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SCIENCE-FICTION STORIES

FIRST PUBLICATION

All New — All Wonderful — Short Stories And Novelettes To Read And Enjoy . . .

Auk House

Clifford D. Simak

David Latimer was lost when he found the house. He had set out for Wyalusing, a town he had only heard of but had never visited, and apparently had taken the wrong road. He had passed through two small villages, Excelsior and Navarre, and if the roadside signs were right, in another few miles he would be coming into Montfort. He hoped that someone in Montfort could set him right again.

The road was a county highway, crooked and narrow and bearing little traffic. It twisted through the rugged headlands that ran down to the coast, flanked by birch and evergreens and rarely out of reach of the muted thunder of surf pounding on giant boulders that lay tumbled on the shore.

The car was climbing a long, steep hill when he first saw the house, between the coast and road. It was a sprawling pile of brick and stone, flaunting massive twin chimneys at either end of it, sited in front of a grove of ancient birch and set so high upon the land that it seemed to float against the sky. He slowed the car, pulled over to the roadside, and stopped to have a better look at it.

A semicircular brick-paved driveway curved up to the entrance of the house. A few huge oak trees grew on the well-kept lawn, and in their shade stood graceful stone benches that had the look of never being used.

There was, it seemed to Latimer, a pleasantly haunted look to the place--a sense of privacy, of olden dignity, a withdrawal from the world. On the front lawn, marring it, desecrating it, stood a large planted sign:

FOR RENT OR SALE

See Campbell's Realty--Half Mile Down the Road

And an arrow pointing to show which way down the road.

Latimer made no move to continue down the road. He sat quietly in the car, looking at the house. The sea, he thought, was just beyond; from a second-story window at the back, one could probably see it.

It had been word of a similar retreat that had sent him seeking out Wyalusing--a place where he could spend a quiet few months at painting. A more modest place, perhaps, than this, although the description he had been given of it had been rather sketchy.

Too expensive, he thought, looking at the house; most likely more than he could afford, although with the last couple of sales he had made, he was momentarily flush. However, it might not be as expensive as he thought, he told himself, a place like this would have small attraction for most people. Too big, but for himself that would make no difference; he could camp out in a couple of rooms for the few months he would be there.

Strange, he reflected, the built-in attraction the house had for him, the instinctive, spontaneous attraction, the instant knowing that this was the sort of place he had had in mind. Not knowing until now that it was the sort of place he had in mind. Old, he told himself

He put the car in gear and moved slowly out into the road, glancing back over his shoulder at the house. A half mile down the road, at the edge of what probably was Montfort, although there was no sign to say it was, on the right-hand side, a lopsided, sagging sign on an old, lopsided shack, announced Campbell's Realty. Hardly intending to do it, his mind not made up as yet, he pulled the car off the road and parked in front of the shack.

Inside, a middle-aged man dressed in slacks and turtleneck sat with his feet propped on a littered desk.

'I dropped in,' said Latimer, 'to inquire about the house down the road. The one with the brick drive.'

'Oh, that one,' said the man. 'Well, I tell you, stranger, I can't show it to you now. I'm waiting for someone who wants to look at the Ferguson place. Tell you what, though. I could give you the key.'

'Could you give me some idea of what the rent would be?'

'Why don't you look at it first. See what you think of it. Get the feel of it. See if you'd fit into it. If you like it, we can talk. Hard place to move. Doesn't fit the needs of many people. Too big, for one thing, too old. I could get you a deal on it.'

The man took his feet off the desk, plopped them on the floor. Rummaging in a desk drawer, he came up with a key with a tag attached to it and threw it on the desk top.

'Have a look at it and then come back,' he said. 'This Ferguson business shouldn't take more than an hour or two.'

'Thank you,' said Latimer, picking up the key.

He parked the car in front of the house and went up the steps. The key worked easily in the lock and the door swung open on well-oiled hinges. He came into a hall that ran from front to back, with a staircase ascending to the second floor and doors opening on either side into ground-floor rooms.

The hall was dim and cool, a place of graciousness.

When he moved along the hall, the floorboards did not creak beneath his feet as in a house this old he would have thought they might. There was no shut-up odor, no smell of damp or mildew, no sign of bats or mice.

The door to his right was open, as were all the doors that ran along the hall. He glanced into the room --a large room, with light from the westering sun flooding through the windows that stood on either side of a marble fireplace. Across the hall was a smaller room, with a fireplace in one corner. A library or a study, he thought. The larger room, undoubtedly, had been thought of, when the house was built, as a drawing room. Beyond the larger room, on the right-hand side, he found what might have been a kitchen with a large brick fireplace that had a utilitarian look to it, used, perhaps, in the olden days for cooking, and across from it a much larger room, with another marble fireplace, windows on either side of it and oblong mirrors set into the wall, an ornate chandelier hanging from the ceiling. This, he knew, had to be the dining room, the proper setting for leisurely formal dinners.

He shook his head at what he saw. It was much too grand for him, much larger, much more elegant than he had thought. If someone wanted to live as a place like this should be lived in, it would cost a fortune in furniture alone. He had told himself that during a summer's residence he could camp out in a couple of rooms, but to camp out in a place like this would be sacrilege; the house deserved a better occupant than that.

Yet, it still held its attraction. There was about it a sense of openness, of airiness, of ease. Here a man would not be cramped; he'd have room to move about. It conveyed a feeling of well-being. It was, in essence, not a living place, but a place for living.

The man had said that it had been hard to move, that to most people

it had slight appeal --too large, too old--and that he could make an attractive deal on it. But, with a sinking feeling, Latimer knew that what the man had said was true. Despite its attractiveness, it was far too large. It would take too much furniture even for a summer of camping out. And yet, despite all this, the pull--almost a physical pull--toward it still hung on.

He went out the back door of the hall, emerging on a wide veranda that ran the full length of the house. Below him lay the slope of ancient birch, running down a smooth green lawn to the seashore studded by tumbled boulders that flung up white clouds of spume as the racing waves broke against them. Flocks of mewling birds hung above the surging surf like white phantoms, and beyond this, the gray-blue stretch of ocean ran to the far horizon.

This was the place, he knew, that he had hunted for --a place of freedom that would free his brush from the conventions that any painter, at times, felt crowding in upon him. Here lay that remoteness from all other things, a barrier set up against a crowding world. Not objects to paint, but a place in which to put upon his canvases that desperate crying for expression he felt within himself.

He walked down across the long stretch of lawn, among the age-striped birch, and came upon the shore. He found a boulder and sat upon it, feeling the wild exhilaration of wind and water, sky and loneliness.

The sun had set and quiet shadows crept across the land. It was time to go, he told himself, but he kept on sitting, fascinated by the delicate deepening of the dusk, the subtle color changes that came upon the water.

When he finally roused himself and started walking up the lawn, the great birch trees had assumed a ghostliness that glimmered in the

twilight. He did not go back into the house, but walked around it to come out on the front.

He reached the brick driveway and started walking, remembering that he'd have to go back into the house to lock the back door off the hall.

It was not until he had almost reached the front entrance that he realized his car was gone. Confused, he stopped dead in his tracks. He had parked it there--he was sure he had. Was it possible he had parked it off the road and walked up the drive, now forgetting that he had?

He turned and started down the driveway, his shoes clicking on the bricks. No, dammit, he told himself, I did drive up the driveway--I remember doing it. He looked back and there wasn't any car, either in front of the house or along the curve of driveway. He broke into a run, racing down the driveway toward the road. Some kids had come along and pushed it to the road-- that must be the answer. A juvenile prank, the pranksters hiding somewhere, tittering to themselves as they watched him run to find it. Although that was wrong, he thought--he had left it set on 'Park' and locked. Unless they broke a window, there was no way they could have pushed it.

The brick driveway came to an end and there wasn't any road. The lawn and driveway came down to where they ended, and at that point a forest rose up to block the way. A wild and tangled forest that was very dark and dense, great trees standing up where the road had been. To his nostrils came the damp scent of forest mold, and somewhere in the darkness of the trees, an owl began to hoot.

He swung around, to face back toward the house, and saw the lighted windows. It couldn't be, he told himself quite reasonably. There was no one in the house, no one to turn on the lights. In all

likelihood, the electricity was shut off.

But the lighted windows persisted. There could he no question there were lights. Behind him, he could hear the strange rustlings of the trees and now there were two owls, answering one another.

Reluctantly, unbelievingly, he started up the driveway. There must be some sort of explanation. Perhaps, once he had the explanation, it would all seem quite simple. He might have gotten turned around somehow, as he had somehow gotten turned around earlier in the day, taking the wrong road. He might have suffered a lapse of memory, for some unknown and frightening reason have experienced a blackout. This might not be the house he had gone to look at, although, he insisted to himself, it certainly looked the same.

He came up the brick driveway and mounted the steps that ran up to the door, and while he was still on the steps, the door came open and a man in livery stepped aside to let him in.

'You are a little late, sir,' said the man. 'We had expected you some time ago. The others waited for you, but just now went in to dinner, thinking you had been unavoidably detained. Your place is waiting for you.'

Latimer hesitated.

'It is quite all right, sir,' said the man. 'Except on special occasions, we do not dress for dinner. You're all right as you are.'

The hall was lit by short candles set in sconces on the wall. Paintings also hung there, and small sofas and a few chairs were lined along the wall. From the dining room came the sound of conversation.

The butler closed the door and started down the hall. 'If you would

follow me, sir.'

It was all insane, of course. It could not be happening. It was something he imagined. He was standing out there, on the bricks of the driveway, with the forest and the hooting owls behind him, imagining that he was here, in this dimly lighted hallway with the talk and laughter coming from the dining room.

'Sir,' said the butler, 'if you please.'

'But, I don't understand. This place, an hour ago...'

'The others are all waiting for you. They have been looking forward to you. You must not keep them waiting.'

'All right, then,' said Latimer. 'I shall not keep them waiting.'

At the entrance to the dining room, the butler stood aside so that he could enter.

The others were seated at a long, elegantly appointed table. The chandelier blazed with burning tapers. Uniformed serving maids stood against one wail. A sideboard gleamed with china and cut glass. There were bouquets of flowers upon the table.

A man dressed in a green sports shirt and a corduroy jacket rose from the table and motioned to him.

'Latimer, over here,' he said. 'You are Latimer, are you not?'

'Yes, I'm Latimer.'

'Your place is over here, between Enid and myself. We'll not bother with introductions now. We can do that later on.'

Scarcely feeling his feet making contact with the floor, moving in a mental haze, Latimer went down the table. The man who stood had remained standing, thrusting out a beefy hand. Latimer took it and the other's handshake was warm and solid.

'I'm Underwood,' he said. 'Here, sit down. Don't stand on formality. We've just started on the soup. If yours is cold, we can have another brought to you.'

'I thank you,' said Latirner. 'I'm sure it's all right.'

On the other side of him, Enid said, 'We waited for you. We knew that you were coming, but you took so long.'

'Some,' said Underwood, 'take longer than others. It's just the way it goes.'

'But I don't understand,' said Latimer. 'I don't know what's going on.'

'You will,' said Underwood. 'There's really nothing to it.'

'Eat your soup,' Enid urged. 'It is really good. We get such splendid chowder here.'

She was small and dark of hair and eyes, a strange intensity in her.

Latimer lifted the spoon and dipped it in the soup. Enid was right; it was a splendid chowder.

The man across the table said, 'I'm Charlie. We'll talk later on. We'll answer any questions.'

The woman sitting beside Charlie said, 'You see, we don't understand it, either. But it's all right. I'm Alice.'

The maids were removing some of the soup bowls and bringing on the salads. On the sideboard the china and cut glass sparkled in the candlelight. The flowers on the table were peonies. There were, with himself, eight people seated at the table.

'You see,' said Latimer, 'I only came to look at the house.'

'That's the way,' said Underwood, 'that it happened to the rest of us. Not just recently. Years apart. Although I don't know how many years. Jonathon, down there at the table's end, that old fellow with a beard, was the first of us. The others straggled in.'

'The house,' said Enid, 'is a trap, very neatly baited. We are mice caught in a trap.'

From across the table, Alice said, 'She makes it sound SO dreadful. It's not that way at all. We are taken care of meticulously. There is a staff that cooks our food and serves it, that makes our beds, that keeps all clean and neat...'

'But who would want to trap us?'

'That,' said Underwood, 'is the question we all try to solve--except for one or two of us, who have become resigned. But, although there are several theories, there is no solution. I sometimes ask myself what difference it makes. Would we feel any better if we knew our trappers?'

A trap neatly baited, Latimer thought, and indeed it had been. There had been that instantaneous, instinctive attraction that the house had held for him--even only driving past it, the attraction had reached out for him.

The salad was excellent, and so were the steak and baked potato.

The rice pudding was the best Latimer had ever eaten. In spite of himself, he found that he was enjoying the meal, the bright and witty chatter that flowed all around the table.

In the drawing room, once dinner was done, they sat in front of a fire in the great marble fireplace.

'Even in the summer,' said Enid, 'when night come on, it gets chilly here. I'm glad it does, because I love a fire. We have a fire almost every night.'

'We?' said Latimer. 'You speak as if you were a tribe.'

'A band,' she said. 'A gang, perhaps. Fellow conspirators, although there's no conspiracy. We get along together. That's one thing that is so nice about it. We get along so well.'

The man with the beard came over to Latimer. 'My name is Jonathon,' he said. 'We were too far apart at dinner to become acquainted.'

'I am told,' said Latimer, 'that you are the one who has been here the longest.'

'I am now,' said Jonathon. 'Up until a couple of years ago, it was Peter. Old Pete, we used to call him.'

'Used to?'

'He died,' said Enid. 'That's how come there was room for you. There is only so much room in this house, you see.'

'You mean it took two years to find someone to replace him.'

'I have a feeling,' said Jonathon, 'that we belong to a select company.

I would think that you might have to possess rather rigid qualifications before you were considered.'

'That's what puzzles me,' said Latimer. 'There must be some common factor in the group. The kind of work we're in, perhaps.'

'I am sure of it,' said Jonathon. 'You are a painter, are you not?'

Latimer nodded. 'Enid is a poet,' said Jonathon, 'and a very good one. I aspire to philosophy, although I'm not too good at it. Dorothy is a novelist and Alice a musician--a pianist. Not only does she play, but she can compose as well. You haven't met Dorothy or Jane as yet.'

'No. I think I know who they are, but I haven't met them.'

'You will,' said Enid, 'before the evening's over. Our group is so small we get to know one another well.'

'Could I get a drink for you?' asked Jonathon.

'I would appreciate it. Could it be Scotch, by any chance?'

'It could be,' said Jonathon, 'anything you want. Ice or water?'

'Ice, if you would. But I feel I am imposing.'

'No one imposes here,' said Jonathon. 'We take care of one another.'

'And if you don't mind,' said Enid, 'one for me as well. You know what I want.'

As Jonathon walked away to get the drinks, Latimer said to Enid, 'I must say that you've all been kind to me. You took me in, a stranger...'

'Oh, not a stranger really. You'll never be a stranger. Don't you

understand? You are one of us. There was an empty place and you've filled it. And you'll be here forever. You'll never go away.'

'You mean that no one ever leaves?'

'We try. All of us have tried. More than once for some of us. But we've never made it. Where is there to go?'

'Surely there must be someplace else. Some way to get back.'

'You don't understand,' she said. 'There is no place but here. All the rest is wilderness. You could get lost if you weren't careful. There have been times when we've had to go out and hunt down the lost ones.'

Underwood came across the room and sat down on the sofa on the other side of Enid.

'How are you two getting on?' he said.

'Very well,' said Enid. 'I was just telling David there's no way to get away from here.'

'That is fine,' said Underwood, 'but it will make no difference. There'll come a day he'll try.'

'I suppose he will,' said Enid, 'but if he understands beforehand, it will be easier.'

'The thing that rankles me,' said Latimer, 'is why. You said at the dinner table everyone tries for a solution, but no one ever finds one.'

'Not exactly that,' said Underwood. 'I said there are some theories. But the point is that there is no way for us to know which one of them is right. We may have already guessed the reason for it all, but the

chances are we'll never know. Enid has the most romantic notion. She thinks we are being held by some super-race from some far point in the galaxy who want to study us. We are specimens, you understand. They cage us in what amounts to a laboratory, but do not intrude upon us. They want to observe us under natural conditions and see what makes us tick. And under these conditions, she thinks we should act as civilized as we can manage.'

'I don't know if I really think that,' said Enid, 'but it's a nice idea. It's no crazier than some of the other explanations. Some of us have theorized that we are being given a chance to do the best work we can. Someone is taking all economic pressure off us, placing us in a pleasant environment, and giving us all the time we need to develop whatever talents we may have. We're being subsidized.'

'But what good would that do?' asked Latimer. 'I gather we are out of touch with the world we knew. No matter what we did, who is there to know?'

'Not necessarily,' said Underwood. 'Things disappear. One of Alice's compositions and one of Dorothy's novels and a few of Enid's poems.'

'You think someone is reaching in and taking them? Being quite selective?'

'It's just a thought,' said Underwood. 'Some of the things we create do disappear. We hunt for them and we never find them.'

Jonathon came back with the drinks. 'We'll have to settle down now,' he said, 'and quiet all this chatter. Alice is about to play. Chopin, I believe she said.'

It was late when Latimer was shown to his room by Underwood, up

on the third floor. 'We shifted around a bit to give this one to you,' said Underwood. 'It's the only one that has a skylight. You haven't got a straight ceiling--it's broken by the roofline--but I think you'll find it comfortable.'

'You knew that I was coming, then, apparently some time before I arrived.'

'Oh, yes, several days ago. Rumors from the staff--the staff seems to know everything. But not until late yesterday did we definitely know when you would arrive.'

After Underwood said good night, Latimer stood for a time in the center of the room. There was a skylight, as Underwood had said, positioned to supply a north light.

Standing underneath it was an easel, and stacked against the wall were blank canvases. There would be paint and brushes, he knew, and everything else that he might need. Whoever or whatever had sucked him into this place would do everything up brown; nothing would be overlooked.

It was unthinkable, he told himself, that it could have happened. Standing now, in the center of the room, he still could not believe it. He tried to work out the sequence of events that had led him to this house, the steps by which he had been lured into the trap, if trap it was--and on the face of the evidence, it had to be a trap. There had been the realtor in Boston who had told him of the house in Wyalusing. 'It's the kind of place you are looking for,' he had said. 'No near neighbors, isolated. The little village a couple of miles down the road. If you need a woman to come in a couple of times a week to keep the place in order, just ask in the village. There's bound to be someone you could hire. The place is surrounded by old fields that haven't been farmed in years and are going back to brush and

thickets. The coast is only half a mile distant. If you like to do some shooting, come fall there'll be quail and grouse. Fishing, too, if you want to do it.'

'I might drive up and have a look at it,' he had told the agent, who had then proceeded to give him the wrong directions, putting him on the road that would take him past this place. Or had he? Had he, perhaps, been his own muddleheadedness that had put him on the wrong road? Thinking about it, Latimer could not be absolutely certain. The agent had given him directions, but had they been the wrong directions? In the present situation, he knew that he had the tendency to view all prior circumstances with suspicion. Yet, certainly, there had been some psychological pressure brought, some misdirection employed to bring him to this house. It could not have been simple happenstance that had brought him here, to a house that trapped practitioners of the arts. A poet, a musician, a novelist, and a philosopher --although, come to think of it, a philosopher did not seem to exactly fit the pattern. Maybe the pattern was more apparent, he told himself, than it actually was. He still did not know the professions of Underwood, Charlie, and Jane. Maybe, once he did know, the pattern would be broken.

A bed stood in one corner of the room, a bedside table and a lamp beside it. In another corner three comfortable chairs were grouped, and along a short section of the wall stood shelves that were filled with books. On the wall beside the shelves hung a painting. It was only after staring at it for several minutes that he recognized it. It was one of his own, done several years ago.

He moved across the carpeted floor to confront the painting. It was one of those to which he had taken a special liking--one that, in fact, he had been somewhat reluctant to let go, would not have sold it if he had not stood so much in need of money.

The subject sat on the back stoop of a tumbledown house. Beside him, where he had dropped it, was a newspaper folded to the 'Help Wanted' ads. From the breast pocket of his painfully clean, but worn, work shirt an envelope stuck out, the gray envelope in which welfare checks were issued. The man's work-scarred hands, lay listlessly in his lap, the forearms resting on the thighs, which were clad in ragged denims. He had not shaved for several days and the graying whiskers lent a deathly gray cast to his face. His hair, in need of barbering, was a tangled rat's nest, and his eyes, deep-set beneath heavy, scraggly brows, held a sense of helplessness. A scrawny cat sat at one corner of the house, a broken bicycle leaned against the basement wall. The man was looking out over a backyard filled with various kinds of litter, and beyond it the open countryside, a dingy gray and brown, seared by drought and lack of care, while on the horizon was the hint of industrial chimneys, gaunt and stark, with faint wisps of smoke trailing from them.

The painting was framed in heavy gilt--not the best choice, he thought, for such a piece. The bronze title tag was there, but he did not bend to look at it. He knew what it would say:

UNEMPLOYED

David Lloyd Latimer

How long ago? he wondered. Five years, or was it six? A man by the name of Johnny Brown, he remembered, had been the model. Johnny was a good man and he had used him several times. Later on, when he had tried to find him, he had been unable to locate him. He had not been seen for months in his old haunts along the waterfront and no one seemed to know where he had gone.

Five years ago, six years ago--sold to put bread into his belly, although that was silly, for when did he ever paint other than for

bread? And here it was. He tried to recall the purchaser, but was unable to.

There was a closet, and when he opened it, he found a row of brand-new clothes, boots and shoes lined up on the floor, hats ranged neatly on the shelf. And all of them would fit--he was sure they would. The setters and the baiters of this trap would have seen to that. In the highboy next to the bed would be underwear, shirts, sock, sweaters--the kind that he would buy.

'We are taken care of,' Enid had told him, sitting on the sofa with him before the flaring fire. There could be, he told himself, no doubt of that. No harm was intended them. They, in fact, were coddled.

And the question: Why? Why a few hand-picked people selected from many millions?

He walked to a window and stood looking out of it. The room was in the back of the house so that he looked down across the grove of ghostly birch. The moon had risen and hung like a milk-glass globe above the dark blur of the ocean. High as he stood, he could see the whiteness of the spray breaking on the boulders.

He had to have time to think, he told himself, time to sort it out, to get straight in his mind all the things that had happened in the last few hours. There was no sense in going to bed; tense as he was, he'd never get to sleep. He could not think in this room, nor, perhaps, in the house. He had to go some place that was uncluttered. Perhaps if he went outside and walked for an hour or so, if no more than up and down the driveway, he could get himself straightened out.

The blaze in the fireplace in the drawing room was little more than a glimmer in the coals when he went past the door.

A voice called to him: 'David, is that you?'

He spun around and went back to the door. A dark figure was huddled on the sofa in front of the fireplace.

'Jonathon?' Latimer asked.

'Yes, it is. Why don't you keep me company. I'm an old night owl and, in consequence, spend many lonely hours. There's coffee on the table if you want it.'

Latimer walked to the sofa and sat down. Cups and a carafe of coffee were on the table. He poured himself a cup.

'You want a refill?' he asked Jonathon.

'If you please.' The older man held out his cup and Latimer filled it. 'I drink a sinful amount of this stuff.' said Jonathon. 'There's liquor in the cabinet. A dash of brandy in the coffee, perhaps.'

'That sounds fine,' said Latimer. He crossed the room and found the brandy, brought it back, pouring a dollop into both cups.

They settled down and looked at one another. A nearly burned log in the fireplace collapsed into a mound of coals. In the flare of its collapse, Latimer saw the face of the other man--beard beginning to turn gray, an angular yet refined face, eyebrows that were sharp exclamation points.

'You're a confused young man,' said Jonathon.

'Extremely so,' Latimer confessed. 'I keep asking all the time why and who.'

Jonathon nodded. 'Most of us still do, I suppose. It's worst when you

first come here, but you never quit. You keep on asking questions. You're frustrated and depressed when there are no answers. As time goes on, you come more and more to accept the situation and do less fretting about it. After all, life is pleasant here. All our needs are supplied, nothing is expected of us. We do much as we please. You, no doubt, have heard of Enid's theory that we are under observation by an alien race that has penned us here in order to study us.'

'Enid told me,' said Latimer, 'that she did not necessarily believe the theory, but regarded it as a nice idea, a neat and dramatic explanation of what is going on.'

'It is that, of course,' said Jonathon, 'but it doesn't stand up. How would aliens be able to employ the staff that takes such good care of us?'

'The staff worries me,' said Latimer. 'Are its members trapped here along with us?'

'No, they're not trapped,' said Jonathon. 'I'm certain they are employed, perhaps at very handsome salaries. The staff changes from time to time, one member leaving to be replaced by someone else. How this is accomplished we do not know. We've kept a sharp watch in the hope that we might learn and thus obtain a clue as to how we could get out of here, but it all comes to nothing. We try on occasions, not too obviously, to talk with the staff - but beyond normal civility, they will not talk with us. I have a sneaking suspicion, too, that there are some of us, perhaps including myself, who no longer try too hard. Once one has been here long enough to make peace with himself, the ease of our life grows upon us. It would be something we would be reluctant to part with. I can't imagine, personally, what I would do if I were turned out of here, back into the world that I have virtually forgotten. That is the vicious part of it --that our captivity is so attractive, we are inclined to fall in love with it.'

'But certainly in some cases there were people left behind-- wives, husbands, children, friends. In my own case, no wife and only a few friends.'

'Strangely enough,' said Jonathon, 'where such ties existed, they were not too strong.'

'You mean only people without strong ties were picked?'

'No, I doubt that would have been the case. Perhaps among the kind of people who are here, there is no tendency to develop such strong ties.'

'Tell me what kind of people. You told me you are a philosopher and I know some of the others. What about Underwood?'

'A playwright. And a rather successful one before he came here.'

'Charlie? Jane?'

'Charlie is a cartoonist, Jane an essayist.'

'Essayist?'

'Yes, high social consciousness. She wrote rather telling articles for some of the so-called little magazines, even a few for more prestigious publications. Charlie was big in the Middle West. Worked for a small daily, hut his cartoons were widely reprinted. He was building a reputation and probably would have been moving on to more important fields.'

'Then we're not all from around here. Not all from New England.'

No. Some of us, of course. Myself and you. The others are from other

parts of the country.'

'All of us from what can be roughly called the arts. And from a wide area. How in the world would they --whoever they may be --have managed to lure all these people to this house? Because I gather we had to come ourselves, that none of us was seized and brought here.'

'I think you are right. I can't imagine how it was managed. Psychological management of some sort, I would assume, but I have no idea how it might be done.'

'You say you are a philosopher. Does that mean you taught philosophy?'

'I did at one time. But it was not a satisfactory job. Teaching those old dead philosophies to a group of youngsters who paid but slight attention was no bargain, I can tell you. Although, I shouldn't blame them, I suppose. Philosophy today is largely dead. It's primitive, outdated, the most of it. What we need is a new philosophy that will enable us to cope with the present world.'

'And you are writing such a philosophy?'

'Writing at it. I find that as time goes on, I get less and less done. I haven't the drive any longer. This life of ease, I suppose. Something's gone out of me. The anger, maybe. Maybe the loss of contact with the world I knew. No longer exposed to that world's conditions, 1 have lost the feel for it. I don't feel the need of protest, I've lost my sense of outrage, and the need for a new philosophy has become remote.'

'This business about the staff. You say that from time to time it changes.'

'It may be fairly simple to explain. I told you that we watch, but we can't

have a watcher posted all the time. The staff, on the other hand, can keep track of us. Old staff members leave, others come in when we are somewhere else.'

'And supplies. They have to bring in supplies. That would not be as simple.'

Jonathon chuckled. 'You've really got your teeth in this.'

'I'm interested, dammit. There are questions about how the operation works and I want to know. How about the basement? Tunnels, maybe. Could they bring in staff and supplies through tunnels in the basement? I know that sounds cloak-and-dagger, but...'

'I suppose they could. If they did, we'd never know. The basement is used to store supplies and we're not welcome there. One of the staff, a burly brute who is a deaf-mute, or pretends to be, has charge of the basement. He lives down there, eats and sleeps down there, takes care of supplies.'

'It could be possible, then?'

'Yes,' said Jonathon. 'It could be possible.'

The fire had died down; only a few coals still blinked in the ash. In the silence that came upon them, Latimer heard the wind in the trees outside.

'One thing you don't know,' said Jonathon. 'You will find great auks down on the beach.'

'Great auks? That's impossible. They've been ...'

'Yes, I know. Extinct for more than a hundred years. Also whales. Sometimes you can sight a dozen a day. Occasionally a polar bear.'

'Then that must mean..."

Jonathon nodded. 'We are somewhere in prehistoric North America. I would guess several thousand years into the past. We hear and, occasionally, see moose. There are a number of deer, once in a while woodland caribou. The bird life, especially the wildfowl, are here in incredible numbers. Good shooting if you ever have the urge. We have guns and ammunition.'

Dawn was beginning to break when Latimer went back to his room. He was bone-tired and now he could sleep. But before going to bed he stood for a time in front of the window overlooking the birch grove and the shore. A thin log had moved off the water and everything had a faery, unrealistic cast.

Prehistoric North America, the philosopher had said, and if that was the case, there was little possibility of escape back to the world he knew. Unless one had the secret--or the technology--one did not move in time. Who, he wondered, could have cracked the technique of time transferral? And who, having cracked it, would use it for the ridiculous purpose of caging people in it?

There had been a man at MIT, he recalled, who had spent twenty years or more in an attempt to define time and gain some understanding of it. But that had been some years ago and he had dropped out of sight, or at least out of the news. From time to time there had been news stories (written for the most part with tongue firmly in cheek) about the study. Although, Latimer told himself, it need not have been the MIT man; there might have been other people engaged in similar studies who had escaped, quite happily, the attention of the press.

Thinking of it, he felt an excitement rising in him at the prospect of

being in primitive North America, of being able to see the land as it had existed before white explorers had come--before the Norsemen or the Cabots or Cartier or any the others. Although there must be Indians about--it was funny that Jonathon had not mentioned Indians.

Without realizing that he had been doing so, he found that he had been staring at a certain birch clump. Two of the birch trees grew opposite off another, slightly behind but on opposite sides of a large boulder that he estimated a t standing five feet high or so. And beyond the boulder, positioned slightly down the slope, but between the other two birch trees, was a third. It was not an unusual situation, he knew; birch trees often grew in clumps of three. There must have been some feature of the clump that had riveted his attention on it, but if that had been the case, he no longer was aware of it and it was not apparent now. Nevertheless, he remained staring at it, puzzled at what he had seen, if he had seen anything at all.

As he watched, a bird flew down from somewhere to light on the boulder. A songbird, but too far away for identification. Idly he watched the bird until it flew off the rock and disappeared.

Without bothering to undress, simply kicking off his shoes, he crossed the room to the bed and fell upon it, asleep almost before he came to rest upon it.

It was almost noon before he woke. He washed his face and combed his hair, not bothering to shave, and went stumbling down the stairs, still groggy from the befuddlement of having slept so soundly. No one else was in the house, but in the dining room a place was set and covered dishes remained upon the sideboard. He chose kidneys and scrambled eggs, poured a cup of coffee, and went back to the table. The smell of food triggered hunger, and after gobbling the plate of food, he went back for seconds and another cup of coffee.

When he went out through the rear door, there was no one in sight. The slope of birch stretched toward the coast. Off to his left, he heard two reports that sounded like shotguns. Perhaps someone out shooting duck or quail. Jonathon had said there was good hunting here.

He had to wend his way carefully through a confused tangle of boulders to reach the shore, with pebbles grating underneath his feet. A hundred yards away the inrolling breakers shattered themselves upon randomly scattered rocks, and even where he stood he felt the thin mist of spray upon his face.

Among the pebbles he saw a faint gleam and bent to see what it was. Closer to it, he saw that it was an agate--tennis-ball size, its fractured edge, wet with spray, giving off a waxy, translucent glint. He picked it up and polished it, rubbing off the clinging bits of sand, remembering how as a boy he had hunted agates in abandoned gravel pits. Just beyond the one he had picked up lay another one, and a bit to one side of it, a third. Crouched, he hunched forward and picked up both of them. One was bigger than the first, the second slightly smaller. Crouched there, he looked at them, admiring the texture of them, feeling once again, after many years, the thrill he had felt as a boy at finding agates. When he had left home to go to college, he remembered there had been a bag full of them still cached away in one corner of the garage. He wondered what might have become of them.

A few yards down the beach, something waddled out from behind a cluster of boulders, heading for the water. A bird, it stood some thirty inches tall and had a fleeting resemblance to a penguin. The upper plumage was black, white below, a large white spot encircled its eye. Its small wings shifted as it waddled. The bill was sharp and heavy, a vicious striking weapon.

He was looking at, he knew, a great auk, a bird that up in his world had been extinct but which, a few centuries before, had been common from Cape Cod to far north in Canada. Cartier's seamen, ravenous for fresh meat as a relief from sea rations, had clubbed hundreds to death, eating some of them at once, putting what remained down in kegs with salt.

Behind the first great auk came another and then two more. Paying no attention to him, they waddled down across the pebbles to the water, into which they dived, swimming away.

Latimer remained in his crouch, staring at the birds in fascination. Jonathon had said he would find them on the beach, but knowing he would find them and actually seeing them, were two different things. Now he was convinced, as he had not been before, of exactly where he was.

Off to his left, the guns banged occasionally, but otherwise there were no signs of the others in the house. Far out across the water, a string of ducks went scuddling close above the waves. The pebbled beach held a sense of peace--the kind of peace, he thought, that men might have known long years ago when the earth was still largely empty of humankind, when there was still room for such peace to settle in and stay.

Squatting there upon the beach, he remembered the clump of birch and now, suddenly and without thinking of it, he knew what had attracted his attention to it--an aberration of perspective that his painter's eye had caught. Knitting his brow, he tried to remember exactly what it was that had made the perspective wrong, but whatever it had been quite escaped him now.

He glimpsed another agate and went to pick it up, and a little farther down the beach he found yet another one. This, he told himself, was

an unworked, unpicked rock-hunters paradise. He put the agates in his pocket and continued down the beach. Spotting other agates, he did not pick them up. Later, at some other time, if need be, he could find hours of amusement hunting them.

When he climbed the beach and started up the slope, he saw that Jonathon was sitting in a chair on the veranda that ran across the hack of the house. He climbed up to where he sat and settled down in another chair.

'Did you see an auk?' asked Jonathon.

'I saw four of them,' said Latimer.

'There are times,' said Jonathon, 'that the beach is crowded with them. Other times, you won't see one for days. Underwood and Charlie are off hunting woodcock. I suppose you heard them shooting. If they get back in time, we'll have woodcock for dinner. Have you ever eaten woodcock?'

'Only once. Some years ago. A friend and I went up to Nova Scotia to catch the early flight.'

'I guess that is right. Nova Scotia and a few other places now. Here I imagine you can find hunting of them wherever you can find alder swamps.'

'Where was everyone?' asked Latimer. 'When I got out of the sack and had something to eat, there was no one around.'

'The girls went out blackberrying,' said Jonathon. 'They do that often. Gives them something to do. It's getting a little late for blackberries, but there are some around. They got back in time to have blackberry pie tonight. He smacked his lips. 'Woodcock and blackberry pie. I

hope you are hungry.'

'Don't you ever think of anything but eating?'

'Lots of other things,' said Jonathon. 'Thing is, here you grab onto anything you can think about. It keeps you occupied. And I might ask you, are you feeling easier than you were last night? Got all the immediate questions answered?'

'One thing still bothers me,' said Latimer. 'I left my car parked outside the house. Someone is going to find it parked there and will wonder what has happened.'

'I think that's something you don't need to worry over,' said Jonathon. 'Whoever is engineering this business would have seen to it. I don't know, mind you, but I would guess that before morning your car was out of there and will be found, abandoned, some other place, perhaps a hundred miles away. The people we are dealing with would automatically take care of such small details. It wouldn't do to have too many incidents clustered about this house or in any other place. Your car will be found and you'll be missing and a hunt will be made for you. When you aren't found, you'll become just another one of the dozens of people who turn up missing every year.'

'Which leaves me to wonder,' said Latimer, 'how many of these missing people wind up in places such as this. It is probably this is not the only place where some of them are being trapped.'

'There is no way to know,' said Jonathon. 'People drop out for very many reasons.'

They sat silent for a time, looking out across the sweep of lawn. A squirrel went scampering down the slope. Far off, birds were calling. The distant surf was a hollow booming.

Finally, Latimer spoke. 'Last night, you told me we needed a new philosophy, that the old ones were no longer valid.'

'That I did,' said Jonathon. 'We are faced today with a managed society. We live by restrictive rules, we have been reduced to numbers--our Social Security numbers, our Internal Revenue Service numbers, the numbers on our credit cards, on our checking and savings accounts, on any number of other things. We are being dehumanized and, in most cases, willingly, because this numbers game may seem to make life easier, but most often because no one wants to bother to make a fuss about it. We have come to believe that a man who makes a fuss is antisocial. We are a flock of senseless chickens, fluttering and scurrying, cackling and squawking, but being shooed along in the way that others want us to go. The advertising agencies tell us what to buy, the public relations people tell us what to think, and even knowing this, we do not resent it. We sometimes damn the government when we work up the courage to damn anyone at all. But I am certain it is not the government we should be damning, but, rather, the world's business managers. We have seen the rise of multinational complexes that owe no loyalty to any government, that think and plan in global terms, that view the human populations as a joint labor corps--consumer group, some of which also may have investment potential. This is a threat, as I see it, against human free will and human dignity, and we need a philosophical approach that will enable us to deal with it.

'And if you should write this philosophy,' said Latimer, 'it would pose a potential threat against the managers.'

'Not at first,' said Jonathon. 'Perhaps never. But it might have some influence over the years. It might start a trend of thinking. To break the grip the managers now hold would require something like a social revolution...'

'These men, these managers you are talking about--they would be cautious men, would they not, farseeing men? They would take no chances. They'd have too much at stake to take any chances at all.'

'You aren't saying...'

'Yes, I think I am. It is, at least, a thought.'

Jonathon said, 'I have thought of it myself but rejected it because I couldn't trust myself. It follows my bias too closely. And it doesn't make sense. If there were people they wanted to get out of the way, there'd be other ways to do it.'

'Not as safely,' said Latimer. 'Here there is no way we could be found. Dead, we would be found...'

'I wasn't thinking of killing.'

'Oh, well,' said Latimer, 'it was only a thought. Another guess.'

'There's one theory no one has told you, or I don't think they have. An experiment in sociology. Putting various groups of people together in unusual situations and measuring their reactions. Isolating them so there is no present-world influence to modify the impact of the situation.'

Latimer shook his head. 'It sounds like a lot of trouble and expense. More than the experiment would be worth.'

'I think so, too,' said Jonathon.

He rose from his chair. 'I wonder if you'd excuse me. I have the habit of stretching out for an hour or so before dinner. Sometimes I doze, other times I sleep, often I just lie there. But it is relaxing.'

'Go ahead,' said Latimer. 'We'll have plenty of time later to talk.'

For half an hour or more after Jonathon had left, he remained sitting in the chair, staring down across the lawn, but scarcely seeing it.

That idea about the managers being responsible for the situation, he told himself, made a ragged sort of sense. Managers, he thought with a smile - how easy it is to pick up someone else's lingo.

For one thing, the idea, if it worked, would be foolproof. Pick up the people you wanted out of the way and pop them into time, and after you popped them into time still keep track of them to be sure there were no slipups. And, at the same time, do them no real injustice, harm them as little as possible, keep a light load on your conscience, still be civilized.

There were two flaws, he told himself. The staff changed from time to time. That meant they must be rotated from here back to present time and they could be a threat. Some way would have had to be worked out to be sure they never talked, and given human nature, that would be a problem. The second flaw lay in the people who were here. The philosopher, if he had remained in present time, could have been a threat. But the rest of them? What threat could a poet pose? A cartoonist, maybe, perhaps a novelist, but a musician-composer - what threat could lie in music?

On the surface of it, however, it was not as insane as it sounded if you happened not to be on the receiving end of it. The world could have been spared a lot of grief in the last few hundred years if such a plan had been operative, spotting potential troublemakers well ahead of the time they became a threat and isolating them. The hard part of such a plan--from where he sat, an apparently impossible part of it--would lie in accurately spotting the potential troublemakers before

they began making trouble. Although that, he supposed, might be possible. Given the state of the art in psychology, it might be possible.

With a start, he realized that during all this time, without consciously being aware of it, he had been staring at the birch clump. And now he remembered another thing. Just before he had stumbled off to bed, he had seen a bird light on the boulder, sit there for a time, then lift itself into the air and disappear--not fly away, but disappear. He must have known this when he saw it, but been so fogged by need of sleep that the significance of it had not made an impression. Thinking back on it, he felt sure he was not mistaken. The bird had disappeared.

He reared out of the chair and strode down the slope until he stood opposite the boulder with the two trees flanking it and the other growing close behind it. He took one of the agates out of his pocket and tossed it carefully over the boulder, aimed so that it would strike the tree behind the rock. It did not strike the tree; he could not hear it fall to the ground. One by one, he tossed all the other agates as he had tossed the first. None of them hit the tree, none fell to the ground. To make sure, he went around the tree to the right and, crouching down, crawled behind the boulder. He carefully went over the ground. There were no agates there.

Shaken, his mind a seething turmoil of mingled doubt and wonder, he went back up the hill and sat in the chair again. Thinking the situation over as calmly as he could, there seemed to be no doubt that he had found a rift of some sort in--what would you call it?-- the time continuum, perhaps. And if you wriggled through the rift or threw yourself through the rift, you'd not be here. He had thrown the agates and they were no longer here; they had gone elsewhere. But where would you go? Into some other time, most likely, and the best guess would seem to be back into the time from which he had been

snatched. He had come from there to here, and if there were a rift in the time continuum, it would seem to be reasonable to believe the rift would lead back into present time again. There was a chance it wouldn't, but the chance seemed small, for only two times had been involved in the interchange.

And if he did go back, what could he do? Maybe not a lot, but he damn well could try. His first move would be to disappear, to get away from the locality and lose himself. Whoever was involved in this trapping scheme would try to find him, but he would make it his business to be extremely hard to find. Then, once he had done that, he would start digging, to ferret out the managers Jonathon had mentioned, or if not them, then whoever might he behind all this.

He could not tell the others here what he suspected. Inadvertently, one of them might tip off a staff member, or worse, might try to prevent him from doing what he meant to do, having no wish to change the even tenor of the life they enjoyed here.

When Underwood and Charlie came up the hill with their guns, their hunting coats bulging with the woodcock they had bagged, he went inside with them, where the others had gathered in the drawing room for a round of before-dinner drinks.

At dinner, there was, as Jonathon had said there would be, broiled woodcock and blackberry pie, both of which were exceptionally tasty, although the pie was very full of seeds.

After dinner, they collected once again before the fire and talked of inconsequential things. Later on Alice played and again it was Chopin.

In his room, he pulled a chair over to the window and sat there, looking out at the birch clump. He waited until he could hear no one

stirring about, and then two more hours after that, to make sure all were safely in their beds, if not asleep. Then he went softly down the stairs and out the back door. A half-moon lighted the lawn so that he had little trouble locating the birch clump. Now that he was there, he was assailed by doubt. It was ridiculous to think, he told himself, what he had been thinking. He would climb up on the boulder and throw himself out toward the third tree that stood behind the boulder and he would tumble to the ground between the tree and boulder and nothing would have happened. He would trudge sheepishly up the slope again and go to bed, and after a time he would manage to forget what he had done and it would be as if he had never done it. And yet, he remembered, he had thrown the agates, and when he had looked, there had not been any agates.

He scrambled up the face of the boulder and perched cautiously on its rounded top. He put out his hands to grasp the third birch and save himself from falling. Then he launched himself toward the tree.

He fell only a short distance, but landed hard upon the ground. There had not been any birch to catch to break his fall.

A hot sun blazed down upon him. The ground beneath him was not a greasy lawn, but a sandy loam with no grass at all. There were some trees, but not any birches.

He scrambled to his feet and turned to look at the house. The hilltop stood bare; there was no house. Behind him, he could hear the booming of the surf as it battered itself to spray against the rocky coastline.

Thirty feet away, to his left, stood a massive poplar, its leaves whispering in the wind that blew off the sea. Beyond it grew a scraggly pine tree and just down the slope, a cluster of trees that he thought were willows. The ground was covered-- not too thickly

covered, for rain runneled soil showed through-- by a growth of small ferns and other low-growing plants he could not identify.

He felt the perspiration starting from his body, running in rivulets from his armpits down his ribs--but whether from fear or sun, he did not know. For he was afraid, stiff and aching with the fear.

In addition to the poplar and the pine, low-growing shrubs were rooted in the ground among the ferns and other ground cover. Birds flew low, from one clump of shrubbery to another, chirping as they flew. From below him, their cries muted by the pounding of the surf, other birds were squalling. Gulls, he thought, or birds like gulls.

Slowly the first impact of the fear drained from him and he was able to move. He took a cautious step and then another and then was running toward the hilltop where the house should be, but wasn't.

Ahead of him, something moved and he skidded to a halt, poised to go around whatever had moved in the patch of shrubbery. A head poked out of the patch and stared at him with unblinking eyes. The nose was blunt and scaly and farther hack the scales gave way to plates of armor. The thing mumbled at him disapprovingly and lurched forward a step or two, then halted.

It stood there, staring at him with its unblinking eyes. Its hack was covered by overlapping plates. Its front legs were bowed. It stood four feet at the shoulder. It did not seem to be threatening; rather, it was curious.

His breath caught in his throat. Once, long ago, he had seen a drawing, an artist's conception, of this tiling -not exactly like it, but very much the same. An anky, he thought--what was it?-- an ankylosaurus, that was what it was, he realized, amazed that he should remember, an ankylosaurus. A creature that should have been

dead for millions of years. But the caption had said six feet at the shoulder and fifteen feet long, and this one was nowhere near that big. A small one, he thought, maybe a young one, maybe a different species, perhaps a baby ankywhatever-the-hell-it-was.

Cautiously, almost on tiptoe, he walked around it, while it kept turning its head to watch him. It made no move toward him. He kept looking over his shoulder to be sure it hadn't moved. Herbivorous, he assured himself, an eater of plants-- posing no danger to anything at all, equipped with armor plate to discourage the meat eaters that might slaver for its flesh. He tried hard to remember whether the caption had said it was herbivorous, but his mind, on that particular point, was blank.

Although, if it were here, there would he carnivores as well--and, for the love of God, what had he fallen into? Why hadn't he given more thought to the possibility that something like this might happen, that he would not, necessarily, automatically go back to present time, but might be shunted off into another time? And why, just as a matter of precaution, hadn't he armed himself before he left? There were high-caliber guns in the library and he could have taken one of them and a few boxes of ammunition if he had just thought about it.

He had failed to recognize the possibility of being dumped into a place like this, he admitted, because he had been thinking about what he wanted to happen, to the exclusion of all else, using shaky logic to convince himself that he was right. His wishful thinking, he now knew, had landed him in a place no sane man would choose.

He was back in the age of dinosaurs and there wasn't any house. He probably was the only human on the planet, and if his luck held out, he might last a day or two, but probably not much more than that. He knew he was going off the deep end again, thinking as illogically as he had been when he launched himself into the time rift. There might

not be that many carnivores about, and if a man was observant and cautious and gave himself a chance to learn, he might be able to survive. Although the chances were that he was stuck here. There could be little hope that he could find another rift in time, and even if he did, there would be no assurance that it would take him to anything better than this. Perhaps, if he could find the point where he had emerged into this world, he might have a chance to locate the rift again, although there was no guarantee that the rift was a two-way rift. He stopped and looked around, but there was no way to know where he had first come upon this place. The landscape all looked very much the same.

The ankylosaurus, he saw, had come a little out of the shrub thicket and was nibbling quite contentedly at the ground cover. Turning his back upon it, he went trudging up the hill.

Before he reached the crest, he turned around again to have a look. The ankylosaurus was no longer around, or perhaps he did not know where to look for it. Down in the swale that had been the alder swamp where Underwood and Charlie had bagged the woodcock, a herd of small reptiles were feeding, browsing off low-growing shrubs and ground cover.

Along the skyline of the hill beyond which the herd was feeding. a larger creature lurched along on its hind legs, its body slanted upright at an angle, the shriveled forearms dangling at its side, its massive, brutal head jerking as it walked. The herd in the swale stopped their feeding, heads swiveling to look at the lurching horror. Then they ran, racing jerkily on skinny hind legs, like a flock of outsize, featherless chickens racing for their lives.

Latimer turned again and walked toward the top of the hill. The last slope was steep, steeper than he remembered it had been on that

other, safer world. He was panting when he reached the crest, and he stopped a moment to regain his breath. Then, when he was breathing more easily, he turned to look toward the south.

Half-turned, he halted, amazed at what he saw--the last thing in the world that he had expected to see. Sited in the valley that lay between the hill on which he stood and the next headland to the south, was a building. Not a house, but a building. It stood at least thirty stories high and looked like an office building, its windows gleaming in the sun.

He sobbed in surprise and thankfulness, but even so, he did not begin to run toward it, but stood for a moment looking at it, as if he must look at it for a time to believe that it was there. Around it lay a park of grass and tastefully planted trees. Around the park ran a high wire fence and in the fence at the foot of the hill closest to him was a gate, beside which was a sentry box. Outside the sentry box stood two men who carried guns.

Then he was running, racing recklessly down the hill, running with great leaps, ducking thickets of shrubs. He stubbed his toe and fell, pinwheeling down the slope. He brought up against a tree and, the breath half-knocked out of him, got to his feet, gasping and wheezing. The men at the gate had not moved, but he knew that they had seen him; they were gazing up the hill toward him.

Moving at a careful, slower pace, he went on down the hill. The slope leveled off and he found a faint path that he followed toward the gate.

He came up to the two guards and stopped.

'You damn fool,' one of them said to him. 'What do you think you're doing, going out without a gun? Trying to get yourself killed?'

'There's been an old Tyranno messing around here for the last several days,' said the other guard. 'He was seen by several people. An old bastard like that could go on the prod at the sight of you and you wouldn't have a chance.'

'The first guard jerked his rifle toward the gate. 'Get in there,' he said. 'Be thankful you're alive. If I ever catch you going out again without a gun, I'll turn you in, so help me.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Latimer.

He walked through the gate, following a path of crushed shells toward the front entrance of the office building. But now that he was there, safe behind the fence, the reaction began setting in. His knees were wobbly and he staggered when he walked. He sat down on a bench beneath a tree. He found that his hands were shaking and he held them hard against his thighs to stop the trembling.

How lucky could one get? He asked himself. And what did it mean? A house in the more recent past, an office building in this place that must be millions of years into the past. There had not been dinosaurs upon the earth for at least sixty million years. And the rift? How had the rift come about? Was it something that could occur naturally, or had it come about because someone was manipulating time? Would such rifts come when someone, working deliberately, using techniques of which there was no public knowledge, was putting stress upon the web of time? Was it right to call time a web? He decided that it made no difference, that the terminology was not of great importance.

An office building, he thought. What did an office building mean? Was it possible that he had stumbled on the headquarters of the project/conspiracy/program that was engaged in the trapping of selected people in the past? Thinking of it, the guess made Sense. A

cautious group of men could not take the chance of operating such an enterprise in present time, where it might be nosed out by an eager-beaver newsman or a governmental investigation or by some other means. Here, buried in millions of years of time, there would be little chance of someone unmasking it.

Footsteps crunched on the path and Latimer looked up. A man in sports shirt and flannels stood in front of him.

'Good morning, sir,' said Latimer.

The man asked, 'Could you be David Latimer, by any chance?'

'I could be, said Latimer.

'I thought so. I don't remember seeing you before. And I was sure I knew everyone. And the guards reported..."

'I arrived only an hour or so ago.'

'Mr Gale wanted to see you as soon as you arrived.'

'You mean you were expecting me?'

'Well, we couldn't be absolutely sure,' said the other. 'We are glad you made it.'

Latimer got off the bench and the two of them walked together to the front entrance, climbed the steps, and went through the door. They walked through a deserted lounge, then into a hallway flanked by numbered doors with no names upon them. Halfway down the hall, the man with Latimer knocked at one of the doors.

'Come in,' a voice said.

The man opened the door and stuck his head in. 'Mr Latimer is here,' he said. 'He made it.'

'That is fine,' said the voice. 'I am glad he did. Please show him in.'

The man stepped aside to allow Latimer to enter, then stepped back into the hall and closed the door. Latimer stood alone, facing the man across the room.

'I'm Donovan Gale,' said the man, rising from his desk and coming across the room. He held out his hand and Latimer took it. Gale's grasp was a friendly corporate handshake.

'Let's sit over here,' he said, indicating a davenport. 'It seems to me we may have a lot to talk about.'

'I'm interested in hearing what you have to say,' said Latimer.

'I guess both of us are,' said Gale. 'Interested in what the other has to say, I mean.'

They sat down on opposite ends of the davenport, turning to face one another.

'So you are David Latimer,' said Gale. 'The famous painter.'

'Not famous,' said Latimer. 'Not yet. And it appears now that I may never be. But what I don't understand is how you were expecting me.'

'We knew you'd left Auk House.'

'So that is what you call it. Auk House.'

'And we suspected you would show up here. We didn't know exactly where, although we hoped that it would be nearby. Otherwise you

never would have made it. There are monsters in those hills. Although, of course, we could not be really sure that you would wind up here. Would you mind telling us how you did it?'

Latimer shook his head. 'I don't believe I will. Not right now, at least. Maybe later on when I know more about your operation. And now a question for you. Why me? Why an inoffensive painter who was doing no more than trying to make a living and a reputation that might enable him to make a better living?'

'I see,' said Gale, 'that you have it figured out.'

'Not all of it,' said Latimer. 'And, perhaps, not all of it correctly. But I resent being treated as a bad guy, as a potential threat of some sort. I haven't got the guts or the motive to be a bad guy. And Enid, for Christ's sake. Enid is a poet. And Alice. All Alice does is play a good piano.'

'You're talking to the wrong men,' Gale told him. 'Breen could tell you that, if you can get him to tell you. I'm only personnel.'

'Who is Breen?'

'He's head of the evaluation team.'

'Those are the ones who figure out who is going to be picked up and tossed into time.'

'Yes, that is the idea, crudely. There's a lot more to it than that. There is a lot of work done here. Thousands of newspapers and other periodicals to be read to spot potential subjects. Preliminary psychological determinations. Then it's necessary to do further study back on prime world. Further investigation of potential subjects. But no one back there really knows what is going on. They're just hired to

do jobs now and then. The real work goes on here.'

'Prime world is present time? Your old world and mine?'

'Yes. If you think, however, of prime world as present time, that's wrong. That's not the way it is. We're not dealing with time, but with alternate worlds. The one you just came from is a world where everything else took place exactly as it did in prime world, with one exception man never evolved. There are no men there and never will be. Here, where we are now, something more drastic occurred. Here the reptiles did not become extinct. The Cretaceous never came to an end, the Cenozoic never got started. The reptiles are still the dominant species and the mammals still are secondary.'

'You're taking a chance, aren't you, in telling me all this.'

'I don't think so,' said Gale. 'You're not going anywhere. There are none of us going anywhere. Once we sign up for this post, we know there's not any going back. We're stuck here. Unless you have a system...'

'No system. I was just lucky.'

'You're something of an embarrassment to us,' said Gale. 'in the years since the program has been in operation, nothing like this has happened at any of the stations. We don't know what to make of it and we don't quite know what to do with you. For the moment, you'll stay on as a guest. Later on, if it is your wish, we could find a place for you. You could become a member of the team.'

'Right at the moment,' said Latimer, 'that holds no great attraction for me.'

'That's because you aren't aware of the facts, nor of the dangers.

Under the economic and social systems that have been developed in prime world, the great mass of mankind has never had it so good. There are ideological differences, of course, but there is some hope that they eventually can be ironed out. There are underprivileged areas; this cannot be denied. But one must also concede that their only hope lies in their development by free-world business interests. So-called big-business interests are the world's one hope. With the present economic structure gone, the entire world would go down into another Dark Age, from which it would require a thousand years or more to recover, if recovery, in fact, were possible at all.'

'So to protect your precious economic structure, you place a painter, a poet, a musician into limbo.'

Gale made a despairing gesture with his hands. 'I have told you I can't supply the rationale on that. You'll have to see Breen if he has the time to see you. He's a very busy man.'

'I would imagine that he might be.'

'He might even dig out the files and tell you,' said Gale. 'As I say, you're not going anywhere. You can pose no problem now. You are stuck with us and we with you. I suppose that we could send you back to Auk House, but that would be undesirable, I think. It would only upset the people who are there. As it is, they'll probably figure that you simply wandered off and got killed by a bear or bitten by a rattlesnake, or drowned in a swamp. They'll look for you and when they don't find you, that will be it. You only got lost; they'll never consider for a moment that you escaped. I think we had better leave it at that. Since you are here and, given time, would nose out the greater part of our operation, we have no choice but to be frank with you. Understandably, however, we'd prefer that no one outside this headquarters knew.'

'Back at Auk House, there was a painting of mine hanging in my room.'

'We thought it was a nice touch,' said Gale. 'A sort of friendly thing to do. We could bring it here.'

'That wasn't why I asked,' said Latimer. 'I was wondering--did the painting's subject have something to do with what you did to me? Were you afraid that I would go on painting pictures pointing up the failures of your precious economic structure?'

Gale was uncomfortable. 'I couldn't say,' he said.

'I was about to say that if such is the case, you stand on very flimsy ground and carry a deep guilt complex.'

'Such things are beyond me,' said Gale. 'I can't even make a comment.'

'And this is all you want of me? To stand in place? To simply be a guest of all these big-hearted corporations?'

'Unless you want to tell us how you got here.'

'I have told you that I won't do that. Not now. I suppose if you put me to the torture...'

'We wouldn't torture you,' said Gale. 'We are civilized. We regret some of the things that we must do, but we do not flinch from duty. And not the duty to what you call big-hearted corporations, but to all humankind. Man has a good thing going; we can't allow it to be undermined. We're not taking any chances. And now, perhaps I should call someone to show you to your room. I take it you got little sleep last night.'

Latimer's room was on one of the topmost floors and was larger and somewhat more tastefully furnished than the room at Auk House. From a window, he saw that the conformation of the coastline was much the same as it had been at Auk House. The dirty gray of the ocean stretched off to the east and the surf still came rolling in to break upon the boulders. Some distance off shore, a school of long-necked creatures were cavorting in the water. Watching them more closely, Latimer made out that they were catching fish. Scattered reptilian monstrosities moved about in the hills that ran back from the sea, some of them in small herds, some of them alone. Dwarfed by distance, none of them seemed unusually large. The trees, he saw, were not a great deal different from the ones he had known. The one thing that was wrong was the lack of grass.

He had been a victim of simplistic thinking in believing, he told himself, that when he threw himself into the rift he would be carried to present time or prime world or whatever one might call it. In the back of his mind, as well, although he had not really dared to think it, had been the idea that if he could get back to the real world, he could track down the people who were involved and put a stop to it.

There was no chance of that now, he knew, and there never had been. Back on prime world, there would be no evidence that would stand up, only highly paid lackeys who performed necessary chores. Private investigators, shady operators like the Boston realtor and the Campbell who had listed Auk House for sale or rent. Undoubtedly, the sign announcing the house was available was posted only when a potential so-called customer would be driving past. Campbell would have been paid well, perhaps in funds that could not be traced, for the part he played, offering the house and then, perhaps, driving off the car left behind by the customer. He took some risks, certainly, but they were minimal. Even should he have been apprehended, there would be no way in which he could be tied into the project. He,

himself, would have had no inkling of the project. A few men in prime world would have to know, of course, for some sort of communications had to be maintained between this operations center and prime world. But the prime-world men, undoubtedly, would be solid citizens, not too well known, all beyond suspicion or reproach. They would be very careful against the least suspicion, and the communications between them and this place must be of a kind that could not be traced and would have no record.

Those few upright men, perhaps a number of hired hands who had no idea of what was being done, would he the only ones in prime world who would play any part in the project. The heart of the operation was in this building. Here the operations were safe. There was no way to get at them. Gale had not even bothered to deny what was being done, had merely referred him to Breen for any further explanation. And Breen, should he talk with him, probably would make no denial, either.

And here he stood, David Latimer, artist, the one man outside time organization who, while perhaps not realizing the full scope of the project, still knew what was happening. Knew and could do nothing about it. He ran the facts he had so far acquired back and forth across his mind, seeking some chink of weakness, arid there seemed to be none.

Silly, he thought, one man pitting himself against a group that held the resources of the earth within its grasp, a group at once ruthless and fanatical, that commanded as its managers the best brains of the planet, arrogant in its belief that what was good for the group was good for everyone, brooking no interference, alert to even the slightest threat, even to imagined threat.

Silly, perhaps absurdly quixotic--and, yet, what could he do? To save his own self-respect, to pay even lip service to the dignity of humanity,

he must make at least a token effort, even knowing that the possibility of his accomplishing anything was very close to zero.

Say this much for them, he thought, they were not cruel men. In many ways, they were compassionate. Their imagined enemies were neither killed nor confined in noisome prisons, as had been the case with historic tyrants. They were held under the best of circumstances, all their needs were supplied, they were not humiliated. Everything was done to keep them comfortable and happy. The one thing that had been taken from them was their freedom of choice.

But man, he thought, had fought for bitter centuries for that very freedom. It was not something that should be lightly held or easily relinquished.

All this, at the moment, he thought, was pointless. If he should be able to do anything at all, it might not he until after months of observation and learning. He could remain in the room for hours, wallowing in his doubt an incompetency, and gain not a thing by it. It was time to begin to get acquainted with his new surroundings.

The parklike grounds surrounding the buildings were ringed by the fence, twelve feet high or more, with a four-foot fence inside it. There were trees and shrubs and beds of flowers and grass--the only grass he had seen since coming here, a well-tended greensward.

Paths of crushed shell ran among the trees and underneath them was a coolness and a quiet. A few gardeners worked in flower beds and guards stood at the distant gate, but otherwise there were few people about. Probably it was still office hours; later on, there might be many people.

He came upon the man sitting on the bench when the walk curved sharply around a group of head-high shrubbery. Latimer stopped,

and for a moment they regarded one another as if each was surprised at the appearance of the other.

Then the man on the bench said, with a twinkle in his eye, 'It seems that the two of us are the only ones who have no tasks on this beautiful afternoon. Could you be, possibly, the refugee from Auk House?'

'As a matter of fact, I am,' said Latimer. 'My name is David Latimer, as if you didn't know.'

'Upon my word,' said the other, 'I didn't know your name. I had only heard that someone had escaped from Auk House and had ended up with us. News travels swiftly here. The place is a rumor mill. There is so little of consequence that happens that once some notable event does occur, it is chewed to tiny shreds.

'My name, by the way, is Horace Sutton and I'm a paleontologist. Can you imagine a better place for a paleontologist to be?'

'No, I can't,' said Latimer.

'Please share this bench with me,' invited Sutton. 'I take it there is nothing of immediate urgency that requires your attention.'

'Not a thing,' said Latimer. 'Nothing whatsoever.'

'Well, that is fine,' said Sutton. 'We can sit and talk a while or stroll around for a bit, however you may wish. Then, as soon as the sun gets over the yardarm, if by that time you're not totally disenchanted with me, we can indulge ourselves in some fancy drinking.'

Sutton's hair was graying and his face was lined, but there was something youthful about him that offset the graying hair and lines.

Latimer sat down and Sutton said to him, 'What do you think of this layout? A charming place, indeed. The tall fence, as you may have guessed, is electrified, and the lower fence keeps stupid people such as you and I from blundering into it. Although, there have been times I have been glad the fence is there. Comes a time when a carnivore or two scents the meat in here and is intent upon a feast, you are rather glad it's there.'

'Do they gather often? The carnivores, I mean.'

'Not as much as they did at one time. After a while, the knowledge of what to keep away from sinks into even a reptilian brain.'

'As a paleontologist you study the wildlife here.'

'For the last ten years,' said Sutton. 'I guess a bit less time than that. It was strange at first; it still seems a little strange. A paleontologist, you understand, ordinarily works with bones and fossil footprints and other infuriating evidence that almost tells you what you want to know, but always falls short.

'Here there is another problem. From the viewpoint of prime world, many of the reptiles, including the dinosaurs, died out sixty-three million years ago. Here they did not die out. As a result, we are looking at them not as they were millions of years ago, but as they are after millions of additional years of evolutionary development. Some of the old species have disappeared, others have evolved into something else in which you can see the traces of their lineage, and some entirely new forms have arisen.'

'You sound as if your study of them is very dedicated,' said Latimer. 'Under other circumstances, you would probably be writing a book...'

'But I am writing a book,' said Sutton. 'I am hard at work on it. There is

a man here who is very clever at drawing and he is making diagrams for me and there will be photographs...'

'But what's the point?' asked Latimer. 'Who will publish it? When will it be published? Gale told me that no one ever leaves here, that there is no going back to prime world.'

'That is right,' said Sutton. 'We are exiled from prime world. I often think of us as a Roman garrison stationed, say, on Britain's northern border or in the wilds of Dacia, with the understanding that we'll not be going back to Rome.'

'But that means your book won't be published. I suppose it could be transmitted back to prime world and be printed there, but the publishing of it would destroy the secrecy of the project.'

'Exactly how much do you know about the project?' Sutton asked.

'Not much, perhaps. Simply the purpose of it--the trapping of people in time--no, not time, I guess. Alternate worlds, rather.'

'Then you don't know the whole of it?'

'Perhaps I don't,' said Latimer.

'The matter of removing potentially dangerous personnel from prime world,' said Sutton, 'is only part of it. Surely if you have thought of it at all, you could see other possibilities.'

'I haven't had time to think too deeply on it,' said Latimer. 'No time at all, in fact. You don't mean the exploitation of these other worlds?'

'It's exactly what I mean,' said Sutton. 'It is so obvious, so logical. Prime world is running out of resources. In these worlds, they lie untouched. The exploitation of the alternate worlds not only would

open new resources, but would provide employment, new lands for colonization, new space for expansion. It is definitely a better idea than this silly talk you hear about going off into outer space to find new worlds that could be colonized.'

'Then why all the mummery of using it to get rid of potential enemies?'

'You sound as if you do not approve of this part of the project.'

'I'm not sure I approve of any of it and certainly not of picking up people and stashing them away. You seem to ignore the fact that I was one of those who was picked up and stashed away. The whole thing smells of paranoia. For the love of God, the big business interests of prime world have so solid a grip on the institutions of the Earth and, in large part, on the people of the Earth, that there is no reason for the belief that there is any threat against them.'

'But they do take into account,' said Sutton, 'the possibility of such threats rising in the years to come, probably based upon events that could be happening right now. They have corps of psychologists who are pursuing studies aimed against such possibilities, corps of economists and political scientists who are looking at possible future trends that might give rise to antibusiness reactions. And, as you know, they are pinpointing certain specific areas and peoples who could contribute, perhaps unwittingly, either now or in the future, to undesirable reactions. But, as I understand it, they are hopeful that if they can forestall the trends that would bring about such reactions for a few centuries, then the political, the economic, and the social climates will be so solidly committed in their favor, that they can go ahead with the exploitation of some of the alternate worlds. They want to be sure before they embark on it, however, that they won't have to keep looking over their shoulders.'

'But hundreds of years! All the people who are engaged in this

project will have been long dead by then.'

'You forget that a corporation can live for many centuries. The corporations are the driving force here. And, in the meantime, those who work in the project gain many advantages. It is worth their while.'

'But they can't go back to Earth--back to prime world, that is.'

'You are hung up on prime world,' said Sutton. 'By working in the project, you are showered with advantages that prime world could never give you. Work in the project for twenty years, for example, and at the age of fifty - in some cases, even earlier--you can have a wide choice of retirements - an estate somewhere on Auk world, a villa on a paradise world, a hunting lodge in another world where there is a variety of game that is unbelievable. With your family, if you have one, with servants, with your every wish fulfilled. Tell me, Mr Latimer, could you do as well if you stayed on prime world? I've listed only a few possibilities; there are many others.'

'Gale told me it would be possible to send me back to Auk House. So people can move around these alternate worlds, but not back to prime world?'

'That is right. Supplies for all the worlds are transported to this world and from here sent out to other stations.'

'But how? How is this done?'

'I have no idea. There is an entire new technology involved. Once I had thought it would be matter transmitters, but I understand it's not. Certain doors exist. Doors with quote marks around them. I suppose there is a corps of elite engineers who knew, but would suspect that no one else does.'

'You spoke of families.'

'There are families here.'

'But I didn't see ...'

'The kids are in school. There aren't many people about right now. They'll be showing up at the cocktail hour. A sort of country-club routine here. That's why I like to get up early. Not many are about. I have this park to myself.'

'Sutton, you sound as if you like this setup.'

'I don't mind it,' Sutton said. It's far preferable to what I had in prime world. There my reputation had been ruined by a silly dispute I fell into with several of my colleagues. My wife died. My university let me stay on in sufferance. So when I was offered a decent job...'

'Not telling you what kind of job?'

'Well, no, not really. But the conditions of employment sounded good and I would be in sole charge of the investigation that was in prospect. To be frank with you, I jumped at it.'

'You must have been surprised.'

'In fact, I was. It took a while to reconcile myself to the situation.'

'But why would they want a paleontologist?'

'You mean, why would money-grabbing, cynical corporations want a paleontologist?'

'I guess that's what I mean.'

'Look, Latimer--the men who make up the corporations are not monsters. They saw here the need for a study of a truly unique world--a continuation of the Cretaceous, which has been, for years, an intriguing part of the planet's history. They saw it as a contribution to human knowledge. My book, when it is published, will show this world at a time before the impact of human exploitation fell upon it.'

'When your book is published?'

'When it is safe to make the announcement that alternate worlds have been discovered and are being opened for colonization. I'll never see the book, of course, but nevertheless, I take some pride in it. Here I have found confirmation for my stand that brought about condemnation by my colleagues. Fuzzy thinking, they said, but they were the fuzzy thinkers. This book will vindicate me.'

'And that's important? Even after you are dead?'

'Of course it is important. Even after I am dead.'

Sutton looked at his watch. 'I think,' he said, 'it may be time now. It just occurred to me. Have you had anything to eat?'

'No,' said Latimer. 'I hadn't thought of it before. But I am hungry.'

'There'll be snacks in the bar,' said Sutton. 'Enough to hold you until dinner.'

'One more question before we leave,' said Latimer. 'You said the reptiles showed some evolutionary trends. In what direction? How have they changed?'

'In many ways,' said Sutton. 'Bodily changes, of course. Perhaps ecological changes as well--behavioral changes, although I can't he

sure of that. I can't know what their behavior was before. Some of the bigger carnivores haven't changed at all. Perhaps a bit more ability in a number of cases. Their prey may have become faster, more alert, and the carnivores had to develop a greater agility or starve. But the most astonishing change is in intelligence. There is one species, a brand-new species so far as I know, that seems to have developed a pronounced intelligence. If it is intelligence, it is taking a strange direction. It's hard to judge correctly. You must remember that of all the stupid things that ever walked the earth, some of the dinosaurs ranked second to none. They didn't have a lick of sense.'

'You said intelligence in a strange direction.'

'Let me try to tell you. I've watched these jokers for hours on end. I'm almost positive that they handle herds of herbivores-- herbivorous reptiles, that is. They don't run around them like sheepdogs manage sheep, but I am sure they do control them. There are always a few of them watching the herds, and while they're watching them, the herds do no straying--they stay together like a flock of sheep tended by dogs. They move off in orderly fashion when there is need to move to a new pasture. And every once in a while, a few members of the herd with detach themselves and go ambling off to a place where others of the so-called intelligent dinosaurs are hanging out, and there they are killed. They walk in to be slaughtered. I can't get over the feeling that the herbivores are meat herds, the livestock of the intelligence species. And another thing. When carnivores roam in, these intelligent jokers shag them out of there. Not by chasing them or threatening them. Just by moving out where they can be seen. Then they sit down, and after the carnivores have looked them over, the carnivores seem to get a little jittery, and after a short time they move off.'

'Hypnotism? Some sort of mental power?'

'Possibly.'

'That wouldn't have to be intelligence. It could be no more than an acquired survival trait.'

'Somehow I don't think so. Other than watching herds and warning off carnivores-- if that is what they're doing--they sit around a lot among themselves. Like a hunch of people talking. That's the impression I get, that they are talking. None of the social mannerisms that are seen among primates--no grooming, horseplay, things like that. There seems to be little personal contact-- no touching, no patting, no stroking. As if none of this were needed. But they dance. Ritualistic dancing of some sort. Without music. Nothing to make music with. They have no artifacts. They haven't got the hands that could fashion artifacts. Maybe they don't need tools or weapons or musical instruments. Apparently they have certain sacred spots. Places where they go, either singly or in small groups, to meditate or worship. I know of one such place; there may be others. No idols, nothing physical to worship. A secluded spot. Seemingly a special place. They have been using it for years. They have worn a path to it, a path trod out through the centuries. They seem to have no form of worship, no rituals that must be observed. They simply go and sit there. At no special time. There are no Sundays in this world. I suspect they go only when they feel the need of going.'

'It is a chilling thought,' said Latimer.

'Yes, I suppose it is.'

He looked at his watch again. 'I am beginning to feel the need of that drink,' he said. 'How about you?'

'Yes' said Latimer, 'I could do with one.'

And now, he told himself, he had a few more of the answers. He knew how the staff at Auk House was changed, where the supplies came from. Everything and everyone, apparently, was channeled and routed from this operations center. Prime world, from time to time, furnished supplies and personnel and then the rest was handled here.

He found himself puzzled by Sutton's attitude. The man seemed quite content, bore no resentment over being exiled here. They are not monsters, he had said, implying that the men in this operation were reasonable and devoted men working in the public interest. He was convinced that someday his book would be published, according him posthumous vindication. There had been, as well, Latimer remembered, Enid's poems and Dorothy's novel. Had the poems and the novel been published back in prime world, perhaps under pseudonyms, works so excellent that it had been deemed important that they not be lost?

And what about the men who had done the research that had resulted in the discovery of the alternate worlds and had worked out the technique of reaching and occupying them? Not still on prime world, certainly; they would pose too great a danger there. Retired, perhaps, to estates on some of the alternate worlds.

They walked around one of the clumps of trees with which the park was dotted, and from a distance Latimer heard the sound of children happy at their play.

'School is out,' said Sutton. 'Now it's the children's hour.'

'One more thing,' said Latimer, 'if you don't mind. One more question. On all these other alternate worlds you mention, are there any humans native to those worlds? Is it possible there are other races of men?'

'So far as I know,' said Sutton, 'man rose only once, on prime world. What I have told you is not the entire story, I imagine. There may be much more to it. I've been too busy to attempt to find out more. All I told you are the things I have picked up in casual conversation. I do not know how many other alternate worlds have been discovered, nor on how many of them stations have been established. I do know that on Auk world there are several stations other than Auk House.'

'By stations, you mean the places where they put the undesirables.

'You put it very crudely, Mr Latimer, but yes, you are quite right. On the matter of humans arising elsewhere, I think it's quite unlikely. It seems to me that it was only by a combination of a number of lucky circumstances that man evolved at all. When you take a close look at the situation, you have to conclude that man had no right to expect to evolve. He is a sort of evolutionary accident.'

'And intelligence? Intelligence rose on prime world, and you seem to have evidence that it has risen here as well. Is intelligence something that evolution may be aiming at and will finally achieve, in whatever form on whatever world? How can you be sure it has not risen on Auk world? At Auk House, only a few square miles have been explored. Perhaps not a great deal more around the other stations.'

'You ask impossible questions,' said Sutton shortly. 'There is no way I can answer them.'

They had reached a place from which a full view of the headquarters building was possible and now there were many people--men and women walking about or sunning themselves, stretched out on the grass, people sitting on terraces in conversational groups, while children ran gaily, playing a childish game.

Sutton, who had been walking ahead of Latimer, stopped so quickly

that Latimer, with difficulty, averted bumping into him.

Sutton pointed. 'There they are,' he said.

Looking in the direction of the pointing finger, Latimer could see nothing unusual. 'What? Where?' he asked.

'On top the hill, just beyond the northern gate.'

After a moment Latimer saw them, a dozen squatting creatures on top of the hill down which, a few hours ago, he had run for the gate and safety. They were too distant to be seen clearly, but they had a faintly reptilian look and they seemed to be coal-black, but whether naturally black or black because of their silhouetted position, he could not determine.

'The ones I told you about,' said Sutton. 'It's nothing unusual. They often sit and watch us. I suspect they are as curious about us as we are about them.'

'The intelligences?' asked Latimer.

'Yes, that is right,' said Sutton.

Someone, some distance off, cried in a loud voice--no words that Latimer could make out, but a cry of apprehension, a bellow of terror. Then there were other cries, different people taking up the cry.

A man was running across the park, heading for its northeast corner, running desperately, arms pumping back and forth, legs a blur of scissoring speed. He was so far off that he looked like a toy runner, heading for the four-foot fence that stood inside the higher fence. Behind him were other runners, racing in au attempt to head him off and pull him down.

'My God, it's Breen,' gasped Sutton. His face had turned to gray. He started forward, in a stumbling run. He opened his mouth to shout, but all he did was gasp.

The running man came to the inner fence and cleared it with a leap. The nearest of his pursuers was many feet behind him.

Breen lifted his arms into the air, above his head. He slammed into the electrified fence. A flash blotted him out. Flickering tongues of flame ran along the fence--bright and sparkling, like the flaring of fireworks. Then the brightness faded and on the fence hung a black blot that smoked greasly and had a fuzzy, manlike shape.

A hush, like an indrawn breath, came upon the crowd. Those who had been running stopped running and, for a moment, held their places. Then some of them, after that moment, ran again, although some of them did not, and the voice took up again, although now there was less shouting.

When he looked, Latimer saw that the hilltop was empty; the dinosaurs that had been there were gone. There was no sign of Sutton.

So it was Breen, thought Latimer, who hung there on the fence. Breen, head of the evaluation team, the one man, Gale had said, who could tell him why he had been lured to Auk House. Breen, the man who pored over psychological evaluations, who was acquainted with the profile of each suspected personage, comparing those profiles against economic charts, social diagnostic indices, and God knows what else, to enable him to make the decision that would allow one man to remain in prime world as he was, another to be canceled out.

And now, thought Latimer, it was Breen who had been canceled out, more effectively than he had canceled any of the others.

Latimer had remained standing where he had been when Sutton and he had first sighted the running Breen, had stood because he could not make up his mind what he should do, uncertain of the relationship that he held or was expected to assume with those other persons who were still milling about, many of them perhaps as uncertain as he of what they should do next.

He began to feel conspicuous because of just standing there, although at the same time he was certain no one noticed him, or if they did notice him, almost immediately dismissed him from their thoughts.

He and Sutton had been on their way to get a drink when it had all happened, and thinking of that, Latimer realized he could use a drink. With this in mind, he headed for the building. Few noticed him, some even brushing against him without notice; others spoke noncommittal greetings, some nodded briefly as one nods to someone of whose identity he is not certain.

The lounge was almost empty. Three men sat at a table in one corner, their drinks before them; a woman and a man were huddled in low-voiced conversation on a corner of a davenport; another man was at the self-service bar, pouring himself a drink.

Latimer made his way to the bar and picked up a glass.

The man who was there said to him, 'You must be new here; I don't remember seeing you about.'

'Just today,' said Latimer. 'Only a few hours ago.'

He found the Scotch and his brand was not among the bottles. He selected his second choice and poured a generous serving over ice.

There were several trays of sandwiches and other snack items. He found a plate, put two sandwiches on it.

'What do you make of Breen?' asked the other man.

'I don't know,' said Latimer. 'I never met the man. Gale mentioned him to me.'

"Three,' said the other man. 'Three in the last four months. There is something wrong.'

'All on the fence?'

'No, not on the fence. This is the first on the fence. One jumped, thirteen stories. Christ, what a mess! The other hanged himself.'

'The man walked off and joined another man who had just come into the lounge. Latimer stood alone, plate and glass in hand. The lounge still was almost empty. No one was paying the slightest attention to him. Suddenly he felt a stranger, unwanted. He had been feeling this all the time, he knew, but in the emptiness of the lounge, the feeling of unwantedness struck with unusual force. He could sit down at a table or in one of a group of chairs or on the end of an unoccupied sofa, wait for someone to join him. He recoiled from the thought. He didn't want to meet these people, talk with them. For the moment, he wanted none of them.

Shrugging, he put another sandwich on the plate, picked up the bottle, and filled his glass to the top. Then he walked out into the hallway and took the elevator to his floor.

In his room, he selected the most comfortable chair and sat down in it, putting the plate of sandwiches on a table. He took a long drink and put down the glass.

'They can all go to hell,' he told himself.

He sensed his fragmented self pulling back together, all the scattered fragments falling back into him again, making him whole again, his entire self again. With no effort at all, he wiped out Breen and Sutton, the events of the last hours, until he was simply a man seated comfortably in his room.

So great a power, he thought, so great and secret. Holding one world in thrall, planning to hold others. The planning, the foresight, the audacity. Making certain that when they moved into the other worlds, there would be no silly conservationists yapping at their heels, no environmentalist demand jug environmental impact statements, no deluded visionaries crying out in protest against monopolies. Holding steadily in view the easy business ethic that had held sway in that day when arrogant lumber barons had built mansions such as Auk House.

Latimer picked up the glass and had another drink. The glass, he saw, was less than half full. He should have carried off the bottle, he thought; no one would have noticed. He reached for a sandwich and munched it down, picked up a second one. How long had it been since he had eaten? He glanced at his watch and knew, even as he did, that the time it told might not be right for this Cretaceous world. He puzzled over that, trying to figure out if there might be some time variance between one world and another. Perhaps there wasn't--logically there shouldn't be--but there might be factors ... he peered closely at the watch face, but the figures wavered and the hands would not stay in line. He had another drink.

He woke to darkness, stiff and cramped, wondering where he was. After a moment of confusion, he remembered where he was, all the details of the last two days tumbling in upon him, at first in scattered pieces, then subtly arranging themselves and interlocking into a

pattern of reality.

He had fallen asleep in the chair. The moonlight pouring through the window showed the empty glass, the plate with half a sandwich still upon it, standing on the table at his elbow. The place was quiet; there was no noise at all. It must be the middle of the night, he thought, and everyone asleep. Or might it be that there was no one else around, that in some strange way, for some strange reason, the entire headquarters had been evacuated, emptied of all life? Although that, he knew, was unreasonable.

He rose stiffly from the chair and walked to the window. Below him, the landscape was pure silver, blotched by deep shadows. Somewhere just beyond the fence, he caught a sense of movement, but was unable to make out what it was. Some small animal, perhaps, prowling about. There would he mammals here, he was sure, the little skitterers, frightened creatures that were hard-pressed to keep out of the way, never having had the chance to evolve as they had back in prime world when something had happened millions of years before to sweep the world clean of its reptilian overlords, creating a vacuum into which they could expand.

The silver world that lay outside had a feel of magic--the magic of a brand-new world as yet unsullied by the hand and tools of men, a clean place that had no litter in it. If he went out and walked in it, he wondered, would the presence of himself, a human who had no right to be there, subtract something from the magic?

Out in the hall, he took the elevator to the ground floor. Just off the corridor lay the lounge and the outer door opened from the lounge. Walking softly, although he could not explain why he went so softly, for in this sleeping place there was no one to disturb, he went into the lounge.

As he reached the door, he heard voices and, halting in the shadow, glanced rapidly over the room to locate the speakers. There were three of them sitting at a table in the far end of the lounge. Bottles and glasses stood upon the table, but they did not seem to be drinking; they were hunched forward, heads close together, engaged in earnest conversation.

As he watched, one of them reared back in his chair, speaking in anger, his voice rising. 'I warned you,' he shouted. 'I warned Breen and I warned you, Gale. And you laughed at me.'

It was Sutton who was speaking. The man was too distant and the light too dim for Latimer to recognize his features, but the voice he was sure of.

'I did not laugh at you,' protested Gale.

'Perhaps not you, but Breen did.'

'I don't know about Breen or laughter,' said the third man, 'but there's been too much going wrong. Not just the three suicides. Other things as well. Miscalculations, erroneous data processing, bad judgments. Things all screwed up. Take the generator failure the other day. Three hours that we were without power, the fence without power. You know what that could mean if several big carnivores ...

'Yes, we know,' said Gale, 'but that was a mere technical malfunction. Those things happen. The one that worries me is this fellow, Latimer. That was a pure and simple foul-up. There was no reason to put him into Auk House. It cost a hell of a lot of money to do so; a very tricky operation. And when he got there, what happens? He escapes. I tell you, gentlemen, there are too many foul-ups. More than can be accounted for in the normal course of operation.'

'There is no use trying to cover it up, to make a mystery out of it,' said Sutton. 'You know and I know what is happening, and the sooner we admit we know and start trying to figure out what to do about it, the better it will be. If there is anything we can do about it. We're up against an intelligence that may be as intelligent as we are, but in a different way. In a way that we can't fight. Mental power against technical power, and in a case like that, I'd bet on mental power. I warned you months ago. Treat these jokers with kid gloves, I told you. Do nothing to upset them. Handle them with deference. Think kindly toward them, because maybe they can tell what you're thinking. I believe they can. And then what happens? A bunch of lunkheads go out for an afternoon of shooting and when they find no other game, use these friends of ours for casual target practice ...'

'But that was months ago,' said the third man.

'They're testing,' said Sutton. 'Finding out what they can do. How far they can go. They can stop a generator. They can mess up evaluations. They can force men to kill themselves. God knows what else they can do. Give them a few more weeks. And, by the way, what particular brand of idiocy persuaded prime world to site the base of operations in a world like this?'

'There were many considerations,' said Gale. 'For one thing, it seemed a safe place. If some opposition should try to move in on us ...'

"You're insane,' shouted Sutton. 'There isn't any opposition. How could there he opposition?'

Moving swiftly. Latimer crossed the corner of the lounge, eased his way out of the door. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw the three still sitting at the table. Sutton was shouting, banging his fist on the table-top.

Gale was shrilling at him, his voice rising over Sutton's shouting: 'How the hell could we suspect there was intelligence here? A world of stupid lizards ...'

Latimer stumbled across the stone-paved terrace and went down the short flight of stone stairs that took him to the lawn. The world still was silver magic, a full moon riding in a cloudless sky. There was a softness in the air, a cleanness in the air.

But he scarcely noticed the magic and the cleanness. One thing thundered in his brain. A mistake! He should not have been sent to Auk House. There had been a miscalculation. Because of the mental machination of a reptilian intelligence on this world where the Cretaceous had not ended, he had been snatched from prime world. Although the fault, he realized, did not lie in this world, but in prime world itself--in the scheme that had been hatched to make prime world and the alternate worlds safe, safe beyond all question, for prime world's business interests.

He walked out across the sward and looked up at the northern hilltop. A row of huddled figures sat there, a long row of dumpy reptilian figures solemnly staring down at the invaders who had dared to desecrate their world.

He had wondered, Latimer remembered, how one man alone might manage to put an end to the prime-world project, knowing well enough that no one man could do it, perhaps that no conceivable combination of men could do it.

But now he need wonder no longer. In time to come, sooner or later, an end would come to it. Maybe by that time, most of the personnel here would have been transferred to Auk House or to other stations, fleeing this doomed place. It might be that in years to come, another

operations center would be set up on some safer world and the project would go on. But at least some time would be bought for the human race; perhaps the project might be dropped. It already had cost untold billions. How much more would the prime-world managers be willing to put into it? That was the crux of it, he knew, the crux of everything on prime world: was it worth the cost?

He turned about to face the hilltop squarely and those who squatted there. Solemnly, David Latimer, standing in the magic moonlight, raised an arm in salutation to them.

He knew even as he did it that it was a useless gesture, a gesture for himself rather than for those dumpy figures sitting on the hilltop, who would neither see nor know. But even so, it was important that he do it, important that he, an intelligent human, pay a measure of sincere respect to an intelligence of another species in recognition of his belief that a common code of ethics might be shared.

The figures on the hilltop did not stir. Which, he told himself, was no more than he had expected of them. How should they know, why should they care what he instinctively had tried to communicate to them, not really expecting to communicate, but at least to make some sign, if to no other than himself, of the sense of fellowship that he, in that moment, felt for them?

As he was thinking this, he felt a warmness come upon him, encompassing him, enfolding him, as when he had been a child, in dim memory, he remembered his mother tucking him snugly into bed. Then he was moving, being lifted and impelled, with the high guard fence below him and the face of the great hill sliding underneath him. He felt no fright, for he seemed to be in a dreamlike state inducing a belief, deep-seated, that what was happening was not happening and that, in consequence, no harm could come to him.

He faced the dark and huddled figures, all sitting in a row, and although he still was dream-confused, he could see them clearly. They were nothing much to look at. They were as dumpy and misshapen as they had seemed when he had seen them from a distance. Their bodies were graceless lumps, the details vague even in the bright moonlight, but the faces he never would forget. They had the sharp triangle of the reptilian skull, the cruelty of the sharpness softened by the liquid compassion of the eyes.

Looking at them, he wondered if he was really there, if he was facing them, as he seemed to be, or if he still might be standing on the greensward of the compound, staring up the hill at the huddled shapes, which now seemed to be only a few feet distant from him. He tried to feel the ground beneath his feet, to press his feet against the ground, a conscious effort to orient himself, and, try as he might, he could feel no ground beneath his feet.

They were not awesome creatures and there was nothing horrible about them - just a faint distastefulness. They squatted in their limpy row and stared at him out of the soft liquid of their eyes. And he felt--in some strange way that he could not recognize, he felt the presence of them. Not as if they were reaching out physically to touch him--fearing that if they did touch him, he would recoil from them--but in another kind of reaching, as if they were pouring into him, as one might pour water in a bottle, an essence of themselves.

Then they spoke to him, not with voice, not with words, with nothing at all that he could recognize--perhaps, he thought wildly, they spoke with that essence of themselves they were pouring into him.

'Now that we have met,' they said, 'we'll send you back again.'

And he was back.

He stood at the end of the brick-paved driveway that led up to the house, and behind him he heard the damp and windy rustle of a primeval forest, with two owls chuckling throatily in the trees behind him. A few windows in the house were lighted. Great oaks grew upon the spreading lawn, and beneath the trees stood graceful stone benches that had the look of never being used.

Auk House, he told himself. They had sent him back to Auk House, not back to the grassy compound that lay inside the fence in that other world where the Cretaceous had not ended.

Inside himself he felt the yeasty churning of the essence that the squatting row of monstrosities had poured into him, and out of it he gained a knowledge and a comfort.

Policemen, he wondered, or referees, perhaps? Creatures that would monitor the efforts of those entrepreneurs who sought a monopoly of all the alternate worlds that had been opened for humans, and perhaps for many other races. They would monitor and correct, making certain that the worlds would not fall prey to the multinational financial concepts of the race that had opened them, but would become the heritage and birth-right of those few intelligent peoples that had risen on this great multiplicity of worlds, seeing to it that the worlds would be used in a wiser context than prime world had been used by humans.

Never doubting for a moment that it would or could be done, knowing for a certainty that it would come about, that in the years to come men and other intelligences would live on the paradise worlds that Sutton had told him of - and all the other worlds that lay waiting to be used with an understanding the human race had missed. Always with those strange, dumpy ethical wardens who would sit on many hilltops to keep their vigil.

Could they be trusted? he wondered, and was ashamed of thinking it. They had looked into his eyes and had poured their essence into him and had returned him here, not back to the Cretaceous compound. They had known where it was best for him to go and they would know all the rest of it.

He started up the driveway, his heels clicking on the bricks. As he came up to the stoop the door came open and the man in livery stood there.

'You're a little late,' said the butler. 'The others waited for you, but just now sat down to dinner. I'm sure the soup's still warm.'

'I'm sorry,' said Latimer. 'I was unavoidably detained.'

'Some of the others thought they should go out looking for you, but Mr Jonathon dissuaded them. He said you'd be all right. He said you had your wits about you. He said you would be back.'

The butler closed the door behind him. 'They'll all he very happy to find you're back,' he said.

'Thank you,' said Latimer.

He walked, trying not to hurry, fighting down the happiness he felt welling up inside himself, toward the doorway from which came the sound of bright laughter and sprightly conversation.