

The expense and time involved are astronomical. However, we sent a third vessel out, a much smaller and faster one than the first two. We have learned much about interstellar drives since a hundred years ago; that is all I can tell you about them. "But the third ship came back several years ago and reported **h" "That it had found a planet on which human beings could live and which was already inhabited by sentient beings"! said Hal, forgetting in his enthusiasm that he had not been asked to speak. Macneff stopped pacing to stare at Hal with his pale blue eyes. "How did you know"? he said sharply. "Forgive me, Sandalphon", said Hal. "But it was inevitable! Did not the Forerunner predict in his <Time and the World Line> that such a planet would be found? I believe it was on page 573"! Macneff smiled and said, "I am glad that your scriptural lessons have left such an impression".

How could they not? thought Hal. Besides, they were not the only impressions. I still bear scars on my back where Pornsen, my <gapt>, whipped me because I had not learned my lessons well enough. He was a good impresser, that Pornsen. Was? Is! As I grew older and was promoted, so was he, always where I was. He was my <gapt> in the creche. He was the dormitory <gapt> when I went to college and thought I was getting away from him. He is now my block <gapt>. He is the one responsible for my getting such low M& R&'s. Swiftly, came the revulsion, the protest. No, not he, for I, and I alone, am responsible for whatever happens to me. If I get a low M& R&, I do so because I want it that way or my dark self does. If I die, I die because I willed it so. So, forgive me, Sigmen, for the contrary-to-reality thoughts! "Please pardon me again, Sandalphon", said Hal. "But did the expedition find any records of the Forerunner having been on this planet? Perhaps, even, though this is too much to wish, find the Forerunner himself"? "No", said Macneff. "Though that does not mean that there may not be such records there. The expedition was under orders to make a swift survey of conditions and then to return to Earth. I can't tell you now the distance in lightyears or what star this was, though you can see it with the naked eye at night in this hemisphere. If you volunteer, you will be told where you're going after the ship leaves. And it leaves very soon". "You need a linguist"? said Hal. "The ship is huge", said Macneff, "but the number of military men and specialists we are taking limits the linguists to one. We have considered several of your professionals because they were <lamechians> and above suspicion. Unfortunately **h" Hal waited: Macneff paced some more, frowning. Then, he said, "Unfortunately, only one <lamechian> linguist exists, and he is too old for this expedition. Therefore **h"

"A thousand pardons", said Hal. "But I have just thought of one thing. I am married". "No problem at all", said Macneff. "There will be no women aboard the <Gabriel>. And, if a man is married, he will automatically be given a divorce".

Hal gasped, and he said, "A divorce"? Macneff raised his hands apologetically and said, "You are horrified, of course. But, from our reading of the <Western Talmud>, we Urielites believe that the Forerunner, knowing this situation would arise, made reference to and provision for divorce. It's inevitable in this case, for the couple will be separated for, at the least, forty years. Naturally, he couched the provision in obscure language. In his great and glorious wisdom, he knew that our enemies the Israelites must not be able to read therein what we planned". "I volunteer", said Hal. "Tell me more, Sandalphon". ##

Six months later, Hal Yarrow stood in the observation dome of the <Gabriel> and watched the ball of Earth dwindle above him. It was night on this hemisphere, but the light blazed from the megalopolises of Australia, Japan, China, Southeast Asia, India, Siberia. Hal, the linguist, saw the glittering discs and necklaces in terms of the languages spoken therein. Australia, the Philippine Islands, Japan, and northern China were inhabited by those members of the Haijac Union that spoke American. Southern China, all of southeast Asia, southern India and Ceylon, these states of the Malay Federation spoke Bazaar.

Siberia spoke Icelandic. His mind turned the globe swiftly for him, and he visualized Africa, which used Swahili south of the Sahara Sea. All around the Mediterranean Sea, Asia Minor, northern India, and Tibet, Hebrew was the native tongue. In southern Europe, between the Israeli Republics and the Icelandic-speaking peoples of northern Europe, was a thin but long stretch of territory called March. This was no man's land, disputed by the Haijac Union and the Israeli Republic, a potential source of war for the last two hundred years. Neither nation would give up their claim on it, yet neither wished to make any move that might lead to a second Apocalyptic War. So, for all practical purposes, it was an independent nation and by now had its own organized government (unrecognized outside its own borders). Its citizens spoke all of the world's surviving tongues, plus a new one called Lingo, a pidgin whose vocabulary was derived from the other six and whose syntax was so simple it could be contained on half a sheet of paper. Hal saw in his mind the rest of Earth: Iceland, Greenland, the Caribbean Islands, and the eastern half of South America. Here the peoples spoke the tongue of Iceland because that island had gotten the jump on the Hawaiian-Americans who were busy resettling North America and the western half of South America after the Apocalyptic War. Then there was North America, where American was the native speech of all except the twenty descendants of French-Canadians living on the Hudson Bay Preserve. Hal knew that when that side of Earth rotated into the night zone, Sigmen City would blaze out into space. And, somewhere in that enormous light, was his apartment. But Mary would soon no longer be living there, for she would be notified in a few days that her husband had died in an accident while on a flight to

Tahiti. She would weep in private, he was sure, for she loved him in her frigid way, though in public she would be dry-eyed. Her friends and professional associates would sympathize with her, not because she had lost a beloved husband, but because she had been married to a man who thought unrealistically. If Hal Yarrow had been killed in a crash, he must have wanted it that way. There was no such thing as an "accident". Somehow, all the other passengers (also supposed to have died in this web of elaborate frauds to cover up the disappearance of the personnel of the <Gabriel>) had simultaneously "agreed" to die. And, therefore, being in disgrace, they would not be cremated and their ashes flung to the winds in public ceremony. No, the fish could eat their bodies for all the Sturch cared. Hal felt sorry for Mary; he had a time keeping the tears from welling to his own eyes as he stood in the crowd in the observation dome. Yet, he told himself, this was the best way. He and Mary would no longer have to tear and rend at each other; their mutual torture would be over. Mary was free to marry again, not knowing that the Sturch had secretly given her a divorce, thinking that death had dissolved her marriage. She would have a year in which to make up her mind, to choose a mate from a list selected by her <gapt>. Perhaps, the psychological barriers that had prevented her from conceiving Hal's child would no longer be present. Perhaps. Hal doubted if this happy event would occur. Mary was as frozen below the navel as he. No matter who the candidate for marriage selected by the <gapt> **h The <gapt>. Pornsen. He would no longer have to see that fat face, hear that whining voice **h "Hal Yarrow"! said the whining voice. And, slowly, feeling himself icy yet burning, Hal turned.

There was the squat loose-jowled man, smiling lopsidedly up at him. "My beloved ward, my perennial gadfly", said the whining voice. "I had no idea that you, too, would be on this glorious voyage. But I might have known! We seem to be bound by love; Sigmen himself must have foreseen it. Love to you, my ward".

"Sigmen love you, too, my guardian", said Hal, choking. "How wonderful to see your cherished self. I had thought we would never again speak to each other".

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THE <Gabriel> pointed towards her destination and, under one-gee acceleration, began to build up towards her ultimate velocity, 99.1 percent of the speed of light. Meanwhile, all the personnel except those few needed to carry out the performance of the ship, went into the suspensor. Here they would lie in suspended animation for many years. Some time later, after a check had been made of all automatic equipment, the crew would join the others. They would sleep while the <Gabriel's> drive would increase the acceleration to a point which the unfrozen bodies of the personnel could not have endured. Upon reaching the desired speed, the automatic equipment would cut off the drive, and the silent but not empty

vessel would hurl towards the star which was its journey's end.

Many years later, the photon-counting apparatus in the nose of the ship would determine that the star was close enough to actuate deceleration. Again, a force too strong for unfrozen bodies to endure would be applied. Then, after slowing the vessel considerably, the drive would adjust to a one-gee deceleration. And the crew would be automatically brought out of their suspended animation. These members would then unthaw the rest of the personnel. And, in the half-year left before reaching their destination, the men would carry out whatever preparations were needed. Hal Yarrow was among the last to go into the suspensor and among the first to come out. He had to study the recordings of the language of the chief nation of Ozagen, Siddo. And, from the first, he faced a difficult task. The expedition that had discovered Ozagen had succeeded in correlating two thousand Siddo words with an equal number of American words. The description of the Siddo syntax was very restricted. And, as Hal found out, obviously mistaken in many cases.

This discovery caused Hal anxiety.

His duty was to write a school text and to teach the entire personnel of the <Gabriel> how to speak Ozagen. Yet, if he used all of the little means at his disposal, he would be instructing his students wrongly. Moreover, even getting this across would be difficult.

For one thing, the organs of speech of the Ozagen natives differed somewhat from Earthmen's; the sounds made by these organs were, therefore, dissimilar. It was true that they could be approximated, but would the Ozagenians understand these approximations? Another obstacle was the grammatical construction of Siddo. Consider the tense system. Instead of inflecting a verb or using an unattached particle to indicate the past or future, Siddo used an entirely different word. Thus, the masculine animate infinitive <dabhumaksanigalu'ahai,> meaning <to live>, was, in the perfect tense, <ksu'u'peli'afo>, and, in the future, <mai'teipa>. The same use of an entirely different word applied for all the other tenses. Plus the fact that Siddo not only had the normal (to Earthmen) three genders of masculine, feminine, and neuter, but the two extra of inanimate and spiritual. Fortunately, gender was inflected, though the expression of it would be difficult for anybody not born in Siddo. The system of indicating gender varied according to tense. All the other parts of speech: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, and conjunctions operated under the same system as the verbs. This was not, for the Angel, just a matter of running through a logical or deductive chain, or deciding on some action from some already established premise. No doubt the Angels could do that kind of thing as fast as any computer. What Gabriel was being asked to do now, however, was to re-examine all his basic assumptions, make value-judgments on them, and give them new and different powers in his mind to govern his motives. This is not wholly a reasoning process- a computer cannot do it all- and even in an Angel it takes time. (Or,

perhaps, <especially> in an Angel, whose assumptions had mostly been fixed millions of years ago.) Being reasonably sure of the reason for the long pause, however, did not make it seem any less long to Jack. He had already become used to Hesperus' snapping back answers to questions almost before Jack could get them asked. There was nothing he could do but wait. The dice were cast. At last Gabriel spoke. "We misjudged you", he said slowly. "We had concluded that no race as ephemeral as yours could have had time to develop a sense of justice. Of course we have before us the example of the great races at the galactic center; individually they are nearly as mortal as you- the difference does not seem very marked to us, where it exists. But they have survived for long periods <as races>, whereas you are young. We shall recommend to them that they shorten your trial period by half. "For now, it is clear that we were in the wrong. You may reclaim your property, and the penalty on Hesperus is lifted. Hesperus, you may speak". "I did not perceive this essential distinction either, First-Born", Hesperus said at once, "I was only practicing a concept that Jack taught me, called a deal". "Nevertheless, you were its agent. Jack, what is the nature of this concept"? "It's a kind of agreement in which each party gives something to the other", Jack said. "We regard it as fair only when each party feels that what he has received is as valuable, or more valuable, than what he has given". His heart, he discovered, was pounding. "For instance, Hesperus agreed to help me find my property, and I agreed to take him to Earth. Between individuals, this process is called bargaining. When it is done between races or nations, it is called making a treaty. And the major part of my mission to your nest is to make a treaty between your race and mine. Recovering the property was much less important". "Strange", Gabriel said. "And apparently impossible. Though it might be that we would have much to give you, you have nothing to give us". "Hesperus and Lucifer", Jack said, "show that we do". Another pause; but this one was not nearly as long. "Then it is a matter of pleasure; of curiosity; of a more alive time. Yes, those could be commodities under this concept. But you should understand, Jack, that Hesperus and Lucifer are not long out of the nursery. Visiting the Earth would not be an offering of worth to those of us who are older".

This explained a great deal. "All the more reason, then", Jack said, "why we must have a treaty. We will gladly entertain your young and give them proper living quarters, in return for their help in running our fusion reactors. But we must know if this is in accordance with your customs, and must have your agreement they will not misuse the power we put in their hands, to our hurt".

"But this simply requires that they behave in accordance with the dictates of their own natures, and respect yours in turn. To this we of course agree". Jack felt a wave of complete elation, but in a second it had vanished without a trace. What Gabriel was asking

was that mankind forego all its parochial moral judgments, and contract to let the Angels serve on Earth as it is in Heaven <regardless> of the applicable Earth laws. The Angels in turn would exercise similar restraints in respect for the natural preferences and natures of the Earthmen- but they had no faintest notion of man's perverse habit of passing and enforcing laws which were contrary to his own preferences and violations of his nature. The simple treaty principle that Gabriel was asking him to ratify, in short, was nothing less than total trust. Nothing less would serve. And it might be, considering the uncomfortable custom the Angels had of thinking of everything in terms of absolutes, that the proposal of anything less might well amount instead to something like a declaration of war.

Furthermore, even the highly trained law clerk who was a part of Jack's total make-up could not understand how the principle could ever be codified. Almost the whole experience of mankind pointed toward suspicion, not trust, as the safest and sanest attitude toward all outsiders. Yet there was some precedent for it. The history of disarmament agreements, for instance, had been unreassuringly dismal; but the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics nevertheless did eventually agree on an atomic bomb test ban, and a sort of provisional acceptance of each other's good intentions on this limited question. Out of that agreement, though not by any easy road, eventually emerged the present world hegemony of the United Nations; suspicion between member states still existed, but it was of about the same low order of virulence as the twentieth-century rivalry between Arizona and California over water supplies. Besides, agreements "in principle", with the petty details to be thrashed out later, were commonplace in diplomatic history. The trouble with them was that they almost never worked, and in fact an agreement "in principle" historically turned out to be a sure sign that neither party really wanted the quarrel settled. Suppose that this one were to work? There was no question in Jack's mind of the good faith on one side, at least. If mankind could be convinced of that **h

It was worth trying. In fact, it had to be tried. It would be at once the most tentative and most final treaty that Earth had ever signed. Secretary Hart had taught Jack, at least partially, to be content with small beginnings in all diplomatic matters; but there was no small way to handle this one. He turned back to the screens, the crucial, conclusive phrase on his lips. But he was too late. He had lost his audience. ##

For a moment he could make no sense at all of what he saw. It seemed to be only a riot of color, light and meaningless activity. Gradually, he realized that the pentagon of Angel elders had vanished, and that the ritual learning dance of the nursery had been broken up. The Angels in the nursery were zigzagging wildly in all directions, seemingly at random. "Hesperus! What's going on here? What's happened"? "Your brothers have been found. They are on their way here".

"Where? I don't see them. The instruments don't show them".

"You can't see them yet, Jack. They'll be in range in a short while". Jack scanned the skies, the boards, and the skies again. Nothing. No- there was a tiny pip on the radar; and it was getting bigger rapidly. If that was the skiff, it was making unprecedented speed. Then the skiff hove into sight, just a dot of light at first against the roiling blackness and crimson streaks of the Coal Sack. Through the telescope, Jack could see that both spacesuits were still attached to it. The sail was still unfurled, though there were a good many holes in it, as Langer had predicted would be the case by now. It was a startling, almost numinous sight; but even more awesome was the fact that it was trailing an enormous comet's-tail of Angels. The skiff was not heading for the nursery, however. It seemed unlikely that her crew, if either of them were alive, could even see the <Ariadne>, for they were passing her at a distance of nearly a light-year. And there would be no chance of signaling them- without the Nernst generator Jack could not send a call powerful enough to get through all the static, and by the time he could rebuild his fusion power the skiff would be gone.

Fuming, helpless, he watched them pass him. The sail, ragged though it was, still had enough surface to catch some of the ocean of power being poured out from the nursery stars. He would never have believed, without seeing it, that the bizarre little vessel could go so fast. But where was it going? And why was it causing so much agitation among the Angels, and being followed by so many of them?

There was only one possible answer, but Jack's horrified mind refused to believe it until he had fed the radar plots of the skiff's course into the computer. The curve on the card the computer spat back at him couldn't be argued with, however. The skiff was headed for the very center of the nebula- toward that place which, Jack knew now, could hold nothing less important than the very core of the Angel's life and religion. It was clear that Langer had at last found a way to attract the Angel's attention.

It was equally clear that as of this moment, the treaty was off.

#STERN CHASE 10#

LANGER WOULD HAVE to be headed off, whether he knew where he was going or not. Almost surely he did; after all, he had had the same set of facts as Jack had had to work from, and he was an almost frighteningly observant man. But not having talked to the Angels, he had made a wrong turn in his reasoning somewhere along the line. Had he decided, perhaps, that the center of the cloud was a center of government, instead of a center of life and faith"?

But it didn't matter now whether he meant to invade the Holy

of Holies, or was simply headed in that direction by accident. If it was intentional, it was now also unnecessary; and whether intentional or not, the outcome would be disastrous. Jack crawled under the boards and restored the six feet of lead line he had excised from the Nernst generator switch. When he was back on his feet again and about to reinstall the fuses, however, he hesitated. He had to have fusion power to catch up with the skiff, and he had to have it fast. But fusion power in the Coal Sack was what had triggered all the trouble in the first place- and he already had an Angel aboard.

"Hesperus"? "Receiving". "I'm going to turn my generator back on, as I promised to do. But I can't take you to Earth yet. First I've got to intercept my brothers before they get any deeper into trouble. Will you obstruct this, or will you help? I know it's not part of the bargain, and your elders might not like it". "Nobody else can live in your hearth while I am in it", Hesperus said promptly. "As for my elders, they have already admitted that they were wrong. If because of this incident they become angry with Earth, I will not be permitted to go there at all. Therefore of course I will help". With a short-lived sigh of relief, Jack plugged the fuses back in and threw the switch. Without an instant's transition, the green light that meant full fusion power winked on the board. Always before, it had taken five minutes to- Of course. Hesperus was in there. From here on out, the <Ariadne> was going to be hotter than any space cruiser man had ever dreamed of. But since he had failed to anticipate it, he lost the five minutes anyhow, in plotting an intercept orbit. "Hesperus, don't use this ~<t-tau> vector trick of yours, please.

Ryan hefted his bulk up and supported it on one elbow. He rubbed his eyes sleepily with one huge paw. "Ekstrohm, Nogol, you guys okay"? "Nothing wrong with me that couldn't be cured", Nogol said. He didn't say what would cure him; he had been explaining all during the trip what he needed to make him feel like himself. His small black eyes darted inside the olive oval of his face.

"Ekstrohm"? Ryan insisted. "Okay".
"Well, let's take a ground-level look at the country around here".

The facsiport rolled open on the landscape. A range of bluffs hugged the horizon, the color of decaying moss. Above them, the sky was the black of space, or the almost equal black of the winter sky above Minneapolis, seen against neon-lit snow. That cold, empty sky was full of fire and light. It seemed almost a magnification of the Galaxy itself, of the Milky Way, blown up by some master photographer.

This fiery swath was actually only a belt of minor planets, almost like the asteroid belt in the original Solar System. These planets were much bigger, nearly all capable of holding an atmosphere.

But to the infuriation of scientists, for no known reason not all of them did. This would be the fifth mapping expedition to the planetoids of Yancy-6 in three generations. They lay months away from the nearest Earth star by jump drive, and no one knew what they were good for, although it was felt that they would probably be good for something if it could only be discovered- much like the continent of Antarctica in ancient history. "How can a planet with so many neighbors be so lonely"? Ryan asked. He was the captain, so he could ask questions like that. "Some can be lonely in a crowd", Nogol said elaborately. ##

"WHAT will we need outside, Ryan"? Ekstrohm asked. "No helmets", the captain answered. "We can breathe out there, all right. It just won't be easy. This old world lost all of its helium and trace gases long ago. Nitrogen and oxygen are about it". "Ryan, look over there", Nogol said. "Animals. Ringing the ship. Think they're intelligent, maybe hostile"? "I think they're dead", Ekstrohm interjected quietly. "I get no readings from them at all. Sonic, electronic, galvanic- all blank. According to these needles, they're stone dead". "Ekstrohm, you and I will have a look", Ryan said. "You hold down the fort, Nogol. Take it easy".

"Easy", Nogol confirmed. "I heard a story once about a rookie who got excited when the captain stepped outside and he couldn't get an encephalographic reading on him. Me, I know the mind of an officer works in a strange and unfathomable manner". "I'm not worried about you mis-reading the dials, Nogol, just about a lug like you reading them at all. Remember, when the little hand is straight up that's negative. Positive results start when it goes towards the hand you use to make your mark". "But I'm ambidextrous". Ryan told him what he could do then. Ekstrohm smiled, and followed the captain through the airlock with only a glance at the lapel gauge on his coverall. The strong negative field his suit set up would help to repel bacteria and insects. Actually, the types of infection that could attack a warm-blooded mammal were not infinite, and over the course of the last few hundred years adequate defenses had been found for all basic categories. He wasn't likely to come down with hot chills and puzzling striped fever.

They ignored the ladder down to the planet surface and, with only a glance at the seismological gauge to judge surface resistance, dropped to the ground. It was day, but in the thin atmosphere contrasts were sharp between light and shadow. They walked from midnight to noon, noon to midnight, and came to the beast sprawled on its side.

Ekstrohm nudged it with a boot. "Hey, this is pretty close to a wart-hog". "Uh-huh", Ryan admitted. "One of the best matches I've ever found. Well, it has to happen. Statistical average and all. Still, it sometimes gives you a creepy feeling to find a rabbit or a snapping turtle on some strange world. It makes

you wonder if this exploration business isn't all some big joke, and somebody has been <everywhere> before you even started". ##

THE

surveyor looked sidewise at the captain. The big man seldom gave out with such thoughts. Ekstrohm cleared his throat. "What shall we do with this one? Dissect it"? Ryan nudged it with his toe, following Ekstrohm's example. "I don't know, Stormy. It sure as hell doesn't look like any dominant intelligent species to me. No hands, for one thing. Of course, that's not definite proof". "No, it isn't", Ekstrohm said. "I think we'd better let it lay until we get a clearer picture of the ecological setup around here. In the meantime, we might be thinking on the problem all these dead beasts represent. What killed them"?

"It looks like we did, when we made blastdown". "But <what> about our landing was lethal to the creatures"?

"Radiation"? Ekstrohm suggested. "The planet is very low in radiation from mineral deposits, and the atmosphere seems to shield out most of the solar output. Any little dose of radiation might knock off these critters". "I don't know about that. Maybe it would work the other way. Maybe because they have had virtually no radioactive exposure and don't have any ~R's stored up, they could take a <lot> without harm". "Then maybe it was the shockwave we set up. Or maybe it's sheer xenophobia. They curl up and die at the sight of something strange and alien- like a spaceship".

"Maybe", the captain admitted. "At this stage of the game anything could be possible. But there's one possibility I particularly don't like". "And that is"? "Suppose it was <not> us that killed these aliens. Suppose it is something right on the planet, native to it. I just hope it doesn't work on Earthmen too. These critters went real sudden". ##

EKSTROHM

lay in his bunk and thought, the camp is quiet. The Earthmen made camp outside the spaceship. There was no reason to leave the comfortable quarters inside the ship, except that, faced with a possibility of sleeping on solid ground, they simply had to get out.

The camp was a cluster of aluminum bubbles, ringed with a spy web to alert the Earthmen to the approach of any being. Each man had a bubble to himself, privacy after the long period of enforced intimacy on board the ship. Ekstrohm lay in his bunk and listened to the sounds of the night on Yancey-6 138. There was a keening of wind, and a cracking of the frozen ground. Insects there were on the world, but they were frozen solid during the night, only to revive and thaw in the morning sun. The bunk he lay on was much more uncomfortable than the acceleration couches on board. Yet he knew the

others were sleeping more soundly, now that they had renewed their contact with the matter that had birthed them to send them riding high vacuum. Ekstrohm was not asleep. Now there could be an end to pretending. He threw off the light blanket and swung his feet off the bunk, to the floor. Ekstrohm stood up. There was no longer any need to hide. But what was there to do? What had changed for him? He no longer had to lie in his bunk all night, his eyes closed, pretending to sleep. In privacy he could walk around, leave the light on, read. It was small comfort for insomnia.

Ekstrohm never slept. Some doctors had informed him he was mistaken about this. Actually, they said, he did sleep, but so shortly and fitfully that he forgot. Others admitted he was absolutely correct- he <never> slept. His body processes only slowed down enough for him to dispell fatigue poisons. Occasionally he fell into a waking, gritty-eyed stupor; but he never slept. Never at all.

Naturally, he couldn't let his shipmates know this. Insomnia would ground him from the Exploration Service, on physiological if not psychological grounds. He had to hide it. ##

OVER the years, he had had buddies in space in whom he thought he could confide. The buddies invariably took advantage of him. Since he couldn't sleep anyway, he might as well stand their watches for them or write their reports. Where the hell did he get off threatening to report any laxness on their part to the captain? A man with insomnia had better avoid bad dreams of that kind if he knew what was good for him.

Ekstrohm had to hide his secret. In a camp, instead of shipboard, hiding the secret was easier. But the secret itself was just as hard. Ekstrohm picked up a lightweight no-back from the ship's library, a book by Bloch, the famous twentieth century expert on sex. He scanned a few lines on the social repercussions of a celebrated nineteenth century sex murderer, but he couldn't seem to concentrate on the weighty, pontifical, ponderous style. On impulse, he flipped up the heat control on his coverall and slid back the hatch of the bubble. Ekstrohm walked through the alien glass and looked up at the unfamiliar constellations, smelling the frozen sterility of the thin air. Behind him, his mates stirred without waking. #/2,#

EKSTROHM was startled in the morning by a banging on the hatch of his bubble. It took him a few seconds to put his thoughts in order, and then he got up from the bunk where he had been resting, sleeplessly. The angry burnt-red face of Ryan greeted him. "Okay, Stormy, this isn't the place for fun and games. What did you do with them"? "Do with what"?

"The dead beasties. All the dead animals laying around the ship".

"What are you talking about, Ryan? What do you think I did with them"? "I don't know. All I know is that they are gone". <"Gone"?> Ekstrohm shouldered his way outside and scanned the veldt. There was no ring of animal corpses. Nothing. Nothing but wispy grass whipping in the keen breeze. "I'll be damned", Ekstrohm said. "You are right now, buddy. ExPe doesn't like anybody mucking up primary evidence". "Where do you get off, Ryan"? Ekstrohm demanded. "Why pick me for your patsy? This has got to be some kind of local phenomenon. Why accuse a shipmate of being behind this"?

"Listen, Ekstrohm, I want to give you the benefit of every doubt. But you aren't exactly the model of a surveyor, you know. You've been riding on a pink ticket for six years, you know that".

"No", Ekstrohm said, "No, I didn't know that".

"You've been hiding things from me and Nogol every jump we've made with you. Now comes this! It fits the pattern of secrecy and stealth you've been involved in". "What could I do with your lousy dead bodies? What would I want with them"?

"All I know is that you were outside the bubbles last night, and you were the only sentient being who came in or out of our alarm web. The tapes show that. Now all the bodies are missing, like they got up and walked away". It was not a new experience to Ekstrohm. No. Suspicion wasn't new to him at all. "Ryan, there are other explanations for the disappearance of the bodies. Look for them, will you? I give you my word I'm not trying to pull some stupid kind of joke, or to deliberately foul up the expedition. Take my word, can't you"? Ryan shook his head. "I don't think I can. There's still such a thing as mental illness. You may not be responsible". Ekstrohm scowled. "Don't try anything violent, Stormy. I outweigh you fifty pounds and I'm fast for a big man". "I wasn't planning on jumping you. Why do you have to jump me the first time something goes wrong?"

She lived and was given a name. Helva. For her first three vegetable months she waved her crabbed claws, kicked weakly with her clubbed feet and enjoyed the usual routine of the infant. She was not alone for there were three other such children in the big city's special nursery. Soon they all were removed to Central Laboratory School where their delicate transformation began. One of the babies died in the initial transferral but of Helva's "class", seventeen thrived in the metal shells. Instead of kicking feet, Helva's neural responses started her wheels; instead of grabbing with hands, she manipulated mechanical extensions. As she matured, more and more neural synapses would be adjusted to operate other mechanisms that went into the maintenance and running of a space ship. For Helva was destined to be the "brain" half of a scout ship, partnered with a man or a woman, whichever she chose, as the mobile half. She would be

among the elite of her kind. Her initial intelligence tests registered above normal and her adaptation index was unusually high. As long as her development within her shell lived up to expectations, and there were no side-effects from the pituitary tinkering, Helva would live a rewarding, rich and unusual life, a far cry from what she would have faced as an ordinary, "normal" being. However, no diagram of her brain patterns, no early I&Q& tests recorded certain essential facts about Helva that Central must eventually learn. They would have to bide their official time and see, trusting that the massive doses of shell-psychology would suffice her, too, as the necessary bulwark against her unusual confinement and the pressures of her profession. A ship run by a human brain could not run rogue or insane with the power and resources Central had to build into their scout ships. Brain ships were, of course, long past the experimental stages. Most babes survived the techniques of pituitary manipulation that kept their bodies small, eliminating the necessity of transfers from smaller to larger shells. And very, very few were lost when the final connection was made to the control panels of ship or industrial combine. Shell people resembled mature dwarfs in size whatever their natal deformities were, but the well-oriented brain would not have changed places with the most perfect body in the Universe. So, for happy years, Helva scooted around in her shell with her classmates, playing such games as Stall, Power-Seek, studying her lessons in trajectory, propulsion techniques, computation, logistics, mental hygiene, basic alien psychology, philology, space history, law, traffic, codes: all the et ceteras that eventually became compounded into a reasoning, logical, informed citizen. Not so obvious to her, but of more importance to her teachers, Helva ingested the precepts of her conditioning as easily as she absorbed her nutrient fluid. She would one day be grateful to the patient drone of the sub-conscious-level instruction.

Helva's civilization was not without busy, do-good associations, exploring possible inhumanities to terrestrial as well as extraterrestrial citizens. One such group got all incensed over shelled "children" when Helva was just turning fourteen. When they were forced to, Central Worlds shrugged its shoulders, arranged a tour of the Laboratory Schools and set the tour off to a big start by showing the members case histories, complete with photographs. Very few committees ever looked past the first few photos. Most of their original objections about "shells" were overridden by the relief that these hideous (to them) bodies <were> mercifully concealed. Helva's class was doing Fine Arts, a selective subject in her crowded program. She had activated one of her microscopic tools which she would later use for minute repairs to various parts of her control panel. Her subject was large- a copy of the Last Supper- and her canvas, small- the head of a tiny screw. She had tuned her sight to the proper degree. As she worked she absentmindedly crooned, producing a curious sound. Shell people used their own vocal cords and diaphragms but sound issued through microphones rather than mouths. Helva's hum then had a curious vibrancy, a warm, dulcet quality even in its aimless chromatic

wanderings. "Why, what a lovely voice you have", said one of the female visitors. Helva "looked" up and caught a fascinating panorama of regular, dirty craters on a flaky pink surface. Her hum became a gurgle of surprise. She instinctively regulated her "sight" until the skin lost its cratered look and the pores assumed normal proportions. "Yes, we have quite a few years of voice training, madam", remarked Helva calmly. "Vocal peculiarities often become excessively irritating during prolonged intra-stellar distances and must be eliminated. I enjoyed my lessons".

Although this was the first time that Helva had seen unshelled people, she took this experience calmly. Any other reaction would have been reported instantly. "I meant that you have a nice singing voice **h dear", the lady amended. "Thank you. Would you like to see my work"? Helva asked, politely. She instinctively sheered away from personal discussions but she filed the comment away for further meditation. "Work"? asked the lady.

"I am currently reproducing the Last Supper on the head of a screw".

"O, I say", the lady twittered. Helva turned her vision back to magnification and surveyed her copy critically.

"Of course, some of my color values do not match the old Master's and the perspective is faulty but I believe it to be a fair copy". The lady's eyes, unmagnified, bugged out.

"Oh, I forget", and Helva's voice was really contrite. If she could have blushed, she would have. "You people don't have adjustable vision". The monitor of this discourse grinned with pride and amusement as Helva's tone indicated pity for the unfortunate.

"Here, this will help", suggested Helva, substituting a magnifying device in one extension and holding it over the picture.

In a kind of shock, the ladies and gentlemen of the committee bent to observe the incredibly copied and brilliantly executed Last Supper on the head of a screw. "Well", remarked one gentleman who had been forced to accompany his wife, "the good Lord can eat where angels fear to tread". "Are you referring, sir", asked Helva politely, "to the Dark Age discussions of the number of angels who could stand on the head of a pin"? "I had that in mind". "If you substitute 'atom' for 'angel', the problem is not insoluble, given the metallic content of the pin in question". "Which you are programed to compute"?

"Of course". "Did they remember to program a sense of humor, as well, young lady"? "We are directed to develop a sense of proportion, sir, which contributes the same effect".

The good man chortled appreciatively and decided the trip was worth his time. If the investigation committee spent months

digesting the thoughtful food served them at the Laboratory School, they left Helva with a morsel as well. "Singing" as applicable to herself required research. She had, of course, been exposed to and enjoyed a music appreciation course which had included the better known classical works such as "Tristan und Isolde", "Candide", "Oklahoma", "Nozze de Figaro", the atomic age singers, Eileen Farrell, Elvis Presley and Geraldine Todd, as well as the curious rhythmic progressions of the Venusians, Capellan visual chromatics and the sonic concerti of the Altairians. But "singing" for any shell person posed considerable technical difficulties to be overcome. Shell people were schooled to examine every aspect of a problem or situation before making a prognosis. Balanced properly between optimism and practicality, the nondefeatist attitude of the shell people led them to extricate themselves, their ships and personnel, from bizarre situations. Therefore to Helva, the problem that she couldn't open her mouth to sing, among other restrictions, did not bother her. She would work out a method, by-passing her limitations, whereby she could sing. She approached the problem by investigating the methods of sound reproduction through the centuries, human and instrumental. Her own sound production equipment was essentially more instrumental than vocal. Breath control and the proper enunciation of vowel sounds within the oral cavity appeared to require the most development and practice. Shell people did not, strictly speaking, breathe. For their purposes, oxygen and other gases were not drawn from the surrounding atmosphere through the medium of lungs but sustained artificially by solution in their shells. After experimentation, Helva discovered that she could manipulate her diaphragmic unit to sustain tone. By relaxing the throat muscles and expanding the oral cavity well into the frontal sinuses, she could direct the vowel sounds into the most felicitous position for proper reproduction through her throat microphone. She compared the results with tape recordings of modern singers and was not displeased although her own tapes had a peculiar quality about them, not at all unharmonious, merely unique. Acquiring a repertoire from the Laboratory library was no problem to one trained to perfect recall. She found herself able to sing any role and any song which struck her fancy. It would not have occurred to her that it was curious for a female to sing bass, baritone, tenor, alto, mezzo, soprano and coloratura as she pleased. It was, to Helva, only a matter of the correct reproduction and diaphragmic control required by the music attempted. If the authorities remarked on her curious avocation, they did so among themselves. Shell people were encouraged to develop a hobby so long as they maintained proficiency in their technical work. On the anniversary of her sixteenth year in her shell, Helva was unconditionally graduated and installed in her ship, the ~XH-834. Her permanent titanium shell was recessed behind an even more indestructible barrier in the central shaft of the scout ship. The neural, audio, visual and sensory connections were made and sealed. Her extendibles were diverted, connected or augmented and the final, delicate-beyond-description brain taps were completed while Helva remained anesthetically unaware of the proceedings. When she awoke, she <was> the ship. Her brain and intelligence controlled every

function from navigation to such loading as a scout ship of her class needed. She could take care of herself and her ambulatory half, in any situation already recorded in the annals of Central Worlds and any situation its most fertile minds could imagine. Her first actual flight, for she and her kind had made mock flights on dummy panels since she was eight, showed her complete mastery of the techniques of her profession. She was ready for her great adventures and the arrival of her mobile partner. There were nine qualified scouts sitting around collecting base pay the day Helva was commissioned. There were several missions which demanded instant attention but Helva had been of interest to several department heads in Central for some time and each man was determined to have her assigned to <his> section. Consequently no one had remembered to introduce Helva to the prospective partners. The ship always chose its own partner. Had there been another "brain" ship at the Base at the moment, Helva would have been guided to make the first move. As it was, while Central wrangled among itself, Robert Tanner sneaked out of the pilots' barracks, out to the field and over to Helva's slim metal hull. "Hello, anyone at home"? Tanner wisecracked. "Of course", replied Helva logically, activating her outside scanners. "Are you my partner"? she asked hopefully, as she recognized the Scout Service uniform. "All you have to do is ask", he retorted hopefully. "No one has come. I thought perhaps there were no partners available and I've had no directives from Central".

Even to herself Helva sounded a little self-pitying but the truth was she was lonely, sitting on the darkened field. Always she had had the company of other shells and more recently, technicians by the score. The sudden solitude had lost its momentary charm and become oppressive. "No directives from Central is scarcely a cause for regret, but there happen to be eight other guys biting their fingernails to the quick just waiting for an invitation to board you, you beautiful thing". It would have killed you in the cabin. Do you have anything for me"?

Mercer stammered, not knowing what B'dikkat meant, and the two-nosed man answered for him, "I think he has a nice baby head, but it isn't big enough for you to take yet". Mercer never noticed the needle touch his arm. B'dikkat had turned to the next knot of people when the super-condamine hit Mercer. He tried to run after B'dikkat, to hug the lead spacesuit, to tell B'dikkat that he loved him. He stumbled and fell, but it did not hurt. The many-bodied girl lay near him. Mercer spoke to her.

"Isn't it wonderful? You're beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. I'm so happy to be here". The woman covered with growing hands came and sat beside them. She radiated warmth and good fellowship. Mercer thought that she looked very distinguished and charming. He struggled out of his clothes. It was foolish and snobbish to wear clothing when none of these nice people did. The two women babbled and crooned at him. With one corner of his mind

he knew that they were saying nothing, just expressing the euphoria of a drug so powerful that the known universe had forbidden it. With most of his mind he was happy. He wondered how anyone could have the good luck to visit a planet as nice as this. He tried to tell the Lady Da, but the words weren't quite straight. A painful stab hit him in the abdomen. The drug went after the pain and swallowed it. It was like the cap in the hospital, only a thousand times better. The pain was gone, though it had been crippling the first time.

He forced himself to be deliberate. He rammed his mind into focus and said to the two ladies who lay pinkly nude beside him in the desert, "That was a good bite. Maybe I will grow another head. That would make B'dikkat happy"! The Lady Da forced the foremost of her bodies in an upright position. Said she, "I'm strong, too. I can talk. Remember, man, remember. People never live forever. We can die, too, we can die like real people. I do so believe in death"! Mercer smiled at her through his happiness.

"Of course you can. But isn't this nice **h" With this he felt his lips thicken and his mind go slack. He was wide awake, but he did not feel like doing anything. In that beautiful place, among all those companionable and attractive people, he sat and smiled.

B'dikkat was sterilizing his knives. ##

Mercer wondered how long the super-condamine had lasted him. He endured the ministrations of the dromozoa without screams or movement. The agonies of nerves and itching of skin were phenomena which happened somewhere near him, but meant nothing. He watched his own body with remote, casual interest.

The Lady Da and the hand-covered woman stayed near him. After a long time the half-man dragged himself over to the group with his powerful arms. Having arrived he blinked sleepily and friendlyly at them, and lapsed back into the restful stupor from which he had emerged. Mercer saw the sun rise on occasion, closed his eyes briefly, and opened them to see stars shining. Time had no meaning. The dromozoa fed him in their mysterious way; the drug canceled out his needs for cycles of the body. At last he noticed a return of the inwardness of pain. The pains themselves had not changed; he had.

He knew all the events which could take place on Shayol. He remembered them well from his happy period. Formerly he had noticed them- now he felt them. He tried to ask the Lady Da how long they had had the drug, and how much longer they would have to wait before they had it again. She smiled at him with benign, remote happiness; apparently her many torsos, stretched out along the ground, had a greater capacity for retaining the drug than did his body. She meant him well, but was in no condition for articulate speech. The half-man lay on the ground, arteries pulsating prettily behind the half-transparent film which protected his abdominal cavity. Mercer

squeezed the man's shoulder. The half-man woke, recognized Mercer and gave him a healthily sleepy grin. "'A good morrow to you, my boy'. That's out of a play. Did you ever see a play"? "You mean a game with cards"? "No", said the half-man, "a sort of eye-machine with real people doing the figures". "I never saw that", said Mercer, "but I"- "But you want to ask me when B'dikkat is going to come back with the needle". "Yes", said Mercer, a little ashamed of his obviousness. "Soon", said the half-man. That's why I think of plays. We all know what is going to happen. We all know when it is going to happen. We all know what the dummies will do"- he gestured at the hummocks in which the decorticated men were cradled- "and we all know what the new people will ask. But we never know how long a scene is going to take". "What's a 'scene'"? asked Mercer. "Is that the name for the needle"? The half-man laughed with something close to real humor. "No, no, no. You've got the lovelies on the brain. A scene is just a part of a play. I mean we know the order in which things happen, but we have no clocks and nobody cares enough to count days or to make calendars and there's not much climate here, so none of us know how long anything takes. The pain seems short and the pleasure seems long. I'm inclined to think that they are about two Earth-weeks each". Mercer did not know what an "Earth-week" was, since he had not been a well-read man before his conviction, but he got nothing more from the half-man at that time. The half-man received a dromozootic implant, turned red in the face, shouted senselessly at Mercer, "Take it out, you fool! Take it out of me"!

When Mercer looked on helplessly, the half-man twisted over on his side, his pink dusty back turned to Mercer, and wept hoarsely and quietly to himself. Mercer himself could not tell how long it was before B'dikkat came back. It might have been several days. It might have been several months. Once again B'dikkat moved among them like a father; once again they clustered like children. This time B'dikkat smiled pleasantly at the little head which had grown out of Mercer's thigh- a sleeping child's head, covered with light hair on top and with dainty eyebrows over the resting eyes. Mercer got the blissful needle. When B'dikkat cut the head from Mercer's thigh, he felt the knife grinding against the cartilage which held the head to his own body. He saw the child-face grimace as the head was cut; he felt the far, cool flash of unimportant pain, as B'dikkat dabbed the wound with a corrosive antiseptic which stopped all bleeding immediately. The next time it was two legs growing from his chest. Then there had been another head beside his own. Or was that after the torso and legs, waist to toe-tips, of the little girl which had grown from his side? He forgot the order. He did not count time. Lady Da smiled at him often, but there was no love in this place. She had lost the extra torsos. In between teratologies, she was a pretty and shapely woman; but the nicest thing about their relationship was her whisper

to him, repeated some thousands of time, repeated with smiles and hope, "People never live forever". She found this immensely comforting, even though Mercer did not make much sense out of it.

Thus events occurred, and victims changed in appearance, and new ones arrived. Sometimes B'dikkat took the new ones, resting in the everlasting sleep of their burned-out brains, in a ground-truck to be added to other herds. The bodies in the truck threshed and bawled without human speech when the dromozoa struck them. Finally, Mercer did manage to follow B'dikkat to the door of the cabin. He had to fight the bliss of super-condamine to do it. Only the memory of previous hurt, bewilderment and perplexity made him sure that if he did not ask B'dikkat when he, Mercer, was happy, the answer would no longer be available when he needed it. Fighting pleasure itself, he begged B'dikkat to check the records and to tell him how long he had been there. B'dikkat grudgingly agreed, but he did not come out of the doorway. He spoke through the public address box built into the cabin, and his gigantic voice roared out over the empty plain, so that the pink herd of talking people stirred gently in their happiness and wondered what their friend B'dikkat might be wanting to tell them. When he said it, they thought it exceedingly profound, though none of them understood it, since it was simply the amount of time that Mercer had been on Shayol: "Standard years- eighty-four years, seven months, three days, two hours, eleven and one half minutes. Good luck, fellow". Mercer turned away.

The secret little corner of his mind, which stayed sane through happiness and pain, made him wonder about B'dikkat. What persuaded the cow-man to remain on Shayol? What kept him happy without super-condamine? Was B'dikkat a crazy slave to his own duty or was he a man who had hopes of going back to his own planet some day, surrounded by a family of little cow-people resembling himself? Mercer, despite his happiness, wept a little at the strange fate of B'dikkat. His own fate he accepted. He remembered the last time he had eaten- actual eggs from an actual pan. The dromozoa kept him alive, but he did not know how they did it. He staggered back to the group. The Lady Da, naked in the dusty plain, waved a hospitable hand and showed that there was a place for him to sit beside her. There were unclaimed square miles of seating space around them, but he appreciated the kindness of her gesture none the less. #/4,#

The years, if they were years, went by. The land of Shayol did not change. Sometimes the bubbling sound of geysers came faintly across the plain to the herd of men; those who could talk declared it to be the breathing of Captain Alvarez. There was night and day, but no setting of crops, no change of season, no generations of men. Time stood still for these people, and their load of pleasure was so commingled with the shocks and pains of the dromozoa that the words of the Lady Da took on very remote meaning. "People never live forever".

Her statement was a hope, not a truth in which they could believe. They did not have the wit to follow the stars in their courses, to exchange names with each other, to harvest the experience of each for the wisdom of all. There was no dream of escape for these people. Though they saw the old-style chemical rockets lift up from the field beyond B'dikkat's cabin, they did not make plans to hide among the frozen crop of transmuted flesh. Far long ago, some other prisoner than one of these had tried to write a letter. His handwriting was on a rock. Mercer read it, and so had a few of the others, but they could not tell which man had done it. Nor did they care.

The letter, scraped on stone, had been a message home. They could still read the opening: "Once, I was like you, stepping out of my window at the end of day, and letting the winds blow me gently toward the place I lived in. Once, like you, I had one head, two hands, ten fingers on my hands. The front part of my head was called a face, and I could talk with it. Now I can only write, and that only when I get out of pain.

DAN MORGAN TOLD HIMSELF HE WOULD FORGET Ann Turner. He was well rid of her. He certainly didn't want a wife who was fickle as Ann. If he had married her, he'd have been asking for trouble.

But all of this was rationalization. Sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night thinking of Ann, and then could not get back to sleep. His plans and dreams had revolved around her so much and for so long that now he felt as if he had nothing. The easiest thing would be to sell out to Al Budd and leave the country, but there was a stubborn streak in him that wouldn't allow it. The best antidote for the bitterness and disappointment that poisoned him was hard work. He found that if he was tired enough at night, he went to sleep simply because he was too exhausted to stay awake. Each day he found himself thinking less often of Ann; each day the hurt was a little duller, a little less poignant. He had plenty of work to do. Because the summer was unusually dry and hot, the spring produced a smaller stream than in ordinary years. The grass in the meadows came fast, now that the warm weather was here. He could not afford to lose a drop of the precious water, so he spent most of his waking hours along the ditches in his meadows. He had no idea how much time Budd would give him. In any case, he had no intention of being caught asleep, so he carried his revolver in its holster on his hip and he took his Winchester with him and leaned it against the fence. He stopped every few minutes and leaned on his shovel as he studied the horizon, but nothing happened, each day dragging out with monotonous calm.

When, in late afternoon on the last day in June, he saw two people top the ridge to the south and walk toward the house, he quit work immediately and strode to his rifle. It could be some kind of trick Budd had thought up. No one walked in this country, least of all Ed Dow or Dutch Renfro or any of the rest of the Bar ~B crew. Morgan watched the two figures for a time, puzzled. When they were closer

and he saw that one was a woman, he was more puzzled than ever.

He cleaned his shovel, left it against the fence, picked up his Winchester, and started downstream. His visitors had crawled through the south fence and were crossing the meadow, angling toward the house. Now he saw that both the man and woman were moving slowly and irregularly, staggering, as if they found it a struggle to remain on their feet. Reaching the house ahead of them, he waited with his Winchester in his hands. They crawled through the north fence and came on toward him, and now he saw that both were young, not more than nineteen or twenty. They were dirty, their clothes were torn, and the girl was so exhausted that she fell when she was still twenty feet from the front door. She lay there, making no effort to get back on her feet. The boy came on to the porch and sat down, his gaze on Morgan as if half expecting him to shoot and not really caring. Morgan hesitated, thinking that if this was a trick, it was a good one. He didn't think it was possible for this couple to be pretending. The boy licked his dry lips. He asked, "Could we have a drink"?

Morgan jerked his head toward the front door. "In the kitchen", he said. Leaning his Winchester against the front of the house, he walked to the girl. "Get up. There's water in the house".

She didn't move or say anything. Her eyes were glazed as if she didn't hear or even see him. She had reached a point at which she didn't even care how she looked. Her face was very thin, and burned by the sun until much of the skin was dead and peeling, the new skin under it red and angry. Her blond hair was frowzy, her dress torn in several places, and her shoes were so completely worn out that they were practically no protection. It must have hurt her even to walk, for the sole was completely off her left foot and Morgan saw that it was bruised and bleeding. He picked her up, sliding one hand under her shoulders, the other under her knees, and carried her into the house. She was amazingly light, and so relaxed in his arms that he wasn't even sure she was conscious. Any lingering suspicion that this was a trick Al Budd had thought up was dispelled. No girl would go this far to fool a man so she could kill him. Besides, she had a sweet face that attracted him. He put her down on the couch, and going into the kitchen, saw that the boy had dropped into a chair beside the table. They looked a good deal alike, Morgan thought. Both had blonde hair and blue eyes, and there was even a faint similarity of features. Morgan filled the dipper from the water bucket on the shelf, went back into the front room, lifted the girl's head, and held the edge of the dipper to her mouth. She drank greedily, and murmured, "Thank you", as he lowered her head. He stood looking down at her for a moment, wondering what could have reduced her to this condition. He had seen a few nester wagons go through the country, the families almost starving to death, but he had never seen any of them on foot and as bad off as these two. The girl dropped off to sleep. Morgan returned to the kitchen, built a fire, and carried in several buckets of water from the spring which he poured

into the copper boiler that he had placed on the stove. He brought his Winchester in from the front of the house, then faced the boy.

"Who are you and what happened to you"? he asked.
"I'm Billy Jones", the boy answered. "That's my wife Sharon.
We ran out of money and we haven't eaten for two days".

"What are you doing here"? "Are we in Wyoming"?

Morgan nodded. "About five miles north of the line".

Jones sighed as if relieved. "We've been looking for work, but all the ranchers have turned us down". "You mean you dragged your wife all over hell's half-acre looking for work"? Morgan demanded. "The town of Buckhorn's only about six miles from here. Why didn't you go there"? "We didn't want town work", Jones said. "This is a mighty empty country", Morgan said. "There's only one more ranch three miles north of here. You'd have starved to death if you'd missed both places".

"Then we're lucky we got here. Could you give us a job, Mr& **h" "Morgan. Dan Morgan". He was silent a moment, thinking he could use a man this time of year, and if the girl could cook, it would give him more time in the meadows, but he knew nothing about the couple. They might kill him in his sleep, thinking there was money in the house. He dismissed the possibility at once. The girl's thin face haunted him. It wasn't the face of a killer. He wasn't so sure about the boy. He hadn't shaved for several weeks, his sparse beard giving his face a pathetic, woebegone expression.

There was more to this than Jones had told him. They were running from something. He'd be an idiot to let them stay he thought, but he couldn't send them on, either. "I could use some help", Morgan said finally, "but I can't afford to pay you anything. I guess you'd better go on in the morning". "We'll work for our keep", the boy said eagerly. "I've been mucking in a mine in the San Juan, but I used to work on a ranch. Sharon, she's cooked in a restaurant. We'll work hard, Mr& Morgan".

"I'll see", Morgan said. "Right now you need a meal and a bath. Your wife's in terrible shape". "I know", Jones said dejectedly. Morgan filled the fire box with wood again, then started supper and set the table. When the meal was ready, he told Jones to wash up, and going into the front room, woke the girl. He said, "I've got some supper ready". She rubbed her eyes and stretched, then sat up, her hands going to her hair. "I'm a mess", she said, and suddenly she was alarmed. "Who are you? How did we get here"? "I'm Dan Morgan. This is the Rafter ~M. You fell down in front of the house, and I carried you in. I gave you a drink and then you went to sleep".

"Oh". She stared at him, her eyes wide as she thought about what he had said; then she murmured: "You're very kind, Mr& Morgan. Do you take in all the strays who come by"?

"I don't have many strays coming to my front door", he said. "Think you can walk to the table"? "Of course".

She got to her feet, staggered, and almost fell. He caught her by an arm and helped her into the kitchen. She sat down at the table, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, Mr& Morgan. I'm usually a very strong woman, but I'm awfully tired". "And hungry", he said. "Start in. It's not much of a meal, but it's what I eat". "Not much of a meal"? the girl cried. "Mr& Morgan, it's the best-looking food I ever saw". He told himself he had never seen two people eat so much. When they were finally satisfied, Jones said, "I think he's going to give us work".

The grateful way she looked at Morgan made him ashamed of himself. When he saw the expression in her eyes, he knew he couldn't send them on. She said, "I guess the Lord looks out for fools, drunkards, and innocents". Morgan laughed. "Which are you"? "We're not drunkards", she said. "That's all I'm sure of". She helped him with the dishes, then he brought more water in from the spring before it got dark. He carried the tub from the back of the house where it hung from a nail in the wall. He said: "You'll feel a lot better after you have a bath. Your feet are in bad shape, Mrs& Jones. You'll have to go to town to see the doc". "No, she'll be all right", Jones said quickly. "I mean, we don't have any way to get there and we can't expect you to quit work just to take us to town". "We'll see", Morgan said. "Could you find me a needle and thread"? the girl asked. "My dress needs some work on it".

He nodded and, going into the bedroom, brought a needle, thread, and scissors. He said: "I'm going to bed". He nodded at the door in front of him. "That's my spare bedroom. The bed isn't made, but you'll find plenty of blankets there". "You're awfully kind", the girl said. "We'll pay you back if you'll let us. Some way". "It's all right", he said. "I get up early. You'd better sleep". Jones followed him into the front room, closing the door behind him. He said: "If it's all right with you, Mr& Morgan, I'll sleep out here on the couch. We haven't slept together since we started. I just can't take any chances on getting her pregnant, and if we were sleeping together **h" He stopped, embarrassed, and Morgan said, "I understand that, but I don't savvy why you'd go off and leave your jobs in the first place". "We got fired", Jones said. "We had to do something". They were a pair of lost, whipped kids, Morgan thought as he went to bed.