

## The Mountain Without a Name

When Morrison left headquarters tent, Dengue the observer was asleep with his mouth open, sprawled loosely in a canvas chair. Morrison did not to awaken him. He had enough trouble on his hands.

He had to see a deputation of natives, the same idiots who had been drumming from the cliffs. And then he had to super-vise the construction of the mountain without a name. His assistant, Ed Lerner, was there now. But first, he had to check the most recent accident.

It was noon when he walked through the work camp, and the men were taking their lunch break, leaning against their gigantic machines, eating sandwiches and sipped coffee. It looked normal enough, but Morrison had been bossing plane-tary construction long enough to know better. No one kidded him, no one griped. They simply sat on the dusty ground in the shade of their big machines, waiting for something else to happen.

A big Owens Landmover had been damaged this time. It sagged on its broken axle where the wrecking gang had left it. The two drivers were sitting in the cab, waiting for him.

"How did it happen?" Morrison asked.

"I don't know," the chief driver said, wiping perspiration from his eyes. "Felt the road lift out. Spun sideways, sorta."

Morrison grunted and kicked the Owens' gigantic front wheel. A Landmover could drop twenty feet onto rock and come up with only a bent fender. They were the toughest machines built. Five of his were out of commission now.

"Nothing's going right on this job," the assistant driver said, as though that explained everything.

"You're getting careless," Morrison said. "You can't wheel

that rig like you were on Earth. How fast were you going?" "We were doing fifteen miles an hour," the chief driver said.

"Sure you were," Morrison said.

"It's the truth! The road sorta dropped out—"

"Yeah," Morrison said. "When will you guys get it through your thick skulls you aren't driving the Indianapolis speedway. I'm docking you both a half-day's wages."

He turned and walked away. They were angry at him now. Good enough, if it helped take their superstitious minds off the planet.

He was starting toward the mountain without a name when the radio operator leaned out of his shack and called, "For you, Morrie. Earth."

Morrison took the call. At full amplification he could just recognize the voice of Mr. Shotwell, chairman of the board of Transterran Steel. He was saying, "What's holding things up?"

"Accidents," Morrison said.

"More accidents?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

There was a moment's silence. Mr. Shotwell said, "But *why*, Morrison? It's a soft planet on the specs. Isn't it?"

"Yes sir," Morrison admitted unwillingly. "We've had a run of bad luck. But pity, no one's ever climbed it."

"I hope so," Mr. Shotwell said. "I certainly hope so. You've been there nearly a month, and you haven't built a single city, or port, or even a highway! Our first advertisements have appeared. Inquiries are rolling in. There are people who want to settle there, Morrison! Businesses and service industries to move in."

"I know that, sir."

"I'm sure you do. But they require a finished planet, and they need definite moving dates. If we can't give it to them, General Construction can, or Earth-Mars, or Johnson and Hearn. Planets aren't that scarce. You understand that, don't you?"

Morrison's temper had been uncertain since the accidents had started. Now it flared suddenly. He shouted, "What in hell

do you want out of me? Do you think I'm stalling your lousy contract and—"

"Now now," Mr. Shotwell said hurriedly. "I didn't *personally* Morrison. We believe—we know—that man in planetary construction. But the stock-holder

"Rough, rough," the radio operator murmured. "Stockholders would like to come out here with their

"Forget it," Morrison said, and hurried off.

Lerner was waiting for him at Control Point somberly at the mountain. It was taller than Everest. The snow on its upper ranges glowed pink in the afternoon. It had never been named.

"Charges all planted?" Morrison asked.

"Another few hours," Lerner hesitated. As Morrison's assistant, he was an amateur conservationist, a careful, graying man.

"It's the tallest mountain on the planet," Lerner said. "You save it?"

"Not a chance. This is the key location. We need it aright here."

Lerner nodded, and looked regretfully at the mountain. "Pity. No one's ever climbed it."

Morrison turned quickly and glared at his assistant. "Lerner," he said. "I am aware that no one has ever climbed this mountain. I recognize the symbolism inherent in it. But you know as well as I do that it has to be built. In?"

"I wasn't—"

"My job isn't to admire scenery. I hate scenery. I want to convert this place to the specialized needs of human life. You're pretty jumpy," Lerner said.

"Just don't give me any more of your sly innuendoes. All right."

Morrison wiped his sweaty hands against his forehead. He smiled faintly, apologetically, and said, "Let's get back to work. See what that damned Dengue is up to."

They turned and walked away. Glancing back, Lerner saw the mountainnesses which his own company could exploit. And if without a name outlined red against the sky.

Even the planet was nameless. Its small native population called it Umgcha or was an expert at that. Ongja, but that didn't matter. It would have no official name until the "And what comes next?" Dengue asked. advertising staff of Trans-terran Steel figured out something semantically "We're taking down a mountain," Lerner said. pleasing to several million potential settlers from the crowded inner planets. In "Good!" Dengue cried, sitting upright. "That big the meantime, it was simply referred to as Work Order 35. Several thousand men He leaned back and stared dreamily at the ceiling- and machines were on the planet, and at Morrison's order they would fan out, was standing while Man was grubbing in the dirt destroy mountains, build up plains, shift whole forests, redirect rivers, melt ice scavenging what the saber-tooth left behind. Lord, caps, mold continents, dig new seas, do everything to make Work Order 35 than that!" Dengue laughed happily and sipped from another suitable home for homo sapiens' unique and demanding technological mountain overlooked the sea when Man—I refer to civilization. species homo sapiens— was a jellyfish, trying to move between land and sea."

Dozens of planets had been rearranged to the terran standard. Work Order 35 should have presented no unusual problems. It was a quiet place of gentle fields and forests, warm seas and rolling hills. But something was wrong with Dengue looked at him shrewdly. "But I'm proud of the tamed land. Accidents happened, past all statistical probability, and I'm proud of all of us. We've come a long way since nervous camp chain-reacted to produce more. Everyone helped. There were days. What nature took a million years to erect we can fights between bulldozer men and explosions men. A cook had hysterics over a single day. We can pull that dinky mountain apart and tub of mashed potatoes, and the bookkeeper's spaniel bit the accountant's concrete and steel city guaranteed to last a century on ankle. Little things led to big things.

And the job—a simple job on an uncomplicated planet— had barely begun. Lerner put a restraining hand on his shoulder. Striking In headquarters tent Dengue was awake, squinting judiciously at a whiskey was a good way to lose your ticket. and soda.

"What ho?" he called. "How goes the good work?"

"Fine," Morrison said.

"Glad to hear it," Dengue said emphatically. "I like watching you lads work. Efficiency. Sureness of touch. Know-how."

Morrison had no jurisdiction over the man or his tongue. The government and build upon them twelve-lane super highways, construction code stipulated that observers from other companies could be in rooms for trees, picnic tables for shrubs, diners present at all projects. This was designed to reinforce the courts' stations for caves, billboards for mountain streets. "method-sharing" decision in planetary construction. But practically, the fanciful substitutions of the demigod Man."

observer looked, not for improved methods, but for hidden weaknesses. Morrison arose abruptly and walked out, followed by Dengue. He felt that it would almost be worthwhile to beat Dengue give up the whole crummy job. But he wouldn't do was what Dengue wanted, what he was hired to accomplish.

And, Morrison asked himself, would he be so upset if there weren't a germ of this happened on every planet with a native population?

Those natives are waiting," Lerner said, catching up with him.

"I don't want to see them now," Morrison said. But distantly, from a far rise of technology. He knew primitive humans too well. In the hills, he could hear their drums and whistles. Another irritation for his poor men. "All right," he said.

Three natives were standing at the North Gate beside the camp interpreter. They were of human-related stock, scrawny, naked stone-age savages.

"What do they want?" Morrison asked.

The interpreter said, "Well, Mr. Morrison, boiling it down, they've changed their minds. They want their planet back, and they're willing to return all our presents."

Morrison sighed. He couldn't very well explain to them that Work Order 35 wasn't "their" planet, or anyone's planet. Land couldn't be possessed—merely occupied. Necessity was the judge. This planet belonged more truly to the several million Earth settlers who would utilize it, than to the few hundred thousand savages who scurried over its surface. That, at least, was the prevailing philosophy upon Earth.

"Tell them again," Morrison said, "all about the splendid reservation we've set aside for them. We're going to feed them, clothe them, educate them—"

Dengue came up quietly. "We're going to astonish them with kindness," he said. "To every man, a wrist watch, a pair of shoes, and a government seed catalogue. To every woman, a lipstick, a bar of soap, and a set of genuine cotton curtains. For every village, a railroad depot, a company store, and—"

"Now you're interfering with work," Morrison said. "And in front of witnesses."

Dengue knew the rules. "Sorry, old man," he said, and moved back.

"They say they've changed their minds," the interpreter said. "To render idiomatically, they say we are to return to our demonland in the sky or they will destroy us with strong magic. The sacred drums are weaving the curse now, and the spirits are gathering."

Morrison looked at the savages with pity. Something like

meaningless threats were always made by pre-civilized men with an inflated opinion of themselves and no concept at all of technology.

He knew primitive humans too well. great killers of the local variety of rabbits and mice. fifty of them would gang up on a tired buffalo, to exhaust it.

exhaustion before they dared approach close enough to strike its life with pin pricks from their dull spears. And

celebration they had! What heroes they thought themselves.

"Tell them to get the hell out of here," Morrison said. "When they come near this camp they'll find some magic that will stop them."

The interpreter called after him, "They're proud of their planet."

"Save it for your doctorate," Morrison said, and grinned cheerfully.

By late afternoon it was time for the destruction of the mountain. Without a name. Lerner went on a last inspection. Dengue, acting like an observer, went down the line jotting down the charge pattern. Then everyone retreated. The natives

crouched in their shelters. Morrison went to Control Room.

One by one the section chiefs reported their men in place. The last readings and found conditions satisfactory. The photographer snapped his last "before" pictures.

"Stand by," Morrison said over the radio, and removed the interlocks from the master detonation box. "Look at the sky."

Morrison glanced up. It was approaching dusk. Black clouds had sprung up from the west, covering the sky.

Silence descended on the camp, and even the drums were quiet.

"Ten seconds . . . five, four, three, two, one—now!" Morrison called, and rammed the plunger home. At that moment a wind fan his cheek.

Just before the mountain erupted, Morrison clawed at his chest, instinctively trying to undo the inevitable moment.

Because even before the men started screaming, he knew that the explosion pattern was wrong, terribly wrong.

Afterward, in the solitude of his tent, after the injured men had been carried to the hospital and the dead had been buried, Morrison tried to reconstruct the event. It had been an accident, of course: A sudden shift in wind direction, the unexpected brittleness of rock just under the surface layer, the failure of the dampers, and the criminal stupidity of placing two booster charges where they would do the most harm.

Another in a long series of statistical improbabilities, he told himself, then sat suddenly upright.

For the first time it occurred to him that the accidents might have been *helped*.

Absurd! But planetary construction was tricky work, with its juggling of massive forces. Accidents happened inevitably. If someone gave them a helping hand, they could become catastrophic.

He stood up and began to pace the narrow length of his tent. Dengue was the obvious suspect. Rivalry between the companies ran high. If Transterran Steel could be shown inept, careless, accident-ridden, she might lose her charter, to the advantage of Dengue's company, and Dengue himself.

But Dengue seemed too obvious. Anyone could be responsible. Even little Lerner might have his motives. He really could trust no one. Perhaps he should even consider the natives and their magic—which might be unconscious manipulation, for all he knew.

He walked to the doorway and looked out on the scores of tents housing his city of workmen. Who was to blame? How could he find out?

From the hills he could hear the faint, clumsy drums of the planet's former owners. And in front of him, the jagged, ruined, avalanche-swept summit of the mountain without a name was still standing.

He didn't sleep well that night.

The next day, work went on as usual. The big conveyor trucks lined up, filled with chemicals for the fixation of the

nearby swamps. Dengue arrived, trim in khaki and officer's shirt.

"Say chief," he said, "I think I'll go along, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," Morrison said, checking out the trip slip.

"Thanks. I like this sort of operation," Dengue said, looking into the lead Trailbreaker beside the chartman.

"This operation makes me proud to be a human. We're

wasting swamp land, hundreds of square miles of it.

Fields of wheat will grow where only bul-rushes flourish.

"You've got the chart?" Morrison asked Rivera, the foreman.

"Here it is," Lerner said, giving it to Rivera.

"Yes," Dengue mused out loud, "Swamp into a miracle of science. And what a surprise it will be for the

swamp! Imagine the consternation of several hundred

fish, the amphibians, water fowl, and beasts of the forest.

They find that their watery paradise has suddenly solidified.

Literally solidified on them; a hard break. But, of course, it's a fertilizer for the wheat."

"All right, move out," Morrison called. Dengue and the convoy started. Rivera climbed into a truck.

The foreman, came by in his jeep.

"Wait a minute," Morrison said. He walked up to the jeep.

"You to keep an eye on Dengue."

Flynn looked blank. "Keep an eye on him?"

"That's right," Morrison rubbed his forehead.

Uncomfortably. "I'm not making any accusations, but there's too many accidents on this job. If someone looks bad—"

Flynn smiled wolfishly. "I'll watch him, boss. Don't worry."

This operation. Maybe he'll join his fishes in the swamp.

"No rough stuff," Morrison warned.

"Of course not. I understand you perfectly," the foreman swung into his jeep and roared to the front.

The procession of trucks churned dust for half an hour. The last of them was gone. Morrison returned to his progress reports.

But he found he was staring at the radio, waiting for Flynn to report. If only Dengue would do something! Nothing big, just enough to prove he was the man. Then Morrison would have every right to take him apart limb by limb.

It was two hours before the radio buzzed, and Morrison banged his knee answering it.

"This is Rivera. We've had some trouble, Mr. Morrison."

"Go on."

"The lead Trailbreaker must have got off course. Don't ask me how. I thought the chartman knew where he was going. He's paid enough."

"Come on, what happened?" Morrison shouted.

"Must have been going over a thin crust. Once the convoy was on it, the surface cracked. Mud underneath, super-saturated with water. Lost all but six trucks."

"Flynn?"

"We pontooned a lot of the men out, but Flynn didn't make it."

"All right," Morrison said heavily. "All right. Sit there. I'm sending the amphibians out for you. And listen. Keep hold of Dengue."

"That'll be sort of difficult," Rivera said.

"Why?"

"Well, you know, he was in that lead Trailbreaker. He never had a chance."

The men in the work camp were in a sullen, angry mood after their new losses, and badly in need of something tangible to strike at. They beat up a baker because his bread tasted funny, and almost lynched a water-control man because he was found near the big rigs, where he had no legitimate business. But this didn't satisfy them, and they began to glance toward the native village.

The stone-age savages had built a new settlement near the work camp, a cliff village of seers and warlocks assembled to curse the skyland demons. Their drums pounded day and night, and the men talked of blasting them out, just to shut them up.

Morrison pushed them on. Roads were constructed, and within a week they crumpled. Food seemed to spoil at an

alarming rate, and no one would eat the planet's meat. During a storm, lightning struck the generator plant, and lightning rods which Lerner had personally installed swept half the camp, and when the fire-control men found the water, they found the nearest streams had been diverted.

A second attempt was made to blow up the mountain, but this one succeeded only in jarring loose landslides. Five men had been holding an unauthorized meeting on a nearby slope, and they were caught beneath falling rocks. That, the explosions men refused to plant charges on. And the Earth office called again.

"But just exactly *what* is wrong, Morrison?" Mr. S.

"I tell you I don't know," Morrison said. After a moment he asked softly, "Is there any possibility of sabotage?"

"I guess so," Morrison said. "All this couldn't be explained. If someone wanted to, they could do a lot of damage by misguiding a convoy, tampering with charges, lousing up the lightning rods—" "Do you suspect anyone?"

"I have over five thousand men here," Morrison said. "I know that. Now listen carefully. The board of directors has granted you extraordinary powers in this emergency. Do anything you like to get the job done. Lock up half the natives. Wish. Blow the natives out of the hills, if you think it will do any good. Take any and all measures. No legal responsibility whatsoever. We're even prepared to pay a sizable bonus. I'll be completed."

"I know," Morrison said.

"Yes, but you don't know how important Work Order No. 1 is. In the strictest confidence, the company has received a number of setbacks elsewhere. There have been loss and damage to the planet uncovered by our insurance. We've sunk too much money to abandon it. You simply must carry it off." "I'll do my best," Morrison said, and signed off. That afternoon there was an explosion in the fuel dump.

Ten thousand gallons of D-12 were destroyed, and the fuel-dump guard was killed.

"You were pretty lucky," Morrison said, staring somberly at Lerner.

"I'll say," Lerner said, his face still gray and sweat-stained. Quickly he poured himself a drink. "If I had walked through there ten minutes later, I would have been in the soup. That's too close for comfort."

"Pretty lucky," Morrison said thoughtfully.

"Do you know," Lerner said, "I think the ground was hot when I walked past the dump? It didn't strike me until now. Could there be some sort of volcanic activity under the surface?"

"No," Morrison said. "Our geologists have charted every inch of this area. We're perched on solid granite."

"Hmm," Lerner said. "Morrie, I believe you should wipe out the natives. Why do that?"

"They're the only really uncontrolled factor. Everyone in the camp watching everyone else. It must be the natives! Psi ability has been proved, you know, and it's been shown more prevalent in primitives."

Morrison nodded. "Then you would say that the explosion was caused by poltergeist activity?"

Lerner frowned, watching Morrison's face. "Why not? It's worth looking into."

"And if they can polter," Morrison went on, "they can do anything else, can't they? Direct an explosion, lead a convoy astray—"

"I suppose they can, granting the hypothesis."

"Then what are they fooling around for?" Morrison asked. "If they can do all that, they could blow us off this planet without any trouble."

"They might have certain limitations," Lerner said.

"Nuts. Too complicated a theory. It's much simpler to assume that someone here doesn't want the job completed. Maybe he's been offered a million dollars by a rival company. Maybe he's a crank. But he'd have to be someone who gets

around. Someone who checks blast patterns, directs work parties—"

"Now just a minute! If you're implying—"

"I'm not implying a thing," Morrison said. "And if I'm implying injustice, I'm sorry." He stepped outside the tent to the workmen. "Lock him up somewhere, and make sure he stays up."

"You're exceeding your authority," Lerner said.

"Sure."

"And you're wrong. You're wrong about me, Morrie."

"In that case, I'm sorry." He motioned to the men and went back to Lerner out.

Two days later the avalanches began. The geologists didn't know why. They theorized that repeated demolitions had caused deep flaws in the bedrock, the flaws expanded, and the ground was anybody's guess.

Morrison tried grimly to push the work ahead, but it was beginning to get out of hand. Some of them were throwing flying objects, fiery hands in the sky, talking animals, and machines. They drew a lot of listeners. It was usual around the camp after dark. Self-appointed guards stood by, but that moved, and quite a number of things that didn't.

Morrison was not particularly surprised when, late one night, he found the work camp deserted. He had expected the men to move. He sat back in his tent and waited.

After a while Rivera came in and sat down. "Come on, no trouble," he said, lighting a cigarette.

"Whose trouble?"

"The natives. The boys are going up to that village."

Morrison nodded. "What started them?"

Rivera leaned back and exhaled smoke. "You know Charlie? The guy who's always praying? Well, he's one of those natives standing beside his tent. He said, 'You die, all of you Earthmen die.' And then he disappeared."

"In a cloud of smoke?" Morrison asked.

"Yeah," Rivera said, grinning. "I think there was smoke in it."

Morrison remembered the man. A perfect hysteric type. A classic case, Lerner pushed his way into Morrison's temporary quarters whose devil spoke conveniently in his own language, and from somewhere in the radio room of the flagship. "What's up?" he asked near enough to be destroyed.

"Tell me," Morrison asked, "are they going up there to destroy witches? Or volcanoes ten miles from here are erupting. The world reports a tidal wave coming that'll flood half this country."

Rivera thought it over for a while, then said, "Well, Mr. Morrison, I'd say shouldn't have earthquakes here, but I suppose you say they don't much care."

In the distance they heard a loud, reverberating boom.

"Did they take explosives?" Morrison asked.

"Don't know. I suppose they did."

It was ridiculous, he thought. Pure mob behavior. Dengue would grin and Rivera burst in. "Just two more sections to go," he reported. "When everyone's on a ship, let me know."

But Morrison found that he was glad his men had made the move. Latent psi "What's going on?" Lerner screamed. "Is this my fault?" "I'm sorry about that," Morrison said.

Half an hour later, the first men straggled in, walking slowly, not talking to each other. "Got something," the radioman said. "Hold on."

"Well?" Morrison asked. "Did you get them all?"

"No sir," a man said. "We didn't even get near them."

"What happened?" Morrison asked, feeling a touch of panic.

More of his men arrived. They stood silently, not looking at each other.

"What happened?" Morrison shouted.

"We didn't even get near them," a man said. "We got about halfway there. ocean beach, the super-jellyfish which called itself that, because of its convoluted gray brain, it was the"

Then there was another landslide.

"Were any of you hurt?"

"No sir. It didn't come near us. But it buried their village."

"That's bad," Morrison said softly.

"Yes sir." The men stood in quiet groups, looking at him.

"What do we do now, sir?"

Morrison shut his eyes tightly for a moment, then said, "Get back to your numbers past all reason, the spaceborn jellyfish hid the green grass under a concrete apron. And then the worlds, and there he did destroy mountains, build up"

They melted into the darkness. Rivera looked questioningly at him. Morrison whole forests, redirect rivers, melt ice caps, mold oceans, new seas, and in these and other ways did deface the earth which, next to the stars, are nature's noblest work. No

He had a suspicion that something was coming, so the tornado that burst and stood slow, but very sure. So inevitably there came a time over the camp half an hour later didn't take him completely by surprise. He was had enough of the presumptuous jellyfish, and his godhood. And therefore, the time came when a great skin he pierced rejected him, cast him out, spit him forth the day the jelly-



fish found, to his amazement, that he had lived all his days in the sufferance of powers past his conception, upon an exact par with the creatures of plain and swamp, no worse than the flowers, no better than the weeds, and that it made no difference to the universe whether he lived or died, and all his vaunted record of works done was no more than the tracks an insect leaves in the sand."

"What is it?" Lerner begged.

"I think the planet didn't want us any more," Morrison said. "I think it had enough."

"I got Earth!" the radio operator called. "Go ahead, Morrie."

"Shotwell? Listen, we can't stick it out," Morrison said into the receiver. "I'm getting my men out of here while there's still time. I can't explain it to you now—I don't know if I'll ever be able to—"

"The planet can't be used at all?" Shotwell asked.

"No. Not a chance. Sir; I hope this doesn't jeopardize the firm's standing—"

"Oh, to hell with the firm's standing," Mr. Shotwell said. "It's just that—you don't know what's been going on here, Morrison. You know our Gobi project? In ruins, every bit of it. And it's not just us. I don't know, I just don't know. You'll have to excuse me, I'm not speaking coherently, but ever since Australia sank—"

"What?"

"Yes, sank, sank I tell you. Perhaps we should have suspected something with the hurricanes. But then the earth-quakes—but we just don't know any more."

"But Mars? Venus? Alpha Centauri?"

"The same everywhere. But we can't be through, can we, Morrison? I mean, Mankind—"

"Hello, hello," Morrison called: "What happened?" he asked the operator.

"They conked out," the operator said. "I'll try again."

"Don't bother," Morrison said. Just then Rivera dashed in.

"Got every last man on board," he said. "The ports are sealed. We're all set to go, Mr. Morrison."

They were all looking at him. Morrison slumped back in his chair and grinned helplessly.

"We're all set," he said. "But where shall we go?"

## The Accountant

Mr. Dee was seated in the big armchair, his belt loose, his evening papers strewn around his knees. Peacefully he smoked his pipe, and considered how wonderful the world was. He had sold two amulets and a philter; his wife was bustling in the kitchen, preparing a delicious meal; and his pipe was smoking. With a sigh of contentment, Mr. Dee yawned and stretched.

Morton, his nine-year-old son, hurried across the hall, laden down with books.

"How'd school go today?" Mr. Dee called.

"O.K.," the boy said, slowing down, but still moving. He was in his room.

"What have you got there?" Mr. Dee asked, getting up. He saw his son's tall pile of books.

"Just some more accounting stuff," Morton said, hurrying. He hurried into his room.

Mr. Dee shook his head. Somewhere, the lad had had the notion that he wanted to be an accountant. An accountant. Morton was quick with figures; but he would have been a nonsense. Bigger things were in store for him.

The doorbell rang.

Mr. Dee tightened his belt, hastily stuffed in his shirt, and opened the front door. There stood Miss Greeb, his son's teacher.

"Come in, Miss Greeb," said Dee. "Can I offer you anything?"

"I have no time," said Miss Greeb. She stood in the doorway with her arms akimbo. With her gray, tangled hair, her tired face and red runny eyes, she looked exactly like

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a witch. And this was as it should be, for Miss Greeb *was* a witch.

"I've come to speak to you about your son," she said.

At this moment Mrs. Dee hurried out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron.

"I hope he hasn't been naughty," Mrs. Dee said anxiously.

Miss Greeb sniffed ominously. "Today I gave the yearly tests. Your son failed miserably."

"Oh dear," Mrs. Dee said. "It's Spring. Perhaps—"

"Spring has nothing to do with it," said Miss Greeb. "Last week I assigned the Greater Spells of Cordus, section one. You know how easy *they* are. He didn't learn a single one."

"Hm," said Mr. Dee succinctly.

"In Biology, he doesn't have the slightest notion which are the basic conjuring herbs. Not the slightest."

"This is unthinkable," said Mr. Dee.

Miss Greeb laughed sourly. "Moreover, he has forgotten all the Secret Alphabet which he learned in third grade. He has forgotten the Protective Formula, forgotten the names of the 99 lesser imps of the Third Circle, forgotten what little he knew of the Geography of Greater Hell. And what's more, he doesn't want to learn."

Mr. and Mrs. Dee looked at each other silently. This was very serious indeed. A certain amount of boyish inattentive-ness was allowable; encouraged, even, for it showed spirit. But a child *had* to learn the basics, if he ever hoped to become a full-fledged wizard.

"I can tell you right here and now," said Miss Greeb, "if this were the old days, I'd flunk him without another thought. But there are so few of us left."

Mr. Dee nodded sadly. Witchcraft had been steadily declining over the centuries. The old families died out, or were snatched by demoniac forces, or became scientists. And the fickle public showed no interest whatsoever in the charms and enchantments of ancient days.

Now, only a scattered handful possessed the Old Lore, guarding it, teaching it in places like Miss Greeb's private school for the children of wizards. It was a heritage, a sacred trust.

"It's this accounting nonsense," said Miss Greeb. "I don't

know where he got the notion." She stared accusingly.

"And I don't know why it wasn't nipped in the bud when his cheeks grow hot."

"But I do know this. As long as Morton has the attention, he can't give his attention to Thaumaturgy."

Mr. Dee looked away from the witch's reproach. It was his fault. He should never have brought home the adding machine. And when he first saw Morton perched at the double-entry bookkeeping, he should have burned it.

But how could he know it would grow into an obsession? He smoothed out her apron, and said, "Miss Greeb, you have our complete confidence. What would you have me do?"

"All I can do I have done," said Miss Greeb. "The remaining thing is to call up Boarbas, the Demon of the Kitchen."

And that, naturally, is up to you."

"Oh, I don't think it's that serious yet," Mr. Dee said. "Calling up Boarbas is a serious measure."

"As I said, that's up to you," Miss Greeb said. "You may or not, as you see fit. As things stand now, you're a wizard."

She turned and started to leave. "Won't you stay for a cup of tea?" Mrs. Dee asked.

Mr. Dee must attend a Witch's Coven in Cincinnati. He bowed to Miss Greeb, and vanished in a puff of orange smoke.

Mr. Dee fanned the smoke with his hands and coughed. "Phew," he said. "You'd think she'd use a perfume bottle."

"She's old-fashioned," Mrs. Dee murmured. They had waited for the door in silence. Mr. Dee was just beginning to open it.

It was hard to believe that his son, his own flesh and blood, didn't want to carry on the family tradition. It was true!

"After dinner," Dee said, finally, "I'll have a roast with him. I'm sure we won't need any demoniac intervention."

"Good," Mrs. Dee said. "I'm sure you can handle it." She smiled, and Dee caught a glimmer of witch-light flickering behind her eyes.

"My roast!" Mrs. Dee gasped suddenly, the witch's face before her. She hurried back to her kitchen.

Dinner was a quiet meal. Morton knew that Miss Greeb had been there, and he ate in guilty silence, glancing occasionally at his father. Mr. Dee sliced and served the roast, frowning deeply. Mrs. Dee didn't even attempt any small talk. After bolting his dessert, the boy hurried to his room.

"Now we'll see," Mr. Dee said to his wife. He finished the last of his coffee, wiped his mouth and stood up. "I am going to reason with him now. Where is my Amulet of Persuasion?"

Mrs. Dee thought deeply for a moment. Then she walked across the room to the bookcase. "Here it is," she said, lifting it from the pages of a brightly jacketed novel. "I was using it as a marker."

Mr. Dee slipped the amulet into his pocket, took a deep breath, and entered his son's room.

Morton was seated at his desk. In front of him was a note-book, scribbled with figures and tiny, precise notations. On his desk were six carefully sharpened pencils, a soap eraser, an abacus and a toy adding machine. His books hung precariously over the edge of the desk; there was *Money*, by Rimraamer, *Bank Accounting Practice*, by Johnson and Calhoun, *Ellman's Studies for the CPA*, and a dozen others.

Mr. Dee pushed aside a mound of clothes and made room for himself on the bed. "How's it going, son?" he asked, in his kindest voice.

"Fine, Dad," Morton answered eagerly. "I'm up to chapter four in *Basic Accounting*, and I answered all the questions—"

"Son," Dee broke in, speaking very softly, "how about your regular homework?" Morton looked uncomfortable and scuffed his feet on the floor.

"You know, not many boys have a chance to become wizards in this day and age."

"Yes sir, I know," Morton looked away abruptly. In a high, nervous voice he said, "But Dad, I want to be an accountant. I really do. Dad."

Mr. Dee shook his head. "Morton, there's always been a wizard in our family. For eighteen hundred years, the Dees have been famous in supernatural circles."

Morton continued to look out the window and smiled sadly. "You wouldn't want to disappoint me, would you?" "You know, anyone can be an adept, but only a chosen few can master the Black Arts."

Morton turned away from the window. He picked up the point, and began to turn it slowly in his fingers.

"How about it, boy? Won't you work harder for me?" Morton shook his head. "I want to be an accountant, not a wizard."

"Wrong with the Amulet of Persuasion? Could the amulet be recharged? He should have recharged it. Nevertheless—"

"Morton," he said in a husky voice, "I'm only a wizard, you know. My parents were very powerful wizards. They couldn't send me to The University."

"I know," Morton said. "I want you to have all the things I never had. I want to be a First Degree Adept."

He shook his head. "I want to be a First Degree Adept. It can be difficult. But your mother and I have a little plan."

"We'll scrape the rest together somehow." Morton was biting his lip and turning the pencil in his fingers.

"How about it, son? You know, as a First Degree Adept, you won't have to work in a store. You can be a Direct Agent."

"Black One. A Direct Agent! What do you say, boy?" For a moment, Dee thought his son was moved.

They were parted, and there was a suspicious brightness in Morton's eyes.

But then the boy glanced at his accounting books, his abacus, his toy adding machine.

"I'm going to be an accountant," he said. "We'll be accountants."

He shouted, all patience gone. "You will *not* be a wizard. You will be a wizard. It was good enough for your family, and by all that's damnable, it'll be good for you. You haven't heard the last of this, young man."

He stormed out of the room.

Immediately, Morton returned to his accounting books.

Mr. and Mrs. Dee sat together on the couch, not talking. Mrs. Dee was busily knitting a wind-cord, but her mind wasn't on it. Mr. Dee stared moodily at a worn spot on the living room rug.

Finally, Dee said, "I've spoiled him. Boarbas is the only solution."

"Oh, no," Mrs. Dee said hastily. "He's so young."

"Do you want your son to be an accountant?" Mr. Dee asked bitterly. "Do you want him to grow up scribbling with figures instead of doing The Black One's important work?"

"Of course not," said Mrs. Dee. "But Boarbas—"

"I know. I feel like a murderer already."

They thought for a few moments. Then Mrs. Dee said, "Perhaps his grandfather can do something. He was always fond of the boy."

"Perhaps he can," Mr. Dee said thoughtfully. "But I don't know if we should disturb him. After all, the old gentleman has been dead for three years."

"I know," Mrs. Dee said, undoing an incorrect knot in the wind-cord. "But it's either that or Boarbas."

Mr. Dee agreed. Unsettling as it would be to Morton's grandfather, Boarbas was infinitely worse. Immediately, Dee made preparations for calling up his dead father.

He gathered together the henbane, the ground unicorn's horn, the hemlock, together with a morsel of dragon's tooth. These he placed on the rug.

"Where's my wand?" he asked his wife.

"I put it in the bag with your golfsticks," she told him.

Mr. Dee got his wand and waved it over the ingredients. He muttered the words of The Unbinding, and called out his father's name.

Immediately a wisp of smoke arose from the rug.

"Hello, Grandpa Dee," Mrs. Dee said.

"Dad, I'm sorry to disturb you," Mr. Dee said. "But my son—your grandson—refuses to become a wizard. He wants to be an—accountant."

The wisp of smoke trembled, then straightened out and described a character of the Old Language.

"Yes," Mr. Dee said. "We tried persuasion."

Again the smoke trembled, and formed another character.

"I suppose that's best," Mr. Dee said. "If you forget him of his wits once and for all, he'll forget this account."

The wisp of smoke nodded, and streamed toward Morton's room. Mr. and Mrs. Dee sat down on the couch.

The door of Morton's room was slammed open, and a gigantic wind. Morton looked up, frowned, and returned to his books.

The wisp of smoke turned into a winged lion with a shark. It roared hideously, crouched, snarled, and waited for a spring.

Morton glanced at it, raised both eyebrows, and then jotted down a column of figures.

The lion changed into a three-headed lizard, its mouth horribly of blood. Breathing gusts of fire, the lizard waited for the boy.

Morton finished adding the column of figures, the result on his abacus, and looked at the lizard.

With a screech, the lizard changed into a giant gnat that fluttered around the boy's head, moaning and gibbering.

Morton grinned, and turned back to his books. Mr. Dee waited and stand it any longer. "Damn it," he shouted, "aren't you?"

"Why should I be?" Morton asked. "It's only grandfather."

The word, the bat dissolved into a plume of smoke. It nipped at Mr. Dee, bowed to Mrs. Dee, and vanished.

"Goodbye, Granpa," Morton called. He got up and closed the door.

"That does it," Mr. Dee said. "The boy is too stubborn for himself. We must call up Boarbas."

"No!" his wife said.

"What, then?"

"I just don't know any more," Mrs. Dee said, with a few tears. "You *know* what Boarbas does to children. It's the same afterwards."

Mr. Dee's face was hard as granite. "I know. It can't be helped."

"He's so young!" Mrs. Dee wailed. "It—it will be trau-matic!"

"If so, we will use all the resources of modern psychology to heal him," Mr. Dee said soothingly. "He will have the best psychoanalysts money can buy. But the boy must be a wizard!"

"Go ahead then," Mrs. Dee said, crying openly. "But please don't ask me to assist you."

How like a woman, Dee thought. Always turning into jelly at the moment when firmness was indicated. With a heavy heart, he made the preparations for calling up Boarbas, Demon of Children.

First came the intricate sketching of the pentagon, the twelve-pointed star within it, and the endless spiral within that. Then came the herbs and essences; expensive items, but abso-lutely necessary for the conjuring. Then came the inscribing of the Protective Spell, so that Boarbas might not break loose and destroy them all. Then came the three drops of hippo-griff blood—

"Where is my hippogriff blood?" Mr. Dee asked, rummag-ing through the living room cabinet.

"In the kitchen, in the aspirin bottle," Mrs. Dee said, wiping her eyes.

Dee found it, and then all was in readiness. He lighted the black candles and chanted the Unlocking Spell.

The room was suddenly very warm, and there remained only the Naming of Name.

"Morton," Mr. Dee called. "Come here."

Morton opened the door and stepped out, holding one of his accounting books tightly, looking very young and defenceless.

"Morton, I am about to call up the Demon of Children. Don't make me do it, Morton."

The boy turned pale and shrank back against the door. But stubbornly he shook his head.

"Very well," Mr. Dee said. "BOARBAS!"

There was an ear-splitting clap of thunder and a wave of heat, and Boarbas appeared, as tall as the ceiling, chuckling evilly.

"Ah!" cried Boarbas, in a voice that shook the boy.

"A naughty little boy," Boarbas said, and laughed, marching forward, shaking the house with every step.

"Send him away!" Mrs. Dee cried.

"I can't," Dee said, his voice breaking. "I can't until he's finished."

The demon's great horned hands reached for the accounting book. Quickly the boy opened the accounting book. The demon screamed.

In that instant, a tall, terribly thin old man appeared with worn pen points and ledger sheets, his eyes zeroes.

"Zico Pico Reel!" chanted Boarbas, turning to the newcomer. But the thin old man laughed.

But the thin old man laughed, contract of a corporation which is *ultra vires* only, but utterly void."

At these words, Boarbas was flung back, breaking the floor. He scrambled to his feet, his skin glowing.

he fell.- He scrambled to his feet, his skin glowing.

the words of Dissolution. "Expiration, Repentance, Surrender, Abandonment and Death!"

Boarbas squeaked in agony. Hastily he backed into the air until he found The Opening. He jumped and was gone.

The tall, thin old man turned to Mr. and Mrs. Dee, a corner of the living room, and said, "Know me, Accountant. And Know, Moreover, that this Contract is Compact with Me, to enter My Apprenticeship as Servant. And in return for Services Rendered, I am teaching him the Damnation of Souls, by means of them in a cursed web of Figures, Forms, Torts and Contracts. behold, this is My Mark upon him!" The Accountant took Morton's right hand, and showed the ink smudge on his finger.

He turned to Morton, and in a softer voice said, "Morton, you are now a wizard."

row, lad, we will consider some aspects of Income Tax Evasion as a Path to Hunting Problem Damnation."

"Yes *sir*," Morton said eagerly.

And with another sharp look at the Dees, The Accountant vanished.

For long seconds there was silence. Then Dee turned to his wife.

"Well," Dee said, "if the boy wants to be an accountant *that* badly, I'm sure I'm not going to stand in his way."

It was the last troop meeting before the big Scout and all the patrols had turned out. Patrol 22—Falcon Patrol—was camped in a shady hollow under a tentacle pull. The Brave Bison Patrol, number 31, was around a little stream. The Bisons were practicing drinking liquids, and laughing excitedly at the odd

And the Charging Mirash Patrol, number 19, was with Scouter Drog, who was late as usual.

Drog hurtled down from the ten-thousand-foot level, solid, and hastily crawled into the circle of scouters. He said, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize what time—"

The Patrol Leader glared at him. "You're out of time, Drog."

"Sorry, sir," Drog said, hastily extruding a tentacle forgotten.

The others giggled. Drog blushed a dim orange. He was invisible.

But it wouldn't be proper right now.

"I will open our meeting with the Scouter Creed," the Patrol Leader said. He cleared his throat. "We, the Young Scouts of planet Elbonai, pledge to perpetuate the skills and traditions of our pioneering ancestors. For that purpose, we shall shape our forebears were born to when they came to the virgin wilderness of Elbonai. We hereby resolve—"

Scouter Drog adjusted his hearing receptors to the Patrol Leader's soft voice. The Creed always thrilled him. He wanted to believe that his ancestors had once been earthlings. But the Elbonai were aerial beings, maintaining only the

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minimum of body, fueling by cosmic radiation at the twenty-thousand-foot level, 482-W, and he came upon a pride of three Mirash. Sensing by direct perception, coming down only for sentimental or sacramental and therefore huntable. I want you, Drog, to track them for purposes. They had come a long way since the Age of Pioneering. The modern to stalk them, using Forest and Mountain Lore. The world had begun with the Age of Submolecular Control, which was followed by only pioneering tools and methods, I want you to use the present age of Direct Control.

"... honesty and fair play," the Leader was saying. "And we further resolve to 'I know I can, sir!'" Drog said. "Go at once," the Leader said. "We will fasten our tools and methods." Drog's flagstaff. We will undoubtedly be commended.

The invocation completed, the youngsters scattered around the plain. The Jam-boree. Patrol Leader came up to Drog.

"This is the last meeting before the Jamboree," the Leader said.

"I know," Drog said.

"And you are the only second-class scouter in the Charging Mirash Patrol. All the others are first-class, or at least Junior Pioneers. What will people think about our patrol?" A few minutes later, he had levitated himself to the area of S-233 by 482-W. It was a wild and romantic area of jagged rocks and scrubby trees, thick undergrowth, valleys, snow on the peaks. Drog looked around.

Drog squirmed uncomfortably. "It isn't entirely my fault," he said. "I know I failed the tests in swimming and bomb making, but those just aren't my skills. It isn't fair to expect me to know everything. Even among the pioneers there were specialists. No one was expected to know all—"

"And just what are your skills?" the Leader interrupted.

"Forest and Mountain Lore," Drog answered eagerly. "Tracking and hunting, particularly skilled in anything except dreaming." The fact of the matter was, he wasn't particularly good at Forest and Mountain Lore, hunting or tracking.

## A Thief in Time

Thomas Eldridge was all alone in his room in Butler Hall when he heard the faint scraping noise behind him. It barely registered on his consciousness. He was studying the Holstead equations, which had caused such a stir a few years ago, with their hint of a non-Relativity universe. They were a disturbing set of symbols, even though their conclusions had been proved quite fallacious.

Still, if one examined them without preconceptions, they seemed to prove something. There was a strange relationship of temporal elements, with interesting force-applications. There was—he heard the noise again and turned his head.

Standing in back of him was a large man dressed in balloon-ing purple trousers, a little green vest and a porous silver shirt. He was carrying a square black machine with several dials and he looked decidedly unfriendly.

They stared at each other. For a moment, Eldridge thought it was a fraternity prank. He was the youngest associate professor at Carvell Tech, and some student was always handing him a hard-boiled egg or a live toad during Hell Week.

But this man was no giggling student. He was at least fifty years old and unmistakably hostile.

"How'd you get in here?" Eldridge demanded. "And what do you want?"

The man raised an eyebrow. "Going to brazen it out, eh?"

"Brazen what out?" Eldridge asked, startled.

"This is Viglin you're talking to," the man said. "*Viglin*. Remember?"

Eldridge tried to remember if there were any insane asylums near Carvell. This Viglin looked like an escaped lunatic.

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"You must have the wrong man," Eldridge said, should call for help.

Viglin shook his head. "You are Thomas Monroe," said. "Born March 16, 1926, in Darien, Connecticut. University Heights College, New York University, *laude*. Received a fellowship to Carvell last year. Correct so far?"

"All right, so you did a little research on me for better be a good one or I call the cops."

"You always were a cool customer. But the bluff v call the police."

He pressed a button on the machine. Instantly appeared in the room. They wore light-weight uniforms, with metallic insignia on the sleeves. Bet carried a black machine similar to Viglin's except t stenciling on its top.

"Crime does not pay," Viglin said. "Arrest that thief." For a moment, Eldridge's pleasant college room, prints, its untidy piles of books, its untidier hi-fi, and red rug, seemed to spin dizzily around him. He blinked hoping that the whole thing had been induced b better yet, perhaps he had been dreaming.

But Viglin was still there, dismayingly substantial.

The two policemen produced a pair of handcuffs forward.

"Wait!" Eldridge shouted, leaning against his desk. "What's this all about?"

"If you insist on formal charges," Viglin said, "I'll file them." He cleared his throat. "Thomas Eldridge, in M invented the Eldridge Traveler. Then—"

"Hold on!" Eldridge protested. "It isn't 1962 y didn't know."

Viglin looked annoyed. "Don't quibble. You Traveler in 1962, if you prefer that phrasing. It's temporal viewpoint."

It took Eldridge a moment to digest this.

"Do you mean—you are from the future?" he blurted.

One of the policemen nudged the other. "What admiringly."

"Better than a groogly show," the other agreed, clicking his handcuffs. "Imagine a famous guy like this being a crook."

"Of course we're from the future," Viglin said. "Where else would we be from?" In policemen said.

1962, you did—or will—invent the Eldridge Time Traveler, thus making time travel possible. With it, you journeyed into the first sector of the future, where you were "Remember the stuggie dancer who killed the received with highest honors. Then you traveled through the three sectors of genius, the readies said."

Civilized Time, lecturing. You were a hero, Eldridge, an ideal. Little children wanted to "Yeah." The first policeman lighted a cigar and grow up to be like you."

With a husky voice, Viglin continued. "We were deceived. Suddenly and All right, Eldridge decided, it was true. He deliberately, you stole a quantity of valuable goods. It was shocking! We had never circum-stances, he had to believe. Nor was it so suspected you of criminal tendencies. When we tried to arrest you, you vanished." always suspected that he might be a genius.

Viglin paused and rubbed his forehead wearily. "I was your friend, Tom, the first But what had happened? person you met in Sector One. We drank many a bowl of flox together. I arranged In 1962, he would invent a time machine. your lecture tour. And you robbed me."

His face hardened. "Take him, officers."

As the policemen moved forward, Eldridge had a good look at the black machine Time. they shared. Like Viglin's, it had several dials and a row of push buttons. Stamped in white across the top were the words: eldridge time traveler—property of THE EASKILL POLICE DEPT.

The policeman stopped and turned to Viglin. "You got the extradition papers?"

Viglin searched his pockets. "Don't seem to have them on me. But you *know* he's a thief!"

"Everybody knows that," the policeman said. "But we got no jurisdiction in a pre-contact sector without extradition papers."

"Wait here," Viglin said. "I'll get them." He examined his wristwatch carefully, muttered something about a half-hour gap, and pressed a button on the Traveler. Immediately, he was gone.

The two policemen sat down on Eldridge's couch and proceeded to ogle the Gauguins.

Eldridge tried to think, to plan, to anticipate. Impossible. He could not believe it. He refused to believe it. No one could make him believe—

"Imagine a famous guy like this being a crook."

"All geniuses are crazy," the other

"Remember the stuggie dancer who killed the

"Yeah." The first policeman lighted a cigar

burned match on Eldridge's shaggy little red rug

And he would travel through the three sectors

Time.

Well, certainly, assuming he had a time machine

three sectors, he would explore them.

He might even explore the uncivilized sectors.

And then, without warning, he became a

No! He could accept everything else,

com-pletely out of character. Eldridge was an i

young man, quite above even petty dishonestie

he had never cheated at exams. As a man, he

true and proper income tax, down to the last per

And it went deeper than that. Eldridge had

no urge for possessions. His desire had always

some warm, drowsy country, content with his b

sunshine, congenial neighbors, the love of a go

So he was accused of theft. Even if he w

con-ceivable motive could have prompted the a

What had happened to him in the future? "You

scrug rally?" one of the cops asked the other.

"Why not? It comes on Malm Sunday, doesn't i

pare. When Viglin returned, they would hand-cu

him to Sector One of the future. He would be se

thrown into a cell.

All for a crime he was *going* to commit.

He made a swift decision and acted on it quickly



"I feel faint," he said, and began to topple out of his chair. "Look out—he may have a gun!" one of the policemen yelled. They rushed over to him, leaving their time machine on the couch.

Eldridge scuttled around the other side of the desk and pounced on the machine. Even in his haste, he realized that Sector One would be an unhealthy place for him. So, as the policemen sprinted across the room, he pushed the button marked Sector Two.

Instantly, he was plunged into darkness.

When he opened his eyes, Eldridge found that he was standing ankle-deep in a pool of dirty water. He was in a field, twenty feet from a road. The air was warm and moist. The Time Traveler was clasped tightly under his arm. He was in Sector Two of the future and it didn't thrill him a bit.

He walked to the road. On either side of it were terraced fields, filled with green stalks of rice plants.

Rice? In New York State? Eldridge remembered that in his own time sector, a climatic shift had been detected. It was predicted that someday the temperate zones would be hot, perhaps tropical. This future seemed to prove the theory. He was perspiring already. The ground was damp, as though from a recent rain, and the sky was an intense, unclouded blue. But where were the farmers? Squinting at the sun directly overhead, he had the answer. At siesta, of course.

Looking down the road, he could see buildings half a mile away. He scraped mud from his shoes and started walking. But what would he do when he reached the buildings? How could he discover what had happened to him in Sector One? He couldn't walk up to someone and say, "Excuse me, sir. I'm from 1954, a year you may have heard about. It seems that in some way or—" No, that would never do.

He would think of something. Eldridge continued walking, while the sun beat down fiercely upon him. He shifted the Traveler to his other arm, then looked at it closely. Since he

was going to invent it—no, already had—he'd how it worked.

On its face were buttons for the first three Civilized Time. There was a special dial for jumping to the Uncivilized Sectors. In one corner was a metal plate, which read: caution: *Allow at least a week between time jumps, to avoid cancelation.*

That didn't tell him much. According to Vigilante, Eldridge had been in Sector Two for eight years—from 1954 to 1962—without understanding it.

Eldridge reached the buildings and found the good-sized town. A few people were on the streets, slowly under the tropical sun. They were dressed in white. He was pleased to see that styles in Sector Two were so conservative that his suit could pass for a rural dress. Their dress.

He passed a large adobe building. The sign in front of it read: PUBLIC READERY.

A library. Eldridge stopped. Within would be the records of the past few hundred years. There would be an account of his crime—if any—and the circumstances under which he had committed it.

But would he be safe? Were there any circulating records of his arrest? Was there an extradition between Sector Two and the present?

He would have to chance it. Eldridge entered, past the thin, gray-faced librarian, and into the study. There was a large section on time, but the one-volume treatment was a book called *Origins of Time* by Ricardo Alfredex. The first part told how the idea had, one fateful day in 1954, received its name from the controversial Holstead equation. The idea was really absurdly simple—Alfredex quoted the first proposition—but no one ever had realized it. Eldridge's genius lay chiefly in perceiving the obvious.

Eldridge frowned at this disparagement. Obviously, he still didn't understand it. And *he* was the inventor. By 1962, the machine had been built. It worked o

first trial, catapulting its young inventor into what became known as Sector One. Eldridge embarked on his career of crime, stealing from

Eldridge looked up and found that a bespectacled girl of nine or so was standing "Sir!" the librarian said. "Deaf or not, you are at the end of his row of books, staring at him. She ducked back out of sight. He read on. Otherwise I will call a guard."

on. Eldridge put down the book, muttered, "Tat on. The next chapter was entitled "Unparadox of Time." Eldridge skimmed it rapidly. little girl, and hurried out of the Readery.

The author began with the classic paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, and Now he knew why Viglin was so eager to a demolished it with integral calculus. Using this as a logical foundation, he went on to the case still pending, Eldridge would be in the so-called time paradoxes—killing one's great-great grandfather, meeting oneself, position behind bars.

and the like. These held up no better than Zeno's ancient paradox. Alfredex went on But why had he stolen? The theft of his invention was an understanding to explain that all temporal paradoxes were the inventions of authors with a gift for confusion. but Eldridge felt certain it was not the right one.

Eldridge didn't understand the intricate symbolic logic in this part, which was Viglin would not make him feel any better nor was embarrassing, since *he* was cited as the leading authority. wrong. His reaction would be either to fight or to

The next chapter was called "Fall of the Mighty." It told how Eldridge had met retire from the whole mess. Anything except stealing. Viglin, the owner of a large sporting-goods store in Sector One. They became fast Well, he would find out. He would hide in his friends. The businessman took the shy young genius under his wing. He arranged per-haps find work. Bit by bit, he would— lecture tours for him. Then—

"I beg your pardon, sir," someone said. Eldridge looked up. The gray-faced Traveler away from him. It was done so smoothly. The librarian was standing in front of him. Beside her was the bespectacled little girl with was still gasping when one of the men showed a smug grin on her face.

"Yes?" Eldridge asked. "Police," the man said. "You'll have to come with me."

"Time Travelers are not allowed in the Readery," the librarian said sternly. "What for?" Eldridge asked.

That was understandable, Eldridge thought. Travelers could grab an armload of "Robbery in Sectors One and Two." valuable books and disappear. They probably weren't allowed in banks, either. So he had stolen here, too.

The trouble was, he didn't dare surrender this book. He was taken to the police station and a cluttered office of the captain of police. The captain

Eldridge smiled, tapped his ear, and hastily went on reading. He was balding, cheerful-faced man. He waved his subordinate the room, motioned Eldridge to a chair and began to read. Eldridge

It seemed that the brilliant young Eldridge had allowed Viglin to arrange all his contracts and papers. One day he found, to his surprise, that he had signed over all the rights in the Time Traveler to Viglin, for a small monetary consideration. Eldridge brought the case to court. The court found against him. The case was appealed. "So you're Eldridge," he said. Penniless and embittered, Eld-

Eldridge nodded morosely.

"Been reading about you ever since I was a captain said nostalgically. "You were one of my best."

Eldridge guessed the captain to be a good friend senior, but he didn't ask about it. After all, *he* was the expert on time paradoxes.

"Always thought you got a rotten deal," the captain said. "Still, I was toying with a large bronze paperweight. "Still, I

stand a man like you stealing. For a while, we thought it might have been temporary insanity."

"Was it?" Eldridge asked hopefully.

"Not a chance. Checked your records. You just haven't got the potentiality. And that makes it rather difficult for me. For example, why did you steal *those* particular items?"

"What items?"

"Don't you remember?"

"I—I've blanked out," Eldridge said. "Temporary amnesia."

"Very understandable," the captain said sympathetically. He handed Eldridge a paper. "Here's the list."

ITEMS STOLEN BY THOMAS MONROE ELDRIDGE *Taken from Viglin's Sporting Goods Store, Sector One:*

Credits

4 Megacharge Hand Pistols.....10,000

3 Lifebelts, Inflatable..... 100

5 Cans, Ollen's Shark Repellant..... 400

*Taken from Alfghan's Specialty Shop, Sector One:*

2 Microflex Sets, World Literature..... 1,000

5 Teeny-Tom Symphonic Tape Runs..... 2,650

*Taken from Loorie's Produce*

*Store, Sector Two:*

4 Dozen Potatoes, White Turtle Brand..... 5

9 Packages, Carrot Seeds (Fancy)..... 6

*Taken from Manori's Notions Store, Sector Two:*

5 Dozen Mirrors, Silver-backed (hand size)..... 95

Total Value.....14,256

"What does it mean?" the captain asked. "Stealing a million credits outright, I could understand, but why all that junk?"

Eldridge shook his head. He could find nothing meaningful in the list. The megacharge hand pistols sounded useful. But why the mirrors, lifebelts, potatoes and the rest of the things that the captain had properly called junk?

It just didn't sound like himself. Eldridge began to see himself as two people. Eldridge I had invented himself as a victimized, stolen some incomprehensible

Andvanished. Eldridge II was himself, the person who had no memory of the first Eldridge. But he had no memory of the first Eldridge's motives and/or suffer for his crimes.

"What happened after I stole these things?" Eldridge asked.

"That's what we'd like to know," the captain said. "You know is, you fled into Sector Three with your loot."

"And then?"

The captain shrugged. "When we applied for your release, the authorities told us you weren't there. Not that they gave you up. They're a proud, independent sector. Anyhow, you'd vanished."

"Vanished? To where?"

"I don't know. You might have gone into the Uncivilized Sectors that lie beyond Sector Three."

"What are the Uncivilized Sectors?" Eldridge asked.

"We were hoping you would tell us," the captain said.

"You're the only man who's explored beyond Sector Three."

Damn it, Eldridge thought, he was supposed to be an authority on everything he wanted to know!

"This puts me in a pretty fix," the captain said, squint-ing at his paperweight.

"Why?"

"Well, you're a thief. The law says I must arrest you. How-ever, I am also aware that you got a very good education. And I happen to know that you stole only from the poor."

And I happen to know that you stole only from the poor. I affiliates in both Sectors. There's a certain amount of law, unfortunately unrecognized by law."

Eldridge nodded unhappily.

"It's my clear duty to arrest you," the captain said with a deep sigh. "There's nothing I can do about it, except to stand trial and probably serve twenty years or so."

"What? For stealing rubbish like shark repellent?"

"We're pretty rough on time theft," said the captain. "Temporal offense."

"I see," Eldridge said, slumping in his chair.

"Of course," said the captain thoughtfully, "if you should suddenly turn vicious, knock me over the head with this heavy paperweight, grab my personal Time Traveler—which I keep in the second shelf of that cabinet—and return to your friends in Sector Three, there would really be nothing I could do about it."

"Huh?"

The captain turned toward the window, leaving his paper-weight within Eldridge's easy reach.

"It's really terrible," he commented, "the things one will consider doing for a boyhood hero. But, of course, you're a law-abiding man. You would never do such a thing and I have psychological reports to prove it."

"Thanks," Eldridge said. He lifted the paperweight and tapped the captain lightly over the head. Smiling, the captain slumped behind his desk. Eldridge found the Traveler in the cabinet, and set it for Sector Three. He sighed deeply and pushed the button.

Again he was overcome by darkness.

When he opened his eyes, he was standing on a plain of parched yellow ground. Around him stretched a treeless waste, and a dusty wind blew in his face. Ahead, he could see several brick buildings and a row of tents, built along the side of a dried-out gully. He walked toward them.

This future, he decided, must have seen another climatic shift. The fierce sun had baked the land, drying up the streams and rivers. If the trend continued, he could understand why the next future was Uncivilized. It was probably Unpop-ulated.

He was very tired. He had not eaten all day—or for several thousand years, depending on how you count. But that, he realized, was a false paradox, one that Alfredex would certainly demolish with symbolic logic.

To hell with logic. To hell with science, paradox, everything. He would run no further. There had to be room for him in this dusty land. The people here—a proud, independent sort—would not give him up. They believed in justice, not the law.

Here he would stay, work, grow old, and forget Eldridge's crazy schemes.

When he reached the village, he saw that the people assembled to greet him. They were dressed in long, like Arabian burnouses, the only logical attire for the

A bearded patriarch stepped forward and nodded to Eldridge. "The ancient sayings are true. For every beginning there is an ending."

Eldridge agreed politely. "Anyone got a drink of water?" "Written," the patriarch continued, "that the thief, given time to wander, will ultimately return to the scene of his crime."

"Crime?" Eldridge asked, feeling an uneasy tingle in his skin. "Crime," the patriarch repeated.

A man in the crowd shouted, "It's a stupid bird that built the nest!" The people roared with laughter, but Eldridge's heart was not in the sound. It was cruel laughter.

"Ingratitude breeds betrayal," the patriarch continued, "and it is omnipresent. We liked you, Thomas Eldridge. You came with your strange machine, bearing booty, and we recognized your spirit. It made you one of us. We protected you from the elements in the Wet Worlds. What did it matter to us if you were a thief? Had they not wronged you? An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The crowd growled approvingly. "But what did I do?" "I wanted to know. The crowd converged on him, waving their hands and knives. A row of men in dark blue cloaks held them off. Eldridge realized that there were policemen even here.

"Tell me what I did," he persisted as the policemen moved the Traveler from him.

"You are guilty of sabotage and murder," the patriarch said.

Eldridge stared around wildly. He had fled a petty crime in Sector One, only to find himself accused of it in Sector Three. He had retreated to Sector Three, where he was wanted for sabotage.

He smiled amiably. "You know, all I ever really wanted

a warm drowsy country, books, congenial neighbors, and the love of a good—" "What did I do?" Eldridge asked. Becker told him.

When he recovered, he found himself lying on packed earth in a small brick jail. Through a slitted window, he could see an insignificant strip of sunset. Outside the wooden door, someone was wailing a song.

He found a bowl of food beside him and wolfed down the unfamiliar stuff. After drinking some water from another bowl, he propped himself against the wall. Through his narrow window, the sunset was fading. In the courtyard, a gang of men were erecting a gallows. "Jailor!" Eldridge shouted.

In a few moments, he heard the clump of footsteps. "I need a lawyer," he said.

"We have no lawyers here," the man replied proudly. "Here we have justice."

He marched off.

Eldridge began to revise his ideas about justice without law. It was very good as an idea—but a horror as reality.

He lay on the floor and tried to think. No thoughts came. He could hear the workmen laughing and joking as they built the gallows. They worked late into the twilight.

In the early evening, Eldridge heard the key turn in his lock. Two men entered. One was middle-aged, with a small, well-trimmed beard. The other was about Eldridge's age, broad-shouldered and deeply tanned.

"Do you remember me?" the middle-aged man asked. "Should I?"

"You should. I was her father."

"And I was her fiance," the young man said. He took a threatening step forward.

The bearded man restrained him. "I know how you feel, Morgel, but he will pay for his crimes on the gallows."

"Hanging is too good for him, Mr. Becker," Morgel argued. "He should be drawn, quartered, burned and scattered to the wind."

"Yes, but we are a just and merciful people," Becker said virtuously.

"Whose father?" Eldridge asked. "Whose fiance?" The two men looked at each other.

He had come to them from Sector Two, loaded explained. The people of Sector Three accepted him. simple folk, direct and quick-tempered, the inheritance of a war-torn Earth. In Sector Three, the minerals were lost its fertility. Huge tracts of land were radioactive. continued to beat down, the glaciers melted, continued to rise.

The men of Sector Three were struggling back to had the rudiments of a manufacturing system and installations. Eldridge had increased the output of given them a lighting system, and taught them sanitary processing. He continued his exploration of Unexplored Sectors beyond Sector Three. He became and the people of Sector Three loved and protected him.

Eldridge had repaid this kindness by abducting Becker.

This attractive young lady had been engaged. Preparations were made for her marriage. Eldridge ignored showed his true nature by kidnaping her one dark

her in an infernal machine of his own making. When invention on, the girl vanished. The overloaded power

every installation for miles around.

Murder and sabotage!

But the irate mob had not been able to reach Eldridge. had stuffed some of his loot into a knapsack, grabbed it, and vanished.

"I did all that?" Eldridge gasped.

"Before witnesses," Becker said. "Your remaining warehouse. We could deduce nothing from it."

With both men staring him full in the face, Eldridge ground.

Now he knew what he had done in Sector Three.

The murder charge was probably false, though. A built a heavy-duty Traveler and sent the girl somewhere intermediate stops required by the portable models.

Not that anyone would believe him. These people had never heard of such a civilized concept as *habeas corpus*.

"Why did you do it?" Becker asked.

Eldridge shrugged his shoulders and shook his head helplessly.

"Didn't I treat you like my own son? Didn't I turn back the police of Sectorown unworldliness. I intended to cut you in —I swe Two? Didn't I feed you, clothe you? Why— *why*—did you do it?"

All Eldridge could do was shrug his shoulders and go on helplessly shaking out his head.

"Very well," Becker said. "Tell your secret to the hangman in the morning." He took Morgel by the arm and left.

If Eldridge had had a gun, he might have shot himself on the spot. All the evidence pointed to potentialities for evil in him that he had never suspected. He was running out of time. In the morning, he would hang.

And it was unfair, all of it. He was an innocent bystander, continually running into the consequences of his former—or later—actions. But only Eldridge I possessed the motives and knew the answers.

Even if his thefts were justified, why had he stolen potatoes, lifebelts, mirrors and such?

What had he done with the girl?

What was he trying to accomplish?

Wearily, Eldridge closed his eyes and drifted into a troubled half-sleep.

He heard a faint scraping noise and looked up.

Viglin was stand there, a Traveler in his hands.

Eldridge was too tired to be very surprised. He looked for a moment, then said, "Come for one last gloat?"

"I didn't plan it this way," Viglin protested, mopping his perspiring face. "You must believe that. I never wanted you killed, Tom."

Eldridge sat up and looked closely at Viglin. "You did steal my invention, didn't you?"

"Yes," Viglin confessed. "But I was going to do the right thing by you. I would have split the profits."

"Then why did you steal it?"

Viglin looked uncomfortable. "You weren't interested in all."

"So you tricked me into signing over my rights?" "If someone else would have, Tom. I was just saving you from your own unworldliness. I intended to cut you in —I swe wiped his forehead again. "But I never dreamed of doing it like this."

"And then you framed me for those thefts," Eldridge said. Viglin appeared to be genuinely surprised. "No, Tom. I did those things. It worked out perfectly for me—until now. You're lying!"

"Would I come here to lie? I've admitted stealing those things. Why would I lie about anything else?"

"Then why did I steal?"

"I think you had some sort of wild scheme in the Sectors, but I don't really know. It-doesn't matter. Listen, there's no way I can call off the lawsuit—it's a time-consuming process now—but I can get you out of here."

"Where will I go?" Eldridge asked hopelessly. "I'll be looking for me all through time."

"I'll hide you on my estate. I mean it. You can live there until the statute of limitations has expired. They'd never think of looking for my place for you."

"And the rights on my invention?"

"I'm keeping them," Viglin said, with a touch of confidence. "I can't turn them over to you without being liable for temporal action. But I *will* share them. And I'll be your business partner."

"All right, let's get out of here," Eldridge said. Viglin had brought along a number of tools, which he used with suspicious proficiency. Within minutes, they were out of the cell and hiding in the dark courtyard.

"This Traveler's pretty weak," Viglin whispered. "I'll put batteries in his machine. "Could we possibly get you out of here?" "It should be in the storehouse," Eldridge said.

The storehouse was unguarded and Viglin made no sound as he unlocked the lock. Inside, they found Eldridge II's machine beset with preposterous, bewildering loot.

"Let's go," Viglin said.

Eldridge shook his head. "What's wrong?" asked Viglin, annoyed. "I'm not going."

"Listen, Tom, I know there's no reason why you should trust me. But I really will give you sanctuary. I'm not lying to you."

"I believe you," Eldridge said. "Just the same, I'm not going back."

"What are you planning to do?"

Eldridge had been wondering about that ever since they had broken out of the cell. He was at the crossroads now. He could return with Viglin or he could go on alone.

There was no choice, really. He had to assume that he had known what he was doing the first time. Right or wrong, he was going to keep faith and meet whatever appointments he had made with the future.

"I'm going into the Uninhabited Sectors," Eldridge said. He found a sack and began loading it with potatoes and carrot seeds.

"You can't!" Viglin objected. "The first time, you ended up in 1954. You might not be so lucky this time. You might be canceled out completely."

Eldridge had loaded all the potatoes and the packages of carrot seeds. Next he slipped in the World Literature Sets, the lifebelts, the cans of shark repellent and the mirrors. On top of this he put the megacharge hand pistols.

"Have you any idea what you're going to do with that stuff?" "Not the slightest," Eldridge said, buttoning the Symphonic Tape Runs inside his shirt.

"But they must fit somewhere."

Viglin sighed heavily. "Don't forget, you have to allow half an hour between jumps or you'll get canceled. Have you got a watch?"

"No, I left it in my room."

"Take this one. Sportsman's Special." Viglin attached it to Eldridge's wrist.

"Good luck, Tom. I mean that." "Thanks."

Eldridge set the button for the farthest jump into the future he could make. He grinned at Viglin and pushed the button.

There was the usual moment of blackness, then a sudden

icy shock. When Eldridge opened his eyes, he found himself under water.

He found his way to the surface, struggling against the sack. Once his head was above water, he looked for the nearest land.

There was no land. Long, smooth-backed waves rolled off from the limitless horizon, lifted him and ran on, leaving him alone on the shore.

Eldridge fumbled in his sack, found the lifebelts and was bobbing on the surface, trying to figure out what happened to New York State.

Each jump into the future had brought him to a new time. Here, countless thousands of years past 1954, the glaciers had melted. A good part of the Earth was probably submerged.

He had planned well in taking the lifebelts. It gave him something to do for the rest of the journey. Now he would just have to wait for the next jump, to avoid cancellation.

He leaned back, supported by his lifebelts, and admired the formations in the sky. Something brushed against him.

Eldridge looked down and saw a long black shape moving toward his feet. Another joined it and they began to move toward him. Sharks!

He fumbled wildly with the sack, spilling out the contents in a hurry, and found a can of shark repellent. He opened it, threw it overboard, and an orange blotch began to spread on the water.

There were three sharks now. They swam toward the spreading circle of repellent. A fourth joined them, and retreated quickly into the orange smear, and retreated quickly.

Eldridge was glad the future had produced something to help him.

In five minutes, some of the orange had dissipated. He opened another can. The sharks didn't give up hope, but they didn't move into the tainted water. He emptied the cans every five minutes. A stalemate held through Eldridge's half-hour wait. He checked his settings and tightened his grip on the sack.

He didn't know what the mirrors or potatoes were for, or why carrot seeds were last one began to lose its charge; he had to club off with the butt.

critical. He would just have to take his chances.

He pressed the button and went into the familiar darkness. When the half hour was over, he set the dial again. He found himself ankle-deep in a thick, evil-smelling bog. The heat was new dangers with some books, potatoes, carrot seeds.

He found himself ankle-deep in a thick, evil-smelling bog. The heat was stifling and a cloud of huge gnats buzzed around his head. Perhaps there were no dangers ahead. Pulling himself out of the gluey mud, accompanied by the hiss and click of unseen life, Eldridge found firmer footing under a small tree. Around him was a green jungle, shot through with riotous purples and reds. There was only one way to find out. He pressed the button.

Eldridge settled against the tree to wait out his half hour. In this future, now there was a breeze-swept pine forest stretching apparently, the ocean waters had receded and the primeval jungle had sprung solid ground underfoot, and a temperate sun in the sky. Eldridge's pulse quickened at the thought that there might be a goal. He had always had an atavistic streak, a desire to see the world as it was.

Eldridge heard a bleating noise and saw a dull green shape move against the brighter green of the foliage. Something was coming toward him. The embittered Eldridge betrayed, must have felt it even more strongly.

He watched. It was about twelve feet tall, with a lizard's wrinkled hide and wide splay feet. It looked amazingly like a small dinosaur. It was a little disappointing. Still, it wasn't too bad. Except for the loneliness. If only there were people—

Eldridge watched the big reptile warily. Most dinosaurs were herbivorous, he reminded himself, especially the ones that lived in swamps. This one probably just wanted to sniff him. Then it would return to cropping grass. A man stepped out of the forest. He was less than six feet tall, thick-set, muscled like a wrestler and wearing a fur kilt. He carried a medium gray. He carried a ragged tree trunk.

The dinosaur yawned, revealing a magnificent set of pointed teeth, and began to approach Eldridge with an air of determination. Two dozen others came through the forest behind him. He marched directly up to Eldridge.

Eldridge dipped into the sack, pushed irrelevant items out of the way, and grabbed a megacharge hand pistol. "Hello, fellows," Eldridge said pleasantly.

This had better be it, he prayed, and fired. The leader replied in a guttural language and made a gesture with his open palm.

The dinosaur vanished in a spray of smoke. There were only a few shreds of flesh and a smell of ozone to show where it had been. Eldridge looked at the megacharge hand pistol with new respect. Now he understood why it was so expensive. "I bring your crops blessings," Eldridge said proudly. "I bring you just what you need." He reached into his sack and pulled out a package of carrot seeds. "Seeds! You'll advance a little in civilization—"

During the next half hour, a number of jungle inhabitants took a lively interest in him. Each pistol was good for only a few firings—no surprise, considering their destructiveness. His The leader grunted angrily and his followers began to move. Eldridge. They held out their hands, palms up, grunting.

They didn't want the sack and they refused the deal. They had him almost completely circled now. He was being hefted and he still had no idea what they wanted. "Potato?" he asked in desperation.



They didn't want potatoes, either.

His time machine had two minutes more to wait. He turned and ran.

The savages were after him at once. Eldridge sprinted into the forest like a grayhound, dodging through the closely packed trees. Several clubs whizzed past him.

One minute to go.

He tripped over a root, scrambled to his feet and kept on running. The savages were close on his heels.

Ten seconds. Five seconds. A club glanced off his shoulder.

Time! He reached for the button—and a club thudded against his head, knocking him to the ground. When he could focus again, the leader of the savages was standing over his Time Traveler, club raised.

"Don't!" Eldridge yelled in panic.

But the leader grinned wildly and brought down the club. In a few seconds, he had reduced the machine to scrap metal.

Eldridge was dragged into a cave, cursing hopelessly. Two savages guarded the entrance. Outside, he could see a gang of men gathering wood. Women and children were scampering back and forth, laden down with clay containers. Judge by their laughter, they were planning a feast.

Eldridge realized, with a sinking sensation, that he would be the main dish.

Not that it mattered. They had destroyed his Traveler. No Viglin would rescue him this time. He was at the end of his road.

Eldridge didn't want to die. But what made it worse was the thought of dying without ever finding out what Eldridge I had planned.

It seemed unfair, somehow.

For several minutes, he sat in abject self-pity. Then he crawled farther back into the cave, hoping to find another way out.

The cave ended abruptly against a wall of granite. But he found something else.

An old shoe.

He picked it up and stared at it. For some reason, it bothered him, although it was a perfectly ordinary brown leather shoe, just like the ones he had on.

Then the anachronism struck him.

*What was a manufactured article like a shoe doing here?*

He looked at the size and quickly tried it on. It fitted, which, made the answer obvious—he must have brought it here on his first trip.

But why had he left a shoe?

There was something inside, too soft to be a pebble, but it was a piece of torn lining. He took off the shoe and found a piece of paper wadded in the toe. He unfolded it and read the handwriting:

*Silliest damned business—how do you address your friend Eldridge?" All right, let's forget the salutation; you can call me "Eldridge" because I already have, and so, naturally, I'm not going to use it, otherwise you wouldn't be able to read it, nor would I be able to write it.*

*Look, you're in a rough spot. Don't worry about it. You'll come out of it in one piece. I'm leaving you a note where you have to go next.*

*The question is: where do I go? I'm deliberately leaving you a half-hour lag it needs, knowing that the Traveler will stay in the past to use. But what happens to me?*

*I think I know. Still, it scares me—this is the first time I'll have experienced. But worrying about it is nonsense. It has to turn out right because there are no time paradoxes.*

*Well, here goes. I'll push the button and cancel the machine. Wish me luck.*

Wish him luck! Eldridge savagely tore up the note and threw it away.

But Eldridge I had purposely canceled and been in the future, which meant that the Traveler hadn't gone with him! It must still be here!

Eldridge began a frantic search of the cave. If he could find it and push the button, he could go on ahead. It *had* to be here.

Several hours later, when the guards dragged him out, he still hadn't found it. a beach. Water was lapping at his toes and he could see the entire village had gathered and they were in a festive mood. The clapping of breakers. Containers were being passed freely and two or three men had already passed out. But the guards who led Eldridge forward were sober enough. The beach was long and narrow and dazzlingly white. Behind him, a blue ocean stretched to infinity. Behind him, like a sacrificial altar. It was decorated with wild colors and heaped around it brilliant vegetation of a tropical island. They carried him to a wide, shallow pit. In the center of it was what looked like a sacrificial altar. It was decorated with wild colors and heaped around it brilliant vegetation of a tropical island. Eldridge was pushed in and the dancing began. He heard a shout. Eldridge looked around for something to defend himself. He tried several times to scramble out, but was prodded back each time. He had nothing, nothing at all. He was defenseless. The dancing continued for hours, until the last dancer had collapsed, exhausted. Men came running from the jungle toward him. An old man approached the rim of the pit, holding a lighted torch. He shouted something strange. He listened carefully. "Welcome! Welcome back!" they called out. Eldridge stamped it out. But more torches rained down, lighting the outermost branches. They flared brightly and he was forced to retreat inward, toward the altar. A gigantic brown man enclosed him in a bearlike hug. "Welcome!" he exclaimed. "Why—yes," Eldridge said. The naming circle closed, driving him back. At last, panting, eyes burning, More people were running down to the beach. His legs buckling, he fell across the altar as the flames licked at him. comely race. The men were tall and tanned, and the most part, were slim and pretty. They looked like the one you would like to have for neighbors. His eyes were closed and he gripped the knobs tightly— "Did you bring them?" a thin old man asked, panting. *Knobs?* "Bring what?" Eldridge looked at the altar. Under its gaudy decoration, the altar was a Time Traveler—the same Traveler, past a doubt, that Eldridge had brought here and left for him. "The carrot seeds. You promised to bring them." Eldridge dug them out of his pockets. "Here they are." When Eldridge vanished, they must have venerated it as a sacred object. "Bring what?" "Thank you. Do you really think they'll grow in the world?" And it *did* have magical qualities. "The carrot seeds. You promised to bring them." Eldridge dug them out of his pockets. "Here they are." The fire was singeing his feet when he adjusted the regulator. With his finger against the button, he hesitated. "Thank you. Do you really think they'll grow in the world?" What would the future hold for him? All he had in the way of equipment was a sack of carrot seeds, potatoes, the symphonic runs, the microfilm volumes of world literature and small mirrors. "Later, later," the big man interrupted. "You must be tired." But he had come this far. He would see the end. Eldridge thought back to what had happened since he awakened, back in 1954. Subjectively, it was so, but it had covered thousands of years back and was crammed with arrests, escapes, dangers and bewilderment. He pressed the button. "Tired," he said. "Very." "Perhaps you'd like to return to your own home?" Opening his eyes, Eldridge found that he was standing on "My own?" "Certainly. The house you built facing the lagoon. Do you remember?" Eldridge smiled feebly and shook his head.

"He doesn't remember!" the man cried.  
"You don't remember our chess games?" another man asked.  
"And the fishing parties?" a boy put in.  
"Or the picnics and celebrations?"  
"The dances?"  
"And the sailing?"

Eldridge shook his head at each eager, worried question.

"All this was before you went back to your own time," the big man told him. He had ceased being Eldridge II.

"Went back?" asked Eldridge. Here was everything he had always wanted. From this point on, he was Eldridge I and he had peace, contentment, warm climate, good neighbors. He felt inside the sack and where he was going, what he would do and the things he would bring. Books, music, his shirt. And books and music, he mentally added to the list. Good Lord, no one to do them. They all led to this goal and this girl, for in his right mind would leave a place like this! And that brought up an important question that he would come back here and live on. "Why did I leave here?"

"Surely you remember *that!*" the big man said.

"I'm afraid not."

A slim, light-haired girl stepped forward. "You really don't remember coming as he had always dreamed.  
back for me?"

Eldridge stared at her. "You must be Becker's daughter. The girl who was Alfredex.  
engaged to Morgel. The one I kidnaped."

"Morgel only *thought* he was engaged to me," she said. "And you didn't kidnap me. I came of my own free will."

"Oh, I see," Eldridge answered, feeling like an idiot. "I mean I think I see. That is—pleased to meet you," he finished inanely.

"You needn't be so formal," she said. "After all, we *are* married. And you *did* bring me a mirror, didn't you?"

It was complete now. Eldridge grinned, took out a mirror, gave it to her, and handed the sack to the big man. Delighted, she did the things with her eyebrows and hair that women always do whenever they see their reflections.

"Let's go home, dear," she said.

He didn't know her name, but he liked her looks. He liked her very much. But that was only natural.

"I'm afraid I can't right now," he replied, looking at his watch. The half hour was almost up. "I have something to do first. But I should be back in a very little while."

She smiled sunnily. "I won't worry. You said you would

return and you did. And you brought back the mirror and potatoes that you told us you'd bring."

She kissed him. He shook hands all around. It symbolized the full cycle Alfredex had used to demonstrate the concept of temporal paradoxes.

The familiar darkness swallowed Eldridge as he pressed the button on the Traveler.

He had ceased being Eldridge II.

From this point on, he was Eldridge I and he had peace, contentment, warm climate, good neighbors, books and music, his shirt. And books and music, he mentally added to the list. Good Lord, no one to do them. They all led to this goal and this girl, for in his right mind would leave a place like this! And that brought up an important question that he would come back here and live on. "Why did I leave here?"

her, their good neighbors, books and music, contentment.

It was wonderful, knowing that everything would be as he had always dreamed.

He even had a feeling of affection and gratitude.

The Luckiest Man in the World

# The Luckiest Man in the World

I'm really amazingly well off down here. But you've got to remember that I'm a fortunate person. It was sheer good luck that sent me to Patagonia. Not pull, understand—no, nor ability. I'm a pretty good meteorologist, but they could have sent a better one. I've just been extremely lucky to be in the right places at the right times.

It takes on an aspect of the fabulous when you consider that the army equipped my weather station with just about every gadget known to man. Not entirely for me, of course. The army had planned on setting up a base here. They got all the equipment in, and then had to abandon the project.

I kept sending in my weather reports, though, as long as they wanted them.

But the gadgets! Science has always amazed me. I'm some-thing of a scientist myself, I suppose, but not a creative sci-entist, and that makes all the difference. You tell a creative scientist to do something impossible, and he goes right ahead and does it every time. It's awe-inspiring.

The way I see it, some general must have said to the sci-entists, "Boys, we've got a great shortage of specialists, and no chance of replacing them. Their duties must be performed by men who may often be completely unskilled. Sounds im-possible, but what can you do about it?" And the scientists started to work in earnest, on all these incredible books and gadgets.

For example, last week I had a toothache. At first I thought it was just the cold, for it's still pretty cold down here, even with the volcanoes acting up. But sure enough, it was a tooth-ache. So I took out the dental apparatus, set it up, and read what I was supposed to read. I examined myself and classi-

fled the tooth, the ache, the cavity. Then I injected the tooth out, and filled it. And dentists spent years learning to do what I accomplished under pressure in minutes. Take food now. I'd been getting disgustingly fat, nothing to do but send in the weather reports. But you see, doing that I started turning out meals that the finest chefs in the world might well have envied. Cooking used to be a science, but the scientists tackled it, they made an exact science of it.

I could go on for pages. A lot of the stuff they gave me for further use for, because I'm all alone now. But anyway, I'm a competent, practicing lawyer with the guides that I've got. They're so arranged that anyone with aver-age intelligence can learn the sections you have to master to successfully defend yourself. I learn what they mean in plain English.

No one has ever tried to sue me, because I've always been fair. But I wish someone would. I'd just like to try out those

Building is another matter. When I first arrived here, I was in a quonset hut. But I unpacked some of the marvelous machines, and found materials that any-one could use. I built myself a bombproof house of five rooms, with a kitchen, a bathroom. It isn't real inlaid tile, of course, but it looks like it, and is amazingly simple to put down. The wall-to-wall carpet goes down easily too, once you've read up on it.

The thing that surprised me the most was the plumbing. Plumbing always seemed the most complicated part of the world to me—more complicated even than medicine. But I had no trouble at all with it. Perhaps it would be perfect by professional standards, but it satisfies me. I have a series of filters, sterilizers, purifiers, fortifiers, and so on, so the water is free of even the toughest germs. And I inspect it myself.

At times I get lonely down here, and there's nothing the scientists can do about that. There's no companionship. But perhaps if the creative scientists

real hard they could have worked up something for isolated guys like me just a little better than complete loneliness.

There aren't even any Patagonians around for me to talk to. They went North after the tidal waves—the few who were left. And music isn't much good. But then, I'm a person who doesn't too much mind being alone. Perhaps that's why they sent me down here.

I wish there were some trees, though.

Painting! I forgot to mention painting! Everyone knows how complicated that subject is. You have to know about perspective and line, color and mass, and don't know what else. You have to practically be a genius before you can get anything out of it.

Now, I just select my brushes, set up my canvas, and I can paint anything that appeals to me. Everything you have to do is in the book. The oils I have of sunsets here are spec-tacular. They're good enough for a gallery. You never saw such sunsets! Flaming colors, impossible shapes! It's all the dust in the air.

My ears are better, too. Didn't I say I was lucky? The ear-drums were completely shattered by the first concussion. But the hearing aid I wear is so small you can hardly see it, and I can hear better than ever.

This brings me to the subject of medicine, and nowhere has science done a better job. The book tells me what to do about everything. I performed an appendectomy on myself that would have been considered impossible a few years ago. I just had to look up the symptoms, follow the directions, and it was done. I've doctored myself for all sorts of ailments, but of course there's nothing I can do about the radiation poisoning. That's not the fault of the books, however. It's just that there's nothing anyone can do about radiation poison-ing. If I had the finest specialists in the world here, they couldn't do anything about it.

If there were any specialists left. There aren't, of course.

It isn't so bad. I know what to do so that it doesn't hurt. And my luck didn't run out or anything. It's just that every-one's luck ran out.

Well, looking over this, it doesn't seem much of a credo, which is what it was meant to be. I guess I'd better study one

of those writing books. I'll know how to say it all th as it can be said. Exactly how I feel about science, and how grateful I am. I'm thirty-nine. I've lived l about everyone, even if I die tomorrow. But that's lucky, and in the right places at the right times

I guess I won't bother with the writing book, s one around to read a word of manuscript. What g

without an audience?

Photography is more interesting.

Besides, I have to unpack some grave-digging a mausoleum, and carve a tombstone for myself.

## Hands Off {pages 70 to 71}

The ship's mass detector flared pink, then red. Agee had been dozing at the controls, waiting for Victor to finish making dinner. Now he woke quickly. "Planet coming," he called, over the hiss of escaping air.

Captain Barnett nodded. He finished shaping a hot patch, and slapped it on *Endeavor's* worn hull. The whistle of escaping air dropped to a low moan, but was not entirely stopped. It never was.

When Barnett came over, the planet was just visible beyond the rim of a little red sun. It glowed green against the black night of space. Both men had an identical thought.

Barnett put the thought into words. "Wonder if there's anything on it worth taking," he said, frowning.

Agee lifted a white eyebrow hopefully. They watched as the dials began to register.

They would never have spotted the planet if they had taken *Endeavor* along the South Galactic Trades. But the Confederacy police were increasingly numerous along that route and Barnett preferred to give them a wide berth.

The *Endeavor* was listed as a trader—but the only cargo she carried consisted of several bottles of an extremely powerful acid used for safes, and three medium-sized atomic bombs. The authorities looked with disfavor upon such goods and they were always trying to hound her on some old charge—a murder on Luna, larceny on Omega, breaking and entering on Samia II. Old, almost forgotten crimes that the police insisted on raking up.

To make matters worse, *Endeavor* was outgunned by the newer police cruisers. So they had taken an outside route to New Athens, where a uranium strike had opened.

"Don't look like much," Agee commented, inspecting the dials critically.

"Might as well pass it by," Barnett said.

The readings were uninteresting. They showed a planet smaller than Earth, uncharted, and with no commercial value other than oxygen. As they swung past, their heavy-metals detector came to life.

"There's stuff down there!" Agee said, quickly interpreting the multiple readings. "Pure. Very pure—and on the surface!"

He looked at Barnett, who nodded. The ship swung toward the planet.

Victor came from the rear, wearing a tiny wool cap crammed on his big shaven head. He stared over Barnett's shoulder as Agee brought the ship down in a tight spiral. Within half a mile of the surface, they saw their deposit of heavy metal.

It was a spaceship, resting on its tail in a natural clearing.

"Now *this* is interesting," Barnett said. He motioned Agee to make a closer approach.

Agee brought the ship down with deft skill. He was well past the compulsory retirement limit for master pilots, but it didn't affect his confidence. Barnett, who found him stranded and penniless, had signed him on. The captain was always glad to help another human, if it was considered likely to be profitable. The two men shared the same attitude toward private property, but sometimes disagreed on ways of acquiring it. Agee preferred a sure thing. Barnett, on the other hand, had more courage than was good for a member of a relatively frail species like *Homosapiens*. Near the surface of the planet, they saw that the strange ship was larger than *Endeavor* and bright, shining new. The hull shape was familiar, but the markings were the markings.

"Ever see anything like it?" Barnett asked.

Agee searched his capacious memory. "Looks a bit like a Cephean job, only they don't build 'em so squat. We're pretty far out, you know. It might not even be from the Confederacy."

Victor stared at the ship, his big lips parted in wonder. He







also mean hot fuel, in which case the switch might control coarse energy flow.

For all he knew, its purpose was to overload the piles in case of enemy attack.

Agee kept all this in mind as he studied the controls. He wasn't too worried. For one thing, spaceships were tough beasts, practically indestructible from the inside.

For another, he believed he had caught onto the pattern.

Barnett stuck his head in the doorway, with Victor close behind him. "You ready?"

Agee looked over the panel. "Guess so." He touched a dial lightly. "This *should* control the airlocks."

He turned it. Victor and Barnett waited, perspiring, in the chilly room.

They heard the smooth flow of lubricated metal. The air-locks had closed.

Agee grinned and blew on his fingertips for luck. "Here's the air-control system. He closed a switch.

Out of the ceiling, a yellow smoke began to trickle.

"Impurities in the system," Agee muttered, adjusting a dial. Victor began to cough.

"Turn it off," Barnett said.

The smoke poured out in thick streams, filling the two rooms almost instantly. "Turn it off!"

"I can't see it!" Agee thrust at the switch, missed and struck a button under it. Immediately the generators began to whine angrily. Blue sparks danced along the panel and jumped to the wall.

Agee staggered back from the panel and collapsed. Victor was already at the door to the cargo hold, trying to hammer it down with his fists. Barnett covered his mouth with one hand and rushed to the panel. He fumbled blindly for the switch, feeling the ship revolve giddily around him.

Victor fell to the deck, still beating feebly at the door.

Barnett jabbed blindly at the panel.

Instantly the generators stopped. Then Barnett felt a cold breeze on his face. He wiped his streaming eyes and looked up.

A lucky stab had closed the ceiling vents, cutting off the

yellow gas. He had accidentally opened the lock. The ship was being replaced by the cold night air.

Soon the atmosphere was breathable.

Victor climbed shakily to his feet, but Agee did not. He gave the old pilot artificial respiration, cursing under his breath.

Agee's eyelids finally fluttered and his chest began to rise. A few minutes later, he sat up and shook his head.

"What was that stuff?" Victor asked.

"I'm afraid," Barnett said, "that our alien friend's breathable atmosphere."

Agee shook his head. "Can't be, Captain. He's from an oxygen world, walking around with no helmet—"

"Air requirements vary tremendously," Barnett said.

"Let's face it—our friend's physical makeup was different from ours."

"That's not so good," Agee said.

The three men looked at each other. In the silence, they heard a faint, ominous sound.

"What was that?" Victor yelled, yanking out his finger. "Shut up!" Barnett shouted.

They listened. Barnett could feel the hairs lift on his neck as he tried to identify the sound.

It came from a distance. It sounded like metal on metal.

The three men looked out the port. In the last light, they could see the main port of *Endeavor I* was coming from the ship.

"It's impossible," Agee said. "The freeze-blasters didn't kill him," Barnett finished.

"That's bad," Agee grunted. "That's very bad."

Victor was still holding his blaster. "Captain, we can't go over that way—"

Barnett shook his head. "He wouldn't let you go through the lock. No, let me think. Was there anything else we can use? The piles?"

"I've got the links, Captain," Victor said.

"Good. Then there's nothing that—"

"The acid," Agee interrupted. "It's powerful. I suppose he can do much with that stuff."

"Not a thing," Barnett said. "We're in this ship and we're staying here. But get it off the ground now."

Agee looked at the instrument panel. Half an hour ago, he had almost understood it. Now it was a cunningly rigged death trap—a booby trap, with invisible wires leading to destruction.

The trap was unintentional. But a spaceship was necessarily a machine for living as well as traveling. The controls would try to reproduce the alien's living conditions, supply his needs. That might be fatal to them.

"I wish I knew what kind of planet he came from," Agee said unhappily. If they knew the alien's environment, they could anticipate what his ship would do. All they knew was that he breathed a poisonous yellow gas.

"We're doing all right," Barnett said, without much confidence. "Just do out the drive mechanism and we'll leave everything else alone."

Agee turned back to the controls.

Barnett wished he knew what the alien was up to. He stared at the bulk of old ship in the twilight and listened to the incomprehensible sound of striking non-metal.

Kalen was surprised to find that he was still alive. But there was a saying among his people—"Either a Mabogian is killed fast or he isn't killed at all." It was not at all—so far.

Groggily, he sat up and leaned against a tree. The single red sun of the planet was low on the horizon and breezes of poisonous oxygen swirled around him. He tested at once and found that his lungs were still securely sealed. His life-giving yellow air, although vitiated from long use, was still sustaining him.

But he couldn't seem to get oriented. A few hundred yards away, his ship was resting peacefully. The fading red light glistened from its hull and, for a moment, Kalen was convinced that there were no aliens. He had imagined the whole thing and now he would return to his ship . . .

He saw one of the aliens loaded down with goods, enter his vessel. In a little while, the airlocks closed.

It was true, all of it. He wrenched his mind back to the present. He needed food and air badly. His outer skin was in need of nutritional cleaning. But food, air and a single red kernel of a nut in his body pouch.

If he could open and eat the nut, he could regain his strength. But how could he open it?

It was shocking, how complete his dependence on the nut had been! Now he would have to find some way of doing without it.

Kalen noticed that the aliens had apparently abandoned their ship. Why? It didn't matter. Out on the plain, he had a chance for survival lay inside their ship.

He slid slowly through the grass, stopping only to rest. After an eternity of crawling, he reached the ship and found it was twilight. In the dimness, he could see that the walls, too thin in the first place, had been repatched. Everything spoke of long, hard use.

Food seemed to be the first problem. He slipped the nut from his pouch. It was round, almost four inches in diameter. The nut was two inches thick. Nuts of this sort were the staple of a Mabogian spaceman's diet. They were energy-packed and sealed.

He propped the nut against a wall, found a steel bar, and struck it down on it. The bar, striking the nut, emitted a sharp sound. The nut was undamaged.

Kalen wondered if the sound could be heard by the aliens. He would have to chance it. Setting himself firmly, he flung the bar.

away. In fifteen minutes, he was exhausted and the bar was bent almost in half. The nut was undamaged.

He was unable to open the nut without a Cracker, a standard device on every Mabogian ship. No one ever thought of opening a nut in any other way. It was terrifying evidence of his helplessness. He lifted the bar for another whack and found that his limbs were stiffening. He dropped the bar and took stock.

His chilled outer hide was hampering his motions. The skin was hardening slowly into impervious horn. Once the hardening was completed, he would be immobilized. Frozen in position, he would sit or stand until he died of suffocation.

Kalen fought back a wave of despair and tried to think. He had to treat his skin without delay. That was more important than food. On board his own ship, he would wash and bathe it, soften it and eventually cure it. But it was doubtful whether the aliens carried the proper cleansers.

The only other course was to rip off his outer hide. The second layer would be tender for a few days, but at least he would be mobile.

He searched on stiffening limbs for a Changer. Then he realized that the aliens wouldn't have even this piece of basic apparatus. He was still on his own.

He took the steel bar, bent it into a hook and inserted the point under a fold of skin. He yanked upward with all his strength. His skin refused to yield.

Next, he wedged himself between a generator and the wall and inserted the hook in a different way. But his arms weren't long enough to gain leverage, and the tough hide held stubbornly.

He tried a dozen different positions, unsuccessfully. Without mechanical assistance, he couldn't hold himself rigidly enough.

Wearily, he dropped the bar. He could do nothing, nothing at all. Then he remembered the thetnite bomb in his pouch.

A primitive part of his mind which he had not previously known existed said that there was an easy way out of all this. He could slip the bomb under the hull of his ship,

while the aliens weren't looking. The light charge would than throw the ship twenty or thirty feet into the air,

really damage it. The aliens, however, would undoubtedly be killed.

Kalen was horrified. How could he think such a thing? Mabogian ethic, ingrained in the fiber of his being, took the taking of intelligent life for any reason whatsoever. A

"But wouldn't this be justified?" that primitive part of his mind whispered. "These aliens are diseased. You would be helping the Universe a favor by getting rid of them and helping yourself. Don't think of it as murder."

He took the bomb out of his pouch and looked at it. He refused to think any more. On tired, almost

He refused to think any more. On tired, almost began to search the alien ship, looking for that would save his life.

Agee was crouched in the pilot's compartment, working with an indelible pencil. His lungs ached and

working all night. Now there was a bleak gray dawn. A chill wind was whipping around *Endeavor II*. The lights were

lighted but cold, for Agee didn't want to touch the controls.

Victor came into the crew room, staggering under a heavy packing case.

"Barnett?" Agee called out.

"He's coming," Victor said.

The captain wanted all their equipment up from the deck. The crew room was used most of the available space.

Looking around for a spot to put the case, Victor found one. He pressed its stud and the door slid from the ceiling, revealing a room the size of a closet. Victor would make an ideal storage space.

Ignoring the crushed red shells on the floor, he stepped inside.

Immediately, the ceiling of the little room began to drop.

Victor let out a yell that could be heard throughout the ship. He leaped up—and slammed his head against the ceiling. He fell on his face, stunned.

Agee rushed out of the pilot's compartment and Barnett sprinted into the room. Barnett grabbed Victor's legs and tried to drag him out, but Victor was heavy and the captain was unable to get a purchase on the smooth metal floor.

With rare presence of mind, Agee up-ended the packing case. The ceiling was momentarily stopped by it.

Together, Barnett and Agee tugged at Victor's legs. They managed to drag him out just in time. The heavy case splintered and, in another moment, was crushed like a piece of balsa wood.

The ceiling of the little room, descending on a greased shaft, compressed the packing case to a six-inch thickness. Then its gears clicked and it slid back into place without a sound.

Victor sat up and rubbed his head. "Captain," he said plaintively, "can't we get our own ship back?"

Agee was doubtful of the venture, too. He looked at the deadly little room, which again resembled a closet with crushed red shells on the floor.

"Sure seems like a jinx ship," he said worriedly. "Maybe Victor's right. "You want to give her up?" Barnett asked.

Agee squirmed uncomfortably and nodded. "Trouble is," he said, not looking at Barnett, "we don't know what she'll do next. It's just too risky, Captain."

"Do you realize what you'd be giving up?" Barnett challenged. "Her hull alone is worth a fortune. Have you looked at her engines? There's nothing on this side of Earth that could stop her. She could drill her way through a planet and come out the other side with all her paint on. And you want to give her up!"

"She won't be worth much if she kills us," Agee objected. Victor nodded emphatically. Barnett stared at them.

"Now listen to me carefully," Barnett said. "We are *not* going to give up this ship. She is *not* jinxed. She's alien and filled with alien apparatus. All we have to do is keep our hands off things until we reach drydock. Understand?"

Agee wanted to say something about closets and hydraulic presses. It didn't seem to him a promising future. But, looking at Barnett's face, he decided against it.

"Have you marked all the operating controls?" Barnett asked. "Just a few more to go," Agee said.

"Right. Finish up and those are the only ones we need." Barnett left the rest of the ship alone, she'll leave us alone. "danger if we just keep *hands off*."

Barnett wiped perspiration from his face, leaned against the wall, and unbuttoned his coat.

Immediately, two metal bands slid out of opening in the wall and circled his waist and stomach.

Barnett stared at them for a moment, then threw them off with all his strength. The bands didn't give. There was a clicking sound in the walls and a slender wire filament touched Barnett's coat appraisingly, then retreated into the wall.

Agee and Victor stared helplessly. "Turn it off," Barnett said tensely.

Agee rushed into the control room. Victor continued to stare at the wall.

of the wall slid a metal limb, tipped with a glittering thorn. Victor unfroze. He ran up and tried to wrench the metal limb from the wall. It twisted once and sent him reeling across the room.

With the precision of a surgeon, the knife slit Barnett's shirt in the middle, not touching the shirt underneath. Then it disappeared of sight.

Agee was punching controls now and the generator hummed. The locks opened and closed, stabilizers twitched, lights flickered.

The mechanism that held Barnett was unaffected. The slender filament returned. It touched Barnett's shirt again, as if it had just paused an instant. The internal mechanism chattered.

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Agee shouted from the control room, "I can't turn it off! It's fully automatic!"

The filament slid into the wall. It disappeared and the knife-tipped limb slid out.

By this time, Victor had located a heavy wrench. He rushed over, swung it above his head and smashed it against the limb, narrowly missing Barnett's head.

The limb was not even dented. Serenely, it cut Barnett's shirt from his back, leaving him naked to the waist.

Barnett was not hurt, but his eyes rolled wildly as the filament came out. Victor put his fist in his mouth and backed away. Agee shut his eyes.

The filament touched Barnett's warm living flesh, clucked approvingly and slid back into the wall. The bands opened. Barnett tumbled to his knees.

For a while, no one spoke. There was nothing to say. Barnett stared moodily into space. Victor started to crack his knuckles over and over again, until Agee nudged him.

The old pilot was trying to figure out why the mechanism had slit Barnett's clothing and then stopped when it reached living flesh. Was this the way the alien undressed himself? It didn't make sense. But then, the press-closet didn't make sense, either.

In a way, he was glad it had happened. It must have taught Barnett something. Now they would leave this jinxed monstrosity and figure out a way of regaining their own ship.

"Get me a shirt," Barnett said. Victor hurriedly found one for him. Barnett slipped it on, staying clear of the walls. "How soon can you get this ship moving?" he asked Agee, a bit unsteadily.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Haven't you had enough?" Agee gasped.

"No. How soon can we blast out?"

"About another hour," Agee grumbled. What else could he say? The captain was just too much. Warily, Agee returned to the control room.

Barnett put a sweater over the shirt and a coat over that. It was chilly in the room and he had begun to shiver violently.

Kalen lay motionless on the deck of the alien ship. Fool-ishly, he had wasted most of his remaining strength in trying

to rip off his stiff outer hide. But the hide grew tougher as he grew weaker. Now it seemed hardly move. Better to rest and feel his internal fires burn low.

Soon he was dreaming of the ridged hills of Mabogian port of Canthanope, where the interstellar traders swarmed their strange cargoes. He was there in twilight, looking at the roofs at the two great setting suns. But why were they set together in the south, the blue sun and the yellow? How could a father could explain it, for it was rapidly growing dark.

He shook himself out of the fantasy and stared at the floor of morning. This was not the way for a Mabogian to die. He would try again.

After half an hour of slow, painful searching, he found a metal box in the rear of the ship. The aliens had overlooked it. He wrenched it open. Inside were several bottles carefully fastened and padded against shock. Kalen examined it.

It was marked with a large white symbol. There was no way why he should know the symbol, but it seemed familiar. He searched his memory, trying to recall where he had seen it.

Then, hazily, he remembered. It was a representation of a humanoid skull. There was one humanoid race in the Union and he had seen replicas of their skulls in a museum. But why would anyone put such a thing on a bottle?

To Kalen, a skull conveyed an emotion of reverence. It must be what the manufacturers had intended. He opened the bottle and sniffed.

The odor was interesting. It reminded him of—  
Skin-cleansing solution!

Without further delay, he poured the entire bottle over his head. Hardly daring to hope, he waited. If he could put his head in working order . . .

Yes, the liquid in the skull-marked bottle was a most pleasant. It was pleasantly scented, too.

He poured another bottle over his armored hide and

the nutritious fluid seep in. His body, starved for nourishment, called eagerly for more. He drained another bottle.

For a long time, Kalen just lay back and let the life-giving fluid soak without his mind being aware of it. in. His skin loosened and became pliable. He could feel a new surge of energy within him, a new will to live. He *would* live!

After the bath, Kalen examined the spaceship's controls, hoping to pilot the old crate back to Mabog. There were immediate difficulties. For some reason, the piloting controls weren't sealed into a separate room. He wondered why not? Those strange creatures couldn't have turned their whole ship into a deceleration chamber. They couldn't! Thereunder wasn't enough tank space to hold the fluid.

It was perplexing, but everything about the aliens was perplexing. Herigged and rubbed his hands together nervously. As far as he could overcome that difficulty. But when Kalen inspected the engines, essential controls were marked. Every-thing should go all right. he saw that a vital link had been re-moved from the piles. They were useless.

That left only one alternative. He had to win back his own ship. But how?

He paced the deck restlessly. The Mabogian ethic forbade intelligent life, and there were no ifs or buts about it. Under circumstances—not even to save your own life—were you allowed to kill. It was a wise rule and had served Mabog well. By strict adherence to it, the Mabogians had avoided war for three thousand years and had trained their people to a high degree of civilization. Which would have been impossible had they allowed exceptions to creep in. Ifs and buts could erode the soundest of principles.

He could not be a backslider. But was he going to die here passively?

Looking down, Kalen was surprised to see that a puddle of cleaning solution had eaten a hole in the deck. How flimsily these ships were made—even a mild cleaning solution could damage one! The aliens themselves must be very weak.

One thetnite bomb could do it.

He walked to the port. No one seemed to be on guard. He supposed they were too busy preparing for takeoff. It would be easy to slide through the grass, up to his ship . . .

And no one on Mabog would ever have to know about it.

between ships without realizing it. Strange, how his body could killing make?

"Aren't you ready yet?" Barnett asked, at noon.

"I guess so," Agee said. He looked over the marked panel.

Barnett nodded. "Victor and I will strap down in the crew room."

Barnett returned to the crew room. Agee fastened the

For there were that closet and the knife. It was anyone's

insane ship would do next.

"Ready out here," Barnett called from the crew room.

"All right. About ten seconds." He closed and sealed the

door closed automatically, cutting him off from the crew

noslight touch of claustrophobia, Agee activated the piles.

There was a thin slick of oil on the deck. Agee decided

loose joint and ignored it. The control surfaces worked

punched a course into the ship's tape and activated the flight

Then he felt something lapping against his foot. Looking

amazed to see that thick, evil-smelling oil was almost three

the deck. It was quite a leak. He couldn't understand how

built as this could have such a flaw. Unstrapping himself, he

source.

He found it. There were four small vents in the deck and

swas feeding a smooth, even flow of oil.

Agee punched the stud that opened his door and found

sealed. Refusing to grow panicky, he examined the door with

It didn't.

The oil was almost up to his knees.

He grinned foolishly. Stupid of him! The pilot room was sealed from the control board. He pressed the release and went back to the door. It still refused to open.

Agee tugged at it with all his strength, but it wouldn't budge. He waded back to the control panel. There had been no oil when they found the ship. That meant there had to be a drain somewhere.

The oil was waist-deep before he found it. Quickly the oil disappeared. Once it was gone, the door opened easily.

"What's the matter?" Barnett asked.

Agee told him.

"So that's how he does it," Barnett said quietly. "Glad I found out."

"Does what?" Agee asked, feeling that Barnett was taking the whole thing too lightly.

"How he stands the acceleration of takeoff. It bothered me. He hadn't anything on board that resembled a bed or cot. No chairs, nothing to strap into. So he floats in the oil bath, which turns on automatically when the ship is prepared for flight."

"But why wouldn't the door open?" Agee asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Barnett said, smiling patiently. "He wouldn't want oil all over the ship. And he wouldn't want it to drain out accidentally."

"We can't take off," Agee insisted.

"Why not?"

"Because I can't breathe very well under oil. It turns on automatically with the power and there's no way of turning it off."

"Use your head," Barnett told him. "Just tie down the drain switch. The oil will be carried away as fast as it comes in."

"Yeah, I hadn't thought of that," Agee admitted unhappily.

"Go ahead, then."

"I want to change my clothes first."

"No. Get this damned ship off the ground."

"But, Captain—"

"Get her moving," Barnett ordered. "For all we know, that alien is planning something."

Agee shrugged his shoulders, returned to the p

thestrapped in.

"Ready?"

"Yes, get her moving."

He tied down the drain tircuit and the oil flowed safely. He ac not rising higher than the tops of his shoes. He ac controls without further incident.

"Here goes." He set minimum acceleration and blew o for luck.

Then he punched the blast-switch.

With profound regret, Kalen watched his ship depart holding the thetnite bomb in his hand.

He had reached his ship, had even stood under seconds. Then he had crept back to the alien vessel.

tunable to set the bomb. Centuries of conditioning wer overcome in a few hours.

Conditioning—and something more.

Few individuals of any race murder for pleasure. The adequate reasons to kill, though, reasons which mig philosopher.

But, once accepted, there are more reasons, and more And murder, once accepted, is hard to stop. It leads to irre and, from there, to annihilation.

Kalen felt that this murder somehow involved the race. His abstinence had been almost a matter of race-su But it didn't make him feel any better.

He watched his ship dwindle to a dot in the sky. T leaving at a ridiculously slow speed. He could think of this, unless they were doing it for his benefit.

Undoubtedly they were sadistic enough for that.

Kalen returned to the ship. His will to live was as stro had no intention of giving up. He would hang onto lif could, hoping for the one chance in a million that woul ship to this planet.

Looking around, he thought that he might concoct a out of the skull-marked cleanser. It would sustain him fo Then, if he could open the kerla nut . . .

He thought he heard a noise outside and rushed to look. The sky was empty. His ship had vanished, and he was alone.

He returned to the alien ship and set about the serious business of staying alive.

As Agee recovered consciousness, he found that he had managed to cut the acceleration in half, just before passing out. This was the only thing that had saved his life.

And the acceleration, hovering just above zero on the dial, was unbearably heavy! Agee unsealed the door and crawled out.

Barnett and Victor had burst their straps on the takeoff. Victor was returning to consciousness. Barnett picked himself out of a pile of smashed cases.

"Do you think you're flying in a circus?" he complained. "I told you *minimum acceleration.*"

"I started *under* minimum acceleration," Agee said. "Go read the tape for yourself."

Barnett marched to the control room. He came out quickly.

"That's bad. Our alien friend operates this ship at three times acceleration."

"That's the way it looks."

"I hadn't thought of that," Barnett said thoughtfully. "He must come from a heavy planet—a place where you have to blast out at high speed, if you expect to get out at all."

"What hit me?" Victor groaned, rubbing his head.

There was a clicking in the walls. The ship was fully awake now, and its servos turned on automatically.

"Getting warm, isn't it?" Victor asked.

"Yeah, and thick," Agee said. "Pressure buildup." He went back to the control room. Barnett and Victor stood anxiously in the doorway, waiting.

"I can't turn it off," Agee said, wiping perspiration from his streaming face.

"The temperature and pressure are auto-matic. They must go to 'normal' as soon as the ship is in flight."

"You damn well better turn them off," Barnett told him. "We'll fry in here if you don't."

"There's no way."

"He must have some kind of heat regulation."

"Sure—there!" Agee said, pointing. "The control is lowest point."

"What do you suppose his normal temperature is?"

"I'd hate to find out," Agee said. "This ship is built to withstand the pressure of an Earth ship. Put those together and you must be able to turn it off somewhere!" Barnett peeled off his jacket and sweater. The heat was mounting. The deck was becoming too hot to stand on. "Turn it off!"

"Wait a minute," Agee said. "I didn't build this ship. How should I know—?"

"Off!" Victor screamed, shaking Agee up and down.

"Off!"

"Let go!" Agee half-drew his blaster. Then, in a burst, he turned off the ship's engines.

The clicking in the walls stopped. The room began to cool.

"The temperature and pressure fall when the engines stop," Agee said. "We're safe—as long as we don't move."

"How long will it take us to coast to a port?"

Agee figured it out. "About three years, if we don't stop."

"Isn't there any way we can rip out those servos?"

"They're built into the guts of the ship," Agee said. "It would be a machine shop and skilled help. Even then, it wouldn't be worth it."

Barnett was silent for a long time. Finally he said, "All right what?"

"We're licked. We've got to go back to that planet as soon as we can."

Agee heaved a sigh of relief and punched a new tape into the ship's tape.

"You think the alien'll give it back?" Victor asked. "Sure, if he's not dead. He'll be back soon."



pretty anxious to get his own ship back. And he has to leave our ship to get in his." Even if he had wanted to hurry, Kalen didn't have the need to pilot his ship. But he knew that he was safe, once inside.

"Sure. But once he gets back in this ship . . ."

"We'll gimmick the controls," Barnett said. "That'll slow him down."

"For a little while," Agee pointed out. "But he'll get into the air, life-giving yellow air. For long minutes, Kalen just breathes it. Then he lugged three of the biggest kerla nuts he could find, and he'll be back sooner or later, with blood in his eye. We'll never outrun him."

"We won't have to," Barnett said. "All we have to do is get into the and let the Cracker open them."

air first. He's got a strong hull, but I don't think it'll take three atomic bombs." After eating, he felt much better. He let the Changer take the first layer off. The second layer was dead, too, and the Changer cut it off.

"I hadn't thought of that," Agee said, smiling faintly.

"Only logical move," Barnett said complacently. "The alloys in the hull will still be worth something. Now, get us back without frying us, if

you can." There was no other way to explain why they had come back.

Agee turned the engines on. He swung the ship around in a tightship.

curve, piling on all the Gs they could stand. The servos clicked on, and Therefore, he would find their authorities and report the the temperature shot rapidly up. Once the curve was rounded, Ageeplanet. They could be found and cured, once and for all.

pointed *Endeavor II* in the right direction and shut off the engines. Kalen felt very happy. He had not deviated from the Mabo

They coasted most of the way. But when they reached the planet, that was the important thing. He could so easily have left the Agee had to leave the engines on, to bring them around their ship, all set and timed. He could have wrecked their deceleration spiral and into the landing. There *had* been a temptation.

They were barely able to get out of the ship. Their skins were blistered and their shoes burned through. There was no time to gimmick the controls. But he had not. He had done nothing at all. All he had done was construct a few minimum essential systems for the preservation of life.

They retreated to the woods and waited.

"Perhaps he's dead," Agee said hopefully.

They saw a small figure emerge from *Endeavor I*. The alien was moving slowly, but he was moving.

They watched. "Suppose," Victor said, "he's made a weapon of some kind. Suppose he comes after us."

"Suppose you shut up," Barnett said.

The alien walked directly to his own ship. He went inside and shut the locks.

"All right," Barnett said, standing up. "We'd better blast off in a hurry. Agee, you take the controls. I'll connect the piles. Victor, you secure the locks. Let's go!"

They sprinted across the plain and, in a matter of seconds, had reached the open airlock of *Endeavor I*.

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If Victor had been touching the side of the ship, he would have been electrocuted instantly.

They shorted out the system and entered the ship.

It was a mess. Everything movable had been ripped up and strewn around. There was a bent steel bar in a corner. Their high-potency acid had been spilled over the deck and had eaten through in several places. The *Endeavor's* old hull was holed.

"I never thought *he'd* gimmick *us!*" Agee said.

They explored further. Toward the rear was another booby trap. The cargo hold door had been cunningly rigged to the small starter motor. If anyone touched it, the door would be slammed against the wall. A man caught between would be crushed.

There were other hookups that gave no hint of their purpose.

"Can we fix it?" Barnett asked.

Agee shrugged his shoulders. "Most of our tools are still on board *Endeavor II*. I suppose we can get her patched up inside of a year. But even then, I don't know if the hull will hold."

They walked outside. The alien ship blasted off.

"What a monster!" Barnett said, looking at the acid-eaten hull of his ship.

"You can never tell what an alien will do," Agee answered.

"The only good alien is a dead alien," Victor said.

*Endeavor I* was now as incomprehensible and dangerous as *Endeavor II*. And *Endeavor II* was gone.

## SOMETHING FOR NOTHING {pages 95 to 108}

But had he heard a voice? He couldn't be sure. Reconstructing it a moment later, Joe Collins knew he had been lying on his bed, too tired even to take his waterlogged shoes off the blanket. He had been staring at the network of cracks in the muddy yellow ceiling, watching water drip slowly and mournfully through.

It must have happened then. Collins caught a glimpse of metal beside his bed. He sat up. There was a machine on the floor, where no machine had been.

In that first moment of surprise, Collins thought he heard a very distant voice say, "There! That does it!"

He couldn't be sure of the voice. But the machine was undeniably there.

Collins knelt to examine it. The machine was about three feet square and it was humming softly. The crackle-grey surface was featureless, except for a red button in one corner and a brass plate in the centre. The plate said, CLASS-A UTILIZER, SERIES AA-1256432. And underneath, WARNING! THIS MACHINE SHOULD BE USED ONLY BY CLASS-A RATINGS!

That was all.

There were no knobs, dials, switches or any of the other attachments Collins associated with machines. Just the brass plate, the red button and the hum.

"Where did you come from?" Collins asked. The Class-A Utilizer continued to hum. He hadn't really expected an answer. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he stared thoughtfully at the Utilizer. The question now was – what to do with it?

He touched the red button warily, aware of his lack of experience with machines that fell from nowhere. When he turned it on, would the floor open up? Would little green men drop from the ceiling?

But he had slightly less than nothing to lose. He pressed the button lightly.

Nothing happened.

"All right – do something," Collins said, feeling definitely let down. The Utilizer only continued to hum softly.

Well, he could always pawn it. Honest Charlie would give him at least a dollar for the metal. He tried to lift the Utilizer. It wouldn't lift. He tried again, exerting all his strength, and succeeded in raising one corner an inch from the floor. He released it and sat down on the bed, breathing heavily.

"You should have sent a couple of men to help me," Collins told the Utilizer. Immediately, the hum grew louder and the machine started to vibrate.

Collins watched, but still nothing happened. On a hunch, he reached out and stabbed the red button.

Immediately, two bulky men appeared, dressed in rough work-clothes. They looked at the Utilizer appraisingly. One of them said, "Thank God, it's the small model. The big ones is brutes to get a grip on."

The other man said, "It beats the marble quarry, don't it?"

They looked at Collins, who stared back. Finally the first man said, "Okay, Mac, we ain't got all day. Where you want it?"

"Who are you?" Collins managed to croak.

"The moving men. Do we look like the Vanizaggi Sisters?"

"But where do you come from?" Collins asked. "And why?"

"We come from the Powha Minnile Movers, Incorporated," the man said. "And we came because you wanted movers, that's why. Now, where you want it?"

"Go away," Collins said. "I'll call for you later."

The moving men shrugged their shoulders and vanished. For several minutes, Collins stared at the spot where they had been. Then he stared at the Class-A Utilizer, which was humming softly again.

Utilizer? He could give it a better name.

A Wishing Machine.

Collins was not particularly shocked. When the miraculous occurs, only dull, workaday mentalities are unable to accept it. Collins was certainly not one of those. He had an excellent background for acceptance.

Most of his life had been spent wishing, hoping, praying that something marvellous would happen to him. In high school, he had dreamed of waking up some morning with an ability to know his homework without the tedious necessity of studying it. In the army, he had wished for some witch or jinn to change his orders, putting him in charge of the day room, instead of forcing him to do close-order drill like everyone else.

Out of the army, Collins had avoided work, for which he was psychologically unsuited. He had drifted around, hoping that some fabulously wealthy person would be induced to change his will, leaving him Everything.

He had never really expected anything to happen. But he was prepared when it did.

"I'd like a thousand dollars in small unmarked bills," Collins said cautiously. When the hum grew louder, he pressed the button. In front of him appeared a large mound of soiled singles, five and ten dollar bills. They were not crisp, but they certainly were money.

Collins threw a handful in the air and watched it settle beautifully to the floor. He lay on his bed and began making plans.

First, he would get the machine out of New York – upstate, perhaps – some place where he wouldn't be bothered by nosy neighbours. The income tax would be tricky on this sort of thing. Perhaps, after he got organised, he should go to Central America, or ...

There was a suspicious noise in the room.

Collins leaped to his feet. A hole was opening in the wall, and someone was forcing his way through.

"Hey, I didn't ask you anything!" Collins told the machine.

The hole grew larger, and a large, red-faced man was half-way through, pushing angrily at the hole.

At that moment, Collins remembered that machines usually have owners. Anyone who owned a wishing machine wouldn't take kindly to having it gone. He would go to any lengths to recover it. Probably, he wouldn't stop short of – "Protect me!" Collins shouted at the Utilizer, and stabbed the red button.

A small, bald man in loud pyjamas appeared, yawning sleepily. "Sanisa Leek, Temporal Wall Protection Service," he said, rubbing his eyes. "I'm Leek. What can I do for you?"

"Get him out of here!" Collins screamed. The red-faced man, waving his arms wildly, was almost through the hole.

Leek found a bit of bright metal in his pyjamas pocket. The red-faced man shouted, "Wait! You don't understand! That man –"

Leek pointed his piece of metal. The red-faced man screamed and vanished. In another moment the hole had vanished too.

"Did you kill him?" Collins asked.

"Of course not," Leek said, putting away the bit of metal. "I just veered him back through his glommatch. He won't try that way again."

"You mean he'll try some other way?" Collins asked.

"It's possible," Leek said. "He could attempt a micro-transfer, or even an animation." He looked sharply at Collins.

"This is your Utilizer, isn't it?"

"Of course," Collins said, starting to perspire.

"And you're an A-rating?"

"Naturally," Collins told him. "If I wasn't, what would I be doing with a Utilizer?"

"No offence," Leek said drowsily, "just being friendly." He shook his head slowly. "How you A's get around! I suppose you've come back here to do a history book?"

Collins just smiled enigmatically.

"I'll be on my way," Leek said, yawning copiously. "On the go, night and day. I'd be better off in a quarry."

And he vanished in the middle of a yawn.

Rain was still beating against the ceiling. Across the airshaft, the snoring continued, undisturbed. Collins was alone again, with the machine.

And with a thousand dollars in small bills scattered around the floor.

He patted the Utilizer affectionately. Those A-ratings had it pretty good. Want something? Just ask for it and press a button. Undoubtedly, the real owner missed it.

Leek had said that the man might try to get in some other way. What way?

What did it matter? Collins gathered up the bills, whistling softly. As long as he had the wishing machine, he could take care of himself.

The next few days marked a great change in Collins's fortunes. With the aid of the Powha Minnile Movers he took the

Utilizer to upstate New York. There, he bought a medium-sized mountain in a neglected corner of the Adirondacks. Once the papers were in his hands, he walked to the centre of his property, several miles from the highway. The two movers, sweating profusely, lugged the Utilizer behind him, cursing monotonously as they broke through the dense underbrush.

"Set it down here and scram," Collins said. The last few days had done a lot for his confidence.

The moving men sighed wearily and vanished. Collins looked around. On all sides, as far as he could see, was closely spaced forest of birch and pine. The air was sweet and damp. Birds were chirping merrily in the treetops, and an occasional squirrel darted by.

Nature! He had always loved nature. This would be the perfect spot to build a large, impressive house with a swimming pool, tennis courts and, possibly, a small airport.

"I want a house," Collins stated firmly, and pushed the red button.

A man in a neat grey business suit and pince-nez appeared. "Yes, sir," he said, squinting at the trees, "but you really must be more specific. Do you want something classic, like a bungalow, ranch, split-level, mansion, castle or palace? Or primitive, like an igloo or hut? Since you are an A, you could have something up-to-the-minute, like a semi face, an Extended New or a Sunken Miniature."

"Huh?" Collins said. "I don't know. What would you suggest?"

"Small mansion," the man said promptly. "They usually start with that."

"They do?"

"Oh, yes. Later, they move to a warm climate and build a palace."

Collins wanted to ask more questions, but he decided against it. Everything was going smoothly. These people thought he was an A, and the true owner of the Utilizer. There was no sense in disenchanting them.

"You take care of it all," he told the man.

"Yes, sir," the man said. "I usually do."

The rest of the day, Collins reclined on a couch and drank iced beverages while the Maxima Olph Construction Company materialised equipment and put up his house.

It was a low-slung affair of some twenty rooms, which Collins considered quite modest under the circumstances. It was built only of the best materials, from a design of Mig of Degma, interior by Towige, a Mula swimming pool and formal gardens by Vierien.

By evening, it was completed, and the small army of workmen packed up their equipment and vanished.

Collins allowed his chef to prepare a light supper for him. Afterward, he sat in his large, cool living-room to think the whole thing over. In front of him, humming gently, sat the Utilizer.

Collins lighted a cheroot and sniffed the aroma. First of all, he rejected any supernatural explanations. There were no demons or devils involved in this. His house had been built by ordinary human beings, who swore and laughed and cursed like human beings. The Utilizer was simply a scientific gadget, which worked on principles he didn't understand or care to understand.

Could it have come from another planet? Not likely. They wouldn't have learned English just for him.

The Utilizer must have come from the Earth's future. But how?

Collins leaned back and puffed his cheroot. Accidents will happen, he reminded himself. Why couldn't the Utilizer have just slipped into the past? After all, it could create something from nothing, and that was much more complicated. What a wonderful future it must be, he thought. Wishing machines! How marvellously civilised! All a person had to do was think of something. Presto! There it was. In time, perhaps, they'd eliminate the red button. Then there'd be no manual labour involved.

Of course, he'd have to watch his step. There was still the owner – and the rest of the A's. They would try to take the machine from him. Probably, they were a hereditary clique ...

A movement caught the edge of his eye and he looked up. The Utilizer was quivering like a leaf in a gale.

Collins walked up to it, frowning blackly. A faint mist of steam surrounded the trembling Utilizer. It seemed to be overheating.

Could he have overworked it? Perhaps a bucket of water ...

Then he noticed that the Utilizer was perceptibly smaller. It was no more than two feet square and shrinking before his eyes.

The owner! Or perhaps the A's! This must be the micro-transfer that Leek had talked about. If he didn't do something quickly, Collins knew, his wishing machine would dwindle to nothingness and disappear.

"Leek Protection Services," Collins snapped. He punched the button and withdrew his hand quickly. The machine was very hot.

Leek appeared in a corner of the room, wearing slacks and a sports shirt, and carrying a golf club. "Must I be disturbed every time I –"

"Do something!" Collins shouted, pointing to the Utilizer, which was now only a foot square and glowing a dull red.

"Nothing I can do," Leek said. "Temporal wall is all I'm licensed for. You want the microcontrol people." He hefted his golf club and was gone.

"Microcontrol," Collins said, and reached for the button. He withdrew his hand hastily. The Utilizer was only about four inches on a side now and glowing a hot cherry red. He could barely see the button, which was the size of a pin. Collins whirled around, grabbed a cushion and punched down.

A girl with horn-rimmed glasses appeared, note-book in hand, pencil poised. "With whom did you wish to make an

appointment?" she asked sedately.

"Get me help fast!" Collins roared, watching his precious Utilizer grow smaller and smaller.

"Mr. Vergon is out to lunch," the girl said, biting her pencil thoughtfully. "He's de-zoned himself. I can't reach him."

"Who can you reach?"

She consulted her note-book. "Mr. Vis is in the Dieg Continuum and Mr. Elgis is doing field work in Paleolithic Europe. If you're really in a rush, maybe you'd better call Transferpoint Control. They're a smaller outfit, but –"

"Transferpoint Control. Okay – scram." He turned his full attention to the Utilizer and stabbed down on it with the scorched pillow. Nothing happened. The Utilizer was barely half an inch square, and Collins realised that the cushion hadn't been able to depress the almost invisible button.

For a moment Collins considered letting the Utilizer go. Maybe this was the time. He could sell the house, the furnishings, and still be pretty well off ...

No! He hadn't wished for anything important yet! No one was going to take it from him without a struggle.

He forced himself to keep his eyes open as he stabbed the white-hot button with a rigid forefinger.

A thin, shabbily dressed old man appeared, holding something that looked like a gaily coloured Easter egg. He threw it down. The egg burst and an orange smoke billowed out and was sucked into the infinitesimal Utilizer. A great billow of smoke went up, almost choking Collins. Then the Utilizer's shape started to form again. Soon, it was normal size and apparently undamaged. The old man nodded curtly.

"We're not fancy," he said, "but we're reliable." He nodded again and disappeared.

Collins thought he could hear a distant shout of anger.

Shakily, he sat down on the floor in front of the machine. His hand was throbbing painfully.

"Fix me up," he muttered through dry lips, and punched the button with his good hand.

The Utilizer hummed louder for a moment, then was silent. The pain left his scorched finger and, looking down, Collins saw that there was no sign of a burn – not even scar tissue to mark where it had been.

Collins poured himself a long shot of brandy and went directly to bed. That night, he dreamed he was being chased by a gigantic letter A, but he didn't remember it in the morning.

Within a week, Collins found that building his mansion in the woods had been precisely the wrong thing to do. He had to hire a platoon of guards to keep away sightseers, and hunters insisted on camping in his formal gardens.

Also, the Bureau of Internal Revenue began to take a lively interest in his affairs.

But, above all, Collins discovered that he wasn't so fond of nature after all. Birds and squirrels were all very well, but they hardly ranked as conversationalists. Trees, though quite ornamental, made poor drinking companions.

Collins decided he was a city boy at heart.

Therefore, with the aid of the Powha Minnile Movers, the Maxima Olph Construction Corporation, the Jagton Instantaneous Travel Bureau and a great deal of money placed in the proper hands, Collins moved to a small Central American republic. There, since the climate was warmer and income tax non-existent, he built a large, airy, ostentatious palace.

It came equipped with the usual accessories – horses, dogs, peacocks, servants, maintenance men, guards, musicians, beves of dancing girls and everything else a palace should have. Collins spent two weeks just exploring the place.

Everything went along nicely for a while.

One morning Collins approached the Utilizer, with the vague intention of asking for a sports car, or possibly a small herd of pedigreed cattle. He bent over the grey machine, reached for the red button ...

And the Utilizer backed away from him.

For a moment, Collins thought he was seeing things, and he almost decided to stop drinking champagne before breakfast. He took a step forward and reached for the red button.

The Utilizer sidestepped him neatly and trotted out of the room.

Collins sprinted after it, cursing the owner and the A's. This was probably the animation that Leek had spoken about – somehow, the owner had managed to imbue the machine with mobility. It didn't matter. All he had to do was catch up, punch the button and ask for the Animation Control people.

The Utilizer raced down a hall, Collins close behind. An under-butler, polishing a solid gold doorknob, stared open-mouthed.

"Stop it!" Collins shouted.

The under-butler moved clumsily into the Utilizer's path. The machine dodged him gracefully and sprinted towards the main door.

Collins pushed a switch and the door slammed shut.

The Utilizer gathered momentum and went right through it. Once in the open, it tripped over a garden hose, regained its balance and headed towards the open countryside.

Collins raced after it. If he could just get a little closer ...

The Utilizer suddenly leaped into the air. It hung there for a long moment, then fell to the ground. Collins sprang at the button.

The Utilizer rolled out of his way, took a short run and leaped again. For a moment, it hung twenty feet above his head – drifted a few feet straight up, stopped twisted wildly and fell.

Collins was afraid that, on a third jump, it would keep going up. When it drifted unwillingly back to the ground, he was ready. He fainted, then stabbed at the button. The Utilizer couldn't duck fast enough.

"Animation Control!" Collins roared triumphantly.

There was a small explosion, and the Utilizer settled down docilely. There was no hint of animation left in it. Collins wiped his forehead and sat on the machine. Closer and closer. He'd better do some big wishing now, while he still had the chance.

In rapid succession, he asked for five million dollars, three functioning oil wells, a motion-picture studio, perfect health, twenty-five more dancing girls, immortality, a sports car and a herd of pedigreed cattle.

He thought he heard someone snicker. He looked around. No one was there.

When he turned back, the Utilizer had vanished.

He just stared. And, in another moment, he vanished.

When he opened his eyes, Collins found himself standing in front of a desk. On the other side was the large, red-faced man who had originally tried to break into his room. The man didn't appear angry. Rather, he appeared resigned, even melancholy.

Collins stood for a moment in silence, sorry that the whole thing was over. The owner and the A's had finally caught him. But it had been glorious while it lasted.

"Well," Collins said directly, "you've got your machine back. Now, what else do you want?"

"My machine?" the red-faced man said, looking up incredulously. "It's not my machine, sir. Not at all."

Collins stared at him. "Don't try to kid me, mister. You A-ratings want to protect your monopoly, don't you?"

The red-faced man put down his paper. "Mr. Collins," he said stiffly, "my name is Flign. I am an agent for the Citizens Protective Union, a non-profit organisation, whose aim is to protect individuals such as yourself from errors of judgement."

"You mean you're not one of the A's?"

"You are labouring under a misapprehension, sir," Flign said with quiet dignity. "The A-rating does not represent a social group, as you seem to believe. It is merely a credit rating."

"A what?" Collins asked slowly.

"A credit rating," Flign glanced at his watch. "We haven't much time, so I'll make this as brief as possible. Ours is a decentralised age, Mr. Collins. Our businesses, industries and services are scattered through an appreciable portion of space and time. The utilization corporation is an essential link. It provides for the transfer of goods and services from point to point. Do you understand?"

Collins nodded.

"Credit is, of course, an automatic privilege. But, eventually, everything must be paid for."

Collins didn't like the sound of that. Pay? This place wasn't as civilised as he had thought. No one had mentioned paying. Why did they bring it up now?

"Why didn't someone stop me?" he asked desperately. "They must have known I didn't have a proper rating."

Flign shook his head. "The credit ratings are suggestions, not laws. In a civilised world, an individual has the right to his own decisions. I'm very sorry, sir." He glanced at his watch again and handed Collins the paper he had been reading. "Would you just glance at this bill and tell me whether it's in order?"

Collins took the paper and read:

One Palace, with Accessories .....	Cr. 45,000,000
Services of Maxima Olph Movers.....	111,000
122 Dancing Girls.....	122,000,000
Perfect Health.....	888,234,031

He scanned the rest of the list quickly. The total came to slightly better than eighteen billion Credits.

"Wait a minute!" Collins shouted. "I can't be held to this! The Utilizer just dropped into my room by accident!"

"That's the very fact I'm going to bring to their attention," Flign said. "Who knows? Perhaps they will be reasonable. It does no harm to try."

Collins felt the room sway. Flign's face began to melt before him.

"Time's up," Flign said. "Good luck."

Collins closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he was standing on a bleak plain, facing a range of stubby mountains. A cold wind lashed his face and the sky was the colour of steel.

A raggedly dressed man was standing beside him. "Here," the man said and handed Collins a pick.

"What's this?"

"This is a pick," the man said patiently. "And over there is a quarry, where you and I and a number of others will cut marble."

"Marble?"

"Sure. There's always some idiot who wants a palace," the man said with a wry grin. "You can call me Jang. We'll be together for some time."

Collins blinked stupidly. "How long?"

"You work it out," Jang said. "The rate is fifty credits a month until your debt is paid off."

The pick dropped from Collins's hand. They couldn't do this to him! The Utilization Corporation must realise its mistake by now! They had been at fault, letting the machine slip into the past. Didn't they realise that?

"It's all a mistake!" Collins said.

"No mistake," Jang said. "They're very short of labour. Have to go recruiting all over for it. Come on. After the first thousand years you won't mind it."

Collins started to follow Jang towards the quarry. He stopped.

"The first thousand years? I won't live that long!"

"Sure you will," Jang assured him. "You got immortality, didn't you?"

Yes, he had. He had wished for it, just before they took back the machine. Or had they taken back the machine after he wished for it?

Collins remembered something. Strange, but he didn't remember seeing immortality on the bill Flighn had shown him.

"How much did they charge me for immortality?" he asked.

Jang looked at him and laughed. "Don't be naïve, pal. You should have it figured out by now."

He led Collins towards the quarry. "Naturally, they give that away for nothing."

## A Ticket to Tranai {Pages 108 to 109}

One fine day in June, a tall, thin, intent, soberly dressed young man walked into the offices of the Transstellar Travel Agency. Without a glance, he marched past the gaudy travel poster depicting the Harvest Feast on Mars. The enormous photomural of dancing forests on Triganium didn't catch his eye. He ignored the somewhat suggestive painting of dawn-rites on Opiuchus II, and arrived at the desk of the book-ing agent.

"I would like to book passage to Tranai," the young man said.

The agent closed his copy of *Necessary Inventions* and frowned. "Tranai? Tranai? Is that one of the moons of Kent IV?"

"It is not," the young man said. "Tranai is a planet, revolv-ing around a sun of the same name. I want to book passage there."

"Never heard of it." The agent pulled down a star cata-logue, a simplified star chart, and a copy of *Lesser Space Routes*.

"Well, now," he said finally. "You learn something new every day. You want to book passage to Tranai, Mister—"

"Goodman. Marvin Goodman."

"Goodman. Well, it seems that Tranai is about as far from Earth as one can get and still be in the Milky Way. *Nobody* goes there."

"I know. Can you arrange passage for me?" Goodman asked, with a hint of suppressed excitement in his voice.

The agent shook his head. "Not a chance. Even the non-skeds don't go that far."

"How close can you get me?"

The agent gave him a winning smile. "Why bother? I can send you to a world that'll have everything this Tranai place has, with the additional advantages of proximity, bargain rates, decent hotels, tours—"

"I'm going to Tranai," Goodman said grimly.

"But there's no way of getting there," the agent explained patiently. "What is it you expected to find? Perhaps I could help."

"You can help by booking me as far as—"

"Is it adventure?" the agent asked, quickly sizing up Good-man's unathletic build and scholarly stoop. "Let me suggest Africanus II, a dawn-age world filled with savage tribes, saber-teeth, man-eating ferns, quicksand, active volcanoes, ptero-dactyls and all the rest. Expeditions leave New York every five days and they combine the utmost in danger with absolute safety. A dinosaur head guaranteed or your money re-funded."

"Tranai," Goodman said.

"Hmm." The clerk looked appraisingly at Goodman's set lips and uncompromising eyes. "Perhaps you are tired of the puritanical restrictions of Earth? Then let me suggest a trip to Almagordo III, the Pearl of the Southern Ridge Belt. Our ten day all-expense plan includes a trip through the mysterious Almagordian Casbah, visits to eight nightclubs (first drink on us), a trip to a zintal factory, where you can buy genuine zintal belts, shoes and pocketbooks at phenomenal savings, and a tour through two distilleries. The girls of Almagordo are beautiful, vivacious and refreshingly naïve. They consider the Tourist the highest and most desirable type of human being. Also—"

"Tranai," Goodman said. "How close can you get me?"

Sullenly the clerk extracted a strip of tickets. "You can take the *Constellation Queen* as far as Legis II and transfer to the *Galactic Splendor*, which will take you to Oume. Then you'll have to board a local, which, after stopping at Machang, Inch-ang, Pankang, Lekung and Oyster, will leave you at Tung-Bradard IV, if it doesn't break down en route. Then a non-sked will transport you past the Galactic Whirl (if it gets past) to Aoomsridgia, from which the mail ship will take you to





ping the exotic, green-gray mixture, Goodman too was lost in the dream. Finally, very gently, he asked, "Why don't you go back, Captain?"

The old man shook his head. "Space gout. I'm grounded for good. We didn't know much about modern medicine in those days. All I'm good for now is a landsman's job."

"What job do you have?"

"I'm a foreman for the Seakirk Construction Corporation," the old man sighed. "Me, that once commanded a fifty-tube clipper. The way those people make concrete. . . . Shall we have another short one in honor of beautiful Tranai?"

They had several short ones. When Goodman left the bar, his mind was made up. Somewhere in the Universe, the *modus vivendi* had been found, the working solution to Man's old dream of perfection. He could settle for nothing less.

The next day, he quit his job as designer at the East Coast Robot Works and drew his life savings out of the bank. He was going to Tranai.

He boarded the *Constellation Queen* for Legis II and took the *Galactic Splendor* to Oume. After stopping at Machang, Inchang, Pankang, Lekung and Oyster—dreary little places—he reached Tung-Bradar IV. Without incident, he passed the Galactic Whirl and finally reached Bellismoranti, where the influence of Terra ended.

For an exorbitant fee, a local spaceline took him to Dvasta II. From there, a freighter transported him past Seves, Olgo and Mi, to the double planet Mvanti. There he was bogged down for three months and used the time to take a hypno-pedic course in the Tranaian language. At last he hired a bush pilot to take him to Ding.

On Ding, he was arrested as a Higastomeritreian spy, but managed to escape the cargo of an ore rocket bound for g'Moree. At g'Moree, he was treated for frostbite, heat poisoning and superficial radiation burns, and at last arranged passage to Tranai.

He could hardly believe it when the ship slipped past the moons Doe and Ri, to land at Port Tranai.

After the airlocks opened, Goodman found himself of profound depression. Part of it was plain letdown after a journey such as his. But more than that, he

He had crossed the Galaxy on the basis of an old yarn. But now it all seemed less likely. Eldorado was probably a more probable place than the Tranai he expected to find.

He disembarked. Port Tranai seemed a pleasant surprise. The streets were filled with people and the shops were high with goods. The men he passed looked much more high with goods. The women were quite attractive. But there was something strange here, something definitely wrong, something *alien*. It took a month or so before he could puzzle it out.

Then he realized that there were at least ten women in sight. And stranger still, practically all the women he saw apparently were under eighteen or over thirty. What had happened to the nineteen-to-thirty-fifty age group? Was there a taboo on their appearing in public?

He would just have to wait and find out.

He went to the Idrig Building, where the government functions were carried out, and procured an office at the office of the Extraterrestrials Minister. He was not alone. The office was small and cluttered, with strange symbols and pictures on the wallpaper. What struck Goodman at once was a high-powered rifle complete with silencer and telescope hanging ominously from one wall. He had no time to think on this, for the minister bounded out of his chair and shook Goodman's hand.

The minister was a stout, jolly man of about fifty. Around his neck he wore a small medallion stamped with the symbol of a bolt of lightning splitting an ear of corn. Goodman recognized correctly, that this was an official seal of office.

"Welcome to Tranai," the minister said heartily, and he piled a pile of papers from a chair and motioned Goodman to sit. "Mister Minister—" Goodman began, in formal Tranai.

"Den Melith is the name. Call me Den. We're all quite informal around here. Put your feet up on the desk and make yourself at home. Cigar?"

"No, thank you," Goodman said, somewhat taken back. "Mister—ah—Den, I have come from Terra, a planet you may have heard of."

"Sure I have," said Melith. "Nervous, hustling sort of place, isn't it? No offense intended, of course."

"Of course. That's exactly how I feel about it. The reason I came here—" Goodman hesitated, hoping he wouldn't sound too ridiculous. "Well, I heard certain stories about Tranai. Thinking them over now, they seem preposterous. But if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you—"

"Ask anything," Melith said expansively. "You'll get a straight answer."

"Thank you. I heard that there has been no war of any sort on Tranai for four hundred years."

"Six hundred," Melith corrected. "And none in sight."

"Someone told me that there is no crime on Tranai."

"None whatsoever."

"And therefore no police force or courts, no judges, sheriffs, marshals, executioners, truant officers or government investigators. No prisons, reformatories or other places of detention."

"We have no need of them," Melith explained, "since we have no crime."

"I have heard," said Goodman, "that there is no poverty on Tranai."

"None that I ever heard of," Melith said cheerfully. "Are you sure you won't have a cigar?"

"No, thank you," Goodman was leaning forward eagerly now. "I understand that you have achieved a stable economy without resorting to socialistic, communistic, fascistic or bureaucratic practices."

"Certainly," Melith said.

"That yours is, in fact, a free enterprise society, where individual initiative flourishes and governmental functions are kept to an absolute minimum."

Melith nodded. "By and large, the government concerns it-self with minor regulatory matters, care of the aged and beautifying the landscape."

"Is it true that you have discovered a method of wealth without resorting to governmental intervention, without based entirely upon individual choice?" Goodman challenged.

"Oh, yes, absolutely."

"Is it true that there is no corruption in any phase of government?"

"None," Melith said. "I suppose that's why we have a hard men to hold public office."

"Then Captain Savage was right!" Goodman cried, unable himself any longer. "This is Utopia!"

"We like it," Melith said.

Goodman took a deep breath and asked, "May I stay here?"

"Why not?" Melith pulled out a form. "We have no immigration. Tell me, what is your occupation?"

"On Earth, I was a robot designer."

"Plenty of openings in that," Melith started to fill in the form, emitted a blob of ink. Casually, the minister threw the pen at the wall where it shattered, adding another blue blotch to the wallpaper.

"We'll make out the paper some other time," he said.

"mood now." He leaned back in his chair. "Let me give you advice. Here on Tranai, we feel that we have come pretty close as you call it. But ours is not a highly organized state with a complicated set of laws. We live by observance of a number of laws, or cus-toms, as you might call them. You will discover that you would be advised—although certainly not ordered—to

"Of course I will," Goodman exclaimed. "I can assure you of my intention of endangering any phase of your paradise."

"Oh, I wasn't worried about *us*," Melith said with an air of indifference. "It was your own safety I was considering. Perhaps my wife has given you some advice for you."

He pushed a large red button on his desk. Immediately a bluish haze. The haze solidified, and in a moment Goodman found himself alone with a handsome young woman standing before him.

"Good morning, my dear," she said to Melith.

"It's afternoon," Melith informed her. "My dear, this young

!

man came all the way from Earth to live on Tranai. I gave him the usual advice. Is there anything else we can do for him?"

Mrs. Melith thought for a moment, then asked Goodman, "Are you married?"

"No, ma'am," Goodman answered.

"In that case, he should meet a nice girl," Mrs. Melith told her husband. "Bachelorhood is not encouraged on Tranai, although certainly not prohibited. Let me see . . . How about that cute Driganti girl?"

"She's engaged," Melith said.

"Really? Have I been in stasis *that* long? My dear, it's not too thoughtful of you."

"I was busy," Melith said apologetically.

"How about Mihna Vensis?"

"Not his type."

"Janna Vley?"

"Perfect!" Melith winked at Goodman. "A most attractive little lady." He found a new pen in his desk, scribbled an address and handed it to Goodman. "My wife will telephone her to be expecting you tomorrow evening."

"And do come around for dinner some night," said Mrs. Melith.

"Delighted," Goodman replied, in a complete daze.

"It's been nice meeting you," Mrs. Melith said. Her husband pushed the red button. The blue haze formed and Mrs. Melith vanished.

"Have to close up now," said Melith, glancing at his watch. "Can't work overtime—people might start talking.. Drop in some day and we'll make out those forms. You really should call on Supreme President Borg, too, at the National Man-sion. Or possibly he'll call on you. Don't let the old fox put anything over on you. And don't forget about Janna." He winked roguishly and escorted Goodman to the door.

In a few moments, Goodman found himself alone on the sidewalk. He had reached Utopia, he told himself, a real, genuine, sure-enough Utopia. But there were some very puzzling things about it. Goodman ate dinner at a small restaurant and checked in

## A Ticket to Tranai

at a nearby hotel. A cheerful bellhop showed him where Goodman stretched out immediately on the bed, rubbed his eyes, trying to sort out his impressions.

So much had happened to him, all in one day! It was bothering him. The ratio of men to women, for example, had meant to ask Melith about that.

But Melith might not be the man to ask, for there were so many curious things about him. Like throwing his pen at a woman. Was that the act of a mature, responsible official? Or was it the act of a wife . . .

Goodman knew that Mrs. Melith had come out of the stasis field; he had recognized the characteristic dizziness used on Terra, too. Sometimes the medical reasons for suspending all activity, all growth, were not clear. Suppose a patient had a desperate need for a drug procurable only on Mars. Simply project the person into the stasis field until the serum could arrive.

But on Terra, only a licensed doctor could operate the stasis field. There were strict penalties for its misuse.

He had never heard of keeping one's wife in one.

Still, if all the wives on Tranai *were* kept in stasis, it would explain the absence of the nineteen-to-thirty-five

women. That would account for the ten-to-one ratio of men to women. But what was the reason for this technological peculiarity?

And something else was on Goodman's mind, something that seemed insignificant, but bothersome all the same.

That rifle on Melith's wall.

Did he hunt game with it? Pretty big game, or was it for practice? Not with a telescopic sight. Why the silence? Why the rifle? Why the silence? Why the rifle? Why the silence? Why the rifle? Why the silence? Why the rifle? Why the silence?

But these were minor matters, Goodman decided. He had to deal with the idiosyncrasies which would become clear when he was back on Tranai. He couldn't expect immediate comprehension of what was, after all, an alien planet.

He was just beginning to doze off when he heard a knock on his door.

"Come in," he called.

A small, furtive, gray-faced man hurried in and closed the door.

door behind him. "You're the man from Terra, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"I figured you'd come here," the little man said, with a pleased smile. "Hit it right the first time. Going to stay on Tranai?"

"I'm here for good."

"Fine," the man said. "How would you like to become Supreme President?"

"Huh?"

"Good pay, easy hours, only a one-year term. You look like a public-spirited type," the man said sunnily. "How about it?"

Goodman hardly knew what to answer. "Do you mean," he asked incredulously, "that you offer the highest office in the land so casually?"

"What do you mean, *casually*?" the little man spluttered. "Do you think we offer the Supreme Presidency to just any-body? It's a great honor to be asked."

"I didn't mean—"

"And you, as a Terran, are uniquely suited."

"Why?"

"Well, it's common knowledge that Terrans derive pleasure from ruling. We Tranians don't, that's all. Too much trouble."

As simple as that. The reformer blood in Goodman began to boil. Ideal as Tranai was, there was undoubtedly room for improvement. He had a sudden vision of himself as ruler of Utopia, doing the great task of making perfection even better. But caution stopped him from agreeing at once. Perhaps the man was a crackpot.

"Thank you for asking me," Goodman said. "I'll have to think it over. Perhaps I should talk with the present incumbent and find out something about the nature of the work."

"Well, why do you think I'm here?" the little man demanded. "I'm Supreme President Borg."

Only then did Goodman notice the official medallion around the little man's neck.

"Let me know your decision. I'll be at the National Mansion." He shook Goodman's hand, and left.

Goodman waited five minutes, then rang for the bellhop. "Who was that man?"

"That was Supreme President Borg," told him. "Did you take the job?"

Goodman shook his head slowly. He suddenly had a *great* deal to learn about Tranai.

The next morning, Goodman listed the factories of Port Tranai in alphabetical order and search of a job. To his amazement, he found one at all, at the very first place he looked. The great Robot Works signed him on after only a cursory

credentials.

His new employer, Mr. Abbag, was short and with a great mane of white hair and an air of personal energy.

"Glad to have a Terran on board," Abbag understood you're an ingenious people and we need some ingenuity around here. I'll be honest with you, Goodman—I'm hoping to profit by your alien visit. We've reached an impasse."

"Is it a production problem?" Goodman asked.

"I'll show you." Abbag led Goodman through the Stamping Room, Heat-Treat, X-ray

Assembly and to the Testing Room. This room was a combination kitchen-living room. A dozen robots stood up against one wall.

"Try one out," Abbag said.

Goodman walked up to the nearest robot and touched its controls. They were simple enough; self-explanatory. He put the machine through a standard repertoire of objects, washing pots and pans, setting a table. The robot's responses were correct enough, but maddeningly slow. On Earth, such sluggishness had been ironed out a long time ago. Apparently they were behind the times here.

"Seems pretty slow," Goodman commented cautiously.

"You're right," Abbag said. "Damned slow, but I think it's about right. But Consumer Research indicates our customers want it slower still."

"Huh?"

"Ridiculous, isn't it?" Abbag asked moodily. "We can't make any money if we slow it down any more. Take a look at

Goodman opened the back panel and blinked at the maze of wiring within. After a moment, he was able to figure it out. The robot was built like a modern Earth machine, with the usual inexpensive high-speed circuits. But special signal-delay relays, impulse-rejection units and step-down gears had been installed.

"Just tell me," Abbag demanded angrily, "how can we slow it down any more without building the thing a third bigger and twice as expensive? I don't know what kind of a disimprovement they'll be asking for next."

Goodman was trying to adjust his thinking to the concept of *disimproving* machine.

On Earth, the plants were always trying to build robots with faster, smoother, more accurate responses. He had never found any reason to question the wisdom of this. He still didn't.

"And as if that weren't enough," Abbag complained, "the new plastic developed for this particular model has catalyzed or some damned thing. Watch."

He drew back his foot and kicked the robot in the middle. The plastic bent like a sheet of tin. He kicked again. The plastic bent still further and the robot began to click and flash pathetically. A third kick shattered the case. The robot's innards exploded in spectacular fashion, scattering over the floor. "Pretty flimsy," Goodman said.

"Not flimsy enough. It's supposed to fly apart on the first kick. Our customers won't get any satisfaction out of stubbing their toes on its stomach all day. But tell me, how am I supposed to produce a plastic that'll take normal wear and tear—we don't want these things falling apart accidentally—and still go to pieces when customer wants it to?"

"Wait a minute," Goodman protested. "Let me get this straight. You purposely slow these robots down so they will irritate people enough to destroy them?" Abbag raised both eyebrows. "Of course!"

"Why?"

"You *are* new here," Abbag said. "Any child knows that."

"It's fundamental."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd explain."

Abbag sighed. "Well, first of all, you are undoubtedly aware that *any* mechanical contrivance is a source of irrita-

Marvin Goodman remembered all the anxious li-

read about machines revolting, cybernetic brains

television set, smashing his toaster against the

aveen" with his car. He remembered all the robot j-

undertone of deep hostility.

"I guess I can go along on that," said Goodman.

"Then allow me to restate the proposition,

pe-dantically. "Any machine is a source of irritat-

machine operates, the stronger the irritation. So-

a *perfectly operating* machine is a focal point i-

loss of self-esteem, undirected resentment—"

"Hold on there!" Goodman objected. "I won't go

—and schizophrenic fantasies," Abba-

"Pretty flimsy," inex-orably. "But machines are necessary to

economy. Therefore the best *human* solution

"The human is an anxious beast. Here on Tr-

anxiety toward this particular point and let it ser-

for a lot of other frustrations as well. I

enough—blam! He kicks hell out of his rob-

immediate and therapeutic discharge of feeling, a

valid—sense of superiority over mere machinery,

general tension, a healthy flow of adrenin into the

and a boost to the industrial economy of Tranai, s-

There was nothing exotic about the date. The  
inexpensive night club, danced, drank a little, talk

Goodman was amazed at their immediate *rapport*. Janna agreed with everything he recovered everything except his eyes. He was carrying a powerful-looking blaster, and it was pointed at her. "You can't do this," Goodman said, too startled to say more. "There's no crime on Tranai!"

She was impressed, almost overwhelmed, by the dangers he had faced in Goodman's stomach. "Who said there was?" the man asked quietly. "You heard me. Your money. Hand it over." "You can't do this," Goodman said, too startled to say more. "There's no crime on Tranai!"

She shuddered when he spoke of the deadly Galactic Whirl and listened to the man's tale of running the notorious Swayback Gantlet, past the bloodthirsty Scarbies who were still cutting up along Star Ridge and infesting the hell holes of Prodengum. As Goodman put it, Terrans were iron men in steel ships, asking you for your money. Are you going to explore the edges of the Great Nothing peacefully or do I have to club it out of you?"

Janna didn't even speak until Goodman told of paying five hundred Terran dollars for a glass of beer at Moll Gann's Red Rooster Inn on Asteroid 342-AA. "You can't get away with this! Crime does not pay!" "Don't be ridiculous," the man said. He held out the blaster. "All right. Don't get excited." Goodman pulled out a small pouch which contained all he had in the world, and gave it to the masked man.

"Oh. But wouldn't it have been better to have saved it? I mean someday you might have a wife and children—" She blushed. The man counted it, and he seemed impressed. "Expected. Thanks, buddy. Take it easy now."

Goodman said coolly, "Well, that part of my life is over. I'm going to marry and settle down right here on Tranai." Goodman looked wildly around for a police officer. He remembered that there were no police on Tranai.

"How *nice*!" she cried. It was a most successful evening. Goodman returned Janna to her home at a respectable hour and arranged a date for the following evening. Made bold by his own tales, he kissed her on the cheek. Inside, there was only a bartender, somberly wiping the bar.

Goodman returned Janna to her home at a respectable hour and arranged a date for the following evening. Made bold by his own tales, he kissed her on the cheek. Inside, there was only a bartender, somberly wiping the bar. "I've been robbed!" Goodman shouted at him. "So?" the bartender said, not even looking up.

"Till tomorrow then," she said, smiled at him, and closed the door. "But I thought there wasn't any crime on Tranai." "There isn't."

He walked away feeling light-headed. Janna! Janna! Was it conceivable that he was in love already? Why not? Love at first sight was a proven psycho-physiological possibility and, as such, was perfectly respectable. Love in Utopia! How wonderful it was that here, upon a perfect planet, he had found the perfect girl!

A man stepped out of the shadows and blocked his path. Goodman noted that he was wearing a black silk mask which hid his face. "I just came in from Terra."

"Terra? Nervous, hustling sort of—" "Yes, yes," Goodman said. He was getting a little of the stereotype. "But how can there be no crime on Tranai?"

"That should be obvious. On Tranai, robbery is no crime!" "But robbery is *always* a crime!"

"What color mask was he wearing?"

Goodman thought for a moment. "Black. Black silk."

The bartender nodded. "Then he was a government tax collector."

"That's a ridiculous way to collect taxes," Goodman snapped.

The bartender set a Tranai Special in front of Goodman. "Try to see this in terms though. Family heirlooms."

of the general welfare. The government has to have *some* money. By collecting it "I'll return them," Goodman promised. "And this way, we can avoid the necessity of an income tax, with all its complicated back, I'll pay for my drinks."

legal and legislative apparatus. And in terms of mental health, it's far better to He slipped the blaster into his belt, donned the extract money in a short, quick, painless operation than to permit the citizen to the bar. If this was how things worked on Tranai, I worry all year long about paying at a specific date."

Goodman downed his drink and the bartender set up another.

"But," Goodman said, "I thought this was a society based upon the concepts of free will and individual initiative. He found a suitably dark street corner and shadows, waiting. Presently he heard footsteps around the corner, saw a portly, well-dressed Tranaiian down the street."

"It is," the bartender told him. "Then surely the government, what little there is around the corner, saw a portly, well-dressed Tranaiian down the street."

Goodman couldn't quite figure that out, so he finished his second drink. "Could Goodman stepped in front of him, snarling, "Hold on!"

I have another of those? I'll pay you as soon as I can." The Tranaiian stopped and looked at Goodman. "Hmmm. Using a wide-aperture Drog 3, eh?"

"Sure, sure," the bartender said good-naturedly, pouring another drink and one for himself. "It's fine," Goodman said. "Hand over your money."

Goodman said, "You asked me what color his mask was. Why?"

"Black is the government mask color. Private citizens wear white masks."

"You mean that private citizens commit robbery also?" "Slow trigger action, though," the Tranaiian said. "Personally, I recommend a Mils-Sleeven n."

"Well, certainly! That's our method of wealth distribution. Money is equalized happens, I'm a sales representative for Sleeveven Arms. Without government intervention, without even taxation, entirely in terms of you a very good price on a trade-in—"

individual initiative." The bartender nodded emphatically. "And it works perfectly," Hand over your money," Goodman barked. too. Robbery is a great leveler, you know."

"I suppose it is," Goodman admitted, finishing his third drink. "If I understand is the fact that it won't fire at all unless you release the lock." He reached out and slapped the gun out of his hand. "You see? You couldn't have done a thing without me."

"Exactly," the bartender said. "Within limits, of course." Goodman scooped up the blaster, found the trigger, released it and hurried after the Tranaiian.

"Stick up your hands," Goodman ordered, but the Tranaiian was already slightly desperate.

"No, no, my good man," the Tranaiian said, no fear. "Only one try to a customer. Mustn't break the law, you know."

"Exactly," the bartender said. "Within limits, of course." Goodman stood and watched until the man turned away.



and was gone. He checked the Drog 3 carefully and made sure that all safeties were off. Then he resumed his post.

After an hour's wait, he heard footsteps again. He tightened his grip on the blaster. This time he was going to rob and nothing was going to stop him. "Okay, buddy," he said, "hands up!"

The victim this time was a short, stocky Tranaian, dressed in old workman's clothes. He gaped at the gun in Goodman's hand.

"Don't shoot, mister," the Tranaian pleaded.

That was more like it! Goodman felt a glow of deep satisfaction.

"Just don't move," he warned. "I've got all safeties off."

"I can see that," the stocky man said cringing. "Be careful with that cannon, mister. I ain't moving a hair."

"You'd better not. Hand over your money."

"Money?"

"Yes; your money, and be quick about it."

"I don't have any money," the man whined. "Mister, I'm a poor man. I'm poverty-stricken."

"There is no poverty on Tranai," Goodman said sententiously.

"I know. But you can get so close to it, you wouldn't know the difference. Give me a break, mister."

"Haven't you any initiative?" Goodman asked. "If you're poor, why don't you go out and rob like everybody else?"

"I just haven't had a chance. First the kid got the whooping cough and I was up every night with her. Then the derrsin broke down, so I had the wife yakking at me all day long. I say there oughta be a spare derrsin in every house! So she decided to clean the place while the derrsin generator was being fixed and she put my blaster somewhere and she can't remember where. So I was all set to borrow a friend's blaster when—"

"That's enough," Goodman said. "This is a robbery and I'm going to rob you of something. Hand over your wallet."

The man snuffled miserably and gave Goodman a worn billfold. Inside it, Goodman found one deeglo, the equivalent of a Terran dollar.

"It's all I got," the man snuffled miserably, "but you're

welcome to it. I know how it is, standing on the corner all night—"

"Keep it," Goodman said, handing the billfold to the man and walking off.

"Gee, thanks, mister!"

Goodman didn't answer. Disconsolately, he returned to the Kitty Kat Bar and gave back the bartender's blaster. When he explained what had happened, the bartender burst into rude laughter.

"Didn't have any money! Man, that's the oldest trick in the books. Everybody carries a fake blaster for emergencies—some-times two or even three. Did you know that?"

"No," Goodman confessed.

"Brother, are you a greenhorn!"

"I guess I am. Look, I really will pay you for the blaster as soon as I can make some money."

"Sure, sure," the bartender said. "You better get some sleep. You had a busy night."

Goodman agreed. Wearily he returned to his room and was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

He reported at the Abbag Home Robot Workshop the problem of disimproving automatic work such as this, Terran ingenuity began to develop a new plastic for the purpose.

It was a silicone, a relative of the "silly putty" that had been used on Earth a long while back. It had the desired toughness, resiliency and long wear; it would not be abused, too. But the case would shatter immediately upon receiving a kick delivered with a force of thirty pounds or more.

His employer praised him for this development and gave him a bonus (which he sorely needed), and told him to go on the idea and, if possible, to bring the needed improvement in twenty-three pounds. This, the research department considered, was the average frustration kick.

He was kept so busy that he had practically no time to further the mores and folkways of Tranai. He did not visit the Citizen's Booth. This uniquely Tranaian

institution was housed in a small building on a quiet back street.

Upon entering, he was confronted by a large board, upon which was listed the original catalyst-plastic discovery. Goodman names of the present officeholders of Tranai, and their titles. Beside each name was a button. The attendant told Goodman that, by pressing a button, a citizen expressed his disapproval of that official's acts. The pressed button was automatically registered in History Hall and was a permanent mark against that officeholder.

No minors were allowed to press the buttons, of course. Goodman considered this somewhat ineffectual; but perhaps, he told himself, officials on Tranai were differently motivated from those on Earth.

He saw Janna almost every evening and together they explored the cultural aspects of Tranai: the cocktail lounges and movies, the concert halls, the art exhibitions, the science museum, the fairs and festivals. Goodman carried a blaster and, after several unsuccessful attempts, robbed a merchant of nearly five hundred deeglo.

Janna was ecstatic over the achievement, as any sensible Tranaian girl would be, and they celebrated at the Kitty Kat Bar. Janna's parents agreed that Goodman seemed to be a good provider.

The following night, the five hundred deeglo—plus some of Goodman's money—was robbed back, by a man of approximately the size and build of the bartender at the Kitty Kat, carrying an ancient Drog 3 blaster.

Goodman consoled himself with the thought that the money was circulating freely, as the system had intended.

Then he had another triumph. One day at the Abbag Home Robot Works, he discovered a completely new process for making a robot's case. It was a plastic, impervious even to serious bumps and falls. The robot owner had to wear special shoes, with a catalytic agent imbedded in the heels. When he kicked the robot, the catalyst came in contact with the plastic case, with immediate gratifying effect.

Abbag was a little uncertain at first; it seemed too gimmicky. But the thing caught on like wildfire and the Home Robot Works went into the shoe business as a subsidiary, I selling at least one pair with every robot.

This horizontal industrial development was very important to Tranai, and the plant's stockholders and was really more important than the original catalyst-plastic discovery. Goodman had a substantial raise in pay and a generous bonus.

On the crest of his triumphant wave, he proposed to marry Janna. His parents favored the match, but the government was to obtain official sanction. Accordingly, he took a day off from work and went to the Idrig Building to see Melith. It was a glorious day for Tranai, the sort that Tranai has for ten months out of the year.

Goodman walked with a light and springy step. He had been successful in business, and soon to become a citizen of Tranai. Of course, Utopia could use some changes, but he felt that Tranai wasn't quite perfect. Possibly he should accept the Presidency, in order to make the needed reforms.

Hey, mister," a voice said, "can you spare a deeglo?" Goodman looked down and saw, squatting on the sidewalk, an unwashed old man, dressed in rags, holding out a cup. "What?" Goodman asked.

"Can you spare a deeglo, brother?" the man asked. "Help a poor man buy a cup of deeglo, mister."

"This is disgraceful! Why don't you get a blaster and rob someone?"

"I'm too old," the man whimpered. "My victim is too old."

"Are you sure you aren't just lazy?" Goodman asked. "I'm not, sir!" the beggar said. "Just look at my teeth!"

He held out both dirty paws; they trembled. Goodman took out his billfold and gave the old man a deeglo. "I thought there was no poverty on Tranai. I understood that the government took care of the aged."

"The government does," said the old man. "I've been out his cup. Engraved on its side was: GOVERNMENT BEGGAR, NUMBER DR-43241-3."

"You mean the government makes you do this?" "The government *lets* me do it," the old man told him. "Begging is a government job and is reserved for the aged and infirm."

"Why, that's disgraceful!"

"You must be a stranger here."

"I'm a Terran."

"Aha! Nervous, hustling sort of people, aren't you?"

"*Our* government does not let people beg," Goodman said.

"No? What do the old people do? Live off their children? Or sit in some home for the aged and wait for death by bore-dom? Not here, young man. On Tranai, every old man is as-sured of a government job, and one for which he needs no particular skill, although skill helps. Some apply for indoor work, within the churches and theatres. Others like the excitement of fairs and carnivals. Personally, I like it outdoors. My job keeps me out in the sunlight and fresh air, gives me mild exercise and helps me meet many strange and interesting people, such as yourself."

"But *begging!*"

"What other work would I be suited for?"

"I don't know. But—but look at you! Dirty, unwashed, in filthy clothes—"

"These are my working clothes," the government beggar said. "You should see me on Sunday."

"You have other clothes?"

"I certainly do, and a pleasant little apartment, and a season box at the opera, and two Home Robots, and probably more money in the bank than you've seen in your life. It's been pleasant talking to you, young man, and thanks for your contribution. But now I must return to work and suggest you do likewise."

Goodman walked away, glancing over his shoulder at the government beggar. He observed that the old man seemed to be doing a thriving business. But *begging!*

Really, that sort of thing should be stopped. If he ever assumed the Presidency—and quite obviously he should—he would look into the whole matter more carefully.

It seemed to him that there had to be an answer.

At the Idrig Building, Goodman told Melith of his marriage plans.

The immigrations minister was enthusiastic.

"Wonderful, absolutely wonderful," he said. "The Vley family for a long time. They're splendid people. Is a girl any man would be proud of."

"Aren't there some formalities I should consider?" Goodman asked. "I mean being an alien and all—"

"None whatsoever. I've decided to dispense with all formalities. You can become a citizen of Tranai, merely stating your intention verbally. Or you can become a citizen of Terra *and* Tranai. If Terra doesn't mind, I don't."

"I think I'd like to become a citizen of Tranai,"

"It's entirely up to you. But if you're thinking of the Presidency, you can retain Terran status and so on. We aren't at all stuffy about that sort of thing. One of our successful Supreme Presidents was a lizard-evo. Aquarella XI."

"What an enlightened attitude!"

"Sure, give everybody a chance, that's our motto. Your marriage—any government employee can get married. Supreme President Borg would be pleased to attend this afternoon if you like." Melith winked. "The groom likes to kiss the bride. But I think he's genuinely happy."

"This afternoon?" Goodman said. "Yes, I will be married this afternoon, if it's all right with Janna. I'll be home."

"It probably will be," Melith assured him. "I'll be home. You going to live after the honeymoon? A hotel would be suitable." He thought for a moment. "Tell you what. A little house on the edge of town. Why don't you look at it until you find something better? Or stay permanently. I like it."

"Really," Goodman protested, "you're too generous."

"Think nothing of it. Have you ever thought of being a citizen of Tranai?"

the next immigrations minister? You might like the work. No red tape, short hours,"Of course not," Goodman said sarcastically. "My good pay— No? Got your eye on the Supreme Presidency, eh? Can't blame you, live *some* of the time."

suppose."

"Exactly," Melith said, seeing no sarcasm in what

Melith dug in his pockets and found two keys. "This is for the front door and said. "You'll catch on."

this is for the back. The address is stamped right on them. The place is fully Goodman stood up. "Is that all?"

equipped, including a brand-new derrsin field generator."

"I guess that's about it. Good luck and all that."

"A derrsin?"

"Thank you," Goodman said stiffly, turned sharply

"Certainly. No home on Tranai is complete without a derrsin stasis field That afternoon, Supreme President Borg performed

generator."

Tranaian marriage rites at the National Mansion

Clearing his throat, Goodman said carefully, "I've been meaning to askkissed the bride with zeal. It was a beautiful ceremony

you—exactly what is the stasis field used for?"

marred by only one thing.

"Why, to keep one's wife in," Melith answered. "I thought you knew."

Hanging on Borg's wall was a rifle, complete

"I did," said Goodman. "But *why*?"

sight and silencer. It was a twin to Melith's

"Why?" Melith frowned. Apparently the question had never entered his head.inexplicable.

Borg took Goodman to one side and asked, "I

"Why does one do anything? It's the custom, that's all. And very logical, too. You wouldn't want a woman chattering around you all the time, night and day."

any further thought to the Supreme Presidency?"

Goodman blushed, because ever since he had met Janna, he had been thinking "I'm still considering it," Goodman said. "I don't

how pleasant it would be to have her around him all the time, night and day. hold public office—"

"It hardly seems fair to the women," Goodman pointed out.

"No one does."

Melith laughed. "My dear friend, are you preaching the doctrine of equality of the sexes? Really, it's a completely dis-proved theory. Men and women just aren'tthink it may be my duty to bring them to the same level as

the same. They're different, no matter what you've been told on Terra. What's goodpeople."

for men isn't necessarily—or even usually—good for women."

"Therefore you treat them as inferiors," Goodman said, his reformer's bloodreally enterprising Supreme President for some time

beginning to boil. you take office right now? Then you could

"Not at all. We treat them in a *different* manner from men, but not in an *inferior*honeymoon in the National Mansion with complete

manner. Anyhow, they don't object."

Goodman was tempted. But he didn't want to

"That's because they haven't been allowed to know any better. Is there any lawaffairs of state on his honeymoon, which was

that requires me to keep my wife in the derrsin field?"

anyhow. Since Tranai had lasted so long

"Of course not. The custom simply suggests that you keep her *out* of stasis for anear-utopian condition, it would undoubtedly

certain minimum amount of time every week. No fair incarcerating the little woman,weeks more.

you know."

"I'll consider it when I come back," Goodman said

Borg shrugged. "Well, I guess I can bear the

longer. Oh, here." He handed Goodman a sealed envelope

"What's this?"

"Just the standard advice," Borg said. "Hurry

waiting for you!"

"Come on, Marvin!" Janna called. "We don't

for the spaceship 1"

Goodman hurried after her, into the spaceport limousine. "Good luck!" her parents like toys, like little dolls that one puts away when playing. Can't you see that?"

"Good luck!" added Melith and his wife, and all the guests. On the way to the spaceport, Goodman opened the envelope and read the printed sheet within:

ADVICE TO A NEW HUSBAND

*You have just been married and you expect, quite naturally, a lifetime of connubial bliss. This is perfectly proper, for a happy marriage is the foundation of good government. But you must do more than merely wish for it. Good marriage is not yours by divine right. A good marriage must be worked for*

*Remember that your wife is a human being. She should be allowed a certain measure of freedom as her inalienable right. We suggest you take her out of stasis at least once a week. Too long in stasis is bad for her orientation. Too much stasis is bad for her complexion and this will be your loss as well as hers.*

*At intervals, such as vacations and holidays, it's customary to let your wife remain out of stasis for an entire day at a time, or even two or three days. It will do no harm and the novelty will do wonders for her state of mind.*

*Keep in mind these few common-sense rules and you can be assured of a happy marriage.*

—By the Government Marriage Council

Goodman slowly tore the card into little bits, and let them drop to the floor of the limousine. His reforming spirit was now thoroughly aroused. He had known that Tranai was too good to be true. Someone had to pay for perfection. In this case, it was the women.

He had found the first serious flaw in paradise.

"What was that, dear?" Janna asked, looking at the bits of paper.

"That was some very foolish advice," Goodman said. "Dear, have you ever thought—really thought—about the marriage customs of this planet of yours?"

"I don't think I have. Aren't they all right?"

"They are wrong, completely wrong. They treat women

"Well, you can think about it now," Goodman said, "because some changes are going to be made and to start in our home."

"Whatever you think best, darling," Janna said, squeezed his arm. He kissed her.

And then the limousine reached the spaceport aboard the ship.

Their honeymoon on Doe was like a brief sojourn in paradise. The wonders of Tranai's little moon had been for lovers, and for lovers only. No businessman came to the quick rest; no predatory bachelor prowled the planet.

The disillusioned, the lewdly hopeful all had to find their own grounds. The single rule on Doe, strictly enforced, was that everyone be two, joyous and in love, and in no other state admitted.

This was one Tranaian custom that Goodman appreciated.

On the little moon, there were meadows of tall grass, green forests for walking and cool black lakes in the valleys. Jagged, spectacular mountains that begged to be climbed were continually getting lost in the forests, and the satisfaction; but not too lost, for one could circle the mountains in a day. Thanks to the gentle gravity, no one could fall from the black lakes, and a fall from a mountaintop was far from

hardly dangerous.

There were, at strategic locations, little hotels and cocktail lounges run by friendly, white-haired bartenders. There were gloomy caves which ran deep (but never too deep), phosphorescent caverns glittering with ice, and underground rivers in which swam great luminous fish-eyes.

The Government Marriage Council had considered these simple attractions sufficient and hadn't bothered with anything more, of course, swimming pool, horse track or shuffleboard. Goodman felt that once a couple desired these things, the honeymoon was over.

Goodman and his bride spent an enchanted week on Doe and at last returned too couldn't be fitted inside the robot's case. He began to lose weight, lost weight, and his temper.

After carrying his bride across the threshold of their new home, Goodman's first Janna became a good, dependable wife. His mood was to unplug the derrsin generator.

"My dear," he said, "up to now, I have followed all the cus-toms of Tranai, eventhe evenings and a sympathetic ear for his difficulties when they seemed ridiculous to me. But this is one thing I will not sanction. On day, she supervised the cleaning of the house. On Terra, I was the founder of the Committee for Equal Job Opportunities for Women. Robots. This took less than an hour and after. On Terra, we treat our women as equals, as com-panions, as partners in thebooks, baked pies, knitted, and destroyed robots. Goodman was a little alarmed at this, because Janna had been doing them at the rate of three or four a week. Still, every day was an adventure of life."

"What a strange concept," Janna said, a frown clouding her pretty face.

"Think about it," Goodman urged. "Our life will be far more satisfying in this a hobby. He could afford to indulge her, since she was a companionable manner than if I shut you up in the purdah of the derrsin field. machines at cost. Don't you agree?"

"You know far more than I, dear. You've traveled all over the Galaxy, and I've designer, a man named Dath Hergo, came up with a new way of doing things. This was based upon a counter-gyroscopic principle. If you say it's the best way, then it must be."

Past a doubt, Goodman thought, she was the most perfect of women.

He returned to his work at the Abbag Home Robot Works and was soon deep in research department said, was the most irritating. He began another disimprovement project. This time, he conceived the bright idea of making robot could assume.) Moreover, by employing a new principle, the robot's joints squeak and grind. The noise would increase the robot's irri-tation principle, the robot would *lurch*, drunk-enly, and lose its value, thereby making its destruction more pleasing and psychologically more irregular intervals—never dropping any-thing, but always being valuable. Mr. Abbag was overjoyed with the idea, gave him another pay raise, and verge of it. He asked him to have the disimprovement ready for early production.

Goodman's first plan was simply to remove some of the lubrication ducts. But head-vance in disimprovement engineering. And he found that friction would then wear out vital parts too soon. That naturally could that he could center his built-in squeak-and-grind unit. *lurch* control. His name was mentioned in the journals next to that of Dath Hergo.

He began to draw up plans for a built-in squeak-and-grind unit. It had to be absolutely life-like and yet cause no real wear. It had to be inexpensive and it had to be small, because the robot's interior was already packed with disimprovements. The new line of Abbag Home Robots was a sensation. At this time, Goodman decided to take a leave of absence from his job and assume the Supreme Presidency of Terra.

But Goodman found that small squeak-producing units sounded artificial. Larger units were too costly to manufacture

owed it to the people. If Terran ingenuity and imagination could bring out improvements in disimprovements, they could be better improving improvements. Tranai was a new era in his hand on the reins, they could go the rest of the way to perfection.

He went down to Melith's office to talk it over.

"I suppose there's always room for change," he said thoughtfully. The immigration chief was seated at his desk, idly watching people pass by. "Of course, our people have been working for quite some time and working very hard."

I don't know what you'd improve. There's no crime, for 1 example—"

"Because you've legalized it," Goodman declared. "You've j simply evaded the issue."

"We don't see it that way. There's no poverty—"

"Because everybody steals. And there's no trouble with old people because the government turns them into beggars. Real- I ly, there's plenty of room for change and improvement."

"Well, perhaps," Melith said. "But I think—" he stopped suddenly, rushed over to the wall and pulled down the rifle. "There he is!"

Goodman looked out the window. A man, apparently no different from anyone else, was walking past. He heard a j muffled click and saw the man stagger, then drop to the j pavement.

Melith had shot him with the silenced rifle.

"What did you do that for?" Goodman gasped.

"Potential murderer," Melith said.

"What?"

"Of course. We don't have any out-and-out crime here, but, being human, we have to deal with the potentiality."

"What did he do to make him a potential murderer?"

"Killed five people," Melith stated.

"But—damn it, man, this isn't fair! You didn't arrest him, , give him a trial, the benefit of counsel—"

"How could I?" Melith asked, slightly annoyed. "We don't have any police to arrest people with and we don't have any j legal system. Good Lord, you didn't expect me to just let him | go on, did you? Our definition of a murderer is a killer of ten and he was well on his way. I couldn't just sit idly by. It's my i duty to protect the people. I can assure you, I made careful inquiries."

"It isn't just!" Goodman shouted.

"Who ever said it was?" Melith shouted back. "What has 'justice got to do with Utopia?"

"Everything!" Goodman had calmed himself with an effort, j "Justice is the basis of human dignity, human desire—"

"Now you're just using words," Melith said, with his usual good-natured smile. "Try to be realistic. We have created a Utopia for *human beings*, not for saints who don't need one. |

We must accept the deficiencies of the human pretend they don't exist. To our way of thing apparatus and a legal-judicial system all tend atmosphere for crime and an acceptance of crime believe me, not to accept the possibility of crime majority of the people will go along with you."

"But when crime does turn up as it inevitably does "Only the potentiality turns up," Melith insisted

"And even that is much rarer than you would shows up, we deal with it, quickly and simply."

"Suppose you get the wrong man?"

"We can't get the wrong man. Not a chance of it."

"Why not?"

"Because," Melith said, "anyone dispos government official is, by definition and by u potential criminal."

Marvin Goodman was silent for a while. Then that the government has more power than I thought

"It does," Melith said. "But not as much imagine."

Goodman smiled ironically. "And is the Supreme still mine for the asking?"

"Of course. And with no strings attached. Do you

Goodman thought deeply for a moment. want it? Well, someone had to rule. Someone had people. Someone had to make a few reforms i madhouse.

"Yes, I want it," Goodman said.

The door burst open and Supreme President B "Wonderful! Perfectly wonderful! You can r National Mansion today. I've been packed for a for you to make up your mind."

"There must be certain formalities to go through—" "No formalities," Borg said, his face perspiration. "None whatsoever. All we do is Presidential Seal; then I'll go down and take my rolls and put yours on."

Goodman looked at Melith. The immigration r face was expressionless.

"All right," Goodman said.

Borg reached for the Presidential Seal, started to remove it from his neck—  
It exploded suddenly and violently.

Goodman found himself staring in horror at Borg's red, ruined head. The Supreme President tottered for a moment, then slid to the floor.

Melith took off his jacket and threw it over Borg's head. Goodman backed to a chair and fell into it. His mouth opened, but no words came out.

"It's really a pity," Melith said. "He was so near the end of his term. I warned him against licensing that new spaceport. The citizens won't approve, I told him. But he was sure they would like to have two spaceports. Well, he was wrong."

"Do you mean—I mean—how—what—"

"All government officials," Melith explained, "wear the badge of office, which contains a traditional amount of tessium, an explosive you may have heard of. The charge is radio-controlled from the Citizens Booth. Any citizen has access to the Booth, for the purpose of expressing his disapproval of the government." Melith sighed. "This will go down as a permanent black mark against poor Borg's record."

"You let the people express their disapproval by blowing up officials?" Goodman croaked, appalled.

"It's the only way that means anything," said Melith "Check and balance. Just as the people are in our hands, so we are in the people's hands."

"And *that's* why he wanted me to take over his term. Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"You didn't ask," Melith said, with the suspicion of a smile, "Don't look so horrified. Assassination is always possible, you know, on any planet, under any government. We try to make it a constructive thing. Under this system, the people never lose touch with the government, and the government never tries to assume dictatorial powers. And, since everyone knows he can turn to the Citizens Booth, you'd be surprised how sparingly it's used. Of course, there are always hotheads—"

Goodman got to his feet and started to the door, not looking at Borg's body. "Don't you still want the Presidency?" asked Melith.

"No!"

"That's so like you Terrans," Melith remarked sardoniously. "You take responsibility only if it doesn't incur risk. That's the only reason for running a government."

"You may be right," Goodman said. "I'm just glad it's over."

He hurried home.

His mind was in a complete turmoil when he entered his house. Was Tranai a Utopia or a planetwide insane asylum? What was the difference? For the first time in his life, he was wondering if Utopia was worth having. Wasn't it a little too much for perfection than to possess it? To have ideals imposed by them? If justice was a fallacy, wasn't the fallacy the truth?

Or was it? Goodman was a sadly confused young man. He shuffled into his house and found his wife in the same state.

The scene had a terrible slow-motion clarity. Janna seemed to take Janna forever to rise to her feet, to look at her disarranged clothing and stare at him open-mouthed. The tall, good-looking fellow whom Goodman had known for years seemed—appeared too startled to speak. He made nervous gestures, brushing the lapel of his jacket, pulling at his hair. Then, tentatively, the man smiled.

"Well!" Goodman said. It was feeble enough, but it had its effect. Janna started to move.

"Terribly sorry," the man murmured. "Didn't expect to see you for hours. This must come as a shock to you. I'm terribly sorry."

The one thing Goodman hadn't expected was sympathy from his wife's lover. He ignored the man and turned to the weeping Janna.

"Well, what did you expect?" Janna screamed at him. "I had to! You didn't love me!"

"Didn't love you! How can you say that?"

"Because of the way you treated me."

"I loved you very much, Janna," he said softly.

"You didn't!" she shrieked, throwing back her head.



look at the way you treated me. You kept me around all day, every day, doing housework, cooking, sitting. Marvin, I could *feel* myself aging. Day after day, the another accepted phase of Tranaiian life—the same weary, stupid routine. And most of the time, when you came home, you were widow who can pursue her own pleasures." too tired to even notice me. All you could talk about was your stupid robots! I "Naturally. In this way, everything is for everybody. The man has a young wife whom he s

It suddenly occurred to Goodman that his wife was un-hinged. Very gently he wishes. He has his complete freedom and a nice said, "But, Janna, that's how life is. A husband and wife settle into aThe woman is relieved of all the dullness of ordinary companionable situation. They age together side by side. It can't all be highwhile she can still enjoy it, is well provided for." spots—"

"But of course it can! Try to understand, Marvin. It can, on Tranai—for a "I thought you knew," Janna said, "since you had a better way. But I can see that you would

"It's impossible," Goodman said. understood, because you're so nai'Ve—though I

"On Tranai, a woman expects a life of enjoyment and pleasure. It's her right, just one of your charms." She smiled wistfully. "Beside as men have their rights. She expects to come out of stasis and find a little party I would never have met Rondo."

prepared, or a walk in the moonlight, or a swim, or a movie." She began to cry The man bowed slightly. "I was leaving sample again. "But *you* were so smart. *You* had to change it. I should have known better Confections. You can imagine my surprise when

than to trust a Terran." lovely young woman *out of stasis*. I mean it was like

The other man sighed and lighted a cigarette. tale come true. One never expects old legends to h

"I know you can't help being an alien, Marvin," Janna said. must admit that there's a certain appeal when they

"But I do want you to understand. Love isn't everything. A "Do you love him?" Goodman asked heavily.

woman must be practical, too. The way things were going, I "Yes," said Janna. "Rondo cares -for me. He's

-would have been an old woman while all my friends were still me in stasis long enough to make up for the time

"Still young?" Goodman repeated blankly. young." sacrifice on his part, but Rondo has a gene'rous na

"Of course," the man said. "A woman doesn't age in the derra field." stand in your way. I am a civilized being, after all. Y

"But the whole thing is ghastly," said Goodman. "My wife would still be a divorce." young woman when I was old."

"That's just when you'd appreciate a young woman," Janna said. He folded his arms across his chest, feeling quite

"But how about you?" Goodman asked. "Would you appreciate an old man?" nobility as from a sudden, violent distaste for all th

"He still doesn't understand," the man said. "We have no divorce on Tranai," Rondo said.

"Marvin, *try*. Isn't it clear yet? Throughout your life, you would have a young "No?" Goodman felt a cold chill run down his spine and beautiful woman whose only desire would be to please you. And when you A blaster appeared in Rondo's hand. "It

died—don't look shocked, dear; everybody dies—when you died, I would still be unsettling, you know, if people were always swa There's only one way to change a marital status."

young, and by law I'd inherit all your money." "But this is revolting!" Goodman blurted, back against all decency!"

"Not if the wife desires it. And that, by the by, is a

excellent reason for keeping one's spouse in stasis. Have I your permission, my dear?"

"Forgive me, Marvin," Janna said. She closed her eyes. "Yes!"

Rondo leveled the blaster. Without a moment's hesitation, Goodman dived head-first out the nearest window. Rondo's shot fanned right over him.

"See here!" Rondo called. "Show some spirit, man. Stand up to it!"

Goodman had landed heavily on his shoulder. He was up at once, sprinting, and Rondo's second shot scorched his arm. Then he ducked behind a house and was momentarily safe. He didn't stop to think about it. Running for all he was worth, he headed for the spaceport.

Fortunately, a ship was preparing for blastoff and took him to g'Moree. From there he wired to Tranai for his funds and bought passage to Higastomeritreia, where the authorities accused him of being a Ding spy. The charge couldn't stick, since the Dingans were an amphibious race, and Goodman almost drowned proving to everyone's satisfaction that he could breathe only air.

A drone transport took him to the double planet Mvanti, past Seves, Olgo and Mi. He hired a bush pilot to take him to Bellismoranti, where the influence of Terra began. From there, a local spaceline transported him past the Galactic Whirl and, after stopping at Oyster, Lekung, Pankang, Inchang and Ma-chang, arrived at Tung-Bradar IV.

His money was now gone, but he was practically next door to Terra, as astronomical distances go. He was able to work his passage to Oum6, and from Oume to Legis II. There the Interstellar Travelers Aid Society arranged a berth for him and at last he arrived back on Earth.

Goodman has settled down in Seakirk, New Jersey, where a man is perfectly safe as long as he pays his taxes. He holds the post of Chief Robotic Technician for the Seakirk Construction Corporation and has married a small, dark, quiet girl, who obviously adores him, although he rarely lets her out of the house.

He and old Captain Savage go frequently to Ed Bar, drink Tranai Specials, and talk of Tranai the Way has been found and Man is no longer Wheel. On such occasions, Goodman complains space malaria—because of it, he can never go back never return to Tranai.

There is always an admiring audience on these nights. Goodman has recently organized, with Captain Seakirk League to Take the Vote from Women only members, but as Goodman puts it, when did

Fromcrusader?

## THE BATTLE {pages 148 to 153}

Supreme General Fetterer barked "At ease!" as he hurried into the command room. Obediently, his three generals stood at ease.

"We haven't much time," Fetterer said, glancing at his watch. "We'll go over the plan of battle again."

He walked to the wall and unrolled a gigantic map of the Sahara Desert.

"According to our best theological information, Satan is going to present his forces at these co-ordinates." He indicated the place with his forefinger. "In the front rank there will be the devils, demons, succubi, incubi, and the rest of the ratings. Bael will command the right wing. His Satanic Majesty will hold the centre."

"Rather medieval," General Dell murmured.

General Fetterer's aide came in, his face shining and happy with the thought of the Coming.

"Sir," he said, "the priest is outside again."

"Stand to attention, soldier," Fetterer said sternly. "There's still a battle to be fought and won."

"Yes sir," the aide said, and stood rigidly, some of the joy fading from his face.

"The priest, eh?" Supreme General Fetterer rubbed his fingers together thoughtfully. Ever since the Coming, since the knowledge of the Last Battle, the religious workers of the world had made a complete nuisance of themselves. They had stopped their bickering, which was commendable. But now they were trying to run military business.

"Send him away," Fetterer said. "He knows we're planning Armageddon."

"Yes sir," the aide said. He saluted sharply, wheeled, and marched out.

"To go on," Supreme General Fetterer said. "Behind Satan's first line of defence will be the resurrected sinners, and various elemental spirits. The fallen angels will act as his bomber corps. Dell's robot interceptors will meet them."

General Dell smiled grimly.

"Upon contact, MacFee's automatic tank corps will proceed towards the centre of the line. MacFee's automatic tank corps will proceed towards the centre," Fetterer went on, "supported by General Ongin's robot infantry. Dell will command the H bombing of the rear, which should be massed. I will thrust with the mechanised cavalry, here and here."

The aide came back, and stood rigidly at attention. "Sir," he said, "the priest refuses to go. He says he must speak with you."

Supreme General Fetterer hesitated before saying no. He remembered that this was the Last Battle, and that the religious workers were to be dealt with it. He decided to give the man five minutes.

"Show him in," he said.

The priest wore a plain business suit, to show that he represented no particular religion. His face was tired but determined.

"General," he said, "I am a representative of all the religious workers of the world, the priests, rabbis, ministers, mullahs, and all the rest of you, General, to let us fight in the Lord's battle."

Supreme General Fetterer drummed his fingers nervously against his side. He wanted to stay on friendly terms with these men. Even the Supreme Commander, might need a good word, when all was said and done ...

"You can understand my position," Fetterer said unhappily. "I'm a general. I have a battle to fight."

"But it's the Last Battle," the priest said. "It should be the people's battle."

"It is," Fetterer said. "It's being fought by their representatives, the military."

The priest didn't look at all convinced.

Fetterer said, "You wouldn't want to lose this battle, would you? Have Satan win?"

"Of course not," the priest murmured.

"Then we can't take any chances," Fetterer said. "All the governments agreed on that, didn't they? Oh, it would be very nice to fight with the mass of humanity. Symbolic, you might say. But could we be certain of victory?"

The priest tried to say something, but Fetterer was talking rapidly.

"How do we know the strength of Satan's forces? We simply must put forth our best foot, militarily speaking. And that means the automatics, the robot interceptors and tanks, the H bombs."

The priest looked very unhappy. "But it isn't right," he said. "Certainly you can find some place in your plan for people?"

Fetterer thought about it, but the request was impossible. The plan of battle was fully developed, beautiful, irresistible. Any introduction of a human element would only throw it out of order. No living flesh could stand the noise of that mechanical attack, the energy potentials in the air, the all-enveloping fire power. A human being who came within a hundred miles of the front would not live to see the enemy.

"I'm afraid not," Fetterer said.

"There are some," the priest said sternly, "who feel that it was an error to put this in the hands of the military."

"Sorry," Fetterer said cheerfully. "That's defeatist talk. If you don't mind –" He gestured at the door. Warily the priest left.

"These civilians," Fetterer mused. "Well gentlemen, are your troops ready?"

"We're ready to fight for Him," General MacFee said enthusiastically. "I can vouch for every automatic in my command. Their metal parts and relays have been renewed, and the energy reservoirs are fully charged. Sir, they're positively itching for battle!"

General Ongin snapped fully out of his daze. "The ground troops are ready, sir!"

"Air arm ready," General Dell said.

"Excellent," General Fetterer said. "All other arrangements have been made. Television facilities are available for the total population. No one, rich or poor, will miss the spectacle of the Last Battle."

"And after the battle –" General Ongin began, and stopped. He looked at Fetterer.

Fetterer frowned deeply. He didn't know what was supposed to happen after the Battle. That part of it was, presumably, in the hands of the religious agencies.

"I suppose there'll be a presentation or something," he said vaguely.

"You mean we will meet – Him?" General Dell asked.

"Don't really know," Fetterer said. "But I should think so. After all – I mean, you know what I mean?"

"But what should we wear?" General MacFee asked, in a sudden panic. "I mean, what does one wear?"

"What do the angels wear?" Fetterer asked Ongin.

## Skulking Permit

Tom Fisher had no idea he was about to begin a criminal career. It was morning. The big red sun was just above the horizon, trailing its small yellow companion. The village, tiny and precise, a unique white dot on the planet's green expanse, glistened under its two midsummer suns.

Tom was just waking up inside his cottage. He was a tall, tanned young man, with his father's oval eyes and his mother's easygoing attitude toward exertion. He was in no hurry; there could be no fishing until the fall rains, and therefore no real work for a fisher. Until fall, he was going to loaf and mend his fishing poles.

"It's supposed to have a red roof!" he heard Billy Painter shouting outside. "Churches *never* have red roofs!" Ed Weaver shouted back.

Tom frowned. Not being involved, he had forgotten the changes that had come over the village in the last two weeks. He slipped on a pair of pants and sauntered out to the village square.

The first thing he saw when he entered the square was a large new sign, reading: NO ALIENS ALLOWED WITHIN CITY LIMITS. There were no aliens on the entire planet of New Delaware. There was nothing but forest, and this one village. The sign was purely a statement of policy.

The square itself contained a church, a jail and a post of-fice, all constructed in the last two frantic weeks and set in a neat row facing the market. No one knew what to do with these buildings; the village had gone along nicely without them for over two hundred years. But now, of course, they had to be built.

Ed Weaver was standing in front of the new church, squint-  
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ing upward. Billy Painter was balanced precariously on the steep roof, his blond mustache bristling indignantly. They had gathered.

"Damn it, man," Billy Painter was saying, "I tell you about it just last week. White roof, okay. Red roof, no. You're mixing it up with something else," Weaver said, about it, Tom?"

Tom shrugged, having no opinion to offer. Just then he bustled up, perspiring freely, his shirt flapping in a paunch.

"Come down," he called to Billy. "I just looked it up. Red *Schoolhouse*, not Churchhouse."

Billy looked angry. He had always been moody; always. But since the mayor made him chief of police last year, he had become downright temperamental.

"We don't have no little schoolhouse," Billy argued, down the ladder.

"We'll just have to build one," the mayor said, in a hurry, too." He glanced at the sky. Involuntarily the crowd gathered upward. But there was still nothing in sight.

"Where are the Carpenter boys?" the mayor asked. "Marv—where are you?"

Sid Carpenter's head appeared through the crowd. He had crutches from last month when he had fallen out of a threstle's eggs; no Carpenter was worth a damn at tre. "The other boys are at Ed Beer's Tavern," Sid said. "Mary would they be?" Mary Waterman called from the crowd.

"Well, you gather them up," the mayor said. "They need a little schoolhouse, and quick. Tell them to put it up. He turned to Billy Painter, who was back on the ground. He pointed to that schoolhouse a good bright red, inside and out. Important."

"When do I get a police chief badge?" Billy demanded. "That police chiefs always get badges."

"Make yourself one," the mayor said. He mopped his shirttail. "Sure hot. Don't know why that inspector came in winter . . . Tom! Tom Fisher! Got an

important job for you. Come on, I'll tell you all about it."

He put an arm around Tom's shoulders and they walked to the mayor's cottage past the empty market, along the village's single paved road. In the old days, that road had been of packed dirt. But the old days had ended two weeks ago and now the road was paved with crushed rock. It made bare-foot walking uncomfortable that the villagers simply cut across each other's lawns. The mayor, though, walked on it out of principle.

"Now look, Mayor, I'm on my vacation—"

"Can't have any vacations now," the mayor said. "Not *now*, He's due any day." He ushered Tom inside his cottage and sat down in the big armchair, which had been pushed as close to the interstellar radio as possible.

"Tom," the mayor said directly, "how would you like to be a criminal?"

"I don't know," said Tom. "What's a criminal?"

Squirming uncomfortably in his chair, the mayor rested a hand on the radio authority. "It's this way," he said, and began to explain.

Tom listened, but the more he heard, the less he liked, It was all the fault of that interstellar radio, he decided. Why hadn't it really been broken?

No one had believed it could work. It had gathered dust in the office of one mayor after another, for generations, the last silent link with Mother Earth. Two hundred years ago. Earth talked with New Delaware, and with Ford IV, Alpha Centauri, Nueva Espana, and the other colonies that made up the Democracies of Earth. Then all conversations stopped.

There seemed to be a war on Earth. New Delaware, with its one village, was too small and too distant to take part. They waited for news, but no news came. And then plague struck the village, wiping out three-quarters of the inhabitants.

Slowly the village healed. The villagers adopted their own ways of doing things. They forgot Earth. Two hundred years passed.

And then, two weeks ago, the ancient radio had coughed itself into life. For hours, it growled and spat static, while the inhabitants of the village gathered around the mayor's cottage,

Finally words came out: ". . . hear me, New Delaware?"

"Yes, yes, we hear you," the mayor said. "The colonies are still a colony of Imperial Earth and subject to her that's over, except for a little mopping up. You of New

acknowledge the status?"

The mayor hesitated. All the books referred to United Democracies. Well, in two centuries, names

"We are still loyal to Earth," the mayor said with dig

"Excellent. That saves us the trouble of sen

for expeditionary force. A resident inspector will be dispatched from the nearest point, to ascertain whether you conform

the mayor asked, worried.

The stern voice became higher-pitched. "You realize that there is room for only one intelligent species in the Universe—Man! All others must be suppressed, wiped out, annihilated. We can tolerate no aliens sneaking around the Democracies of Earth. Then all conversations stopped.

you understand, General." "I'm not a general. I'm a n

"Then you are a general. Permit me to con

galaxy, there is no room for aliens. None! No

for deviant human cultures, which, by defin

It is impossible to administer an empire where

as he pleases. There must be order, *no matter*

The mayor gulped hard and stared

"Be sure you're running an Earth colony, C

radical departures from the norm, such as free

free elections, or anything else on the proscr

things are *alien*, and we're pretty rough on a

colony in order, General. The inspector will

two we

The village held an immediate meeting, to

best to conform with the Earth mandate. All they could do was hastily model "They aren't *that* narrow. They're no narrower than themselves upon the Earth pattern as shown in their ancient books. Weaver's—" "Tom, please," the mayor said. "We're all doing our best to help, don't you?"

"I don't see why there has to be a criminal," Tom said. "That's a very important part of Earth society," the mayor explained. "All the books agree on it. The criminal is as important as the postman, say, or the police chief. Unlike them, the criminal is engaged in anti-social work. He works *against* society, Tom. If you don't have people working *against* society, how can you have people working *for* it? There'd be no jobs for them to do." "I suppose so," Tom repeated wearily. "Fine. You're the police chief. He works *against* society, how? SKULKING PERMIT. *Know all Men by these Presents, That I, Mayor of the Town of Dismal, do hereby require that all Men by these Presents, who are required to Skulk in Dismal Alleys, Haunt Places of* All Break the Law.

Tom shook his head. "I just don't see it." "Be reasonable, Tom. We have to have earthly things. Like paved roads. the books mention that. And churches, and schoolhouses, and jails. And all the books mention crime." Tom read it through twice, then asked, "What law?" "I won't do it," Tom said. "I know as fast as I make them up," the mayor said. "But what do I do?" "You steal. And kill. That should be easy enough for you. You walked to his bookcase and took down ancient volumes. 'Criminal and his Environment, Psychology of Crime, and Studies in Thief Motivation.' 'These'll give you everything you need to know. 'Then why did you build a jail?' he asks me. 'Why did you appoint a police chief?'" "One murder should be enough, though. No more."

The mayor paused for breath. "You see? The whole thing falls through. He sees at once that we're not truly earthlike. We're faking it. We're *aliens*!" and returned to his cottage. It was very hot and a little about crime had puzzled and wearied him. He lay down and began to go through the ancient books.

"Hmm," Tom said, impressed in spite of himself. "This way," the mayor went on quickly, "I can say, 'Certainly we've got crime here, just like on Earth. We've got a combination thief and murderer. Poor fellow. There was a knock on his door. "Come in," Tom called. "He had a bad up-bringing and he's maladjusted. Our police chief has some clues, tired eyes. Marv Carpenter, oldest and tallest of the room, came in, followed by old Jed Farmer, carrying a small sack. "What's rehabilitate?" Tom asked. "You the town criminal, Tom?" Marv asked. "Looks like it." "Then this is for you." They put the sack on the table. "From it a hatchet, two knives, a short spear, a club and a short sword. "What's all that?" Tom asked, sitting upright. "Weapons. "Can't spare anyone else. And you've got narrow eyes. Criminals always have narrow eyes." Jed Farmer said testily. "You can't be a real criminal without weapons."

Tom scratched his head. "Is that a fact?"

"You'd better start figuring these things out for yourself," Farmer went on in his impatient voice. "Can't expect us to do everything for you."

Marv Carpenter winked at Tom. "Jed's sore because the mayor made him our postman."

"I'll do my part," Jed said. "I just don't like having to write all those letters."

"Can't be too hard," Marv Carpenter said, grinning. "The postmen do it on Earth and they got a lot more people there. Gook luck, Tom." They left.

Tom bent down and examined the weapons. He knew what they were; the old books were full of them. But no one had ever actually used a weapon on New Delaware. The only native animals on the planet were small, furry, and confirmed eaters of grass. As for turning a weapon on a fellow villager—why would anybody want to do that?

He picked up one of the knives. It was cold. He touched the point. It was sharp.

Tom began to pace the floor, staring at the weapons. They gave him a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He decided he had been hasty in accepting the job.

But there was no sense worrying about it yet. He still had those books to read. After that, perhaps he could make some sense out of the whole thing.

He read for several hours, stopping only to eat a light lunch. The books were understandable enough; the various criminal methods were clearly explained, sometimes with diagrams. But the whole thing was unreasonable. What was the purpose of crime? Whom did it benefit? What did people get out of it?

The books didn't explain that. He leafed through them, looking at the photographed faces of criminals. They looked very serious and dedicated, extremely conscious of the significance of their work to society.

Tom wished he could find out what that significance was. It would probably make things much easier.

"Tom?" he heard the mayor call from outside.

"I'm in here, Mayor," Tom said.

The door opened and the mayor peered in. Behind him were Farmer, Mary Waterman and Alice Cook. "How about what?" the mayor asked. "How about getting Tom grinned self-consciously. "I was going to," he reading these books, trying to figure out—"

The three middle-aged ladies glared at him, onstopped in embarrassment.

"You're taking your time reading," Alice Cook said. "F outside working," said Jane Farmer. "What's so hard stealing?" Mary Waterman chal-lenged.

"It's true," the mayor told him. "That inspector might day now and we don't have a crime to show him." "All right," Tom said.

He stuck a knife and a blackjack in his belt, put it in his pocket—for loot—and stalked out.

But where was he going? It was mid-afternoon. The town was the most logical place to rob, would be empty in the day. Besides, he didn't want to commit a robbery in daylight. unprofessional.

He opened his skulking permit and read it through. *Haunt Places of Low Repute . . .*

That was it! He'd haunt a low repute place. He could get into the mood of the thing. But un- explained, sometimes with diagrams. But the whole thing was unreasonable. village didn't have much to choose from. There was a Restaurant, run by the widowed Ames sisters, there was a Lounging Spot, and finally there was Ed Beer's Tavern.

Ed's place would have to do. The tavern was a cottage much like the other cottages in the village. It had one big room for guests, a kitchen, and a quarters. Ed's wife did the cooking and kept the place running. Ed could, considering her ailing back. Ed served the drinks. He was a pale, sleepy-eyed man with a talent for worrying.

"Hello, Tom," Ed said. "Hear you're our criminal." "Thank you, Tom. "I'll take a perriola."

Ed Beer served him the nonalcoholic root extract and anxiously in front of Tom's table. "How come you ain't out thieving, Tom?"

"I'm planning," Tom said. "My permit says I have to haunt places of low repute. That's why I'm here."

"Is that nice?" Ed Beer asked sadly. "This is no place of low repute, Tom." "You serve the worst meals in town," Tom pointed out.

"I know. My wife can't cook. But there's a friendly atmosphere here. Folkson like it."

"That's all changed, Ed. I'm making this tavern my head-quarters."

Ed Beer's shoulders drooped. "Try to keep a nice place," he muttered. "A lot of thanks you get." He returned to the bar.

Tom proceeded to think. He found it amazingly difficult. The more he tried, the less came out. But he stuck grimly to it.

An hour passed. Richie Farmer, Jed's youngest son, stuck his head in the door. "You steal anything yet, Tom?"

"Not yet," Tom told him, hunched over his table, still thinking.

The scorching afternoon drifted slowly by. Patches of evening became visible through the tavern's small, not too clean windows. A cricket began to chirp outside, and the first whisper of night wind stirred the surrounding forest.

Big George Waterman and Max Weaver came in for a glass of glava. They sat down beside Tom.

"How's it going?" George Waterman asked.

"Not so good," Tom said. "Can't seem to get the hang of this stealing."

"You'll catch on," Waterman said in his slow, ponderous, earnest fashion. "If anyone could learn it, you can."

"We've got confidence in you, Tom," Weaver assured him.

Tom thanked them. They drank and left. He continued thinking, staring into his empty pericola glass.

An hour later, Ed Beer cleared his throat apologetically. "It's none of my business, Tom, but when *are* you going to steal something?"

"Right now," Tom said.

He stood up, made sure his weapons were secure, and strode out the door.

Nightly bartering had begun in the market. Goods were laid out carelessly on benches, or spread over the grass. There was no currency, no rate of exchange. Ten nails were worth a pail of milk or two fish, or vice versa. Tom was bothered keeping accounts. That was one Earth custom he was having difficulty introducing.

As Tom Fisher walked down the square, everyone was watching him. "Stealing now, huh, Tom?"

"Go to it, boy!"

"You can do it!"

No one in the village had ever witnessed an act like this. Tom considered it an exotic custom of distant Earth and was curious to see how it worked. They left their goods and followed him to the market, watching avidly.

Tom found that his hands were trembling. He didn't want to be caught. Many people watch him steal. He decided he'd be careful while he still had the nerve.

He stopped abruptly in front of Mrs. Miller's fruit stand. "Tasty-looking geefers," he said casually.

"They're fresh," Mrs. Miller told him. She was a bright-eyed old woman. Tom could remember long ago when she had had with his mother, back when his parents were young.

"They look very tasty," he said, wishing he could taste one somewhere else instead.

"Oh, they are," said Mrs. Miller. "I picked them up this afternoon."

"Is he going to steal now?" someone whispered.

"Sure he is. Watch him," someone whispered back.

Tom picked up a bright green geefer and inspected it. He became suddenly silent.

"Certainly looks very tasty," Tom said, carefully holding the geefer.

The crowd released a long-drawn sigh.

Max Weaver and his wife and five children were among the crowd.



next bench. Tonight they were displaying two blankets and a shirt. They all smiled shyly when Tom came over, followed by the crowd.

"That shirt's about your size," Weaver informed him. He wished the people would go away and let Tom work.

"Hmm," Tom said, picking up the shirt.

The crowd stirred expectantly. A girl began to giggle hysterically. Tom gripped the shirt tightly and opened his loot bag.

"Just a moment!" Billy Painter pushed his way through. He was wearing a badge now, an old Earth coin he had polished and pinned to his belt. The expression on his face was unmistakably official.

"What were you doing with that shirt, Tom?" Billy asked.

"Why . . . I was just looking at it."

"Just looking at it, huh?" Billy turned away, his hands clasped behind his back. Suddenly he whirled and extended a rigid forefinger. "I don't think you were just looking at it, Tom. I think you were planning on *stealing* it!"

Tom didn't answer. The tell-tale sack hung limply from one hand, the shirt from the other.

"As police chief," Billy went on, "I've got a duty to pro-*te*ct these people. You're a suspicious character. I think I'd better lock you up for further questioning."

Tom hung his head. He hadn't expected this, but it was just as well.

Once he was in jail, it would be all over. And when Billy released him, he could get back to fishing.

Suddenly the mayor bounded through the crowd, his shirt flapping wildly around his waist.

"Billy, what are you doing?"

"Doing my duty, Mayor. Tom here is acting plenty sus-*pi*cious. The book says—"

"I know what the book says," the mayor told him. "I gave you the book. You can't go arresting Tom. Not yet."

"But there's no other criminal in the village," Billy com-*pl*ained.

"I can't help that," the mayor said.

Billy's lips tightened. "The book talks about preventive police work. I'm supposed to stop crime before it happens."

The mayor raised his hands and dropped them. "don't you understand? This village *needs* a criminal to have to help, too."

Billy shrugged his shoulders. "All right, Mayor, I'll try to do my job." He turned to go. Then he whirled back. "I'll still get you. Remember—Crime Does Stalk."

"He's overambitious, Tom," the mayor explained. "Let's get this job over with."

Tom started to edge away toward the green for the village.

"What's wrong, Tom?" the mayor asked worriedly.

"I'm not in the mood any more," Tom said. "May night—"

"No, right now," the mayor insisted. "You can't go off. Come on, we'll all help you."

"Sure we will," Max Weaver said. "Steal the shirt, Tom. Size any how."

"How about a nice water jug, Tom?"

"Look at these skeegee nuts over here."

Tom looked from bench to bench. As he reached for a shirt, a knife slipped from his belt and dropped to the ground. The crowd clucked sympathetically.

Tom replaced it, perspiring, knowing he was a but-*ter*fingers. He reached out, took the shirt and the loot bag. The crowd cheered.

Tom smiled faintly, feeling a bit better. "I think I can hang of it."

"Sure you are."

"We knew you could do it."

"Take something else, boy."

Tom walked down the market and helped himself to a rope, a handful of skeegee nuts and a grass hat.

"I guess that's enough," he told the mayor.

"Enough for now," the mayor agreed. "This is a good count, you know. This was the same as people going to Practice, you might say."

"Oh," Tom said, disappointed.

"But you know what you're doing. The next time it'll be easy."

"I suppose it will."

"And don't forget that murder."

"Is it really necessary?" Tom asked.

"I wish it weren't," the mayor said. "But this colony has been here for over two hundred years and we haven't had a single murder. Not one! According to the records, all the other colonies had lots."

"I suppose we should have one," Tom admitted. "I'll take care of it." He headed for his cottage. The crowd gave a rousing cheer as he departed.

At home, Tom lighted a rush lamp and fixed himself supper. After eating, he sat for a long time in his big armchair. He was dissatisfied with himself. He had not really handled the stealing well. All day he had worried and hesitated. People practically had to put things in his hands before he could take them. A fine thief he was!

And there was no excuse for it. Stealing and murdering were like any other necessary jobs. Just because he had never done them before, just because he could see no sense to them, that was no reason to bungle them.

He walked to the door. It was a fine night, illuminated by a dozen nearby stars. The market was deserted again and the village lights were winking out. This was the time to steal!

A thrill ran through him at the thought. He was proud of himself. That was how criminals planned and this was how stealing should be—skulking, late at night.

Quickly Tom checked his weapons, emptied his loot sack and walked out.

The last rash lights were extinguished. Tom moved noiselessly through the village. He came to Roger Waterman's house. Big Roger had left his spade propped against a wall. Tom picked it up. Down the block, Mrs. Weaver's jug was in its usual place beside the front door. Tom took it. On his way home, he found a little wooden horse that some child had forgotten. It went with the rest.

He was pleasantly exhilarated, once the goods were safely home. He decided to make another haul.

This time he returned with a bronze plaque from house, Marv Carpenter's best saw, and Jed Farmer's

"Not bad," he told himself. He was catching on.

This time he found a hammer and chisel in Ron and a reed basket at Alice Cook's house. He was against a wall.

Billy Painter came prowling quietly along, his back to the starlight. In one hand, he carried a short, heavy rod, a pair of homemade handcuffs. In the dim light, he looked ominous. It was the face of a man who had practiced against crime, even though he wasn't really sure why.

Tom held his breath as Billy Painter passed within a few feet of him. Slowly Tom backed away.

The loot sack jingled.

"Who's there?" Billy yelled. When no one answered, he went in a slow circle, peering into the shadows. Tom was propped against a wall again. He was fairly sure Billy would catch him. Billy had weak eyes because of the fumes of the paint. All painters had weak eyes. It was one of the real weaknesses of the colony.

"Is that you, Tom?" Billy asked, in a friendly tone. "I'll get you yet!" Billy shouted.

"Well, get him in the morning!" Jeff Hern shouted from his bedroom window. "Some of us are trying to sleep."

Billy moved away. When he was gone, Tom hurriedly dumped his pile of loot on the floor with the rest. He made a haul proudly. It gave him the sense of a job well done.

After a cool drink of glava, Tom went to bed, and fell into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

Next morning, Tom sauntered out to see how the schoolhouse was progressing. The Carpenter boy was working on it, helped by several villagers.

"How's it coming?" Tom called out cheerfully.

"Fair," Mary Carpenter said. "It'd come along better if I had my saw."

"Your saw?" Tom repeated blankly.

After a moment, he remembered that *he* had stolen it last night. It hadn't He fixed Tom with a stern stare. "Criminals o seemed to belong to anyone then. The saw and all the rest had been objects todozens of murders a day and never even think a be stolen. He had never given a thought to the fact that they might bevillage wants of you is one little killing. Is that too n used or needed.

Marv Carpenter asked, "Do you suppose I could use the saw for a while? Justnecessary?"

for an hour or so?"

"I'm not sure," Tom said, frowning. "It's legally stolen, you know."

"Of course it is. But if I could just borrow it—"

"You'd have to give it back."

"Well, naturally I'd give it back," Marv said indignantly. "I wouldn't keepmetal buttons. He sank into a chair. anything that was legally stolen."

"It's in the house with the rest of the loot."

Marv thanked him and hurried after it.

Tom began to stroll through the village. He reached the mayor's house. TheYou're not much of a criminal if you don't commit a mayor was standing outside, staring at the sky.

"Tom, did you take my bronze plaque?" he asked.

"I certainly did," Tom said belligerently.

"Oh. Just wondering." The mayor pointed upward. "See it?"

Tom looked. "What?"

"Black dot near the rim of the small sun."

"Yes. What is it?"

"I'll bet it's the inspector's ship. How's your work coming?"

"Fine," Tom said, a trifle uncomfortably.

"Got your murder planned?"

"I've been having a little trouble with that," Tom confessed. "To tell the truth, I haven't made any progress on it at all."

"Come on in, Tom. I want to talk to you."

Inside the cool, shuttered living room, the mayor poured two glasses of glava Tom thought for a moment. "Well, I don't know J good enough motive?"

"Our time is running short," the mayor said gloomily. "The inspector may land The mayor shook his head. "No, Tom, that won't anyone else."

"*That* has been talking again. Something about a revolt on Deng IV and all loyal"Let's see," Tom said. "How about George Waterm motive?" Billy asked immediately.

Earth

colonies are to prepare for conscription, whatever even heard of Deng IV, but I have to start worry addition to everything else."

Tom spread his hands nervously. "Do you necessary?"

"You know it is," the mayor said. "If we're going to go all the way. This is the only thing holding other projects are right on schedule."

Billy Painter entered, wearing a new official-blue "Kill anyone yet, Tom?"

The mayor said, "He wants to know if it's *necessary* to go all the way. This is the only thing holding other projects are right on schedule."

Billy Painter entered, wearing a new official-blue "Kill anyone yet, Tom?"

The mayor said, "He wants to know if it's *necessary* to go all the way. This is the only thing holding other projects are right on schedule."

"Of course it is," the police chief said. "Read an together nervously."

"Who'll it be, Tom?" the mayor asked.

Tom squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. He ru together nervously."

"Well?"

"Oh, I'll kill Jeff Hern," Tom blurted.

Billy Painter leaned forward quickly. "Why?" he ask

"Why? Why *not*?"

"What's your motive?"

"I thought you just wanted a murder," Tom reto

anything about motive?"

"We can't have a fake murder," the police chief e

to be done right. And that means you have to

motive."

Tom thought for a moment. "Well, I don't know J

good enough motive?"

The mayor shook his head. "No, Tom, that won't

someone else."

"Let's see," Tom said. "How about George Waterm

motive?" Billy asked immediately.

"Oh . . . um . . . Well, I don't like the way

Never did. And he's noisy sometimes."

The mayor nodded approvingly. "Sounds good to me. What do you say, *out a life*. He would make someone *cease to exist*. Billy?"

"How am I supposed to deduce a motive like that?" Billy asked angrily. "No, were just words. To clarify his thoughts, he took that might be good enough for a crime of passion. But you're a legal criminal, Marv Carpenter as an example. Today, Marv was Tom. By definition, you're cold-blooded, ruthless and cunning. You can't kill schoolhouse with his borrowed saw. If Tom kills some-one just because you don't like the way he walks. That's *silly*."

"I'd better think this whole thing over," Tom said, standing up.

"Don't take too long," the mayor told him. "The sooner it's done, the better." Tom nodded and started out the door.

"Oh, Tom!" Billy called. "Don't forget to leave clues. They're very important." "All right," Tom said, and left.

Outside, most of the villagers were watching the sky. The black dot had grown undoubtedly, and with a small pain in his left shoulder immensely larger. It covered most of the smaller sun.

Tom went to his place of low repute to think things out. Ed Beer had apparently changed his mind about the desirability of criminal elements. The tavern was redecorated. There was a large sign, reading: CRIMINAL'S LAIR. Inside, there were new, carefully soiled curtains on the windows, blocking the daylight and making the tavern truly a Dismal Retreat. Weapons, hastily carved out of soft wood, hung on one wall. On another wall was a large red splotch, a freckled hands. Never again to feel the sm ominous-looking thing, even though Tom knew it was only Billy Painter's important pain in his shoulder that Jan Druggist rootberry red paint.

"Come right in, Tom," Ed Beer said, and led him to the darkest corner in the room. Tom noticed that the tavern was unusually filled for the time of day. People seemed to like the idea of being in a genuine criminal's lair.

Tom sipped a perricola and began to think.

He had to commit a murder.

He took out his skulking permit and looked it over. Un-pleasant, unpalatable, something he wouldn't normally do, but he did have the legal obligation.

Tom drank his perricola and concentrated on murder. He told himself he was going to *kill* someone. He had to *snuff*

But the phrases didn't contain the essence of

Marv wouldn't work any more.

Tom shook his head impatiently. He still wasn't grasping

All right, here was Marv Carpenter, biggest and

the pleasantest of the Carpenter boys. He'd be playing

piece of wood, grasping the plane firmly in his

hands, squinting down the line he had drawn

Druggist was unsuccessfully treating.

That was Marv Carpenter.

Marv Carpenter sprawled on the ground, his eyes

limbs stiff, mouth twisted, no air going in or out of

making the tavern truly a Dismal Retreat. Weapons, hastily carved out of soft

beat to his heart. Never again to hold a piece of wood

wood, hung on one wall. On another wall was a large red splotch, a freckled hands. Never again to feel the sm

ominous-looking thing, even though Tom knew it was only Billy Painter's important pain in his shoulder that Jan Druggist

For just a moment, Tom glimpsed what murder

vision passed, but enough of a memory remained to

He could live with the thieving. But murder, even

interests of the village . . .

What would people think, after they saw what

imagined? How could he live with them? How could

himself afterward?

And yet he had to kill. Everybody in the village

that was his.

But whom could he murder?

The excitement started later in the day when

radio was filled with angry voices.

"Call *that* a colony? Where's the capital?"

"This is it," the mayor replied.

"Where's your landing field?"

"I think it's being used as a pasture," the mayor

look up where it was. No ship has landed here in over

"The main ship will stay aloft then. Assemble your officials. I am coming down." Mr. Grent whispered something in the inspector's ear. "Tell me," the inspector asked the mayor, "how many men are there in the village?"

The entire village gathered around an open field that the inspector designated. Tom strapped on his weapons and skulked behind a tree, watching. "I beg your pardon?" the mayor said in polite bewilderment. "Young men between the ages of fifteen and sixteen are the best for the job," the inspector explained.

A small ship detached itself from the big one and dropped swiftly down. It plummeted toward the field while the villagers held their breaths, certain it would crash. At the last moment, jets flared, scorching the grass, and the ship settled gently to the ground. "You see, General, Imperial Mother Earth is enormous. The colonists on Deng IV and some other colonies are revolting against our authority of Mother Earth."

The mayor edged forward, followed by Billy Painter. A door in the ship opened, and four men marched out. They held shining metallic instruments that Tom knew were weapons. After them came a large, red-faced man dressed in black, wearing four bright medals. He was followed by a little man with a wrinkled face, also dressed in black. Four more uniformed men followed him. "We need men for the space fleet," the inspector said. "Good healthy fighting men. Our reserves are depleted. We wish," Mr. Grent broke in smoothly, "to give Earth colonists a chance to fight for Imperial Mother Earth."

"Welcome to New Delaware," the mayor said. "Thank you, General," the big man said, shaking the mayor's hand firmly. "I am Inspector Delumaine. This is Mr. Grent, my political adviser." "Oh, no," the mayor said. "Certainly not. I'm sure you won't refuse."

Grent nodded to the mayor, ignoring his outstretched hand. He was looking at the villagers with an expression of mild disgust. "Oh, no," the mayor said. "Certainly not. I'm sure you won't refuse."

"We will survey the village," the inspector said, glancing at Grent out of the corner of his eye. Grent nodded. The uniformed guards closed around them. "You see?" the inspector said to Mr. Grent. "They're all bright boys. They can learn, I guess."

Tom followed at a safe distance, skulking in true criminal fashion. In the village, he hid behind a house to watch the inspection. Perhaps a hundred recruits. Not such a waste after all. Mr. Grent still looked dubious.

The mayor pointed out, with pardonable pride, the jail, the post office, the church and the little red schoolhouse. The inspector and his adviser went to the refreshment. Four soldiers accompanied them. Mr. Grent smiled unpleasantly and rubbed his jaw. "We're doing our best, as you can see."

"As I thought," he told the inspector. "A waste of time, fuel and a battle cruiser. This place has nothing of value." "Here's your dinner," she said, as soon as she found him. "Why . . . thanks," said Tom, taken by surprise. "I certainly did. Our tavern is your place of lowly existence. We're responsible for your well-being. And the message." "Why, to be earthly," the mayor said. "We're doing our best, as you can see."

"I'm not so sure," the inspector said. He turned to the mayor. "But what did you build them for, General?" "Why, to be earthly," the mayor said. "We're doing our best, as you can see."

"Why, to be earthly," the mayor said. "We're doing our best, as you can see."

"Why, to be earthly," the mayor said. "We're doing our best, as you can see."

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"Why, to be earthly," the mayor said. "We're doing our best, as you can see."

"Why, to be earthly," the mayor said. "We're doing our best, as you can see."

"He said to hurry up with the murder. He's been stalling the inspector and that nasty little Grent man. But they're going to ask him. He's sure of it."

Tom nodded.

"When are you going to do it?" Mrs. Beer asked, cocking her head to one side.

"I mustn't tell you," Tom said.

"Of course you must. I'm a criminal's accomplice," Mrs. Beer leaned closer.

"That's true," Tom admitted thoughtfully. "Well, I'm go-ing to do it tonight. After dark. Tell Billy Painter I'll leave all the fingerprints I can, and any other clues I think of."

"All right, Tom," Mrs. Beer said. "Good luck."

Tom waited for dark, meanwhile watching the village. He noticed that most of the soldiers had been drinking. They swaggered around as though the villagers didn't exist. One of them fired his weapon into the air, frightening all the small, furry grass-eaters for miles around.

The inspector and Mr. Grent were still in the mayor's house.

Night came. Tom slipped into the village and stationed himself in an alley between two houses. He drew his knife and waited.

Someone was approaching! He tried to remember his criminal methods, but nothing came. He knew he would just have to do the murder as best he could, and fast.

The person came up, his figure indistinct in the darkness.

"Hello, hello, Tom." It was the mayor. He looked at the knife. "What are you doing?"

"You said there had to be a murder, so—"

"I didn't mean *me*," the mayor said, backing away. "It can't be me."

"Why not?" Tom asked.

"Well, for one thing, somebody has to talk to the inspector. He's waiting for me. Someone has to show him—"

"Billy Painter can do that," said Tom. He grasped the mayor by the shirt front, raised the knife and aimed for the throat. "Nothing personal, of course," he added.

"Wait!" the mayor cried. "If there's nothing personal, then you have no motive!"

Tom lowered the knife, but kept his grasp on the hilt.

"I can think of one. I've been pretty sore about me criminal."

"It was the mayor who appointed you, wasn't it?"

"Well, sure—"

The mayor pulled Tom out of the shadows, under the starlight. "Look!"

Tom gaped. The mayor was dressed in long, shimmering robes and a tunic resplendent with medals. On each shoulder was a row of ten stars. His hat was thickly crusted with the shape of comets.

"You see, Tom? I'm not the mayor any more. I'm a general."

"What's that got to do with it? You're the same person!"

"Not officially. You missed the ceremony this morning. The inspector said that since I was officially a general, I had to wear a general's uniform. It was a very friendly ceremony. The Earthmen were grinning and winking at me as I passed."

Raising the knife again, Tom held it as he would a sword.

"Congratulations," he said sincerely, "but you were appointed me criminal, so my motive still holds."

"But you wouldn't be killing the mayor! You'd be killing a general!"

"It isn't?" Tom asked. "What is it then?"

"Why, killing a general is mutiny!"

"Oh." Tom put down the knife. He released the mayor.

"Quite all right," the mayor said. "Natural error. You were wrong, and you haven't, of course—no need to." He took a step back.

Tom called out, "Are you sure this murder is necessary?"

"Yes, absolutely," the mayor said, hurrying away.

Tom put the knife back in his belt.

"Not *me*, not *me*. Everyone would feel that way. Yet s—"

body had to be murdered. Who? He couldn't kill himself. That would be suicide, general now, of course, and that would only be murder which wouldn't count.

He began to shiver, trying not to think of the glimpse he'd had of the reality important victim. Tom would be killing for glory of murder. The job had to be done.

Someone else was coming I

The person came nearer. Tom hunched down, his muscles tightening for their's hardly safe to land there. A criminal actually kill on the very first day! Worst criminal we've come across.

It was Mrs. Miller, returning home with a bag of vegetables.

Tom told himself that it didn't matter whether it was Mrs. Miller or anybody realized, just the sort of thing a master criminal would do else. But he couldn't help remembering those conversations with his mother. Feeling proud of himself for the first time in a long time. They left him without a motive for killing Mrs. Miller.

She passed by without seeing him.

He waited for half an hour. Another person walked through the dark alley ". . . sufficiently passive population." Mr. Greaves. "Sheeplike, in fact."

Tom had always liked him. But that didn't mean there couldn't be a motive. "Makes it rather boring," the inspector answered. "All he could come up with, though, was that Max had a wife and five children especially."

who loved him and would miss him. Tom didn't want Billy Painter to tell him that "Well, what do you expect from backward agrarianism that was no motive. He drew deeper into the shadow and let Max go safely by. we're getting some recruits out of it." Mr. Greaves yawned.

The three Carpenter boys came along. Tom had painfully been through that your feet, guards. We're going back to the ship." already. He let them pass. Then Roger Waterman approached. *Guards!* Tom had forgotten about them. He looked back.

He had no real motive for killing Roger, but he had never been especially his knife. Even if he sprang at the inspector, the inspector was friendly with him. Besides, Roger had no children and his wife wasn't fond of probably stop him before the murder could be committed. him. Would that be enough for Billy Painter to work on? have been trained for just that sort of thing.

He knew it wouldn't be . . . and the same was true of all the villagers. But if he had one of their own weapons . . . He had grown up with these people, shared food and work and fun and grief He heard the shuffling of feet inside. Tom hurried out. with them. How could he possibly have a motive for killing any of them? village.

But he had to commit a murder. His skulking permit required it. He couldn't Near the market, he saw a soldier sitting on a bench. let the village down. But neither could he kill the people he had known all his drunkenly to himself. Two empty bottles lay at his feet. weapon was slung sloppily over his shoulder.

Wait, he told himself in sudden excitement. He could kill the inspector! Tom crept up, drew his blackjack and took aim.

Motive? Why, it would be an even more heinous crime than murdering the The soldier must have glimpsed his shadow. He leapt back, ducking the stroke of the blackjack. In the same moment, with his slung rifle, catching Tom in the ribs, tore the soldier's shoulder and aimed. Tom closed his eyes and lashed out with his feet.

He caught the soldier on the knee, knocking him down. could get up, Tom swung the blackjack.

Tom felt the soldier's pulse—no sense killing the wrong man.

e The inspector wanted to send a search party out to hang him on the spot. Mr. Grent didn't agree. New D

eforest. Ten thousand men couldn't have caught a  
forest, if he didn't want to be caught.

The mayor and several villagers came out, to find a scene of great commotion. The soldiers formed a hollow square, with the inspector and Mr. Grent. They stood with weapons ready.

And the mayor explained everything. The village's

of crime. The job that Tom had been given. How ashamed that he had been unable to handle it.

"Why did you give the assignment to that partic

"Well," the mayor said, "I figured if anyone could

"Then the rest of you would be equally unable to kill

"We wouldn't even get as far as Tom did," the

Mr. Grent and the inspector looked at each other

"soldiers. The soldiers were staring at the villagers with respect. They started to whisper among themselves.

"Attention!" the inspector bellowed. He turned to

gin a low voice, "We'd better get away from here. Men  
who can't kill . . ."

They ordered the soldiers back to the ship. The soldiers

They marched more slowly than usual, and they looked back. They whispered together, even though the inspectors

orders.

The small ship took off in a flurry of jets. Soon it



"I bungled it," he said miserably.

"Don't feel bad about it," Billy Painter told him. "It was an impossible job."

"I'm afraid it was," the mayor said, as they walked back to the village. "I thought that just possibly you could swing it. But you can't be blamed. There's not another man in the village who could have done the job even as well."

"What'll we do with these buildings?" Billy Painter asked, motioning at the jail, the post office, the church, and the little red schoolhouse.

The mayor thought deeply for a moment. "I know," he said. "We'll build a playground for the kids. Swings and slides and sandboxes and things."

"Another playground?" Tom asked.

"Sure. Why not?"

There was no reason, of course, why not.

"I won't be needing this any more, I guess," Tom said, hand-ing the skulking permit to the mayor.

"No, I guess not," said the mayor. They watched him sor-rowfully as he tore it up. "Well, we did our best. It just wasn't good enough."

"I had the chance," Tom muttered, "and I let you all down."

Billy Painter put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It's not your fault, Tom. It's not the fault of any of us. It's just what comes of not being civilized for two hundred years. Look how long it took Earth to get civilized. Thousands of years. And we were trying to do it in two weeks."

"Well, we'll just have to go back to being uncivilized," the mayor said with a hollow attempt at cheerfulness.

Tom yawned, waved, went home to catch up on lost sleep. Before entering, he glanced at the sky.

Thick, swollen clouds had gathered overhead and every one of them had a black lining. The fall rains were almost here. Soon he could start fishing again.

Now why couldn't he have thought of the inspector as a fish? He was too tired to examine that as a motive. In any case, it was too late. Earth was gone from them and civilization had fled for no one knew how many centuries more. He slept very badly.

## Citizen in Space

"I'm really in trouble now, more trouble than I ever had. It's a little difficult to explain how I got into this mess, but I'll try to give you a better start at the beginning."

Ever since I graduated from trade school in 1991 I've been working as a sphinx valve assembler on the Starling Spaceship. I really loved those big ships, roaring to Cygnus and all the other places in the news. I was a young man then, I had friends, I even knew some girls. But it was no good.

The job was fine, but I couldn't do my best work. The cameras focused on my hands. Not that I minded; I was used to them. But they distracted me. I concentrated on the work, not on the cameras. It was the whirring noise they made that bothered me.

I complained to Internal Security. I told them, look, we need new, quiet cameras, like everybody else? But they said, "Do anything about it."

Then lots of little things started to bother me. The recorder in my TV set. The F.B.I. never adjusted it. It hummed all night long. I complained a hundred times. They said, "Look, nobody else's recorder hums that way. Why don't you always give me that speech about winning the competition? They couldn't please everybody."

Things like that make a person feel inferior. The government wasn't interested in me.

Take my Spy, for example. I was an 18-D Security Classification as the Vice-President—and this entitled me to special surveillance. But my particular Spy must have thought I was a movie actor, because he always wore a stained tuxedo and a slouch hat jammed over his eyes.

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A stowaway. I stared at her, open-mouthed.

"Well," she said, "are you going to help me out? Or would you prefer to close the sack and forget the whole thing?"

I helped her out. She said, "Your potatoes are lumpy."

I could have said the same of her, with considerable ap-proval. She was a slender girl, for the most part, with hair the reddish blond color of a flaring jet, a compact, a phial of Venus V perfume, a paper-bag, a dirt-smudged face and brooding blue eyes. On Earth, I would gladly have walked, ten miles to meet her. In space, I wasn't so sure.

"Could you give me something to eat?" she asked. "All I've had since we left is raw carrots."

I fixed her a sandwich. While she ate, I asked, "What are you doing here?"

"You wouldn't understand," she said, between mouthfuls.

"Sure I would."

She walked to a porthole and looked out at the spectacle of stars—American stars, most of them—burning in the void of American space.

"I wanted to be free," she said.

"Huh?"

She sank wearily on my cot. "I suppose you'd call me a romantic," she said quietly. "I'm the sort of fool who recites poetry to herself in the black night, and cries in front of some absurd little statuette. Yellow autumn leaves make me tremble, and dew on a green lawn seems like the tears of all Earth. My psychiatrist tells me I'm a misfit."

She closed her eyes with a weariness I could appreciate. Standing in a potato sack for fifty hours can be pretty ex-hausting.

"Earth was getting me down," she said. "I couldn't stand it—the regimentation, the discipline, the privation, the cold war, the hot war, everything. I wanted to laugh in free air, run through green fields, walk unmolested through gloomy for-ests, sing—"

"But why did you pick on me?"

"You were bound for freedom," she said. "I'll leave, if you insist."

That was a pretty silly idea, out in the depths of space. And I couldn't afford the fuel to turn back.

"You can stay," I said.

"Thank you," she said very softly. "You *do* understand."

"Sure, sure," I said. "But we'll have to get a few things. First of all—" But she had fallen asleep on my cot, a smile on her lips.

Immediately I searched her handbag. I found a phial of Venus V perfume, a paper-bag, a dirt-smudged face and brooding blue eyes. On Earth, I would gladly have walked, ten miles to meet her. In space, I wasn't so sure.

I had suspected it, of course. Girls don't talk that way. It was nice to know my government was still looking after me. It made space seem less lonely.

The ship moved into the depths of American Space. Fifteen hours out of twenty-four, I managed to keep my mind in one piece, my atomic piles reasonably cool, my seams tight. Mavis O'Day (as my Spy was named) took care of the light housekeeping, and hid a number of cameras around the ship. They buzzed abominably, but I didn't notice.

Under the circumstances, however, my relations with Mavis were quite proper. The trip was proceeding normally—even something happened.

I was dozing at the controls. Suddenly an intense light came over my starboard bow. I leaped backward, knocking over a chair.

"Excuse me," I said. "Oh, trample me anytime," she said.

I helped her to her feet. Her supple nearness was pleasant, and the tantalizing scent of Venus V tickled my nose.

"You can let me go now," she said. "I know," I said, and continued to hold her. My hand, by her nearness, I heard myself saying, "Mavis—I'll be with you very long, but—"

"Yes, Bill?" she asked. In the madness of the moment I had forgotten of Suspect and Spy. I don't know what I might have done then a second light blazed outside the ship.



the Senate became fewer and fewer, and finally stopped altogether. You really couldn't expect any more from a Spy of his age.

And after I had set up the domes and force-seeded a few acres, Mavis and I perfectly. His home office, interestingly enough, took long walks in the gloomy forest, and in the bright green and yellow fields Clear-Flo, but Central Intelligence. that bordered it.

One day we packed a picnic lunch and ate on the edge of a little waterfall. I spent most of his time sneaking around with Mavis' unbound hair spread lightly over her shoulders, and there was a distant note-book. His presence spurred Young Roy to an enchanted look in her blue eyes. All in all, she seemed extremely un-Spylike, and Mavis and I stopped walking in the gloomy forest, had to remind myself over and over of our respective roles.

"Bill," she said after a while.

"Yes?" I said.

"Nothing." She tugged at a blade of grass.

I couldn't figure that one out. But her hand strayed some-where near mine. Our itinerant fruit pickers. They were followed by fingertips touched, and clung.

We were silent for a long time. Never had I been so happy.

"Bill?"

"Yes?"

"Bill dear, could you ever—"

What she was going to say, and what I might have answered, I will never know. I didn't know whether to feel proud or ashamed. At that moment our silence was shattered by the roar of jets. Down from the sky agents were watching *me*—but every one of them dropped a spaceship.

Ed Wallace, the pilot, was a white-haired old man in a slouch hat and an involved in farmwork and their Spying efforts. He was a salesman for Clear-Flo, an outfit that cleansed water nothing. stained trench coat. He was a salesman for Clear-Flo, an outfit that cleansed water nothing. on a planetary basis. Since I had no need for his services, he thanked me, and left. I had bitter moments. I pictured myself as a test

But he didn't get very far. His engines turned over once, and stopped with anovices, something to cut their teeth on. I was then a frightening finality.

I looked over his drive mechanism, and found that a sphinx valve had blown. It scatterbrained, or just plain incompetent. I saw my would take me a month to make him a new one with hand tools.

"This is terribly awkward," he murmured. "I suppose I'll have to stay here."

"I suppose so," I said.

He looked at his ship regretfully. "Can't understand how it happened," he said. ever been on Earth, and my Spies were pleasant and people.

"Maybe you weakened the valve when you cut it with a hacksaw," I said, and walked off. I had seen the telltale marks.

Mr. Wallace pretended not to hear me. The over-heard his report on the interstellar radio, with perfectly. His home office, interestingly enough, took long walks in the gloomy forest, and in the bright green and yellow fields Clear-Flo, but Central Intelligence.

Mr. Wallace made a good vegetable farmer, and spent most of his time sneaking around with Mavis' unbound hair spread lightly over her shoulders, and there was a distant note-book. His presence spurred Young Roy to an enchanted look in her blue eyes. All in all, she seemed extremely un-Spylike, and Mavis and I stopped walking in the gloomy forest, had to remind myself over and over of our respective roles. seem time to return to the yellow and green fields unfinished sentences.

But our little settlement prospered. We had our man and his wife from Regional Intelligence dropped by itinerant fruit pickers. They were followed by photographers, secret representatives of Information Bureau, and then there was a young man who was actually from the Idaho Council of Spatial

Every single one of them blew a sphinx valve when they came to leave.

I didn't know whether to feel proud or ashamed. At that moment our silence was shattered by the roar of jets. Down from the sky agents were watching *me*—but every one of them dropped a spaceship. later. And invariably, after a few weeks on my planet

I had bitter moments. I pictured myself as a test subject, or just plain incompetent. I saw my half-pay retirement plan Suspect, a substitute for a

But it didn't bother me too much. I did have a half-pay retirement plan Suspect, a substitute for a

al-though it was a little difficult to define. I was happy

ever been on Earth, and my Spies were pleasant and people.

I thought it could go on forever.

Then, one fateful night, there was an unusual important message seemed to be coming in, and all

on. I had to ask a few Spies to share sets, to keep from burning out my generator. And yet, I felt even sorrier for them. Those

Finally all radios were turned off, and the Spies held confer-ences. I heard them clumsy, bungling Spies were returning to a whispering into the small hours. The next morning, they were all assembled in the competitive world. Where would they find another living room, and their faces were long and somber. Mavis stepped forward as me, or another place like my planet? spokes-woman.

"Something terrible has happened," she said to me. "But first, we have I watched her walk to Mr. Wallace's ship. It was something to reveal to you. Bill, none of us are what we seemed. We are all Spies I realized that she was no longer *my* Spy. for the government."

"Huh?" I said, not wanting to hurt any feelings.

"It's true," she said. "We've been Spying on you, Bill."

"Huh?" I said again. "Even you?"

"Even me," Mavis said unhappily.

"And now it's all over," Young Roy blurted out

That shook me. "*Why?*" I asked.

They looked at each other. Finally Mr. Wallace, bending the rim of his hat back green fields. Here with me. and forth in his calloused hands, said, "Bill, a resurvey has just shown that this She was too happy to speak. sector of space is not owned by the United States."

"What country does own it?" I asked.

"Be calm," Mavis said. "Try to understand. This entire sector was overlooked everyone else had some chore or other that he could in the international survey, and now it can't be claimed by any country. As the So here I am—ruler, king, dictator, president, w first to settle here, this planet, and several million miles of space surrounding it, to call myself. Spies are beginning to pour in n belong to you, Bill."

I was too stunned to speak.

"Under the circumstances," Mavis continued, "we have no authorization to be other rulers are beginning to refuse me aid. They th here. So we're leaving immediately."

"But you can't!" I cried. "I haven't repaired your sphinx valves!"

"All Spies carry spare sphinx valves and hacksaw blades," she said gently.

Watching them troop out to their ships I pictured the solitude ahead of me. To send them away. I'm at the end of my rope. would have no government to watch over me. No longer would I hear footsteps in With my entire population consisting of form the night, turn, and see the dedicated face of a Spy behind me. No longer would Spies, you'd think I'd have an easy time forming a the whirr of an old camera soothe me at work, nor the buzz of a defective recorder my own. But no, they're completely uncooper absolute ruler of a planet of farmers, dairymen, cattle raisers, so I guess we won't starve after all. lull me to sleep. the point. The point is: how in hell am I supposed Not a single one of these people will Spy for me.

Ask a Foolish Question

# Ask a Foolish Question

Answerer was built to last as long as was necessary—which was quite long, as some races judge time, and not long at all, according to others. But to Answerer, it was just long enough.

As to size, Answerer was large to some and small to others. He could be viewed as complex, although some believed that he was really very simple.

Answerer knew that he was as he should be. Above and beyond all else, he was The Answerer. He Knew.

Of the race that built him, the less said the better. They also Knew, and never said whether they found the knowledge pleasant.

They built Answerer as a service to less-sophisticated races, and departed in a unique manner. Where they went only Answerer knows. Because Answerer knows everything.

Upon his planet, circling his sun, Answerer sat. Duration continued, long, as some judge duration, short as others judge it. But as it should be, to Answerer.

Within him were the Answers. He knew the nature of things, and why things are as they are, and what they are, and what it all means.

Answerer could answer anything, provided it was a legitimate question. And he wanted to! He was eager to!

How else should an Answerer be?

What else should an Answerer do?

So he waited for creatures to come and ask.

"How do you feel, sir?" Morran asked, floating gently over to the old man.

Lingman said, trying to smile. No-weight was a 192

vast relief. Even though Morran had expended a large amount of fuel, getting into space under minimum weight was a relief. Lingman's feeble heart hadn't liked it. Lingman's heart was still pounding angrily against the brittle metal of the ship, and he sped up. It seemed for a time as though Lingman was going to stop, out of sheer pique.

But no-weight was a vast relief, and the feeble heart began to beat again.

Morran had no such problems. His strong body could handle the strain and stress. He wouldn't experience them. He expected old Lingman to live.

"I'm going to live," Lingman muttered, in response to an unspoken question. "Long enough to find out." He reached for the controls, and the ship slipped into sub-space. No-oil.

"We'll find out," Morran murmured. He helped Lingman unstrap himself. "We're going to find the Answers."

Lingman nodded at his young partner. They had been re-assuring themselves for years. Originally it had been a simple project. Then Morran, graduating from Cal Tech, had taken it on. Together they had traced the rumors across the galaxy, legends of an ancient humanoid race who had knowledge of all things, and who had built Answerer and de-

"Think of it," Morran said. "The answer to the questions of a physicist, Morran had many questions to ask: the expanding universe; the binding force of atoms; the forces of supernovae; planetary formation; red shifts; and a thousand others.

"Yes," Lingman said. He pulled himself to the edge of the ship, looked out on the bleak prairie of the illusory surface, and saw a biologist and an old man. He had two questions. What is life?

What is death?

After a particularly-long period of hunting for answers, the friends gathered to talk. Purple always lived in the quiet neighborhood of multiple-cluster stars—why, no one knew. Talk was definitely in order.

"Do you know," Lek said, "I think I'll hunt up the

Questioners. Occasionally he mumbled the answer

ntThis was his privilege. He Knew.

But he waited, and the time was neither too long

nefor any of the creatures of space to come and ask.

There were eighteen of them, gathered in one place

ey "I invoke the rule of eighteen," cried one

appeared, who had never before been, born

is eighteen.

"We must go to the Answerer," one cried.

negoverned by the rule of eighteen. Where there are

My will be nineteen. Why is this so?"

No one could answer.

"Where am I?" asked the newborn nineteenth

byaside for instruction.

That left seventeen. A stable number.

to "And we must find out," cried another, "Wh

different, although there is no distance."

That was the problem. One is here. Then one is

that, no movement, no reason. And yet, without

in another place.

g "The stars are cold," one cried.

Why?"

It "We must go to the Answerer."

For they had heard the legends, knew the tal

was a race, a good deal like us, and they Knew-

Answerer. Then they departed to where there is

much distance."

"How do we get there?" the newborn nineteen

now with knowledge.

"We go." And eighteen of them vanished.

Moodily he stared at the tremendous spread of a

he too vanished.

"Those old legends are true," Morran gasped. "Th

had come out of sub-space at the place the legend

and before them was a star unlike any oth

Morran invented a classification for it, but it didn't

was no other like it.

Swinging around the star was a planet, and this to



unlike any other planet. Morran invented reasons, but they didn't matter. This planet was the only one.

"Strap yourself in, sir," Morran said. "I'll land as gently as I can."

Lek came to Answerer, striding swiftly from star to star. He lifted Answerer in his hand and looked at him.

"So you are Answerer," he said.

"Yes," Answerer said.

"Then tell me," Lek said, settling himself comfortably in a gap between the stars, "Tell me what I am."

"A partiality," Answerer said. "An indication."

"Come now," Lek muttered, his pride hurt. "You can do better than that. Now then. The purpose of my kind is to gather purple, and to build a mound of it. Can you tell me the real meaning of this?"

"Your question is without meaning," Answerer said. He knew what purple actually was, and what the mound was for. But the explanation was concealed in a greater explanation. Without this, Lek's question was inexplicable, and Lek had failed to ask the real question.

Lek asked other questions, and Answerer was unable to answer them. Lek viewed things through his specialized eyes, extracted a part of the truth and refused to see more. How to tell a blind man the sensation of green? Answerer didn't try. He wasn't supposed to.

Finally, Lek emitted a scornful laugh. One of his little stepping-stones flared at the sound, then faded back to its usual intensity.

Lek departed, striding swiftly across the stars.

Answerer knew. But he had to be asked the proper questions first. He pondered this limitation, gazing at the stars which were neither large nor small, but exactly the right size.

The proper questions. The race which built Answerer should have taken that into account, Answerer thought. They should have made some allowance for semantic nonsense, allowed him to attempt an unravelling.

Answerer contented himself with muttering the answers to himself.

Eighteen creatures came to Answerer, neither waiting nor simply appearing. Shivering in the cold glare of the stars, they gazed up at the massiveness of Answerer.

"If there is no distance," one asked, "Then how far are you from other places?"

Answerer knew what distance was, and what places were. He couldn't answer the question. There was distance, but it was not the distance the creatures saw it. And there were places, but in a direction from that which the creatures expected.

"Rephrase the question," Answerer said hopefully.

"Why are we short here," one asked, "And long there?" "Why are we fat over there, and short here? Why are we cold?"

Answerer knew all things. He knew why stars were cold. He couldn't explain it in terms of stars or coldness.

"Why," another asked, "Is there a rule of eighteen? Do eighteen gather, is another produced?"

But of course the answer was part of another, and Answerer hadn't been asked.

Another was produced by the rule of eighteen, and another, and another, and creatures vanished.

Answerer mumbled the right questions to himself, but he couldn't answer them.

"We made it," Morran said. "Well, well." He patted the old biologist's shoulder—lightly, because Lingman might fall. The old biologist was tired. His face was sunken, his teeth were loose. Already the mark of the skull was showing in his forehead.

Already the mark of the skull was showing in his forehead. His teeth, his small, flat nose, his exposed cheek-bones showed through. He showed through.

"Let's get on," Lingman said. He didn't want to wait. He didn't have any time to waste.

Helmeted, they walked along the little path.

"Not so fast," Lingman murmured.

"Right," Morran said. They walked together, alone on the surface of the planet that was different from all other planets. They walked around a sun different from all other suns.

"Up here," Morran said. The legends were explicit.

leading to stone steps. Stone steps to a courtyard. And then —the Answerer!

To them, Answerer looked like a white screen set in a wall. To their eyes, 'Why was I born under the constellation Scorpio, Answerer was very simple. with Saturn?' I would be unable to answer your question.

Lingman clasped his shaking hands together. This was the culmination of *aof the zodiac*, because the zodiac has nothing to do with lifetime's work, financing, arguing, ferreting bits of legend, ending here, now. "I see," Morran said slowly. "He can't answer questions."

"Remember," he said to Morran, "We will be shocked. The truth will be like of our assumptions. nothing we have imagined." "That seems to be

"I'm ready," Morran said, his eyes rapturous. He is limited to valid questions—which imply, it  
"Very well. Answerer," Lingman said, in his thin little voice, "What is life?" knowledge we just don't have."

A voice spoke in their heads. "The question has no meaning. By 'life,' the Questioner is referring to a partial phenomenon, inexplicable except in terms of its whole." "We can't even ask a valid question?" Morran asked. "What is death?"

"Of what is life a part?" Lingman asked.

"This question, in its present form, admits of no answer. Questioner is still considering 'life,' from his personal, limited bias." "Death an anthropomorphism!" Morran said turned quickly. "Now we're getting somewhere!"

"Answer it in your own terms, then," Morran said.

<p>"The Answerer can only answer questions." Answerer thought again of the sad limitation imposed by his builders.</p> <p>Silence.</p>	<p>"Anthropomorphisms may be classified, tentatively, into A, total truths, or B, partial truths in terms of a partial situation. "Which is applicable here?"</p>
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"Is the universe expanding?" Morran asked confidently.

" 'Expansion' is a term inapplicable to the situation. Uni-verse, as the Questioner views it, is an illusory concept."

"Can you tell us *anything*?" Morran asked.

"I can answer any valid question concerning the nature of things."

The two men looked at each other.

"I think I know what he means," Lingman said sadly. "Our basic assumption is the right question. But how are we supposed to be wrong. All of them." "What's the question?"

"They can't be," Morran said. "Physics, biology—"

"Partial truths," Lingman said, with a great weariness in his voice. "At leastHe closed his eyes.

we've determined that much. We've found out that our inferences concerning "Savages, that's what we are," Morran said, pacing in front of Answerer. "Imagine a bushman w

"But the rule of the simplest hypothesis—"

"It's only a theory," Lingman said.

"But life—he certainly could answer what life is?"

"The scientist wouldn't even attempt it," Lingma said in a low voice; "he would know the limitations of the question."

"It's fine," Morran said angrily. "How do you explain the rotation to a bushman? Or better, how do you explain

relativity to him—maintaining scientific rigor in your explanation at all times, of course."

Lingman, eyes closed, didn't answer.

"We're bushmen. But the gap is much greater here. Worm and superman, perhaps. The worm desires to know the nature of dirt, and why there's so much of it. Oh, well."

"Shall we go, sir?" Morran asked. Lingman's eyes remained closed. His taloned fingers were clenched, his cheeks sunk further in. The skull was emerging.

"Sir! Sir!"

And Answerer knew that that was not the answer.

Alone on his planet, which is neither large nor small, but exactly the right size, Answerer waits. He cannot help the people who come to him, for even Answerer has restrictions.

He can answer only valid questions.

Universe? Life? Death? Purple? Eighteen?

Partial truths, half-truths, little bits of the great question.

But Answerer, alone, mumbles the questions to himself, the true questions, which no one can understand.

How could they understand the true answers?

The questions will never be asked, and Answerer remembers something his builders knew and forgot.

In order to ask a question you must already know most of the answer.

*Version 1.5: The original htm file was missing three stories from this anthology: Hunting Problem, Something for Nothing, and The Battle. I dunno wtf the original scanner was thinking, but if you're going to scan something in, make sure you've got ALL the fucking pages. </rant>*

*Anyway, I found the missing three stories from random sources, and edited them into the correct places in this collection. I don't have the time to proofread this or to clean up the sloppy html, so knock yourselves out!*

*-Scatman Steve (06/06)*