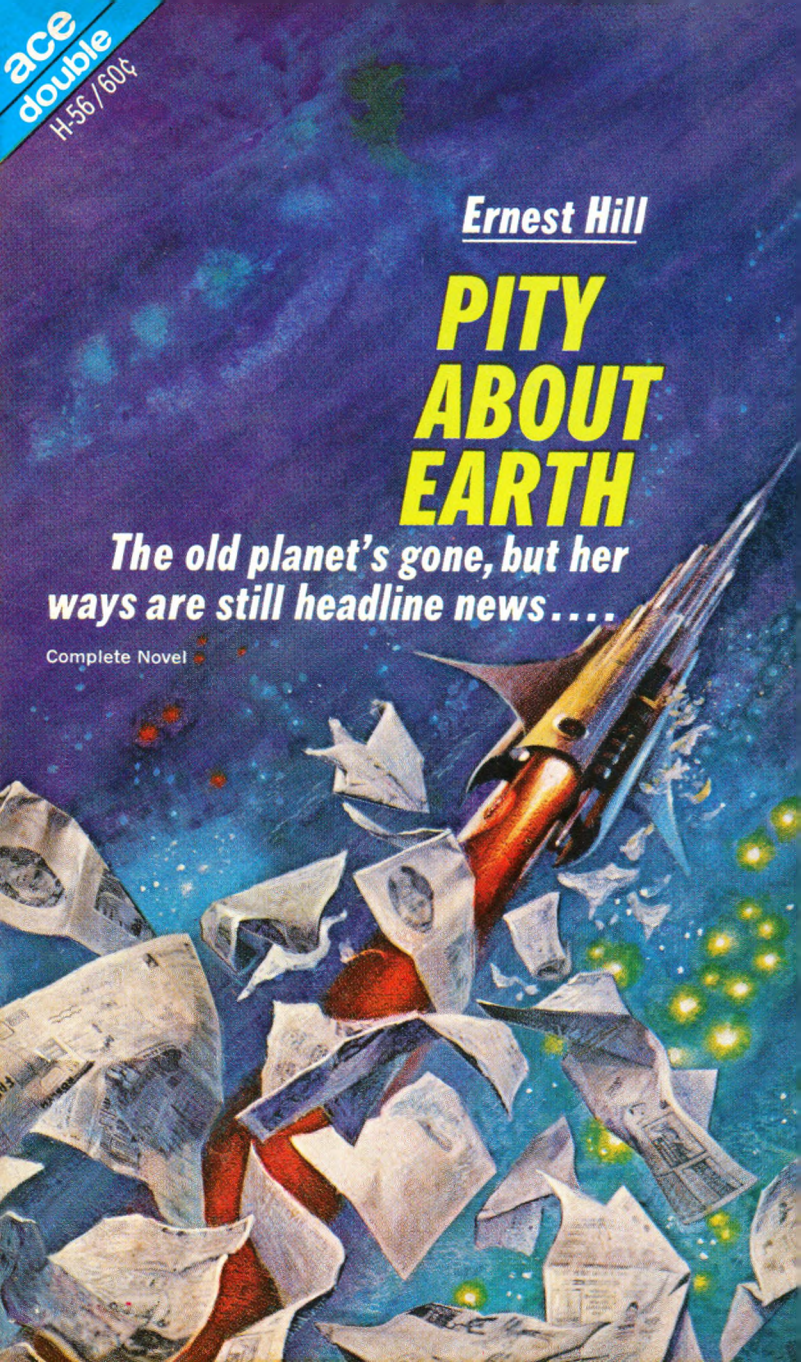
ace double
H-56 / 60¢

Ernest Hill

# PITY ABOUT EARTH

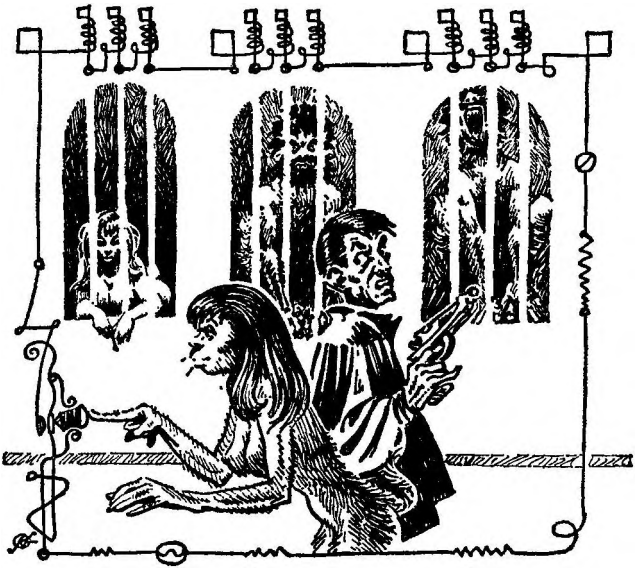
**The old planet's gone, but her ways are still headline news....**

Complete Novel



**Ernest Hill**

# PITY ABOUT EARTH



ACE BOOKS, INC.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

*Cover and interior sketch by Kelly Freas.*



Printed in U.S.A.

# I

SHALE SMILED. A plugged in, switched on, far and away smile, lips drawn back across teeth as white as only alumina crowns could make them. The muscles of his fingers were poised on the point of contraction, a twitch, a grip in the making; his knees were a fraction less than braced, and there was a high-cock-a-lorum look in his roguish eyes, bright, alert and devil-may-care-confident behind the heavy, sleeping lids.

She was giving him a first-rate run for his money. Fleet as an antelope. Swift down the mountainside, in and out among the boulders, plunging like a fox under the bracken, through the gorse, barefoot and hair flying, across the stream and into the wood. Useless of course. She could never escape him in the end. It would be enough to wait until she tired and came to him, but he did not wait. Action Shale, they called him somewhere—where? Who cared? He was riding the wind down the mountain, swinging from bough to bough through the dark, scented glades of the wood. There were obstacles, of course, as always. Her relations lying in wait in the undergrowth and firing missiles and energy pellets and lobbing grenades. A large bird with a razor beak. He broke its neck in passing and went scudding over the winking, pink-white magnolia bushes to where she fell, panting and exhausted in the soft ferns. Her dress was split from the shoulder and the white flesh showed and she looked at him—pathetic and pleading. An old man—her father probably—appeared, hobbling from the shadows on two crutches—the last obstacle, no doubt. Smiling grimly, he snatched the crutches away and broke them, one at a time, across his knee. With a flick of his wrist he pushed the old man into a blackthorn bush and for a moment almost forgot the girl in the fun of watching the cripple's struggles to free himself from the thorn. "A cripple on prickles," he said, "and funny as a crutch." He turned again to the girl. "At last," he said, "over five continents and quite a number of seas—seven, I think. It's high time we had you bedded down in the mud."

"No," she said. "Please!"

She was trying to cover her bare shoulder with the thin and inadequate strip of cotton and her cheeks were wet with

tears. He put his hands on his hips, threw back his head and laughed. "Like Falstaff," he said. "That's what I am. Who the B91 virus was Falstaff?" He leaned forward and took her by the hair. There was a tap on his shoulder. The half-light of the wood lightened and brightened and the outlines of the trees became vague. "No!" He shouted. "Don't anyone dare switch off. Not after five continents and seven seas!" He threw himself at the woman, but she was already misty—insubstantial. A moment later, she and the wood and the trees and the cripple in the blackthorn had faded and he was floating on a warm, pink and blue sea and seagulls were calling and there were porpoises all around him, whistling. It was the usual transition period. The halfway, marking-time, lull-the-mind-to-rest interval for adjustment. Sensivators were like that. They never shot you back into full consciousness at the flick of a switch. They gave you time to wind up. No one likes plunging headfirst into cold reality after a happy period of subjectivity and manipulation of symbols. No one likes it and Shale liked it least of all. When the porpoises finally towed him into harbor and he woke up in the dull, round sleeping quarters in his own ship, the *Admark*, he liked it still less. Groaning and rubbing his eyes and focusing them at last on the calendar, he realized that, far from being at the end of his journey as he should have been, he was only a few weeks out from Lemos. Phrix, of course. By the blue sun of Asgard, he would tie Phrix down and break him, bone by bone, with a monkey wrench, if there was one on the ship—and there should be. No one who wants to dominate his fellows should ever be without a monkey wrench.

He pulled the suction pads testily from his navel and heaved himself up from the bunk.

"Phrix!" He roared.

In a moment, Phrix was standing there, disciplined, attentive, thumbs in line with the seam of his space suit trousers, for all the world as if he didn't know what was going to happen to him. As if waking an archexecutive out of a sensivator session were a matter of little importance and called for no explanation. Still sleepy from the pink and blue sea, Shale yawned before hitting him with all his considerable strength in the solar plexus. He should have kicked him properly as he lay coughing and spluttering on the floor, but he felt suddenly tired and Phrix was not worth the effort. Besides, Shale was a moderate, temperate man. He returned to his bunk and flicked the dispenser switch and waited while three fingers of seventy-five percent Venusian Burgundy spurted into the beaker. He turned the container

thoughtfully in his fingers, sniffed at the rough, coarse aroma and then threw the contents into the face of Phrix.

As he refilled, he considered his subordinate. Writhing with pain, splashed with the pink liquid, Phrix still maintained an air of something—what was it?—dignity? The Groils were like that. Dignified. Unruffled. The body might suffer and do all the things a suffering body does, but the Groil mind remained aloof, tranquil, harboring neither judgment nor resentment. He put his foot on Phrix's face between the whorl-like protuberances of his frontal lobes and pushed. As the back of Phrix's head made contact with the metal wall of the cabin, Shale refilled his beaker. The humanoid monstrosity still retained its dignity. *You have to hand it to them,* Shale thought. *They had courage, even if that just means they were made in a certain courageous way. Everyone is only what the accidents of heredity bequeathed them with. It's pointless to admire a hero and denigrate a coward—one nick in the chromosome chain with a skillful scalpel and we could all be heroes. Nevertheless, we admire the heroes and spit in the face of the cowards.*

"Okay," Shale said, thawing somewhat with the warmth of the alcohol inside him. "Okay, so you woke me! So what? I can knuckle down again. What did you think? I was going to spend the year and a half on this trip wide awake or something? You nuts or something?"

"Beg pardon, Archexecutive," Phrix said in his usual level voice, respectful, without a trace of subservience. "There is a message. It was said to wake you."

"Message, eh? How come we get a message? Aren't we through the light barrier yet?"

"We approach barrier now. Too late for message. Just time when I switched you in."

"You're a horned goat, Phrix." Shale threw himself heavily on his bunk. Even with full anti-G stabilizers—and no Archexecutive would own a ship without full anti-G stabilizers—the human body was still pretty weighty as the ship reached the peak of its acceleration curve before leveling out across the barrier. "Don't you know yet, no message is important enough to bring me back just for the fun of looking at it? What do I care about messages? You switched me out of something more important than all the messages in the universe. I'll never recapture just that combination of everything that's worthwhile in a space-dream again."

"I apologize, Archexecutive, but you can switch in now."

"I'll switch in, all right, but it won't be the same. It never is the same. It'll leave me on edge for the rest of the trip—as much of it as I'll see and that won't be much, believe

you me. Let's have a look at it then—where's the message?"

One never knew how Phrix switched things through, Shale reflected. Whether he had a concealed remote control button located in his armpit or whether he whistled some ultrasonic blast. Things happened when you told Phrix to act. Perhaps it was just willpower—the old mind-over-matter idea. With a mind like a Groil it wouldn't be surprising. You could do things with lobes like that. Whatever it was, you just said, "Where's the message?" and there it was on your own private bedroom screen.

Shale was amused. The mouth movements of the face on the screen were already too slow to be more than vaguely perceptible. A full minute to form the letter *o*. Getting slower. The sound a continuous low-pitched oscillation. A squawk without end. They were very near the light barrier now and safely gaining on the message. Any moment and the order would come to belt down on the couch, assuming the pilot was aware that his master was, contrary to his custom, awake. There would be the usual shuddering as the ship lurched through the critical speeds and then a recommencement of the previous sharp acceleration, with time, in terms of the screen, in reverse gear. The mouth getting faster, the spoken words unintelligible, a gabble from end to beginning and the face fading out at the point where it had switched on. No importance. A voice from Asgard probably. The Publisher's P.A. keeping tabs on him. "Did you reach Shale, P.A.?" "No, Publisher, sir, he was ahead of the message all the way. Should catch up with him in three years with electro-mag acceleration. That is, if he is heading for Gromwold." "A good man, Shale. Hustles. I like to see a man hustle." "Yes, Publisher, sir. A hustler, sir. The Empire couldn't do without him."

He, Shale, was indeed a hustler, although no one had ever heard a conversation from Asgard say so. You cabled Asgard now and again. Whenever anything happened that might show you at your best, enterprising, industrious, an example to your less industrious fellows—the sort of rock Higher Management uses for the cornerstones of its more rewarding projects. Asgard seldom replied. Once in a lifetime perhaps, and a lifetime is a sizable distance along the underbelly of eternity. One always thought every message might be that lifetime's one from Asgard. It was good to be prepared.

Imaginary as the interchange had been, Shale had unconsciously sat to attention, dusted and straightened the folds of his loose space robe and half bowed at even the thought

of the dread name. The Publisher. Yes, the Publisher. Did he really exist? If he *eixsted*, what did he look like? That is, if he had form at all. A one-headed biped, perhaps, like any one of the Ruling Races? Or with the two temples bulging into shell-shaped carbuncles like Phrix, Shale's assistant manager? Phrix was a Groil, evolutionary senior race of all. There had been Groils in some far spot before the amoeba came to Earth. Pity. Pity about Earth.

There must of course be a Publisher. Someone at the top. You couldn't have a Publisher's P.A. without a Publisher to be P.A. to. And he certainly had a P.A.—Shale had heard him at least once. You couldn't have an Advertisement Manager to the major inter-galactic publishing house, a man like himself, a hundred thousand papers with multimillion circulations under him, without a Publisher to publish them. There was, of course, a Publisher. Man becomes skeptical of the ultimate Great One he never sees, but the ultimate Great One must be there. Or something Ultimately Great. Every pyramid has a top to it. No ordinary person had ever been to Asgard, but Asgard was there. Any telescope could pick out the luminous blue glow of its sun—the solitary star outside the galaxies. If there was an Asgard, then, necessarily, there was a Publisher to live on it. No heaven without a god to sit in it and dangle his legs, using all the worlds as his footstool in turn. The chain of command: Publisher—P.A.—Advertisement Manager. No one else mattered. Editors were ten a cent, hands cupped for the loose change left over when the budget balanced—as it always did.

"We are about to pass through the light barrier. Passengers and crew will belt down! With your permission, Archexecutive Shale?" Pilot speaking. The ship was fully automatic and would break through the light barrier anyway, but its pilot was an integral part of it, just as Shale was a part of the Publishing House.

"Permission granted!" he said.

The ship shuddered and bucked and the star clusters outside the porthole danced. The screen mouth was moving and the squawk of the voice slipped from the lowest audible frequency into silence. And then the jolt.

There was a sense of awe in breaking the light barrier. One passed through it on every trip, but each time was like the first all over again. There was nothing mystic about the speed of light. You opened the motors and went a little faster, that was all. You would go on increasing speed to ten times L and think nothing of it. But there, at that little barrier where space and time were mixed and for a moment were one and the same thing, you paused breathless before

forging ahead with a jolt and a shudder and a dancing of all the stars. Why? What was so significant about this speed we have always called L? The speed of light, as we now know, varies considerably, slowing down the further it gets from its source. It must if it is using up energy overcoming the resistance of the aurons, the semi-material particles that are everywhere where nothing else is. The universe is much smaller than was once thought when the speed of light was supposed to be constant.

What of L? L is the speed of light emitted by one E.S. (Earth Sun) at the time of emission, but regarded for practical purposes as being constant within the first twenty-four hours. After that time it begins to slow down appreciably. In one year it will have halved.

Signals, of course, can be boosted. By accelerating the electro-magnetic wave, communication between planets can take place in a fraction of the time it takes the light of their suns to travel the distance. All this considered, it is strange that L, the original speed of light the forefathers on Earth calculated from the eclipses of the moons of Venus, that this Earth light speed should be the critical factor, the threshold over which the passing ship shudders and groans. The initial speed of light from its source was the speed at which, for convenience, most ordinary messages are sent.

"You remember the quasers?" Shale asked, as the ship settled down to an even acceleration. "The stars like Asgard?"

Once through the barrier, the belts on the bunks had released and Phrix had returned dutifully to within striking distance. It was time for Shale to couple himself back to the sensivator and pass the time away more profitably than by lying on his back and staring at Phrix, but oddly enough, Shale felt the need of conversation and human fellowship, even if only with a part-human Groil.

"I remember quasars," Phrix answered, probably with the central, humanoid area of his three-crowned head. It had been a stupid question anyway. The Groils had known all about quasars and most other things before one-headed archetypes had even begun to speculate. Quasars were thought to be a long way off, millions of light-years. But then, the speed of light was believed to be constant. The light from quasars, like the light from the sun of Asgard, travels very slowly. It was a foolish question in another way. Phrix kept his mind, the humanoid part of it, focused always on the matter at hand, and that, as far as he was concerned, was always business. Perhaps Groils talked about other things

among themselves, but with the Ruling Races they confined themselves to things they were paid to do.

"Paid circulation of the *Monitor* on Gromwold, one billion," Phrix said, obviously now using the memory area of his right-hand carbuncle. "We carry three billion copies."

"Jettison!" Shale ordered.

The bundles were ticked off on the enumerator and stacked by auto-handlers in the air lock. A touch of a button that was in any case quite capable of touching itself, and two billion copies of the *Lemos Galactic Monitor* were sucked into space at a speed of approximately 2L. It was a wasteful process, of course, these tactics of jettison, but everyone did it, the smaller companies as mercilessly as the larger. The Inter-Galactic Data Control Board and the Auto-Audit Bureau of Circulations monitored the output of the presses on all the printing planets and the advertisers were informed of the number printed. How many reached the bookstalls was neither here nor there—it was not the function of statisticians to check on ultimate distribution. There were vast clouds of newspapers and magazines hurtling in deep space or orbiting unchartered suns. Shale needed a particularly high circulation for a client on Gromwold. His conscience was clear: he had printed every copy he had claimed.

"We'll get him, of course," Shale said aloud.

"Subterranean Thermal?" Phrix interpreted the thought trend with the uncanny perception of all Groils. "Good account. They want business. We get it for them."

"I don't know about that." Shale shrugged. "We want their advertising. Getting business is their affair. What's advertising got to do with business? Think we work for them or something?"

"Much good business on Gromwold," Phrix said. "Ripe for Subterranean Thermal. New tower heated by active volcano. Test drillings in a number of states. Heat is there. Only have to pipe it."

"Get some stuff for the editors," Shale ordered. "Anything to please S.T. Shoot it in if they advertise, leave it out if they don't. Have to watch these Gromwold comedians. They think you run a paper for their benefit. How many companies can do this piped heat stuff anyway?"

"Only S.T."

"Where else can they do it?"

"Nowhere. Only on Gromwold."

"Good. Get their advertising and whistle it up to the newsad boys. I'm switching in now for the next eighteen months and if you bring me back again I'll cut your lobes off. I'm scheduled to fade in when we orbit Shorne. I'm

dropping off there while you go on to Gromwold. That clear?"

"Metita!" Phrix interpreted.

"Mind your own damn business," Shale snapped. "You know too much with those bulging brains of yours. Keep your menial place, lackey!"

"Only one brain," Phrix corrected. "Enlarged lobes. Very sensitive. You'll get them one day. In a million years or so. Very useful. Comes with use."

"We're the Ruling Races," Shale said dangerously, a slow anger kindling in the adrenal-sympathetico system the Groils had long ago sublimated. "What do we need with lobes?"

"You need mine," Phrix told him. "All facts I know. Intuition—developed—is most valuable. Without me, you have to study. Learn things. Employ spies. Make mistakes. Not with me. You need to know nothing. Leave all to me. Much simpler, no mistakes. I do not think—I know."

Shale wanted to sack him. Banish him to a penal planet. At least demote him to something fittingly more menial in the classified advertising department. There were other Groils as good as Phrix—or were they? Loyal, conscientious, industrious, clear-thinking in a wooden, pedantic sort of way; tireless mentally—always some part of the three brains awake. He was the perfect subordinate. Management needed none of these things; it could do as it liked. It was subordinates who had to prove their worth. Perhaps Phrix was not expendable. He needed keeping in his place, that was all. Menial. All Groils were menial. Let menials once think they matter, or give them the right of free speech, and you were back with the troubles of antiquity: trade unions and management dabbling in welfare schemes, and hard-headed industrialists wasting time posing as humanists and encouraging their menials to think that their shoulders had been created for any other purpose than putting to wheels that would turn just as well without them.

"I don't want Metita mentioned," Shale said. "You advise me on business as and when I tell you to. Personal things are mine alone. Keep out."

"Metita is not good for you," Phrix persisted amicably. "A Salumi. Ruling Race and Salumi bad mixture. Ruling Races bad only by default. No conscience. Vacuum. Salumis positively evil. Fill Ruling Race vacuum. Very retrograde, Salumi in vacuo."

"Conscience!" Shale roared. "Of course I've got no conscience! What the B91 virus is conscience anyhow?"

"Conscience to do accepted things. Ruling Races have standards by custom. Not good standards but not bad standards either. Advertisement Manager has no conscience with

clients. Conforms to standards toward staff and friends. Salumis have no standards at all. Very different. Very bad."

"I've no standards to staff or to you or to anyone and I've no friends." Shale stared at him contemptuously for a moment, stung nevertheless by the inference that he was bad by default rather than properly, positively evil. Better a cloven hoof than a cat's paw, any day. "All men are enemies," he said. "That's the first thing you learn in life if you want to be an archexecutive. The universe has never been any different, whatever men have said to impress their fellows or catch their votes. There's only one thing that matters between you and me: I'm the boss and you're the menial. And that's the way its going to stay. So keep out of my hair." When Phrix did not answer, he said, "Salumis best bint." He had fallen unconsciously half into the attenuated syntax of the Groils and half into the normal client-ad manager shorthand of class-ad sloganry.

Phrix looked at him steadily with the unwavering, deep-set gray eyes characteristic of his race. Groils neither smile nor frown, since facial contortions distort the true presentation of facts and Groils are factual in word and deed. No Groil will gloss over a truth by presenting it obliquely, coyly or snugly in a scabbard smile. A smile may gloss and dazzle and the truth slip by unnoticed. A frown may warn and truth hides from fear. There is only one way to present truth—with the features immobile.

Uneasy under the steady scrutiny of his menial subordinate, Shale rose slowly from his couch. Drawing his fist back with unhurried deliberation, he struck the unblinking Phrix a savage blow in the mouth. Phrix was a vegetarian and his teeth were sharp. The gushing blood seemed to excite Shale still further.

"Now what?" he shouted. "Groils can't feel emotion, can they? We'll see about that. I'll make you hate me, Phrix. I'll make that mealy-cake mouth of yours snarl. There'll be some new tri-hydroflorate acid in your milk and balsam stomach juices when I've finished with you."

Phrix picked himself carefully up from the cabin floor. He wiped his lips with a pocket handkerchief.

"I don't think so," he said. "You forget I know blow is coming. Lobal intuition. No resentment felt. Ruling Races violent. Pity. Regret that. Waste of energy. Distorts thinking. Thinking is all-important, strength serves no purpose. Better to think than rule."

"I give the orders," Shale said savagely. "I don't need to think. And you—you think when I tell you to."

"Yes, Archexecutive."

"And switch your lobes off until I tell you to use them."

"If you say so, Archexecutive."

"Right. Now I'm bedding down for the next eighteen months. You can amuse yourself as you like. Only wake me and you'll find yourself jettisoned in deep space, got that?"

"I shall pass the time in meditation, Archexecutive."

"You do that."

Shale slapped the suction pad back on his navel and in thirty seconds he was rounding the Horn on a windjammer of which he was the captain. The crew were all young, fit, handsome, brave, intelligent, loyal, industrious, hard-working and female. They wore very little under their oilskins and sou'westers. The voyage would last the full eighteen months with occasional landfall in tropical harbors.

## II

"WE ARE in concentric orbit with Shorne and Gromwold, Archexecutive."

Shale rubbed the tang of the salt sea from his eyes. He felt fit, which he attributed to the fresh air, smell of the seaweed, exercise on poop and quarter deck and no doubt to the ministrations of the ship's complement of sixty-one able-bodied sea-nymphs. He had a quick breakfast of roughage and protein-paste and a beaker of Gromwold schnapps, after which he felt in fine fettle and ready for Shorne and the Salumi, Metita. It had been variously estimated that one Salumi is equal to fifty, sixty or seventy-five Ruling Race women, depending on what it is one looks for in a woman.

"Right!" Shale ordered. "Action stations! I'm dropping off on Shorne. You get yourself around the ad boys on Gromwold. Let them know I'm here. See what the setup's like and put some ginger in them. I'll join you in a week or two and sack half of them. Then we'll go on to Borzon."

"Pour encourager les autres?"

"What the B91 virus language is that?"

"Earth classic, Archexecutive."

"Thought they spoke English on Earth?"

"There were other languages in antiquity."

"Pity about Earth!" Shale muttered reverently.

Everyone said "Pity about Earth." It was reverent. The Ruling Races were reverent about nothing else. Only Earth. None of them knew why, nor where exactly Earth was or had been. Earth was the mother planet, the great frog who had spawned them all. Saying "Pity about Earth" was one of the things everyone did—and one of the things no one did, was to ask why. To do what was not done was bad. To talk

about Earth was like mentioning the B91 virus. It was profane—an expletive but not a subject for discussion. Think about it—speak about it—and it would hear you and creep into your system when you weren't looking. Everyone knew what a B91 virus might do but no one knew about Earth. But Earth was as good as the B91 was bad, and it was always as well to keep away from extremes. In antiquity, no one had mentioned cancer for the same reason and everyone had kept at a respectful distance from God and from anyone thought to have an affinity with the Heavenly Host. *God* and *Hell* had remained as swearwords long after everyone had forgotten what they meant.

In a few days, Shale, in his personal orbiter, was circling Shorne, the small brother of Gromwold. Gromwold was big as planets go. Shorne had no mountains, but through the fleecy clouds, streaming apart with the rush of the craft, it was a continuous undulation of low green hills and golden valleys. It could have been an idyllic planet, but men, and not green grass and waterfalls, make idylls. Nevertheless, it was civilized and peaceful on Shorne. There was a subject race, which did all the manual work normally done by machine on any other planet; heavy industry, in consequence, had never gained a foothold, being unwanted and unnecessary. The subject race were the Salumis, whose womenfolk were renowned for soulless beauty. Their beauty was in fact such that it made the absence of a soul a matter of complete irrelevance. Shorne exported knowledge and imported spacecraft and knockabout jet-cars and very little else.

Circulations on Shorne were very limited and there were no potential advertisers. There was, however, Metita, a Salumi. Metita's father had been given Ruling Race status in return for services which otherwise would have cost money in terms of good Ruling Race hard currency—a million mylia. Metita's father was Director of one of the vast Shornian laboratories that provided the knowledge, or at least the data, from which all knowledge derives; that was Shorne's principal export. Barely advertised at all, yet all the universe knew that data came from Shorne.

Metita was beautiful even for a Salumi. She had yellow eyes of fire and long golden hair and a skin of satined ivory. She was one and half standard Galactic meters tall, weighed 112 standard Galactic pounds and was just as sinuous as a serpent with no bones at all but an india rubber spine, reciprocating pelvis, ice-cold hands and diamond-sharp nails.

At the moment of Shale's arrival in Lulonga, the city of the hills and capital of Shorne, Metita was writhing in

ecstasy and exultation in the arms of Kantor. She was nibbling at the jugular vein, occasionally snapping at the left earlobe and all the time searching with long-nailed, slender fingers in the ridges of his rib cage. Probing and finding areas of sensitivity with consummate skill and delight. Her expertise was enough to make any man forget his conscience and Kantor had no conscience to forget.

Kantor was advertisement manager of the Gromwold *Times and Echo,* a low-circulation local job—one of the many single-planet papers that had either escaped the Publisher's notice or were beneath his archexecutive's contempt. Kantor was small-fry in the publishing world, but he had ambition and charm. Metita found his charm, for the time at any rate, more important than his inter-galactic status. She hissed with pleasure as he finally pinioned her to the couch.

"Shale's due today on Shorne," Kantor told her, arched above her on muscular arms.

"Damn Shale," she murmured. "Quickly! Come to me! I want you!"

"You're Shale's frippet," he said. "Shouldn't you be waiting for Shale?"

"Hurry!" she shrieked. "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! You torture me with this waiting!"

"Shale!" he said.

"I stab him in the entrails," she hissed. "I cut his liver out and give it to you. Take me now!"

"Will you?" he asked.

"Will I what?" She was suddenly cold and her eyes narrowed into bright amber slits. Bargaining with a Salumi, as Kantor knew, was like bathing with a hungry barracuda. He had her now in a position where she was likely to agree to anything. He wanted her not only to agree but to remember what it was she had agreed to afterward.

"Will I what?" she repeated. Her teeth, he noticed, were green like polished marble, with blue and white veins.

"Kill Shale," he said.

"So that's what you want! You tickle and prod and chivy at my breasts and all you want is Shale!"

"What's Shale to you?" he asked. "Once in a while, on his way to Gromwold, he drops in and you coil yourself about him like a hungry hydra. I'm always near at hand—I can drop in any time."

"Shale is big," she said, but she reached up to trace the line of his sternum with a thoughtful finger. "An archexecutive. There are no archexecutives on little Shorne. You —you are a little man."

"The *Times and Echo* is growing. We have offers from

other spheres. Interested parties. Without Shale, the Publisher's empire would crumble—at least on the fringe planets. What do you have of his bigness but the prestige of the tattler?"

"So you want Shale dead?" she asked, wriggling against him like a happy panther. "Why don't you kill him yourself? You are much bigger than little me. Much stronger. Hold him in a big, strong hand and—ker-utch! His throat is slit and his blood is piping warm and sunset red from a gap like a frog's mouth from ear to ear. Kill him yourself, big, strong Kantor. Kill him very dead."

"You know what industrial murders are." He shrugged. "Shale kills me and nobody bothers to notice. But if I kill Shale, all his papers will have my picture and they'd have me before the industrial court for breach of ethics. Ethics is what the bigger groups call it: you are guilty in direct proportion to your ability to get caught. But mistress murder is different. No one would blame you; they would all be crowding in to take Shale's place. Everyone hates Shale's guts anyway."

She laughed with a drawing back of her lips over the emerald green teeth and a peep of a curled tongue-tip.

"I'll kill Shale for you," she said. "Crush me to you until all desire is gone and then, when all the wells are dry, I shall need something to fill them up again. Love is a small thing, it is so quickly over. There are other ways to happiness. We play, we Salumis. We laugh and play."

"Torture," he said, avoiding her eyes. There was something frightening in their sudden opacity and in the touch of her lips, at first flaccid and then drawn slowly back across the teeth.

"Torture," she agreed, her desire for him whetted by the thought of it. "My maidens will prick him with hot pins, while I—I will . . ." She chuckled happily at a private, inner vision and, inspired, sank her teeth deep into Kantor's neck. He hardly noticed.

The marble slab tilted behind Shale as he entered the anteroom below the concrete expanse of the house on the hill. It closed with a loud slam. It was cool inside, among the pillars of pink quartz, aquamarine feldspar, Gromwold soapstone and opal Borzonian alabaster. It was cool and silent and there were shadows and soft, green light. The sun of Shorne and Gromwold shone through translucent strips of the marble-like emerald stone quarried only in the Lulonga region of Shorne. There were three stairways leading to the

rooms above, seldom used because of the central shaft housing a lift that gave access both up and down.

Puzzled by the silence and the absence of anyone to meet him, and also possibly warned by some inner intuition learned from the Groil, Phrix, Shale hesitated by the lift and looked about him. There was a large stone table and stone chair by one of the green stone windows. On it, a newspaper caught his eye. He walked over and picked it up. It was thin, badly produced on cheap newsprint and the newsads were laughable in their crass naïvité. It was a copy of the Gromwold *Times and Echo.* Hardly the reading matter for Metita, in the unlikely event that Metita could read. From somewhere up above came a sudden peal of young girlish laughter and from somewhere down below, an odd strangled cry. He had never known what was below the house nor why the lift gave access to it. He was suddenly vaguely aware that without Phrix there were very few things he knew anything about; without his usual bodyguard, he was as vulnerable as a sheep straying out of range of its auto hoverdog. An archexecutive protected himself against everything except a mistress. It was virtually impossible, as anyone who has tried to make love in a bulletproof vest must know. And even that afforded no absolute protection. There was always some vital organ exposed to a sudden, treacherous attack. He was relieved when the communicator in his vest pocket buzzed. Phrix on Gromwold.

"Delay of ten minutes due to relative positions Shorne-Gromwold. No time for reply. You are trapped. Team from *Times and Echo.* Building surrounded. Do not trust Metita. Escape at once. Phrix."

It was all very well to say "Escape at once," but the marble slab door was closed and both walls and windows were solid stone blocks. He wondered why the Laboratory Director needed a house like a fortress.

"Metita!" he called.

She or her family or servants must know of his arrival. There would be camera eyes on the door and—even in the absence of the occupants—there would be a built-in voice to tell the visitor what he or she should do. "Wait!" "Beat it!" "Drop dead!" "For all surveys our position should be registered firmly with the majority." But there was no voice—only silence. He walked over to the elevator and the doors opened. He hesitated. Once inside, there could be no turning back. They could take him wherever they wanted him. The top floor, most likely, where the bottom would fall out at the touch of a button. He drew his pistol and began to climb the stairs. He had never had occasion to climb stairs

before and he was impressed with the skill of their construction, changing direction as they did at every landing so that you went on going up with only fluctuations to left and right of the vertical. The stairs themselves were solid blocks of translucent white stone, like quartz, and the solid balustrades were green marble. At every landing there were sliding green marble doors, but they were closed and unyielding to his thrust.

As he began to climb the fifth flight, he heard a soft, whirring noise and the green panel above began to slowly open and there, standing in the doorway against a great blaze of multicolored lights, was Metita. She wore a diaphanous robe and little else. Her arms were outstretched in welcome. Undulating. Yellow hair falling about her shoulders and halfway down her back. Long scarlet fingernails. Sharp, green teeth. Damn Phrix. She was alone, unarmed and eminently desirable. He had had a long flight. She was swaying forward with those long fingers beckoning. How infallible was intuition? Phrix was invariably right. That was why he was a menial and paid to advise. But he felt no emotions. Could he advise anyone emotionally? No, he could not. What did Phrix know of these soft fingers around his neck, slipping down his arm, his hand, his gun, taking his gun away. The soft, scented breath whispering, "You are home now, with Metita. With Metita you need no weapons." Just the same, a Groil voice could be insiduously persuasive. At a distance of ten minutes and through the distortion of a communicator, in short Groil sentences, Phrix's voice had carried a note of urgency. To believe or not to believe? He did not want to doubt Metita. Sharp nails caressing the hair behind his ears, drawing him into the room with the bright lights, crooning to him with the short staccato sentences of a mother to her child. "Baby Bunting was allergic, to any acid but lysergic." There was something psychedelic about the lights and unaccustomed angles; the floor and the wall had changed places and the roof was somewhere faraway below. Even so, he was aware that the door behind him was closing and that there were others in the room; he could see their faces in distorting mirrors and all around him he could hear their exaggerated breathing and the thumping of their heartbeats. He knew where he was. This was Metita's own woo-room, constructed for her by her scientifically-orientated father for extended satisfaction, a drawing-out and cross-fertilization of all the senses. He was not sure why there were other men in the room, upside-down images of *Times and Echo* comedians with hatchets in their hands.

"Come," her voice said. "Let us wrap ourselves in a scarlet blanket and float away into the sunset."

Phrix's voice came through the communicator, intuititive with a fine sense of timing. "Now is the time for flight."

Shale turned his head against the pressure of her restraining fingers in time to see, high-lights and low-lights reversed like a photographic negative, a host of yellow-eyed Salumi girls bearing down on him like Valkyries through a thundercloud. He ducked and dived for the point where the door should have been, only to realize that this was, in a psychedelic atmosphere, the exact opposite of the true direction. His head did however make contact with the wall, giving him at least something to hold on to. Keeping in mind that where the ceiling appeared to be, there was the floor, he followed the wall around, bounding rapidly with a sideward motion, like a crab. From all around him came the sound of screaming, the Salumi girls ululating and Metita calling in a low, musical contralto, "Shay-hale! Shay-hale!" There was a hand with long diamond nails dug into the calf of his leg and something sharp—it may have been another fingernail—exploring his neck, probably looking for the carotid. He kicked backward savagely and then remembered it should have been forward and kicked again. He caught his head on a protuberance. It seemed that you entered it from underneath and then spiraled up into darkness. It appeared not to be the door, but whatever it was, he chose it in preference to a room full of Salumis. Diving upward, he fell downward and then gravity took over. He was vaguely aware, before the darkness closed about him, that someone was shooting with an energy pistol and there were holes appearing in the floor and ceiling at the opposite side of the room to himself, indicating that someone was shooting at him. But now he seemed to be safe. He was falling down a dark tube narrow enough that he could control his speed of descent by thrusting outward with his elbows, and he was clear of the mind-confusion in the woo-room.

Metita's voice came drifting downward: "Archexecutive," she cooed. There was another voice, harsh and angry. He had heard that voice before somewhere. Kantor of the *Times and Echo.* "Where is he?" Kantor was shouting. "Where'd the barstard go?" "Down the waste-disposal chute," Metita tinkled in answer.

*So that's where I am,* Shale thought. He continued sliding rapidly for a considerable distance as there was obviously no time to lose. The only reason that Kantor had not yet fired down the pipe after him was probably that he was having difficulty in locating the aperture. Firing upward

when he should have fired downward, or inward instead of outward. He would get it right shortly, or Metita would switch off the psychedelic gas or whatever it was and they would see themselves clearly and face-to-face. It was a remarkably long pipe. It seemed he traveled half a kilometer before it ended and he was disgorged on to a concrete floor in a pile of kitchen scraps. "I've arrived," he said.

He was in an enclosure, three walls and a barred frontage like a lion's cage. At the back of the enclosure was a small dog-kennel-shaped hut and at the entrance to the hut a creature was squatting. A creature that Shale, after some reflection, identified as a man. Long-haired, long-bearded, indescribably dirty and quite naked, but still a man. He turned his head slowly and stared at Shale with deep, sunken apathetic eyes for the space of half a minute. Then he snarled with approximately the laryngeal resonance of a sulky tiger. Otherwise, he made no movement. He looked at Shale and Shale looked at him. Slowly, the significance of the man and the cage began to dawn on Shale together with a realization of where he was. He raised his eyes slowly to the notice above the dog-kennel.

"Exhibit 131," he read. "The subject is conditioned to eat when the red light shows. Note transference of response from Stimulus A—the light—to Stimulus B—the food. See notes. Students are warned against pressing the light button too frequently and overfeeding the subject. *It is dangerous to cross the barrier.*"

"Can you speak?" Shale asked. The subject responded with a few gibbering sounds and relapsed again into silence, staring at his feet. The cage grille was of some tough, impervious material and there was a heavy lock on the gate. As Shale examined it carefully, he heard a slobbering sound behind him. Exhibit 131 was allowed water whenever he wished and he was lapping loudly from his bucket. He shook his beard dry afterward and settled down to search the strands for lice.

"I can speak!" It was a voice from the next enclosure. A hand was stretched from behind the dividing wall, calling attention to its presence by waving up and down. It was a thin, pale, tiny hand, like a child's, and it was opening and closing spasmodically.

"Who are you?" Shale called, afraid to move for fear of disturbing Exhibit 131 and perhaps provoking him to violence.

"Exhibit 130. I am conditioned to press the red light button at four hourly intervals to feed 131 in the absence of the keeper or of visitors."

"Don't press it!" Shale called, alarmed at the prospect of being found on a pile of what was no doubt the subject's food.

"Don't worry!" Exhibit 130 told him. "I have to press it at the correct time; it is part of my conditioning and nothing you might say will alter that—but there is still some time before I need respond."

"Are you a man or woman?" Shale asked.

"Oh! I am a man," the subject answered proudly. "It is very simple to condition women to press buttons at scheduled periods. To correctly condition men is much more difficult. It is one of the things I demonstrate, the breakthrough in male worker-response by bio-chemical control. Is there anything I can do for you, as you appear to be unintentionally incarcerated?"

"How can I get out of here?" Shale asked.

"Is he coming for you?"

"Who?"

"The keeper, of course. You shouldn't be here. He will feed you to the anthropophagi."

"Who are they?"

"The cannibals, of course. Are you ignorant?"

"Yes," Shale confessed. "How do I get out of here?"

"I have a high I.Q.," the voice told him. "I have been especially bred for my I.Q. It is done by playing with the chromosome. You break down the chain and insert the chemical factors that generate intelligence. I have inherited my I.Q. from a reconstituted chromosome."

"Then put it to good use and tell me the way out!"

"For me there is no way out. I am happy only in conforming to the stimulus-response sequence of my conditioning. My I.Q. was fostered for experimental purposes only; it is irrelevant to the business of depressing my button. This button is my whole life. I should be miserable outside my cell."

"What about me?" Shale asked. "I'm conditioned to the world outside. Wine, women, travel, debauchery. Power and the satisfaction of my job well done. The manipulation of an apt cliché; the drum beat of words in the sonority of the sort of slogan that stops you in your tracks; the siren-blast of a newsad, properly positioned where the eye just can't fail to see it. That's life, that's living and that's me. . . . I'm an archexecutive," he explained.

"Ah!" the voice agreed. "Then you must return to the world outside. I will give the matter of your escape my undivided attention."

A door clanged in the distance and heavy footsteps crunched steadily along the echoing corridors. It would

obviously be only a matter of time before Metita came for him, for reasons of her own, or her father decided to keep him where he was. As research director, he was probably short of specimens arriving voluntarily and without previous conditioning.

"Hurry!" he begged.

"You could kill 131 and take his place," 130 suggested.

"It wouldn't work. I am unarmed and I am not at all sure I could kill him. He would more likely kill me. Besides, I couldn't impersonate him. He is naked and hairy and I am clean and shaven."

"I, too, am conditioned to shave."

"Hurry!" *If only Phrix were here,* he thought. *Phrix would think of something; it was his job.* Phrix could afford to laugh at this specimen's I.Q. His own was immeasurable by Ruling Race standards.

It was difficult to tell where exactly the footsteps were, because of the echo, but they were louder and thus certainly nearer. *Clang! Crunch! Clang! Crunch!* There was a general whining and wailing, as though other specimens were voicing their fear of the keeper's approach. What sort of I.Q. had this white-haired creature anyway? Still no ideas and the footsteps ringing now with the suggestion of hobnails on a metal road. The indignity of being found squatting on a pile of garbage in some subhuman creature's cage was too much for Shale. Oblivious of 131's warning growls, he ran to the dividing wall and thumped on it with his fists.

"I.Q.?" he shouted. "You haven't got an I.Q.! You're just a blob of protoplasm! All you can do is press a button. You've no more I.Q. than all the rest of our menials. That's all any of them could ever do—press buttons!"

*Clang! Clang! Clang!*

"I have arrived at a solution," 130 told him primly, choosing to ignore the outburst. "You will conceal yourself inside 131's kennel, arming yourself with whatever comes to hand. Conceal all garbage also within the kennel. Ignore 131. Without the correct stimulus, he will not respond. When the keeper enters the cage, which he will do, believing you to be there, I shall depress the red button. It will call for considerable effort on my part, as the four hour period is not yet over, but with concentration I shall succeed. 131 is conditioned to eat when the red light glows. He must do so—it is compulsion. He is not at all selective."

"You mean . . . ?"

"In the absence of his usual garbage, he will eat the keeper."

"Brilliant!"

What a brain the man had! Phrix could have done no better himself, for all his tri-phrenic thinking. Shale gathered up the kitchen scraps, an armful at a time, and carried them into the kennel. Apart from an occasional whimper, Exhibit 131 ignored him. He had tidied up the last morsel and had dived inside the kennel only a moment before the keeper appeared.

"You can come out," the keeper called. "I know you're in there and the management wants you back upstairs."

Shale did not answer. He lay flat on his stomach behind the pile of garbage. Through the door, he could just see the gate and the keeper's hand on the padlock. The keeper waited a moment and then called again. "You might as well come out," he said. "Unless you want to spend the rest of your life in there with 131." Shale still did not answer, but he began to see a flaw in 130's strategy. What if, instead of coming inside to fetch him, the keeper merely went away and left him there against some future occasion when he might be useful? But Shale need not have worried. After a pause, the keeper opened the padlock with one of a large bunch of keys dangling from his belt and, opening the gate, he entered the cage. At the same time, a hand from the adjacent cell curled through the bars and depressed the "Animate 131" button. Exhibit 131 came suddenly to life. He leaped to his feet, bounded to the accustomed place below the garbage chute, and, finding the expected heap of food scraps no longer there, he paused for a moment, puzzled and confused. Then, confirming the infallibility of high I.Q. predictions, he sprang at the keeper with a flurry of teeth and claw-like nails. It was hard to believe that this was neither more nor less than a normal specimen of the human race, behaving no more and no less than in the manner it had been taught to behave. It was all over in a matter of minutes. Reasoned defense was powerless against determined conditioning and the keeper went down as pitifully as a stag with the hounds at its throat. Shale closed the gate carefully behind him as Exhibit 131 munched happily at an arm bared from a blue-uniformed sleeve.

"It worked," Exhibit 130 announced, mildly satisfied. He was a bare eighty centimeters tall, pale and wizened. He sat on a high stool in a narrow cell. The high stool allowed him to reach the "Animate 131" button, which was his sole occupation. It seemed a shameful waste of a good I.Q. rating, but now, due to the breakthrough with the chromosome structure, I.Q.'s could be ten a cent for those that wanted them for future breeding. Few took advantage of the pos-

sibility. Children with a higher I.Q. than their parents are always a source of embarrassment.

"Are you sure you don't want to get out?" Shale asked. "I can let you free if you like; I've got the keeper's keys."

"Oh! My goodness me, no!" the exhibit replied. "What should I do without my red button? No, you go wherever you have to go and do what you have to do. You will never be really happy because you can't be sure what it is you want. You have to wrangle with choice. Free will only breeds neurosis and it is ninety-nine percent an illusion anyway. My reactions are inevitable. I am, and can only be, happy."

"Can you do one more thing," Shale asked, "and tell me the way out of here?"

"As far as I know," the exhibit replied, "there is no way out. It is only because of my unique conditioning and the store of knowledge I have been able to amass, that I am aware that there is a world at all outside the laboratory. It goes on for miles—the laboratory, I mean—practically for ever."

"The keeper must get out," Shale protested. "Or used to get out before 131 ate him."

"The keeper is somewhat unique," 130 considered. "He appears to be a link between the world of the laboratory and that part of the scheme of things that lies between the end of the laboratory and infinity. I always looked on the keeper as being analogous to god."

"There's not much left of him now," Shale said, looking back to where 131 was gnawing happily among a mess of blood, bones and gold-braided uniform.

"There was a period of development in most worlds when the acolytes sought divinity by devouring the god. Who eats the god becomes god. Who eats the keeper becomes in a way his own keeper. We are here only putting to test the significance of past ritual," 130 propounded. He appeared to be on the brink of a lecture and Shale, hearing voices in the distance, was in no mood to listen. Neither 130 nor his opinions on theology were of any interest once he had served his purpose. "I must find a way out," he said.

"If you continue in a straight line," 130 advised him, "you must logically reach somewhere in the end. But take care! It is possible that the laboratory, like the universe, is curved and what appears to be a straight line may return you again to the beginning."

It was clear that 130's chemically inbred intelligence was finding its outlet, having for once the luxury of an audience, in abstruse philosophizing rather than in the practicalities

of the organism's manipulation of its environment. He had adjusted himself to a very small area of environment and had no conception of manipulation. Even in the rescue of Shale, his manipulation had gone no further than the depression of his usual button, although at an admittedly unscheduled hour. The break with schedule had probably been the greatest single effort of his life. Shale left him sitting rather owlishly on his stool, the thought processes showing clearly in the creasing of his wizened forehead.

Shale stopped to listen and to consider the right course of action. There were voices apparently echoing from several directions at once. The roof of the laboratory, which appeared to be underground, was low and extremely resonant. The passage in which he found himself was extremely dimly lit and it was impossible to tell where it might lead whichever direction he took. On either side were the grilles of cages similar to the one he had just left and there seemed nothing he could do but follow 130's advice and keep going in a straight line until something happened. He set off, as far as he could tell, in the opposite direction to the main area of noise, noting as he ran that the exhibit numbers on the cages were increasing and concluding from this observation that he was probably heading away from the main entrance, where the pursuit would most likely come from. The corridor was apparently a main thoroughfare. Other passages branched off to left and to right, all in semi-darkness, identical with each other. There were barred cages on either side, with spotlights inside the cages illuminating points of interest and the show-cards. None of the specimens seemed to take any notice of him; they went on doing the things they were bred to do, proving the anthropological points they were designed to prove, oblivious of all else. Probably those that could speak were used to students and visitors and spoke only when spoken to and said the things they were there to say.

Shale took out his pocket communicator and sent a message to Phrix on Gromwold, telling him of his predicament with instructions to contact the Publisher's P.A. and to buy up the *Times and Echo*, or arrange for its presses to be sabotaged, whichever was the most expedient. He had barely finished the message with the reflection that it would take twenty minutes for a reply to reach him, when he heard the voices again, much nearer and approaching from one of the side corridors. Because the echo made it so difficult to tell how many were looking for him and from which direction they were coming, he couldn't decide which

way to try his escape. The obvious solution was to hide and study, the problem was—where?

He was now in a section apparently devoted to the study of blindness, where the show-cards announced the year and method of blinding and the skills the specimens had subsequently mastered, demonstrated generally by their ability to find their way through various complicated mazes. The drill was constructed with food at the center of a labyrinth—find it, and you eat. Fail, and you starve. "Life," the cards announced, "is like that." Once the specimen had mastered his labyrinth and could run the gauntlet of its hazards to the satisfaction of the lecturers and students, the obstacles were changed, trip wires were inserted and heavy lead balls hanging at head height were arranged, where previously the run had been clear. The specimen, being first well-starved, was then let loose and the time taken to relearn the route, together with injuries received, was noted. Quotients of adaptability were thus established and the whole gamut of human understanding was increased. "Man," the final notice read, "is infinitely adaptable."

Shale, armed with the keeper's keys, hesitated. It would be simple to let himself into one of the cages, but not so simple to impersonate one of the hairy, naked and wild-looking inmates. He could, of course, hide in one of the labyrinths, but what of the occupant? Would he, like Exhibit 131, eat anything that came his way in an otherwise uneatable environment? Would these blinded and sometimes also deafened specimens harbor a grudge against the sighted members of their own race coming temporarily within their power? The keeper of course would carry a whip, if he ever went in the cages at all. Shale had no whip and was suffering from the acute, naked embarrassment of being unarmed. No. The cages of the blind were not for him. Where then? Looming out of the dim light ahead was a large notice swung across the width of the corridor: NEW EXPERIMENTAL SECTION—*Advanced students only.*

Below the notice there was a barrier of light, transparent lumitex and a gate, closed and unyielding, but with no lock or visible catch. "Identify yourself!" a metallic voice ordered. "State seniority and reasons for entry."

"The keeper," Shale announced, "and that's reason enough."

Surprisingly, the gate opened, responding apparently to voice alone with no visual check, unless it accepted the rattle of the keeper's keys as sufficient evidence that the holder was, in fact, the keeper. It was just as well. The voices were now no further away than the next turning and their owners might at any moment come into view. Once

through the barrier, the first thing Shale noticed was an empty cell, only a short distance from the entrance and next door to the one labeled, "Effects of gorilla gonadine injections on the mating approach. Mating will take place Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 1500 hours. Students should be in their places by 1450. Care should be taken not to disturb the specimens." The keeper's key fitted the lock to the empty cell and Shale had just time to close the gates behind him and to conceal himself inside the kennel structure common to most of the enclosures, when a party of students, conducted by a white-coated lecturer, arrived outside.

"This," the lecturer announced, marshaling his charges in front of the opposite enclosure, "is an experiment of deep fundamental interest to all students of anthropology. You will notice the enclosure is divided down the center. In the left-hand cage, we have a female Homo sapiens, in fact, of distant Salumi parentage, but that is irrelevant. Homo sapiens, for the purposes of our investigations, is treated as a single race or species. Our subject is thirteen years old. Puberty is reached. In the right-hand section, we have a male Homo sapiens of the same age. You will notice that in front of the bars we have panels of one-way visual plastic, known as see-throughs. We are thus able to study our subjects without their being aware of our scrutiny. Neither of these subjects has ever seen another creature and no attempt has been made to condition them in any way. They are, in fact, as nature made them, and presumably intended that they should be, isolated from distracting forces and modes of social or tribal conduct. It is only in such laboratory conditions that it is possible to ascertain what is inherent in the specimen itself as distinct from group and environmental influences. In the natural state, no species is able to exist entirely on its own; it is dependent on its parents for food and protection and is later subject to the influences of competition with others of its own age. Our specimens here are fed and watered and their cells are cleaned by automatic processes imported from Gromwold. They are thus both, I repeat, exactly as nature intended that they should be. The object of the experiment is to demonstrate the mating techniques that are the basis of many of our social customs. You will note that similar techniques are common to many animals. Pheasants, swans, stags and some species of crab. Since the experiment can be performed once only with each pair of specimens, who will afterward have served their usefulness and be suitably disposed of, you will realize why this section is reserved for advanced students only. I will

now operate the mechanism drawing aside the sliding door between the cells and you will observe carefully and notes will be taken."

He pressed a button and the dividing doors slid back between the two enclosures. The first reaction of the two specimens, now for the first time confronted with another of their species, was one of fear. From the seclusion of his kennel Shale noted both male and female specimens giving voice to strangled, inarticulate cries and cowering against the opposing walls of their cells. Gradually, curiosity overcame fear and the male approached the female. Cautiously at first, shambling from side to side, poking at her occasionally with his finger. She snapped at his hand. He turned away and sat with his back to her, giving an occasional whine. Slowly, she edged from one end of her wall to the other and then, clawing the air with her hands and grimacing, lips drawn back and baring her teeth, she left the protection of her own territory and advanced toward him, one step at a time. He looked quickly over his shoulder and she responded with a warning grunt. He turned and faced her on all fours and she fled to a corner, upright, but leaning forward like an ape. There must, Shale thought, have been some stimulus from the feeding machines to have inspired an upright posture, or the ability to assume one. The climbing up on to the two feet is imitative. It is doubtful if any human child would do so left to its own devices and without some external influence, such as food above a certain level. Even so, the male seemed happier on his knees. He could move surprisingly quickly on all fours.

The approach and retreat technique continued for some time and then she allowed him to come closer. He was becoming frustrated and angry. Flecks of foam formed at the corners of his mouth. As he snarled, she turned her back on him and he suddenly sprang at her, biting and scratching. She did her best to fight him off, but he was considerably the stronger. In a moment he had dragged her to the ground and strangled her. When he found she no longer moved, he jumped up and down on the broken body shouting hoarse cries of obvious triumph.

"You never can tell," the lecturer regretted. "Good specimens, carefully bred for years, can prove quite useless at times. If this result proves anything at all, it is only how immensely varied is the mind of man and its responses to its environment. Usually the result of this experiment is as one would expect. The sexual instinct takes over and dominates the lust for power and the more basic dread of the unknown. But sometimes, as you see, this happens. It may

give you grounds for reflection, whether the sexual instinct is in fact the prime motivater of our mental mechanisms, or whether the lust for power and the survival factor are not equally dominant. After many thousands of years of experiment, we have still not arrived at a basic conclusion. The prime motivating element or elements still elude us."

The students made rapid notes in their pocket recorders and gathered around the cell taking photographs.

"We shall soon see the motivating factor in this one case," the lecturer continued, "If he eats her, it will indicate the quest for survival and suggest nothing more basic than the likelihood that he was hungry. If he does not eat her and continues to evince signs of triumph and satisfaction, it will, of course, indicate a functioning of the ancient lust for power."

The exhibit did not eat his female counterpart. He became restive, sniffing and prodding at the inert body, wailing and hopping from foot to foot. Finally, he sat beside her and gave voice to an agonizing howl of utter despair, like a wolf crying to the moon.

"Neurosis," the lecturer diagnosed. "The sexual factor is at last beginning to dominate. He is confused and unhappy only because he does not know what it is. He will ravage her in due course, but we cannot wait for that. It may take some time and we have much more to see."

The students dawdled for a moment or two, hoping to see the sexual factor exert itself, but the lecturer hurried on and the exhibit continued to bite his nails and whine. It is the disadvantage of crash courses that the students see too much at once and have no time to dwell on subjects that could be both rewarding and conducive to a better understanding of the universe and its peoples.

"Why is this cell empty?" one of the students asked, pointing to where Shale lay in mortal terror inside the kennel.

"Yes, what about this cell?" the others asked, hoping by this means to spin out the time a little. "Why is it empty?"

"It is not empty," the lecturer announced. "It only appears to be so. The cell contains one of the most remarkable achievements of the laboratory to date. In an enclosure behind a concealed panel at the rear is one of the most successful female hybrids ever raised in captivity."

"Holy Asgard!" Shale groaned.

"Are hybrids actually possible, then?" someone asked. "Assuming you are referring to man and ape, I had understood that such a cross was a biological impossibility."

"I must refer you to the works of Karkoff." The lecturer frowned. "Karkoff, as you know, or should know, carried

out some remarkable experiments on the chromosome. Apart from isolating the genetic factors that control heredity and reproducing the whole complicated chain in the laboratory, he also established the existence of what he termed the element of rejection. Quoting from Karkoff's *Hybridization and Chromosome Synthesis*, which should be recommended reading in any university on any planet: 'There is no chemical reason why any animal cannot be inseminated with the semen of another species. On purely bio-chemical grounds, all hybrids are possible. In many cases of cross fertilization in the past, however, the experiment has failed because of an inhibiting factor in the chromosome which acts like a catalyst in reverse. This anti-catalytic factor I term, *the element of rejection*. Remove it from the chromosome and any crossbreeding becomes possible. Any spermatozoa will attack any ovum, break off and leave within it chromosomes we have artificially reconstituted or from which we have removed the inhibiting factor—the element of rejection.' "

There was a subdued hum of voices as the students dictated in their notebooks. The lecturer sighed. Advanced students should have been aware of Karkoff's findings. The standard of general education, he had long noticed, was declining. The young were less well-informed and less receptive to information than their fathers had been. The universe was fast going to the dogs.

"The particular hybrid we have here concealed," he continued, regretfully aware that silk purses would never be made out of sow's ears, let the universe advance in general understanding with its customary strides however far it might. "The hybrid we have here concealed, we have educated to university standard entirely by machine teachers. She has never yet seen another person nor anything outside the four walls of her enclosure. We are keeping the outside area free for a suitable mate as we intend to breed hybrid with hybrid and produce, we hope, a completely new and chemically perfect strain. It is part of the experiment that she will not be let loose before one is bred."

"Why?" a student asked.

"Why what?" The lecturer frowned.

"Why breed your hybrid in seclusion? What is to be gained by this?"

The lecturer removed his spectacles and wiped them carefully on his coat sleeve.

"I trust," he asked with silky sarcasm, "you are not about to inform us we have been wrong in this? The tail is about to wag the dog, is it not?"

"Not at all," the student protested. "I just wondered, that's all."

"You will all," the lecturer directed, "confine your wonderings to matters about which I direct your, albeit limited, faculties of wonderment. I have prepared my lecture and have no intention of being diverted from an exposition of the knowledge I have acquired into a debate on other matters about which I have had no reason to study. We will continue."

"Couldn't we just see her?" a student asked.

"I will activate the mechanism that will open the door to her inner chamber," the lecturer agreed. "It is, after all, approaching the time when she should be presented to the outside world. It will doubtless be some while before she emerges into what must be, to her, a strange and frightening environment. Nevertheless, she will certainly ultimately emerge. We will pass this way on our return, when you may all see her and photographs may be taken. Now, I would like you to follow me to Exhibit 1049. An ordinary maze. The subject, male Homo sapiens, has learned the secret of the labyrinth and can reach without difficulty food placed at its center. How does he remember the left and right turns, the complexities of the passages? Is this memory, as we might imagine in a rational, thinking creature? Or do the motor muscles of his legs that carry him through these intricacies also play a part? In other words, is the memory a photographic picture in the brain, for the subject has not learned to speak and to say to himself, 'Here I turn right.' Or is it a muscle-memory, a coordination of stimuli that move the legs in a certain way at a certain time? To establish this point, we have amputated the subject's legs and arms. Now, you will observe that, as I press the siren that informs him that the food is there, he wriggles on his stomach, taking the right course as surely as before. Ergo, the memory was contained in the brain cells in the form of a directive sense rather than a stimulation of certain motor muscles, even though the memory itself was nonverbal and contained, like a photographic plate, in chemical but nonetheless pictorial form."

The entourage moved on and Shale emerged cautiously from his kennel, blinking away the retinal images generated by staring at the lights in the opposing cages. As his vision cleared, he found himself face to face with what appeared to be a tall and rather stately chimpanzee.

## III

THEY STARED at each other, both unmoving, for some little time, Shale and the ape-woman. Shale because he was unarmed and had no means of knowing how they stood, strength for strength, being both about the same height, and the ape-woman because she had never seen another person before and needed time for reflection.

"I'm Marylin," she said at last. "You, I think, must be God."

"No," he said, backing cautiously away toward the door. "I am Shale. Just ignore me; I'm on my way."

"A person?" she asked. "Like myself?"

"Somewhat." He hesitated, remembering the fight to the death when the male and female in the opposite cage had found themselves, for the first time, not alone in the world. How far would education by machine sublimate such basic instincts? It would depend no doubt on what it was the machines had taught.

"You are not a person like myself?" Her voice was cultured like a Groil's, or even more, like one expected P.A. men to speak to each other on Asgard. Nothing puts a menial in his place better than the right accent. He had never heard a girl with a cultured voice before.

"You are a little different," he said cautiously. "You are a . . ." Did she know she was half ape? Did she know what apes were? Did she know what men were, if it came to that? What exactly did "University standard" mean? How much could anyone learn entirely from descriptions of things not seem?

"I imagined that persons would look like you," she said. "Although I had expected more hair. On the other hand, I had believed it was my destiny to be bred alone. I thought that only God could alter the course of destiny. I thus naturally assumed that you were He."

I assumed that you were He. The verb to be takes the nominative. The sort of thing a machine-teacher would insist upon, even though the Ruling Races had been saying "It's me" for twenty millennia.

"There is no God," he said. "It's an ancient fable."

"If you are not God, how do you know that? I thought only God knew everything and therefore only God could know that there is no God?" The machines appeared to have provided her with an answer to everything even if this particular piece of logic was no more than nonsense. Or was it? It is always debatable, he thought, the question of

what is logic and what isn't. An advertisement manager should never allow himself to be out-talked by anyone, least of all by a hybrid ape.

"The Publisher knows everything," he said.

"Possibly the Publisher is God," she said. "God has had many names. I have often thought I would like to write my memoires. The machines said I had a good literary style. I would like to meet the Publisher."

"No one meets the Publisher," he told her, embarrassed at the unethical nature of the thought. "The Publisher works through me. I am the Advertisement Manager."

"He moves in a mysterious way," she quoted. "His wonders to perform."

"I have to get out of here," he told her. "This is your cell and they will be coming back to have a look at you shortly. I belong to the world outside. If you don't mind, I'll say goodbye and be on my way."

"I'll come with you," she said. "I've always wanted to see it. The world outside, I mean."

"You can hardly do that!"

"Why not?"

Why not? Well—why not? It was going to be difficult enough to get out anyway. Having a chimpanzee with a college accent wouldn't really make any difference. It would really put one over on Metita and her father to walk off with their exhibit. It wasn't only that, the desire to pay off Metita. He felt an odd liking for this strange, subhuman specimen and a peculiar feeling that he would like to help her. Shale was not given to volunteering help to anyone. The world didn't work that way. People were all potential enemies. You met them as such, got the upper hand at the first opportunity and pushed them down before they pushed you. But inexperienced hybrids were different. They wouldn't know how to push. She looked rather pathetic, standing there all hairy and naked and twiddling her fingers. Also, there was status in owning anyone with a college accent.

"Come along," he said. "I expect we'll find you a job in the organization somewhere."

She might also have news value. As Advertisement Manager, he knew very little about news, but you needed it to weave into the text of the advertisement. Phrix would know about that. They might even bring a piece about her and blackmail Metita's father into advertising the laboratories, which he never did normally. It would be something to actually increase the revenue. He hadn't done anything like that for years. The communicator buzzed in his pocket. Phrix returning his signal.

"On way to Shorne with squad of Gromwold police. Large sum credited to chief constable. Other publications conspiring with *Time and Echo.* Minor attack on Publisher's authority. *Times and Echo* works well guarded. Need reinforcements. Where are you? Phrix."

"In some kind of laboratory under Lulonga. Metita's father is director. Metita's in league with *Times and Echo.* Forbid you to say, 'I told you so.' Get him—Metita's father! Get her too! Signal Asgard for reinforcements. I shall escape and meet you at Lulonga airport. Have with me a . . ." He was going to say "chimpanzee" but, doubtful of Marylin's sensitivity or knowledge of her antecedents, he refrained and substituted "girl."

"Have you a mirror?" Marylin asked. "I have never seen myself. Now that I have seen you and I know what people look like, I am wondering. Do I look at all like you?"

She looked at her hands, turning them over, palms upward and back again. They were human hands but very hairy. Doubtfully, Shale found her a mirror in his smock pocket and handed it to her. She studied her face thoughtfully. It was quite a human face, really, Shale thought. True, it was wrinkled like a chimpanzee's, the eyes were deep-set, the mouth overlarge and the lower lip protruding, but it was, in a way, a likable, attractive face.

"Yes," she said, after a while. "I thought I looked like that. I know it from the feel. You are different, but I find you quite handsome. It's funny, but I've always had an impression of faces from what I have heard about their character. The machines were very exact. What do you think of me? Would you call me—pretty?"

Normally, Shale would have laughed at any woman who, with a face like that, asked such a damn fool question. With any other face for that matter. After all, Advertisement Managers can expect the best in compliments from their brides; there is little point in handing out courtesies in return. Just the same, this time, he did not laugh. The absence of his normal sense of humor puzzled him. Why did he care if a hybrid's feelings were hurt? But he did care. He had begun to like Marylin and it was a new sensation. He had never liked any man or woman before. But then, Marylin was not a woman. Not in the ordinary sense, at least.

"Yes," he said, in answer to her question, "quite pretty. Now, let's get out of here."

They unlocked the outer cage gates and hurried in the opposite direction from the way the lecturer and his party had taken, first closing the gates behind them to leave a mystery for the lecturer, and ultimately the management,

to think about. "The case of the vanishing hybrid—did Karkoff supply all the answers?"

"The last advice I had," Shale said, "was to keep straight on until I came to the end."

"It seems reasonable," she agreed.

"We must get you some clothes," he said, ignoring a thin arm stretched through the bars of a cage labeled, EFFECTS OF STARVATION—DO NOT FEED THE SPECIMENS. Marylin stopped and, for some reason best known to herself, held the hand for a moment before rejoining Shale.

"I wish we had some food for him," she said.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because he's hungry."

"So what?" He was striding along so fast she had to scamper to keep up with him. She took his smock-tails and pulled. "Shale!" she said. He stopped and looked at her curiously. Her mouth was half open and you half expected a long tongue to shoot out of it, like a frog swatting a passing fly. But she seemed more alive, more concerned about life than a phlegmatic toad.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Doesn't anyone care?" she asked. "Doesn't anyone feel hunger when someone else's stomach is empty?"

"What an idea!" He laughed. A droll toad. A comical monkey with its whiskers twitching and their ends a little wet.

"There's a word for it," she said, turning her memory-boxes inside out and finding it in a neglected corner: "Empathy," she said.

"I don't know a lot about words," he grumbled. "That's always the editor's job. I just know about life and running a business, which is what life is all about. If I haven't any food, I'm hungry, or I expect I should be. If someone else hasn't any food, I expect he's hungry too. That's his concern, not mine. There's a lot of people in the universe, far too many for me to bother about whether they live or die. There's only one Archexecutive Shale. I know all about him and I'm taking good care he never wants. You don't mean to tell me you care if some creature you never knew was there a moment ago dies of hunger in his cell? You're going to find life pretty miserable if that's your trouble. Anyway, what are we talking about food for? I was going to get you some clothes before you started blathering."

"Yes, I know you were." She was delighted. "I know about clothes, the things you are wearing. I've always wanted clothes. I've thought sometimes when I was alone in my cell, I shouldn't mind being cut off from the world

I'd learned about and knowing about all the things I'd never see, if I could have clothes and dress up sometimes and pretend there was someone coming who would be pleased because I looked nice. I knew I should feel quite different in a skirt. One does, you know."

"I'll get you clothes," he promised. "The best in the universe."

He didn't know why he said it, nor why he should care whether she dressed or not. She was an ape and nothing to him. Well, half an ape anyway. She slipped an arm around him and kissed him quickly behind the ear with a large mouth. Her lips were wet and leathery but he hardly noticed.

"You can have all the clothes you want," he said. "And a hat. I'll throw in at least one hat."

## IV

THE PUBLISHER'S P.A. lay dreamily on an inflated mattress, floating on the still waters of an Asgard lagoon. His hands dangled, languidly breaking the surface with the slow, circular motion of one finger. There were multicolored fish, deep down in the cool, clear depths of the blue-tinted water. You could see the bottom, fathoms down, clean white gravel and here and there, clumps of anemones, fronds of scarlet and purple reeds, phosphorescent lagoon-urchins, and the waving, glinting outline of scimitar fish upended, rooted on the hilts of their tails. The P.A.'s name was Mule and, in spite of regular hormone injections, he was showing signs of age and corpulence.

Once it had been thought that nothing should age on Asgard with everything there to keep it young. There were no seasons and thus no years—and without years, how should one age? Asgard itself, having no menstrual, annual, or perennial cycle that might have been attributed to an extra-galactic Persephone, did not age. There was no reason why men should do so either; there is nothing necessarily inherent about it. Tissues continue to replace themselves with other similar tissues and there is no reason at all why the body should show any sign of the continuing process. Nevertheless, Mule was aging.

Limsola floated beside him, fanning him every now and again with a water lily leaf. The Asgard temperature was constant at a happy medium between hot and cold, but it was still pleasant to be fanned, particularly by Limsola. Limsola had the figure of an Asgard Venus, though somewhat narrower about the hips. She had good bone structure and high cheekbones and soft, rounded curves in the right places.

There are, as every man knows and probably every woman too, curves and curves. Some mean nothing at all, implying no more and no less than the ability to run a mile in 3 minutes 25.6 seconds. Others are geometrically perfect but you never give them a second glance. But some . . . well, it's a matter of light and shade and suggestion of dimple and texture and tint and a promise of something that only such women have to offer that makes one's very male glands raise their leering heads like sea horses and neigh in a knowing throaty and aquamarine sort of way. And such were the curves of Limsola, as she lay, drifting, her breasts pointing pertly at the Asgard sky like ovoid funnels set laterally across the bows of a ship, while her navel gave access to some secret and miniature engine room. He noticed that her skin shone with a soft, translucent whiteness even under the blue sun of Asgard.

"Your breasts," he said, dreamily. She fanned them with the leaf. The warm air was a gentle caress and she smiled with the movement of it. "Like two igloos with a chimney on each," he said, proud of the simile.

"You've had your injection," she said, nodding. "I always know when you've had your injection."

Mule sighed. He liked to think love was emotional, irrational, the wild fire of blood in torment, rather than coldly and impersonally chemical. It was the same with all emotions. Were those generated from within, by the chemistry of the body, really any different from those sparked off by the synthetic chemistry of the capsule? They all felt the same. In any case, he was sadly aware that, without the sexual hormones, he was an aging and impotent chief executive, whom even Limsola, naked as a naiad, could never rouse to the exuberation of even a dry, querulous cough. But then again, what is impotence?—a matter of chemistry. Did it matter where the chemicals came from? Does the personality really own in a more personal way the laboratory that is inside itself, as something different and apart, than it does the stimulants that are just as much its property by virtue of material, if external, ownership? A chief executive is a chief executive both inside and out and the action of his thyroid is no different from the processes of the laboratories whose products he also controls. Just now, Mule had more on his mind than Limsola and the death of his glands. He dipped his fingers in the warm, clear water and allowed the drops to fall, one by one, on his forehead.

"I'm worried," he said. "It's the responsibility. You don't know what it's like to be responsible."

"Poor S.D.," she said, tickling his nose with the serrated edge of the leaf. "Tell Limsola!"

*S.D.!* he thought, sadly. Sugar Daddy. She had meant it as a term of endearment, but to Mule it was not endearing. It was an epitaph. Two letters that summed up the long drawn-out evening of his life and extinguished forever the vague memory of the fitful fever it might once have been. As P.A. to the Publisher, Mule could have his pick of all the women on Asgard and if they were not to his liking, he could have replacements imported at the drop of a cybernetic hint to the chief clerk. They were all there, imported from the furthest corners, from pivot to outer periphery, for their exceptional qualities. Only the ultimate heads of all the professions came to Asgard, or had come a long time ago. Mistresses were no exception. But Mule was now at the age, 350 or thereabouts, when chemistry could no longer maintain intellectual satisfaction. The body continued to replenish its tissues once the mechanism of aging was inhibited. He was invulnerable to all known diseases, including the B91. Emotionally he was elated, serene, expectant, merry or contemplative at the prick of a needle. Yet somewhere behind the emotions, the mechanical sense mechanism of the body, the intellect had slowly tired until it was no more concerned with even the stimulation of itself. It happened to everyone at some time or other. The needle is plied more and more irregularly, the little hormone tablet in the buttocks runs dry, the body fattens, ages, grows comatose and finally dies, for no better reason than that it has forgotten how to live.

"You should play more golf," she said, laying the water lily leaf on the jut of her pelvis for protection against the untraviolet rays of the blue sun.

"Golf!" he said, with a dry, hollow irony. Golf might once have been fun before the electronic revolution—how many centuries ago? Certainly the ancients had considered it of prime mystical and socio-theological importance. No one made a deal with a non-golfer. But it had been different then. You walked on to the—what did they call them?—Links?—on your own two feet, wheeling or carrying your clubs. You applied yourself to the ball with a swing of the club, dexterously, with your own two hands. But now! You drive on to the simugrass with the auto-transporter. The ball is teed on the green by a pincer device in the undercarriage. You set the dials, read the range finder, wind velocity, elasticity of simuturf. Press! Ping! And back to the clubhouse for drinks all around. You holed in one every time.

"Tell me your worries, poor S.D." Limson yawned. "Has the Publisher found you out?"

"Good gracious, no!" He was amazed at her naïveté. "I never see the Publisher. The head of an empire does not interfere with the running of it. Ordinarily, I never interfere either. What is the point of being Chief Executive on Asgard if you dabble in the dreary universe outside? But now —well, it's different. It's that man Shale."

"The Advertisement Manager," she said brightly.

"Late Advertisement Manager, I think." He shook his head and speared testily with his finger at a passing sapphire fish. It yelped musically, splashing away in a flurry of threshing fins.

"Why?" she asked. "Is the revenue going down?"

"It's not the revenue," he said. "When you have a virtual monopoly, you don't worry about revenue. The auto-accountants on the central banking planet attend to that. The rates are automatically adjusted to balance the budget and transfer our contribution to the maintenance of Asgard. I never bother myself with trivialities like finance. No. It's Shale himself. I think he's expendable."

"Then expend him," she said.

The sapphire fish peered from behind a clump of golden-crowned bullrushes. It whistled a monotonous bi-tonal cuckoo refrain. There was a flash of multicolored plumage and an eagle swooped, carrying it aloft, still singing, in its talons.

"He's got himself into some sort of trouble," the P.A. confided. "Caught napping by a dreary one-planet paper no one has ever heard of. Now he wants reinforcements."

"Can you replace him?" she asked. "You never see any of the staff, do you?"

"Of course not!" He was shocked at the idea. "Higher Management never concerns itself with the squalid bickerings of executives and archexecutives. Normally Shale would choose his own successor in the unlikely event of his retiring before someone else supplanted him."

"How did he get the job in the first place?" she asked.

"Assassinations, I think," he grumbled. "I believe he jettisoned his predecessor in deep space. Shale climbed the ladder in the usual way, by a series of intrigues—amazing how naïve employees can be; they never notice they're being outmaneuvered until it's too late—and then, by some means, he prevailed upon the then Ad Manager to join him on a trip without his bodyguard. It was careless of him and of course in business, carelessness can never be tolerated. Shale had exposed his superior's weakness and presented himself

for appointment at the same time. Higher Management never questions legitimate maneuveres of that nature."

"And now Shale has been careless himself?"

"It seems so. He is apparently in the hands of this small, unknown organization. Naturally I cannot allow the controlling advertisement archexecutive post to fall into the hands of a rival, however brilliantly the campaign was executed that put Shale in their hands."

"Then who will you appoint?"

"I think Shale's Groil. A humanoid called Phrix. He seems to have the situation well in hand."

"I thought Groils were unsuitable for posts of higher authority? Aren't they supposed to be too intelligent to care or something?"

"Ordinarily, yes," he agreed. "But Phrix seems to be exceptional. He is not looking for authority—Groils never do—but, nevertheless, appears to have assumed it. I was most impressed by his analysis of the situation. He appeared to regard Shale as a position rather than as a person and his grasp of the functions of that position was considerably better than Shale's. Shale, of course, never does anything, none of them do. These archexecutive functions are no more than the old offices of president and king and queen, member of Parliament, senator, congressman and oberbürgermeister. Something for the menial to aspire to be. Remove the rung at the top of the ladder and then the rung next to it and the one below that, and very soon you not only have no ladder and nothing for the human race to aspire to, but no human race, either, to do the aspiring. We all know it wouldn't matter whether there is a human race or not, but since there is, we like to think it has its uses.

"Anyway, I have signaled Phrix to assume that Shale is in fact liquidated by his rivals and to take over their organization and deal with them as he sees fit."

"I see," she said.

"It is a great responsibility." He sighed. "I shouldn't have to make these high-level decisions at my time of life."

"Every man is as young as his last injection," she quoted. "Shall we start the mini-motors and head for the shore?"

"I shall do my best to forget the cares of my office," he said, as the mattress sailed toward the bank. "It is very aging, care is. I sometimes think of you. Am I indeed everything you would wish me to be? I am not boring? You do not ever think of younger men?"

"In my profession?" she asked. "Certainly not! I am a mistress. I am much more concerned with seniority than youth."

A giant peacock spread the fan of its tail on the bank where they landed. It raised its head high over the scarlet blossoms of an aromatic magnolia bush and sang. The song was a soft, complicated refrain peculiar to peacocks. The P.A. sighed in Limsola's ardent, dutiful embrace.

"They are noisy," he said. "They are very noisy birds. Peacocks are . . . peacocks are very noisy birds," he added drowsily. A moment later, he was quite dead.

## V

KANTOR, advertisement manager of the Gromwold *Times and Echo* had every exit from the laboratories covered by his men. Now that Shale had escaped, for the moment at any rate, from Metita and the Salumi women, it was open war. And since it was open war, it mattered little whether Shale was killed in an industrial fracas or spirited away by Metita. Once Kantor was master of Shale's spacecraft, his codes, records and his Groil, he was de facto Advertisement Manager of the Publishing House. Shale operated only from his ship and trusted no communication links to his subordinates. The ship was virtually Shale. Once he had taken it over, he would sack the Publisher's staff on Gromwold, appoint his own and then travel from planet to planet exercising his authority as Shale had done. Who wears the crown is king. There were Shale's bodyguards on the ship to contend with, but they would transfer their allegiance to himself as soon as they were convinced that Shale was out of the running. There would be no one among them of possible advertisement manager material or Shale would have jettisoned such a threat to his own authority long ago. There was also Phrix, Shale's Groil. Groils were never aggressive but they were always two thoughts ahead of you and needed watching. Only the Ruling Races in archexecutive positions had Groils. Kantor had no experience in how to deal with them, but it was comforting to consider that Groils were valuable precisely because they took orders without question from their intellectual inferiors. In fact the whole social structure of the universe was built on the well-tried principle of intellectual subservience to strength. Phrix was at this moment orbiting Shorne and appeared in no hurry to land. He seemed somehow to know that the airport was in hostile hands.

Kantor called him up on Shale's frequency from the research director's office. His voice, he thought, had a fair resemblance to Shale's and there was a certain amount of distortion, due to the ionospheres. In Shale's brusque man-

ner, he ordered Phrix in to land. Phrix was not deceived. Kantor tried another approach.

"I am now virtually Ad Manager of the Publishing House," Kantor told the research director. "I can reasonably call for your cooperation. Shale is no more than a person who once knew your daughter and is now a poor fugitive in your laboratories."

"You have it," Metita's father assured him. "Anyone running loose without escort in the laboratories could do untold mischief. Shale will be apprehended as soon as possible. Every attendant is armed and on the lookout for him."

"I will promise you adequate free space in the Lemos *Galactic Monitor,*" Kantor said, by way of thanking him. "I will confirm it with the editor as soon as my position is established."

"You expect no trouble from the editors?" the research director asked.

"Certainly not! Editors are always, in any company, firmly under the control of the advertisement manager. You will have noticed that in all the Publisher's papers, only advertisers are mentioned in a favorable light and non-advertisers are virtually put out of business as soon as possible."

"The Shorne laboratory excepted!"

"Of course. But only because you were Metita's father. Shale would never have allowed your laboratories to function unadvertised for any other reason."

The research director patted the marble bust of a former laboratory specimen who had once achieved the record weight of seven hundred standard Galactic pounds after thyroid injections. He switched on an external view-panel. Phrix was still in orbit. His, or rather, Shale's craft was nosing through the drifting hazy, green-veined, misty, cherry-pink layers of the upper ionosphere. To an Earth-antiquary, it could have called to mind a Norse long-ship riding calmly through a very peaceful summer Aurora Borealis. But the research director was not an Earth-antiquary.

"Why not call him down?" he asked. "Tell him Shale is dead and assert your authority. Groils always respond to authority. Without contact with Shale, he will be in need of a master. We can decide later what to do with him. I could use a Groil for a new experiment I have in mind."

"It's worth a try," Kantor said, agreeing. He called up Phrix again. "I am Advertising Manager," he transmitted. "I have eliminated Shale and informed the Publisher of my appointment. You will land at once and hand the ship and its records over to me."

"On the contrary," Phrix replied, nosing downward into

the second ionosphere. "I have received notice that I am appointed. From the Publisher. Have signaled *Times and Echo* offices takeover by Publishing House. Offered staff two and one-half percent increase. Their loyalty thus assured."

"That's a development I didn't expect," Metita's father murmured. "It's practically unknown to appoint Groils to such posts."

"It's a lie of course!"

"Impossible! Groils never lie. They have no mechanism for it!"

"We'll see about that!" Kantor returned to the Phrix frequency. His voice on the oscilloscope developed an ugly outline, very like the obituary cards announcing the passing of a distant dear one and, giving visual edge to the sawteeth of sorrow, recording for posterity the wave pattern of his death rattle. "You are a Groil," he transmitted. "No Groils are ever appointed to managerial posts. Staff wouldn't stand for it. Two and a half percent increase impossible. All increases must be geared to increased production. Ancient law of Earth. Pity about Earth. Land and surrender!"

"Additional revenue from *Times and Echo* exactly covers increase. All higher executives dismissed. Yourself included. The purpose of adversity is the development of character occasioned by its acceptance. Recommend bowing of head and repetition of magic formula, 'mea culpa.' "

"I'll shoot down your craft first! We've got guns down here at Lulonga, matey. One more peep out of you and you'll get a ton of what's fissionable straight up your jacksie!"

"Then no one Advertisement Manager. All records and codes in craft. Have Gromwold police on board. You want war, Shorne and Gromwold?"

"Shoot him down!" Kantor shouted, but the director's hand had already closed over the switch.

"I only deal on a basis of equality with archexecutives," he said. "It appears you have lost out to a Groil."

"Take him!" Kantor raged and his bodyguard seized the director and held him against further orders. They showed little enthusiasm, however, thinking of the two and a half percent.

"It will be five percent when I'm in charge," Kantor promised them. "We will milk the Lemos *Galactic Monitor* to our own advantage."

His henchmen showed their appreciation by mildly pummeling their prisoner. No one likes battles for power among archexecutives. It makes life very difficult for menials, who, until they are sure which side is winning, are doubtful for whom to cheer.

"I need more men," Kantor told the director, taking a scalpel from a rack below a series of aquaria-like wall containers showing kidneys in pickle. "What have you suitable in the laboratory? Do you breed giants down there? Wolfmen? What's the nastiest thing you ever developed? I want it and the bigger it is, the better."

"We have some specimens nine feet tall," Metita's father confessed, eyeing the scalpel. "But they are slow and lethargic and have never been allowed outside their cages. Something smaller, with a built-in emotional control by electrical stimulus or periodic acid discharge, would probably be more efficacious."

"You're going to find me something," Kantor said, speaking as much with the scalpel as with his lips. "You're going to find me some reinforcements that are going to be real good, aren't you, daddyo?"

"Yes," he promised, "you can have anything you like. Just take it, but please put that scalpel away. I can't stand the sight of blood."

"Right," Kantor announced. "We'll all go down to the lab and see what we can find. And if there's any funny business, I'll cut your ears off. Just to start with. We can also help look for Shale. My men at the airport must wait for Phrix to land. He'll come down in time and then we'll see what his lobes are made of. Right, let's get down to the elevator!"

The light on the monitoring panel glowed and they paused at the door to listen. Phrix was now over the laboratory and there was no time-lag in the conversation.

"Phrix to Shale. Report if alive or dead."

"Shale to Phrix. I am alive. Land and cover exits to laboratory. I am coming out."

"Phrix to Shale. On authority of Publisher I am Ad Manager. Taking over *Times and Echo* and your administration. You dismissed. Opposition still in control on Shorne. Advise remain in laboratory until situation clarifies."

"You damned, treacherous, double-crossing, two-horned subhuman monstrosity! You will obey my orders! No Groil questions the authority of the Ruling Races! Land at once!"

"Obey orders of Publisher. Cannot land. *Times and Echo* in control of airport."

"Why do you think my ship has guns! Shoot up all opposition and land at airport!"

"Obey orders Publisher. Self opposed all forms violence. Intellect triumphs over weapons! New universe in the making. Lion shall lie down with the lamb and tapir smile upon the ant. I speak metaphorically."

"What the whole spectrum of viruses are you talking about? Who asked your opinion on violence or ants or tapirs? The universe is made already and it's no part of your job to alter it. Get shooting!"

"I have ship. I am Ad Manager. You no one. You are trapped. I speak from position of strength. You waste good words."

"Listen, Phrix! I'm sure you mean well, but Groils are unsuited to command; you know they are. You know everything—you must know your own unsuitability. And what's all this about violence? It just shows how far your intellectual horned heads would get if we left decisions to you. How can you survive without violence? Violence is always defensive. Even if we attack, it is to prevent others attacking us. That has always been the justification of arms. If you are unarmed, the weak as well as the strong will attack you. If you believe your authority better than mine, and I and others oppose you, what can you do but shoot us down? Without violence you have no power, no possibility of sustaining a creed of nonviolence. You'll lose out even to the *Times and Echo*. They'll shoot fast enough, believe you me. So get those guns firing, there's a good chap, and we can talk terms when you've got me out of here."

"No shooting. No terms. Outmaneuver by intellect. New universe for posterity to inherit."

"Good for you, Phrix!"

A woman's voice. Somewhere in the dim labyrinth below Lulonga, Shale had a woman with him. A woman with a quiet, cultured voice and apparently left-wing views. A female Groil probably, but there were so few female Groils. The male Groils never seemed to need them.

"Who was that?" Kantor asked when no further sound came from the monitor but the crackle of sun-spot bombardment in the third ionosphere. The research director spread his hands.

"I thought he came alone."

"Metita?"

But Metita was leaning against the sliding doors that led to her chambers. Stroking a white tiger and smiling archly.

"Outmaneuvered by intellect?" She mused, inhaling blue narcotic smoke from a two foot long synthetic hash-mash holder. "Tell me more about this man Phrix. Is he susceptible? Three brains must triple the desire." Kantor shook his head gloomily.

"They inhibit all emotions," he said. "You would be no more to Phrix than a camel. You are committed to me."

"Or to Shale," she murmured. "You haven't caught Shale yet, have you?"

"We'll get him soon enough," he promised her. "And Phrix. It seems he's got some peculiar views. People have tried this lark of philosophy against guns before. The guns always win in the end. Chaps like Phrix are all the same; they think that what they are doing is right, whatever that means. And so they suppose that the other side thinks that what it is doing, in its own way, is right too. It doesn't. It just sits back and waits the chance to get the first shot in. And when the chance comes—that's the end of the philosopher."

"Phrix isn't important," she said. "Shale is. Bring me Shale's head or some other vital part of him and I am yours—body and that other thing—soul, isn't it? I shall stay all yours every moment of the day until someone else takes your place."

## VI

IN THE SPACECRAFT above Lulonga, the Gromwold police inspector drew heavily on a large cigar, the product, duty-free, of Gromwold (Narcotics) Inc. He looked thoughtfully at Phrix, who was reclining, relaxed and unconcerned, watching the Shorne landscape traveling beneath him on the telescopic screen. The green, pastoral peace of it all stirred a distant race-memory at the very root of a lobe; a response that, in a being that could feel no yearnings and no nostalgia, was just the same, both feelings together. It was a fully-fledged yearning nostalgia and it triggered a cellular sigh-relay, although the muscular reflex of the sigh itself had atrophied at a time well before the Earth flood. Pity about Earth. Phrix, who could not sigh, felt the mental equivalent in the form of a minute electro-chemical discharge at a point any competent brain-cartographer would have labeled "Bridge of Sighs." The policeman, like policemen anywhere else, was not given to nostalgia and the knowledge that Phrix neither smoked nor used narcotics in any other form, nor had any need of alcohol, endeared him not at all, conjuring up as it did, an image of a man sufficient to himself, better than other men and thus, in a constabulary sense, needing the maximum amount of watching.

"What now?" he asked.

"We wait," Phrix told him. "All under control—no gains by hurrying."

"I don't get it," the police inspector grumbled. "You've got the spacecraft and all the records. Your own lot have

appointed you official Ad Manager. No one's been appointed officially for years. You've got everything on your side, including the best police contingent that ever came out of Gromwold. How come you let that lot down there make a monkey out of you?"

"No monkey." Phrix shook his head, the three crowns rocking from side to side. "Kantor soon finds *Times and Echo* surrendered to Publisher. Own men then desert him. Capitulate."

"Capitulate, my aunt Fanny! He'll capitulate all right until you turn your back and then he'll put a pellet through you. There's only one way to be sure who has won—when you've got the other side laid out in front of you and you've counted heads to make sure there isn't one missing. If there is, he'll get you. Shoot 'em up, boy! You've got right on your side. Everyone who's winning's got that."

"No more violence. Wasteful. Not necessary. New universe. Peace."

"And Shale? What about Shale when he gets out? I wouldn't be in your shoes, matey, if Shale catches up with you. Shale's got an all-universe reputation. You know what they say? They say that when Shale was born they took him along in his cage and showed him his ma and his ma, she said, 'What's that?' And they said, 'Praise the electron—it's yours and it's a bairn!' And she said, 'Is it now?' and she poked it doubtful-like with her finger and Shale, he bit and he sunk his teeth in, and he wouldn't let go till they prized his mouth open with a toothbrush. That's Shale, matey. What're you going to do? Shake him by the hand or something?"

"Maybe they kill Shale. I do not kill. Shale no one without the spacecraft. Spacecraft is manager, not Shale. Leave on Shorne—Metita."

"I don't get the object of the exercise. You're now the boss in your own outfit. That's fine. What are you going to do with the new power you got? What's all this about a new universe? What's wrong with the universe as it is? It's the only one we've got!"

"You think universe a good place?"

"B91!" The police inspector considered. "What's good? Good's what sticks to rules and bad's what doesn't. I didn't make the rules, no more than you. Who's beefing?"

"I make new rules."

"You don't make rules. Rules just are. How're you going to make new rules?"

"Change policy all papers. Publisher control all forms communication. T.V. Sensivision. Papers. Magazines. Tapes. Post-

ers. Wrappers. All forms packaging. No social message. No guidance. Only sell advertising space. Change all that. Lead people through papers to want new and better things. Honesty. No corruption. Proper use leisure. Teach men to think."

"You'll lose all your advertising!"

"No. Fallacy. Nowhere else to advertise. Publisher control all. Everyone advertise already. Built into system. Can't avoid system. Will still advertise. Totally unnecessary but will do so from faith and habit. But better standard demand. Independent news comment apart from ads—separate."

"I see why they never give the Groils the top jobs! There's something mighty funny going on inside that big head of yours. You're all mixed up. You can't have news apart from advertisements. They're part and parcel of the same thing. You can only have news in newsads and, anyway, no one reads them. They pick up their papers and open them out across the table and they glance through them out of custom and what's customary is right. It's not customary to read them. What's this you're trying to do? Think for other people? Give them standards you've thought up for them and teach them how to like 'em? People, thank Asgard, are conservative. They like things the way they've always known them. That's custom too and don't tell me that what's custom isn't always right or I'll go straight back to Gromwold. I'm a policeman and I hope I know right from wrong. What are you getting out of all this, anyway?"

"Nothing. Instrument in the scheme of things. Destiny of organism to achieve perfection. Self—the tool, of destiny."

"The biggest criminals in the universe," the police inspector, who knew his history, argued, "all blamed it on destiny. When things go your way, it's destiny. When they go someone else's, it's fate. Fate's bad and destiny's good. If you don't mind my saying so, and as a Groil, you don't mind anything, you're doing some pretty cockeyed thinking. Okay! So the organism tries to perfect itself. Right enough! *Itself,* matey—not someone else. The whole social system is based on man serving his own interest. He needs money and status and a knockabout jet-car. So he works and does as he's told and keeps out of trouble, just so no one comes along and knocks his status down a peg or two, or takes his girlfriend or sends him to a penal planet. Your Publisher owns papers to make money. Think he cares what goes in them, as long as it pays? Think he ever reads them? What publisher ever read his own papers? What's he pay editors for? All the Publisher does is count the ads and see he's got one more than last year. That's what pays, matey, ads —not news. So the Publisher lives on Asgard and pays for

all the people who make all the commodities that pour into Asgard. Your job is to make money for the Publisher so he can spend it and pay you and all your staff and all the people who make all the things he wants. Where would they all be if he didn't want anything for himself? Starving. You start getting people to think and want something more than money and you'll upset the whole delicate balance of universal economy. You keep the ads running and keep 'em spending, matey! That way you'll perfect yourself and let the rest of us find our own perfection and that'll be a bit more on our credit cards than we had last year, that's all."

If Phrix had had the bio-chemical ability to look or feel ill at ease, he would have done so. The central, humanoid area of his brain functioned much as the, admittedly smaller, crinkled cranium of the police inspector. But evolution had built on to his frontal lobes until they had extended their physical and psychical areas into two quite separate intellectual reflex relays, with their own memory adjuncts. The central brain memories were the physical and inherited race memories, the consciousness of identity, antecedents and the garnered happenings of an individual lifetime. The one intellectual memory, in the right-hand lobe, was a reservoir of filtered and refined aesthetic experience. The second, in the left-hand lobe, was not a memory at all in the usual sense. It was a reflective correction of filtered physical experience, transposed into a secondary awareness of what could or should have been. The abbreviated phraseology of the Groils was due to their inability to translate a synthesis of the three-brain, tri-phrenic thinking into a language that was inadequate even for normal uniphrenic expression.

As he looked out over the mauve-tinted clouds of Shorne, Phrix was conscious, not only of his inability to express what he meant, but even, at the point where the three memory-chains coalesced, to know in any unified way what exactly it was he did mean.

The memory of what could or should have been, in the mind of Phrix, hankered after the things that had or might have been. Evolution does not concern itself with the past. Evolution molds what is into what will be. Phrix, formulating a course of action at the meeting point of the three memory-trains, found only the humanoid area competent to throw a tentative thought-probe into the future and say, "This will be." And the humanoid area, being humanoid, saw the universe with Phrix at its hub. Humanoid areas are prone to personalize.

"Long time ago," Phrix said, thoughtfully, almost in a

mood of sadness he could only partly feel. "Long time ago. On Far-Groil."

"Where?" the inspector asked.

"New America."

"Oh! Sure! Yes—around Barnard's Star."

"It was Far-Groil then. Very long time ago. They came from Earth."

"Pity about Earth!"

"Great pity! It was happy on Far-Groil."

"Thought you Groils couldn't feel emotion?"

"One emotion only. When only one and no conflict, it is not true emotion as you know it. Emotions arise from conflict. One thing only we feel in Far-Groil. All time once—happiness. Anarchy. Large planet—few Groils. Time to think, write, paint, play music, sing. Highly developed culture. Contemplative. Philosophers. All peace. They came from Earth. Machines. Government. Money. Very busy. Always doing things."

"Pity about Earth!"

"We had telescopes. Radio. Knew astronomy. Knew about Earth—near neighbor. Welcomed first spaceships. Offered them home on Far-Groil. Big mistake. Very busy men. No lobes. Small brains, busy hands. Busy bodies. Multiply fast. Soon more Earthmen than Groils. Better organized. Government. Earthmen govern, Groils governed. Earthmen term it, penalty for being anarchists. Highly developed intellect no use to organize, government. Did not understand, do not understand now. Soon Groils do all work, Earthmen play. Penalty for having lobes, Earthmen say."

"Pity about—"

"You do not know what you say. No intellect. Why—pity?"

"Don't know." The police inspector scratched his head. "Now you mention it—it's a good question—why? Frizzled if I know. It's like spitting through the punchhole in your credit card. Right thing to do—right thing to say. Custom's always right. Reckon it was a pity, too. They all went to—where was it? Far-Groil? New America?"

"What was a pity?"

"How the three penal planets do I know? War, I suppose. What else? It's always war that's been a pity when it's over. When you say, 'Pity that planet died,' what you mean is—'Pity we killed it.' "

"No. Not war. Climate. War indirectly. You know nuclear bombs?"

"Those old things they had way back? The things you see as monuments in some parts? Great cumbersome bag of tricks with a bang inside?"

"Yes. That time long ago, Earth in two camps. East and West. Both made bombs. Each side equal number. Couldn't use. All East bombs automatically fired when West bombs came and vice versa. Very stalemate. Went on for years. Each side making equal number of what other side made. Poisons. Psycho-chemicals. Bacteria. Death rays. And then nature took a hand. Ice age came. Ice cap spread down and up from poles over East and West. Those that could went to Far Groil. Named it New America. Other side went to a planet around Centauri Alpha. New Russia. Both sides left on Earth at last cooperate. Destiny will not be cheated of full quota doom. Cooperation achieves what centuries of hate could not. Both sides pool bombs and put then in the ice caps. Idea is melt ice and break ice age. Big bang. Earth split in half—weakness in crust at poles. Hot magna spill—all steam. Break up and boil."

"Pity about Earth!"

"New America very powerful. Sensation-loving Earthmen breed fast. Groils lose interest, breed little. Still more Earthmen, still fewer Groils. New Russia not successful. East Earthmen succumb to virus, B91. No antidote. West Earthmen discover antidote, isolate virus. Watch while East Earthmen die. All in cause of peace. When enemy dead, no war. Use virus deplete populations of planets before conquest. Arrive not as conquerors but as doctors. Welcomed. Now everywhere, only Ruling Races. Few Groils kept for knowledge and few Salumis kept for beauty left. Ruling Classes of Ruling Races rule by threat of virus. Groils watch Earthmen spread over universe. Do not contest. Contemplate. Wait for evolution. Evolution now ready. Through myself. Tool of destiny."

"I get your point as a Groil," the inspector agreed. "You want to get your own back now that you've got the upper hand, or you think you have. What I don't see, is why you don't shoot up the airport. If I were a Groil, it'd give me a lot of pleasure to feel my finger on the trigger."

"Cannot feel resentment. No desire revenge. Only tool of evolution. We land now. Signal arrive Gromwold, *Times and Echo* surrender, accept my terms."

"You know best," the inspector conceded. "I hope for your sake and mine that Kantor and his men on Shorne know they've lost out to evolution."

The pilot brought the ship around and hovered over Lulonga airport, preparing to land. That is to say, the pilot was present while the ship carried out the necessary maneuveres. A good ship—and Shale's was a good ship—was capable of

assessing the right course of action in any contingency according to its owner's wishes.

The airport appeared to be deserted. The setting sun tipped the control tower with rays of scarlet, green and gold. In the marshaling yards and on the landing strip, the lights went out.

"I don't like it," the inspector grumbled, directing his men to cover the buildings from the open portholes. "At least fire a warning burst from the cobalt cannon."

Phrix shook his head and signaled the pilot to land. The joy-stick steered his hand into the right position and unobtrusively throttled back, extending a microphone to Phrix at the same time. He called up Kantor on the general broadcast frequency.

"Come to airport," he said. "No harm intended you. Terms we will talk."

There was a burst of small arms' fire as the undercarriage buffers settled on the strip and the airport cannon, normally covering the approach lanes, swiveled and trained its barrels on the ship.

"Fire before they do!" the inspector shouted.

"All ad records in ship. They dare not fire."

A squad of heavily armed *Times and Echo* men emerged from the main administrative building and advanced under cover of bulletproof shields. The inspector fired a gas bomb and they paused to fix their masks. He picked off the leader with an energy capsule that exploded on impact, disintegrating his head.

"Tactical napalm!" he ordered.

"No napalm!" Phrix countered. "Barbarous. Unworthy of Groil!"

"Good grief!" the inspector shouted. "This is war, not ring-around-the-roses! What's it matter if we boil or fry them, so long as they all fall down?"

"No napalm!" Phrix repeated. "Inform Shome government the airport is in unauthorized hands."

"The government'll listen to you when they know you've won, matey," the inspector told him contemptuously. "You've got to win first. Where'd you learn your politics? In that long-ago, faraway Groil?"

"Okay, you lot!" he shouted to his constables. "Their feet show under their shields now and then. Fry their feet!"

The constables opened fire with energy capsules and the enemy retreated behind their shields to the main building, leaving half a dozen of their number writhing, footless, on the landing strip.

"Humanity triumphs!" The inspector grunted. "What now, philosopher?"

"Wait!" Phrix told him.

"You're kidding yourself that's Groil tactics," the policeman said, grinning. "Not on your sweet frontal lobes, it isn't. It's sheer indecision. You don't know what to do, do you?"

"Wait!" Phrix repeated, calmly.

It was partly indecision, the old Groil weakness, partly the habit of menial thinking. He would use Ruling Race methods at the order of the Ruling Races, but would not initiate their use himself. But it was partly also from a more tactical reason. There had been no sign of Kantor himself. Without Kantor, there was a fair chance that his men would surrender to the certainty of an immediate two and a half percent rather than wait for a problematical five. An ad in the book is worth two in the pipe line. There was also Shale.

## VII

SHALE HIMSELF was now almost in sight of the western gates of the laboratory. He was, in fact, outside cage Number 99,871, when the searchers first caught sight of him. Through miles of corridor, he had eluded them, through the free-range areas of the mini-worlds, where a half dozen inhabitants roamed, believing their dark corners to be all there was of the universe and fighting each other for control of every dung-hill. Through the simulated sheep farms, where men and women were conditioned to bleat at the sight of a cocked hat, a flag, or a slogan. "My country—right or wrong!" *Baa!* "Britannia rules the electro-magnetic waves!" —*Baa!* "We must be ready, all of us, to give our life's blood for our Fatherland, and for our Motherland, we lay down our lives for thee." Salute, raise the hand, clench the fist, point the only true way into the misty distances and they set up such a bleating and baa-baa-ing, that Shale and his consort had run like mad lest the welkin-ringing betrayed their whereabouts. It was all designed to prove something or other.

Now, outside cage Number 99,871, creeping from a side alley with Marylin at his heels, he found himself face-to-face with an armed squad of attendants. An energy capsule whistled past his ear and a hand protruding through the bars of an adjacent cage disintegrated. Inside, a specimen whimpered. Shale ducked and ran back up the alleyway like a subject injected with the speed factor in a Karkoff

chromosome. Marylin, after a lifetime of confinement in her cage, was slower moving.

"Come on!" he shouted, gaining on her.

He rounded the next corner as a second capsule whistled by. He was in the outer corridor, with cages on one side only, and it was dark. He ran on, for the moment safe from missiles if not from pursuit. Somewhere behind, he heard Marylin cry as she fell and the shouts of the attendants as they surrounded her. He began to run faster.

"What's Marylin to me?" he gasped.

What was Marylin anyway? An ape. How long had he known her? A few hours, perhaps. Time seems to stand still underground. She wasn't worth a second thought. What would they do to her—as if he cared? Put her back in her cage, most likely. And no harm done. She was a valuable specimen; they wouldn't shoot her. Or had she served her purpose by just being bred? If they did shoot her, there would be one specimen less in the laboratory, wouldn't there? Plenty of chimpanzee serum for another injection and another Marylin bred behind bars. What the B91! *Pity about her clothes,* he thought. She had wanted clothes very much, stupid animal. *I wonder if they'll let her have clothes in the end,* he mused. It might stop the students sniggering. Why should they snigger? A monkey's fanny is no different from anyone else's. Probably a monkey's most human possession.

He was lonely, running like a hunted rat with the ferrets after him in a warren of holes. Why the B91 should he run? How many of them were there in that little band? Six? Seven? One Ruling Class Ruling Race was worth any ten of—*baa!* But what right had they to take Marylin away from him, an archexecutive? And perhaps disintegrate her wide, stupid, ape mouth with an energy capsule. They would beat her probably. All the keepers carried whips. *If there's going to be any shooting,* he said to himself, *I'm doing it!* He stopped and spat angrily at a face that appeared grinning fatuously at him behind an adjacent grille. TRIUMPH OF MODERN SURGERY! HUMAN HEAD GRAFT OF HOMO SAPIENS ON FEMALE KANGAROO." He edged his way silently back to the last intersection and, concealing himself around the corner, waited. In the silence he could hear the mensheep bleating.

The echo was back again. All around him there was the clang of large boots on metal and it was impossible to tell from which direction they would come. If from the right, from the way he had come, well and good. He could spring upon them before they knew he was there. But what if they

appeared behind him, or heading him off, from the left? He had not long to wait. Two attendants clattered past the intersection running in step, each with his pistol at the ready and peering ahead of them in the gloom. Shale grimaced as he stepped out behind them and with a sudden spring landed between them, at the same time slamming their heads together with such force that blood poured from their ears and they sank in a heap at his feet. He picked up the pistols—personal protection jobs firing conventional lead bullets. Six of them each. Enough for twelve attendants, if they didn't get him first.

He bent low and made his way back along the corridor. Peering cautiously from the corner where he had first eluded pursuit, he saw why the hunt, for the moment, was off. Two attendants were holding Marylin against the bars of a cage while two more beat her with rifle butts. He took careful aim and fired twice. The two who were holding her fell, clutching their stomachs, and Marylin was free and running in his direction. He fired again and a third fell.

"One movement from the rest of you," he shouted, "and you're all dead!" He couldn't tell how many there were but there seemed to be at least a dozen. They stood with their hands in the air and Marylin rounded the corner, choking hoarsely for breath.

"You're out of condition," he grumbled. "Get weaving toward the main gates. We're going to run around those jokers. I've got nine bullets left and there're at least ten of them."

Marylin could manage only a quick, shambling ungainly walk, but the attendants were in no mood to follow in the darkness. They headed in the general direction of the western gates, parallel with the main corridor.

"There will be guards at the gates," she gasped.

"We'll think about that when we get there," he said. "As long as it's dark, they don't know what weapons I've got. They'll keep their distance."

He stopped and looked at the welts and bruises on her legs and buttocks. Something, he didn't know quite what, moved him to fury. He turned and ran back to the corner. There were guards bending over their wounded comrades, apparently considering whether they were worth treating or if the more humane course was not to shoot them, then and there. Oblivious to the need to conserve his ammunition, he emptied one pistol into the group and would have followed up with the other but they were all pitched forward into a heap and appeared to be dead enough to mollify him. He returned to Marylin.

"Bastards," he said. "All keepers are bastards." Marylin was pleased that he cared enough for her to lose his temper, but was just the same aghast at his homicidal methods of showing it.

"Have you known many keepers?" she asked.

"Not a one," he answered. "But they wear uniforms. Everyone in uniform is a bastard."

"I didn't know," she confessed, humbly.

Suddenly the lights came on and from somewhere ahead there was shouting and the ominous baying of hounds.

"Police dogs!" he said, grimly.

"I thought police dogs sounded like that. My teachers never made the sounds, but they described them very well."

"How stinkingly pedantic of them. I'm a martyr for pedants. The dogs'll tear us to pieces—you know that, don't you? All police dogs are trained to kill."

"I know. They told me that too."

"Come on!" he shouted. "Let's get out of this!"

"If you cross water," she explained, "they can't pick up the scent, they—"

"Belt up!" he stormed. "Where's the viral infested water?"

All the cages in the outside corridor were empty and he stopped outside the open gates of one, a large enclosure, containing a high platform with steps leading up to a small hut about three yards from the ground. Ropes with nooses hung from a gibbet framing the public side of the structure. As they climbed the steps, Shale noticed the show-card on the exterior hut wall.

"Hanging experiment. Subject is conditioned to set noose about his neck before meals in the enclosure. He is then blinded with hot pins and transferred to the platform. As food is proferred, he will search for the noose and hang himself."

"It's ghastly!" Marylin gasped. She was apt to personalize and lacked true scientific sense. Shale assumed she was referring to their situation. It was ghastly enough. The vast underground labyrinth was echoing with the baying of the police dogs and the whole hullabaloo had disturbed and frightened a number of the specimens who were adding to the din by shrieking and screaming in the elemental expression of pre-verbal terror. Shale and Marylin concealed themselves inside the hut and waited.

"Fortunately they haven't got our scent," he said. "Unless they found something of mine to show them."

"They identified me," she confessed. "They have only to take them to my cell and they will be here in minutes."

"Get out!" he shouted. "Take your damned scent some-

where else! You stink, do you hear! You stink to the high outer orbit of Asgard! What are you doing, following me around?"

The hair on her back was torn and the skin lacerated by the rifle butts and a trickle of blood had clotted, matting the down on her buttocks. She cringed from him, drooping, bending forward like an ape as she limped to the door. Her straight back, high chin, and gently, reflective demeanor had crumbled before his scorn and rancor, exposing her for what she indeed was: a human-ape shell with all-ape underneath.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't realize at first that they would use my scent. I should have thought. I'm sorry if I've made you angry. Of course, I'll go at once."

She was halfway down the ladder before he called her back. He was angry at his own stupidity, since to keep her with him served no useful purpose at all. It would mean only that now they would both die, instead of only one of them. The business of everyone living is to stay alive, that is all life is about; but, irrationally, he had wanted her to stay. People, even in these advanced ages, occasionally feel the same incongruous attachment to pet cats.

"What's the odds!" he said, huffily. "You die—I die. What difference does it make? What's in life for anyone, if it comes to that? Who cares?"

"The universe is worse than I thought," she agreed, as she snuggled against him. "Studied subjectively inside my cage, it didn't seem so bad, or perhaps the teachers were programmed to gloss over the hardness of it. I suppose it's always hard to come out of your own cage and expose yourself to the wind and the rain. This laboratory—it's wrong."

"Wrong?" he asked, peering through the window with his pistol ready. "How do you mean—wrong?"

"People shouldn't be used for experiments like this," she said. The baying of the hounds was nearer and had taken on a new and more urgent note. They had picked up the scent.

"We need the data." He shrugged. "Even if we've got it all already, you have to train students to find out for themselves. These things aren't people, they're specimens. A man's a man if that's what you tell him he is. It's all a matter of environment. You're whatever you're brought up to be; you're nothing in yourself. These are specimens. What would you want us to do? Use animals?"

"Oh no!" she exclaimed. "That would be even worse. In a sense, now we do it to ourselves. To experiment and do

these ghastly things to animals, who would never even benefit from the data, would be unthinkable."

"Listen!" he said. "Will you shut up? The hounds'll be here in a minute. If there's no more than three, I can shoot them. If there's one more, he'll tear us to pieces, so you might as well know that and stop blathering."

"It's important to get things straight before you die!"

"Why?" he asked, answering in spite of himself. "What difference does it make? Once you're dead, who cares whether you're straight or not?"

"I want you to agree with me," she whispered. "It's important that you should. Then I'll know the universe wasn't all bad. I'd like to know it wasn't all bad before the dogs come."

He turned away from the window, from the whole business of life and death, and looked at her with a kind of wry perplexity. What did she look like? A cringing, despondent ape, sitting on her haunches and watching him with deep-set, pathetic eyes, more concerned with his opinions than the howling of the police dogs.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, almost kindly. "What's it to you if the universe is good or bad, whatever that means? We're all bad or we're all good, just as you like to think it. We're all the same anyway, the difference is only in what we all think of each other. Kantor's out to kill me. I'm out to kill him if I get the chance. So I'm bad to Kantor and Kantor's bad to me—not that I care what anything is to Kantor; it's what they are to me that counts. There's a lot of people—specimens—here in cages. I expect that's bad for them, although I've met at least one who was happier where he was than outside. It may be bad for them, but it's not bad for me, so why should I care?"

"One of them might be you!"

"What are you babbling about now? How could one of them be me?"

"But for an accident of birth, you might have been a specimen in a cage."

"Now you're really talking like a maniac. I'm me. How the B91 virus could I be anyone else? If a creature is born in a cage—that's him—a different person. If I were a different person, I couldn't be me. Now shut that great mouth of yours and quit squawking."

"It is a person who can feel like you."

He was really angry now. Too angry even to listen and look for the dogs. He turned on her and prodded her with his pistol. "There's something wrong with you!" he shouted. "You must have an I.Q. of about ten to talk like that. Are

you lecturing me about what I should feel like and think like and look like? What do you know about what I think like? What do you know about how anyone thinks like? You're only a stinking, hairy ape, that's all you are."

He returned to the window, awkwardly, turning his back on her and conscious of her silence. There were no medals for shouting at idiots who didn't shout back and wouldn't know what to shout about if they did. He trained his pistol in the direction the dogs would come and covered an odd feeling of guilt by staring into the distance, preoccupied with the business of survival. Slowly, he relented and turned to face her. She was very quiet. He watched a big tear running down the side of her fat, squat nose. Another followed it. She was sobbing quietly to herself.

*At least,* he thought, *she's that much human. Only humans can cry—and orangutans. Not chimps. I think orangutans only cry when they're frightened. Perhaps only humans can feel the things that make them cry for anything but fear.*

"I'm sorry," he said aloud—he had never apologized to anyone before and the words had an unreal, detached quality as if they just happened to be there rather than being in any way related to thoughts of his. "I shouldn't have said that, I suppose."

"It's true?" she asked. "I am an ape?"

Why the Salumi pox did she have to cry like that? He felt like a heel. He felt like a man who had just killed ten thousand fellow creatures at the press of a trigger feels when he kicks his dog. Thank all the mysteries of deep space they would soon both be dead. Nothing that had been mattered, once you were dead and not responsible for it any more.

"You're not really an ape," he said. He put his arm around her and patted the hair on her left breast.

"I am," she whispered. "I'm just an ape. I have known it all along really, although the machines never told me anything about myself. Everything in the universe, they described in detail, only me and anything about me they avoided. It was almost as if I embarrassed them. I knew apes had hair and humans didn't. I tried not to think about it, but I knew it really. Everytime I felt my face and my mouth and my nose, I used to get a little frightened twinge in my stomach. I can't tell you anything now; I can't have any opinions that aren't the same as yours. I thought I was right to feel sorry for the specimens; I thought you were wrong not to care. I thought Phrix was right and you were wrong. But you are human. You must be right. There are a million years of evolution on your side. I'm sorry."

"But you're not an ape," he said. "Not really. You're a hybrid. You can think like a human even if you are a bit mixed up. All this caring business. Humans don't care. They go through the motions of sympathy sometimes when it's fashionable to be involved and left-wing and self-abased. It doesn't mean a thing. It's just an act so that you believe you are really something positive, even if you're not, and your friends will say what a nice guy you are. But none of us really feels anything. You were carrying it all much too far. You were *really* feeling. It was a pity they didn't let you see your show-card. I think they should have. You're quite famous and you're the first success they've had in that line. Anyway—forget about the ape part. Apes don't cry and you're crying."

"Except orangutans," she said, sniffing.

"You know too much," said Shale with a grunt.

"Do you care for me?" she asked. "Do you care if I live or die? The machines said people could care and apes just lived for the day. They seemed to think much better about people than you do—perhaps, in a way, they were jealous. I can care and I've always wanted someone to care for me."

"You're speaking like a woman now." He grinned. "Although I expect apes are just the same—the female ones. All right—yes, I care."

Dogs were spilling from all sides, down the corridor, out of the side alleys, yelping and howling, racing for the enclosure. There were at least thirty of them, pawing at the steps and leaping up a few rungs at a time and falling back, foaming and snarling with thwarted rage. The enclosure was full of them, milling and howling and jostling each other to reach the ladder and their quarry. Police dogs must pay for their keep by making sure no escaping criminal embarrasses the community with the cost of his trial. Everyone is guilty until proved innocent. The police take good care to see that only the guilty die.

"I know how a fox feels," he muttered. They had hunted foxes like this once, he remembered, having nothing better to do.

Dog handlers began to appear in the wake of their dogs, carrying whips and trident-like goads. They arranged themselves in a semicircle, staring at the platform owlishly with their mouths open. Behind them came Kantor. From the far side of the roadway he hailed Shale above the noise of the hounds with a portable megaphone.

"Just for the book, Shale," he shouted. "If you shoot me, the others will see that the dogs get you."

Expecting a volley of capsules, Shale pulled Marylin to

the floor where a faulty joint in the plastic sheets allowed them to watch developments below.

"You can surrender, of course," Kantor called, "and come to no harm. Otherwise we shall have to blow or burn you out."

"No harm!" Shale laughed softly. "Once down the steps and he'll set the dogs on us. Not that they'll need any setting."

Either Kantor did not know that Shale was armed, or he had misjudged the distance. There he was, standing on a little mound like a latter-day Eros, waving his megaphone, and well within range. Shale rested his pistol in the crook of his arm and took careful aim. Marylin laid a horny hand on his. "It's not the way," she said. "We can't win. Why kill him when it will make no difference?"

"You're nuts," he said. "Monkey nuts. But don't worry. I'll save a bullet for each of us. I won't let them take you. But that third-rate ad rep is coming too."

But Kantor, seeing, or sensing the gunbarrel aimed at his head, dived suddenly behind the armored shield of one of the dog handlers and the bullet went wide.

"Right, Shale!" he shouted. "You've asked for it! You're going to get it! Burn him out!"

Shale recognized the napalm-firing firepiece in the hands of an attendant and surprisingly enough felt fear only for Marylin. He fired once at the shield purely as a gesture of defiance, knowing it was impervious to his sort of ammunition. There was a loud report, the gun fired and the hut burst into flames around them.

"You can burn or take the dogs, Shale!" Kantor shouted through the loudspeaker above the noise of the hounds and the crackle of the flames. "Take your choice! I'll put an obituary notice in the Lemos *Monitor.*"

Shale had his pistol against Marylin's forehead when he saw the chute. It was like a mirage. Already his life had been saved once by a garbage chute and now suddenly appearing like a split in the pants of destiny, a hole. The flames, lighting up the dim interior of the hut, exposed it—as welcome a sight as an oasis in the burning sands. It was a disposal channel for the specimen's bodies after the hanging experiment. Inside the hole was a crude conveyor, a series of rollers, sloping from the rear of the hut and disappearing through the wall of the enclosure. In a moment, he had picked Marylin up in his arms and tossed her on to the incline before diving headfirst after her into the darkness that led through the wall of fire.

## VIII

OUTSIDE THE LABORATORY, in the spaceship at Lulonga airport, the police inspector pressed his pistol between the convulutions on Phrix's right and left temples. "Destiny or no destiny," he said, "I'm going to give evolution a hand. Get the cannon trained on that building and blow it to the outer periphery!"

"No!" said Phrix.

"I'm not talking to you, little Groil." The inspector grinned. "You can't feel fear, I know that. I did a course on Groils way back in my student days. I'm talking to my gunners. We're taking over the ship. You can have it back when I've sorted out this little lot for you. You don't seem to know what it's all about, but I do. I'll have this chap Kantor and his lucky lads filling the valleys of the penal planets with picks and shovels and mountains to hew at before you can say 'Lemos *Galactic Monitor.*' All right, boys! Blow them out of there!"

"You are servants of a government and I am Archexecutive. You must obey or go yourself to a penal planet."

"Not a chance, sonny," the policeman said, chuckling. "You said yourself, Groils feel no resentment. No resentment is what you said. When it's all over and you've been saved a lot of trouble, you'll thank me for using my own initiative, since you don't seem to have any yourself. Unless gratitude is another thing Groils don't know about. I shouldn't be surprised, because the Ruling Races aren't so hot on that score either. Never mind, when you tell the Publisher, the Publisher'll say, 'Fine—you won, didn't you?' You start bellyaching when you've lost, matey—just now, you're winning."

"Fire!" he ordered.

The guns were silent and their operators stared back at the inspector with blank incomprehension. Slowly, they shook their heads. It was the first mutiny in any police force for generations.

"Underestimate Groil intellect," Phrix said, his sad eyes looking somewhere into the deep distances of time and space. "Much persuasive force in single word *no.* Inner compulsion in verbal projection. Will also work on you—shall I show you?"

With a quick blow, the inspector struck him down with the butt of his pistol. He tested Groil resilience with an exploratory kick in the stomach. Phrix lay still. A million years had developed his brain, but had done little to strengthen the casing of its skull.

"No you don't, matey," the inspector said. "I'm not having fish-eyed Groils making a monkey out of me. That short course on Groils in my rookie days taught me a lot. 'Hit 'em before they start thinking at you,' they said. No one thinks very well with a crack in their skull."

"Should not have done that," Phrix groaned. "Contrary to evolution. Retrogressive step. Path leads to jungle and Neanderthal."

"Yeah!" The policeman grinned. "I guess it does that, matey. You can live or die for all I care, but now you've called in Gromwold police, Gromwold police are going to give you and the public service. We don't lose out to anyone."

"Fire!" he ordered.

The cobalt cannon belched a puff of smoke and a low rumble. The administrative building, a vast cubiform structure in white Gromwold grade marble, vanished in a black bellowing mushroom cloud of smoke and steam.

"Evolution on the march," the inspector announced. "No one could have wiped out that little lot before evolution took over. Now out we go and winkle them out!"

"A guard for the prisoner?" a sergeant asked, looking at Phrix.

"This chap?" The inspector laughed. "Not on your Nelly's knickers, matey. He'll do no one any harm. We're on his side, aren't we? He'll just sit and think while we do the killing. When we've put his world right with our weapons, he'll say he never wanted those horrible things done and he's a pacifist at heart. We're all bloody pacifists if there's an army somewhere to protect us. Come on, let's go get 'em!"

"Shorne government!" Phrix called. "Without me, you break Shorne law!"

"Gromwold's bigger than Shorne," the inspector called back. "That's what law's all about. They'll keep well out of it. This is a private war."

With a clatter of big boots, the contingent disappeared through the hatchway, fanning out when they reached the ground and spraying the airport buildings indiscriminately with energy fire. Evolution anywhere, Phrix thought ruefully, is invariably preceded by the clatter of boots. It is sometimes difficult for even the most intellectually-minded to convince themselves that boots in the van are not in any way connected with the evolution they precede, that the clatter and the rat-a-tat-tat find no echo in the organism's core, where the soft whisper of evolution plays, unconcerned, with permutations of nucleic acid.

Phrix climbed painfully to his feet, feeling the indentation between the crowns of his head for possible fractures. The

humanoid brain was badly concussed, but the higher intellectual centers were functioning normally. The inspector's boot had left an area of agony in the region of his spleen and he thought with regret that although his ancestors on Far-Groil had outgrown and inhibited all emotions, they had never learned to ignore ordinary physical pain. But, then, there had been little pain on Far-Groil.

"We leave," he said to the pilot. "Nothing for us on Shorne. Shale fight Kantor and Kantor fight Shale and inspector fight both. Go back Lemos. Wait for evolution. Much work with editors."

"Nothing doing!" The pilot refused. "I work for the Advertisement Manager. I'm not at all sure you're winning. I'm staying right here on Shorne where the three of you are. Then I'm giving my loyalty to the one that's left when the others are safely dead. Let's not get in each other's hair, shall we, while we wait and see what happens, eh?"

"I appointed by Publisher," Phrix reminded him.

"Yes," the pilot agreed. "And the Publisher is safe on Asgard. I'm here on Shorne. And here I stay until I know who's boss." The ship apparently agreed with him, since the opinion of a pilot was no more than a rubber stamp on the course a ship had already taken. It was unheard of for a pilot to go against the wishes of his ship; by doing so, he would expose to the universe and more important, to himself, the superfluous nature of his office. And no one likes to be superfluous. Ship and pilot had thus ranged themselves together against their legal master and awaited without any very great interest his reaction.

Shale would of course have shot the pilot dead and engaged another, which no doubt would have been enough to have convinced the ship. Pilots were ten a cent. You used them, like everything else, out of custom. The ship was fully automatic and programmed to take you anywhere you would ever want to go, pilot or no pilot. Yes, Shale would have shot him and Kantor would have shot him, but then, the pilot would not have argued with Kantor or Shale and the ship would have responded faithfully to either. But not so Phrix. Phrix did not even apply the persuasive force of Groil intellect. His head ached and he was again at the three-way point of indecision. The Ruling Races acted. That was why they were the Ruling Races. The lower the I.Q., the more the compulsion to do and to be. The higher executives were all in the low I.Q. bracket. That was why they were higher executives.

It is one thing to know what should be done and another to open the eyes of those who should see it too. Clouding

his vision of an ordered universe of reformed Earthmen was a nostalgic, hovering image of Far-Groil, where no Earthmen had been. But one never went back. No one could relive even recent, personal memories. One could not recapture the glint of the sun, a smile, the touch of a hand, nor a tiny, trivial thing that had once been dear. How then Far-Groil? Evolution was like that, only more so. Perhaps the universe had retrogressed since Far-Groil, but it would find a new course, hover for centuries below the brink of another horizon, and then, in a day, an hour, a second perhaps, the new thought would come flooding over the arch of the universe's ultimate end and there would be a cosmic renaissance. New worlds—but not Far-Groil.

The pilot was looking him over with sardonic, sleepy eyes. "We'll forget about Lemos, shall we?" he said.

"You don't see," Phrix whispered. "You don't see—is all wrong and the Publisher can put it right."

"I see my inter-galactic credit card." The pilot yawned. "And a lot of use that would be without my pay in the bank. You've got to win out. I've got to win out. Let's leave it at that, shall we?"

The beacon on the control tower flashed a message into the gathering darkness. It always flashed the same message at nightfall. "Land at Lulonga airport," it said. The Publisher rented the space to the city fathers. It was totally unnecessary. Shorne had only one airport—Lulonga.

## IX

THE ROLLERS on the narrow conveyor linked up with other chutes from other parts of the laboratory, shuttling its cargoes on to a broad, wide belt traveling slowly through a dark tunnel. The dark tunnel ended in a brightly lit underground factory where the conveyor disappeared through the flaps of a large, stainless steel contrivance. What was inside the stainless steel contrivance was, for the moment, obscure. Marylin and Shale rolled over and slipped from the belt on to a stainless steel gangway that circled the factory or warehouse or whatever it was a few feet above the ground floor. An odd body or two arrived down the side chutes, joined the main stream and disappeared into the belly of the machine.

At the other end, about twenty yards away, packets were emerging, wrapped in brightly decorated wrappers. Each packet bore the message: EAT AT LULONGA CANTEEN.

The Publisher also controlled the advertising on meat wrappers. The Publisher's messages were built in to all

systems everywhere. As the packets trundled away they passed, before disappearing through a flap into the wall, between two magnetic poles which activated a device that bound them in bright green tape. The tape exhorted the recipient to read the Lemos *Galactic Monitor.*

"Praise the Publisher!" Shale grinned. "I'm hungry!" He made his way around the gangway to the delivery end of the machine, which was obviously a meat processing contrivance, and picked up a packet from the conveyor. Turning it over, he found on the reverse side a further announcement: SALT AND PEPPER BY GROMWOLD SPICES UNIVERSAL!

"You're not going to eat it?" Marylin said, gasping.

"Why not?" he asked.

"It's human flesh!"

"So what?" he wanted to know. "It's processed."

"You can't!" she cried, snatching the packet from him. "Shale, you can't!"

"What's eating you?" he asked, mystified.

"You might be! For all you knew, that could have been I!"

"I get your point," he agreed, taking another packet that opened automatically from the warmth of his hand, displaying attractively colored meat slices with a legend imprinted through their centers as had once been the practice with sticks of rock: EAT NOW, PAY LATER.

"At the same time," he continued, "it doesn't look like you and it's cooked and titivated with spices and flavor enhancers. I doubt if it will even taste like you, so why should I care? I don't know what you taste like, anyway."

"Because," she begged, "because I ask it."

He put down the packet on the stainless steel rail and looked at her thoughtfully. A broad-mouthed, wet-eyed ape. Wanting him to do something for no better reason than she wanted him to. But the eyes were pleading and, in spite of their setting, they were not the eyes of an ape. Looking at Marylin was like coming across a gorilla threading a needle and discussing some knotty problem from the *Times of New America.* Something deep down inside him responded to this sort of pathetic appeal, however illogical and paradoxical her plea.

"Okay," he said. "There are other machines. We seem to have landed in a food factory. Let's see what they've got to offer."

There was a processor of what appeared to be kitchen scraps, hedge clippings and assorted debris. Another obviously filtered piped sewage from the laboratory into the fresh-water system and a third was fed with new-mown hay. Milk emerged from the rear in plastic containers.

"Milk!" she said.

"If you say so," he answered. He had always wondered where milk came from. The wonders of other people's scientific achievements really made you humble. Who, for instance, had first thought of the idea? He turned the plastic container over in his hand.

"Drinka lota Gromwold Milk," he read.

He drank. There was a major explosion somewhere outside. Even the underground food processing plant trembled. It was far too big a bang to have been made by the laboratory attendants. Experiments such as "Survival after auronic holocaust" would have been totally unrealistic. Nothing survived after auronic holocausts.

"I'd like to know what they're up to out there," he said. "The only weapon I know with a voice like that is the cobalt cannon on my spacecraft."

"There's a ventilator," she said. "Up there over the Taste Bud Stimulating Essence Machine."

She knew it was a Taste Bud Stimulating Essence Machine because the nameplate said so: *Tickle your buds with Gromwold Stimulating Essence, the product of G.S.E. (Intergalactic) Inc. —Even simulated cod's roe tastes like simulated caviar."*

As he climbed the network of pipes and self-reading meters, tubes and flanges, to reach the ventilator, he wondered what exactly caviar was or had been, simulated or otherwise. From the half-open ventilator, he had a good view of the compound outside the laboratory, which gave unrestricted access to the airport.

"They've blown up the administration block," he called down to Marylin. "I never thought Phrix had it in him; it just shows the value of good example. He's gone berserk, just like a real Ad Manager. The Gromwold police are attacking the laboratory guards. The guards haven't a chance against police armaments—no—I thought so—they've bolted. These police boys really know their stuff when it comes to law enforcement. Pay them enough and they'll shoot anybody. Phrix must have really handed out the gubbins."

"What happens," she asked, "if they get through to us?"

"Best thing possible," he told her. "I know these policemen. Once they see you're the boss, they're on your side in a brace of jiffies."

"Are you?" she asked.

"Am I what?"

"The boss?"

Just the sort of damn fool stupid question this damn fool stupid ape would ask. Anyone else would know he was the

boss just by looking at him; why should she doubt it? How come everyone was doubting whether he was the boss all of a sudden? He felt surly and as sore as ulcers.

"We'll see about that," he said. "We'll just see about that when the time comes."

The police force had passed out of his range of vision and had obviously reached the west gates of the laboratory. They would have adequate means at their disposal to blow them open. Once inside the laboratory, what then? There was Kantor and the *Times and Echo* men and the laboratory attendants. The latter would realize that the tide had turned as soon as they were confronted by the Gromwold police. They would go over to the winning side—in the unlikely event that the police would give them the choice of going anywhere. You don't waste the taxpayer's money by having people left over who are going to ask for courts of inquiry and complain about police brutality. The *Times and Echo* men were the real danger. They would have nothing to lose. If Phrix were in charge, he could only maintain his position by obliterating all opposition. To pay two and a half percent to the staff on Gromwold, he would need to dispose of a number of wage earners—Kantor, the highest paid, certainly. The *Times and Echo* would fight it out. How many were there and what weapons did they have? Even small, one-planet publishers maintained a fair supply of armaments and Kantor was ambitious. Ambitions can only be attained by weapons.

There was another ventilator over a machine labeled *Gromwold Sawdust Sausages.* He climbed down from his first coign of vantage and negotiated the difficult ascent to the second ventilator. The machine was old and hot and puffs of aromatic wood-smoke belched from insecure joints and pressure valves. But he was there at last. The aperture looked out over the main corridor of the laboratory. There was a pitched battle in progress.

"No sign of the attendants," he called down to Marylin. "I thought not. They're on the side of the big battalions—the Publisher, Phrix and the Gromwold police. The *Times and Echo* men are fighting it out. Firing from every corner—can you hear the racket down there? The police are letting out the specimens as a screen. It's quite a sight. Most of them don't know what's going on and they're just walking in the way of the capsules—bullets, too, from the look of it—they haven't all got modern weapons. There's a lot of giant creatures ambling around, shaking their arms and roaring. One of them's caught a *Times and Echo* man and pulled his arm from the socket. Trouble is, they're caught between

two fires and they don't even know what bullets are, let alone capsules. There's a lot of pretty, naked nymph-girls climbing the cage bars to get away from it all. Not bad looking—not bad at all. Every now and again, a stray bullet catches one and she pitches down with her hair trailing, like a fighter crashing in flames. Thud on her head! Oh! Now that's really funny! One of the giants has caught one of the girls and he's trying to rape her in the middle of the corridor with missiles whistling all over the place. There's another female trying to drag him off—I didn't know any of these specimens had that sort of community sense. I think she's a conditioned Lesbian or something. Pity! Someone's fired a napalm capsule and they've all three sizzled. The *Times and Echo* men are opening the cages too, now. A screen's a screen, whoever uses it. It really is a free-for-all. It's just anyone's game as far as I can see.

"No, wait! They've been outmaneuvered! A squad of policemen has come up a side alley behind them. *Brrm! Brrm! Brrm!* They're all down! Every long-haired, dirty, kinky-lipped man jack of them! All except one . . . it's Kantor and he's bolted around a corner and I can't see where he's gone. It's all over anyway. They'll get him all right and I wouldn't like to be in his shoes when they take him back to their station. They play with them for days. There's the research director—they've got him too! The police are putting him in a cage with a female giantess. That should be great! They're all crowding around to watch and I can't see what she's doing to him.

"So," he said, climbing down. "That's that—Phrix has won. He's in charge, although I never saw him out there. What we've got to do now is get out of here and fix Phrix. He'll still be in the spacecraft, if I know his sort. We've got to get out before the police get tired of their little orgy in the lab and start thinking about what to do next. My guess is they'll opt for Phrix when they've had their fun.

"What's the matter?" he asked, finding her doubled up on the gangway, rocking herself from side to side as if in pain.

"It's horrible," she sobbed.

"What's horrible?" he wanted to know.

"The cruel things they do."

He scratched his head and looked around the factory for something to distract her attention. It was, he remembered, from a course he had once called *The historical rudiments of staff relations*, what one did when women or children began howling and you didn't know what they were howling about. At some time before automation in cooking took over, many centuries ago, the kitchen had apparently been manned

by human or Salumi staff. There were a pair of white overalls hanging from a manual control knob on a simulated coffee dispenser.

"Guaranteed sweetened with genuine cyclamates," the caption read. There was also a chef's high hat and white trousers. He brought them to her and touched her gently on the shoulder.

"Clothes," he said. "For you!"

She peered with large, wet eyes through the opened fingers of her hands and the pupils seemed to grow large with wonder. She gave a cry of delight that could have been either human or simian. She took them from him reverently and dried her eyes on the smock sleeve before trying them on.

"Could you turn your back?" she asked shyly.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I don't think you ought to see me dressing."

"You're a woman, all right," and he laughed, pleased at the absurdity of her request. "I don't know if you're man or monkey, but you're female. Of all the three sexes only a woman could be so contagiously cocked-up."

He turned his back until she told him she was ready and there she was, buttoned up, virginally white, with the high hat dented and worn at a jaunty angle. Nervous, shy and a little prim.

"Marvelous!" he said.

"You're very kind," she whispered. She was sobbing quietly from sheer joy. Clothes, to Marylin, were something much more than a covering to keep out the cold. They are to most people. He was not sure what kindness meant, but it gave him a sort of paternal pleasure to watch her delight in the feel of being clad.

"You're too sensitive," he said gruffly. "They put something very odd in your father's semen, or the teaching machines went haywire."

"Don't you want me to be sensitive?" she said laughing.

It had never before occurred to him to care who felt what or why. You cared that women behaved themselves in the way nature intended, but then, they always did—at least to archexecutives. Laughter? Tears? She was more human than most. Humans don't laugh all that much. They crease their faces, answering grin for grin, but their eyes stay cold. But still, laughter—the Marylin sort of laughter—is the real criterion of humanity. Homo sapiens—the thinking man. Thinking—so what? Animals think. Maybe. Thinking is only a matter of degree. But here we have the true defining

factor: Homo ridens. The man of laughter. Animals do not laugh.

"I want you to be sensitive," he said. "Now let's get moving!"

"How?"

"What goes in must go out!"

But the processed food in its neat little packages was smaller than the raw material from which it had been made. The wrapped meat slices, the canned milk, the spiced sawdust sausages were spirited away through tiny tunnels and there was no way out. The machinery kept up a steady whirring and the sausage machine puffed intermittent bursts of wood-smoke and garlic and one by one the bodies of the victims from the battle above came clanking down the rollers and into the processor. The staff above was already tidying up the laboratory. Science is nothing if not tidy. Whatever means of exit the cooks had once used, before the self-servicing automation came along, it had long since been closed against any interference with the steady flow of victuals.

Shale switched his communicator to the general purpose wave band for news of the universe. He could think better when listening to the ads. But this time there were no ads. Only an exchange of messages between the Publisher's band and the channels outside.

"Police inspector to Phrix. Shale dead. *Times and Echo* routed. Your position secure. Function of police in clearing passage for march of evolution substantiated. Am returning to ship."

"Research director to Phrix. Acknowledge your position. You are Ad Manager. Never liked Kantor. Remember part played by laboratory staff in any spare editorial. Shale now dead. Kantor discredited. Metita would like to meet you. Get me out of giant nymph cage."

"Resident editor on Gromwold to Phrix. Declare for you. Never liked Shale. Full cooperation all staff. Personnel director would like to talk about pension fund."

"*Times and Echo* on Gromwold to Phrix. Is two and a half percent back-dated?"

"Interval beacon switching on! Your attention please! Time flies! Be wise! Publicize! Time flies! Be wise! Publicize! Time flies . . ."

Shale's finger switched the button to transmit and the prominent blue veins on his mottled face indicated what he was about to say better than any words could have done. Marylin laid a hand on his arm.

"Be wise," she said. "They think you are dead. Why tell them you are not? They will come and look for you."

"What's your I.Q.?" he asked, wonderingly. "You must have a double dose of it somewhere. You don't miss a trick, do you?"

"My I.Q. is quite low, really," she admitted. "The machines used to measure it and whistle. My brain is a few ounces lighter than yours, I expect. It's my A Factor that helps at a time like this. My A Factor, they said, was quite high."

"What's an A Factor?" he asked.

"Adaptability," she told him, surprised that he did not know. "I.Q. rating shows only the basic intelligence. The A Factor shows how far you can apply what little you have."

"That's what's wrong with Phrix! Enormous I.Q. and no A Factor. I can't wait to tell him so."

"There's nothing you can do about it," she said. "You're born with so much and nothing will make it any bigger."

"Right!" he said. "Put it to some good use and tell me how to get out of here."

But Marylin was curling up on the steel gangway and yawning. She could barely stay awake long enough to tell him the trouble.

"It must be night," she whispered. "I've been conditioned to sleep at nightfall when the lights in my cell went out. The stimulus has transferred itself to time. I . . ."

Her eyes were wide and her face contorting spasmodically. She was struggling frantically against the onrush of sleep. There was something she had to say, to tell Shale, to warn him. The thing behind him. Wriggling down the rollers.

"Shale," she gurgled. "Shale—Urrggh!"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, frustrated and more interested in her A Factor than the phenomenon of the organism's struggle against its conditioning.

She groaned a great and agonized groan and with a despairing effort, pointed. Her hand was heavy, tied down with viscous, treacle-threads of sleep and her finger would not extend. But she achieved her object. Shale looked behind him. It was twenty feet long, green, and composed of segments like a string of beads. A foot thick, powerful, flexible, moving in the hooped, peristaltic action of a snake. It twisted off the rollers, arched its forward segments and raised its head, towering a good seven feet high. It had the head of a long-haired, beautiful woman with sad eyes and soft, full lips pouted in a half smile, moistened now and again with the tip of a forked tongue. She looked down at Shale, turning her head from side to side and sighing with

an unbelievable sadness. Slowly, she bent down and, resting her cheek against his, looped a yard of segment over his arm.

Shale responded to the pleading in her eyes, the yearning, and stared back, half-hypnotized. It was not just that she was beautiful, with a captivating, blonde-haired, Salumi-like beauty. It was much more the pleading, siren-like quality in her deep, green, infinitely sad eyes. After all, how do you treat a serpent-woman? As woman or as serpent? She twisted her soft face to meet his eyes full on, nose to nose, and she began to sing with a whispering half-purr, half hiss.

"Stone the flippin' crows," Shale murmured.

For the second time, Marylin fought against an encroaching, paralyzing sleep. She was struggling to shout with all the difficulty of shouting in a dream. You strain your larnyx to holler like a whirling dervish for help and all that comes out is a dry croak. She managed just that much and no more and managed it only just in the nick of time.

"Shale!" she croaked.

He responded more to what he knew of her than from any sort of urgency in her voice. Barely had she croaked than he leaped quickly to one side with all the S.F. of a true archexecutive, and where survival factors were concerned, Shale truly had more than his fair share. Even as the serpent-woman looked and smiled at him, her tail arched over like a scorpion's and struck where a moment before he had been standing with such force that the foot long barbed sting splintered the concrete to the depth of three inches.

"You cow!" he shouted, pulling out his pistol and choosing his metaphors with anything but care. "You bloody vicious cow!"

Marylin wanted to stop him, wanted to tell him it wasn't the serpent woman's fault—she had probably been bred to kill; that you can't blame anyone for being what nature had intended that they should be, still less when the functions of nature had been usurped by a bunch of most unnatural laboratory attendants—but this time it was no use. She could manage no sound that was in any way likely to influence an irate Shale with a pistol in his hand. The face looking down the barrel of his weapon took on an even more unhappy expression. It was as if she knew either what pistols were, or more probably, recognized the look of hatred and the ability to act hatefully, balefully evidenced in Shale's eyes. Just before he fired, she burst into tears and as the bullet tore through her neck, she sank to the ground, twisting and turning and sobbing in heartrending anguish before she finally curled into a tidy coil and lay still. Shale kicked her in the face.

"Shale," Marylin gasped, finding her voice for a moment in the horror of what she had seen. "How could you!"

"How could I what?" he asked, puzzled. "There's still one bullet left."

"Did you," she asked faintly, "did you love your mother, Shale?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, mystified. "What's my mother got to do with anything? She died when I was quite young."

"Perhaps that accounts for it, then." Marylin sighed. "I'm sorry, Shale. What did she die of?"

It was probably just as well that Marylin, unable any longer to fight against the inevitability of her conditioning, had closed her eyes and at last given herself up to sleep before Shale replied in his simple direct way.

"I shot her," he said.

Realizing she was not only asleep but likely to remain so until the morning, he picked her up from the hard steel and carried her to the sausage machine. He laid her there gently by a hot pipe on the plastic floor, first taking off the chef's hat and folding it into some sort of pillow.

"Clothes," she whispered in her dreams. "I've got clothes!"

"Stupid animal," he muttered. But he raised her head gently and slipped the pillow underneath. It wasn't much, not even a sign of evolution stirring in a frontal lobe, but for a man who had never been kind to a woman before, it was worthy of notice, if destiny or evolution can ever spare the time away from cosmic happenings to notice anything. Shale puttered around restlessly for a while, trying out the sweetened coffee and eating sausages. Thinking that Marylin might be frightened when she awoke and saw the snake-woman, he uncoiled her while she was still warm and dragged her up the essence machine to the ventilator. He thrust her head through first and then, heaving on the body like an old-time sailor raising anchor, he hoisted the rest of her and fed it through the opening until gravity took over and she slid away out of sight. That done, he too settled down to sleep. He hesitated at first whether to use Marylin as a pillow, but some sort of repugnance restrained him and he chose another spot. There was no real need of warmth or comfort in the fully air-conditioned factory.

She brought him coffee in the morning and regretted that there was nowhere to wash. He rummaged in his pocket for his ablutions and handed her the aerosol can and a mirror. She spent a long time combing and spraying herself and

adjusting the hat in front of the mirror. He watched her sardonically.

"Stop preening yourself!" he said at last. "Get that A Factor to work. I've looked around and there's no way out. We certainly can't get back up the rollers."

She handed the ablutions back to him and sat thoughtfully on the gangway. She appeared not to look at anything but just waited for inspiration to come. Archimedes had once done much the same thing in his bath. She did not say "Eureka," but suddenly she smiled.

"Yes?" he asked.

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Mind what?"

"I'm only a monk—a hybrid. You won't feel I ought to wait for you to think of something?"

"Listen!" he said. "I'm an archexecutive, aren't I? What have I got to think for? I pay people to do my thinking. Get on with it!"

"Well," she said, diffidently. "I think we should go through the ventilator."

"The ventilator!" He groaned. "Your tiny little mind having nightmares or something? The opening's far too small. Just big enough for the snake-woman. How do we get through that?"

"Is she out there?" Marylin shuddered.

"Not a chance," he told her cheerfully. "Not with all the Shorne dogs there are around. They'd eat anything."

"It's too horrible!" she said.

"Forget it!" he grumbled. "What about this ventilator you were talking about?"

"Oh yes!" She told him, "It's automatic, you see. It doesn't open any further than that because of the air-conditioning. The temperature in here is constant. If we broke one of those pipes from the sausage machine, the temperature would rise and the ventilator would open further."

"Brilliant!" he said.

He spent the morning pulling and prizing, but the pipes, though centuries old and leaking at every joint, held firm. There was some automatic self-servicing device operating inside. As a fracture appeared, it was welded again before actually breaking.

"What we have to do," she announced, "is to find some means of using the machine for a purpose it was not intended to be used for. It's probably the only way to confuse the process."

"Brilliant again!" he said.

He considered the operation of the machine. The sawdust

arrived under pressure from a pipe in the wall and was blown into a hopper that was constantly half full. It needed, as Marylin had suggested, something added to the sawdust, something that the machine would reject. Iron filings or a sackful of spanners. But the factory floor was tidy and there was nothing portable that might be used. If there were any spanners anywhere, and there probably were, they were an integral part of each self-servicing machine.

"Your uniform," he suggested.

"No!" she cried, horrified at the thought of parting with her first clothes.

"It's a matter of getting out naked or staying all your life down here with your pants on. There's no future in that!"

"No!" she said. "Shale, I won't!"

"All right!" he grumbled, surprisingly amenable to her wishes. "We'll think of something else."

He was leaning on the gangway, idly watching the supply to the meat processing machine, when the body of a young woman, the victim of some unsuccessful experiment, slipped down the rollers. He was abstractly admiring the young dimpled curve of her buttocks as she trundled by, when her utility as well as her aesthetic value occurred to him. He jumped forward and lifted her from the conveyor, just before the mouth of the processor.

"Ha!"

He threw her over his shoulder and bounded across to the sausage-maker. With a heave, he tossed her headfirst into the hopper. Marylin screamed and he wondered vaguely what had upset her, but he was too busy watching developments in the sawdust to inquire. It began to sink in the middle and the body tilted toward the slowly turning vortex. In ten minutes it was upright, upside down, and toes inexplicably pointed upward and the head slowly sinking in the direction of the central intake. Down it went and soon only the feet were showing above the sawdust. There was some peculiar action on the leg muscles, because they began moving up and down on their own account like a railway signal. First pointed and then down to right angles. At the same time things began to happen. A hooter sounded short sharp blasts and a red light glowed.

"That's it!" he shouted. "It's the old warning device from when the place was manned. It can't cope with what it's got and it's calling for help."

"That poor girl!" Marylin was sobbing.

"What poor girl?" he asked, mystified.

Clouds of smoke and steam were now belching from every joint and flange and the smell had changed from garlic and

had taken on a scorched tang like burnt feathers. Suddenly a pipe broke loose and a cloud of hot cellulose pulp with flavor enchancers, mixed spices and indefinable organic material blew outward toward the ventilator. They waited, choking in the steam, and the stench was now definitely of hoof and horn.

"Look!" he gasped.

Marylin had been right. Slowly the ventilator began to open. A new piece of sky appeared, a corner of the roof of some building, drifting cloud, the blue haze of the lower ionosphere, the distant dot of a hovering, predatory angel-stork.

"It worked!" he shouted. "Let's get out of here!"

Avoiding the hot blast, he climbed the essence machine, drew himself up and reached for the aperture.

"Hooray!" he roared.

With a heave he was swinging from the still-opening shutter, and drawing his knees up to his chin, he was feet-first through the opening. He dropped and seized the bottom edge.

"Come on," he shouted and let himself fall to the ground, landing on all fours. Unhurt, he scrambled to his feet and found himself looking down the muzzle of an energy pistol.

"Holy Asgard," said the constable. "It's Shale!"

Inside, Marylin was climbing the machine with difficulty. Although philogenetically she belonged partly to an agile species, her lifelong confinement in a small cage had made her slow and ungainly. She had never, in fact, climbed anything. Her machine physical-educator had believed in machine exercise, being thus able to control the right amount exactly, rather than most of us less fortunate outside, who usually have either too much or too little. There was one thing, however, her educators had neglected altogether: to provide her ears with something to develop her basically acute hearing. All sounds in her cell had been of equal intensity and she was no longer able, like her simian ancestors, to interpret the degree of danger in a footstep or a rustle in the undergrowth. As she struggled to pull herself up the side of the G.S.E. (intergalactic) machine, she did not notice that one body, rattling down the rollers to the food processor, slipped off before it reached the flaps. That it had climbed noiselessly from the gangway and was creeping up behind her. That it was standing there, hands on hips, watching her struggles sardonically. As she at last reached up for the uppermost pipe, preparatory to pulling herself to the top, a hand closed around her leg and pulled her down again.

"By the Incorporated Practicioners in Advertising themselves!" Kantor said, "it's a bloody monkey!"

"Please," Marylin begged, "don't call me that."

"And it talks," he said. "So you're Shale's new girlfriend. Just what he needs. He's no more than a dirty ape himself. So he's gone through the ventilator, has he? Well! Well! Left you here all on your loneliness? This time, I'm going to get friend Archexecutive Shale!"

He struck Marylin savagely in the face with his pistol butt and climbed the machine. Marylin, desperately wiping the blood from her eyes, threw her arms around his legs and held on. He turned and struck her a stunning blow on the crown of her head. Her grip loosened and she sank to the ground. The chef's hat, streaked with blood, slipped from her hand, as with her last effort to retain consciousness, she attempted to hold it in place.

"We'll soon fix you, you ugly ape," Kantor said. He climbed down and, seizing her by the neck, dragged her to the conveyor belt.

"Do you know how stupid you look in clothes?" he shouted, slapping her face to bring her back far enough into life to hear him. "A brute beast trying to look like a human and as hideous as a pig in trousers. Down the belt with you, you hairy monster!"

He climbed on to the gangway, reached down and pulled her up by the hair. Picking her up in his arms, he tossed her into the processing machine.

"Pork," he screamed, "that's what you'll come out as! Monkey cutlets!"

Shale was not very bright intellectually, but when it came to dealing with policemen, he had few equals. The particular member of the force who now confronted him was stupid even for a Gromwold constable. So Shale had no difficulty in distracting his attention by the oldest trick in the universe. As the policeman chivied him with the muzzle of his pistol, Shale grinned and pointed over his shoulder. The policeman turned and Shale shot him in the back.

"Lout!" he said, kicking him in the face as a post mortem reproof. He was bending down and retrieving the pistol and unbuckling the bandolier with the energy capsules when he heard Marylin scream. It was either an ape or a human scream; there is little difference in times of terror.

"What is it?" he called. There was no reply. He scratched his head. Why would she scream? A mouse? Hardly. Where there were serpent-women slithering down conveyors, there might just as well be mice, but Marylin was not the type to yell without good cause.

"Marylin!" he shouted.

Still no reply. The ventilator was out of reach and the wall was rendered with a toughened concrete and was quite smooth. There was, however, the policeman's body and even one or two segments of the snake-woman that the dogs had found inedible. He doubled the policeman up, head between his feet, and slapped two snake segments on his back. Scrambling up, he was just able to reach the aperture. Pistol between his teeth, he pulled himself up. As he squeezed through the ventilator he was in time to see Kantor turning to face him and Marylin's legs disappearing through the processor flaps. After that he was not very clear what happened. Kantor crouched, pointed his pistol, and began firing. In his utter fury, Shale never thought of returning the fire. In times of stress Shale acted, as do most people, by returning to the ways of childhood, in his case to the tough little advertising colony on Lemos, where, if anyone showed signs of incipient executive material in their work or play, you recognized them for what they were—potential dangers to you—and treated them accordingly. You knocked the executive material out of them. When you'd finished thumping them they were very menial and intending to stay that way and keep out of trouble.

Instead of taking cover and returning the fire like a good soldier, Shale took his pistol by the barrel and, using it as a club, leaped at Kantor, fists, pistol, feet, knees and elbows flailing. The essence machine was a good thirty feet high and when Shale landed, it was with the force of an exploding thunderbolt. How it was that not a single Kantor bullet made contact is one of those inexplicable facts of warfare. Heroic tactics do not exactly make one invulnerable but they go a long way toward it. Probably the enemy's hand shakes from the sheer terror of looking at you, bawling and waving your battle-ax and painted with woad. Shale was not painted with woad, but when anyone upset him, his mottled, florid face took on the color of ox liver and the veins and cheeks extended like a cow's udder overdue for milking in some zoological enclave. As he landed, he smashed Kantor's head against the gangway rail with one hand and pulled Marylin back with the other. The hair on the crown of her head, which he noticed for the first time was overlong for an ape's, showed some signs of singeing and she had been liberally sprayed with a basting oil. Otherwise she was no worse physically. Mentally, it was another matter. She clung to Shale with a clawing desperation. Her long fingers tore at his hair, the strong nails scratched his face and she sank her surprisingly small, white, human teeth

deep into his shoulder. He was hardly able to thrust her away long enough to pick up the groaning Kantor and toss him on to the conveyor.

"Cut it out!" he said gruffly. "It's finished now. You're all right, aren't you?"

"He said I was an ugly ape!" she said between sobs.

"Did he, now?" He bent over the rail to give Kantor's feet a vicious shove, accelerating his passage into the processor. There was a muffled scream from somewhere inside and Kantor vanished with a last despairing kick.

"Kantor's a peasant," he said, adding as the screaming ceased, "at least, he was."

"You shouldn't have done that," she whispered, becoming suddenly calmer. "You needn't have put him in there."

"I'll go around the other end and eat him for a nickel," he said, cheerfully. "It's you I'm concerned about."

She sat disconsolately on the gangway, rubbing, not very effectively, at the basting oil. The white smock was splashed with blood and yellow stains and the off-white trousers had slipped about her ankles.

"It was silly of me to put them on," she said sadly, unbuttoning the smock, the human feeling of shame at dressing before him forgotten in the misery of renunciation. "Of course I look ugly and stupid in clothes. I'm not really a woman—I just feel like one, but I know I look like something else. I shouldn't try to be something I'm not.

"Just for a little while," she said, as the tears began to flow again, "I felt like a real woman. You can't imagine how I used to long for clothes in my cell. To dress up and comb my hair. Ever since the day the machines first described clothes to me—it was like showing a caged bird a nest in a tree. Well, it's all over now. I'm glad it was Kantor who told me and not you. You were very understanding."

"I'd like to pull Kantor out just to push him back in again," he said.

She wiped her face with the discarded smock and managed to smile.

"It wouldn't make any difference," she said. "It's been said now. The truth has to come out somehow in the end. It was only a little illusion I had. I'll get over it."

He went to the delivery end of the machine and took the packets as they emerged, steaming and smelling slightly of nutmeg. He didn't know which packets contained Kantor, but he threw them all on the floor and jumped on them.

"Now," he said breathlessly, as the machine appeared to be, for the moment, empty. "That's the Kantor episode over. We're going out now and we're taking over my space-

craft, Phrix or no Phrix, Gromwold police or no Gromwold police. And when we get to somewhere civilized, or even before that, right here in Lulonga, I'm getting you clothes—do you hear? Not an old chef's outfit, but the best clothes in the universe, right bang up to the last minute finery. And you're going to wear them and like them and if anyone says you shouldn't, I'll personally break him in little pieces and cut his liver out. Now get up and get going."

"You're very good," she said.

"I'm the biggest bastard in the universe," he shouted. "But no one's going to make a monkey out of my girlfriend."

It was an unfortunate choice of metaphor, but Marylin, overcome with the significance of the word "friend," hardly noticed.

The teaching machines had filled the gaps between the rest periods of loneliness, but they had never really been her friends. It is possible to have an enormous affection for a machine, but somehow you never get as close to the best and most understanding of them as you do to a very much intellectually inferior and insignificant human—or animal—of one's own kind. She had long felt the need not just to talk and receive always a well thought out and concise reply, but to feel the presence of something less well-informed, groping like herself for an answer, and conscious of its own inadequacy. And now Shale, neither groping nor inadequate, but at the same time far less intellectually perfect than the machines, had called her his friend. She felt almost able to walk on air to the ventilator in spite of her aching head and the blood that had matted in the light down on her chin and shoulders.

Shale was now tolerably well armed with both the policeman's energy pistol and Kantor's personal protection job, the former unlikely to be accurate after its misuse as a club. Shale tucked them both into his smock belt and pulled himself up to the ventilator and peered through the aperture. There was no one in sight. Two Shorne dogs were worrying the body of the Gromwold policeman. As he let himself down, they took a leg apiece and began a tug-of-war to the accompaniment of growls, howls and that high-pitched whistling in the upper register peculiar to Shorne dogs. Dangling from the wall, he kicked them away and let himself down on to the corpse, taking Marylin on his shoulders and stooping to allow her to step off gently.

"All right," he said, "now to my spacecraft!"

It was about a mile to the airstrip. A mile of completely flat surface, faced with Shorne marble slabs and used mostly for parades and demonstrations. The Shornians were great

demonstrators and since all such spontaneous gatherings were by law in favor of the government, the ruling classes were at pains to provide every encouragement and a setting worthy of its people's lion heart. Shale's spacecraft was thus clearly visible, pointing skyward, gleaming and pencil-shaped, not far from the smoking ruins of the administration block. The sight of it was an inspiration to Shale, who set out for it at a brisk trot, heedless of strategy or cover, thinking only of Phrix and what he would do to him when he had him at the wrong end of his pistol. He had taken only a few steps, however, when the motors opened up with a burst of shimmering auron particles. They bellied under the craft in a wide, onion-like ovoid, hazily there and not there, like heat lines over sun-scorched hay. The curved contours straightened and the ovoid, with the ship on its crown, became a cylinder. With the impetus of force-field elongation beneath it, the craft rocketed skyward with the acceleration of light from its source, or very nearly. It was out of sight behind the three ionospheres in two blinks of an eyelid.

"The three-headed thieving jerk!" Shale shouted, firing his pistol in frustrated impotence at the point in the sky where hazy pink ionized smoke rings were slowly widening.

"We're stranded on Shorne!" he groaned. Testily, he shot the Shorne dogs that were howling, whistling and fighting over the body of the policeman.

"It doesn't follow," she said.

"What doesn't?" he wanted to know, blowing the smoke from the barrel of his gun.

"Kantor must have a craft somewhere," she said.

"You're right!" he agreed. "So darned right!"

In the area of what had been the administration block was a milling crowd of officials and armed men. The yellow uniforms of the Shorne police were in evidence now that the blue of Gromwold was gone. They were searching the ruins and shouting instructions to each other through loud hailers.

"We'd better move," he said, "and fast. The research director has declared for Phrix. He's lucky he could declare for anyone after the Gromwold boys got him. I wouldn't give much for my chances if he found out I was still alive."

"Stand and identify!" someone shouted, and a warning shot splintered a gaping hole in the wall behind them.

"Run!" Shale ordered. "No Shorne policeman can ever hit a running target at more than a hundred yards."

He was right. As they ran, large lumps of masonry disintegrated from the roofs and walls of buildings around them, but they crossed the wide open square to the main entrance of the airport unscathed. Looking back as they ran through

the gates, Shale noted that the policemen had abandoned their wild fusillade and were climbing into a jet-hovercraft and setting out in pursuit. The gates themselves, surprisingly enough, were unguarded Outside there was a wide carriageway and on the far side of the carriageway there was a high wall built of highly polished, square black slabs of impermeable Gromwold igneous jegstone. They ran helter-skelter down the road, spurred on by the loud buzzing of the police launch and, shortly before the nick of time, arrived at a gateway with thick wooden, iron-studded gates and a small door in the main frame. The small door was open. They climbed through and shot the bolts behind them.

LULONGA CITY NECROPOLIS

It stood out in large black letters on a white board for the information of visitors The Publisher, or the Publisher's representatives, had not been idle. Beneath the notice, on either side, were two messages, well-displayed on the glass panels of illuminated point-of-sale cabinets. Each letter was a different color and staggered at angles above and below the line of setting to give an effect of lighthearted jollity, in the "sell with smiles" idiom of contemporary psychology.

DEATH ABSOLVES—WE DISSOLVE
*Johnson's of Lulonga—aromatic acids*
DISSOLUTION IS NO SOLUTION
*Butterworths of Shorne—reducing pickles*

As far as Shale and Marylin could see to the left and to the right and stretching away into the distance before them were rows of birdbath-like stone altars about three feet high. On the center of each bird-table was a glass jar containing either colored liquid, or, suspended by a platinum wire from the neck, a tiny wizened body about the size and texture of a pickled walnut. There were corrosive-resistant brass labels on each.

JABLICK—*Pickled AE 20,961*
ROWCOCK—*Dissolved AE 20,855*

A ravishing Salumi beauty in white tights emerged from the gate-lodge and undulated toward them, her nipples peeping prettily skyward from rocking white breasts at every step. A card held by a large hairpin on the upsweep of her elaborate coiffure bore the legend: ***Johnson's Provides the Solution.***

"Where is the D.D.?" she asked. Her voice hovered around middle C on a cello relaxo-tuner.

"Come again?" Shale asked.

"The Dear Departed," she purred. "We always call them the D.D.'s at Johnson's. It's more—well—in keeping, isn't it?"

"No Dear Departed," Shale told her, his eyes on an area of pink-white dimpled cleavage. He went through the motions of expectorating a kiss at what seemed a worthwhile target.

"Sorrowing, then?" she asked, surprised.

"Not sorrowing."

"Souvenirs?"

"No souvenirs."

"You're wasting my time!" The voice changed from cello C to metallic upper B flat. "I'm on commission. I don't chatter with morbid neuroghouls."

"Neuroghouls?" Marylin asked. "What is a neuroghoul?"

"They haunt the places of death." Shale grinned. "Didn't your teachers tell you? I wouldn't mind," he said, turning to the Johnson's girl, "getting my mitts around you and seeing how you dissolve."

In the road outside a police siren wailed and he rather regretfully laid the cold muzzle of his pistol on her navel.

"Just now," he said, "we're interested in acids. Show us the works, voluptuous!"

"Don't shoot me!" she begged. "I'll do anything. I'm terribly afraid of death."

"Why?" he asked. "What have you got to live for that's so special?"

"It's not the living," she said, trembling. "It's the dying and being put in the acid bath and poured into a bottle. I've seen it so often, I can't believe it will happen to me one day."

"With a body like yours," he returned with a grin, "I should think they'd pickle you. You'd look rather nice as a walnut. Now, get inside there and stop blubbering."

Inside the lodge doors was a comfortable room with air-conditioning, chairs and colored liquids in jars arranged tastefully on shelves. There were a few pictures on the walls illustrating the speed of dissolution and accompanied by suitable explanatory captions:

"Anarubic Acid. Note the peaceful repose of the D.D. as all wrinkles disappear in a trice. The final disintegration of the body will be unnoticed in an effervescence of blue bubbles."

"Ridivinsic Aktane in handy corrosive-resistant wrappings.

Readily soluble. Quick acting and leaves no sediment. Try one in *your* D.D.'s final bath."

"Where's it done?" Shale asked.

"Downstairs." She nodded to a doorway partially concealed behind cardboard representations of D.D.s quietly and seraphically recumbent after pre-mortem assurances of Johnson's acid baths. "We call it the soup-kitchen," she confessed.

"Down!" he ordered. "And quick about it!"

Outside, the police had driven their jet-car full tilt into the necropolis gates. The rams on the bumpers had burst the hinges and they were clattering through the opening, pistols poised.

"Right!" Shale ordered. "Behind the bath, you two. As they come down the stairs, I'll pick them off."

"Not the bath!" the Salumi girl wailed. "I'm scared of the bath!"

Marylin comforted her with a quiet whisper in her ear: "Don't cross him, dear," she said. "Shale's the sort of man who will put you inside it if you don't do what he says."

In her own way, Marylin was proud of Shale.

There were only four policemen, who were ill-advised enough to run down the stairs into the soup-kitchen, one behind the other. It was asking for a demonstration of marksmanship. Shale fired one energy capsule and brought them all tumbling to the floor together. He picked them up, one at a time, and tossed them in the bath. They vanished, as the advertisement had promised, in an effervescence of blue bubbles. The Salumi girl was still squatting behind the bath covering her eyes and ears with her hands. He slapped her heartily on the shapely buttocks that were protruding inadvertently over its edge.

"Come on!" he said to Marylin. "Move!"

"Shale," she asked, hurrying behind him down the main avenue of altars, "don't you care?"

"Care?" he threw over his shoulder. "Care?"

She held on to the tail of his smock, tugging to slow the urgency of his stride.

"About those policemen. Didn't you feel anything at all when you threw them in the bath?"

He reached out and grasped her by the scruff of the neck and propelled her along at a jog-trot in front of him.

"Get a move on," he said. "We've got to get to that ship. I don't know what you mean by 'care.' It was up to them to care. I'd care if it were me. It wasn't me, so I'm laughing."

"I wish you could feel." She sighed. "I wish you could care, just a little."

"You're a funny old monkey." He laughed affectionately.

In front of them they saw their first neuroghoul. He was on his knees, staring fixedly in wide-mouthed wonder at a tiny walnut-brown woman in a bottle. His eyes were glazed and gloating and, from time to time, he went through the motions of wetting his lips with a rough, dry tongue. He looked much as neuroghouls had always looked. At public executions and, in the days when executions were no longer public, at gatherings by the notice on prison doors. Delight at the rope become verbal. He had been found, too, at funerals and at sites of violent crimes. Anywhere where death had become sordid enough to fascinate.

Shale emptied a jar of crimson fluid over him in passing. The jar was labeled: JOACOMO. *Dissolved AE 20,701.* It was quite old and its antiquity fascinated him.

"What is A.E.?" he asked suddenly.

"After Earth," she told him.

"Pity about Earth!" he said.

They were making their way to a small gateway in the necropolis wall at a safe distance from the airport gates. With luck they might cross the road and reenter unobserved from the rear. Kantor's craft would be somewhere near the house on the hill; manned or unmanned, guarded or unguarded, they did not know.

"We'll play it by ear when we get there," Shale said.

Before they reached the gate, however, it was throw open and a naked man exploded into the necropolis. Slamming the door behind him, he ran through the rows of altars, coursing to left and right at a speed a leopard might have envied. Long, matted hair trailed behind him and his breathing, as he passed them without a sign of recognition, was a dry, painful whistle. Far in the distance was the sound of posthorns, humming of jets, baying of hounds, shouts and laughter.

"It's a hunt," Shale said. "If we stand behind that black Poor Man's Cyprus by the wall, we can watch. No one will notice us until after the kill."

"But why?" she asked.

"Why what?"

"Why are they hunting the poor man?"

"Sport, of course. It's one of the few active old pastimes left. What did those machines teach you?"

"But what has he done?"

"Done?" he asked. "What should he have done? He's been bred for the chase. Hare hormones or stimulants or something. Antelope serum. What did you think they hunted —foxes?"

"They used to do that," she recalled out loud. "And it was horrible."

"Not much fun with foxes. A good fast man makes a much better quarry. More intelligent. Look at him! Spilling the acid from the jars to cover his scent! Coursing to throw them off! What are you looking so miserable about?" he asked, as she turned away, hiding her face behind the black foliage of the cyprus. "When you turn the corners of your mouth down you look like a sulky frog. Hunting was one of the first things men did when they learned to make weapons. Of course it gives everyone pleasure. It's deep down inside us. It's the thing that first put us on top. It made us superior to the—oh, well. Have it your own way!"

The quarry was a good half mile from the gate and running strongly when the hounds came through in full cry, followed by the huntsmen on their jet-cycles, soaring over the wall with horns blowing, cheering and tallyho-ing.

"They're enjoying themselves," Shale said. "Do you want to stop their simple pleasures?"

"I'm thinking of the hunted," she said, "*not* the huntsmen."

"He enjoys it too, really. Everyone says he does, so he must. They won't kill him if he gives them a good run."

"But if the dogs get him!"

"They usually take the dogs off him and cut his throat. They're quite humane really."

The hunt passed out of sight into the distance and they came out from behind the black Cyprus and made their way to the road, which appeared now to have run into a shopping center. They crossed over and Shale helped himself to a Lemos *Galactic Monitor* from an auto-newsvendor. It was a locally printed Shorne edition and he went purple with rage at the first glance. There was nearly a half column of plain editorial among the newsads on the front page. This in itself was inconceivable and a break with long-standing tradition. It would have been quite impossible in the universal edition. News items are woven only into advertisements. But the subject matter was worse.

SHAME ON SHORNE, it was headed.

The text was of no consequence, since no one read any further than the headlines on any subject. But the lead-in was in sufficiently heavy type to catch the eye of even the most casual observer: CIVILIZED CONSCIENCE REJECTS THE LABORATORIES ! ! !

"Phrix," he shouted. "What does Phrix think he's doing to my papers!"

"He's changing the universe," she said.

"What does Phrix know about conscience?" he stormed.

"He's a Groil. Conscience is a human, Ruling Race affair. It's the thing that tells us what is custom and what isn't custom. We—the Ruling Races. What *we* do and don't do. Not what someone else does or doesn't want to do. We accept laboratories, so laboratories can't be on our conscience. How can a Groil or anyone else tell us what we should reject?"

"A thing can be bad in itself," she said. "Whether we do it or not."

"You're talking like an ape," he said. "How can anything be bad unless someone says it is? Badness is stepping out of line; there's nothing absolute about it. And we make the line we don't step out of. What's bad in one generation may be good in the next, if opinion changes. But you don't mold opinion; it's rooted in custom. We used to hunt foxes, like you said, and then it was good. Now we don't because men are cheaper and give us a better run. So now it's bad to hunt foxes. And it's bad to put editorial on the front page. It would have been bad enough as a newsad. No one puts editorial on the front page."

"How would you have done it?" she asked tactfully. "If you had wanted the Shorne laboratories to advertise and they wouldn't and you wanted to put them out of business?"

"Ah!" he said, pride in his craft overriding his resentment. "That's different. I would have done it properly and not on the front page. Worded it into someone else's ad as a promotional news item. Something like: 'Hugger's gin—easy on the pocket—Avoid Shorne laboratories—they don't stock it,' or something like that."

"Brilliant!" she said.

"It is, rather. Look," he continued. "They've done it here. Now that's the work of an editor who knows his job. You see! There's been an earthquake on Jomrod. But you don't find that out—supposing you want to—without reading the Adam's Analgesic ad. 'Feeling tired, run-down, shaky—like the earth at 0705 Gromwold time yesterday on Jomrod? You need an Adam's Analgesic to put life into you! Life that 2000 people on Jomrod haven't got any more. They won't need Adam's Analgesic—you will! It's got what it quakes!' "

"I see," she said, adding as an afterthought, "you haven't paid for the paper."

"Paid for the paper?" he asked in amazement. "Haven't you ever heard of controlled circulations? The advertiser pays for the paper. The higher the circulation, the more you can charge him. The Lemos *Galactic* has a distribution of a thousand billion. We wouldn't have a couple of thousand if anyone had to buy it.

"A dozen cigars!" he shouted into the service microphone.

"Jomrod Jasmine Hallucinatory Whiffs. I'll smoke them on the way to Lemos when we get that ship of Kantor's," he explained to Marylin.

He slipped his credit card through the counter scrutinizer and the packet slipped down the supply tube. He crammed it into the breast pocket of his smock.

"Now," he said, "to get you some clothes!"

The shops along the street side opposite the necropolis wall were all of uniform three-story height and built of square Shome concrete blocks. Each one bore an illuminated name-board in the center of the third story, stretching the length of the establishment itself.

TROUBADOR'S TOYS FOR TINIEST TOTS

It was the next establishment and the window display comprised a large and varied assortment of miniature energy pistols, hatchets, thumbscrews, death-masks and a "Girl's Own Dissolution Kit." The contents were shown under the caption, *Dissolve your dolly in Anarubic acid,* and a funerary jar was supplied, labeled *Just like Grandma.*

They made their way down the street and Marylin averted her eyes from Pitman's Pornographic Posters. Most of them were animated and extracts were projected on home-movie screens. The display read, *I thought my boy friend was impotent until he saw Pitman's production of Pamela's Passion—Credit card entry canceled if not satisfied.*

There was also a pet shop with man-hounds and tame vultures and a book shop displaying only one thousand copies of the same work: *100,000 Years of Torture.* A small sign announced that a genuine police whip was supplied free with every copy.

"There it is," Shale said. He pointed to a building bearing the sign DRESS TO KILL. But on closer inspection they found it stocked only hunting tights and scarlet capes.

The couturier was further still and uncomfortably near to the airport. It was divided into two halves: footwear under the legend, *If you were in our shoes,* and gowns under, *Full coverage on sure foundations.*

Marylin hesitated at the doors. She was trembling and near to tears. Excitement at the thought of once again being clad in real clothes was equally matched by the fear of looking foolish and the dread of a shop girl's contempt. The couturier was one of the few shops with real live assistants and they were hovering in the corners, severe and contemptuous, in one-piece gowns and wearing their hairdos like helmets.

"They'll think I'm ugly," she whispered.

Shale flicked his gold-colored credit card, the symbol of a million dollars, from his pocket.

"They'll think this is beautiful," he said. "In we go!"

It was a tall and willowy salesgirl who approached them and her regulation once-piece uniform was skintight and woven from a filmy, semi-transparent fabric. Over her regulation hairdo, she wore a wide brimmed hat molded in a loop like the orbital path of a comet. Her long eyelashes drooped for a moment as she glanced at the credit card and then, as Shale had predicted, lifted to uncover smiling eyes, radiating warmth and friendliness to Marylin.

"Madame would prefer to begin at the beginning?" she asked. "Panties, girdle and et ceteras?"

"Please," Marylin whispered, a hot tingling under the down of her cheeks that in a human would have produced a blush. "Anything you say."

"You don't need a bra, really," the assistant noted, with an appraising eye. "Many ladies would envy your remarkably—sturdy—development. However, I think we should say bra, for the sake of form." She smiled at her own plagiarizing from the current advertisement. "Now what had madame in mind for the general ensemble?"

"I want," said Marylin, "clothes."

"Yes, madame, but what sort of clothes?"

"To cover every inch of me. Every inch. It's the hair, you see."

"High boots. Pantaloons. Smock buttoning to the neck, belted at the waist. Snug fitting astronaut-type hat, possibly with veil. Gloves."

"It sounds entrancing."

"Madame should try depilatories!" the assistant whispered, as Marylin, in a frenzy of excitement, tried on a succession of hats but avoided studying their effect in the mirror.

"What are depilatories?"

"They remove hair very effectively. I would not suggest their use but for the fact that madame's skin appears to be pink and unblemished under the—er—down."

"It would really remove my hair?"

"Certainly, madame. We stock all the usual brands."

"I'll try it," Marylin whispered. "I wonder," she added. "Could you advise me? I had thought of plastic surgery. Could a plastic surgeon alter my face?"

"I am sure the nose could be remolded."

"And my mouth made less wide? And could he give me lips?"

Shale was at a safe distance, lounging by the door and

puffing at the Jamrod Jasmine Hallucinogen. He was smiling, watching a dream image form framed in a smoke ring. The assistant softened toward Marylin to a degree not altogether accounted for by Shale's credit card.

"Madame, I take it, is from the laboratories?"

"Yes—a hybrid."

"It presents difficulties for you. I should certainly consult a plastic surgeon at the first opportunity. You are not very familiar with the world of Shorne or the universe?"

"I have very little direct experience."

"Perhaps I might offer a word of warning in regard to men. The gentleman appears to be a very normal and uncomplicated man. Use the depilatory only a little at a time so that the hair disappears slowly. That way, he will not notice. Men are very conservative, madame. He might be unreasonably angry at finding you looking different one day from the way you had looked the day before. Being basically unobservant, no man will notice a change that creeps up on him gradually. You would be quite safe, even with plastic surgery, if your face was changed only a little at a time."

"Thank you!" Marylin smiled. She had finished her dressing and ran to the door to show herself to Shale.

"You look marvelous!" he said. Her face fell when she realized that he was in fact speaking to a dream image.

"Never mind." The assistant comforted her. "He will really think you look marvelous after the cigar. I hope you have an understanding. You know what men are after narcotics—or do you?"

"No!" Marylin gasped, really frightened at the thought. There were some subjects the machines had not covered.

Shale was certainly more affable than usual as they left the shop. He looked at Marylin and said "Hm!" and chucked the assistant under the chin as a parting gesture. Marylin badly wanted him to approve of her choice; the excitement she felt at dressing for herself was nothing compared to her desire to please him. Even if, as the assistant had hinted, the narcotic might . . . but, in any case, why not? Shale was the only man in the world for her.

"You're sure you like it?" she asked. "I can change it if you say so."

"It's fine," he said.

"Should I keep the veil down?" she asked. "It covers my face and people don't notice."

"Don't notice what?" he asked.

She had wanted him to say, "Don't cover your face," but his apparent indifference as to whether it was covered or not was the next best thing. She took his arm shyly.

"You don't think I look silly?"

"No," he said, "you look all right."

All at once she saw the cause of his abstraction. His eyes were on the next building, which stood out from the rest of the street like a vision of Asgard in the Outer Darkness. Its concrete blocks were painted a bright yellow and the door and window frames were mauve. There were multicolored zigzag patterns radiating from the title board which read: LULONGA CITY BROTHEL—YOU WANT IT—WE GOT IT.

"Just what I need," Shale said. "Come along."

She pleaded, "I can't go in there!"

"Of course you can. There's always a waiting room. You can read the papers."

"Must you?" she asked dolefully. She knew about brothels from her teachers, but the machines had been reticent about the manner of their use and the etiquette involved. She had imagined that one went there secretly and took one's time, that it was in some way a matter of importance to the user, calling for tact and discretion.

"I won't be more than five minutes," he said. "That Salumi lass in the bone-yard put ideas in my head."

He was as good as his word. He took her to the waiting room, decorated with a few mildly erotic pictures advertising perfumes, deodorants and aphrodisiacs in aerosol containers. *Use Lulonga Love Mist and Keep your Man at Home,* she read. *Saphos of Shorne unite—You have nothing to lose but your swains—Shorne Sapphic Society. Membership ten dollars.*

Shale disappeared at a jog-trot up the escalator, leaving Marylin seated disconsolately under an illustrated slogan *For Virgin Breasts, Shamrock's is best. Shamrock's reducing Salve.* She was shortly joined by a jolly, buxom woman, whose generous curves rippled under a nightdress of some synthetic fiber only slightly less transparent than glass.

"Coffee?" she asked. "Or a little something to pep you up a bit?"

"No, thank you," Marylin answered, fidgeting nervously in her chair and hoping that Shale would hurry.

The well-proportioned hostess considered her with carefully calculating eyes.

"Thank you?" she said. "Thank you's are a bit old-fashioned these days, aren't they? Where have you been hiding yourself? You're only part human, aren't you?"

"Yes," Marylin confessed.

"The laboratories, of course? You're not looking for a job are you?"

"What sort of a job?" Marylin asked.

"What sort of a job!" The woman laughed. "Well, it's not hard work for those that are cut out for it but the hours are a bit irregular. I suppose you're normal sexually?"

"I don't know," Marylin whispered. "I've never tried. But I couldn't—I couldn't do anything like that—I'd hate it."

"Pity! It's not that bad, you know. I just close my eyes and think of all the money I'm saving and it's all over before you've time to notice."

"I think it's horrible!"

"Well, there's no accounting for taste, I suppose. I could have used you. A lot of the customers are getting a bit jaded and dissatisfied. They'd have a go at anything outlandish or bizarre. They'd pay well for someone like you."

"I know—an ape."

"There's no harm in being an ape, dear. None of us can help our parents. Some of the customers here are worse than apes, I can tell you. No monkey ever gets up to the tricks they do."

"Please," Marylin begged. "I'd rather not hear about it. Don't tell me any more."

The hostess waddled to the door, then turned and looked at Marylin archly.

"You want to get some practice in, love," she said. "If you want to keep that man of yours out of here. You think about it."

Five minutes were barely over when Shale, as good as his word, came running down the stairway whistling. He smacked the brothel keeper heartily on the bottom and put his arm around Marylin.

"We're in luck," he said. "Do you know what I saw from the window?"

"No, what?" she replied.

"My girls must be getting slack," the brothel keeper grumbled. "What were you doing looking out of the window? Who did they give you up there?"

"No idea." He shrugged. "There was someone on a bed. I never looked at her. How do we get out to the parking place?"

"The back door."

"Good!" He hurried Marylin in the direction she had indicated.

"Guess what?" he whispered when they were out of earshot. "I might have known where Kantor would park his craft. It's right here on the brothel parking strip!"

"Is there anyone in it?" she asked.

"There soon won't be," he promised, cocking his pistol.

But there was no need for weapons. The door to the craft

was open and the retractable gangway to the ground in place. The ship was empty. The crew had either perished in the skirmish with the Gromwold police or they were still out looking for Kantor. They climbed aboard and Shale checked the fuel supplies and medicaments, a task normally carried out by the auto-handlers at every airport. All was in order. The ship was stocked for a long voyage and everything was in its place.

"Can you drive it?" she asked.

"Drive?" He laughed. "I can pilot anything. Anyone can. Controls are standard and simple enough."

He pressed a button labeled "Gangway Retract" and the gangway retracted. There were two couches under a control panel so constructed that, as the pilot and couch were drawn backward against the hydraulic buffers as the ship accelerated, the panel followed and remained within arm's reach. Not that it was possible to raise an arm in the initial four hours of acceleration. In the first place, no one could lift a finger at 120 G (Universal), and in the second place, no one was ever conscious to try.

Shale handed Marylin her anti-G tablet with instructions to belt down and swallow. In five seconds, she was secure in a state of deep coma. He settled down himself, swallowed a tablet, set the automatic direction finger to Lemos and pressed the takeoff button. The elongating force field lifted the ship clear of the parking place and the motors opened up. Liquid anti-matter was fed into the combustion chamber and mixed with fifty percent matter in the form of kerosene. The resultant explosion produced a stream of high velocity auron particles and the ship set out at a steady rate of acceleration that would ultimately level off in four hours' time just below the speed of light. Thereafter the acceleration curve would be less steep and the pilot could return to consciousness. Full speed would eventually be maintained in a ship of the Kantor class at around 10L and movement about the cabin would then be possible.

Lemos was five light-years distant from Shorne and the journey would take six months.

As Marylin and Shale returned to consciousness, Marylin's first thought was that they were alone together. For six months there would be only the restricted space in a craft much smaller than Shale's company job which was now also on its way to Lemos with Phrix aboard. A small craft and Shale. Her second thought was the reason for their destination. Why Lemos?

"I'll get that horned goat Phrix, if it's the last thing I do," Shale told her.

Shale would kill Phrix, she thought, and the Publisher would accept Shale's appointment for the second time by assassination. It seemed a small thing to kill Phrix and Shale was not a little man. It seemed the wrong way to run a business, although the system had the precedent of long-standing tradition. Captains of industry and government achieved their success by virtue of their ruthlessness rather than their suitability as examples to the rest.

The universal standards, Marylin thought, were wrong. This was not the way to run a universe. Should not the meek have inherited it? Someone had once said they ought and would. She knew from her history teachers that it had not always been as bad as this. There had been a time, a few centuries ago, when an organization needed some ethical standards at least to maintain its own coherence and efficiency. Industrialists and their staffs had once been subject to the same laws as the ordinary consumers. That had been before B91. Since then, industrial empires had grown and government had in the end become a function of one department of the commercial consortia. First from Asgard itself and then, as the Presidents—the Publisher, the Chemist, and Metallurgist, the Engineer, the Comestible, the Krupp—became more remote, power had been relegated to the sales managers, with the city fathers on individual planets exercising some control over the less privileged classes. Commercial ethics had long been an anachronism. Supply always balanced demand; all production was fully automated and self-servicing, and business functioned by virtue of its machines' efficiency. There was no need for staffs to concern themselves at all, except from habit and a consciousness of being on the payroll. Sales managers fought for markets that were already supplied and serviced in any case. Maintenance men, a relic of the old trade union system, tended machines that were self-servicing and never failed. Accountants supervised vast areas of electronic brain that always balanced its final budget. And now, cruising in a bewilderment of indecision, unemotionally aware that evolution had passed the point of stagnation and was well on its way to one of its periodic cycles of retrogression, was Phrix, the nearest thing to a conscience the universe had found for itself in a brace of millennia. And Shale was all set to kill the conscience of the universe.

"Shale," she asked, calling to her aid every ounce of the A Factor the machines had once assured her that she had, "aren't you setting your sights too low?"

His mouth was still drawn back in an ugly loop due as

much to his own thoughts as to the gravitational forces acting on him. Conversation was difficult, but possible.

"Carve him to pieces," he said. "Cut his lobes off."

"It isn't big enough," she persisted.

"What's bigger?" he wanted to know.

"The Publisher," she said. "You are too big to be just advertisement manager. The Publisher would recognize that if you told him."

"The Publisher's on Asgard," he said. "Phrix is on Lemos. I can get Phrix. Can't get to the Publisher. Can't go to Asgard."

"Why not?" she asked.

He was so overcome with the enormity of the suggestion that he reached up with difficulty and set in motion the slowing down process before they had even reached the light barrier. The question itself was an affront to custom and an affront to custom was the rank, lewd taste of indecency on the taste buds of human rectitude.

"No one goes to Asgard!" he said.

"You are not just anyone," she protested. "You are Shale. Nothing is too big for you. The menials follow custom blindly. A real archexecutive makes his own."

He savored the fine sentiment of the compliment, considered and digested it. He found it much to his liking. He was not the first to take the image of his greatness from the looking-glass world of a woman's eyes. But century-old inhibitions are hard to counter even face-to-face with mirrored greatness.

"No one goes to Asgard," he repeated, with somewhat less conviction than before.

"Is it guarded?" she asked.

"No. I don't think so. It's just a question of what a man does and doesn't do. You've done a lot of tweeting about badness. Well, that's bad. Doing what one doesn't do."

"You're the biggest barstard in the universe," she quoted him a little primly. Suddenly, he laughed.

"It's right," he said. "So I am."

He managed to turn slightly on his side. The restraining forces had diminished to 2G (Shorne).

"What a brain you've got!" He grinned. "Why shouldn't I go to Asgard? Why shouldn't I kill the Publisher instead of Phrix and take over the whole empire?"

"I didn't mean that!" she protested.

"I did," he said. "Baby—we're going to Asgard!"

"Do you know the way?" She hoped, now that she had prodded his ambition and seen it go bounding over new and unintended horizons, that he did not.

"It's not difficult," he said. "No craft is programmed for Asgard, but its sun stands out well enough. We can go on automatic to the outer periphery and manual from there. Once you're out of the galaxy there's only Asgard before you come to the next and that's a lifetime's journey."

"Then we're going?"

"You bet we are," he said. "It's not much further than Lemos. We'll head first for Zanto. That's the last planet programmed in the galaxy, on the very edge of the periphery. We should be there in about five months. Another five and we should be orbiting Asgard."

"We shall be together for ten months, Shale!"

"You won't know about it," he said. "Even a third-rate, standard, production-line model like this crate of Kantor's is wired for sensivation. How else would you pass the time, jog-trotting across the universe? You could put yourself in coma, of course, but what a waste of time! And time's a thing none of us have got enough of to waste. A few hundred years and where are you? Sensivation for the first five months and a few good long sessions after that, once we're on course."

She covered her disappointment as best she could and, as the ship leveled out at an even speed, Shale uncoupled the wires and navel suction pads from the little black box. They extended simply in long spirals to the bunks.

"Bed down," he ordered, "and bare your navel!"

"I don't know that I want to," she protested.

He snapped open the buckle to her belt, opened her smock and clamped the cup in place.

"What do you want?" he asked. "Sex, sadism, romance, adventure, violence or a happy manipulation of symbols as they come?"

"I'll take the symbols," she whispered.

"Quite right," he approved. "I always do that. Of course, to me, symbols are sex-symbols in any case, but it's more fun to watch and wait for it without knowing what's coming."

"It must be," she said, sighing.

She hesitated for a moment as Shale busied himself with the dials that, in any case, adjusted themselves correctly after the initial choice indicator had been set. There was something she wanted to say that was very important to her now that her symbols were about to be manipulated. She needed very much the help of her A Factor.

"Shale," she asked, diffidently, at last, "do you like me?"

"Of course," he said, easily, the dials now set and his finger hovering over the button for the course to Zanto.

"Could you love me, do you think?"

"Love?" he asked. "What is happening inside that tiny brain of yours? What's love? You don't seem to know the meaning of the word. You love a good beano, an orgy, sex, women in general, a fight if you're winning it. You don't love a person."

"No," she sighed, "I suppose you don't."

"Right," he said, pressing the button and taking a phial from the dispensary cabinet. "We're all plugged in to Free Symbols and course is on Zanto. All you have to do now is swallow the coma tablet and wake up when we get there."

"I suppose," she said, "if you like a person, you could love him—or her—too?"

"Are you going to swallow your pill and get to sleep?" he asked. "Or am I going to bring the ship around and find you've suffocated when I wake up? We ought to be well away before the auto-pilot brings her around on course. That can be quite a strain if you're awake. You shouldn't change destination in flight."

"I wondered," she said. "I was talking to that woman in the"—she hid her face for a moment and the hair roots on her chin tingled—"in the brothel. She told me some things I didn't know before."

"I'll bet she did." He grinned.

"Shale," she asked.

"What is it?"

"Do you ever feel you want something outlandish and bizarre?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he grumbled. "Get outside that capsule before I ram it down your throat."

"Yes, Shale," she sighed and slept. The sequence of the symbols that crowded in on her induced dreaming and provided for her a life, synthetic, but nevertheless her own, and thus every bit as important as any other life, remained forever her secret. There were none even interested enough to guess at what they might have been, still less their origins or the Freudian means of their projection. But, as they lay together on adjacent bunks and Shale's lips slowly drew back across his white teeth in a wolfish, Dracula-like grin, Marylin's coarse, wrinkled, downy features relaxed into a soft smile and the corners of her long, lipless, ape-like mouth turned up and the lips parted. They made no sound but they were shaped into the beginnings of a sibilant. "Sh" for Shale.

The ship swung slowly around and headed for Zanto and the outer periphery. It began to accelerate sharply. Soon, it was shuddering through the light barrier and rushing forward in conformity with good Newtonian principles to reach

its final leveling-off speed. Under pressure that would have crushed anyone in the waking state, with the buffers under their couches depressed to their fullest extent, Shale and Marylin slept. Marylin, it was safe to assume, dreamed of Shale and Shale, in five months, would have time to dream of half the women in the universe. Their eyes would seem to open at the end of it all, with a sense of the passage of time suspended. They would be conscious only of having slept and dreamed a night's long dream. No one is bored in space travel, not even on the occasional intergalactic journeys. The bodily functions are inhibited and even without the normal antigeriatric injection, the body ages at about the speed of a diamond in a vacuum.

## X

LIMSOLA WAS playing chess with Hamrod, the Chemist's P.A. The two computer lenses scanned the board, concerned with a hundred thousand alternatives and probabilities. Hamrod depressed his button and a black pawn moved. Limsola's computer countered with the queen. It seemed at first that the incredible had happened. A circuit failure. The queen was obviously in jeopardy; even Hamrod could see that. He bit the fingers of both hands at once and rocked himself with excitement. No one had won a game of chess in centuries. The computers invariably played to a stalemate.

"Take the queen!" he whispered. "Take the queen!"

He pressed his button with a trembling, nail-nibbled finger. It was not to be. The scanning eye swayed to and fro above the board almost as if the vast brain in miniature were shaking its head. No bigger than a matchbox, it had seen through its opponent's ruse. It ignored the queen and countered with an ingenious trap of its own. It would have needed twenty-four standard moves and counter moves before the object of its strategy became apparent, but Limsola's player was at once aware of its opponent's intention, avoided the obvious, and retreated. Machine play is always god-on-high above its operator's head.

"I don't know why we bother," Hamrod grumbled fretfully.

"Darts?" she asked brightly. He sighed.

"I remember, years ago," he said, "when three in a bed used to win. With three in the double-top every time you want it, we had to scrap that rule. First away wins every time. Sometimes I think our machines are too good."

"You can go first," she promised.

"No." He yawned. "I'm tired. Far too tired for darts. Let's

have another injection and go to bed. I shouldn't be surprised if one day we find these damned machines go on playing after we've left them. There's no reason why they shouldn't press their own buttons if they wanted to."

"None at all," she agreed. "All the industrial one's do."

"There's only one thing," he grumbled, "that we haven't mechanized, even if it is mostly chemistry now. Slip your things off, there's a good girl."

"I'm engaged then?" she asked.

"Of course you are," he snapped. "Now old Mule's dead and out of the way, I'm not letting you go to one of the others; you're far too good for them. What did they do with Mule, by the way?"

"No one seemed to bother," she told him. "I didn't want to leave him just lying there by the lagoon. He was quite a nice old boy. I had him dissolved and poured him into the water. I thought he would have liked that. He turned a shade of dark blue."

"We're none of us getting any younger," Hamrod said gloomily. "I suppose we've all got to go some time. I don't think that I want immortality anyway. Things just go on and on and you don't notice anymore. Of course, it's different now I've got you. How old are you, by the way?"

"I was only imported a few years ago," she confessed. "I'm genuinely young. I'm thirty."

"Wonderful," he breathed. "I didn't think there was a girl on Asgard under a hundred and fifty. The supply seemed to dry up some years ago. I think no one bothered to order any more. Mule must have been more enterprising than I was. You're a Salumi, I suppose?"

"I certainly am not!" she told him indignantly. "I come from a very old Ruling Race family of professional mistresses. We inject Salumi genes for our looks, but a good mistress needs conversation and intelligence as well. Salumis are only bed-mates."

"You're intelligent too?" he asked, surprised. "It must be very dull for you. None of the higher executives have an I.Q. above a hundred or they wouldn't be higher executives. What do you do with your intelligence in your spare time?"

"I find my way around," she said. "I've achieved Asgard and the P.A.'s while I'm still really young. Hardly anyone has done that before."

"And now that you're here," he asked, "what now?"

She left the board with the king in check and walked to the window looking out over a rose garden where an autogardner was busy pruning. The long hill sloped down in a

profusion of flowers and colors to the chain of blue lagoons stretching away into the misty distances. It was Asgard as she had pictured it in the fantasies of childhood, but it was not all of Asgard.

"Where is the Valley of the Presidents?" she asked.

Taking advantage of her digression, he poked a bishop forward with a nervous finger. Her player let out a warning hoot and replaced the piece in its proper square. *Phit! Phit! Phit!* it hooted.

"Cheat!" she said.

"The Valley of the Presidents?" he asked awkwardly. "What ever put that in your head? We don't talk about the valley, you know."

"Why not?" she asked.

"It's one of the things one doesn't mention. No one ever bothers the Presidents."

"I don't want to bother them," she said. "I just want to know where they are."

She slipped her long, cool fingers around his neck. It was the neck of a young man, but the skin was dry and parched and the muscles were hard, like perished rubber. The neck of an old man that had kept its shape and poise and outward semblance of youth but had lost the suppleness that even the best of hormones could not preserve forever. His glands, however, responded to her touch and the adrenal-sympathico habit. He was happy when her fingers played across his chest and in the dead cave behind the solar plexus a moth-like youth flickered for a moment around the ghost of a tired flame. He was incapable of generating any desire himself but there was some sort of satisfaction in placating a manipulated urge in the second-hand relationship of mind to body.

"Slip off your things," he said. "I want to feel the touch of real youth against me."

"Where is the Valley of the Presidents?" she asked, wheedling his dry, but still active nerve ends with expert fingertips.

"Beyond the mountains," he groaned. "At the end of the last lagoon. You never see the mountains from here because of the mist. But no one ever crosses the mountains. It wouldn't be right. Not right at all."

On the bed that rocked gently on its underslinging, her lips traveled, gently breathing over the leathery, fibrous texture of his skin, and for the first time in years his limbs began to twitch and the muscles of his legs tightened, bracing against the rigidity of a stone-hard patella. He groaned a little and his agony was only partly arthritic. When she left

him, he was quite dead, but his passing had been happy and in the way he would have wished.

Limsola stroked the wispy, auburn hair back from the smooth forehead and kissed him gently on the dry lips before she covered him with the sheet. Hamrod was a still, frail, ancient, mummified sack of organs with no defect but their will to function any longer or draw in one more lungful of the flower-scented air of Asgard. Limsola was still young enough to feel unrewarding sentiments like sympathy and sorrow. She had the inbred intelligence of a long line of mistresses and lived more fully because she could still feel a sadness for insignificance and the petering out in Hamrod of five centuries of utter unimportance.

It seemed unnecessary to arrange for Hamrod to be dissolved. He was old enough to be practically insoluble. It would be some time, if ever, before anyone noticed his absence from the Club, and the Universal Chemical Works would function just as well without him. These days, the P.A.'s rarely used the Club at all, preferring seclusion with their mistresses and taking all deliveries through the supply tubes from the import bases. Sometimes they would cruise to the nearest lagoon and drift for a while. Occasionally there was some not very effective contact with the sales managers in the galaxies, but generally, at the great age they had all attained, they wanted a quiet life away from the universe, away even from Asgard, secure in the bosom of anyone understanding or well-paid enough to comfort them.

Limsola brought the jet-car out from the garage at the top of the incline leading from the white house down through the gardens on the southern slopes of the hill to the lagoon below. With the wind blowing her long, flaxen, Salumi hair, she cruised down to the water and along the shore in the direction of the misty cloud bank that should hide the mountains at the end of the long chain of lagoons. The barrier before the Valley of the Presidents.

The water was as still and placid as ever, rippling only where a fish threshed its way on translucent flippers, singing throatily or hooting. There was no one drifting on the lagoon nor lying on its banks and the great houses of the P.A.'s on the low hills beyond were silent and apparently deserted. A few brightly colored birds glided, whistling across her path, and a sparrow-eater flicked a long hungry trunk, narrowly missing the emerald green and white flutter of its prey. Limsola sang a soft, haunting refrain, a folk tune from a far planet that had once been her home. Her voice was barely audible above the hum of the motors, but

the birds and fish fell silent, listening. They had never heard a human voice raised in song before. Music as an expression of joy had died with joy itself after the electronic revolution. The machines had made purer sounds and better sounds, even more musical sounds than the ancient instruments. The computers had composed with a mastery unequaled by any human musician. But when the machines came with their music and their musical scores, no one was any longer inspired to listen. Someone must create from within himself before another can respond, and there was nothing left to be created.

But still Limsola sang. There were corners of the universe where pockets of time had forgotten to catch up with the master clock, ticking away at the heart of the continuum. No instruments, of course. No musical scores. An odd folk-song sung, its words meaningless, its sentiments the primitive outpourings of an underdeveloped, forgotten people from somewhere near the beginnings of time, but still finding some chord of response in the heart of an odd Limsola on a fine morning.

As the mist cleared, the mountains loomed ahead. A vast, purple massif, with white snow on the jagged dragon's teeth of its summit, reaching upward to touch the eternal blue sky of Asgard's apparent ending. Behind the mountains would be the valley. The Valley of the Chemist, the Publisher, the Toymaker, the Couturier, the Builder, even, it was said, of the last of the Wordsmiths, left over from the days of the tale and the writings that no one read. The valley was the hub of the universe. The only possible goal for a girl like Limsola.

No great difficulty presented itself. Hamrod's jet-car was the best the Universe could offer and the only possible route became self-evident the nearer she approached to the foot of the mountains. There was a pass running from the lagoon along the course of an ancient stream, disappearing now and again into folds of the landscape, to emerge higher up and wind between crests until it reached the summit as a thin white line etched into the distant hazy blue of the heather. There had even, at one time, been a road. It was now a wide, evenly ascending gradient overgrown with vegetation that parted in the jet-stream like water before the bows of a ship. The brightly flowering bushes of the lowlands gave way, in time, to broom and thorn and then up through mountain ash, highberry bushes and wildglocken and out on to the multicolored heather, the foraging ground of the grass-hopper-like, wingless bees of Asgard. Limsola's jet soared over all obstacles without difficulty and soon the heather

thinned out and there was no further vegetation. A smooth, rocky road, carved out of the mountain, followed the course of the ancient stream that apparently dated from the days when road surfaces had been important, before the discovery of the anti-matter engine and the auron stream. Limsola wondered vaguely how anyone had reached Asgard before the auronic revolution, but concluded that there had been people, indigenous or colonizers, before the presidents and their assistants arrived and found it more desirable than any other planet in the galaxies. Whoever the original people had been, they would not have survived long under the dominance of the industrial heads of the Ruling Races.

There were golden-white clouds resting on the summit of the mountains, but a warm upward current of air caused them to part, curling and billowing at either side of the pass. It was in fact this curling of the mist that led Limsola on the right course over the summit, since the road itself, after winding out of the heather, was soon lost under the snow. She sailed on through the cleavage in the mist and soon she was at the top. Below her was the Valley of the Presidents. It was a vast panorama of river, hill and forest, with a dot of white here and there among the trees—the houses of the great men themselves. The downward course of the road was now plainly marked with giant pillars set at quarter-mile intervals, each surmounted by a scarlet eagle. There were no guards, nor any sign of armies. The only barrier between the valley and the outside world was the ancient taboo. One does not do what is not done. In the end it is always a woman who challenges the immutability of any taboo. Limsola felt no reproach in the stares of the scarlet eagles. She continued to sing softly to herself as she scudded down over the snow. She had reached the hub of the whole universe.

## XI

It was fortunate for Shale that the metabolic rate in hybrids is considerably more rapid than in true humans. When Marylin awoke from her coma, they were already in orbit around a planet and slowing rapidly to land. Shale was still sleeping deeply and no amount of pummeling would wake him. It was at times like these that the significance of a good A Factor in the I.Q. ratings assumed paramount importance. Bewildered and excited as she was, and inexperienced in the operation of spacecraft or in the workings of the minds that had once commissioned, built and stocked them, her inborn intelligence applied itself logically to the problem con-

fronting her. While still slapping Shale's face and sobbing in a frenzy of desperation at her own ignorance and inadequacy, a still, small voice spoke somewhere in the imperturable regions of her hybrid psyche. "Where there is dope there is antidote," it said. Even her subconscious had begun to express itself in the current slogans. She was puzzled at first at the import as well as at the origin of the voice. But then, in a sudden flash, she understood. The dispensary. Stocked by automatic handlers at the ports of call, the medicines were arranged in standard, easy-to-recognize form for the benefit of the uninitiated. In the year of grace A.E. 30,968, no one was initiated to any noticeable degree.

The bottles were labeled, "Short sleep—one tablet for each hour. Swallow immediately before depressing control," "Long sleep. Comas up to five years—see instructions on blue bottles for duration," "Comas up to five hundred years —see red bottles on lower shelf." There was a rack of blue bottles labeled, "Large tablet—five month coma. Take one small tablet for each additional week required." Above the profusion of bottles, the Publisher's point-of-sale display panel flashed its message:

COMAS FOR ROAMERS
DAGWOOD'S DEEP SLEEP SINKS YOU DEEPER

Each rack contained a second row of yellow bottles all bearing the single word "antidote." They were aerosol containers emitting a fine spray for inhalation, since the sleeper was naturally unable to swallow a tablet. Marylin brought the bottle to Shale with difficulty, due to the rapid deceleration of the ship, and pressed the ejector nozzle. Shale awoke almost immediately, considerably refreshed after his five month sleep.

"We're there!" Marylin told him. "We're orbiting Zanto!"

Shale threw off his sleeping harness and rose almost to the roof before he had time to grasp one of the anchoring straps on the cabin floor. He steered himself to a porthole and looked down on the planet below. What he saw there was no sight for a man newly awakened from a peaceful slumber.

"That's not Zanto!" he shouted. "That's a penal planet. Someone's been tampering with the controls."

"How could they?" Marylin asked.

"Remote control," he snapped. "There are ways of doing it if you're sure the pilot's asleep. I've grounded competitors myself on uninhabited planets in the days when I had competitors."

He pulled himself to his bunk and threw the main switch from auto to manual, cutting off any possibility of further outside control.

"Get back on your couch," he ordered. "We're going up!"

"What is a penal planet?" she asked.

With the situation now under control and the ship responding to his will and fancy, he was in the mood to humor her curiosity.

"Want to see?"

Marylin nodded and he brought the ship down through the atmosphere to where the surface now showed clearly on the large scanner screen above the bunks.

"You see," he pointed out. "The first thing I noticed, even at a glance through the porthole. No vegetation. There's something in the air, an acid most likely. It can't support life in any form. The convicts wear helmets and suits and they're fed liquids through a tube from a thing they call an alimentary reservoir. There they are! You can see them now on the side of the mountain, hewing at the rock. That's what they do all day. Move the mountains, a piece at a time, down into the valleys, with only hand tools to do it with. There's the flagellator—the machine that keeps them at it. If they stop, it flogs them. It's got a wallop you can feel even through a space suit. There's the alimentary reservoir coming up now on stilts that look like spiders' legs. They're plugging the tubes into their suits and they must be pretty hungry, the way they're all milling around to get to it. They don't even notice the flagellator getting them in line. . . . It's a good thing you woke me up in time."

"How long a sentence do they get?" she asked, "and what are they there for?"

"Industrial crimes mostly," he told her. "Sales managers encroaching on another's preserves. Representatives poaching on someone else's territory. Some of them, I expect, got in the way of someone else's promotion. As for how long—they're there for life, but none of them are likely to live long, so it's always a fairly short sentence. There's no way off a penal planet."

"How awful!" she exclaimed.

"The machines—the warders—get you out with one of their space suits and then blow your ship up. It's part of the drill. No one lands there except by mistake. You drop the convicts by parachute in the assembly area."

"Couldn't you help them?" she asked.

"Help them?" He was genuinely shocked. "Of course not. They're criminals. I couldn't interfere with law and order."

"It might have been us," she said. "It nearly was!"

"I don't know what 'might have been' has to do with anything," he grumbled. "They're down there and we're up here. That's all there is to it. I couldn't do anything even if I wanted to."

"But Shale," she begged, "one of them might have been you. You said they were there for industrial crimes. You must have done something like that yourself sometime."

"Of course I have," he said with a sigh. "But I won. It's only a crime if it doesn't come off. Every rung in the ladder to fame is a piece of someone else's ambition. They're the criminals—the ones that got walked on—not the chap who got to the top. That's what life's all about, isn't it?"

"I wish you would try and take at least one of them off," she sighed.

"My dear girl, I can't!" he said.

"No," she sighed, thoughtfully. "You can't. Only the Publisher can really alter anything. I'm glad we're going to Asgard."

"This is Phrix's doing," he decided. "Something on my own craft recorded that we were following him and that we had turned off in the direction of Asgard. He fed all the data into a probability computer and it reported that we were the most probable people on board. So he knew I was still alive. Perhaps he worked it out for himself. His mind's a sort of probability computer, anyway. It must be Phrix. He was the only one near enough in space to reach our direction setting by remote control. I wish this ship was geared for it and I could reach him now. I'd land him in the Gromwold volcano. But I couldn't anyway. Part of Phrix is always awake."

"Are we far off course?" she asked.

"Not far, fortunately. All the penal planets are in the outer periphery. I don't know which one this is, but it won't matter. It's already been recorded in the flight control. I need only reset for Zanto."

They strapped themselves down again on the couches and swallowed an hour's sedation. When they awoke there were no stars ahead of them, but only the faint glow of distant galaxies. That and one single, blue luminous pinpoint of light, less than ten light-years distant. Their destination—the sun of Asgard.

## XII

PHRIX, WHO WAS incapable of sorrow as an emotion, was nevertheless able to experience a kind of intellectual regret. He was again at the three-way meeting point of his triple

mind. Alone in Shale's spacecraft, already in orbit around Lemos, he allowed his thought trains to dwell on a problem that in its basic elements was as old as the inhabited universe itself: how far it is justifiable to manipulate evil and turn it against itself. Will two wrongs cancel each other out and leave a right, or will they result only in a negation? If one is hounded by an exponent of unethical practices and one defeats him by a further unethical practice, is this poetic justice, or no justice at all? Can it, in any case, be the result of logical calculation? A true Groil can operate only in conformity with his own and universal logic. The switching of Shale's spacecraft to a penal planet was justifiable, expedient, but was it in any true sense logical? The penal planets were one of the evils he had set himself out to eliminate. Where, then, should Shale be? Immobilized. What could immobilize Shale better than a penal planet? Nothing. He conjured up an eidetic image of Shale in a heavy space suit hewing at the rocky surface of a dead planet. The vision gave him little pleasure.

*Criminals need not be deterred,* he thought. *They can be treated chemically or lobes cut off. Dates from days when leniency was seen to fail. Universe went back to deterrent. Now—small injection—make any man anything.*

Phrix was welcomed with genuine delight by the editors on Lemos. The planet was already humming with rumors of a new approach to publishing: papers that carried news items independent of advertisements; copy designed to induce a scanner to read further than a headline—and, having read, to be influenced in his opinions by those of the Publisher. It was heady stuff. What opinions did the Publisher have? What opinion did anyone have, if it came to that? No one quite knew, but opinions could be generated in any direction and in any field. The whole staff was agog with receptivity and prepared to channel every ounce of opinion-molding material along any path a guiding mind might direct. Phrix needed only to explain his idea and everyone would subscribe to it. It was true that machines composed all the copy, but that was not an insuperable obstacle. Machines could be programmed. They would express any opinion forcefully, or with tact or by innuendo, exactly as they were instructed to do. Editors had always been much the same.

The whole publishing empire was pregnant with resolve. Its great womb was widening and something was hovering somewhere on the very brink of conception. Unfortunately, no one quite knew what it was. Only Phrix. And Phrix saw

the universe and all its frailties as if outlined in soft pencil on a drawing board. Given an eraser, he could have wiped out the whole cosmos and redrawn it with an eye to perfection. But somehow the nature of the eraser itself eluded him. Was it violence, subterfuge, evil against evil, destruction of machines and a return to handicrafts? Was it a physical or a mental thing? Both probably. Did the mental precede the physical or vice versa? Think and act or act and then think? The more he considered his drawing board view of the universe, the more his thoughts turned to Far-Groil.

Would he not be justified in limiting the problem to the few remaining members of his own race and a distant planet called New America in orbit around Barnard's Star? It should be easy to produce copy with no more far-reaching object than the evacuation by the Ruling Races of Far-Groil. A rumor of a new virus or a weakness in the planet's crust would achieve that object in a matter of months. And then the Groils could return, look again for the lost arts, and live together in the contemplative, happy anarchy of thirty millennia ago.

Why not? The Ruling Races could then have the universe to themselves. Cut each other's throat, send each other to penal planets, carouse and debauch themselves in an eternal cosmic orgy. Why should he, Phrix, a Groil, concern himself with the universe? A man who watches a crocus flower and wonders and thinks is more use to evolution than a host of conquerors. Or is he? If conquerors bring peace, as they sometimes do, the crocus may flower untrodden by marching feet. But if there were no conquerors, there would be no conquered and no need for armies in the first place to set their great feet on the real miracles pushing their petals shyly and unnoticed between the blades of grass.

"Tool of Destiny," the central intellect insisted.

"Far-Groil," the left-hand lobal area whispered nostalgically.

In the vast, sprawling, towering edifice of concrete and glass known for obscure reasons as the Fleet, the editors gathered. They gathered every day in the Fleet, watching the machines ticking, composing, proofing and printing, bundling, packing and loading the transporters. But this time it was different. Without a single memo from the mustering Role Taker they all made their way to the conference room and took the places indicated by the chief cybernetic chairman, a machine known as the Beaver. They sat with their recording notebooks on the table before them and waited. A dispensing trolley brought coffee and chew-gum. Not a

single man or woman accepted the hallucinogen; for once they preferred to remain in the waking world, a world that was about to offer them what a dream image never did, the opportunity in some way to control it. The opportunity was somewhere without. They sat and watched for it to knock. The door opened and Phrix came in.

He took his place, as the machine indicated, at the head of the long table. The junior editors looked down from the screens of a thousand view panels ranged around the walls, their faces unmoving and their mouths parted over their notebooks, hanging from leather straps around their necks. The News Assimilator trundled to his side and extended its microphone on a long flexible neck, the circuits of its analytical brain ready to digest, abstract, evaluate and finally disseminate. Phrix looked straight ahead, his eyes far away, seeing no one, but conscious of every thought.

"I am a Groil," he said.

"Yes," they chorused.

"Groils are the best of servants," he continued, speaking by rote the ingrained philosophy of his central brain. "A servant without a master can never change the course of great events."

"You are the master," they told him.

"No," he said. "Machines are master."

The long neck of the News Assimilator arched and straightened again in what, for the want of a better word, could only be described as a shrug. Its scanner pivoted to take in the length of the table as if probing the editors for possible reaction and then returned again to hover dutifully by Phrix.

"We are the editors," they said. "We control the machines. Machines do not think."

"Do you?" he asked.

"We are here," they pointed out. "We are here to think whatever you tell us to think. Machines cannot do that. Machines are programmed. Tell us what we have to do."

"I am a Groil," he said. "I cannot be the master. The master, everyone's master, is the Publisher. The Publisher must decide and I shall follow."

The News Assimilator retracted its microphones and switched itself into a state of quiescent awareness. The editors doodled various nonsense rhymes into their respective recorders. The juniors on the screens yawned. Destiny had crept in on the paws of a mouse, amplified in the hollow echo of the mind, for a moment, into the sound of clattering hooves.

"You will send a signal to the Publisher?" someone asked.

"I shall go to Asgard," Phrix announced.

The chamber came to life again. The News Assimilator reactivated itself and flashed a warning "Top-priority" red light. The editors recorded their first note in five hundred years: "Asgard" they noted in unison. Slowly, the excitement subsided and they turned their heads as one in his direction. Their faces registered a dawning comprehension. They had been fooled by a Groil. Only the News Assimilator continued to flash a warning light in total exaggeration of the situation's newsworthiness.

"No one goes to Asgard!" the editors told each other glumly.

"Nevertheless," Phrix announced to a shocked, uncomprehending chamber, "that is where I am going."

He rose and left the meeting. It was his first great decision. He had never in his life made such a decision before and he felt much better for it.

The door had scarcely closed behind him before the automatic copy-writers were clicking the major news item of his departure into the texts of the better advertisements for setting in every paper distributed by the publishing empire. To human eyes, it hardly seemed that the announcement, breathtaking as it was, warranted the urgency of its dissemination, but the machines, of course, knew best.

"Ortons Auto-programmers ensure smooth control. Avoid manual interference. Phrix's fingers spell disaster."

"Good pilots brake with Rogers Retro-motors—Phrix breaks moral standards of tradition. Don't go to Asgard—go to Rogers."

"Machines are best. No return to manual programs. Let sleeping logs die."

The chief editors and junior editors, the lead writers, cub reporters and copy-writers watched as the automatic proofreaders checked the sheets. They were vaguely troubled by the outcry from their servants. Machine protest focused attention on machine control. A dim awareness of human fallibility grew among editors who had never edited, among reporters who had nothing to report, and copy-writers whose moving fingers had neither writ nor were ever likely to move on.

"It will need new programming," someone murmured, his eyes on the Orton ad.

"The programmers are automatic," someone else pointed out, uneasily.

"The programmers that program the machines that make the programmers are automatic too."

"And the machines that program the programmers of the machines that . . ."

"Somewhere there must be a man!"

"The Publisher!"

"The Publisher!" they all chorused, vastly relieved, although no one really believed in the Publisher either. Asgard was a long way off and the papers were pouring from the presses on to the distribution conveyors. Spacecraft, loaded to capacity, were leaving at regular intervals. Fortunately, the machines were limited by the very conservatism of their own motivation. They could operate only along predetermined channels. Hardly anyone in the universe would realize the implications of Phrix's visit to the Publisher and the bulk of the circulation would be jettisoned in deep space in the usual way. The programming of the Auto-Audit Bureau of Circulation was concerned, as ever, only with statistics.

No one but a Groil could, however, unravel the vast complex of machine production and trace its motivation to its original man-designed source. And only from its source could the reprogramming, that would eventually reorinetate the machine copy-writers, begin.

Fortunately, Phrix could inhibit the need for sleep and, as his craft accelerated, he sat stoically at its manual controls with the sun of Asgard glowing, a bright blue blot on his screen. Destination: the Publisher. As he watched the apparent mass of the star slowly increase, he was conscious of humanity at the isthmus of evolution; the flow of its past behind it, the waters welling at the delta, where one fork only would spill into eternity and the others silt up in a waste of mammoth and dinosaur bones. The Publisher would be there, floating on an impervious copy of the Lemos *Galactic Monitor*. Pointing the way.

*Thank God for the Publisher,* he thought. *Or thank the Publisher for God.*

## XIII

THERE WAS NO RAIN on Asgard, only a light snow drifting very occasionally down on to the summits of its mountains. The water from its seas and lagoons was absorbed by the porous rock of their basins and banks, sank down into the earth and was forced up again by internal pressures to spout in fountains from the hilltops, filtered by sands and fortified by minerals. It ran down again to the seas and the porous rock soaked it up again and spread its moisture to feed the roots of all the flora of Asgard.

Marylin's first impression of the landscape was a kaleidoscopic variation of subdued colors. Every bush and tree was a permutation of the shade of its neighbors and no two blossoms were identical. In the light of other suns, the flowers might have seemed brightly colored and garish, but the blue, hazy glow of Asgard's parent permeated the spectrum and leveled all extremes to a liquid, pastel, tranquil homogeneity.

There were low hills, lagoons, rivers, a ridge of mountains and a deep, lush valley, lying well below sea level and thus more extensively watered by the porosity of its bedrock. Then came more mountains, plain and hill and tundra, lagoon again, and finally sea. At a river mouth, there was an airport and administrative buildings, but no towns anywhere. Along the lagoon chain, a few white houses blinked a flash of blue sunlight from their windows and in the deep valley an occasional roof of some vast palace showed pale green, among the darker shades of the trees.

"Puzzle to find the Publisher," Shale yawned, heavy from a recent three weeks' sleep. "He's somewhere down there, but we don't want to tangle with anyone else. There may be guards."

"The machines always spoke of a valley," she said. "The Valley of the Presidents."

"Did they now?" He whistled.

He brought the ship down cautiously within range of any guns Asgard might have and circled the airport. No one hailed them with either a challenge or landing instructions and no guns fired.

"No sign of life," he said.

"Those buildings"—she pointed to where the white foam of the emptying river troubled for a short distance the unending calm of the waveless sea—"they control the airport. It's an automatic station; they are all shaped like that. An array of pipes from a funnel structure on the landing ground, a large square central building for sorting and storage, and then a funnel in reverse curving down into the ground. It's a supply base for piped commodities."

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"The machines described everything very exactly."

He brought the craft down and hovered over the landing strip. A broad arrow flashed, indicating a landing bay at the mouth of the funnel, and transporter vehicles emerged.

"Don't land," she warned him. "If it's fully auto, we shall be shipped inside and sorted. The machines can't differentiate. We might come under the general programming of livestock."

"It's a thought," he agreed. "It's very much a thought. It would account for the absence of a challenge and no one shooting at us. I don't suppose anyone has come to Asgard for years, except perhaps mistresses. I wonder how they sort and pipe *them* to the Presidents."

"Direct to the palaces," I expect," she answered. "All the houses along the lagoons had landing strips."

"The question is," he considered, "which one is the Publisher?"

"Try the valley," she advised. "The deep valley over the mountains."

*Marylin is an asset,* he thought. *Every bit as good as Phrix.* He needed someone who could do his thinking for him. It was not an archexecutive's function to know things. An archexecutive was a selector of conflicting advices. Why know, when you could employ knowledge? Marylin, he decided, was as good as on the payroll. Assistant Advertisement Manager. And Phrix was as good as dead. He brought the ship around and headed for the valley.

Cruising over the lagoons, he was conscious of a complete reversal of his normal mental outlook and a cold twitching like a fish in his bowels. It was fear. He was overawed at the thought of meeting the Publisher physically, face to face. The primitive people of long ago must have felt something similar, standing alone before the altar in some empty, silent temple, waiting for their god to come down and speak to them and say, "Archexecutive, here am I!" Cub reporters feel much the same at their first orgy. No idea what to say and, more important still, no idea whom to say it to. How did one behave in the presence of the really great? Did one burst in, armed, and say "Hark, ye?" Or would the presence be seen only on an intercom, surrounded by bodyguards and aides? The primitive people of long ago had probably fallen on their knees or on their faces and, oddly enough, he felt disposed to do the same thing. But the right ethic was lacking, or the knowledge of what the right ethic was. Ethic was always custom and what he was about to do was not customary.

"There it is!" She pointed. "The valley!"

The valley was below, but there appeared to be no break in the trees. The blue and white and purple heather of the mountains merged into gold and red and brown scrub. The scrub was interspersed with short, flowering trees, becoming taller as the valley sloped down, until, at its base, there were only giant, multicolored oaks, beeches and elms hiding the contours of the ground beneath them. A river threaded its way somewhere among the trees, evidenced here and there

by a bright flash of reflected sunlight. The occasional pale green dots they had first identified as palaces were hidden by their present angle of approach.

"There's a road," she said. "Or a track. Leading down from the mountains. You can see it as a line in the mist."

He headed for the mountain crest and followed the course of the road; it was lost every now and again in the scrub but emerged lower down as a break in the even surface of the trees below. A moment later they saw the green roof of a palace in a clearing at the foot of the mountain. A giant staircase led down from its portals to the silver curve of the river and a postage stamp landing area, just large enough for a medium-sized craft of the Kantor category.

Unused to manual controls, Shale made several attempts to maneuver into the correct position for direct descent, but each time tangled with the branches of the surrounding trees. He blew up again and hovered.

"You try," he said. "The machines taught you everything else. They must have touched on ships."

"I couldn't!" she gasped.

"Get weaving!" he ordered.

"Shale," she begged, "only a few days ago in conscious time, I had never been outside my cell. I couldn't pilot a spaceship."

"Someone has to," he said, "and I can't. We're not going back now. Get her down."

He seemed to have lost his usual confidence with the knowledge of the Publisher's proximity below and his hands, she noticed, were shaking. Gingerly, she fingered the knobs and levers, the incessant voices of her teachers sounding in her head. "The ship automatically follows the direction of the joy stick. Draw upward, and it rises, downward and it sinks." She moved the stick experimentally and the treetops on the view-panel moved beneath her. She turned the ship around, took it up and down and finally brought it hovering directly over the landing strip.

"Great!" he shouted. "Down we go!"

She had remembered everything except how to stop and when the voices spoke again in warning, it was already too late. The ship struck the center of the hard stone paving; the extendable undercarriage took the strain, depressed its pistons to their fullest extent and then, elasticity overcoming momentum, rebounded like a rubber ball, turned, and crashed upside-down in the river. The current carried it away.

"Ejector hatch!" Shale shouted. "The one at the base!"

But Marylin was lying under the control panel with blood

oozing from a gash in her forehead and her hand trapped under the wreckage of her couch.

"Don't let them take me," she whispered. "Don't let them put me back in the cage."

Shale did not stop to think. He behaved exactly as he would always have done without considering that circumstances had changed and his relationship to Marylin along with them. He snapped the ejector harness around him, pushed the ejector button and sat tight. He was fired through the base hatchway and landed safely in a bed of forget-me-nots on the bank. There he collected his thoughts and wondered. He watched the ship rocked by the current and occasionally rolling over. The course of the river was beginning to slope more sharply downward on its bed of hard granite. A few rocks held the ship for a while, but it would eventually trundle along with the current downward toward the sound of a waterfall.

"I don't need her," he said out loud. "She's got me here. She'll be dead by now. Why should I care?"

He sat on a rock and shook the water from his ears with a crooked finger. He looked up at the palace. He should really be going up the stone steps. Ask where the Publisher lived. Shoot the guards, if any. Remarkable that no one had challenged him yet. He searched for the comforting feel of his pistol grip, snug in the shoulder holster. The ship had rolled over again and water was running in through the ejector hatch. He visualized Marylin now hanging by her trapped arm and pleading with hallucinatory guards while the water rose.

*What do I need with apes?* he asked himself.

Browbeat the Publisher, that was probably the best approach, establish himself as a leader, as ad manager. The Publisher would recognize talent when he saw it. Return to Lemos. Shoot Phrix. And then what? He would need another assistant, another encyclopedia.

*I'd better get her out,* he thought. *I suppose I do need her.*

It was an excuse, even to himself. He felt relieved when he was in the water, swimming toward the ship. Apart from the inertia of habit, he wanted to save her anyway, for reasons that were too obscure to warrant the effort of analysis. He felt a strange wave of affection for her as he bandaged her head after dragging her to the bank. She was lucid again and immensely happy with her head cradled in his arms.

"You're a tough old monkey," he said. "That skull's solid wood."

She smiled, looking up at him with deep-set eyes under the jutting bushy brows of her half-human cranium.

"Thank you, Shale," she said.

"It's nothing. My fault. Should never give a woman a gun or a spaceship. Bound to kill someone. Let's get going."

He hauled her to her feet and the trees and the stairs swam around and the ground rose to meet her. He put one hand on his hip and scratched his head with the other.

"You're a liability," he said. "I think you did that on purpose."

He picked her up and turned toward the stairway to the palace.

"Holy Asgard!" he said and put her down again. Something had caught his eye. The balustrade wall was overgrown with scarlet-leaved Asgard ivy but there was an inscription on one of the main pedestals. He pulled the trailing strands aside and brushed away the dust and dead fibrous strands.

"The Publisher," he read.

For the first time, he looked thoughtfully at the palace above him. The angles of the roof that showed on the river side were green with lichen and house-leek, the windows were broken and the great doors were hanging open from crumbling posts of some once-impervious stone.

"It's a ruin," he said. "It's a decaying, tumble-down ruin. It's as old as the mountains. Look at the steps! Who would build steps like that these days without an escalator?—and they're crumbling too. How did he get up from the landing strip? He must have walked!"

"Look!" she cried. "Statues! A long avenue of statues leading up to the doors!"

"What are statues?" he asked. "You mean those things in stone that look like someone or other?"

"Help me!" she said. "Help me up the stairs. It all looks like what was once called art. It's different from the concrete buildings we know."

He carried her up the stairs and her heart sang some of the tunes her teachers had sung as part of their history lessons in the cell at Lulonga. "Who is kind as he is kind and who can win my heart and mind," a voice whispered to a lilt, composed by an ancient, Before Evacuation king, 2,500 B.E., or thereabouts.

He set her down at the top of the stairs and she leaned on his shoulder as they walked along the avenue of broken statues to the crumbling doors. They flattened themselves against one of the posts and Shale drew his pistol.

"Stand back!" he shouted, his head turned sideways facing the entrance. "It's Shale and I'm coming in!"

His voice echoed in the great stone hall where the sunlight, flickering from the movement of the trees, streamed in angled spotlight beams through the broken holes in the grimed windows. The hall was an expanse of light and shadow, crumbling, mildewed walls, fluttering, tattered draperies, and huge paintings of vaguely discernible subjects.

"Publisher!" he shouted, "it's Shale!"

A flight of bats swept in a terrified rush of wings from the darkness above the beams and circled, blinded by the light, in the orbit of their own built-in radar control.

"Pictures!" she said.

"Is that what they are?"

"Yes!" she stated, positive. "It's art!"

"What do they advertise?" he wanted to know.

She shook her head; she was not sure whether they had really advertised anything or not. Her teachers had known they were painted but had seemed not to understand exactly why.

Their footsteps echoed on the stone floor and the dust of mildewed matting rose at every step. The bats returned to the seclusion of the high roof and they paused, listening. The only sound was the creak of the doors in the gently moving wind.

The corridor ended with a paneled wall where two further statues in some corrosive-resistant metal guarded a heavy door faced with what appeared to be beaten gold. Pistol poised, Shale pulled it slowly open. It groaned in protest. Beyond the door was a spacious room with windows in all the walls; those ahead looked out on to the trunks of the encroaching trees, those to the right afforded a long vista of the river, the valley descending, and the rising spray of the waterfall. The floor was of some durable wood constructed of solid blocks and there were a number of comfortable, large chairs of a plastic material, still intact. In one of the chairs, Limsola was sitting, cross-legged, and smoking a cigarette in a long, black holder.

"You are Shale," she said. "I heard you announce yourself."

"You," he asked incredulously, "*you* are the Publisher?"

"If I am," she asked, drawing at the cigarette, "shouldn't you be on your knees or something?"

"Are you?" he asked.

She exhaled a cloud of blue smoke and watched it rise, curling, to the high domed ceiling.

"No," she said.

"Where is he?" he asked. "And who are you?"

She rose slowly and smiled at him from under a flickering of long lashes.

"Who I am is not important," she said. "You would be Marylin, of course? We have met. I tuned you in on the view-panel. The Publisher sees everything."

"Where is the Publisher?" Shale demanded.

"I'm sorry about your head," Limsola smiled. "Did he do it?"

"No," Marylin denied emphatically. "It was an accident."

"Hm!" Limsola looked Shale over thoughtfully. "I'm surprised. I wouldn't put anything past him. A very husky male. Ad manager by assassination, I understand?"

"How do you know that?" he asked weakly.

"I'm a girl who knows things," Limsola told him. She smiled and put her arm around Marylin. "We should get to know each other better," she said. "We're the only girls in the Valley of the Presidents. Which means of course, there are no Presidents."

"No Presidents!" Shale asked in amazement.

"Does he always repeat what you say?" Limsola asked Marylin. "Or is he just a slow learner? I don't think he's got it yet."

"But—the Publisher!" Shale asked.

"Come," she said, "we'll try the visual. I'll show you the Publisher."

She led them across the room to a large chair, set apart from the rest and turned to face the windows looking down across the valley. The skeleton bones of two feet lay neatly side by side in front of the chair with the shin bones, tibula and fibula, fallen on either side. There was dust, thigh bones and a rib cage in the chair and a skull fallen sideways with its hollow eyes still looking out at the river. The river that like rivers everywhere seemed symbolically to bear all things away and not to notice it very much.

"The Publisher," she said.

"It's incredible!" Marylin whispered, while Shale, moved by some inner mechanism older than the electronic revolution, subsided slowly on to one knee.

"How old do you think?" Limsola asked. "A thousand years? Two thousand? Or much longer than that? He had a happy life here, I think. Wives or mistresses. There are beds upstairs with a heap of dust in each. A touch of a button would bring him anything he needed down the supply tubes. But his wants became less and less with the passing of the years. His mistresses died, one by one, and he never got around to replacing them. He sat all alone, waiting for

the last great boredom to overtake him. When it came, I would like to think the birds were singing in the garden that was there before the trees marched in."

"He left the universe just ticking over," Marylin said sadly. "With no one to guide its thought, it lost the power to think and when the machines took over, no one noticed. There was so little difference between men and machines in the end."

"What are you babbling about?" Shale asked, getting to his feet, dusting himself mentally and physically. "Machines haven't taken over anything. Who's ad manager? I am. Who controls them? I do."

"If you like to think so," Limsola said. "If you like to think a little further, you are Publisher too—or haven't you the vision for that?"

"What a girl you are!" he exclaimed, quite his old self again. "Of course I am! The whole empire's mine! I'm Publisher. I can do anything I want. And I know what I want right now!"

"Me, I expect," she said.

"You're right every time!" he agreed, putting an arm around her and detaching her from Marylin. "In the morning you can show me how the controls work and where they are and I'll exercise my authority and have Phrix boiled in oil. I'm going to really enjoy myself. But right now, I've had a long flight and I'm overcharged with surplus energy. Show me the bedchambers and the dusty beds."

"Shale—" Marylin began.

"Another time," he said. "Just now, I'm going to be busy."

Limsola paused at the door and looked back at Marylin, who was drooping disconsolately, her head bandaged and her knees unsteady.

"Marylin!" she said.

Marylin raised her aching head and met her smile with haunted, tear-welling eyes.

"I didn't make the rules, Marylin," Limsola said quietly. "It works like this, I'm afraid. But you have one consolation, of course."

"Yes?" Marylin asked.

"You've always wanted to change the rules. I watched you trying on the view panel. You can start today."

"How?" Marylin asked.

"It's all in there." Limsola indicated a steel door at the far end of the room. "You are the Publisher now," she said.

"Come along, girl!" Shale bellowed from somewhere above. "I'm shaking the bones out of the blankets."

"Remember!" Limsola said. "While I take care of Shale—Publish and be damned!"

Someone, Marylin remembered, had said the same thing once before. But in this context, it seemed an enigmatic injunction, if not totally pointless. She had seen only one newspaper in her life and that had been the Lemos *Galactic Monitor* Shale had picked up in Lulonga. She had no idea how newspapers were produced. It was, she had once learned, an automatic process. A commodity was produced in one area to meet the demand in another. There was a link between the producing factory and the Publishing House. The signal passed through a demand-stimulating copy-writer who was linked to a sub-editor with signals from the News Assimilator and the newsad appeared. All the newsads were set on a rotating drum and multi-billion copies of the paper appeared, were bundled, shipped down a conveyor to the delivery craft and ultimately either jettisoned in deep space or carried on auto-transporters to the auto-newsvendors. The function of the human editors, reporters, copy-writers and production personnel was as superfluous as that of Shale himself. No one sold advertising space. It was all sold everywhere already and the demand for it was as constant as the supply. Advertising itself was as illusory as the advertisement manager. It had been built into the system at some time when demands fluctuated and slipped out of step with supply. As long as the two always balanced, it failed even to oil the wheels.

The universe, Marylin thought, had not always been as highly organized and self-sufficient as it was now. A need for everything and everything for a need—the executives the only superfluity, ostentatiously manning the administrative buildings with nothing to administer, hurrying from office to office and floor to floor with papers in their hands, much as they had always done. Flying from planet to planet on urgent missions and charging it up to expenses. It had become a habit. No one faced up to reality. Executives with nothing to execute, administrators with nothing to administer. Renamed and conditioned as consumers, they would at least have given some meaning to the organized complex of production. But they refused to be just consumers with leisure on their hands and no inkling of what to do with it.

The active use of leisure, that was the basic need. She was thinking in slogans again. A new ethic. Something to learn, construct, discover. Given a goal, the rules of the game would evolve. Now, the rule was only the rule of the machine. Habit.

What should the game be? A rediscovery of the arts?

Beginning at the beginning in a world with only the original nucleus of a soul, let the cell divide into a germination of new arts, new philosophies, perhaps even new religions? The old never returned in quite the same form. It might not give meaning to existence but at least it would give the world something to do. It was far from established that existence had any intrinsic meaning in the first place, other than that with which man had endowed it. One gave to the cosmos any meaning one liked. It had no built-in significance of its own.

Who could show to men the jigsaw pieces of the universe again and set them to work piecing it together, each building his own individual picture with himself locked in some integral position between God and the surrounding Outer Darkness? It is the only game that has kept man out of mischief since the beginning of time and now they must play it again or sink back into a jungle more impenetrable than the Jurassic. Who could show them how? Only the Publisher.

Marylin wandered from room to room. Kitchens with a massive collection of delivery and blending tubes. Bathrooms with dry fountains and sunken pools silted with debris. Gymnasia. The tattered, mildewed remnants of a real ancient book library, and then back through the sliding steel door that still opened soundlessly at her approach. The nerve center of the Publishing Empire—the control room. An array of view-panels, a wilderness of knobs and buttons and, most important of all, simple instructions in the mode of operation etched into impermeable tablets above each relevant section.

*Phrix,* Marylin thought. *Phrix will know what to do. Phrix has called himself the tool of destiny. I can call for Phrix and ask his help.*

She pressed a button labeled "Locate Ad Manager," and instantaneously the interior of Shale's spacecraft appeared on the screen. She spoke into an obvious microphone that had extended itself on a flexible spiral.

"Publisher to Phrix," she said. "Come in please!"

She had meant to imply that he should come in verbally, but without a sign of acknowledgment, Phrix turned his back on her and walked out of the hatchway of the craft. In a matter of minutes he was standing beside her, calm, imperturbable, attentive. For a moment, she thought the Publisher's equipment had brought him there. Once there had been much talk of teletransportation, but her teachers had assured her it was a myth. Her teachers could never be wrong. Phrix had arrived by tangible means and the expert control of a large ship.

"Publisher?" he said.

He showed no surprise at finding a female hybrid at the hub of the universe, but she realized at once that Groils were incapable of such an emotion. Also, as a Groil, he would judge not her exterior, but her intellect.

"Is the universe a good place, Phrix?" she asked.

"Good?" he returned, as Shale might have done. "What is good? Good is relative. Depends only on standards set. Good is good for one, bad for another. Conformity to standards good for upholders of standard, bad for those who have other standards or no standards at all. Tell me your standard, Publisher, and I will tell you if universe is good or bad."

"By yours, Phrix?"

"I am a Groil. No good or bad. Do not see either. See only what is and what should be. All not what should be."

"What is wrong?"

"Machines. Organism tends to perfect itself. Destiny of organism. Not destiny of machine. Machine builds other machines. Machines program other machines. Programmers program programmers. Do everything better than has been done before. But no new thing. Cannot perfect itself. Organism cannot now program machine. Become less than machine. Wrong."

"Can you put it right, Phrix? Do you know how?"

"Yes."

"Give the organism a goal, give it something to do?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Give it illusion it controls universe. Feeling that it matters. Universe vast but not conscious of itself. Does not know own vastness. Human organism small but conscious of own identity. Must believe, because it knows itself, that it knows the universe too. Must feel more important because capable of feeling importance. Importance illusory word. Nothing has importance but that which can feel important. Must give human organism that. Importance."

"Can you do it through the editors?"

"Yes."

"The machines will be against you."

"No. Machines indifferent. Machines will do as programmed."

"But the programming is done by machines."

"And the programming of the programming."

"Where is the human element? Where did it all begin?"

Phrix walked through the door and out into the long room with the windows looking out to the river. He stood un-

moving by the bones of the Publisher, staring into the distance with eyes that were blank as a mole's. After a while, Marylin joined him and rather timidly touched his shoulder. Phrix neither turned nor focused the opaque irises of his unseeing eyes.

"Is there a man anywhere, Phrix?" she asked.

"There was," he said.

"Can you change the programming now?"

"Yes," he said. "I must go back to the beginning and start again."

"Where is the beginning?"

"The beginning," he said, "I have always known it. When one has all knowledge stored away, one does not call it up and look at it, until the time comes. All along I have known it and not known. It is my destiny. The beginning is on Far-Groil."

"Of course!"

"When they came from Earth with their machines, they showed them to us. We, the Groils, perfected them. It was we who began the programming and it was we who built machines to build machines. And now it is we, the Groils, who must return and begin all over again. We shall return to Far-Groil."

There was a burst of laughter from one of the rooms above, voices treading the notes of opposing scales, thrust and parry—and suddenly a silence more expressive than the creak of bed-springs.

"Shale?" he said.

"Yes," she sighed. "Shale."

"You are sad," he said. "I know of sadness."

"No." She smiled. "Not sad. I only want Shale to be happy. He has found what he wants. For me, that is enough."

"Small thing," he said. "Small sentiment. But basic thought must underlie all programming. We will instill much small sentiment in the papers."

"Go now!" she said. "Shale will kill you if he comes down now."

He rose, nodded, turned on his heel and walked slowly out through the door without a backward glance. Sadness to Phrix was the knowledge of things that were not as they should have been and happiness the application of the intellect to order. That and the thought of Far-Groil. Phrix was happy. He had never asked how she came to be there in the Publisher's chair. To Phrix, she was the Publisher.

Marylin watched the ship rise through the trees and disappear. After a while, Shale and Limsola passed the door, their arms linked. Shale, red-faced, disheveled, and in his

hearty way enjoying the power and prestige of a man of Asgard. Limsola, quiet, demure and misty-eyed.

*We shall never leave Asgard,* Marylin thought.

There had been no friends for Shale to leave behind because all men were enemies to an archexecutive. Only the illusion of power held any significance for him now and he had reached the top. He had no further interest in the universe outside.

"Playing at being a Publisher?" he called to Marylin in passing.

"Yes," Marylin admitted.

"Carry on the good work," he said laughing. "We're going to explore."

Limsola detached herself for a moment and slipped her arm around Marylin's waist.

"Do you mind very much?" she asked.

"No," Marylin said. "I don't mind. I quite like it here."

When they had gone she stroked for a long time the down on her cheek that tingled with the imprint of Limsola's lips. The crinkled hair would never seem quite a symbol of repugnance again. Shale would never kiss her but there was a link between her loneliness and Shale's unconcern. The knowledge that Limsola, whose beauty she admired and wished the ape genes had known how to equal in herself, that Limsola, the beautiful, cared.

Slowly, she returned to the Publisher's panel.

"Publisher to Phrix!" she transmitted.

"Phrix to Publisher!"

"Keep me informed!"

"I will inform you of everything, Publisher!"

Shale and Limsola were swimming in the river and the sun was slipping behind the mountains away from the Valley of the Presidents. Shale did not know it, but the universe would never be quite the same again.

## XIV

For sometime after the departure of Phrix, the atmosphere on Lemos could only be described as auronic. Pregnant. Pregnant with aurons. Awaiting the birth of something. Births on Lemos follow the same law of averages as elsewhere in the universe. One in every $10^{25}$th will be a genius. Every healthy, virile male has the chance of siring—as every fecund, petal-cheeked female has of suckling—genius in the same

ratio as each might have in winning first dividend in the intergalactic sweepstake. They go on suckling and siring and buying tickets just the same. The birth of ideas follows the same pattern. Only one every century or so is in any way different from all the ideas that have gone before. Every century or so, something happens. Something, somewhere, in however small a degree, has changed and nothing will ever be quite the same again. Evolution has opened one eye and taken note. Somewhere a giraffe has added .01 inches to the length of its neck. A virus has stood up on its flippers and spit in the eye of a carefully cultured, marauding antibody. A bent-backed biped has straightened to look over the long grass of the tundra and bequeathed millennia and trillennia of slipped discs to all the bipeds who follow, reached for the stars and believing, quite erroneously, that evolution favors the braced spine and the upended womb. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

All this and a newsad, too. A newsad without news. Or news without the ad. It was heady stuff. Evolution blinked and sighed. The bipeds had been quiet for centuries. Once they had always been up to something.

Editors, sub-editors, reporters, copy-writers gathered daily in the composing room, watching the news and the ads clicking in and the newsads clicking out. Waiting for something to happen. A breakthrough. A news item without an ad. An ad without a news item. There was much speculation about the form such a phenomenon might take. Would anyone read, even in clipped headline form, a bare statement of fact unconnected with a product? Was not the promotion of a product the only justification for the inclusion of a fact? Conversely, was not the fact the only justification for the mention of the product? Could "Man bites dog" exist as a readable headline without the sponsoring "Dumkins dentures for exciting biting?" Even the advocates of "news for news' sake" had to admit that direct reporting of everyday happenings would be deadly dull even if enlivened by the old method of interviewing anyone within hailing distance and thus presenting the man-in-the-street illusion. Reporters' dicta could usually be expressed in syllogisms with varying degrees of authentic fallacy: *The gibbet was seen by Jones. Jones is a little man. I am a little man. Therefore I saw the gibbet. . . .*"

"What did you see, Mr. Jones?"

"I saw him there on the gibbet."

"You saw him there on the gibbet, Mr. Jones. What was he doing there on the gibbet?"

"He was hanging."

"Hanging there on the gibbet?"
"Yes."
"And what did you say when you saw him hanging there on the gibbet?"
"Say?"
"Yes, Mr. Jones, what did you say when you saw this frightful spectacle?"
"I said, 'Look at that geezer hanging up there on that gibbet.' That's what I said."
"That's what you said?"
"I said that."
"And good for you, Mr. Jones."

By such means, it was argued, news might be made palatable enough, provided always that the little-man reader of the Lemos *Galactic Monitor* was prepared to identify himself with little-men readers or little-men not-readers elsewhere. This the opposing faction thought very unlikely. Their argument had the weight of precedent and the time-honored syllogism that had motivated the Publisher's own advertising ever since the early days of Asgard: *Top people take the Lemos* Galactic Monitor. *This man takes the Lemos* Galactic Monitor. *Therefore this man is top people.*

Readers, this faction propounded, identify themselves with the top, not with the bottom. It is thus only permissible to describe the death of a Lemos housewife, mistaken by police dogs for an escaping Orgasmon addict from Zanto, if the otherwise unimportant episode were witnessed by at least a secretary of State for Cosmic Relations. . . .

"What did you see, Minister?"
"Eh?"
"I understand you witnessed this unfortunate occurrence?"
"Oh—that!"
"Would you mind telling our readers in your own words just what . . ."
"Well, there were these dogs, you see."
"Yes?"
"And this woman."
"This woman—yes?"
"They ate her."

Properly reported by a competent eyewitness, you can practically feel the snap of the teeth. Or so it was said. But, argue as they might, the newsads continued to appear in precisely the same way as they had done since the electronic revolution and possible long before that. The machines

kept up their campaign against human interference and the Lemos *Galactic Monitor* continued to flourish.

Rome, of course, was not built in a day and its destruction was even longer drawn out. It would have seemed to Phrix a matter of days only since he had left Lemos on his way to Asgard. Voyages between worlds seem only a matter of days to the voyagers. The Ruling Races sleep or indulge in hallucinatory space dreams and the Groils suspend their awareness or think rewarding thoughts. But to those left behind, time goes on as before. The daily round, the common task. Get up. Breakfast on a proteinburger. Put on your hat. Get in the compressed air tube. Wait while the button presses itself. Get out at the office. Watch the machine. Write a memo and put it in the out-tray. Wait while electronic marvels transfer your memo to the in-tray. Show it to the machine. Wait while the machine straightens it, carefully irons it and rules it out. Get back into the compressed air tube. Rocket out in the play-room. Watch and feel a sensivision. Eat a proteinburger. Go to bed. Remove your hat.

It was in fact ten years before anything happened—the time it took Phrix to reach Far-Groil. And then evolution began to stir. One by one, those archexecutives who had Groils woke up to find their mentors gone and for each missing Groil a spacecraft was missing too. The Groils were going home.

On Far-Groil itself, the presses were spreading alarm and despondency among the Ruling Races. "Epidemic from B92 virus imminent. No antidote. Don't be dead. Take ship instead. Hamratty's jumping jets get you there in half the usual time. Don't delay. Fly Hamratty's today," "Groil volcano on point of eruption. Heavy pressures below surface. Far-Groil about to split. Don't be late. Emigrate."

When the Groils returned to Far-Groil, their old planet was peaceful, rural and all its machines quiescently awaiting instructions—programmers of programmers of programmers and so on to the nth degree. Phrix and his fellow Groils went to work with a will. They whistled softly as they deprogrammed.

It was ten years and five days after Phrix had left Lemos for Asgard before the first signs of his new policy appeared. It caused consternation not only among the staff of the Publishing House but also occasioned unprecedented disturbance in the machines themselves. The auto-setters, autocomps, news assimilators, news emitters, copy-writers and slogameters all began wailing and flashing their red lights. It was a small thing that started the first whinny of objec-

tion: no more than the omission of a half a column on the back page. The house-ad for the Publishing House. "Dear friend—this is the end. Vexed?—the Text—is continued in our next. Read the Lemos *Galactic Monitor.*" They wailed much louder the next day when the entire column disappeared, cheating the universe of a proper appreciation of the Zanto and Peripheral Planets Observer, a guide to the penal code, and the combined Gromwold, Shorne, Rymott and Wingfolt Industrial Index. By the end of the week, the entire back page was blank and in two months' time, nothing remained of the paper but the masthead, earpieces, date and volume number:

Motoring? Make for

Martin's one-bed

Good geneticists give
GORMAS GENES

THE LEMOS
GALACTIC MONITOR

Motettes

for mating mothers

24th Pavlovil 30968AE

One day later and nothing remained but:

THE LEMOS GALACTIC MONITOR

So gradually had the change taken place that the reading public had failed to notice that anything was amiss. Even allowing for any automatic adjustments the delivery craft might make in jettisoning undistributed copies, the effect on circulation of the new policy seemed at best marginal. Wage earners on all the planets began their day, as ever, by taking the L.G.M. from their letter-boxes and propping it against the simulated coffee-dispenser. Thus insulated for a short while from contact with their mates, they were able to adjust, set their faces in the right mold of grim determination to succeed so appreciated by employers, and generally prepare themselves for whatever unlikely challenge the day might bring. They ran their eyes down the front page as usual, unaware of having assimilated any less in the way of readable news than usual.

The staff would not have noticed either, but for the wailing of their machines, who, having nothing to do, clicked rapidly from place to place and office to office in the same search for justification as all executives in this or any other age. The staff—that is, the human, Ruling Race staff—on the other hand, were conscious of having at last a real function

to perform. The absence of text in their newspapers called for high-level, higher-managerial decisions and higher-managerial decisions called for a series of daily, top-level conferences which all attended—top-levelers in the flesh and the rest by remote control. The motion on every agenda was the same: Will this trend in publishing, over which we have no control, lead to an increased circulation, a better informed reading public and increased profits on the 30968 balance sheet? The three points were normally numbered I, 2, and 3 and the answers seemed to be, in that order: 1. The circulation, being controlled, remains constant, regardless of the paper's quality or content. 2. Since human memory is fallible and no one remembers tomorrow what they have read today, the Publisher's papers will continue to inform the public no more and no less than they have always done. 3. Since advertising rates, being geared to circulation, remain constant, there will be no change in revenue from year-in, year-out bookings for the reason that the ads themselves have not appeared.

It seemed therefore that the new policy was a good thing, since costs were theoretically reduced, there being no setting and a considerable saving in ink. The saving was however more logical than real, since the auto-setters, having nothing better to do, syphoned off the surplus ink, the supply of which was as constant and unchanging as everything else. Nevertheless, in the back of everybody's mind was the thought that economies in staff might now be possible and each executive eyed his neighbor covertly and, when the opportunity presented itself, contrived to whisper into any ear that seemed receptive, "Old so-and-so is past it, don't you think?" Certainly it seemed that, should it come to staff reductions, those who had consolidated their position by the right alliances would stay, while those who had been more profligate with their opportunities would drown in a flood of contrived innuendoes.

No one asked how the innovation would affect the economy. Advertising had originally been invented as an integral part of the demand/supply equilibrium. You advertised and thus created a demand which your productive capacity was exactly geared to supply. Remove the ad, and you should theoretically also remove the demand and everything would grind to a halt. It was unthinkable that any housewife would order a washing powder that she had not seen advertised, and yet she did so now in the same volume as before. The balance had leveled between the amount of washing to be done and the amount of powder required to do it.

The Publishing House might have continued to bring blank news sheets under their several titles forevermore. If the practice contributed nothing to the good of mankind, it contributed no evil either. Employment was maintained at its previous level and at breakfast tables everywhere, couples in wedlock or out of it were spared the sobering ordeal of beginning the day by talking to each other face to face with nothing more substantial than a proteinburger to separate soul from soul. It might have continued and probably would have done so forever and day long, but for Marylin.

Marylin was very lonely on Asgard after Shale had discovered the vast libraries available to the Publishing House. All human experience was there on video, audio and sensivo tapes. In fact the ancient compilers had been far more than mere literary hacks. They had not contented themselves with recording for their subscribers sights and sounds and emotions from every corner of the universe, but had drawn extensively on the resourcefulness of their own imaginations to create an otherwise unthinkable mishmash of extended impression and experience. No one who had access to the Publisher's archives would ever need to wander back into the everyday universe or factual happenings. Into the library Shale had gone and in the library Shale stayed.

Marylin first saw the bare pages of the Lemos *Galactic Monitor* on a device known as a Remote Controlled Proof Scanner. No papers were actually delivered to Asgard, and the Proofreader had been installed long ago merely to allow the Publisher to count the ads whenever he chose. The blank pages puzzled Marylin. The absence of text was a clear indication that Phrix had arrived on Far-Groil and had begun the reprogramming of the machines. Why had his activities resulted only in a negation? He had set out, bravely enough, to create a new universe. There was to be an end to the laboratories. The papers were to lead the Ruling Races back to a new awareness. Text was to reawake conscience and consciousness. It was hard to understand how a blank sheet was to achieve this. In the past, ethical systems had fallen into disuse when there had been nothing left to strive for. Mankind organizes itself only in the face and teeth of adversity. This is the law of natural selection. Where no one is around selecting no one bothers to appear worthy. Losing the appearance of worthiness, one ceases to be worthy. How then could a blank page in a daily newspaper recall once-held moral values or create new and better ones? Answer: it could not.

Marylin set the Advertisement manager locater dial. "Come in Phrix!" she ordered.

The locator beams had represented in the old days the major threat to the position and promotion prospects of generations of advertisement managers. It would normally take a year or two before he was traced wherever he might be on his rounds and then, being suddenly and unexpectedly located at any time of the day or night, he was often hard put to explain both his actions and his whereabouts. Advertisement representatives with only single planet territories would appreciate the danger of being located without warning in bed with a Salumi in Lulonga when, according to their recently dispatched weekly reports, they should have been in the antipodes negotiating a difficult contract with Universal Fluorides, Inc.

In fact, Phrix was in no better position than any of his less reputable predecessors when the radiation located him without difficulty, but with a two year delay, on Far-Groil. After the hurried exodus of the Ruling Races, the Groils had found their old planet much to their liking. True, the Ruling Races had built on it. Ruling Races build everywhere. There were a lot of concrete roads and towns and arsenals. But there were also streams and springs and rivers and mountains and forests as there had been in the old days B.E. The Groils had never wanted power or success or wealth or any other of the prize possessions that makes one member of the Ruling Races consider himself better than another. They wanted no more than, in pleasant surroundings, to retire into themselves and think. A laudable and harmless occupation—at least for those who have no responsibilities toward the rest of the universe. Such as Phrix.

When the pulsation reached him and the communicator pad on his navel buzzed, Phrix was sitting cross-legged in the same spot where, with occasional breaks for meals, he had sat for the past three years. It was by the source of a mountain stream where the sun shone and a scented wind blew and where, when the sun set, a limpid moon rose and the temperature never dropped below that of blood heat minus ten.

"Come in Phrix!" he heard.

His mind wandered slowly and luxuriously back through the soft lights and warm shadows, tranquility and fellow-Groil unity of the past years to Marylin and the problems of publishing and the machines he had, in passing, switched off on his arrival.

*It is time,* he thought regretfully, *to act.* As a Groil, he hated action.

"Phrix reporting," he said sadly.

He did not need to wait for three years for the Pub-

lisher's instructions to arrive. He knew what he must do: attend to the reprogramming of the machines. Reform the universe. Offer himself, a tool, into the hands of destiny. He sighed. He did not need to ask himself how all this should be accomplished. As a Groil, he knew. The Groil difficulty was always to bring himself to take action unless expressly ordered to do so. But the voice of Marylin's "Come in, Phrix!" was itself an order.

"New universe in the making," he reported. "Self, the tool of destiny."

He got up stiffly and regretfully from the bank of the stream and picked his way carefully among the other, more fortunate, Groils dotted along the hillside, relaxed, comfortably contemplative in the lotus position. Down below, in the valley's white shimmering square mile upon square mile of white concrete, were the ultimate programmers. Their doors slid open at his approach and he walked slowly and silently along an empty corridor toward the ultimate in publishing. The small room, unique in all the universe, where the command of a human voice was obeyed without question by a machine. The dodge was always to know what to say.

"Evolution," Phrix announced, "is on the march."

The machine blinked in fluorescent astonishment and took careful note. Very shortly, the first universe-shattering message was traveling toward Lemos to begin the transformation —the first positive instruction man had given to machine in many millennia. When it arrived, the front page of the Lemos *Galactic Monitor* would bear a single centrally-positioned sentence in very small type.

Watch this space

In the beginning was only the Word.

ace double H-56/60¢

R. A. LAFFERTY


THE ODYSSEY OF SPACE CAPTAIN ROADSTRUM

The Lay of Road-Storm from the ancient Chronicles

We give you here, Good Spheres and Cool-Boy Conicals,

And perils pinnacled and parts impossible

And every word of it the sworn-on Gosipel.

Lend ear while things incredible we bring about

And Spacemen dead and deathless yet we sing about:

And some were weak and wan, and some were strong enough,

And some got home, but damn it took them long enough!

RAPHAEL ALOYSIUS LAFFERTY was born in Iowa, moved to Oklahoma when four years old, and has been there ever since except for travel and four and one-half years in the army. Now in his fifties, Lafferty describes himself as "a correspondence school electrical engineer" who has worked for electrical jobbers most of his life. He says, "I was a heavy drinker till about eight years ago at which time I cut down on it, beginning my writing attempts about the same time to fill up a certain void." Since then he has published scores of stories both in the science fiction magazines and such journals as *New Mexico Quarterly, Literary Review,* etc., and has been reprinted with increasing frequency in best-of-the-year anthologies.

# R. A. LAFFERTY

# SPACE CHANTEY

ACE BOOKS, INC.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

SPACE CHANTEY



*Cover and interior sketches by Vaughn Bode.*

*Also available from this author:*

PAST MASTER (H-54/60¢)

PITY ABOUT EARTH


Printed in U.S.A.

## CHAPTER ONE

*The Lay of Road-Storm from the ancient Chronicles*
*We give you here, Good Spheres and Cool-Boy Conicals,*

*And perils pinnacled and parts impossible*
*And every word of it the sworn-on Gospel.*

*Lend ear while things incredible we bring about*
*And Spacemen dead and deathless yet we sing about:—*

*And some were weak and wan, and some were strong enough,*
*And some got home, but damn it took them long enough!*

NEW SPACE CHANTEYS,
Living Tapes, Sykestown, A.A. 301

WILL THERE BE a mythology in the future, they used to ask, after all has become science? Will high deeds be told in epic, or only in computer code?

And after the questing spirit had gone into overdrive during the early Space Decades, after the great Captains had appeared, there *did* grow up a mythos through which to view the deeds. This myth filter was necessary. The ship logs could not tell it rightly nor could any flatfooted prose. And the deeds were too bright to be viewed direct. They could only be sung by a bard gone blind from viewing suns that were suns.

Here trumpets blare. Here the high kerigma of heralds rises in silvery gibberish. Here it begins.

The war was finished. It had lasted ten equivalent years and taken ten million lives. Thus it was neither of long duration nor of serious attrition. It hadn't any great significance; it was not intended to have. It did not prove a point, since all points had long ago been proved. What it did, perhaps, was to emphasize an aspect, sharpen a concept, underline a trend.

On the whole it was a successful operation. Economically and ecologically it was of healthy effect, and who should grumble?

And, after wars, men go home. No, no, men start for home. It's not the same.

There were six of them there, Captains of hornets, those small craft that could go anywhere, six of them mustered out with their crews and with travel orders optional. And there wasn't an ordinary man among them. They were six full crews of the saltiest, most sulfurous men who could be combed out of the skies.

Roadstrum, one of the Captains, was as plain a man as ever lived, and now he spoke out plainly:

"I would say let us go directly home. We were boys when this began, and we are not boys now. We should go home, but I could be talked into something else.

"Dammit, I said I could be talked into something else!"

"A day or two on Lotophage might be worth it," said Captain Puckett. "We'll never be this close to it again and there must be something behind all those stories of the soft life there. They say it is Fiddler's Green and Theleme rolled together. They say that it may be Maybe Jones City itself. If we don't like it we can leave at any time."

"The Captains Roadstrum and Puckett are from World, are you not?" Captain Dempster asked. "In that case it is not at all in your direction home."

"We are from World," said Roadstrum, "and we know the direction home."

"Lotophage is supposed to be a bums' world," said Dempster, "and if you stay there long enough you turn into a bum."

"If you're afraid of it we'll mark you off," said Captain Silkey, "and perhaps you have less a way to go to be a bum than we others. But I see that you are afraid."

Silkey knew how to put the needle into Dempster. The only thing that Dempster was afraid of was being called afraid.

"Look at it this way," said Captain Kitterman. "We can't get flight clearance to World or to anything in that Arm for three days, but we can go to Lotophage immediately. We can spend an equivalent day there, we can spend two, and still be home without loss of time. I suggest that we do it."

"For myself," said the sixth Captain, "it is imperative that I get home. There may have been changes there. My wife is faithful within limits, but I do not know whether ten years transcends those limits. My children should have reached an interesting age. Besides, nobody ever stops on Lotophage for only a day or two."

"What think you, Crewmen?" Roadstrum asked loudly of the splendid array. These men were the salt of the skies, the one out of ten who had determinedly stayed alive through the whole war, very often hurt, absolutely refusing to be killed. Never had there been so many great fine men assembled. They were the tall ones.

"I'd give the very ears off my head to go to Lotophage and enjoy it," said Crewman Birdsong, "but the ears on my head and other shapeless things about me will be the obstruction. They have a regulation on Lotophage, you know; only beautiful persons are allowed the enjoyments."

"They bend the regulation," said Captain Silkey. "They use the wide idea of beauty. All the fine surging things they count beautiful, even though they be a little rough in texture. They don't bar one man in a thousand."

"I'm the man in a thousand in that," said Birdsong, "but I'll go; I'll try it. There's no world I'd visit so gladly."

They put it to the vote of their crews. Most of the men were for the side trip to Lotophage, the pleasure planet. Only enough men for one hornet crew wanted to go home directly. The sixth Captain (he shall be nameless, he shall be nameless forever) assembled the cravens and they went to their ready barracks to wait for flight clearance home.

The other five crews tumbled into their hornets to go to Lotophage.

"I have shucked a skin like a yearly snake," said Captain Roadstrum. "I'm an onion and an outer layer is sluffed off me, that of Young Soldier the First Time. But I be bigger and ranker for losing the layer. All who go home in the wrong direction, we fly!"

*Where fiddlers scree'd and Rabelaisians loped, it was,*
*And Maybe Jones had walked the streets and hoped it was.*

*So glad a land, you'd never find a grouser there.*

*They said a man could really throw a rouser there!*

*Ah well, 'twas good enough for Lotophagians,*
*But how about the horny hopping shaggy uns?*

*How turned the bright-eyed crew to sleepy gooney guys?*
*How have a high old night with afternooney guys?*

Lotophage was beautiful at planet-fall, subdued gold, afternoon color. Roadstrum, who captained the lead hornet, intended to take the planet from morning side as he always did, but somehow he failed. He came down in an afternoon world. Then remembered that it was always afternoon on Lotophage.

You could have shipped home whole boat-loads of sugar from the sweetness of their welcome. These people really made you feel wanted. They were even kind with Crewmen Birdsong and Fairfeather when they took them into custody.

"It is that only beautiful people are allowed at large here," the Lotophagians told these unfortunates. "We bend a point, we break a point, but you two are beyond the point entirely. It's into the dungeons below the light that the two of you go."

"But look at Captain Roadstrum with that broken nose on him," Crewman Birdsong protested angrily.

"We bend a point there," said a Lotophagian. "What's a broken nose? He's a beautiful man withall."

"Look at Captain Puckett with a muzzle on him like a coon," howled Crewman Fairfeather with much heat.

"We break a point there," said the Lotophagian. "Take him from the rear, or in no more than one-eighth profile. Is he not beautiful? But we cannot in heart say the same thing about you. It's the dungeon for you two."

"For how long?"

"Until you die. Or until we need the room for two more uglier than yourselves, which is not likely. You two just fill it up."

"Sorry, boys," said Captain Roadstrum. "Sorry, boys," said Captain Puckett and Dempster and Silkey and Kitterman. And the Captains and the crewmen went about the business of enjoying Lotophage.

As with all low-gravity planets there was a lassitude about everything. The indolence was reflected even in the subtropical flora. And no other life but the lazy one would have been possible there, due to the thin atmosphere. It was because of this that one could get high there so quickly. The air was almost entirely oxygen with no nitrogen filler, but it

was still very thin. But for those who love the lazy life, it was automatically induced.

Most flopped down where they were without even going to the nearest building. Why go further? Everything was available everywhere. They fell center-first into the slothful life. They slept hugely. It was hours later before any of them came to awareness again. Then they reclined Roman-fashion on the grass, and the sod rose and formed into contours to accomodate them.

"We used to lie on the roof at home when I was a boy and dream of this," said Cowper, one of Dempster's crewmen. "We'd dream how we would live on an island or planet, and the bananas would fall off the trees beside us. The coconuts would drop with a hole already in them for drinking; and after they were drained they would fall apart for eating. There would be a waterfall that turned a paddle-wheel that worked a music box, and you had only to whistle the key notes and it would take up any tune you wanted to hear. There would be cigarette vines dangling just above you, and you could snap one off and it would be already lit when you snapped it.

"It was big turtles, as I remember the daydream, who were taught to walk by with varieties of food on their backs. It was monkeys who were taught to prepare these foods."

"Ah well," said Captain Roadstrum, "when we travel we find how greatly our boyhood dreams are outstripped by reality."

Roadstrum had a four-foot-long pseudo-banyan fruit, actually a giant banana. He had been eating on it for many hours. He had a jug of rum-mix which he sucked with an attachment. The mix was under slight pressure so that he didn't have to suck very hard. At his side was a control panel of great selectivity. The invisible speaker, heard only by himself, would give him music or song, news or comment, drama and weird humor tales, gem-like repartee, or dirty stories.

He could squeeze a bulb in his hand and he would be flopped over into the warm water of the ocean pool where he could roll and float and dive. He could squeeze the bulb again and he would be transported back onto the grass by an ingenious lift. It was handy, and it was easy on the body.

In only one case did the panel fail him in information. That was when he asked it, "What day is this?"

"That answer we cannot give," the panel said. "It is ruled that, if you will not rise and see, it really does not matter

to you. Besides, here there are not days. Here it is always afternoon."

The only clock available to Roadstrum without rising was the whisker clock. He felt by his beard that many days had gone by. He did not want too many days to have gone by. "Can you shave me?" he asked the panel. "Oh, sure," and the panel did it that quick. And this set the clock back to the beginning.

It was an easy life on Lotophage, and there was a whisper about the houris. The houris were among the things supposed to make the time pass so quickly on Lotophage. In particular Roadstrum had heard the whisper of an houri named Margaret, and now he rose to find her.

He stopped only to inquire of the health of crewman Sorrel. Sorrel, one of Puckett's crewmen, had thus far been their only casualty. He had put his jaw out of place while yawning. He seemed all right now but he would take it easy for a while.

Generally an houri would come on signal, even a thought signal, and swoop a man up in her arms and carry him off to pleasure. Roadstrum, however, being unaccountably energetic, was already on his feet when Margaret came to his unvoiced signal. He suggested that they go to the *Sleepy Sailor* a full hundred feet across the lawn.

Margaret offered to carry him on her twinkling shoulders, but Roadstrum was a bundle of energy even on this soft world and he walked on his own two feet.

In the barroom of the *Sleepy Sailor* there were many patrons sleeping or lounging on couches. But there were others of more hardy breed who sat bolt upright ("What's that mean, anyhow?" asked Margaret; "It means downright upright," said Roadstrum), and even some who stood with toe on rail. Some of the patrons were familiar to Roadstrum. There was Maybe Jones himself.

"Is this the place, Maybe?" Roadstrum asked him.

"No it is not," said Maybe, "though it fools me for a while every time I come. I'll stay here a while till I get a tip on a likelier place. This is very like the Place Itself as it is in the early afternoon, when things are beginning to rustle and make starting noises. But it never blossoms out as does the place; it never really gets into it. 'Things will start hopping along about sundown,' I always say, but here there isn't any sundown."

"I have heard about a place," said Roadstrum, "if you have ten thousand Chancels d'or for the tip."

"Always, always," said Maybe Jones, who always paid well for tips that might lead him to the Place Itself. "Here it is.

Now if you will mark down the rough coordinates here and whisper me a brief description of it I will be off to see." And Roadstrum gave it to him.

"I know a place that might be the place, Maybe," Margaret the houri said.

"Margaret, Margaret," said Maybe Jones, "you have given me ten thousand wrong leads, and yet I believe you could give me the right lead if you wished." And Maybe Jones was gone. He traveled forever looking for the lost pleasure place, and spacemen had begun to call it Maybe Jones City.

"Everybody loves it here," said Margaret the houri. "On Lotophage the law does not restrict. Elsewhere many things are illegal, as are we ourselves. We are forbidden to live anywhere else, and the penalty for disobeying that law is death. Where does that leave you if you happen to be immortal?"

"I have heard about you houris," said Roadstrum, "but the stories are confusing. It is said that you are older than people and that you will live forever."

"I sure hope so. I wouldn't want it any other way. But we change. I remember when I used to call myself Dolores and wore a rose in my hair and carried on like that. I remember when I was Debra and had a lot of style. I remember once when I was a Frenchie. Boy, it sure is fun being a Frenchie! But I don't remember very far back, only a couple of years. It seems like I always did have a lot of boyfriends."

"They say that you are timeless, which I do not understand," said Roadstrum.

" 'He moves a mighty turban on the timeless houri's knees,' as the poet says. I don't understand it either, Roadstrum, but you use a timeless device on your own ships when you make the big instant jumps. Who needs ships?"

Roadstrum sat on the timeless houri's knees and found it pleasant.

"The report is that you are completely immoral," he said.

"Shouldn't wonder if I am," Margaret answered.

"That you are not born, do not generate, and never die."

"No, I don't remember ever doing any of those things."

"In Earth legend, it is said that you are older than Eve."

"You don't understand women, Roadstrum. Never tell one that she is older than Eve. No, no, she was twenty-one years old when she was born; and I'm not one to whisper such things, but it wasn't a normal birth. I'm eternally nineteen. Sure, I remember her. She was the first of those fat housecats."

"You have always had a bad name among good people," said Roadstrum.

"It's those fat house-cats who give us a bad name. I don't care for them either."

"It is even said that you do not live at all, that you are only a tall story that wandering men tell."

"There are worse places to live than in tall stories," said Margaret. "But you are in them yourself, Roadstrum, in all the jokes and stories of the shaggy-people cycles."

"Margaret, it is all wonderfully pleasant on Lotophage, but does it not seem as if they forgot to put the salt in?"

"You can add as much salt as you wish, mighty Roadstrum, but the water will not boil as quickly."

"What, Margaret?"

"To boil a lobster, one takes first a lobster—"

A Lotophagian citizen came in.

"The men who have died, mighty Roadstrum, how do you want them disposed of?"

"Died? How many of our men died here?"

"Only a dozen or so. You'd be proud of them, such happy lazy smiles on their faces when they went!"

"Well, do they bury here, or burn?"

"Oh no, neither. We use. One does not bury nor burn the essence of ecstasy. They provide the distillation of all pleasure. Those bar-snacks that you eat so avidly, are they not fine?"

"They are fine," said Roadstrum. "I wondered what they are."

"From men off the packet ship *The Yellow Dwarf*," said the Lotophagian. "Those men really ate and drank and roistered while they were here, day and night, I mean deep into the afternoon. They stuffed themselves and they spread themselves. They built themselves up while they were tearing themselves down. When they finally gave out there was nothing left of them but bellies and nerves. It's the jangled nerves, the fevered psychic leavings imbedded in the sweet fat that gives the particular flavor."

"The taste is powerful and tantalizing," said Roadstrum, "but the origin leaves a nameless doubt in me."

"—to boil a lobster, one takes first a lobster—" said Margaret.

"Your own men should have an even more unique flavor," said the Lotophagian. "We will call the product 'Lazy Man Ectasy Chips.' Give the word and we will have some of them for you quite shortly."

"All right," said Roadstrum, "go ahead. I don't know why

I gave it a second thought but there are a crowd of second thoughts hovering over my shoulder this afternoon."

"—and one puts it in a bucket of cold water," said Margaret. "Then one very very slowly brings it to a boil—"

A little shabby man was singing *Show Me The Way To Go Home,* an ancient folk melody.

"What are you called?" Roadstrum asked him.

"John Profundus Vagabundus," said the little man. "Deep John the Vagabon'. I'm the original old-time hobo. I've been wandering these thousands of years and I can't get home. I just can't make it."

"Why can you not?" Roadstrum asked him. "You are from World, according to your speech, and we go to World. We will take you when we go."

"But you will not go," said Deep John. "And if you do, I cannot go with you unless you compel me to. I have passed the last possible moment here and I am not able to leave."

"Why should you want to, Vagabond? Is this not the end of the road that every vagabond has looked for? It is the world of every complete pleasure without pain. And they are so glad to have us here. See, they have already made a plaque 'Great Roadstrum loused around here,' and they have set it into my favorite spot at the bar. What other place so welcomes visitors? This is Fiddler's Green, this is Theleme, it is the land of the Lotus Eaters, it is Maybe Jones City—(no, belay that last; Maybe says he isn't sure that it is)—it is Utopia, it is Hy-Brasail, it is the Hesperides. It is the end of every road."

"It's the end of the road, all right," the hobo said, "but I didn't want it to end. That's Fiddler screeing on his instrument in the next room, but he says he doesn't believe that this is the Green at all. And Frankie-Boy is in there too. He eats and drinks, and he carries on as even a red-nosed priest should not; he talks philosophy and he tells those whoppers; but he says that he begins to doubt that this is Theleme, after all."

"I'll just have a couple of words with those fellows and convince them again how wonderful it is," said Roadstrum.

Crewmen Crabgrass and Oldfellow and Bramble came into the *Sleepy Sailor.* Bramble blew a note on a pitch pipe and then he recited:

*All lusty liquor with a crystal cask for it,*
*Whatever wished one only has to ask for it.*

*Tall pleasures piled in infinite variety,*

*Raw rolling gluttony without satiety:*

*And under sheen than all things else is awesomer*
*A golden worm that gnaws and gnaws and gnaws some more.*

"Whence the doggerel, good Bramble?" Roadstrum asked.

"It's a popular epic composing itself these days," said Bramble. "It's called the Lay of Road-Storm, and it's about yourself."

"I understand now," said Roadstrum; "certain low fellows have been making cracks about the 'lay of Roadstrum' every time I set my hands seriously upon a woman here. But what is the 'golden worm' bit?"

"It's the way we feel," the crewmen shouted. "The golden worm is gnawing at our entrails. There is too much of it here, and it doesn't move along at a seemly pace. Captain Roadstrum, we are tired of lying around and going on little benders and jazzing these little girls here. We want to go on big benders. We want to find the big girls."

"What's to stop you, good men?" Roadstrum asked them. "It seems that everything is available here. It surely is here in the *Sleepy Sailor*. Can you think of any pleasure not to be found here?"

"No, we can't, Captain," said Crewman Crabgrass, "and it bugs us. How do we know this is everything, just because we can't think of anything else? We can't even get into places like *Shanghai Sue's of the After Dark Club of the Haystack* or the *Rowdy-Dow*. They all have signs on them, 'Open at twenty-one o'clock.' "

"There is surely plenty to do till then," said Roadstrum.

"Till then? Captain Roadstrum, there isn't any twenty-one o'clock here. It's always afternoon."

"Oh, those are only false fronts and signs that some of the boys from the tramp ship *Muley Cow* put up for fun," said Deep John the hobo. "They sure were good fellows from the *Cow*. I can taste them yet."

"False fronts or not," said Crewman Oldfellow, "they've sowed the seeds of doubt in us. If we sink back into it again now we'll be like the man who was drowning and didn't care."

"Good thing he didn't," said Roadstrum, "or he'd have worried himself to death."

"—passed the last possible moment," said Deep John the Vagabond.

"—heat the water very very slowly," said Margaret, "and the lobster will not stir till he is irrevocably boiled."

"Get your hot 'Lazy Man Ecstasy Chips,' called the Lotophagian coming in with a great basket of them. They all

began to eat great gobs of them, and they were the finest ecstasy chips anyone ever ate.

"These in particular," said Crewman Oldfellow. "I never in my life ate anything with so fine a flavor. I wish that Crewman Bigbender were here to taste them. Somehow they remind me of him."

"Let me see the tag on that bunch," said the Lotophagian. "Ah yes, they *are* Crewmen Bigbender."

They ate variously. It was all good. They drank. It was very good. They dozed. It was perfect.

"I don't care if I never wake up," Roadstrum murmured as he drifted under.

"—passed the last possible moment—" breathed Deep John the hobo.

"They are like all the others," said Margaret the houri. "Why did I think they might be different? I wanted to go back to World with them. I used to have a lot of fun on World. I'll wait me the centuries yet, and I'll yet find a man able to leave here after he comes. But he'll have to be a man in a million."

"I am a man in a million," said Roadstrum out of his shallow sleep.

"It is too late," said Deep John. "On the tomorrow we will eat 'Mighty Roadstrum Ecstasy Chips' and I'm sure they will have a mighty flavor. But I want to go home."

"I have the feeling that my life is in great danger," Roadstrum croaked nervously in his thin sleep.

"Never in your life will you be in such danger as you are at this moment," said Deep John. "You go under now and you can never come up again. And you have gone under."

"I never trusted a one-sided coin," Roadstrum mumbled in his sleep. "I never trusted a too-easy pleasure."

Roadstrum reared up suddenly like a great bear coming out of hibernation on Saint Casimir's Day.

"I have to go home at once," he said ponderously.

"They all say that but none of them do," Margaret told him.

"I am in great danger," said Roadstrum.

"Of course you are," said Deep John. "If you live through this, you will be in other dangers where your life is worth nothing; you will be in jams that will scare the very hair off your head. But you will never be in such danger as you are now here on Lotophage."

Bellowing like a bull, Roadstrum, the one man in a million, ran out of the *Sleepy Sailor* and began to kick the men awake. Most of them fought to get back to sleep or to death. Some of them really wished to leave Lotophage, and they said

so with great sorrow but with no hope. And some of them turned over on their faces and hung on, swearing that nothing could ever tear them away from this soft world. There were handles in the grass provided for hanging on. Lotophage was a jealous world and did not give up her victims willingly. Some of these men had befouled themselves, being unwilling to stir for anything at all, even to give their panels instructions to care for them.

Roadstrum rushed to the dungeon. "I'll get those two if I have to smash the place," he swore. "They, at least, will not be in love with it here. They will help me with the others."

He went to the dungeon and (thing beyond believing) Crewmen Birdsong and Fairfeather had just been released. Two men even uglier than they had arrived on Lotophage, and the hornet men were released to make room for them.

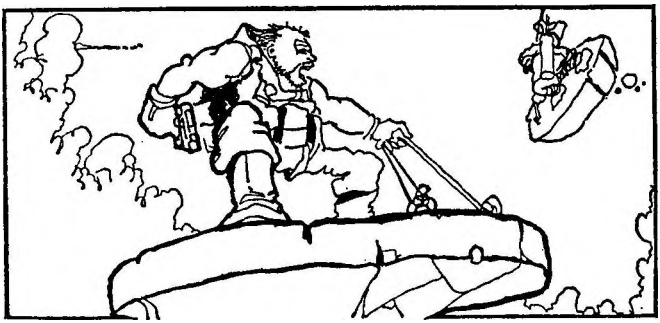
Two men uglier than Birdsong and Fairfeather? Are you sure? That is what the authorities on Lotophage decided. Two men from the *Smiling Skink* were put in the dungeon in place of Birdsong and Fairfeather, and they are still there.

In a frenzy now, Roadstrum fired up two of the hornet ships. He got Captain Puckett onto his feet and aware of the great danger of remaining. He promised to take Margaret back to World, where she had not been for several thousand years. He called to Deep John the Vagabond to come along if he was coming.

Roadstrum and Puckett and Birdsong and Fairfeather, Margaret and Deep John, jerked up those men who clung to the grass less tightly. They carried them, sniffling and sobbing, to the hornet crafts.

They enskied, they were in free space, and the most terrible of all dangers was behind them.

On Lotophage, as they left it, it was still afternoon of the same day and not perceptibly later than when they had arrived.



## CHAPTER TWO

*One needs for picture of the Laestrygonians*
*All hump-backed cuss-words and vile polyphonians.*

*"We'll cry a warning here though we be hung for it!"*
*The fact is, not a crewman had the tongue for it.*

*Those boys are rough, nor steel nor steinn can stay with them;*
*You'd better have viscéral blood to play with them.*

*That human meat and mind should ever rout the things!*
*It scares us silly just to think about the things.*

*We trim to decent measure these giganticals*
*And couch the tale in shaggy-people canticles.*

Ibid

BOTH HORNETS were near inoperative. Somehow they had never shaken off the lassitude they had acquired on Lotophage, and they had been sluggish for the whole trip since. Puckett's hornet had to come down for an overhaul, and that of Roadstrum was nearly as bad.

"A planet, a planet," Puckett hollered over the communicator. "Find us a planet quickly, Roadstrum."

"The only one we can possibly make is Lamos," Roadstrum called to him.

"Lamos of the Laestrygons? But that's a primitive world. There will be no facilities for overhaul there. Pick another."

"I can't, Puckett. My craft won't hold, and you say yours is worse. Make ready for it. Do you still have your psych library and your tapes?"

"Oh hell no. We pitched them out long ago. Is there a people on this world? Is there a language?"

"Puckett, there's information here that I don't trust. A lot of these things were filled in by jokers for the fun of it, figuring nobody would ever get to such a world anyhow. The inhabitants are giant-like and primitive, it says, believed to be a species of Groll's Trolls."

"We've tangled with those big fellows before. They don't worry me."

"These are much bigger than ordinary, it says. They worry me a little. But their language, and this is the joker part of it, is given as something between Old Norse and Icelandic of Earth. How would primitive Troll people have Earth languages? And how such odd ones?"

"Try it, Roadstrum, try it, since you have psych tapes. We've at least fifteen minutes before our hard or easy crash. That's time enough for your men to learn any subject by psych. We shouldn't have pitched ours out, but we have a Norwegian on craft, Oldfellow. Did you know he was a square-head? We'll plug him into the brain-buster and then all plug in on him. Maybe modern Norwegian will bring us close enough. It's something to pass the last fifteen minutes and keep the men from getting nervous. It's all a joke anyhow. And we already know six basic dialects of the Groll's Trolls language. We'll probably encounter some variations of them here."

They came down on Lamos with their retrogrades shrieking. It was a heavy-gravity planet and their power was almost completely shot.

"We'd never make it if it wasn't all downhill," Roadstrum complained. "All right, men, into your pumpkin-picking cradles! We're going to hit hard!"

Ah, it was a hard crash for both the hornets. It knocked everybody out, cracked ribs and clavicles, ruptured lungs and diaphragms, and filled everybody with blood in mouth, nose, and ear. It was suffocating pain riding up through their unconsciousness, quite a long unconsciousness.

"I could open one eye if I could raise a hand to it to uncake the blood," Roadstrum groaned much later. "I could raise one hand if I could find the other hand to raise it with. I could stand on my feet if I weren't broken in the middle and hinder parts and if I hadn't suddenly doubled in weight. But all these things I will do yet. I am the mighty Roadstrum and I will perform the heroic feat of sitting up and prying

my eyes open, and even of raising my voice in exhortation."

He did so. He rose, not only to a sitting position, but onto his feet indeed. And he howled to his men to arise and encounter and defend. He got Crewmen Fairfeather and Birdsong up. He got the great Captain Puckett up and moving. He got the valiant Di Prima and Boniface, and Bramble and Crabgrass and Eseldon up and going, and the others had begin to stir. They had been hurt before often, and they knew how to rise above it.

They were out of their crafts. They were on a rock-strewn scarp with a little short sedge growing out of it. They were under a green-gray sky on a very heavy world, and they were surrounded by grinning giants or ogres, the largest sort of Groll's Trolls ever seen.

Listen, none of the men would head up to the navels of any of these creatures, and the men from the hornets were all fine tall men. These giants were splayfooted and thick as tree-trunks. They had shoulders two meters wide, humps on the back of their forward necks like bull humps, and heads that were howlingly huge. The ears on them were like nine-liter jugs, and their mouths were wider than their wide faces in defiance of all rules.

Margaret the houri was bubbling around, unabashed and unhurt, and was talking at a great rate to the grinning giants. And the language they were using was something between Old Norse and Icelandic of Earth. There wouldn't be much difficulty there then, but it was surely a peculiar business.

"I am Bjorn," said the leader of the Trolls in a voice that sounded as though he had great boulders grinding around in his gizzard. "The others of us have names which you may learn if you live long enough into this day. Come to breakfast now. Boys, you really better eat a big breakfast! You're going to need it."

"No, no," Roadstrum protested. "We must see to our crafts first. We must assess the damage and the possibility of repair. And then we have our own rations to serve us until we have made a study of the produce here."

"Little boy-men, you'd better forget about your crafts or boats or globes," Bjorn told them. "My little boy will fix your boats for you. He's mechanically inclined. And you had better forget your rations. If they produce such puny types as you they will not serve you for this day. We look at you. We look at us. We laugh. Come eat what we eat. You will have to eat the big breakfast of our sort because you are going to fight the big fight afterwards and we want you to be up for it."

"Wait, Bjorn," Roadstrum howled. "Don't let that big

fellow into the hornet craft with those seven big stone hammers. He'll smash things. He'll ruin us forever. I'll just stop him—"

But Roadstrum's feet were spinning in the air and Bjorn was holding him high and clear by the scruff of his neck.

"There is no big fellow going into your craft, good Roadstrum," Bjorn assured him. "That is my little boy Hondstarfer. I told you that he is mechanically inclined. He will fix whatever is wrong with your boats. In the meanwhile you will eat the big breakfast of your lives and then you will fight the big fight to your deaths."

"But he'll break up all the instrumentation with those big stone hammers," Roadstrum protested again, still flailing his feet in the air.

"Have you not trust in me?" the boy Hondstarfer called as he entered the first of the hornets. "Have you not noticed? One of my stone hammers has buckskin laced over it. I use that for the fine work. Do not worry, I will fix your boats, or else I will fail to fix them. This is the high logic. I am the best and only mechanic on Valhal, which is called Lamos by the ignorant."

A boy? He must have been a meter taller than big Roadstrum.

"Somebody stop that young fool!" Roadstrum called, still beating the air in the grasp of Bjorn. "If he meddles with the craft we're stuck here forever. Kill him or something, but stop him anyhow!"

"He who kills before breakfast will have bad luck all the forenoon," Bjorn gave them the proverb. "I would take it unfavorably if anyone killed him. He is my little boy and you will let him do what he wants. I am sure he will fix your boats. Nobody can chip stone or dress leather so finely as my boy; nobody can fit a balk or a beam so well. He is the best mechanic anywhere. And call him not a fool! You think we have no feelings just because we are slobs? Here comes the cars. Now we will go to eat the big breakfast. Try to play the men at the bord whether or not you will be able to play it in the field."

Here come the cars, Bjorn had said. Cars? What *were* those things sliding in through the low sky, skimming in not ten meters above the land, silently and flatly and raggedly? Wait a minute now. It is camouflage of some sort. They cannot be big flat slabs of stone sliding about in the air with giant Trolls standing on them! But they sure did look like big slabs of stone, some of them twenty meters in diameter, some of them only a tenth as wide. There were ten-man and five-man and one-man slabs sliding along flatly above the ground.

And when they came down they still looked like stone slabs, and they were.

Well, how do stone slabs as heavy as these (and the smallest of them were so heavy that twelve men could not budge them at all on the ground) cruise about above the land with no mechanism whatsoever.

"Crewman Bramble, how is that possible?" Captain Roadstrum asked.

"It isn't. Our wits are scrambled, our eyes fail us; it is not possible at all."

"I see that you have never encountered a science as advanced as ours," the boy Hondstarfer said as he came out of one of the hornets to enlighten them. "This is so far beyond you that I am not sure I can explain it to you. You yourselves are caught in the electromagnetic dead-end, so you are hardly able to imagine a thing like this and you doubt your eyes. We are fortunate. We have no surface metal on our world, or perhaps we would have been caught in the same dead-end. Is this not much neater? Our cars operate naturally on the static-repulsion principle."

"How can that be?" asked Crewman Bramble, who knew the theory of everything. "The static-repulsion principle can move nothing heavier than feathers."

"What do you use for feathers on World?" the boy Hondstarfer asked in amazement. "Here it will move stone slabs of a pretty good size, and it would move mountains if they weren't rooted so deeply into the land. This is a dry world and one without metals in its surface. It is mostly of pure flint. So we take slabs of chert or impure flint from the mountains, and there is sufficient static-repulsion between the slabs and the surface flint to enable the slabs to glide and fly."

"It is impossible," said Crewman Bramble.

"Shall I tell you the supreme scientific law of the universes?" Hondstarfer asked. "Hold onto your ears or they may fall off at the magnitude of the disclosure. It is all scientific laws crushed into one. Like charges repel. Think about it."

"Where do the slabs get their charges, Hondstarfer?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't all the slabs fly about all the time?"

"I don't know."

"Why do they fly so lightly in the air and then sink so heavily to the ground?"

"I don't know."

"Will it work for anything besides flint and chert?"

"I don't know. There isn't anything else on our world."

"Well, how do you steer the things?"

"It's all in the way you rub your feet on them. But you will have to put felt boots over those metaled things you're wearing. Here, the women come with small children's boots for you to slip on. Anything else would burden you so that you couldn't move."

Women? Dame elephants rather. They were very large, though not so large as their men-folks, and broad and almost shapeless. They were smiling and mysterious and ineffably wild, unbeautiful, ogresses, giantesses. But Crewmen Fairfeather and Birdsong and others went for them. Being somewhat grosser in their choices than the other crewmen, they were completely taken by these great creatures.

"I have never been so humiliated in my life" said Margaret the houri. "The giants all say, 'Go away, little girl, go away to your mother. Eat the big breakfast and someday you will grow up to be a real woman.' Real woman! Fellows, if there was ever tenth-rate competition, this is it. And I can't compete."

"You go now with my father and the others," the boy Hondstarfer said, "to eat the big breakfast and then to die the big death. And I go to get a bigger stone hammer and still a bigger one. It is fun to work on your flying boats. There are so many things in them that I will have to change or throw out completely. It is no wonder that they break down, they are so primitive."

"Come, come, little boy-men," big Bjorn called. "Mount on the two stone slabs set aside for you there and come to the breakfast hall. Follow us. Oh, you must all put on the little felt boots over your metaled ones. Were you not told? We go now. You follow."

"How do you get these blimy things off the ground?" stone-slab Captains Roadstrum and Puckett called out to the giants after they had assembled their men on the slabs.

"Rub your feet, little boy-men, rub your feet!" laughed Bjorn and Hross and Hjortun and Fjall and Kubbur and all those shaggy giants. "Were there ever such dolts? How do you get your own flying boats off the ground? Rub your feet, little things, rub your feet."

The Captains and crewmen rubbed their feet on the big chert slabs, drew hot sparks; and then the slabs jolted and rose from the ground and glided crazily along. They learned the tricks of steering and gaining height quickly. These were really easy vehicles to operate.

And now they had the impression of great height when they were no more than five hundred meters in the air, an impression that they never had in the hornets. It was all sheer down-drop in the windy air, and these things had no side-

rails of any sort on them, and they tipped and swerved.

"The magic carpet!" said Crewman Bramble. "We have evidence now that the medieval Arabs of Earth really used such. They worked only over the very dry rock deserts, flint and chert deserts; and they were not carpets only, but thin slabs of stone covered with carpeting. Antiquarians have assured us that the evidence is overwhelming that such things were really used. I didn't believe it. I don't know how they could have worked. I don't know how these can work."

They came to the face of a sheer mountain. They hovered in the air in front of a black hole in the face of that rock.

"Come in to the breakfast," Bjorn called. The ogres drifted into the black interior on their stone slabs, and the men followed them in. And came down hard. The static-repulsion principle seemed to fail when they were in the heart of the stone here.

"Clumsy!" taunted Bjorn. "Clumsy!" taunted Blath and Hrekkur and the other ogres.

"You are the new guests here," said Bjorn in the cave darkness. "Tell the sun to come in, little Roadstrum."

"I'd as well tell the wind to lie down and the waves to be quiet," said Roadstrum. "I don't know what you mean."

"You are a boy-brained blockhead," said Bjorn. "What words do you use to order the sun when you are on World? Here it is simple to recite the words. You say, 'The sun, come you in,' and the sun comes in.

"The sun, come you in," Roadstrum said valiantly, wondering at himself. And the sun came in.

It was not, of course, the big sun of Lamos, but the little sun, the little boy of the big sun. It came in through the doorway of the cave, a hot yellow ball three meters in diameter, and it rose up to the roof of the cave and shone there. It was bright and hot, and the cave had been very cold. Water began to run down the walls, and globs of ice to fall.

"What is it?" asked Roadstrum of Crewman Bramble.

"It is the little sun, the little boy of the big sun," Bjorn interrupted. "Does not the sun of World have little boys also?

"What is it really?" Roadstrum asked Bramble.

"Some type of ball lightning," said the crewman. "But no, I see that it is a glowing stone. It must be a very small asteroid captured in the queer ambient of this nonmetallic world. It will glide around as the other rocks, and it should burn up if it is the proper texture. I don't know by what means it obeys voice commands. It burns but it does

not burn up. I haven't worked out a theory on it yet. I suppose that Bjorn's hypothesis is the best one; it is the little boy of the big sun."

"We have roast bull first," said Bjorn, as a big bull was driven to them from some inner space of the cave. "Roadstrum, you are the high guest; skin the bull."

"I would need first a long steel knife to kill it," great Roadstrum said. "And then skinning knives and tongs and an A-frame and a block and tackle to handle it. Give us the equipment, Bjorn, and myself and five or six of my men will have it killed and skinned within the hour."

"You are really the great Road-storm?" Bjorn asked in wonder. "Little boy-men, you don't know how to skin a bull. Fjall, skin the bull."

Fjall broke the horns off the bull and threw them away. Then he put his fingers in the horn holes and broke a girdle out of the skull. He peeled all the skin off the skull. He broke the front hooves off the animal and peeled the skin up the legs; then he did the same thing with the back quarters. With his great thumbnail he then slit the skin up the belly. He rolled the hide back over the hump and shoulders. Then, going around behind the unhappy animal, he caught the bull by the tail and jerked the entire skin off in one piece, leaving the bull bawling and bare.

"See how easy it is when you know how," Bjorn said. "Now, Roadstrum, spear the bull on that pike and raise it up to the sun in the roof and roast it. At least you can do that."

"I cannot raise the bull on that pike," said Roadstrum. "I cannot even raise that pike."

"Oh helvede! Spear the bull and raise it up, Hrekkur," Bjorn said, and Hrekkur did it. That little boy of the sun roasted it thoroughly and quickly with a great dripping of burning wonderful grease and a powerful aroma. They ran other bulls through then, skinned them like gloves, and roasted them whole on spits held high in the small sun.

"Let us not get ahead of the count," said Bjorn. "I doubt me a little whether the boy-men can eat a bull each. We will see. Why do you hesitate, Roadstrum? That first bull is yours. Take it, take it in both hands if need be, and eat it up valiantly."

But Bjorn was right. The boy-men from the hornet crafts could not eat a whole bull each. It took three, and sometimes four of them, to devour a whole bull. And they ate pretty heavily too.

Hey, they brought oat-cakes bigger in diameter than a man is high. They brought onions as big as the head of

Burpy, and he had the biggest head of all the crewmen. They brought in honey-mead in casks large enough to make houses out of. And the breakfast beer! They knocked a bung out of the cave wall itself and the beer flowed, black and strong as Irish porter, in a great stream. It was a mountainful of beer they had there.

You think that was all? They had pork pies with a full-grown boar in each of them.

"Roadstrum, Roadstrum," Bjorn chided. "Do not throw away the tusks. One eats them too. They will make a man of you. It is the same with the teeth and the hooves of the stallions that we come to in the next course."

"And the antlers of the stag too, big Bjorn?" Roadstrum asked, for he would not let the huge fellow out-talk him in any case.

"Oh certainly, little Roadstrum. The accepted way is to swallow them without crumpling them or abridging them, but I see that you have neither the mouth nor the gullet for that."

Well, the boy-men from the hornet crafts acquitted themselves pretty well after they had gotten into it. They were slow starters is all. The mightier of them ordered another round of bulls and ate them with only two men to a bull. They ate those little baked whole foxes as though they were peanuts, and the baked rams as though they were cashews. They devoured the beavers, as was the custom, pelts and all. They developed a taste for whole roast wolf and nearly ran the Laestrygonians out of that commodity. And they found eagle stuffed with meadow mice to be a really different tidbit.

They found also that there is this about honey-mead: the second gallon that one drinks is better than the first, and the third is better and more intoxicating than the second. They got as high as orn-eagles, and as stuffed as pigs on acorns.

"Tell me in truth, little Roadstrum, was it not a great breakfast?" Bjorn asked.

"It was a great breakfast, Bjorn," Roadstrum said in all honesty. "In all my life I have never eaten a more filling one."

"And now, Roadstrum and all your small things, we fight," Bjorn announced. "We fight the great fight to the great death. You'll like this part of it, for I begin to see that you are really good fellows and men after all."

"With what do we fight, and for how long?" Captain Puckett asked.

"We fight with the stone-tipped spears and pikes and

with stone battle-axes," Bjorn said. "We have little boy-sized ones that you will be able to lift if you wish to use them. Or, if you have weapons of your own, you may use those; and we fight till everybody is dead. How else is a fight?"

"Can we use our hand blasters?" Captain Roadstrum asked.

"We do not know what are hand blasters," said Bjorn, "but if they are weapons, you may use them, of course. Now, Roadstrum, dismiss the sun and we will go out. Say only, 'The sun, go you out.' "

"The sun, go you out," said Roadstrum, and the little sun unhooked itself from the ceiling of the cave and glanced brilliantly out of the gaping door.

They all mounted their stone slabs, rubbed their feet, and zoomed out of the cave entrance into the sunlight, that of the father sun, not of the little-boy sun who had been in the cave. They landed in a great meadow. Captain Puckett sent Crewman Birdsong back to the hornet crafts to get a hand blaster for each man.

"Do you want one, Deep John?" Captain Roadstrum asked the vagabond.

"No, I always use a piece of coal-car coal swung in a bandanna," said the hobo.

"We do not know what is coal-car coal or bandanna," said Bjorn, "but use them if they are weapons."

"A good solid rock will do for the piece of coal," said Deep John, "and a little sling I have here to swing it in. And I believe a little stone slab I have my eye on could be used both for vehicle and weapon."

"You are sure you want to use those little things, boys?" Bjorn asked when the hand blasters were brought to the crewmen and passed around. "They are so short and light, how will you kill one of us with one of them? Better take the stone-tipped spears and then we will have real sport. You boy-men are small but you seem to be fast. With the stone spears you will kill some of us, at least, and we will have sport."

"No, we will use our blasters," Roadstrum said. "And I will tell you, Bjorn, that it will be strictly no fight. I do not understand your custom in this, but we do not intend to fight till all of us are dead. We desire very much that none of us be dead. And we will fight till all of you are dead only if it is absolutely necessary."

"Spoilsports!" called Hross and Kubbur, the big giants. "Dog-warriors," Fjall jibed. "Little-girl men," Hrekkur derided, "you are not men for a fight. You are not men at all."

"We are men," said Roadstrum, "and we are masters of

men. Bjorn, bring a pig or a sheep and I will show you how easily and at what a distance one of these blasters can kill."

"Do you not insult us!" Bjorn cried angrily. "Pig-soldiers! Sheep-soldiers! Let us see you kill one of our men with one of your blasters. Then we will know whether they are weapons for men."

"No, no, I could not kill a living man or—ah—ogre for demonstration," Roadstrum said.

"I could," said Crewman Fairfeather. Fairfeather had always been something of a blow-top, but there was something different about him now. He had a grin on him that was almost like the grins of the Laestrygonians. He seemed to grow larger. He looked like—well, he had always been the ugliest of the crewmen, now he was nearly as ugly as the Laestrygonians themselves—he looked like one of the giants, that same happy insane look in the eyes.

Fairfeather shot big Hrekkur with his blaster. He tore a big hole in the giant and killed him.

"Now you've torn it!" said Roadstrum angrily. "We'll probably have to kill them all. Watch for their moves."

But all the giant Laestrygonians were whooping with laughter.

"Killed him! Killed him!" they whooped and roared. "Man, he did look funny when you killed him so easily."

"Look at his face, the side of it that's left. He still doesn't believe it."

"Hey, the boy-men got a real weapon going."

"Show us again."

"Kill me."

"Kill me. Hey, little fellows, kill me with one."

"Easy fellows," big Bjorn said. "We can't use all our fun up in one moment. You'll all get killed this day. We don't want to have our sport over too early; and remember, we have to kill the boy-men also. Are we ready? Onto your stone slabs all and into the air for battle!"

"Must we fight on those things in the air?" Roadstrum asked.

"There are no rules. We do whatever seems the most fun," Bjorn said. "Fight where you will. We like to come zooming at each other on the stone slabs and transfix each other with our spears as we crash together. Fight on the ground if you wish, but we will zoom down and spear you on the ground."

"We will try it both ways," said Roadstrum.

Both men and ogres got on their stone slabs and, rubbing their feet on them, lurched up into the air. They fought

with two or three men or ogres on a slab, or with only one on a slab. The men could not steer or maneuver as well as the ogres could, but they learned rapidly since their lives depended on it. And it is very hard to kill with a blaster when riding one of those stone broncos in the sky and shooting at a fluttering evasive target.

Crewmen Fairfeather and Birdsong and Crabgrass were speared with stone-headed spears and killed, but each of them took an ogre with him. These crewmen died with curious whoops of laughter, quite unmanlike, quite ogre-like.

Crewmen Di Prima and Kolonymous were knocked off their slabs and killed in their fall to the ground. Crewman Oldfellow was cloven from crown to crotch with a stone battle-ax, and he died in the both parts of him. And every blaster shot by every man had missed. Only Fairfeather and Birdsong and Crabgrass had killed ogres, and only these had taken stone spears after the unsuccess of their blasters.

"To ground, to ground," Roadstrum ordered. And all the hornet craft men grounded their slabs. "The low air is the element of the ogres and we can't get them there," Roadstrum explained. "We'll stay on the ground where we can take steady aim, for we cannot do it on those wobbly slabs in flight. And they'll have to come down to our level to try to spear us. Here, here, let's form in rings of about five men each, and one can blast them front-on from whichever direction they come."

They formed so. The Laestrygonian ogres swooped around on their slabs in the low air and devised tactics. And then a large stone slab hung in the air directly over every five-man group.

"Blast up," Roadstrum ordered.

All blasted up, and they tore some holes in the stone slabs. But they could not tell whether they killed any ogres. And not one blast in five went all the way through its slab. Those were good stones.

"We wait them out," said Roadstrum. "They cannot spear us unless they expose themselves, and we have them outranged. We wait while the poor giants make up their slow minds. I wonder what signal they use for surrender?"

"Whup! Whup! Whruuupp!!!" It was like an earth-blast shaking the very ground under all of them. One of the stone slabs had dropped suddenly in dead-fall and had smashed and killed all five men stationed under it. Blood running in little rivulets from under the edges of the stone slab, and wild hooting laughter from the low skies!

"Scatter," roared Captain Roadstrum. "Scatter," roared Captain Puckett. And the men all scattered pretty nimbly.

"Crewman Bramble, go up on a small slab and scout," Roadstrum ordered. "Find us an open-face cave or a haven of some kind under an overhang where they must come in to us and cannot drop on us."

Crewman Bramble scraped his feet on a small stone slab and was airborne, followed by whooping giants with stone-tipped spears.

"Up and fly at random," Roadstrum ordered them all. "Stall and evade and blast. We will learn the low-air tricks. We have them outranged, and there is no excuse for letting them kill us so easily."

So they were all up in the air.

But the only one who was doing any good was Deep John the Vagabond, called by Captain Roadstrum their native light-horse auxiliary. The old hobo had a very thin, very small stone slab, with a sharp cutting edge which he made to be the forward edge. He was able to attain very rapid flight on this and come in behind the flying giants. At first he used his handy rock in its swinging sling, crashing it into what should have been the brain-base of the giants, but he could attain nothing against their bull-humps. Then he used his slab itself for a weapon, swooping in beyond them at a very high speed and calculated height, and just plain slicing their heads off with the forward cutting edge of his slab. Their heads hit the ground with thunderous thumps, and the crewmen could keep track of the kills of their ally.

But say, those giants did have a happy time of it, no matter that a few of them were beheaded. They swooped in on the men on their flying stones, fluttering and banking and using their slabs like shields, and then suddenly struck with their long spears and spitted the men. There was laughter that made the low skies ring like bells whenever they did this. There was even louder laughter on the part of the giants when one of their own folk was killed and blown apart by a blaster. It seemed to be the funniest thing they had ever seen.

And in truth it was funny to see one of them blown apart and come down in huge bleeding hunks, the great head usually broken free and landing with a brain-spewing crash. There was never a folk who took such delight in bloody slaughter as did the Laestrygonians.

After a long while, Crewman Bramble came sailing back to the men, a spear quite through his shoulder giving him a rakish and almost heroic appearance.

"Follow, follow," Bramble called. "It isn't much, but I have found something."

They followed him to a huge stone platform under an overhanging ledge, and all the remaining men landed on this. It was at the end of a pocket, the smaller bit of a wedge, and it could be defended. It had a natural parapet, breast-high, and all were behind it with their blasters. There weren't many of them left though, six or seven, and more than twenty had been killed by the giants. How many giants were left they did not know. The men had never counted them, and they did not know them all. The giants all looked very much alike to the men. Here the giants could come at them only one at a time, and they would be fair shot for every blaster.

One of them swooped in on his slab and was blasted to bits very close. His slab staggered away and crashed into the cliff-side very near the haven. The men were covered with a rubble of broken stone and were drenched with the giant's blood.

Another came in, and another. One came in all the way, leaped from his slab, and killed both Crewmen Burpy and Fracas with a single spear-thrust, and was then blasted to death by Captain Puckett. But the shattered bulk of the giant near crowded them out of their haven and left them knee-deep in blood behind their parapet.

Still could be heard the idiot ear-rupturing laughter and hooting of Vetur and Fjall and many nameless giants in the low sky. Still could be heard the happy strong voice of Bjorn.

"Little boy-men, did you ever have so much fun a fight as this? Hey, it's a rousing thing, is it not? We always like to show our guests a good time."

Quite a few hours had gone by in all this. It wasn't swift. It had been all the tedious maneuvering of battle that is not done in an instant. But the men were all soldiers and they began to enjoy it. And still they were incomparably weary.

"One hour the break," came the big voice of Bjorn from the swooping low sky. "It is the noon. Come out and loosen up, and the women bring the water."

"Is it a trick?" asked Captain Puckett.

"No, they are not capable of tricks," said Captain Roadstrum. "Let's get out of here for a while."

They got onto their stone slabs, rubbed their feet, and lurched out into the sunny soft air. The big women of the Laestrygonians were rising on stone slabs with huge jars of

water for the giants, and Margaret the houri came with a pretty fair sized jug for the men.

"I will *not* let those cows bring water to you," she announced. "I bring the water to you myself. Hey, I've been killing some of those cow-women, one at a time, and unbeknownst to the others. Bjorn is right. This killing can be a lot of fun."

"So far this is the oddest day I've ever half spent," growled mighty Roadstrum, as he took his noontime ease on a stone floating in the low sky. "I don't understand the setup here at all. There is neither rime nor reason to it."

"I bring rime," Bjorn called in his loud voice. "Who needs reason?"

The grinning Bjorn slid his slab near to that of Roadstrum. Then he blew a solid note on a jug flute that he had between his legs. And then he declaimed:

*"The little bug has got the glitter eyes of him,*
*You can't go by the pepper-picking size of him.*

*We look and hoot, 'That must be only half of him.'*
*We laugh at him and laugh at him and laugh at him.*

*He be tall eater and a taller topian,*
*No mind the little fellow's microscopian.*

*We pitch a party, sling the dangest dangeroo.*
*Whoop, whoop and holler! He's a hero-hangeroo!"*

"What in hound-dog heaven is come over you, Bjorn?" Roadstrum asked in wonder. "Is that Laestrygonian verse?"

"Sure is not, little Roadstrum. That is Road-Storm verse, your own high epic. We make verses of it here also, as do folks everywhere. It is so long a time since we have had a certified hero in our place. You think we be so nice to you if we do not know who you are?"

The grinning giant dripped rivers of sweat onto the earth below, and his voice was full of thunder. Roadstrum remembered an old mythology where the first rain was the sweat of such a deity-hero, and the first thunder was such a voice. But now Bjorn changed and became all business.

"The noon is over!" he cried in a voice that made big cracks in a high cloud. "All back and make ready for the fight. Scoot, little men, back to your haven. Last one there gets killed!"

The last one back to the haven was Crewman Ursley, and he was killed at the very entrance of it.

Now came the rocks thrown by the slab-hands of the giants, rocks near as big as the men themselves. This was the mortar attack from cover. Crewman Mundmark was struck by such a rock. His limbs were unstrung, he burst asunder, and he died. Crewman Snow was similarly slain, but in louder fashion. The rock didn't strike him full but it sheared near half of him away. He howled and roared and screamed. Crewman Snow was very reluctant about the dying business, but he died nevertheless.

And yet the men were killing possibly two for one. They blasted arms off the giants that were reared back to throw. They blasted every one dead who ventured into the open. And there hadn't been many giants, or men.

"How many of us left?" Captain Roadstrum asked as though he were counting patrols and batteries and battalions.

"I see myself. I see you," said Captain Puckett. "I do not see any others."

"How many of you dog-hearted giants are left?" Roadstrum called loudly.

"Only myself," came the strong voice of Bjorn. "Come out the two of you and we will see who is dog-hearted."

"I go," said big Captain Puckett. "I always did want to die a hero's death."

Puckett went out with his blaster blasting. He smashed rocks open as though they were eggs. He knocked an arm and shoulder off of Bjorn when he had only half a shot at him, and the happy laughter of Bjorn over it was one of the great things.

"I will show you a hero, a hero," Captain Puckett swore.

"Dead hero, dead hero, come to me," Bjorn jibed. They were out of Roadstrum's sight now. The sun was in his eyes as he peered, and it would soon be dusk.

There were a dozen more blasts, a dozen more hooting laughs almost too big even for a giant, and then a last blood-clabbering scream.

"The little boy-man was a hero after all," Bjorn called. "Shall I toss your dead hero to you, Roadstrum?"

"Toss him," Roadstrum called. And the body of Puckett, impaled on the great spear, came sailing in. Roadstrum caught him somewhat, stretched him out, and gave him the hero's salute.

"Hurry!" Bjorn called with some urgency. "The sun sets, and we two are left."

"What is the hurry?" Roadstrum called. "I fight well in the dark."

"No, no!" the giant cried. "Be you not difficult! All must

be dead before the sun goes down. Hurry out and be the hero too."

"A hero I am not, Bjorn," Roadstrum blared. "Alive I will bide a while, and it is now my brain against yours."

But Roadstrum lied, hardly realizing it. Some time before, in the time of the ten-year war, Roadstrum had caught the heroes' disease during one of the campaigns. It is infectious, and it stays with one to some degree forever. It usually took him every third day along about sundown, coming with a sudden chill and a quick steep fever. Always he had taken precautions so that he would do nothing rash while the heroic fever was upon him. But this was the third day at sundown and the fever came suddenly; and this time Roadstrum had not taken precautions.

He jerked Bjorn's great spear out of the body of Captain Puckett. He selected a stone slab, rubbed his feet on it, and veered out of the haven.

"Up and at it, Bjorn of the dog-liver!" he called boldly. "We fight your way to the death."

"Have we time?" the giant cried. "Thunder! Have we time? The sun goes down."

"In the high air it shines yet," Roadstrum called. "Up and at it, Bjorn."

There were two giants laughing in the sky! Roadstrum had turned himself into a giant with as boisterous and happy a laugh as the best ogre of them all. Now they came at each other on wild pitching stone slabs, the most rampaging stallions ever. Bjorn had his second spear, shorter but heavier than the first, and Roadstrum had found the strength to heft and haft the great spear itself. A pass, and both were slashed and gouged, and each left a hunk of meat on the other's spear.

"Higher," Bjorn called, "the sun fails. Faster, the final sortie. Up, up, Roadstrum, the sun must catch both our spears."

They went up very high. The sun was on the bloody points of both their spears, and all the world below was dark. Then they charged, each on his snorting stone slab that neighed and surged and had come alive. Roadstrum caught big Bjorn in the middle of the belly, where it is mortal to an ogre. To swerve then, in the millionth of a second! But there was not time to swerve. Bjorn's eyes laughed at Roadstrum as he died, and his heavy spear had the man through the center breast. Roadstrum's slab was the higher, and it sliced Bjorn through at the groin. The two heroes came together in death, transfixed on each

other's spears, and fell a very very great way to the ground that was now in night darkness.

"Ah, well, I died a hero and a giant," Roadstrum said, for every man is allowed one sentence after death.

So now all were dead on both sides. It had been close, though. For a while it seemed that they were not going to make it. The giants had told the men that the fun is all spilled out and lost if all are not dead by the fall of night.

Dead and splattered. Gathered up and carried. By what? By whom?

But even in dreams *they* are not. They are on the other side of dreams. It was incredible enough that one of them could carry Roadstrum, a giant among men. But how could one carry Bjorn, who was a giant among giants?

Death is for a long time. Those of shallow thought say that it is forever. There is, at least, a long night of it. There is the forgetfulness and the loss of identity. The spirit, even as the body, is unstrung and burst and scattered. One goes down to the death, and it leaves a mark on one forever.

"Come to the breakfast!" boomed a voice so vast that it shook the world and all the void between the worlds. "Come to the breakfast!"

And there was another voice rilling on in saucy silver, that of Margaret the houri.

"I see that I am going to have to make some changes here," Margaret was shrilling angrily. "You eat, you fight, you die, you sleep, you wake up, and you eat again. But where does that leave the women? You are going to have to find an hour every day for them."

"Yes, yes," said Skel and Mus and Fleyta and Belja and Toa and Glethi and Vinna and Ull and Raetha, and all those other Laestrygonian dames with the more difficult names, "you are going to have to find one hour in the day for us."

"I think for a long time there is something missing," big Bjorn was saying, "but there is no time for anything else. We breakfast, and then we fight till all are killed, and then it is night. We are dead all the night, and then we sleep for a very little while at first sun. Then is it time for breakfast again. Look yourself at the sundial, little witch-child. Can you see any time for anything else on the sundial?"

Margaret the houri lifted a boulder larger than herself and smashed the sundial.

"I will make a new dial," she said. "I will make it different and with an extra hour. There has to be time for the women. And now I will instruct the women on what they will do in that hour."

"How did I get back here, Maggy?" Roadstrum asked the houri. "Was I not dead?"

"Of course you were. And I was Valkyrie last night (the others showed me how to be one) and I carried you back from the battlefield. Sprained a shoulder doing it."

"But how was I dead and now I am alive?" Roadstrum persisted.

"Do you not understand yet, little Roadstrum?" Crewman Birdsong asked him. "Hey, it was a rollick, wasn't it?"

Little Roadstrum? From Crewman Birdsong? Roadstrum was *not* little, he was a giant of a man, he topped Crewman Birdsong by a head.

No he didn't. He didn't come up to the nether ribs of Birdsong. Crewman Birdsong had become a giant, as had Crewman Fairfeather.

"Why has it happened to you two, and not to great Roadstrum and to great Myself?" Captain Puckett asked, for now he was alive and awake again.

"Some have it and some do not," said Crewman Birdsong. "You two, and the most of you, must have had mental reservations when you went into the thing. I thought all along that you fellows weren't as joyous and wholehearted in the battle as you might have been. If you let yourselves go completely today and enter into it with a happy howling heart, then I believe you can make it."

"But what is it? How does it happen? Where are we really?" Roadstrum asked.

"No? You really don't know? Valhalla, of course. Here the heroes fight to the death every day in glorious and cloud-capping battle. And every morning they are reborn to fight and die again. I can see where it's going to be a lot of fun."

"Doesn't it become kind of tiresome after a while, Bjorn?" Roadstrum asked the giant of giants.

"Why no, not really, Roadstrum. You know how it is with everything. They all pall a little after the centuries begin to mount. But this is better than most things. Stay with us; you will be a mighty fighter yet."

"We have a choice to make, Captain Puckett," said Roadstrum.

"Let us first go see if we *do* have a choice, Captain Roadstrum," said Puckett.

They gathered their men, except Crewmen Birdsong and

Fairfeather, who had already become giants and who would remain in any case. They went down to their hornet crafts to see if anything at all could be done to repair them on this world, to see if the mad boy Hondstarfer had left anything of them.

Well, at least the shells of the hornets were still there, but there was a great amount of the works scattered around on the rocky ground.

"I couldn't see any use for a lot of that stuff so I left it out," said the boy Hondstarfer. "They will both fly now, but one of them will break down again after a little while. This one here is perfect and will fly forever. On the other one I made a lot of mistakes. You'll have more room in them now if you ever use them. Those long things I took out were what was taking up all the room."

"Those are the main drives," said Crewman Boniface.

"Ah well, the ships are fixed," the boy said, "but one of them will break down again."

"They will fly?" asked Crewman Humphrey. "Men, men, let's go then! I've had enough of this place where they stuff you full of bull and then hunt you down and kill you every day."

"No, of course they won't fly," said Roadstrum. "How could they fly without their main drives?"

"Oh, they'll fly," the boy Hondstarfer said. "I fixed the clumsy things. Did my father Bjorn not tell you that I was mechanically inclined?"

"However could you fix such intricate machinery with nothing but those seven stone hammers there?" Captain Puckett asked.

"I didn't, I couldn't, I only thought that I could. I had to go get that."

They hadn't noticed it before. They'd thought it was a tree. Hondstarfer hadn't fixed their hornets with those seven little stone hammers. He'd used a *big* stone hammer. Was it ever big!

"Hey, I want to be a hobo," Hondstarfer cried as Deep John the Vagabond fluttered down on his favorite slab. "How do I go about it, Deep John?"

"It isn't like it used to be," said Deep John. "It all seems much smaller and narrower since we took to the skies. The spacious days of it were on World in the old railroad time. But you'd need a time machine to get back there, Hondstarfer."

"Oh, I've got a time machine," the boy said, "also a space-racer. I think I'll go to World and turn myself back and be an old-time railroad hobo."

"Well, what is the choice?" Puckett asked. "Do we try to fly in something that can't possibly fly? Or do we stay to be killed again and again and again?"

"Wait, wait," called Margaret the houri. "I'm going with you. Those giants aren't as much fun as I thought they'd be. You get tired of them after a while."

"That's true, that's true," said Roadstrum. "We have our choice. Let's make it. I was a giant for my moment. I can be one again if I'm called on to be. Shall we say that Hondstarfer could not fix these things to fly? Shall we say that the stone slabs of this world could not fly? Load in whoever wants to go! We fly! We fly! We've flown on less."

And to their own amazement they began to load in.

"Wait, wait," big Bjorn called coming down to them. "Will you not stay to the breakfast?"

"We will not stay to the breakfast," Roadstrum said.

"You will do better today," Bjorn stated. "You begin to be giants. Today you will be able to eat a whole bull, Roadstrum."

"I am able to, yes, Bjorn, but I do not want to eat a whole bull. I can be the giant whenever I wish, and I am afflicted with the heroes' disease that smites me every third day about sundown. But we will fly! There are skies we have not seen yet! There are whole realms still unvisited by us. We will not be penned in even a giants' pen. We fly!"

"In that case, Roadstrum—ah—it is an embarrassing thing to say—in that case there is one thing we must do before you leave."

"Do it then," said Roadstrum.

"We do not want to be overrun with amateurs," the giant Bjorn explained. "If everybody knew how much fun it was here, then everybody would come. We want only such fine farers as yourselves who come by high chance. You must promise never to tell anybody how much fun it is here."

"We promise," said Roadstrum. "We will never tell anybody how much fun it is here."

"And there is one small thing that we must do to make sure that you keep your promises," Bjorn added.

"And what is that?"

"CUT YOUR BLOODY TONGUES OUT!"

Two of the Laestrygonian giants grabbed each man and threw him down; and a third, stepping on his man's throat to force his tongue out, grabbed it and pulled it out still further to its absolute extent, and then cut it out with a stone knife, roots and all.

Here was the creamingest pain ever. Here was utter frustration. Who may battle and defy and get revenge when

deprived of tongue and voice? And besides, they were near dead from the loss of blood, near a more final death than that of the night before.

But they crawled and dragged themselves in, gagging and green, and loaded dying into their crafts, with Roadstrum going last.

"Here is one final thing beyond the final," said Bjorn. "—Ah, I am truly sorry to see you looking so green and puny—one very last surety you must give before you tumble dying into your boat. You must write on this paper that my little boy has here, for my boy Hondstarfer, as you may not know, can read. You will use your finger and the blood from the roots of your tongue. You will write 'I will never tell anyone how much fun it is in this place.' "

And mighty Roadstrum wrote with his finger and his tongue's-roots blood "I will never tell anyone how much fun it is in this place."

*They took to air all bloodily and retchingly,*
*They made new tongues, but didn't make them fetchingly,*

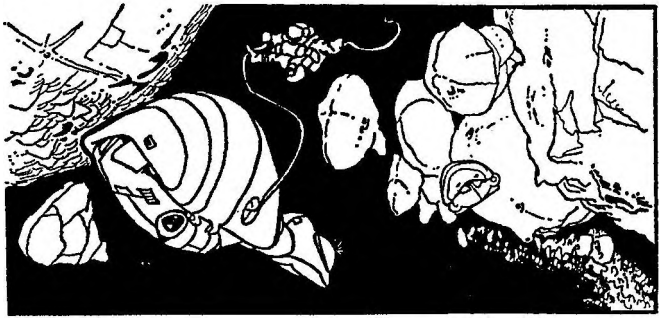
*And flew through chartless skies where none had fled before;*
*Whatever came, at least they'd all been dead before.*

*But one thing worked, whatever else might nix the things,*
*That hammer-handling kid had really fixed the things.*

*All bloody luck they ever got away like that,*
*They sure did never want another day like that!*

*And Roadstrum shucked another layer fretfully:*
*One gives up giantizing most regretfully.*

Ibid



## CHAPTER THREE

*All lost in space, the hide-bound inner side of it,*
*With roaring rocks that gave them quite a ride of it—*

*Ah better Dobie's Hole than such vortexicon*
*That stoned them all and spooked the cowboy lexicon!*

*They guessed wrong guess and reveled in unheedingly*
*(Where clashing rocks turned strange and roared stampedingly),*

*And ate High Cow, and fell beneath the curse of it,*
*And bantered suns, and ended up the worse for it.*

*They had the horns and hump and very prime of it,*
*And rather lost themselves about that time of it.*

Ibid

THEY CAME AMONG the clashing rocks, "the rocks wandering." It was a thick asteroid belt moving at a respectable speed, and it was necessary that the hornets match its direction and speed for safety. Besides, since they were lost, they might as well go where the rocks were going.

The wandering rocks were mostly about the size of the hornets themselves, rounded and not too rough. They were thickly clustered, one every thousand meters or so. "And we called that thick!" the men said later. They were gray bumbling things in the gray twilight, and some of the men got out and rode on them.

"They've got eyes on them," said Crewman Oldfellow.

"Probably the mica glint," said Captain Roadstrum.

"No, no, not like that at all. Eyes like a calf, like a buffalo calf that I saw at a World zoo once. I look sideways at one of them, he looks sideways at me, and we see each others' eyes. But when I look at one of them directly, his eyes disappear."

"Ah well, maybe your eyes disappear also," said Roadstrum. "You'd be the last to know."

The clashing rocks kept their distances and positions pretty well; and yet it seemed as though they became somehow more numerous, as though they spawned when the men were not looking.

Roadstrum sent his men out to mark and number the one hundred nearest rocks. And then they rode along and studied the traveling rocks for an equivalent day.

"There are two forty-nines," Crewman Lawrence reported then, "and we numbered only one of each number."

"Then I have bumblers for men and they are not able to count to one hundred," said Roadstrum angrily.

"That is not so," Crewman Bramble protested. "I made the dies myself and I made them true. But now there are three number nines each bearing my genuine and original die of that number."

"There are five number sevens at least," said Crewman Crabgrass. "It sure does get crowded now."

"Do you hear snorting, Roadstrum?" Captain Puckett called from his hornet. ("False tongue, false tongue," warned the communicator.)

"Space noises, Puckett," Roadstrum called back. ("False tongue," warned the machine.) "And they become even noisier," said Roadstrum. "But would you call it snorting? Well yes, I guess you would. Puckett, where in glare-eyed space are all these rocks coming from? And what is the excitement and fear that seems to be running loose among them?" ("False tongue," the communicator warned again.)

The communicator always gave this warning now, whenever a man spoke from one hornet to another. The "False Tongue" sensor had been built into the communicator from the beginning as guard against space things that may counterfeit the human voice and so interfere and subvert. But now all the crewmen had false manufactured tongues in their heads, and their communicators warned them against themselves.

All except Deep John the hobo. Deep John had in some manner escaped the attention of the Laestrygonian

giants at that time. "I was the only one able to keep a civil tongue in my head," Deep John liked to say.

Margaret the houri had also kept her own tongue, but the communicator called "False tongue" at her nevertheless. The machine read her as something not quite human, and her tongue also.

"It is snorting, Roadstrum," Captain Puckett called again. "It is snorting and bawling and trampling. Hear the heavy hooves of it!" (False tongue," said the thing.)

"We spooked them, Captain Roadstrum," Crewman Threefountains said mysteriously. "Some of these breeds spook easy. Man, are we ever going to have a rumble!"

"They are perverse roaring rocks," said Crewman Bramble, "and I do not believe that the spherical is their real form. And the closest one, rubbing on our very windows there and threatening to break in, bears the number three and five-eighths, and we made no fractional-number dies; and yet it is a die made by my own hand; no one could counterfeit me there."

They went another equivalent day, and the churning rocks were like to crush them all. "Each of the pawing rocks has a brand as well as a die number," Crewman Trochanter said then. "It's a sun-brand, but I don't know what sun."

"There's dust," said Roadstrum, "prairie dust, but how could there be dust out here? And our scan-can reads that there is a break in the thing, half an equivalent day ahead. We'll break out of this then, no matter what we break into."

"The way out of one known fusillade of rocks is Dobie's Hole," said Crewman Crabgrass, "and the hole is not bad. But the way out of the other known congress of clashing rocks is the Vortex. It apparently leads to sure death; nobody has ever come out of it again."

"It's death here," said Roadstrum. "We will take the side break when we come to it. We are lost, and we will not know whether it is Dobie's Hole or the Vortex. Hey, what curious things are you men doing with the ropes there?"

"We don't know," the men said. "We just found ourselves doing it. We have a compulsion to form the ropes into such running loops as these. There is something we must do with them when the time comes."

"Roadstrum," Captain Puckett called from his hornet, "the jostling rocks have gone insane! What's the name of this madness?" ("False tongue," warned the communicator.)

Deep John the hobo took the communicator and called from Roadstrum's hornet to Puckett's:

"The name of it is stampede."

"I think so too," Puckett answered. "Roadstrum, my men are making running loops in ropes, and they don't know why." ("False tongue.")

"So are mine, Puckett," cried mighty Roadstrum. "It will offend someone when it is done; but what is another measure of trouble added to what we already have?" ("False tongue," cried the machine.)

It was as though they were coming to a great river, and the stampeding stones were filling it up and running over it on the backs of their bogged comrades. But at this river in the sky (for half an equivalent day had passed), there was a second ford breaking off hard to the left. The hornets took the branching, coming into a region where the rocks pressed them less hardly. But now the men broke out of the hornets and began to do things clear outside of reason.

Crewmen Crabgrass and Clamdigger went for the horns of a little calf-rock they had selected, a rock even smaller than a hornet, not above five times the size of a bull elephant. And they had the thing by the horns, but how will a small asteroid have horns?

Then all the mad crewmen from both hornets were outside, shouting and making ritual motions with their ropes. They flew flying loops around that calf-rock, more than a dozen of them. They jerked it along their own new way, both the hornets dogging it. The men all gave voice to varieties of barking and hooting, and the calf-rock was bawling. The dust was deep and stifling and smelled of flint sparks.

"It's a thing too tall for my reason," Roadstrum slung out, "but I get the high excitement myself. We are pulled along at a great rate on our new course, but we will not let the doggie go! Onto it! Kill it! Skin it! Break it down! Devour it!"

They were out of the concourse of rocks now, except for the calf-rock whose neck they had broken and which died. They had escaped from one of the known fusillades of rocks, and their way of escape was not Dobie's Hole. It was the Vortex.

Nevertheless, the men, working dangerously, had begun to dismember the calf-rock, and some of them had lit space-primus fires to roast it.

"The horns and the hooves to Captain Roadstrum," Crewman Threefountains roared, "and the fat of the hump to Captain Puckett."

"What is it all, Roadstrum, what is it?" Puckett called.

"False tongue," warned the communicator.

"Oh shut up!" Roadstrum told the communicator. "Crew-

man Bramble, disassemble the bogus-intrusion safeguard. It drives me crazy."

"All right," said Bramble, and he quickly disassembled it.

"I don't know what it is, Puckett," Roadstrum called then, "but there's something about the aroma as they begin to roast the meat. A space-primus fire really has no odor, so how should it smell to me like sage-brush and buffalo-chips? Why should the meat smell to me like buffalo meat roasting, when I never smelled buffalo meat? The closest I ever came to it was my grandfather telling of eating it when he was a boy, at a rodeo on the Fourth of July at the old Hundred and One Ranch. And how is it that the men have got such magnificent horns and hooves off a round rough rock?"

"It's one of the sacred cattle of the sun we have killed," came the voice of Puckett. "We knew before we were born that this was forbidden. Now we must die the fiery death for the offense. You have the lead hornet, Roadstrum. Turn into the near sun with it, and I will follow. Let us be consumed by fire. There is no more hope for us."

"You're out of your wits, Puckett. What cattle of what sun?"

"The sun so great that it is known as *the* sun, Roadstrum. It is the nearest sun to us. Let us turn into it at once and be consumed for our sacrilege!"

"Puckett, if I had one of Hondstarfer's stone hammers here I'd fix your head for you. You're gone daft!"

"What, Roadstrum? I was outside for a moment trying to figure this thing out. Holy cow, it's an odd one! I heard you talking as I came back in."

"Puckett, you were giving me a balleyowl about the cattle of the sun and telling me we must turn into this nearest sun and be consumed."

"I was not, Roadstrum! Curse that sleazy little sun! Someone is trying to call us to our deaths. We'll not go into that little sun, and we can't go back through the stampeding rocks. It was the other sort of false tongue talking to you, not me. We're into the Vortex for good, so let's provision for it. Come out and feast, Roadstrum! Ten men couldn't eat the bull-hump of this calf, a hundred men couldn't eat the loins. Bring out a few kilos of pepper and a firkin of Ganymede hot-sauce."

"Curse that sniveling little sun, Puckett. For time out of mind and belly I've never seen such a thing as this!"

Did they ever carve up that big young bull! They were into the Vortex itself, going at unlawful and unnatural speed, caught by a force that none had ever broken, but they weren't going hungry into it.

They feasted on that big carcass that had seemed to be a rock. They questioned nothing. They were going at a speed where all the onrushing stars appeared violet color ("Lavender," said Crewman Crabgrass. "Lavender world laughs with you," said Crewman Trochanter), where all sequence was destroyed, where any answers would have to come before the questions.

The space-primus fire had become a pungent campfire. Crewman Threefountains played on his harmonica as the crewmen still gorged on the offworldly beef. Then they had branding-iron coffee from somewhere, and horse whisky. They had left the sniveling little sun and were going into a vaster black sun that had gobbled up its own light. It was night now, but it wasn't an ordinary night.

And then they all fell to singing old campfire songs, whether this should be the end of them or not. They sang such old songs as "Eight-Eyed Lucy Jane" (it's plain she isn't plain), "I Lost My Heart on Wallenda World" (to a woolly Woomagoo), "The Green Veronica," and "The Grollanthropus and His Girl."

And they were rushing into the Vortex at two hundred million kilometers a second, and there was no possible way to break out of it.

*They felled a flipping doggie, made a bobble-up,*
*And dropped to mokey sun that worked the gobble-up.*

*It swallowed time and flow in loins and liver yet,*
*And voided all that ever gave the Giver yet.*

*One countered not with care or even laughter it,*
*It drew in whole and pulled the hole in after it.*

*Use but a thumb to gull the gulping glutton there!*
*That hammer-handling kid had put a button there!*

Ibid

"I always wanted to study an involuted, massive, black-giant sun," Crewman Bramble said. "I dreamed as a young man how interesting it would be to have plenty of time to study one and at close range. We will have the time of our life for it now and a very close range. I say it all again, but I have a false tongue in my head in two different

senses. Roadstrum, I never wanted so little to do a thing in my life!"

"The equivalent-day recorder has gone crazy," said Roadstrum. "Look at the days flip over. Why, Bramble, there's nine days passed while we talk here."

"That idiot kid Hondstarfer must have meddled with it as he did with everything else on the crafts," Bramble guessed. "Still, it's peculiar that it should begin to misfunction after all this time."

"Captain Puckett," Roadstrum called over the communicator, "has the equivalent-day recorder gone crazy on your craft?"

"Yep, gone crazy," Pucket answered. "We've been amusing ourselves with it. We've got to amuse ourselves with something as we drop to our deaths. Do you know, Roadstrum, according to this thing, I've aged a year in the last baseline hour? Hey, this would make a man old fast if he went by it, wouldn't it?"

"It's a damned dumb thing that the equivalent-day recorders should go wrong on both hornets at the same time," Roadstrum growled.

"It was a damned dumb kid we had meddling with our equipment," Bramble complained. "But so far we've figured out a purpose for everything he did, except the equivalent-day recorder now, and the *Dong* button."

The *Dong* button was just that, a big green button with the word *Dong* engraved on it. You pushed it, and it went *dong*. Well, that was almost too simple. Should there not be a deeper reason for it? And the small instruction plate over it didn't add much. It read: "Wrong prong, bong gong."

"There's no more to the button than is apparent?" Roadstrum asked Crewman Bramble.

"Yes, there is more. Everything on our hornets works by the static-repulsion principle now, you know. And the *Dong* button contains one half of a static-repulsion couple. But wherever in wall-eyed space the other half of that couple is, I don't know. It isn't on the hornets."

Well, they were well-fed by the space-calf that had masqueraded as a rock until they had slaughtered it. They were well provisioned by its leavings. They were rested and well, and they were falling to their sure deaths.

So the men busied themselves, or they did not, according to their natures. They had fun variously. And now and again one of them returned to one of the crazy equivalent-day recorders.

"Look, look," Crewman Crabgrass chortled. "I'm a month older just while I was in the john. You guys always did

say I took too long there. And I'm two years older than I was when I finished my third breakfast a while ago."

"A man could live a lifetime every two days by that thing," Crewman Snow laughed.

But the crewmen laughed less loudly when they discovered (about the time that the equivalent-day recorder had racked up five years since the beginning of its malfunction) that they had all aged about five years in appearance during those short hours.

Thereafter they whistled softly and spookily and began to look at the recorder with something like frightened awe. And they looked at each other furtively and did not meet each others' eyes.

A little later, Crewman Mundmark died of heart stoppage. He hadn't been too old a man, and he had kept in pretty good shape. But he had lived the violent years of a spaceman, and with twenty years suddenly piled on top of that (for it was about twenty years now) it was no great wonder that he should die.

There were balding pates and graying heads popping out all over the place. Crewman Ursley lost three fingers suddenly. There was nothing happened to them. Suddenly they were gone. A bandage bloomed briefly where the three fingers had been, and then there was only old scar tissue. And Ursley gazed at his changed hand in understandable amazement.

"Whence have I this sudden, great, old scar-gash on my cheek?" Roadstrum croaked out baffled. "When have I lost me my fine right eye, and how is it that I find myself carrying that eye (in pickled form) in my pocket?"

"These are all incidents of the lives we would have lived out were we not falling into the blind black sun," Crewman Clamdigger gave the opinion. "These are the losses and mutilations that we would suffer in our normal lives, and they show on us here as we come to these equivalent years in our fall into the Vortex."

"There was an old World movie named 'Death Train' of which I forget the plot but remember the impression," said Crewman Crabgrass. "And at the end of it they were in a runaway train going into a long tunnel to their deaths. So are we."

"It reminds me of a freight train I caught out of Waterloo, Iowa one night about three hundred years ago," said Deep John the Vagabond. "Man, that train did have an eerie mournful sound to it, and the clicking of the rails—why I can hear the same clicking of the rails now."

"So can we all," said Roadstrum, "but how would there

be rails clicking when we are going at a thousand times the speed of light?"

"Roadstrum," Puckett called from his hornet in a much-aged voice, "I've turned into a bald-headed, pot-bellied, crabby old man with no teeth and not very much vision. I don't like it."

"I don't like my own aging, Puckett. Have any of your men died?"

"Yes, about half. A good thing too. They're not much good for anything when they get to that age. Roadstrum, this will have to be goodbye. I'm too old and stove in to get outside the sphere these last two years—ah—that is, the last thirty minutes. It's happening faster now, you know."

"Myself, I will try it once more," said Captain Roadstrum.

Roadstrum went outside the hornet sphere. He had always liked to go outside, but now it was unpleasant and very difficult. He could not comprehend that positive black light nor the distortions of space. With the reversal of the curvature, the turning inside-out of mass and moment, it seemed that they were already inside the bulk of the black sun, but they rushed forever faster into the deep Vortex.

Roadstrum barely made it back inside. Still, he was proud of himself.

"I always said I'd live to be a hundred," he boasted. "Holy Cow, am I not a ramrod straight and imposing man at ninety-four! A Gray Eminence! Maggy, has it any effect on you? What does that mirror you are so busy with tell you?"

"Really, Captain Roadstrum, twenty or even twenty-one is not a bad age. I study myself as I come to that. No, I do not age as quickly as you do, but I age. I like me when I'm young. I like me when I'm old. I bet I even like me when I get to be twenty-two or even twenty-three."

"What, all the men dead except Hobo John?"

"Yes, all the others, Roadstrum, and now it catches up to me also. I had won a delay some centuries ago, actually I won the delay in a gambling game with a certain Power, but now both my basic and my extended life come to an end," said Deep John.

"It hasn't been a bad life, but it was rather disappointing that the last two-thirds of it should pass away in less than an equivalent day. Seems unfair, but we did kill that calf, and perhaps we shouldn't have. We should have known that such odd cattle would have belonged to someone. What, dying, Hobo John?"

"Might as well, Roadstrum," said Deep John the Vagabond, and he died.

"Be there any living on the other hornet?" Roadstrum called.

"None but me," came the crackling old voice of Crewman Oldfellow. "And I'm about to turn in and die myself. It's funny, Captain Roadstrum, they called me Oldfellow because I was the youngest man in the crews, and the name stuck. And somehow it never seemed to me that I'd really get old. I got to die now, and I doubt if we'll ever meet again. But if they *do* ever let you visit up our way, look me up."

"I will, Oldfellow. Pleasant death to you."

Margaret the houri had just made a little cake.

"Happy birthday, Captain Roadstrum," she called out cheerfully now.

"What, what Mag, what's this?"

"You just turned a hundred, Captain. Eat it."

"I will, Mag. Say, did you ever notice that a man gives off a pretty strong odor for about a second when he dies. Well, they're all gone but me, and now I go. It was nice, but shorter than I expected."

And he went into death snooze. Why not? He was a hundred and eight at least by the time he had finished the cake. It was going faster now.

"You are like all the others," said Margaret. "Why did I think you might be different?"

"Snuff, snuff, snooze," Roadstrum breathed in his death slumber.

"To boil a lobster, one takes first a lobster— Will not that rouse you again, Roadstrum? 'Passed the last possible moment,' Deep John would say, and now he is dead. Are you dead also, Roadstrum?"

"Mighty near." Roadstrum spoke out of his death sleep. "Leave me in peace."

"What was that word, Roadstrum? Peace? It's a fine word for the mob, but it will gag the one man in a million. Shall I say it again, Captain? Peace."

"I *am* one man in a million," Roadstrum protested out of his deep, old-man sleep. "Maggy, it does gag me. Why, I'll erupt out of the grave and stage my own ressurrection."

And he did manage to sit up, looking very much like Lazarus.

"How old am I now, Mag?" he asked in his reedy voice.

"A hundred and twenty, Captain, and it goes faster."

"That's not a bad age for a real man. What went wrong? There is a way out of everything, but somewhere we took the wrong turning, the wrong prong."

Then he looked at the *Dong* by his side, the button that the boy Hondstarfer had put there. "Wrong prong, bong gong," said its instruction plate. Roadstrum pushed this button as he had many times before, and it went *dong* as it always did.

Then Roadstrum fell back once more into what seemed to be his death slumber. But now there was somehow a change in the low purr, in the cosmic sound.

"I had better just hop over to the other hornet and push the button there too," Margaret said, and she did.

Yes, a fellow smells a little high for the short second just before he comes back to life, just as he did for a short second after he died. Margaret snuffled her nose at Crewman Oldfellow, and left. She went back to Roadstrum's hornet. It was her regular place. Everything was much as it had been before, except that the equivalent-day recorder had begun to run backwards as soon as the *Dong* button had matched the other half of its coupler with something in the black sun. And pretty soon Roadstrum came out of his death slumber on the same side he had gone into it.

"Mighty rum thing, Maggy, mighty rum. You remember what the high poet said:

*The eating, aging, empty ogre got 'em there;*
*They fell into the well that had no bottom there.*

Let us expunge that couplet, Maggy, for it was writ of ourselves, and we are entitled to edit our own epic. Perhaps the black sun did get us, but in the time reversal thing he did not. This is a most handy button. Now we can back out of anything we get into, as long as we are with the hornets."

It was fun watching the men return. There was something comic in their difficulty in accepting the thing. "You're kidding. It couldn't really happen like that," they all said. They were a bunch of cranky old men, and then they began to get younger as hope welled up in them. They came back, every last one of them. Roadstrum had his rogue eye back in his head, unpickled and serene. The scar-gash left his cheek. And Crewman Ursley had his three fingers back on his hand.

But there is a weirdness in almost all actions done backwards. It wasn't as much fun regurgitating the space-calf as it had been eating it. And they did have a blue hell of a time putting that thing back together. Roadstrum hated to give up the magnificent horns and hooves, but there was no way out of it. You go on that backwards jag and you'd better expect the improbable.

Certain bodily functions are unusual and almost unpleas-

ant when done in reverse; but to get out of a hole like they were in, you will put up with a lot.

They were back among the clashing rocks, "the rocks wandering." They were out of those rocks again on the other side of them. They were lost in space again; but the equivalent-day recorder was running normally now, in the right direction and apparently at the right speed.

"Whyever did we choose that path into the clashing rocks over all other possible paths?" Roadstrum asked in amazement.

"Give a look at the other possible paths, Captain Roadstrum, as you looked before," said Crewman Crabgrass.

"I look. I shudder," groaned Roadstrum. "I'm not sure but what the terrible course we just backed out of is not the best one. Horror, horrors everywhere we look."

"One thing, Roadstrum," Captain Puckett called from his hornet. "We didn't lose any time on that side trip. We came out at exactly the same moment that we went in."

("False voice," warned the communicator, "false voice.")

## CHAPTER FOUR

*He won a thousand worlds, and made the bums of them,*
*And mocked the Gentry for the broken thumbs of them.*

*He propped the Universe, but propped it jerkily,*
*For mighty Atlas after Georgie Berkeley.*

*He climbed the Siren-zo and made a clown of it,*
*And plucked the high note from the very crown of it.*

*Hold hard with heels and hands and crotch and cuticle*
*For episodes becoming epizootical.*

Ibid

"I BELIEVE that I have found a sure way to beat the games," Roadstrum said. And all the men groaned.

"Give it up, Captain Roadstrum," Crewman Clamdigger begged. "The smartest gambling men in all the worlds are here; and a mental man you are not."

"This is a sure thing," Roadstrum insisted.

"Give it up, Captain," Crewman Trochanter pleaded. "There are men here with luck growing out of their fingers and toes, luck in their eyes and voices, in their minds and in their nether-minds, in their beards and in their bowels. And there is no man of us, even with false tongue, who can say 'Lucky Captain Roadstrum' without laughing. A lucky man you are not."

They were down on Roulettenwelt, the gamblers' world.

This was the showiest of all worlds, and it was said that the streets there were paved with gold. Actually, only the Concourse, the Main Mall, the Royal Row, Broadway West, Vega, and Pitchman's Alley were paved with gold, and these only in their central blocks, not over five thousands of meters of roadway in all.

And crewmen went into the big houses and watched the big gamblers; and they listened to the tall stories about them. There was Johnny Greeneyes, who could see every invisible marking on cards with his odd optics. There was Pyotr Igrokovitch with the hole in his head. Pyotr was the most persistent suicide of them all. Following heavy losses in his youth he had shot himself through the head. It had not killed him, but the shot had carried away great portions of the caution and discretion lobes of his brain. The passage through his head had remained open, with pinkish flaps of flesh covering the holes fore and aft.

Now, whenever Pyotr suffered heavy losses, he jerked out his pistol and shot himself through the head. It was all for a joke; he always shot himself through the same passage; and the "brains" which he appeared to spew out the back opening with the shot were in reality only phlegm that had gathered in his head. But it was rather a weird thing when seen by one for the first time, and Pyotr very often killed spectators standing behind him.

There was the Asteroid Midas, a big-beaked bird of a gambler who could do things with card and dice and markers in his long talons that seemed unlawful. There was Sammy the Snake, who held his "hands" in his mouth, or in his little forked tongue darting around. The last man who accused Sammy of cheating and who made a grab for the hidden card lost his arm clear up to the shoulder. But the man still insisted that Sammy *did* have a hidden card, that he, the man, had succeeded in grabbing it and even then held it in his hand, and that he would prove the thing if Sammy would only give him back his hand and his arm.

There was Willy Wuerfelsohn, Jr. Willy, as his father had been, was a devoted gambler. The father had died of starvation, being nineteen days and nights in a gambling session without eating or drinking. Willy senior was a well-liked man, and there were many people at his funeral mass.

"Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine," the priest said rather near the end of it, "and now we pay special memorial to him by the one thing he loved most."

The priest and the pallbearers dealt out hands of hasty poker on the coffin and bet and played. They showed, and the winner was about to pull when a hand came up out of the

coffin. It held, of course, a royal flush; and the hand raked the money into the coffin with him.

"—per misericordiam Dei requiescant in Pace," the priest concluded. Then they took him out and buried him. A remarkable man, as was his son.

"I know these are all the finest gamblers from all the worlds here," Roadstrum said. "So much the greater opportunity. This thing can't miss, can it, Crewman Bramble?"

"Of course it can miss," Bramble protested. "We haven't even tried it."

"No need to try it till the big money is down," Roadstrum said plainly. He went to the table with the biggest gamblers of them all and tried to get into the game.

"How much have you to bet, Captain?" Johnny Greeneyes asked him. "You may be a big space captain and still only a little man for money. This game is not for boys."

"I have two space hornets and one million Chancels d'or that is my mustering out pay, and ten thousand of same I had in tip from Maybe Jones," Roadstrum said with all the pride of a well-heeled space captain.

"Captain," said Johnny Greeneyes, "the lowest chip here costs one billion Chancels d'or. It was Maybe Jones himself who set this lower limit when he last played with us. It has to be that way, you understand, to keep the kids out. But there are lower tables for lower folk. There are even some where one may buy a marker for as little as a hundred thousand Chancels."

Roadstrum went grumbling and found a lower game. He bet his million and ten thousand Chancels and lost. Then he laughed, reversed it, bet them, and won.

He had in his pocket the *Dong* button from his hornet, and with this he could reverse any happening and run it through again with corrected hindsight. Crewman Bramble had completed the *Dong* with the other half of a floating couple, supposed to reverse things in any really dire emergency. And Captain Roadstrum, with his impassioned participation, turned every gamble into a dire emergency.

It worked again and again. Sometimes Roadstrum even won a hand without needing the button for replay. When he had several billion Chancels, he went to other tables and other sorts of games, testing it and making sure before he went to try the big boys.

The device worked again and again. At dicing, Roadstrum sometimes had to turn it back for as many as a dozen different throws to make his point, for he wasn't a lucky man. It worked perfect at roulette. That was simple one-repeat

stuff. It worked well at roustabout poker. Roadstrum had more trouble at other poker games, the feedback of his own gaming affecting the betting and drawing of the other players. Sometimes he had to run it through twenty times before he won a hand; he wasn't a very good poker player.

It would seem that all this replaying took a lot of time, but it didn't. One goes into time, one backs out of it again, and time is as when one started. Nor did others even notice the *dong* of Roadstrum's button; all things in the sequence were forgotten by the others and remembered only by Roadstrum the principle.

Then Roadstrum went back to the table with the big gamblers. He convinced them that he was now a man of substance, and they played with him. Golganger was now in the game. Golganger was a creature of a species with a difficult name. He was peculiar in the extreme, and he had thirty thumbs on each hand. How that fellow could shuffle and deal.

But Roadstrum noticed with satisfaction that all thirty pair of Golganger's thumbs had been broken somewhere along the way. And that Asteroid bird had had his talons broken more than once, that was clear. Sammy the Snake had a crook in his forked tongue that he had not been born with, and all the men of them, Pyotr, Johnny Greeneyes, Willy Wuerfelsohn, had had their thumbs broken several times in their lives. On Roulettenwelt, as on most of the worlds, a shifty dealer will finally be spotted; he will be dragged out by honest men, and they will break his thumbs painfully; and he cannot be a shifty dealer for another month or so.

"Ah, you gentry of the broken thumbs," Roadstrum mocked, "you have been taken before, all of you, and I will take you now. I work you like putty in the palm!"

They played, and Roadstrum won. The big gambling men smiled at him and played some more, and Roadstrum won some more. Then the big men began to play seriously. Roadstrum had to run one set through more than fifty times to beat Johnny Greeneyes on it. Roadstrum's own thumb was quite sore from pushing the *Dong* button so many times. And still Roadstrum won.

"You have won all the money we have with us," Pyotr Igrokovitch finally said, and he shot himself through the head. "It isn't really much money, but to keep the game going we will let it stand for a medium-sized world. All right, does everybody bet one medium-sized world?"

"You fellows really own worlds?" Roadstrum asked.

"Of course we do," said Sammy the Snake. "Money is

only for the warm-up. The game doesn't start till the title-tokens to worlds come onto the table. Are you nervous, Little Captain of the Early Luck?"

"No, no, I'm not nervous. It's just that I never played for worlds before."

They played and Roadstrum won. He won and won. He won big. He owned more than a hundred worlds now. He had become a mogul in the universe. Many High-Space-Emperors have fewer worlds. Many Confederation Chiefs rule fewer.

"I be King Roadstrum now," he said proudly.

"King Roadstrum, I want to have a word with you," said Crewman Bramble.

"Yes, what is it, Bramble?" Roadstrum asked when they had gone apart to talk.

"I've been following the *Dong* button on the scope, Captain, that is, King," Bramble said. "The pulse becomes a little erratic. That Hondstarfer was an inventive kid, but he wasn't really a careful worker. The button should be worked over. There could be a failure."

"Keep watching it, Bramble. I want to make a couple of big grabs before I quit. If the pulse becomes too erratic, let me know."

Roadstrum went back to the table and continued to win. Johnny Greeneyes got green all over. The great crest-feathers of the Asteroid Midas wilted down as his spirits fell. Sammy the Snake was suffering the miseries, and there is nothing sicker than a sick snake. Pyotr shot himself through the head six times in quick succession, banged his empty pistol down on the table, and cursed.

"I quit," said Willy Wuerfelsohn, Jr. sullenly. "I've only three of four worlds left, and I'll need them to get back in a game in the morning."

"One thousand worlds," Roadstrum said. "I be High Emperor Roadstrum now."

"High Emperor Roadstrum, I want a word with you," said Crewman Bramble.

"This is it, boys," Roadstrum told the gamblers. "It has been a pleasure, and I don't know any man who wins so graciously as I do. —Well, Bramble, it was getting even more erratic, was it? Well, it was a good little button."

"No, no, Roadstrum, the pulse has cleared. It's working perfectly now. Go on with the game. Let the sky be the limit."

"I have won skies enough this day, and my eyes are so tired that I can hardly tell the green suits from the blue. Here, take little *Dong* and put him back in the hornet.

And round up the men. We are off to visit other worlds, perhaps even some of the one thousand."

Crewman Bramble took the *Dong* button back to the hornet and began to round up the man. And great Roadstrum went down to the men's room as he had been meaning to do for some time.

"Here, here," he told the attendant. "I'm no commoner. I own a thousand worlds. Put tissue with the Emperor's Crest on it into the stall for me. I can use no less."

"Put a Chancel d'or into my hand and I will," said the attendant.

"Double or nothing," Roadstrum snapped

The attendant looped a coin and won. They doubled and doubled, and the attendant won. Roadstrum flipped a coin and still the attendant won. Roadstrum no longer had a *Dong* button in his pocket to reverse his calls with.

They cut cards for it, and the attendant continued to win.

"It's a hundred thousand Chancels now and a bit more," the attendant said. "Do you want to go ahead?"

"Sure, double you again. This time I win," said Roadstrum. But the attendant won.

"It's three hundred billion Chancels now," the attendant said; "do you want to keep on?"

"I'm about to the end of my cash," Roadstrum said. "How about title to a medium-sized world?"

"All right. I always wanted to own a world," the attendant said. The attendant won the world, then two, then four, then eight, then sixteen, then thirty-two, then sixty-four—

"But I don't have anything to worry about," Roadstrum said. "I only have to win once to come out of it." But it was the attendant who won and won and won.

"How many worlds did you say you had?" the attendant asked after a while.

"One thousand exactly."

"You owe me a thousand and twenty-four. Give me the titles to the one thousand, and sign this I.O.U. for twenty-four worlds. I can trust you to supply them in a reasonable time?"

"Yes, I'll win them, or buy them somehow, or conquer them. I am a man of my word; I will get you your worlds. Now please, put the Emperor's Crest tissue into the stall for me. I've certainly paid enough for it."

"Can't," said the attendant. "You're not an Emperor anymore. You've lost all your worlds. You're a commoner again. Use plain paper."

The attendant still owns those worlds today. He is High

Emperor and he administers his worlds competently. He is a man of talent.

*A thing unseen is on its face unseeable;*
*a being, savored not nor heard, unbe-able;*

*and be assured there's naught at all outside of us*
*unless perceived by one or by a pride of us,*

*nor someone see it move it will not move at all,*
*and damn! he had a husky guy to prove it all!*

Ibid

They were down on Kentron-Kosmon, an insignificant world. And yet, in the middle of Space-Port there (a cow pasture rather; it wasn't much of a spaceport) there was a nice plaque of electrum and on it was lettered: *This is the Exact Center of the Universe.*

Whether or not the plaque spoke the truth, this was the only world that had such a plaque. And the people of Kentron (there weren't very many of them; it wasn't a very big world) had a sort of cockey pride over their centrality, or over something.

But all the hornet men were flush (even Roadstrum had partly recouped his fortunes on Pieuvre World), and they wanted to have some fun. And Kentron had one fame besides its central location. *It is always Saturday night there,* was a proverb about the place.

"The fact is, we're so knob-headed dumb that we can't count the days," said a crinkly-haired young female, "so we call them all Saturday."

Well, *you* try to count them. A full day lasted about one equivalent minute. Imagine thirty seconds of daylight and thirty seconds of darkness! *If you want to do something in the dark, you'd better do it fast,* is another proverb of Kentron, and it has a certain challenge to it. On Kentron they had pace.

The men explored Kentron quickly. It was only about five kilometers around it. It had twenty-five high class hotels on it, and each man and one houri established himself in one of them as king or queen for the time of the visit. It had about five hundred blind-crows, pubs, winegardens, or beer-cellars, and several of them seemed to be lively. There was a lot of laughter and music going on; the people were fair of face and figure and quite friendly; the weather was almost perfect with its constant variety (one gets neither

very hot nor very cold in thirty seconds); the whole little world seemed to be a series of continuing floor shows; and moreover there was challenge.

Almost central to the planet and to the universe, was a little carnival. There was the Corn-Crib (you had heard all the jokes before, you had met all the girls before somewhere, and you still liked them both); there was the Big Casino with its warning sign *Dong buttons disallowed* (the word had got around); there was a Wrestle-the-Alligator Tank, a tattoo parlor, and the Booth. The big, good-natured-looking man in the booth was the Challenge, and they all felt it.

He winked them a great wink and the twenty-four men and one houri winked it back at him. He was a man of their own measure.

There were signs posted variously about the big fellow's booth. *I'm the guy who keeps it all going. If I weren't here, you wouldn't be here either. I know it all, I'm a smart-aleck. Loan-sharking and fencing. Any time I can't see you, you've had it. Country-style wrestling and scuffling done.*

There were, moreover, dozens of telescopes stuck around the booth, one big one pointing straight down into a hole clear through the planet; and the big man moved his eye rapidly from eyepiece to eyepiece, using them all. He had three sets of earphones on his ears, and he was surrounded by whole banks of instruments and scopes that he scanned constantly.

"Just what is the pitch here, friend?" Roadstrum asked the big fellow. "What is it that you do?"

"Anything and everything," said the big man. "I see them all. I do them all. I know them all. I throw them all."

"You don't look very deep to me," Roadstrum grumbled.

"Oh, I'm not. It isn't my profundity that makes me a mental marvel, it's the amazing detail of my perception. There is nobody else who can keep so many things on his mind at once. Ask me anything, anything at all, Roadstrum."

"Big fellow, if you know it all, then you can answer one small question that bothers me. We are on a very small world here; it should not have an atmosphere; it should not have a gravity of any consequence. By rights, we ought to be in our spacesuits now and wearing our static-grip boots. But we move about free and easy, breathing and functioning, and with our usual weight and balance. We have noticed that this is so on many small worlds. We appreciate it, but we do not understand it. How can it be?"

"You men are from World," said the big fellow. "There-

fore you know of Phelan, who was also from World, and therefore you must understand Phelan's Corollary."

"Certainly we know it, or at least Crewman Bramble does," said Roadstrum. "He does much of our knowing for us."

"But I doubt that even he knows the Corollary to Phelan's Corallary," the big fellow said. "It states that 'As regards very small celestial bodies of a light-minded nature, the law of levity is allowed to supercede the law of gravity.' I call it the compassionate corollary. If I had to sit here all these ages in a spacesuit, I don't believe I'd make it."

"Get out of the way, Captain Roadstrum," Crewman Trochanter blared. "This fellow advertises country-style scuffling. Let him try great Trochanter at the wrestle. Answer me, fat-face; who is the saltiest sky-dog of them all?"

"I am," said the big man. So he and Crewman Trochanter joined in the big wrestle. Trochanter put everything on the big guy, and the big guy twisted around in it like he was made of Rega-rubber. He was always craning his head and neck out of a hold to glance through one of his telescopes or scan a bank of instruments. Trochanter threw him flat on his face, and the man twisted his head for a gawk into the telescope that looked straight down through the planet. "Just in time," he said. "I almost let a couple of them get away from me that time." Then he raised Trochanter up and slammed him shatteringly on his back, forming a spread-eagle indentation in the hard ground, seven feet long.

All the men looked kind of funny then. Trochanter was as good a country scuffler as you'll find anywhere. But spacemen can't let a tough carney keep the hop on them. One of them would have to toss him, if they had to go through the whole list.

"Who is the saltiest sky-dog of them all?" Crewman Clamdigger demanded.

"I am," said the big man. "Just a second till I scan all the scopes again and make sure everything is spinning right. All right, man, have at it."

That big fellow pinned Crewman Clamdigger so fast that it was spooky. He was good. He knew every trick, and he out-stronged them all. But still it was required that they all try him. "Who is the saltiest sky-dog of them all?" a crewman would demand. "I am," the big fellow would answer, and then the battle.

He threw them one after the other. Di Prima, Kolonymous, Boniface, Mundmark, and after each brief set-to the big fellow rushed back to peer through the spyglasses and give a quick listen through the earphones. Burpy, Fracas, Snow, Bramble, he tossed those four mighty quick. Deep John

the hobo; that was an odd match. Deep John has a special hold, "the double caboose," and if the big fellow hadn't countered it with the "little-Frisco switch" he'd have gone down to defeat there. Crabgrass, Oldfellow, Lawrence, Humphrey, each one asked who was the saltiest dog of them all, and each got his thumping answer.

The match with Margaret the houri was even odder, with preternatural elements sprung in. She turned herself into a brindled wildcat and went for his throat. Got a good piece of it too. But he got her soundly with the "cat-cracker." And yet, after she was back in her houri form, she was still licking good salty blood off her chops, his not hers, and looking more than half pleased with herself.

Eseldon, Septimus, Swinnery, Ursley, one, two, three, four, he took them. He took Crewman Threefountains. Then he tangled with Captain Puckett. This was a groaning, bulging, eye-popping contest. It lasted all through a thirty-second night, and all noticed that, when the two grappled strenuously and almost to the death, the stars in the the sky dimmed and nearly went out.

"That was too close," the big fellow breathed heavily after he had left Captain Puckett unconscious on the ground. "Mind if I strap on my fourteen-direction tele-goggles for our encounter, Roadstrum, and my three pair of earphones? I just can't allow myself to be held away from it so long." He put the things on.

"Use anything you want to," Roadstrum shouted. "It will avail you nothing. Who is the saltiest sky-dog of them all?"

"I am," said the big man. And they went at it.

Roadstrum was fast as well as mighty. He was stronger than great Trochanter or great Puckett, and faster than Crabgrass or Clamdigger. He knew the "funny-man back-off," the "gandy grapple," the "mule-skinners' mangle" and the "surgical hammer."

The big guy countered with the "three-jaw cruncher," the "bandygo back-breaker" and the "badger-trap." The short days and nights flickered by, and Roadstrum was looking better and better. He was aware to every possible trick, and a particular awareness came into his mind now.

"This guy is carrying me," Roadstrum said to himself. "What does he want?" And he tumbled the big fellow with the "coon-cat crotch-hold."

"I want a favor of you, Roadstrum," the big fellow answered inside Roadstrum's head. "Promise to grant me one small favor, and I'll let you throw me." And he smashed Roadstrum one with the "Samoyed sledge."

"Anything to soothe my pride and save my reputation,"

Roadstrum thought back into the big fellow's head. "Let me throw you then, and make me look real good." And he sent the big fellow crashing with the "down-under dingo-trip."

"It is a bargain," the big fellow thought back into Roadstrum's head. And he did make it look good. He turned green when Roadstrum clamped him with the "Ruttigan rib-racker," he went down in pain when the great Captain applied the "double bull-whack," and he allowed himself to be pinned in the "big spider."

Roadstrum was the victor. Roadstrum was the saltiest sky-dog of them all.

"You men go enjoy yourselves for the nonce," said great Roadstrum, "and take the pleasures of the planet. I have certain soothing things to say to this glorious vanquished man. Be you away. It becomes a private thing."

The men, their plaudits sunk now to a mild roar, trekked off whooping and hollering and praising their Captain.

"And what is the small favor I am to do for you, big fellow?" Roadstrum asked graciously.

"Mind the booth for me, Roadstrum, while I go to the john. I have no relief man here."

"Why of course I will. That's a small enough favor."

"It is more important and more intricate than it appears," the big man said. "Let me explain it to you." And he explained to Roadstrum the use and importance of the telescopes and earphones and instruments and instrumental scopes.

"It is fantastic," Roadstrum said. "And it really is of such importance? I'll do it, of course. I'm a man of my word. But I had no idea that so much depended on it. The responsibility worries me a little. You will be right back, you say?"

"I will go to the john, Roadstrum, and I will come right back," the big fellow said. The big fellow left. And Roadstrum devoted himself to the business of watching the booth. It was intricate almost beyond belief; it required a degree of concentration that took a lot out of a man.

The down-telescope through the planet had a sixteen-way prismatic mirror on the other end of it (where it emerged downside planet), and integrating those sixteen sectors into a meaningful hemisphere was a mind-straining task.

The three sets of headphones that he was wearing now brought neither audio nor radio to the ears of Roadstrum, but rather three families of cosmic tones. The instruments and scopes led him to sense the various waves and fields of the universes. But none of these was the main thing. The main thing was the centrality of his mind that was

tangential to every body in the all-everything-extent. What did not touch him in one of his senses or apperceptions was not.

"I am holding it," said Roadstrum. "It may be that I am the *only* one holding it at the moment. And if I let it go, if I fail, then everything fails. A few dozen or a few million bodies cannot survive alone. Each one that drops into the void of inattention will weaken the whole and topple the balance.

"It pulses, it all pulses with my own effort. The balance holds, and the lost ones are plucked out of the void each time. But it was near that time there! I must be stronger. And it becomes still nearer every time that the lost ones should careen the sound ones and draw all into the void with them.

"Why doesn't the big fellow come back!"

You see, the big fellow didn't come back right away. Quite a few of those hasty days and nights flipped past, and Roadstrum realized that a great part of an equivalent day had already gone.

Roadstrum could not leave the booth until the big man returned. Captain Puckett had offered to watch the booth for Roadstrum. Various crewmen had offered to watch it, but Roadstrum had to refuse. They were all good men, but they just weren't good enough. The responsibility was too great. Roadstrum must maintain the booth till the big man came back. If he did not, the skies would stagger and fall down, and it would all be gone.

Now rankling anxiety and envy rose up in him. He swore that he'd let the worlds fall down after all if the big fellow didn't return soon; but he knew he'd never do that. He would keep the thing going as long as he possibly could. If everything ended, it would be the end of himself also.

But he'd like to be having fun, as Puckett and the crewmen were. It was all a frolic on Kentron. This was one place where laughter was literally heard around the world. Roadstrum was amazed and amused to hear the booming laughter of Crewman Trochanter coming to him from every horizon. He'd have been more amused if he could have added his own laughter to it. There seemed also to be quite an amount of female glee mixed in with the large lilting voices of the crewmen. They were all on an antic, a revel. And Roadstrum, whose present business was to sense everything everywhere, could not help but feel it all.

"Bless the bony-headed, splayfooted bunch of them," Roadstrum said. "Bless the fine native folk who are enter-

taining them so gaily. And curse the big man if he do not come back quickly. I'm crushed under the weight of this job. I'm avid to be at the pleasures of this world."

But the big man did not come back right away, not for an equivalent day, not for three of them, not for an equivalent week. Roadstrum, of course, could not allow himself to sleep, hardly to blink. The responsibility was far too great. His eyes had become red-rimmed, and his ears were turned into sounding brass. His mind was in such a tangle that the far worlds reeled drunkenly, and only with the greatest effort could Roadstrum steady them again.

"The strength, the grandeur, the majesty of that big man," Roadstrum said in awe. "He has held it all going for years and centuries, so he said, and I am weary after two weeks of it? Imagine his concentration, his width and depth of mind, his spaciousness, the power and the tide of him who could master it all so easily, and I stumble awkwardly through it. Imagine the serenity of that man, the peace-in-power, the scope, the dynamism, the balance! Imagine him with a spit run through him end to end and he roasting on it! *Why don't he come back?*"

For it was a fact that the big fellow didn't come back right away. There was a lot going on there on Kentron, and Roadstrum was missing it. He was not missing it completely, of course, for whatever he missed completely simply was not. He monitored Kentron as he monitored every world everywhere. It was the personal participation in it that he missed.

For one thing, it was now carnival season on Kentron. There had seemed a sort of carnival atmosphere about the place from the beginning, but now it was real carnival. There was high roistering going on such as you do not find everywhere every day.

"Ah, I have relief," Roadstrum said suddenly. "And from World, of all places! He's a curious round-headed young boy, a Living Buddha is what he is, and he holds it all in his concentration and observation without instruments. I'm freed for the moment. I'll go find the big fellow and see what's been taking him so long. I will—

"No, I will not! The young boy slipped beyond it. He is tricky. He really wished to exterminate it all then, after he had such a good hold on it. Had he lulled me and perhaps two or three others, he'd have done it too. We barely saved it in time. Aren't there any others now? Ah, there's a solitary creature on Goffgorina who holds it all and lets it go and holds it again; but he isn't a steady creature. Now there's a mountain-strider on Peluria who holds it all

for a while. Those fellows are all quite capable, to do it without instruments, but none of them understands the importance of it. At any moment there may be a dozen sustaining persons scattered through the universes, but they cannot be trusted allwhere and allwhen. And what if there comes the moment when there are none? The responsibility is more than I can bear.

"I have to see it all in total depth all the time!" he bawled out. "I have to see every apple tree on World, every apple on every tree, every worm in every apple, every entrail-parasite of every worm, every cell of every parasite, every molecule of every cell. I have to see and understand every nucleate particle of every heat-happy sun, I must know every follicle of every trinominal plant on Ghar, every awn and glume of the eimer-wheat fields of New Dakota, every eagle of the Nine-Sky worlds, every mite in the under-feathers of every eagle, every microbe on every mite.

"I must know in which hand Crewman Clamdigger holds the coin in the game he plays with the girl at this moment. I must know the date and the head on that coin, and the flaw-stamping in the obverse lower scroll. I must know the man who made the slightly-flawed die that stamped that coin. I must know his niece. I must know the fellow she went out with three years ago once only. I must know the little kernel growing on his adrenal and beginning to give him trouble. And I must know the million rogue cells in that kernel that will be ten million tomorrow. I must know every object everywhere in many powers deeper depth.

"The spyglasses, the scopes, the instruments are but mnemonics and guides. At every moment I must see and feel the totality of it and all the ultimate detail in this great mind of mine. I stagger under the load of it.

"WHY DON'T THAT GUY COME BACK?"

The big fellow, you remember, had not come back right away, and now several equivalent months had gone by. Carnival season was over now, though there was still a lot of whooping and hollering on Kentron. Now it was the cloud-catcher season. The fleet went out, and the crewmen took the two hornets along with it (they told Roadstrum they'd be back for him bye and bye). The fleet spread its webs of spidery silver and silver nitrate, and caught and formed clouds in the nets. They dragged their catch back to Kentron with them and forced it to rain and lighten on the little world. So it was another festival-time, the Lightning-Lupercal that out-carnivaled the carnival.

Then it was hunting season on Kentron, then field-sports

season, then social-sports season. All the men were having howlers, except Roadstrum.

"If I have to see every atom in the universes, why can't I see the big fellow and know what's delaying him?" Roadstrum asked himself. "Why? Because he's a Subjective, that's why. He's a Subjective, just as I unhappily also am at the moment. I wish the big fellow would come back."

The big fellow came back.

"Thanks, Roadstrum," he said, "I'll take the booth over again."

Roadstrum tore the equipment off himself and collapsed to the ground from the steep weariness of it all.

"Where were you?" he moaned. "You were gone six equivalent months."

"Roadstrum, I'd been tied to that booth for a couple hundred years. Now I'm ready to go for another long spell. But a man does need a break sometimes."

"I had no idea it was so difficult or that so much was involved in it."

"I tried to tell you, but words will not convey it. One has to be inside it to comprehend the magnitude."

"How did such a thing begin?"

"Don't you understand? It *was* the beginning. It's the only thing there is. But it was haphazard for so many aeons that it spooks me to think about it. There were always three or four maintaining it, but there was no one person shouldering the responsibility. 'Somewhere there must be one person strong enough to take it all over,' I said to myself in a direful moment, but the strongest person I could think of was myself. I've been doing it ever since. A few centuries ago Berkeley gave it a philosophical basis, but could I get him to shoulder the thing itself? Yes, for a year or so. And then the flannel-mouthed Irishman talked his way out of it and I had it again. Well, it's a job."

"Is it really so important in every detail?"

"Yes. You are a detail, Roadstrum. If I put you out of my mind for a moment, then you are not. By my attention I hold it all in being. Nothing exists unless it is perceived. If perception fails for a moment, then that thing fails forever."

"Suppose you neglected but one aspect of a faraway thing for but one moment?"

"Sometimes I do. On several of the worlds there are beautiful roses that have no odor. It is because I forgot to smell them for one brief instant. There are several curious bobtailed little animals in various systems. It is because, for an instant, I forgot to think of the ends of their tails.

Here you will find a blind or deaf or halt creature; it is because I did not give them my full attention in one moment."

"Well, you are certainly a sturdy man to stand up under it."

"Yes, but I hate to be misjudged. They say that I bear it all on my shoulders, as though I were a stud or a balk. It is not my great shoulders, it is the amazing head on my great shoulders that maintains it all."

The crewmen were ready to go. They heard of a world that made all others seem trivial. Now that Roadstrum was freed from watching the booth, they said to come along, Captain, and let's be with it.

So they readied the hornets.

"I never did know your name, big fellow," Roadstrum said in parting.

"Atlas."

*What thing they were and what an architecture yet,*
*What song they sang is not beyond conjecture yet.*

*Where heroes' bones for ages strewed the shore about!*
*A murdering song that men can say no more about!*

*They came in cresting waves and boldly tried for it,*
*And broke and blanched and balked and burned and died for it.*

*A tune that must ensorcel them and rot them all!*
*The missing note was really what had got them all.*

## Ibid

They came to Sireneca. "There is something the matter with the spelling of that," Roadstrum said. "It doesn't look right." This was the world of the Siren-Zo, the Siren-Animal, which is either a creature or a musical mountain or a manifestation or a group of very peculiar folks.

"I really wasn't ready for another truculent world," Roadstrum said. "We've had it so pleasant at all our stops since leaving Kentron Planet."

They had been to Nine Worlds; they had taken over Nine Worlds. They had been involved in the work and recreation for which they were best fitted, and it had really been quite a pleasant interlude.

There had been leagues and anti-leagues on Nine Worlds, there had been conspiracy and war and revolution, there

had been crude butchery, and there had been really fine weaponry. The twenty-plus men from the hornets made themselves at home in the situation. They were wonderful fighting men, the least competent of them able to command armies. They took command of troops on opposite sides of the broil (at one time there were five different sides to the battles), and they connived and gained.

Roadstrum himself was probably the finest fighting man in the universe, and now he discovered that he was also a master diplomat. At the time when they had had to make new tongues for themselves (after that little embarrassment on Lamos of the Giants), Roadstrum had made a forked tongue for himself. He was now as polished and pleasant a liar as you would ever want to meet, and he took all those folks in every conference.

The trouble on Nine Worlds was that things had been a little too loose. Now the hornet men came out on top, and they tightened things up a little. They brought in nine world-managers from Guild, and they laid down rules to be followed. For now Roadstrum was absolute owner of Nine Worlds.

"I know that none of you men wish to be burdened with property," he said, "or I'd give you a world each, as long as they lasted. But since none of you have any such desire—"

"I have," said Crewman Snow. "I want a world."

They hadn't known before that Snow was a grasping greedy man. It was hard to understand how a hornet crewman (they were a free and easy lot) could want to be burdened with ownership of a world and the income of billions of billions of Chancels every quarter, but there is someone like that in every crowd.

Roadstrum gave Crewman Snow title to one of the worlds with very bad grace. He sent the titles to the other eight worlds by dispatch to the men's room attendant on Roulettenwelt, reducing his debt somewhat.

So the Nine Worlds affair had been pleasant easy business, and now they had come to another tough world. They were already hooked on Sireneca, and they hadn't intended to be. They had joked about it coming in, but they had known that it had its hook in them already, that they would have to kill it or be killed by it.

"Will you pour hot wax in our ears as was done the first time, Captain Roadstrum?" Crewman Clamdigger jibed. "And tie yourself to the mast? But we don't have a mast."

"I will pour hot lead into your throats to still your chatter," Roadstrum said. "We are fools to be into this thing but we cannot back off. It isn't as good a tune as that. When

we find the lost note and fit it in we will probably discover that it is a very ordinary tune."

"We haven't heard it yet," Crewman Threefountains said.

"In our modern times we always hear a thing before we have heard it," Roadstrum maintained. "Our instruments have already recorded it and broken it down. Crewman Bramble reads the score and is entranced by it, up to a point. He is the most intelligent of us and he enjoys music in the most intelligent way, reading the score without the noise to distract. The others of us, for our insufficiency, are doomed to listen vulgarly.

"But we all know that there is something wrong with that tune, even before we come to it. Our instruments are experiencing frustration, and so are we. 'Something missing, something missing,' they transmit. 'Imperative that the missing element be found. Not very good tune anyhow.' Yes, there's the final high note missing in the tune, and we must find it or we will never sleep again. Many brave men have given their lives for this and failed. I say that we will not fail! We will force the missing note from the thing. And then we will kill it so it will no more be a hazard to farers."

Sireneca was mostly ocean, mean ocean with steely choppy waves following a strange harmonic. They did not have free flow, nor real crest, nor tide. Something was missing from the ocean waves. Their tune was the tune of the planet, and it was an incomplete tune.

There was but one small continent or island on Sireneca, and in the middle of it was the animal, or the mountain, or the folk. The hornets had set down on the flanks of this thing, and the crewmen made ready to solve it.

"Let us tackle this as a strategic problem," said great Captain Puckett. "You had better let me handle this, Roadstrum. A strategic man you are not. Formulate the problem, Crewman Bramble."

"The problem is to force the missing note from the creature or creatures so that our apprehensions and frustrations may be quieted and our sanity restored. The ancillary of the problem is that we do this without ourselves perishing, as all other farers here have perished."

"And what is the nature of the opponent, Crewman Bramble?"

"That we do not know, Captain Puckett, nor whether it is a single or plural thing. In earliest mythology it was referred to as the Siren-Zo or the Siren-Animal, as being one. But in appearance it is many, as we now see it, in the form of various well-bodied, golden-haired, singing women

on the numerous outcroppings of the musical mountain. In what manner they kill all who try to come up to reach them is not known. Our only procedure seems to be that true one—trial and error. I suggest that the most useless man of us begin the climb now, and we will see how he dies."

"Crewman Nonvalevole, start climbing," Captain Puckett ordered. "Make for the nearest of the goldie-blondes there."

"All right," said Crewman Nonvalevole, and he began to climb the musical mountain up to the nearest siren. There was an odd thing about his climbing. Often the rocks of the mountain shivered under his feet as if to throw him down.

"The mountain itself is the creature," said Captain Roadstrum. "The scree and the boulders are part of its hide, and it shivers its hide like a World horse. The whole thing is alive. The blonde maidens are but tentacles of the thing."

"May I tangle with such a tentacle!" said Crewman Crabgrass.

"We must find the mortal center of the creature and attack it there," Roadstrum continued. "We will not kill it by scratching its hide. But when we do find its mortal center and kill it there, then, I believe, in its moment of death agony, we will hear the missing note. That is my conjecture."

"Oh be quiet, great Captain Roadstrum," all the men said. "A conjecture man you are not."

Crewman Nonvalevole had now climbed nearly to the nearest blondie siren. She rolled limpid blue eyes at him and sang in wonderful brass. It was a green-country foot-shuffling tune with a touch of boogie and a touch of ballad, none of your fancy things. It was the sort of tune that faring men themselves sing, but incomparably better, and with a rich beat and swing. The hornet instruments had been wrong to call it "Not very good tune anyhow," for it was good. It rose to the high stunning happy pitch—and then nothing. The climax note was missing and it drove them all crazy.

And then it began once more. Again and again it rose, and left the gaping silence at its apex. Men would perish of hunger and thirst yearning for that missing note. It had to be found.

Crewman Nonvalevole was up to the shimmering blondie now. Singingly she smiled at him and patted her golden knees. The crewman sat on her blonde lap and enfolded her in passionate arms.

There was lightning without thunder. The blondie brushed ashes and cinders out of her lap, ashes and cinders that were all the mortal remains of Crewman Nonvalevole.

"That was sudden and consuming," said Captain Puckett. "Did you get a reading on it, Crewman Bramble?"

"Twelve thousand amps, nine million volts, a little over one million cycles. A pretty good jolt. She never missed a note either, except the missing note itself. And I am sure that I heard a hint of that too, right at the frying moment. It didn't sound, but it was near to becoming a sound."

"The almost-sound was from Crewman Nonvalevole, not from Siren-sis," said Captain Roadstrum. "In his moment he did come near to voicing the note. I believe that I am on the right course. I have this intuition that we must go for the interior vitals. The outer hide of the thing is dangerous."

"Be quiet, Captain Roadstrum," said Captain Puckett. "An intuitive man you are not. It's a pretty good electric chair they have though."

"It isn't new; it's been done before," Crewman Crabgrass cut in. "They have them on Womboggle World, electric chairs in the form of beautiful women so the condemned can die happy."

"Who is the next most worthless man?" Captain Puckett asked. "That would be Crewman Stumble, I believe."

"I'll not go up!" swore Crewman Stumble. "I am not worthless to me. Send a dummy man up."

"That's what you are," said the relentless Captain Puckett. "You will go up, and you will trail a ground wire behind you like a tail. We will see if this one crisps you as thoroughly as that one fried Crewman Nonvalevole. We will get several of these fryings and we may be able to establish a pattern as to the way they work."

"Well, all right, but I don't like it," Crewman Stumble grumbled. Crewman Bramble attached a ground wire to Stumble like a tail, and Stumble began to climb the mountain toward the swishing blondie on a low left ledge. She ground out the ballad, fluting brass and a touch of fiddle music, in her buxom voice. Crewman Stumble became livelier the nearer he came to her, and she sang him up to her with an ever heftier voice, all the foot-stomping ascending notes, except the final one. The top of the tune was still missing.

Crewman Stumble finished his up-jaunt with a wild surge to the blondie's outstretched arms, leaped aboard her spacious frame, and locked around her with arms and legs. She intruded a laughing note into the ballad, but not the note itself. Then she gave him a smooch that was one of the great things.

Once more there was lightning without thunder. Then the blondie was brushing the ashes and embers of Crew-

man Stumble off her breast. And the damnable song rose and fell again and again, and the top of it was always missing.

"Did you get a reading that time, Crewman Bramble?" Captain Puckett asked.

"Yes. I believe it is the beginning of success," Crewman Bramble stated. "The ground wire made a difference. It vaporized, of course, and the reaction killed three other crewman near this end of it, but we do show progress. We begin to establish a pattern. It was only eleven thousand and fifty amps that time, eight and a quarter million volts, and the frequency remained the same. This time we'll use a heavier ground wire . . . hell, we'll use two of them!"

"Who is the next most useless man?" Captain Puckett asked, looking around.

"Enough!" Captain Roadstrum announced ponderously. "I am taking command once more."

"But, Roadstrum, we are proceeding according to scientific testing methods," Puckett protested. "Please don't interfere. A scientific man you are not."

"An excess of science will leave none of us alive, Puckett. Scouting patrol, see how we may find entrance to the thing itself! We itch in its hide, and it scratches us to kill. But it cannot scratch us if we are inside it. I have old folk memory of ascending the thing inside. We will find the passage."

The scouters scouted. They went on hornet instruments when bankrupt of other ideas. The instruments told them that the mountain-animal was indeed hollow, or at least had an open anal-oral passage, and that the entrance could be found, very deep and under water. The instruments indicated just where that passage was, but shuddered when asked whether there were dangers involved.

"As the finest diver and the finest all-man, I will go first," Captain Roadstrum announced. "Do you all follow me like close tails. If we drown and die, remember that one death is as good as another."

"No it is not," said Crewman Mundmark. "I'd rather die crisped by one of those blondies than drown in black water."

Captain Roadstrum dived a great dive down into the black water, in under the shelf of the continent that was also the mountain and the creature; and all the men followed him. He dove till it seemed that his lungs would burst. They did burst a little, bye and bye, and this gave him some relief. It also left a dark red trail that the men could follow.

Then they all broke surface in a black cavity very deep

under the thing. The only light was a garish dark red one far above them.

"It goes five hundred meters up and is a tricky climb," said Captain Puckett.

"We are tricky men; we can climb it," said Captain Roadstrum. "Do you see it now, men, do you see the form of the creature? It is a big rambling spider-form inside here, and the mountain is a living shell it has built for itself, for it's a mixed creature. The tune has a deeper tone inside here, and one can make out the words, but what do they mean. 'Da luan, da mort,' over and over again. 'Da luan, da mort,' what does that mean, over and over again, Crewman Bramble?"

"It's the treadmill song out of an Irish cycle," said Bramble. " 'Monday and Tuesday and Monday and Tuesday and Monday and Tuesday,' so the poor slaves had to sing at their labor for the puca. And finally a great savior came and broke the charm. 'And Wednesday too,' he said, and then it was all over with."

"Roadstrum is the great savior who breaks the charm," Roadstrum announced. "I will set a Wednesday-term to the monster. But there are other elements in this. Is not the climbing up of the giant spider and the slaying of it an Arabian-cycle thing? And did not Hans Schultz, in the green-island cycle, have a dream of the same thing? Upward, men; we are onto a great kill!"

Hawsers, cables a meter thick they climbed—and these were but the fine silks of the giant spider. The hairs on its toes were even thicker, and the men blasted them, beginning the attack. A note of alarm crept into the mountainous singing now. The creature knew that it was invaded but did not know how or by what. The creature sent tremors through its webs that threatened to dash the men down to their deaths.

"We must go inside the creature and kill it interiorly," Roadstrum announced when they had ascended a hundred meters. So they all entered the vulgar cavity of the thing and continued to climb upward.

There was still light, more so than before. It was more garish, redder, more threatening than it had been. That first light had been but the reflection of this. The mountainous interior spider had nine outside eyes and one great glowing interior eye by which he liked to contemplate himself. This was the spookiest light ever seen; and was the spookiest place, but one, in all the universes.

"The big red interior eye like a beacon is the mortal center of the creature," Roadstrum announced. "We will

kill it there and it will die. And we will get our missing note then, or we will die too, from deprivation. It goes into a frenzy now as we close in on it. Who is the scareder, we or it?"

"We are, we are," the men cried. "We're the scaredest men ever."

The singing mountain had become hysterical with fright of the small things climbing up its maw. The song was really a racy one now, a lot of good fever in it, a black-blood beat that was solid. It rose and moaned, and only the top of it was missing. But it had outlined itself now, and the final note, when it came, would be worth it all.

It was now seen that the entire mountain-creature was one single instrument, and the whole planet was its sounding box. The blondie-orifices were but small reeds of this amazing organ, the giant web-threads were quivering strings.

Now the music-mountain was frantic, and so were the men. "Somebody dies pretty quick now," gasped Crewman Cutshark, "either we or he, and I don't much care which so long as it is swift."

"Mind those quivering stalks there, Cutshark," Roadstrum warned. "I believe that they emit a very strong digestive juice."

"Touch one, Crewman Cutshark," Captain Puckett ordered. "Observe the data, Crewman Bramble."

Crewman Cutshark touched one of the stalks, and he dissolved. The flesh was whisked away from him like vapor. He was only rather dirty white bones, and then the bones also dissolved.

"What did you get, Crewman Bramble?" Captain Puckett asked.

"Eleven million dissolution units at a base of—"

"Leave off the science stuff or I'll clamp you all in irons," Roadstrum warned. "Upward, men, to the big kill. It's but fifty meters above us, and death licking at us every spot of the way. Hey, listen to the way it's beginning to scream now! That really jazzes up the tune."

"That's me screaming, Captain Roadstrum, and I don't figure on stopping for quite a while," Crewman Threefountains screamed.

Ah, the baleful red-glowing inner eye of the monster, which was also its soul and its mortal center. It blazed with red and black fire, and crackled and stunk. The tune began a new ascension, many times more powerful than it had been before, hysterical with horror, giddy and gibbering, hate-hopping, and yet quite the best thing of its sort ever done. All it needed was the top of the tune, and that

moment drew very near. The whole mountain was lashing out frantically, flinging thousand-ton boulders out of its quivering hide, moaning and bursting asunder.

"Now, men, now!" great Roadstrum cried, and he dove upward into the giant living eye. And all dove into it, rending it, killing the thing.

The note. The missing note sounded. It was worth it. It was fulfillment. It was water after deserts. It was the top of the tune. They all heard it. And nobody would ever hear it again.

It sounded the note in its last agony. Then the whole mountain died.

Roadstrum kicked the mountain open and they all went outside. The mountain was smaller than it had been, and it shrunk down still smaller as though the air were being let out of it.

The tune was gone and forever. Its missing note would no more be a hazard to that sector of space. All the crewmen felt deep satisfaction. They had heard the dying note of the Siren-Zo and their thirst was quenched. The blondie appendages had become broken dolls.

All loaded into the hornets for further adventures. It was early Wednesday morning.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*On Polyphem, a sneaking, snaking mood they found,*
*And something odd about the tasty food they found.*

*They gazed to see the passive sheep and lambs about,*
*Nor guessed themselves to be the woolly rams about.*

*The leader, he a sullen stormy blokey there,*
*Defiled the bord and put them in the pokey there.*

*And one became so gross they couldn't carry him,*
*And one so queer and cold they had to bury him.*

*But some got out alive from it, and well they did,*
*And lived for worse, but none knows how the hell they did.*

Ibid

THE KID HONDSTARFER, back on Lamos that was Valhalla, had told them that one of the hornets would break down after a little while. He said that he had made a lot of mistakes on one of them. But they had worked perfectly since that time, and the Captains and crewmen had forgotten that advice.

Now the hornet of Puckett broke down. Or it broke, and it had to come down somewhere or perish into pieces. Puckett told Roadstrum to go on and leave him. Puckett had a way of putting it on pretty thick, sort of a wheedling way, sort

of a "but of course one space captain would never leave another in distress" way of presenting such things. Roadstrum felt a strange body twinge which he mistook for the call of duty. He said he would never leave a mate in distress.

"I believe a little creative mutiny is called for here," Crewmen Trochanter and Crabgrass and Clamdigger told Captain Roadstrum. "We are a little tired of caring for the boys in Boat B, and we're not too happy about yourself."

Roadstrum had a way of putting it on pretty thick himself.

"Be there man among you who doubts my demesne or destiny, then I have fared in vain," he said. "I bare my throat to the treacherous steel—"

"All right, all right," the three tough crewmen capitulated. "We're with you, all the way and in everything. Only spare us the 'act.' "

"It's Polyphemia or nothing," Roadstrum called to Puckett over the communicator. "There's not another world we could possibly reach."

"You said the same thing about Lamos of the Giants," Puckett protested. "Roadstrum, there's *got* to be another world."

"Oh, that wasn't really so bad, Puckett. Thinking back on it, it was sort of fun with the giants. There really isn't another world we can reach if you're coming apart. Polyphemia is better than nothing."

("False tongue," voiced the communicator.)

"Oh all right, Roadstrum, we'll go down then."

But the communicator was right. Roadstrum did speak with false tongue unwittingly. Polyphemia was incomparably worse than nothing.

But it looked wonderful enough coming into it. Great green grass! but it did look wonderful! It was a pastoral world, said the manual. The Polyphemians were simple shepherds. They raised sheep and goats, made a little cheese and whey, drank sweet milk, ate fine lamb and kid, perhaps wove a little wool, the manual said, lived in fleece or hair tents, and supposedly played pastoral airs on wooden flutes.

"It cloys, it cloys," said Crewman Clamdigger. "Let's think a little more about that mutiny, men."

"Ah well, maybe there'll be shepherdesses," Roadstrum told them.

"Combing wool and churning butter, not for us," said Crewman Trochanter.

They landed badly. The facilities on Polyphemia were the worst in the universe. They felt eyes watching them, wolfish

eyes, not sheep eyes. But the only one who shuffled up to meet them was a lank, dour shepherd. They supposed he was a shepherd, but he wasn't combing wool.

"A happy day to you," Captain Roadstrum boomed. "I suppose it isn't every day that fine, cheerful, interesting strangers come to visit you."

"We hate strangers," said the Polyphemian. "And we hate spacecraft. We hate just about everything."

He shriveled them with a look, and he spat green.

"But we are in dire distress. One of our crafts is crippled. We will need time to repair it, and perhaps we will need your help," said Roadstrum.

"We are tone-deaf to the call of help," said the sour shepherd. "We are deaf to almost everything. There is only one sound we hear a little. We call it the green whisper."

Roadstrum gave it to him: the soft sound of an educated thumb ruffled over the edges of high-denomination bills. The shepherd heard it. It is a dangerous double-bladed sound. It has got a lot of people in trouble. But the hornet-men were confident of their ability to handle anything.

The shepherd gave a grunt that was perhaps assent. He gaped his face in what might have been a grin. And he was suddenly joined by quite a number of his fellows.

"Just what is it you want, strangers?" asked one of the new shepherds, who seemed to rank a little higher than the first one.

"Why, if not hospitality, at least a hospice," said Roadstrum. "We are space-weary. We would rest. We would eat and drink. And then we would examine the facilities here."

"There is only Drovers' Cottage," said the leading shepherd. "You can rest there now. You can eat with us in the hall this evening. And there are no facilities on Polyphemia."

"How is the food here?" asked Crewman Trochanter.

"Monotonous, mostly," said the shepherd. "There is one particular food that sets us up, and we have not had it in months. We get pretty tired of plain mutton."

Well, the shepherds guided the crewmen to Drovers' Cottage through rich meadows and pastures populated with herds of sheep.

Sheep? Are you sure they are sheep?

The lodgings were bad. Drovers' Cottage was not a palace. But heat was not needed, and there were tallow candles provided for when they should be needed. They were fed a little, though the sun was still high in the sky. It may have been mutton, but most curious tasting mutton. Then porridge, perhaps, that may have been weevily. They

even were served perry from the runted fruit of the land, and became one-tenth happy on it.

But the sheep worried Roadstrum, and he looked out at them and puzzled about them.

"I'm not a farm boy, but there's something the matter with those sheep," he maintained.

"It is my considered opinion that they're woolly enough and dirty enough to be sheep," said Captain Puckett. "Is some third thing required? Why, Roadstrum, you must admit that they're sheepish enough to be sheep. Therefore they are sheep."

"Crewman Bramble, are they sheep?" Captain Roadstrum asked.

"The only thing about sheep I ever studied was sheep's liver flukes parasites, or it may have been sheep's flukes liver parasites. Let me see their parasites and I'll tell you quickly enough whether they're sheep. But I never studied sheep as such, and I doubt if anyone else did. There was no such course at Cram College."

"They walk on two legs when they're not down eating," Roadstrum said. "Is that right? Do you think it right they should walk about on two legs, Crewman Clamdigger?"

"I never studied sheep either, Captain. I say, according to the principle of subsidiarity, and no local law countervening, let them walk on two legs if they want to. Is it our business how the sheep of Polyphemia walk?"

"Well, there is something peculiar about them as sheep," Roadstrum held out stubbornly, "and sooner or later I'll think what it is. I believe I'll just go out and have a talk with those fellows."

Many of the sheep were still eating in the meadow, and they ate awkwardly, as though it were a learned thing for them to eat that way. And others of the sheep were gathered in a low tavern. Roadstrum went into this with some misgivings. He had not heard of sheep as congregating in taverns. "And yet I suppose that they should be classified as social animals," he said; "why should they not meet in taverns?"

It was a shabby sort of tavern they had there. The bar was of rough unfinished wood that had never known polish, the stools and benches were badly made and wobbly, very poor things. "They look as though they had been made by sheep," said Roadstrum, "and I suppose they were."

Roadstrum hardly knew how to begin. He had never talked with sheep before, nor associated with them at all.

"Are you a sheep?" he asked one of them finally.

"Why, yes, I'm a sheep. What else would I be?"

"You look almost as if you were a very shaggy man."

"Ah well, I wouldn't say that. I suppose I'm a sheep. I have always been a sheep."

"Well then, what would you say is the difference between a sheep and a man?"

"A man will eat a sheep. But did you ever hear of a sheep eating a man?"

"Don't believe I ever did," said Captain Roadstrum.

There was something sorrowful about the sheep. They ate and drank dully from a vat that contained foul vegetables, leeks and ramps and strong gross turnips, and rank things that were very earthy but not of old Earth. They were fat, whether men or sheep, and they smelled like sheep.

But there was no real merriment, as there should be in a tavern. They drank a potion that seemed to be potato beer. Roadstrum took a bowl of it out of curiosity. It was mildly alcoholic, and it should have enlivened the tavern.

"Do you ever have music?" Roadstrum asked. "Anything to liven up the place?"

"We sing a little sometimes," said the sheep he had been talking to. "We do not sing well."

"Let's try it," cried Roadstrum. "Come on, fellows; let me hear one of your rousing songs! I am a stranger with a great curiosity about you. Some of you start with a few bars, and I will lend my own wonderful voice to the melody. Sing, sing!"

"Well, all right," some of the bolder sheep said.

They sang flatly, but they sang:

*"The docker-man a-drawing near,*
*"he don't appear at all appall us.*
*"He whets a knife and sheds a tear.*
*"We haven't any tails at all us."*

*"We haven't any tails at all us,"* Roadstrum gave them the last line back in hearty chorus. It wasn't a bad little tune, but the words gave Roadstrum a turn.

"Why, you fellows haven't tails at all, have you? Not even docked stubs. I thought sheep always had tails unless they were chopped off."

"Not on Polyphemia," said the sheep Roadstrum had been talking to. "That must be some other kind of sheep somewhere else."

"Come on, lads; give us another verse," Roadstrum cried encouragingly.

"All right," said the sheep, "if we must." They sang flatly once more.

*"For greeny grass to graze and grout*
*"we couldn't eat the stuff or store it.*

*"They took our gimpy gullet out*
*"and gave us seven stomachs for it."*

*"And gave us seven stomachs for it,"* Roadstrum bawled out in melodic response. "Ah, I believe there is a bit of folklore or ovine-lore hidden in that stanza," he said shrewdly. "You were not naturally ruminants? And you have been made into such? This becomes one of the most curious things I ever ran into. I suspect that you are not sheep at all."

"We have to be sheep," the sheep said. "Who else would have us?"

"Well, no need to be sheepish sheep," Roadstrum encouraged. "Let us have one more stanza and be glad of our respective states. You think it is all possum and red-eyed gravy being a man? Sing, hearties, sing."

And flatly they sang once more:

*"Ah Jennie was a gambol lamb,*
*"a lamb no more is gambol Jennie.*
*"Subducted by a Sweedish ram!*
*"We all got yen for yeaning Yennie."*

*"We all got yen for yeaning Yennie,"* Roadstrum roared out in raucous chorus. "Why, fellows, you have wonderful songs and you are wonderful singers! No? You don't think so? I guess you're right. In no other company in the universe would I be the finest singer present."

A man came in. A man and not a sheep. A villainous looking man. He passed out little slips of parchment to some of the sheep, and then he left again.

And the sheep seemed even more depressed than they had been.

"Your call?" the sheep-bartender asked Roadstrum's friend.

"Yes. For tomorrow," the sheep said sadly.

"We all have to go. That's what we're here for."

"I know. But I hate to leave Agnes and the children."

The sheep was very fat and very sorrowful. Roadstrum was very interested in the sheep as being his friend, and was especially curious about the parchments.

"What is it?" he asked the sheep. "What does your slip say?"

"It says my name," said the sheep, "and it says tomorrow."

Respecting the sheep's reserve, Roadstrum did not pursue the matter, but he felt that something was very wrong.

Oh well, the sheep got a little happier as the afternoon progressed. They sang some more, and they did a little better when they weren't urged to it too strongly.

They passed the cup that impels, and their fat faces began to glow. They even told stories. There is a whimsy to sheep stories that is like nothing else; humble and bashful,

and yet with a real cud of humor. And shaggy sheep stories are a special form. But do sheep, in fact, have stories and humor and song?

Roadstrum had always believed that he had troubles enough of his own. He seldom borrowed trouble, and never at usurious terms. He knew it as a solid thing that sheep do not gather in taverns and drink beer, not even potato beer; that they do not sing, not even badly; that they do not tell stories. But a stranger can easily make trouble for himself on a strange world by challenging local customs.

"But I am the great Roadstrum," he said, suddenly and loudly. "I am a great one for winning justice for the lowly, and I do not scare easily. I threw the great Atlas at the wrestle, and who else can say as much? I suffer from the heroic sickness every third day about nightfall, and I am not sure whether this is the third day or not. I say you are men and not sheep. I say: Arise, and be men indeed!"

"It has been tried before," said Roadstrum's friend the sheep, "and it didn't work."

"You have tried a revolt, and it failed?"

"No, no, another man tried to incite us to revolt, and failed."

"Tell me about it, sheep."

"Another man, another traveler talked to us as you have done. 'Early in the morning you must revolt,' he said. 'You must refuse to go where they herd you; you must refuse to be butchered. You must take up stones and clubs in your hands, and beat down the men who would take you to slaughter.' That's what the man told us."

"And that is what I tell you," said Roadstrum.

"Ah well, it was the shortest revolt on record," the sheep said. "In the morning, some of us did take up sticks and stones in our hands. And then the whistle blew as it does every morning. Those who had received their notices for that day threw away their sticks and stones and broke rank and went, jostling each other, to their slaughter. You don't think we'd want them to have to blow that whistle at us the second time, do you? And who ever heard of sheep picking up sticks and stones and going to battle. It just isn't in our nature to revolt."

There was the gonging of a great bell that signaled it was time for the animals to go to their cotes. It was just sundown, and the sheep should be snug in the fold by dark. They all said good night, and shuffled out very sheep-like.

And so it was sundown, and it was time for Roadstrum and the other hornet men to go dine with the high Polyphemians in their hall.

"Did you find out anything about those fellows, Roadstrum?" Captain Puckett asked him as he joined the others.

"Puckett, they do not look like sheep, and they do not act enough like men. There is something the matter with the whole business."

"I would not worry about it," said Puckett "Remember the hornet-men's code: Never incite a local populace unless there is something in it for you."

Well, they were set down at quite a big table with all the big Polyphemians, and the Cacique of Polyphemia was at the head of the table.

"Are you not afraid to come unarmed into our hall, little men?" the big Cacique asked. "Do you trust our hospitality?"

"We trust all hospitality everywhere," said steady Roadstrum. "We have been on a hundred worlds, and nowhere has the bord been defiled We trust the hospitality of all men when we break bread with them. We have eaten giants' bread on Lamos and cotton candy on Kentron World, and we have not met treachery Treachery, where it comes, does not touch the silent oath of the bord. This is respected on all worlds."

"Eat hearty, eat hearty!" said the Cacique. "How do you like our food?"

"The double oath of the bord does not require that we lie," growled Crewman Trochanter. "It is insipid You must know that yourselves."

"It is not our best food, but it is the best we have to offer at present. For ourselves more than for you we regret this; nobody loves fine food so much as do we. We expect a finer food shortly, but for topological reasons you will not be able to partake of it. But we will bless you in that hour when again we eat our fine food."

"I have a complaint, a very serious complaint," said just Roadstrum.

"Strangers may not lodge complaints till they have been in residence here for ninety days," the Cacique said, "and no stranger has ever remained with us that long."

"My complaint won't hold for ninety days. I accuse you people of eating men."

"You could not have heard of—but no, their arrival was not logged, any more than yours was. If you are given another life, good Roadstrum, you should learn to post your arrivals more carefully, let people know where you are. But that is another matter. What is it you are speaking of? Get to the point."

"I will. You are slaughtering some of them in that building now."

"Oh, you mean the sheep? For a moment I thought that you meant—"

"They are men, and you know it."

"I know it, and you know it. But the sheep don't know it, and the documentation does not know it. We are logged as a pastoral planet, given over almost entirely to the raising of sheep. Will you argue with the Gazeteer itself? I can show you the pedigrees of all these creatures, and they are sheep pedigrees. They are good eating, but there is better. Do you know what it is?"

"I do not. But this I will not eat," said mighty Roadstrum, and he overturned the great bowl of spicy goulash. "Sheep this is not."

"You could have waited till we had finished," grumbled Crewman Clamdigger. "The stuff is good. And you said yourself that the sheep did not act quite like men."

"We are insulted," said the Cacique. "You have defiled the bord. On all worlds one eats what one is given, and one praises it."

"All praise to this flesh!" howled Roadstrum. "Flesh of our own flesh! We eat not our own kindred! On your feet, men! It's a rumble! Awk!"

And not a single brave man came to his feet. They were manacled in their chairs where they sat. Trapped chairs! They had fallen into the most childish trap of them all. They shook the hall with their fury, but their bonds were strong and so was the hall. And all the great Polyphemians were laughing.

"We told you that there was a finer food," the Cacique of Polyphemia chortled, "and that there were reasons why you could not partake of it. But we will partake, and we will begin to do so tomorrow. We have it so seldom. Tame servile sheep is tame food indeed. You were right to call it insipid, but it is the best we have for our daily fare. But there is a better, Roadstrum, a better."

"What, you toothy androphage, what could be more vile, or better in your view?" the furious enchained Roadstrum demanded.

"Yourselves, woolly Roadstrum, rampant ram! It is everything that tame sheep is not. It is the finest of fine foods for our own fine selves. We will have to arrange to have it oftener. Ah, rage, Roadstrum, and all your fine men! Rage and grow fat in your rage. In our own way we love you, and we'll waste not a gout of you."

So Roadstrum and Puckett and all their furious men from

the hornet crews were dragged, amid sky-splitting noise by all concerned, into a dungeon to be fatted for the kill.

Margaret, of course, was not with them. She had made her own arrangements with the high Polyphemians. There were the two great Captains, Deep John the Vagabond, and either seventeen or eighteen crewmen. There is a point of issue here.

Twenty of them had been dragged in, counted, and certified. But a little while later there were twenty-one of them. The big Polyphemians told the counter that he had made a mistake, and that he would go in the pot for it. The counter maintained that he had not made a mistake, that he had counted correctly, and there had been only twenty. The counter was correct in this, but he went into the pot nevertheless.

How the twenty-first man happened to be there, why he was not there at first and where he came from, and how he differed from the rest of them are things of great moment.

A Polyphemian pokey is much like a pokey anywhere. Deep John asserted that this was so, and he had been in more pokies than all of them together. And yet there was something special about this one, and it had to do with their special purpose of being there. They were fed lavishly. And they were mocked. "Rage, and grow fat in your rage," the Cacique had told them. Well, they did rage, and they ate, and they raged again. There was little else to do.

It was rank fare, but there was an abundance of it. Crewman Starkhead would not eat at all. Crewman Burpy ate to excess. The rest of them attempted to practice moderation, but they were hooked into eating more and more. With the rank leeks and ramps were also habit-forming mushrooms of an intoxicating sort, compelling them to eat more and yet more, and to rage and rave. Their moderation became more and more immoderate, and they came somewhat to like the low food. Worried and restricted men will eat to ease their worry, and they grew fat in spite of themselves. Except Crewman Starkhead.

Margaret the houri visited them, but not often. She had been consorting with the high Polyphemians, and Roadstrum accused her of being faithless.

"But of course I am faithless, great Roadstrum," she said. "It is our nature to be."

"Haven't you any loyalty at all," he asked in his sorrowful voice, putting on the act a little.

"I don't think so. We weren't constituted with any," she said.

"But I am sure you would work for us against the Polyphemians."

"Work against those fellows and get put in the pot? Not me. And they're not bad at all. They're so blamed mean that it's fun. There come times when we like our fellows real mean," she said.

"We will remember that when we are out again and you with us," threatened Crewman Trochanter. "Mean, Margaret, real mean. And you won't like it."

"Oh, but you're not going to get out. You're in it for good, and they're going to eat you up every one."

But Roadstrum used his special wheedle on her then, talking to her privately in a low voice through the grille. What words he used we do not know; but remembering that he now had a forked tongue, and that he had become something of a diplomat on Nine-worlds, we know that he found apt words.

Margaret did agree to work for them and spy for them. She still wanted to go to Earth with them. She had heard that the men there were willing.

It was on the following morning, their second day on Polyphemia, that Di Prima was taken. He had always been the fattest of them. He went with a joke on his lips about his name and he being the first of them taken, but in spirt he was uneasy. And the other men all raged at the idea of one of their companions being taken and being roasted and stewed and then eaten. They roared and ranted, and the Polyphemians mocked them to still greater fury. And they ate in their wrath and put on a sheath of hasty angry fat.

Late that night one of the Polyphemians came to them and told them that Di Prima hadn't been very good.

"Fat enough, but not rampant enough," he said. "But we expect much more of all of you. Rampant rams! Rage and grow! Oh you will be prime stuff!"

And they were all driven almost insane by the angry mushrooms in their broth. But Margaret came to them a little later and told them that the mocking Polyphemian had lied.

"Yes he was good! I always liked Crewman Di Prima, but I never liked him so much as at the banquet. He was the best man ever. Really!"

"You ate? You ate part of him?" Captain Roadstrum asked, and he was aghast.

"What else would I eat? He *was* the banquet. And he was good good good!"

Thereafter they all thought of her a little differently, now

that she had feasted with the high Polyphemians and had eaten one of them. And she also thought of them in a different way and looked at them with odd anticipation.

Crewmen Fracas, Snow, Bramble, and Crabgrass went to be eaten, one each day. Bangtree went. Oldfellow and Lawrence went. Each went a little less gallantly than had his predecessor, and now the jokes on their lips were of a strained quality. They were still the brave crewmen, but it does rag you this being taken out and eaten one at a time.

"We can't go on like this," Roadstrum moaned. "We have to play our ace to survive. Why, oh why, won't they take our ace? Another day and we'll go clear mad and eat him ourselves. How can they resist him?"

Their ace was the twenty-first man who had appeared among them after the correct count had been twenty. The secret about him was that he was not a man at all but a kit. He was a kit, and the men had each one of them carried a part of that kit strapped to his belly to be assembled when a real emergency arrived. Their situation in the Polyphemian dungeon was such an emergency, and they had assembled the kit.

His name was Esolog-9-Ex and he was a build-it-yourself pseudanthropus kit. You never know when you are going to need such an automaton, and many hornet-men had formed the habit of carrying such portions of one.

The men had had fun with Esolog-9 in the past, particularly in the happy days of the war. You remember the time they had constructed him into a cardshark? Into a hillbilly? Into a peddler? One of the best had been when they constructed him into a crackpot general. This pseudo-general issued a series of the weirdest and most asinine orders ever heard. They resulted in more than ten thousand men going to their deaths needlessly. It was excessive, but it was funny.

On Bandicoot the natives had found parts of such a kit on dead soldiers of the back-drift of the war, had assembled him into a ruler, and he still rules Bandicoot today. For these kits could be built to be anything in man form.

And in the Polyphemian dungeon the crewmen had built Esolog-9 into a fat man. He was not an ordinary fat man. He was made to rant and rave more than any of them. And another element was set into him, a sialagogue that tantalized the men, that set up such a flow of juice in them all that they almost drowned in their own slaver. They'd have stuck a fork in him if they had one. The wonder is that they did not eat him themselves. And the

high wonder of it all is that the Polyphemians had left him so long.

Day after day the Polyphemians selected other men, fat, but not so fat as Esolog; succulent, but not so succulent as he; ravening, but not with his own special rage.

"Why do they not take him?" Roadstrum moaned again. "We go to our deaths, and it seems as if they will leave the finest one of us till last."

And the point is that the Ace-in-the-Hole, Esolog-9-Ex, was booby-trapped. To eat him was to suffer the swelling death, the exploding death. One would swell and swell and swell, to three times one's size, to nine times one's size, to a thousand times one's size. One would explode and completely destroy oneself and everything around.

"Why don't they take him, and we be released from our misery?" all the men groaned.

Then, one afternoon, Margaret told them that the Polyphemians would take Esolog-9 that very night. They knew, of course, that Esolog was the best of them all, and they had been saving him for a very special occasion. That special occasion had arrived. Some cousins of the Polyphemians from another place had come to visit them. That night would be the finest of all banquets, and Esolog-9-Ex would be the crown of the feast.

"He will destroy them all," said Roadstrum. "Then you will bring us the keys to the dungeon, Margaret, and we will escape. But see that you are at a safe distance from it, and most especially see that you do not eat any of him."

"I say I will not, and I say I will not," said Margaret, "but can I be sure that I will not? Oh oh oh, he will be good! How can I say I will not eat a little bit?"

"Margaret, Margaret, it would be your destruction," Roadstrum warned. "You must be very shrewd in this. Do not eat any of him. And be far distant when the Polyphemians have eaten fully."

"I say I will not, and I say I will not, but can I be sure I will not?"

The Polyphemians came for Esolog-9 in the early evening. He went to his death as dapper a dog as ever went, and his joking was genuine. He was cool; he hadn't a nerve in him. You had to admire him, even if he was no man at all, but an assembled kit. And he raved and ranted as was expected of him when in the hands of the Polyphemians. He was perfect.

The men waited the news, and Margaret brought them hourly bulletins. She reported that the Polyphemians had

begun on him. She reported a second time that the Polyphemians had devoured him all except for a few pieces hardly to be seen. And finally she reported to them that the Polyphemians had begun to swell and swell and swell.

"You know where the keys are, Margaret? You will be able to find them in the wreckage?"

"I know where they are. I will bring them to you as soon as the show is over."

"And don't get too near, Margaret."

"No, no, I'll stay well clear of it."

And Margaret did not have to report to them when the big thing came. It was a rumble like walls going down; it was a sound like a distant dam bursting. Then it was an explosion that shook all Polyphemia to its deepest roots.

By the time their ears were functioning again, Margaret brought them the keys and let them out. Starkhead did not come out. He had eaten nothing since they entered. He was peculiarly inert and cold to the touch and offensive to the nose. One never admits that a hornet-man is dead, it is against the code, but they buried him there in the floor of the dungeon.

And they could not budge Crewman Burpy. He had grown grosser and fatter than any of them, fatter even then Esolog-9, but the Polyphemians had passed him up. He was too placid; they had such sheep of their own; there was nothing rampant about him. He had grown so heavy that he could no longer stand on his own legs, and they left him without a lot of regret.

Freedom from the dungeon, and now the freedom of the skies. No need now to repair the crippled hornet. There were men left to man one craft only, and it would be a little crowded, so large had they grown.

Deep John looked at himself. "Men, men, it was hobo heaven," he said, "and out of it alive. Whoever saw a genuine hobo with such a pot on him."

So they enskied. They were in high space. And in time they would regain their fine lines and their wonderful tempers. Freedom freedom!

"Boys, I don't feel well," said Margaret the houri.

"You shouldn't, you female cannibal," Roadstrum growled. "You saved us in the end, but you didn't treat us at all well in the middle."

"Boy, I feel terrible," she said.

"It is a wonder you do not die of remorse," said Captain Puckett.

"Remorse this is not. I'm going to burst."

"Look out, look out," Crewman Clamdigger warned. "Mag-

gy was fat, but not that fat. She's three times the size she was when we loaded in the hornet."

"You ate, you ate part of him!" Roadstrum howled furiously.

"Only a little sliver. I don't care. It was worth it. Boys, I'm going to burst."

And she had already taken up three-quarters of the hornet and crowded all the men, gasping and straited, into a tight corner. She had begun to rumble, and she would go any minute, and all with her.

"She'll blow! She'll blow!" howled the frightened men. "She'll blow, and she'll blow up the ship and all of us with her." And there came the still deeper rumble that one hears just before the sundering explosion.

Perils! And there would be more of them. And they were still years from home.

*The Chantey pleads a lapse and leaves a doubt of it.*
*We don't know how the hearty crew got out of it!*

*What tales you hear with reason may you doubt them all.*
*They could not be! And yet the men got out them all.*

*Remember not the jokes they made to bluff it off,*
*What ghastly thing they suffered, and to sluff it off.*

*Withhold the question where such brave men cry a lot.*
*Remember also hornet-crewmen lie a lot.*

Ibid

## CHAPTER SIX

*A feckless fate had foiled their path and ditched them there.*
*A lady with a lilty way had witched them there.*

*She thought to light a scorchy flame at least in them,*
*And had to settle for the risen beast in them.*

*Fell dangers from the charmer and the hair of her,*
*Beware of her! Beware of her! Beware of her!—*

*As deft and devious as Ancient Niccolo—*
*Now sing her song, strum harp, and pip the piccolo.*

Ibid

IT WAS scramble on all their data. Their direction and course were gone. They found themselves in the mysterious realm of middle space, which has no real bearings. But there are shoals and obstacles there.

"What is here, you confabulating canister?" Roadstrum demanded of the data log. "What things are these drifting in the space about us?"

"Here there are warlocks and mandragoras and witches," the navigation data log issued.

"When your machines start to go droll on you you're in trouble," Roadstrum growled. "I can get wise answers from my men. I don't need a machine for that."

"He thinks he is men," Crewman Bramble explained. "He has been with men always and does not know other machines."

"Fix the idiot thing, Bramble. Fix it," Roadstrum ordered.

So Crewman Bramble fiddled with the data log a while and then announced that it was fixed. "Bad connection," he said. "That's what I always say, isn't it?"

"All right, Log, now give a straight answer," Roadstrum ordered. "Where are we, and what are these drifting things about us?"

"Here there are warlocks and mandragoras and witches," the log issued once more. "Kill me, torture me, I can say nothing else."

"Who has been feeding nonsense to this machine?" Roadstrum demanded.

They had narrow misses of collisions with things that apparently weren't there at all. The things seemed solid till very near approach, and then they faded to mist. It was illusion space they were in.

"Ram them, ram them," Roadstrum roared every time an object loomed up. "If we pass through them without harm we will know that they aren't really there."

"All right," issued the data log, and they rammed through several objects that had seemed quite solid, jagged, rocky, quite large bodies.

"What if we don't pass through them without harm, Roadstrum?" Captain Puckett asked.

"Don't know. I suppose that will mean they are real, if we have a real collision."

"And it may mean that we aren't real any longer," said Crewman Clamdigger. "We could get unreal awful easy smashing into one of those things that was really there."

There was another one of them looming up, a round little world of gold and green. It was overdone. It was too arty to be real. Whoever had thought it up may have had a certain feeling for art, but none at all for planetary dynamics.

"That's the phoniest one yet," Roadstrum laughed. "Ram it, Log, ram it. I can see into the mind that made it up."

"So can I!" cried Margaret furiously. "It is Aeaea, the Aeaea mind. I hate her! Ram it, canny can, ram it!"

And the navigation log soared the hornet into ram it, and then somehow slackened off a little. They came in at too low a speed for a real ramming job, and the world took on further reality from their hesitation.

"You fumbling idiot," Roadstrum fumed. "You half accepted it on its own terms, so now it is half there. Too close to it to veer now, and it's getting too solid to take a chance going right through. Slow it and land. What happened to you anyhow?

"Lost my nerve," the navigation data log issued.

"Oh, that damned Aeaea!" Margaret exploded again. "I've run into it and her a hundred different times in different parts of the universe. She and that silly planet of hers! She doesn't have a regular place. She hangs it anywhere. And now we've got to land on it. I hate her!"

They landed on Aeaea. They made a bad landing. They first buried themselves in the soft surface that was like smoke. Then they had to back out and let it solidify. They got out and walked, and it was tricky. Aeaea hadn't made her world very thoroughly. For the place was not charted and not generally believed in. The surface was full of nothing-holes. But it firmed, it firmed, it became a workable theory, it became a fact.

"Aeaea!" Roadstrum hooted. "We all know that it shouldn't be here. Whoever heard of coming onto a myth in actuality. I'd say annihilate all myths and be done with it."

"Easy, easy, fine Roadstrum," Margaret cautioned. "What do you think I am?"

"Oh, but this breaks it, Maggie! It would hardly startle me to hear the lady sing."

"No, no, Roadstrum. Give her an ear and she'll take it all. She's worse than the Siren-Zo, and she has a more hideous song. Let's zoom away from this place; it becomes too solid."

But it did startle Roadstrum when he heard the lady sing. It startled them all when they heard it. It was high and clear, and not far away. There was an artiness about that singing that is beyond art. It would have been better if it were not quite as good, but it was remarkable singing.

They were in the center of the singing, and they were all trapped. Then they were in the center of a new silence, in a world inside the song. And there was a nice enough lady there, but could she be Aeaea herself?

"We are strangers, lost and bemused," Roadstrum said to the lady. "We landed here by accident. We are looking for the lady who was singing, the lady who (according to silly myth) is identical with the planet and who sang the planet into being."

"And now we have found you," Margaret interrupted rudely. "Scat, you wood pussy, down on your four legs and skat!"

"The Margaret be mute!" the lady ordered, and the Margaret was frozen into an angry crouching statue. Fire in her eyes and slaver on her mouth, but she could not move or speak.

"I am the lady," the lady said then, "and there is no

lady here except myself. I am Aeaea. To my notion there is no other lady anywhere. And I resent your calling this a silly myth. I made the myth and it is not silly; charming rather. Well, come along, come along! You are my things now, and you will come when I call you."

They all followed her like children—they did not know where.

They came to fine quarters, or perhaps it was that the fine quarters came to them. These things seemed to form about them, and there was no real distance traversed.

"A dish, a doll, a droll, a dream," Crewman Clamdigger breathed.

"A girl, a grig, a gleam, a glom," Crewman Trochanter gobbled.

And Margaret hissed. She would never remain entirely mute, that one. She was still unable to move, yet she was still with them in their quarters. There was something the matter with these quarters. They seemed not to be designed for people at all. For something, but not for people.

"Be you all at ease," said the lady Aeaea in her musical voice. "When you have rested and eaten there will be time to admire me. The Margaret may eat from the bowl on the floor, and the rest of you in your fine stalls—ah cubicles. The mighty Road-Storm will come and talk with me."

"A larkin, a limpet, a lass!" admired Captain Puckett. They liked the lady.

"All right, girl," Roadstrum said when they were alone. "I have a few questions. They will be to the point, and I want answers."

"I doubt that you could understand the answers, " Aeaea warned. "I see now that you are a common simpleminded man, and we maintain a very high intellectual average here. It will be difficult to communicate."

"Who is the 'we' that maintains so high an average, girl?"

"Only myself now. My father has been dead these last several centuries."

"It should be easy to maintain a high average with only one entity."

"It is. I am mistress of all the sciences. I go so far beyond all else that my work is called magic. I manipulate noumena, regarding monads as points of entry tangential to hylomorphism. As to the paradox of Primary Essence being contained in Quiddity, the larger in the smaller, I have my

own solution. The difficulty is always in not confusing Contingency with Accidence. Do you understand me?"

"Sure. You're a witch."

"Exactly, but I frown on the name. Very unscientific. But I am no ordinary witch. I studied in Salamanca the hidden."

"Salamanca, the underground witchcraft school? But that was on World, in the Indias, in the New Latin Lands."

"There are entrances to it on World, Road-Storm, but do you not know that the underground lands are shared by many worlds? It is all one underground, a vast place, and it is but a trick on which globe one will surface on coming out. This is the reason that the inside of every world is so much vaster than the outside. You are fooled by the shape of these little balls on which things live and crawl; you see the universe inside-out; you see the orbs as containing and not contained. I will teach you to see it right if you please me."

"On with it, witch, on with it."

"I am the consumate scientist, Road-Storm. Science has suffered in having her name applied to mechanics, an ugly stepchild of hers. Matter itself is a humiliation to the serious. We cannot make it vanish forever, but can make it seem to. For my purpose that is even better. All matter can be modified as long as it is kept subjective. Let us keep it so."

"Yes. Let's do that, Aeaea."

"Those who fail to understand my science may call it magic or hypnotism or deception. But it is only my projection of total subjectivity. I will bring one of my creatures and you will see what I mean."

"Bring it on, gay girl! Hey, I feel as lively as a monkey here," Roadstrum laughed.

Aeaea left him then, and her singing filled the halls when she was gone. They were fine halls of marble, polished travertine. No crack or grain at all in their walls. But if one took a total subjective view and wished them to be less perfect? Yes, they were not really travertine, but an inferior marble; not marble really, but ordinary limestone; not that either, but adobe, mud really. Roadstrum kicked holes in the walls, and a great part of them fell down.

"Why hokey!" he said. "I can make marble halls myself. I wonder how many others know how? A thing like that could come in handy."

Then he formed them to travertine marble again, being very subjective about it. He heard Aeaea coming again, her wonderful singing drawing nearer, and he was a little

leery of her. She would know many tricks, and he had only partly learned one of them.

She came singing, and she brought a pet raccoon with her. Roadstrum guffawed to see the thing. This was real art! You would practice a long time before you made a thing as comic and clownish as that, and yet at the same time calling out all compassion and sympathy. A coon would no more be only a coon to Roadstrum; this one was really a person. A burlesque, of course, a caricature and a perfect one, a simulacrum with a soul. It was a solid cartoon of a little animal made by a real master.

"It's good, Aeaea," Roadstrum said heartily. "I never saw anything better even in the Natural Arts Museum on Camiroi. Has he seen it? You really take him off with that?"

"Has who seen it, Road-Storm? Of whom does it remind you?"

Roadstrum chuckled with real amusement. "It looks just like Puckett. I might almost say that it is Puckett. What other animal but a coon would he look like? Was it live to begin with, Aeaea? Did it really look like that, or have you only made it look like that?"

"I have explained to you, Road-Storm, that there is no difference between appearing and being, so long as we keep matter subjective. You have not paid attention."

Ah, the angry and at the same time pathetic eyes on that coon!

"Just like Puckett himself, Aeaea," Roadstrum mused. "Even the tail is the sort of tail he'd have if he had one. This is a new art that surpasses anything. You are a genius, Aeaea."

"I have always thought so, Road-Storm. He is so sweet, the little raccoon, but if he bites me one more time I'll break out every cute tooth he has."

"Let's get Puckett here to look at this. Will he recognize himself in caricature?"

"Mighty Road-Storm, do you not understand yet?"

"Understand what? Would Puckett be offended?"

"Of course he is offended. That is why he bites me."

"What? What? I don't believe it. This is not Puckett."

"It is. There is no Puckett anywhere except here. This is High-Captain Puckett, commander of hornets. This is your friend and companion in his new form. You see him like this, I see him like this, he sees himself like this, and therefore—"

"Oh shut up, witch! I don't believe you. I'll find him."

Roadstrum went roaring through the halls to find High-Captain Puckett. Aeaea sang behind him and all around

and laughed as she sang. Roadstrum found Crewman Humphrey.

"When did you last see Puckett, Humph?" he demanded of him.

"I don't know," Humphrey fluttered oddly from his upper lip. "He went with the lady, I think. He looked kind of funny."

"Puckett looked funny! Look at yourself, you straddling kaymo! What's happened to you?

"I don't know," Humphrey fluttered with that rubbery lip. Humphrey *did* look funny. Humphrey had always looked funny, but this was different. Roadstrum would think of the difference in a minute.

"There goes Puckett now," Crewman Eseldon brayed suddenly. "See him there climbing up that plant."

"You ass, that's a coon!" Roadstrum roared. "Was there ever such an ass?"

There never was. The horrible truth swept over Roadstrum in waves while the weird singing of Aeaea rose and fell. It had happened to all those men. The likeness had been so good, and he himself so upset, that Roadstrum had not noticed it happening.

Humphrey had looked funnier than usual. Humphrey had turned into a camel. That's enough to make anyone look funny. "But what right has she to turn my men into camels and coons?" Roadstrum asked angrily. "They are persons inviolate and should not be subverted to animals. Aeaea, Aeaea, come here and give an accounting!"

Crewman Eseldon was now an ass. He had always been one, but now he was one physically. The change seemed to have got all the men. "Hollering won't do it," Roadstrum hollered. "It's time I did some rapid and dynamic thinking about this thing. Come you together here, men, creatures, animals, pseudomorphs, companions of my bosom. Come together here and we will hold congress on this affair."

They came, they came. Was this only group hypnosis? Or had they actually changed? Aeaea said that seeming and being were the same thing. Roadstrum attempted to fight her on her own ground. He became very subjective about it all. He had been able to turn travertine marble to claymud and back to marble, but he could not turn these things back to man-form.

Crewman Septimus was now a rabbit. With that cleft upper lip and those pink eyes he could not say anything else. Crewman Swinnert was a hog, a good solid hog, the kind you'd like to be if you had to be one. Ursley was a bear. Margaret the houri was an alley cat (that was the

first mistake that Aeaea made; it was not a metamorphosis for Margaret to become an alley cat, that was her true form).

Crewmen Clamdigger and Threefountains and Trochanter, three tall stags, great horny wild stags. Those boys had always had a lot of spring to them, and now they were ranging and leaping wildly. Deep John was a polecat. "I always did like folks to treat me with a certain decent reserve," he said. Crewman Bramble was a fox. He had always been the smartest of them, but if he was so smart how come he was taken in this?

"If any of you have any ideas, tell them to me," Roadstrum begged. "Fortunately for you all, the lady Aeaea has an imperfect idea of animals. I believe that she has led a secluded life, that she has never seen real animals. She leaves you with the powers of human speech, for an instance, and that is rare in animals. But I at least have remained a man, and out of my great mind I will fabricate some device to free you from all this."

And they laughed at him. They who had been captain and crewmen and hobo and houri laughed at the Captain Roadstrum, laughed foolish giggly gobbly animal laughs. And he was furious.

"Ah, she left you your men's voices, but she took away your men's brains. Foolish gibbering things hardly worth saving. But for the great love I bear you in your real forms I will find a way to save you yet. I am a man yet, and I will find the way to lead you back to the man context."

They laughed and giggled yet. You have heard stags laughing? You have heard donkeys and polecats laughing? Yes, but have you ever heard a kinkajou laughing? It runs down your spine like an idiot, that laughing. That was Crewman Lawrence in his new form.

"There has to be a converse to all this," Roadstrum maintained, but he was full of doubt now. "I'll break the spell or the science of her singing yet. As the only man left it devolves to me to do it."

There was high laughter in the singing now, and Aeaea came to them assembled there. They all gathered around her, except Margaret, and were completely charmed by her. Animals! Animals!

But Roadstrum was more than surprised when Aeaea swung him up under her arm and set him astride her shoulders. It was pleasant but puzzling. Either she had become very large or he had become very small.

The reflection in the polished wall gave him the answer.

Mighty Roadstrum had become a very small ape. Angrily he leaped down. He didn't like it.

"Many men have become the pet apes of beautiful women," he gibbered in monkey voice, "but I will not have it happen to me literally. And I was small ape all the time that I trumpeted I was the only man left? No wonder that the animals laughed."

But it had happened; it had happened to all of them. How does one accustom himself to being an animal? Roadstrum refused, and held apart. But Aeaea became the center of the lives of the rest of them, and in a day or two she had them hooked.

They were her animals. She maintained their jealousies, fondling one and then the other, keeping them subservient to her. They were her creatures, and she gloried in them.

It would seem that she must be injured or crashed or slashed to death or ground to death, and Aeaea did not seem the durable type. Half a ton of camel in her lap was no great thing, perhaps, but when she went into her frolicking wrestle with Ursley the bear it was a fearful thing. When she went for canters with Eseldon the ass she bore him on her back as often as he bore her on his, and he was quite a big donkey, yet they seemed to have a gay, galloping time of it. The coon and the kinkajou slashed her with teeth, the three great horny stags leaped all over her. Stag-man Trochanter learned to balance with all four feet on her shoulders, and he was big as a horse.

"It is all in being subjective, Apie Road-Storm," she explained. "But of course I am slashed and I bleed, and I am crushed and ground down and broken. I want to be. I have a passion for these things. It is the animal in myself. And yet all these things are in my mind only. They are private fantasies of mine, as are you, most wonderful of apes. You all love me, you know. If you did not, I would make new fantasies."

All loved her except Margaret the alley cat. And Margaret was a violation of Aeaea's thesis. It was axiomatic that all her creatures should love her, said Aeaea; therefore the alley cat loved her also. But Margaret had hateful ways of showing her love.

But Roadstrum still plotted for freedom. He plotted with Margaret the alley cat, with Deep John the polecat, with Puckett the raccoon, and with Bramble the fox.

But had not Bramble died and been eaten by the Polyphemians? No, he had not, it only seemed that he had. He was always too much of a fox to be taken and eaten,

but the trick by which he evaded it will not be given here.

Something was working in Roadstrum's little ape head. When he had been a man he had always known when it was time for action; particularly he had always known the last moment when action was still possible. He knew now that that moment was come very near. He was sinking deeper in his animalness every hour.

Puckett the coon resisted, but with entirely too much deference. "We should let the lady know that we do not always wish to remain animals," he said. "We must present this protest firmly to the lady. We must take the bull by the tail, as the ancient adage has it, and tell the lady that we are not entirely pleased with our state."

Then a blinding light burst on Roadstrum, and he saw the truth of the situation. Many things Roadstrum was not, and it was sometimes wondered why he was the natural leader of all the men. He was their leader because he was a man on whom the blinding light sometimes descended.

"I've got it, I've got it," he shouted. He gibbered it like an ape? No, he shouted it like a man. He had his man's voice back again. "I've got it, guys, I've got it! We have been taking the bull by the wrong organ. The witch has played a semantic trick on us. We were already pretty salty animals when we came here! It is toy animals she has turned us into. We have been working against ourselves, trying to be men again, but to be her idea of men, since we live in her context. But she does not know real animals, or men.

"Listen, listen; what we must do now is become more animal, and not less animal. Assemble, assemble all.

"Toy creatures, puppets, tame things!" he thundered. "Be real animals! Raise it up in you! Show the witch what real animals are. Resurrect the old beast!"

"No, no," they twittered. "Aeaea has already turned us into animals with her singing. Someday, but not today or tomorrow, we will become men again for a little while, if she will permit it. But we are animals now, Ape. Your words are mixed."

"Hear my man words, hear my animal words!" Roadstrum bellowed. "Be you not toys any longer! Stir up the wild business in you. You have to be real animals before you can be men. How could Roadstrum be the tame ape of any woman? Puckett, be you a real boar coon while you are a coon! Humphrey, be you a cob camel at least! Ye three great stags, be rampant and musky stags! Ursley, let out the great growl, be a bear and not a toy bear! Septimus! Swinnert! Eseldon! All! Raise it up in you!"

The arty singing of Aeaea turned into a scream, but a sincere one. Reality, raw murderous reality broke into her contrived world. Terror had come to the planet Aeaea, and it would never be the same again. The lady Aeaea had become a sniffling screaming old lady now, and only Eseldon the ass remained with her. An ass is all she deserved.

No, no, it cannot be given here! The blood would be all over you, on your hands and in your heart, and you would never be able to get rid of it. It was horrifying, animal, human slaughter, the brutish murder of a concept and a person. It would sear your eyes to watch it.

Of what did the great revolt consist? Some say that it was a cosmic gang-shag that left the lady near dead and in terror for the rest of her life, never again to dabble in toy animals. But most agree that she was left dead indeed, though perhaps not from her own viewpoint. And some say that it was an elemental surge, so much more horrifying than a mere attack that it cannot safely be put into words.

Margaret, of course, was in the middle of it. Nobody had ever doubted her animality.

"I'll shred that lark; I'll shred her yet," she had sworn. And Margaret grew to be a larger and larger cat. "I see myself as a very large cat, you all see me as a very large cat, she will see me as one, and therefore I will be one." Margaret had become bobcat sized, leopard sized. Her tail twitched and her whiskers vibrated. She'd have that songbird; for Aeaea, in her terror, had begun to look very like a bird. Ape and cat and coon and fox had been practicing at seeing her as a bird, and it worked.

Margaret went for Aeaea, and they all went for her. She was torn open in throat and breast, she was rent apart, she was ground down, she was trampled and stomped, she was bitten and clawed, she was defaced (that Margaret took the face clear off of her with a final sweep of her tigress claws), she was annihilated. She was dead.

Dead, dead, nothing left, except the song that had turned into a scream that still hung in the air. And the bloody pulp that had almost no resemblance to a body. She was stubborn, though, that Aeaea, and she had her own philosophy.

"I am as I have always been," said Aeaea. "You can all see that there is no blood on me." Well, there was quite a bit of blood around, much of it on the cat Margaret. She reveled in the feathers and blood on her paws and face, quite a bit of blood.

"I see myself as unhurt," Aeaea continued (there was the broken remnant of a body on the ground, and there was the voice in the air). "Surely you all see me as unhurt. Therefore

I *am* unhurt even though (as it happens) I have just died horribly. Now you had better all be gone. I hate sticky farewells, and what is left of me has become very sticky."

"Aeaea, whichever is you, the voice in the air, or the bloody thing on the ground, there is a flaw in your philosophy. You really are dead, you know. You begin to fade away, and so does your world. Hey, we'd better get off this thing while there's still something left to get off!" Roadstrum trumpeted.

"Would you sing for us once more," asked Humphrey the apprehensive camel, who was becoming uncameled.

"Yes, do," said Margaret. She was back in her human or houri form now. "How about 'Mouth Full of Feathers'? That's a good boogie song. Or the 'Dying Canary.' I always did like the 'Dying Canary.' " Margaret was a little cruel.

"I can sing no more," said Aeaea. "I fade, I fade. But do I not carry it all off well?"

She did, she did. But now the murder howl had gone over the space-ways, and they were all outlaws to be hunted. And decent people would no more give them haven.

*She sought with song to make the towsle toys of them,*
*She hadn't recked the ruddy reckless boys of them.*

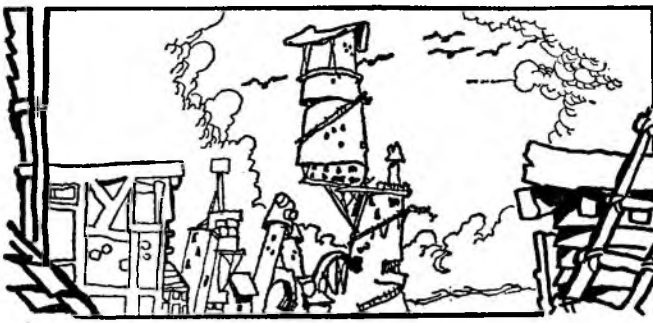
*She sold her reputation for a song she did,*
*And paid a reparation for the wrong she did.*

*The "Songstress Murder" made the space-ways gape to hear,*
*The stunning scandal, murder, wreck, and rape to hear.*

*A killer clan! The avid law is chilled for it,*
*And deems that they be hunted down and killed for it.*

*And Roadstrum cast a youngish pelt aside of him,*
*And came down near the tough essential hide of him.*

Ibid



## CHAPTER SEVEN

*The cream of Horneteers, the high elite of them!*
*And sky-wolves snapping at the bloody feet of them!*

*In Guimbarde town, it rude! it raw! ramshackle it!*
*They sought the crushing, crashing way to tackle it.*

*For noble lies and every royal whopper there*
*They'd kill the kerl who couldn't tell a topper there.*

*Inside the Club itself, the most exclusive yet,*
*Came snuffling death:—and they be more elusive yet!*

*From flying hoosegow, sudden-swift, the ratter ran*
*Who cut all trails and read the Gypsy patteran.*

*He blew the blast! And they be hustled well and gone.*
*And after that they went a while to Hell and gone.*

### Ibid

IT WAS the most exclusive club in the world, in all the worlds, and this is a mighty pale statement to make about it. Let us emphasize that it was hard to get into.

It was a hundred and thirteen stories up by one count, a hundred and nineteen by another, and nobody was sure how close either might be. Naturally the Club did not have a room or suite number, no more than did any other thing in those buildings.

It was in one of those weird, wooden buildings of Guimbarde Town, and the buildings of Guimbarde Town have neither elevators nor zoom-rooms. How could they have? There is no corridor nor shaft in any of them straight enough for such contrived transportation.

It was in one of those thousand-odd steep wooden buildings that crown Blind-Raven hill, tall shanties, most of them over a hundred stories (there is no exact count in any of these buildings) that the Club is found. These buildings lean together and prop each other up; and when one of them topples and falls (and it happens quite often) several others will usually fall with it.

The building no longer had a name, or at least no name that applied to all of it: there were local names that applied to various parts of it. Long ago it had been the Ramshackle Hotel, but the lower nine stories of it had sunk into the mud (they used no foundations in Guimbarde Town) and various tribes and peoples still lived subterraneously there. At a little later time, a dozen upper stories had fallen from the building onto the Greenglanders Building and had been incorporated into that; and very many of the middle stories had burned. But to make up for what it had lost, in simple justice it had received thirteen stories fallen from the old Potters' Steeple, dropping from the sky, as it were. These were conjoined crookedly to the old basic (these segments never do fall straight), and all the higher stories later added to the building were crooked.

Well, how *do* you get up even a hundred and thirteen or a hundred and nineteen stories to arrive at the Club? You go up those old outside stairways, and they sure are dangerous! There will sometimes be five or nine stories missing from the stairway, and there you must scramble. There are places where you must pay toll or fight your way through. There are cliff-dweller Indians in the mid-sixties who drink out of the skulls of those who thought it a safe thing to go up that stairway.

All this, you must know, is the finest section of Guimbarde Town, not the meanest; and Guimbarde Town is the finest city on Yellow Dog. Yellow Dog itself has lost its world license, is now a proscribed world, and is inhabited mostly by shiftless and shifty persons.

So it is seen that the Club is not an easy place to get into. Why not come down to it from above, you say, in gracious copter or in sky car? They don't use them there. The skies over Guimbarde Town, and indeed over the whole of Yellow Dog, are infested by Megagaster birds that can take all but the largest craft in a single gobble. And yet Road-

strum and his brave outlaws *did* come down into the Club from above.

"How can we land? How can we land?" Roadstrum had fretted at the top of his voice.

"Leave it to Bramble," said Captain Puckett. "He'll think of something."

"Leave it to me," said Bramble. "I'll think of something. Hey, you know those nineteen cases of Mumuckey mustard that we have carried for so long a time? Often we've had little room for food or water, and have been forced to sleep three deep. Some of you have howled that we should throw the mustard out so there would be room for ourselves. 'Let us keep them,' I said every time; 'we will find something they are good for.' Now we have found it. We will foil the Megagaster birds with our mustard, and we will land on this planet."

Willing crewmen got out and, working dangerously, coated the entire hornet craft half a meter thick with Mumuckey mustard. Then they came into the dangerous sky of Yellow Dog.

What happened to them? What happens to every craft that enters that dangerous sky? They were gobbled up in one bite by a Megagaster bird.

One account is that they went right through that bird like yellow flame. Another is that it bounced them around nine times in its maw and then spat them out with a cry of disgust and horror. They crashed down through the top dozen flimsy floors of a building and came to rest in the Club. They got out of the hornet craft and looked around.

It was dark there. The more exclusive a club is, the darker it always is. There was no light there at all except the luminescent eyes of some of the creatures present. This, however, was light enough, once they got accustomed to it.

"This is the Improbable Club," said the President-Emeritus in a heavy muffled voice, "and you things have made an improbable entry. Many unqualified persons have attempted to crash this Club, but you have done it literally. Whether you will be able to qualify for our high membership is another thing. It will not matter. We accept, for a brief moment at least, all who come here as members. We will quickly measure you one way or another. We have no living ex-members. Sit you down, all, and unwind your ears. Remember, each topper must be topped."

"If not?" Roadstrum asked boldly, not understanding this jabber at all.

"The stopper," said the President-Emeritus. This worthy

seemed hardly human, but he was a genial person, in a hard-eyed sort of way.

"What's the fellow talking about?" Roadstrum asked Crewman Bramble. "What is this Improbable Club that we have fallen into?"

"I'm not sure, Captain Roadstrum," said Bramble. "The name is, perhaps, an euphemism. There is a crest on the old weapons-rack in the corner, and it reads 'Club Menitros.' Is this the Club Itself whose very location is unknown, the club for membership in which Emperors might give their right galactic segment, the club so exclusive that for a full century it had no members at all? Is this the High Liars Club itself?"

Roadstrum and all the crewmen bowed their heads.

"If it be so, we will all try to be worthy of it," they murmured.

The half-dozen members were drinking loopers, the green-lightning drink, and now a liveried waiter brought them to the crewmen also.

Margaret the houri, who had been larking around in other parts of the building, came in to them now.

"I met a fast-talking fellow and I'm going to World with him," she said. "I'd go with you, but the word is that you're not going there."

"But yes, we will go in our hornet as soon as we are sure we have given the slip to the sky-police," Roadstrum said.

"Three families have already moved into your hornet," Margaret said. "You couldn't get them evicted in a month. Besides, the word is out that you're not going anywhere in that hornet, ever. I guess I'll just go to World with this fast-talking fellow."

"Our fellowship begins to break up," said Roadstrum sadly. "Goodbye, Margaret, you'll miss us."

Deep John the Vagabond, who had likewise been making connections, came back.

"I'm going to hook a night freight to World, fellows," he said. "I'd go with you, but the word is out that you're not going to World. And where you are going, I don't want to go."

"The word is not out until we put it out," Roadstrum said. "I myself intend to go to World very soon."

But Deep John had left them.

"One of the members there reminds me of someone," Roadstrum whispered to Puckett. "The fellow with the green scarf."

"He looks familiar to me also, Roadstrum," said Puckett. "I'm on the verge of thinking whom he reminds me of."

And there was another fellow there who seemed to be, like the hornet-men, on trial membership. He was a curious creature with a knot in the middle of his forehead, with one red eye, and with the other eye covered by a patch.

"You may begin, Probationary," the President-Emeritus said. "Be not nervous. In a very little while you will either be a member, or you will not be."

But the red-eye began nervously for all that.

"I come from a very poor planet. We have no exports except our own citizens, going to better ourselves in other places. We have no talent, can perform few tasks, and have no trade on alien worlds except one. We work as traffic lights."

"As traffic lights?" Roadstrum asked, though he was not sure that a probationary member should be asking questions. "How as traffic lights?"

"All on our world are born with one red eye and one green eye," the creature said. "Our eyes shine brightly, as you see that my red eye shines brightly here now. We offer our services, we stand on corners in fair weather and foul, and we blink first one eye and then the other. The pay is everywhere miserable, the conditions are hard, but it is a livelihood."

The President-Emeritus motioned to three ushers, and they approached grimly.

"Why is the one eye bandaged, and what is the knot in the middle of your forehead?"

"If one wished to work on a good corner anywhere, and have a little better conditions, he had to have an amber eye also," the creature said, very nervously. "The amber eye is not natural to us, so I have had an implant but it is not yet completely formed. It will grow, and it will break open, I believe, by springtime. In the meanwhile my green eye is inflamed. It's the messages I have to flash on it that have done it in. The 'walks' and the 'don't walks' I can manage easily enough. It's the special things, the 'No left turns except on Sunday or before eight A.M.,' things like that have inflamed it. It isn't easy to flash a variety of messages."

"Enough of that," said the President-Emeritus. "I believe you hardly qualify, and if you continue with your jabber it will get worse. Why can folks not understand that this Club is not for amateurs?"

The ushers slit the fellow's throat, opened a trapdoor in the floor, and dropped him through. He fell three hundred and fifty meters, the building having a lean there and this part of the story being out over empty air.

"I understand what he meant," Roadstrum whispered

to Puckett, "when he said, 'In a very little while you will either be a member, or you will not be.' I am not sure that all our men will be able to qualify. They are good ordinary liars, but the extraordinary is expected here."

"That fellow with the green scarf bothers me more and more," Puckettt whispered. "He reminds me very much of someone we have met in our travels, something about the brow, something about his grin."

And it was to the fellow with the green scarf that the President-Emeritus turned now. "Give us one of yours, Horace," the P-E said, "anything to get the taste of the late ineptitude out of our ears."

"Sammy the Snake!" Roadstrum said suddenly and loudly. "Pardon me, sir, but are you any kindred of Sammy the Snake, the gambler on Roulettenwelt?"

"My cousin," said the fellow with the green scarf. "I am Horace the Snake. Fellows, these travelers know Sammy."

All the crewmen could see the resemblance now. It was something about the brow, of course, and something about the grin. It was also the flickering forked tongue and the thirty-meter long torso. Cousins! they could almost have been brothers!

"Ah, I'll tell you about the time I used to be a baseball player," Horace began. "I had natural disabilities for this sport, for it had been originally a human game not designed for snakes. And, after humans, it was the giant frogs who played it best, especially at my chosen position, shortstop. Those fellows could really get the hop on a ball. And I, a poor earth-crawler, had to make my way by diligence and persistency.

"In my apprentice years I had a mighty sore mouth from catching that ball, and I never could throw it at all. But I could reach it. With my tail anchored around second base, I could flop my head all the way to third, or first, instantly. In my ninety years on the diamond (we snakes are long-lived) I had fifty thousand double plays and ten thousand triple plays, all unassisted. This, I believe, is a record."

"How would you bat, Horace?" Roadstrum asked, entranced, for he had never heard Horace's stories before.

"Couldn't very well, Roadstrum. Had to take the bat crossways in my mouth and bunt. I'm telling you I really had a sore snout in my apprentice years. But I stayed with it and I learned. You've heard pitchers say they'll jam a ball down a fellow's throat. They did to me. I've swallowed more baseballs than any ball player who ever lived. The worst thing is, they passed a special ruling that I was out whenever I swallowed a pitched ball. I never did believe

they should have charged me more than a strike for it."

"Still, if you *could* lay down a bunt, any sort of bunt—" Roadstrum saw the possibilities.

"I could and I did, Roadstrum. I got where I could lay them down, and they didn't have to be very good. I could stretch my length and have my head on first base before anyone could blink. And once I was on first, I was as good as around. I hold every base-stealing record in baseball. When the bases are ninety feet apart, and a fellow is a hundred and five feet long, how are you going to tag him out?"

"I believe I know a way to stop that stealing." Crewman Trochanter grinned evily.

"I think I know what you mean, Trochanter." Horace the Snake smiled. "Horse-Hoof Harry tried it once when he was playing first base for the All-Star All Stars. Weighed nine tons, that fellow, and what hooves he did have on him! I still wake up screaming when I remember how he tromped on my tail just as I went into my stretch."

Crewman Trochanter chortled.

"But it was the last tail he ever tromped on, Trochanter," said Horace the Snake. "It was just about the last thing of any sort he ever did. I felt kind of sorry when his widow came around to see me that evening; but, as she said, it's all in the game."

Another person, perhaps human, had come into the Club. He was talking in a low voice with the President-Emeritus and with others. There was cursing, and the phrase "bird-killers" was heard.

"We had a bat-boy named Bennie," Horace the Snake continued. "He was a bat-boy literally, too small to handle the bats, but he flitted around merrily in the air."

"And how he could catch flies!" said Crewman Bramble.

"I hate a guy who's heard them all," said Horace the Snake.

One of the Club members, a florid colonel type, who dressed in the human style, was telling a steep tale of witty warfare and cunning conquest. The high hero of this was a great leader named Alley-Sally. It was a racy tale, and it excited Roadstrum.

"Puckett, Puckett," he whispered avidly, "just listen to this great stuff. Listen how it goes. What I would not give to be in on a campaign like that one! What I would not give to meet such a leader."

"Roadstrum, Roadstrum," Puckett chided. "It is yourself and ourselves he talks about; our own epic. Alley-Sally is yourself, Road-Storm. You remember that bit he's telling

now, the six-day war in Wamtangle? Sure, that was a passing smart trick you devised there, Roadstrum. It's part of our own story he tells."

"Oh, I know that, Puckett. But he tells it so much better than it happened! Listen how they did it, Puckett! Listen to how smart their leader was! Oh, if I could only have been there!"

There was a lot of boy still left in Captain Roadstrum.

"One of the hornet-men will now tell a tale," said the President-Emeritus. "A slander against the hornet-men has been brought into this Club within the last several minutes. I do not believe this slander, but I say it is time the horneteers were tested. If they fail the test, then they be not members of the Club, and it will not matter if the slander is true. We will make it quick. Let one horneteer tell a colossal lie, and all be judged by it."

"Let me," said Captain Puckett. "A raconting man you are not, Roadstrum."

And this is the high tale that Captain Puckett told:

"When I was quite a young man and filled with the spirit of adventure and space-faring, I went out to the Daedalian Chersonese and visited a world known as Demetrio Four. Being an undisciplined youth (I speak of that time now in sorrow, having become a moral man in my maturity) I fell into a liaison with a local girl, one Miseremos. She was the light of my life and I was completely impassioned by her. Our affair went along charmingly, until one day her four brothers came and seized me. They examined me very carefully, and in a way that I could not understand. They said that, things being the way they were, Miseremos and myself must marry. I was not adverse to this, loving the girl mightily, though I resented somewhat the manner and compulsion of it.

"And marry we did, though I was quite puzzled by some of the accompanying rites. Then followed the weeks of deep enjoyment, though I was more and more puzzled. I felt strange and uncertain, and my wife, apparently, did not. 'Your brothers spoke of *Things being the way they are,* Miseremos,' I told her one day. 'And I look at you and wonder. How are things, Miseremos?'

"'Do you not understand, dear Puckett?' she asked me. 'Oh, surely you understand! With us on Demetrio Four it is not the same as with folk elsewhere. We maintain our own most peculiar custom in this.'

"I hadn't known of that custom at all, but I was caught by it. On Demetrio Four it was not as it is elsewhere. I had heard the vaunt, 'The men of Demetrio accomplish what

no man else has ever done,' but I had not understood it. With my dear Miseremos on Demetrio Four, it was I who had become pregnant."

"It reminds me of the young wife," said Horace the Snake, "who complained to her mother, 'My Robert is the most wonderful man in the world, but he simply can't bear children.' "

"My period was an easy one," said Captain Puckett, "and at length I gave birth by the natural method. It was a beautiful baby boy. Our joy was almost complete, and I had no suspicion that my time of shameful failure was at hand. Ah, better I had died in childbirth than have endured such shame!"

"What was it, good Captain Puckett?" asked the President-Emeritus. "In what did you fail shamefully?"

"Couldn't lactate," said Puckett. "My wife's brother had to nurse the child."

The Club members conferred among themselves. Puckett and Roadstrum and all the crewmen were being weighed in the balance. Was it good enough? Would the hasty tale of Puckett get them into the Club before the crisis (which they all felt but none of them understood) broke?

"Puckett, I didn't know you were ever on Demetrio Four or in the Daedalian Chersonese at all. It isn't in your record," Roadstrum whispered. "And the custom isn't mentioned in Fisher's Customs of the Nineteenth Sector. And, come to think of it, there are Demetrios One, Two, and Three, but there isn't any Demetrio Four."

"Be a little less of a boy for the moment, Roadstrum," whispered Puckett. "If we fail the Club, we have our throats slit. If we get into it, there is still a threat mounted here against our lives and liberties, but I believe we can claim asylum as members of the rarest club of them all."

"For one crime there is no asylum even in the Club," whispered Horace the Snake, who had sharp ears for whispering. "For all other crimes we give asylum, but for the most heinous crime in the universe we give no asylum."

"What is the most heinous crime in the universe?" Roadstrum asked.

"Killing a songbird."

The President himself came in dressed in the robes of his office. He conferred with the President-Emeritus and with the others. They were being very grim about the matter.

"I believe I understand it now," Crewman Bramble whispered to the Captains. "The arrival of a little while ago, he who looks at us so balefully, is not a man but a sherlocker. We are tracked down."

Yes, they could all see it now. The thing was a sherlocker, a sky-dick, a snuffling hound. It was a ratter, and they were the rats tracked down. The pipe and the deer-stalker hat were not adjuncts, but parts of its contrived head. It was a burlesque of an old architypical human head, the Baker Street prototype, but the thing was a hound and it went on four legs (which they had not noticed before).

The President of the Club spoke now.

"In great sorrow I speak. All you the crewmen are accepted as members and are duly inscribed. But that members of the highest Club of all should be guilty of the most heinous crime in the universe! We will meet no more for one year, and we will deck our halls in mourning for a nine year period. Your accuser will speak now, and we share your contempt for him. But as for yourselves—how the shining ones have fallen!"

The thing, the dog, the sherlocker, the sky-dick, the ratter cleared his throat and began.

"I am the latest model of sherlocker, the finest tracker in the universe. Here I had no real starting place since the site of the crime was a contingent one, having no regular location in real space. I had only the smell of a toy that the Roadstrum had played with when he was three years old, some knowledge of the thought patterns of the Bramble, and the information that Margaret the houri had no heartbeat and no heart.

"With great good fortune I first cut the trail after cruising nine megaparsecs at random. A little later I spied a bent clump of grass in empty space, and still later three twigs that pointed. Here and there I noticed that the hydrogen atoms were all bent in a certain direction. Shrewdly I noticed variations in the cosmic flux; something had passed to alter it. Then I cut the trail for the second time and had my direction.

"I am the snufflingest tracker ever, and I can read any patteran ever laid; one of my ancestors was a Gypsy dog. As I closed in on them I deducted a multitude of details. I was able to deduce the middle name of Crewman Trochanter's maternal grandfather (from the asphyxan in the wake of the hornet), the secret fantasies of Crewman Ursley (from a muted resonance in the Hondstarfer stone-drive), the scalp-itch of Captain Puckett (he is allergic to the Stoimenof salt in the galley of the hornet). It is all down in my notes. I tracked them here. There they sit confounded! Arrest the criminals!"

"Slit his throat!" Roadstrum howled, coming to his feet in the grip of what seemed to be a good idea. "He has told

the truth at a meeting of the High Liars. Kill him! Kill him!"

"Of course we'll kill him," said the sad President. "We'll slit his throat, and we'll drop him through the trap like the dog he is. But not before he's blown the whistle on you."

The sherlocker blew an old-style police whistle. Three hundred coppers boiled into the room, manacled the brave hornet-men, and dragged them away to the terrible place from which, it is said, there is no returning.

*The place itself, and ne'er a good word spoke of it,*
*You shiver when you even make a joke of it.*

*Though some go cocky, gaily in hand-basket there,*
*The most fare sadly in a clammy casket there,*

*Where Dante doled "Torrible soperchio*
*Del puzzo—e gran pietre in cerchio."*

*Undying pain and gaping loss, no doubt of it.*
*A wide way leading in and no way out of it!*

*But none have told the blackest horror shrouded there—*
*Tall teeming terror—but it sure is crowded there!*

Ibid

They were taken as prisoners to Hellpepper Planet. They were up in court there before Tiresias, the blind Theban prophet, who had considerable to say about the workings of this place. Tiresias was not really blind; but he had weak eyes and he wore blue glasses. His underlings called him Blinky.

"You are up for the rape and murder of the person and planet of Aeaea," said Blinky. "I assure you all that a shudder ran through Hell itself here at the news of your crime. Have any of you regrets?"

"Regrets?" Roadstrum asked in a hollow voice. "My only regret is that I didn't get to hear that fellow tell more of his story at the Club. There were these space warriors, you see, Blinky, and there was their noble and heroic leader, and they—"

"Roadstrum, Roadstrum," Puckett protested. "It was our old story that he told. 'Twas of ourselves."

"I know that, but he told it so much better than it happened. How can I be happy in Hell with my ears itching for more of it?"

"A little order here," Tiresias requested severely. "Some-

thing is wrong. This babbling fool cannot be Roadstrum himself?"

"Something is indeed wrong, Blinky," Roadstrum said evenly. "This silly place cannot be Hell itself?"

"I own a certain disappointment in both," said one of Tiresias' lieutenants, "but it is, and apparently you are. If you have come with high expectations of anything, you have come to the wrong place."

"Have you any defense for your damnable crime?" Tiresias asked sharply.

"Do you want a lawyer?" the lieutenant asked. "There are plenty of them to be had here."

"We'll be wanting no lawyers," said big Roadstrum. "We've made our pan, so we'll fry in it. Is that the way the saying goes? Let's just take a look at the accomodations here, fellows."

"You are not free men to be making examinations," said Tiresias. "You show signs of levity, and that is the one thing not permitted here. This place is for serious persons only. If you are not serious now, by hell you'll get serious pretty quick! Hear it! You are sentenced to durance forever. Process them, minions."

"Hold it!" Roadstrum roared. "Hell, this isn't Hell! Crewman Bramble, you're the nearest thing to an intelligent man we have in our party. Can this hayseed place with that pathetic ineptitude on the bench be Hell itself?"

" 'They order things so damnably in Hell,' as the philosopher said. I don't know, Captain; I just don't know. It might be."

"Puckett, go that way," Roadstrum ordered. "Trochanter, go the other. Blinky, shut up. Report back to me within the hour on the size of this place and the torture facilities here. Now then, Blinky, while they're about it, I'll just have a look at that register of yours there and see who is signed into this place. Kstganglfoofng!! It's hot!" (Roadstrum sometimes used high-Shelta swear words, as did many skymen.)

"Of course it's hot, Roadstrum. Everything is hot here," said Blinky Tiresias, "and you won't get used to it."

"That's all right; that makes it a little more like the real thing. A man'd have to have asbestos hands to handle that register, but why are the names in it writ so small?"

"Everything is writ small here, Roadstrum. There's such a lot to be crowded in."

"But you do torture, you do rend and tear, and break and burn?"

"Certainly, certainly, Roadstrum."

"You have all the monsters and stenches, all the white-hot rocks, all the pits of flame, all the soul-burning regret, all the horror and shrieking without end?"

"We have it all, Roadstrum. You will have your surfeit of it."

"But it bedevils me, Blinky, where you have room for it. This is a small place."

"We haven't room for it. It's awfully crowded. Millions and millions, you know."

Looking generally bedraggled and with their feet smoking, Puckett and Trochanter were back from their explorations.

"I believe it's a fake, Roadstrum," said Puckett with deep disappointment. "This isn't the Hell I believed in. It's as though we looked at it all through the wrong end of the glass. Oh, there's torture enough, crude and raw, and there are the millions of sufferers. But it's all too small, too small."

"It isn't a hundred meters across," declared Trochanter. "And the tortures are repetitious. No real imagination in them. Not what you'd like. I think we'd better shop around for a better Hell before we commit ourselves here."

"You can't," said Tiresias. "You're already committed here. This is all the Hell there is."

"Be reasonable, Blinky," said Roadstrum. "What reason have we to believe you? It seems inadequate to my men and it seems inadequate to me. This petty place cannot be—"

"This petty place cannot be Hell, Roadstrum? Ah, but it is, my friend. That, you see, is the hell of it. Minions, minions, we waste time. Prepare them."

"Blinky, where are the towering flames?" Roadstrum demanded.

"It's all high-frequency cookers, Roadstrum. No smoke, no flame, no mess."

"But it's too small. There is not even room for all the old-time horse-thieves."

"It is crowded, yes, but we make room. Get with it, minions. First you will miniaturize them."

"Miniaturize!!!" howled Roadstrum. "Miniaturize!!!" howled they all.

"Nobody will ever miniaturize me!" Roadstrum roared. And then he broke loose with an inexcusable display of shouting and bad manners:

"It stifles, it shrinks! Where are great fires and the bottomless pits? Where is the howling of the triply-damned, and the clanking of monsters? I'd go to Hell in black glory if it fell to my lot, but I will not abide in this place! It's a rumble, men; rise in your wrath! Break out of it!"

"It's a rumble," they roared like cresting waves, great

Puckett and Trochanter and Clamdigger and Threefountains and all.

Man-a-bleeding, but they broke out of that place! You say it can't be done, but they did it. Their expectations had been too high, and no second-rate Hell could hold them.

In a way, this was their greatest feat. No one else had ever broken out of there before. But they were still in sad straits, without craft, lost and in great pain, mired in the boiling swamps a little to the south of Hell. How, how would they ever get off of Hellpepper Planet? Was it possible that any of them should live through this thing?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*More gory episodes omit we ken of them;*
*The Chantey sings ten years filled up with ten of them.*

*Of crewmen dead we weep, and what a row they had!*
*And some had gotten home but none knows how they had.*

*All high adventures, twined as vermicellio,*
*Through carpers carp "the thing's distinctly paleo."*

*Great Road-Storm wished he'd never seen the first of it,*
*He didn't guess the last would be the worst of it.*

*Penultimate we give with wry apology*
*This mithermenic of a new mythology.*

### Aliunde

ROADSTRUM always said that he walked home from Mars, the last lap of his journey. This may not have been true. He had fallen into habits of untruth somewhere along the way. But he came home, home to Big Tulsa the marvelous, the Capital of World.

He arrived alone, in evil case, to find troubles in his house. He was broke and bewhiskered and tired to the marrow of his bones. And yet he was a man of means, so he made a short visit to replenish those means.

The bank had been modernized. It was a transparent young lady who waited on him. It wouldn't have startled

him on one of the other worlds, but it did at home.

"I am unsure," he said. "Are you people?"

"I also am unsure," said the young lady, "since our position is presently under litigation. Actually we are the newest thing in people. Soon there will be none produced in the old manner. You will have to admit that it was a very grotesque arrangement. Here is your account, Mr. Roadstrum, supplementary name Great Road-Storm."

"Ah, it shocks me to see how it has shrunken." Roadstrum studied it. "It may yet be enough for a modest life, but something has gone amiss with it."

"There have been some fabulous withdrawals, sir. Not many fortunes would have survived such. Is this all you wish to withdraw now, sir?"

"That is enough for now. And block the account."

"Block the account? Penny will be furious."

"I hope so. Thank you, young, er—lady."

Roadstrum went to his house. Little Tele-Max was playing out front. Tele-Max was still little. Roadstrum had been gone for twenty years, what with one thing and another. The kid was a runt or he'd have grown bigger than that.

"Hello, Papa," Tele-Max said.

"Hello, Tele-Max. How did you know me?"

"From your pictures. You have become a legend; but that was several years ago; you're pretty much on the shelf now. There is nothing older than yesterday's legends."

"I know it. But what is that hellish racket, Tele-Max? You'd think even the trees would drop dead from that terrible noise."

"Oh, that's Mama and the suitors, and the song they always play. The trees did die from the noise. These are artificial trees."

"Suitors? What are they doing, having a party?"

"Papa, they've been having a party for twenty years."

"What do the neighbors say?"

"I don't remember any neighbors. I guess they all left a long time ago."

"That song is like salt in an open wound, Tele-Max. Did not your mother used to play it to excess many years ago? Did I not once destroy the tape of it?"

"So family tradition has it, Father. But they have worn out more than five hundred tapes of it since. That is the latest version they are playing now, by the Chowder Heads. You could hardly have heard it before."

"All thanks for small favors. I've been made a monkey out of by singing that *was* singing, and should I fall to this? I tell you what, Tele-Max, your mother has not seen me for

twenty years. Another couple of hours will not matter. I will have to find the strength to face this. I wonder what I did about the suitors the first time. Wasn't there a first time?"

"The first time, Papa? The story is that you impressed them by shooting an arrow through twelve holes in a row. Later you killed them."

"What is an arrow, Tele-Max?"

"I don't know either, Papa."

There is one place where all the important persons of World come at least once a day, the Plugged Nickel Bar; and Roadstrum's old mates were all, in their own way, important persons. Roadstrum entered the portal (it had only a single narrow door) and the only one of his old friends he saw was Margaret the houri.

"Are you ship, shape?" he asked her.

"I am always ship," said Margaret. "I remember you a little. Were you not a pet monkey that I once had."

"I was a pet monkey, but you didn't have me," he said. "Want to tie one on, Maggy?"

"Maggy? I, sir, am Charisse, or perhaps I am Chiara. I have been trying on roles. This time I shall assume a very arty role. Everything has become very arty on World."

"Ah well, Charisse or whoever, want to swing a gantry?"

"What an antiquated expression! No, I do not. No offense, but not with you. You are a space-ace. Don't you know that they're dead?"

"Most of them are."

"Oh, they're finished. The swish boys are all the thing again. I will get me a very delicate one, a limp limpet. It is all the thing to be very delicate and a little weary."

"I'm a little weary, but not that way. Sorry to have seen you Charisse, or should I say Chiara?"

"Melisand. I just believe that I will be Melisand."

"Hey, Cap'n," a huge slack-faced man called to Roadstrum. "Come bust a bottle with me. I think I used to know you before I got muddled in the head."

"And after the holocaust, God made green grass again!" Roadstrum roared happily. "Trochanter! Spleen of my spleen and aorta of my aorta! Trochanter!"

"Easy on the sloppy stuff, Cap'n. I like you too. Let me poke you one to see if you're real. A lot of them aren't. Hey, you are real."

"Of course I'm real!" Roadstrum swore, picking himself up from the floor (Trochanter poked hard). "Did any of the other men survive? Have you seen any of the others?"

"I talk to Cutshark and Crabgrass quite a bit."

"Trochanter, Crewman Cutshark died in the maw of the Siren-Zo, and Crewman Crabgrass was eaten by the Polyphemians. They're dead."

"I didn't say they weren't dead, Cap'n. I just said I talked to them quite a bit. I'm addled in my wits now, I've told you."

Trochanter, the crewman without peer! He was as rough a fellow as Crewmen Birdsong and Fairfeather, who had remained on Lamos to become giants. He was a hornier stag than even Crewmen Clamdigger and Threefountains. An incandescent, heavy, tall man. But some of the light had gone out of him now. He was still heavy, but not so—

"You aren't as tall as you used to be, are you, Trochanter?" Roadstrum asked him.

"Nope, burned the bottom half-meter of my feet and legs off on Hellpepper Planet. You remember that ruckus, Cap'n. Hottest ground I ever saw there! Say, I talk to Crewman Clamdigger sometimes too. I think he's alive. He seems solider than Cutshark and Crabgrass."

"Ah, several of us have survived, then."

"Cap'n, anytime you want to go again, I'll be here. You can't tell. You just might want to go again sometime."

"I will remember," said Roadstrum. "It is very unlikely, but if I ever go again I will certainly take you along, Trochanter."

"Captain," called the nameless houri, "if you *really* want to go again, I'll forget the Charisse and Chiara and Melisand bit and go along. And Crewman Clamdigger *is* alive. He bought the shell of a junk hornet with his last Chancel. It hasn't any drive in it, it won't go at all, it's not worth a thing, but he lives in it and broods. If you do go again, we have the beginnings of a crew."

"It is very unlikely, but I will remember it, Margaret the shape, and great Trochanter the crewman without peer!"

Roadstrum left the Plugged Nickel Bar with mixed feelings. He had regained part of the strength he needed to face things at home. He strode along with resolute step, and suddenly he discovered that his resolute steps were not reaching the pavement.

He had been grabbed by the hair of his head, lifted up by a great hand, and was pulled into a second-story window. There was booming laughter that reminded him of that of Bjorn on Lamos. But it was Bjorn's little boy, Hondstarfer.

"What on the wall-eyed world are you doing on World!" Roadstrum howled. "Hondstarfer, you are ungent for my

sore sclerotics! Hey, did you ever get back far enough to be an old-time railroad hobo?"

"I got back there, Roadstrum. That's why I came to World in the first place. But the other hoboes wouldn't accept me. They were afraid of me. They said I was a railroad bull. What's a railroad bull, Roadstrum?"

"Don't know exactly, Hondstarfer. I didn't even know the old vehicles were sexed. What are you doing now, you old hammer-handler?"

"I'm a design engineer for the IRSQEVWRKILOPNIX-TUR–"

"Yes, I know the bunch. They're a good outfit."

"–MURFWQENERTUSSOKOLUV–"

"I know the bunch, Hondstarfer. This is their building here, is it not?"

"–SHOKKULPOYYOCSHTOLUNYYOK–"

"Dammit, Hondstarfer, I said I knew the bunch. No use giving me the entire initials of the agency. How are you doing with them?"

"–TWUKKYOLUVRIKONNIC–that isn't the entire initials of the agency, Roadstrum; that's the short form. Oh, I'm doing pretty good. I'm a seminal genius, they say, and I have the most sophisticated tools ever devised to work with. And I do build some good things for them. I'm quite successful. I'll tell you something, though. In the daytime, with all those sophisticated tools, and particularly if someone's watching me, I just stall around. But at night–"

"Ah, at night! What do you do then, Hondstarfer?"

"Put away those damned sophisticated tools and get out my stone hammers. That's when I build the good stuff. Don't give me away, though, Roadstrum."

"No, I won't give you away. Hondstarfer, poor addled Crewman Clamdigger has purchased the shell of an old junk hornet, and–"

"I've seen it, Roadstrum."

"Of course it wouldn't be possible to put it in flying condition."

"I could do it in about an hour, Roadstrum. I'm good on those hornets. You going to fly again? I want to go along."

"No. I don't think there's a chance in a thousand that I'll ever fly again, Hondstarfer. It is just that my mind dwells on the old days."

Roadstrum left Hondstarfer and the MURFWQENERETC Building then. He had regained the strength he needed to face things at home.

That song was still going on, and it was still the

Chowder Heads singing it. Roadstrum groaned within himself.

Then he went in and killed the suitors. It seemed to be what was expected of him. It was fun while it lasted. You know how those things are.

So he had everything now. He had dear Penny again. He had come back home in his deep maturity, home to green World, the world of his youth. He was still a man of means (there were many accounts that Penny didn't even know about) and he had the ability to multiply those means. He still owed titles to several worlds to the men's-room attendant on Roulettenwelt, but he saw that by shrewd management he would be able to pay the remainder of this debt.

He had honor, he had respect, he was a high hero. He still had his health, despite the deep inroads made by events. He had sloughed off all the outer layers of him and became the essential onion, pungent and powerful and of an immediacy that sometimes brought him close to tears.

He had, you may have forgotten this part, one eye in his head and the other eye in his pocket. He took the other eye in his hand when they wished to discuss matters, and now he talked to it straight.

"Eye, my eye, everything is wonderful with us. We are home in peace. We have wonderful Penny again. We have the world of our youth. We are honored and respected and one other word which I forget. We have come to the peaceful end of our journey. Why does that sound less exciting every time I say it.?"

The eye in his hand winked at him dourly. Eye was a tough old gump, not much given to easy enthusiasms. Roadstrum put it back in his pocket and once more contemplated his good fortune.

He would stick it out at least a week, he had promised himself. He had already stuck it out for three days, and that's nearly half a week. He didn't hang around the house much anymore. The Intimate people were doing a series on Penny, and there were always half a dozen of their fellows there getting down her poignant memories of her dead suitors, the more than a hundred of them.

"There was Thwocky," she had said. "Shall the first installment be my memories of Thwocky? He was the one you killed first; you remember, Roadsty? Drove the spindle of the player right through his head. Now, of the permissive-motivation of Thwocky, in the impulse patterns and lassitude-conjointment, there are nine salient aspects which I shall discuss as I build up the foundation of our intimacy.

This can best be understood in the nimbus of the empholeuon motif, which—"

Penny had always talked like that, but sometimes he hadn't listened. Now he found it harder and harder to seal off his ear. But it was still wonderful, all wonderful. He had honor and respect and another word which he had forgotten. He was home from his life journey, he had peace and benignity and benevolence and all good things and happy.

But there was one word in this setup that didn't sound right to his ear. Ear, not ears, he now had but one. Which word? What was wrong with a word? What was there of trickery about a word?

He thought of it while the afternoon deepened into evening. He thought of it while the artificial locusts began to chatter and hammer in the artificial trees. He went home and locked himself in his soundproof room, while Penny was telling revealing things about her suitors.

All things possessed in perfect peace for the rest of his life! And one word was wrong there? What word was wrong?

"Eye, my eye," he said as he took it into his hand. "All things are wonderful, and can you say that anything is wrong?"

But the eye closed on him in disgust.

Honor, respect, enjoyment, peace, conjugal love, ease, peace, benignity, peace, perfection, honor, peace. What was wrong with one of the words?

Peace. How does that sound again? Peace.

It exploded inside of Roadstrum. He erupted out of the building in a place where there had never been a door, strewing sheets and beams of the building after him.

"Peace?? For me?? Roadstrum, man, it is yourself you are talking about. Let you not hang it around your own neck! I am great Road-Storm! Peace is for those of the other sort!

He found his foxy forked tongue, and the roots of a deeper tongue that had been torn out, and gave great voice.

"I will be double-damned to a better Hell than Hell-pepper Planet if I will have my ending here in peace! Peace be not the end of my epic! An epic has already failed if it have an ending. I don't care how it ended the first time—it will not end the same now!

"I break out of it! Nobody will sing the last lines of me! A crew! A craft!"

His great voice reached all the way to the Plugged

Nickel Bar and to the MURFWQENERETC Building. The great voice set up echos in old addle-brained crewmen, in a heartless houri, in an overgrown kid from Stone World.

Roadstrum ran away from the bloodless buildings and stood in the open. He took again from his pocket his off eye, his last companion.

"Eye, my eye," he trumpeted. "Look at me! There are places we have never been! There is blood we have not spilled yet! Shall we let them restrict us to a handful of worlds. Eye, my eye, are you with me?"

And the eye came alive and gave a really joyous wink. A hammer-handling kid was already at work on the junk hornet. The lights turned on in dim-witted crewmen who became incandescent again. And others of their kind gathered to them.

"Men! Animals! Rise you up!" Roadstrum roared. "To come to the end of a journey is to die. We go again!"

Roadstrum got a craft and a crew. He went away once more.

*Alas, we have the terminal report of him!*
*The coded chatter gives the sighted mort of him,*

*How out beyond the orb of Di Carissimus*
*His sundered ship became a novanissimus.*

*His soaring vaunt escapes the blooming ears of us,*
*He's gone, he's dead, he's dirt, he disappears from us!*

*Be this the death of highest thrust of human all?*
*The flaming end of bright and shining crewmen all?*

*Destroyed? His road is run? It's but a bend of it;*
*Make no mistake, this only* seems

*the end of it.*