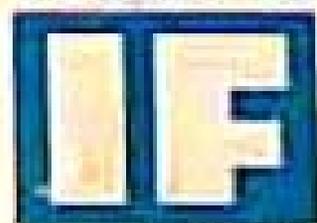


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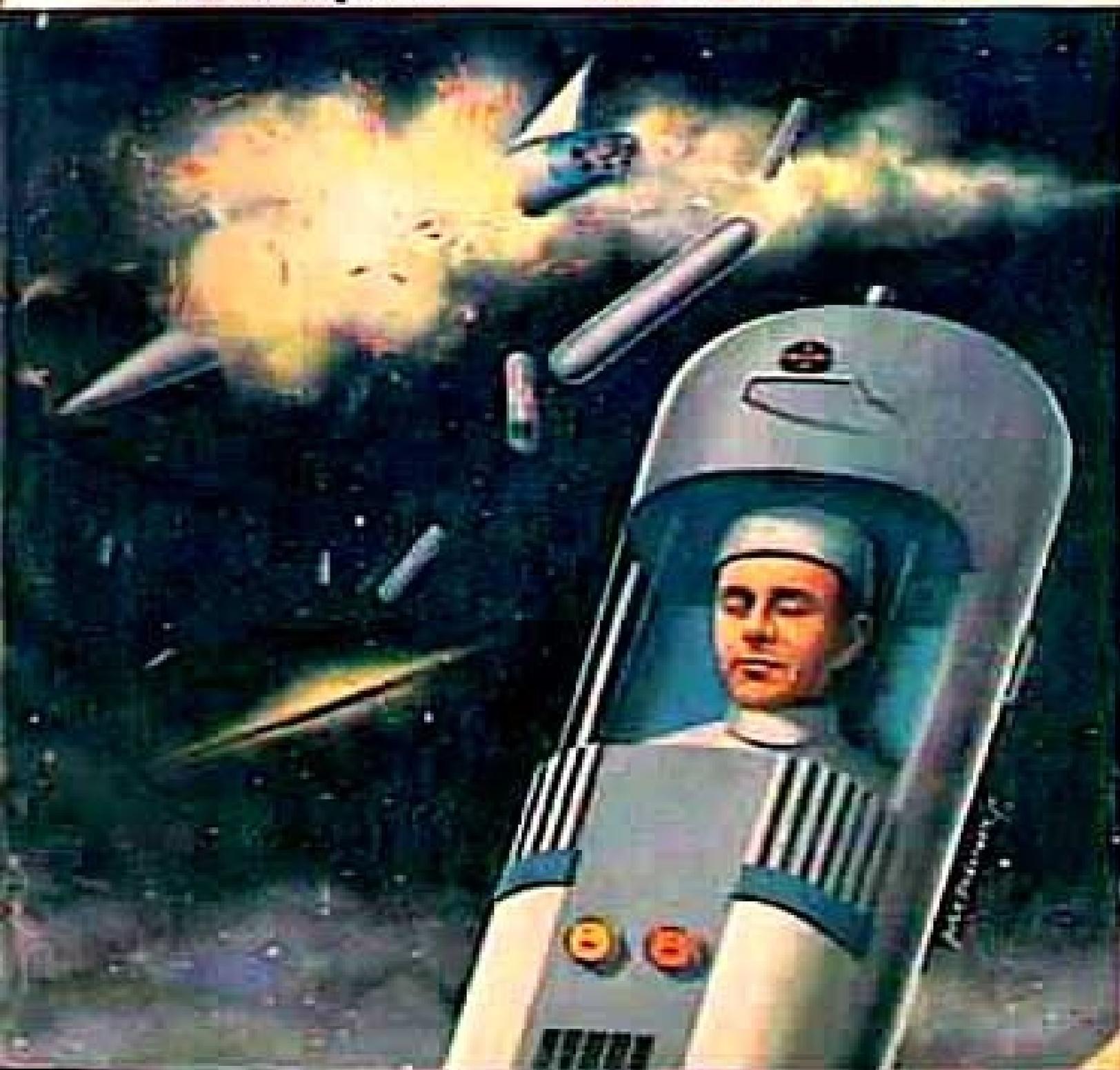


SCIENCE FICTION

THE IMPERIAL STARS
FIRE, 2018!
THE STORE OF
HEART'S DESIRES
THE FINAL EQUATION

E. E.
GEORGE O.
GORDWAINER
JACK

SMITH



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Publisher's Note:

As part of the conversion of the book to its new digital format, we have made certain minor adjustments in its layout.

There is some uncertainty about the numbering of the final chapters in this story. If magazine omitted the heading for chapter IX, but left a corresponding space where the heading was presumably intended to appear. We have supplied the chapter heading "IX". The next chapter heading in the magazine is "XI", which we have altered to "X", to maintain consistency.

The Store Of Heart's Desire

BY CORDWAINER SMITH

*Anything your heart desired
was here—wealth—power—
hatred—love—even death!*

I

The animal-derived underpeople talked about it for hundreds of years thereafter. The story became a part of their legend, their balladry. Real people, walking innocently around on the surface of the Earth, some kilometers above, never heard anything about it. To most of them, downdeep-downdeep was a place where robots and underpeople worked to provide luxuries, comforts and pleasures of mankind. They knew nothing of the mysterious Aitch Eye or of its weird leader, the E-telekeli, and if they had known, they would have been very surprised to find out that a true man had penetrated the uttermost depths and had conferred with the Aitch Eye itself.

Very surprised.

But not interested.

Why should they care? Curiosity had died out a long time ago and the attempted Rediscovery of Man was awakening it only very slowly. A few officials knew or suspected the whole story, but then officials never talked much.

Only the underpeople cared and they were startled indeed.

A true man in downdeep-downdeep?

How had that happened?

What could have gone wrong?

Nothing went wrong.

C'mell took him, and took him at the bidding of the E-telekeli himself. He was an offworlder. He had the odd pompous name of Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan the hundred and fifty-first and he was the richest sheep-owner from the richest planet in the galaxy, Old North Australia, which most people just called Norstrilia. He had gambled wildly, grotesquely, with help from his family's old computer, and he had won the largest fortune in the known or suspected universe. With this, he had bought Earth.

The name didn't mean much. He was no crabbed financier, no empire-builder in civilian clothes. He was a boy, blond, tall, athletic. His shortname was Rod McBan. Though he was a mister and owner and a full-franchise

landholder in Norstrilia, he had been driven to adventure by mischance; he had not sought it for lust of power.

He didn't even go to downdeep-downdeep in true-man form. The traps would have killed him if he had.

He had gone down disguised as a cat-man.

The cat-man disguise was not for the sake of downdeep; it was to keep him alive while all the thieves in space and Earth were looking for him. He had escaped death from the weapons of an old enemy, the Hon. Sec. in Norstrilia; he had bought Earth; he had abandoned his cousin-sweetheart Lavinia on Norstrilia, at the urgent insistence of his own government, and he had arrived on Earth in a cat-body as the unwelcome but honored guest of the Instrumentality. The Instrumentality, which always ruled and never reigned, had even provided him the undergirl C'mell as his consort and escort for his time on Earth; and C'mell was the most brilliant, the most beautiful, and the most enticing of the girlygirls of Earth.

Knowing C'mell had been adventure incarnate. She had led him to things which he had not even imagined, including a knowledge of himself and of others. He had been places in the wet rich air of Earth, on the old streets and the complex cities, which no Norstrilian at home would ever believe; he had faced dangers, and now Rod knew that his time was drawing to a close. At last she was asking something of him and he could not refuse. All the time he had known her—days which seemed as long and busy as years—she had been giving: of herself, her time, the risk of her life. Now, for the first time, it was she who asked. He could not refuse.

He went with her down to a store. A commissary, run by a wonderful person called the Catmaster. Five hundred years old, and still allowed to live, and still allowed to run his store.

It was called the Department Store of Hearts' Desires.

II

The trip was a vivid, quick dream. They had only a few hundred meters to fall before they reached ground level.

They came out on the peoplestreet. A robot policeman watched them from a corner.

Human beings in the costumes of a hundred historical periods were walking around in the warm, wet air of Earth. Rod could not smell as much salt in the air as he had smelled at the top of the tower, but down here in the city it smelled of more people than he had ever even imagined in one place. Thousands of individuals, hundreds and thousands of different kinds of foods, the odors of robots, of underpeople and of other things which seemed to be unmodified animals.

"This is the most interesting-smelling place I have ever been," said he to C'mell.

She glanced at him idly. "That's nice. You can smell like a dog-man. Most of the real people I have known couldn't smell their own feet. Come on though, C'roderick—*remember who you are!* If we're not tagged and licensed for the surface, we'll get stopped by that policeman in one minute or less."

She carried E-ikasus and steered Rod with a pressure on his elbow. They came to a ramp which led to an underground passage, well illuminated. Machines, robots and underpeople were hurrying back and forth along it, busy with the commerce of Earth.

Rod would have been completely lost if he had been without C'mell. Though his miraculous broad-band hiering, which had so often surprised him and pleased him at home, had not returned during his few hours on Old Earth, his other senses gave him a suffocating awareness of the huge number of people around him and above him. (He never

realized that there were times, long gone, when the cities of Earth had populations which reached the tens of millions. To him, several hundred thousand people, and a comparable number of underpeople, was a crowd almost beyond measure.)

The sounds and smells of underpeople were subtly different from those of people; some of the machines of Earth were bigger and older than anything which he had previously imagined; and above all, the circulation of water in immense volumes, millions upon millions of gallons, for the multiple purposes of Earthport—sanitation, cooling, drinking, industrial purposes—made him feel that he was not among a few buildings, which he would have called a city in Old North Australia, but that he himself had become a blood-cell thrusting through the circulatory system of some enormous composite animal, the nature of which he imperfectly understood. This city was alive with a sticky, wet, complicated aliveness which he had hitherto not even imagined to be possible. Movement characterized it. He suspected that the movement went on by night and day, that there was no real cessation to it, that the great pumps thrust water through feeder pipes and drains whether people were awake or not, that the brains of this organization could be no one place, but had to comprise many sub-brains, each committed and responsible for its particular tasks.

No wonder underpeople were needed! It would be boredom and pain, even with perfected automation, to have enough human supervisors to reconnect the various systems if they had breakdowns inside themselves or at their interconnections. Old North Australia had vitality. But it was the vitality of open fields, few people, immense wealth, and perpetual military danger. This was the vitality of the cesspool or the compost heap, but the rotting, blooming components were not waste material, but human beings and near-human beings.

No wonder that his forefathers had fled the cities as they had been. They must have been solid plague to free men. And even Old Original Australia, somewhere here on Earth, had lost its openness and freedom in order to become the single giant city-complex of Nanbien. It must, Rod thought with horror, have been a thousand times the size of this city of Earthport. (He was wrong, because it reached three hundred thousand times the size of Earthport before it died. Earthport had only about two hundred thousand permanent residents when Rod visited it, with an additional number walking in from the nearer suburbs, the outer suburbs still being ruined and abandoned. But Australia—under the name of Aojou Nanbien—had reached a population of thirty billion before it died, and before the Wild Ones and the Menschenjager had set to work killing off the survivors.)

Rod was bewildered, but C'mell was not. She put A'gentur down, over his whined monkey-like protest. He trotted unwillingly beside them.

With the impudent knowledgeability of a true city girl, she led them to a cross-walk from which a continuous whistling roar came forth. By writing, by picture, and by loudspeaker, the warning system repeated, KEEP OFF. FREIGHT ONLY. DANGER. KEEP OFF. She snatched up E-ikasus A'gentur, grabbed Rod by the arm, and jumped with them on a series of rapidly-moving airborne platforms. Rod, startled by the suddenness in which they had found the trackway, shouted to ask what it was:

"Freight? What's that?"

"Things. Boxes. Food. This is the Central trackway. No sense in walking six kilometers when we can get this. Be ready to jump off with me when I give you the sign!"

"It feels dangerous," he said.

"It isn't," said she, "not if you're a cat."

With this somewhat equivocal reassurance, she let them ride. A'gentur could not care less. He cuddled his head against her shoulder, wrapped his long gibbon-like arms around her upper arm and went soundly to sleep.

C'mell nodded at Rod. "Soon now!" she called, judging their distance by landmarks which he found meaningless. The landing points had flat, concrete-lined areas where the individual flat cars, rushing along on their river of air, could be shunted suddenly to the side for loading or unloading. Each of these loading areas had a number, but Rod had

not even noticed at what point they had gotten on. The smells of the underground city changed so much as they moved from one district to another that he was more interested in odors than in the numbers on the platforms.

She pinched his upper arm very sharply as a sign that he should get ready.

They jumped.

He staggered across the platform until he caught himself up against a large vertical crate marked *Algonquin Paper Works—Credit Slips, Miniature—2m*. C'mell landed as gracefully as if she had been acting a rehearsed piece of acrobatics. The little monkey on her shoulder stared with wide bright eyes.

"This," said the monkey A'gentur-E-ikasus firmly and contemptuously, "is where all the people play at working. I'm tired, I'm hungry and my body sugar is low." He curled himself tight against C'mell's shoulder, closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

"He has a point," said Rod. "Could we eat?"

C'mell started to nod and then caught herself short "You're a cat, you know."

He nodded. Then he grinned. "I'm hungry, anyhow. And I need a sandbox."

"Sandbox?" she said, staring at him.

"An awef," he said very clearly, using the Old North Australian term.

"Awef?"

It was his turn to get embarrassed. He said it in full: "An animal waste evacuation facility."

"You mean a johnny," she cried. She thought a minute and then said, "Fooley."

"What's the matter?" he asked, puzzled.

"Each kind of underpeople has to use its own. It's death if you don't use one and it's death if you use the wrong one. The cat one is four stations back on this underground trackway. Or we can walk back on the surface. It would only be a half hour."

He said something rude to Earth. She wrinkled her brow.

"All I said was, 'Earth is a large healthy sheep.' That's not so dirty." Her good humor returned.

Before she could ask him another question he held up a firm hand. "I am not going to waste a half hour. You wait here." He had seen the universal sign for "men's room" at the upper level of the platform. Before she could stop him he had gone into it. She caught her hand up to her mouth, knowing that the robot police would kill him on sight if they found him in the wrong place. It would be such a ghastly joke if the man who owned the earth were to die in the wrong toilet.

As quick as thought she followed him, stopping just outside the door to the "men's room." She dared not go in; she trusted that the place was empty when Rod entered it, because she had heard no boom of a slow, heavy bullet, none of the crisp buzzing of a burner. Robots did not use toilets, so they went in only when they were investigating something. She was prepared to distract any man living if he tried to enter that toilet by offering him the combination of an immediate seduction or a complimentary and unwanted monkey.

A'gentur had waked up.

"Don't bother," he said. "I called my father. Anything approaching that door will fall asleep."

An ordinary man, rather tired and worried-looking, headed for the men's room. C'mell was prepared to stop him at any cost, but she remembered what A'gentur-E-ikasus had told her, so she waited. The man reeled as he neared them. He stared at them, saw that they were underpeople, looked on through them as though they were not there. He took two more steps toward the door and suddenly reached out his hands as if he were going blind. He walked into the wall two meters from the door, touched it firmly and blindly with his hands and crumpled gently to the floor, where he lay snoring.

"My dad's good," said A'gentur-E-ikasus. "He usually leaves real people alone, but when he must get them, he gets them. He even gave that man the distinct memory that he mistakenly took a sleeping pill when he was reaching for a pain-killer. When the human wakes up, he will feel foolish and will tell no one of his experience."

Rod came out of the ever-so-dangerous doorway. He grinned at them boyishly and did not notice the crumpled man lying beside the wall. "That's easier than turning back, and nobody noticed me at all."

He was so proud of his foolhardy adventure that she did not have the heart to blame him. He smiled widely, his cat-whiskers tipping as he did so. For a moment, just a moment, she forgot that he was an important person and a real man to boot. He was a boy, and mighty like a cat, but all boy in his satisfaction, his wanton bravery, his passing happiness with vainglory. For a second or two she loved him.

Then she thought of the terrible hours ahead, and of how he would go home, rich and scornful, to his all-people planet. The moment of love passed but she still liked him very much.

"Come along, young fellow. You can eat. You are going to eat cat food since you are C'roderick, but it's not so bad."

He frowned. "What is it? Do you have fish here? I tasted fish one time. A neighbor bought one. He traded two horses for it. It was delicious."

"He wants fish," she cried to E-ikasus.

"Give him a whole tuna for himself," grumbled the monkey. "My blood sugar is still low. I need some pineapple."

C'mell did not argue. She stayed underground and led them into a hall which had a picture of dogs, cats, cattle, pigs, bears and snakes above the door; that indicated the kinds of people who could be served there. E-ikasus scowled at the sign but he rode C'mell's shoulder in.

"This gentlemen," said C'mell, speaking pleasantly to an old bear-man who was scratching his belly and smoking a pipe, all at the same time, "has forgotten his credits."

"No food," said the bear-man. "Rules. He can drink water, though."

"I'll pay for him," said C'mell.

The bear-plan yawned. "Are you sure that he won't pay you back? If he does, that is private trading and it is punished by death."

"I know the rules," said C'mell. "I've never been disciplined yet."

The bear looked her over critically. He took his pipe out of his mouth and whistled. "No," said he, "and I can see that you won't be. What are you, anyhow? A model."

"A girlygirl," said C'mell.

The bear-man leapt from his stool with astonishing speed. "Cat-madam!" he cried. "A thousand pardons. You can have anything in the place. You come from the top of Earthport? You know the Lords of the Instrumentality personally?"

You would like a table roped off with curtains? Or should I just throw everybody else out of here and report to my Man that we have a famous, beautiful slave from the highplaces?"

"Nothing that drastic," said C'mell. "Just food."

"Wait a bit," said A'gentur E-ikasuk, "if you're offering specials, I'll have two fresh pineapples, a quarter-kilo of ground fresh coconut and a tenth of a kilo of live insect grubs."

The bear-man hesitated. "I was offering things to the cat-lady, who serves the mighty ones, not to you, monkey. But if the lady desires it, I will send for those things." He waited for C'mell's nod, got it, and pushed a button for a low-grade robot to come. He turned to Rod McBan, "And you, cat-gentleman. What would you like?"

Before Rod could speak, C'mell said, "He wants two sailfish steaks, french fried potatoes, Waldorf salad, an order of ice cream and a large glass of orange juice."

The bear-man shuddered visibly. "I've been here for many years and that is the most horrible lunch I ever ordered for a cat. I think I'll try it myself."

C'mell smiled the smile which had graced a thousand welcomes. "I'll just help myself from the things you have on the counters. I'm not fussy."

He started to protest but she cut him short with a graceful but unmistakable wave of the hand. He gave up.

They sat at a table.

A'gentur-E-ikasuk waited for his combination monkey and bird lunch. Rod saw an old robot, dressed in a prehistoric tuxedo jacket, ask a question of the bear-man, leave one tray and bring another tray to him. The robot whipped off a freshly starched napkin. There was the most beautiful lunch which Rod McBan had ever seen. Even at a state banquet, the Old North Australians did not feed their guests like that.

Just as they were finishing, the bear-cashier came to the table and asked, "Your name, cat-madam? I will charge these lunches to the government."

"C'mell, servant to Teadrinker, subject to the Lord Jestocost, a Chief of the Instrumentality."

The bear's face had been epilated, so that they could see him pale.

"C'mell," he whispered. "C'mell! Forgive me, my lady. I have never seen you before. You have blessed this place. You have blessed my life. You are the friend of all underpeople. Go in peace."

C'mell gave him the bow and smile which a reigning empress might give to an active Lord of the Instrumentality. She started to pick up the monkey but he scampered on ahead of her. Rod was puzzled. As the bear-man bowed him out, he asked, "C'mell. You are famous?"

"In a way," she said. "Only among the underpeople."[*] She hurried them both toward a ramp. They reached daylight at last, but even before they came to the surface, Rod's nose was assaulted by a riot of smells—foods frying, cakes baking, liquor spilling its pungency on the air, perfumes fighting with each other for attention and, above all, the smell of old things: dusty treasures, old leathers, tapestries, the echo-smells of people who had died a long time ago.

[*] See the story, "The Ballad of Lost C'mell," in GALAXY MAGAZINE, Vol. 21, No. 1 (October, 1962), pages 8-28.

C'mell stopped and watched him.

"You're smelling things again? I must say, you have a better nose than any human being I ever met before. How

does it smell to you?"

"Wonderful," he gasped. "Wonderful. Like all the treasures of the universe spilled out into one little place."

"It's just the Thieves' Market of Paris."

"There are thieves on Earth? Open ones, like Viola Siderea?"

"Oh no," she laughed. "They would die in a few days. The Instrumentality would catch them. These are just people, playing. The Rediscovery of Man found some old institutions, and an old market was one of them. They make the robots and underpeople find things for them and then they pretend to be ancient, and make bargains with each other. Or they cook food. Not many real people ever cook food these days. It's so funny that it tastes good to them. They all pick up money on their way in. They have barrels of it at the gate. In the evening, or when they leave, they usually throw the money in the gutter, even though they should really put it back in the barrel. It's not money we underpeople could use. We go by numbers and computer cards," she sighed. "I could certainly use some of that extra money."

"And underpeople like you—like us—" said Rod, "what do we do in the market?"

"Nothing," she whispered. "Absolutely nothing. We can walk through if we are not too big and not too small and not too dirty and not too smelly. And even if we are all right, we must walk right through without looking directly at the real people and without touching anything in the market."

"Suppose we do?" asked Rod defiantly.

"The robot police are there, with orders to kill on sight when they observe an infraction. Don't you realize, C'rod," she sobbed at him, "that there are millions of us in tanks, way below in Downdeep-downdeep, ready to be born, to be trained, to be sent up here to serve Man? We're not scarce at all, C'rod, we're not scarce at all!"

"Why are we going through the market, then?"

"It's the only way to the Catmaster's store. We'll be tagged. Come along."

Where the ramp reached the surface, four bright-eyed robots, the blue-enamel bodies shining and their milky eyes glowing, stood at the ready. Their weapons had an ugly buzz to them and were obviously already off the "safety" mark.

C'mell talked to them quietly and submissively. When the robot-sergeant led her to a desk, she stared into an instrument like binoculars and blinked when she took her eyes away. She put her palm on a desk. The identification was completed. The robot sergeant handed her three bright disks, like saucers, each with a chain attached. Wordlessly she hung them around her own neck, Rod's neck, and A'gentur's. The robots let them pass. They walked in demure single file through the place of beautiful sights and smells.

Rod felt that his eyes were wet with tears of rage; "I'll buy this place," he thought to himself, "if it's the only thing I'll ever buy!"

C'mell had stopped walking.

He looked up, very carefully.

There was the sign: THE DEPARTMENT STORE OF HEARTS' DESIRES.

A door opened. A wise old cat-person face looked out, stared at them, snapped, "No underpeople!" and slammed the door. C'mell rang the doorbell a second time. The face reappeared, more puzzled than angry.

"Business," she whispered, "of the Aitch Eye."

The face said, "In. Quick!"

III

Once inside, Rod realized that the store was as rich as the market. There were no other customers. After the outside sounds of music, laughter, frying, boiling, things falling, dishes clattering, people arguing and the low undertone of the ever-ready robot weapons buzzing, the quietness of the room was itself a luxury, like old, heavy velvet. The smells were no less variegated than those on the outside. But they were different, more complicated, and many more of them were completely unidentifiable.

One smell he was sure of: human fear. It had been in this room not long before.

"Quick," said the old cat-man. "I'm in trouble if you don't get out of my store soon. What is your business?"

"I'm C'mell," said C'mell.

He nodded pleasantly, but showed no sign of recognition. "I forget people," he said.

"This is A'gentur." She indicated the monkey.

The old cat-man did not even look at the animal.

C'mell persisted, a note of triumph coming into her voice: "You may have heard of him under his real name, E-ikasukus."

The old man stood there, blinking, as though he were taking it in. "Yeekasoose? With the letter E?"

"Transformed," said C'mell inexorably, "for a trip all the way to Old North Australia and back."

"Is this true?" said the old man to the monkey.

E-ikasukus said calmly, "I am the son of him of whom you think."

The old man dropped to his knees, but did so with dignity: "I salute you, E-ikasukus. When you next think-with your father, give him my greetings and ask from him his blessing. I am C'William, the Catmaster."

"You are famous," said E-ikasukus tranquilly.

"But you are still in danger, merely being here. I have no license for underpeople!"

C'mell produced her trump. "Catmaster, your next guest is no c'man. He is a true man, an offworlder, and he has just bought most of the planet Earth."

C'William looked at Rod with more than ordinary shrewdness. There was a touch of kindness in his attitude. He was tall for a cat-man; few animal features were left to him, because old age, which reduces racial and sexual contrasts to mere memories, had wrinkled him into a uniform beige. His hair was not white, but beige too; his few cat-whiskers looked old and worn. He was garbed in a fantastic costume which—Rod later learned—consisted of the court robes of one of the Original Emperors, a dynasty which had prevailed many centuries among the further stars. Age was upon him, but wisdom was too: the habits of life, in his case, had been cleverness and kindness, themselves unusual in combination. Now very old, he was reaping the harvest of his years. He had done well with the thousands upon thousands of days behind him, with the result that age had brought a curious joy into his manner, as though each experience meant one more treat before the long bleak dark closed in. Rod felt himself attracted to this strange creature, who looked at him with such penetrating and very personal curiosity, and who managed to do so without giving offense.

The catmaster spoke in very passable Norstrilian: "I know what you are thinking, mister and owner McBan."

"You can hier me?" cried Rod.

"Not your thoughts. Your face. It reads easily. I am sure that I can help you."

"What makes you think I need help?"

"All things need help," said the old c'man briskly, "but we must get rid of our other guests first. Where do you want to go, excellent one? And you, cat-madam?"

"Home," said E-ikasus. He was tired and cross again. After speaking brusquely, he felt the need to make his tone more civil. "This body suits me badly, catmaster."

"Are you good at falling?" said the catmaster. "Free fall?"

The monkey grinned. "With this body? Of course. Excellent."

"Fine," said the catmaster, "you can drop down my waste chute. It falls next to the forgotten palace where the great wings beat against time."

The catmaster stepped to one side of the room. With only a nod at C'mell and Rod and a brief, "See you later," the monkey watched as the catmaster opened a manhole cover, leaped trustingly into the complete black depth which appeared and was gone. The catmaster replaced the cover carefully.

He turned to C'mell She faced him truculently, the defiance of her posture oddly at variance with the innocent voluptuousness of her young female body. "I'm going nowhere."

"You'll die," said the catmaster. "Can't you hear their weapons buzzing just outside the door? You know what they do to us underpeople. Especially to us cats. They use us, but do they trust us?"

"I know one who does," she said. "The Lord Jestocost could protect me, even here, just as he protects you, far beyond your limit of years."

"Don't argue it. You will make trouble for him with the other real people. Here, girl, I will give you a tray to carry with a dummy package on it. Go back to the underground and rest in the commissary of the bear-man. I will send Rod to you when we are through."

"Yes," she said hotly, "but will you send him alive or dead?"

The catmaster rolled his yellow eyes over Rod. "Alive," he said. "This one—alive. I have predicted. Did you ever know me to be wrong? Come on, girl, out the door with you."

C'mell let herself be handed a tray and a package, taken seemingly at random. As she left Rod thought of her with quick affection. She was his closest link with earth. He blurted out, "C'mell, will you be all right."

She turned around at the door itself, looking all woman and all cat. Her red wild hair gleamed like a hearth-fire against the open light from the doorway. She stood erect, as though she were a citizen of Earth and not a mere underperson or girlygirl. She held out her right hand clearly and commandingly while balancing the tray on her left hand. When he shook hands with her, Rod realized that her hand felt utterly human but very strong. With scarcely a break in her voice she said, "Rod, goodbye. I'm taking a chance with you, but it's the best chance I've ever taken. You can trust the Catmaster, here in the department store of hearts' desires. He does strange things, Rod, but they're good strange things."

He released her hand and she left. C'William closed the door behind her. The room became hushed.

"Sit down for a minute while I get ready. Or look around."

"Sir catmaster—" said Rod.

"No title, please. I am an underperson, made out of cats. You may call me C'William."

"C'William, please tell me first. I miss C'mell. I'm worried about her. Am I falling in love with her? Is that what falling in love means?"

"She's your wife," said the catmaster. "Just temporarily and just in pretense, but she's still your wife. It's Earthlike to worry about one's mate. She's all right."

The old c'man disappeared behind a door which had an odd sign on it: HATE HALL.

Rod looked around.

The very first thing he saw was a display cabinet full of postage stamps. It was made of glass, but he could see the soft blues and the inimitable warm brick reds of his Cape of Good Hope triangular postage stamps. He had come to earth and there they were! He peered through the glass at them. They were even better than the illustrations which he had seen back on Norstrilia. They had the temper of great age upon them and yet, somehow, they seemed to freight with them the love which men, living men now dead, had given them for thousands and thousands of years. He looked around, and saw that the whole room was full of odd riches. There were ancient toys of all periods, flying toys, copies of machines, things which he suspected were trains. There was a two-story closet of clothing, shimmering with embroidery and gleaming with gold. There was a bin of weapons, clean and tidy—models so ancient that he could not possibly guess what they had been used for, or by whom. Everywhere, there were buckets of coins, usually gold ones. He picked up a handful. They had languages he could not even guess at and they showed the proud imperious faces of the ancient dead. Another cabinet was one which he glanced at and then turned away from, shocked and yet inquisitive; it was filled with indecent souvenirs and pictures from a hundred periods of men's history, images, sketches, photographs, dolls and models, all of them portraying grisly, comical, sweet, friendly, impressive or horrible versions of the many acts of love. The next section made him pause utterly. Who would have ever wanted these things? Whips, knives, hoods, leather corsets. He passed on, very puzzled.

There was a slight sound. Rod turned around to face the Catmaster.

"You like my poems? You like my things? I like them myself. Many men come in here to take things from me, but they find that title is vested in the Lord Jestocost, and they must do strange things to obtain my trifles."

"Are all these things genuine?" asked Rod, thinking that even Old North Australia could not buy out this shop if they were.

"Certainly not," said the old man. "Most of them are wonderful forgeries. The Instrumentality lets me go to the robot-pits where insane or worn-out robots are destroyed. I can have my pick of them if they are not dangerous. I put them to work making copies of anything which I find in the museums."

"Those Cape triangles?" said Rod. "Are they real?"

"Cape triangles? You mean the letter stickers. They are genuine, all right, but they are not mine. Those are on loan from the Earth museum until I can get them copied."

"I will buy them," said Rod.

"You will not," said the cat-master. "They are not for sale."

"Then I will buy Earth and you and them too," said Rod.

"Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to the one hundred and fifty-first, you will not."

"Who are you to tell me?"

"I have looked at one person and I have talked to two others."

"All right," said Rod. "Who?"

"I looked at the other Rod McBan, your workman, Eleanor. She is a little mixed up about having a young man's body, because she is very drunk in the home of the Lord William Not-from-here and a beautiful young woman named Ruth Not-from-here is trying to make Eleanor marry her. She has no idea that she is dealing with another woman and Eleanor, in her copy of your proper body, is finding the experience exciting but terribly confusing. No harm will come of it, and your Eleanor is perfectly safe. Half the rascals of Earth have converged on the Lord William's house, but he has a whole battalion from the Defense Fleet on loan around the place. So nothing is going to happen—except that Eleanor will have a headache and Ruth will have a disappointment."

Rod smiled. "You couldn't have told me anything better. Who else did you talk to?"

"The Lord Jestocost and John Fisher to the hundredth."

"Mister and owner Fisher? He's here?"

"He's at his home, station of the Good Fresh Joey. I asked him if you could have your heart's desire. After a little while, he and somebody named doctor Wentworth said that the Commonwealth of Old North Australia would approve it."

"How did you ever pay for such a call?" cried Rod. "Those things are frightfully expensive."

"I didn't pay for it, mister and owner. *You* did. I charged it to your account, by the authority of your trustee, the Lord Jestocost. He and his forefathers have been my patrons for four hundred and twenty-six years."

"You've got your nerve," said Rod, "spending my money when I was right here and not even asking me!"

"You are an adult for some purposes and a minor for other purposes. I am offering you the skills which keep me alive. Do you think any ordinary cat-man would be allowed to live as long as this?"

"No," said Rod. "Give me those stamps and let me go."

The catmaster looked at him levelly. Once again there was the *personal* look on his face, which in Norstrilia would have been taken as an unpardonable affront; but along with the nosiness, there was an air of confidence and kindness which put Rod a little in awe of the man, underperson though he was. "Do you think that you could love these stamps when you get back home? Could they talk to you? Could they make you like yourself? Those pieces of paper are not your heart's desire. Something else is."

"What?" said Rod, truculently.

"In a bit, I'll explain. First, you cannot kill me. Second, you cannot hurt me. Third, if I kill you, it will be all for your own good. Fourth, if you get out of here, you will be a very happy man."

"Are you barmy, mister?" cried Rod. "I can knock you flat and walk out that door. I don't know what you are talking about."

"Try it," said the catmaster levelly.

Rod looked at the tall withered old man with the bright eyes. He looked at the door, a mere seven or eight meters away. He did not want to try it.

"All right," he conceded, "play your pitch."

"I am a clinical psychologist. The only one on Earth and probably the only one on any planet. I got my knowledge

from some ancient books when I was a kitten, being changed into a young man. I change people just a little, little bit. You know that the Instrumentality has surgeons and brain experts and all sorts of doctors. They can do almost anything with personality but the light stuff. That I do."

"I don't get it," said Rod.

"Would you go to a brain surgeon to get a haircut? Would you need a dermatologist to give you a bath? Of course not. I don't do heavy work. I just change people a little bit. It makes them happy. If I can't do anything with them, I give them souvenirs from this junk-pile out here. The real work is in there. That's where you're going, pretty soon." He nodded his head at the door marked HATE HALL.

IV

Rod was not a coward, but it was with feet and legs of lead that he walked to the door. It opened by itself. He walked in, steady but afraid.

The room was dark with a darkness deeper than mere black. It was the dark of blindness, the expanse of cheek where no eye has ever been.

The door closed behind him and he swam in the dark, so tangible had the darkness become.

He felt blind. He felt as though he had never seen.

But he could hear.

He heard his own blood pulsing through his head.

He could smell—indeed, he was good at smelling. And this air—this air smelled of the open night of Old North Australia.

The smell made him feel little and afraid. It reminded him of his repeated childhoods, of the artificial drownings in the laboratories where he had gone to be re-born from one childhood to another.

He reached out his hands.

Nothing.

He jumped gently. No ceiling. Using a fieldsman's trick familiar from times of dust-storms, he dropped lightly to his hands and feet. He scuttled crabwise on two feet and one hand, using the other hand as a shield to protect his face. In a very few meters he found the wall. He followed the wall around.

Circular.

This was the door.

Follow again.

With more confidence, he moved fast. Around, around, around. He could not tell whether the floor was asphalt or some kind of rough worn tile.

Door again.

A voice spieked to him.

Spieked! *And he heard it.*

He looked upward into the nothing which was bleaker than blindness, almost expecting to see the words in letters of fire, so clear had they been.

The voice was Norstrilian and it said, *Rod McBan is a man, man, man. But what is man?*

Immediate percussion of crazy, sad laughter.

Rod never noticed that he reverted to the habits of babyhood. He sat flat on his rump, legs spread out in front of him at a 90° angle. He put his hands a little behind him and leaned back, letting the weight of his body push his shoulders a little bit upward. He knew the ideas that would follow the words, but he never knew why he so readily expected them.

Light formed in the room, as he had been sure it would.

The images were little, but they looked real.

Men and women and children, children and women and men marched into his vision and out again.

They were not freaks. They were not beasts. They were not alien monstrosities begotten in some outside universe. They were not robots. They were not underpeople. They were all hominids like himself, kinsmen in the Earthborn races of men.

First came people like Old North Australians and Earth people, very much alike, and both similar to the ancient types, except that Norstrilians were pale beneath their tanned skins and more robust.

Then came Daimoni, white-eyed pale giants with a magical assurance, whose very babies walked as though they had already been given ballet lessons.

Then heavy men, fathers, mothers, infants swimming on the solid ground from which they would never arise.

Then rainmen from Amazonas Triste, their skins hanging in enormous folds around them, so that they looked like bundles of wet rags wrapped around monkeys.

Blind men from Olympia, staring fiercely at the world through the radars mounted on their foreheads.

Bloated monster-men from abandoned planets—people as bad off as his own race had been after escaping from Paradise VII.

And still more races.

People he had never heard of.

Men with shells.

Men and women so thin that they looked like insects.

A race of smiling, foolish giants, lost in the irreparable hebephrenia of their world. (Rod had the feeling that they were shepherded by a race of devoted dogs, more intelligent than themselves, who cajoled them into breeding, begged them to eat, led them to sleep. He saw no dogs, only the smiling unfocused fools, but the feeling *dog, good dog!* was somehow very near.)

A funny little people who pranced with an indefinable deformity of gait.

Water-people, the clean water of some unidentified world pulsing through their gills.

And then—

More people, still, but hostile ones. Lipsticked hermaphrodites with enormous beards and fluting voices. Carcinomas which had taken over men. Giants rooted in the earth. Human bodies crawling and weeping as they crept through wet grass, contaminated themselves and looking for more people to infect.

Rod did not know it, but he growled.

He jumped into a squatting position and swept his hands across the rough floor, looking for a weapon.

These were not men—they were enemies!

Still they came. People who had lost eyes, or who had grown fire-resistant, the wrecks and residues of abandoned settlements and forgotten colonies. The waste and spoilage of the human race.

And then—

Him.

Himself.

The child Rod McRan.

And voices, Norstrilian voices calling: "He can't hier. He can't spiek. He's a freak. He's a freak! He can't hier. He can't spiek."

And another voice: "His poor parents!"

The child Rod disappeared and there were his parents again. Twelve times taller than life, so high that he had to peer up into the black absorptive ceiling to see the underside of their faces.

The mother wept.

The father sounded stern.

The father was saying, "It's no use. Doris can watch him while we're gone, but if he isn't any better, we'll turn him in."

"Kill him?" shrieked the woman. "Kill my baby? Oh, no! No!"

The calm, loving, horrible voice of the man. "Darling, spiek to him yourself. He'll never hier. Can that be a Rod McBan?"

Then the woman's voice, sweet-poisonous and worse than death, sobbing agreement with her man against her son.

"I don't know, Rod. I don't know. Just don't tell me about it."

He *had* hiered them, in one of his moments of wild penetrating hiering when everything telepathic came in with startling clarity. He had hiered them when he was a baby.

The real Rod in the dark room let out a roar of fear, desolation, loneliness, rage, hate. This was the telepathic bomb with which he had so often startled or alarmed the neighbors.

But this time, the room was closed. His mind roared back at itself.

Rage, loudness, hate, raw noise poured into him from the floor, the circular wall, the high ceiling.

He cringed beneath it and as he cringed, the sizes of the images changed. His parents sat in chairs, chairs. They were little, little. He was an almighty baby, so enormous that he could scoop them up with his hand.

He reached the tiny loathesome parents who had said, "Let him die."

To crush them, but they faded first.

Their faces turned frightened. They looked wildly around. Their chairs dissolved, the fabric falling to a floor which in turn looked like storm-eroded cloth. They turned for a last kiss and had no lips. They reached to hug each other and their arms fell off. Their space ship had gone milky in mid-trip, dissolving into traceless nothing. And he, himself had seen it!

The rage was followed by tears, by a guilt too deep for regret, by a self-accusation so raw and wet that it lived like one more organ inside his living body.

He wanted nothing.

No money, no stroom, no Station of Doom. He wanted no friends, no companionship, no welcome, no house, no food. He wanted no walks, no solitary discoveries in the field, no friendly sheep, no treasures in the gap, no computer, no day, no night, no life.

He wanted nothing, and he could not understand death.

The enormous room lost all light and all sound, and he did not notice it. His own naked life lay before him like a freshly dissected cadaver. It lay there and it made no sense. There had been many Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBans, one hundred and fifty of them in a room, but he—151! 151!—was not one of them, not a giant who had wrestled treasure from the sick earth and hidden sunshine of the Norstrilian plains. It wasn't his telepathic deformity, his spieklessness, his brain-deafness to hiering. It was himself, the "me-subtile" inside him, which was all wrong. He was the baby worth killing, who had killed instead. He had hated mama and papa for their pride and their hate: when he hated them, they crumpled and died out in the mystery of space, so that they did not even leave bodies to bury.

Rod stood to his feet. His hands were wet. He touched his face and he realized that he had been weeping with his face cupped in his hands.

Wait.

There was something that still remained.

There was *one* thing that he wanted, and he wanted it from his one enemy. He wanted Houghton Syme not to hate him. Houghton could hier and spiek, but he was a shortie, living with the sickness of death lying between himself and every girl, every friend, every job he had met. And he, Rod, had mocked that man, calling him Old Hot and Simple.

Rod might be worthless but he was not as bad off as Houghton Syme, the Hon. Sec. Houghton Syme was at least trying to be a man, to live his miserable scrap of a life, and all Rod had ever done was to flaunt his wealth and near-immortality before the poor cripple who had just one hundred and sixty years to live. Rod wanted only one thing—to get back to Old North Australia in time to help Houghton Syme, to let Houghton Syme know that the guilt was his, Rod's, and not Syme's. The Onseck had a bit of a life and he deserved the best that he could make of it.

Rod stood there, expecting nothing.

He had forgiven his last and worst enemy.

He had forgiven himself.

The door opened very matter-of-factly and there stood the Catmaster, a quiet, wise smile upon his face.

"You can come out now, Mister and owner McBan, and if there is anything in this outer room which you want, you may certainly have it."

Rod walked out slowly. He had no idea how long he had been in HATE HALL.

When he emerged, the door closed behind him.

"No thanks, cobber. It's mighty friendly of you, but I don't need anything much, and I'd better be getting back to my own planet."

"Nothing?" said the Catmaster, still smiling very attentively and very quietly.

"I'd like to hier and spiek but it's not very important."

"This is for you," said the Catmaster. "You put it in your ear and leave it there. If it itches or gets dirty, you take it out, wash it, and put it back in. It's not a rare device, but apparently you don't have them on your planet." He held out an object no larger than the kernel of a ground-nut.

Rod took it absently and was ready to put it into his pocket, not into his ear, when he saw that the smiling attentive face was watching, very gently but very alertly. He put the device into his ear. It felt a little cold.

"I will now," said the Catmaster, "take you to C'mell, who will lead you to your friends in Downdeep-downdeep. You had better take this blue two-penny Cape of Good Hope postage stamp with you. I will report to Jestocost that it was lost while I attempted to copy it. That is slightly true, isn't it?"

Rod started to thank him absent-mindedly and then—

Then, with a thrill which sent gooseflesh all over his neck, back and arms, he realized that the Catmaster had not moved his lips in the slightest, had not pushed air through his throat, had not disturbed the air with the pressure of noise. The Catmaster had spieked to Rod and Rod had hiered him.

V

Rod McBan left the Department Store of Hearts' Desires simply, humbly. He carried a package of books, wrapped in dustproofing paper, and he looked like any other first-class cat-man messenger.

The human beings in the market were still making their uproar, their smells of foods, spices, and odd objects, but he walked so calmly and so straightforwardly through their scattered groups that even the robot police, weapons on the buzz, paid no attention to him.

When he had come across the Thieves' Market, going the other way with C'mell and A'gentur, he had been ill at ease. As a mister-and-owner from Old North Australia, he had been compelled to keep his external dignity, but he had not felt ease within his heart. These people were strange. His destination had been unfamiliar, and the problems of wealth and survival lay heavy upon him.

Now, it was alt different. Catman he might be on the outside, but on the inside he once again felt his proper pride of home and planet.

And more.

He felt calm, down to the very tips of his nerve endings.

The hiering-spieking device should have alerted and excited him: it did not. As he walked through the market, he noticed that very few of the Earth people were communicating with one another telepathically. They preferred to babble in their loud airborne language, of which they had not one but many kinds, with the old Common Tongue serving as a referent for those who had been endowed with different kinds of ancient language by the processes of the Rediscovery of Man. He had even heard Ancient English, the Queen's Own Language, sounding remarkably close to his own spoken language of Norstrilian. These things caused neither stimulation nor excitement, not even pity. He had his own problems, but they were no longer the problems of wealth or of survival. Somehow he had a confidence that a hidden, friendly power in the universe would take care of him, if he took care of others. He wanted to get Eleanor out of trouble, to disembarass the Hon. Sec., to see Lavinia, to reassure Doris, to say goodbye to C'mell, to get back to his sheep, to protect his computer and to keep the Lord Redlady away from his bad habit of killing other people lawfully on occasions too slight for manslaughter.

One of the robot police, a little more perceptive than the others, watched this cat-man who walked with preternatural assurance through the crowds of men, but "C'roderick" did nothing but enter the market from one side, thread his way through it and leave at the other side, still carrying his package. The robot turned away. His dreadful, milky eyes, always ready for disorder and death, scanned the market place again and again with fatigue-free vigilance.

Rod went down the ramp and turned right.

There was the underpeople commissary with the bear-man cashier. The cashier remembered him.

"It's been a long day, cat-sir, since I saw you. Would you like another special order of fish?"

"Where's my girl?" said Rod bluntly.

"C'mell?" said the bear-cashier. "She waited here a long time but then she went on and she left this message, 'Tell my man C'Rod that he should eat before following me, but that when he has eaten he can either follow me by going to Upshaft Four, Ground Level Hostel of the Singing Birds, Room Nine, where I am taking care of an offworld visitor, or he can send a robot to me and I will come to him.' Don't you think, cat-sir, that I've done well, remembering so complicated a message?" The bear-man flushed a little and the edge went off his pride as he confessed, for the sake of some abstract honesty, "Of course, that address part, I wrote that down. It would be very bad and very confusing if I sent you to the wrong address in people's country. Somebody might burn you down if you came into an unauthorized corridor."

"Fish, then," said Rod. "A fish dinner, please."

He wondered why C'mell, with his life in the balance, would go off to another visitor. Even as he thought this, he detected the mean jealousy behind it, and he confessed to himself that he had no idea of the terms, conditions, or hours of work required in the girlygirl business.

He sat dully on the bench, waiting for his food.

The uproar of HATE HALL was still in his mind, the pathos of his parents, those dying dissolving mannikins, was bright within his heart, and his body throbbed with the fatigue of the ordeal. Idly he asked the bear-cashier, "How long has it been since I was here?"

The bear-cashier looked at the clock on the wall, "About fourteen hours, worthy cat."

"How long is that in real time?" Rod was trying to compare Norstrillian hours with Earth hours. He thought that Earth hours were one-seventh shorter, but he was not sure.

The bear-man was completely baffled. "If you mean galactic navigation time, dear guest, we never use that down here anyhow. Are there any other kinds of time?"

Rod realized his mistake and tried to correct it. "It doesn't matter. I am thirsty. What is lawful for underpeople to

drink? I am tired and thirsty, both, but I have no desire to become the least bit drunk."

"Since you are a c'man," said the bear-cashier, "I recommend strong black coffee mixed with sweet whipped cream."

"I have no money," said Rod.

"The famous cat-madam, C'mell your consort, has guaranteed payment for anything at all that you order."

"Go ahead, then."

The bear-man called a robot over and gave him the orders.

Rod stared at the wall, wondering what he was going to do with this Earth he had bought. He wasn't thinking very hard, just musing idly. A voice cut directly into his mind. He realized that the bear-man was spieking to him and that he could hear it.

"You are not an underman, sir and master."

"What?" spieked Rod.

"You heard me," said the telepathic voice. "I am not going to repeat it. If you come in the sign of the Fish, may blessings be upon you."

"I don't know that sign," said Rod.

"Then," spieked the bear-man, "no matter who you are, may you eat and drink in peace because you are a friend of C'mell and you are under the protection of the One Who Lives in Downdeeep."

"I don't know," spieked Rod. "I just don't know, but I thank you for your welcome, friend."

"I do not give such welcomes lightly," said the bear-man, "and ordinarily I would be ready to run away from anything as dangerous and unexplained as yourself, but you bring with you the quality of peace, which made me think that you might travel in the fellowship of the sign of the Fish. I have heard that in that sign, people and underpeople remember the blessed Joan and mingle in complete comradeship."

"No," said Rod, "no. I travel alone."

His food and drink came. He consumed them quietly. The bear-cashier had given him a table and bench far from the serving tables and away from the other underpeople who dropped in, interrupting their tasks, eating in a hurry so that they could get back in a hurry. He saw one wolf-man, wearing the insigne of Auxiliary Polka, who came to the wall, forced his identity-card into a slot, opened his mouth, bolted down five large chunks of red, raw meat end left the commissary, all in less than one and one-half minutes. Rod was amazed but not impressed. He had too much on his mind.

At the desk he confirmed the address which C'mell had left, offered the bearman a handshake and went along to Upshaft Four. He still looked like a c'man and he carried his package alertly and humbly, as he had seen other underpeople behave in the presence of real persons.

He almost met death on the way.

Upshaft Four was one-directional end was plainly marked, "People Only." Rod did not like the looks of it, as long as he moved in a cat-man body, but he did not think that C'mell would give him directions wrongly or lightly. (Later, he found that she had forgotten to tell him the phrase, "Special business under the protection of Jestocost, a Chief of the Instrumentality," if he were to be challenged; but he did not know the phrase.)

An arrogant human man, wearing a billowing red cloak, looked at him sharply as he took a belt, hooked it and stepped into the shaft. When Rod stepped free, he and the man were on a level.

Rod tried to look like a humble, modest messenger, but the strange voice grated his ears: "Just what do you think you are doing? This is a human shaft."

Rod pretended that he did not know it was himself whom the redcloaked man was addressing. He continued to float quietly upward, his magnet-belt tugging uncomfortably at his waist.

A pain in the ribs made him turn suddenly, almost losing his balance in the belt.

"Animal!" cried the man. "Speak up or die."

Still holding his package of books, Rod said mildly, "I'm on an errand and I was told to go this way."

The man's senseless hostility gave caliber to his voice: "And who told you?"

"C'mell," said Rod absently.

The man and his companions laughed at that, and for some reason their laughter had no humor in it, just savagery, cruelty and—way down underneath—something of fear. "Listen to that!" said the man in a red cloak. "One animal says another animal told it to do something." He whipped out a knife.

"What are you doing?" cried Rod.

"Just cutting your belt," said the man. "There's nobody at all below us and you will make a nice red blob at the bottom of the shaft, cat-man. That ought to teach you which shaft to use."

The man actually reached over and seized Rod's belt.

He lifted the knife to slash.

Rod became frightened and angry. His brain ran red.

He spat thoughts at them—

pommy!
shortie!
Earthie!
dead red dirty blue stinking little man,
die, puke, burst, blaze, die!

It all came out in a single flash, faster than he could control it. The red-cloaked man twisted oddly, as if in spasm. His two companions threshed in their belts. They turned slowly.

High above them, two women began screaming.

Further up a man was shouting, both with his voice and with his mind, "Police! Help! Police! Police! Brainbomb! Brainbomb! Help!"

The effort of his telepathic explosion left Rod feeling disoriented and weak. He shook his head and blinked his eyes. He started to wipe his face, only to hit himself on the jaw with the package of books, which he still carried. This aroused him a little. He looked at the three men.

Redcloak was dead, his head at an odd angle. The other two seemed to be dead. One was floating upside down, his rump pointing upmost and the two limp legs swinging out at odd angles; the other was right-side up but had sagged in his belt. All three of them kept moving a steady ten meters a minute, right along with Rod.

There were strange sounds from above.

An enormous voice, filling the shaft with its volume, roared down: "Stay where you are! Police. Police. Police."

Rod glanced at the bodies floating upward. A corridor came by. He reached for the grip-bar, made it, and swung himself into the horizontal passage. He sat down immediately, not getting away from the Upshaft. He thought sharply with his new hearing. Excited, frantic minds beat all around him, looking for enemies, lunatics, crimes, aliens, anything strange.

Softly he began speaking to the empty corridor and to himself, "I am a dumb cat. I am the messenger C'rod. I must take the books to the gentleman from the stars. I am a dumb cat. I do not know much."

A robot, gleaming with the ornamental body-armor of Old Earth, landed at his cross-corridor, looked at Rod and called up the shaft, "Master, here's one. A c'man with a package."

A young subchief came into view, feet first as he managed to ride down the shaft instead of going up it. He seized the ceiling of the transverse corridor, gave himself a push and (once free of the shaft's magnetism) dropped heavily on his feet beside Rod. Rod heard him thinking, "I'm good at this. I'm a good telepath. I clean things up fast. Look at this dumb cat."

Rod went on concentrating, "I'm a dumb cat. I have a package to deliver. I'm a dumb cat."

The subchief looked down at him scornfully. Rod felt the other's mind slide over his own in the rough equivalent of a search. He remained relaxed and tried to feel stupid while the other heard him. Rod said nothing. The subchief flashed his baton over the package, eyeing the crystal knob at the end.

"Books," he snorted.

Rod nodded.

"You!" said the bright young subchief. "You see bodies?" He spoke in a painfully clear, almost childish version of the Old Common Tongue.

Rod held up three fingers and then pointed upward.

"You, cat-man, you feel the brain-bomb!"

Rod, beginning to enjoy the game, threw his head backward and let out a cattish yowl expressing pain. The subchief could not help clapping his hands over his ears. He started to turn away. "I can see what you think of it, cat fellow. You're pretty stupid, aren't you?"

Still thinking low dull thoughts as evenly as he could, Rod said promptly and modestly, "Me smart cat. Very handsome, too."

"Come along," said the subchief to his robot, disregarding Rod altogether.

Rod plucked at his sleeve.

The subchief turned back.

Very humbly Rod said, "Sir and master, which way, Hostel of Singing Birds, Room Nine?"

"Mother of poodles!" cried the subchief. "I'm on a murder case and this dumb cat asks me for directions." He was a decent young man and he thought for a minute. "This way—" said he, pointing up the Upshaft—"it's twenty more meters and then the third street over. But that's 'people only.' It's about a kilometer over to the steps for animals." He stood, frowning, and then swung on one of his robots: "Wush', you see this cat!"

"Yes, master, a cat-man, very handsome."

"So you think he's handsome, too. He already thinks so, so that makes it unanimous. He may be handsome, but he's dumb. Wush', take this cat-man to the address he tells you. Use the upshaft by my authority. Don't put a bek on him, just hug him."

Rod was immeasurably grateful that he had slipped his shaftbelt off and had left it negligently on the rack, just before the robot arrived.

The robot seized him around the waist with what was literally a grip of iron. They did not wait for the slow upward magnetic drive of the shaft to lift them. The robot had some kind of jet in his backpack and lifted Rod with sickening speed to the next level. He pushed Rod into the corridor and followed him.

"Where do you go?" said the robot, very plainly.

Rod, concentrating on feeling stupid just in case someone might still be trying to hier his mind, said slowly and stumblingly, "Hostel of the Singing Birds, Room Nine."

The robot stopped still, as though he were communicating telepathically, but Rod's mind, though alert, could catch not the faintest whisper of telepathic communication. "Hot buttered sheep!" thought Rod. "He's using radio to check the address with his headquarters right from here!"

VI

Wush' appeared to be doing just that. He came to in a moment. They emerged under the sky, filled with Earth's own moon, the loveliest thing that Rod had ever seen. He did not dare to stop and enjoy the scenery, but he trotted lithely beside the robot-policeman.

They came down a road with heavy, scented flowers. The wet warm air of Earth spread the sweetness everywhere.

On their right there was a courtyard with copies of ancient fountains, a dining space now completely empty of diners, a robot waiter in the corner and many individual rooms opening on the plaza. The robot policeman called to the robot-waiter, "Where's number nine?"

The waiter answered him with a lifting of the hand and an odd twist of the wrist, twice repeated, which the robot-policeman seemed to understand perfectly well.

"Come along," he said to Rod, leading the way to an outside stairway which reached up to an outside balcony serving the second story of rooms. One of the rooms had a plain number nine on it.

Rod was about to tell the robot-policeman that he could see the number nine, when Wush' with officious kindness, took the doorknob and flung it open with a gesture of welcome to Rod.

There was the great cough of a heavy gun and Wush', his head blown almost completely off, clanked metalically to the iron floor of the balcony. Rod instinctively jumped for cover and flattened himself against the wall of the building.

A handsome man, wearing what seemed to be a black suit, came into the doorway, a heavy-caliber police pistol in his hand.

"Oh, there you are," said he to Rod evenly enough. "Come on in."

Rod felt his legs working, felt himself walking into the room despite the effort of his mind to resist. He stopped

pretending to be a dumb cat. He dropped the books on the ground and went back to thinking like his normal Old North Australian self, despite the cat body. It did no good. He kept on walking involuntarily, and entered the room.

As he passed the man himself, he was conscious of a sticky sweet rotten smell, like nothing he had ever smelled before. He also saw that the man, though fully clothed, was sopping wet.

He entered the room.

It was raining inside. Somebody had jammed the fire-sprinkler system so that a steady rain fell from the ceiling to the floor.

C'mell stood in the middle of the room, her glorious red hair a wet stringy mop hanging down her shoulders. There was a look of concentration and alarm on her face.

"I," said the man, "am Tostig Amaral. This girl said that her husband would come with a policeman. I did not think she was right. But she was right. With the cat-husband there comes a policeman. I shoot the policeman. He is a robot and I can pay the Earth government for as many robots as I like. You are a cat. I can kill you also, and pay the charges on you. But I am a nice man, and I want to make love with your little red cat over there, so I will be generous and pay you something so that you can tell her she is mine and not yours. Do you understand that, cat-man?"

Rod found himself released from the unexplained muscular bonds which had hampered his freedom.

"My lord, my master from afar," he said, "C'mell is an underperson. It is the law here that if an underperson and a person become involved in love, the underperson dies and the human person gets brainscrubbed. I am sure, my master, that you would not want to be brainscrubbed by the Earth authorities. Let the girl go."

Amaral glided across the room. His face was pale, petulant, human, but Rod saw that the black clothes were not clothes at all.

The "clothes" were mucous membranes, an extension of Amaral's living skin.

The pale face turned even more pale with rage.

"You're a bold cat-man to talk like that. My body is bigger than yours, and it is poisonous as well. We have had to live hard in the rain of Amazonas Triste, and we have mental and physical powers which you had better not disturb. If you will not take payment, go away anyhow. The girl is mine. What happens to her is my business. If I violate Earth regulations, I will destroy the c'girl and pay for her. Go away, or you die."

Rod spoke with deliberate calm and calculated risk. "Citizen, I play no game. I am not a cat-man but a subject of Her Absent Majesty the Queen, from Old North Australia. I give you warning that it is a man you face, and no mere animal. Let that girl go."

C'mell struggled as though she were trying to speak, but could not.

Amaral laughed, "That's a lie, animal and a bold one. I admire you for trying to save your mate. But she is mine. She is a girlygirl and the Instrumentality gave her to me. She is my pleasure. Go, bold cat! You are a good liar."

Rod took his last chance, "Scan me if you will."

He stood his ground.

Amaral's mind ran over his personality like filthy hands pawing naked flesh. Rod recoiled at the dirtiness and intimacy of being felt by such a person's thoughts, because he could sense the kinds of pleasure and cruelty which Amaral had experienced. He stood firm, calm, sure, just. He was not going to leave C'mell with this—this monster from the stars, man though he might be, of the old true human stock.

Amaral laughed. "You're a man, all right. A boy. A farmer. And you cannot hier or spiek except for the button in your ear. Get out, child, before I box your ears!"

Rod spoke: "Amaral, I herewith put you in danger."

Amaral did not reply with words.

His peaked sharp face grew paler and the folds of his skin dilated. They quivered, like the edges of wet, torn balloons. The room began to fill with a sickening sweet stench, as though it were a candy shop in which all the unburied bodies had died weeks before. There was a smell of vanilla, of susar, of fresh hot cookies, of baked bread, of chocolate boiling in the pot; there was even a whiff of stroon. But as Amaral tensed and shook out his auxiliary skins each smell turned wrong, into a caricature and abomination of itself. The composite was hypnotic. Rod glanced at C'mell. She had turned completely white.

That decided him.

The calm which he had found with the Catmaster might be good, but there were moments for calm and other moments for anger.

Rod deliberately chose anger.

He felt fury rising in him as hot and quick and greedy as if it had been love. He felt his heart go faster, his muscles become stronger, his mind clearer. Amaral apparently had total confidence in his own poisonous and hypnotic powers, because he was staring straight-forward as his skins swelled and waved in the air like wet leaves under water. The steady drizzle from the sprinkler kept everything penetratingly wet.

Rod disregarded this. He welcomed fury.

With his new hiering device, he focused on Amaral's mind, and only on Amaral's.

Amaral saw the movement of his eyes and whipped a knife into view.

"Man or cat, you're dying!" said Amaral, himself hot with the excitement of hate and collision.

Rod then spoke, in his worst scream—

beast, filth, offal—
spot, dirt, vile ness,
wet, nasty—
die, die, die!

He was sure it was the loudest cry he had ever given. There was no echo, no effect. Amaral stared at him, the evil knife-point flickering in his hand like the flame atop a candle.

Rod's anger reached a new height.

He felt pain in his mind when he walked forward, cramps in his muscles as he used them. He felt a real fear of the offworld poison which this man-creature might exude, but the thought of C'mell—cat or not cat—alone with Amaral was enough to give him the rage of a beast and the strength of a machine.

Only at the very last moment did Amaral realize Rod had broken loose.

Rod never could tell whether the telepathic scream had really hurt the wet-worlder or not, because he did something very simple.

He reached with all the speed of a Norstrilian farmer, snatched the knife from Amaral's hand, ripping folds of soft, sticky skin with it, and then slashed the other man from clavicle to clavicle.

He jumped back in time to avoid the spurt of blood.

The "wet black suit" collapsed as Amaral died on the floor.

Rod took the dazed C'mell by the arm and led her out of the room. The air on the balcony was fresh, but the murder-smell of Amazonas Triste was still upon him. He knew that he would hate himself for weeks, just from the memory of that smell.

There were whole armies of robots and police outside. The body of Wush' had been taken away.

There was silence as they emerged.

Then a clear, civilized, commanding voice spoke from the plaza below, "Is he dead?"

Rod nodded.

"Forgive me for not coming closer. I am the Lord Jestocost. I know you, C'roderick, and I know who you really are. These people are all under my orders. You and the girl can wash and wash in the rooms below. Then you can run a certain errand. Tomorrow, at the second hour, I will see you."

Robots came close to them—apparently programmed to have no sense of smell, because the fulsome stench did not bother them in the least.

People stepped out of their way looking startled and repelled, as they passed.

Rod was able to murmur, "C'mell, are you all right?"

She nodded and she gave him a wan smile. Then she forced herself to speak. "You are brave, mister McBan. You are even braver than a cat."

The robots separated the two of them.

Within moments Rod found little white medical robots taking his clothing off him gently, deftly and quickly. A hot shower, with a smell of medication to it, was already hissing in the bath-stall. Rod was tired of wetness, tired of all this water everywhere, tired of wet things and complicated people, but he stumbled into the shower with gratitude and hope. He was still alive. He had unknown friends to help him.

And C'mell. C'mell was safe from the rain-man.

"Is this," thought Rod, "what people call love?"

The clean stringing astringency of the shower drove all thoughts from his mind. Two of the little white robots had followed him in. He sat on a hot, wet wooden bench and they scrubbed him with brushes which felt as though they would remove his very skin as they worked to get him clean.

Bit by bit, the terrible odor faded.

VII

Rod McBan went from the room of the stinkman to a place where a doctor gave him new smells to experience, smells of chemistry and of medicine and of heat and cold. The doctor's name was Vomact, and Rod would have

enjoyed his company if he had not wondered where C'mell was and what she was doing.

Vomact was a small man, a full head shorter than Rod himself, but so gracefully proportioned that he did not look stunted or little. His face was thin, with a mop of ungovernable black hair which fell in all directions. Among Norstrilians, this fashion would have been deemed eccentric; to judge by the fact that other Earthmen let their hair grow wild and long, it must have been an Earth fashion. Rod found it foolish but not repulsive.

It was not Vomact's appearance which caused the impression. It was the personality which tingled out of every pore. Vomact could become calm when he knew, from his medical wisdom, that kindness and tranquility were in order, but these qualities were not usual to him. He was vivacious, moody, lively, talkative to an extreme, but he was sensitive enough to the person to whom he was talking: he never became a bore. Even among Norstrilian women, Rod had never seen a person who expressed so much, so fluently. When Vomact talked, his hands were in constant motion—outlining, describing, clarifying the points which he described. When he talked he smiled, scowled, raised his eyebrows in questioning, stared with amazement, looked aside in wonder. Rod was used to the sight of two Norstrilians having a long telepathic conversation, spieking and hiering one another as their bodies reposed, comfortable and immobile, while their minds worked directly on one another. To do all this with the speaking voice—that, to a Norstrilian, was a marvel to hear and behold. There was something graceful and pleasant about the animation of this earth doctor which stood in complete contrast to the quick dangerous decisiveness of the Lords of the Instrumentality. Rod began to think that if Earth were full of people, all of them like Vomact, it must be a delightful but confusing place, Vomact had once hinted that his family was unusual, so that even in the long weary years of perfection, when everyone else had numbers, they kept their family name secret but remembered.

"I am doctor Vomact. I know that you are not a cat, mister and owner McBAn, and it is only my business to check up on you. May I?"

"C'mell—" began Rod.

"She is perfectly all right. We have given her a sedative and for the time being she is being treated as though she was a human woman. From the Instrumentality, the Lord Jestocost told me to suspend the rules in her case, and I did so. But I think we will both have trouble about the matter later on."

"Trouble?" said Rod. "I'll pay—"

"No, no, it's not payment. It's just the rule that damaged underpeople should be destroyed and not put in hospitals. Mind you, I treat them myself now and then, if I can do it on the sly. But now let's have a look at you."

"Why are we talking?" spieked Rod telepathically. "Didn't you know that I can hier mind-to-mind now?"

Instead of getting a physical examination, Rod had a wonderful visit with the doctor, in which they drank enormous glasses of a sweet Earth beverage called chai by the ancient Paroski ones. He found that this doctor Vomact was a candidate for a Chiefship of the Instrumentality, and he learned something of the strange tests required for that office. He even found that the doctor knew more than he himself did about his own financial position, and that the actuarial balances of Earth were sagging with the weight of his wealth, since the increase in the price of stroon might lead to shorter lives. The doctor and he ended by discussing the underpeople; he found that the doctor had just as vivid an admiration for C'mell as he himself did. The evening ended when Rod said, "I'm young, doctor and sir, and I sleep well, but I'm never going to sleep again if you don't get that smell away from me. I can smell it inside my nose."

The doctor became professional. He said, "Open your mouth and breathe right into my face!"

Rod hesitated and then obeyed.

"Great crooked stars!" said the doctor. "I can smell it too. There's a little in your upper respiratory system, perhaps a little even in your lungs. Do you need your sense of smell for the next few days?"

Rod said he did not.

"Fine," said the doctor. "We can numb that section of the brain very gently. There'll be no residual damage. You won't smell anything for eight to ten days, and by that time the smell of Amaral will be gone. Incidentally, you were charged with first degree murder, tried and acquitted, on the matter of Tostig Amaral."

"How could I be?" said Rod. "I wasn't even arrested."

"The Instrumentality computered it. Now lie down, so I can kill off that smell."

Rod lay down. The doctor put his head in a clamp and called in robot assistants. The smell-killing process knocked him out, and when he awakened, it was in a different building. He sat up in bed and saw the sea itself. C'mell was standing at the edge of water. He sniffed. He smelled no salt, no wet, no water—and no Amaral. It was worth the change.

C'Mell came to him. "My dear, my very dear, my sire and master but my very dear! You chanced your life for me last night."

"I'm a cat myself," laughed Rod.

He leaped from the bed and ran out to the water margin. The immensity of the water was incredible. The white waves were separate, definable miracles, each one of them. He had seen the enclosed lakes of Australia, but none of them did things like this.

C'mell had the tact to stay silent till he had seen his fill.

Then she broke the news.

"You own Earth. You have work to do. Either you stay here and begin studying how to manage your property, or you go somewhere else. Either way, something a little bit sad is going to happen today."

He looked at her seriously, his pajamas flapping in the wet wind which he could no longer smell.

"I'm ready," he said. "What is it?"

"You lose me."

"Is that all?" he laughed.

C'mell looked very hurt. She stretched her fingers as though she were a nervous cat looking for something to claw.

"I thought—" said she, and stopped. She turned to look at him, staring fully, trustingly into his face. "You're such a young man, but you can do anything. Even among men you are fierce and decided. Tell me, what—what do you wish?"

"Nothing much," he smiled at her, "except that I am buying you and taking you home. We can't go to Norstrilia unless the law changes, but we can go to New Mars. They don't have any rules there, or none which a few tons of stroon won't get changed. C'mell, I'll stay cat. Will you marry me?"

She started laughing but the laughter turned into weeping. She hugged him and buried her face against his chest. At last she wiped her ears off on her arm and looked up at him.

"Poor silly me! Poor silly you! Don't you see it, mister? I am a cat. If I had children, they would be cat-kittens, every one of them, unless I went every single week to get the genetic code recycled so that they would turn out underpeople. Don't you know that you and I can never marry—not with any real hope? Besides, Rod, there is the other rule. You and I cannot even see each other again from this sunset onward. How do you think the Lord Jestocost saved my life yesterday? How did he break almost all the rules of the book?"

The brightness had gone out of Rod's day. "I don't know," he said dully.

"By promising them I would die promptly and obediently if there were any more irregularities. By saying I was a nice animal. A biddable one. My death is hostage for what you and I must do. It's not a law. It's something worse than a law—it's an agreement between the Lords of the Instrumentality."

"I see," said he, understanding the logic of it, but hating the cruel Earth customs which put C'mell and himself together, only to tear them apart.

"Let's walk down the beach, Rod," she said. "Unless you want your breakfast first of all..."

"Oh, no," he said. Breakfast! a flutty crupp for all the breakfasts on Earth!

She walked as though she had not a care in the world, but there was an undertone of meaning to her walk which warned Rod that she was up to something.

It happened.

First, she kissed him, with a kiss he remembered the rest of his life.

Then, before he could say a word, she spieked in a penetrating telepathic shout. But her spiekling was not words or ideas at all. It was singing of a high wild kind. It was the music which went along with her very own poem, which she had sung to him atop Earthport:

And oh, my love, for you!
High birds flying, and a
High sky crying, and a
High heart striving, and a
High wind driving, and
High brave place for you!

But it was not those words, not those ideas, even though they seemed subtly different this time. She was doing something which the best telepaths of Old North Australia had tried in vain for thousands of years to accomplish—she was transmitting the mathematical and proportional essence of music right out of her mind, and she was doing it with a clarity and force which would have been worthy of a great orchestra. The "high wind driving" fugue kept recurring.

He turned his eyes away from her to see the astonishing thing which was happening all around them. The air, the ground, the sea were all becoming thick with life. Fish flashed out of blue waves. Wings circled by the multitude above them. The beach was thick with little running birds. Dogs and running animals which he had never seen before stood restlessly around C'mell—hectares of them.

Abruptly she stopped her song.

With very high volume and clarity, she spat commands in all directions:

"Think of people.

"Think of this cat and me running away somewhere.

"Think of ships.

"Look for strangers.

"Think of things in the sky."

Rod was glad he did not have his broad-band telepathic hiering come on, as it sometimes had done at home. He was sure he would have gone dizzy with the pictures and the contradictions of it all.

She had grabbed his shoulders and was whispering fiercely into his ear:

"Rod, they'll cover us. Please make a trip with me, Rod. One last dangerous trip. Not for you. Not for me. Not even for mankind. For life, Rod. The Aitch Eye wants to see you."

"Who's the Aitch Eye?"

"He'll tell you the secret if you see him," she hissed. "Do it for me, then, if you don't trust my ideas."

He smiled. "For you, C'mell, yes."

"Don't even think, then, till you get there. Don't even ask questions. Just come along. Millions of lives depend on you, Rod."

She stood up and sang again, but the new song had no grief in it, no anguish, no weird keening from species to species. It was as cool and pretty as a music box, as simple as an assured and happy goodbye.

"That," said C'mell, "should rattle the telepathic monitors for a while. They are not very imaginative anyhow, and when they get something like this they write up reports about it. Then they can't understand their reports and sooner or later one of them asks me what I did. I tell them the truth."

"What are you going to tell them this time?" he asked, as they walked back to the house.

"That I had something which I did not want them to hear."

"They won't take that."

"Of course not, but they will suspect me of trying to beg stroon for you to give to the underpeople."

"Do you want some, C'mell?"

"Of course not! It's illegal and it would just make me live longer than my natural life. Why bother?"

They had reached the house. C'mell paused.

"No questions, Rod." The smile she gave him would have melted a monument. He felt well. He was amused and pleased by the physical delight of hiering and spieking with the occasional true people who passed by. (Some underpeople could hier and spiek but they tried to conceal it, for fear that they would be resented.) He felt strong. Losing C'mell was a sad thing to do, but it was a whole day off; he began dreaming of things that he could do for her when they parted. Buying her services of thousands of people for the rest of her life? Giving her jewelry which would be the envy of Earthmankind? Leasing her a private planofrom yacht? He suspected these might not be legal, but they were pleasant to think about.

VIII

Three hours later, he had no time for pleasant thoughts. They had flown into Earthport city, and they had started going down. Forty-five minutes of dropping had made his stomach very queasy. He felt the air go warm and stale and he wished desperately that he had not given up his sense of smell.

Where the drop-shafts ended, the tunnels and the elevators began.

Down they went, where incredibly old machinery spun slowly in a spray of oil, performing tasks which only the wildest mind could guess at.

In one room, C'mell stopped and shouted at him over the noise of engines: "That's a pump."

It did not look obvious. Huge turbines moved wearily. They seemed to be hooked up to an enormous steam engine powered by nuclear fuel. Five or six brightly-polished robots eyed them suspiciously as they walked around the machine, which was at least eighty meters long by forty-five high.

"And come here..." shouted C'mell.

They went into another room, empty and dean and quiet except for a rigid column of moving water which shot from floor to ceiling with no evidence of machinery at all. An underman, sloppily formed from a rat body, got up from his rocking chair when they entered. He bowed to C'mell as though she were a great lady but she waved him back to his chair.

She took Rod near the column of water and pointed to a shiny ring on the floor.

"That's the other pump. They do the same amount of work."

"What is it?" he shouted.

"Force-field, I guess. I'm not an engineer." They went on.

In a quieter corridor she explained that the pumps were both of them for the service of weather control. The old one had been running six or seven thousand years, and showed very little wear. When people needed a supplementary one, they had simply printed it on plastic, set it in the floor, and turned it on with a few amps. The underman was there just to make sure that nothing broke down or went critical.

"Can't real people design things any more?" asked Rod.

"Only if they want to. Making them want to do things is the hard part now."

"You mean, they don't want to do anything?"

"Not exactly," said C'mell, "but they find that we are better than they are at almost anything. Real work, that is. Not statesmanship like running the Instrumentality and the Earth government. Here and there a real human being gets to work, and there are always offworlders like you to stimulate them and challenge them with new problems. But they used to have secure lives of four hundred years, a common language, and a standard conditioning. They were dying off, just by being too perfect. One way to get better would have been to kill off us underpeople, but they couldn't do that all that way. There was too much messy work to be done that you couldn't count on robots for. Even the best robot, if he's a computer linked to the mind of a mouse will do fine for routine, but unless he has a very complete human education, he's going to make some wild judgments which won't suit what people want. So they need underpeople. I'm still a cat underneath it all, but even the cats which are unchanged are pretty close relatives of human beings. They make the same basic choices between power and beauty, between survival and self-sacrifice, between common sense and high courage. So the Lady Alice More worked out this plan for the Rediscovery of Man. Set up the Ancient Nations, give everybody an extra culture besides the old one based on the Old Common Tongue, let them get mad at each other, restore some disease, some danger, some accidents, but average it out so that nothing is really unchanged."

They had come to a storeroom, the sheer size of which made Rod blink. The great reception hall at the top of Earthport had astounded him. This room was twice the size.

The room was filled with extremely ancient cargoes which had not even been unpacked from their containers.

Rod could see that some were marked outbound for worlds which no longer existed, or which had changed their names. Others were inbound, but no one had unpacked them for five thousand years and more.

"What's all this stuff?"

"Shipping, Technological change. Somebody wrote it all off the computers, so they didn't have to think of it any more. This is the thing which underpeople and robots are searching, to supply the ancient artifacts for the Rediscovery of Man. One of our boys—rat stock, with a human I.Q. of 300—found something marked Musee Nationale. It was the whole National Museum of the Republic of Mali, which had been put inside a mountain when the ancient wars became severe. Mali apparently was not a very important 'nation,' as they called those groupings, but it had the same language as France, and we were able to supply real material, almost everything that was needed, to restore some kind of a French civilization. China has been hard. The Chinesians survived longer than any other nation, and they did their own grave-robbing. So we have found it impossible to reconstruct China before the age of space. We can't modify people into being Ancient Chinese."

Rod stopped, thunderstruck. "Can I talk to you here?"

C'mell listened with a faraway look on her face. "Not here. I feel the very weak sweep of a monitor across my mind now and then. In a couple of minutes you can. Let's hurry along."

"I just thought," cried Rod, "of the most important question in all the worlds!"

"Stop thinking it, then," said C'mell, "until we come to a safe place."

Instead of going straight on through the big aisle between the forgotten crates and packages, she squeezed between two crates and made her way to the edge of the big underground storeroom.

"That package," she said, "is stroon. They lost it. We could help ourselves to it if we wanted to, but we're afraid of it."

Rod looked at the names on the package. It had been shipped by Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan XXVI to Adaminaby Port and reconsigned to Earthport. "That's seventy-five generations ago, shipped from the Station of Doom. My farm. But I think it turns to poison if you leave it for more than two hundred years. Our own military people have some horrible uses for it, when invaders show up, but ordinary Norstrilians, when they find old stroon, always turn it in to the Commonwealth. We're afraid of it. Not that we often lose it. It's too valuable and we're too greedy, with a 20,000,000 per cent import duty on everything."

C'mell led on. They unexpectedly passed a tiny robot, a lamp fixed to his head, who was seated between two enormous piles of books. He was apparently reading them one by one, because he had beside him a pile of notes larger in bulk than he was. He did not look up, nor did they interrupt him.

At the wall, C'mell said, "Now do exactly what you're told. See the dust along the base of this crate?"

"I see it," said Rod.

"That must be left undisturbed. Now watch. I'm going to jump from the top of this crate to the top of that one, without disturbing the dust. Then I want you to jump the same way and go exactly where I point—without even thinking about it, if you can manage. I'll follow. Don't try to be polite or chivalrous, or you'll mess up the whole arrangement."

Rod nodded.

She jumped to a case against the wall. Her red hair did not fly behind her, because she had tied it up in a turban before they started out, when she had obtained coveralls for each of them from the robot-servants. They had looked like an ordinary couple of working c'people.

Either she was very strong or the case was very light. Standing on the case, she tipped it very delicately, so that the pattern of dust around its base would be unchanged, save for microscopic examination. A blue glow came from beyond the case. With an odd, practised turn of the wrist she indicated that Rod should jump from his case to the tipped one, and from there into the area—whatever it might be—beyond the case. It seemed easy for him, but he wondered if she could support both his weight and hers on the case. He remembered her order not to talk or think. He tried to think of the salmon steak he had eaten the day before. That should certainly be a good cat-thought, if a monitor happened to catch his mind at that moment! He jumped, teetered on the slanting top of the second packing case, and scrambled into a tiny doorway just big enough for him to crawl through. It was apparently designed for cables, pipes and maintenance, not for habitual human use: it was too low to stand in. He scrambled forward. There was a slam.

C'mell had jumped in after him, letting the case fall back into its old, apparently undisturbed position.

She crawled up to him. "Keep going," she said.

"Can we talk here?"

"Of course. Do you want to? It's not a very sociable place."

"That question, that big question," said Rod. "I've got to ask you. You underpeople are taking charge of people. If you're fixing up their new cultures for them, you're getting to be the masters of men!"

"Yes," said C'mell and let the explosive affirmative hang in the air between them.

He couldn't think of anything to say; it was his big bright idea for the day, and the fact that she already knew underpeople were becoming secret masters—that was too much!

She looked at his friendly face and said, more gently, "We underpeople have seen it coming for a long time. Some of the human people do, too. Especially the Lord Jestocost. He's no fool. And, Rod, you fit in."

"I?"

"Not as a person. As an economic change. As a source of unallocated power."

"You mean, C'mell, you're after me, too? I can't believe it! I can recognize a pest or a nuisance or a robber. You don't seem like any of these. You're good, all the way through." His voice faltered. "I meant it this morning, C'mell, when I asked you to marry me."

The delicacy of cat and the tenderness of woman combined in her voice as she answered, "I know you meant it." She stroked a lock of hair away from his forehead, in a caress as restrained as any touch could be. "But it's not for us. And I'm not using you myself, Rod. I want nothing for myself, but I want a good world for underpeople. And for people, too. For people, too! We cats loved you people long before we had brains. We've been your cats longer than anyone can remember. Do you think our loyalty to the human race would stop just because you changed our shapes and added a lot of thinking power? I love you, Rod, but I love people too. That's why I'm taking you to the Aitch Eye."

"Can you tell me what that is—now?"

She laughed. "This place is safe. It's the Holy Insurgency. The secret government of the underpeople. This is a silly place to talk about it, Rod. You're going to meet the head of it, right now."

"All of them?" Rod was thinking of the Chiefs of the Instrumentality.

"It's not a them, it's a him. The E-telekeli. The bird beneath the ground."

"If there's only one, how did you choose him? Is he like the British Queen, whom we lost so long ago?"

C'mell laughed. "We didn't choose him. He grew and now he leads us. You people took an eagle's egg and tried to make it into a Daimoni man. When the experiment failed, you threw the fetus out. It lived. It's he. It'll be the strongest mind you've ever met. Come on. This is no place to talk, and we're still talking."

She started crawling down the horizontal shaft, waving at Rod to follow her.

He followed, and as they crawled he called to her, "C'mell, stop a minute."

She stopped until he caught up with her. She thought that he might ask for a kiss, so worried and lonely did he look. She was ready to be kissed. He surprised her by saying, instead:

"I can't smell, C'mell. Please, I'm so used to smelling that I miss it. What does this place smell like?"

Her eyes widened and then she laughed. "It smells like underground. Electricity burning the air. Animals somewhere far away, a lot of different smells of them. The old, old smell of man, almost gone. Engine oil and bad exhaust. It smells like a headache. It smells like silence, like things untouched. There, is that it?"

He nodded and they went on.

At the end of the horizontal C'mell turned and said, "All men die here. Come on!"

Rod started to follow and then stopped, "C'mell, are you disco-ordinated? Why should I die? There's no reason to."

Her laughter was pure happiness. "Silly C'rod! You are a cat, cat enough to come where no man has passed for centuries. Come on. Watch out for those skeletons. They're a lot of them around here. We hate to kill real people, but there are some that we can't warn off in time."

They emerged on a balcony, overlooking and even more enormous storeroom than the one before. This had thousands more boxes in it. C'mell paid no attention to it. She went to the end of the balcony and raced down a slender steel ladder.

"More junk from the past!" she said, anticipating Rod's comment. "People have forgotten it up above; we mess around in it."

Though he could not smell the air, at this depth it felt thick, heavy, immobile.

Cornell did not slow down. She threaded her way through the junk and treasures on the floor as though she were an acrobat. On the far side of the old room she stopped. "Take one of these," she commanded.

They looked like enormous umbrellas, like the pictures his computer had showed him. These seemed oddly large, compared to the ones in the pictures. He looked around for rain. C'mell did not understand his suspicions.

"The shaft," she said, "has no magnetic controls, no updraft of air. It's just a shaft twelve meters in diameter. These are parachutes. We jump into the shaft with them and then we float straight down, four kilometers. It's close to the Moho."

Since he did not pick up one of the big umbrellas, she handed him one. It was clumsy to hold but surprisingly light.

He blinked at her. "How will we ever get out?"

"One of the bird-men will fly us up the shaft. It's hard work, but they can do it. Be sure to hook that thing to your belt. It's a long slow time falling, and we won't be able to talk on the way. And it's terribly dark, too."

He complied.

She opened a big door, beyond which there was the feel of nothing. She gave him a wave, partially opened her "umbrella", stepped over the edge of the door and vanished.

He looked over the edge himself. There was nothing to be seen. Nothing of C'mell, no sound except for the slippage of air and an occasional mechanical whisper of metal against metal. He supposed that must be the rib-tips of the umbrella touching the metallic edge of the shaft as she fell.

He sighed. Norstrilia was safe and quiet compared to this.

He opened his umbrella too.

Acting on an odd premonition, he took his little hiering-spieking shell out of his ear and put it carefully in his coverall pocket. This was his telepathic amplifier, something like an ancient hearing aid. That act saved his life.

IX

Rod McBan remembered falling and falling. He shouted into the wet adhesive darkness, but there was no reply. He thought of cutting himself loose from his big umbrella and letting himself drop to the death below him, but then he thought of C'mell and he knew his body would drop upon her like a bomb.

He wondered about his desperation, but could not understand it. (Only later did he find out that he was passing telepathic suicide screens which the underpeople had set up, screens fitted to the human mind, designed to dredge filth and despair from the paleocortex, the smell-bite-mate sequence of the nose-guided animals who first walked Earth. But Rod was cat enough, just barely cat enough, and he was also telepathically subnormal, so that the screens did not do to him what they would have done to any normal man of Earth—delivered a twisted dead body at the bottom. No man had ever gotten that far, but the underpeople were resolved that none ever should.)

Rod twisted in his harness and at last he fainted.

He awakened in a relatively small room, enormous by Earth standards but still much smaller than the storerooms which he had passed through on the way down. The lights were bright. He suspected that the room stank but he could not prove it with his smell gone.

A man was speaking: "The Forbidden Word is never given unless the man who does not know it plainly asks for it."

There was a chorus of voices sighing, "We remember. We remember what we remember."

The speaker was almost a giant, thin and pale. His face was the face of a dead saint, white as alabaster, with glowing eyes. His body was that of man and bird both, man from the hips up, except that human hands grew out of the elbows of enormous, clean white wings. From the hips down to his legs were bird-legs, ending in horny, almost translucent bird-feet which stood steadily on the ground.

"I am sorry, mister and owner McBan, that you took that risk. I was misinformed. You are a good cat on the outside but still completely a human man on the inside. Our safety devices bruised your mind and they might have killed you."

Rod stared at the man as he stumbled to his feet. He saw that C'mell was one of the people helping him. When he was erect, someone handed him a beaker of very cold water. He drank it thirstily. It was hot down here—hot, stuffy, and with the feel of big engines nearby.

"I," said the great bird-man, "am E-telekeli." He pronounced it Ee-telly-kelly. "You are the first human being in all of time to see me in the flesh."

"Blessed, blessed, blessed, four-fold blessed is the name of our leader, our father, our brother, our son the E-telekeli," chorused the underpeople.

Rod looked around. There was every kind of underperson imaginable here, including several that he had never even thought of. One was a head on a shelf, with no apparent body. When he looked, somewhat shocked, directly at the head, its face smiled and one eye closed in a deliberate wink. The E-telekeli followed his glance. "Do not let us shock you. Some of us are normal, but many of us down here are the discards of men's laboratories. This is my son, who has come here to meet you this day."

A tall, very pale young man with no feathers stood up at this point. He was stark naked and completely unembarrassed. He held out a friendly hand to Rod. Rod was sure he had never seen the young man before. The young man sensed Rod's hesitation and said, "I am the E-ikasukus."

"Blessed, blessed, threefold blessed is the name of our leader-to-be, the Yeekasoose!" chanted the underpeople.

Something about the scene caught Rod's rough Norstrilian humor. Ha spoke to the great underman as he would have spoken to another mister-and-owner back home, friendly but bluntly. "Glad you welcome me, sir!"

"Glad, glad, glad is the stranger from beyond the stars!" sang the chorus.

"Can't you make them shut up?" asked Rod.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up,' says the stranger from the stars!" chorused the group.

The E-telekeli did not exactly laugh, but his smile was not pure benevolence. "We can disregard them and talk, or I can blank out your mind everytime they repeat what we say. This is a sort of court ceremony."

Rod glanced around. "I'm in your power already," said he, "so it won't matter if you mess around with my mind. Blank them out."

The E-telekeli stirred the air in front of him as though he were writing a mathematical equation with his finger. Rod's eyes followed the finger and he suddenly felt the room quiet down.

"Come over here and sit down," said the E-telekeli.

Rod followed. "What do you want?" he asked as he followed.

The E-telekeli did not even turn around to answer. He merely spoke while walking ahead. "Your money, mister and owner McBan. Almost all of your money."

Rod stopped walking. He heard himself laughing wildly. "Money? You? Here? What could you possibly do with it?"

"That," said the E-telekeli, "is why you should sit down."

"Do sit," said C'mell, who had followed.

Rod sat down.

"We are afraid that Man himself will die and leave us alone in the universe. We need Man, and there is still an immensity of time before we all pour into a common destiny. People have always assumed that the end of things is around the corner, and we have the promise of the First Forbidden One that this will be so. But it could be hundreds of thousands of years. Maybe millions. People are scattered, mister McBan, so that no weapon will ever kill them all on all planets. But no matter how scattered they are, they are still haunted by themselves. They reach a point of development and then they stop."

"Yes," said Rod, reaching for a carafe of water and helping himself to another drink. "But it's a long way from the philosophy of the universe down to my money. We have plenty of barmy swarmy talk in Old North Australia, but I

never heard of anybody asking for another citizen's money, right off the bat."

The eyes of the E-telekeli glowed like cold fire but Rod knew that this was no hypnosis, no trick being played upon himself. It was the sheer force of the personality burning outward from the birdman.

"Listen carefully, mister McBan. We are the creatures of man. You are gods to us. You have made us into people who talk, who worry, who think, who love, who die. Most of our races were the friends of man before we became underpeople. Like C'mell. How many cats have served and loved man, and for how long? How many cattle have worked for men, been eaten by men, been milked by men across the ages, and have still followed where men went? Even to the stars. And dogs. I do not have to tell you about the love of dogs for men. We call ourselves the Holy Insurgency because we are rebels. We are a government We are a power almost as big as the Instrumentality. Why do you think Teadrinker did not catch you when you arrived?"

"Who is Teadrinker?"

"An official who wanted to kidnap you. He failed because his underman reported to me. We love you, Rod, not because you are a rich Norstrilian, but because it is our faith to love the mankind which created us."

"This is a long slow wicket for my money," said Rod. "Come to the point, sir."

The E-telekeli smiled with sweetness and sadness. Rod immediately knew that it was his own denseness which made the bird-man sad and patient. For the very first time he began to accept the feeling that this person might actually be the superior of any human.

"I'm sorry," said Rod. "I haven't had a minute to enjoy my money since I got it. People have been telling me that everybody is after it. I'm beginning to think that I shall do nothing but run the rest of my life..."

The E-telekeli smiled happily, the way a teacher smiles when a student has suddenly turned in a spectacular performance. "Correct. You have learned a lot. I am offering you something more—the chance to do enormous good. Have you ever heard of Foundations?"

Rod frowned. "The bottoms of buildings?"

"No. Institutions. From the very ancient past."

Rod shook his head. He hadn't.

"If a gift was big enough, it endured and kept on giving, until the culture in which it was set had fallen. If you took most of your money and gave it to some good, wise men, it could be spent over and over again to improve the race of man. We need that. Better men will give us better lives. Do you think that we don't know how pilots and pinlighters have sometimes died, saving their cats in space?"

"Or how they kill underpeople without a thought?" countered Rod. "Or humiliate them without noticing that they do it. It seems to me that you must have some self-interest, sir."

"I do. Some. But not so much as you think. Men are evil when they are frightened or bored. They are good when they are happy and busy. I want you to give your money to provide games, sports, competitions, shows, music—and a chance for honest hatred."

"Hatred?" said Rod. "I was beginning to think that I had found a Believer bird ... somebody who mouthed old magic."

"We're not ending time," said the great bird-man. "We are just altering the material conditions of man's situation for the present historical period. We want to steer mankind away from tragedy and self-defeat. Though the cliffs crumble, we want man to remain. Do you know Swinburne?"

"Where is it?" said Rod.

"It's not a place. It's a poet, before the age of space. Listen."

Till the slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble,
Till terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,
Till the strength of the waves of the high tide crumble
The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink,
Here now in his triumph where all things falter,
Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,
As a god self-slain on his own strange altar,
Death lies dead.

"Do you agree with that?"

"It sounds nice, but I don't understand it," said Rod. "Please, sir, I'm tired than I thought. And I have only this one day with C'mell. Can I finish the business with you and have a little time with her?"

The great underman lifted his arms. His wings spread like a canopy over Rod.

"So be it!" he said, and the words rang out like great song.

Rod could see the lips of the underpeople choring, but he did not notice the sound.

"I offer you a tangible bargain. Tell me if you find I read your mind correctly."

Rod nodded, somewhat in awe.

"You want your money, but you do not want it. You will keep one hundred thousand credits, FOE money, which will leave you the richest man in Old North Australia for the rest of a very long life. The rest you will give to a foundation which will teach men to hate easily and lightly, as in a game, not sickly and wearily, as in habit. The trustees will be Lords of the Instrumentality whom I know, such as Jestocost, Crudelta, the Lady Johanna Gnade."

"And what do I get?"

"Your heart's desire." The beautiful wise pale face stared down at Rod like a father seeking to fathom the puzzlement of his own child. Rod was a little afraid of the face, but he confided in it, too.

"I want too much. I can't have it all."

"I'll tell you what you want. First, you want to be home right now, and all the trouble done with. I can start you back to the Station of Doom this very night."

"But I want to see Earth!"

"Come back, when you are older and wiser. Some day. See what your money has done."

"Well—" said Rod.

"You want C'mell." The bland wise white face showed no embarrassment, no anger, no condescension. "You shall have her, in a linked dream, her mind to yours, for a happy subjective time of about a thousand years. You will live through all the happy things that you might have done together if you had stayed here and become a c'man. You will see your kitten-children flourish, grow old and die. That will take about one half-hour."

"It's just a dream," said Rod. "You want to take megacredits from me and give me a dreamy!"

"*With two minds? Two living, accelerated minds, thinking into each other?* Have you ever heard of that?"

"No," said Rod.

"Do you trust me?" said the E-telekeli.

Rod stared at the bird-man inquisitively and a great weight fell from him. He did trust this creature, more than he had ever trusted the father who did not want him, the mother who gave him up, the neighbors who looked at him and were kind. He sighed, "I trust you."

"I also," added the E-telekeli, "will take care of all the little incidentals through my own network and I will leave the memory of them in your mind. If you trust me that should be enough. You get home, safe. You are protected, off Norstrilia, into which I rarely reach, for as long as you live. You have a separate life right now with C'mell and you will remember most of it. In return, you go to the wall and transfer your fortune, minus one-half FOE megacredit, to the Foundation of Rod McBan."

Rod did not see that the underpeople thronged around him like worshippers. He had to stop when a very pale, tall girl took his hand and held it to her cheek. "You may not be the promised One, but you are a great and good man. We can take nothing from you. We can only ask. That is the teaching of Joan. And you have given."

"Who are you?" said Rod in a frightened voice, thinking that she might be some lost human girl whom the underpeople had abducted to the guts of the Earth.

"E-lamelanie, daughter of the E-telekeli."

Rod stared at her and went to the wall. He pushed a routine sort of button. What a place to find it! "The Lord Jestocost," he called. "McBan speaking. No, you fool, I own this system."

A handsome, polished plumpish man appeared on the screen. This was the Lord Jestocost himself, one of the governing Instrumentality. "If I guess right," said the strange-man, "you are the first human being ever to get into the depths. Can I serve you, mister and owner McBan?"

"Take a note—" said the E-telekeli, out of sight of the machine, beside Rod.

Rod repeated it.

The Lord Jestocost called witnesses at his end.

It was a long dictation, but at last the conveyance was finished. Only at one point did Rod balk. When they tried to call it the McBan Foundation, he said, "Just call it the One Hundred and Fifty Fund."

"One Hundred and Fifty?" asked Jestocost.

"For my father. It's his number in our family. I'm to-the-hundred-and-fifty-first. He was before me. Don't explain the number. Just use it."

"All clear," said Jestocost. "Now we have to get notaries and official witnesses to veridicate our imprints of your eyes, hand and brain. Ask the Person with you to give you a mask, so that the cat-man face will not upset the witnesses. Where is this machine you are using supposed to be located? I know perfectly well where I think it is."

"At the foot of Alpha Ralpha, in a forgotten market," and the B-telekeli. "Your servicemen will find it there tomorrow when they come to check the authenticity of the machine." He still stood out of line of the machine, so that Jestocost could hear him but not see him.

"I know the voice," said Jestocost. "It comes to me as in a real dream. But I shall not ask to see the face."

"Your friend down here has gone where only underpeople go," said the E-telekeli, "and we are disposing of his

fate in more ways than one, my lord. Subject to your gracious approval."

"My approval does not seem to have been needed much," snorted Jestocost, with a little laugh.

"I would like to talk to you. Do you have any intelligent underperson near you?"

"I can call C'mell. She's always somewhere around."

"This time, my lord, you cannot. She's here."

"There? With you? I never knew she went there." The amazement showed on the face of the Lord Jestocost.

"She is here, nevertheless. Do you have some other underperson?"

Rod felt like a dummy, standing in the visiphone while the two voices, unseen by one another, talked past him. But he felt, very truly, that they both wished him well. He was almost nervous in anticipation of the strange happiness which had been offered to him and C'mell, but he was a respectful enough young man to wait until the great ones got through their business.

"Wait a moment," said Jestocost.

On the screen, in the depths, Rod could see the Lord of the Instrumentality work the controls of other, secondary screens. A moment later Jestocost answered:

"B'dank is here. He will enter the room in a few minutes."

"Twenty minutes from now, my sir and lord, will you hold hands with your servant B'dank as you once did with C'mell? I have the problem of this young man and his return. There are things which you do not know, and I would rather not put them on the wires."

Jestocost hesitated only for the slightest of moments. "Good, then," he laughed. "I might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb."

The E-telekeli stood aside. Someone handed Rod a mask which hid his cat-man features and still left his eyes and hands exposed. The brainprint was gotten through the eyes.

The recordings were made.

Rod went back to the bench and table. He helped himself to another drink of water from the carafe. Someone threw a wreath of fresh flowers around his shoulders. Fresh flowers! In such a place ... he wondered. Three rather pretty undergirls, two of them of cat origin and one of them derived from dogs, were leading a freshly dressed C'mell toward him. She wore the simplest and most modest of all possible white dresses. Her waist was cinched by a broad golden belt. She laughed, stopped laughing and then blushed as they led her to Rod.

Two seats were arranged on the bench. Cushions were disposed so that both of them would be comfortable. Silky metallic caps used in surgeries, were fitted on their heads. Rod felt his sense of smell explode within his brain; it came alive richly and suddenly. He took C'mell by the hand and began walking through the immemorial Earth forest, with a temple older than time shining in the clear soft light cast by Earth's old moon. He knew that he was already dreaming. C'mell caught his thought and said, "Rod, my master and lover, this is a dream. But I am in it with you..."

X

Who can measure a thousand years of happy dreaming—the travels, the hunts, the picnics, the visits to forgotten and empty cities, the discovery of beautiful views and strange places? And the love, and the sharing, and

the reflection of everything wonderful and strange by two separate, distinct and utterly harmonious personalities. C'mell the c'girl and C'roderick the c'man; they seemed happily doomed to be with one another. Who can live whole centuries of real bliss and then report it in minutes? Who can tell the full tale of such real lives—happiness, quarrels, reconciliations, problems, solutions and always sharing, happiness, and more sharing...?

When they awakened Rod very gently, they let C'mell sleep on. He looked down at himself and expected to find himself old. But he was a young man still, in the deep forgotten underground of the E-telekeli, and he could not even smell. He reached for the thousand wonderful years as he watched C'mell, young again, lying on the bench, but the dream-years had started fading even as he reached for them.

Rod stumbled on his feet. They led him to a chair. The E-telekeli sat in an adjacent chair, at the same table. He seemed weary.

"My mister and owner McBan, I monitored your dream sharing, just to make sure it stayed in the right general direction. I hope you are satisfied."

Rod nodded, very slowly, and reached for the carafe of water, which someone had re-filled while he slept. Slept, and lived, and dreamed, and grew old, and woke.

"While you slept, mister McBan," said the great E-man, "I had a telepathic conference with the Lord Jestocost, who has been your friend, even though you do not know him. You have heard of the new automatic planoform ships."

"They are experimental," said Rod.

"So they are," said the E-telekeli, "but perfectly safe. And the best 'automatic' pilots are not automatic at all. They have snake-men pilots. My pilots. They can outperform any pilots of the Instrumentality."

"Of course," said Rod, "because they are dead."

"No more dead than I," laughed the white calm bird of the underground. "I put them in cataleptic trances, with the help of my son the doctor E-ikasus. On the ships they wake up. One of them can take you to Norstrilia in a single long fast jump. And my son can work on you right here. We have a good medical workshop in one of those rooms. It will seem like a single night to you, though it will be several days in objective time. If you say goodbye to me now, and if you are ready to go, you will wake up in orbit just outside the Old North Australian subspace net. I have no wish for one of my underpeople to tear himself to pieces if he meets Mother Hitton's dreadful little kittens, whatever they may be. Do you happen to know?"

"I don't know," said Rod quickly, "and if I did, I couldn't tell you. It's the Queen's secret."

"The Queen?"

"The Absent Queen. We use it to mean the Commonwealth government. Anyhow, mister bird, I can't go now. I've got to go back up to the surface of Earth. And I want my stamp that the catmaster gave me. And the books."

"Do you trust me, mister and owner McBan?" The white giant rose to his feet; his eyes shone like fire.

The underpeople spontaneously chorused, "Put your trust in the joyful lawful, put your trust in the loyal-awful bright blank power of the under-bird!"

"I've trusted you with my life and my fortune, so far," said Rod, a little sullenly, "but you're not going to make me go. No matter how much I want to get home. And I have an old enemy at home that I want to help. Houghton Syme the Hon. Sec. There might be something on Old Earth which I could take back to him."

"I think you can trust me a little further," said the E-telekeli. "Would it solve the problem of the Hon. Sec. if you gave him a dream-share with someone he loved, to make up his having a short life?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I can," said the master of underpeople, "have his prescription made up. It will have to be mixed with plasma from his blood before he takes it. It would be good for about three thousand years of subjective life. We have never let this out of our own undercity before, but you are the Friend of Earth, and you shall have it."

Rod tried to stammer his thanks.

The white giant took Rod by the arm and led him back to the visiphone, still trembling with the connection for Earth's surface, many kilometers above.

Rod trembled. Odd shards of dream-memory, coming out of his recently dreamed "life" with C'mell, pulsed through his mind.

The bird-giant showed him the surface of Earth by borrowing a spying eye through the visiphone. They swooped through the streets of earth one last time. Rod saw his rare postage stamps—Cape triangles, they were, printed before the beginning of time—being packed carefully into a metal box which had his formal address printed on it, very proper indeed:

Roderick Frederick Ronald
Arnold William MacArthur McBan
CLI
"The Station of Doom"
c-o Any Lawful Entry-port
Planet of Old North Australia

At last the E-telekeli sighed and Rod sighed with him.

"Enough?" asked the pale bird-giant.

"Enough," said Rod. He started to leave the visiphone and then stopped.

Rod made no move to leave. He had turned off the screen but he just stood there.

"Something else?" said the E-telekeli.

"She's all right," said the lord of the underworld. "She expects nothing from you. She's a good underperson."

"I want to do something for her."

"There's nothing she wants. She is happy. You do not need to meddle."

"She won't be a girlygirl forever," Rod insisted. "You underpeople get old. I don't know how you manage without stroon."

"Neither do I," said the E-telekeli. "I just happen to have long life. But you're right about her. She will age soon enough, by your kind of time."

"I'd like to buy the restaurant for her, the one the bear-man has, and let it become a sort of meeting place open to people and underpeople. She could give it the romantic and interesting touch so that it could be a success."

"A wonderful idea. A perfect project for your Foundation," smiled the E-telekeli. "It shall be done." The bird-man went on: "Now, if you are ready, we will put you to sleep, my son E-ikasus will change you out of your cat body and you will wake in orbit around your home."

"C'mell? Can you wake her up so I can say goodbye after that thousand years?"

The master of the underworld took Rod gently by the arm and walked him across the huge underground room, talking as they went "Would you want to have another goodbye, after that thousand years she remembers with you, if you were she? Let her be. It is kinder this way. You are human. You can afford to be rich with kindness. It is one of the best traits which you human people have."

Rod stopped. "Do you have a recorder of some kind, then? She welcomed me to Earth with a wonderful little song about 'high birds crying' and I want to leave one of our Norstrilian songs for her."

"Sing anything," said the E-telekeli, "and the chorus of my attendants will remember it as long as they live. The others would appreciate it too."

Rod looked around at the underpeople who had followed them. For a moment he was embarrassed at singing to all of them, but when he saw their warm, adoring smiles, he was at ease with them. "Remember this, then, and be sure to sing it to C'mell for me, when she awakens." He lifted his voice a little and sang.

Run where the ram is dancing, prancing!
Listen where the ewe is greeting, bleating.
Rush where the lambs are running, running.
Watch where the stroon is flowing, growing.
See how the men are reaping, heaping
Wealth for their world!

Look where the hills are dipping, ripping.
Sit where the air is frying, drying.
Go where the clouds are pacing, racing.
Stand where the wealth is gleaming, teeming.
Shout to the top of the singing ringing
Norstrilian power and pride!

The chorus sang it back at him with a wealth and richness which he had never heard in the little song before.

"And now," said the E-telekeli, "the blessing of the First Forbidden One be upon you." The giant bowed a little and kissed Rod McBan on the forehead. Rod thought it strange and started to speak, but the eyes were upon him.

Eyes—like twin fires.

Fire—like friendship and like warmth, like a welcome and a farewell.

Eyes—which became a single fire.

He awakened only when he was in orbit around the planet of Old North Australia.

The descent was easy. The ship had a viewer. The snake pilot said very little.

He put Rod down in the Station of Doom, a few hundred meters from his own door. He left two heavy packages. An Old North Australian patrol ship hovered overhead and the air hummed with danger while Norstrilian police floated to the ground and made sure that no one besides Rod McBan got off. The Earth ship whispered and was gone.

"I'll give you a hand, mister," said one of the police. He clutched Rod with one mechanical claw of his ornithopter, caught the two packages in the other, and flung his machine into the air with a single beat of the giant wings. They coasted into the yard. The wings tipped up, Rod and his packages were deposited deftly and the machine

flapped away back to its distant base in silence.

There was nobody there. He knew that Aunt Doris would come soon. And somebody else. His own sweetheart, on his own farm—Lavinia. Lavinia! Here, now, on this dear poor dry earth, he knew how much Lavinia suited him. Now he could spiek, he could hier!

It was strange. Yesterday—or was it yesterday, for it felt like yesterday?—he had felt very young indeed. He seemed to know in his deepest mind that C'mell had never been more than nine-tenths his, and that other tenth—the most valuable and beautiful and most secret tenth of her life—was forever given to some other man or underman who he would never know. He felt that C'mell would never give her heart again. And yet he kept for her a special kind of tenderness, which would never recur. It was not marriage which they had had, but it was pure romance.

But here, here waited home itself, and love.

Lavinia was in it, dear Lavinia with her mad lost father and her kindness to a Rod who had not let much kindness into his life.

Suddenly, the words of an old poem rose unbidden to his mind:

Ever. Never. Forever.
Three words. The lever
Of life upon time.
Never, forever, ever!

He spieked. He spieked very loud, "Lavinia!"

Beyond the hill the cry came back, right into his mind, "Rod, Rod! Oh, Rod! Rod?"

"Yes," he spieked. "Don't run. I'm home."

He felt her mind coming near, though she must have been beyond one of the nearby hills. When he touched minds with Lavinia, he knew that this was her ground, and his too. Nor for them the wet wonders of Earth, the golden-haired beauties of C'mell and Earth people! He knew without doubt that Lavinia would love and recognize the new Rod as she had loved the old.

He waited very quietly and then he laughed to himself under the gray nearby friendly sky of Norstrilia. He had momentarily the childish impulse to rush across the hills of his home and to kiss his own computer.

He waited for Lavinia instead.

END

[End of *The Store Of Heart's Desire*, by Cordwainer Smith]