

Microsoft®



Microsoft®
Word

1. Over the River and Thru The
Woods

2. Condition of Employment

3. Small Deer

4. Shotgun Cure

5. Madness From Mars

6. Good Night, Mr. James

7. A Death in the House

8. Sunspot Purge

9. The Autumn Land

10. The Sitters

11. Galactic Chest

12. Drop Dead

13. Dinal Gentleman

14. The Golden Bugs

15. Leg. Forst

16. All The Traps of Earth

17. So Bright the Vision

18. The Thing in the Stone

19. Installment Plan

Title : Over the River and
through the Woods

Author : Clifford D. Simak

Original copyright year: 1965

Genre : science fiction

Comments : to my knowledge, this
is the only available e-text of this book

Source : scanned and OCR-read
from a paperback edition with Xerox
TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS
Word 2000.

Date of e-text : February 14, 2000

Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights
reversed.

Over the River and through the Woods

Clifford D. Simak

The two children came trudging down the lane in applecanning time, when the first goldenrods were blooming and the wild asters large in bud. They looked, when she first saw them, out the kitchen window, like children who were coming home from school, for each of them was carrying a bag in which might have been their books. Like Charles and James, she thought, like Alice and Maggie - but the time when those four had trudged the lane on their daily trips to school was in the distant past. Now they had children of their own who made their way to school.

She turned back to the stove to stir the cooking apples, for which the wide-mouthed jars stood waiting on the table, then once more looked out the kitchen window. The two of them were closer now and she could see that the boy was the older of the two - ten, perhaps, and the girl no more than eight.

They might be going past, she thought, although that did not seem too likely, for the lane led to this farm and to nowhere else.

The turned off the lane before they reached the barn and came sturdily trudging up the path that led to the house.

There was no hesitation in them; they knew where they were going.

She stepped to the screen door of the kitchen as they came onto the porch and they stopped before the door and stood looking up at her.

The boy said: 'You are our grandma. Papa said we were to say at once that you were our grandma.'

'But that's not..., ' she said, and stopped. She had been about to say that it was impossible that she was not their grandma. And, looking down into the sober, childish faces, she was glad that she had not said the words.

'I am Ellen,' said the girl, in a piping voice.

'Why, that is strange,' the woman said. 'That is my name, too.'

The boy said, 'My name is Paul.'

She pushed open the door for them and they came in, standing silently in the kitchen, looking all about them as if they'd never seen a kitchen.

'It's just like Papa said,' said Ellen. 'There's the stove and the churn and...'

The boy interrupted her. 'Our name

is Forbes,' he said.

This time the woman couldn't stop herself. 'Why, that's impossible,' she said. 'That is our name, too.'

The boy nodded solemnly. 'Yes, we knew it was.'

'Perhaps,' the woman said, 'you'd like some milk and cookies.'

'Cookies!' Ellen squealed, delighted.

'We don't want to be any trouble,' said the boy. 'Papa said we were to be no trouble.'

'He said we should be good,' piped Ellen.

'I am sure you will be,' said the woman, 'and you are no trouble.'

In a little while, she thought, she'd get it straightened out.

She went to the stove and set the kettle with the cooking apples to one side, where they would simmer slowly.

'Sit down at the table,' she said. 'I'll get the milk and cookies.'

She glanced at the clock, ticking on

the shelf. Four o'clock, almost. In just a little while the men would come in from the fields. Jackson Forbes would know what to do about this; he had always known.

They climbed up on two chairs and sat there solemnly, staring all about them, at the ticking clock, at the wood stove with the fire glow showing through its draft, at the wood piled in the wood box, at the butter churn standing in the corner.

They set their bags on the floor beside them, and they were strange bags, she noticed. They were made of heavy cloth or canvas, but there were no

drawstrings or no straps to fasten them. But they were closed, she saw, despite no straps or strings.

'Do you have some stamps?' asked Ellen.

'Stamps?' asked Mrs Forbes.

'You must pay no attention to her,' said Paul. 'She should not have asked you. She asks everyone and Mama told her not to.'

'But stamps?'

'She collects them. She goes around snitching letters that other people have.'

For the stamps on them, you know.'

'Well now,' said Mrs Forbes, 'there may be some old letters. We'll look for them later on.'

She went into the pantry and got the earthen jug of milk and filled a plate with cookies from the jar. When she came back they were sitting there sedately, waiting for the cookies.

'We are here just for a little while,' said Paul. 'Just a short vacation. Then our folks will come and get us and take us back again.'

Ellen nodded her head vigorously.

'That's what they told us when we went. When I was afraid to go.'

'You were afraid to go?'

'Yes. It was all so strange.'

'There was so little time,' said Paul. 'Almost none at all. We had to leave so fast.'

'And where are you from?' asked Mrs Forbes. 'Why,' said the boy, 'just a little ways from here. We walked just a little ways and of course we had the map. Papa gave it to us and he went over it carefully with us...'

'You're sure your name is Forbes?'

Ellen bobbed her head. 'Of course it is,' she said. 'Strange,' said Mrs Forbes. And it was more than strange, for there were no other Forbes in the neighborhood except her children and her grandchildren and these two, no matter what they said, were strangers.

They were busy with the milk and cookies and she went back to the stove and set the kettle with the apples back on the front again, stirring the cooking fruit with a wooden spoon.

'Where is Grandpa?' Ellen asked.

'Grandpa's in the field. He'll be coming in soon. Are you finished with your cookies?'

'All finished,' said the girl.

'Then we'll have to set the table and get the supper cooking. Perhaps you'd like to help me.'

Ellen hopped down off the chair. 'I'll help,' she said. 'And I,' said Paul, 'will carry in some wood. Papa said I should be helpful. He said I could carry in the wood and feed the chickens and hunt the eggs and...'

'Paul,' said Mrs Forbes, 'it might help if you'd tell me what your father does.'

'Papa,' said the boy, 'is a temporal engineer.'

The two hired men sat at the kitchen table with the checkerboard between them. The two older people were in the living room.

'You never saw the likes of it,' said Mrs Forbes. 'There was this piece of metal and you pulled it and it ran along

another metal strip and the bag came open. And you pulled it the other way and the bag was closed.'

'Something new,' said Jackson Forbes. 'There may be many new things we haven't heard about, back here in the sticks. There are inventors turning out all sorts of things.'

'And the boy,' she said, 'has the same thing on his trousers. I picked them up from where he threw them on the floor when he went to bed and I folded them and put them on the chair. And I saw this strip of metal, the edges jagged-like. And the clothes they wear. That boy's trousers are cut off above the

knees and the dress that the girl was wearing was so short...'

'They talked of plains,' mused Jackson Forbes, 'but not the plains we know. Something that is used, apparently, for folks to travel in. And rockets - as if there were rockets every day and not just on the Earth.'

'We couldn't question them, of course,' said Mrs Forbes. 'There was something about them, something that I sensed.'

Her husband nodded. 'They were frightened, too.'

'You are frightened, Jackson?'

'I don't know,' he said, 'but there are no other Forbes. Not close, that is. Charlie is the closest and he's five miles away. And they said they walked just a little piece.'

'What are you going to do?' she asked. 'What can we do?'

'I don't rightly know,' he said. 'Drive in to the county seat and talk with the sheriff, maybe. These children must be lost. There must be someone looking for them.'

'But they don't act as if they're lost,'

she told him. 'They knew they were coming here. They knew we would be here. They told me I was their grandma and they asked after you and they called you Grandpa. And they are so sure. They don't act as if we're strangers. They've been told about us. They said they'd stay just a little while and that's the way they act. As if they'd just come for a visit.'

'I think,' said Jackson Forbes, 'that I'll hitch up Nellie after breakfast and drive around the neighborhood and ask some questions. Maybe there'll be someone who can tell me something.'

'The boy said his father was a temporal engineer. That just don't make

sense. 'Temporal means the worldly power and authority and...'

'It might be some joke,' her husband said. 'Something that the father said in jest and the son picked up as truth.'

'I think,' said Mrs Forbes, 'I'll go upstairs and see if they're asleep. I left their lamps turned low. They are so little and the house is strange to them. If they are asleep, I'll blow out the lamps.'

Jackson Forbes grunted his approval. 'Dangerous,' he said, 'to keep lights burning of the night. Too much chance of fire.'

The boy was asleep, flat upon his back - the deep and healthy sleep of youngsters. He had thrown his clothes upon the floor when he had undressed to go to bed, but now they were folded neatly on the chair, where she had placed them when she had gone into the room to say goodnight.

The bag stood beside the chair and it was open, the two rows of jagged metal gleaming dully in the dim glow of the lamp. Within its shadowed interior lay the dark forms of jumbled possessions, disorderly, and helter-skelter, no way for a bag to be.

She stooped and picked up the bag and set it on the chair and reached for the little metal tab to close it. At least, she told herself, it should be closed and not left standing open. She grasped the tab and it slid smoothly along the metal tracks and then stopped, its course obstructed by an object that stuck out.

She saw it was a book and reached down to rearrange it so she could close the bag. And as she did so, she saw the title in its faint gold lettering across the leather backstrap - Holy Bible.

With her fingers grasping the book, she hesitated for a moment, then slowly

drew it out. It was bound in an expensive black leather that was dulled with age. The edges were cracked and split and the leather worn from long usage. The gold edging of the leaves were faded.

Hesitantly, she opened it and there, upon the fly leaf, in old and faded ink, was the inscription:

To Sister Ellen from Amelia Oct.
30, 1896

Many Happy Returns of the Day

She felt her knees grow weak and she let herself carefully to the floor and there, crouched beside the chair, read the fly leaf once again.

30 October 1896 - that was her birthday, certainly, but it had not come as yet, for this was only the beginning of September, 1896.

And the Bible - how old was this Bible she held within her hands? A hundred years, perhaps, more than a hundred years.

A Bible, she thought - exactly the

kind of gift Amelia would give her. But a gift that had not been given yet, one that could not be given, for that day upon the fly leaf was a month into the future.

It couldn't be, of course. It was some kind of stupid joke. Or some mistake. Or a coincidence, perhaps. Somewhere else someone else was named Ellen and also had a sister who was named Amelia and the date was a mistake - someone had written the wrong year. It would be an easy thing to do.

But she was not convinced. They had said the name was Forbes and they had come straight here and Paul had spoken of a map so they could find the

way.

Perhaps there were other things inside the bag. She looked at it and shook her head. She shouldn't pry. It had been wrong to take the Bible out.

On 30 October she would be fifty-nine - an old farm-wife with married sons and daughters and grandchildren who came to visit her on week-end and on holidays. And a sister Amelia who, in this year of 1896, would give her a Bible as a birthday gift.

Her hands shook as she lifted the

Bible and put it back into the bag. She'd talk to Jackson when she went down stairs. He might have some thought upon the matter and he'd know what to do.

She tucked the book back into the bag and pulled the tab and the bag was closed. She set it on the floor again and looked at the boy upon the bed. He still was fast asleep, so she blew out the light.

In the adjoining room little Ellen slept, baby-like, upon her stomach. The low flame of the turned-down lamp flickered gustily in the breeze that came through an open window.

Ellen's bag was closed and stood squared against the chair with a sense of neatness. The woman looked at it and hesitated for a moment, then moved on around the bed to where the lamp stood on a bedside table.

The children were asleep and everything was well and she'd blow out the light and go downstairs and talk with Jackson, and perhaps there'd be no need for him to hitch up Nellie in the morning and drive around to ask questions of the neighbors.

As she leaned to blow out the lamp, she saw the envelope upon the table, with the two large stamps of many

colors affixed to the upper right-hand corner.

Such pretty stamps, she thought - I never saw so pretty. She leaned closer to take a look at them and saw the country name upon them. Israel. But there was no such actual place as Israel. It was a Bible name, but there was no country. And if there were no country, how could there be stamps?

She picked up the envelope and studied the stamp, making sure that she had seen right. Such a pretty stamp!

She collects them, Paul had said. She's always snitching letters that belong

to other people.

The envelope bore a postmark, and presumably a date, but it was blurred and distorted by a hasty, sloppy cancellation and she could not make it out.

The edge of a letter sheet stuck a quarter inch out of the ragged edges where the envelope had been torn open and she pulled it out, gasping in her haste to see it while an icy fist of fear was clutching at her heart.

It was, she saw, only the end of a letter, the last page of a letter, and it was in type rather than in longhand - type like

one saw in a newspaper or a book.

Maybe one of those new-fangled things they had in big city offices, she thought, the ones she'd read about. Typewriters - was that what they were called?

do not believe, the one page read, _your plan is feasible. There is no time. The aliens are closing in and they will not give us time.

And there is the further consideration of the ethics of it, even if it could be done. We can not, in all

conscience, scurry back into the past and visit our problems upon the people of a century ago. Think of the problems it would create for them, the economic confusion and the psychological effect.

If you feel that you must, at least, send the children back, think a moment of the wrench it will give those two good souls when they realize the truth. Theirs is a smug and solid world - sure and safe and sound. The concepts of this mad century would destroy all they have, all that they believe in.

But I suppose I cannot presume to counsel you. I have done what you asked. I have written you all I know of

our old ancestors back on that Wisconsin farm. As historian of the family, I am sure my facts are right. Use them as you see fit and God have mercy on us all.

Your loving brother,

Jackson

P.S. A suggestion. If you do send the children back, you might send along with them a generous supply of the new cancer-inhibitor drug. Great-great-grandmother Forbes died in 1904 of a condition that I suspect was cancer. Given those pills, she might survive another ten or twenty years. And what, I ask you, brother, would that mean to this

tangled future? I don't pretend to know. It might save us. It might kill us quicker. It might have no effect at all. I leave the puzzle to you.

If I can finish up work here and get away, I'll be with you at the end._

Mechanically she slid the letter back into the envelope and laid it upon the table beside the flaring lamp.

Slowly she moved to the window that looked out on the empty lane.

They will come and get us, Paul

had said. But would they ever come. Could they ever come?

She found herself wishing they would come. Those poor people, those poor frightened children caught so far in time.

Blood of my blood, she thought, flesh of my flesh, so many years away. But still her flesh and blood, no matter how removed. Not only these two beneath this roof tonight, but all those others who had not come to her.

The letter had said 1904 and cancer and that was eight years away - she'd be an old, old woman then. And the

signature had been Jackson - an old family name, she wondered, carried on and on, a long chain of people who bore the name of Jackson Forbes?

She was stiff and numb, she knew. Later she'd be frightened. Later she would wish she had not read the letter. Perhaps, she did not know.

But now she must go back downstairs and tell Jackson the best way that she could.

She moved across the room and blew out the light and went out into the hallway.

A voice came from the open door beyond.

'Grandma, is that you?'

'Yes, Paul,' she answered. 'What can I do for you?'

In the doorway she saw him crouched beside the chair, in the shaft of moonlight pouring through the window, fumbling at the bag.

'I forgot,' he said. 'There was something papa said I was to give you right away.'

Condition of Employment
by
Clifford D. Simak

HE HAD BEEN dreaming of home, and when he came awake, he held his eyes tight shut in a desperate effort not to lose the dream. He kept some of it, but it was blurred and faint and lacked the sharp distinction and the color of the dream.

He could tell it to himself, he knew just how it was, he could recall it as a lost and far-off thing and place, but it was not there as it had been in the dream.

But even so, he held his eyes tight shut, for now that he was awake, he knew what they'd open on, and he shrank from the drabness and the coldness of

the room in which he lay. It was, he thought, not alone the drabness and the cold, but also the loneliness and the sense of not belonging. So long as he did not look at it, he need not accept this harsh reality, although he felt himself on the fringe of it, and it was reaching for him, reaching through the color and the warmth and friendliness of this other place he tried to keep in mind.

At last it was impossible. The fabric of the held-onto dream became too thin and fragile to ward off the moment of reality, and he let his eyes come open.

It was every bit as bad as he

remembered it. It was drab and cold and harsh, and there was the maddening alienness waiting for him, crouching in the corner. He tensed himself against it, trying to work up his courage, hardening himself to arise and face it for another day.

The plaster of the ceiling was cracked and had flaked away in great ugly blotches. The paint on the wall was peeling and dark stains ran down it from the times the rain leaked in. And there was the smell, the musty human smell that had been caged in the room too long.

Staring at the ceiling, he tried to see the sky. There had been a time when he

could have seen it through this or any ceiling. For the sky had belonged to him, the sky and the wild, dark space beyond it. But now he'd lost them. They were his no longer.

A few marks in a book, he thought, an entry in the record. That was all that was needed to smash a man's career, to crush his hope forever and to keep him trapped and exiled on a planet that was not his own.

He sat up and swung his feet over the edge of the bed, hunting for the trousers he'd left on the floor. He found and pulled them on and scuffed into his shoes and stood up in the room.

The room was small and mean - and cheap. There would come a day when he could not afford a room even as cheap as this. His cash was running out, and when the last of it was gone, he would have to get some job, any kind of job. Perhaps he should have gotten one before he began to run so short. But he had shied away from it. For settling down to work would be an admission that he was defeated, that he had given up his hope of going home again.

He had been a fool, he told himself, for ever going into space. Let him just get back to Mars and no one could ever get him off it. He'd go back to the ranch

and stay there as his father had wanted him to do. He'd marry Eller and settle down, and other fools could fly the death-traps around the Solar System.

Glamor, he thought-it was the glamor that sucked in the kids when they were young and starry-eyed. The glamor of the far place, of the wilderness of space, of the white eyes of the stars watching in that wilderness - the glamor of the engine-song and of the chill white metal knifing through the blackness and the loneliness of the emptiness, and the few cubic feet of courage and defiance that thumbed its nose at that emptiness.

But there was no glamor. There

was brutal work and everlasting watchfulness and awful sickness, the terrible fear that listened for the stutter in the drive, for the ping against the metal hide, for any one of the thousand things that could happen out in space.

He picked up his wallet off the bedside table and put it in his pocket and went out into the hall and down the rickety stairs to the crumbling, lopsided porch outside.

And the greenness waited for him, the unrelenting, bilious green of Earth. It was a thing to gag at, to steel oneself against, an indecent and abhorrent color for anyone to look at. The grass was

green and all the plants and every single tree. There was no place outdoors and few indoors where one could escape from it, and when one looked at it too long, it seemed to pulse and tremble with a hidden life.

The greenness, and the brightness of the sun, and the sapping beat - these were things of Earth that it was hard to bear. The light one could get away from, and the heat one could somehow ride along with - but the green was always there.

He went down the steps, fumbling in his pocket for a cigarette. He found a crumpled package and in it one

crumpled cigarette. He put it between his lips and threw the pack away and stood at the gate, trying to make up his mind.

But it was a gesture only, this hardening of his mind, for he knew what he would do. There was nothing else to do. He'd done it day after day for more weeks than he cared to count, and he'd do it again today and tomorrow and tomorrow, until his cash ran out.

And after that, he wondered, what?

Get a job and try to strike a bargain with his situation? Try to save against the day when he could buy passage back

to Mars - for they'd surely let him ride the ships even if they wouldn't let him run them. But, he told himself, he'd figured that one out. It would take twenty years to save enough, and he had no twenty years.

He lit the cigarette and went tramping down the street, and even through the cigarette, he could smell the hated green.

Ten blocks later, he reached the far edge of the spaceport. There was a ship. He stood for a moment looking at it before he went into the shabby restaurant to buy himself some breakfast.

There was a ship, he thought, and that was a hopeful sign. Some days there weren't any, some days three or four.

But there was a ship today and it might be the one.

One day, he told himself, he'd surely find the ship out there that would take him home - a ship with a captain so desperate for an engineer that he would overlook the entry in the book.

But even as he thought it, he knew it for a lie - a lie he told himself each day. Perhaps to justify his coming here each day to check at the hiring hall, to lie to keep his hope alive, to keep his courage

up. A lie that made it even barely possible to face the bleak, warm room and the green of Earth.

He went into the restaurant and sat down on a stool.

The waitress came to take his order. "Cakes again?" she asked.

He nodded. Pancakes were cheap and filling and he had to make his money last.

"You'll find a ship today," said the waitress. "I have a feeling you will."

"Perhaps I will," he said, without

believing it.

"I know just how you feel," the waitress told him. "I know how awful it can be. I was homesick once myself, the first time I left home. I thought I would die."

He didn't answer, for he felt it would not have been dignified to answer. Although why he should now lay claim to dignity, he could not imagine.

But this, in any case, was more than simple homesickness. It was planetsickness, culturesickness, a cutting off of all he'd known and wanted.

Sitting, waiting for the cakes to cook, he caught the dream again - the dream of red hills rolling far into the land, of the cold, dry air soft against the skin, of the splendor of the stars at twilight and the faery yellow of the distant sandstorm. And the low house crouched against the land, with the old gray-haired man sitting stiffly in a chair upon the porch that faced toward the sunset.

The waitress brought the cakes.

The day would come, he told himself, when he could afford no longer this self-pity he carried. He knew it for

what it was and he should get rid of it. And yet it was a thing he lived with - even more than that, it had become a way of life. It was his comfort and his shield, the driving force that kept him trudging on each day.

He finished the cakes and paid for them.

"Good luck," said the waitress, with a smile.

"Thank you," he said.

He tramped down the road, with the gravel crunching underfoot and the sun like a blast upon his back, but he had left

the greenness. The port lay bare and bald, scalped and cauterized.

He reached where he was going and went up to the desk.

"You again," said the union agent.

"Anything for Mars?"

"Not a thing. No, wait a minute. There was a man in here not too long ago."

The agent got up from the desk and went to the door. Then he stepped outside the door and began to shout at someone.

A few minutes later, he was back. Behind him came a lumbering and irate individual. He had a cap upon his head that said CAPTAIN in greasy, torn letters, but aside from that he was distinctly out of uniform.

"Here's the man," the agent told the captain. "Name of Anson Cooper. Engineer first class, but his record's not too good."

"Damn the record!" bawled the captain. He said to Cooper: "Do you know Morrisons?"

"I was raised with them," said

Cooper. It was not the truth, but he knew he could get by.

"They're good engines," said the captain, "but cranky and demanding. You'll have to baby them. You'll have to sleep with them. And if you don't watch them close, they'll up and break your back."

"I know how to handle them," said Cooper.

"My engineer ran out on me." The captain spat on the floor to show his contempt for runaway engineers. "He wasn't man enough."

"I'm man enough," Cooper declared.

And he knew, standing there, what it would be like. But there was no other choice. If he wanted to get back to Mars, he had to take the Morrisons.

"O.K., then, come on with you," the captain said.

"Wait a minute," said the union agent. "You can't rush off a man like this. You have to give him time to pick up his duffle."

"I haven't any to pick up," Cooper said, thinking of the few pitiful

belongings back in the boarding house.
"Or none that matters."

"You understand," the agent said to the captain, "that the union cannot vouch for a man with a record such as his."

"To hell with that," said the captain. "Just so he can run the engines. That's all I ask."

The ship stood far out in the field. She had not been much to start with and she had not improved with age. Just the job of riding on a craft like that would be high torture, without the worry of nursing Morrisons.

"She'll hang together, no fear," said the captain. "She's got a lot more trips left in her than you'd think. It beats all hell what a tub like that can take."

Just one more trip, thought Cooper. Just so she gets me to Mars. Then she can fall apart, for all I care.

"She's beautiful," he said, and meant it.

He walked up to one of the great landing fins and laid a hand upon it. It was solid metal, with all the paint peeled off it, with tiny pits of corrosion speckling its surface and with a hint of cold, as if it might not as yet have shed

all the touch of space.

And this was it, he thought. After all the weeks of waiting, here finally was the thing of steel and engineering that would take him home again.

He walked back to where the captain stood.

"Let's get on with it," he said. "I'll want to look the engines over."

"They're all right," said the captain.

"That may be so. I still want to run a check on them." He had expected the engines to be bad, but not as bad as they

turned out to be. If the ship had not been much to look at, the Morrisons were worse.

"They'll need some work," he said. "We can't lift with them, the shape they're in."

The captain raved and swore. "We have to blast by dawn, damn it! This is a goddam emergency."

"You'll lift by dawn," snapped Cooper. "Just leave me alone."

He drove his gang to work, and he worked himself, for fourteen solid hours, without a wink of sleep, without a bite to

eat.

Then he crossed his fingers and told the captain he was ready.

They got out of atmosphere with the engines holding together. Cooper uncrossed the fingers and sighed with deep relief. Now all he had to do was keep them running.

The captain called him forward and brought out a bottle. "You did better, Mr. Cooper, than I thought you would."

Cooper shook his head. "We aren't there yet, Captain. We've a long way still to go."

"Mr. Cooper," said the captain, "you know what we are carrying? You got any idea at all?"

Cooper shook his head.

"Medicines," the captain told him. "There's an epidemic out there. We were the only ship anywhere near ready for takeoff. So we were requisitioned."

"It would have been much better if we could have overhauled the engines."

"We didn't have the time. Every minute counts."

Cooper drank the liquor, stupid with a tiredness that cut clear to the bone. "Epidemic, you say. What kind?"

"Sand fever," said the captain. "You've heard of it, perhaps."

Cooper felt the chill of deadly fear creep along his body.

"I've heard of it." He finished off the whisky and stood up.

"I have to get back, sir. I have to watch those engines."

"We're counting on you, Mr. Cooper. You have to get us through."

He went back to the engine room and slumped into a chair, listening to the engine-song that beat throughout the ship.

He had to keep them going. There was no question of it now, if there'd ever been a question. For now it was not the simple matter of getting home again, but of getting needed drugs to the old home planet.

"I promise you," he said, talking to himself. "I promise you we'll get there."

He drove the engine crew and he drove himself, day after dying day, while the howling of the tubes and the

thunder of the haywire Morrisons racked a man almost beyond endurance.

There was no such thing as sleep - only catnaps caught as one could catch them. There were no such things as meals, only food gulped on the run. And there was work, and worse than work were the watching and the waiting, the shoulders tensed against the stutter or the sudden screech of metal that would spell disaster.

Why, he wondered dully, did a man ever go to space? Why should one deliberately choose a job like this? Here in the engine room, with its cranky motors, it might be worse than

elsewhere in the ship. But that didn't mean it wasn't bad. For throughout the ship stretched tension and discomfort and, above all, the dead, black fear of space itself, of what space could do to a ship and the men within it.

In some of the bigger, newer ships, conditions might be better, but not a great deal better. They still tranquilized the passengers and colonists who went out to the other planets - tranquilized them to quiet the worries, to make them more insensitive to discomfort, to prevent their breaking into panic.

But a crew you could not tranquilize. A crew must be wide-

awake, with all its faculties intact. A crew had to sit and take it.

Perhaps the time would come when the ships were big enough, when the engines and the drives would be perfected, when Man had lost some of his fear of the emptiness of space - then it would be easier.

But the time might be far off. It was almost two hundred years now since his family had gone out, among the first colonists, to Mars.

If it were not that he was going home, he told himself, it would be beyond all tolerance and endurance. He

could almost smell the cold, dry air of home - even in this place that reeked with other smells. He could look beyond the metal skin of the ship in which he rode and across the long dark miles and see the gentle sunset on the redness of the hills.

And in this he had an advantage over all the others.

For without going home, he could not have stood it.

The days wore on and the engines held and the hope built up within him. And finally hope gave way to triumph.

And then came the day when the ship went mushing down through the thin, cold atmosphere and came in to a landing.

He reached out and pulled a switch and the engines rumbled to a halt. Silence came into the tortured steel that still was numb with noise.

He stood beside the engines, deafened by the silence, frightened by this alien thing that never made a sound.

He walked along the engines, with his hand sliding on their metal, stroking them as he would pet an animal, astonished and slightly angry at himself

for finding in himself a queer, distorted quality of affection for them.

But why not? They had brought him home. He had nursed and pampered them, he had cursed them and watched over them, he had slept with them, and they had brought him home.

And that was more, he admitted to himself, than he had ever thought they would do.

He found that he was alone. The crew had gone swarming up the ladder as soon as he had pulled the switch. And now it was time that he himself was going.

But he stood there for a moment, in that silent room, as he gave the place one final visual check. Everything was all right. There was nothing to be done.

He turned and climbed the ladder slowly, heading for the port.

He found the captain standing in the port, and out beyond the port stretched the redness of the land.

"All the rest have gone except the purser," said the captain. "I thought you'd soon be up. You did a fine job with the engines, Mr. Cooper. I'm glad you shipped with us."

"It's my last run," Cooper said, staring out at the redness of the hills. "Now I settle down."

"That's strange," said the captain. "I take it you're a Mars man."

"I am. And I never should have left."

The captain stared at him and said again: "That's strange."

"Nothing strange," said Cooper. "I -"

"It's my last run, too," the captain

broke in. "There'll be a new commander to take her back to Earth."

"In that case," Cooper offered, "I'll stand you a drink as soon as we get down."

"I'll take you up on that. First we'll get our shots."

They climbed down the ladder and walked across the field toward the spaceport buildings. Trucks went whining past them, heading for the ship, to pick up the unloaded cargo.

And now it was all coming back to Cooper, the way he had dreamed it in

that shabby room on Earth - the exhilarating taste of the thinner, colder air, the step that was springier because of the lesser gravity, the swift and clean elation of the uncluttered, brave red land beneath a weaker sun.

Inside, the doctor waited for them in his tiny office.

"Sorry, gentlemen," he said, "but you know the regulations."

"I don't like it," said the captain, "but I suppose it does make sense."

They sat down in the chairs and rolled up their sleeves.

"Hang on," the doctor told them. "It gives you quite a jolt."

It did.

And it had before, thought Cooper, every time before.

He should be used to it by now.

He sat weakly in the chair, waiting for the weakness and the shock to pass, and he saw the doctor, there behind his desk, watching them and waiting for them to come around to normal.

"Was it a rough trip?" the doctor

finally asked.

"They all are rough," the captain replied curtly.

Cooper shook his head. "This one was the worst I've ever known. Those engines..."

The captain said: "I'm sorry, Cooper. This time it was the truth. We were really carrying medicine. There is an epidemic. Mine was the only ship. I'd planned an overhaul, but we couldn't wait."

Cooper nodded. "I remember now," he said.

He stood up weakly and stared out the window at the cold, the alien, the forbidding land of Mars.

"I never could have made it," he said flatly, "if I'd not been psychoed."

He turned back to the doctor. "Will there ever be a time?"

The doctor nodded. "Some day, certainly. When the ships are better. When the race is more conditioned to space travel."

"But this homesickness business - it gets downright brutal."

"It's the only way," the doctor declared. "We'd not have any spacemen if they weren't always going home."

"That's right," the captain said. "No man, myself included, could face that kind of beating unless it was for something more than money."

Cooper looked out the window at the Martian sandscape and shivered. Of all the God-forsaken places he had ever seen!

He was a fool to be in space, he told himself, with a wife like Doris and two kids back home. He could hardly

wait to see them.

And he knew the symptoms. He was getting homesick once again - but this time it was for Earth.

The doctor was taking a bottle out of his desk and pouring generous drinks into glasses for all three of them.

"Have a shot of this," he said, "and let's forget about it"

"As if we could remember," said Cooper, laughing suddenly.

"After all," the captain said, far too cheerfully, "we have to see it in the right

perspective. It's nothing more than a condition of employment."

Title : Small Deer
Author : Clifford D. Simak
Original copyright year: 1965
Genre : science fiction
Comments : to my knowledge, this
is the only available e-text of this book
Source : scanned and OCR-read
from a paperback edition with Xerox
TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS
Word 2000.
Date of e-text : February 14, 2000
Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights
reversed.

Small Deer

Clifford D. Simak

Willow Bend,
Wisconsin June 23, 1966

Dr. Wyman Jackson, Wyalusing
College. Muscoda, Wisconsin

My dear Dr. Jackson:

I am writing to you because I don't know who else to write to and there is something I have to tell someone who can understand. I know your name because I read your book, 'Cretaceous Dinosaurs,' not once, but many times. I tried to get Dennis to read it, too, but I guess he never did. All Dennis was interested in were the mathematics of his time concept - not the time machine itself. Besides, Dennis doesn't read too well. It is a chore for him.

Maybe I should tell you, to start

with, that my name is Alton James. I live with my widowed mother and I run a fix-it shop. I fix bicycles and lawn mowers and radios and television sets - I fix anything that is brought to me. I'm not much good at anything else, but I do seem to have the knack of seeing how things go together and understanding how they work and seeing what is wrong with them when they aren't working. I never had no training of any sort, but I just seem to have a natural bent for getting along with mechanical contraptions.

Dennis is my friend and I'll admit right off that he is a strange one. He doesn't know from nothing about

anything, but he's nuts on mathematics. People in town make fun of him because he is so strange and Ma gives me hell at times for having anything to do with him. She says he's the next best thing to a village idiot. I guess a lot of people think the way that Ma does, but it's not entirely true, for he does know his math.

I don't know how he knows it. He didn't learn it at school and that's for sure. When he got to be 17 and hadn't got no farther than eighth grade, the school just sort of dropped him. He didn't really get to eighth grade honest: the teachers after a while got tired of seeing him on

one grade and passed him to the next. There was talk, off and on, of sending him to some special school, but it never got nowhere.

And don't ask me what kind of mathematics he knew. I tried to read up on math once because I had the feeling, after seeing some of the funny marks that Dennis put on paper, that maybe he knew more about it than anyone else in the world. And I still think that he does - or that maybe he's invented an entirely new kind of math. For in the books I looked through I never did find any of the symbols that Dennis put on paper. Maybe Dennis used symbols he made up, inventing them as he went along,

because no one had ever told him what the regular mathematicians used. But I don't think that's it - I'm inclined to lean to the idea Dennis came up with a new brand of math, entirely.

There were times I tried to talk with Dennis about this math of his and each time he was surprised that I didn't know it, too. I guess he thought most people knew about it. He said that it was simple, that it was plain as day. It was the way things worked, he said.

I suppose you'll want to ask how come I understood his equations well enough to make the time machine. The answer is I didn't. I suppose that Dennis

and I are alike in a lot of ways, but in different ways, I know how to make contraptions work (without knowing any of the theory) and Dennis sees the entire universe as something operating mechanically (and him scarcely able to read a page of simple type).

And another thing. My family and Dennis' family live in the same end of town and from the time we were toddlers, Dennis and I played together. Later on, we just kept on together. We didn't have a choice. For some reason or other, none of the kids would play with us. Unless we wanted to play alone, we had to play together. I guess we got so, through the years, that we understood

each other.

I don't suppose there'd have been any time machine if I hadn't been so interested in paleontology. Not that I knew anything about it; I was just interested. From the time I was a kid I read everything I could lay my hands on about dinosaurs and saber-tooths and such, Later on I went fossil hunting in the hills, but I never found nothing really big. Mostly I found brachiopods. There are great beds of them in the Platteville limestone. And lots of times I'd stand in the street and look up at the river bluffs above the town and try to imagine what it had been like a million years ago, or a hundred million. When I first read in a

story about a time machine, I remember thinking how I'd like to have one. I guess that at one time I thought a little about making one, but then realized I couldn't.

Dennis had a habit of coming to my shop and talking, but most of the time talking to himself rather than to me. I don't remember exactly how it started, but after a while I realized that he had stopped talking about anything but time. One day he told me he had been able to figure out everything but time, and now it seemed he was getting that down in black and white, like all the rest of it.

Mostly I didn't pay too much attention to what he said, for a lot of it didn't make much sense. But after he'd talked, incessantly, for a week or two, on time, I began to pay attention. But don't expect me to tell you what he said or make any sense of it, for there's no way that I can. To understand what Dennis said and meant, you'd have to live with him, like I did, for twenty years or more. It's not so much understanding what Dennis says as understanding Dennis.

I don't think we actually made any real decision to build a time machine, It just sort of grew on us. All at once we found that we were making one.

We took our time. We had to take our time, for we went back a lot and did things over, almost from the start. It took weeks to get some of the proper effects - at least, that's what Dennis called them. Me, I didn't know anything about effects. All that I knew was that Dennis wanted to make something work a certain way and I tried to make it work that way. Sometimes, even when it worked the way he wanted it, it turned out to be wrong, So we'd start all over.

But finally we had a working model of it and took it out on a big bald bluff, several miles up the river, where no one ever went. I rigged up a timer to a

switch that would turn it on, then after two minutes would reverse the field and send it home again.

We mounted a movie camera inside the frame that carried the machine, and we set the camera going, then threw the timer switch.

I had my doubts that it would work, but it did. It went away and stayed for two minutes, then came back again.

When we developed the camera film, we knew without any question the camera had traveled back in time. At first there were pictures of ourselves standing there and waiting. Then there

was a little blur, no more than a flicker across a half a dozen frames, and the next frames showed a mastodon walking straight into the camera. A fraction of a second later his trunk jerked up and his ears flared out as he wheeled around with clumsy haste and galloped down the ridge.

Every now and then he'd swing his head around to take a look behind him. I imagine that our time machine, blossoming suddenly out of the ground in front of him, scared him out of seven years of growth.

We were lucky, that was all. We could have sent that camera back another thousand times, perhaps, and never caught a mastodon - probably never caught a thing. Although we would have known it had moved in time, for the landscape had been different, although not a great deal different, but from the landscape we could not have told if it had gone back a hundred or a thousand years. When we saw the mastodon, however, we knew we'd sent the camera back 10,000 years at least.

I won't bore you with how we worked out a lot of problems on our second model, or how Dennis managed to work out a time-meter that we could

calibrate to send the machine a specific distance into time. Because all this is not important. What is important is what I found when I went into time.

I've already told you I'd read your book about Cretaceous dinosaurs and I liked the entire book, but that final chapter about the extinction of the dinosaurs is the one that really got me. Many a time I'd lie awake at night thinking about all the theories you wrote about and trying to figure out in my own mind how it really was.

So when it was time to get into that machine and go, I knew where I would be headed.

Dennis gave me no argument. He didn't even want to go. He didn't care no more. He never was really interested in the time machine. All he wanted was to prove out his math. Once the machine did that, he was through with it.

I worried a lot, going as far as I meant to go, about the rising or subsidence of the crust. I knew that the land around Willow Bend had been stable for millions of years. Sometime during the Cretaceous a sea had crept into the interior of the continent, but had stopped short of Wisconsin and, so far as geologists could determine, there had been no disturbances in the state. But I

still felt uneasy about it. I didn't want to come out into the Late Cretaceous with the machine buried under a dozen feet of rock or, maybe, hanging a dozen feet up in the air.

So I got some heavy steel pipes and sunk them six feet into the rock on the bald bluff top we had used the first time, with about ten feet of their length extending in the air. I mounted the time frame on top of them and rigged up a ladder to get in and out of it and tied the pipes into the time field. One morning I packed a lunch and filled a canteen with water. I dug the old binoculars that had been my father's out of the attic and debated whether I should take along a

gun. All I had was a shotgun and I decided not to take it. If I'd had a rifle, there'd been no question of my taking it, but I didn't have one. I could have borrowed one, but I didn't want to. I'd kept pretty quiet about what I was doing and I didn't want to start any gossip in the village.

I went up to the bluff top and climbed up to the frame and set the timer to 63 million years into the past and then I turned her on. I didn't make any ceremony out of it. I just turned her on and went.

I told you about the little blur in the movie film and that's the best way, I suppose, to tell you how it was. There was this little blur, like a flickering twilight. Then it was sunlight once again and I was on the bluff top, looking out across the valley.

Except it wasn't a bluff top any longer, but only a high hill. And the valley was not the rugged, tree-choked, deeply cut valley I had always known, but a great green plain, a wide and shallow valley with a wide and sluggish river flowing at the far side of it. Far to the west I could see a shimmer in the sunlight, a large lake or sea. But a sea, I thought, shouldn't be this far east. But

there it was, either a great lake or a sea - I never did determine which.

And there was something else as well. I looked down to the ground and it was only three feet under me. Was I ever glad I had used those pipes!

Looking out across the valley, I could see moving things, but they were so far away that I could not make them out. So I picked up the binoculars and jumped down to the ground and walked across the hilltop until the ground began to slope away.

I sat down and put the binoculars to my eyes and worked across the valley

with them.

There were dinosaurs out there, a whole lot more of them than I had expected. They were in herds and they were traveling. You'd expect that out of any dozen herds of them, some of them would be feeding, but none of them was. All of them were moving and it seemed to me there was a nervousness in the way they moved. Although, I told myself, that might be the way it was with dinosaurs.

They all were a long way off, even with the glasses, but I could make out some of them. There were several groups of duckbills, waddling along and

making funny jerky movements with their heads. I spotted a couple of small herds of thescelosaurus, pacing along, with their bodies tilted forward. Here and there were small groups of triceratops. But strangest of all was a large herd of brontosaurus, ambling nervously and gingerly along, as if their feet might hurt. And it struck me strange, for they were a long way from water and from what I'd read in your book, and in other books, it didn't seem too likely they ever wandered too far away from water.

And there were a lot of other things that didn't look too much like the pictures I had seen in books.

The whole business had a funny feel about it. Could it be, I wondered, that I had stumbled on some great migration, with all the dinosaurs heading out for some place else?

I got so interested in watching that I was downright careless and it was foolish of me. I was in another world and there could have been all sorts of dangers and I should have been watching out for them, but I was just sitting there, flat upon my backside, as if I were at home.

Suddenly there was a pounding, as

if someone had turned loose a piledriver, coming up behind me and coming very fast. I dropped the glasses and twisted around and as I did something big and tall rushed past me, no more than three feet away, so close it almost brushed me. I got just a brief impression of it as it went by - huge and gray and scaly.

Then, as it went tearing down the hill, I saw what it was and I had a cold and sinking feeling clear down in my gizzard. For I had been almost run down by the big boy of them all -
Tyrannosaurus rex.

His two great legs worked like

driving pistons and the light of the sun glinted off the wicked, recurved claws as his feet pumped up and down. His tail rode low and awkward, but there was no awkwardness in the way he moved. His monstrous head swung from side to side, with the great rows of teeth showing in the gaping mouth, and he left behind him a faint foul smell - I suppose from the carrion he ate. But the big surprise was that the wattles hanging underneath his throat were a brilliant iridescence - red and green and gold and purple, the color of them shifting as he swung his head.

I watched him for just a second and then I jumped up and headed for the time machine. I was more scared than I like to

think about. I had, I want to testify right here, seen enough of dinosaurs for a lifetime.

But I never reached the time machine.

Up over the brow of the hill came something else. I say something else because I have no idea what it really was. Not as big as _rex_, but ten times worse than him.

It was long and sinuous and it had a lot of legs and it stood six feet high or so and was a sort of sickish pink. Take a caterpillar and magnify it until it's six feet tall, then give it longer legs so that it

can run instead of crawl and hang a death mask dragon's head upon it and you get a faint idea. Just a faint idea.

It saw me and swung its head toward me and made an eager whimpering sound and it slid along toward me with a side-wheeling gait, like a dog when it's running out of balance and lop-sided.

I took one look at it and dug in my heels and made so sharp a turn that I lost my hat. The next thing I knew, I was pelting down the hill behind old _Tyrannosaurus_.

And now I saw that myself and _rex_ were not the only things that were running down the hill. Scattered here and there along the hillside were other running creatures, most of them in small groups and herds, although there were some singles. Most of them were dinosaurs, but there were other things as well.

I'm sorry I can't tell you what they were, but at that particular moment I wasn't what you might call an astute observer. I was running for my life, as if the flames of hell were lapping at my heels.

I looked around a couple of times and that sinuous creature was still behind me. He wasn't gaining on me any, although I had the feeling that he could if he put his mind to it. Matter of fact, he didn't seem to be following me alone. He was doing a lot of weaving back and forth. He reminded me of nothing quite so much as a faithful farm dog bringing in the cattle. But even thinking this, it took me a little time to realize that was exactly what he was - an old farm dog bringing in a bunch of assorted dinosaurs and one misplaced human being. At the bottom of the hill I looked back again and now that I could see the whole slope of the hill, I saw that this was a bigger cattle drive than I had imagined. The

entire hill was alive with running beasts and behind them were a half dozen of the pinkish dogs.

And I knew when I saw this that the moving herds I'd seen out on the valley floor were not migratory herds, but they were moving because they were being driven - that this was a big roundup of some sort, with all the reptiles and the dinosaurs and myself being driven to a common center.

I knew that my life depended on getting lost somehow, and being left behind. I had to find a place to hide and I had to dive into this hiding place without being seen. Only trouble was there

seemed no place to hide. The valley floor was naked and nothing bigger than a mouse could have hidden there.

Ahead of me a good-size swale rose up from the level floor and I went pelting up it. I was running out of wind. My breath was getting short and I had pains throbbing in my chest and I knew I couldn't run much farther.

I reached the top of the swale and started down the reverse slope. And there, right in front of me, was a bush of some sort, three feet high or so, bristling with thorns. I was too close to it and

going too fast to even try to dodge it, so I did the only thing I could - I jumped over it.

But on the other side there was no solid ground. There was, instead, a hole. I caught just a glimpse of it and tried to jerk my body to one side, and then I was falling into the hole.

It wasn't much bigger than I was. It bumped me as I fell and I picked up some bruises, then landed with a jolt. The fall knocked the breath out of me and I was doubled over, with my arms wrapped about my belly.

My breath came slowly back and

the pain subsided and I was able to take a look at where I was.

The hole was some three feet in diameter and perhaps as much as seven deep. It slanted slightly toward the forefront of the slope and its sides were worn smooth. A thin trickle of dirt ran down from the edge of it, soil that I had loosened and dislodged when I had hit the hole. And about halfway up was a cluster of small rocks, the largest of them about the size of a human head, projecting more than half their width out of the wall. I thought, idly, as I looked at them, that some day they'd come loose and drop into the hole. And at the thought I squirmed around a little to one side, so

that if they took a notion to fall I'd not be in the line of fire.

Looking down, I saw that I'd not fallen to the bottom of the hole, for the hole went on, deeper in the ground. I had come to rest at a point where the hole curved sharply, to angle back beneath the swale top.

I hadn't noticed it at first, I suppose because I had been too shook up, but now I became aware of a musky smell. Not an overpowering odor, but a sort of scent - faintly animal, although not quite animal.

A smooth-sided hole and a musky

smell - there could be no other answer: I had fallen not into just an ordinary hole, but into a burrow of some sort. And it must be the burrow of quite an animal, I thought, to be the size it was. It would have taken something with hefty claws, indeed, to have dug this sort of burrow.

And even as I thought it, I heard the rattling and the scrabbling of something coming up the burrow, no doubt coming up to find out what was going on.

I did some scrabbling myself. I didn't waste no time. But about three feet up I slipped. I grabbed for the top of the

hole, but my fingers slid through the sandy soil and I couldn't get a grip. I shot out my feet and stopped my slide short of the bottom of the hole. And there I was, with my back against one side of the hole and my feet braced against the other, hanging there, halfway up the burrow.

While all the time below me the scrabbling and the clicking sounds continued. The thing, whatever it might be, was getting closer, and it was coming fast.

Right in front of me was the nest of rocks sticking from the wall. I reached out and grabbed the biggest one and

jerked and it came loose. It was heavier than I had figured it would be and I almost dropped it, but managed to hang on.

A snout came out of the curve in the burrow and thrust itself quickly upward in a grabbing motion. The jaws opened up and they almost filled the burrow and they were filled with sharp and wicked teeth.

I didn't think. I didn't plan. What I did was instinct. I dropped the rock between my spread-out legs straight down into that gaping maw. It was a heavy rock and it dropped four feet or so and went straight between the teeth,

down into the blackness of the throat. When it hit it splashed and the jaws snapped shut and the creature backed away.

How I did it, I don't know, but I got out of the hole. I clawed and kicked against the wall and heaved my body up and rolled out of the hole onto the naked hillside.

Naked, that is, except for the bush with the inch-long thorns, the one that I'd jumped over before I fell into the burrow. It was the only cover there was and I made for the upper side of it, for by now, I figured, the big cattle drive had gone past me and if I could get the

bush between myself and the valley side of the swale, I might have a chance. Otherwise, sure as hell, one of those dogs would see me and would come out to bring me in.

For while there was no questions that they were dinosaur herders, they probably couldn't tell the difference between me and a dinosaur. I was alive and could run and that would qualify me.

There was always the chance, of course, that the owner of the burrow would come swarming out, and if he did I couldn't stay behind the bush. But I rather doubted he'd be coming out, not right away, at least. It would take him a

while to get that stone out of his throat.

I crouched behind the bush and the sun was hot upon my back and, peering through the branches, I could see, far out on the valley floor, the great herd of milling beasts. All of them had been driven together and there they were, running in a knotted circle, while outside the circle prowled the pinkish dogs and something else as well - what appeared to be men driving tiny cars. The cars and men were all of the same color, a sort of greenish gray, and the two of them, the cars and men, seemed to be a single organism. The men didn't seem to be

sitting in the cars; they looked as if they grew out of the cars, as if they and the cars were one. And while the cars went zipping along, they appeared to have no wheels, It was hard to tell, but they seemed to travel with the bottom of them flat upon the ground, like a snail would travel, and as they traveled, they rippled, as if the body of the car were some sort of flowing muscle.

I crouched there watching and now, for the first time, I had a chance to think about it, to try to figure out what was going on. I had come here, across more than sixty million years, to see some dinosaurs, and I sure was seeing them, but under what you might say were

peculiar circumstances. The dinosaurs fit, all right. They looked mostly like the way they looked in books, but the dogs and car-men were something else again. They were distinctly out of place.

The dogs were pacing back and forth, sliding along in their sinuous fashion, and the car-men were zipping back and forth, and every once in a while one of the beasts would break out of the circle and the minute that it did, a half dozen dogs and a couple of car-men would race to intercept it and drive it back again.

The circle of beasts must have had, roughly, a diameter of a mile or more - a

mile of milling, frightened creatures. A lot of paleontologists have wondered whether dinosaurs had any voice and I can tell you that they did. They were squealing and roaring and quacking and there were some of them that hooted - I think it was the duckbills hooting, but I can't be sure.

Then, all at once, there was another sound, a sort of fluttering roar that seemed to be coming from the sky. I looked up quickly and I saw them coming down - a dozen or so spaceships, they couldn't have been anything but spaceships. They came down rather fast and they didn't seem too big and there were tails of thin, blue

flame flickering at their bases. Not the billowing clouds of flame and smoke that our rockets have, but just a thin blue flicker.

For a minute it looked like one of them would land on top of me, but then I saw that it was too far out. It missed me, matter of fact, a good two miles or so. It and the others sat down in a ring around the milling herd out in the valley.

I should have known what would happen out there. It was the simplest explanation one could think of and it was logical. I think, maybe, way deep down,

I did know, but my surface mind had pushed it away because it was too matter-of-fact and too ordinary.

Thin snouts spouted from the ships and purple fire curled mistily at the muzzle of those snouts and the dinosaurs went down in a fighting, frightened, squealing mass. Thin trickles of vapor drifted upward from the snouts and out in the center of the circle lay that heap of dead and dying dinosaurs, all those thousands of dinosaurs piled in death.

It is a simple thing to tell, of course, but it was a terrible thing to see. I crouched there behind the bush, sickened at the sight, startled by the

silence when all the screaming and the squealing and the hooting ceased. And shaken, too - not by what shakes me now as I write this letter, but shaken by the knowledge that something from outside could do this to the Earth.

For they were from outside. It wasn't just the spaceships, but those pinkish dogs and gray-green car men, which were not cars and men, but a single organism, were not things of earth, could not be things of earth.

I crept back from the bush, keeping low in hope that the bush would screen me from the things down in the valley until I reached the swale top. One of the

dogs swung around and looked my way and I froze, and after a time he looked away.

Then I was over the top of the swale and heading back toward the time machine. But half way down the slope, I turned around and came back again, crawling on my belly, squirming to the hilltop to have another look.

It was a look I'll not forget.

The dogs and car-men had swarmed in upon the heap of dead dinosaurs, and some of the cars already were crawling back toward the grounded spaceships, which had let

down ramps. The cars were moving slowly, for they were heavily loaded and the loads they carried were neatly butchered hams and racks of ribs.

And in the sky there was a muttering and I looked up to see yet other spaceships coming down - the little transport ships that would carry this cargo of fresh meat up to another larger ship that waited overhead.

It was then I turned and ran.

I reached the top of the hill and piled into the time machine and set it at zero and came home. I didn't even stop to hunt for the binoculars I'd dropped.

And now that I am home, I'm not going back again. I'm not going anywhere in that time machine. I'm afraid of what I might find any place I go. If Wyalusing College has any need of it, I'll give them the time machine.

But that's not why I wrote.

There is no doubt in my mind what happened to the dinosaurs, why they became extinct. They were killed off and butchered and hauled away, to some other planet, perhaps many light years distant, by a race which looked upon the

earth as a cattle range - a planet that could supply a vast amount of cheap protein.

But that, you say, happened more than sixty million years ago. This race did once exist. But in sixty million years it would almost certainly have changed its ways or drifted off in its hunting to some other sector of the galaxy, or, perhaps, have become extinct, like the dinosaurs.

But I don't think so. I don't think any of those things happened. I think they're still around. I think Earth may be only one of many planets which supply their food.

And I'll tell you why I think so.

They were back on Earth again, I'm sure, some 10,000 or 11,000 years ago, when they killed off the mammoth and the mastodon, the giant bison, the great cave bear and the saber-tooth and a lot of other things. Oh, yes. I know they missed Africa. They never touched the big game there. Maybe, after wiping out the dinosaurs, they learned their lesson, and left Africa for breeding stock.

And now I come to the point of this letter, the thing that has me worried.

Today there are just a few less than three billion of us humans in the world.

By the year 2,000 there may be as many as six billion of us.

We're pretty small, of course, and these things went in for tonnage, for dinosaurs and mastodon and such. But there are so many of us! Small as we are, we may be getting to the point where we'll be worth their while.

Title : Shotgun Cure

Author : Clifford D. Simak

Original copyright year: 1960

Genre : science fiction

Comments : to my knowledge, this
is the only available e-text of this book

Source : scanned and OCR-read
from a paperback edition with Xerox
TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS
Word 2000.

Date of e-text : February 14, 2000

Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights reversed.

Shotgun Cure

Clifford D. Simak

The clinics were set up and in the morning they'd start on Operation Kelly - and that was something, wasn't it, that they should call it Kelly!

He sat in the battered rocking chair on the sagging porch and said it once again and rolled it on his tongue, but the taste of it was not so sharp nor sweet as it once had been, when that great London doctor had risen in the United Nations to suggest it could be called nothing else but Kelly.

Although, when one came to think of it, there was a deal of happenstance. It needn't have been Kelly. It could have been just anyone at all with an M.D. to his name. It could as well have been Cohen or Johnson or Radzonovich or any other of them - any one of all the doctors in the world.

He rocked gently in the creaking chair while the floor boards of the porch groaned in sympathy, and in the gathering dusk were the sounds, as well, of children at the day's-end play, treasuring those last seconds before they had to go inside and soon thereafter to bed.

There was the scent of lilacs in the coolness of the air and at the corner of the garden he could faintly see the white flush of an early-blooming bridal wreath - the one that Martha Anderson had given him and Janet so many years ago, when they first had come to live in this very house.

A neighbor came tramping down the walk and he could not make him out in the deepening dusk, but the man called out to him.

'Good evening, Doc,' he said.

'Good evening, Hiram,' said old Doc Kelly, knowing who it was by the voice of him.

The neighbor went on, tramping down the walk.

Old Doc kept up his gentle rocking with his hands folded on his pudgy stomach and from inside the house he could hear the bustling in the kitchen as

Janet cleared up after supper. In a little while, perhaps, she'd come out and sit with him and they'd talk together, low-voiced and casually, as befitted an old couple very much in love.

Although, by rights, he shouldn't stay out here on the porch. There was the medical journal waiting for him on the study desk and he should be reading it. There was so much new stuff these days that a man should keep up with - although, perhaps, the way things were turning out it wouldn't really matter if a man kept up or not.

Maybe in the years to come there'd be precious little a man would need to

keep up with.

Of course, there'd always be need of doctors. There'd always be damn fools smashing up their cars and shooting one another and getting fishhooks in their hands and falling out of trees. And there'd always be the babies.

He rocked gently to and fro and thought of all the babies and how some of them had grown until they were men and women now and had babies of their own. And he thought of Martha Anderson, Janet's closest friend, and he thought of old Con Gilbert, as ornery an old shikepoke as ever walked the earth,

and tight with money, too. He chuckled a bit wryly, thinking of all the money Con Gilbert finally owed him, never having paid a bill in his entire life.

But that was the way it went. There were some who paid and others who made no pretense of paying, and that was why he and Janet lived in this old house and he drove a five-year car and Janet had worn the selfsame dress to church the blessed winter long.

Although it made no difference, really, once one considered it. For the important pay was not in cash.

There were those who paid and

those who didn't pay. And there were those who lived and the other ones who died, no matter what you did. There was hope for some and the ones who had no hope - and some of these you told and there were others that you didn't.

But it was different now.

And it all had started right here in this little town of Millville - not much more than a year ago.

Sitting in the dark, with the lilac scent and the white blush of the bridal wreath and the muted sounds of children clasping to themselves the last minutes of their play, he remembered it.

It was almost 8:30 and he could hear Martha Anderson in the outer office talking to Miss Lane and she, he knew, had been the last of them.

He took off his white jacket, folding it absent-mindedly, fogged with weariness, and laid it across the examination table.

Janet would be waiting supper, but she'd never say a word, for she never had. All these many years she had never said a word of reproach to him, although there had been at times a sense of

disapproval at his easy-going ways, at his keeping on with patients who didn't even thank him, much less pay their bills. And a sense of disapproval, too, at the hours he kept, at his willingness to go out of nights when he could just as well have let a call go till his regular morning rounds.

She would be waiting supper and she would know that Martha had been in to see him and she'd ask him how she was, and what was he to tell her?

He heard Martha going out and the sharp click of Miss Lane's heels across the outer office. He moved slowly to the basin and turned on the tap, picking up

the soap.

He heard the door creak open and did not turn his head. 'Doctor,' said Miss Lane, 'Martha thinks she's fine. She says you're helping her. Do you think...'

'What would you do,' he asked.

'I don't know,' she said.

Would you operate, knowing it was hopeless? Would you send her to a specialist, knowing that he couldn't help her, knowing she can't pay him and that she'll worry about not paying? Would you tell her that she has, perhaps, six months to live and take from her the little

happiness and hope she still has left to her?'

'I am sorry, doctor.'

'No need to be. I've faced it many times. No case is the same. Each one calls for a decision of its own. It's been a long, hard day...'

'Doctor, there's another one out there.'

'Another patient?'

'A man. He just came in. His name is Harry Herman.'

'Herman? I don't know any Hermans.'

'He's a stranger,' said Miss Lane.
'Maybe he just moved into town.'

'If he'd moved in,' said Doc, 'I'd have heard of it. I hear everything.'

'Maybe he's just passing through.
Maybe he got sick driving on the road.'

'Well, send him in,' said Doc,
reaching for a towel. 'I'll have a look at him.'

The nurse turned to the door.

'And Miss Lane.'

'Yes?'

'You may as well go home. There's no use sticking round. It's been a real bad day.'

And it had been, at that, he thought. A fracture, a burn, a cut, a dropsy, a menopause, a pregnancy, two pelvics, a scattering of colds, a feeding schedule, two teething, a suspicious lung, a possible gallstone, a cirrhosis of the liver and Martha Anderson. And now, last of all, this man named Harry Herman - no name that he knew and when one came to think of it, a rather

funny name.

And he was a funny man. Just a bit too tall and willowy to be quite believable, ears too tight against his skull, lips so thin they seemed no lips at all.

'Doctor?' he asked, standing in the doorway.

'Yes,' said Doc, picking up his jacket and shrugging into it. 'Yes, I am the doctor. Come on in. What can I do for you?'

'I am not ill,' said the man.

'Not ill?'

'But I want to talk to you. You have time, perhaps?'

'Yes, certainly,' said Doc, knowing that he had no time and resenting this intrusion. 'Come on in. Sit down.'

He tried to place the accent, but was unable to. Central European, most likely.

'Technical,' said the man.
'Professional.'

'What do you mean?' asked Doc, getting slightly nettled.

'I talk to you technical. I talk professional.'

'You mean that you're a doctor?'

'Not exactly,' said the man,
'although perhaps you think so. I should
tell you immediate that I am an alien.'

'An alien,' said Old Doc. 'We've
got lots of them around. Mostly
refugees.'

'Not what I mean. Not that kind of
alien. From some other planet. From
some other star.'

'But you said your name was Herman...'

'When in Rome,' said the other one, 'you must do as Romans.'

'Huh?' asked Doc, and then: 'Good God, do you mean that? That you are an alien. By an alien, do you mean...'

The other nodded happily. 'From some other planet. From some other star. Very many light-years.'

'Well, I'll be damned,' said Doc.

He stood there looking at the alien and the alien grinned back at him, but

uncertainly.

'You think, perhaps,' the alien said,
'but he is so human!'

'That,' said Doc, 'was going through
my mind.'

'So you would have a look,
perhaps. You would know a human
body.'

'Perhaps,' said Doc grimly, not
liking it at all. 'But the human body can
take some funny turns.'

'But not a turn like this,' said the
stranger, showing him his hands.

'No,' said the shocked old Doc. 'No such turn as that.' For the hand had two thumbs and a single finger, almost as if a bird claw had decided to turn into a hand.

'Nor like this?' asked the other, standing up and letting down his trousers.

'Nor like that,' said Doc, more shaken than he'd been in many years of practice.

'Then,' said the alien, zipping up his trousers, 'I think that it is settled.'

He sat down again and calmly crossed his knees, 'If you mean I accept you as an alien,' said Doc, 'I suppose I do. Although it's not an easy thing.'

'I suppose it is not. It comes as quite a shock.'

Doc passed a hand across his brow. 'Yes, a shock, of course. But there are other points...'

'You mean the language,' said the alien. 'And my knowledge of your customs.'

'That's part of it, naturally.'

'We've studied you,' the alien said. 'We've spent some time on you. Not you alone, of course...'

'But you talk so well,' protested Doc. 'Like a well-educated foreigner.'

'And that, of course,' the other said, 'is what exactly I am.'

'Why, yes, I guess you are,' said Doc. 'I hadn't thought of it.'

'I am not glib,' said the alien. 'I know a lot of words, but I use them incorrect. And my vocabulary is restricted to just the common speech. On matters of great technicality, I will not

be proficient.'

Doc walked around behind his desk and sat down rather limply.

'All right,' he said, 'let's have the rest of it. I accept you as an alien. Now tell me the other answer. Just why are you here?'

And he was surprised beyond all reason that he could approach the situation as calmly as he had. In a little while, he knew, when he had time to think it over, he would get the shakes.

'You're a doctor,' said the alien.
'You are a healer of your race.'

'Yes,' said Doc. 'I am one of many healers.'

'You work very hard to make the unwell well. You mend the broken flesh. You hold off death...'

'We try. Sometimes we don't succeed.'

'You have many ailments. You have the cancer and the heart attacks and colds and many other things - I do not find the word.'

'Diseases,' Doc supplied.

'Disease. That is it. You will
pardon my shortcomings in the tongue.'

'Let's cut out the niceties,' suggested
Doc. 'Let's get on with it.'

'It is not right,' the alien said, 'to
have all these diseases. It is not nice. It
is an awful thing.'

'We have less than we had at one
time. We've licked a lot of them.'

'And, of course,' the alien said, 'you
make your living with them.'

'What's that you said!' yelled Doc.

'You will be tolerant of me if I misunderstand. An economic system is a hard thing to get into one's head.'

'I know what you mean,' growled Doc, 'but let me tell you, sir...'

But what was the use of it, he thought. This being was thinking the self-same thing that many humans thought.

'I would like to point out to you,' he said, starting over once again, 'that the medical profession is working hard to conquer those diseases you are talking of. We are doing all we can to destroy our own jobs.'

'That is fine,' the alien said. 'It is what I thought, but it did not square with your planet's business sense. I take it, then, you would not be averse to seeing all disease destroyed.'

'Now, look here,' said Doc, having had enough of it, 'I don't know what you are getting at. But I am hungry and I am tired and if you want to sit here threshing out philosophies...'

'Philosophies,' said the alien. 'Oh, not philosophies. I am practical. I have come to offer an end of all disease.'

They sat in silence for a moment, then Doc stirred half protestingly and

said, 'Perhaps I misunderstood you, but I thought you said...'

'I have a method, a development, a find - I do not catch the word - that will destroy all diseases.'

'A vaccine,' said Old Doc.

'That's the word. Except it is different in some ways than the vaccine you are thinking.'

'Cancer?' Doc asked.

The alien nodded. 'Cancer and the common cold and all the others of them. You name it and it's gone.'

'Heart,' said Doc. 'You can't vaccinate for heart.'

'That, too,' the alien said. 'It does not really vaccinate. It makes the body strong. It makes the body right. Like tuning up a motor and making it like new. The motor will wear out in time, but it will function until it is worn out entirely.'

Doc stared hard at the alien. 'Sir,' he said, 'this is not the sort of thing one should joke about.'

'I am not joking,' said the alien.

'And this vaccine - it will work on humans? It has no side effects?'

'I am sure it will. We have studied your - your - the way your bodies work.'

'Metabolism is the word you want.'

'Thank you.' said the alien.

'And the price?' asked Doc.

'There is no price,' the alien said.

'We are giving it to you.'

'Completely free of charge? Surely there must be...'

'Without any charge,' the alien said.
'Without any strings.'

He got up from the chair. He took a flat box from his pocket and walked over to the desk. He placed it upon the desk and pressed its side and the top sprang open. Inside of it were pads - like surgical pads, but they were not made of cloth.

Doc reached out, then halted his hand just above the box.

'May I?' he asked.

'Yes, certainly. You only touch the tops.'

Doc gingerly lifted out one of the pads and laid it on the desk. He kneaded it with a skittish finger and there was liquid in the pad. He could feel the liquid squish as he pressed the pad.

He turned it over carefully and the underside of it was rough and corrugated, as if it were a mouthful of tiny, vicious teeth.

'You apply the rough side to the body of the patient.' said the alien. 'It seizes on the patient. It becomes a part of him. The body absorbs the vaccine and the pad drops off.'

'And that is all there's to it?'

'That is all,' the alien said.

Doc lifted the pad between two cautious fingers and dropped it back into the box.

He looked up at the alien. 'But why?' he asked. 'Why are you giving this to us!'

'You do not know,' the alien said.
'You really do not know.'

'No, I don't,' said Doc.

The alien's eyes suddenly were old

and weary and he said: 'In another million years you will.'

'Not me,' said Doc.

'In another million years,' the alien said, 'you'll do the same yourself, but it will be something different. And then someone will ask you, and you won't be able to answer any more than I am now.'

If it was a rebuke, it was a very gentle one. Doc tried to decide if it were or not. He let the matter drop.

'Can you tell me what is in it?' he asked, gesturing at the pad.

'I can give you the descriptive formula, but it would be in our terms. It would be gibberish.'

'You won't be offended if I try these out?'

'I'd be disappointed if you didn't,' said the alien. 'I would not expect your faith to extend so far. It would be simple minded.'

He shut the box and pushed it closer to Old Doc. He turned and strode toward the door.

Doc rose ponderously to his feet.

'Now, wait a minute there!' he bellowed.

'I'll see you in a week or two,' the alien said.

He went out and closed the door behind him.

Doc sat down suddenly in the chair and stared at the box upon the desk.

He reached out and touched it and it was really there. He pressed the side of it, and the lid popped open and the pads were there, inside.

He tried to fight his way back to

sanity, to conservative and solid ground,
to a proper - and a human - viewpoint.

'It's all hogwash,' he said.

But it wasn't hogwash. He knew
good and well it wasn't.

He fought it out with himself that
night behind the closed door of his study,
hearing faintly the soft bustling in the
kitchen as Janet cleared away from
supper.

And the first fight was on the front
of credibility.

He had told the man he believed he was an alien and there was evidence that he could not ignore. Yet it seemed so incredible, all of it, every bit of it, that it was hard to swallow.

And the hardest thing of all was that this alien, whoever he might be, had come, of all the doctors in the world, to Dr. Jason Kelly, a little one horse doctor in a little one horse town.

He debated whether it might be a hoax and decided that it wasn't, for the three digits on the hand and the other thing he'd seen would have been difficult to simulate. And the whole thing, as a

hoax, would be so stupid and so cruel that it simply made no sense. Besides, no one hated him enough to go to all the work. And even granting a hatred of appropriate proportion, he doubted there was anyone in Millville imaginative enough to think of this.

So the only solid ground he had, he told himself, was to assume that the man had been really an alien and that the pads were bona fide.

And if that was true, there was only one procedure: He must test the pads.

He rose from his chair and paced up and down the floor.

Martha Anderson, he told himself. Martha Anderson had cancer and her life was forfeit - there was nothing in man's world of knowledge that had a chance to save her. Surgery was madness, for she'd probably not survive it. And even if she did, her case was too advanced. The killer that she carried had already broken loose and was swarming through her body and there was no hope for her.

Yet he could not bring himself to do it, for she was Janet's closest friend and she was old and poor and every instinct in him screamed against his using her as a guinea pig.

Now if it were only old Con Gilbert - he could do a thing like that to Con. It would be no more than the old skinflint rightly had coming to him. But old Con was too mean to be really sick; despite all the complaining that he did, he was healthy as a hog.

No matter what the alien had said about no side effects, he told himself, one could not be sure. He had said they'd studied the metabolism of the human race and yet, on the face of it, it seemed impossible.

The answer, he knew, was right there any time he wanted it. It was tucked away back in his brain and he

knew that it was there, but he pretended that it wasn't and he kept it tucked away and refused to haul it forth.

But after an hour or so of pacing up and down the room and of batting out his brains, he finally gave up and let the answer out.

He was quite calm when he rolled up his sleeve and opened up the box. And he was a matter-of-fact physician when he lifted out the pad and slapped it on his arm.

But his hand was shaking when he rolled down the sleeve so Janet wouldn't see the pad and ask a lot of questions

about what had happened to his arm.

Tomorrow all over the world outside Millville, people would line up before the clinic doors, with their sleeves rolled up and ready. The lines, most likely, would move at a steady clip, for there was little to it. Each person would pass before a doctor and the doctor would slap a pad onto his or her arm and the next person would step up.

All over the world, thought Doc, in every cranny of it, in every little village; none would be overlooked. Even the

poor, he thought, for there would be no charge.

And one could put his finger on a certain date and say:

'This was the day in history when disease came to an end.'

For the pads not only would kill the present ailments, but would guard against them in the future.

And every twenty years the great ships out of space would come, carrying other cargoes of the pads and there would be another Vaccination Day. But not so many then - only the younger

generation. For once a person had been vaccinated, there was no further need of it. Vaccinated once and you were set for life.

Doc tapped his foot quietly on the floor of the porch to keep the rocker going. It was pleasant here, he thought. And tomorrow it would be pleasant in the entire world. Tomorrow the fear would have been largely filtered out of human life. After tomorrow, short of accident or violence, men could look forward confidently to living out their normal lifetimes. And, more to the point, perhaps, completely healthy lifetimes.

The night was quiet, for the

children finally had gone in, giving up their play. And he was tired. Finally, he thought, he could admit that he was tired. There was now, after many years, no treason in saying he was tired.

Inside the house he heard the muffled purring of the phone and the sound of it broke the rhythm of his rocking, brought him forward to the chair's edge.

Janet's feet made soft sounds as they moved toward the phone and he thrilled to the gentleness of her voice as she answered it.

Now, in just a minute, she would

call him and he'd get up and go inside.

But she didn't call him. Her voice went on talking.

He settled back into the chair.

He'd forgotten once again.

The phone no longer was an enemy. It no longer haunted.

For Millville had been the first. The fear had already been lifted here. Millville had been the guinea pig, the pilot project.

Martha Anderson had been the first of them and after her Ted Carson, whose lung had been suspicious, and after him the Jurgen's baby when it came down with pneumonia. And a couple of dozen others until all the pads were gone.

And the alien had come back.

And the alien had said - what was it he had said?

'Don't think of us as benefactors nor as supermen. We are neither one. Think of me if you will, as the man across the street.'

And it had been. Doc told himself, a reaching by the alien for an understanding, an attempt to translate this thing that they were doing into a common idiom.

And had there been any understanding - any depth of understanding? Doc doubted that there had been.

Although, he recalled, the aliens had been basically very much like humans. They could even joke.

There had been one joking thing the original alien had said that had stuck inside his mind. And it had been a sort

of silly thing, silly on the face of it, but it had bothered him.

The screen door banged behind Janet as she came out on the porch. She sat down in the glider.

'That was Martha Anderson,' she said.

Doc chuckled to himself. Martha lived just five doors up the street and she and Janet saw one another a dozen times a day yet Martha had to phone.

'What did Martha want?' he asked.

Janet laughed. 'She wanted help

with rolls.'

'You mean her famous rolls?'

'Yes. She couldn't remember for the life of her, how much yeast she used.'

Doc chortled softly. 'And those are the ones, I suppose, she wins all the prizes on at the county fair.'

Janet said, crisply: 'It's not so funny as you make it, Jason. It's easy to forget a thing like that. She does a lot of baking.'

'Yes, I suppose you're right.' said Doc.

He should be getting in, he told himself, and start reading in the journal. And yet he didn't want to. It was so pleasant sitting here - just sitting. It had been a long time since he could do much sitting.

And it was all right with him, of course, because he was getting old and close to worn out, but it wouldn't be all right with a younger doctor, one who still owed for his education and was just starting out. There was talk in the United Nations of urging all the legislative bodies to consider medical subsidies to keep the doctors going. For there still was need of them. Even with all

diseases vanished, there still was need of them. It wouldn't do to let their ranks thin out, for there would be time and time again when they would be badly needed.

He'd been listening to the footsteps for quite a while, coming down the street, and now all at once they were turning in the gate.

He sat up straighter in his chair.

Maybe it was a patient, knowing he'd be home, coming in to see him.

'Why,' said Janet, considerably surprised, 'it is Mr. Gilbert.'

It was Con Gilbert, sure enough.

'Good evening, Doc,' said Con.

'Good evening, Miz Kelly.'

'Good evening,' Janet said, getting up to go.

'No use of you to leave,' Con said to her.

'I have some things to do,' she told him. 'I was just getting ready to go in.'

Con came up the steps and sat down on the glider.

'Nice evening,' he declared.

'It is all of that,' said Doc.

'Nicest spring I've ever seen,' said Con, working his way around to what he had to say.

'I was thinking that,' said Doc. 'It seems to me the lilacs never smelled so good before.'

'Doc,' said Con, 'I figure I owe you quite a bit of money.'

'You owe me some,' said Doc.

'You got an idea how much it might

be?'

'Not the faintest,' Doc told him. 'I never bothered to keep track of it.'

'Figured it was a waste of time,' said Con. 'Figured I would never pay it.'

'Something like that,' Doc agreed.

'Been doctoring with you for a right long time,' said Con.

'That's right, Con.'

'I got three hundred here. You figure that might do it?'

'Let's put it this way. Con,' said Doc. 'I'd settle for a whole lot less.'

'I guess, then, that sort of makes us even. Seems to me three hundred might be close to fair.'

'If you say so,' said Doc.

Con dug out his billfold, extracted a wad of bills and handed them across. Doc took them and folded them and stuffed them in his pocket.

'Thank you, Con,' he said.

And suddenly he had a funny feeling, as if there were something he

should know, as if there were something that he should be able to just reach out and grab.

But he couldn't, no matter how he tried, figure what it was.

Con got up and shuffled across the porch, heading for the steps.

'Be seeing you around,' he said.

Doc jerked himself back to reality.

'Sure, Con. Be seeing you around. And thanks.'

He sat in the chair, not rocking, and

listened to Con going down the walk and out the gate and then down the street until there was only silence.

And if he ever was going to get at it, he'd have to go in now and start reading in the journal.

Although, more than likely, it was all damn foolishness. He'd probably never again need to know a thing out of any medic journal.

Doc pushed the journal to one side and sat there, wondering what was wrong with him. He'd been reading for

twenty minutes and none of it had registered. He couldn't have told a word that he had read.

Too upset, he thought. Too excited about Operation Kelly. And wasn't that a thing to call it - Operation Kelly!

And he remembered it once again exactly.

How he'd tried it out on Millville, then gone to the county medical association and how the doctors in the county, after some slight amount of scoffing and a good deal of skepticism, had become convinced. And from there it had gone to state and the AMA.

And finally that great day in the United Nations, when the Ellen had appeared before the delegates and when he, himself, had been introduced - and at last the great London man arising to suggest that the project could be called nothing else but Kelly.

A proud moment, he told himself - and he tried to call up the pride again, but it wasn't there, not the whole of it. Never in his life again would he know that kind of pride.

And here he sat, a simple country doctor once again, in his study late at night, trying to catch up with reading he

never seemed to get the time to do.

Although that was no longer strictly true. Now he had all the time there was.

He reached out and pulled the journal underneath the lamp and settled down to read.

But it was slow going.

He went back and read a paragraph anew.

And that, he told himself, was not the way it should be.

Either he was getting old or his

eyes were going bad or he was plain stupid.

And that was the word - that was the key to the thing that it had seemed he should have been able to just reach out and grab.

Stupid!

Probably not actually stupid. Maybe just a little slow. Not really less intelligent, but not so sharp and bright as he had been. Not so quick to catch the hang of things.

Martha Anderson had forgotten how much yeast to use in those famous,

prize-winning rolls of hers. And that was something that Martha should never have forgotten.

Con had paid his bill, and on the scale of values that Con had subscribed to all his life, that was plain stupidity. The bright thing, the sharp thing would have been for Con, now that he'd probably never need a doctor, just to forget the obligation. After all, it would not have been hard to do; he'd been forgetful of it up to this very night.

And the alien had said something that, at the time, he'd thought of as a joke.

'Never fear,' the alien had said,

'we'll cure all your ills. Including, more than likely, a few you don't suspect.'

And was intelligence a disease?

It was hard to think of it as such.

And yet, when any race was as obsessed with intelligence as Man was, it might be classed as one.

When it ran rampant as it had during the last half century, when it piled progress on top of progress, technology on top of technology, when it ran so fast that no man caught his breath, then it might be disease.

Not quite so sharp, thought Doc.
Not quite so quick to grasp the meaning
of a paragraph loaded with medical
terminology - being forced to go a little
slower to pack it in his mind.

And was that really bad?

Some of the stupidest people he'd
ever known, he told himself, had been
the happiest.

And while one could not make out
of that a brief for planned stupidity, it at
least might be a plea for a less harassed
humanity.

He pushed the journal to one side

and sat staring at the light.

It would be felt in Millville first because Millville had been the pilot project. And six months from tomorrow night it would be felt in all the world.

How far would it go, he wondered - for that, after all, was the vital question.

Only slightly less sharp?

Back to bumbling?

Clear back to the ape?

There was no way one could tell...

And all he had to do to stop it was pick up the phone.

He sat there, frozen with the thought that perhaps Operation Kelly should be stopped - that after all the years of death and pain and misery, Man must buy it back.

But the aliens, he thought - the aliens would not let it go too far. Whoever they might be, he believed they were decent people.

Maybe there had been no basic understanding, no meeting of the minds, and yet there had been a common ground

- the very simple ground of compassion for the blind and halt.

But if he were wrong, he wondered - what if the aliens proposed to limit Man's powers of self-destruction even if that meant reducing him to abject stupidity... what was the answer then? And what if the plan was to soften man up before invasion?

Sitting there, he knew.

Knew that no matter what the odds were against his being right, there was nothing he could do.

Realized that as a judge in a matter

such as this he was unqualified, that he was filled with bias, and could not change himself.

He'd been a doctor too long to stop Operation Kelly.

Title : Madness from Mars
Author : Clifford D. Simak
Original copyright year: 1939
Genre : science fiction
Comments : to my knowledge, this
is the only available e-text of this book
Source : scanned and OCR-read
from a paperback edition with Xerox
TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS
Word 2000.
Date of e-text : February 14, 2000
Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights
reversed.

Madness from Mars

Clifford D. Simak

The _Hello Mars IV_ was coming home, back from the outward reaches of space, the first ship ever to reach the Red Planet and return. Telescopes located in the Crater of Copernicus Observatory on the Moon had picked it up and flashed the word to Earth, giving its position. Hours later, Earth

telescopes had found the tiny mote that flashed in the outer void.

Two years before, those same telescopes had watched the ship's outward voyage, far out until its silvery hull had dwindled into nothingness. From that day onward there had been no word or sign of _Hello Mars IV_ - nothing until the lunar telescopes, picking up again that minute speck in space, advised Earth of its homecoming.

Communication with the ship by Earth had been impossible. On the Moon, powerful radio stations were capable of hurling ultra-short wave messages across the quarter million

miles to Earth. But man as yet had found no means of communicating over fifty million miles of space. So _Hello Mars IV_ had arrowed out into the silence, leaving the Moon and the Earth to speculate and wonder over its fate.

Now, with Mars once again swinging into conjunction, the ship was coming back - a tiny gnat of steel pushing itself along with twinkling blasts of flaming rocket-fuel. Heading Earthward out of that region of silent mystery, spurning space-miles beneath its steel-shod heels. Triumphant, with the red dust of Mars still clinging to its plates - a mote of light in the telescopic lenses.

Aboard it were five brave men - Thomas Delvaney, the expedition's leader; Jerry Cooper, the red-thatched navigator; Andy Smith, the world's ace cameraman, and two space-hands, Jimmy Watson and Elmer Paine, grim old veterans of the Earth-Moon run.

There had been three other _Hello Mars_ ships - three other ships that had never come back - three other flights that had collided with a meteor a million miles out from the Moon. The second had flared briefly, deep in space, a red splash of flame in the telescopes through which the flight was watched - the fuel tanks had exploded. The third had

simply disappeared. On and on it had gone, boring outward until lost from sight. That had been six years ago, but men still wondered what had happened.

Four years later - two years ago - the _Hello Mars IV_ had taken off. Today it was returning, a gleaming thing far out in space, a shining symbol of man's conquest of the planets. It had reached Mars - and it was coming back. There would be others, now - and still others. Some would flare against the black and be lost forever. But others would win through, and man, blindly groping, always outward, to break his earthly bonds, at last would be on the pathway to the stars.

Jack Woods, _Express_ reporter,
lit a cigarette and asked:

'What do you figure they found out
there, Doc?'

Dr. Stephen Gilmer, director of the
Interplanetary Communications Research
Commission, puffed clouds of smoke
from his black cigar and answered
irritably:

'How in blue hell would I know
what they found? I hope they found
something. This trip cost us a million
bucks.'

'But can't you give me some idea of what they might have found?' persisted Woods. 'Some idea of what Mars is like. Any new ideas.'

Dr. Gilmer wrangled the cigar viciously.

'And have you spread it all over the front page,' he said. 'Spin something out of my own head just because you chaps are too impatient to wait for the actual data. Not by a damn sight. You reporters get my goat sometimes.'

'Ah, Doc, give us something,' pleaded Gary Henderson, staff man for the Star.

'Sure,' said Don Buckley, of the _Spaceways_. 'What do you care? You can always say we misquoted you. It wouldn't be the first time.'

Gilmer gestured toward the official welcoming committee that stood a short distance away.

'Why don't you get the mayor to say something, boys?' he suggested. 'The mayor is always ready to say something.'

'Sure,' said Gary, 'but it never adds up to anything. We've had the mayor's

face on the front page so much lately that he thinks he owns the paper.'

'Have you any idea why they haven't radioed us?' asked

Woods. 'They've been in sending distance for several hours now.'

Gilmer rolled the cigar from east to west. 'Maybe they broke the radio,' he said.

Nevertheless there were little lines of worry on his face. The fact that there had been no messages from the _Hello Mars IV_ troubled him. If the radio had been broken it could have been repaired.

Six hours ago the _Hello Mars IV_ had entered atmosphere. Even now it was circling the Earth in a strenuous effort to lose speed. Word that the ship was nearing Earth had brought spectators to the field in ever-increasing throngs. Highways and streets were jammed for miles around.

Perspiring police cordons struggled endlessly to keep the field clear for a landing. The day was hot, and soft drink stands were doing a rushing business. Women fainted in the crowd and some men were knocked down and trampled. Ambulance sirens sounded.

'Humph,' Woods grunted. 'We can send space-ships to Mars, but we don't know how to handle crowds.'

He stared expectantly into the bright blue bowl of the sky.

'Ought to be getting in pretty soon,' he said.

His words were blotted out by a mounting roar of sound. The ear-splitting explosions of roaring rocket tubes. The thunderous drumming of the ship shooting over the horizon.

The bellow from the crowd competed with the roaring of the tubes as

the _Hello Mars IV_ shimmered like a streak of silver light over the field. Then fading in the distance, it glowed redly as its forward tubes shot flame.

'Cooper sure is giving her everything he has,' Woods said in awe. 'He'll melt her down, using the tubes like that.'

He stared into the west, where the ship had vanished. His cigarette forgotten, burned down and scorched his fingers.

Out of the tail of his eye he saw Jimmy Andrews, the _Express_ photographer.

'Did you get a picture?' Woods roared at him.

'Picture, hell,' Andrews shouted back. 'I can't shoot greased lightning.'

The ship was coming back again, its speed slowed, but still traveling at a terrific pace. For a moment it hung over the horizon and then nosed down toward the field.

'He can't land at that speed,' Woods yelled. 'It'll crack wide open!'

'Look out,' roared a dozen voices and then the ship was down, its nose

plowing into the ground, leaving in its wake a smoking furrow of raw earth, its tail tilting high in the air, threatening to nose over on its back.

The crowd at the far end of the field broke and stampeded, trampling, clawing, pushing, shoving, suddenly engulfed in a hysteria of fear at the sight of the ship plowing toward them.

But the _Hello Mars IV_ stopped just short of the police cordon, still right side up. A pitted, battered ship - finally home from space - the first ship to reach Mars and return.

The newspapermen and photographers were rushing forward. The crowd was shrieking. Automobile horns and sirens blasted the air. From the distant rim of the city rose the shrilling of whistles and the far-away roll of clamoring bells.

As Woods ran a thought hammered in his head. A thought that had an edge of apprehension. There was something wrong. If Jerry Cooper had been at the controls, he never would have landed the ship at such speed. It had been a madman's stunt to land a ship that way. Jerry was a skilled navigator, averse to taking chances. Jack had watched him in

the Moon Derby five years before and the way Jerry could handle a ship was beautiful to see.

The valve port in the ship's control cabin swung slowly open, clanged back against the metal side. A man stepped out - a man who staggered jerkily forward and then stumbled and fell in a heap.

Dr. Gilmer rushed to him, lifted him in his arms.

Woods caught a glimpse of the man's face as his head lolled in Gilmer's arms. It was Jerry Cooper's face - but a face that was twisted and changed

almost beyond recognition, a face that burned itself into Jack Wood's brain, indelibly etched there, something to be remembered with a shudder through the years. A haggard face with deeply sunken eyes, with hollow cheeks, with drooling lips that slobbered sounds that were not words.

A hand pushed at Woods.

'Get out of my way,' shrilled Andrews~ 'How do you expect me to take a picture?'

The newsman heard the camera whirr softly, heard the click of changing plates.

'Where are the others?' Gilmer was shouting at Cooper. The man looked up at him vacantly, his face twisting itself into a grimace of pain and fear.

'Where are the others?' Gilmer shouted again, his voice ringing over the suddenly hushed stillness of the crowd.

Cooper jerked his head toward the ship.

'In there,' he whispered and the whisper cut like a sharp-edged knife.

He mumbled drooling words, words that meant nothing. Then with an

effort he answered.

'Dead,' he said.

And in the silence that followed, he said again:

'All dead!'

They found the others in the living quarters back of the locked control room. All four of them were dead - had been dead for days. Andy Smith's skull had been crushed by a mighty blow.

Jimmy Watson had been strangled,

with the blue raised welts of blunt fingers still upon his throat. Elmer Paine's body was huddled in a corner, but upon him there were no marks of violence, although his face was contorted into a visage of revulsion, a mask of pain and fear and suffering. Thomas Delvaney's body sprawled beside a table. His throat had been opened with an old fashioned straight-edge razor. The razor, stained with blackened blood, was tightly clutched in the death grip of his right hand.

In one corner of the room stood a large wooden packing box. Across the smooth white boards of the box someone had written shakily, with black crayon,

the single word 'Animal'. Plainly there had been an attempt to write something else - strange wandering crayon marks below the single word. Marks that scrawled and stopped and made no sense.

That night Jerry Cooper died, a raving maniac.

A banquet, planned by the city to welcome home the conquering heroes, was cancelled. There were no heroes left to welcome back.

What was in the packing box?

'It's an animal,' Dr. Gilmer

declared, 'and that's about as far as I would care to go. It seems to be alive, but that is hard to tell. Even when moving fast - fast, that is, for it - it probably would make a sloth look like chain lightning in comparison.'

Jack Woods stared down through the heavy glass walls that caged the thing Dr. Gilmer had found in the packing box marked 'Animal'.

It looked like a round ball of fur.

'It's all curled up, sleeping,' he said.

'Curled up, hell,' said Gilmer.

'That's the shape of the beast. It's

spherical and it's covered with fur. Fur-Ball would be a good name for it, if you were looking for something descriptive. A fur coat of that stuff would keep you comfortable in the worst kind of weather the North Pole could offer. It's thick and it's warm. Mars, you must remember, is damned cold.'

'Maybe we'll have fur-trappers and fur-trading posts up on Mars,' Woods suggested. 'Big fur shipments to Earth and Martian wraps selling at fabulous prices.'

'They'd kill them off in a hurry if it ever came to that,' declared Gilmer. 'A foot a day would be top speed for that

baby, if it can move at all. Oxygen would be scarce on Mars. Energy would be something mighty hard to come by and this boy couldn't afford to waste it by running around. He'd just have to sit tight and not let anything distract him from the mere business of just living.'

'It doesn't seem to have eyes or ears or anything you'd expect an animal to have,' Woods said, straining his eyes the better to see the furry ball through the glass.

'He probably has sense-perceptions we would never recognize,' declared Gilmer. 'You must remember, Jack, that he is a product of an entirely different

environment - perhaps he rose from an entirely different order of life than we know here on Earth. There's no reason why we must believe that parallel evolution would occur on any two worlds so remotely separated as Earth and Mars.

'From what little we know of Mars,' he went on, rolling the black cigar between his lips, 'it's just about the kind of animal we'd expect to find there. Mars has little water - by Earth standards, practically none at all. A dehydrated world. There's oxygen there, but the air is so thin we'd call it a

vacuum on Earth. A Martian animal would have to get on very little water, very little oxygen.

'And, when he got it, he'd want to keep it. The spherical shape gives him a minimum surface-per-volume ratio.

'This makes it easier for him to conserve water and oxygen. He probably is mostly lungs. The fur protects him from the cold. Mars must be devilish cold at times. Cold enough at night to freeze carbon dioxide. That's what they had him packed in on the ship.'

'No kidding,' said Woods.

'Sure,' said Gilmer. 'Inside the wooden box was a steel receptacle and that fellow was inside of that. They had pumped out quite a bit of the air, made it a partial vacuum, and packed frozen carbon dioxide around the receptacle. Outside of that, between the box and the ice, was paper and felt to slow up melting. They must have been forced to repack him and change air several times during the trip back.

'Apparently he hadn't had much attention the last few days before they got here, for the oxygen was getting pretty thin, even for him, and the ice was almost gone. I don't imagine he felt any too good. Probably was just a bit sick.

Too much carbon dioxide and the temperature uncomfortably warm.'

Woods gestured at the glass cage.

'I suppose you got him all fixed up now,' he said. 'Air conditioned and everything.'

Gilmer chuckled.

'Must seem just like home to him.' he replied. 'In there the atmosphere is thinned down to about one-thousandth Earth standard, with considerable ozone. Don't know whether he needs that, but a good deal of the oxygen on Mars must be in the form of ozone. Surface conditions

there are suitable for its production. The temperature is 20 degrees below zero Centigrade. I had to guess at that, because I have no way of knowing from what part of Mars this animal of ours was taken. That would make a difference.'

He wrangled the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

'A little private Mars all his own,' he stated.

'You found no records at all on the ship?' asked Woods. 'Nothing telling anything at all about him?'

Gilmer shook his head and clamped a vicious jaw on the cigar.

'We found the log book,' he said, 'but it had been deliberately destroyed. Someone soaked it in acid. No chance of getting anything out of it.'

The reporter perched on a desk top and drummed his fingers idly on the wood.

'Now just why in hell would they want to do that?' he asked.

'Why in hell did they do a lot of things they did?' Gilmer snarled. 'Why did somebody, probably Delvaney, kill

Paine and Watson? Why did Delvaney, after he did that, kill himself? What happened to Smith? Why did Cooper die insane, screaming and shrieking as if something had him by the throat? Who scrawled that single word on the box and tried to write more, but couldn't? What stopped him writing more?

Woods nodded his head toward the glass cage.

'I wonder how much our little friend had to do with it,' he speculated.

'You're crazier than a space-bug,'

Gilmer snapped. 'What m blue hell could he have had to do with it? He's just an animal and probably of a pretty low order of intelligence. The way things are on Mars he'd be kept too damn busy just keeping alive to build much brain. Of course, I haven't had much chance to study it yet. Dr. Winters, of Washington, and Dr. Lathrop, of London, will be here next week. We'll try to find out something then.'

Woods walked to the window in the laboratory and looked out.

The building stood on top of a hill, with a green lawn sweeping down to a park-like area with fenced off paddock,

moat-protected cliff-cages and monkey-islands - the Metropolitan Zoo.

Gilmer took a fresh and fearsome grip on his cigar.

'It proves there's life on Mars,' he contradicted. 'It doesn't prove a damn thing else.'

'You should use a little imagination,' chided Woods.

'If I did,' snarled Gilmer, 'I'd be a newspaperman. I wouldn't be fit for any other job.'

Along toward noon, down in the

zoo, Pop Anderson, head-keeper of the lionhouse, shook his head dolefully and scratched his chin.

'Them cats have been actin' mighty uneasy,' he declared. 'Like there was something on their minds. They don't hardly sleep at all. Just prowl around.'

Eddie Riggs, reporter for the _Express_, clucked sympathetically.

'Maybe they aren't getting the right vitamins, Pop,' he suggested.

Pop disagreed.

'It ain't that,' he said. 'They're gettin'

the same feed we always give 'em. Plenty raw meat. But they're restless as all git-out. A cat is a lazy critter. Sleeps hours at a stretch and always takin' naps. But they don't do that no more. Cranky. Fightin' among themselves. I had to give Nero a good whoppin' the other day when he tried to beat up Percy. And when I did he made a pass at me - me, who's took care of him since he was a cub.'

From across the water-moat Nero snarled menacingly at Pop.

'He's still got it in for me,' Pop said. 'If he don't quiet down, I'll give him a raw-hidin' he'll remember. There ain't

no lion can get gay with me.'

He glanced apprehensively at the lion-run.

'I sure hope they calm down,' he said. 'This is Saturday and there'll be a big crowd this afternoon. Always makes them nervous, a crowd does, and the way they are now there'll be no holdin' 'em.'

'Anything else you heard of going on?' Riggs asked. Pop scratched his chin.

'Susan died this morning,' he declared.

Susan was a giraffe.

'Didn't know Susan was sick,' said Riggs.

'She wasn't,' Pop told him. 'Just keeled over.'

Riggs turned his eyes back to the lion caves. Nero, a big black-maned brute, was balancing himself on the edge of the water ditch, almost as if he were about to leap into the water. Percy and another lion were tusseling, not too good-naturedly.

'Looks like Nero might be thinking of coming over here after you,' the reporter suggested.

'Shucks,' snorted Pop. 'he wouldn't do that. Not Nero. Nor no other lion. Why, them cats hate water worse'n poison.'

From the elephant paddock, a mile or more away, came the sudden angry trumpeting of the pachyderms. Then a shrill squeal of elephantine rage.

'Sounds like them elephants was

actin' up, too,' Pop declared calmly.

Pounding feet thundered around the corner of the walk that circled the cat-cages. A man who had lost his hat, whose eyes were wild with terror, pounded past them. As he ran on he cried:

'An elephant has gone mad! It's coming this way!'

Nero roared. A mountain lion screamed.

A great gray shape, moving swiftly despite its lumbering gait, rounded a clump of bushes and moved out on the

smooth green sward of the park. It was the elephant. With trunk reared high, emitting screams of rage, with huge ears flapping, the beast headed for the cat-cages.

Riggs turned and pounded madly toward the administration building. Behind him Pop puffed and panted.

Shrill screams rent the air as early visitors at the zoo scampered for safety.

Animal voices added to the uproar.

The elephant, turning from his original direction, charged through the two acre paddock in which three pairs

of wolves were kept, taking fence, trees and brush in his stride.

On the steps of the administration building. Riggs looked back.

Nero, the lion, was dripping water! The water that theoretically should have kept him penned in his cage as securely as steel bars!

A keeper, armed with a rifle, rushed up to Riggs.

'All hell's broken loose,' he shouted.

The polar bears had staged a

bloody battle, with two of them dead, two dying and the rest so badly mauled that there was little hope they would live. Two buck deer, with locked horns, were fighting to the death. Monkey Island was in an uproar, with half of the little creatures mysteriously dead - dead, the keepers said, of too much excitement. A nervous condition.

'It ain't natural,' protested Pop, when they were inside. 'Animals don't fight like that.'

Riggs was yelling into a telephone.

Outside a rifle roared.

Pop flinched.

'Maybe that's Nero.' he groaned.
'Nero, that I raised from a cub. Bottle-fed him, I did.'

There were traces of tears in the old man's eyes.

It was Nero. But Nero, before he died, had reached out for the man who held the rifle and had killed him with a single vicious blow that crushed his skull.

Later that day, in his office, Doctor

Gilmer smote the newspaper that lay open on his desk.

'You see that?' he asked Jack Woods.

The reporter nodded grimly. 'I see it. I wrote it. I worked on it all afternoon. Wild animals turned loose in the city. Ravening animals. Mad with the lust to kill. Hospitals full of dying people. Morgues with ripped humanity. I saw an elephant trample a man into the earth before the police shot the beast. The whole zoo gone mad. Like a jungle nightmare.'

He wiped his forehead with his

coat sleeve and lit a cigarette with shaking fingers.

'I can stand most anything,' he said, 'but this was the acme of something or other. It was pretty horrible, Doc. I felt sorry for the animals, too,' he said. 'Poor devils. They weren't themselves. It was a pity to have to kill so many of them.'

Doc leaned across the table. 'Why did you come here?' he asked.

Woods nodded toward the glass cage that held the Martian animal. 'I got to thinking,' he said. 'The shambles down

there today reminded me of something else -'

He paused and looked squarely at Gilmer.

'It reminded me of what we found in the _Hello Mars IV_.'

'Why?' snapped Gilmer.

'The men on board the ship were insane,' declared Woods. 'Only insane men would do the things they did. And Cooper died a maniac. How he held onto his reason long enough to bring the ship to a landing is more than I know.'

Gilmer took the mangled cigar out of his mouth and concentrated on picking off the worst of the frayed edge. He tucked it carefully back into the corner of his jaw.

'You figured those animals were insane today?'

Woods nodded.

'And for no reason,' he added.

'So you up and suspicioned the Martian animal,' said Gilmer. 'Just how in blue hell do you think that defenseless little Fur-Ball over there could make men and animals go insane?'

'Listen,' said Woods, 'don't act that way, Doc. You're on the trail of something. You broke a poker date tonight to stay here at the laboratory. You had two tanks of carbon monoxide sent up. You were shut in here all afternoon. You borrowed some stuff from Appleman down in the sound laboratory. It all adds up to something. Better tell me.'

'Damn you,' said Gilmer, 'you'd find out anyway even if I kept mum.'

He sat down and put his feet on the desk. He threw the wrecked and battered cigar into the waste-paper basket, took a

fresh one out of a box, gave it a few preliminary chews and lit it.

'Tonight,' said Gilmer, 'I am going to stage an execution. I feel badly about it, but probably it is an act of mercy.'

'You mean,' gasped Jack, 'that you are going to kill Fur-Ball over there?'

Gilmer nodded. 'That's what the carbon monoxide is for. Introduce it into the cage. He'll never know what happened. Get drowsy, go to sleep, never wake up. Humane way to kill the thing.'

'But why?'

'Listen to me,' said Gilmer. 'You've heard of ultrasonics, haven't you?'

'Sounds pitched too high for the human ear to hear,' said Woods. 'We use them for lots of things. For underwater signaling and surveying. To keep check on high-speed machines, warn of incipient breakdowns,'

'Man has gone a long way with ultrasonics,' said Gilmer. 'Makes sound do all sorts of tricks. Creates ultrasonics up to as high as 20 million vibrations per second. One million cycle stuff kills germs. Some insects talk to one another with 32,000 cycle vibration. Twenty

thousand is about as high as the human ear can detect. But man hasn't started yet. Because little Fur-Ball over there talks with ultrasonics that approximate thirty million cycles.'

The cigar traveled east to west.

'High frequency sound can be directed in narrow beams, reflected like light, controlled. Most of our control has been in liquids. We know that a dense medium is necessary for the best control of ultrasonics. Get high frequency sound in a medium like air and it breaks down fast, dissipates. That is, up to twenty million cycles, as far as we have gone.

'But thirty million cycles, apparently, can be controlled in air, in a medium less dense than our atmosphere. Just what the difference is I can't imagine, although there must be an explanation. Something like that would be needed for audible communication on a place like Mars, where the atmosphere must be close to a vacuum.'

'Fur-Ball used thirty million cycle stuff to talk with,' said Jack, 'That much is clear. What's the connection?'

'This.' said Gilmer. 'Although sound reaching that frequency can't be heard in the sense that your auditory nerves will pick it up and relay it to your brain, it

apparently can make direct impact on the brain. When it does that it must do something to the brain. It must disarrange the brain, give it a murderous complex, drive the entity of the brain insane.'

Jack leaned forward breathlessly.

'Then that was what happened on the _Hello Mars IV_. That is what happened down in the park today.'

Gilmer nodded, slowly, sadly.

'It wasn't malicious,' he said. 'I am sure of that. Fur-Ball didn't want to hurt anything. He was just lonesome and a little frightened. He was trying to contact

some intelligence. Trying to talk with something. He was asleep or at least physiologically dormant when I took him from the ship. Probably he fell into his sleep just in time to save Cooper from the full effects of the ultrasonics. Maybe he would sleep a lot. Good way to conserve energy.

'He woke up sometime yesterday, but it seemed to take some time for him to get fully awake. I detected slight vibrations from him all day yesterday. This morning the vibrations became stronger. I had put several different assortments of food in the cage, hoping he would choose one or more to eat, give me some clue to his diet. But he

didn't do any eating, although he moved around a little bit. Pretty slow, although I imagine it was fast for him. The vibrations kept getting stronger. That was when the real hell broke out in the zoo. He seems to be dozing off again now and things have quieted down.'

Gilmer picked up a box-like instrument to which was attached a set of headphones.

'Borrowed these from Appleman down in the sound laboratory,' he said. 'The vibrations had me stumped at first. Couldn't determine their nature. Then I

hit on sound. These things are a toy of Appleman's. Only half-developed yet. They let you 'hear' ultrasonics. Not actual hearing, of course, but an impression of tonal quality, a sort of psychological study of ultrasonics, translation of ultrasonics into what they would be like if you could hear them.'

He handed the head-set to Woods and carried the box to the glass cage. He set it on the cage and moved it slowly back and forth, trying to intercept the ultrasonics emanating from the little Martian animal.

Woods slipped on the phones, sat waiting breathlessly.

He had expected to hear a high, thin sound, but no sound came. Instead a dreadful sense of loneliness crept over him, a sense of bafflement, lack of understanding, frustration. Steadily the feeling mounted in his brain, a voiceless wail of terrible loneliness and misery - a heart-wrenching cry of home-sickness.

He knew he was listening to the wailing of the little Martian animal, was 'hearing' its cries, like the whimperings of a lost puppy on a storm-swept street.

His hands went up and swept the phones from his head.

He stared at Gilmer, half in horror.

'It's lonesome,' he said. 'Crying for Mars. Like a lost baby.'

Gilmer nodded.

'It's not trying to talk to anyone now,' he said. 'Just lying there, crying its heart out. Not dangerous now. Never intentionally dangerous, but dangerous just the same.'

'But,' cried Woods, 'you were here all afternoon. It didn't bother you. You didn't go insane.'

Gilmer shook his head.

'No,' he said, 'I didn't go insane. Just the animals. And they would become immune after a while with this one certain animal. Because Fur-Ball is intelligent. His frantic attempts to communicate with some living things touched my brain time and time again... but it didn't stay. It swept on. It ignored me.

'You see, back in the ship it found that the human brain couldn't communicate with it. It recognized it as an alien being. So it didn't waste any more time with the human brain. But it tried the brains of monkeys and elephants and lions, hoping madly that it

would find some intelligence to which it could talk, some intelligence that could explain what had happened, tell it where it was, reassure it that it wasn't marooned from Mars forever.

'I am convinced it has no visual sense, very little else except this ultrasonic voice to acquaint itself with its surroundings and its conditions. Maybe back on Mars it could talk to its own kind and to other things as well. It didn't move around much. It probably didn't have many enemies. It didn't need so many senses.'

'It's intelligent,' said Woods.
'Intelligent to a point where you can
hardly think of it as an animal.'

Gilmer nodded.

'You're right,' he said. 'Maybe it is
just as human as we are. Maybe it
represents the degeneration of a great
race that once ruled Mars...'

He jerked the cigar out of his mouth
and flung it savagely on the floor.

'Hell,' he said, 'what's the use of
speculation? Probably you and I will
never know. Probably the human race
will never know.'

He reached out and grasped the tank of carbon monoxide, started to wheel it toward the glass cage.

'Do you have to kill it, Doc?' Woods whispered. 'Do you really have to kill it?'

Gilmer wheeled on him savagely.

'Of course I have to kill it,' he roared. 'What if the story ever got out that Fur-Ball killed the boys in the ship and all those animals today? What if he drove others insane? There'd be no more trips to Mars for years to come. Public opinion would make that impossible.'

And when another one does go out they'll have instructions not to bring back any Fur-Balls - and they'll have to be prepared for the effects of ultrasonics.'

He turned back to the tank and then wheeled back again.

'Woods,' he said, 'you and I have been friends for a long time. We've had many a beer together. You aren't going to publish this, are you, Jack?'

He spread his feet.

'I'd kill you if you did,' he roared.

'No,' said Jack, 'just a simple little

story. Fur-Ball is dead. Couldn't take it, here on Earth.'

'There's another thing,' said Gilmer. 'You know and I know that ultrasonics of the thirty million order can turn men into insane beasts. We know it can be controlled in atmosphere, probably over long distances. Think of what the war-makers of the world could do with that weapon! Probably they'll find out in time - but not from us!'

'Hurry up,' Woods said bitterly. 'Hurry up, will you. Don't let Fur-Ball suffer any longer. You heard him. Man got him into this - there's only one way man can get him out of it. He'd thank you

for death if he only knew.'

Gilmer laid hands on the tank again.

Woods reached for a telephone. He dialed the _Express_ number.

In his mind he could hear that puppyish whimper, that terrible, soundless cry of loneliness, that homesick wail of misery. A poor huddled little animal snatched fifty million miles from home, among strangers, a hurt little animal crying for attention that no one could offer.

'_Daily Express_', said the voice of Bill Carson, night editor. 'This is Jack,' the reporter said. 'Thought maybe you'd want something for the morning edition. Fur-Ball just died - yeah, Fur-Ball, the animal the _Hello Mars IV_ brought in - Sure, the little rascal couldn't take it.'

Behind him he heard the hiss of gas as Gilmer opened the valve.

'Bill,' he said, 'I just thought of an angle. You might say the little cuss died of loneliness... yeah, that's the idea, grieving for Mars... Sure, it ought to give the boys a real sob story to write...'

Title: Good night, Mr. James

Author: Clifford D. Simak

Original copyright year: 1951

Genre: science fiction

Comments: To my knowledge, this is the only available e-text of this story.

Source: scanned and OCR-read from a paperback edition with Xerox TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS Word 2000.

Date of e-text: August 18, 1999

Prepared by: Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 1999. All rights
reversed.

GOOD NIGHT, MR. JAMES

Clifford D. Simak

I

HE CAME ALIVE from nothing.
He became aware from unawareness.

He smelled the air of the night and heard the trees whispering on the embankment above him and the breeze that had set the trees to whispering came down to him and felt him over with soft and tender fingers, for all the world as if it were examining him for broken bones or contusions and abrasions.

He sat up and put both his palms down upon the ground beside him to help him sit erect and stared into the darkness. Memory came slowly and when it came it was incomplete and answered nothing.

His name was Henderson James and he was a human being and he was sitting somewhere on a planet that was called the Earth. He was thirty-six years old and he was, in his own way, famous, and comfortably well-off. He lived in an old ancestral home on Summit avenue, which was a respectable address even if it had lost some of its smartness in the last twenty years or so.

On the road above the slope of the embankment a car went past with its tires whining on the pavement and for a moment its headlights made the treetops glow. Far away, muted by the distance, a whistle cried out. And somewhere else a

dog was barking with a flat viciousness.

His name was Henderson James and if that were true, why was he here? Why should Henderson James be sitting on the slope of an embankment, listening to the wind in the trees and to a wailing whistle and a barking dog? Something had gone wrong, some incident that, if he could but remember it, might answer all his questions.

There was a job to do.

He sat and stared into the night and found that he was shivering, although there was no reason why he should, for the night was not that cold. Beyond the

embankment he heard the sounds of a city late at night, the distant whine of the speeding car and the far-off wind-broken screaming of a siren. Once a man walked along a street close by and James sat listening to his footsteps until they faded out of hearing.

Something had happened and there was a job to do, a job that he had been doing, a job that somehow had been strangely interrupted by the inexplicable incident which had left him lying here on this embankment.

He checked himself. Clothing... shorts and shirt, strong shoes, his wristwatch and the gun in the holster at

his side.

A gun?

The job involved a gun.

He had been hunting in the city, hunting something that required a gun. Something that was prowling in the night and a thing that must be killed.

Then he knew the answer, but even as he knew it he sat for a moment wondering at the strange, methodical, step-by-step progression of reasoning that had brought him to the memory. First his name and the basic facts pertaining to himself, then the realization of where he

was and the problem of why he happened to be there and finally the realization that he had a gun and that it was meant to be used. It was a logical way to think, a primer schoolbook way to work it out:

I am a man named Henderson James.

I live in a house on Summit avenue.

Am I in the house on Summit avenue?

No, I am not in the house on Summit avenue.

I am on an embankment somewhere.

Why am I on the embankment?

But it wasn't the way a man thought, at least not the normal way a normal man would think. Man thought in shortcuts. He cut across the block and did not go all the way around.

It was a frightening thing, he told himself, this clear-around-the-block thinking. It wasn't normal and it wasn't right and it made no sense at all... no more sense than did the fact that he should find himself in a place with no memory of getting there.

He rose to his feet and ran his hands up and down his body. His clothes were neat, not rumpled. He hadn't been beaten up and he hadn't been thrown from a speeding car.

There were no sore places on his body and his face was unbloody and whole and he felt all right.

He hooked his fingers in the holster belt and shucked it up so that it rode tightly on his hips. He pulled out the gun and checked it with expert and familiar fingers and the gun was ready.

He walked up the embankment and reached the road, went across it with a

swinging stride to reach the sidewalk that fronted the row of new bungalows. He heard a car coming and stepped off the sidewalk to crouch in a clump of evergreens that landscaped one corner of a lawn. The move was instinctive and he crouched there, feeling just a little foolish at the thing he'd done.

The car went past and no one saw him. They would not, he now realized, have noticed him even if he had remained out on the sidewalk.

He was unsure of himself; that must be the reason for his fear. There was a blank spot in his life, some mysterious incident that he did not know and the

unknowing of it had undermined the sure and solid foundation of his own existence, had wrecked the basis of his motive and had turned him, momentarily, into a furtive animal that darted and hid at the approach of his fellow men.

That and something that had happened to him that made him think clear around the block.

He remained crouching in the evergreens, watching the street and the stretch of sidewalk, conscious of the white-painted, ghostly bungalows squatting back in their landscaped lots.

A word came into his mind. Puudly.

An odd word, unearthly, yet it held terror.

The puudly had escaped and that was why he was here, hiding on the front lawn of some unsuspecting and sleeping citizen, equipped with a gun and a determination to use it, ready to match his wits and the quickness of brain and muscle against the most bloodthirsty, hate-filled thing yet found in the Galaxy.

The puudly was dangerous. It was not a thing to harbor. In fact, there was a law against harboring not only a puudly, but certain other alien beasties even less lethal than a puudly. There was good reason for such a law, reason which no

one, much less himself, would ever think to question.

And now the puudly was loose and somewhere in the city.

James grew cold at the thought of it, his brain forming images of the things that might come to pass if he did not hunt down the alien beast and put an end to it.

Although beast was not quite the word to use. The puudly was more than a beast... just how much more than a beast he once had hoped to learn. He had not learned a lot, he now admitted to himself, not nearly all there was to learn, but he had learned enough. More than

enough to frighten him.

For one thing, he had learned what hate could be and how shallow an emotion human hate turned out when measured against the depth and intensity and the ravening horror of the puudly's hate. Not unreasoning hate, for unreasoning hate defeats itself, but a rational, calculating, driving hate that motivated a clever and deadly killing machine which directed its rapacity and its cunning against every living thing that was not a puudly.

For the beast had a mind and a personality that operated upon the basic law of self-preservation against all

corners, whoever they might be, extending that law to the interpretation that safety lay in one direction only... the death of every other living being. No other reason was needed for a puudly's killing. The fact that anything else lived and moved and was thus posing a threat, no matter how remote, against a puudly, was sufficient reason in itself.

It was psychotic, of course, some murderous instinct planted far back in time and deep in the creature's racial consciousness, but no more psychotic, perhaps, than many human instincts.

The puudly had been, and still was for that matter, a unique opportunity for a

study in alien behaviorism. Given a permit, one could have studied them on their native planet. Refused a permit, one sometimes did a foolish thing, as James had.

And foolish acts backfire, as this one did.

James put down a hand and patted the gun at his side, as if by doing so he might derive some assurance that he was equal to the task. There was no question in his mind as to the thing that must be done. He must find the puudty and kill it and he must do that before the break of dawn.

Anything less than that would be abject and horrifying failure.

For the puudly would bud. It was long past its time for the reproductive act and there were bare hours left to find it before it had loosed upon the Earth dozens of baby puudlies. They would not remain babies for long. A few hours after budding they would strike out on their own. To find one puudly, lost in the vastness of a sleeping city, seemed bad enough; to track down some dozens of them would be impossible.

So it was tonight or never.

Tonight there would be no killing

on the puudly's part, Tonight the beast would be intent on one thing only, to find a place where it could rest in quiet, where it could give itself over, wholeheartedly and with no interference, to the business of bringing other puudlies into being.

It was clever. It would have known where it was going before it had escaped. There would be, on its part, no time wasted in seeking or in doubling back. It would have known where it was going and already it was there, already the buds would be rising on its body, bursting forth and growing.

There was one place, and one place

only, in the entire city where an alien beast would be safe, from prying eyes. A man could figure that one out and so could a puudly. The question was: Would the puudly know that man could figure it out? Would the puudly underestimate a man? Or, knowing that the man would know it, too, would it find another place of hiding?

James rose from the evergreens and went down the sidewalk. The street marker at the corner, standing underneath a swinging street light, told him where he was and it was closer to the place where he was going than he might have hoped.

II

The zoo was quiet for a while, and then something sent up a howl that raised James' hackles and made his blood stop in his veins.

James, having scaled the fence, stood tensely at its foot, trying to identify the howling animal. He was unable to place it. More than likely, he told himself, it was a new one. A person simply couldn't keep track of all the zoo's occupants. New ones were coming in all the time, strange, unheard of creatures from the distant stars.

Straight ahead lay the unoccupied moat cage that up until a day or two before had held an unbelievable monstrosity from the jungles of one of the Arctian worlds. James grimaced in the dark, remembering the thing. They had finally had to kill it.

And now the puudly was there... well, maybe not there, but one place that it could be, the one place in the entire city where it might be seen and arouse no comment, for the zoo was filled with animals that were seldom seen and another strange one would arouse only momentary wonder.

One animal more would go unnoticed unless some zoo attendant should think to check the records. There, in that unoccupied cage area, the puudly would be undisturbed, could quietly go about its business of budding out more puudlies. No one would bother it, for things like puudlies were the normal

occupants of this place set aside for the strangers brought to Earth to be stared at and studied by that ferocious race, the humans.

James stood quietly beside the fence.

Henderson James. Thirty-six. Unmarried. Alien psychologist. An official of this zoo. And an offender against the law for having secured and harbored an alien being that was barred from Earth.

Why, he asked himself, did he think of himself in this way? Why, standing here, did he catalogue himself? It was

instinctive to know one's self... there was no need, no sense of setting up a mental outline of one's self.

It had been foolish to go ahead with this puudly business. He recalled how he had spent days fighting it out with himself, reviewing all the disastrous possibilities which might arise from it. If the old renegade spaceman had not come to him and had not said, over a bottle of most delicious Lupan wine, that he could deliver, for a certain, rather staggering sum, one live puudly, in good condition, it never would have happened.

James was sure that of himself he never would have thought of it. But the

old space captain was a man he knew and admired from former dealings. He was a man who was not averse to turning either an honest or a dishonest dollar, and yet he was a man, for all of that, you could depend upon. He would do what you paid him for and keep his lip buttoned tight once the deed was done.

James had wanted a puudly, for it was a most engaging beast with certain little tricks that, once understood, might open up new avenues of speculation and approach, might write new chapters in the tortuous study of alien minds and manners.

But for all of that, it had been a terrifying thing to do and now that the beast was loose, the terror was compounded.

For it was not wholly beyond speculation that the descendants of this one brood that the escaped puudly would spawn might wipe out the population of the Earth, or at the best, make the Earth untenable for its rightful dwellers.

A place like the Earth, with its teeming millions, would provide a field day for the fangs of the puudlies, and the minds that drove the fangs. They would not hunt for hunger, nor for the sheer madness of the kill, but because of the

compelling conviction that no pudly would be safe until Earth was wiped clean of life. They would be killing for survival, as a cornered rat would kill... except that they would be cornered nowhere but in the murderous insecurity of their minds.

If the posses scoured the Earth to hunt them down, they would be found in all directions, for they would be shrewd enough to scatter. They would know the ways of guns and traps and poisons and there would be more and more of them as time went on. Each of them would accelerate its budding to replace with a dozen or a hundred the ones that might be killed.

James moved quietly forward to the edge of the moat and let himself down into the mud that covered the bottom. When the monstrosity had been killed, the moat had been drained and should long since have been cleaned, but the press of work, James thought, must have prevented its getting done.

Slowly he waded out into the mud, feeling his way, his feet making sucking noises as he pulled them through the slime. Finally he reached the rocky incline that led out of the moat to the island cage.

He stood for a moment, his hands

on the great, wet boulders, listening, trying to hold his breath so the sound of it would not interfere with hearing. The thing that howled had quieted and the night was deathly quiet. Or seemed, at first, to be. Then he heard the little insect noises that ran through the grass and bushes and the whisper of the leaves in the trees across the moat and the far-off sound that was the hoarse breathing of a sleeping city.

Now, for the first time, he felt fear. Felt it in the silence that was not a silence, in the mud beneath his feet, in the upthrust boulders that rose out of the moat.

The puudly was a dangerous thing, not only because it was strong and quick, but because it was intelligent. Just how intelligent, he did not know. It reasoned and it planned and schemed. It could talk, though not as a human talks... probably better than a human ever could. For it not only could talk words, but it could talk emotions. It lured its victims to it by the thoughts it put into their minds; it held them entranced with dreams and illusion until it slit their throats. It could purr a man to sleep, could lull him to suicidal inaction. It could drive him crazy with a single flickering thought, hurling a perception so foul and alien that the mind recoiled deep inside itself and stayed there,

coiled tight, like a watch that has been overwound and will not run.

It should have budded long ago, but it had fought off its budding, holding back against the day when it might escape, planning, he realized now, its fight to stay on Earth, which meant its conquest of Earth, it had planned, and planned well, against this very moment, and it would feel or show no mercy to anyone who interfered with it.

His hand went down and touched the gun and he felt the muscles in his jaw involuntarily tightening and suddenly there was at once a lightness and a hardness in him that had not been there

before. He pulled himself up the boulder face, seeking cautious hand- and toeholds, breathing shallowly, body pressed against the rock. Quickly, and surely, and no noise, for he must reach the top and be there before the puudly knew there was anyone around.

The puudly would be relaxed and intent upon its business, engrossed in the budding forth of that numerous family that in days to come would begin the grim and relentless crusade to make an alien planet safe for puudlies... and for puudlies alone.

That is, if the puudly were here and not somewhere else. James was only a

human trying to think like a puudly and that was not an easy or a pleasant job and he had no way of knowing if he succeeded. He could only hope that his reasoning was vicious and crafty enough.

His clawing hand found grass and earth and he sank his fingers deep into the soil, hauling his body up the last few feet of the rock face above the pit.

He lay flat upon the gently sloping ground, listening, tensed for any danger. He studied the ground in front of him, probing every foot. Distant street lamps lighting the zoo walks threw back the total blackness that had engulfed him as

he climbed out of the moat, but there still were areas of shadow that he had to study closely.

Inch by inch, he squirmed his way along, making sure of the terrain immediately ahead before he moved a muscle. He held the gun in a rock-hard fist, ready for instant action, watching for the faintest hint of motion, alert for any hump or irregularity that was not rock or bush or grass.

Minutes magnified themselves into hours, his eyes ached with staring and the lightness that had been in him drained away, leaving only the hardness, which was as tense as a drawn

bowstring. A sense of failure began to seep into his mind and with it came the full-fledged, until now unadmitted, realization of what failure meant, not only for the world, but for the dignity and the pride that was Henderson James.

Now, faced with the possibility, he admitted to himself the action he must take if the puudly were not here, if he did not find it here and kill it. He would have to notify the authorities, would have to attempt to alert the police, must plead with newspapers arid radio to warn the citizenry, must reveal himself as a man who, through pride and self-conceit, had exposed the people of the Earth to this threat against their hold

upon their native planet.

They would not believe him. They would laugh at him until the laughter died in their torn throats, choked off with their blood. He sweated, thinking of it, thinking of the price this city, and the world, would pay before it learned the truth.

There was a whisper of sound, a movement of black against deeper black.

The pudly rose in front of him, not more than six feet away, from its bed beside a bush. He jerked the pistol up and his finger tightened on the trigger.

"Don't," the pudly said inside his mind. "I'll go along with you."

His finger strained with the careful slowness of the squeeze and the gun leaped in his hand, but even as it did he felt the whiplash of terror slash at his brain, caught for just a second the terrible import, the mind-shattering obscenity that glanced off his mind and ricocheted away.

"Too late," he told the pudly, with his voice and his mind and his body shaking. "You should have tried that first. You wasted precious seconds. You would have got me if you had done it first."

It had been easy, he assured himself, much easier than he had thought. The pudly was dead or dying and the Earth and its millions of unsuspecting citizens were safe, and, best of all, Henderson James was safe... safe from indignity, safe from being stripped naked of the little defenses he had built up through the years to shield him against the public stare. He felt relief flood over him and it left him pulseless and breathless and feeling clean, but weak,

"You fool," the dying pudly said, death clouding its words as they built up in his mind. "You fool, you halfthing, you duplicate..."

It died then and he felt it die, felt the life go out of it and leave it empty.

He rose softly to his feet and he seemed stunned and at first he thought it was from knowing death, from having touched hands with death within the puudly's mind.

The puudly had tried to fool him. Faced with the pistol, it had tried to throw him off his balance to give it the second that it needed to hurl the mind-blasting thought that had caught at the edge of his brain. If he had hesitated for a moment, he knew, it would have been all over with him.

If his finger had slackened for a moment, it would have been too late.

The puudly must have known that he would think of the zoo as the first logical place to look and, even knowing that, it had held him in enough contempt to come here, had not even bothered to try to watch for him, had not tried to stalk him, had waited until he was almost on top of it before it moved.

And that was queer, for the puudly must have known, with its uncanny mental powers, every move that he had made. It must have maintained a casual contact with his mind every second of

the time since it had escaped. He had known that and... wait a minute, he hadn't known it until this very moment, although, knowing it now, it seemed as if he had always known it.

What is the matter with me, he thought. There's something wrong with me. I should have known I could not surprise the puudly, and yet I didn't know it. I must have surprised it, for otherwise it would have finished me off quite leisurely at any moment after I climbed out of the moat.

You fool, the puudly had said. You fool, you half-thing, you duplicate...

You duplicate!

He felt the strength and the personality and the hard, unquestioned identity of himself as Henderson James, human being, drain out of him, as if someone had cut the puppet string and he, the puppet, had slumped supine upon the stage.

So that was why he had been able to surprise the puudly! There were two Henderson Jameses. The puudly had been in contact with one of them, the original, the real Henderson James, had known every move he made, had known that it was safe so far as that Henderson James might be concerned.

It had not known of the second Henderson James that had stalked it through the night.

Henderson James, duplicate.

Henderson James, temporary.

Henderson James, here tonight,
gone tomorrow,

For they would not let him live.
The original Henderson James would not allow him to continue living, and even if he did, the world would not allow it. Duplicates were made only for very temporary and very special reasons

and it was always understood that once their purpose was accomplished they would be done away with.

Done away with... those were the words exactly. Gotten out of the way. Swept out of sight and mind. Killed as unconcernedly and emotionlessly as one chops off a chicken's head.

He walked forward and dropped on one knee beside the puudly, running his hand over its body in the darkness. Lumps stood out all over it, the swelling buds that now would never break to spew forth in a loathsome birth a brood of puudly pups.

He rose to his feet.

The job was done, The puudly had been killed - killed before it had given birth to a horde of horrors.

The job was done and he could go home.

Home?

Of course, that was the thing that had been planted in his mind, the thing they wanted him to do. To go home, to go back to the house on Summit avenue, where his executioners would wait, to walk back deliberately and unsuspectingly to the death that waited.

The job was done and his usefulness was over. He had been created to perform a certain task and the task was now performed and while an hour ago he had been a factor in the plans of men, he was no longer wanted. He was an embarrassment and superfluous.

Now wait a minute, he told himself. You may not be a duplicate. You do not feel like one.

That was true. He felt like Henderson James. He was Henderson James. He lived on Summit avenue and had illegally brought to Earth a beast

known as a puudly in order that he might study it and talk to it and test its alien reactions, attempt to measure its intelligence and guess at the strength and depth and the direction of its non-humanity. He had been a fool, of course, to do it, and yet at the time it had seemed important to understand the deadly, alien mentality.

I am human, he said, and that was right, but even so the fact meant nothing. Of course he was human. Henderson James was human and his duplicate would be exactly as human as the original. For the duplicate, processed from the pattern that held every trait and characteristic of the man he was to

become a copy of, would differ in not a single basic factor.

In not a single basic factor, perhaps, but in certain other things. For no matter how much the duplicate might be like his pattern, no matter how full-limbed he might spring from his creation, he still would be a new man. He would have the capacity for knowledge and for thought and in a little time he would have and know and be all the things that his original was...

But it would take some time, some short while to come to a full realization of all he knew and was, some time to coordinate and recognize all the

knowledge and experience that lay within his mind. At first he'd grope and search until he came upon the things that he must know. Until he became acquainted with himself, with the sort of man he was, he could not reach out blindly in the dark and put his hand exactly and unerringly upon the thing he wished.

That had been exactly what he'd done. He had groped and searched. He had been compelled to think, at first, in simple basic truths and facts.

I am a man.

I am on a planet called Earth.

I am Henderson James.

I live on Summit avenue.

There is a job to do.

It had been quite a while, he remembered now, before he had been able to dig out of his mind the nature of the job.

There is a puudly to hunt down and destroy.

Even now he could not find in the hidden, still-veiled recesses of his mind the many valid reasons why a man

should run so grave a risk to study a thing so vicious as a puudly. There were reasons, he knew there were, and in a little time he would know them quite specifically.

The point was that if he were Henderson James, original, he would know them now, know them as a part of himself and his life, without laboriously searching for them.

The puudly had known, of course. It had known, beyond any chance of error, that there were two Henderson Jameses. It had been keeping tab on one when another one showed up. A mentality far less astute than the puudly's would have

had no trouble in figuring that one out.

If the puudly had not talked, he told himself, I never would have known. If it had died at once and not had a chance to taunt me, I would not have known. I would even now be walking to the house on Summit avenue.

He stood lonely and naked of soul in the wind that swept across the moated island. There was a sour bitterness in his mouth.

He moved a foot and touched the dead puudly.

"I'm sorry," he told the stiffening

body. "I'm sorry now I did it. If I had known, I never would have killed you."

Stiffly erect, he moved away.

III

He stopped at the street corner, keeping well in the shadow. Halfway down the block, and on the other side, was the house. A light burned in one of the rooms upstairs and another on the post beside the gate that opened into the yard, lighting the walk up to the door.

Just as if, he told himself, the house were waiting for the master to come home. And that, of course, was exactly what it was doing. An old lady of a house, waiting, hands folded in its lap, rocking very gently in a squeaky chair... and with a gun beneath the folded shawl.

His lip lifted in half a snarl as he stood there, looking at the house; What do they take me for, he thought, putting out a trap in plain sight and one that's not even baited? Then he remembered. They would not know, of course, that he knew he was a duplicate. They would think that he would think that he was Henderson James, the one and only.

They would expect him to come walking home, quite naturally, believing he belonged there. So far as they would know, there would be no possibility of his finding out the truth.

And now that he had? Now that he was here, across the street from the waiting house?

He had been brought into being, had been given life, to do a job that his original had not dared to do, or had not wanted to do. He had carried out a killing his original didn't want to dirty his hands with, or risk his neck in doing.

Or had it not been that at all, but the

necessity of two men working on the job, the original serving as a focus for the puudly's watchful mind while the other man sneaked up to kill it while it watched?

No matter what, he had been created, at a good stiff price, from the pattern of the man that was Henderson James. The wizardry of man's knowledge, the magic of machines, a deep understanding of organic chemistry, of human physiology, of the mystery of life, had made a second Henderson James. It was legal, of course, under certain circumstances... for example, in the case of public policy, and his own creation, he knew, might have been

validated under such a heading. But there were conditions and one of these was that a duplicate not be allowed to continue living once it had served the specific purpose for which it had been created.

Usually such a condition was a simple one to carry out, for the duplicate was not meant to know he was a duplicate.

So far as he was concerned, he was the original. There was no suspicion in him, no foreknowledge of the doom that was invariably ordered for him, no reason for him to be on guard against the death that waited.

The duplicate knitted his brow, trying to puzzle it out.

There was a strange set of ethics here.

He was alive and he warned to stay alive. Life, once it had been tasted, was too sweet, too good, to go back to the nothingness from which he had come... or would it be nothingness? Now that he had known life, now that he was alive, might he not hope for a life after death, the same as any other human being? Might not be, too, have the same human right as any other human to grasp at the shadowy and glorious promises and

assurances held out by religion and by faith?

He tried to marshal what he knew about those promises and assurances, but his knowledge was illusive. A little later he would remember more about it. A little later, when the neural bookkeeper in his mind had been able to coordinate and activate the knowledge that he had inherited from the pattern, he would know.

He felt a trace of anger stir deep inside of him, anger at the unfairness of allowing him only a few short hours of life, of allowing him to learn how wonderful a thing life was, only to

snatch it from him. It was a cruelty that went beyond mere human cruelty. It was something that had been fashioned out of the distorted perspective of a machine society that measured existence only in terms of mechanical and physical worth, that discarded with a ruthless hand whatever part of that society had no specific purpose.

The cruelty, he told himself, was in ever giving life, not in taking it away.

His original, of course, was the one to blame. He was the one who had obtained the puudly and allowed it to escape.

It was his fumbling and his inability to correct his error without help which had created the necessity of fashioning a duplicate.

And yet, could he blame him?

Perhaps, rather, he owed him gratitude for a few hours of life at least, gratitude for the privilege of knowing what life was like. Although he could not quite decide whether or not it was something which called for gratitude.

He stood there, staring at the house. That light in the upstairs room was in the study off the master bedroom. Up there Henderson James, original, was waiting

for the word that the duplicate had come home to death. It was an easy thing to sit there and wait, to sit and wait for the word that was sure to come. An easy thing to sentence to death a man one had never seen, even if that man be the walking image of one's self.

It would be a harder decision to kill him if you stood face to face with him... harder to kill someone who would be, of necessity, closer than a brother, someone who would be, even literally, flesh of your flesh, blood of your blood, brain of your brain.

There would be a practical side as well, a great advantage to be able to

work with a man who thought as you did, who would be almost a second self. It would be almost as if there were two of you.

A thing like that could be arranged. Plastic surgery and a price for secrecy could make your duplicate into an unrecognizable other person. A little red tape, some finagling... but it could be done. It was a proposition that Henderson James, duplicate, thought would interest Henderson James, original. Or at least he hoped it would.

The room with the light could be reached with a little luck, with strength and agility and determination. The brick

expanse of a chimney, its base cloaked by shrubs, its length masked by a closely growing tree, ran up the wall. A man could climb its rough brick face, could reach out and swing himself through the open window into the lighted room.

And once Henderson James, original, stood face to face with Henderson James, duplicate ... well, it would be less of a gamble. The duplicate then would no longer be an impersonal factor. He would be a man and one that was very close to his original.

There would be watchers, but they would be watching the front door. If he

were quiet, if he could reach and climb the chimney without making any noise, he'd be in the room before anyone would notice.

He drew back deeper in the shadows and considered. It was either get into the room and face his original, hope to be able to strike a compromise with him, or simply to light out... to run and hide and wait, watching his chance to get completely away, perhaps to some far planet in some other part of the Galaxy.

Both ways were a gamble, but one was quick, would either succeed or fail within the hour; the other might drag on

for months with a man never knowing whether he was safe, never being sure.

Something nagged at him, a persistent little fact that skittered through his brain and eluded his efforts to pin it down. It might be important and then, again, it might be a random thing, simply a floating piece of information that was looking for its pigeonhole.

His mind shrugged it off.

The quick way or the long way?

He stood thinking for a moment and then moved swiftly down the street, seeking a place where he could cross in

shadow.

He had chosen the short way.

IV

The room was empty.

He stood beside the window,
quietly, only his eyes moving, searching
every corner, checking against a
situation that couldn't seem quite true...
that Henderson James was not here,
waiting for the word.

Then he strode swiftly to the bedroom door and swung it open. His finger found the switch and the lights went on. The bedroom was empty and so was the bath. He went back into the study.

He stood with his back against the wall, facing the door that led into the hallway, but his eyes went over the room, foot by foot, orienting himself, feeling himself flow into the shape and form of it, feeling familiarity creep in upon him and enfold him in its comfort of belonging.

Here were the books, the fireplace

with its mantel loaded with souvenirs, the easy chairs, the liquor cabinet... and all were a part of him, a background that was as much a part of Henderson James as his body and his inner thoughts were a part of him.

This, he thought, is what I would have missed, the experience I never would have had if the puudly had not taunted me. I would have died an empty and unrelated body that bad no actual place in the universe.

The phone purred at him and he stood there startled by it, as if some intruder from the outside had pushed its way into the room, shattering the sense

of belonging that had come to him.

The phone rang again and he went across the room and picked it up.

"James speaking," he said.

"That you, Mr. James?"

The voice was that of Anderson, the gardener.

"Why, yes," said the duplicate.
"Who did you think it was?"

"We got a fellow here who says he's you."

Henderson James, duplicate, stiffened with fright and his hand, suddenly, was grasping the phone so hard that he found the time to wonder why it did not pulverize to bits beneath his fingers.

"He's dressed like you," the gardener said, "and I knew you went out. Talked to you, remember? Told you that you shouldn't? Not with us waiting for that... that thing."

"Yes," said the duplicate, his voice so even that he could not believe it was he who spoke. "Yes, certainly I remember talking with you."

"But, sir, how did you get back?"

"I came in the back way," the even voice said into the phone. "Now what's holding you back?"

"He's dressed like you."

"Naturally. Of course he would be, Anderson."

And that, to be sure, didn't quite follow, but Anderson wasn't too bright to start with and now he was somewhat upset.

"You remember," the duplicate said, "that we talked about it."

"I guess I was excited and forgot," admitted Anderson.

"You told me to call you, to make sure you were in your study, though. That's right, isn't it, sir?"

"You've called me," the duplicate said, "and I am here."

"Then the other one out here is him?"

"Of course," said the duplicate. "Who else could it be?" He put the phone back into the cradle and stood waiting.

It came a moment after, the dull, throaty cough of a gun. He walked to a chair and sank into it, spent with the knowledge of how events had so been ordered that now, finally, he was safe, safe beyond all question.

Soon he would have to change into other clothes, hide the gun and the clothes that he was wearing. The staff would ask no questions, most likely, but it was best to let nothing arouse suspicion in their minds.

He felt his nerves quieting and lie allowed himself to glance about the room, take in the books and furnishings,

the soft and easy... and earned... comfort of a man solidly and unshakably established in the world.

He smiled softly.

"It will be nice," he said.

It had been easy. Now that it was over, it seemed ridiculously easy. Easy because he had never seen the man who had walked up to the door. It was easy to kill a man you have never seen.

With each passing hour he would slip deeper and deeper into the personality that was his by right of heritage. There would be no one to

question, after a time not even himself, that he was Henderson James.

The phone rang again and he got up to answer it. A pleasant voice told him, "This is Allen, over at the duplication lab. We've been waiting for a report from you."

"Well," said James, "I..."

"I just called," interrupted Allen, "to tell you not to worry. It slipped my mind before."

"I see," said James, though he didn't.

"We did this one a little differently," Allen explained.

"An experiment that we thought we'd try out. Slow poison in his bloodstream. Just another precaution. Probably not necessary, but we like to be positive. In case he fails to show up, you needn't worry any."

"I am sure he will show up."

Allen chuckled. "Twenty-four hours. Like a time bomb. No antidote for it even if he found out somehow."

"It was good of you to let me know," said James. "Glad to," said

Allen. "Good night, Mr. James."

Title : A Death in the House

Author : Clifford D. Simak

Original copyright year: 1959

Genre : science fiction

Comments : to my knowledge, this

is the only available e-text of this book

Source : scanned and OCR-read
from a paperback edition with Xerox
TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS
Word 2000.

Date of e-text : January 3, 2000

Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights
reversed.

A Death in the House

Clifford D. Simak

Old Mose Abrams was out hunting cows when he found the alien. He didn't know it was an alien, but it was alive and it was in a lot of trouble and Old Mose, despite everything the neighbors said about him, was not the kind of man who could bear to leave a sick thing out there in the woods.

It was a horrid-looking thing, green and shiny, with some purple spots on it, and it was repulsive even twenty feet away. And it stank.

It had crawled, or tried to crawl, into a clump of hazel brush, but hadn't made it. The head part was in the brush

and the rest lay out there naked in the open. Every now and then the parts that seemed to be arms and hands clawed feebly at the ground, trying to force itself deeper in the brush, but it was too weak; it never moved an inch.

It was groaning, too, but not too loud - just the kind of keening sound a lonesome wind might make around a wide, deep cave. But there was more in it than just the sound of winter wind: there was a frightened, desperate note that made the hair stand up on Old Mose's nape.

Old Mose stood there for quite a spell, making up his mind what he ought

to do about it, and a while longer after that working up his courage, although most folks offhand would have said that he had plenty. But this was the sort of situation that took more than just ordinary screwed-up courage. It took a lot of foolhardiness.

But this was a wild, hurt thing and he couldn't leave it there, so he walked up to it, and knelt down, and it was pretty hard to look at, though there was a sort of fascination in its repulsiveness that was hard to figure out - as if it were so horrible that it dragged one to it. And it stank in a way that no one had ever smelled before.

Mose, however, was not finicky. In the neighborhood, he was not well known for fastidity. Ever since his wife had died almost ten years before, he had lived alone on his untidy farm and the housekeeping that he did was the scandal of all the neighbor women. Once a year, if he got around to it, he sort of shoveled out the house, but the rest of the year he just let things accumulate.

So he wasn't as upset as some might have been with the way the creature smelled. But the sight of it upset him, and it took him quite a while before he could bring himself to touch it. and when he finally did, he was considerably surprised. He had been prepared for it to

be either cold or slimy, or maybe even both. But it was neither. It was warm and hard and it had a clean feel to it, and he was reminded of the way a green corn stalk would feel.

He slid his hand beneath the hurt thing and pulled it gently from the clump of hazel brush and turned it over so he could see its face. It hadn't any face. It had an enlargement at the top of it, like a flower on top of a stalk, although its body wasn't any stalk, and there was a fringe around this enlargement that wiggled like a can of worms, and it was then that Mose almost turned around and ran.

But he stuck it out.

He squatted there, staring at the no-face with the fringe of worms, and he got cold all over and his stomach doubled up on him and he was stiff with fright - and the fright got worse when it seemed to him that the keening of the thing was coming from the worms.

Mose was a stubborn man. One had to be stubborn to run a runty farm like this. Stubborn and insensitive in a lot of ways. But not insensitive, of course, to a thing in pain.

Finally he was able to pick it up and hold it in his arms and there was

nothing to it, for it didn't weigh much. Less than a half-grown shoat, he figured.

He went up the woods path with it, heading back for home, and it seemed to him the smell of it was less. He was hardly scared at all and he was warm again and not cold all over.

For the thing was quieter now and keening just a little. And although he could not be sure of it, there were times when it seemed as if the thing were snuggling up to him, the way a scared and hungry baby will snuggle to any grown person that comes and picks it up.

Old Mose reached the buildings

and he stood out in the yard a minute, wondering whether he should take it to the barn or house. The barn, of course, was the natural place for it, for it wasn't human - it wasn't even as close to human as a dog or cat or sick lamb would be.

He didn't hesitate too long, however. He took it into the house and laid it on what he called a bed, next to the kitchen stove. He got it straightened out all neat and orderly and pulled a dirty blanket over it, and then went to the stove and stirred up the fire until there was some flame.

Then he pulled up a chair beside the bed and had a good, hard, wondering

look at this thing he had brought home. It had quieted down a lot and seemed more comfortable than it had out in the woods. He tucked the blanket snug around it with a tenderness that surprised himself. He wondered what he had that it might eat, and even if he knew, how he'd manage feeding it, for it seemed to have no mouth.

'But you don't need to worry none,' he told it. 'Now that I got you under a roof, you'll be all right. I don't know too much about it, but I'll take care of you the best I can.'

By now it was getting on toward evening, and he looked out the window

and saw that the cows he had been hunting had come home by themselves.

'I got to go get the milking done and other chores,' he told the thing lying on the bed, 'but it won't take me long. I'll be right back.'

Old Mose loaded up the stove so the kitchen would stay warm and he tucked the thing in once again, then got his milk pails and went down to the barn.

He fed the sheep and pigs and horses and he milked the cows. He hunted eggs and shut the chicken house. He pumped a tank of water.

Then he went back to the house.

It was dark now and he lit the oil lamp on the table, for he was against electricity. He'd refused to sign up when REA had run out the line and a lot of the neighbors had gotten sore at him for being uncooperative. Not that he cared, of course.

He had a look at the thing upon the bed. It didn't seem to be any better, or any worse, for that matter. If it had been a sick lamb or an ailing calf, he could have known right off how it was getting on, but this thing was different. There was no way to tell.

He fixed himself some supper and ate it and wished he knew how to feed the thing. And he wished, too, that he knew how to help it. He'd got it under shelter and he had it warm, but was that right or wrong for something like this? He had no idea.

He wondered if he should try to get some help, then felt squeamish about asking help when he couldn't say exactly what had to be helped. But then he wondered how he would feel himself if he were in a far, strange country, all played out and sick, and no one to get him any help because they didn't know exactly what he was.

That made up his mind for him and he walked over to the phone. But should he call a doctor or a veterinarian? He decided to call the doctor because the thing was in the house. If it had been in the barn, he would have called the veterinarian.

He was on a rural line and the hearing wasn't good and he was halfway deaf, so he didn't use the phone too often. He had told himself at times it was nothing but another aggravation and there had been a dozen times he had threatened to have it taken out. But now he was glad he hadn't.

The operator got old Dr. Benson and they couldn't hear one another too well, but Mose finally made the doctor understand who was calling and that he needed him and the doctor said he'd come.

With some relief, Mose hung up the phone and was just standing there, not doing anything, when he was struck by the thought that there might be others of these things down there in the woods. He had no idea what they were or what they might be doing or where they might be going, but it was pretty evident that the one upon the bed was some sort of stranger from a very distant place. It stood to reason that there might be more

than one of them, for far traveling was a lonely business and anyone - or anything - would like to have some company along.

He got the lantern down off the peg and lit it and went stumping out the door. The night was as black as a stack of cats and the lantern light was feeble, but that made not a bit of difference, for Mose knew this farm of his like the back of his hand.

He went down the path into the woods. It was a spooky place, but it took more than woods at night to spook Old Mose. At the place where he had found the thing, he looked around, pushing

through the brush and holding the lantern high so he could see a bigger area, but he didn't find another one of them.

He did find something else, though - a sort of outsize bird-cage made of metal lattice work that had wrapped itself around an eight-inch hickory tree. He tried to pull it loose, but it was jammed so tight that he couldn't budge it.

He sighted back the way it must have come. He could see where it had plowed its way through the upper branches of the trees, and out beyond were stars, shining bleakly with the look of far away.

Mose had no doubt that the thing lying on his bed beside the kitchen stove had come in this birdcage contraption. He marveled some at that, but he didn't fret himself too much, for the whole thing was so unearthly that he knew he had little chance of pondering it out.

He walked back to the house and he scarcely had the lantern blown out and hung back on its peg than he heard a car drive up.

The doctor, when he came up to the door, became a little grumpy at seeing Old Mose standing there.

'You don't look sick to me,' the

doctor said. 'Not sick enough to drag me clear out here at night.'

'I ain't sick,' said Mose.

'Well, then,' said the doctor, more grumpily than ever, 'what do you mean by phoning me?'

'I got someone who is sick,' said Mose. 'I hope you can help him. I would have tried myself, but I don't know how to go about it.'

The doctor came inside and Mose shut the door behind him.

'You got something rotten in here?'

asked the doctor.

'No, it's just the way he smells. It was pretty bad at first, but I'm getting used to it by now.'

The doctor saw the thing lying on the bed and went over to it. Old Mose heard him sort of gasp and could see him standing there, very stiff and straight. Then he bent down and had a good look at the critter on the bed.

When he straightened up and turned around to Mose, the only thing that kept him from being downright angry was that he was so flabbergasted.

'Mose,' he yelled, 'what _is_ this?'

'I don't know,' said Mose. 'I found it in the woods and it was hurt and wailing and I couldn't leave it there.'

'You think it's sick?'

'I know it is,' said Mose, 'It needs help awful bad. I'm afraid it's dying.'

The doctor turned back to the bed again and pulled the blanket down, then went and got the lamp so that he could see. He looked the critter up and down, and he prodded it with a skittish finger, and he made the kind of mysterious clucking sound that only doctors make.

Then he pulled the blanket back over it again and took the lamp back to the table.

'Mose,' he said. 'I can't do a thing for it.'

'But you're a doctor!'

'A human doctor, Mose. I don't know what this thing is, but it isn't human. I couldn't even guess what is wrong with it, if anything. And I wouldn't know what could be safely done for it even if I could diagnose its illness. I'm not even sure it's an animal. There are a lot of things about it that

argue it's a plant.'

Then the doctor asked Mose straight out how he came to find it and Mose told him exactly how it happened. But he didn't tell him anything about the birdcage, for when he thought about it, it sounded so fantastic that he couldn't bring himself to tell it. Just finding the critter and having it here was bad enough, without throwing in the birdcage.

'I tell you what,' the doctor said. 'You got something here that's outside all human knowledge. I doubt there's ever been a thing like this seen on Earth before. I have no idea what it is and I

wouldn't try to guess. If I were you, I'd get in touch with the university up at Madison. There might be someone there who could get it figured out. Even if they couldn't they'd be interested. They'd want to study it.'

Mose went to the cupboard and got the cigar box almost full of silver dollars and paid the doctor. The doctor put the dollars in his pocket, joshing Mose about his eccentricity.

But Mose was stubborn about his silver dollars. 'Paper money don't seem legal, somehow,' he declared. 'I like the feel of silver and the way it chinks. It's got authority.'

The doctor left and he didn't seem as upset as Mose had been afraid he might be. As soon as he was gone, Mose pulled up a chair and sat down beside the bed.

It wasn't right, he thought, that the thing should be so sick and no one to help - no one who knew any way to help it.

He sat in the chair and listened to the ticking of the clock, loud in the kitchen silence, and the crackling of the wood burning in the stove.

Looking at the thing lying on the

bed, he had an almost fierce hope that it could get well again and stay with him. Now that its birdcage was all banged up, maybe there'd be nothing it could do but stay. And he hoped it would, for already the house felt less lonely.

Sitting in the chair between the stove and bed, Mose realized how lonely it had been. It had not been quite so bad until Towser died. He had tried to bring himself to get another dog, but he never had been able to. For there was no dog that would take the place of Towser and it had seemed unfaithful even to try. He could have gotten a cat, of course, but that would remind him too much of Molly; she had been very fond

of cats, and until the time she died, there had always been two or three of them underfoot around the place.

But now he was alone. Alone with his farm and his stubbornness and his silver dollars. The doctor thought, like all the rest of them, that the only silver Mose had was in the cigar box in the cupboard. There wasn't one of them who knew about the old iron kettle piled plumb full of them, hidden underneath the floor boards of the living room. He chuckled at the thought of how he had them fooled. He'd give a lot to see his neighbors' faces if they could only know, but he was not the one to tell them. If they were to find out, they'd have to find

it out themselves.

He nodded in the chair and finally slept, sitting upright, with his chin resting on his chest and his crossed arms wrapped around himself as if to keep him warm.

When he woke, in the dark before the dawn, with the lamp flickering on the table and the fire in the stove burned low, the alien had died.

There was no doubt of death. The thing was cold and rigid and the husk that was its body was rough and drying out - as a corn stalk in the field dries out, whipping in the wind once the growing

had been ended.

Mose pulled the blanket up to cover it, and although this was early to do the chores, he went out by lantern light and got them done.

After breakfast, he heated water and washed his face and shaved, and it was the first time in years he'd shaved any day but Sunday. Then he put on his one good suit and slicked down his hair and got the old jalopy out of the machine shed and drove into town.

He hunted up Eb Dennison, the town clerk, who also was the secretary of the cemetery association.

'Eb,' he said, 'I want to buy a lot.'

'But you've got a lot,' protested Eb.

'That plot,' said Mose, 'is a family plot. There's just room for me and Molly.'

'Well, then,' asked Eb, 'why another one? You have no other members of the family.'

'I found someone in the woods,' said Mose. 'I took him home and he died last night. I plan to bury him.'

'If you found a dead man in the

woods,' Eb warned him, 'you better notify the coroner and sheriff,'

'In time I may,' said Mose, not intending to. 'Now how about that plot?'

Washing his hands of the affair entirely, Eb sold him the plot.

Having bought his plot, Mose went to the undertaking establishment run by Albert Jones.

'Al,' he said, 'there's been a death out at the house. A stranger I found out in the woods. He doesn't seem to have anyone and I aim to take care of it.'

'You got a death certificate?' asked Al, who subscribed to none of the niceties affected by most funeral parlor operators.

'Well, no, I haven't.'

'Was there a doctor in attendance?'

'Doc Benson came out last night.'

'He should have made you out one. I'll give him a ring.'

He phoned Doctor Benson and talked with him a while and got red around the gills. He finally slammed down the phone and turned on Mose.

'I don't know what you're trying to pull off,' he fumed, but Doc tells me this thing of yours isn't even human. I don't take care of dogs or cats or-'

'This ain't no dog or cat.'

'I don't care what it is. It's got to be human for me to handle it. And don't go trying to bury it in the cemetery, because it's against the law.'

Considerably discouraged, Mose left the undertaking parlor and trudged slowly up the hill toward the town's one and only church.

He found the minister in his study working on a sermon. Mose sat down in a chair and fumbled his battered hat around and around in his work-scarred hands.

'Parson,' he said, 'I'll tell you the story from first to last,' and he did. He added, 'I don't know what it is. I guess no one else does, either. But it's dead and in need of decent burial and that's the least that I can do. I can't bury it in the cemetery, so I suppose I'll have to find a place for it on the farm. I wonder if you could bring yourself to come out and say a word or two.'

The minister gave the matter some

deep consideration.

'I'm sorry, Mose,' he said at last. 'I don't believe I can. I am not sure at all the church would approve of it.'

'This thing may not be human,' said Old Mose, 'but it is one of God's critters.'

The minister thought some more, and did some wondering out loud, but made up his mind finally that he couldn't do it.

So Mose went down the Street to where his car was waiting and drove home, thinking about what heels some

humans are.

Back at the farm again, he got a pick and shovel and went into the garden, and there, in one corner of it, he dug a grave. He went out to the machine shed to hunt up some boards to make the thing a casket, but it turned out that he had used the last of the lumber to patch up the hog pen.

Mose went to the house and dug around in a chest in one of the back rooms which had not been used for years, hunting for a sheet to use as a winding shroud, since there would be no casket. He couldn't find a sheet, but he did unearth an old white linen table

cloth. He figured that would do, so he took it to the kitchen.

He pulled back the blanket and looked at the critter lying there in death and a sort of lump came into his throat at the thought of it - how it had died so lonely and so far from home without a creature of its own to spend its final hours with. And naked, too, without a stitch of clothing and with no possession, with not a thing to leave behind as a remembrance of itself.

He spread the table cloth out on the floor beside the bed and lifted the thing and laid it on the table cloth. As he laid it down, he saw the pocket in it - if it

was a pocket - a sort of slitted flap in the center of what could be its chest. He ran his hand across the pocket area. There was a lump inside it. He crouched for a long moment beside the body, wondering what to do.

Finally he reached his fingers into the flap and took out the thing that bulged. It was a ball, a little bigger than a tennis ball, made of cloudy glass - or, at least, it looked like glass. He squatted there, staring at it, then took it to the window for a better look.

There was nothing strange at all about the ball. It was just a cloudy ball of glass and it had a rough, dead feel

about it, just as the body had.

He shook his head and took it back and put it where he'd found it and wrapped the body securely in the cloth. He carried it to the garden and put it in the grave. Standing solemnly at the head of the grave, he said a few short words and then shoveled in the dirt.

He had meant to make a mound above the grave and he had intended to put up a cross, but at last he didn't do either one of these. There would be snoopers. The word would get around and they'd be coming out and hunting for the spot where he had buried this thing he had found out in the woods. So there

must be no mound to mark the place and no cross as well. Perhaps it was for the best, he told himself, for what could he have carved or written on the cross?

By this time it was well past noon and he was getting hungry, but he didn't stop to eat, because there were other things to do. He went out into the pasture and caught up Bess and hitched her to the stoneboat and went down into the woods.

He hitched her to the birdcage that was wrapped around the tree and she pulled it loose as pretty as you please. Then he loaded it on the stoneboat and hauled it up the hill and stowed it in the

back of the machine shed, in the far corner by the forge.

After that, he hitched Bess to the garden plow and gave the garden a cultivating that it didn't need so it would be fresh dirt all over and no one could locate where he'd dug the grave.

He was just finishing the plowing when Sheriff Doyle drove up and got out of the car. The sheriff was a soft-spoken man, but he was no dawdler. He got right to the point.

'I hear,' he said, 'you found something in the woods.'

'That I did,' said Mose.

'I hear it died on you.'

'Sheriff, you heard right.'

'I'd like to see it, Mose.'

'Can't. I buried it. And I ain't telling where.'

'Mose,' the sheriff said, 'I don't want to make you trouble, but you did an illegal thing. You can't go finding people in the woods and just bury them when they up and die on you.'

'You talk to Doc Benson?'

The sheriff nodded. 'He said it wasn't any kind of thing he'd ever seen before. He said it wasn't human.'

'Well, then,' said Mose, 'I guess that lets you out. If it wasn't human, there could be no crime against a person. And if it wasn't owned, there ain't any crime against property. There's been no one around to claim they owned the thing, is there?'

The sheriff rubbed his chin. 'No, there hasn't. Maybe you're right. Where did you study law?'

'I never studied law. I never studied

anything. I just use common sense.'

'Doc said something about the folks up at the university might want a look at it.'

'I tell you, Sheriff,' said Mose. 'This thing came here from somewhere and it died. I don't know where it came from and I don't know what it was and I don't hanker none to know. To me it was just a living thing that needed help real bad. It was alive and it had its dignity and in death it commanded some respect. When the rest of you refused it decent burial, I did the best I could. And that is all there is to it.'

'All right, Mose,' the sheriff said, 'if that's how you want it.'

He turned around and stalked back to the car. Mose stood beside old Bess hitched to her plow and watched him drive away. He drove fast and reckless as if he might be angry.

Mose put the plow away and turned the horse back to the pasture and by now it was time to do chores again.

He got the chores all finished and made himself some supper and after supper sat beside the stove, listening to the ticking of the clock, loud in the silent house, and the crackle of the fire.

All night long the house was lonely.

The next afternoon, as he was plowing corn, a reporter came and walked up the row with him and talked with him when he came to the end of the row. Mose didn't like this reporter much. He was too flip and he asked some funny questions, so Mose clammed up and didn't tell him much.

A few days later, a man turned up from the university and showed him the story the reporter had gone back and written. The story made fun of Mose.

'I'm sorry.' the professor said.

'These newspapermen are unaccountable. I wouldn't worry too much about anything they write.'

'I don't,' Mose told him.

The man from the university asked a lot of questions and made quite a point about how important it was that he should see the body.

But Mose only shook his head. 'It's at peace,' he said. 'I aim to leave it that way.'

The man went away disgusted, but still quite dignified.

For several days there were people driving by and dropping in, the idly curious, and there were some neighbors Mose hadn't seen for months. But he gave them all short shrift and in a little while they left him alone and he went on with his farming and the house stayed lonely.

He thought again that maybe he should get a dog, but he thought of Towser and he couldn't do it.

One day, working in the garden, he found the plant that grew out of the grave. It was a funny-looking plant and his first impulse was to root it out.

But he didn't do it, for the plant intrigued him. It was a kind he'd never seen before and he decided he would let it grow, for a while at least, to see what kind it was. It was a bulky, fleshy plant, with heavy, dark-green, curling leaves, and it reminded him in some ways of the skunk cabbage that burgeoned in the woods come spring.

There was another visitor, the queerest of the lot. He was a dark and intense man who said he was the president of a flying saucer club. He wanted to know if Mose had talked with the thing he'd found out in the woods and seemed terribly disappointed when Mose told him he hadn't. He wanted to

know if Mose had found a vehicle the creature might have traveled in and Mose lied to him about it. He was afraid, the wild way the man was acting, that he might demand to search the place, and if he had, he'd likely have found the birdcage hidden in the machine shed back in the corner by the forge. But the man got to lecturing Mose about withholding vital information.

Finally Mose had taken all he could of it, so he stepped into the house and picked up the shotgun from behind the door. The president of the flying saucer club said good-by rather hastily and got out of there.

Farm life went on as usual, with the corn laid by and the haying started and out in the garden the strange plant kept on growing and now was taking shape. Old Mose couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the sort of shape it took and he spent long evening hours just standing in the garden, watching it and wondering if his loneliness were playing tricks on him.

The morning came when he found the plant standing at the door and waiting for him. He should have been surprised, of course, but he really wasn't, for he had lived with it, watching it of eventide, and although he had not dared admit it even to himself, he had known

what it was.

For here was the creature he'd found in the woods, no longer sick and keening, no longer close to death, but full of life and youth.

It was not the same entirely, though. He stood and looked at it and could see the differences - the little differences that might have been those between youth and age, or between a father and a son, or again the differences expressed in an evolutionary pattern.

'Good morning,' said Mose, not feeling strange at all to be talking to the thing. 'It's good to have you back.'

The thing standing in the yard did not answer him. But that was not important; he had not expected that it would. The one important point was that he had something he could talk to.

'I'm going out to do the chores,' said Mose. 'You want to tag along?'

It tagged along with him and it watched him as he did the chores and he talked to it, which was a vast improvement over talking to himself.

At breakfast, he laid an extra plate for it and pulled up an extra chair, but it turned out the critter was not equipped to

use a chair, for it wasn't hinged to sit.

Nor did it eat. That bothered Mose at first, for he was hospitable, but he told himself that a big, strong, strapping youngster like this one knew enough to take care of itself, and he probably didn't need to worry too much about how it got along.

After breakfast, he went out to the garden, with the critter accompanying him, and sure enough, the plant was gone. There was a collapsed husk lying on the ground, the outer covering that had been the cradle of the creature at his side.

Then he went to the machine shed and the creature saw the birdcage and rushed over to it and looked it over minutely. Then it turned around to Mose and made a sort of pleading gesture.

Mose went over to it and laid his hands on one of the twisted bars and the critter stood beside him and laid its hands on, too, and they pulled together. It was no use. They could move the metal some, but not enough to pull it back in shape again.

They stood and looked at one another, although looking may not be the word, for the critter had no eyes to look with. It made some funny motions with

its hands, but Mose couldn't understand. Then it lay down on the floor and showed him how the birdcage ribs were fastened to the base.

It took a while for Mose to understand how the fastening worked and he never did know exactly why it did. There wasn't actually, any reason that it should work that way.

First you applied some pressure, just the right amount at the exact and correct angle, and the bar would move a little. Then you applied some more pressure, again the exact amount and at the proper angle, and the bar would move some more. You did this three

times and the bar came loose, although there was, God knows, no reason why it should.

Mose started a fire in the forge and shoveled in some coal and worked the bellows while the critter watched. But when he picked up the bar to put it in the fire, the critter got between him and the forge, and wouldn't let him near. Mose realized then he couldn't - or wasn't supposed to - heat the bar to straighten it and he never questioned the entire rightness of it. For, he told himself, this thing must surely know the proper way to do it.

So he took the bar over to the anvil

and started hammering it back into shape again, cold, without the use of fire, while the critter tried to show him the shape that it should be. It took quite a while, but finally it was straightened out to the critter's satisfaction.

Mose figured they'd have themselves a time getting the bar back in place again, but it slipped on as slick as could be.

Then they took off another bar and this one went faster, now that Mose had the hang of it.

But it was hard and grueling labor. They worked all day and only

straightened out five bars.

It took four solid days to get the bars on the birdcage hammered into shape and all the time the hay was waiting to be cut.

But it was all right with Mose. He had someone to talk to and the house had lost its loneliness.

When they got the bars back in place, the critter slipped into the cage and starting fooling with a dingus on the roof of it that looked like a complicated basket. Mose, watching, figured that the basket was some sort of control.

The critter was discouraged. It walked around the shed looking for something and seemed unable to find it. It came back to Mose and made its despairing, pleading gesture. Mose showed it iron and steel; he dug into a carton where he kept bolts and clamps and bushings and scraps of metal and other odds and ends, finding brass and copper and even some aluminium, but it wasn't any of these.

And Mose was glad - a bit ashamed for feeling glad, but glad all the same,

For it had been clear to him that when the birdcage was all ready, the critter would be leaving him. It had been

impossible for Mose to stand in the way of the repair of the cage, or to refuse to help. But now that it apparently couldn't be, he found himself well pleased.

Now the critter would have to stay with him and he'd have someone to talk to and the house would not be lonely.

It would be welcome, he told himself, to have folks again. The critter was almost as good a companion as Towser.

Next morning, while Mose was fixing breakfast, he reached up in the cupboard to get the box of oatmeal and his hand struck the cigar box and it came

crashing to the floor. It fell over on its side and the lid came open and the dollars went free-wheeling all around the kitchen.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mose saw the critter leaping quickly in pursuit of one of them. It snatched it up and turned to Mose, with the coin held between its fingers, and a sort of thrumming noise was coming out of the nest of worms on top of it.

It bent and scooped up more of them and cuddled them and danced a sort of jig, and Mose knew, with a sinking heart, that it had been silver the critter had been hunting.

So Mose got down on his hands and knees and helped the critter gather up all the dollars. They put them back into the cigar box and Mose picked up the box and gave it to the critter.

The critter took it and hefted it and had a disappointed look. Taking the box over to the table, it took the dollars out and stacked them in neat piles and Mose could see it was very disappointed.

Perhaps, after all, Mose thought, it had not been silver the thing had been hunting for, Maybe it had made a mistake in thinking that the silver was some other kind of metal.

Mose got down the oatmeal and poured it into some water and put it on the stove. When it was cooked and the coffee was ready, he carried his breakfast to the table and sat down to eat.

The critter still was standing across the table from him, stacking and restacking the piles of silver dollars. And now it showed him with a hand held above the stacks, that it needed more of them. This many stacks, it showed him, and each stack so high.

Mose sat stricken, with a spoon full of oatmeal halfway to his mouth. He

thought of all those other dollars, the iron kettle packed with them, underneath the floor boards in the living room. And he couldn't do it; they were the only thing he had - except the critter now. And he could not hive them up so the critter could go and leave him too.

He ate his bowl of oatmeal without tasting it and drank two cups of coffee. And all the time the critter stood there and showed him how much more it needed.

'I can't do it for you,' Old Mose said. 'I've done all you can expect of any living being. I found you in the woods and I gave you warmth and shelter. I

tried to help you, and when I couldn't, at least I gave you a place to die in. I buried you and protected you from all those other people and I didn't pull you up when you started growing once again. Surely you can't expect me to keep on giving endlessly.'

But it was no good. The critter could not hear him and he did not convince himself.

He got up from the table and walked into the living room with the critter trailing him. He loosened the floor boards and took out the kettle, and the critter, when it saw what was in the kettle, put its arms around itself and

hugged in happiness.

They lugged the money out to the machine shed and Mose built a fire in the forge and put the kettle in the fire and started melting down that hard-saved money.

There were times when he thought he couldn't finish the job, but he did.

The critter got the basket out of the birdcage and put it down beside the forge and dipped out the molten silver with an iron ladle and poured it here and there into the basket, shaping it in place with careful hammer taps.

It took a long time, for it was exacting work, but finally it was done and the silver almost gone. The critter lugged the basket back into the birdcage and fastened it in place.

It was almost evening now and Mose had to go and do the chores. He half expected the thing might haul out the bird-cage and be gone when he came back to the house. And he tried to be sore at it for its selfishness - it had taken from him and had not tried to pay him back - it had not, so far as he could tell, even tried to thank him. But he made a poor job of being sore at it.

It was waiting for him when he

came in from the barn carrying two pails full of milk. It followed him inside the house and stood around and he tried to talk to it. But he didn't have the heart to do much talking. He could not forget that it would be leaving, and the pleasure of its present company was lost in his terror of the loneliness to come.

For now he didn't even have his money to help ward off the loneliness.

As he lay in bed that night, strange thoughts came creeping in upon him - the thought of an even greater loneliness than he had ever known upon this runty farm, the terrible, devastating loneliness of the empty wastes that lay between the

stars, a driven loneliness while one hunted for a place or person that remained a misty thought one could not define, but which it was most important one should find.

It was a strange thing for him to be thinking, and quite suddenly he knew it was no thought of his, but of this other that was in the room with him.

He tried to raise himself, he fought to raise himself, but he couldn't do it. He held his head up a moment, then fell back upon the pillow and went sound asleep.

Next morning, after Mose had eaten

breakfast, the two of them went to the machine shed and dragged the birdcage out. It stood there, a weird alien thing, in the chill brightness of the dawn.

The critter walked up to it and started to slide between two of the bars, but when it was halfway through, it stepped out again and moved over to confront Old Mose.

'Good-by, friend,' said Mose. 'I'll miss you.'

There was a strange stinging in his eyes.

The other held out its hand in

farewell, and Mose took it and there was something in the hand he grasped, something round and smooth that was transferred from its hand to his.

The thing took its hand away and stepped quickly to the birdcage and slid between the bars. The hands reached for the basket and there was a sudden flicker and the birdcage was no longer there.

Mose stood lonely in the barnyard, looking at the place where there was no birdcage and remembering what he had felt or thought - or been told? - the night before as he lay in bed.

Already the critter would be there,

out between the stars, in that black and utter loneliness, hunting for a place or thing of person that no human mind could grasp.

Slowly Mose turned around to go back to the house, to get the pails and go down to the barn to get the milking done.

He remembered the object in his hand and lifted his still clenched fist in front of him. He opened his fingers and the little crystal ball lay there in his palm - and it was exactly like the one he'd found in the slitted flap in the body he had buried in the garden. Except that one had been dead and cloudy and this one had the living glow of a distant-

burning fire.

Looking at it, he had the strange feeling of a happiness and comfort such as he had seldom known before, as if there were many people with him and all of them were friends.

He closed his hand upon it and the happiness stayed on - and it was all wrong, for there was not a single reason that he should be happy. The critter finally had left him and his money was all gone and he had no friends, but still he kept on feeling good.

He put the ball into his pocket and stepped spryly for the house to get the

milking pails. He pursed up his whiskered lips and began to whistle and it had been a long, long time since he had even thought to whistle.

Maybe he was happy, he told himself, because the critter had not left without stopping to take his hand and try to say good-bye.

And a gift, no matter how worthless it might be, how cheap a trinket, still had a basic value in simple sentiment. It had been many years since anyone had bothered to give him a gift.

It was dark and lonely and unending in the depths of space with no Companion. It might be long before another was obtainable.

It perhaps was a foolish thing to do, but the old creature had been such a kind savage, so fumbling and so pitiful and eager to help. And one who travels far and fast must likewise travel light. There had been nothing else to give.

Title : Sunspot Purge

Author : Clifford D. Simak

Original copyright year: 1940

Genre : science fiction

Comments : to my knowledge, this
is the only available e-text of this book

Source : scanned and OCR-read
from a paperback edition with Xerox
TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS
Word 2000.

Date of e-text : February 16, 2000

Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights
reversed.

Sunspot Purge

Clifford D. Simak

I was sitting around, waiting for the boy to bring up the first batch of papers from the pressroom. I had my feet up on

the desk, my hat pulled down over my eyes, feeling pretty sick.

I couldn't get the picture of the fellow hitting the sidewalk out of my mind. Twenty storeys is a long way to jump. When he'd hit he'd just sort of spattered and it was very messy.

The fool had cavorted and pranced around up on that ledge since early morning, four long hours, before he took the dive.

Herb Harding and Al Jarvey and a couple of other _Globe_ photographers had gone out with me, and I listened to them figure out the way they'd co-

operate on the shots. If the bird jumped, they knew they'd each have just time enough to expose one plate. So they got their schedules worked out beforehand.

Al would take the first shot with the telescopic lens as he made the jump. Joe would catch him halfway down. Harry would snap him just before he hit, and Herb would get the moment of impact on the sidewalk.

It gave me the creeps, listening to them.

But anyhow, it worked and the _Globe_ had a swell sequence panel of the jump to go with my story.

We knew the _Standard_, even if it got that sidewalk shot, wouldn't use it, for the _Standard_ claimed to be a family newspaper and made a lot of being a sheet fit for anyone to read.

But the _Globe_ would print anything - and did. We gave it to 'em red-hot and without any fancy dressing.

'The guy was nuts,' said Herb, who had come over and sat down beside me.

'The whole damn world is nuts,' I told him. 'This is the sixth bird that's hopped off a high building in the last month.'

I wish they'd put me down at the obit desk, or over on the markets, or something. I'm all fed up on gore.'

'It goes like that,' said Herb. 'For a long time there ain't a thing worth shooting. Then all hell breaks loose.'

Herb was right. News runs that way - in streaks. Crime waves and traffic-accident waves and suicide waves. But this was something different. It wasn't just screwballs jumping off high places. It was a lot of other things.

There was the guy who had massacred his family and then turned the

gun on himself. There was the chap who'd butchered his bride on their honeymoon. And the fellow who had poured gasoline over himself and struck a match.

All such damn senseless things.

No newsman in his right mind objects to a little violence, for that's what news is made of. But things were getting pretty thick; just a bit revolting and horrifying. Enough to sicken even a hard-working legman who isn't supposed to have any feelings over things like that.

Just then the boy came up with the papers, and, if I say so myself, that story

of mine read like a honey. It should have. I had been thinking it up and composing it while I watched the bird teetering around up on that ledge.

The pictures were good, too. Great street-sale stuff. I could almost see old J.R. rubbing his hands together and licking his lips and patting himself on the back for the kind of a sheet we had.

Billy Larson, the science editor, strolled over to my desk and draped himself over it. Billy was a funny guy. He wore big, horn-rimmed spectacles, and he wiggled his ears when he got

excited, but he knew a lot of science. He could take a dry-as-dust scientific paper and pep it up until it made good reading.

'I got an idea,' he announced.

'So have I,' I answered. 'I'm going down to the Dutchman's and take me on a beer. Maybe two or three.'

'I hope,' piped Herb. 'that it ain't something else about old Doc Ackerman and his time machine.'

'Nope,' said Billy, 'it's something else. Doc's time machine isn't so hot any more. People got tired of reading about it. I guess the old boy has plenty on the

ball, but what of it? Who will ever use the thing? Everyone is scared of it.'

'What's it this time?' I asked.

'Sunspots,' he said.

I tried to brush him off, because I wanted that beer so bad I could almost taste it, but Billy had an idea, and he wasn't going to let me get away before he told me all about it.

'It's pretty well recognized,' he told me, 'that sunspots do affect human lives. Lots of sunspots and we have good times. Stocks and bonds are up, prices are high. Trade is good. But likewise,

we have an increased nervous tension. We have violence. People get excited.'

'Hell starts to pop,' said Herb.

'That's exactly it,' agreed Billy.

'Tchijevsky, the Russian scientist, pointed it out thirty years ago. I believe he's the one that noted increased activity on battle fronts during the first World War occurring simultaneously with the appearance of large spots on the Sun. Back in 1937, the sit-down strikes were ushered in by one of the most rapid rises in the sunspot curve in twenty years.'

I couldn't get excited. But Billy was all worked up about it. That's the way he

is - enthusiastic about his work.

'People have their ups and downs,' he said, a fanatic light creeping into his eyes, the way it does when he's on the trail of some idea to make _Globe_ readers gasp.

'Not only people, but peoples - nations, cultures, civilizations. Go back through history and you can point out a parallelism in the cycles of sunspots and significant events. Take 1937, for example, the year they had the sit-down strikes. In July of that year the sunspot cycle hits its maximum with a Wolfer index of 137.

'Scientists are pretty sure periods of excitement are explained by acute changes in the nervous and psychic characters of humanity which take place at sunspot maxima, but they aren't sure of the reasons for those changes.'

'Ultraviolet light,' I yawned, remembering something I had read in a magazine about it.

Billy wiggled his ears and went on: 'Most likely ultraviolet has a lot to do with it. The spots themselves aren't strong emission centers for ultraviolet. But it may be the very changes in the Sun's atmosphere which produce the spots also result in the production of

more ultraviolet.

'Most of the ultraviolet reaching Earth's atmosphere is used up converting oxygen into ozone, but changes of as much as twenty percent in its intensity are possible at the surface.

'And ultraviolet produces definite reaction in human glands, largely in the endocrine glands.'

'I don't believe a damn word of it,' Herb declared flatly, but there was no stopping Billy.

He clinched his argument: 'Let's say, then, that changes in sunshine, such

as occur during sunspot periods, affect the physiological character and mental outlook of all the people on Earth. In other words, human behavior corresponds to sunspot cycles.

'Compare Dow Jones averages with sunspots and you will find they show a marked sympathy with the cycles - the market rising with sunspot activity. Sunspots were riding high in 1928 and 1929. In the autumn of 1929 there was an abrupt break in sunspot activity and the market crashed. It hit bedrock in 1932 and 1933, and so did the sunspots. Wall Street follows the sunspot cycle.'

'Keep those old sunspots rolling,' I

jeered at him, 'and we'll have everlasting prosperity. We'll simply wallow in wealth.'

'Sure,' said Herb, 'and the damn fools will keep jumping off the buildings.'

'But what would happen if we reversed things - made a law against sunspots?' I asked.

'Why, then,' said Billy, solemn as an owl, 'we'd have terrible depressions.'

I got up and walked away from him. I had got to thinking about what I had seen on the sidewalk after the fellow

jumped, and I needed that beer.

Jake, one of the copy boys, yelled at me just as I was going out the door.

'J.R. wants to see you, Mike.'

So I turned around and walked toward the door behind which J.R. sat rubbing his hands and figuring out some new stunts to shock the public into buying the _Globe_.

'Mike,' said J.R. when I stepped into his office, 'I want to congratulate you on the splendid job you did this

morning. Mighty fine story, my boy, mighty fine.'

'Thanks, J.R.,' I said, knowing the old rascal didn't mean a word of it.

Then J.R. got down to business.

'Mike,' he said, 'I suppose you've been reading this stuff about Dr. Ackerman's time machine.'

'Yeah,' I told him, 'but if you think you're going to send me out to interview that old publicity grabber, you're all wrong. I saw a guy spatter himself all over Fifth Street this morning, and I been listening to Billy Larson telling about

sunspots, and I can't stand much more. Not in one day, anyhow.'

Then J.R. dropped the bombshell on me.

'The _Globe_, ' he announced, 'has bought a time machine.'

That took me clear off my feet.

The _Globe_, in my time, had done a lot of wacky things, but this was the worst.

'What for?' I asked weakly, and J.R. looked shocked; but he recovered in a minute and leaned across the desk.

'Just consider, Mike. Think of the opportunities a time machine offers a newspaper. The other papers can tell them what has happened and what is happening, but, by Godfrey, they'll have to read the _Globe_ to know what is going to happen.'

'I have a slogan for you,' I said.
"Read the News Before It Happens."

He didn't know if I was joking or was serious and waited for a minute before going on.

'A war breaks out,' he said. 'The other papers can tell what is happening

at the moment. We can do better than that. We can tell them what will happen. Who will win and lose. What battles will be fought. How long the war will last-

'But, J.R.,' I yelled at him, 'you can't do that! Don't you see what a hell of a mess you'll make of things. If one side knew it was going to lose-'

'It doesn't apply merely to wars,' said J.R. 'There's sports. Football games. Everybody is nuts right now to know if Minnesota is going to lick Wisconsin. We jump into our time machine, travel ahead to next Saturday. Day before the game we print the story,

with pictures and everything.'

He rubbed his hands and purred.

'I'll have old Johnson down at the _Standard_ eating out of my hand,' he gloated. 'I'll make him wish he never saw a newspaper. I'll take the wind out of his sails. I'll send my reporters out a day ahead-'

'You'll have every bookie on your neck,' I shouted. 'Don't you know there's millions of dollars bet every Saturday on football games? Don't you see what you'd do?

You'd put every jackpot, every

betting window out of business. Tracks would close down. Nobody would spend a dime to see a game they could read about ahead of time. You'd put organized baseball and college football, boxing, everything else out of business. What would be the use of staging a prize fight if the public knew in advance who was going to win?

But J.R. just chortled gleefully and rubbed his hands.

'We'll publish stock-market quotations for the coming month on the first of every month,' he planned. 'Those papers will sell for a hundred bucks apiece.'

Seeing him sitting there gave me a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. For I knew that in his hands rested a terrible power, a power that he was blind to or too stubborn to respect.

The power to rob every human being on Earth of every bit of happiness. For if a man could look ahead and see some of the things that no doubt were going to happen, how could he be happy?

Power to hurl the whole world into chaos. Power to make and break any man, or thing, or institution that stood before him.

I tried another angle.

'But how do you know the machine will work?'

'I have ample proof,' said J.R. 'The other papers ridiculed Dr. Ackerman, while we presented his announcement at face value. That is why he is giving us an exclusive franchise to the purchase and use of his invention. It's costing us plenty of money - a barrel of money - but we're going to make two barrels of money out of it.'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'O.K.,' I said. 'Go ahead. I don't see why the hell you called me in.'

'Because,' beamed J.R., 'you're going to make the first trip in the time machine!'

'What!' I yelled.

J.R. nodded. 'You and a photographer. Herb Harding. I called you in first. You leave tomorrow morning. Five hundred years into the future for a starter. Get pictures. Come back and write your story. We'll spring it in the Sunday paper. Whole front-page layout. What does the city look like five hundred years from now? What changes

have been made? Who's mayor? What are the women wearing in the fall of 2450?'

He grinned at me.

'And you might say, too, that the _Standard_ no longer is published. Whether it's the truth or not, you know. Old Johnson will go hog wild when he reads that in your story.'

I could have refused, of course, but if I had, he would have sent somebody else and tied the can on me. Even in 1950, despite a return to prosperity that

beggared the flushiest peak of 1929, good jobs in the newspaper field were not so easy to pick up.

So I said I'd go, and half an hour later I found myself getting just a bit excited about being one of the first men to travel into time. For I wouldn't be the very first. Doc Ackerman had traveled ahead a few years in his own machine, often enough and far enough to prove the thing would work.

But the prospect of it gave me a headache when I tried to reason it out. The whole thing sounded wacky to me. Not so much the idea that one could really travel in time, for I had no doubt

one could. J.R. wasn't anybody's fool. Before he sunk his money in that time machine he would have demanded ironclad, gilt-edged proof that it would operate successfully.

But the thing that bothered me was the complications that might arise. The more I thought of it, the sicker and more confused I got.

Why, with a time machine a reporter could travel ahead and report a man's death, get pictures of his funeral. Those pictures could be taken back in time and published years before his death. That man, when he read the paper, would know the exact hour that he would

die, would see his own face framed within the casket.

A boy of ten might know that some day he would be elected president of the United States simply by reading the _Globe_. The present president, angling for a third term, could read his own political fate if the _Globe_ chose to print it.

A man might read that the next day he would meet death in a traffic accident. And if that man knew he was going to die, he would take steps to guard against it. But could he guard against it? Could he change his own future? Or was the future fast in a rigid

mold? If the future said something was going to happen, was it absolutely necessary that it must happen?

The more I thought about it, the crazier it sounded. But somehow I couldn't help but think of it. And the more I thought about it, the worse my head hurt.

So I went down to the Dutchman's.

Louie was back of the bar, and when he handed me my first glass of beer, I said to him: 'It's a hell of a world, Louie.'

And Louie said tome: 'It sure as

hell is, Mike.'

I drank a lot of beer, but I didn't get drunk. I stayed cold sober. And that made me sore, because I figured that by rights I should take on a load. And all the time my head swam with questions and complicated puzzles.

I would have tried something stronger than beer, but I knew if I mixed drinks I'd get sick, so finally I gave up.

Louie asked me if there was something wrong, and I said no, there wasn't, but before I left I shook hands

with Louie and said good-by. If I had been drunk, Louie wouldn't have thought a thing of it, but I could see he was surprised I acted that way when he knew I was sober as the daylight.

Just as I was going out the door I met Jimmy Langer coming in. Jimmy worked for the _Standard_ and was a good newspaperman, but mean and full of low-down tricks. We were friends, of course, and had worked on lots of stories together, but we always watched one another pretty close. There was never any telling what Jimmy might be up to.

'Hi, Jimmy,' I said.

And Jimmy did a funny thing. He didn't say a word. He just looked right at me and laughed into my face.

It took me so by surprise I didn't do anything until he was inside the Dutchman's, and then I walked down the street. But at the corner I stopped, wondering if I hadn't better go back and punch Jimmy's nose. I hadn't liked the way he laughed at me.

The time-machine device was installed in a plane because, Doc Ackerman told us, it wouldn't be wise to

try to do much traveling at ground level. A fellow might travel forward a hundred years or so and find himself smack in the middle of a building. Or the ground might rise or sink and the time machine would be buried or left hanging in the air. The only safe way to travel in time, Doc warned us, was to do it in a plane.

The plane was squatting in a pasture a short distance from Doc's Laboratories, situated at the edge of the city, and a tough-looking thug carrying a rifle was standing guard over it. The plane had been guarded night and day. It was just too valuable a thing to let anyone get near it.

Doc explained the operation of the time machine to me.

'It's simple,' he said. 'Simple as falling off a log.'

And what he said was true. All you had to do was set the indicator forward the number of years you wished to travel. When you pressed the activator stud you went into the time spin, or whatever it was that happened to you, and you stayed in it until you reached the proper time. Then the mechanism acted automatically, your time speed was slowed down, and there you were. You just reversed the process to go backward.

Simple. Simple, so Doc said, as falling off a log. But I knew that behind all that simplicity was some of the most wonderful science the world had ever known - science and brains and long years of grueling work and terrible disappointment.

'It will be like plunging into night.' Doc told me. 'You will be traveling in time as a single dimension. There will be no heat, no air, no gravitation, absolutely nothing outside your plane. But the plane is insulated to keep in the heat. In case you do get cold, just snap on those heaters. Air will be supplied if you need it, by the oxygen tanks. But on a

short trip like five hundred years you probably won't need either the heaters or the oxygen. Just a few minutes and you'll be there.'

J.R. had been sore at me because I had been late. Sore, too, because Herb had one of the most beautiful hangovers I have ever laid eyes on. But he'd forgotten all about that now. He was hopping up and down in his excitement.

'Just wait,' he chortled. 'Just wait until Johnson sees this down at the _Standard_. He'll probably have a stroke. Serve him right, the stubborn old buzzard.'

The guard, standing just outside the door of the ship, was shuffling his feet. For some reason the fellow seemed nervous.

Doc croaked at him. 'What's the matter with you, Benson?'

The guy stammered and shifted his rifle from one hand to another. He tried to speak, but the words just dried up in his mouth. Then J.R. started some more of his gloating and we forgot about the guard.

Herb had his cameras stowed away and everything was ready. J.R. stuck out his fist and shook hands with me and

Herb, and the old rascal was pretty close to tears.

Doc and J.R. got out of the ship, and I followed them to the door. Before I closed and sealed it I took one last look at the city skyline. There it shimmered, in all its glory, through the blue haze of an autumn day. Familiar towers, and to the north the smudge of smoke that hung over the industrial district.

I waved my hand at the towers and said to them: 'So long, big boys. I'll be seeing you five hundred years from now.'

The skyline looked different up there in the future. I had expected it to look different because in five hundred years some buildings would be torn down and new ones would go up. New architectural ideas, new construction principles over the course of five centuries will change any city skyline.

But it was different in another way than that.

I had expected to see a vaster and a greater and more perfect city down below us when we rolled out of our time spin, and it was vaster and greater, but there was something wrong.

It had a dusty and neglected look.

It had grown in those five hundred years, there was no doubt of that. It had grown in all directions, and must have been at least three times as big as the city Herb and I had just left behind.

Herb leaned forward in his seat.

'Is that really the old burg down there?' he asked. 'Or is it just my hangover?'

'It's the same old place,' I assured him. Then I asked him. 'Where did you pick up that beauty you've got?'

'I was out with some of the boys,' he told me. 'Al and Harry. We met up with some of the _Standard_ boys and had a few drinks with them later in the evening.'

There were no planes in the sky and I had expected that in 2450 the air would fairly swarm with them. They had been getting pretty thick even back in 1950. And now I saw the streets were free of traffic, too.

We cruised around for half an hour, and during that time the truth was driven home to us. A truth that was plenty hard to take.

That city below us was a dead city!
There was no sign of life. Not a single
automobile on the street, not a person on
the sidewalks.

Herb and I looked at one another,
and disbelief must have been written in
letters three feet high upon our faces.

'Herb,' I said, 'we gotta find out
what this is all about.'

Herb's Adam's apple jiggled up and
down his neck.

'Hell,' he said. 'I was figuring on
dropping into the Dutchman's and getting

me a pick-up.'

It took almost an hour to find anything that looked like an airport, but finally I found one that looked safe enough. It was overgrown with weeds, but the place where the concrete runways had been was still fairly smooth, although the concrete had been broken here and there, and grass and weeds were growing through the cracks.

I took her down as easy as I could, but even at that we hit a place where a slab of concrete had been heaved and just missed a crack-up.

The old fellow with the rifle could have stepped from the pages of a history of early pioneer days except that once in a while the pioneers probably got a haircut.

He came out of the bushes about a mile from the airport, and his rifle hung cradled in his arm. There was something about him that told me he wasn't one to fool with.

'Howdy, strangers,' he said in a voice that had a whiny twang.

'By Heaven,' said Herb, 'it's Daniel Boone himself.'

'You jay birds must be a right smart step from home,' said the old guy, and he didn't sound as if he'd trust us very far.

'Not so far,' I said. 'We used to live here a long time ago.'

'Danged if I recognize you.' He pushed back his old black felt hat and scratched his head. 'And I thought I knew everybody that ever lived around here. You wouldn't be Jake Smith's boys, would you?'

'Doesn't look like many people are living here any more,' said Herb.

'Matter of fact, there ain't,' said Daniel Boone. 'The old woman was just telling me the other day we'd have to move so we'd be nearer neighbors. It gets mighty lonesome for her. Nearest folks is about ten miles up thataway.'

He gestured to the north, where the skyline of the city loomed like a distant mountain range, with gleaming marble ramparts and spires of mocking stone.

'Look here,' I asked him. 'Do you mean to say your nearest neighbor is ten miles away?'

'Sure,' he told me. 'The Smiths lived over a couple of miles to the west,

but they moved out this spring. Went down to the south. Claimed the hunting was better there.'

He shook his head sadly. 'Maybe hunting is all right. I do a lot of it. But I like to do a little farming, too, And it's mighty hard to break new ground. I had a right handsome bunch of squashes and carrots this year. 'Taters did well, too.'

'But at one time a lot of people lived here.' I insisted. 'Thousands and thousands of people. Probably millions of them.'

'I heard tell of that,' agreed the old man, 'but I can't rightfully say there's any

truth in it. Must've been a long time ago. Somebody must have built all them buildings -although what for I just can't figure out.'

The _Globe_ editorial rooms were ghostly. Dust lay everywhere, and a silence that was almost as heavy as the dust.

There had been some changes, but it was still a newspaper office. All it needed was the blur of voices, the murmur of the speeding presses to bring it to life again.

The desks still were there, and chairs ringed the copy table.

Our feet left trails across the dust that lay upon the floor and raised a cloud that set us both to sneezing.

I made a beeline for one dark corner of the room; there I knew I would find what I was looking for.

Old bound files of the paper. Their pages crackled when I opened them, and the paper was so yellowed with age that in spots it was hard to read.

I carried one of the files to a window and glanced at the date.

September 14, 2143. Over three hundred years ago!

A banner screamed: 'Relief Riots in Washington.' Hurriedly we leafed through the pages. And there, on the front pages of those papers that had seen the light more than three centuries before, we read the explanation for the silent city that lay beyond the shattered, grime-streaked windows.

'Stocks Crash to Lowest Point in Ten Years!' shrieked one banner. Another said: 'Congress Votes Record Relief Funds.' Still another: 'Taxpayers Refuse to Pay.' After that they came faster and faster. 'Debt Moratorium

Declared'; 'Bank Holiday Enforced':
'Thousands Starving in Cleveland';
Jobless March on Washington'; 'Troops
Fight Starving Mobs': 'Congress Gives
Up, Goes Home': 'Epidemic Sweeping
East'; 'President Declares National
Emergency':

'British Government Abdicates';
'Howling Mob Sweeping Over France';
'U.S. Government Bankrupt.'

In the market and financial pages,
under smaller heads, we read footnotes
to those front-page lines. Story after
story of business houses closing their
doors, of corporations crashing, reports
on declining trade; increasing

unemployment, idle factories.

Civilization, three hundred years before, had crashed to ruin under the very weight of its own superstructure. The yellowed files did not tell the entire story, but it was easy to imagine.

'The world went nuts,' said Herb, 'Yeah,' I said. 'Like that guy who took the dive.'

I could see it all as plain as day. Declining business, increasing unemployment, heavier taxation to help the unemployed and buy back prosperity, property owners unable to pay those taxes. A vicious circle.

Herb was rummaging around back in the dimness by the filing cabinet. Presently he came out into the light again, all covered with dust.

'They're only twenty or thirty years of files,' he said, 'and we got the newest one. But I found something else. Back behind the cabinet. Guess it must have fallen back there and nobody ever bothered to clean it out.'

He handed it to me - an old and crumpled paper, so brittle with age I was afraid it might crumble to dust in my very hands.

'There was quite a bit of rubble back of the cabinet,' said Herb. 'Some other papers. Old, too, but this one was the oldest.'

I looked at the date. April 16, 1985.

That yellowed paper was almost five hundred years old! It had come off the press less than thirty-five years after Herb and I had taken off with the time machine!

Lying behind the filing cabinet all those years. The cabinet was large and heavy to move, and janitors in newspaper offices aren't noted for outstanding tidiness.

But there was something bothering me. A little whisper way back in my head, somewhere down at the base of my brain, that kept telling me there was something I should remember.

I tossed the old paper on a desk and walked to a window. Most of the glass was broken out, and what wasn't broken out was coated so thick with grime you couldn't see through it. I looked out through the place where there wasn't any glass.

There the city lay - almost as I

remembered it. There was Jackson's tower, the tallest in the city back in 1950, but now dwarfed by three or four others. The spire of the old cathedral was gone, and I missed that, for it had been a pretty thing. I used to sit and watch it from this very window through the mist of early-spring rain or through the ghostly white of the winter's first snowfall. I missed the spire, but Jackson's tower was there, and so were a lot of other buildings I could place.

And every one of them looked lonely. Lonely and not quite understanding - like a dog that's been kicked out of a chair he thinks of as his own. Their windows gaping like dead

eyes. No cheerful glow of light within them. Their colors dulled by the wash of seasons that had rolled over them.

This was worse, I told myself, than if we'd found the place all smashed to hell by bombs. Because, brutal as it is, one can understand a bombed city. And one can't understand, or feel comfortable in a city that's just been left behind to die.

And the people!

Thinking about them gave me the jitters. Were all the people like old Daniel Boone? We had seen how he and his family lived, and it wasn't pretty.

People who had backed down the scale of progress. People who had forgotten the printed word, had twisted the old truths and the old history into screwy legends.

It was easy enough to understand how it had happened. Pull the economic props from under a civilization and there's hell to pay. First you have mad savagery and even madder destruction as class hatred flames unchecked. And when that hatred dies down after an orgy of destruction there is bewilderment, and then some more savagery and hatred born of bewilderment.

But, sink as low as he may, man

always will climb again. It's the nature of the beast. He's an ornery cuss.

But man, apparently, hadn't climbed again. Civilization, as Herb and I knew it, had crashed all of three hundred years before - and man still was content to live in the shadow of his former greatness, not questioning the mute evidences of his mighty past, uninspired by the soaring blocks of stone that reared mountainous above him.

There was something wrong.
Something devilish wrong.

Dust rose and tickled my nose, and suddenly I realized my throat was hot

and dry. I wanted a beer, if I could only step down the street to the Dutchman's- Then it smacked me straight between the eyes, the thing that had been whispering around in the back of my head all day.

I remembered Billy Larson's face and the way his ears wiggled when he got excited and how hopped up he had been about a sunspot story.

'By Heaven, Herb, I got it,' I yelled, turning from the window.

Herb's mouth sagged, and I knew he thought that I was nuts.

'I know what happened now,' I said.

'We have to get a telescope.'

'Look here, Mike,' said Herb, 'if you feel-'

But I didn't let him finish.

'It's the sunspots,' I yelled at him.

'Sunspots?' he squeaked.

'Sure,' I said. 'There aren't any.'

My hunch had been right.

There weren't any sunspots. No black dots on that great ball of flame.

It had taken two days before we found a pair of powerful field glasses in the rubbish of what once had been a jewelry store. Most of the stores and shops were wiped clean. Raided time after time in the violence which must have followed the breakdown of government, they later would have been looted systematically.

'Herb,' I said, 'there must have been something in what Billy said. Lots of sunspots and we have good times. No sunspots and we have bad times.'

'Yeah,' said Herb, 'Billy was plenty smart. He knew his science, all right.'

I could almost see Billy, his ears wiggling, his eyes glowing, as he talked to me that morning.

Wall Street followed the sunspot cycle, he had said. Business boomed when sunspots were riding high, went to pot when they blinked out.

I remembered asking him what would happen if someone passed a law against sunspots. And now it seemed that someone had!

It was hard to believe, but the evidence was there. The story lay in those musty files up in the _Globe_ office. Stories that told of the world

going mad when business scraped rock bottom. Of governments smashing, of starving hordes sweeping nation after nation.

I put my head down between my hands and groaned. I wanted a glass of beer. The kind Louie used to push across the bar, cool and with a lot of foam on top. And now there wasn't any beer. There hadn't been for centuries. All because of sunspots!

Ultraviolet light. Endocrine glands and human behavior. Words that scientists rolled around in their mouths and nobody paid much attention to. But they were the things that had played the

devil with the human race.

Herb chuckled behind me. I swung around on him, my nerves on edge.

'What's the matter with you?' I demanded.

'Boy,' said Herb, 'this Wash Tubbs can get himself into some of the damnedest scrapes!'

'What you got there?' I asked, seeing he was reading a paper.

'Oh, this.' he said. 'This is that old paper we found up at the office. The one published in '85. I'm going to take it back

and give it to J.R. But right now I'm reading the funnies-'

I grunted and hunkered down, turning my mind back to the sunspots. It sounded wacky, all right, but that was the only explanation.

It didn't seem right that a body of matter ninety-three million miles away could rule the lives of mankind - but, after all, all life depended on the Sun. Whiff out the Sun and there wouldn't be any life. Those old savages who had worshiped the Sun had the right idea.

Say, then, that sunspots had gone out of style. What would happen?

Exactly what those files back at the _Globe_ office had shown. Depression, ever deepening. Business failures, more and more men out of work, taxes piling higher and higher as a panicky government fought to hold off the day of reckoning.

I heard Herb making some strangling sounds and swung around again. I was getting annoyed with Herb.

But the look on Herb's face halted the words that were bubbling on my lips. His face was stark. It was white as a sheet and his eyes were frozen wide.

He shoved the paper at me,
babbling, a shaking finger pointing at a
small item,

I grabbed the sheet and squinted to
make out the faded type. Then I read,
slowly, but with growing horror:

LANGER DIES

'James Langer, convicted in 1951
of tampering with the time machine in
which Mike Hamilton and Herb

Harding, _Globe_ newsmen, set out on a flight into the future the preceding year, died in Rocky Point prison today at the age of sixty-five.

'Langer, at his trial, confessed he had bribed the guard placed in charge of the machine, to allow him to enter the plane in which it was installed. There, he testified, he removed that portion of the mechanism which made it possible for the machine to move backward in time.

'Langer, at that time, was an employee of the _Standard_, which went out of business a few years later.

'National indignation aroused by the incident resulted in the passage by Congress of a law prohibiting further building or experimentation with time machines. Heartbroken, Dr. Ambrose Ackerman, inventor of the machine, died two weeks after the trial.'

I sat numb for a few minutes, my hand tightening in a terrible grip upon the paper, grinding its yellowed pages into flaking shreds.

Then I looked at Herb, and as I looked into his fear-stricken face I remembered something.

'So.' I said, and I was so mad that I almost choked.

'So, you just had a few drinks with the boys that night before we left. You just met up with some _Standard_ boys and had a few.'

I remembered the way Jimmy Langer had laughed in my face as I was leaving the Dutchman's. I remembered how nervous the guard had been that morning.

'You didn't spill your guts, did you?' I rasped.

'Look, Mike-' said Herb, getting up off the ground.

'You got drunk, damn you,' I yelled at him, 'and your brains ran right out of your mouth. You told that _Standard_ crowd everything you knew. And Old Man Johnson sent Langer out to do the dirty work.'

I was mad, mad clear down to the soles of my boots.

'Damn you, Mike-' said Herb, and right then I let him have it. I gave him a poke that shook him clear down to the ground, but he came right back at me. Maybe he was mad, too.

He clipped me alongside the jaw and I plastered him over the eye, and after that we went at it hammer and tongs.

Herb wasn't any slouch with his dukes, and he kept me pretty busy. I gave him everything I had, but he always came back for more, and he pasted me a few that set my head to ringing.

But I didn't mind - all I wanted was to give Herb a licking he'd remember right down to the day he breathed his last.

When we quit it was just because

neither one of us could fight another lick. We lay there on the ground, gasping and glaring at one another. One of Herb's eyes was closed, and I knew I had lost a couple of teeth and my face felt like it had been run through a meat grinder.

Then Herb grinned at me.

'If I could have stayed on my feet a bit longer,' he gasped, 'I'd have murdered you.'

And I grinned back at him.

Probably we should have stayed

back in 2450. We had a chance back there. Old Daniel Boone didn't know too much, but at least he was civilized in a good many ways. And no doubt there still were books, and we might have been able to find other useful things.

We might have made a stab at rebuilding civilization, although the cards would have been stacked against us. For there's something funny about that sunspot business. When the sunspots stopped rearing around out on the Sun, something seemed to have run out of men - the old double-fisted, hell-for-leather spirit that had taken them up through the ages.

But we figured that men would make a come-back. We were pretty sure that somewhere up in the future we'd find a race that had started to climb back.

So we went ahead in time. Even if we couldn't go back, we could still go ahead..

We went five hundred years and found nothing. No trace of Daniel Boone's descendants. Maybe they'd given up raising squashes and had moved out where the hunting was better. The city still stood, although some of the stones had crumbled and some of the buildings were falling to pieces.

We traveled another five hundred years, and this time a horde of howling savages, men little more advanced than the tribes which roamed over Europe in the old Stone Age., charged out of the ruins at us, screaming and waving clubs and spears.

We just beat them to the plane.

In two thousand years the tribe had disappeared, and in its place we saw skulking figures that slunk among the mounds that once had been a city. Things that looked like men.

And after that we found nothing at

all. Nothing, that is, except a skeleton that looked like it might once have been a human being.

Here at last we stop. There's no use of going farther, and the gas in the tank of our plane is running low.

The city is a heap of earthy mounds, bearing stunted trees. Queer animals shuffle and slink over and among the mounds. Herb says they are mutations - he read about mutations somewhere in a book.

To the west stretch great veldts of waving grass, and across the river the hills are forested with mighty trees.

But Man is gone. He rose, and for a little while he walked the Earth, But now he's swept away.

Back in 1950, Man thought he was the whole works. But he wasn't so hot, after all. The sunspots took him to the cleaners. Maybe it was the sunspots in the first place that enabled him to rise up on his hind legs and rule the roost. Billy said that sunspots could do some funny things.

But that doesn't matter now. Man is just another has-been.

There's not much left for us to do.

Just to sit and think about J.R. rubbing his hands together. And Billy Larson wiggling his ears. And the way Jimmy Langer laughed that night outside the Dutchman's place.

Right now I'd sell my soul to walk into the Dutchman's place and say to Louie: 'It's a hell of a world, Louie.'

And hear Louie answer back: 'It sure as hell is, Mike.'

Title : The Autumn Land

Author : Clifford D. Simak

Original copyright year: 1971

Genre : science fiction

Comments : to my knowledge, this
is the only available e-text of this book

Source : scanned and OCR-read
from a hardback edition with Xerox
TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS
Word 2000.

Date of e-text : February 17, 2000

Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights
reversed.

The Autumn Land

Clifford D. Simak

He sat on the porch in the rocking
chair, with the loose board creaking as
he rocked. Across the street the old

white-haired lady cut a bouquet of chrysanthemums in the never-ending autumn. Where he could see between the ancient houses to the distant woods and wastelands, a soft Indian-summer blue lay upon the land. The entire village was soft and quiet, as old things often are - a place constructed for a dreaming mind rather than a living being. It was an hour too early for his other old and shaky neighbor to come fumbling down the grass-grown sidewalk, tapping the bricks with his seeking cane. And he would not hear the distant children at their play until dusk had fallen - if he heard them then. He did not always hear them.

There were books to read, but he did not want to read them. He could go into the backyard and spade and rake the garden once again, reducing the soil to a finer texture to receive the seed when it could be planted - if it ever could be planted - but there was slight incentive in the further preparation of a seed bed against a spring that never came. Earlier, much earlier, before he knew about the autumn and the spring, he had mentioned garden seeds to the Milkman, who had been very much embarrassed.

He had walked the magic miles and left the world behind in bitterness and when he first had come here had been content to live in utter idleness, to be

supremely idle and to feel no guilt or shame at doing absolutely nothing or as close to absolutely nothing as a man was able. He had come walking down the autumn street in the quietness and the golden sunshine, and the first person that he saw was the old lady who lived across the street. She had been waiting at the gate of her picket fence as if she had known he would be coming, and she had said to him, 'You're a new one come to live with us. There are not many come these days. That is your house across the street from me, and I know we'll be good neighbors.' He had reached up his hand to doff his hat to her, forgetting that he had no hat. 'My name is Nelson Rand,' he'd told her. 'I am an engineer. I will try

to be a decent neighbor.' He had the impression that she stood taller and straighter than she did, but old and bent as she might be there was a comforting graciousness about her. 'You will please come in,' she said. 'I have lemonade and cookies. There are other people there, but I shall not introduce them to you.' He waited for her to explain why she would not introduce him, but there was no explanation, and he followed her down the time-mellowed walk of bricks with great beds of asters and chrysanthemums, a mass of color on either side of it.

In the large, high-ceilinged living room, with its bay windows forming

window seats, filled with massive furniture from another time and with a small blaze burning in the fireplace, she had shown him to a seat before a small table to one side of the fire and had sat down opposite him and poured the lemonade and passed the plate of cookies.

'You must pay no attention to them,' she had told him. 'They are all dying to meet you, but I shall not humor them.'

It was easy to pay no attention to them, for there was no one there.

'The Major, standing over there by the fireplace,' said his hostess, 'with his

elbow on the mantel, a most ungainly pose if you should ask me, is not happy with my lemonade. He would prefer a stronger drink. Please, Mr. Rand, will you not taste my lemonade? I assure you it is good. I made it myself. I have no maid, you see, and no one in the kitchen. I live quite by myself and satisfactorily, although my friends keep dropping in, sometimes more often than I like.'

He tasted the lemonade, not without misgivings, and to his surprise it was lemonade and was really good, like the lemonade he had drunk when a boy at Fourth of July celebrations and at grade school picnics, and had never tasted since.

'It is excellent,' he said.

'The lady in blue,' his hostess said, 'sitting in the chair by the window, lived here many years ago. She and I were friends, although she moved away some time ago and I am surprised that she comes back, which she often does. The infuriating thing is that I cannot remember her name, if I ever knew it. You don't know it, do you?'

'I am afraid I don't.'

'Oh, of course, you wouldn't. I had forgotten. I forget so easily these days. You are a new arrival.'

He had sat through the afternoon and drank her lemonade and eaten her cookies, while she chattered on about her nonexistent guests. It was only when he had crossed the street to the house she had pointed out as his, with her standing on the stoop and waving her farewell, that he realized she had not told him her name. He did not know it even now.

How long had it been? He wondered, and realized he didn't know. It was this autumn business. How could a man keep track of time when it was always autumn?

It all had started on that day when

he'd been driving across Iowa, heading for Chicago. No, he reminded himself, it had started with the thinnesses, although he had paid little attention to the thinnesses to begin with. Just been aware of them, perhaps as a strange condition of the mind, or perhaps an unusual quality to the atmosphere and light. As if the world lacked a certain solidity that one had come to expect, as if one were running along a mystic borderline between here and somewhere else.

He had lost his West Coast job when a government contract had failed to materialize. His company had not been the only one; there were many other

companies that were losing contracts and there were a lot of engineers who walked the streets bewildered. There was a bare possibility of a job in Chicago, although he was well aware that by now it might be filled. Even if there were no job, he reminded himself, he was in better shape than a lot of other men. He was young and single, he had a few dollars in the bank, he had no house mortgage, no car payments, no kids to put through school. He had only himself to support - no family of any sort at all. The old, hard-fisted bachelor uncle who had taken him to raise when his parents had died in a car crash and had worked him hard on that stony hilly Wisconsin farm, had receded deep into the past

becoming a dim, far figure that was hard to recognize. He had not liked his uncle, Rand remembered - had not hated him, simply had not liked him. He had shed no tears, he recalled, when the old man had been caught out in a pasture by a bull and gored to death. So now Rand was quite alone, not even holding the memories of a family.

He had been hoarding the little money that he had, for with a limited work record, with other men better qualified looking for the jobs, he realized that it might be some time before he could connect with anything. The beat-up wagon that he drove had space for sleeping, and he stopped at the

little wayside parks along the way to cook his meals.

He had almost crossed the state, and the road had started its long winding through the bluffs that rimmed the Mississippi. Ahead he caught a glimpse, at several turnings of the road, of smokestacks and tall structures that marked the city just ahead.

He emerged from the bluffs, and the city before him, a small industrial center that lay on either side the river. It was then that he felt and saw (if one could call it seeing) the thinness that he had seen before or had sensed before. There was about it, not exactly an alienness,

but a sense of unreality, as if one were seeing the actuality of the scene through some sort of veil, with the edges softened and the angles flattened out, as if one might be looking at it as one would look at the bottom of a clear-water lake with a breeze gently ruffling the surface. When he had seen it before, he had attributed it to road fatigue and had opened the window to get a breath of air or had stopped the car and gotten out to walk up and down the road awhile, and it had gone away.

But this time it was worse than ever, and he was somewhat frightened at it - not so much frightened at it as he was frightened of himself, wondering what

might be wrong with him.

He pulled off to the side of the road, braking the car to a halt, and it seemed to him, even as he did it, that the shoulder of the road was rougher than he'd thought. As he pulled off the road, the thinness seemed to lessen, and he saw that the road had changed, which explained its roughness. The surface was pocked with chuckholes and blocks of concrete had been heaved up and other blocks were broken into pebbly shards.

He raised his eyes from the road to look at the city, and there was no city, only the broken stumps of a place that had somehow been destroyed. He sat

with his hands frozen on the wheel, and in the silence - the deadly, unaccustomed silence - he heard the cawing of crows. Foolishly, he tried to remember the last time he had heard the caw of crows, and then he saw them, black specks that flapped just above the bluff top. There was something else as well - the trees. No longer trees, but only here and there blackened stumps. The stumps of a city and the stumps of trees, with the black, ash-like flecks of crows flapping over them.

Scarcely knowing what he did, he stumbled from the car. Thinking of it later, it had seemed a foolish thing to do, for the car was the only thing he knew,

the one last link he had to reality. As he stumbled from it, he put his hand down in the seat, and beneath his hand he felt the solid, oblong object. His fingers closed upon it, and it was not until he was standing by the car that he realized what he held - the camera that had been lying in the seat beside him.

Sitting on the porch, with the loose floor board creaking underneath the rocker, he remembered that he still had the pictures, although it had been a long time since he had thought of them - a long time, actually, since he'd thought of anything at all beyond his life, day to day, in this autumn land. It was as though he had been trying to keep himself from

thinking, attempting to keep his mind in neutral, to shut out what he knew - or, more precisely perhaps, what he thought he knew.

He did not consciously take the pictures, although afterward he had tried to tell himself he did (but never quite convincing himself that this was entirely true), complimenting himself in a wry sort of way for providing a piece of evidence that his memory alone never could have provided. For a man can think so many things, daydream so many things, imagine so many things that he can never trust his mind.

The entire incident, when he later

thought of it, was hazy, as if the reality of that blasted city lay in some strange dimension of experience that could not be explained, or even rationalized. He could remember only vaguely the camera at his eyes and the clicking as the shutter snapped. He did recall the band of people charging down the hill toward him and his mad scramble for the car, locking the door behind him and putting the car in gear, intent on steering a zigzag course along the broken pavement to get away from the screaming humans who were less than a hundred feet away.

But as he pulled off the shoulder, the pavement was no longer broken. It ran smooth and level toward the city that

was no longer blasted. He pulled off the road again and sat limply, beaten, and it was only after many minutes that he could proceed again, going very slowly because he did not trust himself, shaken as he was, to drive at greater speed.

He had planned to cross the river and continue to Chicago, getting there that night, but now his plans were changed. He was too shaken up and, besides, there were the films. And he needed time to think, he told himself, a lot of time to think.

He found a roadside park a few miles outside the city and pulled into it, parking alongside an outdoor grill and

an old-fashioned pump. He got some wood from the small supply he carried in the back and built a fire. He hauled out the box with his cooking gear and food, fixed the coffee pot, set a pan upon the grill and cracked three eggs into it.

When he had pulled off the road, he had seen the man walking along the roadside; and now, as he cracked the eggs, he saw that the man had turned into the park and was walking toward the car. The man came up to the pump.

'Does this thing work?' he asked.

Rand nodded. 'I got water for the pot,' he said. 'Just now.'

'It's a hot day,' said the man.

He worked the pump handle up and down.

'Hot for walking,' he said.

'You been walking far?'

'The last six weeks,' he said.

Rand had a closer look at him. The clothes were old and worn, but fairly clean. He had shaved a day or two before. His hair was long - not that he wore it long, but from lack of barbering.

Water gushed from the spout and the man cupped his hands under it, bent to drink.

'That was good,' he finally said. 'I was thirsty.'

'How are you doing for food?' asked Rand, The man hesitated. 'Not too well,' he said.

'Reach into that box on the tailgate. Find yourself a plate and some eating implements. A cup, too. Coffee will be ready soon.'

'Mister, I wouldn't want you to think I was walking up here...'

'Forget it,' said Rand. 'I know how it is. There's enough for the both of us.'

The man got a plate and cup, a knife, a fork, a spoon. He came over and stood beside the fire.

'I am new at this,' he said. 'I've never had to do a thing like this before. I always had a job. For seventeen years I had a job . . .'

'Here you are,' said Rand. He slid the eggs onto the plate, went back to the box to get three more.

The man walked over to a picnic

table and put down his plate. 'Don't wait for me,' said Rand. 'Eat them while they're hot. The coffee's almost ready. There's bread if you want any.'

'I'll get a slice later,' said the man, 'for mopping up.'

John Sterling, he said his name was, and where now would John Sterling be, Rand wondered - still tramping the highways, looking for work, any kind of work, a day of work, an hour of work, a man who for seventeen years had held a job and had a job no longer? Thinking of Sterling, he felt a pang of guilt. He owed John Sterling a debt he never could repay, not

knowing at the time they talked there was any debt involved.

They had sat and talked, eating their eggs, mopping up the plates with bread, drinking hot coffee.

'For seventeen years,' said Sterling. 'A machine operator. An experienced hand. With the same company. Then they let me out. Me and four hundred others. All at one time. Later they let out others. I was not the only one. There were a lot of us. We weren't laid off, we were let out. No promise of going back. Not the company's fault, I guess. There was a big contract that fizzled out. There was no work to do. How about yourself? You

let out, too?'

Rand nodded. 'How did you know?'

'Well, eating like this. Cheaper than a restaurant. And you got a sleeping bag. You sleep in the car?'

'That is right,' said Rand. 'It's not as bad for me as it is for some of the others. I have no family.'

'I have a family,' said Sterling. 'Wife, three kids. We talked it over, the wife and me. She didn't want me to leave, but it made sense I should. Money all gone, unemployment run out. Long as I was around, it was hard to get relief.'

But if I deserted her, she could get relief. That way there's food for the wife and kids, a roof over their heads. Hardest thing I ever did. Hard for all of us. Someday I'll go back. When times get better, I'll go back. The family will be waiting.'

Out on the highway the cars went whisking past. A squirrel came down out of a tree, advanced cautiously toward the table, suddenly turned and fled for his very life, swarming up a nearby trunk.

'I don't know,' said Sterling. 'It might be too big for us, this society of ours. It may be out of hand. I read a lot.

Always liked to read. And I think about what I read. It seems to me maybe we've outrun our brains. The brains we have maybe were OK back in prehistoric days. We did all right with the brains we had until we built too big and complex. Maybe we built beyond our brains. Maybe our brains no longer are good enough to handle what we have. We have set loose economic forces we don't understand and political forces that we do not understand, and if we can't understand them, we can't control them. Maybe that is why you and I are out of jobs.'

'I wouldn't know,' said Rand. 'I never thought about it.'

'A man thinks a lot,' said Sterling. 'He dreams a lot walking down the road. Nothing else to do. He dreams some silly things: Things that are silly on the face of them, but are hard to say can't be really true. Did this ever happen to you?'

'Sometimes,' said Rand.

'One thing I thought about a lot. A terribly silly thought. Maybe thinking it because I do so much walking. Sometimes people pick me up, but mostly I walk. And I got to wondering if a man should walk far enough could he leave it all behind? The farther a man might walk, the farther he would be from

everything.'

'Where you heading?' Rand asked.

'Nowhere in particular. Just keep on moving, that is all. Month or so I'll start heading south. Get a good head start on winter. These northern states are no place to be when winter comes,'

'There are two eggs left,' said Rand. 'How about it?'

'Hell, man, I can't. I already...

'Three eggs aren't a lot. I can get some more.'

'Well, if you're sure that you don't mind. Tell you what - let's split them, one for you, one for me.'

The giddy old lady had finished cutting her bouquet and had gone into the house. From up the street came the tapping of a cane - Rand's other ancient neighbor, out for his evening walk. The sinking sun poured a blessing on the land. The leaves were gold and red, brown and yellow - they had been that way since the day that Rand had come. The grass had a tawny look about it - not dead, just dressed up for dying.

The old man came trudging carefully down the walk, his cane alert

against a stumble, helping himself with it without really needing any help. He was slow, was all. He halted by the walk that ran up to the porch. 'Good afternoon,' he said. 'Good afternoon.' said Rand. 'You have a nice day for your walk.' The old man acknowledged the observation graciously and with a touch of modesty, as if he, himself, might somehow be responsible for the goodness of the day. 'It looks,' he said, 'as if we might have another fine day tomorrow.' And having said that, he continued down the street.

It was ritual. The same words were said each day. The situation, like the village and the weather, never varied. He could sit here on this porch a

thousand years, Rand told himself, and the old man would continue going past and each time the selfsame words would be mouthed - a set piece, a strip of film run over and over again. Something here had happened to time. The year had stuck on autumn.

Rand did not understand it. He did not try to understand it. There was no way for him to try. Sterling had said that man's cleverness might have outstripped his feeble, prehistoric mind - or, perhaps, his brutal and prehistoric mind. And here there was less chance of understanding than there had been back in that other world.

He found himself thinking of that other world in the same myth-haunted way as he thought of this one. The one now seemed as unreal as the other. Would he ever, Rand wondered, find reality again? Did he want to find it?

There was a way to find reality, he knew. Go into the house and take out the photos in the drawer of his bedside table and have a look at them. Refresh his memory, stare reality in the face again. For those photos, grim as they might be, were a harder reality than this world in which he sat or the world that he had known. For they were nothing seen by the human eye, interpreted by the human brain.

They were, somehow, fact. The camera saw what it saw and could not lie about it; it did not fantasize, it did not rationalize, and it had no faulty memory, which was more than could be said of the human mind.

He had gone back to the camera shop where he had left the film and the clerk had picked out the envelope from the box behind the counter.

'That will be three ninety-five.' he said.

Rand took a five-dollar bill out of his wallet and laid it on the counter.

'If you don't mind my asking,' said the clerk, 'where did you get these pictures?'

'It is trick photography,' said Rand.

The clerk shook his head. 'If that is what they are, they're the best I've ever seen.'

The clerk rang up the sale and, leaving the register open, stepped back and picked up the envelope.

'What do you want?' asked Rand.

The man shook the prints out of the

envelope, shuffled through them.

'This one,' he said.

Rand stared at him levelly. 'What about it?' he asked.

'The people. I know some of them. The one in front. That is Bob Gentry. He is my best friend.'

'You must be mistaken,' Rand said coldly.

He took the prints from the clerk's fingers, put them back in the envelope.

The clerk made the change. He still

was shaking his head, confused, perhaps a little frightened, when Rand left the shop.

He drove carefully, but with no loss of time, through the city and across the bridge. When he hit open country beyond the river, he built up his speed, keeping an eye on the rear-vision mirror. The clerk had been upset, perhaps enough to phone the police. Others would have seen the pictures and been upset as well. Although, he told himself, it was silly to think of the police. In taking the photos, he had broken no regulations, violated no laws. He had had a perfect right to take them.

Across the river and twenty miles down the highway, he turned off into a small, dusty country road and followed it until he found a place to pull off, where the road widened at the approach to a bridge that crossed a small stream. There was evidence that the pull-off was much used, fishermen more than likely parking their cars there while they tried their luck. But now the place was empty.

He was disturbed to find that his hands were shaking when he pulled the envelope from his pocket and shook out the prints.

And there it was - as he no longer could remember it.

He was surprised that he had taken as many pictures as he had. He could not remember having taken half that many. But they were there, and as he looked at them, his memory, reinforced, came back again, although the photos were much sharper than his memory. The world, he recalled, had seemed to be hazed and indistinct so far as his eyes had been concerned; in the photos it lay cruel and merciless and clear. The blackened stumps stood up, stark and desolate, and there could be no doubt that the imprint that lay upon the photos was the actuality of a bombed-out city. The photos of the bluff showed the barren rock no longer masked by trees, with only here and

there the skeletons of trees that by some accidental miracle had not been utterly reduced by the storm of fire. There was only one photo of the band of people who had come charging down the hill toward him; and that was understandable, for once having seen them, he had been in a hurry to get back to the car. Studying the photo, he saw they were much closer than he'd thought. Apparently they had been there all the time, just a little way off, and he had not noticed them in his astonishment at what had happened to the city. If they had been quieter about it, they could have been on top of him and overwhelmed him before he discovered them. He looked closely at the picture and saw

that they had been close enough that some of the faces were fairly well defined. He wondered which one of them was the man the clerk back at the camera shop had recognized.

He shuffled the photographs together and slid them back into the envelope and put it in his pocket. He got out of the car and walked down to the edge of the stream. The stream, he saw, was no more than ten feet or so across; but here, below the bridge, it had gathered itself into a pool, and the bank had been trampled bare of vegetation, and there were places where fishermen had sat. Rand sat down in one of these places and inspected the pool. The

current came in close against the bank and probably had undercut it, and lying there, in the undercut, would be the fish that the now-absent anglers sought, dangling their worms at the end of a long cane pole and waiting for a bite.

The place was pleasant and cool, shaded by a great oak that grew on the bank just below the bridge. From some far-off field came the subdued clatter of a mower. The water dimpled as a fish came up to suck in a floating insect. A good place to stay, thought Rand. A place to sit and rest awhile. He tried to blank his mind, to wipe out the memory and the photos, to pretend that nothing at all had happened, that there was nothing

he must think about.

But there was, he found, something that he must think about. Not about the photos, but something that Sterling had said just the day before. 'I got to wondering.' he had said, 'if a man should walk far enough, could he leave it all behind.'

How desperate must a man get, Rand wondered, before he would be driven to asking such a question. Perhaps not desperate at all - just worried and alone and tired and not being able to see the end of it. Either that, or afraid of what lay up ahead. Like knowing, perhaps, that in a few years

time (and not too many years, for in that photo of the people the clerk had seen a man he knew) a warhead would hit a little Iowa town and wipe it out. Not that there was any reason for it being hit; it was no Los Angeles, no New York, no Washington, no busy port, no center of transportation or communication, held no great industrial complex, was no seat of government. Simply hit because it had been there, hit by blunder, by malfunction, or by miscalculation. Although it probably didn't matter greatly, for by the time it had been hit, the nation and perhaps the world might have been gone. A few years, Rand told himself, and it would come to that. After all the labor, all the hopes and dreams,

the world would come to just that.

It was the sort of thing that a man might want to walk away from, hoping that in time he might forget it ever had been there. But to walk away, he thought, rather idly, one would have to find a starting point. You could not walk away from everything by just starting anywhere.

It was an idle thought, sparked by the memory of his talk with Sterling; and he sat there, idly, on the stream bank; and because it had a sense of attractive wonder, he held it in his mind, not letting go at once as one did with idle thoughts. And as he sat there, still holding it in

mind, another thought, another time and place crept in to keep it company; and suddenly he knew, with no doubt at all, without really thinking, without searching for an answer, that he knew the place where he could start.

He stiffened and sat rigid, momentarily frightened, feeling like a fool trapped by his own unconscious fantasy. For that, said common sense, was all that it could be. The bitter wondering of a beaten man as he tramped the endless road looking for a job, the shock of what the photos showed, some strange, mesmeric quality of this shaded pool that seemed a place apart from a rock-hard world - all of

these put together had produced the fantasy.

Rand hauled himself erect and turned back toward the car, but as he did he could see within his mind this special starting place. He had been a boy - how old? he wondered, maybe nine or ten - and he had found the little valley (not quite a glen, yet not quite a valley, either) running below his uncle's farm down toward the river. He had never been there before and he had never gone again; on his uncle's farm there had been too many chores, too many things to do to allow the time to go anywhere at all. He tried to recall the circumstances of his being there and found that he could

not. All that he could remember was a single magic moment, as if he had been looking at a single frame of a movie film - a single frame impressed upon his memory because of what? Because of some peculiar angle at which the light had struck the landscape? Because for an instant he had seen with different eyes than he'd ever used before or since? Because for the fractional part of a second he had sensed a simple truth behind the facade of the ordinary world? No matter what, he knew, he had seen magic in that moment.

He went back to the car and sat behind the wheel, staring at the bridge and sliding water and the field beyond,

but seeing, instead of them, the map inside his head. When he went back to the highway, he'd turn left instead of right, back toward the river and the town, and before he reached them he would turn north on another road and the valley of the magic moment would be only a little more than a hundred miles away. He sat and saw the map and purpose hardened in his mind. Enough of this silliness, he thought; there were no magic moments, never had been one; when he reached the highway, he'd turn to the right and hope the job might still be there when he reached Chicago.

When he reached the highway, he turned not right, but left.

It had been so easy to find, he thought as he sat on the porch. There had been no taking of wrong roads, no stopping for directions; he'd gone directly there as if he'd always known he would be coming back and had kept the way in mind. He had parked the car at the hollow's mouth, since there was no road, and had gone on foot up the little valley. It could so easily have been that he would not have found the place, he told himself, admitting now for the first time since it all began that he might not have been so sure as he had thought he was. He might have gone up the full length of the valley and not have found the magic ground, or he might have

passed it by, seeing it with other eyes and not recognizing it.

But it still was there, and he had stopped and looked at it and known it; again he was only nine or ten, and it was all right, the magic still was there. He had found a path he had not seen before and had followed it, the magic still remaining; and when he reached the hilltop, the village had been there. He had walked down the street in the quietness of the golden sunshine, and the first person that he had seen had been the old lady waiting at the gate of her picket fence, as if she had been told that he would becoming.

After he had left her house he went across the street to the house she said was his. As he came in the front door, there was someone knocking at the back.

'I am the Milkman,' the knocker had explained. He was a shadowy sort of person: you could see and yet you did not really see him; when one looked away and then looked back at him, it was as if one were seeing someone he had never seen before.

'Milkman,' Rand had said. 'Yes, I suppose I could do with milk.'

'Also,' said the Milkman, 'I have eggs, bread, butter, bacon and other

things that you will need. Here is a can of oil; you'll need it for your lamps. The woodshed is well stocked, and when there's need of it, I'll replenish it. The kindling's to the left as you go through the door.'

Rand recalled that he'd never paid the milkman or even mentioned payment. The Milkman was not the kind of man to whom one mentioned money. There was no need, either, to leave an order slip in the milkbox; the Milkman seemed to know what one might need and when without being told. With some shame, Rand remembered the time he had mentioned garden seeds and caused embarrassment, not only for the

Milkman, but for himself as well. For as soon as he mentioned them, he had sensed that he'd broken some very subtle code of which he should have been aware.

The day was fading into evening, and he should be going in soon to cook himself a meal. And after that, what he wondered. There still were books to read, but he did not want to read them. He could take out from the desk the plan he had laid out for the garden and mull over it a while, but now he knew he'd never plant the garden. You didn't plant a garden in a forever-autumn land, and there were no seeds.

Across the street a light blossomed in the windows of that great front room with its massive furniture, its roomy window seats, the great fireplace flaring to the ceiling. The old man with the cane had not returned, and it was getting late for him. In the distance now Rand could hear the sounds of children playing in the dusk.

The old and young, he thought. The old, who do not care: the young, who do not think. And what was he doing here, neither young nor old?

He left the porch and went down the walk. The street was empty, as it always was. He drifted slowly down it,

heading toward the little park at the village edge. He often went there, to sit on a bench beneath the friendly trees; and it was there, he was sure, that he would find the children. Although why he should think that he would find them there he did not know, for he had never found them, but only heard their voices.

He went past the houses, standing sedately in the dusk. Had people ever lived in them, he wondered. Had there ever been that many people in this nameless village? The old lady across the street spoke of friends she once had known, of people who had lived here and had gone away. But was this her memory speaking or the kind

befuddlement of someone growing old?

The houses, he had noted, all were in good repair. A loose shingle here and there, a little peeling paint, but no windows broken, no loosened gutters, sagging from the eaves, no rotting porch posts. As if, he thought, good householders had been here until very recently.

He reached the park and could see that it was empty. He still heard the childish voices, crying at their play, but they had receded and now came from somewhere just beyond the park. He crossed the park and stood at its edge, staring off across the scrub and

abandoned fields.

In the east the moon was rising, a full moon that lighted the landscape so that he could see every little clump of bushes, every grove of trees. And as he stood there, he realized with a sudden start that the moon was full again, that it was always full, it rose with the setting of the sun and set just before the sun came up, and it was always a great pumpkin of a moon, an eternal harvest moon shining on an eternal autumn world.

The realization that this was so all at once seemed shocking. How was it that he had never noticed this before?

Certainly he had been here long enough, had watched the moon often enough to have noticed it. He had been here long enough - and how long had that been, a few weeks, a few months, a year? He found he did not know. He tried to figure back and there was no way to figure back. There were no temporal landmarks. Nothing ever happened to mark one day from the next. Time flowed so smoothly and so uneventfully that it might as well stand still.

The voices of the playing children had been moving from him, becoming fainter in the distance; and as he listened to them, he found that he was hearing them in his mind when they were no

longer there. They had come and played and now had ceased their play. They would come again, if not tomorrow night, in another night or two. It did not matter, he admitted, if they came or not, for they really weren't there.

He turned heavily about and went back through the streets. As he approached his house, a dark figure moved out from the shadow of the trees and stood waiting for him. It was the old lady from across the street. It was evident that she had been waiting his return.

'Good evening, ma'am.' he said gravely. 'It is a pleasant night.'

'He is gone,' she said. 'He did not come back. He went just like the others and he won't come back.'

'You mean the old man.'

'Our neighbor,' she said. 'The old man with the cane. I do not know his name. I never knew his name. And I don't know yours.'

'I told it to you once,' said Rand, but she paid him no attention.

'Just a few doors up the street.' she said, 'and I never knew his name and I doubt that he knew mine. We are a

nameless people here, and it is a terrible thing to be a nameless person.'

'I will look for him,' said Rand. 'He may have lost his way.'

'Yes, go and look for him,' she said. 'By all means look for him. It will ease your mind. It will take away the guilt. But you will never find him.'

He took the direction that he knew the old man always took. He had the impression that his ancient neighbor, on his daily walks, went to the town square and the deserted business section, but he did not know. At no other time had it ever seemed important where he might

have gone on his walks.

When he emerged into the square, he saw, immediately, the dark object lying on the pavement and recognized it as the old man's hat. There was no sign of the old man himself.

Rand walked out into the square and picked up the hat. He gently reshaped and creased it and after that was done held it carefully by the brim so that it would come to no further damage.

The business section drowsed in the moonlight. The statue of the unknown man stood starkly on its base in the center of the square. When he first had

come here, Rand recalled, he had tried to unravel the identity of the statue and had failed. There was no legend carved into the granite base, no bronze plate affixed. The face was undistinguished, the stony costume gave no hint as to identity or period. There was nothing in the posture or the attitude of the carven body to provide a clue. The statue stood, a forgotten tribute to some unknown mediocrity.

As he gazed about the square at the business houses. Rand was struck again, as he always was, by the carefully unmodern make-up of the establishments. A barber shop, a hotel, a livery barn, a bicycle shop, a harness shop, a grocery

store, a meat market, a blacksmith shop - no garage, no service station, no pizza parlor, no hamburger joint. The houses along the quiet streets told the story; here it was emphasized. This was an old town, forgotten and by-passed by the sweep of time, a place of another century. But there was about it all what seemed to be a disturbing sense of unreality, as if it were no old town at all, but a place deliberately fashioned in such a manner as to represent a segment of the past.

Rand shook his head. What was wrong with him tonight? Most of the time he was quite willing to accept the village for what it seemed to be, but

tonight he was assailed with uneasy doubt.

Across the square he found the old man's cane. If his neighbor had come in this direction, he reasoned, he must have crossed the square and gone on down the street nearest to the place where he had dropped the cane. But why had he dropped the cane? First his hat and then his cane. What had happened here?

Rand glanced around, expecting that he might catch some movement, some furtive lurker on the margin of the square. There was nothing. If there had been something earlier, there was nothing now.

Following the street toward which his neighbor might have been heading, he walked carefully and alert, watching the shadows closely. The shadows played tricks on him, conjuring up lumpy objects that could have been a fallen man, but weren't. A half a dozen times he froze when he thought he detected something moving, but it was, in each case, only an illusion of the shadows.

When the village ended, the street continued as a path. Rand hesitated, trying to plan his action. The old man had lost his hat and cane, and the points where he had dropped them argued that he had intended going down the Street

that Rand had followed. If he had come down the Street, he might have continued down the path, out of the village and away from it, perhaps fleeing from something in the village.

There was no way one could be sure, Rand knew. But he was here and might as well go on for at least a ways. The old man might be out there somewhere, exhausted, perhaps terribly frightened, perhaps fallen beside the path and needing help.

Rand forged ahead. The path, rather well-defined at first, became fainter as it wound its way across the rolling moonlit countryside. A flushed rabbit went

bobbing through the grass. Far off an owl chortled wickedly. A faint chill wind came out of the west. And with the wind came a sense of loneliness, of open empty space untenanted by anything other than rabbit, owl and wind.

The path came to an end, its faintness finally pinching out to nothing. The groves of trees and thickets of low-growing shrubs gave way to a level plain of blowing grass, bleached to whiteness by the moon, a faceless prairie land. Staring out across it, Rand knew that this wilderness of grass would run on and on forever. It had in it the scent and taste of foreverness. He shuddered at the sight of it and

wondered why a man should shudder at a thing so simple. But even as he wondered, he knew - the grass was staring back at him; it knew him and waited patiently for him, for in time he would come to it. He would wander into it and be lost in it, swallowed by its immensity and anonymity.

He turned and ran, unashamedly, chill of blood and brain, shaken to the core. When he reached the outskirts of the village, he finally stopped the running and turned to look back into the wasteland. He had left the grass behind, but he sensed illogically that it was stalking him, flowing forward, still out of sight, but soon to appear, with the

wind blowing billows in its whiteness.

He ran again, but not so fast and hard this time, jogging down the street. He came into the square and crossed it, and when he reached his house, he saw that the house across the street was dark. He did not hesitate, but went on down the street he'd walked when he first came to the village. For he knew now that he must leave this magic place with its strange and quiet old village, its forever autumn and eternal harvest moon, its faceless sea of grass, its children who receded in the distance when one went to look for them, its old man who walked into oblivion, dropping hat and cane - that he must somehow find

his way back to that other world where few jobs existed and men walked the road to find them, where nasty little wars flared in forgotten corners and a camera caught on film the doom that was to come.

He left the village behind him and knew that he had not far to go to reach the place where the path swerved to the right and down a broken slope into the little valley to the magic starting point he'd found again after many years. He went slowly and carefully so that he would not wander off the path, for as he remembered it the path was very faint. It took much longer than he had thought to reach the point where the path swerved

to the right into the broken ground, and the realization grew upon him that the path did not swing to right and there was no broken ground.

In front of him he saw the grass again and there was no path leading into it. He knew that he was trapped, that he would never leave the village until he left it as the old man had, walking out of it and into nothingness. He did not move closer to the grass, for he knew there was terror there and he'd had enough of terror. You're a coward, he told himself.

Retracing the path back to the village, he kept a sharp lookout, going slowly so that he'd not miss the turnoff if

it should be there. It was not, however. It once had been, he told himself, bemused, and he'd come walking up it, out of that other world he'd fled.

The village street was dappled by the moonlight shining through the rustling leaves. The house across the street still was dark, and there was an empty loneliness about it. Rand remembered that he had not eaten since the sandwich he had made that noon. There'd be something in the milkbox - he'd not looked in it that morning, or had he? He could not remember.

He went around the house to the back porch where the milkbox stood.

The Milkman was standing there. He was more shadowy than ever, less well defined, with the moonlight shining on him, and his face was deeply shaded by the wide-brimmed hat he wore.

Rand halted abruptly and stood looking at him, astounded that the Milkman should be there. For he was out of place in the autumn moonlight. He was a creature of the early morning hours and of no other times.

'I came,' the Milkman said, 'to determine if I could be of help.'

Rand said nothing. His head buzzed large and misty, and there was nothing to

be said.

'A gun,' the Milkman suggested.
'Perhaps you would like a gun.'

'A gun? Why should I want one?'

'You have had a most disturbing evening. You might feel safer, more secure, with a gun in hand, a gun strapped about your waist.'

Rand hesitated. Was there mockery in the Milkman's voice?

'Or a cross.'

'A cross?'

'A crucifix. A symbol ...'

'No,' said Rand. 'I do not need a cross.'

'A volume of philosophy, perhaps.'

'No!' Rand shouted at him. 'I left all that behind. We tried to use them all, we relied on them and they weren't good enough and now...'

He stopped, for that had not been what he'd meant to say, if in fact he'd meant to say anything at all. It was something that he'd never even thought about; it was as if someone inside of him

were speaking through his mouth.

'Or perhaps some currency?'

'You are making fun of me,' Rand said bitterly, 'and you have no right...'

'I merely mention certain things,' the Milkman said, 'upon which humans place reliance...'

'Tell me one thing,' said Rand, 'as simply as you can. Is there any way of going back?'

'Back to where you came from?'

'Yes,' said Rand. 'That is what I

mean.'

'There is nothing to go back to.' the Milkman said. 'Anyone who comes has nothing to go back to.'

'But the old man left. He wore a black felt hat and carried a cane. He dropped them and I found them.'

'He did not go back,' the Milkman said. 'He went ahead. And do not ask me where, for I do not know.'

'But you're a part of this.'

'I am a humble servant. I have a job to do and I try to do it well. I care for

our guests the best that I am able. But there comes a time when each of our guests leaves us. I would suspect this is a halfway house on the road to someplace else.'

'A place for getting ready,' Rand said.

'What do you mean?' the Milkman asked.

'I am not sure,' said Rand. 'I had not meant to say it.' And this was the second time, he thought, that he'd said something he had not meant to say.

'There's one comfort about this

place.' the Milkman said. 'One good thing about it you should keep in mind. In this village nothing ever happens.'

He came down off the porch and stood upon the walk. 'You spoke of the old man,' he said, 'and it was not the old man only. The old lady also left us. The two of them stayed on much beyond their time.'

'You mean I'm here all alone?'

The Milkman had started down the walk, but now he stopped and turned. 'There'll be others coming,' he said. 'There are always others coming.'

What was it Sterling had said about man outrunning his brain capacity? Rand tried to recall the words, but now, in the confusion of the moment, he had forgotten them. But if that should be the case, if Sterling had been right (no matter how he had phrased his thought), might not man need, for a while, a place like this, where nothing ever happened, where the moon was always full and the year was stuck on autumn?

Another thought intruded and Rand swung about, shouting in sudden panic at the Milkman. 'But these others? Will they talk to me? Can I talk with them? Will I know their names?'

The Milkman had reached the gate by now and it appeared that he had not heard.

The moonlight was paler than it had been. The eastern sky was flushed. Another matchless autumn day was about to dawn.

Rand went around the house. He climbed the steps that led up to the porch. He sat down in the rocking chair and began waiting for the others.

Title: The Sitters

Author: Clifford D. Simak

Original copyright year: unknown, re-published 1962

Genre: science fiction

Comments: To my knowledge, this is the only available e-text of this story.

Source: scanned and OCR-read from a paperback edition with Xerox TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS Word 2000.

Date of e-text: August 15, 1999

Prepared by: Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 1999. All rights
reversed.

THE SITTERS

Clifford D. Simak

THE FIRST WEEK of school was finished. Johnson Dean, superintendent of Millville High, sat at his desk, enjoying the quiet and the satisfaction of

late Friday afternoon.

The quiet was massacred by Coach Jerry Higgins. He clomped into the office and threw his muscular blond frame heavily in a chair.

"Well, you can call off football for the year," he said angrily. "We can drop out of the conference."

Dean pushed away the papers on which he had been working and leaned back in his chair. The sunlight from the western windows turned his silver thatch into a seeming halo.

His pale, blue-veined, wrinkled

hands smoothed out, painstakingly, the fading crease in his fading trousers.

"What has happened now?" he asked.

"It's King and Martin, Mr. Dean. They aren't coming out this year."

Dean clucked sympathetically, but somewhat hollowly, as if his heart was not quite in it. "Let me see," he said. "If I remember rightly, those two were very good last year. King was in the line and Martin quarterback."

Higgins exploded in righteous indignation. "Who ever heard of a

quarterback deciding he wouldn't play no more?

And not just an ordinary boy, but one of the very best. He made all-conference last year."

"You've talked to them, of course?"

"I got down on my knees to them," said the coach. "I asked them did they want that I should lose my job. I asked is there anything you got against me. I told them they were letting down the school. I told them we wouldn't have a team without them. They didn't laugh at me, but -"

"They wouldn't laugh at you," said Dean. "Those boys are gentlemen. In fact, all the youngsters in school -"

"They're a pack of sissies!" stormed the coach.

Dean said gently, "That is a matter of opinion. There have been moments when I also wasn't able to attach as much importance to football as it seemed to me I should."

"But that's different," argued the coach. "When a man grows up, naturally he will lose some interest. But these are kids. This just isn't healthy. These young fellows should be out there pawing up

the earth. All kids should have a strong sense of competition. And even if they don't, there's the financial angle. Any outstanding football man has a chance, when he goes to college -"

"Our kids don't need athletic subsidies," said Dean, a little sharply. "They're getting more than their share of scholastic scholarships."

"If we had a lot more material," moaned Higgins, "King and Martin wouldn't mean so much. We wouldn't win too often, but we still would have a team. But as it is - do you realize, Mr. Dean, that there have been fewer coming out each year? Right now, I haven't more

than enough -"

"You've talked to King and Martin. You're sure they won't reconsider?"

"You know what they told me? They said football interfered with studies!"

The way Higgins said it, it was rank heresy.

"I guess, then," Dean said cheerfully, "that we'll just have to face it."

"But it isn't normal," the coach protested. "There aren't any kids who

think more of studies than they do of football. There aren't any kids so wrapped up in books -"

"There are," said Dean. "There are a lot, right here at Millville. You should take a look at the grade averages over the past ten years, if you don't believe it."

"What gets me is that they don't act like kids. They act like a bunch of adults." The coach shook his head, as if to say it was all beyond him. "It's a dirty shame. If only some of those big bruisers would turn out, we'd have the makings of a team."

"Here, also," Dean reminded him, "we have the makings of men and women that Millville in the future may very well be proud of."

The coach got up angrily. "We won't win a game," he warned. "Even Bagley will beat us."

"That is something," Dean observed philosophically, "that shan't worry me too much."

He sat quietly at his desk and listened to the hollow ringing of the coach's footsteps going down the corridor, dimming out with distance.

And he heard the swish and rumble of a janitorial servomechanism wiping down the stairs. He wondered where Stuffy was. Fiddling around somewhere, no doubt. With all the scrubbers and the washers and wipers and other mechanical contraptions, there wasn't too much to take up Stuffy's time.

Although Stuffy, in his day, had done a lot of work - he'd been on the go from dark to dark, a top-notch janitor.

If it weren't for the labor shortage, Stuffy would have been retired several years ago. But they didn't retire men any more the way they had at one time. With Man going to the stars, there now was

more than the human race could do. If they had been retiring men, Dean thought, he himself would be without a job.

And there was nothing he would have hated more than that. For Millville High was his. He had made it his. For more than fifty years, he'd lived for Millville High, first as a young and eager teacher, then as principal, and now, the last fifteen years or so, as its superintendent.

He had given everything he had. And it had given back. It had been wife and child and family, a beginning and an end. And he was satisfied, he told

himself - satisfied on this Friday of a new school year, with Stuffy puttering somewhere in the building and no football team - or, at least, next to none.

He rose from the desk and stood looking out, the window. A student, late in going home, was walking across the lawn.

Dean thought he knew her, although of late his eyes had not been so good for distance.

He squinted at her harder, almost certain it was Judy Charleson. He'd known her grandfather back in the early days and the girl, he thought, had old

Henry Charleson's gait. He chuckled, thinking back. Old Charleson, he recalled, had been a slippery one in a business deal. There had been that time he had gotten tangled up in the deal for tube-liners to be used by a starship outfit...

He jerked his mind away, tried to wipe out his thinking of the old days. It was a sign of advancing age, the dawn of second childhood.

But however that might be, old Henry Charleson was the only man in Millville who had ever had a thing to do with starships - except Lamont Stiles.

Dean grinned a little, remembering Lamont Stiles and the grimness in him and how he'd amounted to something after many years, to the horrified exasperation of many people who had confidently prophesied he'd come to no good end.

And there was no one now, of course, who knew, or perhaps would ever know, what kind of end Lamont Stiles had finally come to. Or if, in fact, he'd come to an end as yet.

Lamont Stiles, Dean thought, might this very moment be striding down the street of some fantastic city on some distant world. And if that were so, and if

he came home again, what would he bring this time?

The last time he'd come home - the only time he ever had come home - he had brought the Sitters, and they were a funny lot.

Dean turned from the window and walked back to the desk. He sat down and pulled the papers back in front of him. But he couldn't get down to work. That was the way it often was. He'd start thinking of the old days, when there were many friends and many things to do, and get so involved in thinking that he couldn't settle down to work.

He heard the shuffle coming along the hall and shoved the papers to one side. He could tell that it was Stuffy, from the familiar shuffle, coming by to pass the time of day.

Dean wondered at the quiet anticipation he felt within himself. Although it was not so strange, once one considered it. There weren't many left like Stuffy, not many he could talk with.

It was odd with the old, he thought. Age dissolved or loosened the ties of other days. The old died or moved away or were bound by infirmities. Or they drew within themselves, into a world of their own, where they sought a comfort

they could find no longer in the outer world.

Stuffy shuffled to the doorway, stopped and leaned against the jamb. He wiped his drooping yellow mustaches with a greasy hand.

"What's ailing the coach?" he asked. "He went busting out of here like he was turpentine."

"He has no football team," said Dean. "Or he tells me that he hasn't any."

"He cries early every season," Stuffy said. "It's just an act."

"I'm not so sure this time. King and Martin aren't coming out."

Stuffy shuffled a few more paces into the room and dropped into a chair.

"It's them Sitters," Stuffy declared. "They're the cause of it."

Dean sat upright. "What is that you said!"

"I been watching it for years. You can spot the kids that the Sitters sat with or that went to their nursery school. They done something to them kids."

"Fairy tale," said Dean.

"It ain't a fairy tale," Stuffy declared stubbornly. "You know I don't take no stock in superstition. Just because them Sitters are from some other planet... Say, did you ever find out what planet they were from?"

Dean shook his head. "I don't know that Lamont ever said. He might have, but I never heard it."

"They're weird critters," said Stuffy, stroking his mustaches slowly to lend an air of deliberation to his words, "but I never held their strangeness against them. After all, they ain't the only aliens on the Earth. The only ones we

have in Millville, of course, but there are thousands of other critters from the stars scattered round the Earth."

Dean nodded in agreement, scarcely knowing what he was agreeing with. He said nothing, however, for there was no need of that. Once Stuffy got off to a running start, he'd go on and on.

"They seem right honest beings," Stuffy said. "They never played on no one's sympathy. They just settled in, after Lamont went away and left them, and never asked no one to intercede for them. They made an honest living all these years and that is all one could

expect of them."

"And yet," said Dean, "you think they've done something to the kids."

"They changed them. Ain't you noticed it?"

Dean shook his head. "I never thought to notice. I've known these youngsters for years. I knew their folks before them. How do you think they were changed?"

"They grew them up too fast," Stuffy said.

"Talk sense," snapped Dean. "Who

grew what too fast?'

"The Sitters grew the kids too fast. That's what's wrong with them. Here they are in high school and they're already grown up."

From somewhere on one of the floors below came the dismal hooting of a servo-mechanism in distress.

Stuffy sprang to his feet. "That's the mopper-upper. I'll bet you it got caught in a door again."

He swung around and galloped off at a rapid shuffle.

"Stupid machine!" he yelled as he went out the door.

Dean pulled the papers back in front of him again and picked up a pencil. It was getting late and he had to finish.

But he didn't see the papers. He saw many little faces staring up at him from where the papers lay - solemn, big-eyed little faces with an elusive look about them.

And he knew that elusive look - the look of dawning adulthood staring out of childish faces.

They grew them up too fast!

"No," said Dean to himself. "No, it couldn't be!"

And yet there was corroborative evidence: The high averages, the unusual number of scholarships, the disdain for athletics. And, as well, the general attitude. And the lack of juvenile delinquency - for years, Millville had been proud that its juvenile delinquency had been a minor problem. He remembered that several years ago he had been asked to write an article about it for a parent-teacher magazine.

He tried to remember what he had

written in that article and slowly bits of it came back to him - the realization of parents that their children were a part of the family and not mere appendages; the role played by the churches of the town; the emphasis placed on the social sciences by the schools.

"And was I wrong?" he asked himself. "Was it none of these, but something else entirely - someone else entirely?"

He tried to work and couldn't. He was too upset. He could not erase the smiling little faces that were staring up at him.

Finally he shoved the papers in a drawer and got up from the desk. He put on his worn topcoat and sat the battered old black felt hat atop his silver head.

On the ground floor, he found Stuffy herding the last of the servo-mechanisms into their cubby for the night. Stuffy was infuriated.

"It got itself caught in a heating grill," he raged. "If I hadn't gotten there in the nick of time, it would have wrecked the works." He shook his head dolefully. "Them machines are fine when everything goes well. But just let something happen and they panic. It was best the old way, John."

Stuffy slammed the door on the last of the waddling machines and locked it savagely.

"Stuffy, how well did you know Lamont Stiles?" asked Dean.

Stuffy rubbed his mustaches in fine deliberation. "Knew him well. Lamont and me, we were kids together. You were a little older. You were in the crowd ahead."

Dean nodded his head slowly. "Yes, I remember, Stuffy. Odd that you and I stayed on in the old home town. So many of the others left."

"Lamont ran away when he was seventeen. There wasn't much to stay for. His old lady was dead and his old man was drinking himself to death and Lamont had been in a scrape or two. Everyone was agreed Lamont never would amount to nothing."

"It's hard for a boy when a whole town turns against him."

"That's a fact," said the janitor. "There was no one on his side. He told me when he left that someday he'd come back and show them. But I just thought he was talking big. Like a kid will do, you know, to bolster up himself."

"You were wrong," said Dean.

"Never wronger, John."

For Lamont Stiles had come back, more than thirty years after he had run away, back to the old weather-beaten house on Maple Street that had waited empty for him all the lonely years; had come back, an old man when he still was scarcely fifty, big and tough despite the snow-white hair and the skin turned cordovan with the burn of many alien suns; back from far wandering among the distant stars.

But he was a stranger. The town

remembered him; he had forgotten it. Years in alien lands had taken the town and twisted it in his brain, and what he remembered of it was more fantasy than truth - the fantasy spawned by years of thinking back and of yearning and of hate.

"I must go," Dean said. "Carrie will have supper ready. She doesn't like to have it getting cold."

"Good night, John," said the janitor.

The sun was almost down when Dean came out the door and started down the walk. It was later than he'd thought. Carrie would be sore at him and

she would bawl him out.

Dean chuckled to himself. There was no one quite like Carrie.

Not wife, for he'd never had a wife. Not mother or sister, for both of those were dead. But housekeeper, faithful all the years - and a bit of wife and sister, and sometimes even mother.

A man's loyalties are queer, he thought. They blind him and they bind him and they shape the man he is. And, through them, he serves and achieves a kind of greatness, although at times the greatness may be gray and pallid and very, very quiet.

Not like the swaggering and the bitter greatness of Lamont Stiles, who came striding from the stars, bringing with him those three queer creatures who became the Sitters.

Bringing them and installing them in his house on Maple Street and then, in a year or two, going off to the stars again and leaving them in Millville.

Queer, Dean thought, that so provincial a town as this should accept so quietly these exotic beings. Queerer still that the mothers of the town, in time, should entrust their children to the aliens' care.

As Dean turned the corner into Lincoln Street, he met a woman walking with a knee-high boy.

It was Mildred Anderson, he saw - or had been Mildred Anderson, but she was married now and for the life of him he could not recall the name. Funny, he thought, how fast the young ones grew up. Not more than a couple of years ago, it seemed, that Mildred was in school - although he knew he must be wrong on that; it would be more like ten.

He tipped his hat, "Good evening, Mildred. My, how the boy is growing."

"I doe to cool," the child lisped.

His mother interpreted. "He means he goes to school. He is so proud of it."

"Nursery school, of course."

"Yes, Mr. Dean. The Sitters. They are such lovely things. And so good with children. And there's the cost. Or, rather, the lack of it. You just give them a bouquet of flowers or a little bottle of perfume or a pretty picture and they are satisfied. They positively refuse to take any money. I can't understand that. Can you, Mr. Dean?"

"No," said Dean. "I can't."

He'd forgotten what a talker Mildred was. There had been a period in school, he recalled, when she had been appropriately nicknamed Gabby.

"I sometimes think," she said, hurrying on so she'd miss no time for talk, "that we people here on Earth attach too much importance to money. The Sitters don't seem to know what money is, or if they do, they pay no attention to it. As if it were something that was not important. But I understand there are other races like that. It makes one think, doesn't it, Mr. Dean?"

And he remembered now another

infuriating trait of Mildred's - how she inevitably ended any string of sentences with a dangling question.

He didn't try to answer. He knew an answer was not expected of him.

"I must be getting on," he said. "I am late already."

"It was nice to see you, Mr. Dean," said Mildred. "I so often think of my days in school and sometimes it seems like just positively ages and there are other times when it seems no more than just yesterday and..."

"Very nice, indeed," said Dean,

lifting his hat to her, then almost scurrying off.

It was undignified, he grumbled to himself, being routed in broad daylight on a public street by a talkative woman.

As he went up the walk to the house, he heard Carrie bustling angrily about.

"Johnson Dean," she cried the instant he came in the door, "you sit right down and eat. Your food's already cold. And it's my circle night. Don't you even stop to wash."

Dean calmly hung up his hat and

coat.

"For that matter," he said, "I guess I don't need to wash. My kind of job, a man doesn't get too dirty."

She was bustling about in the dining area, pouring his cup of coffee and straightening up the bouquet of mums that served for the centerpiece.

"Since it's my circle night," she said, laying deliberate stress upon the words to shame him for being late, "I won't stay to wash the dishes. You just leave them on the table. I will do them later."

He sat down meekly to eat.

Somehow, for some reason he could not understand, fulfilling a need of which he was not aware, he suddenly felt safe. Safe and secure against a nagging worry and a half-formed fear that had been building up within him without his knowing it.

Carrie came through the living room, settling a determined hat upon her determined head. She had the very air of a woman who was late for her circle meeting through no fault of her own. She halted at the door.

"You got everything you need?" she

asked, her eyes making a swift inventory of the table.

"Everything." He chuckled. "Have a good time at the circle. Pick up a lot of gossip."

It was his favorite quip and he knew it irked her - and it was childish, too. But he could not resist it.

She flounced out of the door and he heard her putting down her heels with unnecessary firmness as she went down the walk.

With her going, a hard silence gripped the house and the deeper dusk

moved in as he sat at the table eating.

Safe, he thought - old Johnson Dean, school man, safe inside the house his grandfather had built - how many years ago? Old-fashioned now, with its split-level floor plan and its high-bricked fireplace, with its double, attached garage and the planter out in front.

Safe and lonely.

And safe against what threat, against what creeping disturbance, so subtle that it failed of recognition?

He shook his head at that.

But lonely - that was different. That could be explained.

The middle-young, he thought, and the very old are lonely. The middle-young because full communication had not been established, and the very old because communication had broken down.

Society was stratified, he told himself, stratified and sectored and partitioned off by many different factors - by age, by occupation, by education, by financial status. And the list did not end there. One could go on and on. It would be interesting, if a man could only find

the time, to chart the stratification of humanity. Finished, if it ever could be finished, that chart would be a weird affair.

He finished the meal and wiped his mouth carefully with the napkin. He pushed back from the table and prowled the darkening living area.

He knew that he should at least pick up the dishes and tidy up the table. By rights, he should even wash them. He had caused Carrie a lot of fuss because he had been late. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. He couldn't settle down. Safe, he still was not at peace.

There was no use in putting this business off any longer, he realized, no use to duck the fear that was nagging at him. He knew what it was he faced, if he only would admit it.

Stuffy was crazy, of course. He could not possibly be right. He'd been thinking too much - imagining, rather.

The kids were no different now than they'd ever been.

Except that the grade averages had improved noticeably in the last ten years or so.

Except that there were, as one

might expect of such grade averages, an increase in scholarships.

Except that the glitter of competitive sports was beginning to wear off.

Except that there was, in Millville, almost no delinquency. And those solemn childish faces, with the big, bright eyes, staring up at him from the papers on his desk.

He paced slowly up and down the carpeting before the big brick fireplace, and the dead, black maw beneath the chimney throat, with the bitter smell of old wood ashes in it, seemed to be a

mouth making sport of him.

He cracked one feebly clenched old fist into a shaky palm.

"It can't be right," he said fiercely to himself.

And yet, on the face of all evidence, it was.

The children in Millville were maturing faster; they were growing up, intellectually, much faster than they should.

And perhaps even more than that.

Growing in a new dimension, he wondered. Receding farther from the savage that still lingered in humanity. For sports, organized sports on whatever basis, still remained a refined product of the cave - some antagonism that Man had carried forward under many different guises and which broke forth at least partially in the open in the field of sports.

If he could only talk with the students, he thought, if he could somehow find out what they thought, then there might be a chance of running this thing to the ground.

But that was impossible. The barriers were too high and intricate, the lines of communication much too cluttered.

For he was old and they were young; he was authority and they were the regimented. Once again the stratifications would keep them apart. There was no way in which he could approach them.

It was all right to say there was something happening, ridiculous as it might sound. But the important matter, if such should be the case, was to discover the cause and to plot the trend.

And Stuffy must be wrong. For it was fantastic to suggest the Sitters were engineering it.

Peculiarly enough, the Sitters, alien as they were, had established themselves as solid citizens of Millville. They would, he was sure, do nothing to jeopardize the position they had won - the position of being accepted and generally let alone and little talked

about.

They would do nothing to attract attention to themselves. Through the years, too many other aliens had gotten into trouble through attempts to meddle and by exhibitionism.

Although, come to think of it, what might have seemed to be exhibitionism, from the human viewpoint, possibly had been no more than normal alien conduct.

It had been the good fortune of the Sitters that their natural mother-disposition had enabled them to fit into the human pattern. They had proven ideal baby-sitters and in this they had an

economic value and were the more readily accepted.

For many years, they had taken care of the Millville babies and they were everything that a sitter ought to be. And now they ran a nursery school, although, he remembered, there had been some ruckus over that, since they quite understandably did not hold formal education credits.

He turned on a light and went to the shelves to find something he could read. But there was nothing there that held any interest for him. He ran a finger along the backs of the rows of volumes and his eyes flicked down the titles, but he found

absolutely nothing.

He left the shelves and paced over to the large front window and stared out at the street. The street lamps had not come on yet, but there were lights here and there in windows and occasionally a bubble-shaped car moved silently down the pavement, the fanning headlights catching a scurrying bunch of leaves or a crouching cat.

It was one of the older streets in town; at one time, he had known everyone who had lived upon it. He could call out without hesitation the names of the one-time owners - Wilson, Becket, Johnson, Random - but none of

them lived here any longer. The names had changed and the faces were faces that he did not know; the stratification had shifted and he knew almost no one on the street.

The middle-young and the very old, he thought, they are the lonely ones.

He went back to the chair beside the lamp he'd lighted and sat down rather stiffly in it. He fidgeted, drumming his fingers on the arms. He wanted to get up, but there was nothing to get up for, unless it was to wash the dishes, and he didn't want to wash them.

He could take a walk, he told

himself. That might be a good idea. There was a lot of comfort in an evening walk.

He got his coat and hat and went out the door and down the walk and turned west at the gate.

He was more than halfway there, skirting the business section, before he admitted to himself that he was heading for the Stiles house and the Sitters - that he had, in fact, never intended doing otherwise.

What he might do there, what he might learn there, he had no idea. There was no actual purpose in his mind. It

was almost as if he were on an unknown mission, as if he were being pushed by some unseen force into a situation of no-choice.

He came to the Stiles house and stood on the walk outside, looking at it.

It was an old house, surrounded by shade trees that had been planted many years before, and the front yard was a wilderness of shrubs. Every once in a while, someone would come and cut the lawn and maybe trim the hedges and fix up the flower beds to pay the Sitters for all the baby-

minding they had done, since the

Sitters took no money.

And that was a funny thing, Dean thought, their not taking any money - just as if they didn't need it, as if they might not know what to do with it even if they had any.

Perhaps they didn't need it, for they bought no food and still they kept on living and never had been sick enough for anyone to know about it. There must have been times when they were cold, although no one ever mentioned it, but they bought no fuel, and Lamont Stiles had left a fund to pay the taxes - so maybe it was true that they had no need of money.

There had been a time, Dean recalled, when there had been a lot of speculation in the town about their not eating - or at least not buying any food. But after a time the speculation dwindled down and all anyone would say was that you could never figure a lot of things about alien people and there was no use in trying.

And that was right, of course.

The Stiles house, Dean realized with something of a start, was even older than his house. It was a rambler and they had been popular many years before the split-level had come in.

Heavy drapes were drawn at the windows, but there was light behind the drapes and he knew the Sitters were at home. They were usually home, of course. Except on babysitting jobs, they never left the house, and in recent years they had gone out but little, for people had gotten in the habit of dropping off the kids at the Sitters' house. The kids never made a fuss, not even the tiny ones. They all liked going to the Sitters.

He went up the walk and climbed the stoop to ring the bell.

He waited and heard movement in the house.

The door came open and one of the Sitters stood there, with the light behind it, and he had forgotten - it had been many years since he'd seen one of the Sitters.

Shortly after Lamont Stiles had come home, Dean remembered, he had met all three of them, and in the years between, he had seen one of them from time to time a distance on the street. But the memory and the wonder had faded from his mind and now it struck him once again with all the olden force - the faery grace, the sense of suddenly standing face to face with a gentle flower.

The face, if it might be called a face, was sweet - too sweet, so sweet that it had no character and hardly an individuality. A baffling skin arrangement, like the petals of a flower, rose above the face, and the body of the Sitter was slender beyond all belief and yet so full of grace and poise that one forgot the slimness. And about the entire creature hung an air of such sweet simplicity and such a scent of innocence that it blotted out all else.

No wonder, Dean found himself thinking, that the children liked them so.

"Mr. Dean," the Sitter said, "won't

you please come in? We are very honored."

"Thank you," he said, taking off his hat.

He stepped inside and heard the closing of the door and then the Sitter was at his side again.

"This chair right here," it said. "We reserve this one for our special visitors."

And it was all very sweet and friendly, and yet there was an alien, frightening touch.

Somewhere there were children laughing in the house. He twisted his head around to find where the laughter came from.

"They're in the nursery," said the Sitter. "I will close the door."

Dean sank into the chair and perched his battered old soft hat on one bony knee, fondling it with his bony fingers.

The Sitter came back and sat down on the floor in front of him, sat down with a single, effortless motion and he had the distinct impression of the swirl of flaring skirts, although the Sitter wore

none.

"Now," the Sitter said by way of announcing that Dean commanded its entire attention.

But he did not speak, for the laughter still was in the room. Even with the door to the nursery shut, there still was childish laughter. It came from everywhere all about the room and it was an utterly happy laughter, the gay and abandoned, the unthinking, the spontaneous laughter of children hard at play.

Nor was that all.

Childish sparkle glittered in the air and there was the long forgotten sense of timelessness - of the day that never ended, that was never meant to end. A breeze was blowing out of some never-never land and it carried with it the scent of brook water bearing on its tide flotillas of fallen autumn leaves, and there was, as well, the hint of clover and of marigolds, and the smell of fuzzy, new-washed blankets such as are used in cribs.

"Mr. Dean," the Sitter said.

He roused himself guiltily.

"I'm sorry," he told the Sitter. "I

was listening to the children."

"But the door is closed."

"The children in this room," he said.

"There are no children in this room."

"Quite right," he said. "Quite right."

But there were. He could hear their laughter and the patter of their feet.

There were children, or at least the sense of them, and there was also the sense of many flowers, long since died

and shriveled in actuality, but with the feel of them still caged inside the room. And the sense of beauty - the beauty of many different things, of flowers and gee-gaw jewelry and little painted pictures and of gaily colored scarves, of all the things that through the years had been given to the Sitters in lieu of money.

"This room," he said haltingly, half-confused. "It is such a pleasant room. I'd just like to sit here."

He felt himself sink into the room, into the youngness and the gayety. If he let go, he thought, if he only could let go, he might join the running and be the same

as they.

"Mr. Dean," the Sitter said, "you are very sensitive."

"I am very old," said Dean. "Maybe that's the reason."

The room was both ancient and antique. It was a cry across almost two centuries, with its small brick fireplace paneled in white wood, its arched doorways and the windows that stretched from floor to ceiling, covered by heavy drapes of black and green, etched with golden thread. And it had a solid comfort and a deep security that the present architecture of aluminum and

glass never could achieve. It was dusty and moldy and cluttered and perhaps unsanitary, but it had the feel of home.

"I am old-fashioned," said Dean, "and, I suspect, very close to senile, and I am afraid that the time has come again to believe in fairy tales and magic."

"It is not magic," the Sitter replied. "It is the way we live, the only way we can live. You will agree that even Sitters must somehow stay alive."

"Yes, I agree," said Dean.

He lifted the battered hat from off his knee and rose slowly to his feet.

The laughter seemed to be fainter now and the patter not so loud. But the sense of youth - of youngness, of vitality and of happiness - still lay within the room. It lent a sheen to the ancient shabbiness and it made his heart begin to ache with a sudden gladness.

The Sitter still sat upon the floor. "There was something you wanted, Mr. Dean?"

Dean fumbled with his hat. "Not any more. I think I've found my answer."

And even as he said it, he knew it was unbelievable, that once he stood

outside the door, he'd know with certainty there could be no truth in what he'd found.

The Sitter rose. "You will come again? We would love to have you."

"Perhaps," said Dean, and turned toward the door.

Suddenly there was a top spinning on the floor, a golden top with flashing jewels set in it that caught the light and scattered it in a million flashing colors, and as it spun, it played a whistling tune - the kind of music that got inside and melted down one's soul.

Dean felt himself let go - as, sitting in the chair, he had thought it was impossible for him to do. And the laughter came again and the world outside withdrew and the room suddenly was filled with the marvelous light of Christmas.

He took a quick step forward and he dropped his hat. He didn't know his name, nor where he was, nor how he might have come there, and he didn't care. He felt a gurgling happiness welling up in him and he stooped to reach out for the top.

He missed it by an inch or two and he shuffled forward, stooping, reaching,

and his toe caught in a hole in the ancient carpeting and he crashed down on his knees.

The top was gone and the Christmas light snapped out and the world rushed in upon him. The gurgling happiness had gone and he was an old man in a beauty-haunted house, struggling from his knees to face an alien creature.

"I am sorry," said the Sitter. "You almost had it. Perhaps some other time."

He shook his head. "No! Not another time!"

The Sitter answered kindly, "It's the best we have to offer.'

Dean fumbled his hat back on his head and turned shakily to the door. The Sitter opened it and he staggered out.

"Come again," the Sitter said, most sweetly. "Any time you wish."

On the street outside, Dean stopped and leaned against a tree. He took off his hat and mopped his brow.

Now, where he had felt only shock before, the horror began creeping in - the horror of a kind of life that did not eat as human beings ate, but in another way,

who sucked their nourishment from beauty and from youth, who drained a bouquet dry and who nibbled from the happy hours of laughing child, and even munched the laughter.

It was no wonder that the children of this village matured beyond their years. For they had their childishness stripped from them by a hungry form of life that looked on them as fodder. There might be, he thought, only so much of happy running and of childish laughter dealt out to an human. And while some might not use their quota, there still might be a limit on it, and once one had used it all, then it was gone and a person became an adult without too much of

wonder or of laughter left within him.

The Sitters took no money. There was no reason that they should, for they had no need of it. Their house was filled with all the provender they had stowed away for years.

And in all those years, he was the first to know, the first to sense the nature of those aliens brought home by Lamont Stiles. It was a sobering thought - that he should be the first to find it out. He had said that he was old and that might be the reason. But that had been no more than words rising to his lips almost automatically as a part of his professional self-pity. Yet there might be

something in it even so.

Could it be possible that, for the old, there might be certain compensations for the loss of other faculties? As the body slowed and the mind began to dim, might some magical ability, a sort of psychic bloodhound sense, rise out of the embers of a life that was nearly spent?

He was always potholing around about how old he was, he told himself, as if the mere fact of getting old might be a virtue. He was forgetful of the present and his preoccupation with the past was growing to the danger point. He was close to second childhood and he was

the one who knew it - and might that be the answer? Might that be why he'd seen the top and known the Christmas lights?

He wondered what might have happened if he could have grabbed the top.

He put his hat back on and stepped out from the tree and went slowly up the walk, heading back for home.

What could he do about it, he wondered, now that he'd unearthed the Sitters' secret? He could run and tattle, surely, but there'd be no one to believe him. They would listen to him and they would be polite so as not to hurt his

feelings, yet there was no one in the village but would take it for an old man's imaginings, and there'd be nothing that he could do about it. For beyond his own sure knowledge, he had not a shred of proof.

He might call attention to the maturity of the young people, as Stuffy had called his attention to it this very afternoon. But even there he would find no proof, for in the final reckoning, all the villagers would retreat to rationalization. Parental pride, if nothing else, might require they should. Not a single one of them would find much cause for wonder in the fact that a boy or girl of theirs was singularly well-

mannered and above the average in intelligence.

One might say that the parents should have noticed, that they should have known that an entire village full of children could not possibly be so well-behaved or so levelheaded or so anything else as were these Millville children. And yet they had not noticed. It had crept along so slowly, had insinuated itself so smoothly, that the change was not apparent.

For that matter, he himself had not noticed it, he who most of his life had been intimately associated with these very children in which he found so much

wonder now. And if he had not noticed, then why expect that someone else should? It had remained for a gossipy old busybody like the janitor to put a finger on it.

His throat was dry and his belly weak and sick and what he needed most of all, Dean told himself, was a cup of coffee.

He turned off on a street that would take him to the downtown section and he plodded along with his head bent against the dark.

What would be the end of it, he asked himself. What would be the gain

for this lost childhood? For this pilfering of children? What the value that growing boys and girls should cease to play a little sooner, that they take up the attitude of adults before the chosen time?

There was some gain already seen. The children of Millville were obedient and polite; they were constructive in their play; they'd ceased to be little savages or snobs.

The trouble was, now that one thought of it, they'd almost ceased being children, too.

And in the days to come? Would Millville supply Earth with great

statesmen, with canny diplomats, with topnotch educators and able scientists? Perhaps, but that was not the point at all. The question of robbing childhood of its heritage to achieve these qualities was the basic question.

Dean came into the business district, not quite three blocks long and walked slowly down the street, heading for the only drugstore in the town.

There were only a few people in the store and he walked over to the lunch counter and sat down. He perched on the stool forlornly, with the battered hat pulled down above his eyes, and he gripped the counter's edge to keep his

hands from shaking.

"Coffee," he said to the girl who came to take his order, and she brought it to him.

He sipped at it, for it was too hot to drink. He was sorry he had come.

He felt all alone and strange, with all the bright light and the chrome, as if he were something that had shuffled from the past into a place reserved for the present.

He almost never came downtown any more and that must be the reason for the way he felt. Especially he almost

never came down in the evening,
although there had been a time he had.

He smiled, remembering how the
old crowd used to get together and talk
around in circles, about inconsequential
things, their talk not getting anywhere
and never meaning to.

But that was all ended now. The
crowd had disappeared.

Some of them were dead and some
had moved away and the few of them
still left seldom ventured out.

He sat there, thinking, knowing he
was maudlin and not caring if he was,

too tired and shaken to flinch away from it.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he swung around, surprised.

Young Bob Martin stood there, and although he smiled, he still had the look of someone who had done a thing that he was unsure of.

"Sir, there are some of us down here at a table," said young Martin, gulping a little at his own boldness.

Dean nodded. "That's very nice," he mumbled.

"We wondered if maybe - that is, Mr. Dean, we'd be pleased if you would care to join us."

"Well, that is very nice of you, indeed."

"We didn't mean, sir - that is -"

"Why, certainly," said Dean. "I'd be very glad to."

"Here, sir, let me take your coffee. I won't spill a drop of it."

"I'll trust you, Bob," said Dean, getting to his feet. "You almost never fumble."

"I can explain that, Mr. Dean. It's not that I don't want to play. It's just that..."

Dean tapped him on the shoulder lightly. "I understand. There is no need to explain."

He paused a second, trying to decide if it were wise to say what was in his mind.

He decided to: "If you don't tell the coach, I might even say I agree with you. There comes a time in life when football begins to seem a little silly."

Martin grinned, relieved. "You've hit it on the head. Exactly."

He led the way to the table.

There were four of them - Ronald King, George Woods, Judy Charleson and Donna Thompson. All good kids, thought Dean, every one of them. He saw they had been dawdling away at sodas, making them stretch out as long as possible.

They all looked up at him and smiled, and George Woods pulled back a chair in invitation. Dean sat down carefully and placed his hat on the floor beside him. Bob set down the coffee.

"It was good of you to think of me," said Dean and wondered why he found himself embarrassed. After all, these were his kids - the kids he saw every day in school, the ones he pushed and coddled into an education, the kids he'd never had himself.

"You're just the man we need," said Ronald King. "We've been talking about Lamont Stiles. He is the only Millville man who ever went to space and..."

"You must have known him, Mr. Dean," said Judy.

"Yes," Dean said slowly, "I did

know him, but not as well as Stuffy did. Stuffy and he were kids together. I was a little older."

"What kind of man is he?" asked Donna.

Dean chuckled. "Lamont Stiles? He was the town's delinquent. He was poor in school and he had no home life and he just mostly ran wild. If there was trouble, you could bet your life that Lamont had had a hand in it. Everyone said that Lamont never would amount to anything and when it had been said often enough and long enough, Lamont must have taken it to heart..."

He talked on and on, and they asked him questions, and Ronald King went to the counter and came back with another cup of coffee for him.

The talk switched from Stiles to football. King and Martin told him what they had told the coach. Then the talk went on to problems in student government and from that to the new theories in ionic drive, announced just recently.

Dean did not do all the talking; he did a lot of listening, too, and he asked questions of his own and time flowed on unnoticed.

Suddenly the lights blinked and Dean looked up, startled.

Judy laughed at him. "That means the place is closing. It's the signal that we have to leave."

"I see," said Dean. "Do you folks do this often - staying until closing time, I mean?"

"Not often," Bob Martin told him. "On weekdays, there is too much studying."

"I remember many years ago -" Dean began, then left the words hanging in the air.

Yes, indeed, he thought, many years ago. And again tonight!

He looked at them, the five faces around the table. Courtesy, he thought, and kindness and respect. But something more than that.

Talking with them, he had forgotten he was old. They had accepted him as another human being, not as an aged human being, not as a symbol of authority. They had moved over for him and made him one of them and themselves one of him; they had broken down the barrier not only of pupil and teacher, but of age and youth as well.

"I have my car," Bob Martin said.
"Can I drive you home?"

Dean picked his hat from off the floor and rose slowly to his feet.

"No, thanks," he said. "I think I'd like to walk. I have an idea or two I'd like to mull a bit. Walking helps one think."

"Come again," said Judy Charleson.
"Some other Friday night, perhaps."

"Why, thanks," said Dean, "I do believe I will."

Great kids, he told himself with a certain pride. Full of a kindness and a courtesy beyond even normal adult courtesy and kindness. Not brash, not condescending, not like kids at all, and yet with the shine of youthfulness and the idealism and ambition that walked hand in hand with youth.

Premature adults, lacking cynicism... And that was an important thing, the lack of cynicism.

Surely there could be nothing wrong in a humanity like that. Perhaps this was the very coin in which the Sitters paid for the childhood they had stolen... if they had stolen it. For they

might not have stolen it; they might merely have captured it and stored it.

And in such a case, then they had given free this new maturity and this new equality. And they had taken something which would have been lost in any event - something for which the human race had no use at all, but which was the stuff of life for the Sitter people.

They had taken youth and beauty and they had stored it in the house; they had preserved something that a human could not preserve except in memory. They had caught a fleeting thing and held it and it was there - the harvest of many years; the house was bulging with it.

Lamont Stiles, he wondered, talking in his mind to that man so long ago, so far away, how much did you know? What purpose was in your mind?

Perhaps a rebuke to the smugness of the town that had driven him to greatness. Perhaps a hope, maybe a certainty, that no one in Millville could ever say again, as they had said of Lamont Stiles, that this or that boy or girl would amount to nothing.

That much, perhaps, but surely not any more than that.

Donna had put her hand upon his

arm, was tugging at his sleeve.

"Come on, Mr. Dean," she urged.
"You can't stay standing here."

They walked with him to the door and said good night and he went up the street at a little faster gait, it seemed to him, than he ordinarily traveled.

But that, he told himself quite seriously, was because now he was just slightly younger than he had been a couple of hours before.

Dean went on even faster and he didn't hobble and he wasn't tired at all, but he wouldn't admit it to himself - for

it was a dream, a hope, a seeking after that one never must admit. Until one said it aloud, there was no commitment to the hope, but once the word was spoken, then bitter disappointment lurked behind a tree.

He was walking in the wrong direction. He should be heading back for home. It was getting late and he should be in bed.

And he mustn't speak the word. He must not breathe the thought.

He went up the walk, past the shrub-choked lawn, and he saw that the light still filtered through the drawn

drapes.

He stopped on the stoop and the thought flashed through his mind: There are Stuffy and myself and old Abe Hawkins. There are a lot of us...

The door came open and the Sitter stood there, poised and beautiful and not the least surprised. It was, he thought, almost as if it had been expecting him.

And the other two of them, he saw, were sitting by the fireplace.

"Won't you please come in?" the Sitter said. "We are so glad you decided to come back. The children all are gone.

We can have a cozy chat."

He came in and sat down in the chair again and perched the hat carefully on one knee.

Once again the children were running in the room and there was the sense of timelessness and the sound of laughter.

He sat and nodded, thinking, while the Sitters waited.

It was hard, he thought. Hard to make the words come right.

He felt again as he had felt many

years ago, when the teacher had called upon him to recite in the second grade.

They were waiting, but they were patient; they would give him time.

He had to say it right. He must make them understand.

He couldn't blurt it out. It must be made to sound natural, and logical as well.

And how, he asked himself, could he make it logical?

There was nothing logical at all in men as old as he and Stuffy needing

baby-sitters.

Title : Galactic Chest
Author : Clifford D. Simak
Original copyright year: 1956
Genre : science fiction
Comments : to my knowledge, this

is the only available e-text of this book
Source : scanned and OCR-read
from a paperback edition with Xerox
TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS
Word 2000.

Date of e-text : February 13, 2000

Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights
reversed.

Galactic Chest

Clifford D. Simak

I had just finished writing the daily Community Chest story, and each day I wrote that story I was sore about it; there were plenty of punks in the office who could have ground out that kind of copy. Even the copy boys could have written it and no one would have known the difference; no one ever read it - except maybe some of the drive chairmen, and I'm not even sure about them reading it.

I had protested to Barnacle Bill about my handling the Community Chest for another year. I had protested loud. I had said: "Now, you know, Barnacle, I

been writing that thing for three or four years. I write it with my eyes shut. You ought to get some new blood into it. Give one of the cubs a chance; they can breathe some life into it. Me, I'm all written out on it."

But it didn't do a bit of good. The Barnacle had me down on the assignment book for the Community Chest, and he never changed a thing once he put it in the book.

I wish I knew the real reason for that name of his. I've heard a lot of stories about how it was hung on him, but I don't think there's any truth in them. I think he got it simply from the way he

can hang on to a bar.

I had just finished writing the Community Chest story and was sitting there, killing time and hating myself, when along came Jo Ann. Jo Ann was the sob sister on the paper; she got some lousy yarns to write, and that's a somber fact I guess it was because I am of a sympathetic nature, and took pity on her, and let her cry upon my shoulder that we got to know each other so well. By now, of course, we figure we're in love; off and on we talk about getting married, as soon as I snag that foreign correspondent job I've been angling for.

"Hi, kid," I said.

And she says, "Do you know, Mark, what the Barnacle has me down for today?"

"He's finally ferreted out a one-armed paperhanger," I guessed, "and he wants you to do a feature..."

"It's worse than that," she moans. "It's an old lady who is celebrating her one hundredth birthday."

"Maybe," I said, "she will give you a piece of her birthday cake."

"I don't see how even you can joke about a thing like this," Jo Ann told me.

"It's positively ghastly."

Just then the Barnacle let out a bellow for me, so I picked up the Community Chest story and went over to the city desk.

Barnacle Bill is up to his elbows in copy; the phone is ringing and he's ignoring it, and for this early in the morning he has worked himself into more than a customary lather. "You remember old Mrs. Clayborne?"

"Sure, she's dead. I wrote the obit on her ten days or so ago."

"Well, I want you to go over to the house and snoop around a bit."

"What for?" I asked. "She hasn't come back, has she?"

"No, but there's some funny business over there. I got a tip that someone might have hurried her a little."

"This time," I told him, "you've outdone yourself. You've been watching too many television thrillers."

"I got it on good authority," he said and turned back to his work.

So I went and got my hat and told myself it was no skin off my nose how I spent the day; I'd get paid just the same!

But I was getting a little fed up with some of the wild-goose chases to which the Barnacle was assigning not only me, but the rest of the staff as well.

Sometimes they paid off; usually, they didn't. And when they didn't, Barnacle had the nasty habit of making it appear that the man he had sent out, not he himself, had dreamed up the chase. His "good authority" probably was no more than some casual chatter of someone next to him at the latest bar he'd honored with his cash.

Old Mrs. Clayborne had been one of the last of the faded gentility which at one time had graced Douglas Avenue. The family had petered out, and she was the last of them; she had died in a big and lonely house with only a few servants, and a nurse in attendance on her, and no kin close enough to wait out her final hours in person.

It was unlikely, I told myself, that anyone could have profited by giving her an overdose of drugs, or otherwise hurrying her death. And even if it was true, there'd be little chance that it could be proved; and that was the kind of story

you didn't run unless you had it down in black and white.

I went to the house on Douglas Avenue. It was a quiet and lovely place, standing in its fenced-in yard among the autumn-colored trees.

There was an old gardener raking leaves, and he didn't notice me when I went up the walk. He was an old man, pottering away and more than likely mumbling to himself, and I found out later that he was a little deaf.

I went up the steps, rang the bell and stood waiting, feeling cold at heart and wondering what I'd say once I got

inside. I couldn't say what I had in mind; somehow or other I'd have to go about it by devious indirection.

A maid came to the door.

"Good morning, ma'am," I said, "I am from the Tribune. May I come in and talk?"

She didn't even answer; she looked at me for a moment and then slammed the door. I told myself I might have known that was the way it would be.

I turned around, went down the steps, and cut across the grounds to where the gardener was working. He

didn't notice me until I was almost upon him; when he did see me, his face sort of lit up. He dropped the rake, and sat down on the wheelbarrow. I suppose I was as good an excuse as any for him to take a breather.

"Hello," I said to him, "Nice day," he said to me. "Indeed it is."

"You'll have to speak up louder," he told me; "I can't hear a thing you say."

"Too bad about Mrs. Clayborne," I told him.

"Yes, yes," he said. "You live around here? I don't recall your face."

I nodded; it wasn't much of a lie, just twenty miles or so.

"She was a nice old lady. Worked for her almost fifty years. It's a blessing she is gone."

"I suppose it is."

"She was dying hard," he said.

He sat nodding in the autumn sun and you could almost hear his mind go traveling back across those fifty years. I am certain that, momentarily, he'd forgotten I was there.

"Nurse tells a funny story," he said finally, speaking to himself more than he spoke to me. "It might be just imagining; nurse was tired, you know."

"I heard about it," I encouraged him.

"Nurse left her just a minute and she swears there was something in the room when she came back again. Says it went out the window, just as she came in. Too dark to see it good, she says. I told her she was imagining. Funny things happen, though; things we don't know about."

"That was her room," I said,

pointing at the house. "I remember, years ago..."

He chuckled at having caught me in the wrong. "You're mistaken, sonny. It was the corner one; that one over there."

He rose from the barrow slowly and took up the rake again.

"It was good to talk with you," I said. "These are pretty flowers you have. Mind if I walk around and have a look at them?"

"Might as well. Frost will get them in a week or so."

So I walked around the grounds, hating myself for what I had to do, and looking at the flowers, working my way closer to the corner of the house he had pointed out to me.

There was a bed of petunias underneath the window and they were sorry-looking things. I squatted down and pretended I was admiring them, although all the time I was looking for some evidence that someone might have jumped out the window.

I didn't expect to find it, but I did.

There, in a little piece of soft earth where the petunias had petered out, was

a footprint-well, not a footprint, either, maybe, but anyhow a print. It looked something like a duck track-except that the duck that made it would have had to be as big as a good-sized dog.

I squatted on the walk, staring at it and I could feel spiders on my spine. Finally I got up and walked away, forcing myself to saunter when my body screamed to run.

Outside the gate I did run.

I got to a phone as fast as I could, at a corner drugstore, and sat in the booth a while to get my breathing back to normal before I put in a call to the city desk.

The Barnacle bellowed at me.

"What you got?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe nothing. Who was Mrs. Clayborne's doctor?"

He told me. I asked him if he knew who her nurse had been, and he asked how the hell should he know, so I hung up.

I went to see the doctor and he threw me out.

I spent the rest of the day tracking down the nurse; when I finally found her

she threw me out too. So there was a full day's work gone entirely down the drain.

It was late in the afternoon when I got back to the office. Barnacle Bill pounced on me at once. "What did you get?"

"Nothing," I told him. There was no use telling him about that track underneath the window. By that time, I was beginning to doubt I'd ever seen it, it seemed so unbelievable.

"How big do ducks get?" I asked him. He growled at me and went back to his work.

I looked at the next day's page in the assignment book. He had me down for the Community Chest, and: _See Dr. Thomas at Univ.-magnetism._

"What's this?" I asked. "This magnetism business?"

"Guy's been working on it for years," said the Barnacle. "I got it on good authority he's set to pop with something."

There was that "good authority" again. And just about as hazy as the most of his hot tips.

And anyhow, I don't like to

interview scientists. More often than not, they're a crochety set and are apt to look down their noses at newspapermen. Ten to one the newspaperman is earning more than they are - and in his own way, more than likely, doing just as good a job and with less fumbling.

I saw that Jo Ann was getting ready to go home, so I walked over to her and asked her how it went.

"I got a funny feeling in my gizzard, Mark," she told me. "Buy me a drink and I'll tell you all about it."

So we went down to the corner bar and took a booth way in the back.

Joe came over and he was grumbling about business, which was unusual for him. "If it weren't for you folks over at the paper," he said, "I'd close up and go home. That must be what all my customers are doing; they sure ain't coming here. Can you think of anything more disgusting than going straight home from your job?"

We told him that we couldn't, and to show that he appreciated our attitude he wiped off the table - a thing he almost never did.

He brought the drinks and Jo Ann told me about the old lady and her hundredth birthday. "It was horrible. There she sat in her rocking chair in that bare living room, rocking back and forth, gently, delicately, the way old ladies rock. And she was glad to see me, and she smiled so nice and she introduced me all around."

"Well, that was fine," I said. "Were there a lot of people there?"

"Not a soul."

I choked on my drink. "But you said she introduced..."

"She did. To empty chairs."

"Good Lord!"

"They all were dead," she said.

"Now, let's get this straight..."

"She said, 'Miss Evans, I want you to meet my old friend, Mrs. Smith. She lives just down the street. I recall the day she moved into the neighborhood, back in '33. Those were hard times, I tell you.' Chattering on, you know, like most old ladies do. And me, standing there and staring at an empty chair, wondering what to do. And, Mark, I don't know if I did right or not, but I said, 'Hello, Mrs.

Smith. I am glad to know you.' And do you know what happened then?"

"No," I said. "How could I?"

"The 'old lady said, just as casually as could be - just conversationally, as if it were the most natural thing in all the world-'You know, Miss Evans, Mrs. Smith died three years ago. Don't you think it's nice she dropped in to see me?'"

"She was pulling your leg," I said. "Some of these old ones sometimes get pretty sly."

"I don't think she was. She

introduced me all around; there were six or seven of them, and all of them were dead."

"She was happy, thinking they were there. What difference does it make?"

"It was horrible," said Jo Ann.

So we had another drink to chase away the horror.

Joe was still down in the mouth. "Did you ever see the like of it? You could shoot off a cannon in this joint and not touch a single soul. By this time, usually, they'd be lined up against the bar, and it'd be a dull evening if

someone hadn't taken a poke at someone else - although you understand I run a decent place."

"Sure you do," I said. "Sit down and have a drink with us."

"It ain't right that I should," said Joe. "A bartender should never take a drink when he's conducting business. But I feel so low that if you don't mind, I'll take you up on it."

He went back to the bar and got a bottle and a glass and we had quite a few.

The corner, he said, had always

been a good spot - steady business all the time, with a rush at noon and a good crowd in the evening. But business had started dropping off six weeks before, and now was down to nothing.

"It's the same all over town," he said, "some places worse than others. This place is one of the worst; I just don't know what's gotten into people."

We said we didn't, either. I fished out some money and left it for the drinks, and we made our escape.

Outside I asked Jo Ann to have dinner with me, but she said it was the night her bridge club met, so I drove her

home and went on to my place.

I take a lot of ribbing at the office for living so far out of town, but I like it. I got the cottage cheap, and it's better than living in a couple of cooped-up rooms in a third-rate resident hotel-which would be the best I could afford if I stayed in town.

After I'd fixed up a steak and some fried potatoes for supper, I went down to the dock and rowed out into the lake a ways. I sat there for a while, watching the lighted windows winking all around the shore and listening to the sounds you never hear in daytime - the muskrat swimming and the soft chuckling of the

ducks and the occasional slap of a jumping fish.

It was a bit chilly and after a little while I rowed back in again, thinking there was a lot to do before winter came. The boat should be caulked and painted; the cottage itself could take a coat of paint, if I could get around to it. There were a couple of storm windows that needed glass replaced, and by rights I should putty all of them. The chimney needed some bricks to replace the ones that had blown off in a windstorm earlier in the year, and the door should have new weatherstripping.

I sat around and read a while and

then I went to bed. Just before I went to sleep I thought some about the two old ladies - one of them happy and the other dead.

The next morning I got the Community Chest story out of the way, first thing; then I got an encyclopedia from the library and did some reading on magnetism.

I figured that I should know something about it, before I saw this whiz-bang at the university.

But I needn't have worried so much; this Dr. Thomas turned out to be a regular Joe. We sat around and had quite

a talk. He told me about magnetism, and when he found out I lived at the lake he talked about fishing; then we found we knew some of the same people, and it was all right.

Except he didn't have a story.

"There may be one in another year or so," he told me. "When there is, I'll let you in on it."

I'd heard that one before, of course, so I tried to pin him down.

"It's a promise," he said; "you get it first, ahead of anyone?"

I let it go at that. You couldn't ask the man to sign a contract on it.

I was watching for a chance to get away, but I could see he still had more to say. So I stayed on; it's refreshing to find someone who wants to talk to you.

"I think there'll be a story," he said, looking worried, as if he were afraid there mightn't be. "I've worked on it for years. Magnetism is still one of the phenomena we don't know too much about. Once we knew nothing about electricity, and even now we do not entirely understand it; but we found out about it, and when we knew enough about it, we put it to work, We could do

the same with magnetism, perhaps-if we only could determine the first fundamentals of it."

He stopped and looked straight at me. "When you were a kid, did you believe in brownies?"

That one threw me and he must have seen it did.

"You remember - the little helpful people. If they liked you, they did all sorts of things for you; and all they expected of you was that you'd leave out a bowl of milk for them."

I told him I'd read the stories, and I

supposed that at one time I must have believed in them - although right at the moment I couldn't swear I had.

"If I didn't know better," he said, "I'd think I had brownies in this lab. Someone - or something - shuffled my notes for me. I'd left them on the desktop held down with a paperweight; the next morning they were spread all over, and part of them dumped onto the floor."

"A cleaning woman," I suggested.

He smiled at my suggestion. "I'm the cleaning woman here."

I thought he had finished and I

wondered why all this talk of notes and brownies. I was reaching for my hat when he told me the rest of it.

"There were two sheets of the notes still underneath the paperweight," he said. "One of them had been folded carefully. I was about to pick them up, and put them with the other sheets so I could sort them later, when I happened to read what was on those sheets beneath the paperweight."

He drew a long breath. "They were two sections of my notes that, if left to myself, I probably never would have tied together. Sometimes we have strange blind spots; sometimes we look

so closely at a thing that we are blinded to it. And there it was - two sheets laid there by accident. Two sheets, one of them folded to tie up with the other, to show me a possibility I'd never have thought of otherwise. I've been working on that possibility ever since; I have hopes it may work out."

"When it does..." I said.

"It is yours," he told me.

I got my hat and left.

And I thought idly of brownies all the way back to the office.

I had just got back to the office, and settled down for an hour or two of loafing, when old J. H. - our publisher - made one of his irregular pilgrimages of good will out into the newsroom. J. H. is a pompous windbag, without a sincere bone in his body; he knows we know this and we know he knows-but he, and all the rest of us, carry out the comedy of good fellowship to its bitter end.

He stopped beside my desk, clapped me on the shoulder, and said in a voice that boomed throughout the newsroom: "That's a tremendous job

you're doing on the Community Chest, my boy."

Feeling a little sick and silly, I got to my feet and said, "Thank you, J. H.; it's nice of you to say so."

Which was what was expected of me. It was almost ritual.

He grabbed me by the hand, put the other hand on my shoulder, shook my hand vigorously and squeezed my shoulder hard. And I'll be damned if there weren't tears in his eyes as he told me, "You just stick around, Mark, and keep up the work. You won't regret it for a minute. We may not always show it,

but we appreciate good work and loyalty and we're always watching what you do out here."

Then he dropped me like a hot potato and went on with his greetings.

I sat down again; the rest of the day was ruined for me. I told myself that if I deserved any commendation I could have hoped it would be for something other than the Community Chest stories. They were lousy stories; I knew it, and so did the Barnacle and all the rest of them. No one blamed me for their being lousy - you can't write anything but a lousy story on a Community Chest drive. But they weren't cheering me.

And I had a sinking feeling that, somehow, old J. H. had found out about the applications I had planted with a half dozen other papers and that this was his gentle way of letting me know he knew - and that I had better watch my step.

Just before noon, Steve Johnson - who handles the medical run along with whatever else the Barnacle can find for him to do - came over to my desk. He had a bunch of clippings in his hand and he was looking worried. "I hate to ask you this, Mark," he said, "but would you help me out?"

"Sure thing, Steve."

"It's an operation. I have to check on it, but I won't have the time. I got to run out to the airport and catch an interview."

He laid the clips down on my desk.
"It's all in there,"

Then he was off for his interview.

I picked up the clippings and read them through; it was a story that would break your heart.

There was this little fellow, about three years old, who had to have an operation on his heart. It was a piece of

surgery that had been done only a time or two before, and then only in big Eastern hospitals by famous medical names - and never on one as young as three.

I hated to pick up the phone and call; I was almost sure the kind of answer I would get.

But I did, and naturally I ran into the kind of trouble you always run into when you try to get some information out of a hospital staff - as if they were shining pure and you were a dirty little mongrel trying to sneak in. But I finally got hold of someone who told me the boy seemed to be okay and that the operation appeared to be successful.

So I called the surgeon who had done the job. I must have caught him in one of his better moments, for he filled me in on some information that fit into the story.

"You are to be congratulated, Doctor," I told him and he got a little testy.

"Young man," he told me, "in an operation such as this the surgeon is no more than a single factor. There are so many other factors that no one can take credit."

Then suddenly he sounded tired and

scared. "It was a miracle," he said.

"But don't you quote me on that," he fairly shouted at me.

"I wouldn't think of it," I told him.

Then I called the hospital again, and talked to the mother of the boy.

It was a good story. We caught the home edition with it, a four-column head on the left side of page one, and the Barnacle slipped a cog or two and gave me a byline on it.

After lunch I went back to Jo Ann's desk; she was in a tizzy. The Barnacle

had thrown a church convention program at her and she was in the midst of writing an advance story, listing all the speakers and committee members and special panels and events. It's the deadliest kind of a story you can be told to write; it's worse, even, than the Community Chest.

I listened to her being bitter for quite a while; then I asked her if she figured she'd have any strength left when the day was over.

"I'm all pooped out," she said.

"Reason I asked," I told her, "is that I want to take the boat out of the water

and I need someone to help me."

"Mark," she said, "if you expect me to go out there and horse a boat around..."

"You wouldn't have to lift," I told her. "Maybe just tug a little. We'll use a block and tackle to lift it on the blocks so that I can paint it later. All I need is someone to steady it while I haul it up."

She still wasn't sold on it, so I laid out some bait.

"We could stop downtown and pick up a couple of lobsters," I told her. "You are good at lobsters. I could make some

of my Roquefort dressing, and we could have a..."

"But without the garlic," she said. So I promised to forego the garlic and she agreed to come.

Somehow or other, we never did get that boat out of the water; there were so many other things to do.

After dinner we built a fire in the fireplace and sat in front of it. She put her head on my shoulder and we were comfortable and cozy. "Let's play pretend," she said. "Let's pretend you have that job you want. Let's say it is in London, and this is a lodge in the

English fens..."

"A fen," I said, "is a hell of a place to have a lodge."

"You always spoil things," she complained. "Let's start over again. Let's pretend you have that job you want..."

And she stuck to her fens.

Driving back to the lake after taking her home, I wondered if I'd ever get that job. Right at the moment it didn't look so rosy. Not that I couldn't have handled it, for I knew I could. I had racks of books on world affairs, and I kept close track of what was going on. I had a good

command of French, a working knowledge of German, and off and on I was struggling with Spanish. It was something I'd wanted all my life - to feel that I was part of that fabulous newspaper fraternity which kept check around the world.

I overslept, and was late to work in the morning. The Barnacle took a sour view of it. "Why did you bother to come in at all?" he growled at me. "Why do you ever bother to come in? Last two days I sent you out on two assignments, and where are the stories?"

"There weren't any stories," I told him, trying to keep my temper. "They were just some more pipe dreams you dug up."

"Some day," he said, "when you get to be a real reporter, you'll dig up stories for yourself. That's what's the matter with this staff," he said in a sudden burst of anger. "That's what's wrong with you. No initiative; sit around and wait; wait until I dig up something I can send you out on. No one ever surprises me and brings in a story I haven't sent them out on."

He pegged me with his eyes. "Why don't you just once surprise me?"

"I'll surprise you, buster," I said and walked over to my desk.

I sat there thinking. I thought about old Mrs. Clayborne, who had been dying hard - and then suddenly had died easy. I remembered what the gardener had told me, and the footprint I had found underneath the window. I thought of that other old lady who had been a hundred years old, and how all her old, dead friends had come visiting. And about the physicist who had brownies in his lab. And about the boy and his successful operation.

And I got an idea.

I went to the files and went through them three weeks back, page by page. I took a lot of notes and got a little scared, but told myself it was nothing but coincidence.

Then I sat down at my typewriter and made half a dozen false starts, but finally I had it.

__The brownies have come back again__, I wrote.

__You know, those little people who do all sorts of good deeds for you, and expect nothing in return except that you set out a bowl of milk for them.__

At the time I didn't realize that I was using almost the exact words the physicist had said.

I didn't write about Mrs. Clayborne, or the old lady with her visitors, or the physicist, or the little boy who had the operation; those weren't things you could write about with your tongue in cheek, and that's the way I wrote it.

But I did write about the little two and three paragraph items I had found tucked away in the issues I had gone through - the good luck stories; the little happy stories of no consequence, except

for the ones they had happened to - about people finding things they'd lost months or years ago, about stray dogs coming home, and kids winning essay contests, and neighbor helping neighbor. All the kindly little news stories that we'd thrown in just to fill up awkward holes.

There were a lot of them - a lot more, it seemed to me, than you could normally expect to find. _All these things happened in our town in the last three weeks_, I wrote at the end of it.

And I added one last line: _Have you put out that bowl of milk?_

After it was finished, I sat there for

a while, debating whether I should hand it in. And thinking it over, I decided that the Barnacle had it coming to him, after the way he'd shot off his mouth.

So I threw it into the basket on the city desk and went back to write the Community Chest story.

The Barnacle never said a thing to me and I didn't say a thing to him; you could have knocked my eyes off with a stick when the kid brought the papers up from the pressroom, and there was my brownie story spread across the top of page one in an eight-column feature strip.

No one mentioned it to me except Jo Ann, who came along and patted me on the head and said she was proud of me - although Cod knows why she should have been.

Then the Barnacle sent me out on another one of his wild-goose chases concerning someone who was supposed to be building a homemade atomic pile in his back yard. It turned out that this fellow is an old geezer who, at one time, had built a perpetual motion machine that didn't work. Once I found that out, I was so disgusted that I didn't even go back to the office, but went straight home instead.

I rigged up a block and tackle, had some trouble what with no one to help me, but I finally got the boat up on the blocks. Then I drove to a Utile village at the end of the lake and bought paint not only for the boat, but the cottage as well. I felt pretty good about making such a fine start on all the work I should do that fall.

The next morning when I got to the office, I found the place in an uproar. The switchboard had been clogged all night and it still looked like a Christmas tree. One of the operators had passed out, and they were trying to bring her to.

The Barnacle had a wild gleam in

his eye, and his necktie was all askew. When he saw me, he took me firmly by the arm and led me to my desk and sat me down. "Now, damn you, get to work!" he yelled and he dumped a bale of notes down in front of me.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"It's that brownie deal of yours," he yelled. "Thousands of people are calling in. All of them have brownies; they've been helped by brownies; some of them have even seen brownies."

"What about the milk?" I asked.

"Milk? What milk?"

"Why, the milk they should set out for them."

"How do I know?" he said. "Why don't you call up some of the milk companies and find out?"

That is just what I did - and, so help me Hannah, the milk companies were slowly going crazy. Every driver had come racing back to get extra milk, because most of their customers were ordering an extra quart or so. They were lined up for blocks outside the stations waiting for new loads and the milk supply was running low.

There weren't any of us in the newsroom that morning who did anything but write brownie copy. We filled the paper with it - all sorts of stories about how the brownies had been helping people. Except, of course, they hadn't known it was brownies helping them until they read my story. They'd just thought that it was good luck.

When the first edition was in, we sat back and sort of caught our breath - although the calls still were coming in - and I swear my typewriter still was hot from the copy I'd turned out.

The papers came up, and each of us took our copy and started to go through

it, when we heard a roar from J.H.'s office. A second later, J. H. came out himself, waving a paper in his fist, his face three shades redder than a brand-new fire truck.

He practically galloped to the city desk and he flung the paper down in front of the Barnacle and hit it with his fist. "What do you mean?" he shouted. "Explain yourself. Making us ridiculous!"

"But, J. H., I thought it was a good gag and -"

"Brownies!" J. H. snorted.

"We got all those calls," said Barnacle Bill. "They still are coming in. And -"

"That's enough," J. H. thundered. "You're fired!" He swung around from the city desk and looked straight at me. "You're the one who started it," he said. "You're fired, too."

I got up from my chair and moved over to the city desk. "We'll be back a little later," I told J. H., "to collect our severance pay."

He flinched a little at that, but he didn't back up any. The Barnacle picked up an ash tray off his desk and let it fall.

It hit the floor and broke. He dusted off his hands. "Come on, Mark," he said; "I'll buy you a drink."

We went over to the corner. Joe brought us a bottle and a couple of glasses, and we settled down to business.

Pretty soon some of the other boys started dropping in. They'd have a drink or two with us and then go back to work. It was their way of showing us they were sorry the way things had turned out. They didn't say anything, but they kept dropping in. There never was a time during the entire afternoon when there wasn't someone drinking with us. The

Barnacle and I took on quite a load.

We talked over this brownie business and at first we were a little skeptical about it, laying the situation more or less to public gullibility. But the more we thought about it, and the more we drank, the more we began to believe there might really be brownies. For one thing, good luck just doesn't come in hunks the way it appeared to have come to this town of ours in the last few weeks. Good luck is apt to scatter itself around a bit - and while it may run in streaks, it's usually pretty thin. But here it seemed that hundreds - if not thousands - of persons had been visited by good luck.

By the middle of the afternoon, we were fairly well agreed there might be something to this brownie business. Then, of course, we tried to figure out who the brownies were, and why they were helping people.

"You know what I think," said Barnacle. "I think they're aliens. People from the stars. Maybe they're the ones who have been flying all these saucers."

"But why would aliens want to help us?" I objected. "Sure, they'd want to watch us and find out all they could; and

after a while, they might try to make contact with us. They might even be willing to help us, but if they were they'd want to help us as a race, not as individuals."

"Maybe," the Barnacle suggested, "they're just busybodies. There are humans like that. Psychopathic dogooders, always sticking in their noses, never letting well enough alone."

"I don't think so," I argued back at him. "If they are trying to help us, I'd guess it's a religion with them. Like the old friars who wandered all over Europe in the early days. Like the Good Samaritan. Like the Salvation Army."

But he wouldn't have it that way. "They're busybodies," he insisted. "Maybe they come from a surplus economy, a planet where all the work is done by machines and there is more than enough of everything for everyone. Maybe there isn't anything left for anyone to do - and you know yourself that a man has to have something to keep him occupied, something to do so he can think that he is important."

Then along about five o'clock Jo Ann came in. It had been her day off and she hadn't known what had happened until someone from the office phoned her. So she'd come right over.

She was plenty sore at me, and she wouldn't listen to me when I tried to explain that at a time like this a man had to have a drink or two. She got me out of there and out back to my car and drove me to her place. She fed me black coffee and finally gave me something to eat and along about eight o'clock or so she figured I'd sobered up enough to try driving home.

I took it easy and I made it, but I had an awful head and I remembered that I didn't have a job. Worst of all, I was probably tagged for life as the man who had dreamed up the brownie hoax. There was no doubt that the wire services had

picked up the story, and that it had made front page in most of the papers coast to coast. No doubt, the radio and television commentators were doing a lot of chuckling at it.

My cottage stands up on a sharp little rise above the lake, a sort of hog's back between the lake and road, and there's no road up to it. I had to leave my car alongside the road at the foot of the rise, and walk up to the place.

I walked along, my head bent a little so I could see the path in the moonlight, and I was almost to the cottage before I heard a sound that made me raise my head.

And there they were.

They had rigged up a scaffold and there were four of them on it, painting the cottage madly. Three of them were up on the roof replacing the bricks that had been knocked out of the chimney. They had storm windows scattered all over the place and were furiously applying putty to them. And you could scarcely see the boat, there were so many of them slapping paint on it.

I stood there staring at them, with my jaw hanging on my breastbone, when I heard a sudden _swish_ and stepped quickly to one side. About a dozen of

them rushed by, reeling out the hose, running down the hill with it. Almost in a shorter time than it takes to tell it, they were washing the car.

They didn't seem to notice me. Maybe it was because they were so busy they didn't have the time to - or it might have been just that it wasn't proper etiquette to take notice of someone when they were helping him.

They looked a lot like the brownies that you see pictured in the children's books, but there were differences. They wore pointed caps, all right, but when I got close to one of them who was busy puttying, I could see that it was no cap at

all. His head ran up to a point, and that the tassel on the top of it was no tassel of a cap, but a tuft of hair or feathers - I couldn't make out which. They wore coats with big fancy buttons on them, but I got the impression - I don't know how - that they weren't buttons, but something else entirely. And instead of the big sloppy clown-type shoes they're usually shown as wearing, they had nothing on their feet.

They worked hard and fast; they didn't waste a minute. They didn't walk, but ran. And there were so many of them.

Suddenly they were finished. The boat was painted, and so was the

cottage. The puttied, painted storm windows were leaned against the trees. The hose was dragged up the hill and neatly coiled again.

I saw that they were finishing and I tried to call them all together so that I could thank them, but they paid no attention to me. And when they were finished, they were gone. I was left standing, all alone - with the newly painted cottage shining in the moonlight and the smell of paint heavy in the air.

I suppose I wasn't exactly sober, despite the night air and all the coffee Jo Ann had poured into me. If I had been cold, stone sober I might have done it

better; I might have thought of something. As it was, I'm afraid I bungled it.

I staggered into the house, and the outside door seemed a little hard to shut. When I looked for the reason, I saw it had been weather-stripped.

With the lights on, I looked around - and in all the time I'd been there the place had never been so neat. There wasn't a speck of dust on anything and all the metal shone. All the pots and pans were neatly stacked in place; all the clothing I had left strewn around had been put away; all the books were lined straight within the shelves, and the magazines were where they should be

instead of just thrown anywhere.

I managed to get into bed, and I tried to think about it; but someone came along with a heavy mallet and hit me on the head and that was the last I knew until I was awakened by a terrible racket.

I got to it as fast as I could.

"What is it now?" I snarled, which is no way to answer a phone, but was the way I felt.

It was J.H. "What's the matter with you?" he yelled. "Why aren't you at the office? What do you mean by..."

"Just a minute, J. H.; don't you remember? You canned me yesterday."

"Now, Mark," he said, "you wouldn't hold that against me, would you? We were all excited..."

"_I_ wasn't excited," I told him.

"Look," he said, "I need you, There's someone here to see you."

"All right," I said and hung up.

I didn't hurry any; I took my time. If J. H. needed me, if there was someone there to see me, both of them could wait.

I turned on the coffee maker and took a shower; after the shower and coffee, I felt almost human.

I was crossing the yard, heading for the path down to the car, when I saw something that stopped me like a shot.

There were tracks in the dust, tracks all over the place-exactly the kind of tracks I'd seen in the flower bed underneath the window at the Clayborne estate. I squatted down and looked closely at them to make sure there was no mistake and there couldn't be. They were the self-same tracks.

They were brownie tracks!

I stayed there for a long time, squatting beside the tracks and thinking that now it was all believable because there was no longer any room for disbelief.

The nurse had been right; there had been something in the room that night Mrs. Clayborne died. It was a mercy, the old gardener said, his thoughts and speech all fuzzed with the weariness and the basic simplicity of the very old. An act of mercy, a good deed, for the old lady had been dying hard, no hope for her.

And if there were good deeds in

death, there were as well in life. In an operation such as this, the surgeon had told me, there are so many factors that no one can take the credit. It was a miracle, he'd said, but don't you quote me on it.

And someone - no cleaning woman, but someone or something else - had messed up the notes of the physicist and in the messing of them had put together two pages out of several hundred - two pages that tied together and made sense.

Coincidence? I asked myself. Coincidence that a woman died and that a boy lived, and that a researcher got a clue he'd otherwise have missed? No, not coincidence when there was a track

beneath a window and papers scattered from beneath a paperweight.

And - I'd almost forgotten - Jo Ann's old lady who sat rocking happily because all her old dead friends had come to visit her. There were even times when senility might become a very kindness.

I straightened up and went down to the car. As I drove into town I kept thinking about the magic touch of kindness from the stars or if, perhaps, there might be upon this earth, coexistent with the human race, another race that had a different outlook and a different way of life. A race, perhaps, that had

tried time and time again to ally itself with the humans and each time had been rejected and driven into hiding - sometimes by ignorance and superstition and again by a too-brittle knowledge of what was impossible. A race, perhaps, that might be trying once again.

J. H. was waiting for me, looking exactly like a cat sitting serenely inside a bird cage, with feathers on his whiskers. With him was a high brass flyboy, who had a rainbow of decorations spread across his jacket and eagles on his shoulders. They shone so bright and earnestly that they almost

sparkled.

"Mark, this is Colonel Duncan," said J. H. "He'd like to have a word with you."

The two of us shook hands and the colonel was more affable than one would have expected him to be. Then J. H. left us in his office and shut the door behind him. The two of us sat down and each of us sort of measured up the other. I don't know how the colonel felt, but I was ready to admit I was uncomfortable. I wondered what I might have done and what the penalty might be.

"I wonder, Lathrop," said the

colonel, "if you'd mind telling me exactly how it happened.

"How you found out about the brownies?"

"I didn't find out about them, Colonel; it was just a gag."

I told him about the Barnacle shooting off his mouth about no one on the staff ever showing any initiative, and how I'd dreamed up the brownie story to get even with him. And how the Barnacle had got even with me by running it.

But that didn't satisfy the colonel.

"There must be more to it than that," he said.

I could see that he'd keep at me until I'd told it, anyhow; and while he hadn't said a word about it, I kept seeing images of the Pentagon, and the chiefs of staff, and Project Saucer - or whatever they might call it now - and the FBI, and a lot of other unpleasant things just over his left shoulder.

So I came clean with him. I told him all of it and a lot of it, I granted, sounded downright silly.

But he didn't seem to think that it was silly. "And what do you think about

all this?"

"I don't know," I told him. "They might come from outer space, or ..."

He nodded quietly. "We've known for some time now that there have been landings. This is the first time they've ever deliberately called attention to themselves."

'What do they want, Colonel? What are they aiming at?"

"I wish I knew."

Then he said very quietly, "Of course, if you should write anything

about this, I shall simply deny it. That will leave you in a most peculiar position at best."

I don't know how much more he might have told me - maybe quite a bit. But right then the phone rang. I picked it up and answered; it was for the colonel.

He said "Yes," and listened. He didn't say another word. He got a little white around the gills; then he hung up the phone.

He sat there, looking sick.

"What's the matter, Colonel?"

"That was the field," he told me. "It happened just a while ago. They came out of nowhere and swarmed all over the plane - polished it and cleaned it and made it spic and span, both inside and out. The men couldn't do a thing about it. They just had to stand and watch."

I grinned. "There's nothing bad about that, Colonel. They were just being good to you."

"You don't know the half of it," he said. "When they got it all prettied up, they painted a brownie on the nose."

That's just about all there's to it as far as the brownies are concerned. The

job they did on the colonel's plane was, actually, the sole public appearance that they made. But it was enough to serve their purpose if publicity was what they wanted - a sort of visual clincher, as it were. One of our photographers - a loopy character by the name of Charles, who never was where you wanted him when you wanted him, but nevertheless seemed to be exactly on the spot when the unusual or disaster struck - was out at the airport that morning. He wasn't supposed to be there; he was supposed to be covering a fire, which turned out luckily to be no more than a minor blaze. How he managed to wind up at the airport even he, himself, never was able to explain. But he was there and he got

the pictures of the brownies polishing up the plane - not only one or two pictures, but a couple dozen of them, all the plates he had. Another thing - he got the pictures with a telescopic lens. He'd put it in his bag that morning by mistake; he'd never carried it before. After that one time he never was without it again and, to my knowledge, never had another occasion where he had to use it.

Those pictures were a bunch of lulus. We used the best of them on page one - a solid page of them - and ran two more pages of the rest inside. The AP got hold of them, transmitted them, and a number of other member papers used them before someone at the Pentagon

heard about it and promptly blew his stack. But no matter what the Pentagon might say, the pictures had been run and whatever harm - or good - they might have done could not be recalled.

I suppose that if the colonel had known about them, he'd have warned us not to use them and might have confiscated them. But no one knew the pictures had been taken until the colonel was out of town, and probably back in Washington. Charlie got waylaid somehow - at a beer joint most likely - and didn't get back to the office until the middle of the afternoon.

When he heard about it, J. H. paced

up and down and tore his hair and threatened to fire Charlie; but some of the rest of us got him calmed down and back into his office. We caught the pictures in our final street edition, picked the pages up for the early runs next day, and the circulation boys were pop-eyed for days at the way those papers sold.

The next day, after the worst of the excitement had subsided, the Barnacle and I went down to the corner to have ourselves a couple. I had never cared too much for the Barnacle before, but the fact that we'd been fired together established a sort of bond between us; and he didn't seem to be such a bad sort,

after all,

Joe was as sad as ever. "It's them brownies," he told us, and he described them in a manner no one should ever use when talking of a brownie. "They've gone and made everyone so happy they don't need to drink no more."

"Both you and me, Joe," said the Barnacle; "they ain't done nothing for me, either."

"You got your job back," I told him.

"Mark," he said, solemnly, pouring out another. "I'm not so sure if that is good or not."

It might have developed into a grade-A crying session if Lighthing, our most up-and-coming copy boy, had not come shuffling in at that very moment.

"Mr. Lathrop," he said, "there's a phone call for you."

"Well, that's just fine."

"But it's from New York," said the kid.

That did it. It's the first time in my life I ever left a place so fast that I forgot my drink.

The call was from one of the papers to which I had applied, and the man at the New York end told me there was a job opening in the London staff and that he'd like to talk with me about it. In itself, it probably wasn't any better than the job I had, he said, but it would give me a chance to break in on the kind of work I wanted.

When could I come in? he asked, and I said tomorrow morning.

I hung up and sat back and the world all at once looked rosy. I knew right then and there those brownies still were working for me.

I had a lot of time to think on the plane trip to New York; and while I spent some of it thinking about the new job and London, I spent a lot of it thinking about the brownies, too.

They'd come to Earth before, that much at least was clear. And the world had not been ready for them. It had muffled them in a fog of folklore and superstition, and had lacked the capacity to use what they had offered it. Now, they tried again. This time we must not fail them, for there might not be a third time.

Perhaps one of the reasons they had failed before - although not the only reason - had been the lack of a media of mass communications. The story of them, and of their deeds and doings, had gone by word of mouth and had been distorted in the telling. The fantasy of the age attached itself to the story of the brownies until they became no more than a magic little people who were very droll, and on occasion helpful, but in the same category as the ogre, or the dragon, and others of their ilk.

Today it had been different. Today there was a better chance the brownies would be objectively reported. And while the entire story could not be told

immediately, the people could still guess.

And that was important - the publicity they got. People must know they were back again, and must believe in them and trust them.

And why, I wondered, had one medium-sized city in the midwest of America been chosen as the place where they would make known their presence and demonstrate their worth? I puzzled a lot about that one, but I never did get it figured out, not even to this day.

Jo Ann was waiting for me at the airport when I came back from New York with the job tucked in my pocket. I was looking for her when I came down the ramp and I saw that she'd got past the gate and was running toward the plane. I raced out to meet her and I scooped her up and kissed her and some damn fool popped a flash bulb at us. I wanted to mop up on him, but Jo Ann wouldn't let me.

It was early evening and you could see some stars shining in the sky, despite the blinding floodlights; from way up, you could hear another plane that had just taken off; and up at the far end of the field, another one was warming up.

There were the buildings and the lights and the people and the great machines and it seemed, for a long moment, like a table built to represent the strength and swiftness, the competence and assurance of this world of ours.

Jo Ann must have felt it, too, for she said suddenly:

"It's nice, Mark. I wonder if they'll change it." I knew who she meant without even asking.

"I think I know what they are," I told her; "I think I got it figured out. You know that Community Chest drive that's going on right now. Well, that's what

they are doing, too - a sort of Galactic Chest. Except that they aren't spending money on the poor and needy; their kind of charity is a different sort. Instead of spending money on us, they're spending love and kindness, neighborliness and brotherhood. And I guess that it's all right. I wouldn't wonder but that, of all the people in the universe, we are the ones who need it most. They didn't come to solve all our problems for us - just to help clear away some of the little problems that somehow keep us from turning our full power on the important jobs, or keep us from looking at them in the right way."

That was more years ago than I like to think about, but I still can remember just as if it were yesterday.

Something happened yesterday that brought it all to mind again.

I happened to be in Downing Street, not too far from No. 10, when I saw a little fellow I first took to be some sort of dwarf. When I turned to look at him, I saw that he was watching me; he raised one hand in an emphatic gesture, with the thumb and first finger made into a circle - the good, solid American signal that everything's okay.

Then he disappeared. He probably ducked into an alley, although I can't say for a fact I actually saw him...

But he was right. Everything's okay.

The world is bright, and the cold war is all but over. We may be entering upon the first true peace the human race has ever known.

Jo Ann is packing, and crying as she packs, because she has to leave so many things behind. But the kids are goggle-eyed about the great adventure just ahead. Tomorrow morning we leave

for Peking, where I'll be the first
accredited American correspondent for
almost thirty years.

And I can't help but wonder if,
perhaps, somewhere in that ancient city -
perhaps in a crowded, dirty street;
perhaps along the imperial highway;
maybe some day out in the country
beside the Great Wall, built so
fearsomely so many years ago - I may
not see another little man.

Title: Drop dead

Author: Clifford D. Simak

Original copyright year: unknown, re-published 1962

Genre: science fiction

Comments: To my knowledge, this is the only available e-text of this story.

Source: scanned and OCR-read from a paperback edition with Xerox TextBridge

Pro 9.0, proofread in MS Word 2000.

Date of e-text: August 12, 1999

Prepared by: Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 1999. All rights
reversed.

DROP DEAD

Clifford D. Simak

THE CRITTERS were unbelievable.
They looked like something from the
maudlin

pen of a well-alcoholized cartoonist.

One herd of them clustered in a semicircle in front of the ship, not jittery or belligerent - just looking at us. And that was strange.

Ordinarily, when a spaceship sets down on a virgin planet, it takes a week at least for any life that might have seen or heard it to creep out of hiding and sneak a look around.

The critters were almost cow-size, but nohow as graceful as a cow. Their bodies were pushed together as if every blessed one of them had run full-tilt into a wall. And they were just as lumpy as you'd expect from a

collision like that. Their hides were splashed with large squares of pastel color - the kind of color one never finds on any self-respecting animal: violet, pink, orange, chartreuse, to name only a few. The overall effect was of a checkerboard done by an old lady who made crazy quilts.

And that, by far, was not the worst of it.

From their heads and other parts of their anatomy sprouted a weird sort of vegetation, so that it appeared each animal was hiding, somewhat ineffectively, behind a skimpy thicket. To compound the situation and

make

it completely insane, fruits and
vegetables - or what appeared to be
fruits

and vegetables - grew from the
vegetation.

So we stood there, the critters
looking at us and us looking back at
them,

and finally one of them walked
forward until it was no more than six
feet

from us. It stood there for a moment,
gazing at us soulfully, then dropped
dead at our feet.

The rest of the herd turned around

and trotted awkwardly away, for all the world as if they had done what they had come to do and now could go about their business.

Julian Oliver, our botanist, put up a hand and rubbed his balding head with an absentminded motion.

"Another what is it coming up!" he moaned. "Why couldn't it, for once, be something plain and simple?"

"It never is," I told him. "Remember that bush out on Hamal V that spent half its life as a kind of glorified tomato and the other half as grade A poison ivy?"

"I remember it," Oliver said sadly.

Max Weber, our biologist, walked over to the critter, reached out a cautious foot and prodded it.

"Trouble is," he said, "that Hamal tomato was Julian's baby and this one here is mine."

"I wouldn't say entirely yours," Oliver retorted. "What do you call that underbrush growing out of it?"

I came in fast to head off an argument. I had listened to those two quarreling for the past twelve years,

across several hundred light-years
and on a couple dozen planets. I
couldn't stop it here, I knew, but at
least I could postpone it until they had
something vital to quarrel about.

"Cut it out," I said. "It's only a
couple of hours till nightfall and we
have to get the camp set up."

"But this critter," Weber said. "We
can't just leave it here."

"Why not? There are millions more
of them. This one will stay right here
and even if it doesn't -"

"But it dropped dead!"

"So it was old and feeble."

"It wasn't. It was right in the prime of life."

"We can talk about it later," said Alfred Kemper, our bacteriologist. "I'm as interested as you two, but what Bob says is right. We have to get the camp set up."

"Another thing," I added, looking hard at all of them. "No matter how innocent this place may look, we observe planet rules. No eating anything. No drinking any water. No wandering off alone. No carelessness

of any
kind."

"There's nothing here," said Weber.
"Just the herds of critters. Just the
endless plains. No trees, no hills, no
nothing."

He really didn't mean it. He knew as
well as I did the reason for observing
planet rules. He only wanted to argue.

"All right," I said, "which is it? Do
we set up camp or do we spend the
night up in the ship?"

That did it.

We had the camp set up before the sun went down and by dusk we were all

settled in. Carl Parsons, our ecologist, had the stove together and the

supper started before the last tent peg was driven.

I dug out my diet kit and mixed up my formula and all of them kidded me about it, the way they always did.

It didn't bother me. Their jibs were automatic and I had automatic answers.

It was something that had been going on for a long, long time. Maybe it was best that way, better if they'd

disregarded my enforced eating habits.

I remember Carl was grilling steaks and I had to move away so I couldn't smell them. There's never a time when I wouldn't give my good right arm for a steak or, to tell the truth, any other kind of normal chow. This diet stuff keeps a man alive all right, but that's about the only thing that can be said of it.

I know ulcers must sound silly and archaic. Ask any medic and he'll tell you they don't happen any more. But I have a riddled stomach and the diet kit to prove they sometimes do. I guess it's what you might call an

occupational ailment. There's a lot of never-ending worry playing nursemaid to planet survey gangs.

After supper, we went out and dragged the critter in and had a closer look at it.

It was even worse to look at close than from a distance.

There was no fooling about that vegetation. It was the real McCoy and it was part and parcel of the critter. But it seemed that it only grew out of certain of the color blocks in the critter's body.

We found another thing that practically had Weber frothing at the mouth.

One of the color blocks had holes in it - it looked almost exactly like one of those peg sets that children use as toys. When Weber took out his jackknife and poked into one of the holes, he pried out an insect that looked something like a bee. He couldn't quite believe it, so he did some more probing and in another one of the holes he found another bee. Both of the bees were dead.

He and Oliver wanted to start dissection then and there, but the rest of

us

managed to talk them out of it.

We pulled straws to see who would stand first guard and, with my usual luck, I pulled the shortest straw. Actually there wasn't much real reason for standing guard, with the alarm system set to protect the camp, but it was regulation - there had to be a guard.

I got a gun and the others said good night and went to their tents, but I could hear them talking for a long time afterward. No matter how hardened you may get to this Survey business,

no matter how blasé, you hardly ever get much sleep the first night on any planet.

I sat on a chair at one side of the camp table, on which burned a lantern in lieu of the campfire we would have had on any other planet. But here we couldn't have a fire because there wasn't any wood.

I sat at one side of the table, with the dead critter lying on the other side of it and I did some worrying, although it wasn't time for me to start worrying yet. I'm an agricultural economist and I don't begin my

worrying

until at least the first reports are in.

But sitting just across the table from where it lay, I couldn't help but do some wondering about that mixed-up critter. I didn't get anywhere except go around in circles and I was sort of glad when Talbott Fullerton, the Double Eye, came out and sat down beside me.

Sort of, I said. No one cared too much for Fullerton. I have yet to see the Double Eye I or anybody else ever cared much about.

"Too excited to sleep?" I asked him.

He nodded vaguely, staring off into the darkness beyond the lantern's light.

"Wondering," he said. "Wondering if this could be the planet."

"It won't be," I told him. "You're chasing an El Dorado, bunting down a fable."

"They found it once before," Fullerton argued stubbornly. "It's all there in the records."

"So was the Gilded Man. And the

Empire of Prester John. Atlantis and all
the rest of it. So was the old
Northwest Passage back on ancient
Earth. So

were the Seven Cities. But nobody
ever found any of those places because
they weren't there."

He sat with the lamplight in his face
and he had that wild look in his eyes
and his hands were knotting into fists,
then straightening out again.

"Sutter," he said unhappily, "I don't
know why you do this - this mocking
of yours. Somewhere in this
universe there is immortality.
Somewhere,

somehow, it has been accomplished. And the human race must find it. We have

the space for it now - all the space there is - millions of planets and eventually other galaxies. We don't have to keep making room for new generations, the way we would if we were stuck on a single world or a single solar system. Immortality, I tell you, is the next step for humanity!"

"Forget it," I said curtly, but once a Double Eye gets going, you can't shut him up.

"Look at this planet," he said. "An

almost perfect Earth-type planet.

Main-sequence sun. Good soil, good climate, plenty of water - an ideal

place for a colony. How many years, do you think, before Man will settle here?"

"A thousand. Five thousand. Maybe more."

"That's right. And there are countless other planets like it, planets crying to be settled. But we won't settle them, because we keep dying off. And that's not all of it..."

Patiently, I listened to all the rest - the

terrible waste of dying - and I
knew every bit of it by heart. Before
Fullerton, we'd been saddled by one
Double Eye fanatic and, before him,
yet another. It was regulation. Every
planet-checking team, no matter what
its purpose or its destination, was
required to carry as supercargo an
agent of Immortality Institute.

But this kid seemed just a little worse
than the usual run of them. It was
his first trip out and he was all
steamed up with idealism. In all of them,
though, burned the same intense
dedication to the proposition that Man
must
live forever and an equally

unyielding belief that immortality could and

would be found. For had not a lost spaceship found the answer centuries before - an unnamed spaceship on an unknown planet in a long-forgotten year!

It was a myth, of course. It had all the hallmarks of one and all the fierce loyalty that a myth can muster. It was kept alive by Immortality Institute, operating under a government grant and billions of bequests and gifts from hopeful rich and poor - all of whom, of course, had died or would die in spite of their generosity.

"What are you looking for?" I asked Fullerton, just a little wearily, for I was bored with it. "A plant? An animal? A people?"

And he replied, solemn as a judge: "That's something I can't tell you."

As if I gave a damn!

But I went on needling him. Maybe it was just something to while away my time. That and the fact that I disliked the fellow. Fanatics annoy me. They won't get off your ear.

"Would you know it if you found it?"

He didn't answer that one, but he turned haunted eyes on me.

I cut out the needling. Any more of it and I'd have had him bawling.

We sat around a while longer, but we did no talking.

He fished a toothpick out of his pocket and put it in his mouth and rolled it around, chewing at it moodily. I would have liked to reach out and slug him, for he chewed toothpicks all the time and it was an irritating habit, that set me unreasonably on edge. I guess I was jumpy, too.

Finally he spit out the mangled toothpick and slouched off to bed.

I sat alone, looking up at the ship, and the lantern light was just bright enough for me to make out the legend lettered on it: 'Caph VII - Ag Survey 286', which was enough to identify us anywhere in the Galaxy.

For everyone knew Caph VII, the agricultural experimental planet, just as they would have known Alderbaran XII, the medical research planet, or Capella IX, the university planet, or any of the other special departmental planets.

Caph VII is a massive operation and the hundreds of survey teams like us were just a part of it. But we were the spearheads who went out to new worlds, some of them uncharted, some just barely charted, looking for plants and animals that might be developed on the experimental tracts.

Not that our team had found a great deal. We had discovered some grasses that did well on one of the Eltanian worlds, but by and large we hadn't done anything that could be called distinguished. Our luck just seemed to run bad - like that Hamal poison ivy business. We worked as hard as any of

the rest of them, but a lot of good that did.

Sometimes it was tough to take - when all the other teams brought in stuff that got them written up and earned them bonuses, while we came creeping in

with a few piddling grasses or maybe not a thing at all.

It's a tough life and don't let anyone tell you different. Some of the planets turn out to be a fairly rugged business. At times, the boys come back pretty much the worse for wear and there are times when they don't come back at all.

But right now it looked as though we'd hit it lucky - a peaceful planet, good climate, easy terrain, no hostile inhabitants and no dangerous fauna.

Weber took his time relieving me at guard, but finally he showed up.

I could see he still was goggle-eyed about the critter. He walked around it several times, looking it over.

"That's the most fantastic case of symbiosis I have ever seen," he said.

"If it weren't lying over there, I'd say it was impossible. Usually you associate symbiosis with the lower,

more simple forms of life."

"You mean that brush growing out of it?" He nodded.

"And the bees?"

He gagged over the bees.

"How are you so sure it's symbiosis?"

He almost wrung his hands. "I don't know," he admitted.

I gave him the rifle and went to the tent I shared with Kemper. The bacteriologist was awake when I came in.

"That you, Bob?"

"It's me. Everything's all right."

"I've been lying here and thinking," he said. "This is a screwy place."

"The critters?"

"No, not the critters. The planet itself. Never saw one like it. It's positively naked. No trees. No flowers. Nothing. It's just a sea of grass."

"Why not?" I asked. "Where does it say you can't find a pasture planet?"

"It's too simple," he protested. 'Too simplified. Too neat and packaged.

Almost as if someone had said 'let's make a simple planet, let's cut out all the frills, let's skip all the biological experiments and get right down to basics. Just one form of life and the grass for it to eat.'"

"You're way out on a limb," I told him. "How do you know all this? There may be other life-forms. There may be complexities we can't suspect. Sure, all we've seen are the critters, but maybe that's because there are so many of them."

"To hell with you," he said and turned over on his cot.

Now there's a guy I liked. We'd been tent partners ever since he'd joined the team better than ten years before and we got along fine.

Often I had wished the rest could get along as well. But it was too much to expect.

The fighting started right after breakfast, when Oliver and Weber insisted

on using the camp table for dissecting. Parsons, who doubled as cook,

jumped straight down their throats. Why he did it, I don't know. He knew before he said a word that he was licked, hands down. The same thing had happened many times before and he knew, no matter what he did or said, they would use the table.

But he put up a good battle. "You guys go and find some other place to do your butchering! Who wants to eat on a table that's all slopped up?"

"But, Carl, where can we do it? We'll use only one end of the table."

Which was a laugh, because in half an

hour they'd be sprawled all over it.

"Spread out a canvas," Parsons snapped back.

"You can't dissect on a canvas. You got to have -"

"Another thing. How long do you figure it will take? In a day or two, that critter is going to get ripe."

It went on like that for quite a while, but by the time I started up the ladder to get the animals, Oliver and Weber had flung the critter on the table and were at work on it.

Unshipping the animals is something not exactly in my line of duty, but over the years I'd taken on the job of getting them unloaded, so they'd be there and waiting when Weber or some of the others needed them to run off a batch of tests.

I went down into the compartment where we kept them in their cages. The rats started squeaking at me and the zartyls from Centauri started screeching at me and the punkins from Polaris made an unholy racket, because the punkins are hungry all the time. You just can't give them enough to eat. Turn them loose with

food and they'd eat themselves to death.

It was quite a job to get them all lugged up to the port and to rig up a sling and lower them to the ground, but I finally finished it without busting a single cage. That was an accomplishment. Usually I smashed a cage or two and some of the animals escaped and then Weber would froth around for days about my carelessness.

I had the cages all set out in rows and was puttering with canvas flies to protect them from the weather when

Kemper came along and stood watching me.

"I have been wandering around," he announced. From the way he said it, I could see he had the wind up.

But I didn't ask him, for then he'd never have told me. You had to wait for Kemper to make up his mind to talk.

"Peaceful place," I said and it was all of that. It was a bright, clear day and the sun was not too warm. There was a little breeze and you could see a long way off. And it was quiet. Really quiet. There wasn't any noise at all.

"It's a lonesome place," said Kemper.

"I don't get you," I answered patiently.

"Remember what I said last night?
About this planet being too simplified?"

He stood watching me put up the
canvas, as if he might be considering
how
much more to tell me. I waited.

Finally, he blurted it. "Bob, there are
no insects!" "What have insects -"

"You know what I mean," he said.
"You go out on Earth or any Earthlike

planet and lie down in the grass and watch. You'll see the insects. Some of them on the ground and others on the grass. There'll be all kinds of them."

"And there aren't any here?"

He shook his head. "None that I could see. I wandered around and lay down and looked in a dozen different places. Stands to reason a man should find

some insects if he looked all morning. It isn't natural, Bob."

I kept on with my canvas and I don't know why it was, but I got a little chilled about there not being any

insects. Not that I care a hoot for insects, but as Kemper said, it was unnatural, although you come to expect the so-called unnatural in this planet-checking business.

"There are the bees," I said.

"What bees?"

"The ones that are in the critters. Didn't you see any?"

"None," he said. "I didn't get close to any critter herds. Maybe the bees don't travel very far."

"Any birds?"

"I didn't see a one," he said. "But I was wrong about the flowers. The grass has tiny flowers."

"For the bees to work on."

Kemper's face went stony. "That's right. Don't you see the pattern of it, the planned -"

"I see it," I told him.

He helped me with the canvas and we didn't say much more. When we had it done, we walked into camp.

Parsons was cooking lunch and grumbling at Oliver and Weber, but they

weren't paying much attention to him. They had the table littered with different parts they'd carved out of the critter and they were looking slightly numb.

"No brain," Weber said to us accusingly, as if we might have made off with

it when he wasn't looking. "We can't find a brain and there's no nervous system."

"It's impossible," declared Oliver. "How can a highly organized, complex

animal exist without a brain or nervous system?"

"Look at that butcher shop!" Parsons yelled wrathfully from the stove. "You guys will have to eat standing up!"

"Butcher shop is right," Weber agreed. "As near as we can figure out, there

are at least a dozen different kinds of flesh - some fish, some fowl, some good red meat. Maybe a little lizard, even."

"An all-purpose animal," said Kemper. "Maybe we found something finally."

"If it's edible," Oliver added. "If it doesn't poison you. If it doesn't grow hair all over you."

"That's up to you," I told him. "I got the cages down and all lined up. You can start killing off the little cusses to your heart's content."

Weber looked ruefully at the mess on the table.

"We did just a rough exploratory job," he explained. "We ought to start another one from scratch. You'll have to get in on that next one, Kemper."

Kemper nodded glumly.

Weber looked at me. "Think you can get us one?"

"Sure," I said. "No trouble."

It wasn't.

Right after lunch, a lone critter came walking up, as if to visit us. It stopped about six feet from where we sat, gazed at us soulfully, then obligingly dropped dead.

During the next few days, Oliver and Weber barely took time out to eat and sleep. They sliced and probed. They

couldn't believe half the things they found. They argued. They waved their scalpels in the air to emphasize their anguish. They almost broke down and wept. Kemper filled box after box with slides and sat hunched, half petrified, above his microscope.

Parsons and I wandered around while the others worked. He dug up some soil samples and tried to classify the grasses and failed, because there weren't any grasses - there was just one type of grass. He made notes on the weather and ran an analysis of the air and tried to pull together an ecological report without a lot to go on.

I looked for insects and I didn't find any except the bees and I never saw those unless I was near a critter herd. I watched for birds and there were none. I spent two days investigating a creek, lying on my belly and staring down into the water, and there were no signs of life. I hunted up a sugar sack and put a hoop in the mouth of it and spent another two days seining. I didn't catch a thing - not a fish, not even a crawdad, not a single thing.

By that time, I was ready to admit that Kemper had guessed right.

Fullerton walked around, too, but we paid no attention to him. All the Double Eyes, every one of them, always were looking for something no one

else could see. After a while, you got pretty tired of them. I'd spent twenty years getting tired of them.

The last day I went seining, Fullerton stumbled onto me late in the afternoon. He stood up on the bank and watched me working in a pool.

When I looked up, I had the feeling he'd been watching me for quite a little while.

"There's nothing there," he said.

The way he said it, he made it sound as if he'd known all along there was nothing there and that I was a fool for looking.

But that wasn't the only reason I got sore.

Sticking out of his face, instead of the usual toothpick, a stem of grass and he was rolling it around in his lips chewing it the way he chewed the toothpicks.

"Spit out that grass!" I shouted at him.
"You fool, spit it out!"

His eyes grew startled and he spit out the grass.

"It's hard to remember," he mumbled.
"You see, it's my first trip out and
_"

"It could be your last one, too," I told him brutally. "Ask Weber sometime, when you have a moment, what happened to the guy who pulled a leaf and chewed it. Absent-minded, sure. Habit, certainly. He was just as dead as if he'd committed suicide."

Fullerton stiffened up.

"I'll keep it in mind," he said.

I stood there, looking up at him, feeling a little sorry that I'd been so tough with him.

But I had to be. There were so many absent-minded, well-intentioned ways a man could kill himself.

"You find anything?" I asked.

"I've been watching the critters," he said. "There was something funny that I couldn't quite make out at first..."

"I can list you a hundred funny things."

"That's not what I mean, Sutter. Not the patchwork color or the bushes growing out of them. There was something else. I finally got it figured out. There aren't any young."

Fullerton was right, of course. I realized it now, after he had told me.

There weren't any calves or whatever you might call them. All we'd seen

were adults. And yet that didn't necessarily mean there weren't any calves.

It just meant we hadn't seen them. And the same, I knew, applied as well to

insects, birds and fish. They all might be on the planet, but we just hadn't managed to find them yet.

And then, belatedly, I got it - the inference, the hope, the half-crazy fantasy behind this thing that Fullerton had found, or imagined he'd found.

"You're downright loopy," I said flatly.

He stared back at me and his eyes were shining like a kid's at Christmas.

He said: "It had to happen sometime, Sutter, somewhere." I climbed up the bank and stood beside him. I looked at

the net I still held in my hands and
threw it back into the creek and
watched it sink.

"Be sensible," I warned him. "You
have no evidence. Immortality wouldn't
work that way. It couldn't. That way,
it would be nothing but a dead end.

Don't mention it to anyone. They'd
ride you without mercy all the way back
home."

I don't know why I wasted time on
him. He stared back at me stubbornly,
but

still with that awful light of hope and
triumph on his face.

"I'll keep my mouth shut," I told him curtly. "I won't say a word."

"Thanks, Sutter," he answered. "I appreciate it a lot."

I knew from the way he said it that he could murder me with gusto.

We trudged back to camp.

The camp was all slicked up.

The dissecting mess had been cleared away and the table had been scrubbed so hard that it gleamed. Parsons was cooking supper and singing one of his obscene ditties. The other three sat

around in their camp chairs and they had broken out some liquor and were human once again.

"All buttoned up?" I asked, but Oliver shook his head.

They poured a drink for Fullerton and he accepted it, a bit ungraciously, but he did take it. That was some improvement on the usual Double Eye.

They didn't offer me any. They knew I couldn't drink it. "What have we got?" I asked.

"It could be something good," said Oliver. "It's a walking menu. It's an

all-purpose animal, for sure. It lays eggs, gives milk, makes honey. It has six different kinds of red meat, two of fowl, one of fish and a couple of others we can't identify."

"Lays eggs," I said. "Gives milk. Then it reproduces." "Certainly," said Weber. "What did you think?"

"There aren't any young."

Weber grunted. "Could be they have nursery areas. Certain places instinctively set aside in which to rear their young."

"Or they might have instinctive birth

control," suggested Oliver. "That would fit in with the perfectly balanced ecology Kemper talks about..."

Weber snorted. "Ridiculous!"

"Not so ridiculous," Kemper retorted. "Not half so ridiculous as some other things we found. Not one-tenth as ridiculous as no brain or nervous system.

Not any more ridiculous than my bacteria."

"Your bacteria!" Weber said. He drank down half a glass of liquor in a single gulp to make his disdain emphatic.

"The critters swarm with them,"
Kemper went on. "You find them
everywhere

throughout the entire animal. Not
just in the bloodstream, not in
restricted areas, but in the entire
organism. And all of them the same.

Normally it takes a hundred
different kinds of bacteria to make a
metabolism work, but here there's
only one. And that one, by definition,
must be general purpose - it must do
all the work that the hundred other
species do."

He grinned at Weber. "I wouldn't
doubt but right there are your brains and

nervous systems - the bacteria doubling in brass for both systems."

Parsons came over from the stove and stood with his fists planted on his hips, a steak fork grasped in one hand and sticking out at a tangent from his body.

"If you ask me," he announced, "there ain't no such animal. The critters are all wrong. They can't be made that way." '

"But they are," said Kemper.

"It doesn't make sense! One kind of life. One kind of grass for it to eat.

I'll bet that if we could make a census, we'd find the critter population is at exact capacity - just so many of them to the acre, figured down precisely to the last mouthful of grass. Just enough for them to eat and no more. Just enough so the grass won't be overgrazed. Or undergrazed, for that matter."

"What's wrong with that?" I asked, just to needle him.

I thought for a minute he'd take the steak fork to me.

"What's wrong with it?" he thundered. "Nature's never static,

never

standing still. But here it's standing still. Where's the competition? Where's the evolution?"

"That's not the point," said Kemper quietly. "The fact is that that's the way it is. The point is why? How did it happen? How was it planned? Why was it planned?"

"Nothing's planned," Weber told him sourly. "You know better than to talk like that."

Parsons went back to his cooking. Fullerton had wandered off somewhere.

Maybe he was discouraged from hearing about the eggs and milk.

For a time, the four of us just sat.

Finally Weber said: "The first night we were here, I came out to relieve Bob at guard and I said to him..."

He looked at me. "You remember, Bob?" "Sure. You said symbiosis."

"And now?" asked Kemper.

"I don't know. It simply couldn't happen. But if it did - if it could - this critter would be the most beautifully logical example of symbiosis

you

could dream up. Symbiosis carried to its logical conclusion. Like, long ago, all the life-forms said let's quit this feuding, let's get together, let's cooperate. All the plants and animals and fish and bacteria got together -"

"It's far-fetched, of course," said Kemper. "But, by and large, it's not anything unheard of, merely carried further, that's all. Symbiosis is a recognized way of life and there's nothing -"

Parsons let out a bellow for them to come and get it, and I went to my tent

and broke out my diet kit and mixed up a mess of goo. It was a relief to eat in private, without the others making cracks about the stuff I had to choke down.

I found a thin sheaf of working notes on the small wooden crate I'd set up for a desk. I thumbed through them while I ate. They were fairly sketchy and sometimes hard to read, being smeared with blood and other gook from

the dissecting table. But I was used to that. I worked with notes like that all the blessed time; So I was able to decipher them. The whole picture wasn't there, of course, but there was

enough to bear out what they'd told me and a good deal more as well.

For examples, the color squares that gave the critters their crazy-quiltish look were separate kinds of meat or fish or fowl or unknown food, whatever it might be. Almost as if each square was the present-day survivor of each ancient symbiont - if, in fact, there was any basis to this talk of symbiosis.

The egg-laying apparatus was described in some biologic detail, but there

seemed to be no evidence of recent egg production. The same was true of the

lactation system.

There were, the notes said in Oliver's crabbed writing, five kinds of fruit and three kinds of vegetables to be derived from the plants growing from the critters.

I shoved the notes to one side and sat back on my chair, gloating just a little.

Here was diversified farming with a vengeance! You had meat and dairy herds, fish pond, aviary, poultry yard, orchard and garden rolled into one, all in the body of a single animal that was a complete farm in itself!

I went through the notes hurriedly again and found what I was looking for.

The food product seemed high in relation to the gross weight of the animal.

Very little would be lost in dressing out.

That is the kind of thing an ag economist has to consider.

But that isn't all of it, by any means. What if a man couldn't eat the critter? Suppose the critters couldn't be moved off the planet because they died if you took them from their range?

I recalled how they'd just walked up and died; that in itself was another headache to be filed for future worry.

What if they could only eat the grass that grew on this one planet? And if so, could the grass be grown elsewhere? What kind of tolerance would the

critter show to different kinds of climate? What was the rate of reproduction? If it was slow, as was indicated, could it be stepped up?

What was the rate of growth?

I got up and walked out of the tent and stood for a while, outside. The

little breeze that had been blowing
had died down at sunset and the place
was quiet. Quiet because there was
nothing but the critters to make any
noise and we had yet to hear them
make a single sound. The stars blazed
overhead and there were so many
of them that they lighted up the
countryside as if there were a moon.

I walked over to where the rest of
the men were sitting. "It looks like
we'll be here for a while," I said.
"Tomorrow we might as well get the
ship
unloaded."

No one answered me, but in the

silence I could sense the half-hidden satisfaction and the triumph. At last we'd hit the jackpot! We'd be going home with something that would make those other teams look pallid. We'd be the ones who got the notices and bonuses.

Oliver finally broke the silence. "Some of our animals aren't in good shape. I went down this afternoon to have a look at them. A couple of the pigs and several of the rats."

He looked at me accusingly.

I flared up at him. "Don't look at me!

I'm not their keeper. I just take care of them until you're ready to use them."

Kemper butted in to beat off an argument. "Before we do any feeding, we'll need another critter."

"I'll lay you a bet," said Weber.

Kemper didn't take him up.

It was just as well he didn't, for a critter came in, right after breakfast, and died with a savoir faire that was positively marvelous. They went to work on it immediately.

Parsons and I started unloading the supplies. We put in a busy day. We moved all the food except the emergency rations we left in the ship. We

slung down a refrigerating unit Weber had been yelling for, to keep the critter products fresh.

We unloaded a lot of equipment and some silly odds and ends that I knew we'd have no use for, but that some of the others wanted broken out. We put up tents and we lugged and pushed and hauled all day. Late in the afternoon, we had it all stacked up and under canvas and were completely

bushed.

Kemper went back to his bacteria.
Weber spent hours with the animals.

Oliver dug up a bunch of grass and
gave the grass the works. Parsons went
out on field trips, mumbling and
fretting.

Of all of us, Parsons had the job that
was most infuriating.

Ordinarily the ecology of even the
simplest of planets is a complicated
business and there's a lot of work to
do. But here was almost nothing.

There was no competition for
survival.

There was no dog eat dog. There were just critters cropping grass.

I started to pull my report together, knowing that it would have to be revised and rewritten again and again. But I was anxious to get going. I fairly itched to see the pieces fall together - although I knew from the very start some of them wouldn't fit. They almost never do.

Things went well. Too well, it sometimes seemed to me.

There were incidents, of course, like when the punkins somehow chewed their

way out of their cage and disappeared.

Weber was almost beside himself.

"They'll come back," said Kemper.
"With that appetite of theirs, they won't stay away for long."

And he was right about that part of it. The punkins were the hungriest creatures in the Galaxy. You could never feed them enough to satisfy them. And they'd eat anything. It made no difference to them, just so there was a lot of it. And it was that very factor in their metabolism that made them invaluable as research animals.

The other animals thrived on the critter diet. The carnivorous ones ate the critter-meat and the vegetarians chomped on critter-fruit and critter-vegetables. They all grew sleek and sassy. They seemed in better health than the control animals, which continued their regular diet. Even the pigs and rats that had been sick got well again and as fat and happy as any of the others.

Kemper told us, "This critter stuff is more than just a food. It's a medicine. I can see the signs: 'Eat Critter and Keep Well!'"

Weber grunted at him. He was never one for joking and I think he was a worried man. A thorough man, he'd found too many things that violated all the tenets he'd accepted as the truth. No brain or nervous system. The ability to die at will. The lingering hint of wholesale symbiosis. And the bacteria.

The bacteria, I think, must have seemed to him the worst of all.

There was, it now appeared, only one type involved.

Kemper had hunted frantically and had discovered no others, Oliver found

it

in the grass. Parsons found it in the soil and water. The air, strangely enough, seemed to be free of it.

But Weber wasn't the only one who worried. Kemper worried, too. He unloaded

most of it just before our bedtime, sitting on the edge of his cot and trying to talk the worry out of himself while I worked on my reports.

And he'd picked the craziest point imaginable to pin his worry on.

"You can explain it all," he said, "if you are only willing to concede on

certain points. You can explain the critters if you're willing to believe in a symbiotic arrangement carried out on a planetary basis. You can believe in the utter simplicity of the ecology if you're willing to assume that, given space and time enough, anything can happen within the bounds of logic."

"You can visualize how the bacteria might take the place of brains and nervous systems if you're ready to say this is a bacterial world and not a critter world. And you can even envision the bacteria - all of them, every single one of them - as forming one gigantic linked intelligence. And if

you accept that theory, then the voluntary deaths become understandable,

because there's no actual death involved - it's just like you or me trimming off a hangnail. And if this is true, then Fullerton has found immortality, although it's not the kind he was looking for and it won't do him or us a single bit of good.

"But the thing that worries me," he went on, his face all knotted up with worry, "is the seeming lack of anything resembling a defense mechanism.

Even assuming that the critters are no more than fronting for a bacterial

world, the mechanism should be there as a simple matter of precaution.

Every living thing we know of has some sort of way to defend itself or to escape potential enemies. It either fights or runs and hides to preserve its life."

He was right, of course. Not only did the critters have no defense, they even saved one the trouble of going out to kill them.

"Maybe we are wrong," Kemper concluded. "Maybe life, after all, is not as

valuable as we think it is, Maybe it's not a thing to cling to. Maybe it's

not worth fighting for. Maybe the critters, in their dying, are closer to the truth than we."

It would go on like that, night after night, with Kemper talking around in circles and never getting anywhere. I think most of the time he wasn't talking to me, but talking to himself, trying by the very process of putting it in words to work out some final answer.

And long after we had turned out the lights and gone to bed, I'd lie on my cot and think about all that Kemper said and I thought in circles, too. I wondered why all the critters that

came in and died were in the prime of life. Was the dying a privilege that was accorded only to the fit? Or were all the critters in the prime of life? Was there really some cause to believe they might be immortal?

I asked a lot of questions, but there weren't any answers.

We continued with our work. Weber killed some of his animals and examined

them and there were no signs of ill effect from the critter diet. There were traces of critter bacteria in their blood, but no sickness, reaction or antibody formation. Kemper kept

on with his bacterial work. Oliver started a whole series of experiments with the grass. Parsons just gave up.

The punkins didn't come back and Parsons and Fullerton went out and hunted for them, but without success.

I worked on my report and the pieces fell together better than I had hoped they would. It began to look as though we had the situation well nailed down. We were all feeling pretty good. We could almost taste that bonus.

But I think that, in the back of our minds, all of us were wondering if we

could get away scot free. I know I had mental fingers crossed. It just didn't seem quite possible that something wouldn't happen.

And, of course, it did.

We were sitting around after supper, with the lantern lighted, when we heard the sound. I realized afterward that we had been hearing it for some time before we paid attention to it. It started so soft and so far away that it crept upon us without alarming us. At first, it sounded like a sighing, as if a gentle wind were blowing through a little tree, and then it changed into a rumble, but a far-off

rumble that had no menace in it. I

was just getting ready to say something about thunder and wondering if our

stretch of weather was about to break when Kemper jumped up and yelled.

I don't know what he yelled. Maybe it wasn't a word at all. But the way he yelled brought us to our feet and sent us at a dead run for the safety of the ship. Even before we got there, in the few seconds it took to reach the ladder, the character of the sound had changed and there was no mistaking what it was - the drumming of hoofs heading straight for camp.

They were almost on top of us when we reached the ladder and there wasn't time or room for all of us to use it. I was the last in line and I saw I'd never make it and a dozen possible escape plans flickered through my mind. But I knew they wouldn't work fast enough. Then I saw the rope, hanging where I'd left it after the unloading job, and I made a jump for it. I'm no rope-climbing expert, but I shinnied up it with plenty of speed. And right behind me came Weber, who was no rope-climber; either, but who was doing rather well.

I thought of how lucky it had been that I hadn't found the time to take

down the rig and how Weber had ridden me unmercifully about not doing it. I

wanted to shout down and point it out to him, but I didn't have the breath.

We reached the port and tumbled into it. Below us, the stampeding critters went grinding through the camp. There seemed to be millions of them. One of the terrifying things about it was how silently they ran. They made no outcry of any kind; all you could hear was the sound of their hoofs pounding on the ground. It seemed almost as if they ran in some blind fury that was too deep for outcry.

They spread for miles, as far as one could see on the star-lit plains, but the spaceship divided them and they flowed to either side of it and then flowed back again, and beyond the spaceship there was a little sector that they never touched.

I thought how we could have been safe staying on the ground and huddling in that sector, but that's one of the things a man never can foresee.

The stampede lasted for almost an hour. When it was all over, we came down and surveyed the damage. The

animals in their cages, lined up between the

ship and the camp, were safe. All but one of the sleeping tents were standing. The lantern still burned brightly on the table. But everything else was gone. Our food supply was trampled in the ground. Much of the equipment was lost and wrecked. On either side of the camp, the ground was churned up like a half-plowed field. The whole thing was a mess.

It looked as if we were licked.

The tent Kemper and I used for sleeping still stood, so our notes were safe. The animals were all right. But

that was all we had - the notes and animals.

"I need three more weeks," said Weber. "Give me just three weeks to complete the tests."

"We haven't got three weeks," I answered. "All our food is gone."

"The emergency rations in the ship?"

"That's for going home."

"We can go a little hungry."

He glared at us - at each of us in turn - challenging us to do a little

starving.

"I can go three weeks," he said, "without any food at all? "We could eat critter," suggested Parsons. "We could take a chance."

Weber shook his head. "Not yet. In three weeks, when the tests are finished, then maybe we will know. Maybe we won't need those rations for going home. Maybe we can stock up on critters and eat our heads off all the way to Caph."

I looked around at the rest of them, but I knew, before I looked, the answer I would get.

"All right," I said. "We'll try it."

"It's all right for you," Fullerton retorted hastily. "You have your diet kit."

Parsons reached out and grabbed him and shook him so hard that he went

cross-eyed. "We don't talk like that about those diet kits."

Then Parsons let him go.

We set up double guards, for the stampede had wrecked our warning system,

but none of us got much sleep. We were too upset.

Personally, I did some worrying about why the critters had stampeded. There was nothing on the planet that could scare them. There were no other animals. There was no thunder or lightning - as a matter of fact, it appeared that the planet might have no boisterous weather ever. And there seemed to be nothing in the critter makeup, from our observation of them, that would set them off emotionally.

But there must be a reason and a purpose, I told myself. And there must be,

too, in their dropping dead for us.
But was the purpose intelligence or
instinct? That was what bothered me
most. It kept me awake all night long.

At daybreak, a critter walked in and
died for us happily. We went without

our breakfast and, when noon came, no one said anything about lunch, so we skipped that, too.

Late in the afternoon, I climbed the ladder to get some food for supper.

There wasn't any. Instead, I found five of the fattest punkins you ever laid your eyes on. They had chewed holes through the packing boxes and the food was cleaned out. The sacks were limp and empty. They'd even managed to get the lid off the coffee can somehow and had eaten every bean.

The five of them sat contentedly in a corner, blinking smugly at me. They didn't make a racket, as they usually

did. Maybe they knew they were in the wrong or maybe they were just too full. For once, perhaps, they'd gotten all they could eat.

I just stood there and looked at them and I knew how they'd gotten on the ship. I blamed myself, not them. If only I'd found the time to take down the unloading rig, they'd never gotten in. But then I remembered how that dangling rope had saved my life and Weber's and I couldn't decide whether I'd done right or wrong.

I went over to the corner and picked the punkins up. I stuffed three of them in my pockets and carried the

other two. I climbed down from the ship and walked up to camp. I put the punkins on the table.

"Here they are," I said. "They were in the ship. That's why we couldn't find them. They climbed up the rope."

Weber took one look at them. "They look well fed. Did they leave anything?"

"Not a scrap. They cleaned us out entirely."

The punkins were quite happy. It was apparent they were glad to be back with us again. After all, they'd eaten everything in reach and there was no

further reason for their staying in the ship.

Parsons picked up a knife and walked over to the critter that had died that morning.

"Tie on your bibs," he said.

He carved out big steaks and threw them on the table and then he lit his stove. I retreated to my tent as soon as he started cooking, for never in my life have I smelled anything as good as those critter steaks.

I broke out the kit and mixed me up some goo and sat there eating it,

feeling sorry for myself.

Kemper came in after a while and sat down on his cot.

"Do you want to hear?" he asked me.

"Go ahead," I invited him resignedly.

"It's wonderful. It's got everything you've ever eaten backed clear off the table. We had three different kinds of red meat and a slab of fish and something that resembled lobster, only better. And there's one kind of fruit growing out of that bush in the middle of the back..."

"And tomorrow you drop dead."

"I don't think so," Kemper said.

"The animals have been thriving on it.
There's nothing wrong with them."

It seemed that Kemper was right.
Between the animals and men, it took a
critter a day. The critters didn't
seem to mind. They were
johnny-on-the-spot. They walked in
promptly, one at a time, and keeled over
every morning.

The way the men and animals ate
was positively indecent. Parsons
cooked
great platters of different kinds of

meat and fish and fowl and what-not.

He prepared huge bowls of vegetables. He heaped other bowls with fruit. He

racked up combs of honey and the men licked the platters clean. They sat around with belts unloosened and patted their bulging bellies and were disgustingly contented.

I waited for them to break out in a rash or to start turning green with purple spots or grow scales or something of the sort. But nothing happened.

They thrived, just as the animals were thriving. They felt better than they ever had.

Then, one morning, Fullerton turned up sick. He lay on his cot flushed with fever. It looked like Centaurian virus, although we'd been inoculated against that. In fact, we'd been inoculated and immunized against almost

everything. Each time, before we blasted off on another survey, they jabbed us full of booster shots.

I didn't think much of it. I was fairly well convinced, for a time at least, that all that was wrong with him was overeating.

Oliver, who knew a little about medicine, but not much, got the medicine

chest out of the ship and pumped Fullerton full of some new antibiotic that came highly recommended for almost everything.

We went on with our work, expecting he'd be on his feet in a day or two.

But he wasn't. If anything, he got worse.

Oliver went through the medicine chest, reading all the labels carefully, but didn't find anything that seemed to be the proper medication. He read

the first-aid booklet. It didn't tell him anything except how to set broken legs or apply artificial respiration and simple things like that.

Kemper had been doing a lot of worrying, so he had Oliver take a sample of

Fullerton's blood and then prepared a slide. When he looked at the blood through the microscope, he found that it swarmed with bacteria from the critters. Oliver took some more blood samples and Kemper prepared more

slides, just to double-check, and there was no doubt about it.

By this time, all of us were standing around the table watching Kemper and waiting for the verdict. I know the same thing must have been in the mind of each of us.

It was Oliver who put it into words. "Who is next?" he asked.

Parsons stepped up and Oliver took the sample.

We waited anxiously.

Finally Kemper straightened.

"You have them, too," he said to Parsons. "Not as high a count as

Fullerton."

Man after man stepped up. All of us had the bacteria, but in my case the count was low.

"It's the critter," Parsons said. "Bob hasn't been eating any."

"But cooking kills -" Oliver started to say.

"You can't be sure. These bacteria would have to be highly adaptable. They do the work of thousands of other microorganisms. They're a sort of bandy-man, a jack-of-all-trades. They can acclimatize. They can meet

new

situations. They haven't weakened the strain by becoming specialized."

"Besides," said Parsons, "we don't cook all of it. We don't cook the fruit and most of you guys raise hell if a steak is more than singed."

"What I can't figure out is why it should be Fullerton," Weber said. "Why should his count be higher? He started on the critter the same time as the rest of us."

I remembered that day down by the creek.

"He got a head start on the rest of you," I explained. "He ran out of toothpicks and took to chewing grass stems. I caught him at it."

I know it wasn't very comforting. It meant that in another week or two, all of them would have as high a count as Fullerton. But there was no sense not telling them. It would have been criminal not to. There was no place for wishful thinking in a situation like that.

"We can't stop eating critter," said Weber. "It's all the food we have. There's nothing we can do."

"I have a hunch," Kemper replied,
"it's too late anyhow."

"If we started home right now," I said,
"there's my diet kit..."

They didn't let me finish making my
offer. They slapped me on the back and
pounded one another and laughed like
mad.

It wasn't funny. They just needed
something they could laugh at.

"It wouldn't do any good," said
Kemper. "We've already had it. Anyhow,
your
diet kit wouldn't last us all the way

back home."

'We could have a try at it," I argued.

"It may be just a transitory thing," Parsons said. "Just a bit of fever. A little upset from a change of diet."

We all hoped that, of course.

But Fullerton got no better.

Weber took blood samples of the animals and they had a bacterial count almost as high as Fullerton's - much higher than when he'd taken it before.

Weber blamed himself. "I should have

kept closer check. I should have taken tests every day or so."

"What difference would it have made?" demanded Parsons. "Even if you had, even if you'd found a lot of bacteria in the blood, we'd still have eaten critter. There was no other choice."

"Maybe it's not the bacteria," said Oliver. "We may be jumping at conclusions. It may be something else that Fullerton picked up."

Weber brightened up a bit. "That's right. The animals still seem to be okay."

They were bright and chipper, in the best of health.

We waited. Fullerton got neither worse nor better.

Then, one night, he disappeared.

Oliver, who had been sitting with him, had dozed off for a moment. Parsons, on guard, had heard nothing.

We hunted for him for three full days. He couldn't have gone far, we figured. He had wandered off in a delirium and he didn't have the strength to cover any distance.

But we didn't find him.

We did find one queer thing,
however. It was a ball of some
strange

substance, white and fresh-appearing.
It was about four feet in diameter.

It lay at the bottom of a little gully,
hidden out of sight, as if someone
or something might have brought it
there and hidden it away.

We did some cautious poking at it
and we rolled it back and forth a little
and wondered what it was, but we
were hunting Fullerton and we didn't
have

the time to do much investigating.
Later on, we agreed, we would come
back
and get it and find out what it was.

Then the animals came down with the
fever, one after another - all except
the controls, which had been eating
regular food until the stampede had
destroyed the supply.

After that, of course, all of them ate
critter.

By the end of two days, most of the
animals were down.

Weber worked with them, scarcely

taking time to rest. We all helped as best we could.

Blood samples showed a greater concentration of bacteria. Weber started a

dissection, but never finished it. Once he got the animal open, he took a quick look at it and scraped the whole thing off the table into a pail. I saw him, but I don't think any of the others did. We were pretty busy.

I asked him about it later in the day, when we were alone for a moment. He briskly brushed me off.

I went to bed early that night because

I had the second guard. It seemed I had no more than shut my eyes when I was brought upright by a racket that raised goose pimples on every inch of me.

I tumbled out of bed and scrabbled around to find my shoes and get them on. By that time, Kemper had dashed out of the tent.

There was trouble with the animals. They were fighting to break out, chewing the bars of their cages and throwing themselves against them in a blind and terrible frenzy. And all the time they were squealing and screaming. To listen to them set your

teeth on edge.

Weber dashed around with a hypodermic. After what seemed hours, we had them

full of sedative. A few of them broke loose and got away, but the rest were sleeping peacefully.

I got a gun and took over guard duty while the other men went back to bed.

I stayed down near the cages, walking back and forth because I was too

tense to do much sitting down. It seemed to me that between the animals' frenzy to escape and Fullerton's

disappearance, there was a parallel that was too similar for comfort.

I tried to review all that had happened on the planet and I got bogged down time after time as I tried to make the picture dovetail. The trail of thought I followed kept turning back to Kemper's worry about the critters' lack of a defense mechanism.

Maybe, I told myself, they had a defense mechanism, after all - the slickest, smoothest, trickiest one Man ever had encountered.

As soon as the camp awoke, I went to our tent to stretch out for a moment,

perhaps to catch a catnap. Worn out, I slept for hours.

Kemper woke me.

"Get up, Bob!" he said. "For the love of God, get up!"

It was late afternoon and the last rays of the sun were streaming through the tent flap. Kemper's face was haggard. It was as if he'd suddenly grown

old since I'd seen him less than twelve hours before.

"They're encysting," he gasped. "They're turning into cocoons or

chrysalises or..."

I sat up quickly. "That one we found out there in the field!"

He nodded.

"Fullerton?" I asked

"We'll go out and see, all five of us, leaving the camp and animals alone."

We had some trouble finding it because the land was so flat and featureless that there were no landmarks.

But finally we located it, just as dusk

was setting in. The ball had split
in two - not in a clean break, in a
jagged one. It looked like an egg after
a chicken has been hatched. And the
halves lay there in the gathering
darkness, in the silence underneath
the sudden glitter of the stars - a
last farewell and a new beginning and
a terrible alien fact.

I tried to say something, but my brain
was so numb that I was not entirely
sure just what I should say. Anyhow,
the words died in the dryness of my
mouth and the thickness of my tongue
before I could get them out.

For it was not only the two halves of

the cocoon - it was the marks within
that hollow, the impression of what
had been there, blurred and distorted
by the marks of what it had become.

We fled back to camp.

Someone, I think it was Oliver, got the
lantern lighted. We stood uneasily,
unable to look at one another,
knowing that the time was past for all
dissembling, that there was no use of
glossing over or denying what we'd
seen in the dim light in the gully.

"Bob is the only one who has a
chance," Kemper finally said, speaking
more

concisely than seemed possible. "I think be should leave right now.

Someone

must get back to Caph. Someone has to tell them."

He looked across the circle of lantern light at me.

'Well," he said sharply, "get going! What's the matter with you?'

"You were right," I said, not much more than whispering. "Remember how you

wondered about a defense mechanism?"

"They have it," Weber agreed. "The best you can find. There's no beating them. They don't fight you. They absorb you. They make you into them. No

wonder there are just the critters here. No wonder the planet's ecology is simple. They have you pegged and measured from the instant you set foot on the planet. Take one drink of water. Chew a single grass stem. Take one bite of critter. Do any one of these things and they have you cold."

Oliver came out of the dark and walked across the lantern-lighted circle. He stopped in front of me.

"Here are your diet kit and notes," he said.

"But I can't run out on you!"

"Forget us!" Parsons barked at me.
"We aren't human any more. In a few
more
days..."

He grabbed the lantern and strode
down the cages and held the lantern high,
so that we could see.

"Look," he said.

There were no animals. There were
just the cocoons and the little critters

and the cocoons that had split in half.

I saw Kemper looking at me and there was, of all things, compassion on his face.

"You don't want to stay," he told me. "If you do, in a day or two, a critter will come in and drop dead for you. And you'll go crazy all the way back home - wondering which one of us it was."

He turned away then. They all turned away from me and suddenly it seemed I was all alone.

Weber had found an axe somewhere and he started walking down the row of cages, knocking off the bars to let the little critters out.

I walked slowly over to the ship and stood at the foot of the ladder, holding the notes and the diet kit tight against my chest.

When I got there, I turned around and looked back at them and it seemed I couldn't leave them.

I thought of all we'd been through together and when I tried to think of specific things, the only thing I could think about was how they always

kidded me about the diet kit.

And I thought of the times I had to leave and go off somewhere and eat alone so that I couldn't smell the food. I thought of almost ten years of eating that damn goo and that I could never eat like a normal human because of my ulcerated stomach.

Maybe they were the lucky ones, I told myself. If a man got turned into a critter, he'd probably come out with a whole stomach and never have to worry about how much or what he ate. The critters never ate anything except the grass, but maybe, I thought, that grass tasted just as good to them as

a steak or a pumpkin pie would taste to me.

So I stood there for a while and I thought about it. Then I took the diet kit and flung it out into the darkness as far as I could throw it and I dropped the notes to the ground.

I walked back into the camp and the first man I saw was Parsons.

"What have you got for supper?" I asked him.

Title : Final Gentleman

Author : Clifford D. Simak

Original copyright year: 1959

Genre : science fiction

Comments : to my knowledge, this
is the only available e-text of this book

Source : scanned and OCR-read
from a paperback edition with Xerox
TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS
Word 2000.

Date of e-text : February 5, 2000

Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights
reversed.

Final Gentleman

Clifford D. Simak

After thirty years and several
million words there finally came a day
when he couldn't write a line.

There was nothing more to say. He
had said it all.

The book, the last of many of them, had been finished weeks ago and would be published soon and there was an emptiness inside of him, a sense of having been completely drained away.

He sat now at the study window, waiting for the man from the news magazine to come, looking out across the wilderness of lawn, with its evergreens and birches and the gayness of the tulips. And he wondered why he cared that he would write no more, for certainly he had said a great deal more than most men in his trade and most of it more to the point than was usual, and cloaked though it was in fictional garb, he'd said

it with sincerity and, he hoped, convincingly.

His place in literature was secure and solid. And, perhaps, he thought, this was the way it should be - to stop now at the floodtide of his art rather than to go into his declining years with the sharp tooth of senility nibbling away the bright valor of his work.

And yet there remained the urge to write, an inborn feeling that to fail to write was treachery, although to whom it might be traitorous he had no idea. And there was more to it than that: An injured pride, perhaps, and a sense of panic such as the newly blind must feel.

Although that was foolishness, he told himself. In his thirty years of writing, he had done a lifetime's work. And he'd made a _good_ life of it. Not frivolous or exciting, but surely satisfying.

He glanced around the study and thought how a room must bear the imprint of the man who lives within it - the rows of calf-bound books, the decorous neatness of the massive oaken desk, the mellow carpet on the floor, the old chairs full of comfort, the sense of everything firmly and properly in place.

A knock came. 'Come in.' said

Harrington.

The door opened and old Adams stood there, bent shoulders, snow white hair - the perfect picture of the old retainer.

'It's the gentleman from _Situation_, sir.'

'Fine,' said Harrington. 'Will you show him in?'

It wasn't fine - he didn't want to see this man from the magazine. But the arrangements had been made many weeks before and there was nothing now but to go through with it.

The man from the magazine looked more like a businessman than a writer, and Harrington caught himself wondering how such a man could write the curt, penetrating journalistic prose which had made _Situation_ famous.

'John Leonard, sir,' said the man, shaking hands with Harrington.

'I'm glad to have you here,' said Harrington, falling into his pat pattern of hospitality. 'Won't you take this chair? I feel I know you people down there. I've read your magazine for years. I always read the Harvey column immediately it arrives.'

Leonard laughed a little. 'Harvey,' he said, 'seems to be our best known columnist and greatest attraction. All the visitors want to have a look at him.'

He sat down in the chair Harrington had pointed out.

'Mr. White,' he said, 'sends you his best wishes.'

'That is considerate of him,' said Harrington. 'You must thank him for me. It's been years since I have seen him.'

And thinking back upon it, he recalled that he'd met Preston White only

once, all of twenty years ago. The man, he remembered, had made a great impression upon him at the time - a forceful, driving, opinionated man, an exact reflection of the magazine he published.

'A few weeks ago,' said Leonard. 'I talked with another friend of yours. Senator Johnson Enright.'

Harrington nodded. 'I've known the senator for years and have admired him greatly. I suppose you could call it a dissimilar association. The senator and I are not too much alike.'

'He has a deep respect and

affection for you.'

'And I for him.' said Harrington.
'But this secretary of state business. I am concerned...'

'Yes?'

'Oh, he's the man for it, all right.'
said Harrington. 'or I would suppose he is. He is intellectually honest and he has a strange, hard streak of stubbornness and a rugged constitution, which is what we need. But there are considerations...'

Leonard showed surprise. 'Surely you do not...'

Harrington waved a weary hand. 'No, Mr. Leonard, I am looking at it solely from the viewpoint of a man who has given most of his life to the public service. I know that Johnson must look upon this possibility with something close to dread. There have been times in the recent past when he's been ready to retire, when only his sense of duty has kept him at his post.'

'A man,' said Leonard positively, 'does not turn down a chance to head the state department. Besides, Harvey said last week he would accept the post.'

'Yes, I know,' said Harrington. 'I read it in his column.'

Leonard got down to business. 'I won't impose too much upon your time,' he said. 'I've already done the basic research on you.'

'It's quite all right,' said Harrington. 'Take all the time you want. I haven't a single thing to do until this evening, when I have dinner with my mother.'

Leonard's eyebrows raised a bit. 'Your mother is still living?'

'Very spry.' said Harrington, 'for all she's eighty-three. A sort of Whistler's mother. Serene and beautiful.'

'You're lucky. My mother died when I was still quite young.'

'I'm sorry to hear of it,' said Harrington. 'My mother is a gentlewoman to her fingertips. You don't find many like her now. I am positive I owe a great deal of what I am to her. Perhaps the thing I'm proudest of is what your book editor, Cedric Madison, wrote about me quite some years ago. I sent a note to thank him at the time and I fully meant to look him up someday, although I never did. I'd like to meet the man.'

'What was it that he said?'

'He said, if I recall correctly, that I was the last surviving gentleman.'

'That's a good line.' Leonard said. 'I'll have to look it up. I think you might like Cedric. He may seem slightly strange at times, but he's a devoted man, like you. He lives in his office, almost day and night.'

Leonard reached into his briefcase and brought out a sheaf of notes, rustling through them until he found the page he wanted.

'We'll do a full-length profile on you,' he told Harrington. 'A cover and an inside spread with pictures. I know a

great deal about you, but there still are some questions, a few inconsistencies.'

'I'm not sure I follow you.'

'You know how we operate,' said Leonard. 'We do exhaustive checking to be sure we have the background facts, then we go out and get the human facts. We talk with our subject's boyhood chums, his teachers, all the people who might have something to contribute to a better understanding of the man himself. We visit the places he has lived, pick up the human story, the little anecdotes. It's a demanding job, but we pride ourselves on the way we do it.'

'And rightly so, young man.'

'I went to Wyalusing in Wisconsin,' said the man from the magazine. 'That's where the data said that you were born.'

'A charming place as I remember it,' said Harrington. 'A little town, sandwiched between the river and the hills.'

'Mr. Harrington.'

'Yes?'

'You weren't born there.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'There's no birth record at the county seat. No one remembers you.'

'Some mistake,' said Harrington. 'Or perhaps you're joking.'

'You went to Harvard, Mr. Harrington. Class of 27.'

'That is right. I did.'

'You never married, sir.'

'There was a girl. She died.'

'Her name,' said Leonard, 'was Cornelia Storm.'

'That was her name. The fact's not widely known.'

'We are thorough, Mr. Harrington, in our background work.'

'I don't mind,' said Harrington. 'It's not a thing to hide. It's just not a fact to flaunt.'

'Mr. Harrington.'

'Yes?'

'It's not Wyalusing only. It's all the rest of it. There is no record that you went to Harvard. There never was a girl

named Cornelia Storm.'

Harrington came straight out of his chair.

'That is ridiculous!' he shouted.
'What can you mean by it?'

'I'm sorry,' Leonard said. 'Perhaps I could have found a better way of telling you than blurting it all out. Is there anything -'

'Yes, there is,' said Harrington. 'I think you'd better leave.'

'Is there nothing I can do? Anything at all?'

'You've done quite enough,' said Harrington. 'Quite enough, indeed.'

He sat down in the chair again, gripping its arms with his shaking hands, listening to the man go out.

When he heard the front door close, he called to Adams to come in.

'Is there something I can do for you?' asked Adams.

'Yes. You can tell me who I am.'

'Why, sir,' said Adams, plainly puzzled, 'you're Mr. Hollis Harrington.'

'Thank you, Adams,' said Harrington. 'That's who I thought I was!'

Dusk had fallen when he wheeled the car along the familiar street and drew up to the curb in front of the old, white-pillared house set well back from the front of wide, tree-shaded grounds.

He cut the engine and got out, standing for a moment to let the sense of the street soak into him - the correct and orderly, the aristocratic street, a refuge in this age of materialism. Even the cars that moved along it, he told himself,

seemed to be aware of the quality of the street, for they went more slowly and more silently than they did on other streets and there was about them a sense of decorum one did not often find in a mechanical contraption.

He turned from the street and went up the walk, smelling in the dusk the awakening life of gardens in the springtime, and he wished that it were light for Henry, his mother's gardener, was quite famous for his tulips.

As he walked along the path, with the garden scent, he felt the strange sense of urgency and of panic drop away from him, for the street and house were in

themselves assurances that everything was exactly as it should be.

He mounted the brick steps and went across the porch and reached out his hand for the knocker on the door.

There was a light in the sitting room and he knew his mother would be there, waiting for him to arrive, but that it would be Tilda, hurrying from the kitchen, who would answer to his knock, for his mother did not move about as briskly as she had.

He knocked and waited and as he waited he remembered the happy days he'd spent in this house before he'd gone

to Harvard, when his father still was living. Some of the old families still lived here, but he'd not seen them for years, for on his visits lately he'd scarcely stirred outdoors, but sat for hours talking with his mother.

The door opened, and it was not Tilda in her rustling skirts and her white starched collar, but an utter stranger.

'Good evening,' he said. 'You must be a neighbor.'

'I live here.' said the woman.

'I can't be mistaken,' said Harrington. 'This is the residence of

Mrs. Jennings Harrington.'

'I'm sorry,' said the woman. 'I do not know the name. What was the address you were looking for?'

'2034 Summit Drive.'

'That's the number,' said the woman, 'but Harrington - I know of no Harringtons. We've lived here fifteen years and there's never been a Harrington in the neighborhood.'

'Madam,' Harrington said, sharply, 'this is most serious -'

The woman closed the door.

He stood on the porch for long moments after she had closed the door, once reaching out his hand to clang the knocker again, then withdrawing it. Finally he went back to the street.

He stood beside the car, looking at the house, trying to catch in it some unfamiliarity - but it was familiar. It was the house to which he'd come for years to see his mother; it was the house in which he'd spent his youth.

He opened the car door and slid beneath the wheel. He had trouble getting the key out of his pocket and his hand was shaking so that it took a long

time for him to insert it in the ignition lock.

He twisted the key and the engine started. He did not, however, drive off immediately, but sat gripping the wheel. He kept staring at the house and his mind hurled back the fact again and yet again that strangers had lived behind its walls for more than fifteen years.

Where, then, were his mother and her faithful Tilda? Where, then, was Henry, who was a hand at tulips? Where the many evenings he had spent in that very house? Where the conversations in the sitting room, with the birch and maple burning in the fireplace and the

cat asleep upon the hearth?

There was a pattern, he was reminded - a deadly pattern - in all that had ever happened to him; in the way that he had lived, in the books that he had written, in the attachments he had had and, perhaps, more important, the ones he had not had. There was a haunting quality that had lurked behind the scenes, just out of sight, for years, and there had been many times he'd been aware of it and wondered at it and tried to lay his fingers on it - but never a time when he'd ever been quite so acutely aware of it as this very moment.

It was, he knew, this haunted factor

in his life which kept him steady now, which kept him from storming up the walk again to hammer at the door and demand to see his mother.

He saw that he had stopped shaking, and he closed the window and put the car in gear.

He turned left at the next corner and began to climb, street after street.

He reached the cemetery in ten minutes' time and parked the car. He found the topcoat in the rear seat and put it on. For a moment, he stood beside the car and looked down across the town, to where the river flowed between the

hills.

This, he told himself, at least is real, the river and the town. This no one could take away from him, or the books upon the shelf.

He let himself into the cemetery by the postern gate and followed the path unerringly in the uncertain light of a sickle moon.

The stone was there and the shape of it unchanged; it was a shape, he told himself, that was burned into his heart. He knelt before it and put out his hands and laid them on it and felt the moss and lichens that had grown there and they

were familiar, too!

'Cornelia,' he said. 'You are still here, Cornelia.'

He fumbled in his pocket for a pack of matches and lit three of them before the fourth blazed up in a steady flame. He cupped the blaze between his hands and held it close against the stone.

A name was graven there.

It was not Cornelia Storm.

Senator Johnson Enright reached

out and lifted the decanter.

'No thanks,' said Harrington. 'This one is all I wish. I just dropped by to say hello. I'll be going in a minute.'

He looked around the room in which they sat and now he was sure of it - sure of the thing that he had come to find. The study was not the same as he had remembered it. Some of the bright was gone, some of the glory vanished. It was faded at the edges and it seemed slightly out of focus and the moose head above the mantle was somehow just a little shabby, instead of grand and notable.

'You come too seldom,' said the senator, 'even when you know that you are always welcome. Especially tonight. The family are all out and I'm a troubled man.'

'This business of the state department?'

Enright nodded. 'That is it exactly. I told the President, yes, I would take it if he could find no one else. I almost pleaded with him to find another man.'

'You could not tell him no?'

'I tried to,' said the senator. 'I did my best to tell him. I, who never in my

life have been at a loss for words. And I couldn't do it. Because I was too proud. Because through the years I have built up in me a certain pride of service that I cannot turn my back upon.'

The senator sat sprawling in his chair and Harrington saw that there was no change in him, as there had been in the room within which they sat. He was the same as ever - the iron-gray unruly mop of hair, the woodchopper face, the snaggly teeth, the hunched shoulders of a grizzly.

'You realize, of course,' said Enright, 'that I have been one of your most faithful readers.'

'I know,' said Harrington. 'I am proud of it.'

'You have a fiendish ability,' said the senator, 'to string words together with fishhooks hidden in them. They fasten into you and they won't let loose and you go around remembering them for days.'

He lifted up his glass and drank.

'I've never told you this before,' he said. 'I don't know if I should, but I suppose I'd better. In one of your books you said that the hallmark of destiny might rest upon one man. If that man

failed, you said, the world might well be lost.'

'I think I did say that. I have a feeling...'

'You're sure,' asked the senator, reaching for the brandy, 'that you won't have more of this?'

'No, thanks,' said Harrington.

And suddenly he was thinking of another time and place where he'd once gone drinking and there had been a shadow in the corner that had talked with him - and it was the first time he'd ever thought of that. It was something, it

seemed, that had never happened, that could not remotely have happened to Hollis Harrington. It was a happening that he would not - could not - accept, and yet there it lay cold and naked in his brain.

'I was going to tell you,' said the senator, 'about that line on destiny. A most peculiar circumstance, I think you will agree. You know, of course, that one time I had decided to retire.'

'I remember it,' said Harrington. 'I recall I told you that you should.'

'It was at that time,' said the senator, 'that I read that paragraph of

yours. I had written out a statement announcing my retirement at the completion of my term and intended in the morning to give it to the press. Then I read that line and asked myself what if I were that very man you were writing of. Not, of course, that I actually thought I was.'

Harrington stirred uneasily. 'I don't know what to say. You place too great a responsibility upon me.'

'I did not retire,' said the senator. 'I tore up the statement.'

They sat quietly for a moment, staring at the fire flaming on the hearth.

'And now,' said Enright, 'there is this other thing.'

'I wish that I could help,' said Harrington, almost desperately. 'I wish that I could find the proper words to say. But I can't, because I'm at the end myself. I am written out. There's nothing left inside me.'

And that was not, he knew, what he had wished to say. _I came here to tell you that someone else has been living in my mother's house for more than fifteen years, that the name on Cornelia's headstone is not Cornelia's name. I came here to see if this room had changed and

it has changed. It has lost some of its old baronial magic..._

But he could not say it. There was no way to say it. Even to so close a friend as the senator it was impossible.

'Hollis, I am sorry,' said the senator.

It was all insane, thought Harrington. He was Hollis Harrington. He had been born in Wisconsin. He was a graduate of Harvard and - what was it Cedric Madison had called him - the last surviving gentleman.

His life had been correct to the last

detail, his house correct, his writing most artistically correct - the result of good breeding to the fingertips.

Perhaps just slightly too correct. Too correct for this world of 1962, which had sloughed off the final vestige of the old punctilio.

He was Hollis Harrington, last surviving gentleman, famous writer, romantic figure in the literary world - and written out, wrung dry of all emotion, empty of anything to say since he had finally said all that he was capable of saying.

He rose slowly from his chair.

'I must be going, Johnson. I've stayed longer than I should.'

'There is something else,' said the senator. 'Something I've always meant to ask you. Nothing to do with this matter of myself. I've meant to ask you many times, but felt perhaps I shouldn't, that it might somehow...'

'It's quite all right,' said Harrington. 'I'll answer if I can.'

'One of your early books,' said the senator _'A Bone to Gnaw'_, I think.'

'That,' said Harrington, 'was many

years ago.'

'This central character,' said the senator. 'This Neanderthaler that you wrote about. You made him seem so human.'

Harrington nodded. 'That is right. That is what he was. He was a human being. Just because he lived a hundred thousand years ago -'

'Of course.' said the senator. 'You are entirely right. But you had him down so well. All your other characters have been sophisticates, people of the world. I have often wondered how you could write so convincingly of that kind of man

- an almost mindless savage.'

'Not mindless,' said Harrington. 'Not really savage. A product of his times. I lived with him for a long time, Johnson, before I wrote about him. I tried to put myself into his situation, think as he did, guess his viewpoint. I knew his fears and triumphs. There were times, I sometimes think, that I was close to being him.'

Enright nodded solemnly. 'I can well believe that. You really must be going? You're sure about that drink?'

'I'm sorry. Johnson. I have a long way to drive.'

The senator heaved himself out of the chair and walked with him to the door.

'We'll talk again,' he said, 'and soon. About this writing business. I can't believe you're at the end of it.'

'Maybe not,' said Harrington. 'It may all come back.'

But he only said this to satisfy the senator. He knew there was no chance that it would come back.

They said good-night and Harrington went trudging down the walk.

And that was wrong - in all his life, he'd never trudged before.

His car was parked just opposite the gate and he stopped beside it, staring in astonishment, for it was not his car.

His had been an expensive, dignified model, and this one was not only one of the less expensive kinds, but noticeably decrepit.

And yet it was familiar in a vague and tantalizing way.

And here it was again, but with a difference this time, for in this instance he was on the verge of accepting

unreality.

He opened the door and climbed into the seat. He reached into his pocket and found the key and fumbled for the ignition lock. He found it in the dark and the key clicked into it. He twisted, and the engine started.

Something came struggling up from the mist inside his brain. He could feel it struggle and he knew what it was. It was Hollis Harrington, final gentleman.

He sat there for a moment and in that moment he was neither final gentleman nor the man who sat in the ancient car, but a younger man and a far-

off man who was drunk and miserable.

He sat in a booth in the farthest, darkest corner of some unknown establishment that was filled with noise and smell and in a corner of the booth that was even darker than the corner where he sat was another one, who talked.

He tried to see the stranger's face, hut it either was too dark or there was no face to see. And all the time the faceless stranger talked.

There were papers on the table, a fragmented manuscript, and he knew it was no good and he tried to tell the

stranger how it was no good and how he wished it might be good, but his tongue was thick and his throat was choked.

He couldn't frame the words to say it, but he felt it inside himself - the terrible, screaming need of putting down on paper the conviction and belief that shouted for expression.

And he heard clearly only one thing that the stranger said.

'I am willing,' said the stranger, 'to make a deal with you.'

And that was all there was. There was no more to remember.

And there it stood - that ancient, fearsome thing - an isolated remembrance from some former life, an incident without a past or future and no connection with him.

The night suddenly was chilly and he shivered in the chill. He put the car in gear and pulled out from the curb and drove slowly down the street.

He drove for half an hour or more and he was still shivering from the chilly night. A cup of coffee, he thought, might warm him and he pulled the car up to the curb in front of an all-night quick-and-greasy. And realized with some

astonishment that he could not be more than a mile or two from home.

There was no one in the place except a shabby blonde who lounged behind the corner, listening to a radio.

He climbed up on a stool.

'Coffee, please,' he said and while he waited for her to fill the cup he glanced about the place. It was clean and cozy with the cigarette machines and the rack of magazines lined against the wall.

The blonde set the cup down in front of him.

'Anything else?' she asked, but he didn't answer, for his eye had caught a line of printing across the front of one of the more lurid magazines.

'Is that all?' asked the blonde again.

'I guess so,' said Harrington. 'I guess that's all I want.'

He didn't look at her; he was still staring at the magazine.

Across the front of it ran the glaring lines:

THE ENCHANTED WORLD OF HOLLIS HARRINGTON!

Cautiously he slid off the stool and stalked the magazine. He reached out quickly and snatched it from the rack before it could elude him. For he had the feeling, until he had it safely in his hand, that the magazine would be like all the rest of it, crazy and unreal. He took it back to the counter and laid it down and stared at the cover and the line stayed there. It did not change; it did not go away. He extended his thumb and rubbed the printed words and they were real enough.

He thumbed swiftly through the magazine and found the article and staring out at him was a face he knew to be his own, although it was not the kind of face he had imagined he would have - it was a somewhat younger, darker face that tended to untidiness, and beneath that face was another face that was without doubt a face of great distinction. And the caption that ran between them asked a question: _Which one of these men is really Hollis Harrington?_

There was as well a picture of a house that he recognized in all its ramshackleness and below it another picture of the same house, but highly

idealized, gleaming with white paint and surrounded by neatly tended grounds - a house with character.

He did not bother with the reading of the caption that ran between the houses. He knew what it would say.

And the text of the article itself:

_Is Hollis Harrington really more than a man? Is he in actuality the man he thinks he is, a man he has created out of his own mind, a man who moves in an incredibly enchanted world of good living and good manners? Or is this attitude no more than a carefully cultivated pose, an exceptional piece of

perfect showmanship? Or could it be that to write in the manner that he does, to turn out the sleekly tailored, thoughtful, often significant prose that he has been writing for more than thirty years, it is necessary that he create for himself another life than the one he really lives, that he has forced himself to accept this strange internal world of his and believe in it as a condition to his continued writing._

A hand came out and spread itself across the page so he could not read and he looked up quickly. It was the hand of the waitress and he saw there was a

shining in her eyes that was very close to tears.

'Mr. Harrington.' she said. 'Please, Mr. Harrington. Please don't read it, sir.'

'But, miss...'

'I told Harry that he shouldn't let them put in that magazine. I told him he should hide it. But he said you never came in here except on Saturdays.'

'You mean,' asked Harrington, 'that I've been here before?'

'Almost every Saturday,' she told him, surprised. 'Every Saturday for

years. You like our cherry pie. You always have a piece of our cherry pie.'

'Yes, of course,' he said.

But, actually, he had no inkling of this place, unless, good God, he thought, unless he had been pretending all the time that it was some other place, some goldplated eatery of very great distinction.

But it was impossible, he told himself, to pretend as big as that. For a little while, perhaps, but not for thirty years. No man alone could do it unless he had some help.

'I had forgotten,' he told the waitress. 'I'm somewhat upset tonight. I wonder if you have a piece of that cherry pie.'

'Of course,' the waitress said.

She took the pie off the shelf and cut a wedge and slid it on the plate. She put the plate down in front of him and laid a fork beside it.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Harrington,' she said. 'I'm sorry I didn't hide the magazine. You must pay no attention to it - or to anything. Not to any of the things that people say or what other people write. All of us around here are so proud

of you.'

She leaned across the counter toward him.

'You mustn't mind,' she said. 'You are too big to mind.'

'I don't believe I do,' said Hollis Harrington.

And that was the solemn truth, for he was too numb to care. There was in him nothing but a vast wonderment that filled his being so there was room for nothing else.

'I am willing,' the stranger in the

corner of the booth had told him many years ago. 'I am willing to make a deal with you.'

But of the deal he had no recollection, no hint of terms or of the purpose of it, although possibly he could guess.

He had written for all of thirty years and he had been well paid for it - not in cash and honor and acclaim alone - but in something else as well. In a great white house standing on a hill with a wilderness of grounds, with an old retainer out of a picture book, with a Whistler's mother, with a romantic bittersweetness tied to a gravestone

symbol.

But now the job was done and the pay had stopped and the make-believe had ended.

The pay had stopped and the delusions that were a part of it were gone. The glory and the tinsel had been stripped out of his mind. No longer could he see an old and battered car as a sleek, glossy machine. Now, once again, he could read aright the graving on a stone. And the dream of a Whistler's mother had vanished from his brain - but had been once so firmly planted that on this very evening he actually had driven to a house and an address that was a

duplicate of the one imprinted on his imagination.

He had seen everything, he realized, overlain by a grandeur and a lustre out of story books.

But was it possible, he wondered. Could it be made to work? Could a man in all sanity play a game of make-believe for thirty years on end? Or might he be insane?

He considered it calmly and it seemed unlikely, for no insanity could have written as he had written; that he _had_ written what he thought he had was proved by the senator's remarks

tonight.

So the rest had been make-believe; it could be nothing else. Make-believe with help from that faceless being, whoever he might be, who had made a deal with him that night so long ago.

Although, he thought, it might not take much help. The propensity to kid one's self was strong in the human race. Children were good at it; they became in all reality all the things they pretended that they were. And there were many adults who made themselves believe the things they thought they should believe or the things they merely wanted to believe for their peace of mind.

Surely, he told himself, it would be no great step from this kind of pretending to a sum total of pretending.

'Mr. Harrington,' asked the waitress, 'don't you like your pie?'

'Certainly,' said Harrington, picking up the fork and cutting off a bite.

So pretending was the pay, the ability to pretend without conscious effort a private world in which he moved alone. And perhaps it was even more than that - perhaps it was a prior

condition to his writing as he did, the exact kind of world and life in which it had been calculated, by whatever means, he would do his best.

And the purpose of it?

He had no idea what the purpose was.

Unless, of course, the body of his work was a purpose in itself.

The music in the radio cut off and a solemn voice said:

'We interrupt our program to bring you a bulletin. The Associated Press has

just reported that the White House has named Senator Johnson Enright as secretary of state. And now, we continue with our music....'

Harrington paused with a bite of pie poised on the fork, halfway to his mouth.

'The hallmark of destiny,' he quoted, 'may rest upon one man!'

'What was that you said, Mr. Harrington?'

'Nothing. Nothing, miss. Just something I remembered. It's really not important.'

Although, of course, it was.

How many other people in the world, he wondered, might have read a certain line out of one of his books? How many other lives might have been influenced in some manner from the reading of a phrase that he had written?

And had he had help in the writing of those lines? Did he have actual talent or had he merely written the thoughts that lay in other minds? Had he had help in writing as well as in pretending? Might that be the reason now he felt so written out?

But however that might be, it was all over now. He had done the job and he had been fired. And the firing of him had been as efficient and as thorough as one might well expect - all the mumbo-jumbo had been run in competent reverse, beginning with the man from the magazine this morning. Now here he sat, a humdrum human being perched upon a stool, eating cherry pie.

How many other humdrum humans might have sat, as he sat now, in how many ages past, released from their dream-life as he had been released, trying with no better luck than he was having to figure out what had hit them? How many others, even now, might still

be living out a life of make-believe as he had lived for thirty years until this very day?

For it was ridiculous, he realized, to suppose he was the only one. There would be no point in simply running a one-man make-believe.

How many eccentric geniuses had been, perhaps, neither geniuses nor eccentric until they, too, had sat in some darkened corner with a faceless being and listened to his offer?

Suppose - just suppose - that the only purpose in his thirty years had been that Senator Johnson Enright should not

retire from public life and thus remain available to head the state department now? Why, and to whom, could it be so important that one particular man got one certain post? And was it important enough to justify the use of one man's life to achieve another's end?

Somewhere, Harrington told himself, there had to be a clue. Somewhere back along the tangled skein of those thirty years there must be certain signposts which would point the way to the man or thing or organization, whatever it might be.

He felt dull anger stirring in him, a formless, senseless, almost hopeless

anger that had no direction and no focal point.

A man came in the door and took a stool one removed from Harrington.

'Hi, Gladys,' he bellowed.

Then he noticed Harrington and smote him on the back. 'Hi, there, pal,' he trumpeted. 'Your name's in the paper.'

'Quiet down, Joe,' said Gladys. 'What is it you want?'

'Gimme a hunk of apple pie and a cuppa coffee.'

The man, Harrington saw, was big and hairy. He wore a Teamsters badge.

'You said something about my name being in the paper.'

Joe slapped down a folded paper.

'Right there on the front page. The story there with your picture in it.'

He pointed a grease-stained finger.

'Hot off the press,' he yelped and burst into gales of laughter.

'Thanks,' said Harrington.

'Well, go ahead and read it,' Joe urged boisterously. 'Or ain't you interested.'

'Definitely,' said Harrington.

The headline said:

NOTED AUTHOR WILL RETIRE

'So you're quitting,' blared the driver. 'Can't say I blame you, pal. How many books you written?'

'Fourteen,' said Harrington.

'Gladys, can you imagine that! Fourteen books! I ain't even read that many books in my entire life...'

'Shut up, Joe,' said Gladys, banging down the pie and coffee.

The story said:

Hollis Harrington, author of See My Empty House, _which won him the Nobel prize, will retire from the writing field with the publication of his latest work_, Come Back, My Soul.

—The announcement will be made in this week's issue of— Situation Magazine, —under the byline of Cedric Madison, book editor.

Harrington feels, Madison writes, that he has finally, in his forthcoming book, rounded out the thesis which he commenced some thirty years and thirteen books ago...—

Harrington's hand closed convulsively upon the paper, crumpling it.

'Wassa matter, pal?'

'Not a thing,' said Harrington.

'This Madison is a jerk,' said Joe.

'You can't believe a thing he says. He is full of...'

'He's right,' said Harrington. 'I'm afraid he's right.' But how could he have known? He asked himself. How could Cedric Madison, that queer, devoted man who practically lived in his tangled office, writing there his endless stream of competent literary criticism, have known a thing like this? Especially, Harrington told himself, since he himself had not been sure of it until this very

morning.

'Don't you like your pie?' asked Joe. 'And your coffee's getting cold.'

'Leave him alone,' said Gladys, fiercely. 'I'll warm up his coffee.'

Harrington said to Joe: 'Would you mind if I took this paper?'

'Sure not, pal. I'm through with it. Sports is all I read.'

'Thanks,' said Harrington. 'I have a man to see.'

The lobby of the _Situation_ building was empty and sparkling - the bright, efficient sparkle that was the trademark of the magazine and the men who made it.

The 1-foot globe, encased in its circular glass shield, spun slowly and majestically, with the time-zone clocks ranged around its base and with the keyed-in world situation markers flashing on its surface.

Harrington stopped just inside the door and glanced around, bewildered and disturbed by the brightness and the glitter. Slowly he oriented himself. Over

there the elevators and beside them the floor directory board. There the information counter, now unoccupied, and just beyond it the door that was marked:

HARVEY

Visiting Hours

9 to 5 on Week Days

Harrington crossed to the directory and stood there, craning his neck, searching for the name. And found it.

CEDRIC MADISON... 317

He turned from the board and pressed the button for the elevator.

On the third floor the elevator stopped and he got out of it and to his right was the newsroom and to his left a line of offices flanking along hall.

He turned to the left and 317 was the third one down. The door was open and he stepped inside. A man sat behind a desk stacked high with books, while

other books were piled helter-skelter on the floor, and still others bulged the shelves upon the walls.

'Mr. Madison?' asked Harrington and the man looked up from the book that he was reading.

And suddenly Harrington was back again in that smoky, shadowed booth where long ago he'd bargained with the faceless being - but no longer faceless. He knew by the aura of the man and the sense of him, the impelling force of personality, the disquieting, obscene feeling that was a kind of psychic spoor.

'Why, Harrington!' cried the

faceless man, who now had taken on a face. 'How nice that you dropped in! It's incredible that the two of us...'

'Yes, isn't it,' said Harrington.

He scarcely knew he said it. It was, he realized, an automatic thing to say, a putting up of hands to guard against a blow, a pure and simple defense mechanism.

Madison was on his feet now and coming around the desk to greet him, and if he could have turned and run, Harrington would have fled. But he couldn't run; he was struck and frozen; he could make no move at all beyond the

automatic ones of austere politeness that had been drilled into him through thirty years of simulated aristocratic living.

He could feel his face, all stiff and dry with the urbane deadpan that he had affected - and he was grateful for it, for he knew that it would never do to show in any way that he had recognized the man.

'It's incredible that the two of us have never met,' said Madison, 'I've read so much of what you've written and liked so much everything I've read.'

'It's good of you to say so,' said the urbane, unruffled part of Harrington,

putting out his hand. 'The fault we have never met is entirely mine. I do not get around as much as I really should.'

He felt Madison's hand inside his own and closed his fingers on it in a sense of half-revulsion, for the hand was dry and cold and very like a claw. The man was vulture-like -the tight, dessicated skin drawn tight across the death-head face, the piercing, restless eyes, the utter lack of hair, the knife-like slash of mouth.

'You must sit down,' said Madison, 'and spend some time with me. There are so many things we have to talk about.'

There was just one empty chair; all the others overflowed with books. Harrington sat down in it stiffly, his mouth still dry with fear.

Madison scurried back behind the desk and hunched forward in his chair.

'You look just like your pictures,' he declared.

Harrington shrugged. 'I have a good photographer - my publisher insists.'

He could feel himself slowly coming back to life, recovering from the numbness, the two of him flowing back together into the single man.

'It seems to me,' he said, 'that you have the advantage of me there. I cannot recall I've ever seen your picture.'

Madison waved a waggish finger at him. 'I am anonymous,' he said. 'Surely you must know all editors are faceless. They must not intrude themselves upon the public consciousness.'

'That's a fallacy, no doubt,' Harrington declared, 'but since you seem to value it so much, I will not challenge you.'

And he felt a twinge of panic - the remark about editorial facelessness

seemed too pat to be coincidental.

'And now that you've finally come to see me,' Madison was saying, 'I fear it may be in regard to an item in the morning papers.'

'As a matter of fact,' Harrington said smoothly, 'that is why I'm here.'

'I hope you're not too angry.'

Harrington shook his head. 'Not at all. In fact, I came to thank you for your help in making up my mind. I had considered it, you see. It was something I told myself I should do, but...'

'But you were worried about an implied responsibility. To your public, perhaps; perhaps even to yourself.'

'Writers seldom quit,' said Harrington, 'At least not voluntarily. It didn't seem quite cricket.'

'But it was obvious,' protested Madison. 'It seemed so appropriate a thing for you to do, so proper and so called-for, that I could not resist. I confess I may have wished somewhat to influence you. You've tied up so beautifully what you set out to say so many years ago in this last book of yours that it would be a shame to spoil it by attempting to say more. It would be

different, of course, if you had need of money from continued writing, but your royalties-'

'Mr. Madison, what would you have done if I had protested?'

'Why, then,' said Madison, 'I would have made the most abject apology in the public prints. I would have set it all aright in the best manner possible.'

He got up from the desk and scrabbled at a pile of books stacked atop a chair.

'I have a review copy of your latest book right here,' he said. 'There are a

few things in it I'd like to chat about with you...'

He's a clue, thought Harrington, watching him scrabble through the books - but that was all he was. There was more, Harrington was sure, to this business, whatever it might be, than Cedric Madison.

He must get out of here, he knew, as quickly as he could, and yet it must be done in such a manner as not to arouse suspicion. And while he remained, he sternly warned himself, he must play his part as the accomplished man of letters, the final gentleman.

'Ah, here it is!' cried Madison in triumph.

He scurried to the desk, with the book clutched in his hand.

He leafed through it rapidly.

Now, here, in chapter six, you said...'

The moon was setting when Harrington drove through the massive gates and up the curving driveway to the white and stately house perched upon its hill.

He got out of the car and mounted the broad stone steps that ran up to the house. When he reached the top, he halted to gaze down the moon-shadowed slope of grass and tulips, whitened birch and darkened evergreen, and he thought it was the sort of thing a man should see more often - a breathless moment of haunting beauty snatched from the cycle that curved from birth to death.

He stood there, proudly, gazing down the slope, letting the moonlit beauty, the etching of the night soak into his soul.

This, he told himself, was one of

those incalculable moments of experience which one could not anticipate, or afterwards be able to evaluate or analyze.

He heard the front door open and slowly turned around.

Old Adams stood in the doorway, his figure outlined by the night lamp on the table in the hall. His snow-white hair was ruffled, standing like a halo round his head, and one frail hand was clutched against his chest, holding together the ragged dressing gown he wore.

'You are late, sir,' said Adams. 'We

were growing a bit disturbed.'

'I am sorry,' said Harrington. 'I was considerably delayed.'

He mounted the stoop and Adams stood aside as he went through the door.

'You're sure that everything's all right, sir?'

'Oh, quite all right,' said Harrington. 'I called on Cedric Madison down at _Situation_. He proved a charming chap.'

'If it's all right with you, sir. I'll go back to bed. Knowing you are safely in,

I can get some sleep.'

'It's quite all right,' said Harrington.
'Thanks for waiting up.'

He stood at the study door and watched Adams trudge slowly up the stairs, then went into the study, turning on the lights.

The place closed in around him with the old familiarity, with the smell of comfort and the sense of being home, and he stood gazing at the rows of calf-bound books, and the ordered desk, the old and home-like chairs, the worn, mellow carpet.

He shrugged out of his topcoat and tossed it on a chair and became aware of the folded paper bulging in his jacket pocket.

Puzzled, he pulled it out and held it in front of him and the headline hit him in the face:

The room changed, a swift and subtle changing. No longer the ordered sanctuary, but a simple workroom for a writing man. No longer the calf-bound volumes in all their elegance upon the shelves, but untidy rows of tattered, dog-eared books. And the carpet was neither worn nor mellow; it was utilitarian and almost brand new.

'My God!' gasped Harrington, almost prayerfully.

He could feel the perspiration breaking out along his forehead and his hands suddenly were shaking and his knees like water.

For he had changed as well as the room had changed; the room had changed because of the change in him.

He was no longer the final gentleman, but that other, more real person he had been this evening. He was himself again; had been jerked back to himself again, he knew, by the headlines

in the paper.

He glanced around the room and knew that it finally was right, that all its starkness was real, that this had been the way the room had always been, even when he had made it into something more romantic.

He had found himself this very evening after thirty years and then - he sweat as he thought about it - and then he had lost himself again, easily and without knowing it, without a twitch of strangeness.

He had gone to see Cedric Madison, with this very paper clutched

within his hands, had gone without a clear purpose - almost, he told himself, as if he were being harried there. And he had been harried for too long. He had been harried into seeing a room different than it was; he had been made to read a myth-haunted name upon a strange gravestone; he had been deluded into thinking that he had supper often with his mother who had long been dead; he had been forced to imagine that a common quick-and-greasy was a famous eatery - and, of course, much more than that.

It was humiliating to think upon, but there was more than mere humiliation - there was a method and a purpose and now it was important, most immediately

important, to learn that method and that purpose.

He dropped the paper on the floor and went to the liquor cabinet and got a bottle and a glass. He sloshed liquor in the glass and gulped it.

You had to find a place to start, he told himself, and you worked along from there - and Cedric Madison was a starting point, although he was not the whole of it. No more, perhaps, than a single clue, but at least a starting point.

He had gone to see Cedric Madison and the two of them had sat and talked much longer than he planned, and

somewhere in that talk he'd slid smoothly back into the final gentleman.

He tried to drive his mind and memory along the pathway of those hours, seeking for some break, hunting for the moment he had changed, but there was nothing. It ironed out flat and smooth.

But somewhere he had changed, or more likely had been changed, back into the masquerade that had been forced upon him long years in the past.

And what would be the motive of that masquerade? What would be the reason in changing a man's life, or, more

probably, the lives of many men?

A sort of welfare endeavor, perhaps. A matter of rampant do-goodism, an expression of the itch to interfere in other people's lives.

Or was there here a conscious, well-planned effort to change the course of world events, so to alter the destiny of mankind as to bring about some specific end-result? That would mean that whoever, or whatever, was responsible possessed a sure method of predicting the future, and the ability to pick out the key factors in the present which must be changed in order effectively to change that future in the desired direction.

From where it stood upon the desk the phone snarled viciously.

He swung around in terror, frightened at the sound. The phone snarled a second time.

He strode to the desk and answered. It was the senator.

'Good,' said the senator. 'I did not get you up.'

'No. I was just getting ready to turn in.'

'You heard the news, of course.'

'On the radio,' said Harrington.

'The White House called...'

'And you had to take it.'

'Yes, of course, but then...'

There was a gulping, breathing sound at the other end as if the senator were on the verge of strangling.

'What's the matter, Johnson? What is going -'

'Then,' said the senator, 'I had a visitor.'

Harrington waited.

'Preston White,' said the senator.

'You know him, of course.'

'Yes. The publisher of _Situation_.'

'He was conspiratorial,' said the senator. 'And a shade dramatic. He talked in whispers and very confidentially. As if the two of us were in some sort of deal.'

'But what -'

'He offered me,' said the senator, almost strangling with rare, 'the

exclusive use of Harvey -'

Harrington interrupted, without knowing why - almost as if he feared to let the senator go on.

'You know,' he said, 'I can remember many years ago - I was just a lad - when Harvey was installed down in the _Situation_ office.'

And he was surprised at how well he could remember it - the great hurrah of fanfare. Although at that time, he recalled, no one had put too much credence in the matter, for _Situation_ was then notorious for its circulation stunts. But it was different now. Almost

everyone read the Harvey column and even in the most learned of circles it was quoted as authority.

'Harvey!' spat the senator. 'A geared-up calculator! A mechanical predictor!'

And that was it, Harrington thought wildly. That was the very thing for which he had been groping!

For Harvey was a predictor. He predicted every week and the magazine ran a column of the predictions he spewed out.

'White was most persuasive,' said

the senator. 'He was very buddy-buddy. He placed Harvey at my complete disposal. He said that he would let me see all the predictions that he made immediately he made them and that he'd withhold from publication any that I wished.'

'It might be a help, at that,' said Harrington.

For Harvey was good. Of that there was no question. Week after week he called the shots exactly, right straight down the line.

'I'll have none of it!' yelled the senator. 'I'll have no part of Harvey. He

is the worst thing that could have happened so far as public opinion is concerned. The human race is entirely capable, in its own good judgment, of accepting or rejecting the predictions of any human pundit. But our technological society has developed a conditioning factor that accepts the infallibility of machines. It would seem to me that Situation, in using an analytical computer, humanized by the name of Harvey, to predict the trend of world events, is deliberately preying upon public gullibility. And I'll have no part of it. I will not be tarred with -'

'I knew White was for you,' said Harrington. 'I knew he favored your

appointment, but -'

'Preston White,' said the senator, 'is a dangerous man. Any powerful man is a dangerous man, and in our time the man who is in a position to mold public opinion is the most powerful of them all. I can't afford to be associated with him in any way at all. Here I stand, a man of some forty years of service, without, thank God, a single smudge upon me. What would happen to me if someone came along and pegged this man White - but good? How would I stand then?'

'They almost had him pegged.' said Harrington, 'that time years ago when the congressional committee investigated

him. As I remember, much of the testimony at that time had to do with Harvey.'

'Hollis,' said the senator. 'I don't know why I trouble you. I don't know why I phoned you. Just to blow off steam, I guess.'

'I am glad you did,' said Harrington. 'What do you intend to do?'

'I don't know,' said the senator. 'I threw White out, of course, so my hands theoretically are clean, but it's all gone sour on me. I have a vile taste in my mouth.'

'Sleep on it,' said Harrington.
'You'll know better in the morning.'

'Thanks, Hollis, I think I will,' said the senator. 'Good night.'

Harrington put up the phone and stood stiff beside the desk.

For now it all was crystal clear. Now he knew without a doubt exactly who it was that had wanted Enright in the state department.

It was precisely the kind of thing, he thought, one could expect of White.

He could not imagine how it had

been done - but if there had been a way to do it, White would have been the one to ferret out that way.

He'd engineered it so that Enright, by reading a line out of a book, had stayed in public life until the proper time had come for him to head the state department.

And how many other men, how many other situations, stood as they did tonight because of the vast schemings of one Preston White?

He saw the paper on the floor and picked it up and looked at the headline, then threw it down again.

They had tried to get rid of him, he thought, and it would have been all right if he'd just wandered off like an old horse turned out to pasture, abandoned and forgotten. Perhaps all the others had done exactly that. But in getting rid of him, in getting rid of anyone, they must have been aware of a certain danger. The only safe and foolproof way would have been to keep him on, to let him go on living as the final gentleman until his dying day.

Why had they not done that? Was it possible, for example, that there were limitations on the project, that the operation, whatever its purpose, had a

load capacity that was now crammed to its very limit? So that, before they could take on someone else, they must get rid of him?

If that were true, it very well could be there was a spot here where they were vulnerable.

And yet another thing, a vague remembrance from that congressional hearing of some years ago - a sentence and a picture carried in the papers at the time. The picture of a very puzzled man, one of the top technicians who had assembled Harvey, sitting in the witness chair and saying:

'But, senator, I tell you no analytical computer can be anywhere near as good as they claim Harvey is.'

And it might mean something and it might not. Harrington told himself, but it was something to remember, it was a hope to which to cling.

Most astonishing, he thought placidly, how a mere machine could take the place of thinking man. He had commented on that before, with some asperity, in one of his books - he could not recall which one. As Cedric Madison had said this very evening...

He caught himself in time.

In some dim corner of his brain an alarm was ringing, and he dived for the folded paper he had tossed onto the floor.

He found it, and the headline screamed at him and the books lost their calf-bound elegance and the carpeting regained its harsh newness, and he was himself once more.

He knelt, sobbing, on the floor, the paper clutched in a shaky hand.

No change, he thought, no warning!

And a crumpled paper the only

shield he had.

But a powerful shield, he thought.

Try it again! he screamed at Harvey. _Go ahead and try!_

Harvey didn't try.

It had _been_ Harvey. And, he told himself, of course he didn't know.

Defenseless, he thought, except for a folded paper with a headline set in 18 point caps.

Defenseless, with a story that no one would believe even if he told it to

them.

Defenseless, with thirty years of eccentricity to make his every act suspect.

He searched his mind for help and there was no help. The police would not believe him and he had few friends to help, for in thirty years he had made few friends.

There was the senator - but the senator had troubles of his own.

And there was something else - there was a certain weapon that could be used against him. Harvey only had to

wait until he went to sleep. For if he went to sleep, there was no doubt he'd wake the final gentleman and more than likely then remain the final gentleman, even more firmly the final gentleman than he'd ever been before. For if they got him now, they'd never let him go.

He wondered, somewhat vaguely, why he should fight against it so. The last thirty years had not been so bad; the way they had been passed would not be a bad way, he admitted. being honest with himself, to live out the years that he had left in him.

But the thought revolted him as an insult to his very humanness. He had a

right to be himself, perhaps even an obligation to remain himself, and he felt a deep-banked anger at the arrogance that would make him someone else.

The issue was straightly drawn, he knew. Two facts were crystal clear: Whatever he did, he must do himself; he must expect no help. And he must do it now before he needed sleep.

He clambered to his feet, with the paper in his hand, squared his shoulders and turned toward the door. But at the door he halted, for a sudden, terrible truth had occurred to him.

Once he left the house and went out

into the darkness, he would be without his shield. In the darkness the paper would be worthless since he would not be able to read the headline.

He glanced at his watch and it was just after three. There were still three hours of darkness and he couldn't wait three hours.

He needed time, he thought. He must somehow buy some time. Within the next few hours he must in some way manage to smash or disable Harvey. And while that, he admitted to himself, might not be the whole answer, it would give him time.

He stood beside the door and the thought came to him that he might be wrong - that it might not be Harvey or Madison or White. He had put it all together in his mind and now he'd managed to convince himself. He might, he realized, have hypnotized himself almost as effectively as Harvey or someone else had hypnotized him thirty years ago.

Although probably it had not been hypnotism.

But whatever it might be, he realized, it was a bootless thing to try to thresh out now. There were more immediate problems that badly needed

solving.

First of all he must devise some other sort of shield. Defenseless, he'd never reach the door of the _Situation_ lobby.

Association, he thought - some sort of association - some way of reminding himself of who and what he was. Like a string around his finger, like a jingle in his brain.

The study door came open and old Adams stood there, clutching his ragged robe together.

'I heard someone talking, sir.'

'It was I.' said Harrington. 'On the telephone.'

'I thought, perhaps,' said Adams, 'someone had dropped in. Although it's an unearthly time of night for anyone to call.'

Harrington stood silent, looking at old Adams, and he felt some of his grimness leave him - for Adams was the same. Adams had not changed. He was the only thing of truth in the entire pattern.

'If you will pardon me,' said Adams, 'your shirt tail's hanging out.'

'Thanks,' said Harrington. 'I hadn't noticed. Thanks for telling me.'

'Perhaps you had better get on to bed, sir. It is rather late.'

'I will,' said Harrington, 'in just another minute.' He listened to the shuffling of old Adams' slippers going down the hall and began tucking in his shirt tail.

And suddenly it struck him: Shirt tails - they'd be better than a string!

For anyone would wonder, even the final gentleman would wonder, why his

shirt tails had a knot in them.

He stuffed the paper in his jacket pocket and tugged the shirt tails entirely free. He had to loosen several buttons before there was cloth enough to make a satisfactory knot.

He made it good and hard, a square knot so it wouldn't slip, and tight enough so that it would have to be untied before he took off the shirt.

And he composed a silly line that went with the knotted shirt tails:

__ I tie this knot because I'm not the
final gentleman.__

He went out of the house and down
the steps and around the house to the
shack where the garden tools were kept.

He lighted matches until he found
the maul that he was looking for. With it
in his hand, he went back to the car.

And all the time he kept repeating
to himself the line:

__ I tie this knot, because I'm not the
final gentleman.__

The __Situation__ lobby was as
brilliant as he remembered it and as
silent and deserted and he headed for the
door that said HARVEY on it.

He had expected that it would be
locked, but it wasn't, and he went
through it and closed it carefully behind
him.

He was on a narrow catwalk that
ran in a circle, with the wall behind him
and the railing out in front. And down in

the pit circled by the catwalk was something that could be only Harvey.

Hello, son, it said, or seemed to say, inside his brain.

Hello, son. I'm glad that you've come home again.

He stepped forward to the railing eagerly and leaned the maul against it and gripped the railing with both hands to stare down into the pit, enveloped in the feel of father-love that welled up from the thing that squatted in the pit - the old pipe-tweed coat-grizzled whisker love he'd forgotten long ago.

A lump came in his throat and tears smarted in his eyes and he forgot the barren street outside and all the lonely years.

The love kept welling up - the love and understanding and the faint amusement that he should have expected anything but love from an entity to which he had been tied so intimately for all of thirty years.

__You did a good job, son.I am proud of you. I'm glad that you've come home to me again.__

He leaned across the railing, yearning toward the father squatting in

the pit, and one of the rails caught against the knotted shirt tail and shoved it hard against his belly.

Reflexes clicked within his brain and he said, almost automatically: _I tie this knot because I'm not_

And then he was saying it consciously and with fervor, like a single chant.

I tie this knot because I'm not the final gentleman.

I tie this knot because I'm not...

He was shouting now and the sweat

streamed down his face and he fought like a drunken man to push back from the railing, and still he was conscious of the father, not insistent, not demanding, but somewhat hurt and puzzled by this ingratitude.

Harrington's hand slipped from the top rail and the fingers touched the handle of the maul and seized and closed upon it and lifted it from the floor to throw.

But even as he lifted it, the door catch snicked behind him and he swung around.

Cedric Madison stood just inside

the door and his death-head face wore a look of utter calm.

'Get him off my back!' yelled Harrington. 'Make him let loose of me or I will let you have it.'

And was surprised to find that he meant every word of it, that a man as mild as he could find it in his heart to kill another man without a second thought.

'All right,' said Madison, and the father-love was gone and the world stood cold and hard and empty, with just the two of them standing face to face.

'I'm sorry that this happened, Harrington. You are the _first_...'

'You took a chance,' said Harrington. 'You tried to turn me loose. What did you expect I would do - moon around and wonder what had happened to me?'

'We'll take you back again. It was a pleasant life. You can live it out,'

'I have no doubt you would. You and White and all the rest of -'

Madison sighed, a very patient sigh. 'Leave White out of this,' he said. 'The poor fool thinks that Harvey...'

He stopped what he meant to say and chuckled.

'Believe me, Harrington, it's a slick and foolproof setup. It is even better than the oracle at Delphi.'

He was sure of himself, so sure that it sent a thrill of apprehension deep through Harrington, a sense of being trapped, of being backed into a corner from which he never could escape.

They had him cold, he thought, between the two of them - Madison in front and Harvey at his rear. Any second now Harvey would throw another punch

at him and despite all that he had said, despite the maul he gripped, despite the knotted shirt tails and the silly rhyme, he had grave doubts that he could fight it off.

'I am astonished that you are surprised,' Madison was saying smoothly. 'For Harvey has been in fact a father to you for all these many years, or the next thing to a father, maybe better than a father. You've been closer to him, day and night, than you've ever been to any other creature. He has watched over you and watched out for you and guided you at times and the relationship between the two of you has been more real than you can ever guess.'

'But why?' asked Harrington and he was seeking furiously for some way out of this, for some defense that might be more substantial than a knotted shirt.

'I do not know how to say this so you will believe it,' Madison told him earnestly, 'but the father-feeling was no trick at all. You are closer at this moment to Harvey and perhaps even to myself than you can ever be to any other being. No one could work with you as long as Harvey worked with you without forming deep attachments. He, and I, have no thought but good for you. Won't you let us prove it?'

Harrington remained silent, but he was wavering - even when he knew that he should not waver. For what Madison had said seemed to make some sense.

'The world,' said Madison, 'is cold and merciless. It has no pity for you. You've not built a warm and pleasant world and now that you see it as it is no doubt you are repelled by it. There is no reason you should remain in it. We can give you back the world you've known. We can give you security and comfort. Surely you would be happy then. You can gain nothing by remaining as you are. There is no disloyalty to the human race in going back to this world you love. Now you can neither hurt nor harm

the race. Your work is done...'

'No!' cried Harrington.

Madison shook his head. 'Your race is a queer one, Harrington.'

'My race!' yelled Harrington. 'You talk as if -'

'There is greatness in you,' said Madison, 'but you must be pushed to bring it out. You must be cheered and coddled, you must be placed in danger, you must be given problems. You are like so many children. It is my duty, Harrington, my sworn, solemn duty to bring out the greatness in you. And I will

not allow you nor anyone to stand against the duty.'

And the truth was there, screaming through the dark, dread corridors of belated recognition. It had been there all the time, Harrington told himself, and he should have seen it.

He swung up the maul in a simple reflex action, as a gesture of horror and revulsion, and he heard his screaming voice as if it were some other voice and not his own at all:

'Why, damn you, you aren't even human!'

And as he brought the maul up in its arc and forward, Madison was weaving to one side so that the maul would miss, and his face and hands were changing and his body, too - although changing was perhaps not the word for it. It was a relaxing, rather, as if the body and the face and hands that had been Madison were flowing back again into their normal mould after being held and imprisoned into human shape. The human clothes he wore ripped apart with the pressure of the change and hung on him in tatters.

He was bigger, or he seemed to be, as if he had been forced to compress his bigness to conform to human standards,

but he was humanoid and there was no essential change in his skull-like face beyond its taking on a faintly greenish cast.

The maul clanged to the floor and skidded on the steel face of the catwalk and the thing that had been Madison was slouching forward with the alien sureness in it. And from Harvey poured a storm of anger and frustration - a father's storming anger at a naughty child which must now stand in punishment. And the punishment was death, for no naughty child must bar the great and solemn duty of a sworn and dedicated task. In that storming fury, even as it rocked his mind, Harrington sensed an

essential oneness between machine and alien, as if the two moved and thought in unison.

And there was a snarling and a coughing sound of anger and Harrington found himself moving toward the alien thing with his fingers spread and his muscles tensed for the seizing and the rending of this enemy from the darkness that extended out beyond the cave. He was shambling forward on bowed and sturdy legs and there was fear deep-rooted in his mind, a terrible, shriveling fear that drove him to his work. But above and beyond that fear there was as well the knowledge of the strength within his own brute body.

For a moment he was aghast at the realization that the snarling and the coughing was coming from himself and that the foam of fighting anger was dripping from his jaws. Then he was aghast no longer, for he knew with surety who he was and all that he might have been or might ever have thought was submerged and swept away in sheer bestiality and the driving urge to kill.

His hands reached out and caught the alien flesh and tore at it and broke it and ripped it from the bones, and in the wild, black job of killing scarcely felt or noticed the raking of the other's talons or the stabbing of the beak.

There was a screaming somewhere, a piercing sound of pain and agony from some other place, and the job was done.

Harrington crouched above the body that lay upon the floor and wondered at the growling sounds which still rumbled in his throat.

He stood erect and held out his hands and in the dim light saw that they were stained with sticky red, while from the pit he heard Harvey's screams dwindle into moaning.

He staggered forward to the railing and looked down into the pit and streams

of some dark and stringy substance were pouring out of every crack and joint of Harvey - as if the life and intelligence were draining out of him.

And somewhere a voice (a voice?) was saying: You fool! Now look at what you've done! _What will happen to you now?_

'We'll get along,' said Harrington, not the final gentleman, nor yet Neanderthaler.

There was a gash along one arm and the blood was oozing out and soaking the fabric of his torn coat and one side of his face was wet and sticky,

but he was all right,

We kept you on the road, said the dying voice, now faint and far away.

We kept you on it for so many ages...

Yes, thought Harrington. Yes, my friend, you're right. Once the Delphian oracle and how many cons before that?

And clever - once an oracle and in this day an analytical computer. And where in the years between - in monastery? in palace? in some counting house?

Although, perhaps, the operation need not have been continuous. Perhaps

it was only necessary at certain crisis points.

And what the actual purpose? To guide the toddling footsteps of humanity, make man think as they wanted him to think? Or to shape humanity to the purpose of an alien race? And what the shape of human culture if there had been no interference?

And he, himself, he wondered - was he the summer-up, the man who had been used to write the final verdict of the centuries of patterning? Not in his words, of course, but in the words of these other two - the one down in the pit, the other on this catwalk. Or were there

two of them? Might there have been only one? Was it possible, he wondered, that they were the same - the one of them no more than an extension of the other? For when Madison had died, so had Harvey.

'The trouble with you, friend,' he said to the thing lying on the floor. 'was that you were too close to human in many ways yourself. You got too confident and you made mistakes.'

And the worst mistake of all had been when they'd allowed him to write a Neanderthaler into that early story.

He walked slowly toward the door and stopped at it for a moment to look

back at the twisted form that lay huddled on the floor. They'd find it in an hour or two and think at first, perhaps, that it was Madison. Then they'd note the changes and know that it could not be Madison. And they'd be puzzled people, especially since Madison himself would have disappeared. They'd wonder, too, what had happened to Harvey, who'd never work again. And they'd find the maul!

The maul! Good God, he thought. I almost left the maul! He turned back and picked it up and his mind was churning with the fear of what might have happened had he left it there. For his fingerprints would be all over it and the

police would have come around to find out what he knew.

And his fingerprints would be on the railing too, he thought. He'd have to wipe them off.

He took out his handkerchief and began to wipe the railing, wondering as he did it why he went to all the trouble, for there would be no guilt associated with this thing he'd done.

No guilt! he asked himself.

How could he be sure?

Had Madison been a villain or a

benefactor?

There was no way, he knew, that anyone could be sure.

Not yet, at least. Not so shortly after. And now perhaps there'd never be any way to know. For the human race had been set so firmly in the track that had been engineered for it, it might never deviate. For the rest of his days he'd wonder about the rightness and the wrongness of this deed he'd done.

He'd watch for signs and portents. He'd wonder if every piece of disturbing news he read might have been averted by this alien that now lay upon the floor.

He'd come fighting out of sleep at night, chased by nightmares of an idiot doom that his hand had brought about.

He finished polishing the railing and walked to the door. He polished the knob most carefully and shut the door behind him. And, as a final gesture, he untied the shirt tails.

There was no one in the lobby and no one in the street, and he stood looking up and down the street in the pale cold light of morning.

He cringed against it - against the morning light and against this street that was a symbol of the world. For there

seemed to him to be a crying in the street, a crying of his guilt.

There was a way, he knew, that he could forget all this - could wipe it from his mind and leave it all behind him. There was a path that even at this hour led to comfort and security and even, yes, to smugness, and he was tempted by it. For there was no reason that he shouldn't. There was no point in not doing it. No one except himself stood either to gain or to lose.

But he shook his head stubbornly, as if to scare the thought away.

He shifted the maul from one hand

to the other and stepped out to cross the street. He reached the car and opened the back door and threw the maul in on the floor.

And he stood there, empty-handed now, and felt the silence beating in long rolls, like relentless surf pounding through his head.

He put up his hands to keep his head from bursting and he felt a terrible weakness in him. He knew it was reaction -nerves suddenly letting go after being taut too long.

Then the stifling silence was no more than an overriding quietness. He

dropped his hands.

A car was coming down the street, and he watched it as it parked across from him a short distance up the street.

From it came the shrilling voice of a radio tuned high:

'... In his note to the President, refusing the appointment, Enright said that after some soul-searching he was convinced it would be better for the country and the world if he did not accept the post. In Washington, foreign policy observers and the diplomatic corps are reported in a dither. What, after all, they ask, could soul-searching

have to do with the state department?

'And here is another piece of news this morning that is likewise difficult to assess. Peking announces a reshuffling of its government, with known moderates taking over. While it is too early yet to say, the shift could result in a complete reversal of Red China's policies-'

The radio shut off abruptly and the man got from the car. He slammed the door behind him and went striding down the street.

Harrington opened the front door and climbed behind the wheel. He had the strangest sense that he had forgotten

something. He tried to remember what it was, but it was gone entirely.

He sat with his hands clutched upon the wheel and he felt a little shiver running through his body. Like a shiver of relief, although he could not imagine why he should feel relief.

Perhaps over that news about Enright. he told himself. For it was very good news. Not that Enright was the wrong man for the post, for he surely was the right one. But there came a time when a man had the right and duty to be himself entirely.

And the human race, he told

himself, had that same right.

And the shift of government in China was a most amazing thing. As if, he thought, evil geniuses throughout the world might be disappearing with the coming of the dawn.

And there was something about geniuses, he told himself, that he should remember. Something about how a genius came about.

But he could not recall it.

He rolled down the window of the car and sniffed the brisk, fresh breeze of morning. Sniffing it, he consciously

straightened his body and lifted up his chin. A man should do a thing like this more often, he told himself contentedly. There was something in the beginning of a day that sharpened up one's soul.

He put the car in gear and wheeled it out into the street.

Too bad about Madison, he thought. He was really, after all, a very decent fellow.

Hollis Harrington, final gentleman, drove down the morning street.

Title : The Golden Bugs
Author : Clifford D. Simak
Original copyright year: 1960
Genre : science fiction
Comments : to my knowledge, this
is the only available e-text of this book
Source : scanned and OCR-read

from a paperback edition with Xerox
TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS
Word 2000.

Date of e-text : February 20, 2000

Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights reversed.

The Golden Bugs

Clifford D. Simak

It started as a lousy day.

Arthur Belsen, across the alley, turned on his orchestra at six o'clock and brought me sitting up in bed.

I'm telling you, Belsen makes his living as an engineer, but music is his passion. And since he is an engineer, he's not content to leave well enough alone. He had to mess around.

A year or two before he'd had the idea of a robotic symphony, and the man has talent, you have to give him that. He went to work on this idea and designed machines that could read--not only play,

but read--music from a tape, and he built a machine to transcribe the tapes. Then he built a lot of these music machines in his basement workshop.

And he tried them out!

It was experimental work, quite understandably, and there was redesigning and adjusting to be done, and Belsen was finicky about the performance that each machine turned out. So he tried them out a lot--and loudly--not being satisfied until he had the instrumentation just the way he thought it should be.

There had been some idle talk in

the neighborhood about a lynching party, but nothing came of it. That's the trouble, one of the troubles, with this neighborhood of ours--they'll talk an arm off you, but never do a thing.

As yet no one could see an end to all the Belsen racket. It had taken him better than a year to work up the percussion section and that was bad enough. But now he'd started on the strings and that was even worse.

Helen sat up in bed beside me and put her hands up to her ears, but she couldn't keep from hearing. Belsen had it turned up loud, to get, as he would tell you, the feel of it.

By this time, I figured, he probably had the entire neighborhood awake.

'Well, that's it," I said, starting to get up.

"You want me to get breakfast?"

"You might as well," I said. "No one's going to get any sleep with that thing turned on."

While she started breakfast, I headed for the garden back of the garage to see how the dahlias might be faring. I don't mind telling you I was delighted with those dahlias. It was nearly fair

time and there were some of them that would be at bloom perfection just in time for showing.

I started for the garden, but I never got there. That's the way it is in this neighborhood. A man will start to do something and never get it done because someone always catches him and wants to talk a while.

This time it was Dobby. Dobby is Dr. Darby Wells, a venerable old codger with white chin whiskers, and he lives next door. We all call him Dobby and he doesn't mind a bit, for in a way it's a badge of tribute to the man. At one time Dobby had been an entomologist of

some repute at the university and it had been his students who had hung the name on him. It was no corruption of his regular name, but stemmed rather from his one-time interest in mud-dauber wasps.

But now Dobby was retired, with nothing in the world to do except hold long and aimless conversations with anyone he could manage to nail down.

As soon as I caught sight of him, I knew I was sunk.

"I think it's admirable," said Dobby, leaning on his fence and launching into full-length discussion as

soon as I was in voice distance, "for a man to have a hobby. But I submit it's inconsiderate of him to practice it so noisily at the crack of dawn."

"You mean that," I said, making a thumb at the Belsen house, from which the screeching and the caterwauling still issued in full force.

"Exactly," said Dobby, combing his white chin whiskers with an air of grave deliberation. "Now, mind me, not for a moment would I refuse the man the utmost admiration--"

"Admiration?" I demanded. There are occasions when I have a hard time

understanding Dobby. Not so much because of the pontifical way in which he talks as because of the way he thinks.

"Precisely," Debby told me. "Not for his machines, although they are electronic marvels, but for the way in which he engineers his tapes. The machine that he rigged up to turn out those tapes is a most versatile contraption. Sometimes it seems to be almost human."

"When I was a boy," I said, "we had player pianos and the pianos ran on tapes."

"Yes, Randall, you are right,"

admitted Dobby; "the principle was there, but the execution--think of the execution. All those old pianos had to do was tinkle merrily along, but Belsen has worked into his tapes the most delicate nuances."

"I must have missed them nuances," I told him, without any charity at all. "All I've heard is racket."

We talked about Belsen and his orchestra until Helen called me in for breakfast.

I had no sooner sat down than she dragged out her grievance list.

"Randall," she said, with determination, "the kitchen is positively crawling with grease ants again. They're so small you can hardly see them and all at once they're into everything."

"I thought you got rid of them," I said.

"I did. I tracked them to their nest and poured boiling water into it. But this time it's up to you."

"Sure thing," I promised. "I'll do it right away."

"That's what you said last time."

"I was ready to," I told her, "but you beat me to it."

"And that isn't all," she said. "There are those wasps up in the attic louvers. They stung the little Montgomery girl the other day."

She was getting ready to say more, but just then Billy, our eleven year old, came stumbling down the stairs.

"Look, Dad," he cried excitedly, holding out a small-size plastic box. "I have one here I've never seen before."

I didn't have to ask one what. I knew it was another insect. Last year it

had been stamp collecting and this year it was insects--and that's another thing about having an idle entomologist for a next door neighbor.

I took the box without enthusiasm.

"A ladybug," I said.

"No, it's not," said Billy. "It's too big to be a ladybug. And the spots are different and the color is all wrong. This one is gold and a ladybug is orange."

"Well, look it up," I said, impatiently. The kid will do anything to keep away from reading.

"I did," said Billy. "I looked all through the book and I couldn't find it."

"Oh, for goodness sakes," snapped Helen, "sit down and eat your breakfast. It's bad enough to be overrun with ants and wasps without you spending all your time catching other bugs."

"But, Mom, it's educational," protested Billy. "That's what Dr. Wells says. He says there are seven hundred thousand known families of insects..."

"Where did you find it, son?" I asked, a bit ashamed of how we both were jumping on him.

"Right in my room," said Billy.

"In the house!" screamed Helen.

"Ants aren't bad enough..."

"Soon as I get through eating, I'll show it to Dr. Wells."

"Now, don't you pester Dobby."

"I hope he pesters him a lot," Helen said, tight-lipped. "It was Dobby who got him started on this foolishness."

I handed back the box and Billy put it down beside his plate and started in on breakfast.

"Randall," Helen said, taking up her third point of complaint. "I don't know what I'm going to do with Nora."

Nora was the cleaning woman. She came in twice a week.

"What did she do this time?"

"It's what she doesn't do. She simply will not dust. She just waves a cloth around and that's all there is to it. She won't move a lamp or vase."

"Well, get someone else," I said.

"Randall, you don't know what you're talking about. Cleaning women

are hard to find and you can't depend on them. I was talking to Amy..."

I listened and made the appropriate replies. I've heard it all before.

As soon as I finished breakfast, I took off for the office. It was too early to see any prospects, but I had some policies to write up and some other work to do and I could use the extra hour or two.

Helen phoned me shortly after noon and she was exasperated.

"Randall," she said, without preamble, "someone has dumped a

boulder in the middle of the garden."

"Come again?" I said.

"You know. A big rock. It squashed down all the dahlias."

"Dahlias!" I yipped.

"And the funny thing about it is there aren't any tracks. It would take a truck to move a rock that big and..."

"Now, let's take this easy. How big, exactly, is this boulder?"

"It's almost as tall as I am."

"It's impossible!" I stormed. Then I tried to calm myself, "It's a joke," I said. "Someone played a joke."

I searched my mind for someone who might have done it and I couldn't think of anyone who'd go to all the trouble involved in that sort of joke. There was George Montgomery, but George was a sobersides. And Belsen, but Belsen was too wrapped up in music to be playing any jokes. And Dobby--it was inconceivable he'd ever play a joke.

"Some joke!" said Helen.

Nobody in the neighborhood, I told myself, would have done a trick like

that, Everyone knew I was counting on those dahlias to win me some more ribbons.

"I'll knock off early," I told her, "and see what can be done about it."

Although I knew there was precious little that could be done about it--just haul the thing away.

"I'll be over at Amy's," Helen said. "I'll try to get home early."

I went out and saw another prospect, but I didn't do too well. All the time I was thinking of the dahlias.

I knocked off work in the middle of the afternoon and bought a spray-can of insecticide at a drugstore. The label claimed it was effective against ants, roaches, wasps, aphids and a host of other pests.

At home, Billy was sitting on the steps.

"Hello, son. Nothing much to do?"

"Me and Tommy Henderson played soldier for a while, but we got tired of it."

I put the insecticide on the kitchen table, then headed for the garden. Billy

trailed listlessly behind me.

The boulder was there, squarely in the middle of the dahlia patch, and every bit as big as Helen said it was. It was a funny looking thing, not just a big slab-sided piece of rock, but a freckled looking job. It was a washed out red and almost a perfect globe.

I walked around it, assessing the damage. There were a few of the dahlias left, but the better ones were gone. There were no tracks, no indication of how the rock might have gotten where it was. It lay a good thirty feet from the alleyway and someone might have used a crane to hoist it off a truck bed, but that seemed

most unlikely, for a heavy nest of utility wires ran along the alley.

I went up to the boulder and had a good, close look at it. The whole face of it was pitted with small, irregular holes, none of them much deeper than half an inch, and there were occasional smooth patches, with the darker luster showing, as if some part of the original surface had been knocked off. The darker, smoother patches had the shine of highly polished wax, and I remembered something from very long ago--when a onetime pal of mine had been a momentary rock collector.

I bent a little closer to one of the

smooth, waxy surfaces and it seemed to me that I could see the hint of wavy lines running in the stone.

"Billy," I asked, "would you know an agate if you saw one?"

"Gosh, Dad, I don't know. But Tommy would. He is a sort of rockhound. He's hunting all the time for different kinds of rocks."

He came up close and looked at one of the polished surfaces. He wet his thumb against his tongue and rubbed it across the waxy surface to bring out the satin of the stone.

"I don't know," he said, "but I think it is."

He backed off a ways and stared at the boulder with a new respect.

"Say, Dad, if it really is an agate--if it is one big agate, I mean, it would be worth a lot of money, wouldn't it?" "

"I don't know. I suppose it might be."

"A million dollars, maybe."

I shook my head. "Not a million dollars."

"I'll go get Tommy, right away," he said.

He went around the garage like a flash and I could hear him running down the driveway, hitting out for Tommy's place.

I walked around the boulder several times and tried to estimate its weight, but I had no knowledge I could go on.

I went back to the house and read the directions on the can of insecticide. I uncapped and tested it and the sprayer worked.

So I got down on my knees in front of the threshold of the kitchen door and tried to find the path the ants were using to come in. I couldn't see any of them right away, but I knew from past experience that they are little more than specks and almost transparent in the bargain and mighty hard to see.

A glittery motion in one corner of the kitchen caught my eye and I wheeled around. A glob of golden shimmer was running on the floor, keeping close to the baseboard and heading for the cabinet underneath the kitchen sink.

It was another of the outsize ladybugs.

I aimed the squirt can at it and let it have a burst, but it kept right on and vanished underneath the cabinet.

With the bug gone, I resumed looking for the ants and found no sign of them. There were none coming in the door. Or going out, for that matter. There were none on the sink or the work table space.

So I went around the corner of the house to size up Operation Wasp. It would be a sticky one, I knew. The nest was located in the attic louver and would be hard to get at. Standing off and looking at it, I decided the only thing to

do was wait until night, when I could be sure all the wasps were in the nest. Then I'd put up a ladder and climb up and let them have it, then get out as fast as I could manage without breaking my fool neck.

It was a piece of work that I frankly had no stomach for, but I knew from the tone of Helen's voice at the breakfast table there was no ducking it.

There were a few wasps flying around the nest, and as I watched a couple of them dropped out of the nest and tumbled to the ground.

Wondering what was going on, I

stepped a little closer and then I saw the ground was littered with dead or dying wasps. Even as I watched, another wasp fell down and lay there, twisting and squirming.

I circled around a bit to try to get a better look at whatever might be happening. But I could make out nothing except that every now and then another wasp fell down.

I told myself it was all right with me. If something was killing off the wasps it would save me the job of getting rid of them.

I was turning around to take the

insecticide back to the kitchen when Billy and Tommy Henderson came panting in excitement from the backyard.

"Mr. Marsden," Tommy said, "that rock out there is an agate. It's a banded agate."

"Well, now, that's fine," I said.

"But you don't understand," cried Tommy. "No agate gets that big. Especially not a banded agate. They call them Lake Superior agates and they don't ever get much bigger than your fist."

That did it. I jerked swiftly to attention and went pelting around the

house to have another look at the boulder in the garden. The boys came pounding on behind me.

That boulder was a lovely thing. I put out my hand and stroked it. I thought how lucky I was that someone had plopped it in my garden. I had forgotten all about the dahlias.

"I bet you," Tommy told me, his eyes half as big as saucers, "that you could get a lot of money for it."

I won't deny that approximately the same thought had been going through my mind.

I put out my hand and pushed against it, just to get the solid and substantial feel of it.

And as I pushed, it rocked slightly underneath the pressure!

Astonished, I pushed a little harder, and it rocked again.

Tommy stood bug-eyed. "That's funny, Mr. Marsden. By rights, it hadn't ought to move. It must weigh several tons. You must be awfully strong."

"I'm not strong," I told him. "Not as strong as that." I tottered back to the house and put away the insecticide, then

went out and sat down on the steps to do some worrying.

There was no sign of the boys. They probably had run swiftly off to spread the news through the neighborhood.

If that thing was an agate, as Tommy said it was--if it really was one tremendous agate, then it would be a fantastic museum piece and might command some money. But if it was an agate, why was it so light? No ten men, pushing on it, should have made it budge.

I wondered, too, just what my rights

would be if it should actually turn out to be an agate. It was on my property and it should be mine. But what if someone came along and claimed it?

And there was this other thing:
How had it gotten there to start with?

I was all tied up in knots with my worrying when Dobby came trundling around the corner of the house and sat down on the steps beside me.

"Lots of extraordinary things going on," he said. "I hear you have an agate boulder in the garden."

"That's what Tommy Henderson

tells me. I suppose that he should know.
Billy tells me he's a rockhound."

Dobby scratched at his whiskers.
"Great things, hobbies," he said.
"Especially for kids. They learn a lot
from them,"

"Yeah," I said without enthusiasm.

"Your son brought me an insect for
identification after breakfast this
morning."

"I told him not to bother you."

"I am glad he brought it," Dobby
said. "It was one I'd never seen before."

"It looked like a ladybug."

"Yes," Dobby agreed, "there is some resemblance. But I'm not entirely certain--well, fact of the matter is, I'm not even sure that it is an insect. To tell the truth, it resembles a turtle in many ways more than it does an insect. There is an utter lack of bodily segmentation, such as you'd find in any insect. The exoskeleton is extremely hard and the head and legs are retractible and it has no antennae."

He shook his head in some perplexity. "I can't be sure, of course. Much more extensive examination would

be necessary before an attempt could be made at classifying it You didn't happen to find any more of them, did your'

"I saw one running on the floor not so long ago."

"Would you mind, next time you see one, grabbing it for me?"

"Not at all," I said. "I'll try to get you one."

I kept my word. After he left I went down into the basement to look up a bug for him. I saw several of them, but couldn't catch a one. I gave up in disgust.

After supper, Arthur Belsen came popping from across the alley. He was in a dither, but that was not unusual. He is a birdlike, nervous man and it doesn't take too much to get him all upset.

"I hear that boulder in your garden is an agate," he said to me. "What do you intend to do with it?"

"Why, I don't know. Sell it, I suppose, if anyone wants to buy it."

"It might be valuable," said Belsen. "You can't just leave it out there. Someone might come along and pinch it."

"Guess there's nothing else to do," I told him. "I certainly can't move it and I'm not going to sit up all night to guard it."

"You don't need to sit up all night," said Belsen. "I can fix it for you. We can rig up a nest of trip wires and hook up an alarm."

I wasn't too impressed and tried to discourage him, but he was like a beagle on a rabbit trail. He went back to his basement and came out with a batch of wire and a kit of tools and we fell to work.

We worked until almost bedtime

getting the wires rigged up and an alarm bell installed just inside the kitchen door. Helen took a sour view of it. She didn't like the idea of messing up her kitchen, agate or no agate.

In the middle of the night the clamor of the bell jerked me out of bed, wondering what all the racket was. Then I remembered and went rushing for the stairs. On the third step from the bottom I stepped on something that rolled beneath my foot and sent me pitching down the stairs into the living room. I fell sprawling and skidded into a lamp, which landed on top and me and hit me on the head. I brought up against a chair, tangled with the lamp.

A marble, I thought. That damn kid has been strewing marbles all over the house again! He's too big for that. He knows better than to leave marbles on the stairs.

In the bright moonlight pouring through the picture window I saw the marble and it was moving rapidly-- _not rolling, moving!_ And there were a lot of other marbles, racing across the floor. Sparkling golden marbles running in the moonlight.

And that wasn't all--in the center of the living room stood the refrigerator!

The alarm bell was still clanging loudly and I picked myself up and got loose from the lamp and rushed for the kitchen door. Behind me I heard Helen yelling at me from the landing.

I got the door open and went racing in bare feet through the dew-soaked grass around the corner of the house.

A puzzled dog was standing by the boulder. He had managed to get one foot caught in one of Belsen's silly wires and he was standing there, three-legged, trying to get loose.

I yelled at him and bent over, scrabbling in the grass, trying to find

something I could throw at him. He made a sudden lurch and freed himself. He took off up the alley, ears flapping in the breeze.

Behind me the clanging bell fell silent.

I turned around and trailed back to the house, feeling like a fool.

I suddenly remembered that I had seen the refrigerator standing in the living room. But, I told myself, that must be wrong. The refrigerator was in the kitchen and no one would have moved it. There was, first of all, no reason for a refrigerator to be in the living room; its

place was in the kitchen. No one would have wanted to move it, and even if they did, they'd have made noise enough to wake the house if they'd tried to do it.

I was imagining things, I told myself. The boulder and the bugs had got me all upset and I was seeing things.

But I wasn't.

The refrigerator still stood in the center of the living room. The plug had been pulled out of the outlet and the cord trailed across the floor. A puddle of water from the slowly-thawing box had soaked into the carpet.

"It's ruining the carpet!" Helen shrieked at me, standing in a corner and staring at the errant refrigerator. "And the food will all be spoiled and..."

Billy came stumbling down the stairs, still half asleep.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said.

I almost told him about the bugs I'd seen running in the house, but caught myself in time. There was no use upsetting Helen any more than she was right then.

"Let's get that box back where it belongs," I suggested, as matter-of-factly as I could. "The three of us can do it."

We tugged and shoved and hauled and lifted and got it back in its proper place and plugged it in again. Helen found some rags and started to mop up the sopping carpet.

"Was there something at the boulder, Dad?" asked Billy.

"A dog," I told him. "Nothing but a dog."

"I was against it--from the start," declared Helen, on her knees, angrily

mopping the carpet. "It was a lot of foolishness. No one would have stolen the boulder. It isn't something you can just pick up and carry off. That Arthur Belsen's crazy."

"I agree with you," I told her, ruefully. "But he is a conscientious sort of fellow and a determined cuss and he thinks in terms of gadgets..."

"We won't get a wink of sleep," she said. "We'll be up a dozen times a night, chasing off stray dogs and cats. And I don't believe the boulder is an agate. All we have to go on is Tommy Henderson."

"Tommy is a rockhound," Billy told

her, staunchly defending his pal. "He knows an agate when he sees one. He's got a big shoe box full of ones he's found."

And here we were, I thought, arguing about the boulder, when the thing that should most concern us--the happening with the most brain-twisting implications--was the refrigerator.

And a thought came to me--a floating, random thought that came stumbling out of nowhere and glanced against my mind.

I shivered at the thought and it came back again and burrowed into me and I

was stuck with it:

__What if there was some connection between the refrigerator and the bugs?__

Helen got up from the floor.
"There," she said accusingly, "that is the best I can do. I hope the carpet isn't ruined."

But a bug, I told myself--no bug could move a refrigerator. No bug, nor a thousand bugs. And what was more and final, no bug would want to move one. No bug would care whether a refrigerator was in the living room or kitchen.

Helen was very businesslike. She spread the wet cloth out on the sink to dry. She went into the living room and turned out the lights.

"We might as well get back to bed," she said. "If we are lucky, we can get some sleep."

I went over to the alarm beside the kitchen door and jerked the connections loose.

"Now," I told her, "we can get some sleep."

I didn't really expect to get any. I

expected to stay awake the rest of the night, worrying about the refrigerator. But I did drop off, although not for very long.

At six-thirty Belsen turned on his orchestra and brought me out of bed.

Helen sat up, with her hands against her ears.

"Oh, not again!" she said.

I went around and closed the windows. It cut down the noise a little.

"Put the pillow over your head," I told her.

I dressed and went downstairs. The refrigerator was in the kitchen and everything seemed to be all right. There were a few of the bugs running around, but they weren't bothering anything.

I made myself some breakfast; then I went to work. And this was the second day running I'd gone early to the office. If this kept up, I told myself, the neighborhood would have to get together and do something about Belsen and his symphony.

Everything went all right. I sold a couple of policies during the morning and lined up a third.

When I came back to the office early in the afternoon a wild-eyed individual was awaiting me.

"You Marsden?" he demanded.
"You the guy that's got an agate boulder?" -

"That's what I'm told it is," I said.

The man was a little runt. He wore sloppy khaki pants and engineer boots. Stuck in his belt was a rock hammer, one of those things with a hammer on one end of the head and a pick on the other.

"I heard about it," said the man,

excitedly and a bit belligerently, "and I can't believe it. There isn't any agate that ever ran that big."

I didn't like his attitude. "If you came here to argue..."

"It isn't that," said the man. "My name is Christian Barr. I'm a rockhound, you understand. Been at it all my life. Have a big collection. President of our rock club. Win prizes at almost every show. And I thought if you had a rock like this..."

"Yes?"

"Well, if you had a rock like this, I

might make an offer for it. I'd have to see it first."

I jammed my hat back on my head.

"Let us go," I said.

In the garden, Barr walked entranced around the boulder, He wet his thumb and rubbed the smooth places on its hide. He leaned close and inspected it. He ran a speculative hand across its surface. He muttered to himself.

"Well?" I asked.

"It's an agate," Barr told me,

breathlessly. "Apparently a single, complete agate. Look here, this sort of pebbled, freckled surface--well, that's the inverse imprint of the volcanic bubble inside of which it formed. There's the characteristic mottling on the surface one would expect to find. And the fractures where the surface has been nicked show subconchoidal cleavage. And, of course, there is the indication of some banding."

He pulled the rock hammer from his belt and idly banged the boulder. It rang like a monstrous bell.

Barr froze and his mouth dropped open.

"It hadn't ought to do that," he explained as soon as he regained some of his composure. "It sounds as if it's hollow."

He rapped it once again and the boulder pealed.

"Agate is strange stuff," he said. "It's tougher than the best of steel. I suppose you could make a bell out of it if you could only fabricate it."

He stuck the hammer back into his belt and prowled around the boulder.

"It could be a thunderegg," he said,

talking to himself, "But no, it can't be that. A thunderegg has agate in its center and not on the surface. And this is banded agate and you don't find banded agate associated with a thunderegg."

"What is a thunderegg?" I asked, but he didn't answer. He had hunkered down and was examining the bottom portion.

"Marsden," he asked, "how much will you take for it?"

"You'd have to name a figure," I told him. "I have no idea what it's worth."

"I'll give you a thousand as it stands."

"I don't think so," I said. Not that I didn't think it was enough, but on the principle that it's never wise to take a man's first figure.

"If it weren't hollow," Barr told me, "It would be worth a whole lot more."

"You can't be sure it's hollow."

"You heard it when I rapped it."

"Maybe that's just the way it sounds."

Barr shook his head. "It's all wrong," he complained. "No banded agate ever ran this big. No agate's ever hollow. And you don't know where this one came from."

I didn't answer him. There was no reason for me to.

"Look here," he said, after a while. "There's a hole in it. Down here near the bottom."

I squatted down to look where his finger pointed. There was a neat, round hole, no more than half an inch in diameter; no haphazard hole, but round and sharply cut, as if someone might

have drilled it.

Barr hunted around and found a heavy weed stalk and stripped off the leaves. The stalk, some two feet of it, slid into the hole.

Barr squatted back and stared, frowning, at the boulder.

"She's hollow, sure as hell," he said.

I didn't pay too much attention to him. I was beginning to sweat a little. For another crazy thought had come bumbling along and fastened onto me:

__That hole would be just big enough for one of those bugs to get through!__

"Tell you what," said Barr. "I'll raise that offer to two thousand and take it off your hands."

I shook my head. I was going off __my__ rocker linking up the bugs and boulder--even if there was a bug-size hole drilled into the boulder. I remembered that I likewise had linked the bugs with the refrigerator--and it must be perfectly obvious to anyone that the bugs could not have anything to do with either the refrigerator or the boulder.

They were just ordinary bugs-- well, maybe not just ordinary bugs, but, anyhow, just bugs. Dobby had been puzzled by them, but Dobby would be the first, I knew, to tell you that there were many insects unclassified as yet. This might be a species which suddenly had flared into prominence, favored by some strange quirk of ecology, after years of keeping strictly under cover.

"You mean to say," asked Barr, astonished, "that you won't take two thousand?"

"Huh?" I asked, coming back to earth.

"I just offered you two thousand for the boulder."

I took a good hard look at him. He didn't look like the kind of man who'd spend two thousand for a hobby. More than likely, I told myself, he knew a good thing when he saw it and was out to make a killing. He wanted to snap this boulder up before I knew what it was worth.

"I'd like to think it over," I told him, warily. "If I decide to take the offer, where can I get in touch with you?"

He told me curtly and gruffly said

goodbye. He was sore about my not taking his two thousand. He went stumping around the garage and a moment later I heard him start his car and drive away.

I squatted there and wondered if maybe I shouldn't have taken that two thousand. Two thousand was a lot of money and I could have used it. But the man had been too anxious and he'd had a greedy look.

Now, however, there was one thing certain. I couldn't leave the boulder out here in the garden. It was much too valuable to be left unguarded. Somehow or other I'd have to get it into the garage

where I could lock it up. George Montgomery had a block and tackle and maybe I could borrow it and use it to move the boulder.

I started for the house to tell Helen the good news, although I was pretty sure she'd read me a lecture for not selling for two thousand.

She met me at the kitchen door and threw her arms around my neck and kissed me.

"Randall," she caroled, happily, "It's just too wonderful."

"I think so, too," I said, wondering

how in the world she could have known about it.

"Just come and look at them," she cried. "The bugs are cleaning up the house!"

"They're what!" I yelled.

"Come and look," she urged, tugging at my arm. "Did you ever see the like of it? Everything's just shining!"

I stumbled after her into the living room and stared in disbelief that bordered close on horror.

They were working in battalions

and they were purposeful about it. One gang of them was going over a chair back, four rows of them in line creeping up the chair back, and it was like one of those before-and-after pictures. The lower half of the chair back was so clean it looked like new, while the upper half was dingy.

Another gang was dusting an end table and a squad of others was working on the baseboard in the corner and a small army of them was polishing up the television set.

"They've got the carpeting all done!" squealed Helen. "And this end of the room is dusted and there are some of

them starting on the fireplace. I never could get Nora to even touch the fireplace. And now I won't need Nora. Randall, do you realize that these bugs will save us the twenty dollars a week that we've been paying Nora? I wonder if you'll let me have that twenty dollars for my very own. There are so many things I need, I haven't had a new dress for ages and I should have another hat and I saw the cutest pair of shoes the other day..."

"But bugs!" I yelled. "You are afraid of bugs. You detest the things. And bugs don't clean carpeting. All they do is eat it."

"These bugs are cute," protested Helen, happily, "and I'm not afraid of them. They're not like ants and spiders. They don't give you a crawly feeling. They are so clean themselves and they are so friendly and so cheerful. They are even pretty. And I just love to watch them work. Isn't it cunning, the way they get together in a bunch to work? They're just like a vacuum cleaner. They just move over something and the dust and dirt are gone."

I stood there, looking at them hard at work, and I felt an icy finger moving up my spine, for no matter how it might violate common sense, now I knew that the things I had been thinking, about the refrigerator and the boulder, had not been half as crazy as they might have seemed.

"I'm going to phone Amy," said Helen, starting for the kitchen. "This is just too wonderful to keep. Maybe we could give her some of the bugs. What do you think, Randall? Just enough of them to give her house a start."

"Hey, wait a minute," I hollered at

her. "These things aren't bugs."

"I don't care what they are," said Helen, airily, already dialing Amy's number, "just so they clean the house."

"But, Helen, if you'd only listen to me..."

"Shush," she said playfully. "How can I talk to Amy if you keep--Oh, hello, Amy, is that you..."

I saw that it was hopeless. I retreated in complete defeat.

I went around the house to the garage, intending to move some stuff to

make room for the boulder at the back.

The door was open. Inside was Billy, busy at the work bench.

"Hello, son," I said, as cheerfully as I could manage. "What's going on?"

"I'm making some bug traps, Dad. To catch some of the bugs that are cleaning up the house. Tommy's partners with me. He went home to get some bait."

"Bait?"

"Sure. We found out that they like agates."

I reached out and grabbed a studding to hold myself erect. Things were going just a bit too fast to take.

"We tried out the traps down in the basement," Billy told me. "There are a lot of the bugs down there. We tried everything for bait. We tried cheese and apples and dead flies and a lot of other things, but the bugs weren't having any. Tommy had an agate in his pocket, just a little gravel agate that he picked up. So we tried that."

"But why an agate, son? I can't think of anything less likely..."

"Well, you see, it was this way, Dad. We tried everything..."

"Yes," I said, "I can see the logic of it."

"Trouble is," Billy went on, "we have to use plastic for the traps. It's the only thing that will hold the bugs. They burst right out of a trap made of anything but plastic."

"Now, just a minute there," I warned him. "Once you catch these bugs, what do you intend to do with them?"

"Sell them, naturally," said Billy. "Tommy and me figured everyone would

want them. Once the people around here find out how they'll clean a house, everyone will want them. We'll charge five dollars for half a dozen of them. That's a whole lot cheaper than a vacuum cleaner."

"But just six bugs..."

"They multiply," said Billy. "They must multiply real fast. A day or two ago we had just a few of them and now the house is swarming."

Billy went on working on the trap.

Finally he said, "Maybe, Dad, you'd like to come in with us on the

deal? We need some capital. We have to buy some plastic to make more and better traps. We might be able to make a big thing out of it."

"Look, son. Have you sold any of the bugs?"

"Well, we tried to, but no one would believe us. So we thought we'd wait until Mom noised it around a bit."

"What did you do with the bugs you caught?"

"We took them over to Dr. Wells. I remembered that he wanted some. We gave them to him free."

"Billy, I wish you'd do something for me."

"Sure, Dad. What is it?"

"Don't sell any of the bugs. Not right away at least. Not until I say that it's okay."

"But, gee, Dad..."

"Son, I have a hunch. I think the bugs are alien."

"Me and Tommy figured that they might be."

"You what!"

"It was this way, Dad. At first we figured we'd sell them just as curiosities. That was before we knew how they would clean a house. We thought some folks might want them because they looked so different, and we tried to figure out a sales pitch. And Tommy said why don't we call them alien bugs, like the bugs from Mars or something. And that started us to thinking and the more we thought about it the more we thought they might really be bugs from Mars. They aren't insects, nor anything else so far as we could find. They're not like anything on Earth..."

"All right," I said, "All right!"

That's the way kids are these days. You can't keep up with them. You think you have something all nailed down and neat and here they've beat you to it. It happens all the time.

I tell you, honestly, it does nothing for a man.

"I suppose," I said, "that while you were figuring all this out, you also got it doped how they might have got here."

"We can't be really sure," said Billy, "but we have a theory. That boulder out in back--we found a hole in

it just the right size for these bugs. So we sort of thought they used that."

"You won't believe me, son," I told him, "but I was thinking the same thing. But the part that's got me stumped is what they used for power. What made the boulder move through space?"

"Well, gee, Dad, we don't know that. But there is something else. They could have used the boulder for their food all the time they traveled. There'd be just a few of them, most likely, and they'd get inside the boulder and there'd be all that food, maybe enough of it to last them years and years. So they'd eat the agate, hollowing out the boulder and

making it lighter so it could travel faster-
-well, if not faster, at least a little easier.
But they'd be very careful not to chew
any holes in it until they'd landed and it
was time to leave."

"But agate is just rock..."

"You weren't listening, Dad," said
Billy, patiently. "I told you that agate
was the only bait they'd go for."

"Randall," said Helen, coming
down the driveway, "if you don't mind,
I'd like to use the car to go over and see
Amy. She wants me to tell her all about
the bugs."

"Go ahead," I said. "Any way you look at it, my day is shot. I may as well stay home."

She went tripping back down the driveway and I said to Billy: "You just lay off everything until I get back."

"Where are you going, Dad?"

"Over to see Dobby."

I found Dobby roosting on a bench beneath an apple tree, his face all screwed up with worry. But it didn't stop him from talking.

"Randall," he said, beginning to

talk as soon as I have in sight, "this is a sad day for me. All my life I've been vastly proud of my professional exactitude in my chosen calling. But this day I violated, willingly and knowingly and in a fit of temper, every precept of experimental observation and laboratory technique."

"That's too bad," I said, wondering what he was talking about. Which was not unusual. One often had to wonder what he was getting at.

"It's those damn bugs of yours," Dobby accused me explosively.

"But you said you wanted some

more bugs. Billy remembered that and he brought some over."

"And so I did. I wanted to carry forward my examination of them. I wanted to dissect one and see what made him go. Perhaps you recall my telling you about the hardness of the exoskeletons."

"Yes, of course I do."

"Randall," said Dobby sadly, "would you believe me if I told you that exoskeleton was so hard I could do nothing with it? I couldn't cut it and I couldn't peel it off. So you know what I did?"

"I have no idea," I declared, somewhat exasperated. I hoped that he'd soon get to the point, but there was no use in hurrying him. He always took his time.

"Well, I'll tell you, then," said Dobby, seething. "I took one of those little so-and-sos and I put him on an anvil. Then I picked up a hammer and I let him have it. And I tell you frankly that I am not proud of it. It constituted, in every respect, a most improper laboratory technique."

"I wouldn't let that worry me at all," I told him. "You'll simply have to

put this down as an unusual circumstance. The important thing, it seems to me, is what you learned about the bug..."

And then I had a terrible thought.
"Don't tell me the hammer failed!"

"Not at all," said Dobby with some satisfaction. "It did a job on him. He was smashed to smithereens."

I sat down on the bench beside him and settled down to wait. I knew that in due time he'd tell me.

"An amazing thing," said Dobby.
"Yes, a most amazing thing. That bug

was made of crystals--of something that looked like the finest quartz. There was no protoplasm in him. Or, at least," he qualified, judiciously, "none I could detect."

"But a crystal bug! That's impossible!"

"Impossible," said Dobby. "Yes, of course, by any earthly standard. It runs counter to everything we've ever known or thought. But the question rises: Can our earthly standards, even remotely, be universal?"

I sat there, without saying anything, but somehow I felt a great relief that

someone else was thinking the same thing I had thought It went to prove, just slightly, that I wasn't crazy.

"Of course," said Dobby, "it had to happen sometime. Soon or late, it should be almost inevitable that some alien intelligence would finally seek us out. And knowing this, we speculated on monsters and monstrosities, but we fell short of the actual mark of horr--"

"There's no reason at the moment," I told him hastily, "that we should fear the bugs. They might in fact, become a useful ally. Even now they are cooperating. They seemed to strike up some sort of deal. We furnish them a

place to live and they, in turn..."

"You're mistaken, Randall," Dobby warned me solemnly. "These things are alien beings. Don't imagine for a moment that they and the human race might have a common purpose or a single common concept. Their life process, whatever it may be, is entirely alien to us. So must be their viewpoints. A spider is blood-brother to you as compared with these."

"But we had ants and wasps and they cleaned out the ants and wasps."

"They may have cleaned out the ants and wasps, but it was no part, I am sure, of a cooperative effort. It was no

attempt on their part to butter up the human in whose dwelling place they happened to take refuge, or set up their camp, or carve out their beachhead, however you may put it. I have grave doubts that they are aware of you at all except as some mysterious and rather shadowy monstrosity they can't bother with as yet. Sure they killed your insects, but in this they did no more than operate on a level common with their own existence. The insects might have been in their way or they may have recognized in them some potential threat or hindrance."

"But even so, we can use them," I told him impatiently, "to control our

insect pests, or carriers of disease."

"Can we?" Dobby asked. "What makes you think we can? And it would not be insect pests alone, but rather all insects. Would you, then deprive our plant life of its pollination agents--to mention just one example of thousands?"

"You may be right," I said, "but you can't tell me that we must be afraid of bugs, of even crystal bugs. Even if they should turn out to be a menace, we could find a way in which to cope with them."

"I have been sitting here and thinking, trying to get it straight within my mind," said Dobby, "and one thing

that has occurred to me is that here we may be dealing with a social concept we've never met with on this planet. I'm convinced that these aliens must necessarily operate on the hive-mind principle. We face not one of them alone nor the total number of them, but we face the sum total of them as a single unit, as a single mind and a single expression of purpose and performance."

"If you really think they're dangerous, what would you have us do?"

"I still have my anvil and my hammer."

"Cut out the kidding, Dobby."

"You are right," said Dobby. "This is no joking matter, nor is it one for an anvil and a hammer. My best suggestion is that the area be evacuated and an atom bomb be dropped."

Billy came tearing clown the path.

"Dad!" he was yelling. "Dad!"

"Hold up there," I said, clutching at his arm. "What is going on?"

"Someone is ripping up our furniture," yelled Billy, "and then throwing it outdoors."

"Now, wait a minute--are you sure?"

"I saw them doing it," yelled Billy.
"Gosh, will Mom be sore!"

I didn't wait to hear any more. I started for the house as fast as I could go. Billy followed close behind me and Dobby brought up the rear, white whiskers bristling like an excited billy goat.

The screen door off the kitchen was standing open as if someone had propped it, and outside, beyond the stoop, lay a pile of twisted fabric and the odds and ends of dismembered

chairs.

I went up the steps in one bound and headed for the door. And just as I reached the doorway I saw this great mass of stuff bulleting straight toward me and I ducked aside. A limp and gutted love seat came hurtling out the door and landed on the pile of debris. It sagged into a grotesque resemblance of its former self.

By this time I was good and sore. I dived for the pile and grabbed up a chair leg. I got a good grip on it and rushed through the door and across the kitchen into the living room. I had the club at ready and if there'd be anybody there I

would have let him have it.

But there was no one there--no one I could see.

The refrigerator was back in the center of the room and heaped all about it were piles of pots and pans. The tangled coil springs from the love seat were leaning crazily against it and scattered all about the carpet there were nuts and bolts, washers, brads and nails and varying lengths of wire.

There was a strange creaking noise from somewhere and I glanced hurriedly around to find out what it was. I found out, all right.

Over on one corner, my favorite chair was slowly and deliberately and weirdly coming apart. The upholstery nails were rising smoothly from the edging of the fabric--rising from the wood--as if by their own accord--and dropping to the floor with tiny patterings. As I watched a bolt fell to the floor and one leg bent underneath the chair and the chair tipped over. The upholstery nails kept right on coming out.

And as I stood there watching this, I felt the anger draining out of me and a fear come dribbling in to take its place. I started to get cold all over and I could

feel the gooseflesh rising.

I started sneaking out. I didn't dare to turn my back so I backed carefully away and I kept my club ready.

I bumped into something and let out a whoop and spun around and raised my club to strike.

It was Dobby. I just stopped the club in time. "Randall," said Dobby calmly, "it's those bugs of yours again."

He gestured toward the ceiling and I looked. The ceiling was a solid mass of golden-gleaming bugs.

I lost some of my fear at seeing them and started to get sore again. I pulled back my arm and aimed the club up at the ceiling. I was ready to let the little stinkers have it, when Dobby grabbed my arm.

"Don't go getting them stirred up," he yelled. "No telling what they'd do."

I tried to jerk my arm away from him, but he hung on to it.

"It is my considered opinion," he declared, even as he wrestled with me, "that the situation has evolved beyond the point where it can be handled by the private citizen."

I gave up. It was undignified trying to get my arm loose from Dobby's clutching paws and I likewise began to see that a club was no proper weapon to use against the bugs.

"You may be right," I said.

I saw that Billy was peering through the door.

"Get out of here," I yelled at him. "You're in the line of fire. They'll be throwing that chair out of here in another minute. They're almost through with it."

Billy ducked back out of sight.

I walked out to the kitchen and hunted through a cupboard drawer until I found the phone book. I looked up the number and dialed the police.

"This is Sergeant Andrews talking," said a voice.

"Now listen closely, Sergeant," I said. "I have some bugs out here..."

"Ain't we all?" the sergeant asked in a happy tone of voice.

"Sergeant," I told him, trying to sound as reasonable as I could, "I know that this sounds funny. But these are a

different kind of bug. They're breaking up my furniture and throwing it outdoors."

"I tell you what," the sergeant said, still happy. "You better go on back to bed and try to sleep it off. If you don't, I'll have to run you in."

"Sergeant," I told him, "I am completely sober..."

A hollow click came from the other end and the phone went dead.

I dialed the number back.

"Sergeant Andrews," said the

voice.

"You just hung up on me," I yelled. "What do you mean by that? I'm a sober, law-abiding, taxpaying citizen and I'm entitled to protection, and even if you don't think so, to some courtesy as well. And when I tell you I have bugs..."

"All right," said the sergeant wearily. "Since you are asking for it. What's your name and address?"

I gave them to him.

"And Mr. Marsden," said the sergeant.

"What is it now?"

"You better have those bugs. If you know what's good for you, there better be some bugs."

I slammed down the phone and turned around.

Dobby came tearing out of the living room.

"Look out! Here it comes!" he yelled.

My favorite chair, what was left of it, came swishing through the air. It hit the door and stuck. It jiggled violently

and broke loose to drop on the pile outside.

"Amazing," Dobby panted. "Truly amazing. But it explains a lot."

"Tell me," I snapped at him, "what explains a lot?" I was getting tired of Dobby's ramblings.

"Telekinesis," said Dobby.

"Tele-what?"

"Well, maybe only teleportation," Dobby admitted sheepishly. "That's the ability to move things by the power of mind alone."

"And you think this teleportation business bears out your hive-mind theory?"

Dobby looked at me with some astonishment. "That's exactly what I meant," he said.

"What I can't figure out," I told him, "is why they're doing this."

"Of course you can't," said Dobby. "No one expects you to. No one can presume to understand an alien motive. On the surface of it, it would appear they are collecting metal, and that well may be exactly what they're doing. But the

mere fact of their metal grabbing does not go nearly far enough. To truly understand their motive..."

A siren came screaming down the street.

"There they are," I said, racing for the door.

The police car pulled up to the curb and two officers vaulted out.

"You Marsden?" asked the first one.

I told him that I was.

"That's funny," said the second one.
"Sarge said he was stinko."

"Say," said the first one, staring at the pile of wreckage outside the kitchen door, "what is going on here?"

Two chair legs came whistling out the door and thudded to the ground.

"Who is in there throwing out the stuff?" the second cop demanded.

"Just the bugs," I told them. "Just the bugs and Dobby. I guess Dobby's still in there."

"Let's go in and grab this Dobby

character," said the first one, "before he wrecks the joint."

I stayed behind. There was no use of going in. All they'd do would be ask a lot of silly questions and there were enough of them I could ask myself without listening to the ones thought up by someone else.

A small crowd was beginning to gather. Billy had rounded up some of his pals and neighbor women were rushing from house to house, cackling like excited chickens. Several cars had stopped and their occupants sat gawping.

I walked out to the street and sat

down on the curbing.

And now, I thought, it all had become just a little clearer. If Dobby was right about this teleportation business, and the evidence said he was, then the boulder could have been the ship the bugs had used to make their way to Earth. If they could use their power to tear up furniture and throw it out of the house, they could use that selfsame power to move anything through space. It needn't have been the boulder; it could have been anything at all.

Billy, in his uninhibited, boyish thinking, probably had struck close to the truth--they had used the boulder because

it was their food.

The policemen came pounding back out of the house and stopped beside me.

"Say, mister," said one of them, "do you have the least idea what is going on?"

I shook my head. "You better talk to Dobby. He's the one with answers."

"He says these things are from Mars."

"Not Mars," said the second officer. "It was you who said it might be Mars. He said from the stars."

"He's a funny-talking old coot," complained the first policeman. "A lot of stuff he says is more than a man can swallow."

"Jake," said the other one, "we better start doing something about this crowd. We can't let them get too close."

"I'll radio for help," said Jake.

He went to the police car and climbed into it.

"You stick around," the other said to me, "I'm not going anywhere," I said.

The crowd was good-sized by now. More cars had stopped and some of the people in them had gotten out, but most of them just sat and stared. There were an awful lot of kids by this time and the women were still coming, perhaps from blocks away. Word spreads fast in an area like ours.

Dobby came ambling down the yard. He sat down beside me and started pawing at his whiskers.

"It makes no sense," he said, "but, then, of course, it wouldn't."

"What I can't figure out," I told him, "is why they cleaned the house. Why did

it have to be spic and span before they started piling up the metal? There must be a reason for it."

A car screeched down the street and slammed up to the curb just short of where we sat. Helen came bustling out of it.

"I can't turn my back a minute," she declared, "but something up and happens."

"It's your bugs," I said. "Your nice house-cleaning bugs. They're ripping up the place."

"Why don't you stop them, then?"

"Because I don't know how."

"They're aliens," Dobby told her calmly. "They came from somewhere out in space."

"Dobby Wells, you keep out of this! You've caused me all the trouble I can stand. The idea of getting Billy interested in insects! He's had the place cluttered up all summer."

A man came rushing up. He squatted down beside me and started pawing at my arm. I turned around and saw that it was Barr, the rockhound.

"Marsden," he said, excitedly, "I have changed my mind. I'll give you five thousand for that boulder. I'll write you out a check right now."

"What boulder?" Helen asked.

"You mean our boulder out in the back?"

"That's the one," said Barr. "I've got to have that boulder."

"Sell it to him," Helen said.

"I will not," I told her.

"Randall Marsden," she screamed, "you can't turn down five thousand! Think of what five thousand..."

"I can turn it down," I told her, firmly. "It's worth a whole lot more than that. It's not just an agate boulder any longer. It's the first spaceship that ever came to Earth. I can get anything I ask."

Helen gasped.

"Dobby," she asked weakly, "is he telling me the truth?"

"I think," said Dobby, "that for once he is." The wail of sirens sounded down the street. One of the policemen came back from the car.

"You folks will have to get across

the street," he said.

"As soon as the others get here, we'll cordon off the place."

We got up to start across the street.

"Lady," said the officer, "you'll have to move your car." "If you two want to stay together," Dobby offered, "I'll drive it down the street."

Helen gave him the keys and the two of us walked across the street. Dobby got into the car and drove off,

The officers were hustling the other cars away.

A dozen police cars arrived. Men piled out of them. They started pushing back the crowd. Others fanned out to start forming a circle around the house.

Broken furniture, bedding, clothing, draperies from time to time came flying out the kitchen door. The pile of debris grew bigger by the moment.

We stood across the street and watched our house be wrecked.

"They must be almost through by now," I said, with a strange detachment. "I wonder what comes next."

"Randall," said Helen tearfully, clinging to my arm, "what do we do now? They're wrecking all my things. How about it--is it covered by insurance?"

"Why, I don't know," I said. "I never thought of it."

And that was the truth of it--it hadn't crossed my mind. And me an insurance man!

I had written that policy myself and now I tried desperately to remember what the fine print might have said and I had a sinking feeling. How, I asked myself, could anything like this be

covered? It certainly was no hazard that could have been anticipated.

"Anyhow," I said, "we still have the boulder. We can sell the boulder."

"I still think we should have taken the five thousand," Helen told me. "What if the Government should move in and just grab the boulder off?"

And she was right, I told myself. This would be just the sort of thing in which the Government could become intensely interested.

I began to think myself that maybe we should have taken that five thousand.

Three policemen walked across the yard and went into the house. Almost at once they came tearing out again. Pouring out behind them came a swarm of glittering dots that hummed and buzzed and swooped so fast they seemed to leave streaks of their golden glitter in the air behind them. The policemen ran in weaving fashion, ducking and dodging. They waved their hands in the air above their heads.

The crowd surged back and began to run. The police cordon broke and retreated with what dignity it could.

I found myself behind the house

across the street, my hand still gripping Helen's arm. She was madder than a hornet.

"You needn't have pulled me along so fast," she told me. "I could have made it by myself. You made me lose my shoes."

"Forget your shoes," I told her sharply. "This thing is getting serious. You go and round up Billy and the two of you get out of here. Go up to Amy's place."

"Do you know where Billy is?"

"He's around somewhere. He is

with his pals. Just look for a bunch of boys."

"And you?"

"I'll be along," I said.

"You'll be careful, Randall?"

I patted her shoulder and stooped down to kiss her. "I'll be careful. I'm not very brave, you know. Now go and get the boy."

She started away and then turned back. "Will we ever go back home?" she asked.

"I think we will," I said, "and soon. Someone will find a way to get them out of there."

I watched her walk away and felt the chilly coldness of the kindness of my lie.

Would we, in solemn truth, ever go back home again? Would the entire world, all of humanity, ever be at home again? Would the golden bugs take away the smug comfort and the warm security that Man had known for ages in his sole possession of a planet of his own?

I went up the backyard slope and found Helen's shoes. I put them in my

pocket. I came to the back of the house and peeked around the corner.

The bugs had given up the chase, but now a squadron of them flew in a lazy, shining circle around and just above the house. It was plain to see that they were on patrol.

I ducked back around the house and sat down in the grass, with my back against the house. It was a warm amid blue-sky summer day; the kind of day a man should mow his lawn.

A slobbering horror, I thought, no matter how obscene or fearful, might be understood, might be fought against. But

the cold assuredness with which the golden bugs were directed to their purpose, the self-centered, vicious efficiency with which they operated, was something else again.

And their impersonal detachment, their very disregard of us, was like a chilly blast upon human dignity.

I heard footsteps and looked up, startled.

It was Arthur Belsen and he was upset.

But that was not unusual. Belsen could get upset at something that was

downright trivial.

"I was looking for you everywhere," he chattered. "I met Dobby just a while ago and he tells me these bugs of yours..."

"They're no bugs of mine," I told him sharply. I was getting tired of everyone talking as if I owned the bugs, as if I might be somehow responsible for their having come to Earth.

"Well, anyway, he was telling me they are after metal." I nodded. "That's what they're after. Maybe it's precious stuff to them. Maybe they haven't got too much of it wherever they are from."

And I thought about the agate boulder. If they had had metal, certainly they'd not have used the agate boulder.

"I had an awful time getting home," said Belsen. "I thought there was a fire. There are cars parked in the street for blocks and an awful crowd. I was lucky to get through."

"Come on and sit down," I told him. "Stop your fidgeting."

But he paid no attention to me.

"I have an awful lot of metal," he said. "All those machines of mine down

in the basement. I've put a lot of time and work and money into those machines and I can't let anything happen to them. You don't think the bugs will start branching out, do you?"

"Branching out?"

"Well, yes, you know--after they get through with everything in your house, they might start getting into other houses."

"I hadn't thought of it," I said. "I suppose that it could happen."

I sat there and thought about it and I had visions of them advancing house by

house, cleaning out and salvaging all the metal, putting it into one big pile until it covered the entire block and eventually the city.

"Dobby says that they are crystal. Isn't that a funny thing for bugs to be?"

I said nothing. After all, he was talking to himself.

"But crystal can't be alive," protested Belsen. "Crystal is stuff that things are made of. Vacuum tubes and such. There is no life in it."

"Don't try to fight with me," I told him. "I can't help it if they are crystal."

There seemed to be a lot of ruckus going on out in the street and I got on my feet to peer around the corner of the house.

For a moment there was nothing to see. Everything looked peaceful. One or two policemen were running around excitedly, but I couldn't see that anything was happening. It looked just as it had before.

Then a door slowly, almost majestically, detached itself from one of the police cars parked along the curb and started floating toward the open kitchen door. It reached the door and

made a neat left turn and disappeared inside.

A rear vision mirror sailed flashing through the air. It was followed by a siren. Both disappeared within the house.

Good Lord, I told myself, the bugs are going after the cars!

Now I saw that a couple of the cars were already minus hoods and fenders and that some other doors were missing.

The bugs, I thought, had finally really hit the jackpot. They wouldn't stop until they'd stripped the cars clean down

to the tires.

And I was thinking, too, with a strange perverse reaction, that there wasn't nearly room enough inside the house to pack all those dismantled cars, What, I wondered, would the bugs do when the house was full?

A half dozen policemen dashed across the street and started for the house. They reached the lawn before the bug patrol above the house became aware of them and swooped down in a screaming, golden arc.

The policemen ran back pell-mell. The bug patrol, it's duty done, returned

to circling the house. Fenders, doors, taillights, headlights, radio antennae, and other parts of cars continued to pour into the house.

A dog came trotting out of nowhere and went across the lawn, tail wagging in friendly curiosity.

A flight of bugs left the patrol and headed down toward him.

The dog, startled by the whistle of the diving bugs, wheeled about to run.

He was too late.

There was a sickening thud of

missiles hitting flesh. The dog leaped high into the air and fell over on his back.

The bugs swooped up into the air again. There were no gaps in their ranks.

The dog lay twitching in the yard and blood ran in the grass.

I ducked back around the corner, sick. I doubled up, retching, trying hard to keep from throwing up.

I fought it off and my stomach quieted down. I peeked around the corner of the house.

All was peaceful once again. The dead dog lay sprawling in the yard. The bugs were busy with their stripping of the cars. No policemen were in sight. There was no one in sight at all. Even Belsen had disappeared somewhere.

It was different now, I told myself. The dog had made it different.

The bugs were no longer only a mystery; now they were a deadly danger. Each of them was a rifle bullet with intelligence.

I remembered something that Dobby had said just an hour or so ago. Evacuate the area, he had said, then drop

an atom bomb.

And would it come to that? I wondered. Was that the measure of the danger?

No one, of course, was thinking that way yet, but in time they might. This was just the start of it. Today the city was alerted and the police were on the scene; tomorrow it might be the governor sending in some troops. And in time it would be the Federal Government. And after that, Dobby's solution might be the only answer.

The bugs hadn't spread too far as yet. But Belsen's fear was valid; in time

they would expand, pushing out their beachhead block by block as there were more and more of them. For Billy had been right when he had said they must multiply real fast.

I tried to imagine how the bugs could multiply, but I had no idea.

First of all, of course, the Government would probably try to make contact with them, would attempt to achieve some communication with them-not with the creatures themselves, perhaps, but rather with that mass mind which Dobby had figured them to have.

But was it possible to communicate

with creatures such as these? On what intellectual level might one approach them? And what good could possibly come of such communication if it was established? Where was the basis for understanding between these creatures and the human race?

And I realized, even as I thought all this, that I was thinking with pure panic. To approach a problem such as the bugs presented, there was need of pure objectivity--there could be no question of either fear or anger. The time had come for Man to discard the pettiness of one-planet thinking.

It was no problem of mine, of

course, but thinking of it, I saw a deadly danger--that the eventual authority, whoever that might be, might delay too long in its objectivity.

There had to be a way to stop the bugs; there must be some measure to control them. Before we tried to establish contact, there must be a way in which we could contain them.

And I thought of something--of Billy telling me that to hold them once you caught them you needed a plastic trap.

I wondered briefly how the kid had known that. Perhaps it had been no more

than simple trial and error. After all, he and Tommy Henderson must have tried several different kinds of traps.

Plastic might be the answer to the problem I had posed. It could be the answer if we acted before they spread too far.

And why plastic? I wondered. What element within plastic would stop them cold and hold them once they were trapped within it? Some factor, perhaps, that we would learn only after long and careful study. But it was something that did not matter now; it was enough we knew that plastic did the trick.

I stood there for a time, turning the matter in my mind, wondering who to go to.

I could go to the police, of course, but I had a feeling I would get little hearing there. The same would be true of the officials of the city. For while it was possible the might listen, they'd have to talk it over, they'd have to call a conference, they'd feel compelled to consult some expert before they did anything about it. And the Government in Washington, at the moment, was unthinkable.

The trouble was that no one was scared enough as yet to act as quickly as

they should. They'd have to be scared silly--and I had had a longer time to get scared silly than any of the rest.

Then I thought of another man who was as scared as I was.

Belsen.

Belsen was the man to help me.
Belsen was scared stiff.

He was an engineer and possibly he could tell me if what I had been thinking was any good or not. He could sit down and figure how it might be done. He'd know where to get the plastic that we needed and the best type of it to use and

more than likely he'd know how to go about arranging for its fabrication. And he might, a well, know someone it would do some good to talk to.

I went back to the corner of the house and had a look around.

There were a few policemen in sight, but not too many of them. They weren't doing anything, just standing there and watching while the bugs kept on working at the cars. They had the bodies pretty well stripped down by now and were working on the engines. As I watched I saw one motor rise and sail toward the house. It was dripping oil, and chunks of caked grease and dust

were falling off of it. I shivered at the thought of what a mess like that would do to Helen's carpeting and the decorating.

There were a few knots of spectators here and there, but all of them were standing at quite a distance off.

It looked to me as if I'd have no trouble reaching Belsen's house if I circled around the block, so I started out.

I wondered if Belsen would be at home and was afraid he might not be. Most of the houses in the neighborhood seemed to be deserted. But it was a chance, I knew, that I had to take. If he

wasn't at his house, I'd have to hunt him down.

I reached his place and went up the steps and rang the bell. There wasn't any answer, so I walked straight in.

The house seemed to be deserted.

"Belsen," I called.

He didn't answer me and I called again.

Then I heard footsteps clattering up a stairs.

The basement door came open and

Belsen stuck his head out.

"Oh, it's you," he said. "I'm glad you came. I will need some help. I sent the family off."

"Belsen," I said, "I know what we can do. We can get a monstrous sheet of plastic and drop it on the house. That way they can't get out. Maybe we can get some helicopters, maybe four of them, one for each corner of the sheet..."

"Come downstairs," said Belsen. "There's work for both of us."

I followed him downstairs into his workroom.

The place was orderly, as one might expect from a fuss-budget such as Belsen.

The music machines stood in straight and shining lines, the work bench was immaculate and the tools were all in place. The tape machine stood in one corner and it was all lit up like a Christmas tree.

A table stood in front of the tape machine, but it was far from tidy. It was strewn with books, some of them lying flat and open and others piled haphazardly. There were scribbled sheets of paper scattered everywhere

and balled-up bunches of it lay about the floor.

"I cannot be mistaken," Belsen told me, jittery as ever "I must be sure the first time. There'll be no second chance. I had a devil of a time getting it all figured out but I think I have it now."

"Look, Belsen," I said, with some irritation, "I don't know what harebrained scheme you may be working on, but whatever it may be, this deal of mine is immediate and important."

"Later," Belsen told me, almost hopping up and down in his anxiety. "Later you can tell me. I have a tape I

have to finish. I have the mathematics all worked out..."

"But this is about the bugs!"

Belsen shouted at me: "And so is this, you fool! What else did you expect to find me working on? You know I can't take a chance of their getting in here. I won't let them take all this stuff I've built."

"But, Belsen..."

"See that machine," he said, pointing to one of the smaller ones. "That's the one we'll have to use. It is battery powered. See if you can get it

moved over to the door."

He swung around and scurried over to the tape machine and sat down in front of it. He began punching slowly and carefully on the keyboard and the machine began to mutter and to chuckle at him and its lights winked on and off.

I saw there was no sense in trying to talk to him until he had this business done. And there was a chance, of course, that he knew what he was doing--that he had figured out some way either to protect these machines of his or to stop the bugs.

I walked over to the machine and it

was heavier than it looked. I started tugging at it and I could move it only a few inches at a time, but I kept on tugging it.

And suddenly, as I tugged away, I knew without a question what Belsen must be planning.

And I wondered why I hadn't thought of it myself, why Dobby, with all his talk of A-bombs, hadn't thought of it. But, of course, it would take a man like Belsen, with his particular hobby, to have thought of it.

The idea was so old, so ancient, so much a part of the magic past that it was

almost laughable--and yet it ought to work.

Belsen got up from the machine and lifted a reel of tape from a cylinder in its side. He hurried over to me and knelt down beside the machine I'd tugged almost to the door.

"I can't be sure of exactly what they are," he told me. "Crystal. Sure, I know they're crystalline in form, but what kind of crystals--just what type of crystals? So I had to work out a sort of sliding shotgun pattern of supersonic frequencies. Somewhere in there, I hope, is the one that will synchronize with whatever structure they may have."

He opened a section of the small machine and started threading in the tape.

"Like the violin that broke the goblet," I said.

He grinned at me nervously. "The classical example, I see you've heard of it."

"Everyone has," I said.

"Now listen to me carefully," said Belsen. "All we have to do is flip this switch and the tape starts moving. The dial controls the volume and it's set at

maximum. We' open up the door and we'll grab the machine, one on each side of it, and we'll carry it as far as we can before we set it down. I want to get it close."

"Not too close," I cautioned. "The bugs just killed a dog. Couple of them hit him and went through him without stopping. They're animated bullets."

Belsen licked his lips. "I figured something like that." He reached out for the door.

"Just a minute, Belsen. Have we got a right to?"

"A right to what?" he asked.

"A right to kill these things. They're the first aliens I come to visit us. There's a lot we might learn from them if we could only talk to them..."

"Talk to them?"

"Well, communicate. Get to understand them."

And I wondered what was wrong with me, that should be talking that way.

"After what they did to the dog?
After what they did to you?"

"Yes, I think," I said, "even after what they did to me."

"You're crazy," Belsen screamed.

He pulled the door wide open.

"Now!" he shouted at me.

I hesitated for a second, then grabbed hold.

The machine was heavy, but we lifted it and rushed out into the yard. We went staggering with it almost to the alley and there the momentum of our rush played out and we set it down.

I looked up toward my house and the bug patrol was there, circling at rooftop height, a flashing golden circle in the light of the setting sun.

"Maybe," Belsen panted, "maybe we can get it closer."

I bent to pick it up again and even as I did I saw the patrolling circle break.

"Look out!" I screamed. The bugs were diving at us.

"The switch!" I yelled. "The switch!"

But Belsen stood there, staring at

them, frozen, speechless, stiff.

I flung myself at the machine and found the switch and flipped it and then I was groveling in the dirt, rooting into it, trying to make myself extremely thin and small.

There was no sound and, of course, I had known there would be none, but that didn't stop me from wondering why I didn't hear it. Maybe, I thought, the tape had broken; maybe the machine had failed to work.

Out of the tail of my eye I saw the patrol arrowing down on us and they seemed to hang there in the air, as if

something might have stopped them, but I knew that was wrong, that it was simply fright playing tricks with time.

And I was scared, all right, but not as seared as Belsen. He still stood there, upright, unable to move a muscle, staring at oncoming death in an attitude of stricken disbelief.

They were almost on top of us. They were so close that I could see each of them as a dancing golden mote and then suddenly each little mote became a puff of shining dust and the swarm was gone.

I climbed slowly to my feet and

brushed off my front. "Snap out of it," I said to Belsen. I shook him.

He slowly turned toward me and I could see the tension going from his face.

"It worked," he said, in a flat sort of voice. "I was pretty sure it would."

"I noticed that," I said. "You're the hero of the hour." And I said it bitterly, without even knowing why.

I left him standing there and walked slowly across the alley.

We had done it, I told myself. Right

or wrong, we'd done it. The first things from space had come and we had smashed them flat.

And was this, I wondered, what would happen to us, too, when we ventured to the stars? Would we find as little patience and as little understanding? Would we act as arrogantly as these golden bugs had acted?

Would there always be the Belsens to outshout the Marsdens? Would the Marsdens always be unable or unwilling to stand up before the panic-shouting--always fearful that their attitude, slowly forming, might be antisocial? Would the

driving sense of fear and the unwillingness to understand mar all things from the stars?

And that, I told myself, was a funny thing for me, of all people, to be thinking. For mine was the house the bugs had ruined.

Although, come to think of it, they might have cost me not a dime. They might have made me money. I still had the agate boulder and that was worth a fortune.

I looked quickly towards the garden and the boulder wasn't there!

I broke into a run, breath sobbing in my throat. I stopped at the garden's edge and stared in consternation at the neat pile of shining sand.

There was one thing I'd forgotten: that an agate, as well as bugs and goblet, was also crystalline!

I turned around and stared back across the yard and I was sore clean through.

That Belsen, I thought--him and his sliding shotgun pattern!

I would take one of those machines of his and cram it down his throat!

Then I stopped dead still. There was, I realized, nothing I could do or say. Belsen was the hero, exactly as I said he was.

He was the man, alone, who'd quashed the menace from the stars.

That was what the headlines would be saying, that was what the entire world would think. Except, perhaps, a few scientists and others of their kind who didn't really count.

Belsen was the hero and if I laid a finger to him I'd probably be lynched.

And I was right. Belsen is the hero.

He turns on his orchestra at six o'clock each morning and there's no one in the neighborhood who'll say a word to him.

Is there anyone who knows how much it costs to soundproof an entire house?

Title : Leg. Forst.
Author : Clifford D. Simak
Original copyright year: 1958
Genre : science fiction
Comments : to my knowledge, this
is the only available e-text of this book
Source : scanned and OCR-read
from a paperback edition with Xerox
TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS
Word 2000.
Date of e-text : February 14, 2000
Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights
reversed.

Leg. Forst.

Clifford D. Simak

When it was time for the postman to have come and gone, old Clyde Packer quit working on his stamps and went into the bathroom to comb his snow-white hair and beard. It was an everlasting bother, but there was no way out of it. He'd he sure to meet some of his

neighbors going down and coming back and they were a snoop lot. He felt sure that they talked about him; not that he cared, of course. And the Widow Foshay, just across the hall, was the worst one of them all.

Before going out, he opened a drawer in the big desk in the middle of the cluttered living room, upon the top of which was piled an indescribable array of litter, and found the tiny box from Unuk al Hay. From the box he took a pinch of leaf and tucked it in his cheek.

He stood for a moment, with the drawer still open, and savored the flavorful satisfaction of the taste within

his mouth - not quite like peppermint, nor like whiskey, either, but with some taste akin to both and with some other tang that belonged entirely to itself. It was nothing like another man had ever tasted and he suspected that it might be habit-forming, although PugAlNash had never informed him that it was.

Perhaps, he told himself, even if Pug should so try to inform him, he could not make it out, for the Unukian's idea of how Earth's language should be written, and the grammar thereof, was a wonder to behold and could only be believed by someone who had tried to decipher one of his flowery little notes.

The box, he saw, was nearly empty, and he hoped that the queer, faithful, almost wistful little correspondent would not fail him now. But there was, he told himself, no reason to believe he would; PugAlNash, in a dozen years, had not failed him yet. Regularly another tiny box of leaf arrived when the last one was quite finished, accompanied by a friendly note - and all franked with the newest stamps from Unuk.

Never a day too soon, nor a day too late, but exactly on the dot when the last of the leaf was finished. As if PugAlNash might know, by some form of intelligence quite unknown to Earth, when his friend on Earth ran out of the

leaf.

A solid sort, Clyde Packer told himself. Not humanoid, naturally, but a very solid sort.

And he wondered once again what Pug might actually be like. He always had thought of him as little, but he had no idea, of course, whether he was small or large or what form his body took. Unuk was one of those planets where it was impossible for an Earthman to go, and contact and commerce with the planet had been accomplished, as was the case on so many other worlds, by an intermediary people.

And he wondered, too, what Pug did with the cigars that he sent him in exchange for the little boxes of leaf - eat them, smoke them, smell them, roll in them or rub them in his hair? If he had hair, of course.

He shook his head and closed the door and went out into the hall, being doubly sure that his door was locked behind him. He would not put it past his neighbors, especially the Widow Foshay, to sneak in behind his back.

The hall was empty and he was glad of that. He rang almost stealthily for the elevator, hoping that his luck would hold.

It didn't.

Down the hall came the neighbor from next door. He was the loud and flashy kind, and without any encouragement at all, he'd slap one on the back.

"Good morning, Clyde!" he bellowed happily from afar.

"Good morning, Mr. Morton," Packer replied, somewhat icily. Morton had no right to call him Clyde. No one ever called him Clyde, except sometimes his nephew, Anton Camper, called him Uncle Clyde, although he

mostly called him Unk. And Tony, Packer reminded himself, was a worthless piece - always involved in some fancy scheme, always talking big, but without much to show for it. And besides, Tony was crooked - as crooked as a cat.

Like myself, Packer thought, exactly like myself. Not like the most of the rest of them these days, who measured to no more than just loud-talking boobies.

In my day, he told himself with fond remembrance, _I could have skinned them all and they'd never know it until I twitched their hides slick off_.

"How is the stamp business this morning?" yelled Morton, coming up and clapping Packer soundly on the back.

"I must remind you, Mr. Morton, that I am not in the stamp business," Packer told him sharply. "I am interested in stamps and I find it most absorbing and I could highly recommend it -"

"But that is not what I meant," explained Morton, rather taken aback "I didn't mean you dealt in stamps..."

"As a matter of fact, I do," said Packer, "to a limited extent. But not as a regular thing and certainly not as a regular business. There are certain other

collectors who are aware of my connections and sometimes seek me out - "

"That's the stuff!" boomed Morton, walloping him on the back again in sheer good fellowship. "If you have the right connections, you get along okay. That works in any line. Now, take mine, for instance..."

The elevator arrived and rescued Packer.

In the lobby, he headed for the desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Packer," said

the clerk, handing him some letters.
"There is a bag for you and it runs slightly heavy. Do you want me to get someone to help you with it?"

"No, thank you," Packer said. "I am sure that I can manage."

The clerk hoisted the bag atop the counter and Packer seized it and let it fall to the floor. It was fairly large - it weighed, he judged, thirty pounds or so - and the shipping tag, he saw with a thrill of anticipation, was almost covered with stamps of such high denominations they quite took his breath away.

He looked at the tag and saw that

his name and address were printed with painful precision, as if the Earthian alphabet was something entirely incomprehensible to the sender. The return address was a mere jumble of dots and hooks and dashes that made no sense, but seemed somewhat familiar, although Packer at the moment was unable to tell exactly what they were. The stamps, he saw, were Iota Cancri, and he had seen stamps such as them only once before in his entire life. He stood there, mentally calculating what their worth might be.

He tucked the letters under his arm and picked up the bag. It was heavier than he had expected and he wished

momentarily that he had allowed the clerk to find someone to carry it for him. But he had said that he would carry it and he couldn't very well go back and say he'd rather not. After all, he assured himself, he wasn't quite that old and feeble yet.

He reached the elevator and let the bag down and stood facing the grillwork, waiting for the cage.

A birdlike voice sounded from behind him and he shivered at it, for he recognized the voice - it was the Widow Foshay.

"Why, Mr. Packer," said the

Widow, gushingly, "how pleasant to find you waiting here."

He turned around. There was nothing else for it; he couldn't just stand there, with his back to her.

"And so loaded down!" the Widow sympathized. "Here, do let me help you."

She snatched the letters from him.

"There," she said triumphantly, "poor man; I can carry these."

He could willingly have choked her, but he smiled instead. It was a somewhat strained and rather ghastly

smile, but he did the best he could.

"How lucky for me," he told her, "that you came along. I'd never have made it."

The veiled rebuke was lost on her. She kept on bubbling at him.

"I'm going to make beef broth for lunch," she said, "and I always make too much. Could I ask you in to share it?"

"Impossible," he told her in alarm. "I am very sorry, but this is my busy day. I have all these, you see." And he motioned at the mail she held and the bag he clutched. He whuffed through his

whiskers at her like an irate walrus, but she took no notice.

"How exciting and romantic it must be," she gushed, "getting all these letters and bags and packages from all over the galaxy. From such strange places and from so far away. Some day you must explain to me about stamp collecting."

"Madam," he said a bit stiffly, "I've worked with stamps for more than twenty years and I'm just barely beginning to gain an understanding of what it is all about. I would not presume to explain to someone else."

She kept on bubbling.

Damn it all, he thought, _is there no way to quiet the blasted woman?_

Prying old biddy, he told himself, once again whuffling his whiskers at her. She'd spend the next three days running all about and telling everyone in the entire building about her strange encounter with him and what a strange old coot he was. "Getting all those letters from all those alien places," she would say, "and bags and packages as well. You can't tell me that stamps are the only things in which he's interested. There is more to it than that; you can bet your bottom dollar on it."

At his door she reluctantly gave him back his letters.

"You won't reconsider on that broth?" she asked him, "It's more than just ordinary broth. I pride myself on it. A special recipe."

"I'm sorry," he said.

He unlocked his door and started to open it. She remained standing there.

"I'd like to invite you in," he told her, lying like a gentleman, "but I simply can't. The place is a bit upset."

Upset was somewhat of an

understatement.

Safely inside, he threaded his way among piles of albums, boxes, bags and storage cases scattered everywhere.

He finally reached the desk and dropped the bag beside it. He leafed through the letters and one was from Dahib and another was from the Lyraen system and the third from Muphrid, while the remaining one was an advertisement from a concern out on Mars.

He sat down in the massive, upholstered chair behind his desk and surveyed the room.

Someday he'd have to get it straightened out, he told himself. Undoubtedly there was a lot of junk he could simply throw away and the rest of it should be boxed and labeled so that he could lay his hands upon it. It might be, as well, a good idea to make out a general inventory sheet so that he'd have some idea what he had and what it might be worth.

Although, he thought, the value of it was not of so great a moment.

He probably should specialize, he thought. That was what most collectors did. The galaxy was much too big to try

to collect it all. Even back a couple of thousand years ago when all the collectors had to worry about were the stamps of Earth, the field even then had become so large and so unwieldy and so scattered that specialization had become the thing.

But what would a man specialize in, if he should decide to restrict his interest? Perhaps just the stamps from one particular planet or one specific system? Perhaps only stamps from beyond a certain distance - say, five hundred light-years? Or covers, perhaps? A collection of covers with postmarks and cancellations showing the varying intricacies of letter

communication throughout the depths of space, from star to star, could be quite interesting.

And that was the trouble with it - it all was so interesting. A man could spend three full lifetimes at it and still not reach the end of it,

In twenty years, he told himself, a man could amass a lot of material if he applied himself. And he had applied himself; he had worked hard at it and enjoyed every minute of it, and had become in certain areas, he thought with pride, somewhat of an expert. On occasion he had written articles for the philatelic press, and scarcely a week

went by that some man well-known in the field did not drop by for a chat or to seek his aid in a knotty problem.

There was a lot of satisfaction to be found in stamps, he told himself with apologetic smugness. Yes, sir, a great deal of satisfaction.

But the mere collection of material was only one small part of it - a sort of starting point. Greater than all the other facets of it were the contacts that one made. For one had to make contacts - especially out in the farther reaches of the galaxy. Unless one wanted to rely upon the sorry performance of the rascally dealers, who offered only what

was easy to obtain, one must establish contacts. Contacts with other collectors who might be willing to trade stamps with one; contacts with lonely men in lonely outposts far out on the rim, where the really exotic material was most likely to turn up, and who would be willing to watch for it and save it and send it on to one at a realistic price; with far-out institutions that made up mixtures and job lots in an attempt to eke out a miserly budget voted by the home communities.

There was a man by the name of Marsh out in the Coonskin system who wanted no more than the latest music tapes from Earth for the material that he

sent along. And the valiant priest at the missionary station on barren Agustron who wanted old tobacco tins and empty bottles which, for a most peculiar reason, had high value on that topsy-turvy world. And among the many others, Earthmen and aliens alike, there was always PugAlNash.

Packer rolled the wad of leaf across his tongue, sucking out the last faded dregs of its tantalizing flavor.

If a man could make a deal for a good-sized shipment of the leaf, he thought, he could make a fortune on it. Packaged in small units, like packs of gum, it would go like hot cakes here on

Earth. He had tried to bring up the subject with Pug, but had done no more than confuse and perplex the good Unukian who, for some unfathomable reason, could not conceive of any commerce that went beyond the confines of simple barter to meet the personal needs of the bargaining individuals.

The doorbell chimed and Packer went to answer it.

It was Tony Camper.

"Hi, Uncle Clyde," said Tony breezily.

Packer held the door open

grudgingly.

"Since you are here," he said, "you might as well come in."

Tony stepped in and tilted his hat back on his head. He looked the apartment over with an appraising eye.

"Some day, Unk," he said, "you should get this place shoveled out. I don't see how you stand it."

"I manage it quite well," Packer informed him tartly. "Some day I'll get around to straightening up a bit."

"I should hope you do," said Tony.

"My boy," said Packer, with a trace of pride, "I think that I can say, without fear of contradiction, that I have one of the finest collections of out-star stamps that anyone can boast. Some day, when I get them all in albums -"

"You'll never make it, Unk. It'll just keep piling up. It comes in faster than you can sort it out."

He reached out a foot and nudged the bag beside the desk.

"Like this," he said. "This is a new one, isn't it?"

"It just came in," admitted Packer.
"Haven't gotten around as yet to figuring out exactly where it's from."

"Well, that is fine," said Tony.
"Keep on having fun. You'll outlive us all."

"Sure I will," said Packer testily.
"What is it that you want?"

"Not a thing, Unk. Just dropped in to say hello and to remind you you're coming up to Hudson's to spend the weekend with us. Ann insisted that I drop around and nudge you. The kids have been counting the days -"

"I would have remembered it," lied Packer, who had quite forgotten it.

"I could drop around and pick you up. Three this afternoon?"

"No, Tony, don't bother. I'll catch a stratocab. I couldn't leave that early. I have things to do."

"I bet you have," said Tony.

He moved toward the door.

"You won't forget," he cautioned.

"No, of course I won't," snapped Packer.

"Ann would be plenty sore if you did. She's fixing everything you like."

Packer grunted at him.

"Dinner at seven," said Tony cheerfully.

"Sure, Tony. I'll be there."

"See you, Unk," said Tony, and was gone. _Young whippersnapper_, Packer told himself. _Wonder what he's up to now. Always got a new deal cooking, never quite making out on it. Just keeps scraping along._

He stumped back to the desk.

Figures he'll be getting my money when I die, he thought. _The little that I have. Well, I'll fool him. I'll spend every cent of it. I'll manage to live long enough for that._

He sat down and picked up one of the letters, slit it open with his pocketknife and dumped out its contents on the one small bare spot on the desk in front of him,

He snapped on the desk lamp and pulled it close. He bent above the stamps.

Pretty fair lot, he thought. That one there from Rho Geminorum XII, or was it XVI, was a fine example of the modern classic - designed with delicacy and imagination, engraved with loving care and exactitude, laid on paper of the highest quality, printed with the highest technical precision.

He hunted for his stamp tongs and failed to find them. He opened the desk drawer and rummaged through the tangled rat's nest he found inside it. He got down on his hands and knees and searched beneath the desk.

He didn't find the tongs.

He got back, puffing, into his chair, and sat there angrily.

__Always losing tongs__, he thought.
__I bet this is the twentieth pair I've lost.
Just can't keep track of them, damn 'em!__

The door chimed.

"Well, come on in!" Packer yelled in wrath.

A mouse-like little man came in and closed the door gently behind him. He stood timidly just inside, twirling his hat between his hands.

"You Mr. Packer, sir?"

"Yes, sure I am," yelled Packer.
"Who did you expect to find here?"

"Well, sir," said the man,
advancing a few careful steps into the
room, "I am Jason Pickering. You may
have heard of me."

"Pickering?" said Packer.
"Pickering? Oh, sure, I've heard of you.
You're the one who specializes in
Polaris."

"That is right," admitted Pickering,
mincing just a little. "I am gratified that
you -"

"Not at all," said Packer, getting up to shake his hand. "I'm the one who's honored."

He bent and swept two albums and three shoe boxes off a chair. One of the shoe boxes tipped over and a mound of stamps poured out

"Please have a chair, Mr. Pickering," Packer said majestically.

Pickering, his eyes popping slightly, sat down gingerly on the edge of the swept-clean chair.

"My, my," he said, his eyes taking in the litter that filled the apartment, "you

seem to have a lot of stuff here.
Undoubtedly, however, you can lay your hands on anything you want."

"Not a chance," said Packer, sitting down again. "I have no idea whatsoever what I have."

Pickering tittered. "Then, sir, you may well be in for some wonderful surprises."

"I'm never surprised at anything," said Packer loftily.

"Well, on to business," said Pickering. "I do not mean to waste your time. I was wondering if it were

possible you might have Polaris 17b on cover. It's quite an elusive number, even off cover, and I know of not a single instance of one that's tied to cover. But someone was telling me that perhaps you might have one tucked away."

"Let me see, now," said Packer. He leaned back in his chair and leafed catalogue pages rapidly through his mind. And suddenly he had it - Polaris 17b - a tiny stamp, almost a midget stamp, bright blue with a tiny crimson dot in the lower left-hand corner and its design a mass of lacy scrollwork.

"Yes," he said, opening his eyes, "I believe I may have one. I seem to

remember, years ago..."

Pickering leaned forward, hardly breathing.

"You mean you actually..."

"I'm sure it's here somewhere," said Packer, waving his hand vaguely at the room.

"If you find it," offered Pickering, "I'll pay ten thousand for it."

"A strip of five," said Packer, "as I remember it. Out of Polaris VII to Betelgeuse XIII by way of - I don't seem to remember by way of where."

"A strip of five!"

"As I remember it. I might be mistaken."

"Fifty thousand," said Pickering, practically frothing at the mouth. "Fifty thousand, if you find it."

Packer yawned. "For only fifty thousand, Mr. Pickering, I wouldn't even look."

"A hundred, then."

"I might think about it."

"You'll start looking right away?
You must have some idea."

"Mr. Pickering, it has taken me all of twenty years to pile up all the litter that you see and my memory's not too good. I'd have not the slightest notion where to start."

"Set your price," urged Pickering.
"What do you want for it?"

"If I find it," said Packer, "I might consider a quarter million. That is, if I find it."

"You'll look?"

"I'm not sure. Some day I might stumble on it. Some day I'll have to clean up the place. I'll keep an eye out for it."

Pickering stood up stiffly.

"You jest with me," he said.

Packer waved a feeble hand, "I never jest," he said.

Pickering moved toward the door.

Packer heaved himself from the chair. "I'll let you out," he said.

"Never mind. And thank you very

much."

Packer eased himself back into the chair and watched the man go out.

He sat there, trying to remember where the Polaris cover might be buried. And finally gave up. It had been so long ago.

He hunted some more for the tongs, but he didn't find them.

He'd have to go out first thing in the morning and buy another pair. Then he remembered that he wouldn't be here in the morning. He'd be up on Hudson's Bay, at Tony's summer place.

It did beat hell, he thought, how he could manage to lose so many tongs.

He sat for a long time, letting himself sink into a sort of suspended state, not quite asleep, nor yet entirely awake, and he thought, quite vaguely and disjointedly, of many curious things.

But mostly about adhesive postage stamps and how, of all the ideas exported by the Earth, the idea of the use of stamps had caught on most quickly and, in the last two thousand years, had spread to the far corners of the galaxy.

It was getting hard, he told himself,

to keep track of all the stamps, even of the planets that were issuing stamps. There were new ones popping up all the blessed time. A man must keep everlastingly on his toes to keep tab on all of them.

There were some funny stamps, he thought. Like the ones from Menkalinen that used smells to spell out their values. Not five cent stamps or five dollar stamps or hundred dollar stamps, but one stamp that smelled something like a pasture rose for the local mail and another stamp that had the odor of ripe old cheese for the system mail and yet another with a stink that could knock out a human at forty paces distance for the

interstellar service. And the Algeiban issues that shifted into colors beyond the range of human vision - and worst of all, with the values based on that very shift of color. And that famous classic issue put out, quite illegally, of course, by the Leonidian pirates who had used, instead of paper, the well-tanned, thin-scraped hides of human victims who had fallen into their clutches.

He sat nodding in the chair, listening to a clock hidden somewhere behind the litter of the room, ticking loudly in the silence.

It made a good life, he told himself, a very satisfactory life. Twenty years

ago when Myra had died and he had sold his interest in the export company, he'd been ready to curl up and end it all, ready to write off his life as one already lived. But today, he thought, he was more absorbed in stamps than he'd ever been in the export business and it was a blessing - that was what it was, a blessing.

He sat there and thought kindly of his stamps, which had rescued him from the deep wells of loneliness, which had given back his life and almost made him young again.

And then he fell asleep.

The door chimes wakened him and he stumbled to the door, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

The Widow Foshay stood in the hall, with a small kettle in her hands. She held it out to him.

"I thought, poor man, he will enjoy this," she said. "It's some of the beef broth that I made. And I always make so much. It's so hard to cook for one."

Packer took the kettle.

"It was kind of you," he mumbled.

She looked at him sharply.

"You are sick," she said.

She stepped through the door, forcing him to step back, forcing her way in.

"Not sick," he protested limply. "I fell asleep, that's all. There's nothing wrong with-me."

She reached out a pudgy hand and held it on his forehead.

"You have a fever," she declared. "You are burning..."

"There's nothing wrong with me,"

he bellowed. "I tell you, I just fell asleep, is all."

She turned and bustled out into the room, threading her way among the piled-up litter. Watching her, he thought: _My God, she finally got into the place! How can I throw her out?_

"You come over here and sit right down," she ordered him. "I don't suppose you have a thermometer."

He shook his head, defeated.

"Never had any need of one," he said. "Been healthy all my life."

She screamed and jumped and whirled around and headed for the door at an awkward gallop. She stumbled across a pile of boxes and fell flat upon her face, then scrambled, screeching, to her feet and shot out of the door.

Packer slammed the door behind her and stood looking, with some fascination, at the kettle in his hand. Despite all the ruckus, he'd spilled not a single drop.

But what had caused the widow...

Then he saw it - a tiny mouse running on the floor. He hoisted the kettle in a grave salute.

"Thanks, my friend," he said.

He made his way to the table in the dining room and found a place where he could put down the kettle.

Mice, he thought. There had been times when he had suspected that he had them - nibbled cheese on the kitchen shelf, scurryings in the night - and he had worried some about them making nests in the material he had stacked all about the place.

But mice had a good side to them, too, he thought.

He looked at his watch and it was almost five o'clock and he had an hour or so before he had to catch a cab and he realized now that somehow he had managed to miss lunch. So he'd have some of the broth and while he was doing that he'd look over the material that was in the bag.

He lifted some of the piled-up boxes off the table and set them on the floor so he had some room to empty the contents of the bag.

He went to the kitchen and got a spoon and sampled the broth. It was more than passing good. It was still warm and he had no doubt that the kettle

might do the finish of the table top no good, but that was something one need not worry over.

He hauled the bag over to the table and puzzled out the strangeness of the return address. It was the new script they'd started using a few years back out in the Bootes system and it was from a rather shady gentle-being from one of the Cygnian stars who appreciated, every now and then, a case of the finest Scotch.

Packer, hefting the bag, made a mental note to ship him two, at least.

He opened up the bag and upended it and a mound of covers flowed out on

the table.

Packer tossed the bag into a corner and sat down contentedly. He sipped at the broth and began going slowly through the pile of covers. They were, by and large, magnificent. Someone had taken the trouble to try to segregate them according to systems of their origin and had arranged them in little packets, held in place by rubber bands.

There was a packet from Rasalhague and another from Cheleb and from Nunki and Kaus Borealis and from many other places.

And there was a packet of others he

did not recognize at all. It was a fairly good-sized packet with twenty-five or thirty covers in it and all the envelopes, he saw, were franked with the same stamps - little yellow fellows that had no discernible markings on them - just squares of yellow paper, rather thick and rough. He ran his thumb across one and he got the sense of crumbling, as if the paper were soft and chalky and were abrading beneath the pressure of his thumb.

Fascinated, he pulled one envelope from beneath the rubber band and tossed the rest of the packet to one side.

He shambled to his desk and dug

frantically in the drawer and came back with a glass. He held it above the stamp and peered through it and he had been right - there were no markings on the stamp. It was a mere yellow square of paper that was rather thick and pebbly, as if it were made up of tiny grains of sand.

He straightened up and spooned broth into his mouth and frantically flipped the pages of his mental catalogue, but he got no clue. So far as he could recall, he'd never seen or heard of that particular stamp before.

He examined the postmarks with the glass and some of them he could

recognize and there were others that he couldn't, but that made no difference, for he could look them up, at a later time, in one of the postmark and cancellation handbooks. He got the distinct impression, however, that the planet, or planets, of origin must lie Libra-ward, for all the postmarks he could recognize trended in that direction.

He laid the glass away and turned his full attention to the broth, being careful of his whiskers. Whiskers, he reminded himself, were no excuse for one to be a sloppy eater.

The spoon turned in his hand at that very moment and some of the broth

spilled down his beard and some spattered on the table, but the most of it landed on the cover with the yellow stamp.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and tried to wipe the cover clean, but it wouldn't wipe. The envelope was soggy and the stamp was ruined with the grease and he said a few choice cusswords, directed at his clumsiness.

Then he took the dripping cover by one corner and hunted until he found the wastebasket and dropped the cover in it.

He was glad to get back from the weekend at Hudson's Bay.

Tony was a fool, he thought, to sink so much money in such a fancy place. He had no more prospects than rabbit and his high-pressure deals always seemed to peter out, but he still went on talking big and hung onto that expensive summer place. Maybe, Packer thought, that was the way to do it these days; maybe if you could fool someone into thinking you were big, you might have better chance of getting into something big. Maybe that was the way it worked, but he didn't know.

He stopped in the lobby to pick up

his mail, hoping there might be a package from PugAlNash. In the excitement of leaving for the weekend, he'd forgotten to take along the box of leaf and three days without it had impressed upon him how much he had come to rely upon it. Remembering how low his supply was getting he became a little jittery to think that more might not be forthcoming.

There was a batch of letters, but no box from Pug.

And he might have known, he told himself, that there wouldn't be, for the box never came until he was entirely out. At first, he recalled, he wondered by

what prophetic insight Pug might have known when the leaf was gone, how he could have gauged the shipping time to have it arrive exactly when there was need of it. By now he no longer thought about it, for it was one of those unbelievable things it does no good to think about.

"Glad to have you back," the clerk told him cheerfully. "You had a good weekend, Mr. Packer?"

"Tolerable," growled Packer, grumpily, heading for the elevator.

Before he reached it, he was apprehended by Elmer Lang, the

manager of the building.

"Mr. Packer," he whinnied, "I'd like to talk to you."

"Well, go ahead and talk."

"It's about the mice, Mr. Packer."

"What mice?"

"Mrs. Foshay tells me there are mice in your apartment."

Packer drew himself up to the fullness of his rather dumpy height.

"They are your mice, Lang," he

said. "You get rid of them."

Lang wrung his hands. "But how can I, Mr. Packer? It's the way you keep your place. All that litter in there. You've got to clean it up."

"That litter, I'll have you know, sir, is probably one of the most unique stamp collections in the entire galaxy. I've gotten behind a little in keeping it together, true, but I will not have you call it litter."

"I could have Miles, the caretaker, help you get it straightened out."

"I tell you, sir," said Packer, "the

only one who could help me is one trained in philately. Does your caretaker happen to be -"

"But, Mr. Packer," Lang pleaded, "all that paper and all those boxes are nesting places for them. I can do nothing about the mice unless I can get in there and get some of it cleared away."

"Cleared away!" exploded Packer. "Do you realize, sir, what you are talking of? Somewhere hidden in that vast stock of material, is a certain cover - to you, sir, an envelope with stamps and postmarks on it - for which I have been offered a quarter million dollars if I ever turn it up. And that is one small

piece of all the material I have there. I ask you, Lang, is that the sort of stuff that you clear away?"

"But, Mr. Packer, I cannot allow it to go on. I must insist -"

The elevator arrived and Packer stalked into it haughtily, leaving the manager standing in the lobby, twisting at his hands.

Packer whuffed his moustache at the operator.

"Busybody," he said, "What was that, sir?"

"Mrs. Foshay, my man. She's a busybody."

"I do believe," said the operator judiciously, "that you may be entirely right."

Packer hoped the corridor would be empty and it was. He unlocked his door and stepped inside.

A bubbling noise stopped him in his tracks.

He stood listening, unbelieving, just a little frightened.

The bubbling noise went on and on.

He stepped cautiously out into the room and as he did he saw it.

The wastebasket beside the desk was full of a bubbling yellow stuff that in several places had run down the sides and formed puddles on the floor.

Packer stalked the basket, half prepared to turn and run.

But nothing happened. The yellowness in the basket simply kept on bubbling.

It was a rather thick and gooey mess, not frothy, and the bubbling was

no more than a noise that it was making, for in the strict sense of the word, he saw, it was not bubbling.

Packer sidled closer and thrust out a hand toward the basket. It did not snap at him. It paid no attention to him.

He poked a finger at it and the stuff was fairly solid and slightly warm and he got the distinct impression that it was alive.

And immediately he thought of the broth-soaked cover he had thrown in the basket. It was not so unusual that he should think of it, for the yellow of the brew within the basket was the exact

color of the stamp upon the cover,

He walked around the desk and dropped the mail he'd picked up in the lobby. He sat down ponderously in the massive office chair.

So a stamp had come to life, he thought, and that certainly was a queer one. But no more queer, perhaps, than the properties of many other stamps, for while Earth had exported the idea of their use, a number of peculiar adaptations of the idea had evolved.

__And now__, he thought a little limply, __you have to get this mess in the basket out of here before Lang comes

busting in._

He worried a bit about what Lang had said about cleaning up the place and he got slightly sore about it, for he paid good money for these diggings and he paid promptly in advance and he was never any bother. And besides, he'd been here for twenty years, and Lang should consider that.

He finally got up from the chair and lumbered around the desk. He bent and grasped the wastebasket, being careful to miss the places where the yellow goo had run down the sides, He tried to lift it and the basket did not move. He tugged as hard as he could pull and the basket

stayed exactly where it was. He squared off and aimed a kick at it and the basket didn't budge.

He stood off a ways and glared at it, with his whiskers bristling. As if he didn't have all the trouble that he needed, without this basket deal! Somehow or other, he was going to have to get the apartment straightened out and get rid of the mice, He should be looking for the Polaris cover. And he'd lost or mislaid his tongs and would have to waste his time going out to get another pair.

But first of all, he'd have to get this basket out of here. Somehow it had become stuck to the floor - maybe some

of the yellow goo had run underneath the edge of it and dried. Maybe if he had a pinch bar or some sort of lever that he could jab beneath it, he could pry it loose.

From the basket the yellow stuff made merry bubbling noises at him.

He clapped his bat back on his head and went out and slammed and locked the door behind him.

It was a fine summer day and he walked around a little, trying to run his many problems through his mind, but no matter what he thought of, he always came back to the basket brimming with

the yellow mess and he knew he'd never be able to get started on any of the other tasks until he got rid of it.

So he hunted up a hardware store and bought a good-sized pinch bar and headed back for the apartment house. The bar, he knew, might mark up the floor somewhat, but if he could get under the edge of the basket with a bar that size he was sure that he could pry it loose,

In the lobby, Lang descended on him.

"Mr. Packer," he said sternly, "where are you going with that bar?"

"I went out and bought it to exterminate the mice."

"But, Mr. Packer -"

"You want to get rid of those mice, don't you?"

"Why, certainly I do."

"It's a desperate situation," Packer told him gravely, "and one that may require very desperate measures."

"But that bar!"

"Ill exercise my best discretion," Packer promised him. "I shall hit them

easy."

He went up the elevator with the bar. The sight of Lang's discomfiture made him feel a little better and he managed to whistle a snatch of tune as he went down the hall.

As he fumbled with the key, he heard the sound of rustling coming from beyond the door and he felt a chill go through him, for the rustlings were of a furtive sort and they sounded ominous,

__Good Lord__, he thought, __there can't be that many mice in there!__

He grasped the bar more firmly and

unlocked the door and pushed it open.

The inside of the place was a storm of paper.

He stepped in quickly and slammed the door behind him to keep the blowing paper from swooping out into the hall.

Must have left a window open, he thought. But he knew he had not, and even if he had, it was quiet outside. There was not a breath of breeze.

And what was happening inside the apartment was more than just a breeze.

He stood with his back against the

door and watched what was going on and shifted his grip on the bar so that it made a better club.

The apartment was filled with a sleet of flying paper and a barrage of packets and a snowstorm of dancing stamps. There were open boxes standing on the floor and the paper and the stamps and packets were drifting down and chunking into these, and along the wall were other boxes, very neatly piled - and that was entirely wrong, for there had been nothing neat about the place when he had left it less than two hours before.

But even as he watched, the activity

slacked off. There was less stuff flying through the air and some of the boxes were closed by unseen hands and then flew off, all by themselves, to stack themselves with the other boxes.

Poltergeists! he thought in terror, his mind scrambling back frantically over all that he had ever thought or read or heard to grasp some explanation.

Then it was done and over.

There was nothing flying through the air. All the boxes had been stacked. Everything was still.

Packer stepped out into the room

and stared in slackjawed amazement.

The desk and the tables shone. The drapes hung straight and clean. The carpeting looked as if it might be new. Chairs and small tables and lamps and other things, long forgotten, buried all these years beneath the accumulation of his collection, stood revealed and shining - dusted, cleaned and polished.

And in the middle of all this righteous order stood the wastebasket, bubbling happily.

Packer dropped the bar and headed for the desk.

In front of him a window flapped open and he heard a swish and the bar went past him, flying for the window. It went out the window and slashed through the foliage of a tree, then the window closed and he lost sight of it.

Packer took off his hat and tossed it on the desk.

Immediately his hat lifted from the desk and sailed for a closet door. The closet door swung open and the hat ducked in. The door closed gently on it.

Packer whuffled through his whiskers, He got out his handkerchief and mopped a glistening brow.

"Funny goings-on," he said to himself.

Slowly, cautiously, he checked the place. All the boxes were stacked along one wall, three deep and piled from floor to ceiling. Three filing cabinets stood along another wall and he rubbed his eyes at that, for he had forgotten that there were three of them - for years he'd thought that he had only two. And all the rest of the place was neat and clean and it fairly gleamed.

He walked from room to room and everywhere it was the same.

In the kitchen the pots and pans were all in place and the dishes stacked primly in the cupboard. The stove and refrigerator had been wiped clean and there were no dirty dishes and that was a bit surprising for he was sure there had been. Mrs. Foshay's kettle, with the broth emptied out of it and scrubbed until it shone, stood on the kitchen table.

He went back to the desk and the top of it was clear except for several items laid out, as if for his attention:

Ten dead mice.

Eight pairs of stamp tongs.

The packet of covers with the strange yellow stamps.

Two - not one - but two covers, one bearing a strip of four and the other a strip of five Polaris 17b.

Packer sat down heavily in his chair and stared at the items on the desk.

How in the world, he wondered - how had it come about? What was going on?

He peeked around the desk edge at the bubbling basket and it seemed to chortle at him.

It was, he told himself, it _must be_ the basket - or, rather, the stuff within the basket. Nothing else had been changed, no other factor had been added. The only thing new and different in the apartment was the basket of yellow gook.

He picked up the packet of covers with the yellow stamps affixed and opened the drawer to find a glass. The drawer was arranged with startling neatness and there were five glasses lying in a row. He chose the strongest one.

Beneath the glass the surface of the stamps became a field made up of tiny ball-like particles, unlike the grains of

sand which the weaker glass he had used before had shown.

He bent above the desk, with his eye glued to the glass, and he knew that what he was looking at were spores.

Encysted, lifeless, they still would carry life within them, and that had been what had happened here. He'd spilled the broth upon the stamp and the spores had come to life - a strange alien community of life that settled within the basket.

He put the glass back in the drawer and rose. He gathered up the dead mice carefully by their tails. He carried them

to the incinerator shaft and let them drop.

He crossed the room to the bookcases and the books were arranged in order and in sequence and there, finally, were books that he'd lost years ago and hunted ever since. There were long rows of stamp catalogs, the set of handbooks on galactic cancellations, the massive list of postmarks, the galactic travel guides, the long row of weird language dictionaries, indispensable in alien stamp identification, and a number of technical works on philatelic subjects.

From the bookcase he moved to the piled-up boxes. One of them he lifted

down. It was filled with covers, with glassine envelopes of loose stamps, with sheets, with blocks and strips. He dug through the contents avidly, with wonder mounting in him.

All the stamps, all the covers, were from the Thuban system.

He closed the box and bent to lift it back. It didn't wait for him. It lifted by itself and fitted itself in place.

He looked at three more boxes. One contained, exclusively, material from Korephoros, and another material from Antares and the third from Dschubba. Not only had the litter been picked up

and boxed and piled into some order, but the material itself had been roughly classified...

He went back to the chair and sat down a little weakly. It was too much, he thought, for a man to take.

The spores had fed upon the broth and had come to life, and within the basket was an alien life form or a community of life forms. And they possessed a passion for orderliness and a zest for work and an ability to channel that zest into useful channels.

And what was more, the things within the basket did what a man wanted

done.

It had straightened up the apartment, it had classified the stamps and covers, it had killed the mice, it had located the Polaris covers and had found the missing tongs.

And how had it known that he wanted these things done? Read his mind, perhaps?

He shivered at the thought, but the fact remained that it had done absolutely nothing except bubble merrily away until he had returned. It had done nothing, perhaps, because it did not know what to do - until he had somehow told it what to

do. For as soon as he had returned, it had found out what to do and did it.

The door chimed and he got up to answer. It was Tony.

"Hi, Unk," he said. "You forgot your pajamas and I brought them back. You left them on the bed and forgot to pack them."

He held out a package and it wasn't until then that he saw the room.

"Unk!" he yelled. "What happened? You got the place cleaned up!"

Packer shook his head in bewilderment. "Something funny, Tony."

Tony walked in and stared around in admiration and astonishment.

"You sure did a job," he said.

"I didn't do it, Tony."

"Oh, I see. You hired someone to do it while you were up at our place."

"No, not that. It was done this morning. It was done by that!"

He pointed at the basket.

"You're crazy, Unk," said Tony, firmly. "You have flipped your thatch."

"Maybe so," said Packer. "But the basket did the work."

Tony walked around the basket warily. He reached down and punched the yellow stuff with a stuck-out finger.

"It feels like dough," he announced.

He straightened up and looked at Packer.

"You aren't kidding me?" he asked.

"I don't know what it is," said Packer. "I don't know why or how it did it, but I'm telling you the truth."

"Unk," said Tony, "we may have something here!"

"There is no doubt of that."

"No, that's not what I mean. This may be the biggest thing that ever happened. This junk, you say, will really work for you?"

"Somehow or other," said Packer. "I don't know how it does it. It has a sense of order and it does the work you want. It seems to understand you - it

anticipates whatever you want done. Maybe it's a brain with enormous psi powers. I was looking at a cover the other night and I saw this yellow stamp..."

Packer told him swiftly what had happened. Tony listened thoughtfully, pulling at his chin. "Well, all right, Unk," he said, "we've got it. We don't know what it is or how it works, but let's put our thinking into gear. Just imagine a bucket of this stuff standing in an office - a great big, busy office. It would make for efficiency such as you never saw before. It would file all the papers and keep the records straight and keep the entire business strictly up to date.

There'd never be anything ever lost again. Everything would be right where it was supposed to be and could be located in a second, When the boss or someone else should want a certain file - bingo! it would be upon his desk. Why, an office with one of these little buckets could get rid of all its file clerks. A public library could be run efficiently without any personnel at all. But it would be in big business offices - in insurance firms and industrial concerns and transportation companies - where it would be worth the most."

Packer shook his head, a bit confused. "It might be all right, Tony; it might work the way you say. But who

would believe you? Who would pay attention? It's just too fantastic. They would laugh at you."

"You leave all that to me," said Tony. "That's my end of the business. That's where I come in."

"Oh," said Packer, "so we're in business now."

"I have a friend," said Tony, who always had a friend, "who'd let me try it out. We could put a bucket of this stuff in his office and see how it works out."

He looked around, suddenly all business.

"You got a bucket, Unk?"

"Out in the kitchen. You'd find something there."

"And beef broth. It was beef broth, wasn't it?"

Packer nodded. "I think I have a can of it."

Tony stood and scratched his head. "Now let's get this figured out, Unk. What we want is a sure source of supply."

"I have those other covers. They all

have stamps on them. We could start a new batch with one of them."

Tony gestured impatiently. "No, that wouldn't do. They are our reserves. We lock them tight away against emergency. I have a hunch that we can grow bucket after bucket of the stuff from what we have right here. Pull off a handful of it and feed it a shot of broth -"

"But how do you know -"

"Unk," said Tony, "doesn't it strike you a little funny that you had the exact number of spores in that one stamp, the correct amount of broth, to grow just one basket full?"

"Well, sure, but..."

"Look, this stuff is intelligent. It knows what it is doing. It lays down rules for itself to live by. It's got a sense of order and it lives by order. So you give it a wastebasket to live in and it lives within the limits of that basket. It gets just level with the top; it lets a little run down the sides to cement the basket tight to the floor. And that is all. It doesn't run over. It doesn't fill the room. It has some discipline."

"Well, maybe you are right, but that still doesn't answer the question -"

"Just a second, Unk. Watch here."

Tony plunged his hand into the basket and came out with a chunk of the spore-growth ripped loose from the parent body.

"Now, watch the basket, Unk," he said.

They watched. Swiftly, the spores surged and heaved to fill the space where the ripped-out chunk had been. Once again the basket was very neatly filled.

"You see what I mean?" said Tony.
"Given more living room, it will grow."

All we have to do is feed it so it can.
And we'll give it living room. We'll give
it a lot of buckets, so it can grow to its
heart's content and -"

"Damn it, Tony, will you listen to
me? I been trying to ask you what we're
going to do to keep it from cementing
itself to the floor. If we start another
batch of it, it will cement its bucket or
its basket or whatever it is in to the floor
just like this first one did."

"I'm glad you brought that up," said
Tony. "I know just what to do. We will
hang it up. We'll hang up the bucket and
there won't be any floor."

"Well," said Packer, "I guess that covers it. I'll go heat up that broth."

They heated the broth and found a bucket and hung it on a broomstick suspended between two chairs.

They dropped the chunk of spore-growth in and watched it and it stayed just as it was.

"My hunch was right," said Tony. "It needs some of that broth to get it started."

He poured in some broth and the spores melted before their very eyes into a black and ropy scum.

"There's something wrong," said Tony, worriedly.

"I guess there is," said Packer.

"I got an idea, Unk. You might have used a different brand of broth. There might be some difference in the

ingredients. It may not be the broth itself, but some ingredient in it that gives this stuff the shot in the arm it needs. We might be using the wrong broth."

Packer shuffled uncomfortably.

"I don't remember, Tony."

"You have to!" Tony yelled at him. "Think, Unk! You got to - you have to remember what brand it was you used." Packer whuffed out his whiskers unhappily.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Tony, it wasn't boughten broth. Mrs. Foshay made it."

"Now, we're getting somewhere! Who is Mrs. Foshay?"

"She's a nosy old dame who lives across the hall."

"Well, that's just fine. All you have

to do is ask her to make some more for you."

"I can't do it, Tony."

"All we'd need is one batch, Unk. We could have it analyzed and find out what is in it. Then we'd be all set."

"She'd want to know why I wanted it. And she'd tell all over how I asked for it. She might even figure out there was something funny going on."

"We can't have that," exclaimed Tony in alarm. "This is our secret, Unk. We can't cut in anyone."

He sat and thought.

"Anyhow, she's probably sore at me," said Packer. "She sneaked in the other day and got the hell scared out of her when a mouse ran across the floor. She tore down to the management about it and tried to make me trouble."

Tony snapped his fingers.

"I got it!" he cried. "I know just how we'll work it. You go on and get in bed -"

"I will not!" snarled Packer.

"Now listen, Unk, you have to play

along. You have to do your part."

"I don't like it," protested Packer. "I don't like any part of it."

"You get in bed," insisted Tony, "and look the worst you can. Pretend you're suffering. I'll go over to this Mrs. Foshay and I'll tell her how upset you were over that mouse scaring her. I'll say you worked all day to get the place cleaned up just because of that; I'll say you worked so hard -"

"You'll do no such thing," yelped Packer. "She'll come tearing in here. I won't have that woman -"

"You want to make a couple billion, don't you?" asked Tony angrily.

"I don't care particularly," Packer told him. "I can't somehow get my heart in it."

"I'll tell this woman that you are all tuckered out and that your heart is not so good and the only thing you want is another bowl of broth."

"You'll tell her no such thing," raved Packer. "You'll leave her out of this."

"Now, Unk," Tony reasoned with him, "If you won't do it for yourself, do

it for me - me, the only kin you have in the entire world. It's the first big thing I've ever had a chance at. I may talk a lot and try to look prosperous and successful, but I tell you, Unk..."

He saw he was getting nowhere.

"Well, if you won't do it for me, do it for Ann, do it for the kids. You wouldn't want to see those poor little kids -"

"Oh, shut up," said Packer. "First thing you know, you'll be blubbering. All right, then, I'll do it."

It was worse than he had thought it would be. If he had known it was to be so bad, he'd never have consented to go through with it.

The Widow Foshay brought the bowl of broth herself. She sat on the bed and held his head up and cooed and crooned at him as she fed him broth.

It was most embarrassing. But they got what they were after. When she had finished feeding him, there was still half a bowl of broth and she left that with them because, she said, poor man, he might be needing it.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon and almost time for the Widow Foshay to come in with the broth.

Thinking of it, Packer gagged a little.

Someday, he promised himself, he'd beat Tony's brains out. If it hadn't been for him, this never would have started.

Almost six months now and every blessed day she had brought the broth and sat and talked with him while he forced down a bowl of it. And the worst

of it, Packer told himself, was that he had to pretend that he thought that it was good.

And she was so gay! Why did she have to be so gay? _Toujours gai_, he thought. Just like the crazy alley cat that ancient writer had penned the silly lines about.

Garlic in the broth, he thought - _my God, who'd ever heard of garlic in beef broth!_ It was uncivilized. A special recipe, she'd said, and it was all of that. And yet it had been the garlic that had done the job with the yellow sporelife - it was the food needed by the spores to kick them into life and to start

them growing.

The garlic in the broth might have been good for him as well, he admitted to himself, for in many years, seemed, he had not felt so fine. There was a spring in his step, he'd noticed, and he didn't get so tired; he used to take a nap in the afternoon and now he never did. He worked as much as ever, actually more than ever, and he was, except for the widow and the broth, a very happy man. Yes, a very happy man.

He would continue to be happy, he told himself, as long as Tony left him to his stamps. Let the little whippersnapper carry the load of Efficiency, Inc.; he

was, after all, the one who had insisted on it. Although, give him credit, he had done well with it. A lot of industries had signed up and a whole raft of insurance companies and a bunch of bond houses and a good scattering of other lines of business. Before long, Tony said, there wouldn't be a business anywhere that would dare to try to get along without the services of Efficiency, Inc.

The doorbell chimed and he went to answer it. It would be the Widow Foshay, and she would have her hands full with the broth.

But it was not the widow.

"Are you Mr. Clyde Packer?" asked the man who stood in the hall.

"Yes, sir," Packer said. "Will you please step in?"

"My name is John Griffin," said the man, after he was seated, "I represent Geneva."

"Geneva? You mean the Government?"

The man showed him credentials.

"Okay," said Packer a bit frostily, being no great admirer of the Government. "What can I do for you?"

"You are senior partner in Efficiency, Inc., I believe."

"I guess that's what I am."

"Mr. Packer, don't you know?" -

"Well, I'm not positive. I'm a partner, but I don't know about this senior business. Tony runs the show and I let him have his head."

"You and your nephew are sole owners of the firm?"

"You bet your boots we are. We kept it for ourselves. We took no one in with us."

"Mr. Packer, for some time the Government has been attempting to negotiate with Mr. Camper. He's told you nothing of it?"

"Not a thing," said Packer. "I'm busy with my stamps. He doesn't bother me."

"_We_ have been interested in your service," Griffin said. "_We_ have tried to buy it."

"It's for sale," said Packer. "You just pay the price and -"

"But you don't understand. Mr.

Camper insists on a separate contract for every single office that we operate. That would run to a terrific figure -"

"Worth it," Packer assured him.
"Every cent of it."

"It's unfair," said Griffin firmly.
"We are willing to buy it on a departmental basis and we feel that even in that case we would be making some concession. By rights the Government should be allowed to come in under a single covering arrangement."

"Look," protested Packer, "what are you talking to me for? I don't run the business; Tony does. You'll have to deal

with him. I have faith in the boy. He has a good hard business head. I'm not even interested in Efficiency. All I'm interested in is stamps."

"That's just the point," said Griffin heartily. "You've hit the situation exactly on the head."

"Come again?" asked Packer.

"Well, it's like this," Griffin told him in confidential tones. "The Government gets a lot of stamps in its daily correspondence. I forget the figure, but it runs to several tons of philatelic material every day. And from every planet in the galaxy. We have in the past

been disposing of it to several stamp concerns, but there's a disposition in certain quarters to offer the whole lot as a package deal at a most attractive price."

"That is fine," said Packer, "but what would I do with several tons a day?"

"I wouldn't know," declared Griffin, "but since you are so interested in stamps, it would give you a splendid opportunity to have first crack at a batch of top-notch material. It is, I dare say, one of the best sources you could find."

"And you'd sell all this stuff to me

if I put in a word for you with Tony?"

Griffin grinned happily. "You follow me exactly, Mr Packer."

Packer snorted, "Follow you! I'm way ahead of you."

"Now, now," cautioned Griffin, "you must not get the wrong impression. This is a business offer - a purely business offer."

"I suppose you'd expect no more than nominal payment for all this waste paper I would be taking off your hands."

"Very nominal," said Griffin.

"All right, I'll think about it and I'll let you know. I can't promise you a thing, of course."

"I understand, Mr. Packer. I do not mean to rush you."

After Griffin left, Packer sat and thought about it and the more he thought about it, the more attractive it became.

He could rent a warehouse and install an Efficiency Basket in it and all he'd have to do would be dump all that junk in there and the basket would sort it out for him.

He wasn't exactly sure if one basket would have the time to break the selection down to more than just planetary groupings, but if one basket couldn't do it, he could install a second one and between the two of them, he could run the classification down to any point he wished. And then, after the baskets had sorted out the more select items for his personal inspection, he could set up an organization to sell the rest of it in job lots and he could afford to sell it at a figure that would run all the rest of those crummy dealers clear out on the limb.

He rubbed his hands together in a gesture of considerable satisfaction,

thinking how he could make it rough for all those skinflint dealers. It was murder, he reminded himself, what they got away with; anything that happened to them, they had coming to them.

But there was one thing he gagged on slightly. What Griffin had offered him was little better than a bribe, although it was, he supposed, no more than one could expect of the Government. The entire Governmental structure was loaded with grafters and ten percenters and lobbyists and special interest boys and others of their ilk.

Probably no one would think a thing of it if he made the stamp deal -

except the dealers, of course, and there was absolutely nothing they could do about it except sit and howl.

But aside from that, he wondered, did he have the right to interfere with Tony? He could mention it to him of course, and Tony would say yes. But did he have the right?

He sat and worried at the question, without reaching a conclusion, without getting any nearer to the answer until the door chimes sounded.

It was the Widow Foshay and she was empty-handed. She had no broth today.

"Good afternoon," he said. "You are a little late."

"I was just opening my door to come over when I saw you had a caller. He's gone now, isn't he?"

"For some time," said Packer.

She stepped inside and he closed the door. They walked across the room.

"Mr. Packer," said the Widow, "I must apologize. I brought no broth today. The truth of the matter is, I'm tired of making it all the time."

"In such a case," he said, very gallantly, "the treats will be on me."

He opened the desk drawer and lifted out the brand new box of PugAlNash's leaf, which had arrived only the day before.

Almost reverently, he lifted the cover and held the box out to her. She recoiled from it a little.

"Go ahead," he urged. "Take a pinch of it. Don't swallow it. Just chew it."

Cautiously, she dipped her fingers in the box.

"That's too much," he warned her.
"Just a little pinch. You don't need a lot.
And it's rather hard to come by."

She took a pinch and put it in her mouth.

He watched her closely, smiling. She looked for all the world as if she had taken poison. But soon she settled back in her chair, apparently convinced it was not some lethal trick.

"I don't believe," she said, "I've ever tasted anything quite like it."

"You never have. Other than

myself, you may well be the only human that has ever tasted it. I get it from a friend of mine who lives on one of the far-out stars. His name is PugAlNash and he sends it regularly. And he always includes a note."

He looked in the drawer and found the latest note.

"Listen to this," he said.

He read it:

_Der Fiend: Grately injoid latter smoke you cent me. Ples mor of sam

agin. You du knot no that I profetick and
wach ahead for you. Butt it be so and I
grately hapy to perform this taske for
fiend. I assur you it be onely four the
beste. You prophet gratly, maybee.

Your luvving fiend,

PugAlNash_

He finished reading it and tossed it
on the desk.

"What do you make of it?" he
asked. "Especially that crack about his
being a prophet and watching ahead for

me?"

"It must be all right," the widow said. "He claims you will profit greatly."

"He sounds like a gypsy fortune-teller. He had me worried for a while."

"But why should you worry over that?"

"Because I don't want to know what's going to happen to me. And sometime he might tell me. If a man could look ahead, for example, he'd know just when he was going to die and how and all the -"

"Mr. Packer," she told him, "I don't think you're meant to die. I swear you are getting to look younger every day."

"As a matter of fact," said Packer, vastly pleased, "I'm feeling the best I have in years."

"It may be that leaf he sends you."

"No, I think most likely it is that broth of yours."

They spent a pleasant afternoon - more pleasant, Packer admitted, than he would have thought was possible.

And after she had left, he asked

himself another question that had him somewhat frightened.

Why in the world, of all people in the world, had he shared the leaf with her?

He put the box back in the drawer and picked up the note. He smoothed it out and read it once again.

The spelling brought a slight smile to his lips, but he quickly turned it off, for despite the atrociousness of it, PugAlNash nevertheless was one score up on him. For Pug had been able, after a fashion, to master the language of Earth, while he had bogged down completely

when confronted with Pug's language.

__I profetick and wach ahead for
you.__

It was crazy, he told himself. It was, perhaps, some sort of joke, the kind of thing that passed for a joke with Pug.

He put the note away and prowled the apartment restlessly, vaguely upset by the whole pile-up of worries.

What should he do about the Griffin offer?

Why had he shared the leaf with the Widow Foshay?

What about that crack of Pug's?

He went to the bookshelves and put out a finger and ran it along the massive set of _Galactic Abstracts_. He found the right volume and took it back to the desk with him.

He leafed through it until he found _Unuk al Hay_. Pug, he remembered, lived on Planet X of the system.

He wrinkled up his forehead as he puzzled out the meaning of the compact, condensed, sometimes cryptic wording, bristling with fantastic abbreviations. It was a bloated nuisance, but it made

sense, of course. There was just too much information to cover in the galaxy - the set of books, unwieldy as it might be, would simply become unmanageable if anything like completeness of expression and description were attempted.

_X-lt.kn., int., unin. Hu., (T-67),
tr. intrm. (T-102) med. hbs., leg. forst.,
diff. lang..._

Wait a second, there!

Leg. forst.

Could that be _legend of foresight?

—

He read it again, translating as he went:

X-little known, intelligence, uninhabitable for humans (see table 67), trade by intermediaries (see table 102), medical herbs, legend (or legacy?) of foresight, difficult language...

And that last one certainly was

right. He'd gained a working knowledge of a lot of alien tongues, but will Pug's he could not even get an inkling.

Leg. forst.?

One couldn't be sure, but it could be - it could be!

He slapped the book shut and took it back to the shelf.

So you watch ahead for me, he said.

And why? To what purpose?

PugAlNash, he said, a little

pleased, _some day I'll wring your
scrawny, meddling neck._

But, of course, he wouldn't.
PugAlNash was too far away and he
might not be scrawny and there was no
reason to believe he even had a neck.

When bedtime came around, he got
into his flame-red pajamas with the
yellow parrots on them and sat on the
edge of the bed, wiggling his toes.

It had been quite a day, he thought.

He'd have to talk with Tony about

this Government offer to sell him the stamp material. Perhaps, he thought, he should insist upon it even if it meant a loss of possible revenue to Efficiency, Inc. He might as well get what he could and what he wanted when it was for the taking. For Tony, before they were through with it, probably would beat him out of what he had coming to him. He had expected it by now - but more than likely Tony had been too busy to indulge in any crookedness. Although it was a wonder, for Tony enjoyed a dishonest dollar twice as much as he did an honest one.

He remembered that he had told Griffin that he had faith in Tony and he

guessed that he'd been right - he had faith in him and a little pride as well. Tony was an unprincipled rascal and there was no denying it. Thinking about it, Packer chuckled fondly. _Just like me_, he told himself, _when I was young as Tony and was still in business._

There had been that triple deal with the bogus Chippendale and the Antarian paintings and the local version of moonshine from out in the Packrat system. _By God_, he told himself, _I skinned all three of them on that one._

The phone rang and he padded out of the bedroom, his bare feet slapping on the floor.

The phone kept on insisting.

"All right!" yelled Packer angrily.
"I'm coming!" He reached the desk and picked up the phone. "This is Pickering," said the voice.

"Pickering. Oh, sure. Glad to hear from you."

"The man you talked with about the Polaris cover."

"Yes, Pickering. I remember you."

"I wonder, did you ever find that cover?"

"Yes, I found it. Sorry, but the strip had only four. I told you five, I fear. An awful memory, but you know how it goes. A man gets old and -"

"Mr. Packer, will you sell that cover?"

"Sell it? Yes, I guess I told you that I would. Man of my word, you realize, although I regret it now."

"It's a fine one, then?"

"Mr. Pickering," said Packer, "considering that it's the only one in existence -"

"Could I come over to see it sometime soon?"

"Any time you wish. Any time at all."

"You will hold it for me?"

"Certainly," consented Packer.

"After all, no one knows as yet that I have the thing."

"And the price?"

"Well, now, I told you a quarter million, but I was talking then about a strip of five. Since it's only four I'd be

willing to shave it some. I'm a reasonable man Mr. Pickering. Not difficult to deal with."

"I can see you aren't," said Pickering with a trace of bitterness.

They said good night and Packer sat in the chair and put his bare feet up on the desk and wiggled his toes watching them with a certain fascination, as if he had never seen them before.

He'd sell Pickering the four-strip cover for two hundred thousand. Then he'd let it get noised about that there was a five-strip cover, and once he heard that Pickering would be beside himself and

frothing at the mouth. He'd be afraid that someone might get ahead of him and buy the five-stamp strip while he had only four. And that would be a public humiliation that a collector of Pickering's stripe simply couldn't stand.

Packer chortled softly to himself.

"Bait," he said aloud.

He probably could get half a million out of that five strip piece. He'd make Pickering pay for it. He'd have to start it high, of course, and let Pickering beat him down.

Be looked at the clock upon the

desk and it was ten o'clock - a good hour past his usual bedtime.

He wiggled his toes some more and watched them. Funny thing about it, he wasn't even sleepy. He didn't want to go to bed; he'd got undressed from simple force of habit.

Nine o'clock, he thought, is a hell of a time for a man to go to bed. He could remember a time when he had never turned in until well after midnight and there had been many certain memorable occasions, he chucklingly recalled, when he'd not gone to bed at all.

But there had been something to do

in those days. There had been places to go and people to meet and food had tasted proper and the liquor had been something a man looked forward to. They didn't make decent liquor these days, he told himself. And there were no great cooks any more. And no entertainment, none worthy of the name. All his friends had either died or scattered; none of them had lasted.

Nothing lasts, he thought.

He sat wiggling his toes and looking at the clock and somehow he was beginning to feel just a bit excited, although he could not imagine why.

In the silence of the room there were two sounds only - the soft ticking of the clock and the syrupy gurgling of the basket full of spores.

He leaned around the corner of the desk and looked at the basket and it was there, foursquare and solid - a basketful of fantasy come to sudden and enduring life.

Someday, he thought, someone would find where the spores came from - what distant planet in what misty reaches out toward the rim of the thinning galaxy. Perhaps even now the origin of the stamps could be determined if he'd only release the data that he had,

if he would show the covers with the yellow stamps to some authority. But the covers and the data were a trade secret and had become too valuable to be shown to any one; they were tucked away deep inside a bank vault.

Intelligent spores, he mused - what a perfect medium for the carrying of the mail. You put a dab of them on letter or a package and you told them, somehow or other, where the letter or the package was to go and they would take it there. And once the job was done then the spores encysted until the day that someone else, or something else, should recall them to their labors.

And today they were laboring for the Earth and the day would come, perhaps, when they'd be housekeepers to the entire Earth. They'd run all business efficiently and keep all homes picked up and neat; they would clean the streets and keep them free of litter and introduce everywhere an era of such order and such cleanliness as no race had ever known.

He wiggled his toes and looked at the clock again. I was not ten-thirty yet and it was really early. Perhaps he should change his mind - perhaps he should dress again and go for a moonlight stroll. For there was a moon; he could see it through the window.

Damn old fool, he told himself, whuffling out his whiskers.

But he took his feet down off the desk and paddled toward the bedroom.

He chuckled as he went, planning exactly how he was going to skin Pickering to within an inch of that collector's parsimonious life.

He was bending at the mirror, trying to make his tie track, when the doorbell set up a clamor.

If it was Pickering, he thought, he'd throw the damn fool out. Imagine turning

up at this time of night to do a piece of business that could better wait till morning.

It wasn't Pickering.

The man's card said he was W. Frederick Hazlitt and that he was president of the Hazlitt Suppliers Corporation.

"Well, Mr. Hazlitt?"

"I'd like to talk to you a minute," Hazlitt said, peering furtively around. "You're sure that we're alone here?"

"Quite alone," said Packer.

"This is a matter of some delicacy," Hazlitt told him, "and of some alarm as well. I came to you rather than Mr. Anton Camper because I know of you by reputation as a man of proven business sagacity. I feel you could understand the problem where Mr. Camper -"

"Fire away," invited Packer cordially.

He had a feeling that he was going to enjoy this. The man was obviously upset and scared to death as well.

Hazlitt hunched forward in his chair and his voice dropped almost to a

whisper.

"Mr. Packer," he confided in stricken horror, "I am becoming honest!"

"That's too bad," said Packer sympathetically.

"Yes, it is," said Hazlitt soberly. "A man in my position - in any business connection - simply can't be honest. Mr. Packer, I'll tell you confidentially that I lost out on one of the biggest deals in all my business life just last week because I had grown honest."

"Maybe," Packer suggested, "if you persevered, if you set your heart on it,

you could remain at least partially dishonest."

Hazlitt shook his head dolefully. "I tell you, sir, can't. I've tried. You don't know how hard I've tried. And no matter how I try, I find myself telling the truth about everything. I find that I cannot take unfair advantage of anyone, not even of a customer. I even found myself the other day engaged in cutting my profit margins down to a more realistic figure -"

"Why, that's horrible!" cried Packer.

"And it's all your fault," yelled Hazlitt.

"My fault," protested 'Packer, whuffling out his whiskers. "Upon my word, Mr. Hazlitt, I can't see how you can say a thing like that. I haven't had a thing to do with it."

"It's your Efficiency units," howled Hazlitt. "They're the cause of it."

"The Efficiency units have nothing to do with you, declared Packer angrily. "All they do..."

He stopped.

Good Lord, he thought, they could!

He'd been feeling better than he'd felt for years and he didn't need his nap of an afternoon and here he was dressing to go out in the middle of the night!

"How long has this been going on?" he asked in growing horror.

"For a month at least," said Hazlitt. "I think I first noticed it a month or six weeks ago."

"Why didn't you simply heave the unit out?" "I did," yelled Hazlitt, "but it did no good."

"I don't understand. If you threw it out that should be the end of it."

"That's what I thought at the time, myself. But I was wrong. That yellow stuffs still there. It's growing in the

cracks and floating in the air and you can't get rid of it. Once you have it, you are stuck with it."

Packer clucked in sympathy.

"You could move, perhaps."

"Do you realize what that would cost me, Packer? And besides, as far as I'm concerned, it simply is no good. The stuff's inside of me!"

He pounded at his chest. "I can feel it here, inside of me - turning me honest, making a good man out of me, making me orderly and efficient, just like it made our files. And I don't want to be a good man, Packer - I want to make a lot of money!"

"There's one consolation," Packer told him. "Whatever is happening to you undoubtedly also is happening to your competitors."

"But even if that were the case," protested Hazlitt, "it would be no fun. What do you think a man goes into business for? To render service, to become identified with the commercial

community, to make money only? No, sir, I tell you - it's the thrill of skinning a competitor, of running the risk of losing your own shirt, of -"

"Amen," Packer said loudly.

Hazlitt stared at him. "You, too..."

"Not a chance," said Packer proudly. "I'm every bit as big a rascal as I ever was."

Hazlitt settled back into his chair. His voice took on an edge, grew a trifle cold.

"I had considered exposing you,

warning the world, and then I saw I couldn't..."

"Of course you can't," said Packer gruffly. "You don't enjoy being laughed at. You are the kind of man who can't stand the thought of being laughed at."

"What's your game, Packer?"

"My game?"

"You introduced the stuff. You must have known what it would do. And yet you say you are unaffected by it. What are you shooting at - gobbling up the entire planet?"

Packer whuffed. "I hadn't thought of it," he said. "But it's a capital idea."

He rose stiffly to his feet. "Little old for it," he said, "but I have a few years yet. And I'm in the best of fettle. Haven't felt -"

"You were going out," said Hazlitt, rising. "I'll not detain you."

"I thank you, sir," said Packer. "I noticed that there was a moon and I was going for a stroll. You wouldn't join me, would you?"

"I have more important things to do, Packer, than strolling in the moonlight."

"I have no doubt of that," said Packer, bowing slightly. "You would, of course, an upright, honest businessman like you."

Hazlitt slammed the door as he went out.

Packer padded back to the bedroom, took up the tie again.

Hazlitt an honest man, he thought. And how many other honest men this night? And a year from now - how many honest men in the whole wide world just one year from now? How long before the entire Earth would be an honest

Earth? With spores lurking in the cracks and floating in the air and running with the rivers, it might not take so long.

Maybe that was the reason Tony hadn't skinned him yet. Maybe Tony was getting honest, too. Too bad, thought Packer, gravely. Tony wouldn't be half as interesting if he should happen to turn honest.

And the Government? A Government that had come begging for the spores - begging to be honest, although to be completely fair one must admit the Government as yet did not know about the honesty.

That was a hot one, Packer told himself. An honest Government! And it would serve those stinkers right! He could see the looks upon their faces.

He gave up the business of the tie and sat down on the bed and shook for minutes with rumbling belly laughter.

At last he wiped the tears out of his eyes and finished with the tie.

Tomorrow morning, bright and early, he'd get in touch with Griffin and arrange the package deal for the stamp material. He'd act greedy and drive a hard bargain and then, in the end, pay a bit more than the price agreed upon for a

long-term arrangement. An honest Government, he told himself, would be too honest to rescind such an agreement even if, in the light of its new honesty, it should realize the wrongness of it. For, happily, one of the tenets of honesty was to stay stuck with a bad bargain, no matter how arrived at.

He shucked into his jacket and went into the living room. He stopped at the desk and opened the drawer. Reaching in, he lifted the lid of the box of leaf. He took a pinch and had it halfway to his mouth when the thought struck him suddenly and he stood for a moment frozen while all the gears came together, meshing, and the pieces fell into a

pattern and he knew, without even asking, why he was the only genuine dishonest man left on the entire Earth.

__I profetick and wach ahead for you!__

He put the leaf into his mouth and felt the comfort of it.

__Antidote__, he thought, and knew that he was right.

But how could Pug have known - how could he have foreseen the long, twisting tangle of many circumstances which must inevitably crystallize into this very moment?

Leg. forst.?

He closed the lid of the box and shut the drawer and turned toward the door.

The only dishonest man in the world, he thought. Immune to the honesty factor in the yellow spores because of the resistance built up within him by his long use of the leaf.

He had set a trap tonight to victimize Pickering and tomorrow he'd go out and fox the Government and there was no telling where he'd go from there. Hazlitt had said something about taking

over the entire planet and the idea was not a bad one if he could only squeeze out the necessary time.

He chuckled at the thought of how all the honest suckers would stand innocently in line, unable to do a thing about it - all fair prey to the one dishonest man in the entire world. A wolf among the sheep!

He drew himself erect and pulled the white gloves on carefully. He flicked his walking stick. Then he thumped himself on the chest - just once - and let himself out into the hall. He did not bother to lock the door behind him.

In the lobby, as he stepped out of the elevator, he saw the Widow Foshay coming in the door. She turned and called back cheerfully to friends who had brought her home.

He lifted his hat to her with an olden courtesy that he thought he had forgotten.

She threw up her hands in mock surprise. "Mr. Packer," she cried, "what has come over you? Where do you think you're going at this time of night, when all honest people are abed?"

"Minerva," he told her gravely, "I was about to take a stroll. I wonder if

you might come along with me?"

She hesitated for an instant, just long enough to give the desired small show of reluctance and indecision.

He whuffed out his moustache at her. "Besides," he said, "I am not an honest person."

He offered her his arm with distinguished gallantry.

Clifford D.Simak. All the traps of
Earth

© Copyright 1960 Clifford D.Simak
Prepared by: Anada Sucka, August
12, 1999

THE INVENTORY list was

long. On its many pages, in his small and

precise script, he had listed furniture, paintings, china, silverware and

all the rest of it - all the personal belongings that had been accumulated by the Barringtons through a long family history.

And now that he had reached the end of it, he noted down himself, the last item of them all:

One domestic robot, Richard Daniel, antiquated but in good repair.

He laid the pen aside and shuffled all the inventory sheets together and stacked them in good order, putting a paper weight upon them - the

little exquisitely carved ivory paper weight that aunt Hortense had picked up that last visit she had made to Peking.

And having done that, his job came to an end.

He shoved back the chair and rose from the desk and slowly walked across the living room, with all its clutter of possessions from the family's past. There, above the mantel, hung the sword that ancient Jonathon had worn in the War Between the States, and below it, on the mantelpiece

itself, the cup the Commodore had won with his valiant yacht, and the jar of moon-dust that Tony had brought

back from Man's fifth landing on the Moon,

and the old chronometer that had come from the long-scrapped family spacecraft that had plied the asteroids.

And all around the room, almost cheek by jowl, hung the family portraits, with the old dead faces staring out into the world that they had helped to fashion.

And not a one of them from the last six hundred years, thought Richard

Daniel, staring at them one by one, that he had not known.

There, to the right of the fireplace, old Rufus Andrew Barrington, who had been a judge some two hundred years ago. And to the right of Rufus,

Johnson Joseph Barrington, who had headed up that old lost dream of mankind,

the Bureau of Paranormal Research. There, beyond the door that led out to the porch, was the scowling pirate face of Danley Barrington, who had first

built the family fortune.

And many others - administrator, adventurer, corporation chief. All good men and true.

But this was at an end. The family had run out.

Slowly Richard Daniel began his last tour of the house - the family room with its cluttered living space, the den with its old mementos, the library and its rows of ancient books, the dining hall in which the crystal and the china shone and sparkled, the kitchen gleaming with the copper and aluminum and the stainless steel, and the bedrooms on the second floor, each of them with its landmarks of former occupants. And finally, the bedroom

where old Aunt Hortense had finally died, at long last closing out the line of Barringtons.

The empty dwelling held a not-quite-haunted quality, the aura of a house that waited for the old gay life to take up once again. But it was a false aura. All the portraits, all the china and the silverware, everything within the house would be sold at public auction to satisfy the debts. The rooms would be stripped and the possessions would be scattered and, as a last indignity, the house itself be sold.

Even he, himself, Richard Daniel thought, for he was chattel, too. He was there with all the rest of it, the final item on the inventory.

Except that what they planned to do with him was worse than simple sale. For he would be changed before he was offered up for sale. No one would be interested in putting up good money for him as he stood. And, besides, there was the law - the law that said no robot could legally have continuation of a single life greater than a hundred years.

And he had lived in a single life six times a hundred years. He had gone to see a lawyer and the lawyer had been sympathetic, but had held forth no hope.

"Technically," he had told Richard Daniel in his short, clipped lawyer voice, "you are at this moment

much in violation of the statute. I completely fail to see how your family got away with it."

"They liked old things," said Richard Daniel. "And, besides, I was very

seldom seen. I stayed mostly in the house. I seldom ventured out."

"Even so," the lawyer said, "there are such things as records. There must be a file on you..."

"The family," explained Richard Daniel, "in the past had many

influential friends. You must understand, sir, that the Barringtons, before

they fell upon hard times, were quite

prominent in politics and in many other matters."

The lawyer grunted knowingly.

"What I can't quite understand," he said, "is why you should object so bitterly. You'll not be changed entirely. You'll still be Richard Daniel."

"I would lose my memories, would I not?"

"Yes, of course you would. But memories are not too important. And you'd collect another set."

"My memories are dear to me," Richard Daniel told him.

"They are all I have. After some six hundred years, they are my sole worthwhile possession. Can you imagine, counselor, what it means to

spend

six centuries with one family?"

"Yes, I think I can," agreed the lawyer. "But now, with the family gone, isn't it just possible the memories may prove painful?"

"They're a comfort. A sustaining comfort. They make me feel important. They give me perspective and a niche."

"But don't you understand? You'll need no comfort, no importance once you're reoriented. You'll be brand new. All that you'll retain is a certain sense of basic identity - that they cannot take away from you even if they wished. There'll be nothing to regret. There'll be no leftover guilts, no

frustrated aspirations, no old loyalties to hound you."

"I must be myself," Richard Daniel insisted stubbornly. "I've found a depth of living, a background against which my living has some meaning. I could not face being anybody else."

"You'd be far better off," the lawyer said wearily. "You'd have a better body. You'd have better mental tools. You'd be more intelligent."

Richard Daniel got up from the chair. He saw it was no use.

"You'll not inform on me?" he asked.

"Certainly not," the lawyer said. "So far as I'm concerned, you aren't even here."

"Thank you," said Richard Daniel.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Not a thing," the lawyer told him.

"I never make a charge to anyone
who is older than five hundred."

He had meant it as a joke, but
Richard Daniel did not smile. He had
not
felt like smiling.

At the door he turned around.

"Why?" he was going to ask. "Why
this silly law."

But he did not have to ask - it was
not hard to see.

Human vanity, he knew. No human
being lived much longer than a hundred
years, so neither could a robot. But a
robot, on the other hand, was too

valuable simply to be junked at the end of a hundred years of service, so there was this law providing for the periodic breakup of the continuity of each robot's life. And thus no human need undergo the psychological indignity of knowing that his faithful serving man might manage to outlive him by several thousand years.

It was illogical, but humans were illogical.

Illogical, but kind. Kind in many different ways.

Kind, sometimes, as the Barringtons had been kind, thought Richard

Daniel. Six hundred years of kindness. It was a prideful thing to think

about. They had even given him a double name. There weren't many robots

nowadays who had double names. It was a special mark of affection and respect.

The lawyer having failed him, Richard Daniel had sought another source

of help. Now, thinking back on it, standing in the room where Hortense

Barrington had died, he was sorry that he'd done it. For he had embarrassed

the religico almost unendurably. It had been easy for the lawyer to tell him

what he had. Lawyers had the statutes to determine their behavior, and thus suffered little from agonies of

personal decision.

But a man of the cloth is kind if he is worth his salt. And this one had been kind instinctively as well as professionally, and that had made it worse.

"Under certain circumstances," he had said somewhat awkwardly, "I could counsel patience and humility and prayer. Those are three great aids to anyone who is willing to put them to his use. But with you I am not certain."

"You mean," said Richard Daniel, "because I am a robot." "Well, now..." said the minister, considerably befuddled at this direct approach.

"Because I have no soul?"

"Really," said the minister miserably, "you place me at a disadvantage."

You are asking me a question that for centuries has puzzled and bedeviled the best minds in the church."

"But one," said Richard Daniel, "that each man in his secret heart must answer for himself."

"I wish I could," cried the distraught minister. "I truly wish I could."

"If it is any help," said Richard Daniel, "I can tell you that sometimes I suspect I have a soul."

And that, he could see, had been most upsetting for this kindly human. It had been, Richard Daniel told

himself, unkind of him to say it. For it must have been confusing, since coming from himself it was not opinion only, but expert evidence.

So he had gone away from the minister's study and come back to the empty house to get on with his inventory work.

Now that the inventory was all finished and the papers stacked where Dancourt, the estate administrator, could find them when he showed up in the

morning, Richard Daniel had done his final service for the Barringtons and now must begin doing for himself.

He left the bedroom and closed

the door behind him and went quietly down the stairs and along the hallway to the little cubby, back of the kitchen, that was his very own.

And that, he reminded himself with a rush of pride, was of a piece with his double name and his six hundred years. There were not too many robots who had a room, however small, that they might call their own.

He went into the cubby and turned on the light and closed the door behind him.

And now, for the first time, he faced the grim reality of what he meant to do.

The cloak and hat and trousers hung upon a hook and the galoshes

were

placed precisely underneath them. His attachment kit lay in one corner of the cubby and the money was cached underneath the floor board he had

loosened many years ago to provide a hiding place.

There was, he, told himself, no point in waiting. Every minute counted.

He had a long way to go and he must be at his destination before morning light.

He knelt on the floor and pried up the loosened board, shoved in a hand and brought out the stacks of bills, money hidden through the years against a day of need.

There were three stacks of bills, neatly held together by elastic bands - money given him throughout the years as tips and Christmas gifts, as birthday presents and rewards for little jobs well done.

He opened the storage compartment located in his chest and stowed away all the bills except for half a dozen which he stuffed into a pocket in one hip.

He took the trousers off the hook and it was an awkward business, for he'd never worn clothes before except when he'd tried on these very trousers several days before. It was a lucky thing, he thought, that long-dead Uncle

Michael had been a portly man, for otherwise the trousers never would have fit.

He got them on and zippered and belted into place, then forced his feet into the overshoes. He was a little worried about the overshoes. No human went out in the summer wearing overshoes. But it was the best that he could

do. None of the regular shoes he'd found in the house had been nearly large enough.

He hoped no one would notice, but there was no way out of it. Somehow or other, he had to cover up his feet, for if anyone should see them, they'd

be a giveaway.

He put on the cloak and it was a little short. He put on the hat and it was slightly small, but he tugged it down until it gripped his metal skull and that was all to the good, he told himself; no wind could blow it off.

He picked up his attachments - a whole bag full of them that he'd almost never used. Maybe it was foolish to take them along, he thought, but

they were a part of him and by rights they should go with him. There was so little that he really owned - just the money he had saved, a dollar at a time, and this kit of his.

With the bag of attachments

clutched underneath his arm, he closed the

cubby door and went down the hall.

At the big front door he hesitated and turned back toward the house,

but it was, at the moment, a simple darkened cave, empty of all that it once had held. There was nothing here to stay for - nothing but the memories, and the memories he took with him.

He opened the door and stepped out on the stoop and closed the door behind him.

And now, he thought, with the door once shut behind him, he was on his own. He was running off. He was wearing clothes. He was out at night, without the permission of a master.

And all of these were against the law.

Any officer could stop him, or any citizen. He had no rights at all.

And he had no one who would speak for him, now that the Barringtons were gone.

He moved quietly down the walk and opened the gate and went slowly down

the street, and it seemed to him the house was calling for him to come back.

He wanted to go back, his mind said that he should go back, but his feet kept going on, steadily down the street.

He was alone, he thought, and the aloneness now was real, no longer the mere intellectual abstract he'd held in

his mind for days. Here he was, a vacant hulk, that for the moment had no purpose and no beginning and no end, but was just an entity that stood naked in an endless reach of space and time and held no meaning in itself.

But he walked on and with each block that he covered he slowly fumbled back to the thing he was, the old robot in old clothes, the robot running from a home that was a home no longer.

He wrapped the cloak about him tightly and moved on down the street and now he hurried, for he had to hurry.

He met several people and they paid no attention to him. A few cars passed, but no one bothered him.

He came to a shopping center that was brightly lighted and he stopped and looked in terror at the wide expanse of open, brilliant space that lay ahead of him. He could detour around it, but it would use up time and he

stood there, undecided, trying to screw up his courage to walk into the light.

Finally he made up his mind and strode briskly out, with his cloak wrapped tight about him and his hat pulled low.

Some of the shoppers turned and looked at him and he felt agitated spiders running up and down his back. The galoshes suddenly seemed

three

times as big as they really were and they made a plopping, squashy sound that was most embarrassing.

He hurried on, with the end of the shopping area not more than a block away.

A police whistle shrilled and Richard Daniel jumped in sudden fright and ran. He ran in slobbering, mindless fright, with his cloak streaming out

behind him and his feet slapping on the pavement.

He plunged out of the lighted strip into the welcome darkness of a residential section and he kept on running.

Far off he heard the siren and he leaped a hedge and tore across the yard. He thundered down the driveway and across a garden in the back and a

dog came roaring out and engaged in noisy chase.

Richard Daniel crashed into a picket fence and went through it to the accompaniment of snapping noises as the pickets and the rails gave way. The dog kept on behind him and other dogs joined in.

He crossed another yard and gained the street and pounded down it. He

dodged into a driveway, crossed another yard, upset a birdbath and ran

into

a clothesline, snapping it in his headlong rush.

Behind him lights were snapping on in the windows of the houses and screen doors were banging as people hurried out to see what the ruckus was.

He ran on a few more blocks, crossed another yard and ducked into a lilac thicket, stood still and listened. Some dogs were still baying in the distance and there was some human shouting, but there was no siren.

He felt a thankfulness well up in him that there was no siren, and a sheepishness, as well. For he had been panicked by himself, he knew; he had

run from shadows, he had fled from guilt.

But he'd thoroughly roused the neighborhood and even now, he knew, calls must be going out and in a little while the place would be swarming with police.

He'd raised a hornet's nest and he needed distance, so he crept out of the lilac thicket and went swiftly down the street, heading for the edge of town.

He finally left the city, and found the highway. He loped along its deserted stretches. When a car or truck appeared, he pulled off on the shoulder and walked along sedately. Then when the car or truck had passed,

he broke into his lope again.

He saw the spaceport lights miles before he got there.

When he reached the port, he circled off the road and came up outside a

fence and stood there in the darkness, looking.

A gang of robots was loading one great starship and there were other ships standing darkly in their pits.

He studied the gang that was loading the ship, lugging the cargo from a

warehouse and across the area lighted by the floods. This was just the setup

he had planned on, although he had not hoped to find it immediately - he had

been afraid that he might have to hide out for a day or two before he found a situation that he could put to use. And it was a good thing that he had stumbled on this opportunity, for an intensive hunt would be on by now for a fleeing robot, dressed in human clothes.

He stripped off the cloak and pulled off the trousers and the overshoes; he threw away the hat. From his attachments bag he took out the cutters, screwed off a hand and threaded the cutters into place. He cut the fence and wiggled through it, then replaced the hand and put the cutters

back into the kit.

Moving cautiously in the darkness, he walked up to the warehouse,
keeping in its shadow.

It would be simple, he told himself. All he had to do was step out and

grab a piece of cargo, clamber up the ramp and down into the hold. Once inside, it should not be difficult to find a hiding place and stay there until the ship had reached first planet-fall.

He moved to the corner of the warehouse and peered around it and there

were the toiling robots, in what

amounted to an endless chain, going up the

ramp with the packages of cargo, coming down again to get another load.

But there were too many of them and the line too tight. And the area too well lighted. He'd never be able to break into that line.

And it would not help if he could, he realized despairingly - because he was different from those smooth and shining creatures. Compared to them,

he was like a man in another century's dress; he and his six-hundred-year-old body would stand out like a circus freak.

He stepped back into the shadow

of the warehouse and he knew that he had lost. All his best-laid plans, thought out in sober, daring detail, as he had labored at the inventory, had suddenly come to naught.

It all came, he told himself, from never going out, from having no real contact with the world, from not keeping up with robot-body fashions, from

not knowing what the score was. He'd imagined how it would be and he'd got it all worked out and when it came down, to it, it was nothing like he thought.

Now he'd have to go back to the hole he'd cut in the fence and retrieve the clothing he had thrown away and

hunt up a hiding place until he could think of something else.

Beyond the corner of the warehouse he heard the harsh, dull grate of metal, and he took another look.

The robots had broken up their line and were streaming back toward the warehouse and a dozen or so of them were wheeling the ramp away from the

cargo port. Three humans, all dressed in uniform, were walking toward the

ship, heading for the ladder, and one of them carried a batch of papers in his hand.

The loading was all done and the

ship about to lift and here he was,
not more than a thousand feet away,
and all that he could do was stand and
see it go.

There had to be a way, he told
himself, to get in that ship. If he
could only do it his troubles would be
over - or at least the first of his
troubles would be over.

Suddenly it struck him like a hand
across the face. There was a way to
do it! He'd stood here, blubbering,
when all the time there had been a way
to do it!

In the ship, he'd thought. And that
was not necessary.

He didn't have to be in the ship.
He started running, out into the

darkness, far out so he could circle round and come upon the ship from the other side, so that the ship would be between him and the flood lights on the warehouse. He hoped that there was time.

He thudded out across the port, running in an arc, and came up to the ship and there was no sign as yet that it was about to leave.

Frantically he dug into his attachments bag and found the things he needed - the last things in that bag he'd ever thought he'd need. He found the suction discs and put them on, one for each knee, one for each elbow, one for each sole and wrist.

He strapped the kit about his waist

and clambered up one of the mighty fins, using the discs to pull himself awkwardly along. It was not easy. He had never used the discs and there was a trick to using them, the trick of getting one clamped down and then working loose another so that he could climb.

But he had to do it. He had no choice but to do it. He climbed the fin and there was the vast steel body of the craft rising far above him, like a metal wall climbing to the sky, broken by the narrow line of a row of anchor posts that ran lengthwise of the hull - and all that huge extent of metal painted by the faint, illusive shine of starlight that glittered in his

eyes.

Foot by foot he worked his way up the metal wall. Like a humping caterpillar, he squirmed his way and with each foot he gained he was a bit more thankful.

Then he heard the faint beginning of a rumble and with the rumble came terror. His suction cups, he knew, might not long survive the booming vibration of the wakening rockets, certainly would not hold for a moment when the ship began to climb.

Six feet above him lay his only hope - the final anchor post in the long row of anchor posts.

Savagely he drove himself up the barrel of the shuddering craft,

hugging the steely surface like a desperate fly.

The rumble of the tubes built up to blot out all the world and he climbed in a haze of almost prayerful, brittle hope. He reached that anchor post or he was as good as dead. Should he slip and drop into that pit of flaming gases beneath the rocket mouths and he was done for.

Once a cup came loose and he almost fell, but the others held and he caught himself.

With a desperate, almost careless lunge, he hurled himself up the wall of metal and caught the rung in his finger-tips and held on with a concentration of effort that wiped out

all else.

The rumble was a screaming fury now that lanced through brain and body.

Then the screaming ended and became a throaty roar of power and the

vibration left the ship entirely. From one corner of his eye he saw the lights of the spaceport swinging over gently on their side.

Carefully, slowly, he pulled himself along the steel until he had a better grip upon the rung, but even with the better grip he had the feeling that some great hand had him in its fist and was swinging him in anger in a hundred-mile-long arc.

Then the tubes left off their

howling and there was a terrible silence and the stars were there, up above him and to either side of him, and they were steely stars with no twinkle in them. Down below, he knew, a lonely Earth was swinging, but he could not see it.

He pulled himself up against the rung and thrust a leg beneath it and sat up on the hull.

There were more stars than he'd ever seen before, more than he'd dreamed there could be. They were still and cold, like hard points of light against a velvet curtain; there was no glitter and no twinkle in them and it was as if a million eyes were staring down at him. The Sun was underneath

the ship and over to one side; just at the edge of the left-hand curvature was the glare of it against the silent metal, a sliver of reflected light outlining one edge of the ship. The Earth was far astern, a ghostly blue-green ball hanging in the void, ringed by the fleecy halo of its atmosphere.

It was as if he were detached, a lonely, floating brain that looked out upon a thing it could not understand nor could ever try to understand; as if he might even be afraid of understanding it - a thing of mystery and delight

so long as he retained an ignorance of it, but something fearsome and

altogether overpowering once the ignorance had gone.

Richard Daniel sat there, flat upon his bottom, on the metal hull of the speeding ship and he felt the mystery and delight and the loneliness and

the cold and the great uncaring and his mind retreated into a small and huddled, compact defensive ball.

He looked. That was all there was to do. It was all right now, he thought. But how long would he have to look at it? How long would he have to camp out here in the open - the most deadly kind of open?

He realized for the first time that he had no idea where the ship was

going or how long it might take to get there. He knew it was a starship, which meant that it was bound beyond the solar system, and that meant that

at some point in its flight it would enter hyperspace. He wondered, at first academically, and then with a twinge of fear, what hyperspace might do to one sitting naked to it. But there was little need, he thought

philosophically, to fret about it now, for in due time he'd know, and there was not a thing that he could do about it - not a single thing.

He took the suction cups off his body and stowed them in his kit and then with one hand he tied the kit to

one of the metal rungs and dug around in it until he found a short length of steel cable with a ring on one end and a snap on the other. He passed the ring end underneath a rung and threaded the snap end through it and snapped the snap onto a metal loop underneath his armpit. Now he was secured; he need not fear carelessly letting go and floating off the ship.

So here he was, he thought, neat as anything, going places fast, even if he had no idea where he might be headed, and now the only thing he needed

was patience. He thought back, without much point, to what the religico had

said in the study back on Earth.
Patience and humility and prayer, he'd
said, apparently not realizing at the
moment that a robot has a world of
patience.

It would take a lot of time,
Richard Daniel knew, to get where he
was

going. But he had a lot of time, a lot
more than any human, and he could
afford to waste it. There were no
urgencies, he thought - no need of food
or

air, or water, no need of sleep or
rest... There was nothing that could
touch him.

Although, come to think of it, there
might be.

There was the cold, for one. The space-hull was still fairly warm, with one side of it picking up the heat of the Sun and radiating it around the metal skin, where it was lost on the other side, but there would be a time when the Sun would dwindle until it had no heat and then he'd be subjected to the utter cold of space.

And what would the cold do to him. Might it make his body brittle?

Might it interfere with the functioning of his brain? Might it do other

things he could not even guess?

He felt the fears creep in again and tried to shrug them off and they drew off, but they still were there,

lurking at the fringes of his mind.

The cold, and the loneliness, he thought - but he was one who could cope with loneliness. And if he couldn't, if he got too lonely, if he could no longer stand it, he could always beat a devil's tattoo on the hull and after a time of that someone would come out to investigate and they would haul him in.

But that was the last move of desperation, he told himself. For if they came out and found him, then he would be caught. Should he be forced to that

extremity, he'd have lost everything - there would then have been no point in leaving Earth at all.

So he settled down, living out his time, keeping the creeping fears at bay just beyond the outposts of his mind, and looking at the universe all spread out before him.

The motors started up again with a pale blue flickering in the rockets at the stern and although there was no sense of acceleration he knew that the ship, now well off the Earth, had settled down to the long, hard drive to reach the speed of light.

Once they reached that speed they would enter hyperspace. He tried not to think of it, tried to tell himself there was not a thing to fear - but it hung there just ahead of him, the great unknowable.

The Sun shrank until it was only one of many stars and there came a time when he could no longer pick it out. And the cold clamped down but it didn't seem to bother him, although he could sense the coldness.

Maybe, he said in answer to his fear, that would be the way it would be with hyperspace as well. But he said it unconvincingly. The ship drove on and on with the weird blueness in the tubes.

Then there was the instant when his mind went splattering across the universe.

He was aware of the ship, but only aware of it in relation to an

awareness of much else, and it was no anchor point, no rallying position. He was spread and scattered; he was opened out and rolled out until he was very

thin. He was a dozen places, perhaps a hundred places, all at once, and it was confusing, and his immediate reaction was to fight back somehow against

whatever might have happened to him - to fight back and pull himself together. The fighting did no good at all, but made it even worse, for in certain instances it seemed to drive parts of him farther from other parts of him and the confusion was made greater.

So he quit his fighting and his
struggling and just lay there,
scattered, and let the panic ebb away
and told himself he didn't care, and
wondered if he did.

Slow reason returned a dribble at
a time and he could think again and
he wondered rather bleakly if this
could be hyperspace and was pretty
sure

it was. And if it were, he knew, he'd
have a long time to live like this, a
long time in which to become
accustomed to it and to orient himself, a
long

time to find himself and pull himself
together, a long time to understand
this situation if it were, in fact,

understandable.

So he lay, not caring greatly, with no fear or wonder, just resting and letting a fact seep into him here and there from many different points.

He knew that, somehow, his body - that part of him which housed the rest of him - was still chained securely to the ship, and that knowledge, in

itself, he knew, was the first small step towards reorienting himself. He had to reorient, he knew. He had to come to some sort of terms, if not to understanding, with this situation.

He had opened up and he had scattered out - that essential part of him, the feeling and the knowing and the

thinking part of him, and he lay thin across a universe that loomed immense in unreality.

Was this, he wondered, the way the universe should be, or was it the unchained universe, the wild universe beyond the limiting disciplines of measured space and time.

He started slowly reaching out, cautious as he had been in his crawling on the surface of the ship, reaching out toward the distant parts of him, a little at a time. He did not know how he did it, he was conscious of no particular technique, but whatever he was doing, it seemed to work, for he pulled himself together, bit by

knowing bit, until he had gathered up all the scattered fragments of him into several different piles.

Then he quit and lay there, wherever there might be, and tried to sneak

up on those piles of understanding that he took to be himself.

It took a while to get the hang of it, but once he did, some of the incomprehensibility went away, although the strangeness stayed. He tried to

put it into thought and it was hard to do. The closest he could come was that he had been unchained as well as the universe - that whatever bondage had been imposed upon him by that

chained and normal world had now become

dissolved and he no longer was fenced in by either time or space.

He could see - and know and sense - across vast distances, if distance were the proper term, and he could understand certain facts that he had not even thought about before, could understand instinctively, but without the language or the skill to coalesce the facts into independent data.

Once again the universe was spread far out before him and it was a different and in some ways a better universe, a more diagrammatic universe, and in time, he knew, if there were such a thing as time, he'd gain some

completer understanding and acceptance of it.

He probed and sensed and learned and there was no such thing as time, but a great foreverness.

He thought with pity of those others locked inside the ship, safe behind its insulating walls, never knowing all the glories of the innards of a star or the vast panoramic sweep of vision and of knowing far above the flat galactic plane.

Yet he really did not know what he saw or probed; he merely sensed and felt it and became a part of it, and it became a part of him - he seemed unable to reduce it to a formal outline of fact or of dimension or of

content. It still remained a knowledge and a power so overwhelming that it was nebulous. There was no fear and no wonder, for in this place, it seemed, there was neither fear nor wonder.

And he finally knew that it was a place apart, a world in which the normal space-time knowledge and emotion had no

place at all and a normal space-time being could have no tools or measuring stick by which he might reduce it to a frame of reference.

There was no time, no space, no fear, no wonder - and no actual knowledge, either.

Then time came once again and suddenly his mind was stuffed back into

its cage within his metal skull and he was again one with his body, trapped and chained and small and cold and naked.

He saw that the stars were different and that he was far from home and

just a little way ahead was a star that blazed like a molten furnace hanging in the black.

He sat bereft, a small thing once again, and the universe reduced to package size.

Practically, he checked the cable that held him to the ship and it was intact. His attachments kit was still tied to its rung. Everything was exactly as it had been before.

He tried to recall the glories he had seen, tried to grasp again the fringe of knowledge which he had been so close to, but both the glory and the knowledge, if there had ever been a knowledge, had faded into nothingness.

He felt like weeping, but he could not weep, and he was too old to lie down upon the ship and kick his heels in tantrum.

So he sat there, looking at the sun that they were approaching and finally there was a planet that he knew must be their destination, and he found room to wonder what planet it might be and how far from Earth it was.

He heated up a little as the ship

skipped through atmosphere as an aid to braking speed and he had some rather awful moments as it spiraled into

thick and soupy gases that certainly were a far cry from the atmosphere of Earth. He hung most desperately to the rungs as the craft came rushing down onto a landing field, with the hot gases of the rockets curling up about him. But he made it safely and swiftly clambered down and darted off into

the smog-like atmosphere before anyone could see him.

Safely off, he turned and looked back at the ship and despite its outlines being hidden by the drifting

clouds of swirling gases, he could see it clearly, not as an actual structure, but as a diagram. He looked at it wonderingly and there was something wrong with the diagram, something vaguely wrong, some part of it that was out of whack and not the way it should be.

He heard the clanking of cargo haulers coming out upon the field and he wasted no more time, diagram or not.

He drifted back, deeper in the mists, and began to circle, keeping a good distance from the ship. Finally he came to the spaceport's edge and the beginning of the town.

He found a street and walked

down it leisurely and there was a wrongness in the town.

He met a few hurrying robots who were in too much of a rush to pass the time of day. But he met no humans.

And that, he knew quite suddenly, was the wrongness of the place. It was not a human town.

There were no distinctly human buildings -no stores or residences, no churches and no restaurants. There were gaunt shelter barracks and sheds for

the storing of equipment and machines, great sprawling warehouses and vast

industrial plants. But that was all there was. It was a bare and dismal

place compared to the streets that he had known on Earth.

It was a robot town, he knew. And a robot planet. A world that was barred to humans, a place where humans could not live, but so rich in some

natural resource that it cried for exploitation. And the answer to that exploitation was to let the robots do it.

Luck, he told himself. His good luck still was holding. He had literally been dumped into a place where he could live without human interference. Here, on this planet, he would be with his own.

If that was what he wanted. And he

wondered if it was. He wondered just exactly what it was he wanted, for he'd had no time to think of what he wanted. He had been too intent on fleeing Earth to think too much about it.

He had known all along what he was running from, but had not considered what he might be running to.

He walked a little further and the town came to an end. The Street became a path and went wandering on into the wind-blown foginess.

So he turned around and went back up the street.

There had been one barracks, he remembered, that had a TRANSIENTS sign

hung out, and he made his way to it.

Inside, an ancient robot sat behind the desk. His body was old-fashioned and somehow familiar. And it was familiar, Richard Daniel knew, because it was as old and battered and as out-of-date as his.

He looked at the body, just a bit aghast, and saw that while it resembled his, there were little differences. The same ancient model, certainly, but a different series. Possibly a little newer, by twenty years or so, than his.

"Good evening, stranger," said the ancient robot. "You came in on the ship?"

Richard Daniel nodded.

"You'll be staying till the next one?"

"I may be settling down," said Richard Daniel. "I may want to stay here."

The ancient robot took a key from off a hook and laid it on the desk.

"You representing someone?"

"No," said Richard Daniel.

"I thought maybe that you were. We get a lot of representatives. Humans can't come here, or don't want to come, so they send robots out here to represent them."

"You have a lot of visitors?"

"Some. Mostly the representatives I was telling you about. But there are some that are on the lam. I'd take

it, mister, you are on the lam."

Richard Daniel didn't answer.

"It's all right," the ancient one assured him. "We don't mind at all, just so you behave yourself. Some of our most prominent citizens, they came here on the lam."

"That is fine," said Richard Daniel. "And how about yourself? You must be on the lam as well."

"You mean this body. Well, that's a little different. This here is punishment."

"Punishment?"

"Well, you see, I was the foreman of the cargo warehouse and I got to goofing off. So they hauled me up and

had a trial and they found me guilty.

Then they stuck me into this old body and I have to stay in it, at this

lousy job, until they get another criminal that needs punishment. They can't

punish no more than one criminal at a time because this is the only old body

that they have. Funny thing about this body. One of the boys went back to

Earth on a business trip and found this old heap of metal in a junkyard and

brought it home with him - for a joke, I guess. Like a human might buy a skeleton for a joke, you know."

He took a long, sly look at Richard Daniel. "It looks to me, stranger, as if your body..."

But Richard Daniel didn't let him finish.

"I take it," Richard Daniel said, "you haven't many criminals."

"No," said the ancient robot sadly, "we're generally a pretty solid lot."

Richard Daniel reached out to pick up the key, but the ancient robot put out his hand and covered it.

"Since you are on the lam," he said, "it'll be payment in advance."

"I'll pay you for a week," said Richard Daniel, handing him some money.

The robot gave him back his change.

"One thing I forgot to tell you.

You'll have to get plasticated."

"Plasticated?"

"That's right. Get plastic squirted over you. To protect you from the atmosphere. It plays hell with metal. There's a place next door will do it."

"Thanks. I'll get it done immediately."

"It wears off," warned the ancient one. "You have to get a new job every week or so."

Richard Daniel took the key and went down the corridor until he found his numbered cubicle. He unlocked the door and stepped inside. The room was small, but clean. It had a desk and

chair and that was all it had.

He stowed his attachments bag in one corner and sat down in the chair and tried to feel at home. But he couldn't feel at home, and that was a funny thing - he'd just rented himself a home.

He sat there, thinking back, and tried to whip up some sense of triumph at having done so well in covering his tracks. He couldn't.

Maybe this wasn't the place for him, he thought. Maybe he'd be happier on some other planet. Perhaps he should go back to the ship and get on it once again and have a look at the next planet coming up.

If he hurried, he might make it. But

he'd have to hurry, for the ship
wouldn't stay longer than it took to
unload the consignment for this place
and take on new cargo.

He got up from the chair, still only
half decided.

And suddenly he remembered how,
standing in the swirling mistiness, he
had seen the ship as a diagram rather
than a ship, and as he thought about
it, something clicked inside his brain
and he leaped toward the door.

For now he knew what had been
wrong with the spaceship's diagram - an
injector valve was somehow out of
kilter, he had to get back there before
the ship took off again.

He went through the door and

down the corridor. He caught sight of the ancient robot's startled face as he ran across the lobby and out into the street. Pounding steadily toward the spaceport, he tried to get the diagram into his mind again, but it would not come complete - it came in bits and pieces, but not all of it.

And even as he fought for the entire diagram, he heard the beginning take-off rumble.

"Wait!" he yelled. "Wait for me! You can't..."

There was a flash that turned the world pure white and a mighty invisible wave came swishing out of nowhere and sent him reeling down the street, falling as he reeled. He was

skidding on the cobblestones and sparks were flying as his metal scraped along the stone. The whiteness reached a

brilliance that almost blinded him and then it faded swiftly and the world was dark.

He brought up against a wall of some sort, clanging as he hit, and he lay there, blind from the brilliance of the flash, while his mind went scurrying down the trail of the diagram.

The diagram, he thought - why should he have seen a diagram of the ship

he'd ridden through space, a diagram that had shown an injector

out of

whack? And how could he, of all robots, recognize an injector, let alone know there was something wrong with it. It had been a joke back home, among the Barringtons, that he, a mechanical thing himself, should have no

aptitude at all for mechanical contraptions. And he could have saved those

people and the ship - he could have saved them all if he'd immediately recognized the significance of the diagram. But he'd been too slow and stupid and now they all were dead.

The darkness had receded from his eyes and he could see again and he

got slowly to his feet, feeling himself all over to see how badly he was hurt. Except for a dent or two, he seemed to be all right.

There were robots running in the street, heading for the spaceport, where a dozen fires were burning and where sheds and other structures had been flattened by the blast.

Someone tugged at his elbow and he turned around. It was the ancient robot.

"You're the lucky one," the ancient robot said. "You got off it just in time."

Richard Daniel nodded dumbly and had a terrible thought:

What if they should think he did it?

He had gotten off the ship; he had admitted that he was on the lam; he had rushed out suddenly, just a few seconds before the ship exploded. It would be easy to put it all together - that he had sabotaged the ship, then at the last instant had rushed out, remorseful, to undo what he had done. On the face of it, it was damning evidence.

But it was all right as yet, Richard Daniel told himself. For the ancient robot was the only one that knew - he was the only one he'd talked to, the only one who even knew that he was in town.

There was a way, Richard Daniel thought - there was an easy way. He

pushed the thought away, but it came back. You are on your own, it said. You are already beyond the law. In rejecting human law, you made yourself an

outlaw. You have become fair prey. There is just one law for you - self preservation.

But there are robot laws, Richard Daniel argued. There are laws and

courts in this community. There is a place for justice.

Community law, said the leech clinging in his brain, provincial law, little more than tribal law - and the stranger's always wrong.

Richard Daniel felt the coldness of

the fear closing down upon him and he knew, without half thinking, that the leech was right.

He turned around and started down the street, heading for the transients barracks. Something unseen in the street caught his foot and he stumbled and went down. He scrabbled to his knees, hunting in the darkness

on the cobblestones for the thing that tripped him. It was a heavy bar of steel, some part of the wreckage that had been hurled this far. He gripped it by one end and arose.

"Sorry," said the ancient robot.
"You have to watch your step."

And there was a faint implication

in his word - a hint of something more than the words had said, a hint of secret gloating in a secret knowledge.

You have broken other laws, said the leech in Richard Daniel's brain.

What of breaking just one more? Why, if necessary, not break a hundred more.

It is all or nothing. Having come this far, you can't afford to fail. You can allow no one to stand in your way now.

The ancient robot half turned away and Richard Daniel lifted up the bar of steel, and suddenly the ancient robot no longer was a robot, but a diagram. There, with all the details of a blueprint, were all the working

parts, all the mechanism of the robot that walked in the street before him.

And if one detached that single bit of wire, if one burned out that coil, if

- Even as he thought it, the diagram went away and there was the robot, a stumbling, failing robot that clanged on the cobblestones.

Richard Daniel swung around in terror, looking up the street, but there was no one near.

He turned back to the fallen robot and quietly knelt beside him. He gently put the bar of steel down into the street. And he felt a thankfulness

- for, almost miraculously, he had not killed.

The robot on the cobblestones

was motionless. When Richard Daniel lifted him, he dangled. And yet he was all right. All anyone had to do to bring him back to life was to repair whatever damage had been done his body.

And that served the purpose, Richard Daniel told himself, as well as killing would have done.

He stood with the robot in his arms, looking for a place to hide him.

He spied an alley between two buildings and darted into it. One of the

buildings, he saw, was set upon stone blocks sunk into the ground, leaving a clearance of a foot or so. He knelt and shoved the robot underneath the

building. Then he stood up and brushed the dirt and dust from his body.

Back at the barracks and in his cubicle, he found a rag and cleaned up the dirt that he had missed. And, he thought hard.

He'd seen the ship as a diagram and, not knowing what it meant, hadn't done a thing. Just now he'd seen the ancient robot as a diagram and had most decisively and neatly used that diagram to save himself from murder - from

the murder that he was fully ready to commit.

But how had he done it? And the answer seemed to be that he really had done nothing. He'd simply thought that

one should detach a single wire, burn out a single coil - he'd thought it and it was done.

Perhaps he'd seen no diagram at all. Perhaps the diagram was no more than some sort of psychic rationalization to mask whatever he had seen or

sensed. Seeing the ship and robot with the surfaces stripped away from them

and their purpose and their function revealed fully to his view, he had sought some explanation of his strange ability, and his subconscious mind

had devised an explanation, an analogy that, for the moment, had served

to

satisfy him.

Like when he'd been in hyperspace, he thought. He'd seen a lot of

things out there he had not understood. And that was it, of course, he

thought excitedly. Something had happened to him out in hyperspace.

Perhaps

there'd been something that had stretched his mind. Perhaps he'd picked up

some sort of new dimension-seeing, some new twist to his mind.

He remembered how, back on the ship again, with his mind wiped clean of

all the glory and the knowledge, he had felt like weeping. But now he knew that it had been much too soon for weeping. For although the glory and the knowledge (if there'd been a knowledge) had been lost to him, he had not

lost everything. He'd gained a new perceptive device and the ability to use it somewhat fumblingly - and it didn't really matter that he still was at a loss as to what he did to use it. The basic fact that he possessed it and could use it was enough to start with.

Somewhere out in front there was someone calling - someone, he now realized, who had been calling for some little time....

"Hubert, where are you? Hubert, are you around? Hubert..."

Hubert?

Could Hubert be the ancient robot? Could they have missed him already?

Richard Daniel jumped to his feet for an undecided moment, listening to the calling voice. And then sat down again. Let them call, he told himself.

Let them go out and hunt.

He was safe in this cubicle. He had rented it and for the moment it was home and there was no one who would dare break in upon him.

But it wasn't home. No matter how hard he tried to tell himself it was, it wasn't. There wasn't any home.

Earth was home, he thought. And

not all of Earth, but just a certain street and that one part of it was barred to him forever. It had been barred to him by the dying of a sweet old lady who had outlived her time; it had been barred to him by his running from it.

He did not belong on this planet, he admitted to himself, nor on any other planet. He belonged on Earth, with the Barringtons, and it was impossible for him to be there.

Perhaps, he thought, he should have stayed and let them reorient him.

He remembered what the lawyer had said about memories that could become a

burden and a torment. After all, it

might have been wiser to have started over once again.

For what kind of future did he have, with his old outdated body, his old outdated brain? The kind of body that they put a robot into on this planet by way of punishment. And the kind of brain - but the brain was different, for he had something now that made up for any lack of more modern mental tools.

He sat and listened, and he heard the house - calling all across the light years of space for him to come back to it again. And he saw the faded living room with all its vanished glory that made a record of the years. He

remembered, with a twinge of hurt,
the little room back of the kitchen that
had been his very own.

He arose and paced up and down
the cubicle - three steps and turn, and
then three more steps and turn for
another three.

The sights and sounds and
smells of home grew close and
wrapped

themselves about him and he
wondered wildly if he might not have
the power,

a power accorded him by the
universe of hyperspace, to will himself
to that

familiar street again.

He shuddered at the thought of it,

afraid of another power, afraid that
it might happen. Afraid of himself,
perhaps, of the snarled and tangled
being he was - no longer the faithful,
shining servant, but a sort of mad
thing that rode outside a spaceship,
that was ready to kill another being,
that could face up to the appalling
sweep of hyperspace, yet cowered
before
the impact of a memory.

What he needed was a walk, he
thought. Look over the town and maybe
go
out into the country. Besides, he
remembered, trying to become
practical,
he'd need to get that plastication job

he had been warned to get.

He went out into the corridor and strode briskly down it and was crossing the lobby when someone spoke to him.

"Hubert," said the voice, "just where have you been? I've been waiting hours for you."

Richard Daniel spun around and a robot sat behind the desk. There was another robot leaning in a corner and there was a naked robot brain lying on the desk.

"You are Hubert, aren't you", asked the one behind the desk.

Richard Daniel opened up his mouth to speak, but the words refused to come.

"I thought so," said the robot.

"You may not recognize me, but my name

is Andy. The regular man was busy, so the judge sent me. He thought it was only fair we make the switch as quickly as possible. He said you'd served a

longer term than you really should. Figures you'd be glad to know they'd convicted someone else."

Richard Daniel stared in horror at the naked brain lying on the desk.

The robot gestured at the metal body propped into the corner.

"Better than when we took you out of it," he said with a throaty chuckle. "Fixed it up and polished

it and got out all the dents. Even modernized it some. Brought it strictly up to date. You'll have a better body than you had when they stuck you into that monstrosity."

"I don't know what to say," said Richard Daniel, stammering. "You see, I'm not..."

"Oh, that's all right," said the other happily. "No need for gratitude.

Your sentence worked out longer than the judge expected. This just makes up for it."

"I thank you, then," said Richard Daniel. "I thank you very much."

And was astounded at himself, astonished at the ease with which he said

it, confounded at his sly duplicity.

But if they forced it on him, why should he refuse? There was nothing that he needed more than a modern body!

It was still working out, he told himself. He was still riding luck.

For this was the last thing that he needed to cover up his tracks.

"All newly plasticated and everything," said Andy. "Hans did an extra special job."

"Well, then," said Richard Daniel, "let's get on with it."

The other robot grinned. "I don't blame you for being anxious to get out of there. It must be pretty

terrible to live in a pile of junk like that."

He came around from behind the desk and advanced on Richard Daniel.

"Over in the corner," he said, "and kind of prop yourself. I don't want you tipping over when I disconnect you. One good fall and that body'd come apart."

"All right," said Richard Daniel. He went into the corner and leaned back against it and planted his feet solid so that he was propped.

He had a rather awful moment when Andy disconnected the optic nerve and he lost his eyes and there was

considerable queasiness in having his skull

lifted off his shoulders and he was in sheer funk as the final disconnections were being swiftly made.

Then he was a blob of greyness without a body or a head or eyes or anything at all. He was no more than a bundle of thoughts all wrapped around themselves like a pail of worms and this pail of worms was suspended in pure nothingness.

Fear came to him, a taunting, terrible fear. What if this were just a sort of ghastly gag? What if they'd found out who he really was and what

he'd done to Hubert? What if they took his brain and tucked it away somewhere for a year or two - or for a hundred years? It might be, he told himself, nothing more than their simple way of justice.

He hung onto himself and tried to fight the fear away, but the fear ebbed back and forth like a restless tide.

Time stretched out and out - far too long a time, far more time than one would need to switch a brain from one body to another. Although, he told

himself, that might not be true at all. For in his present state he had no way in which to measure time. He

had no external reference points by which

to determine time.

Then suddenly he had eyes.

And he knew everything was all right.

One by one his senses were restored to him and he was back inside a

body and he felt awkward in the body, for he was unaccustomed to it.

The first thing that he saw was his old and battered body propped into its corner and he felt a sharp regret at the sight of it and it seemed to him that he had played a dirty trick upon it. It deserved, he told himself, a better fate than this - a better fate

than being left behind to serve as a shabby jailhouse on this outlandish planet. It had served him well for six hundred years and he should not be deserting it. But he was deserting it. He was, he told himself in contempt, becoming very expert at deserting his old

friends. First the house back home and now his faithful body.

Then he remembered something else - all that money in the body!

"What's the matter, Hubert?" Andy asked.

He couldn't leave it there, Richard Daniel told himself, for he needed it. And besides, if he left it there, someone would surely find it later and

it would be a give-away. He couldn't leave it there and it might not be safe to forthrightly claim it. If he did, this other robot, this Andy, would think he'd been stealing on the job or running some side racket. He might try to bribe the other, but one could never tell how a move like that might go. Andy might be full of righteousness and then there'd be hell to pay.

And, besides, he didn't want to part with any of the money.

All at once he had it - he knew just what to do. And even as he thought it, he made Andy into a diagram.

That connection there, thought Richard Daniel, reaching out his arm to

catch the falling diagram that turned into a robot. He eased it to the floor and sprang across the room to the side of his old body. In seconds he had the chest safe open and the money safely out of it and locked inside his present body.

Then he made the robot on the floor become a diagram again and got the connection back the way that it should be.

Andy rose shakily off the floor. He looked at Richard Daniel in some consternation.

"What happened to me?" he asked in a frightened voice. Richard Daniel sadly shook his head. "I don't know.

You just keeled over. I started for the door to yell for help, then I heard you stirring and you were all right."

Andy was plainly puzzled.

"Nothing like this ever happened to me before," he said.

"If I were you," counseled Richard Daniel, "I'd have myself checked

over. You must have a faulty relay or a loose connection."

"I guess I will," the other one agreed. "It's downright dangerous."

He walked slowly to the desk and picked up the other brain, started with it toward the battered body leaning in the corner.

Then he stopped and said: "Look,

I forgot. I was supposed to tell you.

You better get up to the warehouse. Another ship is on its way. It will be coming in any minute now."

"Another one so soon?"

"You know how it goes," Andy said, disgusted. "They don't even try to keep a schedule here. We won't see one for months and then there'll be two or three at once."

"Well, thanks," said Richard Daniel, going out the door. He went swinging down the street with a newborn confidence. And he had a feeling

that there was nothing that could lick him, nothing that could stop him.

For he was a lucky robot!

Could all that luck, he wondered, have been gotten out in hyperspace, as his diagram ability, or whatever one might call it, had come from hyperspace? Somehow hyperspace had taken him and twisted him and changed him, had molded him anew, had made him into a different robot than he had been before.

Although, so far as luck was concerned, he had been lucky all his entire life. He'd had good luck with his human family and had gained a lot of favors and a high position and had been allowed to live for six hundred years. And that was a thing that

never should have happened. No matter how

powerful or influential the Barringtons had been, that six hundred years

must be due in part to nothing but sheer luck.

In any case, the luck and the diagram ability gave him a solid edge over all the other robots he might meet. Could it, he asked himself, give him an edge on Man as well?

No - that was a thought he should not think, for it was blasphemous.

There never was a robot that would be the equal of a man.

But the thought kept on intruding and he felt not nearly so contrite

over this leaning toward bad taste, or poor judgment, whichever it might be, as it seemed to him he should feel.

As he neared the spaceport, he began meeting other robots and some of them saluted him and called him by the name of Hubert and others stopped and

shook him by the hand and told him they were glad that he was out of pokey.

This friendliness shook his confidence. He began to wonder if his luck

would hold, for some of the robots, he was certain, thought it rather odd that he did not speak to them by name, and there had been a couple of remarks that he had some trouble

fielding. He had a feeling that when he reached the warehouse he might be sunk without a trace, for he would know none of the robots there and he had not the least idea what his duties might include. And, come to think of it, he didn't even know where the warehouse was.

He felt the panic building in him and took a quick involuntary look around, seeking some method of escape. For it became quite apparent to him that he must never reach the warehouse.

He was trapped, he knew, and he couldn't keep on floating, trusting to his luck. In the next few minutes he'd

have to figure something.

He started to swing over into a side street, not knowing what he meant to do, but knowing he must do something, when he heard the mutter far above

him and glanced up quickly to see the crimson glow of belching rocket tubes shimmering through the clouds.

He swung around again and sprinted desperately for the spaceport and

reached it as the ship came chugging down to a steady landing. It was, he saw, an old ship. It had no burnish to it and it was blunt and squat and wore a hangdog look.

A tramp, he told himself, that

knocked about from port to port, picking up whatever cargo it could, with perhaps now and then a paying passenger

headed for some backwater planet where there was no scheduled service.

He waited as the cargo port came open and the ramp came down and then marched purposefully out onto the field, ahead of the straggling cargo crew, trudging toward the ship. He had to act, he knew, as if he had a perfect right to walk into the ship as if he knew exactly what he might be doing. If there were a challenge he would pretend he didn't hear it and simply keep on going.

He walked swiftly up the ramp, holding back from running, and plunged through the accordion curtain that served as an atmosphere control. His feet

rang across the metal plating of the cargo hold until he reached the catwalk and plunged down it to another cargo level.

At the bottom of the catwalk he stopped and stood tense, listening.

Above him he heard the clang of a metal door and the sound of footsteps coming down the walk to the level just above him. That would be the purser or the first mate, he told himself, or perhaps the captain, coming down to arrange for the discharge of the cargo.

Quietly he moved away and found a corner where he could crouch and hide.

Above his head he heard the cargo gang at work, talking back and forth, then the screech of crating and the thump of bales and boxes being hauled out to the ramp.

Hours passed, or they seemed like hours, as he huddled there. He heard the cargo gang bringing something down from one of the upper levels and he

made a sort of prayer that they'd not come down to this lower level - and he hoped no one would remember seeing him come in ahead of them, or if they did

remember, that they would assume that he'd gone out again.

Finally it was over, with the footsteps gone. Then came the pounding of

the ramp as it shipped itself and the banging of the port.

He waited for long minutes, waiting for the roar that, when it came, set his head to ringing, waiting for the monstrous vibration that shook and lifted up the ship and flung it off the planet

Then quiet came and he knew the ship was out of atmosphere and once more on its way.

And knew he had it made.

For now he was no more than a

simple stowaway. He was no longer Richard

Daniel, runaway from Earth. He'd dodged all the traps of Man, he'd covered

all his tracks, and he was on his way.

But far down underneath he had a jumpy feeling, for it all had gone too smoothly, more smoothly than it should.

He tried to analyze himself, tried to pull himself in focus, tried to assess himself for what he had become.

He had abilities that Man had never won or developed or achieved, whichever it might be. He was a certain step ahead of not only other

robots,

but of Man as well. He had a thing, or the beginning of a thing, that Man had sought and studied and had tried to grasp for centuries and had failed.

A solemn and a deadly thought: was it possible that it was the robots, after all, for whom this great heritage had been meant? Would it be the

robots who would achieve the paranormal powers that Man had sought so long,

while Man, perforce, must remain content with the materialistic and the merely scientific? Was he, Richard Daniel, perhaps, only the first of many? Or was it all explained by no more

than the fact that he alone had been
exposed to hyperspace? Could this
ability of his belong to anyone who
would

subject himself to the full,
uninsulated mysteries of that mad
universe

unconstrained by time? Could Man
have this, and more, if he too should
expose himself to the utter
randomness of unreality?

He huddled in his corner, with the
thought and speculation stirring in
his mind and he sought the answers,
but there was no solid answer.

His mind went reaching out, almost
on its own, and there was a diagram
inside his brain, a portion of a

blueprint, and bit by bit was added to it until it all was there, until the entire ship on which he rode was there, laid out for him to see.

He took his time and went over the diagram resting in his brain and he found little things - a fitting that was working loose and he tightened it, a printed circuit that was breaking down and getting mushy and he strengthened it and sharpened it and made it almost new, a pump that was leaking just a bit and he stopped its leaking.

Some hundreds of hours later one of the crewmen found him and took him to the captain.

The captain glowered at him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"A stowaway," Richard Daniel told him.

"Your name," said the captain, drawing a sheet of paper before him and picking up a pencil, "your planet of residence and owner."

"I refuse to answer you," said Richard Daniel sharply and knew that the

answer wasn't right, for it was not right and proper that a robot should refuse a human a direct command.

But the captain did not seem to mind. He laid down the pencil and stroked his black beard slyly.

"In that case," he said, "I can't exactly see how I can force the

information from you. Although there might be some who'd try. You are very lucky that you stowed away on a ship whose captain is a most kind-hearted man."

He didn't look kind-hearted. He did look foxy. Richard Daniel stood there, saying nothing.

"Of course," the captain said, "there's a serial number somewhere on your body and another on your brain. But I suppose that you'd resist if we tried to look for them."

"I am afraid I would."

"In that case," said the captain, "I don't think for the moment we'll concern ourselves with them."

Richard Daniel still said nothing, for he realized that there was no need to. This crafty captain had it all worked out and he'd let it go at that.

"For a long time," said the captain, "my crew and I have been considering the acquiring of a robot, but it seems we never got around to it. For one thing, robots are expensive and our profits are not large."

He sighed and got up from his chair and looked Richard Daniel up and down.

"A splendid specimen," he said. "We welcome you aboard. You'll find us congenial."

"I am sure I will," said Richard Daniel. "I thank you for your courtesy."

"And now," the captain said, "you'll go up on the bridge and report to Mr. Duncan. I'll let him know you're coming. He'll find some light and pleasant duty for you."

Richard Daniel did not move as swiftly as he might, as sharply as the occasion might have called for, for all at once the captain had become a complex diagram. Not like the diagrams of ships or robots, but a diagram of

strange symbols, some of which Richard Daniel knew were frankly chemical,

but others which were not.

"You heard me!" snapped the captain. "Move!"

"Yes, sir," said Richard Daniel, willing the diagram away, making the captain come back again into his solid flesh.

Richard Daniel found the first mate on the bridge, a horse-faced, somber man with a streak of cruelty ill-hidden, and slumped in a chair to one side of the console was another of the crew, a sodden, terrible creature.

The sodden creature cackled. "Well, well, Duncan, the first non-human member of the Rambler's crew."

Duncan paid him no attention. He said to Richard Daniel: "I presume you are industrious and ambitious and would like to get along."

"Oh, yes," said Richard Daniel, and was surprised to find a new sensation - laughter - rising in himself.

"Well, then," said Duncan, "report to the engine room. They have work for you. When you have finished there, I'll find something else."

"Yes, sir," said Richard Daniel, turning on his heel.

"A minute," said the mate. "I must introduce you to our ship's physician, Dr. Abram Wells. You can be truly thankful you'll never stand in need of his services."

"Good day, Doctor," said Richard Daniel, most respectfully.

"I welcome you," said the doctor, pulling a bottle from his pocket. "I don't suppose you'll have a drink with me. Well, then, I'll drink to you."

Richard Daniel turned around and left. He went down to the engine room and was put to work at polishing and scrubbing and generally cleaning up.

The place was in need of it. It had been years, apparently, since it had been cleaned or polished and it was about as dirty as an engine room can get - which is terribly dirty. After the engine room was done there were other places to be cleaned and furbished up

and he spent endless hours at cleaning
and in painting and shinning up the
ship. The work was of the dullest kind,
but he didn't mind. It gave him time
to think and wonder, time to get
himself sorted out and to become
acquainted with himself, to try to plan
ahead.

He was surprised at some of the
things he found in himself. Contempt,
for one - contempt for the humans on
this ship. It took a long time for him
to become satisfied that it was
contempt, for he'd never held a human in
contempt before.

But these were different humans,
not the kind he'd known.

These were no Barringtons.

Although it might be, he realized, that he

felt contempt for them because he knew them thoroughly. Never before had he

known a human as he knew these humans. For he saw them not so much as living

animals as intricate patternings of symbols. He knew what they were made of

and the inner urgings that served as motivations, for the patterning was not of their bodies only, but of their

minds as well. He had a little trouble with the symbology of their minds, for it was so twisted and so interlocked and so utterly confusing that it was

hard at first to read. But he finally got it figured out and there were times he wished he hadn't.

The ship stopped at many ports and Richard Daniel took charge of the loading and unloading, and he saw the planets, but was unimpressed. One was a nightmare of fiendish cold, with the very atmosphere turned to drifting snow. Another was a dripping, noisome jungle world, and still another was a bare expanse of broken, tumbled rock without a trace of life beyond the crew of humans and their robots who manned the huddled station in this howling wilderness.

It was after this planet that Jenks, the cook, went screaming to his bunk, twisted up with pain - the victim of a suddenly inflamed vermiform appendix.

Dr. Wells came tottering in to look at him, with a half-filled bottle sagging the pocket of his jacket. And later stood before the captain, holding out two hands that trembled, and with terror in his eyes.

"But I cannot operate," he blubbered. "I cannot take the chance. I would kill the man!"

He did not need to operate. Jenks suddenly improved. The pain went away and he got up from his bunk and went

back to the galley and Dr. Wells sat huddled in his chair, bottle gripped between his hands, crying like a baby.

Down in the cargo hold, Richard Daniel sat likewise huddled and aghast that he had dared to do it - not that he had been able to, but that he had dared, that he, a robot, should have taken on himself an act of interference, however merciful, with the body of a human.

Actually, the performance had not been too difficult. It was, in a certain way, no more difficult than the repairing of an engine or the untangling of a faulty circuit. No more difficult - just a little different.

And he wondered what he'd done and

how he'd' gone about it, for he did not know. He held the technique in his mind, of that there was ample demonstration, but he could in no way isolate or pinpoint the pure mechanics of it. It was like an instinct, he thought - unexplainable, but entirely workable.

But a robot had no instinct. In that much he was different from the human and the other animals. Might not, he asked himself, this strange ability of his be a sort of compensating factor given to the robot for his

very lack of instinct? Might that be why the human race had failed in its search for paranormal powers? Might

the instincts of the body be at certain odds with the instincts of the mind?

For he had the feeling that this ability of his was just a mere beginning, that it was the first emergence of a vast body of abilities which

some day would be rounded out by robots. And what would that spell, he wondered, in that distant day when the robots held and used the full body of that knowledge? An adjunct to the glory of the human race, or equals of the human race, or superior to the human race - or, perhaps, a race apart?

And what was his role, he wondered. Was it meant that he should go out

as a missionary, a messiah, to carry to robots throughout the universe the message that he held? There must be some reason for his having learned this truth. It could not be meant that he would hold it as a personal belonging, as an asset all his own.

He got up from where he sat and moved slowly back to the ship's forward area, which now gleamed spotlessly from the work he'd done on it, and he felt a certain pride.

He wondered why he had felt that it might be wrong, blasphemous, somehow, to announce his abilities to the world? Why had he not told those here in the ship that it had been he who had healed the cook, or mentioned

the many other little things he'd done to maintain the ship in perfect running order?

Was it because he did not need respect, as a human did so urgently? Did glory have no basic meaning for a robot? Or was it because he held the humans in this ship in such utter contempt that their respect had no value to him?

"And this contempt - was it because these men were meaner than other

humans he had known, or was it because he now was greater than any human

being? Would he ever again be able to look on any human as he had looked

upon the Barringtons?

He had a feeling that if this were true, he would be the poorer for it.

Too suddenly, the whole universe was home and he was alone in it and as yet

he'd struck no bargain with it or himself.

The bargain would come later. He need only bide his time and work out

his plans and his would be a name that would be spoken when his brain was

scaling flakes of rust. For he was the emancipator, the messiah of the robots; he was the one who had been called to lead them from the wilderness.

"You!" a voice cried.

Richard Daniel wheeled around and saw it was the captain.

"What do you mean, walking past me as if you didn't see me?" asked the captain fiercely.

"I am sorry," Richard Daniel told him.

"You snubbed me!" raged the captain.

"I was thinking," Richard Daniel said.

"I'll give you something to think about," the captain yelled. "I'll work you till your tail drags. I'll teach the likes of you to get uppity with me!"

"As you wish," said Richard Daniel.

For it didn't matter. It made no difference to him at all what the captain did or thought. And he wondered why the respect even of a robot

should mean so much to a human like the captain, why he should guard his

small position with so much zealousness.

"In another twenty hours," the captain said, "we hit another port."

"I know," said Richard Daniel. "Sleepy Hollow on Arcadia." "All right,

then," said the captain, "since you know so much, get down into the hold and

get the cargo ready to unload. We
been spending too much time in all these
lousy ports loading and unloading.
You been dogging it."

"Yes, sir," said Richard Daniel,
turning back and heading for the hold.

He wondered faintly if he were
still robot - or was he something else?

Could a machine evolve, he
wondered, as Man himself evolved?
And if a

machine evolved, whatever would it
be? Not Man, of course, for it never
could be that, but could it be machine?

He hauled out the cargo
consigned to Sleepy Hollow and there
was not

too much of it. So little of it, perhaps,

that none of the regular carriers would even consider its delivery, but dumped it off at the nearest terminal, leaving it for a roving tramp, like the Rambler, to carry eventually to its destination.

When they reached Arcadia, he waited until the thunder died and the ship was still. Then he shoved the lever that opened up the port and slid out the ramp.

The port came open ponderously and he saw blue skies and the green of trees and the far-off swirl of chimney smoke mounting in the sky.

He walked slowly forward until he stood upon the ramp and there lay Sleepy Hollow, a tiny, huddled

village planted at the river's edge, with the

forest as a background. The forest ran on every side to a horizon of climbing folded hills. Fields lay near the village, yellow with maturing crops, and he could see a dog sleeping in the sun outside a cabin door.

A man was climbing up the ramp toward him and there were others running from the village.

"You have cargo for us?" asked the man.

"A small consignment," Richard Daniel told him. "You have something to put on?"

The man had a weatherbeaten look and he'd missed several haircuts and

he had not shaved for days. His clothes were rough and sweat-stained and his

hands were strong and awkward with hard work.

"A small shipment," said the man. "You'll have to wait until we bring it up. We had no warning you were coming. Our radio is broken."

"You go and get it," said Richard Daniel. "I'll start unloading."

He had the cargo half unloaded when the captain came storming down into

the hold. What was going on, he

yelled. How long would they have to wait?

"God knows we're losing money as it is even stopping at this place."

"That may be true," Richard Daniel agreed, "but you knew that when you

took the cargo on. There'll be other cargoes and goodwill is something -"

"Goodwill be damned!" the captain roared. "How do I know I'll ever see

this place again?"

Richard Daniel continued unloading cargo.

"You," the captain shouted, "go down to that village and tell them I'll wait no longer than an hour..."

"But this cargo, sir?"

"I'll get the crew at it. Now, jump!"

So Richard Daniel left the cargo and went down into the village.

He went across the meadow that lay between the spaceport and the village, following the rutted wagon tracks, and it was a pleasant walk. He realized with surprise that this was the first time he'd been on solid ground since he'd left the robot planet. He wondered briefly what the name

of that planet might have been, for he had never known. Nor what its importance was, why the robots might be there or what they might be doing.

And he wondered, too, with a twinge of guilt, if they'd found Hubert yet.

And where might Earth be now? he asked himself. In what direction did it lie and how far away? Although it didn't really matter, for he was done with Earth.

He had fled from Earth and gained something in his fleeing. He had

escaped all the traps of Earth and all the snares of Man. What he held was his, to do with as he pleased, for he was no man's robot, despite what the captain thought.

He walked across the meadow and saw that this planet was very much like Earth. It had the same soft feel about

it, the same simplicity. It had far distances and there was a sense of freedom.

He came into the village and heard the muted gurgle of the river running and the distant shouts of children at their play and in one of the cabins a sick child was crying with lost helplessness.

He passed the cabin where the dog was sleeping and it came awake and stalked growling to the gate. When he passed it followed him, still growling, at a distance that was safe and sensible.

An autumnal calm lay upon the village, a sense of gold and lavender,

and tranquillity hung in the silences between the crying of the baby and the shouting of the children.

There were women at the windows looking out at him and others at the

doors and the dog still followed, but his growls had stilled and now he trotted with prick-eared curiosity.

Richard Daniel stopped in the street and looked around him and the dog

sat down and watched him and it was almost as if time itself had stilled and the little village lay divorced from all the universe, an arrested microsecond, an encapsulated acreage that stood sharp in all its truth

and

purpose.

Standing there, he sensed the village and the people in it, almost as if he had summoned up a diagram of it, although if there were a diagram, he was not aware of it.

It seemed almost as if the village were the Earth, a transplanted Earth with the old primeval problems and hopes of Earth - a family of peoples that faced existence with a readiness and confidence and inner strength.

From down the street he heard the creak of wagons and saw them coming around the bend, three wagons piled high and heading for the ship.

He stood and waited for them and

as he waited the dog edged a little closer and sat regarding him with a not-quite-friendliness.

The wagons came up to him and stopped.

"Pharmaceutical materials, mostly," said the man who sat atop the first

load, "It is the only thing we have that is worth the shipping."

"You seem to have a lot of it," Richard Daniel told him. The man shook

his head. "It's not so much. It's almost three years since a ship's been here. We'll have to wait another three, or more perhaps, before we see another."

He spat down on the ground.

"Sometimes it seems," he said,

"that we're at the tail-end of nowhere.

There are times we wonder if there is a soul that remembers we are here."

From the direction of the ship, Richard Daniel heard the faint, strained violence of the captain's roaring.

"You'd better get on up there and unload," he told the man. "The captain is just sore enough he might not wait for you."

The man chuckled thinly. "I guess that's up to him," he said.

He flapped the reins and clucked good-naturedly at the horses.

"Hop up here with me," he said to

Richard Daniel. "Or would you rather walk?"

"I'm not going with you," Richard Daniel said. "I am staying here. You can tell the captain."

For there was a baby sick and crying. There was a radio to fix. There was a culture to be planned and guided. There was a lot of work to do. This

place, of all the places he had seen, had actual need of him.

The man chuckled once again. "The captain will not like it."

"Then tell him," said Richard Daniel, "to come down and talk to me. I am my own robot. I owe the captain nothing. I have more than paid any debt I

owe him."

The wagon wheels began to turn and the man flapped the reins again.

"Make yourself at home," he said. "We're glad to have you stay."

"Thank you, sir," said Richard Daniel. "I'm pleased you want me."

He stood aside and watched the wagons lumber past, their wheels lifting and dropping thin films of powdered earth that floated in the air as an acrid dust.

Make yourself at home, the man had said before he'd driven off. And the words had a full round ring to them and a feel of warmth. It had been a long time, Richard Daniel thought, since

he'd had a home.

A chance for resting and for knowing - that was what he needed.

And a

chance to serve, for now he knew that was the purpose in him. That was, perhaps, the real reason he was staying - because these people needed him...

and he needed, queer as it might seem, this very need of theirs. Here on this Earth-like planet, through the generations, a new Earth would arise.

And perhaps, given only time, he could transfer to the people of the planet all the powers and understanding he would find inside himself.

And stood astounded at the

thought, for he'd not believed that he had it in him, this willing, almost eager, sacrifice. No messiah now, no robotic liberator, but a simple teacher of the human race.

Perhaps that had been the reason for it all from the first beginning.

Perhaps all that had happened had been no more than the working out of human

destiny. If the human race could not attain directly the paranormal power he held, this instinct of the mind, then they would gain it indirectly through the agency of one of their creations.

Perhaps this, after all, unknown to

Man himself, had been the prime purpose of the robots.

He turned and walked slowly down the length of village street, his back

turned to the ship and the roaring of the captain, walked contentedly into this new world he'd found, into this world that he would make - not for himself, nor for robotic glory, but for a better Mankind and a happier.

Less than an hour before he'd congratulated himself on escaping all the traps of Earth, all the snares of Man. Not knowing that the greatest trap of all, the final and the fatal trap, lay on this present planet.

But that was wrong, he told himself. The trap had not been on this world at all, nor any other world. It

had been inside himself.

He walked serenely down the wagon-rutted track in the soft, golden afternoon of a matchless autumn day, with the dog trotting at his heels.

Somewhere, just down the street, the sick baby lay crying in its crib.

Last-modified: Tue, 24-Aug-99
03:22:07 GMT

Title : So Bright the Vision
Author : Clifford D. Simak
Original copyright year: 1956
Genre : science fiction
Comments : to my knowledge, this
is the only available e-text of this book
Source : scanned and OCR-read
from a paperback edition with Xerox
TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS
Word 2000.
Date of e-text : February 15, 2000
Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights
reversed.

So Bright the Vision

Clifford D. Simak

The showroom was in the decorous part of town, where Kemp Hart seldom found himself. It was a long way from his usual haunts and he was surprised to find that he had walked so far. In fact, he would not have walked at all if his credit had been good at the Bright Star

bar where his crowd hung out.

As soon as he realized where he was he knew he should turn around and walk rapidly away, for he was out of place in this district of swank publishers, gold-plated warrens and famous eateries. But the showroom held him. It would not let him go. He stood in front of it in all his down-at-the-heels unkemptness, one hand thrust in a pocket, fugitively rubbing between thumb and finger the two small coins that still remained to him.

Behind the glass the machines were shining-wonderful, the sort of merchandise that belonged on this svelte

and perfumed street. One machine in the corner of the showroom was bigger and shinier than the others and had about it a rare glint of competence. It had a massive keyboard for the feeding in of data and it had a hundred slots or so for the working tapes and films. It had a mood control calibrated more sensitively than any he had ever seen and in all probability a lot of other features that were not immediately apparent.

With a machine such as that, Hart told himself, a man could become famous almost automatically and virtually overnight. He could write anything he wished and he would write it well and the doors of the most snooty

of the publishers would stand open to him.

But much as he might wish to, there was no use of going in to see it. There was nothing to be gained by even thinking about it. It was just something he could stand and look at from beyond the showroom's glass.

And yet, he told himself, he had a perfect right to go in and look it over. There was not a thing to stop him. Nothing, at least, beyond the sneer upon the salesman's face at the sight of him - the silent, polite, well-disciplined contempt when he turned and slunk away.

He looked furtively up and down the street and the street was empty. The hour was far too early for this particular street to have come to life, and it occurred to him that if he just walked in and asked to see the machine, it would be all right. Perhaps he could explain he did not wish to buy it, but just to look at it. Maybe if he did that they wouldn't sneer at him. Certainly no one could object. There must be a lot of people, even rich and famous people, who only come to look.

He edged along the showroom, studying the machines and heading for the door, telling himself that he would

not go in, that it was foolish to go in, but secretly knowing that he would.

He reached the door and opened it and stepped inside. The salesman appeared almost as if by magic.

"The yarker in the corner," Hart said. "I wonder if I might - "

"Most certainly," said the salesman. "If you'll just come along with me."

In the corner of the showroom, the salesman draped his arm across the machine affectionately.

"It is our newest model," he said.

"We call it the Classic, because it has been designed and engineered with but one thought in mind - the production of the classic. It is, we think, a vast improvement over our Best Seller Model, which, after all, is intended to turn out no better than best sellers - even though on occasion it has turned out certain minor classics. To be quite honest with you sir, I would suspect that in almost every one of those instances, it had been souped up a bit, I am told some people are very clever that way."

Hart shook his head. "Not me. I'm all thumbs when it comes to tinkering."

"In that case," said the salesman,

"the thing for you to do is buy the best yarner that you can. Used intelligently, there's virtually no limit to its versatility. And in this particular model the quality factor is much higher than in any of the others. Although naturally, to get the best results you must be selective in your character film, and your narrative problem tapes. But that needn't worry you. We have a large stock of tapes and films and some new mood and atmosphere fixers that are quite unique. They come fairly high, of course, but - "

"By the way, just what is the price of this model?"

"Ifs only twenty-five thousand," the

salesman told him brightly. "Don't you wonder, sir, how it can be offered at so ridiculous a figure? The engineering that went into it is remarkable. We worked on it for ten full years before we were satisfied. And during those ten years the specifications were junked and redrawn time and time again to keep pace with our developmental research."

He slapped the shiny machine with a jubilant hand. "I can guarantee you, sir, that nowhere can you get a product superior to this. It has everything. Millions of probability factors have been built into it, assuring you of sure-fire originality. No danger of stumbling into the stereotype, which is not true at

all with so many of the cheaper models. The narrative bank alone is capable of turning out an almost infinite number of situations on any particular theme and the character developer has thousands of points of reference instead of the hundred or so you find in inferior models. The semantics section is highly selective and sensitive and you must not overlook - "

"It's a good machine," interposed Hart. "But it costs a bit too much. Now, if you had something else..."

"Most certainly, sir. We have many other models."

"Would you take a machine in trade?"

"Gladly. What kind of machine do you have, sir?"

"An Auto-Author Ninety-six."

The salesman froze just slightly. He shook his head, half sadly, half in bewilderment. "Well, now, I don't know if we could allow you much for that. It's a fairly old type of machine. Almost obsolete."

"But you could give me something?"

"I think so. Not a great deal, though."

"And time payment?"

"Yes, certainly. We could work something out. If you would give me your name."

Hart told him what it was.

The salesman jotted it down and said, "Excuse me a moment, sir."

Hart stood for a moment, looking after him. Then, like a sneak thief in the night, he moved softly to the front door and walked swiftly down the street.

There was no use in staying. No use at all of waiting for the salesman to come back and shake his hand and say, 'We're very sorry, sir.'

We're very sorry, sir, because we've looked up your credit rating and it's absolutely worthless. We checked your sales record and found you sold just one short story in the last six months.

"It was a mistake to go for a walk at all," Hart told himself, not without bitterness.

Downtown, in a section of the city far removed from the glamorous showroom, Hart climbed six flights of stairs because the elevator was out of whack again.

Behind the door that said IRVING PUBLICATIONS, the preoccupied receptionist stopped filing her nails long enough to make a motion with her thumb toward the inner office.

"Go on in and see him," she said.

Ben Irving sat behind a heaped-up desk cluttered with manuscripts, proofs and layout sheets. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and he wore an

eyeshade. He always wore the eyeshade and that was one of the minor mysteries of the place, for at no time during the day was there light enough in his dingy office to blind a self-respecting bat.

He looked up and blinked at Hart.

"Glad to see you, Kemp," he said.
"Sit down. What's on your mind today?"

Hart took a chair. "I was wondering. About that last story that I sent you - "

"Haven't got around to it yet," said Irving. He waved his hand at the mess upon his desk by way of explanation.

"Mary!" he shouted.

The receptionist stuck her head inside the door.

"Get Hart's manuscript," he said, "and let Millie have a look at it"

Irving leaned back in his chair. "This won't take long," he said. "Millie's a fast reader."

"I'll wait," said Hart.

"I've got something for you," Irving told him. "We're starting a new magazine, aimed at the tribes out in the

Algol system. They're a primitive sort of people, but they can read, Lord love them. We had the devil's own time finding someone who could do the translations for us and it'll cost more than we like to pay to have the type set up. They got the damndest alphabet you ever saw. We finally found a printer who had some in his fonts."

"What kind of stuff?" Hart asked.

"Simple humanoid," Irving replied. "Blood and thunder and a lot of spectacle. Life is tough and hard out there, so we have to give them something with plenty of color in it that's easy to read. Nothing fancy, mind you."

"Sounds all right."

"Good basic hack," said Irving.

"See how it goes out there and if it goes all right we'll make translations for some of the primitive groups out in the Capella region. Minor changes, maybe, but none too serious."

He squinted meditatively at Hart.

"Not too much pay. But if it goes over we'll want a lot of it"

"I'll see what I can do," said Hart
"Any taboos? Anything to duck?"

"No religion at all," the editor told him. "They've got it, of course, but it's so complicated that you'd better steer clear of it entirely. No mushy stuff. Love don't rate with them. They buy their women and don't fool around with love.

Treasure and greed would be good. Any standard reference work will give you a line on that. Fantastic weapons - the more gruesome the better. Bloodshed, lots of it. Hatred, that's their dish. Hatred and vengeance and hell-for-leather living. And you simply got to keep it moving."

"I'll see what I can do."

"That's the second time you've said

that."

"I'm not doing so good, Ben. Once I could have told you _yes_. Once I could have hauled it over by the ton."

"Lost the touch?"

"Not the touch. The machine. My yarner is haywire. I might just as well try to write my stories by hand."

Irving shuddered at the thought.

"Fix it up," he said, "Tinker with it."

"I'm no good at that. Anyhow, it's

too old. Almost obsolete."

"Well, do the best you can. I'd like to go on buying from you."

The girl came in. Without looking at Hart she laid the manuscript down upon the desk. From where he sat, Hart could see the single word the machine had stamped upon its face: REJECTED.

"Emphatic," said the girl. "Millie almost stripped a gear."

Irving pitched the manuscript to Hart.

"Sorry, Kemp. Better luck next

time."

Hart rose, holding the manuscript in his hand. "I'll try this other thing," he said.

He started for the door.

"Just a minute," Irving said, his voice sympathetic.

Hart turned back.

Irving brought out his billfold, stripped out two tens and held them out.

"No," said Hart, staring at the bills longingly.

"It's a loan," said the editor. "Damn it, man, you can take a loan. You'll be bringing me some stuff."

"Thanks, Ben. I'll remember this."

He stuffed the bills into his pocket and made a swift retreat.

Bitter dust burned in his throat and there was a hard, cold lump in the center of his belly.

Got something for you, Ben had said. _Good basic hack._

Good basic hack.

So that was what he'd sunk to!

Angela Maret was the only patron in the Bright Star bar when Hart finally arrived there, with money in his pocket and a man-sized hankering for a glass of beer. Angela was drinking a weird sort of pink concoction that looked positively poisonous. She had her glasses on and her hair skinned back and was quite obviously on a literary binge. It was a shame, Hart thought. She could be attractive, but preferred not to be.

The instant Hart joined her Blake,

the bartender, came over to the table and just stood there, with his fists firmly planted on his hips.

"Glass of beer," Hart told him.

"No more cuff," Blake said, with an accusing stare.

"Who said anything about cuff? I'll pay for it."

Blake scowled. "Since you're loaded, how about paying on the bill?"

"I haven't got that kind of money. Do I get the beer or don't I?"

Watching Blake waddle back to the bar, Hart was glad he had had the foresight to stop and buy a pack of cigarettes to break one of the tens. Flash a ten and Blake would be on it in a second and have it chalked against his bill.

"Staked?" Angela asked sweetly.

"An advance," Hart told her, lying like a gentleman. "Irving has some stuff for me to do. He'll need a lot of it. It doesn't pay too well, of course."

Blake came with the beers and plunked it down on the table and waited pointedly for Hart to do the expected

thing.

Hart paid him and he waddled off.

"Have you heard about Jasper?"

Angela asked.

Hart shook his head. "Nothing recent," he said. "Did he finish his book?"

Angela's face lit up. "He's going on vacation. Can you imagine that? _Him_ going on vacation!"

"I don't see why not," Hart protested. "Jasper has been selling. He's the only one of us who manages to stay

loaded week after week."

"But that's not it, Kemp. Wait until I tell you - it simply is a scream. Jasper thinks he can write better if he goes off on vacation."

"Well, why not? Just last year Don went to one of those summer camps. That Bread Loaf thing, as they call it."

"All they do there," she said, "is brush up on mechanics. It's a sort of refresher course on the gadgetry of yarners. How to soup up the old heap so it'll turn out fresher stuff."

"I still don't see why Jasper can't

take a vacation if he can afford it."

"You're so dense," said Angela.
"Don't you get the point at all?"

"I get the point all right. Jasper thinks there's still a human factor in our writing. He's not entirely satisfied to get his facts out of a standard reference work or encyclopedia. He's not content to let the yarner define an emotion he has never felt or the color of a sunset he has never seen. He was nuts enough to hint at that and you and the rest of them have been riding him. No wonder the guy is eccentric. No wonder he keeps his door locked all the time."

"That locked door," Angela said cattily, "is symbolic of the kind of man he is."

"I'd lock my door," Hart told her. "I'd be eccentric too - if I could turn it out like Jasper. I'd walk on my hands. I'd wear a sarong. I'd even paint my face bright blue."

"You sound like you believe the same as Jasper does."

He shook his head. "No, I don't think the way he does. I know better. But if he wants to think that way let him go ahead and think it."

"You do," she crowed at him. "I can see it in your face. You think it's possible to be independently creative."

"No, I don't. I know it's the machines that do the creating - not us. We're nothing but attic tinkers. We're literary mechanics. And I suppose that's the way it should be. There is, naturally, the yearning for the past. That's been evident in every age. The 'good old days' complex. Back in those days a work of fiction was writ by hand and human agony."

"The agony's still with us, Kemp."

He said, "Jasper's a mechanic.

That's what's wrong with me. I can't even repair that junk-heap of mine and you should see the way Jasper has his clunk souped up."

"You could hire someone to repair it. There are firms that do excellent work."

"I never have the money." He finished his beer.

"What's that stuff you're drinking?" he asked. "Want another one?"

She pushed her glass away. "I don't like that mess," she said. "I'll have a beer with you, if you don't mind."

Hart signaled to Blake for two beers.

"What are you doing now, Angela?" he asked. "Still working on the book?"

"Working up some films," she said.

"That's what I'll have to do this afternoon. I need a central character for this Irving stuff. Big and tough and boisterous - but not too uncouth. I'll look along the riverfront."

"They come high now, Kemp," she said. "Even those crummy aliens are getting wise to us. Even the ones from

way out. I paid twenty for one just the other day and he wasn't too hot, either."

"It's cheaper than buying made-up films."

"Yes, I agree with you there. But it's a lot more work."

Blake brought the beer and Hart counted out the change into his waiting palm.

"Get some of this new film," Angela advised. "It's got the old stuff beat forty different ways. The delineation is sharper and you catch more of the marginal factors. You get a

more rounded picture of the character. You pick up all the nuances of the subject, so to speak. It makes your people more believable. I've been using it."

"It comes high, I suppose," he said.

"Yes, it's a bit expensive," she admitted.

"I've got a few spools of the old stuff. I'll have to get along with that."

"I've an extra fifty you can have."

He shook his head. "Thanks, Angela. I'll cadge drinks and bum meals

and hit up for a cigarette, but I'm not taking a fifty you'll need yourself. There's none of us so solvent we can lend someone else a fifty."

"Well, I would have done so gladly. If you should change your mind -"

"Want another beer?" Hart asked, cutting her short.

"I have to get to work."

"So have I," said Hart.

Hart climbed the stairs to the seventh floor, then went down the

corridor and knocked on Jasper Hansen's door.

"Just a minute," said a voice from within the room. He waited for three minutes. Finally a key grated in the lock and the door was opened wide.

"Sorry I took so long," apologized Jasper. "I was setting up some data and I couldn't quit. Had to finish it."

Hart nodded. Jasper's explanation was understandable. It was difficult to quit in the middle of setting up some data that had taken hours to assemble.

The room was small and littered. In

one corner stood the yarner, a shining thing, but not as shiny as the one he'd seen that morning in the uptown showroom. A typewriter stood on a littered desk, half covered by the litter. A long shelf sagged with the weight of dog-eared reference works. Bright-jacketed books were piled helter-skelter in a corner. A cat slept on an unmade bed. A bottle of liquor stood on a cupboard beside a loaf of bread. Dirty dishes were piled high in the sink.

"Heard you're going on vacation, Jasper," Hart said.

Jasper gave him a wary look. "Yes, I thought I might."

"I was wondering, Jasper, if you'd do something for me.

"Just name it."

"When you're gone, could I use your yarner?"

"Well, now, I don't know, Kemp. You see - "

"Mine is busted and I haven't the cash to fix it. But I've got a line on something. If you'd let me use yours, I could turn out enough in a week or two to cover the repair bill."

"Well, now," said Jasper, "you know I'd do anything for you. Anything at all. But that yarker - I just can't let you use it. I got it jiggered up. There isn't a circuit in it that has remained the way it was originally. There isn't a soul but myself who could operate it. If someone else tried to operate it they might burn it out or kill themselves or something."

"You could show me, couldn't you?" Hart asked, almost pleadingly.

"It's far too complicated. I've tinkered with it for years," said Jasper.

Hart managed a feeble grin. "I'm sorry, I thought - "

Jasper draped an arm around his shoulder. "Anything else. Just ask me anything."

"Thanks," said Hart, turning to go.

"Drink?"

"No, thanks," said Hart, and walked out of the door.

He climbed two more flights to the topmost floor and went into his room. His door was never locked. There was nothing in it for anyone to steal. And for that matter, he wondered, what did Jasper have that anyone might want?

He sat down in a rickety chair and stared at his yarner. It was old and battered and ornery, and he hated it.

It was worthless, absolutely worthless, and yet he knew he would have to work with it. It was all he had. He'd slave and reason with it and kick it and swear at it and he'd spend sleepless nights with it. And gurgling and clucking with overweaning gratitude, it would turn out endless reams of mediocrity that no one would buy.

He got up, and walked to the window. Far below lay the river and at the wharfs a dozen ships were moored,

disgorging rolls of paper to feed the hungry presses that thundered day and night. Across the river a spaceship was rising from the spaceport, with the faint blue flicker of the ion stream wisping from the tubes. He watched it until it was out of sight.

There were other ships, with their noses pointed at the sky, waiting for the signal - the punched button, the flipped switch, the flicker of a piece of navigation tape - that would send them bounding homeward. First out into the blackness and then into that other place of weird other-worldness that annihilated time and space, setting at defiance the theoretic limit of the speed

of light. Ships from many stars, all come to Earth for one thing only, for the one commodity that Earthmen had to sell.

He pulled his eyes from the fascination of the spaceport and looked across the sprawling city, the tumbled, canted, box-like rectangles of the district where he lived, while far to the north shone the faerie towers and the massive greatness of the famous and the wise.

A fantastic world, he thought. A fantastic world to live in. Not the kind of world that H. G. Wells and Stapledon had dreamed. With them it had been a far wandering and galactic empire, a glory and a greatness that Earth had somehow

missed when the doors to space had finally been opened. Not the thunder of the rocket, but the thunder of the press. Not the great and lofty purpose, but the faint, quiet, persistent voice spinning out a yarn. Not the far sweep of new planets, but the attic room and the driving fear that the machine would fail you, that the tapes had been used too often, that the data was all wrong.

He went to the desk and pulled all three of the drawers. He found the camera in the bottom one beneath a pile of junk. He hunted for and found the film in the middle drawer, wrapped in aluminum foil.

Rough and tough, he thought, and it shouldn't be too hard to find a man like that in one of the dives along the riverfront, where the space crews on planet leave squandered their pay checks.

The first dive he entered was oppressive with the stink of a group of spidery creatures from Spica and he didn't stay. He grimaced distastefully and got out as fast as he could. The second was repellently patronized by a few cat-like denizens of Dahib and they were not what he was looking for.

But in the third he hit the jackpot, a dozen burly humanoids from Caph -

great brawling creatures with a flair for extravagance in dress, a swashbuckling attitude and a prodigious appetite for lusty living. They were grouped about a large round table out in the center of the room and they were whooping it up. They were pounding the table with their tankards and chivvying the scuttling proprietor about and breaking into songs that they repeatedly interrupted with loud talk and argument.

Hart slipped into an unoccupied booth and watched the Caphians celebrate. One of them, bigger and louder and rowdier than the rest, wore red trousers, and a bright green shirt. Looped necklaces of platinum and

outlandish alien gems encircled his throat and glittered on his chest, and his hair had not been trimmed for months. He wore a beard that was faintly satanic, and, startlingly enough, his ears were slightly pointed. He looked like an ugly customer to get into a fracas with. _And so_, thought Hart, _he's just the boy I want._

The proprietor finally lumbered over to the booth.

"Beer," said Hart. "A big glass."

"Buster," said the man, "no one drinks beer here."

"Well, then, what have you got?"

"I got _bocca_ and _igno_ and
hzbut and _greno_ and - "

"_Bocca_," said Hart. He knew what _bocca_ was and he didn't recognize any of the others. Lord knows what some of them might do to the human constitution. _Bocca_, at least, one could survive.

The man went away and in a little while came back with a mug of _bocca_. It was faintly greenish and it sizzled just a little. What was worse, it tasted like a very dilute solution of sulphuric acid.

Hart squeezed himself back into the corner of the booth and opened his camera case. He set the camera on the table, no farther forward than was necessary to catch Green Shirt in the lens. Sighting through the finder, he got the Caphian in focus, and then quickly pressed the button that set the instrument in motion.

Once that was done, he settled down to drinking _bocca_.

He sat there, gagging down the _bocca_ and manipulating the camera. Fifteen minutes was all he needed. At the end of fifteen minutes Green Shirt would be on film. Probably not as good as if he

had been using the new fangled spools that Angela was using, but at least he'd have him.

The camera ground on, recording the Caphian's physical characteristics, his personal mannerisms, his habits of speech, his thought processes (if any), his way of life, his background, his theoretic reaction in the face of any circumstance.

Not three-dimensional, thought Hart, not too concise, nor too distinctive, not digging deep into the character and analyzing him - but good enough for the kind of tripe he'd have to write for Irving.

Take this joker and surround him with a few other ruffians chosen haphazardly from the file. Use one of the films from the Deep Dark Villain reel, throw in an ingenious treasure situation and a glob of violence, dream up some God-awful background, and he'd have it, that is, if the yarner worked...

Ten minutes gone. Just five more to go. In five more minutes he'd stop the camera, put it back into its case, slip the case into his pocket and get out of the place as fast as he could. Without causing undue notice, of course.

It had been simple, he thought -

much simpler than he could possibly have imagined.

__They're getting on to us__, Angela had said. __Even these crummy aliens.__

Only three more minutes to go.

A hand came down from nowhere, and picked up the camera. Hart swiveled around. The proprietor stood directly behind him, with the camera under his arm.

__Good Lord__, thought Hart, __I was watching the Caphians so closely I forgot about this guy!__

The proprietor roared at him: "So! You sneak in here under false pretences to get your film! Are you trying to give my place a bad name?"

Swiftly Hart flung himself out of the booth, one frantic eye on the door. There was just a chance that he might make it. But the proprietor stuck out an expert foot and tripped him. Hart landed on his shoulders and somersaulted. He skidded across the floor, smashed into a table and rolled half under it.

The Caphians had come to their feet and were looking at him. He could see that they were hoping he'd get his head bashed in.

The proprietor hurled the camera with great violence to the floor. It came apart with an ugly, splintering sound. The film rolled free and snaked across the floor. The lens wobbled crazily. A spring came unloose from somewhere and went _zing_. It stood out at an angle, quivering.

Hart gathered his feet beneath him, and leaped out from the table. The Caphians started moving in on him - not rushing him, not threatening him in any way. They just kept walking toward him and spreading out so that he couldn't make a dash for the door.

He backed away, step by careful step, and the Caphians still continued their steady advance.

Suddenly he leaped straight toward them in a direct assault on the center of the line. He yelled and lowered his head and caught Green Shirt squarely in the belly. He felt the Caphian stagger and lurch to one side, and for a split second he thought that he had broken free.

But a hairy, muscular hand reached out and grabbed him and flung him to the floor. Someone kicked him. Someone stepped on his fingers. Someone else picked him up and threw him - straight through the open door into the street

outside.

He landed on his back and skidded, with the breath completely knocked out of him. He came to rest with a jolt against the curbing opposite the place from which he had been heaved.

The Caphians, the full dozen of them, were grouped around the doorway, aroar with booming laughter. They slapped their thighs, and pounded one another on the back. They doubled over, shrieking. They shouted pleasantries and insults at him. Half of the jests he did not understand, but the ones that registered were enough to make his blood run cold.

He got up cautiously, and tested himself, He was considerably bruised and battered and his clothes were torn. But seemingly he had escaped any broken bones. He tried a few steps, limping. He tried to run and was surprised to find that he could.

Behind him the Caphians were still laughing. But there was no telling at what moment they might cease to think that his predicament was funny and start after him in earnest - for blood.

He raced down the street and ducked into an alley that led to a tangled square. He crossed the square into another street without pausing for breath

and went running on. Finally he became satisfied that he was safe and sat down on a doorstep in an alley to regain his breath and carefully review the situation.

The situation, he realized, was bad. He not only had failed to get the character he needed; he had lost the camera, suffered a severe humiliation and barely escaped with his life.

There wasn't a thing that he could do about it. Actually, he told himself, he had been extremely lucky. For he didn't have a legal leg to stand on. He'd been entirely in the wrong. To film a character without the permission of the character's original was against the law.

It wasn't that he was a lawbreaker, he thought. It wasn't as if he'd deliberately set out to break the law. He'd been forced into it. Anyone who might have consented to serve as a character would have demanded money - more money than he was in a position to shell out.

But he did desperately need a character! He simply had to have one, or face utter defeat.

He saw that the sun had set, and that twilight was drifting in. The day, he thought, had been utterly wasted, and he had only himself to blame.

A passing police officer stopped and looked into the alley.

"You," he said to Hart. "What are you sitting there for?"

"Resting," Hart told him.

"All right. You're rested. Now get a move on."

Hart got a move on.

He was nearing home when he heard the crying in the areaway between

an apartment house and a bindery. It was a funny sort of crying, a not-quite-human crying - perhaps not so much a crying as a sound of grief and loneliness.

He halted abruptly and stared around him. The crying had cut off, but soon it began again. It was a low and empty crying, a hopeless crying, a crying to one's self.

For a moment he stood undecided, then started to go on. But he had not gone three paces before he turned back. He stepped into the areaway and at the second step his foot touched something lying on the ground.

He squatted and looked at the form that lay there, crying to itself. It was a bundle - that described it best - a huddled, limp, sad bundle that moaned heartbrokenly.

He put a hand beneath it and lifted it and was surprised at how little weight it had. Holding it firmly with one hand, he searched with the other for his lighter. He flicked the lighter and the flame was feeble, but he saw enough to make his stomach flop. It was an old blanket with a face that once had started out to be humanoid and then, for some reason, had been forced to change its mind. And that was all there was - a blanket and a face.

He thumbed the lighter down and crouched in the dark, his breath rasping in his throat. The creature was not only an alien. It was, even by alien standards, almost incredible. And how had an alien strayed so far from the spaceport? Aliens seldom wandered. They never had the time to wander, for the ships came in, freighted up with fiction, and almost immediately took off again. The crews stayed close to the rocket berths, seldom venturing farther than the dives along the riverfront.

He rose, holding the creature bundled across his chest as one would hold a child - it was not as heavy as a child - and feeling the infant-like warmth

of it against his body and a strange companionship. He stood in the areaway while his mind went groping back in an effort to unmask the faint recognition he had felt. Somewhere, somehow, it seemed he once had heard or read of an alien such as this. But surely that was ridiculous, for aliens did not come, even the most fantastic of them, as a living blanket with the semblance of a face.

He stepped out into the street and looked down to examine the face again. But a portion of the creature's blanket-body had draped itself across its features and he could see only a waving blur.

Within two blocks be reached the Bright Star bar, went around the corner to the side door and started up the stairs. Footsteps were descending and he squeezed himself against the railing to let the other person past.

"Kemp," said Angela Maret.

"Kemp, what have you there?"

"I found it in the street," Hart told her.

He shifted his arm a little and the blanket-body slipped and she saw the face. She moved back against the railing, her hand going to her mouth to choke off a scream.

"Kemp! How awful!"

"I think that it is sick. It - "

'What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Hart said. "It was crying to itself. It was enough to break your heart. I couldn't leave it there."

"I'll get Doc Julliard."

Hart shook his head. "That wouldn't do any good. Doc doesn't know any alien medicine. Besides, he's probably drunk."

"No one knows any alien

medicine," Angela reminded him.
"Maybe we could get one of the specialists uptown." Her face clouded.
"Doc is resourceful, though. He has to be down here. Maybe he could tell us - "

"All right," Hart said. "See if you can rout out Doc."

In his room he laid the alien on the bed. It was no longer whimpering. Its eyes were closed and it seemed to be asleep, although he could not be sure.

He sat on the edge of the bed and studied it and the more he looked at it the less sense it seemed to make. Now he could see how thin the blanket body

was, how light and fragile. It amazed him that a thing so fragile could live at all, that it could contain in so inadequate a body the necessary physiological machinery to keep itself alive.

He wondered if it might be hungry and if so what kind of food it required. If it were really ill how could he hope to take care of it when he didn't know the first basic thing about it?

Maybe Doc - But no, Doc would know no more than he did. Doc was just like the rest of them, living hand to mouth, cadging drinks whenever he could get them, and practicing medicine without adequate equipment and with a

knowledge that had stopped dead in its tracks forty years before.

He heard footsteps coming up the stairs - light steps and trudging heavy ones. It had to be Angela with Doc. She had found him quickly and that probably meant he was sober enough to act and think with a reasonable degree of coordination.

Doc came into the room, followed by Angela. He put down his bag and looked at the creature on the bed.

"What have we here?" he asked and probably it was the first time in his entire career that the smug doctorish

phrase made sense.

"Kemp found it in the street," said Angela quickly. "It's stopped crying now."

"Is this a joke?" Doc asked, half wrathfully. "If it is, young man, I consider it in the worst possible taste."

Hart shook his head. "It's no joke. I thought that you might know - "

"Well, I don't," said Doc, with aggressive bitterness.

He let go of the blanket edge and it quickly flopped back upon the bed.

He paced up and down the room for a turn or two. Then he whirled angrily on Angela and Hart.

"I suppose you think that I should do something," he said. "I should at least go through the motions. I should act like a doctor. I'm sure that is what you're thinking. I should take its pulse and its temperature and look at its tongue and listen to its heart. Well, suppose you tell me how I do these things. Where do I find the pulse? If I could find it, what is its normal rate? And if I could figure out some way to take its temperature, what is the normal temperature for a monstrosity such as this? And if you

would be so kind, would you tell me how - short of dissection - I could hope to locate the heart?"

He picked up his bag and started for the door.

"Anyone else, Doc?" Hart pleaded, in a conciliatory tone. "Anyone who'd know?"

"I doubt it," Doc snapped.

"You mean there's _no one_ who can do a thing? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Look, son. Human doctors treat

human beings, period. Why should we be expected to do more? How often are we called upon to treat an alien? We're not expected to treat aliens. Oh, possibly, once in a while some specialist or researcher may dabble in alien medicine. But that is the correct name for it - just plain dabbling. It takes years of a man's life to learn barely enough to qualify as a human doctor. How many lifetimes do you think we should devote to curing aliens?"

"All right, Doc. All right."

"And how can you even be sure there's. something wrong with it?"

"Why, it was crying and I quite naturally thought - "

"It might have been lonesome or frightened or grieving. It might have been lost."

Doc turned to the door again.

"Thanks, Doc," Hart said.

"Not at all." The old man hesitated at the door. "You don't happen to have a dollar, do you? Somehow, I ran a little short."

"Here," said Hart, giving him a bill.

"I'll return it tomorrow," Doc promised. He went clumping down the stairs.

Angela frowned. "You shouldn't have done that, Kemp. Now he'll get drunk and you'll be responsible."

"Not on a dollar," Hart said confidently. "That's all you know about it. The kind of stuff Doc drinks - "

"Let him get drunk then. He deserves a little fun." "But - " Angela motioned to the thing upon the bed.

"You heard what Doc said. He can't do anything. No one can do anything.

When it wakes up - if it wakes up

- it may be able to tell us what is wrong with it. But I'm not counting on that."

He walked over to the bed and stared down at the creature. It was repulsive and abhorrent and not in the least humanoid. But there was about it a pitiful loneliness and an incongruity that made a catch come to his

throat.

"Maybe I should have left it in the areaway," he said. "I started to walk on. But when it began to cry again I went

back to it. Maybe I did wrong bothering with it at all. I haven't helped it any. If I'd left it there it might have turned out better. Some other aliens may be looking for it by now."

"You did right," said Angela.

"Don't start in fighting with windmills."

She crossed the room and sat down in a chair. He went over to the window and stared somberly out across the city.

"What happened to you?" she asked. "Nothing."

"But your clothes. Just look at your clothes."

"I got thrown out of a dive. I tried to take some film."

"Without paying for it."

"I didn't have the money."

"I offered you a fifty."

"I know you did. But I couldn't take it. Don't you understand, Angela? _I simply couldn't take it._"

She said softly, "You're bad off, Kemp."

He swung around, outraged. She

hadn't needed to say that. She had no right to say it. She - He caught himself up before the words came tumbling out

She had a right. She'd offered him a fifty - but that had been only a part of it. She had the right to say it because she knew that she could say it. No one else in all the world could have felt the way she did, about him.

"I can't write," he said. "Angela, no matter how I try, I can't make it come out right. The machine is haywire and the tapes are threadbare and most of them are patched."

"What have you had to eat today?"

"I had the beers with you and I had some _bocca_."

"That isn't eating. You wash your face and change into some different clothes and we'll go downstairs and get you some food."

"I have eating money."

"I know you have. You told me about the advance from Irving."

"It wasn't an advance."

"I know it wasn't, Kemp."

"What about the alien?"

"It'll be all right - at least long enough for you to get a bite to eat. You can't help it by standing here. You don't know how to help it."

"I guess you're right."

"Of course I am. Now get going and wash your dirty face. And don't forget your ears."

Jasper Hansen was alone in the Bright Star bar. They went over to his table and sat down. Jasper was finishing a dish of sauerkraut and pig's knuckles and was drinking wine with it, which

seemed a bit blasphemous.

"Where's everyone else?" asked Angela. "There's a party down the street," said Jasper. "Someone sold a book."

"Someone that we know?"

"Hell, no," Jasper said. "Just someone sold a book. You don't have to know a guy to go to his party when he sells a book."

"I didn't hear anything about it."

"Neither did the rest of the bunch. Someone looked in at the door and

hollered about the party and everyone took off. Everyone but me. I can't monkey with no party. I've got work to do."

"Free food?" asked Angela.

"Yeah. Don't it beat you, though. Here we are, honorable and respected craftsmen, and every one of us will break a leg to grab himself a sandwich and a drink."

"Times are tough," said Hart.

"Not with me," said Jasper. "I keep working all the time."

"But work doesn't solve the main problem."

Jasper regarded him thoughtfully, tugging at his chin.

"What else is there?" he demanded. "Inspiration? Dedication? Genius? Go ahead and name it. We are rmechanics, man. We got machines and tapes. We went into top production two hundred years ago. We mechanized so we could go into top production so that people could turn out books and stories even if they had no talent at all. We got a job to do. We got to turn out tons of drivel for the whole damn galaxy. We got to keep them drooling over what is going to

happen next to sloe-eyed Annie, queen of the far-flung spaceways. And we got to shoot up the lad with her and patch him up and shoot him up and patch him up and..."

He reached for an evening paper, opened it to a certain page and thumped his fist upon it.

"Did you see this?" he asked. "The Classic, they call it. Guaranteed to turn out nothing but a classic."

Hart snatched the paper from him and there it was, the wondrous yarner he had seen that morning, confronting him in all its glory from the center of a full-

"Pretty soon," said Jasper, "all you'll need to write is have a lot of money. You can go out and buy a machine like that and say turn out a story and press a button or flip a switch or maybe simply kick it and it'll cough out a story complete to the final exclamation point.

"It used to be that you could buy an old beat-up machine for, say, a hundred dollars and you could turn out any quantity of stuff - not good, but salable. Today you got to have a high-priced machine and an expensive camera and a lot of special tape and film. Someday,"

he said, "the human race will outwit itself. Someday it will mechanize to the point where there won't be room for humans, but only for machines."

"You do all right," said Angela.

"That's because I keep dinging my machine up all the time. It don't give me no rest. That place of mine is half study and half machine shop and I know as much about electronics as I do about narration."

Blake came shuffling over.

"What'll it be?" he growled.

"I've eaten," Angela told him. "All I want is a glass of beer."

He turned to Hart. "How about you" he demanded.

"Give me some of that stuff Jasper has - without the wine.

"No cuff," said Blake.

"Damn it, who said anything about cuff? Do you expect me to pay you before you bring it?"

"No," said Blake. "But immediately, after I bring it."

He turned and shuffled off.

"Some day," said Jasper, "there has to be a limit to it. There must be a limit to it and we must be reaching it. You can only mechanize so far. You can assign only so many human activities and duties to intelligent machines. Who, two hundred years ago, would have said that the writing of fiction could have been reduced to a matter of mechanics?"

"Who, two hundred years ago," said Hart, "could have guessed that Earth could gear itself to a literary culture? But that is precisely what we have today. Sure, there are factories that build the machines we need and

lumbermen who cut the trees for pulp and farmers who grow the food, and all the other trades and skills which are necessary to keep a culture operative. But by and large Earth today is principally devoted to the production of a solid stream of fiction for the alien trade."

"It all goes back to one peculiar trait," said Jasper. "A most unlikely trait to work - as it does - to our great advantage. We just happen to be the galaxy's only liars. In a mass of stars where truth is accepted as a universal constant, we are the one exception."

"You make it sound so horrible,"

protested Angela.

"I suppose I do, but that's the way it is. We could have become great traders and skinned all and sundry until they got wise to us. We could have turned our talent for the untruth into many different channels and maybe even avoided getting our heads bashed in. But instead we drifted into the one safe course. Our lying became an easy virtue. Now we can lie to our hearts' content and they lap it up. No one, nowhere, except right here on Earth, ever even tried to spin a yarn for simple entertainment, or to point a moral or for any other reason. They never attempted it because it would have been a lie, and we are the only liars in

the universe of stars."

Blake brought the beer for Angela and the pig knuckles for Hart. Hart paid him out of hand.

"I've still got a quarter left," he said. "Have you any pie?"

"Apple."

"Here," said Hart, "I'll pay you in advance."

"First," went on Jasper, "it was told by mouth. Then it was writ by hand and now it's fabricated by machine."

But surely that's not the end of it. There must be something else. There must be another way, a better way. There must be another step."

"I would settle for anything," said Hart. "Any way at all. I'd even write by hand if I thought I could go on selling."

"You can't!" Angela told him, sharply. "Why, its positively indecent to even joke about it. You can say it as a joke just among the three of us, but if I ever hear you - "

Hart waved his hand. "Let it go. I'm sorry that I said it."

"Of course," said Jasper, "it's a great testimonial to the cleverness of Man, to the adaptability and resourcefulness of the human race. It is a somewhat ludicrous application of big business methods to what had always been considered a personal profession. But it works. Some day, I have no doubt, we may see the writing business run on production lines, with fiction factories running double shifts."

"No," Angela said. "No, you're wrong there, Jasper. Even with the mechanization, it's still the loneliest business on Earth."

"It is," agreed Jasper. "But I don't

regret the loneliness part. Maybe I should, but I don't."

"It's a lousy way to make a living," said Angela, with a strange half-bitterness in her voice. "What are we contributing?"

"You are making people happy - if you can call some of our readers people. You are supplying entertainment."

"And the noble ideas?"

"There are even a few of those."

"It's more than that," said Hart.

"More than entertainment, more than

great ideas. It's the most innocent and the deadliest propaganda in all of human history. The old writers, before the first space flight, glorified far wandering and galactic conquest and I think that they were justified. But they missed the most important development completely. They couldn't possibly foresee the way we would do it - with books, not battleships. We're softening up the galaxy with a constant stream of human thought. Our words are reaching farther than our spaceships ever could."

"That's the point I want to make," Jasper said, triumphantly. "You hit the point exactly. But if we are to tell the galaxy a story it must be a human story. If we sell them a bill of goods it must be a human bill of goods. And how can we keep it human if we relegate its telling to machines?"

"But they're human machines," objected Angela.

"A machine can't be purely human. Basically a machine is universal. It could be Caphian as well as human, or Aldebaran or Draconian or any other race. And that's not all. We let the machine set the norm. The one virtue of

mechanics is that it sets a pattern. And a pattern is deadly in literary matters. It never changes. It keeps on using the same old limp plots in many different guises.

"Maybe at the moment it makes no difference to the races who are reading us, for as yet they have not developed anything approaching a critical faculty. But it should make some difference to us. It should make some difference in the light of a certain pride of workmanship we are supposed to have. And that is the trouble with machines. They are destroying the pride in us. Once writing was an art. But it is an art no longer. It's machine-produced, like a factory chair.

A good chair, certainly. Good enough to sit on, but not a thing of beauty or of craftsmanship or - "

The door crashed open and feet pounded on the floor.

Just inside the door stood Green Shirt and behind him, grinning fiendishly, his band of Caphians.

Green Shirt advanced upon them happily, with his arms flung wide in greeting. He stopped beside Hart's chair and clapped a massive hand upon his shoulder.

"You recall me, don't you?" he

asked in slow and careful English.

"Sure," Hart said, gulping. "Sure, I remember you. This is Miss Maret and over there is Mr. Hansen."

Green Shirt said, with precise bookishness, "So happy, I assure you."

"Have a seat," said Jasper.

"Glad to," said Green Shirt, hauling out a chair. His necklaces jingled musically as he sat down.

One of the other Caphians said something to him in a rapid-fire alien tongue. Green Shirt answered curtly and

waved toward the door. The others marched outside.

"He is worried," Green Shirt said. "We will slow - how do you say it - we will slow the ship. They cannot leave without us. But I tell him not to worry. The captain will be glad we slow the ship when he see what we bring back."

He leaned forward and tapped Hart upon the knee. "I look for you," he said. "I look high and wide."

"Who is this joker?" Jasper asked.

"Joker?" asked Green Shirt, frowning.

"A term of great respect," Hart hastily assured him. "So," said Green Shirt. "You all write the stories?"

"Yes. All three of us."

"But you write them best."

"I wouldn't say that exactly. You see - "

"You write the wild and woolly stories? The bang-bangs?"

"Yeah. I guess I'm guilty."

Green Shirt looked apologetic.

"Had I known, we would not from the tavern have thrown you out. It was just big fun. We did not know you write the stories. When we find out who you are we try to catch you. But you run and hide."

"Just what is going on here, anyhow?" Angela demanded.

Green Shirt whooped for Blake.

"Set them up," he shouted. "These are my friends. Set up the best you have."

"The best I have," Blake said icily, "is Irish whiskey and that costs a buck a

shot."

"I got the cash," said Green Shirt.

"You get this name I cannot say, and you will get your cash."

He said to Hart, "I have a surprise for you, my friend. We love the writers of the bang-bangs. We read them _always_. We get much stimulation."

Jasper guffawed.

Green Shirt swung about in amazement, his bushy brows contracting.

"He's just happy," Hart explained, quickly. "He likes Irish whiskey."

"Fine," said Green Shirt, beaming.
"You drink all you wish. I will give the cash. It is - how do you say - on me."

Blake brought the drinks and Green Shirt paid him.

"Bring the container," he said.

"The container?"

"He means the bottle."

"That'll be twenty dollars," said Blake.

"So," said Green Shirt, paying him.

They drank the whiskey and Green Shirt said to Hart, "My surprise is that you come with us."

"You mean in the ship?"

"We have never had a real live writer on our planet. You will have a good time. You will stay and write for us.

'Well," said Hart, "I'm not sure - "

"You try to take the picture. The tavern man explain it all to us. He say it is against the law. He say if I complain it will come big trouble."

"You can't do it, Kemp," protested Angela. "Don't let this big hyena bluff you. _We'll_ pay your fine."

"We not complain," said Green Shirt, gently. "We just with you mop up the condemned place."

Blake brought the bottle and thumped it down in the center of the table. Green Shirt picked it up and filled their glasses to the brim.

"Drink up," he said and set a fine example.

He drank and Green Shirt filled his

glass again. Hart picked up his glass and twirled it in his fingers.

There had to be a way out of this mess, he told himself. It was absurd that this thundering barbarian from one of the farther suns should be able to walk into a bar and tell a man to come along with him.

However, there was no percentage in stirring up a fight - not with ten or eleven Caphians waiting just outside.

"I explain it to you," said Green Shirt. "I try hard to explain it well so that you will - so that you will - "

"Understand," supplied Jasper Hansen.

"I thank you, Hansen man. So you will understand. We get the stories only shortly ago. Many of the other races got them long ago, but with us it is new and most wonderful. It takes us - how would you say - out of ourselves. We get many things from other stars, useful things, things to hold in the hand, things to see and use. But from you we get the going of far places, the doing of great deeds, the thinking of great thoughts."

He filled the glasses all around again. "You understand?" Green Shirt asked. They nodded.

"And now we go."

Hart rose slowly to his feet.

"Kemp, you can't!" screamed Angela.

"You shut the mouth," said Green Shirt.

Hart marched through the door and out into the street. The other Caphians oozed out of dark alleyways and surrounded him.

"Off we go," said Green Shirt, happily. "It gives big time on Caph."

Halfway to the river, Hart stopped in the middle of the street.

"I can't do it," he said.

"Can't do what?" asked Green Shirt, prodding him along.

"I let you think," said Hart, "that I was the man you wanted. I did it because I'd like to see your planet. But it isn't fair. I'm not the man you want."

"You write the bang-bangs, do you not? You think up the wild and woollies?"

"Certainly. But not really good ones. Mine aren't the kind where you hang on every word. There's another man who can do it better."

"_This_ man we want," said Green Shirt. "Can you tell us where to find him?"

"That's easy. The other man at the table with us. The one who was so happy when you ordered whiskey."

"You mean the Hansen man?"

"He is the one, exactly."

"He write the bang-bangs good?"

"Much better than I do. He's a genius at it." Green Shirt was overcome with gratitude. He hugged Hart to him in

an extravagant expression of good will.

"You fair," he said. "You fine. It was nice of you to tell us."

A window banged up in a house across the street and a man stuck his head out.

"If you guys don't break it up," he bellowed, "I'll call the cops."

"We shatter the peace," sighed Green Shirt "It is a queer law you have."

The window banged down again.

Green Shirt put a friendly hand

upon Hart's shoulder. "We love the wild and woollies," he said gravely. "'We want the very best. We thank you. We find this Hansen man."

He turned around and loped back up the street, followed by his ruffians.

Hart stood on the corner and watched them go. He drew a deep breath and let it slowly out.

It had been easy, he told himself, once you got the angle. And it had been Jasper, actually, who had given him the angle. _Truth Is regarded as a universal constant_, Jasper had said. _We are the only liars._

It had turned out tough on Jasper - a downright dirty trick. But the guy wanted to go on vacation, didn't he? And here was the prospect of a travel jaunt which would be really worthwhile. He'd refused the use of his machine and he had guffawed insultingly when Green Shirt had asked about the wild and woollies. If ever a guy had it coming to him, Jasper Hansen was that guy.

And above and beyond all that, he always kept his door locked - which showed a contemptible suspicion of his fellow writers.

Hart swung about and walked

rapidly away in an opposite direction. Eventually he'd go back home, he told himself. But not right now. Later on he'd go, when the dust had settled slightly.

It was dawn when Hart climbed the stairs to the seventh floor and went down the corridor to Jasper Hansen's door. The door was locked as usual. But he took out of his pockets a thin piece of spring steel he'd picked up in a junkyard and did some judicious prying. In the matter of seconds, the lock clicked back and the door swung open.

The yarner squatted in its corner, a

bright and lovely sight.

Jiggered up, Jasper had affirmed. If someone else ever tried to use it, it would very likely burn out or kill him. But that had been just talk, just cover-up for his pig-headed selfishness.

Two weeks, Hart told himself. If he used his head he should be able to operate it without suspicion for at least two weeks. It would be easy. All he'd have to say was that Jasper had told him that he could borrow it any time he wished. And if he was any judge of character, Jasper would not be returning soon.

But even so, two weeks would be all the time he'd need. In two weeks, working day and night, he could turn out enough copy to buy himself a new machine.

He walked across the room to the yarner and pulled out the chair that stood in front of it. Calmly he sat down, reached out a hand and patted the instrument panel. It was a good machine. It turned out a lot of stuff - good stuff. Jasper had been selling steadily. _Good old yarner_, Hart said.

He dropped his finger to the switch and flipped it over. Nothing happened. Startled, he flipped it back, flipped it on

again. Still nothing happened.

He got up hastily to check the power connection. There was no power connection! For a shocked moment, he stood rooted to the floor.

Jiggered up, Jasper had said. Jiggered up so ingeniously that it could dispense with power?

It just wasn't possible. It was unthinkable. With fumbling fingers, he lifted the side panel, and peered inside.

The machine's innards were a mess. Half of the tubes were gone. Others were burned out, and the wiring had

been ripped loose in places. The whole relay section was covered with dust. Some of the metal, he saw, was rusty. The entire machine was just a pile of junk.

He replaced the panel with suddenly shaking fingers, reeled back blindly and collided with a table. He clutched at it and held on tight to still the shaking of his hands, to steady the mad roaring in his head.

Jasper's machine wasn't jiggered up. It wasn't even in operating condition...

No wonder Jasper had kept his

door locked. He lived in mortal fear that someone would find out that he wrote by hand!

And now, despite the dirty trick he'd played on a worthy friend, Hart was no better off than he had been before. He was faced with the same old problems, with no prospect of overcoming them. He still had his own beaten-up machine and nothing more. Maybe it would have been better if he had gone to Caph.

He walked to the door, paused there for an instant, and looked back. On the littered desk he could see Jasper's typewriter carefully half-buried by the litter, and giving the exact impression

that it was never used.

Still, Jasper sold. Jasper sold almost every word he wrote. He sold - hunched over his desk with a pencil in his hand or hammering out the words on a muted typewriter. He sold without using the yarker at all, but keeping it all bright and polished, an empty, useless thing. He sold by using it as a shield against the banter and the disgust of all those others who talked so glibly and relied so much upon the metal and the magic of the ponderous contraption.

First it was told by mouth, Jasper had said that very evening. _Then it was writ by hand. Now it's fabricated by

machine._

And what's next, he'd asked - as if he had never doubted that there would be something next.

What next? thought Hart. Was this the end and all of Man - the moving gear, the clever glass and metal, the adroit electronics?

For the sake of Man's own dignity - his very sanity - there _had_ to be a next. Mechanics, by their very nature, were a dead end. You could only get so clever. You could only go so far.

Jasper knew that. Jasper had found

out. He had discarded the mechanistic aid and gone back to hand again.

Give a work of craftsmanship some economic value and Man would find a way to turn it out in quantity. Once furniture had been constructed lovingly by artisans who produced works of art that would last with pride through many generations. Then the machine had come and Man had turned out furniture that was purely functional, furniture that had little lasting value and no pride at all.

And writing had followed the same pattern. It had pride no longer. It had ceased to be an art, and become a commodity.

But what was a man to do? What _could_ he do? Lock his door like Jasper and work through lonely hours with the bitter taste of nonconformity sharp within his mind, tormenting him night and day?

Hart walked out of the room with a look of torment in his eyes. He waited for a second to hear the lock click home. Then he went down the hall and slowly climbed the stairs.

The alien - the blanket and the face - was still lying on the bed. But now its

eyes were open and it stared at him when he came in and closed the door behind him.

He stopped just inside the door and the cold mediocrity of the room - all of its meanness and its poverty - rose up to clog his nostrils. He was hungry, sick at bean and lonely, and the yarker in the corner seemed to mock him.

Through the open window he could hear the rumble of a spaceship taking off across the river and the hooting of a tug as it warped a ship into a wharf.

He stumbled to the bed.

"Move over, you," he said to the wide-eyed alien, and tumbled down beside it. He turned his back to it and drew his knees up against his chest and lay huddled there.

He was right back where he'd started just the other morning. He still had no tape to do the job that Irving wanted. He still had a busted up haywire machine. He was without a camera and he wondered where he could borrow one - although there would be no sense of borrowing one if he didn't have the money to pay a character. He'd tried once to take a film by stealth and he wouldn't try again. It wasn't worth the risk of going to prison for three or four

years.

__We love the wild and woollies__,
Green Shirt had said. __From them we get
the going of far places.__

And while with Green Shirt it
would be the bang-bangs and the wild
and woollies, with some other race it
would be a different type of fiction -
race after race finding in this strange
product of Earth a new world of
enchantment. The far places of the mind,
perhaps - or the far places of emotion.
The basic differences were not too
important

Angela had said it was a lousy way

to make a living.

But she had only been letting off steam. All writers at times said approximately the same thing. In every age men and women of every known profession at some time must have said that theirs was a lousy way to make a living. At the moment they might have meant it, but at other times they knew that it was not lousy because it was important.

And writing was important, too - tremendously important. Not so much because it meant the "going of far places," but because it sowed the seed of Earth - the seed of Earth's thinking

and of Earth's logic - among the myriad stars.

They are out there waiting, Hart thought, for the stories that he would never write.

He would try, of course, despite all obstacles. He might even do as Jasper had done, scribbling madly with a sense of shame, feeling anachronistic and inadequate, dreading the day when someone would ferret out his secret, perhaps by deducing from a certain eccentricity of style that it was not machine-written.

For Jasper was wrong, of course.

The trouble was not with the yarners nor with the principle of mechanistic writing. It was with Jasper himself - a deep psychopathic quirk that made a rebel of him. But even so he had remained a fearful and a hidden rebel who locked his door and kept his yarner polished, and carefully covered his typewriter with the litter on his desk so no one would suspect that he ever used it.

Hart felt warmer now and he seemed to be no longer hungry and suddenly he thought of one of those far places that Green Shirt had talked about. It was a grove of trees and a brook ran through the grove. There was a sense of

peace and calm and a touch of majesty and for-everness about it. He heard birdsong and smelled the sharp, spice-like scent of water running in its mossy banks. He walked among the trees and the Gothic shape of them made the place seem like a church. As he walked he formed words within his mind - words put together so feelingly and so rightly and so carefully that no one who read them could mistake what he had to say. They would know not only the sight of the grove itself, but the sound and the smell of it and the foreverness that filled it to overflowing.

But even in his exaltation he sensed a threat within the Gothic shape and the

feeling of foreverness. Some lurking intuition told him that the grove was a place to get away from. He tried for a moment to remember how he had gotten there, but there was no memory. It was as if he had become familiar with the grove only a second or two before and yet he knew that he had been walking beneath the sun-dappled foliage for what must have been hours or days.

He felt a tingling on his throat and raised a hand to brush it off and his hand touched something small and warm that brought him upright out of bed.

His hand tightened on the creature's neck. He was about to rip it from his

chest when suddenly he recalled, full-blown, the odd circumstance he had tried to remember just the night before.

His grip relaxed and he let his hand drop to his side. He stood beside the bed, in the warm familiarity of the room, and felt the comfort of the blanket-creature upon his back and shoulders and around his throat.

He wasn't hungry and he wasn't tired and the sickness that he'd felt had somehow disappeared. He wasn't even worried and that was most unusual, for he was customarily worried.

Twelve hours before he had stood

in the areaway with the blanket creature in his arms and had sought to pry out of a suddenly stubborn mind an explanation for the strange sense of recognition he'd experienced - the feeling that somewhere he had read or heard of the crying thing he'd found. Now, with it clasped around his back and clinging to his throat, he knew.

He strode across the room, with the blanket creature clinging to him, and took a book down from a narrow, six foot shelf. It was an old and tattered book, worn smooth by many hands, and it almost slipped from his clasp as he turned it over to read the title on the spine:

Fragments from Lost Writings.

He reversed the volume and began to leaf through its pages. He knew now where to find what he was looking for. He remembered exactly where he had read about the thing upon his back.

He found the pages quickly enough - a few salvaged paragraphs from some story, written long ago and lost,

He skipped the first two pages, and came suddenly upon the paragraphs he wanted:

—Ambitious vegetables, the life blankets waited, probably only obscurely aware of what they were waiting for. But when the humans came the long, long wait was over. The life blanket made a deal with men. And in the last analysis they turned out to be the greatest aid to galactic exploration that had ever been discovered.—

And there it was, thought Hart - the old, smug, pat assurance that it would be the humans who would go into the galaxy to explore it and make contact with its denizens and carry to every planet they

visited the virtues of the Earth.

— With a life blanket draped like a bobtailed cloak around his shoulders, a man had no need to worry about being fed, for the life blanket had the strange ability to gather energy and convert it into food for the body of its host.

It became, in fact, almost a second body - a watchful, fussy, quasiparental body that watched over the body of its host, keeping metabolism in balance despite alien conditions, rooting out infections, playing the role of mother, cook and family doctor combined.

But in return the blanket became, in a sense, the double of its host. Shedding its humdrum vegetable existence, it became vicariously a man, sharing all of its host's emotions and intelligence, living the kind of life it never could have lived if left to itself.

And not content with this fair trade, the blankets threw in a bonus, a sort of dividend of gratitude. They were storytellers and imaginers. They could imagine anything - literally anything at all. They spent long hours spinning out tall yarns for the amusement of their hosts, serving as a shield against boredom and loneliness._

There was more of it, but Hart did not need to read on. He turned back to the beginning of the fragment and he read: _Author Unknown. Circa 1956._

Six hundred years ago! Six hundred years - and how could any man in 1956 have known?

The answer was he couldn't.

There was no way he could have known. He'd simply _dreamed_ it up. And hit the truth dead center! Some early writer of science fiction had had an

inspired vision!

There was something coming through the grove and it was a thing of utter beauty. It was not humanoid and it was not a monster. It was something no man had ever seen before. And yet despite the beauty of it, there was a deadly danger in it and something one must flee from.

He turned around to flee and found himself in the center of the room.

"All right," he said to the blanket. "Let's cut it out for now. We can go back later."

—We can go back later and we can make a story of it and we can go many other planes and make stories of them, too. I won't need a yarner to write those kind of stories, for I can recapture the excitement and splendor of it, and link it all together better than a yarner could. I have been there and lived it, and that's a setup you can't beat.—

And there it was! The answer to the question that Jasper had asked, sitting at the table in the Bright Star bar.

What next?

And this was next: a symbiosis between Man and an alien thing,

imagined centuries ago by a man whose very name was lost.

It was almost, Hart thought, as if God had placed His hand against his back and propelled him gently onward, for it was utterly fantastic that he should have found the answer crying in an areaway between an apartment house and a bindery.

But that did not matter now. The important thing was that he'd found it and brought it home - not quite knowing why at the time and wondering later why he had even bothered with it.

The important thing was that _now_

was the big pay...

He heard footsteps coming up the stairs and turning down the hall. Alarmed by their rapid approach he reached up hastily and snatched the blanket from his shoulders. Frantically he looked about for a place to hide the creature. Of course! His desk. He jerked open the bottom drawer and stuffed the blanket into it, ignoring a slight resistance. He was kicking the drawer shut when Angela came into the room.

He could see at once that she was burned up.

"That was a lousy trick," she said.
"You got Jasper into a lot of trouble."

Hart stared at her in consternation.
"Trouble? You mean he didn't go to
Caph?"

"He's down in the basement hiding
out. Blake told me he was there. I went
down and talked to him."

"He got away from them?" Hart
appeared badly shaken.

"Yes. He told them they didn't want
a man at all. He told them what they
wanted was a machine and he told them

about that glittering wonder - that Classic model - in the shop uptown."

"And so they went and stole it."

"No. If they had it would have been all right. But they bungled it. They smashed the glass to get at it, and that set off an alarm. Every cop in town came tearing after them."

"But Jasper was all - "

"They took Jasper with them to show them where it was."

Some of the color had returned to Hart's face. "And now Jasper's hiding

from the law."

"That's the really bad part of it. He doesn't know whether he is or not. He's not sure the cops even saw him. What he's afraid of is that they might pick up one of those Caphians and sweat the story out of him. And if they do, Kemp Hart, you have a lot to answer for."

"Me? Why, I didn't do a thing - "

"Except tell them that Jasper was the man they wanted. How did you ever make them believe a line like that?"

"Easy. Remember what Jasper said. Everyone else tells the truth. We're the

only ones who lie. Until they get wise to us, they'll believe every word we say. Because, you see, no one else tells anything but the truth and so -"

"Oh, shut up!" Angela said impatiently.

She looked around the room.
"Where's that blanket thing?" she asked.

"It must have left. Maybe it ran away. When I came home it wasn't here."

"Haven't you any idea what it was?"

Hart shook his head. "Maybe it's just as well it's gone," he said. "It gave me a queasy feeling."

"You and Doc! That's another thing. This neighborhood's gone crazy. Doc is stretched out dead drunk under a tree in the park and there's an alien watching him. It won't let anyone come near him. It's as if it were guarding him, or had adopted him or something."

"Maybe it's one of Doc's pink elephants come to actual life. You know, dream a thing too often and - "

"It's no elephant and it isn't pink. It's got webbed feet that are too big for it and long, spindly legs. It's some thing like a spider, and its skin is warts. It has a triangular head with six horns. It fairly makes you crawl just to look at it."

Hart shuddered. Ordinary aliens could be all right but a thing like that - "Wonder what it wants of Doc." "Nobody seems to know. It won't talk." "Maybe it can't talk." "You know all aliens talk. At least enough of our language to make themselves understood. Otherwise they wouldn't come here."

"It sounds reasonable," said Hart.

"Maybe It's acquiring a second-hand jag just sitting there beside Doc."

"Sometimes," said Angela, "your sense of humor is positively disgusting."

"Like writing books by hand."

"Yes," she said. "Like writing books by hand. You know as well as I do that people just don't talk about writing anything by hand. It's like - well, it's like eating with your fingers or belching in public or going without clothes."

"All right," he said, "all right. I'll never mention it again."

After she had left, Hart sat down and gave some serious thought to his situation.

In many ways he'd be a lot like Jasper, but he wouldn't mind if he could write as well as Jasper.

He'd have to start locking his door. He wondered where his key _was_. He never used it and now he'd have to look through his desk the first chance he got, to see if he couldn't locate it. If he couldn't find it, he'd have to have a new key made, because he couldn't have people walking in on him unexpectedly and catching him wearing the blanket or

writing stuff by hand.

Maybe, he thought, it might be a good idea to move. It would be hard at times to explain why all at once he had started to lock his door. But he hated the thought of moving. Bad as it was, he'd gotten used to this place and it seemed like home.

Maybe, after he started selling, he should talk with Angela and see how she felt about moving in with him. Angela was a good kid, but you couldn't ask a girl to move in with you when you were always wondering where the next meal was coming from. But now, even if he didn't sell, he'd never have to worry

where his next meal was coming from. He wondered briefly if the blanket could be shared as a food provider by two persons and he wondered how in the world he'd ever manage to explain it all to Angela.

And how had that fellow back in 1956 ever thought of such a thing? How many of the other wild ideas concocted out of tortuous mental efforts and empty whiskey bottles might be true as well? -

A dream? An idea? A glimmer of the future? It did not matter which, for a man had thought of it and it had come true. How many of the other things that Man had thought of in the past and would

think of in the future would also become the truth?

The idea scared him.

That "going of far places." The reaching out of the imagination. The influence of the written word, the thought and power behind it. It was deadlier than a battleship, he'd said, How everlastingly right he had been.

He got up and walked across the room and stood in front of the yarker. It leered at him. He stuck out his tongue at it.

"That for you," he said,

Behind him he heard a rustle and hastily whirled about.

The blanket had somehow managed to ooze out of the desk drawer and it was heading for the door, reared upon the nether folds of its flimsy body. It was slithering along in a jerky fashion like a wounded seal.

"Hey, you!" yelled Hart and made a grab at it. But he was too late. A being - there was no other word for it - stood in the doorway and the blanket reached it and slithered swiftly up its body and plastered itself upon its back.

The thing in the doorway hissed at Hart: "I lose it. You are so kind to keep it. I am very grateful."

Hart stood transfixed.

The creature _was_ a sight. Just like the one which Angela had seen guarding Doc, only possibly a little uglier. It had webbed feet that were three times too big for it, so that it seemed to be wearing snowshoes, and it had a tail that curved ungracefully halfway up its back.

It had a melon-shaped head with a

triangular face, and six horns and there were rotating eyes on the top of each and every horn.

The monstrosity dipped into a pouch that seemed to be part of its body, and took out a roll of bills.

"So small a reward," it piped and tossed the bills to Hart.

Hart put out a hand and caught them absentmindedly.

"We go now," said the being. "We think kind thoughts of you."

It had started to turn around, but at

Hart's bellow of protest it swiveled back.

"Yes, good sir?"

"This - blanket - this thing I found.
What about it?"

"We make it."

"But it's alive and - "

The thing grinned a murderous grin.
"You so clever people. You think it up.
Many times ago."

"That story!"

"Quite so. We read of it. We make it. Very good idea."

"You can't mean you actually - "

"We biologist. What you call them - biologic engineers."

It turned about and started down the hall.

Hart howled after it. "Just a minute! Hold up there! Just a min - "

But it was going fast and it didn't stop. Hart thundered after it. When he reached the head of the stairs and glanced down it was out of sight. But he

raced after it, taking the stairs three at a time in defiance of all the laws of safety.

He didn't catch it. In the street outside he pulled to a halt and looked in all directions but there was no sign of it. It had completely disappeared.

He reached into his pocket and felt the roll of bills he had caught on the fly. He pulled the roll out and it was bigger than he remembered it. He snapped off the rubber band, and examined a few of the bills separately. The denomination on the top bill, in galactic credits, was so big it staggered him. He riffled through the entire sheaf of bills and all the denominations seemed to be the

same.

He gasped at the thought of it, and riffled through them once again. He had been right the first time - all the denominations _were_ the same. He did a bit of rapid calculation and it was strictly unbelievable. In credits, too - and a credit was convertible, roughly, into five Earth dollars.

He had seen credits before, but never actually held one in his hand. They were the currency of galactic trade and were widely used in interstellar banking circles, but seldom drifted down into general circulation. He held them in his hand and took a good look at them and

they sure were beautiful.

The being must have immeasurably prized that blanket, he thought - to give him such a fabulous sum simply for taking care of it. Although, when you came to think of it, it wasn't necessarily so. Standards of wealth differed greatly from one planet to another and the fortune he held in his hands might have been little more than pocket money to the blanket's owner.

He was surprised to find that he wasn't too thrilled or happy, as he should have been. All he seemed to be able to think about was that he'd lost the blanket.

He thrust the bills into his pocket and walked across the street to the little park. Doc was awake and sitting on a bench underneath a tree. Hart sat down beside him.

"How you feeling, Doc?" he asked.

"I'm feeling all right, son," the old man replied.

"Did you see an alien, like a spider wearing snowshoes?"

"There was one of them here just a while ago. It was here when I woke up. It wanted to know about that thing you'd

found."

"And you told it."

"Sure. Why not? It said it was hunting for it. I figured you'd be glad to get it off your hands."

The two of them sat silently for a while.

Then Hart asked, "Doc, what would you do if you had about a billion bucks?"

"Me," said Doc, without the slightest hesitation, "I'd drink myself to death. Yes, sir, I'd drink myself to death real fancy, not on any of this rotgut they

sell in this end of town."

And that was the way it went, thought Hart. Doc would drink himself to death. Angela would go in for arty salons and the latest styles. Jasper more than likely would buy a place out in the mountains where he could be away from people.

And me, thought Hart, what will I do with a billion bucks - give or take a million?

Yesterday, last night, up until a couple of hours ago, he would have traded in his soul on the Classic yarner.

But now it seemed all sour and offbeat.

For there was a better way - the way of symbiosis, the teaming up of Man and an alien biologic concept.

He remembered the grove with its Gothic trees and its sense of foreverness and even yet, in the brightness of the sun, he shivered at the thought of the thing of beauty that had appeared among the trees.

That was, he told himself, a surely better way to write - to know the thing yourself and write it, to live the yarn and write it.

But he had lost the blanket and he didn't know where to find another. He didn't even know, if he found the place they came from, what he'd have to do to capture it.

An alien biologic concept, and yet not entirely alien, for it had first been thought of by an unknown man six centuries before. A man who had written as Jasper wrote even in this day, hunched above a table, scribbling out the words he put together in his brain. No yarner there - no tapes, no films, none of the other gadgets. But even so that unknown man had reached across the mists of time and space to touch another

unknown mind and the life blanket had come alive as surely as if Man himself had made it.

And was that the true greatness of the human race - that they could imagine something and in time it would be so?

And if that were the greatness, could Man afford to delegate it to the turning shaft, the spinning wheel, the clever tubes, the innards of machines?

"You wouldn't happen," asked Doc, "to have a dollar on your'

"No," said Hart, "I haven't got a dollar."

"You're just like the rest of us," said Doc. "You dream about the billions and you haven't got a dime."

Jasper was a rebel and it wasn't worth it. All the rebels ever got were the bloody noses and the broken heads.

"I sure could use a buck," said Doc.

It wasn't worth it to Jasper Hansen and it wasn't worth it to the others who must also lock their doors and polish up their never-used machines, so that when someone happened to drop in they'd see them standing there.

__And it isn't worth it to me__, Kemp Hart told himself. Not when by continuing to conform he could become famous almost automatically and virtually overnight.

He put his hand into his pocket and felt the roll of bills and knew that in just a little while he'd go uptown and buy that wonderful machine. There was plenty in the roll to buy it. With what there was in that roll he could buy a shipload of them.

"Yes, sir," said Doc harking back to his answer to the billion dollar question. "It would be a pleasant death. A pleasant death, indeed."

A gang of workmen were replacing the broken window when Hart arrived at the uptown showroom, but he scarcely more than glanced at them and walked straight inside.

The same salesman seemed to materialize from thin air.

But he wasn't happy. His expression was stern and a little pained.

"You've come back, no doubt," he said, "to place an order for the Classic."

"That is right," said Hart and pulled the roll out of his pocket.

The salesman was well-trained. He stood walleyed for just a second, then recovered his composure with a speed which must have set a record.

"That's fine," he said. "I knew you'd be back. I was telling some of the other men this morning that you would be coming in."

I just bet you were, thought Hart.

"I suppose," he said, "that if I paid you cash you would consider throwing in a rather generous supply of tapes and

films and some of the other stuff I need."

"Certainly, sir. I'll do the best I can for you."

Hart peeled off twenty-five thousand and put the rest back in his pocket.

"Won't you have a seat," the salesman urged. "I'll be right back. I'll arrange delivery and fix up the guarantee...,"

"Take your time," Hart told him, enjoying every minute of it.

He sat down in a chair and did a

little planning. First he'd have to move to better quarters and as soon as he had moved he'd have a dinner for the crowd and he'd rub Jasper's nose in it. He'd certainly do it - if Jasper wasn't tucked away in jail. He chuckled to himself, thinking of Jasper cringing in the basement of the Bright Star bar.

And this very afternoon he'd go over to Irving's office and pay him back the twenty and explain how it was he couldn't find the time to write the stuff he wanted.

Not that he wouldn't have liked to help Irving out.

But it would be sacrilege to write the kind of junk that Irving wanted on a machine as talented as the Classic.

He heard footsteps coming hurriedly across the floor behind him and he stood up and turned around, smiling at the salesman.

But the salesman wasn't smiling. He was close to apoplexy.

"You!" said the salesman, choking just a little in his attempt to remain a gentleman. "That money! We've had enough from you, young man."

"The money," said Hart. "Why, it's

galactic credits. It..."

"It's play money," stormed the salesman. "Money for the kids. Play money from the Draconian federation. It says so, right on the face of it. In those big characters."

He handed Hart the money.

"Get out of here!" the salesman shouted.

"But," Hart pleaded, "are you sure? It can't be! You must be mistaken - "

"Our teller says it is. He has to be an expert on all sorts of money and _he

says it is!_

"But you took it. You couldn't tell the difference."

"I can't read Draconian. But the teller can."

"That damn alien!" shouted Hart in sudden fury. "Just let me get my hands on him!"

The salesman softened just a little.

"You can't trust those aliens, sir. They are a sneaky lot..."

"Get out of my way," Hart shouted.

"I'vee got to find that alien!"

The man at the Alien bureau wasn't very helpful.

"We have no record," he told Hart, "of the kind of creature you describe. You wouldn't have a photo of it, would you?"

"No," said Hart. "I haven't got a photo."

The man started piling up the catalogs he had been looking through.

"Of course," he said, "the fact we have no record of him doesn't mean a

thing. Admittedly, we can't keep track of all the various people. There are so many of them and new ones all the time. Perhaps you might inquire at the spaceport. Someone might have seen your alien."

"I've already done that. Nothing. Nothing at all. He must have come in and possibly have gone back, but no one can remember him. Or maybe they won't tell."

"The aliens hang together," said the man. "They don't tell you nothing."

He went on stacking up the books. It was near to quitting time and he was

anxious to be off.

The man said, jokingly, "You might go out in space and try to hunt him up."

"I might do just that," said Hart and left, slamming the door behind him.

Joke: You might go out in space and find him. You might go out and track him across ten thousand light-years and among a million stars. And when you found him you might say I want to have a blanket and he'd laugh right in your face.

But by the time you'd tracked him across ten thousand light-years and among a million stars you'd no longer

need a blanket, for you would have lived your stories and you would have seen your characters and you would have absorbed ten thousand backgrounds and a million atmospheres.

And you'd need no yarker and no tapes and films, for the words would be pulsing at your fingertips and pounding in your brain, shrieking to get out.

Joke: Toss a backwoods yokel a fistful of play money for something worth a million. The fool wouldn't know the difference until he tried to spend it. Be a big shot cheap and then go off in a corner by yourself and die laughing at how superior you are.

And who had it been that said
humans were the only liars?

Joke: Wear a blanket around your
shoulders and send your ships to Earth
for the drivel that they write there -
never knowing, never guessing that you
have upon your back the very thing that's
needed to break Earth's monopoly on
fiction.

__And that__, said Hart, __is a joke on
you.__

__If I ever find you, I'll cram it down
your throat.__

Angela came up the stairs bearing an offering of peace. She set the kettle on the table. "Some soup," she said. "I'm good at making soup."

"Thanks, Angela," he said. "I forgot to eat today."

"Why the knapsack, Kemp? Going on a hiker?"

"No, going on vacation."

"But you didn't tell me."

"I just now made up my mind to go."

A little while ago."

"I'm sorry I was so angry at you. It turned out all right. Green Shirt and his gang made their getaway."

"So Jasper can come out."

"He's already out. He's plenty sore at you."

"That's all right with me. I'm no pal of his." She sat down in a chair and watched him pack. "Where are you going, Kemp?"

"I'm hunting for an alien."

"Here in the city? Kemp, you'll never find him."

"Not in the city. I'll have to ask around."

"But there aren't any aliens - "

"That's right."

"You're a crazy fool," she cried.
"You can't do it, Kemp. I won't let you.
How will you live? What will you do?"

"I'll write."

"Write? You can't write! Not without a yarner."

"I'll write by hand. Indecent as it may be, I'll write by hand because I'll know the things I write about. It'll be in my blood and at my fingertips. I'll have the smell of it and the color of it and the taste of it!"

She leaped from the chair and beat at his chest with tiny fists.

"It's filthy! It's uncivilized! It's - "

"That's the way they wrote before. All the millions of stories, all the great ideas, all the phrases that you love to quote. And that is the way it should have stayed. This is a dead-end street we're

on."

"You'll come back," she said.

"You'll find that you are wrong and you'll come back."

He shook his head at her. "Not until I find my alien."

"It isn't any alien you are after. It is something else. I can see it in you."

She whirled around and raced out the door and down the stairs.

He went back to his packing and when he had finished, he sat down and ate the soup. Angela, he thought, was

right. She was good at making soup.

And she was right in another thing as well. It was no alien he was seeking.

For he didn't need an alien. And he didn't need a blanket and he didn't need a yarner.

He took the kettle to the sink and washed it beneath the tap and dried it carefully. Then he set it in the center of the table where Angela, when she came, would be sure to see it.

Then he took up the knapsack and started slowly down the stairs.

He had reached the street when he heard the cry behind him. It was Angela and she was running after him. He stopped and waited for her.

"I'm going with you, Kemp."

"You don't know what you're saying. It'll be rough and hard. Strange lands and alien people. And we haven't any money."

"Yes, we have. We have that fifty. The one I tried to loan you. It's all I have and it won't go far, I know. But we have it."

"You're looking for no alien."

"Yes, I am. I'm looking for an alien, too. All of us, I think, are looking for your alien."

He reached out an arm and swept her roughly to him, held her close against him.

"Thank you, Angela," he said.

Hand in hand they headed for the spaceport, looking for a ship that would take them to the stars.

Subject: TXT Flood - [130/157] -
Simak - The Thing in the Stone.txt (1/1)

Date: Wed, 04 Jul 2001 17:49:00
GMT

From: fordpref@nospam.home.com
(remove nospam) (FordPref)

Organization: Excite@Home - The
Leader in Broadband

<http://home.com/faster>

Newsgroups: alt.binaries.e-book.flood

Title : The Thing in the Stone

Author : Clifford D. Simak

Original copyright year: 1970

Genre : science fiction

Comments : to my knowledge, this is the only available e-text of this book

Source : scanned and OCR-read from a paperback edition with Xerox TextBridge

Pro 9.0, proofread in MS Word 2000.

Date of e-text : February 21, 2000

Prepared by : Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 2000. All rights

reversed.

The Thing in the Stone

Clifford D. Simak

1

He walked the hills and knew what the hills had seen through geologic time. He listened to the stars and spelled out what the stars were saying.

He had found the creature that lay imprisoned in the stone. He had climbed the tree that in other days had been climbed by homing wildcats to reach the

den gouged by time and weather out of the cliff's sheer face. He lived alone on a worn-out farm perched on a high and narrow ridge that overlooked the confluence of two rivers. And his next-door neighbor, a most ill-favored man, drove to the county seat, thirty miles away, to tell the sheriff that this reader of the hills, this listener to the stars was a chicken thief.

The sheriff dropped by within a week or so and walked across the yard to where the man was sitting in a rocking chair on a porch that faced the river hills. The sheriff came to a halt at the foot of the stairs that ran up to

the porch.

'I'm Sheriff Harley Shepherd,' he said. 'I was just driving by. Been some years since I been out in this neck of the woods. You are new here, aren't you?'

The man rose to his feet and gestured at another chair. 'Been here three years or so,' he said. 'The name is Wallace Daniels. Come up and sit with me.'

The sheriff climbed the stairs and the two shook hands, then sat down in the chairs.

'You don't farm the place,' the sheriff said.

The weed-grown fields came up to the fence that hemmed in the yard.

Daniels shook his head.

'Subsistence farming, if you can call it that. A

few chickens for eggs. A couple of cows for milk and butter. Some hogs for meat -- the neighbors help me butcher. A garden of course, but that's about the story.'

'Just as well,' the sheriff said. 'The place is all played out. Old Amos

Williams, he let it go to ruin. He never was no farmer.'

'The land is resting now,' said Daniels. 'Give it ten years -- twenty might be better -- and it will be ready once again. The only things it's good for now are the rabbits and the woodchucks and the meadow mice. A lot of birds, of course. I've got the finest covey of quail a man has ever seen.'

'Used to be good squirrel country,' said the sheriff. 'Coon, too. I suppose you still have coon. You have a hunter, Mr. Daniels?'

'I don't own a gun,' said Daniels.

The sheriff settled deeply into the chair, rocking gently.

'Pretty country out here,' he declared. 'Especially with the leaves turning colors. A lot of hardwood and they are colorful. Rough as hell, of course, this land of yours. Straight up and down, the most of it. But pretty.'

'It's old country,' Daniels said. 'The last sea retreated from this area more than four hundred million years ago. It has stood as dry land since the

end of the Silurian. Unless you go up north, on to the Canadian Shield, there aren't many places in this country you can find as old as this.'

'You a geologist, Mr. Daniels?'

'Not really. Interested, is all. The rankest amateur. I need something to fill my time and I do a lot of hiking, scrambling up and down these hills. And you can't do that without coming face to face with a lot of geology. I got interested. Found some fossil brachiopods and got to wondering about them. Sent off for some books and read up on them. One thing

led to another and -- '

'Brachiopods? Would they be dinosaurs, or what? I never knew there were dinosaurs out this way.'

'Not dinosaurs,' said Daniels. 'Earlier than dinosaurs, at least the ones I found. They're small. Something like clams or oysters. But the shells are hinged in a different sort of way. These were old ones, extinct millions of years ago. But we still have a few brachiopods living now. Not too many of them.'

'It must be interesting.'

'I find it so,' said Daniels.

'You knew old Amos Williams?'

'No. He was dead before I came here. Bought the land from the bank that was settling his estate.'

'Queer old coot,' the sheriff said.
'Fought with all his neighbors.

Especially with Ben Adams. Him and Ben had a line fence feud going on for years. Ben said Amos refused to keep up the fence. Amos claimed Ben knocked

it down and then sort of, careless-like,

hazed his cattle over into Amos's
hayfield. How you get along with
Ben?'

'All right,' Daniels said. 'No
trouble. I scarcely know the man.'

'Ben don't do much farming, either,'
said the sheriff. Hunts and fishes,
hunts ginseng, does some trapping in
the winter. Prospects for minerals now
and then.'

'There are minerals in these hills,'
said Daniels. 'Lead and zinc. But
it would cost more to get it out than it
would be worth. At present prices,
that is.'

'Ben always has some scheme cooking.' said the sheriff. 'Always off on some wild goose chase. And he's a pure pugnacious man. Always has his nose

out of joint about something. Always on the prod for trouble. Bad man to have for an enemy. Was in the other day to say someone's been lifting a hen or two of his. You haven't been missing any, have you?'

Daniels grinned. 'There's a fox that levies a sort of tribute on the coop every now and then. I don't begrudge them to him.'

'Funny thing,' the sheriff said.

'There ain't nothing can rile up a farmer like a little chicken stealing. It don't amount to shucks, of course, but they get real hostile at it.'

'If Ben has been losing chickens,' Daniels said, 'more than likely the culprit is my fox.'

'Your fox? You talk as if you own him.'

'Of course I don't. No one owns a fox. But he lives in these hills with me. I figure we are neighbours. I see him every now and then and watch him. Maybe that means I own a piece of

him. Although I wouldn't be surprised if he watches me more than I watch him. He moves quicker than I do.'

The sheriff heaved himself out of the chair.

'I hate to go,' he said. 'I declare it has been restful sitting here and talking with you and looking at the hills. You look at them a lot, I take it.'

'Quite a lot,' said Daniels.

He sat on the porch and watched the sheriff's car top the rise far down the ridge and disappear from sight.

What had it all been about? he wondered. The sheriff hadn't just happened to be passing by. He'd been on an errand. All this aimless, friendly talk had not been for nothing and in the course of it he'd managed to ask lots of questions.

Something about Ben Adams, maybe? Except there wasn't too much against

Adams except he was bone-lazy. Lazy in a weasely sort of way. Maybe the sheriff had got wind of Adams' off-and-on moonshining operation and was out

to do some checking, hoping that some

neighbor might misspeak himself. None of them would, of course, for it was none of their business, really, and the moonshining had built up no nuisance value. What little liquor Ben might make didn't amount to much. He was too lazy for anything he did to amount to much.

From far down the hill he heard the tinkle of a bell. The two cows were finally heading home. It must be much later, Daniels told himself, than he had thought. Not that he paid much attention to what time it was. He hadn't for long months on end, ever since he'd smashed his watch when he'd fallen off the ledge. He had never bothered

to have the watch fixed. He didn't need a watch. There was a battered old alarm clock in the kitchen but it was an erratic piece of mechanism and not to be relied upon. He paid slight attention to it.

In a little while, he thought, he'd have to rouse himself and go and do the chores -- milk the cows, feed the hogs and chickens, gather up the eggs.

Since the garden had been laid by there hadn't been much to do. One of these

days he'd have to bring in the squashes and store them in the cellar and there were those three or four big pumpkins he'd have to lug down the

hollow

to the Perkins kids, so they'd have them in time to make jack-o-lanterns for Halloween. He wondered if he should carve out the faces himself or if the kids would rather do it on their own.

But the cows were still quite a distance away and he still had time. He sat easy in his chair and stared across the hills.

And they began to shift and change as he stared.

When he had first seen it, the phenomenon had scared him silly. But now

he was used to it.

As he watched, the hills changed into different ones. Different vegetation and strange life stirred on them.

He saw dinosaurs this time. A herd of them, not very big ones. Middle Triassic, more than likely. And this time it was only a distant view -- he himself was not to become involved. He would only see, from a distance, what ancient time was like and would not be thrust into the middle of it as most often was the case.

He was glad. There were chores to do.

Watching, he wondered once again what more he could do. It was not the dinosaurs that concerned him, nor the earlier amphibians, nor all the other creatures that moved in time about the hills.

What disturbed him was that other being that lay buried deep beneath the Platteville limestone.

Someone else should know about it. The knowledge of it should be kept alive so that in the days to come -- perhaps in another hundred years --

when man's technology had reached the point where it was possible to cope with such a problem, something could be done to contact -- and perhaps to free -- the dweller in the stone.

There would be a record, of course, a written record. He would see to

that. Already that record was in progress -- a week by week (at times a day

to day) account of what he had seen, heard and learned. Three large record books now were filled with his careful writing and another one was well

started. All written down as honestly

and as carefully and as objectively as he could bring himself to do it.

But who would believe what he had written? More to the point, who would

bother to look at it? More than likely the books would gather dust on some hidden shelf until the end of time with no human hand ever laid upon them.

And even if someone, in some future time, should take them down and read them, first blowing away the accumulated dust, would he or she be likely to believe?

The answer lay clear. He must

convince someone. Words written by a man

long dead -- and by a man of no reputation -- could be easily dismissed as

the product of a neurotic mind. But if some scientist of solid reputation could be made to listen, could be made to endorse the record, the events that paraded across the hills and lay within them could stand on solid ground, worthy of full investigation at some future date.

A biologist? Or a neuropsychiatrist? Or a paleontologist?

Perhaps it didn't matter what branch

of science the man was in. Just so
he'd listen without laughter. It was
most important that he listen without
laughter.

Sitting on the porch, staring at the
hills dotted with grazing
dinosaurs, the listener to the stars
remembered the time he had gone to see
the paleontologist.

'Ben,' the sheriff said. 'you're way
out in left field. That Daniels
fellow wouldn't steal no chickens.
He's got chickens of his own.'

'The question is,' said Adams, 'how
did he get them chickens?'

'That makes no sense,' the sheriff said. 'He's a gentleman. You can tell that just by talking with him. An educated gentleman.'

'If he's a gentleman,' asked Adams, 'what's he doing out here? This ain't no place for gentlemen. He showed up two or three years ago and moved out to this place. Since that day he hasn't done a tap of work. All he does is wander up and down the hills.'

'He's a geologist,' said the sheriff. 'Or anyway interested in geology. A sort of hobby with him. He tells me

he looks for fossils.'

Adams assumed the alert look of a dog that has sighted a rabbit. 'So that is it,' he said. 'I bet you it ain't fossils he is looking for.'

'No,' the sheriff said.

'He's looking for minerals,' said Adams. 'He's prospecting, that's what he's doing. These hills crawl with minerals. All you have to do is know where to look.'

'You've spent a lot of time looking,' observed the sheriff. 'I ain't no geologist. A geologist would have a

big advantage. He would know rocks and such.'

'He didn't talk as if he were doing any prospecting. Just interested in the geology, is all. He found some fossil clams.'

'He might be looking for treasure caves,' said Adams. 'He might have a map or something.'

'You know damn well,' the sheriff said, 'there are no treasure caves.'

'There must be,' Adams insisted. 'The French and Spanish were here in

the early days. They were great ones for treasure, the French and Spanish.

Always running after mines. Always hiding things in caves. There was that cave over across the river where they found a skeleton in Spanish armour and the skeleton of a bear beside him, with a rusty sword stuck into where the bear's gizzard was.'

'That was just a story,' said the sheriff, disgusted. 'Some damn fool started it and there was nothing to it. Some people from the university came out and tried to run it down. It developed that there wasn't a word of truth in it.'

'But Daniels has been messing around with caves,' said Adams. 'I've seen

him. He spends a lot of time in that cave down on Cat Den Point. Got to climb a tree to get to it.'

'You been watching him?'

'Sure I been watching him. He's up to something and I want to know what it is.'

'Just be sure he doesn't catch you doing it,' the sheriff said.

Adams chose to let the matter pass.

'Well, anyhow,' he said, 'if there aren't any treasure caves, there's a lot of lead and zinc. The man who finds it is about to make a million.'

'Not unless he can find the capital to back him,' the sheriff pointed out.

Adams dug at the ground with his heel. 'You think he's all right, do you?'

'He tells me he's been losing some chickens to a fox. More than likely that's what has been happening to yours.'

'If a fox is taking his chickens,'
Adams asked, 'why don't he shoot it?'

'He isn't sore about it. He seems to
think the fox has got a right to.

He hasn't even got a gun.'

'Well, if he hasn't got a gun and
doesn't care to hunt himself -- then
why won't he let other people hunt?
He won't let me and my boys on his
place

with a gun. He has his place all
posted. That seems to me to be
un-neighborly. That's one of the things
that makes it so hard to get along
with him. We've always hunted on that
place. Old Amos wasn't an easy man to

get along with but he never cared if we did some hunting. We've always hunted all around here. No one ever minded. Seems to me hunting should be free. Seems right for a man to hunt wherever he's a mind to.'

Sitting on the bench on the hard-packed earth in front of the ramshackle house, the sheriff looked about him -- at the listlessly scratching chickens, at the scrawny hound sleeping in the shade, its hide twitching against the few remaining flies, at the clothes-line strung between two trees and loaded with drying clothes and dish towels, at the washtub balanced on its edge on a wash bench

leaning against the side of the house.

Christ, he thought, the man should be able to find the time to put up a decent clothes-line and not just string a rope between two trees.

'Ben,' he said, 'you're just trying to stir up trouble. You resent

Daniels, a man living on a farm who doesn't work at farming, and you're sore because he won't let you hunt his land. He's got a right to live anywhere he wants to and he's got a right not to let you hunt. I'd lay off him if I were you. You don't have to like him, you don't have to have anything to do with him -- but don't go around spreading

fake accusations against the man. He could jerk you up in court for that.'

2

He had walked into the paleontologist's office and it had taken him a

moment fully to see the man seated toward the back of the room at a cluttered desk. The entire place was cluttered. There were long tables covered with chunks of rock with embedded fossils, Scattered here and there

were stacks of papers. The room was large and badly lighted. It was a dingy and depressing place.

'Doctor?' Daniels had asked. 'Are you Dr. Thorne?'

The man rose and deposited a pipe in a cluttered ashtray. He was big, burly, with graying hair that had a wild look to it. His face was seamed and weather-beaten. When he moved he shuffled like a bear.

'You must be Daniels,' he said. 'Yes, I see you must be. I had you on my calendar for three o'clock. So glad you could come,'

His great paw engulfed Daniel's hand. He pointed to a chair beside the

desk, sat down and retrieved his pipe from the overflowing tray, began packing it from a large canister that stood on the desk.

'Your letter said you wanted to see me about something important,' he said. 'But then that's what they all say. But there must have been something about your letter -- an urgency, a sincerity. I haven't the time, you understand, to see everyone who writes. All of them have found something, you see. What is it, Mr. Daniels, that you have found?'

Daniels said, 'Doctor, I don't quite

know how to start what I have to say. Perhaps it would be best to tell you first that something had happened to my brain.'

Thorne was lighting his pipe. He talked around the stem. 'In such a case, perhaps I am not the man you should be talking to. There are other people -- '

'No, that's not what I mean,' said Daniels. 'I'm not seeking help. I am quite all right physically and mentally, too. About five years ago I was in a highway accident. My wife and daughter were killed and I was badly hurt

and -- '

'I am sorry, Mr. Daniels.'

'Thank you -- but that is all in the past. It was rough for a time but I muddled through it. That's not what I'm here for. I told you I was badly hurt -- '

'Brain damage?'

'Only minor. Or so far as the medical findings are concerned. Very minor

damage that seemed to clear up rather soon. The bad part was the crushed chest and punctured lung.'

'But you're all right now?'

'As good as new,' said Daniels.

'But since the accident my brain's been different. As if I had new senses. I see things, understand things that seem impossible.'

'You mean you have hallucinations?'

'Not hallucinations. I am sure of that. I can see the past.'

'How do you mean -- see the past?'

'Let me try to tell you,' Daniels

said. 'exactly how it started. Several years ago I bought an abandoned farm in south-western Wisconsin. A place to hole up in, a place to hide away. With my wife and daughter gone I still was recoiling from the world. I had got through the first brutal shock but I needed a place where I could lick my wounds. If this sounds like self-pity -- I don't mean it that way. I am trying to be objective about why I acted as I did, why I bought the farm.'

'Yes. I understand,' said Thorne. 'But I'm not entirely sure hiding was the wisest thing to do.'

'Perhaps not, but it seemed to me

the answer. It has worked out rather well. I fell in love with the country. That part of Wisconsin is ancient land. It has stood uncovered by the sea for four hundred million years. For some reason it was not overridden by the Pleistocene glaciers. It has changed, of course, but only as the result of weathering. There have been no great geologic upheavals, no massive erosions -- nothing to disturb it.'

'Mr. Daniels,' said Thorne, somewhat testily, 'I don't quite see what this has to do -- '

'I'm sorry. I am just trying to lay the background for what I came to

tell you. It came on rather slowly at first and I thought that I was crazy, that I was seeing things, that there had been more brain damage than had been apparent -- or that I was finally cracking up. I did a lot of walking in the hills, you see. The country is wild and rugged and beautiful -- a good place to be out in. The walking made me tired and I could sleep at night. But at times the hills changed. Only a little at first. Later on they changed more and finally they became places I had never seen before, that no one had ever seen before.'

Thorne scowled. 'You are trying to tell me they changed into the past.'

Daniels nodded. 'Strange vegetation, funny-looking trees. In the earlier

times, of course, no grass at all. Underbrush of ferns and scouring rushes.

Strange animals, strange things in the sky. Saber-tooth cats and mastodons, pterosaurs and uinatheres and -- '

'All at the same time?' Thorne asked, interrupting. 'All mixed up?'

'Not at all. The time periods I see seem to be true time periods.

Nothing out of place. I didn't know at first -- but when I was able to convince myself that I was not

hallucinating I sent away for books. I studied. I'll never be an expert, of course -- never a geologist or paleontologist -- but I learned enough to distinguish one period from another, to have some idea of what I was looking at.'

Thorne took his pipe out of his mouth and perched it in the ashtray. He ran a massive hand through his wild hair.

'It's unbelievable,' he said. 'It simply couldn't happen. You said all this business came on rather slowly?'

'To begin with it was hazy, the past

foggily imposed upon the present,
then the present would slowly fade
and the past came in, real and solid. But
it's different now. Once in a while
there's a bit of flickering as the
present gives way to the past -- but
mostly it simply changes, as if at the
snap of a finger. The present goes
away and I'm standing in the past. The
past is all around me. Nothing of the
present is left.'

'But you aren't really in the past?
Physically, I mean.'

'There are times when I'm not in it
at all. I stand in the present and
the distant hills or the river valley

changes. But ordinarily it changes all around me, although the funny thing about it is that, as you say, I'm not really in it. I can see it and it seems real enough for me to walk around in it. I can walk over to a tree and put my hand out to feel it and the tree is there, But I seem to make no impact on the past. It's as if I were not there at all. The animals do not see me. I've walked up to within a few feet of dinosaurs. They can't see me or hear or smell me. If they had I'd have been dead a dozen times. It's as if I were walking through a three-dimensional movie. At first I worried a lot about the surface differences that might exist. I'd wake up dreaming of going

into the past and being buried up to my waist in a rise of ground that since has eroded away. But it doesn't work that way. I'm walking along in the present and then I'm walking in the past. It's as if a door were there and I stepped through it. I told you I don't really seem to be in the past -- but I'm not in the present, either. I tried to get some proof. I took a camera with me and shot a lot of pictures. When the films were developed there was nothing on them. Not the past -- but what is more important, not the present, either. If I had been hallucinating, the camera should have caught pictures of the present. But apparently there was nothing there for the camera to take. I

thought maybe the camera failed or I had the wrong kind of film. So I tried several cameras and different types of film and nothing happened. I got no pictures. I tried bringing something back. I picked flowers, after there were flowers. I had no trouble picking them but when I came back to the present I was empty-handed. I tried to bring back other things as well. I thought maybe it was only live things, like flowers, that I couldn't bring, so I tried inorganic things -- like rocks -- but I never was able to bring anything back.'

'How about a sketch pad?'

'I thought of that but I never used one. I'm no good at sketching -- besides, I figured, what was the use? The pad would come back blank.'

'But you never tried.'

'No,' said Daniels. 'I never tried. Occasionally I do make sketches after I get back to the present. Not every time but sometimes. From memory.'

But, as I said, I'm not very good at sketching.'

'I don't know,' said Thorne. 'I don't really know. This all sounds incredible. But if there should be

something to it -- Tell me, were you ever frightened? You seem quite calm and matter-of-fact about it now, but at first you must have been frightened.'

'At first,' said Daniels, 'I was petrified. Not only was I scared, physically scared -- frightened for my safety, frightened that I'd fallen into a place from which I never could escape -- but also afraid that I'd gone insane. And there was the loneliness.'

'What do you mean -- loneliness?'

'Maybe that's not the right word. Out of place. I was where I had no

right to be. Lost in a place where man had not as yet appeared and would not appear for millions of years. In a world so utterly alien that I wanted to hunker down and shiver. But I, not the place, was really the alien there. I still get some of that feeling every now and then. I know about it, of course, and am braced against it, but at times it still gets to me. I'm a stranger to the air and the light of that other time -- it's all imagination, of course.'

'Not necessarily,' said Thorne.

'But the greatest fear is gone now, entirely gone. The fear I was

insane. I am convinced now.'

'How are you convinced? How could a man be convinced?'

'The animals. The creatures I see --

'You mean you recognize them from the illustrations in these books you have been reading.'

'No, not that. Not entirely that. Of course the pictures helped. But actually it's the other way around. Not the likeness, but the differences.

You see, none of the creatures are exactly like the pictures in the books.

Some of them not at all like them. Not like the reconstruction the paleontologists put together. If they had been I might still have thought they were hallucinations, that what I was seeing was influenced by what I'd seen or read. I could have been feeding my imagination on prior knowledge.

But since that was not the case, it seemed logical to assume that what I see is real. How could I imagine that Tyrannosaurus had dewlaps all the colors

of the rainbow? How could I imagine that some of the saber-tooths had tassels on their ears? How could anyone possibly imagine that the big

thunder beasts of the Eocene had hides as colorful as giraffes?'

'Mr. Daniels,' said Thorne, 'I have great reservations about all that you have told me, Every fiber of my training rebels against it. I have a feeling that I should waste no time on it. Undoubtedly, you believe what you have told me. You have the look of an honest man about you. Have you talked to any other men about this? Any other paleontologists or geologists? Perhaps a neuropsychiatrist?'

'No,' said Daniels. 'You're the only person, the only man I have talked with. And I haven't told you all of it.'

This is really all just background.'

'My God, man -- just background?'

'Yes, just background. You see, I also listen to the stars.' Thorne got up from his chair, began shuffling together a stack of papers. He retrieved the dead pipe from the ashtray and stuck it in his mouth.

His voice, when he spoke, was noncommittal.

'Thank you for coming in,' he said. 'It's been most interesting.'

And that was where he had made his mistake. Daniels told himself. He never should have mentioned listening to the stars. His interview had gone well until he had. Thorne had not believed him, of course, but he had been intrigued, would have listened further, might even have pursued the matter, although undoubtedly secretly and very cautiously.

At fault, Daniels knew, had been his obsession with the creature in the stone. The past was nothing -- it was the creature in the stone that was important and to tell of it, to explain it and how he knew that it was

there, he must tell about his listening to the stars.

He should have known better, he told himself. He should have held his tongue. But here had been a man who, while doubting, still had been willing to listen without laughter, and in his thankfulness Daniels had spoken too much.

The wick of the oil lamp set upon the kitchen table guttered in the air currents that came in around the edges of the ill-fitting windows. A wind had risen after chores were done and now shook the house with gale-like blasts. On the far side of the room the

fire in the wood-burning stove threw friendly, wavering flares of light across the floor and the stovepipe, in response to the wind that swept the chimney top, made gurgling, sucking sounds.

Thorne had mentioned a neuropsychiatrist, Daniels remembered, and

perhaps that was the kind of man he should have gone to see. Perhaps before he attempted to interest anyone in what he could see or hear, he should make

an effort to find out why and how he could hear and see these things. A man who studied the working of the brain

and mind might come up with new answers

-- if answers were to be had.

Had that blow upon his head so rearranged, so shifted some process in his brain that he had gained new capabilities? Was it possible that his brain had been so jarred, so disarranged as to bring into play certain latent talents that possibly, in millennia to come, might have developed

naturally by evolutionary means? Had the brain damage short-circuited evolution and given him -- and him alone -- these capabilities, these senses, perhaps a million years ahead

of time?

It seemed -- well, not reasonable but one possible explanation. Still, a trained man might have some other explanation.

He pushed his chair back from the table and walked over to the stove. He used the lifter to raise the lid of the rickety old cook stove. The wood in the firebox had burned down to embers. Stooping, he picked up a stick of wood from the woodbox and fitted it in, added another smaller one and replaced the lid. One of these days soon, he told himself, he would have to

get the furnace in shape for operation.

He went out to stand on the porch, looking toward the river hills. The wind whooped out of the north, whistling around the corners of the building

and booming in the deep hollows that ran down to the river, but the sky was clear -- steely clear, wiped fresh by the wind and sprinkled with stars, their light shivering in the raging atmosphere.

Looking up at the stars, he wondered what they might be saying but he didn't try to listen. It took a lot of

effort and concentration to listen to
the stars. He had first listened to them
on a night like this, standing out
here on the porch and wondering what
they might be saying, wondering if the
stars did talk among themselves. A
foolish, vagrant thought, a wild,
daydreaming sort of notion, but,
voicing it, he had tried to listen, knowing
even as he did that it was foolishness
but glorying in his foolishness,
telling himself how fortunate he was
that he could afford to be so inane as
to try to listen to the stars -- as a child
might believe in Santa Claus or
the Easter Rabbit. He'd listened and
he'd heard and while he'd been
astonished, there could be no doubt

about it, no doubt at all that out there somewhere other beings were talking back and forth. He might have been listening in on a party line, he thought, but a party line that carried millions, perhaps billions, of long-distance conversations. Not words, of course, but something (thought, perhaps) that was as plain as words. Not all

of it understandable -- much of it, as a matter of fact, not understandable -- possibly because his background and his learning gave him no basis for an understanding. He compared himself to an Australian aborigine listening to the conversation of a couple of nuclear physicists discussing a new

theory.

Shortly after that, when he had been exploring the shallow cave down on Cat Den Point, he had picked up his first indication of the creature buried in the stone. Perhaps, he thought, if he'd not listened to the stars, if he'd not known he could listen to the stars, if he'd not trained his mind by listening, he would not have heard the creature buried deep beneath the limestone.

He stood looking at the stars and listening to the wind and, far across the river, on a road that wound over the distant hills, he caught the faint

glimmer of headlights as a car made its way through the night. The wind let up for a moment, as if gathering its strength to blow even harder and, in the tiny lull that existed before the wind took up again, he heard another sound -- the sound of an axe hitting wood. He listened carefully and the sound came again but so tossed about by the wind that he could not be sure of its direction.

He must be mistaken, he thought. No one would be out and chopping on a night like this. Coon hunters might be the answer. Coon hunters at times chopped down a tree to dislodge a prey too well hidden to be spotted. The

unsportsmanlike trick was one that Ben Adams and his overgrown, gangling sons might engage in. But this was no night for coon hunting. The wind would blow away scent and the dogs would be unable to track. Quiet nights were the best for hunting coon. And no one would be insane enough to cut down a tree

on a night like this when a swirling wind might catch it and topple it back upon the cutters.

He listened to catch the sound again but the wind, recovering from its lull, was blowing harder than ever now and there was no chance of hearing any sound smaller than the wind.

The next day came in mild and gray, the wind no more than a whisper.

Once in the night Daniels had awoken to hear it rattling the windows,

pounding at the house and howling mournfully in the tangled hollows that lay

above the river. But when he woke again all was quiet and faint light was graying the windows. Dressed and out of doors he found a land of peace --

the sky so overcast that there was no hint of sun, the air fresh, as if

newly washed but heavy with the moist grayness that overlay the land. The

autumn foliage that clothed the hills had taken on a richer luster than it

had worn in the flooding autumn sunlight.

After chores and breakfast Daniels set out for the hills. As he went down the slope towards the head of the first hollow he found himself hoping that the geologic shift would not come about today. There were many times it didn't and there seemed to be no reason to its taking place or its failure to take place. He had tried at times to find some reason for it, had made careful notes of how he felt or what he did, even the course he took when he went for his daily walk, but he had found no pattern. It lay, of course, somewhere in his brain -- something

triggered into operation his new capability. But the phenomenon was random and involuntary. He had no control

of it, no conscious control, at least. At times he had tried to use it, to

bring the geologic shift about -- in each case had failed. Either he did not know how to go about it or it was truly random.

Today, he hoped, his capability would not exercise its option, for he wanted to walk in the hills when they had assumed one of their most attractive moods, filled with gentle melancholy, all their harshness softened by the grayness of the

atmosphere, the trees standing silently
like

old and patient friends waiting for
one's coming, the fallen leaves and
forest mold so hushed footfalls made
no sound.

He went down to the head of the
hollow and sat on a fallen log beside a
gushing spring that sent a stream of
water tinkling down the boulder-strewn
creek bed. Here, in May, in the pool
below the spring, the marsh marigolds
had bloomed and the sloping hillsides
had been covered with the pastel of
hepaticas. But now he saw no sign of
either. The woods had battened down
for

winter. The summer and the autumn plants were either dead or dying, the drifting leaves interlocking on the forest floor to form cover against the ice and snow.

In this place, thought Daniels, a man walked with a season's ghosts.

This was the way it had been for a million years or more, although not always. During many millions of years, in a time long gone, these hills and

all the world had basked in an eternal summertime. And perhaps not a great deal more than ten thousand years before a mile-high wall of ice had reared

up not too far to the north, perhaps close enough for a man who stood where his house now sat to have seen the faint line of blueness that would have been the top of that glacial barrier. But even then, although the mean temperature would have been lower, there had still been seasons.

Leaving the log, Daniels went on down the hollow, following the narrow path that looped along the hillside, a cow-path beaten down at a time when there had been more cows at pasture in these woods than the two that Daniels owned. Following it, Daniels noted, as he had many times before, the excellent engineering sense of a cow.

Cows always chose the easiest grade in stamping out their paths.

He stopped barely beyond the huge white oak that stood at a bend in the path, to have a look at the outsize jack-in-the-pulpit plant he had observed throughout the years. Its green-purple hood had withered away completely, leaving only the scarlet fruit cluster which in the bitter months ahead would serve as food for birds.

As the path continued, it plunged deeper between the hills and here the silence deepened and the grayness thickened until one's world became private.

There, across the stream bed, was the den. Its yellow maw gaped beneath a crippled, twisted cedar. There, in the spring, he had watched baby foxes play. From far down the hollow came the distant quacking of ducks upon the pond in the river valley. And up on the steep hillside loomed Cat Den Point, the den carved by slow-working wind and weather out of the sheer rock of the cliff.

But something was wrong.

Standing on the path and looking up the hill, he could sense the wrongness, although he could not at

first tell exactly what it was. More of the cliff face was visible and something was missing. Suddenly he knew that

the tree was no longer there -- the tree that for years had been climbed by homing wildcats heading for the den after a night of prowling and later by humans like himself who wished to seek out the wildcat's den. The cats, of course, were no longer there -- had not been there for many years. In the pioneer days they had been hunted almost to extermination because at times they had exhibited the poor judgment of bringing down a lamb. But the evidence of their occupancy of the cave could still be found by anyone who

looked. Far back in the narrow recesses of the shallow cave tiny bones and

the fragmented skulls of small mammals gave notice of food brought home by the wildcats for their young.

The tree had been old and gnarled and had stood, perhaps, for several centuries and there would have been no sense of anyone's cutting it down, for it had no value as lumber, twisted as it was. And in any case to get it out of the woods would have been impossible. Yet, last night, when he had stepped out on the porch, he had seemed to hear in a lull in the wind the

sound of chopping -- and today the tree was gone.

Unbelieving, he scrambled up the slope as swiftly as he could. In places the slope of the wild hillside slanted at an angle so close to forty-five degrees that he went on hands and knees, clawing himself upward, driven by an illogical fear that had to do with more than simply a missing tree.

For it was in the cat den that one could hear the creature buried in the stone.

He could recall the day he first had

heard the creature and on that day
he had not believed his senses. For he
had been sure the sound came from his
own imagination, was born of his
walking with the dinosaurs and
eavesdropping on the stars. It had not
come the first time he had climbed
the tree to reach the cave-that-was-a-
den. He had been there several times
before, finding a perverse satisfaction
at discovering so unlikely a
retreat. He would sit on the ledge that
ran before the cave and stare over
the froth of treetop foliage that clothed
the plunging hillside, but
afforded a glimpse of the pond that lay
in the flood plain of the river. He
could not see the river itself -- one

must stand on higher ground to see the river.

He liked the cave and the ledge because it gave him seclusion, a place cut off from the world, where he still might see this restricted corner of the world but no one could see him. This same sense of being shut out from the world had appealed to the wildcats, he had told himself. And here, for them, not only was seclusion but safety -- and especially safety for their young. There was no way the den could be approached other than by climbing the tree.

He had first heard the creature when he had crawled into the deepest part of the shallow cave to marvel at the little heaps of bones and small shattered skulls where the wildcat kittens, perhaps a century before, had crouched and snarled at feast. Crouching where the baby wildcats once had crouched, he had felt the presence welling up at him, coming up to him from the depth of stone that lay far beneath him. Only the presence at first, only the knowing that something was down there. He had been skeptical at first, later on believing. In time belief

had become solid certainty.

He could record no words, of course, for he had never heard any actual sound. But the intelligence and the knowing came creeping through his body,

through his fingers spread flat upon the stone floor of the cave, through his knees, which also pressed the stone. He absorbed it without hearing and

the more he absorbed the more he was convinced that deep in the limestone, buried in one of the strata, an intelligence was trapped. And finally the time came when he could catch fragments of thoughts -- the edges of the

living in the sentience encysted in the rock.

What he heard he did not understand. This very lack of understanding was significant. If he had understood he would have put his discovery down to his imagination. As matters stood he had no knowledge that could possibly have served as a springboard to imagine the thing of which he was made aware. He caught an awareness of tangled life relationships which made no sense at all -- none of which could be understood, but which lay in tiny, tangled fragments of outrageous (yet simple) information no human mind

could

quite accept. And he was made to
know the empty hollowness of distances
so

vast that the mind reeled at the very
hint of them and of the naked

emptiness in which those distances
must lie. Even in his eavesdropping on
the stars he had never experienced
such devastating concepts of the

other-where-and-when. There was
other information, scraps and bits he
sensed

faintly that might fit into mankind's
knowledge. But he never found enough
to discover the proper slots for their
insertion into the mass of mankind's
knowledge. The greater part of what

he sensed, however, was simply beyond his grasp and perhaps beyond the grasp of any human. But even so his mind

would catch and hold it in all its incomprehensibility and it would lie there festering amid his human thoughts.

They were or it was, he knew, not trying to talk with him -- undoubtedly they (or it) did not know that such a thing as a man existed, let alone himself. But whether the creature (or creatures -- he found the collective singular easier) simply was thinking or might, in its loneliness, be talking to itself -- or whether it might be

trying to communicate with something other than himself, he could not determine.

Thinking about it, sitting on the ledge before the cave, he had tried to make some logic of his find, had tried to find a way in which the creature's presence might be best explained. And while he could not be sure of it -- in fact, had no data whatsoever to bolster his belief -- he came to think that in some far geologic day when a shallow sea had lain upon this land, a ship from space had fallen into the sea to be buried deeply in the mud that in later millennia had hardened into

limestone. In this manner the ship had become entrapped and so remained to this very day. He realized his reasoning held flaws -- for one thing, the pressure involved in the fashioning of the

stone must have been so great as to have crushed and flattened any ship unless it should be made of some material far beyond the range of man's technology.

Accident, he wondered, or a way of hiding? Trapped or planned? He had no way of knowing and further speculation was ridiculous, based as it necessarily must be upon earlier assumptions that were entirely without

support.

Scrambling up the hillside, he finally reached the point where he could see that, in all truth, the tree had been cut down. It had fallen downhill and slid for thirty feet or so before it came to rest, its branches entangled with the trunks of other trees which had slowed its plunge. The stump stood raw, the whiteness of its wood shining in the grayness of the day. A deep cut had been made in the downhill side of it and the final felling had been accomplished by a saw. Little piles of brownish sawdust lay beside the stump. A two-man saw, he

thought.

From where Daniels stood the hill slanted down at an abrupt angle but just ahead of him, just beyond the stump, was a curious mound that broke the

hillside slope, In some earlier day, more than likely, great masses of stone had broken from the cliff face and piled up at its base, to be masked in time by the soil that came about from the forest litter. Atop the mound grew a clump of birch, their powdery white trunks looking like huddled ghosts against the darkness of the other trees.

The cutting of the tree, he told

himself once again, had been a senseless piece of business. The tree was worthless and had served no particular purpose except as a road to reach the den. Had someone, he wondered, known that he used it to reach the den and cut it out of malice? Or had someone, perhaps, hidden something in the cave and then cut down the tree so there would be no way in which to reach it?

But who would hold him so much malice as to come out on a night raging with wind working by lantern light, risking his life, to cut down the tree? Ben Adams? Ben was sore because

Daniels would not permit hunting on his land

but surely that was no sufficient reason for this rather laborious piece of petty spite.

The other alternative -- that something hidden in the cave had caused the tree's destruction -- seemed more likely, although the very cutting of the tree would serve to advertize the strangeness of the place.

Daniels stood puzzled, shaking his head. Then he thought of a way to find out some answers. The day still was young and he had nothing else to do.

He started climbing up the hill,
heading for his barn to pick up some
rope.

4

There was nothing in the cave. It
was exactly as it had been before. A
few autumn leaves had blown into the
far corners. Chips of weathered stone
had fallen from the rocky overhang,
tiny evidences of the endless process of
erosion which had formed the cave
and in a few thousand years from now
might
wipe it out.

Standing on the narrow ledge in front of the cave, Daniels stared out across the valley and was surprised at the change of view that had resulted from the cutting of the tree. The angles of vision seemed somehow different and the hillside itself seemed changed. Startled, he examined the sweep of the slope closely and finally satisfied himself that all that had changed was his way of seeing it. He was seeing trees and contours that earlier had been masked.

His rope hung from the outcurving rock face that formed the roof of the cave. It was swaying gently in the

wind and, watching it, Daniels recalled that earlier in the day he had felt no wind. But now one had sprung up from the west. Below him the treetops were bending to it.

He turned toward the west and felt the wind on his face and a breath of chill. The feel of the wind faintly disturbed him, rousing some atavistic warning that came down from the days when naked roaming bands of proto-men had turned, as he turned now, to sniff the coming weather. The wind might mean that a change in weather could be coming and perhaps he should clamber up the rope and head back for the

farm.

But he felt a strange reluctance to leave. It had been often so, he recalled. For here was a wild sort of refuge which barred out the world and the little world that it let in was a different kind -- a more primal and more basic and less complicated world than the one he'd fled from.

A flight of mallards came winging up from the pond in the river valley arrowing above the treetops, banking and slanting up the long curve of the bluff and then, having cleared the bluff top, wheeling gracefully back toward the flyer. He watched them

until they dipped down behind the trees that fringed the unseen river.

Now it was time to go. There was no use waiting longer. It had been a fool's errand in the first place; he had been wrong to let himself think something might be hidden in the cave.

He turned back to the rope and the rope was gone.

For a moment he stared stupidly at the point along the cliff face where the rope had hung, swaying in the breeze. Then he searched for some sign of

it, although there was little area to search. The rope could have slid, perhaps, for a short distance along the edge of the overhanging mass of rock but it seemed incredible that it could have slid far enough to have vanished from his sight.

The rope was new, strong, and he had tied it securely to the oak tree on the bluff above the cliff, snugging it tightly around the trunk and testing the knot to make certain that it would not slip.

And now the rope was gone. There had to be a human hand in this. Someone had come along, seen the rope and

quietly drawn it up and now was crouched

on the bluff above him, waiting for his frightened outburst when he found himself stranded. It was the sort of crude practical joke than any number of people in the community might believe to be the height of humor. The thing

to do, of course, was to pay no attention, to remain quiet and wait until the joke would pall upon the jokester.

So he hunkered down upon the ledge and waited. Ten minutes, he told himself, or at least fifteen, would wear out the patience of the jokester.

Then the rope would come down and

he could climb up and go back to the house. Depending upon who the joker might turn out to be, he'd take him home and pour a drink for him and the two of them, sitting in the kitchen, would have a laugh together.

He found that he was hunching his shoulders against the wind, which seemed to have a sharper bite than when he first had noticed it. It was shifting from the west to north and that was no good.

Squatting on the ledge, he noticed that beads of moisture had gathered upon his jacket sleeve -- not a result of rain, exactly, but of driven mist.

If the temperature should drop a bit the weather might turn nasty.

He waited, huddled, listening for a sound -- a scuffling of feet through leaves, the snap of broken brush -- that would betray the presence of someone on the clifftop. But there was no sound at all. The day was muffled.

Even the branches of the trees beneath his perch, swaying in the wind, swayed without their usual creaks and groans.

Fifteen minutes must have passed and there had been no sound from atop the cliff. The wind had increased somewhat and when he twisted his head

to

one side to try to look up he could feel the soft slash of the driving mist against his cheek.

He could keep silent no longer in hope of waiting out the jokester. He sensed, in a sudden surge of panic, that time was running out on him.

'Hey, up there -- ' he shouted.

He waited and there was no response.

He shouted again, more loudly this time.

Ordinarily the cliff across the hollow should have bounced back echoes.

But now there were no echoes and his shout seemed dampened, as if this wild place had erected some sort of fence to hem him in.

He shouted again and the misty world took his voice and swallowed it.

A hissing sound started. Daniels saw it was caused by tiny pellets of ice streaming through the branches of the trees. From one breath to another the driven mist had turned to ice.

He walked back and forth on the

ledge in front of the cave, twenty feet at most, looking for some way of escape. The ledge went out into space and

then sheered off. The slanting projection of rock came down from above. He was neatly trapped.

He moved back into the cave and hunkered down. Here he was protected from the wind and he felt, even through his rising panic, a certain sense of snugness. The cave was not yet cold. But the temperature must be dropping and dropping rather swiftly or the mist would not have turned to ice. He

wore a light jacket and could not make a fire. He did not smoke and never carried matches.

For the first time he faced the real seriousness of his position. It might be days before anyone noticed he was missing. He had few visitors and no one ever paid too much attention to him. Even if someone should find that he was missing and a hunt for him was launched, what were the chances that he would be found? Who would think to look in this hidden cave? How long, he wondered, could a man survive in cold and hunger?

If he could not get out of here, and soon, what about his livestock? The cows would be heading home from pasture, seeking shelter from the storm, and

there would be no one there to let them into the barn. If they were not milked for a day or two they would be tormented by swollen udders. The hogs and chickens would go unfed. A man, he thought, had no right to take the kind of chance he had taken when so many living creatures were dependent on him.

He crawled farther back into the cave and stretched himself out on his belly, wedging himself into its

deepest recess, an ear laid against the stone.

The creature still was there -- of course it still was there. It was trapped even more securely than himself, held down by, perhaps, several hundred feet of solid rock, which had been built up most deliberately through many millions of years.

It was remembering again. In its mind was another place and, while part of that flow of memory was blurred and wavy, the rest was starkly clear. A great dark plain of rock, one great slab of rock, ran to a far horizon and above that far horizon a reddish sun

came up and limned against the great red ball of rising sun was a hinted structure -- an irregularity of the horizon that suggested a place. A castle, perhaps, or a city or a great cliff dwelling -- it was hard to make out what it was or to be absolutely sure that it was anything at all.

Home? Was that black expanse of rock the spaceport of the old home planet? Or might it be only a place the creature had visited before it had come to Earth? A place so fantastic, perhaps, that it lingered in the mind.

Other things mixed into the memory, sensory symbols that might

have

applied to personalities, life forms,
smells, tastes.

Although he could be wrong,
Daniels knew, in supplying this
entrapped

creature with human sensory
perceptions, these human sensory
perceptions

were the only ones he knew about.

And now, listening in on the
memory of that flat black expanse of
rock

and imagining the rising sun which
outlined the structure of the far
horizon, Daniels did something he had

never tried to do before. He tried to talk back to the buried creature, tried to let it know that someone was listening and had heard, that it was not as lonely and as isolated as it might have thought it was.

He did not talk with his tongue -- that would have been a senseless thing to do. Sound could never carry through those many feet of stone. He talked with his mind instead.

Hello, down there, he said.
_This is a friend of yours. I've been listening to you for a long, long time and I hope that you can hear me. If you can, let us talk together. Let me try

to make you understand about
myself and the world I live in and you
tell me about yourself and the kind
of world you lived in and how you
came to be where you are and if there is
anything I can do for you, any help that
I can give._

He said that much and no more.
Having spoken, he continued lying with
his ear against the hard cave floor,
listening to find out if the creature
might have heard him. But the creature
apparently had not heard or, having
heard, ignored him as something not
worth its attention. It went on thinking
about the place where the dull red sun
was rising above the horizon.

It had been foolish, and perhaps presumptuous, he knew, for him to have tried to speak to it. He had never tried before; he had simply listened. And he had never tried, either, to speak to those others who talked among the stars -- again he'd simply listened.

What new dimension had been added to himself, he wondered, that would have permitted him to try to communicate with the creature? Had the possibility that he was about to die moved him?

The creature in the stone might not

be subject to death -- it might be immortal.

He crawled out of the far recess of the cave and crept out to where he had room to hunker down.

The storm had worsened. The ice now was mixed with snow and the temperature had fallen. The ledge in front of the cave was filmed with slippery ice. If a man tried to walk it he'd go plunging down the cliff face to his death.

The wind was blowing harder. The branches of the trees were waving and a storm of leaves was banking down the

hillside, flying with the ice and snow.

From where he squatted he could see the topmost branches of the clump of birches which grew atop the mound just beyond where the cave tree had stood.

And these branches, it seemed to him, were waving about far more violently than could be accounted for by wind. They were lashing wildly from one side to the other and even as he watched they seemed to rise higher in the air, as if the trees, in some great agony, were raising their branches far above their heads in a plea for mercy.

Daniels crept forward on his hands

and knees and thrust his head out to see down to the base of the cliff.

Not only the topmost branches of the clump of birches were swaying but the entire clump seemed to be in motion, thrashing about as if some unseen

hand were attempting to wrench it from the soil. But even as he thought this, he saw that the ground itself was in agitation, heaving up and out. It looked exactly as if someone had taken a time-lapse movie of the development

of a frost boil with the film being run at a normal speed. The ground was heaving up and the clump was heaving

with it. A shower of gravel and other debris was flowing down the slope, loosened by the heaving of the ground. A boulder broke away and crashed down the hill, crushing brush and shrubs and leaving hideous scars.

Daniels watched in horrified fascination.

Was he witnessing, he wondered, some wonderfully speeded-up geological

process? He tried to pinpoint exactly what kind of process it might be. He knew of one that seemed to fit. The mound kept on heaving upward,

splintering outward from its center. A great flood of loose debris was now pouring down the slope, leaving a path of brown in the whiteness of the fallen snow. The clump of birch tipped over and went skidding down the slope and out of the place where it had stood a shape emerged.

Not a solid shape, but a hazy one that looked as if someone had scraped some stardust from the sky and molded it into a ragged, shifting form that did not set into any definite pattern, that kept shifting and changing, although it did not entirely lose all

resemblance to the shape in which it might originally have been molded. It looked as a loose conglomeration of atoms might look if atoms could be seen. It sparkled softly in the grayness of the day and despite its seeming insubstantiality it apparently had some strength -- for it continued to push itself from the shattered mound until finally it stood free of it.

Having freed itself, it drifted up toward the ledge.

Strangely, Daniels felt no fear, only a vast curiosity. He tried to make out what the drifting shape was but he could not be sure.

As it reached the ledge and moved slightly above it he drew back to crouch within the cave. The shape drifted in a couple of feet or so and perched on the ledge -- either perched upon it or floated just above it.

You spoke, the sparkling shape said to Daniels.

It was not a question, nor a statement either, really, and it was not really speaking. It sounded exactly like the talk Daniels had heard when he'd listened to the stars.

You spoke to it, said the shape,

as if you were a friend (although the word was not friend but something else entirely, something warm and friendly). _You offered help to it. Is there help that you can give?_

That question at least was clear enough.

'I don't know,' said Daniels. 'Not right now, there isn't. But in a hundred years from now, perhaps -- are you hearing me? Do you know what I am saying?'

You say there can be help, the creature said, _but only after time.

Please, what is that time?_

'A hundred years,' said Daniels.
'When the planet goes around the star
one hundred times.'

One hundred? asked the creature.

Daniels held up the fingers of both
hands. 'Can you see my fingers? The
appendages on the tips of my arms?'

See? the creature asked.

'Sense them. Count them.'

Yes, I can count them.

'They number ten,' said Daniels.
'Ten times that many of them would be a
hundred.'

__It is no great span of time__, the
creature said. __What kind of help by
then?__

'You know genetics? How a
creature comes into being, how it knows
what

kind of thing it is to become, how it
grows, how it knows how to grow and
what to become. The amino acids that
make up the ribonucleic acids and
provide the key to the kind of cells it
grows and what their functions are.'

I do not know your terms, the creature said, _but I understand. So you know of this? You are not, then, a brute wild creature, like the other life that simply stands and the others that burrow in the ground and climb the standing life forms and run along the ground._

It did not come out like this, of course. The words were there -- or meanings that had the feel of words -- but there were pictures as well of trees, of burrowing mice, of squirrels, of rabbits, of the lurching woodchuck and the running fox.

'Not I,' said Daniels, 'but others of

my kind. I know but little of it.

There are others who spend all their time in the study of it.'

The other perched on the ledge and said nothing more. Beyond it the trees whipped in the wind and the snow came whirling down, Daniels huddled

back from the ledge, shivered in the cold and wondered if this thing upon the ledge could be hallucination.

But as he thought it, the thing began to talk again, although this time it did not seem to be talking to him. It talked, rather, as the creature in the stone had talked, remembering. It

communicated, perhaps, something he was not meant to know, but Daniels had no way of keeping from knowing.

Sentience flowed from the creature and impacted on his mind, filling all his mind, barring all else, so that it seemed as if it were he and not this other who was remembering.

5

First there was space -- endless, limitless space, so far from everything, so brutal, so frigid, so uncaring that it numbed the mind, not so much from fear or loneliness as from the realization that in this eternity of space the thing that was

himself was dwarfed to an
insignificance no yardstick could
measure. So far from home, so lost, so
directionless -- and yet not entirely
directionless, for there was a trace,
a scent, a spoor, a knowing that could
not be expressed or understood or
even guessed at in the framework of
humanity; a trace, a scent, a spoor that
showed the way, no matter how dimly
or how hopelessly, that something else
had taken at some other time. And a
mindless determination, an unflagging
devotion, a primal urgency that drove
him on that faint, dim trail, to
follow where it might lead, even to
the end of time or space, or the both of
them together, never to fail or quit or

falter until the trail had finally
reached an end or had been wiped out
by whatever winds might blow through
empty space.

There was something here. Daniels
told himself, that, for all its
alienness, still was familiar, a factor
that should lend itself to
translation into human terms and thus
establish some sort of link between
this remembering alien mind and his
human mind.

The emptiness and the silence, the
cold uncaring went on and on and on
and there seemed no end to it. But he
came to understand there had to be an

end to it and that the end was here, in these tangled hills above the ancient river. And after the almost endless time of darkness and uncaring, another almost endless time of waiting, of having reached the end, of having gone as far as one might go and then settling down to wait with an ageless patience that never would grow weary.

You spoke of help, the creature said to him. _Why help? You do not know this other. Why should you want to help?_

'It is alive,' said Daniels. 'It's alive

and I'm alive and is that not enough?'

__I do not know__, the creature said.

'I think it is,' said Daniels.

__And how could you help?__

'I've told you about this business of genetics. I don't know if I can explain -- '

__I have the terms from your mind__, the creature said. __The genetic code.__

'Would this other one, the one

beneath the stone, the one you guard -- '

Not guard, the creature said.

The one I wait for.

'You will wait for long.'

I am equipped for waiting. I have waited long. I can wait much longer.

'Someday,' Daniels said, 'the stone will erode away. But you need not wait that long. Does this other creature know its genetic code?'

It knows, the creature said. _It knows far more than I._

'But all of it,' insisted Daniels.
'Down to the last linkage, the final
ingredient, the sequences of all the
billions of -- '

__It knows__, the creature said. __The
first requisite of all life is to
understand itself.__

'And it could -- it would -- be
willing to give us that information, to
supply us its genetic code?'

__You are presumptuous__, said the
sparkling creature (although the word
was harder than presumptuous). __That
is information no thing gives another.
It is indecent and obscene__ (here

again the words were not exactly
indecent

and obscene). _It involves the giving
of one's self into another's hands. It
is an ultimate and purposeless
surrender._

'Not surrender,' Daniels said. 'A
way of escaping from its imprisonment.

In time, in the hundred years of which
I told you, the people of my race
could take that genetic code and
construct another creature exactly like
the

first. Duplicate it with exact
preciseness.'

But it still would be in stone.

'Only one of it. The original one. That original could wait for the erosion of the rock. But the other one, its duplicate, could take up life again.'

And what, Daniels wondered, if the creature in the stone did not wish for rescue? What if it had deliberately placed itself beneath the stone?

What if it simply sought protection and sanctuary? Perhaps, if it wished, the creature could get out of where it was as easily as this other one -- or this other thing -- had risen from the mound.

No, it cannot, said the creature squatting on the ledge. _I was careless. I went to sleep while waiting and I slept too long._

And that would have been a long sleep, Daniels told himself. A sleep so long that dribbling soil had mounded over it, that fallen boulders, cracked off the cliff by frost, had been buried in the soil and that a clump of birch had sprouted and grown into trees thirty feet high. There was a difference here in time rate that he could not comprehend.

But some of the rest, he told himself, he had sensed -- the devoted

loyalty and the mindless patience of the creature that tracked another far among the stars. He knew he was right, for the mind of that other thing, that devoted star-dog perched upon the ledge, came into him and fastened on his mind and for a moment the two of them, the two minds, for all their differences, merged into a single mind in a gesture of fellowship and basic understanding, as if for the first time in what must have been millions of years this baying hound from outer space had found a creature that could understand its duty and its purpose.

'We could try to dig it out,' said Daniels. 'I had thought of that, of

course, but I was afraid that it would be injured. And it would be hard to convince anyone -- '

No, said the creature, _digging would not do. There is much you do not understand. But this other proposal that you have, that has great merit. You

say you do not have the knowledge of genetics to take this action now. Have you talked to others of your kind? _

'I talked to one,' said Daniels, 'and he would not listen. He thought I was mad. But he was not, after all, the man I should have spoken to. In time I could talk with others but not right now. No matter how much I might want to -- I can't. For they would laugh at me and I could not stand their laughter. But in a hundred years or somewhat less I could -- '

But you will not exist a hundred years, said the faithful dog. _You are a short-lived species. Which

might explain your rapid rise. All life here is short-lived and that gives evolution a chance to build intelligence.

When I first came here I found but mindless entities._

'You are right,' said Daniels. 'I can live no hundred years. Even from the very start, I could not live a hundred years, and better than half of my life is gone. Perhaps much more than half of it. For unless I can get out of this cave I will be dead in days.'

Reach out, said the sparkling one. _Reach out and touch me, being._

Slowly Daniels reached out. His

hand went through the sparkle and the shine and he had no sense of matter -- it was as if he'd moved his hand through nothing but air.

You see, the creature said, _I cannot help you. There is no way for our energies to interact. I am sorry, friend._ (it was not friend, exactly, but it was good enough, and it might have been, Daniels thought, a great deal more than friend.)

'I am sorry, too,' said Daniels. 'I would like to live.'

Silence fell between them, the soft and brooding silence of a snow-laden

afternoon with nothing but the trees
and the rock and the hidden little life
to share the silence with them.

It had been for nothing, then,
Daniels told himself, this meeting with a
creature from another world. Unless
he could somehow get off this ledge
there was nothing he could do.

Although why he should so concern
himself

with the rescue of the creature in the
stone he could not understand. Surely
whether he himself lived or died
should be of more importance to him
than

that his death would foreclose any
chance of help to the buried alien.

'But it may not be for nothing,' he told the sparkling creature. 'Now that you know -- '

__My knowing__, said the creature, __will have no effect. There are others from the stars who would have the knowledge -- but even if I could contact them they would pay no attention to me. My position is too lowly to converse

with the greater ones. My only hope would be people of your kind and, if I'm not mistaken, only with yourself. For I catch the edge of thought that you are the only one who really understands. There is no other of your

race who
could even be aware of me. _

Daniels nodded. It was entirely true. No other human existed whose brain

had been jumbled so fortunately as to have acquired the abilities he held.

He was the only hope for the creature in the stone and even such hope as he represented might be very slight, for before it could be made effective he must find someone who would listen and believe. And that belief must reach across the years to a time when genetic engineering was considerably advanced beyond its present state.

If you could manage to survive the present this, said the hound from outer space, _I might bring to bear certain energies and techniques -- sufficiently for the project to be carried through. But, as you must realize, I cannot supply the means to survive this crisis._

'Someone may come along,' said Daniels. 'They might hear me if I yelled every now and then.'

He began yelling every now and then and received no answer. His yells were muffled by the storm and it was unlikely, he knew, that there would be men abroad at a time like this. They'd

be safe beside their fires.

The sparkling creature still perched upon the ledge when Daniels slumped back to rest. The other made an indefinite sort of shape that seemed much like a lopsided Christmas tree standing in the snow.

Daniels told himself not to go to sleep. He must close his eyes only for a moment, then snap them open -- he must not let them stay shut for then sleep would come upon him. He should beat his arms across his chest for warmth -- but his arms were heavy and did not want to work.

He felt himself sliding prone to the cave floor and fought to drive himself erect. But his will to fight was thin and the rock was comfortable.

So comfortable, he thought, that he could afford a moment's rest before forcing himself erect. And the funny thing about it was that the cave floor had turned to mud and water and the sun was shining and he seemed warm again.

He rose with a start and he saw that he was standing in a wide expanse of water no deeper than his ankles, black ooze underfoot.

There was no cave and no hill in which the cave might be. There was simply this vast sheet of water and behind him, less than thirty feet away, the muddy beach of a tiny island -- a muddy, rocky island, with smears of sickly green clinging to the rocks.

He was in another time, he knew, but not in another place. Always when he slipped through time he came to rest on exactly the same spot upon the surface of the earth that he had occupied when the change had come.

And standing there he wondered once again, as he had many times before, what strange mechanism operated to

shift him bodily in space so that when he was transported to a time other than his own he did not find himself buried under, say, twenty feet of rock or soil or suspended twenty feet above the surface.

But now, he knew, was no time to think or wonder. By a strange quirk of circumstance he was no longer in the cave and it made good sense to get away from where he was as swiftly as he could. For if he stayed standing where he was he might snap back unexpectedly to his present and find himself still huddled in the cave.

He turned clumsily about, his feet tangling in the muddy bottom, and lunged towards the shore. The going was hard but he made it and went up the slimy stretch of muddy beach until he could reach the tumbled rocks and could sit and rest.

His breathing was difficult. He gulped great lungfuls and the air had a strange taste to it, not like normal air.

He sat on the rock, gasping for breath, and gazed out across the sheet of water shining in the high, warm sun. Far out he caught sight of a long, humping swell and watched it coming in. When it reached the shore it washed

up the muddy incline almost to his feet. Far out on the glassy surface another swell was forming.

The sheet of water was greater, he realized, than he had first imagined.

This was also the first time in his wanderings through the past that he had ever come upon any large body of water. Always before he had emerged on dry

land whose general contours had been recognizable -- and there had always been the river flowing through the hills.

Here nothing was recognizable. This was a totally different place and

there could be no question that he had been projected farther back in time than ever before -- back to the day of some great epicontinental sea, back to a time, perhaps, when the atmosphere had far less oxygen than it would

have in later eons. More than likely, he thought, he was very close in time to that boundary line where life for a creature such as he would be

impossible. Here there apparently was sufficient oxygen, although a man must

pump more air into his lungs than he would normally. Go back a few million years and the oxygen might fall to the point where it would be insufficient.

Go a little farther back and find no free oxygen at all.

Watching the beach, he saw the little things skittering back and forth, seeking refuge in spume-whitened piles of drift or popping into tiny burrows. He put his hand down on the rock on which he sat and scrubbed gently at a patch of green. It slid off the rock and clung to his flesh, smearing his palm with a slimy gelatinous mess that felt disgusting and unclean.

Here, then, was the first of life to dwell upon the land -- scarcely creatures as yet, still clinging to the

edge of water, afraid and unequipped to wander too far from the side of that wet and gentle mother which, from the first beginning, had nurtured life. Even the plants still clung close to the sea, existing, perhaps, only upon rocky surfaces so close to the beach that occasional spray could reach them.

Daniels found that now he did not have to gasp quite so much for breath. Plowing through the mud up to the rock had been exhausting work in an oxygen-poor atmosphere. But sitting quietly on the rocks, he could get along all right.

Now that the blood had stopped pounding in his head he became aware of

silence. He heard one sound only, the soft lapping of the water against the muddy beach, a lonely effect that seemed to emphasize rather than break the silence.

Never before in his life, he realized, had he heard so little sound.

Back in the other worlds he had known there had been not one noise, but many, even on the quietest days. But here there was nothing to make a sound -- no trees, no animals, no insects, no birds -- just the water running to

the far horizon and the bright sun in the sky.

For the first time in many months he knew again that sense of out-of-placeness, of not belonging, the feeling of being where he was not wanted and had no right to be, an intruder in a world that was out of bounds, not for him alone but for anything that was more complex or more sophisticated than the little skitterers on the beach.

He sat beneath the alien sun, surrounded by the alien water, watching the little things that in eons yet to come would give rise to such creatures

as himself, and tried to feel some sort of kinship to the skitterers. But he could feel no kinship.

And suddenly in this place of one-sound-only there came a throbbing, faint but clear and presently louder, pressing down against the water, beating at the little island -- a sound out of the sky.

Daniels leaped to his feet and looked up and the ship was there, plummeting down toward him. But not a ship of solid form, it seemed -- rather a distorted thing, as if many planes of light (if there could be such things as planes of light) had been

slapped together in a haphazard sort of way.

A throbbing came from it that set the atmosphere to howling and the planes of light kept changing shape or changing places, so that the ship, from one moment to the next, never looked the same.

It had been dropping fast to start with but now it was slowing down as it continued to fall, ponderously and with massive deliberation, straight toward the island.

Daniels found himself crouching, unable to jerk his eyes and senses away

from this mass of light and thunder
that came out of the sky.

The sea and mud and rock, even in
the full light of the sun, were
flickering with the flashing that came
from the shifting of the planes of
light. Watching it through eyes
squinted against the flashes, Daniels saw
that if the ship were to drop to the
surface it would not drop upon the
island, as he first had feared, but a
hundred feet or so offshore.

Not more than fifty feet above the
water the great ship stopped and
hovered and a bright thing came from
it. The object hit the water with a

splash but did not go under, coming to rest upon the shallow, muddy bottom of the sea, with a bit less than half of it above the surface. It was a sphere, a bright and shiny globe against which the water lapped, and even with the thunder of the ship beating at his ears, Daniels imagined he could hear the water lapping at the sphere.

Then a voice spoke above this empty world, above the throbbing of the ship, the imagined lapping sound of water, a sad, judicial voice -- although it could not have been a voice, for any voice would have been too puny to be heard. But the words were there and

there was no doubt of what they said:

__Thus, according to the verdict and the sentence, you are here deported and abandoned upon this barren planet, where it is most devoutly hoped you

will find the time and opportunity to contemplate your sins and especially the sin of__ (and here were words and concepts Daniels could not understand, hearing them only as a blur of sound -- but the sound of them, or something in the sound of them, was such as to turn his blood to ice and at the same time fill him with a disgust and a loathing such as he'd never known before). __It is regrettable, perhaps,

that you are immune to death, for much as we might detest ourselves for doing it, it would be a kinder course to discontinue you and would serve better than this course to exact our purpose, which is to place you beyond all possibility of ever having contact with any sort of life again.. Here, beyond the farthest track of galactic intercourse, on this uncharted planet, we can only hope that our purpose will be served. And we urge upon you such self-examination that if, by some remote chance, in some unguessed time, you should be freed through ignorance or malice, you shall find it within yourself so to conduct your existence as

not to meet or merit such fate again.
And now, according to our law, you may
speak any final words you wish._

The voice ceased and after a while
came another. And while the
terminology was somewhat more
involved than Daniels could grasp their
idiom
translated easily into human terms.

Go screw yourself, it said.

The throbbing deepened and the
ship began to move straight up into the
sky. Daniels watched it until the
thunder died and the ship itself was a
fading twinkle in the blue.

He rose from his crouch and stood erect, trembling and weak. Groping behind him for the rock, he found it and sat down again.

Once again the only sound was the lapping of the water on the shore. He could not hear, as he had imagined that he could, the water against the shining sphere that lay a hundred feet offshore. The sun blazed down out of the sky and glinted on the sphere and Daniels found that once again he was gasping for his breath.

Without a doubt, out there in the shallow water, on the mudbank that

sloped up to the island, lay the creature in the stone. And how then had it

been possible for him to be transported across the hundreds of millions of

years to this one microsecond of time that held the answer to all the

questions he had asked about the intelligence beneath the limestone? It

could not have been sheer coincidence, for this was coincidence of too large

an order ever to come about. Had he somehow, subconsciously, gained more knowledge than he had been aware of from the twinkling creature that had perched upon the ledge? For a

moment, he remembered, their minds had met and

mingled -- at that moment had there occurred a transmission of knowledge, unrecognized, buried in some corner of himself? Or was he witnessing the operation of some sort of psychic warning system set up to scare off any future intelligence that might be tempted to liberate this abandoned and marooned being? And what about the twinkling creature? Could some hidden, unguessed good exist in the thing imprisoned in the sphere -- for it to have commanded the loyalty and devotion of the creature on the ledge beyond the slow erosion of geologic ages? The question raised another: What were

good

and evil? Who was there to judge?

The evidence of the twinkling creature was, of course, no evidence at all. No human being was so utterly depraved that he could not hope to find a dog to follow him and guard him even to the death.

More to wonder at was what had happened within his own jumbled brain that could send him so unerringly to the moment of a vital happening. What more would he find in it to astonish and confound him? How far along the path to ultimate understanding might it drive him? And what was the purpose

of that driving?

He sat on the rock and gasped for
breath. The sea lay flat and calm
beneath the blazing sun, its only
motion the long swells running in to
break

around the sphere and on the beach.
The little skittering creatures ran
along the mud and he rubbed his palm
against his trouser leg, trying to
brush off the green and slimy scum.

He could wade out, he thought, and
have a closer look at the sphere
lying in the mud. But it would be a
long walk in such an atmosphere and he
could not chance it -- for he must be

nowhere near the cave up in that distant future when he popped back to his present.

Once the excitement of knowing where he was, the sense of out-of-placeness, had worn off, this tiny mud-flat island was a boring place. There was nothing but the sky and sea and the muddy beach; there was nothing much to look at. It was a place, he thought, where nothing ever happened, or was about to happen once the ship had gone away and the great event had ended. Much was going on, of course, that in future ages would spell out to quite a lot -- but it was

mostly happening out of sight, down
at the bottom of this shallow sea. The
skittering things, he thought, and
the slimy growth upon the rock were
hardy, mindless pioneers of this distant
day -- awesome to look upon and
think about but actually not too
interesting.

He began drawing aimless patterns
in the mud with the toe of one boot.

He tried to make a tic-tac-toe layout
but so much mud was clinging to his
toe that it didn't quite come out.

And then, instead of drawing in the
mud, he was scraping with his toe in
fallen leaves, stiff with frozen sleet

and snow.

The sun was gone and the scene was dark except for a glow from something

in the woods just down the hill from him. Driving sheets of snow swirled into his face and he shivered. He pulled his jacket close about him and began to button it. A man, he thought, could catch his death of cold this way, shifting as quickly as he had shifted from a steaming mudbank to the whiplash chill of a northern blizzard.

The yellow glow still persisted on the slope below him and he could hear the sound of human voices. What was

going on? He was fairly certain of where he was, a hundred feet or so above the place where the cliff began -- there should be no one down there; there should not be a light.

He took a slow step down the hill, then hesitated. He ought not to be going down the hill -- he should be heading straight for home. The cattle would be waiting at the barnyard gate, hunched against the storm, their coats covered with ice and snow, yearning for the warmth and shelter of the barn. The pigs would not have been fed, nor the chickens either. A man owed some consideration to his livestock.

But someone was down there,
someone with a lantern, almost on the lip
of

the cliff. If the damn fools didn't
watch out, they could slip and go
plunging down into a hundred feet of
space. Coon hunters more than likely,
although this was not the kind of night
to be out hunting coon. The coons
would all be denned up.

But whoever they might be, he
should go down and warn them.

He was halfway to the lantern,
which appeared to be setting on the
ground, when someone picked it up

and held it high and Daniels saw and recognized the face of the man who held it.

Daniels hurried forward.

'Sheriff, what are you doing here?'

But he had the shamed feeling that he knew, that he should have known from the moment he had seen the light.

'Who is there?' the sheriff asked, wheeling swiftly and tilting the lantern so that its rays were thrown in Daniels' direction. 'Daniels,' he gasped. 'Good God, man, where have you been?'

'Just walking around,' said Daniels weakly. The answer, he knew, was no good at all -- but how could he tell anyone that he had just returned from a trip through time?

'Damn it,' the sheriff said, disgusted. 'We've been hunting you. Ben Adams got scared when he dropped over to your place and you weren't there. He knows how you go walking around in the woods and he was afraid something had happened to you. So he phoned me, and he and his boys began looking for you. We were afraid you had fallen or

had been hurt somehow. A man wouldn't last the night in a storm like this.'

'Where is Ben now?' asked Daniels.

The sheriff gestured down the hill and Daniels saw that two men, probably Adams' sons, had a rope snubbed around a tree and that the rope extended down over the cliff.

'He's down on the rope,' the sheriff said. 'Having a look in the cave.

He felt somehow you might be in the cave.'

'He had good reason to -- ' Daniels

started to say but he had barely begun to speak when the night was rent by a shriek of terror. The shrieking did not stop. It kept on and on. The sheriff thrust the lantern at Daniels and hurried forward.

No guts, Daniels thought. A man who could be vicious enough to set up another for death, to trap him in a cave -- but who, when the chips were down, could not go through with it and had to phone the sheriff to provide a witness to his good intentions -- a man like that lacked guts.

The shrieks had fallen to moaning. The sheriff hauled on the rope,

helped by one of Adams' sons. A man's head and shoulders appeared above the

cliff top and the sheriff reached out and hauled him to safety.

Ben Adams collapsed on the ground and never stopped his moaning. The

sheriff jerked him to his feet.

'What's the matter, Ben?'

'There's something down there,' Adams screamed. 'There is something in the cave -- '

'Something, damn it? What would it

be? A cat? A panther?'

'I never seen it. I just knew that it was there. I felt it. It was crouched back inside the cave.'

'How could anything be in there? Someone cut down the tree. How could anything get into the cave?'

'I don't know,' howled Adams. 'It might have been in there when the tree was cut. It might have been trapped in there.'

One of the sons was holding Ben erect and the sheriff moved away. The other son was puffing in the rope and

neatly coiling it.

'Another thing,' the sheriff said, 'how come you thought Daniels might be in that cave? If the tree was cut down he couldn't have used a rope the way you did, for there wasn't any rope. If he had used a rope it would still have been there. I don't know what's going on -- damned if I do. You down messing in that cave and Daniels comes walking out of the woods. I wish someone would tell me.'

Adams, who had been hobbling forward, saw Daniels for the first time and
came to a sudden halt.

'Where did you come from?' he demanded. 'Here we been wearing out our guts trying to hunt you down and then - - '

'Oh, go on home,' the sheriff said in a disgusted tone of voice.

'There's a fishy smell to this. It's going to take me a little while to get it figured out.'

Daniels reached out his hand to the son who had finished coiling the rope.

'I believe that's my rope,' he said.

Without protest, taken by surprise,
the boy handed it to him.

'We'll cut across the woods,' said
Ben. 'Home's closer that way.'

'Good night, men,' the sheriff said.

Slowly the sheriff and Daniels
climbed the hill.

'Daniels,' said the sheriff, 'you were
never out walking in this storm.

If you had been you'd have had a
whole lot more snow on you than shows.
You

look like you just stepped from a

house.'

'Maybe I wasn't exactly walking around,' Daniels said.

'Would you mind telling me where you were? I don't mind doing my duty as I see it but I don't relish being made to look a fool while I'm doing it.'

'Sheriff, I can't tell you. I'm sorry. I simply cannot tell you.'

'All right, then. What about the rope?'

'It's my rope,' said Daniels. 'I lost it this afternoon.'

'And I suppose you can't tell me about that, either.'

'No, I guess I can't.'

'You know,' the sheriff said, 'I've had a lot of trouble with Ben Adams through the years. I'd hate to think I was going to have trouble with you, too.'

They climbed the hill and walked up to the house. The sheriff's car was parked out on the road.

'Would you come in?' asked Daniels. 'I could find a drink.'

The sheriff shook his head. 'Some other time,' he said. 'Maybe soon. You figure there was something in that cave? Or was it just Ben's imagination? He's a flighty sort of critter.'

'Maybe there wasn't anything,' said Daniels. 'but if Ben thought there was, what difference does it make? Thinking it might be just as real as if there were something there. All of us, sheriff, live with things walking by our sides no one else can see.'

The sheriff shot a quick glance at him. 'Daniels, what's with you?' he asked. 'What is walking by your side

or sniffing at your heels? Why did you bury yourself out here in this Godforsaken place? What is going on?'

He didn't wait for an answer. He got into his car, started it and headed down the road.

Daniels stood in the storm and watched the glowing taillights vanish in the murk of flying snow. He shook his head in bewilderment. The sheriff had asked a question and then had not waited for the answer. Perhaps because it

was a question to which he did not want an answer.

Daniels turned and went up the snowy path to the house. He'd like some coffee and a bite to eat -- but first he had to do the chores. He had to milk the cows and feed the pigs. The chickens must wait till morning -- it was too late to feed the chickens. The cows would be waiting at the barn door.

They had waited for a long time and it was not right to make them wait.

He opened the door and stepped into the kitchen.

Someone was waiting for him. It sat on the table or floated so close

above it that it seemed to be sitting.
The fire in the stove had gone out
and the room was dark but the
creature sparkled.

__You saw?__ the creature asked.

'Yes,' said Daniels. 'I saw and
heard. I don't know what to do. What is
right or wrong? Who knows what's
right or wrong?'

__Not you__, the creature said. __Not
I. I can only wait. I can only keep
the faith.__

Perhaps among the stars, thought
Daniels, might be those who did know.

Perhaps by listening to the stars,
perhaps by trying to break in on their
conversations and by asking
questions, he might get an answer.
Certainly

there must be some universal ethics. A
list, perhaps, of Universal
Commandments. Maybe not ten of
them. Maybe only two or three -- but any
number might be enough.

'I can't stay and talk,' he said. 'I
have animals to take care of. Could
you stick around? Later we can talk.'

He fumbled for the lantern on the
bench against the wall, found the
matches on the shelf. He lit the lantern

and its feeble flame made a puddle
of light in the darkness of the room.

__You have others to take care of?__
asked the creature. __Others not quite
like yourself? Others, trusting you,
without your intelligence?__

'I guess you could say it that way,'
Daniels said, 'I've never heard it
put quite that way before.'

__Could I go along with you?__ the
creature asked, __it occurs to me, just
now, that in many ways we are very
much alike.__

'Very much -- ' But with the

sentence hanging in the air, Daniels stopped.

Not a hound, he told himself. Not the faithful dog. But the shepherd.

Could that be it? Not the master but the long-lost lamb?

He reached out a hand towards the creature in a swift gesture of understanding, then pulled it back, remembering it was nothing he could touch.

He lifted the lantern and turned toward the door.

'Come along,' he said.

Together the two of them went through the storm toward the barn and the waiting cows.

Title: Installment plan

Author: Clifford D. Simak

Original copyright year: unknown, re-published 1962

Genre: science fiction

Comments: To my knowledge, this is the only available e-text of this story.

Source: scanned and OCR-read from a paperback edition with Xerox TextBridge Pro 9.0, proofread in MS Word 2000.

Date of e-text: August 12, 1999

Prepared by: Anada Sucka

Anticopyright 1999. All rights reversed.

INSTALLMENT PLAN

Clifford D. Simak

I

THE MISHAP came at dusk, as the last floater was settling down above the cargo dump, the eight small motors flickering blueely in the twilight. One instant it was floating level, a thousand feet above the ground, descending gently, with its cargo stacked upon it and the riding robots perched atop the cargo.

The next instant it tilted as first one motor failed and then a second one. The load of cargo spilled and the riding robots with it.

The floater, unbalanced, became a screaming wheel, spinning crazily, that whipped in a tightening, raging spiral down upon the base.

Steve Sheridan tumbled from the pile of crates stacked outside his tent. A hundred yards away, the cargo hit with a thundering crash that could be heard and felt above the screaming of the floater. The crates and boxes came apart and the crushed and twisted merchandise spread into a broken mound.

Sheridan dived for the open tent flaps and, as he did, the floater hit, slicing into the radio shack, which had been set up less than an hour before. It tore a massive hole into the ground, half burying itself, throwing up a barrage of sand and gravel that bulleted across the area, drumming like a storm of sleet against the tent.

A pebble grazed Sheridan's forehead and he felt the blast of sand against his cheek. Then he was inside the tent and scrambling for the transmog chest that stood beside the desk.

"Hezekiah!" he bawled. "Hezekiah,

where are you!"

He fumbled his ring of keys and found the right one and got it in the lock. He twisted and the lid of the chest snapped open.

Outside, he could hear the pounding of running robot feet.

He thrust back the cover of the chest and began lifting out the compartments in which the transmogs were racked.

"Hezekiah!" he shouted.

For Hezekiah was the one who

knew where all the transmogs were; he could lay his hands upon any of them that might be needed without having to hunt for it.

Behind Sheridan, the canvas rustled and Hezekiah came in with a rush. He brushed Sheridan to one side.

"Here, let me, sir," he said.

"We'll need some roboticists," said Sheridan. "Those boys must be smashed up fairly bad."

"Here they are. You better handle them, sir. You do it better than any one of us."

Sheridan took the thee transmogs and dropped them in the pocket of his jacket.

"I'm sorry there are no more, sir," Hezekiah said. "That is all we have."

"These will have to do," said Sheridan. "How about the radio shack? Was anyone in there?"

"I understand that it was quite empty. Silas had just stepped out of it. He was very lucky, sir."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Sheridan.

He ducked out of the tent and ran toward the mound of broken crates and boxes. Robots were swarming over it, digging frantically. As he ran, he saw them stoop and lift free a mass of tangled metal. They hauled it from the pile and carried it out and laid it on the ground and stood there looking at it.

Sheridan came up to the group that stood around the mass of metal.

"Abe," he panted, "did you get out both of them?"

Abraham turned around. "Not yet, Steve. Max is still in there."

Sheridan pushed his way through the crowd and dropped on his knees beside the mangled robot. The midsection, he saw, was so deeply dented that the front almost touched the back. The legs were limp and the arms were canted and locked at a crazy angle. The head was twisted and the crystal eyes were vacant.

"Lem," he whispered. "Lemuel, can you hear me?"

"No, he can't," said Abraham. "He's really busted up."

"I have roboticists in my pocket." Sheridan got to his feet "Three of them.

Who wants a go at it? It'll have to be fast work."

"Count me in," Abraham said, "and Ebenezer there and..."

"Me, too," volunteered Joshua.

"We'll need tools," said Abraham. "We can't do a thing unless we have some tools."

"Here are the tools," Hezekiah called out, coming on the trot. "I knew you would need them."

"And light," said Joshua. "It's getting pretty dark, and from the looks of

it, we'll be tinkering with his brain."

"We'll have to get him up someplace," declared Abraham, "so we can work on him. We can't with him lying on the ground."

"You can use the conference table," Sheridan suggested. "Hey, some of you guys," yelled Abraham, "get Lem over there on the conference table."

"We're digging here for Max," Gideon yelled back. "Do it yourself."

"We can't," bawled Abraham. "Steve is fixing to get our transmogs changed..."

"Sit down," ordered Sheridan. "I can't reach you standing up. And has someone got a light?"

"I have one, sir," said Hezekiah, at his elbow. He held out a flash.

"Turn it on those guys so I can get the transmogs in."

Three robots came stamping over and picked up the damaged Lemuel. They lugged him off toward the conference table.

In the light of the flash, Sheridan got out his keys, shuffled swiftly through

them and found the one he wanted.

"Hold that light steady. I can't do this in the dark."

"Once you did," said Ebenezer. "Don't you remember, Steve? Out on Galanova. Except you couldn't see the labels and you got a missionary one into Ulysses when you thought you had a woodsman and he started preaching. Boy, was that a night!"

"Shut up," said Sheridan, "and hold still. How do you expect me to get these into you if you keep wiggling?"

He opened the almost invisible

plate in the back of Ebenezer's skull and slid it quickly down, reached inside and found the spacehand transmog. With a quick twist, he jerked it out and dropped it in his pocket, then popped in the roboticist transmog, clicked it into place and drove it home. Then he shoved up the brain plate and heard it lock with a tiny click.

Swiftly he moved along. He had switched the transmogs in the other two almost as soon as Ebenezer had regained his feet and picked up the kit of tools.

"Come on, men," said Ebenezer.
"We have work to do on Lem."

The three went striding off.

Sheridan looked around. Hezekiah and his light had disappeared, galloping off somewhere, more than likely, to see to something else.

The robots still were digging into the heap of merchandise. He ran around the pile to help them. He began pulling stuff from the pile and throwing it aside.

Beside him, Gideon asked: "What did you run into, Steve?"

"Huh?"

"Your face is bloody."

Sheridan put up his hand. His face was wet and sticky. "A piece of gravel must have hit me."

"Better have Hezekiah fix it."

"After Max is out," said Sheridan, going back to work.

They found Maximilian fifteen minutes later, at the bottom of the heap. His body was a total wreck, but he still could talk.

"It sure took you guys long enough," he said.

"Ah, dry up," Reuben said. "I think you engineered this so you could get a new body."

They hauled him out and skidded him along the ground.

Bits of broken arms and legs kept dropping off him. They plunked him on the ground and ran toward the radio shack.

Maximilian squalled after them: "Hey, come back! You can't just dump me here!"

Sheridan squatted down beside him. "Take it easy; Max. The floater hit

the radio shack and there's trouble over there."

"Lemuel? How is Lemuel?"

"Not too good. The boys are working on him."

"I don't know what happened, Steve. We were going all right and all at once the floater bucked us off."

"Two of the motors failed," said Sheridan. "Just why, we'll probably never know, now that the floater's smashed. You sure you feel all right?"

"Positive. But don't let the fellows

fool around. It would be just like them to hold out on a body. Just for laughs. Don't let them."

"You'll have one as soon as we can manage. I imagine Hezekiah is out running down spare bodies."

"It does beat all," said Maximilian. "Here we had all the cargo down - a billion dollars' worth of cargo and we hadn't broken -"

"That's the way it is, Max. You can't beat the averages."

Maximilian chuckled. "You human guys," he said. "You' always figure

averages and have hunches and..."

Gideon came running out of the darkness. "Steve, we got to get those floater motors stopped. They're running wild. One of them might blow."

"But I thought you fellows -"

"Steve, it's more than a spacehand job. It needs a nuclear technician."

"Come with me."

"Hey!" yelled Maximilian.

"I'll be back," said Sheridan.

At the tent, there was no sign of Hezekiah. Sheridan dug wildly through the transmog chest. He finally located a nuclear technician transmog.

"I guess you're elected," he said to Gideon.

"Okay," the robot said. "But make it fast. One of those motors can blow and soak the entire area with radiation. It wouldn't bother us much, but it would be tough on you."

Sheridan clicked out the spacehand transmog, shoved the other in.

"Be seeing you," said Gideon,

dashing from the tent. Sheridan stood staring at the scattered transmogs. Hezekiah will give me hell, he thought.

Napoleon walked into the tent. He had his white apron tucked into the belt. His white cook's hat was canted on his head.

"Steve," he asked, "how would you like a cold supper for tonight?"

"I guess it would be all right."

"That floater didn't only hit the shack. It also flattened the stove."

"A cold supper is fine. Will you do

something for me?"

"V/hat is it?"

"Max is out there, scared and busted up and lonely. He'll feel better in the tent."

Napoleon went out, grumbling:
"Me, a chef, lugging a guy..."

Sheridan began picking up the transmogs, trying to get them racked back in order once again.

Hezekiah returned. He helped pick up the transmogs, began rearranging them.

"Lemuel will be all right, sir," he assured Sheridan. "His nervous system was all tangled up and short-circuiting. They had to cut out great hunks of wiring. About all they have at the moment, sir, is a naked brain. It will take a while to get him back into a body and all hooked up correctly."

"We came out lucky, Hezekiah."

"I suppose you are right, sir. I imagine Napoleon told you about the stove."

Napoleon came in, dragging the wreckage that was Maximilian, and

propped it against the desk.

"Anything else?" he asked with withering sarcasm.

"No, thank you, Nappy. That is all."

"Well," demanded Maximilian, "how about my body?"

"It will take a while," Sheridan told him. "The boys have their hands full with Lemuel. But he's going to be all right."

"That's fine," said Maximilian. "Lem is a damn good robot. It would be a shame to lose him."

"We don't lose many of you," Sheridan observed. "No," said Maximilian. "We're plenty tough. It takes a lot to destroy us."

"Sir," Hezekiah said, "you seem to be somewhat injured. Perhaps I should call in someone and put a medic transmog in him..."

"It's all right," said Sheridan. "Just a scratch. If you could find some water, so I could wash my face?"

"Certainly, sir. If it is only minor damage, perhaps I can patch you up."

He went to find the water.

"That Hezekiah is a good guy, too," said Maximilian, in an expansive mood. "Some of the boys think at times that he's a sort of sissy, but he comes through in an emergency."

"I couldn't get along without Hezekiah," Sheridan answered evenly. "We humans aren't rough and tough like you. We need someone to look after us. Hezekiah's job is in the very best tradition."

"Well, what's eating you?" asked Maximilian. "I said he was a good guy."

Hezekiah came back with a can of water and a towel. "Here's the water, sir. Gideon said to tell you the motors are okay. They have them all shut off."

"I guess that just about buttons it all up - if they're sure of Lemuel," Sheridan said.

"Sir, they seemed very sure."

"Well, fine," said Maximilian, with robotic confidence. "Tomorrow morning we can start on the selling job."

"I imagine so," Sheridan said, standing over the can of water and taking off his jacket.

"This will be an easy one. We'll be all cleaned up and out of here in ninety days or less."

Sheridan shook his head. "No, Max. There's no such thing as an easy one."

He bent above the can and sloshed water on his face and head.

And that was true, he insisted to himself. An alien planet was an alien planet, no matter how you approached it. No matter how thorough the preliminary survey, no matter how astute the planning, there still would always be that lurking factor one could not foresee.

Maybe if a crew could stick to just one sort of job, he thought, it eventually might be possible to work out what amounted to a foolproof routine. But that was not the way it went when one worked for Central Trading.

Central Trading's interests ran to many different things.

Garson IV was sales. Next time it could just as well be a diplomatic mission or a health-engineering job. A man never knew what he and his crew of robots might be in for until he was handed his assignment.

He reached for the towel.

"You remember Carver VII?" he asked Maximilian.

"Sure, Steve. But that was just hard luck. It wasn't Ebenezer's fault he made that small mistake."

"Moving the wrong mountain is not a small mistake," Sheridan observed with pointed patience.

"That one goes right back to Central," Maximilian declared, with a show of outrage. "They had the blueprints labeled wrong..."

"Now let's hold it down," Sheridan advised. "it is past and done with. There's no sense in getting all riled up."

"Maybe so," said Maximilian, "but it burns me. Here we go and make ourselves a record no other team can touch. Then Central pulls this boner and pins the blame on us. I tell you, Central's got too big and clumsy."

And smug as well, thought Sheridan, but he didn't say it. Too big and too complacent in a lot of ways. Take this very planet, for example. Central should have sent a trading team out here many years ago, but instead had fumed and fussed around, had connived

and schemed; they had appointed committees to delve into the situation and there had been occasional mention of it at the meetings of the board, but there had been nothing done until the matter had ground its way through the full and awesome maze of very proper channels.

A little competition, Sheridan told himself, was the very thing that Central needed most. Maybe, if there were another outfit out to get the business, Central Trading might finally rouse itself off its big, fat dignity.

Napoleon came clumping in and banged a plate and glass and bottle

down upon the table. The plate was piled with cold cuts and sliced vegetables; the bottle contained beer. Sheridan looked surprised. "I didn't know we had beer."

"Neither did I," said Napoleon, "but I looked and there it was. Steve, it's getting so you never know what is going on."

Sheridan tossed away the towel and sat down at the desk. He poured a glass of beer.

"I'd offer you some of this," he told Maximilian, "except I know it would rust your guts."

Napoleon guffawed.

"Right as of this moment," Maximilian said, "I haven't any guts to speak of. Most of them dropped out."

Abraham came tramping briskly in. "I hear you have Max hidden out some place."

"Right here, Abe," called Maximilian eagerly.

"You certainly are a mess," said Abraham. "Here we were going fine until you two clowns gummed up the works."

"How is Lemuel?" asked Sheridan.

"He's all right," said Abraham.

"The other two are working on him and they don't really need me. So I came hunting Max." He said to Napoleon, "Here, grab hold and help me get him to the table. We have good light out there."

Grumbling, Napoleon lent a hand.

"I've lugged him around half the night," he complained. "Let's not bother with him. Let's just toss him on the scrap heap."

"It would serve him right,"

Abraham agreed, with pretended wrath.

The two went out, carrying Maximilian between them. He still was dropping parts.

Hezekiah finished with the transmog chest, arranging all the transmogs neatly in their place. He closed the lid with some satisfaction.

"Now that we're alone," he said, "let me see your face." Sheridan' grunted at him through a mouth stuffed full of food.

Hezekiah looked him over. "Just a scratch on the forehead, but the left side of your face, sir, looks as if someone

had sandpapered it. You are sure you don't want to transmog someone? A doctor should have a look at it."

"Just leave it as it is," said Sheridan. "It will be all right."

Gideon stuck his head between the tent flaps. "Hezekiah, Abe is raising hell about the body you found for Max. He says it's an old, rebuilt job. Have you got another one?"

"I can look and see," said Hezekiah. "It was sort of dark. There are several more. We can look them over."

He left with Gideon, and Sheridan

was alone. He went on eating, mentally checking through the happenings of the evening. It had been hard luck, of course, but it could have been far worse. One had to expect accidents and headaches every now and then. After all, they had been downright lucky. Except for some lost time and a floater load of cargo, they had come out unscathed.

All in all, he assured himself, they'd made a good beginning. The cargo sled and ship were swinging in tight orbits, the cargo had been ferried down and on this small peninsula, jutting out into the lake, they had as much security as one might reasonably expect on any alien planet. The Garsonians, of course,

were not belligerent, but even so one could never afford to skip security.

He finished eating and pushed the plate aside. He pulled a portfolio out of a stack of maps and paper work lying on the desk. Slowly he untied the tapes and slid the contents out. For the hundredth time, at least, he started going through the summary of reports brought back to Central Trading by the first two expeditions.

Man first had come to the planet more than twenty years ago to make a preliminary check, bringing back field notes, photographs and samples. It had been mere routine; there had been no

thorough or extensive survey. There had been no great hope nor expectation; it had been simply another job to do. Many planets were similarly spot-checked, and in nineteen out of twenty of them, nothing ever came of it.

But something very definite had come of it in the case of Garson IV.

The something was a tuber that appeared quite ordinary, pretty much, in fact, like an undersize, shriveled-up potato. Brought back by the survey among other odds and ends picked up on the planet, it had in its own good time been given routine examination and analysis by the products laboratory -

with startling results.

From the podar, the tuber's native designation, had been derived a drug which had been given a long and agonizing name and had turned out to be the almost perfect tranquilizer. It appeared to have no untoward side-effects; it was not lethal if taken in too enthusiastic dosage; it was slightly habit-forming, a most attractive feature for all who might be concerned with the sale of it.

To a race vitally concerned with an increasing array of disorders traceable to tension, such a drug was a boon, indeed. For years, a search for such a

tranquilizer had been carried on in the laboratories and here it suddenly was, a gift from a new-found planet.

Within an astonishingly short time, considering the deliberation with which Central Trading usually operated, a second expedition had been sent out to Carson IV, with the robotic team heavily transmogged as trade experts, psychologists and diplomatic functionaries. For two years the team had worked, with generally satisfactory results. When they had blasted off for Earth, they carried a cargo of the podars, a mass of meticulously gathered data and a trade agreement under which the Garsonians agreed to produce and store

the podars against the day when another team should arrive to barter for them.

And that, thought Sheridan, is us.

And it was all right, of course, except that they were late by fifteen years.

For Central Trading, after many conferences, had decided to grow the podar on Earth. This, the economists had pointed out, would be far cheaper than making the long and expensive trips that would be necessary to import them from a distant planet. That it might leave the Garsonians holding the bag insofar as the trade agreement was concerned

seemed not to have occurred to anyone at all. Although, considering the nature of the Garsonians, they probably had not been put out too greatly.

For the Garsonians were a shiftless tribe at best and it had been with some initial difficulty that the second team had been able to explain to them the mechanics and desirability of interstellar trade. Although, in fairness, it might be said of them that, once they understood it, they had been able to develop a creditable amount of eagerness to do business.

Podars had taken to the soil of Earth with commendable adaptiveness.

They had grown bigger and better than they'd ever grown on their native planet. This was not surprising when one took into account the slap-dash brand of agriculture practiced by the Garsonians.

Using the tubers brought back by the second expedition for the initial crop, it required several years of growing before a sufficient supply of seed podars were harvested to justify commercial growing.

But finally that had come about and the first limited supply of the wonder drug had been processed and put on sale with wide advertising fanfare and an accompanying high price.

And all seemed well, indeed. Once again the farmers of the Earth had gained a new cash crop from an alien planet. Finally Man had the tranquillizer which he'd sought for years.

But as the years went by, some of the enthusiasm dimmed. For the drug made from the podars appeared to lose its potency. Either it had not been as good as first believed or there was some factor lacking in its cultivation on Earth.

The laboratories worked feverishly on the problem. The podars were planted in experimental plots on other planets in the hope that the soil or air or

general characteristics there might supply the needed element - if missing element it were.

And Central Trading, in its ponderous, bureaucratic fashion, began preliminary plans for importation of the tubers, remembering belatedly, perhaps, the trade agreement signed many years before. But the plans were not pushed too rapidly, for any day, it was believed, the answer might be found that would save the crop for Earth.

But when the answer came, it ruled out Earth entirely; it ruled out, in fact, every place but the podar's native planet. For, the laboratories found, the

continued potency of the drug relied to a large extent upon the chemical reaction of a protozoan which the podar plants nourished in their roots. And the protozoan flourished, apparently, on Garson IV alone.

So finally, after more than fifteen years, the third expedition had started out for Garson IV. And had landed and brought the cargo down and now was ready, in the morning, to start trading for the podars.

Sheridan flipped idly through the sheets from the portfolio. There was, he thought, actually no need to look at all the data once again. He knew it all by

heart.

The canvas rustled and Hezekiah stepped into the tent. Sheridan looked up. "Good," he said, "you're back. Did you get Max fixed up?"

"We found a body, sir, that proved acceptable."

Sheridan pushed the pile of reports aside. "Hezekiah, what are your impressions?"

"Of the planet, sir?"

"Precisely."

"Well, it's those barns, sir. You saw them, sir, when we were coming down. I believe I mentioned them to you."

Sheridan nodded. "The second expedition taught the natives how to build them. To store the podars in."

"All of them painted red," the robot said. "Just like the barns we have on Christmas cards."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"They look a little weird, sir."

Sheridan laughed. "Weird or not,

those barns will be the making of us. They must be crammed with podars. For fifteen years, the natives have been piling up their podars, more than likely wondering when we'd come to trade..."

"There were all those tiny villages," Hezekiah said, "and those big red barns in the village square. It looked, if you will pardon the observation, sir, like a combination of New England and Lower Slobbovia."

"Well, not quite Lower Slobbovia. Our Garsonian friends are not as bad as that. They may be somewhat shiftless and considerably scatterbrained, but they keep their villages neat and their houses

spic and span."

He pulled a photograph from a pile of data records. "Here, take a look at this."

The photograph showed a village street, neat and orderly and quiet, with its rows of well-kept houses huddled underneath the shade trees. There were rows of gay flowers running along the roadway and there were people - little, happy, gnomelike people - walking in the road.

Hezekiah picked it up. "I will admit, sir, that they look fairly happy. Although, perhaps, not very smart."

Sheridan got to his feet. "I think I'll go out and check around and see how things are going."

"Everything is all right, sir," said Hezekiah. "The boys have the wreckage cleared up. I'm sorry to have to tell you, sir, that not much of the cargo could be saved."

"From the looks of it, I'm surprised we could salvage any of it."

"Don't stay out too long," Hezekiah warned him. "You'll need a good night's sleep. Tomorrow will be a busy day and you'll be out at the crack of dawn."

"I'll be right back," Sheridan promised and ducked out of the tent.

Batteries of camp lights had been erected and now held back the blackness of the night. The sound of hammering came from the chewed-up area where the floater had come down. There was no sign of the floater now and a gang of spacehand robots were busily going about the building of another radio shack. Another gang was erecting a pavilion tent above the conference table, where Abraham and his fellow roboticists still worked on Lemuel and Maximilian. And in front of the cook shack, Napoleon and Gideon were

squatted down, busily shooting craps.

Sheridan saw that Napoleon had set up his outdoors stove again.

He walked over to them and they turned their heads and greeted him, then went back to their game.

Sheridan watched them for a while and then walked slowly off.

He shook his head in some bewilderment - a continuing bewilderment over this robotic fascination with all the games of chance. It was, he supposed, just one of the many things that a human being - any human

being - would never understand.

For gambling seemed entirely pointless from a robotic point of view. They had no property, no money, no possessions. They had no need of any and they had no wish for any - and yet they gambled madly.

It might be, he told himself, no more than an aping of their fellow humans. By his very nature, a robot was barred effectively from participating in most of the human vices. But gambling was something that he could do as easily and perhaps more efficiently than any human could.

But what in the world, he wondered, did they get out of it? No gain, no profit, for there were no such things as gain or profit so far as a robot was concerned. Excitement, perhaps? An outlet for aggressiveness?

Or did they keep a phantom score within their mind - mentally chalking up their gains and loss - and did a heavy winner at a game of chance win a certain prestige that was not visible to Man, that might, in fact, be carefully hidden from a man?

A man, he thought, could never know his robots in their entirety and that might be as well - it would be an unfair

act to strip the final shreds of individuality from a robot.

For if the robots owed much to Man - their conception and their manufacture and their life - by the same token Man owed as much, or even more, to robots.

Without the robots, Man could not have gone as far or fast, or as effectively, out into the Galaxy. Sheer lack of transportation for skilled manpower alone would have held his progress to a crawl.

But with the robots there was no shipping problem.

And with the transmogs there was likewise no shortage of the kind of brains and skills and techniques - as there would otherwise have been - necessary to cope with the many problems found on the far-flung planets.

He came to the edge of the camp area and stood, with the lights behind him, facing out into the dark from which came the sound of running waves and the faint moaning of the wind.

He tilted back his head and stared up at the sky and marveled once again, as he had marveled many other times on many other planets, at the sheer, devastating loneliness and alienness of

unfamiliar stars.

Man pinned his orientation to such fragile things, he thought - to the way the stars were grouped, to how a flower might smell, to the color of a sunset.

But this, of course, was not entirely unfamiliar ground. Two human expeditions already had touched down. And now the third had come, bringing with it a cargo sled piled high with merchandise.

He swung around, away from the lake, and squinted at the area just beyond the camp and there the cargo was, piled in heaps and snugged down with tough

plastic covers from which the starlight glinted. It lay upon the alien soil like a herd of humpbacked monsters bedded for the night.

There was no ship built that could handle that much cargo - no ship that could carry more than a dribble of the merchandise needed for interstellar trade.

For that purpose, there was the cargo sled.

The sled, set in an orbit around the planet of its origin, was loaded by a fleet of floaters, shuttling back and forth. Loaded, the sled was manned by robots

and given the start on its long journey by the expedition ship. By the dint of the engines on the sled itself and the power of the expedition ship, the speed built up and up.

There was a tricky point when one reached the speed of light, but after that it became somewhat easier - although, for interstellar travel, there was need of speed many times in excess of the speed of light.

And so the sled sped on, following close behind the expedition ship, which served as a pilot craft through that strange gray area where space and time were twisted into something other than

normal space and time.

Without robots, the cargo sleds would have been impossible; no human crew could ride a cargo ship and maintain the continuous routine of inspection that was necessary.

Sheridan swung back toward the lake again and wondered if he could actually see the curling whiteness of the waves or if it were sheer imagination. The wind was moaning softly and the stranger stars were there, and out beyond the waters the natives huddled in their villages with the big red barns looming in the starlit village squares.

II

In the morning, the robots gathered around the conference table beneath the gay pavilion tent and Sheridan and Hezekiah lugged out the metal transmog boxes labeled SPECIAL-GARSON IV.

"Now I think," said Sheridan, "that we can get down to business, if you gentlemen will pay attention to me." He opened one of the transmog boxes. "In here, we have some transmogs tailor-made for the job that we're to do.

Because we had prior knowledge of this planet, it was possible to fabricate this special set. So on this job we won't start from scratch, as we are often forced to do..."

"Cut out the speeches, Steve," yelled Reuben, "and let's get started with this business."

"Let him talk," said Abraham. "He certainly has the right to, just like any one of us."

"Thank you, Abe," Sheridan said.

"Go ahead," said Gideon. "Rube's just discharging excess voltage."

"These transmogs are basically sales transmogs, of course. They will provide you with the personality and all the techniques of a salesman. But, in addition to that, they contain as well all the data pertaining to the situation here and the language of the natives, plus a mass of planetary facts."

He unlocked another of the boxes and flipped back the lid. "Shall we get on with it?" he asked.

"Let's get going," demanded Reuben. "I'm tired of this spacehand transmog."

Sheridan made the rounds, with Hezekiah carrying the boxes for him.

Back at his starting point, he shoved aside the boxes, filled now with spacehand and other assorted transmogs. He faced the crew of salesmen.

"How do they feel?" he asked.

"They feel okay," said Lemuel.

"You know, Steve, I never realized until now how dumb a spacehand is."

"Pay no attention to him," Abraham said, disgusted. "He always makes that crack."

Maximilian said soberly: "It shouldn't be too bad. These people have been acclimated to the idea of doing business with us. There should be no initial sales resistance. In fact, they may be anxious to start trading."

"Another thing," Douglas pointed out. "We have the kind of merchandise they've evinced interest in. We won't have to waste our time in extensive surveys to find out what they want."

"The market pattern seems to be a simple one," said Abraham judiciously. "There should be no complications. The principal thing, it would appear, is the setting of a proper rate of exchange -

how many podars they must expect to pay for a shovel or a hoe or other items that we have."

"That will have to come," said Sheridan, "by a process of trial and error."

"We'll have to bargain hard," Lemuel said, "in order to establish a fictitious retail price, then let them have it wholesale. There are many times when that works effectively."

Abraham rose from his chair. "Let's get on with it. I suppose, Steve, that you will stay in camp."

Sheridan nodded. "I'll stay by the radio. I'll expect reports as soon as you can send them."

The robots got on with it. They scrubbed and polished one another until they fairly glittered. They brought out fancy dress hardware and secured it to themselves with magnetic clamps. There were colorful sashes and glistening rows of metals and large chunks of jewelry not entirely in the best of taste, but designed to impress the natives.

They got out their floaters and loaded up with samples from the cargo dump. Sheridan spread out a map and assigned each one a village. They

checked their radios. They made sure they had their order boards.

By noon, they all were off.

Sheridan went back to the tent and sat down in his camp chair. He stared down the shelving beach to the lake, sparkling in the light of the noon-high sun.

Napoleon brought his lunch and hunkered down to talk, gathering his white cook's apron carefully in his lap so it would not touch the ground. He pushed his tall white cap to a rakish angle.

"How you got it figured, Steve?"

"You can never figure one beforehand," Sheridan told him. "The boys are all set for an easy time and I hope they have it. But this is an alien planet and I never bet on aliens."

"You look for any trouble?"

"I don't look for anything. I just sit and wait and hope feebly for the best. Once the reports start coming in..."

"If you worry so much, why not go out yourself?"

Sheridan shook his head. "Look at

it this way, Nappy. I am not a salesman and this crew is. There'd be no sense in my going out. I'm not trained for it."

And, he thought, the fact of the matter was that he was not trained for anything. He was not a salesman and he was not a spacehand; he was not any of the things that the robots were or could be.

He was just a human, period, a necessary cog in a team of robots.

There was a law that said no robot or no group of robots could be assigned a task without human supervision, but that was not the whole of it. It was,

rather, something innate in the robot makeup, not built into them, but something that was there and always might be there - the ever-present link between the robot and his human.

Sent out alone, a robot team would blunder and bog down, would in the end become unstuck entirely - would wind up worse than useless. With a human accompanying them, there was almost no end to their initiative and their capability.

It might, he thought, be their need of leadership, although in very truth the human member of the team sometimes showed little of that. It might be the

necessity for some symbol of authority and yet, aside from their respect and consideration for their human, the robots actually bowed to no authority.

It was something deeper, Sheridan told himself, than mere leadership or mere authority. It was comparable to the affection and rapport which existed as an undying bond between a man and dog and yet it had no tinge of the god-worship associated with the dog.

He said to Napoleon: "How about yourself? Don't you ever hanker to go out? If you'd just say the word, you could."

"I like to cook," Napoleon stated. He dug at the ground with a metal finger. "I guess, Steve, you could say I'm pretty much an old retainer."

"A transmog would take care of that in a hurry."

"And then who'd cook for you? You know you're a lousy cook."

Sheridan ate his lunch and sat in his chair, staring at the lake, waiting for the first reports on the radio.

The job at last was started. All that had gone before - the loading of the cargo, the long haul out through space,

the establishing of the orbits and the unshipping of the cargo - had been no more than preliminary to this very moment.

The job was finally started, but it was far from done. There would be months of work. There would be many problems and a thousand headaches. But they'd get it done, he told himself with a sure pride. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, that could stump this gang of his.

Late in the afternoon, Hezekiah came with the word:

"Abraham is calling, sir. It seems

that there is trouble."

Sheridan leaped to his feet and ran to the shack. He pulled up a chair and reached for the headset. "That you, Abe? How is it going, boy?"

"Badly, Steve," said Abraham. "They aren't interested in doing business. They want the stuff, all right. You can see the way they look at it. But they aren't buying. You know what I think? I don't believe they have anything to trade."

'That's ridiculous, Abe! They've been growing podars all these years. The barns are crammed with them."

"Their barn is all nailed up," said Abraham. "They have bars across the door and the windows boarded. When I tried to walk up to it, they acted sort of ugly."

"I'll be right out," decided Sheridan. "I want to look this over." He stood up and walked out of the shack. "Hezekiah, get the flier started. We're going out and have a talk with Abe. Nappy, you mind the radio. Call me at Abe's village if anything goes wrong."

"I'll stay right here beside it," Napoleon promised him.

Hezekiah brought the flier down in the village square, landing it beside the floater, still loaded with its merchandise.

Abraham strode over to them as soon as they were down. "I'm glad you came, Steve. They want me out of here. They don't want us around."

Sheridan climbed from the flyer and stood stiffly in the square. There was a sense of wrongness - a wrongness with the village and the People - something wrong and different.

There were a lot of natives standing around the square, lounging in the

doorways and leaning against the trees. There was a group of them before the barred door of the massive barn that stood in the center of the square, as if they might be a guard assigned to protect the barn.

"When I first came down," said Abraham, "they crowded around the floater and stood looking at the stuff and you could see they could hardly keep their hands off it. I tried to talk to them, but they wouldn't talk too much, except to say that they were poor. Now all they do is just stand off and glare."

The barn was a monumental structure when gauged against the tiny

houses of the village. It stood up foursquare and solid and entirely without ornament and it was an alien thing - alien of Earth. For, Sheridan realized, it was the same kind of barn that he had seen on the backwoods farms of Earth - the great hip-roof, the huge barn door, the ramp up to the door, and even the louvered cupola that rode astride the ridge-pole.

The man and the two robots stood in a pool of hostile silence and the lounging natives kept on staring at them and there was something decidedly wrong.

Sheridan turned slowly and glanced

around the square and suddenly he knew what the wrongness was.

The place was shabby; it approached the downright squalid. The houses were neglected and no longer neat and the streets were littered. And the people were a piece with all the rest of it.

"Sir," said Hezekiah, "they are a sorry lot."

And they were all of that.

There was something in their faces that had a look of haunting and their shoulders stooped and there was fatigue

upon them.

"I can't understand it," said the puzzled Abraham. "The data says they were a happy-go-lucky bunch, but look at them out there. Could the data have been wrong?"

"No, Abe. It's the people who have changed."

For there was no chance that the data could be wrong. It had been compiled by a competent team, one of the very best, and headed by a human who had long years of experience on many alien planets. The team had spent two years on Garson IV and had made it

very much its business to know this race inside out.

Something had happened to the people. They had somehow lost their gaiety and pride. They had let the houses go uncared for. They had allowed themselves to become a race of ragamuffins.

"You guys stay here," Sheridan said.

"You can't do it, sir," said Hezekiah in alarm.

"Watch yourself," warned Abraham.

Sheridan walked toward the barn. The group before it did not stir. He stopped six feet away.

Close up, they looked more gnomelike than they had appeared in the pictures brought back by the survey team. Little wizened gnomes, they were, but not happy gnomes at all. They were seedy-looking and there was resentment in them and perhaps a dash of hatred. They had a hangdog look and there were some among them who shuffled in discomfiture.

"I see you don't remember us," said Sheridan conversationally. "We were

away too long, much longer than we had thought to be."

He was having, he feared, some trouble with the language. It was, in fact, not the easiest language in the Galaxy to handle. For a fleeting moment, he wished that there were some sort of transmog that could be slipped into the human brain. It would make moments like this so much easier.

"We remember you," said one of them in a sullen voice.

"That's wonderful," said Sheridan with forced enthusiasm. "Are you speaker for this village?"

Speaker because there was no leader, no chief - no government at all beyond a loose, haphazard talking over what daily problems they had, around the local equivalent of the general store, and occasional formless town meetings to decide what to do in their rare crises, but no officials to enforce the decisions.

"I can speak for them," the native said somewhat evasively. He shuffled slowly forward. "There were others like you who came many years ago."

"You were friends to them."

"We are friends to all."

"But special friends to them. To them you made the promise that you would keep the podars."

"Too long to keep the podars. The podars rot away."

"You had the barn to store them in."

"One podar rots. Soon there are two podars rotten. And then a hundred podars rotten. The barn is no good to keep them. No place is any good to keep them."

"But we - those others showed you what to do. You go through the podars

and throw away the rotten ones. That way you keep the other podars good."

The native shrugged.. "Too hard to do. Takes too long."

"But not all the podars rotted. Surely you have some left."

The creature spread his hands. "We have bad seasons, friend. Too little rain, too much. It never comes out right. Our crop is always bad."

"But we have brought things to trade you for the podars. Many things you need. We had great trouble bringing them. We came from far away. It took us

long to come."

"Too bad," the native said. "No podars. As you can see, we are very poor."

"But where have all the podars gone?"

"We," the man said stubbornly, "don't grow podars any more. We changed the podars into another crop. Too much bad luck with podars."

"But those plants out in the fields?"

"We do not call them podars."

"It doesn't matter what you call them. Are they podars or are they not?"

"We do not grow the podars."

Sheridan turned on his heel and walked back to the robots. "No soap," he said. "Something's happened here. They gave me a poor-mouth story and finally, as a clincher, said they don't grow podars any more."

"But there are fields of podars," declared Abraham. "If the data's right, they've actually increased their acreage. I checked as I was coming in. They're growing more right now than they ever grew before."

"I know," said Sheridan. "It makes no sense at all. Hezekiah, maybe you should give base a call and find what's going on."

"One thing," Abraham pointed out. "What about this trade agreement that we have with them? Has it any force?"

Sheridan shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe we can wave it in their faces, just to see what happens. It might serve as a sort of psychological wedge a little later on, once we get them softened up a bit."

"If we get them softened up."

"This is our first day and this is only one village."

"You don't think we could use the agreement as a club?"

"Look, Abe, I'm not a lawyer, and we don't have a lawyer transmog along with us for a damned good reason - there isn't any legal setup whatever on this planet. But let's say we could haul them into a galactic court. Who signed for the planet? Some natives we picked as its representatives, not the natives themselves; their signing couldn't bind anything or anybody. The whole business of drawing up a contract was nothing but an impressive ceremony

without any legal basis - it was just meant to awe the natives into doing business with us."

"But the second expedition must have figured it would work."

"Well, sure. The Garsonians have a considerable sense of morality - individually and as families. Can we make that sense of morality extend to bigger groups? That's our problem."

"That means we have to figure out an angle," said Abraham. "At least for this one village."

"If it's just this village," declared

Sheridan, "we can let them sit and wait. We can get along without it."

But it wasn't just one village. It was all the rest of them, as well.

Hezekiah brought the news.

"Napoleon says everyone is having trouble," he announced. "No one sold a thing. From what he said, it's just like this all over."

"We better call in all the boys," said Sheridan. "This is a situation that needs some talking over. We'll have to plan a course of action. We can't go flying off at a dozen different angles."

"And we'd better pull up a hill of podars," Abraham suggested, "and see if they are podars or something else."

III

Sheridan inserted a chemist transmog into Ebenezer's brain case and Ebenezer ran off an analysis.

He reported to the sales conference seated around the table.

"There's just one difference," he said, "The podars that I analyzed ran a higher percentage of calenthropodensia - that's the drug used as a tranquilizer - than the podars that were brought in by the first and second expeditions. The factor is roughly ten per cent, although that might vary from one field to another, depending upon weather and soil conditions - I would suspect especially soil conditions."

"Then they lied," said Abraham, "when they said they weren't growing podars."

"By their own standards," observed Silas, "they might not have lied to us."

You can't always spell out alien ethics - satisfactorily, that is - from the purely human viewpoint. Ebenezer says that the composition of the tuber has changed to some extent. Perhaps due to better cultivation, perhaps to better seed or to an abundance of rainfall or a heavier concentration of the protozoan in the soil - or maybe because of something the natives did deliberately to make it shift..."

"Si," said Gideon, "I don't see what you are getting at."

"Simply this. If they knew of the shift or change, it might have given them an excuse to change the podar name. Or

their language or their rules of grammar might have demanded that they change it. Or they may have applied some verbal mumbo-jumbo so they would have an out. And it might even have been a matter of superstition. The native told Steve at the village that they'd had bad luck with podars. So perhaps they operated under the premise that if they changed the name, they likewise changed the luck."

"And this is ethical?"

"To them, it might be. You fellows have been around enough to know that the rest of the Galaxy seldom operates on what we view as logic or ethics."

"But I don't see," said Gideon, "why they'd want to change the name unless it was for the specific purpose of not trading with us - so they could tell us they weren't growing podars."

"I think that is exactly why they changed the name," Maximilian said. "It's all a piece with those nailed-up barns. They knew we had arrived. They could hardly have escaped knowing. We had clouds of floaters going up and down and they must have seen them."

"Back at that village," said Sheridan, "I had the distinct impression that they had some reluctance telling us

they weren't growing podars. They had left it to the last, as if it were a final clincher they'd hoped they wouldn't have to use, a desperate, last-ditch argument when all the other excuses failed to do the trick and -"

"They're just trying to jack up the price," Lemuel interrupted in a flat tone.

Maximilian shook his head. "I don't think so. There was no price set to start with. How can you jack it up when you don't know what it is?"

"Whether there was a price or not," said Lemuel testily, "they still could create a situation where they could hold

us up."

"There is another factor that might be to our advantage," Maximilian said. "If they changed the name so they'd have an excuse not to trade with us, that argues that the whole village feels a moral obligation and has to justify its refusal."

"You mean by that," said Sheridan, "that we can reason with them. Well, perhaps we can. I think at least we'll try."

"There's too much wrong," Douglas put in. "Too many things have changed. The new name for the podars and the

nailed-up barns and the shabbiness of the villages and the people. The whole planet's gone to pot. It seems to me our job - the first job we do - is to find what happened here. Once we find that out, maybe we'd have a chance of selling."

"I'd like to see the inside of those barns," said Joshua.

"What have they got in there? Do you think there's any chance we might somehow get a look?"

"Nothing short of force," Abraham told him. "I have a hunch that while we're around, they'll guard them night and day."

"Force is out," said Sheridan. "All of you know what would happen to us if we used force short of self-defense against an alien people. The entire team would have its license taken away. You guys would spend the rest of your lives scrubbing out headquarters."

"Maybe we could just sneak around. Do some slick detective work."

"That's an idea, Josh," Sheridan said. "Hezekiah, do you know if we have some detective transmogs?"

"Not that I know of, sir. I have never heard of any team using them."

"Just as well," Abraham observed. "We'd have a hard time disguising ourselves."

"If we had a volunteer," Lemuel said with some enthusiasm, "we could redesign him..."

"It would seem to me," said Silas, "that what we have to do is figure out all the different approaches that are possible. Then we can try each approach on a separate village till we latch onto one that works."

"Which presupposes," Maximilian pointed out, "that each village will react

the same."

Silas said: "I would assume they would. After all, the culture is the same and their communications must be primitive. No village would know what was happening in another village until some little time had passed, which makes each village a perfectly isolated guinea pig for our little tests."

"Si, I think you're right," said Sheridan. "Somehow or other we have to find a way to break their sales resistance. I don't care what kind of prices we have to pay for the podars at the moment. I'd be willing to let them skin us alive to start with. Once we have

them buying, we can squeeze down the price and come out even in the end. After all, the main thing is to get that cargo sled of ours loaded down with all the podars it can carry."

"All right," said Abraham. "Let's get to work."

They got to work. They spent the whole day at it. They mapped out the various sales approaches. They picked the villages where each one would be tried. Sheridan divided the robots into teams and assigned a team to each project. They worked out every detail. They left not a thing to chance.

Sheridan sat down to his supper table with the feeling that they had it made - if one of the approaches didn't work, another surely would. The trouble was that, as he saw it, they had done no planning. They had been so sure that this was an easy one that they had plunged ahead into straight selling without any thought upon the matter.

In the morning, the robots went out, full of confidence.

Abraham's crew had been assigned to a house-to-house campaign and they worked hard and conscientiously. They didn't miss a single house in the entire village. At every house, the answer had

been no. Sometimes it was a firm but simple no; sometimes it was a door slammed in the face; at other times, it was a plea of poverty.

One thing was plain: Individual Garsonians could be cracked no more readily than Garsonians en masse.

Gideon and his crew tried the sample racket - handing out gift samples door to door with the understanding they would be back again to display their wares. The Garsonian householders weren't having any. They refused to take the samples.

Lemuel headed up the lottery

project. A lottery, its proponents argued, appealed to basic greed. And this lottery had been rigged to carry maximum appeal. The price was as low as it could be set - one podar for a ticket. The list of prizes offered was just this side of fabulous. But the Garsonians, as it appeared, were not a greedy people. Not a ticket was sold.

And the funny thing about it - the unreasonable, maddening, impossible thing about it - was that the Garsonians seemed tempted.

"You could see them fighting it," Abraham reported at the conference that night. "You could see they wanted

something we had for sale, but they'd steel themselves against it and they never weakened."

"We may have them on the very edge," said Lemuel. "Maybe just a little push is all it will take. Do you suppose we could start a whispering campaign? Maybe we could get it rumored that some other villages are buying right and left. That should weaken the resistance."

But Ebenezer was doubtful. "We have to dig down to causes. We have to find out what is behind this buyers' strike. It may be a very simple thing, if we only knew..."

Ebenezer took out a team to a distant village. They hauled along with them a pre-fabricated supermarket, which they set up in the village square. They racked their wares attractively. They loaded the place with glamor and excitement. They installed loud-speakers all over town to bellow out then bargains.

Abraham and Gideon headed up two talking-billboard crews. They ranged far and wide, setting up their billboards splashed with attractive color, and installing propaganda tapes.

Sheridan had transmogged Oliver and Silas into semantics experts and they

had engineered the tapes - a careful, skillful job. They did not bear down too blatantly on the commercial angle, although it certainly was there. The tapes were cuddly in spots and candid in others. At all times, they rang with deep sincerity. They sang the praises of the Garsonians for the decent, upstanding folks they were; they preached pithy homilies on honesty and fairness and the keeping of contracts; they presented the visitors as a sort of cross between public benefactors and addle-pated nitwits who could easily be outsmarted;

The tapes ran day and night. They pelted the defenseless Garsonians with a smooth, sleek advertising - and the

effects should have been devastating, since the Garsonians were entirely unfamiliar with any kind of advertising.

Lemuel stayed behind at base and tramped up and down the beach, with his hands clenched behind his back, thinking furiously. At times he stopped his pacing long enough to scribble frantic notes, jotting down ideas.

Lemuel was trying to arrive at some adaptation of an old sales gag that he felt sure would work if he could only get it figured out - the ancient I-am-working-my-way-through-college wheeze.

Joshua and Thaddeus came to

Sheridan for a pair of playwright transmogs. Sheridan said they had none, but Hezekiah, forever optimistic, ferreted into the bottom of the transmog chest. He came up with one transmog labeled auctioneer and another public speaker. They were the closest he could find.

Disgusted, the two rejected them and retired into seclusion, working desperately and as best they could on a medicine show routine.

For example, how did one write jokes for an alien people? What would they regard as funny? The off-color joke - oh, very fine, except that one would

have to know in some detail the sexual life of the people it was aimed at. The mother-in-law joke - once again one would have to know; there were a lot of places where mothers-in-law were held in high regard, and other places where it was bad taste to even mention them. The dialect routine, of course, was strictly out, as it well deserved to be. Also, so far as the Garsonians were concerned, was the business slicker joke. The Garsonians were no commercial people; such a joke would sail clear above their heads.

But Joshua and Thaddeus, for all of that, were relatively undaunted. They requisitioned the files of data from

Sheridan and spent hours poring over them, analyzing the various aspects of Garsonian life that might be safely written into their material. They made piles of notes. They drafted intricate charts showing relationships of Garsonian words and the maze of native social life. They wrote and rewrote and revised and polished. Eventually, they hammered out their script.

"There's nothing like a show," Joshua told Sheridan with conviction, "to loosen up a people. You get them feeling good and they lose their inhibitions. Besides, you have made them become somewhat indebted to you. You have entertained them and naturally

they must feel the need to reciprocate."

"I hope it works" said Sheridan, somewhat doubtful and discouraged.

For nothing else was working.

In the distant village, the Garsonians had unbent sufficiently to visit the supermarket - to visit, not to buy. It almost seemed as if to them the market was some great museum or showplace. They would file down the aisles and goggle at the merchandise and at times reach out and touch it, but they didn't buy. They were, in fact, insulted if one suggested perhaps they'd like to buy.

In the other villages, the billboards had at first attracted wide attention. Crowds had gathered around them and had listened by the hour. But the novelty had worn off by now and they paid the tapes very little attention. And they still continued to ignore the robots. Even more pointedly, they ignored or rebuffed all attempts to sell.

It was disheartening.

Lemuel gave up his pacing and threw away his notes. He admitted he was licked. There was no way, on Garson IV, to adapt the idea of the college salesman.

Baldwin headed up a team that tried to get the whisper campaign started. The natives flatly disbelieved that any other village would go out and buy.

There remained the medicine show and Joshua and Thaddeus had a troupe rehearsing. The project was somewhat hampered by the fact that even Hezekiah could not dig up any actor transmogs, but, even so, they were doing well.

Despite the failure of everything they had tried, the robots kept going out to the villages, kept plugging away, kept on trying to sell, hoping that one day they would get a clue, a hint, an indication

that might help them break the shell of reserve and obstinacy set up by the natives;

One day Gideon, out alone, radioed to base.

"There's something out here underneath a tree that you should take a look at," he told Sheridan.

"Something?"

"A different kind of being. It looks intelligent."

"A Garsonian?"

"Humanoid, all right, but it's no Garsonian."

"I'll be right out," said Sheridan.
"You stay there so you can point it out to me."

"It has probably seen me," Gideon said, "but I did not approach it. I thought you might like first whack at it yourself."

As Gideon had said, the creature was sitting underneath a tree. It had a glittering cloth spread out and an ornate jug set out and was taking things out of a receptacle that probably was a hamper.

It was more attractively humanoid

than the Garsonians. Its features were finely chiseled and its body had a look of lithe ranginess, it was dressed in the richest fabrics and was all decked out with jewels. It had a decided social air about it.

"Hello, friend," Sheridan said in Garsonian.

The creature seemed to understand him, but it smiled in a superior manner and seemed not to be too happy at Sheridan's intrusion.

"Perhaps," it finally said, "you have the time to sit down for a while."

Which, the way that it was put, was a plain and simple invitation for Sheridan to say no, he was sorry, but he hadn't and he must be getting on.

"Why, certainly," said Sheridan. "Thank you very much." He sat down and watched the creature continue to extract things from the hamper.

"It's slightly difficult," the creature told him, "for us to communicate in this barbaric language. But I suppose it's the best we can do. You do not happen to know Ballic, do you?"

"I'm sorry," said Sheridan. "I've never heard of it."

"I had thought you might. It is widely used."

"We can get along," said Sheridan quietly, "with the language native to this planet."

"Oh, certainly," agreed the creature. "I presume I'm not trespassing. If I am, of course -"

"Not at all. I'm glad to find you here."

"I would offer you some food, but I hesitate to do so. Your metabolism undoubtedly is not the same as mine. It

should pain me to poison you."

Sheridan nodded to indicate his gratitude. The food indeed was tempting. All of it was packaged attractively and some of it looked so delectable that it set the mouth to watering.

"I often come here for..." The creature hunted for the Garsonian word and there wasn't any.

Sheridan tried to help him out. "I think in my language I would call it picnic."

"An eating-out-of-doors," the stranger said. "That is the nearest I can

come in the language of our host."

"We have the same idea."

The creature brightened up considerably at this evidence of mutual understanding. "I think, my friend, that we have much in common. Perhaps I could leave some of this food with you and you could analyze it. Then the next time I come, you could join me."

Sheridan shook his head. "I doubt I'll stay much longer."

"Oh," the stranger said, and he seemed pleased at it. "So you're a transitory being, too. Wings passing in

the night. One hears a rustle and then the sound is gone forever."

"A most poetic thought," said Sheridan, "and a most descriptive one."

"Although," the creature said, "I come here fairly often. I've grown to love this planet. It is such a fine spot for an eating-out-of-doors. So restful and simple and unhurried. It is not cluttered up with activity and the people are so genuine, albeit somewhat dirty and very, very stupid. But I find it in my heart to love them for their lack of sophistication and their closeness to the soil and the clear-eyed view of life and their uncomplicated living of that life."

He halted his talk and cocked an eye at Sheridan.

"Don't you find it so, my friend?"

"Yes, of course I do," agreed Sheridan, rather hurriedly.

"There are so few places in the Galaxy," mourned the stranger, "where one can be alone in comfort. Oh, I do not mean alone entirely, or even physically. But an aloneness in the sense that there is space to live, that one is not pushed about by boundless, blind ambitions or smothered by the impact of other personalities. There are, of course, the

lonely planets which are lonely only by the virtue of their being impossible for one to exist upon. These we must rule out."

He ate a little, daintily, and in a mincing manner. But he took a healthy snort from the ornate jug.

"This is excellent," said the creature, holding out the jug. "Are sure you do not want to chance it?"

"I think I'd better not."

"I suppose it's wise of you," the stranger admitted. "Life is not a thing that a person parts from without due

consideration."

He had another drink, then put the jug down in his lap and sat there fondling it.

"Not that I am one," he said, "to extoll the virtue of living above all other things. Surely there must be other facets of the universal pattern that have as much to offer."

They spent a pleasant afternoon together.

When Sheridan went back to the flier, the creature had finished off the jug and was sprawled, happily pickled,

among the litter of the picnic.

IV

Grasping at straws, Sheridan tried to fit the picnicking alien into the pattern, but there was no place where he'd fit.

Perhaps, after all, he was no more than what he seemed - a flitting dilettante with a passion for a lonely eating-out-of-doors and an addiction to the bottle.

Yet he knew the native language

and he had said he came here often and that in itself was more than merely strange. With apparently the entire Galaxy in which to flit around, why should he gravitate to Garson IV, which, to the human eye, at least, was a most unprepossessing planet?

And another thing - how had he gotten here?

"Gideon," asked Sheridan, "did you see, by any chance, any sort of conveyance parked nearby that our friend could have traveled in?"

Gideon shook his head. "Now that you mention it, I am sure there wasn't. I

would have noticed it."

"Has it occurred to you, sir," inquired Hezekiah, "that he may have mastered the ability of teleportation? It is not impossible. There was that race out on Pilico..

"That's right," said Sheridan, "but the Pilicoans were good for no more than a mile or so at a time. You remember how they went popping along, like a jack rabbit making mile-long jumps, but making them so fast that you couldn't see him jump. This gent must have covered light-years. He asked me about a language that I never heard of. Indicated that it is widely spoken in at

least some parts of the Galaxy."

"You are worrying yourself unduly, sir," cautioned Hezekiah. "We have more important things than this galivanting alien to trouble ourselves about."

"You're right," said Sheridan. "If we don't get this cargo moving, it will be my neck."

But he couldn't shake entirely the memory of the afternoon. He went back, in his mind, through the long and idle chatter and found, to his amazement, that it had been completely idle. So far as he could recall, the creature had told him

nothing of itself. For three solid hours or more, it had talked almost continuously and in all that time had somehow managed to say exactly nothing.

That evening, when he brought the supper, Napoleon squatted down beside the chair, gathering his spotless apron neatly in his lap.

"We are in a bad way, aren't we?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose you could say we are."

"What will we do, Steve, if we can't move the stuff at all - if we can't get

any podars?"

"Nappy," said Sheridan, "I've been trying very hard not to think of it."

But now that Napoleon had brought it up, he could well imagine the reaction of Central Trading if he should have to haul a billion-dollar cargo back intact. He could imagine, a bit more vividly, what might be said to him if he simply left it here and went back home without it.

No matter how he did it, he had to sell the cargo!

If he didn't, his career was in a

sling.

Although there was more, he realized, than just his career at stake. The whole human race was involved.

There was a real and pressing need for the tranquilizer made from podar tubers. A search for such a drug had started centuries before and the need of it was underlined by the fact that through all those centuries the search had never faltered. It was something that Man needed badly - that Man, in fact, had needed badly since the very moment he'd become something more than animal.

And here, on this very planet, was

the answer to that terrible human need - an answer denied and blocked by the stubbornness of a shiftless, dirty, backward people.

"If we only had this planet," he said, speaking more to himself than to Napoleon, "if we could only take it over, we could grow all the podars that we needed. We'd make it one big field and we'd grow a thousand times more podars than these natives ever grew."

"But we can't," Napoleon said. "It is against the law."

"Yes, Nappy, you are right. Very much against the law." For the

Garsonians were intelligent - not startlingly so, but intelligent, at least, within the meaning of the law.

And you could do nothing that even hinted of force against an intelligent race. You couldn't even buy or lease their land, for the law would rule that in buying one would be dispossessing them of the inalienable rights of all alien intelligences.

You could work with them and teach them - that was very laudable. But the Garsonians were almost unteachable. You could barter with them if you were very careful that you did not cheat them too outrageously. But the Garsonians

refused to barter.

"I don't know what we'll do," Sheridan told Napoleon. "How are we going to find a way?"

"I have a sort of suggestion. If we could introduce these natives to the intricacies of dice, we might finally get somewhere. We robots, as you probably know, are very good at it."

Sheridan choked on his coffee. He slowly and with great care set the cup down.

"Ordinarily," he told Napoleon solemnly, "I would frown upon such

tactics. But with the situation as it stands, why don't you get some of the boys together and have a try at it?"

"Glad to do it, Steve."

"And... uh, Nappy..."

"Yes, Steve?"

"I presume you'd pick the best crapshooters in the bunch."

"Naturally," said Napoleon, getting up and smoothing his apron.

Joshua and Thaddeus took their troupe to a distant village in entirely

virgin territory, untouched by any of the earlier selling efforts, and put on the medicine show.

It was an unparalleled success. The natives rolled upon the ground, clutching at their bellies, helpless with laughter. They howled and gasped and wiped their streaming eyes. They pounded one another on the back in appreciation of the jokes. They'd never seen anything like it in all their lives - there had never been anything like it on all of Garson IV. And while they were weak with merriment, while they were still well-pleased, at the exact psychological moment when all their inhibitions should be down and all stubbornness and

hostility be stilled, Joshua made the sales pitch.

The laughter stopped. The merriment went away. The audience simply stood and stared.

The troupe packed up and came trailing home, deep in despondency.

Sheridan sat in his tent and faced the bleak prospect. Outside the tent, the base was still as death. There was no happy talk or singing and no passing laughter. There was no neighborly tramping back and forth.

"Six weeks," Sheridan said bitterly

to Hezekiah. "Six weeks and not a sale. We've done everything we can and we've not come even close."

He clenched his fist and hit the desk. "If we could only find what the trouble is! They want our merchandise and still they refuse to buy. What is the holdup, Hezekiah? Can you think of anything?"

Hezekiah shook his head. "Nothing, sir. I'm stumped. We all are."

"They'll crucify me back at Central," Sheridan declared. "They'll nail me up and keep me as a horrible example for the next ten thousand years."

There've been failures before, but none like this."

"I hesitate to say this, sir," said Hezekiah, "but we could take it on the lam. Maybe that's the answer. The boys would go along. Theoretically they're loyal to Central, but deep down at the bottom of it, it's you they're really loyal to. We could load up the cargo and that would give us capital and we'd have a good head start..."

"No," Sheridan said firmly. "We'll try a little longer and we may solve the situation. If not, I face the music."

He scraped his hand across his

jaw.

"Maybe," he said, "Nappy and his crap-shooters can turn the trick for us. It's fantastic, sure, but stranger things have happened."

Napoleon and his pals came back, sheepish and depressed. "They beat the pants off us," the cook told Sheridan in awe. "Those boys are really naturals. But when we tried to pay our bets, they wouldn't take our stuff!"

"We have to try to arrange a powwow," said Sheridan, "and talk it out with them, although I hold little hope for it. Do you think, Napoleon, if we

came clean and told them what a spot we're in, it would make a difference?"

"No, I don't," Napoleon said.

"If they only had a government," observed Ebenezer, who had been a member of Napoleon's gambling team, "we might get somewhere with a powwow. Then you could talk with someone who represented the entire population. But this way you'll have to talk with each village separately and that will take forever."

"We can't help it, Eb," said Sheridan. "It's all we have left."

But before any powwow could be arranged, the podar harvest started. The natives toiled like beavers in the fields, digging up the tubers, stacking them to dry, packing them in carts and hauling them to the barns by sheer manpower, for the Garsonians had no draft animals.

They dug them up and hauled them to the barns, the very barns where they'd sworn that they had no podars.

But that was not to wonder at when one stopped to think of it, for the natives had also sworn that they grew no podars.

They did not open the big barn doors, as one would have normally

expected them to do. They simply opened a tiny, man-size door set into a bigger door and took the podars in that way. And when any of the Earth party hove in sight, they quickly stationed a heavy guard around the entire square.

"We'd better let them be," Abraham advised Sheridan. "If we try to push them, we may have trouble in our lap."

So the robots pulled back to the base and waited for the harvest to end. Finally it was finished and Sheridan counseled lying low for a few days more to give the Garsonians a chance to settle back to their normal routine.

Then they went out again and this time Sheridan rode along, on one of the floaters with Abraham and Gideon.

The first village they came to lay quiet and lazy in the sun. There was not a creature stirring.

Abraham brought the floater down into the square and the three stepped off.

The square was empty and the place was silent - a deep and deathly silence.

Sheridan felt the skin crawling up his back, for there was a stealthy, unnatural menace in the noiseless

emptiness.

"They may be laying for us," suggested Gideon. "I don't think so," said Abraham. "Basically they are peaceful."

They moved cautiously across the square and walked slowly down a street that opened from the square.

And still there was no living thing in sight. And stranger still - the doors of some of the houses stood open to the weather and the windows seemed to watch them out of blind eyes, with the colorful crude curtains gone.

"Perhaps," Gideon suggested, "they

may have gone away to some harvest festival or something of that nature."

"They wouldn't leave their doors wide open, even for a day," declared Abraham. "I've lived with them for weeks and I've studied them. I know what they would do. They'd have closed the doors very carefully and tried them to be sure that they were closed."

"But maybe the wind...?"

"Not a chance," insisted Abraham. "One door, possibly. But I see four of them from here."

"Someone has to take a look," said

Sheridan. "It might as well be me."

He turned in at a gate where one of the doors stood open and went slowly up the path. He halted at the threshold and peered in. The room beyond was empty. He stepped into the house and went from room to room and all the rooms were empty - not simply of the natives, but of everything. There was no furniture and the utensils and the tools were gone from hooks and racks. There was no scrap of clothing. There was nothing left behind. The house was dead and bare and empty, a shabby and abandoned thing discarded by its people.

He felt a sense of guilt creep into

his soul. What if we drove them off?
What if we hounded them until they'd
rather flee than face us?

But that was ridiculous, he told
himself. There must be some other
reason for this incredibly complete mass
exodus.

He went back down the walk.
Abraham and Gideon went into other
houses. All of them were empty.

"It may be this village only,"
suggested Gideon. "The rest may be
quite normal."

But Gideon was wrong.

Back at the floater, they got in touch with base.

"I can't understand it," said Hezekiah, "I've had the same report from four other teams. I was about to call you, sir."

"You'd better get out every floater that you can," said Sheridan. "Check all the villages around. And keep a lookout for the people. They may be somewhere in the country. There's a possibility they're at a harvest festival."

"If they're at a festival, sir," asked Hezekiah, "why did they take their

belongings? You don't take along your furniture when you attend a festival."

"I know," said Sheridan. "You put your finger on it. Get the boys out, will you?"

"There's just a possibility," Gideon offered, "that they are changing villages. Maybe there's a tribal law that says they have to build a new village every so often. It might have its roots in an ancient sanitation law that the camp must be moved at stated intervals."

"It could be that," Sheridan said wearily. "We'll have to wait and see."

Abraham thumbed a fist toward the barn.

Sheridan hesitated, then threw caution to the winds.

"Go ahead," he said.

Gideon stalked up the ramp and reached the door. He put out a hand and grasped one of the planks nailed across the door. He wrenched and there was an anguished shriek of tortured nails ripping from the wood and the board came free. Another plank came off and then another one and Gideon put his shoulder to the door and half of it swung open.

Inside, in the dimness of the barn, was the dull, massive shine of metal - a vast machine sitting on the driveway floor.

Sheridan stiffened with a cold, hollow sense of terror.

It was wrong, he thought. There could be no machine.

The Garsonians had no business having a machine. Their culture was entirely non-mechanical. The best they had achieved so far had been the hoe and wheel, and even yet they had not been able to put the hoe and wheel together to

make themselves a plow.

They had had no machine when the second expedition left some fifteen years ago, and in those fifteen years they could not have spanned the gap. In those fifteen years, from all surface indications, they had not advanced an inch.

And yet the machine stood in the driveway of the barn.

It was a fair-sized cylinder, set on end and with a door in one side of it. The upper end of it terminated in a dome-shaped cap. Except for the door, it resembled very much a huge and snub-nosed bullet.

Interference, thought Sheridan.

There had been someone here between the time the second expedition left and the third one had arrived.

"Gideon," he said.

"What is it, Steve?"

"Go back to base and bring the transmog chest. Tell Hezekiah to get my tent and all the other stuff over here as soon as he is able. Call some of the boys off reconnaissance. We have work to do."

There had been someone here, he

thought - and most certainly there had. A very urbane creature who sat beneath a tree beside a spread-out picnic cloth, swigging at his jug and talking for three solid hours without saying anything at all!

V

The messenger from Central Trading brought his small ship down to one side of the village square, not far from where Sheridan's tent, was pitched. He slid back the visi-dome and climbed

out of his seat.

He stood for a moment, shining in the sun, during which he straightened his SPECIAL COURIER badge, which had become askew upon his metal chest. Then he walked deliberately toward the barn, heading for Sheridan, who sat upon the ramp.

"You are Sheridan?" he asked.

Sheridan nodded, looking him over. He was a splendid thing.

"I had trouble finding you. Your base seems to be deserted."

"We ran into some difficulty,"
Sheridan said quietly.

"Not too serious, I trust I see your
cargo is untouched."

"Let me put it this way - we haven't
been bored."

"I see," the robot said, disappointed
that an explanation was not immediately
forthcoming. "My name is Tobias and I
have a message for you."

"I'm listening."

Sometimes, Sheridan told himself,
these headquarters robots needed taking

down a peg or two.

"It is a verbal message. I can assure you that I am thoroughly briefed. I can answer any questions you may wish to ask."

"Please," said Sheridan. "The message first."

"Central Trading wishes to inform you that they have been offered the drug calenthropodensia in virtually unlimited supply by a firm which describes itself as Galactic Enterprises. We would like to know if you can shed any light upon the matter."

"Galactic Enterprises," said Sheridan. "I've never heard of them."

"Neither has Central Trading. I don't mind telling you that we're considerably upset."

"I should imagine you would be."

Tobias squared his shoulders. "I have been instructed to point out to you that you were sent to Garson IV to obtain a cargo of podars, from which this drug is made, and that the assignment, in view of the preliminary work already done upon the planet, should not have been so difficult that -"

"Now, now," cautioned Sheridan.
"Let us keep our shirts on. If it will quiet your conscience any, you may consider for the record that I have accepted the bawling out you're supposed to give me."

"But you -"

"I assume," said Sheridan, "that Galactic Enterprises is quoting a good stiff price on this drug of theirs."

"It's highway robbery. What Central Trading has sent me to find out -"

"Is whether I am going to bring in a cargo of podars. At the moment, I can't

tell you."

"But I must take back my report!"

"Not right now, you aren't. I won't be able to make a report to you for several days at least. You'll have to wait."

"But my instructions are -"

"Suit yourself," Sheridan said sharply. "Wait for it or go back without it. I don't give a damn which you do."

He got up from the ramp and walked into the barn.

The robots, he saw, had finally pried or otherwise dislodged the cap from the big machine and had it on the side on the driveway floor, tilted to reveal the innards of it.

"Steve," said Abraham bitterly, "take a look at it."

Sheridan took a look. The inside of the cap was a mass of fused metal.

"There were some working parts in there," said Gideon, "but they have been destroyed."

Sheridan scratched his head. "Deliberately? A self-destruction

relay?"

Abraham nodded. "They apparently were all finished with it. If we hadn't been here, I suppose they would have carted this machine and the rest of them back home, wherever that may be. But they couldn't take a chance of one of them falling in our hands. So they pressed the button or whatever they had to do and the entire works went pouf."

"But there are other machines. Apparently one in every barn."

"Probably just the same as this," said Lemuel, rising from his knees beside the cap.

"What's your guess?" asked Sheridan.

"A matter transference machine, a teleporter, whatever you want to call it," Abraham told him. "Not deduced, of course, from anything in the machine itself, but from the circumstances. Look at this barn. There's not a podar in it. Those podars went somewhere. This picnicking friend of yours -"

"They call themselves," said Sheridan, "Galactic Enterprises. A messenger just arrived. He says they offered Central Trading a deal on the podar drug."

"And now Central Trading," Abraham supplied, "enormously embarrassed and financially outraged, will pin the blame on us because we've delivered not a podar."

"I have no doubt of it," said Sheridan. "It all depends upon whether or not we can locate these native friends of ours."

"I would think that most unlikely," Gideon said. "Our reconnaissance showed all the villages empty throughout the entire planet. Do you suppose they might have left in these machines? If they'd transport podars, they'd probably

transport people."

"Perhaps," said Lemuel, making a feeble joke, "everything that begins with the letter p."

"What are the chances of finding how they work?" asked Sheridan. "This is something that Central could make a lot of use of."

Abraham shook his head. "I can't tell you, Steve. Out of all these machines on the planet, which amounts to one in every barn, there is a certain mathematical chance that we might find one that was not destroyed."

"But even if we did," said Gideon, "there is an excellent chance that it would immediately destroy itself if we tried to tamper with it."

"And if we don't find one that is not destroyed?"

"There is a chance," Lemuel admitted. "All of them would not destroy themselves to the same degree, of course. Nor would the pattern of destruction always be the same. From say, a thousand of them, you might be able to work out a good idea of what kind of machinery there was in the cone."

"And say we could find out what kind of machinery was there?"

"That's a hard one to answer, Steve," Abraham said. "Even if we had one complete and functioning, I honestly don't know if we could ferret out the principle to the point where we could duplicate it. You must remember that at no time has the human race come even close to something of this nature."

It made a withering sort of sense to Sheridan. Seeing a totally unfamiliar device work, even having it blueprinted in exact detail, would convey nothing whatever if the theoretical basis was missing. It was, completely, and there

was a great deal less available here than a blueprint or even working model.

"They used those machines to transport the podars," he said, "and possibly to transport the people. And if that is true, it must be the people went voluntarily - we'd have known if there was force involved. Abe, can you tell me: Why would-the people go?" "I wouldn't know," said Abraham. "All I have now is a physicist transmog. Give me one on sociology and I'll wrestle with the problem."

There was a shout outside the barn and they whirled toward the door. Ebenezer was coming up the ramp and in

his arms he carried a tiny, dangling form.

"It's one of them," gasped Gideon.

"It's a native, sure enough!"

Ebenezer knelt and placed the little native tenderly on the floor. "I found him in the field. He was lying in a ditch. I'm afraid he's done for."

Sheridan stepped forward and bent above the native. It was an old man - any one of the thousands of old men he'd seen in the villages. The same leathery old face with the wind and weather wrinkles in it, the same shaggy brows shielding deep-sunk eyes, the same scraggly crop of whiskers, the same

sense of forgotten shiftlessness and driven stubbornness.

"Left behind," said Ebenezer. "Left behind when all the others went. He must have fallen sick out in the field..."

"Get my canteen," Sheridan said. "It's hanging by the door."

The oldster opened his eyes and glanced around the circle of faces that stared down at him. He rubbed a hand across his face, leaving streaks of dirt.

"I fell," he mumbled. "I remember falling. I fell into a ditch."

"Here's the water, Steve," said Abraham.

Sheridan took it, lifted the old man and held him half upright against his chest. He tilted the canteen to the native's lips. The oldster drank unneatly, gulping at the water.

Some of it spilled, splashing down his whiskers to drip onto his belly.

Sheridan took the canteen away.

"Thank you," the native said and, Sheridan reflected, that was the first civil word to come their way from any of the natives.

The native rubbed his face again with a dirty claw. "The people all are gone?"

"All gone," said Sheridan.

"Too late," the old man said. "I would have made it if I hadn't fallen down. Perhaps they hunted for me..." His voice trailed off into nothingness.

"If you don't mind, sir," suggested Hezekiah, "I'll get a medic transmog."

"Perhaps you should," said Sheridan. "Although I doubt it'll do much good. He should have died days ago out

there in the field."

"Steve," said Gideon, speaking softly, "a human doctor isn't too much use treating alien people. In time, if we had the time, we could find out about this fellow - something about his body chemistry and his metabolism. Then we could doctor him."

"That's right, Steve," Abraham said.

Sheridan shrugged. "All right then, Hezekiah. Forget about the transmog."

He laid the old man back on the floor again and got up off his knees. He sat on his heels and rocked slowly back

and forth.

"Perhaps," he said to the native, "you'll answer one question. Where did all your people go?"

"In there," the native said, raising a feeble arm to point at the machine. "In there, and then they went away just as the harvest we gathered did."

Sheridan stayed squatting on the floor beside the stricken native.

Reuben brought in an armload of grass and wadded it beneath the native's head as a sort of pillow.

So the Garsonians had really gone away, Sheridan told himself, had up and left the planet. Had left it, using the machines that had been used to make delivery of the podars. And if Galactic Enterprises had machines like that, then they (whoever, wherever they might be) had a tremendous edge on Central Trading. For Central Trading's lumbering cargo sleds, snaking their laborious way across the light-years, could offer only feeble competition to machines like those.

He had thought, be remembered, the first day they had landed, that a little competition was exactly what Central Trading needed. And here was that

competition - a competition that had not a hint of ethics. A competition that sneaked in behind Central Trading's back and grabbed the market that Central Trading needed - the market that Central could have cinched if it had not fooled around, if it had not been so sly and cynical about adapting the podar crop to Earth. Just where and how, he wondered, had Galactic Enterprises found out about the podars and the importance of the drug? Under what circumstances had they learned the exact time limit during which they could operate in the podar market without Central interference? And had they, perhaps, been slightly optimistic in regard to that time limit and gotten

caught in a situation where they had been forced to destroy all those beautiful machines?

Sheridan chuckled quietly to himself. That destruction must have hurt them!

It wasn't hard, however, to imagine a hundred or a thousand ways in which they might have learned about the podar situation, for they were a charming people and really quite disarming. He would not be surprised if some of them might be operating secretly inside of Central Trading.

The native stirred. He reached out a

skinny hand and tugged at the sleeve of Sheridan's jacket.

"Yes, what is it, friend?"

"You will stay with me?" the native begged. "These others here, they are not the same as you and..."

"I will stay with you," Sheridan promised.

"I think we'd better go," said Gideon. "Maybe we disturb him."

The robots walked quietly from the barn and left the two alone.

Reaching out, Sheridan put a hand on the native's brow. The flesh was clammy cold.

"Old friend," he said, "I think perhaps you owe me something."

The old man shook his head, rolling it slowly back and forth upon the pillow. And the fierce light of stubbornness and a certain slyness came into his eyes.

"We don't owe you," he said. "We owed the other ones."

And that, of course, hadn't been what Sheridan had meant.

But there they lay - the words that told the story, the solution to the puzzle that was Garson IV.

"That was why you wouldn't trade with us," said Sheridan, talking to himself rather than to the old native on the floor.

"You were so deep in debt to these other people that you needed all the podars to pay off what you owed them?"

And that must have been the way it was. Now that he thought back on it, that supplied the one logical explanation for everything that happened. The reaction of the natives, the almost desperate sales

resistance was exactly the kind of thing one would expect from people in debt up to their ears.

That was the reason, too, the houses had been so neglected and the clothes had been in rags. It accounted for the change from the happy-go-lucky shiftlessness to the beaten and defeated and driven attitude. So pushed, so hounded, so fearful that they could not meet the payments on the debt that they strained their every resource, drove themselves to ever harder work, squeezing from the soil every podar they could grow.

"That was it?" he demanded

sharply. "That was the way it was?"

The native nodded with reluctance.

"They came along and offered such a bargain that you could not turn it down. For the machines, perhaps? For the machines to send you to other places?"

The native shook his head. "No, not the machines. We put the podars in the machines and the podars went away. That was how we paid."

"You were paying all these years?"

"That is right," the native said. Then he added, with a flash of pride:

"But now we're all paid up."

"That is fine," said Sheridan. "It is good for a man to pay his debts."

"They took three years off the payments," said the native eagerly. "Was that not good of them?"

"I'm sure it was," said Sheridan, with some bitterness.

He squatted patiently on the floor, listening to the faint whisper of a wind blowing in the loft and the rasping breath of the dying native.

"But then your people used the

machines to go away. Can't you tell me why?"

A racking cough shook the old man and his breath came in gasping sobs.

Sheridan felt a sense of shame in what he had to do. I should let him die in peace, he thought. I should not badger him. I should let him go in whatever dignity he can - not pushed and questioned to the final breath he draws.

But there was that last answer - the one Sheridan had to have.

Sheridan said gently: "But tell me, friend, what did you bargain for? What

was it that you bought?"

He wondered if the native heard. There was no indication that he had.

"What did you buy?" Sheridan insisted.

"A planet," said the native.

"But you had a planet!"

"This one was different," the native told him in a feeble whisper. "This was a planet of immortality. Anyone who went there would never, never die."

Sheridan squatted stiffly in shocked

and outraged silence. And from the silence came a whisper - a whisper still of faith and belief and pity that would haunt the human all his life.

"That was what I lost," the whisper said. "That was what I lost..."

Sheridan opened his hands and closed them, strangling the perfect throat and the winning smile, shutting off the cultured flow of words.

If I had him now, he thought, if I only had him now!

He remembered the spread-out picnic cloth and the ornate jug and the

appetizing food, the smooth, slick gab and the assurance of the creature. And even the methodical business of getting very drunk so that their meeting could end without unpleasant questions or undue suspicion.

And the superior way in which he'd asked if the human might know Ballic, all the time, more than likely, being able to speak English himself.

Sly Central Trading finally had its competition. From this moment, Central Trading would be fighting with its back against the wall. For these jokers in Galactic Enterprises played dirty and for keeps.

The Garsonians had been naive fools, of course, but that was no true measure of Galactic Enterprises. They undoubtedly would select different kinds of bait for different kinds of fish, but the old never-never business of immortality might be deadly bait for even the most sophisticated if appropriately presented.

An utter lack of ethics and the transference machines were the trumps Galactic held.

What had really happened, he wondered, to all the people who had lived on this planet? Where had they really gone when they followed the

podars into those machines?

Could the Galactic boys, by chance, have ferreted out a place where there would be a market for several million slaves?

Or had they simply planned to get the Garsonians out of the way as an effective means of cutting off the podar supply for Central Trading, thus insuring a ready and profitable sale for their supply of drugs?

Or had they lured the Garsonians away so they themselves could take over the planet?

And if that was the case - perhaps in any case - Galactic Enterprises definitely had lost this first encounter. Maybe, Sheridan told himself, they are really not so hot.

They gave us exactly what we need, he realized with a pleased jolt. They did us a favor!

Old blundering, pompous Central Trading had won the first round, after all.

He got to his feet and headed for the door. He hesitated and turned back to the native. "Maybe, friend," he said, "you were the lucky one." The native did

not hear him.

Gideon was waiting at the door.

"How is he?" he asked.

"He's dead," Sheridan said. "I wonder if you'd arrange for burial."

"Of course," said Gideon. "You'll let me see the data. I'll have to bone up on the proper rites."

"But first do something else for me."

"Name it, Steve."

"You know this Tobias, the messenger that Central Trading sent? Find him and see that he doesn't leave."

Gideon grinned. "You may rest assured."

"Thank you," said Sheridan.

On his way to the tent, he passed the courier's ship. It was, he noted, a job that was built for speed - little more than an instrument board and seat tacked onto a powerful engine.

In a ship like that, be thought, a pilot could really make some time.

Almost to the tent, he met Hezekiah.

"Come along with me," he said. "I have a job for you." Inside the tent, he sat down in his chair and reached for a sheet of paper.

"Hezekiah," he said, "dig into that chest. Find the finest diplomatic transmog that we have."

"I know just where it is, sir," said Hezekiah, pawing through the chest.

He came out with the transmog and laid it on the desk.

"Hezekiah," said Sheridan, "listen

to me carefully. Remember every word I say."

"Sir," replied Hezekiah, a little huffily, "I always listen carefully."

"I know you do. I have perfect faith and trust in you. That is why I'm sending you to Central."

"To Central, sir! You must be joking, surely. You know I cannot go. Sir, who would look after you? Who would see that you -"

"I can get along all right. You'll be coming back. And I'll still have Napoleon."

"But I don't want to go, sir!"

"Hezekiah, I must have someone I can trust. We'll put that transmog in you and -"

"But it will take me weeks, sir!"

"Not with the courier ship. You're going back instead of the courier. I'll write an authorization for you to represent me. It'll be as if I were there myself."

"But there is Abraham. Or Gideon. Or you could send any of the others..."

"It's you, Hezekiah. You are my oldest friend."

"Sir," said Hezekiah, straightening to attention, "what do you wish me to do?"

"You're to tell Central that Garson IV is now uninhabited. You're to say that such being the case, I'm possessing it formally in the name of Central Trading. Tell them I'll need reinforcements immediately because there is a possibility that Galactic Enterprises may try to take it from us. They're to send out one sled loaded with robots as an initial occupying and colonizing force, and another sledload of agricultural

implements so we can start our farming. And every last podar that they have, for seed. And, Hezekiah..."

"Yes, sir?"

"That sledload of robots. They'd better be deactivated and knocked down. That way they can pile on more of them. We can assemble them here."

Hezekiah repressed a shudder. "I will tell them, sir."

"I am sorry, Hezekiah."

"It is quite all right, sir."

Sheridan finished writing out the authorization. "Tell Central Trading," he said, "that in time we'll turn this entire planet into one vast podar field. But they must not waste a minute. No committee sessions, no meetings of the board, no dawdling around. Keep right on their tail every blessed second."

"I will not let them rest, sir,"
Hezekiah assured him.

VI

The courier ship had disappeared from sight. Try as he might, Sheridan could catch no further glimpse of it.

Good old Hezekiah, he thought, he'll do the job. Central Trading will be wondering for weeks exactly what it was that hit them.

He tilted his head forward and rubbed his aching neck. He said to Gideon and Ebenezer: "You can get up off him now."

The two arose, grinning, from the prostrate form of Tobias. Tobias got up, outraged. "You'll hear of this," he said to Sheridan.

"Yes, I know," said Sheridan. "You hate my guts."

Abraham stepped forward, "What is next?" he asked.

"Well," Sheridan said, "I think we should all turn gleaners."

"Gleaners?"

"There are bound to be some podars that the natives missed. We'll need every one we can find for seed."

"But we're all physicists and mechanical engineers and chemists and

other things like that. Surely you would not expect such distinguished specialists -"

"I think I can remedy that," said Sheridan. "I imagine we still can find those spacehand transmogs. They should serve until Central sends us some farmer units."

Tobias stepped forward and ranged himself alongside of Abraham. "As long as I must remain here, I demand to be of use. It's not in a robot's nature just to loaf around."

Sheridan slapped his hand against his jacket pocket, felt the bulge of the

transmog he'd taken out of Hezekiah.

"I think," he told Tobias, "I have just the thing for you."

