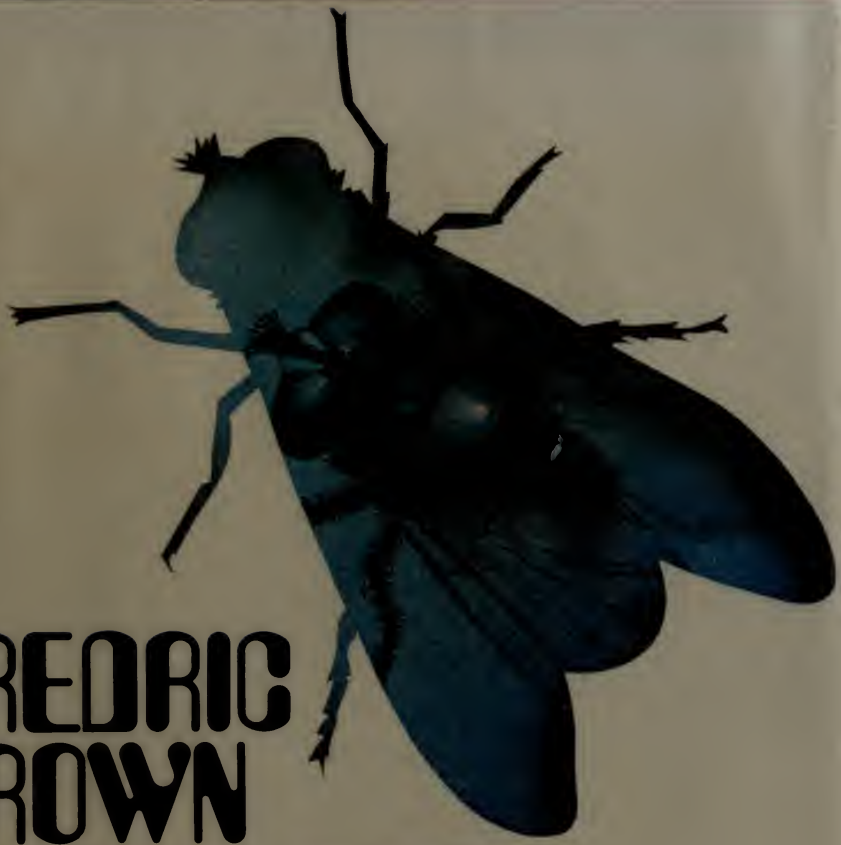

FREDRIC BROWN

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Fredric Brown began his career as a mystery writer and achieved instant success with his first book, *The Fabulous Clipjoint,* for which he won the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Award as the best first mystery of its year.

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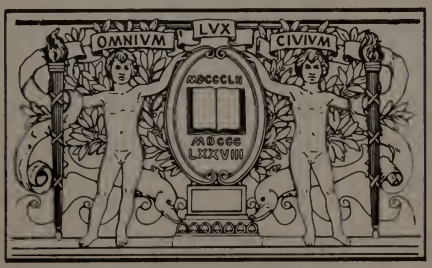
FREDRIC BROWN
PARADOX LOST



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HIS NAME WAS DEATH

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THE LIGHTS IN THE SKY ARE STARS

THE MIND THING

WHAT MAD UNIVERSE

THE OFFICE

PARADOX LOST

PARADOX LOST

and Twelve Other
Great Science Fiction Stories

by **FREDRIC BROWN**

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INTRODUCTION

FRED hated to write. But he loved having written. He would do everything he could think of to delay sitting at his typewriter: he would dust his desk, tootle on his flute, read a little, tootle some more. Or if we were living in a town where mail was not delivered, he would call for it at the post office, and then find someone to have a game, or two or three, of chess or pinochle or cribbage. By the time he got home he thought it was too late to get started. After this went on for days and his conscience began to hurt, he would actually sit at his typewriter. He might write a line or two, or he might write a few pages. But the books got written.

He was not a prolific writer. His average day's output was about three pages. Sometimes, if a book seemed to be

writing itself, he would write six or seven pages a day, but this was unusual.

Fred paced from room to room when he was plotting. Since we were both home a good deal of the time, we had the problem of my talking to him while he paced, thereby interrupting his trend of thought. He didn't like that. After trying several remedies without success, I suggested that he wear his red denim cap when he did not want to be disturbed. Eventually, I automatically looked at his head before I opened my mouth.

After a book was finished we usually went on a trip, the length of our stay depending on our circumstances.

There came a time when Fred's plotting would bog down. Despite all of his pacing he couldn't get anywhere. When this happened on one of his earlier books, he thought perhaps a trip, by night, by bus, might help. He was not an early-to-bed person, and he thought that after the bus lights were out and all was quiet, he might be able to concentrate better. He took a pencil flashlight and note pad along. He stayed away a few days, and when he came home his plot had been worked out.

He took many more of these trips. And I could always tell when he was about to make the announcement that he was going. He did not *always* have his plot worked out when he came home, but if not, he had worked out a plot for his next book.

The high point in Fred's career was leaving his proofreading job to write full time. But his happiest and proudest occasion was the winning of the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Allan Poe Award, for a best first mystery, for his *The Fabulous Clipjoint*, and of all the books he wrote since, he never felt quite the same about another. It was his birth as a novelist. It is only natural that he liked some of his books better than others, but *The*

Fabulous Clipjoint was his first-born and he remained partial to it.

Until he had several books published, he continued to write short stories between books in order to have a backlog to depend on during the time it took to write a book. Then he wrote a short story, or a vignette, only when he had one he knew he *must* write.

For many years he had been wanting to write *The Office*, but it would be in a new field for him, since it would be a straight novel. He knew his mystery and science-fiction books would sell, but he didn't know how a straight novel by someone new in that field would do. He couldn't yet afford to write a book that might not sell. But eventually he did write it. And it did sell.

He tried writing for TV for a short time, but decided it was not for him and went back to writing books. He has had a few hundred stories and twenty-eight novels published, and this is his eighth collection.

Though I have liked all of Fred's books, my all-time favorite is *The Screaming Mimi.* Others I like particularly are *Here Comes a Candle*, *The Lenient Beast*, *The Far Cry*, *His Name Was Death* and *Night of the Jabberwock.*

I am not really a science-fiction fan because most science-fiction novels are too technical for my liking. But I found Fred's easily readable. My favorites in this group are *The Lights in the Sky Are Stars* and *The Mind Thing. What Mad Universe* is a near-classic and near-favorite of mine.

To me, his collections are delightful. I am especially fond of this one because it is his last finished work. And since it is his farewell to his readers, I hope you like it too.

ELIZABETH BROWN

PARADOX LOST

PARADOX LOST

A BLUE BOTTLE FLY had got in through the screen, somehow, and it droned in monotonous circles around the ceiling of the classroom. Even as Professor Dolohan droned in monotonous circles of logic up at the front of the class. Shorty McCabe, seated in the back row, glanced from one to the other of them and finally settled on the blue bottle fly as the more interesting of the two.

"The negative absolute," said the professor, "is, in a manner of speaking, not absolutely negative. This is only seemingly contradictory. Reversed in order, the two words acquire new connotations. Therefore—"

Shorty McCabe sighed inaudibly and watched the blue bottle fly, and wished that he could fly around in circles like that, and with such a soul-satisfying buzz. In

comparative sizes and decibels, a fly made more noise than an airplane.

More noise, in comparison to size, than a buzz saw. Would a buzz saw saw metal? Say, a saw. Then one could say he saw a buzz saw saw a saw. Or leave out the buzz and that would be better: I saw a saw saw a saw. Or, better yet: Sue saw a saw saw a saw.

"One may think," said the professor, "of an absolute as a mode of being—"

Yeah, thought Shorty McCabe, one may think of anything as anything else, and what does it get you but a headache. Anyway, the blue bottle fly was becoming more interesting. It was flying down now, toward the front of the classroom, and maybe it would light on Professor Dolohan's head. And buzz.

No, but it lighted somewhere out of sight behind the professor's desk. Without the fly to solace him, Shorty looked around the classroom for something else to look at or think about. Only the backs of heads; he was alone in the back row, and—well, he could concentrate on how the hair grew on the backs of people's necks, but it seemed a subject of limited fascination.

He wondered how many of the students ahead of him were asleep, and decided that about half of them were; and he wished he could go to sleep himself, but he couldn't. He'd made the silly mistake of going to bed early the night before and as a result he was now wide-awake and miserable.

"But," said Professor Dolohan, "if we disregard the contravention of probability arising in the statement that the positive absolute is less than absolutely positive, we are led to—"

Hooray! The blue bottle fly was back again, arising from its temporary concealment back of the desk. It droned upward to the ceiling, paused there a moment to preen its wings, and then flew down again, this time toward the back of the room.

And if it kept that spiral course, it would go past within an inch of Shorty's nose. It did. He went cross-eyed watching it and turned his head to keep it in sight. It flew past and—

It just wasn't there any more. At a point about twelve inches to the left of Shorty McCabe, it had suddenly quit flying and suddenly quit buzzing, and it wasn't there. It hadn't died and hadn't fallen into the aisle. It had just—

Disappeared. In midair, four feet above the aisle, it had simply ceased to be there. The sound it had made seemed to have stopped in midbuzz, and in the sudden silence the professor's voice seemed louder, if not funnier. "By creating, through an assumption contrary to fact, we create a pseudoreal set of axioms which are, in a measure, the reversal of existing—"

Shorty McCabe, staring at the point where the fly had vanished, said "Gaw!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Sorry, Professor. I didn't speak," said Shorty. "I . . . I just cleared my throat."

"—by the reversal of existing— What was I saying? Oh, yes. We create an axiomatic basis of pseudologic which would yield different answers to all problems. I mean—"

Seeing that the professor's eyes had left him, Shorty turned his head again to look at the point where the fly had ceased to fly. Had ceased, maybe, to *be* a fly? Nuts; it

must have been an optical illusion. A fly went pretty fast. If he'd suddenly lost sight of it—

He shot a look out of the corner of his eye at Professor Dolohan, and made sure that the professor's attention was focused elsewhere. Then Shorty reached out a tentative hand toward the point, or the approximate point, where he'd seen the fly vanish.

He didn't know what he expected to find there, but he didn't feel anything at all. Well, that was logical enough. If the fly had flown into nothing and he, Shorty, had reached out and felt nothing, that proved nothing. But, somehow, he was vaguely disappointed. He didn't know what he'd expected to find; hardly to touch the fly that wasn't there, or to encounter a solid but invisible obstacle, or anything. But—*what* had happened to the fly?

Shorty put his hands on the desk and, for a full minute, tried to forget the fly by listening to the professor. But that was worse than wondering about the fly.

For the thousandth time he wondered why he'd ever been such a sap as to enroll in this Logic 2B class. He'd never pass the exam. And he was majoring in paleontology, anyway. He liked paleontology; a dinosaur was something you could get your teeth into, in a manner of speaking. But logic, phooey; 2B or not 2B. And he'd rather study about fossils than listen to one.

He happened to look down at his hands on the desk. "Gaw!" he said.

"Mr. McCabe?" said the professor.

Shorty didn't answer; he couldn't. He was looking at his left hand. There weren't any fingers on it. He closed his eyes.

The professor smiled a professorial smile. "I believe our

young friend in the back seat has . . . uh . . . gone to sleep," he said. "Will someone please try—"

Shorty hastily dropped his hands into his lap. He said, "I . . . I'm okay, Professor. Sorry. Did you say something?"

"Didn't you?"

Shorty gulped. "I . . . I guess not."

"We were discussing," said the professor—to the class, thank heaven, and not to Shorty individually—"the possibility of what one might refer to as the impossible. It is not a contradiction in terms, for one must distinguish carefully between *im*possible and *un*possible. The latter—"

Shorty surreptitiously put his hands back on the desk and sat there staring at them. The right hand was all right. The left— He closed his eyes and opened them again and still all the fingers of his left hand were missing. They didn't *feel* missing. Experimentally, he wriggled the muscles that ought to move them and he felt them wriggle.

But they weren't there, as far as his eyes could see. He reached over and felt for them with his right hand—and he couldn't feel them. His right hand went right through the space that his left-hand fingers ought to occupy, and felt nothing. But still he could move the fingers of his left hand. He did.

It was very confusing.

And then he remembered that was the hand he had used in reaching out toward the place where the blue bottle fly had disappeared. And then, as though to confirm his sudden suspicion, he felt a light touch on one of the fingers that wasn't there. A light touch, and some-

thing light crawling along his finger. Something about the weight of a blue bottle fly. Then the touch vanished, as though it had flown again.

Shorty bit his lips to keep from saying "Gaw!" again. He was getting scared.

Was he going nuts? Or had the professor been right and was he asleep after all? How could he tell? Pinching? With the only available fingers, those of his right hand, he reached down and pinched the skin of his thigh, hard. It hurt. But then if he dreamed he pinched himself, couldn't he also dream that it hurt?

He turned his head and looked toward his left. There wasn't anything to see that way; the empty desk across the aisle, the empty desk beyond it, the wall, the window, and blue sky through the pane of glass.

But—

He glanced at the professor and saw that his attention was now on the blackboard where he was marking symbols. "Let *N*," said the professor, "equal known infinity, and the symbol *a* equal the factor of probability."

Shorty tentatively reached out his left hand again into the aisle and watched it closely. He thought he might as well make sure; he reached out a little farther. The *hand was gone.* He jerked back his wrist, and sat there sweating.

He was nuts. He had to be nuts.

Again he tried to move his fingers and felt them wriggle very satisfactorily, just as they should have wriggled. They still had feeling, kinetic and otherwise. But— He reached his wrist toward the desk and didn't feel the desk. He put it in such a position that his hand, if it had been on the end of his wrist, would have *had* to touch or pass through the desk, but he felt nothing.

Wherever his hand was, it wasn't on the end of his wrist. It was still out there in the aisle, no matter where he moved his arm. If he got up and walked out of the classroom, would his hand *still* be out there in the aisle, invisible? And suppose he went a thousand miles away? But that was silly.

But was it any sillier than that his arm should rest here on the desk and his hand be two feet away? The difference in silliness between two feet and a thousand miles was only one of degree.

Was his hand out there?

He took his fountain pen out of his pocket and reached out with his right hand to approximately the point where he thought *it* was, and—sure enough—he was holding only part of a fountain pen, half of one. He carefully refrained from reaching any farther, but raised it and brought it down sharply.

It rapped—he felt it—across the missing knuckles of his left hand! That tied it! It so startled him that he let go of the pen and it was gone. It wasn't on the floor of the aisle. It wasn't anywhere. It was just gone, and it had been a good five-dollar pen, too.

Gaw! Here he was worrying about a *pen* when *his left hand was missing*. What was he going to do about *that?*

He closed his eyes. "Shorty McCabe," he said to himself, "you've got to think this out logically and figure out how to get your hand back out of whatever that is. You daren't get scared. Probably you're asleep and dreaming this, but maybe you aren't, and, *if* you aren't, you're in a jam. Now let's be logical. There is a place out there, a plane or something, and you can reach across it or put things across it, but you can't get them back again.

"Whatever else is on the other side, your left hand is. And your right hand doesn't know what your left hand is doing because one is here and the other is there, and never the twain shall— Hey, cut it out, Shorty. *This isn't funny.*"

But there was one thing he could do, and that was find out roughly the size and shape of the—whatever it was. There was a box of paper clips on his desk. He picked up a few in his right hand and tossed one of them out into the aisle. The paper clip got six or eight inches out into the aisle, and vanished. He didn't hear it land anywhere.

So far, so good. He tossed one a bit lower; same result. He bent down at his desk, being careful not to lean his head out into the aisle, and skittered a paper clip across the floor out into the aisle, saw it vanish eight inches out. He tossed one a little forward, one a bit backward. The plane extended at least a yard to the front and back, roughly parallel with the aisle itself.

And up? He tossed one upward that arced six feet above the aisle and vanished there. Another one, higher yet and in a forward direction. It described an arc in the air and landed on the head of a girl three seats forward in the next aisle. She started a little and put up a hand to her head.

"Mr. McCabe," said Professor Dolohan severely, "may I ask if this lecture bores you?"

Shorty jumped. He said, "Y— No, Professor. I was just—"

"You were, I noticed, experimenting in ballistics and the nature of a parabola. A parabola, Mr. McCabe, is the curve described by a missile projected into space with no continuing force other than its initial impetus and the

force of gravity. Now shall I continue with my original lecture, or would you rather we called you up before the class to demonstrate the nature of paraboloid mechanics for the edification of your fellow students?"

"I'm sorry, Professor," said Shorty. "I was . . . uh . . . I mean . . . I mean I'm sorry."

"Thank you, Mr. McCabe. And now—" The professor turned again to the blackboard. "If we let the symbol *b* represent the degree of unpossibility, in contradistinction to *c*—"

Shorty stared morosely down at his hands—his *hand,* rather—in his lap. He glanced up at the clock on the wall over the door and saw that in another five minutes the class period would be over. He had to do *something,* and do it quickly.

He turned his eyes toward the aisle again. Not that there was anything there to see. But there was plenty there to think about. Half a dozen paper clips, his best fountain pen, and his left hand.

There was an invisible something out there. You couldn't feel it when you touched it, and objects like paper clips didn't click when they hit it. And you could get through it in one direction, but not in the other. He could reach his right hand out there and touch his left hand with it, no doubt, but then he wouldn't get his right hand back again. And pretty soon class would be over and—

Nuts. There was only one thing he could do that made any sense. There wasn't anything on the other side of that plane that hurt his left hand, was there? Well, then, why not step through it? Wherever he'd be, it would be all in one piece.

He shot a glance at the professor and waited until he turned to mark something on the blackboard again. Then, without waiting to think it over, without *daring* to think it over, Shorty stood up in the aisle.

The lights went out. Or he had stepped into blackness.

He couldn't hear the professor any more, but there was a familiar buzzing noise in his ears that sounded like a blue bottle fly circling around somewhere nearby in the darkness.

He put his hands together, and they were both there; his right hand clasped his left. Well, wherever he was, he was *all* there. But why couldn't he see?

Somebody sneezed.

Shorty jumped, and then said, "Is . . . uh . . . anybody there?" His voice shook a little, and he hoped now that he was really asleep and that he'd wake up in a minute.

"Of course," said a voice. A rather sharp and querulous voice.

"Uh . . . who?"

"What do you mean, who? Me. Can't you see— No, of course you can't. I forgot. Say, listen to that guy! And they say we're crazy!" There was a laugh in the darkness.

"What guy?" asked Shorty. "And who says who's crazy? Listen, I don't get—"

"*That* guy," said the voice. "The teacher. Can't you— No, I forget you can't. You've got no business here anyway. But I'm listening to the teacher telling about what happened to the saurians."

"The what?"

"The saurians, stupid. The dinosaurs. The guy's nuts. And they say *we* are!"

Shorty McCabe suddenly felt the need, the stark necessity, of sitting down. He groped in darkness and felt the top of a desk and felt that there was an empty seat behind it and eased himself down into the seat. Then he said, "This is Greek to me, mister. Who says who's crazy?"

"*They* say *we* are. Don't you know—that's right, you don't. Who let that fly in here?"

"Let's start at the beginning," Shorty begged. "Where am I?"

"You *normals,*" said the voice petulantly. "Face you with anything out of the ordinary and you start asking—Oh, well, wait a minute and I'll tell you. Swat that fly for me."

"I can't see it. I—"

"Shut up. I want to listen to this; it's what I came here for. He— Yow, he's telling them that the dinosaurs died out for lack of food because they got too big. Isn't that silly? The bigger a thing is the better chance it has to find food, hasn't it? And the idea of the herbivorous ones ever starving in those forests! Or the carnivorous ones while the herbivorous ones were around! And— But why am I telling you all this? You're normal."

"I . . . I don't get it. If I'm normal, what are you?"

The voice chuckled. "I'm *crazy.*"

Shorty McCabe gulped. There didn't seem to be anything to say. The voice was all too obviously right, about that.

In the first place, if he could hear outside, Professor Dolohan was lecturing on the positive absolute, and this voice—with whatever, if anything, was attached to it—had come to hear about the decline of the saurians. That

didn't make sense because Professor Dolohan didn't know a pixilated pterodactyl from an oblate spheroid.

And— "Ouch!" said Shorty. Something had given him a hard thwack on the shoulder.

"Sorry," said the voice. "I just took a swat at that dratted fly. It lighted on you. Anyway, I missed it. Wait a minute until I turn the switch and let the darned thing out. You want out, too?"

Suddenly the buzzing stopped.

Shorty said, "Listen, I . . . I'm too darn curious to want out of here until I got *some* idea what I'm getting out from, I mean out of. I guess I must be crazy, but—"

"No, you're normal. It's we who are crazy. Anyway, that's what they say. Well, listening to that guy talk about dinosaurs bores me; I'd just as soon talk to you as listen to him. But you had no business getting in here, either you or that fly, see? There was a slip-up in the apparatus. I'll tell Napoleon—"

"Who?"

"Napoleon. He's the boss in this province. Napoleons are bosses in some of the others, too. You see a lot of us think we're Napoleon, but not me. It's a common delusion. Anyway, the Napoleon I mean is the one in Donnybrook."

"Donnybrook? Isn't that an insane asylum?"

"Of course, where else would anyone be who thought he was Napoleon? I ask you."

Shorty McCabe closed his eyes and found that didn't do any good because it was dark anyway and he couldn't see even with them open. He said to himself, "I got to keep on asking questions until I get something that makes sense or *I'm* going crazy. Maybe I *am* crazy;

maybe this is what it's like to be crazy. But if I am, am I still sitting in Professor Dolohan's class, or . . . or what?"

He opened his eyes and asked, "Look, let's see if we can get at this from a different angle. Where are you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm in Donnybrook, too. Normally, I mean. All of us in this province are, except a few that are still on the outside, see? Just now"—suddenly his voice sounded embarrassed—"I'm in a padded cell."

"And," asked Shorty fearfully, "is . . . is this *it?* I mean, am *I* in a padded cell, too?"

"Of course not. You're sane. Listen, I've got no business to talk these things over with you. There's a sharp line drawn, you know. It was just because something went wrong with the apparatus."

Shorty wanted to ask "What apparatus?" but he had a hunch that if he did the answer would open up seven or eight new questions. Maybe if he stuck to one point until he understood that one, he could begin to understand some of the others. He said, "Let's get back to Napoleon. You say there is more than one Napoleon among you? How can that be? There can't be two of the same thing."

The voice chuckled. "That's all you know. That's what proves you're normal. That's normal reasoning; it's right, of course. But these guys who think they are Napoleon are crazy, so it doesn't apply. Why can't a hundred men each be Napoleon if they're too crazy to know they can't?"

"Well," said Shorty, "even if Napoleon wasn't dead, at least ninety-nine of them would have to be wrong, wouldn't they? That's logic."

"That's what's wrong with it here," said the voice. "I keep telling you we're crazy."

"We? You mean that I'm—"

"No, no, no, no, no. By 'we' I mean us, myself and the others, not you. That's why you got no business being here at all, see?"

"No," said Shorty. Strangely, he felt completely unafraid now. He knew that he must be asleep dreaming this, but he didn't think he was. But he was as sure as he was sure of anything that he *wasn't* crazy. The voice he was talking to said he wasn't; and that voice certainly seemed to be an authority on the subject. A hundred Napoleons! He said, "This is fun. I want to find out as much as I can before I wake up. Who are you; what's your name? Mine's Shorty."

"Moderately glad to know you, Shorty. You normals bore me usually, but you seem a bit better than most. I'd rather not give you the name they call me at Donnybrook, though; I wouldn't want you to come there visiting or anything. Just call me Dopey."

"You mean . . . uh . . . the Seven Dwarfs? You think you're one of—"

"Oh, no, not at all. I'm not a paranoiac; none of my delusions, as you would call them, concern identity. It's just the nickname they know me by here. Just like they call you Shorty, see? Never mind my other name."

Shorty said, "What are your . . . uh . . . delusions?"

"I'm an inventor, what they call a nut inventor. I think I invent time machines, for one thing. This is one of them."

"This is— You mean that I'm in a time machine? Well, yes, that would account for . . . uh . . . a thing or two. But, listen, if this is a time machine and it works, why do you say you *think* you invent them? If this *is* one —I mean—"

The voice laughed. "But a time machine is impossible. It is a paradox. Your professors will explain that a time machine cannot be, because it would mean that two things could occupy the same space at the same time. And a man could go back and kill himself when he was younger, and—oh, all sorts of stuff like that. It's completely impossible. Only a crazy man could—"

"But you say this *is* one. Uh . . . where is it? I mean, where in time."

"Now? It's 1968, of course."

"In— Hey, it's only 1963. Unless you moved it since I got on; did you?"

"No. *I* was in 1968 all along; that's where I was listening to that lecture on the dinosaurs. But you got on back there, five years back. That's because of the warp. The one I'm going to take up with Napo—"

"But where am I . . . are we . . . now?"

"You're in the same classroom you got on from, Shorty. But five years ahead. If you reach out, you'll see— Try, just to your left, back where you yourself were sitting."

"Uh—would I get my hand back again, or would it be like when I reached into here?"

"It's all right; you'll get it back."

"Well—" said Shorty.

Tentatively, he reached out his hand. It touched something soft that felt like hair. He took hold experimentally and tugged a little.

It jerked suddenly out of his grasp, and involuntarily Shorty jerked his hand back.

"Yow!" said the voice beside him. "That was funny!"

"What . . . what happened?" asked Shorty.

"It was a girl, a knockout with red hair. She's sitting in

the same seat you were sitting in back there five years ago. You pulled her hair, and you ought to've seen her jump! Listen—"

"Listen to what?"

"Shut up, then, so I can listen—" There was a pause, and the voice chuckled. "The prof is dating her up!"

"Huh?" said Shorty. "Right in class? How—"

"Oh, he just looked back at her when she let out a yip, and told her to stay after class. But from the way he's looking at her, I can guess he's got an ulterior motive. I can't blame him; she's sure a knockout. Reach out and pull her hair again."

"Uh . . . well it wouldn't be quite . . . uh—"

"That's right," said the voice disgustedly. "I keep forgetting you aren't crazy like me. Must be awful to be normal. Well, let's get out of here. I'm bored. How'd you like to go hunting?"

"Hunting? Well, I'm not much of a shot. Particularly when I can't see anything."

"Oh, it won't be dark if you step out of the apparatus. It's your own world, you know, but it's crazy. I mean, it's an—how would your professor put it?—an illogical aspect of logicality. Anyway, we always hunt with slingshots. It's more sporting."

"Hunt what?"

"Dinosaurs. They're the most fun."

"*Dinosaurs! With a slingshot!* You're cra— I mean, do you?"

The voice laughed. "Sure, we do. Look, that's what was so funny about what that professor was saying about the saurians. You see, we killed them off. Since I made this time machine, the Jurassic has been our favorite

hunting ground. But there may be one or two left for us to hunt. I know a good place for them. This is it."

"This? I thought we were in a classroom in 1968."

"We were, then. Here, I'll inverse the polarity, and you can step right out. Go ahead."

"But—" Shorty said, and then "Well—" and then took a step to his right.

Sunlight blinded him.

It was a brighter, more glaring sunlight than he had ever seen or known before, a terrific contrast after the darkness he'd been in. He put his hands over his eyes to protect them, and only slowly was he able to take them away and open his eyes.

Then he saw he was standing on a patch of sandy soil near the shore of a smooth-surfaced lake.

"They come here to drink," said a familiar voice, and Shorty whirled around. The man standing there was a funny-looking little cuss, a good four inches shorter than Shorty, who stood five feet five. He wore shell-rimmed glasses and a small goatee; and his face seemed tiny and wizened under a tall black top hat that was turning greenish with age.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small slingshot, but with quite heavy rubber between the prongs. He said, "You can shoot the first one if you want," and held it out.

Shorty shook his head vigorously. "You," he said.

The little man bent down and carefully selected a few stones out of the sand. He pocketed all but one, and fitted that into the leather insert of the slingshot. Then he sat down on a boulder and said, "We needn't hide. They're dumb, those dinosaurs. They'll come right by here."

Shorty looked around him again. There were trees about a hundred yards back from the lake, strange and monstrous trees with gigantic leaves that were a much paler green than any trees he'd ever seen before. Between the trees and the lake were only small, brownish, stunted bushes and a kind of coarse yellow grass.

Something was missing. Shorty suddenly remembered what it was. "Where's the time machine?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh, right here." The little man reached out a hand to his left and it disappeared up to the elbow.

"Oh," said Shorty. "I wondered what it looked like."

"Looked like?" said the little man. "How could it look like anything? I told you that there isn't any such thing as a time machine. There couldn't be; it would be a complete paradox. Time is a fixed dimension. And when I proved that to myself, that's what drove me crazy."

"When was that?"

"About four million years from now, around 1961. I had my heart set on making one, and went batty when I couldn't."

"Oh," said Shorty. "Listen, how come I couldn't see you, up there in the future, and I can here? And which world of four million years ago *is* this; yours or mine?"

"The same thing answers both of those questions. This is neutral ground; it's before there was a bifurcation of sanity and insanity. The dinosaurs are awfully dumb; they haven't got brains enough to be insane, let alone normal. They don't know from anything. They don't know there couldn't be a time machine. That's why we can come here."

"Oh," said Shorty again. And that held him for a while. Somehow it didn't seem particularly strange any

more that he should be waiting to see a dinosaur hunted with a slingshot. The mad part of it was that he should be waiting for a dinosaur *at all.* Granting that, it wouldn't have seemed any sillier to have sat here waiting for one with a— "Say," he said, "if using a slingshot on those things is sporting, did you ever try a fly swatter?"

The little man's eyes lighted up. "That," he said, "*is* an idea. Say, maybe you really *are* eligible for—"

"No," said Shorty hastily. "I was just kidding, honest. But, listen—"

"I don't hear anything."

"I don't mean that; I mean—well, listen, pretty soon I'm going to wake up or something, and there are a couple questions I'd like to ask while . . . while you're still here."

"You mean while *you're* still here," said the little man. "I told you that your getting in on this with me was a pure accident, and one moreover that I'm going to have to take up with Napo—"

"Damn Napoleon," said Shorty. "Listen, can you answer this so I can understand it? *Are* we here, or *aren't* we? I mean, if there's a time machine there by you, how can it be there if there can't be a time machine? And am I, or am I not, still back in Professor Dolohan's classroom, and if I am, what am I doing here? And—oh, darn it; what's it all about?"

The little man smiled wistfully. "I can see that you are quite thoroughly mixed up. I might as well straighten you out. Do you know anything about logic?"

"Well, a little, Mr. . . . uh—"

"Call me Dopey. And if you know a little about logic, *that's your trouble.* Just forget it and remember that I'm

crazy, and that makes things different, doesn't it? A crazy person doesn't have to be logical. Our worlds are different, don't you see? Now you're what we call a normal; that is, you see things the same as everybody else. But we don't. And since matter is most obviously a mere concept of mind—"

"Is it?"

"Of course."

"But *that's* according to logic. Descartes—"

The little man waved his slingshot airily. "Oh, yes. But not according to other philosophers. The dualists. That's where the logicians cross us up. They divide into two camps and take diametrically opposite sides of a question, and they can't both be wrong. Silly, isn't it? But the fact remains that matter is a concept of consciousness, even if some people who aren't really crazy think it is. Now there is a normal concept of matter, which you share, and a whole flock of abnormal ones. The abnormal ones sort of get together."

"I don't quite understand. You mean that you have a secret society of . . . uh . . . lunatics, who . . . uh . . . live in a different world, as it were?"

"Not as it were," corrected the little man emphatically, "but *as it weren't.* And it isn't a secret society, or anything organized that way. It just *is.* We project into two universes, in a manner of speaking. One is normal; our bodies are born there, and of course, they stay there. And if we're crazy enough to attract attention, we get put into asylums there. But we have another existence, in our minds. That's where I am, and that's where you are at the moment, in my mind. I'm not really here, either."

"Whew!" said Shorty. "But how *could* I be in your—"

"I told you; the machine slipped. But logic hasn't much place in my world. A paradox more or less doesn't matter, and a time machine is a mere bagatelle. Lots of us have them. Lots of us have come back here hunting with them. That's how we killed off the dinosaurs and that's why—"

"Wait," said Shorty. "Is this world we're sitting in, the Jurassic, part of your . . . uh . . . concept, or is it real? It looks real, and it looks authentic."

"This is real, but it never really existed. That's obvious. If matter is a concept of mind, and the saurians hadn't any minds, then how could they have had a world to live in, except that we thought it up for them afterward?"

"Oh," said Shorty weakly. His mind was going in buzzing circles. "You mean that the dinosaurs never really—"

"Here comes one," said the little man.

Shorty jumped. He looked around wildly and couldn't see anything that looked like a dinosaur.

"Down there," said the little man, "coming through these bushes. Watch this shot."

Shorty looked down as his companion raised the slingshot. A small lizardlike creature, but hopping erect as no lizard hops, was coming around one of the stunted bushes. It stood about a foot and a half high.

There was a sharp pinging sound as the rubber snapped, and a thud as the stone hit the creature between the eyes. It dropped, and the little man went over and picked it up. "You can shoot the next one," he said.

Shorty gawked at the dead saurian. "A struthiomi-

mus!" he said. "Golly. But what if a big one comes along? A brontosaurus, say, or a tyrannosaurus rex?"

"They're all gone. We killed them off. There's only the little ones left, but it's better than hunting rabbits, isn't it? Well, one's enough for me this time. I'm getting bored, but I'll wait for you to shoot one if you want to."

Shorty shook his head. "Afraid I couldn't aim straight enough with that slingshot. I'll skip it. Where's the time machine?"

"Right here. Take two steps ahead of you."

Shorty did, and the lights went out again.

"Just a minute," said the little man's voice, "I'll set the levers. And you want off where you got on?"

"Uh . . . it might be a good idea. I might find myself in a mess otherwise. Where are we now?"

"Back in 1968. That guy is still telling his class what *he* thinks happened to the dinosaurs. And that red-headed girl— Say, she really *is* a honey. Want to pull her hair again?"

"No," said Shorty. "But I want off in 1963. How's this going to get me there?"

"You got on here, from 1963, didn't you? It's the warp. I think this will put you off just right."

"You *think?*" Shorty was startled. "Listen, what if I get off the day before and sit down on my own lap in that classroom?"

The voice laughed. "You couldn't do that; you're not crazy. But I did, once. Well, get going. I want to get back to—"

"Thanks for the ride," said Shorty. "But—wait—I still got one question to ask. About those dinosaurs."

"Yes? Well, hurry; the warp might not hold."

"The big ones, the really big ones. How the devil did you kill *them* with slingshots? Or did you?"

The little man chuckled. "Of course we did. We just used bigger slingshots, that's all. Goodby."

Shorty felt a push, and light blinded him again. He was standing in the aisle of the classroom.

"Mr. McCabe," said the sarcastic voice of Professor Dolohan, "class is not dismissed for five minutes yet. Will you be so kind as to resume your seat? And were you, may I ask, somnambulating?"

Shorty sat down hastily. He said, "I . . . uh— Sorry, Professor."

He sat out the rest of the period in a daze. It had seemed too vivid for a dream, and his fountain pen was still gone. But, of course, he could have lost that elsewhere. But the whole thing had been so vivid that it was a full day before he could convince himself that he'd dreamed it, and a week before he could forget about it, for long at a time.

Only gradually did the memory of it fade. A year later, he still vaguely remembered that he'd had a particularly screwy dream. But not five years later; no dream is remembered that long.

He was an associate professor now, and had his own class in paleontology. "The saurians," he was telling them, "died out in the late Jurassic age. Becoming too large and unwieldy to supply themselves with food—"

As he talked, he was staring at the pretty red-headed graduate student in the back row. And wondering how he could get up the nerve to ask her for a date.

There was a blue bottle fly in the room; it had risen in a droning spiral from a point somewhere at the back of

the room. It reminded Professor McCabe of something, and while he talked, he tried to remember what it was. And just then the girl in the back row jumped suddenly and yipped.

"Miss Willis," said Professor McCabe, "is something wrong?"

"I . . . I thought something pulled my hair, Professor," she said. She blushed, and that made her more of a knockout than ever. "I . . . I guess I must have dozed off."

He looked at her—severely, because the eyes of the class were upon him. But this was just the chance he'd been waiting and hoping for. He said, "Miss Willis, will you please remain after class?"

PUPPET SHOW

HORROR CAME TO CHERRYBELL at a little after noon on a blistering hot day in August.

Perhaps that is redundant; *any* August day in Cherrybell, Arizona, is blistering hot. It is on Highway 89 about forty miles south of Tucson and about thirty miles north of the Mexican border. It consists of two filling stations, one on each side of the road to catch travelers going in both directions, a general store, a beer-and-wine-license-only tavern, a tourist-trap type trading post for tourists who can't wait until they reach the border to start buying serapes and huaraches, a deserted hamburger stand, and a few 'dobe houses inhabited by Mexican-Americans who work in Nogales, the border town to the south, and who, for God knows what reason, prefer to

live in Cherrybell and commute, some of them in Model T Fords. The sign on the highway says, "Cherrybell, Pop. 42," but the sign exaggerates; Pop died last year—Pop Anders, who ran the now-deserted hamburger stand—and the correct figure is 41.

Horror came to Cherrybell mounted on a burro led by an ancient, dirty and gray-bearded desert rat of a prospector who later—nobody got around to asking his name for a while—gave the name of Dade Grant. Horror's name was Garth. He was approximately nine feet tall but so thin, almost a stick-man, that he could not have weighed over a hundred pounds. Old Dade's burro carried him easily, despite the fact that his feet dragged in the sand on either side. Being dragged through the sand for, as it later turned out, well over five miles hadn't caused the slightest wear on the shoes—more like buskins, they were—which constituted all that he wore except for a pair of what could have been swimming trunks, in robin's-egg blue. But it wasn't his dimensions that made him horrible to look upon; it was his *skin.* It looked red, raw. It looked as though he had been skinned alive, and the skin replaced upside down, raw side out. His skull, his face, were equally narrow or elongated; otherwise in every visible way he appeared human—or at least humanoid. Unless you counted such little things as the fact that his hair was a robin's-egg blue to match his trunks, as were his eyes and his boots. Blood red and light blue.

Casey, owner of the tavern, was the first one to see them coming across the plain, from the direction of the mountain range to the east. He'd stepped out of the back door of his tavern for a breath of fresh, if hot, air. They

were about a hundred yards away at that time, and already he could see the utter alienness of the figure on the led burro. Just alienness at that distance, the horror came only at closer range. Casey's jaw dropped and stayed down until the strange trio was about fifty yards away, then he started slowly toward them. There are people who run at the sight of the unknown, others who advance to meet it. Casey advanced, however slowly, to meet it.

Still in the wide open, twenty yards from the back of the little tavern, he met them. Dade Grant stopped and dropped the rope by which he was leading the burro. The burro stood still and dropped its head. The stickman stood up simply by planting his feet solidly and standing, astride the burro. He stepped one leg across it and stood a moment, leaning his weight against his hands on the burro's back, and then sat down in the sand. "High-gravity planet," he said. "Can't stand long."

"Kin I get water for my burro?" the prospector asked Casey. "Must be purty thirsty by now. Hadda leave water bags, some other things, so it could carry—" He jerked a thumb toward the red-and-blue horror.

Casey was just realizing that it *was* a horror. At a distance the color combination seemed a bit *outré,* but close— The skin was rough and seemed to have veins on the outside and looked moist (although it wasn't) and *damn* if it didn't look just like he had his skin peeled off and put back upside down. Or just peeled off, period. Casey had never seen anything like it and hoped he wouldn't ever see anything like it again.

Casey felt something behind him and looked over his shoulder. Others had seen now and were coming, but the nearest of them, a pair of boys, were ten yards behind

him. *"Muchachos,"* he called out. *"Agua por el burro. Un pazal. Pronto."*

He looked back and said, "What—? Who—?"

"Name's Dade Grant," said the prospector, putting out a hand, which Casey took absently. When he let go of it it jerked back over the desert rat's shoulder, thumb indicating the thing that sat on the sand. "*His* name's Garth, he tells me. He's an extra something or other, and he's some kind of minister."

Casey nodded at the stick-man and was glad to get a nod in return instead of an extended hand. "I'm Manuel Casey," he said. "What does he mean, an extra something?"

The stick-man's voice was unexpectedly deep and vibrant. "I am an extraterrestrial. And a minister plenipotentiary."

Surprisingly, Casey was a moderately well-educated man and knew both of those phrases; he was probably the only person in Cherrybell who would have known the second one. Less surprisingly, considering the speaker's appearance, he believed both of them. "What can I do for you, sir?" he asked. "But first, why not come in out of the sun?"

"No, thank you. It's a bit cooler here than they told me it would be, but I'm quite comfortable. This is equivalent to a cool spring evening on my planet. And as to what you can do for me, you can notify your authorities of my presence. I believe they will be interested."

Well, Casey thought, by blind luck he's hit the best man for his purpose within at least twenty miles. Manuel Casey was half-Irish, half-Mexican. He had a half brother who was half-Irish and half assorted-American,

and the half brother was a bird colonel at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson. He said, "Just a minute, Mr. Garth, I'll telephone. You, Mr. Grant, would you want to come inside?"

"Naw, I don't mind sun. Out in it all day every day. An' Garth here, he ast me if I'd stick with him till he was finished with what he's gotta do here. Said he'd gimme somethin' purty vallable if I did. Somethin'—a 'lectrononic—"

"An electronic battery-operated portable ore indicator," Garth said. "A simple little device, indicates presence of a concentration of ore up to two miles, indicates kind, grade, quantity and depth."

Casey gulped, excused himself, and pushed through the gathering crowd into his tavern. He had Colonel Casey on the phone in one minute, but it took him another four minutes to convince the colonel that he was neither drunk nor joking.

Twenty-five minutes after that there was a noise in the sky, a noise that swelled and then died as a four-man helicopter sat down and shut off its rotors a dozen yards from an extraterrestrial, two men and a burro. Casey alone had had the courage to rejoin the trio from the desert; there were other spectators, but they still held well back.

Colonel Casey, a major, a captain and a lieutenant who was the helicopter's pilot all came out and ran over. The stick-man stood up, all nine feet of him; from the effort it cost him to stand you could tell that he was used to a much lighter gravity than Earth's. He bowed, repeated his name and identification of himself as an extraterrestrial and a minister plenipotentiary. Then he apol-

ogized for sitting down again, explained why it was necessary, and sat down.

The colonel introduced himself and the three who had come with him. "And now, sir, what can we do for you?"

The stick-man made a grimace that was probably intended as a smile. His teeth were the same light blue as his hair and eyes. "You have a cliché, 'take me to your leader.' I do not ask that. In fact, I *must* remain here. Nor do I ask that any of your leaders be brought here to me. That would be impolite. I am perfectly willing for you to represent them, to talk to you and let you question me. But I do ask one thing.

"You have tape recorders. I ask that, before I talk or answer questions, you have one brought. I want to be sure that the message your leaders eventually receive is full and accurate."

"Fine," the colonel said. He turned to the pilot. "Lieutenant, get on the radio in the whirlybird and tell them to get us a tape recorder faster than possible. It can be dropped by para— No, that'd take longer, rigging it for a drop. Have them send it by another helicopter." The lieutenant turned to go. "Hey," the colonel said. "Also fifty yards of extension cord. We'll have to plug it in inside Manny's tavern."

The lieutenant sprinted for the helicopter.

The others sat and sweated a moment and then Manuel Casey stood up. "That's a half an hour wait," he said, "and if we're going to sit here in the sun, who's for a bottle of cold beer? You, Mr. Garth?"

"It is a cold beverage, is it not? I am a bit chilly. If you have something hot—?"

"Coffee, coming up. Can I bring you a blanket?"

"No, thank you. It will not be necessary."

Casey left and shortly returned with a tray with half a dozen bottles of cold beer and a cup of steaming coffee. The lieutenant was back by then. Casey put down the tray and first served the stick-man, who sipped the coffee and said, "It is delicious."

Colonel Casey cleared his throat. "Serve our prospector friend next, Manny. As for us—well, drinking is forbidden on duty, but it was a hundred and twelve in the shade in Tucson, and this is hotter and also is *not* in the shade. Gentlemen, consider yourselves on official leave for as long as it takes you to drink one bottle of beer, or until the tape recorder arrives, whichever comes first."

The beer was finished first, but by the time the last of it had vanished, the second helicopter was within sight and sound. Casey asked the stick-man if he wanted more coffee. The offer was politely declined. Casey looked at Dade Grant and winked and the desert rat winked back, so Casey went in for two more bottles, one apiece for the civilian terrestrials. Coming back he met the lieutenant coming with the extension cord and returned as far as the doorway to show him where to plug it in.

When he came back, he saw that the second helicopter had brought its full complement of four, besides the tape recorder. There were, besides the pilot who had flown it, a technical sergeant who was skilled in the operation of the tape recorder and who was now making adjustments on it, and a lieutenant-colonel and a warrant officer who had come along for the ride or because they had been made curious by the request for a tape recorder to be rushed to Cherrybell, Arizona, by air. They were stand-

ing gaping at the stick-man and whispered conversations were going on.

The colonel said, "Attention" quietly, but it brought complete silence. "Please sit down, gentlemen. In a rough circle. Sergeant, if you rig your mike in the center of the circle, will it pick up clearly what any one of us may say?"

"Yes, sir. I'm almost ready."

Ten men and one extraterrestrial humanoid sat in a rough circle, with the microphone hanging from a small tripod in the approximate center. The humans were sweating profusely; the humanoid shivered slightly. Just outside the circle, the burro stood dejectedly, its head low. Edging closer, but still about five yards away, spread out now in a semicircle, was the entire population of Cherrybell who had been at home at the time; the stores and the filling stations were deserted.

The technical sergeant pushed a button and the tape recorder's reel started to turn. "Testing . . . testing," he said. He held down the rewind button for a second and then pushed the playback button. "Testing . . . testing," said the recorder's speaker. Loud and clear. The sergeant pushed the rewind button, then the erase one to clear the tape. Then the stop button. "When I push the next button, sir," he said to the colonel, "we'll be recording."

The colonel looked at the tall extraterrestrial, who nodded, and then the colonel nodded at the sergeant. The sergeant pushed the recording button.

"My name is Garth," said the stick-man, slowly and clearly. "I am from a planet of a star which is not listed in your star catalogs, although the globular cluster in which it is one of ninety thousand stars, is known to you. It is, from here, in the direction of the center of the gal-

axy at a distance of a little over four thousand light-years.

"However, I am not here as a representative of my planet or my people, but as minister plenipotentiary of the Galactic Union, a federation of the enlightened civilizations of the galaxy, for the good of all. It is my assignment to visit you and decide, here and now, whether or not you are to be welcomed to join our federation.

"You may now ask questions freely. However, I reserve the right to postpone answering some of them until my decision has been made. If the decision is favorable, I will then answer all questions, including the ones I have postponed answering meanwhile. Is that satisfactory?"

"Yes," said the colonel. "How did you come here? A spaceship?"

"Correct. It is overhead right now, in orbit twenty-two thousand miles out, so it revolves with the earth and stays over this one spot. I am under observation from it, which is one reason I prefer to remain here in the open. I am to signal it when I want it to come down to pick me up."

"How do you know our language so fluently? Are you telepathic?"

"No, I am not. And nowhere in the galaxy is any race telepathic except among its own members. I was taught your language, for this purpose. We have had observers among you for many centuries—by *we,* I mean the Galactic Union, of course. Quite obviously I could not pass as an Earthman, but there are other races who can. Incidentally, they are not spies, or agents; they have in no way tried to affect you; they are observers and that is all."

"What benefits do we get from joining your union, if we are asked and if we accept?" the colonel asked.

"First, a quick course in the fundamental social sci-

ences which will end your tendency to fight among yourselves and end or at least control your aggressions. After we are satisfied that you have accomplished that and it is safe for you to do so, you will be given space travel, and many other things, as rapidly as you are able to assimilate them."

"And if we are not asked, or refuse?"

"Nothing. You will be left alone; even our observers will be withdrawn. You will work out your own fate—either you will render your planet uninhabited and uninhabitable within the next century, or you will master social science yourselves and again be candidates for membership and again be offered membership. We will check from time to time and if and when it appears certain that you are not going to destroy yourselves, you will again be approached."

"Why the hurry, now that you're here? Why can't you stay long enough for our leaders, as you call them, to talk to you in person?"

"Postponed. The reason is not important but it is complicated, and I simply do not wish to waste time explaining."

"Assuming your decision is favorable, how will we get in touch with you to let you know *our* decision? You know enough about us, obviously, to know that *I* can't make it."

"We will know your decision through our observers. One condition of acceptance is full and uncensored publication in your newspapers of this interview, verbatim from the tape we are now using to record it. Also of all deliberations and decisions of your government."

"And other governments? We can't decide unilaterally for the world."

"Your government has been chosen for a start. If you accept we shall furnish the techniques that will cause the others to fall in line quickly—and those techniques do not involve force or the threat of force."

"They must be *some* techniques," said the colonel wryly, "if they'll make one certain country I don't have to name fall into line quickly, without even a threat."

"Sometimes the offer of reward is more significant than the use of threat. Do you think the country you do not wish to name would like your country colonizing planets of far stars before they even reach Mars? But that is a minor point, relatively. You may trust the techniques."

"It sounds almost too good to be true. But you said that you are to decide, here and now, whether or not we are to be invited to join. May I ask on what factors you will base your decision?"

"One is that I am—was, since I already have—to check your degree of xenophobia. In the loose sense in which you use it, that means fear of strangers. We have a word that has no counterpart in your vocabulary: it means fear of and revulsion toward *aliens.* I—or at least a member of my race—was chosen to make the first overt contact with you. Because I am what you would call roughly humanoid—as you are what I would call roughly humanoid—I am probably more horrible, more repulsive to you than many completely different species would be. Because to you, I am a caricature of a human being, I am more horrible to you than a being who bears no remote resemblance to you.

"You may think you *do* feel horror at me, and revulsion, but believe me, you have passed that test. There *are* races in the galaxy who can never be members of the federation, no matter how they advance otherwise, because

they are violently and incurably xenophobic; they could never face or talk to an alien of any species. They would either run screaming from him or try to kill him instantly. From watching you and these people"—he waved a long arm at the civilian population of Cherrybell not far outside the circle of the conference—"I know you feel revulsion at the sight of me, but believe me it is relatively slight and certainly curable. You have passed that test satisfactorily."

"And are there other tests?"

"One other. But I think it is time that I—" Instead of finishing the sentence, the stick-man lay back flat on the sand and closed his eyes.

The colonel started to his feet. "What in *hell?*" he said. He walked quickly around the mike's tripod and bent over the recumbent extraterrestrial, put an ear to the bloody-appearing chest.

As he raised his head, Dade Grant, the grizzled prospector, chuckled. "No heartbeat, Colonel, because no heart. But I may leave him as a souvenir for you and you'll find much more interesting things inside him than heart and guts. Yes, he is a puppet whom I have been operating—as your Edgar Bergen operates his—what's his name?—oh yes, Charlie McCarthy. Now that he has served his purpose, he is deactivated. You can go back to your place, Colonel."

Colonel Casey moved back slowly. "Why?" he asked.

Dade Grant was peeling off his beard and wig. He rubbed a cloth across his face to remove make-up and was revealed as a handsome young man. He said, "What he told you, or what you were told through him, was true as far as it went. He is only a simulacrum, yes, but he is an exact duplicate of a member of one of the intelligent

races of the galaxy, the one toward whom you would be disposed—if you were violently and incurably xenophobic—to be most horrified by, according to our psychologists. But we did not bring a real member of his species to make first contact because they have a phobia of their own, agoraphobia—fear of space. They are highly civilized and members in good standing of the federation, but they never leave their own planet.

"Our observers assure us you don't have *that* phobia. But they were unable to judge in advance the degree of your xenophobia and the only way to test it was to bring along something in lieu of someone to test it against, and presumably to let him make the initial contact."

The colonel sighed audibly. "I can't say this doesn't relieve me in one way. We could get along with humanoids, yes, and will when we have to. But I'll admit it's a relief to learn that the master race of the galaxy is, after all, human instead of only humanoid. What is the second test?"

"You are undergoing it now. Call me—" He snapped his fingers. "What's the name of Bergen's second-string puppet, after Charlie McCarthy?"

The colonel hesitated, but the tech sergeant supplied the answer. "Mortimer Snerd."

"Right. So call me Mortimer Snerd, and now I think it is time that I—" He lay back flat on the sand and closed his eyes just as the stick-man had done a few minutes before.

The burro raised its head and put it into the circle over the shoulder of the tech sergeant. "That takes care of the puppets, Colonel," it said. "And now what's this bit about it being important that the master race be human or at least humanoid? What is a master race?"

THE LAST TRAIN

ELIOT HAIG SAT ALONE AT A BAR, as he had sat alone at many bars before, and outside it was dusk, a peculiar dusk. Inside the tavern it was dim and shadowy, almost darker than outside. The blue bar mirror heightened the effect; in it Haig seemed to see himself as in dim moonlight from a blue moon. Dimly but clearly he saw himself; not double, despite the several drinks he had had, but single. Very, very single.

And as always when he had been drinking a few hours he thought, maybe this time I'll do it.

The *it* was vague and big; it meant everything. It meant making a big jump from one life to another life that he had so long contemplated. It meant simply walking out on a moderately successful semishyster lawyer

named Eliot Haig, walking out on all the petty complications of his life, on the personal involvements, the legal chicanery that was just inside the letter of the law or indetectably outside; it meant cutting the cable of habit that tied him to an existence that had become without meaning or significance or incentive.

The blue reflection depressed him and he felt, more strongly than usual, the need to move, to go somewhere else if only for another drink. He finished the last sip of his highball and slid off the stool to the solid floor. He said, "So long, Joe," and strolled toward the front.

The bartender said, "Must be a big fire somewhere; lookit that sky. Wonder if it's the lumberyards other side of town." The bartender was leaning to the front window, staring out and up.

Haig looked up after he had gone through the door. The sky was a pinkish gray, as though with the glow of a distant fire. But it covered all of the sky he could see from where he stood, with no clue to the direction of the conflagration.

He strolled south at random. The far whistle of a locomotive came to his ears, reminding him.

Why not, he thought. Why not tonight? The old impulse, ghost of thousands of unsatisfactory evenings, was stronger tonight. He was walking, even now, toward the railway station; but that he had done before, often. Often he had gone so far as to watch trains depart, thinking, as he watched each: I should be on that train. Never actually boarding one.

Half a block from the station, he heard clang of bell and chug of steam and the starting of the train. He'd missed that one, if he'd had the nerve to take it.

And suddenly it came to him that tonight was dif-

ferent, that tonight he'd really make it. Just with the clothes he had on, the money that happened to be in his pocket. Just as he'd always intended; the clean break. Let them report him missing, let them wonder, let someone else straighten the tangled mess his business would suddenly be without him.

Walter Yates was standing in front of the open door of his tavern a few doors from the station. He said, "Hello, Mr. Haig. Beautiful aurora borealis tonight. Best one I've ever seen."

"That what it is?" Haig asked. "I thought it was reflection from a big fire."

Walter shook his head. "Nope. Look north; the sky's kind of shivery up that way. It's the aurora."

Haig turned and looked north, back along the street. The reddish glow in that direction was—yes, "shivery" described it well. It was beautiful, too, but just a little frightening, even when one knew what it was.

He turned back and went past Walter into the tavern, asking, "Got a drink for a thirsty man?"

Later, stirring a highball with the glass rod, he asked, "Walter, when does the next train leave?"

"For where?"

"For anywhere."

Walter glanced up at the clock. "In a few minutes. It's going to highball any second now."

"Too soon; I want to finish this drink. And the next one after that?"

"There's one at ten-fourteen. Maybe that's the last one out tonight. Up to midnight anyway, it is; I close up then, so I don't know."

"Where does it— Wait, don't tell me where it goes. I don't want to know. But I'm going to be on it."

"Without knowing where it goes?"

"Without caring where it goes," corrected Haig. "And look, Walter, I'm serious. I want you to do this for me: if you read in the newspapers that I've disappeared, don't tell anyone I was here tonight, or what I told you. I didn't mean to tell anyone."

Walter nodded sagely. "I can keep my trap shut, Mr. Haig. You've been a good customer. They won't trace you through me."

Haig swayed a little on the stool. His eyes focused on Walter's face, seeing the slight smile. There was a haunting sense of *familiarity* in this conversation. It was as though he had said the same words before, had had the same answer.

Sharply he asked, "Have I told you that before, Walter? How often?"

"Oh, six—eight—maybe ten times. I don't remember."

Haig said "God" softly. He stared at Walter and Walter's face blurred and separated into two faces and only an effort pulled them back into one face, faintly smiling, ironically tolerant. It had been oftener, he knew now, than ten times. "Walter, am I a lush?"

"I wouldn't call you that, Mr. Haig. You drink a lot, yes, but—"

He didn't want to look at Walter any more.

He stared down into his glass and saw that it was empty. He ordered another, and while Walter was getting it, he stared at himself in the mirror behind the bar. Not a blue mirror here, thank God. It was bad enough to see two images of himself in the plain mirror; the twin images Haig and Haig, only that was now an outworn

joke with himself and it was one of the reasons he was going to catch that train. *Going* to, by God, drunk or sober he'd be on that train.

Only that phrase too had a ring of uneasy familiarity.

How many times?

He stared down into a glass a quarter full and the next time it was over half full and Walter was saying, "Maybe it *is* a fire, Mr. Haig, a big fire; that's getting too bright for an aurora. I'm going out a second."

But Haig stayed on the stool and when he looked again, Walter was back behind the bar, fiddling with the radio.

Haig asked, "Is it a fire?"

"Must be. I'm going to get the ten-fifteen newscast and see." The radio blared jazz, a high-riding jittery clarinet over muted brass and restless drums. "Be on in a minute; that's the station."

"Be on in a minute—" He almost fell, getting off the stool. "It's ten-fourteen, then?"

He didn't wait for an answer. The floor seemed tilting a little as he headed for the open door. Only a few doors and through the station. He might make it; he might actually make it. Suddenly it was as though he'd had nothing to drink at all and his mind was crystal clear no matter how his feet might stagger. And trains seldom left on the *exact* second, and Walter might have said "in a minute" meaning three or two or four minutes. There was a chance.

He fell on the steps but got up and went on, losing only seconds. Past the ticket window—he could buy his ticket on the train—and through the back doors to the platform, the gates, and the red taillight of a train pulling out

only yards, but hopeless yards, away. Ten yards, a hundred. Dwindling.

The station agent stood at the edge of the platform looking out after the departing train.

He must have heard Haig's footsteps; over his shoulder he said, "Too bad you missed it. That was the last one."

Haig suddenly saw the funny side of it and began to laugh. It was simply too ridiculous to take seriously, the narrowness of the margin by which he'd missed that train. Besides, there'd be an early one. All he had to do was go back in the station and wait until— He asked, "When's the first one out tomorrow?"

"You don't understand," said the agent.

For the first time he turned and Haig saw his face against the crimson, blazing sky. "You don't understand," he said. "That was *the last train.*"

IT DIDN'T HAPPEN

ALTHOUGH THERE WAS NO WAY in which he could have known it, Lorenz Kane had been riding for a fall ever since the time he ran over the girl on the bicycle. The fall itself could have happened anywhere, any time; it happened to happen backstage at a burlesque theater on an evening in late September.

For the third evening within a week he had watched the act of Queenie Quinn, the show's star stripper, an act well worth watching, indeed. Clad only in blue light and three tiny bits of strategically placed ribbon, Queenie, a tall blond built along the lines of a brick whatsit, had just completed her last stint for the evening and had vanished into the wings, when Kane made up his mind that a private viewing of Queenie's act, in his bachelor apartment,

not only would be more pleasurable than a public viewing but would indubitably lead to even greater pleasures. And since the finale number, in which Queenie, as the star, was not required to appear, was just starting, now would be the best time to talk to her with a view toward obtaining a private viewing.

He left the theater and strolled down the alley to the stage door entrance. A five-dollar bill got him past the doorman without difficulty and a minute later he had found and was knocking upon a dressing room door decorated with a gold star. A voice called out "Yeah?" He knew better than to try to push a proposition through a closed door and he knew his way around backstage well enough to know the one question that would cause her to assume that he was someone connected with show business who had a legitimate reason for wanting to see her. "Are you decent?" he asked.

" 'Sta minute," she called back, and then, in just a minute, "Okay."

He entered and found her standing facing him, in a bright red wrapper that beautifully set off her blue eyes and blond hair. He bowed and introduced himself, then began to explain the details of the proposition he wished to offer.

He was prepared for initial reluctance or even refusal and ready to become persuasive even, if necessary, to the extent of four figures, which would certainly be more than her weekly take—possibly more than her monthly take—in a burlesque house as small as this one. But instead of listening reasonably, she was suddenly screaming at him like a virago, which was insulting enough, but then she made the very serious mistake of taking a step

forward and slapping him across the face. Hard. It hurt.

He lost his temper, retreated a step, took out his revolver and shot her in the heart.

Then he left the theater and took a taxi home to his apartment. He had a few drinks to soothe his understandably ruffled nerves and went to bed. He was sleeping soundly when, at a little after midnight, the police came and arrested him for murder. He couldn't understand it.

Mortimer Mearson, who was possibly if not certainly the best criminal attorney in the city, returned to the clubhouse the next morning after an early round of golf and found waiting for him a message requesting him to call Judge Amanda Hayes at his earliest convenience. He called her at once.

"Good morning, Your Honoress," he said. "Something gives?"

"Something gives, Morty. But if you're free the rest of the morning and can drop around to my chambers, you'll save me going into it over the telephone."

"I'll be with you within an hour," he told her. And he was.

"Good morning again, Your Judgeship," he said. "Now please take a deep breath and tell me just what it is that gives."

"A case for you, if you want it. Succinctly, a man was arrested for murder last night. He refuses to make a statement, any statement, until he has consulted an attorney, and he doesn't have one. Says he's never been in any legal trouble before and doesn't even know any attorneys. Asked the chief to recommend one, and the chief passes the buck to me on said recommendation."

Mearson sighed. "Another free case. Well, I suppose it's about time I took one again. Are you appointing me?"

"Down, boy," said Judge Hayes. "Not a free case at all. The gentleman in question isn't rich, but he's reasonably well-heeled. A fairly well-known young man about town, *bon vivant,* what have you, well able to afford any fee you wish to charge him, within reason. Not that your fee will probably *be* within reason, but that's between you and him, if he accepts you to represent him."

"And does this paragon of virtue—most obviously innocent and maligned—have a name?"

"He does, and you will be familiar with it if you read the columnists. Lorenz Kane."

"The name registers. Most *obviously* innocent. Uh—I didn't see the morning papers. Whom is he alleged to have killed? And do you know any of the details?"

"It's going to be a toughie, Morty boy," the judge said. "I don't think there's a prayer of a chance for him other than an insanity plea. The victim was a Queenie Quinn —a stage name and no doubt a more valid one will come to light—who was a stripper at the Majestic. Star of the show there. A number of people saw Kane in the audience during her last number and saw him leave right after it during the final number. The doorman identifies him and admits having—ah—admitted him. The doorman knew him by sight and that's what led the police to him. He passed the doorman again on his way out a few minutes later. Meanwhile several people heard a shot. And a few minutes after the end of the show, Miss Quinn was found dead, shot to death, in her dressing room."

"Hmmm," said Mearson. "Simple matter of his word against the doorman's. Nothing to it. I'll be able to prove

that the doorman is not only a pathological liar but has a record longer than Wilt-the-Stilt's arm."

"Indubitably, Morty. But. In view of his relative prominence, the police took a search warrant as well as a warrant for arrest on suspicion of murder when they went to get him. They found, in the pocket of the suit he had been wearing, a thirty-two caliber revolver with one cartridge fired. Miss Quinn was killed by one bullet fired from a thirty-two caliber revolver. The very *same* revolver, according to the ballistics experts of our police department, who fired a sample bullet and used a comparison microscope on it and the bullet which killed Miss Quinn."

"Hmmm and double hmm," Mearson said. "And you say that Kane has made no statement whatsoever except to the effect that he will make no statement until he has consulted with an attorney of his choice?"

"True, except for one rather strange remark he made immediately after being awakened and accused. Both of the arresting officers heard it and agree on it, even to the exact wording. He said, 'My God, she must have been real!' What do you suppose he could possibly have meant by that?"

"I haven't the faintest, Your Judgeship. But if he accepts me as his attorney, I shall most certainly ask him. Meanwhile, I don't know whether to thank you for giving me a chance at the case or to cuss at you for handing me a very damned hot potato."

"You like hot potatoes, Morty, and you know it. Especially since you'll get your fee win or lose. I'll save you from making waste motions in one direction, though. No use trying for bail or for a habeas corpus writ. The D.A.

jumped in with both feet the moment the ballistics report came up heads. The charge is formal, murder in the first. And the prosecution doesn't need any more case than they have; they're ready to go to trial as soon as they can pressure you into it. Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Nothing," Mearson said. He left.

A guard brought Lorenz Kane to the consultation room and left him there with Mortimer Mearson. Mearson introduced himself and they shook hands. Kane, Mearson thought, looked quite calm, and definitely more puzzled than worried. He was a tall, moderately good-looking man in his late thirties, impeccably groomed despite a night in a cell. One got the idea that he was the type of man who would manage to appear impeccably groomed anywhere, any time, even a week after his bearers had deserted in midsafari nine hundred miles up the Congo, taking all his possessions with them.

"Yes, Mr. Mearson. I shall be more than glad to have you represent me. I've heard of you, read about cases you've handled. I don't know why I didn't think of you myself, instead of asking for a recommendation. Now, do you want to hear my story before you accept me as a client—or do you accept as of now, for better or for worse?"

"For better or for worse," Mearson said, "till—" And then stopped himself; "till death do us part," is hardly a diplomatic phrase to use to a man who stands, quite possibly, in the shadow of the electric chair.

But Kane smiled and finished the phrase himself. "Fine," he said. "Let's sit down then," and they sat down on the two chairs, one on each side of the table in the consultation room. "And since that means we'll be seeing

quite a bit of one another for a while, let's start on a first-name basis. But not Lorenz, in my case. It's Larry."

"And make mine Morty," Mearson said. "Now I want your story in detail, but two quick questions first. Are you—?"

"Wait," Kane interrupted him. "*One* quick question ahead of your two. Are you absolutely and completely positive that this room is not bugged, that this conversation is completely private?"

"I am," Mearson said. "Now my first question: are you guilty?"

"Yes."

"The arresting officers claim that before clamming up, you said one thing: 'My God, she must have been real!' Is that true, and if so what did you mean by it?"

"I was stunned at the moment, Morty, and can't remember—but I probably said something to that effect, because it's exactly what I was thinking. But as to what I meant by it—that's something I can't answer quickly. The only way I can make you understand, if I can make you understand at all, is to start at the beginning."

"All right. Start. And take your time. We don't have to go over everything in one sitting. I can stall the trial at least three months—longer if necessary."

"I can tell it fairly quickly. It started—and don't ask me for an antecedent for the pronoun *it*—five and a half months ago, in early April. About two-thirty A.M. on the morning of Tuesday, April the third, to be as nearly exact about it as I can. I had been at a party in Armand Village, north of town, and was on my way home. I—"

"Forgive interruptions. Want to be sure I have the whole picture as it unfolds. You were driving? Alone?"

"I was driving my Jag. I was alone."

"Sober? Speeding?"

"Sober, yes. I'd left the party relatively early—it was rather a dull bit—and had been feeling my drinks moderately at that time. But I found myself suddenly quite hungry—I think I'd forgotten to eat dinner—and stopped at a roadhouse. I had one cocktail while I was waiting, but I ate all of a big steak when it came, all the trimmings, and had several cups of coffee. And no drinks afterward. I'd say that when I left there I was more sober than usual, if you know what I mean. And, on top of that, I had half an hour's drive in an open car through the cool night air. On the whole, I'd say that I was soberer than I am now—and I haven't had a drink since shortly before midnight last night. I—"

"Hold it a moment," Mearson said. He took a silver flask from his hip pocket and extended it across the table. "A relic of Prohibition; I occasionally use it to play St. Bernard to clients too recently incarcerated to have been able to arrange for importation of the necessities of life."

Kane said, "Ahhh. Morty, you may double your fee for service beyond the call of duty." He drank deeply.

"Where were we?" he asked. "Oh, yes. I was definitely sober. Speeding? Only technically. I was heading south on Vine Street a few blocks short of Rostov—"

"Near the Forty-fourth Precinct Station."

"Exactly. It figures in. It's a twenty-five-mile zone and I was going about forty, but what the hell, it was half-past two in the morning and there wasn't any other traffic. Only the proverbial little old lady from Pasadena would have been going *less* than forty."

"She wouldn't have been out that late. But carry on."

"So all of a sudden out of the mouth of an alley in the middle of the block comes a girl on a bicycle, pedaling about as fast as a bicycle can go. And right in front of me. I got one clear flash of her as I stepped on the brake as hard as I could. She was a teenager, like sixteen or seventeen. She had red hair that was blowing out from under a brown babushka she had on her head. She wore a light green angora sweater and tan pants of the kind they call pedal pushers. She was on a red bicycle."

"You got all that in one glance?"

"Yes. I can still visualize it clearly. And—*this* I'll never forget—just before the moment of impact, she turned and was looking straight at me, through frightened eyes behind shell-rimmed glasses.

"My foot was, by then, trying to push the brake pedal through the floor and the damn Jag was starting to slue and make up its mind whether to go end over end or what. But hell, no matter how fast your reactions are—and mine are pretty good—you can barely start to *slow down* a car in a few yards if you're going forty. I must have still been going over thirty when I hit her—it was a *hell* of an impact.

"And then bump-crunch, bump-crunch, as first the front wheels of the Jag went over and then the back wheels. The bumps were *her,* of course, and the crunches were the bicycle. And the car shuddered to a stop maybe another thirty feet on.

"Ahead of me, through the windshield, I could see the lights of the precinct station only a block away. I got out of the car and started running for it. I didn't look back. I didn't *want* to look back. There was no point to it; she had to be deader than dead, after that impact.

"I ran into the precinct house and after a few seconds I got coherent enough to get across what I was trying to tell them. Two of the city's finest left with me and we started back the block to the scene of the accident. I started out by running, but they only walked fast and I slowed myself down because I wasn't anxious to get there first. Well, we got there and—"

"Let me guess," the attorney said. "No girl, no bicycle."

Kane nodded slowly. "There was the Jag, slued crooked in the street. Headlights on. Ignition key still on, but the engine had stalled. Behind it, about forty feet of skid marks, starting a dozen feet back of the point where the alley cut out into the street.

"And that was all. No girl. No bicycle. Not a drop of blood or a scrap of metal. Not a scratch or a dent in the front of the car. They thought I was crazy and I don't blame them. They didn't even trust me to get the car off the street; one of them did that and parked it at the curb —and kept the key instead of handing it to me—and they took me back to the station house and questioned me.

"I was there the rest of the night. I suppose I could have called a friend and had the friend get me an attorney to get me out on bail, but I was just too shaken to think of it. Maybe even too shaken to *want* out, to have any idea where I'd want to go or what I'd want to do if I got out. I just wanted to be alone to think and, after the questioning, a chance to do that was just what I got. They didn't toss me into the drunk tank. Guess I was well enough dressed, had enough impressive identification on me, to convince them that, sane or nuts, I was a solid and

solvent citizen, to be handled with kid gloves and not rubber hose. Anyway, they had a single cell open and put me in it and I was content to do my thinking there. I didn't even try to sleep.

"The next morning they had a police head shrinker come in to talk to me. By that time I'd simmered down to the point where I realized that, whatever the score was, the police weren't going to be any help to me and the sooner I got out of their hands the better. So I conned the head shrinker a bit by starting to play my story down instead of telling it straight. I left out sound effects, like the crunching of the bicycle being run over and I left out kinetic sensations, feeling the impact and the bumps, gave it to him as what could have been purely a sudden and momentary *visual* hallucination. He bought it after a while, and they let me go."

Kane stopped talking long enough to take a pull at the silver flask and then asked, "With me so far? And, whether you believe me or not, any questions to date?"

"Just one," the attorney said. "Are you, can you be, positive that your experience with the police at the Forty-fourth is objective and verifiable? In other words, if this comes to a trial and we should decide on an insanity defense, can I call as witnesses the policemen who talked to you, and the police psychiatrist?"

Kane grinned a little crookedly. "To me my experience with the police is just as objective as my running over the girl on the bicycle. But at least you can verify the former. See if it's on the blotter and if they remember it. Dig?"

"I'm hip. Carry on."

"So the police were satisfied that I'd had an hallucina-

tion. I damn well wasn't. I did several things. I had a garage run the Jag up on a rack and I went over the underside of it, as well as the front. No sign. Okay, it hadn't happened, as far as the *car* was concerned.

"Second, I wanted to know if a girl of that description, living or dead, had been out on a bicycle that night. I spent several thousand dollars with a private detective agency, having them canvass that neighborhood—and a fair area around it—with a fine-tooth comb to find if a girl answering that description currently or ever had existed, with or without a red bicycle. They came up with a few possible red-headed teenagers, but I managed to get a gander at each of them, no dice.

"*And,* after asking around, I picked a head shrinker of my own and started going to him. Allegedly the best in the city, certainly the most expensive. Went to him for two months. It was a washout. I never found out what he thought had happened; he wouldn't talk. You know how psychoanalysts work, they make you do the talking, analyze yourself, and finally tell them what's wrong with you, then you yak about it a while and tell them you're cured, and they then agree with you and tell you to go with God. All right if your subconscious knows what the score is and eventually lets it leak out. But my subconscious didn't know which end was up, so I was wasting my time, and I quit.

"But meanwhile I'd leveled with a few friends of mine to get their ideas and one of them—a professor of philosophy at the university—started talking about ontology and that started me reading up on ontology and gave me a clue. In fact, I thought it was more than a clue, I thought it was the *answer.* Until last night. Since last night I know I was at least partly wrong."

"Ontology—" said Mearson. "Word's vaguely familiar, but will you pin it down for me?"

"I quote you the *Webster Unabridged*, unexpurgated version: 'Ontology is the science of being or reality; the branch of knowledge that investigates the nature, essential properties, and relations of being, as such.' "

Kane glanced at his wrist watch. "But this is taking longer to tell than I thought. I'm getting tired talking and no doubt you're even more tired of listening. Shall we finish this tomorrow?"

"An excellent idea, Larry." Mearson stood up.

Kane tilted the silver flask for the last drop and handed it back. "You'll play St. Bernard again?"

"I went to the Forty-fourth," Mearson said. "The incident you described to me is on the blotter all right. And I talked to one of the two coppers who went back with you to the scene of the—uh—back to the car. Your *reporting* of the accident was real, no question of that."

"I'll start where I left off," Kane said. "Ontology, the study of the nature of reality. In reading up on it I came across solipsism, which originated with the Greeks. It is the belief that the entire universe is the product of one's imagination—in my case, *my* imagination. That I myself am the only concrete reality and that all things and all other people exist only in my mind."

Mearson frowned. "So, then the girl on the bicycle, having only an imaginary existence to begin with, ceased to exist—uh, *retroactively,* as of the moment you killed her? Leaving no trace behind her, except a memory in your mind, of ever having existed?"

"That possibility occurred to me, and I decided to do

something which I thought would verify or disprove it. Specifically, to commit a murder, deliberately, to see what would happen."

"But—but Larry, murders happen every day, people are killed every day, and don't vanish retroactively and leave no trace behind them."

"But they were not killed by *me,*" Kane said earnestly. "And if the universe *is* a product of my imagination, that should make a difference. The girl on the bicycle is the first person *I* ever killed."

Mearson sighed. "So you decided to check by committing a murder. And shot Queenie Quinn. But why didn't she—?"

"No, no, no," Kane interrupted. "I committed another first, a month or so ago. A man. A man—and there's no use my telling you his name or anything about him because, as of now, he never existed, like the girl on the bicycle.

"But of course I didn't *know* it would happen that way, so I didn't simply kill him openly, as I did the stripper. I took careful precautions, so if his body *had* been found, the police would never have apprehended *me* as the killer.

"But after I killed him, well—he just never had existed, and I thought that my theory was confirmed. After that I carried a gun, thinking that I could kill with impunity any time I wanted to—and that it wouldn't matter, wouldn't be immoral even, because anyone I killed didn't really exist anyway except in my mind."

"Ummm," said Mearson.

"Ordinarily, Morty," Kane said, "I'm a pretty even-tempered guy. Night before last was the first time I used

the gun. When that damn stripper hit me she hit *hard,* a roundhouse swing. It blinded me for the moment and I just reacted automatically in pulling out the gun and shooting her."

"Ummm," the attorney said. "And Queenie Quinn turned out to be for real and you're in jail for murder and doesn't that blow your solipsism theory sky-high?"

Kane frowned. "It certainly modifies it. I've been thinking a lot since I was arrested, and here's what I've come up with. If Queenie was real—and obviously she was—then I was not, and probably am not, the *only* real person. There are real people and unreal ones, ones that exist only in the imagination of the real ones.

"How many, I don't know. Maybe only a few, maybe thousands, even millions. My sampling—three people, of whom one turned out to have been real—is too small to be significant."

"But why? Why should there be a duality like that?"

"I haven't the faintest idea." Kane frowned. "I've had some pretty wild thoughts, but any one of them would be just a guess. Like a conspiracy—but a conspiracy against *whom?* Or *what?* And *all* of the real ones couldn't be in on the conspiracy, because I'm not."

He chuckled without humor. "I had a really far-out dream about it last night, one of those confused, mixed-up dreams that you can't really tell anybody, because they have no continuity, just a series of impressions. Something about a conspiracy and a *reality file* that lists the names of all the *real* people and keeps them real. And—here's a dream pun for you—reality is really run by a chain, only they're not known to be a chain, of *reality* companies, one in each city. Of course they deal in real

estate too, as a front. And—oh hell, it's all too confused even to try to tell.

"Well, Morty, that's it. And my guess is that you'll tell me my only defense is an insanity plea—and you'll be right because, damn it, if I *am* sane I *am* a murderer. First degree and without extenuating circumstances. So?"

"So," said Mearson. He doodled a moment with a gold pencil and then looked up. "The head shrinker you went to for a while—his name wasn't Galbraith, was it?"

Kane shook his head.

"Good. Doc Galbraith is a friend of mine and the best forensic psychiatrist in the city, maybe in the country. Has worked with me on a dozen cases and we've won all of them. I'd like his opinion before I even start to map out a defense. Will you talk to him, be completely frank with him, if I send him around to see you?"

"Of course. Uh—will you ask him to do me a favor?"

"Probably. What is it?"

"Lend him your flask and ask him to bring it filled. You've no idea how much more nearly pleasant it makes these interviews."

The intercom on Mortimer Mearson's desk buzzed and he pressed the button on it that would bring his secretary's voice in. "Dr. Galbraith to see you, sir." Mearson told her to send him in at once.

"Hi, Doc," Mearson said. "Take a load off your feet and tell all."

Galbraith took the load off his feet and lighted a cigarette before he spoke. "Puzzling for a while," he said. "I didn't get the answer till I went into medical history with him. While playing polo at age twenty-two he had a fall

and got a whop on the head with a mallet that caused a bad concussion and subsequent amnesia. Complete at first, but gradually his memory came back completely up to early adolescence. Pretty spotty between then and the time of the injury."

"Good God, the indoctrination period."

"Exactly. Oh, he has flashes—like the dream he told you about. He could be rehabilitated—but I'm afraid it's too late, now. If only we'd caught him before he committed an overt murder— But we can't possibly risk putting his story on record now, even as an insanity defense. So."

"So," Mearson said. "I'll make the call now. And then go see him again. Hate to, but it's got to be done."

He pushed a button on the intercom. "Dorothy, get me Mr. Hodge at the Midland Realty Company. When you get him, put the call on my private line."

Galbraith left while he was waiting and a moment later one of his phones rang and he picked it up. "Hodge?" he said, "Mearson here. Your phone secure? . . . Good. Code eighty-four. Remove the card of Lorenz Kane—L-o-r-e-n-z K-a-n-e—from the reality file at once . . . Yes, it's necessary and an emergency. I'll submit a report tomorrow."

He took a pistol from a desk drawer and a taxi to the courthouse. He arranged an audience with his client and as soon as Kane came through the door—there was no use waiting—he shot him dead. He waited the minute it always took for the body to vanish, and then went upstairs to the chambers of Judge Amanda Hayes to make a final check.

"Hi, Your Honoress," he said. "Somebody recently

was telling me about a man named Lorenz Kane, and I don't remember who it was. Was it you?"

"Never heard the name, Morty. It wasn't me."

"You mean 'It wasn't I.' Must've been someone else. Thanks, Your Judgeship. Be seeing you."

KNOCK

THERE IS A SWEET LITTLE HORROR STORY that is only two sentences long:

The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock at the door . . .

Two sentences and an ellipsis of three dots. The horror, of course, isn't in the story at all; it's in the ellipsis, the implication: *what* knocked at the door. Faced with the unknown, the human mind supplies something vaguely horrible.

But it *wasn't* horrible, really.

The last man on Earth—or in the universe, for that matter—*sat alone in a room.* It was a rather peculiar room. He'd just been studying out the reason for its peculiarity. His conclusion didn't horrify him, but it annoyed him.

Walter Phelan, who had been associate professor of anthropology at Nathan University up to the time two days ago when Nathan University had ceased to exist, was not a man who horrified easily. Not that Walter Phelan was a heroic figure, by any wild stretch of the imagination. He was slight of stature and mild of disposition. He wasn't much to look at, and he knew it.

Not that appearance worried him now. Right now, in fact, there wasn't much feeling in him. Abstractedly, he knew that two days ago, within the space of an hour, the human race had been destroyed, except for him and, somewhere—one woman. And that was a fact which didn't concern Walter Phelan in the slightest degree. He'd probably never see her and didn't care too much if he didn't.

Women just hadn't been a factor in Walter's life since Martha had died a year and a half ago. Not that Martha hadn't been a good wife—albeit a bit on the bossy side. Yes, he'd loved Martha, in a deep, quiet way. He was only forty now, and he'd been only thirty-eight when Martha had died, but—well—he just hadn't thought about women since then. His life had been his books, the ones he read and the ones he wrote. Now there wasn't any point in writing books, but he had the rest of his life to spend in reading them.

True, company would have been nice, but he'd get along without it. Maybe after a while he'd get so he'd enjoy the occasional company of one of the Zan, although that was a bit difficult to imagine. Their thinking was so alien to his that it was a bit difficult to imagine their finding common ground for a discussion. They were intelligent in a way, but so is an ant. No man has ever es-

tablished communication with an ant. He thought of the Zan, somehow, as super-ants, although they didn't look like ants—and he had a hunch that the Zan regarded the human race as the human race regarded ordinary ants. Certainly what they'd done to Earth had been what men do to ant hills, and it had been done much more efficiently.

But they'd given him plenty of books. They'd been nice about that, as soon as he had told them what he wanted. And he had told them that the moment he realized that he was destined to spend the rest of his life alone in this room. The rest of his life, or as the Zan had quaintly expressed it, for-ev-er.

Even a brilliant mind, and the Zan obviously had brilliant minds, had its idiosyncrasies. The Zan had learned to speak Terrestrial English in a matter of hours, but they persisted in separating syllables. However, we digress.

There was a knock at the door.

You've got it all now except the three dots, the ellipsis, and I'm going to fill that in and show you that it wasn't horrible at all.

Walter Phelan called out, "Come in," and the door opened. It was, of course, only a Zan. It looked exactly like the other Zan; if there was any way of telling them apart, Walter hadn't found it. It was about four feet tall and it looked like nothing on Earth—nothing, that is, that had been on Earth before the Zan came here.

Walter said, "Hello, George." When he'd learned that none of them had names, he'd decided to call them all George and the Zan didn't seem to mind.

This one said, "Hel-lo, Wal-ter." That was ritual, the knock on the door and the greetings. Walter waited.

"Point one," said the Zan. "You will please hence-forth sit with your chair fac-ing the oth-er way."

Walter said, "I thought so, George. That plain wall is transparent from the other side, isn't it?"

"It is trans-par-ent."

Walter sighed. "I knew it. That plain blank wall, without a single piece of furniture against it. And made of something different from the other walls. If I persist in sitting with my back to it, what then? You will kill me?—I ask hopefully."

"We will take a-way your books."

"You've got me there, George. All right, I'll face the other way when I sit and read. How many other animals besides me are in this zoo of yours?"

"Two hun-dred and six-teen."

Walter shook his head. "Not complete, George. Even a bush-league zoo can beat that—*could* beat that, I mean, if there were any bush-league zoos left. Did you just pick us at random?"

"Ran-dom sam-ples, yes. All spe-cies would have been too man-y. Male and fe-male each of one hun-dred kinds."

"What do you feed them? The carnivorous ones, I mean."

"We make feed. Syn-thet-ic."

"Smart. And the flora? You've got a collection of that, too, haven't you?"

"Flo-ra not hurt by vi-bra-tions. It is all still grow-ing."

"Good for the flora. You weren't as hard on it, then, as you were on the fauna. Well, George, you started out with 'point one.' I deduce that there is a point two lurking somewhere. What is it?"

"There is some-thing we do not un-der-stand. Two of the oth-er an-i-mals sleep and do not wake. They are cold."

"It happens in the best-regulated zoos, George. Probably not a thing wrong with them except that they're dead."

"Dead? That means stopped. But noth-ing stopped them. Each was a-lone."

Walter stared at the Zan. "Do you mean, George, that you do not know what natural death is?"

"Death is when a be-ing is killed, stopped from living."

Walter Phelan blinked. "How old are you, George?" he asked.

"Six-teen—you would not know the word. Your planet went a-round your sun a-bout sev-en thou-sand times. I am still young."

Walter whistled softly. "A babe in arms," he said. He thought hard for a moment. "Look, George, you've got something to learn about this planet you're on. There's a guy down here who doesn't hang around where you come from. An old man with a beard and a scythe and an hourglass. Your vibrations didn't kill him."

"What is he?"

"Call him the Grim Reaper, George. Old Man Death. Our people and animals live until somebody, Old Man Death, stops them from ticking."

"He stopped the two crea-tures? He will stop more?"

Walter opened his mouth to answer, and then closed it again. Something in the Zan's voice indicated that there would be a worried frown on his face if he had a face recognizable as such.

"How about taking me to those animals who won't

wake up?" Walter asked. "Is that against the rules?"

"Come," said the Zan.

That had been the afternoon of the second day. It was the next morning that the Zan came back, several of them. They began to move Walter Phelan's books and furniture. When they finished that, they moved him. He found himself in a much larger room a hundred yards away.

He sat and waited this time, too. When there was a knock on the door, he knew what was coming and politely stood up as he called out, "Come in."

A Zan opened the door and stood aside. A woman entered.

Walter bowed slightly. "Walter Phelan," he said, "in case George didn't tell you my name. George tries to be polite but he doesn't know all our ways."

The woman seemed calm; he was glad to notice that. She said, "My name's Grace Evans, Mr. Phelan. What's this all about? Why did they bring me here?"

Walter was studying her as she talked. She was tall, fully as tall as he, and well-proportioned. She looked to be somewhere in her early thirties, about the age Martha had been. She had the same calm confidence about her that he had always liked about Martha, even though it had contrasted with his own easygoing informality. In fact, he thought she looked quite a bit like Martha.

"I think you can guess why they brought you here, but let's go back a bit," he said. "Do you know what's happened otherwise?"

"You mean that they've—killed everyone?"

"Yes. Please sit down. You know how they accomplished it?"

She sank into a comfortable chair nearby. "No," she

said. "I don't know just how. Not that it matters, does it?"

"Not a lot. But here's the story, what I know of it from getting one of them to talk, and from piecing things together. There isn't a great number of them—here anyway. I don't know how numerous a race they are where they came from and I don't know where that is, but I'd guess it's outside the solar system. You've seen the spaceship they came in?"

"Yes. It's as big as a mountain."

"Almost. Well, it has equipment for emitting some sort of vibration—they call it that in our language, but I imagine it's more like a radio wave than a sound vibration—that destroys all animal life. The ship itself is insulated against the vibration. I don't know whether its range is big enough to kill off the whole planet at once, or whether they flew in circles around the earth, sending out the vibratory waves. But it killed everything at once instantly and, I hope, painlessly. The only reason we, and the other two-hundred-odd animals in this zoo weren't killed was because we were inside the ship. We'd been picked up as specimens. You do know this is a zoo, don't you?"

"I—I suspected it."

"The front walls are transparent from the outside. The Zan were pretty clever in fixing up the inside of each cubicle to match the natural habitat of the creature it contains. These cubicles, such as the one we're in, are of plastic and they've got a machine that makes one in about ten minutes. If Earth had a machine and a process like that, there wouldn't have been any housing shortage. Well, there isn't any housing shortage now, anyway. And

I imagine that the human race—specifically you and I—can stop worrying about the H-bomb and the next war. The Zan have certainly solved a lot of problems for us."

Grace Evans smiled faintly. "Another case where the operation was successful but the patient died. Things *were* in an awful mess. Do you remember being captured? I don't. I went to sleep one night and woke up in a cage on the spaceship."

"I don't remember either," Walter said. "My hunch is that they used the waves at low intensity first, just enough to knock us all out. Then they cruised around, picking up samples for their zoo more or less at random. After they had as many as they wanted, or as many as they had room in the ship for, they turned on the juice all the way. And that was that. It wasn't until yesterday that they knew they'd made a mistake by overestimating us. They thought we were immortal, as they are."

"That we were—what?"

"They can be killed but they don't know what natural death is. They didn't anyway, until yesterday. Two of us died yesterday."

"Two of— Oh!"

"Yes, two of us animals in their zoo. Two species gone irrevocably. And by the Zan's way of figuring time, the remaining member of each species is going to live only a few minutes anyway. They figured they had permanent specimens."

"You mean they didn't realize what short-lived creatures we are?"

"That's right," Walter said. "One of them is young at seven thousand years, he told me. They're bisexual them-

selves, incidentally, but they probably breed every ten thousand years or thereabouts. When they learned yesterday how ridiculously short a life span we terrestrial animals have, they were probably shocked to the core, if they have cores. At any rate they decided to reorganize their zoo—two by two instead of one by one. They figure we'll last longer collectively if not individually."

"Oh!" Grace Evans stood up and there was a faint flush on her face. "If you think— If they think—" She turned toward the door.

"It'll be locked," Walter Phelan said calmly. "But don't worry. Maybe they think, but I *don't* think. You needn't even tell me that you wouldn't have me if I were the last man on Earth; it would be corny under the circumstances."

"But are they going to keep us locked up together in this one little room?"

"It isn't so little; we'll get by. I can sleep quite comfortably in one of those overstuffed chairs. And don't think I don't agree with you perfectly, my dear. All personal considerations aside, the least favor we can do the human race is to let it die out with us and not be perpetuated for exhibition in a zoo."

She said, "Thank you," almost inaudibly, and the flush was gone from her face. There was anger in her eyes, but Walter knew that it wasn't anger at him. With her eyes sparkling like that, she looked a lot like Martha, he thought.

He smiled at her and said, "Otherwise—"

She started out of her chair and for a moment he thought she was going to come over and slap him. Then she sank back wearily. "If you were a *man,* you'd be

thinking of some way to— They can be killed, you said?" Her voice was bitter.

"The Zan? Oh, certainly. I've been studying them. They look horribly different from us, but I think they have about the same metabolism, the same type of circulatory system, and probably the same type of digestive system. I think that anything that would kill one of us would kill one of them."

"But you said—"

"Oh, there are differences, of course. Whatever factor it is in man that ages him, they don't have. Or else they have some gland that man doesn't have, something that renews cells. More often than every seven years, I mean."

She had forgotten her anger now. She leaned forward eagerly. She said, "I think that's right. I don't think, though, that they feel pain."

He had been hoping that. He said, "What makes you think so, my dear?"

"I stretched a piece of wire that I found in the desk of my own cubicle across the door so the Zan would fall over it. He did, and the wire cut his leg."

"Did he bleed red?"

"Yes, but it didn't seem to annoy him. He didn't get mad about it; he didn't mention it, just took the wire down. When he came back the next time a few hours later, the cut was gone. Well, almost gone. I could see just enough of a trace of it to be sure it was the same Zan."

Walter Phelan nodded slowly. "He wouldn't get angry, of course. They're emotionless. Maybe if we killed one they wouldn't even punish us. Just give us our food through a trap door and stay clear of us, treat us as men would have treated a zoo animal that had killed its

keeper. They'd probably just see that we didn't get a crack at any more keepers."

"How many of them are there?"

Walter said, "About two hundred, I think, in this particular spaceship. But undoubtedly there are many more where they came from. I have a hunch, though, that this is just an advance board, sent to clear off this planet and make it safe for Zan occupancy."

"They certainly did a good—"

There was a knock at the door and Walter Phelan called out, "Come in." A Zan opened the door and stood in the doorway.

"Hello, George," said Walter.

"Hel-lo, Wal-ter." The same ritual. The same Zan?

"What's on your mind?"

"An-oth-er creature sleeps and will not wake. A small fur-ry one called a wea-sel."

Walter shrugged. "It happens, George. Old Man Death. I told you about him."

"And worse. A Zan has died. This morn-ing."

"Is that worse?" Walter looked at him blandly. "Well, George, you'll have to get used to it if you're going to stay around here."

The Zan said nothing. It stood there.

Finally, Walter said, "Well?"

"About the wea-sel. You advise the same?"

Walter shrugged again. "Probably won't do any good. But why not?"

The Zan left.

Walter could hear his footsteps dying away outside. He grinned. "It might work, Martha," he said.

"Mar— My name is Grace, Mr. Phelan. What might work?"

"My name is Walter, Grace. You might as well get used to it. You know, Grace, you do remind me a lot of Martha. She was my wife. She died a couple of years ago."

"I'm sorry. But *what* might work? What were you talking about to the Zan?"

"We should know tomorrow," Walter said. And she couldn't get another word out of him.

That was the third day of the stay of the Zan. The next day was the last.

It was nearly noon when one of the Zan came. After the ritual, he stood in the doorway, looking more alien than ever. It would be interesting to describe him for you, but there aren't words. He said, "We go. Our coun-cil met and de-ci-ded."

"Another of you died?"

"Last night. This is pla-net of death."

Walter nodded. "You did your share. You're leaving two hundred and thirteen alive, besides us, but that's out of quite a few billion. Don't hurry back."

"Is there an-y-thing we can do?"

"Yes. You can hurry. And you can leave our door unlocked, but not the others. We'll take care of the others."

The Zan nodded, and left.

Grace Evans was standing, her eyes shining. She asked, "How—? What—?"

"Wait," cautioned Walter. "Let's hear them blast off. It's a sound I want to hear and remember."

The sound came within minutes, and Walter Phelan, realizing how rigidly he'd been holding himself, dropped into a chair and relaxed.

He said softly, "There was a snake in the Garden of Eden, too, Grace, and it got us into trouble. But this one

got us out of it, and made up. I mean the mate of the snake that died day before yesterday. It was a rattlesnake."

"You mean it killed the two Zan who died? But—"

Walter nodded. "They were babes in the woods here. When they took me to see the first creatures who 'were asleep and wouldn't wake up,' and I saw that one of them was a rattlesnake, I had an idea, Grace. Just maybe, I thought, poison creatures were a development peculiar to Earth and the Zan wouldn't know about them. And, too, maybe their metabolism was enough like ours that the poison would kill them. Anyway, I had nothing to lose trying. And both maybes turned out to be right."

"How did you get the living rattlesnake to—"

Walter Phelan grinned. "I told them what affection is. They didn't know. But they were interested, I found, in preserving the remaining one of each species as long as possible, to picture and record it before it died. I told them it would die immediately because of the loss of its mate, unless it had affection and petting, constantly.

"I showed them how, with the duck, which was the other creature who had lost its mate. Luckily it was a tame duck and I had no trouble holding it against my chest and petting it, to show them how. Then I let them take over with it—and with the rattlesnake."

He stood up and stretched, and then sat down again more comfortably. He said, "Well, we've got a world to plan. We'll have to let the animals out of the ark, and that will take some thinking and deciding. The herbivorous wild ones we can let go right away, and let them take their chances. The domestic ones we'll do better to

keep and take charge of; we'll need them. But the carnivora, the predators— Well, we'll have to decide. But I'm afraid it's got to be thumbs down. Unless maybe we can find and operate the machinery that they used to make synthetic food."

He looked at her. "And the human race. We've got to make a decision about that. A pretty important decision."

Her face was getting a bit pink again, as it had yesterday; she sat rigidly in her chair. "No," she said.

He didn't seem to have heard her. "It's been a nice race, even if nobody won it. It'll be starting over again now, if we start it, and it may go backwards for a while until it gets its breath, but we can gather books for it and keep most of its knowledge intact, the important things anyway. We can—"

He broke off as she got up and started for the door. Just the way Martha would have acted, he thought, back in the days when he was courting her, before they were married.

He said, "Think it over, my dear, and take your time. But come back."

The door slammed. He sat waiting, thinking out all the things there were to do once he started, but in no hurry to start them.

And after a while he heard her hesitant footsteps coming back.

He smiled a little. See? It wasn't horrible, really.

The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock at the door . . .

OBEDIENCE

ON A TINY PLANET of a far, faint star, invisible from Earth, and at the farther edge of the galaxy, five times as far as man has yet penetrated into space, there is a statue of an Earthman. It is made of precious metal and it is a tremendous thing, fully ten inches high, exquisite in workmanship.

Bugs crawl on it . . .

They were on a routine patrol in Sector 1534, out past the Dog Star, many parsecs from Sol. The ship was the usual two-man scout used for all patrols outside the system. Captain May and Lieutenant Ross were playing chess when the alarm rang.

Captain May said, "Reset it, Don, while I think this out." He didn't look up from the board; he knew it

couldn't be anything but a passing meteor. There weren't any ships in this sector. Man had penetrated space for a thousand parsecs and had not as yet encountered an alien life form intelligent enough to communicate, let alone to build spaceships.

Ross didn't get up either, but he turned around in his chair to face the instrument board and the telescreen. He glanced up casually and gasped; there *was* a ship on the screen. He got his breath back enough to say "Cap!" and then the chessboard was on the floor and May was looking over his shoulder.

He could hear the sound of May's breathing, and then May's voice said, "Fire, Don!"

"But that's a Rochester Class cruiser! One of ours. I don't know what it's doing here, but we can't—"

"Look again."

Don Ross couldn't look again because he'd been looking all along, but he suddenly saw what May had meant. It was almost a Rochester, but not quite. There was something *alien* about it. Something? It *was* alien; it was an alien imitation of a Rochester. And his hands were racing for the firing button almost before the full impact of that hit him.

Finger at the button, he looked at the dials on the Picar ranger and the Monold. They stood at zero.

He swore. "He's jamming us, Cap. We can't figure out how far he is, or his size and mass!"

Captain May nodded slowly, his face pale.

Inside Don Ross's head, a thought said, *"Compose yourselves, men. We are not enemies."*

Ross turned and stared at May. May said, "Yes, I got it. Telepathy."

Ross swore again. *If they were telepathic—*

"Fire, Don. Visual."

Ross pressed the button. The screen was filled with a flare of energy, but when the energy subsided, there was no wreckage of a spaceship . . .

Admiral Sutherland turned his back to the star chart on the wall and regarded them sourly from under his thick eyebrows. He said, "I am not interested in rehashing your formal report, May. You've both been under the psychograph; we've extracted from your minds every minute of the encounter. Our logicians have analyzed it. You are here for discipline. Captain May, you know the penalty for disobedience."

May said stiffly, "Yes, sir."

"It is?"

"Death, sir."

"And what order did you disobey?"

"General Order Thirteen-Ninety, Section Twelve. Quad-A priority. Any terrestrial ship, military or otherwise, is ordered to destroy immediately, on sight, any alien ship encountered. If it fails to do so, it must blast off toward outer space, in a direction not exactly opposite that of Earth, and continue until fuel is exhausted."

"And the reason for that, Captain? I ask merely to see if you know. It is not, of course, important or even relevant whether or not you understand the reason for any ruling."

"Yes, sir. So there is no possibility of the alien ship following the sighting ship back to Sol and so learning the location of Earth."

"Yet you disobeyed that ruling, Captain. You were not

certain that you had destroyed the alien. What have you to say for yourself?"

"We did not think it necessary, sir. The alien ship did not seem hostile. Besides, sir, they must already know our base; they addressed us as 'men.' "

"Nonsense! The telepathic message was broadcast from an alien mind, but was received by yours. Your minds automatically translated the message into your own terminology. He did not necessarily know your point of origin or that you were humans."

Lieutenant Ross had no business speaking, but he asked, "Then, sir, it is not believed that they were friendly?"

The admiral snorted. "Where did you take your training, Lieutenant? You seem to have missed the most basic premise of our defense plans, the reason we've been patrolling space for four hundred years, on the lookout for alien life. *Any alien is an enemy.* Even though he were friendly today, how could we know that he would be friendly next year or a century from now? And a potential enemy is an enemy. The more quickly he is destroyed the more secure Earth will be.

"Look at the military history of the world! It proves that, if it proves nothing else. Look at Rome! To be safe she couldn't afford powerful neighbors. Alexander the Great! Napoleon!"

"Sir," said Captain May. "Am I under the penalty of death?"

"Yes."

"Then I may as well speak. Where is Rome now? Alexander's empire or Napoleon's? Nazi Germany? Tyrannosaurus rex?"

"Who?"

"Man's predecessor, the toughest of the dinosaurs. His name means 'king of the tyrant lizards.' He thought every other creature was his enemy, too. And where is he now?"

"Is that all you have to say, Captain?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I shall overlook it. Fallacious, sentimental reasoning. You are *not* under sentence of death, Captain. I merely said so to see what you would say, how far you would go. You are not being shown mercy because of any humanitarian nonsense. A truly ameliorating circumstance has been found."

"May I ask what, sir?"

"The alien *was* destroyed. Our technicians and logicians have worked that out. Your Picar and Monold were working properly. The only reason that they did not register was that the alien ship was too small. They will detect a meteor weighing as little as five pounds. The alien ship was smaller than that."

"Smaller than—?"

"Certainly. You were thinking of alien life in terms of your own size. There is no reason why it should be. It could be even submicroscopic, too small to be visible. The alien ship must have contacted you deliberately, at a distance of only a few feet. And your fire, at that distance, destroyed it utterly. That is why you saw no charred hulk as evidence that it was destroyed."

He smiled. "My congratulations, Lieutenant Ross, on your gunnery. In the future, of course, visual firing will be unnecessary. The detectors and estimators on ships of all classes are being modified immediately to detect and indicate objects of even minute sizes."

Ross said, "Thank you, sir. But don't you think that the fact that the ship we saw, regardless of size, was an imitation of one of our Rochester Class ships is proof that the aliens already know much more of us than we do of them, including, probably, the location of our home planet? And that—even if they are hostile—the tiny size of their craft is what prevents them from blasting us from the system?"

"Possibly. Either both of those things are true, or neither. Obviously, aside from their telepathic ability, they are quite inferior to us technically—or they would not imitate our design in spaceships. And they must have read the minds of some of our engineers in order to duplicate that design. However, granting that is true, they may still not know the location of Sol. Space coordinates would be extremely difficult to translate, and the name Sol would mean nothing to them. Even its approximate description would fit thousands of other stars. At any rate, it is up to us to find and exterminate them before they find us. Every ship in space is now alerted to watch for them, and is being equipped with special instruments to detect small objects. A state of war exists. Or perhaps it is redundant to say that; a state of war always exists with aliens."

"Yes, sir."

"That is all, gentlemen. You may go."

Outside in the corridor two armed guards waited. One of them stepped to each side of Captain May.

May said quickly, "Don't say anything, Don. I expected this. Don't forget that I disobeyed an important order, and don't forget that the admiral said only that I wasn't under sentence of death. Keep yourself out of it."

Hands clenched, teeth clamped tightly together, Don

Ross watched the guards take away his friend. He knew May was right; there was nothing he could do except get himself into worse trouble than May was in, and make things worse for May.

But he walked almost blindly out of the Admiralty Building. He went out and got promptly drunk, but that didn't help.

He had the customary two weeks' leave before reporting back for space duty, and he knew he'd better straighten himself out mentally in that time. He reported to a psychiatrist and let himself be talked out of most of his bitterness and feeling of rebellion.

He went back to his schoolbooks and soaked himself in the necessity for strict and unquestioning obedience to military authority and the necessity of unceasing vigilance for alien races and the necessity of their extermination whenever found.

He won out; he convinced himself how unthinkable it had been for him to believe that Captain May could have been completely pardoned for having disobeyed an order, for whatever reason. He even felt horrified for having himself acquiesced in that disobedience. Technically, of course, he was blameless; May had been in charge of the ship and the decision to return to Earth instead of blasting out into space—and death—had come from May. As a subordinate, Ross had not shared the blame. But now, as a person, he felt conscience-stricken that he had not tried to argue May out of his disobedience.

What would Space Corps be without obedience?

How could he make up for what he now felt to be his dereliction, his delinquency? He watched the telenewscasts avidly during that period and learned that, in var-

ious other sectors of space, four more alien ships had been destroyed. With the improved detection instruments all of them had been destroyed on sight; there had been no communication after first contact.

On the tenth day of his leave, he terminated it of his own free will. He returned to the Admiralty Building and asked for an audience with Admiral Sutherland. He was laughed at, of course, but he had expected that. He managed to get a brief verbal message carried through to the admiral. Simply: "I know a plan that may possibly enable us to find the planet of the aliens, at no risk to ourselves."

That got him in, all right.

He stood at rigid attention before the admiral's desk. He said, "Sir, the aliens have been trying to contact us. They have been unable because we destroy them on contact before a complete telepathic thought has been put across. If we permit them to communicate, there is a chance that they will give away, accidentally or otherwise, the location of their home planet."

Admiral Sutherland said drily, "And whether they did or not, they might find out *ours* by following the ship back."

"Sir, my plan covers that. I suggest that I be sent out into the same sector where initial contact was made—this time in a one-man ship, *unarmed.* That the fact that I am doing so be publicized as widely as possible, so that every man in space knows it, and knows that I am in an unarmed ship for the purpose of making contact with the aliens. It is my opinion that they will learn of this. They must manage to get thoughts at long distances, but to send thoughts—to Earth minds anyway—only at very short distances."

"How do you deduce that, Lieutenant? Never mind; it coincides with what our logicians have figured out. They say that the fact that they have stolen our science—as in their copying our ships on a smaller scale—before we were aware of their existence proves their ability to read our thoughts at—well, a moderate distance."

"Yes, sir. I am hoping that if news of my mission is known to the entire fleet it will reach the aliens. And knowing that my ship is unarmed, they will make contact. I will see what they have to say to me, to us, and possibly that message will include a clue to the location of their home planet."

Admiral Sutherland said, "And in that case that planet would last all of twenty-four hours. But what about the converse, Lieutenant? What about the possibility of their following you back?"

"That, sir, is where we have nothing to lose. I shall return to Earth *only if I find out that they already know its location.*

"With their telepathic abilities I believe they already do—and that they have not attacked us only because they are not hostile or are too weak. But whatever the case, if they know the location of Earth they will not deny it in talking to me. Why should they? It will seem to them a bargaining point in their favor, and they'll think we're bargaining. If they might claim to know, even if they do not—but I shall refuse to take their word for it unless they give me proof."

Admiral Sutherland stared at him. He said, "Son, you *have* got something. It'll probably cost you your life, but—if it doesn't, and if you come back with news of where the aliens come from, you're going to be the hero of the race. You'll probably end up with *my* job. In fact, I'm

tempted to steal your idea and make that trip myself."

"Sir, you're too valuable. I'm expendable. Besides, sir, I've *got* to. It isn't that I want any honors. I've got something on my conscience that I want to make up for. I should have tried to stop Captain May from disobeying orders. I shouldn't be here now, alive. We should have blasted out into space, since we weren't sure we'd destroyed the alien."

The admiral cleared his throat. "You're not responsible for that, son. Only the captain of a ship is responsible, in a case like that. But I see what you mean. You feel you disobeyed orders, in spirit, because you agreed at the time with what Captain May did. All right, that's past, and your suggestion makes up for it, even if you yourself did not man the contact ship."

"But may I, sir?"

"You may, Lieutenant. Rather, you may, Captain."

"Thank you, sir."

"A ship will be ready for you in three days. We could have it ready sooner, but it will take that long for word of our 'negotiations' to spread throughout the fleet. But you understand—you are not, under any circumstances, to deviate on your own initiative from the limitations you have outlined."

"Yes, sir. Unless the aliens already know the location of Earth and prove it completely, I shall not return. I shall blast off into space. I give you my word, sir."

"Very good, Captain Ross."

The one-man spacer hovered near the center of Sector 1534, out past the Dog Star. No other ship patrolled that sector.

Captain Don Ross sat quietly and waited. He watched

the visiplate and listened for a voice to speak inside his head.

It came when he had waited less than three hours. *"Greetings, Donross,"* the voice said, and simultaneously there were five tiny spaceships outside his visiplate. His Monold showed that they weighed less than an ounce apiece.

He said, "Shall I talk aloud or merely think?"

"It does not matter. You may speak if you wish to concentrate on a particular thought, but first be silent a moment."

After half a minute, Ross thought he heard the echo of a sigh in his mind. Then: *"I am sorry. I fear this talk will do neither of us any good. You see, Donross, we do not know the location of your home planet. We could have learned, perhaps, but we were not interested. We were not hostile and from the minds of Earthmen we knew we dared not be friendly. So you will never be able, if you obey orders, to return to report."*

Don Ross closed his eyes a moment. This, then, was the end; there wasn't any use talking further. He had given his word to Admiral Sutherland that he would obey orders to the letter.

"That is right," said the voice. *"We are both doomed, Donross, and it does not matter what we tell you. We cannot get through the cordon of your ships; we have lost half our race trying."*

"Half! Do you mean—?"

"Yes. There were only a thousand of us. We built ten ships, each to carry a hundred. Five ships have been destroyed by Earthmen; there are only five ships left, the ones you see, the entire race of us. Would it interest you, even though you are going to die, to know about us?"

He nodded, forgetting that they could not see him, but the assent in his mind must have been read.

We are an old race, much older than you. Our home is—or was —a tiny planet of the dark companion of Sirius; it is only a hundred miles in diameter. Your ships have not found it yet, but it is only a matter of time. We have been intelligent for many, many millennia, but we never developed space travel. There was no need and we had no desire.

"Twenty of your years ago an Earth ship passed near our planet and we caught the thoughts of the men upon it. And we knew that our only safety, our only chance of survival, lay in immediate flight to the farthest limits of the galaxy. We knew from those thoughts that we would be found sooner or later, even if we stayed on our own planet, and that we would be ruthlessly exterminated upon discovery."

"You did not think of fighting back?"

"No. We could not have, had we wished—and we did not wish. It is impossible for us to kill. If the death of one single Earthman, even of a lesser creature, would ensure our survival, we could not bring about that death.

"That you cannot understand. Wait—I see that you can. You are not like other Earthmen, Donross. But back to our story. We took details of space travel from the minds of members of that ship and adapted them to the tiny scale of the ships we built.

"We built ten ships, enough to carry our entire race. But we find we cannot escape through your patrols. Five of our ships have tried, and all have been destroyed."

Don Ross said grimly, "And I did a fifth of that: I destroyed one of your ships."

"You merely obeyed orders. Do not blame yourself. Obedience is almost as deeply rooted in you as hatred of killing is in us. That first contact, with the ship you were on, was deliberate; we had to be sure that you would destroy us on sight.

"But since then, one at a time, four of our other ships have tried to get through and have all been destroyed. We brought all the re-

maining ones here when we learned that you were to contact us with an unarmed ship.

"But even if you disobeyed orders and returned to Earth, wherever it is, to report what we have just told you, no orders would be issued to let us through. There are too few Earthmen like you, as yet. Possibly in future ages, by the time Earthmen reach the far edge of the galaxy, there will be more like you. But now, the chances of our getting even one of our five ships through is remote.

"Goodby, Donross. What is this strange emotion in your mind and the convulsion of your muscles? I do not understand it. But wait—it is your recognition of perceiving something incongruous. But the thought is too complex, too mixed. What is it?"

Don Ross managed finally to stop laughing. "Listen, my alien friend who cannot kill," he said, "I'm getting you out of this. I'm going to see that you get through our cordon to the safety you want. But what's funny is the way I'm going to do it. By obedience to orders and by going to my own death. I'm going to outer space, to die there. You, all of you, can come along and *live* there. Hitchhike. *Your tiny ships won't show on the patrol's detectors if they are touching this ship.* Not only that, but the gravity of this ship will pull you along and you won't have to waste fuel until you are well through the cordon and beyond the reach of its detectors. A hundred thousand parsecs, at least, before my fuel runs out."

There was a long pause before the voice in Don Ross's mind said, *"Thank you."* Faintly. Softly.

He waited until the five ships had vanished from his visiplate and he had heard five tiny sounds of their touching the hull of his own ship. Then he laughed once more. And obeyed orders, blasting off for space and death.

* * *

On a tiny planet of a far, faint star, invisible from Earth, and at the farther edge of the galaxy, five times as far as man has yet penetrated into space, there is the statue of an Earthman. It is a tremendous thing, ten inches high, exquisite in workmanship.

Bugs crawl on it, but they have a right to; they made it, and they honor it. The statue is of very hard metal. On an airless world it will last forever—or until Earthmen find it and blast it out of existence. Unless, of course, by that time Earthmen have changed an awful lot.

TEN PERCENTER

I'M SCARED STIFF. Not just because tomorrow is the big day, the day I'm scheduled to go through a little green door for a lesson in what cyanide gas smells like. It's not that at all. I *want* to die. But—

Everything started when I met Roscoe, but before I get to that let me give you a quick sketch of what I was B. R.—*Before Roscoe.*

I was young, reasonably good-looking in a rough-hewn sort of way, reasonably intelligent, fairly well-educated. And my name was Bill Wheeler, then. And I was a would-be television or movie actor who'd been trying for five years and hadn't been able to get even a chance to do a local commercial, let alone a walk-on in a B movie. I was eating by working an evening shift, 6 P.M. to 2 A.M., as counterman in a hamburger drive-in in Santa Monica.

I'd taken the job originally because it gave me my days free to take the bus into Hollywood and haunt the offices of agents and studios. But as of the evening when it all started, when my luck did an abrupt volte-face, I'd just about given up. I hadn't been in Hollywood for almost a week. I'd been resting up and getting a healthy tan on the beach, doing some heavy thinking about my future, trying to decide what kind of a job I might be fitted for and able to get, and that might lead me into a life that would have at least *some* satisfactions. Up to then, it had been acting or nothing; to give up even the someday hope of being an actor took quite a bit of readjustment in my thinking.

My change of luck started one evening at six o'clock, just the time I'd have been reporting to work at the drive-in had it not been my evening off, and it happened on Olympic Boulevard near Fourth Street in Santa Monica.

I found a wallet. The wallet contained only thirty-five dollars in cash, but there were Diner's Club, Carte Blanche, International and other credit cards.

I headed for the nearest bar for a drink—and some thinking.

I'd never done anything seriously dishonest in my life, but I decided that this find, at the very nadir of my life to date, was a sign from Someone or Something that this was meant to be the biggest night of my life as well as its turning point.

I knew it wouldn't be safe to use the cards indefinitely, but surely there'd be no risk for one evening, one night. I'd have a fine dinner, drinks, a plush hotel, a call girl, the works. (Yes, I know call girls don't honor credit cards, but I could use the cards to cash checks for whatever the

traffic would bear at every place I stopped, and I'd stop as many places as I could before the call-girl stage of the evening.)

With any luck at all I'd end up with a pretty fair stake. I'd make my final use of a credit card for plane fare out of this hopeless place in the morning, and start over somewhere else *as* something else. I'd try anything but acting. Never again that—unless someday after the bitter taste of failure at professionalism had gone, at amateur theatricals, as an avocation.

I began to lay my plans carefully, for time was of the essence.

I started by asking the bartender if he'd phone for a taxi for me. I took it to my room. There, for half an hour, I practiced the signature on the cards until I could forge it perfectly without glancing at it. I called for another taxi while I packed and was ready when it came. I told the driver to take me to the nearest car-rental agency.

I wanted a Cadillac and was a little disappointed to have to settle for a Chrysler, but it didn't really matter, since it was unlikely that anyone but parking attendants would be seeing it.

I told the man, as I planned to tell a lot of other people before the night was over, that I'd run short of ready cash and if he had a blank check available I'd appreciate it if he could cash a check for me for whatever amount he could conveniently handle. Of course I had plenty of other identification, including, thank God, a driver's license, to match the credit cards. He checked the register, cashed a check for me for fifty dollars, and I was off on my career of crime.

I was getting hungry, so I drove in on Wilshire to

Hollywood, turned the car over to a parking attendant at the Derby, and went in. The tables were all taken and the maître d'hôtel told me I'd have to wait fifteen or twenty minutes for a table. I told him that was all right and that he'd find me at the bar whenever a table was ready, and walked through to the bar.

I took the only vacant stool at the bar and found myself sitting next to a man who was also obviously alone, since on the other side of him sat a couple who were engrossed in one another and not including him in the conversation. He was a dapper little man with a thick but ruly shock of almost pure white hair and a small neat white mustache, but the pinkness and baby-smoothness of his skin indicated him to be much younger than his white hair and mustache would otherwise make him seem. Obviously, he'd been at the bar only a minute or two, since he didn't yet have a drink in front of him.

In a sense it was the bartender who introduced us. Assuming that we were together, he took and brought our orders together and asked if we wanted one bar check or two. The dapper little man beat me to the punch, since I was about to do the same thing, by turning to me and asking if I'd do him the honor of having my drink with and on him. I thanked him and accepted; we touched glasses and were in conversation.

As I recall it, we skipped using the weather as an opening gambit but found ourselves on the number two midsummer subject of conversation in Los Angeles, the Dodgers' pennant chances.

As an actor—or anyway as an ex-would-be actor—I have always been interested in accents and his especially intrigued me. It was Oxford English with just a touch of

Lebanese and salted or peppered with an occasional pure Hollywoodism or fragment of bop talk. If and when I quote him directly later, I won't try to reproduce it.

I liked him and he seemed to like me. Almost right away, without formally introducing ourselves, we got on a first-name basis. Call him Roscoe, he told me. And I told him to call me Jerry instead of Bill, because J. was the first initial of J. R. Burger, the name on the credit cards; I'd already decided that if Roscoe hadn't dined yet I'd probably ask him to eat with me. Under the circumstances two dinners wouldn't cost me any more than one.

After baseball, about which neither of us knew very much, movies came up in our conversation. Yes, he told me, he was in the industry. Not actively at the moment, but he had investments in several independent productions and two television shows. Up to three years ago he had produced or directed a dozen movies, the first few in London, the rest here. Was I an actor? He thought I looked and talked as though I could be one.

Don't ask me why; suddenly I found myself telling him the whole bitter truth about my failure but, oddly, not telling it bitterly at all but lightly, making it sound funny. Still more oddly, suddenly myself seeing it as amusing. I was just going good when a waiter came and asked if I was the gentleman waiting for a table. I said I was and asked Roscoe if he'd be my guest and he accepted.

We ordered and then I found myself doing most of the talking while we ate. Of course I had to change the ending of my story to account for my relative prosperity at the moment, but that wasn't difficult; I simply invented a small inheritance from an uncle. And said that I'd

learned my lesson and wasn't going to pour it down the same rathole as I had the last five years of my life. I was going back to my hometown and a sensible job.

The waiter came and went, leaving our bill. I turned it over to add a generous tip and then put a credit card atop it. I was glad Roscoe didn't give me an argument about paying or even splitting it. I wanted to establish my credit to see if I could cash a check. And, mostly to make conversation, I mentioned to Roscoe I was short of cash and asked if he had any idea how big a check the Derby might cash for me.

"Why bother them, old boy?" he asked. "I always carry quite a bit of cash. Would five hundred be enough?"

I tried not to look elated when I told him that it would. I hadn't hoped for more than a fraction of that from the restaurant; they'd probably take some chance on a credit-card customer but surely not too much. When the waiter came to pick up the bill and the card, I asked him to bring a blank check and he did. While I filled in the name of a bank at the top and made the check out to cash, Roscoe brought out a gold money clip that seemed to hold all hundreds, at least a dozen of them, and counted out five.

He gave them to me as I handed him the check. He glanced at it and his eyebrows went up slightly. "Jerry," he said, "I'd intended to ask you up to my place for a talk anyway, but now there's a double reason. We seem to have the same name. Or did you by any chance find a wallet I lost this afternoon in Santa Monica?"

Oh God, oh God, oh God, yes, I know *now* that it was something more than coincidence—it *had* to be in a city

the size of Los Angeles—but what else could I think then? It wasn't even as though he'd *followed* me into the Derby; he'd been there ahead of me.

For a wild moment I considered making a bolt for it—after all, he didn't know my right name and if I made a clean getaway I'd be safe. But if I started to run and he yelled "Stop thief!" half a dozen waiters would have a chance of holding me or tripping me.

He was talking on, calmly. "The J. R. is for Joshua Roscoe, so you can see why I choose the lesser of evils. Now don't be a shnook. I may be able to make you an interesting proposition. Ready?"

He stood up and I nodded dumbly and stood up too, wondering what in hell kind of a proposition he could have in mind. He didn't look queer, but if that's what it was I could handle him.

I followed him out and of course this *was* coincidence but there was a police car with two coppers in it parked just past the loading zone. He gave the doorman a buck—he kept small change like that loose in a pocket and only big bills in the clip—and asked for a taxi. I almost opened my mouth to say I had a car on the lot, but decided to keep my yap shut and see what happened.

We got in the cab and he gave an address on La Cienega. He didn't talk on the way, and I was doing mental arithmetic. I could make restitution, just about on the head. Out of my own twenty-five bucks, I mean. The restaurant bill had been, with tip, twelve bucks. And if I took the Chrysler back right away there'd be only about twenty miles and two or three hours on it, and I could use the same fifty I'd got for the bum check to buy it back. If

he'd let me, I'd make a clean breast of things and handle it that way.

The cab stopped in front of a prosperous-looking apartment building. *Was* it coincidence that another police car happened to be parked across the street? Anyway, I'd already decided to listen to him, and then to make my own pitch, and to try a break only if all else failed.

We took a self-service elevator to the fourth floor, where he used a key to let us into the living room of a very pleasant bachelor apartment. Six rooms, I learned later, but no live-in servants, since he liked privacy. He waved me to a sofa, and walked toward a small bar in one corner. "A brandy?"

I nodded and then started to talk, to make my pitch about restitution, while he poured brandy into two snifters. He came over and gave me one of them. "Spare me the sordid details, Jer— Oh, is that your right first name, or did you pick it just to match the first initial on the cards?"

"It's Bill," I said. "William Trent." I wasn't about to give him my right last name until I knew it would be safe, but there was nothing to lose with my first.

I was glad to see that he took a chair facing me, not alongside me on the sofa. "Not distinctive," he said. "With that reddish hair of yours, how about Brick? Brick Brannon. Like it?"

I nodded. I did rather like it, and besides he could call me anything he wanted as long as he didn't call copper or make a pass.

"To your health, Brick," he said, lifting the snifter. "Now the story you told me. How much of it is true?"

"Every word," I told him, "if you substitute finding a wallet for an inheritance from an uncle."

He put down his glass, crossed the room to a small desk and took a mimeographed movie script from a drawer. He found a place in the script while he crossed back with it, and handed it to me open. "Read the part of Philippe for the next page and a half. He's a tough, illiterate lumberjack, Canuck accent. Deeply in love with his wife but jumping mad at her in this quarrel scene. Read it to yourself first and then try it. Just pause for her lines."

I read it over to myself and then tried it. He told me to leaf over a dozen or so pages to find another scene and read the part of one of the characters, and then a third, each time briefing me on who the character was, how he talked, and his relationship to the other characters on scene or referred to.

When I finished the third reading, he nodded and told me to put the manuscript down and pick up my brandy.

He took a leisurely sip of his own drink. "Okay," he said, "you *are* an actor. You just haven't had a break. I can make a star out of you within two years if you let me manage you."

"No catches?" I asked, wondering if he was out of his head.

"Ten percent," he said. "But it will have to come off the top—and under the table. You see, Bill, I'm not an accredited agent, and you'll have to have one of them, and pay him another ten percent, to handle details, draw up contracts and such. What I do will be behind the scenes."

I said, "Fine by me, but I haven't been able to get a reputable agent to sign me yet. What do I do about that?"

"I'll take care of that. You'll have to pay him ten percent off the top too, because he's not to know—*nobody* is to know—about your arrangement with me. His ten percent will be a normal tax deduction for you, but mine won't because it'll be off the record. Agreed?"

I said, "Fine," again, and meant it. I'd often thought in despair of trying to bribe an agent to take me on by offering him twenty or even fifty percent if he'd really push me; I'd actually tried it with several of them I'd been able to get in to see, and had been turned down flat. "Any other conditions?"

"Only one. Since there'll be nothing on paper between us, I'll expect you, on your honor, not to let me build you up and then try to include me out. So here's how we'll define that.

"Either of us may cancel this agreement during the first year. But if for that year—with me operating behind the scenes, whether or not you recognize my fine Italian hand in what happens—your gross income is twenty-five thousand dollars or more, then the arrangement between us becomes permanent and irrevocable. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I said. I hadn't earned a hundred dollars from acting in my life; twenty-five thousand seemed an impossible figure.

And even if he was crazy, I had nothing to lose, and besides he wasn't going to have me arrested. Which reminded me, and I took out the wallet. I said, "Now, about restitution—"

He sighed. "All right," he said. "I detest details, so let's get them out of the way. Tell me everything you did since you found the wallet." I did, and put the wallet itself on the table.

He picked it up, emptied all the money out of it and pocketed the wallet. "So," he said. "Five hundred and thirty-five of that is mine. Keep it as a loan; you can pay me back in a month or so. Take back the rented car and buy back the fifty-dollar check. Forget the tab you signed my name to at the Derby; the dinner was on me.

"Don't go back to the drive-in. Take a room or an apartment tonight in Hollywood. That suit you have on isn't bad, but if it's your best, get a better one tomorrow, and whatever accessories you need. Oh, a black leather motorcycle jacket and jeans, if you don't happen to have them already."

"A motorcycle jacket?" I asked. "Why?"

"Never mind why. Wait." He took out the money clip, counted out the hundred-dollar bills left in it, eight of them, and handed them to me. "Eight hundred more you owe me. Get a car out of it; you'll need something to get around in. You'll have to get around to Universal City, Culver City—the industry isn't concentrated in Hollywood. Spend maybe five hundred of that for something used. You'll be trading it in for a new car within a few months.

"What else? Oh, *was* Bill Trent your right name?"

"It's Bill Wheeler."

"It was; it's Brick Brannon now. And that's all, except give me a ring early tomorrow afternoon. My number's in the book." He grinned. "And you won't forget the name since you practiced forging it."

I had a busy evening, though far from the one I'd planned. I took a taxi back to the Derby and got the Chrysler, turned it in in Santa Monica and bought back my check out of the register on the story that I'd acciden-

tally overdrawn my account in writing it and had raised cash elsewhere. Fortunately, the rental agency was on the stretch of Santa Monica Boulevard that's full of used-car lots that are open evenings, so I left my suitcases at the agency and went car hunting. On the second lot I found just what I wanted, a Rambler priced at five hundred. After a drive around the block I talked it down to four-fifty easily even without a trade-in, and bought it on the spot.

I got my suitcases and drove back into Hollywood. It was still early and I shopped Sunset Strip for a bachelor apartment, found one and moved in. For a hundred and fifty a month I had a home, parking space for the Rambler, access to a swimming pool, even telephone service through a switchboard. And it was still early, hours before I would have ended the evening I had originally planned, but I was suddenly dead tired, and turned in the minute I'd unpacked my suitcases. I should have been too excited to sleep, but I dropped off and slept soundly the moment I got into bed.

In the morning I went up to Hollywood Boulevard, bought a good if ready-made suit and a few other things. Even a damn black leather jacket, although I didn't know why. I already had several pairs of jeans. Back home I had a swim, went across the street for lunch, and then phoned Roscoe.

"Stout fellow, sweetie," he said. "Know an agent named Ray Ramspaugh?"

"I know of him," I said. And I did, with awe. He was the biggest of the solo-operator flesh peddlers, the biggest and the best. He handled only a few hand-picked clients. I'd never dreamed of even trying to see him.

"You've got an appointment with him at two o'clock. Be there."

"Will do," I said. "Shall I call to let you know what happens?"

"I already know," he said. "Brick, from here on in you'll have to call me only when you get a check. Then phone me and we'll make a date, here or somewhere else, and you can give me my cut."

I got to Ramspaugh's office on South Vernon Drive on the dot and didn't have to wait a minute. His secretary sent me right in.

He got right down to business. He said, "Roscoe says you're good and I'll take his word for it. Here's a contract ready for your signature. It's a standard contract, but read it before you sign it. Take it in the outer office for that; I'll be making some phone calls."

It was a printed contract and I'd have signed it on faith, but apparently he wanted to get rid of me while he did some phoning, so I took it into his secretary's office and read it, even the small type, and then signed it. His secretary used the intercom and told me he was ready to see me again and I should go back in, and I did.

He said, "Think I've got something lined up. A small part, but you'll have to take some small ones first to get yourself some credits. One-shot part in a new series they're starting to film at Revue. They had it cast, but the boy they signed got himself bunged up in an auto accident this morning. They need you fast. Can you get there by three?"

I nodded speechlessly.

"Okay. Ask for Ted Crowther. Oh, it'll save time if you can go in costume. You'll play a tough young punk,

one of those who try to act like Brando in *The Wild One.* Got a black leather jacket and jeans?"

I gulped and nodded again.

"Change into 'em on your way. And fly right, sweetheart. We're going places."

That's just how difficult it was for me to get my first break at acting, and for a long time I was too busy to wonder just how Roscoe could possibly have known, the night before, that next day it would help me get a fast start on my first role to have a black leather motorcycle jacket ready to put on. As of when he'd made the suggestion, the automobile accident that had incapacitated the young man signed for that role hadn't happened yet.

But I think I know *why* he told me about that jacket. Aside from getting me signed, right off and without a question, by a top agent—a miracle in itself—Roscoe's "fine Italian hand" seldom showed. All my roles came through Ramspaugh and I could have assumed that he and I were doing it all by ourselves. That very first time, to show me something, Roscoe had *wanted* his hand to show. He'd wanted to give me something to think about.

But I didn't have too much time to think, certainly not enough time to get frightened. I got too busy. Small parts at first, some of them only bit parts, but as many of them as I could handle. And by the end of the year I was building up, or being built up, for solid, important supporting roles. I could probably have made more money, but sometimes Ramspaugh turned down for me higher-paying parts in favor of lower-paying ones. He didn't want to let me become typed, for one thing. Also he wouldn't let me take any continuing role on a series show

where I'd be put under contract to do the same thing over and over again.

Even so, I grossed a little over fifty thousand that year, twice the figure that would have made my agreement with Roscoe irrevocable, so irrevocable it became. After the two ten percents, one of them deductible against taxes and the other not, and taxes themselves, I still had a little over five hundred bucks a week take-home; also a Jaguar, a really fine wardrobe and a really nice apartment.

The second year I doubled that. Doubled my net, I mean, to a thousand a week, which meant that since it put me in a higher tax bracket, I had considerably more than doubled my gross. I was moving more and more to supporting roles in movies now; my name was well enough known so that my appearances on series television shows were "guest star" shots, and I'd had leading roles on several anthology shows.

That year though, something happened that reminded me of Roscoe's prescience, if that's what it was, and indicated a new facet in our relationship that I hadn't realized he considered to exist.

This isn't the episode, but I'll have to tell it as preliminary: I spent a week in Las Vegas on location for a movie. Ordinarily I'm not a gambler, but one evening I did go to one of the casinos, buy a thousand in chips, and go to one of the crap tables. Starting at a hundred dollars a bet I hit a hot streak and soon was betting the maximum of five hundred a throw. I ran it up to a little over twenty thousand and then started to lose. And when I was down to eleven thousand, a profit of ten grand even, I quit. On my return I saw Roscoe to hand him his off-the-top of my take since I'd last seen him. He counted it

and then asked for a thousand more, reminding me of my ten grand extra in Las Vegas. I handed it over, and without question. I hadn't tried to hold out on him; I just hadn't realized that by ten percent of everything he *meant* everything. There was no mystery how he could have learned of my luck; several others of the movie company had been at the table with me.

It was the follow-up of that episode that worries me now, and later you'll see why. We returned a week later to Las Vegas for some retakes. I did some gambling again—why not, since I was still ahead?—and this time dropped four thousand. But because I hit no lucky streaks, I didn't stay long in any one place; I wandered the length of the Strip and visited a dozen casinos. No one was with me and no one could have possibly known the total of my losses. Nevertheless, the next time I saw Roscoe to give him money, he handed me back four hundred of it. Fair enough; if he cut my winnings, why not my losses? But how could he have known?

Anyway, it was another clue as to what he meant by ten percent of everything. The really staggering one came when I got married. Yes, you've guessed it, but I'll have to explain how it came about.

At the start of my third year I was signed for my first starring role in an important picture, at five grand a week. Co-starring, rather; my co-star was a beautiful and coming young actress named Lorna Howard. In a briefing session before the shooting started, Lorna and I were together in the office of the producer, and he had a sudden thought. "Say, kids," he said, "this is just an idea, but you're both free and single. If you got married—to each other, I mean—we could hang a big hunk of publicity on it. Good for the picture *and* your careers." He

grinned. "It could be a marriage of convenience, of course."

I raised an eyebrow at Lorna. "*Would* it be?" I asked her.

She raised an eyebrow back. "That could, sir, depend on what you mean by convenience."

And so we were married.

Looking back, it's hard for me to realize, let alone explain, why I had taken so little advantage of the increasing opportunities with women that my meteoric rise over those first two years had given me. Oh, I hadn't been celibate. But my affairs had been relatively few and unimportant to me. Of course I'd been damned busy, and at the end of a hard day I was usually dead tired and dreading the thought of having to get up early the next morning for another day of it. Sometimes I'd not even think about wanting a woman for weeks at a time.

But marriage snapped me out of that. Lorna and I weren't in love, but she was as concupiscent as she was beautiful and the marriage did turn out to be more than convenient. For a while we had fun head over heels, sometimes quite literally. With the understanding that each of us was free morally, and that since there was no love between us there must be no jealousy either. I myself didn't take advantage of that understanding, but it wasn't long before I realized that I apparently wasn't quite enough for her and that she was having an affair on the side. Ten percent of the time, I felt sure, after I accidentally learned who her lover was.

I had no moral cause for complaint, but for me it did take the bloom off things; she felt it and we drifted apart. After the picture was released, she went to Reno for a quiet divorce. At no cost to me, incidentally; she had

more capital than I, and as much income. If I'd had to pay for the divorce, or pay alimony, I have a hunch I'd have been reimbursed for ten percent of whatever it would have cost me.

By that time I'd signed for another starring role, this time at a really astronomical figure, and suddenly realized something. Past a certain level of income, I was beginning to lose money by making more. Most people don't realize it, and I certainly hadn't, but when the taxable portion of your income passes two hundred thousand, in the case of a single man, you have to pay ninety-one percent on everything above that, leaving you nine percent—less, of course, state income tax. So, with ten percent of my gross going to Roscoe under the table and therefore not deductible, I *lost* money on everything I earned over two hundred thousand. If I ever grossed half a million in one year, I'd go broke. I could never become a *top* star.

But that wasn't what made me decide to kill Roscoe, as the only way to revoke an irrevocable agreement. I wasn't all that greedy for either money or greater fame and, while it wouldn't make me happy to do so, I could do as some stars already did and make only one picture a year. Ramspaugh wouldn't like it, but he could lump it.

What tore things was that I fell in love. Suddenly, completely, overboard, for the first time in my life, and, I knew, for the only time. She wasn't an actress and had never wanted to be one; her name was Bessie Evans and she was a script girl at Columbia. And the first time we met, she fell in love with me as completely as I with her.

Roscoe had to go. I wanted more than just an affair with her; I wanted to marry her and for keeps, and while Roscoe lived, I couldn't. Or anyway wouldn't. If he

would get ten percent of *that* marriage, I'd have to kill him anyway, so it might as well be sooner.

I couldn't explain to Bessie why I couldn't marry her at once, of course; I simply had to ask her to trust me, and she did. And while I was laying my plans to kill Roscoe and free myself I hid her away under an assumed name in a little apartment in Burbank. I saw her as seldom as our ardor would permit and took the most elaborate precautions never to be followed there.

I shall not go into detail about my plan to kill Roscoe. Suffice it to say that I acquired an untraceable gun and a key to his apartment. And wore a perfect disguise so that if I were seen in or near his apartment building, I'd never be recognized or afterward identified.

One morning at three o'clock I used the key. Gun in hand, I crossed the living room silently and opened the bedroom door. There was just enough light from outside for me to see him sit up suddenly at the sound of the opening door. I shot six times and he wasn't sitting up any longer.

I'd have left immediately except that in the sudden silence after the shots I heard the quiet closing of a window, seemingly from his kitchen, one window of which, I remembered, opened onto a fire escape.

A sudden horrible suspicion made me turn on the bedroom light, and the horrible suspicion had been justified. It hadn't been Roscoe, alone in bed. It had been Bessie, momentarily alone there. Why had it never even remotely occurred to me that ten percent of everything wouldn't mean only of money or a marriage?

In a sense, I died right there and then. Anyway, I decided that I *wanted* to die, and if there'd been a bullet left in the gun I'd probably have put it into my head. In-

stead, I phoned the police. By the time they came I'd come to the conclusion I might as well let them do the job for me in the gas chamber.

I refused to talk to the police lest a lawyer might use my story to make, even against my will, a successful insanity plea. To avoid this, when I got a lawyer and talked to him, I told him lies that made him think he had the basis for a successful defense, and so conned him into putting me on the stand to testify. Then, deliberately, I let the prosecutor tear me to pieces on cross-examination so there'd be no doubt about my getting the death penalty.

Roscoe dropped out of sight and is still missing. Since the murder happened in his apartment, the police had wanted to find him to ask him questions, but they didn't need him for their case and didn't look hard.

But wherever he is, the agreement between us is "permanent and irrevocable," and that's what's got me scared, so scared I haven't slept the last few nights.

What's ten percent of death? Do I remain one-tenth alive, one-tenth conscious, throughout a gray eternity? Return to live again and suffer again one day out of ten or one year out of ten—and in what form? Or if Roscoe is who I'm beginning to suspect him of being, what will he do with ten percent of a soul?

All I know is that *tomorrow I'll find out*—and I'm scared.

AELUROPHOBE

AS FAR BACK AS HE COULD REMEMBER, Hilary Morgan had suffered from aelurophobia, which is morbid fear of *Felis domestica,* the common or domestic cat.

It was, as are all phobias, a matter completely uncontrollable by his conscious mind. He could and did tell himself, and was told by his concerned friends, that there was no *reason* for him to fear a harmless little pussycat. Of course cats could scratch and sometimes did, but they were not a fraction as potentially dangerous as dogs. Even a small dog, if feisty, can remove quite painfully a sizable hunk of epidermis, and a big dog can be deadly. Cats? Phooey. Yet Hilary loved dogs, and feared cats, all cats.

If he saw a cat on the street twenty yards away he would cringe and cross to the other side, jaywalking if

necessary, to avoid coming closer to it. If there was no way of avoiding one he would turn around and retrace his steps. None of his friends owned cats; he never accepted a first invitation to the home of a new acquaintance without carefully inquiring to make sure that the potential friend owned no animal of the feline persuasion. Always he used that or some similar circumlocution because even the *word* "cat" or any word starting with that syllable repelled him. He never visited the best nightclub in Albany (where he lived) because it was called the Catamaran Club, and he turned pale and trembled when anyone in the office of the MacReady Noil Company (where he worked) happened to make a catty remark. He avoided and never made friends with men named Tom or Felix; he was afraid of pussy willows and cattails; he never took catnaps or ate catfish or catsup. He never read catalogs and luckily had not been raised a Catholic, so he had never had to learn a catechism.

Aside from his phobia and the various inconveniences and annoyances that resulted from it, he lived and loved quite normally. Especially loved; he was still, in his thirties, a bachelor but far from celibate; in fact, one might say he was just the opposite, if the word "celibate" has an opposite. He loved women, and fortunately he was very attractive to women and he got plenty of—but *that* was one word he never even let himself think of in connection with his amours. That way would lie madness.

So one might say that Hilary Morgan, despite the inhibitions and irritations caused by his aelurophobia, was a very happy man. And he would probably have continued to be a very happy man had not two things happened to him during his thirty-fifth year.

He fell in love, really overboard head-over-heels in love, with the most attractive woman he had ever met.

And a well-to-do uncle of his died and left him a bequest of fifty thousand dollars.

Either of these apparently wonderful things he might have survived, but the combination proved to be his undoing. Of course he proposed to his beloved, under the circumstances, and of course he was accepted, and not because of his inheritance but because his love was returned in full measure; nor was there any dragging of feet on the part of his beloved in the way of making him await a trip to the altar. If his beloved had any fault at all it was that she had just a touch of mania. But it was the best of all possible manias, nymphomania, and Hilary didn't mind that, not in the slightest. You might say that he had just a touch of satyriasis himself, and what better cure—"treatment" would be the better word—is there for one than the other, its complement.

Yes, Hilary Morgan was very happy with his love and very happy with his inheritance. But the combination proved fatal. His wife-to-be wanted him whole, mentally as well as physically, and persuaded him that he should spend some of his inheritance—as much as might be necessary; it surely, she pointed out, would not run more than a few thousand dollars—on the services of a head shrinker who could cure him forever of his aelurophobia.

The psychiatrist he chose was a good one. Within a dozen sessions he had laid bare Hilary's past back as far as the age of three years; his fear of cats had been even stronger then than it was now.

Hilary's conscious memories would carry him back no further. All his conscious mind knew, and that through

hearsay, about his experiences prior to the age of three was that his mother had died in childbirth; he had been taken care of by a series of nursemaids from the time of his birth until the time his father had remarried when he, Hilary, was just short of three years old.

To push beyond the barrier of conscious memory the psychiatrist resorted to hypnosis to produce the common phenomenon of regression, the reversion of mind and memory so the subject can relive and relate his experiences in a past forgotten by his conscious mind.

Under deepest hypnosis he carried Hilary's memory back to the age of two and a half years. At that time his father had brought home a kitten for him and had held out the kitten for Hilary and he said, "For you, son. See? A kitty!"

And Hilary had screamed then—as now his screams reverberated through the psychiatrist's office. The psychiatrist had wakened him quickly; he had explained what had happened and had terminated the session for that day, telling Hilary that they were getting close now, that perhaps the very next session would explain the trauma that had caused him to scream at the sight of a kitten at so tender an age.

At the next session the psychiatrist again put him under deep hypnosis and regressed him even further. When Hilary, in his mind and memory, was at the age of two years he relived and related another episode and—as the memory of it gripped him—he screamed again.

This time the psychiatrist snapped him out of the trance even more quickly, and the psychiatrist was smiling. He said, "We have at last uncovered the traumatic experience that has led to your fear of cats, and you will fear them no longer.

"When you were two years old you had a nursemaid who turned out to be dangerously psychotic. One morning, annoyed by your crying in your playpen, she became homicidal, got a knife from the kitchen and attacked you with it, attempted to kill you. Fortunately your father was in the next room and heard your screams as she came at you with the knife and was able to get there in time to subdue her and save your life. She was sent to an asylum for the criminally insane."

"But what," Hilary demanded, "does that have to do with my fear of—uh—the animal I'm afraid of?"

"The nursemaid's name was Kitty. And when, six months later, your father offered you a cat and referred to it as a 'kitty' your mind associated it with your horribly traumatic experience with a homicidal woman named Kitty, and you screamed.

"Now that you have relived the memory and know the truth about what happened, you will no longer feel any fear of cats. You are free of aelurophobia.

"I shall prove it to you here and now. In anticipation of success I had my secretary bring a cat, her own cat, to the office with her today. She left it in its carrying case and out of sight while you were crossing the waiting room. I'll have her bring it in now—and you'll feel no fear of it. You'll appreciate it for the beautiful animal it is and probably want to pet it."

He picked up the telephone on his desk and talked briefly to his secretary.

"I certainly hope you're right, Doctor," Hilary said earnestly. "If so, it seems that my mind made an absurd transference—if that's the right word to use. Maybe "association" would be more precise. At any rate, it seems

that I should never have been afraid of cats at all. I should instead have been afraid of—"

The door opened and the psychiatrist's beautiful secretary came through it with a cat in her arms. Hilary Morgan turned and saw her—and screamed.

Not at the cat.

He might eventually have been cured of gynephobia, morbid fear of women, by catharsis, had not the catastrophic suddenness of his learning the true category of his phobia cataclysmically catapulted him into a catabolic catatonia, and thence into a catalepsy so deep that it lasted until, after resting briefly on a catafalque, he was interred in a catacomb in the nearby Catskills.

EINE KLEINE NACHTMUSIK

(In collaboration with Carl Onspaugh)

HIS NAME WAS DOOLEY HANKS and he was One of Us, by which I mean that he was partly a paranoiac, partly a schizophrenic, and mostly a nut with a strong *idée fixe,* an obsession. His obsession was that someday he'd find The Sound that he'd been looking for all his life, or at least all of his life since twenty years ago, in his teens, when he had acquired a clarinet and learned how to play it. Truth to tell, he was only an average musician, but the clarinet was his rod and staff, and it was the broomstick that enabled him to travel over the face of Earth, on all the continents, seeking The Sound. Playing a gig here and a gig there, and then, when he was ahead by a few dollars or pounds or drachmas or rubles he'd

take a walking tour until his money started to run out, then start for the nearest city big enough to let him find another gig.

He didn't know what The Sound would sound like, but he knew that he'd know it when he heard it. Three times he'd *thought* he'd found it. Once, in Australia, the first time he'd heard a bull-roarer. Once, in Calcutta, in the sound of a musette played by a fakir to charm a cobra. And once, west of Nairobi, in the blending of a hyena's laughter with the voice of a lion. But the bull-roarer, on second hearing, was just a noise; the musette, when he'd bought it from the fakir for twenty rupees and had taken it home, had turned out to be only a crude and raucous type of reed instrument with little range and not even a chromatic scale; the jungle sounds had resolved themselves finally into simple lion roars and hyena laughs, not at all The Sound.

Actually Dooley Hanks had a great and rare talent that could have meant much more to him than his clarinet, a gift of tongues. He knew dozens of languages and spoke them all fluently, idiomatically and without accent. A few weeks in any country was enough for him to pick up the language and speak it like a native. But he had never tried to cash in on this talent, and never would. Mediocre player though he was, the clarinet was his love.

Currently, the language he had just mastered was German, picked up in three weeks of playing with a combo in a beer-*stube* in Hanover, West Germany. And the money in his pocket, such as it was, was in marks. And at the end of a day of hiking, augmented by one fairly long lift in a Volkswagen, he stood in moonlight on the banks

of the Weser River. Wearing his hiking clothes and with his working clothes, his good suit, in a haversack on his back. His clarinet case in his hand; he always carried it so, never trusting it to suitcase, when he used one, or to haversack when he was hiking.

Driven by a demon, and feeling suddenly an excitement that must be, that could only be, a hunch, a feeling that at long last he was really about to find The Sound. He was trembling a little; he'd never had the hunch this strongly before, not even with the lions and the hyenas, and that had been the closest.

But where? Here, in the water? Or in the next town? Surely not farther than the next town. The hunch was that strong. That tremblingly strong. Like the verge of madness, and suddenly he knew that he *would* go mad if he did not find it soon. Maybe he was a little mad already.

Staring over moonlit water. And suddenly something disrupted its surface, flashed silently white in the moonlight and was gone again. Dooley stared at the spot. A fish? There had been no sound, no splash. A hand? The hand of a mermaid swum upstream from the North Sea beckoning him? Come in, the water's fine. (But it wouldn't be; it was *cold.*) Some supernatural water sprite? A displaced Rhine Maiden in the Weser?

But was it really a sign? Dooley, shivering now at the thought of what he was thinking, stood at the Weser's edge and imagined how it would be . . . wading out slowly from the bank, letting his emotions create the tune for the clarinet, tilting his head back as the water became deeper so that the instrument would stick out of the water after he, Dooley, was under it, the bell of the clarinet last

to submerge. And the sound, whatever sound there was, being made by the bubbling water closing over them. Over him first and then the clarinet. He recalled the clichéd allegation, which he had previously viewed with iconoclastic contempt but now felt almost ready to accept, that a drowning person was treated to a swift viewing of his entire life as it flashed before his eyes in a grand finale to living. What a mad montage that would be! What an inspiration for the final gurglings of the clarinet. What a frantic blending of the whole of his wild, sweetly sad, tortured existence, just as his straining lungs expelled their final gasp into a final note and inhaled the cold, dark water. A shudder of breathless anticipation coursed through Dooley Hanks's body as his fingers trembled with the catch on the battered clarinet case.

But *no,* he told himself. Who would hear? Who would know? It was important that someone hear. Otherwise his quest, his discovery, his entire life would be in vain. Immortality cannot be derived from one's solitary knowledge of one's greatness. And what good was The Sound if it brought him death and not immortality?

A blind alley. Another blind alley. Perhaps the next town. Yes, the next town. His hunch was coming back now. How had he been so foolish as to think of drowning? To find The Sound, he'd kill if he had to—but not himself. That would make the whole gig meaningless.

Feeling as one who had had a narrow escape, he turned and walked away from the river, back to the road that paralleled it, and started walking toward the lights of the next town. Although Dooley Hanks had no Indian blood that he knew of, he walked like an Indian, one foot directly in front of the other, as though on a tightrope.

And silently, or as nearly silently as was possible in hiking boots, the ball of his foot coming down first to cushion each step before his heel touched the roadway. And he walked rapidly because it was still early evening and he'd have plenty of time, after checking in at a hotel and getting rid of his haversack, to explore the town a while before they rolled up the sidewalks. A fog was starting to roll in now.

The narrowness of his escape from the suicidal impulse on the Weser's bank still worried him. He'd had it before, but never quite so strongly. The last time had been in New York, on top of the Empire State Building, over a hundred stories above the street. It had been a bright, clear day, and the magic of the view had enthralled him. And suddenly he had been seized by the same mad exultation, certain that a flash of inspiration had ended his quest, placed the goal at his fingertips. All he need do was take his clarinet from the case, assemble it. The magic view would be revealed in the first clear notes of the instrument and the heads of the other sightseers would turn in wonder. Then the contrasting gasp as he leaped into space, and the wailing, sighing, screaming notes, as he hurled pavementward, the weird melody inspired by the whirling color scene of the street and sidewalk and people watching in horrified fascination, watching him, Dooley Hanks, and hearing The Sound, his sound, as it built into a superb fortissimo, the grand finale of his greatest solo—the harsh final note as his body slammed into the sidewalk and fused flesh, blood and splintered bone with concrete, forcing the final, glorious expulsion of breath through the clarinet just before it left his lifeless fingers. But he'd saved himself by turning back and running for the exit and the elevator.

He didn't want to die. He'd have to keep reminding himself of that. No other price would be too great to pay.

He was well into town now. In an old section with dark, narrow streets and ancient buildings. The fog curled in from the river like a giant serpent hugging the street at first, then swelling and rising slowly to blot and blur his vision. But through it, across the cobbled street, he saw a lighted hotel sign, *Unter den Linden.* A pretentious name for so small a hotel, but it looked inexpensive and that was what he wanted. It was inexpensive all right and he took a room and carried his haversack up to it. He hesitated whether to change from his walking clothes to his good suit, and decided not to. He wouldn't be looking for an engagement tonight; tomorrow would be time for that. But he'd carry his clarinet, of course; he always did. He hoped he'd find a place to meet other musicians, maybe be asked to sit in with them. And of course he'd ask them about the best way to obtain a gig here. The carrying of an instrument case is an automatic introduction among musicians. In Germany, or anywhere.

Passing the desk on his way out he asked the clerk—a man who looked fully as old as the hostelry itself—for directions toward the center of town, the lively spots. Outside, he started in the direction the old man had indicated, but the streets were so crooked, the fog so thick, that he was lost within a few blocks and no longer knew even the direction from which he had come. So he wandered on aimlessly and in another few blocks found himself in an eerie neighborhood. This eeriness, without observable cause, unnerved him and for a panicked moment he started to run to get through the district as fast as he could, but then he stopped short as he suddenly became aware of music in the air—a weird, haunting whis-

per of music that, after he had listened to it a long moment, drew him along the dark street in search of its source. It seemed to be a single instrument playing, a reed instrument that didn't sound exactly like a clarinet or exactly like an oboe. It grew louder, then faded again. He looked in vain for a light, a movement, some clue to its birthplace. He turned to retrace his steps, walking on tiptoe now, and the music grew louder again. A few more steps and again it faded and Dooley retraced those few steps and paused to scan the somber, brooding building. There was no light behind any window. But the music was all around him now and—could it be coming up from below? Up from under the sidewalk?

He took a step toward the building, and saw what he had not seen before. Parallel to the building front, open and unprotected by a railing, a flight of worn stone steps led downward. And at the bottom of them, a yellow crack of light outlined three sides of a door. From behind that door came the music. And, he could now hear, voices in conversation.

He descended the steps cautiously and hesitated before the door, wondering whether he should knock or simply open it and walk in. Was it, despite the fact that he had not seen a sign anywhere, a public place? One so well-known to its habitués that no sign was needed? Or perhaps a private party where he would be an intruder?

He decided to let the question of whether the door would or would not turn out to be locked against him answer that question. He put his hand on the latch and it opened to his touch and he stepped inside.

The music reached out and embraced him tenderly. The place *looked* like a public place, a wine cellar. At the

far end of a large room there were three huge wine tuns with spigots. There were tables and people, men and women both, seated at them. All with wineglasses in front of them. No steins; apparently only wine was served. A few people glanced at him, but disinterestedly and not with the look one gave an intruder, so obviously it was not a private party.

The musician—there was just one—was in a far corner of the room, sitting on a high stool. The room was almost as thick with smoke as the street had been thick with fog and Dooley's eyes weren't any too good anyway; from that distance he couldn't tell if the musician's instrument was a clarinet or an oboe or neither. Any more than his ears could answer that same question, even now, in the same room.

He closed the door behind him, and weaved his way through the tables, looking for an empty one as close to the musician as possible. He found one not too far away and sat down at it. He began to study the instrument with his eyes as well as his ears. It looked familiar. He'd seen one like it or almost like it somewhere, but where?

"Ja, mein Herr?" It was whispered close to his ear, and he turned. A fat little waiter in lederhosen stood at his elbow. "Zinfandel. Burgundy. Riesling."

Dooley knew nothing about wines and cared less, but he named one of the three. And as the waiter tiptoed away, he put a little pile of marks on the table so he wouldn't have to interrupt himself again when the wine came.

Then he studied the instrument again, trying for the moment *not* to listen to it, so he could concentrate on where he'd once seen something like it. It was about the

length of his clarinet, with a slightly larger, more flaring bell. It was made—all in one piece, as far as he could tell—of some dark rich wood somewhere in color between dark walnut and mahogany, highly polished. It had finger holes and only three keys, two at the bottom to extend the range downward by two semitones, and a thumb-operated one at the top that would be an octave key.

He closed his eyes, and would have closed his ears had they operated that way, to concentrate on remembering where he'd seen something very like it. Where?

It came to him gradually. A museum, somewhere. Probably in New York, because he'd been born and raised there, hadn't left there until he was twenty-four, and this was longer ago than that, like when he was still in his teens. Museum of Natural Science? That part didn't matter. There had been a room or several rooms of glass cases displaying ancient and medieval musical instruments: viola da gambas and viola d'amores, sackbuts and panpipes and recorders, lutes and tambours and fifes. And one glass case had held only shawms and hautboys, both precursors of the modern oboe. And this instrument, the one to which he was listening now in thrall, was a hautboy. You could distinguish the shawms because they had globular mouthpieces with the reeds down inside; the hautboy was a step between the shawm and the oboe. And the hautboy had come in various stages of development from no keys at all, just finger holes, to half a dozen or so keys. And yes, there'd been a three-keyed version, identical to this one except that it had been light wood instead of dark. Yes, it had been in his teens, in his early teens, that he'd seen it, while he was

a freshman in high school. Because he was just getting interested in music and hadn't yet got his first clarinet; he'd still been trying to decide which instrument he wanted to play. That's why the ancient instruments and their history had fascinated him for a brief while. There'd been a book about them in the high-school library and he'd read it. It had said— Good God, it had said that the hautboy had a coarse tone in the lower register and was shrill on the high notes! A flat lie, if this instrument was typical. It was smooth as honey throughout its range; it had a rich full-bodied tone infinitely more pleasing than the thin reediness of an oboe. Better even than a clarinet; only in its lower, or chalumeau, register could a clarinet even approach it.

And Dooley Hanks knew beyond certainty that he had to have an instrument like that, and that he *would* have one, no matter what he had to pay or do to get it.

And with that decision irrevocably made, and with the music still caressing him like a woman and exciting him as no woman had ever excited him, Dooley opened his eyes. And since his head had tilted forward while he had concentrated, the first thing he saw was the very large goblet of red wine that had been placed in front of him. He picked it up and, looking over it, managed to catch the musician's eye; Dooley raised the glass in a silent toast and downed the wine in a single draught.

When he lowered his head after drinking—the wine had tasted unexpectedly good—the musician had turned slightly on the stool and was facing another direction. Well, that gave him a chance to study the man. The musician was tall but thin and frail looking. His age was indeterminate; it could have been anywhere from forty to

sixty. He was somewhat seedy in appearance; his threadbare coat did not match his baggy trousers and a garish red and yellow striped muffler hung loosely around his scrawny neck, which had a prominent Adam's apple that bobbed every time he took a breath to play. His tousled hair needed cutting, his face was thin and pinched, and his eyes so light a blue that they looked faded. Only his fingers bore the mark of a master musician, long and slim and gracefully tapered. They danced nimbly in time with the wondrous music they shaped.

Then with a final skirl of high notes that startled Dooley because they went at least half an octave above what he'd thought was the instrument's top range and still had the rich resonance of the lower register, the music stopped.

There were a few seconds of what seemed almost stunned silence, and then applause started and grew. Dooley went with it, and his palms started to smart with pain. The musician, staring straight ahead, didn't seem to notice. And after less than thirty seconds he again raised the instrument to his mouth and the applause died suddenly to silence with the first note he played.

Dooley felt a gentle touch on his shoulder and looked around. The fat little waiter was back. This time he didn't even whisper, just raised his eyebrows interrogatorily. When he'd left with the empty wineglass, Dooley closed his eyes again and gave full attention to the music.

Music? Yes, it was music, but not any *kind* of music he'd ever heard before. Or it was a blend of *all* kinds of music, ancient and modern, jazz and classical, a masterful blend of paradoxes or maybe he meant opposites, sweet and bitter, ice and fire, soft breezes and raging hurricanes, love and hate.

Again when he opened his eyes a filled glass was in front of him. This time he sipped slowly at it. How on Earth had he missed wine all his life? Oh, he'd drunk an occasional glass, but it had never tasted like this wine. Or was it the music that made it taste this way?

The music stopped and again he joined in the hearty applause. This time the musician got down from the stool and acknowledged the applause briefly with a jerky little bow, and then, tucking his instrument under his arm, he walked rapidly across the room—unfortunately not passing near Dooley's table—with an awkward forward-leaning gait. Dooley turned his head to follow with his eyes. The musician sat down at a very small table, a table for one, since it had only one chair, against the opposite wall. Dooley considered taking his own chair over, but decided against it. Apparently the guy wanted to sit alone or he wouldn't have taken that particular table.

Dooley looked around till he caught the little waiter's eye and signaled to him. When he came, Dooley asked him to take a glass of wine to the musician, and also to ask the man if he would care to join him at Dooley's table, to tell him that Dooley too was a musician and would like to get to know him.

"I don't think he will," the waiter told him. "People have tried before and he always politely refused. As for the wine, it is not necessary; several times an evening we pass a hat for him. Someone is starting to do so now, and you may contribute that way if you wish."

"I wish," Dooley told him. "But take him the wine and give him my message anyway, please."

"Ja, mein Herr."

The waiter collected a mark in advance and then went to one of the three tuns and drew a glass of wine and took

it to the musician. Dooley, watching, saw the waiter put the glass on the musician's table and, talking, point toward Dooley. So there would be no mistake, Dooley stood up and made a slight bow in their direction.

The musician stood also and bowed back, slightly more deeply and from the waist. But then he turned back to his table and sat down again and Dooley knew his first advance had been declined. Well, there'd be other chances, and other evenings. So, only slightly discomfited, he sat back down again and took another sip of his wine. Yes, even without the music, or at any rate with only the aftereffects of the music, it still tasted wonderful.

The hat came, "For the musician," passed by a stolid red-faced burgher, and Dooley, seeing no large bills in it and not wishing to make himself conspicuous, added two marks from his little pile on the table.

Then he saw a couple getting up to leave from a table for two directly in front of the stool upon which the musician sat to play. Ah, just what he wanted. Quickly finishing his drink and gathering up his change and his clarinet, he moved over to the ringside table as the couple walked away. Not only could he see and hear better, but he was in the ideal spot to intercept the musician with a personal invitation after the next set. And instead of putting it on the floor he put his clarinet case on the table in plain sight, to let the man know that he was not only a fellow musician, which could mean almost anything, but a fellow woodwind player.

A few minutes later he got a chance to signal for another glass of wine and when it was brought he held the little waiter in conversation. "I gather our friend turned down my invitation," he said. "May I ask what his name is?"

"Otto, *mein Herr.*"

"Otto what? Doesn't he have a last name?"

The waiter's eyes twinkled. "I asked him once. Niemand, he told me. Otto Niemand."

Dooley chuckled. *Niemand,* he knew, meant "nobody" in German. "How long has he been playing here?" he asked.

"Oh, just tonight. He travels around. Tonight is the first we've seen him in almost a year. When he comes, it's just for one night and we let him play and pass the hat for him. Ordinarily we don't have music here, it's just a wine cellar."

Dooley frowned. He'd have to make *sure,* then, to make contact tonight.

"Just a wine cellar," the little waiter repeated. "But we also serve sandwiches if you are hungry. Ham, knackwurst, or beer cheese . . ."

Dooley hadn't been listening and interrupted. "How soon will he play again? Does he take long between sets?"

"Oh, he plays no more tonight. A minute ago, just as I was bringing your wine, I saw him leave. We may not see him again for a long . . ."

But Dooley had grabbed his clarinet case and was running, running as fast as he could make it on a twisting course between tables. Through the door without even bothering to close it, and up the stone steps to the sidewalk. The fog wasn't so thick now, except in patches. But he could see *niemand* in either direction. He stood utterly still to listen. All he could hear for a moment were sounds from the wine cellar, then blessedly someone pulled shut the door he'd left open and in the silence that followed he thought, for a second, that he could hear footsteps to his right, the direction from which he had come.

He had nothing to lose, so he ran that way. There was a twist in the street and then a corner. He stopped and listened again, and—*that* way, around the corner, he thought he heard the steps again and ran toward them. After half a block he could see a figure ahead, too far to recognize but thank God tall and thin; it *could* be the musician. And past the figure, dimly through the fog he could see lights and hear traffic noises. This must be the turn he had missed in trying to follow the hotel clerk's directions for finding the downtown bright lights district, or as near to such as a town this size might have.

He closed the distance to a quarter of a block, opened his mouth to call out to the figure ahead and found that he was too winded to call out. He dropped his gait from a run to a walk. No danger of losing the man now that he was this close to him. Getting his breath back, he closed the distance between them slowly.

He was only a few paces behind the man—and, thank God, it *was* the musician—and was lengthening his strides to come up alongside him and speak when the man stepped down the curb and started diagonally across the street. Just as a speeding car, with what must have been a drunken driver, turned the corner behind them, lurched momentarily, then righted itself on a course bearing straight down on the unsuspecting musician. In sudden reflex action Dooley, who had never knowingly performed a heroic act in his life, dashed into the street and pushed the musician from the path of the car. The impetus of Dooley's charge sent him crashing down on top of the musician and he sprawled breathlessly in this shielding position as the car passed by so close that it sent out rushing fingers of air to tug at his clothing. Dooley

raised his head in time to see the two red eyes of its tail-lights vanishing into the fog a block down the street.

Dooley listened to the drumming roll of his heart in his ears as he rolled aside to free the musician and both men got slowly to their feet.

"Was it close?"

Dooley nodded, swallowed with difficulty. "Like a shave with a straight razor."

The musician had taken his instrument from under his coat and was examining it. "Not broken," he said. But Dooley, realizing that his own hands were empty, whirled around to look for his clarinet case. And saw it. He must have dropped it when he raised his hands to push the musician. A front wheel and a back wheel of the car must each have run over it, for it was flattened at both ends. The case and every section of the clarinet were splintered, useless junk. He fingered it a moment and then walked over and dropped it into the gutter.

The musician came and stood beside him. "A pity," he said softly. "The loss of an instrument is like the loss of a friend."

An idea was coming to Dooley, so he didn't answer, but managed to look sadder than he felt. The loss of the clarinet was a blow in the pocketbook, but not an irrevocable one. He had enough to buy a used, not-so-hot one to start out with and he'd have to work harder and spend less for a while until he could get a really good one like the one he'd lost. Three hundred it had cost him. Dollars, not marks. But he'd get another clarinet all right. Right now, though, he was much *much* more interested in getting the German musician's hautboy, or one just like it. Three hundred dollars, not marks, was peanuts to what

he'd give for that. And if the old boy felt responsible and offered . . .

"It was my fault," the musician said. "For not looking. I wish I could afford to offer to buy you a new— It was a clarinet, was it not?"

"Yes," Dooley said, trying to sound like a man on the brink of despair instead of one on the brink of the greatest discovery of his life. "Well, what's kaput is kaput. Shall we go somewhere for a drink, and have a wake?"

"My room," said the musician. "I have wine there. And we'll have privacy so I can play a tune or two I do not play in public. Since you too are a musician." He chuckled. "*Eine Kleine Nachtmusik,* eh? A little nightmusic —but not Mozart's; my own."

Dooley managed to conceal his elation and to nod as though he didn't care much. "Okay, Otto Niemand. My name's Dooley Hanks."

The musician chuckled. "Call me Otto, Dooley. I use no last name, so Niemand is what I tell any who insist on my having one. Come, Dooley; it isn't far."

It wasn't far, just a block down the next side street. The musician turned in at an aged and darkened house. He opened the front door with a key and then used a small pocket flashlight to guide them up a wide but uncarpeted staircase. The house, he explained on the way, was unoccupied and scheduled to be torn down, so there was no electricity. But the owner had given him a key and permission to use it while the house still stood; there were a few pieces of furniture here and there, and he got by. He liked being in a house all by himself because he could play at any hour of the night without bothering anyone trying to sleep.

He opened the door of a room and went in. Dooley waited in the doorway until the musician had lighted an oil lamp on the dresser, and then followed him in. Besides the dresser there was only a straight chair, a rocker and a single bed.

"Sit down, Dooley," the musician told him. "You'll find the bed more comfortable than the straight chair. If I'm going to play for us, I'd like the rocker." He was taking two glasses and a bottle out of the top drawer of the dresser. "I see I erred. I thought it was wine I had left; it is brandy. But that is better, no?"

"That is better, yes," said Dooley. He could hardly restrain himself from asking permission right away to try the hautboy himself, but felt it would be wiser to wait until brandy had done a little mellowing. He sat down on the bed.

The musician handed Dooley a huge glass of brandy; he went back to the dresser and got his own glass and, with his instrument in his other hand, went to the rocker. He raised the glass. "To music, Dooley."

"To *Nachtmusik,*" said Dooley. He drank off a goodly sip, and it burned like fire, but it was good brandy. Then he could wait no longer. "Otto, mind if I look at that instrument of yours? It's a hautboy, isn't it?"

"A hautboy, yes. Not many would recognize it, even musicians. But I'm sorry, Dooley. I can't let you handle it. Or play it, if you were going to ask that, too. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is, my friend."

Dooley nodded and tried not to look glum. The night is young, he told himself; another drink or two of brandy that size may mellow him. Meanwhile, he might as well find out as much as he could.

"Is it—your instrument, I mean, a real one? I mean, a medieval one? Or a modern reproduction?"

"I made it myself, by hand. A labor of love. But, my friend, stay with the clarinet, I advise you. Especially do not ask me to make you one like this; I could not. I have not worked with tools, with a lathe, for many years. I would find my skill gone. Are you skillful with tools?"

Dooley shook his head. "Can't drive a nail. Where could I find one, even something like yours?"

The musician shrugged. "Most are in museums, not obtainable. You might find a few collections of ancient instruments in private hands, and buy one at an exorbitant price—and you might even find it still playable. But, my friend, be wise and stay with your clarinet. I advise you strongly."

Dooley Hanks could not say what he was thinking, and didn't speak.

"Tomorrow we will talk about finding you a new clarinet," the musician said. "Tonight, let us forget it. And forget your wish for a hautboy, even your wish to play this one—yes, I know you asked only to touch and handle, but could you hold it in your hands without wanting to put it to your lips? Let us drink some more and then I will play for us. *Prosit!*"

They drank again. The musician asked Dooley to tell something about himself, and Dooley did. Almost everything about himself that mattered except the one thing that mattered most—his obsession and the fact that he was making up his mind to kill for it if there was no other way.

There was no hurry, Dooley thought; he had all night. So he talked and they drank. They were halfway through

their third round—and the last round, since it finished the bottle—of brandy, when he ran out of talk and there was silence.

And with a gentle smile the musician drained his glass, put it down, and put both hands on his instrument. "Dooley . . . would you like some girls?"

Dooley suddenly found himself a little drunk. But he laughed. "Sure," he said. "Whole roomful of girls. Blonds, brunettes, redheads." And then because he couldn't let a squarehead square beat him at drinking, he killed the rest of his brandy too, and lay back across the single bed with his shoulders and head against the wall. "Bring 'em on, Otto."

Otto nodded, and began to play. And suddenly the excruciating, haunting beauty of the music Dooley had last heard in the wine cellar was back. But a new tune this time, a tune that was lilting and at the same time sensual. It was so beautiful that it hurt, and Dooley thought for a moment fiercely: damn him, he's playing *my* instrument; he owes me that for the clarinet I lost. And almost he decided to get up and *do* something about it because jealousy and envy burned in him like flames.

But before he could move, gradually he became aware of another sound somewhere, above or under the music. It seemed to come from outside, on the sidewalk below, and it was a rapid click-click-clickety-click for all the world like the sound of high heels, and then it was closer and it *was* the sound of heels, many heels, on wood, on the uncarpeted stairway, and then—and this was all in time with the music—there was a gentle tap-tap at the door. Dreamily, Dooley turned his head toward the door as it swung open and girls poured into the room and sur-

rounded him, engulfing him in their physical warmth and exotic perfumes. Dooley gazed in blissful disbelief and then suspended the disbelief; if this were illusion, let it be. As long as— He reached out with both hands, and yes, they could be touched as well as seen. There were brown-eyed brunettes, green-eyed blonds and black-eyed redheads. And blue-eyed brunettes, brown-eyed blonds and green-eyed redheads. They were all sizes from petite to statuesque and they were all beautiful.

Somehow the oil lamp seemed to dim itself without completely going out, and the music, growing wilder now, seemed to come from somewhere else, as though the musician were no longer in the room, and Dooley thought that that was considerate of him. Soon he was romping with the girls in reckless abandon, sampling here and there like a small boy in a candy store. Or a Roman at an orgy, but the Romans never had it quite so good, nor the gods on Mount Olympus.

At last, wonderfully exhausted, he lay back on the bed, and surrounded by soft, fragrant girlflesh, he slept.

And woke, suddenly and completely and soberly, he knew not how long later. But the room was cold now; perhaps that was what had wakened him. He opened his eyes and saw that he was alone on the bed and that the lamp was again (or still?) burning normally. And the musician was there too, he saw when he raised his head, sound asleep in the rocking chair. The instrument was gripped tightly in both hands and that long red and yellow striped muffler was still around his scrawny neck, his head tilted backward against the rocker's back.

Had it really happened? Or had the music put him to sleep, so he'd dreamed it about the girls? Then he put the

thought aside; it didn't matter. What mattered, all that mattered, was that he was not leaving here without the hautboy. But did he *have* to kill to get it? Yes, he did. If he simply stole it from the sleeping man he wouldn't stand a chance of getting out of Germany with it. Otto even knew his right name, as it was on his passport, and they'd be waiting for him at the border. Whereas if he left a dead man behind him, the body—in an abandoned house—might not be found for weeks or months, not until he was safe back in America. And by then any evidence against him, even his possession of the instrument, would be too thin to warrant extradition back to Europe. He would claim that Otto had given him the instrument to replace the clarinet he'd lost in saving Otto's life. He'd have no proof of that, but they'd have no proof to the contrary.

Quickly and quietly he got off the bed and tiptoed over to the man sleeping in the rocker and stood looking down at him. It would be easy, for the means were at hand. The scarf, already around the thin neck and crossed once in front, the ends dangling. Dooley tiptoed around behind the rocker and reached over the thin shoulders and took a tight grip on each end of the scarf and pulled them apart with all his strength. And held them so. The musician must have been older and more frail than Dooley had thought. His struggles were feeble. And even dying he held onto his instrument with one hand and clawed ineffectually at the scarf only with the other. He died quickly.

Dooley felt for a heartbeat first to make sure and then pried the dead fingers off the instrument. And held it himself at last.

His hands held it, and trembled with eagerness. When would it be safe for him to try it? Not back at his hotel, in the middle of the night, waking other guests and drawing attention to himself.

Why, here and now, in this abandoned house, would be the safest and best chance he'd have for a long time, before he was safely out of the country maybe. Here and now, in this house, before he took care of fingerprints on anything he might have touched and erased any other traces of his presence he might find or think of. Here and now, but softly so as not to waken any sleeping neighbors, in case they might hear a difference between his first efforts and those of the instrument's original owner.

So he'd play softly, at least at first, and quit right away if the instrument made with the squeaks and ugly noises so easy to produce on any unmastered instrument. But he had the strangest feeling that it wouldn't happen that way to him. He knew already how to manage a double reed; once in New York he'd shared an apartment with an oboe player and had tried out his instrument with the thought of getting one himself, to double on. He'd finally decided not to because he preferred playing with small combos and an oboe fitted only into large groups. And the fingering? He looked down and saw that his fingers had fallen naturally in place over the fingerholes or poised above the keys. He moved them and watched them start, seemingly of their own volition, a little finger-dance. He made them stop moving and wonderingly put the instrument to his lips and breathed into it softly. And out came, softly, a clear, pure middle-register tone. As rich and vibrant a note as any Otto had played. Cautiously he raised a finger and then another and found

himself starting a diatonic scale. And, on a hunch, made himself forget his fingers and just *thought* the scale and let his fingers take over and they did, every tone pure. He *thought* a scale in a different key and played it, then an arpeggio. He didn't know the fingerings, but his fingers did.

He could play it, and he would.

He might as well make himself comfortable, he decided despite his mounting excitement. He crossed back to the bed and lay back across it, as he had lain while listening to the musician play, with his head and shoulders braced up against the wall behind it. And put the instrument back to his mouth and played, this time not caring about volume. Certainly if neighbors heard, they'd think it was Otto, and they would be accustomed to hearing Otto play late at night.

He thought of some of the tunes he'd heard in the wine cellar, and his fingers played them. In ecstasy, he relaxed and played as he had never played a clarinet. Again, as when Otto had played, he was struck by the purity and richness of the tone, so like the chalumeau register of his own clarinet, but extending even to the highest notes.

He played, and a thousand sounds blended into one. Again the sweet melody of paradoxes, black and white blending into a beautiful radiant gray of haunting music.

And then, seemingly without transition, he found himself playing a strange tune, one he'd never heard before. But one that he knew instinctively belonged to this wonderful instrument. A calling, beckoning tune, as had been the music Otto had played when the girls, real or imaginary, had click-clicked their way to him, but different this—was it a sinister instead of a sensual feeling underlying it?

But it was beautiful and he couldn't have stopped the dance of his fingers or stopped giving it life with his breath if he'd tried.

And then, over or under the music, he heard another sound. Not this time a click-click of high heels but a scraping, scrabbling sound, as of thousands of tiny clawed feet. And he saw them as they spilled suddenly out of many holes in the woodwork that he had not before noticed, and ran to the bed and jumped upon it. And with paralyzing suddenness the bits and pieces fell into place and by an effort that was to be the last of his life Dooley tore the accursed instrument from his mouth, and opened his mouth to scream. But they were all around him now, all over him: great ones, tawny ones, small ones, lean ones, black ones . . . And before he could scream out of his opened mouth the largest black rat, the one who led them, leaped up and closed its sharp teeth in the end of his tongue and held on, and the scream a-borning gurgled into silence.

And The Sound of feasting lasted far into the night in Hamelin town.

NOTHING SIRIUS

HAPPILY, I was taking the last coins out of our machines and counting them while Ma entered the figures in the little red book as I called them out. Nice figures they were.

Yes, we'd had a good play on both of the Sirian planets, Thor and Freda. Especially on Freda. Those little Earth colonies out there are starved to death for entertainment of any kind, and money doesn't mean a thing to them. They'd stood in line to get into our tent and push their coins into our machines—so even with the plenty high expenses of the trip we'd done all right by ourselves.

Yes, they were right comforting, those figures Ma was entering. Of course she'd add them up wrong, but then Ellen would straighten it out when Ma finally gave up.

Ellen's good at figures. And got a good one herself, even if I do say it of my only daughter. Credit for that goes to Ma anyway, not to me. I'm built on the general lines of a space tug.

I put back the coin box of the Rocket-Race and looked up. "Ma—" I started to say. Then the door of the pilot's compartment opened and John Lane stood there. Ellen, across the table from Ma, put down her book and looked up too. She was all eyes and they were shining.

Johnny saluted smartly, the regulation salute which a private ship pilot is supposed to give the owner and captain of the ship. It always got under my skin, that salute, but I couldn't talk him out of it because the rules said he should do it.

He said, "Object ahead, Captain Wherry."

"Object?" I queried. "What kind of object?"

You see, from Johnny's voice and Johnny's face you couldn't guess whether it meant anything or not. Mars City Polytech trains 'em to be strictly deadpan and Johnny had graduated magna cum laude. He's a nice kid but he'd announce the end of the world in the same tone of voice he'd use to announce dinner, if it was a pilot's job to announce dinner.

"It seems to be a planet, sir," was all he said.

It took quite a while for his words to sink in.

"A planet?" I asked, not particularly brilliantly. I stared at him, hoping that he'd been drinking or something. Not because I had any objections to his seeing a planet sober, but because if Johnny ever unbent to the stage of taking a few drinks, the alky would probably dissolve some of the starch out of his backbone. Then I'd have someone to swap stories with. It gets lonesome trav-

eling through space with only two women and a Polytech grad who follows all the rules.

"A planet, sir. An object of planetary dimensions, I should say. Diameter about three thousand miles, distance two million, course apparently an orbit about the star Sirius A."

"Johnny," I said, "we're inside the orbit of Thor, which is Sirius *I,* which means it's the first planet of Sirius, and how can there be a planet inside of that? You wouldn't be kidding me, Johnny?"

"You may inspect the viewplate, sir, and check my calculations," he replied stiffly.

I got up and went into the pilot's compartment. There was a disk in the center of the forward viewplate, all right. Checking his calculations was something else again. My mathematics end at checking coins out of coin machines. But I was willing to take his word for the calculations. "Johnny," I almost shouted, "we've discovered a new planet! Ain't that something?"

"Yes, sir," he commented, in his usual matter-of-fact voice.

It was something, but not too much. I mean, the Sirius system hasn't been colonized long and it wasn't too surprising that a little three-thousand-mile planet hadn't been noticed yet. Especially as (although this wasn't known then) its orbit is very eccentric.

There hadn't been room for Ma and Ellen to follow us into the pilot's compartment, but they stood looking in, and I moved to one side so they could see the disk in the viewplate.

"How soon do we get there, Johnny?" Ma wanted to know.

"Our point of nearest approach on this course will be within two hours, Mrs. Wherry," he replied. "We come within half a million miles of it."

"Oh, *do* we?" I wanted to know.

"Unless, sir, you think it advisable to change course and give it more clearance."

I gave clearance to my throat instead and looked at Ma and Ellen and saw that it would be okay by them. "Johnny," I said, "we're going to give it *less* clearance. I've always hankered to see a new planet untouched by human hands. We're going to land there, even if we can't leave the ship without oxygen masks."

He said, "Yes, sir," and saluted, but I thought there was a bit of disapproval in his eyes. Oh, if there had been, there was cause for it. You never know what you'll run into busting into virgin territory out here. A cargo of canvas and slot machines isn't the proper equipment for exploring, is it?

But the Perfect Pilot never questions an owner's orders, doggone him! Johnny sat down and started punching keys on the calculator and we eased out to let him do it.

"Ma," I said, "I'm a blamed fool."

"You would be if you weren't," she came back. I grinned when I got that sorted out, and looked at Ellen.

But she wasn't looking at me. She had that dreamy look in her eyes again. It made me want to go into the pilot's compartment and take a poke at Johnny to see if it would wake him up. "Listen, honey," I said, "that Johnny—"

But something burned the side of my face and I knew it was Ma looking at me, so I shut up. I got out a deck of cards and played solitaire until we landed.

Johnny popped out of the pilot's compartment and saluted. "Landed, sir," he said. "Atmosphere one-oh-sixteen on the gauge."

"And what," Ellen asked, "does that mean in English?"

"It's breathable, Miss Wherry. A bit high in nitrogen and low in oxygen compared to Earth air, but nevertheless definitely breathable."

He was a caution, that young man was, when it came to being precise.

"Then what are we waiting for?" I wanted to know.

"Your orders, sir."

"Shucks with my orders, Johnny. Let's get the door open and get going."

We got the door open. Johnny stepped outside first, strapping on a pair of heatojectors as he went. The rest of us were right behind him.

It was cool outside, but not cold. The landscape looked just like Thor, with bare rolling hills of hard-baked greenish clay. There was plant life, a brownish bushy stuff that looked a little like tumbleweed.

I took a look up to gauge the time and Sirius was almost at zenith, which meant Johnny had landed us smack in the middle of the day side. "Got any idea, Johnny," I asked, "what the period of rotation is?"

"I had time only for a rough check, sir. It came out twenty-one hours and seventeen minutes."

Rough check, he had said.

Ma said, "That's rough enough for us. Gives us a full afternoon for a walk, and what are we waiting for?"

"For the ceremony, Ma," I told her. "We got to name the place, don't we? And where did you put that bottle of

champagne we were saving for my birthday? I reckon this is a more important occasion than that is."

She told me where, and I went and got it and some glasses.

"Got any suggestions for a name, Johnny? You saw it first."

"No, sir."

I said, "Trouble is that Thor and Freda are named wrong now. I mean, Thor is Sirius *I* and Freda is Sirius *II*, and since this orbit is inside theirs, they ought to be II and III respectively. Or else this ought to be Sirius O. Which means it's Nothing Sirius."

Ellen smiled and I think Johnny would have except that it would have been undignified.

But Ma frowned. "William—" she said, and would have gone on in that vein if something hadn't happened.

Something looked over the top of the nearest hill. Ma was the only one facing that way and she let out a whoop and grabbed me. Then we all turned and looked.

It was the head of something that looked like an ostrich, only it must have been bigger than an elephant. Also there was a collar and a blue polka-dot bow tie around the thin neck of the critter, and it wore a hat. The hat was bright yellow and had a long purple feather. The thing looked at us a minute, winked quizzically, and then pulled its head back.

None of us said anything for a minute and then I took a deep breath. "That," I said, "tears it, right down the middle. Planet, I dub thee Nothing Sirius."

I bent down and hit the neck of the champagne bottle against the clay and it just dented the clay and wouldn't break. I looked around for a rock to hit it on. There wasn't any rock.

I took out a corkscrew from my pocket and opened the bottle instead. We all had a drink except Johnny, who took only a token sip because he doesn't drink or smoke. Me, I had a good long one. Then I poured a brief libation on the ground and recorked the bottle; I had a hunch that I might need it more than the planet did. There was lots of whiskey in the ship and some Martian greenbrew but no more champagne. I said, "Well, here we go."

I caught Johnny's eye and he said, "Do you think it wise, in view of the fact that there are—uh—inhabitants?"

"Inhabitants?" I said. "Johnny, whatever that thing that stuck its head over the hill was, it wasn't an inhabitant. And if it pops up again, I'll conk it over the head with this bottle."

But just the same, before we started out, I went inside the *Chitterling* and got a couple more heatojectors. I stuck one in my belt and gave Ellen the other; she's a better shot than I am. Ma couldn't hit the side of an administration building with a spraygun, so I didn't give her one.

We started off, and sort of by mutual consent, we went the other direction from where we'd seen the whatever-it-was. The hills all looked alike for a while and as soon as we were over the first one, we were out of sight of the *Chitterling*. But I noticed Johnny studying a wrist-compass every couple of minutes, and I knew he'd know the way home.

Nothing happened for three hills and then Ma said, "Look," and we looked.

About twenty yards to our left there was a purple bush. There was a buzzing sound coming from it. We went a

little closer and saw that the buzzing came from a lot of things that were flying around the bush. They looked like birds until you looked a second time and then you saw that their wings weren't moving. But they zoomed up and down and around just the same. I tried to look at their heads, but where the heads ought to be there was only a blur. A circular blur.

"They got propellers," Ma said. "Like old-fashioned airplanes used to have."

It did look that way.

I looked at Johnny and he looked at me and we started over toward the bush. But the birds, or whatever, flew away quick, the minute we started toward them. They skimmed off low to the ground and were out of sight in a minute.

We started off again, none of us saying anything, and Ellen came up and walked alongside me. We were just far enough ahead to be out of earshot, and she said, "Pop—"

And didn't go on with it, so I answered, "What, kid?"

"Nothing," she replied sorrowful-like. "Skip it."

So of course I knew what she wanted to talk about, but I couldn't think of anything to say except to cuss out Mars Polytech and that wouldn't have done any good. Mars Polytech is just too good for its own good and so are its ramrods of graduates. After a dozen years or so outside, though, some of them manage to unbend and limber up.

But Johnny hadn't been out that long, by ten years or so. The chance to pilot the *Chitterling* had been a break for him, of course, as his first job. A few years with us and he'd be qualified to skipper something bigger. He'd qual-

ify a lot faster than if he'd had to start in as a minor officer on a bigger ship.

The only trouble was that he was too good-looking, and didn't know it. He didn't know anything they hadn't taught him at Polytech and all they'd taught him was math and astrogation and how to salute, and they hadn't taught him how not to.

"Ellen," I started to say, "don't—"

"Yes, Pop?"

"Uh—nothing. Skip it." I hadn't started to say that at all, but suddenly she grinned at me and I grinned back and it was just like we'd talked the whole thing over. True, we hadn't got anywhere, but then we wouldn't have got anywhere if we had, if you know what I mean.

So just then we came to the top of a small rise, and we stopped because just ahead of us was the blank end of a paved street.

An ordinary everyday plastipaved street just like you'd see in any city on Earth, with curb and sidewalks and gutters and the painted traffic line down the middle. Only it ran out to nowhere, where we stood, and from there at least until it went over the top of the next rise, and there wasn't a house or a vehicle or a creature in sight.

I looked at Ellen and she looked at me and then we both looked at Ma and Johnny Lane, who had just caught up with us. I said, "What is it, Johnny?"

"It seems to be a street, sir."

He caught the look I was giving him and flushed a little. He bent over and examined the paving closely and when he straightened up his eyes were even more surprised.

I queried, "Well, what is it? Caramel icing?"

"It's Permaplast, sir. We aren't the discoverers of this planet because that stuff's a trademarked Earth product."

"Um," I mumbled. "Couldn't the natives here have discovered the same process? The same ingredients might be available."

"Yes, sir. But the blocks are trademarked, if you'll look closely."

"Couldn't the natives have—" Then I shut up because I saw how silly that was. But it's tough to think your party has discovered a new planet and then have Earth-trademarked bricks on the first street you come to. "But what's a street doing here at all?" I wanted to know.

"There's only one way to find out," said Ma sensibly. "And that's to follow it. So what are we standing here for?"

So we pushed on, with much better footing now, and on the next rise we saw a building. A two-story red brick with a sign that read "Bon-Ton Restaurant" in Old English script lettering.

I said, "I'll be a—" But Ma clapped her hand over my mouth before I could finish, which was maybe just as well, for what I'd been going to say had been quite inadequate. There was the building only a hundred yards ahead, facing us at a sharp turn in the street.

I started walking faster and I got there first by a few paces. I opened the door and started to walk in. Then I stopped cold on the doorstep, because there wasn't any "in" to that building. It was a false front, like a cinema set, and all you could see through the door was more of those rolling greenish hills.

I stepped back and looked up at the "Bon-Ton Restaurant" sign, and the others walked up and looked through the doorway, which I'd left open. We just stood there until Ma got impatient and said, "Well, what are you going to do?"

"What do you want me to do?" I wanted to know. "Go in and order a lobster dinner? With champagne?—Hey, I forgot."

The champagne bottle was still in my jacket pocket and I took it out and passed it first to Ma and then to Ellen, and then I finished most of what was left; I must have drunk it too fast because the bubbles tickled my nose and made me sneeze.

I felt ready for anything, though, and I took another walk through the doorway of the building that wasn't there. Maybe, I figured, I could see some indication of how recently it had been put up, or something. There wasn't any indication that I could see. The inside, or rather the back of the front, was smooth and plain like a sheet of glass. It looked like a synthetic of some sort.

I took a look at the ground back of it, but all I could see was a few holes that looked like insect holes. And that's what they must have been, because there was a big black cockroach sitting (or maybe standing; how can you tell whether a cockroach is sitting or standing?) by one of them. I took a step closer and he popped down the hole.

I felt a little better as I went back through the front doorway. I said, "Ma, I saw a cockroach. And do you know what was peculiar about it?"

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," I told her. "That's the peculiar thing, there was nothing peculiar. Here the ostriches wear hats and

the birds have propellers and the streets go nowhere and the houses haven't any backs to them, but that cockroach didn't even have feathers."

"Are you sure?" Ellen wanted to know.

"Sure I'm sure. Let's take the next rise and see what's over it."

We went, and we saw. Down in between that hill and the next, the road took another sharp turn and facing us was the front view of a tent with a big banner that said, "Penny Arcade."

This time I didn't even break stride. I said, "They copied that banner from the show Sam Heideman used to have. Remember Sam, and the good old days, Ma?"

"That drunken no-good," Ma said.

"Why, Ma, you liked him too."

"Yes, and I liked you too, but that doesn't mean that you aren't or he isn't—"

"Why, Ma," I interrupted. But by that time we were right in front of the tent. Looked like real canvas because it billowed gently. I said, "I haven't got the heart. Who wants to look through this time?"

But Ma already had her head through the flap of the tent. I heard her say, "Why, hello Sam, you old soak."

I said, "Ma, quit kidding or I'll—"

But by that time I was past her and inside the tent, and it *was* a tent, all four sides of one, and a good big one at that. And it was lined with the old familiar coin machines. There, counting coins in the change booth, was Sam Heideman, looking up with almost as much surprise on his face as there must have been on mine.

He said, "Pop Wherry! I'll be a dirty name." Only he didn't say "dirty name"—but he didn't get around to

apologizing to Ma and Ellen for that until he and I had pounded each other's backs and he had shaken hands around and been introduced to Johnny Lane.

It was just like old times on the carny lots of Mars and Venus. He was telling Ellen how she'd been "so high" when he'd seen her last and did she really remember him?

And then Ma sniffed.

When Ma sniffs like that, there's something to look at, and I got my eyes off dear old Sam and looked at Ma and then at where Ma was looking. I didn't sniff, but I gasped.

A woman was coming forward from the back of the tent, and when I call her a woman it's because I can't think of the right word if there is one. She was St. Cecilia and Guinevere and a Petty girl all ironed into one. She was like a sunset in New Mexico and the cold silver moons of Mars seen from the Equatorial Gardens. She was like a Venusian valley in the spring and like Dorzalski playing the violin. She was really something.

I heard another gasp from alongside me, and it was unfamiliar. Took me a second to realize why it was unfamiliar; I'd never heard Johnny Lane gasp before. It was an effort, but I shifted my eyes for a look at his face. And I thought, "Oh—oh. Poor Ellen." For the poor boy was gone, no question about it.

And just in time—maybe seeing Johnny helped me—I managed to remember that I'm pushing fifty and happily married. I took hold of Ma's arm and hung on. "Sam," I said, "what on Earth—I mean on whatever planet this is—"

Sam turned around and looked behind him. He said,

"Miss Ambers, I'd like you to meet some old friends of mine who just dropped in. Mrs. Wherry, this is Miss Ambers, the movie star."

Then he finished the introductions, first Ellen, then me, and then Johnny. Ma and Ellen were much too polite. Me, I maybe went the other way by pretending not to notice the hand Miss Ambers held out. Old as I am, I had a hunch I might forget to let go if I took it. That's the kind of girl she was.

Johnny did forget to let go.

Sam was saying to me, "Pop, you old pirate, what are you doing here? I thought you stuck to the colonies, and I sure didn't look for you to drop in on a movie set."

"A movie set?" Things were beginning to make sense, almost.

"Sure. Planetary Cinema, Inc. With me as the technical advisor on carny scenes. They wanted inside shots of a coin arcade, so I just brought my old stuff out of storage and set it up here. All the boys are over at the base camp now."

Light was just beginning to dawn on me. "And that restaurant front up the street? That's a set?" I queried.

"Sure, and the street itself. They didn't need it, but they had to film the making of it for one sequence."

"Oh." I went on, "But how about the ostrich with the bow tie and the birds with the propellers? They couldn't have been movie props. Or could they?" I'd heard that Planetary Cinema did some pretty impossible things.

Sam shook his head a bit blankly. "Nope. You must have come across some of the local fauna. There are a few but not many, and they don't get in the way."

Ma said, "Look here, Sam Heideman, how come if this

planet has been discovered we hadn't heard about it? How long has it been known, and what's it all about?"

Sam chuckled. "A man named Wilkins discovered this planet ten years ago. Reported it to the Council, but before it got publicized Planetary Cinema got wind of it and offered the Council a whopping rental for the place on the condition that it be kept secret. As there aren't any minerals or anything of value here and the soil ain't worth a nickel, the Council rented it to them on those terms."

"But why secret?"

"No visitors, no distractions, not to mention a big jump on their competitors. All the big movie companies spy on one another and swipe one another's ideas. Here they got all the space they want and can work in peace and privacy."

"What'll they do about our finding the place?" I asked.

Sam chuckled again. "Guess they'll entertain you royally now that you're here and try to persuade you to keep it under your hat. You'll probably get a free pass for life to all Planetary Cinema theaters too."

He went over to a cabinet and came back with a tray of bottles and glasses. Ma and Ellen declined, but Sam and I had a couple apiece and it was good stuff. Johnny and Miss Ambers were over in a corner of the tent whispering together earnestly, so we didn't bother them, especially after I told Sam that Johnny didn't drink.

Johnny still had hold of her hand and was gazing into her eyes like a sick pup. I noticed that Ellen moved around so she was facing the other way and didn't have to watch. I was sorry for her, but there wasn't anything I

could do. Something like that happens if it happens. And if it hadn't been for Ma—

But I saw that Ma was getting edgy and I said we'd better get back to the ship and get dressed up if we were due to be entertained royally. Then we could move the ship in closer. I reckoned we could spare a few days on Nothing Sirius. I left Sam in stitches by telling him how we'd named the planet that after a look at the local fauna.

Then I gently pried Johnny loose from the movie star and led him outside. It wasn't easy. There was a blank, blissful expression on his face, and he'd even forgotten to salute me when I'd spoken to him. Hadn't called me "sir" either. In fact, he didn't say anything at all.

Neither did any of the rest of us, walking up the street.

There was something knocking at my mind and I couldn't quite figure out what it was. There was something wrong, something that didn't make sense.

Ma was worried too. Finally I heard her say, "Pop, if they really want to keep this place a secret, wouldn't they maybe—uh—"

"No, they wouldn't," I answered, maybe a bit snappishly. That wasn't what I was worried about, though.

I looked down at that new and perfect road, and there was something about it I didn't like. I diagonaled over to the curb and walked along that, looked down at the greenish clay beyond, but there wasn't anything to see except more holes and more bugs like I'd seen back at the Bon-Ton Restaurant.

Maybe they weren't cockroaches, though, unless the movie company had brought them. But they were near enough like cockroaches for all practical purposes—if a

cockroach has a practical purpose, that is. And they still didn't have bow ties or propellers or feathers. They were just plain cockroaches.

I stepped off the paving and tried to step on one or two or them, but they got away and popped into holes. They were plenty fast and shifty on their feet.

I got back on the road and walked with Ma. When she asked, "What were you doing?" I answered, "Nothing."

Ellen was walking on the other side of Ma and keeping her face a studious blank. I could guess what she was thinking and I wished there was something could be done about it. The only thing I could think of was to decide to stay on Earth a while at the end of this trip, and give her a chance to get over Johnny by meeting a lot of other young sprigs. Maybe even finding one she liked.

Johnny was walking along in a daze. He was gone all right, and he'd fallen with awful suddenness, like guys like that always do. Maybe it wasn't love, just infatuation, but right now he didn't know what planet he was on.

We were over the first rise now, out of sight of Sam's tent.

"Pop, did you see any movie cameras around?" Ma asked suddenly.

"Nope, but those things cost millions. They don't leave them setting around loose when they're not being used."

Ahead of us was the front of that restaurant. It looked funny as the devil from a side view, walking toward it from that direction. Nothing in sight but that, the road and green clay hills.

There weren't any cockroaches on the street, and I realized that I'd never seen one there. It seemed as though

they never got up on it or crossed it. Why would a cockroach cross the road? To get on the other side?

There was still something knocking at my mind, something that made less sense than anything else.

It got stronger and stronger and it was driving me as crazy as it was. I got to wishing I had another drink. The sun Sirius was getting down toward the horizon, but it was still plenty hot. I even began to wish I had a drink of water.

Ma looked tired too. "Let's stop for a rest," I said, "we're about halfway back."

We stopped. It was right in front of the Bon-Ton and I looked up at the sign and grinned. "Johnny, will you go in and order dinner for us?"

He saluted and replied, "Yes, sir," and started for the door. He suddenly got red in the face and stopped. I chuckled but I didn't rub it in by saying anything else.

Ma and Ellen sat down on the curb.

I walked through the restaurant door again and it hadn't changed any. Smooth like glass on the other side. The same cockroach—I guess it was the same one—was still sitting or standing by the same hole.

I said, "Hello, there," but it didn't answer, so I tried to step on it but again it was too fast for me. I noticed something funny. It had started for the hole the second I decided to step on it, even before I had actually moved a muscle.

I went back through to the front again, and leaned against the wall. It was nice and solid to lean against. I took a cigar out of my pocket and started to light it, but I dropped the match. *Almost,* I knew what was wrong.

Something about Sam Heideman.

"Ma," I said, "isn't Sam Heideman—dead?"

And then, with appalling suddenness I wasn't leaning against a wall any more because the wall just wasn't there and I was falling backward.

I heard Ma yell and Ellen squeal.

I picked myself up off the greenish clay. Ma and Ellen were getting up too, from sitting down hard on the ground because the curb they'd been sitting on wasn't there any more either. Johnny was staggering a bit from having the road disappear under the soles of his feet, and dropping a few inches.

There wasn't a sign anywhere of road or restaurant, just the rolling green hills. And—yes, the cockroaches were still there.

The fall had jolted me plenty, and I was mad. I wanted something to take out my mad on. There were only cockroaches. They hadn't gone up into nothingness like the rest of it. I made another try at the nearest one, and missed again. This time I was positive that he'd moved before I did.

Ellen looked down at where the street ought to be, at where the restaurant front ought to be, and then back the way we'd come as though wondering if the Penny Arcade tent was still there.

"It isn't," I said.

Ma asked, "It isn't what?"

"Isn't there," I explained.

Ma glowered at me. "What isn't where?"

"The tent," I said, a bit peeved. "The movie company. The whole shebang. And especially Sam Heideman. It was when I remembered about Sam Heideman—five years ago in Luna City we heard he was dead—so he

wasn't there. None of it was there. And the minute I realized that, they pulled it all out from under us."

" 'They?' What do you mean, *'they,'* Pop Wherry? Who is 'they'?"

"You mean who *are* 'they'?" I said, but the look Ma gave me made me wince.

"Let's not talk here," I went on. "Let's get back to the ship as quick as we can, first. You can lead us there, Johnny, without the street?"

He nodded, forgetting to salute or "sir" me. We started off, none of us talking. I wasn't worried about Johnny getting us back; he'd been all right until we'd hit the tent; he'd been following our course with his wrist-compass.

After we got to where the end of the street had been, it got easy because we could see our own footprints in the clay, and just had to follow them. We passed the rise where there had been the purple bush with the propeller birds, but the birds weren't there now, nor was the purple bush.

But the *Chitterling* was still there, thank Heavens. We saw it from the last rise and it looked just as we had left it. It looked like home, and we started to walk faster.

I opened the door and stood aside for Ma and Ellen to go in first. Ma had just started in when we heard the voice. It said, "We bid you farewell."

I said, "We bid you farewell, too. And the hell with you."

I motioned Ma to go on into the ship. The sooner I was out of this place, the better I'd like it.

But the voice said, "Wait," and there was something about it that made us wait. "We wish to explain to you so that you will not return."

Nothing had been further from my mind, but I said, "Why not?"

"Your civilization is not compatible with ours. We have studied your minds to make sure. We projected images from the images we found in your minds, to study your reactions to them. Our first images, our first thought-projections, were confused. But we understood your minds by the time you reached the farthest point of your walk. We were able to project beings similar to yourselves."

"Sam Heideman, yeah," I said. "But how about the da—the woman? She couldn't have been in the memory of any of us because none of us knew her."

"She was a composite—what you would call an idealization. That, however, doesn't matter. By studying you we learned that your civilization concerns itself with things, ours with thoughts. Neither of us has anything to offer the other. No good could come through interchange, whereas much harm might come. Our planet has no material resources that would interest your race."

I had to agree with that, looking out over that monotonous rolling clay that seemed to support only those few tumbleweedlike bushes, and not many of them. It didn't look like it would support anything else. As for minerals, I hadn't seen even a pebble.

"Right you are," I called back. "Any planet that raises nothing but tumbleweeds and cockroaches can keep itself, as far as we're concerned. So—" Then something dawned on me. "Hey, just a minute. There must be something else or who the devil am I talking to?"

"You are talking," replied the voice, "to what you call cockroaches, which is another point of incompatibility between us. To be more precise, you are talking to a

thought-projected voice, but we are projecting it. And let me assure you of one thing—that you are more repugnant physically to us than we are to you."

I looked down then and saw them, three of them, ready to pop into holes if I made a move.

Back inside the ship, I said, "Johnny, blast off. Destination, Earth."

He saluted and said, "Yes, sir," and went into the pilot's compartment and shut the door. He didn't come out until we were on an automatic course, with Sirius dwindling behind us.

Ellen had gone to her room. Ma and I were playing cribbage.

"May I go off duty, sir?" Johnny asked, and walked stiffly to his room when I answered, "Sure."

After a while, Ma and I turned in. A while after that we heard noises. I got up to investigate, and investigated.

I came back grinning. "Everything's okay, Ma," I said. "It's Johnny Lane and he's as drunk as a hoot owl!" And I slapped Ma playfully on the fanny.

"Ouch, you old fool," she sniffed. "I'm sore there from the curb disappearing from under me. And what's wonderful about Johnny getting drunk? *You* aren't, are you?"

"No," I admitted, regretfully perhaps. "But, Ma, he told me to go to blazes. And without saluting. Me, the owner of the ship."

Ma just looked at me. Sometimes women are smart, but sometimes they're pretty dumb.

"Listen, he isn't going to keep on getting drunk," I said. "This is an occasion. Can't you see what happened to his pride and dignity?"

"You mean because he—"

"Because he fell in love with the thought-projection of a cockroach," I pointed out. "Or anyway he thought he did. He has to get drunk once to forget that, and from now on, after he sobers up, he's going to be human. I'll bet on it, any odds. And I'll bet too that once he's human, he's going to *see* Ellen and realize how pretty she is. I'll bet he's head-over-heels before we get back to Earth. I'll get a bottle and we'll drink a toast on it. To Nothing Sirius!"

And for once I was right. Johnny and Ellen were engaged before we got near enough to Earth to start decelerating.

THE NEW ONE

"PAPA, ARE HUMAN BEINGS REAL?"

"Drat it, kid, don't they teach you those things in Ashtaroth's class? If they don't then what am I paying them ten B.T.U. a semester for?"

"Ashtaroth talks about it, Papa. But I can't make much sense out of what he says."

"Um-m-m . . . Ashtaroth is a bit— Well, what does he say?"

"He says *they* are and *we* aren't; that we exist only because they believe in us, that we are fig . . . fig . . . something."

"Figments of their imagination?"

"That's it, Papa. We're figments of their imagination, he says."

"Well, what's hard about that? Doesn't it answer your question?"

"But, Papa, if we're not *real,* why are we here? I mean, how can—"

"All right, kid, I suppose I might as well take time out to explain this to you. But first, don't let these things worry you. They're academic."

"What's 'academic'?"

"Something that doesn't really matter. Something you got to learn so you won't be ignorant, like a dumb dryad. The real lessons, the ones you should study hard, are the ones you get in Lebalome's classes, and Marduk's."

"You mean red magic, and possession and—"

"Yeah, that sort of thing. Particularly the red magic; that's your field as a fire elemental, see? But to get back to this reality stuff. There are two kinds of . . . uh . . . stuff; mind and matter. You got that much clear now?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Well, *mind* is higher than *matter,* isn't it? A higher plane of existence. Now things like rocks and . . . uh . . . like rocks are pure matter; that's the lowest kind of existence. Human beings are a kind of fork between mind and matter. They got both. Their bodies are matter like rocks and yet they got minds that run them. That makes them halfway up the scale, understand?"

"I guess so, Papa, but—"

"Don't interrupt. Then the third and highest form of existence is . . . uh . . . us. The elementals and the gods and the myths of all kinds—the banshees and the mermaids and the afreets and the *loups-garou* and—well, everybody and everything you see around here. We're higher."

"But if we aren't *real,* how—"

"Hush. We're higher because we're pure thought, see? We're pure mind-stock, kid. Just like humans evolved out of nonthinking matter, we evolved out of them. They *conceived* us. Now do you understand?"

"I guess so, Papa. But what if they quit believing in us?"

"They never will—completely. There'll always be some of them who believe, and that's enough. Of course the more of them believe in us, the stronger we are, individually. Now you take some of the older lads like Ammon-Ra and Bel-Marduk—they're kind of weak and puny these days because they haven't any real followers. They used to be big guns around here, kid. I remember when Bel-Marduk could lick his weight in Harpies. Look at him today—walks with a cane. And Thor—boy, you should have heard *him* in a ruckus, only a few centuries ago."

"But what, Papa, if it ever gets so nobody up there believes in them? Do they die?"

"Um-m-m—theoretically, yes. But there's one thing saves us. There are some humans who believe *anything.* Or anyway don't actually disbelieve in anything. That group is a sort of nucleus that holds things together. No matter how discredited a belief is, they hang on by doubting a little."

"But what, Papa, if they conceive of a *new* mythological being? Would he come into existence down here?"

"Of course, kid. That's how we all got here, one time or another. Why, look at poltergeists, for instance. They're newcomers. And all this ectoplasm you see floating around and getting in the way, that's new. And—

well, like this big guy Paul Bunyan; he's only been around here a century or so; he isn't much older than you are. And lots of others. Of course, they have to get *invoked* before they show up, but that always gets done sooner or later."

"Gosh, thanks, Papa. I understand you a lot better than I did Ashtaroth. He uses big words like 'transmogrification' and 'superactualization' and what not."

"Okay, kid, now run along and play. But don't bring any of those darn water elemental kids back with you. The place gets so full of steam I can't see. And a very important personage is going to drop in."

"Who, Papa?"

"Darveth, the head fire demon. The big shot himself. That's why I want you to run along outside."

"Gee, Papa, can't I—"

"No. He wants to tell me about something important. He's got a human being on the string, and it's ticklish business."

"How do you mean, got a human being on the string? What's he want to do with him?"

"Make him set fires, of course, up there. What Darveth's going to do with this guy will be good. He says better than he did with Nero or Mrs. O'Leary's cow. It's something big on, this time."

"Gee, can't I watch?"

"Later, maybe. There's nothing to watch yet. This guy's still just a baby. But Darveth's farsighted. Get 'em young, that's his idea. It'll take years to work out, but it'll be hot stuff when it happens."

"Can I watch, then?"

"Sure, kid. But run along and play now. And keep away from those frost giants."

"Yes, Papa."

It took twenty-two years for it to get him. He fought it off that long, and then—blooie.

Oh, it had been there all along, ever since Wally Smith was a baby; ever since—well, it was there before he could remember. Since he'd managed to stand on babyhood's thick stubby little legs, hanging on to two bars of his playpen, and had watched his father take a little stick and rub it across the sole of his shoe and then hold it to his pipe.

Funny, those clouds of smoke that came from that pipe. They were there, and then they weren't, like gray phantoms. But that was merely interesting in a mild way.

What drew his eyes, his round wide wondering eyes, was the *flame.*

The thing that danced on the end of the stick. The thing that flared there, ever-shape-changing. Yellow-red-blue wonder, magic beauty.

One of his chubby hands clung to the bar of the playpen, and the other reached out for the *flame.* His; he wanted it. His.

And his father, holding it safely out of reach, grinning at him in proud and blind paternity. Never guessing. "Pretty, huh, sonny? But mustn't touch. Fire *burn.*"

Yes, Wally, fire *burns.*

Wally Smith knew a lot about fire by the time he was in school. He knew that fire burns. He knew it by experience, and it had been painful, but not bitter, experience. The scar was on his forearm to remind him. The blotchy white scar that would always be there when he rolled up his sleeves.

It had marked him in another way, too. His eyes.

That had come early, also. The sun, the glorious sun, the murderous sun. He'd watched that, too, when his mother had moved his playpen out into the yard. Watched it with breathless fascination until his eyes hurt, and had looked back at it again as soon as he could, and had stretched up his little arms toward it. He knew that it was fire, flame, somehow identical with the thing that danced on the end of the sticks his father held to his pipe.

Fire. He *loved* it.

And so, quite young, he wore glasses. All his life he was to be nearsighted and wear thickish glasses.

The draft board took one look at the thickness of those lenses and didn't even send him around for a physical examination. On the thickness of his lenses, they marked him exempt and told him to go home.

That was tough, because he *wanted* to get in. He'd seen a movie newsreel that showed the new flamethrowers. If he could get one of *those* things to operate—

But that desire was subconscious; he didn't know that it was a big part of the reason he wanted to get into uniform. That was in the fall of '41 and we weren't *in* the war yet. Later, after December, it was still part of the reason he wanted to get in, but not the major part. Wally Smith was a good American; that was even more important than being a good pyromaniac.

Anyway, he'd licked the pyromania. Or thought he had. If it was there, it was buried down deep where most of the time he could avoid thinking about it, and there was a "Thus Far, No Farther" sign across one passage of his mind.

That yen for a flamethrower worried him a bit. Then

came Pearl Harbor and Wally Smith had it out with himself to discover whether it was *all* patriotism that made him want to kill Japs, or whether that yen for a flamethrower figured at all.

And while he mulled it over, things got hotter in the Philippines and the Japs moved down Malaya to Singapore, and there were U-boats off the coast and it began to look as though his country needed him. And there was a fighting anger in him that told him the hell with whether or not it was pyromania—it was patriotism even more, and he'd worry about the psychiatry of it later.

He tried three recruiting stations, and each of them bounced him back. Then the factory where he worked changed over and— But wait, we're getting a bit ahead of things.

When little Wally Smith was seven, they took him to a psychiatrist. "Yes," said the psychiatrist, "*pyromania.* Or anyway a strong tendency toward pyromania."

"And . . . uh . . . what causes it, Doctor?"

You've seen that psychiatrist, lots of times. In yeast ads. Identified—probably correctly—as a famous Vienna specialist. Remember when there was that long line of famous Vienna specialists who advocated eating yeast for everything from moral turpitude to ingrowing toenails? That, of course, was before the Nazi steam roller crossed Austria and blood began to flow like *wein.* Well, make a composite picture in your mind of the Vienna yeast dynasty and you'll know how impressive that psychiatrist looked.

"And . . . uh . . . what causes it, Doctor?"

"Emotional instability, Mr. Smith. Pyromania is not insanity, I wish you to understand. Not as long as it remains . . . ah . . . under control. It is a compulsion

neurosis, predicated upon emotional instability. As to why the neurosis took that particular channel of expression; somewhere back in infancy there must have been a psychic trauma which—"

"A what, Doctor?"

"A trauma. A wound to the psyche, the mind. Possibly in the case of pyromania, the suffering caused by a severe burn. You've heard the old saying, Mr. Smith, 'A burned child fears the fire.' "

And the psychiatrist smiled condescendingly and waved his wand—I mean, his pince-nez glasses on the black silk ribbon—in a gesture of exorcism. "The truth is quite the converse, of course. The burned child *loves* the fire. Was young Wally ever burned, Mr. Smith?"

"Why, yes, Doctor. When he was four he got hold of some matches and—"

There's the scar in plain sight on his arm, Doc. Didn't you notice it? And surely a burned child loves the fire; else he probably wouldn't have been burned in the first place.

The psychiatrist failed to ask about prefire symptoms —but then he would merely have deprecated them had Mr. Smith remembered to tell him. He'd have assured you that such attraction toward flame is normal and that it didn't achieve abnormal proportions until after the episode of the burn. Once a psychiatrist is in full war paint on the traumata trail, he can explain such minor discrepancies without half trying.

And so the psychiatrist, having found the cause, cured him. Period.

"*Now,* Darveth?"

"No, I'm going to wait."

"But it'd be fun to see that schoolhouse burn down. It'd burn easily, too, and the fire escapes aren't quite big enough."

"Uh-huh. But just the same, I'm going to wait."

"You mean, he'll get a whack at something bigger later on?"

"That's the idea."

"But are you sure he won't wiggle off your hook?"

"Not *him*."

"Time to get up, Wally."

"All right, Mamma." He sat up in bed, hair rumpled, and reached for his glasses so he could see her. And then: "Mamma, I had one of those dreams again last night. The thing that was all fire, and another one like it but different and not so big talking to it. About the schoolhouse and—"

"Wally, the doctor told you you mustn't talk about those dreams. Except when he asks you. You see, talking about them impresses them on your mind and you remember them and think about it, and then that makes you dream about them again. See, Wally boy?"

"Yes, but why can't I tell you—"

"Because the doctor said not to, Wally. Now tell me what you did in school yesterday. Did you get a hundred in arithmetic again?"

Of course the psychiatrist took keen interest in those dreams; they were part of his stock in trade. But he found them confused, meaningless stuff. And you can't blame him for that; have you ever listened to a seven-year-old kid try to tell the plot of a movie he's seen?

It was hash, the way Wally remembered and told it:

"—and then this big yellow thing sort of—well, it didn't do much then, I guess. And then the big one, the one that was taller than the other and redder, was talking to it something about fishing and saying he wouldn't wiggle off the hook, and—"

Sitting there on the edge of the chair looking at the psychiatrist through his thick-lensed glasses, his hands twisting tightly together and his eyes round and wide. But talking gibberish.

"My little man, when you sleep tonight, try to think about something pleasant. Something you like very much, like . . . uh—"

"Like a *bonfire,* Doctor?"

"*No!* I mean, something like playing baseball or going skating."

They watched him carefully. Particularly, they kept matches away from him, and fire. His parents bought an electric stove instead of their gas one, although they couldn't really afford it. But then again, because of the danger of matches, his father gave up smoking and what he saved on tobacco paid for the stove.

Yes, he was cured all right. The psychiatrist took credit for that, as well as cash. At any rate, the more dangerous outward symptoms disappeared. He was still fascinated by fire, but what boy doesn't chase fire engines?

He grew up to be a fairly husky young man. Tall, if a bit awkward. About the right build for a basketball player, except that his eyes weren't good enough to let him play.

He didn't smoke, and—after an experience or two—he decided that he didn't drink either. Drinking tended to weaken that barrier that said, "Thus Far, No Farther,"

across the blocked passage of his mind. That night he'd almost let go and set fire to the factory where he worked, days, as a shipping clerk. Almost, but not quite.

"*Now,* Darveth?"

"Not yet."

"But, Master, why wait longer? That's a big building; it's wood and it's ramshackle, and they make celluloid novelties. And *celluloid*—you've seen celluloid burn, haven't you, Darveth?"

"Yes, it *is* beautiful. But—"

"You think there is a bigger chance coming?"

"Think? I *know* there is."

Wally Smith woke up with an awful hangover that next morning, and found there was a box of matches in his pocket. They hadn't been there when he'd started to drink the night before, and he didn't remember when or where he'd picked them up.

But it gave him the willies to think that he *had* picked them up. And it gave him the screaming-meemies to wonder what he'd had in his mind when he'd put that box of matches in his pocket. He knew that he'd been on the ragged edge of something, and he had a very frightening idea of what that something had been.

Anyway, he took the pledge. He made up his mind that he'd never, under any circumstances, drink again. He thought he could be sure of himself as long as he didn't drink. As long as his conscious mind was in control, he *wasn't* a pyromaniac, damn it, he *wasn't.* The psychiatrist had cured him of that when he was a kid, hadn't he? Sure he had.

But just the same there came to be a haunted look in

his eyes. Luckily, it didn't show much, through his thick glasses. Dot noticed it, a little. Dot Wendler was the girl he went with.

And although Dot didn't know it, that night put another tragedy into his life, for Wally had been on the verge of proposing to her, but now—

Was it fair, he wondered, for him to ask a girl like Dot to marry him when he was no longer quite sure? He almost decided to give her up and not torture himself by seeing her again. That was a bit too much though; he compromised by continuing to date her but not popping the question. A bit like a man who dares not eat, but who stares into delicatessen windows every chance he gets.

Then it got to be December 7th in the year of 1941, and it was on the morning of the 9th that he tried to enlist, in three recruiting stations and was turned down in each.

Dot tried to console him—although down in her heart she was glad. "But, Wally, I'm sure the factory you work for will switch over to defense work. All the ones like it are changing. And you'll be just as helpful. The country needs guns and . . . and ammunition and stuff just as much as it needs soldiers. And—" She wanted to say, and it would give him a chance to settle down and marry her, but of course she didn't say it.

It was early in January that she was proved right. He was laid off during an interim period while the factory changed over. There was two weeks of that; the first week a happy vacation because Dot took a week off work, too, and they went everywhere together. She took the week off without pay, just to be with him, but she didn't tell him that.

Then at the end of two weeks, he was called back to work. They'd made the changeover rather quickly; it doesn't require as much changing and retooling for a factory working with chemicals as for one working in metals.

They were going to nitrate toluene. And when toluene has been so treated, they call it trinitrotoluene when they have the time. When they haven't time for a mouthful of syllables like that, TNT describes it just as well.

"*Now,* Darveth?"

"Now!"

By noon that day, Wally Smith didn't know what was wrong with him, but he knew he didn't feel so well, mentally. *Something* was wrong with him, and getting wronger.

He went out onto the loading platform against the railroad spur to eat his lunch. There were a dozen cars on the spur, and ten men were working through the lunch hour at unloading one of them. Stuff in sacks that looked heavy.

"What is it?" Wally called over to one of the men.

"Just cement. For the fireproofing."

"Oh," said Wally. "When do they start on that?"

The man put down his sack and ran the back of a dirty hand across his forehead. "Tomorrow. Know how they're handling this job?" He grinned. "Tear down one wall at a time and pour a cement one. Right while they keep on running full blast."

"Um-m-m," said Wally. "All those cars full of cement?"

"Naw, just this one. Those others are chemicals and

stuff. Gosh, I'll feel a lot easier when they get this place fixed up. Right now— You know this'd be worse than Black Tom in the last war if anything went wrong this week. That stuff in the cars alone would blow the fire clear over to the oil-cracking plants across the tracks. And you know what's on the other side of them?"

"Yes," said Wally. "Course they got lots of guards and everything, but—"

"*But* is right," said the man. "We need munitions in a hurry all right, but they got stuff too concentrated around here. This isn't any place to monkey with trinitro anyway. It's too near other stuff. If this plant *did* go up, even with all the precautions they're taking, it'd set off a chain of—" He looked narrowly at Wally Smith. "Say, we're talking too damn much. Don't say anything like what we been saying outside the plant."

Wally nodded, very soberly.

The workman started to heft the sack, and then didn't. He said, "Yeah, they're taking precautions. But one damn spy in here could practically lose the war for us. If he had luck. I mean, if it spread; there's enough stuff right near here to . . . well, damn near to swing the balance in the Pacific, kid."

"And," said Wally, "there'd be a lot of people killed, I guess."

"Nuts to people. Maybe a thousand people get killed, what does that matter? That many get killed on the Russian front every day. More. But, Wally— Hell, I talk too much."

He swung the sack of cement back onto his shoulder and went on into the building.

Wally finished his lunch, thoughtfully, and wadded up the paper it had been wrapped in and put it into the fire-

proof metal trash can. He glanced at his wrist watch and saw there was ten minutes left. He sat down again on the edge of the platform.

He knew what he ought to do. Quit. Even if there was one chance in a million that— But there wasn't a chance, even in a million. Damn it, he told himself, he'd been *cured.* He was O.K. And they needed him here; his job was important, in a small way.

But listen—just in case—how's about going back to that psychiatrist he'd used to go to? The guy was still in town. Tell him the whole story and take his advice; if he said to quit, then—

And he could call him up now, from the office phone, and make an appointment for this evening. No, not the office phone, but there was a nickel phone in the hall. Did he have a loose nickel? Yes, he remembered now; he did.

He stood up and reached into his change pocket, pulled out the change there. Four pennies, and he looked at them curiously. How the deuce had he got those pennies? There'd been a nickel—

He reached into his other pocket, and his hand froze there.

His fingers had touched cardboard, cardboard shaped like a folder of paper matches. Scarcely daring to breathe, he let his fingers explore the foreign object in his pocket. Unmistakably it was a folder of safety matches, a full one, and there was another one below it. And didn't those matches sell two folders for a penny—the missing penny from his nickel that had turned into four cents' change?

But he hadn't put them there. He *never* bought or carried matches. He hadn't—

Or *had* he?

Because he remembered now, the queer thing that had happened this morning on his way to work. That funny feeling when, with mild surprise, he'd found himself on the corner of Grant and Wheeler streets, a block off his regular route to work. A block out of his way, and he didn't remember walking that block.

Getting absent-minded, he'd told himself. Daydreaming. But there were stores along that block, stores that sold matches.

A man can daydream himself into walking a block out of his way. But can he make a purchase—one with fearful connotation like that—without knowing it?

And if he could *buy* matches without conscious volition, couldn't he also *use*—

Maybe even before he could get out of here!

Quick, Wally, while you know what you're doing, while you *can*—

He took the two folders of matches from his pocket and pushed them through the slide of the fireproof trash can.

And then, walking rapidly and with his face white and set, he went back into the building, down the long corridor to the shipping office, and went in.

He said, "Mr. Davis, I quit."

The baldheaded man at the desk looked up, mild surprise on his mild face. "Wally, what's wrong? Has something happened or . . . are you well?"

Wally tried to straighten out his face and make it feel as though it looked natural. He said, "I . . . I just quit, Mr. Davis. I can't explain." He turned to walk on out.

"But, Wally, you *can't.* Lord, we're short-handed as it is. And you know your department, Wally. It'll take weeks to get a man broken in to take your place. You've

got to give us notice to pull something like this. A week, at the very least, so we can break in a—"

"No. I quit right now. I *got* to—"

"But— Hell, Wally, that's *deserting.* Man, you're *needed* here. This is just as important as . . . as the Bataan front. This factory is as important as a whole damn fleet in the Pacific. It's . . . you know what we're doing here. And— What are you quitting for?"

"I . . . I'm just quitting, that's all."

The baldheaded man at the desk stood up and his face wasn't mild any more. He was a little over five feet tall, to Wally's six, but for the moment he seemed to tower over the younger man. He said, "You're going to tell me what's back of this, or I'm going to—" He was coming around the desk while he talked, and his fists were doubled at his sides.

Wally took a step backward. He said, "Listen, Mr. Davis, you don't understand. I don't *want* to quit. I *got*—"

"Hey, where's Darveth? Get Darveth right away!"

"He's over chewing the fat with Apollo. The Greek's trying to talk him out of this because Greece is on America's side and wants them to win, but Apollo—and all the rest of 'em—aren't strong enough any more to buck—"

"Shut up. *Hey, Darveth!*"

"Yes?"

"This pyromaniac of yours, he's going to *talk.* They'll lock him up if he does and he won't be able to—"

"Shut up; I see."

"Hurry! You're going to lose—"

"Shut up so I can concentrate. Ah, I got him."

"Listen, Mr. Davis, I . . . I didn't mean it that way at all. I got such a splitting headache, I just couldn't think straight and I didn't know what I was saying. I was just saying anything to get out of here, so I could go—"

"Oh, that's different, Wally. But why *quit*, just because you got a headache? Sure, leave now and go to your doctor. But come back—today or tomorrow or next week, whenever it's okay again. Man, you don't have to quit just to go home, if you're sick."

"All right, Mr. Davis. Sorry I gave that impression. I wasn't thinking straight. I'll be back as soon as I can. Maybe even today."

That's it, Wally, you got him fooled now. Tell him you're going to see a doc, and that'll give you an excuse to go out for a while. That'll let you buy some more matches, because you couldn't get the ones back you put in the trash box, not without attracting attention.

You're going out to get more matches, and you know what you're going to do with them, don't you, Wally? You're going to lose a thousand lives and several billion dollars' worth of materials and lots of valuable *time* off the armament program, but it'll be a beautiful fire, Wally. The whole sky will be red, red as blood, Wally.

Tell him—

"Look, Mr. Davis, I've had these headaches before. They're sharp and awful while they last, but they last only a few hours. Tell you what; I can come back at five and work four hours then to make up for this afternoon. That be all right?"

"Why, sure—if you're feeling all right by then and are sure it won't hurt you. We *are* behind, and every hour you can put in counts."

"Thanks, Mr. Davis. I'm sure I can. So long."

"Nice work getting out of that one, Darveth. And *night* will be better anyway."

"Night is always better."

"Boy, oh, boy. I'm sure going to be around to watch. Remember Chicago? And Black Tom? And Rome?"

"This will top them."

"But those Greeks, Hermes and Ulysses and that gang. Won't they get together maybe and try to stop it? And some of the legends from other countries on that side might join in. You ready for trouble, Darveth?"

"Trouble? Phooey, nobody believes in those mugs enough to give them any power. I could push 'em all off with my little finger. And look who'd help us, if they did start trouble. Siegfried and Sugimoto and that gang."

"And the Romans."

"The Romans? No, they're not interested in this war. They don't like Mussolini much. No, there won't be trouble. One of my imps could handle the whole gang."

"Swell. Save me a box seat, Darveth."

Night was strange. At seven o'clock, when he'd been working two hours, it began to get dark. And it seemed to Wally Smith that darkness itself was something alien.

He knew, with part of his mind, that he was working, just as he always worked. He knew that he talked and joked with the other men on the shift. Men he knew well because he'd often before worked several hours overtime and thus overlapped the evening shift.

His body worked without his own volition. He picked up things that should be picked up, and put them down

where they should be put down, and he made out cards and file memos and bills of lading. It was as though his hands worked of themselves and his voice spoke of itself.

There was another part of Wally Smith that must have been the real part. It seemed to stand back at a distance and watch his body work and listen to his voice speak. A Wally Smith that stood helpless on the edge of an abyss of horror. Knowing, now. The wall pushed through, knowing everything. About Darveth.

And knowing that at nine o'clock, on his way out of the building he would pass that corner room where he'd carefully planted the heap of rubbish. Highly inflammable rubbish; stuff that would catch fire from a single match and flare high, setting fire to the wall behind it before anyone would even know it was there. And *behind* that wall—

There were only two things left to do. Turn the handle that shut off the sprinkler system. Light one match—

One yellow-flaming match, then the red hell of consuming fire. Holocaust. Fire they could never stop, once it was started. Building after building turning to flame-red; body after body turning to charred black as men, killed or stunned by the explosions, cooked in a flaming hell.

It was a strange mix-up, the mind of Wally Smith. Nightmare visions that seemed familiar because he'd seen them in dreams when he was a child. Fantastic beings that he'd never been able to describe or identify, as a child. But now he knew, at least vaguely, who and what they were. Things out of myth and legend. Things that *weren't.*

But that *were,* somehow, in that nightmare plane.

He even heard them—not their voices, but their

thoughts expressed in no language. And names, sometimes, that were the same in any language. Over and over again, the name Darveth, and somehow it was something of fire named Darveth that was making him do what he was doing and going to do.

He saw and heard and felt, in loathing terror, while his hands made out shipping tickets and his voice cracked casual jokes with the other men around him.

And watched the clock. A minute to nine.

Wally Smith yawned. "Well," he said, "guess I'll call it a night. So long, boys."

He walked over to the clock, put his timecard into the slot and punched out.

Put on his hat and coat. Started down the hallway.

Then he was out of sight of the others, and not yet in sight of the guard at the door, and his movements were suddenly stealthy. He walked like a panther as he turned in at the door of the deserted stockroom. The room where everything was ready.

Here it comes. The match was in his hand; his hand was striking the match. The *flame.* As the first flame he had ever seen, dancing on the end of a match in his father's hand. While Wally's stubby little fingers, all those years ago, had reached out for the thing on the end of the stick. The thing that flared there, ever-shape-changing; yellow-red-blue wonder, magic beauty. The *flame.*

Wait until the stick has caught fire, too, wait until it's well-ablaze, so stooping down won't blow it out. A flame's a tender thing, at first.

"No!" cried another part of his mind. "*Don't!* Wally, *don't*—"

But you can't stop now, Wally, you can't "don't" be-

cause Darveth, the fire demon, is in the driver's seat. He's stronger than you are, Wally; he's stronger than any of the others in that nightmare world you're looking into. Yell for help, Wally, it won't do you any good.

Yell to any of them. Yell to old Moloch; he won't listen to you. He's going to enjoy this, too. Most of them are. Not all. Thor's standing to one side, not particularly happy about what's going to happen because he's a fighting man, but he isn't big enough to tangle with Darveth. None of them is, over there.

Fire's king, and all the fire elementals are dancing a dervish dance. Others watching. There's white-bearded Zeus and someone with a head like a crocodile standing beside him. And Dagon riding Scylla—all the creatures men have conceived, and conceiving—

But none of them will help you, Wally. You're on your own. And you're bending over now, with the match. Shielding it with your palm so it won't blow out in the draft from the open door.

Silly, isn't it, Wally, that you're being driven to this by something that can't really be there, something that exists only because it's *thought* of? You're mad, Wally. Mad. Or are you?—isn't *thought* as real a thing as anything? What are *you* but thought harnessed to a chunk of clay? What are *they* but thought, unharnessed?

Yell for help, Wally. There must be help somewhere. Yell, not with your throat and lips because they aren't yours right now, but with your mind! Yell for help where it will do good, *over there. Somebody* to stop Darveth. Somebody that would be on your side.

YES! That's it! YELL.

* * *

How he got home, afterward and an hour later, Wally never quite remembered. Only that the sky was black with night and studded with stars, not a scarlet sky of holocaust. He scarcely felt the burns on his thumb and forefinger where the match had burned down and burned out against his skin.

His landlady was in her rocking chair on the cool porch. She said, "Home so early, Wally?"

"Early?"

"Why, yes. Didn't you say this morning that you had a date with that girl of yours? I thought you ate downtown and went right to her house from the plant."

Wally, panic-stricken in remembering, was running to the telephone. A frantic moment and then he heard her voice.

"Wally, what happened? I've been waiting since—"

"Sorry, Dot—had to work late and couldn't phone. Can I come around now, and will you marry me?"

"Will I— What did you say, Wally?"

"Honey, it's all right now. Will you marry me?"

"Why— You come on over and I'll tell you, Wally. But what do you mean, it's all right now?"

"It's . . . I'll be right over, and tell you."

But reason reasserted itself in the six blocks he had to walk, and of course he didn't tell her what had happened. He thought up a story that would cover what he'd said—and one that she'd believe. Of such stuff are good husbands made, and Wally Smith was ready to make a good one if he got his chance. And he did.

"Papa."

"Hush, child."

"But why, Papa? And what are you doing under the bed?"

"Shhh. Oh, all right, but talk softly. He's still around somewhere, I think."

"Who, Papa?"

"*The new one.* The one that— Grief, child, did you sleep through all the rumpus last night? The biggest fight here in seventeen centuries!"

"Gee, Papa! Who licked who?"

"The new one. He kicked Darveth so far he hasn't got back yet, and then a bunch of Darveth's friends ganged up on him and he knocked hell out of *them.* Now he's walking around out there and—"

"Looking for somebody else to beat up, Papa?"

"Well, I don't know. He hasn't started a fight with anybody yet except the ones that started after him, except Darveth. I guess he took on Darveth because this human being Darveth was working on must have called him."

"But why are *you* hiding, Papa?"

"Because— Well, kid, I'm a fire elemental, of course, and he may think I'm a friend of Darveth's, and I'm not taking any chances till things quiet down. See? Golly, there must be a flock of people up there on this guy's side and believing in him to make him as strong as that. What he did to Darveth—"

"What's his name, Papa? And is he a myth or a legend or what?"

"Don't know, kid. Me, I'm going to let somebody else ask him first."

"I'm going to look out through the curtain, Papa. I'll keep my glow down to a glimmer."

"Hey, come— Oh, all right, but be careful. Is he in sight?"

"Yes; I guess it's him. He doesn't *look* dangerous, but—"

"But don't take any chances, kid. I'm not even going near the window to look out; I'm brighter than you are and he'd see me. Say, I didn't get much of a look last night in the dark. What does he look like by day?"

"Not dangerous-*looking,* Papa. He's got a white goatee and he's tall and thinnish, and he's got red-and-white-striped pants stuffed into boots. And a stovepipe hat; it's blue and got white stars on it. Red, white and blue. Does that mean anything, Papa?"

"From what happened last night, kid, it *must.* Me, I'm staying under the bed until somebody else asks him what his name is!"

DOUBLE STANDARD

APRIL 11TH— I'm wondering whether what I'm feeling is shock, fear or wonder that the rules might be different, the other side of the glass. Morality, I'd always thought, was a constant. And it *must* be; two sets of rules wouldn't be fair. Their Censor simply slipped up; that's all it could have been.

Not that it matters, but it happened during a Western. I was Whitey Grant, Marshal of West Pecos, a fine rider, a fine fighter, an all-around hero. A gang of bad men came to town looking for me, real gunslingers, and since everyone else in town was afraid to go up against them I had to take them on all by myself. Black Burke, the leader of the outlaws, told me afterward (I'd only had to knock him out, not to kill him) through the bars of the

jail that he thought it was a bit like *High Noon* and maybe it was, but what does that matter? *High Noon* was only a movie and if life happens to imitate fiction, so what?

But it was before that, while we were still "on the air," that I happened to look out through the glass (we sometimes call it "the screen") into the *other* world. One can do this only when one happens to be facing the screen directly. In the relatively rare times when this happens we get glimpses into this other world, a world in which people also exist, people like us, except that instead of doing things or having adventures they are simply sitting and watching *us* through the screen. And for some reason that is a Mystery to me (one of many Mysteries), never do we on two different evenings happen to see the same person or group of persons watching us from this other world.

That's what I was doing when I looked through last night. In the living room into which I happened to be looking, a young couple sat. They were close together on a sofa, *very* close together, only a dozen feet away from me, and they were kissing. Well, we allow kisses occasionally *here,* but only brief and chaste ones. And this kiss didn't look to be either. They were simply *twined* in each other's arms, lost in and *holding* what looked like a passionate kiss, a kiss with sexual implications. Three times in pacing toward and from the screen I saw them, and they were *still* holding that kiss.

By the time I caught my third glimpse of them they were still holding it and twenty seconds at least must have elapsed. I was forced to avert my eyes; it was simply *too* much. Kissing at least twenty seconds! Probably longer if they started before my first look or continued after my last one. A twenty-second kiss! What kind of Censors have they got over there, to be so careless?

What kind of *Sponsors* to *let* Censors be so careless?

After the Western was over and the glass opaque again, leaving us alone in our own world, I wanted to talk it over with Black Burke and did talk quite a while through the bars, but I decided no, I shouldn't bring up what I had seen. They'll probably hang Burke soon, after his trial tomorrow. He's being brave about it, but why should I put another worry on his mind? Killer or no, he isn't a *really* bad guy, and hanging is enough for him to have to think about!

April 15th— I am deeply disturbed now. It happened again last night. And it was *worse!* This time most definitely a shock.

The few nights between that first time and this even worse one, I'd been afraid, almost, to look out. I'd turned toward the glass as seldom and as briefly as possible. But when I *had* seen through it there'd been nothing amiss. A different living room each time, but never one with a young couple alone together in it, violating the Code. People sitting around behaving themselves, watching us. Kids, sometimes. The usual.

But last night!

Really shocking. A young couple alone again—not, of course, the same couple or the same living room. There wasn't any sofa in this one, just two big overstuffed chairs—and they were both sitting in the same chair; she was in his lap.

That was all I saw my first glimpse. I was a doctor and conditions at the hospital were pretty hectic and kept me rushing from emergency to emergency, saving lives. But near *The End* (that's what we call it when the final commercial comes on and we can no longer see out nor can

those in the outside world any longer see us) I was delivering some good advice to a younger doctor and faced away from him to do it, which put me looking into the screen, or through the glass, and I saw them again.

And either they had moved or else I saw something I had *not* noticed in my first glimpse. Oh, they were watching the screen all right and not kissing. But!

The girl was wearing shorts, very short shorts, and *his hand was on her thigh*—and not even just resting there but moving slightly, caressing! What sort of a den of iniquity is it out there that such a thing would be permitted? A man caressing a woman's bare thigh! Anyone in *our* world would shiver at the very thought of it.

I am shivering now, just thinking about it.

What's wrong with their Censors anyway?

Is there some difference between worlds that I do not understand? The unknown is always frightening. I am frightened. *And* shocked.

April 22nd— A full week has passed since the second of the two disturbing episodes and until last night I had begun to feel reassured. I had begun to think that the two Code violations I had observed were isolated instances of indecency, things that had slipped through by mistake.

But last night I saw—or rather heard, in this case—something that was a most flagrant violation of a completely different section of the Code.

Perhaps before describing it I should explain the phenomenon of "hearing." Very seldom do we hear sounds from the other side of the screen. They are too faint to penetrate the glass, or they are drowned out by our own

conversations or the sounds we make, or by the music that plays during otherwise silent sequences. (I used to wonder about the source of that music, since, except in sequences that take place in night clubs, dance halls or the like, there are never any musicians around to produce it, but finally I decided that it is simply a Mystery that we are not supposed to understand.) For one of us actually to hear identifiable sounds from the other world requires a combination of circumstances. It can happen only during a sequence in which there is absolute silence, sans even music, in our own world. And even then it can be heard by only one of us at a time, since that one of us must be very, very near to the glass. (We call this a "tight close-up.") Occasionally, under these ideal circumstances, one of us can hear, clearly enough to understand, a phrase or even an entire sentence spoken in the world outside.

For a moment last night these ideal circumstances prevailed for me and I heard a complete sentence spoken, as well as being able to see the speaker and the spoken-to. They were an ordinary-looking middle-aged couple sitting (but decorously apart) on a sofa facing me. The man said—and I am sure I heard him correctly, for he spoke quite loudly, as though the woman was a bit hard of hearing: "---, honey, that's awful. Let's shut the ---- thing off and go down to the corner for a beer, huh?"

The first of the two words for which I use dashes was the name of the Deity and it is a perfectly proper word when used reverently and in context. But it certainly didn't *sound* as though he was using it reverently, and the second word was very definitely profanity.

I am deeply disturbed.

April 30th— There is no real reason for me to make an entry tonight to add to the other notes I have made recently. I am more or less doodling and will no doubt throw this page away when I have finished with it. I am writing it simply because I have to be writing something and might as well do this as something even more meaningless.

You see, I am writing this "on screen," as we call it. Tonight I am a newspaper reporter sitting in front of my typewriter in the city room of a newspaper.

I have, however, already played my active part in this adventure, and am now in the background, required only to look busy and keep typing. Since I am a touch typist and do not need to watch the keys, tonight I have ample opportunity to take occasional glances through the glass into the other world. I find myself again seeing a young couple alone together. Their "set" is in their bedroom and obviously they are married, since they are watching from their beds. "Beds," plural, of course. I am pleased to see that they are following the Code, which permits married couples to be shown talking to one another from twin beds a reasonable distance apart but more than understandably forbids their being shown together in a double bed; no matter how far apart they lie this is definitely suggestive.

Just took another glance. Apparently they aren't much interested in watching the screen from their side. Instead they are talking. Of course I cannot hear what they are saying to one another; even if there were absolute silence on our side I am too far back from the glass. But he is asking her a question and she is nodding, smilingly.

Suddenly she sweeps back the covers and swings her feet out of bed, sits up.

She is naked.

Dear God, how can you *permit* this? It is impossible. In our world there *is* no such thing as a naked woman. It just cannot *be.*

She stands up and I cannot tear my eyes away from the impossibly beautiful, beautifully impossible, sight of her. Out of the corner of one eye I can see that he has thrown back the covers on his bed and he too is naked. He is beckoning to her, and for a brief moment she stands there laughing, looking at him and letting him look at her.

Something strange, something I have never felt before, something I did not know was possible, is happening in my loins. I try to tear my eyes away, but I cannot.

She crosses the two steps between the beds and lies down beside him. Suddenly he is kissing and caressing her. And now—

Can such things be?

It is true, then! There *is* no censorship for them; they *can and do* do the things that in our world may be only vaguely suggested as offstage happenings. How can they be free when we are not? It is *cruel.* We are being denied equality and our birthright.

Let me out of here! LET ME OUT!

Help, anyone, HELP!

LET ME OUT!

LET ME OUT OF THIS GOD DAMN BOX!

SOMETHING GREEN

THE BIG SUN WAS CRIMSON in a violet sky. At the edge of the brown plain, dotted with brown bushes, lay the red jungle.

McGarry strode toward it. It was tough work and dangerous work, searching in those red jungles, but it had to be done. And he'd searched a thousand of them; this was just one more.

He said, "Here we go, Dorothy. All set?"

The little five-limbed creature that rested on his shoulder didn't answer, but then it never did. It couldn't talk, but it was something to talk to. It was company. In size and weight it felt amazingly like a hand resting on his shoulder.

He'd had Dorothy for—how long? At a guess, four

years. He'd been here about five, as nearly as he could reckon it, and it had been about a year before he'd found her. Anyway, he assumed that Dorothy was of the gentler sex, if for no better reason than the gentle way she rested on his shoulder, like a woman's hand.

"Dorothy," he said, "reckon we'd better get ready for trouble. Might be lions or tigers in there."

He unbuckled his sol-gun holster and let his hand rest on the butt of the weapon, ready to draw it quickly. For the thousandth time, at least, he thanked his lucky stars that the weapon he'd managed to salvage from the wreckage of his spacer had been a sol-gun, the one and only weapon that worked practically forever without refills or ammunition. A sol-gun soaked up energy. And, when you pulled the trigger, it dished it out. With any weapon but a sol-gun he'd never have lasted even one year on Kruger III.

Yes, even before he quite reached the edge of the red jungle, he saw a lion. Nothing like any lion ever seen on Earth, of course. This one was bright magenta, just enough different in color from the purplish bushes it crouched behind so he could see it. It had eight legs, all jointless and as supple and strong as an elephant's trunk, and a scaly head with a beak like a toucan's.

McGarry called it a lion. He had as much right to call it that as anything else, because it had never been named. Or if it had, the namer had never returned to Earth to report on the flora and fauna of Kruger III. Only one spacer had ever landed here before McGarry's, as far as the records showed, and it had never taken off again. He was looking for it now; he'd been looking for it systematically for the five years he'd been here.

If he found it, it might—just barely might—contain intact some of the electronic transistors which had been destroyed in the crash-landing of his own spacer. And if it contained enough of them, he could get back to Earth.

He stopped ten paces short of the edge of the red jungle and aimed the sol-gun at the bushes behind which the lion crouched. He pulled the trigger and there was a bright green flash, brief but beautiful—oh, so beautiful—and the bushes weren't there any more, and neither was the lion.

McGarry chuckled softly. "Did you see that, Dorothy? That was *green,* the one color you don't have on this bloody red planet of yours. The most beautiful color in the universe, Dorothy. *Green!* And I know where there's a world that's mostly green, and we're going to get there, you and I. Sure we are. It's the world I came from, and it's the most beautiful place there is, Dorothy. You'll love it."

He turned and looked back over the brown plain with brown bushes, the violet sky above, the crimson sun. The eternally crimson sun Kruger, which never set on the day side of this planet, one side of which always faced it as one side of Earth's moon always faces Earth.

No day and night—unless one passed the shadow line into the night side, which was too freezingly cold to sustain life. No seasons. A uniform, never-changing temperature, no wind, no storms.

He thought for the thousandth, or the millionth, time that it wouldn't be a bad planet to live on, if only it were green like Earth, if only there was something green upon it besides the occasional flash of his sol-gun. It had breathable atmosphere, moderate temperature ranging

from about forty Fahrenheit near the shadow line to about ninety at the point directly under the red sun, where its rays were straight down instead of slanting. Plenty of food, and he'd learned long ago which plants and animals were, for him, edible and which made him ill. Nothing he'd ever tried was outright poisonous.

Yes, a wonderful world. He'd even got used, by now, to being the only intelligent creature on it. Dorothy was helpful, there. Something to talk to, even if she didn't talk back.

Except—Oh, God—he wanted to see a *green* world again.

Earth, the only planet in the known universe where green was the predominant color, where plant life was based on chlorophyll.

Other planets, even in the solar system, Earth's neighbors, had no more to offer than greenish streaks in rare rocks, an occasional tiny life-form of a shade that might be called brownish green if you wanted to call it that. Why, you could live years on any planet but Earth, anywhere in the cosmos, and never see green.

McGarry sighed. He'd been thinking to himself, but now he thought out loud, to Dorothy, continuing his thoughts without a break. It didn't matter to Dorothy. "Yes, Dorothy," he said, "it's the only planet worth living on—Earth! Green fields, grassy lawns, green trees. Dorothy, I'll never leave it again, once I get back there. I'll build me a shack out in the woods, in the middle of trees, but not trees so thick that the grass doesn't grow under them. *Green* grass. And I'll paint the shack green, Dorothy. We've even got green pigments back on Earth."

He sighed and looked at the red jungle ahead of him.

"What's that you asked, Dorothy?" She hadn't asked

anything, but it was a game to pretend that she talked back, a game to keep him sane. "Will I get married when I get back? Is that what you asked?"

He gave it consideration. "Well, it's like this, Dorothy. Maybe and maybe not. You were named after a woman back on Earth, you know. A woman I was going to marry. But five years is a long time, Dorothy. I've been reported missing and presumably dead. I doubt if she's waited this long. If she has, well, I'll marry her, Dorothy.

"Did you ask, what if she hasn't? Well, I don't know. Let's not worry about that till I get back, huh? Of course, if I could find a woman who was *green,* or even one with green hair, I'd love her to pieces. But on Earth almost everything is green *except* the women."

He chuckled at that and, sol-gun ready, went on into the jungle, the red jungle that had nothing green except the occasional flash of his sol-gun.

Funny about that. Back on Earth, a sol-gun flashed violet. Here under a red sun, it flashed green when he fired it. But the explanation was simple enough. A sol-gun drew energy from a nearby star and the flash it made when fired was the complementary color of its source of energy. Drawing energy from Sol, a yellow sun, it flashed violet. From Kruger, a red sun, green.

Maybe that, he thought, had been the one thing that, aside from Dorothy's company, had kept him sane. A flash of green several times a day. Something green to remind him what the color *was.* To keep his eyes attuned to it, if he ever saw it again.

It turned out to be a small patch of jungle, as patches of jungle went on Kruger III. One of what seemed countless millions of such patches. And maybe it really was

millions; Kruger III was larger than Jupiter. But less dense, so the gravity was easily bearable. Actually it might take him more than a lifetime to cover it all. He knew that, but did not let himself think about it. No more than he let himself think that the ship might have crashed on the dark side, the cold side. Or than he let himself doubt that, once he found the ship, he would find the transistors he needed to make his own spacer operative again.

The patch of jungle was less than a mile square, but he had to sleep once and eat several times before he had finished it. He killed two more lions and one tiger. And when he finished it, he walked around the circumference of it, blazing each of the larger trees along the outer rim so he wouldn't repeat by searching this particular jungle again. The trees were soft; his pocketknife took off the red bark down to the pink core as easily as it would have taken the skin off a potato.

Then out across the dull brown plain again, this time holding his sol-gun in the open to recharge it.

"Not that one, Dorothy. Maybe the next. The one over there near the horizon. Maybe it's there."

Violet sky, red sun, brown plain.

"The green hills of Earth, Dorothy. Oh, how you'll love them."

The brown never-ending plain.

The never-changing violet sky.

Was there a sound up there? There couldn't be. There never had been. But he looked up. And saw it.

A tiny black speck high in the violet, moving. *A spacer. It had to be a spacer. There were no birds on Kruger III. And birds don't trail jets of fire behind them—*

He knew what to do; he'd thought of it a million times, how he could signal a spacer if one ever came in sight. He raised his sol-gun, aimed it straight into the violet air and pulled the trigger. It didn't make a big flash, from the distance of the spacer, but it made a *green* flash. If the pilot were only looking or if he would only look before he got out of sight, he couldn't miss a green flash on a world with no other green.

He pulled the trigger again.

And the pilot of the spacer *saw*. He cut and fired his jets three times—the standard answer to a signal of distress—and began to circle.

McGarry stood there trembling. So long a wait, and so sudden an end to it. He touched his left shoulder and touched the five-legged pet that felt to his fingers as well as to his naked shoulder so like a woman's hand.

"Dorothy," he said, "it's—" He ran out of words.

The spacer was closing in for a landing now. McGarry looked down at himself, suddenly aware and ashamed of himself, as he would look to a rescuer. His body was naked except for the belt that held his holster and from which dangled his knife and a few other tools. He was dirty and probably smelled, although he could not smell himself. And under the dirt his body looked thin and wasted, almost old, but that was due of course to diet deficiencies; a few months of proper food, Earth food, would take care of that.

Earth! The green hills of Earth!

He ran now, stumbling sometimes in his eagerness, toward the point where the spacer was landing. He could see now that it was a one-man job, like his own had been. But that was all right; it could carry two in an emer-

gency, at least as far as the nearest planet where he could get other transportation back to Earth. To the green hills, the green fields, the green valleys.

He prayed a little and swore a little as he ran. There were tears running down his cheeks.

He was there, waiting, as the door opened and a tall slender young man in the uniform of the Space Patrol stepped out.

"You'll take me back?" he shouted.

"Of course," said the young man calmly. "Been here long?"

"Five years!" McGarry knew that he was crying, but he couldn't stop.

"Good Lord!" said the young man. "I'm Lieutenant Archer. Of course I'll take you back, man, as soon as my jets cool enough for a takeoff. I'll take you as far as Carthage, on Aldebaran II, anyway; you can get a ship out of there for anywhere. Need anything right away? Food? Water?"

McGarry shook his head dumbly. Food, water— What did such things matter now?

The green hills of Earth! He was going back to them. *That* was what mattered, and all that mattered. So long a wait, then so sudden an ending. He saw the violet sky swimming and then it suddenly went black as his knees buckled under him.

He was lying flat and the young man was holding a flask to his lips and he took a long draught of the fiery stuff it held. He sat up and felt better. He looked to make sure the spacer was still there; it was, and he felt wonderful.

The young man said, "Buck up, old-timer; we'll be off

in half an hour. You'll be in Carthage in six hours. Want to talk, till you get your bearings again? Want to tell me all about it, everything that's happened?"

They sat in the shadow of a brown bush, and McGarry told him about it, everything about it. The five-year search for the other ship he'd read had crashed on the planet and which might have intact the parts he needed to repair his own ship. The long search. About Dorothy, perched on his shoulder, and how she'd been something to talk to.

But somehow, the face of Lieutenant Archer was changing as McGarry talked. It grew even more solemn, even more compassionate.

"Old-timer," Archer asked gently, "what year was it when you came here?"

McGarry saw it coming. How can you keep track of time on a planet whose sun and seasons are unchanging? A planet of eternal day, eternal summer—

He said flatly, "I came here in twenty-two forty-two. How much have I misjudged, Lieutenant? How old am I—instead of thirty, as I've thought?"

"It's twenty-two seventy-two, McGarry. You came here thirty years ago. You're fifty-five. But don't let that worry you too much. Medical science has advanced. You still have a long time to live."

McGarry said it softly. "Fifty-five. *Thirty years.*"

The lieutenant looked at him pityingly. He said, "Old-timer, do you want it all in a lump, all the rest of the bad news? There are several items of it. I'm no psychologist but I think maybe it's best for you to take it now, all at once, while you can still throw into the scale against it the fact that you're going back. Can you take it, McGarry?"

There couldn't be anything worse than he'd learned already. The fact that thirty years of his life had already been wasted here. Sure, he could take the rest of whatever it was, as long as he was getting back to Earth, green Earth.

He stared at the violet sky, the red sun, the brown plain. He said, very quietly, "I can take it. Dish it out."

"You've done wonderfully for thirty years, McGarry. You can thank God for the fact that you believed Marley's spacer crashed on Kruger III; it was Kruger IV. You'd have never found it here, but the search, as you say, kept you—reasonably sane." He paused a moment. His voice was gentle when he spoke again. "There isn't anything on your shoulder, McGarry. This Dorothy is a figment of your imagination. But don't worry about it; that particular delusion has probably kept you from cracking up completely."

McGarry put up his hand. It touched his shoulder. Nothing else.

Archer said, "My God, man, it's marvelous that you're *otherwise* okay. Thirty years alone; it's almost a miracle. And if your one delusion persists, now that I've told you it *is* a delusion, a psychiatrist back at Carthage or on Mars can fix you up in a jiffy."

McGarry said dully, "It doesn't persist. It isn't there now. I—I'm not even sure, Lieutenant, that I ever did really believe in Dorothy. I think I made her up on purpose, to talk to, so I'd remain sane except for that. She was—she was like a woman's hand, Lieutenant. Or did I tell you that?"

"You told me. Want the rest of it now, McGarry?"

McGarry stared at him. "The rest of it? What rest can there be? I'm fifty-five instead of thirty. I've spent thirty

years, since I was twenty-five, hunting for a spacer I'd never have found, since it's on another planet. I've been crazy—in one way, but only one—most of that time. But none of that matters now that I can go back to Earth."

Lieutenant Archer was shaking his head slowly. "Not back to Earth, old-timer. To Mars if you wish, the beautiful brown and yellow hills of Mars. Or, if you don't mind heat, to purple Venus. But not to Earth, McGarry. Nobody lives there any more."

"Earth is—gone? I don't—"

"Not gone, McGarry. It's there. But it's black and barren, a charred ball. The war with the Arcturians, twenty years ago. They struck first, and got Earth. We got *them,* we won, we exterminated them, but Earth was gone before we started. I'm sorry, but you'll have to settle for somewhere else."

McGarry said, "No Earth." There was no expression in his voice. No expression at all.

Archer said, "That's the works, old-timer. But Mars isn't so bad. You'll get used to it. It's the center of the solar system now, and there are three billion Earthmen on it. You'll miss the green of Earth, sure, but it's not so bad."

McGarry said, "No Earth." There was no expression in his voice. No expression at all.

Archer nodded. "Glad you can take it that way, old-timer. It must be rather a jolt. Well, I guess we can get going. The tubes ought to have cooled enough by now. I'll check and make sure."

He stood up and started toward the little spacer.

McGarry's sol-gun came out of its holster. McGarry shot him, and Lieutenant Archer wasn't there any more.

McGarry stood up and walked to the little spacer. He aimed the sol-gun at it and pulled the trigger. Part of the spacer was gone. Half a dozen shots and it was completely gone. Little atoms that had been the spacer and little atoms that had been Lieutenant Archer of the Space Patrol may have danced in the air, but they were invisible.

McGarry put the gun back into its holster and started walking toward the red splotch of jungle near the horizon.

He put his hand up to his shoulder and touched Dorothy and she was there, as she'd been there now for four of the five years he'd been on Kruger III. She felt, to his fingers and to his bare shoulder, like a woman's hand.

He said, "Don't worry, Dorothy. We'll find it. Maybe this next jungle is the right one. And when we find it—"

He was near the edge of the jungle now, the red jungle, and a tiger came running out to meet him and eat him. A mauve tiger with six legs and a head like a barrel. McGarry aimed his sol-gun and pulled the trigger, and there was a bright green flash, brief but beautiful—oh, so beautiful—and the tiger wasn't there any more.

McGarry chuckled softly. "Did you see that, Dorothy? That was *green,* the color there isn't much of on any planet but the one we're going to. The only green planet in the system, and it's the one I came from. You'll love it."

She said, "I know I will, Mac." Her low throaty voice was completely familiar to him, as familiar as his own; she'd always answered him. He reached up his hand and touched her as she rested on his naked shoulder. She felt like a woman's hand.

He turned and looked back over the brown plain studded with brown bushes, the violet sky above, the crimson sun. He laughed at it. Not a mad laugh, a gentle one. It didn't matter because soon now he'd find the spacer so he could go back to Earth.

To the green hills, the green fields, the green valleys. Once more he patted the hand upon his shoulder and spoke to it, listened to its answer.

Then, gun at ready, he entered the red jungle.

About the Author

FREDRIC BROWN was born in Cincinnati in 1906 and was educated in the public schools of that city and at Hanover College. Among his numerous successful novels are: *The Screaming Mimi*, *The Far Cry*, *Night of the Jabberwock* and *What Mad Universe.* He died in 1972 in Tucson, Arizona, where his wife still lives.

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In her introduction, Elizabeth Brown writes: "Fred hated to write. But he loved having written. He would do everything he could think of to delay sitting at his typewriter: he would dust his chair, tootle on his flute, read a little, tootle some more. After a time his conscience would begin to hurt, and he would actually sit at his typewriter. He might write a line or two, or he might write a few pages. But the books got written. . . . To me, his collections are delightful. I am especially fond of this one because it is his last finished work. And since it is his farewell to his readers, I hope you like it too."

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