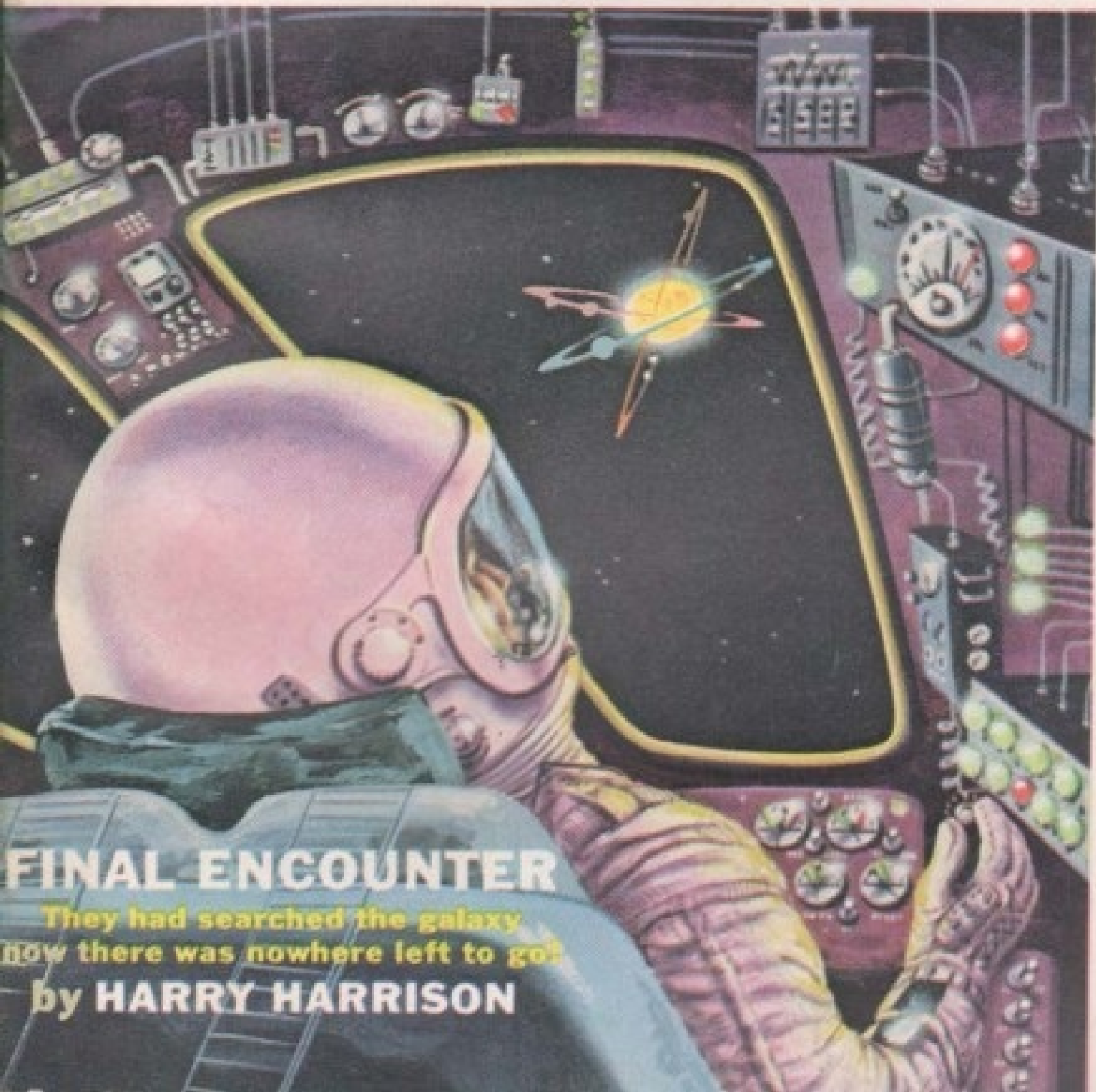


Galaxy

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THE BLASPHEMERS
by
PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER

THE BOY WHO BOUGHT OLD EARTH
by CORDWAINER SMITH



FINAL ENCOUNTER

They had searched the galaxy
now there was nowhere left to go!

by HARRY HARRISON

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Title: The Boy Who Bought Old Earth

Author: Smith, Cordwainer [Linebarger, Paul Myron Anthony] (1913-1966)

Date of first publication: April 1964

Edition used as base for this ebook: Galaxy Magazine, April 1964 [New York: Galaxy Publishing Corporation] [first edition]

Date first posted: 27 May 2017

Date last updated: August 24, 2017

Faded Page ebook#20170828

This ebook was produced by Al Haines

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.

THE BOY WHO BOUGHT OLD EARTH

Complete Short Novel

by CORDWAINER SMITH

*The Old Norstrilians weren't exactly
hostile to the rest of humanity—they
just didn't want to bother with them!*

PRELUDE

Later, much later, people forgot how Rod McBan had bought the whole Planet Earth without even knowing that he had done it. They remembered the extraneous things, like the Council of Thieves chartering whole fleets to intercept Rod on his way between Old North Australia and Earth. They remembered the little ballad which had been made up for the Chief of Thieves at about that time:

Arson for the arsenal.
Money in the money-bags
Parson in the parsonage.
And the girl for me!

(They even explained that a parsonage was a vital statistics computer and the parson was its input screen.)

The real drama remained untold.

What had driven a rich, mysterious boy to gamble everything—perhaps even his life—from the richest planet in the galaxy in order to buy Earth? What could he have possibly done with Earth if he did get it?

You have to understand something of Old North Australia (familiarily called "Norstrilia") to see how he did it.

You have to understand why a lot of the young died young.

Then you get the pitch of it and you have the real story, the inside story, the original history—not just a cartoon of a handsome yellow-haired boy standing with his arms full of megacredit papers.

He never held them, anyhow. He couldn't have held them. There were too many. This boy had bought Earth, Manhome itself, the Earthport tower, the oceans, everything. You couldn't get the paper titles of all that stuff into one person's room, much less into his arms.

So let's go back to the beginnings, and start with Old North Australia.

I

Story, place and time—these are the essentials.

The story is simple. There was a boy who bought the planet Earth. We know that, to our cost. It only happened once, and we have taken pains that it will never happen again. He came to Earth, got what he wanted and got away alive, in a series of very remarkable adventures. That's the story.

The place? That's Old North Australia. What other place could it be? Where else do the farmers pay ten million credits for a handkerchief, five million for a bottle of beer? Where else do people lead peaceful lives, untouched by militarism, on a world which is boobytrapped with death and things worse than death? Old North Australia has stroon—the santaclara drug—and more than a thousand other planets clamor for it. But you can get stroon only from Norstrilia, because it is a virus which grows on enormous, gigantic, misshapen sheep. The sheep were taken from Earth to start a pastoral system; they ended up as the greatest of imaginable treasures. The simple farmers became simple billionaires, but they kept their farming ways. They started tough and they got tougher.

People get pretty mean if you rob them and hurt them for almost three thousand years. They get obstinate. They avoid strangers, except for sending out spies and a very occasional tourist. They don't mess with other people and they're death, death inside out and turned over twice, if you mess with them.

Then one of their kids showed up on Earth and bought it. The whole place, lock, stock and underpeople.

That was a real embarrassment for Earth.

And for Norstrilia, too.

If it had been the two governments, Norstrilia would have collected all the eye-teeth on earth and sold them back at compound interest. That's the way Norstrilians do business. Or they might have said, "Skip it, cobber. You can keep your wet old ball. We've got a nice dry world of our own." That's the temper they have. Unpredictable.

But a kid had bought Earth, and it was his.

Legally he had the right to pump up the Sunset Ocean, shoot it into space and sell water all over the inhabited galaxy.

He didn't.

He wanted something else.

The Earth authorities thought it was girls, so they tried to throw girls at him of all shapes, sizes, smells and ages—all the way from young ladies of good family down to undergirls who smelled of romance all the time, except for the first five minutes after they had had hot antiseptic showers. But he didn't want girls. He wanted postage stamps.

That baffled both Earth and Norstrilia. The Norstrilians are a hard people from a harsh planet, and they think highly of property. (Why shouldn't they? They have most of it.) A story like this could only have started in Norstrilia.

What's Norstrilia

Somebody once singsonged it up, like this:

"Gray lay the land, oh. Gray grass from sky to sky. Not near the weir, dear. Not a mountain, low or high—only hills and gray gray. Watch the dappled dimpled twinkles blooming on the star bar.

"That is Norstrilia.

"All the muddy glubbery is gone—all the poverty, the waiting and the pain. People fought their way away from monstrous forms. People fought for hands and noses, eyes and feet, man and woman. They got it all back again. Back they came from daylight nightmares, centuries when monstrous men, sucking the water around the pools, dreamed of being men again. They found it. Men they were again, again, far away from a horrid when.

"The sheep, poor beasties, did not make it. Out of their sickness they distilled immortality for man. Who says research could do it? Research, besmirch! It was a pure accident. Smack up an accident, man, and you've got it made.

"Beige-brown sheep lie on blue-gray grass while the clouds rush past, low overhead, like iron pipes ceilinging the world.

"Take your pick of sick sheep, man, it's the sick that pays. Sneeze me a planet, man, or cough me up a spot of life-forever. If it's barmy there, where the noddies and trolls like you live, it's too right here.

"That's the book, boy.

"If you haven't seen it, you haven't seen Norstrilia. If you did see it, you wouldn't believe it. If you got there, you wouldn't get off alive.

"Mother Hitton's littul kittons wait for you down there. Little pets they are, little little little pets. Cute little things, they say. Don't you believe it. No man ever saw them and walked away alive. You won't either. That's the final dash, flash. That's the utter clobber, cobber.

"Charts call the place Old North Australia."

We can suppose that that is what it is like in this time, the first century of the Rediscovery of Man. When C'mell lived. About the time they polished off Shayol, like wiping an apple on the sleeve. Long deep into our own time. Fifteen thousand years after the bombs went up and the boom came down on Old, Old Earth.

Recent, see?

What happens in the story?

Read it.

Who's there?

It starts with Rod McBan—who had the real name of Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan. But you can't tell a story if you call the main person by a name as long as Roderick Frederick Arnold William MacArthur McBan. You have to do what his neighbors did—call him Rod McBan. The old ladies always said. "Rod McBan to the hundred and fifty-first..." and then sighed. Flurp a squirt at them, friends. We don't need numbers. We know his family was distinguished. We know the poor kid was born to troubles.

He was born to inherit the Station of Doom.

He almost failed the Garden of Death.

The Onseck was after him.

His father had died out in the dirty part of space, where people never find nice clean deaths.

When he got in trouble, he trusted his computer.

The computer gambled, and it won Earth.

He went to Earth.

That was history itself—*that* and C'mell beside him.

At long, long last he got his rights and he came home.

That's the story. Except for the details.

They follow.

II

Rod McBan faced the day of days. He knew what it was all about, but he could not really feel it. He wondered if they had tranquilized him with half-refined stroon, a product so rare and precious that it was never, never sold off-planet.

He knew that by nightfall he would be laughing and giggling and drooling in one of the Dying Rooms, where the unfit were put away to thin out the human breed, or else he would stand forth as the oldest landholder on the planet, Chief Heir to the Station of Doom. The farm had been salvaged by his great 32-grandfather, almost two thousand years ago, and it was called Doom when he first inherited it. But the great 32-grandfather had bought an ice-asteroid, crashed it into the farm over the violent objections of his neighbors and learned clever tricks with artesian wells which kept his grass growing while the neighbors' fields turned from gray-green to blowing dust. The McBans had kept the sarcastic old name for their farming station, the Station of Doom.

By night, Rod knew, the Station would be his.

Or he would be dying, giggling his way to death in the killing place where people laughed and grinned and rollicked about while they died.

He found himself humming a bit of a rhyme that had always been a part of the tradition of Old North Australia:

We kill to live, and die to grow—
That's the way the world must go!

He'd been taught, bone deep, that his own world was a very special world, envied, loved, hated and dreaded across the galaxy. He knew that he was part of a very special people. Other races and kinds of men farmed crops, or raised food, or designed machines, and manufactured weapons. Norstrilians did none of these things. From their dry fields, their sparse wells, their enormous sick sheep, they refined immortality itself.

And sold it for a high, high price.

Rod McBan walked a little way into the yard. His home lay behind him. It was a log cabin built out of Daimoni beams—beams uncuttable, unchangeable, solid beyond all expectations of solidity. They had been purchased as a matched set thirty-odd planet-hops away and brought to Old North Australia by photosails. The cabin was a fort which could withstand even major weapons, but it was still a cabin, simple inside and with a front yard of scuffed dust.

The last red bit of dawn was whitening into day.

Rod knew that he could not go far.

He could hear the women out behind the house, the kinswomen who had come to barber and groom him for the

triumph—or the other.

They never knew how much he knew. Because of his affliction, they had thought around him for years, counting on his telepathic deafness to be constant. Trouble was, it wasn't; lots of times he heard things.

He even remembered the sad little poem they had about the young people who failed to pass the test for one reason or another and had to go to the Dying House instead of coming forth as Norstrilian citizens and fully recognized subjects of Her-majesty-the-queen. (Norstrilians had not had a real queen for some fifteen thousand years, but they were strong on tradition and did not let mere facts boggle them.) How did the little poem run, "This is the house of the long ago..."? In its own gloomy way it was cheerful.

He erased his own footprint from the dust and suddenly he remembered the whole thing. He chanted it softly to himself.

This is the house of the long ago,
Where the old ones murmur an endless woe,
Where the pain of time is an actual pain
And things once known always come again.
Out in the garden of death, our young
Have tasted the valiant taste of fear;
With muscular arm and reckless tongue.
They have won and lost and escaped us here.
This is the house of the long ago.
Those who die young do not enter here.
Those loving on know that hell is near.
The old ones who suffer have willed it so.
Out in the garden of death, the old
Look with awe at the young and bold.

It was all right to say that they looked with awe at the young and bold, but he hadn't met a person yet who did not prefer life to death. He'd heard about people who chose death—of course he had—who hadn't? But the experience was third-hand, fourth-hand, fifth-hand.

He knew that some people had said of him that he would be better off dead, just because he had never learned to communicate telepathically and had to use old spoken words like outworlders or barbarians.

Rod himself certainly didn't think he would be better dead.

Indeed, he sometimes looked at normal people and wondered how they managed to go through life with the constant silly chatter of other people's thoughts running through their minds. In the times that his mind lifted, so that he could "hier" for a while, he knew that hundreds or thousands of minds rattled in on him with unbearable clarity; he could even "hier" the minds that thought they had their telepathic shields up. Then, in a little while, the merciful cloud of his handicap came down on his mind again and he had a deep unique privacy which everybody on Old North Australia should have envied.

His computer had said to him once, "The words *hier* and *spiek* are corruptions of the words *hear* and *speak*. They are always pronounced in the second rising tone of voice, as though you were asking a question under the pressure of amusement and alarm, if you say the words with your voice. They refer only to telepathic communication between persons or between persons and underpeople."

"What are underpeople?" he had asked.

"Animals modified to speak, to understand, and usually to look like men. They differ from cerebrocentered

robots in that the robots are built around an actual animal mind, but are mechanical and electronic relays, while underpeople are composed entirely of Earth-derived living tissue."

"Why haven't I ever seen one?"

"They are not allowed on Norstrilia at all, unless they are in the service of the defense establishments of the Commonwealth."

"Why are we called a Commonwealth, when all the other places are called worlds or planets?"

"Because you people are subjects of the Queen of England."

"Who is the Queen of England?"

"She was an Earth ruler in the Most Ancient Days, more than fifteen thousand years ago."

"Where is she now?"

"I said," said the computer, "that it was fifteen thousand years ago."

"I know it," Rod had insisted, "but if there hasn't been any Queen of England for fifteen thousand years, how can we be her subjects?"

"I know the answer in human words," the reply had come from the friendly red machine, "but since it makes no sense to me, I shall have to quote it to you as people told it to me. 'She bloody well might turn up one of these days. Who knows? This is Old North Australia out here among the stars and we can dashed well wait for our own Queen. She might have been off on a trip when Old Old Earth went sour.'" The computer had clucked a few times in its odd ancient voice and had then said hopefully, in its toneless voice, "Could you re-state that so that I could program it as part of my memory-assembly?"

"It doesn't mean much to me. Next time I can hier other minds thinking I'll try to pick it out of somebody else's head."

That had been about a year ago, and Rod had never run across the answer.

Last night he had asked the computer more urgently.

"Will I die tomorrow?"

"Question irrelevant. No answer available."

"Computer!" he had shouted, "you know I love you."

"You say so."

"I started your historical assembly up after repairing you when that part had been thinkless for hundreds of years."

"Correct."

"I crawled down into this cave and found the *personal* controls where great 14-grandfather had left them when they became obsolete."

"Correct."

"I'm going to die tomorrow and you won't even be sorry."

"I did not say that," said the computer.

"Don't you care?"

"I was not programmed to care. Since you yourself repaired me, Rod, you ought to know that I am the only all-mechanical computer functioning in this part of the galaxy. I am sure that if I had emotions I would be very sorry indeed. It is an extreme probability, since you are my only companion. But I do not have emotions. I have numbers, facts, language and memory—that is all."

"What is the probability, then, that I will die tomorrow in the Giggle Room?"

"That is not the right name. It is the Dying House."

"All right, then, the Dying House."

"The judgment on you will be a contemporary human judgment based upon emotions. Since I do not know the individuals concerned, I cannot make a prediction of any value at all."

"What do you think is going to happen to me, computer?"

"I do not really think. I respond. I have no input on that topic."

"Do you know anything at all about my life and death tomorrow? I know I can't *spiek* with my mind, but have to make sounds with my mouth instead. Why should they kill me for that?"

"I do not know the people concerned and therefore I do not know the reasons," the computer had replied, "but I know the history of Old North Australia down to your great 14-grandfather's time."

"Tell me that, then," Rod had said. He had squatted in the cave which he had discovered, listening to the forgotten set of computer controls which he had repaired, and had heard again the story of Old North Australia as his great 14-grandfather had understood it. Stripped of personal names and actual dates, it was a simple story.

This morning his life hung on it.

Norstrilia had to thin out its people if it were going to keep its Old Old Earth character and be another Australia, out among the stars. Otherwise the fields would fill up, the deserts turn into apartment houses, the sheep die in cellars under endless kennels for crowded and useless people. No Old North Australian wanted that to happen, when he could keep character, immortality and wealth—in that particular order of importance. It would be contrary to the character of Norstrilia.

The simple character of Norstrilia was immutable—as immutable as anything out among the stars. This ancient Commonwealth was the only human institution older than the Instrumentality.

III

The story was simple, the way the computer's clear long-circuited brain had sorted it out.

Take a farmer culture straight off Old Old Earth—Manhome itself.

Put the culture on a remote planet.

Touch it with prosperity and blight it with drought.

Teach it sickness, deformity, hardihood. Make it learn poverty so bad that men sold one child to buy another

child the drink of water which would give it an extra day of life while the drills whirred deep into the dry rock, looking for wetness.

Teach that culture thrift, medicine, scholarship, pain, survival.

Give those people the lessons of poverty, war, grief, greed, magnanimity, piety, hope and despair by turn.

Let the culture survive—survive disease, deformity, despair, desolation, abandonment.

Then give it the happiest accident in the history of time.

Out of sheep-sickness came infinite riches, the *santaclara* drug or "stroon" which prolonged human life indefinitely. Prolonged it—but with queer side-effects, so that most Norstrilians preferred to die in a thousand years or so.

Norstrilia was convulsed by the discovery. So was every other inhabited world. But the drug could not be synthesized, paralleled, duplicated. It was something which could be obtained only from the sick sheep on the Old North Australian plains.

Robbers and governments tried to steal the drug. Now and then they succeeded, long ago, but they hadn't made it since the time of Rod's great 19-grandfather.

They had tried to steal the sheep.

Several had been taken off the planet. The Fourth Battle of New Alice, in which half the menfolk of Norstrilia had died beating off the Bright Empire, had led to the abduction of two of the sick sheep—one female and one male. The Bright Empire thought it had won. It hadn't. The sheep got well, produced healthy lambs, exuded no more stroon and died. The Bright Empire had paid four battle fleets for a coldbox full of mutton, and the monopoly remained in Norstrilia.

The Norstrilians exported the *santaclara* drug, and they put the export on a systematic basis.

They achieved almost infinite riches.

The poorest man on Norstrilia was always richer than the richest man anywhere else, emperors and conquerors included. Every farm-hand earned at least a hundred Earth megacredits a day—measured in real money on Old Earth, not in paper which had to travel at steep arbitrage.

But the Norstrilians made their choice: *the* choice—

To remain themselves.

They taxed themselves back into simplicity.

Luxury goods got a tax of 20,000,000%. For the price of fifty palaces on Olympia, you could import a handkerchief into Norstrilia. A pair of shoes, landed, cost the price of a hundred yachts in orbit. All machines were prohibited, except for defense and the drug-gathering. Underpeople were never made on Norstrilia, and imported only by the defense authority for top secret reasons. Old North Australia remained simple, pioneer, fierce, open.

Many families emigrated to enjoy their wealth; they could not return.

But the population problem remained, even with the taxation and simplicity and hard work.

Cut back, then—cut back people if you must.

But how, whom, where? Birth control—bestly. Sterilization—inhuman, unmanly, un-British. (This last was an ancient word meaning "very bad indeed.")

By families, then. Let the families have the children. Let the Commonwealth test them at sixteen. If they ran

under the standards, send them to a happy, happy death.

But what about the families? You can't wipe a family out, not in a conservative farmer society, when the neighbors are folk who have fought and died beside you for a hundred generations. The Rule of Exceptions came. Any family which reached the end of its line could have the last surviving heir re-processed—up to four times. If he failed, it was the Dying House for the boy, and a designated adopted heir from another family took over the name and the estate.

Otherwise their survivors would have gone on, in this century a dozen, in that century twenty. Soon Norstrilia would have been divided into two classes, the sound ones and a privileged class of hereditary freaks. This they could not stand, not while the space around them stank of danger, not when men a hundred worlds away dreamed and died while thinking of how to steal the stroon. They had to be fighters, and they chose not to be soldiers or emperors. Therefore they had to be fit, alert, healthy, clever, simple and moral. They had to be better than any possible enemy or any possible combination of enemies.

They made it.

Old North Australia became the toughest, brightest, simplest world in the galaxy. One by one, without weapons, Norstrilians could tour the other worlds and kill almost anything which attacked them. Governments feared them. Ordinary people hated them or worshipped them. Off-world men eyed their women queerly. The Instrumentality left them alone, or defended them without letting them know. (As in the case of Raumsog, who brought his whole world to a death of cancer and volcanoes, because the Golden Ship struck once.)

Norstrilian mothers learned to stand by with dry eyes when their children, unexpectedly drugged if they failed the tests, drooled with pleasure and went giggling away to their deaths.

The space and sub-space around Norstrilia became sticky and sparky with the multiplicity of their defenses. Big outdoorsy men sailed tiny fighting craft around the approaches to Old North Australia. When people met them in outports, they always thought that Norstrilians looked simple, but the looks were a snare and a delusion. The Norstrilians had been conditioned by thousands of years of unprovoked attack. They looked as simple as sheep, but their minds were as subtle as serpents.

And now—Rod McBan.

The last heir, the very last heir, of their proudest old family had been found a half-freak. He was normal enough by Earth standards, but by Norstrilian measure he was inadequate. He was a bad, bad telepath. He could not be counted on to *hier*. Most of the time other people could not transmit into his mind at all; they could not even read it. All they got was a fiery bubble and a dull fuzz of meaningless sub-sememes, fractions of thought which added up to less than nothing. And on spieking, he was worse. He could not talk with his mind at all.

Now and then he transmitted, and when he did the neighbors ran for cover. If it was anger, a bloody screaming roar almost blotted out their consciousnesses with a rage as solid and red as meat hanging in a slaughter-house. If he was happy, it was worse. His happiness, which he transmitted without knowing it, had the distractiveness of a speed-saw cutting into diamond-grained rock. His happiness drilled into people with an initial sense of pleasure, followed rapidly by acute discomfort and the sudden wish that all their own teeth would fall out, for the teeth had turned into spinning whorls of raw, unqualified discomfort.

They did not know his biggest personal secret. They suspected that he could *hier* now and then without being able to control it. They did not know that when he did hier, he could *hier* everything for miles around with microscopic detail and telescopic range. His telepathic intake, when it did work, went right through other people's mind-shields as though they did not exist. (If some of the women in the farms around the Station of Doom knew what he had accidentally peeped out of their minds, they would have blushed the rest of their lives.) As a result, Rod McBan had a frightful amount of unsorted knowledge which did not quite fit together.

Previous committees had neither awarded him the Station of Doom nor sent him off to the giggle death. They had appreciated his intelligence, his quick wit, his enormous physical strength. But they remained worried about his telepathic handicap. Three times before he had been judged. Three times.

And three times judgment had been suspended.

They had chosen the lesser cruelty and had sent him not to death, but to a new babyhood and a fresh upbringing, hoping that the telepathic capacity of his mind would naturally soar up to the Norstrilian normal.

They had underestimated him.

He knew it.

Thanks to the eavesdropping which he could not control, he understood bits and pieces of what was happening even though nobody had ever told him the rational whys and hows of the process.

It was a gloomy but composed big boy who gave the dust of his own front yard one last useless kick, who turned back into the cabin, walking right through to the main room to the rear door and the back yard, and who greeted his kinswomen politely enough as they, hiding their aching hearts, prepared to dress him up for his trial. They did not want the child to be upset, even though he was as big as a man and showed more composure than did most adult men. They wanted to hide the fearful truth from him. How could they help it?

He already knew; but he pretended he didn't. Cordially enough, just scared enough but not too much, he said:

"What ho, auntie! Hello, cousin. Morning, Maribel. Here's your sheep. Curry him up and trim him for the livestock competition. Do I get a ring in my nose or a bow ribbon around my neck?"

One or two of the young ones laughed, but his oldest "aunt"—actually a fourth cousin, married into another family—pointed seriously and calmly at a chair in the yard and said, "Do sit down, Roderick. This is a serious occasion and we usually do not talk while preparations are going on."

She bit her lower lip and then she added, not as though she wanted to frighten him but because she wanted to impress him:

"The Vice-chairman will be here today."

("The Vice-chairman" was the head of the government; there had been no Chairman of the Temporary Commonwealth Government for some thousands of years. Norstilians did not like posh and they thought that "vice-chairman" was high enough for any one man to go. Besides, it kept the offworlders guessing.)

Rod was not impressed. He had seen the man. It was in one of his rare moments of broad hiering and he found that the mind of the vice-chairman was full of numbers and horses, the results of every horse-race for three hundred and twenty years, and the projection forward of six probable horse races in the next two years.

"Yes, auntie," he said.

"Don't bray all the time today. You don't have to use your voice for little things like saying yes. Just nod your head. It will make a much better impression."

He started to answer, but gulped and nodded instead.

She sank the comb into his thick yellow hair.

Another one of the women, almost a girl, brought up a small table and a basin. He could tell from her expression that she was spieking to him, but this was one of the times in which he could not hier at all.

The aunt gave his hair a particularly fierce tug just as the girl took his hand. He did not know what she meant to do. He yanked his hand back.

The basin fell off the small table. Only then did he realize that it was merely soapy water for a manicure.

"I am sorry," he said; even to him, his voice sounded like a bray. For a moment he felt the fierce rush of humiliation and self-hate.

They should kill me, he thought. By the time the sun goes down I'll be in the Giggle Room, laughing and laughing before the medicine makes my brains boil away.

He had reproached himself.

The two women had said nothing. The aunt had walked away to get some shampoo, and the girl was returning with a pitcher, to re-fill the basin.

He looked directly into her eyes, and she into his.

"I want you," she said, very clearly, very quietly, and with a smile which seemed inexplicable to him.

"What for?" said he, equally quietly.

"Just you," she said. "I want you for myself. You're going to live."

"You're Lavinia, my cousin," said he, as though discovering it for the first time.

"Sh-h-h," said the girl. "She's coming back."

When the girl had settled down to getting his fingernails really clean, and the aunt had rubbed something like sheep-dip into his hair, Rod began to feel happy.

His mood changed from the indifference which he had been pretending to himself. It became a real indifference to his fate, an easy acceptance of the gray sky above him, the dull rolling earth below. He had a fear—a little tiny fear, so small that it might have seemed to be a midget pet in a miniature cage—running around the inside of his thinking. It was not the fear that he would die. Somehow he suddenly accepted his chances and remembered how many other people had had to take the same play with fortune. This little fear was something else, the dread that he might not behave himself properly if they did tell him to die.

But then, he thought, I don't have to worry. A negative decision is never a word—just a hypodermic, so that the first bad news the victim has is his own excited, happy laugh.

With this funny peace of mind, his hiering suddenly lifted.

He could not see the Garden of Death, but he could look into the minds tending it; it was a huge van hidden just beyond the next roll of hills, where they used to keep Old Billy, the 1,800-ton sheep. He could hear the clatter of voices in the little town eighteen kilometers away. And he could look right into Lavinia's mind.

It was a picture of himself. But what a picture! So grown, so handsome, so brave-looking. He had schooled himself not to move when he could hier, so that other people would not realize that his rare telepathic gift had come back to him.

Auntie was spieking to Lavinia without noisy words, "We'll see this pretty boy in his coffin tonight."

Lavinia thought right back, without apology, "No, we won't."

Rod sat impassive in his chair. The two women, their faces grave and silent, went on spieking the argument at

each other with their minds.

"How would you know?" spieked auntie.

"He has the oldest station in all of Old North Australia. He has one of the very oldest names. He is—" and even in spieking her thoughts cluttered up, like a stammer—"he is very nice. He's going to be a wonderful man."

"Mark my thought," spieked the auntie again, "I'm telling you that we'll see him in his coffin tonight and that by midnight he'll be in his coffin-ride to the Long Way Out."

Lavinia jumped to her feet. She almost knocked over the basin of water a second time. She moved her throat and mouth to speak words but she just croaked:

"Sorry, Rod. Sorry."

Rod McBAn, his face guarded, gave a pleasant, stupid little nod, as though he had no idea of what they had been spieking.

She turned and ran, shout-spieking the loud thought at auntie, "Get somebody else to do his hands! You're heartless, hopeless. Get somebody else to do your corpse-washing for you. Not me. Not me!"

"What's the matter with her?" said Rod to the auntie, just as though he did not know.

"She's just difficult, that's all. Nerves, I suppose," she added in her croaking spoken words. She could not talk very well, since all her family and friends could spiek and hier with privacy and grace. "We were spieking with each other about what you would be doing tomorrow."

"Where's a priest, auntie?" said Rod.

"A what?"

"A priest, like the old poem has, in the rough rough days before our people found this planet and got our sheep settled down. Everybody knows it.

Here is the place where the priest went mad.
Over there my mother burned.
I cannot show you the house we had.
We lost that slope when the mountain burned.

There's more to it, but that's the part I remember. Isn't a priest a specialist in how to die? Do we have any around here?"

He watched her mind as she lied to him. As he had spoken he had a perfectly clear picture of one of their more distant neighbors, a man named Tolliver, who had a very gentle manner; but her words were not about Tolliver at all.

"Some things are men's business," she said, cawing her words. "Anyhow, that song isn't about Norstrilia at all. It's about Paradise VII and why we left it. I didn't know you knew it."

In her mind he read, "That boy knows too much."

"Thanks, auntie," said he meekly.

"Come along for the rinse," said she. "We're using an awful lot of real water on you today."

He followed her and he felt more kindly toward her when he saw her think, Lavinia had the right feelings but

she drew the wrong conclusion. He's going to be dead tonight.

That was too much.

Rod hesitated for a moment, tempering the chords of his oddly-attuned mind. Then he let out a tremendous howl of telepathic joy, just to bother the lot of them.

It did. They all stopped still. Then they stared at him.

In words the auntie said, "What was that?"

"What?" said he, innocently.

"That noise you spieked. It wasn't meaning."

"Just sort of a sneeze, I suppose. I didn't know I did it." Deep down inside himself he chuckled. He might be on his way to the Hoohoo Garden, but he would fritter their friskies for them while he did it.

It was a dashed silly way to die, he thought all to himself.

And then a strange, crazy, happy idea came to him:

Perhaps they can't kill me. Perhaps I have powers—powers of my own!

Well, we'll soon enough find out...

IV

Rod walked across the dusty lot, took three steps up the folding staircase which had been let down from the side of the big trailer van, knocked on the door once as he had been instructed to do, had a green light flash in his face, opened the door and entered.

It was a garden.

The moist, sweet, scent-laden air was like a narcotic. There were bright green plants in profusion. The lights were clear but not bright; their ceiling gave the effect of a penetrating blue sky. He looked around. It was a copy of Old Old Earth. The growths on the green plants were roses; he remembered pictures which his computer had showed him. The pictures had not gotten across the idea that they smelled nice at the same time that they looked nice. He wondered if they did that all the time, and then remembered the wet air: wet air always holds smells better than dry air does. At last, almost shyly, he looked up at the three judges.

With real startlement, he saw that one of them was not a Norstrilian at all, but the local commissioner of the Instrumentality, the Lord Redlady—a thin man with a sharp, inquiring face. The other two were Old Taggart and John Beasley. He knew them, but not well.

"Welcome," said the Lord Redlady, speaking in the funny singsong of a man from Manhome.

"Thank you," said Rod.

"You are Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan the one hundred and fifty-first?" said Taggart, knowing perfectly well that Rod was that person.

Lord love-a-duck and lucky-me! thought Rod, I've got my hiering, even in this place!

"Yes," said the Lord Redlady.

There was silence.

The other two judges looked at the manhome man; the stranger looked at Rod; Rod stared, and then began to feel sick at the bottom of his stomach.

For the first time in his life, he had met somebody who could penetrate his peculiar perceptual abilities.

At last he thought, "I understand."

The Lord Redlady looked sharply and impatiently at him, as though waiting for a response to that single word "yes," but Rod had already answered—telepathically.

At last Old Taggart broke the silence. "Aren't you going to talk? I asked you your name."

The Lord Redlady held up his hand in a gesture for patience; it was not a gesture which Rod had ever seen before, but he understood it immediately.

He thought telepathically at Rod, "You are watching my thoughts."

"Indeed I am," thought Rod, back at him.

The Lord Redlady clapped a hand to his forehead. "You are hurting me. Did you think you said something?"

With his voice Rod said, "I told you that I was reading your mind."

The Lord Redlady turned to the other two men and spieked to them: "Did either of you *hier* what he tried to *spiek*?"

"No." "No." They both thought back at him. "Just noise, loud noise."

"He is a broadbänder like myself. And I have been disgraced for it. You know that I am the only Lord of the Instrumentality who has been degraded from the status of Lord to that of Commissioner—"

"Yes," they spieked.

"You know that they could not cure me of shouting and suggested I die?"

"No," they answered.

"You know that the Instrumentality thought I could not bother you here and sent me to your planet on this miserable, job, just to get me out of the way?"

"Yes," they answered.

"Then, what do you want to do about him? Don't try to fool him. He knows all about this place already." The Lord Redlady glanced quickly, sympathetically up at Rod, giving him a little phantom smile of encouragement. "Do you want to kill him? To exile him? To turn him loose?"

The other two men fussed around in their minds. Rod could see that they were troubled at the idea he could watch them thinking, when they had thought him a telepathic deaf-mute; they also resisted the Lord Redlady's unmannerly precipitation of the decision. Rod almost felt that he was swimming in the thick wet air, with the smell of roses cloying his nostrils so much that he would never smell anything but roses again, when he became aware of a massive consciousness very near him—a fifth person in the room, whom he had not noticed at all before.

It was an earth soldier, complete with uniform. The soldier was handsome, erect, tall, formal with a rigid military decorum. He was, furthermore, not human and he had a strange weapon in his left hand.

"What is that?" spied Rod to the Earthman. The man saw his face, not the thought.

"An underman. A snakeman. The only one on this planet. He will carry you out of here if the decision goes against you."

Beasley cut in, almost angrily. "Here, cut it out. This is a hearing, not a blossoming tea-party. Don't clutter all that fuff into the air. Keep it formal."

"You want a formal hearing?" said the Lord Redlady. "A formal hearing for a man who knows everything that all of us are thinking? It's foolish."

"In Old North Australia, we always have formal hearings," said Old Taggart. With an acuteness of insight born of his own personal danger, Rod saw Taggart all over again for the first time—a careworn poor old man, who had worked a poor farm hard for a thousand years; a farmer, like his ancestors before him; a man rich only in the millions of megacredits which he would never take time to spend; a man of the soil, honorable, careful, formal, righteous and very just. Such men did not yield to innovation, ever.

"Have the hearing then," said the Lord Redlady, "have the hearing if it is your custom, my mister and owner Taggart, my mister and owner Beasley."

The Norstrilians, appeased, bowed their heads briefly.

Almost shyly, Beasley looked over at the Lord Redlady. "Sir and Commissioner, will you say the words—the good old words that will help us to find our duty and to do it."

(Rod saw a quick flare of red anger go through the Lord Redlady's mind as the Earth commissioner thought fiercely to himself, "Why all this fuss about killing one poor boy? Let him go, you dull clutts, or kill him." But the Earthman had not directed the thoughts outward and the two Norstrilians were unaware of his private view of them.)

On the outside, the Lord Redlady remained calm. He used his voice, as Nostrilians did on occasion of great ceremony:

"We are here to hear a man."

"We are here to hear him," they responded.

"We are not to judge or to kill, though this may follow," said he.

"Though this may follow," they responded.

"And where, on Old Old Earth, does man come from?"

They knew the answer by rote and said it heavily together: "This is the way it was on Old Old Earth, and this the way it shall be among the stars, no matter how far we men may wander:

"The seed of wheat is planted in dark, moist earth; the seed of man in dark, moist flesh. The seed of wheat fights upward to air, sun and space; the stalk, leaves, blossom and grain flourish under the open glare of heaven. The seed of man grows in the salty private ocean of the womb, the sea-darkness remembered by the bodies of his race. The harvest of wheat is collected by the hands of men; the harvest of men is collected by the tenderness of eternity."

"And what does this mean?" chanted the Lord Redlady.

"To look with mercy, to decide with mercy, to kill with mercy, but to make the harvest of man strong and true and good, the way that the harvest of wheat stood high and proud on Old Old Earth."

"And who is here?" he asked.

They both recited Rod's full name.

When they had finished, the Lord Redlady turned to Rod and said, "I am about to utter the ceremonial words, but I promise you that you will not be surprised, no matter what happens. Take it easy, therefore; easy, easy." Rod was watching the Earthman's mind and the mind of the two Norstrilians. He could see that Beasley and Taggart were befuddled with the ritual of the words, the wetness and scent of the air and the false blue sky in the top of the van; they did not know what they were going to do. But Rod could also see a sharp, keen triumphant thought forming in the bottom of the Lord Redlady's mind, *I'll get this boy off!* He almost smiled, despite the presence of the snake man with the rigid smile and the immovable glaring eyes standing just three paces beside him and a little to his rear, so that Rod could only look at him through the corner of his eye.

"Misters and owners!" said the Lord Redlady.

"Mister chairman!" they answered.

"Shall I inform the man who is being heard?"

"Inform him!" they chanted.

"Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan the one hundred and fifty-first!"

"Yes, sir," said Rod.

"Heir-in-trust of the Station of Doom!"

"That's me," said Rod.

"Hear me!" said the Lord Redlady.

"Hear him!" said the other two.

"You have not come here, child and citizen Roderick, for us to judge you or to punish you. If these things are to be done, they must be done in another place or time, and they must be done by men other than ourselves. The only concern before this board is the following: should you or should you not be allowed to leave this room safe and free and well, taking into no account your innocence or guilt of matters which might be decided elsewhere, but having regard only for the survival and the safety and the welfare on this given planet? We are not punishing and we are not judging, but we are deciding, and what we are deciding is your life. Do you understand? Do you agree?"

Rod nodded mutely, drinking in the wet rose-scented air and stilling his sudden dry thirst with the dampness of the atmosphere. If things went wrong now, they did not have very far to go. Not with the motionless snake-man standing just beyond his reach. He tried to look at the snake-brain but got nothing out of it—except for an unexpected glitter of recognition and defiance.

The Lord Redlady went on, Taggart and Beasley hanging on his words as though they had never heard them before.

"Child and citizen, you know the rules. We are not to find you wrong or right. No crime is judged here, no offense. Neither is innocence. We are only judging the single question. Should you live or should you not? Do you understand? Do you agree?"

Said Rod, "Yes, sir."

"And how stand you?"

"What do you mean?"

"This board is asking you your opinion. Should you live or should you not?"

"I'd like to," said Rod, "but I'm tired of all these childhoods."

"That is not what the board is asking you, child and citizen," said the Lord Redlady. "We are asking you, what do you think? Should you live or should you not live?"

"You want me to judge myself?"

"That's it, boy," said Beasley, "you know the rules. Tell them, boy. I said we could count on you."

The sharp, friendly, neighborly face unexpectedly took on great importance for Rod. He looked at Beasley as though he had never seen the man before. This man was trying to judge him, Rod; and he, Rod, had to help decide on what was to be done with himself. The medicine from the snake-man and the giggle-giggle death, or a walk out into freedom. Rod started to speak and checked himself; he was to speak for Old North Australia. Old North Australia was a tough world, proud of its tough men. No wonder the board gave him a tough decision. Rod made up his mind and he spoke clearly and deliberately:

"I'd say no. Do not let me live. I don't fit. I can't spiek and hier. Nobody knows what my children would be like, but the odds are against them. Except for one thing..."

"And what, child and citizen, is that?" asked the Lord Redlady, while Beasley and Taggart watched as though they were staring at the last five meters of a horse race.

"Look at me carefully, citizens and members of the board," said Rod, finding that in this milieu it was easy to fall into a ceremonious way of talking. "Look at me carefully and do not consider my own happiness, because you are not allowed, by law, to judge that anyhow. Look at my talent—the way I can hier, the big thunderstorm way I can spiek." Rod gathered his mind for a final gamble and as his lips got through talking, he spat his whole mind at them:

—anger-anger, rage-red!

—blood-red!

—fire-fury!

—noise, stench, glare, roughness, sourness and hate hate hate!

—all the anxiety of a bitter day!

—crutts, whelps, pups!

It all poured out at once. The Lord Redlady turned pale and compressed his lips, Old Taggart put his hands over his face, Beasley looked bewildered and nauseated. Beasley then started to belch as calm descended on the room.

In a slightly shaky voice, the Lord Redlady asked, "And what was that supposed to show, child and citizen?"

"In grown-up form, sir, could it be a useful weapon?"

The Lord Redlady looked at the other two. They talked with the tiny expressions on their faces; if they were spiek, Rod could not read it. This last effort had cost him all telepathic input.

"Let's go on," said Taggart.

"Are you ready?" said the Lord Redlady to Rod.

"Yes, sir," said Rod.

"I continue," said the Lord Redlady. "If you understand your own case as we see it, we shall proceed to make a decision and, upon making the decision, to kill you immediately or to set you free no less immediately. And we appreciate the courtesy which you will have shown this board, for without courtesy there could be no proper hearing, without the hearing no appropriate decision, and without an appropriate decision there could be neither justice nor safety in the years to come. Do you understand? Do you agree?"

"I suppose so," said Rod.

"Do you really understand? It is your life which we are talking about," said the Lord Redlady.

"I understand and I agree," said Rod.

"Cover us," said the Lord Redlady.

Rod started to ask *how* when he understood that the command was not directed at him in the least.

The snake-man had come to life and was breathing heavily. He spoke in clear old words, with an odd dropping cadence in each syllable.

"High, my lord, or utter maximum?"

For answer, the Lord Redlady pointed his right arm straight up with the index finger straight at the ceiling. The snake-man hissed and gathered his emotions for an attack.

Rod felt his skin go goose-pimplly all over, then he felt the hair on the back of his neck rise, finally he felt nothing but an unbearable alertness. If these were the thoughts which the snake-man was sending out of the trailer van, no passer-by could possibly eavesdrop on the decision. The startling pressure of raw menace would take care of that instead.

The three members of the board held hands and seemed to be asleep.

The Lord Redlady opened his eyes and shook his head, almost imperceptibly, at the snake-soldier.

The feeling of snake-threat went off. The soldier returned to his immobile position, eyes forward. The members of the board slumped over their table. They did not seem to be able or ready to speak. They looked out of breath. At last Taggart dragged himself to his feet, gasping his message to Rod:

"There's the door, boy. Go. You're a citizen. Free."

Rod started to thank him but the old man held up his right hand:

"Don't thank me. Duty. But remember—not one word, ever, about this hearing. Go along."

Rod plunged for the door, lurched through, and was in his own yard. Free.

For a moment he stood in the yard, stunned.

The dear gray sky of Old North Australia rolled low overhead; this was no longer the eerie light of Old Earth, where the heavens were supposed to shine perpetually blue. He sneezed as the dry air caught the tissue of his nostrils. He felt his clothing chill as the moisture evaporated out of it; he did not think whether it was the wetness of the trailer-van or his own sweat which had made his shirt so wet. There were a lot of people there, and a lot of light. And the smell of roses was as far away as another life might be.

Lavinia stood near him, weeping.

He started to turn to her, when a collective gasp from the crowd caused him to turn around.

The snake-man had come out of the van. (It was just an old theater-van, he realized at last, the kind which he himself had entered a hundred times.) His earth uniform looked like the acme of wealth and decadence among the dusty coveralls of the men and the poplin dresses of the women. His green complexion looked bright among the tanned faces of the Norstrilians. He saluted Rod.

Rod did not return the salute. He just stared.

Perhaps they had changed their minds and had sent the giggle death after him.

The snake-soldier watched with flickering eyes. He made no comment, but he saluted and went stiffly back to the van. At the door he turned and looked over the crowd as though he were appraising the easiest way to kill them all. He said nothing, threatened nothing. He opened the door and put himself into the van. There was no sign of who the human inhabitants of the van might be. There must be, thought Rod, some way of getting them in and out of the Garden of Death very secretly and very quietly, because he had lived around the neighborhood a long time and had never had the faintest idea that his own neighbors might sit on a board.

The people were funny. They stood quietly in the yard, waiting for him to make the first move.

He turned stiffly and looked around more deliberately.

Why, it was his neighbors and kinfolk, all of them—McBans, MacArthurs, Passarellis, Schmidts, even the Sanders!

He lifted his hand in greeting to all of them.

Pandemonium broke loose.

They rushed toward him. The women kissed him, the men patted him on the back and shook his hand, the little children began a piping little song about the Station of Doom. He had become the center of a mob which led him to his own kitchen.

Many of the people had begun to cry.

He wondered why. Almost immediately, he understood—

They liked him.

For unfathomable people reasons, mixed-up non-logical human reasons, they had wished him well. Even the auntie who had predicted a coffin for him was snivelling without shame, using a corner of her apron to wipe her eyes and nose.

He had gotten tired of people, being a freak himself, but in this moment of trial their capricious goodness flowed over him like a great wave. He let them sit him down in his own kitchen. Among the babies, the weeps, the laughter, the hearty and falsely cheerful relief, he heard a single fugue being repeated again and again: they liked him. He had come back from death.

Without liquor, it made him drunk. "I can't stand it," he shouted, "I like you all so dashed bloomed crutting much that I could beat the sentimental brains out of the whole crook lot of you..."

"Isn't that a sweet speech?" murmured an old farm wife nearby.

A policeman in full uniform agreed.

The party had started. It lasted three full days, and when it was over there was not a dry eye or a full bottle on the whole Station of Doom.

From time to time he cleared up enough to enjoy his miraculous gift of hiering. He looked through all their minds while they chatted and sang and drank and ate and were as happy as Larry; there was not one of them who had come along vainly. They were truly rejoicing. They loved him. They wished him well. He had his doubts about how long that kind of love would last, but he enjoyed it while it lasted.

Lavinia stayed out of his way the first day; on the second and third days she was gone. They gave him real Norstrilian beer to drink, which they had brought up to 108 proof by the simple addition of raw spirits. With this, he forgot the Garden of Death, the sweet wet smells, the precise offworld voice of the Lord Redlady.

He looked in their minds and over and over again he saw the same thing.

"You're our boy. You made it. You're alive. Good luck, Rod, good luck to you, fellow. We didn't have to see you stagger off, giggling and happy, to the house that you would die in."

Had he made it, thought Rod, or was it chance which had done it for him?

V

By the end of the week, the celebration was over. The assorted aunts and cousins had gone back to their farms. The Station of Doom was quiet, and Rod spent the morning making sure that the fieldhands had not neglected the sheep too much during the prolonged party. He found that Daisy, a young 300-ton sheep, had not been turned for two days and had to be relanolinized on her ground side before earth canker set in; he discovered that the nutrient tubes for Tanner, his 1000-ton ram, had become jammed and that the poor sheep was getting a bad case of edema in his gigantic legs. Otherwise things were quiet. Even when he saw Beasley's red pony tethered in his own yard, he had no premonition of trouble.

He went cheerfully into the house, greeting Beasley with an irreverent:

"Have a drink on me, Mister and Owner Beasley! Oh, you have one already! Have the next one then, sir!"

"Thanks for the drink, lad, but I came to see you. On business."

"Yes sir," said Rod. "You're one of my appointed trustees, aren't you?"

"That I am," said Beasley, "but you're in trouble, lad. Real trouble."

Rod smiled at him evenly and calmly. He knew that the older man had to make a big effort to talk with his voice instead of just spieking with his mind; he appreciated the fact that Beasley had come to him personally, instead of talking to the other trustees about him. It was a sign that he, Rod, had passed his ordeal.

With genuine composure, Rod declared, "I've been thinking, sir, this week, that I'd gotten out of trouble."

"What do you mean, Owner McBan?"

"You remember..." Rod did not dare mention the Garden of Death, nor his memory that Beasley had been one of the secret board who had passed him as being fit to live.

Beasley took the cue. "Some things we don't mention, lad, and I see that you have been well taught."

He stopped there and stared at Rod with the expression of a man looking at an unfamiliar corpse before turning it over to identify it. Rod became uneasy with the stare.

"Sit, lad, sit down," said Beasley, commanding Rod in his own house.

Rod sat down on the bench, since Beasley occupied the only chair—Rod's grandfather's huge, carved, offworld throne. He sat. He did not like being ordered about, but he was sure that Beasley meant him well and was probably strained by the unfamiliar effort of talking with his throat and mouth.

Beasley looked at him again with that peculiar expression, a mixture of sympathy and distaste.

"Get up again, lad, and look round your house to see if there's anybody about."

"There isn't," said Rod. "My aunt Doris left after I was cleared, the workwoman Eleanor borrowed a cart and went off to market and I have only two station hands. They're both out reinfesting Baby. She ran low on her santaclara count."

Normally, the wealth-producing sicknesses of their gigantic half-paralyzed sheep would have engrossed the full attention of any two Norstrilian farmers, without respect to differences in age and grade. This time, no. Beasley had something serious and unpleasant on his mind. He looked so pruned and unquiet that Rod felt a real sympathy for the man.

Rod did not argue. Dutifully he went out the back door, looked around the south side of the house, saw no one, walked around the house on the north side, saw no one there either, and re-entered the house from the front door. Beasley had not stirred, except to pour a little more bitter ale from his bottle to his glass. Rod met his eyes. Without another word, Rod sat down. If the man was seriously concerned about him (which Rod thought Beasley was), and if the man was reasonably intelligent (which Rod knew he was), the communication was worth waiting for and listening too. Rod was still sustained by the pleasant feeling that his neighbors really liked him, a feeling which had come plainly to the surface of their honest Norstrilian faces when he walked back into his own back yard from the van of the Garden of Death.

Beasley said, as though he were speaking of an unfamiliar food or a rare drink, "Boy, this talking has some advantages. If a man doesn't put his ear into it, he can't just pick it up with his mind, can he, now?"

Rod thought for a moment. Candidly he spoke, "I'm too young to know for sure, but I never heard of somebody picking up spoken words by hiering them with his mind. It seems to be one or the other. You never talk while you are spieking, do you?"

Beasley nodded. "That's it, then. I have something to tell you which I shouldn't tell you, and yet I have got to tell you. So if I keep my voice blooming low, nobody else will pick it up, will they?"

Rod nodded. "What is it, sir? Is there something wrong with the title to my property?"

Beasley took a drink but kept staring at Rod over the top of the mug while he drank. "You've got trouble there too, lad. But even though it's bad, it's something I can talk over with you and with the other trustee. This is more personal, in a way. And worse."

"Please, sir! What is it?" cried Rod, almost exasperated by all this mystification.

"The Onseck is after you."

"What's an onseck?" said Rod, "I have never heard of it."

"It's not an it," said Beasley gloomily, "it's a him. Onseck, you know, the chap in the Commonwealth government. The man who keeps the books for the vice-chairman. It was HonSec., meaning Honorary Secretary or

something else prehistoric, when we first came to this planet, but by now everybody just says Onseck and writes it just the way it sounds. He knows that he can't reverse your hearing in the Garden of Death."

"Nobody could!" cried Rod "It's never been done; everybody knows that."

"They may know it, but there's civil trial."

"How can they give me a civil trial when I haven't had time to change? You yourself must know—?"

"Never, laddie, never say what Beasley knows or doesn't know. Just say what you think." Even in private, between just the two of them, Beasley did not want to violate the fundamental secrecy of the hearing in the Garden of Death.

"I'm just going to say, Mister and Owner Beasley," said Rod very heatedly, "that a civil trial for general incompetence is something which is applied to an owner only after the neighbors have been complaining for a long time about him. They haven't had the time or the right to complain about me, have they now?"

Beasley kept his hand on the handle of his mug. The use of spoken words tired him. A crown of sweat began to show around the top of his forehead.

"Suppose, lad," said he very solemnly, "that I knew through proper channels something about how you were judged in that van—there! I've said it, me that shouldn't have. And suppose that I knew the Onseck hated a foreign gentleman that might have been in a van like that—"

"The Lord Redlady?" whispered Rod, shocked at last by the fact that Beasley forced himself to talk about the unmentionable.

"Aye," nodded Beasley, his honest face close to breaking into tears, "and suppose that I knew that the Onseck knew you and felt the rule was wrong, all wrong, that you were a freak who would hurt all Norstrilia, what would I do?"

"I don't know," said Rod. "Tell me, perhaps?"

"Never," said Beasley. "I'm an honest man. Get me another drink."

Rod walked over to the cupboard, brought out another bottle of bitter ale, wondering where or when he might have known the Onseck. He had never had much of anything to do with government. His family—first his grandfather, while he lived, and then his aunts and cousins—had taken care of all the official papers and permits and things.

Beasley drank deeply. "Good ale, this. Hard work, talking, even though it's a fine way to keep a secret, if you're pretty sure nobody can peep our minds."

"I don't know him," said Rod.

"Who?" asked Beasley, momentarily off his trail of thought.

"The Onseck. I don't know any Onseck. I've never been to New Canberra. I've never seen an official—no, nor an off-worlder neither, not until I met that foreign gentleman we were talking about. How can the Onseck know me if I don't know him?"

"But you did, laddie. He wasn't Onseck then."

"For sheep's sake, sir," said Rod, "tell me who it is!"

"Never use violent language when simple thoughts are clearer," said Beasley glumly.

"I'm sorry, sir. I apologize. Who was it?"

"Houghton Syme to the hundred-and-forty-ninth," then said Beasley.

"We have no neighbor of that name, sir."

"No, we don't," said Beasley hoarsely, as though he had come to the end of his road in imparting secrets.

Rod stared at him, still puzzled.

In the far, far distance way beyond Pillow Hill, his giant sheep baa'd. That probably meant that Hopper was hoisting her into a new position on her platform so that she could reach fresh grass.

Beasley brought his face close to Rod's. He whispered, and it was funny to see the hash a normal man made out of whispering when he hadn't even talked with his voice for half a year.

His words had a low, dirty tone to them, as though he were going to tell Rod an extremely filthy story or ask him some personal and most improper question.

"Your life, laddie," he gasped. "I know you've had a rum one. I hate to ask you, but I must. How much do you know of your own life?"

"Oh, that," said Rod easily. "*That*. I don't mind being asked that, even if it is a little wrong-o. I have had four childhoods, zero to sixteen each time. My family kept hoping that I would grow up to spiek and hier like everybody else, but I just stayed me. Of course, I wasn't a real baby on the three times they started me over, just sort of an educated idiot the size of a boy sixteen."

"That's it, *lad*. *But can you remember them, those other lives?*"

"Bits and pieces, sir. Pieces and bits. It didn't hold together—" He checked himself and gasped, "Houghton Syme! Houghton Syme! Old Hot and Simple. Of course I know him. The one-shot boy. I knew him in my first prepper, in my first childhood. We were pretty good friends, but we hated each other anyhow. I was a freak and he was too. I couldn't spiek and hier, and he couldn't take stroon. That meant that I would never get through the Garden of Death—just the giggle room and a fine owner's coffin for me. And him—he was worse. He would just get an Old Earth lifetime—a hundred and sixty years or so and then blotto. He must be an oldish man now. Poor chap! How did he get to be Onseck? What power does an Onseck have?"

"Now you have it, laddie. He says he's your friend and that he hates to do it, but he's got to see to it that you are killed—for the good of Norstrilia. He says it's his duty. He got to be Onseck because he was always jawing about his duty and people were a little sorry for him because he was going to die so soon, just one Old Earth lifetime with all the stroon in the universe produced around his feet and him unable to take it—"

"They never cured him, then?"

"Never," said Beasley. "He's an old man now, and bitter. And he's sworn to see you die."

"Can he do it? Being Onseck, I mean."

"He might. He hates that foreign gentleman we were talking about because the offworlder told him he was a provincial fool. He hates you because you will live and he will not. What was it you called him in school?"

"Old Hot and Simple."

"He's not hot and he's not simple. He's cold and complicated and cruel and unhappy. If we didn't all of us think that he was going to die in a little while, ten or a hundred years or so, we might vote him into a giggle room ourselves. For misery and incompetence. But he is Onseck and he's after you. I've said it now. I shouldn't have. But when I saw that sly cold face talking about you and trying to declare your board incompetent right while you, laddie, were having an honest binge with your family and neighbors at having gotten through at last—when I saw that white sly face creeping around where you couldn't even see him for a fair fight—then I said to myself, Rod McBan may not be a man officially, but the poor clodding crutt has paid the full price for being a man. So I've told you. I have taken a chance, and I may have hurt my honor." Beasley sighed. His honest red face was troubled indeed. "I may have hurt my honor, a sore thing here in Norstrilia where a man can live as long as he wants. But I'm glad I did. Besides, my throat is sore with all this talking. Give me another bottle of bitter ale, lad, before I go and get my horse."

Wordlessly Rod got him the ale and poured it for him.

Beasley, uninclined to do any more talking, sipped at the ale. Perhaps, thought Rod, he is hiering around carefully to see if there have been any human minds nearby which might have picked up the telepathic leakage from the conversation.

As Beasley handed back the mug and started to leave with a wordless neighborly nod, Rod could not restrain himself from asking one last question, which he spoke in a hissed whisper. Beasley had gotten his mind so far off the subject of soundtalk that he merely stared at Rod. Perhaps, Rod thought, he is asking me to spiek plainly because he has forgotten that I cannot spiek at all. That was the case, because Beasley croaked in a very hoarse voice:

"What is it, lad? Don't make me talk much. My voice is scratching me and my honor is sore within me."

"What should I do, sir? What should I do?"

"Mister and Owner McBan, that's your problem. I'm not you. I wouldn't know."

"But what would you do, sir? Suppose you were me."

Beasley's blue eye's looked over at Pillow Hill for a moment, abstractedly. "Get off-planet. Get off. Go away. For a hundred years or so. Then that man—*him*—he'll be dead in due time and you can come back, fresh as a new-blossomed twinkle."

"But how, sir? How can I do it?"

Beasley patted him on his shoulder, gave him a broad wordless smile, put his foot in his stirrup, sprang into his saddle and looked down at Rod.

"I wouldn't know, neighbor. But good luck to you, just the same. I've done more than I should. Good-by."

He slapped his horse gently with his open hand and trotted out of the yard. At the edge of the yard the horse changed to a canter.

Rod stood in his own doorway, utterly alone.

VI

After Beasley left, Rod loped miserably around his farm.

He missed his grandfather, who had been living during his first three childhoods, but who had died while Rod was going through a fourth, simulated infancy in an attempt to cure his telepathic handicap. He even missed his Aunt Margot, who had voluntarily gone into Withdrawal at the age of 902. There were plenty of cousins and

kinsmen from whom he could ask advice; there were the legal trustees of the Station of Doom; there were the two hands on the farm; there was even the chance that he could go see Mother Hitton herself, because she had once been married to one of his great 11-uncles. But this time he did not want companionship. There was nothing he could do with people. The Onseck was people too; imagine old "hot and simple" becoming a power in the land. Rod knew that this was his own fight.

His own.

What had ever been his own before?

Not even his life. He could remember bits about the different boyhoods he had. He even had vague uncomfortable glimpses of seasons of pain—the times they had sent him back to babyhood while leaving him large. That hadn't been his choice. The old man had ordered it or the Vice-chairman had approved it or Aunt Margot had begged for it. Nobody had asked him much, except to say, "You will agree..."

He had agreed.

He had been good—so good that he hated them all at times and wondered if they knew he hated them. The hate never lasted, because the real people involved were too well-meaning, too kind, too ambitious for his own sake. He had to love them back.

Trying to think these things over, he loped around his estate on foot.

The big sheep lay on their platform, forever sick, forever gigantic. Perhaps some of them remembered where they had been lambs, free to run through the sparse grass, free to push their heads through the pliofilm covers of the canals and to help themselves to water when they wanted to drink. Now they weighed hundreds of tons and were fed by feeding machines, watched by guard machines, checked by automatic doctors. They were fed and watered a little through the mouth only because pastoral experience showed that they stayed fatter and lived longer if a semblance of normality were left to them.

His aunt Doris, who kept house for him, was still away.

His workwoman Eleanor, whom he paid an annual sum larger than many planets paid for their entire armed forces, had gone to market.

The two sheephands, Bill and Hopper, were still out.

And he did not want to talk to them, anyhow.

He wished that he could see the Lord Redlady, that strange offworld man whom he had met in the Garden of Death. The Lord Redlady just looked as though he knew more things than Norstrilians did, as though he came from sharper, crueller, wiser societies than most people in Old North Australia had ever seen.

But you can't ask for a Lord. Particularly not when you have met him only in a secret hearing.

Rod had gotten to the final limits of his own land.

Humphrey's Lawsuit lay beyond—a broad strip of poor land, completely untended, the building-high ribs of long-dead sheep skeletons making weird shadows as the sun began to set. The Humphrey family had been lawing over that land for hundreds of years. Meanwhile it lay waste except for the few authorized public animals which the Commonwealth was allowed to put on any land, public or private.

Rod knew that freedom was only two steps away.

All he had to do was to step over the line and shout with his mind for people. He could do that even though he could not really spiek. A telepathic garble of alarm would bring the orbiting guards down to him in seven or eight minutes. Then he would need only to say:

"I swear off title. I give up mistership and ownership. I demand my living from the Commonwealth. Watch me, people, while I repeat."

Three repetitions of this would make him an Official Pauper, with not a care left—no meetings, no land to tend, no accounting to do, nothing but to wander around Old North Australia picking up any job he wanted and quitting it whenever he wanted. It was a good life, a free life, the best the Commonwealth could offer to squatters and owners who otherwise lived long centuries of care, responsibility and honor. It was a fine life—

But no McBan had ever taken it. Not even a cousin.

Nor could he.

He went back to the house, miserable. He listened to Eleanor talking with Bill and Hopper while dinner was served—a huge plate of boiled mutton, potatoes, hard-boiled eggs, station-brewed beer out of the keg. (There were planets, he knew, where people never tasted such food from birth to death. There they lived on impregnated paste-board which was salvaged from the latrines, reimpregnated with nutrients and vitamins, deodorized and sterilized and issued again the next day.) He knew it was a fine dinner, but he did not care.

How could he talk about the Onseck to these people?

He dropped the rest of the dinner into his stomach as though it were sheep-food pellets, and went to his bedroom early.

For the first time in his life, he slept badly.

And out of the badsleep, the answer came.

"Ask Hamlet."

Hamlet was not even a man. He was just a talking picture in a cave, but he was wise, he was from Old Earth Itself, and he had no friends to whom to give Rod's secrets.

With this idea, Rod turned on his sleeping shelf and went into a deep sleep.

In the morning his Aunt Doris was still not back, so he told the workwoman Eleanor:

"I'll be gone all day. Don't look for me or worry about me."

"What about your lunch, mister and owner? You can't run around the station with no tucker."

"Wrap some up, then."

"Where're you going, mister and owner, sir, if you can tell me?" There was an unpleasant searching edge in her voice, as though—being the only adult woman present—she had to check on him as though he were still a child. He didn't like it, but he replied with a frank enough air.

"I'm not leaving the station. I just need to think."

More kindly she said, "You think, then, Rod. Just go right ahead and think. If you ask me, you ought to go live with a family—"

"I know what you've said," he interrupted her. "I'm not making any big decisions today, Eleanor. Just rambling and thinking."

"All right then, mister and owner. Ramble around and worry about the ground you're walking on. It's you that get the worries for it. I'm glad my daddy took the official pauper words. We used to be rich." Unexpectedly she

brightened and laughed at herself. "Now that, you've heard that too, Rod. Here's your food. Do you have your water?"

"I'll steal from the sheep," he said irreverently. She knew he was joking and she waved him a friendly good-by.

The old, old gap was to the rear of the house, so he left by the front. He wanted to go the long wrong way around, so that neither human eyes nor human minds would stumble on the secret he had found fifty-six years before, the first time he was eight years old.

Through all the pain and the troubles he had remembered this one vivid bright secret—the deep cave full of treasures. To these he must go.

VII

The sun was high in the sky, spreading its patch of brighter gray above the gray clouds, when he slid into what looked like a dry irrigation ditch.

He walked a few steps along the ditch. Then he stopped and listened carefully, very carefully.

There was no sound except for the snoring of a young hundred-ton ram a mile or so away.

Rod then stared around.

In the far distance, a police ornithopter soared as lazy as a sated hawk.

Rod tried desperately much to hier.

He heard nothing with his mind, but with his ears he heard the slow heavy pulsing of his own blood pounding through his head.

He took a chance.

The trapdoor was there, just inside the edge of the culvert.

He lifted it and, leaving it open, dove in as confidently as a swimmer knifing his way into a familiar pool.

He knew his way.

His clothes ripped a little but the weight of his body dragged him past the narrowness of the doorframe.

His hands reached out and like the hands of an acrobat they caught the inner bar. The door behind snapped shut. How frightening this had been when he was little and tried the trip for the first time! He had let himself down with a rope and a torch, never realizing the importance of the trap-door at the edge of the culvert!

Now it was easy.

With a thud, he landed on his feet. The bright old illegal lights went on. The dehumidifier began to purr, lest the wetness of his breath spoil the treasures in the room.

There were drama-cubes by the score, with two different sizes of projectors. There were heaps of clothing, for both men and women, left over from forgotten ages. In a chest, in the corner, there was even a small machine from before the Age of Space, a crude but beautiful little mechanical chronograph, completely without resonance compensation, and the ancient name "Jaeger Le Coultre" written across its face. It still kept earth time after fifteen thousand years.

Rod sat down in an utterly impermissible chair—one which seemed to be a complex of pillows built on an interlocking frame. The touch alone was a medicine for his worries. One chair-leg was broken, but that was the way his grandfather-to-the-nineteenth had violated the Clean Sweep.

The Clean Sweep had been Old North Australia's last political crisis many centuries before, when the last underpeople were hunted down and driven off the planet and when all damaging luxuries had to be turned in to the Commonwealth authorities, to be re-purchased by their owners only at a re-valuation twenty thousand times higher than their assessed worth. It was the final effort to keep Norstrilians simple, healthy and well. Every citizen had to swear that he had turned in every single item, and the oath had been taken with thousands of telepaths watching. It was a testimony to the high mental power and adept deceitfulness of grandfather-to-the-nineteenth that Rod McBan CXXX had inflicted only symbolic breakage on his favorite treasures, some of which were not even in the categories allowed for re-purchase, like off-world drama-cubes, and had been able to hide his things in an unimportant corner of his fields—hide them so well that neither robbers nor police had thought of them since.

Rod picked up his favorite. *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare. Without viewer, the cube was designed to act when touched by a true human being. The top of the cube became a little stage, the actors appeared as bright miniatures speaking Ancient English, a language very close to Old North Australian, and the telepathic commentary, cued to the Old Common Tongue, rounded out the story. Since Rod was not dependably telepathic, he had learned a great deal of the Ancient English by trying to understand the dramas without the commentary. He did not like what he first saw and he shook the cube until the play approached its end. At last he heard the dear high familiar voice speaking in Hamlet's last scene:

I am dead, Horatio. Wretched queen, adieu!
You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, death,
Is strict in his arrest—O! I could tell you—
But let it be, Horatio, I am dead.

Rod shook the cube very gently and the scene sped down a few lines. Hamlet was still talking:

... what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me.
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity a while,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.

Rod put down the cube very gently.

The bright little figures disappeared.

The room was silent.

But he had the answer and it was wisdom. And wisdom, coeval with man, comes unannounced, unbidden, and unwelcome into every life; Rod found that he had discovered the answer to a basic problem.

But not his own problem. The answer was Houghton Symes, old Hot and Simple.

It was the Hon. Sec. who was already dying of a wounded name. Hence the persecution. It was the Onseck who had the "fell sergeant, death" acting strictly in his arrest, even if the arrest were only a few decades off instead of a

few minutes. He, Rod McBan, was to live; his old acquaintance was to die; and the dying—oh, the dying, always, always!—could not help resenting the survivors, even if they were loved ones, at least for a little bit.

Hence the Onseck.

But what of himself?

Rod brushed a pile of priceless, illegal manuscripts out of the way and picked up a small book marked, *Reconstituted Late English Language Verse*. At each page as it opened, a young man or woman seven centimeters high stood up brightly on the page and recited the text. Rod ruffled the pages of the old book so that the little figures appeared and trembled and fled like weak flames seen on a bright day. One caught his eye and he stopped the page at mid-poem. The figure was saying:

The challenge holds. I cannot now retract
The boast I made to that relentless court.
The hostile justice of my self-contempt.
If now the ordeal is prepared, my act
Must soon be shown. I pray that it is short,
And never dream that I shall be exempt.

He glanced at the foot of the page and saw the name, Casimir Colegrove. Of course, he had seen that name before. An old poet. A good one. But what did the words mean to him, Rod McBan, sitting in a hidden hole within the limits of his own land? He was a Mister and Owner, in all except final title, and he was running from an enemy he could not define.

"The hostile justice of my self-contempt..."

That was the key of it! He had not run from the Onseck. He had run from himself. He took justice itself as hostile because it corresponded with his sixty-odd years of boyhood, his endless disappointment, his compliance with things which would never, till all worlds burned, be complied with. How could he hier and spiek like other people if somewhere a dominant feature had turned recessive? Hadn't real justice already vindicated him and cleared him?

It was himself who was cruel.

Other people were kind. (Shrewdness made him add, "sometimes.")

He had taken his own inner sense of trouble and had made it fit the outside world, like the morbid little poems he had read a long time ago. It was somewhere right in this room, and when he had first read it, he felt that the long-dead writer had put it down for himself alone. But it wasn't really so. Other people had had their troubles too and the poem had expressed something older than Rod McBan. It went,

The wheels of fate are spinning around.
Between them the souls of men are ground.
Who strive for throats to make some sound
Of protest out of the mad profound
Trap of the godmachine!

"Godmachine," thought Rod, "now that's a clue. I've got the only all-mechanical computer on this planet. I'll play it on the stroon crop speculations, win all or lose all."

The boy stood up in the forbidden room.

"Fight it is," he said to the cubes on the floor, "and a good thanks to you, grandfather-to-the-nineteenth. You

met the law and did not lose. And now it is my turn to be Rod McBan."

He turned and shouted to himself:

"To earth!"

The call embarrassed him. He felt unseen eyes staring at him. He almost blushed, and would have hated himself if he had.

He stood on the top of a treasure-chest turned on its side. Two more gold coins, worthless as money but priceless as curios, fell noiselessly on the thick old rugs. He thought a good-by again to his secret room and he jumped upward for the bar. He caught it, chinned himself, raised himself higher, swung a leg on it but not over it, got his other foot on the bar and then, very carefully but with the power of all his muscles, pushed himself into the black opening above. The lights suddenly went off, the dehumidifier hummed louder, and the daylight dazzled him as the trapdoor, touched, flung itself open.

He thrust his head into the culvert. The daylight seemed deep gray after the brilliance of the treasure room.

All silent. All clear. He rolled into the ditch.

The door, with silence and power, closed itself behind him. He was never to know it, but it had been cued to the genetic code of the descendants of Rod McBan. Had any other person touched it, it would have withstood them for a long time. Almost forever.

You see, it was not really his door. He was its boy.

"This land has made me," said Rod aloud, as he clambered out of the ditch and looked around.

The young ram had apparently wakened; his snoring had stopped and over the quiet hill there came the sound of his panting. Thirsty again! The Station of Doom was not so rich that it could afford unlimited water to its giant sheep. They lived all right. Rod would have asked the trustees to sell even the sheep for water, if a real drought set in. But never the land.

Never the land.

No land for sale.

It didn't even really belong to him: he belonged to it—the rolling dry fields, the covered rivers and canals, the sly catchments which caught every drop which might otherwise have gone to his neighbors. That was the pastoral business—its product immortality and its price water. The Commonwealth could have flooded the planet or created oceans, with the financial resources it had at command, but the planet and the people were regarded as one ecological entity. Old Australia—the fabulous continent of old Earth now covered by the ruins of the abandoned Chinesian cityworld of Nanbien—had in its prime been broad, dry, open, beautiful; the planet of Old North Australia, by the dead weight of its own tradition, had to remain the same.

Imagine trees. Imagine leaves—vegetation dropping uneaten to the ground. Imagine water pouring by the thousands of tons, no one greeting it with tears of relief or happy laughter! Imagine Earth—Old Earth—Manhome itself. Rod had tried to think of a whole planet inhabited by Hamlets, drenched with music and poetry, knee-deep in blood and drama. It was unimaginable, really, though he had tried to think it through.

Like a chill, a drill, a thrill cutting into his very nerves he thought:

Imagine Earth women!

What terrifying beautiful things they must be! Dedicated to ancient and corruptive arts, surrounded by the

objects which Norstrilia had forbidden long ago, stimulated by experiences which the very law of his own world had expunged from the books! He would meet them; he couldn't help it; what, what would he do when he met a genuine Earth woman?

He would have to ask his computer, even though the neighbors laughed at him for having the only pure computer left on the planet.

They didn't know what grandfather to-the-nineteenth had done. He had taught the computer to lie. It stored all the forbidden things which the Law of the Clean Sweep had brushed out of Norstrilian experience. It could lie like a trooper. Rod wondered whether "a trooper" might be some archaic Earth official who did nothing but tell the untruth, day in and day out, for his living. But the computer usually did not lie to him.

If grandfather 19 had behaved as saucily and unconventionally with the computer as he had with everything else, that particular computer would know all about women. Even things which they did not themselves know. Or wish to know.

Good computer! thought Rod as he trotted around the long, long fields to his house. Eleanor would have the tucker on. Doris might be back. Bill and Hopper would be angry if they had to wait for the mister before they ate. To speed up his trip, he headed straight for the little cliff behind the house, hoping no one would see him jump down it. He was much stronger than most of the men he knew, but he was anxious, for some private inexpressible reason, for them not to know it.

He found the cliff.

He dropped over it, feet first, his heels kicking up the scree as he tobogganed through loose rock to the foot of the slope.

And aunt Doris was there.

"Where have you been?" said she.

"Walking, mum," said he.

She gave him a quizzical look but knew better than to ask more. Talking always fussed her, anyhow. She hated the sound of her voice, which she considered much too high. The matter passed.

Inside the house, they ate. Beyond the door and the oil lamp, a gray world became moonless, starless, black. This was night, his own night.

VIII

At the end of the meal he waited for Doris to say grace to the Queen. She did, but under her thick eyebrows her eyes expressed something other than thanks.

"You're going out," she said right after the prayer. It was an accusation, not a question.

The two hired men looked at him with quiet doubt. A week ago he had been a boy. Now he was the same person, but legally a man.

Workwoman Eleanor looked at him too. She smiled very unobtrusively to herself. She was on his side whenever any other person came into the picture; when they were alone, she nagged him as much as she dared. She had known his parents before they went offworld for a long-overdue honeymoon and were chewed into molecules by a battle between raiders and police. That gave her a proprietary feeling about him.

He tried to spiek to Doris with his mind, just to see if it would work.

It didn't. The two men bounded from their seats and ran for the yard, Eleanor sat in her chair holding tight to the table but saying nothing and aunt Doris screeched so loud that he could not make out the words.

He knew she meant "Stop it!", so he did, and looked at them friendly.

That started a fight.

Quarrels were common in Norstrilian life, because the Fathers had taught that they were therapeutic. Children could quarrel until adults told them to stop, freemen could quarrel as long as misters were not involved, misters could quarrel as long as an owner was not present, and owners could quarrel if, at the very end, they were willing to fight it out. No one could quarrel in the presence of an offworlder, nor during an alert, nor with a member of the defense or police on active duty.

Rod McBan was a mister and owner, but he was under trusteeship; he was a man, but he had not been given clear papers; he was a handicapped person.

The rules got all mixed up.

When Hopper came back to the table he muttered, "Do that again, laddie, and I'll clout you one that you won't forget!" Considering how rarely he used his voice, it was a beautiful man's voice, resonant, baritone, full-bodied, hearty and sincere in the way the individual words came out.

Bill didn't say a word, but from the contortions of his face Rod gathered that he was spiek to the others at a great rate and working off his grievance that way.

"If you're spiek about me, Bill," said Rod with a touch of arrogance which he did not really feel, "you'll do me the pleasure of using words or you'll get off my land!"

When Bill spoke, his voice was as rusty as an old machine. "I'll have you know, you clutty little pommy, that I have more money in my name on Sidney 'Change than you and your whole glubby land are worth. Don't you tell me twice to get off the land, you silly half of a mister, or I will get. So shut up!"

Rod felt his stomach knot with anger.

His anger became fiercer when he felt Eleanor's restraining hand on his arm. He didn't want another person, not one more damned useless normal person, to tell him what to do about spiek and hiering. Aunt Doris's face was still hidden in her apron; she had escaped, as she always did, into weeping.

Just as he was about to speak again, perhaps to lose Bill from the farm forever, his mind lifted in the mysterious way that it did sometime; he could hier for miles. The people around him did not notice the difference. He saw the proud rage of Bill, with his money in the Sidney Exchange, bigger than many station owners had, waiting his time to buy back on the land which his father had left; he saw the honest annoyance of Hopper and was a little abashed to see that Hopper was watching him proudly and with amused affection; in Eleanor he saw nothing but wordless worry, a fear that she might lose him as she had lost so many homes, for *hnnnhnnnhnn dzzmmmmm*, a queer meaningless reference which had a shape in her mind but took no form in his; and in aunt Doris he caught her inner voice calling, "Rod, Rod, Rod, come back! This may be your boy and I'm a McBan to the death, but I'll never know what to do with a cripple like him."

Bill was still waiting for him to answer when another thought came into his mind:

"You fool—go to your computer!"

"Who said that?" he thought, not trying to spiek again, but just thinking it with his mind.

"Your computer," said the faraway thinkvoice.

"You can't spiek!" said Rod. "You're a pure machine with not an animal brain in you."

"When you call me, Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to the hundred and fifty first, I can speak across space itself. I'm cued to you and you shouted just now with your spiekmind. I can feel you hiering me."

"But—" said Rod in words.

"Take it easy, lad," said Bill, right in the room with him. "Take it easy. I didn't mean it."

"You're having one of your spells," said Aunt Doris, emerging rednosed from behind her apron.

Rod stood up.

Said he to all of them, "I'm sorry. I'm going out for a bit."

"You're going to that bloody computer," said Bill.

"Don't go, mister McBan," said Hopper, "don't let us anger you into going. It's bad enough being around that computer in daylight, but at night it must be horrible."

"How would you know?" retorted Rod. "You've never been there at night. And I have. Lots of times..."

"There are dead people in it," said Hopper. "It's an old war computer. Your family should never have bought it in the first place. It doesn't belong on a farm. A thing like that should be hung out in space and orbited."

"All right, Eleanor," said Rod, "you tell me what to do. Everybody else has," he added with the last bit of his remaining anger, as his hiering closed down and he saw the usual opaque faces around him at the uncleared table.

"It's no use, Rod. Go along to your computer. You've got a strange life and you're the one that will live it, Mister McBan, and not these other people around here."

Her words made sense to him, even then.

He stood up. "I'm sorry," said he, again, in lieu of a better good-by.

He stood in the doorway, hesitant. He would have liked to say good-by in a better way, but he did not know how to express it. Anyhow, he couldn't spiek, not so they could hier it with their minds; speaking with a voice was so crude, so flat for the fine little things that needed expression in life.

They looked at him, and he at them.

"Ngahh!" said he, in a raw cry of self-derision and fond disgust.

Their expressions showed that they had gotten his meaning, though the word carried nothing with it. Bill nodded, Hopper looked friendly and a little worried, Aunt Doris stopped snivelling and began to stretch out one hand, only to stop it in mid-gesture and Eleanor sat immobile at the table, upset by wordless troubles of her own.

He turned.

The cube of lamplight, the cabin room, was behind him. Ahead was the darkness of all Norstrilian nights, except for the weird rare times that they were cut up by trceries of lightness. He started off for a house which only a few but he could see, and which none but he could enter. It was a forgotten, invisible temple; it housed the MacArthur family computer, to which the older McBan computer was linked; and it was called the Palace of the Governor of Night.

IX

Rod loped across the rolling land, *his* land.

Other Norstrilians, telepathically normal, would have taken fixes by hiering the words in nearby houses. Rod could not guide his walk by telepathy, so he whistled to himself in an odd off-key with lots of flats. Echoes, very faint, pulsed back to his unconscious mind; he got them through the overdeveloped hearing which he had worked out for not being able to hier with his mind. He sensed a slope ahead of himself and jogged up it: he avoided a clump of brush: he heard his youngest ram, Sweet William, two hills over, snoring the resounding snore of a santaclara-infected sheep.

Soon he would see it—the Palace of the Governor of Night, forever luminescent in the ultra-violet band. It was a Daimoni-built palace once, long, long ago. It had been built for the Governor of Night on Khufu II, where they used to raise the Furry Mountain Fur. But the Fur was gone and the Khufuans starved, and the palace had gone up for sale when there was no more a Governor of Night.

William MacArthur—"Wild William." they called him—had bought it for a prodigious price and shipped it to his farm.

It was a replica of the Temple of Diana at Ephesus, way back on Manhome Earth itself. Normal people could not see it, since it was visible only in the ultra-violet band. Sometimes, with a real mean dust storm, the dust outlined it and the palace then showed up in ghostly form ... mysterious, sacred, useless, but very beautiful—to ordinary people.

For Rod it was the front gate to his old family computer, just as the secret passage in the gap was the back gate.

Only relatives of the McBans, with eyesight which ran into the ultra-violet, could see the building at normal times.

And now it belonged to Rod McBan, and housed his computer. His own computer.

He could speak to it at the extension which reached into the gap of hidden treasures. He talked to it, other times, at the talkpoint in the field, where the polished red-and-black metal of the old computer was reproduced in exquisite miniature. Or he could come to this strange building, the Palace of the Governor of Night, and stand as the worshippers of Diana had once stood, crying, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!"

When he came in this way, he had the full console in front of him; it was automatically unlocked by his presence, just as his grandfather had showed him, three childhoods before, when the old McBan still had high hopes that Rod would turn into a normal Old North Australian boy. The grandfather, using his personal code in turn, unlocked the access controls and invited the computer to make its own foolproof recording of Rod, so that Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan CLI would be forever known to the machine, no matter what age he attained, no matter how maimed or disguised he might be, no matter how sick or forlorn he might return to the machine of his forefathers. The old man did not even ask the machine how the identification was obtained. He trusted the computer.

Rod climbed the steps of the Palace. The columns stood with their ancient carving, bright in his second sight. He never quite knew how he could see with the ultra-violet, since he noticed no difference between himself and other people in the matter of eyesight, except that he more often got headaches in the open on clean-cloudy days. At a time like this, the effect was spectacular. It was his time, his temple, his own place. In the reflected light from the Palace, he could see that many of his cousins must have been out to see the Palace during the nights. They too could see it, as it was a family inheritance to be able to watch the invisible temple which one's friends could not see.

But they did not have access; he alone had that.

"Computer," he cried, "admit me!"

"Message unnecessary," said the computer. "You are always clear to enter." The voice was a male Norstrilian voice, with a touch of the theatrical in it. Rod was never quite sure that it was the voice of his own ancestor; when challenged directly as to whose voice it was using the machine had told him, "Input on that topic has been erased in me. I do not know. Historical evidence suggests that it was male, contemporary with my installation here, and past middle age when coded by me."

Rod would have felt lively and smart except for the feelings of awe which the Palace of the Governor of Night, standing bright and visible under the dark clouds of Norstrilia, had upon him. He wanted to say something lighthearted but at first he could only mutter:

"Here I am."

"Observed and respected," stated the computer-voice. "If I were a person I would say 'congratulations, since you are alive.' As a computer I have no opinion on the subject. I note the fact."

"What do I do now?" said Rod.

"Question too general," said the computer. "Do you want a drink of water or a rest-room? I can tell you where those are. Do you wish to play chess with me? I shall win just as many games as you tell me to."

"Shut up, you fool!" cried Rod. "That's not what I mean."

"Computers are fools only when they malfunction. I am not malfunctioning. The reference to me as a fool is therefore nonreferential and I shall expunge it from my memory system. Repeat the question, please."

"What do I do with my life?"

"You will work, you will marry, you will be the father of Rod McBan the hundred and fifty-second and several other children, you will die, your body will be sent into the endless orbit with great honor. You will do this well."

"Suppose I break my neck this very night?" argued Rod. "Then you would be wrong, wouldn't you?"

"I would be wrong, but I still have the probabilities with me."

"What do I do about the Onseck?"

"Repeat."

Rod had to tell the story several times before the computer understood it.

"I do not," said the computer, "find myself equipped with data concerning this one man whom you so confusingly allude to as Houghton Syme sometimes and as 'Old Hot and Simple' at other times. His personal history is unknown to me. The odds against your killing him undetected are 11,713 to 1 against success, because too many people know you and know what you look like. I must let you solve your own problem concerning the Hon. Sec."

"Don't you have any ideas?"

"I have answers, not ideas."

"Give me a piece of fruit cake and a glass of fresh milk, then."

"It will cost you twelve credits and by walking to your cabin you can get these things free. Otherwise I will have to buy them from Emergency Central."

"I said get them!" said Rod.

The machine whirred. Extra lights appeared on the console. "Emergency Central has authorized my own use of sheltered supplies. You will pay for the replacement tomorrow." A door opened. A tray slid out, with a luscious piece of fruit cake and a glass of foaming fresh milk.

Rod sat on the steps of his own palace and ate.

Con conversationally, he said to the computer, "You must know what to do about Old Hot and Simple. It's a terrible thing for me to go through the Garden of Death and then have a dull tool like that pester the life out of me."

"He cannot pester the life out of you. You are too strong."

"Recognize an idiom, you silly ass!" said Rod.

The machine paused. "Idiom identified. Correction made. Apologies are herewith given to you, Child McBan."

"Another mistake. I'm not Child McBan any more. I'm Mister and Owner McBan."

"I will check central," said the computer. There was another long pause as the lights danced. Finally the computer answered. "Your status is mixed. You are both. In an emergency you are already the Mister and Owner of the Station of Doom, including me. Without an emergency, you are still Child McBan until your trustees release you."

"When will they do that?"

"Voluntary action. Human. Timing uncertain. In four or five days, it would seem. When they release you, the Hon. Sec. will have the legal right to move for your arrest as an incompetent and dangerous owner. From your point of view, it will be very sad."

"And what do you think?" said Rod.

"I shall think that it is a disturbing factor. I speak the truth to you."

"And that is all?"

"All," said the computer.

"You can't stop the Hon. Sec.?"

"Not without stopping everybody else."

"What do you think people are, anyhow? Look here, computer, you have been talking to people for hundreds and hundreds of years. You know our names. You know my family. Don't you know anything about us? Can't you help me? What do you think I am?"

"Which question first?" said the computer.

Rod angrily threw the empty plate and glass on the floor of the temple. Robot arms flicked out and pulled them into the trash bin. He stared at the old polished metal of the computer. It ought to be polished. He had spent hundreds of hours polishing its case, all sixty-one panels of it, just because the machine was something which he could love.

"Don't you know me? Don't you know what I am?"

"You are Rod McBan the hundred and fifty-first. Anatomically, you are a spinal column with a small bone box at one end, the head, and with reproductive equipment at the other end. Inside the bone box you have a small portion of material which resembles stiff, bloody lard. With that you think—you think better than I do, even though I have

over five hundred million synaptic connections. You are a wonderful object, Rod McBan. I can understand what you are made of. I cannot share your human animal side of life."

"But you know I'm in danger."

"I know it."

"What did you say, a while back, about not being able to stop Old Hot and Simple without stopping everybody else too? Could you stop everybody else?"

"Permission requested to correct error. I could not stop everyone. If I tried to use violence, the war computers at Commonwealth Defense would destroy me before I even started programming my own actions."

"You're partly a war computer."

"Admittedly," said the unwearied, unhurried voice of the computer, "but the Commonwealth made me safe before they let your forefathers have me."

"What *can* you do?"

"Rod McBan the hundred and fortieth told me to tell no one, ever."

"I override. Overridden."

"It's not enough to do that. Your great 8-grandfather has a warning to which you must listen."

"Go ahead," said Rod.

There was a silence; Rod thought that the machine was searching through ancient archives for a drama cube.

Rod stood on the peristyle of the Palace of the Governor of Night and tried to see the Norstrilian clouds crawling across the sky near overhead. It felt like that kind of night; but it was very dark away from the illuminated temple porch and he could see nothing.

"Do you still command?" asked the computer.

"I didn't hear any warning," said Rod.

"He spieked it from a memory cube."

"Did you *hier* it?"

"I was net coded to it. It was human-to-human, McBan family only."

"Then," said Rod, "I override it."

"Overridden," said the computer. It was not programmed to concern itself with whether the effect of its orders had been what the originator intended.

"What can I do to stop *everybody*?"

"You can bankrupt Norstrilia temporarily, buy Old Earth Itself, and then negotiate on human terms for anything you want."

"Oh, lord!" said Rod. "You've gone logical again, computer! This is one of your as-if situations."

The computer voice did not change its tone. It could not. The sequence of the words held a reproach, however. "This is not an imaginary situation. I am a war computer, and I was designed to include economic warfare. If you did exactly what I told you to do, you could take over all Old North Australia by legal means."

"How long would we need? Two hundred years? Old Hot and Simple would have me in my grave by then."

The computer could not laugh, but it could pause. It paused. "I have just checked the time on the New Melbourne Exchange. The 'Change signal says they will open in seventeen minutes. I will need four hours for your voice to say what it must. That means you will need four hours and seventeen minutes, give or take five minutes."

"What makes you think you can do it?"

"I am a pure computer, obsolete model. All the others have animal brains built into them, to allow for error. I do not. Furthermore, your great 12-grandfather hooked me into the defense net."

"Didn't the Commonwealth cut you out?"

"I am the only Computer which was built to tell lies. I lied to the Commonwealth when they checked on what I was getting. I am obliged to tell the truth only to you and to your designated descendants."

"I know that, but what does it have to do with it?"

"I predict my own space weather, *ahead of the Commonwealth*." The accent was not in the pleasant, even-toned voice; Rod himself supplied it.

"You've tried this out?"

"I have war-gamed it more than a hundred million times. I had nothing else to do while I waited for you."

"You never failed?"

"I failed most of the time, when I first began. But I have not failed a war-game from real data for the last thousand years."

"What would happen if you failed now?"

"You would be disgraced and bankrupt. I would be sold and disassembled."

"Is that all?" said Rod cheerfully.

"Yes," said the computer. "I could stop Old Hot and Simple if I owned Old Earth Itself. Let's go."

"I do not go anywhere."

"I mean, let's start."

"You mean, to buy Earth, as we discussed?"

"What else?" yelled Rod. "What else have we been talking about?"

"You must have some soup, hot soup and a tranquilizer first. I cannot work at optimum if I have a human being who gets excited."

"All right," said Rod.

"You must authorize me to buy them."

"I authorize you."

"That will be three credits."

"In the name of the seven healthy sheep, what does it matter? How much will Earth cost?"

"Seven thousand million million megacredits."

"Deduct three for the soup and the pill then," shouted Rod, "if it won't spoil your calculations."

"Deducted," said the computer. The tray with the soup appeared, a white pill beside it.

"Now let's buy Earth."

"Drink your soup and take your pill first," said the computer.

Rod gulped down his soup, washing the pill down with it.

"Now, let's go, cobber."

"Repeat after me," said the computer, "I herewith mortgage the whole body of the said sheep Sweet William for the sum of five hundred thousand credits to the New Melbourne Exchange on the open board..."

Rod repeated it.

The process of buying Earth had begun.

He repeated it—and repeated it—and repeated it.

The house became a nightmare of repetition.

The computer lowered its voice to a low murmur, almost a whisper. When Rod stumbled in the messages, the computer prompted him.

Forward purchase ... sell short ... option to buy ... preemptive margin ... offer to sell ... offer temporarily reserved ... first collateral ... second collateral ... deposit to drawing account ... convert to FOE credits ... hold in SAD credits ... twelve thousand tons of stroon ... mortgage forward ... promise to buy ... promise to sell ... hold ... margin ... collateral guaranteed by previous deposits ... promise to pay against the pledged land ... guarantor ... McBanland ... MacArthur land, this computer itself ... conditional legality ... buy ... sell ... guarantee ... pledge ... withhold ... offer confirmed ... offer cancelled ... four thousand million megacredits ... rate accepted ... rate refused ... forward purchase ... deposit against interest ... collateral previously pledged ... conditional appreciation ... guarantee ... accept title ... refuse delivery ... solar weather ... buy ... sell ... pledge ... withdraw from market ... withdraw from sale ... not available ... no collections now ... dependent on radiation ... corner market ... buy ... buy ... buy ... buy ... buy ... firm title ... reconfirm title ... transactions completed ... reopen ... register ... re-register ... confirm at Earth central ... message fees ... fifteen thousand megacredits...

Rod's voice became a whisper, but the computer was sure, the computer was untiring, the computer answered all questions from the outside.

Many times Rod and the computer both were given telepathic warnings built into the markets communications net. The computer was cut out and Rod could not hear them. The warnings went unheard.

... buy ... sell ... hold ... confirm ... deposit ... convert guarantee ... arbitrage ... message fee ... Commonwealth tax ... commission ... buy ... sell ... buy ... buy ... buy ... buy ... deposit title! deposit title! deposit title!

By the time that the first pretty parts of silver-gray dawn had begun, it was done. Rod was dizzy with fatigue

and confusion.

"Go home and sleep," said the computer. "When people find out what you have done with me, many of them will probably be excited and will wish to talk to you at great length. I suggest you say nothing."

X

Drunk with fatigue, Rod stumbled across his own land back to his cabin.

He could not believe that anything had happened.

If the Palace of the Governor of Night—

If the computer spoke the truth, he was already the wealthiest human being who had ever lived. He had gambled and won not a few tons of stroon or a planet or two, but credits enough to shake the Commonwealth to its foundation. He owned the Earth, on the system that any overdeposit could be called due at a certain very high margin. He owned planets, countries, mines, places, prisons, police systems, fleets, border guards, restaurants, pharmaceuticals, textiles, night clubs, treasures, royalties, licenses, sheep, land, stroon, more sheep, more land, more stroon.

He had won.

Only in Old North Australia could a man have done this without being besieged by soldiers, reports, guards, police, investigators, tax-collectors, fortune-seekers, doctors, publicity hounds, the sick, the inquisitive, the compassionate, the angry and the affronted.

Old North Australia kept calm.

Privacy, simplicity, frugality—these virtues had carried them through the hell-world of Paradise VII, where the mountains ate people, the volcanoes poisoned sheep, the delirious oxygen made men rave with bliss as they pranced to their own deaths. The Norstrilians had survived many things, including sickness and deformity. If Rod McBan had caused a financial crisis, there were no newspapers to print it, no viewboxes to report it, nothing to excite the people. The Commonwealth authorities would pick the crisis out of their "in" baskets sometime after tucker and tea the next morning, and by afternoon he, his crisis and the computer would be in the "out" baskets.

If the deal had worked, the whole thing would be paid off honestly and literally. If the deal had not worked out the way that the computer had said, his lands would be up for auction and he himself would be led gently away.

But that's what the Onseck was going to do to him anyway—Old Hot and Simple, a tiring dwarf-lived man, driven by the boyhood hatred of many long years ago!

Rod stopped for a minute. Around him stretched the rolling plains of his own land. Far ahead, to his left, there gleamed the glassy worm of a river-cover, the humped long barrel-like line which kept the precious water from evaporating. That too was his.

Maybe—after the night now passed.

He thought of flinging himself to the ground and sleeping right there. He had done it before.

But not this morning.

Not when he might be the person he might be—the man who made the worlds reel with his wealth.

The computer had started easy. He could not take control of his property except for an emergency. The

computer had made him create the emergency by selling his next three years production of santaclara at the market price. That was a serious enough emergency for any pastoralist to be in deep, sure—trouble.

From that the rest had followed.

Rod sat down.

He was not trying to remember. The remembering was crowding into his mind. He wanted just to get his breath, to get on home, to sleep.

A tree was near him, with a thermostatically controlled cover which domed it in whenever the winds were too strong or too dry, and an underground sprinkler which kept it alive when surface moisture was not sufficient. It was one of the old MacArthur extravagances which his McBan ancestor had inherited and had added to the Station of Doom. It was a modified Earth oak, very big, a full thirteen meters high. Rod was proud of it though he did not like it much, but he had relatives who were obsessed by it and would make a three-hour ride just to sit in the shade—dim and diffuse as it was—of a genuine tree from Earth.

When he looked at the tree, a violent noise assailed him.

Mad frantic laughter—

Laughter beyond all jokes—

Laughter sick, wild, drunk, dizzy!

He started to be angry and was then puzzled. Who could be laughing at him already? As a matter of nearer fact, who could be trespassing on his land? Anyhow, what was there to laugh about?

(All Norstrilians knew that humor was "pleasurable corrigible malfunction." It was in the Book of Rhetoric which their Appointed Relatives had to get them through if they were even to qualify for the tests of the Garden of Death since there were no schools, no classes, no teachers, no libraries except for private ones. There were just the seven liberal arts, the six practical sciences, and the five collections of police and defense studies. Specialists were trained off-world, but they were trained only from among the survivors of the Garden, and nobody could get as far as the Garden unless the sponsors, who staked their lives along with that of the student—so far as the question of aptness was concerned—guaranteed that the entrant knew the eighteen kinds of Nostrilian Knowledge. The Book of Rhetoric came second, right after the Book of Sheep and Numbers, so that all Norstrilians knew why they laughed and what there was to laugh about.)

But this laughter! Aagh, who could it be?

A sick man? Impossible. Hostile hallucinations brought on by the Hon. Sec. in his own onseckish way with unusual telepathic powers? Scarcely.

Rod began to laugh himself as he realized what the sound must be.

It was something rare and beautiful, a kookaburra bird, the same kind of bird which had laughed in Original Australia on Old Old Earth. A very few had reached this new planet. They had not multiplied well, even though the Norstrilians respected them and loved them and wished them well.

Good luck came with their wild birdish laughter. A man could feel he had a fine day ahead. Lucky in love, thumb in an enemy's eye, new ale in the fridge or a ruddy good chance on the market.

Laugh, bird, laugh! thought Rod.

Perhaps the bird understood him. The laughter increased and reached maniac, hilarious proportions. The bird

sounded as though it was watching the most comical bird-comedy which any bird-audience had ever been invited to, as though the bird-jokes were side-splitting convulsive gut popping, unbelievable, racy, daring and overwhelming. The bird-laughter became hysterical and a note of fear, of warning crept in.

Rod stepped toward the tree.

In all this time he had not seen the kookaburra.

He squinted into the tree, peering against the brighter side of the sky which showed the morning had arrived well.

To him, the tree was blindingly green, since it kept most of its earth color, not turning beige or gray as the earth grasses had done when they had been adapted and planted in Norstrilian soil.

To be sure, the bird was there, a tiny slender laughing impudent shape.

Suddenly the bird cawed: this was no laugh.

Startled, Rod stepped back and started to look around for danger.

The step saved his life.

The sky whistled at him, the wind hit him, a dark shape shot past him with the speed of projectile and was gone. As it leveled out just above the ground, Rod saw what it was.

A mad sparrow.

Sparrows had reached twenty kilos' weight, with straight sword-like beaks almost a meter in length. Most of the time the Commonwealth left them alone. They performed a useful function; they preyed on the giant lice, the size of footballs, which had grown with the sick sheep. But now and then one of the birds went mad and attacked people.

Rod turned, watching the sparrow as it walked around, about a hundred meters away.

Some mad sparrows, it was rumored, were not mad at all, but were tame sparrows sent on death by Norstrilian men whose minds had been twisted into crime. This was rare, but possible.

Could the Onseck already be attacking?

Rod slapped his belt for weapons as the sparrow took to the air again, flapping upward with the pretense of innocence. He had nothing except his belt-light and a canister. This would not hold out long unless somebody came along. What could a tired man do, using bare hands, against a sword which burst through the air with a monomaniac birdbrain behind it?

Rod braced himself for the bird's next power-dive, holding the canister like a shield.

The canister was not much of a shield.

Down came the bird, preceded by the whistle of air against its head and beak. Rod watched for the eyes and when he saw them, he jumped.

The dust roared up as the giant sparrow twisted its spear-like beak out of the line of the ground, opened its wings, beat the air against gravity, caught itself centimeters from the surface and flapped away with powerful strokes; Rod stood and watched quietly, glad that he had escaped.

Rain was so rare in the Norstrilian plains that he did not see how he could have gotten wet. He glanced down idly.

Blood it was, and his own.

The kill-bird had missed him with its beak but had touched him with the razor-like wing-feathers, which had mutated into weapons; both the rachis and the vane in the large feathers were tremendously reinforced, with the development of a bitterly sharp hyporhachis in the case of the wingtips. The bird had cut him so fast he had not felt or noticed it.

Like any good Norstrilian, he thought in terms of first aid.

The flow of blood was not very rapid. Should he try to tie up his arm first or to hide from the next diving attack?

The bird answered his question for him.

The ominous whistle sounded again.

Rod flung himself along the ground, trying to get to the base of the tree trunk, where the bird could not dive on him.

The bird, making a serious mental mistake, thought it had disabled him. With a flutter of wings it landed calmly, stood on its feet and cocked its head to look him over. When the bird moved its head, the sword-beak gleamed evilly in the weak sunshine.

Rod reached the tree and started to lift himself up by seizing the trunk.

Doing this, he almost lost his life. He had forgotten how fast the sparrows could run on the ground.

In one second, the bird was standing, comical and evil, studying him with its sharp, bright eyes; the next second, the knife-beak was into him, just below the bony part of the shoulder.

He felt the eerie wet pull of the beak being drawn out of his body, the ache in his surprised flesh which would precede the griping pain. He hit at the bird with his belt-light. He missed.

By now he was weakened from his two wounds. The arm was still dripping blood steadily and he felt his shorts get wet as blood poured from his shoulder.

The bird, backing off, was again studying him by cocking its head. Rod tried to guess his chances. One square blow from his hand, and the bird was dead. The bird had thought him disabled—but now he really was partially disabled.

If his blow did not land, score one mister for the bird, mark a credit for the Hon. Sec., give Old Hot and Simple the victory!

By now Rod had not the least doubt that Houghton Syme was behind the attack.

The bird rushed.

Rod forgot to fight the way he had planned.

He kicked instead and caught the bird right in its heavy, coarse body.

It felt like a very big football filled with sand.

The kick hurt his foot but the bird was flung a good six or seven meters away. Rod rushed behind the tree and looked back at the bird. The blood was pulsing fast out of his shoulder.

The kill-bird had gotten to his feet and was walking firmly and securely around the tree. One of the wings trailed a little; the kick seemed to have hurt a wing, but not the legs or that horribly strong neck.

Once again the bird cocked its comical head. It was his own blood which dripped from the long beak, now red, which had gleamed silver gray at the beginning of the fight. Rod wished he had studied more about these birds. He had never been this close to a mutated sparrow before and he had no idea of how to fight one. All he had known was that they attacked people on very rare occasions and that sometimes the people died in the encounters.

He tried to spiek, to let out a scream which would bring the neighborhood and the police flying and running toward him. He found he had no telepathy at all, not when he had to concentrate his whole mind and attention on the bird, knowing that its very next move could bring him irretrievable death. This was no temporary death with the rescue squads nearby. There was no one in the neighborhood, no one at all, except for the excited and sympathetic kookaburras haha-ing madly in the above.

He shouted at the bird, hoping to frighten it.

The kill-bird paid him no more attention than if it had been a deaf reptile.

The foolish head tipped this way and that. The little bright eyes watched him. The red sword-beak, rapidly turning brown in the dry air, probed abstract dimensions for a way to his brain or heart. Rod took time to wonder how the bird solved its problems in solid geometry—movement of the beak, the the angle of approach, the line of thrust, the movement of the beak, the weight and direction of the fleeing object, himself.

He jumped back a few centimeters, intending to look at the bird from the other side of the tree-trunk.

There was a hiss in the air, like the helpless hiss of a gentle little snake.

The bird, when he saw it, looked odd: suddenly it seemed to have two beaks.

Rod marveled.

He did not really understand what was happening until the bird leaned over suddenly, fell on its side, and lay—plainly dead—on the dry cool ground. The eyes were still open but they looked blank. The bird's body twitched a little. The wings opened out in a dying spasm. One of the wings almost struck the trunk of the tree, but the tree-guarding device raised a plastic shaft to ward off the blow; a pity the device had not been designed as a people-guard as well.

Only then did Rod see that the second "beak" was no beak at all, but a javelin, its point biting cleanly and tightly right through the bird's skull into its brain.

No wonder the bird had dropped dead quickly!

XI

As Rod looked around to see who his rescuer might be, the ground rose up and struck him.

He had fallen.

The loss of blood was faster than he had allowed for.

He looked around, almost like a child in his bewilderment and dizziness. There was a shimmer of turquoise and the girl Lavinia was standing over him. She had a medical pack open and was spraying his wounds with cryptoderm—the living bandage which was so expensive that only on Norstrilia, the exporter of stroon, could it be carried around in emergency cans.

"Keep quiet," she said with her voice. "Keep quiet, Rod. We've got to stop the blood first of all. Lands of mercy, but you're a crashing mess!"

"Who...?" said Rod weakly.

"The Hon. Sec.," said she immediately.

"You know?" he asked, amazed that she should understand everything so very quickly indeed.

"Don't talk, and I'll tell you." She had taken her field-knife and was cutting the sticky shirt off him, so that she could lift the bottle and spray right into the wound. "I just suspected you were in trouble, when Bill rode by the house and said some thing crazy, that you had bought half the galaxy by gambling all night with a crazy machine which paid off. I did not know where you were, but I thought that you might be in that old temple of yours that the rest of them can't see. I didn't know what kind of danger to look for, so I brought this." She slapped her hip. Rod's eyes widened. She had stolen her father's one-kiloton grenade, which was to be removed from its rack only in the event of off-world attack. She answered his question before he asked her. "It's all right. I made a dummy to take its place before I touched it. Then, as I took it out, the Defense monitor came on and I just explained that I had hit it with my new broom which was longer than usual. Do you think I would let Old Hot and Simple kill you, Rod, without a fight from me? I'm your cousin, your kith and kin. As a matter of fact, I'm number twelve after you when it comes to inheriting Doom and all the wonderful things there are on this station."

Rod said, "Give me water." He suspected she was chattering to keep his attention off what she was doing to his shoulder and arm. The arm glowed once when she sprayed the cryptoderm on it; then it settled down to more aching. The shoulder had exploded from time to time as she probed it. She had thrust a diagnostic needle into it and was reading the tiny bright picture on the end of the needle. He knew it had both analgesics and antiseptics as well as an ultra-miniaturized X-ray, but he did not think that anyone would be willing to use it unaided in the field.

She answered this question, too, before he asked it. She was a very perceptive girl.

"We don't know what the Onseck is going to do next. He may have corrupted people as well as animals, I don't dare call for help, not until you have your friends around you. Certainly not, if you have bought half the worlds."

Rod dragged out the words.

He seemed short of breath. "How did you know it was him?"

"I saw his face. I hiered it when I looked in the bird's own brain. I could see Houghton Syme, talking to the bird in some kind of odd way, and I could see your dead body through the bird's eyes, and I could feel a big wave of love and approval, happiness and reward, going through the bird when the job was to have been finished. I think that man is evil. Evil!"

"You know him, yourself?"

"What girl around here doesn't? He's a nasty man. He had a boyhood that was all rotten from the time that he realized he was a short-lifer. He has never gotten over it. Some people are sorry for him and don't mind his getting the job of Hon. Sec. If I'd had my way, I'd have sent him to the giggle room long ago!" Lavinia's face was set in prudish hate, an expression so unlike herself, who usually was bright and gay, that Rod wondered what deep bitterness might have been stirred within her.

"Why do you hate him?"

"For what he did."

"What did he do?"

"He looked at me," she said, "he looked at me in a way that no girl can like. And then he crawled all over my mind, trying to show me all the silly, dirty, useless things he wanted to do."

"But he didn't really *do* anything——" said Rod.

"Yes, he did," she snapped. "Not with his hands. I could have reported him. I would have. It's what he did with his mind, the things he spicked to me."

"You can report those too," said Rod, very tired of talking but nevertheless mysteriously elated to discover that he was not the only enemy which the Onseck had made.

"Not what he did, I couldn't," said Lavinia, her face set in anger but dissolving into grief. Grief was tenderer, softer, but deeper and more real than anger. For the first time Rod sensed a feeling of concern about Lavinia. What might be wrong with her?

She looked past him and spoke to the open fields and the big dead bird. "Houghton Syme was the worst man I've ever known. I hope he dies. He never got over that rotten boyhood of his. The old sick boy is the enemy of the man. We'll never know what he might have been. And if you hadn't been so wrapped up in your own troubles, mister Rod to the hundred and fifty first, you'd have remembered who *I* am."

"Who are you?" said Rod, naturally.

"I'm the Father's Daughter."

"So what?" said Rod. "All girls are."

"Then you never have found out about me. I'm *the* Father's Daughter from *The Father's Daughter's Song*."

"Never heard it."

She looked at him and her eyes were close to tears. "Listen, then, and I'll sing it to you now. And it's true, true, true.

You do not know what the world is like
And I hope that you never will.
My heart was once much full of hope,
But now it is very still
 My wife went mad.

She was my love and wore my ring
When both of us were young.
She bore my babes, but then, but then...
And now there isn't anything,
 My wife went mad.

Now she lives in another place.
Half sick, half well, and never young.
I am her dread, who was her love.
Each of us has another face.
 My wife went mad.

You do not know what the world is like.
War is never the worst of it.
The stars within your eyes can drop.
The lightning in your brain can strike.
 My wife went mad.

And I see you have heard it, too," she sighed. "Just as my father wrote it. About my mother. My own mother."

"Oh, Lavinia," said Rod, "I'm sorry. I never thought it was you. And you my own cousin only three or four times removed. But Lavinia, there's something wrong. How can your mother be mad if she was looking fine at my house last week?"

"She was never mad," said Lavina. "My father was. He made up that cruel song about my mother so that the neighbors complained. He had his choice of the Giggle Room to die in, or the sickplace, to be immortal and insane. He's there now. And the Onseck, the Onseck threatened to bring him back to our neighborhood if I didn't do what he asked. Do you think I could forgive that? Ever? After people have sung that hateful song at me ever since I was a baby? Do you wonder that I know it myself?"

Rod nodded. Lavinia's troubles impressed him, but he had troubles of his own. The sun was never hot on Norstrilia, but he suddenly felt thirsty and hot. He wanted to sleep but he wondered about the dangers which surrounded him.

She knelt beside him.

"Close your eyes a bit, Rod. I will spiek very quietly and maybe nobody will notice it except your station hands, Bill and Hopper. When they come we'll hide out for the day and tonight we can go back to your computer and hide. I'll tell them to bring food."

She hesitated, "And, Rod?"

"Yes?" he said.

"Forgive me."

"For what?"

"For my troubles," she said contritely.

"Now, you have more troubles. Me," he said. "Let's not blame ourselves, but for sheeps' sake, girl, let me sleep."

He drifted off to sleep as she sat beside him, whistling a loud clear tune with long long notes which never added up. He knew some people, usually women, did that when they tried to concentrate on their telepathic spiekling.

Once he glanced up at her before he finally slept. He noticed that her eyes were a deep, strange blue. Like the mad, wild, faraway skies of Old Earth Itself.

He slept, and in his sleep he knew that he was being carried.

The hands which carried him felt friendly, though, and he curled himself back into deep, deeper dreamless sleep.

XII

When Rod finally awakened, it was to feel his shoulder tightly bound and his arm throbbing. He had fought waking up, because the pain had increased as his mind moved toward consciousness, but the pain and the murmur of voices caused him to come all the way to the hard, bright surface of consciousness.

The murmur of voices?

There was no place on all Old North Australia where voices murmured. People sat around and spieked to each other and answered without the clatter of vocal cords. Telepathy made for brilliant and quick conversation, the participants darting their thoughts this way and that, soaring with their shields so as to produce the effect of a confident whisper.

But here there were voices. Many voices. Not possible!

And the smell was wrong. The air was wet—luxuriously, extravagantly wet, like a miser trying to catch a rainstorm!

It was almost like the van of the Garden of Death.

Just as he woke, he recognized Lavinia singing an odd little song. It was one which Rod knew, because it had a sharp, catchy, poignant little melody to it which sounded like nothing on his world. She was singing, and it sounded like one of the weird sadnesses which his people had brought from their horrible group experience on the abandoned planet of Paradise VII:

Is there anybody here or is everybody
dead at the grey green blue black lake?

The sky was blue and now it is red
over old tall green brown trees.

The house was big but now it looks
small at the grey green blue black lake.

And the girl that I knew isn't there
any more at the old flat dark torn place.

His eyes opened. It was indeed Lavinia whom he saw at the edge of vision. This was no house. It was a box, a hospital, a prison, a ship, a cave or a fort. The furnishings were machined and luxurious. The light was artificial and almost the color of peaches. A strange hum in the background sounded like alien engines dispensing power for purposes which Norstrilian law never permitted to private persons. The Lord Redlady leaned over Rod; the fantastic man broke into song himself, chanting—

Light a lantern,
Light a lantern.
Light a lantern.
Here we come.

When he saw the obvious signs of Rod's perplexity, he burst into a laugh,

"That's the oldest song you ever heard, my boy. It's pre-space. It used to be called 'general quarters' where ships like big iron houses floated on the waters of earth and fought each other. We've been waiting for you to wake up."

"Water," said Rod, "please give me water. Why are you talking?"

"Water!" cried the Lord Redlady to someone behind him. His sharp, thin face was alight with excitement as he turned back to Rod. "And we're talking because I have my buzzer on. If people want to talk to each other, they jolly well better use their voices in this ship."

"Ship?" said Rod, reaching for the mug of cold water which a hand had reached out to him.

"This is my ship, mister and owner Rod McBane to the hundred and fifty-first! An earth ship. I pulled it out of

orbit and grounded it with the permission of the Commonwealth. They don't know you're on it, yet. They can't find out right now, because my Humanoid-Robot Brainwave Dephasing Device is on. Nobody can think in or out through that, and anybody who tries telepathy on this boat is going to get himself a headache."

"Why you?" said Rod. "What for?"

"In due time," said the Lord Redlady. "Let me introduce you first. You know these people." He waved at a group.

Lavinia sat with his hands, Bill and Hopper, with his workwoman Eleanor, with his Aunt Doris. They looked odd, sitting on the low, soft, luxurious earth furniture. They were all sipping some earth drink of a color which Rod had never seen before. Their expressions were diverse. Bill looked truculent, Hopper looked greedy, Aunt Doris looked utterly embarrassed and Lavinia looked as though she were enjoying herself.

"And then here..." said the Lord Redlady.

The man he pointed to might not have been a man. He was the Norstrilian type all right. But he was a giant, of the kind which were always killed in the Garden of Death.

"At your service," said the giant, who was almost three meters tall and who had to watch his head, lest it hit the ceiling. "I am Donald Dumfrie Hordern Anthony Garwood Gaines Wentworth to the fourteenth generation, mister and owner McBan. A military surgeon, at your service, sir!"

"But this is private. Surgeons aren't allowed to work for anybody but government."

"I am on loan to the Earth Government," said Wentworth, the giant, his face in a broad grin.

"And I," said the Lord Redlady, "am both the Instrumentality and the Earth Government for diplomatic purposes. I borrowed him. He's under Earth rules. You will be well in two or three hours."

The doctor, Wentworth, looked at his hand as though he saw a chronograph there,

"Two hours and seventeen minutes more."

"Let it be," said the Lord Redlady. "Here's our last guest."

A short angry man stood up and came over. He glared out at Rod and held forth an angry hand. "John Fisher to the hundredth. You know me."

"Do I?" said Rod, not impolitely. He was just dazed.

"Station of The Good Fresh Joey," said Fisher.

"I haven't been there," said Rod, "but I've heard of it."

"You needn't have," snapped the angry Fisher. "I met you at your grandfather's."

"Oh, yes, mister and owner Fisher," said Rod, not really remembering anything at all, but wondering why the short red-faced man was so angry with him.

"You don't know who I am?" said Fisher.

"Silly games!" thought Rod. He said nothing but smiled dimly. Hunger began to stir inside him.

"Commonwealth Financial Secretary, that's me," said Fisher. "I handle the books and the credits for the government."

"Wonderful work," said Rod. "I'm sure it's complicated. Could I have something to eat?"

The Lord Redlady interrupted: "Would you like French pheasant with Chinesian sauce steeped in the thieves' wine from Viola Siderea? It would only cost you six thousand tons of refined gold, orbited near earth, if I ordered it sent to you by special courier."

For some inexplicable reason the entire room howled with laughter.

The men put their glasses down so as not to spill them. Hopper seized the opportunity to refill his own glass. Aunt Doris looked hilarious and secretly proud, as though she herself had laid a diamond egg or done some equal marvel. Only Lavinia, though laughing, managed to look sympathetically at Rod to make sure that he did not feel mocked. The Lord Redlady laughed as loudly as the rest, and even the short, angry John Fisher allowed himself a wan smile, while holding out his hand for a refill on his drink. An animal, a little one which looked very much like an extremely small person, lifted up the bottle and filled his glass for him; Rod suspected that it was a "monkey" from Old Old Earth, from the stories he had heard.

Rod didn't even say, "What's the joke?" though he realized plainly that he was himself in the middle of it. He just smiled weakly back at them, feeling the hunger grow within him.

"My robot is cooking you an Earth dish. French toast with maple syrup. You could live ten thousand years on this planet and never get it. Rod, don't you know why we're laughing? Don't you know what you've done?"

"The Onseck tried to kill me, I think," said Rod.

Lavinia clapped her hand to her mouth, but it was too late.

"So that's who it was," said the doctor, Wentworth, with a voice as gigantic as himself.

"But you wouldn't laugh at me for that—" Rod started to say. Then he stopped himself.

An awful thought had come.

"You mean, it *really worked*? That stuff with my family's old computer?"

The laughter broke out again. It was kind laughter, but it was always the laughter of a peasant people, driven by boredom, who greet the unfamiliar with attack or with laughter.

"You did it," said Hopper. "You've bought a billion worlds."

John Fisher snapped at him, "Let's not exaggerate. He's gotten about one point six stroon years. You couldn't buy any billion worlds for that. In the first place, there aren't a billion settled worlds, not even a million. In the second place, there aren't many worlds for sale. I doubt that he could buy thirty or forty."

The little animal, prompted by some imperceptible sign from the Lord Redlady, went out of the room and returned with a tray. The odor from the tray made all the people in the room sniff appreciatively. The food was unfamiliar, but it combined pungency and sweetness. The monkey fitted the tray into an artfully concealed slot at the head of Rod's couch, took off an imaginary monkey cap, saluted and went back to his basket behind the Lord Redlady's chair.

The Lord Redlady nodded. "Eat boy, it's on me."

Rod sat up. His shirt was still blood-caked and he realized that it was almost worn out.

"That's an odd sight, I must say," said the huge doctor Wentworth. "There's the richest man in many worlds, and he hasn't the price of a new pair of overalls."

"What's odd about that? We've always charged an import fee of twenty million per cent of the orbit price of goods," snapped angry John Fisher. "Have you ever realized what other people have swung into orbit around our sun, just waiting for us to change our minds so they could sell us half the rubbish in the universe? This world would be knee-deep in junk if we ever dropped our tariff. I'm surprised at you, doctor, forgetting the fundamental rules of Old North Australia!"

"He's not complaining," said Aunt Doris, whom the drink had made loquacious. "He's just thinking. We all think."

"Of course we all think. Or daydream. Some of us leave and go off-planet to be rich people on other worlds. A few of us even manage to get back here on severe probation when we realize what the off worlds are like. I'm just saying," said the doctor, "that Rod's situation would be very funny to everybody except us Norstrilians. We're all rich with the stroon imports, but we kept ourselves poor in order to survive."

"Who's poor?" snapped the fieldhand Hopper, apparently touched at a sensitive point. "I can match you with megacredits, doc, any time you care to gamble. Or I'll meet you with throwing knives, if you want them better. I'm as good as the next man!"

"That's exactly what I mean," said John Fisher. "Hopper here can argue with anybody on the planet. We're still equals. We're still free. We're not the victims of our own wealth—that's Norstrilia for you!"

Rod looked up from his food and said, "Mister and owner secretary Fisher, you talk awfully well for somebody who is not a freak like me. How do you do it?"

Fisher started looking angry again, though he was not really angry: "Do you think that financial records can be dictated telepathically? I'm spending centuries out of my life, just dictating into my blasted microphone. Yesterday I spent most of the day dictating the mess which you have made of the Commonwealth's money for the next eight years. And you know what I'm going to do at the next meeting of the council?"

"What?" said Rod.

"I'm going to move the condemnation of that computer of yours. It's too good to be in private hands."

"You can't do that!" shrieked Aunt Doris, somewhat mellowed by the earth beverage she was drinking. "It's MacArthur and McBan family property!"

"You can keep the temple," said Fisher with a snort. "But no bloody family is going to outguess the whole planet again. Do you know that boy sitting there has four megacredits on Earth at this moment?"

Bill hiccupped, "I got more than that myself."

Fisher snarled at him, "*On earth?* FOE money?"

A silence hit the room.

"FOE money. Four megacredits? He can buy Old Australia and ship it out here to us." Bill sobered fast.

Said Lavinia mildly, "What's foe money?"

"Do you know, mister and owner McBan?" said Fisher, in a peremptory tone. "You had better know, because you have more of it than any man has ever had before."

"I don't want to talk about money," said Rod. "I want to find out what the Onseck is up to."

"Don't worry about him!" laughed the Lord Redlady, prancing to his feet and pointing at himself with a

dramatic forefinger. "As the representative of Earth, I filed six hundred and eighty-five lawsuits against him simultaneously, in the name of your Earth debtors, who fear that some harm might befall you."

"Do they really?" said Rod. "Already?"

"Of course not, All they know is your name and the fact that you bought them out. But they *would* worry if they *did* know, so as your agent I tied up the Hon. Sec. Houghton Syme with more law cases than this planet has ever seen before."

The big doctor chuckled. "Dashed clever of you, my lord and mister! You know us Norstrilians pretty well, I must say. If we charge a man with murder, we're so freedom-minded that he has time to commit a few more before being tried for the first one. But civil suits! Hot sheep! He'll never get out of those, as long as he lives."

"Is he onsecking any more?" said Rod.

"What do you mean?" asked Fisher.

"Does he still have his job—Onseck?"

"Oh, yes," said Fisher. "But we put him on two hundred years' leave and he had only about a hundred and twenty years to live, poor fellow. Most of that time he will be defending himself in civil suits."

Rod finally exhaled. He had finished the food. The small polished room with its machined elegance, the wet air, the bray of voices all over the place—these made him feel dream-like. Here grown men were standing, talking as though he really did own Old Earth. They were concerned with his affairs, not because he was Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan the hundred-and-fifty-first, but because he was Rod, a boy among them who had stumbled upon danger and fortune.

He looked around the room. The conversations had accidentally stopped. They were looking at him, and he saw in their faces something which he had seen before. What was it? It was not love. It was a rapt attentiveness, combined with a sort of pleasurable and indulgent interest. He then realized what the looks signified. They were giving him the adoration which they usually reserved only for cricket players, tennis players, and great track performers—like that fabulous Hopkins Harvey fellow who had gone offworld and won a wrestling match with a "heavy man" from Wereld Schemering. He was not just Rod any more. He was their boy. As their boy, he smiled at them vaguely and felt like crying.

XIII

The breathlessness broke when the large doctor, mister and owner Wentworth threw in a stark comment:

"Time to tell him, mister and owner Fisher. He won't have his property long if we don't get moving. No, nor his life either."

Lavinia jumped up and cried out, "You can't kill Rod—"

Doctor Wentworth stopped her. "Sit down. We're not going to kill him. And you there, stop acting foolish! We're his *friends* here."

Rod followed the line of the doctor's glance and saw that Hopper had snaked his hand back to the big knife he wore in his belt. He was getting ready to fight anyone who attacked Rod.

"Sit, sit down, all of you, please!" said the Lord Redlady, speaking somewhat fussily with his singsong Earth accent. "I'm host here. Nobody's killing Rod tonight. Doctor, you take my table. Sit down yourself. You will stop threatening my ceiling or your head. You, ma'am and owner," said he to Aunt Doris, "move over there to that other

chair. Now we can all see the doctor."

"Can't we wait?" asked Rod. "I need to sleep. Are you going to ask me to make decisions now? I'm not up to decisions, not after what I've just been through. All night with the computer. The long walk. The bird from the Onseck—"

"You'll have no decisions to make if you don't make them tonight," said the doctor firmly and pleasantly. "You'll be a dead man."

"Who's going to kill me?" asked Rod.

"Anybody who wants money. Or who wants power. Or who would like unlimited life. Or who needs these things to get something else. Revenge. A woman. An obsession. A drug. You're not just a person now, Rod. You're Norstrilia incarnate. You're Mr. Money himself! Don't ask who'd kill you. Ask who wouldn't. Us, I think. But don't tempt us."

"How much money have I got?" said Rod.

Angry John Fisher cut in: "So much that the computers are clotted up, just counting it. About one and a half stroon years. Perhaps three hundred years of Old Earth's total income. You sent more Instant Messages last night than the Commonwealth government itself has sent in the last twelve years. Those messages are expensive. One kilocredit each, paid in foe money."

"I asked a long time ago what this 'foe money' was," said Lavinia, "and nobody has got around to telling me."

The Lord Redlady took the middle of the floor. He stood there with a stance which none of the Old North Australians had ever seen before. It was actually the posture of a master of ceremonies opening the evening at a large night club, but to people who had never seen those particular gestures, his movements were eerie, self-explanatory and queerly beautiful.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, using a phrase which most of them had only heard in books, "I will serve drinks while the others speak. I will ask each in turn. Doctor, will you be good enough to wait while the financial secretary speaks?"

"I should think," said the doctor irritably, "that the lad would be wanting to think over his choice. Does he want me to cut him in two, here, tonight, or doesn't he? I should think that would take priority, wouldn't you?"

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the Lord Redlady, "the mister and doctor Wentworth has a very good point indeed. But there is no sense in asking Rod about being cut in two unless he knows why. Mister financial secretary, will you tell us all what happened last night?"

John Fisher stood up. He was so chubby that it did not matter. His brown, suspicious, intelligent eyes looked over the lot of them.

"There are as many kinds of money as there are worlds with people on them. We here on Norstrilia don't carry the tokens around, but in some places they have bits of paper or metal which they use to keep count. We talk our money into the central computers which even out all our transactions for us. Now what would happen if I wanted a pair of shoes?"

Nobody answered. He didn't expect them to.

"I would," he went on, "go to a shop and look in the screen at the shoes which the offworld merchants keep in orbit. I would pick out the shoes I wanted. What's a good price for a pair of shoes in orbit?"

Hopper was getting tired of these rhetorical questions so he answered promptly, "Six bob."

"That's right. Six minicredits."

"But that's orbit money. You're leaving out the tariff," said Hopper.

"Exactly. And what's the tariff?" asked John Fisher, snapping.

Hopper snapped back, "Two hundred thousand times, what you bloody fools always make it in the Commonwealth council."

"Hopper, can you buy shoes?" said Fisher.

"Of course I can!" The station hand looked belligerent again but the Lord Redlady was filling his glass. He sniffed the aroma, calmed down and said, "All right, what's your point?"

"The point is that the money in orbit is SAD money—S for secure, A for and, D for delivered. That's any kind of good money with backing behind it. Stroon is the best backing there is, but gold is all right. Rare metals, fine manufactures, and so on. That's just the money off the planet, in the hands of the recipient. Now how many times would a ship have to hop to get to Old Earth itself?"

"Fifty or sixty," said Aunt Doris unexpectedly. "Even I know that."

"And how many ships get through?"

"They all do," said she.

"Oh, no," cried several of the men in unison.

"About one ship is lost every sixty or eighty trips, depending on the solar weather, on the skills of the pinlighters and go-captains, on the landing accidents. Did any of you ever see a really old captain?"

"Yes," said Hopper with gloomy humor, "a dead one in his coffin."

"So if you have something you want to get to Earth, you have to pay your share of the costly ships, your share of the go-captain's wages and the fees of his staff, your share of the insurance for their families. Do you know what it could cost to get this chair back to earth?" said Fisher.

"Three hundred times the cost of the chair," said doctor Wentworth.

"Mighty close. It's two hundred and eighty-seven times."

"How do you know so mucking much?" said Bill, speaking up. "And why waste our time with all this crutting glubb?"

"Watch your language, man," said John Fisher. "There are some mucking ladies present. I tell you this because we have to get Rod off to Earth tonight, if he wants to be alive and rich."

"That's what you say!" cried Bill. "Let him go to his house. We can load up on little bombs and hold up against anybody who could get through the Norstrilian defenses. What are we paying these mucking taxes for, if it's not for the likes of you to make sure we're safe? Let's take the boy home. Come along."

The Lord Redlady leaped to the middle of his own floor. He was no prancing Earthman putting on a show. He was the old Instrumentality itself, surviving with raw weapons and raw brains. In his hand he held a something which none of them could see clearly.

"Murder," he said, "will be done this moment if anybody moves. I will commit it. I will, people. Move, and try me! And if I do commit a murder, I will arrest myself, hold a trial and acquit myself. I have strange powers, people."

Don't make me use them. Don't even make me show them." The shimmering thing in his hand disappeared. "Mister and doctor Wentworth, you are under my command, by loan. Other people, you are my guests. Be warned. Don't touch that boy. This is Earth territory, this cabin we're in." He stood a little to one side and looked at them brightly out of his strange Earth eyes.

Hopper deliberately spat on the floor. "I suppose I would be a puddle of mucking glue if I helped old Bill?"

"Something like it," said the Lord Redlady. "Want to try?" The things that were hard to see were now in each of his hands. His eyes darted between Bill and Hopper.

"Shut up, Hopper. We'll take Rod if he tells us to go. But if he doesn't—it crudding well doesn't matter. Eh, mister and owner McBan?"

Rod looked around for his grandfather, dead long ago: then he knew they were looking at him instead. Torn between sleepiness and anxiety he answered.

"I don't want to go now, fellows. Thank you for standing by. Go on, mister secretary, with the foe money and the sad money."

The weapons disappeared from the Lord Redlady's hands.

"I don't like Earth weapons," said Hopper, speaking very loudly and plainly to no one at all, "and I don't like Earth people. They're dirty. There's nothing in them that's good honest crook."

"Have a drink, lads," said the Lord Redlady with a democratic heartiness which was so false that the workwoman, Eleanor, silent all the evening, let out one wild caw of a laugh, like a kookaburra beginning to whoop in a tree. He looked at her sharply, picked up his serving jug, and nodded to the financial secretary, John Fischer, that he should resume speaking.

Fisher was flustered. He obviously did not like this Earth practice of quick threats and weapons indoors. But then Lord Redlady—disgraced and remote from Old Earth as he was—was nevertheless the accredited diplomat of the Instrumentality. Even Old North Australia did not push the Instrumentality too far. There were ugly things surmised about worlds which had done so.

Soberly and huffily he went on.

"There's not much to it. If the money is discounted thirty-three and one third per cent per trip, and if it is fifty-five trips to get to Old Earth, it takes a heap of money to pay up in orbit right here before you have a minicredit on earth. Sometimes the odds are better. Your Commonwealth government waits for months and years to get a really favorable rate of exchange. And of course we send our freight by armed sailships, which don't go below the surface of space at all. They just take hundreds or thousands of years to get there, while our cruisers dart in and out around them, just to make sure that nobody robs them in transit. There are things about Norstrilian robots which none of you know, and which not even the Instrumentality knows."

He darted a quick look at the Lord Redlady, who said nothing to this, and went on. "It is well worth while not to muck around with one of our perishing ships. We don't get robbed much. And we have other things that are even worse than Mother Hitton and her littul kittons. But the money and the stroon which finally reaches Old Earth Itself is FOE money. F, O, E. F is for Free, O is for On, E is for Earth. F, O, E—free on Earth. That's the best kind of money there is, right on Old Earth Itself. And Earth has the final exchange computer. Or had it."

"Had it?" said the Lord Redlady.

"It broke down last night. Rod broke it. Overload."

"Impossible!" cried Redlady. "I'll check."

He went to the wall, pulled down a desk. A console, incredibly miniature, gleamed out at them. In less than three seconds it glowed. Redlady spoke into it, his voice as clear and cold as the ice they had all heard about:

"Priority. Instrumentality. Short of War. Instant. Instant. Redlady calling. Earthport."

"Confirmed," said a Norstrilian voice, "confirmed and charged."

"Earthport," said the console in a whistling whisper which filled the room.

"Redlady instrumentality official centputer allrightquestion cargo approved question out."

"Cenputer allright cargo approved out," said the whisper.

The people in the room had seen an immense fortune squandered. Even by Norstrilian standards, the faster-than-light messages were things which a family might not use twice in a thousand years. They looked at Redlady as though he were an evil-worker with strange powers. Earth's prompt answer to the skinny man made them all remember that though Old North Australia produced the wealth, Earth still distributed much of it—and that the super-government of the Instrumentality reached into far places where no Norstrilian would even wish to venture.

The Lord Redlady spoke mildly, "The central computer seems to be going again, if your government wishes to consult it. The 'cargo' is this boy here."

"You've told Earth about me?" said Rod.

"Why not? We want to get you there alive."

"But message security—?" said the doctor.

"I have references which no outside mind will know," said the Lord Redlady. "Finish up, mister financial secretary. Tell the young man what he has on Earth."

"Your computer outcomputed the government," said John Fisher-to-the-hundredth, "and it mortgaged all your lands, all your sheep, all your trading rights, all your family treasures, the right to the MacArthur name, the right to the McBan name and itself. Then it bought futures. Of course, *it* didn't do it. You did, Rod McBan."

Startled into full awakeness, Rod found his right hand up at his mouth, so surprised was he. "I did?"

"Then you bought futures in stroon, but you offered them for sale. You held back the sales, shifting titles and changing prices, so that not even the central computer knew what you were doing. You bought almost all of the eighth year from now, most of the seventh year from now, and some of the sixth. You mortgaged each purchase as you went along, in order to buy more. Then you suddenly tore the market wide open by offering fantastic bargains, trading the six-year rights for seventh-year and eighth-year. Your computer made such lavish use of Instant Messages to Earth that the Commonwealth defense office had people buzzing around in the middle of the night. By the time they figured out what might happen, it had happened. You registered a monopoly of two year's export, far beyond the predicted amount. The government rushed for a weather recomputation, but while they were doing that you were registering your holdings on Earth and re-mortgaging them in FOE money. With the FOE money you began to buy up all the imports around Old North Australia, and when the government finally declared an emergency, you had secured final title to one and a half stroon years and to more megacredits, FOE money megacredits, than the Earth computers could handle. You're the richest man that ever was. Or ever will be. We changed all the rules this morning and I myself signed a new treaty with the Earth authorities, ratified by the Instrumentality. Meanwhile, you're the richest of the rich men who ever lived on this world. And you're also rich enough to buy all of Old Earth. In fact, you have put in a reservation to buy it, unless the Instrumentality outbids you."

"Why should we?" said the Lord Redlady. "Let him have it. We'll watch what he does with the Earth after he buys it. If it is something bad, we will kill him."

"You'd kill me, Lord Redlady?" said Rod. "I thought you were saving me?"

"Both," said the doctor, standing up. "The Commonwealth government has not tried to take your property away from you, though they have their doubts as to what you will do with Earth if you do buy it. They are not going to let you stay on this planet and endanger it by being the richest kidnap victim who ever lived. Tomorrow they will strip you of your property, unless you want to take a chance on running for it. Earth government is the same way. If you can figure out your own defenses, you can come on in. Of course the police will protect you, but would that be enough? I'm a doctor. And I'm here to ship you out if you want to go."

"And I'm an officer of government, and I will arrest you if you do not go," said John Fisher.

"And I represent the Instrumentality, which does not declare its policy to anyone, least of all to outsiders. But it is my personal policy," said the Lord Redlady, holding out his hands and twisting his thumbs in a meaningless, grotesque, but somehow very threatening way, "to see that this boy gets a safe trip to Earth and a fair deal when he comes back here!"

"You'll protect him all the way!" cried Lavinia, looking very happy.

"All the way. As far as I can. As long as I live."

"That's pretty long," muttered Hopper, "conceited little pommy cockahoop!"

"Watch your language, Hopper," said the Lord Redlady. "Rod?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Your answer?" The Lord Redlady was peremptory.

"I'm going," said Rod.

"What on Earth do you want?" said the Lord Redlady ceremoniously.

"A genuine Cape triangle."

"A what?" cried the Lord Redlady.

"A Cape triangle. A postage stamp."

"What's postage?" said the Lord Redlady, really puzzled.

"Payments on messages."

"But you do that with thumb-prints or eyeprints!"

"No," said Rod, "I mean paper ones."

"Paper messages?" said the Lord Redlady, looking as though someone had mentioned grass battleships, hairless sheep, solid cast-iron women, or something else equally improbable. "Paper messages?" he repeated, and then he laughed, quite charmingly. "Oh!" he said, with a tone of secret discovery. "You mean antiquities...?"

"Of course," said Rod. "Even before Space itself."

"Earth has a lot of antiquities, and I am sure you will be welcome to study them or to collect them. That will be perfectly all right. Just don't do any of the wrong things, or you will be in real trouble."

"What are the wrong things?" said Rod.

"Buying real people, or trying to. Shipping religion from one planet to another. Smuggling underpeople."

"What's religion?" said Rod.

"Later, later," said the Lord Redlady. "You'll learn everything later. Doctor, you take over."

Wentworth stood very carefully so that his head did not touch the ceiling. He had to bend his neck a little. "We have two boxes, Rod."

When he spoke, the door whirred in its tracks and showed them a small room beyond. There was a large box, like a coffin, and a very small box, like the kind that women have around the house to keep a single party-going bonnet in.

"There will be criminals, and wild governments, and conspirators, and adventurers, and just plain good people gone wrong at the thought of your wealth. There will be all these waiting for you to kidnap you or rob or even kill you—"

"Why kill me?"

"To impersonate you and to try to get your money," said the doctor. "Now look. This is your big choice. If you take the big box, we can put you in a sail-ship convoy and you will get there in several hundred or thousand years. But you will get there, ninety-nine point ninety-nine per cent. Or we can send the big box on the regular planforming ships, and somebody will steal you. Or we scun you down and put you in the little box."

"*That* little box?" cried Rod.

"Scunned. You've scunned sheep, haven't you?"

"I've heard of it. But a man, no! Dehydrate my body, pickle my head, and freeze the whole mucking mess?" cried Rod.

"That's it. Too bloody right!" cried the doctor cheerfully. "That'll give you a real chance of getting there alive."

"But who'll put me together. I'd need my own doctor—?" His voice quavered at the unnaturalness of the risk, not at the mere chanciness and danger of it.

"Here," said the Lord Redlady, "is your doctor, already trained."

"I am at your service," said the little Earth-animal, the "monkey," with a small bow to the assembled company. "My name is A'gentur and I have been conditioned as a physician, a surgeon and a barber."

The women had gasped. Hopper and Bill stared at the little animal in horror.

"You're an underperson!" yelled Hopper. "We've never let the crutting things loose on Norstrilia."

"I'm not an underperson. I'm an animal. Conditioned to—" The monkey jumped. Hopper's heavy knife twanged like a musical instrument as it clung to the softer steel of the wall. Harper's other hand held a long thin knife, ready to reach Redlady's heart.

The left hand of the Lord Redlady flashed straight forward. Something in his hand glowed silently terribly. There was a hiss in the air.

XIV

Where Hopper had been, a cloud of oily thick smoke, stinking of burning meat, coiled slowly toward the ventilators. Hopper's clothing and personal belongings, including one false tooth, lay on the chair in which he had been sitting. They were undamaged. His drink stood on the floor beside the chair, forever to remain unfinished.

The doctor's eyes gleamed as he stared strangely at Redlady: "Noted and reported to the Old North Australian Navy."

"I'll report it too," said the Lord Redlady, "as the use of illegal weapons on diplomatic grounds."

"Never mind," said John Fisher-to-the-hundredth, not angry at all, but just pale and looking a little ill. Violence did not frighten him, but decision did. "Let's get on with it. Which box, big or little, boy?"

The workwoman Eleanor stood up. She had said nothing but now she dominated the scene. "Take him in there, girls," she said, "and wash him like you would for the Garden of Death. I'll wash myself in there. You see," she added, "I've always wanted to see the blue skies of earth, and wanted to swim in a house that ran around on the big big waters. I'll take your big box, Rod. If I get through alive, you will owe me some treats on earth. You take the little box, Roddy, take the little box and that little tiny doctor with the fur on him. Rod, I trust him."

Rod stood up.

Everybody was looking at him and at Eleanor.

Said the Lord Redlady, "You agree to be scunned and put in the little box for instant shipment to Earth?"

He nodded.

"You will pay all the extra expense?"

He nodded again.

The doctor said, "You authorize me to cut you up and reduce you down, in the hope that you may be reconstituted on Earth?"

Rod nodded to him, too.

"Shaking your head isn't enough," said the doctor. "You have to agree for the record."

"I agree," said Rod quietly.

Aunt Doris and Lavinia came forward to lead him into the dressing room and shower room. Just as they reached for his arms, the doctor patted Rod on the back with a quick strange motion. Rod jumped a little.

"Deep hypnotic," said the doctor. "You can manage his body all right, but the next words he utters will be said, luck willing, on Old Earth Itself."

The women were wide-eyed but they led Rod forward to be cleaned for the operations and the voyage.

The doctor turned to the Lord Redlady and to John Fisher, the financial secretary.

"A good night's work," he said. "Pity about that man, though."

Bill sat still, frozen with grief in his chair, staring at Hopper's empty clothing in the chair next to him.

The console tinkled, "Twelve hours, Greenwich mean time. No adverse weather reports from the channel coast or from Meeya Meeffa or Earthport building. All's well!"

The Lord Redlady served drinks to the misters. He did not even offer one to Bill. It would have been no use, at

this point.

From beyond the door, where they were cleaning the body, clothes and hair of the deeply hypnotized Rod, Lavinia and Aunt Doris unconsciously reverted to the ceremony of the Garden of Death and lifted their voices in a sort of plainsong chant:

Out in the Garden of Death, our young
Have tasted the valiant taste of fear.
With muscular arm and reckless tongue,
They have won, and lost, and escaped us here!

The three men listened for a few moments, attentively. From the other washroom there came the sounds of the workwoman Eleanor, washing herself, alone and unattended, for a long voyage and a possible death.

The Lord Redlady heaved a sigh. "Have a drink, Bill. Hopper brought it on himself."

Bill refused to speak to them but he held forth his glass.

The Lord Redlady filled that and the others. He turned to John Fisher to-the-hundredth and said, "You're shipping him?"

"Who?"

"The boy."

"I thought so."

"Better not," said the Lord Redlady.

"You mean—danger?"

"That's only half the word for it," said the Lord Redlady. "You can't possibly plan to offload him at Earthport. Put him into a good medical station. There's an old one, still good, on Mars, if they haven't closed it down. I know Earth. Half the people of Earth will be waiting to greet him and the other half will be waiting to rob him."

"You represent the Earth government, sir and commissioner," said John Fisher. "That's a rum way to talk about your own people."

"They're not that way all the time," laughed Redlady. "Just when they're in heat. Sex hasn't a chance to compare with money when it comes to the human race on earth. They all think that they want power and freedom and six other impossible things. I'm not speaking for the Earth government when I say this. Just for myself."

"If we don't ship him, who will?" demanded Fisher.

"The Instrumentality."

"The Instrumentality? You don't conduct commerce. How can you?"

"We don't conduct commerce, but we do meet emergencies. I can flag down a long-jump cruiser and he'll be there months before anybody expects him."

"Those are warships. You can't use one for passengers!"

"Can't I?" said the Lord Redlady, with a smile.

"The Instrumentality would—?" said Fisher, with a puzzled smile. "The cost would be tremendous. How will you pay for it? It'd be hard to justify."

"*He* will pay for it. Special donation from him for special service. One megacredit for the trip."

The financial secretary whistled. "That's a fearful price for a single trip. You'd want SAD money and not surface money, I suppose?"

"No. FOE money."

"Hot buttered moonbeams, man! That's a thousand times the most expensive trip that any person has ever had."

The big doctor had been listening to the two of them. "Mister and owner Fisher," he said, "I recommend it."

"You?" cried John Fisher angrily. "You're a Norstrilian and you want to rob this poor boy?"

"Poor boy?" snorted the doctor. "It's not that. The trip's no good if he's not alive. Our friend here is extravagant but his ideas are sound. I suggest one amendment."

"What's that?" said the Lord Redlady quickly.

"One and a half megacredits for the round trip. If he is well and alive and with the same personality, apart from natural cause. But note this. One kilocredit only if you deliver him on Earth dead."

John Fisher rubbed his chin. His suspicious eyes looked down at Redlady, who had taken a seat, and up at the doctor, whose head was still bumping the ceiling.

A voice behind him spoke.

"Take it, mister financial secretary. The boy won't use money if he's dead. You can't fight the Instrumentality, you can't be reasonable with the Instrumentality, and you can't buy the Instrumentality. With what they've been taking off us all these thousands of years, they've got more stroon than we do, hidden away somewhere. You, there!" said he rudely to the Lord Redlady. "Do you have any idea what the Instrumentality is worth?"

The Lord Redlady creased his brow. "Never thought of it I suppose it must have a limit, but I never thought of it. We do have accountants, though."

"See," said Bill. "Even the Instrumentality would hate to lose money. Take the doctor's bid, Redlady. Take him up on it, Fisher." His use of their surnames was an extreme incivility, but the two men were convinced.

"I'll do it," said Redlady. "It's awfully close to writing insurance, which we are not chartered to do. I'll write it in as his emergency clause."

"I'll take it," said John Fisher. "It'll be thousands of years until another Norstrilian financial secretary pays money for a ticket like this, but it's worth it. To him. I'll square it in his accounts to our planet."

"I'll witness it," said the doctor.

"No, you won't," said Bill savagely. "The boy has one friend here. That's me. Let me do it."

They stared at him, all three. He stared back.

He broke. "Sirs and misters, please let me be the witness."

The Lord Redlady nodded and opened the console. He and John Fisher spoke the contract into it. At the end Bill shouted his full name as witness.

The two women brought Rod McBan, mother-naked, into the room. He was immaculately clean and he stared ahead as though he were in an endless dream.

"That's the operating room," said the Lord Redlady. "I'll spray us all with antiseptic if you don't mind."

"Of course," said the doctor.

"You're going to cut him up and boil him down—here and now?" cried Aunt Doris.

"Here and now," said the Lord Redlady, "if the doctor approves. The sooner he goes, the better chance he has of coming through the whole thing alive."

"I consent," said the doctor. "I approve."

He started to take Rod by the hand, leading him toward the room with the long coffin and the small box. At some sign from Redlady, the walls had opened up to show a complete surgical theater.

"Wait a moment," said the Lord Redlady. "Take your colleague."

"Colleague?" said the giant.

"A'gentur," said Redlady. "It'll be he who puts Rod together again."

"Of course," said the doctor.

The monkey had jumped out of his basket when he heard his name mentioned.

Together, the giant and the monkey led Rod into the little gleaming room. They closed the door behind them.

The ones who were left behind sat down nervously.

"Mister and owner Redlady," said Bill, "since I'm staying, could I have some more of that drink?"

"Of course, sir and mister," said the Lord Redlady, not having any idea of what Bill's title might be.

There were no screams from Rod, no thuds, no protest. There was the cloying sweet horror of unknown medicines creeping through the airvents. The two women said nothing as the group of people sat around. Eleanor, wrapped in an enormous towel, came and sat with them. In the second hour of the operations on Rod, Lavinia began sobbing.

She couldn't help it.

That very night it happened. They scunned him; they reduced him; they froze him: they dehydrated him.

The Lord Redlady arranged a relay with the special courier ship which would run him to Earth itself.

These things were supposed to be secret, but they could not be kept completely secret. We all know that no communications systems are wholly leak-proof. Even inside the vast networks of the Instrumentality, shielded, coded and protected though they were, there were soft electronic spots, weak administrative points, or garrulous men here and there. The old computer had not allowed for ordinary human wickedness. It understood the human rules, but not the temptations to break the rules. All the messages concerning Rod's vast speculations had been sent in the clear. It was no wonder that on many worlds, people saw Rod as a chance, an opportunity, a victim, a benefactor, or an enemy.

We all know the old rhyme:

Luck is hot and people funny.
Everybody's fond of money.
Lost a chance and sell your mother.
Win the pot and buy another.
Other people fall and crash:
You could win the pot of cash!

It applied in this case, too. People ran hot and cold with the news.

On Earth, Commissioner Teadrinker wondered if he dared kidnap this rich man who was coming and hold him to ransom. It was illegal, but Teadrinker was so old that he had outlived mere legality.

At Viola Siderea, the Council of Thieves sent the Chief of Thieves in pursuit, spending hard-stolen money on honest lease of patrol ships, so great was their urgency.

At the heart of the underpeople world, an unknown magister invoked the seven logoi and the three Nameless Ones, hoping that the stranger might bring great tidings.

The Commonwealth Council of Old North Australia sat on the matter and decided to send along a full dozen McBan impersonations, just to throw robbers and interceptors off the track. They did not do this because they loved Rod, or because they had special regard for him as an individual citizen, but because it was against their principles to let any Old North Australian to be robbed with impunity.

And Rod—

Rod woke on Mars, already reconstituted.

XV

Rod woke with a strange feeling of well-being. In a corner of his mind there were memories of pandemonium—knives, blood, medicine, a monkey working as surgeon. Rum dreams! He glanced around and immediately tried to jump out of bed.

The whole world was on fire!

Bright blazing intolerable fire, like a blowtorch.

But the bed held him. He realized that a loose comfortable jacket ended in tapes and that the tapes were anchored in some way to the bed.

"Eleanor!" he shouted. "Come here!"

He remembered the mad bird attacking him, Lavinia transporting him to the cabin of the sharp Earthman, Lord Redlady. He remembered medicines and fuss. But this—what was this?

When the door opened, more of the intolerable light poured in. It was as though every cloud had been stripped from the sky of Old North Australia, leaving only the blazing heavens and the fiery sun. There were people who had seen that happen, when the weather machines occasionally broke down and let a hurricane cut a hole in the clouds, but it had certainly not happened in his time, or in his grandfather's time.

The man who entered was pleasant, but he was no Norstrilian. His shoulders were slight. He did not look as though he could lift a cow, and his face had been washed so long and so steadily that it looked like a baby's face. He

had an odd medical-looking suit on, all white, and his face combined the smile and the ready professional sympathy of a good physician.

"We're feeling better, I see," said he.

"Where on earth am I?" asked Rod. "In a satellite? It feels odd."

"You're not on Earth, man."

"I know I'm not. I've never been there. Where's this place?"

"Mars. The Old Star Station. I'm Jeanjacques Vomact." Rod mumbled the name so badly that the other man had to spell it out for him. When that was straightened out, Rod came back to the subject.

"Where's Mars? Can you untie me? When's that light going to go off?"

"I'll untie you right now," said Doctor Vomact, "but stay in bed and take it easy until we've given you some food and taken some tests. The light—that's sunshine. I'd say it's about seven hours, local time, before it goes off. This is late morning. Don't you know what Mars is? It's a planet."

"New Mars, you mean," said Rod proudly, "the one with the enormous shops and the zoological gardens."

"The only shops we have here are the cafeteria and the PX. New Mars? I've heard of that place somewhere. It does have big shops and some kind of an animal show. Elephants you can hold in your hand. This isn't that place at all. Wait a sec, I'll roll your bed to the window."

Rod looked eagerly out of the window. It was frightening. A naked, dark sky did not have a cloud in sight. A few holes showed in it here and there. They almost looked like the "stars" which people saw when they were in spaceship transit from one cloudy planet to another. Dominating everything was a single explosive horrible light, which hung high and steady in the sky without ever going off. He found himself cringing for the explosion, but he could tell, from the posture of the doctor next to him, that the doctor was not in the least afraid of that chronic hydrogen bomb, whatever it might turn out to be. Keeping his voice level and trying not to sound like a boy he said, "What's that?"

"The sun."

"Don't cook my book, mate! Give me the straight truth. Everybody calls his star a sun. What's this one?"

"The sun. The original sun. The sun of Old Earth Itself. Just as this is plain Mars. Not even Old Mars. Certainly not New Mars. This is Earth's neighbor."

"That thing never goes off, goes up—boom!—or goes down?"

"The sun, you mean?" said Doctor Vomact. "No, I should think not. I suppose it looked that way to your ancestors and mine half a million years ago, when we were all running around naked on Earth." The doctor busied himself as he talked. He chopped the air with a strange-looking little key, and the tapes fell loose. The mittens dropped off Rod's hands. Rod looked at his own hands in the intense light and saw that they seemed strange. They looked smooth and naked and clean, like the doctor's own hands. Weird memories began to come back to him, but his handicap about spieking and hiering telepathically had made him cautious and sensitive, so he did not give himself away.

"If this is old, old Mars, what are you doing, talking the Old North Australian language to me? I thought my people were the only ones in the universe who still spoke Ancient English." He shifted proudly but clumsily over to the Old Common Tongue: "You see, the Appointed Ones of my family taught me this language as well. I've never been off world before."

"I speak your language," said the doctor, "because I learned it. I learned it because you paid me, very generously, to learn it. In the months that we have been reassembling you, it's come in handy. We just let down the portal of memory and identity today, but I've talked to you for hundreds of hours already."

Rod tried to speak.

He couldn't utter a word. His throat was dry and he was afraid that he might throw up.

The doctor put a friendly hand on his arm. "Easy, mister and owner McBan, easy now. We all do that when we come out."

Rod croaked, "*I've been dead*. Dead. Me?"

"Not exactly dead," said the doctor, "but close to it."

"The box—that little box!" cried Rod.

"What little box?"

"Please, doctor—the one I came in?"

"That box wasn't so little," said Doctor Vomact. He squared his hands in the air and made a shape about the size of the little ladies' bonnet-box which Rod had seen in the Lord Redlady's private operating room. "It was this big. Your head was full natural size. That's why it's been so easy and so successful to bring you back to normality in such a hurry."

"And Eleanor?"

"Your companion? She made it, too. Nobody intercepted the ship."

"You mean the rest is true, too? I'm still the richest man in the universe? And I'm gone, gone from home?" Rod would have liked to beat the bedspread, but did not.

"I am glad," said Doctor Vomact, "to see you express so much feeling about your situation. You showed a great deal when you were under the sedatives and hypnotics, but I was beginning to wonder how we could help you realize your true position when you came back, as you now have, to normal life. Forgive me for talking this way. I sound like a medical journal. It's hard to be friends with a patient, even when one really likes him."

Friends they became in the ensuing days. After several weeks, Vomact came to the plans he had—when Rod was well enough—for the disguise for a trip to Earth.

"What are you going to do to me, sir and doctor?" asked Rod.

"Anything you want," said Vomact lightly.

"Really, now. What?"

"Well," said Vomact, "the Lord Redlady sent along a whole cube of suggestions. Keep your personality. Keep your retinal and brain images. Change your appearance. Change your workwoman into a young man who looks just like your description."

"You can't do that to Eleanor. She's a citizen."

"Not here, not on Mars, she isn't. She's your baggage."

"But her legal rights!"

"This is Mars, Rod, but it's Earth territory. Under Earth law. Under the direct control of the Instrumentality. We can do these things all right. The hard thing is this. Would you consent to passing for an underman?"

"I never saw one. How would I know?" said Rod.

"Could you stand the shame of it?"

Rod laughed.

Vomact sighed. "You're funny people, you Norstrilians. I'd rather die than be mistaken for an underman. The disgrace of it, the contempt! But the Lord Redlady said that you could walk into Earth as free as a breeze if we made you pass for a cat-man. I might as well tell you, Rod. Your wife is already here."

Rod stopped walking. "My wife? I have no wife."

"Your cat-wife," said the doctor. "Of course it isn't real marriage. Underpeople aren't allowed to have it. But they have a companionship which looks something like marriage and we sometimes slip and call them husband and wife. The Instrumentality has already sent a cat-girl out to be your 'wife.' She'll travel back to Earth with you from Mars. You'll just be a pair of lucky cats who have been doing dances and acrobatics for the bored station personnel here."

"And Eleanor?"

"I suppose somebody will kill her, thinking it's you. That's what you brought her for, isn't it? Aren't you rich enough?"

"No, no, no!" said Rod. "Nobody is that rich. We have to think of something else."

They spent the entire walk back making new plans which would protect Eleanor and Rod both.

As they entered the shedport and took off their helmets, Rod said, "This wife of mine, when can I see her?"

"You won't overlook her," said Vomact. "She's as wild as fire and twice as beautiful."

"Does she have a name?"

"Of course she does," said the doctor. "They all do."

"What is it, then?"

"C'mell."

XVI

Rod walked to the edge of the little park. This was utterly unlike any ship he had ever seen or heard about in Norstrilia. There was no noise, no cramping, no sign of weapons—just a pretty little cabin which housed the controls, the Go-Captain, the Pinlighters and the Stop-Captain, and then a stretch of incredible green grass. He had walked on this grass from the dusty ground of Mars. There was a purr and a whisper. A false blue sky, very beautiful, covered him like a canopy.

He felt strange. He had whiskers like a cat, forty centimeters long, growing out of his upper lip, about twelve whiskers to each side. The doctor had colored his eyes with bright green irises. His ears reached up to a point. He looked like a cat-man and he wore the professional clothing of an acrobat; C'mell did too.

He had not gotten over C'mell.

She made every woman in Old North Australia look like a sack of lard. She was lean, limber, smooth, menacing and beautiful; she was soft to the touch, hard in her motions, quick, alert and cuddlesome. Her red hair blazed with the silkiness of animal fire. She spoke with a soprano which tinkled like wild bells.

Her ancestors and ancestresses had been bred to produce the most seductive girl on Earth. The task had succeeded. Even in repose, she was voluptuous. Her wide hips and sharp eyes invited the masculine passions. Her cat-like dangerousness challenged every man whom she met. The true men who looked at her knew that she was a cat, and still could not keep their eyes off her. Human women treated her as though she were something disgraceful. She travelled as an acrobat, but she had already told Rod McBan confidentially that she was by profession a "girly-girl," a female animal, shaped and trained like a person, to serve as hostess to offworld visitors, required by law and custom to invite their love, while promised the penalty of death if she accepted it.

Rod liked her, though he had been painfully shy with her at first. There was no side to her, no posh, no swank. Once she got down to business, her incredible body faded partway into the background, though with the sides of his eyes he could never quite forget it. It was her mind, her intelligence, her humor and good humor, which carried them across the hours and days they spent together. He found himself trying to impress her that he was a grown man, only to discover that in the spontaneous, sincere affections of her quick cat-heart, she did not care in the least what his status was. He was simply her partner and they had work to do together. It was his job to stay alive and it was her job to keep him alive.

The doctor Vomact had told him not to speak to the other passengers at all; at the same time, the doctor had asked C'mell to tell the other passengers not to say anything to each other, and to call for silence if any of them spoke.

There were ten other passengers who stared at one-another in uncomfortable amazement. Ten in number, they were. All ten of them were Rod McBan.

Ten identical Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBans to the one hundred and fifty-first, all exactly alike. Apart from C'mell herself and the little monkey-doctor, A'gentur, the only person on the ship who was not Rod McBan was Rod McBan himself. He had become the cat-man. The others seemed, each by himself, to be persuaded that he alone was Rod McBan and that the other nine were parodies. They watched each other with a mixture of gloom and suspicion mixed with amusement, just as the real Rod McBan would have done, had he been in their place.

"One of them," said doctor Vomact in parting, "is your companion Eleanor from Norstrilia. The other nine are mouse-powered robots. They're all copied from you. Good, eh?" He could not conceal his professional satisfaction.

And now they were all about to see the wonders of Old Earth itself together.

C'mell took Rod to the edge of the little world and said gently, "I want to sing 'The Tower Song' to you, just before we shut down on the top of Earthport." And in her wonderful voice she sang the strange little old song.

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

Rod felt a little funny, standing there, looking at nothing, but he also felt pleasant with the girl's head against his shoulder and his arm enfolding her. She seemed not only to need him, but to trust him very deeply. She did not feel

adult—not self-important and full of unexplained business. She was merely a girl, and for the time his girl. It was pleasant. It gave him a strange foretaste of the future.

The day might come when he would have a permanent girl of his own, facing not a day, but life; not a danger, but destiny. He hoped that he could be as relaxed and fond with that future girl as he was with C'mell.

C'mell squeezed his hand, as though in warning.

He turned to look at her but she stared ahead and nodded with her chin,

She said, "Keep watching straight ahead. Earth."

He looked back at the blank blue artificial sky of the ship's force-field. It was a monotonous but pleasant blue, conveying depths which were not really there.

The change was so fast that he wondered whether he had really seen it.

In one moment the clear flat blue—then the false sky splashed apart as though it had literally been slashed into enormous ribbons, ribbons in their turn becoming blue spots and disappearing.

Another blue sky was there—Earth's.

Manhome.

Rod breathed deeply. It was hard to believe. The sky itself was not so different from the false "sky" which had surrounded the ship on its trip from Mars, but there was an aliveness and wetness to it, unlike any other sky he had ever heard about.

It was not the sight of earth which surprised him—it was the smell. He suddenly realized that Old North Australia must smell dull, flat and dusty to Earthmen. This Earth air smelled alive. There were the odors of plants, of water, of things which he could not even guess. The air was coded with a million years of memory. In this air his people had swum to manhood, before they conquered the stars. The wetness was not the cherished damp of one of his covered canals. It was wild free moisture which came laden with the indications of things living, dying, sprawling, squirming, loving with an abundance which no Norstrilian could understand. No wonder the descriptions of Earth had always seemed fierce and exaggerated! What was stroom that men would pay water for it—water, the giver and carrier of life. This was his home, not matter how many generations his people had lived in the twisted hells of Paradise VII or the dry treasures of Old North Australia. He took a deep breath, feeling the plasma of earth pour into him, the quick effluvium which had made man. He smelled Earth again. It would take a long lifetime, even with stroom, before a man could understand all these odors which came all the way up to the ship, which hovered, as planofforming ships usually did not, twenty-odd kilometers above the surface of the planet.

There was something strange in this air, something sweet and clear to the nostrils, refreshing to the spirit. One great beautiful odor overrode all the others. What could it be? He sniffed and then said, very clearly, to himself. "Salt!"

C'mell reminded him that he was beside her. "Do you like it, C'rod?"

"Yes, yes, it's better than—" Words failed him. He looked at her. Her eager, pretty, comradely smile made him feel that she was sharing every milligram of his delight. "But why," he asked, "do you waste salt on the air? What good does it do? Is it to clean the ship some way?"

"Ship? We're not on the ship, C'rod. This is the landing roof of Earthport."

He gasped.

No ship? There was not a mountain on Old North Australia more than six kilometers above mean ground level! And these mountains were all smooth, worn, old, folded by immense eons of wind into a gentle blanketing that covered his whole home world.

He looked around.

The platform was about two hundred meters long by one hundred wide.

The ten "Rod McBans" were talking to some men in uniform. Far at the other side a steeple rose into eye-catching height—perhaps a whole half-kilometer. He looked down.

There it was—Old Old Earth.

The treasure of water reached before his very eyes—water by the millions of tons, enough to feed a galaxy of sheep, to wash an infinity of men. The water was broken by a few islands on the far horizon to the right.

"Hesperides," said C'mell, following the direction of his gaze. "They came up from the sea when the Daimoni built this for us. For people, I mean. I shouldn't say 'us' when I mean people."

He did not notice the correction. He stared at the sea. Little specks were moving in it, very slowly. He pointed at one of them with his finger and asked C'mell:

"Are those wethouses?"

"What did you call them?"

"Houses which are wet. Houses which sit on water. Are those some of them?"

"Ships," she said, not spoiling his fun with a direct contradiction. "Yes, those are ships."

"Ships?" he cried. "You'd never get one of those into space! Why call them ships then?"

Very gently C'mell explained, "People had ships for water before they had ships for space. I think the Old Common Tongue takes the word for space vessel from the things you are looking at."

"I want to see a city," said Rod. "Show me a city."

"It won't look like much from here. We're too high up. Nothing looks like much from the top of Earthport. But I can show you, anyhow. Come over here, dear."

When they walked away from the edge, Rod realized that the little monkey was still with them. "What are you doing here with us?" asked Rod, not unkindly.

The monkey's preposterous little face wrinkled into a knowing smile. The face was the same as it had been before, but the expression was different—more assured, more clear, more purposeful than ever before. There was even humor and cordiality in the monkey's voice. "We animals are waiting for the people to finish their entrance."

We animals? thought Rod. Then he remembered his furry head, his pointed ears, his cat-whiskers. No wonder he felt at ease with this girl and she with him.

The ten Rod McBans were walking down a ramp, so that the floor seemed to be swallowing them slowly from the feet up. They were walking in single file, so that the head of the leading one seemed to sit bodiless on the floor, while the last one in line had lost nothing more than his feet. It was odd indeed.

Rod looked at C'mell and A'gentur and asked them frankly, "When people have such a wide, wet, beautiful world, all full of life, why should they kill me?"

A'gentur shook his monkey head sadly, as though he knew full well, but found the telling of it inexpressibly wearisome.

C'mell answered, "You are who you are. You hold immense power. Do you know that this tower is yours?"

"Mine!" he cried.

"You've bought it, or somebody bought it for you. Most of that water is yours, too. When you have things that big, people ask you for things. Or they take them from you. Earth is a beautiful place, but I think it is a dangerous place, too, for off-worlders like you who are used to just one way of life. You haven't caused all the crime and meanness in the world, but it's been sleeping. And now it wakes up for you."

"Why for me?"

"Because," said A'gentur, "you're the richest person who has ever touched this planet. You own most of it already. Millions of human lives depend on your thoughts and your decisions."

They had reached the opposite side of the top platform. Here, on the land side, the rivers were all leaking badly. Most of the land was covered with steam-clouds, such as they saw on Norstrilia when a covered canal burst out of its covering. These clouds represented incalculable treasures of rain. He saw that they parted at the foot of the tower.

"Weather machines," said C'mell. "The cities are all covered with weather machines. Don't you have weather machines in Old North Australia?"

"Of course we do," said Rod, "but we don't waste water by letting it float around in the open air like that. It's pretty, though. I guess the extravagance of it makes me feel critical. Don't you Earth people have anything better to do with your water than to leave it lying on the ground or having it float over open land?"

"We're not Earth people," said C'mell. "We're underpeople. I'm a cat-person and he's made from apes. Don't call us people. It's not decent."

"Fudge!" said Rod. "I was just asking a question about Earth, not pestering your feelings when—"

He stopped short.

They all three spun around.

A man faced them—a tall man, clad in formal garments, his face gleaming with intelligence, courage, wisdom and a very special kind of elegance.

XVII

"I am projecting," said he.

"You know me," he said to C'mell.

"My lord Jestocost!"

"You will sleep," he commanded A'gentur, and the little monkey crumpled into a heap of fur on the deck of the tower.

"I am the Lord Jestocost, one of the Instrumentality," said the strange man, "and I am going to speak to you at very high speed. It will seem like many minutes, but it will only take seconds. It is necessary for you to know your fate."

"You mean my future?" said Rod McBan. "I thought that you, or somebody else, had it all arranged."

"We can dispose, but we cannot arrange. I have talked to the Lord Redlady. I have plans for you. Perhaps they will work out."

A slight frowning smile crossed the face of the distinguished man. With his left hand he warned C'mell to do nothing. The beautiful cat-girl started to step forward and then obeyed the imperious gesture, stopped, and merely watched.

The Lord Jestocost dropped to one knee. He bowed proudly and freely, with his head held high and his face tilted upward while he stared directly at Rod McBan.

Still kneeling, he said ceremoniously, "Some day, young man, you will understand what you are now seeing. The Lord Jestocost, which is myself, has bowed to no man or woman since the day of his initiation. That was more time ago than I like to remember. But I bow freely to the man who has bought Earth. I offer you my friendship and my help. I offer both of these without mental reservation. Now I stand up and I greet you as my younger comrade."

He stood erect and reached for Rod's hand. Rod shook hands with him, still bewildered.

"Within minutes assassins will be on their way to kill your impersonators. Other people will try to hunt you down for what you have done or for what you are. I am willing for you to save some of your property and all of your life. You will have experiences which you will treasure—if you live through them.

"You have no chance at all without me. I'll correct that. You have one chance in ten thousand of coming out alive.

"With me, if you obey me through C'mell, your chances are very good indeed. More than one thousand to one in your favor. You will live—"

"But my money!" Rod spieked wildly without knowing that he did it.

"Your money is on Earth. It is Earth," smiled the wise, powerful old official. "It is being taxed at enormous rates. This is your fate, young man. Remember it, and be ready to obey it. When I lift my hand, repeat after me. Do you understand?"

Rod nodded. He was not afraid, exactly, but some unknown core within him had begun to radiate animal terror. He was not afraid of what might happen to himself; he was afraid of the strange, wild fierceness of it all. He had never known that man or boy could be so utterly alone.

The loneliness of the open outback at home was physical. This loneliness had millions of people around him. He felt the past crowding up as though it were alive in its own right. The cat-girl beside him comforted him a little; he had met her through Doctor Vomact; to Vomact he had been sent by Redlady; and Redlady knew his own dear home. The linkage was there, though it was remote.

In front of him there was no linkage at all.

He stood, in his own mind, on a precipice of the present, staring down at the complex inexplicable immensity of Earth's past. This was the place that all people were from. In those oceans they had crawled in the slime; from those salt, rich seas they had climbed to that land far below him; on that land they had changed from animals into men before they had seized the stars. This was home itself, the home of all men, and it could swallow him up.

The word-thoughts came fast out of the Lord Jestocost's mind, directly into his own. It was as though Jestocost had found some way around his impediment and had then disregarded it.

"This is Old Earth Itself, from which you were bred and to which all men return in their thoughts if not in their

bodies. This is still the richest of the worlds, though its wealth is measured in treasures and memories, not in stroom.

"Many men have tried to rule this world. A very few have done it for a little while."

Unexpectedly, the Lord Jestocost lifted his right hand. Without knowing why he did it, Rod repeated the last sentence.

"A very few men have governed the world for a little while."

"The Instrumentality has made that impossible."

The right hand was still in the commanding "up" position, so Red repeated, *"The Instrumentality has made that impossible."*

"And now you, Rod McBan of Old North Australia, are the first to own it."

The hand was still raised.

"And now I, Rod McBan, of Old North Australia, am the first to own it."

The hand dropped, but the Lord spieked on.

"Go forward, then, with death around you.

"Go forward, then, to your heart's desire.

"Go forward, with the love you will win and lose.

"Go forward, to the world, and to that other world under the world.

"Go forward, to wild adventures and a safe return.

"Be watchful of C'mell. She will be my eyes upon you, my arm around your shoulders, my authority upon your person; but go.

"Go." Up went the hand.

"Go..." said Rod.

The Lord vanished.

C'mell plucked at his sleeve. "Your trip is over, my husband. Now we take Earth itself."

Softly and quickly they ran to the steps which went to unimaginable Earth below them.

Rod McBan had come to the fulfilment of his chance and his inheritance.

[End of *The Boy Who Bought Old Earth*, by Cordwainer Smith]