

WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

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All Stories New and Complete

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SHORT NOVEL

ABBR. by Frank Riley 4

SHORT STORIES

NOR DUST CORRUPT by James McConnell 54

THE OLD GOAT by Charles L. Fontenay 67

ULTIMATE MELODY by Arthur C. Clarke 70

WAR GAME by Bryce Walton 76

THE FLOATER by Kenneth O'Hara 82

CRONUS OF THE D.F.C by Lloyd Biggle, Jr. 94

THE RUMBLE AND THE ROAR
by Stephen Bartholomew 108

ARTICLE

PROGNOSIS FOR TOMORROW by Alan E. Nourse, M.D. 47

FEATURES

EDITOR'S REPORT 2

WHAT IS YOUR SCIENCE I.Q.? 69

SCIENCE BRIEFS 115

HUE AND CRY 118

COVER:

The Titan Flagpole Painter by Mel Hunter

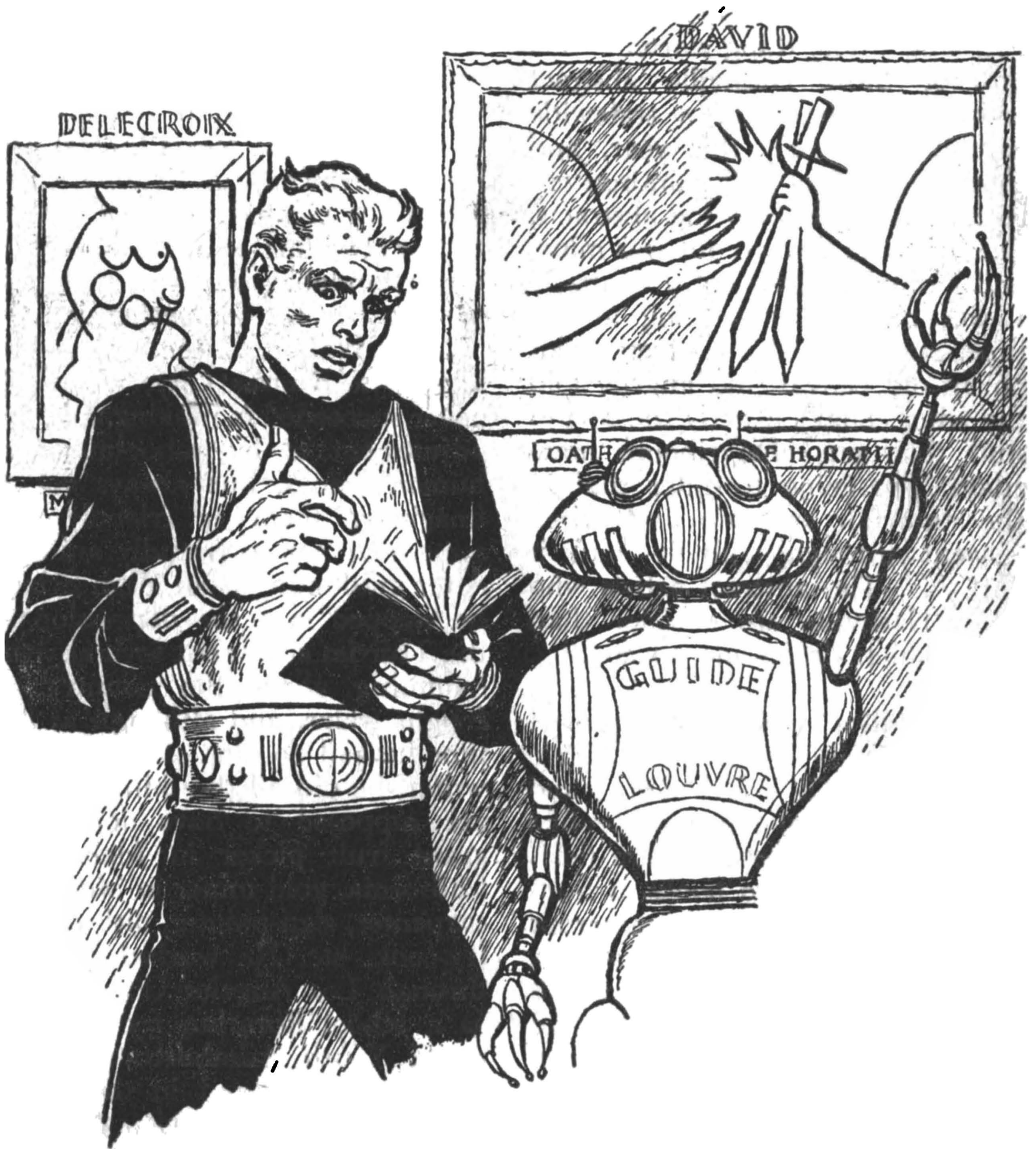
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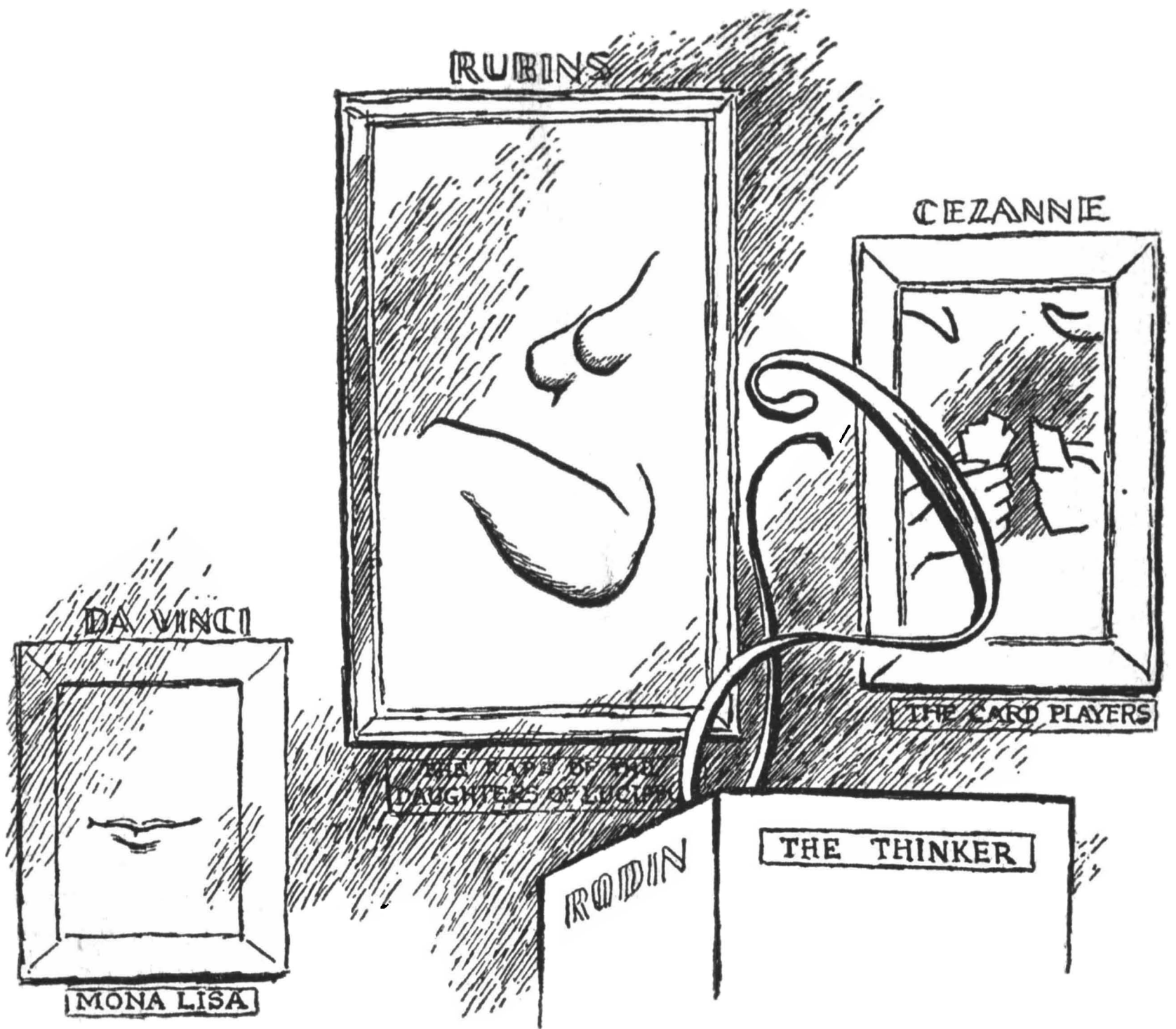
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Brevity was the new watchword.

Vrythg dgstd stht lsrcdb njyd.



Illustrated by Ed Emsch



Abbr.

BY FRANK RILEY

WALTHER VON KOENIGSBURG woke up a few moments after the earth shuttle had passed Venus. As he gazed back at the lonely, shrouded planet, abandoned long ago when Man won freedom to colonize

more habitable worlds in deep space, Walther realized that in just a matter of minutes his long pilgrimage would be over. Soon he would walk down the ramp and set foot on Earth—the almost mythical homeland of his people. Walther was young enough, and old enough, not to be ashamed of the sudden choking in his throat, the moisture in his eyes.

A light touch on his shoulder brought him back to the shuttle ship. The pert stewardess smiled at his start.

“Wyslgsr,” she asked pleasantly.

Or at least that’s what it sounded like to Walther, whose ears were still ringing from the take off at the Cyngus III shuttleport.

“I beg your pardon,” he began. “I’m afraid . . .”

For a moment she looked startled, then her full, red lips parted in another bright smile.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” she exclaimed. “I didn’t realize . . . I just asked, Sir, whether you had been sleeping.”

She spoke with the mechanical, stilted perfection he had first noted when transferring from the Aldebaran liner at the shuttleport. He had wondered, briefly, about the source of the accent, but had been too polite to ask.

The stewardess put a small pillow in his lap, then placed a tray on it. The recessed compartments of the tray held a cup of steaming black coffee, a piece of pastry that reminded Walther of apfelstrudel, and a paper-covered booklet entitled: “Easy Earth Dictionary and Orientation Manual”. Stamped on

the cover, in the manner of an official seal, were the words: “Prepared under the authorization of Happy Time, Ltd.”

“Thank you,” said Walther, then he grinned buoyantly, eager to share these moments of excitement at being so close to Earth. “But I don’t think I’ll need the dictionary!”

Tiny frown lines appeared between the stewardess’s carefully arched eyebrows.

“Hg su’v rthsr?” she inquired uncertainly.

“I don’t understand . . .”

The stewardess managed a professional smile that was edged with just the faintest touch of impatience.

“That’s what I thought. What I asked, Sir, was how long since you’ve been on Earth?”

“This is my first visit!”

“Then you had better study the dictionary,” she said firmly.

“Oh, no, I really don’t need it!” Walther’s inner excitement showed in the flush of his fair Nordic complexion. He turned toward her in a burst of confidence. “You see, my people always kept alive their native languages. My father’s side of the family was German . . . and down through all the generations they’ve managed to teach the language to their children! It was the same way with my mother’s family, who were English . . .” Pride came into his voice: “I could speak both languages by the time I was four.”

“And you’ve never taken this shuttle from Cyngus?”

“I’ve never been on Cyngus before—nor on Aldebaran VI—Den-

eb II—or Arcturus IX,” explained Walther, naming the farflung way station across the galaxy. He added: “I’m on my way in from Neustadt—Andromeda, you know.”

Respect replaced the hint of impatience in the stewardess’s smile, which instantly became more personal. Not for generations had a colonist from the Andromeda galaxy boarded this shuttle; the Andromeda run, across 1,500,000 light years of space, could be made only by special charter, at a fantastic cost. This blonde young man with the stubborn chin and sensitive mouth was obviously a colonial of tremendous wealth.

The pilot’s buzzer sounded, and a red light flickered on the Passenger Instruction panel.

“I have to go forward now,” the stewardess said, regretfully. “We’re entering the warp, and it’s time to prepare for landing. Maybe later . . .”

She let the invitation trail off, and left him with a very special smile.

Walther understood the smile. He was a young man, but he was no fool. In the trading centers of Andromeda many women smiled at him that way when they learned he was a Von Koenigsburg from Neustadt.

He dunked the pastry in the black coffee, took a generous bite and settled back to be alone with his thoughts. An earth woman was not an essential part of the dream that had taken him on this quixotic voyage. True, there might be a woman who would come to love him enough so that she would leave

the old world culture and graciousness of Earth for the colonial life on the immense frontier of Andromeda. But, being of an age where the dreams of youth are merging with practicality, Walther rather doubted he would find such a woman.

He didn’t doubt that the rest of his dream would come gloriously to life.

While the shuttle whirled without motion through the voidless void of hyper space, Walther smiled at the prospect ahead. Six months to immerse himself in the wonder of Earth’s culture! Six months to enjoy the whole of it, instead of nourishing the few precious fragments kept alive by his family through the first centuries of colonial life in the new galaxy.

Delightful evenings at the symphony and the opera! Beethoven, Verdi, Brahms, Schubert and Wagner! Wagner!—Perhaps he would even be able to attend a performance of *Die Meistersinger*. Walther smiled to himself. His great, great grandfather, who had first discovered the incredibly rich mines, forests and black loam of Neustadt, had started the tradition of naming the first son Walther, after the whimsical *Meistersinger*, Walther von der Vogelweide.

Then there would be leisurely afternoons in the great libraries and museums! All the great classics of literature and art, instead of the few faded pictures and the handful of volumes in the high beamed library of his family castle. The infrequent ships that traveled between the fringes of the two gal-

axies had little room for books and art treasures. Three years ago, on the occasion of Walther's twenty-first birthday, his mother had broken down in tears as she told of trying for half a decade to order a set of Goethe as a coming of age present for him. But after the request had finally reached Earth, some clerk had garbled the order and sent a four-page booklet that apparently was some kind of puzzle-book for children.

Now he could steep himself in Goethe, Schiller, Dickens, Maupassant, Tolstoi!

And best of all the conversation! The delicate art of communicating mind with mind! What tales he would have to tell when he sat again in the family banquet hall! How his mother's eyes would sparkle! How his father would roar with delight as he recounted some rapier-like *bon mot* . . .

But all this was only the small part of the dream. The small, personal part. The dream itself was so much bigger, as big as a dream must be to carry over from youth to manhood. He had first dreamed it as a boy, sitting on the hearth rug with his knees tucked up under his chin, watching the great leaping fire, while behind him in the shadows his grandfather played on the old violin. *Meditation*, his grandfather had called it. By a long ago composer of Earth, a man strangely named Thais. His grandfather couldn't play very much of it, but the fragment had lodged in Walther's heart and would be there to the end of his life.

Walther's dream was indeed a

grand dream, shaped of a melody and leaping flames. He would not spend his lifetime wresting more wealth from the riches of Neustadt. That had been done for him; the challenge was gone. But someday he would make the journey to Earth, and bring back with him enough of the beauty and culture to make Neustadt a miniature Earth, out on the rim of Andromeda.

It was indeed a grand dream. He would spend his wealth for books and music and treasures of art. He would try to bring back artists and teachers, too, and from Neustadt would spread the wonder of the new, old culture; it would reach out to all the colonies of the Andromeda galaxy, giving texture to life. And it would be there like a shining beacon when Man made his next great step across space, across the millions of light years to the Camora galaxy, and beyond . . .

The stewardess again touched his shoulder, with a gesture that was not entirely according to shuttle-ship regulations.

"We're through the warp and are now in orbit," she said. "We'll land at Uniport in three minutes."

Uniport! The fabled entry port of Earth! It was the new hub, the pulsing heart of the homeland. It was the syndrome of all Earth culture, and its stratoways reached out like spokes of a spidery wheel to every city of the planet.

Walther's knees were a little shaky as he moved down the ramp, and the moisture in the corners of his eyes was not caused by the sleety December wind that whipped across the vast landing area. He

was on Earth. He was the first of his people to return to the fatherland that had cradled them and sent them out into the universe.

When the stewardess said good-bye to him at the foot of the ramp, she looked both puzzled and disappointed. Her smile had been an invitation, and she had sensed the tug of it in his answering grin. But he only tipped his hat, and went on into the customs office.

He felt like a small boy suddenly confronted by so many delights that he knew not which to sample first.

“Destination?”

The customs officer's blue pencil poised over the question on the Uniport entry form. Walther shrugged carelessly.

“Oh, I'll look around Uniport awhile, then visit other cities . . . New York . . . London . . . Vienna . . . I have six months, you know.”

“I know—I'm sure you'll enjoy your happy time. But you must have a destination—someplace where you can be contacted, or leave forwarding addresses.” The official's voice was patient, but it had the curious mechanical quality Walther had noted in speech of the pretty young stewardess.

“Can you recommend good lodging?”

“The Uniport landing provides excellent facilities, and you'll be among other travelers until you have a chance to adjust yourself to happy time activities.”

“Oh, no! I don't want to waste a moment! I want to live among the people of Earth from this very first night!”

The customs officer peered at Walther's entry permit.

“Andromeda . . . that's what I thought.” He shook his head dubiously. “You have your Orientation Manual?”

Walther fumbled in the pockets of his greatcoat.

“I must have left it on the shuttleship, but I don't need it.”

The official pressed another copy of the manual firmly into Walther's hands.

“It is required,” he said. “First visitors are not allowed to leave the Uniport landing without one.”

Walther was too happy to argue. He shoved the manual into one of pockets.

“If I may suggest, Sir,” said the customs officer, his eyes widening as he looked over Walther's letters of credit, “You will find the Hotel Altair most comfortable. It's where all important visitors in Uniport stay.”

The next few moments went by so quickly they left Walther a little dazed. A servo-robot took his bags and led him to a monorail car, which whisked him off to the hotel.

“Gdegr,” said the doorman, another servo-robot, in a brilliant scarlet uniform. Its wax-like features were set in a perpetual smile.

Walther blinked.

“I'm sorry,” he began. “I—”

“Thayr,” said the majestic robot, taking Walther's handtooled overnight bag and motioning imperiously for two bellhop robots to bring the rest of the luggage. Silent and smiling, they leaped to obey.

The desk clerk was a human, and

greeted Walther with an efficient:

“Wemtalr.”

He offered Walther a pen and a registration card on which appeared some undecipherable combination of letters.

Walther began to have a sense of unreality about the whole thing, as if he were still day-dreaming in the Venus warp.

“Really,” he said, “I seem to be quite confused—”

With a smile of sudden comprehension, the clerk produced a Manual and thumbed rapidly through its pages. He pointed to a phrase with the tip of his pen, and Walther read:

What price room do you desire?

Opposite these words was the phonetic jumble:

Whprumuirer?

Walther shrugged to indicate that price was not important, but his thoughts were spinning. And they were still spinning when the robot bellhop left him alone in his suite. The possibility of a language barrier on Earth was something he had never considered. With only six months planned for his visit, it would be impossible to learn a new language and still do all he had dreamed of doing.

But the Von Koenigsburgs were noted for their stubbornness. Walther’s chin set, and he opened the Manual to learn what this was all about.

He promptly realized that this was a Manual only for the most elementary needs of conversation, and that a great amount of study would be necessary for normal discourse. The first section of the Manual de-

voted a short chapter to each of the basic languages of Earth. Turning from one to another, Walther discovered that an extreme degree of condensation had taken place in all languages. It was as though a form of speedwriting and shorthand had been vocalized.

But why? What did it mean?

Walther found a partial explanation in the Orientation section which began:

“Be brief!”

“Soyez bref!”

“Mach’ es kurz!”

“Sea breze!”

In a score of languages, first-time visitors were admonished that an understanding of these two words was essential to getting maximum enjoyment out of their stay on Earth.

“Even in an earlier age,” the introduction pointed out, “the words ‘Be Brief’ expressed the essence of a new way of life, a life in which pace and tempo were all important. Later, as technology and automation relieved man of the burden of labor, he realized that tempo was equally important to fullest enjoyment of his happy time hours. You will understand this better after a few pleasant days on Earth.”

There was a false ring to the words that heightened Walther’s sense of forboding.

Under the glass top of his dressing table, he saw several brightly colored, attractively illustrated notices. One in particular caught his attention. It showed a young woman with lovely and poignantly expressive features. Her hands were outstretched, as though she were

singing or engaged in a dramatic scene.

With the help of his Manual, Walther ascertained that the young woman was named Maria Piavi, and that she was an Italian operatic soprano appearing currently in Uniport with a New York company.

Walther's buoyancy began to return. What better way to become acquainted with Earth's culture than to spend his first evening at the opera? He removed the announcement with Maria Piavi's picture from under the glass and stood it upright against the mirror.

Dinner in the hotel's main dining room was a confusing interlude. The cuisine was superb, the robot waiter faultless—although Walther was beginning to weary of their fixed smiles. But more irritating was the flicker of huge, tri-dimensional television screens on the walls of the dining room. When he deciphered his bill, he saw he had been taxed for the TV entertainment.

After dinner, he showed the opera announcement to the hotel clerk, and asked how to get there. The clerk wrote down the number of the monorail car he was to take, but when Walther learned the opera house was only six blocks away, he decided to walk. The clerk was aghast at this, and followed him all the way to the sidewalk, waving his arms and protesting in an hysterical jumble of consonants.

THE OPERA house itself was a revelation. All he had dreamed of, and more. The frescoed facade!

ABBR.

The dazzling marquee! The crowd of elegantly dressed men and women, animatedly speaking their strange syllables as they watched a floor show in the lobby. When the floor show ended, and the crowd shifted to the far end, where a pantomimist was beginning his act, Walther had a clear view of the life-size cutout of Maria Piavi in the center of the lobby.

He stood in front of it, staring with unashamed admiration. There was an earthiness and warmth about her that reminded him of the young women of his own planet. Paradoxically, there was also an air of remoteness and rigid self-discipline, a sense of emotion eternally controlled. He wondered which was the real Maria. Beside her picture was the photograph of a peppery old man whom Walther was able to identify as Willy Fritsh. The consonants under his name said he was now a producer, and had formerly directed for many years.

Walther purchased his ticket without too much difficulty. The lights blinked, and he followed the crowd into the orchestra section.

As he sank into the luxury of upholstered seat, Walther opened his senses to the sounds and sights about him, the tingling scent of the lovely women, the ebb and flow of indistinguishable conversation, the strange, short bursts of music which he found to be emanating from a tiny, jeweled radio in the purse of the woman who sat next to him.

His excitement and anticipation grew still greater when he carefully deciphered the program and discovered that Maria Piavi was to

sing Gilda, in Rigoletto, this very evening. What unbelievable good luck! Rigoletto, to commemorate his first evening on Earth! Walther vaguely knew the story of the opera, but from earliest childhood he could remember his mother singing snatches of *Caro Nome* and *La donna e mobile*. Now he would hear the entire arias, the full score of this masterpiece.

Suddenly all was quiet. The orchestra rose swiftly into view in front of the stage. The white-haired leader bowed. There was an eruption of applause, as brief as the crack of a rocket breaking the sound barrier. The golden baton rose, a glorious burst of music filled the opera house and the velvet curtain zipped upward so rapidly that the blinking of an eye would have missed it.

The opening scene of festal entertainment in the hall of the ducal palace was a masterpiece in conception, but the gay cavaliers and ladies, the Duke's twenty-second condensation of the "Questa o quella" ballata, the plotting with Rigoletto and the mocking of Monterone were all accomplished and done with before Walther knew what was happening.

Then he realized that he was looking upon a tremendous revolving stage, divided into many exquisite sets. Each set appeared majestically, established itself, often with an almost indiscernable pause, and then moved out of view to be replaced by the next.

The second scene was the deserted street outside Rigoletto's cottage. Rigoletto appeared and disap-

peared, Gilda and the disguised Duke flashed through their duets, the orchestra set up the briefest of fanfares, and the lovely Maria Piavi moved to the center of the stage to sing Gilda's immortal aria

"Caro nome che il me cor . . ."

The words electrified Walther to the edge of his seat. Here were the first naturally spoken words of the opera, the words of Gilda as she expressed joy at learning the name of her lover. Walther's mother had sung the haunting words on many an evening as he drifted off to sleep in his nursery. But he had never heard them phrased so beautifully as they came now from the lips of Maria Piavi. After the numbing shock of the first scene, they started the blood throbbing in his temples again.

But they were the last words he understood of the aria.

Using the archaic phrase with superb showmanship to startle her audience, Maria swung with flawless technique into a contraction of verse and music that somehow managed to convey the beauty of both in the few seconds that she held the center of the stage. It was like passing a star just before you entered hyperspace. You saw it for an instant, it awed and choked you with its wonder, and then it vanished into a nothingness that was deeper than night.

There was so much beauty in the fragment that Walther ached to hear the rest of the aria. But Gilda had been abducted to the Duke's palace, and the stage had revolved far into Act II before Walther could assimilate the realization that

no more of "Caro Nome" would be heard this evening, or any evening.

Nothing mattered after this, not even the Duke's half-minute condensation of "*La donna e mobile*". The stage picked up momentum, thunder and lightning flashed, the murdered Gilda's body was discovered by her father in the sack beside the river, the final curtain swooped down over the grisly horror, the orchestra disappeared, lights flashed on and Walther found himself being hurried along with the pleased audience toward the exit, where servo-robots were passing out handbills and pointing to a theatre across the street.

The entire opera had lasted eleven minutes.

Stunned, his dream crumbling, Walther stood outside the opera house and watched the crowd disappear into the theatre across the street, or plunge into passing monorail cars. The wind of the late afternoon was gone. A light snow was falling; it melted on his cheeks and powdered the fur collar of his great-coat. Some of the younger couples didn't immediately board the monorail. They walked around to the stage exit and waited, laughing and chattering. Walther joined them.

In a few moments members of the cast began to appear. They waved gaily at friends in the crowd.

Maria came out in the company of two young men, followed closely by the peppery, bright-eyed little man whom Walther recognized from the lobby poster as being Willy Fritsh, the producer. The young couples closed around them,

ABBR.

applauding. Walther shouldered his way toward the center of the group.

Maria was laughing with excitement. This was the warm, earthy Maria, not the exquisite, almost aloof, artist Walther had seen on the stage. She was a full-lipped, gay Italian girl who was enjoying the plaudits of her friends. She was bundled in a white fur, and her teeth flashed as she tossed back a rippling comment to one of the young men standing near Walther.

As they started to move away, Walther stepped forward in sudden desperation.

"I beg pardon," he said. "Can you wait while I try to ask one question?"

Maria looked startled, and one of her escorts stepped quickly between her and Walther.

"Whststyt?" the young man snapped.

Walther flushed at the tone. He wasn't used to being spoken to this way, certainly not by anyone his own age. His jaw set as he held on to his self control, and continued thumbing through the Manual.

Then he noticed that Maria was being hurried along by her other escort. He tried to step around the young man blocking his path.

The young man put out his arm and pushed against Walther's shoulder, as if to shove him back into the crowd.

Out of the corner of his eye, Walther saw Willy Fritsh hurrying forward to intervene. But his own reflexes were already in motion. His left hand flashed up; the back of it struck the young man in the chest. Walther didn't intend it to be a

blow, merely a warning. He even managed to check it before it landed. But, to his bewilderment, the young man staggered back, slumped to his knees, gasping for breath.

The other escort, though white-faced with fear, hurled himself at Walther.

Still trying to maintain a measure of control, Walther merely blocked the second escort by thrusting out the palm of his hand. The young man toppled backward, and the whole scene began to take on a never-never land quality.

Girls screamed in terror; the crowd around Walther scrambled out of his reach. Maria stared at him wide-eyed, but didn't move.

"I'm terribly sorry," Walther blurted.

There was a shrill whistle, a drumbeat of running feet on the cold sidewalk. Walther moved forward to help the young men to their feet. They shrank away from him, and then he was surrounded by three armed police officers, shouting a gibberish of commands.

Finally, Willy Fritsh made himself heard. He pointed to Walther's manual, and spoke a few patient words of explanation. When one of the officers still seemed unsatisfied, Willy turned to Walther with a twinkle in his eyes:

"They want to know if you are a professional pugilist?"

Walther felt immeasurably relieved at hearing these naturally spoken words.

"Good Lord, no!" he gasped.

He took out his entry permits, his identification certificate and his letters of credit, impressively drawn

up on the stationery of the Inter-Galactic Exchange Union on Den-eb II.

When the doubting officer saw the amount of the credits, his hands shook and he handed the papers back to Walther as if they were state documents. The officers helped the two young men to their feet, admonished them sharply, tipped their hats to Walther and hurried back to their posts.

Willy regarded Walther quizzically.

"Well, young man, you seem to have very persuasive ways!"

At home, it had been easy for Walther to slip from English to German. He did it now in the stress of the moment.

"Ich kann Ihnen nicht sagen wie leid es mir tut—"

He was in the middle of his apology before he realized he was talking German. He broke off in confusion. Willy's pink cheeks crinkled with amusement.

"Ist schon gut. Ich spreche auch das 'alte' Deutsch."

Willy went on to explain:

"As a young man I translated many of the German masters into our modern happy time presentations. Now, what is it you wanted to ask Miss Maria?"

Walther addressed his question to Willy, but he looked at Maria as he spoke:

"I . . . I wanted to ask if she would ever consider singing Rigoletto in its original form. I would be happy to pay all expenses . . ."

"I'm sure you would," Willy said drily. "But Miss Maria sings only the pure happy time essence of

Rigoletto. Not for more than a century has Verdi's original version been sung on Earth."

Maria looked puzzled during the interchange. Willy translated for her, and she nodded in vigorous endorsement of his words. There was a titter of laughter from the young couples who had crowded around them again.

Walther drew himself very erect.

"Thank you," he said.

He turned on his heel and walked into the darkness beyond the stage exit. He walked blindly into the snow flurries, not caring where his steps were taking him. But he had not gone two hundred yards before he realized he was being followed.

WALTHER STOPPED and waited.

The footsteps behind him drew closer. A slight shadow bulked out of the darkness, and Walther heard Willy Fritsh say in German:

"Don't be alarmed, young man."

Willy came up and linked his arm through Walther's.

"Keep on walking— It's a cold night."

The chill air rattled in Willy's throat as he panted from the pace of overtaking Walther. When he caught his breath, he asked:

"What sort of world do you come from? It's quite amazing that someone from the Andromeda galaxy should ask for the original Rigoletto!"

Walther told the old producer something of his home and family. Willy questioned him closely on sev-

eral points, and finally seemed satisfied.

"When they come from the stars," he murmured.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It is nothing—just the title of an old classic."

At the next corner, Willy stopped. "I leave you here."

He stepped closer to Walther and lowered his voice, even though there was nothing around them but darkness and drifting snow.

"Would you care to sample a bit of Bohemia, my boy?"

"Well—I guess so," Walther answered doubtfully.

"Tomorrow evening then, at eight. 1400 Avenue B, apartment 21. Can you remember that?"

"1400 Avenue B, apartment 21."

"I must emphasize the need for discretion on your part. There will be important people present."

"Why do you trust me?" Walther challenged.

"Because I am an old fool," chuckled Willy Fritsh.

The chuckle emboldened Walther to ask one more question:

"Will Maria be there?"

"Now you are a fool!"

Willy took a step away, then returned, flicked on his cigarette lighter and studied Walther thoughtfully.

"Or maybe not," he murmured. "Maybe not. Perhaps Maria could be there, this once . . ."

He snapped out the lighter.

With another chuckle, Willy disappeared into the darkness.

1400 Avenue B, apartment 21. Eight o'clock tomorrow evening. The directions whirled all night

through Walther's fitful sleep. They intermingled with a strange company of servo-robots, unintelligible phrases, the dry chuckle of Willy Fritsh and the haunting voice of Maria Piavi, beginning an aria she would never finish.

The next day, Walther determined to find out how the cult of brevity had changed other fields of Earth's culture. He went first to the library, where foreboding hardened into bitter reality. Classic after classic was cut to its essence. Hamlet was reduced to a total reading time of seven minutes. But the old librarian seemed embarrassed about this.

By mutual reference to the Manual, she managed to convey to him that a new edition would be out soon, and that it would be edited down to five minutes reading time. Did he want to sign up for a copy?

Walther gave her a stricken look, and silently shook his head.

Puzzled, she led him to the other classics on his list. Each was a new blow. "Great Expectations" was cut to twenty pages, all of Thoreau to one thin pamphlet, Henry James to a pocket-size digest of less than ten pages; "Leaves of Grass" to a few lines of verse.

Walther's sense of loss became more than personal. He saw uncounted generations of boys who would never know Whitman, who might never have time for the open road in the Spring, the sweet springtime of life. The road and the poem, they were part of each other. Without one, the other could not live.

The fire of Walther's dream

flamed up fiercely within him. There was yet time for beauty in Andromeda. Time for quiet and thinking and true leisure. Somehow, he must rescue the treasures of the ages from the tomb of Earth and let them live again, three-quarters of a million light years away.

He beckoned to the old librarian, and laboriously communicated his question:

"The originals of these classics—where are they?"

She frowned in bewilderment. He pointed to the proper words again, and gestured with his hands to indicate a large book.

A smile of understanding replaced her frown. She consulted a larger edition of his own Manual, and wrote:

Digester's Vaults—lower six levels.

He wrote back:

Can I go down there?

After some delay, she encoded the answer:

Only authorized happy time Digesters are permitted in the vaults.

Walther thanked her glumly. His spirits were so depressed that not even the digested version of the Bible shocked him too greatly. The Old Testament amounted to eleven pages, in rather large type; the Gospel of St. Mark was three paragraphs; the Acts of the Apostles spanned less than half a page.

Walther left the library, and the icy wind roused him from depression. It lashed him to anger, to a desperate, unreasoning anger that drove him to find, somewhere on Earth, an ember of the old culture. Somewhere he had to find such an

ember and bring it back to Neustadt, where it would flame again.

He managed to get directions to the Vienna stratowaycar. Surely in Vienna he would find some trace of the spirit left by Mozart and Hayden, Beethoven, Schubert and Strauss.

Ten minutes later, when he left the stratoway in the Platz terminal near the Vienna Ring, his heart beat a little faster. This was indeed the old Vienna, as he had envisaged it from the few pictures he had seen and the many stories he had been told. The buildings on the Ring were in good repair, and not substantially altered. There was the Burg Theatre, the Art and History Museum, the buttressed facade of the ancient Opera House, the soaring twin spires of the Votive Church. It was like seeing an old woodcut come to life.

But, for Walther, that was all that came to life in Vienna. The Burg Theatre was currently presenting Faust, in what was billed as a brilliant new production scaled down to seventeen minutes. Walther sadly recalled Goethe's prophetic line: *Mein Lied ertont der unbekaten Menge . . .* My song sounds to the unknown multitude.

Wandering outside the city itself, into the footpaths of the Wienerwald, Walther tried to lose himself among the gentle slopes and the old trees that cut latticework into the sky. He came suddenly upon the village of Tullnerzing, where, from a tiny sidewalk cafe, music of a stringed ensemble came in short, quick bursts. It was scherzo speeded up a hundredfold, with not three

ABBR.

but an infinite number of quarter notes blurred into what sounded like a single beat.

These were the Vienna woods! How could he ever tell his mother and father? Heartsick, he returned to the Platz and found the Berlin stratoway.

In Berlin, his bitterness grew. He had known the Unter den Linden must have changed through the centuries, but he was not prepared for such a pace of life, such a frenzy of leisure. Better not to have left Andromeda. Better always to have lived with a dream.

The sight of two elderly burghers drinking beer reminded him of his own great grandfather, and gave him a heartening twinge of nostalgia. But as he stepped close to their table, he saw that as they sipped from their miniature steins the fingers of their free hands beat out a rhythmic accompaniment to the convolutions of an adagio team imaged on the table-top television screen.

The final irony came to him when he read the lines of Schiller, carved over the entrance to a museum near the Brandenburg Gate. Because they were cut deep into the old stone, they could not be erased or condensed. They were there to give their ironic message to a world that could no longer read them:

Only through the morning gateway of the beautiful did you enter the land of knowledge.

And beneath them was Schiller's immortal warning to the artist:

*Der Menschheit Wurde ist in eure Hand gegeben,
Bewahret sie . . .*

Walther copied the entire passage on the back of his Manual. This, at least, he could take back with him. These words he could preserve for the artists who would someday create their works of beauty on the frontier of Andromeda. As he copied them, Walther felt that the words were also a personal message from Schiller to himself:

*The dignity of Mankind is placed
in your hands,*

Preserve it!

*Whether it sinks or rises depends
on you.*

The holy spell of poetry

Serves a wise world order;

*May it guide man to that great
sea*

Where harmony prevails.

The words sustained Walther's spirits until he left the stratoway in Paris and went to the Louvre. He had told himself that by this time nothing could shock him, that he could take any blow. But the Louvre was a new shock all over again.

Translating a title with the help of his Manual and the servo-robot guide, Walther found that the thin, wavering line, about two inches long, against a background of misty blue, was the Mona Lisa.

The servo-robot explained, after much searching among its tapes for words:

"This is the spirit of the famous Mona Lisa smile. The Happy Time artist has cleverly removed all non-essential detail so that you can get the meaning of the picture in the minimum amount of time."

Walther studied the thin, waver-

ing line. This, then, was Da Vinci's eternal enigma of womanhood. Perhaps it explained why he felt there were two Marias. Could there be one whole woman in a culture of fragmented lives?

The portraits of Holbein were reduced to a few sprinkles of geometric designs shot through with a single brilliant color. The nudes of Watteau, Rubens and Velazquez were little more than shadow curves.

In the east wing of the Louvre, the servo-robot pointed to a series of larger paintings. Each of these, Walther learned, summarized the entire life work of a single artist. Here it was possible to see all of Titian or Michaelangelo or Van Gogh on one simplified canvas.

Where were the originals of these classics? In the cultural vaults at Uniport, the servo-robot explained. Only authorized Happy Time artists could work with them.

Afterwards, Walther was never quite certain what happened to the rest of his day. Distaught, he wandered around the Earth, changing from stratoway to stratoway, scarcely paying any heed to his next destination. Rome, Athens, Moscow, Jerusalem. Everywhere the pace of leisure was the same. Capetown, New Delhi, Tibet, Tokyo, San Francisco. Everywhere he saw something that crumbled his dream a little more: The Buddhist monk pausing for ten seconds of meditation while he counted his beads, not one by one but in groups of twenty; the World Government Chamber where the Senator from the United States filibustered a proposal to

death by speaking for the unprecedented period of four minutes; the cafe near the school where teenage boys and girls, immense numbers of them, danced, snapped their fingers and shrieked ecstatically as the latest popular record exploded in a wild three-note burst of sound.

It was seven o'clock in the evening before Walther became aware of the time. He was half the Earth and just one hour away from his meeting with Willy Fritsh.

1400 Avenue B, apartment 21.

A bit of Bohemia, Willy had promised him. The words disturbed Walther. He had been disappointed so often in his twenty-four hours on Earth that he didn't feel like bracing himself for another let-down. Nor did he feel in the mood for a gay evening, if that was what Willy had meant.

Would Maria be there?

Walther shook his head angrily. He was indeed a fool if he expected anything after this day.

I 400 AVENUE B was only a few moments by monorail from the Hotel Altair. A gentle-faced woman who reminded Walther of his own mother answered his knock on the door of Apartment 21.

"Kdftc?" she inquired politely.

Walther stared at her. Was this all a cruel joke played by Willy Fritsh? Certainly this elderly woman, this quiet building, contained no Bohemia to be spoken of with discretion.

"Excuse me," he muttered, not even bothering to consult his Manual. He bowed and backed away.

ABBR.

"I'm afraid I've made a mistake—"

She stayed him with a small gesture of her delicate fingers. Glancing swiftly up and down the hall, she beckoned him inside. When the door was closed, she smiled a bright welcome, and spoke in the old tongue:

"You're the young man from Andromeda!"

Walther felt the tension inside him beginning to relax. He nodded, and she took his arm.

"Willy told us—we've been expecting you."

She led him from the small foyer into a large, tastefully furnished living room. Walther glanced around uncertainly, but his first impression proved correct. There was no one else here.

The woman urged him forward with a light touch of her fingertips.

"We must be so careful," she murmured.

She guided him through the living room, past the kitchen and one bedroom, and then opened the door of what appeared to be the entrance to a second bedroom.

This room was unexpectedly large, and contained many people. They were talking with great animation, but hushed abruptly as he entered.

"The young man from Andromeda," his hostess announced.

The dry voice of Willy Fritsh came through the haze of cigarette smoke.

"Over here, boy! Come and sit down!"

He saw Willy and Maria sitting on a long cushion against the far wall. They moved over to make

room for him. Maria smiled rather hesitantly. He sensed she was very ill at ease.

"I'll introduce you around later," said Willy. "Everybody's too keyed up right now. We've just had an unexpected surprise—really quite startling."

The conversation had bubbled up again, and there was an electric feeling of excitement in the air. Everyone was trying to talk at the same time. Cheeks were flushed, eyes sparkled.

While everyone was talking to those nearest, the most constantly recurring focal point of attention was the thin, balding man seated just across the room from Walther, on the arm of the sofa. He was riffling the pages of a pocket-size notebook and smiling with self-conscious pride.

Willy nodded toward the man.

"There's the gentleman who furnished our surprise— He brought shorthand notes on an entire chapter from Don Quixote!"

After the day he had just been through, Walther could appreciate this. He asked wonderingly,

"Where did he get them?"

"He's a Happy Time Digester."

Walther studied the little man. So this was one of the comparative few on Earth who could get into the deep vaults of the Uniport library! What wonders he must have explored! What beauty and adventure, what mind-stretching thoughts he must encounter in those underground catacombs. How deep into the past he could explore, how far into the future! Why, he could range the universe faster than the

warp drive, out even beyond the Andromeda galaxy!

Willy cut into his thoughts.

"He's going to read the entire chapter!"

Walther turned to Maria to see if she shared his excitement. It was the aloof, controlled Maria who smiled faintly at him. It was obvious she had come against her will, and was trying to be gracious about it.

A middle-aged couple arrived.

"Dr. and Mrs. Althuss," Willy whispered. "He's the famous heart surgeon . . ."

The next arrival was a distinguished looking man whose fingers shook with nervousness.

"That's the World Government alternate delegate from England," Willy whispered again. "It wouldn't do his reputation any good for word to get out that he spent an evening in this Bohemian crowd . . ."

Their hostess moved to the center of the room, raised her hand and announced:

"We're all here now. Please go ahead, Lorne."

The room quieted instantly. The thin little man proudly began in the old English:

"Don Cervante at the Castle . . ."

His reading was painfully slow, and he stumbled over the pronunciation of many words. The people in the room watched him so intensely, with such absolute concentration, that they gave the impression of reading his lips rather than listening to his words. Frequently, he would have to translate a word or phrase into the new language,

and there would be nods of understanding and relief.

Willy's bright blue eyes sparkled more brightly than ever. He ran his fingers constantly through his thin bristle of white hair. The elderly woman on the sofa beside the Digester was so flushed and breathing so rapidly that Walther feared she was on the verge of a stroke. Even the urbane heart surgeon showed the emotional impact of this experience. His long, tapered fingers were clenched together, and he ran his under lip constantly over the edge of his greying mustache.

Maria seemed the only one in the room who was not affected by the reading. Only a slight tightening of her lips marred her careful composure.

Soon Walther lost himself in the tingling excitement of the room, and he forgot about watching the others. Word by word, sentence by sentence, the Digester led them along with Don Cervante.

The reading, with its many pauses for translation, took almost two hours. When it was over, everyone was emotionally and physically exhausted. The little Digester was so pale he looked ill; his high forehead dripped with perspiration.

Walther drew a long breath, and brought himself reluctantly back to reality.

Willy asked quietly:

"What do you think of our intellectual underworld?"

An outbreak of almost hysterical conversation made it useless for Walther to answer. Maria, with a look of reproach at Willy, moved across the room to speak to their

ABBR.

hostess. Willy lit one of his cigars and leaned closer to Walther. There was a gleam of amusement in his twinkling blue eyes.

"You look more worn out than Don Cervante!" he chuckled.

The contrast between this evening and the disillusionment of the day made it hard for Walther to put his gratitude into words.

"I can't thank you enough—" he began.

"Don't try," said Willy. "I may have had my own devious reasons for inviting you." He glanced toward Maria, who was making an effort at polite conversation with the hostess. "I'm afraid our young diva isn't an ardent admirer of the unexpurgated Don Quixote"

There were many questions Walther wanted to ask about Maria, but he tactfully inquired, instead:

"How often does this group meet?"

"Whenever there is something to share—a chapter of literature—a copy of an old painting—a recording. It all depends on what our few Digester friends can manage—They don't have an easy time of it, you know."

"Is it difficult for them to take things out of the vaults?"

"Difficult . . . and dangerous," Willy answered grimly.

"But why . . .?"

For reasons that make good sense, officially at least. A culture founded on brevity cannot be expected to encourage its own demise through the acts of its civil servants! Think what could happen: A total work of art, whatever its form, takes time to appreciate! But if people spend

too long at an opera, the legitimate theatre or the television industry would be slighted! If they paused too long in contemplation of a painting, newspapers might not be purchased! If they dawdled over the old-style newspaper, the digest magazines, the popular recordings, the minute movies, the spectator sports—the thousand and one forms of mass recreation offered the public—each in turn would suffer from unrestrained competition!”

“It’s inconceivable,” Walther protested, “that entertainment interests could be strong enough to shape a culture! Surely the productive basis of Earth’s economy . . .”

Willy snorted.

“My boy, work as such may still be important in Andromeda, but how could it possibly be so here on Earth? Generations ago, automation, the control of the atom, the harnessing of the sun’s energy—all combined with many other factors to make work a negligible part of Man’s existence! Thus, with four-fifths of his waking hours devoted to leisure-time pursuits, the balance of power shifted inevitably to the purveyors of mass entertainment. Great monopolies, operating under the Happy Time, Ltd. cartel, seized upon the digest trend in the old culture and made brevity the basis of the new order. The briefer you make a piece of entertainment, the more pieces you can sell the public in a given number of leisure hours! It’s just good business,” Willy concluded drily.

Walther was silent a moment, trying to frame this picture in his thoughts. But there were so many

missing elements.

“Your artists and writers,” he demanded, “all your creative people—don’t they have anything to say about it?”

“Damn little. You see, the successful artist—whatever his field—is well paid by his particular monopoly. Besides, he’s been trained in the new form! I doubt if Maria has ever seen the original score of an opera—let alone tried to sing an entire aria!”

Willy took a glass of wine from a tray offered by the hostess’s servorobot. He motioned to Walther to help himself, but Walther shook his head. Another question was troubling him.

“Why do the monopolies even bother with Digesters and the classics? Why not let modern artists create in the new form?”

Willy’s voice grew hard.

“Because,” he snapped, “there have been no creative artists on Earth for over a century! Why create when your creation is only fed into the maw of the Digesters? That which is not wanted dies—in a culture as well as in the human body! That—my young friend from Andromeda—is the bitter tragedy of it all!”

Maria rejoined them, and whispered something to Willy. The old producer sighed and turned to Walther.

“Maria would like to leave now. Will you take her back to our hotel? There are some people here I must see . . .”

“Of course!”

Yet, in spite of his eagerness to get better acquainted with Maria,

Walther was reluctant to leave. There was so much more he wanted to ask, to learn. And deep beneath the surface of his thoughts a bold idea was beginning to form.

As if reading his mind, Willy said:

"We have no performance tomorrow afternoon. Come and see me at our hotel—we'll talk further! Meanwhile—" Willy's blue eyes sparkled again, "Meanwhile, for the young, the evening is still young. It should be an interesting challenge!"

Maria said nothing until they had left the apartment building and started across the street to the monorail station. Then she stopped, drew a long breath of the wintry air, and shook her head.

"Whtrblvng!" she exclaimed.

She smiled at his puzzled expression and tucked her arm through his. When they were inside the station, he handed her his Manual. She flipped through the pages, but could not find the exact translation of her remark. Finally, she picked out parts of three phrases. Put together, they read:

"What a terrible evening!"

After the first shock of her words, Walther realized he could expect her to feel no differently. She was a product of her culture, and evidently this had been her first visit to Willy's Bohemia.

It was past midnight when they boarded the monorail, and they were alone in the car. Fumbling in her purse for a coin, Maria pointed to the small screen on the back of the seat in front of them. Walther

offered a handful of coins. She put one into the slot beside the screen. A comedy sequence appeared, lasting for approximately thirty seconds. Much of it was lost to Walther, because he couldn't understand the dialogue. But Maria laughed gaily. The tension lines, the outward evidences of inner emotional control, began to smooth away. Her cheeks flushed; her dark eyes began to sparkle. This was the Maria Walther felt he could learn to know.

When the television screen went dark, Maria promptly put another coin into a slot beside a small grid. A full-scale orchestra sounded what might have been the first chord of a symphony, but the piece was over before Walther could identify it. A third coin, dropped into the arm of the seat, produced a small two-page magazine, which seemed to consist chiefly of pictures. One of the pictures showed Maria herself, in operatic costume. She studied it critically, then tossed the magazine into a handy receptacle under the seat. A fourth coin brought out a game from the side of the monorail car. It vaguely resembled a checkerboard, except that there were only six squares and two magnetized checkers. Maria guided his hand while he made two moves. As she completed her last move, the board automatically folded back into the side of the car. A fifth coin summoned a miniature keyboard from just beneath the television screen. Maria touched the keys, producing tinkling noises that sounded like a tiny celeste. Then the keyboard zipped back into its enclosure.

Maria reached for a sixth coin. Walther closed his hand over hers, and made a motion to indicate that his head was already in a whirl. She laughed, but didn't try to remove her hand. A moment later the monorail stopped in front of their hotel.

As they crossed the lobby, Walther pointed inquiringly toward the cocktail lounge. Maria smiled and nodded gaily.

A servo-robot waiter seated them at a small chrome table beside a tiny dance floor. Maria ordered their drinks, and the waiter was back with them in a matter of seconds. The glasses seemed extremely small to Walther, compared to the huge mugs and steins he was accustomed to on Neustadt. The liquor tasted rather bland, more like a sweet wine than a whiskey.

The servo-robot presented a bill with the drinks. Money had never meant anything to Walther, but he could scarcely repress a start when he deciphered the amount of the bill. By any standard of wealth or exchange, the drinks were fantastically expensive.

A scattering of applause announced the return of the orchestra. Maria held out her hand in an invitation to Walther. With some misgivings, he led her out on the dance floor. She turned and came into his arms so naturally and suddenly that she almost took his breath away. She danced very close to him. Her cheek was warm, and the faint perfume from the tip of her ear was something he would have liked to explore more thoroughly. But the moment was over

before it began. The music stopped, the orchestra leader bowed and led his men from the stage.

Back at the table, Walther lifted his glass to suggest another drink. She shook her head, explaining, "Olndrptd."

Spelled out with his Manual, her explanation was:

"Only one drink is permitted."

And, after Willy's brief orientation, this was understandable: Nothing could disrupt the perpetual entertainment cycles more easily than excessive drinking. A tipsy person was not a good customer for other leisure-time activities. Therefore, permit only one drink to a person, and charge enough for it so that the liquor monopoly would get its fair share of the entertainment expenditure. As Willy would say, it was just good business.

Maria touched his hand to signify it was time to leave. Walther took her up to her room on the 32nd floor, and they watched two musical comedies en route on the elevator pay-as-you-see television screen.

In front of her door, Maria lightly touched the back of his hand with her fingertips. She said, "Thyfrwrdrftm."

Walther knew she was thanking him, but from force of newly-acquired habit he reached for his Manual.

She laughed, shook her head and translated her own words by raising up on tiptoe and brushing his lips with her own.

Their lips were together so briefly that Walther wasn't sure whether he had really kissed her. He reached



out to take her in his arms and make sure of it.

Deftly, she turned away and closed her door behind her.

MANY THOUGHTS interfered with Walther's second night of sleep on Earth, and they weren't only of Maria. In fact, as his idea took form, even the scent of her perfume and the moth-like touch of her lips were forced temporarily into the background of his consciousness.

The next morning he waited impatiently for an hour after breakfast, then went up to Willy's room. Willy came to the door in his dressing robe, holding his glasses in one hand and a sheet of music in the other. He waved aside Walther's apology for not waiting until afternoon.

"Nein . . . nein!" he said. "I ordered an extra pot of coffee—because I didn't think you could wait!"

Willy led Walther into his sitting room and poured him some coffee.

"Maria was already here," he chuckled. "She came to . . . ah . . . pick up music . . . and to ask what I know about you. I told her nothing good, and nothing bad!"

He settled himself in his easy chair with a luxurious sigh. His bristling white hair and cherubic cheeks gave him the appearance of a benign old innkeeper, brought to life from a canvas by Holbein.

"All right, tell me what you've been thinking about all night!"

Walther shifted tensely to the edge of his chair. He spilled a little

coffee in setting his cup down.

"I would like to buy copies," he said, "of everything your Digester friends have ever smuggled out of the vaults!"

"That's a large order, my young friend."

"I'll pay . . . whatever it costs!"

"So would I—if I could afford it! But I fear it's not that simple. Take, for example, the chapter of Don Quixote you heard last evening. The World Government representative from England sent the Digester's notes to an aunt in Liverpool. She'll read them to her Bohemian friends tonight, and tomorrow they may be in Buenos Aires or Istanbul—who knows?"

"But what happens to them eventually? Aren't they kept in some central place?"

Willy spread his short, pudgy fingers in a gesture of hopelessness.

"That would mean organization—and we're not organized. We wouldn't dare to be! I've never stopped to think what finally happens to these things. Perhaps they end up among the papers of some old dreamer like myself. It's enough that they have brought their mellow moments of happiness!"

"It's not enough!" Walther protested fiercely. "It's a great waste! How will you ever improve things that way?"

"Who's trying to improve anything? The people of Earth are content—and those of us who are not entirely so—well, we have our little underworlds of pleasure."

"Is that all you want?"

"Is there more?"

Walther jumped up angrily.

"I believe there is—and I think you do, too!" he said harshly. "If you don't, why did you take me to that meeting last night and invite me here today? Why did you send me off alone with Maria?"

Willy only smiled, but under his silk robe his round belly shook with silent laughter.

"You are a foolish young man . . . and sometimes not so foolish! Sit down. Sit down . . ."

He leaned forward in his easy chair, and his manner became grave.

"Perhaps it's difficult for an old man to come near the end of life fearing that the beauty he loves will never escape from its tomb. Perhaps it's also difficult for an old maestro who cherishes the talent and loveliness of a young woman to know that she may never understand what her gift really means. Perhaps an old man can still dream some dreams that a young man could not comprehend . . ."

The tight knot in Walther's stomach slowly unwound itself.

"Then you will help me," he said quietly.

"Yes, I will help you . . . if I can . . . and you will help me!"

At Willy's suggestion, they decided to talk first to the Digester who had smuggled out the Don Quixote chapter.

"He's been most successful of all of our friends," said Willy. "He might be willing to organize a group of Digesters who could bring out things to be duplicated, and return them, I question, though, that you could duplicate many things here on Earth."

"Then we'll ship them away from Earth! The outermost world of this galaxy—at least to my knowledge—is Alden IV; it's technically well-developed and is a contact with our own galaxy."

Willy called the bald little Digester, and he came over right after lunch. But his reaction to Walther's proposal was not what they had expected.

"This . . . this is a terrible mistake!" he stammered. "It's . . . it's too big—much too big! Now—by being cautious—we can enjoy our little evenings together. But if we anger the Happy Time, Ltd. people we'll lose everything!"

Willy snapped his fingers impatiently.

"What have we to lose? A chance to be tea-cup rebels! This young man is giving us an opportunity to do something about what we profess to believe!"

The Digester looked pained.

"We are already doing something," he protested. "Did I not bring Chapter IX of Don Quixote . . ."

"You did, and we enjoyed it! But what if we could inspire a rebirth of art as big as a whole galaxy instead of entertaining each other with our little flings at Bohemia?"

The little Digester struggled with the thought for a moment, then dismissed it with a shudder.

"It's too big," he repeated miserably. "Please forget about it, Willy—our own way is best." He glared at Walther, and his distress turned to rage: "I warn you, young man . . . don't start trouble for us! If you can't accept the ways of Earth, go

back where you belong!"

He held out a trembling hand to Willy.

"Goodby, Willy . . . I go now." He hesitated, then added with the wistful air of a small boy waiting to be praised: "In two weeks I will bring another whole chapter to read!"

When Willy only shrugged, the little Digester turned away and sadly left the room.

During the next two days, Willy contacted several other Digester friends. In varying degrees, he met with refusals from each. By the end of the week, only two of the younger Digesters in the Bohemian set had agreed to cooperate and even they were careful not to promise too much.

"At this rate," Walther pointed out glumly, "it will take years to collect any real quantity of material—and I have only six months! Is there no other source?"

Willy shook his head.

"None that I know of."

"There must be!" Walther insisted. "Do you mean to tell me that in all the homes of Earth there are no treasured heirlooms of the past? No books? No paintings? No recordings?"

"Oh, I'm sure they are," Willy agreed. "But how to reach them? We can hardly advertise."

He paused, hesitated, then snapped his fingers.

"Wait—there may be a way—even more illegal than your first suggestion, but still a way . . ."

"What is it?"

"I used the word 'underworld' in speaking of our Bohemian group

last night, but actually there is an underworld, of a sort . . . trafficking mostly in liquor. The cartel's one-drink restriction has never been too enforceable." Willy lifted the seat of his piano bench and took out a bottle. "If you can afford it, you can always buy a bootleg supply."

"What's liquor got to do with art?"

"For a price—the underworld may be willing to traffic in art, literature and music . . . in addition to alcohol!"

Willy sent out word through a bootlegger who supplied some of the opera singers with their favorite beverages. The next night, after final curtain, a greying, bespectacled and very distinguished looking gentleman in formal dress met Willy and Walther in a vacant dressing room backstage. He spoke tersely, and Willy translated:

"He says he has friends who could be interested in your proposition, if there's money enough in it."

"Tell him there's money enough," Walther replied grimly.

Willy digested this, and their visitor smiled his scepticism.

Not accustomed to having his financial standing questioned, Walther faced the man himself and demanded:

"How much money do you want?"

The man understood Walther's tone, if not his words. After a brief calculation, he named a price that shocked Willy, who turned to Walther with dismay:

"Ten thousand credits for every usable piece of art that can be bought outright. An additional de-

posit of ten thousand if it has to be sent away from Earth to be duplicated. You are to pay all shipping costs, as well as legal expenses if any of their men are arrested."

Walther accepted the terms with a nod.

Their underworld contact stared respectfully at Walther, took off his suede gloves and proceeded to get down to business. It was soon arranged for Walther to set up letters of credit in banks of all major cities. Shipments of "tools and machinery" would be billed against these credits, after bills of lading had been inspected by Walther or a designated representative. From the level of the discussion, they might have been transacting legal business on a corporation scale.

Their visitor shook hands with each of them, doffed his top hat and left with a courteous bow.

Willy wiped shining beads of sweat from his forehead.

"High finance," he gasped, "is not a part of my daily routine!"

He dug into a wardrobe trunk, brought out a bottle and poured two drinks. Raising his glass high in the air, he toasted:

"To art . . . and crime! I hope we don't have to pay too much for either!"

"How are you getting along with Maria?" Willy asked a few days later.

"Just what do you expect to accomplish by throwing the two of us together so much," Walther asked bluntly. "Oh, I enjoy it, mind you—but, really, we're worlds apart. When I go back . . ."

"With the young everything is possible—even the impossible," Willy answered evasively.

"Well, tell me something more about her. Where does she come from? Has she ever been engaged? Married?"

Willy filtered a cloud of smoke through his nostrils.

"Maria's the only talented offspring ever produced by a rather poor family in Naples. She still supports them—or rather, makes it possible for them to be good Happy Time consumers. As for her talent . . . well, it was discovered by her first school teacher—and from then on her education was taken over by the opera monopoly! Engaged? Nothing serious that I know of. Married?" Willy frowned. "I shudder to think of her marriage to one of our mechanical young rabbits!"

Walther blinked.

"Do you mind explaining that one?"

Willy grimaced.

"I might as well. You see, sex per se is encouraged, with or without the formality of marriage. Large numbers of offspring are good for society! We have the technology to provide for them, and the more there are, the more potential Happy Time consumers! But the arts of sex . . . the refinements of love . . . Can't you imagine by this time what takes place in the boudoirs of Earth? Sex is something to be accommodated between pay-as-you see television programs! Besides, you've encountered a couple of our young men, do you consider them physically capable of prolonged amour?"

Walther was finding it heavy going to picture some of the things Willy was describing for him. But the mention of the two young men he had met outside the opera that first night brought up a question he'd been waiting to ask:

"What was wrong with them? I barely touched them!"

"Participation sports—physical activity of any kind is discouraged as interfering with the mass entertainment media. The few gifted boys are trained to be professionals. The others scarcely develop enough muscle to walk against a strong wind. In fact, they don't walk any more than is necessary!"

Willy paced agitatedly around his room, and stopped in front of Walther's chair. He held out his hands pleadingly:

"Be patient with Maria," he begged. "You promised to help me, too . . . and this is all I ask of you!"

Walther didn't find it unpleasant to comply with Willy's request. He had nothing to do while waiting for the first shipment to be assembled, and so was able to attend rehearsals as well as the performances of the operas.

At rehearsals, he saw a serious Maria, a perfectionist devoted to her art, a superb technician. After rehearsals and the opera itself, he saw a Maria who was a product of the alien leisure-time culture he had found on Earth—a Maria who flitted with tireless zest from one activity to another, who naturally and enthusiastically accepted the innumerable forms of entertainment offered by the Happy Time cartel.

With growing despair, Walther tried to find some activity they could share. He had always enjoyed sports, so he took her to all the attractions at the Uniport arenas. Each was a new disappointment. What was billed as a fight for the world's heavyweight title ended with a one-round decision. A basketball game was exciting—for three furiously-contested minutes. The professional tennis match consisted of each player serving four balls, which the other attempted to return.

While traveling to and from the various attractions, there were always the diversions offered on the monorail and stratoway cars. Private transportation, Walther learned after hopefully exploring this possibility, had been eliminated for the obvious reason that it was restricted in the number of recreational opportunities it permitted, and might lead to over-indulgence in sex—from the point of view of the time involved, rather than promiscuity. And while walking was not strictly illegal, those who tended to over-indulge were advised to curtail their eccentricity.

After much thought, Walther did hit upon a possibility: It was prompted by his recollection that the natural beauty of such places as the Vienna woods had not been obscured. Since Maria was not required to be at rehearsals until two in the afternoon, they could spend the morning visiting some distant beauty spots he had read or heard about back on Neustadt. Perhaps in some of these places the pace of leisure would be slowed.

Maria happily accepted his initial invitation to spend a morning in the South Sea Islands. They boarded a stratoway car immediately after breakfasting together at the hotel, and soon had exchanged chilly Uniport for languorous Tahiti.

The island village, the natives and their costumes, the wet fragrance of the jungle and the soft rippling of the surf were all as Walther had pictured them since his first reading of Stevenson's voyages to the South Seas.

However, suspecting that the Happy Time cartel had probably made its presence felt in the village itself, Walther steered Maria around it, toward a path that wound invitingly between the tall palms and growths of bread fruit trees.

Maria's hand fell easily, naturally into his own, and she pressed a little closer to him, as if awed by the unaccustomed stillness.

She smiled up at him, started to say something, but Walther put his finger over her lips and shook his head. Maria looked puzzled, then took out of her handbag a miniaturized, self-powered television set, with its own tiny coin meter. She popped in a coin, flicked the dial, and the image of an actor appeared on the screen. Walther covered it with his hand. He took the set away from her, and dropped it into the pocket of his coat. Then he pointed to her, to the shadowed trees around them—and spread his hands as if to ask what more anyone could possibly want.

He wasn't sure she understood,

but he put his arm around her waist and she rested her head against his shoulder. They continued a dozen steps down the path, until it ended at a silvery lagoon. Here, she touched the radio button of her wristwatch—rented on a weekly basis—and the rhythm of a jazz band filled the tropical air.

Walther took her wrist, shut off the radio. He turned her toward him and held her face tightly between the palms of his hands.

"No television," he said firmly, "No radio—no nothing—except this . . ."

She yielded with a faint smile. Her eyes closed, but their lips had scarcely touched when she tried to draw back.

"Not that way," Walther told her. "This way . . ."

He held her face firmly teaching her the kind of kisses that were used in a frontier world where people had time to make love. She struggled away from the unnaturalness of his kissing, then slowly she ceased to struggle.

Suddenly, the lagoon was lighted by a brilliant spotlight, and a servo-robot stepped out of the shadows. It said pleasantly:

"Since only tourists come to this spot, it is presumed that you come from some distant planet. Therefore, let me point out that all couples are limited to two minutes by the lagoon. If you hurry, you can catch a native dance number before the next stratoway leaves."

In the same pleasant tone, the servo-robot began to repeat these words in the other ancient languages of Earth.

Maria's breath came in short, trembling gasps. Her lips were still apart, and she touched them with the tip of her tongue.

"*Weil nur Touristen nach diesem Fleckchen Erde kommen . . .*" the servo-robot droned along in its pleasing voice.

"Oh, shut up!" Walther growled.

He took Maria by the arm and led her back up the path.

"Somehow," he promised her fervently, "Somewhere—we're going to finish that."

"Dthgn," she whispered in breathless wonder.

THE FIRST shipment of "tools and machinery" had been assembled at the Uniport landing. Walther received a formal notice to this effect from the local Exchange Bank. The same evening, in a backstage dressing room, he and Willy Fritsh received a rather more informative report from the gentleman who was their contact with the bootleg underworld. Every item in the shipment was listed and described with meticulous care. By reference to a leather-bound pocket notebook, the contact managed to furnish additional details.

With Willy's help, Walther was able to judge the nature of the haul. He was both pleased and disappointed. Numerically, it had more items than he had expected. Qualitatively, it left much to be desired. There were no complete literary works, only fragments. The pictures were admittedly cheap copies; the recordings were only passages from major works. A total

of eight hundred items had been purchased outright by underworld agents; fourteen hundred more had been borrowed on the security of the huge deposit. The latter would have to be duplicated on Alden IV and returned to their Earth owners as quickly as possible. Walther had expended a huge fortune for a dubious return. But, through Willy, he told the contact:

"Keep it up. Get everything you can!"

Several items did look promising: From an elderly spinster in Durban, South Africa, the first two acts of "Othello" had been obtained by the bootlegger who delivered her dry sec sherry twice a month; in New Orleans, an undertaker had parted with a nearly complete Louis Armstrong original—about an inch was broken off one edge of the record, but the bill of lading stated that the rest was quite audible. There was also what was reported to be the last third of "Crime and Punishment," loaned by a lawyer in Prague.

The second shipment was on a par with the first, with the hopeful indication that some of the new acquisitions would complement others in the first shipment. Walther stood beside Willy at the Uniport landing as the shuttle ship carrying their second shipment blasted off on the first leg of the long route to far-off Alden IV.

The third shipment was much smaller, only three hundred outright purchases and seven hundred and twenty items obtained against deposit. With the bill of lading came a warning note. Walther

translated it himself. It was from their contact, who wrote:

"Don't try to get in touch with me until further notice. Send off this shipment as soon as possible. The Happy Time boys know something big is going on."

By paying a fabulous premium, Walther was able to get the third shipment off on the midnight shuttle. Afterwards he stood in the window of Willy's hotel room, staring up at the star-filled sky.

"Well, that may be the end of it," he said.

"You've done well," said Willy, joining him. "I didn't think you'd get that much."

"I hope it'll do some good. Perhaps all this new material will at least form the basis of a good research library."

Willy glanced at him speculatively.

"I was disappointed about the music," he said. "Not one complete work."

By this time, Walther had learned to know when Willy was maneuvering toward an objective.

"Just tell me what you've got in mind," he grinned. "No preliminaries."

Willy chuckled his appreciation, then grew serious.

"Our opera season ends this week . . . We're supposed to take a month off, then start rehearsals for the next tour. Perhaps, during this month . . ."

Walther sensed what was coming next, but he held his breath—waiting for Willy to say it. Willy did:

"Perhaps—if you still want to spend more money to pay them—

we could persuade some of our group to record . . ."

"A full-length opera!" Walther exclaimed. "Would they—could they—do it?"

Willy pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"As for willingness—you've observed that your wealth is rather persuasive on Earth. Like most artists, our people spend more than they earn, and would probably try anything for what you could pay them. As for ability—we'd undoubtedly have to record in short sessions. We might even have to break up the arias into sections, because we're not conditioned for sustained effort."

"I'll pay them anything to try it," Walther broke in, enthusiastically. "Where would you try it—here in Uniport?"

"Hardly. But there's an old inn in North Wales where I once spent a vacation with some of our group. If the Happy Time agents should be watching us now, it would be quite natural to return to that inn."

"Maria . . . do you think she would?"

Willy sighed, and shrugged.

"Not for the money alone . . . she's quite a perfectionist about her art. But I'm hopeful that by this time . . ." His eyes twinkled.

Walther laughed.

"What a chess player you would make! I think you've been moving me around like a pawn ever since the first evening we met!"

"Not a pawn," Willy corrected him with a smile. "A knight."

However, they decided not to tell Maria the real purpose of the proposed vacation until they were all

set up at the inn in North Wales. Walther thought the setting sounded perfect for some personal unfinished business.

"Even I could sing an aria in such a place," Willy enthused.

Willy began quietly and individually contacting other members of his company. With the kind of payment Walther authorized him to offer, he had little difficulty getting performers for the venture. Most of them thought the project ridiculous, but the money was more than they would normally earn in an entire season. Willy swore each of them to silence. They were to treat the trip as nothing more than a vacation. He made arrangements for the various pieces of recording equipment to be shipped separately from London, Berlin and New York.

Willy's pink cheeks were perpetually flushed these days, and his bright eyes sparkled brighter than ever. When Walther brought up the question of which opera would be attempted, he discovered that the shrewd old maestro had long ago acquired Puccini's complete "Madame Butterfly" and had already packed the music for shipment to North Wales.

The night before they were to leave Uniport, a familiar, distinguished figure appeared backstage, threading his way between the huge crates being packed by the servo-robot stagehands. Willy led him immediately to one of the dressing rooms.

With admirable simplicity, the underworld contact put a proposition before them.

The first three shipments had pretty well exhausted the supply of readily obtainable material. With the Happy Time agents now alerted, the risk of trying to get more material wasn't justified by the probable results. But the underworld wasn't anxious to let go of a good revenue source without one big payoff.

What did they propose to do?

Willy's voice shook as he translated:

"For—for the right—fee—they're willing to break into the Uniport Library vaults!"

Walther was silent for a long moment. Instinctively, he recoiled from such overt action. But reason asked: Why should he draw back now? Everything taken from the vaults would be duplicated and returned in good condition. Was it right to let his own personal reaction stand in the way of something that might benefit whole ages of Mankind?

When he had firm control of his own voice, he nodded and asked:

"How do they propose to do it?"

The plan was a piece of professional craftsmanship. In the century of its existence, no one had ever attempted to enter the new library illegally. With the absence of any known motive for doing so, the need for guarding against it was routine. There were the usual doors and time-locks, the alarm systems and servo-robot guards, but nothing that couldn't be handled. They would bring in technicians from Vega VI to handle the time-locks. Otherwise, barring some unsuspected move by the Happy Time

security police, the job was within the bounds of their own abilities. Of course, there must be meticulous attention to detail and planning.

The contact explained that, according to preliminary surveys, they could count on about two hours of work after gaining entrance to the vaults. By concentrating only on books, for speed of handling and packing, a reasonable sized crew should be able to get at least twenty thousand volumes out of the vaults and into a waiting monorail transport, where the crates would already be assembled. Previous arrangements could be made for the midnight freight shuttle to take the crates from the Uniport landing to Cyngus III. From there, the crates could be dispersed throughout the immeasurable reaches of deep space.

“But they must be returned,” Walther insisted. “I’ll see to that!”

Their visitor shrugged, indicating that this detail was of no interest to him. He named a price, and when Walther promptly agreed to it, Willy poured them all a drink.

“When I was a small boy,” Willy said, in a voice that still trembled, “I slid on the seat of my trousers down an icy slope in the Alps. It was good fun for the first twenty yards; and then I realized I had gone beyond my power to stop. That’s the way I feel right now. Prosit!”

As their caller started to leave, Walther stopped him by raising his hand. Throughout the discussion, an irresistible compulsion had been growing within him. Now he had to speak:

“I’ve come a long way,” he told Willy. “Granting that nothing goes wrong, and that I’m able to leave, I know I’ll never return to Earth again. But there’s one selfish, personal thing I want to do before leaving. It isn’t sensible, I know—but neither was my dream to begin with. I want to go with these men into the Uniport vaults—just to see for an hour—greater treasures than I can ever hope to see again.”

FROM HIS room on the second floor of the Bridge End Inn, Walther could look down upon the River Dee, tumbling along beside what was still called the Shropshire and Union Railroad Canal, although the tracks of that ancient railroad had been torn up centuries ago. Old ways and names had a way of persisting in North Wales, despite the pace of modern leisure. Walther had noted with satisfaction that the double consonants of the old language, with their strange throaty pronunciation, had defied contraction. Llangollen and Llantsilio were two nearby cities whose names were still spelled out, as they had been for a thousand years.

He glanced at his watch. Maria should be waking from her nap just about now. In a half hour, Willy wanted to meet with her and ask her cooperation in doing “Madame Butterfly”. Walther had suggested waiting until the next day, since Maria was tired from the closing night festivities in Uniport, and from packing the rest of the night in time to catch the morning strato-way. But Willy opposed delay.

As he stood there by his window, Walther had a sense of peace, for the first time since he'd been on Earth. The moment was all the more to be cherished, since he knew it could not last.

A light knock on his door jarred the view and the peace out of focus.

"Come in," he called, and turned, expecting to see Willy.

But it was Maria who entered, looking remarkably refreshed after her short nap. She wore a sweater, a very short skirt and open-toed sandals. Her long, dark hair was combed out loose.

It was the first time he had seen her dressed so casually. She looked more like a Welsh mountain girl than the star of the Uniport opera.

"Hi!" he said, inadequately.

She laughed at his surprise, and put her arms around him.

"Hi," she answered.

Maria had not forgotten her first lesson beside the Tahiti lagoon; and Walther was reviewing some subsequent lessons when both of them became aware of the unwelcome fact that they were not alone.

Willy Fritsh stood in the doorway, smiling benignly.

"Oh, hell," said Walther.

"Believe me, I didn't intend to interrupt," Willy said happily. "But since we're all together right now . . . under such . . . ah . . . propitious circumstances, suppose we talk things over."

"Later," said Walther.

Ignoring his protest, Willy sat himself comfortably on the window seat, opened a large envelope and took out the bound libretto of "Madame Butterfly". He handed

it to Maria, without comment. She stared at it curiously, but made no move to open it until Willy motioned her to do so.

She nodded with recognition at the title page, then as she riffled through succeeding pages, her expression changed from surprise to distaste. She tried to hand the libretto back to Willy, but instead of taking it, he drew her to the window seat beside him, and spoke to her as a father might speak to his daughter.

By this time, Walther could understand a little of what Willy was saying and he could guess the rest of it. Maria's first reaction was to stare incredulously at Willy. As the full meaning of what he was asking became clear to her, she looked up at Walther. He saw scorn and anger in her dark eyes.

When she looked back at Willy, it was to shake her head in emphatic refusal.

Willy's tone became even more persuasive. He gazed out the window as he spoke, down at the river pouring over the weir and ducking under the old stone bridge. Maria rolled the libretto into a tight scroll. Her fingers showed white through her unpolished nails.

Willy stopped abruptly. He looked older, tired. Maria remained silent, her lips compressed into a tight line. At last she answered him, in a voice that was tightly, coldly controlled.

She stood up and walked toward the door. Walther held out his hand; she ignored it. He started after her, and Willy said,

"Let her go."

Willy looked so depressed that Walther felt a need to comfort him.

"It's all right," he said. "We'll forget the whole idea."

Willy shook his head.

"She'll do it," he said wearily.

"But . . ."

"She'll do it because she thinks she owes it to me."

Walther waited for the old maestro to continue.

"As soon as we're through recording," Willy went on, pushing himself up from the window seat, "Maria wants to be released to another opera company."

"I'll go see her right now," Walther began.

"Not now," Willy interrupted. "She wouldn't have anything to do with you. She thinks your only interest has been this recording."

Willy started rehearsals early the next morning, in the big stone barn behind the inn. The structure's high roof and thick walls provided natural acoustics, while its location was far enough from Llangollen to avoid creating undue curiosity. Recording equipment had been set up along one side; around it, the orchestra was grouped. The center area was marked off for vocal rehearsals.

Willy handled the direction himself, and not for a century had any director on Earth undertaken such a staggering task.

From the first moments of rehearsal, it became evident that the orchestra could never hope to play an entire number in one sustained effort. It was not so much the physical effort involved, as the difficulty

of maintaining an emotional crest for so long a period. The first violinist fainted halfway through the opening sequence between Lieutenant Pinkerton and the American consul. This triggered a mass collapse among the woodwinds. The pianist wavered off an octave through sheer fatigue, and the drummer dropped his sticks when Willy cued him to step up tempo.

Willy was frantic.

"We'll have to record a few bars at a time—until they're more accustomed to the strain," he told Walther. "What an editing job this will be!"

The problem with the vocalists was even more acute. Every duet would have to be recorded in at least ten segments.

Maria was the only one who stubbornly insisted on doing a complete number. It was a point of pride with her. She hated the music; it violated every principle she had ever learned. But the perfectionist in her, reinforced by her bitterness toward Walther and her sense of obligation to Willy, drove her to deliver the full measure of her promise.

In the love duet between Butterfly and Pinkerton, which closed Act I, the pale and perspiring Pinkerton was nearly spent as he began his final lines:

Come then,

Love, what fear holds you trembling?

Have done with all misgivings . . .

His impassioned plea quavered; he clutched Maria's arm to steady himself. Willy cut the music. For five minutes they held cold com-

presses to the singer's wrists, while members of the orchestra slumped, exhausted, in their chairs. When all were somewhat recovered, Pinkerton attempted the next two lines of his wedding night rapture:

The night doth enfold us,
See the world lies sleeping . . .

And then he had to rest again.

But when Maria answered, her dark eyes flashing defiantly, she went through her entire eight lines without a pause.

Her great test came with the famous second act solo, "One Fine Day". It was difficult enough to learn the strange words and music, but to achieve and hold the emotional peaks of the solo for nearly two minutes was something she had never before attempted.

Because she insisted on doing the entire aria without resting, Willy set the recording for early in the morning, when the orchestra would be fresh. He asked them to assemble on the improvised sound stage an hour after breakfast.

Willy limited the orchestra to a minimum tune up period so that the musicians could conserve their energies for the ordeal ahead. The violins were the last to be ready. When the final string had been tuned, Willy cued the engineers to stand by and pointed the tip of his baton toward Maria.

"Un Bel Di . . ."

The words came clear as the notes of a silver bell, calling back to life the beauty that had been dead for so long. Walther felt his stomach muscles tighten; a tingle of wonder crept up his spine.

Standing there in the center of

the old stone barn, wearing only sandals, shorts and a light blouse open at the neck, Maria still managed to convey the feelings of the lonely young Japanese wife who sang so confidently of her husband's return from across the sea.

This was Maria, the incomparable artist, using all of her technique to blend the unfamiliar words and music.

But for the first few lines it was only a technical tour de force. Then Puccini's music began to take hold of Maria, merging the artist with the woman, and creating yet a third entity out of the two.

He saw Willy turn, transfixed toward Maria. His hands and baton continued to move, but not by conscious direction. His pink cheeks were pale, etched with deepening lines. His blue eyes were misted.

Even the other members of the company seemed moved by Maria's performance. Yet they could not stay with her emotionally; they were compelled to break the tension by shuffling their feet and self-consciously lighting cigarettes.

To a man, the orchestra played as if hypnotized, sweeping through measure after measure with an intensity that seemed impossible to maintain.

For an uncertain moment, near the end of the aria, it looked as if Maria could not finish. She swayed, held tightly to the microphone for support. Walther stepped forward to catch her, but she recovered, drawing on some inner source of strength to finish:

". . . This will all come to pass, as I tell you!

Banish your idle fears . . .

For he will return, I know it!"

As Maria finished, she tore herself away from the microphone. Her lips were trembling; her eyes were wide, like those of a woman in shock. She half-ran out of the barn, stopped—confused—in the bright sunlight, and then ran on down the path toward the Inn.

UNTIL LATE afternoon, Maria would see no one. Then she agreed to see Willy for a few moments.

When the old maestro left her room, he looked deeply troubled.

"I don't know . . ." he told Walther, shaking his head. "I don't know what this has done to her."

"What did she say?"

"Right now, she says she will never sing again. She's going to her home in Italy this evening."

"Can we do anything?"

"Looks like we've already done more than we should. Mixing two cultures in one artist is dangerous chemistry!"

Up to this moment. Walther had deliberately avoided any decision about Maria. She had been a continuing and delightful challenge, especially since Tahiti, but beyond that he had not allowed his thoughts to go. Now there was a responsibility he could no longer evade. He had watched the dual personality that was Maria being shattered under the impact of Puccini's music. How would the pieces fit together again? Should he stand by and watch? Or should he try to help? And if he could help her,

ABBR.

how would it all end? The gulf between two cultures could be wider than the mathematics of space between two galaxies, or the bridging power of sex.

Against Willy's advice, Walther decided to catch the same stratoway with Maria, and take his chances on what might happen.

But a phone call from Uniport abruptly changed his plans. It was from their underworld contact, who informed Willy that the "Board of Directors" was meeting that evening; if Walther wanted to attend, he would have to take the next stratoway to Uniport. Someone would meet him at the station.

Uniport or Italy? Willy intervened to make the decision easier.

"This will be your only chance to get into the vaults," he counseled. "Besides, Maria must think some things through for herself."

His emotions in turmoil, Walther boarded the next stratoway for Uniport. As North Wales and England blurred into the ocean beneath him, he had the feeling that he would never see the River Dee country again.

A tall, thin young man, with eyes as colorless as waxpaper, met him at the Uniport station and hurried him into a monorail car. Walther tentatively began a question, but the young man stopped him with an opaque stare.

Four times they changed monorail cars, ending up eventually at a freight terminal, where an older man met them and pointed silently to one of the freight cars. Inside, Walther saw a strange assortment of smiling servo-robots and grim-

faced humans sitting around on empty packing cases. The cases were already marked for shipment and trans-shipment throughout the galaxy.

After quick, sharp glances of appraisal, no one paid any attention to him. He sat down beside one of the servo-robots and forced himself to wait as patiently as possible. For a half hour nothing happened. The servo-robots remained motionless; the humans chain-smoked until the air in the freight car was an acrid grey smog. Nearly every human switched constantly and nervously from his tiny TV set to his watch-radio. One of the men brought out a bottle, but quickly put it away after a staccato command from the greying, square-jawed man who seemed to be in charge.

At 6 o'clock, without warning, the freight car vibrated slightly and began to move. The servo-robots stood up attentively; the humans snuffed out their cigarettes. Peering through one of the small windows, Walther saw that twilight was merging into night.

It was completely dark when the car stopped at a loading platform behind the steel-grey building that towered above the Uniport cultural vaults. A servo-robot guard stepped forward challengingly.

At a gesture from the leader, one of the servo-robots within the car marched out on the platform and presented a punched bill of lading. As the guard fed the document into its tabulator, the other stepped closer and lightly brushed against it. The guard stiffened, as though from a severe shock. There was a

sound like that of a racing motor suddenly thrown out of gear. Then a click, and silence. The servo-robot guard unhinged itself at the knees and collapsed on the platform.

Another signal from the leader, and out of the car scurried the humans and servo-robots. They ran across the platform toward the shadow of the building. Here, two of the men, who Walther guessed to be the experts imported to Earth for this job, traced a circle around the door with an instrument that resembled a small camera. Evidently this was to cut off the alarm system, for almost immediately they relaxed and went on to open the door without any attempt at caution.

Proceeding in single file, lighting their way with powerful flashlights, they passed in similar manner through a series of inner doors to an elevator leading down into the vaults. A servo-robot took over its operation, and they shot downward. At each level, the leader stepped off the elevator to look around. At the sixth level, he nodded and they followed him into the vault.

This was the book vault. Tier upon tier, the stacks of books reached in every direction as far as a flashlight beam could probe.

Motioning Walther to follow him, the leader took a piece of chalk and began marking off groups of books. The men rounded up library carts for the servo-robots, who swiftly fell to loading the carts and trundling them back to the elevator.

Walther soon moved ahead of

the leader and began marking the books himself. They had started in the M-sections. With mounting excitement, Walther chalked off Machiavelli, Mann, Markham, Masefield, Maugham, Maupassant, Melville, Millay, Moliere. . .

Leaping to the next tier, he raced through the stacks marking the works of Nathan and Newton, O'Neill . . . Ovid . . . Then on to Parker, Pater, Pepys, Plato, Poe. . . . Racine, Rousseau. . . . Sandburg . . . Santayana. . . .

What an astounding haul this would be! The masterpieces of the ages, to be whisked across space, from star system to star system, until at last they reached his homeland, where they would grow and multiply a million-fold, generation into generation, down through the millenniums of universal time.

Back to the A-sections! Adams, Aeschylus, Anderson, Aristotle . . .

On to the B-sections! Bacon . . . Balzac . . . Benet . . . Bronte . . . Byron . . .

It was like drinking a heady burgundy. Each new title whetted his taste for more.

Inevitably, the very magnitude of the thing began to have its sobering effect. Was it actually possible to get so much material out of the vaults? Off the Earth?

The leader caught up with him in the K-sections and motioned him not to mark off any more books. They'd have a hard time getting those Walther had already chalked.

Walther rode up with the next elevator load. On the way down, he indicated to the servo-robot that he

wanted to go all the way to the bottom level. There he stepped out of the elevator and stood in the darkness for a moment to steady himself from the excitement of marking so many books.

Then he swept his flashlight beam slowly around the vault.

It was like turning on a light in a tomb that had been sealed for centuries. Certainly this tomb had been sealed, to all except the Digesters and the servo-robot attendants.

The vault was at least two hundred feet high. Walther could only guess at the other dimensions, and the extent of the corridors that fanned out like the spokes of a wheel. Sculptured figures from all the ages of Earth loomed out of the shadows with a quality of arrested life that might at any moment move again.

The figures of the Pharaohs were here, the chiseled perfection of Athens and Rome, the genius of the Renaissance and the primitive gods of the Aztecs. The armless Venus gazed down dispassionately on the bowed back of the Discus Thrower, while Rodin's Thinker stared in eternal contemplation at the belly of Buddha.

And then Walther looked upward.

High overhead, reassembled on a great oblong span of artificial ceiling suspended from the top of the vault, were the nine immortal panels from the Sistine Chapel. Tracing his beam of light through scene by scene of Michaelangelo's creation of the world, lingering among the connective figures of the

prophets and sibyls, the lunettes and triangles, Walther lost all sense of time.

When his back and neck muscles could stand the strain no longer, he wandered deeper into the dim recesses of the vault, following corridor after corridor, entranced. He was like a condemned man watching his last sunrise and trying to absorb it all, knowing he would not come this way again.

Walther did not realize how far he had wandered until he came at last to the end of a corridor and glanced at his watch.

Ten o'clock!

He'd been gone from the group for nearly three hours, and the entire raid had been timed for two hours.

He started running for the elevator. Corridor led into corridor, gallery into gallery. It took him twenty minutes to find his way back to the main vault, another five minutes to locate the right elevator. He pressed the button and listened. There was no sound within the shaft.

He shouted, and there was only the echo of his own voice reverberating through the ages around him.

Fighting down a flutter of panic, Walther turned off his light and leaned against the elevator door to organize his thoughts.

He was sure the others had left on time to make shipment schedules at the Uniport landing. They might have delayed long enough to make a cursory search for him, but his safety was no part of their commit-

ment. They had successfully raided the vaults, which was all they had contracted to do. Before morning, most of them undoubtedly would have embarked on inter-planetary cruises.

Walther's first decision was to try the other elevators on the off-chance that one had been left in operating gear.

None had.

Next, he set off to look for a stair well, fire ladder or other method of exit. It took him three hours to cover the entire vault and its corridors. No doubt of it, the elevators were the only means of entering and leaving.

It was now one o'clock. In eight hours the upper level doors would open to the Digesters. No particular effort had been made to camouflage the gaps in the stacks. His one chance was to reach the street level before anyone noticed the missing books. Meanwhile, he could do nothing except spend the night as comfortably as possible. He spread his coat on the marble floor behind the squat statue of a Malayan goddess.

Surprisingly, he did doze off toward morning. He awoke shortly after eight o'clock, and began to punch the elevator button every five minutes. Finally, at three minutes to nine, a faint hum responded within the shaft. He retreated hastily into the nearest corridor, and waited another ten minutes before bringing the elevator down to his level. Then he entered it, pressed the street-level control and shot upward.

He lit a cigarette, and was pre-

pared to step out nonchalantly as soon as the door opened.

His exit was nonchalant enough, but the servo-robot guard in front of the elevator held out its tabulator slot and said.

“Crdpls.”

Walther was shaken, but did not freeze up. He fumbled in his pocket for a slip of paper and tried to cram it into the tabulator. A red light flashed on the servo-robot’s chest; a buzzer sounded.

Thirty yards beyond, Walther saw the front desk and the door open to the street. He acted with the impulse. A sidestep took him around the servo-robot, and then he was racing toward the door.

Three steps later, a vise-like grip clamped around his shoulders and swept him off his feet. Twisting, he saw that the servo-robot’s arm had elongated, and that the fingers had stretched to encircle his body. He kicked hard at the arm, and that was his last conscious act.

The next time Walther opened his eyes, his head throbbed so violently he closed them again. When the spinning stopped, he tried once more.

Around him he saw four metallic walls, and overhead a ceiling of similar material. Except for a ventilator grid, and the outlines of two doors, there were no breaks in the wall and no decorations. He was lying on a low, narrow cot, and was still fully dressed.

He felt his head. There was a large lump above his right temple, where he might have struck the floor. But he was still too groggy for much speculation. He closed his

eyes to ease the throbbing, and fell into an uneasy sleep.

The creaking of the door must have roused him, for it was closing as he focussed on it. A tray of food was within arm’s reach. A smaller door behind his bed had been opened; it led to a tiny washroom.

After freshening up and trying the food, Walther felt much better. He was a strong-nerved young man, not accustomed to worry, and he tried to weigh the facts for and against him. If the shipments had gone off without a hitch, things might not be so bad. He’d been found leaving the vaults, but no one would suppose that he’d have staved around after somehow disposing of the books. They might suspect him, but it would be hard to disprove his story that he’d taken the elevator by mistake the day before and been trapped overnight. Anyway, as a visitor from another galaxy, he was entitled to certain consideration.

He felt even better when the door opened late in the afternoon to admit Willy Fritsh and a tight-lipped man of about forty.

“Your lawyer,” said Willy. He looked and sounded grim.

After completing introductions, Willy told him that he was indeed accused of the theft, and would be arraigned in the morning.

“They can’t prove it,” Walther answered calmly.

“They think they can. Our Digester friend—remember our Bohemian evening?—has come forward to accuse you. He’ll testify about the offer we made him.”

“We? Will he accuse you, too?”

"Not exactly. I'm supposed to be an innocent bystander. A friend who was used!"

In spite of the circumstances, a hint of the old sparkle returned to Willy's eyes and he smiled faintly.

"What can they do about it?" Walther demanded. After all, he was a Von Koenigsburg.

Willy's smile vanished.

"Our legal friend here says ten years would be a light sentence."

They discussed the case for an hour, while the lawyer took meticulous notes. Then, through Willy, the attorney began questioning Walther about his financial status. Even in the language of consonants, his voice was suave.

The lawyer's precise little symbols wavered as Walther briefly outlined his family circumstances, but a servo-robot opened the door before further questions could be asked.

Willy started to shake hands with Walther, then impulsively put his arms around him. There were tears in the corners of his blue eyes. He tried to say something, but gave it up and hurried out the door behind the attorney.

"Wait." Walther called after him. "Have you heard anything from Maria?"

Willy sadly shook his head.

"No. Nothing."

Walther had scarcely finished breakfast next morning when a servo-robot came to take him to court. The robot linked thumb and forefinger around Walther's wrist with the grip of a handcuff.

There were no spectators in the courtroom; perhaps, Walther

thought glumly, because it was a free attraction that would interfere with the consumption of happy time entertainment. Willy joined him at the defendants table.

"Still the loyal, misguided friend," Willy murmured. "I volunteered to be your interpreter."

The Judge was a human, but all clerks and bailiffs were servo-robots. As soon as the court was gaveled into session, the Prosecutor presented a twenty-second digest of the case against Walther, and called the little Digester as a substantiating witness.

Walther didn't need any translation to understand what the witness was saying. Shifting unhappily in his chair, and avoiding Willy's eyes, the little Digester answered preliminary questions in a scarcely audible voice. But when he pointed his finger at Walther, his voice became shrill and he reddened to the top of his bald head.

"Now he'll be afraid to attend one of our meetings," Willy murmured. "That's what he's really blaming you for."

When the Digester left the stand, a portly man, with a perpetual tick in his left cheek, arose to address the court. He was at the Prosecutor's table, and until this moment had seemed to take very little interest in the proceedings. But now he spoke in a steel-edged voice that was in surprising contrast to his slow, heavy movements.

"He's speaking as a friend of the court," Willy whispered. "His office is legal representative of the Happy Time cartel in Uniport. He's telling the court what a terrible of-

fense you committed—but is willing—in the public interest not to press charges if you'll return the books at once. Otherwise, he demands you be held for trial without bail."

Walther's lawyer conferred briefly with Willy. The Judge and Prosecutor also conferred, and both spoke with obvious deference to the Happy Time attorney.

With a bow to all three, Walther's lawyer addressed the court. His smooth voice rippled lightly over the harsh consonants, and his thin lips parted often in a swift, mirthless smile. He spoke for almost a minute, and the Judge began to toy with his gavel, watching the Happy Time attorney for a cue to his feelings. The attorney had slumped back in his chair, eyes drooping. But the tick in his cheek worked furiously.

Then Walther's lawyer turned toward the Happy Time lawyer and paused dramatically.

"He's talking about your family," Willy whispered again. "I think he's exaggerating a bit, but he says they own an entire planet twice the size of Earth."

When the lawyer continued, the smoothness was gone from his voice. His words came hard, crisp, brief. The elderly Judge sagged back in his chair, the Prosecutor blinked and the Happy Time attorney allowed his eyes to close completely.

"I hope you approve," Willy said in a shaky whisper. "You've just offered to deposit a hundred million credits with the Happy Time cartel as assurance the books will be returned."

"What?—I don't even admit taking them!"

"Neither does your lawyer. But, as he puts it, if anyone acting in your behalf, but without your direct knowledge, should have seized these books and shipped them off the Earth, you will assume responsibility for their return. Otherwise, they may be turned loose among the people of Earth to plant seeds of future trouble."

Walther's lawyer emphasized one brief phrase, and sat down. Even Walther recognized the words: One hundred million credits.

The Happy Time attorney slowly opened his eyes and heaved himself to his feet. He spread out both pudgy hands to the Judge, and shrugged his bulking shoulders. He spoke briefly, and the steel-edge was gone from his voice.

"He suggests that the court in its wisdom, temper justice with mercy." Willy translated excitedly.

After this it was a matter of detail, with the Prosecutor insisting only that Walther be kept in custody and deported immediately after the deposit had been arranged.

The strain of the whole affair had been too much for Willy, but as the smiling servo-robot led Walther out of the courtroom, he called after him:

"I'll be at the landing!"

Walther knew he should be happy. He had found what he wanted on Earth. Not in the way he had hoped, but the final reckoning was the same. Still, there was an emptiness to it all, an emptiness and an aching.

When he cleared customs, and was released by his servo-robot guard, Walther saw Willy Fritsh waiting beside the Cyngus III shuttleship. A half dozen of his musicians were with him.

Willy said with simple directness:

“If you want us, we’d like to go with you.”

Of all the things that had happened to him in the last twenty-four hours, this took Walther most completely by surprise. He stared, speechless, from Willy to the musicians, most of them older men.

“These few came to me,” Willy said. “They don’t want to go back to our own music—Neither do I!” His voice broke, and he continued, pleading: “We can help bring your dream to life in the few years left to us.”

Walther enveloped the old mae-

stro in a bear-hug that crushed the breath out of him.

“Want you?” he cried. “Now, who’s a fool?”

“You are,” gasped Willy, “if you thought I’d leave part of my heart behind!”

Walther looked around quickly.

At the top of the shuttleship ramp stood a young woman with half a smile and half a question on her lips. There was doubt in that smile, and fear. There was loneliness and wonder, and hope. It was a promise and a warning of all that lay ahead for them, out there beyond the stars.

Humbly, more knowing that he had yet been in his short life, Walther held out his hands and walked up the ramp toward her—toward a dream that was over, and a reality that could be more bitter, more sweet, than any dream. ● ● ●