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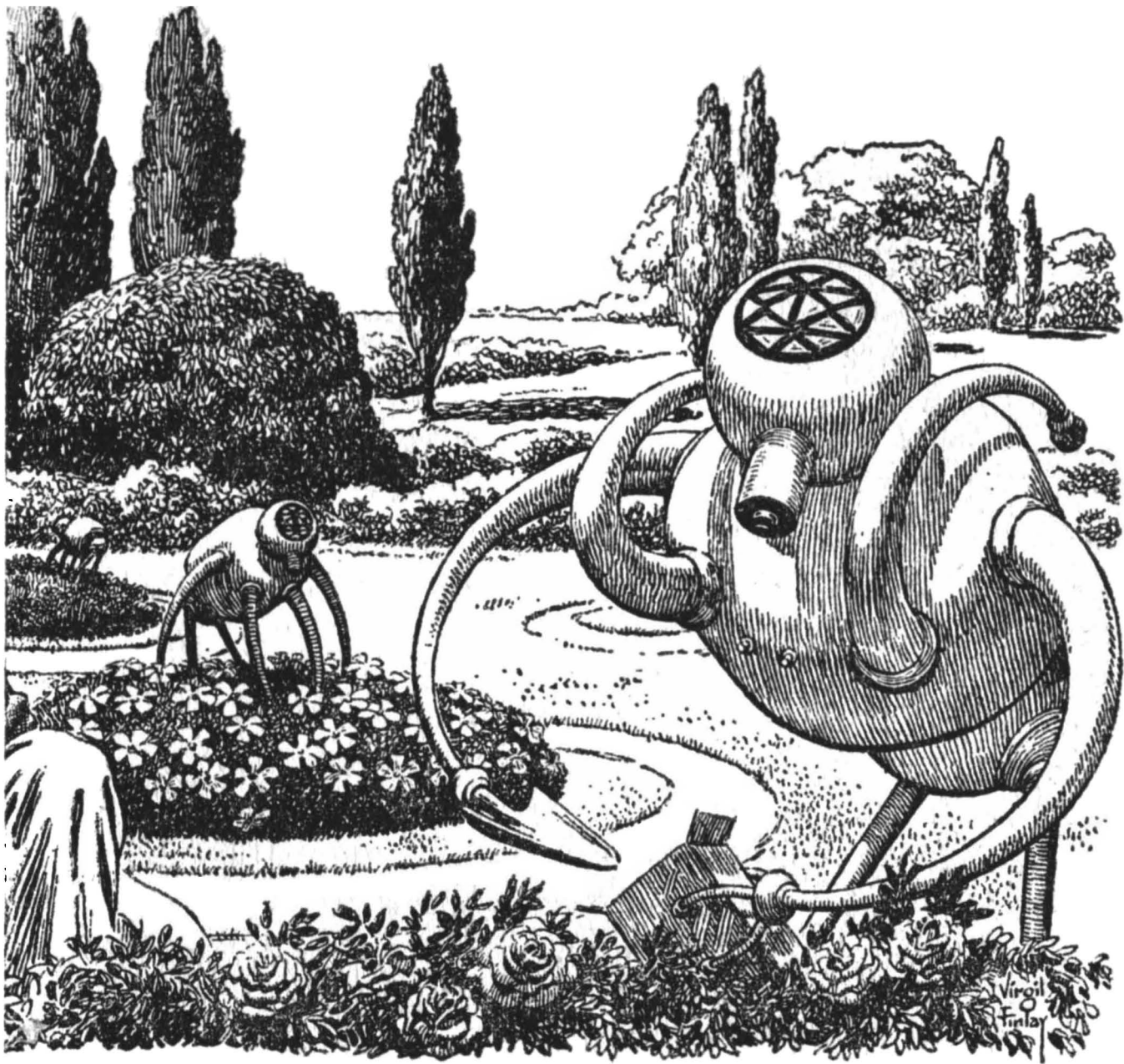


*Burial on Earth was the dream of every person in the galaxy.*

*And Krieg was certainly rich enough to buy his way in.*

*Valhalla was his. But he changed his mind. . .*

**BY JAMES MC CONNELL**



*Illustrated by Virgil Finlay*

# Nor Dust Corrupt

**T**HE ROOM seemed more a mausoleum than an office, but that was as had been intended. Perhaps thirty feet high, fifty feet wide, it stretched a good hundred feet in length. It was paneled entirely in jet black onyx, which gave a sense of infinity to it. The floor was a thick lawn of heavy black pile carpeting. Only two areas of the room offered mitigation to this oppressive gloom. Just past the middle, bathed in a haze of light, was placed a large black desk,

and behind it sat a man. At the far end of the room, slightly elevated, was an alabaster statue, an abstraction of incredible beauty and poignancy. The statue too was wrapped in a soft nimbus. Few visitors to this room ever had to be told the title of this work of art, for its meaning was apparent in its every line—*Bereavement*.

The man behind the big black desk belonged to the room as much as did the onyx walls, the thick carpet or the alabaster statue. Without the presence of this man the chamber seemed strangely empty, strangely morbid, and few of the man's associates cared to remain in the room when he was not there. Somehow the warm air of benevolence to be found in his fair, pinkish face softened the harsh somberness of the appointments, while the gentle strength in his dark and mournful eyes gave amelioration to the atmosphere of despair. His job was to be a Janus, looking from the cheery rubric of today towards the unknown but dimmer colors of tomorrow—to be a bridge between present pleasures and future fears. There was no better man for the task in all the Galaxy than Consolator Steen.

At the moment Consolator Steen sat waiting, thinking, planning. Soon through the huge doors facing him would come a man, one Joseph Krieg by name, who sought Steen's assistance. The fact that Krieg was one of the richest men in all the known universe made the impending interview a most important one, for Consolator Steen's assistance depended entirely upon the

price that could be paid.

Steen's fingers flicked over the set of hidden controls on his desk. Everything was in readiness. "And another innocent fish gets hooked," he muttered to himself. He sighed once, shortly, then touched an invisible button. "I will see Joseph Krieg now." In the outer office Steen's aide-de-camp, Assistant Consolator Braun, sprang to an attitude of proper deference as the huge bronze doors swung open. Braun bowed slightly as Joseph Krieg strode past him and into the onyx chamber.

Steen's eyes narrowed in admiration as he examined the man walking towards him. Joseph Krieg was a huge person, just past middle age but still retaining the hardened appearance of late youth. His face had a chiseled squareness to it, and his manner indicated not so much wealth as it did an obvious determination to succeed. This would be an interesting fish to play with indeed, Steen thought.

About half-way to the desk Krieg stumbled slightly, but recovered his pace with the cumbersome grace of some massive animal. A smile flickered briefly over Steen's face. The thickness of the carpet had more purposes than one. When Krieg was almost upon him, Steen stood up.

Krieg stopped in front of the desk, facing Steen, as if waiting for some signal. Steen, who knew the value of silence, remained absolutely still. After a few seconds, obviously perplexed, Krieg smiled nervously. "Consolator Steen?"

“Welcome to Earth, Joseph Krieg. Welcome to the Heart of the Galaxy.” Steen’s voice was rich, mellifluous, and the words fell from his mouth like benedictions. He extended a hand. “Won’t you please be seated?”

The chair received Krieg’s body as if it were the most precious burden it had ever held. Its soft contours almost demanded that he relax, yield the tenseness of his muscles to its smooth and welcoming shape. Its surface closed around him as if it were a second skin, then began to tingle in gentle caress. Joseph Krieg had never felt so comforted in his life.

Consolator Steen seated himself behind his desk, then waited until his assistant, Braun, had taken a chair some feet away. He smiled paternally. “May I ask you one favor? Would it seem presumptuous if I called you Joseph? Perhaps you would feel it an impertinence on my part, but . . .” Consolator Steen gestured slightly with both his hands, as if to implore forgiveness.

Joseph Krieg smiled, nodded his head. “Of course I won’t mind if you use my first name. It would be an honor, Sir.” The smile continued on his face, but his eyes narrowed as if he were attempting to puzzle out the figure behind the desk.

“You will excuse me too if I say that you’ve come too soon, Joseph,” the Consolator said.

“Too soon?” Krieg replied quizzically. “I don’t think I . . .”

Steen smiled warmly. “I only mean that you look still so young,

so strong and vibrant with life. And yet, perhaps you are the wiser to come now, still in the vigor of living. It shows an honesty with yourself, an ability to face the facts, which is much to be admired.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Krieg replied. He continued to stare at the Consolator.

Steen knew full well the turmoil that was stirring within the man. The entire interview had been psychologically planned to evoke dark and dormant emotions which, when released, would destroy Krieg’s normal ability to judge situations impassively. Proof that things were going as intended came from Krieg’s continual use of the word “Sir.” Krieg’s commercial empires spanned the Universe; from perfume to starships, from food to fertilizers, he was king. And yet he would never understand that it was Steen’s quiet paternal power, the fact that he wore wise sorrow wrapped around him the way some men wear a cloak, that called forth this unfamiliar reverence. The psychological survey done on Krieg had cost the Consolator a small fortune, and he didn’t intend to waste it.

“You must realize, Joseph, that the things which you have come to discuss are matters of the deepest concern for all of us here on Earth.” Steen gesticulated towards Braun as if Braun represented somehow all the other billions on Earth. “The problem is one that touches deep within all of us, and we are anxious to be of whatever service possible. But more than anything else, we want you to know

that we *understand*.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Krieg repeated. He frowned for a moment, then seemed to smile. “But if you don’t mind, maybe we could begin our discussion of terms.”

Steen raised one eyebrow slightly. The man showed a remarkable lack of sentimentality. Corrections would have to be made in the approach . . .

“Of course. I am delighted to get on with things. And I must say, I find your attitude extraordinarily sane. The problem is, really, a simple one best met head on. You are here because you know that as it come to all men, death must come to you too. And you feel the necessity to make certain that when your time comes, you will be brought to Earth to your final rest. You are a son of Earth. This is your great ancestral home.”

Krieg started slightly, then relaxed almost in reverie. Steen smiled inwardly at the power of words, repeated, to invoke long forgotten memories. For Steen knew that when Krieg had been no more than a toddling child, learning to read, learning to respond to affection, his simple-syllabled books had spoken in reverent tones of “The Great Ancestral Home.” In later years, all of Krieg’s studies had had hidden at their core an emotional dependence upon Earth. No place was finer, more beautiful, more important. No, not all the rest of the stars put together. He had been told it a million times until it had become an inseparable part of his very personality, just so the words would have the desired effect at

this moment. *The Great Ancestral Home*.

“You are so fortunate, my son,” the Consolator continued. “So very few of Earth’s teeming children will ever have the opportunity that lies within your grasp. You must make the most of it.”

As Steen watched, Krieg seemed to shake some of the feeling of awe from him. “I intend to make the most of it, Sir,” he said, offering Steen his most charming smile. “It just depends on how hard a bargain you want to drive.”

Consolator Steen gave Krieg a look of mild reproach. “There is no ‘bargaining’ to be done, Joseph. The monetary considerations are set by law, and we have no choice in the matter. All that we can do is to explain the services which we are prepared to extend to you, and then help you as best we can to arrive at the most suitable decision. Our position is simply that of catering to your individual wants as best we can.”

“My wants are simple,” Krieg replied, and it seemed to Steen that far too much of the man’s usual forcefulness was returning to his voice. “I wish to be buried on Earth when I die, and I want you to arrange this for me.”

“Of course, of course, my son,” Steen said, letting just a glint of steel appear in his eyes. “But what do we mean by burial? We have such different problems here on Earth than you do elsewhere in the Galaxy. You must understand that. We are forced to such strange solutions to these problems. But perhaps if I merely show you the vari-

ous types of burial which we undertake, then you will understand." Steen laughed to himself. The fish appeared fat and hungry, and now it was time to drop in the bait.

The Consolator touched a hidden switch atop his desk and one of the black onyx walls rippled and seemed to dissolve in mist. A replica of Earth swam through the haze and into view. "Earth. Such an incredibly small planet, Joseph. But the heart of the Galaxy none the less." The replica seemed to swell in size and geographical details became apparent. "Earth. Once a world of gentle, rolling plains, winding rivers, thick forests, wide oceans and soaring mountains. Just like any other habitable planet. And now look at it. One solid mass of buildings and machines, Joseph. We've drained the oceans and filled in their beds with metal. We've destroyed the forests and the rolling plains and planted the land for miles above and below with throbbing inorganic monsters. We've hollowed out the very mountains to make more space. Space for nine hundred billion people, Joseph. And still we are cramped almost beyond belief. We need to expand a hundredfold. But we cannot. There simply is no room left.

"No room for the living, Joseph, and this means no more room for the dead, either. Here, let me show you." The scene changed, showing first a huge building, and then, the bottom floor of the edifice. "This is one of our larger buildings, Joseph. It is more than fifty miles long and one hundred miles wide.

The bottom floor alone is more than one quarter mile high. This huge space is completely filled with cubes two inches square. Each cube holds the ashes of one human being who wished to find his final resting place on Earth."

Consolator Steen made a motion of resignation. "Notice that I said 'on Earth,' Joseph, and not 'in Earth.' This is our 'pauper's field,' the burial ground of those devoted souls who could not afford to be buried *in* the Earth itself."

Joseph Krieg frowned. "But surely underneath the building . . ."

"Underneath the bottom floor of that building are the bodies of many millions more, Joseph, just as there are bodies under all of our buildings. Bodies of those wealthy few who could afford to escape cremation and find surcease of life in the loamy substance of the Earth itself. I shudder to tell you how tightly packed they are, of the skin-tight coffins which we had to devise, of the geometrical tricks involved in jamming as many bodies as possible in the least amount of space. And yet, it is burial, and it is *in* the Earth itself. No granite monuments, of course, no vases of flowers, no green grass. Just a perpetual flame burning in the main lobby of the building, and a micro-film file available somewhere listing the vital statistics of all those souls whose remains lie in the basement—or below."

Krieg's face was furrowed with a heavy frown. Steen's words had been as shocking to the man as Steen had hoped they would be. "But the Parks . . ."

"Ah, yes, Joseph. The Parks . . ." Consolator Steen leaned forward slightly. The fish was sniffing at the bait quite properly now. "Our Parks, which are the one remaining link with the past. Those green and grassy meadows in the midst of our metallic forests. The last places on Earth where you can be buried out in the open, with flowers over your head and birds singing above. You want to be buried in one of the Parks, don't you Joseph?" When the man nodded briefly, Steen continued. "Which Park, Joseph?"

"Manhattan . . ."

Steen drew himself up with a sudden, silent movement. The fish had taken a good look at the bait. Now to remove it from sight for a while. Steen closed his eyes briefly, then raised a hand as if to brush away a sudden tear. "I'm sorry, Joe. Very sorry indeed. I was afraid that was what you wanted, and yet, there was always . . ." He blinked his eyes. "Manhattan Park is impossible, Joe. Confucius Park in Hong Kong, perhaps. I think there are still some plots available in Frogner Park in Oslo. I'm certain that we could get you into Amundsen Park at the South Pole. But Manhattan . . . No, Joe. That's one dream I'm afraid you'll just have to give up."

"Why?" Joseph Krieg asked quietly but determinedly.

"Have you ever seen it, Joe? I thought not. It's perhaps the most beautiful part of this most beautiful planet in the Galaxy. Would you like to see Manhattan?"

*Manhattan.* Steen was quite aware that to Joseph Krieg this was

a word of a hundred thousand associations, each of them connected with love, security, devotion and repose. It was like asking a starving man if he would care for something to eat.

Steen did not even wait for a reply. "I think it could be managed, as a special favor. Permission to enter Manhattan Park is difficult to get, you know, but I think this once . . ." Steen turned to Braun. "Put a call through to the President's office . . ."

**A**TOP GRASSY knolls, supple willows trailed languid branches to the ground. Silver-throated birds sang secret melodies while bees hummed a scarcely audible background. Narrow graveled paths wound through this gentle landscape, now hugging the edge of a tinkling stream, now plunging through carpets of gorgeous flowers. The three men sat silent on a rough stone bench observing the pastoral scene.

Finally Consolator Steen spoke softly. "I understand how you feel, Joe. The first time any of us sees it, we are afflicted with silence. Its beauty is almost painful, the memories it invokes almost beyond bearing. Lincoln is buried there, just beyond that hillock; Landowski not far from him. Shakespeare's grave is there to the right, and close by is the body of Sharon, the poet of the Galaxy. Einstein's final resting place is a mile or so away, and near to it you'll find Chi Wan, who gave us Stardrive. Humanity's Valhalla, Joe."



Joseph Krieg had not cried openly since childhood, and yet now there were tears in his eyes. "This has always been my dream . . ."

Consolator Steen placed a friendly arm around the man's shoulders. "Yes, now you have seen it. Your dream has come true." He paused for just a moment, then said, "And now, Joe, perhaps we had better go."

Joseph Krieg turned towards the man with an abrupt motion. "Go? Why should we go? We've been here scarcely ten minutes."

"Because the longer you stay, the harder it will be for you to leave, Joe. And the less attractive the other parks will seem to you. So, I'd like for us to leave at once." His voice became businesslike. "First, I'd like to show you Hong Kong, and then . . ."

"I don't want to see Hong Kong, or any place else. This is where I want to be buried, Steen. Whatever the price is, I'll pay."

Consolator Steen sighed deeply. "I don't think you understand, Joe. It isn't a matter of price. Manhattan is simply not available to you, for the reason that it is not for sale. I know that you have heard otherwise; I am sure that rumors have reached your ears that burial in Manhattan could be effected for a mere trillion credits. But these fantastic tales are incorrect—for two reasons.

"The first reason, Joe, is a financial one. To the average man, a mere million credits is such a gigantic, unobtainable sum that he is sure anything in the Galaxy could be obtained for a trillion. This is

not so, as you and I both know. Why, a million credits will scarcely get you a burial in a two-inch-square cube in the bottom floor of one of our huge buildings. Remember? I called those huge bargain basements 'pauper's fields.' And that they are—available to those poor people throughout the Universe who have only a few millions to their names. Incredible, isn't it?

"A trillion credits? Why, it takes a hundred billion to make you eligible for burial *under* one of the buildings, where you're packed in like a sardine with millions of other bodies. And how many people in the Galaxy can lay their hands on a hundred billion credits? The answer, Joe, is too many people indeed. Some of them have so much more money than that, they can actually afford to be buried in one of the Parks.

"A trillion credits? Yes, that will get you buried in Hong Kong Park, or in Frogner, or Amundsen. But not for long. You can rent a temporary grave in Hong Kong, for example, for a mere billion credits a day. At that rate, for a trillion credits, you'd stay buried on Earth for less than three years, and then your body would have to be moved elsewhere. Very few people can afford to purchase a permanent plot in one of these parks. But they are available—at a cost of something like one quadrillion credits. And just how many men in the Galaxy *have* a quadrillion credits or so?"

Consolator Steen knew the answer to this question exactly—he also knew that Joseph Krieg was

one of these men. Krieg could have afforded a quadrillion credits, but it would have exhausted his fortune. Steen waited until he was sure that the other man was deep in mental turmoil and then he continued, his voice now softer, less commercial sounding. "And having given you 'the prices,' so to speak, of the lesser treasures, I will now surprise you by saying that the entry ticket to Manhattan Park is free."

Joseph Krieg looked at the man intently, a curious fire of hope in his eyes. "Free?"

Steen nodded. "And because it is free, it is unobtainable. It is not generally known, Joe, but the only way one can be buried in Manhattan Park is by permission of the Galactic Congress. Only certified heroes are so honored, and they are few and far between. Remember the great bacteriologist Manuel de Artega? It took the Galactic Congress more than fifty years of debate after he died to decide to let him in—but after all, the only claim to fame he had was that he saved a few trillion lives from the Green Plague. He was buried here some thirteen years ago. There has been no one since, and no one in sight."

Steen patted the man on the shoulder. "Now, come along, Joe. I want you to take a look at Amundsen Park before you make up your mind. It's not at all cold at the Pole these days—lovely flowers, trees . . ."

"No!" Joseph Krieg cried, standing up. Steen and Braun both rose too. "There must be a way!"

The Consolator smiled inwardly.

*The fish was responding magnificently. Now to push the bait just a little closer . . .*

"Now, now, Joe. You mustn't get upset about this. The other Parks are just as fine, I assure you," Steen murmured in consolation.

Krieg shook his head. "You can't tell me that sometime or other someone didn't buy his way into Manhattan. It stands to reason . . ."

"Now, Joe. You're taking this much too hard . . ."

"I tell you, I know people. And that's all—the Galactic Congress is made up of—people. Tell me the truth, Steen. Has anyone ever bribed his way into this Park?"

Steen frowned and turned his head slightly away from the man. *Just a flick or two more of the line . . .*

"I wish you wouldn't ask me questions like that, Joe. When I say that it's impossible, I mean just that. You'll just excite yourself needlessly by listening to foolish rumors . . ."

Krieg pounced on the word jubilantly. "What do you mean, rumors? Then there *has* been someone who bought his way in! Who was it, Steen? I swear, if you don't tell me, I'll move heaven and earth to find out."

Consolator Steen seemed to consider for a moment, then sighed. *Hooked.* "All right, Joe. But believe me, you'll wish you hadn't asked. For what happened to . . . to this other person is unattainable to you."

"Who was it?" Krieg asked excitedly.

“Who was the richest man who ever lived, Joe?”

“You mean . . .”

“Who was it that founded the University you went to, the hospital in which you were born? Who gave a magnificent library to every city in the known universe, who was it . . .”

Krieg interrupted. “Old C. T. himself . . .”

Steen nodded. “Yes, old C. T. Anderman himself. Years ago, Joe, he faced the same problem you face now, and he reacted the same way you have. So he set out on a campaign to get into Manhattan the only way he knew how—with money. There was one difference, Joe. Where you are fabulously wealthy, C. T. Anderman was wealthy beyond all dreams. Do you know that he gave away more than one quintillion credits—*gave it away!* Just to make his name universally known. ‘The Philanthropist of the Galaxy,’ they called him. One quintillion credits! No wonder they voted him a hero’s grave. But what the press and the public never knew is that it cost him more than twice that much—for he had to spend another one quintillion credits for bribes and influence. It took him fifty years, Joe, to pack the Galactic Congress with enough of his men to swing the trick. But he finally did it.”

There was a short silence, then Steen continued. “Now you see why I didn’t want to tell you, Joe—to raise false hopes. Only one man in the Galaxy was ever wealthy enough to buy his way into Manhattan. And he had to give up his entire

fortune to do it. I’m afraid that you’ll never make the grade, Joe.”

Krieg stood stunned. Steen was aware that two quintillion credits was beyond Krieg’s wildest dreams, for Steen knew that Joseph Krieg had come to Earth determined to purchase his burial lot and then retire from the business world.

Steen pulled lightly at Krieg’s arm. “Now, come along, Joe. Let’s go take a look at Hong Kong.” The three men started off down the path, but before they had gone ten feet, a robot scurried out of the bushes and dashed over to the bench they had been sitting on. It clucked softly to itself, put forth several arms, and in a matter of seconds had completely washed and disinfected the bench.

Joseph Krieg, an empty and numb look on his face, stopped to watch the process. He stared for a few seconds, then asked hoarsely, “What’s that?”

Consolator Steen smiled. “One of the Guardians, Joe. Superb—and completely incorruptible. Within minutes after we leave, every vestige of our visit will be gone—each piece of gravel we tread on will be scrubbed clean or replaced, each piece of grass we touch uprooted and destroyed, even the very air we breathe will be sterilized to remove our traces. We have our problem of vandals too, you know,” Steen said, a wisp of a smile playing about the corners of his mouth. “But these are vandals who want to get in and leave something, not like those of ancient times on Earth who broke into burial grounds to loot and destroy. Yes, Joe, we found long ago

that the only safe method was to employ mechanical devices to guard against clandestine burials. So even the gardeners who keep this Park in blossom are mechanical. See, there's another one over there, hard at work."

Joseph Krieg turned and saw to one side, by a large bed of red flowers, another robot with dozens of visible appendages. It purred an almost silent tune as it clipped and pruned, dug and spaded, trimmed and cleaned the beds, occasionally sprinkling a rich fertilizer dust here and there.

"The Guardians of Valhalla, Joe. They were set into motion centuries ago, and not even the President knows how to change their orders. They can't be bribed, even if their human masters can be."

Joseph Krieg stooped down beside the bed of flowers. He reached out and picked up a handful of the fine dirt and let it slip pensively through his fingers. "Dust unto dust," he said slowly. "Man was created from the soil of Earth, and to dust he returneth." There was a long silence as Steen let the emotion run its course. Then he touched Krieg lightly on the arm and the man stood up again. They started off down the path, ignoring the machine that skittered along behind them, cleansing each bit of gravel they stepped upon.

To Steen, this was always the most important part of the interview. While the fish was masticating the bait, he had to prattle on to keep the hook from becoming too visible. "Some day I must tell you of all the ways people have

tried to get themselves buried on Earth without paying for the privilege, Joe. It makes a fascinating story. We're in a difficult position here, you know, for we have to import every single bit of food we eat, every machine we use, each piece of clothing that we wear. But every single item that we import is carefully scanned to make sure that no one has concealed so much as a single human hair in the process." Steen watched Krieg's face closely as they walked. The man should be going through hell just now, but not too much of it showed on his face. Steen continued his prattle, a little puzzled.

"Oh, it's incredible the ways that people have tried to cheat. Some of the methods used are too ugly to relate, some of them humorous beyond belief. But this is why we've resorted to mechanical guards all the way round—to maintain our incorruptibility. Even Anderman with all of his quintillions could not have bribed his way past our machines." Steen's voice betrayed none of the anxiety that he felt. For Joseph Krieg was almost smiling now, was apparently feeling none of the great confusion that Steen had counted upon.

They reached the gates. "Well, Joe. I think we'll head straight for Hong Kong, if you don't mind. It will be early morning there by now, and that's the best time . . ."

Joseph Krieg turned to face the man. "Thank you very much, Consolator, but I don't think that will be necessary. You see, I've changed my mind."

Steen repressed a frown.

"Changed your mind?" he asked blandly.

"Yes. After giving it due consideration, I think that it would be foolish to squander all of my fortune on a burial on Earth. My family would be cheated out of its inheritance if I did, and after all, if my sons carry on in their father's tradition, that's enough for me." Krieg extended his hand. "I wish to thank you, Steen, for your kindness. I regret that I have troubled you for nothing."

Steen shook the man's hand warmly, using his free hand to grasp Krieg's arm in friendly fashion. "It was no trouble at all, I assure you. But please understand, Joseph, if I can ever be of service to you in *any* way, if I can ever be of assistance in any manner whatsoever, please do not hesitate to call upon me. After all, even Anderman had certain problems which . . ." Steen smiled knowingly.

Krieg returned the smile. "I think I understand. And I appreciate your offer, although I must tell you that there is little likelihood that I will be forced to take it up. Again my thanks. And now, goodbye." Krieg turned and strode through the gates.

**C**ONSOLATOR STEEN and his assistant, Braun, stood watching the man as he disappeared into the distance. Then Steen turned and walked over to one of the benches in the Park near to the gates. He sat down wearily.

"Braun," he said. "I don't like it. Not at all. He should have been be-

side himself with worry, he should have pumped me for more information, he should have done a thousand other things. But he didn't. He just turned and left. I tell you, I don't like it at all."

Braun frowned. "He seemed to take the bait, Sir."

"And then, after sniffing it over carefully, he turned and spat it right back in our faces. We can't afford mistakes like this, Braun. Earth needs the money too badly. It's our only means of support, and we can't let a fish like Krieg get off the hook."

"There are other fish around, Sir."

Steen's face took on an angry look. "Of course there are. But none with the potentialities that Krieg showed. Don't you realize that ever since that sad day when Earth realized that she was a has-been, she's had to take advantage of every single opportunity offered her, just to keep alive? Oh, they were clever, those ancient ones who realized that if a civilization is to be kept together, it must have a myth. And so they gave our civilization its myth—that of Earth, the Great Ancestral Home. Just accidentally, it also offered Earth a means of retaining at least a part of her power."

Steen waved his hands in the air. "From an economic viewpoint it was nice too. Only the very wealthy could afford an Earth burial, and so it became a means of hidden, graduated taxation—Earth soaked the rich and ignored the poor, and cut her overt taxes while doing so. Burial became so costly that it

helped break up the huge estates, it helped leaven out the wealth. Our propaganda was sharpened to the point where we could take a man like Anderman and drive him all of his life towards an almost unattainable goal, force him to expend his tremendous energies in the accumulation of great wealth, extending the frontiers of the Galaxy as he did so, building up our civilization's strength in the process, and then, in the end, make him turn all of his wealth over to Earth in one form or another. Oh, I tell you, Braun, those ancient ones were clever."

The tirade halted. The air hung silent for a moment, and the twittering of a near-by bird could be heard.

"They were very, very clever. They gave us all the tools, and somehow we've failed to use them correctly. What was it, Braun? What did we do, or fail to do, that let Krieg get away from us?"

Braun frowned. "I don't know, Sir. Perhaps he just changed his mind about Earth."

Steen snorted. "Impossible! He's had too many years' exposure to our propaganda for that. He can no more give up his dream of burial in Manhattan than he can give up his very personality. No, Braun, I think we just underestimated the man. Somewhere along the line he had an idea, he saw something that we failed to see.

Braun shrugged his shoulders. "But what are we going to do about it?"

Consolator Steen pursed his lips. "I tell you what I'm going to do

about it. I'm going straight back to the office and sit and think, and think, and then think some more. Krieg's got a good fifty years ahead of him yet, and that means I've got exactly that long to guess what's on his mind. I'll get that quintillion credits if it's the last thing I do."

They had no more than reached the gate when one of the mechanical Guardians appeared from behind a bush, chortled to itself and scurried over to the bench. It cleansed the rough-hewn stone, then washed the path the two men had taken. Then, its exceptional chores accomplished, it went back to its normal pursuits.

It approached a bed of begonias nearby. One appendage extended itself and began digging up the dirt around the plants. Meanwhile, inside the machine, other appendages ripped open a small bag and spilled the fine dust inside the bag into a small trough. The empty bag was rolled up and stuck in a disposal bin along with several other bags, all with identical markings:

JOSEPH KRIEG AND SONS,  
BY APPOINTMENT,  
PURVEYORS OF FINE  
FERTILIZERS  
TO THE GALACTIC GOVERN-  
MENT ON EARTH

The machine clucked quietly to itself as it sprinkled the dust evenly over the black, yielding earth. It patted the fertilizer gently into the rich soil, making sure that each plant got its fair share. Then it scurried off silently to tend to a bed of calla lilies nearby. ● ● ●