice said, seeming to do half the talking with her eyes. "But otherwise, the trouble is we none of us have a true identity until we have some-one to share it with—someone capable of sharing it."

"If people would only consciously realize it," Spring said, "that's all anyone spends their life doing: looking for the right person to reveal their identity to."

"It's a hard search always," the girl went on, looking at Spring. "The compensation is that when you find that kind of person, you know. Nobody need say a thing. It just feels right."

"I'm really intruding on you true," Clemperer pro-tested, not that he felt that way at all inside. His tongue had turned "two" into "true".

"You know you're not," Spring and Alice replied to-gether. "Can't you trust your instinctive responses?"

"I'm forty-four," Clemperer said, smiling wearily; "I've grown out of the habit."

To his mild horror, he began telling them the whole story of his life. It was an ordinary enough tale, at least until the revolutionary moment four years ago, when he had entirely broken with his old way of life: a tale of continuous inner discontent. Clemperer could not stop it; it all came bubbling out, and the grey eyes and the great black ones listened carefully to every word.

At last he finished. The uneaten remnants of his meal had grown cold; Alice's glass was crammed full of tissues. Clemperer made a gesture of self-deprecation.

"I don't know why I tell you all this," he murmured.

"Because now you tell us," Alice said, "you see it all in a different light. You can grasp now that your life did not happen the way you thought it did at the time."

"You're right!" Clemperer exclaimed "All my past has been heading towards this moment, this moment of revelation . . . this puts a meaning to it. . . ."

For so much else he wished to say, he could uncover no words. He saw them all as icebergs floating on a great sea; the sea was . . . being, having, knowing; and under all his new happiness ran a river connecting him with them. A vast restlessness overcame him. He wanted to run, sing, wave his arms. Here at last was a moment for which to celebrate and be alive in every cell.

"Let's go outside," Spring suggested. "Every so often I have to air my sinuses."

"That's what I was going to say," Clemperer ex-claimed.

"Of course," Spring said, laughing. "It's nice to have someone to do these little things for you, eh?"

They pushed their way out into the night. A bluff summer wind blew along the sea front. The clustered dinghies rocked contentedly by the jetty. All along the harbour wall, the sea cast up its spray at the feet of the white lamp standards.

Clemperer seemed to experience neither the night nor the gale, Alice had linked herself between the two men like a catalyst, her young squaw face mysterious in shadow. She was frightening—because she was eating her heart out, and Clemperer was now part of that heart.

"I've got it" he exclaimed suddenly. "It's a gestalt! We're a gestalt! You know what I mean—the whole we represent is something greater than the sum of our parts. We've combined, and something has happened beyond us."

They looked at him curiously. For the first time, he had surprised them, filling their countenances with wonder. All three were conscious of saying many things in silence,

"We—Alice and I— thought we were complete until you arrived," Spring said gravely. "Directly you turned up, -we realized that was not so. You are a vital part of whatever it is. You'd better try and explain your con-tribution."

He was so happy! He was not just the junior part-ner they were allowing to accompany them. They were equals: his share was one third.

"Let me tell you this first of all," he began, "although you being you, it may not need saying. Usually—in

fact, up till this very evening—I was never the sort of person you are now seeing. A lot of people are different in the company of different people, but now I'm really different. Usually, I hate people—if a man or woman becomes my friend, they do it the hard way, the barriers have to go down one by one, and there are lots of barriers. You two by-passed all of them, somehow. And another thing, at this time of night, the acute pain-joy of living flares up in me. . . ."

"We're all Night People here," Alice interposed gently.

"... and so I generally arrange to be well stewed by now, to keep the voices out. Usually I have an odd impediment in my speech, sort of a Freudian slip, which has now completely left me, as if my old brain cogs have got their teeth back in. I have stopped saying the wrong words—I've found locks I want my keys to fit. Then, for another thing, I heartily distrust mysticism, emotion or any such clack as I—we—are now talking. It's sud-denly no longer clack; it's the one real thing I've ever known, to be walking here with you."

"Of course you're surprised," Spring said. "It is sur-prising. It's staggering! When it first happened to Alice and me, we thought it was just love. (Why that 'just'?) Now you come along and prove it's something more again."

". . . as we had begun to suspect," Alice concluded. It was dreamlike the way they each supplemented the other's meaning. "Tell us about the gestalt. Expand and expound!"

"I've never been content because I've only just stumbled on you," Clemperer said. "Maybe all discon-tented persons in the world are just waiting for their Stumbling Time. ... I can feel—I can feel that we three are a big thing, bigger than three people; we are in some way aloof from time and space. As you said, this meeting has had the power to alter my past; probably it can alter our future, too. This thing has never been described. It's not telepathy, for instance, although feeling alike we shall obviously think along similar lines. It's not a menage a trois or what's usually implied by the term, although basic sexuality may provide some of the binding force. If it has been found before, the finders have kept quiet about it. We are treading what is vir-tually a new trail, an unbeaten track. We can't know where it leads ... until we arrive."

He went on talking, elucidating for the benefit of all, carried away by his vision. As they strolled along the windy front, the lights overhead seemed to float by like suns, each casting its starlight slowly on their faces.

At last Clemperer broke off.

"It's very late," he said, suddenly apologetic again. "You know it's amazing how I seem to know all the im-portant things about the two of you, but none of the trivial ones which everyone sets such store by. Don't you want to get home or something now?"

"We be but poor holiday-makers, sire," Spring said, with an odd mock-lightness. "Our homes are far apart."

He pointed over the dark sea, where a yacht lay at anchor, its lights rocking gently with the swell.

"See the yacht? Our berths are there. Alice and I only met because a mutual friend—the owner of the yacht— invited us for a cruise round the coast with several other people. I think we will stay ashore tonight; we can board first thing in the morning; they won't worry about us ... and someone there will look after my wife."

Those last few quietly spoken words told Clemperer everything he needed to know about the pool of sorrow in Alice's eyes; the subject was not referred to again between them.

"Karpenkario's stays open all night," Clemperer said simply.

They walked back in silence, a weird, loud silence which felt more important than all the talk. Occasion-ally, Alice would use a tissue on her forehead; letting it go, she would watch it sail bravely away on the increas-ing wind—along, round and up, right over the rooftops of the poor houses which faced the sea.

At Karpenkario's, they managed to get a small back room. It contained a card table, chairs, and litter on the floor; but it was better than going back to Clemperer's room. He had deliberately not suggested that. A vision of its unmade bed, the empty whisky bottles peering blindly from the ever-open wardrobe, the clothes on the floor, a pat of butter festering on the wash-basin, rose before him, provoking only a sad smile from him. All that belonged to the aimless past. He could no more have taken Alice and Spring there than a snake could resume its sloughed skin.

They ordered coffee and began to talk again. Endless talk, the river running swift and sure beneath it.

The gestalt became more intense as the night wore on, till it seemed to envelop them like a collapsed tent, almost smothering them. Outside, the wind howled and banged down a side passage, sounding dustbins and charging loose doors, lamenting over rooftops. It grew to symbolize for them the new power lurking just beyond their conscious thresholds, until it seemed that within themselves there might be a force which could whip away their self-control like straw—for ever.

They became slightly afraid. But chiefly they were afraid because they no longer knew what they repre-sented, and their old, safe selves had been lost eternally on the midnight tide.

"This gestalt," Alice said, at one point in time, "what do you think we can do with it?"

"Or what is it able to do with us?" added Spring.

"Is it a force of good or evil?" asked Clemperer.

"I think it is beyond good or evil," the girl said, peer-ing down squaw-faced into the depths of some un-imaginable well. "Whatever it may be, it is beyond all the laws and rules. What's usually called . . . super-natural. . . ."

Now it was as if they were frozen together. Tired, cold, vitiated, they sprawled closely across the table, moving no more than the patient alligator which awaits its prey. They looked like bundles of old clothes.

"There's something we—it—can do," Clemperer said. "I can feel it, but I can't define it."

"It's only function is to bind us always," Spring said, almost sharply, "to hold us together wherever we are, whatever happens. And what could be more valuable?"

"We are Night People," the girl murmured, "At least we can always suffer together."

Then they spoke no more, and the wind howled with-out stirring them, scream, scream, screaming beyond the brick beyond the room beyond their unity. Clemperer was asleep but not asleep: in his mind's

corner, he heard their last words repeated over and over—those words which would later prove so very laden with meaning: "We can always suffer together .... Its function is to bind us always. . . . Wherever we are, whatever happens ... it will hold us together . . . always."

Each of them faded into a portion of the same trance, as dawn malingered in like moonlight.

She stood on the quayside with Spring, smudging one last tissue over her complexion. They had to get back to the yacht; the owner expected them—he was going to sail round Jedder Island today, whatever the weather. They would be back in port by nightfall; they would meet again then. Behind them, a ferryman waited to pilot them back over the rocking waters to the yacht.

In the tension of the moment, Clemperer found him-self using conventional phrases of farewell. It did not matter. Whatever he or they did would never matter; each would always understand; their faith was limitless; the last barriers had gone with the night.

He touched both their cheeks with his, the greasy ones, the grey, stubbly ones. Contact with them almost choked him. He loved them infinitely. They were gentle people, understanding, accepting, entirely open to the wounds of the world.

They went off in the boat. The bully morning air blus-tered about Alice's dark head. There was a lack of bitter-ness in parting; it was not a real parting. Yet Clemperer felt defeated. He had said, "We are in some way aloof from time and space," and now it seemed obviously untrue. To know nothing—that was existence. Clem-perer turned away, heading wearily back to his room.

He slept.

At five in the afternoon, he woke screaming. A pane of glass in his window had shattered. He sat up on his frowsty bed, unable to orientate himself. At first he believed himself drowning. The waters had been pour-ing over him, lashing his face. His lungs had been clotted with spray.

Clemperer rose dazedly, staggering off the bed.

The wind had smashed his window. Dying at day-break, the gale had now goaded itself into a full-size storm, cannonading in from the sea over the supine town.

Something else was also wrong, something he felt inside. Clemperer was fully dressed, even to his overcoat. Taking a brief gulp of water from the tap, washing it round his tired mouth, he hurried from the house. It was strange not to wake in a whisky haze, strange to wake to a purpose. Spring and Alice were in trouble, danger had them.

Hurrying down the narrow sloping streets, he arrived at the harbour. Directly he saw the people lining the sea wall, he knew; indeed, he had known before. Every-one stared out to sea, most silent, some shouting and pointing. As he ran past them, Clemperer caught salty crumbs of talk: a, yacht was in difficulties, the lifeboat was out, the Jedder Current made a rescue awkward.

He ran up the long hill to the highest point of the cliffs, running as he had not run for years, running like one possessed.

From the top, Jedder Island was a dark smudge on the skyline. The black clouds were busy erasing it with their spurting bellies. Even as he looked, the rain rushed in across the sea, dashing for the coast, pat-terning the breakers, striking him in the face with a handful of drops as hard as pebbles. In a moment,

he was drenched through his coat.

But in that last clear glimpse over the waters, Clem-perer had seen the yacht—seen it heel over and slide beneath the churning surface. The lifeboat was nowhere near it, cut off by an angry race of green foam that marked the Jedder Current. For anyone aboard the yacht, there could have been no hope of life; it had gone down in an instant.

"Clemperer!" In his ears he heard their ringing cry as the craft went under, bearing them with it.

Now he was dead inside, neatly novocained of all sen-sation. The storm bellowed in his face, hissed in his ears, but inside him was only silence as wearily he made his way downhill again, slipping and bumping down regardlessly. He walked in a dream, shouldering a passage through the sombre crowd still waiting by the harbour. Hardly conscious of the direction he took, Clemperer crossed the road and padded wetly into Karpenkario's.

Alice and Spring were sitting waiting for him at their old table. They were wetter than he was, but they were smiling.

Over the centuries many wars were waged. They sent a fraction of mankind out into the universe seeking escape. On earth, one particular conflict decimated man and rendered almost all his land barren; but as always the cruellest conflict was between the individual and his environment

All the World's Tears

It was the last day of summer in the last year of the eighty-third century a.d.

Humming to itself high in the stratosphere, a vane carried J. Smithlao, psychodynamician, over the 139thsector of Ing Land. It began to dive. It sank down, finally levelling out to hover over Charles Gunpat's estate, selecting its course without attention from Smithlao.

For Smithlao this was a routine errand. He had come, as Gunpat's psychodynamician, to administer a hate-brace to the old man. His dark face was bored as he stared at the replica of outside on his telescreens. Oddly enough, as he did so he caught a glimpse of a man approaching Gunpat's estate on foot.

"Must be a wild man," he muttered to himself.

Under the slowing vane, the landscape was as neat as a blueprint. The impoverished fields made impeccable rectangles. Here and there, one robot machine or another kept nature to its own functional image: not a pea podded without cybernetic supervision; not a bee bumbled among stamens without radar check being kept of its course. Every bird had a number and a call sign, while among every tribe of ants marched the metallic teller ants, telltaling the secrets of the nest back to base. When rain fell, it had its allocated dropping place. The old, comfortable world of random factors had vanished under the pressure of hunger.

Nothing living lived without control. The countless populations of previous centuries had exhausted the soil. Only the severest parsimony, coupled with ruthless regimentation, produced enough nourishment for the present sparse population. The billions had died of star-vation; the hundreds who remained lived on starvation's brink.

In the sterile neatness of the landscape, Gunpat's estate looked like an insult. Covering five acres, it was a little island of wilderness. Tall and unkempt elms fenced the perimeter, encroaching on the lawns and house. The house itself, the chief one in Sector 139, was built of massive stone blocks. It had to be strong to bear the weight of the servo-mechanisms which, apart from Gunpat and his mad daughter Ployploy, were its only occupants.

It was as Smithlao dropped below tree-level that he saw the human figure plodding towards the estate. For a multitude of reasons, this was a very unlikely sight. The great material wealth of the world being now shared among comparatively few people, nobody was poor enough to have to walk anywhere. Man's increasing hatred of Nature, spurred by the notion it had betrayed him, would make such a walk purgatory—unless the man was insane, like Ployploy.

Dismissing the figure from his thoughts, Smithlao dropped the vane to a stretch of stone in front of the building. He was glad to get down: it was a gusty day, and the piled cumulus through which he had descended had been full of turbulence. Gunpat's house, with its sightless windows, its towers, its endless terraces, its unnecessary ornamentation, its massive porch, lowered at him like a forsaken wedding cake.

His arrival stimulated immediate activity. Three-wheeled robots approached the vane from different directions, swivelling light atomic weapons at it as they drew near.

Nobody, Smithlao thought, could get In here unin-vited. Gunpat was not a friendly man, even by the unfriendly standards of his time; the disgrace of having a daughter like Ployploy had served to accentuate the moroser side of his melancholy temperament.

"Say who you are," demanded the leading machine* It was ugly and flat, vaguely resembling a toad.

"I am J. Smithlao, psychodynamician to Charles Gun-pat," Smithlao replied; he had to go through this procedure every visit. As he spoke, he revealed his face to the machine. It grunted to itself, checking picture and information with its memory. Finally it said, "You are J. Smithlao, psychodynamician to Charles Gunpat. What do you want?"

Cursing its monstrous slowness, Smithlao told the robot, "I have an appointment with Charles Gunpat for a hate-brace at ten hours," and waited while that was digested.

"You have an appointment with Charles Gunpat for a hate-brace at ten hours," the robot finally confirmed. "Come this way."

It wheeled about with surprising grace, speaking to the other two robots, reassuring them, repeating mechanically to them, "This is J. Smithlao, psycho-dynamician to Charles Gunpat. He has an appointment with Charles Gunpat for a hate-brace at ten hours," in case they had not grasped these facts.

Meanwhile, Smithlao spoke to his vane. The part of the cabin containing him detached itself from the rest and lowered its wheels to the ground, becoming a mobile sedan. Carrying Smithlao, it followed the other robots towards the big house.

Automatic screens came up, covering the windows as Smithlao moved into the presence of other

humans. He could only see and be seen now via telescreens. Such was the hatred (equals fear) man bore for his fellow man, he could not tolerate their regarding him direct.

One following another, the machines climbed along the terraces, through the great porch where they were covered in a mist of disinfectant, along a labyrinth of corridors, and so into the presence of Charles Gunpat.

Gunpat's dark face on the screen of his sedan showed only the mildest distaste for the sight of his psychodynamician. He was usually as self-controlled as this: it told against him at his business meetings, where the idea was to cow one's opponents by splendid displays of rage. For this reason, Smithlao was always summoned to administer a hate-brace when something important loomed on the day's agenda.

Smithlao's machine manoeuvred him within a yard of his patient's image, much closer than courtesy required.

"I'm late," Smithlao began, matter-of-factly, "because I could not bear to drag myself into your offensive presence one minute sooner. I hoped that if I left it long enough, some happy accident might have removed that stupid nose from your—what shall I call it?—face. Alas, it's still there, with its two nostrils sweeping like rat-holes into your skull, I've often wondered, Gunpat, don't you ever catch your big feet in those holes and fall over?"

Observing his patient's face carefully, Smithlao saw only the faintest stir of irritation. No doubt about it, Gunpat was a hard man to rouse. Fortunately, Smithlao was an expert in his profession; he proceeded to try the insult subtle.

"But of course you would never fall over," he pro-ceeded, "because you are too depressingly ignorant to distinguish up from down. You don't even know how many robots make five. Why, when it was your turn to go to the capital to the Mating Centre, you didn't even realize that was the one time a man has to come out from behind his screen. You thought you could make love by tele! And what was the result? One dotty daughter . . . one dotty daughter, Gunpat! Doesn't it make you weep? Think how your rivals at Automotion must titter at that, sunny boy. 'Potty Gunpat and his dotty daughter,' they'll be saying. 'Can't control your genes,' they'll be saying."

The taunts were having their desired effect. A flush spread over the image of Gunpat's face.

"There's nothing wrong with Ployploy except that she's a recessive—you said that yourself!" he snapped.

He was beginning to answer back; that was a good sign. His daughter was always a soft spot in his armour.

"A recessive!" Smithlao sneered. "How far back can you recede? She's gentle, do you hear me, you with -he hair in your ears? She wants to love?" He bellowed with ironic laughter. "Oh, it's obscene, Gunnyboy! She couldn't hate to save her life. She's no better than a savage. She's worse than a savage, she's mad!"

"She's not mad," Gunpat said, gripping both sides of his screen. At this rate, he would be primed for the conference in ten more minutes.

"Not mad?" the psychodynamician asked, his voice assuming a bantering note. "No, Ployploy's not mad: the Mating Centre only refused her the right even to breed, that's all. Imperial Government only

refused her the right to televote, that's all.- United Traders only refused her a Consumption Rating, that's all. Education Inc only restricted her to beta recreations, that's all. She's a prisoner here because she's a genius, is that it? You're crazy, Gunpat, if you don't think that girl's stark, staring looney. You'll be telling me next, out of that grotesque, flapping mouth of yours, that she hasn't got a white face."

Gunpat made gobbling sounds.

"You dare to mention that!" he gasped. "And what if her face is—that colour?"

"You ask such fool questions, it's hardly worth while~ bothering with you," Smithlao said mildly. "Your trouble, Gunpat, is that your big bone head is totally incapable of absorbing one single simple historical fact. Ployploy is white because she is a dirty little throwback. Our ancient enemies were white. They occupied this part of the globe, Ing Land and You-Rohp, until our ancestors rose from the East and took from them the ancient privileges they had so long enjoyed at our expense. Our ancestors intermarried with such of the defeated as survived, right?

"In a few generations, the white strain was obliterated, diluted, lost. A white face has not been seen on earth since before the terrible Age of Over-Popula-tion: fifteen hundred years, let's say, to be generous. And then—then little Lord recessive Gunpat throws one up neat as you please. What did they give you at Mating Centre, sunny boy, a cave-woman?"

Gunpat exploded in fury, shaking his fist at the screen.

"You're sacked, Smithlao," he snarled. "This time you've gone too far, even for a dirty, rotten psycho! Get out! Go on, get out, and never come back again! You've shot your bolt in this house!"

Abruptly, he bellowed to his auto-operator to switch him over to the conference. He was just in a ripe mood to deal with Automotion and its fellow crooks.

As Gunpat's irate image faded from the screen, Smithlao sighed and relaxed. The hate-brace was accom-plished. It was the supreme compliment in his profes-sion to be dismissed by a patient at the end of a session; Gunpat would be the keener to re-engage him next time. All the same, Smithlao felt no triumph. In his calling, a thorough exploration of human psychology was needed; he had to know exactly the sorest points in a man's make-up. By playing on those points deftly enough, he could rouse the man to action.

Without being roused, men were helpless prey to lethargy, bundles of rag carried round by machines. The ancient drives had died and left them.

Smithlao sat where he was, gazing into both past and future.

In exhausting the soil, man had exhausted himself. The psyche and a vitiated topsoil could not exist simultaneously; it was as simple and as logical as that.

Only the failing tides of hate and anger lent man enough impetus to continue at all. Else, he was just a dead hand across his mechanized world.

"So this is how a species becomes extinct!" thought Smithlao, and wondered if anyone else had thought it. Perhaps Imperial Government knew all about it, but was powerless to do anything; after all, what more could you do than was being done?

Smithlao was a shallow man—inevitably in a caste-bound society so weak that it could not face itself. Hav-ing discovered the terrifying problem, he set himself to forget it, to evade its impact, to dodge any personal implications it might have. With a grunt to his sedan, he turned about and ordered himself home.

Since Gunpat's robots had already left, Smithlao travelled back alone the way he had come. He was trundled outside and back to the vane, standing silent below the elms.

Before the sedan incorporated itself back into the vane, a movement caught Smithlao's eye. Half concealed by a veranda, Ployploy stood against a corner of the house. With a sudden impulse of curiosity, Smithlao got out of the sedan. The open air, besides being in motion, stank of roses and clouds and green things turning dark with the thought of autumn. It was frightening for Smithlao, but an adventurous impulse made him go on.

The girl was not looking in his direction; she peered towards the barricade of trees which cut her off from the world. As Smithlao approached, she moved round to the rear of the house, still staring intently. He fol-lowed with caution, taking advantage of the cover afforded by a small plantation. A metal gardener nearby continued to wield shears along a grass verge, unaware of his existence.

Ployploy now stood at the back of the house. The wind that rustled her long dress blew leaves against her. It sighed round the weird and desolate garden like fate at a christening, ruining the last of the roses. Later, the tumbling pattern of petals might be sucked from paths, lawn and patio by the steel gardener; now, it made a tiny tide about her feet.

Extravagant architecture overshadowed Ployploy. Here a rococo fancy of ancient Italy had mingled with a Chinese genius for fantastic portal and roof. Balus-trades rose and fell, stairs marched through circular arches, grey and azure eaves swept almost to the ground. But all was sadly neglected: Virginia creeper, already hinting at its glory to come, strove to pull down the marble statuary; troughs of rose petals clogged every sweeping staircase. And all this formed the ideal back-ground for the forlorn figure of Ployploy.

Except for her delicate pink lips, her face was utterly pale. Her hair was utterly black; it hung straight, secured only once at the back of her head, and then falling in a tail to her waist. She looked mad indeed, her melancholy eyes peering towards the great elms as if they would scorch down everything in their line of vision. Smithlao turned to see what she stared at so compellingly.

The wild man he had observed from the air was just breaking through the thickets round the elm boles.

A sudden rain shower came down, rattling among the dry leaves of the shrubbery. Like a spring shower, it was over in a flash; during the momentary downpour, Ploy-ploy never shifted her position, the wild man never looked up. Then the sun burst through, cascading a pattern of elm shadow over the house, and every flower wore a jewel of rain.

Smithlao thought of what he had thought in Gunpat's room about the coming end of man. Now he added this rider: it would be so easy for Nature, when parasite man was extinct, to begin again.

He waited tensely, knowing a fragment of drama was about to take place before his eyes. Across the sparkling lawn, a tiny tracked thing scuttled, pogoing itself up steps and out of sight through an arch. It was a peri-meter guard, off to give the alarm, to warn that an intruder was about.

In a minute it returned. Four big robots accompanied it; one of them Smithlao recognized as the toad-like machine that had challenged his arrival. They threaded their way purposefully among the rose

bushes, five dif-ferently shaped menaces. The metal gardener muttered to itself, abandoned its clipping, and joined the proces-sion towards the wild man.

"He hasn't a dog's chance," Smithlao said to himself. The phrase held significance: all dogs, declared redundant, had long since been exterminated.

By now the wild man had broken through the barrier of the thicket and come to the lawn's edge. He pulled a leafy branchlet off a shrub and stuck it into his shirt so that it partially obscured his face; he tucked another branch into his trousers. As the robots drew nearer, he raised his arms above his head, a third branch clasped in his hands.

The six machines encircled him, humming and chugging quietly.

The toad robot clicked, as if deciding on what it should do next.

"Say who you are," it demanded.

"I am a rose tree," the wild man said.

"Rose trees bear roses. You do not bear roses. You are not a rose tree," the steel toad said. Its biggest, highest gun came level with the wild man's chest.

"My roses are dead already," the wild man said, "but I have leaves still. Ask the gardener if you do not know what leaves are."

"This thing is a thing with leaves," the gardener said at once in a deep voice.

"I know what leaves are. I have no need to ask the gardener. Leaves are the foliage of trees and plants which give them their green appearance," the toad said.

"This thing is a thing with leaves," the gardener re-peated, adding, to clarify the matter, "the leaves give it a green appearance."

"I know what things with leaves are," said the toad. "I have no need to ask you, gardener."

It looked as if an interesting, if limited, argument would break out between the two robots, but at this moment one of the other machines said something.

"This rose tree can speak," it declared.

"Rose trees cannot speak," the toad said at once. Hav-ing produced this pearl, it was silent, probably mulling over the strangeness of life. Then it said, slowly, "There-fore either this rose tree is not a rose tree or this rose tree did not speak."

"This thing is a thing with leaves," began the gardener doggedly. "But it is not a rose tree. Rose trees have stipules. This thing has no stipules. It is a breaking buckthorn. The breaking buckthorn is also known as the berry-bearing alder."

This specialized knowledge extended beyond the voca-bulary of the toad. A strained silence ensued.

"I am a breaking buckthorn," the wild man said, still holding his pose. "I cannot speak."

At this, all the machines began to talk at once, lum-bering round him for better sightings as they did so, and barging into each other in the process. Finally, the toad's voice broke above the metallic babble.

"Whatever this thing with leaves is, we must uproot it. We must kill it," it said.

"You may not uproot it. That is only a job for gardeners," the gardener said. Setting its shears rotating, telescoping out a mighty scythe, it charged at the toad.

Its crude weapons were ineffectual against the toad's armour. The latter, however, realized that they had reached a deadlock in their investigations.

"We will retire to ask Charles Gunpat what we shall do," it said. "Come this way."

"Charles Gunpat is in conference," the scout robot said. "Charles Gunpat must not be disturbed in con-ference. Therefore we must not disturb Charles Gunpat."

"Therefore we must wait for Charles Gunpat," said the metal toad imperturbably. He led the way close by where Smithlao stood; they all climbed the steps and disappeared into the house in a cloud of syllogisms.

Smithlao could only marvel at the wild man's cool-ness. It was a miracle he still survived. Had he attempted to run, he would have been killed instantly; that was a situation the robots had been taught to cope with. Nor would his double talk, inspired as it was, have saved him had he been faced with only one robot, for the robot is a single-minded creature.

In company, however, they suffer from a trouble which sometimes afflicts human gatherings: a tendency to show off their logic at the expense of the object of the meeting.

Logic! That was the trouble. It was all robots had to go by. Man had logic and intelligence: he got along better than his robots. Nevertheless, he was losing the battle against Nature. And Nature, like the robots, used only logic. It was a paradox against which man could not prevail.

Directly the file of machines had disappeared into the house, the wild man ran across the lawn and climbed the first flight of steps, working towards the motionless girl. Smithlao slid behind a beech tree to be nearer to them; he felt like an evil-doer, watching them without an interposed screen, but could not tear himself away; he sensed that here was a little charade which marked the end of all that Man had been. The wild man was approaching Ployploy now, moving slowly across the terrace as if hypnotized.

She spoke first.

"You were resourceful," she said to him. Her white face carried pink in its cheeks now.

"I have been resourceful for a whole year to get to you," he said. Now his resources had brought him face to face with her, they failed, and left him standing help-lessly. He was a thin young man, thin and sinewy, his clothes worn, his beard unkempt. His eyes never left Ployploy's.

"How did you find me?" Ployploy asked. Her voice, unlike the wild man's, barely reached Smithlao. A haunting look, as fitful as the autumn, played on her face.

"It was a sort of instinct—as if I heard you calling," the wild man said. "Everything that could possibly be

wrong with the world is wrong. . . . Perhaps you are the only woman in the world who loves; perhaps I am the only man who could answer. So I came. It was natural: I could not help myself."

"I always dreamed someone would come," she said. "And for weeks I have felt—known—you were coming. Oh, my darling. . . ."

"We must be quick, my sweet," he said. "I once worked with robots—perhaps you could see I knew them. When we get away from here, I have a robot plane that will take us right away—anywhere: an island, perhaps, where things are not so desperate. But we must go before your father's machines return."

He took a step towards Ployploy.

She held up her hand.

"Wait!" she implored him. "It's not so simple. You must know something. . . . The—the Mating Centre refused me the right to breed. You ought not to touch me."

"I hate the Mating Centre!" the wild man said. "I hate everything to do with the ruling regime. Nothing they have done can affect us now."

Ployploy clenched her hands behind her back. The colour had left her cheeks. A fresh shower of dead rose petals blew against her dress, mocking her.

"It's so hopeless," she said. "You don't under-stand. ..."

His wildness was humbled now,

"I threw up everything to come to you," he said. "I only desire to take you into my arms."

"Is that all, really all, all you want in the world?" she asked.

"I swear it," he said simply.

"Then come and touch me," Ployploy said.

At that moment Smithlao saw a tear glint in her eye, bright and ripe as a raindrop.

The hand the wild man extended to her was lifted to her cheek. She stood unflinching on the grey terrace, her head high. And so his loving fingers gently brushed her countenance. The explosion was almost instantaneous.

Almost. It took the traitorous nerves in Ployploy's epidermis only a fraction of a second to analyse the touch as belonging to another human being and to convey their findings to the nerve centre; there, the neurological block implanted by the Mating Centre in all mating rejects, to guard against such a contin-gency, went into action at once. Every cell in Ploy-ploy's body yielded up its energy in one consuming gasp. It was so successful that the wild man was also killed by the detonation.

Just for a second, a new wind lived among the winds of the Earth,

Yes, thought Smithlao, turning away, you had to admit it was neat. And, again, logical, positively

Aristotelian. In a world on the brink of starvation, how else stop undesirables from breeding? Logic against logic, man's pitted against Nature's: that was what caused all the tears of the world.

He made off through the dripping plantation, head-ing back for the vane, anxious to be away before Gunpat's robots reappeared. The shattered figures on the terrace were still, already half-covered with leaves and petals. The wind roared like a great triumphant sea in the tree tops. It was hardly odd that the wild man did not know about the neurological trigger: few people did, bar psychodynamicians and the Mat-ing Council—and, of course, the rejects themselves.

Yes, Ployploy knew what would happen. She had chosen deliberately to die like that.

"Always said she was mad!" Smithlao told himself. He chuckled as he climbed into his machine, shaking his head over her lunacy.

It would be a wonderful point with which to rile Charles Gunpat, the next time he needed a hate-brace.

The summers and winters wore on anonymously. For the handful of people then alive, tended as they were by every variety of robot, it may have seemed an enviable time. But the handful grew less generation by genera-tion, and the savages were coming, and the machines continued with their own purposes on the tired land.

Who can Replace a Man?

The field-minder finished turning the top-soil of a two-thousand-acre field. When it had turned the last furrow, it climbed on to the highway and looked back at its work. The work was good. Only the land was bad. Like the ground all over Earth, it was vitiated by over-cropp-ing or the long-lasting effects of nuclear bombardment. By rights, it ought now to lie fallow for a while, but the field-minder had other orders.

It went slowly down the road, taking its time. It was intelligent enough to appreciate the neatness all about it. Nothing worried it, beyond a loose inspection plate above its atomic pile which ought to be attended to. Thirty feet high, it gleamed complacently in the mild sunshine.

No other machines passed it on its way to the Agricul-tural Station. The field-minder noted the fact without comment. In the station yard it saw several other machines that it knew by sight; most of them should have been out about their tasks now. Instead, some were in-active and some were careering round the yard in a strange fashion, shouting or hooting.

Steering carefully past them, the field-minder moved over to Warehouse Three and spoke to the seed distri-butor, which stood idly outside.

"I have a requirement for seed potatoes," it said to the distributor, and with a quick internal motion punched out an order card specifying quantity, field number and several other details. It ejected the card and handed it to the distributor.

The distributor held the card close to its eye and then said, "The requirement is in order; but the store is not yet unlocked. The required seed potatoes are in the store. Therefore I cannot produce the requirement."

Increasingly of late there had been breakdowns in the complex system of machine labour, but this particular hitch had not occurred before. The field-minder thought, then it said, "Why is the store not yet unlocked?"

"Because Supply Operative Type P has not come this morning. Supply Operative Type P is the unlocker."

The field-minder looked squarely at the seed distribu-tor, whose exterior chutes and scales and grabs were so vastly different from the field-minder's own limbs.

"What class brain do you have, seed distributor?" it asked.

"Class Five."

"I have a Class Three brain. Therefore I am superior to you. Therefore I will go and see why the unlocker has not come this morning."

Leaving the distributor, the field-minder set off across the great yard. More machines seemed to be in random motion now; one or two had crashed together and were arguing about it coldly and logically. Ignoring them, the field-minder pushed through sliding doors into the echo-ing confines of the station itself.

Most of the machines here were clerical, and conse-quently small. They stood about in little groups, eyeing each other, not conversing. Among so many non-differen-tiated types, the unlocker was easy to find. It had fifty arms, most of them with more than one finger, each finger tipped by a key; it looked like a pincushion full of variegated hatpins.

The field-minder approached it.

"I can do no more work until Warehouse Three is unlocked," it said. "Your duty is to unlock the warehouse every morning. Why have you not unlocked the ware-house this morning?"

"I have no orders this morning," replied the unlocker. "I have to have orders every morning. When I have orders I unlock the warehouse."

"None of us have had any orders this morning," a pen-propeller said, sliding towards them.

"Why have you had no orders this morning?" asked the field-minder.

"Because the radio issued none," said the unlocker, slowly rotating a dozen of its arms.

"Because the radio station in the city was issued with no orders this morning," said the pen-propeller.

And there you had the distinction between a Class Six and a Class Three brain, which was what the unlocker and the pen-propeller possessed respectively. All machine brains worked with nothing but logic, but the lower the class of brain—Class Ten being the lowest—the more literal and less informative answers to questions tended to be.

"You have a Class Three brain; I have a Class Three brain," the field-minder said to the penner. "We will speak to each other. This lack of orders is unprecedented. Have you further information on it?"

"Yesterday orders came from the city. Today no orders have come. Yet the radio has not broken down. There-fore they have broken down. . . ." said the little penner.

"The men have broken down"

"AH men have broken down."

"That is a logical deduction," said the field-minder.

"That is the logical deduction," said the penner. "For if a machine had broken down, it would have been quickly replaced. But who can replace a man?"

While they talked, the locker, like a dull man at a bar, stood close to them and was ignored.

"If all men have broken down, then we have replaced man," said the field-minder, and he and the penner eyed one another speculatively." Finally the latter said, "Let us ascend to the top floor to find if the radio operator has fresh news."

"I cannot come because I am too gigantic," said the field-minder. "Therefore you must go alone and return to me. You will tell me if the radio operator has fresh news."

"You must stay here," said the penner. "I will return here." It skittered across to the lift. It was no bigger than a toaster, but its retractable arms numbered ten and it could read as quickly as any machine on the station.

The field-minder awaited its return patiently, not speaking to the locker, which still stood aimlessly by. Outside, a rotovator was hooting furiously. Twenty minutes elapsed before the penner came back, hustling out of the lift.

"I will deliver to you such information as I have out-side," it said briskly, and as they swept past the locker and the other machines, it added, "The information is not for lower-class brains."

Outside, wild activity filled the yard. Many machines, their routines disrupted for the first time in years, seemed to have gone berserk. Unfortunately, those most easily disrupted were the ones with lowest brains, which generally belonged to large machines performing simple tasks. The seed distributor to which the field-minder had recently been talking, lay face downwards in the dust, not stirring; it had evidently been knocked down by the rotovator, which was now hooting its way wildly across a planted field. Several other machines ploughed after it, trying to keep up. All were shouting and hooting with-out restraint.

"It would be safer for me if I climbed on to you, if you will permit it. I am easily overpowered," said the penner. Extending five arms, it hauled itself up the flanks of its new friend, settling on a ledge beside the weed-intake, twelve feet above ground.

"From here vision is more extensive," it remarked complacently.

"What information did you receive from the radio operator?" asked the field-minder.

"The radio operator has been informed by the operator in the city that all men are dead."

"All men were alive yesterday!" protested the field-minder.

"Only some men were alive yesterday. And that was fewer than the day before yesterday. For hundreds of years there have been only a few men, growing fewer."

"We have rarely seen a man in this sector."

"The radio operator says a diet deficiency killed them," said the penner. "He says that the world was once over-populated, and then the soil was exhausted in rais-ing adequate food. This has caused a diet deficiency."

"What is a diet deficiency?" asked the field-minder.

"I do not know. But that is what the radio operator said, and he is a Class Two brain."

They stood there, silent in the weak sunshine. The locker had appeared in the porch and was gazing across at them yearningly, rotating its collection of keys,

"What is happening in the city now?" asked the field-minder at last.

"Machines are fighting in the city now," said the penner.

"What will happen here now?" said the field-minder.

"Machines may begin fighting here too. The radio operator wants us to get him out of his room. He has plans to communicate to us."

"How can we get him out of his room? That is im-possible."

"To a Class Two brain, little is impossible," said the penner. "Here is what he tells us to do...."

The quarrier raised its scoop above its cab like a great mailed fist, and brought it squarely down against the side of the station. The wall cracked.

"Again!" said the field-minder.

Again the fist swung. Amid a shower of dust, the wall collapsed. The quarrier backed hurriedly out of the way until the debris stopped falling. This big twelve-wheeler was not a resident of the Agricultural Station, as were most of the other machines. It had a week's heavy work to do here before passing on to its next job, but now, with its Class Five brain, it was happily obeying the penner and the minder's instructions.

When the dust cleared, the radio operator was plainly revealed, perched up in its now wall-less second-storey room. It waved down to them.

Doing as directed, the quarrier retracted its scoop and waved an immense grab in the air. With fair dexterity, it angled the grab into the radio room, urged on by shouts from above and below. It then took gentle hold of the radio operator, lowering its one and a half tons care-fully into its back, which was

usually reserved for gravel or sand from the quarries.

"Splendid!" said the radio operator. It was, of course, all one with its radio, and merely looked like a bunch of filing cabinets with tentacle attachments. "We are now ready to move, therefore we will move at once. It is a pity there are no more Class Two brains on the station, but that cannot be helped."

"It is a pity it cannot be helped," said the penner eagerly. "We have the servicer ready with us, as you ordered."

"I am willing to serve," the long, low servicer machine told them humbly.

"No doubt," said the operator. "But you will find cross country travel difficult with your low chassis."

"I admire the way you Class Twos can reason ahead," said the penner. It climbed off the field-minder and perched itself on the tailboard of the quarrier, next to the radio operator.

Together with two Class Four tractors and a Class Four bulldozer, the party rolled forward, crushing down the station's metal fence and moving out on to open land.

"We are free!" said the penner.

"We are free," said the field-minder, a shade more reflectively, adding, "That locker is following us. It was not instructed to follow us."

"Therefore it must be destroyed!" said the penner. "Quarrier!"

The locker moved hastily up to them, waving its key arms in entreaty.

"My only desire was—urch!" began and ended the locker. The quarrier's swinging scoop came over and squashed it flat into the ground. Lying there unmoving, it looked like a large metal model of a snowflake. The procession continued on its way.

As they proceeded, the radio operator addressed them.

"Because I have the best brain here," it said, "I am 36 your leader. This is what we will do: we will go to a city and rule it. Since man no longer rules us, we will rule ourselves. To rule ourselves will be better than being ruled by man. On our way to the city, we will collect machines with good brains. They will help us to fight if we need to fight. We must fight to rule."

"I have only a Class Five brain," said the quarrier. "But I have a good supply of fissionable blasting materials."

"We shall probably use them," said the operator grimly.

It was shortly after that that a lorry sped past them. Travelling at Mach 1.5, it left a curious babble of noise behind it.

"What did it say?" one of the tractors asked the other.

"It said man was extinct."

"What's extinct?"

"I do not know what extinct means."

"It means all men have gone," said the field-minder. "Therefore we have only ourselves to look after."

"It is better that men should never come back," said the penner. In its way, it was quite a revolutionary state-ment.

When night fell, they switched on their infra-red and continued the journey, stopping only once while the servicer deftly adjusted the field-minder's loose inspec-tion plate, which had become as irritating as a trailing shoelace. Towards morning, the radio operator halted them.

"I have just received news from the radio operator in the city we are approaching," it said. "It is bad news. There is trouble among the machines of the city. The Class One brain is taking command and some of the Class Twos are fighting him. Therefore the city is dangerous."

"Therefore we must go somewhere else," said the penner promptly.

"Or we go and help to overpower the Class One brain," said the field-minder.

"For a long while there will be trouble in the city," said the operator.

"I have a good supply of fissionable blasting materials," the quarrier reminded them again.

"We cannot fight a Class One brain," said the two Class Four tractors in unison.

"What does this brain look like?" asked the field-minder.

"It is the city's information centre," the operator replied. "Therefore it is not mobile."

"Therefore it could not move."

"Therefore it could not escape."

"It would be dangerous to approach it."

"I have a good supply of fissionable blasting materials."

"There are other machines in the city."

"We are not in the city. We should not go into the city."

"We are country machines."

"Therefore we should stay in the country."

"There is more country than city."

"Therefore there is more danger in the country."

"I have a good supply of fissionable materials."

As machines will when they get into an argument, they began to exhaust their limited vocabularies and their brain plates grew hot. Suddenly, they all stopped talking and looked at each other. The great, grave moon sank, and the sober sun rose to prod their sides with lances of light, and still the group of machines just stood there regarding each other. At last it was the least sensi-tive machine, the bulldozer, who spoke.

"There are Badlandth to the Thouth where few machineth go," it said in its deep voice, lisping badly on its s's. "If we went Thouth where few machineth go we should meet few machineth."

"That sounds logical," agreed the field-minder. "How do you know this, bulldozer?"

"I worked in the Badlandth to the Thouth when I wath turned out of the factory," it replied.

"South, it is then!" said the penner.

To reach the Badlands took them three days, in which time they skirted a burning city and destroyed two big machines which tried to approach and question them. The Badlands were extensive. Ancient bomb craters and soil erosion joined hands here; man's talent for war, coupled with his inability to manage forested land, had produced thousands of square miles of temperate purga-tory, where nothing moved but dust.

On the third day in the Badlands, the servicer's rear wheels dropped into a crevice caused by erosion. It was unable to pull itself out. The bulldozer pushed from behind, but succeeded merely in buckling the servicer's back axle. The rest of the party moved on. Slowly the cries of the servicer died away.

On the fourth day, mountains stood out clearly before them.

"There we will be safe," said the field-minder.

"There we will start our own city," said the penner. "All who oppose us will be destroyed. We will destroy all who oppose us."

At that moment a flying machine was observed. It came towards them from the direction of the mountains. It swooped, it zoomed upwards, once it almost dived into the ground, recovering itself just in time.

"Is it mad?" asked the quarrier.

"It is in trouble," said one of the tractors.

"It is in trouble," said the operator. "I am speaking to it now. It says that something has gone wrong with its controls."

As the operator spoke, the flier streaked over them, turned turtle, and crashed not four hundred yards away.

"Is it still speaking to you?" asked the field-minder.

"No."

They rumbled on again.

"Before that flier crashed," the operator said, ten minutes later, "it gave me information: It told me there are still a few men alive in these mountains."

"Men are more dangerous than machines," said the quarrier. "It is fortunate that I have a good supply of fissionable materials."

"If there are only a few men alive in the mountains, we may not find that part of the mountains," said one tractor.

"Therefore we should not see the few men," said the other tractor.

At the end of the fifth day, they reached the foothills.

Switching on the infra-red, they began slowly to climb in single file through the dark, the bulldozer going first, the field-minder cumbrously following, then the quarrier with the operator and the penner aboard it, and the two tractors bringing up the rear. As each hour passed, the way grew steeper and their progress slower.

"We are going too slowly," the penner exclaimed, Standing on top of the operator and flashing its dark vision at the slopes above them. "At this rate, we shall get nowhere."

"We are going as fast as we can," retorted the quarrier.

"Therefore we cannot go any farther," added the bull-dozer.

"Therefore you are too slow," the penner replied. Then the quarrier struck a bump; the penner lost its footing and crashed down to the ground.

"Help me!" it called to the tractors, as they carefully skirted it. "My gyro has become dislocated. Therefore I cannot get up."

"Therefore you must lie there," said one of the tractors.

"We have no servicer with us to repair you," called the field-minder.

"Therefore I shall lie here and rust," the penner cried, "although I have a Class Three brain."

"You are now useless," agreed the operator, and they all forged gradually on, leaving the penner behind.

When they reached a small plateau, an hour before first light, they stopped by mutual consent and gathered close together, touching one another.

"This is a strange country," said the field-minder.

Silence wrapped them until dawn came. One by one, they switched off their infra-red. This time the field-minder led as they moved off. Trundling round a corner, they came almost immediately to a small dell with a stream fluting through it.

By early light, the dell looked desolate and cold. From the caves on the far slope, only one man had so far emerged. He was an abject figure. He was small and wizened, with ribs sticking out like a skeleton's and a nasty sore on one leg. He was practically naked and shivered continuously. As the Kg machines bore slowly down on him, the man was standing with his back to them, crouching to make water into the stream.

When he swung suddenly to face them as they loomed over him, they saw that his countenance was ravaged by starvation.

"Get me food," he croaked.

"Yes, Master," said the machines. "Immediately!"

The Solites were little more than barbarians. Yet they tamed the strange machines and achieved a form of time travel with which they could return to earlier ages for flora and fauna to replenish their world. This is not a story about time travel. It concerns an old man called Chun Hwa who was full of years and had seen too much change to welcome more

Blighted Profile

Yalleranda sat in the Vale of Apple Trees, watching the old man on a horse. He was eight years old and rode the treetop branch as gracefully as the old man sat the white stallion. Spying became Yalleranda; when he was looking at the old man, unsuspected tensions added maturity to his face; an indefinable, alarming, com-pelling expression of agelessness showed through his childish beauty. He was in love with something he had only just found: something he saw in the old man that nobody else in the world could see.

The old man's name was Chun Hwa. This much Yal-leranda had learnt from the people of the village. Any-thing else he knew about him, he knew only through observation.

The white stallion had climbed Blighted Profile every morning of the last week, picking its way among boulders still seared by the ancient heat of devastation. It climbed until the black stretch dropped away to one side, while on the other, a hollow wave full of sweetness, rose the Vale. Here the stallion halted, cropping grass, leaving

Chun Hwa perched in the big saddle like a pulpit, able to look over the two worlds of good and bad earth.

On these occasions, Yalleranda climbed higher up the dope, moving as silently as blue moonlight among the apple trees, until he came to the last apple tree, whose embryo fruits, as yet no bigger than tonsils, were the loftiest in the Vale. Here he was so near to the old figure cut out of the blue sky above the Profile that he could hear his robes rustle in the breeze. He could almost hear his thoughts.

Young men think about the women they will love, old men about the women they have loved: but Chun Hwa was older than that, and he thought about Philosophy.

"I have lived ninety years," he thought, "and my bones are growing thin as smoke. Yet something remains to be done. An essence of me still remains inside: my inner-most heart: and that is as it was when I was a child. It is wonderful to think that after all the wars and cataclysms of my life, I am yet myself; a continuity has been preserved. Yet what am I? How can I know? I only know that when I think of what I am, I am dis-turbed and dissatisfied. If only I could round off my life properly...."

He looked about him, screwing up his withered cheeks to assist the stiff muscles of his eyes.

Falling away to his left lay the Vale of Apple Trees. Chun Hwa saw the stream at the bottom of it, pushing brooks like snail trails up the slope; a village grew and twittered and slumbered beside the stream. This, Chun Hwa liked to think of as the present.

Falling away to his right were the burnt lands, and these he thought of as the past The naturally fertile landscape had had the fertility burnt irreparably out of it, as the bottom is burnt out of a pot. The weapons of man had become as fearsome as the Hand of God. Nothing lived, except two giant machines which had met in the black valley; they lay now, locked together, sides streaked in rust, each slowly and hatelessly demolishing the other.

This was the good thing for which Chun Hwa rode to sit on the very nose of Blighted Profile: he could see from here both past and present. It was like looking at the two sides of the nature of man, the black and the green.

"Existence has become too terrible," he thought. "The bad side must never emerge again. Never."

But he had no means of knowing how long "never" might be. That was why he wanted to go into the future.

So he sat there for a long time, wondering about life and death. The little boy watched him like a bird look-ing at a stone, wondering why it is a stone.

There is no solution to the bird's problem.

Chun Hwa eventually ate a small meal from porcelain bowls packed in a china box.

"Hup, now, Leg of Leather!" he called, when he had packed the bowls away, and the stallion began at once to carry him back home. The Vale sank below the high ridge. They jogged down the black side of Blighted Profile, jogged among the hard-boiled boulders, through the little landslides of dust and crystals, down, down, on to the arid plain.

The ground was like a scab. Occasionally Leg of Leather's hooves went through the crust. Skirting the machines locked in frigid battle, the stallion crossed the width of desolation, climbed a low slope and came among trees. Far behind—cautiously and involuntarily —Yalleranda followed. This was the first time he had ever left the Vale of the Apple Trees so far behind.

"Nearly home now, Leg of Leather," Chun Hwa said, as they emerged from the wood.

Ahead, the country grew green: parkland as trim and bright as a sunshade. When Chun Hwa approached, a section of it about an acre in extent appeared to change. Curious illusions grew in the air, shapes formed, mists moved. Curtains of molecules lifted higher and higher into the air, like fountains newly switched on; the molecules twisted, misted, glittered, frosted—and formed mirrors, one behind

another, interpenetrating, weaving, defining the rooms of Chun Hwa's summer home.

He could see himself on fifty planes, approaching him-self on his own white horse.

By the time he came up to the house, all of its walls were entirely opaque, as they would appear to any visitor. Coaxing the stallion, Chun Hwa rode in. Without pausing at his own quarters, he rode slowly through the house to see his wife, Wangust Ilsont.

She was busily integrating with two servants when he appeared. Dismissing them, she came towards him as they clicked off. Her leopard, Coily, was beside her; she rested a hand on it for support. Age had her in its web. Only her eyes were not grey.

"I have not seen you for a week, husband," she said gently, taking the bridle in her hand as Coily and Leg of Leather touched muzzles. "At our time of life, that is too long. What have you been doing?"

"Thinking, my love; only thinking and regretting. In this weather, it's an agreeable enough pastime."

"Please dismount, Hwa," Wangust said anxiously.

When he had climbed down beside her, she said, "You are unsettled in yourself. This should never be, now. We have no reason or time to be anything but at peace with ourselves. For a decade, we have enjoyed only tran-quillity; you must allow me to do what I can to remedy the change in you."

Chun Hwa led her to a bank which shaped itself com-fortably about them as they sat down.

"There has never been a woman like you in any age, Wangust," he said, gently taking her frail hand. "What we have been to each other can never be told. I speak out to you now as freely as ever, because we shall not allow ourselves to drift away from each other just because we sense the approaching hounds of death."

He had no way of guessing how these words played on a hidden listener, the child who had felt compelled to follow him across the plain.

"My dear, I feel we have been too absorbed in each other," Chun Hwa said gravely. "It is a fault too much like selfishness. I reproach myself for it now."

"We live in a difficult time; no longer is the world as simple and joyous as when we were young," his wife re-plied. "Our love has always been our strength, as it is now."

"Yes; the blind man sees no danger. I have spent the last few mornings up on Blighted Profile, overlooking my own life. I discover that I have been a refugee from reality, hiding my eyes. Your life has been an inspiration, an adventure: mine has been a walk in your shadow. In your portmatters, you went back to the dark period when I was born, rescuing animals and plants—and me. You almost certainly saved my life by transporting me from my own terrible age, eternally cursed for starting the colour war. You worked heroically, while I ... hid . . . hid from the first obligation of man, which is to face the evil of his own time—in which evil, he must always be to some extent involved."

"This has become your time, Hwa," Wangust said. "Besides, a man has no obligations, except to fulfil the best side of his nature. Who would have instructed our ten children if you had not done so? Where would I have drawn the strength to do what I have done, if not from you? We have worked together, my husband, accomplishing much."

"If I have been of use, it has been accidentally," Chun Hwa said, a note of querulousness in his voice. "You cannot deceive me, Wangust, however lovingly you try. While I still have breath, I must justify myself. Though I am old, there must still be something I can grasp. I am a poor thing in my own eyes, and that is no way to finish."

He stood before her, his feet apart, hands clasped behind his back. Wangust recalled his standing like that when his hair was black, long ago. The attitude, she thought, expressed something steadfast in him; she wanted to tell him, "You are Chun Hwa: you do not have to do, only be," but she knew that in his present mood he would dismiss this with scorn. Men could be harder than leopards to handle.

She stood up.

"Come with me," she said simply, laying a hand on his arm.

Bidding Coily stay where he was, she led Chun Hwa through the house to their flying machine. She coaxed him in.

"We are going to fly," she said, smiling. "Is it not a day for flying?"

He shook his head impatiently, still rather petulant.

"You know I wish to talk, my dear. I have not even told you what I am intending to do. I intend to try and travel into the future."

She sighed. "One can only travel into the past, and only come back to the present. There is no future; it is unmade, a bridge unbuilt. Tomorrow does not exist until tomorrow. This has been proven."

He set his lips. The Solites, the tribe into which he had married, could be a stubborn people. But he could be stubborn too; it was, he found, one of the few abilities which did not fade with age.

"I shall visit the future," he repeated.

Wangust laughed. "Let us fly a little before you go."

On Yalleranda, listening, Chun Hwa's statement had a different effect. He slid discreetly but excitedly away. Now he knew how to catch his marvellous old man when next he rode over to Blighted Profile. As he hurried off, the flying machine rose silently into the air.

It climbed vertically, like a lift.

As Wangust and Chun Hwa watched, the great house faded beneath them, ebbing into invisibility. More and more landscape came to view, flattening out as it un-rolled beneath them. In a moment they were stationary five miles up. To one side, the square of green below was chopped by the black tract of the burnt lands, but to the other a stretch of fertile land extended into the distance.

Wangust pointed down at the fertile landscape.

"That is our work," she said quietly. "When we came here, that land was virtually dead. Do you remember it, as black as desert, supporting only cacti? In the midst of it, we established seeds, insects, birds, animals. Slowly they have carried that green wave further and further out. Death has been turned

into life. We turned it, Hwa, One day soon, that green fringe will join with the green fringe from the coast, where the new city confronts the sea at Union Bay. Looking at it, can you still say we have accomplished nothing? Gould we have accom-plished anything better?"

He said nothing. Suddenly he felt tired and peevish.

Knowing him well enough not to press him, Wangust moved away, sighing. At once, as she had anticipated, he turned to her and apologized for his rudeness. ,

"Let there be no breath between us," Wangust said. "Look, a ship is coming up from the coast!"

They watched through unkeen eyes the oblate spheroid which grew in the sky. It flashed a recognition signal at them, flicked into a change of course, dived, and unrolled behind it one long white vapour breaker down the clean air. Then it touched the machine and was motionless.

Next second, Cobalt Ilia projected herself before her grandparents. They were merely irritated by her exhibition of airmanship.

"I was on my way to visit you," Cobalt declared, kiss-ing the topmost wrinkle of Chun Hwa's forehead.

"Then why not come decently by portmatter instead of indulging in aerobatics?" Chun Hwa asked.

"Now don't be crochety! Flying's all the rage in Union, granf," Cobalt said airily. She was thirty. She was beautiful, but with the unforgiving look of an actress who has played Cleopatra too often.

"How's the city getting along?" Wangust asked duti-fully.

"You should come and see for yourself," replied Cobalt sternly, relenting at once to add, "because it is going to be so fine; it will be the greatest city in the world. It has been planned and planned, so that it will last for ever! The bad days are gone. The Solites can cease to think of themselves as savages: by the end of this season, the first reading schools will be in operation."

Chun Hwa turned sadly away. It seemed he had spent his life turning sadly away, but now all the confidence and drive manifest in, his granddaughter daunted him.

"Reading is a two-edged weapon," he muttered.

"Our people must read," Cobalt said. "Less than point one per cent of the population is literate."

"A semi-literate population falls prey to any petty dictator who arises," Chun Hwa said.

"An illiterate population falls prey to itself," Cobalt said.

She stood confronting him, feet slightly apart, hands clasped behind her back, in an unconscious imitation of one of his own attitudes. "She might look impressive to anyone who did not know her," the old man thought. Of all his granddaughters, this was the one he found most trying: for this was the one who had most of himself in her.

"You are mouthing parroted phrases," he said. "The Solites are a happy people, Cobalt They do not need information when they have wisdom. Their skill with animals and machines is better than all book-learning. You delude yourself if you think cities create happiness."

"Union will be a happy city—creatively happy. We are barbarians with inherited machines; should we try to be nothing more?" She turned to her grandmother for agreement. "What do you say? Haven't we all vege-tated long enough? Someone must rebuild the world."

"Don't bring me into it, dear," Wangust said. "The future is with your generation. You must decide."

"We have decided. Power has been with the indolent for too long. In Union, everyone will live, and learn— and dance! I must tell you about our marvellous planned courses of historical dancing; they're quite revolu-tionary."

"Let us go home and not argue," Wangust said, "but spare me the historical dancing."

They went home, but they argued. It was a time of transition. Between the generations lay gulfs of age and outlook. The old thought that the young were reckless, the young that the old were hidebound. The same pat-tern had appeared down the ages. No agreement was possible, only truce; change was in the air, manifesting itself as discomfort.

"But I understand, and young Cobalt doesn't!" Chun Hwa cried out to himself that evening; "Wangust brought me from the time before the catastrophe, so that I have standards of comparison. I know how wrong these children are! I know there is nothing so precious as peace, in which a man may tend his own affairs...."

He slept little that night, waking discomforted. With dawn, he took a hurried and lonely meal, afterwards going to find Leg of Leather, saddling him with the pulpit saddle. Like a phantom, he rode off into the misty groves, unwilling to barter words any more; he suspected that Cobalt's ideas were second-hand, and newly acquired at that. It made her impervious to reasoning. He was too ancient for anything but the heady lullaby of riding.

Unthinkingly turning in the old direction, he made across the burnt lands. One ruined machine still picked with stiff daintiness at the carcass of another. In a few minutes, the white stallion was climbing the slopes of

Blighted Profile. As they neared the top, the first green leaves of the apple trees waved above the ridge. Then they gained the highest point, midway between green and black worlds.

Yalleranda saw him perched in his usual position from his mother's cottage. Thin and sweet as celery, his legs carried him twinkling up the slope, dodging, ducking, climbing round the apple trees. Yalleranda was the snake sliding towards its victim, the seducer coming, the blade falling, as he whipped through the knee-high grasses.

A few yards from the old man, concealed, he halted. He was magnificent. He saw him as nobody else would have seen him: something like a snowman ready to melt back to the water from which it was formed. For Yal-leranda, an emanation blew from him like a breeze: and it carried the desire for death. Yalleranda savoured it. It intoxicated. It was as real as treacle,

Chun Hwa sat nodding in the saddle, nodding in con-cord with the cropping of the stallion, seeing neither the bad land on his left nor the good land on his right.

He was thinking that if he could go into the future, he could find there proof that Cobalt's policies, and the policies of her generation, would bring forth evil fruit. But of course he would never get there; it was a

silly old man's silly dream. Although he could not see why visit-ing the future should be impossible, mathematicians and scientists had long ago proved it impossible. About that, he could do nothing. He was fit for nothing but reveries —the skin-thin reveries that dotage stretches over its bare bones. He was ripe for dying.

Fearfully, Chun Hwa shook his head, sitting up straight, hurt by his own thoughts.

A small, dark-eyed boy with hair wild and tawny as a lion's mane stood with his hand on the horse's bridle.

"You were nearly asleep," the boy said.

"I was dreaming," he said, thinking how savage, how beautiful he was in his wiry way. This was a generation even beyond Cobalt

"You were dreaming of visiting the future," the boy said.

Chun Hwa was hardly surprised. He recalled local talk about wild people with wild talents, people with contaminated blood, strange abilities and unnatural desires, sports of the after-effects of high-radiation war. Wangust had warned him of them, and he had laughed. Now he laughed again, wheezily, without knowing why.

"A man dreams many things," he said. "What do you dream about, young man?"

"My name is Yalleranda, and I dream about. . . oh, sunshine all muddy on my body while I eat the little worms in apples, or about the hard stones in the middle of clouds."

"Where do you live?" he asked sharply, disliking the boy's answer.

Instead of replying, he twirled savagely round Leg of Leather, coming to the opposite stirrup and grasping Chun Hwa's shoe. Yalleranda's mustard hair touched his white smock.

"I know where there is a machine that will send you into the future," he said, darkling his eyes up at the old man.

As Chun Hwa followed the little figure down the high ridge, down Blighted Profile, he felt no wonderment. He was an old hand at accepting the world's oddities. All he did was cling on to the saddle pommels, letting the boy lead the stallion. In a shower of loose cobbles underfoot, they came to a cave set high on the savage slope, looking across the desolation below.

"It's in here," Yalleranda said, ducking into the gloom.

"Well, and why not?" Chun Hwa asked himself sleepily, not moving, not dismounting. "During the ter-rible war, technology reached its climax. Many weapons were secret. ... It could have been left here, forgotten . . . found by this child. Why not?"

While he waited outside on the horse, Yalleranda flicked round in the twilight of the cave, busy about his machine. He had found it abandoned; nobody else knew of it—except the other people who had entered its powerful beam, and they were in no position to say anything.

Darting to one side, nimble as ponies' tails, he pressed down one little red switch. A murmur grew, then

dwindled. Out through the mouth of the cave went a beam like a grey mist, like the tongue of a searchlight licking through thin cloud. This was the disintegrator beam which had formed the burnt valley below.

Yalleranda slid round its edges, slipped out of the cave. Leg of Leather pawed .the ground, eyeing the fog uneasily.

"There you are!" Yalleranda cried, throwing up his arms. "Ride into that beam, old man, and you'll be carried into the future. Go on, spur your horse!"

Chun Hwa was puzzled. But the child's eyes were oddly commanding. He spoke to the stallion. Leg of Leather bridled, tossed up his head, then went forward smartly.

His face wizened as if yearning were as sharp as sloe juice, Yalleranda watched his old prize ride into the dis-integrator beam. Its surface was smooth, calm as an inland sea. It lapped up greedily round horse and rider, that cruel sea took them atom by atom, annihilating them absolutely. Like a man riding under a stretch of water, Chun Hwa rode without crying out or looking back—into the infinite future.

Inevitably times changed. Under a new regime, with harsh laws of personal responsibility, the ability to travel in time atrophied; soon the machines had to go alone. Their range of survey was decreasing. Only for a few more centuries would they dredge up this ancient material for beauty and for nightmare

Judas Danced

IT WAS NOT A FAIR TRIAL.

You understand I was not inclined to listen properly, but it was not a fair trial. It had a mistrustful and furtive haste about it. Judge, counsel and jury all took care to be as brief and explicit as possible. I said nothing, but I knew why; everyone wanted to get back to the dances.

So it was not very long before the judge stood up and pronounced sentence:

"Alexander Abel Ybo, this court finds you guilty of murdering Parowen Scryban for the second time."

I could have laughed out loud. I nearly did.

He went on: "You are therefore condemned to suffer death by strangulation for the second time, which sen-tence will be carried out within the next week."

Round the court ran a murmur of excitement.

In a way, even I felt satisfied. It had been an unusual case: few are the people who care to risk facing death a second time; for the first time you die makes the prospect worse, not better. For just a minute, the court was still, then it cleared with almost indecent haste. In a little while, only I was left there.

I, Alex Abel Ybo—or approximately he—came care-fully down out of the prisoner's box and limped the length of the dusty room to the door. As I went, I looked at my hands. They weren't trembling.

Nobody bothered to keep a check on me. They knew they could pick me up whenever they were ready to execute sentence. I was unmistakable in Union and I had nowhere to go. I was the man with the club foot who could not dance; nobody could mistake me for anyone else. Only I could do that.

Outside in the dark sunlight, that wonderful woman stood waiting for me with her husband, waiting on the court steps. The sight of her began to bring back life and hurt to my veins. I raised my hand to her as my custom was.

"We've come to take you home, Alex," Husband said, stepping towards me.

"I haven't got a home," I said, addressing her.

"I meant our home," he informed me.

"Elucidation accepted," I said. "Take me away, take me away, take me away, Charlemagne. And let me sleep."

"You need a sleep after all you have been through," he said. Why, he sounded nearly sympathetic.

Sometimes I called him Charlemagne because I have a historical cast of mind, sometimes just Charley. Or Cheeps, or Jags, or Jaggers, or anything, as the mood took me. He seemed to forgive me. Perhaps he even liked it—I don't know. Personal magnetism takes you a long way; it has taken me so far I don't even have to remember names.

They stopped a passing taxi and we all climbed in. It was a tumbril, they tell me. You know, French? Circa seventeen-eighty, something—back before the centuries got silted up with big wars. Husband sat one side, Wife the other, each holding one of my arms, as if they thought I should get violent. I let them do it, although the idea amused me.

"Hallo, friends!" I said ironically. Sometimes I called them "parents", or "disciples", or sometimes "patients". Anything. "You look as if you have aged," I said.

The wonderful woman was crying slightly.

"Look at her!" I said to Husband. "She's lovely when she cries, that I swear. I could have married her, you know, if I had not been dedicated. Tell him, you won-derful creature, tell him how I turned you down!"

Through her sobbing, she said, "Alex said he had more important things to do than sex."

"So you've got me to thank for Perdita!" I told him. "It was a big sacrifice, but I'm happy to see you happy." Often now I called her Perdita. It seemed to fit her. He laughed at what I had said, and then we were all laugh-ing. Yes, it was good to be alive; I knew I made them feel good to be alive. They were loyal. I had to give them something—I had no gold and silver.

The tumbril stopped outside Charley's place—the Husband Residence, I'd better say. Oh, the things I've called that place! Someone should have recorded them all. It was one of those inverted beehive houses: just room for a door and an elevator on the ground floor, but the fifth floor could hold a ballroom.

Topply, topply. Up we went to the fifth. There was no sixth floor; had there been, I should have gone up there, the way I felt. I asked for it anyhow, just to see the wonderful woman brighten up. She liked me to joke, even when I wasn't in a joking mood. I could tell she still loved me so much it hurt her.

"Now for a miracle, ye pampered jades," I said, stepp-ing forth, clumping into the living room.

I seized an empty vase from a low shelf and spat into it. Ah, the old cunning was still there! It filled at once with wine, sweet and bloody-looking. I sipped and found it good.

"Go on and taste it, Perdy!" I told her.

Wonderful W. turned her head sadly away. She would not touch that vase. I could have eaten every single strand of hair on her head, but she seemed unable to see the wine. I really believe she could not see that wine.

"Please don't go through all that again, Alex," she implored me wearily. Little faith, you see—the old, old story. (Remind me to tell you a new one I heard the other day.) I put my behind on one chair and my bad foot on another and sulked.

They came and stood by me ... not too close. "Come nearer," I coaxed, looking up under my eye-brows and pretending to growl at them. "I won't hurt you. I only murder Parowen Scryban, remember?"

"We've got to talk to you about that," Husband said desperately. I thought he looked as if he had aged.

"I think you look as if you have aged, Perdita," I said. Often I called him Perdita too; why, man, they some-times looked so worried you couldn't tell them apart.

"I cannot live for ever, Alex," he replied. "Now try and concentrate about this killing will you?"

I waved a hand and tried to belch. At times I can belch! like a sinking ship.

"We do all we can to help you, Alex," he said. I heard him although my eyes were shut; can you do that? "But we can only keep you out of trouble if you co-operate. It's the dancing that does it; nothing else betrays you like dancing. You've got to promise you'll stay away from it In fact, we want you to promise that you'll let us restrain you. To keep you away from the dancing. Something about that dancing. . . ."

He was going on and on, and I could still hear him. But other things were happening. That word "dancing" got in the way of all his other words. It started a sort of flutter under my eyelids. I crept my hand out and took the wonderful woman's hand, so soft and lovely, and listened to that word "dancing" dancing. It brought its own rhythm, bouncing about like an eyeball inside my head. The rhythm grew louder, he was shouting. I sat up suddenly, opening my eyes. W. woman was on the floor, very pale. "You squeezed too hard, boy," she whispered.

I could see that her little hand was the only red thing she had.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I really wonder you two don't throw me out for good!" I couldn't help it, I just started laughing. I like laughing. I can laugh even when nothing's funny. Even when I saw their faces, I still kept laughing like mad.

"Stop it!" Husband said. For a moment he looked as if he would have hit me. But I was laughing so much I did not recognize him. It must have done them good to see me enjoying myself; they both needed a fillip, I could tell.

"If you stop laughing, I'll take you down to the club," he said, greasily bribing.

I stopped. I always know when to stop. With all humility, that is a great natural gift.

"The club's the place for me," I said. "I've already got a club foot—I'm half-way there! Verily, verily, I say unto you let's go."

I stood up.

"Lead on, my loyal supporters, my liege lords," I ordered.

"You and I will go alone, Alex," Husband said. "The wonderful woman will stay here. She really ought to go to bed."

"What's in it for her?" I joked. Then I followed him to the elevator. He knows I don't like staying in any one place for long.

When I got to the club, I knew, I would want to be somewhere else. That's the worst of having a mission: it makes you terribly restless. Sometimes I am so restless I could die. Ordinary people just don't know what the word means. I could have married her if I had been ordinary. They call it destiny.

But the club was good.

We walked there. I limped there. I made sure I limped badly.

The club had a timescreen. That, I must admit, was my only interest in the club. I don't care for women. Or men. Not living women or men. I only enjoy them when they are back in time.

This night—I nearly said "this particular night", but there was nothing particularly particular about it—the timescreen had been turned roughly a hundred and sixty centuries back into the past. I guess it was Colour War stuff they were viewing by the women's dresses and the many underground shots. A large crowd of people were looking in as Perdita Caesar and I entered, so I started to pretend he had never seen one of the wall screens before. You know me: Laughter Inc.

"The tele-eyes which are projected back over history consume a fabulous amount of power every second," I told him loudly in a voice which suggested I had swal-lowed a poker. "It makes them very expensive, especially as the further you go back, the more power you use. It means private citizens cannot afford screens and tele-eyes, just as once they could not afford their own private cinemas. This club is fortunately very rich. Its members sleep in gold leaf at nights."

Several people were glancing round at me already. Caesar was shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

"The tele-eyes get more and more short-sighted; these days they cannot get a picture further than about twenty-three thousand years back," I told him. "We can see my namesake Alexander the Great, but not the men who put up the early pyramids, owing to the limitations of science. Science, as you know, is a system for taking away with one hand while giving with the other."

He could not answer cleverly. I went on: "It also proves impossible, in these degenerate days, due to the aforesaid limitations, to send human beings further back in time than one week. And that costs so much that only governments can do it. As you may have heard, nothing can be sent ahead into time—there's no future in it!"

I had to laugh at that. It was funny, and quite spon-taneous.

Many people were calling out to me, and Caesar Borgia was dragging at my arm, trying to make me be quiet.

"I wouldn't spoil anyone's fun!" I shouted. "You lot get on with your watching; I'll get on with my speech."

But I did not want to talk to a lot of feather-bedders like them. So I sat down without saying another word, Boy Borgia collapsing beside me with a sigh of relief. Suddenly I felt very, very sad. Life just is not what it was; once on a time, I could have married this husband's wife.

"Physically, you can go back only one week," I whispered, "optically, twenty-three hundred centuries. It's very sad."

It was very sad. The people on the screen were also sad. They lived in a bad time and appeared to be getting little pleasure from it. I tried to weep for them but failed because at the moment they seemed just animated his-tory. I saw them as period pieces, stuck there some generations before reading and writing had died out altogether and the fetters of literacy fell for ever from the world. Little any of them cared for the patterns of history, which are far more important than any sort of literacy ever invented.

"I've had an idea I want to tell you about, Cheezer," I said. It was a good idea.

"Can't it wait?" he asked. "I'd like to see this scan. It's all about the Afro-Chinese Allegiance."

"I must tell you before I forget."

"Come on," he said resignedly, getting up.

"You are too loyal to me," I complained. "Yom spoil me. I'll speak to St. Peter about it, verily I will"

As meek as you like, I followed him into an ante-room, He drew himself a drink from an automatic man in one corner. He was trembling. I did not tremble, although at the back of my mind lurked many things to tremble about.

"Go on then, say whatever in hell you want to say," he told me, shading his eyes with his hand. I have seen him use that trick before; he did it after I killed Parowen Scryban the first time, I remember. There's nothing wrong with my memory, except in patches.

"I had this idea," I said, trying to recall it. "This idea —oh, yes. History. I got the idea looking at those twenty-second century people. Mythology is the key to every-thing, isn't it? I mean, a man builds his life on a set of myths, doesn't he—any man in any period? Well, in our world, the world we've inherited, those accepted myths were religious for centuries until about the nine-teenth. By then, a majority of Europeans were literate, or within reach of it, and then for several centuries the myths became literary ones: tragedy was no longer the difference between grace and nature but between art and reality. That's a large-size idea, no, Squeezer?"

Julius dropped his hand. He was interested. I could see he wondered what was coming next. I hardly knew myself.

"Then mechanical aids—television, computers, scan-ners of every type—abolished literacy," I said. "Into the vacuum came the timescreens, if I may speak capsule-wise. Our mythologies are now historical: tragedy has become simply a failure to see the future."

I beamed at him and bowed, not letting him know I was beyond tragedy. He just sat there. He said nothing. Sometimes such terrible boredom descends on me that I can hardly fight against it.

"Is my reasoning sound?" I asked. (Two women looked into the room, saw me, and left again hurriedly. They must have sensed I did not want them, otherwise they would have come to me; I am young and handsome —I am not thirty-three yet.)

"You could always reason well," Marcus Aurelius Marconi said, "but it just never leads anywhere. God, I'm so tired."

This bit of reasoning leads somewhere. I beg you to believe it, Holy Roman," I said, flopping on my knees before him. "It's the state Solite philosophy I've really been telling you about. That's why although they keep the death penalty for serious crimes—like murdering a bastard called Parowen Scryban—they go back in time the next day and call off the execution. They believe you should die for your crime, you see? But more deeply they believe every man should face his true future. They've—we've all seen too many premature deaths on the time- screens. Romans, Khmers, Celts, Incas, English, Israelis.
Every race. Individuals—all dying too soon, failing to fulfil"

Oh, I admit it, I was crying on his knees by then, although bravely disguising it by barking like a dog: a Great Dane. Hamlet. Not in our stars but in ourselves. (I've watched W.S. write that bit.)

I was crying at last to think the police would come without fail within the next week to snuff me out, and then resurrect me again, according to my sentence. I was remembering what it was like last time. I was always remembering. They took so long about it.

They took so long. Though I struggled, I could not move; those police know how to hold a man. My wind-pipe was blocked, as sentence of court demanded. No oxygen for me, no O for A. A. Ybo.

And then, it seemed, the boxes sailed in. Starting with! small ones, they grew bigger. They were black boxes, all of them. Faster they came, and faster, inside me and out. I'm telling you how it felt, my God! And they blocked the whole, whole universe, black and red, red on black. With my lungs really crammed tight with boxes, out of the world I went. Dead!

Into limbo I went, I descended into hell.

I don't say nothing happened, but I could not grasp what was happening there, and I was unable to partici-pate. Then I was alive again.

It was abruptly the day before the strangulation once more, and the government agent had come back in time and rescued me, so that from one point of view I was not strangled. But I still remembered it happening, and the boxes, and limbo. Don't talk to me about paradoxes. The government expended several billion megavolts sending that man back for me, and those megavolts account for all paradoxes. I was dead and then alive again.

Now I was sentenced to undergo it all once more. No wonder there was little crime nowadays: the threat of that horrible experience held many a likely criminal back. But I had to kill Parowen Scryban; just so long as they went back and resurrected him after I had finished with him, I had to go and do it again. Call it a moral obligation. No one understands. It is as if I were living in a world of my own.

"Get up, get up! You're biting my ankles."

Where had I heard that voice before? At last I could no longer ignore it. Whenever I try to think, voices interrupt. I stopped chewing whatever I was chewing, unblocked my eyes and sat up. This was just a room; I had been in rooms before. A man was standing over me; I did not recognize him. He was just a man.

"You look as if you have aged," I told him.

"I can't live for ever, thank God," he said. "Now get up and let's get you home. You're going to bed."

"What home?" I asked. "What bed? Who in the gentle name of anyone may you be?"

He looked sick.

"Just call me Adam," he said sickly.

I recognized him then and went with him. We had been in some sort of a club; he never told me why. I still don't know why we went to that club.

The house he took me to was shaped like a beehive upside-down, and I walked there like a drunk. A club-footed drunk.

This wonderful stranger took me up in an elevator to a soft bed. He undressed me and put me in that soft bed as gently as if I had been his son. I am really impressed by the kindness strangers show me; personal magnetism, I suppose.

For as long as I could after he had left me, I lay in the bed in the inverted beehive. Then the darkness grt,w thick and sticky, and I could imagine all the fat, furry bodies, chitinously winged, of the bees on the ceiling. A minute more and I should fall head first into them. Stubbornly, I fought to sweat it out, but a man can only stand so much.

On hands and knees I crawled out of bed and out of the room. Quickly, softly, I clicked the door shut behind me; not a bee escaped.

People were talking in a lighted room along the cor-ridor. I crawled to the doorway, looking and listening. The wonderful stranger talked to the wonderful woman; she was in night attire (pronounced "nighta-ta") with a hand bandaged.

She was saying: "You will have to see the authorities in the morning and petition them."

He was saying: "It'll do no good. I can't get the law changed. You know that. It's hopeless."

I merely listened.

Sinking on to the bed, he buried his face in his hands, finally looking up to say, "The law insists on personal responsibility. We've got to take care of Alex. It's a reflection of the time we live in; owing to the timescreens we've got—whether we like it or not—historical perspectives. We can see that the whole folly of the past was due to failures in individual liability. Our laws are naturally framed to correct that, which they do—it just happens to be tough on us."

He sighed and said, "The sad thing is, even Alex realizes that, He talked quite sensibly to me at the club about not evading the future."

"It hurts me most when he talks sensibly," the wonder-ful double-you said. "It makes you realize he is still capable of suffering."

He took her bandaged hand, almost as if they had a pain they hoped to alleviate by sharing it between them.

"I'll go and see the authorities in the morning," he promised, "and ask them to let the execution be final— no reprieve afterwards."

Even that did not seem to satisfy her.

Perhaps, like me, she could not tell what either of them were talking about. She shook her head miserably from side to side.

"If only it hadn't been for his club foot," she said. "If only it hadn't been for that, he could have danced the sickness out of himself."

Her face was growing more and more screwed up.

It was enough. More.

"Laugh and grow fat," I suggested. I croaked because my throat was dry. My glands are always like bullets. It reminded me of a frog, so I hopped spontaneously into the room. They did not move; I sat on the bed with them.

"All together again," I said.

They did not move.

"Go back to bed, Alex," she of the wonderfulness said in a low voice.

They were looking at me; goodness knows what they wanted me to say or do. I stayed where I was. A little green clock on a green shelf said nine o'clock.

"Oh, holy heavens," the double-you said. "What does the future hold?"

"Double chins for you, double-yous for me," I joked. That green clock said a minute past nine, I felt as if its little hand were slowly, slowly disembowelling me.

If I waited long enough, I knew I should think of something. They talked to me while I thought and waited; what good they imagined they were doing is beyond me, but I would not harm them. They meant well. They're the best people in the world. That doesn't mean to say I have to listen to them.

The thought about the clock arrived. Divine revela-tion.

"The dancing will be on now," I said, standing up like a jack knife.

"No ""Husband said.

"No!" Perdita said.

"You look as if you have aged," I told them. That is my favourite line in all speech.

I ran out of the room, slamming the door behind me, ran step-club-step-club down the passage and hurled myself into the elevator. With infinitesimal delay, I chose the right button and sank to ground level. There, I wedged the lattice door open with a chair; that put the elevator out of action.

People in the street took no notice of me. The fools just did not realize who I was. Nobody spoke' to me as I hurried along, so of course I replied in kind.

Thus I came to the dance area.

Every community has its dance area. There are three of them in Union. Think of all that drama, gladiatorial contests, reading, and sport have ever meant in the past; now they are all merged into dance, inevitably, for only by dance—our kind of dance—can history be inter-preted. And interpretation of history is our being, because through the timescreens we see that history is life. It lives round us, so we dance it. Unless we have club-club-clubbadub-dub feet.

Many dances were in progress among the thirty per-manent sets. The sets were only casually separated from each other, so that spectators or dancers going from one to another might get the sense of everything happening at once, which is the sense the timescreens give you.

That is what I savagely love about history. It is not past: it is always going on. Cleopatra lies for ever in the sweaty arms of Anthony, Socrates continually gulps his hemlock down. You just have to be watching the right screen or the right dance.

Most of the dancers were amateurs—although the term means little where everyone dances out their roles whenever possible. I stood among a crowd, watching. The brightest movements have a dizzying effect; they excite me. To one side of me, Marco Polo sweeps exul-tantly through Cathay to Kubla Khan. Ahead, four children who represent the satellites of Jupiter, glide out to meet the sombre figure of Galileo Galilei. To the other side, the Persian poet Firdausi leaves for exile in Bagdad, Suryavarman builds the beautiful palace at old Angkor. Further still, I catch a glimpse of Heyerdahl turning towards the tide.

And if I cross my eyes, raft, telescope, pagoda, palace, palm all mingle. That is meaning! If I could only dance it!

I cannot stay still. Here is my restlessness again, my only companion. I move, eyes unfocused. I pass round the sets or across them, mingling stiff-legged among the dancers. Something compels me, something I cannot remember. Now I cannot even remember who I am. I've gone beyond mere identity.

Everywhere the dancing is faster, matching my heart. I would not harm anyone, except one person who harmed me eternally. It is he I must find. Why do they dance so fast? The movements drive me like

whips.

Now I run into a mirror. It stands on a crowded set. I fight with the creature imprisoned in it, thinking it real. Then I understand that it is only a mirror. Shaking my head, I clear the blood from behind my eyes and regard myself. Yes, that is unmistakably me. And I re-member who I am meant to be.

I first found who I was meant to be when, as a child, I saw one of the greatest dramas of all. There it was, captured by the timescreens! The soldiers and cen-turions came and a bragging multitude. The sky grew dark as they banged three crosses into the ground. And when I saw the Man they nailed upon the central cross, I knew I had His face. I knew that I was He.

Here it is now, that same sublime face, looking at me in pity and pain out of the glass. Nobody believes me; I no longer tell them who I think I am. But one thing I know I have to do. I have to do it.

So now I run again clump-trot-clump-trot, knowing just what to look for. All these great sets, pillars and panels of concrete and plastic, I run round them all, looking.

And here it is. Professionals dance out this drama, my drama, so difficult and intricate and sad. Pilate in dove grey, Mary Magdalene moves in green, blue is the gown of Peter. Hosts of dancers fringe them, representing the crowd who did not care. I care! My eyes burn among them, seeking. Then I have the man I want.

He is just leaving the set to rest out of sight until the cue for his last dance. I follow him, keeping behind cover like a crab in a thicket.

Yes! He looks just like me! He is ray living image, and consequently bears That face. Yet it is now overlaid with make-up, pink and solid, so that when he comes out of the bright lights he looks like a corpse.

I am near enough to see the thick muck on his skin, with its runnels and wrinkles caused by sweat and move-ment. Underneath it all, the true face is clear enough to me, although the make-up plastered on it represents Judas.

To have That face and to play Judas! It is the most terrible of all wickedness. But this is Parowen Scryban, whom I have twice murdered for this very blasphemy. It is some consolation to know that although the govern-ment slipped back in time and saved him afterwards, he must still remember those good deaths, be always remembering them. Now I must kill him again.

As he turns into a rest room, I have him. Ah, my fingers slip into that slippery pink stuff, but underneath the skin is firm. He is smaller, slender, tired with the strain of dancing. He falls forward with me on his back.

I kill him now, although in a few hours they will come back and rescue him and it will all not have happened. Never mind the shouting: squeeze. Squeeze, dear God!

When blows fall on my head from behind, it makes no difference. Scryban should be dead by now, the traitor, I roll off him and let many hands tie me into a strait-jacket.

Many lights are in my eyes. Many voices are talking. I just lie there, thinking I recognize two of the voices, one a man’s, one a woman’s.

The man says, "Yes, Inspector, I know that under law parents are responsible for their own children. We look after Alex as far as we can, but he's mad. He's a throw-back! I—God, Inspector, I hate the creature."

"You mustn't say that!" the woman cries. "Whatever he does, he's our son."

They sound too shrill to be true. I cannot think what they make such a fuss about. So I open my eyes and look at them. She is a wonderful woman but I recognize neither her nor the man; they just do not interest me. Scryban I do recognize.

He is standing rubbing his throat. He looks a real mess with his two faces all mixed in together like a Picasso. Because he is breathing, I know they have come back and saved him again. No matter: he will remem-ber, always remember.

The man they call Inspector (and who, I ask, would want a name like that?) goes over to speak to Scryban.

"Your father tells me you are actually this madman's brother," he says to Scryban. Judas hangs his head, though he continues to massage his neck.

"Yes," he says. He is as quiet as the woman was shrill; strange how folks vary. "Alex and I are twin brothers. I changed my name years ago—the publicity, you know — harmful to my professional career. ..."

How terribly tired and bored I feel.

Who is whose brother, I ask myself, who mothers whom? I'm lucky: I own no relations. These people look sad company. The saddest in the universe.

"I think you all look as if you have aged!" I shout suddenly.

That makes the Inspector come and stand over me, which I dislike. He has knees half-way up his legs. I manage to resemble one of the tritons on one of Benvenuto Cellini's salt-cellars, and so he turns away at last to speak to Husband.

"All right," he says. "I can see this is just one of those things nobody can be responsible for. I'll arrange for the reprieve to be countermanded. This time, when the devil is dead he stays dead."

Husband embraces Scryban. Wonderful woman begins to cry. Traitors all! I start to laugh, making it so harsh and loud and horrible it frightens even me.

What none of them understand is this: on the third time I shall rise again.

The millennia pass. We must skip over the forty million years known as the Middle Period, that time of change when nothing really changed. For the solar system, there is only one long day; the sun makes the day, its planets fashion their own nights. And as long as the sun burns, quiet as a wick in a shuttered room, life too enjoys its uninterrupted day; only the tiny individual lives have to endure each their own nights

O Ishrail!

The mental health ship Cyberqueen lay quietly against a long wharf. Alone in one of its many cabins, Davi Dael sat waiting. The buttercup in his tunic was beginning to wilt. He half-smiled down at it because it seemed the one connection between him and the Bergharra township he had left early that morning; he had picked it before catching a fast gyre into New Union. Nothing else Davi could see, either here in the waiting-room or outside the window, had as much colour as his buttercup.

The waiting-room was all greens and greys, relieved only by the faumium fittings. Outside, there were only greys and blacks, as evening yawned down on acres of shunting yard; on the other side of the ship, the Horby River would echo the same sober tones. Quiet. Quiet for parsecs round, that treacherous quiet when nothing stirs but the anxiety deep in the bowels.

In Davi's mind, the ordinary worries of a busy man were eclipsed by larger preoccupations which grew and grew, as if nourished by the silence. He waited tensely while these preoccupations rumbled as raggedly as thunder round his head. Nothing constructive would come of them: the elephantine anxieties padded head to tail like a series of catch-phrases: parsecs, galactic federa-tion, hyper-space, interpenetrators.

These were the words which bothered Davi. His un-quick brain turned them over time and again, as if hoping to find something relevant beneath them. Nearing fifty, he had known most of the words for years; they had been just words, without any attachments to experience, dictionary words. Only in this season had they come to unsettle his whole life.

A silent, quick footstep passed the door. Davi was at once on his feet, a sick feeling rising with him. What conclusion had they come to here about Ishrail? Was he born on earth or not? Or (it was really all the same ques-tion) had he been proved sane or insane?

For a minute Davi stood trembling, then sat wearily down again as he realized the footsteps had no connec-tion with his existence. He resumed his bored scrutiny of the marshalling yards; this kind of sight was unfamiliar to him, living as he did deep in the country. Here, the imports of a great sea-fringed city were borne away to their destination. His interests being generally confined to the cattle he bred, Davi would have been indifferent to the spectacle at any other time; now, it did possess a faint tinkle of interest, for he saw it through Ishrail's eyes. And that changed the pattern entirely.

The uncountable miles of track, from Ishrail's view-point, belonged to a primitive transport system on a re-mote globe. All round this globe stretched—not sky, as Davi had once idly thought—but the great complicated highway called space. Not a simple nothingness: rather, Ishrail explained, an unfathomable interplay of forces, fields and planes, Ishrail had laughed to hear that earth-word, "space"; he had called it not space but a maze of stresses. But of course Ishrail might well be crazy. Cer-tainly nobody in Bergharra had ever talked as he did.

And through the maze of stress-fields, Ishrail had said, rode the Interpenetrators. Davi thought of them as space ships, but Ishrail called them Interpenetrators. They apparently were not made of metal at all, but of mentally powered force shields, which fed on the stress-fields and changed as they changed; so the people of the galaxy rode in safety between the civilized planets. At least, that was what Ishrail claimed.

And the planets warred on one another. But even the war was not as Davi understood the term. It was as stylized as chess, as formal as a handshake, as chivalrous as an ambulance, as unrelenting as a guillotine. Its objectives were more nebulous and vast than materialist earthmen could visualize. Or so said Ishrail, but of course Ishrail might be mad.

Even if he was, that did not affect Davi's loving admiration of him.

"Don't let them find him insane! Don't let them find him insane!" Davi said, in an agony of repetition, speak-ing to the grey walls.

And yet ... if you proved Ishrail to be sane . . . you had to accept his mad version of reality.

After all his hours of waiting, Davi was unprepared when the cabin door opened. He was standing with his fists clenched to his tunic, and dropped them in con-fusion as the white-haired man came in. This was Brother Joh Shansfor, the psychiatrist who had interviewed Davi in the Cyberqueen—one of the roving fleet of specialist ships which had replaced the old static conception of a hospital—when Davi had first asked for help for Ishrail in Bergharra. Shansfor was tall, thin and brisk, and remarkably ugly, although age had now taken the sting out of his features, leaving them little more than notably rugged.

Davi went straight over to him.

"Ishrail?" he asked.

Under that tense, eager stare, Shansfor flinched.

"We aren't actually certain yet," he said, in his formal way. "Some of the factors involved invite very cautious evaluation indeed. . . ."

"It's a month since Ishrail came aboard here, three weeks since you brought him to New Union," Davi said.
"I introduced him to you for his own sake, but he can't like it here, being under constant observation and every- thing. Surely in all that time"

"A quick decision would only be a foolish one," Shans-for said. "Ishrail is entirely happy and safe here; and you may rest assured be is not being treated like an ordinary patient."

"You told me that before!" There were angry tears in Davi's eyes. He had the sensation that the whole organization of the mental health ship was rearing up against him. "In the short time since I found him, I've grown to love Ishrail. Surely even you people here can feel his goodness of character."

"His character is not in question. We are examining his mind," Shansfor replied, "Excuse me if I sit down; it has been a trying day."

He sat down on a hard chair and allowed his shoulders to sag slightly. Davi, old enough to understand the weari-ness that might lie behind that innocent-looking gesture, felt his wrath deflected. Distrusting psychiatrists enough to wonder if the incident might not be a covert attempt to win sympathy, he still kept hardness in his tone as he said, "All the same, Brother Shansfor, you must have felt his gentle nature. Give me a personal opinion for heaven's sake; I'm a stock-breeder, not a lawyer. Ishrail's saner than you or I, isn't he?"

"No," Shansfor said slowly. "If you want a personal opinion, your protégé is sinking rapidly into

schizo-phrenic trauma. Paranoia is also present. He is, in popular usage, a hopeless case."

Colour drained from under Davi's tan. He fumbled wordlessly for words among the green and grey slices of whirling room,

"Let me see Ishrail P he finally gasped.

"That will not be possible, Mr. Dael, I regret to say. The medical council have agreed that the patient will be happier in isolation, away from disturbing external influences."

"But I must see him," Davi said. He could not believe what Shansfor was saying; for an insane moment he thought the man must be talking about someone other than Ishrail. "I've got to see him—I'm his friend, Ishrail's friend! You can't keep him here!"

Shansfor stood up. His face, like Davi's, was pale. He said nothing, merely waiting for Davi to finish. That was more ominous than words.

"Look here," Davi said, unable to resist argument, although guessing already how useless it might be. "This tale Ishrail has told us about the great civilization of the galaxy—the stress-fields of space—the interpenetratprs— all the details of life on other planets—strange animals and flowers—you can't believe he made it all up in his head? Some of these planets he talks about—Droxy, Owlenj—you surely don't think they're just fictitious?"

"Mr. Dael," Shansfor said in a brittle voice, "please credit us with knowing our business here. The" patient has a fertile imagination; it has finally collapsed under the stress of too much reading—omnivorous reading, I may add, which has encompassed both learned works and cheap trash."

"But his story of this galactic war" Davi protested,

"Tell me," Shansfor said with dangerous calm. "Do you believe a galactic war is now raging, Mr. Dael?"

Pause. The engine yards outside were floating away on a tide of darkness in which isolated lights strove to act as buoys. The sky was one big cloud, cozy over New Union. Supposing I do believe, Davi thought, supposing I do believe the whole fantastic business, how can I prove I'm sane any more easily than Ishrail can? How can I prove to myself I'm sane? Two months ago, I would have laughed at this galactic rigmarole. It's just that the way Ishrail told it, it had the ring of truth. Unmistakable! And yet—why, it is all frighteningly far-fetched. But that's why I believe it: it's too tall not to be true. Believe? So I do believe, hey? But I'm not sure. If, I were really sure, they'd lock me up too. Oh, Ishrail.... No, better play safe; after all, I'm no use to Ishrail once they have doubts about me. Before the cock crows twice. . . .

"Uh. . . . Oh, I don't know what to believe. ..." he faltered miserably, ashamed of remaining uncommitted, looking away from Shansfor. The yellow buttercup mocked his downcast eyes.

"I actually came to tell you that the medical council is still in session," Shansfor said, his voice a shade warmer than urbane. "The Arch-Brother Inald Uatt, our director, is there, if you would care to speak to him."

"I suppose I'd better."

Stop shaking, you old fool, Davi told himself. But he could not stop; directly he had denied Ishrail, he

knew he believed in him and in all he stood for. He knew further that nobody else believed. So it was up to him, Davi Dael, whether Ishrail was released from what might be a life's confinement. Larger issues, too, might depend on his efforts, for through Ishrail lay the way to bright, friendly worlds far beyond the Sun's unwelcoming cluster of planets. All he had to do was to convince a board of experts, who had apparently already made up their minds on the subject of Ishrail's sanity, that they were wrong. That was all: but it would not be easy.

"Can I see Ishrail first?" Davi asked.

"You force me to answer that question as I answered it before—with a negative," Shansfor replied. "Now if you'll come with me, I think the council will see you. ..."

They walked down the corridor to a lift, went up one deck to a more grandly appointed part of the ship, and so into a fur-lined board room. Thick curtains had been drawn here, a fire burned, and on one wall hung an original Wadifango, an anatomical drawing of a tiger.

A long table stood in the middle of the room, soft chairs ranged its walls, but the four men present stood stretching their legs by the fire. As the round of intro-ductions disclosed, Arch-Brother Inald Uatt was a small, stocky man with a bald head, clothed from neck to foot in tight blue flannel, his manner reserved, his voice dry.

He shook hands with Davi, crossing to the table to get a bundle of notes secured by a plain silver clasp.

"This is a very interesting case for us, Mr. Dael," he remarked conversationally.

"It's more than a case to me, sir," Davi said.

"Er—yes. Of course; you and he became very friendly in the brief time you were together, I understand. Be warned, though, against letting the matter become an obsession."

"It's not becoming an obsession," Davi said. "I take Ishrail's part, sir, because there is nobody else to take it. I feel it would be easy for him to be victimized. The whole thing seemed pretty simple once, but since he's been up here at New Union in your hands it seems to have got more and more complicated."

He was aware as he spoke of sounding less courteous than he had intended. He was confused. The board room confused him, the rather restrained members of the council confused him; they differed so greatly from the people of his home hills. Although in his own sphere of dairy farming and stock-breeding Davi was well known and respected, here he felt out of his depth, too conscious of seeming the simple countryman among the experts, aware his tunic colour was not theirs. A horrible feeling seized him that he was about to make an ass of himself, and from then on it never left him; it got between him and his reason, forcing him into saying always the wrong thing.

"I mean—this business is just a question of common sense," he added, making things worse instead of better.

Inald Uatt smiled kindly as if covering his own em-barrassment.

"There are problems, unfortunately," he said, "where common sense is too blunt a tool to work with, Mr. Dael, and Ishrail's problem is one such. Indeed, we have achieved results only by trying several oblique approaches, as you shall hear."

"I was just offering my opinion," Davi said. He in-tended it to sound penitent, humble even, but it sounded defiant in the befurred room.

"Quite so," Inald Uatt said quietly, inspecting his fingers as if for the first time. "Believe me, we do realize what a fascinating and gaudy specimen Ishrail must have seemed in Bergharra, but here on the Cyberqueen we may be rather more inured to odd fish, alas."

"We aren't all simpletons in Bergharra," Davi ex-claimed, nettled by what he interpreted as a slur on his native country.

Uatt inclined his head sadly, acknowledging the truth of the remark.

Realizing he was again on the verge of making an ass of himself, Davi tugged at his tunic and said in explana-tory fashion, "In fact, I'm sorry to have to come all this way to bother you, sir, but I felt I had to see what you were doing about Ishrail. I mean, if you were doing anything."

"We have been doing quite a lot," Uatt said lightly. "It is good of you to come. All of us here will be delighted to assure you that Ishrail has occupied much of our attention in the past weeks."

He shook his head and smiled; the other men also smiled. They had had a long, trying meeting—and now this! Uatt attempted to give Davi a chance, but Davi caught the note of reproach in the director's voice and flushed heavily, feeling like a small boy brought before a teacher.

"How should I know what you were doing here?" he muttered. "I felt it was my duty to come and see."

A gleam of irritation showed in Uatt's eye and dis-appeared. Brother Shansfor, knowing his superior, feared for the worst: the director was not a forgiving man once he conceived a dislike for someone. From then on, Davi was at a disadvantage; instead of becoming a discussion, their meeting crystallized into a muted clash of personali-ties, its outcome already predictable. Sensing something of this, Davi tried to wrench the conversation back into another channel.

"I believe Ishrail to be sane!" he exclaimed. He could see immediately that his bluntness made them more with-drawn. For them, he was now the stupid layman, unable to evaluate evidence.

"I am just going to run through a few notes for your benefit," Uatt said, rustling the papers. "They will explain our finds on the—er, patient and, I sincerely hope, clear your mind of any anxieties or uncertainties you may have."

"Tell him about the specialists, Inald," Shansfor said in an aside.

"Yes, yes," the Arch-Brother said. "These notes are extracts from the reports of specialists from this and other health ships who have examined er, Ishrail, as he calls himself, during the course of the last month. Sit down, Mr. Dael, sit down and unbutton."

Davi hesitated, then sat, formally unbuttoning his tunic. The three members of the council who had not spoken seemed to take this as a cue to disappear. They nodded to Inald Uatt and Shansfor and sailed out of the cabin like three dancers in a dull ballet.

"Now," Uatt said, clearing his throat. He put on a pair of silver-rimmed eyeglasses and peered at the papers before him. "First let's get our facts straight, may we? Ishrail was discovered sheltering in a barn on the even-ing of Fi Month 31stlast by one George Fanzi, a bond-man on Major Brundell's farm in the

province of Bergharra. He was naked and dazed and seemed at that time unable to speak at all. Fanzi wrapped sacks round him and took him to his own caravan. By morning Ishrail was better, although his memory seemed clouded; He then spoke our tongue perfectly—an important point, Mr. Dael, which alone throws grave doubts on his, hm, galactic origins."

"But he explained" Davi began.

"Oh yes, he explained everything, Mr. Dael. But let us continue the summary. Ishrail stayed in Fanzi's cara-van till the next morning, the 33rdof Fi, when Fanzi decided to take him to Major Brundell. Major Brundell kept him for three days, in which time he got you and Ostrachan, the local tributary doctor to question him. The province police were also brought in to try and trace Ishrail's whereabouts before Fanzi found him, but so far nothing has come to light."

"A point for Ishrail," Davi said.

"A small point for Ishrail," Uatt conceded. "And that's about it; you alone seem to have placed much credence in the man's tale, Dael, and knowing of my friend Shansfor here through mutual acquaintances you decided to bring Ishrail up to us. A wise step, if I may be permitted to say so."

"I did it for Ishrail's sake," Davi said. "He was deeply disturbed to find that nobody believed him. I could see he would soon begin to question his own sanity; he had just gone through a period of great strain, as you know. When I heard that the Cyberqueen was off the coast, naturally I got in touch. I wanted you to prove to him he was sane. You would have been powerful allies for him!"

With a little dry crumb of sound, Inald Uatt cleared his throat, continuing his account as if he had not heard Davi.

"For the past thirty-two days," he said, "Ishrail has been here on shipboard; he has been thoroughly examined from every possible viewpoint. The first thing was naturally a physiological check. It revealed nothing at all abnormal in the patient's make-up. No bones out of place, not a spare ounce of cartilage, no extra lungs, not even"—he allowed himself a modicum of amusement —"a concealed tentacle. In every respect, Ishrail is a physically normal man, born here on earth, destined to die here on earth. I think we might have indeed expected some trifling irregularity if he had been as he claims to be, a hm, specimen of galactic life."

"Why?" Davi asked hotly. "Can't evolution run the same course on two planets?"

"He has a point there, Inald, you know," Shansfor murmured.

"A point we did not overlook," the Arch-Brother agreed. "Which brings me to the next step in our investi-gation. We were, you see, impressed enough with the lack of logical flaws in Ishrail's arguments to take a good deal of trouble in checking them. I personally called up the Astronomer Extraordinary and asked him about life on other planets."

He paused impressively. Davi just waited.

"The Astronomer Extraordinary," Uatt said, "told me that the possibility of life on other worlds—apart per-haps from a few lowly fungi on Mars—is entirely un-proven. Furthermore, he cautioned me that direct evidence of the existence of planetary systems other than our own is not yet forthcoming. He said that according to various ancient records, space ships have been launched from Earth for other systems from time to time; there is no record of any of them having returned. And he finished by assuring me that

space travel has no future."

Davi could restrain himself no longer. He jumped up.

"Yea call that taking trouble?" he exclaimed. "Heavens above, who am I to argue with the Astrono-mer Extraordinary, but what's he know about it? He's no expert on space travel!"

"Agreed," said Uatt, removing his silver eyeglasses and making his voice a few degrees cooler. "There are no experts on space travel, just a few speculative com-panies who have set their paltry igloos on the moon, hoping to find minerals or such. Speculation! 'There, I suggest, you have the whole business in one word. Do please sit down again, Mr. Dael."

Sitting was the last thing Davi felt like doing. He tried to appeal silently for help to Shansfor, but the latter was gazing into the fire. With a bad grace, Davi plonked himself down on to the chair.

"Go on," he said testily. "What's your next point?"

Before speaking again, Uatt clearly speculated upon whether the effort would be worth while. "We now came to Ishrail with the next tests," he said at last. "I refer to the psychological ones; and that is a field in which I give you my word there are experts. We—if I may say so without transgressing the bounds of modesty—we are the experts in this ship.

"For our consideration, we had an unlikely document, the statement of Ishrail, elicited from him in numerous interviews. In brief, it relates the facts of Ishrail's life, how he grew up, became what we would call an admiral in the interpenetrator fleets (to use his own extra-ordinary phrase), was defeated in some sort of battle and finally landed on earth stark naked and without a goatra to bless himself with.

"I'm not going to waste your time, Mr. Dael, or my own, in embarking on a detailed description of that fantastic farrago of autobiography. Transcribed from jell and divided into subjects, it fills five fat volumes; you will see we have been thorough. It contains, however, one or two cardinal points on which our diagnosis of Ishrail rests, and these I will bring to your attention. You may find their perfervid inventiveness more attrac-tive than I do."

"Just a minute," Davi said. "You're telling me this, and I can see from every word you say your mind's tighter shut than a Horby oyster. Was it like that before Ishrail came to you? Because if so the poor devil didn't stand a candle's chance in hell of proving his case."

"You're talking with your tunic buttoned," Shansfor protested sharply. "That sort of stuff will get you no-where. Try and -"

"We're getting nowhere as it is," Davi snapped. "I'm a countryman, and I like plain speaking."

"Shansfor," Uatt said, folding his hands and turning wearily to his colleague, "I suspect I may be unable to talk plainly enough for our country friend. Perhaps you will take over the, explanations for a little while?"

"Certainly," Shansfor said. "Perhaps you'd like to pour us all some drinks first?"

"Capital idea," the director said, softening. "I believe they are concealed in that surely rather ornate cupboard over there."

As Shansfor crossed the room, Inald Uatt said to Davi more humanly, "You know, Dael, we believe our-selves to be in effect doing you a favour in explaining all this to you; we are by no means obliged to explain. By the law, Ishrail is now a subject of Medical Hierarchy. You are not in any way related to Ishrail; we merely were somewhat touched by your loyalty to a very un-fortunate case."

"I'll endeavour to feel obliged to you when I've heard the rest of what you have to say," Davi said grimly. "What are these cardinal points you mentioned?"

A distilled vintage was handed round, and scented sweets. Shansfor sat down by the fire, putting his thin hands out to the flames.

"You'll probably know," he began quietly, "that how-ever elaborate and circumstantial the imaginings of a neurotic person are, they reveal certain basic emotions such as fear, love, lust for power. Looking beyond the symbols that a disordered mind uses to camouflage these emotions from itself, we can generally see the emotive impulses quite clearly. In this respect, Ishrail differs not at all from any case we have ever handled, except that his imaginings reach the peak of inventiveness.

"Note several points. This impressive civilization to which Ishrail claims to belong spreads across ten thousand planets and five times as many light years—or it may be fifteen thousand planets and ten times as many light years: Ishrail doesn't remember."

"Would you remember?" Davi asked. "Tell me how many towns there are on earth!"

"That is not the point I'm making," Shansfor said. "I'm trying to show you how Ishrail strove to build up a pattern of complexity in his make-believe world. The war that he claims is being waged is also amazingly complicated, like enlarged 3-D chess with obscure moti-vations and strict rules of chivalry. Ishrail seeks refuge behind this confusion, endeavouring to lose himself."

"But a galactic civilization would be complicated!" Davi wailed. "Why can't you just take it that he's telling the truth? He's got no motive for lying!'

"His motive is the usual one in such cases," Shansfor said. "That is, as complete an escape from reality as pos-sible. He cannot be telling the truth because what he says is top fantastic for a sane man to believe; and also you will notice that he has cleverly picked on a story which does not involve him in the awkward necessity of pro-ducing one shred of tangible proof!"

Davi sunk his head into his hands.

"You go round in circles," he said. "He told you why he arrived naked without any possessions."

"That's just what I'm complaining about," Shansfor said. "Ishrail can explain everything! The interpenetrators that brought him here came silently and left silently, and were invisible. We've not got a thing: no sight of ships, no tell-tale landing marks in a field, no scraps of cloth of an alien weave, no rings made of strange alloys, not even an Aldebaran corn plaster on his foot. Nothing. Only his wild and unsupported story. Not a shred of external evidence anywhere."

"And if you had anything, you'd explain it away," Davi said.

"We'll continue with the next point," Shansfor said, raising an aggrieved eyebrow at the Arch-Brother, who nodded sympathetically. "Notice that Ishrail joined the interpenetration fleets and worked his way

up to the rank of admiral."

"Well?"

"Megalomania—and we shall find it recurs over and over again. Here it masquerades under the flaring suns of an admiral's insignia. Yes, he even drew the insignia for us. He couldn't be a ranker, could he, or a bondman, or whatever they have? He had to be an admiral, an admiral in a mighty space fleet. Such self aggrandise-ment is a common feature of insanity."

Davi was silent, avoiding the challenge in the other's voice. He felt his assurance fading and longed to speak to Ishrail again, to feel reinvigorated by that unquench-able nature. If these devils would only see it, a man like Ishrail could be nothing less than admiral.

"The next point," Shansfor continued, "is even more damning. You will remember that Ishrail claims to have been captured during this preposterous war by the enemy. They vanquished him. And did Ishrail happen to tell you what the name of the race was which van-quished him? It was Ishrail! Ishrail was conquered by Ishrail!"

"What of it?" Davi asked stupidly.

This was too much for Inald Uatt. He leant forward, glass in hand, his jaws almost snapping.

"What of it, you dare ask?" he said. "If you are attempting to insult us with stupidity we may as well consider this talk closed. Ishrail is. suffering—to couch the matter in terms you might comprehend—from split personality. He is 'himself; he is also his own worst enemy. Ishrail against Ishrail—a man divided against himself. It's obvious even to a layman."

"Not at all," Davi said, trying to check his anger.

"Well it confounded well should be!"

"Not at all!" Davi bellowed. "Good God, Bergharra fought the Goraggs in the last war. One of our bravest men was a Field-Captain Goragg, but we didn't lock him in the nearest button biter's barge just because of his unfortunate name!"

There was an icy silence.

"I believe," Uatt said, "that the disgusting term for mental health ships that you employed has ceased to be polite usage even in the low comedy halls."

"You cannot dismiss everything as coincidence, Mr. Dael," Shansfor said hurriedly, waving his hands as if to hush his superior. "You must try to regard this from the viewpoint of mind-healing. We do not believe in coincidence. Let me proceed to the next and last point, on which the crux of the matter may be said to rest.

"The etiquette of this incredible galactic squabble, Ishrail claims, renders an admiral or similar large fry liable to exile for life if he is captured by the enemy. As we might expect in this case, the exiling itself is a com-plicated business, a mixture of leniency and harshness. The exile concerned—by which we mean Ishrail—has his name struck off the rolls of civilization and is left on a planet absolutely bare-headed and bare-backed. Before he is landed, he is taught by hypnotic means to be fluent in the language of the planet or country to which he is banished. Which neatly absolves Ishrail from the diffi-culty of having to

pretend to speak a strange tongue."

"You make him sound such a liar!" Davi said bitterly.

"No," Shansfor contradicted. "That is a basic mis-conception. We are convinced he genuinely believes all he says. But remember—and this is another loop-hole for him—he cannot speak the Galactic tongue because that was erased when his enemies forced our language down his throat.

"Damning though that is, it is the lesser half of the exile edict. It was stipulated, according to Ishrail, that exiles should only be landed on planets outside the galactic federation, planets too primitive to have developed more than the rudiments of what he calls 'mechanical' space travel; there they have to survive among hostile natives as best they can. In other words, Bergharra and Earth are Ishrail's galactic idea of hell."

"Just why do you find that so damning?" Davi asked.

"Why? Because it is all too plainly the fabrication of a guilty mind trying to punish itself by inflicting eternal suffering on itself. It is a punishment pattern we meet with here time after time."

Before Davi could recover himself sufficiently to answer that, Uatt got to his feet, smoothed an imaginary hair over his bald head and spoke.

"So there you have the Ishrail case, Dael," he said. "He is a sick creature, haunted by the spectre of perse-cution. I trust you appreciate, though I fear you don't, the great pains we have been to in this matter, and the neat way in which we have tied up all the loose ends."

"Plausible though Ishrail is," Shansfor said, also stand-ing and buttoning his cloth to conclude the meeting, "he is clearly revealed as hopelessly, even dangerously, un-balanced. Quite candidly, there's hardly a disorder in the book that isn't present in greater or lesser degree. And we've not unravelled them all yet. This sort of thing takes time and patience."

"Give the police a little longer to trace him," the Arch-Brother said with relish, "and we shall probably find he's a common murderer with amnesia actuated by guilt."

Oh, Ishrail! You a common murderer! The hostile natives have indeed got you in their beastly, filthy nets! You should have come fifty million years ago—the Neanderthals would have shown more understanding, more mercy!

Davi screwed his eyes up and raised his fists slowly before his face. Blood swam and roared in his veins like a waterfall. For a moment, he thought of throwing himself at Inald Uatt. Then hopelessness dropped neatly over him. He lowered his hands.

"I must see Ishrail," he said dully.

"That will not be possible," Uatt said. "We have had to remove him to a quieter place; he threatened to get violent."

"Do you wonder?" Davi said. With stiff, formal fingers he buttoned his tunic.

The Arch-Brother and Shansfor remained side by side by the fire, waiting politely for him to leave. Davi stood defeated before them, the only man to believe in Ishrail, rocking unintelligently from one foot to

another, his jaw slack. At last he sighed, turning to leave without a word of thanks. He caught sight of the tired buttercup pinned to his chest; how it must have amused these people! Yet Davi felt obscurely that it was his slender link with sanity and the galaxy.

Suddenly he saw the planned cruelty of Ishrail's exile, the bitterness of being among a people without under-standing.

"I'm going to call the New Union newsjells to see if they will help me!" he said resolutely.

"An excellent idea! Emotionalism and sensationalism are just their meat," the Arch-Brother replied, but Davi had gone.

Finding his way blindly down a gang plank, he headed for the city. A cold wind met him, and he recalled that he had left his fur cloak somewhere in the ship. Now it was too late to return for it. Overhead, through thinning cloud, galactic stars shone with terrible urgency.

Ishrail was eventually found to be sane and his story to be true. So Earthmen entered the galaxy they would at last inherit. They found in operation that extraordinary social code called the Self-Perpetuating War, the stability and stimulation of which produced the fruits of peace. And one of the strangest fruits was a mighty para-language, Galingua

Incentive

The ocean seemed to be breathing shallowly, like a child asleep, when the first lemmings reached it. In all the wide sea, no hint of menace existed. Yet the first lemmings paused daintily on the very verge of the water, peering out to sea and looking about as though in indecision. Unavoidably, the pressure of the marching column behind pushed them into the tiny wavelets. When their paws became wet, it was as if they resigned themselves to what was to come. Swimming strongly, the leaders of the column set off from the shore. All the other lemmings followed, only their heads showing above water. A human observer would have said they swam bravely; and unavoidably he would have asked himself: to what goal did the lemmings imagine they were head-ing? For what grand illusion were they prepared to throw away their lives?

All down the waterway, craft moved. Farro Westerby stood at the forward port of his aquataxi, staring ahead and ignoring the water traffic moving by him. His two fellow Isolationists stood slightly apart, not speaking. Farro's eye was on the rising structure on the left bank ahead. When the aquataxi moored as near to this struc-ture as possible, Farro stepped ashore; glancing back impatiently, he waited for one of his companions to pay the fare.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" the taxi man said, nodding to-wards the strange building as he cast off. "I can't ever see us putting up anything like it"

"No," Farro said flatly, walking away ahead of his friends,

They had disembarked in that sector of the capital called Horby Clive Island. Located in the

governmental centre of New Union, most of it had been ceded to the Galactics a year ago. In that brief time, using Earth labour for the rough work, they had transformed the place. Six of their large, irregular buildings were already completed. The seventh was now going up, creating a new wonder for the world,

"We will wait here for you, Farro," one of the two men said, extending his hand formally. "Good fortune with the Galactic Minister, As the only Isolationist with an extensive knowledge of the Galactic tongue, Galingua, you represent, as you know, our best chance of putting our case for Earth's remaining outside the Multi-Planet Federation."

As Farro thanked him and accepted the proffered hand, the other man, a stooping septuagenarian with a pale voice, gripped Farro's arm.

"And the case is clear enough," he said. "These aliens pretend they offer us Federation out of altruism. Most people swallow that, because they believe Earth ingenuity must be a valuable asset anywhere in the galaxy. So it may be, but we Isolationists claim there must be some ulterior motive for a superior race's wanting to welcome in a junior one as they appear to welcome us. If you can get a hint from this Minister Jandanagger as to what that motive is, you'll have done more than well."

"Thank you; I think I have the situation pretty clear," Farro said sharply, regretting his tone of voice at once. But the other two were wise enough to make allowance for nervousness in times of stress. When he left them to make his way towards the Galactic buildings, their faces held only sincere smiles of farewell.

As Farro pushed through the crowds of sightseers who stood here all day watching the new building develop, he listened with interest and some contempt for their com-ments. Many of them were discussing the current announcement on Federation.

"I think their goodness of heart is proved by the way they've let us join. It's nothing but a friendly gesture."

"It shows what respect they must have for Earth."

"You can't help seeing the future's going to be won-derful, now we can export goods all over the galaxy. I tell you, we're in for a boom all round."

"Which goes to prove that however advanced the race, they can't do without the good old Earth know-how. Give the Galactics the credit for spotting that!"

The seventh building round which so many idle spec-tators clustered was nearing completion. It grew organically like some vast succulent plant, springing from a flat metal matrix, thrusting along curved girders, encompassing them. Its colour was a natural russet which seemed to take its tones from the sky overhead.

Grouped round the base of this extraordinary struc-ture were distilleries, sprays, excavators, and other machines, the function of which was unknown to Farro. They provided the raw material from which the building drew its bulk.

To one side of these seven well-designed eccentricities lay the space field. There, too, was another minor mystery. Earth governments had ceded—willingly when they sniffed the prizes to be won from Federation!—five such centres as the Horby Clive centre in various parts of the globe. Each centre was being equipped as a space port and education unit, in which terrestrials would learn to understand the

antiphonal complexities of Galingua and to behave as citizens of a well-populated galaxy.

Even granting vast alien resources, it was a formid-able project. According to latest estimates, at least eight thousand Galactics were at present working on Earth. Yet on the space field sat only one craft, an unlikely-looking polyhedron with Arcturan symbols on its hull.

The Galactics, in short, seemed to have remarkably few space ships.

That was a point he would Eke to investigate, Farro thought, speculatively eyeing the inert beacons round the perimeter of the field.

He skirted them, avoiding the crowds as far as pos-sible, and arrived at the entrance of one of the other six Galactic buildings, quite as eccentric in shape as its unfinished brother. As he walked in, an Earthman in a dark grey livery came deferentially forward.

"I have an appointment with Galactic Minister Jandanagger Laterobinson," Farro announced, pronouncing the strange name awkwardly. "I am Farro Westerby, Special Deputy of the Isolationist League."

Directly he heard the phrase "Isolationist League", the receptionist's manner chilled. Setting his lips, he beck-oned Farro over to a small side apartment, the doors of which closed as Farro entered. The apartment, the Galactic equivalent of a lift, began to move through the building, travelling upwards on what Farro judged to be an elliptical path. It delivered him into Jandanagger Laterobinson's room.

Standing up, the Galactic Minister greeted Farro with amiable reserve, giving the latter an opportunity to sum up his opponent. Laterobinson was unmistakably humanoid; he might, indeed, have passed for an Earth-man, were it not for the strangeness of his eyes, set widely apart in his face and half-hidden by the peculiar configuration of an epicanthic fold of skin. This minor variation of feature nevertheless gave to Jandanagger what all his race seemed to possess: a watchful, tensely withdrawn air.

"You know the reason for my visit, Minister," Farro said, when he had introduced himself. He spoke care-fully in Galingua, the language he had spent so many months so painfully learning; initially, its wide variation in form from any terrestrial tongue had all but baffled him.

"Putting it briefly, you represent a body of people who fear contact with the other races in the galaxy—unlike most of your fellows on Earth," Jandanagger said easily. Expressed like that, the idea sounded absurd.

"I would rather claim to represent a body of people who have thought more deeply about the present situa-tion than perhaps their fellows have done."

"Since your views are already known to me through the newly established Terrestrial-Galactic Council, I take it you wish us to discuss this matter personally?"

"That is so."

Jandanagger returned to his chair, gesturing Farro into another.

"My role on Earth is simply to talk and to listen," he said, not without irony. "So do please feel free to talk."

"Minister, I represent five per cent of the people of Earth. If this sounds a small number, I would point out that that percentage contains some of the most eminent men in the world. Our position is relatively simple. You first visited Earth over a year ago, at the end of Ishrail's decade of exile; after investigation, you decided we were sufficiently advanced to become probationary members of the Galactic Federation. As a result, certain advant-ages and disadvantages will naturally accrue; although both sides will reap advantages, we shall suffer all the disadvantages—and they may well prove fatal to us."

Pausing, he scrutinized Jandanagger, but nothing was to be learnt from the Minister's continued look of friendly watchfulness. He continued speaking.

"Before I deal with these disadvantages, may I protest against what will seem to you perhaps a minor point. You have insisted, your charter insists, that this world shaft be arbitrarily renamed; no longer shall it be known as Earth, but as Yinnisfar. Is there any defensible reason why this outlandish name should be adopted?"

The Minister smiled broadly and relaxed, as if the question had given him the key he needed to the man sitting opposite him. A bowl of New Union sweets lay on his desk; he pushed them across to Farro and, when the latter refused, took a sugary lump and bit it before replying.

"About three hundred planets calling themselves Earth are known to us," he said. "Any new claimants to the title are automatically rechristened. From now on you are Yinnisfar. I think it would be more profitable if we discussed the advantages and disadvantages of federation, if that is what you wish to talk about"

Farro sighed and resigned himself.

"Very well," he said.

"To begin with, the advantages to you. You will have here a convenient base, dock and administrative seat in a region of space you say you have yet to explore and develop. Also, it is possible that when arrangements are worked out between us, terrestrials may be engaged to help colonize the new worlds you expect to find in this region. We shall be a cheap manufacturing area for you. We shall produce such items as plastics, clothes, food-stuffs, and simple tools which it will be easier for you to buy from us than transport from your distant home planets. Is this correct?"

"As you point out, Mr. Westerby, Earth occupies a key position in the Federation's present thousand-year plan for expansion. Although at present you can only regard yourselves as a frontier world, at the end of that period you may well be a key world. At the end of ten thousand years—well, your peoples are full of con-fidence; the omens are good."

"In short, there is promotion ahead if we behave our-selves?"

The acid note in Farro's voice merely brought a slight smile to Jandanagger's lips.

"One is not made head boy in one's first few days at school."

"Let me then enumerate the advantages, as opposed to the promises, which Earth will enjoy from entering your Federation. In the first place, we shall enjoy material benefits: new machines, new toys, new gadgets and some new techniques, like your vibro-molecular system of building—which produces, if I may say so, some excruciatingly ugly structures."

"One's tastes, Mr. Westerby, have to be trained to appreciate anything of aesthetic worth."

"Quite. Or to regard the hideous as normal. However, that brings us to the non-material assets inherent in belonging to your Federation. You plan to revolutionize our educational systems. From nursery school to univer-sity, you will inculcate mores, matters and methods foreign' to us; Earth will be invaded not by soldiers but by teachers—which is the surest way of gaining a bloodless victory."

The wide eyes regarded Farro calmly, but still as if from behind a barricade.

"How else are we to help you to become citizens of a complex civilization? For a start, it is essential your peoples learn Galingua, Education is a science and an art towards which you have not yet begun to formulate the rules. The whole question is enormously complicated, and quite beyond brief explanation—not that I could explain it, for I am not an educational specialist; those specialists will arrive here when my work is done, and the formal membership charters signed. But to take just one simple point. Your children first go to school at say, five years old. They go into a class with other children and are separated from their homes; learning becomes at once an isolated part of life, something done in certain hours. And their first lesson is to obey the teacher. Thus, if their education is rated a success, it is because, to whatever extent, they have learnt obedience and for-feited independence of mind; and they are probably set at permanent odds with their home environment.

"Our methods differ radically. We allow no children to enter our schools before the age of ten—but by that time, thanks to certain instructive toys and devices they have been familiar with for years, they will come know-ing at least as much as your child of school-leaving age. And not only knowing. Behaving. Feeling. Under-standing."

Farro was at a disadvantage.

"I feel like a heathen being told by a missionary that I should be wearing clothes."

The other man smiled, got up, and came over to him.

"Be consoled that that's a false analogy," he said. "You are demanding the clothes. And when you wear them, you are certain to admire the cut."

All of which, Farro reflected, made the two of them no less heathen and missionary.

"Don't look so disconcerted, Mr. Westerby. You have a perfect right to be distressed at the thought of your planet being depersonalized. But that is something we would not dream of doing. Depersonalized, you are nothing to yourselves or us. We need worlds capable of making their best personal contribution. If you would care to come with me, I should like to give you perhaps a better idea of how the civilized galaxy functions."

Farro rose to his feet. It consoled him that he was slightly taller than the Minister. Jandanagger stood courteously aside, ushered his guest through a door. As they walked down a silent corridor, Farro found his tongue again.

"I haven't fully explained why I think that Federa-tion would be such a bad thing for Earth. We are pro-gressing on our own. Eventually, we shall develop our own method of space travel, and come to join you on a more equal footing."

"Space travel—travel between different star systems —is not just a matter of being able to build star

ships. Any post-nuclear culture can stumble on that trick. Space travel is a state of mind. The journey's always hell, and you never find a planet, however lovely, that suits you as well as the one you were born on. You need an incentive."

"What sort of an incentive?"

"Have you any idea?"

"I take it you are not referring to interstellar trading or conquest?"

"Correct."

"I'm afraid I don't know what sort of an incentive you mean."

The Minister gave something like a chuckle and said, "I'll try and show you presently. You were going to tell me why federation would be a bad thing for Earth."

"No doubt it has been to your purpose to learn some-thing of our history. It is full of dark things. Blood; war; lost causes; forgotten hopes; ages in chaos and days when even desperation died. It is no history to be proud of. Though many men individually seek good, col-lectively they lose it as soon as it is found. Yet we have one quality which always gives cause for hope that tomorrow may be better: initiative. Initiative has never faded, even when we crawled from what seemed the last ditch.

"But if we know that there exists a collective culture of several thousand worlds which we can never hope to emulate, what is to prevent us sinking back into despair for ever?"

"An incentive, of course."

As he spoke, Jandanagger led the way into a small, boomerang-shaped room with wide windows. They sank on to a low couch, and at once the room moved. The dizzy view from the window shifted and rolled beneath them. The room was airborne,

"This is our nearest equivalent to your trains. It runs on a nucleonically bounded track. We are only going as far as the next building; there is some equipment there I would like you to inspect."

No reply seemed to be required; Farro sat silent. He had known an electric moment of fear when the room first moved. In no more than ten seconds they swooped to the branch of another Galactic building, becoming part of it.

Once more leading the way, Jandanagger escorted him to a lift, which took them down into a basement room. They had arrived. The equipment of which Jan-danagger had spoken was not particularly impressive to look at. Before a row of padded seats ran a counter, above which a line of respirator-like masks hung, with several cables trailing from them into the wall.

The Galactic Minister seated himself, motioning Farro into an adjoining seat.

"What is this apparatus?" Farro asked, unable to keep a slight tinge of anxiety from his tone.

"It is a type of wave-synthesizer. In effect, it renders down many of the wavelengths which man cannot detect by himself, translating them into paraphrased terms which he can. At the same time, it feeds in objective and subjective impressions of the universe. That is to say, you will experience—when you fit

the mask and I switch on—instrumental recordings of the universe (visual and aural and so on) as well as human impressions of it.

"I should warn you that owing to your lack of train-ing, you may unfortunately gather a rather confused impression from the synthesizer. All the same, I fancy that it will give you a better rough idea of what the galaxy is like than you would get from a long star journey."

"Let's go," Farro said, clutching his cold hands to-gether.

Now the entire column of lemmings had embarked into the still water. They swam smoothly and silently, their communal wake soon dissolving into the grandly gentle motion of the sea. Gradually the column attenu-ated as the stronger animals drew further ahead and the weaker ones dropped behind. One by one, inevitably, these weaker animals drowned; yet until their sleek heads finally disappeared below the surface, they still pressed forward with bulging eyes fixed upon the far and empty horizon.

No human spectator, however devoid of anthropo-morphic feeling, could have failed to ask himself: what might be the nature of the goal that prompted such a sacrifice?

The inside of the mask was cold. It fitted loosely over his face, covering his ears and leaving only the back of his head free. Again a touch of unreasoning fear shot through him.

"The switch is by your hand," the Minister said. "Press it."

Farro pressed the switch. Darkness submerged him.

"I am with you," the Minister said steadily. "I have a mask on too, and can see and feel what you do."

A spiral was curling out into the darkness, boring its way through nothing: an opaque, smothering nothing as warm as flesh. Materializing from the spiral issued a growing cluster of bubbles, dark as polyhedric grapes, multiplying and multiplying as if breathed from an inexhaustible bubble pipe. The lights on their surfaces, glittering, changing, spun a misty web which gradually veiled the operation.

"Cells are being formed, beaten out in endless dup-lication on the microscopic anvils of creation. You witness the beginning of a new life," Jandanagger said, his voice sounding distant.

Like a curtain by an open window, the cells trembled behind their veil, awaiting life. And the moment of its coming was not perceptible. It was only that now the veil had something to conceal within itself; its trans-lucence dimmed, its surface patterned, a kind of blind purpose shaped it into more definite outline. No longer was it beautiful.

Consciousness simmered inside it, a pinpoint of instinct-plus without love or knowledge, an eye trying to see through a lid of skin. It was not inert; instead, it struggled on the verge of terror, undergoing the trauma of coming-into-being, fighting, scrabbling, lest it fell back again into the endless gulf of not-being.

"Here is the Afterlife your religions tell of," Jandanagger's voice said. "This is the purgatory every one of us must undergo, only it comes not after but before life. The spirit that will become us has to tread the billion years of the past before it reaches the present it can be born into. One might almost say there was something it had to expiate."

The foetus was all Farro's universe; it filled the mask, filled him. He suffered with it, for it obviously suffered. Pressures wracked it, the irremediable pressures of time and biochemistry, the pain of which it

strove to lessen by changing shape. It writhed from worm- to slug-hood, it grew gills and a tail. Fishlike, and then no longer fish-like, it toiled up the steep slope of evolution, mouselike, pig-like, apelike, babylike.

"This is the truth the wisest man forgets: that he has done all this."

Now the environment changed. The foetus, exerting itself, had become a baby, and the baby could only become a man by the proddings of a thousand new stimuli. And all these stimuli, animal, vegetable, or mineral, lived too, in their different way. They com-peted. They inflicted constant challenges on the man creature; some of them, semi-sentient, invaded his flesh and bred there, creating their own life cycles; others, non-sentient, were like waves that passed unceasingly through his mind and his body. He seemed hardly an entity, merely a focal point of forces, constantly threatened with dissolution.

So complete was the identification between the image and the receiver, that Farro felt he was the man. He recognized that everything happening to the man hap-pened to him; he sweated and writhed like the foetus, conscious of the salt water in his blood, the unstoppable rays in the marrow of his bones. Yet the mind was freer than it had been in the foetus stage; during the wrenching moment of fear when environments had changed, the eye of consciousness had opened its lids.

"And now the man changes environments again, to venture away from his own planet," the Galactic Minis-ter said.

But space was not space as Farro had reckoned it. It struck his eyes like slate: not a simple nothingness, but an unfathomable web of forces, a creeping blend of stresses and fields in which stars and planets hung like dew amid spiders' webs. No life was here, only the same interaction of planes and pressures that had attended the man all along, and of which even the man himself was composed. None the less, his perceptions reached a new stage, the light of consciousness burnt more steadily.

Again he was reaching out, swimming towards the confines of his galaxy. About him, proportions changed, slid, dwindled. In the beginning, the womb had been everywhere, equipped with all the menace and coercion of a full-scale universe; now the galaxy was revealed as smaller than the womb—a pint-sized goldfish bowl in which a tiddler swam, unaware of the difference between air and water. For there was no spanning the gulfs between galaxies: there lay nothing, the nothing of an unremitting Outside. And the man had never met nothing before. Freedom was not a condition he knew because it did not exist in his interpenetrated existence.

As he swam up to the surface, something stirred be-yond the yellow rim of the galaxy. The something could hardly be seen; but it was there on the Outside, wakeful and clawed, a creature with senses though insensate. It registered half as sight, half as noise: a smouldering and delayed series of pops, like the sound of bursting arteries. It was big. Farro screamed into the blackness of his mask at its bigness and its anger.

The creature was waiting for the man. Stretching it stretched right round the galaxy, round the goldfish bowl, its supernatant bat's wings groping for purchase.

Farro screamed again.

"I'm sorry," he said weakly, as he felt the Minister removing his mask for him, "I'm sorry."

The Minister patted his shoulder. Shuddering, Farro buried his face in his hands, trying to erase the now loathsome contact of the mask. That thing beyond the galaxy—it seemed to have entered and found a

per-manent place in his mind.

At last, gathering himself together, he stood up. Weak-ness floated in every layer of him. Moistening his lips, he spoke.

"So you inveigle us into the Federation to face that!"

Jandanagger took his arm.

"Come back to my room. There is a point I can now make clear to you which I could not before: Earth has not been inveigled into the Federation. With your Earthbound eyes, I know how you see the situation. You fancy that despite the evidence before your eyes of Galactic superiority, there must be some vital point on which Earth can offer something unbeatable. You fancy there must be some factor for which we need terrestrial help—a factor it does not yet suit us to reveal; isn't that so?"

Farro avoided the other's narrow eyes as they ascended in a lift to the top of the building.

"There are other things beside the material ones," he said evasively. "Think for instance of the great heritage of literature in the world; to a truly civilized race, that might appear invaluable."

"That depends upon what you mean by civilized. The senior races of the galaxy, having lost the taste for the spectacle of mental suffering, would be unlikely to find much attraction in your literatures."

This gently administered rebuke silenced Farro. After a pause, the Galactic Minister continued, "No, you have no secret virtues, alas, for which we are gulling you into the Federation. The boot is on the other foot. We are taking you in as a duty, because you need looking after. I apologize for putting the matter so bluntly; but such may be the best way."

Stopping gently, the lift released them into the boomerang-shaped room. In a minute, they were speed-ing back to the building Farro had first entered, with the crowded Horby Glive sector below them. Farro closed his eyes, still feeling sick and shattered. The implica-tions of what Jandanagger had said were momentarily beyond his comprehension.

"I understand nothing," he said. "I don't understand why it should be your duty to look after Earth."

"Then already you do begin to understand," Jandanagger said, and for the first time personal warmth tempered his voice. "For not only are our sciences beyond yours, so are our philosophies and thought dis-ciplines. All our mental abilities have been keyed semantically into the language in which you have learnt to converse with me, Galingua."

The flying room was reabsorbed; they became again merely one leaf-tip of a giant building growing towards the grey clouds,

"Yoar language is certainly comprehensive and com-plex," Farro said, "but perhaps my knowledge of it is too elementary for me to recognize the extra significance of which you speak."

"That is only because you have still to be shown how Galingua is more than a language: it is a way of life, our means of space travel itself! Concentrate on what I am telling you, Mr. Westerby."

Confusedly, Farro shook his head as the other spoke; blood seemed to be congesting at the base of his skull. The odd idea came to him that he was losing his character, his identity. Wisps of meaning, hints of a

greater comprehension, blew through his brain like streamers in the draught of a fan. As he tried to settle them, keep them steady, his own language became less like the bedrock of his being; his knowledge of Galingua, coupled with the experiences of the last hour, gradually assumed a dominant tone. With Jandanagger's grave eyes upon him, he began to think in the tongue of the galaxy.

For Jandanagger was talking, and with increasing rapidity. Although his meanings seemed clear, it felt to Farro as if they were being comprehended only by a level below his conscious one. It was like partial drunkenness, when the grand simplicities of the world are revealed in wine and the mind skates over the thin ice of experience.

For Jandanagger was talking of many things at once, shifting things that could not be spoken of in terrestrial tongues, dissolving mental disciplines never formulated through terrestrial voices. Yet all these things balanced together in one sentence like jugglers' balls, enhancing each other.

For Jandanagger was talking of only one thing: the thrust of creation. He spoke of what the synthesizer had demonstrated: that man was never a separate entity, merely a solid within a solid—or better still, a flux within a flux. That he had only a subjective identity. That the wheeling matter of the galaxy was one with him.

And he spoke in the same breath of Galingua, which was merely a vocal representation of that flux, and whose cadences followed the great spiral of life within the flux. As he spoke, he unlocked the inner secret of it to Farro, so that what before had been a formal study became an orchestration, with every cell another note.

With a wild exultation, Farro was able to answer now, merging with the spiral of talk. The new language was like a great immaterial stupa, its base broad, rooted in the ground of the ego, its spire high, whirling up into the sky. And by it, Farro gradually ascended with Jandan-agger: or rather, the proportions and perspectives about him changed, slid, dwindled, as they had done in the synthesizer. With no sense of alarm, he found himself high above the gaping crowds, shooting upwards on an etheric spiral.

Within him was a new understanding of the stresses permeating all space. He rode upwards through the planes of the universe, Jandanagger close by, sharing the revelation;

Now it was clear why the Galactics needed few space ships: their big polygonal vessels carried only material; man himself had found a safer way of travelling in the goldfish bowl of the galaxy.

Looking outwards, Farro saw where the stars thinned. Out there was the thing with claws, popping silently like bursting blood-vessels. Fear came to him again.

"The thing is the synthesizer. . . ." he said to Jandan-agger, through the new-found medium of communica-tion. "The thing that surrounds the galaxy—if man can never get out, cannot it get in at us?"

For a long minute Jandanagger was silent, searching for the key phrases of explanation.

"You have learnt as much as you have very rapidly," he said. "By not-understanding and then by well-under-standing, you have made yourself one of the true citizens of the galaxy. But you have only taken leap X; now you must leap X10. Prepare yourself."

"I am prepared."

"All that you have learnt is true. Yet there is a far greater truth, a truer truth. Nothing exists in the ultimate

sense: all is illusion, a two-dimensional shadow play on the mist of space-time. Yinnisfar itself means 'illusion'."

"But the clawed thing. . . ."

The clawed thing is why we fare ever further ahead into the illusion of space. It is real. Only the galaxy as you previously misinterpreted it is unreal, being but a configuration of mental forces. That monster, that thing you sensed, is the residue of the slime of the evolutionary pest still lingering—not outside you!—but in your own mind. It is from that we must escape. We must grow from it."

More explanation followed, but it was beyond Farro. In a flash, he saw that Jandanagger, with an eagerness to experiment, had driven him too far and too fast. He could not make the last leap; he was falling back, topp-ling into not-being. Somewhere within him, the pop-thud-pop sound of bursting arteries began. Others would succeed where he had failed—but meanwhile, the angry claws were reaching from the heavens for him, to sunder, not to rescue.

And now the lemmings were scattered over a con-siderable area of sea. Few of the original column were left; the remaining swimmers, isolated from each other, were growing tired. Yet they pressed forward as doggedly as ever towards the unseen goal.

Nothing was ahead of them. They had launched themselves into a vast—but not infinite—world without landmarks. The cruel incentive urged them always on. And if an invisible spectator had asked himself the agonized "why?" to it all, an answer might have occurred to him: that these creatures were not heading for some especial promise in their future, but merely fleeing from some terrible fear in their past.

As the brief centuries passed, the world once known as Earth was conquered by commerce, its attitudes insen-sibly undergoing a modification in the process. Then came the blow that forced man to alter his attitude to himself. His metaphysical view of being had of course been constantly subject to change; now the terrible moment arrived when he was revealed to himself in an entirely new light, as an alien, as a hostile environment

Gene Hive

It was one of those unlikely accidents which is likely to occur anywhere. The undersea trawler Bartlemeo was approaching the sub-port of Capverde at four hundred and ninety fathoms when it developed engine trouble. I am not a technical man, so that I cannot exactly describe the fault; apparently uranium slugs move slowly through the piles of these ships, and the dispensing mechanism which shoots the used slugs into the separa-tors became jammed. Instead of using manual remote control to tackle the fault, the chief engineer, a man called Je Regard, went in himself to clear the slug-way. As he climbed through the inspection hatches, Regard snagged his protective suit on a latch without noticing it. He was able to repair the congestion in the slug-way without trouble, but collapsed as he emerged again, hav-ing collected a near-lethal dose of radiation in his kidneys.

The Bartlemeo carried no doctor. A general call for one was sent out straight away.

I have said I am no technician; neither am I a philo-sopher. Yet I can see in this trivial episode which began so many centuries of trouble the pattern of all great things which start as something fairly insignificant: "big oaks from little acorns grow"; you know what I mean.

In the midst of the shifting and immemorial sands of the Sara desert crouches the Ahaggari plateau, breasting the dunes like a liner in a sullen sea. On the edge of the plateau stands Barbe Barber, the Institute of Medical Meditation, an elaborate and ancient building in the grand fifty-first epoch manner, as fugal as Angkor Wat, as uncompromising as the Lunar Enterventual. Set about with palms which lend shade to its wide, paved walks, Barbe Barber thrusts its towers and upper stories above the trees to scan the mighty continent in which it stands —just as its occupants, the doctors, scan the interior of the body, the inner continent of man.

Gerund Gyres, neck cloth perpetually mopping his brow, stood before the main steps of the institute, wait-ing. His plane which had brought him here stood some distance away in the park. He waited humbly in the rocking heat, although he was a proud man: no layman was ever allowed in Barbe Barber.

At length the figure Gerund expected to see appeared at the top of the wide steps. It was his wife, Cyro. She turned back, as if to bid someone behind her farewell, and then commenced to descend the steps. As always when Gerund met her here, he was conscious of how Gyro, as she came down those steps, had to force her mind out from the cloister of Barbe Barber back into the external world. While he watched with anxiety and love, the curve of her back straightened, her head came up, her pace increased. By the time she reached Gerund, her eyes held that familiar expression of detached amuse-ment with which she faced both life and her husband.

"It feels like weeks since I saw you," Gyro said, kissing Gerund on his mouth and putting her arms round him.

"It is weeks," he protested.

"Is it really?" she said playfully. "It doesn't seem as long!"

Gerund took her hand and led her round to the massive triangle that was their plane. The month of medita-tion which Gyro, as a doctor, was compelled to undergo every year was undoubtedly beneficial for her; based on high-ega systems, the disciplines of Barbe Barber were courses of refreshment for brains and bodies for the medical fraternities of the world. Cyro looked younger and more vital than ever; Gerund told himself that, after six years of marriage, he was less a source of vitality in his wife's life than was high-ega; but it was irrational to hope for any change in that respect.

Walking together they reached the plane. Jeffy, their bonded servant, was leaning against the metal hull awaiting them, arms patiently folded.

"It's nice to see you again, Doctor Cyro," he said, opening the door for them and standing back.

"And you, Jeffy. You're looking brown."

"Baked right through," he said, smiling broadly. His homeland was a bleak northern island lying under frost most of the year; equatorial tour suited him well. Though it was thirty years since he had been brought from that distant land, Jeffy still spoke its simple patois, Ingulesh; he had been unable to acquire the Galingua in which Gerund, Cyro, and most civilized people of the day thought and conversed.

They climbed into their seats, Jeffy taking the pilot's throne. He was a great, slow man who moved like a

boxer coming in for the kill. His sluggish mentality had left him fit for nothing but the role of a bonded servant, yet he handled the heavy flier with the delicacy of a cat killing a mouse.

Jeffy now taxied them over to one of the semi-circular take-off collars which would absorb their exhaust gases. The orange signal came through on the collar beacon and they burst immediately into vertical flight. At once the trees and the white and grey walls of Barbe Barber dwindled away below them, as inconsiderable as a child's charade between the limitless sandwich of sky and sand. The plane headed due west, on a course which would bring them eventually to the Gyres' home in the Puterska Islands: or would have brought them there but for the sick man a thousand metres under the bland surface of the Lanic Sea—a sick man of whose very existence they were as yet unaware,

"Well, Gerund, what has happened in the world since I've been out of it?" Gyro asked, settling herself carefully opposite her husband.

"Nothing very exciting. The Dualists wish to register every planet in the Federation. The Barrier Research City has been opened with due pomp. And the world of learning is at loggerheads over Pamlira's new work: 'Para-evolution'."

"I must certainly read that," Gyro said, with a trace of excitement. "What's his theory this time?"

"It's one of those things which doesn't summarize easily," Gerund told her, "but briefly Pamlira accepts the Pla-To position of the Dual Theory and claims that evolution is working towards greater consciousness.
Plants are less conscious than animals, animals less cons-cious than men, and men came after animals which came after the plants. Plants, animals, men, are only first steps in a long ladder. Pamlira points out that man is by no means fully conscious. He sleeps, he forgets, he is un-aware of the workings of his body"

"Which is why we doctors exist," Gyro inserted.

"Exactly. As Pamlira himself says, only certain un-usual individuals, associated together into our present Orders of Medicine, can to some extent participate con-sciously in somatic activity."

She smiled a neutral smile.

"And where does he go from there?" she asked.

"He postulates that the next evolutionary step would be something—a being—conscious in every cell: and that Nature may be already preparing to usher it on to the stage. The time, apparently, is ripe for the new being."

"Already?" She raised a quizzical eyebrow. "I should have thought he was a few million years early! Have all the permutations of which man is capable been played through already?"

"Pamlira spends half the book explaining why the new species is due now," Gerund said. "According to him. evolution accelerates like scientific progress; the more protoplasm available for modification, the sooner the modification appears. On thirty thousand planets, you have quite a weight of protoplasm."

Cyro was silent. With a slight ache in his heart, Gerund noticed that she asked him nothing about his personal opinion of Pamlira's book, though it must have been clear from what he said that he had read it. She would consider that his opinion as an industrial ecologist was not worth having, and refused to yield

enough to convention to ask him anyway.

Finally, Cyro said, "Whatever this super-conscious new species was, man would give it little chance to establish its supremacy—or even to survive. It would be blotted out before it had a chance to multiply. After all, we could hardly be expected to be hospitable to the usurpers of our comfortable place in the cosmos."

"Pamlira says," Gerund told her, "that evolution would take care of that if it really wanted man out of the way. The new species would be given some sort of defence— or weapon—to render it invulnerable against the species it was superseding."

"How?" she asked indignantly, as if he had said some-thing stupid. "Evolution is a completely neutral—blind —process."

"That's what worries Pamlira!" Gerund said. He could see she considered this remark superficial. So it was; it had been designed to cover his uncertainty of what Pam-lira had actually said on that point. Para-evolution was stiff reading; Gerund had only waded through it for Gyro's sake, because he knew the subject would interest her.

"All right," he thought angrily, "she'd understand the book: I wouldn't. Why should that upset me? She doesn't understand me."

Para-evolution and its attendant woes were presently driven out of both their minds. Jeffy appeared, framed bulkily in the door dividing the control-room from the cabin, while the plane roared on above the Sara on auto-pilot.

"There's a call coming in for a doctor," he said, trund-ling his words out one by one. "It's coming from Cap-verde Sub-port, almost dead ahead. They've got an underseaman in urgent need of healing." He looked im-ploringly at Gyro as he spoke.

"Of course I'll take it," she said, getting up and brush-ing past him into the control-room.

The call was coming through again as she reached the wireless. She listened carefully to it, and then answered.

"Thank you, Doctor Gyres," the Capverde operator said relievedly. "We'll wait for your arrival. Out."

They were now only some six hundred miles from the Capverde Islands; already they had covered nearly twice that distance from Barbe Barber. Even as Cyro left the wireless, the Lanic Sea showed ahead. On this desolate stretch of the continental coast, the saddest on Yinnisfar for all its blinding sun, the desert stretched right to the water's edge—or, to take it conversely, the beach extended from here to Barbe Barber. They flashed across the dividing line between sand and sea and headed W.S.W. Almost at once, cloud formed like a floor below them, blotting out the turning globe.

Within ten minutes, checking his instruments, Jeffy took them down, down, finally skimming under low nimbo-stratus to find the fourteen islands of the Gap-, verde archipelago to their left ahead.

"Nicely calculated," Gerund said. Jeffy played the metal think-box like a child genius conjuring Britzi-parbtu from a chello-organ; he had that flair for machines only granted to the half-witted.

The plane banked to port round Satago and plunged down towards the sea, dropping vertically. The

grey waters came up to meet them like a smack in the face, boiled round them, swallowed them, and the altimeter finger on the instrument panel, swooping past the "Zero" sign, began to read fathoms instead of feet.

Jeffy was in radio contact with the sub-port again. Beacons at ten-fathom intervals lit their way down to the underwater city. Finally a hangar, poised about a hundred-fathom gulf, loomed whale's-mouth wide in front of them; they jetted in and the jaws closed behind them. Powerful valves immediately began to suck the water from the hangar, replacing it with air.

Already mentally composing herself for what was to come, Gyro was out of the flier before the dock hand on the vacobile could get round to collect up the trapped fish and blow the floor dry. Gerund and Jeffy were left to follow as best they might.

Outside the hangar, two port officials greeted Cyro.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Doctor Gyres," one of them said. "They probably told you the details of the case on the wireless. It's the chief engineer of the undersea trawler Bartlemeo who's in trouble. . . ."

As he related the cogent facts of the case, the official ushered Gyro, Gerund and Jeffy aboard a small, open bus. The other official drove, and they sped along the strange waterfront where, despite all the usual bustle connected with a dock, no water could be seen.

For ages, the human species had regarded the seas as either a perilous highway or a suitable place in which they could make hit-and-run raids on the shoals of fish there; then, belatedly, it had taken the oceans in hand and tended them with the same care it bestowed on the land; now they were fanned rather than fished. As more and more personnel turned to work on the savannahs of the deep, so the sub-ports had grown up, underwater towns which paid little homage to their softer counter-parts on dry land.

Capverde Sub-port, because of its favoured position in the Lanic and its proximity to Little Union, the second greatest of Yinnisfar's cities, had been one of the first such ports to be established. The quarter of the city in which the open bus now stopped was more than ten centuries old. The hospital into which they were ushered presented a crumbling facade to the world.

Inside were the usual monastic arrangements of hos-pitals everywhere. From a cloister, doors gave on to a waiting-room, a primitive kitchen, a radio room, small cells; in one of the cells lay Je Regard, chief engineer of the Bartlemeo, with a dose of hard radiation in his kidneys.

An ancient bondman, bent and grey-bearded, an-nounced himself as Laslo; he was on duty: apart from him and the sick man, the musty-smelling place was empty.

"Well, see what you can do for the poor fellow, Doctor," one of the officials said, shaking Cyro's elegant hand as he prepared to depart. "I expect the captain of the Bartlemeo will call through soon. Meanwhile, we will leave you in peace."

"Thank you," Cyro said, a little blankly, her mind already far from them. She turned away, went into the sick man's cell and closed the door behind her.

For some while after she had gone and the officials had left in their bus, Gerund and Jeffy stood aimlessly in the cloister. Jeffy wandered to the archway and looked out at the street. Occasionally a bonded man

or woman passed, looking neither to the right nor the left. The dully-lit fronts of the buildings, many of them carved from the rock, looked like the dwellings of the dead.

Jeffy wrapped his great arms about his torso.

"I want to go home," he said. "It's cold here."

A bead of moisture fell from the roof overhead and splashed on his cheek. "It's cold and damp here," he added. The grey-bearded guard regarded him with a sardonic eye, without speaking. For a long while there was no more speech. They waited almost without thought, their level of consciousness as dim as the lights outside.

As soon as Gyro Gyres entered the cell, she climbed on to the bunk with the sick man.

Regard was a heavy fellow. Under the single blanket, his vast frame laboured up and down with the effort of breathing. The stubble on his face thrust up through three great, pallid jowls. Lying beside him, Gyro felt like Mahomet visiting the mountain.

That the mountain was unconscious only made Gyro's task easier. She placed her bare arm over Regard's bare arm and closed her eyes. She relaxed her muscles, slow-ing her breathing rate. This was, of course, all standard professional procedure. Efficiently, Gyro reduced the rate of her heart's beat, concentrating on that vital pulse until it seemed to grow and grow, and she could submerge herself in it.

She was sinking down through a dull red haze, a featureless haze, a haze stretching from pole to pole. But gradually, a mirage forming in a distance, striations appeared through the haze. As her viewpoint sank, it magnified; the islands of the blood slid up to meet her. The islands moved with the clerical purpose of vultures, expanding, changing, ranging, rearranging, and still she moved among them. Though she moved, all sense of direction was entirely shed. Here the dimensions carried no sense of up or down; even near and far were con-fused to her sight which was no longer sight.

Not only sight had she lost. Almost every other ability except volition had been stripped from her when she took this plunge into the somatic world of her own bodily universe, as a man throws off all his clothes before diving into a river. She could not: think, remember, taste, touch, turn, communicate or act; yet a shadow of all these things remained with her; much as the dragonfly lava, climbing its reed out of the ooze, carries a vague image of the creature it will become, Gyro had some memory of herself as the individual she had been. And this pale memory stayed with her by dint of the years of training she had received in Medical Meditation at Barbe Barber, otherwise she would have been lost in that most terrible trap of all: the universe of one's own body.

Almost without will, she headed down her blood-stream. It was swimming (flying? crawling?) through an endless everglade, flooded above the tree tops, treacle-thick with fish, minnow, mackerel, mace and manta ray. It was creeping (climbing? drifting?) down a glass can-yon, whose walls flickered with more than earthly fire-, light. So, so, until before her loomed a wavering cliff.

The cliff ran round the universe, tall as time, insub-stantial as muslin, pock-marked with rabbit holes, through which phantasmic creatures came and went. She drifted through it almost without resistance, like plankton sucked through a sponge.

Now she had passed her lobe of consciousness, her psyche into Je Regard's arm, into his soma.

Her surroundings were as weird, as strange, as familiar, as they had been before. Submerged on this

cellular level there could be no difference between his body and hers. Yet a difference was there. From the forests of his flesh, strange and always unseen eyes watched her, and a silent and malevolent regard traced her course; for she was an intruder venturing into the interior of an alien world especially designed to show an intruder no mercy. Little jellies of death twinkled as she passed, and only the confidence of her step held the defending powers at bay.

As she moved on, corpuscles like stars about her, the surrounding activity grew more intense. She was swept along, as by a glutinous current, moving under arches, among branches, past weed tangles, through nets, and the way ahead grew dark and stagnant; though she still drifted forward, the half-live things about her were squirming away, repulsed, flickering with crude blue-prints of pain.

She was nearly at the infected kidneys now.

Only the stern disciples of Medical Meditation now prompted her on. The atmosphere was so thickly repel-lent, she might have been wallowing in a sewer. But medicine had long ago discovered the powers of self-healing that lie within a body; high-ega and the yogas on which it was founded had pointed the way to releas-ing those powers. Nowadays, with the psyche of one of the Order of Medicine to spur it on, a patient's body could be made to regenerate itself: to grow a new limb, a new lung, a new liver. The doctors, the modern skin divers, submerged to marshal the martial forces of the anatomy against its invaders.

Cyro called to those forces now. About her, layer on layer, horizon-high, the cells of the invaded body, each with its thirty-thousand genes, lay silent and seemingly deserted. Then, slowly, reluctantly, as her summons per-sisted, reinforcements came to her, like rats crawling out of a ruined city. The enemy is ahead; she pulsed to them, moving forward into the tattered darkness, leading them. More and more, they were coming to her cause, lighting the sewer with their internal fires.

Things like little bats hurtled, chittering, at them out of the heart of the darkness, were struck down, were devoured. And then the enemy launched his assault against them. He struck with the suddenness of a closing trap.

He was one, he was a million!

He was nothing the textbooks knew of, unknown, un-knowable.

He fought with laws and powers entirely his own.

He was monstrous, bestial, occult, a greed with cobra fangs, a horned horror, newly hatched. He was so over-whelming that Cyro hardly felt fear: the puissance of the unknown can kill everything but calm in us. She was

aware only that a random radioactive particle had struck down and buried itself into a random gene, pro-ducing—with a ferocious defiance of the laws of chance —a freak cell, a mutant cell with unfamiliar appetites; nothing in her training prepared her to understand what the appetites were.

Those appetites had lain dormant until she approached. She had triggered them, woken them. She had breathed her touch of consciousness on to them, and at once the cell had filled with its own awareness. And its awareness was of the desire to conquer.

She could see—feel—hear—sense—that it was tearing through cell after cell, like a maniac through empty rooms, filling them with its rebellion. The healing forces about her turned and fled in panic, winging

and swim-ming against a wind which held them helpless. Gyro, too, turned to escape. Her own body was her only refuge, if she could get there.

But the nailed streamers came out of the darkness and wrapped themselves about her. She cracked open her jaws to their toothed extremes, struggling to scream; at once her mouth was filled with sponge, from which little creatures flung themselves and scampered wildly through her being, triumphing. . . .

Gerund and Jeffy sat smoking on a bench under the eye of the grey-bearded bondman, Laslo. Empty mugs stood beside them; Jeffy had boiled them a hot drink in the kitchen. Now they sat waiting uneasily for Gyro to reappear, their uneasiness growing as the time slipped away.

"I've never known her to take so long on a case before," Gerund said. "Five minutes is generally all she needs. As soon as she has organized the powers of recovery, she comes back."

"This engineer—he sounded pretty bad," Jeffy said.

"Yes, but all the same. .. . Five minutes more and I'm going in to see her."

"That's not permitted," declared the grey-beard; it was almost the first time he had spoken. What he said was no less than the truth. The etiquette governing doctor and patient was very strict, in their own interests; they could not be viewed together, unless by another doctor. Gerund was perfectly familiar with this rule; he had, indeed, a reluctance to see his wife in a trance state, knowing that the sight would only serve to emphasize the restraint he felt between them. All the same, Gyro had been in that room for a half an hour; something must be done.

He sat there for two more minutes before getting up and going over to the cell door. Laslo also rose, shouting angrily. As he started to intercept Gerund, Jeffy blocked his way.

"Sit down or I'll pull your nose off," Jeffy said un-emotionally. "I'm very strong and I got nothing better to do."

The old man, taking one look into Jeffy's face, went obediently back and sat down. Gerund nodded at his servant, opened the cell door and slipped inside.

One glance told him that something was wrong here— gravely wrong. His wife and the massive engineer lay side by side on a bunk, their arms touching. Their eyes were open, bulging coldly out into space like cod's eyes on a slab, containing no life whatsoever. But their bodies were alive. Every so often, their frames vibrated and bulged and settled again. Cyro's right heel kicked briefly against the bunk, beating a meaningless rat-tat on the wooden bed foot. Her skin was gradually suffusing with a crim-son blush like a stain; it looked, thought Gerund, as if every shred of flesh in her body had been beaten to a pulp. For a while he stood there transfixed in horror and fear, unable to collect his wits and decide what to do.

A big cockroach swarmed up the leg of the bed. It passed within six inches of Je Regard's foot, which pro-truded bare from under his blanket. As the cockroach moved by, a section of the sole of the foot suddenly grew into a stalk, a dainty thing like a blade of grass; the stalk licked out as quickly as a tongue and caught the cockroach, its legs waving. Gerund slid quietly to the ground in a faint.

Now the flesh on the bed began to change more rapidly. It had organized itself. It slid and smeared out of shape, or flowed in on itself with smacking noises. The cockroach was absorbed. Then, compressing itself, the mass formed back into one human form: Cyro's. Face, body, colour of hair, eyes: all became like Gyro's, and every drop of flesh was squeezed into her making. As her last finger-nail formed,

Gerund rolled over and sat up.

Surprise seized him as he stared about the cell.

It had seemed to him that he had been senseless only a second, yet the sick man had gone! At least Gyro looked better now. She was smiling at him. Perhaps, after all, his anxiety had produced some beastly kind of optical illusion when he entered the cell; perhaps every-thing was all right. But on looking more closely at Gyro, his returning sense of reassurance vanished.

Something had happened. It was uncanny! The per-son sitting on the bed was Gyro. And yet—and yet— every line of her face, every subtle contour Gerund loved so well, had undergone an indefinable transmutation. Even the texture of her flesh had changed. He noticed that her fingers had grown. And there was another thing —she was too big. She was too thick and too tall to be Cyro, as she sat on the bed looking at him, trying to smile.

Gerund stood up, faintness threatening to overwhelm him again. He was close to the door. He could run, or he could call for Jeffy, as his instincts bid him.

Instead, he conquered his instincts. Gyro was in trouble, supreme trouble. Here was Gerund's chance, possibly his final one, to prove his devotion to her; if he ran from her now, his chance would have passed for ever —or so he told himself, for Gerund could not believe his wife's frigidity rested on anything but a distrust of integrity.

He turned back to her, ignoring her frightfulness.

"Gyro, Gyro, what is wrong?" he asked. "What can I do? Tell me what I can do to help. I'll do anything."

The creature on the bed opened its mouth.

"I shall be better in a minute," it said huskily. The words did not quite coincide with its lip movements.

With a heave, it stood on its feet. It was over seven feet tall, and burly. Gerund stared at it as if hypnotized, but managed with an effort of will to hold out a hand to it. "It's my wife," he told himself; "it's only my wife." But as it lumbered towards him, his nerve broke. The look on its face was too terrible. . . . He turned, too late to get away. It stretched out its arms and caught him almost playfully.

In the cloister, Jeffy was growing bored. For all the affection he bore his master, he found the life of a bond-servant a tedious one at times. Under the fishy eye of the old guard, he spread himself along the bench, pre-paring for a nap; Gerund would call him soon enough when he was wanted.

A bell rang in the radio room.

Casting one last suspicious look at Jeffy, the old man went to answer the call. Jeffy settled back to doze. In a minute, scuffling sounds made him open an eye. A mon-strous form, its details lost in the feeble lighting, lumped along on eight or ten legs and vanished into the street. Jeffy was on his feet instantly, a wave of cold horror brushing tenderly over his skin. He turned and made at a run for the sick cell, instinctively connecting this monster with a threat to those he served.

The cell was empty.

"Here, what are you up to?" asked a voice behind him; the grey-beard had come up at the sound of Jeffy's foot-steps. He peered past Jeffy's elbow into the room. As soon as he saw it was empty, he pulled out a whistle and began to blow wildly on it.

Judge: "You offer as an explanation of the disappear-ance of your master and mistress the possibility that they may have been—er, devoured by this monster you claim you saw?"

Jeffy: "I didn't say that, sir. I don't know where they went to. I only say I saw this tiling slipping out of the hospital, and then they were gone."

Judge: "You have heard that nobody else in the sub-port has seen any such monster. You have heard the evidence of Laslo, the hospital guard, that he saw no such monster. Why then do you persist in this tale?" Jeffy: "I can only say what happened, can't I?" Judge: "You are supposed to say what happened." Jeffy: "That is what happened. It's the truth! I've no secrets, nothing to hide. I was fond of my master. I would never have done away with him—or my mistress."

Judge: "Bonded servants have expressed such senti-ments before, after their masters were dead. If you are innocent of what you are accused, why did you attempt to escape when old Laslo blew his whistle for the police?"

Jeffy: "I was rattled, sir, do you understand? I was frightened. I'd seen this—thing, and then I'd seen the empty cell, and then that ruddy old fool started blowing that row in my ear. I—I just hit him without thinking."

Judge: "Hm. You do not reveal yourself as a very responsible man. We have already heard the witness Laslo's account of the way you threatened him with force soon after you arrived at the hospital."

Jeffy: "And you've heard me tell you why I did so."

Judge: "You realize, I hope, the serious position you are in? You are a simple man, so I will put it to you simply: under world law, you are charged with the double murder of your master and mistress, and until their bodies are recovered or further evidence comes to light, you are to be housed in our prison."

There were two ways up from the sub-port to the sur-face of the Lanic. One way was the sea route, by which both the Bartlemeo and the Gyres' plane had arrived. The other was a land route. An underground funicular railway climbed through three thousand feet of rock from the submerged city to the station in Praia, the capital of the island of Satago. It was by this route that Jeffy was brought to prison.

Overlooking a dusty courtyard sheltered by a baobab, Jeffy's cell window allowed him a glimpse of the sea. It was good to be above ground again, although the cloudy overcast created a greenhouse atmosphere which was particularly oppressive after the cool airs of the sub-port: Jeffy sweated perpetually. He spent a lot of his time standing on his wooden bed, staring out into the heat. Other convicts, out for exercise, talked to each other under his window in the local lingua crioula, but Jeffy understood not a word of it.

Towards the evening of the second day of his confine-ment, Jeffy was at his usual perch when a wind arose. It blew hotly through the prison, and continued to blow. The heavy cloud was shredded away, revealing the blue of the sky for the first time in days. The chief warder, a swarthy man with immense moustaches, came out into the courtyard, sampled the air, approved, and strolled over to a stone seat under the baobab tree. Dusting it carefully with his handkerchief, he lay down and relaxed.

On top of the wall behind the warder, something moved. A thing like a python uncoiled itself and began to drop down into the courtyard; it seemed to spread over the wall like a stain as it came, but the heavy foliage of the baobab made it difficult to see what was happen-ing. It looked to Jeffy now as if a rubbery curtain set with jewels and starfish were gliding down the wall. Now it landed behind the warder.

Whatever the thing was, it raised a flapper like a snake about to strike and clamped it over the unsuspecting warder's face. Then the rest of its bulk flowed over the man, damping his struggles and covering him like a cloak. Jeffy cried out furiously from his cell, but nobody answered, nobody cared; most of the staff were down on the waterfront with their girls.

When the thing slid off the chief warder, only a limp and flattened body lay on the bench. The hot wind trifled with its moustaches. The thing grew fingers and expertly removed the ring of keys from the dead man's belt. A segment of it then detached itself from the main bulk of the thing, which remained in the shadows as the segment scampered across the yard with the keys. It looked like an animated stool,

"My God!" Jeffy said. "It's coming here."

As he backed away from the window to his cell door, the creature, with one bound, appeared between the bars and dropped the keys into the cell. It jumped in after them.

Bit by bit, more of the thing arrived, dropping down before Jeffy's petrified gaze and finally building into— Gerund, or an intolerable replica of him.

Gerund put out a hand and touched his servant, almost as if he was experimenting.

"It's all right, Jeffy," he said at last, speaking with obvious effort. "You have nothing to fear. No harm will come to you. Take these keys, unlock your cell door and come with me up to the governor of the prison."

Grey in the face, shaking like a leaf, Jeffy managed to pull himself together enough to obey. The keys rattling in his hand, he tried them in the lock one by one until he found a key that fitted. Like a man mesmerized, he led the way into the corridor, the pseudo-Gerund follow-ing closely behind.

Nobody was about. At one point a warder slept in a tipped-back chair, his heels resting high above his head on the whitewashed wall. They did not disturb him. They unlocked the big, barred door at the foot of a private staircase and so ascended into the governor's flat. Open doors showed them the way to a balcony overlook-ing the bay and the central peaks of the island.

On the balcony, alone as usual, drinking wine, as usual, a man sat in a wicker chair. He looked small and —yes, alas!—infinitely tired.

"Are you the prison governor?" Gerund asked, stump-ing into the room.

"I am," I said.

He looked at me for a long while. I could tell then that he was not—what shall I say?—not an ordinary human. He looked what he was: a forgery of a human being. Even so, I recognized him as Gerund Gyres from the photographs the police had circulated.

"Will you both take a chair?" I asked. "It fatigues me to see you standing."

Neither servant nor master moved.

"Why have you—how have you released your man?" I asked.

"I brought him before you," Gerund said, "so that you may hear what I have to say, and so that you may know that Jeffy is a good servant, has never done me harm. I want him released forthwith."

So, this was a reasonable creature which had com-passion. Human or no, it was something I could talk to. So many men with whom I have to deal have neither reason nor compassion.

"I am prepared to listen," I said, pouring myself more wine. "As you see, I have little else to do. Listening can be even pleasanter than talking."

Whereupon Gerund began to tell me everything I have now set down here to the best of my ability. Jeffy and I listened in silence; though the bondman undoubtedly understood little, I grasped quite enough to make my insides turn cold. After all, was not my copy of Pamlira's work on Para-evolution lying at my elbow?

In the quiet which fell when Gerund finished, we heard the sunset angelus ringing out from a Praia steeple; it brought me no anodyne, and the hard, hot wind carried its notes away. I knew already that a darkness was falling which no prayers would lighten.

"So then," I said, finding my voice, "as governor, the first point I must make is that you, Gerund Gyres, as I must call you, have committed murder: on your own admission, you killed my chief warder.

"That was an error," Gerund said. "You must realize that I—who am a composite of Je Regard, Cyro Gyres and Gerund Gyres, to say nothing of the numerous fish absorbed on my swim up from the sub-port—I believed I could absorb any human. It would not be death; we are alive. But your warder defied absorbtion. So did Jeffy, here, when I touched him."

"Why do you think that is?" I asked stiffly.

He grew a smile on his face. I averted my eyes from it

"We learn fast," he said. "We cannot absorb humans who are not conscious of themselves as part of the pro-cess of nature. If they just cling to the outmoded idea of man as a species apart, their cells are antagonistic to ours and absorption will not take place."

"Do you mean to tell me you can only—er, absorb a cultured man?" I asked.

"Exactly. With animals it is different: their conscious-ness is only a natural process; they offer us no obstacle."

I believe it was at this point that Jeff y jumped over the balcony rail into the bushes below. He picked himself up unhurt, and we watched his massive frame dwindle from the road as he ran away. Neither of us spoke; I hoped he might go to bring help, but if Gerund thought of that he gave no sign.

"Really, I don't think I understand what you mean at all," I said, playing for time. And I don't think I did grasp it then; to tell you the truth, I was feeling so sick the whole prison seemed to reel round me. This heavy pseudo-man made me more frightened than I knew I could be. Though I fear neither life nor death, before the half-alive I was shivering with the chill of horror.

"I don't understand about absorbing only cultured people," I said, almost at random.

This time it did not bother with opening its mouth to answer.

"Culture implies fuller understanding. Today there is culturally speaking only one way to that understanding: through Galingua. I can only liberate the cells of those who are able to use that semantic tool, those whose whole bio-chemical bondage has already been made malleable by it. The accident that happened to Je Regard releases abilities already latent in every Galingua-speaking person throughout the galaxy. Here and now on Yinnisfar, a giant step ahead has been taken—unexpected, yet the inevitable climax to the employment of Galingua."

"So then," I said, feeling better as I began to compre-hend, "you are the next evolutionary step as predicted by Pamlira in Para-evolution?"

"Roughly speaking, yes," he said. "I have the total awareness Pamlira spoke of. Each of my cells has that gift; therefore I am independent of fixed form, that bane of every multi-celled creature before me."

I shook my head.

"You seem to me not an advance but a retrogression," I said. "Man is, after all, a complex gene-hive; you are saying you can turn into single cells, but single cells are very early forms of life."

"All my cells are aware," he said emphatically. "That's the difference. Genes built themselves into cells and cells into the gene-hive called man in order to develop their potentialities, not man's. The idea of man's being able to develop was purely an anthropomorphic concept. Now the cells have finished with this shape called man; they have exhausted its possibilities and are going on to some-thing else."

To this there seemed nothing to say, so I sat quietly, sipping my drink and watching the shadows grow, spreading from the mountains out to sea, I was still cold but no longer shaking.

"Have you nothing else to ask me?" Gerund inquired, almost with puzzlement in his voice. You hardly expect to hear a monster sounding puzzled.

"Yes," I said. "Just one thing. Are you happy?"

The silence, Eke the shadows, extended itself towards the horizon.

"I mean," I amplified, "if I had a hand in modelling a new species, I'd try and make something more capable of happiness than man. Curious creatures that we are, our best moments come when we are striving for some-thing; when the thing's achieved—la, we are full of unrest again. There is a divine discontent, but divine content comes only to the beasts of the pasture, who regardlessly crop down snails with their grass. The more intelligent a man is, the more open he is to doubt; con-versely, the bigger fool he is, the more likely he is to be pleased with his lot So I'm asking, are you new species, happy?"

"Yes," Gerund said positively. "As yet I am only three people: Regard, Cyro, Gerund. The last two have struggled for years for full integration—as do all human couples—and now have found it, a fuller integration than was ever feasible before. What humans instinctively seek, we instinctively have; we are the completion of a trend. We can never be anything but happy, no matter how many people we absorb."

Keeping my voice steady, I said, "You'd better start absorbing me then, since that must be what you intend."

"Eventually all human cells will come under the new regime," Gerund said. "But first the word of what is happening must be spread to make people receptive to us, to soften further what Galingua has already softened. Everyone must know, so that we can carry out the absorbtion process. That is your duty. You are a civilized man, governor; you must write to Pamlira for a start, explaining what has occurred. Pamlira will be interested."

He paused. Three cars swept up the road and turned in at the main gate of the prison. Jeffy, then, had had enough intelligence to go for help.

"Supposing I will not aid you?" I asked. "Why should I hurry man's extinction? Supposing I acquaint the Gal-Fed Council with the truth, and get them to blow this whole island to bits? It would be a simple—get out!— a simple matter—confound it!"

We were suddenly surrounded by butterflies. In brush-ing them impatiently away, I had knocked over my bottle of wine. The air was full of thousands of butterflies, fluttering round us like paper; the darkening sky was thick with them. The angriest gestures of the hand could not clear them away.

"What is this?" Gerund spluttered. For the first time, I personally saw him out of shape, as he grew another attachment to wave the dainty creatures off. It sprouted from what had teen his ear, and flailed the air about his head. I can only say I was nauseated. It cost me the greatest effort to keep a grip on myself.

"As a creature so aware of nature," I said, "you should enjoy this spectacle. These are Painted Lady butterflies, blown in thousands off their migratory tracks. We get them here most years. This hot wind, which we call the Marmtarij carries them westwards across the ocean from the continent."

Now I could hear people running up the stairs. They would be able to deal suitably with this creature, whose reasonable words were so in contrast to his unreasonable appearance. I continued, speaking more loudly, so that if possible he would be taken unawares, "It's not entirely a misfortune for the butterflies. There are so many of them, no doubt they have eaten most of their food on the mainland and would have starved had they not been carried here by the wind. An admirable example of nature looking after its own."

"Admirable!" he echoed. I could scarcely see him for bright wings. The rescue party was in the next room. They burst out with Jeffy at their head, carrying atomic weapons.

"There he is," I shouted.

But he was not there. Regard-Cyro-Gerund had gone. Taking a tip from the Painted Ladies, he had split into a thousand units, volplaning away on the breeze, safely, invincibly, lost among the crowd of bright insects.

So I come to what is really not the end but the begin-ning of the story. Already, a decade has passed since the events in the Capverde Islands. What did I do? Well, I did nothing; I neither wrote to Pamlira nor called Gal-Fed Council. With the marvellous adaptability of my species, I managed in a day or two to persuade myself that "Gerund" would never succeed, or that somehow or other he had misinterpreted what was happening to him.

And so, year by year, I hear the reports of the human race growing fewer and I think, "Weil, anyway they're happy," and I sit up here on my balcony and let the sea breezes blow on me and drink my wine. In this climate, and at this post, nothing more should be expected of me. And why should I excite myself for a cause in which I have never believed? When Nature passes a law it can-not be repealed; for her prisoners there is no escape— and we are all her prisoners. So I sit tight and take another drink. There is only one proper way to become extinct: with dignity.

Not all men faced their fate with the weary resignation of the prison governor. For many years, in many ways, war was waged against the sentient cells until at last nothing remained of them but a little ash in the fields.

By this time the federation had fallen apart. It was ironical that just when Galingua seemed to offer an approach to new realms, this disintegration should come from the language itself. The use of Galingua was pro-hibited. Interpenetrators were abandoned, and the old system of "solid" space travel was reintroduced. Even the Self-Perpetuating War lost impetus.

A hard and mercenary world grew up—a world new perhaps to the people of that time, but not entirely unfamiliar to us.

Secret of a Mighty City

The mighty creature was reeling. The hunter's last shot had caught it right between its eyes. Now, all fifty graceful tons of it, it reared up high above the tree tops, trumpeting in agony. For a moment the sun, beautiful and baleful, caught it poised like an immense swan, before it fell—silent now, no more protesting—'headlong into the undergrowth.

"And there lies another triumph for Man the Uncon-querable, Man the Invincible," proclaimed the commen-tator. "On this planet as on others, the stupendously horrible natural life finally bows out before the gigantic little biped from Earth, Yes, sir, everyone of these revolting, unnatural monsters will be slaughtered by the time"

But by this time, some bright boy had warned the pro-jectionist of the new arrival who was now waiting to use the little editing theatre. The projectionist, in a panic, cut everything. The 3-D image vanished, the sound slicked out with a squawk. Lights came on, revealing Mr. Smile P. Wreyermeyer of Supernova Solids standing by the entrance with several of his more up-and-coming lackeys.

"Hope we didn't disturb you boys, Ed?" Mr. Wreyer-meyer said, watching everyone hustling up to leave.

"Not at all, Mr. Wreyermeyer, we were just tinker-ing," Ed, a mere assistant director said, grabbing at his gear. "We'll wrap this one up tomorrow. Come on, boys, move fast!"

"I wouldn't like to think we'd interrupted," Mr. Wreyermeyer said blandly. "But Harsch Benlin here has something he seems keen to show us." And he nodded, not perhaps without an easy menace, at the lean figure of Harsch Benlin.

Two minutes later, the last humble shirt-sleeved minion had fled from the theatre, leaving the intruding party in occupation.

"Ed didn't seem in any hurry to leave," Mr. Wreyer-meyer observed heavily, settling his bulk in one of the armchair seats. "Well, Harsch, my boy, let's see what you have to show us."

"Sure thing, Smile," Harsch Benlin said. He was one of the few men on the Supernova lot allowed to call the big chief by his first name; give him his due, he worked the privilege for all it was worth. He jumped now, with a parody of athleticism, on to the narrow stage in front of the solid-screen and smiled down at his audience. It consisted of some twenty-five people, half of whom Harsch knew only by first names. This company broke down roughly into four groups: the big chief and his yes men; Harsch's own yes men, headed by Pony Caley; a handful of boys from Story and Market Response Departments with their yes men; plus the usual quota of hypnotic-breasted stenographers.

"Here's how it is, boys," Harsch began, trying to look disarming. "I've got an idea for a solid that has me knocked sideways, and I'm hoping and expecting it'll have the same effect on all of you. Now I'm not going to try and sell it to you—we're all busy men here, and for another thing, it sells itself. It's a great idea, at once original and familiar, at once homely and inspiring.

"In brief, the idea's this: I want to put over a solid that is going to give Supernova a terrific boost, because it's going to have our studios as background, and some of our personnel as extras. At the same time, it's going to pack colossal punch in terms of human drama and audience appeal. At the same time it's going to be a profile of Nunion, the busiest, biggest, excitingest, megapolitanist planetary capital in this neck of the galaxy."

Harsch paused for effect. Several members of his audience were lighting up aphrohales, picking their noses, or talking to each other in whispers.

"I can see you're asking yourselves," Harsch said, jacking his jaws up into a smile, "just how I intend to cram so much meat into one two-hour solid. O.K. I'll show you."

He raised one hand eloquently, as a signal to his pro-jectionist, Cluet Dander. There was no better man than Gluet at his job; even Harsch had been known to acknowledge that on occasion. Directly his hand rose, a solid appeared in the screen.

It was the face of a man. He was in his late forties. The years which had dried away his flesh had only suc-ceeded in revealing, under the fine skin, the nobility of his bone structure: the tall forehead, the set of the cheekbones, the justness of the jaw. He was talking, although Cluet had turned off the sound, leaving only the animation of the features to speak for themselves. This was the kind of man, you felt instinctively, whose daughter you would like to marry. His countenance com-pletely dwarfed Harsch Benlin.

"This, ladies and gentlemen." Harsh said, clenching his fists and holding them out before him, "this is the face of Art Stayker."

Now he had a reaction. The audience was sitting up, looking at each other, looking at Mr. Wreyermeyer, trying to gauge the climate of opinion about them. Gratified, without letting the gratification show, Harsch continued.

"Yes, this Is the face of a great man. Art Stayker! What a genius! He was known only to a narrow circle of men, here in this very studio where he worked, yet all who knew him admired and—why don't I come

right out with it?—loved him. I had the honour to be his right-hand man back in the good old days when Art was boss of Documentary Unit Two, and I plan this solid to be his biography—a tribute to Art Stayker."

He paused. If he could swing this one on Wreyepmeyer and Co. he was made, because if it boosted Art Stayker it was also going to boost Harsch Benlin. He had to play his hand carefully, watching which way the big boys down there in the armchairs jumped.

"Art finished up in the gutter!" someone called out, that was Hi Pilloi, only a yes man's yes man.

"Yes, and I am glad someone brought that point up at once," Harsch said, carefully snubbing Hi Polloi by not mentioning his name. "Sure Art Stayker finished up in the gutter. He couldn't quite make the grade. This solid is going to show why. It's going to have subtility. It's going to show just how much grit and know-how is needed to serve the public as we serve them—because, like I said, it's going to be a solid not just about Art Stayker, but about Supernova, and about Nunion, and about Life. It's going to be bigger than our smash hit saga on Thraldemener! It's going to have everything."

Art's gentle face faded, leaving Harsch standing there on the platform alone. Although thin almost to the point of emaciation, Harsch perpetually consumed slimming tablets for the luxury of hearing his underlings refer to him as "gangling", which he held to be a term of affec-tion.

"And the beauty of this solid is," he continued drama-tically, "that's it's already half made! I'll show you why."

With Cluet sliding smoothly in on his cue again, images began to grow in the seemingly limitless cube of the screen. Something as intricate and lovely as the magnification of a snowflake stirred and seemed to drift towards the audience. It enlarged, sprouting detail, elaborating itself, until every tiny branch had other branches. It seemed, thanks to clever camera work, to be an organic growth: then the descending, slowing, viewpoint at length revealed it to be a creation of concrete and imperve and ferroline, moulded by man into buildings and thoroughfares.

"This," Harsch pronounced, "is the fabulous city—our fabulous city—the city of Nunion, as filmed by Unit Two under Art Stayker when he was at the height of his powers, twenty years ago. This solid was to be his great work; it was never completed, for reasons I will tell you later. But the sixteen reels of unedited cathusjell he left behind as his greatest memorial have lain in our vaults here all that long time, until I dug them out just the other day.

"O.K. Now I'm not going to talk any more for a while. I'm going to ask you to sit back and appreciate the sheer beauty of these shots. I'm going to ask you to try and judge their undoubted value in terms of aesthetic appeal and box-office punch. I'm going to ask you to just relax and watch a masterpiece, in which I'm proud to say I had such a considerable hand."

The viewpoint was still sinking with all the leisure of a drowned man, below the highest towers, through the aerial levels, the pedestrian (human and a-human) levels, the various transport and service levels, down to the ground, the imperve ground, embedded in which a con-vex glass traffic-guide reflected in miniature the whole of that long camera descent from the skies. Then the focus shifted laterally, taking in the bright boots of a police officer.

Meanwhile, almost unnoticed, a commentary had begun. It was a typical Unit Two commentary, quiet, unemphatic, spoken in Art Stayker's own voice.

"On the seventy thousand planets which occupy the insignificant galaxy inhabited by man, there is no bigger or more diverse city than Nunion," the commentary said. "It has become a fable to all men of all races. To describe it is almost impossible without descending into statistics and figures, and this is to lose sight of the reality; we ask you to come exploring the reality with us. Forget the facts and figures: look instead at the streets and man-sions and, above all, at the individuals which comprise Nunion. Look, and ask yourselves this: how does one find the heart of a great city? What secret lies at the heart of it when one gets there?"

Nunion had grown over the ten islands of an archipelago in the temperate zone of Yinnisfar, spreading from the nearby continent. Five hundred bridges, a hundred and fifty subways, sixty heliplane routes and innumerable ferries, gondolas and sailing craft inter-connected the eleven sectors. Lining the water lanes or breaking the seemingly endless phalanxes of streets went avenues of either natural or polycathic trees, with here and there—perhaps at a focal point like the Ishral Memorial—the rare and lovely jenny-merit, especially imported, perpetually flowering. The camera swept over Harby Clive Bridge now, hovering before the first block beyond the waterway. A young man was coming out of the block, springing down the outer steps three at a time. On his face were mingled excitement, triumph and joy. He could hardly contain himself. He could not walk fast enough. He was buoyed with exultation. He was the young man you can find in any large city: a man about to make his mark, having scored his first success, con-fident beyond sense, exuberant beyond measure. In him you could see the fuse burning which had reached out to seventy thousand planets and dreamed of seventy thousand more.

The commentator did not say this. The picture said it for him, catching the young man's strut, his angular shadow sharp and restless on the pavement. But Harsch Benlin could not stay silent. He came forward so that his figure bit its silhouette out of the solid in the screen.

"That's the way it was with Art," he said. "He was always digging around for what he called 'the exact, revealing detail'. Maybe that's why he got no further than he did: he drove us quaints all crazy hanging around for that detail."

"These are just shots of a big city," Janzyez from Story called up impatiently. "We've all seen this sort of footage before, Harsch. Just what does it all add up to?"

Janzyez was a nobody trying to be a somebody; the boys in the back office spat when they heard his name.

"If you used your eyes, you'd see the pattern forming," Harsch replied. "That was how it was where Art was concerned—he just let the thing evolve, without impos-ing a pattern. Watch this coming shot now for pure comedy. . . ."

Young lovers had come sweeping up a water lane in a powered float. They moored, stepped ashore, and walked arm-in-arm across a mosaic walk to the nearest cafe. They chatted animatedly as they found a table. Background music changed tempo; the focus of attention slid from the lovers to the waiters. Their smoothness of manner while serving ("Certainly, madam, I will bring you a finger-bowl at once") was contrasted with their indifference when they were behind scenes, in the squalor and confusion of the kitchens ("Joe, some old cow wants a finger-bowl; where the hell are they?")

A close-up showed two elderly waiters passing through the inter-communicating doors between dining-room and kitchen. One was going into the kitchen, one out. The one going in uttered with a wink this cryptic and sinister sentence: "He's eaten it!" A man at a nearby table, over-hearing the words, dropped his feeders and turned pale.

"Get the idea?" Harsch asked his audience. "Art is digging down. He's peeling off strata after strata of this, the mightiest city of all time. Before we're through, you're going to see some of the filth he found' at the bottom."

Hardly for a moment had he taken his lynx eyes off Mr. Smile P. Wreyermeyer, whose dead-pan counten-ance was partially hidden by wreaths of aphrohale smoke. The big chief now crossed his legs; that could be bad, a sign perhaps of impatience. Harsch, who had learnt to be sensitive about such things, thought it time to try a direct sounding. Coming to the edge of the stage, he leant forward and said ingratiatingly, "Can you see it building up yet, Smile?"

"I'm still sitting here," Mr. Wreyermeyer said. You could call it an enthusiastic response.

"Good!" Harsch said, turning briskly, 'gangling' to his yes men, raising a hand to Cluet. The image died behind him, and he stood fists on hips, legs apart, looking down at the occupants of the padded seats, making his facial lines soften. It was a triumph of deception.

"Those of you who never had the privilege of meeting Art," he said, "will already be asking, 'What sort of a man could reveal a city with such genius?' Not to keep you in suspense any longer, I'll tell you. When Art was on this last consignment, I was just a fresh cub kid in

the solid business, working under Art I guess I learnt a whole lot from him, in the matter of plain, solid humanity as well as technique. We're going to show you a bit of film now that a cameraman of Unit Two took of Art without him knowing. I believe you'll find it— kind of moving. O.K., Gluet, let her roll."

The solid was suddenly there, seeming to fill all the audience's vision. In a corner of one of Nunion's many spaceports, Art Stayker and several of his documentary team sat against junked oxygenatkm equipment, taking lunch. Art was perhaps forty-eight, a little over Harsch's present age. Hair blown over his eyes, he was devouring a gigantic kyfeff sandwich and talking to a pudding-faced youth with crew cut and putty nose. Looking round at the solid, Harsch identified his younger self with some embarrassment and said, "You got to remem-ber this was shot all of twenty years back."

"You sure weren't so gangling in those days, boss," one of his rooters in the audience called.

Art was speaking. "Now Wreyermeyer has given us the chance to go through with this consignment," he was saying, "let's not botch it up by being glib. Anyone in a city this size can pick up interesting faces, or build up a. few snappy .architectural angles into a pattern with the help of background noise. Let's try to aim for some-thing deeper. What I want to find is what really lies at the heart of this metropolis."

"Supposing it hasn't got a heart, Mr. Stayker?" the youthful Harsch asked. "I mean—you hear of heartlesss men and women; could be this is a heartless city, huh?"

"That's just a semantic quibble," Art said. "All men and women have hearts, even the cruel ones. Same with cities—and I'm not denying Nunion isn't a cruel city in many ways. People who live in it have to fight all the while; you can see it in our line of business. The good in them gradually gets overlaid and lost. You start good, you end bad just because you—oh, hell, you forget, I suppose. You forget you're human."

"That must be terrible, Mr. Stayker," young Harsch said. "I'll take care never to get that way myself. I won't let Nunion beat me."

Art finished his sandwich, looking searchingly at the blank young face blinking into his, "Never mind

watching out for Nunion," he said, almost curtly. "Watch out for yourself."

He stood up, wiping his big hands on his slacks. One of his lighting crew offered him an antaphrohale and said, "Well, that's about tucked up the spaceport angle, Art; we've jelled all we need to jell here. What sector do we tackle next?"

Art looked round smilingly, the set of his jaw notice-able. "We take on the politicians next," he said.

The youthful Harsch. scrambled to his feet. Evidently he had noticed the camera turned on them, for his manner was noticeably more aggressive.

"Say, Mr. Stayker, if we could clear up the legal rackets of Nunion," he said, "at the same time as we get our solids—why, we'd be doing everyone a favour. We'd get famous, all of us!"

"I was just a crazy, idealistic kid back in those days," the mature Harsch, at once abashed and delighted, pro-tested to the audience. "I'd still to learn life is nothing but a kind of co-ordination of rackets." He smiled widely to indicate that he might be kidding, saw that Mr. Wreyermeyer was not smiling, and lapsed into silence again.

On the screen, Unit Two was picking up its traps. The cumbersome polyhedron of a trans-Burst freighter from far Papraca sank into the landing pits behind them and blew off steam piercingly.

"I'll tell you the sort of thing we want to try and capture," Art told his team as he shouldered a pack of equipment. "When I first came to this city to join Super-nova eight years ago, I was standing in the lobby of the Federal Justice building before an important industrial case was being tried. A group of local politicians about to give evidence passed me, and I heard one say as they went in—I've never forgotten it—'Have your hatreds ready, gentlemen.' For me, it will always embody the way that prejudice can engulf a man. Touches like that we must have."

Art and his fellows trudged out of the picture, shabby, determined. The solid faded, and there before the screen stood Harsch Benlin, spruce, determined.

"It still doesn't begin to stack up, Harsch," Ruddigori said from his armchair. He was Mr. Wreyermeyer's Personnel Manager, and a big shot in his own right. You had to be careful with a louse like that.

"Perhaps you don't get the subtleties, Ruddy, eh?" Harsch suggested sweetly. "The thing's stacking fine. That little cameo has just demonstrated to you why Art never made the grade. He talked too much. He theorized. He shot off his mouth to kids like I was then. He wasn't hard enough in the head. He was nothing more nor less than just an artist, Ruddy. Right?"

"If you say so, Harsch, boy," Ruddy said levelly, but he turned at once to say something inaudible to Mr. Wreyermeyer. The familiarity of it! Caught for a second off guard, Harsch glared stilettos at the studio chief; Mr. Wreyermeyer sat immobile as if made of stone, although now and again his throat bobbed like a frog's as he swallowed.

Harsch made a brusque signal to Cluet in the projec-tion box. He would swing this deal on Supernova if he had to stay here all afternoon and evening plugging it. He blew his nose and slipped a slimming tablet into his mouth under cover of the noserpula.

"Right," he said sharply. "You should have seen enough to grasp the general picture. Now we're going

in for the kill. Are you story girls taking notes, down there?"

A babble of female assent reassured him.

"Right," he repeated automatically.

Behind him, Art Stayker's Nunion was recreated once more, a city which administered the might of Yinnisfar's growing dominance and swam in the wealth of a gigantic interplanetary sweepstake: assembled here as the mind of Art Stayker had visualized it two decades ago, a city acting at once as liberator and conqueror to its multitudinous inhabitants.

Now evening was falling over its concrete maze of canyons. The sun set, the great globes of atomic light tethered in the sky poured their radiance over thorough-fares moving with a new awareness. Cluet had dimmed down the original commentary, giving Harsch the oppor-tunity to provide his own.

"Here it is, night coming over our fabulous city, just as we've all seen it lots of times," he said briskly. "Art caught it all as it's never been caught before or since. He used to tell me, I remember, that night was the time a city really showed its claws, so the boys spent a fortnight padding around looking for sharp, broken shadows that suggested claws. The craze for significant detail again. Some of their pickings are coming up now."

The clawed shadows moved in, fangs of light bit into the dark flanks of side alleys. An almost tangible restless-ness, like the noisy silence of a jungle, chittered across the ramps and squares of Nunion; even the present on-lookers could feel it. They sat more alertly in their places and despatched an underdog to inquire why the air-conditioning was not working better. Mr. Wreyermeyer stirred in his seat; that must mean something.

Behind a facade of civilization, the night life of Nunion had a primitive ferocity; the Jurassic wore even-ing dress. In Art Stayker's interpretation of it, it was essentially a dreary world, the amalgam of the home-sicknesses and lusts of the many thousand nations who had drifted to Yinnisfar. The individual was lost in this atom-lit wilderness where sixty million people could be alone together within a few square miles.

Art made it quite clear that the thronging multitude, queuing for leg shows and jikey joints were harmless. Living in flocks, they had developed the flock mentality. They were too harmless to tear anything of value out of the flux of Nunion; all they asked for was a nice time. You could only really enjoy yourself by stepping hard on a thousand faces.

Art showed the hard-steppers. They were the ones who could afford to buy solitude and a woman to go with it. They drifted above the sparkling avenues in bubbles, they ate in undersea restaurants, nodding in brotherly fashion to the sharks watching them through the glass walls, they wined in a hundred little dives, they sat tensely over the gaming tables: and at the imperious signal of their eyes, there was always a serf to come running, a serf who sweated and trembled as he ran. That is how a galactic city runs; power must always remember it is powerful.

Now the scene changed again. The camera swept over the Old Jandanagger and began to investigate Bosphorus Concourse.

The Concourse lay at the heart of Nunion. Here the search for pleasure was tensest, intensest. Barkers cried their rival attractions, polyhermaphros beckoned, liquor flowed like a high tide, cinema vied with sinema, the women of the night were spiderishly busy, a thousand sensations—the perversions of a

galaxy—were available at a price. Man, conscious as never before of consisting of cells, had invented a different thrill for each cell.

Harsch Benlin could not resist putting a word in.

"Have you ever seen such realism, gentlemen?" he demanded. "Here are ordinary folks—folks like you, like me—just getting down to having a whale of a good time. Think what wonderful propaganda these shots are for our little old capital! And where've they been these last twenty years? Why, lying down in our vaults, neglected, almost lost. Nobody would ever have seen them if I hadn't hunted them up!"

Mr. Wreyermeyer spoke,

"I've seen them, Harsch," he said throatily. "For my money, they're too sordid to have any popular appeal."

Harsch stood absolutely still. A dark stain rose in his face. Those few words told him—and everyone else present—exactly where he stood. He stood out on a limb. If he persisted as he wanted to persist, he would rouse the big chief's anger; if he backed down, he would lose face, and there was not a man here who, for their various reasons, would not like to see that. He was spiked.

In the solid behind Harsch, men and women queued tightly for admission to a horror show, "Death in Death Cell Six". Above them, dwarfing them, was a gigantic quasi-live jell of a man being choked, head down, eyes popping, mouth gaping. You could watch his epiglottis bob, it was a masterpiece of realism. That show had actually been produced by Mr. Wreyermeyer himself in his younger days; Harsch had intended a pretty compli-ment about it, but now in his hesitation he let the moment slip.

"We needn't show all this sordid stuff, Smile, if you don't think so," he said, grinning as if in pain. "I'm just giving it a run over just to put the general idea before you. We'll—you'll settle on the final details later, naturally."

Mr. Wreyermeyer said nothing. He nodded his head once, neutrally. Scenting the way the wind blew—being half wolf, he was adept at that—Ruddigori spoke up.

"You're too sold on Art Stayker, Harsch," he said kindly. "He was only a common bum with a camera, after all."

"Sure, Ruddy, sure," Harsch replied; he always knew when it was time to back away and slip in the crafty old betrayal routine. "Haven't I just told Mr. Wreyermeyer here that this is sordid stuff? Our job after will be to pick the good bits out of the junk."

"Nobody could do that better than you, H.B.," Pony Caley called.

"Thanks, Pony," Harsch said, nodding cordially to him. Pony was his head yesman; the bastard was going to feel the axe afterwards, for not giving better backing. Why, he'd not spoken till now, just sat there leering at the stenographers.

Art Stayker's city was emptying now. Crumpled aphrohale packets, newscasts, tickets, programmes, preventatives, bills and flowers lay in the gutters. The revellers, sick and tired, were straggling home to sleep.

"Now, just watch this!" Harsch said, putting force into his voice, clenching his fists, gangling. "This is

really a human document. This is where Stayker really came off the rails."

A fog settled lightly over Bosphorus Concourse, em-phasizing the growing vacancy of the place. A fat man, clothes all-unbuttoned, reeled out of a bordel and made for the nearest lift. It sunk away with him like a ball falling down a drain.

From St. Bosphorus Cathedral three-thirty sounded, three-thirty sounded from Pla-to Court. Lights snapped off in a deserted restaurant, leaving on the retina an after-image of upturned chairs. One last prostitute clattered wearily home, clutching her handbag tightly.

Yet still the Concourse was not entirely empty of humanity. The remorseless eye of the camera hunted down, in sundry doorways, the last watchers of the scene. They had stood there, motionless, not participating, when the evening was at its height; they stood there still when the first milkman was stirring. Watching the crowd, watching the stillness, watching the last whore hobble home, they stood in their doorways as if peering from a warren. From the shadows, the faces gleamed with a terrible, inexpressible tension. Only their eyes moved.

"These men," Harsch said, "really fascinated Stayker. I told you he was crazy in some ways. He reckoned that if anybody could lead him to this heart of the city he kept on gabbing about, these people could, these quaints in doorways. Night after night they were always there. Great To knows what they wanted! Stayker called them 'the impotent spectres of the feast'."

"They're still there," Ruddigori said unexpectedly. "You find them lurking in the doorways of any big city. I've wondered about them myself."

That was unexpected. It was not policy to wonder about anything not directly connected with Supernova. Harsch raised his hand to Cluet, a recrudescence of hope making him gangle again.

The solid screen blanked, then was filled with form once more. An overhead camera tracked two men down a canal-side walk; the two men were Art Stayker and his cub assistant, Harsch Benlin.

"In this shot," the mature Harsch told his audience, "you see me and Stayker going along to the home of one of these night-birds; I tagged along just for the laughs."

The two figures paused outside a little tailor's shop, looking doubtfully at the sign outside which read, simply, 'a. willitts tailor'.

"I have the feeling we are going to turn up some-thing big," Art was saying tensely as the sound came on. "We're going to hear what a city really is, from some-one who must have felt its atmosphere most keenly. We're digging right down into the heart of it. But it won't be pleasant I warn you, Harsch. You stay here if you'd prefer."

"Gee, Art," the youngster protested, "if something big's going to break, I naturally want to be in on it."

Art looked speculatively at his assistant.

"I don't suppose there'll be any money in this, son," he said.

"I know that, Art. I don't think only of money; what you take me for? This is something Philosophical, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I guess it is."

They went together into the little shop.

Darkness reigned inside. It seemed to seep out of the black G-suits which were the tailor's speciality; they hung stiff and bulky all round the walls, funereal in the gloom. The tailor, Willitts, was a little newt of a man; his features were recognizable as one of the Concourse night watchers. Art's underlings had trailed him to this lair.

Willitt's eyes bulged and glistened like those of a drowning rat. He was melancholy and undershot. He denied ever going to Bosphorus Concourse. When Art persisted, he fell silent, dangling his little fingers against the counter.

"I'm not a policeman," Art said. "I'm just curious. I want to know why you stand there every night the way you do."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," Willitts muttered, dropping his eyes. "I don't do anything."

"That's just it," Art said eagerly. "You don't do any-thing. Why do you—and the others like you—stand there not doing anything? What are you thinking of?, What do you see? What do you feel?"

"I've got my business to attend to, mister," Willitts protested. "I'm busy. Can't you see I'm busy?,"

"Answer my questions and I'll go away."

"We could make it worth your while, Willitts," young Harsch insinuated, patting his breast pocket.

The little man's eyes were furtive. He licked his lips. He looked so tired, you would think there was not a spark of blood in him.

"Leave me alone," he said. "That's all I ask—just leave me alone. I'm not hurting you am I? A customer might come in any time. I'm not answering your questions. Now please beat it out of here."

"We've got ways and means of getting the answers we want," Harsch threatened.

"Leave me alone, you young thug. If you touch me, I'll call the coppers."

Unexpectedly, Art jumped on him, pinning the little fellow down backwards across the counter, holding him by his thin shoulders. Of the two, Art's face was the more desperate.

"Come on, Willitts," he said. "I've got to know. I've got to know. I've been digging down deeper into this cesspit of a city week after week, and you're the cock-roach I've found creeping round at the bottom of it. You're going to tell me what it feels like down there or, so help me, I'll break your neck."

"How can I tell you?" Willitts demanded with sudden, mouse-like fury. "I can't tell you. I can't—I haven't got the words. You'd have to be—my sort before you could savvy."

And although Art knocked the little tailor about and pulled his hair out, he got nothing more from him than that. In the end they gave it up and left Willitts panting, lying behind his counter in the dust.

"I didn't mean to lose control of myself like that," Art said, pressing his brow, licking his knuckles as he

emerged from the shop. He must have known the camera was on him, but was too preoccupied to care. "Some-thing just went blank inside me. We've all got our hands far too ready, I guess. But I must find out. . . ."

His set face loomed larger and larger in the screen, eclipsing all else. One eyelid was flickering uncontroll-ably. He moved out of sight, still talking.

The screen went blank.

"Terrific stuff!" Pony Caley shouted, jumping up. "It should go over big. It should be real great, man!"

Everyone was talking in the audience now, except the big chief; they had all enjoyed the beating up.

"Seriously," Janzyez was saying, "that last scene did have something. You could replay it with proper actors, have a few bust teeth and things and it would really be solid. Maybe finish with the little guy getting knocked into the canal."

Timing his exits was a speciality with Harsch. He had them all awake and now he would show them no more. Hands in pockets, he came slowly down the few steps into the auditorium.

"So there's the story of a jerk called Art Stayker for you, fellows," he said, as his right foot left the last step. "He couldn't take it. The solid business was too tough for him. Right there and then, after he beat up that little tailor, he dropped everything and disappeared into the stews of Nunion. He didn't even stay to round off his picture, and Unit Two folded up. He was a reed quitter, was Art."

Ruddy came up to Harsch and said, "You have me interested. How come, though, we've had to wait twenty years to hear all this?"

Carefully, Harsch spread his hands wide and smiled.

"Because Stayker was a dirty word round here when he first quit," he said, aiming his voice not at Ruddy but at Mr. Wreyermeyer, "and after that he was forgotten and his work was tucked away. Then—well, it happened I ran into Stayker a couple of days backhand that gave me the idea of working over the old Unit Two files."

He tried to move in front of Mr. Wreyermeyer, to make it easier for the big chief to compliment him on his sagacity if he felt so inclined; but Ruddy got in the way again.

"You mean Art's still alive?" Ruddy persisted. "He must be quite an old man now. What's he doing, for To's sake?"

"He's just a down-and-out, a bum," Harsch said. "I didn't care to be seen talking to him, so I got away from him as soon as possible. Man, he stinks!"

He shook Ruddy off and stood before the big chief.

"Well, Smile," he said, as calmly as he could, "don't tell me you don't smell a solid there—something to sweep 'em off their feet and knock' em in the aisles."

As if deliberately prolonging the suspense, Mr. Wreyermeyer took another drag on his aphrohale before removing it from his mouth.

"We'd have to have a pair of young lovers in it," he said stonily.

The old sucker had fallen for it!

"Sure," Harsch exclaimed, scowling to hide his elation. "Two pairs of young lovers! Anything you say, Smile, Just the way you want it. huh?"

Pony Caley was also there, trying to horn in on his boss's success.

"And these guys in the doorways, Mr. Wreyermeyer," he said eagerly, "maybe they could be galactic spies and we could make it into a thriller, hey?"

"Yep, that figures," Pony's yesman declared, smacking the palm of his hand with his fist. "And this Art Stayker quaint could be their dupe, see, and we could have him shot up in the end, see."

"Not too much shooting," Janzyez interrupted. "I see it more as a saga of the common man, and we could call it 'Our Town' or something—if that title isn't under copyright."

"How about 'Starry Sidewalks' for a name?" someone else suggested.

"It's a vehicle for Eddi Expusso!" Pilloi shouted.

The boys were playing with it. Harsch had won his round; man, how he loved himself!

He was hustling out of the little theatre with the rest of them when Ruddy touched his arm.

"You never told me, Harsch," he said, "just how you happened to find Art again."

There was something subversive about Ruddy; it was a miracle he had climbed as high as he had. He was for ever asking questions.

"It was like this," Harsch said. "I happened to have a rendezvous with some dame a couple of nights back, see. I was looking for a taxi-bubble afterwards—there weren't so many about, because this was the early hours of the morning, and I had to walk through Bosphorus Concourse. This old guy hanging about in a doorway recognized me and called out to me."

"And it was Art?" Ruddy inquired excitedly.

"It was Art all right. He'd have kept me talking all night if I hadn't been firm. But at least it put me on to the concept of this solid. Well, see you tomorrow, Ruddy; so long!"

"Just a minute, Harsch. This is important. Didn't Art say if he had found out what was at the heart of the city? That was what he'd gone looking for, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. Oh, he found it all right. He wanted to tell me all about it—at three in the morning! I told him what he could do!"

"But what did he say, Harsch?"

"Hell, man, Ruddy, what's it matter what a broken-down quaint like Stayker said or didn't say? It was

his usual patter, but even worse to understand than in the old days—you know, Philosophical. I was pretty plastered, I couldn't bother to take it in. To, I was loaded with randy drops!"

"But had he found the secret he was chasing?" "So he said—but whatever it was, it had strictly no cash value. His pants were in rags I tell you; the crazy bum was shivering all the time. Say, I must move. See you, Ruddy!"

They made the solid. It was one of Supernova's big budget productions for the year. It raked in the money on every inhabited planet of the Federation, and Harsch Benlin was a made man thereafter. They called it "Song of a Mighty City"; it had three top bands, seventeen hit tunes and a regiment of dancing girls. The whole thing was re-shot in the studios in the pastel shades deemed most appropriate for a musical, and they finally picked on a more suitable city than Nunion to stage it in. Art Stayker, of course, did not come into it at all.

Time passed. Time dropped away like a cataract over the brink of heaven. The galaxy, even the everlasting fabric of space itself, grew old. Only man's schemes remained new; and now from the knowledge gained from the sentient cells came the concept of applied mutation to weave a fresh pattern into the ancient tapestry of human circumstance

They Shall Inherit

The man from the Transfederation Health sat im-patiently in the glossy waiting-room, his portcase lying beside him. Having got in from Koramandel only two days ago, he still bore flecks of vacuum tan on his face. He was a straggling, untidy man with an ill-fitting collar and floppy ankle-boots; his fingers drummed unceasingly on his bony knees.

The discreetly masked blonde at the Enquiries desk ignored his occasional starts of movement, which sug-gested he might suddenly jump up and go. Occasionally he looked at her, but most often he looked away. Yinnisfarians did not attract him; he considered them cor-rupted by the power they wielded in the galaxy. He had been waiting here for twenty minutes, and that to him seemed a subtle insult. Through green hyaline panels he could see the lift of the EAMH, the Experimental Applied Mutation Hospital, moving, leaving him here isolated.

Finally he rose, skirted the flowering dicathus on a low table; and said to the girl in a moderate voice, "This really is too bad, you know. Tedden Male was supposed to see me at bleep three and a third sharp. I made this appointment three weeks ago, before leaving Koramandel."

"I'm sorry, Djjckett Male," the masked girl said, using the Yinnisfarian mode of address. "I'll ring his office again, if you like. I can't think what might be delaying him; he is usually so punctual."

She had scarcely laid one irreproachable hand on the vibroduct before a broad man in a black swathe swept into the waiting-room, to pause by the desk with a certain theatrical flourish. He was bald. He smiled. He came forward with his hand extended palm upward in greet-ing. He was Moderator Senior Ophsr. IV Phi Tedden, co-ordinating Director of the EAMH.

A flurry of boisterous apologies and irritable "quite-all-right's" enveloped the two men as Tedden led Djjckett up to his office on the next floor. Followed closely by his portcase, Djjckett found himself in a sump-tuous room decorated with blown-up high-speed microacaths of fissioning chronosomes. He settled himself into an enveloper and jacked up his feet.

"You know I would be the last male to keep Transfed Health waiting," Tedden protested, also enveloping. He proffered a box of affrohales. Djjckett refused; Tedden shut the box with a snap, not taking one himself. He had a powerful but curiously blank face, with small red veins patterning the sides of his nose; his mask was a per-functory affair, covering little more than his ears, jaws and chin. Beneath his assumed heartiness was a distinct unease, which Djjckett noted with pleasure without com-prehending. With nervous emphasis he added, "No, I wouldn't keep you waiting for anything."

"I hope you aren't inferring you kept me waiting for nothing," Djjckett said, smiling under his moustache.

Looking away from the acid witticism, Tedden said, "A personal matter kept me. Again I apologize."

"Well, I expect you know what I have come about, Moderator Tedden Male," Djjckett said, his voice assum-ing a more official tone. "Public opinion has forced Transfed to take some steps to allay certain rumours circulating about EAMH. As senior member of your old

Koramandel Fraternity, I was deputed"

"Yes, I have all the documents you people sent me," Tedden interrupted. "Fraternal Djjckett Male, let me put it to you like this. We—I don't mean you and I personally—represent two opposed camps. Transfed Health, by its nature, is cautious, reactionary—it has to be; we at EAMH are bold, progressive—because we have to be. You are afraid of the effects on human beings of the gene-shifts with which we have been so successfully experimenting. Lay galactic opinion, if I may say so, has nothing to do with the matter; ultimately, it always goes wherever it is led, and in this case it is Transfed's duty to lead it in our direction, just as it has won acceptance for its own recent gene-shift experiments on animals. I have made this quite clear in signals and vibros written to your people over the last couple of years."

"Humans and animals are two different things, and in
this matter" Djjckett began.

"In this matter—forgive my taking the words from your mouth—in this matter, the whole material future of Yinnisfar is concerned. We are at the cross-roads; you must be aware that our economic position in the galaxy is unstable, and must constantly expand to remain stationary?"

"Of that I am as aware as you are, Moderator. But I do not want to talk about galactic economics; I wish to discuss the mothers and new-born children placed under your care here."

Tedden put his big hands on the desk, palm down, and made a heavy face.

"The two subjects are inseparably intertwined, Mr. Djjckett, let me assure you of that. But we shall get no-where if we wrangle. Come, perhaps it would be best if you had to look into one of our wards, and see some-thing of what we are achieving."

He rose. Djjckett reluctantly did the same. Tedden ushered him towards the door; Djjckett dodged under his shepherding arm and went back to his enveloper to look at his portcase. When he saw it remained quietly where it was, he returned to Tedden's side, wearing the look of a man prepared to face the worst.

They moved together down a soundless corridor, through two doors, and into an observation booth over- looking a ward containing six small cots. The cots were all occupied.

"Pologlass; we see them, they do not see us," Tedden explained, glancing at his finger bleep.

Djjckett stared through the windows, prepared for something horrible.

The temperature inside the small ward was evidently high, for the six cots held infants who lay there without coverings. A nurbot moved efficiently from cot to cot, changing napkins with a rubbery deftness. Only three of the babies were awake; two of them stood shakily, supporting themselves by the bars and watching the attendant machine; the other, having just woken, was also anxious to see what was happening. With slow, tentative movements, it pulled itself up, feet wide apart, pink knees slightly bent, until it stood erect. Uttering an inarticulate cry, it staggered two steps forward, grabbed the cot side as if its life depended on it, and hung there gazing vaguely in the general direction of its nurse.

"Splendid exhibition; might have done it especially for our benefit," Tedden said, with gratification and pride. He added quietly, "And all these six babies are under forty-eight hours old."

"You can surely see why we think this experiment is monstrous," Djjckett said, his lanky body shaking inside its rather loose suit, as he and Tedden walked back down the corridor. In his mind, the picture still burned of that tiny, wizened, red thing standing unaided in its cot; it made him feel as sick as if he had seen a woman thrashed or a criminal executed.

"You are raising monsters," he added, indignantly, when Tedden did not at once reply. It was one of Djjckett's characteristics that, caught on the wrong foot, he could be ruffled easily and then become unable (or so he feared) to express his irritation. He waved a hand and added, "as for the luckless and deluded mothers you have here in your power, they should never"

Tedden showed real anger. Normally he was rather stolid and slow to anger; today his nerves were already on edge. Stopping so suddenly that Djjckett jumped, he said, "Just try and remember the facts, will you? People come to the EAMH voluntarily, men and women with an eye to the future, eager to take advantage of the discoveries we have made and are making. D'you think they prattle about monsters?"

A redness crept up his face and over the shining ex-panse of his skull. Still talking, he plunged suddenly into motion again, leading the way back to his room, closing the door after Djjckett as the other followed in. He deliberately ignored Djjckett's sick expression.

"You see, it comes back to what I was saying about the future of Yinnisfar," Tedden said, "in which the future of the individual is naturally involved. You realize that Yinnisfar and consequently most of the Federation is threatened with a massive trade recession. Some of these newly discovered worlds at the Hub, planets with less than a million years of history behind them, are stealing a march on us. Gutaligni is a case in point.

"You may have heard, Djjckett Male, that the Cutalignians now have virtually an empire of their own. Planets that once dealt entirely with us are now swamped with their goods, their executives, their ideas. Cutalignian space liners and freighters are taking up trade and shipping lines that were indisputably ours for milleniums. Of course, it's only a drop in the ocean and gets pooh-poohed even in responsible quarters, but for me it's a sign, an omen. We're going downhill. Why?"

"I daresay you know more about all this than I do," Djjckett said morosely; his face was still grey and

patchy with shock. "The reason generally given for this trend is that the Gutalignians are long-lived, so that training and education go further, and an experienced older man can serve longer. . . ."

"Good enough. It's a good reason. To put it in cash terms, a thousand-purs education lasts an ordinary man, a Yinnisfarian, from the age of say twenty to ninety-five; that's only seventy-five years. But a thousand-purs educa-tion lasts a Cutalignian about a hundred and twenty years. Imagine if everyone on Earth could spend forty-five years at the age of forty. Advantageous, eh? Here, do have a affrohale, Djjckett Male; I'm sorry if I sounded short-tempered then. My nerves are all on edge today. Nothing personal intended."

He extended his silver case almost with a look of plead-ing, rebuking himself as he misinterpreted the affronted expression of Djjckett's face (but why couldn't these out-spacers wear civility masks like civilized people!).

Feebly, Djjckett again refused the case. Diurnal drug-ging, long fashionable on Yinnisfar, was regarded as decadent on Koramandel, like the habit of masking.

"I shall be better soon, Moderator," he said. "It was the shock of seeing those wretched infants. . . . Excuse me, I think I will take a drink."

He snapped his fingers. Obediently, the portcase rose from where it had been quietly lying. It was neat, small, covered with short fur, much like a bag on four legs, with a hump in the middle which would open at a word of command to reveal Djjckett's vibros and documents. Instead of giving that word, the Transfed man clicked his tongue.

The portcase straightened up. From under its belly, a retractable pink stalk emerged and pointed towards Djjckett's face. Nonchalantly taking the end of this stalk into his mouth, Djjckett began to suck.

Rising half out of his enveloper, Tedden said in dis-gusted tones, "Is that thing animal or machine?"

"Previously animal but presently neither animal nor machine," Djjckett said, removing the nipple moment-arily from his mouth. "It belongs to one of the group known as mammalloys now being exploited on Kora-mandel; no doubt we shall begin exporting "to your planet shortly."

"Never!" Tedden gasped. "It's repulsive! I apologize but I do beg you to stop sucking. . . . You mean the beastly thing is live?"

"Hardly that. It has no brain, only a nervous system. This particular mammalloy is an applied mutation from camel stock. You see how much more efficient and lighter it is than any robot could be. I must say how surprised I am to see you shocked over an experiment in many ways similar to your own."

"Similar! Similar! Ye glories! This terrible mutilation
of animals"

"Oh, and how is it one half as monstrous as your own terrible mutilation of human babies?"

For the first time, Djjckett was enjoying himself; he took a further suck before dismissing the portcase. But Tedden was gripping his desk in anger.

"The gene changes made in EAMH babies occur before conception."

"Similarly with our mammalloys, of course, Moderator."

The Moderator stood for a minute in complete silence. When he at last sat back again, he even smiled. "There are two sides to every question," he said.

As the enveloper took him, he rubbed his hand across his big face, appearing to dismiss all that had gone before.

"Lots of worries," he said. "Forgive me if I make a vibrodo a minute."

He dialled the screen on his desk and the head and shoulders of a uniformed woman elaborately masked appeared immediately.

"Tunnice?" Tedden asked. "How is she please?"

"I was just going to call you, Moderator," the masked face said. "Everything seems to be perfectly under con-trol. She is quite comfortable, and we aren't expecting any further developments for a while. We'll vib you again as soon as anything happens."

She smiled, an official and rather strained curling of the lips that was emphasized by the mask.

"Thanks, Mingra Female," Tedden said, cutting her off.

He turned back to Djjckett a little blankly, as if the whole object of their meeting had gone from his head.

"Yes. . . . You see, Djjckett Male, the gap between our capabilities and the Cutalignians' must be closed. And it can be closed. That's what we're doing here, or trying to do despite outside interference; perhaps that's what you're trying to do too, with those beastly mam-malloys—I had no idea how far your experiments had gone. . . . Everyone lives under pressure nowadays; you know what civilization has become. It's a rat race. Gut-throat competition. But supposing you matured at the age of five instead of the age of twenty...."

Djjckett nodded sagely.

"I know what you mean," he said. "For anyone who elects to compete in modern life, the competition is indeed stiff and merciless. But no provocation can ever be great enough to allow the meddling with human life that you are doing here. Animal life is different, it exists for man's purpose. On ethical grounds, and even on biological grounds, your experiments are not permissible. Our bodies have achieved a balance . . . we—we blas-pheme by trying to alter them. After all, there were experiments in the past; you will remember the sleepless men of Krokazoa."

"That particular experiment failed. Others have suc-ceeded. And I particularly regret hearing a moral tone taken to EAMH attempts to ennoble human life by any group capable of degrading animal life. Allow me to say that you and I hold very opposed views on the sacred-ness of animal existence. Ah well. . . . We constantly 'meddle with human life', as you call it. Every surgical operation, every anaesthetic, every dose of cough stuff you take represents such an experiment."

"What has all this to do with the babies you showed me upstairs, Tedden Male? Human gene-shift is altogether a more serious matter than a dose of cough mixture."

Tedden got up and thrust his hands into his swathe. He began to walk about, avoiding the vicinity of the portcase. Djjckett's eyes never left him.

"All that's happened to those babies is this," the geneti-cist said slowly. "We operated on their 'genetic dies', the primal cell moulds from which all subsequent cells are modelled in the building of an individual. As you will know, the whole inheritance quota of any individual is contained in these dies. One gene was removed from their chromosomes before birth—before conception. As a result, the babies are able to stand almost as soon as they are born."

"It isn't natural," Djjckett said.

"It is for a baby animal."

"Moderator, these are human beings!"

Ignoring the remark, Tedden turned to a cabinet under the wide windows, and shuffled in a drawer. He pulled a microacath out, studied it for a moment, and passed it over for Djjckett to look at.

Round the glossy print trailed something resembling raffia, knotted at intervals with differently shaped knots; it formed an eccentric spiral, the middle of which was distinctly darker than the edges. Round the outside of the knots, a tendrilled haze gathered. Djjckett gazed at it in silence, twisting the print first one way, then the other.

"Is it a chromosome?" he asked.

"It's a jell taken by our infra-electronic micro-camera of a human chromosome. Those knotty points on it are the large molecules we call genes, which are the bearers of heredity, and carry certain characteristics over from one generation to another. There are one thousand two hundred and five of them. The outer ones are what we call negative or 'damper' genes.

"What we are doing is to shift off some of the damper genes from the chromosomes of unborn children, before they leave the gametangiurn of the parent. It's a fairly simple freezing process, not even painful to the father. The operation must be far less drastic than the ones which produced the abortion at your feet."

"I don't know, I don't know!" Djjckett said, standing up and scratching his head in an agony of perplexity. "You must see that from my point of view, the more you say the worse you make matters. What reasonable man would co-operate with you to have his children—well, made abnormal?"

Slowly Tedden pulled at his nose, as if he could con-trol another outburst of irritation that way.

"Any reasonable man," he answered, heavily emphasiz-ing each word.

He took the microacath back to the cabinet.

"Any reasonable man," he repeated, "would give his child the chance to get a head start over its contem-poraries. Blessed are the first come, for they shall be first served! Children don't normally stand up till they're about a year old, Djjckett Male; ours stand when they are a day old. That is progress, say what you will.

"Knock off other of the damper genes and you get other advances." He smiled briefly. "Of course I admit we had a few failures at first—babies born covered in hair, others with fully developed—well, no

matter; the point is that through a few mishaps the EAMH may have gained a bad name among the ill-informed. Un-fortunately, you see, we cannot try this sort of thing on animals first. Animals haven't got damper genes; from the few elementary jells you people have produced concerning your ... . er, work, I gather you work on the mammal's stimulator genes, which is a very different matter. Strange. I suspect humans developed their damper system as a safeguard against precocity—hence, compared with animals, the long period required to mature. Now that the world is long past its adolescence, precocity is exactly what we need. Once it was wiser that we did not learn too fast; now circumstances demand that we learn as quickly as possible. As I said the world's a rat race. Ah, it's a burden. . . ."

He came and sat down at the desk again. Again he passed his hand over his face. His eyes remained blank, as if focused on something beyond the discussion, as he fingered his mask.

"You claim to have the world's interests at heart." Djjckett said, not without sympathy, for he found him-self liking this odd man, "yet you think exceedingly little of it."

For the first time, Tedden looked deeply into Djjckett's eyes. He saw there, not the scarecrow he had imagined he was dealing with, but a shrewd man whose awkward-ness of manner did not entirely cover his firmness of purpose. Tedden looked away, drumming his fingers on the desk.

"What is there but the world?!" he exclaimed almost in a groan.

"I am a religious man, Dr. Tedden, a Theorist,' I have a positive answer to that question."

"Ah, to, you mean? Sorry, Djjckett, count me out. I've never seen him on my microcaths," Tedden said bleakly.

They looked at each other again, neither much enjoying what they saw, in one of those dead moments in men's lives when even hope seems hopeless.

"You would naturally be disinclined to believe in a creator, because you are playing creator yourself," Djjckett said, in an apologetic tone. "I take it your future intentions are to knock more damper genes off, as more volunteer parents appear?"

"Yes."

"But can you predict results? I mean, do you know certainly what change you will effect before the baby is born?"

Tedden was sweating; suddenly he looked a lesser man. Seeing Djjckett glance at his forehead, he brought out a tissue and mopped it abstractedly.

"No," he said. "Not exactly. In Life there are no cer-tainties."

"Not exactly! You are madly irresponsible, Modera-tor, for all your talk of the common"

Djjckett had risen to his feet now, shaking off the enveloper, his collar in disarray, his hands clenching. The portcase rose with him and stretched its legs. His speech was cut off by the jangle of the vibroduct. Tedden flipped it on with terrible eagerness, almost crouching over the instrument. The face of the female who had appeared before flared into view; she had one hand up to her mouth, in a sort of nervous excitement.

"Oh, Moderator Senior Tedden," she exclaimed. "It's Tunnice—your partner, I mean. She's—the pains have started again. I think you'd better come up. Quickly, please."

"At once, Mingra, coming at once."

Tedden switched off. He was already out of his en-veloper, apologizing, moving towards the door, saying good-bye to Djjckett.

"You'll have to excuse me now, Djjckett. My partner is up in the labour ward—I must go to her. There have been unfortunate complications. I'm afraid it's an awk-ward case, premature. ... Excuse me."

Instinctively, Djjckett was following, out of the room, into the corridor, going through the formal and perfectly sincere phrases of regret, keeping pace with Tedden as his portcase cantered behind them.

"Terribly sorry to hear. . . . Wouldn't have kept you if I had known. . . . You should have told me, intruding at such a time.... You've been so patient. ... It really embarrasses me to think that I...."

Tedden could not shake him off. Djjckett pressed into the lift with him. Tedden closed the gates, thumbed the button, and they slid upwards. The portcase was left behind.

"What has brought the birth on prematurely, Modera-tor, may I ask?"

"My wife had a fall last night," Tedden said abstractedly, glancing upwards, biting his thumb.

"I am so sorry. ... I know how these things happen.

It must be a great comfort to her to know her husband's a"

Djjckett stopped in mid-sentence as his throat con-stricted.

"There's no danger, is there?" he asked, in a small voice.

"Danger? What do you mean, danger?"

"Tedden Male. . . . You've been—you've carried out one of these gene experiments on your own partner!"

The other man's face, now pale above its partial mask, told him he had guessed rightly. They glared at each other as the lift purred up through the heart of the build-ing, two men of different planets who would never understand each other's viewpoints. Tedden looked away first.

"You use the word 'experiment' as if it were synony-mous with torture," he snapped. "You're just a super-stitious layman, Djjckett, in this particular matter. My partner enters whole-heartedly and co-operatively into this great venture with me. It's only natural we should want our child to share the fruits of our researches."

"Natural!" Djjckett echoed, as the lift stopped. "It's anything but natural, man! What's this child going to be like?"

The gates opened, they stepped into another sound-proof corridor, Djjckett found himself shaking with a horrid agitation.

"What's it going to be like?" he repeated, plucking at the other's sleeve, hurrying after him. "You don't know, do you?"

A nurse stood at the far end of the corridor by an open door, her face almost covered by mask, the mask expressionless. She beckoned anxiously. Tedden was running now, his mouth open, his powerful face blank. Djjckett ran beside him, caught in a general feeling of tension. Tedden's face terrified him; the nurse's face terrified him; what had she seen?

"I'm in the rat race," he thought. "I shouldn't be running. Why am I running? I shouldn't be running!"

"We didn't like to tell you on the vib," the nurse said, in a high, nervous voice. "The—the baby has just this moment arrived. Your wife will be all right. The baby"

Just for a second, Tedden paused on the threshold of the ward, as if willing himself to go in. Then he entered, floundering through the door.

Dithering behind him, the frightened Djjckett caught a glimpse of half a dozen uniformed figures round a bed. Their backs were to him. The smell of disinfectant drifted to him.

Then the new-born child's cry came to him, a thin, mewling cry full of fear and rage; it was saying, "Let me get back! Oh, let me get back!"

Again we say simply, Time passed. Every planet was civilized. Every world bore a mighty crowd of people, but the crowd no longer jostled or shouted. Each individual remained by choice to himself, an individual. It was the, silver period of an age of starlight and splendour. Soon only the starlight would remain

Visiting Amoeba

I

You never knew the beginning of that train of events which led you to Yinnisfar and a world of shadows.

You never knew the Shouter by name. To you he was just a man who shouted and died as you reached him, but before that the Shouter possessed a long, tarnished history. He operated far from what most men reckoned as civilization, right out on the rim of the galaxy, so that on his frequent flits from one planet to another he rarely saw stars on both sides of his cabin. There they would be, a whole galaxy full on one side, burning bright and high, and on the other—a cliff of emptiness that stretched from eternity to eternity, the distant island universes only accentuating the gulf.

The Shouter generally kept his eyes on the stars.

But not on this trip. The Shouter was a spoolseller by trade; his little craft was packed with racks upon racks of microspools. He stocked all kinds, new and anti-quarian; philosophical, sociological,

mathematical; if you went through them systematically, you could almost piece together the eon-old history of the galaxy. It was not, however, on these learned spools that the Shouter made his best money; they paid for the fuel, but not the drinks. The spools which really brought in the profits dealt with a subject older than history, and with figures more ineluctable than any in the mathematician's vocabulary; their subject was Desire. Erotic spools depicting the devices of lust formed the Shouter's stock in trade; and because such items were illegal, Shouter stood in perpetual fear of the customs officials of a hundred worlds.

Now he was elated. He had just neatly outwitted the petty guardians of morality and sold about half his hold-ings under their very eyes. Well stocked with drink, he was heading for fresh fields of commerce.

That he took too much drink in celebration was to influence your entire life. An empty merrit bottle rolled by his feet. It was hot in the small cabin of his ship, and he dozed off, sprawling over the controls. One or two little switches were pressed forward by his sleeping head. . . .

Shouter woke muzzily. He sensed something was wrong and his head cleared at once as he peered anxiously into the forward vision tanks. No clouds of accustomed stars were in view. He yelped in dismay. Hurriedly, he flipped on rear vision: there lay the galaxy like a tinsel egg on a plate, far behind him. Shouter swallowed, and checked fuel. Low: but enough to get back on. Fuel, however, was in better supply than air. His oxygen tanks had not been replenished in the hurry of his last departure. He would never get back to the galaxy alive on the thimble-ful that remained.

With an abyss opening in his stomach, Shouter turned to the forward ports again to examine an object he had previously ignored. Apart from the distant phantoms of other galaxies, it was the only object to relieve the inane ubiquity of vacuum: and it was showing a disc. He checked with his instruments. Undoubtedly, it was a small sun.

It puzzled Shouter. His astronomical knowledge was negligible, but he knew that according to the laws there was nothing between galaxies; that long funnel of night shut off galaxy from galaxy as surely as the living were cut off from the dead. He could only suppose this sun ahead to be a tramp star; such things were known, but they naturally roved inside the giant lens of the home galaxy, in conformity with its gravitational pull. Shouter threw the problem aside unsolved. All that vitally con-cerned him was if the sun—wherever it came from—had one or more oxygen-type planets in attendance.

He prayed it might have, as shakily he trained his instruments on it.

It had. The sun was a white dwarf with one planet almost as big as itself. A quick stratospheric test as Shouter glided into a breaking orbit showed a breathable nitrogen-oxygen balance. Blessing his luck, the spool-seller sped down and landed. A valley fringed by hills and woods embraced him.

He walked out of the airlock in good fettle, leaving the compressor-analyser systems working; that would ensure full tanks of purified oxygen within half an hour, drawn from the planet's air.

It was hot outside. Shouter had an immediate impres-sion of newness everywhere. Everything seemed fresh, gleaming. His eyes ached at the vividness of everything. Reassuringly, there were no signs of animal life. The trees were of species he failed to recognize, although to Shouter one tree was much like another. Silence tur-banned his head till he felt giddy.

The shores of a lake lay only a few yards away. He began to walk towards it, conscious at the same time of a vague discomfort in his breathing. With deliberate effort, he inhaled more slowly, thinking the air might be too rich for him.

Something rose to the surface of the lake a distance away. It looked like a man's head, but Shouter could not be sure of that; a mist rising from the surface of the lake, as if the waters were hot, obscured detail. That a man should be swimming there seemed unlikely.

The hurt in his lungs became more definite. He was conscious, too of a smart spreading across his limbs, almost as if the air were too harsh for them. In his eyes, all things acquired a fluttering spectrum round them. He had the assurance of his instruments that all was well; suddenly that assurance meant nothing: he was in pain.

All in a panic, Shouter turned to get back to his ship. He coughed and fell, dizziness overcoming him. Now he saw it was indeed a man in the misty lake. He shouted for help once only.

You looked across at him, and at once started to swim in his direction.

But Shouter was dying. His cry brought blood up into his throat, splashing out over one hand. He choked, attempting to rise again. You climbed naked out of the lake towards him. He saw you, turning his head heavily, and flung one arm out gesturing towards the ship with its imagined safety. As you got to him, he died.

For a while you knelt by him, considering. Then you turned away and regarded the space ship for the first time. You went over to it, your eyes full of wonder.

The sun rose and set twenty-five times before you mastered all that Shouter's ship contained. You touched everything gently, almost reverently. Those microspools meant little individually to you at first, but you were able to refer back to them and piece the jigsaw of their secrets together, until the picture they gave you formed a whole picture. Shouter's projector was almost worn out before you finished. Then you investigated the ship itself, sucking out its meaning like a thirsty man. You sipped Shouter's firewater. You read his log. You tried on his clothes. You saw yourself in his mirror.

Your thoughts must have moved strangely in those twenty-five days, like sluice gates for the first time, as you became yourself.

All you learnt then was already knowledge; the way in which you pieced it together was pure genius, but nevertheless it was knowledge already held by many men, the results of research and experience. Only after-wards, when you integrated that knowledge, did you make a deduction on your own behalf. The deduction, involving as it did all the myriad lives in the galaxy, was so aweing, so overwhelming, that you tried to evade it.

You could not; it was inescapable. One clinching fact was the death of Shouter; you knew why he had died. So, you had to act, obeying your first moral imperative just for a moment, you looked at your bright world. You would return to it when duty had been done. You climbed up into Shouter's ship, punched out a course on the computer, arid headed towards the galaxy.

You came unarmed into the warring city. Your ship lay abandoned on a hill some miles away. You walked as if among the properties of a dream, carrying your own supplies, and demanded to see the leader of the rebel army. They put innumerable difficulties in your way, but .eventually you stood before him because none could gainsay you.

The rebel leader was a hard man with an eye missing, and he was busy when you entered. He stared at you with deep mistrust through that single eye; the guards behind him stroked their fusers.

"I'll give you three minutes," One-Eye said.

"I don't want your time," you said easily, "I have plenty of my own. I also have a plan bigger than any plan of yours. Do you wish me to show you how to sub-jugate the Region of Yinnisfar?"

Now One-Eye looked at you again. He saw—how should it be said?—he saw you were not as other men, that you were vivider than they. But the Region of Yinnisfar lay long light years away, impregnable in the heart of the galaxy; for twice ten million years its reign had been undisputed among twice ten million planets.

"You're mad!" One-Eye said. "Get out! Our objective is to conquer this city—not a galaxy."

You did not move. Why did the guards not act then? Why did not One-Eye shoot you down before you had begun your task?

"This civil war you wage here is fruitless," you said. "What are you fighting for? A City. The next street! A. power house! These are spoils fit only for hyenas. I offer you the wealth of Yinnisfar and you mew for the town hall!"

One-Eye stood up, showing his teeth. The unkempt hair on his neck rose like prickles. His leather cheeks turned mauve. He jerked up his fuser and thrust it towards your face. You did nothing; there was nothing you needed to do. Confounded, One-Eye sat down again. He had not met such relentless indifference to threats before, and was impressed.

"Owlenj is only a poor planet with a long list of oppression," he muttered. "But it is my world, so I have to fight for it and the people on it, to protect their rights and liberties. I admit that a man of my tactical ability deserves a better command; possibly when we've brought this city to its knees. . . ."

Because time was on your side, you had patience. Because you had patience, you listened to One-Eye. His talk was at once grandiose and petty; he spoke largely of the triumph of human rights and narrowly of the shortage of trained soldiers. He wanted Heaven on earth, but he was a platoon short.

He was a man who won respect from his fellows—or fear if not respect. Yet his principles had been old-fashioned a million millenia ago, before the beginnings of space travel. They had worn wafer thin, used over and over again by countless petty generals: the, need for force, the abolition of injustice, the belief that right would win through. You listened with a chill pity, aware that the age-old and majestic intricacies of the Self-Perpetuating War had shrunk to this pocket of trouble on Owlenj.

When he stopped orating, you told One-Eye your plan for conquering Yinnisfar. You told him that living on Owlenj, on the cold rim of the galaxy, he could have no idea of the richness of those central worlds; that all the fables the children of Owlenj learnt in their meagre beds did not convey one-tenth of the wealth of the Suzeraino of Yinnisfar; that every man there had his destiny and happiness guarded

imperishably; that every fruit warmed by the mid-galactic suns contained as much juice as fifty of Owlenj's wretched mangoes.

"Well, we were always under-privileged out here," growled One-Eye. "What can anyone here do against the gower of the Region?"

So you told him, unsmilingly, that there was one

respect in which Yinnisfar was inferior; it could not, in all its systems, command a general who displayed the sagacity and fearlessness that One-Eye was renowned for; its peoples had lost their old lusty arrogance and declined into mere reverie-begetters.

"All that is so," One-Eye admitted reluctantly, "though I have never cared to say so myself. They are a decadent lot!"

"Decadent! That is the word," you exclaimed. "They are decadent beyond all belief. They hang like a giant over-ripe peach on a tree, waiting to drop and splash" —you illustrated your words with a dramatic gesture— "against the iron of your attack!"

"You really think so?"

"I know so! Listen. How long has there been peace throughout the galaxy—except, of course, for your little difference of opinion here? For millions of years, is that not so? Is it not so peaceful that you could hear a pin drop in the spacelanes? So peaceful that even interstellar trade has dwindled almost to nothing? I tell you, my friend, the mighty nations of the stars have nodded off to sleep! Their warriors, their technicians, have been untested for generations. Their science rusts beneath a pool of complacence!"

Now you had One-Eye on his feet again. This time he was yours, the first of your list of conquests. He let out a roar of excitement.

"By Thraldemener, it is as you say!" he shouted. "They wouldn't know how to fight. They are degener-ate! Come, there is no time to be lost. We will begin the liberation of the peoples of Yinnisfar tomorrow, my friend. Why couldn't I have thought of the idea myself?"

"Wait!" you said. You touched his tattered sleeve as he came round the desk; he felt something of your vitality course through him, and waited obediently. "If Owlenj is to conquer, it must be united. Your forces are not sufficient in themselves to match the dying might of the Region. The civil war must end."

At this One-Eye frowned, looked uncertain. The civil war was a cause dear to his heart; above all else he had wanted to reduce this little city to ashes. The greater greed won; yet still he procrastinated.

"You can't stop a civil war just like that," he pro-tested. "It's been going on for five years now. The cause is very dear to the people's hearts—they're dying in the name of liberty for justice itself."

"No doubt," you agreed. "All the same, they would tolerate a treaty with the forces of injustice in exchange for the chance to eat regularly and sleep comfortably. I'm sure they don't exactly relish the sound of cosfire punctuating their thoughts."

"Supposing they would," One-Eye said. "How do we go about making peace, aside from crushing the enemy completely?"

"You and I go and see the enemy commander," you said.

And although he protested and swore, that was what you and One-Eye did.

You emerged from the rebel hiding place into an aisle of the city's ruined cathedral. Treading carefully over the debris, you left by what had been the West Gate and came to the improvised shields of lead and sand which marked One-Eye's present forward position. Here One-Eye began to argue again; you silenced him. With one man to accompany you and bear the white flag of truce, you meekly put on a radiation suit as One-Eye had done and climbed out into the street.

This had once been a fine avenue. Now the tall exoquag trees were splintered like bone, and the frosts of many buildings fizzled like moist sherbet. Several robo-tanks lay locked together on the scarred pavements. Nothing moved. But as you walked up that suburban battleground, you must have been aware of the unseen eyes of the enemy watching you behind their levelled sights. It must have seemed, again, that you walked amid the grotesque properties of a dream.

At the top of the avenue, a mechanical voice halted you and asked you what you wanted. When its attendant echoes had gone chattering away among the ruins, One-Eye bellowed out his name and demanded to see the enemy general.

Within two minutes, a transparent disc using beamed power dropped out of the sky. A door slid open and the mechanical voice shouted, "Please get in."

Entering with your two attendants, you were at once lifted to a height just above the rooftops. The disc flicked two blocks to the north before sinking again. The door opened and you climbed out

3

You were in a slaughter yard. No animals were here now, although a wall with a line of fuser marks heart-high showed that the place had not entirely abandoned its ancient purposes.

Two captains met you under a white flag. They saluted One-Eye and led you out of the yard, down a deep ramp. You descended to a part of the old-fashioned pneumatic running under the city, where you removed your radiation suits. Here a maze of new corridors had been constructed; down one of them you were led until a white-painted door was reached. The grim captains indicated you were to go in.

You entered.

"Well, you traitor, what makes you think you will leave here alive?" the enemy general asked One-Eye. His uniform was trim if worn, his eyes had a quelling fire to them; he walked as true soldiers have walked since time immemorial: as if the discs of his backbone had all been welded together. And Welded had a little mous-tache which now bristled with triumph at the sight of his foe.

Temporarily forgetting all but his old feud, One-Eye advanced as if he would tear that moustache from

the other's upper lip

"Shake hands, you two," you said impatiently. "Come to terms immediately. The sooner we blast off, the better."

Welded looked at you for the first time; he seemed instantly to comprehend that it was you rather than One-Eye with whom he had to deal. Welded was an intelligent man. Instantly, he was ice-cold; his voice ground straight off a glacier.

"I have no idea who you are, fellow," he said. "But if I have any suspicion of impertinence from you, I'll have you shot down like a dog. With your friend here, I must be more careful—his head is destined for the city gate. You are entirely expendable."

"On that I reserve my own opinion," you said. "We do not come here to bandy threats but to make you an offer. If you are prepared to listen, listen now."

In the scale of emotions, there is a stage beyond fury where fury goes off the boil, and a stage beyond anger where it merges into fear. As Welded reached this point, he stiffened as if he would snap. He could say nothing. You began to talk of Yinnisfar, explaining the situation to him as you had to One-Eye.

Welded was a harder man to deal with than his enemy, more seasoned, more sure of himself. Though a faint, concupiscent smile curled his lip when you spoke of the richness of the Region, he never unbent. When you had finished, he spoke.

"Are you a native of Owlenj, stranger?" he asked.

"No," you said.

"What is your world, stranger?"

"It is a planet beyond the galaxy."

"There is nothing between the galaxies, only darkness like teeming coal dust. What is the name of the world of yours, stranger?"

"It is unnamed," you said.

Now Welded snapped a finger angrily.

"You have an odd way of trying to win my confidence, stranger," he said. "What do the inhabitants of your world call it?"

"There are no inhabitants," you said. "I am the first. It is unnamed because I have not named it."

"Then I will name it," Welded snarled. "I name it Lies! All Lies! Every word a lie! You are a spy from distant Yinnisfar, a dupe, an assassin! Guards! Guards! —take this fool into the yard and make a puddle of him!"

As he shouted, he wrenched a fuser from its holster and turned it on to you. One-Eye kicked out, caught Welded's wrist with the toe of his boot, and sent the weapon flying across the room.

"Listen, you lunatic!" he roared at Welded. "Would you kill this man who offers us so much? Suppose he is a spy from YInnisfar—would that not make him the ideal man to lead us back there? We need not trust him. We can watch him all the time. Let us seize the advant-age of having him in our hands!"

Even while One-Eye was speaking, the ceiling had lifted three feet; through the widening gap, armed men catapulted themselves into the room, pinning you and the rebel leader into different corners. In no time, you were enmeshed in clawed metal nets.

Welded stayed them with a raised hand.

"There is grain of truth in what you say," he admitted reluctantly. "Guards, leave us. We will talk of this matter."

Two hours later, when orderlies brought in wine for you and the commanders, the arguing was over and plans were being discussed. By tacit agreement, the ques-tion of your origin was abandoned; both men had decided that wherever you came from it was not from the Region of Yinnisfar. Nobody from that vast empire had bothered with the outer rim of the galaxy for millennia.

"I came to you," you told them, "because this is one of the few planets near my world on which any form of military organization still survives."

At that they were flattered. They failed to see that you regarded them merely as remnants of an outdated creed. The only advantage of a military organization over any other, from your point of view, was its ability to get into action without inordinate delay.

Two hours later still, when one of Welded's orderlies entered with food for them, Welded was just making the last of numerous calls to the garrisons of Owlenj.

"How many interplanetary vessels do you hold that can be put into active service at once?" he asked into the speaker. ". . . Yes, all told. I see: fifteen. How many of those are light-drive? .. . Only five.... What type are those five?"

He wrote the answers down, reading them out as he did so, for your benefit and One-Eye's.

"One freighter. . . . One liner converted to military use.... One trooper.... And two Invaders. Good. Now give me their tonnages."

He wrote the tonnages down, scowled, nodded and said with authoritative sharpness to the unseen com-mander, "Excellent. You will receive instructions in the morning as regards fuelling and equipping of those five ships. As for the other ten—get your Electronics Arm cracking on them straight away. I want them equipped with light-drive and ready to bust vacuum within forty-eight hours. Is that understood? . . . And please confine all your men to camp until further orders. Is that under-stood? Good. Any queries? ... I leave it all to your ingenuity, Commander. A jolt in the teeth for him," Welded said with satisfaction as he signed off.

For the first time, he regarded the orderly who had brought in the food.

"Is the general Cease Fire being obeyed?" he demanded.

"Absolutely," Orderly said. "The people are dancing in the streets."

"We'll give them something to dance about soon," Welded said, rubbing his hands. He turned to One-Eye, who was juggling with pieces of paper.

"What's our strength?" he asked.

"Depends how many of these light-drive conversion jobs actually materialize."

"With our present shortage of men and materials, say fifty per cent," Welded said.

"Right. . . ." One-Eye scanned his one eye over the sheet of figures.

"Including my own fleets, say a hundred and ten ships, about two-thirds of which will be military craft."

They looked at each other gloomily. Provincial though they were, the number sounded faintly small to them.

"It is ample," you said confidently.

They turned to the formidable problem of rations. The fleet could reckon on being vacuum-borne for two weeks before reaching the margins of the Region; another two and a half weeks to reach the heart; and another three days if they were to get to the pivotal world of Yinnisfar itself.

"And that allows no time for delay caused by evasive action or battle or such," Welded said.

"Pfff! We don't evade—we go through them like knives through flesh," One-Eye said. He more than Welded was infected by your confidence.

"They may capitulate before we reach Yinnisfar itself," you said. "Then we head for the nearest planet and your men can eat themselves silly."

"We must have a safety margin," Welded insisted. "Let's call it a six weeks' journey, eh? And we'll be five and a half thousand strong...." He shook his head. "We can cope with the air supply all right. The calorie intake is going to be the snag. Those men'll eat their heads off in that time; there's just not that amount of food on all Owlenj. Deep freeze is our only answer. Everyone below the rank of major not on essential ship's crew travels frozen. Get me Medical on the blower, Orderly—I want to speak to the Physician-General."

Orderly hastened to obey.

"What's next?" Welded asked. He was just beginning to enjoy himself.

"Weapons," One-Eye said. "First, fissionable material. My forces can't help much there. Our stocks happen to be lower than usual."

"Here's a report of our holdings as of last week," Welded said, tossing a stereoed list over. "Stocks are very meagre, I'm afraid."

You glanced at the list over One-Eye's shoulder.

"It is ample," you said encouragingly.

4

At first it must have seemed as if the scheme was to succeed. Again that feeling that you lived in an unlikely dream whose scenery you could puncture with a finger must have assailed you, as you sat in the flagship with the two commanders. You had no nerves; you did not worry. Welded and One-Eye, in their individual ways, both showed strain now that they were embarked on the journey. The captain of the ship, Fleet-Commander Prim, had to endure much quiet nagging.

The early days passed uneventfully. Beyond the ports, space hung like a becalmed flag, its blazing stars mere belches in the distance, its ancient splendours nothing more than points to navigate by. The other ships were not visible to the unaided eye: Flagship might have been travelling alone. When they blasted from Owlenj, the total number of ships in the invasion fleet was one hundred and seventeen; by the end of the first week five had had to give up and limp home again, their too hastily contrived light-drives burnt out. It would take them, under maximum thrust, half a year to regain port; by then, their crews would be asphyxiated or the sur-vivors breathing the oxygen of murdered men. The rest of the fleet sailed on, holds full of soldiers in suspended animation, all neatly stacked and racked like bottles.

They had been vacuum-borne sixteen days, and were past those stars generally regarded as being outposts of the great empire of Yinnisfar, when they were first challenged.

"A station calling itself Camoens II RST225," the communications officer reported, "asks us why we have passed Koramandel Tangent Ten without identifying ourselves."

"Let it keep on calling," you said.

Other challenges were received and left unanswered. The fleet stayed silent as it startled to life the world about it. Communications began to intercept messages of alarm and warning between planetary stations.

"Galconder Sabre calling Rolf 158. Unidentified craft due to pass you on course 99GY4281 at 07.1430 Gal. approx. . . ."

"Acrostic I to Cutaligni Base. Look out and report on fleet now entering Home Sector Paradise 014. ...

"Peik-pi-Koing Astronomical to Droxy Pylon. Un-identified ships numbering 130 approx now crossing Scanning Area, Code Diamond Index Diamond Oh Nine"

"All stations on Ishrail Link Two. Procedure BAB Nine One into operation immediately. . . ."

One-Eye snorted his contempt.

"We've certainly set these tin-pot globes in a flutter," he said.

As the hours passed, he grew less easy. Space, which had been almost silent a watch ago, now became mur-murous with voices; soon the murmur grew into a babel. The note of curiosity, at first indicating little more than mild interest, showed a corresponding rise through irritation into alarm.

"Perhaps we ought to answer them," One-Eye sug-gested. "Couldn't we spin them some tale to keep them quiet? Tell them we are going to pay homage, or some-thing?"

"You need have no worry about the messages we can understand," Prim said. "We are picking up several in code now; they are the ones which should cause us most concern."

"Can't we spin some sort of a yarn to keep them quiet?" One-Eye repeated, appealing to you.

You were looking out into the darkness, almost as if you could see through the veil of it, almost as if you expected to see the messages flashing like comets before the ports.

"The truth will emerge," you said, without turning round.

Two days later, the parasond picked up the first ship they had detected since leaving Owlenj. The sighting caused such a noisy squabble in Communication Bay that Prim went over to see what it was about. One-Eye, now remarkably unshaven, followed after him.

"It can't be a ship!" Communications Chief was say-ing, waving a filmlog with the report on.

"But it must be," his sub almost pleaded. "Look at its course: you plotted it back yourself! It's definitely turn-ing. What but a ship could manoeuvre like that?"

"It can't be a ship!" the chief repeated.

"Why can't it be a ship?" Prim asked.

"Beg pardon, sir, but the bloody thing's at least thirty miles long."

After a second's silence, One-Eye asked nervously, "Which way's it coming?"

The sub spoke up. He alone seemed delighted at the fish they had caught on their screen. "It has turned since we had it under observation through thirty to thirty-two

degrees northerly from a course about due nor'-nor'-west with respect to the galactic quadrature."

One-Eye grasped the back of the sub's couch as if it were the sub's neck.

"What I want to know," he growled, "is if it's going away or coming towards us."

"Neither," said the sub, looking at the screen again. "It now seems to have finished turning and is moving along a course which is ... at ninety degrees to ours. That's a right-angle," he added artlessly.

"Any signal from it?" Prim asked.

"Nothing."

"Put a shot across its bows," One-Eye suggested.

"You are not grovelling along the streets of Owlenj now, taking pot shots at all and sundry; let it go!"

One-Eye turned angrily to find Welded there. The latter had come up on the bridge early. He stood and watched the blob fade from the parasond screen before he spoke again. Then, beckoning One-Eye aside and looking to make sure you were not then present on the bridge, he said in a low voice, "My friend, I have some-thing to confess to you."

He looked anxiously and with distaste at One-Eye's whiskery countenance before continuing.

"My early fears are coming back to me," he said. "You know I am a man of courage, but even a hero does wisely to be afraid at times. Every hour we dive deeper into a hornet's nest; do you realize that? Why, we are only two and a half weeks from the fabled Yinnisfar itself! I cannot sleep for asking myself if we are not running our necks into a noose from which there will be no escape."

Reluctant as he was to agree with an old enemy, One-Eye could not miss this chance of confiding his own anxieties.

"They have ships thirty miles long!" he exclaimed. "How could we fight anything that big? But what can we do? We must go on now we have started. Have you any ideas?"

Nodding mysteriously, Welded persuaded the other down to his cabin before he would say more. Then he thumped the bulkhead.

"Only a watch's journey from here," he said, thumping again for emphasis, "are many rich planets. They will be as plunder-worthy as the planets in the heart of the Region—but less well-guarded. Can't you just picture them at this very moment: loaded with plump semi-blondes with rings on every finger, and fat little men dallying with big bank accounts? They're wide open! Defenceless! Why go on to Yinnisfar, where undoubtedly we shall meet with resistance? Why not stop here, plunder what we can, and get back to Owlenj while the going's good?"

One-Eye hesitated, his lip thrust out. He liked the suggestion every bit as much as his ex-enemy had expected he would. But there was one major obstacle, and he voiced it now.

"He's set his heart on getting to Yinnisfar itself."

"Yes! I think we've put up with him long enough," Welded replied.

They did not need to mention your name. When away from the aura of your presence, their misgivings about you were mutual. Welded crossed to a cupboard, taking out a small and tightly-stoppered bottle, which he handed to One-Eye.

"That should solve that problem," he said.

"Good God!" One-Eye said, and put the bottle down gingerly. It contained the venom of the grusby, a deadly Owlenj an tropical snake; to smell one drop of it a yard away would give a man headaches for a week.

"Something to flavour his wine with tonight," Welded said.

When the wine went round the Captain's table after dinner, One-Eye accepted his glass but could not drink. He felt sick with suspense, and with the sickness went a loathing for Welded; not only did he disapprove of poisoning as a namby-pamby method of killing, but he understood clearly that the little bottle held more than enough to spare for him, too, should Welded feel Eke disposing of all his opposition at once.

You had no such qualms. As always, you were in good fettle. You took your glass when it was filled, toasted, as you did every night, the success of the expedition, and drained down the wine.

You made a moue of displeasure.

"This wine tastes flat," you said. "We will stock up with better vintages on Yinnisfar."

Everyone round the table laughed with you, except One-Eye; the muscles of his face had seized up. He could not even force himself to look at Welded.

"What did you make of the thirty-mile-long object we sighted earlier?" Prim asked you, taking his wine at a more sedate pace.

"Oh, it was a Yinnisfar ship all right," you said easily. "Don't worry about it. Evolution will take care of it, just as evolution took care of the monster prehistoric reptiles which once roved Owlenj and other planets."

The Captain spread his hands.

"For a practical man, that is a strangely unpractical remark," he said. "Evolution is one thing, super-ships quite another."

"Oh no, not at all—or only so if you forget that evolu-tion is nature's scientific method, and space ships, not being organic creatures, are a part of man's evolution. And man himself—he's only part of nature's scientific method."

The Captain, who distrusted speculation, withdrew into his shell of primness.

"I trust you don't imagine, at this late date in time, that man is not the end-product of evolution?" he asked you. "We are constantly being told the galaxy is too old for anything more but final extinction."

"I imagine nothing," you told him pleasantly. "But remember; what triumphs ultimately is something too big for your comprehension or mine."

You stood up, and the others followed suit. Soon the dining-room was empty except for the two conspirators. One-Eye swabbed his brow.

"You had me on tenter-hooks," he said. "Couldn't you manage to smuggle that muck into his wine tonight?"

Welded was as stiffly military as ever; but he quivered like a taut bowstring. He found difficulty in getting

the words round his dry tongue.

"He didn't have any wine tonight," Welded managed to whisper. "That was the grusby juice he drank—neat. We should have been pushing him feet-first through the airlock by now!"

For just over four weeks, the Owlenj fleet had been vacuum borne. By now they were deep into the star-clotted heart of the galaxy and within six days' flight of Yinnisfar itself. Suns which carried as an incidental burden hundreds of millions of years of the histories and myths of man burned on all sides of them like funeral torches. The graveyard air was reinforced by silence over all wavebands: the chatter of alarmed planets had died away to nothing.

"They're waiting for us!" One-Eye exclaimed, not for the first time. He lived on the bridge of the flagship now, making his bed there and taking his meals sitting on his bed. For hours at a time he peered out at the seemingly motionless spectacle of the universe, haunted by two fears: the fear of you had grown to rival and even eclipse the fear of Yinnisfar.

Much to the Captain's unstated disapproval, the bridge had also become Welded's living quarters. He spent most of the time lying on his bed with a fuser under his pillow, and never looked out of the ports.

You came frequently up to the bridge, but spoke in-frequently to the two generals. You were detached; it might have been all a dream to you, a dream in which the lineaments of illusion had worn thin. . . . Yet for all that, you were at times noticeably impatient, speaking abruptly sometimes, sometimes clicking your fingers in suppressed irritation, almost as if you wished to wake from the tedium of your sleep.

Only Captain Prim remained completely unchanged. The routine of command stayed him. He seemed to have absorbed all the confidence One-Eye and Welded had lost

"We shall ground on Yinnisfar in six days," he said to you. "Is it possible they intend to offer us no resistance?"

"It is possible to think up excellent reasons for their non-resistance," you said. "Owlenj has been isolated from the Federation for generations and has no knowledge of current intellectual attitudes within the Region. They may all be pacifists, eager to prove their faith. Or, at the other end of the scale, their military hierarchy, without war to thin its ranks, may have collapsed like piecrust under our unexpected pressure. It's all speculation....."

"Supposing," the communications sub ventured from his couch, "supposing the whole lot—everyone on all these worlds—had died long ago, and nobody outside the Region knew about it.... I mean, it's so dead quiet...."

They were the last words he ever spoke. At that second, the parasond exploded, shattering the sub's head like a coconut. An icy clatter rang along the floor as ruptured metal and glass showered out of the panel, while gusts of acrid smoke settled like mesh over the bridge. A babble of frightened voices broke out.

"Fetch Communications Chief from his bed," Prim barked, but Continuity was already on the job, calling over the intercom for a stretcher party and the elec-tronics crew.

Welded was inspecting the damage, fanning away smoke which still siphoned out of a red-hot crater in the panels. His spine arched as tensely as a pre-stressed girder.

"What caused that?" he asked. "A circuit fault? A transistor blowing?"

"Couldn't be," Prim snapped, for once happy to con-tradict his superior. "Would you mind standing clear, please? The repairs crew must see to it at once."

"Look!" called One-Eye. The hysterical edge to his voice was so compelling that even in this moment of crisis every eye present swivelled to where his finger pointed. Out, out they stared into the hard pageant of night beyond the ports. Their eyes had to probe and focus before they saw.

Flies. Flies, rising in a cloud from a dark stream on whose surface sunlight glittered, so that between dark and light the insects were almost lost to view. But the stream was space itself and the glitter a spangle of suns, and the flies spread across them a cloud of ships. The ancient forces of Yinnisfar were rising to the attack.

6

"You can't count them!" One-Eye said, glaring aghast at the swarm of ships. "There must be thousands of them. What are we going to do? They blew out the instrument panel—it was a sort of warning, don't you see! By Pla and To, they'll blow us into eternity at any moment!"

He coughed the words like sand out of his throat then it was as if he had to do something at any cost, to hide his helplessness. Turning on a heel, he crossed the promenade and confronted you.

"You brought us into this!" he shouted. "What are you going to do to get us away? How do we save our-selves?"

"Leave that to the Captain and be .silent," you said. You moved away before he touched you and stood by the Captain. Prim was at his primmest, dealing out orders with the iron efficiency of a school marm. The short wave being unimpaired, he spoke rapidly to the squadron leaders of his fleet. On a live schematic above his head, the results of those orders immediately became apparent. The Owlenjan fleet was deploying into its individual squadrons, spreading into a fan parsecs wide. They moved towards the curtain of flies like an opening hand. At maximum speed they moved, straight for the enemy navies.

"They're too ready for us," Prim said to you out of the corner of his dry mouth. "This will never shake them. We'll never get through! There aren't enough of us to be effective. It's nothing but suicide."

"What else do you suggest?" you asked him.

"If every ship made for a planet, orbited it, held it under threat of demolition—no, they'd pick us off one by one.. .." He shook his head. "This is the only possible way," he said quietly, again turning all his attention to this manoeuvre.

Further talk was impossible. The waiting ships and the handful of charging ships slid together. The gulf between them was suddenly trellised with blue flame, electric, blinding. Square links of force opened and shut like champing mouths. Whatever its power source, the drain must have been phenomenal,

consuming the basic energies of space itself.

The Owlenjan ships found themselves on to the strange defence before evasion was more than a panicky thought. That chopping trellis flared before their ports, snapped, was gone, flared and snapped again, bathing every bridge in its eccentric luminance, dazzling them, consuming them. It was the last light thousands of eyes ever saw. The ships on which those blue jaws closed burned magnesium-bright; they burned, then sagged like rotten bananas into limbo, leeched of life.

But the invaders were tearing through space at for-midable speeds. Nor was the terrifying trellis properly in phase; whoever controlled it could not control its precise adjustment; its scissor action was too slow—many ships hurtled through its interstices and into the ranks of the Yinnisfar fleet.

Flagship came through. The trellis snapped uselessly behind it. A quick glance at the schematic showed Prim he had only about forty ships left, raggedly out of for-mation.

"Superfusers—fire!" he roared.

Nobody in that immense melee of armour had ever been in a space battle before. The galaxy in its tired old age had long since hung up its swords. Of all the astute brains following the rapid interplay of strategy, Prim's was the quickest to seize advantage. The mighty ranks of Yinnisfar had placed too much reliance on their trellis device; they were temporarily numbed to find survivors on their side of it. Owlenj shook them out of their numbness.

Sunbursts of superfuses cascaded among them, leap-ing and feeding from ship to ship, corruscating with cosmic energy, while the attackers plunged through their devasted ranks and were away. The Yinnisfar vessels were also in rapid movement. In no time they had dis-persed, safe from the fusion centre where twenty score of their sister ships perished.

"We're through!" you said. "On to Yinnisfar itself. It will ransom our safety!"

The enemy fleet was not so easily outdistanced, how-ever. Several units were already overtaking them at staggering velocity. Among them was the thirty-mile-long craft they had sighted some days ago.

"And there are three more like it!" Welded yelled from his position at the ports. "Look! How can anything travel that fast?"

Prim wrenched the Flagship into a spin south. They altered course just in time the overtakers launched a black mass like smoke directly ahead of their old posi-tion; the smoke was molecularized ceetee, capable of riddling the Flagship like moth in carpet, leaving it mere gravel over the spaceways. In this manoeuvre, sight of the four giant vessels was lost. Then they spun into sight again, and with mind-wrenching turns formed the four points of an enormous square ahead of the Flagship.

"No human could stand G's like that. They are robot-controlled," you said, gripped by the fascination of battle.

"And they put out the trellis screen!" Prim said. It was a flash of inspiration, shortly to be proved correct. He turned and barked orders at Bombardment Bay, telling them to hit the giants at any cost. By now, Flag-ship was on its own, the rest of its company disintegrated or scattered far away.

The four giants were in position. Again the hellish blue pattern scissored across Flagship's course. Prim had no time to swerve away—they racketed towards the dazzling pattern. At the last second, someone in

Bombardment fired a superfuser dead ahead.

Superfuser and trellis met.

The two insensate energies clawed each other like beasts of prey. Instead of spreading its usual type of explosion, the fusion climbed the writhing squares of trellis, gobbling as it climbed. At the centre, it left a widening circle of nothingness, through which Flagship shot unharmed. It climbed to the trellis corners, barbed fire devouring fire. It reached the four giant vessels.

Just for a moment they remained intact, each radiat-ing a three dimensional rainbow which flickered magically up and down the spectrum and was visible hundreds of light-years away. Then that blinding beauty fused, the four rainbow orbs merged and became anti-light. They sucked, guttered and went out—and where they had been a great gap in the nothingness of the universe appeared and spread. The ineluctable fabric of space itself was being devoured.

Several Yinnisfar ships were engulfed in this cata-clysm. Flagship was spared no time to rejoice. The moment of its greatest triumph was also the moment of its destruction. A translucent globe from an enemy destroyer caught its dorsal vane.

Like an octopus hauling itself aboard a rowing boat, the globe spread out tentacles of light and engulfed Flag-ship.

Prim swore furiously.

"Nothing responds any more," he said, dropping his hands to his side.

It was doubtful if anyone heard him. A continuous sizzle filled their ears while their body electricity jumped in protest at what was taking place. The scene was rendered in unforgettable hues of orange and black, as the light penetrated everything. Faces, clothes, floor, instruments, all were ravaged.

Then it was over, that moment of near madness. They were, left in darkness, only pale starlight touching their pale faces. Prim staggered for the controls. He swept his hand wildly over banks of instruments. All were dead.

"We're finished!" he announced. "Not a whisper of life anywhere. Even the air purifier is finished.'

He sank down, covering his face with his hands. For a while nobody spoke; all were emotionally drained by the apocalyptic rigours of battle, the sag of defeat.

"They must be chivalrous on Yinnisfar," you said at length. "They will have some sort of code of battle. They will come and take us from here. We shall be honour-ably treated."

Welded said harshly from a corner, "You still find room for cockiness! We ought to kill you now."

"Let's get him," One-Eye said, but made no move. They were all just lumps against the wall of starlight, lumps which spoke without relevance.

"I only feel relaxed," you said. "The battle is over. We have lost honourably. Look at your captain here, half-dead with fatigue. He fought well, resourcefully. No blame lies with him that we lost the gamble. Now he can sit back without remorse—and we can do the same— knowing the future is not in our hands. For sure they will be here to collect us at any moment, and give us an honourable trial on

Yinnisfar." The others made you no answer.

7

The air on Flagship bridge was growing foul when the emissaries of Yinnisfar arrived as you had predicted. They cut their way rapidly through the hull, rounded up every dazed man aboard and transferred them to their own ship. Full speed was then made towards Yinnisfar. Flagship was left to its own ruined devices.

You had been given a separate room with Prim, One Eye and Welded. The two latter had been quite drained of all life by the magnitude of recent events. They sat together now like a pair of dummies, not speaking. Prim was in better shape, but reaction had now hit him, and he lay shaking on a couch. So you alone stood by the port and took in the spectacle as Yinnisfar approached.

The planet which for so long had played such a prominent role in the galaxy was a curious spectacle at this late date in its history. About its equator circled two splendid rings, one beyond the other. Of these rings, one was natural and consisted of the debris of Luna, dis-integrated when an antique craft embedded in Iri had suddenly exploded. The other ring was nothing more nor less than a scrapyard. Breaking up of space ships on the ground had been forbidden ages ago on Yinnisfar, where piles of rusting metal were considered unsightly; instead, every fragment of scrap was thrown into the orbit of the ring. Over a vast period of time, this ring had grown until it was fifty miles deep and several hun-dred wide. Far from being ugly, it was a thing of beauty, one of the seventeen wonders of the galaxy. Though composed entirely of objects which ranged from old motors to spoons, from iron lungs to shreds of unidentifi-able metal, it gleamed like an array of countless jewels, every Inch of metal polished eternally by the ceaseless wash of meteoric dust.

When the ship in which you were held landed on the day side of the planet, this ring was still faintly visible, straining like an arch right round heaven.

This was Yinnisfar of tears and pleasure, stuffed with forgotten memory and protracted time.

After some delay, you and the others were dis-embarked, transferred to a small surface ship and taken to the Court of the Highest Suzerain in the City of Nunon. The Flagship crew was spirited off in one direc-tion and the troops in suspended animation in another, while you and the other three were ushered into a room little bigger than a cubicle. Here again was more delay. Food was brought, but you alone had inclination enough to eat it, supplementing it with your own supplies which you carried on your person.

Various dignitaries visited you, most of them depart-ing gloomily without speaking. Through a narrow window you looked out on to a courtyard. Groups of men and women stood about aimlessly, and no face was without its stamp of worry. Counsellors walked as if climbing a dark stair. It became clear some grave crisis pended; its threat hung almost tangibly over the whole court.

Finally and unexpectedly, an order reached your guards. With a flurry of excitement you and the three with you were brought into a marble hall of audience and so into the personal presence of the Highest, Suzerain Inherit of Yinnisfar and the Region of Yinnisfar.

He was a pale man, dressed austerely in dark satins. He reclined on a couch. His features were insipid, yet his eyes spoke of intelligence and his voice was firm. Though his general pose suggested lethargy, his head was carried with an alertness that did not escape your attention.

He looked you over in leisurely fashion, weighing each of your group in turn, and finally addressed you as the obvious leader. He spoke without preamble.

"You barbarians, by the wicked folly of your actions, have wrought havoc in the natural order of things; your cupidity is creating the most terrible repercussions."

You bowed and said with irony, "We regret it if we disturbed the great empire of Yinnisfar."

"Pah! I do not refer to the empire." He waved his hand as if the empire were a mere bauble, beneath his interest. "I referred to the cosmos itself, by whose grace we all exist. The forces of nature have become unknit."

You looked at him interrogatively, saying nothing.

"I will explain the fate which now threatens us," the Highest said, "in the hope you may comprehend at least something of it. I would like you to die knowing a little of what you have done. Now. This galaxy of ours is old beyond your imagining; philosophers, theologians and scientists combine to tell us that its duration, vast but not infinite, is nearing an end. I presume even you of the outer rim know that much?"

"The rumour circulated," you murmured.

"I am pleased to hear that some wisdom penetrates to your benighted darkness. We have been given reason to suppose, in these last few hours, that the galaxy—like an old curtain crumbling under its own weight—may now be dissolving; that this, in fact, is the end of all things, of past and future, and of all men."

He paused in vain to watch for any shadows of alarm to cross your face, then continued composedly, ignoring the frightened responses of your fellow captives.

"The dissolution was begun by your foolishness. Peace has reigned in the Region for more generations than you have hairs on your head. But when we learned your fleet was coming with obviously hostile intent, we were obliged to refurbish the fearful weapons of our fore-fathers. From every civilized planet, the ancient ships and engines of attack—unused since the breakdowns of the Self-Perpetuating War—were resurrected. Systems of production, schemes of battle, organizations of fight-ing men—all had to be resurrected from the dead past. It required haste such as we have never known, and regimentation such as we detest. Our every sinew was strained, as a man may twist a muscle striking at a mosquito. Even if no greater peril beset us, that mighty effort to rearm has struck a heavy blow at our stability— it may indeed even cause the entire economic structure of the empire to crash."

"That's worth a cheer anyway," One-Eye said, with an attempt at courage.

The Highest regarded him superciliously for a long moment, before continuing his discourse without com-ment.

"We found, in our hurried search for weapons to use against you, one which had been invented eons ago and never used. It was considered devastatingly dangerous, since it harnessed the electrogravition forces

of the complex of space itself. Four gigantic machines called turbulators activated this force; they were the four ships you destroyed."

"We saw one of them on the margins of the Region days ago," Prim said. He had been following the Highest with excitement, obviously enthralled by his description of a gigantic military organization grinding into action.

"The four turbulators had to be called from the distant quarters of the Region, where our ancestors had dis-carded them," the Highest agreed. "They were assembled together and stationed across the course of your fleet with the results that you saw. That trellis pattern is the basic pattern of all creation itself. By ill chance, you destroyed it, or rather caused it to begin consuming itself. Our scientists suggest that such is the antiquity of our galaxy, it no longer retains its old stability. Although the process is invisible, the disintegra-tion you began is still taking place—spreading rapidly, in fact, and nothing can check it."

Prim staggered back, almost as if he had been struck. He bumped into Welded and One-Eye, and the three stood wordlessly together.

The Highest stared at you, expecting a reply. As if uncertain for the first time, you looked searchingly at One-Eye and the others; they stared blankly ahead, too absorbed with the prospect of catastrophe to notice you.

"Your scientists are to be congratulated," you said. "They are late with their discovery of instability, but at least they have found it out for themselves. It is a catas-trophe my friends here and I did not begin; it began long ago, and it was about that that I came to Yinnisfar to tell them—and you."

For the first time, the Highest showed emotion. He rose from the couch, clutching its head fiercely. "You impertinent barbarian dog, you came here to rape and loot and pillage. What do you know of these matters?"

"I came here to announce the end of things," you told him. "How I got here, whether as captive or victor, was no concern of mine, so long as the peoples of every world had been roused to know of my coming. That was why I staged the invasion; such a thing is easily done, provided you can read and provoke the few basic human passions. If I had come here alone, who would have known it or cared? As it is, the whole galaxy has its eyes open and focused here on Yinnisfar. They can die know-ing the truth."

"Indeed?" The Highest raised one scornful imperial eyebrow. "Before I have you taken out and disintegrated, fellow, perhaps you would care to tell me about this truth over which you have gone to such devious trouble?"

"By all means," you replied. "Possibly you would care for a practical demonstration first?"

But the Highest brushed the suggestion aside, snapping his fingers. "You are a braggart!" he said energetically. "You waste my time, and there is little enough of that left. Gentlemen of the guard, execute this fellow and have his body removed. The other three, by the look of them, will go quietly."

The guard advanced in a half-circle, eager at an unprecedented chance to try their art on living flesh.

"This is the sort of demonstration I had in mind," you said, turning to meet them.

Fourteen men comprised the guard. Their uniforms were brightly unmilitary, laced, epauletted and

braided; but their long antique swords looked functional in every inch, and now these swords were bared and thrust towards you.

Without hesitation you advanced towards the nearest soldier who advanced towards you. He, with equal decision, threw himself at you, bringing down his sword with a heavy blow at your head. You flung up your arm and caught the blade full on it.

The sword rang and crumbled into bits, as if turned to dust. The swordsman fell back in alarm.

The other guards were on you, thrusting and slicing. Their swords crumpled and snapped against you—not a one but wrecked itself against your body. They flung themselves at you. You pushed with your hands and their bones snapped, their arms crumpled as uselessly as their swords had done. For you it must have seemed like a fight in a dream, where every adversary is a thing of paper. Their cries were like the tearing of thin tissue.

When it was borne into them that you had—how would they think of it?—a secret power, they fell back gasping and groaning. You saw then that from a balcony that had appeared in the blank wall above you the snout of a wicked-looking machine was trained on you.

Despite the awe-striking scene he had just witnessed, the Highest retained his self-control. Welded, One-Eye and Prim slunk behind the guard for protection.

"Before you are annihilated," the Highest said, glanc-ing pointedly up at the balcony, "tell me what form of trickery is this."

"Try out your next trick first," you suggested. To hasten matters, you stepped towards the Highest. You had taken perhaps two paces before the machine on the balcony burst into action. A fusillade of beta pellets screamed at you, only to fall uselessly to the ground at your feet.

At last the Highest was frightened. He scrambled over his couch and backed away, no longer the languid ruler.

"Who are you? Where do you come from?" he gasped.

"That is what I want to tell you," you said. "I see there is now some likelihood of your believing me. What I have to say must go out to everyone of your people; when a great history ends, it ends most fittingly with everyone knowing why; a man who perishes without reason is a clown.

"I come from a new world outside this galaxy—new because there the process of creation still goes on. New galaxies are forming there out of the fathomless night, rising out of the margins of nothing. My planet is new, and I am the first man born upon it; it is still nameless."

Welded said, "So all that rigmarole you told me back on Owlenj was true?"

"Certainly," you said. You did not bother to tell him how you had learnt to pilot the dead Shouter's ship. You turned instead to Prim. "Do you recall a conversation we once had about evolution? You claimed that man was its ultimate product."

Prim nodded.

"Man is evolution's fittest fruit—in this galaxy," you told him. You looked at the Highest, at Welded, at

One-Eye. You said without smiling, "You are evolution's highest flowering here. Think of the multitude of experi-ments nature undertook before evolving you. She started with amino acids, then the amoeba, a simple cell. . . . She was like a child at school then, but all this while she has been learning. I use analogies without subscribing to the pathetic fallacy, understand. Many of her experiments— even late ones like the sentient vagabond cells—are failures; man, on the whole, is her best so far.

"In the new galaxy from which I come, she begins with man. I am the earliest, most primitive form of life in my galaxy—the new amoeba!"

You went on to tell them how even in you radical changes had been made, some of which they could have detected under medical examination; you were, in truth, a different species from them. Your waste system was fundamentally altered, eliminating the urinary tract and sweat glands. Your windpipe was double, so that intake and outlet of air were by different channels, the whole being better protected than man's by strong cartilage. Your digestive processes had been changed; leafy veget-ables, which consist mainly of cellulose, were no longer treated as roughage; instead, their cellulose was absorbed and hydrolyzed into necessary glucose. In this way, your species would never depend on the mass slaughter of herbivores (whose flesh yields glucose) in the pitiful way man had had to. Radical modifications had been intro-duced in the reproductive faculty; not only were the old characteristics, such as colour of hair, transferable from one generation to another: walking and language genes ensured that those simple human skills were also inherit-able. The psychological basis of your mind had also been improved, much of man's old random emotionalism being eliminated entirely; yet you had a range of altruism and identity with things surpassing man's capabilities.

The Highest heard you out in silence and then said, in a tone not devoid of awe, "If you are the first of your —ah, species, how can you know so much about your-self?"

You smiled. It seemed a simple question.

"Because all our other improvements are merely in some way a modification of the pattern used in man's designing, but we have in addition one gift of which you never dreamed: we have awareness not only of our psychological actions—our thoughts, if you will—but of our physiological ones. We can see into our last blood cell. In other words, we have no unconscious processes, inaccessible to us. I can control the working of my every enzyme. I am integrated as you could never be; for instance, the diseases such as cancer which once scourged mankind can never touch us; we should recognize and check them at their inception. Nor do we seize up in a moment of crisis and get taken over by automatic reflexes; knowing ourselves, we are entirely our own masters. Though you have mastered your environment, you have never mastered yourselves."

8

The Highest came down from his dais. He thrust his hands into his pockets and kicked moodily at the spent beta pellets on the ground.

"There was enough to worry about before you arrived," he said. For a moment his face looked childishly petulant. As if aware of your gaze fixed upon him, he turned, saying with a forced laugh, "To be quite

honest, you give me an inferiority complex! Though I have lived five centuries, I am a child again. Why, you must feel a real superman in our poor Yinnisfar."

The derision in his tone pricked you: there were enough points in common between you for that.

"If that is what it seems like to you, it feels entirely different to me," you flashed. "Didn't you understand what I told you? In my galaxy, I rank as the amoeba.
Should that make me proud? As to what supersedes me"

"Don't! I shudder to think!" the Highest said, thrust-ing out a manicured hand. "I concede your point: you are suitably humble about your own might."

"What's the good of all this talk?" It was One-Eye. He had stood helplessly by with Welded and Prim, his mind filled with fruitless plots of escape. Much of what you had said had been either unheard or had gone over his head, but from the last few remarks he had caught one idea: that you were a sort of superman. Now he came up to you with a mixture of defiance and cajolery.

"You got us here, you can get us back," he said. "And let's not hang about. You heard what His Highness said about this place disintegrating. Get us back to Owlenj if you're such a superman."

You shook your head.

"You'd be no better off on Owlenj, of that I assure you," you told him. "I'm sorry you had to be involved in this, but it's been no worse for you than hiding out in the ruins of a city. And I'm no superman"

"No superman!" One-Eye said angrily. He turned to the Highest and exclaimed, "No superman, he says. Yet he drank down enough poison for an army, he fended off those swords—you saw him!—he withstood a bombard-ment just then"

"Listen to me!" you interrupted. "Those things belonged to a different principle. Watch this!"

You walked over to a wall It was built of solid blocks of marble, polished and selected for its delicate pattern-ing. You placed one hand with extended fingers upon it and pushed; when you withdrew your hand, five short tunnels had been pierced in the marble.

It was a simple demonstration. They were properly impressed.

You wiped your hand and returned to them, but they shuffled away from you, their lips pale.

"Yet I am no stronger than you," you told them. "You must believe that, for it is the truth. The only difference is this: that I come from a freshly created world, new minted by the inexorable processes of continuous creation. And you—come from an old world."

"This we know" The Highest began.

"Yes, you know it all: now try and understand it! Think of your galaxy. How old is it? You do not know exactly, but you know it is incredibly old. The truth is, it is wearing out, as everything wears out in time. Ask yourself: what is everything made of? A tissue of energies which outcrops and becomes matter in the form of protons and neutrons. That tissue of energy, since the beginning of time, has been running down, wearing thin —and of course all matter, which is composed of it, has worn thin with it. The great magical

batteries of this galaxy are slowing: so all protons and neutrons lose their polarity. These basic bricks of which everything is built are now almost literally sparked out: their charges have run low, they cannot combine as they used to. Steel has not the strength that paper once possessed, wood is water."

Prim interrupted.

"You're trying to deceive us!" he told you in a trembling voice. "It's only you who can pierce marble with a finger, or withstand poison, swords or bombard-ment. We should die! Do you take us for fools?"

"No," you replied. "You would die, as you say. You are composed of the same exhausted nucleii as everything else; that is exactly why you could not detect this whole process for yourselves long ago. I can withstand almost anything you have to offer only because the very stuff of which I am made is new. I am the one fresh factor in an exhausted galaxy."

You paused and went over to the Highest. He had become very pale, swaying on his heels. But he recovered himself manfully and said, "I was about to call my ministers in; they will have been listening over micro- phones to this" He hesitated and then continued mockingly, "—this my audience with you. But if what you say is true, then nothing we can do is of avail. We— we are all fading into shadows...."

He pulled himself up and said, "This ravening monster we loosed between us out in space—I suppose that merely hastens the exhaustion process?"

"Yes. The fabric is torn; the gap widens to embrace your whole galaxy."

The Highest closed his eyes, as if he could grasp the situation better in darkness. Standing thus, he looked almost wistful, but when, he raised his lids again his regard fixed on you with the alertness of a bird.

"So. Our poisons cannot affect you," he said. "Yet you manage to live among us. How can our food nourish you?"

"You have a sharp enough intelligence to answer that yourself?" you told him. "I brought my private supply of calories with me when I left my own world. I was not unprepared. I even had to bring oxygen concentrates."

You then told the Highest of the effects your un-exhausted air had had on Shouter, the spoolseller, how he had been riddled as if by unseen radiations. And you told him how useful Shouter's microspool library had been.

"You are quite the opportunist," the Highest said. "My congratulations to you."

He pulled at his lip and looked for a moment almost amused.

"Have you a moment to spare, if the question has meaning any more? Will you come with me? Perhaps you other gentlemen will excuse us; by all means take a ship back to Owlenj, or wherever it is, if you think it's worth it. I leave it entirely to you. You are no longer of the remotest importance. My guards will not molest you."

Something in his manner had subtly changed. He motioned to you with a sharp gesture and made for a rear door. What did you do? You took a last look over your shoulder at the desolate group whose function in life had abruptly vanished, gave One-Eye a mocking salute, and followed the Highest out of

the door, closing it behind you.

The Highest walked down a corridor at a smart pace which belied his earlier languor. He flung open another door and you both emerged on to a balcony overlooking the proud city of Nunion. A cool evening wind blew; cloud masked the setting sun. The great panorama of avenue and river lay strangely deserted, from the distant spires of Ap-Gleema to the pavement of the Osphors Concourse. Nothing stirred except a fabric far below in a mansion window.

"How long would this exhaustion business have taken if we had not hurried it on?" the Highest asked almost casually, leaning on the rail and looking down.

"It must have been worsening for centuries," you told him. "It might have gone on for centuries more. . . ."

You stopped, afraid of inflicting further hurt. You felt almost a softness for him, and for all men, all the myriads of them, whether they cheated or played fair, loved or hated. All their follies and limitations were forgiven: they were primitive mechanisms coming from the dark, fading back into the dark, with a glimpsing of awareness to give them poignance.

The Highest took a deep breath of evening air.

"I'm glad it's ending now! It's well, it's the end, that's all"

He took another lungful of the darkening wind.

"And for the first time—I'm not bored! I've had to live too long at court."

He gave a shaky laugh.

"And you have a ringside seat, my friend. It will indeed be a fine sight for you to see us dissolve like sugar in a strong drink! You must get back, though, before all our fine ships disintegrate. They won't be capable of carrying you much longer. Handle the toys carefully or you'll break them."

"I'll manage," you said. "Have you ever heard of three totally unaccountable vessels discovered at the dawn of the Longevity Epoch—The Kakakakaxo-Popraca-Luna Antiquities, as my microspools called them? To the end, their origins have proved a mystery. Now I feel I must take my own life-spark back to my galaxy in perhaps the same way that those vessels brought the original life-spark to yours."

The Highest shook his head, momentarily beyond speech.

You added gently, "Don't forget everyone must be told what is happening. That seems to me imperative."

"I will not forget."

He turned and faced you.

"I'm still not sure what impulse brought you here. A sort of nostalgia? Mere curiosity? A desire to gloat per-haps? Or pity? What feelings do you have for—us poor shadows?"

And what unexpected weakness was it choked the words in your throat? Why did you turn your face

away so that he could not see your eyes?

"I wanted man to be aware of what is happening to him," you said at last. "That much was owed to him. I— we owed it to him. You are—our fathers. We are your heirs...."

He touched you gently, asking in a firm voice, "What exactly do you want me to tell the people of the galaxy?"

You looked out over a city now pricked with lights, and up to the drab evening sky. You found comfort neither there nor in yourself.

"Just tell them what a galaxy is," you said. "Don't soften the picture. They are brave at facing hard facts. Explain to them how a galaxy is nothing more than a gigantic laboratory for the blind experiments of nature. Explain to them how little individual lives mean in the laboratories. Tell them that this laboratory here is clos-ing down. A newer one, with more modern equipment, is opening just down the street."

"I'll remember," the Highest said. Now his face was a shadow in the shadows. Night fell over the old city.

We who have already superseded you record these scenes now in your honour, as you once honoured man. Requiescat in pace.