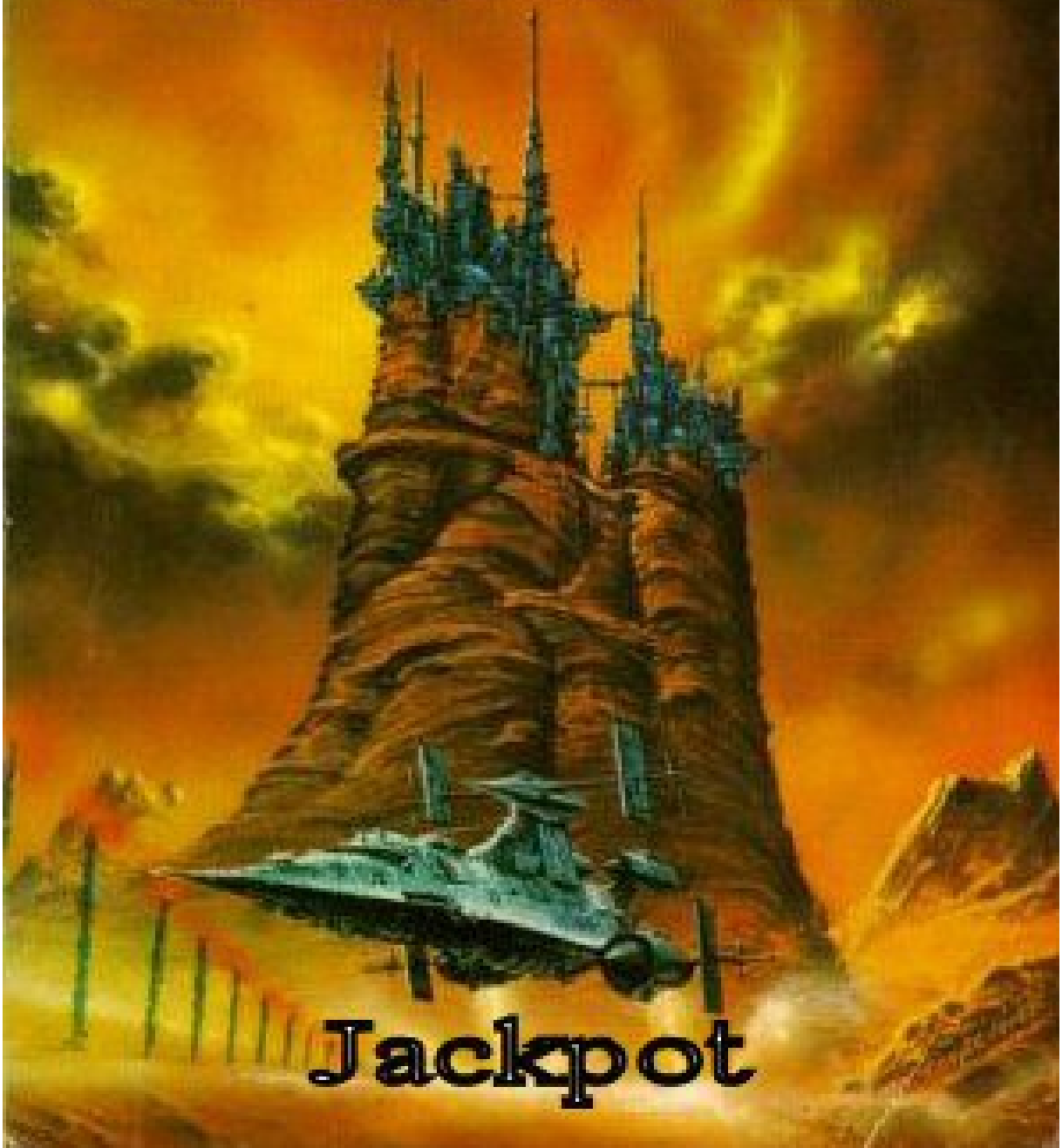
THE BEST OF CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

EDITED BY ANGUS WELLS



Jackpot

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There was not a thing or anyone to stop us walking in.

It was quiet and solemn inside--and unspectacular. It reminded me of a monstrous office building.

It was all cut up with corridors, with openings off the corridors leading into rooms. The rooms were lined with what looked like filing cases.

We walked for quite a while, leaving paint markers along the walls to lead us back to the entrance. Get lost inside a place like that and one could wander maybe a lifetime finding his way out.

We were looking for something--almost anything--but we didn't find a thing except those filing cases.

So we went into one of the rooms to have a look inside the files.

Pancake was disgusted. "There won't be nothing but records in those files. Probably in a lingo we can't even read."

"There couM be anything inside those files," said Frost. "They don't have to be records."

Pancake had a sledge and he lifted it to smash one of the files, but I stopped him. There wasn't any use doing it messy if there was a better way.

We fooled around a while and we found the place where you had to wave your hand to make a drawer roll out.

The drawer was packed with what looked like sticks of dynamite. They were about two inches in diameter and a foot, or maybe a little more, in length, and they were heavy.

"Gold," said Hutch.

"I never saw black gold," Pancake said.

"It isn't gold," I told them.

I was just as glad it wasn't. If it had been, we'd have broken our backs hauling it away. Gold's all right, but you can't get rich on it. It doesn't much more than pay wages.

We dumped out a pile of the sticks and squatted on the floor, looking them over.

"Maybe it's valuable," said Frost, "but I wouldn't know. What do you think it is ?"

None of us had the least idea.

We found some sort of symbols on each end of the sticks and ;he symbols on each stick seemed to be different, but it didn't aelp us any because the symbols made no sense.

We kicked the sticks out of the way and opened some more drawers. Every single drawer was filled with the sticks.

When we came out of the silo, the day had turned into a scorcher. Pancake climbed the ladder to stack us up some grub and the rest of us sat down in the shade of the ship and laid several of the sticks out in front of us and sat there looking at them, wondering what we had.

"That's where we're at a big disadvantage," said Hutch. "If a regular survey crew stumbled onto this, they'd have all sorts of experts to figure out the stuff. They'd test it a dozen different ways and they'd skin it alive almost and they'd have all sorts of ideas and they'd come up with some educated guesses. And pretty soon, one way or another, they'd know just what it was and if it was any use."

"Someday," I told them, "if we ever strike it rich, we'll have to hire us some experts. The kind of loot we're always turning up, we could make good use of them."

"You won't find any", said Doc, "that would team up with a bunch like us."

"Where do you get 'bunch like us' stuff?" I asked him, a little sore. "Sure, we ain't got much education and the ship is just sort of glued together and we don't use any fancy words to cover up the fact that we're in this for all we can get out of it. But we're doing an honest job."

"I wouldn't call it exactly honest. Sometimes we're inside the law and sometimes outside it."

That was nonsense and Doc knew it. Mostly where we went, there wasn't any law.

"Back on Earth, in the early days," I snapped back, "it was folks like us who went into new lands and ~lazed the trails and found rivers and climbed the mountains and brought back word to those who stayed at home. And they went because they were looking for beaver or for gold or slaves or for anything else that wasn't nailed down tight. They didn't worry much about the law or the ethics of it and no one blamed them for it. They found it and they took it and that was the end of it. If they killed a native or two or burned a village or some other minor

thing like that, why, it was just too bad."

Hutch said to Doc: "There ain't no sense in you going holy on us. Anything we done, you're in as deep as we are."

"Gentlemen," said Doc, in that hammy way of his, "I wasn't trying to stir up any ruckus. I was just pointing out that you needn't set your heart on getting any experts."

"We could get them," I said, "if we offered them enough. They got to live, just like anybody else."

"They have professional pride, too. That's something you've forgotten."

"We got you."

"We//, now," said Hutch, "I'm not too sure Doc is pro- fessional. That time he pulled the tooth for me .... "

"Cut it out," I said. "The both of you."

This wasn't any time to bring up the matter of the tooth. Just a couple of months ago, I'd got it quieted down and I didn't want it breaking out again.

Frost picked up one of the sticks and turned it over and over, looking at it.

"Maybe we could rig up some tests," he suggested.

"And take the chance of getting blown up ?" asked Hutch.

"It might not go off. You have a better than fifty-fifty chance that it's not explosive."

"Not me," said Doc. "I'd rather just sit here and guess. It's less tiring and a good deal safer."

"You don't get anywhere by guessing," protested Frost. "We might have a fortune right inside our mitts if we could only find out what these sticks are for. There must be tons of them stored in the building. And there's nothing in the world to stop us from taking them."

"The first thing", I said, "is to find out if it's explosive. I don't think it is. It looks like dynamite, but it could be almost anything. For instance, it might be food."

"We'll have Pancake cook us up a mess," said Doc.

I paid no attention to him. He was just needling me.

"Or it might be fuel," I said. "Pop a stick into a ship engine that was built to use it and it would keep it going for a year or two."

Pancake blew the chow horn and we all went in.

After we had eaten, we got to work.

We found a flat rock that looked like granite and above it we set up a tripod made out of poles that we had to walk a mile to cut and then had to carry back. We rigged up a pulley on the tripod and found another rock and tied it to the rope that went up to the pulley. Then we paid out the rope as far as it would go and there we dug a foxhole.

By this time, the sun was setting and we were tuckered out, but we decided to go ahead and make the test and set our minds at rest.

So I took one of the sticks that looked like dynamite and while the

others back in the foxhole hauled up the rock tied to the rope, I put the stick on the first rock underneath the second and then I ran like hell. I tumbled into the foxhole and the others let go of the rope and the rock dropped down on the stick.

Nothing happened.

Just to make sure, we pulled up and dropped the rock two or three times more and there was no explosion.

We climbed out of the foxhole and went over to the tripod and rolled the rock off the stick, which wasn't even dented.

By this time, we were fairly well convinced that the stick couldn't be set off by concussion, although the test didn't rule out a dozen other ways it might blow us all up.

That night, we gave the sticks the works. We poured acid on them and the acid just ran off. We tried a cold chisel on them and we ruined two good chisels. We tried a saw and to stripped the teeth clean off.

We wanted Pancake to try to cook one of them, but Panc~ refused.

"You aren't bringing that stuff into my galley," he said. you do, you can cook for yourselves from now on. I keel good clean galley and I try to keep you guys well fed and I aij having you mess up the place."

"All right, Pancake," I said. "Even with you cooking it, probably wouldn't be fit to eat."

We wound up sitting at a table, looking at the sticks piled the centre of it. Doc brought out a bottle and we all had a dri or two. Doc must have been considerably upset to share k liquor with us.

"It stands to reason", said Frost, "that the sticks are go~ for something. If the cost of that building is any indication their value, they're worth a fortune."

"Maybe the sticks aren't the only things in there," Hut, pointed out. "We just covered part of the first floor. The might be a lot of other stuff in there. And there are all tho~ other floors. How many would you say there were ?"

"Lord knows," said Frost. "When you're on the ground, yr can't be sure you see to the top of it. It just sort of fades aw~ when you look up at it."

"You notice what it was built of?" asked Doc.

"Stone," said Hutch.

"I thought so, too," said Doc. "But it isn't. You rememb{ those big apartment mounds we ran into in that insect cultm out on Suud ?"

We all remembered them, of course. We'd spent days tryi~ to break into them because we had found a handful of beaut fully carved jade scattered around the entrance of one of the~ and we figured there might be a lot of it inside. Stuff like th~ brings money. Folks back in civilization are nuts about an kind of alien art and that jade sure enough was alien.

We'd tried every trick that we could think of and we got nowhere. Breaking into those mounds was like punching a feather pillow. You could dent the surface plenty, but you couldn't break it because the strength of the material built up as pressure compressed the atoms. The harder you hit, the tougher it became. It was the kind of building material that would last forever and never need repair and those insects must have known they were safe from us, for they went about

their business and never noticed us. That's what made it so unfuriating.

And material like that, I realized, would be just the ticket for a structure like the silo. You could build as big or as high as you had a mind to; the more pressure you put on the lower structure, the stronger it would be.

"It means", I said, "that the building out there could be much older than it seems to be. It could be a million years or older."

"If it's that old," said Hutch, "it could really be packed. You can store away a lot of loot in a million years."

Doc and Frost drifted off to bed and Hutch and I sat there alone, looking at the sticks.

I got to thinking about some of the things that Doc was always saying, about how we were just a bunch of cut-throats, and I wondered if he might be right. But think on it as hard and as honest as I could, I couldn't buy it.

On every expanding frontier, in all of history, there had been three kinds of men who went ahead and marked out the trails for other men to follow--the traders and the missionaries and the hunters.

We were the hunters in this case, hunting not for gold or slaves or furs, but for whatever we could find. Sometimes we came back with empty hands and sometimes we made a haul. Usually, in the long run, we evened out so we made nothing more than wages. But we kept on going out, hoping for that lucky break that would make us billionaires.

It hadn't happened yet, and perhaps it never would. But someday it

might. We touched the ghostly edge of hope just often enough to keep us thinking that it would. Although, 1 admitted to myself, perhaps we'd have kept going out even it there'd been no hope at all. Seeking for the unknown gets intc your blood.

When you came right down to it, we probably didn't do a bil more harm than the traders or the missionaries. What we took, we took; we didn't settle down and change or destroy the civilizations of people we pretended we were helping. I said as much to Hutch. He agreed with me.

"The missionaries are the worst," he said. "I wouldn't be a missionary no matter what they paid me."

We weren't doing any good just sitting there, so I got up to start for bed.

"Maybe tomorrow we'll find something else," I said.

Hutch yawned. "I sure hope we do. We have been wasting our time on these sticks of dynamite."

He picked them up and on our way up to bed, he heaved them out the port.

The next day, we did find something else.

We went much deeper into the silo than we had been before, following the corridors for what must have been two miles or more.

We came to a big room that probably covered ten or fifteen acres aud it was filled from wall to wall with rows of machines, all of them alike.

They weren't much to look at. They resembled to some extent a rather

ornate washing machine, with a bucket seat attached and a dome on top. They weren't bolted down and you could push them around and when we tipped one of them up to look for hidden wheels, we found instead a pair of runners fixed on a swivel so they'd track in any direction that one pushed. The runners were made of metal that was greasy to the touch, but when you rubbed your fingers on them, no grease came off.

There was no power connection.

"Maybe it's a self-powered unit," said Frost. "Come to think of it, I haven't noticed any power outlets in the entire building."

We hunted for some place where we could turn on the power and there wasn't any place. That whole machine was the smoothest, slickest hunk of metal you ever saw. We looked for a way to get into its innards, so we could have a look at them, but there wasn't any way. The jacket that covered the works seemed to be one solid piece without an apparent seam or a sign of a bolt or rivet.

The dome looked as though it ought to come off and we tried to get it off, but it remained stubbornly in place.

The bucket seat, however, was something else again. It was lousy with all sorts of attachments to accommodate the sitting surface of almost any conceivable kind of being. We had a lot of fun adjusting it in different ways and trying to figure out what kind of animal could have a seat hke that. We got a bit obscene about it, I remember, and Hutch was doubled up laughing.

But we weren't getting anywhere and we were fairly sure we wouldn't until we could get a cutting tool and open up one of the machines to find out what made it tick.

We picked out one of them and we skidded it down the corridors. When we got to the entrance, we figured we would have to carry it, but we were mistaken. It skidded along over the ground and even loose sand almost as well as it did in the corridors.

After supper, Hutch went down to the engine room and came back with a cutting tool. The metal was tough, but we finally got at least some of the jacket peeled away.

The innards of that machine were enough to drive you crazy. It was a solid mass of tiny parts all hooked together in the damnedest jumble. There was no beginning and no end. It was like one of those puzzle mazes that go on and on forever and get no place.

Hutch got into it with both hands and tried to figure out how to start taking it apart.

After a while, he sat back on his heels and growled a little at it. "There's nothing holding them together. Not a bolt or rivet, not even so much as a cotter pin. But they hang together somehow."

"Just pure cussedness," I said.

He looked at me kind of funny. "You might be right, at that."

He went at it again and bashed a couple of knuckles and sat there sucking at them.

"If I didn't know that I was wrong," he said, "I'd say that it was friction."

"Magnetism," Doc offered.

"I tell you what Doc," said Hutch. "You stick to what little medicine you know and let me handle the mechanics."

Frost dived in quick to head offan argument. "That frictional idea might not be a bad one. But it would call for perfect machining and surface polish. Theoretically, if you place two perfectly polished surfaces together, the molecules will attract one another and you'll have permanent cohesion."

I don't know where Frost got all that stuff. Mostly he seemed to be just like the rest of us, but occasionally he'd come out with something that would catch you by surprise. I never asked him anything about himself; questions like that were just plain bad manners.

We messed around some more and Hutch bashed another knuckle and I sat there thinking how we'd found two items in the silo and both of them had stopped us in our tracks. But that's the way it is. Some days you can't make a dime.

Frost moved around and pushed Hutch out of the way. "Let me see what I can do."

Hutch didn't protest any. He was licked.

Frost started pushing and pulling and twisting and fiddling away at that mess of parts and all at once there was a kind of whooshing sound, like someone had let out their breath sort of slow and easy, and all the parts fell in upon themselves. They came unstuck, in a kind of slow-motion manner, and they made a metallic thump along with tinkling sounds and they were just a heap inside the jacket that had protected them. "Now see what you done !" howled Hutch.

"I didn't do a thing," said Frost. "I was just seeing if I could bust one loose and one did and the whole shebang caved in."

He held up his fingers to show us the piece that had come loose.

"You know what I think ?" asked Pancake. "I think whoever made that machine made it so it would fall apart if anyone tried to tinker with it. They didn't want no one to find out how it was put together."

"That makes sense," said Doc. "No use getting peeved at it. After all, it was their machine."

"Doc," I said, "you got a funny attitude. I never noticed you turning down your share of anything we find."

"I don't mind when we confine ourselves to what you might call, in all politeness, natural resources. I can even stomach the pillaging of art-forms. But when it comes to stealing brains-- and this machine is brains .... "

Frost let out a whoop.

He was hunkered down, with his head inside the jacket of the machine, and I thought at first he'd got caught and that we'd have to cut him out, but he could get out, all right.

"I see now how to get that dome off the top," he said.

It was a complicated business, almost like a combination on a safe. The dome was locked in place by a lot of grooves and you had to know just how to turn it to lift it out of place.

Frost kept his head inside the jacket and called out directions to Hutch, who twisted the dome first this way and then that, sometimes having to pull up on it and other times press down to engage the slotted mechanism that held it locked in place. Pancake wrote down the combinations as Frost called them off and finally the dome came loose in Hutch's hands.

Once it was off, there was no mystery to it. It was a helmet, all rigged out with adjustable features so it could be made to fit any type of head, just as the seat was adjustable to fit any sitting apparatus.

The helmet was attached to the machine with a retractable cable that reeled out far enough to reach someone sitting in the seat.

And that was fine, of course. But what was it ? A portable electric chair ? A permanent-wave machine ? Or what ?

So Frost and Hutch poked around some more and in the top of the machine, just under where the dome had nested, they found a swivel trap door and underneath it a hollow tube extending down into the mass of innards--only the innards weren't a mass any more, but just a basket of loose parts.

It didn't take any imagination to figure what that hollow tube was for. It was just the size to take one of the sticks of dynamite.

Doc went and got a bottle and passed it around as a sort of celebration and after a drink or two, he and Hutch shook hands and said there were no hard feelings. But I didn't pay much attention to that. They'd done it many times before and then been at one another's throats before the night was over.

Just why we were celebrating was hard to figure. Sure, we knew the machine fitted heads and that the dynamite fitted the machine--but we still had no idea what it was all about.

We were, to tell the truth, just a little scared, although you couldn't have gotten one of us to admit it. We did some guessing, naturally.

"It might be a mechanical doctor," said Hutch. "Just sit in that seat and put the helmet on your head and feed in the proper stick and you

come out cured of whatever is wrong with you. It would be a blessing, I can tell you. You wouldn't ever need to worry if your doctor knew his business or not."

I thought Doc was going to jump right down Hutch's throat, but he must have remembered how they had shaken hands and he didn't do it.

"As long as you're thinking along that line," said Doc,"let's think a little bigger. Let's say it is a rejuvenation machine and the stick is crammed with vitamins and hormones and such that turn you young again. Just take the treatment every twenty years or so and you stay young forever."

"It might be an educator," Frost put in. "Those sticks might be packed full of knowledge. Maybe a complete college subject inside of each of them."

"Or it might be just the opposite," said Pancake. "Those sticks might soak up everything you know. Each of those sticks might be the story of one man's whole life."

"Why record life stories ?" asked Hutch. "There aren't many men or aliens or what-not that have life stories important enough to rate all that trouble."

"If you're thinking of it being some sort of communications deal," I said, "it might be anything. It might be propaganda or religion or maps or it might be no more than a file of business records."

"And", said Hutch, "it might kill you deader than a mack- erel."

"I don't think so," Doc replied. "There are easier ways to kill a person than to sit him in a chair and put a helmet on him. And it doesn't have

to be a communicator." "There's one way to find out," I said.

"I was afraid", said Doc, "we'd get around to that."

"It's too complicated," argued Hutch. "No telling what trouble it may get us into. Why not drop it cold ? We can blast off and hunt for something simple."

"No !" shouted Frost. "We can't do that!"

"I'd like to know why not," said Hutch.

"Because we'd always wonder if we passed up the jackpot. We'd figure that maybe we gave up too quick--a day or two too quick. That we got scared out. That if we'd gone ahead, we'd be rolling in money."

We knew Frost was right, but we batted it around some more before we would admit he was. All of us knew what we had to do, but there were no volunteers.

Finally we drew straws and Pancake was unlucky.

"Okay," I said. "First thing in the morning .... "

"Morning, nothing!" wailed Pancake. "I want to get it over with. I wouldn't sleep a wink."

He was scared, all right, and he had a right to be. He felt just the way I would have if I'd drawn the shortest straw.

I didn't like barging around on an alien planet after dark, but we had to do it. It wouldn't have been fair to Pancake to have done otherwise. And, besides, we were all wrought up and we'd have no rest until we'd found out what we had.

So we got some flashes and went out to the silo. We tramped down the corridors for what seemed an endless time and came to the room where the machines were stored.

There didn't seem to be any difference in the machines, so we picked one at random. While Hutch got the helmet off, I adjusted the seat for Pancake and Doc went into an adjoining room to get a stick.

When we were all ready, Pancake sat down in the seat.

I had a sudden rush of imbecility.

"Look," I said to Pancake, "you don't need to do this."

"Someone has to," said Pancake. "We got to find out some. how and this is the quickest way." "I'11 take your place."

Pancake called me a dirty name and he had no right to do that, for I was only being helpful. But I called him another an we were back to normal.

Hutch put the helmet on Pancake's head and it came dow so far you couldn't see his face. Doc popped the stick into th tube and the machine purred a little, starting up, then settk into silence. Not exactly silence, either--when you laid your e: against the jacket, you could hear it running.

Nothing seemed to happen to Pancake. He sat there cool ar relaxed and Doc got to work on him at once, checking him over.

"His pulse has slowed a little," Doc reported, "and his heart action's sort of feeble, but he seems to be in no danger. His breathing is a little shallow, but not enough to worry about."

It might not have meant a thing to Doc, but it made the rest of us uneasy. We stood around and watched and nothing happened. I don't know what we thought might happen. Funny as it sounds, I had thought that something would.

Doc kept close watch, but Pancake got no worse.

We waited and we waited. The machine kept running and Pancake sat slumped in the seat. He was as limp as a dog asleep and when you picked up his hand, you'd think his bones had melted plumb away. All the time we got more nervous. Hutch wanted to jerk the helmet off Pancake, but I wouldn't let him. No telling what might happen if we stopped the business in the middle.

It was about an hour after dawn that the machine stopped running. Pancake began to stir and we removed the helmet.

He yawned and rubbed his eyes and sat up straight. He looked a bit surprised when he saw us and it seemed to take a moment for him to recognize us.

"What happened ?" Hutch asked him.

Pancake didn't answer. You could see him pulling himself together, as if he were remembering and getting his bearings once again.

"I went on a trip," he said.

"A travelogue !" said Doc, disgusted.

"Not a travelogue. I was there. It was a planet, way out at the rim of the Galaxy, I think. There weren't many stars at night because it was so far out--way out where the stars get thin and there aren't many of them. There was just a thin strip of light that moved overhead."

"Looking at the Galaxy edge on," said Frost, nodding. "Like you were looking at a buzz-saw's cutting edge."

"How long was I under ?" asked Pancake.

"Long enough," I told him. "Six or seven hours. We were getting nervous."

"That's funny," said Pancake. "I'll swear I was there for a year or more."

"Now let's get this straight," Hutch said. "You say you were there. You mean you saw this place."

"I mean I was there?' yelled Pancake. "I lived with those people and I slept in their burrows and I talked with them and I worked with them. I got a blood blister on my hand from hoeing in a garden. I travelled from one place to another and I saw a lot of things and it was just as real as sitting here."

We bundled him out of there and went back to the ship. Hutch wouldn't let Pancake get the breakfast. He threw it together himself and since Hutch is a lousy cook, it was a miserable meal. Doc dug up a bottle and gave Pancake a drink, but he wouldn't let any of the rest of us have any of it. Said it was medicinal, not social.

That's the way he is at times. Downright hog-selfish. Pancake told us about this place he had been to. It didn't seem to have much, if any, government, mostly because it didn't seem to need one, but was a humble sort of planet where rather dim-witted people lived in a primitive agricultural state, They looked, he said, like a cross between a human and a groundhog, and he drew a picture of them, but it didn't help a lot, for Pancake is no artist.

He told us the kind of crops they raised, and there were some screwy kinds, and what kind of food they ate, and we gagged at some of. it, and he even had some of the place names down pat and he remembered shreds of the language and it was out- landish-sounding.

We asked him all sorts of questions and he had the answers to every one of them and some were the kind he could not have made up from his head. Even Doc, who had been sceptical to start with, was ready to admit that Pancake had visited the planet.

After we ate, we hustled Pancake off to bed and Doc checked him over and he was all right.

When Pancake and Doc had left, Hutch said to me and Frost: "I can feel those dollars clinking in my pocket right this minute."

We both agreed with him.

We'd found an entertainment gadget that had anything yet known backed clear off the map.

The sticks were recordings that packed in not only sight and sound, but stimuli for all the other senses. They did the job so well that anyone subjected to their influence felt that he was part of the environment they presented. He stepped into the picture and became a part of it. He was really there.

Frost already was planning exactly how we'd work it.

"We could sell the stuff," he said, "but that would be rather foolish. We want to keep control of it. We'll lease out the machines and we'll rent the sticks and since we'll have the sole supply, we can charge anything we wish."

"We can advertise year-long vacations that take less than half a day," said Hutch. "They'll be just the thing for executives and other busy people. Why, in a single week-end you could spend four or five years' time on several different planets."

"Maybe it's not only planets," Frost went on. "There might be concerts or art galleries and museums. Maybe lectures on history and literature and such."

We were feeling pretty good, but we were tuckered out, so we trailed off to bed.

I didn't get into bed right away, however, but hauled out the log. I don't know why I ever bothered with it. It was a hit-and- miss affair at best. There would be months rd not even think about it and then all at once I'd get all neat and orderly and keep a faithful record for several weeks or so. There was no real reason to make an entry in it now, but I was somewhat excited and had a feeling that perhaps what had just happened should be put down in black and white.

So I crawled under the bunk and pulled out the tin box I kept it and the other papers in, and while I was lifting it to the bunk, it slipped out of my hands. The lid flew open. The log and all the papers and the other odds and ends I kept there scattered on the floor.

I cussed a bit and got down on my hands and knees to pick up the mess. There was an awful lot of it and most of it was junk. 'Someday, I told myself, I'd have to throw a lot of it away. There were clearance papers from a hundred different ports and medical certificates and other papers that were long outdated. But among it I found also the title to the ship.

I sat there thinking back almost twenty years to the day I'd bought the ship for next to nothing and towed it from the junkyard and I recalled

how I'd spent a couple of years' spare time and all I could earn getting it patched up so it could take to space again. No wonder, I told myself, that it was a haywire ship. It had been junk to start with, and during all those years, we'd just managed to keep it glued together. There had been many times when the only thing that got it past inspection had been a fast bribe slipped quietly to the man. No one in the Galaxy but Hutch could have kept it flying.

I went on picking up the papers, thinking about Hutch and all the rest of them. I got a little sentimental and thought a lot of things I'd have clobbered anyone for if they had dared to say them to me. About how we had stuck together and how any one of them would have died for me and I for any one of them.

There had been a time, of course, when it had not been that way, back in the days when they'd first signed on and had been nothing but a crew. But that day was long past; now they were more than just a crew. There had been no signing on for years, but just staying on as men who had a right to stay. And I sat there, flat on the floor, and thought how we'd finally done the thing we'd always hoped to do, how we'd caught up with the dream--us, the ragamuffin crew in the glued-together ship and I felt proud and happy, not for myself alone, but for Hutch and Pancake and Doc and Frost and all the rest.

Finally I got the papers all picked up and back in the box again and tried to write up the log, but was too tired to write, so I went to bed, as I should have done in the first place.

But tired as I was, I lay there and thought of how big the silo was and tried to estimate how many sticks might be cached away there. I got up into the trillions and I saw it was no use; there was no way to keep the figures straight.

The whole deal was big--bigger than anything we'd ever found

before. It would take a group of men like us at least five lifetimes of steady hauling to empty the silo. We'd have to set up a corporation and get a legal staff (preferably one with the lowest kind of ethics) and file a claim on this planet and go through a lot of other red tape to be sure we had it all sewed up.

We couldn't take a chance of letting it slip through our fingers because of any lack of foresight. We'd have to get it all doped out before we went ahead.

I don't know about the rest of them, but I dreamed that night of wading knee-deep through a sea of crisp, crinkly banknotes.

When morning came, Doc failed to show up for breakfast. I went hunting him and found he hadn't even gone to bed. He was sprawled in his rickety old chair in the dispensary and there was one empty bottle on the floor and he trailed another, almost empty, alongside the chair, keeping a rather flimsy hold upon its neck. He still was conscious, which was about the most that could be said of him.

I was plenty sore. Doc knew the rules. He could get paralysed as soon or as often or as long as he wanted to when we were in space, but when we were grounded and there was work to do and planet ailments to keep an eye out for, he was expected to stay sober.

I kicked the bottle out of his fist and I took him by the collar with one hand and by the scat of his britches with the other and frog-walked him to the galley.

Plunking him down in a chair, I yelled for Pancake to get another pot of coffee going.

"I want you sobered up," I told Dec, "so you can go out with us on the second trip. We need all the manpower we have."

Hutch had rounded up his gang and Frost had got the crew together and had rigged up a block and tackle so we could start loading. Everyone was ready to begin bringing in the cargo excep~Doc and I swore to myself that, before the day was oYer, I'd work the tail right off him.

As soon as we had breakfast, we started out. We planned to get aboard as many of the machines as we could handle and to fill in the space between them with all the sticks we could find room for.

Wewent down the corridors to the room that held the machines and we paired off, two men to the machine and started out. Everything went fine until we were more than half-way across the stretch of ground between the building and the ship.

Hutch and I were in the lead and suddenly there was an explosion in the ground about fifty feet ahead of us. We skidded to a halt.

"It's Dec!" yelled Hutch, grabbing for his belt-gun.

I stopped him just in time. "Take it easy, Hutch."

Dec stood up in the port and waved a rifle at us.

"I could pick him off," Hutch said.

"Put back that gun," I ordered.

I walked out alone to where Dec had placed his bullet.

He lifted his rifle and I stopped dead still. He'd probably miss, but even so, the kind of explosive charge he 'was firing could cut a man in two if it struck ten feet away.

"I'm going to throw away my gun," I called out to him. "I want to talk with you."

Dec hesitated for a moment. "All right. Tell the rest of them to pull back a way."

I spoke to Hutch over my shoulder. "Get out of here. Take the others with you."

"He's crazy drunk," said Hutch. "No telling what he'll do."

"I can handle him," I said, sounding surer than I felt.

Doc let loose another bullet off to one side of us.

"Get moving, Hutch." I didn't dare look back. I had to keep an eye on Doc.

"All right," Doc finally yelled at me. "They're back. Throw away your gun."

Moving slow so he wouldn't think I was trying to draw on him, I unfastened the buckle of the gun belt and let it fall to the ground. I walked forward, keeping my eyes on Doc, and all the time my skin kept trying to crawl up my back.

"That's far enough," Doc said when I'd almost reached the ship. "We can talk from here."

"You're drunk," I told him. "I don't know what this is all about, but I know you're drunk."

"Not nearly drunk enough. Not drunk enough by half. If I were drunk enough, I simply wouldn't care." "What's eating you ?"

"Decency," said Doc, in that hammy way of his. "I've told you many times that I can stomach looting when it involves no more than uranium and gems and other trash like that. I can even shut my eyes when you gut a culture, because you can't steal a culture--even when you get through looting it, the culture still is there and can build back again. But I balk at robbing knowledge. I will not let you do it, Captain." "I still say you're drunk."

"You don't even know what you've found. You are so blind and greedy that you don't recognize it."

"Okay, Doc," I said, trying to smooth his feathers, "tell me what we've found."

"A library. Perhaps the greatest, most comprehensive library in all the Galaxy. Some race spent untold years compiling the knowledge that is in that building and you plan to take it and sell it and scatter it. If that happens, in time it will be lost and what little of it may be left will be so out of context that half its meaning will be lost. It doesn't belong to us. It doesn't even belong to the human race alone. A library like that can belong only to all the peoples of the Galaxy." (19 of 92)22-2-2006 1:21:29

"Look, Doc," I pleaded, "we've worked for years, you and I and all the rest of them. We've bled and sweated and been disappointed time and time again. This is our chance to make a killing. And that means you as well as the rest of us. Think of it, Doc---more money than you can ever spend--enough to keep you drunk the rest of your life !"

Doc swung the rifle around at me and I thought my goose was cooked. But I never moved a muscle. I stood and bluffed it out.

At last he lowered the gun. "We're barbarians. History is full of the likes of us. Back on Earth, the barbarians stalled human progress for

a thousand years when they burned and scattered the libraries and the learning of the Greeks and Romans. To them, books were just something to start a fire with or ivipe their weapons on. To you, this great cache of accumulated knowledge means nothing more than something to make a quick buck on. You'll take a scholarly study of a vital social problem and retail it as a year's vacation that can be experienced in six hours' time and you'll take .... "

"Spare me the lecture, Doc," I said wearily. "Tell me what you want."

"Go back and report this find to the Galactic Commission. It will help wipe out a lot of things we've done."

"So help me, Doc, you've gone religious on us."

"Not religious. Just decent."

"And if we don't ?"

"I've got the ship," said Doc. "I have the food and water."

"You'll have to sleep."

"I'll close the port. Just try getting in."

He had us and he knew he did. Unless we could figure out a way to grab him, he had us good and proper. I was scared, but mostly I was burned. For years, we'd listened to him run off at the mouth and never for a moment had any of us thought he meant a word of it. And now suddenly he did--he meant every word of it.

I knew there was no way to talk him out of it. And there was no compromise. When it came right down to it, there was no agreement possible, for any agreement or compromise would have to be based on honour and we had no honour--not a one of us, not even among

ourselves. It was stalemate, but Doc didn't know that yet. He'd realize it once he got a little sober

and thought about it some. What he had done had been done on alcoholic impulse, but that didn't mean he wouldn't see it through.

One thing was certain: As it stood, he could outlast us.

"Let me go back," I said. "I'11 have to talk this over with the others."

I think that Doc right then began to suspect how deeply he had become committed~ began to see for the first time the impossibility of us trusting one another.

"When you come back," he told me, "have it all thought out. I'll want some guarantees." "Sure, Doc," I said.

"I mean this, Captain. I'm in deadly earnest. I'm not just fooling."

"I know you aren't, Doc."

I went back to where the others were clustered just a short distance from the building. I explained what was up.

"We'll have to spread out and charge him," Hutch decided. "He may get one or two of us, but we can pick him off."

"He'll simply close the port," I said. "He can starve us out. In a pinch, he could try to take the ship up. If he ever managed to get sober, he could probably do it."

"He's crazy," said Pancake. "Just plain drunken crazy."

"Sure he is," I said, "and that makes him twice as deadly. He's been brooding on this business for a long, long time. He built up a guilt

complex that's three miles high. And worst of all, he's got himself out on a limb and he can't back down."

"We haven't got much time," said Frost. "We've got to think of something. A man can die of thirst. You can get awfully hungry in just a little while."

The three of them got to squabbling about what was best to do and I sat down on the sand and leaned back against one of the machines and tried to figure Doc.

Doc was a failure as a medic; otherwise he'd not have tied up with us. More than likely, he had joined us as a gesture of defiance or despair--perhaps a bit of both. And besides being a failure, he was an idealist. He was out of place with us, but there'd been nowhere else to go, nothing else to do. For years, it had eaten at him and his values got all warped and there's no place better than deep space to get your values warped.

He was crazy as a coot, of course, but a special kind o: crazy. If it hadn't been so ghastly, you might have called i glorious crazy.

You wanted to laugh him off or brush him to one side, fol that was the kind of jerk he was, but he wouldn't laugh or brush

I don't know if I heard a sound--a footstep, maybe- or if 1 just sensed another presence, but all at once I knew we'd beet joined by someone.

I half got up and swung around toward the building and there, just outside the entrance, stood what looked at first to be a kind of moth made up in human size.

I don't mean it was an insect--it just had the look of one. Itt face was

muffled up in a cloak it wore and it was not a humar face and there was a ruff rising from its head like those crest,, you see on the helmets in the ancient plays.

Then I saw that the cloak was not a cloak at all, but a part of he creature and it looked like it might be folded wings, but il wasn't wings.

"Gentlemen," I said as quietly as I could, "we have a visitor."

I walked toward the creature soft and easy and alert, not wanting to frighten it, but all set to take evasive action if it tried to put the finger on me.

"Be ready, Hutch," I said.

"I'm covering you," Hutch assured me and it was a comfort to know that he was there. A man couldn't get into too much trouble with Hutch backing him.

I stopped about six feet from the creature and he didn't look as bad close up as he did at a distance. His eyes seemed to be kind and gentle and his funny face, alien as it was, had a sort of peacefulness about it. But even so, you can't always tell with aliens.

We stood there looking at one another. The both of us understood there was no use in talking. We just stood and sized one another up.

Then the creature took a couple of steps and reached out a hand that was more like a claw than hand. He took my hand in his and tugged for me to come.

There were just two things to do--either snatch my hand away or go. I went.

I didn't stop to get it figured out, but there were several factors that helped make up my mind. First off, the creature seemed to be friendly and intelligent. And Hutch and all the others were there, just behind me. And over and above all, you don't get too far with aliens if you act stand-offish. So I went.

We walked into the silo and behind me I heard the tramping feet of the others and it was a sound that was good to hear.

I didn't waste any time wondering where the creature might have come from. I admitted to myself, as I walked along, that I had been half-expecting something just like this. The silo was so big that it could hold many things, even people or creatures, we could not know about. After all, we'd explored only one small corner of the first floor of it. The creature, I figured, must have come from somewhere on the upper floors as soon as he learned about us. It might have taken quite a while, one way or another, for the news to reach him.

He led me up three ramps to the fourth floor of the building and went down a corridor for a little way, then went into a room.

It was not a large room. It held just one machine, but this one was a double model; it had two bucket seats and two helmets. There was another creature in the room.

The first one led me over to the machine and motioned for me to take one of the seats.

I stood there for a while, watching Hutch and Pancake and Frost and all the others crowd into the place and line up against the wall.

Frost said: "A couple of you boys better stay outside and watch the corridor."

Hutch asked me: "You going to sit down in that contraption, Captain ?"

"Why not?" I said. "They seem to be all right. There's more of us than them. They don't mean us any harm." "It's taking a chance," said Hutch.

"Since when have we stopped taking chances ?"

The creature I had met outside had sat down in one of the seats, so I made a few adjustments in the other. While I was doing this, the second creature went to a file and got out two sticks, but these sticks were transparent instead of being black. He lifted off the helmets and inserted the two sticks. Then he fitted one of the helmets on his fellow-creature's head and held out the other to me.

I sat down and let him put it on and suddenly I was squatting on the floor across a sort of big coffee-table from the gent I had met outside.

"Now we can talk," said the creature, "which we couldn't do before."

I wasn't scared or flustered. It seemed just as natural as if it had been Hutch across the table.

"There will be a record made of everything we say," said the creature. "When we are finished, you will get one copy and I will get the other for our files. You might call it a pact or a contract or whatever term seems to be most applicable."

"I'm not much at contracts," I told him. "There's too much legal flypaper tied up with most of them."

"An agreement, then," the creature suggested. "A gentle- men's agreement."

"Good enough," I said.

Agreements are convenient things. You can break them any time you want. Especially gentlemen's agreements.

"I suppose you have figured out what this place is," he said.

"Well, not for sure," I replied. "Library is the closest that we have come."

"It's a university, a galactic university. We specialize in extension or home-study courses."

I'm afraid I gulped a bit. "Why, that's just fine."

"Our courses are open to all who wish to take them. There are no entrance fees and there is no tuition. Neither are there any scholastic requirements for enrolment. You yourself can see how difficult it would be to set up such requirements in a galaxy where there are many races of varying viewpoints and abilities."

"You bet I can."

"The courses are free to all who can make use of them," he said. "We do expect, of course, that they make proper use of them and that they display some diligence in study."

"You mean anyone at all can enrol?" I asked. "And it don't cost anything ?"

After the first disappointment, I was beginning to see the possibilities. With bona fide university educations for the taking, it would be possible to set up one of the sweetest rackets that anyone could ask for.

"There's one restriction," the creature explained. "We can- not, obviously, concern ourselves with individuals. The paper- work would get completely out of hand. We enrol cultures. You, as a representative of your culture--what is it you all yourselves?"

"The human race, originally of the planet Earth, now covering some half million cubic light-years. I'd have to see your chart .... "

"That's not necessary at the moment. We would be quite happy to accept your application for the entrance of the human race."

It took the wind out of me for a minute. I wasn't any representative of the human race. And if I could be, I wouldn't. This was my deal, not the human race's. But I couldn't let him know that, of course. He wouldn't have done business with me.

"Now not so fast," I pleaded. "There's a question or two I'd like to have you answer. What kind of courses do you offer9. What kind of electives do you have ?"

"First there is the basic course," the creature said. "It is more or less a familiarization course, a sort of orientation. It includes those subjects which we believe can be of the most use to the race in question. It is, quite naturally, tailored specifically for each student culture. After that, there is a wide field of electives, hundreds of thousands of them."

"How about final exams and tests and things like that ?" I wanted to know.

"Oh, surely," said the creature. "Such tests are conducted every--tell me about your time system." I told him the best I could and he seemed to understand. "I'd say", he finally said, "that about every thousand years of your time would come fairly close. It is a long-range

programme and to conduct tests any oftener would put some strain upon our resources and might be of little value."

That decided me. What happened a thousand years from now was no concern of mine.

I asked a few more questions to throw him offthe track--just in ease he might have been suspicious--about the history of the university and such.

I still can't believe it. It's hard to conceive of any race working a million years to set up a university aimed at the eventual education of an entire galaxy, travelling to all the planets to assemble data, compiling the records of countless cultures, correlating and classifying and sorting out that mass of information to set up the study courses. It was just too big for a man to grasp.

For a while, he had me reeling on the ropes and faintly starry-eyed about the whole affair. But then I managed to snap back to normal

"All right, Professor," I said, "you can sign us up. What am I supposed to do ?"

"Not a thing," he said. "The recording of our discussion will supply the data. We'll outline the course of basic study and you then may take such electives as you wish."

"If we can't haul it all in one trip, we can come back again?" I asked.

"Oh, definitely. I anticipate you may wish to send a fleet to carry all you need. We'll supply sufficient machines and as many copies of the study recordings as you think you will need."

"It'll take a lot," I said bluntly, figuring I'd start high and haggle my way

down. "An awful lot."

"I am aware of that," he told me. "Education for an entire culture is no simple matter. But we are geared for it."

So there we had it--all legal and airtight. We could get anything we wanted and as much as we wanted and we'd have a right to it. No one could say we stole it. Not even Doc could say that.

The creature explained to me the system of notation they used on the recording cylinders and how the courses would be boxed and numbered so they could be used in context. He promised to supply me with recordings of the electives so I could pick out what we wanted.

He was real happy about finding another customer and he proudly told me of all the others that they had and he held forth at length on the satisfaction that an educator feels at the opportunity to pass on the torch of knowledge. He had me feeling like a heel.

Then we were through and I was sitting in the seat again and the second creature was taking the helmet off my head.

I got up and the first creature rose to his feet and faced me. We couldn't talk any more than we could to start with. It was a weird feeling, to face a being you've just made a deal with and not be able to say a single word that he can understand.

But he held out both his hands and I took them in mine and he gave my hands a friendly squeeze.

"Why don't you go ahead and kiss him ?" asked Hutch. "Me and the boys will look the other way."

Ordinarily, I'd have slugged Hutch for a crack like that, but I didn't even get sore.

The second creature took the two sticks out of the machine and handed one to me. They'd gone in transparent, but they came out black.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

We got out as fast as we could and still keep our dignity--if you could call it that.

Outside the silo, I got Hutch and Pancake and Frost together and told them what had happened.

"We got the universe by the tail," I said, "with a downhill pull."

"What about Doc ?" asked Frost.

"Don't you see ? It's just the kind of deal that would appeal to him. We can let on we're noble and big-hearted and acting in good faith. All I need to do is get close enough to grab him."

"He won't even listen to you," said Pancake. "He won't believe a word you say."

"You guys stay right here," I said. 'T'll handle Doc."

I walked back across the stretch of ground between the building and the ship. There was no sign of Doc. I was all set to holler for him, then thought better of it. I took a chance and started up the ladder. I reached the port and there was still no sign of him.

I moved warily into the ship. I thought I knew what had become of him, but there was no need to take more chances than I had to.

I found him in his chair in the dispensary. He was stiffer than a goat. The gun lay on the floor. There were two empty bottles beside the chair.

I stood and looked at him and knew what had happened. After I had left, he had got to thinking about the situation and had run into the problem of how he'd climb down off that limb and he had solved it the way he'd solved most of his problems all his life.

I got a blanket and covered him. Then I rummaged around and found another bottle. I uncorked it and put it beside the chair, where he could reach it easy. Then I picked up the gun and went to call the others in.

I lay in bed that night and thought about it and it was beautiful.

There were so many angles that a man didn't know quite where to start.

There was the university racket which, queerly enough, was entirely legitimate, except that the professor out in the silo never meant it to be sold.

And there was the quickie vacation deal, offering a year or two on an alien planet in six hours of actual time. All we'd need to do was pick a number of electives in geography or social science or whatever they might call it.

There could be an information bureau or a research agency, charging fancy prices to run down facts on any and all subjects.

Without a doubt, there'd be some on-the-spot historical recordings and with those in hand, we could retail adventure, perfectly safe

adventure, to the stay-at-homes who might hanker for it.

I thought about that and a lot of other things which were not quite so sure, but at least probable and worth investigating, and I thought, too, about how the professors had finally arrived at what seemed to me a sure-fire effective medium for education.

You wanted to know about a thing, so you up and lived it; you learned it on the ground. You didn't read about it or hear about it or even see it in plain three-dimension--you experi- enced it. You walked the soil of the planet you wanted to know about; you lived with the beings that you wished to study; you saw as an eye-witness, and perhaps as a participant, the history that you sought to learn.

And it could be used in other ways as well. You could learn to build anything, even a spaceship, by actually building one. You could learn how an alien machine might operate by putting it together, step by simple step. There was no field of knowledge in which it would not work--and work far better than standard educational methods.

Right then and there, I made up my mind we'd not release a single stick until one of us had previewed it. No telling what a man might find in one of them that could be put to practical USe.

I fell asleep dreaming about chemical miracles and new engineering principles, of better business methods and new philosophic concepts. And I even figured out how a man could make a mint of money out of a philosophic concept.

We were on top of the universe for sure. We'd set up a corporation with more angles than you could shake a stick at. We would be big time. In a thousand years or so, of course, there'd be a reckoning, but none of us would be around to take part in it.

Doc sobered up by morning and I had Frost heave him in the brig. He wasn't dangerous any longer, but I figured that a spell in pokey might do him a world of good. After a while, I intended to talk to him, but right at the moment I was much too busy to be bothered with him.

I went over to the silo with Hutch and Pancake and had another session with the professor on the double-seat machine and picked out a batch of electives and settled various matters.

Other professors began supplying us with the courses, all boxed and labelled, and we set the crew and the engine gang to work hauling them and the machines aboard and stowing them away.

Hutch and I stood outside the silo and watched the work go on.

"I never thought", said Hutch, "that we'd hit the jackpot this way. To be downright honest with you, I never thought we'd hit it. I always thought we'd just go on looking. It goes to show how wrong a man can be."

"Those professors are soft in the head," I said. "They never asked me any questions. I can think of a lot they could have asked that I couldn't answer."

"They're honest and think everyone's the same. That's what comes of getting so wrapped up in something you have time for nothing else."

And that was true enough. The professor race has been busy for a million years doing a job it took a million years to do-- and another million and a million after that--and that never would be finished.

"I can't figure why they did it," I said. "There's no profit in it."

"Not for them," said Hutch, "but there is for us. I tell you, Captain, it takes brains to work out the angles."

I told him what I had figured out about previewing every- thing before we gave it out, so we would be sure we let nothing slip away from us.

Hutch was impressed. "I'll say this for you, Captain--you don't miss a bet. And that's the way it should be. We might as well milk this deal for every cent it's worth."

"I think we should be methodical about' this previewing business," I said. "We should start at the beginning and go straight through to the end."

Hutch said he thought so, too. "But it will take a lot of time," he warned me.

"That's why we should start right now. The orientation course is on board already and we could start with that. All we'd have to do is set up a machine and Pancake could help you with it."

"Help me!" yelled Hutch. "Who said anything about me doing it ? I ain't cut out for that stuff. You know yourself I never do any reading .... "

"It isn't reading. You just live it. You'll be having fun while we're out here slaving." "I won't do it."

"Now look," I said, "let's use a little sense. I should be out here at the silo seeing everything goes all right and close at hand so I can hold a pow-wow with the professor if there's any need of it. We need Frost to superintend the loading. And Doc is in the clink. That leaves you and Pancake. I can't trust Pancake with that previewing job. lie's too scatterbrained. He'd let a fortune glide right past him without recognizing it. Now you're a fast man with a buck and the way I see it .... "

"Since you put it that way," said Hutch, all puffed up, "I suppose I am the one who should be doing it."

That evening, we were all dog-tired, but we felt fine. We had made a good start with the loading and in a few more days would be heading home.

Hutch seemed to be preoccupied at supper. He fiddled witt his food. He didn't talk at all and he seemed like a man witt something on his mind.

As soon as I could, I cornered him.

"How's it going, Hutch ?"

"Okay," he said. "Just a lot of gab. Explaining what it's al! about. Gab."

"Like what ?"

"Some of it's hard to tell. Takes a lot of explaining I haven't got the words for. Maybe one of these days you'll find the time to run through it yourself."

"You can bet your life I will," I said, somewhat sore at him. "There's nothing worth a dime in it so far," said Hutch.

I believed him on that score. Hutch could spot a dollar twenty miles away.

I went down to the brig to see Doc. He was sober. Also unrepentant.

"You outreached yourself this time," he said. "That stuff isn't yours to sell. There's knowledge in that building that belongs to the Galaxy--for free."

I explained to him what had happened, how we'd found the silo was a university and how we were taking the courses on board for the human race after signing up for them all regular and proper. I tried to make it sound as if we were being big, but Doc wouldn't buy a word of it.

"You wouldn't give your dying grandma a drink of water unless she paid you in advance," he said. "Don't give me any of that gruff about service to humanity."

So I left him to stew in the brig a while and went up to my cabin. I was sore at Hutch and all burned up at Doc and my tail was dragging. I fell asleep in no time.

The work went on for several days and we were almost finished.

I felt pretty good about it. After supper, I climbed down the ladder and sat on the ground beside the ship and looked across at the silo. It still looked big and awesome, but not as big as that first day--because now it had lost some of its strangeness and even the purpose of it had lost some of its strangeness, too.

Just as soon as we got back to civilization, I promised myself, we'd seal the deal as tight as possible. Probably we couldn't legally claim the planet because the professors were intelligent and you can't claim a planet that has intelligence, but there were plenty of other ways we could get our hooks into it for keeps.

I sat there and wondered why no one came down to sit with me, but no one did, so finally I clambered up the ladder.

I went down to the brig to have a word with Doc. He was still unrepentant, but he didn't seem too hostile.

"You know, Captain," he said, "there have been times when I've not seen eye to eye with you, but despite that I've respected you and sometimes even liked you."

"What are you getting at ?" I asked him. "You can't soft-talk yourself out of the spot you're in."

"There's something going on and maybe I should tell you. You are a forthright rascal. You don't even take the trouble to deny you are. You have no scruples and probably no morals, and that's all right, because you don't pretend to have. You are .... "

"Spit it out ! If you don't tell me what's going on, I'll come in there and wring it out of you."

"Hutch has been down here several times," said Doc, "inviting me to come up and listen to one of those recordings he is fooling with. Said it was right down my alley. Said I'd not be sorry. But there was something wrong about it. Something sneaky." He stared round-eyed through the bars at me. "You know, Captain, Hutch was never sneaky." "Well, go on !"

"Hutch has found out something, Captain. If I were you, I'd be finding out myself."

I didn't even wait to answer him. I remembered how Hutch had been acting, fiddling with his food and preoccupied, not talking very much. And come to think of it, some of the others had been acting strangely, too. I'd just been too busy to give it much attention.

Running up the catwalks, I cussed with every step I took. A captain of a ship should never get so busy that he loses touch-- he has to stay in touch all the blessed time. It had all come of being in a hurry, of wanting to get loaded up and out of there before something

happened.

And now something had happened. No one had come down to sit with me. There'd not been a dozen words spoken at the supper table. Everything felt deadly wrong.

Pancake and Hutch had rigged up the chart room for the previewing chore and I busted into it and slammed the door and stood with my back against it.

Not only Hutch was there, but Pancake and Frost as well and, in the machine's bucket seat, a man I recognized as one of the engine gang.

I stood for a moment without saying anything, and the three of them stared back at me. The man with the helmet on his head didn't notice--he wasn't even there.

"All right, Hutch," I said, "come clean. What is this all about? Why is that man previewing? I thought just you and .... "

"Captain," said Frost, "we were about to tell you."

"You shut up! I am asking Hutch."

"Frost is right," said Hutch. "We were all set to tell you. But you were so busy and it came a little hard ...."

"What's hard about it ?"

"Well, you had your heart all set to make yourself a fortune. We were trying to find a way to break it to you gentle." I left the door and walked over to him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, "but we still make

ourselves a killing. There never was a time of day or night, Hutch, that I couldn't beat your head in and if you don't want me to start, you better talk real fast."

"We'll make no killing, Captain," Frost said quietly. "We're taking this stuff back and we'll turn it over to the authorities."

"All of you are nuts !" I roared. "For years, we've slaved and sweated, hunting for the jackpot. And now that we have it in our mitts, now that we can walk barefooted through a pile of thousand-dollar bills, you're going chicken on me. What's .... "

"It's not right for us to do it, sir," said Panoake.

And that "sir" scared me more than anything that had happened so far. Pancake had never called me that before.

I looked from one to the other of them and what I saw in their faces chilled me to the bone. Every single one of them thought just the same as Pancake.

"That orientation course !" I shouted. Hutch nodded. "It explained about honesty and honour." "What do you scamps know about honesty and honour ?" I raged. "There ain't a one of you that ever drew an honest breath."

"We never knew about it before," said Pancake, "but we know about it now."

"It's just propaganda! It's just a dirty trick the professors played on us !"

And it was a dirty trick. Although you have to admit the professors knew their onions. I don't know if they figured us humans for a race of

heels or if the orientation course was just normal routine. But no wonder they hadn't questioned me. No wonder they'd made no investigation before handing us their knowledge. They had us stopped before we could even make a move.

"We felt that since we had learned about honesty," said Frost, "it was only right the rest of the crew should know. It's an awful kind of life we've been living, Captain."

"So", said Hutch, "we been bringing in the men, one by one, and orienting them. We figured it was the least that we could do. This man is about the last of them."

"A missionary," I said to Hutch. "So that is what you are. Remember what you told me one night ? You said you wouldn't be a missionary no matter what they paid you."

"There's no need of that," Frost replied coldly. "You can't shame us and you can't bully us. We know we are right."

"But the money I What about the corporation ? We had it all planned out !"

Frost said: "You might as well forget it, Captain. When you take the course .... "

"I'm not taking any course." My voice must have been as deadly as I felt, for not a one of them made a move toward me. "If any of you mealy-mouthed missionaries feel an urge to make me, you can start trying right now."

They still didn't move. I had them bluffed. But there was no point in arguing with them. There was nothing I could do against that stone wall of honesty and honour.

I turned my back on them and walked to the door. At the door, I stopped. I said to Frost: "You better turn Doc loose and give him the cure. Tell him it's all right with me. He has it coming to him. It will serve him right."

Then I shut the door behind me and went up the cat- walk to my cabin. I locked the door, a thing I'd never done before.

I sat down on the edge of the bunk and stared at the wall and thought.

There was just one thing they had forgotten. This was my ship, not theirs. They were just the crew and their papers had run out long ago and never been renewed.

I got down on my hands and knees and hauled out the tin box I kept the papers in. I went through it systematically and sorted out the papers that I needed--the title to the ship and the registry and the last papers they had signed.

I laid the papers on the bunk and shoved the box out of the way and sat down again.

I picked up the papers and shuffled them from one hand to the other.

I could throw them off the ship any time I wished. I could take off without them and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, they could do about it.

And what was more, I could get away with it. It was legal, of course, but it was a rotten thing to do. Now that they were honest men and honourable, though, they'd bow to the legality and let me get away with it. And in such a case, they had no one but themselves to thank.

I sat there for a long time thinking, but my thoughts went round and

round and mostly had to do with things out of the pastuhow Pancake had gotten tangled up in the nettle patch out in the Coonskin System and how Doc had fallen in love with (of all things) a tri-sexual being that time we touched at Siro and how Hutch had cornered the liquor supply at Munko, then lost it in a game that was akin to craps except the dice were queer little living entities that you had no control of, which made it tough on Hutch.

A rap came at the door.

It was Doc.

"You all full of honesty ?" I asked him.

He shuddered. "Not me. I turned down the offer."

"It's the same kind of swill you were preaching at me just a couple of days ago."

"Can't you see", asked Doc, "what it would do to the human race ?"

"Sure. It'll make them honourable and honest. No one will ever cheat or steal again and it will be cosy .... "

"They'll die of complicated boredom," said Doc. "Life will become a sort of cross between a Boy Scout jamboree and a ladies' sewing circle. There'll be no loud and unseemly argument and they'll be polite and proper to the point of stupefaction."

"So you have changed your mind."

"Not really, Captain. But this is the wrong way to go about it. Whatever progress the race has ever made has been achieved by the due process of social evolution. In any human advance, the villains and the rascals are as important as the forward- looking

idealist. They are man's consciences and man can't get along without them."

"If I were you, Doc," I said, "I wouldn't worry so much about the human race. It's a pretty big thing and it can take a lot of bumps. Even an overdose of honesty won't hurt it permanently."

Actually, I didn't give a damn. I had other things on my mind right then.

Doc crossed the room and sat down on the bunk beside me. He leaned over and tapped the papers I still held in my hand.

"You got it all doped out," he said.

I nodded bleakly. "Yeah."

"I thought you would."

I shot a quick glance at him. "You were way ahead of me. That's why you switched over."

Doc shook his head emphatically. "No. Please believe me, Captain, I feel as bad as you do."

"It won't work either way." I shuffled the papers. "They acted in good faith. They didn't sign aboard, sure. But there was no reason that they should have. It was all understood. Share and share alike. And that's the way it's been for too long to repudiate it now. And we can't keep on. Even ff we agreed to dump the stuff right here and blast off and never think of it again, we'd not get rid of it. It would always be there. The past is dead, Doc. It's spoiled. It's smashed and it can't be put back together."

I felt like bawling. It had been a long time since I had felt that full of

grief.

"They are different kind of men now," I said. "They went and changed themselves and they'll never be the same. Even if they could change back, it wouldn't be the same."

Doc mocked me a little. "The race will build a monument to you. Maybe actually on Earth itself, with all the other famous humans, for bringing back this stuff. They'd be just blind enough to do it."

I got up and paced the floor. "I don't want any monument. I'm not bringing it in. I'm not having anything more to do with it."

I stood there, wishing we had never found the silo, for what had it done for me except to lose me the best crew and the best friends a man had ever had ?

"The ship is mine," I said. "That is all I want. I'll take the cargo to the nearest point and dump it there. Hutch and the rest of them can carry on from there, any way then can. They can have the honesty and honour. I'll get another crew."

Maybe, I thought, some day it would be almost the way it had been. Almost, but not quite.

"We'll go on hunting," I said. "We'll dream about the jackpot. We'll do our best to find it. We'll do anything to find it. We'll break all the laws of God or man to find it. But you know something, Doc ?"

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

"I hope we never find it. I don't want to find another. I just want to go on hunting."

We stood there in the silence, listening to the fading echoes of those

days we hunted for the jackpot.

"Captain," said Doc, "will you take me along?"

I nodded. What was the difference ? He might just as well.

"Captain, you remember those insect mounds on Suud ?"

"Of course. How could I forget them ?"

"You know, I've figured out a way we might break into them. Maybe we should try it. There should be a billion .... "

I almost clobbered him. I'm glad now that I didn't.

Suud is where we're headed.

If Doc's plan works out, we may hit that jackpot yet !

Death Scene

She was waiting on the stoop of the house when he turned into the driveway and as he wheeled the car up the concrete and brought it to a halt he was certain she knew, too.

She had just come from the garden and had one arm full of flowers and she was smiling at him just a shade too gravely.

He carefully locked the car and put the keys away in the pocket of his jacket and reminded himself once again, "Matter- of-factly, friend. For it is better this way."

And that was the truth, he reassured himself. It was much better than the old way. It gave a man some time.

He was not the first and he would not be the last and for some of them it was rough, and for others, who had prepared themselves, it was not so rough and in time, perhaps, it would become a ritual so beautiful and so full of dignity one would look forward to it. It was more civilized and more dignified than the old way had been and in another hundred years or so there could be no doubt that it would become quite acceptable. All that was wrong with it now, he told himself, was that it was too new. It took a little time to become accustomed to this way of doing things after having done them differently through all of human history.

He got out of the car and went up the walk to where she waited for him. He stooped and kissed her and the kiss was a little longer than was their regular custom--and a bit more tender. And as he kissed her he smelled the summer flowers she carried, and he thought how appropriate it was that he should at this time smell the flowers from the garden they both loved.

"You know," he said and she nodded at him.

"Just a while ago," she said. "I knew you would be coming home. I went out and picked the flowers."

"The children will be coming, I imagine."

"Of course," she said, "They will come right away."

He looked at his watch, more from force of habit than a need to know the time. "There is time," he said. "Plenty of time for all of them to get here. I hope they bring the kids."

"Certainly they will," she said. "I went to phone them once, then I thought how silly."

He nodded. "We're of the old school, Florence. It's hard even yet to accept this thing--to know the children will know and come almost as soon as we know. It's still a little hard to be sure of a thing like that."

She patted his arm. "The family will be all together. Tbere'll be time to talk. We'll have a splendid visit." "Yes, of course," he said.

He opened the door for her and she stepped inside.

"What pretty flowers," he said.

"They've been the prettiest this year that they have ever been."

"That vase," he said. "The one you got last birthday. The blue and gold. That's the one to use."

"That's exactly what I thought. On the dining table."

She went to get the vase and he stood in the living-room and thought how much he was a part of this room and this room a part of him. He knew every inch of it and it knew him as well and it was a friendly place, for he'd spent years making friends with it.

Here he'd walked the children of nights when they had been babies and been ill of cutting teeth or croup or colic, nights when the lights in this room had been the only lights in the entire block. Here the family had spent many evening hours in happiness and peace--and it had been a lovely thing, the peace.

For he could remember the time when there had been no peace, nowhere in the world, and no thought or hope of peace, but in its place the ever-present dread and threat of war, a dread that had been so commonplace that you scarcely noticed it, a dread you came to think was a normal part of living.

Then, suddenly, there had been the dread no longer, for you could not fight a war if your enemy could look ahead an entire day and see what was about to happen. You could not fight a war and you could not play a game of baseball or any sort of game, you could not rob or cheat or murder, you could not make a killing in the market. There were a lot of things you could no longer do and there were times when it spoiled a lot of fun, for surprise and anticipation had been made impossible. It took a lot of getting used to and a lot of readjustment, but you were safe, at least, for there could be no war--not only at the moment, but forever and forever, and you knew that not only were you safe, but your children safe as well and their children and your children's children's children and you were willing to pay almost any sort of price for such complete assurance.

It is better this way, he told himself, standing in the friendly room. It is much better this way. Although at times it's hard.

He walked across the room and through it to the porch and stood on the porch steps looking at the flowers. Florence was right, he thought; they were prettier this year than any year before. He tried to remember back to some year when they might have been prettier, but he couldn't quite be sure. Maybe the autumn when young John had been a baby, for that year the mums and asters had been particularly fine. But that was unfair, he told himself, for it was not autumn now, but summer. It was impossible to compare summer flowers with autumn. Or the year when Mary had been ill so long--the lilacs had been so deeply purple and had smelled so sweet; he remembered bringing in great bouquets of them each evening because she loved them so. But that was no comparison, for the lilacs bloomed in spring.

A neighbour went past on the sidewalk outside the picket fence and he spoke gravely to her: "Good afternoon, Mrs. Abrams."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Williams," she said and that was the way it always was, except on occasions she would stop a moment and they'd talk about the flowers. But today she would not stop unless he made it plain he would like to have her stop, for otherwise she would not wish to intrude upon him. That was the way it had been at the office, he recalled.

He'd put away his work with sure and steady hands--as sure and steady as he could manage them. He'd walked to the rack and got down his hat and no one had spoken to him, not a single one of them had kidded him about his quitting early, for all had guessed-or known--as well as he. You could not always tell, of course, for the foresight ability was more pronounced in some than it was in others, although the lag in even the least efficient of them would not be more than a quarter-hour at most.

He'd often wished he could understand how it had been brought

about, but there were factors involved he could not even remotely grasp. He knew the story, of course, for he could remember the night that it had happened and the excitement there had been--and the consternation. But knowing how it came about and the reason for it was quite a different thing from understanding it.

It had been an ace in the hole, a move of desperation to be used only as a last resort. The nation had been ready for a long time with the transmitters all set up and no one asking any questions because everyone had taken it for granted they were a part of the radar network and, in that case, the less said of them the better.

No one had wanted to use those transmitters, or at least that had been the official explanation after they'd been used--but anything was better than another war.

So the time had come, the time of last resort, the day of desperation, and the switches had been flicked, blanketing the nation with radiations that did something to the brain.

"stimulating latent abilities" was as close a general explanation as anyone had made--and all at once everyone had been able to see twenty-four hours ahead.

There'd been hell to pay, of course, for quite a little while, but after a time it simmered down and the people settled down to make the best of it, to adapt and live with their strange new ability.

The President had gone on television to tell the world what had happened and he had warned potential enemies that we'd know twenty-four hours ahead of time exactly what they'd do. In consequence of which they did exactly nothing except to undo a number of incriminating moves they had already made --some of which the President had foretold that they would undo, naming the

hour and place and the manner of their action.

He had said the process was no secret and that other nations were welcome to the know-how if they wanted it, although it made but little difference if they did or not, for the radiations in time would spread throughout the entire world and would affect all people. It was a permanent change, he said, for the ability was inheritable and would be passed on from one generation to the next, and never again, for good or evil, would the human race be blind as it had been in the past.

So finally there had been peace, but there'd been a price to pay. Although, perhaps, not too great a price, Williams told himself. He'd liked baseball, he recalled, and there could be no baseball now, for it was a pointless thing to play a game the outcome of which you'd know a day ahead of time. He had liked to have the boys in occasionally for a round of pokerm but poker was just as pointless now and as impossible as baseball or football or horse racing or any other sport.

There had been many changes, some of them quite awkward. Take newspapers, for example, and radio and television reporting of the news. Political tactics had been forced to undergo a change, somewhat for the better, and gambling and crime had largely disappeared.

Mostly, it had been for.the best. Although even some of the best was a little hard at first--and some of it would take a long time to become completely accustomed to.

Take his own situation now, he thought.

A lot more civilized than in the old days, but still fairly hard to take. Hard especially on Florence and the children, forcing them into a new

and strange attitude that in time would harden into custom and tradition, but now was merely something new and strange. But Florence was standing up to it admirably, he thought. They'd often talked of it, especially in these last few years, and they had agreed that no matter which of them it was they would keep it calm and dignified, for that was the only way to face it. It was one of the payments that you made for peace, although sometimes it was a little hard to look at it that way.

But there were certain compensations. Florence and he could have a long talk before the children arrived. There'd be a chance to go over certain final details--finances and insurance and other matters of like nature. Under the old way there would have been, he told himself, no chance at all for that. There'd be the opportunity to do all the little worthwhile things, all the final sentimental gestures, that except for the foresight ability would have been denied.

There'd be talk with the children and the neighbours bringing things to eat and the big bouquet of flowers the office gang would send--the flowers that under other circumstances he never would have seen. The minister would drop in for a moment and manage to get in a quiet word or two of comfort, all the time making it seem to be no more than a friendly call. In the morning the mail would bring many little cards and notes of friendship sent 'by people who wanted him to know they thought of him and would have liked to have been with him if there had been the time. But they would not intrude, for the time that was left was a family time.

The family would sit and talk, remembering the happy days --the dog that Eddie had and the time John had run away from home for an hour or two and the first time Mary had ever had a date and the dress she wore. They'd take out the snapshot albums and look at the pictures, recalling all the days of bitter- sweetness and would know

that theirs had been a good life-- and especially he would know. And through it all would run the happy clatter of grandchildren playing in the house, climbing up on Grand-dad's knee to have him tell a story. All so civilized, he thought. Giving all of them a chance to prove they were civilized. He'd have to go back inside the house now, for he could hear Florence arranging the flowers in the birthday vase that was blue and gold. And they had so much to say to one another-- even after forty years they still had so much to say to one another.

He turned and glanced back at the garden.

Most beautiful flowers, he thought, that they had ever raised.

He'd go out in the morning, when the dew was on them, when they were most beautiful, to bid them all good-bye.

Green Thumb

I had come back from lunch and was watching the office while Millie went out to get a bite to eat. With my feet up on the desk in a comfortable position, I was giving considerable attention to how I might outwit a garbage-stealing dog.

The dog and I had carried on a feud for months and I was about ready to resort to some desperate measures.

I had blocked up the can with heavy concrete blocks so he couldn't tip it over, but he was a big dog and could stand up and reach down into the can and drag all the garbage out. I had tried putting a heavy weight on the lid, but he simply dragged it off and calmly proceeded with his foraging. I had waited up and caught him red-handed at it and heaved some rocks and whatever else was handy at him, but he recognized tactics such as these for what they were and they didn't bother him. He'd come back in half an hour, calm as ever.

I had considered setting a light muskrat trap on top of the garbage so that, when he reached down into the can, he'd get his muzzle caught. But if I did that, sure as hell I'd forget to take it out some Tuesday morning and the garbageman would get caught instead. I had toyed with the idea of wiring the can so the dog would get an electric shock when he came fooling around. But I didn't know how to go about wiring it and, if I did, ten to one I'd fix it up so I'd electrocute him instead of just searing him off, and I didn't want to kill him.

I like dogs, you understand. That doesn't mean I have to like all dogs, does it ? And if you had to serape up garbage every morning, you'd be just as sore at the mutt as I was.

While I was wondering if I couldn't put something in a particularly

tempting bit of garbage that would make him sick and still not kill him, the phone rang.

It was old Pete Skinner out on Acorn Ridge.

"Could you come out ?" he asked.

"Maybe," I said. "What you got ?"

"I got a hole out in the north forty."

"Sink-hole ?"

"Nope. Looks like someone dug it out and carried off the dirt."

"Who would do that, Pete ?"

"I don't know. And that ain't all of it. They left a pile of sand beside the hole."

"Maybe that's what they dug out of the hole."

"You know well enough", said Pete, "that I haven't any sandy soil. You've run tests enough on it. All of mine is clay."

"I'll be right out," I told him.

A county agent gets some funny calls, but this one topped them all. Hog cholera, corn borers, fruit blight, milk production records--any of these would have been down my alley. But a hole in the north forty ?

And yet, I suppose I should have taken it as a compliment that Pete called me. When you've been a county agent for fifteen years, a lot of farmers get to trust you and some of them, like Pete, figure you can straighten out any problem. I enjoy a compliment as much as

anybody. It's the headaches that go with them that I don't like.

When Millie came back, I drove out to Pete's place, which is only four or five miles out of town.

Pete's wife told me that he was up in the north forty, so I went there and found not only Pete, but some of his neighbours. All of them were looking at the hole and doing a lot &talking. I never saw a more puzzled bunch of people.

The hole was about thirty feet in diameter and about thirty-five feet deep, an almost perfect cone--not the kind of hole

you'd dig with a pick and shovel. The sides were cut as clean as

if they'd been machined, but the soil was not compressed, as it

would have been if machinery had been used.

The pile of sand lay just a short distance from the hole. Looking at it, I had the insane feeling that, if you shovelled that sand into the hole, it would exactly fit. It was the whitest sand I've ever seen and, when I walked over to the pile and picked up some of it, I saw that it was clean. Not just ordinary clean, but absolutely clean--as though laundered grain by grain.

I stood around for a while, like the rest of them, staring at the hole and the pile of sand and wishing I could come up with some bright idea. But I wasn't able to. There was the hole and there was the sand. The topsoil was dry and powdery and would have shown wheelmarks or any other kind if there'd been any. There weren't.

I told Pete maybe he'd better fence in the whole business, because the sheriff or somebody from the state, or even the university, might

want to look it over. Pete said that was a good idea and he'd do it right away.

I went back to the farmhouse and asked Mrs. Skinner to give me a couple of fruit jars. One of them I filled with a sample from the sand pile and the other with soil from the hole, being careful not to jolt the walls.

By this time, Pete and a couple of the neighbours had gotten a wagon-load of fence posts and some wire and were coming out to the field. I waited and helped unload the posts and wire, then drove back to the office, envying Pete. He was satisfied to put up the fence and let me worry about the problem.

I found three fellows waiting for me. I gave Millie the fruit jars and asked her to send them right away to the Soils Bureau at the State Farm Campus. Then I settled down to work.

Other people drifted in and it was late in the afternoon before I could call up the Soils Bureau and tell them I wanted the contents of the two jars analysed. I told them a little of what had happened, although not all of it for, when you tried to put it into words, it sounded pretty weird.

"Banker Stevens called and asked if you'd drop by his place on your way home," Millie told me.

"What would Stevens want with me ?" I asked. "He isn't a farmer and I don't owe him any money." "He grows fancy flowers," said Millie.

"I know that. He lives just up the street from me."

"From what I gathered, something awful happened to them. He was all broken up."

So, on the way home, I stopped at the Stevens place. The banker was out in the yard, waiting for me. He looked terrible. He led me around to the big flower garden in the back and never have I seen such utter devastation. In that whole area, there wasn't a single plant alive. Every one of them had given up the ghost and was lying wilted on the ground.

"What could have done it, Joe ?" asked Stevens and, the way he said it, I felt sorry for him.

After all, those flowers were a big thing in his life. He'd raised them from special seed and he'd babied them along, and for anybody who is crazy about flowers, I imagine they were tops.

"Someone might have used some spray on them," I said. "Almost any kind of spray, if you don't dilute it enough, would kill them."

Out in the garden, I took a close look at the dead flowers, but nowhere could I see any sign of the burning from too strong a spray.

Then I saw the holes, at first only two or three of them, then, as I went on looking, dozens of them. They were all over the garden, about an inch in diameter, for all the world as if someone had taken a broomstick and punched holes all over the place. I got down on my knees and could see that they tapered, the way they do when you pull weeds with big taproots out of the ground.

"You been pulling weeds ?" I asked.

"Not big ones like that," said the banker. "I take good care of those flowers, Joe. You know that. Keep them weeded and watered and cultivated and sprayed. Put just the right amount of commercial fertilizer in the soil. Try to keep it at top fertility."

"You should use manure. It's better than all the commercial fertilizer you can buy."

"I don't agree with you. Tests have proved .... "

It was an old argument, one that we fought out each year. I let him run on, only half listening to him, while I picked up some of the soil and crumbled it. It was dead soil. You could feel that it was. It crumbled at the lightest touch and was dry, even when I dug a foot beneath the surface.

"You water this bed recently ?" I asked.

"Last evening," Stevens said.

"When did you find the flowers like this ?"

"This morning. They looked fine last night. And now .... " he blinked fast.

I asked him for a fruit jar and filled it with a sample of the soil.

"I'll send this in and see if there's anything wrong with it," I said.

A bunch of dogs were barking at something in the hedge in front of my place when I got home. Some of the dogs in the neighbourhood are hell on cats. I parked the car and picked up an old hoe handle and went out to rescue the cat they seemed to have cornered.

They scattered when they saw me coming and I started to look in the hedge for the cat. There wasn't any and that aroused my curiosity and I wondered what the dogs could have been barking at. So I went hunting. And I found it.

It was lying on the ground, close against the lower growth of the

hedge, as if it had crawled there for protection.

I reached in and pulled it out--a weed of some sort, about five feet tall, and with a funny root system. There were eight roots, each about an inch in diameter at the top and tapering to a quarter inch or so. They weren't all twisted up, but were sort of sprung out, so that there were four to the side, each set of four in line. I looked at their tips and I saw that the roots were not broken off, but ended in blunt, strong points.

The stalk, at the bottom, was about as thick as a man's fist. There were four main branches covered with thick, substantial, rather meaty leaves; but the last foot of the branches was bare of leaves. At the top were several flower or seed pouches, the biggest of them about the size of an old-fashioned coffee mug.

I squatted there looking at it. The more I looked, the more puzzled I became. As a county agent, you have to know quite a bit about botany and this plant was like none I had seen before.

I dragged it across the lawn to the tool shed back of the garage and tossed it in there, figuring that after supper I'd have a closer look at it.

I went in the house to get my evening meal ready and decided to broil a steak and fix up a bowl of salad.

A lot of people in town wonder at my living in the old homestead, but I'm used to the house and there seemed to be no sense in moving somewhere else when all it costs me is taxes and a little upkeep. For several years before Mother died, she had been quite feeble and I did all the cleaning and helped with the cooking, so I'm fairly handy at it.

After I washed the dishes, I read what little there was to read in the evening paper and then looked up an old text on botany, to see if I

could find anything that might help identify the plant.

I didn't find anything and, just before I went to bed, I got a flashlight and went out, imagining, I suppose, that I'd find the weed somehow different from the way I remembered it.

I opened the door of the shed and flashed the light where I'd tossed the weed on the floor. At first I couldn't see it, then I hear a leafy rustling over in one corner and I turned the light in that direction.

The weed had crawled over to one corner and it was trying to get up, its stem bowed out--the way a man would arch his back--pressing against the wall of the shed.

Standing there with my mouth open, watching it try to raise itself erect, I felt horror and fear. I reached out to the corner nearest the door and snatched up an axe.

If the plant had succeeded in getting up, I might have chopped it to bits. But, as I stood there, I saw the thing would never make it. I was not surprised when it slumped back on the floor.

What I did next was just as unreasoning and instinctive as reaching for the axe.

I found an old washtub and half filled it with water. Then I picked up the plant--it had a squirmish feel to it, like a worm-- stuck its roots into the water, and pushed the tub back against the wall, so the thing could be braced upright.

I went into the house and ransacked a couple of closets until I found the sunlamp I'd bought a couple of years back, to use when I had a touch of arthritis in my shoulder. I rigged up the lamp and trained it on the plant, not too close. Then I got a big shovelful of dirt and dumped

it in the tub.

And that, I figured, was about all I could do. I was giving the plant water, soil-food and simulated sunlight. I was afraid that, if I tried a more fancy treatment, I might kill it, for I hadn't any notion of what conditions it might be used to.

Apparently I handled it right. It perked up considerably and, as I moved about, the coffee-cup-sized pod on the top kept turning, following every move I made.

I watched it for a while and moved the sunlamp back a little, so there'd be no chance of scorching it, and went back into the house.

It was then that I really began to get bone-scared. I had been frightened out in the shed, of course, but that had been shock.

Now, thinking it over, I began to understand more clearly what sort of creature I'd found underneath the hedge. I remember I wasn't yet ready to say it out loud, but it seemed probable that my guest was an alien intelligence.

I did some wondering about how it had gotten here and if it had made the holes in Banker Stevens' fiowerbed and also if it could have had anything to do with the big hole out in Pete Skinner's north forty.

I sat around, arguing with myself, for a man just does not go prowling around in his neighbour's garden after midnight. But I had to know.

I walked up the alley to the back of the Stevens house and sneaked into the garden. Shielding the flashlight with my hat, I had another look at the holes in the ruined flowerbed. I wasn't too surprised when I saw that they occurred in series of eight, four to the side---exactly the kind of holes the plant back in my toolshed would make if it sank its roots

into the ground.

I counted at least eleven of those eight-in-line sets of holes and I'm sure that there were more. But I didn't want to stick around too long, for fear Banker Stevens might wake up and ask questions.

So I went back home, down the alley, and was just in time to catch that garbage-stealing dog doing a good job on the can. He had his head stuck clear down into it and I was able to sneak up behind him. He heard me and struggled to get out, but he'd jammed himself into the can. Before he could get loose, I landed a good swift kick where it did maximum good. He set some kind of canine speed record in getting offthe premises, I imagine.

I went to the toolshed and opened the door. The tub half full of muddy water was still there and the sunlamp was still burning--but the plant was gone. I looked all over the shed and couldn't find it. So I unplugged the sunlamp and headed for the house.

To be truthful, I was a little relieved that the plant had wandered off.

But when I rounded the corner of the house, I saw it hadn't. It was in the window box, and the geraniums I had nursed all spring were hanging limply over the side of the box.

I stood there and looked at it and had the feeling that it was looking back at me.

And I remembered that not only had it had to travel from the toolshed to the house and then climb into the window box, but it had had to open the toolshed door and close it again.

It was standing up, stiff and straight, and appeared to be in the best of health. It looked thoroughly incongruous in the window boxr-as if a

man had grown a tall stalk of corn there, although it didn't look anything like a stalk of corn.

I got a pail of water and poured it into the window box. Then I felt something tapping me on the head and looked up. The plant had bent over and was patting me with one of its branches. Fhe modified leaf at the end of the branch had spread itself out to do the patting and looked something like a hand.

I went into the house and up to bed and the main thing I was thinking about was that, ff the plant got too troublesome or dangerous, all I had to do was mix a strong dose of commercial fertilizer or arsenic, or something just as deadly, and water it with the mixture.

Believe it or not, I went to sleep.

Next morning I got to thinking that maybe I should repair the old greenhouse and put my guest in there and be sure to keep the door locked. It seemed to be reasonably friendly and inoffensive, but I couldn't be sure, of course.

After breakfast, I went out into the yard to look for it, with the idea of locking it in the garage for the day, but it wasn't in the window box, or anywhere that I could see. And since it was Saturday, when a lot of farmers came to town, with some of them sure to be dropping in to see me, I didn't want to be late to work.

I was fairly busy during the day and didn't have much time for thinking or worrying. But when I was wrapping up the sample of soil from the banker's garden to send to the Soils Bureau, I wondered if maybe there wasn't someone at the university I should notify. I also wondered about letting someone in Washington know, except I didn't have the least idea whom to contact, or even which department.

Coming home that evening, I found the plant anchored in the garden, in a little space where the radishes and lettuce had been. The few lettuce plants still left in the ground were looking sort of limp, but everything else was all right. I took a good look at the plant. It waved a couple of its branches at me--and it wasn't the wind blowing them, for there wasn't any wind-- and it nodded its coffee-cup pod as if to let me know it recog- nized me. But that was all it did.

After supper, I scouted the hedge in front of the house and found two more of the plants. Both of them were dead.

My next-door neighbours had gone to a movie, so I scouted their place, too, and found four more of the plants, under bushes and in comers where they had crawled away to die.

I wondered whether it might not have been the plant I'd rescued that the dogs had been barking at the night before. I felt fairly sure it was. A dog might be able to recognize an alien being where a man would be unable to.

I counted up. At least seven of the things had picked out Banker Stevens' flowerbed for a meal and the chemical fertilizer he used had killed all but one of them. The sole survivor, then, was out in the garden, killing off my lettuce.

I wondered why the lettuce and geraniums and Stevens' flowers had reacted as they did. It might be that the alien plants produced some sort of poison, which they injected into the soil to discourage other plant life from crowding their feeding grounds. That was not exactly far-fetched. There are trees and plants on Earth that accomplish the same thing by various methods. Or it might be that the aliens sucked the soil so dry of moisture and plant food that the other plants simply starved to death.

I did some wondering on why they'd come to Earth at all and why some of them had stayed. If they had travelled from some other planet, they must have come in a ship, so that hole out in Pete's north forty might have been where they stopped to replenish their food supply, dumping the equivalent of garbage beside the hole.

And what about the seven I had counted ?

Could they have jumped ship ? Or gone on shore leave and run into trouble, the way human sailors often do ?

Maybe the ship had searched for the missing members of the party, had been unable to find them, and had gone on. If that were so, then my own plant was a marooned alien. Or maybe the ship was still hunting.

I wore myself out, thinking about it, and went to bed early, but lay there tossing for a long time. Then, just as I was falling asleep, I heard the dog at the garbage can. You'd think after what had happened to him the night before, that he'd have decided to skip that particular can, but not him. He was rattling and banging it around, trying to tip it over.

I picked a skillet off the stove and opened the back door. I got a good shot at him, but missed him by a good ten feet. I was so sore that I didn't even go out to pick up the skillet, but went back to bed.

It must have been several hours later that I was brought straight up in bed by the terror-stricken yelping of a dog. I jumped out and ran to the window. It was a bright moonlit night and the dog was going down the driveway as if the devil himself were after him. Behind him sailed the plant. It had wrapped one of its branches around his tail and the other three branches were really giving him a working over.

They went up the street out of sight and, for a long time after they disappeared, I could hear the dog still yelping. Within a few minutes, I saw the plant coming up the gravel, walking like a spider on its eight roots.

It turned off the driveway and planted itself beside a lilac bush and seemed to settle down for the night. I decided that if it wasn't good for anything else, the garbage can would be safe, at least. If the dog came back again, the plant would be waiting to put the bee on him.

I lay awake for a long time, wondering how the plant had known I didn't want the dog raiding the garbage. It probably had seen--if that is the proper word--me chase him out of the yard.

I went to sleep with the comfortable feeling that the plant and I had finally begun to understand each other.

The next day was Sunday and I started working on the greenhouse, putting it into shape so I could cage up the plant. It had found itself a sunny spot in the garden and was imitating a large and particularly ugly weed I'd been too lazy to pull out.

My next-door neighbour came over to offer free advice, but he kept shifting uneasily and I knew there was something on his mind.

Finally he came out with it. "Funny thing--Jenny swears she saw a big plant walking around in your yard the other day. The kid saw it, too, and he claims it chased him." He tittered a little, embarrassed. "You know how kids are." "Sure," I said.

He stood around a while longer and gave me some more advice, then went across the yard and home.

I worried about what he had told me. If the plant really had taken to

chasing kids, there'd be hell to pay.

I worked at the greenhouse all day long, but there was a lot to do, for it had been out of use ten years or more, and by nightfall I was tuckered out.

After supper, I went out on the back stoop and sat on the steps, watching the stars. It was quiet and restful.

I hadn't been there more than fifteen minutes when I heard a rustling. I looked around and there was the plant, coming up out of the garden, walking along on its roots.

It sort of squatted down beside me and the two of us just sat there, looking at the stars. Or, at least, I looked at them. I don't actually know if the plant could see. If it couldn't, it had some other faculty that was just as good as sight. We just sat there.

After a while, the plant moved one of its branches over and took hold of my arm with that handlike leaf. I tensed a bit, but its touch was gentle enough and I sat still, figuring that if the two of us were to get along, we couldn't start out by flinching away from one another.

Then, so gradually that at first I didn't notice it, I began to perceive a sense of gratitude, as if the plant might be thanking me. I looked around to see what it was doing and it wasn't doing a thing, just sitting there as I was, but with its "hand" still on my arm.

Yet in some way, the plant was trying to make me under- stand that it was grateful to me for saving it.

It formed no words, you understand. Other than rustling its leaves, it couldn't make a sound. But I understood that some system of communication was in operation. No words, but emotion---deep,

clear, utterly sincere emotion. It eventually got a little embarrassing, this nonstop gratitude. "Oh, that's all right," I said, trying to put an end to it. "You would have done as much for me."

Somehow, the plant must have sensed that its thanks had been accepted, because the gratitude wore off a bit and some- thing else took over--a sense of peace and quiet.

The plant got up and started to walk offand I called out to it, "Hey, Plant, wait a minute !"

It seemed to understand that I had called it back, for it turned around. I took it by a branch and started to lead it around the boundaries of the yard. If this communication business was going to be any good, you see, it had to go beyond the sense of gratitude and peace and quiet. So I led the plant all the way around the yard and I kept thinking at it as hard as I could, telling it not to go beyond that perimeter.

By the time I'd finished, I was wringing wet with effort. But, finally, the plant seemed to be trying to say okay. Then I built up a mental image of it chasing a kid and I shook a mental finger at it. The plant agreed. I tried to tell it not to move around the yard in daylight, when people would be able to see it. Whether the concept was harder or I was getting tired, I don't know, but both the plant and I were limp when it at last indicated that it understood.

Lying in bed that night, I thought a lot about this problem of communication. It was not telepathy, apparently, but some- thing based on mental pictures and emotions.

But I saw it as my one chance. If I could learn to converse, no matter how, and the plant could learn to communicate some- thing beyond abstracts to me, it could talk to people, would be acceptable and believable, and the authorities might be willing to recognize it as an

intelligent being. I decided that the best thing to do would be to acquaint it with the way we humans lived and try to make it understand why we lived that way. And since I couldn't take my visitor outside the yard, I'd have to do it inside.

I went to sleep, chuckling at the idea of my house and yard being a classroom for an alien.

The next day I received a phone call from the Soils Bureau at the university

"What kind of stuff is this you're sending us?" the man demanded. "Just some soil I picked up," I said. "What's wrong with it ?" "Sample One is all right. It's just common, everyday Burton County soil. But Sample Two, that sand--good God, man, it has gold dust and flakes of silver and some copper in it ! All of it in minute particles, of course. But if some farmer out your way has a pit of that stuff, he's rich."

"At the most, he has twenty-five or thirty truckloads of it."

"Where'd he get it*. Where'd it come from?"

I took a deep breath and told him all I knew about the incident out at Pete's north forty.

He said he'd be right out, but I caught him before he hung up and asked him about the third sample.

"What was he growing on that ground?" the man asked baffiedly. "Nothing I know of could suck it that clean, right down to the bare bone! Tell him to put in a lot of organic material and some lime and almost everything else that's needed in good soil, before he tries to use it."

The soils people came out to Pete's place and they brought along some other men from the university. A little later in the week, after the papers had spelled out big headlines, a couple of men from Washington showed up. But no one seemed able to figure it out and they finally gave up. The newspapers gave it a play and dropped it as soon as the experts did.

During that time, curiosity seekers flocked to the farm to gape at the hole and the pile of sand. They had carried offmore than half the sand and Pete was madder than hell about the whole business.

"I'm going to fill in that hole and forget all about it," he told me, and that was what he did.

Meanwhile, at home, the situation was progressing. Plant seemed to understand what I had told him about not moving out of the yard and acting like a weed during the daytime and leaving kids alone. Everything was peaceable and I got no more complaints. Best of all, the garbage-stealing dog never showed his snout again.

Several times, during all the excitement out at Pete's place, I had been tempted to tell someone from the university about Plant. In each case, I decided not to, for we weren't getting along too well in the talk department.

But in other ways, we were doing just fine.

I let Plant watch me while I took an electric motor apart and then put it together again, but I wasn't too sure he knew what it was all about. I tried to show him the concept of mechanical power and I demonstrated how the motor would deliver that power and I tried to tell him what electricity was. But I got all bogged down with that, not knowing too much about it myself. I don't honestly think Plant got a thing out of that electric motor.

With the motor of the car, though, we were more successful. We spent one whole Sunday dismantling it and then putting it back together. Watching what I was doing, Plant seemed to take a lot of interest in it.

We had to keep the garage door locked and it was a scorcher of a day and, anyhow, I'd much rather spend a Sunday fishing than tearing down a motor. I wondered a dozen times if it was worth it, if there might not be easier ways to teach Plant the facts of our Earth culture.

I was all tired out and failed to hear the alarm and woke up an hour later than I should. I jumped into my clothes, ran out to the garage, unlocked the door and there was Plant. He had parts from that motor strewn all over the floor and he was working away at it, happy as a clam. I almost took an axe to him, but I got hold of myself in time. I locked the door behind me and walked to work.

All day, I wondered how Plant had gotten into the garage. Had he sneaked back in the night before, when I wasn't looking, or had he been able to pick the lock ? I wondered, too, what sort of shape I'd find the car in when I got home. I could just see myself working half the night, putting it back together.

I left work a little early. If I had to work on the car, I wanted an early start.

When I got home, the motor was all assembled and Plant was out in the garden, acting like a weed. Seeing him there, I realized he knew how to unlock the door, for I'd locked it when I left that morning.

I turned on the ignition, making bets with myself that it wouldn't start. But it did. I rode around town a little to check it and there wasn't a thing wrong with it.

For the next lesson, I tried something simpler. I got my carpentry tools and showed them to Plant and let him watch me while I made a bird house. Not that I needed any more bird houses. The place already crawled with them. But it was the easiest, quickest thing I could think of to show Plant how we worked in wood.

He watched closely and seemed to understand what was going on, all right, but I detected a sadness in him. I put my hand on his arm to ask him what was the matter. All that I got was a mournful reaction.

It bewildered me. Why should Plant take so much interest in monkeying around with a motor and then grieve at the making of a bird house ? I didn't get it figured out until a few days later, when Plant saw me picking a bouquet of flowers for the kitchen table.

And then it hit me.

Plant was a plant and flowers were plants and so was lumber, or at least lumber at one time had been a plant. And I stood there, with the bouquet dangling in my hand and Plant looking at me, and I thought of all the shocks he had in store for him when he found out more about uswhow we slaughtered our forests, grew plants for food and clothing, squeezed or boiled drugs from them.

It was just like a human going to another planet, I realized, and finding that some alien life form grew humans for food.

Plant didn't seem to be sore at me nor did he shrink from me in horror. He was just sad. When he got sad, he was the saddest-looking thing you could possibly imagine. A blood- hound with a hangover would have looked positively joyous in comparison.

If we ever had gotten to the point where we could have really talked--about things like ethics and philosophy, I meanwl might have learned

just how Plant felt about our plant-utilizing culture. I'm sure he tried to tell me, but I couldn't understand much of what he was driving at.

We were sitting out on the steps one night, looking at the stars. Earlier, Plant had been showing me his home planet, or it may have been some of the planets he had visited. I don't know.

All I could get were fuzzy mental pictures and reactions. One place was hot and red, another blue and cold. There was another that had all the colours of the rainbow and a cool, restful feel about it, as if there might have been gentle winds and fountains and birdsongs in the twilight.

We had been sitting there for quite a while when he put his hand back on my arm again and he showed me a plant. He must have put considerable effort into getting me to visualize it, for the image was sharp and clear. It was a scraggy, rundown plant and it looked even sadder than Plant looked when he got sad, if that is possible. When I started feeling sorry for it, he began to think of kindness and, when he thought of things like kindness and sadness and gratitude and happiness, he could really pour it on.

He had me thinking such big, kindly thoughts, I was afraid that I would burst. While I sat there, thinking that way, I saw the plant begin to perk up. It grew and flowered and was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. It matured its seeds and dropped them. Swiftly, little plants sprang from the seeds and they were healthy and full of ginger, too.

I mulled that one over several days, suspecting I was crazy for even thinking what I did. I tried to shrug it off, but it wouldn't shrug. It gave me an idea.

The only way I could get rid of it was to try it out.

Out in back of the toolshed was the sorriest yellow rose in town. Why it clung to life, year after year, I could never figure out. It had been there ever since I was a boy. The only reason it hadn't been dug up and thrown away long ago was that no one had ever needed the ground it was rooted in. I thought, if a plant ever needed help, that yellow rose was it. So I sneaked out back of the toolshed, making sure that Plant didn't see me, and stood in front of that yellow rose. I began to think kindly thoughts about it, although God knows it was hard to think kindly toward such a wretched thing. I felt foolish and hoped none of the neighbours spotted me, but I kept at it. I didn't seem to accomplish much to start with, but I went back, time after time. In a week or so, I got so that I just naturally loved that yellow rose to pieces.

After four or five days, I began to see some change in it. At the end of two weeks, it had developed from a scraggy, no- account bush to one that any rose fancier would have been proud to own. It dropped its bug-chewed leaves and grew new ones that were so shiny they looked as if they were waxed. Then it grew big flower buds and, in no time at all, was a blaze of yellow glory.

But I didn't quite believe it. In the back of my mind, I figured that Plant must have seen me doing it and helped along a bit. So I decided to test the process again where he couldn't interfere.

Millie had been trying for a couple of years to grow an African violet in a flower pot at the office. By this time, even she was willing to admit it was a losing battle. I had made a lot of jokes about the violet and, at'times, Millie had been sore at me about it. Like the yellow rose, it was a hard-luck plant. The bugs ate it. MiUie forgot to water it. It got knocked onto the floor. Visitors used it for an ashtray.

Naturally, I couldn't give it the close, intensive treatment I'd given the rose, but I made a point to stop for a few minutes every day beside

the violet and think good things about it and, in a couple of weeks, it perked up considerably. By the end of the month, it had bloomed for the first time in its life.

Meanwhile, Plant's education continued.

At first, he'd balked at entering the house, but finally trusted me enough to go in. He didn't spend much time there, for the house was too full of reminders that ours was a plant-utilizing culture. Furniture, clothing, cereal, paper---even the house itself--all were made of vegetation. I got an old butter tub and filled it with soil and put it in one corner of the dining-room, so he could eat in the house if he wanted to, but I don't remember that he even once took a snack out of that tub.

Although I didn't admit it then, I knew that what Plant and I had tried to do had been a failure. Whether someone else might have done better, I don't know. I suspect he might have. But I didn't know how to go about getting in touch and I was afraid of being laughed at. It's a terrible thing, our human fear of ridicule.

And there was Plant to consider, too. How would he take being passed on to someone else ? I'd screw up my courage to do something about it, and then Plant would come up out of the garden and sit beside me on the steps, and we'd talk--not about anything that mattered, really, but about happiness and sadness and brotherhood, and my courage would go glimmering and I'd have to start all over again.

I've since thought how much like two lost children we must have been, strange kids raised in different countries, who would have liked to play together, except neither knew the rules for the other's games or spoke the other's language.

I know... I know. According to common sense, you begin with mathematics. You show the alien that you know two and two are four. Then you draw the solar system and show him the sun on the diagram and then point to the sun overhead and you point to Earth on the diagram, then point to yourself. In this way, you demonstrate to him that you know about the solar system and about space and the stars and so on. Then you hand him the paper and the pencil.

But what if he doesn't know mathematics ? What if the two- plus-two-makes-four routine doesn't mean a thing to him? What if he's never seen a drawing? What if he can't draw--or see or hear or feel or think the way you do ?

To deal with an alien, you've got to get down to basics.

And maybe math isn't basic.

Maybe diagrams aren't.

In that case, you have to search for something that is.

Yet there must be certain universal basics.

I think I know what they are.

That, if nothing else, Plant taught me.

Happiness is basic. And sadness is basic. And gratitude, in perhaps a lesser sense. Kindness, too. And perhaps hatred-- although Plant and I never dealt in that.

Maybe brotherhood. For the sake of humanity, I hope so. But kindness and happiness and brotherhood are awkward tools to use in reaching specific understanding, although in Plant's world, they may not be.

It was getting on toward autumn and I was beginning to wonder how I'd take care of Plant during the winter months.

I could have kept him in the house, but he hated it there.

Then, one night, we were sitting on the back steps, listening to the first crickets of the season.

The ship came down without a sound. I didn't see it until it was about at treetop level. It floated down and landed between the house and toolshed.

I was startled for a moment, but not frightened, and perhaps not too surprised. In the back of my head, I'd wondered all the time, without actually knowing it, whether Plant's pals might not ultimately find him.

The ship was a shimmery sort of thing, as if it might not have been made of metal and was not really solid. I noticed that it had not really landed, but floated a foot or so above the grass.

Three other Plants stepped out and the oddest part of it was that there wasn't any door. They just came out of the ship and the ship closed behind them.

Plant took me by the arm and twitched it just a little, to make me understand he wanted me to walk with him to the ship. He made little comforting thoughts to try to calm me down.

And all the time that this was going on, I could sense the talk between Plant and those othe~ three--but just grasping the fringe of the conversation, barely knowing there was talk, not aware of what was being said.

And then, while Plant stood beside me, with his hand still on my arm, those other plants walked up. One by one, each took me by the other arm and stood facing me for a moment and told me thanks and happiness.

Plant told me the same, for the last time, and then the four of them walked toward the ship and disappeared into it. The ship left me standing there, watching it rise into the night, until I couldn't see it any longer.

I stood there for a long time, staring up into the sky, with the thanks and happiness fading and loneliness beginning to creepin.

I knew that, somewhere up there, was a larger ship, that in it were many other Plants, that one of them had lived with me for almost six months and that others of them had died in the hedges and fence corners of the neighbourhood. I knew also that it had been the big ship that had scooped out the load of nutritious soil from Pete Skinner's field.

Finally I stopped looking at the sky. Over behind the tool- shed I saw the whiteness of the yellow rose in bloom and once again I thought about the basics.

I wondered if happiness and kindness, perhaps even emotions that we humans do not know, might not be used on Plant's world as we use the sciences.

For the rose bush had bloomed when I thought kindly thoughts of it. And the African violet had found a new life in the kindness of a human.

Startling as it may seem, foolish as it may sound, it is not an unknown phenomenon. There are people who have the knack of getting the

most out of a flowerbed or a garden. And it is said of these people that they have green thumbs.

May it not be that green thurnbness is not so much concerned with skill or how much care is taken of a plant, as with the kindliness and the interest of the person tending it ?

For eons, the plant life of this planet has been taken for granted. It is simply there. By and large, plants are given little affection. They are planted or sown. They grow. In proper season, they are harvested.

I sometimes wonder if, as hunger tightens its grip upon our teeming planet, there may not be a vital need for the secret of green thumbness.

If kindness and sympathy can cause a plant to produce beyond its normal wont, then shouldn't we consider kindness as a tool to ward off Earth's hunger ? How much more might be produced if the farmer loved his wheat ? It's silly, of course, a principle that could not gain acceptance. And undoubtedly it would not work--not in a plant-utilizing culture.

For how could you keep on convincing a plant that you feel kindly toward it when, season after season, you prove that your only interest in it is to eat it or make it into clothing or chop it down for lumber ?

I walked out back of the shed and stood beside the yellow rose, trying to find the answer. The yellow rose stirred, like a pretty woman who knows she's being admired, but no emotion came from it.

The thanks and happiness were gone. There was nothing left but the loneliness.

Damned vegetable aliens--upsetting a man so he couldn't eat his

breakfast cereal in peace!

Neighbour

Coon Valley is a pleasant place, but there's no denying it's sort of off the beaten track and it's not a place where you can count on getting rich because the farms are small and a lot of the ground is rough. You can farm the bottom lands, but the hillsides are only good for pasture and the roads are just dirt roads, impassable at certain times of year.

The old-timers, like Bert Smith and Jingo Harris and myself, are well satisfied to stay here, for we grew up with the country and we haven't any illusions about getting rich and we'd feel strange and out-of-place anywhere but in the valley. But there are others, newcomers, who move in and get discouraged after a while and up and move away, so there usually is a farm or two, standing idle, waiting to be sold.

We are just plain dirt farmers, with emphasis on the dirt, for we can't afford a lot of fancy machinery and we don't go in for blooded stock--but there's nothing wrong with us; we're just everyday, the kind of people you meet all over these United States. Because we're out of the way and some of the families have lived here for so long, I suppose you could say that we have gotten clannish. But that doesn't mean we don't like outside folks; it just means we've lived so long together that we've got to know and like one another and are satisfied with things just as they are.

We have radios, of course, and we listen to the programmes and the news, and some of us take daily papers, but I'm afraid that we may be a bit provincial, for it's fairly hard to get us stirred up much about world happenings. There's so much o interest right here in the valley we haven't got the time to worr. about all those outside things. I imagine you'd call us conserative, for most of us vote Republican without even wonderin why and there's none of us who has much time

for all thi government interference in the farming business.

The valley has always been a pleasant place--not only th land, but the people in it, and we've always been fortunate i the new neighbours that we' get. Despite new ones coming i every year or so, we've never had a really bad one and the means a lot to us.

But we always worry a little when one of the new ones up an, moves away and we speculate among ourselves, wonderin what kind of people will buy or rent the vacant farm.

The old Lewis farm had been abandoned for a long time, th buildings all run down and gone to ruin and the fields gor back to grass. A dentist over at Hopkins Corners had rented for several years and run some cattle in it, driving out on weel ends to see how they were doing. We used to wonder every no' and then if anyone would ever farm the place again, but final] we quit wondering, for the buildings had fallen into such di: repair that we figured no one ever would. I went in one day an talked to the banker at Hopkins Corners, who had the rentin of the place, and told him I'd like to take it over if the denti~ ever gave it up. But he told me the owners, who lived i Chicago then, were anxious to sell rather than to rent i although he didn't seem too optimistic that anyonewould buy i

Then one spring a new family moved onto the farm and :' time we learned it had been sold and that the new family's nan was Heath--Reginald Heath. And Bert Smith said to m "Reginald! That's a hell of a name for a farmer !" But that w; all he said.

Jingo Harris stopped by one day, coming home from tow: when he saw Heath out in the yard, to pass the time of day. was a neighbourly thing to do, of course, and Heath seems glad to have him stop, although Jingo said he seemed to be a funny kind of man to be a farmer.

"He's a foreigner," Jingo told me. "Sort of dark. Like he might be a Spaniard or from one of those other countries. I don't know how he got that Reginald. Reginald is English and Heath's no Englishman."

Later on we heard that the Heaths weren't really Spanish, but were Rumanians or Bulgarians and that they were refugees from the Iron Curtain.

But Spanish, or Rumanian, or Bulgarian, the Heaths were workers. There was Heath and his wife and a half-grown girl and all three of them worked all the blessed time. They paid attention to their business and didn't bother anyone and because of this we liked them, although we didn't have much to do with them. Not that we didn't want to or that they didn't want us to; it's just that in a community like ours new folks sort of have to grow in instead of being taken in.

Heath had an old beaten-up, wired-together tractor that made a lot of noise, and as soon as the soil was dry enough to plough he started out to turn over the fields that through the years had grown up to grass. I used to wonder if he worked all night long, for many times when I went to bed I heard the tractor running. Although that may not be as late as it sounds to city dwellers, for here in the valley we go to bed early--and get up early, too.

One night after dark I set out to hunt some cows, a couple of fence-jumping heifers that gave me lots of trouble. Just let a man come in late from work and tired and maybe it's raining a little and dark as the inside of a cat and those two heifers would turn up missing and I'd have to go and hunt them. I tried all the different kinds of pokes and none of them did any good. When a heifer gets to fence-jumping there isn't much that can be done with her.

So I lit a lantern and set out to hunt for them, but I hunted for two hours

and didn't find a trace of them. I had just about decided to give up and go back home when I heard the soun~ a tractor running and realized that I was just above the field of the old Lewis place. To get home I'd have to go ri past the field and I figured it might be as well to wait whe reached the field until the tractor came around and ask He if he had seen the heifers.

It was a dark night, with thin clouds hiding the stars an~ wind blowing high in the treetops and there was a smell of n in the air. Heath, I figured, probably was staying out extra 1~ to finish up the field ahead of the coming rain, althougt remember that I thought he was pushing things just a lit hard. Already he was far ahead of all the others in the vall with his ploughing.

So I made my way down the steep hillside and waded 1 creek at a shallow place I knew and while I was doing thi heard the tractor make a complete round of the field. I look for the headlight, but I didn't see it and I thought probably 1 trees had hidden it from me.

I reached the edge of the field and climbed through the fen walking out across the furrows to intercept the tractor. I he~ it make the turn to the east of me and start down the fi~ toward me and although I could hear the noise of it, the wasn't any light.

I found the last furrow and stood there waiting, sort wondering, not too alarmed as yet, how Heath managed drive the rig without any light. I thought that maybe he had eyes and could see in the dark and although it seemed funny later when I remembered it, the idea that a man might have eyes did not seem funny then.

The noise kept getting louder and it seemed to be comi: pretty close, when all at once the tractor rushed out of the da and seemed to leap at me. I guess I must have been afraid th it would run over me, for I jumped back a yard or two, with my heart up in my neck. But I needn't

have bothered, for I was out of the way to start with.

The tractor went on past me and I waved the lantern and yelled for Heath to stop and as I waved the lantern the light was thrown onto the rear of the tractor and I saw that there was no one on it.

A hundred things went through my mind, but the one idea that stuck was that Heath had fallen off the tractor and might be lying injured, somewhere in the field.

I ran after the tractor, thinking to shut it down before it got loose and ran into a tree or something, but by the time I reached it, it had reached a turn and it was making that turn as neatly as if it had been broad daylight and someone had been driving it.

I jumped up on the drawbar and grabbed the seat, hauling myself, up. I reached out a hand, grabbing for the throttle, but with my hand upon the metal I didn't pull it back. The tractor had completed the turn now and was going down the furrowm and there was something else.

Take an old tractor, now--one that wheezed and coughed and hammered and kept threatening to fall apart, like this one did--and you are bound to get a lot of engine vibration. But in this tractor there was no vibration. It ran along as smooth as a high-priced car and the only jolts you got were when the wheels hit a bump or slight gully in the field.

I stood there, hanging on to the lantern with one hand and clutching the throttle with the other, and I didn't do a thing. I just rode down to the point where the tractor started to make another turn. Then I stepped off and went on home. I didn't hunt for Heath lying in the field, for I knew he wasn't there.

I suppose I wondered how it was possible, but I didn't really fret

myself too much trying to figure it all out. I imagine, in the first place, I was just too numb. You may worry a lot about little things that don't seem quite right, but when you run into a big thing, like that self-operating tractor, you sort of give up automatically, knowing that it's too big for your brain to handle, that it's something you haven't got a chance of solving. live with. So your mind rejects it.

I got home and stood out in the barnyard for a moment, listening. The wind was blowing fairly hard by then and the first drops of rain were falling, but every now and then, when the wind would quiet down, I could hear the tractor.

I went inside the house and Helen and the kids were all in bed and sound asleep, so I didn't say anything about it that night. And the next morning, when I had a chance to think about it, I didn't say anything at all. Mostly, I suppose, because I knew no one would believe me and that I'd have to take a lot of kidding about automatic tractors.

Heath got his ploughing done and his crops in, well ahead of everyone in the valley. The crops came up in good shape and we had good growing weather; then along in June we got a spell of wet, and everyone got behind with corn ploughing because you can't go out in the field when the ground is soggy. All of us ohored around our places, fixing fences and doing other odd jobs, cussing out the rain and watching the weeds grow like mad in the unploughed field.

All of us, that is, except Heath. His corn was clean as a whistle and you had to hunt to find a weed. Jingo stopped by one day and asked him how he managed, but Heath just laughed a little, in that quiet way of his, and talked of something else.

The first apples finally were big enough for green-apple pies and there is no one in the country makes better green-apple pies than Helen. She wins prizes with her pies every year at the county fair and

she is proud of them.

One day she wrapped up a couple of pies and took them over to the Heaths. It's a neighbourly way we have of doing in the valley, with the women running back and forth from one neighbour to another with their cooking. Each of them has some dish she likes to show off to the neighbours and it's a sort of harmless way of bragging.

Helen and the Heaths got along just swell. She was late in getting home and I was starting supper, with the kids yelling they were hungry when-do-we-eat-around-here, when she finally showed up.

She was full of talk about the Heaths--how they had fixed up the house, you never would have thought anyone could do so much to such a terribly run-down place as they had, and about the garden they had--especially about the garden. It was a big one, she said, and beautifully taken care of and it was full of vegetables she had never seen before. The funniest things you ever saw, she said. Not the ordinary kind of vegetables.

We talked some about those vegetables, speculating that maybe the Heaths had brought the seeds out with them from behind the Iron Curtain, although so far as I could remember, vegetables were vegetables, no matter where you were. They grew the same things in Russia or Rumania or Timbuktu as we did. And, anyhow, by this time I was getting a little sceptical about that story of their escaping from Rumania.

But we didn't have the time for much serious speculation on the Heaths, although there was plenty of casual gossip going around the neighbourhood. Haying came along and then the small-grain harvest and everyone was busy. The hay was good and the small-grain crop was fair, but it didn't look like we'd get much corn. For we hit a drought. That's the way it goesm too much rain in June, not enough in

August.

We watched the corn and watched the sky and felt hopeful when a cloud showed up, but the clouds never meant a thing. It just seems at times that God isn't on your side.

Then one morning Jingo Harris showed up and stood around, first on one foot, then the other, talking to me while I worked on an old corn binder that was about worn out and which it didn't look nohow I'd need to use that year.

"Jingo," I said, after I'd watched him fidget for an hour or more, "You got something on your mind?"

He blurted it out then. "Heath got rain last night," he said.

"No one else did," I told him.

"I guess you're right," said Jingo. "Heath's the only one."

He told me how he'd gone to cut through Heath's north cornfield, carrying back a couple of balls of binder twine he'd borrowed from Bert Smith. It wasn't until he'd crawled through the fence that he noticed the field was wet, soaked by a heavy rain.

"It must have happened in the night," he said.

He thought it was funny, but figured maybe there had been a shower across the lower end of the valley, although as a rule rains travel up and down the valley, not across it. But when he had crossed the corner of the field and crawled through the fence, he noticed it hadn't rained at all. So he went back and walked around the field and the rain had fallen on the field, but nowhere else. It began at the fence and ended at the fence.

When he'd made a circuit of the field he sat down on one of the balls of twine and tried to get it all thought out, but it made no sense--furthermore, it was plain unbelievable.

Jingo is a thorough man. He likes to have all the evidence and know all there is to know before he makes up his mind. So he went over to Heath's second corn patch, on the west side of the valley. And once again he found that it had rained on that field--on the field, but not around the field.

"What do you make of it ?" Jingo asked me and I said I didn't know. I came mighty close to telling him about the unmanned tractor, but I thought better of it. After all, there was no point in getting the neighbourhood stirred up.

After Jingo left I got in the car and drove over to the Heath farm, intending to ask him if he could loan me his posthole digger for a day or two. Not that I was going to dig any post- holes, but you have to have some excuse for showing up at a neighbour's place.

I never got a chance to ask him for that posthole digger, though. Once I got there I never even thought of it.

Heath was sitting on the front steps of the porch and he seemed glad to see me. He came down to the car and shook my hand and said, "It's good to see you, Calvin." The way he said it made me feel friendly and sort of important, too--especially that Calvin business, for everyone else just calls me Cal. I'm not downright sure, in fact, that anyone in the neighbourhood remembers that my name is Calvin.

"I'd like to show you around the place," he said. "We've done some fixing up."

Fixing up wasn't exactly the word for it. The place was spick- and-

span. It looked like some of those Pennsylvania and Connecticut farms you see in the magazines. The house and all the other buildings had been ramshackle with all the paint peeled off them and looking as if they might fall down at any minute. But now they had a sprightly, solid look and they gleamed with paint. They didn't look new, of course, but they looked as if they'd always been well taken care of and painted every year. The fences were all fixed up and painted, too, and the weeds were cut and a couple of old unsightly scrap-lumber piles had been cleaned up and burned. Heath had even tackled an old iron and machinery junk pile and had it sorted out.

"There was a lot to do," said Heath, "but I feel it's worth it. I have an orderly soul. I like to have things neat."

Which might be true, of course, but he'd done it all in less than six months' time. He'd come to the farm in early March and it was only August and he'd not only put in some hundred acres of crops and done all the other farm work, but he'd got the place fixed up. And that wasn't possible, I told myself. One man couldn't do it, not even with his wife and daughter helping--not even if he worked twenty-four hours a day and didn't stop to eat. Or unless he could take time and stretch it out to make one hour equal three or four.

I trailed along behind Heath and thought about that time- stretching business and was pleased at myself for thinking of it, for it isn't often that I get foolish thoughts that are likewise pleasing. Why, I thought, with a deal like that you could stretch

out any day so you could get all the work done you wanted to. And if you could stretch out time, maybe you could compress it, too, so that a trip to a dentist, for example, would only seem to take a minute.

Heath took me out to the garden and Helen had been right. There were the familiar vegetables, of course---cabbages and tomatoes

and squashes and all the other kinds that are found in every garden--but in addition to this there were as many others I had never seen before. He told me the names of them and they seemed to be queer names then, although now it seems a little strange to think they once had sounded queer, for now everyone in the valley grows these vegetables and it seems like we have always had them.

As we talked he pulled up and picked some of the strange vegetables and put them in a basket he had brought along.

"You'll want to try them all," he said. "Some of them you may not like at first, but there are others that you will. This one you eat raw, sliced like a tomato, and this one is best boiled, although you can bake it, too .... "

I wanted to ask him how he'd come on the vegetables and where they had come from, but he didn't give me a chance; he kept on telling me about them and how to cook them and that this one was a winter keeper and that one you could can and he gave me one to eat raw and it was rather good.

We'd got to the far end of the garden and were starting to come back when Heath's wife ran around the corner of the house.

Apparently she didn't see me at first or had forgotten I was there, for she called to him and the name she called him wasn't Reginald or Reggie, but a foreign-sounding name. I won't even try to approximate it, for even at the time I wasn't able to recall it a second after hearing it. It was like no word I'd ever heard before.

Then she saw me and stopped running and caught her breath, and a moment later said she'd been listening in on the party line and that Bert Smith's little daughter, Ann, was terribly sick.

"They called the doctor," she said, "but he is out on calls and he won't get there in time."

"Reginald," she said, "the symptoms sound like .... "

And she said another name that was like none I'd ever heard or expect to hear again.

Watching Heath's face, I could swear I saw it pale despite his olive tinge of skin. "qui~k!" tt~ %lx~t%~ ~l~ ~,bb~6 m~ by the arm. we ran around in front to his old clunk of a car. He threw the basket of vegetables in the back seat and jumped behind the wheel. I scrambled in after him and tried to close the door, but it wouldn't close. The look kept slipping loose and I had to hang on to the door so it wouldn't bang.

We lit out of there like a turpentined dog and the noise that old ear made was enough to deafen one. Despite my holding on to it, the door kept banging and all the fenders rattled and there was every other kind of noise you'd expect a junk-heap car to make, with an extra two or three thrown in.

I wanted to ask him what he planned to do, but I was having trouble framing the question in my mind and even if I had known how to phrase it I doubt he could have heard me with all the racket that the car was making.

So I hung on as best I could and tried to keep the door from banging and all at once it seemed to me the car was making more noise than it had any call to. Just like the old haywire tractor made more noise than any tractor should. Too much noise, by far, for the way that it was running. ;lust like on the tractor, there was no engine vibration and despite all the banging and the clanking we were making time. As I've said, our valley roads are none too good, but even so I swear

there were places we hit seventy and we went around sharp comers where, by rights, we should have gone into the ditch at the speed that we were going, but the car just seemed to settle down and hug the road and we never even skidded.

We pulled up in front of Bert's place and Heath jumped and ran up the walk, with me following him.

Amy Smith came to the door and I could see that she'd bt crying, and she looked a little surprised to see the two of us

We stood there for a moment without saying anything, tl Heath spoke to her and here is a funny thing: Heath wearing a pair of ragged overalls and a sweat-stained shirt he didn't have a hat and his hair was all rumpled up, but th was a single instant when it seemed to me that he was w, dressed in an expensive business suit and that he took off hat and bowed to Amy.

"I understand", he said, "that the little girl is sick. Mayl~ can help."

I don't know if Amy had seen the same thing that I h seemed to see, but she opened the door and stood to one side that we could enter.

"In there," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Heath, and went into the roo~

Amy and I stood there for a moment, then she turned to and I could see the tears in her eyes again. "Cal, she's awful sick," she said.

I nodded miserably, for now the spell was gone and common sense was coming back again and I wondered at the madness this farmer who thought that he could help a little girl who w terribly sick. And at my madness for standing there, witho even going in the room with

him.

But just then Heath came out of the room and closed tl door softly behind him. "She's sleeping now," he said to Amy. "She'll be all right Then, without another word, he walked out of the door. hesitated a moment, looking at Amy, wondering what to d~ And it was pretty plain there was nothing I could do. So followed him.

We drove back to his farm at a sober rate of speed, but the car banged and thumped just as bad as ever.

"Runs real good," I yelled at him.

He smiled a bit.

"I keep it tinkered up," he yelled back at me.

When we got to his place, I got out of his car and walked over to my own.

"You forgot the vegetables," he called after me.

So I went back to get them.

"Thanks a lot," I said.

"Any time," he told me.

I looked straight at him, then, and said: "It sure would be fine if we could get some rain. It would mean a lot to us. A soaking rain right now would save the corn."

"Come again," he told me. "It was good to talk with you."

And that night it rained, all over the valley, a steady, soaking rain, and

the corn was saved. And Ann got well.

The doctor, when he finally got to Bert's, said that she had passed the crisis and was already on the mend. One of those virus things, he said. A lot of it around. Not like the old days, he said, before they got to fooling around with all their miracle drugs, mutating viruses right and left. Used to be, he said, a doctor knew what he was treating, but he don't know any more.

I don't know if Bert or Amy told Doc about Heath, although I imagine that they didn't. After all, you don't tell a doctor that a neighbour cured your child. And there might have been someone who would have been orhery enough to try to bring a charge against Heath for practising medicine without a licence, although that would have been pretty hard to prove. But the story got around the valley and there was a lot of talk. Heath, I heard, had been a famous doctor in Vienna before he'd made his getaway. But I didn't believe it. I don't even believe those who started the story believed it, but that's the way it goes in a neighbourhood like ours.

That story, and others, made quite a flurry for a month or so, but then it quieted down and you could see that the Heaths had become one of us and belonged to the valley. Bert went over and had quite a talk with Heath and the women-folks took to calling Mrs. Heath on the telephone, with some of those who were listening in breaking in to say a word or two, thereby initiating Mrs. Heath into the round-robin telephone con- versations that are going on all the time on our valley party line, with it getting so that you have to bust in on them and tell them to get off the line when you want to make an important call. We had Heath out with us on our coon hunts that fall and some of the young bloods started paying attention to Heath's daughter. It was almost as if the Heaths were old-time residents.

As I've said before, we've always been real fortunate in getting in

good neighbours.

When things are going well, time has a way of flowing along so smoothly that you aren't conscious of its passing, and that was the way it was in the valley.

We had good years, but none of us paid much attention to that. You don't pay much attention to the good times, you get so you take them for granted. It's only when bad times come along that you look back and realize the good times you have had.

A year or so ago I was just finishing up the morning chores when a car with a New York licence pulled up at the barnyard gate. It isn't very often we see an out-of-state licence plate in the valley, so I figured that it probably was someone who had gotten lost and had stopped to ask directions. There was a man and woman in the front seat and three kids and a dog in the back seat and the car was new and shiny.

I was carrying the milk up from the barn and when the man got out I put the pails down on the ground and waited for him.

He was a youngish sort of fellow and he looked intelligent and he had good manners.

He told me his name was Rickard and that he was a New York newspaperman on vacation and had dropped into the valley on his way out west to check some information.

It was the first time, so far as I knew, that the valley had ever been of any interest newswise and I said so. I said we never did much here to get into the news.

"It's no scandal," Rickard told me, "if that is what you're thinking. It's just a matter of statistics."

There are a lot of times when I don't catch a situation as quickly as I should, being a sort of deliberate type, but it seems to me now that as soon as he said statistics I could see it coming.

"I did a series of farm articles a few months back," said Rickard, "and to get my information I had to go through a lot of government statistics. I never got so sick of anything in my entire life."

"And ?" I asked, not feeling too well myself.

"I found some interesting things about this valley," he went on. "I remember that I didn't catch it for a while. Went on past the figures for a ways. Almost missed the significance, in fact. Then I did a double-take and backed up and looked at them again. The full story wasn't in that report, of course. Just a hint of something. So I did some more digging and came up with other facts."

I tried to laugh it off, but he wouldn't let me.

"Your weather, for one thing," he said. "Do you realize you've had perfect weather for the past ten years ?"

"The weather's been pretty good," I admitted.

"It wasn't always good. I went back to see."

"That's right," I said. "It's been better lately."

"Your crops have been the best they've ever been in the last ten years."

"Better seed," I said. "Better ways of farming."

He grinned at me. "You guys haven't changed your way of farming in

the last quarter century."

"There was an army worm invasion two years ago," he said. "It hit all around you, but you got by scot-free."

"We were lucky. I remember we said so at the time."

"I checked health records," he said. "Same thing once again. For ten solid years. No measles, no chickenpox, no pneumonia. No nothing. One death in ten full years---complications atten- dant on old age."

"Old Man Parks," I said. "He was going on to ninety. Fine old gentleman."

"You see," said Rickard.

I did see.

The fellow had the figures. He had tracked it down, this thing we hadn't even realized, and he had us cold.

"What do you want me to do about it?" I asked.

"I want to talk to you about a neighbour."

"I won't talk about any of my neighbours. Why don't you talk to him yourself?"

"I tried to, but he wasn't home. Fellow down the road said he'd gone into town. Whole family had gone into town."

"Reginald Heath," I said. There wasn't much sense in playing dumb with Rickard, for he knew all the angles.

"That's the man. I talked to folks in town. Found out he'd never had to

have any repair work done on any of his machinery or his car. Has the same machinery he had when he started farming. And it was worn out then."

"He takes good care of it," I told him. "He keeps it tinkered up."

"Another thing," said Rickard. "Since he's been here he hasn't bought a drop of gasoline."

I'd know the rest of it, of course, although I'd never stopped to think about it. But I didn't know about the gasoline. I must have shown my surprise, for Rickard grinned at me.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"A story."

"Heath's the man to talk to. I don't know a thing to help you."

And even when I said it I felt easy in my mind. I seemed to have an instinctive faith that Heath could handle the situation, that he'd know just what to do.

But after breakfast I couldn't settle down to work. I was pruning the orchard, a job I'd been putting off for a year or two and that badly needed doing. I kept thinking of that business of Heath not buying gasoline and that night I'd found the tractor ploughing by itself and how smooth both the car and tractor ran despite all tile noise they made.

So I laid down my pruning hook and shears and struck out across the fields. I knew the Heath family was in town, but I don't think it would have made any difference to me if they'd been at home. I think I would have gone just the same. For more than ten years now, I realized, I'd

been wondering about that tractor and it was time that I found out.

I found the tractor in the machine shed and I thought maybe I'd have some trouble getting into it. But I didn't have a bit. I slipped the catches and the hood lifted up and I found exactly what I had thought I'd find, except that I hadn't actually worked out in my mind the picture of what I'd find underneath that hood.

It was just a block of some sort of shining metal that looked almost like a cube of heavy glass. It wasn't very big, but it had a massive look about it, as if it might have been a heavy thing to lift.

You could see the old bolt holes where the original internal combustion engine had been mounted and a heavy piece of some sort of metal had been fused across the frame to seat that little power plant. And up above the shiny cube was an apparatus of some sort. I didn't take the time to find out how it worked, but I could see that it was connected to the exhaust and I knew it was a dingus that disguised the power plant. You know how in electric trains they have it fixed up so that the locomotive goes chuff-chuffand throws out a stream of smoke. Well, that was what that contraption was. It threw out little puffs of smoke and made a tractor noise.

I stood there looking at it and I wondered why it was, if Heath had an engine that worked better than an internal combustion engine, he should have gone to so much trouble to hide the fact he had it. If I'd had a thing like that, I knew, I'd make the most of it. I'd get someone to back me and go into production and in no time at all I'd be stinking rich. And there'd been nothing in the world to prevent Heath from doing that. But instead he'd fixed the tractor so it looked and sounded like an ordinary tractor and he'd fixed his car to make so much noise that it hid the fact it had a new type motor. Only he had overdone it. He'd made both the car and tractor make more noise than they should. And he'd missed an important bet in not buying gasoline. In

his place I'd bought the stuff, just the way you should, and thrown it away or burned it to get rid of it.

It almost seemed to me that Heath might have had something he was hiding all these years, that he'd tried deliberately to keep himself unnoticed. As if he might really have been a refugee from the Iron Curtain--or from somewhere else.

I put the hood back in place again and snapped the catches shut and when I went out I was very careful to shut the machine shed door securely.

I went back to my pruning and I did quite a bit of thinking and while I was doing it I realized that I'd been doing this same thinking, piecemeal, ever since that night I'd found the tractor running by itself. Thinking of it in snatches and not trying to correlate all my thinking and that way it hadn't added up to much, but now it did and I suppose I should have been a little scared.

But I wasn't scared. Reginald Heath was a neighbour, and a good one, and we'd gone hunting and fishing together and we'd helped one another with haying and threshing and one thing and another and I liked the man as well as anyone I had ever known. Sure, he was a little different and he had a funny kind of tractor and a funny kind of car and he might even have a way of stretching time and since he'd come into the valley we'd been fortunate in weather and in health. All true, of course, but nothing to be scared of. Nothing to be scared of, once you knew the man.

For some reason or other I remembered the time several years before when I'd dropped by of a summer evening. It was hot and the Heath family had brought chairs out on the lawn because it was cooler there. Heath got me a chair and we sat and talked, not about anything in particular, but whatever came into our heads.

There was no moon, but there were a lot of stars and they were the prettiest I have ever seen them.

I called Heath's attention to them and, just shooting off my mouth, I told him what little rd picked up about astronomy.

"They're a long ways off," I said. "So far off that their light takes years to reach us. And all of them are suns. A lot of them bigger than our sun."

Which was about all I knew about the stars.

Heath nodded gravely.

"There's one up there", he said, "that I watch a lot. That blue one, over there. Well, sort of blue, anyhow. See it ? See how it twinkles. Like it might be winking at us. A friendly sort of star."

I pretended that I saw the one he was pointing at, although I wasn't sure I did, there were so many of them and a lot of them were twinkling.

Then we got to talking about something else and forgot about the stars. Or at least I did.

Right after supper, Bert Smith came over and said that Rickard had been around asking him some questions and that he'd been down to Jingo's place and that he'd said he'd see Heath just as soon as Heath got back from town.

Bert was a bit upset about it, so I tried to calm him down.

"These city folks get excited easy," I told him. "There's nothing to it."

I didn't worry much about it because I felt sure that Heath could handle things and even if Rickard did write a story for the New York papers it wouldn't bother us. Coon Valley is a long piece from New York.

I figured we'd probably seen and heard the last from Rickard. But in all my life, I've never been more wrong. About midnight or so I woke up with Helen shaking me.

"There's someone at the door," she said. "Go see who it is."

So I shucked into my overalls and shoes and lit the lamp and went downstairs to see.

While I'd been getting dressed there'd been some knocking at the door, but as soon as I lit the lamp it quit.

I went to the door and opened it and there stood Rickard and he wasn't near as chipper as he'd been in the morning. "Sorry to get you up," he said, "but it seems that I'm lost." "You can't be lost," I told him. "There isn't but one road through the valley. One end of it ties up to Sixty and the other to Eighty-five. You follow the valley read and you're bound to hit one or the other of them."

"I've been driving", he told me, "for the last four hours and I can't find either of them."

"Look," I said, "all you do is drive one way or the other. You can't get off the road. Fifteen minutes either way and you're on a state highway."

I was exasperated with him, for it seemed a silly thing to do. And I don't take kindly to being routed out at midnight.

"But I tell you I'm lost," he said in a sort of desperation and I could see

that he was close to panic. "The wife is getting scared and the kids are dead on their feet .... "

"All right," I told him. "Let me get on my shirt and tie my shoes. I'll get you out of here."

He told me he wanted to get to Sixty, so I got out my car and told him to follow me. I was pretty sore about it, but I figured the only thing to do was to help him out. He'd upset the valley and the sooner out the better.

I drove for thirty minutes before I began to get confused myself. That was twice as long as it should have taken to get out to the highway. But the road looked all right and there seemed to be nothing wrong, except for the time it took. So I kept on going. At the end of forty-five minutes we were back in front of my place again.

I couldn't figure it out for the life of me. I got out of my car and went back to Rickard's car.

"You see what I mean," he said.

"We must have got turned around," I said.

His wife was almost hysterical.

"What's going on?" she asked me in a high, shrill voice. "What is going on around here?"

"We'll try again," I said. "We'll drive slower this time so we don't make the same mistake."

I drove slower and this time it took an hour to get back to the farm. So we tried for Eighty-five and forty minutes later were right back where we started.

"I give up," I told them. "Get out and come in. We'll fix up some beds. You can spend the night and we'll get you out come light."

I cooked up some coffee and found stuff to make sandwiches while Helen fixed up beds to take care of the five of them.

"The dog can sleep out here in the kitchen," she said.

I got an apple box and quilt and fixed the dog a bed.

The dog was a nice little fellow, a wirehair who was full of fun, and the Rickard kids were about as fine a bunch of kids as you'd find anywhere.

Mrs. Rickard was all set to have hysterics, but Helen got her to drink some coffee and I wouldn't let them talk about not being able to get out.

"Come daylight," I told them, "and there'll be nothing to it." After breakfast they were considerably calmed down and seemed to have no doubt they could find Number Sixty. So they started out alone, but in an hour were back again. I took my car and started out ahead of them and I don't rain, admitting I could feel bare feet walking up and down my spine.

I watched closely and all at once I realized that somehow w were headed back into the valley instead of heading out of il So I stopped the car and we turned our cars around an4 headed back in the right direction. But in ten minutes we wer. turned around again. We tried again and this time we fairl3 crawled, trying to spot the place where we got turned around But we could never spot it.

We went back to my place and I called up Bert and Jing and asked

them to come over.

Both of them tried to lead the Rickards out, one at a time then the two of them together, but they were no better at it thar I was. Then I tried it alone, without the Rickards following me and I had no trouble at all. I was out to highway Sixty and bac~ in half an hour. So we thought maybe the jinx was broken and 1 tried to lead out the Rickard car, but it was no soap.

By mid-afternoon we knew the answer. Any of the natives could get out of the valley, but the Rickards couldn't.

Helen put Mrs. Rickard to bed and fed her some sedative and I went over to see Heath.

He was glad to see me and he listened to me, but all the time I was talking to him I kept remembering how one time I had wondered if maybe he could stretch out time. When I had finished he was silent for a while, as if he might have been going over some decision just to be certain that it was right.

"It's a strange business, Calvin," he said finally, "and it doesn't seem right the Rickards should be trapped in this valley if they don't want to stay here.

"Yet, it's a fortunate thing for us, actually. Rickard was planning on writing a story about us and if he'd written as he planned to, there'd been a lot of attention paid us. There would have been a crowd of people coming in--other newspapermen and government men and people from the universities and the idly curious. They'd have upset our lives and some of them taking it somewhat better and the Rickard kids were happy with the outdoor life and the Rickard dog was busily engaged in running all the valley rabbits down to skin and bones.

"There's the old Chandler place up at the head of the valley," said Jingo. "No one's been living there for quite a while, but it's in good shape. It could be fixed up so it was comfortable."

"But I can't stay here," protested Rickard. "I can't settle down here."

"Who said anything about settling down ?" asked Bert. "You just got to wait it out. Some day whatever is wrong will get straightened out and then you can get away." "But my job," said Rickard.

Mrs. Rickard spoke up then. You could see she didn't like the situation any better than he did, but she had that queer, practical, everyday logic that a woman at times surprises a man by showing. She knew that they were stuck here in the valley and she was out to make the best of it.

"Remember that book you're always threatening to write ?" she asked. "Maybe this is it." That did it.

Rickard mooned around for a while, making up his mind, although it already was made up. Then he began talking about the peace in the valley--the peace and quietness and the lack of hurry--just the place to write a book.

The neighbours got together and fixed up the house on the old Chandler place and Rickard called his office and made some excuse and got a leave of absence and wrote a letter to his bank, transferring whatever funds he had. Then he settled down to write.

Apparently in his phone calls and his letter-writing he never even hinted at the real reason for his staying--perhaps because it would have sounded downright silly--for there was no ruckus over his failure to go back.

The valley settled down to its normal life again and it felt good after all the uproar. The neighbours shopped for the Rickards and carried out from town all the groceries and other things they needed and once in a while Rickard took the car and had a try at finding the state highways.

But mostly he wrote and in about a year he sold this book of his. ProbaNy you have read it: You Could Hear the Silence. Made him a hunk of money. But his New York publishers still are going slowly mad trying to understand why he steadfastly refuses to stir out of the valley. He has refused lecture tours, has declined dinners in his honour and turned down all the other glitter that goes with writing a best seller.

The book didn't change Rickard at all. By the time he sold it he was well liked in the valley and seemed to like everyonem except possibly Heath. He stayed rather cold to Heath. He used to do a lot of walking, to get exercise, he said, although I think that he thought up most of his book out on those walks. And he'd stop by and chew the fat when he was out on those walks and that way everyone got to know him. He used to talk a lot about when he could get out of the valley and all of us were beginning to feel sorry that a time would come when he would leave, for the Rickards had turned out to be good neighbours. There must be something about the valley that brings out the best there is in everyone. As I have said before, we have yet to get a bad neighbour and that is something most neighbourhoods can't say.

One day I had stopped on my way from town to talk a while with Heath and as we stood talking, up the road came Rickard. You could see he wasn't going anywhere, but was just out for a walk.

He stopped and talked with us for a few minutes, then suddenly he said, "You know, we've made up our minds that we would like to stay here."

"Now, that is fine," said Heath.

"Grace and I were talking about it the other night," said Rickard. "About the time when we could get out of here. Then suddenly we stopped our talking and looked at one another and we knew right then and there we didn't want to leave. It's been so peaceful and the kids like the school here so much better than in the city and the people are so fine we couldn't bear to leave."

'Tm glad to hear you say that," Heath told him. "But it seems to me you've been sticking pretty close. You ought to take the wife and kids in town to see a show." And that was it. It was as simple as all that.

Life goes on in the valley as it always has, except it's even better now. All of us are healthy. We don't even seem to get colds any more. When we need rain we get it and when there's need of sun the sun is sure to shine. We aren't getting rich, for you can't get rich with all this Washington interference, but we're making a right good living. Rickard is working on his second book and once in a while I go out at night and try to locate the star Heath showed me that evening long ago.

But we still get some publicity now and then. The other night I was listening to my favourite newscaster and he had an item he had a lot of fun with.

"Is there really such a place as Coon Valley ?" he asked and you could hear the chuckle just behind the words. "If there is, the government would like to know about it. The maps insist there is and there are statistics on the books that say it's a place where there is no sickness, where the climate is ideal, where there's never a crop failure--a land of milk and honey. Investigators have gone out to seek the truth of this and they can't find the place, although people in nearby communities insist there's such a valley. Telephone calls have

been made to people listed as residents of the valley, but the calls can't be completed. Letters have been written to them, but the letters are returned to the sender for one or another of the many reasons the post office has for non-delivery. Investigators have waited in nearby trading centres, but Coon Valley people never came Neighbour to town while the investigators were there. If there is such a place and if the things the statistics say of it are true, the government would be very interested, for there must be data in the valley that could be studied and applied to other sectors. We have no way of knowing whether this broadcast can reach the valley--if it is any more efficient than investigators or telephone or the postal service. But if it does--and if there is such a place as Coon Valley--and if one of its residents should be listening, won't he please speak up !"

He chuckled then, chuckled very briefly, and went on to tell the latest rumour about Khrushchev.

I shut off the radio and sat in my chair and thought about the times when for several days no one could find his way out of the valley and of the other times when the telephones went dead for no apparent reason. And I remembered how we'd talked about it among ourselves and wondered if we should speak to Heath about it, but had in each case decided not to, since we felt that Heath knew what he was doing and that we could trust his judgment.

It's inconvenient at times, of course, but there are a lot of compensations. There hasn't been a magazine salesman in the valley for more than a dozen years--nor an insurance salesman, either.