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**THE BIG
TERRARIUM**

by
JAMES SCHMITZ



DAMON KNIGHT. MILTON LESSER. CHARLES EINSTEIN

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THE BIG TERRARIUM

by James Schmitz

They called it "The Little Place" because it was just like Fred's farm back on Earth—only where his fence ended it became strictly "out of this world!" And in spite of the incredible weather and the floating Eyes, it could have been bearable if it weren't for the Things Fred had to share it with!

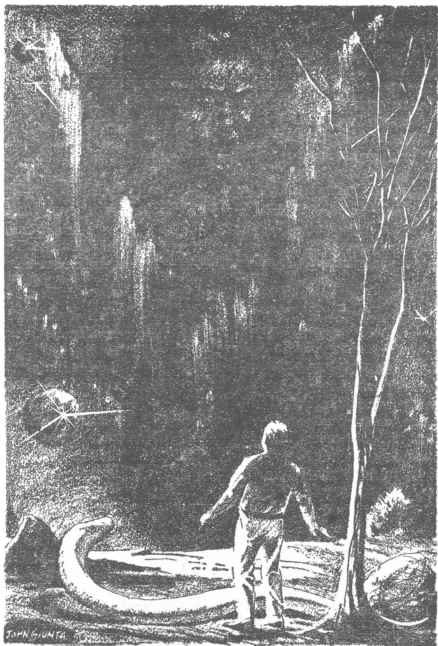
A "DIFFERENT" NOVELETTE

THE THIRD morning Fred Nieheim woke up in the Little Place, he no longer had to prove to himself that he wasn't dreaming. He knew where he was, all right, along with the rest of them—Wilma and Ruby and Howard Cooney and the Cobrisol. But knowing it didn't make him any happier!

He remained lying on his back, gazing moodily out through the bedroom window, while he wondered how one went about getting back to Earth from here—specifically, to the Nieheim farm twenty-two miles south of Richardsville, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. It wasn't apparently just a matter of finding a way out through the very odd sort of

barriers that fenced in the area. According to the Cobrisol, a local creature which appeared to be well-informed, they would then simply be in something known as "Outside," which was nowhere near Earth. At least, the Cobrisol had never heard of Earth, and still wasn't entirely convinced that it existed.

"Sometimes, Fred," it had hinted gently only last evening while they sat together on the front porch, watching a rather good production of an Earth-type sunset above the apple orchard, "sometimes the memory and other mental functions are deranged by transfer from one Place to another. Don't let it worry you, though! Such effects almost



always wear off in time...."

Fred felt Wilma stir quietly in bed beside him, and he raised himself cautiously on an elbow to look at her. The bed creaked.

Ruby went, "Chuck-chuck!" sharply from the corner of the bedroom, where she slept in a basket. She was a middle-aged hen pheasant of belligerent nature, who regarded herself as the watchdog of the Nieheim farm. Basket and all, she'd been transferred along with them to the Little Place.

Fred remained quiet until Ruby stuck her head back under her wing. Wilma was still asleep, and only a rounded, smooth shoulder and a mop of yellow hair were visible at the moment above the blankets. They had been married less than two years, and if he and Wilma and Ruby had been set down here alone, he mightn't have minded it so much. The Cobrisol had assured him that one ordinarily received the best of care and attention in the Little Places; and the Cobrisol itself, though disconcerting in appearance until you got used to it, seemed to be as agreeable a neighbor as anyone could want.

Unfortunately, there was also Howard Cooney....

OUT IN the kitchen, precisely as Fred's reflections reached that point, a metallic clatter announced that Howard Cooney was manipulating Wilma's big iron skillet on the stove again.

Fred scowled thoughtfully. For a recent acquaintance, Howard certainly was making himself at home with them! He was a tramp who had happened to select the night of their transfer to sleep in the shed back of the Nieheim farmhouse; and so he'd been picked up and brought along, too. Unfortunately, whoever or whatever had constructed a reasonably accurate duplicate of a section of the Nieheim farm in the Little Place, hadn't bothered to include the shed. The first night, at Wilma's suggestion, Howard had moved into the living room. After that, he'd stayed there.

Fred felt he couldn't reasonably object to the arrangement under the circumstances, but he suspected that Howard was an untrustworthy character. He'd already begun to ogle Wilma when he thought nobody was noticing—and there

was the disturbing fact that he was considerably bigger and huskier than Fred. . . .

He'd better, Fred decided uneasily, work out a method of getting them all back to Earth before Howard got the wrong kind of ideas!

"MORNING," Howard Cooney said hospitably, as Fred came into the kitchen. "Sit down and have some hoot. Where's Wilma?"

Fred said Wilma was still sleeping.

"Me," said Howard, "I'm up with the sun! Or what goes for the sun around here. Know what? I'm going to build a still!" He explained that he'd discovered a maze of piping under the front porch which wasn't connected to anything and which he could use for the purpose.

Fred doubted Howard would have any success with his dubious project, but he didn't comment on it. The piping wouldn't be missed. The duplicated house functioned just as well as the house back on Earth had; but it was operated on different and—so far—incomprehensible principles. Hot and cold water ran out of the proper faucets and vanished down the drains,

but neither faucets nor drains appeared to be connected to anything but the solid walls! Similarly, the replicas of the electric stove and refrigerator performed their normal duties—but Fred had discovered by accident that they worked just as well when they weren't plugged into the electric outlets. It was all a little uncanny, and he preferred not to think about it too much.

He tried a slice of the hoot Howard had been frying. Hoots came in various flavors, and this one wasn't at all bad—quite as good as ham, in fact. He said so.

"Could have been a famous chef back on Earth if I'd wanted to!" Howard admitted carelessly. "This is last night's hoot, by the way. There weren't any fresh ones floating around this morning."

"Howard," said Fred, "I'm trying to think of a way to get us back to Earth—"

"You are?" Howard looked startled and then frowned. "Look, Buster," he said in a confidential tone, leaning across the table, "let's face it. We got it soft here! Once I get the liquor situation straightened out, we'll have everything we need!"

Fred's mouth opened in surprise. "You don't mean you want to stay here all your life, do you?"

Howard eyed him speculatively. "You ought to wise up! You never been in stir, have you? Well, that's where you are now!"

"It's more like a zoo!" said Fred. "And—"

"Call it a zoo," the tramp interrupted. "Same principle." He shrugged his massive shoulders. "Trying to break out is a good way to get killed, see? And it's likely to make it rough on everyone else. You wouldn't want something worse than being shut up here to happen to Wilma, would you?" He grinned amiably at Fred, but the little gray eyes were shrewd and, at the moment, a trifle menacing.

There was just enough sense in what he'd said to make Fred uncertain; Howard seemed to have had some experiences which could be of value now. "What do you think we ought to do?" he inquired.

However, at that point, Howard became rather vague. In stir, he said, one had to take things easy until one had figured out the system. And then one made use of the system.

The danger was in getting whoever was in charge of the Little Place riled up by thoughtless action....

GOING IN search of the Cobrisol after breakfast, Fred admitted to himself that he couldn't quite make out what Howard Cooney was after. The tramp seemed to have something definite in mind, but apparently he wasn't willing to reveal it at this time.

At any rate, he'd made it clear that he didn't intend to be helpful about getting them back to Earth.

He found the Cobrisol coiled up at the head of a sloping section of ground which apparently was intended to represent the upper half of the south meadow of the Nieheim farm on Earth. As such, it was a few hundred yards out of place, and the grass that grew there wasn't exactly grass either; but Fred didn't pay much attention to such arbitrary rearrangements of his property any more.

"Nice day, isn't it?" he remarked, coming up.

"If you're speaking of the weather, yes!" said the Cobrisol. "Otherwise, I'll reserve my opinion."

Fred sat down beside it. "Something wrong?"

The Cobrisol nodded. "Possibly. . . !" It was a quite odd-looking creature, with a snaky, ten-foot body, brick-red in color and with a rubbery feel to it, and a head that was a little like that of a pig and a little more like that of an alligator. No arms or legs, but it didn't seem to miss them. When it moved slowly, it extended and contracted itself like an earthworm; when it was in a hurry, it slithered about in sideways loops like a snake. "Take a look around!" it invited significantly.

Fred gazed about. There was the usual, vague sort of sun-disk shining through the overhead haze, and the morning was pleasantly warm. At the end of the meadow was a huge, vertical something with indefinite borders called a "mirror-barrier," inside which he could see the Cobrisol and himself sitting in the grass, apparently a long distance away, and the duplicated farm-house behind them. To the left was a rather accurate reproduction of the Nieheim apple orchard—though the trees were constructed more like firs—complete with a copy of the or-

chard section of the Nieheim trout stream. Unfortunately, no trout appeared to have been transferred.

Beyond the orchard was a thick, motionless mist which blended into the haze of the sky. The mist was another barrier; the Cobrisol called it a "barrier of confusion." The first day, Fred had made a determined attempt to walk out of the Little Place at that point; it had been a confusing experience, all right!

THERE WASN'T much more to the Little Place. Behind the house, the ground sloped uphill into another wall of mist. He could hear Wilma and Howard Cooney talking in the back garden; and a number of small, circular objects that looked as if they might be made of some shiny metal floated about here and there in the air. The Cobrisol had explained that these were Eyes, through which the goings-on in the Little Place were being observed. Their motion seemed aimless, but Fred hadn't been able to get close enough to one to catch it.

"Everything looks about the same to me!" he admitted at last.

"Everything?" repeated the Cobrisol.

Its long toothy jaws and rubbery throat moved slightly as it spoke, though it wasn't actually pronouncing human words. Neither had Fred been talking in the Cobrisol's language, whatever that was. It was a little hard to understand. They hadn't been suddenly gifted with telepathy; it was just that when you were set down in a Little Place, you knew what the other intelligent creatures there wanted to say. And it sounded as if they were using your kind of speech.

Fred had given up trying to figure it out. . . .

"Well, there aren't any hoots in sight this morning," he acknowledged. "Or robols either!" he added, after a brief search of the meadow grass. "Howard Cooney mentioned the hoots were gone at breakfast."

"Very observant of the Cooney person!" the Cobrisol stated drily. It and Howard had disliked each other on sight. "Fred, there are a few matters I feel I should discuss with you."

"Now's a good time for a chat!" Fred said agreeably.

The Cobrisol darted its head

about in a series of rapid, snaky motions, surveying the area.

"The Eyes," it remarked then, "have assumed an unusual observational pattern this morning! You will note that two are stationed directly above us. Another cluster has positioned itself above the roof of the house. Early in the morning, an exceptionally large number were gathered among the trees of the orchard. These have now largely transferred themselves to the opposite side of the Little Place, near the maze-barrier."

"I see," said Fred, wondering what it was driving at.

"The One who maintains this Place is showing a remarkable degree of interest in us today!" the Cobrisol concluded.

Fred nodded.

"**VERY WELL,**" the creature resumed. "Life in a Little Place is usually very satisfactory. The Ones who maintain them can be regarded as hobbyists who take a benevolent interest in the life-forms they select to inhabit their creations. Whereas Big Places, of course, are designed for major scientific projects. . . ." The creature shuddered slight-

ly throughout its length. "I've never been in one of those, but—well, I've heard stories! Until this morning, Fred, I was inclined to regard us here as exceptionally fortunate life-forms!"

"Well," Fred said, frowning, "I don't quite agree with... what do you mean, 'until this morning'?"

"There are indications that this Place is being maintained, shall we say, carelessly? Nothing conclusive, as yet, you understand. But indications!" The Cobrisol jerked its head in the direction of the mirror-barrier. "That barrier, for instance, Fred, and one or two others have been permitted to go soft overnight!"

"Go soft?" Fred repeated.

"They're no longer operating as barriers. If we chose to, we could go right through them now—and be Outside! An almost unheard-of example of slip-shod maintenance—"

Fred brightened. "Well, say!" He got hurriedly to his feet. "Let's try it then!" He hesitated. "I'll go get Wilma and Ruby first though. I don't like to leave Wilma alone with that Cooney character!"

The Cobrisol hadn't moved.

"I'm afraid you don't have

the picture," it remarked. "You assume that once you're Outside you'll be able to find your way back to the place you call Earth?"

"Not exactly," Fred said cautiously. He didn't like to be evasive with the Cobrisol, but he wasn't sure it would want them to leave—and it might be in a position to make their departure more difficult. "We could just step through and look around a little...."

"Even if we weren't under observation at the moment," the Cobrisol pointed out, "you wouldn't live very long if you did. No life form—as we know life-forms—can exist Outside! The barriers are set up to keep us where it's safe. That's why it's so irresponsible of the One—"

Fred abandoned the idea of taking Wilma with him. He'd have to make a careful check first. "About how long," he inquired, "could I stand it out there, safely?"

"Forget it, Fred!" the creature advised him earnestly. "Unless you knew exactly what to do to get back into the Little Place, you'd be worse than dead as soon as you stepped out there! And you don't."

"Do you?" Fred challenged it.

"Yes," said the Cobrisol, "I do. But I won't tell you. Sit down again, Fred."

Fred sat down thoughtfully. At least, he'd learned a few new facts, and the knowledge might come in handy.

"A few moments ago," the Cobrisol said, "you made an interesting statement! It appears that you don't wish to leave Wilma alone with the other human?"

Fred glanced at it in surprise. "No," he said shortly, "I don't."

THE COBRISOL hesitated. "I don't wish to be tactless," it remarked. "I understand many species have extremely rigid taboos on the subject—but might this have something to do with the process of procreation?"

Fred flushed. He hadn't got quite that far in his thoughts about Wilma and Howard. "In a general sort of way," he admitted.

The Cobrisol regarded him judiciously. "Wilma is a charming life-form," it stated then, somewhat to Fred's surprise, "whereas the Cooney is as offensive as he is ignorant. I ap-

prove of your attitude, Fred! How do you intend to kill him?"

Shocked, Fred protested that he didn't intend to kill Howard Cooney. Human beings didn't act like that—or, at least, they weren't supposed to.

"Ah," said the Cobrisol. "That is unusual!" It reflected a moment. "To get back, then, to our previous subject—"

"What previous subject?" By now, Fred was getting a little confused by the sudden shifts in the conversation.

"Hoots and robols," the Cobrisol said tersely. "They don't just fade away—and there were enough around last evening to have kept us all supplied for another week. What may we deduce from their sudden disappearance, Fred?"

Fred considered. "They got sick and died?"

"Try again!" the Cobrisol told him encouragingly. "We could still see a dead hoot, couldn't we?"

"Something ate them!" Fred said, a trifle annoyed.

"Correct! Something," added the Cobrisol, "with a very large appetite—or else a number of perhaps less voracious somethings. Something, further, that was transferred here

during the night, since there was no shortage in the food supplies previous to this morning. And, finally—since it's given no other indications of its presence—something with secretive habits!"

Fred looked around uneasily. "What do you think it is?"

"Who knows?" The Cobrisol had no shoulders to shrug with, but it employed an odd, jerky motion now which gave the same impression. "A Gramoose? An Icier? Perhaps even a pack of Bokans...." It indicated the observing Eyes above the house with a flick of its snout. "The point is, Fred, that the One appears curious to see what we shall do in the situation! Taken together with the softening of the barriers, this suggests a deplorable—and, for us, perhaps very unfortunate—degree of immaturity in our particular hobbyist!"

FEELING his face go pale, Fred got to his feet. "I'm going to go tell Wilma to stay in the house with Ruby!" he announced shakily.

"A wise precaution!" The Cobrisol uncoiled and came slithering along beside him as he strode rapidly towards the

house. "The situation, incidentally, does have one slight advantage for you personally."

"What's that?" Fred inquired

"I have noticed that the Cooney individual is considerably larger and more powerful than you. But you can emphasize to him now that, since we are in a state of common danger, this is no time to indulge in procreational disputes...."

Before Fred could answer, there was a sudden furious squawking from Ruby in the back garden. An instant later, he heard a breathless shriek from Wilma and a sort of horrified bellowing from Howard Cooney. He came pounding up to the front porch just as the house door flew open. Howard dashed out, wild-eyed, leaped down the porch stairs, almost knocking Fred over, and charged on.

Fred's impression was that the big man hadn't even seen him. As he scrambled up on the porch, there was a thud and a startled "Oof!" behind him, as if Howard had just gone flat on his face, but he didn't look back. Wilma came darting through the door in Howard's tracks, Ruby tucked firmly under her left arm and a big iron

skillet grasped in her right hand. Her face looked white as paper under its tan.

"Run, Fred!" she gasped. "There's something at the back door!"

"You're mistaken, Wilma," the Cobrisol's voice informed them from the foot of the stairs. "It's now coming around the house. Up on the front porch, everyone! You, too, Cooney! No place to run to, you know!"

"What's coming?" Fred demanded hoarsely. He added to Wilma, "Here, I'll hold Ruby!"

Nobody answered immediately. Howard thumped up the steps, closely followed by the Cobrisol. It struck Fred then that it probably had been a flip of the Cobrisol's tail that halted Howard; but Howard wasn't complaining. He took up a stand just behind Wilma, breathing noisily.

The Cobrisol coiled up on Fred's left.

"It's an Icier.... Well, things could be worse—listen!"

Ruby clasped under his left arm, Fred listened. A number of Eyes were bobbing about excitedly in front of the porch. Suddenly, he heard footsteps.

They were heavy, slow, slapping steps, as if something were

walking through mud along the side of the house. Fred turned to the edge of the porch where Howard had been pulling up plankings to find material for his still. A four-foot piece of heavy pipe lay beside the loose boards, and he picked that up just as Wilma and Howard uttered a gasp of renewed shock....

Something—the Icier—was standing behind the south end of the porch!

"Ah!" it said in a deep voice, peering in at the group through the railings. "Here we all are!"

FRED STARED at it speechlessly. It stood on two thick legs, and it had a round head where a head ought to be. It was at least seven feet tall, and seemed to be made of moist black leather—even the round, bulging eyes and the horny slit of a mouth were black. But the oddest thing about it was that, in addition, it appeared to have wrapped a long black cloak tightly around itself.

It marched on to the end of the porch and advanced towards the stairs, where it stopped.

"Are all the intelligent in-

habitants of the Place assembled here?" the inhuman voice inquired.

Fred discovered that his knees were shaking uncontrollably. But nobody else seemed willing to answer.

"We're all here!" he stated, in as steady a voice as he could manage. "What do you want?"

The Icier stared directly at him for a long moment. Then it addressed the group in general.

"Let this be understood first! Wherever an Icier goes, an Icier rules!"

It paused. Fred decided not to dispute the statement just now. Neither did anyone else.

"Splendid!" The Icier sounded somewhat mollified. "Now, as all intelligent beings know," it went on, in a more conversational tone, "the Law of the Little Places states that a ruling Icier must never go hungry while another life-form is available to nourish it...." The black cloak around it seemed to stir with a slow, writhing motion of its own. "I am hungry!" the Icier added, simply but pointedly.

UNCONSCIOUSLY, the humans on the porch had drawn a little closer together.

The Cobrisol stayed where it was, motionless and watchful, while the monster's black eyes swiveled from one to the other of the petrified little group.

"The largest one, back there!" it decided shortly.

And with that, what had looked like a cloak unfolded and snapped out to either side of it. For a blurred, horrified second, Fred thought of giant sting-rays on an ocean bottom, of octopi—of demonish vampires! The broad, black flipper-arms the creature had held wrapped about it were lined with row on row of wet-toothed sucker-mouths! From tip to tip, they must have stretched almost fifteen feet!

Howard Cooney made a faint screeching noise and fainted dead away, collapsing limply to the porch.

"Ah!" rumbled the Icier, with apparent satisfaction. "The rest of you may now stand back—" It took a step forward, the arms sweeping around to reach out ahead of it. Then it stopped.

"I said," it repeated, on a note of angry surprise, "that you may now stand back!"

Ruby clacked her beak sharply; there was no other sound. Fred discovered he had

half-raised the piece of pipe, twisting it back from his wrist like a one-handed batter. Wilma held the big skillet in front of her, grasping it determinedly in both hands. Her face wasn't white any more; it was flushed, and her lips were set. And the Cobrisol's neck was drawn back like that of a rattlesnake, its jaws suddenly gaping wide.

"What is this?" The Icier glanced at some of the Eyes floating nearby, as if seeking support. "Are you defying the Law?" it demanded.

No one answered; but Fred realized, in a rush of relief which left him almost weak enough to follow Howard's example, that the monster was licked! It withdrew its horrid flippers slowly, letting them trail on the ground, while it shifted its weight uncertainly from one thick leg to the other.

And then Ruby burst into a series of raucous, derisive sounds that made everyone start nervously, including the Icier. The Cobrisol closed its long jaws with a snap. The Icier snorted, wrapped its flipper-arms back about itself, turned and stalked off toward the apple orchard. Its feet were huge and flat like the

flippers of a seal, Fred noticed, which seemed to account for the odd, sloppy sounds it made with each step.

- At the edge of the trees, it turned again.

"This matter is not settled!" it rumbled menacingly. "But for the time being, the stream back here and the trees are my personal area. You will enter it at your own risk!"

Its voice and appearance still made Fred's skin crawl. "We'll agree to that," he answered hoarsely. "But you'll leave that area again at *your* own risk!"

The Icier gave him a final, silent stare before it moved on into the orchard.

They began to revive Howard Cooney....

ODDLY enough, Howard seemed more sullen than grateful when he woke up finally and realized the Icier was gone.

"If it hadn't been for my weak heart," he growled, "I'd have clobbered the devilish creature!"

"An excellent suggestion," the Cobrisol remarked approvingly. "You'll find it sitting in the trout stream, Cooney...."

Howard grunted and changed the subject. Within

an hour after their encounter with the new neighbor, all the Eyes had disappeared from the area, indicating that whoever was using them didn't expect anything of interest to happen now. But the hoots and robols were back in normal numbers.

Apparently, a crisis had been passed! The only thing remarkable about the next day was that the weather turned hot and dry. The night wasn't much of an improvement, and by noon of the day that followed, it looked as if they were in for a regular Earth-style heat wave.

Wondering whether this meant that summer was now on the Little Place's calendar, Fred rigged up a makeshift hammock on the front porch, which seemed to be the coolest spot around the house. While Wilma gratefully napped in the hammock and Ruby drooped in a corner with a pan of water near her half-open beak, he sat on the front steps putting an edge to their two largest kitchen knives. He'd fastened the knife-handles into longish pieces of piping the afternoon after the Icen showed up; they made quite formidable looking weapons.

But he wished they were all

safely back home again.

Glancing up presently, he discovered the Cobrisol in the meadow, moving slowly toward the house. Howard Cooney hadn't been in sight for the past two hours, which was one of the reasons Fred was maintaining informal guard duty until Wilma woke up. There'd been some trouble with Howard the evening before, and he suspected the tramp was still in a sulky mood, which wouldn't be improved any by the heat.

Twice, on its way to the house, the Cobrisol reached up languidly to snap a low-fluttering hoot out of the air; and each time, Fred winced. He'd convinced Wilma—and nearly convinced himself—that the olive-brown hoots and the pinkish, hopping robols were merely mobile vegetables; but he still didn't like the way they wriggled about hopefully inside the Cobrisol's elastic gullet, as if they were trying to poke their way out again.

“WILMA'S sleeping,” he cautioned the creature, as it came sliding up to the foot of the stairs.

“Fine,” said the Cobrisol in a low, pensive voice. “I don't

imagine you've made any progress in your plans to return to Earth?"

"Well, no. . . . Why?"

"It's unlikely that there is any way of doing it," the Cobrisol admitted. "Very unlikely. However, if you think of something, I'd appreciate it if you invited me to go along!"

Surprised, Fred said he'd be happy to do that. "I think you'd like it on a real farm," he added, a little doubtfully.

"Cobrisols are adaptable creatures," it assured him. "But there are limits!" It glanced indignantly up at their simmering source of heat and light overhead. "Do you realize, Fred, that there've been no Eyes around for nearly two full days? The One has simply gone away, leaving the temperature on high! It's inexcusable."

Fred hadn't considered the possibility that the heat-wave might be due to an oversight on the part of the supervisor. "In that case," he said hopefully, "he might be back any minute to turn it down, mightn't he?"

"He might," said the Cobrisol. "Even so, I feel wasted here! But one thing at a time.

There's fresh trouble coming up, Fred!"

"If it's from the Icient," Fred remarked, a trifle complacently, "I wouldn't worry!" He held up one of his weapons. "There are Icient spears!"

The Cobrisol inspected the spears. "Very ingenious!" it acknowledged. "However, am I right in assuming, Fred, that the procreational problem involving the Cooney individual has come into the open?"

Fred reddened again and glanced at the hammock. "Howard did make a pass at Wilma after dinner last night," he said then, lowering his voice a trifle more. "I told him off!" He had, as a matter of fact, picked up one of the spears he was working on and threatened to run Howard out into the Icient-haunted night. Howard had gone white and backed down hurriedly.

"Ah?" said the Cobrisol. "A pass?"

Fred explained about passes.

"The Cooney is certainly easily frightened by the threat of physical destruction," the Cobrisol remarked. "But a frightened being is dangerously unpredictable!"

It paused, significantly.

"What are you driving at?" Fred inquired.

"An hour or so ago," said the Cobrisol, "I saw Cooney stealing into that section of the apple orchard that extends behind the house! I found him presently engaged in conversation with the Icier—"

"What?" Fred was stunned. "Why, Howard's scared to death of that thing!" he protested.

"I believe that fear of it was one of his motivations," the Cobrisol agreed. "His attitude was a propitiating one. Nevertheless, they have formed an alliance! The Cooney is to rule over all humans that are now in this Place or that may be transferred to it eventually, while he acknowledges the Icier as the supreme ruler of all beings here, and as his own superior.... It was decided that, as the first step in this program, Cooney is to devise a means whereby the Icier can come upon you unawares, Fred, and eat you!"

FRED DIDN'T tell Wilma of Howard's gruesome plotting with the Icier. She wouldn't be able to conceal her feelings well enough; and the conclusion he'd come to with the Cobrisol

was that Howard must not suspect that they knew what he had done. Now and then, looking at the man—who, since his meeting with the Icier, had assumed a conciliatory and even mildly jovial attitude with the Nieheims—he had to suppress twinges of a feeling akin to horror. It was like living under the same roof with a ghoul!

But one had to admit, he thought, that Howard Cooney was being consistent. He had figured out the system here, and he intended to make use of it, just as he had announced he would do. If it hadn't been for the Cobrisol's alertness, he probably would have gotten away with it! In spite of the heat, Fred shivered.

After another two days, the meadow and orchard looked as if they had passed through an extreme summer's drought on Earth. It didn't get *much* hotter; it simply wouldn't cool down again at all, and the Little Place seemed to have forgotten how to produce rain. In the middle of the third night, Fred was lying awake when the Cobrisol slid its rubbery snout up on the pillow, next to his ear, and murmured, "Awake, Fred?"

"Yes," he whispered. It

must have come sliding in by the window, though he hadn't heard a sound.

"The kitchen," it muttered. Then it was gone again. Moving cautiously, Fred managed to get out of the bedroom without rousing either Wilma or Ruby and locked the door quietly behind him. He stood a moment in the almost pitch-black little hallway, grasping the larger of the two Icier spears. In the living room, Howard snored loudly and normally, as if he hadn't a thing on his conscience.

The Cobrisol was waiting beside the door that opened from the kitchen into the garden. That was the weak spot in the house. The windows were all too high and narrow for a creature of the Icier's build to enter by; the front door was bolted and locked, and at night Fred kept the key under his pillow. But the back door was secured only by a bolt which Howard, if he wanted to, could simply slide back to let the monster come inside. . . .

"The Icier left its pool in the stream a short while ago," the Cobrisol whispered. "It's prowling about the house now. Do you hear it?"

Fred did. There wasn't a

breath of breeze in the hot, black night outside; and no matter how carefully the Icier might be placing its great, awkward feet, the back garden was full of rustlings and creakings as it tramped about slowly in the drying vegetation. Presently, it came up to one of the kitchen windows and remained still for a while, apparently trying to peer inside. Fred couldn't even make out its silhouette against the darkness; but after a few seconds, an oily, alien smell reached his nostrils, and his hair went stiff at the roots. . . .

Then it moved off slowly along the side of the house.

"GOING to wake up Cooney now!" The Cobrisol's voice was hardly more than a breath of sound in the dark.

This was how they had expected it would happen; but now that the moment was here, Fred couldn't believe that Howard was going to go through with the plan. Aside from everything else, it would be as stupid as forming a partnership with a man-eating tiger!

There came two faint thumps—presumably the Icier's flip-

per slapping cautiously against the frame of the living room window. Howard's snoring was cut off by a startled exclamation. Then there was dead silence. After what seemed a long time, Fred heard the Icier return along the outside of the house. It stopped in front of the back door and stayed there.

It wasn't until then that he realized Howard already had entered the kitchen. There was a sound of shallow, rapid breathing hardly six feet away from him.

For a time, the tramp simply seemed to stand there, as motionless as the Icier outside the door. Finally, he took a deep, sighing breath, and moved forward again. As Cooney's hand touched the door, groping for the bolt, Fred dropped his spear and flung both arms around him, pinning his arms to his sides and dragging him backwards.

Howard gasped and went heavily to the floor. Fred guessed that the Cobrisol had tripped him up and flung itself across his legs. He wasn't trying to struggle.

"Be quiet or we'll kill you!" he breathed hastily. Then they waited. Howard kept quiet.

What the Icier made of the brief commotion inside the kitchen and the following silence was anybody's guess. It remained where it was for perhaps another ten seconds. Then they heard it move unhurriedly off through the garden and back to the orchard again.

In the bedroom, Ruby started clucking concernedly....

"NOW THAT his criminal purpose has been amply demonstrated," the Cobrisol argued, "the neat and reasonable solution would be for me to swallow Cooney." It eyed Howard appraisingly. "I'm quite distensible enough for the purpose, I think! If we stun him first, the whole affair will be over in less than ten minutes—"

Howard, lying on the floor, tied hand and foot, burst into horrified sobs.

"We're not going to hurt you!" Fred assured him quickly. He wasn't feeling too sorry for Howard at the moment, but Wilma's face had gone white at the Cobrisol's unpleasant suggestion. "But we're not giving you a chance to try any more tricks on us either. You're really in stir now, Howard!"

He explained to Wilma that

they were going to use the bedroom as a temporary jail for Howard, since it was the only room in the house with a separate key.

"I know you were only joking," she told the Cobrisol. "But I wish you wouldn't talk about swallowing anybody again!"

"The jest was in bad taste!" the Cobrisol admitted penitently. It winked a green, unrepentant eye at Fred. "Almost a pun, eh, Fred?"

In the end, they tied Howard up a little more comfortably and took turns watching him till morning. Then Fred cleared out the bedroom, nailed heavy boards across the window, leaving slits for air and light, and locked the prisoner inside.

He'd just finished with that when the Cobrisol called him into the back garden.

"The other half of our criminal population is behaving in an odd fashion," the creature announced. "I wish you'd come along and help me decide why it's digging holes in the stream-bed...."

"Digging holes?" Fred hesitated. "It doesn't sound dangerous," he pointed out.

"Anything you don't under-

stand can be dangerous!" the Cobrisol remarked sententiously. "Better come along, Fred."

Fred sighed and told Wilma to call him back if Howard showed any inclination to try to break out of the bedroom. From the edge of the orchard, they heard the Icier splashing around vigorously in one of the pools of the shrunken stream; and presently they were lying on top of the bank, peering cautiously down at it. Using its feet and flipper-tips, it was making clumsy but persistent efforts to scoop out a deep hole in the submerged mud.

"Iciens,"* whispered the Cobrisol, "are so rarely brought into contact with more civilized species that not much is known of their habits. Can you suggest a purpose for this activity, Fred?"

"Think it could be trying to dig its way out of the Little Place?" Fred whispered back.

"No. It's not that stupid!"

"Well," Fred whispered, "I read about fish once, or it could have been frogs—those are Earth animals—that dig themselves into the mud of a creek that's drying out, and sleep there until it fills up with water again."

The Cobrisol agreed that it was a possibility. "Though it's already dug a number of holes and covered them again...."

"Might still be looking for a soft spot," Fred suggested.

At that moment, they heard Wilma call Fred's name once, in a high, frightened voice.

HOWARD COONEY was waiting for them outside the kitchen door. Wilma stood in front of him, one arm twisted up behind her back, while Howard held the point of a small steak knife against the side of her neck. The two Icier spears leaned against the wall beside him.

"Slow to a walk!" he shouted in a hoarse, ragged voice, as they came in sight.

They slowed. The Cobrisol gliding beside him, Fred walked stiffly as far as the center of the garden, where Howard ordered him to stop again. Wilma's chin was trembling.

"I'm sorry, Fred!" she gasped suddenly. "I let him trick me!"

Howard jerked at her wrist. "Keep your mouth shut!" His eyes looked hot and crazy, and the side of his face kept twitching as he grinned at Fred.

"I'm in charge now, Buster!" he announced. "See how you like it!"

"What do you want me to do?" Fred kept his voice carefully even and didn't look at Wilma.

"The snake," said Howard, "doesn't come any closer, or this knife goes right in! Understand?"

"Certainly, I understand," said the Cobrisol. It began to curl up slowly into its usual resting position. "And, of course, I shall come no closer, Cooney! As you say, you're in charge now...."

Howard ignored it. He jerked his head at the door. "You, Buster—you go right through the kitchen and into the bedroom! Go to the other side of the bedroom and look at the wall. We'll come along behind you, and I'll lock you in. Get it?"

Crazy or not, he had it figured out. Walking slowly toward the door, Fred couldn't think of a thing he could do fast enough to keep that knife from going through Wilma's throat. And once he was locked in—

Wilma's eyes shifted suddenly past him. "*Ruby!*" she screamed. "*Sic him!*"

Fred was almost as shocked as Howard, as the pheasant, her feathers on end, came half-running, half-flying past him, went up like a rocket and whirred straight at Howard's face.

Howard screeched like a woman, dodged and slashed wildly and futilely at Ruby. Wilma twisted free of his grasp and threw herself to the ground as Fred flung himself forwards.

He went headlong over the Cobrisol, which was darting in from the side with the same purpose in mind, and rolled almost to Howard's feet. For a moment, the tramp's white, unshaven face seemed to hang in the air directly above him, glaring down at him; and light flashed from the edge of the knife. It was another wild swipe, and it missed Fred by inches. Then Howard had jumped back into the kitchen and slammed the door behind him.

BY THE time they got around to the front of the house, Cooney was racing down the meadow like a rabbit, heading for the orchard. He dodged in among the trees and turned toward the trout stream.

Fred stopped. "We're not

going to follow him there just now!" he panted. He glanced down at the spear he'd grabbed up before charging off in pursuit, and wondered briefly what he would have done with it if they'd caught up with Howard! The Little Place seemed to bring out the more violent side in everybody's nature.

"Come on!" he said, a little shaken by the thought. "Let's get back to Wilma—"

"A moment, Fred!" The Cobrisol had lifted its head off the ground, peering after Howard. "Ah!"

A harsh, furious roar reached them suddenly from the orchard, mingled with a human yell of fright and dismay. Howard Cooney came scampering out into the meadow again, glancing back over his shoulder. Close behind him lumbered the black, clumsy form of the Icier, its flipper-arms outstretched....

"The confederates," murmured the Cobrisol, "are no longer in complete accord. As I suspected! Come on, Fred!"

It darted down into the meadow in its swift, weaving snake-gait. Fred ran after it, a little surprised by its sudden solicitude for Howard.

Everything happened very quickly then.

The Icier, to Fred's relief, stopped near the edge of the orchard when it saw them coming. The Cobrisol, well ahead of Fred, called suddenly, "Cooney! Wait!"

Howard looked round and saw two other deadly enemies hurrying toward him, apparently cutting off his escape from the Icier. He gave a scream of wild terror, turned and plunged toward the mirror-barrier.

A warning yell was gathering in Fred's throat, but he didn't have time to utter it. Howard reached the barrier and simply went on into it. Except that there wasn't the slightest ripple, he might have vanished in the same way beneath the surface of a quietly gleaming lake of quicksilver.

The Cobrisol turned and came gliding back to Fred.

"The barrier is still soft!" it remarked. "Well, that's the end of Cooney!"

Fred stared down at it, a little dazed. He was almost certain now that it had deliberately chased Howard into the barrier! "Is there anything we can do?"

The Cobrisol curled up com-

fortably in the rustling dead grass. The green eyes stared blandly up at him for a moment.

"No," it said. "There is nothing we can do. But in a while there may be something to see, and I think you should see it, Fred! Why don't you go back to Wilma? I'll call you when it happens."

Fred glanced at the tall, shining thing that had silently swallowed up a man. It was a very hot morning, but for a moment he felt chilled.

He turned round and went back to Wilma.

WHAT HAD occurred, according to Wilma, was that, shortly after Fred left the house, Howard Cooney began to groan loudly behind the bedroom door. When Wilma asked him what was wrong, he gasped something about his heart and groaned some more. Then there was a heavy thump inside the room, as if he'd fallen down: and, after that, silence.

Remembering he'd said he had a bad heart, Wilma hurriedly unlocked the door, without stopping to think. And Howard, of course, was waiting behind the door and simply grabbed her.

Wilma looked too remorseful for Fred to make any obvious comments. After all, he thought, he hadn't married her because of anything very remarkable about her brains, and Howard was—or had been—a pretty good actor! He decided not to tell her just yet what had happened to Howard; and when he heard the Cobrisol call him, he went out alone.

"He's trying to get out now," the Cobrisol told him. "Take a good look, Fred! If you ever go Outside, you'll know why you don't want to get lost there, like he did!"

FRED STARED apprehensively at the barrier which was changing as he looked at it. Now it no longer reflected the meadow and the house; its strange surface had become like a sheet of milky glass, stretching up into the artificial sky, and glowing as if from a pale light behind it. There was also a pattern of shifting and sliding colors inside it, which now coalesced suddenly into the vague outlines of Howard Cooney's shape. Only the shape looked about forty feet tall! It stood half turned away from them, in an attitude as if

Howard were listening or watching.

"He's got everything aroused out there," said the Cobrisol, "and he's begun to realize it...."

Fred's mouth felt suddenly dry. "Listen," he began, "couldn't we—that is, couldn't I—"

"No," said the Cobrisol. "You couldn't! If you went Outside, you still couldn't find Cooney. And," it added cryptically, "even if I told you how to get back, they're alert now and they'd get you before you could escape—"

Fred swallowed. "Who are *they*?"

"Nobody knows," said the Cobrisol. "There are a number of theories—rank superstition, for the most part— Watch it, Fred! I think they've found him...."

The shape inside the barrier had begun to move jerkily as if it were running in short sprints, first in one direction, then in another. Its size and proportions also changed constantly, and for a few seconds Howard Cooney's fear-crazed face filled the whole barrier, his eyes staring out into the Little Place.

Then the face vanished, and

there were many tiny figures of Cooney scampering about in the barrier.

Then he was no longer scampering, but crawling on hands and knees.

"They have him now!" the Cobrisol whispered.

There was only a single large figure left, lying face down inside the barrier, and to Fred it seemed to be slowing melting away. As it dwindled, the odd inner light of the barrier also dimmed, until it suddenly went out. A few seconds later, the milkiness vanished from it, and it had become a mirror-barrier again.

That appeared to be the end of it.

What actually had happened to Howard Cooney was something the Cobrisol was either unwilling or unable to explain to Fred. He didn't question it too persistently. He had an uneasy feeling that he wouldn't really like to know....

THE MORNING the kitchen faucets stopped delivering water from their unknown source of supply wasn't noticeably hotter than the preceding few mornings had been. But when Wilma called from the kitchen to complain of the

trouble, Fred was appalled. He didn't dare finish the thought that leaped into his mind; he shut it away, and went hurriedly into the bathroom without replying to Wilma.

A thin, warm trickle ran from the tub faucet there, and that was all.

He shut it off at once, afraid of wasting a single drop, and started for the kitchen. Wilma met him in the hall.

"Fred," she repeated, "the water—"

"I know," he said briskly. "We'll take all the pots and pans we have and fill them with water from the bathtub. It's still running there, but not very strong. They might turn it on again any moment, of course, but we want to be sure...."

He'd felt he was being quite casual about it, but as he stopped talking, something flickered in Wilma's eyes; and he knew they were both thinking the same thought.

She reached out suddenly and squeezed his hand. "It's too hot to kiss you, but I love you, Freddy! Yes, let's fill the pots and pans—"

"Or you do that, while I go talk to the Cobrisol," Fred said. He added reassuringly,

"The Cobrisol's had a lot of experience with these Places, you know! It'll know just what to do."

What he had in mind, however, when he left Wilma in charge of the pots and pans in the bathroom, picked up a spear and went quietly outdoors, wasn't conversation with the Cobrisol. There had been no reason to dispute the Icier's appropriation of the entire trout stream; but now a more equitable distribution of the water rights in the Little Place seemed to be in order.

IF IT hadn't been so breathlessly still, the scene around the house might have been an artistic reproduction of the worst section of the Dust Bowl—or it could have been one of the upper and milder levels of hell, Fred thought. He looked around automatically to see if the Eyes had returned—they hadn't—and instead caught sight of the Cobrisol and the Icier down near the mirror-barrier, at the orchard's edge.

He stopped short in surprise. So far as he could see at that distance, the two creatures were engaged in a serious but not unfriendly discussion. There was about twenty-five

feet of space between them, which was probably as close as the Cobrisol, fast as it was, cared to get to the Icier. But it was coiled up in apparent unconcern.

He walked slowly down the dried-out meadow toward them. As he approached, both turned to look at him.

"Fred," said the Cobrisol, "the Icier reports there isn't even a drop of moist mud left in the trout stream this morning!"

The Icier stared balefully at Fred and said nothing; but he realized a truce had been declared to cope with the emergency. Somewhat self-consciously, he grounded the spear—it was useless now—and told them about the kitchen faucets. "What can we do about it? In this heat—"

"In this heat, and without water," the Cobrisol agreed soberly, "none of us will be alive very many hours from now! Unless—"

"Fred!" Wilma's call reached them faintly from the porch.

He turned, with a sinking feeling in his chest. "Yes?"

"The — bathtub — just — quit!" Her distant, small face looked white and strained.

Suddenly, Fred was extraordinarily thirsty. "It's all right, honey!" he shouted back. "We're going to fix it!" She hesitated a moment, and then went back into the house. He turned to the other two. "We *can* fix it, can't we?" he pleaded.

"There is a way, of course," the Icier rumbled. "But—" It shrugged its black leather shoulders discouragely.

"We've been discussing it," said the Cobrisol. "The fact is, Fred, that the only one who can remedy this situation is yourself! And, undoubtedly, the attempt would involve extreme risk for you personally...."

Fred guessed it then. "One of us has to go Outside to fix it; and neither of you can do it. Is that it?"

The two creatures stared at him.

"That's it!" the Cobisol agreed reluctantly. "I can't explain, just now, why it would be impossible for either of us to go Outside—but between us we can tell you exactly what to do there! The risk, of course, is that what happened to Cooney will also happen to you. But if you make no mistakes—"

"He'll panic!" the Icier

growled darkly. "They all do!"

"No," said the Cobrisol. "It's been done before, Fred. But not very often."

Fred sighed and wiped a film of dirty sweat off his forehead with a hand that shook a little, but not too much. It seemed to him they were making a great deal of conversation about something that couldn't be helped!

"Dying of thirst," he pointed out reasonably, "gets to be pretty dangerous, too! What am I supposed to do?"

AS SOON as he'd stepped Outside, he realized that, though the Cobrisol and the Icier had warned him of this particular problem, his real difficulty would be to remember exactly what he was supposed to do.

Basically, it was very simple—but he didn't want to do it!

Irrelevant thought-pictures were streaming through his mind. Wilma's white, tear-stained face as he'd seen it last, just a moment ago—but that moment was darting off into the past behind him as if a week passed with every heart-beat here! Clusters of bright, flickering memory-scenes of their farm, back home on

Earth, swirled next through his head.... The reason for this kind of disturbance, the two creatures had told him, was that he didn't want to know what was going on Outside!

It was too different. Different enough, if he hadn't been warned, to hold him here shocked and stunned, trying to blind himself mentally to the strangeness around him, until it was too late—

That thought frightened Fred enough to drive the little escape-pictures out of his head as if a sudden gust of wind had swept them up and away together. He'd just recalled that he had very little time here!

He looked around.

It wasn't, he thought, really as bad as he'd expected! He got the instant impression—partly, at least, because of what he'd been told—that he was standing in the middle of the audible thought-currents of a huge mechanical mind. Not audible, exactly; the currents seemed to be tugging at him or pulsing rhythmically through and about him, in all directions. Most of them, as the Cobrisol had explained, appeared to be connected in some way or another with the up-keep of the Little Place. But there were

others, darkly drifting things or very deep sounds—it was hard to distinguish really just what they *were* most like—that were completely and terrifyingly incomprehensible to Fred....

Some of those were the dangerous ones! He wasn't to give them any attention. He waited.

THE MOMENT none of those dark, monstrous waves seemed to be passing anywhere near him, he quickly verbalized the first of the three things they had told him to think here:

"The Little Place has become too dry for the life-forms in it! There should be water and rain again in the Little Place!"

He held the thought, picturing rain coming down in sheets all over the Little Place, the trout stream running full again, and water pouring freely from all the faucets in the house. Then he let the pictures and the thoughts go away from him. For an instant, there seemed to be a tiny shifting, a brief eddy of disturbance passing through all the mental flows about him.

Hurriedly, he formed the second thought:

"The temperature has become too high for the life-forms in the Little Place! The temperature must be adjusted to their normal living requirements!"

This time, he'd barely finished the thought before it seemed to be plucked out of his mind by a sudden agitated swirling in the living currents about him. Then he had a sense of darkening, and something huge and deadly and invisible went flowing closely past, trailing behind it a fluttering apparition that brought a soundless scream of terror into Fred's throat. It was a shape that looked exactly as Howard Cooney had looked in life, except that it was no thicker than a sheet of paper! For an instant, as Howard's eyes glared sightlessly in his direction, he had the impression that somewhere far overhead Howard had called his name. Then the thing that brought darkness with it and the fluttering shape were gone.

The other disturbances continued. In some way, the Outside was growing aware of his presence and beginning to look for him!

The next order he hadn't discussed with the others, since

he was certain they would have tried to talk him out of giving it.

"The life-forms in the Little Place that were taken away from Earth must be returned unharmed to Earth!"

Hastily, thinking of the Cobrisol, he added:

"Including any other life-forms that would like to come along—except Iciens!"

Something like a long crash of thunder went shaking all through him—apparently, that last set of instructions had upset the entire Outside!

Fred didn't bother to think out the final thought. He shouted with all his strength: "And I should *now* be standing on the other side of the mirror-barrier inside the Little Place!"

Instantly, he was there. Rain was slamming down in sheets all about him, like an Earthly cloud-burst, as Wilma, laughing and crying, grabbed him by an arm. Hand in hand, they ran through the soaking meadow toward the house, the Cobrisol streaking ahead of them. The Icier was nowhere in sight.

"I DIDN'T say exactly how *much* rain and water!" Fred admitted. They had discovered they couldn't turn the

faucets off now! It didn't matter much, since the surplus water vanished down through the drains as usual. But, two hours after Fred's return to the Little Place, the cloud-burst outdoors was continuing in full strength.

The Cobrisol lay in a corner of the kitchen, its teeth chattering, as if it were chilled. Wilma had shoved blankets under it and piled more blankets on top, and they had lit the stove. Actually the temperature had dropped only to the equivalent of a rather warm, rainy spring day on Earth.

"I should have cautioned you," the creature remarked, between fits of chattering, "to limit your order for water! You had no way of knowing that Cobrisols react unfavorably to excessive atmospheric moisture...."

"This capsulating you mentioned," Wilma inquired concernedly, "does it hurt?"

"Not at all, Wilma!" the Cobrisol assured her. "I shall simply shrivel up rather suddenly—it's a completely automatic process, you see, and not under my control—and form a hard shell around myself. As soon as things dry out suffi-

ciently, the shell splits, and there I am again!"

Fred had offered to go back Outside and rephrase the order concerning the water, but he was rather relieved when everyone told him not to be foolish. At worst, the Cobrisol would simply go dormant for a while, and the disturbance caused by his visit obviously hadn't settled out yet.

From time to time, strange lights went gliding about erratically inside the mirror-barrier, as if the Little Place's mechanical wardens were persisting in their search for the intruder. Occasional faint tremors passed through the foundations of the house, and there were intermittent rumblings in the air, which might have been simulated Earth-thunder, to accompany the rain.

"There's a good chance," the Cobrisol explained, "that all this commotion may return the One's attention to the Little Place, in which case we can expect normal weather conditions to be re-established promptly. Otherwise—well, I'm sure you agree with me now, Fred, that only an absolute emergency would justify going Outside again!"

And, of course, Fred did

agree. He hadn't gone into specific details concerning his experience there, since he knew it would be disturbing to Wilma. And neither had he mentioned his order to get them transferred back to Earth—almost anything seemed justified to get away from a place where your future depended entirely on somebody else's whims—but he was guiltily certain that that was the cause of most of the uproar!

Now and then they looked out from a window to see if the Eyes had reappeared; but none had. Towards evening, Fred observed the Icier wandering about the lower end of the meadow, trailing its flipper-arms through rivulets of water and stopping now and then to stare up into the streaming sky, as if it enjoyed getting thoroughly soaked. Unlike the Cobrisol, it was, of course, an aquatic sort of creature to begin with.

Just as he went to sleep that night, Fred almost managed to convince himself that when he next woke up, he would discover they were all safely back on Earth. However, when he did awaken, he knew instantly the Outside hadn't acted upon that order. They were still in the

Little Place—and it was raining harder than ever!

THE COBRISOL had elected to sleep in the kitchen, but it wasn't lying on the chair before the stove where they had left it. Fred was wondering where it had crawled to, when another thought struck him. Expectantly, he separated the blankets on the chair.

The shell was lying there, a brown, smooth, egg-shaped shell—but hardly bigger than a healthy goose-egg! It was difficult to imagine the Cobrisol shrinking itself down to that size; but it couldn't be anything else. Feeling as if he were handling an urn containing the remains of a friend, Fred carried the shell carefully into the bedroom and laid it down on the bed.

"He said it was practically impossible to damage these shells," he reminded Wilma. "But it might be better not to let Ruby peck at it."

"I'll watch her," Wilma promised, big-eyed. From the way she kept staring at the shell, Fred gathered that Wilma, too, felt as if the Cobrisol somehow had passed away, even if it was only a temporary arrangement.

"He'll probably be hatching again pretty soon," he said briskly. "I'll go check on the weather now...."

He opened the front porch door and stopped there, appalled. A sheet of water covered the entire meadow and lapped up to within forty feet of the house! In the orchard, half the trees were submerged. Considering the slope of the ground, the water would be at least ten yards deep where it stood against the mirror-barrier. And the rain still drummed down furiously upon it!

He checked his first impulse to call Wilma. News as bad as that could wait a little! The barrier stood there, placidly mirroring the scene of the flood. Except for eerie rumbling sounds that still echoed in the upper air, the Outside seemed to be back to normal.

So, if he swam across now, Fred thought, before it rose any higher—

The order would be a quite simple one: "Reduce rainfall and water-level to meet the normal requirements of the life-forms within the Little Place."

And if he did it immediately, Wilma wouldn't have a chance

to get all upset about it.

Of course, if he got caught Outside this time—

She and Ruby would be just as badly off one way as the other, he decided. He wasn't going to get caught! It would only take him a few minutes....

HE CLOSED the porch door quietly behind him, stripped hurriedly to his shorts and started down towards the water, mentally rehearsing the order he would give, to fix it firmly in his mind. Intent on that, he almost overlooked the slow, heavy swirling of the water-surface to his left as he began to wade out. A big fish, a section of his mind reported absently, had come up out of deep water into the shallows, turned sharply and gone out again—

He stopped short, feeling a sudden burst of icy pricklings all over him. A fish? There weren't any fish here!

He turned, slipping and almost stumbling on the submerged grass, and plunged back toward the higher ground. There was a sudden tremendous splash just behind him and a surge of water round his knees. Then he was on solid ground; he ran on a few yards

and slowed, looking back.

The Icier hadn't tried to follow him out of the water. It stood upright, black and dripping, in the rain-whipped shallows, probably furious at having missed its chance at him.

They stared silently at each other. He might have guessed it, Fred thought, looking at the great flat flipper-arms. The first time he'd seen it, it had reminded him of a huge sting-ray. It was an aquatic creature by choice, and this flood suited it perfectly!

And it was intelligent enough to know why he would want to swim back to the mirror-barrier!

He thought of the speed with which it had come driving after him, and knew that even with his spears he didn't have a chance against that kind of creature in deep water.

The Icier knew it, too! But it might expect him to make a final desperate attempt before the water came lapping into the house. . . .

Fred walked back to the porch and pulled his clothes on again. When he looked round before going inside, the Icier had vanished.

LESS THAN three minutes later, Fred stepped quietly out the back door, carrying his spear. He heard Wilma lock and bolt the door behind him as he splashed carefully through the big puddles in the garden. Then he was trotting up the rain-drenched rising ground behind the house towards a wall of misty nothingness a few hundred yards away.

He wished the Cobrisol hadn't been obliged to capsule itself so quickly; he could have used that knowledgeable creature's advice just now! But it had mentioned that there were a number of soft spots in the barriers around the Little Place. All he had to do was to find one that the rising flood hadn't made inaccessible, step through it, and give one quick order to the huge mechanical mind that was the Outside.

That was the way he had explained it to Wilma. He had a notion the Icier wouldn't attempt to stop him outside the water, even if it knew what he was up to. Spear in hand and in his own element, he didn't intend to be stopped by it, anyway!

He had covered half the distance between the house and

the nearest barrier when a new inhabitant of the Little Place stood up unhurriedly behind a rock twenty yards ahead of him, blocking his advance.

Fred stopped, startled. For a moment, he had thought it was the Icier. But then he saw it was much closer than he had thought and quite small, hardly four feet high; though in every other respect it was very similar to the black monster. It spread its flipper-arms wide, opened a black gash of a mouth and snarled at him, fearless and threatening.

He thought: *It's a young one!*

The Icier had started to breed....

Holding the spear in both hands, Fred walked rapidly towards it. Icieris at any age appeared to be irreconcilably hostile, and he didn't care to wait until the big one came along to join the dispute! If it didn't get out of his way—

At the last moment, with a hiss of fury, the Icier cub waddled aside. Fred stepped cautiously past it—and stopped again.

AN ARMY of the little horrors seemed to be rising up in front of him! They

sprouted into view behind boulders and bushes, and came hurrying in from right and left. There was a burst of ugly, hoarse Icier voices, which sounded very much like a summons to their awesome parent.

For a second or two, Fred was chiefly bewildered. Where had that horde arrived from so suddenly? Then a memory of the big Icier, scooping out holes in the mud of the half-dried trout stream, flashed up; it must have been sowing its brood then, in some strange, unearthly fashion. Obviously their growth rate simply wasn't that of Earth creatures.

He half turned and speared the first one as its flipper-tip gripped his leg. The blade sank into its body, and it snarled hideously, striking at him while it died. He pulled out the spear and slashed at another which had rushed in but stopped now, just out of reach.

Three had moved in behind him, apparently with the intention of cutting off his retreat to the house. But he was still headed for the barrier. He dodged to the left and turned uphill again; another line of them confronted him there!

As Fred hesitated, he heard Wilma cry out to him. He

glanced back and saw she had come out of the kitchen, carrying the other spear—and that the big Icier was striding ponderously along the side of the house, on its way up from the flooded meadow....

He turned back.

He had to spear two more of the ugly young before he got down to the garden; and the second of the two clung howling and dying to the spear-shaft. He dropped the spear, bundled Wilma into the kitchen and slammed and bolted the door almost in the big Icier's face. Seconds later, the black pack was roaring and banging against the outside wall. A flipper slapped and tore at the window-screen, and he jabbed at it with the tip of Wilma's spear until it vanished.

WILMA WAS shouting in his ear. "What?" he yelled dazedly.

"The Eyes!" she shouted. "They're back!"

"The Eyes?" Then he saw she was pointing up out the window into the rain.

More than a dozen of the odd shiny gadgets drifted there in the air. As Fred stared, a huge one—almost ten feet across—sailed slowly and ma-

jestically past the window. The roaring outside the house stopped suddenly, and there were splashing sounds everywhere from the garden, as if the Icier and its brood were departing in great haste.

But the thundering racket in the upper air was growing louder by the second—and changing now in a manner Fred couldn't immediately define. He stood listening, and suddenly a wild notion came to him. He turned to Wilma.

"Quick! Get into the bedroom!"

"The bedroom?" She looked startled. "Why?"

"Don't ask!" He hustled her down the hall ahead of him. Ruby was screeching her head off behind the closed door. "Grab Ruby—make her shut up! I'll be right back."

Recklessly, he tore open the front door and looked out. Young Icier were still streaming past on either side of the house, hurrying awkwardly to the water's edge and plunging in. The big Eye—or another one like it—was stationed in front of the porch now, turning slowly as if anxious to take in everything. For a moment, it seemed to Fred that it was fo-

cusing itself directly on him....

He closed the door and hurried back into the bedroom. Wilma was sitting on the bed with Ruby in her lap and the shell of the Cobrisol under one hand. He sat down beside her.

"What do we do now, Fred?"

"We just wait!" He was trembling with exhaustion and excitement.

"Those noises—" she said.

"Yes?"

"It sounds to me," Wilma told him wonderingly, "exactly like two people were having themselves a big fight next door!"

"Or up in the attic," Fred nodded. "And it sounds even more like one person is being told off good by another one, doesn't it?"

"By a much bigger one!" Wilma agreed. She was watching him shrewdly. "You know something you haven't told me yet! What's going to happen?"

"I'm not sure," Fred admitted. "But I think in a minute or two—"

The world suddenly went black.

IT WAS still black when Fred found he was thinking again. He decided he must have

been unconscious for some while, because he felt stiff all over. Now he was lying on his back on something hard and lumpy and warm. Wilma's head, he discovered next, was pillowed on his arm, and she was breathing normally. Somewhere near the top of his head, Ruby clucked away irritably as she tended to do when she was half awake.

"Wilma?" he whispered.

"Yes, Fred?" she said sleepily. And then, "Where are we? It's awfully dark here!"

He was wondering himself. "It'll probably get light soon," he said soothingly. Wilma was sitting up, and now she gave an exclamation of surprise.

"We're outdoors somewhere, Fred! This is grass we're lying on—"

"It was magnificently done!" another voice remarked, startlingly close to Fred's ear. It was a small, rather squeaky voice, but it seemed familiar.

"Who was that?" Wilma inquired nervously.

"I think," said Fred, "it's the Cobrisol!" He groped about cautiously and found the shell lying next to his head. It appeared to be cracked down the long side, and something

was stirring inside it. "Are you uncapsulating again?" he inquired.

"Correct!" said the Cobrisol. "But allow me to continue my congratulations, Fred. You appear to have resolved successfully a situation that had baffled even a Cobrisol! Need I say more?"

"I guess not," said Fred. "Thanks—"

"Wilma," the Cobrisol resumed, "you seem concerned about this darkness—"

"I'm glad you're back, Cobrisol!" she told it.

"Thank you," said the creature. "As I was about to explain, the appearance of darkness about us is a common phenomenon of transfer. Nothing to worry about! And—ah!"

They all cried out together, a chorus of startled and expectant voices. Around them, like black curtains whisking aside, like black smoke dispelled by a blower, the darkness shifted and vanished. Yellow sunlight blazed down on them, and the two humans threw up their hands to shield their eyes.

Then they lowered them again. It was, after all, no brighter than was normal for a clear summer day! They were sitting at the top of a sloping

green meadow. They looked out over it, blinking....

"Why!" Wilma said, in a small, awed voice. "Why, Fred! We're home!"

Then she burst into tears.

SOME HOURS later, sitting on the front porch of the farm house—the *real* front porch of the *real* farm house—Fred remarked, "There's one thing I just don't get!"

"What's that, Fred?" The Cobrisol lifted its head inquiringly out of the hammock. It was about the size of a healthy rattlesnake by now and accepting a sandwich or two from Wilma every half hour.

Fred hesitated and then told the Cobrisol quietly about the gruesome, fluttering thing he'd seen Outside that looked like Cooney.

"There are various theories about what happens to those who get lost Outside," the Cobrisol said thoughtfully. "There is no reason to provide you with additional material for nightmares, so I won't tell you what I think you saw. But it was the fact that the Icier and I were acquainted with some of those theories that made it quite impossible for

either of us to do what you did!"

It paused. "Otherwise, everything seems clear enough now. The One who collected you and Wilma and Ruby and the Cooney was obviously as immature as I suspected. He had no right to do it. Your interference with the mechanisms of the Outside created enough disturbance to attract the attention of a mature One, who then chastised the offender and returned you to Earth where you belonged—"

THE COBRISOL sniffed the air greedily. "That's another bacon-and-egg sandwich Wilma is fixing!" it remarked with appreciation. "Yes, I'm sure I'll like it on Earth, Fred. But your hypothesis that my shell came along by accident is highly debatable. For one thing, you've noticed, of course, that we have retained the ability to understand each other's speech-forms—which, I gather, is not the rule among different species on Earth!"

"Well—" The fact had escaped Fred's attention till now. "That could be an accident," he pointed out. "They just forgot to switch it off, or whatever they do."

"Possibly," the Cobrisol acknowledged. "I believe, however, that having become aware of our cooperative efforts in the Little Place, the mature One decided to utilize the special talents of a Cobrisol in whatever Project is being conducted on Earth. Had you thought of going into politics, Fred?"

Fred chuckled. "No! And I don't blame you for not being able to get rid of the feeling you're still in some Place or other. But this is Earth—and nobody else has any Projects here! You'll realize all that, by and by."

"No doubt," said the Cobrisol. "What's that passing way up high above the apple orchard, Fred?"

Fred looked, and leaped excitedly out of his chair. "Hey, Wilma! Come quick!" he shouted. "No—it's gone now! Boy, they *are* fast...."

Then his voice trailed off, and he felt his face go pale, as he turned to stare at the Cobrisol.

"A flying saucer!" he muttered.

"Oh?" said the Cobrisol. "Is that what they call the Eyes here, Fred?"

THE END