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MICROCOSMIC GOD

by
Theodore Sturgeon

Here is a story about a man who had too much power, and a man who took too much, but don't worry; I'm not going political on you. The man who had the power was named James Kidder and the other was his banker.

Kidder was quite a guy. He was a scientist and he lived on a small island off the New England coast all by himself. He wasn't the dwarfed little gnome of a mad scientist you read about. His hobby wasn't personal profit, and he wasn't a megalomaniac with a Russian name and no scruples. He wasn't insidious, and he wasn't even particularly subversive. He kept his hair cut and his nails clean and lived and thought like a reasonable human being. He was

slightly on the baby-faced side; he was inclined to be a hermit; he was short and plump and-brilliant. His spe-cialty was biochemistry, and he was always called *Mr.* Kidder. Not "Dr." Not

"Professor." Just Mr. Kidder.

He was an odd sort of apple and always had been. He had never graduated from any college or university be-cause he found them too slow for him, and too rigid in their approach to education. He couldn't get used to the idea that perhaps his professors knew what they were talk-ing about. That went for his texts, too. He was always ask-ing questions, and didn't mind very much when they were embarrassing. He considered Gregor Mendel a bungling

liar, Darwin a n amusing philosopher, and Luther Burbank a sensationalist. He never opened his mouth without leav-ing his victim feeling breathless. If he was talking to some-one who had knowledge, he went in there and got it, leav-ing his victim breathless. If he was talking to someone whose knowledge was already i n h i s possession, h e o n l y asked repeatedly, "How d o you know?" His most delect-able pleasure w as cutting a fanatical eugenicist into conversational ribbons. S o people left him alone and never, never asked him to tea. He was polite, but not politic.

He had a little money of his own, and with it he leased the island and built himself a laboratory. Now I've men-

tioned that he was a biochemist. But being what he was, he couldn't keep his nose in his own field. It wasn't too remarkable when he made an intellectual excursion wide enough to perfect a method of crystallizing Vitamin B1

profitably by the ton-if anyone wanted it by the ton. He got a lot of money for it. He bought his island outright and put eight hundred men to work on an acre and a half of his ground, adding to his laboratory and building equipment. He got to messing around with sisal fiber, found out how to fuse it, and boomed the banana industry by producing a practically unbreakable cord from the stuff.

You remember the popularizing

demonstration he put on at Niagara, don't you?

That business of running a line of the new cord from bank to bank over the rapids and suspending a ten-ton truck from the middle of it by razor edges resting on the cord? That's why ships now moor themselves with what looks like heaving line, no thicker than a lead pencil, that can be coiled on reels like garden hose. Kidder made cigarette money out of that, too. 'He went out and bought himself a cyclotron with part of it.

After that money wasn't money any more. It was large numbers in little books. Kidder used little amounts of it to have food and equipment sent out to him,

but after a while that stopped, too. His bank dispatched a messenger by seaplane to find out if Kidder was still alive. The man returned two days later in a bemused state, having been amazed something awesome at the things he'd seen out there. Kidder was alive, all right, and he was turning out a surplus of good food in an astonishingly simplified syn-thetic form. The bank wrote immediately and wanted to know if Mr. Kidder, in his own interest, was willing to release the secret of his dirtless farming. Kidder replied that he would be glad to, and enclosed the formulas. In a P.S. he said that he hadn't sent the information ashore because he hadn't realized anyone would be interested.

That from a man who was responsible for the greatest sociological change in the second half of the twentieth century-factory farming. It made him richer; I mean it made his bank richer. He didn't give a rap. Kidder didn't really get started until about eight months after the messenger's visit. For a biochemist who couldn't even be called "Doctor" he did pretty well. Here is a par-tial list of the things that he turned out:

A commercially feasible plan for making an aluminum alloy stronger than the best steel so that it could be used as a structural metal. . .

An exhibition gadget he called a light pump, which worked on the theory that light is a form of matter and therefore

subject to physical and electromagnetic laws. Seal a room with a single source, beam a cylindrical vibratory magnetic field to it from the pump, and the light will be led down it. Now pass the light through Kidder's "lens"-a ring which perpetuates an electric field along the lines of a high-speed iris-typo camera shutter. Below this is the heart of the light pump - a ninety-eight-per-cent efficient light absorber, crystalline, which, in a sense, *loses* the light in its internal facets. The effect of darkening the room with this apparatus is slight but measurable. Pardon my layman's language, but that's the general idea.

Synthetic chlorophyll-by the barrel.

An airplane propeller efficient at

eight times sonic speed.

A cheap goo you brush on over old paint, let harden, and then peel off like strips of cloth. The old paint comes with it. That one made friends fast. A self-sustaining atomic disintegration of uranium's iso-tope 238, which is two hundred times as plentiful as the old stand-by, U-235.

That will do for the present. If I may repeat myself; for a biochemist who couldn't even be called "Doctor," he did pretty well.

Kidder was apparently unconscious of the fact that he held power enough on his little island to become master of the world. His mind simply didn't run to things like that. As long as he was left

alone with his experiments, he was well content to leave the rest of the world to its own clumsy and primitive devices. He couldn't be reached except by a radiophone of his own design, and the only counterpart was locked in a vault of his Boston bank. Only one man could operate it. The extraordinarily sensitive transmitter would respond only to Conant's own body vibrations. Kidder had instructed Conant that he was not to be disturbed except by messages of the greatest moment. His ideas and patents, what Conant could pry out of him, were released under pseudonyms known only to Conant-Kidder didn't care. The result, of course, was an infiltration of the most astonishing advancements since the

dawn of civilization. The nation profited-the world profited. But most of all, the bank profited. It began to get a little oversize. It began getting its fingers into other pies. It grew more fingers and had to bake more figurative pies. Before many years had passed, it was so big that, using Kidder's many weapons, it almost matched Kidder in power.

Almost.

Now stand by while I squelch those fellows in the lower left-hand corner who've been saying all this while that Kidder's slightly improbable; that no man could ever per-fect himself in so many ways in so many sciences.

Well, you're right. Kidder was a genius-granted. But his genius was not

creative. He was, to the core, a student. He applied what he knew, what he saw, and what he was taught. When first he began working in his new laboratory on his island he reasoned something like this:

"Everything I know is what I have been taught by the sayings and writings of people who have studied the say-ings and writings of people who have-and so on. Once in a while someone stumbles on something new and he or someone cleverer uses the idea and disseminates it. But for each one that finds something really new, a couple of million gather and pass on information that is already current. I'd know more if I could get the jump on evolu-tionary trends. It takes too

long to wait for the accidents that increase man's knowledge-my knowledge. If I had ambition enough now to figure out how to travel ahead in time, I could skim the surface of the future and just dip down when I saw something interesting. But time isn't that way. It can't be left behind or tossed ahead. What else is left?

"Well, there's the proposition of speeding intellectual evolution so that I can observe what it cooks up. That seems a bit inefficient. It would involve more labor to discipline human minds to that extent than it would to simply apply myself along those lines. But I can't apply myself that way. No man can.

"I'm licked. I can't speed myself up,

and I can't speed other men's minds up. Isn't there an alternative? There must be-somewhere, somehow, there's got to be an answer."

So it was on this, and not on eugenics, or light pumps, or botany, or atomic physics, that James Kidder applied himself. For a practical man he found the problem slightly on the metaphysical side; but he attacked it with typical thoroughness, using his own peculiar brand of logic. Day after day he wandered over the island, throwing shells im-potently at seagulls and swearing richly. Then came a time when he sat indoors and brooded. And only then did he get feverishly to work.

He worked in his own field,

biochemistry, and concen-trated mainly on two things-genetics and animal metab-olism. He learned, and filed away in his insatiable mind, many things having nothing to do with the problem at hand, and very little of what he wanted. But he piled that little on what little he knew or guessed, and in time had quite a collection of known factors to work with. His approach was characteristically unorthodox. He did things on the order of multiplying apples by pears, and balancing equations by adding log V-i to one side and °° to the other. He made mistakes, but only one of a kind, and later, only one of a species. He spent so many hours at his microscope that he had quit work for

two days to get rid of a hallucination that his heart was pumping his own blood through the mike. He did nothing by trial and error because he disapproved of the method as sloppy. And he got results. He was lucky to begin with and even luckier when he formularized the law of probability and reduced it to such low terms that he knew almost to the item what experiments not to try. When the cloudy, viscous semifluid on the watch glass began to move itself he knew he was on 'the right track. When it began to seek food on its own he began to be excited. When it divided and, in a few hours, redivided, and each part grew and divided again, he was triumphant, for he had created life.

He nursed his brain children and sweated and strained over them, and he designed baths of various vibrations for them, and inoculated and dosed and sprayed them. Each move he made taught him the next And out of his tanks and tubes and incubators came amoebalike creatures, and then ciliated animalcules, and more and more rapidly he produced animals with eye spots, nerve cysts, and then-victory of victories-a real blastopod, possessed of many cells instead of one. More slowly he developed a gastropod, but once he had it, it was not too difficult for him to give it organs, each with a specified function, each inheritable.

Then came cultured molluskilke

things, and creatures with more and more perfected gills. The day that a non-descript thing wriggled up an inclined board out of a tank, threw flaps over its gills and feebly breathed air, Kidder quit work and went to the other end of the island and got disgustingly drunk. Hangover and all, he was soon back in the lab, forgetting to eat, forgetting to sleep, tearing into his problem.

He turned into a scientific byway and ran down his other great triumph-accelerated metabolism. He extracted and refined the stimulating factors in alcohol, cocoa, heroin, and Mother Nature's prize dope runner, *cannabis indica*. Like the scientist who, in analyzing the various clotting agents for

blood treatments, found that oxalic acid and oxalic acid alone was, the active factor, Kidder isolated the accelerators and decelerators, the stimulants and soporifics, in every substance that ever undermined a man's morality and/or caused a "noble experiment." In 'the process he found one thing he needed badly-a colorless elixir that made sleep the unnecessary and avoidable waster of time it should be. Then and there he went on a twenty-four-hour shift.

He artificially synthesized the substances he had isolated, and in doing so sloughed away a great many useless components. He pursued the subject along the lines of radiations and vibrations. He discovered something in

the longer reds which, when projected through a vessel full of air vibrating in the supersonics, and then polarized, speeded up the heartbeat of small animals twenty to one. They ate twenty times as much, grew twenty times as fast, and-died twenty times sooner than they should have.

Kidder built a huge hermetically sealed room. Above it was another room, the same length and breadth but not quite as high. This was his control chamber. The large room was divided into four sealed sections, each with its individual miniature cranes and derricks-handling ma-chinery of all kinds. There were also trapdoors fitted with air locks leading from the upper to

the lower room. By this time the other laboratory had produced a warm-blooded, snake-skinned quadruped with an astonishingly rapid life cycle-a generation every eight days, a life span of about fifteen. Like the echidna, it was oviparous and mammalian. Its period of gestation was six hours; the eggs hatched in three; the young reached sexual maturity in another four days. Each female laid four eggs and lived just long enough to care for the young after they hatched. The male generally died two or three hours after mating. The creatures were highly adaptable. They were small-not more than three inches long, two inches to the shoul-der from the ground. Their forepaws had three digits

and a triple-jointed, opposed thumb. They were attuned to life in an atmosphere, with a large ammonia content. Kidder bred four of the creatures and put one group in each section of the sealed room.

Then he was ready. With his controlled atmospheres he varied temperatures, oxygen content, humidity. He killed them off like flies with excesses of, for instance, carbon dioxide, and the survivors bred their physical resistance into the next generation. Periodically he would switch the eggs from one sealed section to another to keep the strains varied. And rapidly, under these controlled conditions, the creatures began to

evolve.

This, then, was the answer to his problem. He couldn't speed up mankind's intellectual advancement enough to have it teach him the things his incredible mind yearned for. He couldn't speed himself up. So he created a new race-a race which would develop and evolve so fast that it would surpass the civilization of man; and from them he would learn.

They were completely in Kidder's power. Earth's normal atmosphere would poison them, as he took care to demonstrate to every fourth generation. They would make no attempt to escape from him. They would live their lives and progress and make their little trial-

and-error experi-ments hundreds of times faster than man did. They had the edge on man, for they had Kidder to guide them. It took man six thousand years really to discover science, three hundred to put it to work. It took Kidder's creatures two hundred days to equal man's mental attainments. And from then on-Kidder's spasmodic output made the late, great Tom Edison look like a home handicrafter.

He called them Neoterics, and he teased them into working for him. Kidder was inventive in an ideological way; that is, he could dream up impossible propositions providing he didn't have to work them out. For example, he wanted the Neoterics to

figure out for themselves how to build shelters out of porous material. He created the need for such shelters by subjecting one of the sections to a high-pressure rainstorm which flattened the inhabitants. The Neoterics promptly devised waterproof shelters out of the thin waterproof material he piled in one corner.

Kidder immediately blew down the flimsy structures with a blast of cold air. They built them up again so that they resisted both wind and rain. Kidder lowered the tempera-tures so abruptly that they could not adjust their bodies to it. They heated their shelters with tiny braziers. Kidder promptly turned up the beat until they began to roast to death.

After a few deaths, one of their bright boys fig-ured out how to build a strong insulant house by using three-ply rubberoid, with the middle layer perforated thou-sands of times to create tiny air pockets.

Using such tactics, Kidder forced them to develop a highly advanced little culture. He caused a drought in one section and a liquid surplus in another, and then opened the partition between them. Quite a spectacular war was fought, and Kidder's notebooks filled with information about military tactics and weapons. Then there was the vaccine they developed against the common cold-the reason why that affliction has been absolutely stamped

out in the world today, for it was one of the things that Co-nant, the bank president, got hold of. He spoke to Kidder over the radiophone one winter afternoon with a voice so hoarse from laryngitis that Kidder sent him a vial of vac-cine and told him briskly not to ever call him again in such a disgustingly inaudible state. Conant had it analyzed and again Kidder's accounts and the bank's swelled.

At first, Kidder merely supplied the materials he thought they might need, but when they developed an intelligence equal to the task of fabricating their own from the ele-ments at hand, he gave each section a stock of raw mate-rials. The process for really strong aluminum was

devel-oped when he built in a huge plunger in one of the sec-tions, which reached from wall to wall and was designed to descend at the rate of four inches a day until it crushed whatever was at the bottom. The Neoterics, in self-defense, used what strong material they had in hand to stop the inexorable death that threatened them. But Kidder had seen to it that they had nothing but aluminum oxide and a scattering of other elements, plus plenty of electric power. At first they ran up dozens of aluminum pillars; when these were crushed and twisted they tried shaping them so that the soft metal would take more weight. When that failed they quickly built stronger ones; and when the plunger was

halted, Kidder removed one of the pillars and analyzed it. It was hardened aluminum, stronger and tougher than molybdenum steel.

Experience taught Kidder that he had to make certain changes to increase his power over the Neoterics before they got too ingenious. There were things that could be done with atomic power that he was curious about; but he was not willing to trust his little superscientists with a thing like that unless they could be trusted to use it strictly ac-cording to Hoyle. So he instituted a rule of fear. The most trivial departure from what he chose to consider the right way of doing things resulted in instant death of half a tribe. if he was trying to develop a

Diesel-type power plant, for instance, that would operate without a flywheel, and a bright young Neoteric used any of the materials for architectural purposes, half the tribe immediately died. Of course, they had developed a written language; it was Kid-der's own. The teletype in a glass-enclosed area in a corner of each section was a shrine. Any directions that were given on it were obeyed, or else. . . . After this innovation, Kidder's work was much simpler. There was no need for any indirection. Anything he wanted done was done. No matter how impossible his commands, three or four gen-erations of Neoterics could find a way to carry them out.

This quotation is from a paper that one of Kidder's highspeed telescopic cameras discovered being circulated among the younger Neoterics. It is translated from the highly simplified script of the Neoterics.

"These edicts shall be followed by each Neoteric upon pain of death, which punishment will be inflicted by the tribe upon the individual to protect the tribe against him.

Priority of interest and tribal and individual effort is to be given the commands that appear on the word machine.

"Any misdirection of material or power, or use thereof for any other purpose than the carrying out of the ma-

chine's commands, unless no command appears, shall be punishable by death.

"Any information regarding the problem at hand, or ideas or experiments which might conceivably bear upon it, are to become the property of the tribe.

"Any individual failing to cooperate in the tribal effort, or who can be termed guilty of not expending his full efforts in the work, or the suspicion thereof shall be subject to the death penalty."

Such are the results of complete domination. This paper impressed Kidder as much as it did because it was com-pletely spontaneous. It was the Neoterics' own creed, de-veloped by them for their own greatest good.

And so at last Kidder had his

fulfillment. Crouched in the upper room, going from telescope to telescope, running off slowed-down films from his high speed cameras, he found himself possessed of a tractable, dynamic source of information. Housed in the great square building with its four half-acre sections was a new, world, to which he was god.

Conant's mind was similar to Kidder's in that its approach to any problem was along the shortest distance between any two points, regardless of whether that ap-proach was along the line of most or least resistance. His rise to the bank presidency was a history of ruthless moves whose only justification was that they got him what he wanted.

Like an over-efficient general, he would never vanquish an enemy through sheer force of numbers alone. He would also skillfully flank his enemy, not on one side, but on both. Innocent bystanders were creatures deserving no consideration.

The time he took over a certain thousand-acre property, for instance, from a man named Grady, he was not satis-fied with only the title to the land. Grady was an airport owner-had been all his life, and his father before him. Conant exerted every kind of pressure on the man and found him unshakable. Finally judicious persuasion led the city officials to dig a sewer right across the middle of the field, quite efficiently

wrecking Grady's business. Knowing that this would supply Grady, who was a wealthy man, with motive for revenge, Conant took over Grady's bank at half again its value and caused it to fold up. Grady lost every cent he had and ended his life in an asylum. Conant was very proud of his tactics.

Like many another who had had Mammon by the tail, Conant did not know when to let go. His vast organization yielded him more money and power than any other concern in history, and yet he was not satisfied. Conant and money were like Kidder and knowledge. Conant's pyramided enterprises were to him what the Neoterics were to Kidder. Each had made his private world, each

used it for his instruction and profit. Kidder, though, dis-turbed nobody but his Neoterics. Even so, Conant was not wholly villainous. He was a shrewd man, and had discovered early the value of pleasing people. No man can rob successfully over a period of years without pleasing the people he robs. The technique for doing this is highly involved, but master it and you can start your own mint.

Conant's one great fear was that Kidder would some day take an interest in world events and begin to become opinionated. Good heavens-the potential power he had!

A little matter like swinging an election could be managed by a man like

Kidder as easily as turning over in bed.

The only thing he could do was to call him periodically and see if there was anything that Kidder needed to keep himself busy. Kidder appreciated this. Conant, once in a while, would suggest something to Kidder that intrigued him, something that would keep him deep in his hermit-age for a few weeks. The light pump was one of the re-sults of Conant's imagination. Conant bet him it couldn't be done. Kidder did it.

One afternoon Kidder answered the squeal of the radiophone's signal. Swearing-mildly, he shut off the film he was watching and crossed the compound to the old laboratory. He went to the radiophone, threw a switch. The

squealing stopped.

"Well?"

"Hello," said Conant. "Busy?"

"Not very," said Kidder. He was delighted with the pictures his camera had caught, showing the skillful work of a gang of Neoterics synthesizing rubber out of pure sulphur. He would rather have liked to tell Conant about it, but somehow he had never got around to telling Conant about the Neoterics, and he didn't see why he should start now.

Conant said, "Er . . . Kidder, I was down at the club the other day and a bunch of us were filling up an evening with loose talk. Something came up which might interest you."

"What?"

“Couple of the utilities boys there. You know the power setup in this country, don’t you? Thirty per cent atomic, the rest hydroelectric, Diesel and steam?”

“I hadn’t known,” said Kidder, who was as innocent as a babe of current events.

“Well, we were arguing about what chance a new power source would have. One of the men there said it would be smarter to produce a new power and then talk about it Another one waived that; said he couldn’t name that new power, but he could describe it. Said it would have to have everything that present power sources have, plus one or two more things. It could be cheaper, for

instance. It could be more efficient. It might supercede the others by being, easier to carry from the power plant to the consumer. See what I mean? Any one of these factors might prove a new source of power competitive to the others. What I'd like to see is a new power with *all* of these factors. What do you think of it?"

"Not' impossible."

"Think not?"

"I'll try it."

"Keep me posted." Conant's transmitter clicked off. The switch was a little piece of false front that Kidder had built into the set, which was something that Conant didn't know. The set switched itself off when Conant moved

from it. After the switch's sharp crack, Kidder heard the banker mutter, "If he does it, I'm all set. If he doesn't, at least the crazy fool will keep himself busy on the island."

Kidder eyed the radiophone, for an instant with raised eyebrow; and then shrugged them down again with his shoulders. It was quite evident that Conant had something up his sleeve, but Kidder wasn't worried. Who on earth would want to disturb him? He wasn't bothering anybody. He went back to the Neoterics' building, full of the new power idea.

Eleven days later Kidder called Conant and gave spe-cific instructions on how to equip his receiver with a fac-

simile set which would enable Kidder to send written mat-ter over the air. As soon as, this was done and Kidder informed, the biochemist for once in his life spoke at some length.

"Conant-you implied that a new power source that would be cheaper, more efficient and more easily transmitted than any now in use did not exist. You might be interested in the little generator I have just set up.

"It has power, Conant-unbelievable power. Broadcast. A beautiful little tight beam. Here-catch this on the fac-simile recorder." Kidder slipped a sheet of paper under the clips of his transmitter and it appeared on Conant's set. "Here's the wiring diagram for a power receiver.

Now listen. The beam is so tight, so highly directional, that not three-thousandths of one per cent of the power would be lost in a, two-thousand-mile transmission. The power sys-tem is closed. That is, any drain on the beam returns a signal along it to the transmitter, which automatically steps up to increase the power output. It has a limit, but it's way up. And something else. This little gadget of mine can send out eight different beams with a total horsepower output of around eight thousand per minute per beam. From each beam you can draw enough power to turn the page of a book or fly a superstratosphere plane. Hold on-I haven't finished yet. Each beam, as I

told you before, returns a signal from receiver to transmitter. This not only controls the power output of the beam, but directs it. Once contact is made, the beam will never let go. It will follow the receiver anywhere. You can power land, air or water vehicles with it, as well as any stationary plant. Like it?"

Conant, who was a banker and not a scientist, wiped his shining pate with the back of his hand and said, "I've never known you to steer me wrong yet, Kidder. How about the cost of this thing?"

"High." said Kidder promptly. "As high as an atomic plant. But there are no high-tension lines, no wires, no pipelines, no nothing. The receivers are

little more com-plicated than a radio set. Transmitter is-well, that's quite a job."

"Didn't take you long," said Conant.

"No," said Kidder, "it didn't, did it?" It was, the lifework of nearly twelve hundred highly cultured people, but Kidder wasn't going into that. "Of course, the one I have here's just a model."

Conant's voice was strained. "A-model? And it de-livers-"

"Over sixty-thousand horsepower," said Kidder gleefully. "Good heavens! In a full sized machine-why, one transmitter would be enough to-" The possibilities of the thing choked Conant for a moment. "How is it fueled?"

"It isn't," said Kidder. "I won't begin to explain it I've tapped a source of

power of unimaginable force. It's-well, big. So big that it can't be misused."

"What?" snapped Conant. "What do you mean by that?" Kidder cocked an eyebrow. Conant *had* something up his sleeve, then. At this second indication of it, Kidder, the least suspicious of men, began to put himself on guard. "I mean just what I say," he said evenly. "Don't try too hard to understand me-I barely savvy it myself. But the source of this power is a monstrous resultant caused by the un-balance of two previously equalized forces. Those equalized forces are cosmic in quantity. Actually, the forces are those which make suns, crush atoms the way they crushed those that compose the companion of Sirius. It's

not anything you can fool with."

"I don't-" said Conant, and his voice ended puzzledly.

"I'll give you a parallel of it," said Kidder. "Suppose you take two rods, one in each hand. Place their tips together and push. As long as your pressure is directly along their long axes, the pressure is equalized; right and left hands cancel each other. Now I come along; I put out one finger and touch the rods ever so lightly where they come to-gether. They snap out of line violently; you break a couple of knuckles. The resultant force is at right angles to the original forces you exerted. My power transmitter is on the same principle. It takes an infinitesimal

amount of energy to throw those forces out of line. Easy enough when you know how to do it. The important question is whether or not you can control the resultant when you get it. I can."

"I-see." Conant indulged in a four-second gloat. "Heaven help the utility companies. I don't intend to. Kidder-I want a full-size power transmitter."

Kidder clucked into the radiophone. "Ambitious, aren't you? I haven't a staff out here, Conant-you know that. And I can't be expected to build four or five thousand tons of apparatus myself."

"I'll have five hundred engineers and laborers out there in forty-eight hours."

"You will not. Why bother me with it? I'm quite happy here, Conant, and one of

the reasons is that I've got no one to get in my hair."

"Oh, now, Kidder-don't be like that-I'll pay you-"

"You haven't got that much money," said Kidder briskly. He flipped the switch on his set. *His* switch worked.

Conant was furious. He shouted into the phone several times, then began to lean on the signal button. On his island, Kidder let the thing squeal and went back to his projection room. He was sorry he had sent the diagram of the receiver to Conant. It would have been interesting to power a plane or a car with the model transmitter he had taken from the Neoterics. But if Conant was going to be that way about it-well,

anyway, the receiver would be no good without the transmitter. Any radio engineer would understand the diagram, but not the beam which activated it. And Conant wouldn't get his beam.

Pity he didn't know Conant well enough.

Kidder's days were endless sorties into learning. He never slept, nor did his Neoterics. He ate regularly every five hours, exercised for half an hour in every twelve. He did not keep track of time, for it meant nothing to him. Had he wanted to know the date, or the year, even, he knew he could get it from Conant. He didn't care, that's all. The time that was not spent in observation was used in developing new problems

for the Neoterics. His thoughts just now ran to defense. The idea was born in his con-versation with Conant; now the idea was primary, its motivation something of no importance. The Neoterics were working on a vibration field of quasi-electrical nature. Kidder could see little practical value in such a thing-an invisible wall which would kill any living thing which touched it. But still-the idea was intriguing.

He stretched and moved away from the telescope in the upper room through which he had been watching his crea-tions at work. He was profoundly happy here in the large control room. Leaving it to go to the old laboratory for a bite to eat was a thing he hated, to do. He felt

like bidding it good-by each time he walked across the compound, and saying a glad hello when he returned. A little amused at himself, he went out.

There was a black blob-a distant power boat-a few miles off the island, toward the mainland. Kidder stopped and stared distastefully a tit. A white petal of spray was affixed to each side of the black body-it was coming toward him. He snorted, thinking of the time a yachtload of silly fools had landed out of curiosity one afternoon, spewed themselves over his beloved island, peppered him with lame-brained questions, and thrown his nervous equilibrium out for days. Lord, how he hated *people!*

The thought of unpleasantness bred two more thoughts that played half-consciously with his mind as he crossed the compound and entered the old laboratory. One was that perhaps it might be wise to surround his buildings with a field of force of some kind and post warnings for tres-passers. The other thought was of Conant and the vague uneasiness the man had been sending to him through the radiophone these last weeks. His suggestion, two days ago, that a power plant be built on the island-horrible idea!

Conant rose from a laboratory bench as Kidder walked in.

They looked at each other wordlessly for a long moment Kidder hadn't seen

the bank president in years. The man's presence, he found, made his scalp crawl.

"Hello," said Conant genially. "You're looking fit."

Kidder grunted. Conant eased his unwieldy body back onto the bench and said,

"Just to save you the energy of asking questions, Mr. Kidder, I arrived two hours ago on, a small boat. Rotten way to travel. I wanted to be a sur-prise to you; my two men rowed me the last couple of miles. You're not very well equipped here for defense, are you? Why, anyone could slip up on you the way I did."

"Who'd want to?" growled Kidder.

The man's voice edged annoyingly into his brain. He spoke too loudly for such a small room; at least, Kidder's hermit's ears felt that way. Kidder shrugged and went about preparing a light meal for himself.

"Well," drawled the banker. "I 'might want to." He drew out a Dow-metal cigar case. "Mind if I smoke?"

"I do," said Kidder sharply.

Conant laughed easily and put the cigars away. "I might," he said, "want to urge you to let me build that power station on this island."

"Radiophone work?"

"Oh, yes. But now that I'm here you can't switch me off. Now-how about it?"

"I haven't changed my mind."

"Oh, but you should, Kidder, you should. Think of it-think of the good it would do for the masses of people that are now paying exorbitant power bills!"

"I hate the masses! Why do you have to build here?"

"Oh, that. It's an ideal location. You own the island; work could begin here without causing any comment whatsoever. The plant would spring full-fledged on the power markets of the country, having been built in secret. The island can be made impregnable."

"I don't want to be bothered."

"We wouldn't bother you. We'd build on the north end of the island-a mile and a quarter from you and your work. Ah-by the way-where's the model of the power

transmitter?”

Kidder, with his mouth full of synthesized food, waved a hand at a small table on which stood the model, a four-foot, amazingly intricate device of plastic and steel and tiny coils.

Conant rose and went over to look at it. “Actually works, eh?” He sighed deeply and said, “Kidder, I really hate to do this, but I want to build that plant rather badly.

“Carson! Robbins!”

Two bull-necked individuals stepped out from their hiding places in the corners of the room. One idly dangled a revolver by its trigger guard. Kidder looked blankly from one to the other of them.

“These gentlemen will follow my orders implicitly, Kid-der. In half an hour a party will land here-engineers, contractors. They will start surveying the northend of the island for the construction of the power plant. These boys here feel about the same way I do as far as you are con-cerned. Do we proceed with your cooperation or without it? It’s immaterial to me whether or not you are left alive to continue your work. My engineers can duplicate your model.”

Kidder said nothing. He had stopped chewing when he saw the gunmen, and only now remembered to swallow. He sat crouched over his plate without moving or speaking.

Conant broke the silence by walking to the door. "Robbins-can you carry that model there?" The big man put his gun away, lifted the model gently, and nodded.

"Take it down to the beach and meet the other boat. Tell Mr. Johansen, the engineer, that this is the model he is to work from." Robbins went out. Conant turned to Kidder.

"There's no need for us to anger ourselves," he said oilily. "I think you are stubborn, but I don't hold it against you. I know how you feel. You'll be left alone: you have my promise. But I mean to go ahead on this job, and a small thing like your life can't stand in my way."

Kidder said, "Get out of here." There

were two swollen veins throbbing at his temples. His voice was low, and it shook.

"Very well. Good day, Mr. Kidder. Oh-by the way-you're a clever devil." No one had ever referred to the scholastic Mr. Kidder that way before. "I realize the pos-sibility of your blasting us off the island. I wouldn't do it if I were you. I'm willing to give you what you want-privacy. I want the same thing in return. If anything happens to me while I'm here, the island will be bombed by someone who is working for me; I'll admit they might fail.

If they do, the United States government will take a hand. You wouldn't want that, would you? That's

rather a big thing for one man to fight. The same thing goes if the plant is sabotaged in any way after I go back to the mainland. You might be killed. You will most certainly be bothered interminably. Thanks for your . . . er. . . cooperation." The banker smirked and walked out, followed by his taci-turn gorilla.

Kidder sat there for a long time without moving. Then he shook his head, rested it in his palms. He was badly frightened; not so much because his life was in danger, but because his privacy and his work-his world-were threatened. He was hurt and bewildered. He wasn't a business-man. He couldn't handle men. All his life he had run away

from human beings and what they represented to him. He was like a frightened child when men closed in on him.

Cooling a little, he wondered vaguely what would hap-pen when the power plant opened. Certainly, the govern-ment would be interested. Unless-unless by then Conant was the government. That plant was an unimaginable source of power, and not only the kind of power that turned wheels. He rose and went back to the world that was home to him, a world where his motives were under-stood, and where there were those who could help him.

Back at the Neoterics' building, he escaped yet again from the world of men

into his work.

Kidder called Conant the following week, much to the banker's surprise. His two days on the island had got the work well under way, and he had left with the arrival of a shipload of laborers and material. He kept in close touch by radio with Johansen, the engineer in charge. It had been a blind job for Johansen and all the rest of the crew on the island. Only the bank's infinite resources could have hired such a man, or the picked gang with him.

Johansen's first reaction when he saw the model had been ecstatic. He wanted to tell his friends about this mar-vel; but the only radio set available was beamed to Conant's private office in the bank,

and Conant's armed guards, one to every two workers, had strict orders to destroy any other radio transmitter on sight. About that time he realized that he was a prisoner on the island. His instant anger subsided when he reflected that being a prisoner at fifty thousand dollars a week wasn't too bad; Two of the laborers and an engineer thought differently, and got disgruntled a couple of days after they arrived. They disappeared one night-the same night that five shots were fired down on the beach. No questions were asked, and there was no more trouble.

Conant covered his surprise at Kidder's call and was as offensively jovial as ever.

"Well, now! Anything I can do for

you?”

“Yes,” said Kidder. His voice was low, completely with-out expression. “I want you to issue a warning to your men not to pass the white line I have drawn five hundred yards north of my buildings, right across the island.”

“Warning? Why, my dear fellow, they have orders that you are not to be disturbed on any account.”

“You’ve ordered them. All right. Now warn them. I have a n electric field surrounding my laboratories that will kill anything living which penetrates it. I don’t want to have murder on my conscience. There will be no deaths unless there are trespassers. You’ll inform your workers?”

"Oh, now, Kidder," the banker expostulated. "That was totally unnecessary. You won't be bothered. Why-" but he found he was talking into a dead mike. He knew better than to call back. He called Johansen instead and told him about it. Johansen didn't like the sound of it, but he re-peated the message and signed off. Conant liked that man. He was, for a moment, a little sorry that Johansen would never reach the mainland alive.

But that Kidder-he was beginning to be a problem. As long as his weapons were strictly defensive he was no real menace. But he would have to be taken care of when the plant was operating. Conant couldn't afford to have genius

around him unless it was unquestionably on his side. The power transmitter and Conant's highly ambitious plans would be safe as long as Kidder was left to himself. Kidder knew that he could, for the time being, expect more sym-pathetic treatment from Conant than he could from a horde of government investigators.

Kidder only left his own enclosure once after the work began on the north end of the island, and it took all of his unskilled diplomacy to do it. Knowing the source of the plant's power, knowing what could happen if it were mis-used, he asked Conant's permission to inspect the great transmitter when it was nearly finished. Insuring his own life by

refusing to report back to Conant until he was safe within his own laboratory again, he turned off his shield and walked up to the north end. He saw an awe-inspiring sight. The four-foot model was duplicated nearly a hundred times as large. Inside a mas-sive three-hundred-foot tower a space was packed nearly solid with the same bewildering maze of coils and bars that the Neoterics had built so delicately into their machine. At the top was a globe of polished golden alloy, the trans-mitting antenna. From it would stream thousands of tight beams of force, which could be tapped to any degree by corresponding thousands of receivers placed anywhere at any distance. Kidder learned that the

receivers had already been built, but his informant, Johansen, knew little about that end of it and was saying less. Kidder checked over every detail of the structure, and when he was through he shook Johansen's hand admiringly.

"I didn't want this thing here," he said shyly, "and I don't. But I will say that it's a pleasure to see this kind of work."

"It's a pleasure to meet the man that invented it", Kidder beamed. " I didn't invent it," he said. "Maybe someday I'll show you who did. I-well, good-by." He turned before he had a chance to say too much and marched off down the path.

"Shall I?" said a voice at Johansen's side. One of Conant's guards had his gun out.

Johansen knocked the man's arm down. "No." He scratched his head. "So that's the mysterious menace from the other end of the island. Eh! Why, he's a hell of a nice little feller!"

Built on the ruins of Denver, which was destroyed in the great Battle of the Rockies during the Western War, stands the most beautiful city in the world-our nation's capital, New Washington. In a circular room deep in the heart of the White House, the president, three army men and a civilian sat. Under the president's desk a dictaphone unostentatiously recorded every word that was said. Two thousand and more miles away, Conant hung over a radio receiver, tuned to receive the signals of

the tiny transmitter in the civilian's side pocket.

One of the officers spoke.

"Mr. President, the 'impossible claims' made for this gentleman's product are absolutely true. He has proved beyond doubt each item on his prospectus."

The president glanced at the civilian, back at the officer. "I won't wait for your report," he said. "Tell me-what happened?"

Another of the army men mopped his face with a khaki bandanna. "I can't ask you to believe us, Mr. President, but it's true all the same. Mr. Wright here has in his suit-case three or four dozen small . . . er . . . bombs-"

"They're not bombs," said Wright casually.

"All right. They're not bombs. Mr. Wright smashed two of them on an anvil with a sledge hammer. There was no result. He put two more in an electric furnace. They burned away like so much tin and cardboard. We dropped one down the barrel of a field piece and fired it. Still nothing." He paused and looked at the third officer, who picked up the account:

"We really got started then. We flew to the proving grounds, dropped one of the objects and flew to thirty thousand feet. From there, with a small hand detonator no bigger than your fist, Mr. Wright set the thing off. I've never seen

anything like it. Forty acres of land came straight up at us, breaking up as it came. The concussion was terrific-you must have felt it here, four hundred miles away."

The president nodded. "I did. Seismographs on the other side of the Earth picked it up."

"The crater it left was a quarter of a mile deep at the center. Why, one plane load of those things could demolish any city! There isn't even any necessity for accuracy!"

"You haven't heard anything yet," another officer broke in. "Mr. Wright's automobile is powered by a small plant similar to the others. He demonstrated it to us. We could find no fuel tank of any

kind, or any other driving mech-anism. But with a power plant no bigger than six cubic inches, that car, carrying enough weight to give it traction, outpulled an army tank!"

"And the other test!" said the third excitedly. "He put one of the objects into a replica of a treasury vault. The walls were twelve feet thick, super-reinforced concrete. He controlled it from over a hundred yards away. He . . . he burst that vault! It wasn't an explosion-it was as if some incredibly powerful expansive force inside filled it and flattened the walls from inside. They cracked and split and powdered, and the steel girders and rods came twisting and shearing out like. . . like *whew!* After that he insisted

on seeing you. We knew it wasn't usual, but he said he has more to say and would say it only in your presence."

The president said gravely, "What is it, Mr. Wright?"

Wright rose, picked up his suitcase, opened it and took out a small cube, about eight inches on a side, made of some light-absorbent red material. Four men edged ner-vously away from it.

"These gentlemen," he began, "have seen only part of the things this device can do. I'm going to demonstrate to you the delicacy of control that is possible with it."

He made an adjustment with a tiny knob on the side of the cube, set it on the edge of the president's desk.

“You have asked me more than once if this is my invention or if I am representing someone. The latter is true. It might also interest you to know that the man who controls this cube is right now several thousand miles from here. He and he alone, can prevent it from detonating now that I-” He pulled his detonator out of the suitcase and pressed a button-“have done this. It will explode the way the one we dropped from the plane did, completely destroying this city and everything in it, in just four hours. It will also explode-” He stepped back and threw a tiny switch on his detonator-”if any moving object comes within three feet of it or if anyone leaves this room but me-it can be compensated

for that. If, after I leave, I am molested, it will detonate as soon as a hand is laid on me. No bullets can kill me fast enough to prevent me from setting it off."

The three army men were silent. One of them swiped nervously at the beads of cold sweat on his forehead. The others did not move. The president said evenly:

"What's your proposition?"

"A very reasonable one. My employer does not work in the open, for obvious reasons. All he wants is your agree-ment to carry out his orders; to appoint the cabinet mem-bers he chooses, to throw your influence in any way he dictates. The public-Congress--anyone else--need never know anything about it. I might add that if you agree to this proposal,

this ‘bomb,’ as you call it, will not go off. But you can be sure that thousands of them are planted all over the country. You will never know when you are near one. If you disobey, it beams instant annihilation for you and everyone else within three or four square miles.

“In three hours and fifty minutes-that will be at pre-cisely seven o’clock-there is a commercial radio program on Station RPRS. You will cause the announcer, after his station identification, to say ‘Agreed.’ It will pass unnoticed by all but my employer. There is no use in having me fol-lowed; my work is done. I shall never see nor contact my employer again. That is all. Good afternoon, gentlemen!”

Wright closed his suitcase with a businesslike snap, bowed, and left the room. Four men sat staring at the little red cube.

"Do you think he can do all he says?" asked the president.

The three nodded mutely. The president reached for his phone. There was a neavesdropper to all of the foregoing Conant, squatting behind his great desk in the vault, where he had his sanctum sanctorum, knew nothing of it. But beside him was the compact bulk of Kidder's radiophone. His presence switched it on, and Kidder, on his island, blessed the day he had thought of the device. He had been meaning to call Conant all morning, but was very

hesitant. His meeting with the young engineer Johansen had im-pressed him strongly. The man was such a thorough scien-tist, possessed of such complete delight in the work he did, that for the first time in his life Kidder found himself actually wanting to see someone again. But he feared for Johansen's life if he brought him to the laboratory, for Johansen's work was done on the island, and Conant would most certainly have the engineer killed if he heard of his visit, fearing that Kidder would influence him to sabotage the great transmitter. And if Kidder went to the power plant he would probably be shot on sight.

All one day Kidder wrangled with

himself, and finally determined to call Conant. Fortunately he gave no signal, but turned up the volume on the receiver when the little red light told him that Conant's transmitter was function-ing. Curious, he heard everything that occurred in the president's chamber three thousand miles away. Horrified, he realized what Conant's engineers had done. Built into tiny containers were tens of thousands of power receivers. They had no power of their own, but, by remote control, could draw on any or all of the billions of horsepower the huge plant on the island was broadcasting.

Kidder stood in front of his receiver, speechless. There was nothing he could do. If he devised some means of

destroying the power plant, the government would cer-tainly step in and take over the island, and then what would happen to him and his precious Neoterics?

Another sound grated out of the receiver-a commercial radio program. A few bars of music, a man's voice adver-tising stratoline fares on the installment plan, a short silence, then:

"Station RPRS, voice of the nation's Capital, District of South Colorado."

The three-second pause was interminable.

"The time is exactly . .. er . . . *agreed.* The time is exactly seven P.M., Mountain Standard Time."

Then came a half-insane chuckle.

Kidder had difficulty believing it was Conant. A phone clicked. The banker's voice:

"Bill? All set. Get out there with your squadron and bomb up the island. Keep away from the plant, but cut the rest of it to ribbons. Do it quick and get out of there."

Almost hysterical with fear, Kidder rushed about the room and then shot out the door and across the compound. There were five hundred innocent workmen in barracks a quarter mile from the plant Conant didn't need them now, and he didn't need Kidder. The only safety for anyone was in the plant itself, and Kidder wouldn't leave his Neoterics to be bombed. He flung himself up the

stairs and to the nearest teletype. He banged out, "Get me a defense. I want an impenetrable shield. Urgent!"

The words ripped out from under his fingers in the func-tional script of the Neoterics. Kidder didn't think of what he wrote, didn't really visualize the thing he ordered. But he had done what he could. He'd have to leave them now, get to the barracks; warn those men. He ran up the path toward the plant, flung himself over the white line that marked death to those who crossed it.

A squadron of nine clip-winged, mosquito-nosed planes rose out of a cover on the mainland. There was no sound from the engines, for there were no engines. Each plane was powered

with a tiny receiver and drew its unmarked, light-absorbent wings through the air with power from the island. In a matter of minutes they raised the island. The squadron leader spoke briskly into a microphone.

"Take the barracks first. Clean 'em up. Then work south."

Johansen was alone on a small hill near the center of the island. He carried a camera, and though he knew pretty well that his chances of ever getting ashore again were practically nonexistent, he liked angle shots of his tower, and took innumerable pictures. The first he knew of the planes was when he heard their whining dive over the barracks. He stood transfixed, saw a

shower of bombs hurtle down and turn the barracks into a smashed ruin of broken wood, metal and bodies. The picture of Kidder's earnest face flashed into his mind. Poor little guy-if they ever bombed his end of the island he would- But his tower! Were they going to bomb the plant?

He watched, utterly appalled, as the planes flew out to sea, cut back and dove again. They seemed to be working south. At the third dive he was sure of it. Not knowing what he could do, he nevertheless turned and ran toward Kidder's place. He rounded a turn in the trail and collided violently with the little biochemist. Kidder's face was scarlet with exertion, and he was the most

terrified-looking object Johanson had ever seen.

Kidder waved a hand northward. "Conant!" he screamed over the uproar. "It's Conant! He's going to kill us all!"

"The plant?" said Johansen, turning pale.

"It's safe. He won't touch *that!* But. . . my place . . what about all those men?"

"Too late!" shouted Johansen.

"Maybe I can-Come on!" called Kidder, and was off down the trail, heading south.

Johansen pounded after him. Kidder's little short legs became a blur as the squadron swooped overhead, laying its eggs in the spot where they had met. As they burst out of the woods, Johansen put

on a spurt, caught up with the scientist and knocked him sprawling not six feet from the white line.

"Wh. . . wh-"

"Don't go any farther, you fool! Your own damned force field--it'll kill you!"

"Force field? But-I came through it on the way up-Here. Wait. If I can-" Kidder began hunting furiously about in the grass. In a few seconds he ran up to the line, clutching a large grasshopper in his hand. He tossed if over. It lay still.

"See?" said Johansen. "It-"

"Look! It jumped. Come on! I don't know what-went wrong, unless the Neoterics shut if off. They generated that field-I didn't."

"Nec---huh?"

"Never mind," snapped the biochemist, and ran.

They pounded gasping up the steps and into the Neo-terics' control room. Kidder clapped his eyes to a telescope and shrieked in glee. "They've done it! They've done it!"

"My little people! The Neoterics! They've made the im-penetrable shield! Don't you see-it cut through the lines of force that start up the field out there. Their generator is still throwing it up, but the vibrations can't get out! They're safe!

They're safe!" And the overwrought hermit began to cry. Johansen looked at him pityingly and shook his head.

"Sure, your little men are all right. But

we aren't," he added as the floor shook to the detonation of a bomb.

Johansen closed his eyes, got a grip on himself and let his curiosity overcome his fear. He stepped to the binoc-ular telescope, gazed down it. There was nothing there but a curved sheet of gray material. He had never seen a gray quite like that. It was absolutey neutral. It didn't seem soft and it didn't seem hard, and to look at it made his brain reel. He looked up.

Kidder was pounding the keys of a teletype, watching the blank yellow tape anxiously.

"I'm not getting through to them," he whimpered. "I don't know. What's the mat-Oh, of *course!*"

"What?"

" T h e s h i e l d i s absolutely impenetrable! T h e teletype im-pulses can't get through or I could get them to extend the screen over the building-over the whole island!

There's *nothing* those people can't do!"

"He's crazy," Johansen muttered. "Poor little-"

The teletype began clicking sharply. Kidder dove at it, practically embraced it. He read off the tape as it came out. Johansen saw the characters, but they meant nothing to him.

"Almighty," Kidder read falteringly, "p r a y h a v e m e r c y o n u s a n d be forbearing until we have said our say.

With-out orders we have lowered the screen you ordered us to raise. We are lost, O great one. Our screen is truly impen-etrable, and so cut off your words on the word machine. We have never, in the memory of any Neoteric, been with-out your word before. Forgive us our action. We will eagerly await your answer."

Kidder's fingers danced over the keys. "You can look now," he gasped. "Go on-the telescope!"

Johansen, trying to ignore the whine of sure death from above, looked. He saw what looked like land-fantastic fields under cultivation, a settlement of some sort, factories, and-beings. Everything moved with incredible rapidity. He

couldn't see one of the inhabitants except as darting pinky--white streaks. Fascinated, he stared for a long minute. A sound behind him made him whirl. It was Kidder, rubbing his hands together briskly. There was a broad smile on his face.

"They did it," he said happily. "You see?"

Johansen didn't see until he began to realize that there was a dead silence outside. He ran to a window. It was night outside--the blackest night-when it should have been dusk. "What happened?"

"The Neoterics," said Kidder, and laughed like a child. "My friends downstairs there. They threw up the

impen-etrable shield over the whole island. We can't be touched now!"

And at Johansen's amazed questions, he launched into a description of the race of beings below them.

Outside the shell, things happened. Nine airplanes sud-denly went dead-stick. Nine pilots glided downward, pow-erless, and some fell into the sea, and some struck the miraculous gray shell that loomed in place of an island; slid off and sank. And ashore, a man named Wright sat in a car, half dead with fear, while government men surrounded him, ap-proached cautiously, daring instant death from a non-dead source.

In a room deep in the White House, a

high-ranking army officer shrieked, "I can't stand it any more! I can't!" and leaped up, snatched a red cube off the president's desk, ground it to ineffectual litter under his shining boots. And in a few days they took a broken old man away from the bank and put him in an asylum, where he died within a week.

The shield, you see, was truly impenetrable. The power plant was untouched and sent out its beams; but the beams could not get out, and anything powered from the plant went dead. The story never became public, although for some years there was heightened naval activity off the New England coast. The navy, so the story went, had a new target range out there-a great hemi-ovoid of

gray-material. They bombed it and shelled it and rayed it and blasted all around it, but never even dented its smooth surface.

Kidder and Johansen let it stay there. They were happy enough with their researches and their Neoterics. They did not hear or feel the shelling, for, the shield was truly im-penetrable. They synthesized their food and their light and air from materials at hand, and they simply didn't care. They were the only survivors of the bombing, with the exception of three poor maimed devils who died soon afterward. All this happened many years ago, and Kidder and Johansen may be alive today, and they may be dead. But that doesn't matter

too much. The important thing is that the great gray shell will bear watching. Men die, but traces live. Some day the Neoterics, after innumerable generations of inconceivable advancement, will take down their shield and come forth. When I think of that I feel frightened.

NIGHT

By
John W Campbell

Condon was staring through the glasses with a face tense and drawn, all his attention utterly concentrated on that one almost invisible speck infinitely far up in the blue sky, and saying over and

over again in the most horribly absent-minded way, "My Lord—my Lord ——————"

Suddenly he shivered and looked down at me, sheer agony in his face. "He's never coming down. Don, he's never coming down——————"

I knew it, too—knew it as solidly as I knew the knowledge was impossible. But I smiled and said: "Oh, I wouldn't say that. If anything, I'd fear his coming down. What goes up comes down."

Major Condon trembled all over. His mouth worked horribly for a moment before he could speak. "Talbot—I'm scared—I'm horribly scared. You know—you're his assistant—you know he's trying to defeat gravity. Men aren't meant

to—it's wrong—wrong———"

His eyes were glued on those binoculars again, with the same terrible tensity, and now

he

was

saying

over

and

over

in

that

absent-minded

way,

"wrong—wrong—wrong—“

Simultaneously he stiffened, and stopped. The dozen or so other men standing on that lonely little emergency

field stiffened; then the major crumpled to the ground. I've never before seen a man faint, let alone an army officer with a D.S. medal. I didn't stop to help him, because I knew something had happened. I grabbed the glasses.

Far, far up in the sky was that little orange speck—far, where there is almost no air, and he had been forced to wear a stratosphere suit with a little alcohol heater. The broad, orange wings were overlaid now with a faint-glowing, pearl-gray light. And it was falling. Slowly, at first, circling aimlessly downward. Then it dipped, rose, and somehow went into a tail spin.

It was horrible. I know I must have breathed, but it didn't seem so. It took

minutes for it to fall those miles, despite the speed. Eventually it whipped out of that tail spin—through sheer speed, whipped out and into a power dive. It was a ghastly, flying coffin, hurtling at more than half a thousand miles an hour when it reached the Earth, some fifteen miles away.

The ground trembled, and the air shook with the crash of it. We were in the cars and roaring across the ground long before it hit. I was in Bob's car, with Jeff, his laboratory technician—Bob's little roadster he'd never need again. The engine picked up quickly, and we were going seventy before we left the field, jumped a shallow ditch and hit the road—the deserted, concrete road

that led off toward where he must be. The engine roared as Jeff clamped down on the accelerator. Dimly, I heard the major's big car coming along behind us.

Jeff drove like a maniac, but I didn't notice. I knew the thing had done ninety-five but I think we must have done more. The wind whipped tears in my eyes so I couldn't be sure whether I saw mounting smoke and flame or not. With Diesel fuel there shouldn't be—but that plane had been doing things it shouldn't. It had been trying out Carter's antigravity coil.

We shot up the flat, straight road across wide, level country, the wind moaning a requiem about the car. Far ahead I saw the side road that must lead off toward where Bob should be, and

lurched to the braking of the car, the whine and sing of violently shrieking tires, then to the skidding corner. It was a sand road; we slithered down it and for all the lightness and power, we slowed to sixty-five, clinging to the seat as the soft sand gripped and clung.

Violently Jeff twisted into a branching cow path, and somehow the springs took it. We braked to a stop a quarter of a mile from the plane.

It was in a fenced field of pasture and woodlot. We leaped the fence, and raced toward it: Jeff got there first, just as the major's car shrieked to a stop behind ours. The major was cold and pale when he reached us. "Dead," he stated. And I was very much colder and

probably several times as pale. "I don't know!" I moaned. "He isn't there!"

"Not there!" The major almost screamed it. "He must be—he has to be. He has no parachute—wouldn't take one. They say he didn't jump———" I pointed to the plane, and wiped a little cold sweat from my forehead. I felt clammy all over, and my spine prickled. The solid steel of the huge Diesel engine was driven through the stump of a tree, down into the ground perhaps eight or nine feet, and the dirt and rock had splashed under that blow like wet mud. The wings were on the other side of the field, flattened, twisted straws of dural alloy. The fuselage of the ship was a perfect silhouette—a longitudinal

projection that had flattened in on itself, each separate section stopping only as it hit the ground. The great torus coil with its strangely twined wrappings of hair-fine bismuth wire was intact! And bent over it, twisted, utterly wrecked by the impact, was the main-wing stringer—the great dural-alloy beam that supported most of the ship's weight in the air. It was battered, crushed on those hair-fine, fragile bismuth wires—and not one of them was twisted or misplaced or so much as skinned. The back frame of the ponderous Diesel engine—the heavy supercharger was the anvil of that combination—was cracked and splintered. And not one wire of the hellish bismuth coil was strained or

skinned or displaced.

And the red pulp that should have been there—the red pulp that had been a man—wasn't. It simply wasn't there at all. He hadn't left the plane. In the clear, cloudless air, we could see that. He was gone.

We examined it, of course. A farmer came, and another, and looked, and talked. Then several farmers came in old, dilapidated cars with their wives and families, and watched.

We set the owner of the property on watch and went away—went back to the city for workmen and a truck with a derrick. Dusk was falling. It would be morning before we could do anything, so we went away.

Five of us—the major of the army air force, Jeff Rodney, the two Douglass Co. men whose names I never remembered and I—sat in my—our—room. Bob's and Jeff's and mine. We'd been sitting there for hours trying to talk, trying to think, trying to remember every little detail, and trying to forget every ghastly detail. We couldn't remember the detail that explained it, nor forget the details that rode and harried us. And the telephone rang. I started. Then slowly got up and answered. A strange voice, flat and rather unpleasant, said: "Mr. Talbot?"

"Yes."

It was Sam Gantry, the farmer we'd left on watch. "There's a man here."

"Yes? What does he want?"

"I dunno. I dunno where he came from. He's either dead or out cold. Gotta funny kind of an aviator suit on, with a glass face on it. He looks all blue, so I guess he's dead."

"Lord! Bob! Did you take the helmet off?" I roared.

"No, sir, no—no, sir. We just left him the way he was."

"His tanks have run out. Listen. Take a hammer, a wrench, anything, and break that glass faceplate! Quick! We'll be there."

Jeff was moving. The major was, too, and the others. I made a grab for the half-empty bottle of Scotch, started out, and ducked back into the closet. With the

oxygen bottle under my arm I jumped into the crowded little roadster just as Jeff started it moving. He turned on the horn, and left it that way. We dodged, twisted, jumped and stopped with jerks in traffic, then leaped into smooth, roaring speed out toward the farmer's field. The turns were familiar now; we scarcely slowed for them, sluing around them. This time Jeff charged through the wire fence. A headlight popped; there was a shrill scream of wire, the wicked *zing* of wire scratching across the hood and mud guards, and we were bouncing across the field.

There were two lanterns on the ground; three men carried others; more men squatted down beside a still figure

garbed in a fantastic, bulging, airproof stratosphere suit. They looked at us, open-mouthed as we skidded to a halt, moving aside as the major leaped out and dashed over with the Scotch. I followed close behind with the oxygen bottle.

Bob's faceplate was shattered, his face blue, his lips blue and flecked with froth. A long gash across his cheek from the shattered glass bled slowly. The major lifted his head without a word, and glass tinkled inside the helmet as he tried to force a little whisky down his throat.

"Wait!" I called. "Major, give him artificial respiration, and this will bring him around quicker—better." The major

nodded, and rose, rubbing his arm with a peculiar expression.

"That's cold!" he said, as he flipped Bob over, and straddled his back. I held the oxygen bottle under Bob's nose as the major swung back in his arc, and let the raw, cold oxygen gas flow into his nostrils.

In ten seconds Bob coughed, gurgled, coughed violently, and took a deep shuddering breath. His face turned pink almost instantly under that lungful of oxygen, and I noticed with some surprise that he seemed to exhale almost nothing, his body absorbing the oxygen rapidly.

He coughed again; then: "I could breathe a heck of a sight better if you'd get off my back," he said. The major

jumped up, and Bob turned over and sat up. He waved me aside, and spat. "I'm—all right," he said softly.

"Lord, man, what happened?" demanded the major.

Bob sat silent for a minute. His eyes had the strangest look—a hungry look—as he gazed about him. He looked at the trees beyond and at the silent, watching men in the light of the lanterns; then up, up to where a myriad stars gleamed and danced and flickered in the clear night sky.

"I'm back," he said softly. Then suddenly he shivered, and looked horribly afraid.

"But—I'll have to be—then—too."

He looked at the major for a minute,

and smiled faintly. And at the two Douglass Co. men. "Your plane was all right. I started up on the wings, as arranged, went way up, till I thought surely I was at a safe height, where the air wasn't too dense and the field surely wouldn't reach to Earth—Lord!— reach to Earth! I didn't guess how far that field extended. It touched Earth—twice.

"I was at forty-five thousand when I decided it was safe, and cut the engine. It died, and the stillness shocked me. It was so quiet. So quiet.

"I turned on the coil circuit, and the dynamotor began to hum as the tubes warmed up. And then—the field hit me. It paralyzed me in an instant. I never had a chance to break the circuit, though I

knew instantly something was wrong—terribly wrong. But the very first thing it did was to paralyze me, and I had to sit there and watch the instruments climb to positions and meanings they were never meant for.

"I realized I alone was being affected by that coil—I alone, sitting directly over it. I stared at the meters and they began to fade, began to seem transparent, unreal. And as they faded into blankness I saw clear sky beyond them; then for a hundredth of a second, like some effect of persistence of vision, I thought I saw the plane falling, twisting down at incredible speed, and the light faded as the Sun seemed to rocket suddenly across the sky and vanish.

"I don't know how long I was in that paralyzed condition, where there was only blankness—neither dark nor light, nor time nor any form—but I breathed many times. Finally, form crawled and writhed into the blankness, and seemed to solidify beneath me as, abruptly, the blankness gave way to a dull red light. I was falling.

"I thought instantly of the forty-five thousand feet that lay between me and the solid Earth, and stiffened automatically in terror. And in the same instant I landed in a deep blanket of white snow, stained by the red light that lighted the world.

"Cold. Cold—it tore into me like the fang of a savage animal. What cold! The

cold of ultimate death. It ripped through that thick, insulated suit and slashed at me viciously, as though there were no insulation there. I shivered so violently I could scarcely turn up the alcohol valves. You know I carried alcohol tanks and catalyst grids for heating, because the only electric fields I wanted were those of the apparatus. Even used a Diesel instead of gas engine.

"I thanked the Lord for that then. I realized that whatever had happened I was in a spot indescribably cold and desolate. And in the same instant, realized that the sky was black. Blacker than the blackest night, and yet before me the snow field stretched to infinity, tainted by the blood-red light, and my

shadow crawled in darker red at my feet.

"I turned around. As far as the eye could see in three directions the land swept off in very low, very slightly rolling hills, almost plains—red plains of snow dyed with the dripping light of sunset, I thought.

"In the fourth direction, a wall—a wall that put the Great Wall of China to shame—loomed up half a mile—a blood-red wall that had the luster of metal. It stretched across the horizon, and looked a scant hundred yards away, for the air was utterly clear. I turned up my alcohol burners a bit more and felt a little better.

"Something jerked my head around

like a giant hand—a sudden thought. I stared at the Sun and gulped. It was four times—six times—the size of the Sun I knew. And it wasn't setting. It was forty-five degrees from the horizon. It was red. Blood-red. And there wasn't the slightest bit of radiant heat reaching my face from it. That Sun was cold.

"I'd just automatically assumed I was still on Earth, whatever else might have happened, but now I knew I couldn't be. It must be another planet of another sun—a frozen planet— for that snow was frozen air. I knew it absolutely. A frozen planet of a dead sun.

"And then I changed even that. I looked up at the black sky above me, and in all the vast black bowl of the heavens,

not three-score stars were visible. Dim, red stars, with one single sun that stood out for its brilliance—a yellowish-red sun perhaps a tenth as bright as our Sun, but a monster here. It was another—a dead—space. For if that snow was frozen air, the only atmosphere must have been neon and helium. There wasn't any hazy air to stop the light of the stars, and that dim, red sun didn't obscure them with its' light. The stars were gone.

"In that glimpse, my mind began working by itself; I was scared.

"Scared? I was so scared I was afraid I was going to be sick. Because right then I knew I was never coming back. When I felt that cold, I'd wondered when my oxygen bottles would give out, if I'd

get back before they did. Now it was not a worry. It was simply the limiting factor on an already-determined thing, the setting on the time bomb. I had just so much more time before I died right there.

"My mind was working out things, working them out all by itself, and giving answers I didn't want, didn't want to know about. For some reason it persisted in considering this was Earth, and the conviction became more: and more fixed. It was right. That was Earth. And it was old Sol. Old—old Sol. It was the time axis that coil distorted—not gravity at all. My mind worked that out with a logic; as cold as that planet.

"If it was time it had distorted, and this was Earth, then it had distorted time

beyond imagining to an extent as meaningless to our minds as the distance a hundred million light years is. It was simply vast—incalculable. The Sun was dead. The Earth was dead. And Earth was already, in our time, two billion years old, and in all that geological time, the Sun had not changed measurably. Then how long was it since my time? The Sun was dead. The very stars were dead. It must have been, I thought even then, billions on billions of years. And I grossly underestimated it.

"The world was old—old—old. The very rocks and ground radiated a crushing aura of incredible age. It was old, older than—but what is there? Older than the hills?

Hills? Gosh, they'd been born and died and been born and worn away again, a million, a score of million times! Old as the stars? No, that wouldn't do. The stars were dead—then.

"I looked again at the metal wall, and set out for it, and the aura of age washed up at me, and dragged at me, and tried to stop this motion when all motion should have ceased. And the thin, unutterably cold wind whined in dead protest at me, and pulled at me with the ghost hands of the million million million that had been born and lived and died in the countless ages before I was born.

"I wondered as I went. I didn't think clearly; for the dead aura of the dead planet pulled at me. Age. The stars were

dying, dead. They were huddled there in space, like decrepit old men, huddling for warmth. The galaxy was shrunk. So tiny, it wasn't a thousand light years across, the stars were separated by miles where there had been light years. The magnificent, proudly sprawling universe I had known, that flung itself across a million million light years, that flung radiant energy through space by the millions of millions of tons was —gone.

"It was dying—a dying miser that hoarded its last broken dregs of energy in a tiny cramped space. It was broken and shattered. A thousand billion years before the cosmical constant had been dropped from that broken universe. The cosmical constant that flung giant

galaxies whirling apart with ever greater speed had no place here: It had hurled the universe in broken fragments, till each spattered bit felt the chill of loneliness, and wrapped space about itself, to become a universe in itself while the flaming galaxies vanished.

"That had happened so long ago that the writing it had left in the fabric of space itself had worn away. Only the gravity constant remained, the hoarding constant, that drew things together, and slowly the galaxy collapsed, shrunken and old, a withered mummy.

"The very atoms were dead. The light was cold; even the red light made things look older, colder. There was no youth in the universe. I didn't belong, and the

faint protesting rustle of the infinitely cold wind about me moved the snow in muted, futile protest, resenting my intrusion from a time when things were young. It whinnied at me feebly, and chilled the youth of me.

"I plodded on and on, and always the metal wall retreated, like one of those desert mirages. I was too stupefied by the age of the thing to wonder; I just walked on.

"I was getting nearer, though. The wall was real; it was fixed. As I drew slowly nearer, the polished sheen of the wall died and the last dregs of hope died. I'd thought there might be some one still living behind that wall. Beings who could build such a thing might be able to

live even here. But I couldn't stop then; I just went on. The wall was broken and cracked. It wasn't a wall I'd seen; it was a series of broken walls, knitted by distance to a smooth front.

"There was no weather to age them, only the faintest stirring of faint, dead winds—winds of neon and helium, inert and uncorroding—as dead and inert as the universe. The city had been dead a score of billions of years. That city was dead for a time ten times longer than the age of our planet to-day. But nothing destroyed it. Earth was dead—too dead to suffer the racking pains of life. The air was dead, too dead to scrape away metal.

"But the universe itself was dead.

There was no cosmic radiation then to finally level the walls by atomic disintegration. There had been a wall—a single metal wall. Something—perhaps a last wandering meteor—had chanced on it in a time incalculably remote, and broken it. I entered through the great gap. Snow covered the city—soft, white snow. The great red sun stood still just where it was. Earth's restless rotation had long since been stilled—long, long since.

"There were dead gardens above, and I wandered up to them. That was really what convinced me it was a human city, on Earth. There were frozen, huddled heaps that might once have been men. Little fellows with fear forever fro/en on

their faces huddled helplessly over something that must once have been a heating device. Dead perhaps, since the last storm old Earth had known, tens of billions of years before.

"I went down. There were vastnesses in that city. It was huge. It stretched forever, it seemed, on and on, in its dead-ness. Machines, machines everywhere. And the machines were dead, too. I went down, down where I thought a bit of light and heat might linger. I didn't know then how long death had been there; those corpses looked so fresh, preserved by the eternal cold.

"It grew dark down below, and only through rents and breaks did that bloody light seep in. Down and down, till I was

below the level of the dead surface. The white snow persisted, and then I came to the cause of that final, sudden death. I could understand then. More and more I had puzzled, for those machines I'd seen I knew were far and beyond anything we ever conceived—machines of perfection, self-repairing, and self-energizing, self-perpetuating. They could make duplicates of themselves, and duplicate other, needed machines; they were intended to be eternal, everlasting.

"But the designers couldn't cope with some things that were beyond even their majestic imaginations—the imaginations that conceived these cities that had lived beyond—a million times beyond—what they had dreamed. They must have

conceived some vague future. But not a future when the Earth died, and the Sun died, and even the universe itself died.

"Cold had killed them. They had heating arrangements, devices intended to maintain forever the normal temperature despite the wildest variations of the weather. But in every electrical machine, resistances, balance resistances, and induction coils, balance condensers, and other inductances. And cold, stark, spatial cold, through ages, threw them off. Despite the heaters, cold crept in colder—cold that made their resistance balances tad their induction coils superconductors! That destroyed the city, Superconduction—like the elimination of friction, on which all

things must rest. It is a drag and a thing engineers fight forever. Resistance and friction must finally be the rest and the base of all things, the force that holds the great bed bolts firm and the brakes that stop the machines when needed.

"Electrical resistance died in the cold and the wonderful machines stopped for the replacement of defective parts. And when they were replaced, they, too, were defective. For what months must that constant stop—replacement—start—stop

—replacement have gone on before, at last defeated forever, those vast machines must bow in surrender to the inevitable? Cold had defeated them by defeating and removing the greatest

obstacle of the engineers that built them—resistance.

"They must have struggled forever—as we would say—through a hundred billion years against encroaching harshness of nature, forever replacing worn, defective parts. At last, defeated forever, the great power plants, fed by dying atoms, had been forced into eternal idleness and cold. Cold conquered them at last.

"They didn't blow up. Nowhere did I see a wrecked machine; always they had stopped automatically when the defective resistances made it impossible to continue. The stored energy that was meant to re-start those machines after repairs had been made had long since

leaked out. Never again could they move, I knew.

"I wondered how long they had been, how long they had gone on and on, long after the human need of them had vanished. For that vast city contained only a very few humans at the end. What untold ages of lonely functioning perfection had stretched behind those at-last-defeated mechanisms?

"I wandered out, to see perhaps more, before the necessary end came to me, too. Through the city of death. Everywhere little self-contained machines, cleaning machines that had kept that perfect city orderly and neat stood helpless and crushed by eternity and cold. They must have continued

functioning for years after the great central power stations failed, for each contained its own store of energy, needing only occasional recharge from the central stations.

" I could see where breaks had occurred in the city, and, clustered about those breaks were motionless repair machines, their mechanisms in positions of work, the debris cleared away and carefully stacked on motionless trucks. The new beams and plates were partly attached, partly fixed and left, as the last dregs of their energy were fruitlessly expended in the last, dying attempts of that great body to repair itself. The death wounds lay unmended.

"I started back up. Up to the top of the

city. It was a long climb, an infinite, weary climb, up half a mile of winding ramps, past deserted, dead homes; past, hen; and there, shops and restaurants; past motionless little automative passenger cars.

"Up and up, to the crowning gardens that lay stiff and brittle and frozen. The breaking of the roof must have caused a sudden chill, for their leaves lay green in sheaths of white, frozen air. Brittle glass, green and perfect to the touch. Flowers, blooming in wonderful perfection showed still; they didn't seem dead, but it didn't seem they could be otherwise under the blanket of cold.

"Did you ever sit up with a corpse?" Bob looked up at us —through us. "I had

to once, in my little home town where they always did that. I sat with a few neighbors while the man died before my eyes. I knew he must die when I came there. He died—and I sat there all night while the neighbors filed out, one by one, and the quiet settled. The quiet of the dead.

"I had to again. I was sitting with a corpse then. The corpse of a dead world in a dead universe, and the quiet didn't have to settle there; it had settled a billion years ago, and only my coming had stirred those feeble, protesting ghosts of eon-dead hopes of that planet to softly whining protest—protest the wind tried to sob to me, the dead wind of the dead gases. I'll never be able to

call them inert gases again. I know. I know they are dead gases, the dead gases of dead worlds.

"And above, through the cracked crystal of the roof, the dying suns looked down on the dead city. I couldn't stay there. I went down. Down under layer after layer of buildings, buildings of gleaming metal that reflected the dim, blood light of the Sun outside in carmine stains. I went down and down, down to the machines again. But even there hopelessness seemed more intense. Again I saw that agonizing struggle of the eternally faithful machines trying to repair themselves once more to serve the masters who were dead a million million years. I could see it again in the

frozen, exhausted postures of the repair machines, still forever in their hopeless endeavors, the last poor dregs of energy spilled in fruitless conflict with time.

"It mattered little. Time himself was dying now, dying with the city and the planet and the universe he had killed.

"But those machines had tried to hard to serve again—and failed. Now they could never try again. Even they—the deathless machines—were dead.

"I went out again, away from those machines, out into the illimitable corridors, on the edge of the city. I could not penetrate far before the darkness became as absolute as the cold. I passed the shops where goods, untouched by time in this cold, still beckoned those

strange humans, but humans for all that; beckoned the masters of the machines that were no more. I vaguely entered one to see what manner of things they used in that time.

"I nearly screamed at the motion of the thing in there, heard dimly through my suit the strangely softened sounds it made in the thin air. I watched it stagger twice—and topple. I cannot guess what manner of storage cells they had—save that they were marvelous beyond imagination. That stored energy that somehow I had released by entering was some last dreg that had remained through a time as old as our planet now. Its voice was stilled forever. But it drove me out—on.

"It had died while I watched. But somehow it made me more curious. I wondered again, less oppressed by utter death. Still, some untapped energy remained in this place, stored unimaginably. I looked more keenly, watched more closely. And when I saw a screen in one office, I wondered. It was a screen. I could see readily it was television of some type. Exploratively, I touched a stud. Sound! A humming, soft sound!

"To my mind leaped a picture of a system of these. There must be—interconnected—a vast central office somewhere with vaster accumulator cells, so huge, so tremendous in their power once, that even the little

microfraction that remained was great. A storage system untouchable to the repair machines—the helpless, hopeless power machines.

"In an instant I was alive again with hope. There was a strange series of studs and dials, unknown devices. I pulled back on the stud I had pressed, and stood trembling, wondering. Was there hope?

'Then the thought died. What hope? The city was dead. Not merely that. It had been dead, dead for untold time. Then the whole planet was dead. With whom might I connect? There were none on the whole planet, so what mattered it that there was a communication system.

"I looked at the thing more blankly.

Had there been—how could I interpret its multitudinous devices? There was a thing on one side that made me think of a telephone dial for some reason. A pointer over a metal sheet engraved with nine symbols in a circle under the arrow of the pointer. Now the pointer was over what was either the first or the last of these.

"Clumsily, in these gloves, I fingered one of the little symbol buttons inlaid in the metal. There was an unexpected click, a light glowed on the screen, a lighted image!

It was a simple projection—but what a projection! A three-dimensional sphere floated, turning slowly before my eyes, turning majestically. And I nearly

fell as understanding flooded me abruptly. The pointer was a selector! The studs beneath the pointer I understood! Nine of them. One after the other I pressed, and nine spheres—each different—swam before me. . "And right there I stopped and did some hard thinking. Nine spheres. Nine planets. Earth was shown first—a strange planet to me, but one I knew from the relative size and the position of the pointer must be Earth—then, in order, the other eight.

"Now—might there be life? Yes. In those nine worlds there might be, somewhere.

"Where? Mercury—nearest the Sun? No, the Sun was too dead, too cold, even for warmth there. And Mercury was too

small. I knew, even as I thought, that I'd have one good chance because whatever means they had for communication wouldn't work without tremendous power. If those incredible storage cells had the power for even one shot, they had no more. Somehow I guessed that this apparatus might incorporate no resistance whatever. Here would be only very high frequency alternating current, and only condensers and inductances would be used in it. Supercooling didn't bother them many. It improved them. Not like the immense direct-current power machinery.

"But where to try? Jupiter? That was big. And then I saw what the solution must be. Cold had ruined these

machines, thrown them off by making them too-perfect conductors. Because they weren't designed to defend themselves against spatial cold. But the machines—if there were any—on Pluto for instance, must originally have been designed for just such conditions! There it had always been cold. There it always would be cold.

"I looked at that thing with an intensity that should have driven my bare eyesight to Pluto. It was a hope. My only hope. But—how to signal Pluto? They could not understand! If there were any 'they.'

"So I had to guess—and hope. Somehow, I knew, there must be some means of calling the intelligent attendant, that the user might get aid. There was a

bank of little studs— twelve of them— with twelve symbols, each different, in the center of the panel, grouped in four rows of three. I guessed. Duodecimal system.

"Talk of the problems of interplanetary communication! Was there ever such a one? The problem of an anachronism in the city of the dead on a dead planet, seeking life somewhere, somehow.

"There were two studs, off by themselves, separate from the twelve— one green, one red. Again I guessed. Each of these had a complex series of symbols on it, so I turned the pointer on the right to Pluto, wavered, and turned it to Neptune. Pluto was farther. Neptune

had been cold enough; the machines would still be working there, and it would be, perhaps, less of a strain on the dregs of energy that might remain. "I depressed the green symbol hoping I had guessed truly, that red still meant danger, trouble and wrongness to men when that was built—that it meant release and cancellation for a wrongly pressed key. That left green to be an operative call signal.

"Nothing happened. The green key alone was not enough. I looked again, pressed the green key and that stud I had first pressed.

"The thing hummed again. But it was a deeper note now, an entirely different sound, and there was a frenzied clicking

inside. Then the green stud kicked back at me. The Neptune key under the pointer glowed softly; the screen began to shimmer with a grayish light. And, abruptly, the humming groaned as though at a terrific overload; the screen turned dull; the little signal light under Neptune's key grew dim. The signal was being sent—hurled out.

"Minute after minute I stood there, staring. The screen grew very slowly, very gently duller, duller. The energy was fading. The last stored driblet was being hurled away—away into space. 'Oh,' I groaned, 'it's hopeless—hopeless to———'

"I'd realized the thing would take hours to get to that distant planet,

traveling at the speed of light, even if it had been correctly aligned. But the machinery that should have done that through the years probably had long since failed for lack of power.

"But I stood there till the groaning motors ceased altogether, and the screen was as dark as I'd found it, the signal light black. I released the stud then, and backed away, dazed by the utter collapse of an insane hope. Experimentally I pressed the Neptune symbol again. So little power was left now, that only the faintest wash of murky light projected the Neptune image, little energy as that would have consumed.

"I went out. Bitter. Hopeless. Earth's last picture was long, long since painted

—and mine had been the hand that spent Earth's last poor resource. To its utter exhaustion, the eternal city had strived to serve the race that created it, and I, from the dawn of time had, at the end of time, drained its last poor atom of life. The thing was a thing done.

"Slowly I went back to the roof and the dying suns. Up the miles of winding ramp that climbed a half mile straight up. I went slowly—only life knows haste—and I was of the dead.

"I found a bench up there—a carved bench of metal in the midst of a riot of colorful, frozen towers. I sat down, and looked out across the frozen city to the frozen world beyond, and the freezing red Sun.

"I do not know how long I sat there. And then something whispered in my mind.

" 'We sought you at the television machine.'

"I leaped from the bench and stared wildly about me.

"It was floating in the air—a shining dirigible of metal, ruby-red in that light, twenty feet long, perhaps ten in diameter, bright, warm orange light gleaming from its ports. I stared at it in amazement.

" 'It—it worked!' I gasped.

" 'The beam carried barely enough energy to energize the amplifiers when it reached Neptune, however,' replied the creature in the machine.

"I couldn't see him—I knew I wasn't hearing him, but somehow that didn't surprise me.

"Your oxygen has almost entirely given out, and I believe your mind is suffering from lack of oxygen. I would suggest you enter the lock; there is air in here.'

"I don't know how he knew, but the gauges confirmed his statement. The oxygen was pretty nearly gone. I had perhaps another hour's supply if I opened the valves wide—but it was a most uncomfortably near thing, even so.

"I got in. I was beaming, joyous. There was life. This universe was not so dead as I had supposed. Not on Earth, perhaps, but only because they did not

choose! They had space ships! Eagerly I climbed in, a strange thrill running through my body as I crossed the threshold of the lock. The door closed behind me with a soft *shush* on its soft gaskets, locked, and a pump whined somewhere for a moment; then the inner door opened. I stepped in— and instantly turned off my alcohol burners. There was heat—heat and light and air!

"In a moment I had the outer lacings loose, and the inner zipper down. Thirty seconds later I stepped out of the suit, and took a deep breath. The air was clean and sweet and warm, invigorating, fresh-smelling, as though it had blown over miles of green, Sun-warmed fields. It smelled alive, and young.

"Then I looked for the man who had come: for me. There was none. In the nose of the ship, by the controls, floated a four-foot globe of metal, softly glowing with a warm, golden light. The light pulsed slowly or swiftly with the rhythm of his thoughts, and I knew that this was the one who had spoken to me.

" 'You had expected a human?' he thought to me. 'There are no more. There have been none for a time I cannot express in your mind. Ah, yes, you have a mathematical means of expression, but no understanding of that time, so it is useless. But the last of humanity was allowed to end before the Sun changed from the original G-O stage—a very, very long time ago."

"I looked at him and wondered. Where was he from? Who—what—what manner of thing? Was it an armor-incased living creature or another of the perfect machines?

"I felt him watching my mind operate, pulsing softly in his golden light. And suddenly I thought to look out of the ports. The dim red suns were wheeling across those ports at an unbelievable rate. Earth was long since gone. As I looked, a dim, incredibly dim, red disk suddenly appeared, expanded—and I looked in awe at Neptune.

"The planet was scarcely visible when we: were already within a dozen millions of miles. It was a jeweled world. Cities—the great, perfect cities

—still glowed. They glowed in soft, golden light above, and below, the harsher, brighter blue of mercury vapor lighted them.

"He was speaking again. 'We are machines—the ultimate development of man's machines. Man was almost gone when we came.

" 'With what we have learned in the uncounted dusty megayears since, we might have been able to save him. We could not then. It was better, wiser, that man end than that he sink down so low as he must, eventually. Evolution is the rise under pressure. Devolution is the gradual sinking that comes when there is no pressure—and there is no end to it. Life vanished from this system—a dusty

infinity I cannot sort in my memory—my type memory, truly, for I have complete all the memories of those that went before me that I replace.

But my memory cannot stretch back to that time you think of—a time when the constellations———

" 'It is useless to try. Those memories are buried under others, and those still buried under the weight of a billion centuries.

" 'We enter'—he named a city; I cannot reproduce that name—'now. You must return to Earth though in some seven and a quarter of your days, for the magnetic axis stretches back in collapsing field strains. I will be able to inject you into it, I believe.'

"So I entered that city, the living city of machines, that had been when time and the universe were young.

"I did not know then that, when all this universe had dissolved away, when the last sun was black and cold, scattered dust in a fragment of a scattered universe, this planet with its machine cities would go on—a last speck of warm light in a long-dead universe. I did not know then.

" 'You still wonder that we let man die out?' asked the machine. 'It was best. In another brief million years he would have lost his high estate. It was best.'

" 'Now we go on. We cannot end, as he did. It is automatic with us.'

"I felt it then, somehow. The blind,

purposeless continuance of the machine cities I could understand. They had no intelligence, only functions. These machines—these living, thinking, reasoning investigators—had only one function, too. Their function was slightly different—they were designed to be eternally curious, eternally investigating. And their striving was the more purposeless of the two, for theirs could reach no end. The cities fought eternally only the blind destructive-ness of nature; wear, decay, erosion.

"But their struggle had an opponent forever, so long as they existed. The intelligent—no, not quite intelligent, but something else—curious machines were without opponents. They had to be

curious. They had to go on investigating. And they had been going on in just this way for such incomprehensible ages that there was no longer anything to be curious about. Whoever, whatever designed them gave them function and forgot purpose. Their only curiosity was the wonder if there might, somewhere, be one more thing to learn.

"That—and the problem they did not want to solve, but must try to solve, because of the blind functioning of their very structure.

"Those eternal cities were limited. The machines saw now the limit, and saw the hope of final surcease in it. They worked on the energy of the atom. But the masses of the suns were yet

tremendous. They were dead for want of energy. The masses of the planets were still enormous. But they, too, were dead for want of energy.

"The machines there on Neptune gave me food and drink—strange, synthetic foods and drinks. There had been none on all the planet. They, perforce, started a machine, unused in a billion years and more, that I might eat. Perhaps they were glad to do so. It brought the end appreciably nearer, that vast consumption of mine.

"They used so very, very little, for they were so perfectly efficient. The only possible fuel in all the universe is one—hydrogen. From hydrogen, the lightest of elements, the heaviest can be

built up, and energy released. They knew how to destroy matter utterly to energy, and could do it.

"But while the energy release of hydrogen compounding to the heavy elements is controllable, the destruction of matter to energy is a self-regenerative process. Started once, it spreads while matter lies within its direct, contiguous; reach. It is wild, uncontrollable. It is impossible to utilize the full energy of matter.

"The suns had found that. They had burned their hydrogen until it was a remnant so small the action could not go on.

"On all Earth there was not an atom of hydrogen—nor was there on any planet,

save Neptune. And there the store was not great. I used an appreciable fraction while I was there. That is their last hope. They can see the end now.

"I stayed those few days, and the machine i s came and went. Always investigating, always curious. But there i s i n a l l that universe nothing to investigate save the one problem they are sure they cannot solve.

"The machine took me back to Earth, set up something near me that glowed with a peculiar, steady, gray light. It would fix the magnetic axis on me, on my location, within a few hours. He could not stay near when the axis touched again. He went back to Neptune, but a few millions of miles distant, in

this shrunken mummy of the solar system.

"I stood alone on the roof of the city, in the frozen garden with its deceptive look of life.

"And I thought of that night I had spent, sitting up with the dead man. I had come and watched him die. And I sat up with him in the quiet. I had wanted some one, any one to talk to.

"I did then. Overpoweringly it came to me I was sitting up in the night of the universe, in the night and quiet of the universe, with a dead planet's body, with the dead, ashen hopes of countless, nameless generations of men and women. The universe was dead, and I sat up alone—alone in the dead hush.

"Out beyond, a last flicker of life was dying on the planet Neptune—a last, false flicker of aimless life, but not life. Life was dead. The world was dead.

"I knew there would never be another sound here. For all the little remainder of time. For this was the dark and the night of time and the universe. It was inevitable, the inevitable end that had been simply more distant in my day—in the long, long-gone time when the stars were mighty lighthouses of a mighty space, not the dying, flickering candles at the head of a dead planet.

"It had been inevitable then; the candles must burn out for all their brave show. But now I could see them guttering low, the last, fruitless dregs of

energy expiring as the machines below had spent their last dregs of energy in that hopeless, utterly faithful gesture—to attempt the repair of the city already dead.

"The universe had been dead a billion years. It had been. This, I saw, was the last radiation of the heat of life from an already-dead body—the feel of life and warmth imitation of life by a corpse. Those suns had long and long since ceased to generate energy. They were dead, and their corpses were giving off the last, lingering life heat before they cooled.

"I ran. I think I ran—down away from the flickering, red suns in the sky. Down to the shrouding blackness of the dead

city below, where neither light, nor heat, nor life, nor imitation of life bothered me.

"The utter blackness quieted me somewhat. So I turned off my oxygen valves, because I wanted to die sane, even here, and I knew I'd never come back.

"The impossible happened! I came to with that raw oxygen in my face. I don't know how I came—only that here is warmth and life.

"Somewhere, on the far side of that bismuth coil, inevitable still, is the dead planet and the flickering, guttering candles that light the death watch I must keep at the end of time."

ADAPTATION

By
John Wyndham

The prospect of being stuck on Mars for a while did not worry Marilyn Godalpin a lot — not at first, anyway. She had been near the piece of desert that they called a landing field when the *Andromeda* came into a bad landing. After that it did not surprise her at all when the engineers said that with the limited facili-ties at the settle-ment the repairs would take at least three months, most likely four. The asto-nish-ing thing was that no one in the ship had got more than a bad shaking. It still did not worry her when they explained to her, with

simpli-fied astro-nautics, that that meant there could be no take-off for the *Andromeda* for at least eight months on account of the rela-tive posi-tion of Earth. But she did get a bit fussed when she discovered that she was going to have a baby. Mars did not seem the right place for that.

Marsha d surprised her. When Franklyn Godalpin was offered the job of developing the Jason Mining Corporation's terri-tory there, a few months after their marriage, it had been she who had persuaded him to accept it. She had had an instinct that the men who were in on the ground floor there would go places. Of Mars itself, as seen in pictures, her opi-nion was low. But she

wanted her hus-band to go places, and to go with him. With Franklyn's heart and head pulling in oppo-site direc-tions she could have succeeded o n either side. She chose head for two reasons. One was lest some day he might come to hold the lost chance of his life against her, the other because, as she said:

"Honey, if we are going to have a family, I want them to have every-thing we can give them. I love you any way you are, but for their sake I want you to be a big man."

She had persuaded him not only into taking the job, but into taking her with him. The idea was that she should see him settled into his hut as com-fort-ably as the primi-tive condi-tions of the place

allowed, and then go back home on the next ship. That should have been after a four-week stop — Earth reckoning. But the ship intended was the *Andro-meda*; and she was the last in the present oppositional phase.

Franklyn's work left her little of his time, and had Mars been what she expected she would have been dismayed by the prospect of even an extra week there. But the first discovery she had made when she stepped onto the planet was that photo-graphs can be literally true while spiritually quite false. The deserts were there, all right. Mile upon mile of them. But from the first they lacked that harsh un-charitable-ness that the pictures had given

them. There was a quality which in some way the lens had filtered out. The land-scape came to life, and showed itself differently from the recorded shades.

There was unexpected beauty in the colour-ing of the sands, and the rocks, and the distant, rounded moun-tains, and strange-ness in the dark deeps of the cloudless sky. Among the plants and bushes on the water-way margins there were flowers, more beau-ti-ful and more deli-cately complex than any she had seen on Earth. There was mystery, too, where the stones of ancient ruins lay half buried —all that was left, maybe, of huge palaces or temples. It was some-thing like that, Marilyn felt, that Shelley's traveller had known in his

antique land:

Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Yet it was not grim. She had looked to find a sour deso-lation; the morbid after-math of eruption, destruc-tion and fire. It had never occurred to her that the old age of a world might come softly, with a gentle melan-choly, like the turning of a leaf in the fall.

Back on Earth, people were looking on the Martian venturers as the new pioneers attacking the latest frontier opposed to man. Mars made non-sense of that. The land lay placidly open to

them, unresisting. Its placidity dwindled their impor-tance, making them crude intruders on the last quiet drowsi-ness.

Mars was coma-tose, sinking slowly deeper into her final sleep. But she was not yet dead. Seasonal tides still stirred in the waters, too, though they seldom gave any more sign of themselves than a vagrant ripple. Among the flowers and the tinkerbells there were still insects to carry pollen. Kinds of gram still grew, sparse, poorly nourished vestiges of vanished har-vests, yet capable of thriv-ing again with irri-ga-tion. , There were the thrippetts, bright flashes of flying colour, unclassi-fiable as insect or bird. By night other small creatures emerged. Some of them mewed, almost like

kittens, and sometimes when both moons were up, one caught glimpses of little marmoset-like shapes. Almost always there was that most charac-teristic of all Martian sounds, the ringing of the tinker-bells. Their hard shiny leaves which flashed like polished metal needed no more than a breath of the thin air to set them chiming so that all the desert rang faintly to their tiny cymbals. The clues to the manner of people who had lived there were too faint to read. Rumour spoke of small groups, apparently human, farther south, but real explo-ra-tion still waited on the develop-ment of craft suited to the thin Martian air. A frontier of a kind there was, but with-out valour — for there was little left to fight

but quiet old age. Beyond the busy settlement Mars was a rest-ful place.

"I like it," said Marilyn. "In a way it's sad, but it isn't saddening. A song can be like that some-times. It soothes you and makes you feel at peace."

Franklyn's concern over her news was greater than Marilyn's, and he blamed himself for the state of affairs. His anxiety irritated her slightly. And it was no good trying to place blame, she pointed out. All that one could do was to accept the situ-ation and take every sensi-ble care.

The settlement doctor backed that up. James Forbes was a young man, and no saw-bones. He was there because a good man was needed in a place where

un-usual effects might be expected, and strange condi-tions called for careful study. And he had taken the job because he was interested. His line now was matter of fact, and encouraging. He refused to make it remarkable.

"There was nothing to worry about," he assured them. "Ever since the dawn of history there have been women produ-cing babies in far more incon-venient times and places than this — and getting away with it. There's no reason at all why every-thing should not be perfectly normal."

He spoke his professional lies with an assu-rance which greatly increased their confi-dence, and he main-tained it steadily by his manner. Only in his diary

did he admit worry-ing speculations on the effects of lowered gravi-tation and air-pressure, the rapid tempe-rature changes, the possi-bility of unknown infections and the other hazard-ous factors.

Marilyn minded little that she lacked the luxu-ries that would have attended her at home. With her coloured maid, Helen, to look after her and keep her company she busied herself with sewing and small matters. The Martian scene retained its fascination for her. She felt at peace with it as though it were a wise old coun-sellor who had seen too much of birth and death to grow vehe-ment over either. Jannessa, Marilyn's daughter, was born with no great trial

upon a night when the desert lay cold in the moon-light, and so quiet that only an occa-sional faint chime from the tinker-bells disturbed it. She was the first Earth baby to be born on Mars. A perfectly normal six and a half pounds —Earth — and a credit to all concerned. It was afterwards that things started to go less well. Dr. Forbes' fears of strange infect-ions had been well grounded, and despite his scrupu-lous pre-cau-tions there were compli-ca-tions. Some were suscept-ible to the attacks of peni-cillin and the complex sulfas, but others resisted them. Marilyn, who had at first appeared to be doing well, weakened and then became seriously ill.

Nor did the child thrive as it should,

and when the repaired *Andro-meda* at last took off, it left them behind. Another ship was due in from Earth a few days later. Before it arrived, the doctor put the situa-tion to Franklyn.

"I'm by no means happy about the child," he told him. "She's not putting on weight as she should. She grows, but not enough. It's pretty obvious that the condi-tions here are not suiting her. She might survive, but I can't say with what effect on her constitution. She should have normal Earth condi-tions as soon as possible."

Franklyn frowned.

"And her mother?" he asked.

"Mrs. Godalpin is in no condi-tion to travel, I'm afraid."

"It's out of the question. In her present state, and after so long in low gravi-tation, I doubt whether she could stand a G of acce-lera-tion."

Franklyn looked bleakly unwilling to compre-hend.

"You mean—?"

"In a nutshell, it's this. It would be fatal for your wife to attempt the journey. And it would probably be fatal for your child to remain here."

There was only one way out of that. When the next ship, the *Aurora*, came in it was decided to delay no longer. A passage was arranged for Helen and the baby, and in the last week of 1994 they went on board.

Franklyn and Marilyn watched the

Aurora leave. Marilyn's bed had been pushed close to the window, and he sat on it, holding her hand. Together they watched her shoot up-wards on a narrow cone of flame and curve away until she was no more than a twinkle in the dark Martian sky. Marilyn's fingers held his tightly. He put his arm around her to support her, and kissed her.

"It'll be all right, darling. In a few months you'll be with her again," he said. Marilyn put her other hand against his cheek, but she said nothing. Nearly seven-teen years were to pass before any-thing more was heard of the *Aurora*, but Marilyn was not to know that. In less than two months she was resting for ever in the Martian sands with the tinker-bells

chiming softly above her. When Franklyn left Mars, Dr. Forbes was the only member of the original team still left there. They shook hands beside the ramp which led up to the latest thing in nuclear-powered ships. The doctor said:

"For five years I've watched you work, and overwork, Franklyn. You'd no busi-ness to survive. But you have. Now go home and live. You've earned it."

Franklyn withdrew his gaze from the thriving Port Gilling-ton which had grown, and was still grow-ing out of the rough settle-ment of a few years ago.

"What about your-self? You've been here longer than I have."

"But I've had a couple of vaca-tions. They were long enough for me to look

around a t home and decide that what really interests m e i s here." H e might have added that the second h a d been long enough for him to find and marry a girl whom he had brought with him, but h e just added: "Besides I've just been working, not over-working."

Franklyn's gaze had wandered again, this time beyond the settle-ment, towards the fields which now fringed the water-way. Among them w a s a small plot marked with a single up-right stone.

"You're still a young man. Life owes y o u some-thing," the doctor said. Franklyn seemed not to have heard, but he knew that he had. He went on: "And you owe some-thing to life. You hurt only your-self by resisting it. We have to

adapt to life."

"I wonder—?" Franklyn began, but the doctor laid a hand on his arm.

"Not that way. You have worked hard to forget. Now you must make a new beginning."

"No wreckage of the *Aurora* has ever been reported, you know," Franklyn said. The doctor sighed, quietly. The Ships that disappeared without trace consider-ably out-numbered those that left any.

"A new beginning," he repeated, firmly.

The hailer began to call "All aboard."

Dr. Forbes watched his friend into the entrance port. He was a little surprised to feel a touch on his arm, and find his

wife beside him.

"Poor man," she said, softly. "Maybe when he gets home—"

"Maybe," said the doctor, doubtfully. He went on: "I've been cruel, mean-ing to be kind. I should have tried my best to crush that false hope and free him from it. But ... well, I couldn't do it."

"No," she agreed. "You'd nothing to give him to take the place of it. But some-where at home there'll be some-one who has — a woman. Let's hope he meets her soon."

Jannessa turned her head from a thought-ful study of her own hand, and regarded the slaty-blue arm and fingers beside her.

"I'm so different," she said, with a

sigh. “So different from every-body. Why am I different, Telta?”

“Everybody's different,” Telta said. She looked up from her task of slicing a pale round fruit into a bowl. Their eyes met, Jannessa's china blue in their white setting look-ing questioningly in Telta's dark pupils which floated in clear topaz. A small crease appeared between the woman's delicate silvery brows as she studied the child. “I'm different. Toti's different. Melga's different. That's the way things are.”

“But I'm more different. Much more different.”

“I don't suppose you'd be so very different where you came from” Telta said, resuming her slicing.

“Was I different when I was a baby?”

“Yes, dear.”

Jannessa reflected.

“Where do babies come from, Telta?”

Telta explained. Jannessa said, scornfully:

“I don't mean like that. I mean babies like me. Different ones.”

“I don't know. Only that it must have been somewhere far, far away.”

“Somewhere outside; in the cold?”

“Yes, Telta.”

“Well, it must have been one of those twinkles that you came from. But nobody knows which one.”

“Truly, Telta?”

“Quite, truly.”

Jannessa sat still a moment, thinking

of the infinite night sky with its myriads of stars.

“But why didn't I die in the cold ?”

“You very nearly did, dear. Toti found you just in time.”

“And was I all alone?”

“No, dear. Your mother was holding you. She had wrapped you round with every-thing she could to keep the cold away. But the cold was too much for her. When Toti found her she could only move a little. She pointed to you and said:

‘Jannessa! Jannessa!’ So we thought that must be your name.”

Telta paused, remem-bering how when Toti, her hus-band, had brought the baby down from the surface to the life-

giving warmth it had been touch and go. A few more minutes out-side would have been fatal. The cold was a dread-ful thing. She shuddered, recalling Toti's account of it, and how it had turned the un-fortu-nate mother black, but she did not tell that to the child.

Jannessa was frowning, puzzled.

"But how? Did I *fall* off the star?"

"No, dear. A ship brought you."

But the word meant nothing to Jannessa.

It was difficult to explain to a child. Diffi-cult, for that matter, for Telta herself to believe. Her ex-pe-rience included only the system she lived in. The surface was a grim, in-hospi-table place of jagged rocks and kill-ing cold

which she had seen only from the protected domes. The history books told her of other worlds where it was warm enough to live on the sur-face, and that her own people had come from such a world many gene-ra-tions ago. She believed that that was true, but it was never-the-less unreal. More than fifty ances-tors stood between her and life on a planet's surface, and it is difficult for anything that far away to seem real. Never-the-less, she told Jannessa the story in the hope that it would give her some con-so-la-tion.

"Because of the cold?"

"That — and other things. But in the end they made it possible for you to live here. They had to work very hard and

cleverly for you. More than once we thought we were going to lose you."

"But what were they doing?"

"I don't understand much of it. But you see you were intended for a diffe-rent world. It must have been one where there was more weight, thicker air, more humi-dity, higher tempe-ra-ture, different food and — oh, lots of things you'll learn about when you're older. So they had to help you get used to things as they are here."

Jannessa considered that.

"It was very kind of them," she said, "but they weren't very good, were they?"

Telta looked at her in surprise.

"Dear, that's not very grateful. What do you mean?"

“If they could do all that, why couldn't they make me look like other people?

Why did they leave me all white, like this? Why didn't they give me lovely hair like yours, instead of this yellow stuff?”

“Darling, your hair's lovely. It's like the finest golden threads.”

“But it's not like anyone else's. It's different. I want to be like other people. But I'm a freak.”

Telta looked at her, unhappily perplexed.

“Being of another kind isn't being a freak,” she said.

“It is if you're the only one. And I don't want to be different. I hate it,” said Jannessa.

A man made his way slowly up the

marble steps of the Venturers' Club. He was middle-aged, but he walked with a clumsy lack of certainty more appropriate to an older man. For a moment the porter looked doubt-ful, then his expression cleared.

"Good evening, Dr. Forbes," he said.

Dr. Forbes smiled.

"Good evening, Rogers. You've got a good memory. It's twelve years."

"So now you're home for good — and loaded with medical honours," Franklyn said.

"It's a curious feeling," Forbes said. "Eighteen years altogether. I'd been there almost a year when you came."

"Well, you've earned the rest. Others got us there, but it's your work that's

enabled us to build there and stay there."

"There was a lot to learn. There's a lot yet."

"You never remarried?" he asked.

"No." Franklyn shook his head.

"You should have. I told you, remember? You should have a wife and family. It's still not too late."

Again Franklyn shook his head.

"I've not told you my news yet," he said. "I've had word of Jannessa."

Forbes stared at him. If he had ever thought any-thing more un-likely he could not recall what it was.

"Had word," he repeated, care-fully. "Just what does that mean?"

Franklyn explained.

"For years I have been adver-tising

for news of the *Aurora*. The answers came mostly from nuts, or from those who thought I was crazy enough for them to cash in on — until six months or so ago."

"The man who came to see me then was the owner of a spaceman's hostel in Chicago. He'd had a man die there a little while before, and the man had some-thing he wanted to get off his chest before he went out. The owner brought it to me for what it was worth."

"The dying man claimed that the *Aurora* was not lost in space, as every-one thought; he said that his name was Jenkins and he had been aboard her, so he ought to know. According to his story, there was a mutiny on the *Aurora* when

she was a few days out from Mars. It was on account of the captain deciding to hand some of the crew over to the police on arrival, for crimes un-specified. When the muti-neers took over they had the support of all but one or two of the officers, and they changed course. I don't know what the ulti-mate plan was, but what they did then was to lift from the plane of the ecliptic, and hop the asteroid belt, on a course for Jupiter."

"The owner got the impression that they were not so much a ruth-less gang as a bunch of despe-rate men with a grie-vance. They could have pushed the officers and the passengers out into space since they had all quali-fied for a hang-ing any-way. But they didn't.

Instead, like other pirates before them, they elected to maroon the lot and leave them to make out as best they could — if they could."

"According to Jenkins, the place chosen was Europa, somewhere in the region of its twentieth parallel, and the time some-where in the third or fourth month of 1995. The party they stranded consisted of twelve persons — including a coloured girl in charge of a white baby."

Franklyn paused.

"The owner bears a quite blame-less character. The dying man had nothing to gain by fabri-ca-tion. And, on looking up the sailing list, I find that there was a space-man named Evan David Jenkins

aboard the *Aurora*”

He concluded with a kind of cau-tious triumph, and looked expec-tantly across the table at Forbes. But there was no enthu-siasm in the doctor's face.

“Europa,” he said, reflectively. He shook his head.

Franklyn's expression hardened.

“Is that all you have to say?” he demanded.

“No,” Forbes told him, slowly. “For one thing I should say that it is more than unlikely — that it is almost impos-sible that she can have survived.”

“Almost is not quite. But I am going to find out. One of our pros-pect-ing ships is on her way to Europa now.”

Forbes shook his head again.

“It would be wiser to call her off.”

Franklyn stared at him.

“After all these years — when at last there is hope—”

The doctor looked steadily back at him.

“My two boys are going back to Mars next week,” he said.

“I don't see what that has to do with it.”

“But it has. Their muscles ache conti-nu-ally. The strain of that makes them too tired either to work or to enjoy life. The humidity here also exhausts them. They com-plain that the air feels like a thick soup all around and inside them. They have never been free of catarrh since they arrived. There are other

things, too. So they are going back."

"And you stay here. That's tough."

"It's tougher on Annie. She adores those boys. But that's the way life is, Frank."

"Meaning?"

'That it's conditions that count. When we produce a new life, it is some-thing plastic. Inde-pen-dent. We can't live its life as well as our own. We can't do more than to see that it has the best condi-tions to shape it the way we like best. If the condi-tions are in some way beyond our control, one of two things happens; either it becomes adapted to the condi-tions it finds — or it fails to adapt, which means that it dies.

"We talk airily about conquering this

or that natural obstacle — but look at what we really do and you'll find that more often than not it is our-selves we are adapting."

"My boys have been accli-ma-tized to Martian condi-tions. Earth doesn't suit them. Annie and I have sustained Martian con-di-tions for a while, but, as adults, we were in-cap-able of thorough adapt-ation. So either we must come home — or stay there to die early."

"You mean, you think that Jannessa —"

"I don't know what may have happened — but I have thought about it. I don't think you have thought about it at all. Frank."

"I've thought of little else these last

seven-teen years."

"Surely 'dreamed' is the word, Frank?" Forbes looked across at him, his head a little on one side, his manner gentle. "Once upon a time some-thing, an ancestor of ours, came out of the water on to the land. It became adapted until it could not go back to its relatives in the sea. That is the process we agree to call progress. It is inherent in life. If you stop it, you stop life, too."

"Philosophically that may be sound enough, but I'm not interested in abstractions. I'm interested in my daughter."

"How much do you think your daughter may be interested in you? I know that sounds callous, but I can see that you have some idea of affinity in

mind. You're mis-taking civilized custom for natu-ral law, Frank. Perhaps we all do, more or less."

"I don't know what you mean."

"To be plain — *if* Jannessa has survived, she will be more foreign than any Earth foreigner could possibly be."

"There were eleven others to teach her civilized ways and speech."

"*If* any of them survived. Suppose they did not, or she was some-how separated from them. There are authenticated instances of children reared by wolves, leopards and even antelopes, and not one of them turned out to be in the least like the Tarzan fiction. All were sub-human. Adaptation works both ways."

“Even if she has had to live among savages she can learn.”

Dr. Forbes faced him seriously.

“I don't think you can have read much anthro-pology. First she would have to unlearn the whole basis of the culture she has known. Look at the different races here, and ask your-self if that is possible. There might be a veneer, yes. But more than that—” He shrugged.

“There is the call of the blood—”

“Is there? If you were to meet your great-grand-father would there be any tie —

would you even know him?”

Franklyn said, stubbornly:

“Why are you talking like this, Jimmy? I'd not have listened to another

man. Why are you trying to break down all that I've hoped for? You can't, you know. Not now. But why try?"

"Because I'm fond of you, Frank. Because under all your success you're still the young man with a romantic dream. I told you out o remarry. You wouldn't — you preferred the dream to reality. You've lived with that dream so long now that it is part of your mental pattern. But your dream is of *finding* Jannessa — not of having found her. You have centred your life on that dream. If you *do* find her, in what-ever condi-tion you find her, the dream will be finished — the purpose you set your-self will have been accomp-lished. And there will be nothing else left for you."

Franklyn moved uneasily.

"I have plans and ambitions for her."

"For the daughter you know nothing of? No, for the dream daughter; the one that exists only in your mind, what-ever you may find, it will be a real person — not your dream puppet, Frank."

Dr. Forbes paused, watching the smoke curl up from his cigarette. It was in his mind to say: "Whatever she is like, you will come to hate her, just because she cannot exactly match your dream of her," but he decided to leave that unspoken. It occurred to him also to enlarge on the un-happi-ness which might descend on a girl removed from all that was familiar to her, but he knew that Franklyn's answer to that would be

— there was money enough to provide every luxury and conso-la-tion. He had already said enough — perhaps too much, and none of it had really reached Franklyn. He decided to let it rest there, and hope. After all, there was little like-li-hood that Jannessa had either survived or would be found. The tense look that had been on Franklyn's face gradu-ally relaxed. He smiled.

"You've said your piece, old man. You think I may be in for a shock, and you want to prepare me, but I realize all that. I had it out with myself years ago. I can take it, if it's necessary."

Dr. Forbes' eyes dwelt on his face for a moment. He sighed, softly and privately.

“Very well,” he agreed, and started to talk of some-thing else.

“You see,” said Toti, “this is a very small planet—”

“A satellite,” said Jannessa. “A satellite of Yan.”

“But a planet of the sun, all the same. And there is the terrible cold.”

“Then why did your people choose it?” Jannessa asked, reasonably.

“Well, when our own world began to die and we had to die with it or go some-where else, our people thought about those they could reach. Some were too hot, some were too big—”

“Why too big?”

“Because of the gravity. On a big planet we could scarcely have crawled.”

“Couldn't they have ... well, made things lighter?”

Toti made a negative move-ment of his head, and his silver hair glistened in the fluor-escence from the walls.

“An increase in density can be simu-lated; we've done that here. But no one has succeeded in simu-la-ting a decrease — nor, we think now, ever will. So you see our people had to choose a small world. All the moons of Yan are bleak, but this was the best of them, and our people were despe-rate. When they got here they lived in the ships and began to burrow into the ground to get away from the cold. They gradu-ally burnt their way in, making halls and rooms and galleries, and the food-growing tanks, and the

culture fields, and all the rest of it. Then they sealed it, and warmed it, and moved in from the ships and went on working inside. It was all a very long time ago."

Jannessa sat for a moment in thought.

"Telta said that perhaps I came from the third planet, Sonnal. Do you think so?"

"It may be. We know there was some kind of civili-za-tion there."

"If they came once, they might come again — and take me home."

Toti looked at her, troubled, and a little hurt.

"Home?" he said. "You feel like that?"

Jannessa caught his expression. She put her white hand quickly into his slaty-

blue one.

"I'm sorry, Toti. I didn't mean that. I love you, and Telta, and Melga. You know that. It's just ... oh, how can you know what it's like to be different — different from every-one around you? I'm so *tired* of being a freak, Toti, dear. Inside me I'm just like any other girl. Can't you under-stand what it would mean to me to be looked on by every-one as normal?"

Toti was silent for a while. When he spoke, his tone was troubled:

"Jannessa, have you ever thought that after spending all your life here this really is your world? Another might seem very ... well, strange to you."

"You mean living on the outside

instead of the inside. Yes, that would seem funny."

"Not just that, my dear," he said, carefully. "You know that after I found you up there and brought you in the doctors had to work hard to save your life?"

"Telta told me." Jannessa nodded. "What did they do?"

"Do you know what glands are?"

"I think so. They sort of control things."

"They do. Well, yours were set to control things suit-ably for your world. So the doctors had to be very clever. They had to give you very accu-rate injec-tions — it was a kind of balancing process, you see, so that the glands would work in the proper propor-tions

to suit you for life here. Do you understand?"

"To make me comfort-able at a lower tempe-rature, help me to digest this kind of food, stop over-stimu-lation by the high oxygen content, things like that," Telta said.

"Things like that," Toti agreed. "It's called adapt-ation. They did the best they could to make you suited for life here among us."

"It was very clever of them," Jannessa said, speaking much as she had spoken years ago to Telta. "But why didn't they do more? Why did they leave me white like this? Why didn't they make my hair a lovely silver like yours and Telta's? I wouldn't have been a freak then — I

should have felt that I really belong here." Tears stood in her eyes.

Toti put his arms around her.

"My poor dear. I didn't know it was as bad as that. And I love you — so does Telta — as if you were our own daughter."

"I don't see how you can — with this!" She held up her pale hand.

"But, we do, Jannessa, dear. Does that really matter so very much?"

"It's what makes me different. It reminds me all the time that I belong to another world, really. Perhaps I shall go there one day."

Toti frowned.

"That's just a dream, Jannessa. You don't know any world but this. It couldn't

be what you expect. Stop dream-ing, stop worrying yourself, my dear. Make up your mind to be happy here with us."

"You don't understand, Toti," she said gently. "Some-where there are people like me — my own kind."

It was only a few months later that the observers in one of the domes reported the landing of a ship from space.

"Listen, you old cynic," said Franklyn's voice, almost before his image was sharp on the screen. "They've found her — and she's on the way Home."

"Found — Jannessa?" Dr. Forbes said, hesi-tantly.

"Of course. Who else would I be meaning?"

“Are you — quite sure, Frank?”

“You old sceptic. Would I have rung you if I weren't? She's on Mars right now. They put in there for fuel, and to delay for proximity.”

“But can you be sure?”

“There's her name — and some papers found with her.”

“Well, I suppose—”

“Not enough, eh?” Franklyn's image grinned. “All right, then. Take a look at this.”

He reached for a photo-graph on his desk and held it close to the trans-mitting screen.

“Told them to take it there, and transmit here by radio,” he explained. “Now what about it?”

Dr. Forbes studied the picture on the screen carefully. It showed a girl posed with a rough wall for a back-ground. Her only visible garment was a piece of shining cloth, draped around her, rather in the manner of a sari. The hair was fair and dressed in an unfam-iliar style. But it was the face looking from beneath it that made him catch his breath. It was Marilyn Godalpin's face, gazing back at him across eighteen years.

"Yes, Frank," he said, slowly. "Yes, that's Jannessa. I ... I don't know what to say, Frank."

"Not even congratulations?"

"Yes, oh yes — of course. It's ... well, it's just a miracle. I'm not used to miracles."

The day that the newspaper told him that the *Chloe*, a research ship belonging to the Jason Mining Corpo-ration, was due to make ground at noon, was spent absent-mindedly by Dr. Forbes. He was sure that there would be a message from Franklyn Godalpin, and he found him-self unable to settle to any-thing until he should receive it. When, at about four o'clock the bell rang, he answered it with a swift excite-ment. But the screen did not clear to the expected features of Franklyn. Instead, a woman's face looked at him anxiously. He recognized her as Godalpin's house-keeper.

"It's Mr. Godalpin, doctor," she said. "He's been taken ill. If you could come —?"

A taxi set him down on Godalpin's strip fifteen minutes later. The housekeeper met him and hurried him to the stairs through the rabble of journa-lists, photo-graphers and commen-tators that filled the hall. Franklyn was lying on his bed with his clothes loosened. A secretary and a frightened-looking girl stood by. Dr. Forbes made an exami-na-tion and gave an injection.

"Shock, following anxiety," he said. "Not surprising. He's been under a great strain lately. Get him to bed. Hot bottles, and see that he's kept warm."

The housekeeper spoke as he turned away.

"Doctor, while you're here. There's the ... I mean, if you wouldn't mind

having a look at ... at Miss Jannessa, too."

"Yes, of course. Where is she?"

The housekeeper led the way to another room, and pointed.

"She's in there, doctor."

Dr. Forbes pushed open the door and went in. A sound of bitter sobbing ended in choking as he entered. Looking for the source of it he saw a child standing beside the bed.

"Where—?" he began. Then the child turned towards him. It was not a child's face. It was Marilyn's face, with Marilyn's hair, and Marilyn's eyes looking at him. But a Marilyn who was twenty-five inches tall — Jannessa

THE ENCHANTED VILLAGE

By
A. E. van Vogt

"Explorers of a new frontier" they had been called before they left for Mars. For a while, after the ship crashed into a Martian desert, killing all on board except—miraculously—this one man, Bill Jenner spat the words occasionally into the constant, sand-laden wind. He despised himself for the pride he had felt when he first heard them.

His fury faded with each mile that he walked, and his black grief for his friends became a gray ache. Slowly he

realized that he had made a ruinous misjudgment. He had underestimated the speed at which the rocketship had been traveling. He'd guessed that he would have to walk three hundred miles to reach the shallow, polar sea be and the others had observed as they glided in from outer space. Actually, the ship must have flashed a nimmensely greater distance before it hurtled down out of control.

The days stretched behind him, seemingly as numberless as the hot, red, alien sand that scorched through his tattered clothes. A huge scarecrow of a man, he kept moving across the endless, arid waste—he would not give up.

By the time he came to the mountain,

his food had long been gone. Of his four water bags, only one remained, and that was so close to being empty that he merely wet his cracked lips and swollen tongue whenever his thirst became unbearable. Jenner climbed high before he realized that it was not just another dune that had barred his way. He paused, and as she gazed up at the mountain that towered above him, he cringed a little. For an instant he felt the hopelessness of this mad race he was making to nowhere—but he reached the top. He saw that below him was a depression surrounded by hills as high as, or higher than, the one on which he stood. Nestled in the valley they made was a village.

He could see trees and the marble floor of a courtyard. A score of buildings was clustered around what seemed to be a central square. They were mostly low-constructed, but there were four towers pointing gracefully into the sky. They shone in the sunlight with a marble luster.

Faintly, there came to Jenner's cars a thin, high-pitched whistling sound. It rose, fell, faded completely, then came up again clearly and unpleasantly. Even as Jenner ran toward it, the noise grated on his ears, eerie and unnatural. He kept slipping on smooth rock, and bruised himself when he fell. He rolled halfway down into the valley. The buildings remained new and bright when seen

from nearby. Their walls Bashed with reflections. O n e v e r y s i d e was vegetation—

reddish-green shrubbery, yellow-green trees laden with purple and red fruit. With ravenous intent, Jenner headed for the nearest fruit tree. Close up, the tree looked dry and brittle. The large red fruit he tore from the lowest branch, however, was plump and juicy.

A s h e lifted i t t o his mouth, he remembered that he had been warned during his training period to taste nothing on Mars until it had been chemically examined. But that was meaningless advice to a man whose only chemical equipment was in his own body.

Nevertheless, t h e possibility of

danger made him cautious. He took his first bite gingerly. It was bitter to his tongue, and he spat it out hastily. Some of the juice which remained in his mouth seared his gums. He felt the fire on it, and he reeled from nausea. His muscles began to jerk, and he lay down on the marble to keep himself from falling. After what seemed like hours to Jenner, the awful trembling finally went out of his body and he could see again. He looked up despisingly at the tree. The pain finally left him, and slowly he relaxed. A soft breeze rustled the dry leaves. Nearby trees took up that gentle clamor, and it struck Jenner that the wind here in the valley was only a whisper of what it had been on the Bat desert

beyond the mountain.

There was no other sound now. Jenner abruptly remembered the high-pitched, ever-changing whistle he had heard. He lay very still, listening intently, but there was only the rustling of the leaves. The noisy shrilling had stopped. He wondered if it had been an alarm, to warn the villagers of his approach.

Anxiously he climbed to his feet and fumbled for his gun. A sense of disaster shocked through him. It wasn't there. His mind was a blank, and then he vaguely recalled that he had first missed the weapon more than a week before. He looked around him uneasily, but there was not a sign of creature life. He braced himself. He couldn't leave, as

there was nowhere to go. If necessary, he would fight to the death to remain in the village.

Carefully Jenner took a sip from his water bag, moistening his cracked lips and his swollen tongue. Then he replaced the cap and started through a double line of trees toward the nearest building. He made a wide circle to observe it from several vantage points. On one side a low, broad archway opened into the interior. Through it, he could dimly make out the polished gleam of a marble floor.

Jenner explored the buildings from the outside, always keeping a respectful distance between him and any of the entrances. He saw no sign of animal life.

He reached the far side of the marble platform on which the village was built, and turned back decisively. It was time to explore interiors.

He chose one of the four tower buildings. As he came within a dozen feet of it, he saw that he would have to stoop low to get inside.

Momentarily, the implications of that stopped him. These buildings had been constructed for a life form that must be very different from human beings. He went forward again, bent down, and entered reluctantly, every muscle tensed. He found himself in a room without furniture. However, there were several low marble fences projecting from one marble wall. They formed what looked

like a group of four wide, low stalls. Each stall had an open trough carved out of the floor. The second chamber was fitted with four inclined planes of marble, each of which slanted up to a dais. Altogether there were four rooms on the lower floor. From one of them a circular ramp mounted up, apparently to a tower room. Jenner didn't investigate the upstairs. The earlier fear that he would find alien life was yielding to the deadly conviction that he wouldn't. No life meant no food or chance of getting any. In frantic haste he hurried from building to building, peering into the silent rooms, pausing now and then to shout hoarsely. Finally there was no doubt. He was alone in a deserted

village on a lifeless planet, without food, without water—except for the pitiful supply in his bag— and without hope.

He was in the fourth and smallest room of one of the tower buildings when he realized that he had come to the end of his search. The room had a single stall jutting out from one wall. Jenner lay down wearily in it. He must have fallen asleep instantly. When he awoke he became aware of two things, one right after the other. The first realization occurred before he opened his eyes—the whistling sound was back; high and shrill, it wavered at the threshold of audibility.

The other was that a fine spray of

liquid was being directed down at him from the ceiling. It had an odor, of which technician Jenner took a single whiff. Quickly he scrambled out of the room, coughing, tears in his eyes, his face already burning from chemical reaction.

He snatched his handkerchief and hastily wiped the exposed parts of his body and face.

He reached the outside and there paused, striving to understand what had happened.

The village seemed unchanged.

Leaves trembled in a gentle breeze. The sun was poised on a mountain peak. Jenner guessed from its position that it was morning again and that he had slept at least a dozen hours. The glaring white

light suffused the valley. Half hidden by trees and shrubbery, the buildings Bashed and shimmered.

He seemed to be in an oasis in a vast desert. It was an oasis, all right, Jenner reflected grimly, but not for a human being. For him, with its poisonous fruit, it was more like a tantalizing mirage.

He went back inside the building and cautiously peered into the room where he had slept. The spray of gas had stopped, not a bit of odor lingered, and the air was fresh and clean.

He edged over the threshold, half inclined to make a test. He had a picture in his mind of a long-dead Martian creature lazing on the floor in the stall while a soothing chemical sprayed down

on its body. The fact that the chemical was deadly to human beings merely emphasized how alien to man was the life that had spawned on Mars. But there seemed little doubt of the reason for the gas. The creature was accustomed to taking a morning shower.

Inside the "bathroom," Jenner eased himself feet first into the stall. As his hips came level with the stall entrance, the solid ceiling sprayed a jet of yellowish gas straight down upon his legs. Hastily Jenner pulled himself clear of the stall. The gas stopped as suddenly as it had started.

He tried it again, to make sure it was merely an automatic process. It turned on, then shut off.

Jenner's thirst-puffed lips parted with excitement. He thought, "If there can be one automatic process, there may be others."

Breathing heavily, he raced into the outer room. Carefully he shoved his legs into one of the two stalls. The moment his hips were in, a steaming gruel filled the trough beside the wall.

He stared at the greasy-looking stuff with a horrified fascination—food—and drink. He remembered the poison fruit and felt repelled, but he forced himself to bend down and put his finger into the hot, wet substance. He brought it up, dripping, to his mouth.

It tasted flat and pulpy, like boiled wood fiber. It trickled viscously into his

throat. His eyes began to water and his lips drew back convulsively. He realized he was going to be sick, and ran for the outer door—but didn't quite make it. When he finally got outside, he felt limp and unutterably listless. In that depressed state of mind, he grew aware again of the shrill sound.

He felt amazed that he could have ignored its rasping even for a few minutes. Sharply he glanced about, trying to determine its source, but it seemed to have none. Whenever he approached a point where it appeared to be loudest, then it would fade or shift, perhaps to the far side of the village.

He tried to imagine what an alien culture would want with a mind-

shattering noise—although, of course, it would not necessarily have been unpleasant to them. He stopped and snapped his fingers as a wild but nevertheless plausible notion entered his mind. Could this be music?

He toyed with the idea, trying to visualize the village as it had been long ago. Here a music-loving people had possibly gone about their daily tasks to the accompaniment of what was to them beautiful strains of melody.

The hideous whistling went on and on, waxing and waning. Jenner tried to put buildings between himself and the sound. He sought refuge in various rooms, hoping that at least one would be soundproof. None were. The whistle

followed him wherever he went.

He retreated into the desert, and had to climb halfway up one of the slopes before the noise was low enough not to disturb him. Finally, breathless but immeasurably relieved, he sank down on the sand and thought blankly:

What now?

The scene that spread before him had in it qualities of both heaven and hell. It was all too familiar now—the red sands, the stony dunes, the small, alien village promising so much and fulfilling so little.

Jenner looked down at it with his feverish eyes and ran his parched tongue over his cracked, dry lips. He knew that he was a dead man unless he could alter

the automatic food-making machines that must be hidden somewhere in the walls and under the Boors of the buildings.

In ancient days, a remnant of Martian civilization had survived here in this village. The inhabitants had died off, but the village lived on, keeping itself clean of sand, able to provide refuge for any Martian who might come along. But there were no Martians. There was only Bill Jenner, pilot of the first rocketship ever to land on Mars. He had to make the village turn out food and drink that he could take. With-out tools, except his hands, with scarcely any knowledge of chemistry, he must force it to change its habits.

Tensely he hefted his water bag. He

took another sip and fought the same grim fight to prevent himself from guzzling it down to the last drop. And, when he had won the battle once more, he stood up and started down the slope. He could last, he estimated, not more than three days. In that time he must conquer the village.

He was already among the trees when it suddenly struck him that the "music" had stopped. Relieved, he bent over a small shrub, took a good firm hold of it — and pulled.

It came up easily, and there was a slab of marble attached to it. Jenner stared at it, noting with surprise that he had been mistaken in thinking the stalk came up through a hole in the marble. It

was merely stuck to the surface. Then he noticed something else—the shrub had no roots. Almost instinctively, Jenner looked down at the spot from which he had torn the slab of marble along with the plant. There was sand there. He dropped the shrub, slipped to his knees, and plunged his fingers into the sand. Loose sand trickled through them. He reached deep, using all his strength to force his arm and hand down; sand—nothing but sand.

He stood up and frantically tore up another shrub. It also came up easily, bringing with it a slab of marble. It had no roots, and where it had been was sand. With a kind of mindless disbelief, Jenner rushed over to a fruit tree and

shoved at it. There was a momentary resistance, and then the marble on which it stood split and lifted slowly into the air. The tree fell over with a swish and a crackle as its dry branches and leaves broke and crumbled into a thousand pieces. Un-derneath where it had been was sand.

Sand everywhere. A city built on sand. Mars, planet of sand. That was not completely true, of course. Seasonal vegetation had been observed near the polar ice caps. All but the hardiest of it died with the coming Of summer. It had been intended that the rocketship land near one of those shallow, tideless seas. By coming down out of control, the ship had wrecked more than itself. It had

wrecked the chances for life of the only survivor of the voyage. Jenner came slowly out of his daze. He had a thought then. He picked up one of the shrubs he had already torn loose, braced his foot against the marble to which it was attached, and tugged, gently at first, then with increasing strength. It came loose finally, but there was no doubt that the two were part of a whole. The shrub was growing out of the marble.

Marble? Jenner knelt beside one of the holes from which he had torn a slab, and bent over an adjoining section. It was quite porous—calciferous rock, most likely, but not true marble at all. As he reached toward it, intending to break off a piece, it changed color. Astounded,

Jenner drew back. Around the break, the stone was turning a bright orange-yellow. He studied it uncertainly, then tentatively he touched it. It was as if he had dipped his fingers into searing acid. There was a sharp, biting, burning pain. With a gasp, Jenner jerked his hand clear.

The continuing anguish made him feel faint. He swayed and moaned, clutch-ing the bruised members to his body. When the agony finally faded and he could look at the injury, he saw that the skin had peeled and that blood blisters had formed already. Grimly Jenner looked down at the break in the stone. The edges remained bright orange-yellow.

The village was alert, ready to defend

itself from further attacks. Suddenly weary, he crawled into the shade of a tree. There was only one possible conclusion to draw from what had happened, and it almost defied com-mon sense. This lonely village was alive.

As he lay there, Jenner tried to imagine a great mass of living substance grow-ing into the shape of buildings, adjusting itself to suit another life form, ac-cepting the role of servant in the widest meaning of the term.

If it would serve one race, why not another? If it could adjust to Martians, why not to human beings?

There would be difficulties, of course. He guessed wearily that essential ele-ments would not be

available. The oxygen for water could come from the air thousands of compounds could be made from sand.... Though it meant death if he failed to find a solution, he fell asleep even as he started to think about what they might be. When he awoke it was quite dark.

Jenner climbed heavily to his feet. There was a drag to his muscles that alarmed him. He wet his mouth from his water bag and staggered toward the entrance of the nearest building. Except for the scraping of his shoes on the "marble," the silence was intense.

He stopped short, listened, and looked. The wind had died away. He couldn't see the mountains that rimmed the valley, but the buildings were still

dimly visible, black shadows in a shadow world.

For the first time, it seemed to him that, in spite of his new hope, it might be better if he died. Even if he survived, what had he to look forward to? Only too well he recalled how hard it had been to rouse interest in the trip and to raise the large amount of money required. He remembered the colossal problems that had had to be solved in building the ship, and some of the men who had solved them were buried somewhere in the Martian desert.

It might be twenty years before another ship from Earth would try to reach the only other planet in the Solar System that had shown signs of being

able to support life. During those uncountable days and nights, those years, he would be here alone. That was the most he could hope for—if he lived. As he fumbled his way to a dais in one of the rooms, Jenner considered another problem: How did one let a living village know that it must alter its processes? In a way, it must already have grasped that it had a new tenant. How could he make it realize he needed food in a different chemical combination than that which it had served in the past; that he liked music, but on a different scale system; and that he could use a shower each morning—of water, not of poison gas?

He dozed fitfully, like a man who is

sick rather than sleepy. Twice he wakened, his lips on fire, his eyes burning, his body bathed in perspiration. Several times he was startled into consciousness by the sound of his own harsh voice crying out in anger and fear at the night.

He guessed, then, that he was dying.

He spent the long hours of darkness tossing, turning, twisting, befuddled by waves of heat. As the light of morning came, he was vaguely surprised to realize that he was still alive. Restlessly he climbed off the dais and went to the door. A bitingly cold wind blew, but it felt good to his hot face. He wondered if there were enough pneumococci in his blood for him to catch pneumonia. He

decided not. In a few moments he was shivering. He retreated back into the house, and for the first time noticed that, despite the doorless doorway, the wind did not come into the building at all. The rooms were cold but not draughty.

That started an association: Where had his terrible body heat come from? He teetered over to the dais where he spent the night. Within seconds he was sweltering in a temperature of about one hundred and thirty.

He climbed off the dais, shaken by his own stupidity. He estimated that he had sweated at least two quarts of moisture out of his dried-up body on that furnace of a bed.

This village was not for human

beings. Here even the beds were heated for creatures who needed temperatures far beyond the heat comfortable for men. Jenner spent most of the day in the shade of a large tree. He felt exhausted, and only occasionally did he even remember that he had a problem. When the whistling started, it bothered him at first, but he was too tired to move away from it. There were long periods when he hardly heard it, so dulled were his senses. Late in the afternoon he remembered the shrubs and the trees he had torn up the day before and wondered what had happened to them. He wet his swollen tongue with the last few drops of water in his bag, climbed lackadaisically to his feet, and went to

look for the dried-up remains.

There weren't any. He couldn't even find the holes where he had torn them out. The living village had absorbed the dead tissue into itself and had repaired the breaks in its "body."

That galvanized Jenner. He began to think again . . . about mutations, genetic readjustrnents, life forms adapting to new environments. There'd been lectures on that before the ship left Earth, rather generalized talks designed to acquaint the explorers with the problems men might face on an alien planet. The im-portant principle was quite simple: adjust or die.

The village had to adjust to him. He doubted if he could seriously damage it,

but he could try. His own need to survive must be placed on as sharp and hostile a basis as that.

Frantically Jenner began to search his pockets. Before leaving the rocket he had loaded himself with odds and ends of small equipment. A jackknife, a folding metal cup, a printed radio, a tiny superbattery that could be charged by spinning an attached wheel—and for which he had brought along, among other things, a powerful electric fire lighter.

Jenner plugged the lighter into the battery and deliberately scraped the red-hot end along the surface of the "marble." The reaction was swift. The substance turned an angry purple this time. When an entire section of the Boor

had changed color, Jenner headed for the nearest stall trough, entering far enough to activate it. There was a noticeable delay. When the food finally flowed into the trough, it was clear that the living village had realized the reason for what he had done. The food was a pale, creamy color, where earlier it had been a murky gray. Jenner put his finger into it but withdrew it with a yell and wiped his finger. It continued to sting for several moments. The vital question was: Had it delib-erately offered him food that would damage him, or was it trying to appease him without knowing what he could eat?

He decided to give it another chance, and entered the adjoining stall. The gritty

stuff that flooded up this time was yellower. It didn't burn his finger, but Jenner took one taste and spat it out. He had the feeling that he had been offered a soup made of a greasy mixture of clay and gasoline.

He was thirsty now with a need heightened by the unpleasant taste in his mouth. Desperately he rushed outside and tore open the water bag, seeking the wetness inside. In his fumbling eagerness, he spilled a few precious drops onto the courtyard. Down he went on his face and licked them up.

Half a minute later, he was still licking, and there was still water. The fact penetrated suddenly. He raised himself and gazed wonderingly at the

droplets of water that sparkled on the smooth stone. As he watched, another one squeezed up from the apparently solid surface and shimmered in the light of the sinking sun.

He bent, and with the tip of his tongue sponged up each visible drop. For a long time he lay with his mouth pressed to the "marble," sucking up the tiny bits of water that the village doled out to him.

The glowing white sun disappeared behind a hill. Night fell, like the dropping of a black screen. The air turned cold, then icy. He shivered as the wind keened through his ragged clothes. But what finally stopped him was the collapse of the surface from which he had been drinking.

Jenner lifted himself in surprise, and in the darkness gingerly felt over the stone. It had genuinely crumbled. Evidently the substance had yielded up its available water and had disintegrated in the process. Jenner estimated that he had drunk altogether an ounce of water.

It was a convincing demonstration of the willingness of the village to please him, but there was another, less satisfying, implication. If the village had to destroy a part of itself every time it gave him a drink, then clearly the supply was not unlimited. Jenner hurried inside the nearest building, climbed onto a dais —and climbed off again hastily, as the heat blazed up at him. He waited, to give the Intelligence a chance to realize he

wanted a change, then lay down once more. The heat was as great as ever.

He gave that up because he was too tired to persist and too sleepy to think of a method that might let the village know he needed a different bedroom temperature. He slept on the Boor with an uneasy conviction that it could *not* sustain him for long. He woke up many times during the night and thought, "Not enough water. No matter how hard it tries—" Then he would sleep again, only to wake once more, tense and unhappy.

Nevertheless, morning found him briefly alert; and all his steely determination was back—that iron will power that had brought him at least five

hundred miles across an unknown desert.

He headed for the nearest trough. This time, after he had activated it, there was a pause of more than a minute; and then about a thimbleful of water made a wet splotch at the bottom.

Jenner licked it dry, then waited hopefully for more. When none came he reflected gloomily that somewhere in the village an entire group of cells had broken down and released their water for him.

Then and there he decided that it was up to the human being, who could move around, to find a new source of water for the village, which could not move. In the interim, of course, the village would have to keep him alive, until he had

investigated the possibilities. That meant, above everything else, he must have some food to sustain him while he looked around.

He began to search his pockets. Toward the end of his food supply, he had carried scraps and pieces wrapped in small bits of cloth. Crumbs had broken off into the pocket, and he had searched for them often during those long days in the desert. Now, by actually ripping the seams, he discovered tiny particles of meat and bread, little bits of grease and other unidentifiable substances.

Carefully he leaned over the adjoining stall and placed the scrapings in the trough there. The village would not be

able to offer him more than a reasonable facsimile. If the spilling of a few drops on the courtyard could make it aware of his need for water, then a similar offering might give it the clue it needed as to the chemical nature of the food he could eat.

Jenner waited, then entered the second stall and activated it. About a pint of thick, creamy substance trickled into the bottom of the trough. The smallness of the quantity seemed evidence that perhaps it contained water.

He tasted it. It had a sharp, musty flavor and a stale odor. It was almost as dry as flour—but his stomach did not reject it.

Jenner ate slowly, acutely aware that

at such moments as this the village had him at its mercy. He could never be sure that one of the food ingredients was not a slow-acting poison.

When he had finished the meal he went to a food trough in another building. He refused to eat the food that came up, but activated still another trough. This time he received a few drops of water.

He had come purposefully to one of the tower buildings. Now he started up the ramp that led to the upper Boor. He paused only briefly in the room he came to, as he had already discovered that they seemed to be additional bed-rooms. The familiar dais was there in a group of three.

What interested him was that the circular ramp continued to wind on upward. First to another, smaller room that seemed to have no particular reason for being. Then it wound on up to the top of the tower, some seventy feet above the ground. It was high enough for him to see beyond the rim of all the surrounding hilltops. He had thought it might be, but he had been too weak to make the climb before. Now he looked out to every horizon. Almost immediately the hope that had brought him up faded.

The view was immeasurably desolate. As far as he could see was an arid waste, and every horizon was hidden in a mist of wind-blown sand.

Jenner gazed with a sense of despair.

If there were a Martian sea out there somewhere, it was beyond his reach.

Abruptly he clenched his hands in anger against his fate, which seemed inevitable now. At the very worst, he had hoped he would find himself in a mountainous region. Seas and mountains were generally the two main sources of water. He should have known, of course, that there were very few mountains on Mars. It would have been a wild coincidence if he had actually run into a mountain range. His fury faded because he lacked the strength to sustain any emotion. Numbly he went down the ramp.

His vague plan to help the village ended as swiftly and finally as that. The days drifted by, but as to how many he

had no idea. Each time he went to eat, a smaller amount of water was doled out to him. Jenner kept telling himself that each meal would have to be his last. It was unreasonable for him to expect the village to destroy itself when his fate was certain now.

What was worse, it became increasingly clear that the food was not good for him. He had misled the village as to his needs by giving it stale, perhaps even tainted, samples, and prolonged the agony for himself. At times after he had eaten, Jenner felt dizzy for hours. All too frequently his head ached and his body shivered with fever. The village was doing what it could. The rest was up to him, and he couldn't even adjust to an

approximation of Earth food.

For two days he was too sick to drag himself to one of the troughs. Hour after hour he lay on the floor. Some time during the second night the pain in his body grew so terrible that he finally made up his mind.

"If I can get to a dais," he told himself, "the heat alone will kill me; and in absorbing my body, the village will get back some of its lost water."

He spent at least an hour crawling laboriously up the ramp of the nearest dais, and when he finally made it, he lay as one already dead. His last waking thought was:

"Beloved friends, I'm coming."

The hallucination was so complete

that momentarily he seemed to be back in the control room of the rocketship, and all around him were his former companions. With a sigh of relief Jenner sank into a dreamless sleep.

He woke to the sound of a violin. It was a sad-sweet music that told of the rise and fall of a race long dead.

Jenner listened for a while and then, with abrupt excitement, realized the truth. This was a substitute for the whistling—the village had adjusted its music to him!

Other sensory phenomena stole in upon him. The dais felt comfortably warm, not hot at all. He had a feeling of wonderful physical well-being. Eagerly he scrambled down the ramp to the

nearest food stall. As she crawled forward, his nose close to the floor, the trough filled with a steamy mixture. The odor was so rich and pleasant that he plunged his face into it and slopped it up greedily. It had the flavor of thick, meaty soup and was warm and soothing to his lips and mouth. When he had eaten it all, for the first time he did not need a drink of water.

"I've won!" thought Jenner. "The village has found a way!"

After a while he remembered something and crawled to the bathroom. Cau-tiously, watching the ceiling, he eased himself backward into the shower stall. The yellowish spray came down, cool and delightful.

Ecstatically Jenner wriggled his four-foot-tail and lifted his long snout to let the thin streams of liquid wash away the food impurities that clung to his sharp teeth. Then he waddled out to bask in the sun and listen to the timeless music.

Huddling Place

By

Clifford D. Simak

The drizzle sifted from the leaden skies, like smoke drifting through the bare-branched trees. It softened the hedges and hazed the outlines of the buildings and blotted out the distance. It glinted on the metallic skins of the silent robots and silvered the shoulders of the three humans listening to the intonations of the black-garbed man, who read from

the book cupped between his hands.

" *For I am the Resurrection and the Life-*"

The moss-mellowed graven figure that reared above the door of the crypt seemed straining upwards, every crystal of its yearning body reaching towards something that no one else could see. Straining as it had strained since that day of long ago when men had chipped it from the granite to adorn the family tomb with a symbolism that had pleased the first John J. Webster in the last years he held of life.

" *And whosoever liveth and believeth in Me-*" Jerome A. Webster felt his son's fingers tighten on his arm, heard the muffled sobbing of his mother, saw the

lines of robots standing rigid, heads bowed in respect to the master they had served. The master who now was going home-to the final home of all.

Numbly, Jerome A. Webster wondered if they understood-if they understood life and death-if they understood what it meant that Nelson F. Webster lay there in the casket, that a man with a book intoned words above him.

Nelson F. Webster, fourth of the line of Websters who had lived on these acres, had lived and died here, scarcely leaving, and now was going to his final rest in that place the first of them had prepared for the rest of them-for that long line of shadowy descendants who

would live here and cherish the things and the ways and the life that the first John J. Webster had established.

Jerome A. Webster felt his jaw muscles tighten, felt a little tremor run across his body. For a moment his eyes burned and the casket blurred in his sight and the words the man in black was saying were one with the wind that whispered in the pines standing sentinel for the dead. Within his brain remembrance marched-remembrance of a grey-haired man stalking the hills and fields, sniffing the breeze of an early morning, standing, legs braced, before the flaring fireplace with a glass of brandy in his hand.

Pride-the pride of land and life, and

the humility and greatness that quiet living breeds within a man. Contentment of casual leisure and surety of purpose. Independence of assured security, comfort of familiar surroundings, freedom of broad acres.

Thomas Webster was joggling his elbow. "Father," he was whispering. "Father." The service was over. The black-garbed man had closed his book. Six robots stepped forward, lifted the casket.

Slowly the three followed the casket into the crypt, stood silently as the robots slid it into its receptacle, closed the tiny door and affixed the plate that read: NELSON F. WEBSTER

2034-2117

That was all. Just the name and dates. And that, Jerome A. Webster found himself thinking, was enough. There was nothing else that needed to be there. That was all those others had. The ones that called the family roll-starting with William Stevens, 1920-1999. Gramp Stevens, they had called him, Webster remembered. Father of the wife of that first John J. Webster, who was here himself-1951-2020. And after him his son, Charles F. Webster, 1980-2060. And his son, John J. II, 2004-2086. Webster could remember John J. II-a grandfather who had slept beside the fire with his pipe hanging from his mouth, eternally threatening to set is whiskers aflame. Webster's eyes strayed to

another plate, Mary Webster, the mother of the boy here at his side. And yet not a boy. He kept forgetting that Thomas was twenty now, in a week or so would be leaving for Mars, even as in his younger days he, too, had gone to Mars.

All here together, he told himself. The Websters and their wives and children. Here in death together as they had lived together, sleeping in the pride and security of bronze and marble with the pines outside and the symbolic figure above the age-greened door.

The robots were waiting, standing silently, their task fulfilled. His mother looked at him.

"You're head of the family now, my son," she told him. He reached out and

hugged her close against his side. Head of the family-what was left of it. Just the three of them now. His mother and his son. And his son would be leaving soon, going out to Mars. But he would come back. Come back with a wife, perhaps, and the family would go on. The family wouldn't stay at three. Most of the big house wouldn't stay closed off, as it now was closed off. There had been a time when it had rung with the life of a dozen units of the family, living in their separate apartments under one big roof. That time, he knew, would come again. The three of them turned and left the crypt, took the path back to the house, looming like a huge grey shadow in the mist.

A fire blazed in the hearth and the book lay upon his desk. Jerome A. Webster reached out and picked it up, read the title once again:

Martian Physiology, With Especial Reference to the Brain, by Jerome A. Webster, M.D.

Thick and authoritative-the work of a lifetime. Standing almost alone in its field. Based upon the data gathered during those five plague years on Mars-years when he had laboured almost day and night with his fellow colleagues of the World Committee's medical commission, dispatched on an errand of mercy to the neighbouring planet.

A tap sounded on the door.

"Come in," he called.

The door opened and a robot glided in.

"Your whisky, sir."

"Thank you, Jenkins," Webster said.

"The minister, sir," said Jenkins, "has left."

"Oh, yes. I presume that you took care of him."

"I did, sir. Gave him the usual fee and offered him a drink. He refused the drink."

"That was a social error," Webster told him. "Ministers don't drink."

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know. He asked me to ask you to come to church sometime."

"I told him, sir, that you never went anywhere."

"That was quite right, Jenkins," said Webster. "None of us ever go anywhere." Jenkins headed for the door, stopped before he got there, turned around. "If I may say so, sir, that was a touching service at the crypt. Your father was a fine human, the finest ever was. The robots were saying the service was very fitting. Dignified like, sir. He would have liked it had he known."

"My father," said Webster, "would be even more pleased to hear you say that, Jenkins."

"Thank you, sir," said Jenkins, and went out.

Webster sat with the whisky and the book and the fire-felt the comfort of the well-known room close in about him,

felt the refuge that was in it. This was home. It had been home for the Websters since that day when the first John J. had come here and built the first unit of the sprawling house. John J. had chosen it because it had a trout stream, or so he always said. But it was something more than that. It must have been, Webster told himself, something more than that. Perhaps, at first, it had only been the trout stream. The trout stream and the trees and meadows, the rocky ridge where the mist drifted in each morning from the river. Maybe the rest of it had grown, grown gradually through the years, through years of family association until the very soil was soaked with something that approached,

but wasn't quite, tradition. Something that made each tree, each rock, each foot of soil a Webster tree or rock or clod of soil. It all belonged. John J., the first John J., had come after the break-up of the cities, after men had forsaken, once and for all, the twentieth century huddling places, had broken free of the tribal instinct to stick together in one cave or in one clearing against a common foe or a common fear. An instinct that had become outmoded, for there were no fears or foes. Man revolting against the herd instinct economic and social conditions had impressed upon him in ages past. A new security and a new sufficiency had made it possible to break away.

The trend had started back in the twentieth century, more than two hundred years before, when men moved to country homes to get fresh air and elbow room and a graciousness in life that communal existence, in its strictest sense, never had given them.

And here was the end result. A quiet living. A peace that could only come with good things. The sort of life that men had yearned for years to have. A manorial existence, based on old family homes and leisurely acres, with atomics supplying power and robots in place of serfs.

Webster smiled at the fireplace with its blazing wood. That was an anachronism, but a good one-something

that Man had brought forward from the caves. Useless, because atomic heating was better-but more pleasant. One couldn't sit and watch atomics and dream and build castles in the flames.

Even the crypt out there, where they had put his father that afternoon. That was family, too. All of a piece with the rest of it. The sombre pride and leisured life and peace. In the old days the dead were buried in vast plots all together, stranger cheek by jowl with stranger- *He never goes anywhere*.

That is what Jenkins had, told the minister.

And that was right. For what need was there to go anywhere? It all was here. By simply twirling a dial one

could talk face to face with anyone one wished, could go, by sense, if not in body, anywhere one wished. Could attend the theatre or hear a concert or browse in a library half-way around the world. Could transact any business one might need to transact without rising from one's chair. Webster drank the whisky, then swung to the dialled machine beside his desk. He spun dials from memory without resorting to the log. He knew where he was going.

His finger flipped a toggle and the room melted away-or seemed to melt. There was left the chair within which he sat, part of the desk, part of the machine itself and that was all.

The chair was on a hillside swept

with golden grass and dotted with scraggly, wind-twisted trees, a hillside that straggled down to a lake nestling in the grip of purple mountain spurs. The spurs, darkened in long streaks with the bluish-greens of distant pine, climbed in staggering stairs, melting into the blue-tinged snow-capped peaks that reared beyond and above them in jagged saw-toothed outline. The wind talked harshly in the crouching trees and ripped the long grass in sudden gusts. The last rays of the sun struck fire from the distant peaks. Solitude and grandeur, the long sweep of tumbled land, the cuddled lake, the knife-like shadows on the far-off ranges.

Webster sat easily in his chair, eyes

squinting at the peaks. A voice said almost at his shoulder: "May I come in?" A soft, sibilant voice, wholly unhuman. But one that Webster knew. He nodded his head. "By all means, Juwain." He turned slightly and saw the elaborate crouching pedestal, the furry, soft-eyed figure of the Martian squatting on it. Other alien furniture loomed indistinctly beyond the pedestal, half guessed furniture from that dwelling out on Mars.

The Martian flipped a furry hand towards the mountain range.

"You love this," he said. "You can understand it. And I can understand how you understand it, but to me there is more terror than beauty in it. It is something we could never have on

Mars."

Webster reached out a hand, but the Martian stopped him. "Leave it on," he said.

"I know why you came here. I would not have come at a time like this except I thought perhaps an old friend-"

"It is kind of you," said Webster. "I am glad that you have come."

"Your father," said Juwain, "was a great man. I remember how you used to talk to me of him, those years you spent on Mars. You said then you would come back sometime. Why is it you've never come?"

"Why," said Webster, "I just never-"

"Do not tell me," said the Martian. "I already know."

"My son," said Webster, "is going to Mars in a few days. I shall have him call on you."

"That would be a pleasure," said Juwain. "I shall be expecting him." He stirred uneasily on the crouching pedestal. "Perhaps he carries on tradition."

"No," said Webster. "He is studying engineering. He never cared for surgery."

"He has a right," observed the Martian, "to follow the life that he has chosen. Still, one might be permitted to wish."

"One could," Webster agreed. "But that is over and done with. Perhaps he will be a great engineer. Space structure.

Talks of ships out to the stars."

"Perhaps," suggested Juwain, "your family has done enough for medical science. You and your father-"

"And his father," said Webster, "before him."

"Your book," declared Juwain, "has put Mars in debt to you. It may focus more attention on Martian specialization. My people do not make good doctors. They have no background for it. Queer how the minds of races run. Queer that Mars never thought of medicine-literally never thought of it. Supplied the need with a cult of fatalism. While even in your early history, when men still lived in caves-"

"There are many things," said

Webster, "that you thought of and we didn't. Things we wonder now how we ever missed. Abilities that you developed and we do not have. Take your own speciality, philosophy. But different than ours. A science, while ours never was more than ordered fumbling. Yours a norderly, logical development of philosophy, workable, practical, applicable, an actual tool." Juwain started to speak, hesitated, then went ahead. " I am near to something, something that may be new and startling. Something that will be a tool for you humans as well as for the Martians. I've worked on it for years, starting with certain mental concepts that first were suggested to me with arrival of the

Earthmen. I have said nothing, for I could not be sure."

"And now," suggested Webster, "you are sure."

"Not quite," said Juwain. "Not positive. But almost." They sat in silence, watching the mountains and the lake. A bird came and sat in one of the scraggly trees and sang. Dark clouds piled up behind the mountain ranges and the snow-tipped peaks stood out like graven stone. The sun sank in a lake of crimson, hushed finally to the glow of a fire burned low.

A tap sounded from a door and Webster stirred in his chair, suddenly brought back to the reality of the study, of the chair beneath him.

Juwainw a sgone.T h e old philosopher had come and sat an hour of contemplation with his friend and then had quietly slipped away. The rap came again.

Webster leaned forward, snapped the toggle and the mountains vanished; the room became a room again. Dusk filtered through the high windows and the fire was a rosy flicker in the ashes.

"Come in," said Webster.

Jenkins opened the door. "Dinner is served, sir," he said.

"Thank you," said Webster. He rose slowly from the chair.

"Your place, sir," said Jenkins, "is laid at the head of the table."

"Ah, yes," said Webster. "Thank you,

Jenkins. Thank you very much, for reminding me."

Webster stood on the broad ramp of the space field and watched the shape that dwindled in the sky with faint flickering points of red lancing through the wintry sunlight.

For long minutes after the shape was gone he stood there, hands gripping the railing in front of him, eyes still staring up into the sky.

His lips moved and they said: "Good-bye, son"; but there was no sound. Slowly he became alive to his surroundings. Knew that people moved about the ramp, saw that the landing field seemed to stretch interminably to the far horizon, dotted here and there

with hump-backed things that were waiting spaceships. Scooting tractors worked near one hangar, clearing away the last of the snowfall of the night before.

Webster shivered and thought that it was queer, for the noonday sun was warm. And shivered again.

Slowly he turned away from the railing and headed for the administration building. And for one brain-wrenching moment he felt a sudden fear-an unreasonable and embarrassing fear of that stretch of concrete that formed the ramp. A fear that left him shaking mentally as he drove his feet towards the waiting door. A man walked towards him, briefcase swinging in his hand, and

Webster, eyeing him, wished fervently that the man would not speak to him.

The man did not speak, passed him with scarcely a glance, and Webster felt relief. If he were back home, Webster told himself, he would have finished lunch, would now be ready to lie down for his midday nap. The fire would be blazing on the hearth and the flicker of the flames would be reflected from the andirons. Jenkins would bring him a liqueur and would say a word or two-inconsequential conversation.

He hurried towards the door, quickening his step, anxious to get away from the bare-cold expanse of the massive ramp.

Funny how he had felt about Thomas.

Natural, of course, that he should have hated to see him go. But entirely unnatural that he should, in those last few minutes, find such horror welling up within him. Horror of the trip through space, horror of the alien land of Mars- although Mars was scarcely alien any longer. For more than a century now Earthmen had known it, had fought it, lived with it; some of them had even grown to love it.

But it had only been utter will power that had prevented him, in those last few seconds before the ship had taken off, from running out into the field, shrieking for Thomas to come back, shrieking for *him* not to go.

And that, of course, never would have

done. It would have been exhibitionism, disgraceful and humiliating-the sort of a thing a Webster could not do. After all, he told himself, a trip to Mars was no great adventure, not any longer. There had been a day when it had been, but that day was gone for ever. He, himself, in his earlier days had a made a trip to Mars, had stayed there for five long years. That had been-he gasped when he thought of it-that had been almost thirty years ago.

The babble and hum of the lobby hit him in the face as the robot attendant opened the door for him, and in that babble ran a vein of something that was almost terror. For a moment he hesitated, then stepped inside. The door closed

softly behind him. He stayed close to the wall to keep out of people's way, headed for a chair in one corner. He sat down and huddled back, forcing his body deep into the cushions, watching the milling humanity that seethed out in the room.

Shrill people, hurrying people, people with strange, unneighbourly faces. Strangers-every one of them. Not a face he knew. People going places. Heading out for the planets. Anxious to be off. Worried about last details. Rushing here and there.

Out of the crowd loomed a familiar face. Webster hunched forward.

"Jenkins!" he shouted, and then was sorry for the shout, although no one seemed to notice.

The robot moved towards him, stood before him. "Tell Raymond," said Webster,

"that I must return immediately. Tell him to bring the 'copter in front at once."

"I am sorry, sir," said Jenkins, "but we cannot leave at once. The mechanics found a flaw in the atomics chamber. They are installing a new one. It will take several hours."

"Surely," said Webster, impatiently, "that could wait until some other time."

"The mechanic said not, sir," Jenkins told him. "It might go at any minute. The entire charge of power-"

"Yes, yes," agreed Webster, "I suppose so." He fidgeted with his hat. "I just remembered," be said, "something I

must do. Something that must be done at once. I must get home. I can't wait several hours." He hitched forward to the edge of the chair, eyes staring at the milling crowd. Faces-faces-"Perhaps you could televise," suggested Jenkins. "One of the robots might be able to do it. There is a booth-"

"Wait, Jenkins," said Webster. He hesitated a moment. "There is nothing to do back home. Nothing at all. But I must get there. I can't stay here. If I have to, I'll go crazy. I was frightened out there on the ramp. I'm bewildered and confused here. I have, a feeling-a strange, terrible feeling. Jenkins, I-"

"I understand, sir," said Jenkins. "Your father had it, too." Webster

gasped. "My father?"

"Yes, sir, that is why he never went anywhere. He was about your age, sir, when he found it out. He tried to make a trip to Europe and he couldn't. He got halfway there and turned back. He had a name for it."

Webster sat in stricken silence.

"A name for it," he finally said. "Of course there's a name for it. My father had it. My grandfather-did he have it, too?"

"I wouldn't know that, sir," said Jenkins. "I wasn't created until after your grandfather was an elderly man. But he may have. He never went anywhere, either."

"You understand, then," said Webster.

"You know how it is. I feel like I'm going to be sick-physically ill. See if you can charter a 'copter-anything, just so we get home."

"Yes, sir," said Jenkins.

He started off and Webster called him back.

"Jenkins, does anyone else know about this? Anyone-"

"No, sir," said Jenkins. "Your father never mentioned it and I felt, somehow, that he wouldn't wish me to."

"Thank you, Jenkins," said Webster.

Webster huddled back into his chair again, feeling desolate and alone and misplaced. Alone in a humming lobby that pulsed with life-a loneliness that tore at him, that left him limp and weak.

Homesickness. Downright, shameful homesickness, he told himself. Something that boys are supposed to feel when they first leave home, when they first go out to meet the world.

There was a fancy word for it-agoraphobia, the morbid dread of being in the midst of open spaces-from the Greek root for the fear-literally, of the market place. If he crossed the room to the television booth, he could put in a call, talk with his mother or one of the robots-or, better yet, just sit and look at the place until Jenkins came for him.

He started to rise, then sank, back in the chair again. It was no dice. Just talking to someone or looking in on the place wasn't being there. He couldn't

smell the pines in the wintry air, or hear familiar snow crunch on the walk beneath his feet or reach out a hand and touch one of the massive oaks that grew along the path. He couldn't feel the heat of the fire or sense the sure, deft touch of belonging, of being one with a tract of ground and the things upon it.

And yet-perhaps it would help. Not much, maybe, but some. He started to rise from the chair again and froze. The few short steps to the booth held terror, a terrible, overwhelming terror. If he crossed them, he would have to run. Run to escape the watching eyes, the unfamiliar sounds, the agonizing nearness of strange faces.

Abruptly he sat down.

A woman's shrill voice cut across the lobby and he shrank away from it. He felt terrible. He felt like hell. He wished Jenkins would get a hustle on. The first breath of spring came through the window, filling the study with the promise of melting snows, of coming leaves and flowers, of north-bound wedges of waterfowl streaming through the blue, of trout that lurked in pools waiting for the fly. Webster lifted his eyes from the sheaf of papers on his desk, sniffed the breeze, felt the cool whisper of it on his cheek. His hand reached out for the brandy glass, found it empty, and put it back.

He bent back above the papers once again, picked up a pencil and crossed

out a word.

Critically, he read the final paragraphs:

The fact that of the two hundred and fifty men who were invited to visit me, presumably on missions of more than ordinary importance, only three were able to come, does not necessarily prove that all but those three are victims of agoraphobia. Some may have had legitimate reasons for being unable to accept my invitation. But it does indicate a growing unwillingness of men living under the mode of Earth existence set up following the break-up of the cities to move from familiar places, a deepening instinct to stay among the scenes and possessions which in their mind have

become associated with contentment and graciousness of life. What the result of such a trend will be, no one can clearly indicate since it applies to only a small portion of Earth's population. Among the larger families economic pressure forces some of the sons to seek their fortunes either in other parts of the Earth or on one of the other planets. Many others deliberately seek adventure and opportunity in space while still others become associated with professions or trades which made a sedentary existence impossible.

He flipped the page over, went on to the last one.

It was a good paper, he knew, but it could not be published, not just yet.

Perhaps after he had died. No one, so far as he could determine, had ever so much as realized the trend, had taken as matter of course the fact that men seldom left their homes. Why, after all, should they leave their homes?

Certain dangers may be recognized in-.

The televisor muttered at his elbow and he reached out to flip the toggle. The room faded and he was face to face with a man who sat behind a desk, almost as if he sat on the opposite side of Webster's desk. A grey-haired man with sad eyes behind heavy lenses.

For a moment Webster stared, memory tugging at him.

"Could it be-" he asked and the man

smiled gravely.

"I have changed," he said. "So have you. My name is Clayborne. Remember? The Martian medical commission-"

"Clayborne! I'd often thought of you. You stayed on Mars." Clayborne nodded. "I've read your book, doctor. It is a real contribution. I've often thought one should be written, wanted to myself; but I didn't have the time. Just as well I didn't. You did a better job. Especially on the brain."

"The Martian brain," Webster told him, "always intrigued me. Certain peculiarities. I'm afraid I spent more of those five years taking notes on it than I should have. There was other work to do."

"A good thing you did," said Clayborne. "That's why I'm calling you now. I have a patient-a brain operation. Only you can handle it."

Webster gasped, his hands trembling. "You'll bring him here?" Clayborne shook his head. "He cannot be moved. You know him, I believe. Juwain, the philosopher."

"Juwain!" said Webster. "He's one of my best friends. We talked together just a couple of days ago."

"The attack was sudden," said Clayborne. "He's been asking for you." Webster was silent and cold-cold with a chill that crept upon him from some unguessed place. Cold that sent perspiration out upon his forehead, that

knotted his fists.

"If you start immediately," said Clayborn, "you can be here on time. I've already arranged with the World Committee to have a ship at your disposal instantly. The utmost speed is necessary."

"But," said Webster, "but... I cannot come."

"You can't come!"

"It's impossible," said Webster. "I doubt in any case that I am needed. Surely, you yourself-"

"I can't," said Clayborne. "No one can but you. No one else has the knowledge. You hold Juwain's life in your hands. If you come, he lives. If you don't, he dies."

"I can't go into space," said Webster.

"Anyone can go into space," snapped Clayborne. "It's not like it used to be. Conditioning of any sort desired is available."

"But you don't understand," pleaded Webster. "You-"

"No, I don't," said Clayborne. "Frankly, I don't. That anyone should refuse to save the life of his friend-"

The two men stared at one another for a long moment, neither speaking.

"I shall tell the committee to send the ship straight to your home," said Clayborne finally. "I hope by that time you will see your way clear to come." Clayborne faded and the wall came into view again-the wall and books, the

fireplace and the paintings, the well-loved furniture, the promise of spring that came through the open window.

Webster sat frozen in his chair, staring at the wall in front of him. Juwain, the furry, wrinkled face, the sibilant whisper, the friendliness and understanding that was his. Juwain, grasping the stuff that dreams are made of and shaping them into logic, into rules of life and conduct. Juwain using philosophy as a tool, as a science, as a stepping stone to better living.

Webster dropped his face into his hands and fought the agony that welled up within him.

Clayborne had not understood. One could not expect him to understand since

there was no way for him to know. And even knowing, would he understand? Even he, Webster, would not have understood it in someone else until he bad discovered it in himself-the terrible fear of leaving his own fire, his own land, his own possessions, the little symbolisms that he had erected. And yet, not he, himself; alone, but those other Websters as well. Starting with the first John J. Men and women who had setup a cult of life, a tradition of behaviour. He, Jerome A. Webster, had gone to Mars when he was a young man, and had not felt or suspected the psychological poison that ran through his veins. Even as Thomas a few months ago had gone to Mars. But thirty years of quiet life here

in the retreat that the Websters called a home had brought it forth, had developed it without his even knowing it. There had, in fact, been no opportunity to know it. It was clear how it had developed-clear as crystal now.

Habit and mental pattern and a happiness association with certain things-things that had no actual value in themselves, but had been assigned a value, a definite, concrete value by one family through five generations.

No wonder other places seemed alien, no wonder other horizons held a hint of horror in their sweep.

And there was nothing one could do about it-nothing, that is, unless one cut down every tree and burned the house

and changed the course of waterways. Even that might not do it-even that-The televisor purred and Webster lifted his head from his hands, reached out and thumbed the tumbler.

The room became a flare of white, but there was no image.

A voice said: "Secret call. Secret call."

Webster slid back a panel in the machine, spun a pair of dials, heard the hum of power surge into a screen that blocked out the room.

"Secrecy established," he said.

The white flare snapped out and a man sat across the desk from him. A man be had seen many times before in televised addresses, in his daily paper.

Henderson, president of the World Committee.

"I have had a call from Clayborne," said Henderson. Webster nodded without speaking. "He tells me you refuse to go to Mars."

"I have not refused," said Webster. "When Clayborne cut off the question was left open. I had told him it was impossible for me to go, but he had rejected that, did not seem to understand."

"Webster, you must go," said Henderson. "You are the only man with the necessary knowledge of the Martian brain to perform this operation, if it were a simple operation, perhaps someone else could do it. But not one

such as this."

"That may be true," said Webster, "but-"

"It's not just a question of saving a life", said Henderson. "Even the life of so distinguished a personage as Juwain. It involves even more than that. Juwain is a friend of yours. Perhaps he hinted of something he has found."

"Yes," said Webster. "Yes, he did. A new concept of philosophy."

" A concept," declared Henderson, "that we cannot do without. A concept that will remake the solar system, that will put mankind ahead a hundred thousand years in the space of two generations. A new direction of purpose that will aim towards a goal we

heretofore bad not suspected, bad not even known existed A brand new truth, you see. One that never before had occurred to anyone." Webster's hands gripped the edge of the desk until his knuckles stood out white.

"If Juwain dies," said Henderson, "that concept dies with him. May be lost forever."

"I'll try," said Webster. "I'll try-"

Henderson's eyes were hard. "Is that the best that you can do?"

"That is the best," said Webster.

"But man, you must have a reason! Some explanation."

"None," said Webster, "that I would care to give." Deliberately he reached out and flipped up the switch.

Webster sat at the desk and held his hands in front of him, staring at them. Hands that had skill, held knowledge. Hands that could save a life if he could get them to Mars. Hands that could save for the solar system, for mankind, for the Martians an idea-a new idea-that would advance them a hundred thousand years in the next two generations.

But hands chained by a phobia that grew out of this quiet life. Decadence-a strangely beautiful-and deadly-decadence.

Man had forsaken the teeming cities, the huddling places, two hundred years ago. He had done with the old foes and the ancient fears that kept him around the common camp fire, had left behind the

hobgoblins that had walked with him from the caves.

And yet-and yet-Here was another huddling place. Not a huddling place for one's body, but one's mind. A psychological campfire that still held a man within the circle of its light.

Still, Webster knew, he must leave that fire. As the men had done with the cities two centuries before, he must walk off and leave it. And he must not look back. He had to go to Mars-or at least start for Mars. There was no question there, at all. He had to go.

Whether he would survive the trip, whether he could perform the operation once he had arrived, he did not know. He wondered vaguely, whether

agoraphobia could be fatal. In its most exaggerated form, he supposed it could. He reached out a hand to ring, then hesitated. No use having Jenkins pack. He would do it himself-something to keep him busy until the ship arrived. From the top shelf of the wardrobe in the bedroom, he took down a bag and saw that it was dusty. He blew on it, but the dust still clung. It had been there for too many years.

As he packed, the room argued with him, talked in that mute tongue with which inanimate but familiar things may converse with a man.

"You can't go," said the room. "You can't go off and leave me." And Webster argued back, half pleading, half

explanatory. " I have to go. Can't you understand? It's a friend, an old friend. I will be coming back." Packing done, Webster returned to the study, slumped into his chair. He must go and yet he couldn't go. But when the ship arrived, when the time had come, he knew that he would walk out of the house and towards the waiting ship. He steeled his mind to that, tried to set it in a rigid pattern, tried to blank out everything but the thought that he was leaving.

Things in the room intruded on his brain, as if they were part of a conspiracy to keep them there. Things that he saw as if he were seeing them for the first time. Old, remembered things that suddenly were renew. The

chronometer that showed both Earthian and Martian time, the days of the month, the phases of the moon. The picture of his dead wife on the desk. The trophy he had won at prep school. The framed short snorter bill that had cost him ten bucks on his trip to Mars. He stared at them, half unwilling at first, then eagerly, storing up the memory of them in his brain. Seeing them as separate components - of a room he had accepted all these years as a finished whole, never realizing what, a multitude of things went to make it up.

Dusk was falling, the dusk of early spring, a dusk that smelled of early pussy willows.

The ship should have arrived long

ago. He caught himself listening for it, even as he realized that he would not hear it. A ship, driven by atomic motors, was silent except when it gathered speed. Landing and taking off, it floated like thistledown, with not a murmur in it.

It would be here soon. It would have to be here soon or he could never go. Much longer to wait, he knew, and his high-keyed resolution would crumble like a mound of dust in beating rain. Not much longer could he hold his purpose against the pleading of the room, against the flicker of the fire, against the murmur of the land where five generations of Websters had lived their lives and died. He shut his eyes and fought down the chill that crept across his body. He

couldn't let it get him now, he told himself. He had to stick it out. When the ship arrived he still must be able to get up and walk out of the door to the waiting port. A tap came on the door.

"Come in," Webster called.

It was Jenkins, the light from the fireplace flickering on his shining metal hide.

"Had you called earlier, sir?" he asked.

Webster shook his bead.

"I was afraid you might have," Jenkins explained, "and wondered why I didn't come. There was a most extraordinary occurrence, sir. Two men came with a ship and said they wanted you to go to Mars-"

"They are here," said Webster. "Why didn't you call me?" He struggled to his feet.

"I didn't think, sir," said Jenkins, "that you would want to be bothered. It was so preposterous. I finally made them understand you could not possibly want to go to Mars."

Webster stiffened, felt chill fear gripping at his heart.

Hands groping for the edge of the desk, he sat down in the chair, sensed the walls of the room closing in about him, a trap that would never let him go.

WAKE FOR THE LIVING

By
RAY BRADBURY

There was any amount of hanging and hammering for a number of days along with deliveries of metal parts and odd-ments which Mr. Charles Braling took into his little workshop with feverish anxiety. He was a dying man, a badly dying man, and he seemed to be in a great hurry, between racking coughs and spitting, to piece together one last invention.

"What are you doing?" inquired his younger brother, Rich-ard Braling. He had listened with increasing difficulty and much curiosity to that banging and rattling about, and now he stuck his head through the workroom door.

"Go far, far away and let me alone," said Charles Braling, who was seventy, trembly and wet-lipped most of the time. He trembled nails into place and trembled a hammer down with a weak blow upon a large timber and then stuck a small metal ribbon down into an intricate machine, and, all in all, was having a carnival of labor. Richard looked on, bitter-eyed, for a long moment. There was a hatred between them. It had gone on for some years and now was neither better nor worse for the fact that Charlie was dying. Richard was delighted to know of the impend-ing death, if he thought of it at all. But this busy fervor of his brother's stimulated him.

"Pray tell," he asked, not moving from the door.

"If you must know." snarled old Charles. fitting in an old thingumabob on the box before him, "I'll be dead in another week and I'm—I'm building my own coffin!"

" A coffin, m y dear Charlie; that doesn't *look* like a coffin. A. coffin isn't that complex. Come on now, what *are* you up to?"

"I tell you it is a coffin! An odd coffin, yes, but, neverthe-less—" the old man moved his fingers around within the large box—"nevertheless a coffin!"

"But it would be easier to buy one."

"Not one like this! You couldn't buy one like this any place, ever. Oh, it will

be a really fine coffin, all right."

"You're obviously lying." Richard moved forward. "Why, that coffin is a good twelve feet long. Six feet longer than normal size!"

"Oh, yes?" The old man laughed quietly.

"And that transparent top, who ever heard of a coffin lid you can see through?

What good is a transparent lid to a corpse?"

"Oh, just never you mind at all," sang the old man heart-ily. "La!" And he went humming and hammering about the shop.

"This coffin is terribly thick," shouted the young brother over the din. "Why, it must be five feet thick; how utterly

unnecessary!"

"I only wish I might live to patent this amazing coffin," said old Charlie. "It would be a Godsend to all the poor peoples of the world. Think how it would eliminate the expense of most funerals. Oh, but, of course, you don't know how it would do that, do you? How silly of me. Well, I shan't tell you. If this coffin could be mass-produced—expensive at first, naturally—but then when you finally got them made in vast quantities, ah, but the money people would save."

"To hell with it!" And the younger brother stormed out of the shop. It had been an unpleasant life. Young Richard had always been such a bounder he had never had two coins to clink to-gether at

one time; all of his money had come from old brother Charlie, who had the indecency to remind him of it at all times. Richard spent many hours with his hobbies; he dearly loved piling up bottles with French wine labels, in the garden. "I like the way they *glint,"* he often said, sitting sipping and sipping and sitting. He was the man in county who could hold the longest gray ash on a fifty-cent cigar for the longest recorded time. And he knew how to hold his hands so his diamonds jangled in the light. But he had not bought the wine, the diamonds, the cigars—no! They were all gifts. He was never allowed to buy anything himself. It was always brought to him and given to him. He had to ask

for everything, even writing paper. He considered himself quite a martyr to have put up with taking things from that rickety old brother for so long a time. Everything Charlie ever laid his hand to turned to money; everything Richard ever tried in the way of a leisurely career had failed.

And now, here was this old mole of a Charlie whacking out a new invention which could probably bring Charlie addi-tional specie long after his bones were slotted in the earth!

Well, two weeks passed.

One morning the old brother toddled upstairs and stole the insides from the electric phonograph. Another morning he raided the gardener's greenhouse. Still

another time he re-ceived a delivery from a medical company. It was all young Richard could do to sit and hold his long gray cigar ash steady while these murmuring excursions took place.

"I'm finished!" cried old Charlie on the fourteenth morn-ing, and dropped dead. Richard finished out his cigar and, without showing his inner excitement, he laid down his cigar with its fine long whitish ash, two inches long, a real record, and arose.

He walked to the window and watched the sunlight playfully glittering among the fat beetle-like champagne bottles in the garden.

He looked toward the top of the stairs where dear old brother Charlie lay

peacefully sprawled against the banister. Then he walked to the phone and perfunctorily dialed a num-ber.

"Hello, Green Lawn Mortuary? This is the Braling resi-dence. Will you send around a wicker, please? Yes. For brother Charlie. Yes. Thank you. Thank you." As the mortuary people were taking brother Charles out in their wicker, they received instructions. "Ordinary casket," said young Richard. "No funeral service. Put him in a pine coffin. He would have preferred it that way—simple. Good-bye."

"Now!" said Richard, rubbing his hands together. "We shall see about this `coffin'

built by dear Charlie. I do not suppose

he will realize he is not being buried in his

'special' box. Ah."

He entered the downstairs shop.

The coffin sat before some wide-flung French windows, the lid shut, complete and neat, all put together like the fine innards of a Swiss watch. It was vast, and it rested upon a Tong long table with rollers beneath for easy maneuvering. The coffin interior, as he peered through the glass lid, was six feet long. There must he a good three feet of false body at both head and foot of the coffin, then. Three feet at each end which, covered by secret panels that he must find some way of opening, might very well reveal —exactly what?

Money, of course. It would be just like Charlie to suck his riches into his grave with himself, leaving Richard with not a cent to buy a bottle with. The old tight-wad!

He raised the glass lid and felt about, but found no hidden buttons. There was a small sign studiously inked on white paper, thumb-tacked to the side of the satin-lined box. It said:

THE BRALING ECONOMY CASKET.

Simple to operate. Can be used again and again by morticians and families with an eye to the future.

Richard snorted thinly. Who did Charlie think he was fool-ing?

There was more writing:

DIRECTIONS: SIMPLY PLACE BODY IN COFFIN.

What a fool thing to say. Put body in coffin! Naturally! How else would one go about it? He peered intently and finished out the directions: *SIMPLY PLACE BODY IN COFFIN—AND MUSIC WILL START.*

"It can't be!" Richard gaped at the sign. "Don't tell me all this work has been for a—" He went to the open door of the shop, walked out upon the tiled terrace and called to the gar-dener in his greenhouse. "Rogers!" The gardener stuck his head out.

"What time is it?" asked Richard.

"Twelve o'clock, sir," replied Rogers.

"Well, at twelve-fifteen, you come up

here and check to see if everything is all right, Rogers," "Yes, sir," said the gardener. Richard turned and walked back into the shop. "We'll find out—" he said, quietly.

There would be no harm in lying in the box, testing it. He noticed small ventilating holes in the sides. Even if the lid were closed down there'd be air. And Rogers would he up in a moment or two. Simply place body in coffin—and music will start. Really, how naive of old Charlie. Richard hoist himself up.

He was like a man getting into a bathtub. He felt naked and watched over. He put one shiny shoe into the coffin, and crooked his knee and eased himself up and made some little remark to

nobody in particular; then he put in his other knee and foot and crouched there, as if undecided about the temperature of the bath-water. Edging himself about, chuckling softly, he lay down, pretending to himself; "for it was fun pretending that he was dead, that people were dropping tears on him, that candles were fuming and illuminating and that the world was stopped in mid-stride because of his passing. He put on a long pale expression, shut his eyes, holding back the laughter in himself behind pressed, quivering lips. He folded his hands and decided they felt waxen and cold.

Whirr! Spung! Something whispered inside the box-wall. *Spung!*

The lid slammed down on him!

From outside, if one had just come into the room, one would have imagined a wild man was kicking, pounding, blathering and shrieking inside a closet! There was a sound of a body dancing and cavorting. There was a thundering of flesh and fists. There was a squeaking and a kind of wind from a frightened man's lungs. There was a rustling like paper and a shrilling as of many pipes simultaneously played. Then there was a real fine scream. Then—silence.

Richard Braling lay in the coffin and relaxed. He let loose all his muscles. He began to chuckle. The smell of the box was not unpleasant. Through the little perforation he drew more than enough air to live comfortably on. He need only

push gently up with his hands, with none of this kicking and screaming, and the lid would open. One must be calm. He flexed his arms.

The lid was locked.

Well, still there was no danger. Rogers would be up in a minute or two. There was nothing to fear.

The music began to play.

It seemed to come from somewhere inside the head of the coffin. It was fine music. Organ music, very slow and melan-choly, typical of Gothic arches and long black tapers. It smelled of earth and whispers. It echoed high between stone walls. It was so sad that one almost cried listening to it. It was music of potted plants and crimson and blue-

stained glass windows. It was late sun at twilight and a cold wind blowing. It was a dawn with only fog and a far away fog-horn moaning.

"Charlie, Charlie, Charlie, you old fool, you! So this is your odd coffin!" Tears of laughter welled into Richard's eyes. "Nothing more than a coffin which plays its own dirge. Oh, my sainted grandma!"

He lay and listened critically, for it was beautiful music and there was nothing he could do until Rogers came up and let him out. His eyes roved aimlessly; his fingers tapped soft little rhythms on the satin cushions. He crossed his legs, idly. Through the glass lid he saw sunlight shooting through the

French windows, dust particles dancing on in. It was a lovely blue day with wisps of clouds overhead. The sermon began.

The organ music quieted and a gentle voice said:

"We are gathered together, those who loved and those who knew the deceased, to give him our homage and our due—"

"Charlie, bless you, that's *your* voice!" Richard was delighted. A mechanical, transcribed funeral, by God! Organ music and lecture, on records! And Charlie giving his own oration for himself!

The soft voice said, "We who knew and loved him are grieved at the passing of—"

"What was *that?"* Richard raised himself, startled. He didn't quite believe what he had heard. He repeated it to himself just the way he had heard it:

"We who knew and loved him are grieved at the passing of Richard Braling." That's what the voice had said.

"Richard Braling," said the man in the coffin. "Why, *I'm* Richard Braling." A slip of the tongue, naturally. Merely a slip. Charlie had meant to say, *Charles* Braling. Certainly. Yes. Of course. Yes. Certainly. Yes. Naturally. Yes.

"Richard was a fine man," said the voice, talking on. "We shall see no finer in our time."

"My name, *again!"*

Richard began to move about uneasily

in the coffin. Why didn't Rogers come?

It was hardly a mistake, using that name twice. Richard Braling. Richard Braling. We are gathered here. We shall miss. We are grieved. No finer man. No finer in our time. We are gathered here. The deceased. Richard Braling. *Richard* Braling. *Whirrr! Spunng!*

Flowers! Six dozen bright blue, red, yellow, sun-brilliant flowers leaped up from behind the coffin on concealed springs!

The sweet odor of fresh-cut flowers filled the coffin. The flowers swayed gently before his amazed vision, tapping si-lently on the glass lid. Others sprang up, and up, until the coffin was banked with petals and color and sweet odors.

Gardenias and dahlias and petunias and daffodils, trembling and shining.

"Rogers!"

The sermon continued.

“. . . Richard Braling, in his life, was a connoisseur of great and good things. . . ." The music sighed, rose and fell, distantly.

". . Richard Braling savored of life as one savors of a rare wine, holding it upon the lips..."

A small panel in the side of the box flipped open. A swift bright metal arm snatched out. A needle stabbed Richard in the thorax, not very deeply. He screamed. The needle shot him full of a colored liquid before he could seize it. Then it popped back into a receptacle

and the panel snapped shut.

"Rogers!"

A growing numbness. Suddenly he could not move his fin-gers or his arms or turn his head. His legs were cold and limp.

"Richard Braling loved beautiful things. Music. Flowers," said the voice.

"Rogers!"

This time he did not scream it. He could only think it. His tongue was motionless in his anaesthetized mouth.

Another panel opened. Metal forceps issued forth on steel arms. His left wrist was pierced by a huge sucking needle. His blood was being drained from his body. He heard a little pump working somewhere.

". . . Richard Braling will be missed among us. . . . " The organ sobbed and murmured.

The flowers looked down upon him, nodding their bright-petaled heads. Six candles, black and slender, rose up out of hidden receptacles and stood behind the flowers, flickering and glowing.

Another pump started to work. While his blood drained out one side of his body, his right wrist was punctured, held, a needle shoved into it, and the second pump began to force formaldehyde into him.

Pump, pause, *pump,* pause, *pump,* pause, *pump,* pause. The coffin moved.

A small motor popped and chugged. The room drifted by on either side of

him. Little wheels revolved. No pallbearers were necessary. The flowers swayed as the casket moved gently out upon the terrace under a blue clear sky. *Pump,* pause. *Pump,* pause.

"Richard Braling will be missed by all his. . . ."

Sweet soft music.

Pump, pause.

"Ah, sweet mystery of life, at last . . ." Singing.

"Braling, the gourmet ..."

"Ah, I know at last the secret of it all . . ."

Staring, staring, his eyes egg-blind, at the little card out of the corners of his eyes: **THE BRALING ECONOMY CASKET.**

Directions: Simply place body in coffin—and music will start. A tree swung by overhead. The coffin rolled gently through the garden, behind some bushes, carrying the voice and the music with it.

"Now it is the time when we must consign this part of this man to the earth.

.

."

Little shining spades leaped out of the sides of the casket. They began to dig. He saw the spades toss up dirt. The coffin settled. Bumped, settled, dug, bumped, and settled, dug, bumped and settled again.

Pump, pause, *pump,* pause, *pump,* pause, *pump,* pause. "Ashes to ashes,

dust to dust. ."

The flowers glistened and waved. The box was deep. The music played. The last thing Richard Braling saw was the spading arms of the Braling Economy Casket reaching up and pulling the hole in after it.

"Richard Braling, Richard Braling, Richard Braling, Rich-ard Braling, Richard Braling. . .

The record was stuck.

Nobody minded. Nobody was listening.

MOTHER

By

PHILIP JOSE FARMER

Look, mother. The clock is running backwards."

Eddie Fetts pointed to the hands on the pilot room dial, always set on Central Standard Time because the majority of the research expedition thought it would remind them of their home state, Illinois, whenever they looked at it. When staryachting, one time was as good as another.

Dr. Paula Fetts said, "The crash must have reversed it." "How could it do that?"

"I can't tell you. I don't know

everything, son."

"Oh!"

"Well, don't look at me so disappointedly. I'm a patholo-gist, not an electronicist."

"Don't be so cross, mother. I can't stand it. Not now." He walked out of the pilot room. Anxiously, she followed him. Burying the crew and her fellow scientists had been very trying for him. Spilled blood had always made him dizzy and sick; he could scarcely control his hands enough to help her sack the scattered bones and entrails. He had wanted to put the corpses in the nuclear furnace, but she had forbidden that. The Geigers amidships were ticking loudly, warning that there was an invisible death

in the stern. The meteor that struck the moment the ship came out of Translation into normal space had probably wrecked the en-gine-room. So she had understood from the incoherent high-pitched phrases of a colleague before he fled to the pilot room. She had hurried to find Eddie. She feared his cabin door would still be locked, as he had been making a talk of the *Heavy Hangs the Albatross* aria from Gianelli's *Ancient Mariner.*

Fortunately, the emergency system had automatically thrown out the locking circuits. Entering, she had called out his name in fear he'd been hurt. He was lying half-uncon-scious on the floor, but it was not the accident that had thrown him there. The reason lay in the corner,

released from his lax band: a quart free-fall thermos, rubber-nippled. From Eddie's open mouth charged a breath of rye that not even chlorophyll pills had been able to conceal.

Sharply, she had commanded him to get up and onto the bed. Her voice, the first he had ever heard, pierced through the phalanx of Old Red Star. He struggled up, and she though smaller, had thrown every ounce of her weight into getting him up and onto the bed.

There she had lain down with him and strapped them both in. She understood that the lifeboat had been wrecked also, and that it was up to the captain to bring the yacht down safely to the surface of this chartered but unexplored planet,

Baudelaire. Everybody else had gone to sit behind the cap-tain, strapped in their crashchairs, unable to help except with their silent backing.

Moral support had not been enough. The ship had come in on a shallow slant. Too fast, though. The wounded motors had not been able to hold her up. The prow had taken the brunt of the punishment. So had those seated in the nose. Dr. Fetts had held her son's head on her bosom and prayed out loud to her God. Eddie had snored and muttered. Then there was a sound like the clashing of the gates of doom—a tremendous bong as if the ship were a clapper in a gargan-tuan bell tolling the most frightening message human ears may

hear—a blinding blast of light—and darkness and silence.

A few moments later Eddie began crying out in a childish voice, "Don't leave me to die, mother! Come back! Come back!"

Mother was unconscious by his side, but he did not know that. He wept for a while, then he lapsed back into his rye-fogged stupor—if he had ever been out of it—and slept. Again darkness and silence.

It was the second day since the crash, if "day" could describe the twilight state on Baudelaire. Dr. Fetts followed her son wherever he went. She knew he was very sensitive and easily upset. All his life she had known it and had tried to get

between him and anything that would cause trouble. She had succeeded, she thought, fairly well until three months ago when Eddie had eloped.

The girl was Polina Fameux, the ash blonde long-legged actress whose tridi image, taped, had been shipped to all stars where a small acting talent and a large and shapely bosom were admired. Since Eddie was a well known Metro baritone, the marriage made a big splash whose ripples ran around the civilized Galaxy. Dr. Fetts had felt very bad about the elopement, but she had, she knew, hidden her grief very well beneath a smiling mask. She didn't regret having to give him up; after all, he was a full-grown man, no longer her little boy; but,

really, aside from the seasons at the Met and his tours, he had not been parted from her since he was eight.

That was when she went on a honeymoon with her second husband. And then they'd not been separated long, for Eddie had gotten very sick, and she'd had to hurry back and take care of him, as he had insisted she was the only one who could make him well.

Moreover, you couldn't count his days at the opera as being a total loss, for he vised her every noon and they had a long talk—no matter how high the vise bills ran. The ripples caused by her son's marriage were scarcely a week old before they were followed by even bigger ones. They bore the news of the

separation of the two. A fortnight later, Polina applied for divorce on the grounds of incompati-bility. Eddie was handed the papers in his mother's apart-ment. He had come back to her the day he and Polina had agreed they "couldn't make a go of it," or, as he phrased it to his mother, "couldn't get together."

Dr. Fetts was, of course, very curious about the reason for their parting, but as she explained to her friends, she "re-spected" his silence. What she didn't say was that she had told herself the time would come when he would tell her all. Eddie's

"nervous breakdown" started shortly afterwards. He had become very irritable, moody, and depressed, but he

got worse the day a so-called friend told Eddie that whenever Po-lina heard his name mentioned, she laughed loud and long. The friend added that Polina had promised to tell someday the true story of their brief merger. That night his mother had to call in a doctor.

In the days that followed, she thought of giving up her po-sition as research pathologist at De Kruif and taking up all her time to help him "get back on his feet." It was a sign of the struggle going on in her mind that she had not been able to decide within a week's time. Ordinarily given to swift consideration and resolution of a problem, she could not agree to surrender her beloved quest into tissue regeneration.

Just as she was on the verge of doing what was for her the incredible and the shameful: tossing a coin, she had been vised by her superior. He told her she had been chosen to go with a group of biologists on a research cruise to ten pre-selected planetary systems.

Overjoyed, she had thrown away the papers that would turn Eddie over to a sanitorium. And, since he was quite famous, she had used her influence and his good name to get the government to allow him to go along. Ostensibly, he was to make a survey of the development of operaon planets colonized by Terrans. That the yacht was not visiting any col-onized globes seemed to have been missed by the

bureaus con-cerned. But it was not the first time in the history of the government that its left hand knew not what its right was doing.

Actually, he was to be "rebuilt" by his mother, who thought herself as being much more capable of setting him up again than any of the prevalent, A, F, J, R, S, K, or H therapies. True some of her friends reported amazing results with some of the symbol-chasing techniques. On the other hand, she knew two close companions who had tried them all and had gotten no benefits from any of them. After all, she decided, she was his mother; she could do more for him than any of those "alphabatties"; he was flesh of her flesh, blood of her blood.

Besides, he wasn't so sick. He just got awfully blue sometimes and made theatrical but insincere threats of suicide or else just sat and stared into space. But she could handle him. So now it was that she followed him from the backward-running clock to his room. And saw him step inside, look for a second, and then turn to her with a twisted face.

"Neddie is ruined, mother. Absolutely ruined."

She glanced at the piano. It had torn loose from the wall-racks at the moment of impact and smashed itself against the opposite wall. To Eddie, it wasn't just a piano; it was Neddie. He had a pet name for everything he contacted for more than a brief time. It was as if he hopped from

one appellation to the next, like an ancient sea sailor who felt lost unless he were close to the familiar points of the shoreline. Otherwise, Eddie seemed to be drifting helplessly in a chaotic ocean, one that was anonymous and amorphous.

Or, analogy more typical of him, he was like the nightclubber who feels submerged, drowning, unless he hops from table to table, going from one well known group of faces to the next, and avoiding the featureless and unnamed dummies at the strangers' tables.

He did not cry over Neddie. She wished he would. He had been so apathetic during the voyage. Nothing, not even the unparalleled splendor of the naked stars nor the inexpressible

alienness of strange planets had seemed to lift him very long. If he would only weep or laugh loudly or display some sign that he was reacting violently to what was happening. She would even have welcomed his striking her in anger or call-ing her bad names.

But no, not even during the gathering of the mangled corpses, when he looked for a while as if he was going to vomit, would he give way to his body's demand for expres-sion. She understood that if he were to throw up, he would be much better, for it would, as it were, have gotten rid of much of the psychic disturbance along with the physical.

He would not. He had kept on raking flesh and bones into the large plastic

bags and kept a fixed look of resentment and sullenness.

She hoped now that the loss of his piano would bring the big tears and the racked shoulder. Then she could take him in her arms and give him sympathy. He would be her little boy again, afraid of the dark, afraid of the dog killed by a car, seeking her arms for the sure safety, the sure love.

"Never mind, baby," she said. "When we're rescued, we'll get you a new one."

"When—!"

He lifted his eyebrows and sat down on the bed's edge. "What do we do now?" She became very brisk and efficient.

"The ultrad was setworking the

moment the meteor struck. If it's survived the crash, its still sending SOS's. If not, then there's nothing we can do about it. Neither of us knows how to repair it.

"However, it's possible that in the last five years since this planet was chartered, other expeditions may have landed here. Not from Earth, but from some of the colonies. Or from nonhuman globes. Who knows? It's worth taking a chance. Let's see."

A single glance was enough to wreck their hopes about the ultrad. It had been twisted and broken until it was no longer even recognizable as the machine that sent swifter-than-light waves through the no-ether.

Dr. Fetts said with false cheeriness, "Well, that's that! So what? It makes things so easy. Let's go into the storeroom and see what we can see." Eddie shrugged and followed her. There she insisted that both take a panrad. If they had to separate for any reason, they could always communicate and also using the DF's—the direction finders built within it—locate each other. Having used them before, they knew the instruments' capabilities and how essential they were on scouting or camping trips.

The panrads were lightweight cylinders about two and a half feet high and eight inches in diameter. Crampacked, they had the mechanisms of

two dozen different utilities. They never ran out of power, because their batteries could be recharged from the body electricity of their own owners, and they were practically indestructible and worked under almost any conditions, even under water or in extreme cold or heat.

Dr. Fetts insisted they handcuff their left wrists to the cyl-inders as long as they were outside the yacht. That way, they couldn't drop them and thus have no chance of keeping in touch. Eddie thought such precaution was ridiculous, but he said nothing.

Keeping away from the side of the ship that had the huge hole in it, they took the panrads outside. The long wave

bands were searched by Eddie while his mother moved the dial that ranged up and down the shortwaves. Neither really expected to hear anything, but their quest was better than doing nothing. Finding the modulated wave-frequencies empty of any sig-nificant noises, he switched to the continuous waves. He was startled by a dot-dashing.

"Hey, mom! Something in the 1000 kilocycles! Unmodu-lated!" She found the band on her own cylinder. He looked blankly a t her. " I know nothing about radio, but that's not Morse."

"What? You must be mistaken!"

"I—I don't think so."

"Is it or isn't it? Good God, son, make u p your mind fast a but something you

should be sure of."

She turned the amplifier up. Though it wasn't necessary she cocked her head to listen. As both of them had learned Galacto-Morse through sleeplearn techniques, she checked him at once.

"You're right. What do you make of it?"

His quick ear pounced on the pulses.

"No simple dot and dash. Four different time-lengths." He listened some more.

"They've got a certain rhythm, all right. I can make out definite groupings. Ah!

That's the sixth time I've caught that particular one. And there's another. And another."

Dr. Fetts shook her ash-blonde head. She could make out nothing but a series of zzt-zzt-zzt's. There was a rhythm to it, she admitted, but even after trying hard to identify certain units, she didn't recognize them when they repeated. Well, she shrugged, she was as tone-deaf and non-musical as they came. Eddie took after his father in that trait.

He glanced at the DF needle.

"Coming from NE by E. Should we try to locate?"

"Naturally," she replied. "But we'd better eat first. We don't know how far away it is, or what we'll find there. While I'm getting a hot meal ready, you get our field trip stuff ready."

"O.K.," he said with more enthusiasm

than he had shown for a long time. When he came back he ate all of the large dish his mother had prepared on the unwrecked galley stove.

"You always did make the best stew," he said.

"Thank you. I'm glad you're eating again, son. I am sur-prised. I thought you'd be sick about all this."

He waved vaguely, but energetically.

"The challenge of the unknown, you know. I have a sort of feeling this is going to turn out much better than we thought. Much better."

She came close and sniffed his breath. It was clean, inno-cent even of stew. That meant he'd taken chlorophyll, which probably meant he'd been sampling some

hidden rye. Otherwise, how explain his reckless disregard of the possible dangers?

It wasn't like his normal attitude.

She said nothing, for she knew that if he tried to hide a bottle in his clothes or field sack while they were tracking down the radio signals, she would soon find it. And take it away. He wouldn't even protest, merely let her lift it froth his limp hand while his lips swelled with resentment.

They set out. Both wore knapsacks and carried cuffed pan-rads. He had slung a gun over his shoulder, and she had snapped onto her sack her small black bag of medical and lab supplies.

High noon of late autumn was topped

by a weak red sun that barely managed to make itself seen through the eternal double-layer of clouds. Its twin, an even smaller blob of lilac, was setting on the northwestern horizon. They walked in a sort of bright twilight, the best that Baudelaire ever achieved. Yet, despite the lack of light, the air was too warm. That was a phenomenon common to certain planets behind the Horsehead Nebula, one being investigated but as yet unexplained. The country was hilly and had many deep ravines. Here and there were prominences high enough and steepsided enough to be called embryo mountains. Considering the roughness of the land, however, there was a surprising amount of vegetation. Pale

green, red, and yellow bushes, vines, and little trees clung to every bit of ground, horizontal or vertical. All had comparatively broad leaves that turned with the sun in hopes to catch the most of the light.

From time to time, as the two Terrans strode noisily through the forest, small multi-colored insect-like and mam-mal-like creatures scuttled from hiding place to hiding place. Eddie decided to unsling his gun and carry it in the crook of his arm. Then, after they were forced to scramble up and down ravines and hills and fight their way through thickets that became unexpectedly tangled, he put it back over his shoulder, where it hung from a strap.

Despite their exertions, they did not tire fast. They weighed about twenty pounds less than they would have on Earth, and, though the air was thinner, it was, for some un-known reason, richer in oxygen.

Dr. Fetts kept up with Eddie. Thirty years the senior of the twenty-three year old she passed even at close inspection for his older sister. Longevity pills took care of that. However, he treated her with all the courtesy and chivalry that one gave one's mother and helped her up the steep inclines, even though the climbs did not appreciably cause her deep chest to demand more air.

They paused once by a creek bank to get their bearings. "The signals have

stopped," he said.

"Obviously," she replied.

At that moment the radar-detector built into the panrad began a high ping-ping-ping. Both of them automatically looked upwards.

"There's no ship in the air."

"It can't be coming from either of those hills," she pointed out. "There's nothing but a boulder on top each. Tremendous rocks."

"Nevertheless, it's coming from there, I think. Oh! Ohl Did you see what I saw?

Looked like a tall stalk of some kind being pulled down behind that big rock." She peered through the dim light. "I think you were imag-ining things, son. I saw nothing."

Then even as the pinging kept up, the zzting started again. But after a burst of noise, both stopped.

"Let's go up and see what we shall see," she said.

"Something screwy," he commented. She did not answer. They forded the creek and began the ascent. Halfway up, they stopped to sniff puzzled at a gust of some heavy odor coming downwind.

"Smells like a cageful of monkeys," he said.

"In heat," she added. If he had the keener ear, hers was the sharper nose. They went up. The RD began sounding its tiny hysteri-cal gouging. Nonplused, Eddie stopped. The DF indicated the radar pulses were not

coming from the top of the hill up which they were going, as formerly, but from the other hill across the valley. Abruptly, the panrad fell silent.

"What do we do now?"

"Finish what we started. This hill. Then we go to the other." He shrugged and then hastened after her tall slim body in its long-legged coveralls. She was hot on the scent, literally, and nothing could stop her. Just before she reached the bun-galow-sized boulder topping the hill, he caught up with her. She had stopped to gaze intently at the DF needle, which swung widely before it stopped at neutral. The monkey-cage odor was very strong.

"Do you suppose it could be some

sorto fradio-creating mineral?" she asked, disappointedly.

"No. Those groupings were semantic. And that smell ..."

"Then what—?"

He didn't know whether to feel pleased or not because she had so obviously and suddenly thrust the burden of responsi-bility and action on him. Both pride and a curious shrinking affected him. But he did feel exhilarated. Almost, he thought, he felt as if he were on the verge of discovering what he had been looking for for a long time. What the object of his search had been, he could not say. But he was excited and not very much afraid.

He unslung his weapon, a two-

barreled combination shotgun and rifle. The panrad was still quiet.

"Maybe the boulder is camouflage for a spy outfit," he said. He sounded silly, even to himself.

Behind him, his mother gasped and screamed. He whirled and raised his gun, but there was nothing to shoot. She was pointing at the hilltop across the valley, shaking, and saying something incoherent.

He could make out a long slim antenna seemingly project-ing from the monstrous boulder crouched there. At the same time, two thoughts struggled for first place in his mind: one, that it was more than a coincidence that both hills had almost identical stone structures on

their brows, and two, that the antenna must have been recently stuck out, for he was sure that he had not seen it the last time he looked. He never got to tell her his conclusions, for something thin and flexible and manifold and irresistible seized him from behind. Lifted into the air, he was borne backwards. He dropped the gun and tried to grab the bands of tentacles around him and tear them off with his bare hands. No use.

He caught one last glimpse of his mother running off down the hillside. Then a curtain snapped down, and he was in total darkness.

Before he could gather what had happened, Eddie sensed himself, still suspended, twirled around. He could not

know for sure, of course, but he thought he was facing exactly the opposite direction. Simultaneously, the tentacles binding his legs and arms were released. Only his waist was still gripped. It was pressed so tightly that he cried out with pain.

Then, boot-toes bumping on some resilient substance, he was carried forward. Halted, facing he knew not what horri-ble monster, he was suddenly assailed—not by a sharp beak or tooth or knife or some other cutting or mangling instru-ment—but by a dense cloud of that same monkey perfume. In other circumstances, he might have vomited. Now his stomach was not given the time to consider whether it

should clean house or not. The tentacle lifted him higher and thrust him against something soft and yielding—something fleshlike and womanly—almost breastlike in texture and smoothness and warmth, and its hint of gentle curving.

He put his hands and feet out to brace himself, for he thought for a moment he was going to sink in and be covered up—enfolded—ingested. The idea of a gargantuan amoeba-thing hiding within a hollow rock—or a rocklike shell—made him writhe and yell, and shove at the protoplasmic substance. But nothing of the kind happened. He was not plunged into a smothering and slimy featherbed that would strip him of his skin and then his flesh and then either dissolve his

bones or reject them. He was merely shoved repeatedly against the soft swelling. Each time he pushed or kicked or struck at it. After a dozen of these seemingly purposeless acts, he was held away, as if whatever was doing it was puz-zled by his behavior.

He had quit screaming. The only sounds were his harsh breathings and the zzzts and pings from the panrad. Even as he became aware of them, the zzzts changed tempo and set-tled into a recognizable pattern of bursts—three units that crackled out again and again.

"Who are you? Who are you?"

Of course, it could just as easily have been, "What are you?" or "What the hell!" or "Nov smoz ka pop?"

Or nothing—semantically speaking.

But he didn't think the latter. And when he was gently lowered to the floor, and the tentacle went off to only-God--knew-where in the dark, he was sure that the creature was communicating—or trying to—with him.

It was this thought that kept him from screaming and run-ning around in the lightless and fetid chamber, brainlessly, in-stinctively seeking an outlet. He mastered his panic and snapped open a little shutter in the panrad's side and thrust in his right hand index finger. There he poised it above the key and in a moment, when the thing paused in transmitting, he sent back, as best he could, the pulses he had received. It was

not necessary for him to turn on the light and spin the dial that would put him on the 1000 kc. band. The instrument would automatically key that frequency in with the one he had just received.

The oddest part about the whole procedure was that his whole body was trembling almost uncontrollably—one part excepted. That was his index finger, his one unit that seemed to him to have a definite function in his otherwise meaningless situation. It was the section of him that was helping him to survive—the only part that knew how—at that moment. Even his brain seemed to have no connection with his finger. That digit was himself, and the rest just happened to be linked to it. When he paused, the

transmitter began again. This time the units were unrecognizable. There was a certain rhythm to them, but he could not know what they meant. Meanwhile, the RD was pinging. Something somewhere in the dark hole had a beam held tightly on him.

He pressed a button on the panrad's top, and the built-in flashlight illuminated the area just in front of him. He saw a wall of reddish-gray rubbery substance and on the wall a roughly circular and light grey swelling about four feet in di-ameter. Around it, giving it a Medusa appearance, were coiled twelve very long and very thin tentacles. Though he was afraid that if he turned his back to them, the tentacles would

seize him once more, his curiosity forced him to wheel about and examine with the bright beam his surroundings. He was in an egg-shaped chamber about thirty feet long, twelve wide, and eight to ten high in the middle. It was formed of a reddish-gray material, smooth except for ir-regular intervals of blue or red pipes. Veins and arteries, obviously.

A door-sized portion of the wall had a vertical slit running down it. Tentacles fringed it. He guessed it was a sort of iris and that it had opened to drag him inside. Starfish-shaped groupings of tentacles were scattered on the walls or hung from the ceiling. On the wall opposite the iris was a long and flexible

stalk with a cartilaginous ruff around its free end. When Eddie moved, it moved, its blind point following him as a radar antenna pursues the thing it is locating. That was what it was. And unless he was wrong, the stalk was also a C.W. transmitter-receiver. He shot the light on around. When it reached the end far-thest from him, he gasped. Ten creatures were huddled to-gether facing him! About the size of half-grown pigs, they looked like nothing so much as unshelled snails; they were eyeless, and the stalk growing from the forehead of each was a tiny duplicate of that on the wall. They didn't look danger-ous. Their open mouths were little and toothless, and their rate of locomotion must be slow, for they

moved, like a snail, on a large pedestal of flesh—a foot-muscle.

Nevertheless, if he were to fall asleep, they could overcome him by force of numbers, and those mouths might drip an acid to digest him, or they might carry a concealed poi-sonous sting.

His speculations were interrupted violently. He was seized, lifted, and passed on to another group of tentacles. He was carried beyond the antenna-stalk and toward the snail-beings. Just before he reached them, he was halted, facing the wall. An iris, hitherto invisible, opened. His light shone into it, but he could see nothing but convolutions of flesh.

His panrad gave off a new pattern of dit-dot-deet-dats. The iris widened until it was large enough to admit his body, if he were shoved in headfirst. Or feet first. It didn't matter. The convolutions straightened out and became a tunnel. Or a throat. From thousands of little pits emerged thousands of tiny and razor-sharp teeth. They flashed out and sank back in, and before they had disappeared thousands of other wicked little spears darted out and past the receding fangs.

Meat-grinder effect.

Beyond the murderous array, at the end of the throat, was a huge pouch of water, a veritable tank. Steam came from it, and with it an odor like that of his mother's stew. Dark bits, presumably

meat, and pieces of vegetables floated on the seething surface.

Then the iris closed, and he was turned around to face the slugs. Gently, but unmistakably, a tentacle spanked his but-tocks. And the panrad zzzted a warning. Eddie was not stupid. He knew now that the ten creatures were not dangerous unless he molested them. In which case he had just seen where he would go if he did not behave.

Again he was lifted and carried along the wall until be was shoved against the light grey spot. The monkey-cage odor, which had died out, became strong again. Eddie identified its source with a very small hole which appeared in the wall. When he did not respond—he had

no idea yet how he was supposed to act —the tentacles dropped him so unexpectedly that he fell on his back. Unhurt by the yielding flesh, he rose.

What was the next step? Exploration of his resources.

Itemization: The panrad. A sleeping-bag, which he wouldn't need as long as the present too-warm temperature kept up. A bottle of Old Red Star capsules. A free-fall thermos with at-tached nipple. A box of A-2-Z rations. A Foldstove. Car-tridges for his double-barrel, now lying outside the creature's boulderish shell. A roll of toilet paper. Toothbrush. Paste. Soap. Towel. Pills: chlorophyll, hormone, vitamin, longevity, reflex and sleeping. And a thread-thin wire, a

hundred feet long when uncoiled, that held prisoner in its molecular struc-ture a hundred symphonies, eighty operas, a thousand different types of musical pieces, and two thousand great books ranging from Sophocles and Dostoyevsky and Hammet and Henry Miller to the latest bestseller. It could be run off inside the panrad. He inserted it, thumbed a designated spot, and spoke, "Eddie Fetts's recording of Puccini's *Che gelida manna,* please."

And while he listened approvingly to his own magnificent voice, he zipped open a can he had found in the bottom of the sack. His mother had put into it the stew left over from their last meal in the ship.

Not knowing what was happening, yet, for some reason, sure he was, for the present, safe, he munched meat and vegetables with a contented jaw. Transition from abhorrence to appetite sometimes came easily for Eddie.

He cleaned out the can and finished up with some crackers and a chocolate bar. Rationing was out. As long as the food lasted, he would eat well. Then, if nothing turned up, he would.. But then, somehow, he reassured himself as he licked his fingers, his mother, who was free, would find some way to get him out of his trouble.

She always had.

The panrad, silent for a while, began signaling. Eddie spot-lighted the antenna

and saw it was pointing at the snail-beings, which he had, in accordance with his custom, dubbed familiarly. Sluggos he called them.

The Sluggos crept towards the wall and stopped close to it. Their mouths, built on the tops of their heads, gaped like so many hungry young birds. The iris opened, and two lips formed into a spout. Out of it streamed steaming-hot water and chunks of meat and vegetables. Stew! Stew that fell ex-actly into each waiting mouth. That was how Eddie learned the second phase of Mother Polyphema's language. The first message had been, "What are you?" This was, "Come and get it!" He experimented. He tapped out a repetition

of what he'd last heard. As one, the Sluggos—except the one then being fed—turned to him and crept a few feet before halting, puz-zled.

Inasmuch as Eddie was broadcasting, the Sluggos must have had some sort of built-in DF. Otherwise they wouldn't have been able to distinguish between his pulses and their Mother's.

Immediately *after,* a tentacle smote Eddie *across* the shoul-ders and knocked him down. The panrad zzzted its third in-telligible message: "Don't ever do that!" And then a fourth, to which the ten young obeyed by wheeling and resuming their former positions.

"This way, children."

Yes, *they* were the offspring, living,

eating, sleeping, play-ing, and learning to communicate in the womb of their mother—the Mother. They were the mobile brood of this vast immobile entity that had scooped up Eddie as a frog scoops up a fly. This Mother. She who had once been just such a Sluggo until she had grown hog-size and had been pushed out of her Mother's womb. And who, rolled into a tight ball, had freewheeled down her natal hill, straightened out at the bottom, inched her way up the next hill, rolled down, and so on. Until she found the empty shell of an adult who had died. Or, if she wanted to he a first class citizen in her society and not a prestigeless *occupee,* she found the bare top of a tall hill—or any eminence

that commanded a big sweep of territory —and there squatted.

And there she put out many thread-thin tendrils into the soil and into the cracks in the rocks, tendrils that drew sustenance from the fat of her body and grew and extended downwards and ramified into other tendrils. Deep underground the rootlets worked their instinctive chemistry; searched for and found the water, the calcium, the iron, the copper, the nitro-gen, the carbons, fondled earthworms and grubs and larvae, teasing them for the secrets of their fats and proteins; broke down the wanted substance into shadowy colloidal particles; sucked them up the thready pipes of the tendrils and back to the pale

and slimming body crouching on a flat space atop a ridge, a hill, a peak.

There, using the blueprints stored in the molecules of the cerebellum, her body took the building blocks of elements and fashioned them into a very thin shell of the most available material, a shield large enough so she could expand to fit it while her natural enemies—the keen and hungry predators that prowled twilighted Baudelaire—nosed and clawed it in vain.

Then, her evergrowing bulk cramped, she would resorb the hard covering. And if no sharp tooth found her during that process of a few days, she would cast another and a larger. And so on through a dozen or more.

Until she had become the monstrous and much reformed body of an adult and virgin female. Outside would be the stuff that so much resembled a boulder, that was, actually, rock: either granite, diorite, marble, basalt, or maybe just plain limestone. Or sometimes iron, glass, or cellulose.

Within was the centrally located brain, probably as large as a man's. Surrounding it, the tons of the various organs: the nervous system, the mighty heart, or hearts, the four stom-achs, the microwave and longwave generators, the kidneys, bowels, tracheae, scent and taste organs, the perfume factory which made odors to attract animals and birds close enough to be seized, and the huge

womb. And the antennae—the small one inside for teaching and scanning the young, and a long and powerful stalk on the outside, projecting from the shelltop, retractable if danger came.

The next step was from virgin to Mother, lower case to up-percase as designated in her pulse-language by a longer pause before a word. Not until she was deflowered could she take a high place in her society. Immodest, unblushing, she herself made the advances, the proposals, and the surrender.

After which, she ate her mate.

The all-around clock in the panrad told Eddie he was in his thirtieth day of imprisonment when he found out that lit-

tle bit of information. He was shocked, not because it offended his ethics, but because he himself had been intended to be the mate. And the dinner.

His finger tapped, "Tell me, O Mother, what you mean." He had not wondered before how a species that lacked males could reproduce. Now he found that, to the Mothers, all creatures except themselves were male. Mothers were im-mobile and female. Mobiles were male. Eddie had been mo-bile. He was, therefore, a male.

He had approached this particular Mother during the mat-ing season, that is, midway through raising a litter of young.

She had scanned him as he came along

the creekbanks at the valley bottom. When he was at the foot of the hill, she had detected his odor. It was new to her. The closest she could come to it in her memorybanks was that of a beast similar to him. From her description, he guessed it to be an ape. So she had released from her repertoire its rut stench. When he seemingly fell into the trap, she had caught him. He was supposed to attack the conception-spot, that light gray swelling on the wall. After he had ripped and torn it enough to begin the mysterious workings of pregnancy, he would have been popped into her stomach-iris.

Fortunately, he had lacked the sharp beak, the fang, the claw. And she had

received her own signals back from the panrad.

Eddie did not understand why it was necessary to use a mobile for mating. A Mother was intelligent enough to pick up a sharp stone and mangle the spot herself. He was given to understand that conception would not start unless it was accompanied by a certain titillation of the nerves—a frenzy and its satisfaction. Why this emotional state was needed, Mother did not know.

Eddie tried to explain about such things as genes and chro-mosomes and why they had to be present in highly-developed species in order to have differences and selections of favora-ble characteristics and open the gates to

evolutionary changes. Mother did not get it.

Eddie wondered if the number of slashes and rips in the spot corresponded to the number of young. Or, if in any way, say, there were a large number of potentialities in the hered-ity-ribbons spread out under the conception-skin. And if the haphazard irritation and consequent stimulation of the genes paralleled the chance combining of genes in human male-fe-male mating. Thus resulting in offspring with traits that were both joinings and dissimilarities of their parents'.

Or did the inevitable devouring of the mobile after the act indicate more than an emotional and nutritional reflex? Did

it hint that the mobile caught up scattered gene-nodes, like hard seeds, along with the torn skin, in its claws and tusks, that these genes survived the boiling in the stew-stomach, and were later passed out in the feces? Where animals and birds picked them up in beak, tooth, or foot, and then, seized by other Mothers in this oblique rape, transmitted the heredity-carrying agents to the conception spots while attacking them, the nodules being scraped off and implanted in the skin and blood of the swelling even as others were harvested? Later the mobiles were eaten, digested, and ejected in the obscure but ingenious and never-ending cycle? Thus ensuring the con-tinual, if haphazard, recombining of genes,

chances for varia-tions in offspring, opportunities for mutations, and so on?

Mother pulsed that she was nonplused.

Eddie gave up. He'd never know. After all, did it matter?

He decided not and rose from his prone position to request water. She pursed up her iris and spouted a tepid quartful into his thermos. He dropped in a pill, swished it around till it dissolved, and drank a reasonable facsimile of Old Red Star. He preferred the harsh and powerful rye, though he could have afforded the smoothest. Quick results were what he wanted. Taste didn't matter, as he disliked all liquor tastes. Thus he drank what the Skid Row bums

drank and shud-dered even as they did so, renaming it Old Rotten Tar and cursing the fate that had brought them so low they had to gag such stuff down.

The rye glowed in his belly and spread quickly through his limbs and up to his head, chilled only by the increasing scarcity of the capsules. When he ran out—then what? It was at times like this that he most missed his mother. Thinking about her brought a few large tears. He snuffled and drank some more and when the biggest of the Sluggos nudged him for a back-scratching, he gave it instead a shot of Old Red Star. A slug for Sluggo. Idly, he wondered what effect a taste for rye would have on the future of the race

when these virgins became Mothers.

At that moment he was rocked by what seemed a wonder-ful lifesaving idea. These creatures could suck up the re-quired elements from the earth and with them duplicate quite complex molecular structures. Provided, of course, they had a sample of the desired substance to brood over in some cryptic organ. Well, what easier to do than give her one of the cherished capsules? One could become any number. Those, plus the abundance of water pumped up through hollow underground tendrils from the nearby creek, would give enough to make a master-distiller green!

He smacked his lips and was about to key her his request when what she was

transmitting penetrated his mind. Rather cattily, she remarked that her neighbor across the valley was putting on airs because she, too, held prisoner a communicating mobile.

The Mothers had a society as hierarchical as table-protocol in Washington or the peck-order in a barnyard. Prestige was what counted, and prestige was determined by the broadcast-ing power, the height of the eminence on which the Mother sat, which governed the extent of her radar-territory, and the abundance and novelty and wittiness of her gossip. The crea-ture that had snapped Eddie up was a Queen. She had prece-dence over thirty-odd of her kind; they all had to let her

broadcast first, and none dared start pulsing until she quit. Then, the next in order began, and so on down the line. Any of them could be interrupted at any time by Number One, and if any of the lower echelon had something interesting to transmit, she could break in on the one then speaking and get permission from the Queen to tell her tale. Eddie knew this, but he could not listen in directly to the hilltop-gabble. The thick pseudo-granite shell barred him from that and made him dependent upon her womb-stalk for relayed information.

Now and then Mother opened the door and allowed her young to crawl out. There they practiced beaming and broadcasting at the Sluggos of the

Mother across the valley. Occa-sionally that Mother deigned herself to pulse the young, and Eddie's keeper reciprocated to her offspring.

Turnabout.

The first time the children had inched through the exit-iris, Eddie had tried, Ulysses-like, to pass himself off as one of them and crawl out in the midst of the flock. Eyeless, but no Polyphemus, Mother had picked him out with her tentacles and hauled him back in.

It was following that incident that he had named her Polyphema. Thus, he knew she had increased her own already powerful prestige tremendously by possession of that unique thing—a transmitting mobile. So much had her

importance grown that the Mothers on the fringes of her area passed on the news to others. Before he had learned her language, the entire conti-nent was hooked-up. Polyphema had become a veritable gos-sip columnist; tens of thousands of hill-crouchers listened in eagerly to her accounts of her dealings with the walking para-dox: a semantic male.

That had been fine. Then, very recently, the Mother across the valley had captured a similar creature. And in one bound she had become Number Two in the area and would, at the slightest weakness on Polyphema's part, wrest the top posi-tion away. Eddie became widely excited at the news. He had often

daydreamed about his mother and wondered what she was doing. Curiously enough, he ended many of his fantasies with lip-mutterings, reproaching her almost audibly for having left him and for making no try to rescue him. When he became aware of his attitude, he was ashamed. Nevertheless, the sense of desertion colored his thoughts. Now that he knew she was alive and had been caught, probably while trying to get him out, he rose from the leth-argy that had lately been making him doze the clock around. He asked Polyphema if she would open the entrance so he could talk directly with the other captive. She said yes. Eager to listen in on a conversation

between two mobiles, she was very co-operative. There would be a mountain of gossip in what they would have to say. The only thing that dented her joy was that the other Mother would also have access.

Then, remembering she was still Number One and would broadcast the details first, she trembled so with pride and ec-stasy that Eddie felt the floor shaking. Iris open, he walked through it and looked across the val-ley. The hillsides were still green, red, and yellow, as the plants on Bandelaire did not lose their leaves during winter. But a few white patches showed that winter had begun. Eddie shivered from the bite of cold air on his naked skin. Long ago

h e h a d taken o f f h i s clothes. The wombwarmth had made garments too uncomfortable; moreover, Eddie, being human, had had to get rid of waste products. And Polyphema, being a Mother, had had periodically to flush out the dirt with warm water from one of her stomachs. Everytime the tra-cheae-vents exploded, streams that swept the undesirable ele-ments out through her door-iris, Eddie had become soaked. When he abandoned dress, his clothes had gone floating out. Only by sitting on his pack did he keep it from a like fate.

Afterwards, he and the Sluggos had been dried off by warm air pumped through the same vents and originating from the mighty battery of lungs. Eddie

was comfortable enough—he'd always liked showers, anyway—but the loss of his garments kept him from escaping. If he were to, he would soon freeze to death outside unless he found the yacht quickly. And he wasn't sure he remembered the path back.

So now, when he stepped outside, he retreated a pace or two and let the warm air from Polyphema flow like a cloak from his shoulders.

Then he peered across the half-mile that separated him from his mother, but he could not see her. The twilight state and the dark of the unlit interior of her captor quite hid her.

He tapped, in Morse, "Switch to the talkie, same fre-quency." Paula Fetts did

so. She began asking him, franti-cally, if he were all right.

He replied he was fine.

"Have you missed me terribly, son?"

"Oh, very much."

Even as he said this, he wondered, vaguely, why his voice sounded so hollow. Despair at never again being able to see her, probably.

"I've almost gone crazy, Eddie. When you were caught I ran away as fast as I could. I had no idea what horrible mon-ster it was that was attacking us. And then, halfway down the hill, I fell and broke my leg. . . ."

"Oh, no, mother!"

"Yes. But I managed to crawl back to the ship. And there, after I'd set it

myself, I gave myself B.K. shots. Only, my system didn't react like it's supposed to. There are people that way, you know, and the healing took twice as long.

"But when I was able to walk, I got a gun and a box of Blasto. I was going to blow up what I thought was a kind of rock-fortress, an outpost for some kind of extee. I'd no idea of the true nature of these beasts. First, though, I decided to reconnoiter. I was going to spy on the boulder from across the valley. And I was trapped by this thing.

"Listen, son. Before I'm cut off for any reason, let me tell you not to give up hope. I'll be out of here before long and over to rescue you."

"How?"

"If you remember, my lab kit holds a number of carcino-gens for field work. Well, you know that sometimes a Mother's conception-spot, torn up during mating, instead of begetting young, goes into cancer—the opposite of preg-nancy. I've injected a carcinogen into the spot and a beautiful carcinoma has developed. She'll be dead in a few days."

"Mom! You'll be buried in that rotting mass!"

"No. This creature has told me that when one of her spe-cies dies, a reflex opens the labia. That's to permit their young—if any—to escape. Listen, I'll—" A tentacle coiled about him and pulled him back through the iris, which shut.

When he switched hack to C.W., he heard, "Why didn't you communicate? What were you doing? Tell me! Tell me!"

Eddie told her. There was a silence that could only be in-terpreted as astonishment. After she'd recovered her wits, she said, "From now on, you will talk to the other male through me."

Obviously, she envied and hated his ability to change wave-bands, and, perhaps, had a struggle to accept the idea. It was outre.

"Please," he persisted, not knowing how dangerous were the waters he was wading in, "please let me talk to my mother di—"

For the first time, he heard her stutter.

"Wha-wha-what? Your Mo-Mo-Mother?"

"Yes. Of course."

The floor heaved violently beneath his feet. He cried out and braced himself to keep from falling and then flashed on the light. The walls were pulsating like shaken jelly, and the vascular columns had turned from red and blue to gray. The entrance-iris sagged open, like a lax mouth, and the air cooled. He could feel the drop in temperature in her flesh with the soles of his feet.

It was some time before he caught on.

Polyphema was in a state of shock.

What might have happened had she stayed in it, he never knew. She might have died and thus forced him out into

the winter before his mother could escape. If so, and he couldn't find the ship, he would die. Huddled in the warmest corner of the egg-shaped chamber, Eddie contemplated that idea and shivered to a degree the outside air couldn't account for.

However, Polyphema had her own method of recovery. It consisted of spewing out the contents of her stew-stomach, which had doubtless become filled with the poisons draining out of her system from the blow. Her ejection of the stuff was the physical manifestation of the psychical catharsis. So furious was the flood that her foster son was almost swept out in the hot tide, but she, reacting instinctively had coiled

tentacles about him and the Sluggos. Then she followed the first upchucking by emptying her other three waterpouches, the second hot and the third lukewarm and the fourth, just filled, cold.

Eddie yelped as the icy water doused him.

Polyphema's irises closed again. The floor and walls grad-ually quit quaking; the temperature rose; and her veins and arteries regained their red and blue. She was well again. Or so she seemed.

But when, after waiting twenty-four hours, he cautiously approached the subject, he found she not only would not talk about it, she refused to acknowledge the existence of the other mobile.

Eddie, giving up the hopes of conversation, thought for quite a while. The only conclusion he could come to, and he was sure he'd grasped enough of her psychology to make it valid, was that the concept of a mobile female was utterly unacceptable.

Her world was split into two: mobile and her kind, the im-mobile. Mobile meant food and mating. Mobile meant—male. The Mothers were—female.

How the mobiles reproduced had probably never entered the hillcrouchers' minds. Their science and philosophy were on the instinctive body-level. Whether they had some notion of spontaneous generation or amoeba-like fission being re-sponsible for the

continued population of mobiles, or they'd just taken for granted they "growed," like Topsy, Eddie never found out. To them, they were female and the rest of the protoplasmic cosmos was male.

That was that. Any other idea was more than foul and ob-scene and blasphemous. It was—unthinkable.

So that Polyphema had received a deep trauma from his words. And though she seemed to have recovered, somewhere in those tons of unimaginably complicated flesh a bruise was buried. Like a hidden flower, dark purple, it bloomed, and the shadow it cast was one that cut off a certain memory, a certain tract, from the light of

consciousness. That bruise-stained shadow covered that time and event which the Mother, for reasons unfathomable to the human being, found necessary to mark KEEP OFF.

Thus, though Eddie did not word it, he understood in the cells of his body, he felt and knew, as if his bones were prophesying and his brain did not hear, what came to pass.

Sixty-six hours later by the panrad clock, Polyphema's entrance-lips opened. Her tentacles darted out. They came back in, carrying his helpless and struggling mother. Eddie, roused out of a doze, horrified, paralyzed, saw her toss herlabkita thim and heard an inarticulate cry from her. And saw her

plunged, headforemost, into the stomach-iris.

Polyphema had taken the one sure way of burying the evi-dence. Eddie lay face down, nose mashed against the warm and faintly throbbing flesh of the floor. Now and then his hands clutched spasmodically as if he were reaching for something that someone kept putting just within his reach and then moving away. How long he was there, he didn't know, for he never again looked at the clock. Finally, in the darkness, he sat up and giggled, inanely, "Mother always did make good stew."

That set him off. He leaned back on his hands and threw his head back and howled like a wolf under a full moon.

Polyphema, of course, was dead-deaf, but she could radar his posture, and her keen nostrils deduced from his body-scent that he was in a terrible fear and anguish. A tentacle glided out and gently enfolded him.

"What is the matter?" zzted the panrad.

He stuck his finger in the keyhole.

"I have lost my mother!"

“?”

"She's gone away, and she'll never come back."

"I don't understand. *Here I am."*

Eddie quit weeping and cocked his head as if he were lis-tening to some inner voice. He snuffled a few times and wiped away the tears, slowly

disengaged the tentacle, patted it, walked over to his pack in a corner, and took out the bot-tle of Old Red Star capsules. One he popped into the thermos; the other he gave to her with the request she duplicate it, if possible. Then he stretched out on his side, propped on one elbow, like a Roman in his sensualities, sucked the rye through the nipple, and listened to the medly of Beethoven, Moussorgsky, Verdi, Strauss, Porter, Casals, Feinstein, and Waxworth.

So the time—if there were such a thing there—flowed around Eddie. When he was tired of music or plays or books, he listened in on the area hook-up. Hungry, he rose and walked—or

often just crawled—to the stew-iris. Cans of ra-tions lay in his pack; he had planned to eat on those until he was sure that—what was it he was forbidden to eat? Poison? Something had been devoured by Polyphema and the Sluggos. But sometime during the music-rye orgy, he had forgotten. He now ate quite hungrily and with thought for nothing but the satisfaction of his wants. Sometimes the door-iris opened, and Billy Greengrocer hopped in. Billy looked like a cross between a cricket and a kangaroo. He was the size of a collie, and he bore in a mar-supalian pouch vegetables and fruit and nuts. These he ex-tracted with shiny green, chitinous claws and gave to Mother in return for

meals of stew. Happy symbiote, he chirruped merrily while his many-faceted eyes, revolving inde-pendently of each other, looked one at the Sluggos and the other at Eddie. Eddie, on impulse, abandoned the 1000 kc. band and roved the frequencies until he found that both Polyphema and Billy were emitting a 108 wave. That, apparently, was their natural signal. When Billy had his groceries to deliver, he broadcast. Polyphema, in turn, when she needed them, sent back to him. There was nothing intelligent on Billy's part; it was just his instinct to transmit. And the Mother was, aside from the "semantic" frequency, limited to that one band. But it worked out fine.

Everything was fine. What more could a man want? Free food, unlimited liquor, soft bed, air-conditioning, shower-baths, music, intellectual works (on the tape), interesting conversation (much of it was about him), privacy, and secu-rity. If he had not already named her, he would have called her Mother Gratis. Nor were creature comforts all. She had given him the answers to all his questions, all. . . .

Except one.

That was never expressed vocally by him. Indeed, he would have been incapable of doing so. He was probably un-aware that he had such a question. But Polyphema voiced it one day when she asked him to do her a favor. Eddie reacted as if outraged.

"One does not—! One does not—!"

He choked and then he thought, how ridiculous! She is not—

And looked puzzled, and said, "But she is."

He rose and opened the lab kit. While he was looking for a scalpel, he came across the carcinogens. Without thinking about it, he threw them through the half-opened labia far out and down the hillside.

Then he turned and, scalpel in hand, leaped at the light grey 'swelling on the wall. And stopped, staring at it, while the instrument fell from his hand. And picked it up and stabbed freely and did not even scratch the skin. And again let it drop.

"What is it? What is it?" crackled the panrad hanging from his wrist. Suddenly, a heavy cloud of human odor—mansweat—was puffed in his face from a nearby vent.

"? ? ? ?"

And he stood, bent in a half-crouch, seemingly paralyzed. Until tentacles seized him in fury and dragged him towards the stomach-iris, yawning mansized. Eddie screamed and writhed and plunged his finger in the panrad and tapped, "All right! All right!"

And once back before the spot, he lunged with a sudden and wild joy; he slashed savagely; he yelled. "Take that! And that, P . . ." and the rest was lost in a mindless shout.

He did not stop cutting, and he might have gone on and on until he had quite excised the spot had not Polyphema inter-fered by dragging him towards her stomach-iris again. For ten seconds he hung there, helpless and sobbing with a strange mixture of fear and glory.

Polyphema's reflexes had almost overcome her brain. For-tunately, a cold spark of reason lit up a corner of the vast, dark, and hot chapel of her frenzy. The convolutions leading to the steaming, meat-laden pouch closed and the foldings of flesh rearranged themselves. Eddie was suddenly hosed with warm water from what he called the "sanitation" stomach. The iris closed. He was put down. The scalpel was put

back in the bag.

For a long time Mother seemed to he shaken by the thought of what she might have done to Eddie. She did not trust herself to transmit until her nerves were settled. When she did, she did not refer to his narrow escape. Nor did he. He was happy. He felt as if a spring, tight-coiled against his bowels since he and his wife had parted, was now, for some reason, sprung. The dull vague pain of loss and discon-tent, the slight fever and cramp in his entrails and apathy that sometimes afflicted him, were gone. He felt fine.

Meanwhile, something akin to deep affection had been lighted, like a tiny candle under the drafty and

overtowering roof of a cathedral. Mother's shell housed more than Eddie; it now curved over an emotion new to her kind. This was evi-dent by the next event that filled him with terror.

For the wounds in the spot healed and the swelling in-creased into a large bag. Then the bag burst and ten mouse-sized Sluggos struck the floor. The impact had the same effect as a doctor's spanking a newborn baby's bottom; they drew in their first breath with shock and pain: their uncontrolled and feeble pulses filled the ether with shapeless SOS's.

When Eddie was not talking with Polyphema or listening in or drinking or sleeping or eating or bathing or running off the tape, he played with the Sluggos.

He was, in a sense, their father. Indeed, as they grew to hog-size, it was hard for their female parent to distinguish him from her young. As he sel-dom walked *any* more, and was often to be found on hands and knees in their midst, she could not scan him too well. Moreover, something in the heavy wet air or in the diet had caused every hair on his body to drop off. He grew very fat. Generally speaking, he was one with the pale, soft, round, and bald offspring. A family likeness.

There was one difference. When the time came for the vir-gins to be expelled, Eddie crept to one end, whimpering, and stayed there until he was sure Mother was not going to thrust

him out into the cold, hard, and hungry world. That final crisis over, he came back to the center of the floor. The panic in his breast had died out, but his nerves were still quivering. He filled his thermos and then listened for a while to his own baritone singing the Sea *Things* aria from his favorite opera, Gianelli's *Ancient Mariner.* Suddenly he burst out and accompanied himself, finding himself thrilled as never before by the concluding words. *And from my neck so free*

The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.

Afterwards, voice silent but heart singing, he switched off the wire and cut in on Polyphema's broadcast.

Mother was having trouble. She could not precisely describe to the continent-wide hook-up this new and almost inexpressible emotion she felt about the mobile. It was a con-cept her language was not prepared for. Nor was she helped any by the gallons of Old Red Star in her bloodstream.

Eddie sucked at the plastic nipple and nodded sympathetically and drowsily at her search for words. Presently, the thermos rolled out of his hand. He slept on his side, curled in a ball, knees on his chest and-arms crossed, neck bent forward. Like the pilot room chronometer whose hands reversed after the crash, the clock of his body was ticking backwards, ticking backwards. In

the darkness, in the moistness, safe and warm, well fed, well loved.