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IRRESISTIBLE FORCE

BY CHAN ELLIOTT

MY NAME is Sven Pakinaan. I was born on Earth and raised a forester. I served on many planets. And I managed the '83-5 survey of Kappa-Lyrae-III, which I named Tapiola. I didn't like Tapiola, and certainly didn't intend to go back, least of all in a small party.

Then, this Taylor Payne approached me about taking him there, offering me the sort of fee you don't turn down. So I went. The policeboat his influence chartered, set us down at the old Survey camp-site, he and me and his disciple Ed Greene, five tons of supplies, and the synthotelepath beacon for when we wanted to leave.

While I made the site habitable again, Payne and Ed assembled a flier. The moment they finished, Payne decreed we should start exploring; when I proposed to inspect the thing, he cut me short. He was a slight, swarthy man with burning eyes and a Call to Lead his Fellowman towards the Light. He also con-

sidered himself a woodsman, which might have been true in a national park with a guide. Anyhow, we went; I went because he was my responsibility.

Sure as Fate, the engine began to halt three-hundred kilometers from base. I took the controls and won us a hundred. But then she came down in forest—a ninety-percent probability on Tapiola. Ordinary trees, we might have crashed through with only dents; but these went down and down, a nightmare of wrestling branches, and wrecked her; only the buoyancy tanks saved our lives.

Well, we camped. Payne wasn't in the least crestfallen by his blunder. He demonstrated how to pick a spot for our film-tent and cook a wilderness dinner from our emergency rations. I let him; I wanted to think. At least he was being Strong and Silent.

But after dinner, by the fire, Strong, Silent men open their hearts. He let you see him Listening, Think-

ing. Then he opened up on Tapiola: It was, was it not, a planet entirely devoid of animal life? "Only plants! The mighty trees in their serene wisdom, the gentle, lovely flowers, the whispering reeds, the—ah—lesser things content and happy in their places, moss and mushroom and—ah, Ed, I suppose seaweeds and corals and such mysterious ocean things."

Ed, being a biologist, set him right on corals, diffidently.

"Oh really? Are you sure? Well, no matter. It doesn't really concern the point I was making. This is the fourth day of Creation before the beast and willful, foolish man."

Let him talk. I had to think. I was scared worse than I'd ever been in my life. At the skirt of the firelight, the crumpled flier was bloodied silver; and behind it, went up a blackness that might have been a cliff. But it was the trees, five times bigger than redwoods. No wild beasts, no clouds of blood-sucking insects, no snakes, no savages; just trees. Just Tapiola.

And I was alone in it with two fools who might become madmen if they ever woke to what I saw in Tapiola. My one idea was to get back to base alive and sane. I wasn't ashamed of that.

Finally I said, "Well, gentlemen, I think we should turn in. We have an ordeal ahead of us and we can't afford to waste an hour or an ounce of food. We must be up at dawn."

Payne gave me his piercing stare: "Oh come, Sven! Surely you're dramatizing. Personally, I feel our mishap is a providential opportunity for me to immerse myself in the spirit of this wonderful world, as I might not otherwise have done."

"Gods of Light forbid!" I thought.

"And what have three experienced woodsmen to fear from a hike through this harmless land? I have always found the Plant Folk bountiful; and surely this lovely planet will yield a wealth of fruits and nuts and roots, man's best food."

Before Ed could start on a thesis, I cut him off with a summary: "Fruits are bait to persuade animals to carry seed; no animals, no fruit. There are nuts, and without shells to speak of, but not good to eat; and a few tasteless tubers."

Payne looked as if I had arranged all this to thwart him, but in vain. "I'm sure your fatigue makes you pessimistic, Sven. I believe it was you who named this world Tapiola? Ancient, pagan spirit of the Deep Forest, wasn't it? Ah, you're more of a poet than you admit—or than one would think from that rough-hewn exterior."

Well, if he'd ever heard that piece of music, he hadn't listened to it—or understood it. Tapiola, ha? Poet? Maybe.

Anyhow, they turned in while I closed up camp and put out the fire. Then I switched off my flash, and stood while my eyes adapted to the near pitch-dark.

All around me, the world was filled with a hushing on the verge of silence, wind in the trees that filled the blackness for a thousand feet up. Payne had praised the pure democracy of plants, but what aristocrats had ever monopolized even the sunlight? In this monstrous glade, only swarms of toadstool things and waxy growths lived on the refuse of the giants. Yet neither the tyranny of the trees nor the scavenging of the fungi was the horrible thing. Real tyranny, even real cringing, would have been a relief, almost lovable qualities. Spirit of the Deep Forest, ha?

I gazed up steadily, waiting, till a single star pierced some chink for a moment. It was icy and unspeakably far; but I wished I were on any habitable planet it might own—any!

We set out as soon as we could see. Going was easy: fallen branches, even trunks, were quickly digested by the fungi, and no undergrowth could survive in the gloom.

Direction was obvious, so Payne took the lead. He strode along vigorously enough, darting glances from side to side. After an hour or so, however, he remembered the laconic comradeship the wilderness brings out in Men, and fell back beside me: "You know, I must confess I do miss the smaller, inoffensive animal life—squirrels, birds, woodmice. But I suppose that would mean predators too. Yet the silence does become oppressive after a while. We must change all that... How far would you say this type of forest extends?"

I told him that, according to my observations from the flier, we'd come out in river-meadows in about thirty kilometers.

He clapped me on the shoulder: "Sven, you're a natural reactionary. You said at least a fortnight to get back to base? Why, if I were a betting man, I'd wager we'll do it in a week." Then he turned to Ed, picking a topic congenial for *him*: "Well, Ed, has this first-hand observation given you any new ideas on how this beautiful ecology arose?"

Ed tried to earn his keep without perjuring himself: "Just the old ones, Chief. Maybe some missing trace-element; maybe chance failure to produce genes for contractile proteins; maybe some early plant-form so inedible and voracious that it choked out animal life."

Payne looked stern: "That last, I can't accept. Plant life uses only competition in mutual aid, even with animals. I like to think that this has triumphed here. It would make this world the germinal center for a new humanity conditioned to gentleness..." He was off.

By late afternoon we reached the river-meadows. Payne halted and scanned them, like a pioneer in a poster. Then, his brow knit and his lips twitched uneasily. He said, "You know, it's very interesting. This meadow world is so like one on Earth, it's difficult to analyse the

difference. And yet..."

Ed submitted: "Well, no flowers, of course."

Payne rounded on him sharply: "Why 'of course'?"

"Well, ah, Chief, as you know, flowers developed to attract insects to pollinate the plants. No insects, no flowers."

Payne donned that look of high-souled pig-headedness that would subjugate inconvenient facts to his credo: "Oh rubbish, Ed! That's official dogma; but we know the type of people who manufacture it. I hold that flowers express a joy in life too exquisite for our coarser natures. More likely, insects adapted to flowers. This just isn't flowering season in this region."

In two years on Tapiola, I had never seen a flower. But that would be just another inconvenient fact to subjugate. Anyway, Payne was subconsciously keyed up, and I didn't want to unsettle him further.

We camped near the river. Payne insisted on a fire but, after a very short Togetherness by it, turned in, leaving me to put it out. This was an ugly job, as we hadn't found rock to build it on, and the soil was a bed of roots. A grass-to-forest fire on Tapiola was a spectacle I had no wish to witness—maybe the river would stop it, maybe not. I had to dig down to moisture-level.

Then, Ed strolled up. He was tall and hungry with that incorrigible kindness that would wreck your best efforts, to pander to some hard-luck adept.

His type ought to be locked up in libraries. However, he helped me a bit. And he wasn't so meek and mild that he didn't curse the roots. "Miserable stuff anywhere," he said, wiping back a lank strand of hair, "But these are the worst I've ever struck. Look, they just throttle each other!"

Throttle was right. One ugly little cup-shaped growth had roots like wires, seemingly to cut those of com-

petitors. Above-ground, one rootless vine sank thorns in its neighbors, to suck juice, Ed said. He even thought some of the thorns were to deposit seed in the pods of victims. "Lack of animal vectors makes them ingenious." He said, "Some of them behave outright vindictively."

So, at least his scientific compartment didn't accept Payne's creed. And as long as he thought in terms of ingenuity and vindictiveness, he wouldn't think in terms of—something worse.

Then, he flitted through a gastight mental bulkhead: "Sven, do you notice anything, ah, *odd* about the Chief? He's always high-strung, but he's tremendously excited about this planet. He's a great leader in Biosociology—you know, the movement to mold people in the Right direction by ecology. So, he hopes Tapiola can be colonized by one of the more contemplative races, like the North Americans on Earth, or the Hindi on Nirvanah. He believes he can start a new focus for humanity if he can bring up a generation on a planet like this, free of aggression." He was dead earnest, dangling a hank of murderously knotted roots in his hand.

I was too stunned to answer, as things fell into an obvious pattern: Payne! There had been one famous, or notorious, Manning Payne. I hadn't drawn the obvious connection... A small excuse: His acolytes always referred to him as The Man. The masses revered him—seemingly because he caused them to die by millions, and coined ringing blurbs about them. I'd seen his picture, an ikon in myriads of simple homes; but he'd been a big-faced, benevolent type—his son didn't remind you of him. Maternal contribution no doubt.

The Man had been a guiding spirit in endless interlocking outfits: Committee for... , Council to... , League of... All were meticulously self-appointed, but starred such adjectives

as Democratic, Social, and Citizens', and were dedicated to managing humanity with new enlightenments. He'd begun as the lawyer who freed Billy Thoms for a renewed career of murder, pillage, random hand-outs from the loot and, so, a niche in the pantheon of folk-heroes. Payne had held the Breach against intervention in two Peoples' Revolts that ended in mass-murder tyrannies. He'd helped disarm New Haven before the Kreetts moved in—the All for Peace Movement.

Not my business? So: He'd been on the Citizens' Board that stampeded Jones' Landing into donating handsome crop-surpluses to the chronic famine-world of Mahdze-Dong. Very noble. Only, on Mahdze-Dong a desperate government was trying to root out progeny-worship and so control disastrous over-population. Seeing no limit to free food, the masses doubled themselves in a short generation, while the surpluses ran out. The government, in despair, armed; and they erupted like a horde of locusts. An estimated quarter-billion of them perished in flimsy ships or tides of dead smothering ground-defenses. A dozen planets were ravaged—Jones' Landing with peculiar vindictiveness—before the Union could mobilize. Cousins of mine escaped with what they wore. Manning Payne came through with new laurels as chairman of the Federation for a Negotiated Peace. He also won the undying gratitude of thousands for his Refugee Bundles and his triumphant non-sequitur about The Little Folk Come of Age—which helped substantially to prolong the post-war chaos by fostering swelled heads that even then weren't very big.

His Institute for Brotherhood Now preached that equal genetic potential assured equal cultural maturity in three easy lessons. A friend of my father's, who had given his life to education on Bangami (no three lessons, and not easy) had been butch-

ered, and his wife and small daughters raped to death, in an inter-tribal riot traceable to the Institute's verbal alkaloids.

Truly, the war-lords kill their millions, but the Paynes, their tens of millions.

But Manning Payne had only treated cancers with aspirin, and psychoses with hashish. Taylor Payne, standing on his father's shoulders, proposed to treat tertiary syphilis by making the patient high-priestess in a religion of promiscuous love...

I agreed that Payne seemed tense, and slipped off into the starlight. Tapiola brooded around me—but brooding is alive, and this was negation of life. River-marshes breathed a dull stench of vegetable rot and fed the mist that hangs almost everywhere on Tapiola; it would carry no malaria, yet it was deathly beyond all disease. I cared little for semi-vegetable meechers like the Americans who had bred themselves into dead-end, or the Hindi who left Earth when their land Sold Its Soul to reason; but I gagged at what Payne and Tapiola would do to, and through, them. False religion is man's worse scourge. Here, it had its ideal false Messiah.

And here, in my hands, was power to stop it while it *could* be stopped. One neat accident, with no witness but an earnest simpleton, might scotch an infection that could devastate man... And, like many before me in such crises, I couldn't work that way. Something bewildered my human reason like marsh-lights. I plodded back to camp.

Next morning, a breeze made the meadow toss and frolic under fair-weather clouds, as if scoffing my morbid fear of it. Payne was amiable too. He could hardly sway crowds and beguile politicians without real charm; and now, it veiled his moody posings. But I knew my Tapiola, and

now I knew my Payne. I held my counsel.

We crossed the river by crude raft, and climbed the opposite meadow towards woods. My euphoria waned as we waded through tangled vegetation. Nobody cursed when he tripped, as in a normal party. And the woods gave no relief; these ones had undergrowth. I took the lead, picking and hacking a way. And Tapiola closed in again—the old, unfocussed horror like the impalpable blue haze. That presence had made survey-crews be never less than ten, had made us exaggerate drink, and horseplay, and wrangles. Now, I was alone in it with two paranoids.

We stepped high to avoid creepers and acrid puff-balls, and I thought of the prince's journey through Witchwood, in the Firebird.

Tramp-tramp. But not even one flaming, winged thing swooped from these branches. Trunks made endless vistas, each gap filled with farther columns till the mist swallowed them. Ahead, deafness, blindness, numbness opened out. Behind, deafness, numbness, blindness closed in like meaningless generations. You reached out to grapple it—nothing was there. Passive resistance perfected. Mindlessness.

Tramp-tramp. I thought of a little forester's cabin north of Lake-Ladoga, alone and not lonely. In three years there, my first job, I learned even the insect-cycle—bulge-eyed ephemerids, tiny frog-hoppers, furry moths, seething on the window one week, gone the next. Why did they live? Yet—they *had* wondered at the light.

Tramp-tramp. I had played a part in the dramas of fish and game. Cruelty, yes. Squandered life, yes. But more. Something that was not here. Something that spoke of a meaning and hope in courage and mind, that Payne would never see...

Tramp-tramp. I thought of the Great Plains: the hand-agriculture

that supported maximum population; the smell of urine and sewage you never escaped; the big-eyed families of twelve; above all, the Workers, doting, fondling, sanctifying it all, learned in relieving sterility. Rumor said, their religion taught breeding from idiots—Innocents! Payne's fosterlings. Suppose Payne brought them *here* without even mosquitoes to fight, and bred missionaries to pander to mankind's queer perversity...

Tramp-tramp. Payne drew up beside me. His all-men-are-equal-especially-me had faded. He said sharply, "Look here, Sven: Are you sure you know where you're taking us?" Then, when I told him I was headed for height-of-land to take bearings, he went on testily, "I see. Not that I grudge time for this very wonderful experience, meeting this world frankly, cut off from man-made things. I'm learning what I can do for my wards through it. Beautiful! But I have deadlines..."

A glance showed his face wild and feverish. A sudden, ugly idea took form: If I couldn't kill him, Tapiola might madden him. Already, it was fermenting in him, and we had maybe a fortnight to go.

Tramp-tramp...

That night, we sheltered in a ten-foot hollow bole from a great thunderstorm, our fire lonely in the roaring, creaking sea of mindless tumult. Payne stood gazing out, exalted by it.

Next day, scantier growth and thinning mist heralded high ground. Noon brought us out on a bluff in clear air. The spectacle was majestic enough. A thirty-mile spread of unbroken forest swept to opposite heights. In those, with some relief, I recognized landmarks.

Payne scanned the view intensely, then gestured: "Look at it, men. A million great beings who have never known hate, ambition, or pride, who have never harmed other life but created themselves out of the pure

elements. Even in their bodies they have no government, no domineering, discontented brain; all works by cooperation. Think what such companionship should do for men... Sven, I hope you know where we're heading now?"

I told him that our base was just beyond a dog-tooth hill and we'd have to head north along the ridge and down a sloping bay. That would certainly take us to a stream, our best guide home.

"Why not here? It's steep but it's practicable. Let's take the straight route, the *forest* route." He turned decisively, but descended only two heel-braced steps before rounding on me with a sudden, gaunt anger: "And don't compare *my* hills to dogs' teeth."

The thought had flashed through my mind: Good. *Let* us claw through forest. *Let* Tapiola work on him. Now I realized: Tapiola was already at work. He was mad, all right, but not afraid...

Then, blind fate struck. As he turned wrathily back to the slope, a creeper, such as we had learned to step over, snared him off balance, and pitched him. He grabbed more creepers to stop himself, and rose at once. But his ankle gave. By the time we got him up top again, and his sock off, it was swelling badly. I found no large bone broken, but a small bone or a sprain could take longer to heal—and we'd starve before it did.

Well...down below, we could at least grub roots. We contrived a stretcher from saplings and creepers, splinted the ankle, gave him an analgesic, and started along the ridge to my bay.

To do Payne justice, he kept quiet now and didn't even grunt when we jolted. Ed and I had to be quiet too; we were fully occupied. But my mind worked on: I resented this casual accident that put Payne at a disadvantage. I'd wanted to see Tapiola take him, in his arrogant meekness, and

slowly reveal itself for the spectre it was—refute him, shatter his ego, drive him mad. Hah! Drive *who* mad? I wasn't relishing the weeks ahead myself.

Yet, the situation woke in me a resolve to fight while I could.

Ed wasn't built for the kind of ordeal we were enduring. We took two days to come into the valley. It was like descending into an ocean on Kalki the salt-world where no life was—but *no* life would have been better than that unchanging mist and the growing Stuff in it.

The second night, I camped while we could still see the ridge behind. Sunset above it was golden bugles. Along the skyline, the upland growth was a meaningless shag, not like man-fostered trees of Earth. But sunset uplifted me.

Then Payne broke his fast from testifying. When we had eaten, he expertly gathered our eyes with his that glowed fanatical in the firelight, and spoke swift, hot, and low: How his own animal willfulness, and not Tapiola, had caused this misfortune (if such it was). How he would stamp out self-will in himself, and establish a race without it, Tapiola aiding. He sketched his plans eloquently, the inverse of everything I felt to be good...

And my own self-will met him head-on. I'd been baffled by the lack of anything *to* fight. Now, behind him, the faceless jumble of growth merged in twilight, the endless sage and olive and drab and jade and absinth greens sank into a blackness where you could just imagine green; the millions of anonymous leaves became part of a nameless whole that we only *called* Tapiola. But out of it, Payne's firelit face emerged clearer and clearer, his eyes hypnotic, his lips rather thick in his ascetic face, writhing out blasphemy against life—the great blasphemy of life turning itself against life.

I made no answer. But here, I thought, was something I could grip and fight... I didn't know Payne yet!

He stopped finally and sat brooding—Communing. Then he switched to his terse, practical avatar: "Sven, perhaps I'd better have a sedative now."

I fetched the medicine-kit and took out the pore-injector. But he motioned me back and ran his finger along the vials, stopping at the gautamin label: "Here," he said, "we'll use this. You can give me a three-day dose. I'll be less of a burden, eat less of your food—and profit from my time."

Profit, ha? Yes, the Gautamin religion of the Hindi—*really* Communing. A few of their big saints took enough to free their minds from their bodies permanently—at least, the bodies were free of minds, lying enshrined. I said involuntarily, "That's dangerous."

He gave me a look of lofty disdain. "All the anodynes of life are vegetable, Sven; none are animal. Pain is animal. Plants reach out to heal it in us. All the great religions are based on what fools call narcotics: lotus-eating, opium—eh, wine, hashish, marijuana peyote, and now gautamin on Nirvanah. What's there to fear in Mother Nature's open doorways?"

I could have told him, but to what purpose? Let him have it.

My mistake. Not giving it to him, which I couldn't refuse, but thinking it didn't much matter...

Next day, he was easier to carry. But...

His head jugged on the stretcher in front of me. It glided through the misty shades, blind, deaf, numb—yet undead. Was the mind inside it really discovering Tapiola, bringing Tapiola closer to us? Would Tapiola suddenly speak horribly through undead lips?

No. Worse. Far worse. It had no need to speak. It simply was. What

had Payne said? "No domineering, discontented brain." No mind. That was the horrible thing. And now, Payne part of its mindlessness. His accident—*It* hadn't struck him down, just as he said. *It* didn't know. *It* simply received him. And he would breed a race from *It*, with enough vitality only to infect and corrupt—mind turned against mind.

By Gautamin, he had slipped from my grasp, as intangible—and horrible—as the forest rustle. You *can't* fight the undead...

We tramped, two living minds in a hell of mindlessness. Ed didn't speak, for fear the sound would be too tiny... The only sounds of life on the globe were our breathing and the crackle-shuffle of our feet in branch and leaf rotting from undeath to death. Those sounds fell into the unliving whisper—feathers into a dead sea... I didn't speak. I feared that Payne and Tapiola had beaten me. I longed for the peace of being beaten, of merging... I held on...

A clear, chuckling joined our human sounds. We swerved, to find a mountain brook arching and braiding over rocks. Compared to the shaggy Stuff dipping into it, reaching to swallow the light from its gap, it was inanimate. Yet, it was bright. It thrust Tapiola back.

We followed it that day and the next, while it grew to be a young river thrusting Tapiola apart to let sky through. Where it joined a stream too wide to ford, we dug in to camp while I built a canoe. I had a small nuclear torch that cut wood like butter. A dugout would be too heavy; so, I stripped a coco-husk bark, soaked it in resin bled from another growth, and layered it shaping a hull. Ribs, gunwales, thwarts from hickory-tough saplings, paddles from heartwood. Working, I found myself humming old woodsmen's songs from home:

"In Gorensko, in the mountains, the broad streams run down.

Tall pine-trees shed above them their needles of brown.

Hola-drijo-ri, hola-drijo-ri, hola-drijo-ri, drijo-ho!"

Pine-trees we had clothed with human names and warmths. The stuff under my hands was taking human forms and names—gunwales, paddles—becoming part of me, not of the Tapiola horror.

Ed tried some maudlin bleat about how wondrously the forest served us. I faced him across the hull: "The forest serves *nothing*, not even itself. Till I *took* this stuff and humanized it, it was just—Stuff."

He was a type that fumed at opposition—and tried to undermine it from behind. He temporized now: "Well, Chief'll be pleased when he wakes. He admires wood-craft; it's one of his vocations."

And Payne was pleased, as far as he was pleased—or displeased—with anything. He was a being brought reluctantly from a higher Revelation to guide the affairs of ants (beloved ants, parts of the All but—ants). He said nothing of the Revelation, of course; he could transmit that to finite minds only by inspiration. He conceded: "This innocent plunder compels even us to shape Beauty."

Exceptions to that Great Thought are a rule in themselves. But I kept counsel while he rambled on about peace lost with Eden (through a vegetable, wasn't it?) and this new, snakeless Eden, a portal to the All he was learning to know through gautamin.

When I stuck to my canoe, as a buckler against him, he gave it a ghost of his eagle-look: "Yes, but it's too big, Sven. I am resting here to complete my initiation, which I could not do at that focus of human fever you call Base. I can self-administer treatments and eat what I need. What can harm me? When you return with your machines and officers, I will know the Truth."

Ed broke in: "Well now, Chief, if

you stay I stay. I don't suppose I'll have *your* illumination. But at least..." He was deathly afraid, but screwed up to a Big Decision.

The hell with them both. I *would* reach help faster alone. And I'd confront Tapiola alone too—and lick it, and Payne.

In a fury, I built a one-man canoe and struck out downstream, into Tapiola. Payne didn't stay awake to see me go. Ed stood around making inane remarks, hoping I'd find some excuse to make him come after all—deathly afraid. I didn't want him. His *job* was to stay with Payne. And I had mine. I drove through the spread of that utterly evil forest, with only the stream for company. We both thrust Tapiola back steadily. I confronted my fear, and it melted. I had no answer to it, but I was on the trail of one...

I fought for days, paddling, dodging dead-heads, portaging, threading swamps. My hands grew raw, my back ached—pain. I had half the medicine-kit, but I rejected 'anodynes'. I wanted my wits clear. Pain? It's to make you think. It's made man fight himself to mastery over bacterial plagues and the vegetable-growth of cancer. I baked my back at campfires, sprayed myself gloves with the fibrin squeegee. Anodynes, hell! While I had stuff to fight, I'd *fight*. While I *could* fight, I'd cure my ills, not short-circuit them.

And gradually, I came to realize that I, this tiny, moving dot in the heart of this unmoving world of un-life, was the master. I'd grip it, fight it, and make it bend to *my* purpose, like the canoe.

Nights, I slept in that canoe hitched to rocky islands, *not* because I feared Tapiola any more, but because the stars and sound of water around me were good. Even the river-mists were different from that formless forest haze. I'd wake contented.

And gradually, I worked out what

was what...

I sprinted up the trail to Base, high on a bluff, and set the beacon to call the rescue-squad on Peterswurl. Every minute saved brought me closer to counter-attack. The syntho-telepath neuron-culture supposedly made instant contact over the light-years, but took time to build up response in the resonant receiver—two days there, two here for reply.

The Stuff had moved in, even in the few days I'd been gone. I mowed the clearing and sprayed it with a killer to slaughter the Tapiolan elephant-ears that shouldered up choking humanized grass and flowers. I felled scores of big ones around the edge; maybe that was foolish when a caterpillar-mill could have done it all in an hour and made planks of it. But even a token start was good. I scanned the cabin for the fungus-rot pressing like gas through any pin-hole, cauterized the spots, and sealed them. Nights, I slept luxuriously.

My beacon beep-beeped on schedule—all you could get in or out of Peterswurl through any filter that cut the psycho-noise. Next day, the telebeamed police-ship landed.

The officer was as nice a youngster as you'd meet, named Warde. I told him what he needed to know, and convinced him that his flier could neither locate the castaways under the forestmat, nor land anyway.

Next morning, we took off in my canoe. Paddling upstream was tougher, even with two. The second day, Warde put some analgesic salve on his blister and then worked his hands into raw beef before he knew it. That left him plenty of time to realize Tapiola as the banks and mist closed in on us.

Over our fourth campfire, he burst out: "Say, Sven, what *gives* with this world? It's kind of beautiful in a way, only... Holy Joe! What a hell of a world! What's wrong?"

Well, he was an ideal test-subject

for my Mental anti-Tapiola Vaccine, intelligent but not imaginative, as gulf-jumpers have to be. And he was coming to pick up something putrid with the infection. So, I put it into blunt words: "Well, Warde, what use is mind?"

He poised his coffee-cup: "Mind?! Why, it's what you *are* isn't it? What use would anything else be without it?"

"Sure." I indicated the wall of Stuff in the firelight. "Here's a whole world that lives without mind—anywhere. Clouds, rivers, sunsets, stars, rocks, galaxies, have no mind but they aren't alive; they're alien, but they aren't perverted. But this stuff feeds, and grows, and breeds, and even evolves, to fill a whole planet. It's alive and it knows *nothing*; it just *is*. But it's doing fine. So what advantage is your mind?"

"Well hell... I'm better because I *know* I'm better."

A good answer, but would it hold up? "Yet, it's made you uneasy. It's done worse to Payne and Greene."

"There's an answer. *You* know it?"

I said, "Maybe. Think it over yourself first."

You could almost smell rubber burning any time in the next few days when his resumed paddling gave him a chance to think. Once he let his paddle trail and looked around at the valley, millions of packed trees sloping up, up, up to the skyline and over. He said, hopelessly "It's so *big*. It must mean *something*."

That was what I wanted. I gave him his second shot: "Warde, half a million years ago, some anthropoids couldn't bother to develop human minds; they branched off into the apes, and now, we preserve them to study. A hundred-million years before, some furry things couldn't bother to develop even monkey minds; now, they're the beasts we use for food or pleasure. Half a billion years before that, some worms couldn't evolve even a fish mind;

they're the insects we exterminate or tolerate for ecology or color. And a billion years ago, some pond-life made the biggest abnegation of all and forked off as the totally mindless plant world. It's big, all right. But the most colossal blunder is still just a blunder. It doesn't impress *me*."

He thought it over and then declared, "You know, Sven, that's the most colossal *arrogance* I ever heard."

Then I really let him have it: "Yes," I said, "it is! And I stand on it, by God—and I *mean* by God! Anything that has enough mind to realize itself, and *doesn't* have the arrogance of its own worth—anything that goes around whining that feeble minds are so much Nobler and Realler, well—you'll see."

Days later, he asked, "So, what can you *do* about it?"

I swung my paddle at that huge, mindless tangle: "I'm coming back—Payne can't stop me—to shape *that* into *my* idea of meaning, *my* idea of beauty. And no apologies because somebody'll improve on me some day. That somebody'll come only if *I* fight now."

I filled the next days with accounts of my plans: How the Guild of Foresters would jump at the challenge I'd pose to them; how we'd establish a fighting ecology; how we'd direct humanized plants with humanized insect vectors to surprise bejzus out of this junk; what approach we'd use on Payne's witless fosterlings. I could see Warde's uneasiness melt. I figured the Pakinaan treatment was a success.

But I still hadn't measured Payne's full reach.

Nearing camp, I was uneasy. The Stuff had swallowed my blazes. Forkings and rocks were utterly anonymous in reverse. In fact, I'd have passed camp if Ed hadn't galloped down the bank, waving his

arms and hooting.

Then I was even more uneasy. Turning in, I saw how his beard grew weedy. He nearly dumped the canoe, grabbing me. He stank—some lilies-of-the-field sanctity no doubt. As we landed, he babbled over and over “You came...came...Back!”

“Yes.” I barked to snap him out of it, “Where’s Payne?”

He wavered between doting and horror: “With—with the All.”

We found Payne in the lean-to I’d built (already melting into crowded, abortive seedlings like Hindi children). He’d taken the dose that knocks out the brain permanently. So, he’d achieved his ideal: he was a vegetable. But the significance didn’t hit me yet.

Young Warde grimaced: “Well, that’s that! No need to tote *him* back. Legally, he’s dead and they’d let him die on any civilized world. Not on Nirvanah, of course—but *they* won’t know or grieve.”

“Yes!” Ed doddered eagerly, “He said, leave him here. Merge with Tapiola. Merge with the All!”

Then I saw: Let that hulk get to Nirvanah, and they’d enshrine it, and hold anemic orgies over it, and show their humility by competing to perform the nasty little services it would need, and weave myths around it—all fecundity, and self-abnegation, and Merging.

Yes. But what if he just disappeared, *literally* merged with Tapiola? The whole cursed planet would be a shrine.

It grew on me while we made decent camp again. But alone in my sleeping-bag, I got it full force: The Successors who spring up after any Payne, like suckers around a stump, would carry on his Work, with the inspiration of the Legend. They’d flood their weeds into the planet to choke out any *human* colony like an untended garden. That is, unless we had the resolution to sit tight and watch their famines and plagues, or

even drive out passive invaders. That kind of resolve weakens sooner or later—and once is enough.

I could see Payne’s narrow, burning face, his noble understandingness for the vanquished: “You see? My way *must* win. The highest mind turns to end mind. You cannot refute the inevitable All. You cannot fight the unresisting.”

I writhed and groaned in my blankets. All the old, faceless horror of Tapiola closed over me again. It had sucked in and dissolved a doting Payne; it would suck and dissolve all mind...

Ed Greene shook me out of limbo, his horsy face gaunt in the dawn, gibbering with the Tapiola horrors: “See here! You aren’t going to *leave* me here, are you? All this blind, deaf...”

Rude wakening always angers me. He still stank.

I zipped open the bag and stalked at him, shouting, “Yes, I’ll leave you if you can’t act like a man. Get to that river and wash!”

He backed away alarmed, naturally not towards the river but almost stumbling over the lean-to. He glanced at the uncorpse there and rallied his looniness, hunched and glared like a wrathful sheep, shouting back. “I will *not*! You can’t order me! I refuse!” A look of silly cunning dawned: “I see. Leave me. You killed him. I’m the witness.”

The Thing, lying there, paralyzed me. I’ve seen grizzlier dead men from that sanctified anatomy. I’ve seen demagogues idolized into Great White Fathers who understand all, permit all, provide all—and stultify everything. But in the foggy corpse-light before dawn, Payne’s cadaver was more than a dead man, more than a narcotic, more even than a mouth-piece for Tapiola... He was a short-circuit to the All that is behind

even Tapiola, that turns life to deny life, valor to destroy valor, fertility to castrate races, the short-circuit away from the infinite road ahead, back into the gray-mist nothing that is the All.

That clammy, colorless mist engulfed me, immovable because it was everywhere, dissolving you in unre-sistance...

Through that moment's eternal horror, a more tangible fear stabbed savingly: Greene's crazed effrontery was no joke. Gas-tight compartments were his natural method of thought: Manning Payne had bungled millions to death; Manning Payne was an all-wise leader. Tapiola was mindless terror; Tapiola was sanctuary if Taylor Payne said so. And now, Payne had attained beatitude by a supreme renunciation *and* had been doped to death by a rival claimant for the planet.

Young Warde had appeared and was looking grimly from me to Greene who went on shouting, "But that Officer won't leave me, even if he is a tool of the Imperialists. Taylor Payne will rise to confound you."

Yes, and Greene would stick to one compartment till he'd at least ruined my reputation and secured the planet for the Payne Legend—and how plausible he could be! He'd flit through the bulkhead only on Nirvanah.

I knew the legal obfuscation, the well-heeled brotherhoods of bleeding-hearts, the skilled villification I faced. I still fought the gray mist, and Payne's own living corpse was my only recourse: "Officer, you hear the charge. I demand that we bring this—specimen with us in evidence."

Warde was certainly for me, but uneasy: "Before I could expend power for transport, Mr. Pakinaan, I'd have to know its relevancy."

"At this stage, experts can tell very closely how long it's been drugged. And you know how long I must have been away from camp."

Greene blustered shrewdly: "He's a citizen of Nirvanah and, as such, is *not* legally dead. You'll have to extradite him."

Extradition would take months. By then, an untended Payne would be mold and saplings, Merged. And all the little, expert clagues would have rallied to stampede public opinion with their cries.

I said, "Not from a planet in the public domain."

"This is *not* public. Mr. Payne claimed it as a Nirvanah colony."

Oh fine! And They would rush a suicide settlement to clinch it. I beat at the mist: "That's only a claim, by a non-Union-member."

Green made like a noble sheep—Humble Disciple inspired to carry on The Work: "Nirvanah has Rights. Mr. Payne has Rights..."

That overworked word did it! Suddenly, the gas-tight bulkhead, insinuated into my mind by experts, burst. Payne's big play had bamboozled me: He had legal rights; he was a sanctified vegetable. Ha? Rights? What rights has a vegetable? He would never rise to confound me.

I cut Greene short in full prate: "If Payne is dead by Union law, his presumptive claim doesn't stand. And if the claim doesn't stand, Tapiola is in the public domain—and he's dead."

Green bristled with righteous indignation: "That's outrageous. That's a purely circular argument."

Warde grinned: "Yehr. So's yours. The courts'll decide which one has a minus radius. So I'll impound the evidence." He gestured at the uncorpse.

Greene panicked: "No! No! We *must* respect Mr. Payne's last wishes. If I must do so to save him, I withdraw the charge."

Warde said curtly, "Felony's State business. You're only a witness."

"But—well, we can bring him *back*, I suppose."

I laughed. I *could* master Greene:

"Not unless you *fight* your way in. That's the final test of Rights in this man's universe, you know."

Greene suffered: "'No real Decision was ever made by Force.'"

"I could name a few." The look of gaunt, grieved Rightness set on Payne's death-mask might inspire sculptors to Interpret its Humanity; it would only have stimulated the Mongols, Hitler, or Gamal III.

For me, he was Stuff, to be swept aside or used...?

Greene was utterly disjoined. Then, incredibly, he wafted into a new compartment: "Yes, but see here. *I* have a right to come. I'll work for you, help you settle this planet."

Over-gods forbid! Followers of mine would take the wrong branch some day when the trail forked, because I'd been *that* much wrong. But *some* would take the right branch... Let Ed Greene in, and he'd bush the lot with some maudlin legend. *I* was no Payne. *I* hadn't the answers. I'd just fight my best, and open doors.

He insisted, "I'll do just what you say."

My brain was clearing more widely. A magnificent lie took form in it. Tapiola was Stuff to be used; now Payne himself was Stuff. Use him! I was sure now he hadn't claimed Tapiola for Nirvanah; he'd hold it in Trust till he Decided. I could bluff. I gestured to his hulk: "Ed, he didn't claim Tapiola for anyone but the Foresters' Guild. That's why *I'm* here. So you take him. Tour Nir-

vanah. Tour North America. Tell them he wants us to accept only people who meet our standards."

It swept the board clean, Greene, Payne, their fosterlings. Maybe we'd even get some use of them. Maybe they'd help us salvage some genes and traditions of Pioneers or Rajputs.

Payne didn't rise. He was what he wanted to be—harmless, unresisting un-mind. Stuff.

The sun struck red-gold through tree-tops beyond the river. Morning mist drifted past trees and river like wraiths of life from Ameba to monkey. But life wouldn't have to make a long climb, fighting that sullen planet. Man, arrogant, aspiring man stood there on my two bare feet, ready to whip all comers, including Life's renegades.

I had whipped Tapiola. I had whipped Payne. And suddenly I saw the gray nothing that had drained life through them, powerless, its short-circuits cut. I felt the irresistible force that would move that moveless vacancy, the sun that would draw that mist. Life, mind, man!

To Tapiola and Payne, I felt no gratitude; I felt not even enmity. They were just stuff to help in the climb up the great slopes ahead, into the golden sunlight of life.

Already, I had attained through them the most irresistible knowledge of all.

I knew my Self.

