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# THE MASTERS

By URSULA K. LeGUIN

*The black numbers fantasied through his brain, and  
the piddling uses of the Comparing Sticks  
dwindled into insignificance.*

*But there was a price to pay for knowledge.*

IN darkness a man stood alone, naked, holding a smoking torch. The reddish glow lit air and ground for only a few feet; beyond that was the darkness, the immeasurable. From moment to moment there was a rush of wind, a half-glimpsed glitter of eyes, a vast muttering: "Hold it higher!" The man obeyed, though the torch shook in his shaking hands. He raised it clear above his head, while the darkness rushed and jabbered around him, closing in. The wind blew colder, the red flame guttered. His rigid arms began to quiver, then to jerk a little; his face was oily with sweat; he barely heard the soft, huge jabbering, "Hold it up, up, hold it up . . ." The current of time had stopped; only the whispering grew and grew till it was a

howling, and still, horribly, nothing touched him, nothing came within the circle of light. "Now walk!" the great voice howled, "Walk forward!"

The torch above his head, he stepped forward on the ground he could not see. It was not there. With a scream for help, he fell, darkness and thunder about him, the torch he would not let go flaming backward into his eyes.

Time . . . time, and light, and pain, they had all started again. He was crouching in some kind of ditch, on all fours in the mud. His face stung and his eyes, in this bright light, were full of fog. He looked up from his mud-blotched nakedness to a blurred, radiant figure standing above him. Light fell in glory on white hair, the long folds of a white cloak. The eyes gazed at

Ganil, the voice spoke to him: "You lie in the grave. You lie in the Grave of Knowledge. So lie your forefathers forever beneath the ashes of the fires of Hell." The voice swelled out: "O fallen Man, arise!" Ganil managed to get to his feet. The white figure was pointing: "That is the light of Human Reason. It guided you to the grave. Drop it." Ganil realized he was still holding a mud-sodden black stick, the torch; he let it fall. "Now rise," the white figure cried in a slow exaltation, "rise from darkness and walk in the light of Common Day!" Hands reached to Ganil, helping and hauling him up. Men knelt offering him basins and sponges, others towelled him, rubbed him down till he stood clean and warm, a grey cloak round his shoulders, amid the chatting and laughter, coming and going, in the bright spacious hall. A bald man clapped his shoulder. "Come on, time for the Oath."

**D**ID I—did I do all right?" "Fine! Only you held up that damn fool torch so long. Thought you'd keep us growling around in the dark all day. Come on." They led him over black pavement and under the very lofty, white-beamed ceiling, to a curtain that dropped, pure white, in a few straight folds, thirty feet from roof to floor

"Curtain of Mystery," somebody said to Ganil in a matter-of-fact tone. Laughing and talking had died away, they stood all round him, silent. In silence the white curtain parted. Ganil stared fog-gily at what was revealed: a high Altar, a long table, and an old man in white.

"Postulant, will you swear our Oath with us?"

Somebody nudged Ganil, whispering, "I will."—"I will," Ganil stuttered.

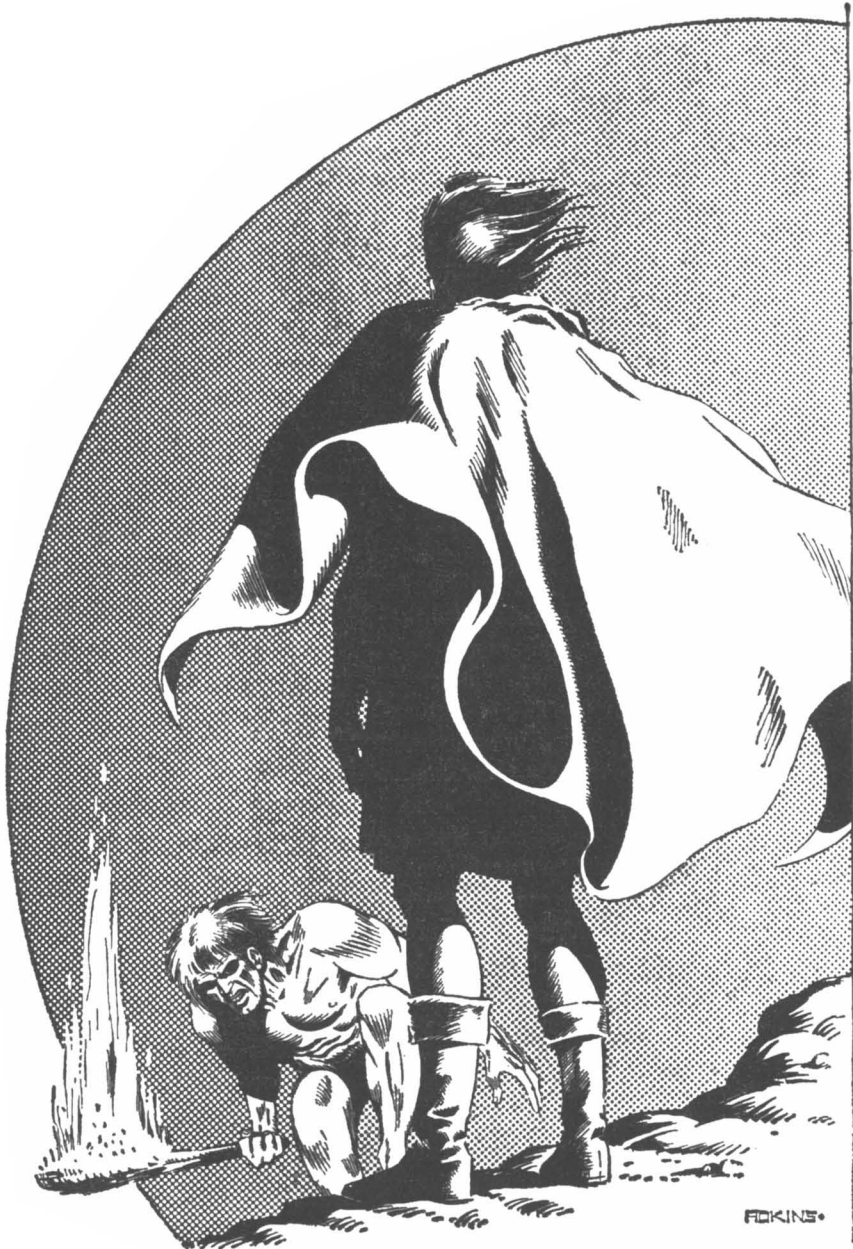
"Swear then, Masters of the Rite!" The old man raised up a shape of silver: an X-cross, supported by an iron shaft. "Under the Cross of the Common Day I swear never to reveal the rites and mysteries of my Lodge—"

"Under the Cross . . . I swear . . . the rites . . ." muttered all the men around Ganil, and propelled by another nudge he muttered with them.

"To live well, to work well, to think well—" As Ganil finished repeating this a voice whispered in his ear, "Don't swear."

"To avoid all heresies, to betray all necromancers to the Courts of College, and to obey the High Masters of my Lodge from now forth till my death—" Mutter, mutter. Some seemed to be repeating the long passage, some not; Ganil, confused, muttered a word or two and then stood silent.

"And I swear never to teach



the Mysteries of Machinery to any gentile. I swear this beneath the Sun." A grating rumble almost drowned their voices. Slowly, crankily, a section of the roof was swinging back to reveal the yellow-grey, cloud-covered sky of summer. "Behold the Light of Common Day!" the old man in white cried out, triumphant, and Ganil stared up at it. The machinery apparently stuck before the skylight was fully open; there was a loud clanking of gears, then silence. The old man came forward, kissed Ganil on both cheeks, and said, "Welcome, Master Ganil, to the Inner Rite of the Mystery of the Machine." The initiation was over. Ganil was a Master of his Lodge.

**M**EAN burn you got there," the bald fellow said as they all walked back down the hall. Ganil put up his hand and found that his left cheek and temple were raw and sore. "Lucky it missed your eye."

"Just missed being blinded by the light of Reason, eh?" said a soft voice. Glancing round Ganil saw a fair man, with brown hair and blue eyes, actually blue, like those of an albino cat or a blind horse. He looked away from the deformity at once, but the fair man went on in his soft voice, the voice that had whispered "Don't swear" during the taking of the oath, "I'm Mede Fairman.

I'll be your Co-Master in Lee's shop. Feel like getting a beer when we're out of here?"

The dank beer-dreggy warmth of the tavern was a queer change from all the terror and ceremony of the day. Ganil felt dizzy. Mede Fairman drank off half a tankard, wiped foam pleurably off his mouth, and inquired, "What d'you think of the initiation?"

"It was—it was—"

"Humbling?"

"Yes," Ganil agreed. "Really humbling."

"Humiliating, even," the blue-eyed man suggested, and finished off his tankard.

"Yes. A—a great mystery." Perplexed, Ganil stared down into his beer. Mede smiled and said in his soft voice, "I know. Drink up, now. I think you ought to have an Apothecary look at that burn." Ganil obediently followed him out into the evening, into the narrow streets thronged with pedestrians, horse-carts, ox-carts, chuffing motor-carts. In the Merchantsplace the booths of the artisans were being closed for the night, and down High Street the great doors of the Shops and Lodges were already barred. Here and there the overhung, elbowing houses were parted by the blank yellow facade of a temple, marked with one plain circle of polished brass. In the dull, brief summer twilight under the unmoving clouds

the black-haired, bronze-skinned people of the Common Day crowded and idled and pushed and talked and cursed and laughed, and Ganil, dizzy from fatigue and pain and strong beer, kept close beside Mede as if, for all his own new Masterhood, this blue-eyed stranger were his only guide.

\* \* \*

"XVI plus IXX," Ganil said impatiently, "What the devil, boy, can't you add." The apprentice flushed red. "Isn't it XXXVI, then, Master Ganil?" he asked feebly. For answer Ganil jammed one of the rods the boy had been machining into its place in the steam-engine that was being repaired; it was too long by an inch.

"It's because my rule of thumb's so long, sir," the boy said, displaying his knobby hands. The distance between first and second thumbjoint was in fact unusually long. "So it is," Ganil said. His dark face darkened. "Very interesting. But it doesn't matter how long your inch is so long as you use it consistently. And what matters, you blockhead, is that XVI and IXX don't make XXXVI, never have, never can, never will till the world ends—you incompetent gentile!"

"Yes, sir. It's so hard to remember, sir."

"It's intended to be hard to

remember, Wannu Prentice," said a deep voice: Lee the Shopmaster, a fat deep-chested man with bright black eyes. "Come over here a minute, Ganil." Leading him to a quieter corner of the great workshop, Lee went on cheerfully, "You're a bit impatient, Master Ganil."

"Wannu should know his addition-tables."

"Even Masters forget an addition now and then, you know." Lee patted Ganil's shoulder in a fatherly way. "Why, you sounded for a moment there as if you expected him to compute it!" He laughed aloud, a fine bass laugh through which his eyes gleamed merrily and with infinite shrewdness. "Take it easy, that's all . . . I understand you're coming for dinner next Altaday Eve?"

"I took the liberty—"

"Fine, fine! More power to you. Wish she'd take on a good steady fellow like you. But I give you fair warning. My daughter's a willful hussy." Again the Master laughed, and Ganil grinned, a little ruefully. The Shopmaster's daughter Lani had not only most of the young men of the Shop, but also her father, twisted right round her little finger. A clever, quicksilver girl, she had at first rather scared Ganil. It took him a while to notice that she spoke, to him only, with a certain shyness, a hint almost of

pleading. He had finally got up courage to ask a dinner-invitation from her mother, the recognized first step of a courtship. He stood now where Lee had left him, thinking of Lani's smile.

"Ganil, have you ever seen the Sun?"

It was a low voice, dry and easy. He turned, meeting his friend's blue eyes.

"The Sun? Yes, of course I have."

"When was the last time?"

"Let's see, I was twenty-six; four years ago. Weren't you here in Edun then? It came out in late afternoon, and that night there were stars. I counted eighty-one, I remember, before the sky closed."

"I was up north in Keling then in my first Mastership." Mede leaned against the wooden guardrail of the model heavy-steam-engine as he spoke. His light eyes looked away from the busy shop, out the windows at the fine, steady rain of late autumn. "Heard you telling off young Wanno just now . . . 'What matters is that XVI and IXX don't make XXXVI . . . When I was twenty-six, four years ago . . . I counted eighty-one stars . . .' A little more and you'd be computing, Ganil."

Ganil frowned, unconsciously rubbing the whitish scar on his temple. "Well, hell, Mede! even gentiles know IV from XXX!"

MEDE smiled faintly. He had his Comparing Stick in his hand, and lowering it he drew on the dusty floor a round shape. "What's that?" he asked.

"The Sun."

"Right. It's also a . . . a figure. A number. The figure for Nothing."

"The figure for Nothing?"

"Yes. You could use it in the subtraction-tables, for instance. I from II leaves I, right? But what does II from II leave?" A pause. He tapped the circle with his stick. "That."

"Yes, of course." Ganil stared down at the circle, the sacred image of the Sun, the Hidden Light, the Face of God. "Is that priest-knowledge?"

"No." Mede drew an X-cross over the circle. "That is."

"Then what—whose knowledge is the—the figure for Nothing?"

"No one's. Anyone's. It's not a mystery." Ganil frowned in surprise at this statement. They spoke in low voices, standing close as if discussing a measurement on Mede's Comparing Stick. "Why did you count the stars, Ganil?"

"I . . . I wanted to know. I've always liked counting, numbers, the tables. That's why I'm a Mechanic."

"Yes. You're thirty, aren't you, you've been a Master for four months now. Did you ever

think, Ganil, that to be a Master means you have learned everything your trade can teach? From now on until your death you'll learn nothing more. There is no more."

"But the Shopmasters—"

"Shopmasters learn some secret signals and passwords," Mede said in his soft, dry voice, "and of course they have power. But they know no more than you . . . You thought perhaps they were allowed to compute, didn't you? They aren't."

Ganil was silent.

"And yet there are things to be learned, Ganil."

"Where?"

"Outside."

There was a long pause.

"I can't listen to this, Mede. Don't speak of it again. I won't betray you." Ganil turned and walked away, his face harsh with anger. With all his will he turned that confused and struggling anger against Mede, a man as deformed of mind as of body, an evil counsellor, a lost friend.

\* \* \*

It had been a pleasant evening: Lee jovial, his fat wife motherly, and Lani shy and radiant. Ganil's youthful gravity made her tease him, but even in her teasing was that pleading, yielding note; another moment, it seemed, and all her verve would turn to tenderness. Passing a dish at table once her hand

had for an instant touched his. He still knew exactly where, there, the side of his right hand near the wrist, one soft touch. He moaned luxuriously as he lay in bed in his room over the shop in the utter blackness of the city night. Oh Lani, soft touch of a hand, of lips—Oh Lord, Lord. Courtship was a long business, eight months at least, going from step to step as one must with a Master's daughter. Ganil had to get his mind off this unendurable sweetness. Think of nothing, he told himself firmly, go to sleep. Think of nothing . . . And he thought of nothing. The circle. The round empty circle. What was I times O? The same as II times O. What if you put I beside O, what would that figure be, IO?

MEDE Fairman sat up in bed, brown hair lank over groggy blue eyes, and tried to focus on the person crashing around his room. The first dirty-yellow light of dawn showed at the window. "This is Altaday," he growled, "go away, I'm sleepy." The vague figure resolved into Ganil, the crashing into a whisper. "Mede!" Ganil kept whispering, "look!" He stuck a slate under "Mede's nose. "Look, look what you can do with that figure for Nothing—"

"Oh, that," said Mede. He pushed Ganil and the slate away,



went and dunked his head in the basin of icy water on his clothes-chest, and kept it there a while. He returned dripping to sit on the bed. "Let's see."

"See, you can use any number for a base, I used XII because it's handy. XII becomes I-O, see, and XIII is I-I, then when you get up to XXIV—"

"Sh."

Mede studied the slate. Finally he said, "Will you remember this?" and at Ganil's nod, wiped the neat crowded figures off the slate with a rub of his sleeve. "I hadn't realized that one could use any base . . . But look, use the base X, I'll tell you why in a minute, and here's a device that makes it easier. Now X will be IO, and XI will be II, but for XII, write this," and he wrote on the slate, 12.

**G**ANIL stared at the figure. At last he said in a peculiar struggling voice, "Isn't that one of the black numbers?"

"Yes, it is. Now you see Ganil, all you've done is to come at the black numbers by the back door."

Ganil sat beside Mede, silently absorbing his words.

"What's CXX times MCC?" Mede inquired.

"The tables don't go that high."

"Watch." Mede wrote on the slate:

1200

120

and then as Ganil watched,

0000

2400

1200

144000

Another long pause. "Three Nothings . . . XII times itself . . . Give me the slate," Ganil muttered. Then after a silence broken only by the patter of rain and the squeak of chalk on slate, "What's the black number for VIII?"

By twilight of that cold Altar-day they had gone as far as Mede could take Ganil. Indeed Ganil had gone farther than Mede could follow him. "You must meet Yin," the fair man said. "He can teach you what you need. Yin works with angles, triangles, measurements. He can measure the distance between any two points, points you can't reach, using his triangles. He is a great Learner. Numbers are the heart of this knowledge, the language of it."

"And my own language."

"Yes, it is. Not mine. I don't love numbers for themselves. I want to use them. To explain things . . . For instance, if you throw a ball, what makes the ball move?"

"Your throwing it." Ganil grinned. White as a sheet—much whiter than Mede's sheets—his

head ringing with sixteen straight hours of mathematics minus meals or sleep, he had lost all fear, all humanity. His smile was that of a king come home from exile.

"Fine," said Mede. "Why does it *keep on moving*?"

"Because . . . because the air holds it up?"

"Then why does it ever fall? Why does it follow a curve? What kind of curve is it? Do you see how I need your numbers?" It was Mede who now looked like a king, an angry king with an empire too immense to control. "And they talk about Mysteries," he snorted, "in their little shuttered shops! —Here, come on, let's get some dinner and go see Yin."

**B**UILT right up against the city wall, the tall old house peered from leaded windows at the two young Masters down in the street. Sulfurous late-autumn twilight hung over the steep slate roofs shining with rain. "Yin was a Machine-Master like us," Mede told Ganil as they waited at the iron-barred door, "retired now, you'll see why. Men from all the Lodges come here, Apothecaries, weavers, Masons. Even some artisans. One butcher. He cuts up dead cats." Mede spoke with amused tolerance, as physicists generally speak of biologists. Now the

door swung open, and a servant took them upstairs to a room where logs glowed on a great hearth, and a man rose from a highbacked oaken chair to greet them.

Ganil thought at once of the Overmaster of his Lodge, the figure that had cried down to him in his grave, "Arise." Yin too was old and tall, and wore the white cloak of the high Masters. But he stooped, and his face was creased and weary as an old hound's. He held out his left hand to greet them. His right arm ended in a long-healed, shiny stump at the wrist.

"This is Ganil," Mede was saying. "He invented the duodecimal system last night. Get him working on the mathematics of curves for me, Master Yin."

Yin laughed, an old man's short, soft laugh. "Welcome, Ganil. From now on, come here when you please. We're all necromancers here, we practise the black arts. Or try to . . . Come freely, day or night. And go freely. If we're betrayed, so be it. We must trust one another. Mystery belongs to no man; we're not keeping a secret, but practising an art. Does that make sense to you?"

Ganil nodded. Words never came easily to him, only numbers. And he found himself very moved, which embarrassed him. This was no solemn symbolic

Initiation and Oath, but only an old man talking quietly.

"Good," said Yin, as if Ganil's nod has been quite sufficient. "Some wine, young Masters, or ale? My dark ale came out first-rate this year. So you like numbers, do you, Ganil?"

**I**N early spring Ganil stood in the shop supervising Wannu as the prentice took measurements onto his Comparing Stick from the model of the hauling-cart engine. Ganil's face was grim. He had changed over these few months, looked older, more resolute, harder. Four hours' sleep a night plus the invention of algebra might well change a man.

"Master Ganil?" said a shy voice.

"Repeat that measurement," he told Wano, and then turned questioningly to the girl. Lani too had changed. Her face looked a little cross, a little forlorn, and she spoke to Ganil with real timidity. He had taken the second step of courtship, the three evening calls, and then becoming absorbed in his work with Yin, had gone no further. No man had ever dropped Lani in the middle of a courtship. No man had ever looked right through her, as he was doing now. What was it he saw, when he looked through her? She was wild to know that, to get at his secret, to get at him.

In a vague, unquantifiable way he knew this, and was sorry for Lani, and a little afraid of her.

She was watching Wannu. "Do they . . . do you ever change those measurements?" she asked, trying to make conversation.

"To change a Model is the heresy of Invention."

That ended that. "My father wanted me to tell you the Shop will be shut tomorrow."

"Shut? Why's that?"

"The College has announced there's a west wind rising, and the Sun may come out tomorrow."

"Good! A good beginning for the spring, eh? Thanks." And he turned back to the model.

The Priests of the College had for once been right. Weather prediction, on which they spent most of their waking hours, was a thankless task. But once in ten tries or so they caught a Sun, and this was one of the times. By noon the rains had ceased and the cloud-cover was paling beginning to boil and flow slowly eastward. By mid-afternoon all the people of Edun were out on the streets and squares, on chimneypots and rooftrees, on the wall and the fields beyond the wall, watching; the Priests of the College had begun their ceremonial dance, bowing and interweaving on the great forecourt of the College; priests stood

ready in every temple to pull chains that would open the roofs so that the Sun's light might strike the altar-stones. And in late afternoon at last the sky opened. Between ragged smoking edges of yellow-grey appeared a streak of blue. A sigh, a soft tremendous murmur rose up from the streets, squares, windows, roofs, walls of the city of Edun: "Heaven, heaven . . ."

The rent in the sky widened. A shower of rain spattered over the city, blown aslant on the fresh wind, and suddenly the raindrops glittered, as at night in torchlight; but this glory they reflected was the glory of the Sun. To westward it stood, all alone in heaven, blinding.

GANIL stood with the others, face lifted. On his face, on the scar of his burn, he felt the heat of the Sun. He stared at it till his eyes swam with tears, the Circle of Fire, and the face of God . . .

"What is the Sun?"

That was Mede's soft voice, remembered. A cold midwinter night, he and Mede and Yin and the others talking before the fire in Yin's house. "Is it a circle, or a sphere? Why does it cross the sky? And how big is it—how far away is it. Ah, to think that once all a man had to do to see the Sun was lift up his head . . ."

Flutes and drums throbbed, a gay faint sound, away off at the College. Sometimes cloud-fragments blew across the intolerable face and the world turned grey and chill again, the flutes stopped; but the west wind blew, the clouds passed and the Sun reappeared, always a little lower. Just before it sank into the heavy cloud-rack in the west it was growing red and one could look at it without pain. In those moments it certainly looked to Ganil's eyes not like a disk but like an enormous, haze-warped, slowly falling ball.

It fell, was gone.

Overhead through the torn sky glimpses of heaven still shone, infinitely clear and deep, blue-green. Then westward near where the Sun had set, at the edge of a mounting cloud, gleamed one bright point: the evening star. "Look!" Ganil cried, but few turned to look. The Sun was set, what did stars matter. The yellowish haze, part of the single windingsheet of cloud that had covered earth with its mantle of dust and rain ever since Hellfire fourteen generations ago, moved up over the star, erased it. Ganil sighed, rubbed his neck that was stiff with craning back, and started home along with all the other people of the Common Day.

\* \* \*

He was arrested that night.

From guards and fellow-prisoners (all his Shop was in jail with him except the Shopmaster Lee) he learned that his crime was that of knowing Mede Fairman. Mede stood accused of heresy. He had been seen out on the fields pointing an instrument at the Sun, a device, they said, for measuring distances. He had been trying to measure the distance between the earth and God.

The prentices were soon let go. On the third day guards came for Ganil, bringing him out into one of the enclosed courts of the College, into the soft, fine rain of early spring. Priests lived almost wholly out of doors, and the great complex of Edun College was only a series of meager barracks surrounding the roofless sleeping-courts, writing-courts, prayer-courts, eating-courts, and courts of law. Into one of these they brought Ganil, forcing him on between the ranks of men robed in white and yellow that filled it, until he stood in front of them all. He saw a clear space, an Altar, a long table shining wet with rain, and behind it a priest in the golden robe of the High Mystery. At the far end of the table was another man who like Ganil was flanked by guards. This man was looking at Ganil, a straight look, cold and blank; yet they were blue eyes, the same blue as heaven above the clouds.

"Ganil Kalson of Edun, you

are suspect as an acquaintance of Mede Fairman, accused of the heresies of Invention and Computation. You were this man's friend."

"We were Co-Masters—"

"Yes. Did he ever speak to you of measurements made without Comparing Sticks?"

"No."

"Of black numbers?"

"No."

"Of the black arts?"

"No."

"Master Ganil, you've answered No three times. Do you know the Order of the Priest-Masters of the Mystery of the Law concerning suspects in heresy?"

"No, I don't—"

"The Order says: If the suspect shall deny the questions four times, the questions may be repeated with use of the hand-press until answered. I shall now repeat, unless you wish to retract one of your denials."

"No," Ganil said, confused, looking round him at the crowded blank faces, the high walls. When they had brought out a squat wooden machine of some kind and had locked his right hand into it, he was still more confused than scared. What was all this mumbo-jumbo? It was like his initiation, when they had worked so hard to frighten him; that time they had succeeded.

"As a Mechanic," the golden

priest was saying, "you know the use of the lever, Master Ganil. Will you retract?"

"No," Ganil said, frowning a little. He had noticed that his right arm now seemed to end at the wrist, like Yin's.

"Very well." One of the guards put his hands on the lever sticking out of the wooden box, and the golden priest said, "Were you a friend of Mede Fairman?"

"No," Ganil said. He said No to each question even after he had ceased to hear the priest's voice; he went on saying No till he heard his own voice mixed with the clapping echo from the walls above the courtyard, No, no, no, no.

THE light came and went, the rain fell cold on his face and ceased, somebody kept trying to help him stand up. His grey cloak stank, he had been sick with pain. At the thought, he was sick again. "Take it easy, now," a guard was whispering to him. The motionless white and yellow ranks were still crowded there, the faces set, the eyes staring . . . but not at him now.

"Heretic, do you know this man?"

"He is my Co-Master."

"Did you speak to him of the black arts?"

"Yes."

"Did you teach him the black arts?"

"No. I tried to." The voice cracked a little; even in the silence of the courtyard, over only the whisper of the rain, it was hard to hear Mede speak. "He was too stupid. He dared not and could not learn. He'll make a fine Shopmaster." The cold blue eyes looked straight at Ganil without pity or appeal.

The golden priest turned to face the court again. "There is no evidence against the suspect Ganil. You may go, suspect. Come here at noon tomorrow to witness the execution of judgment. Failure to come will be taken as proof of your guilt." Before he understood, the guards had led Ganil out of the courtyard. They left him at a side door of the College, barring the door behind him with a clang. He stood there a while, then crouched down on the pavement, pressing his blackened, blood-caked hand against his side under his cloak. Rain whispered around him. No one passed. It was not till dusk that he pulled himself up and walked, street by street, house by house, step by step, across the city to Yin's house.

In the shadows of the doorway a shadow moved, spoke: "Ganil!" He stopped. "Ganil, I don't care if you're suspect. It's all right. Come back home with me. My father will take you back into the shop. He will if I ask him."

Ganil did not answer.

"Come with me. I waited for you, I knew you'd come here, I've followed you before." Her nervous, jubilant laugh died away.

"Let me by, Lani."

"No. Why do you come to old Yin's house? Who lives here? Who is she? Come back with me, you have to, my father won't take a suspect back into his shop, unless I—"

Yin's door was never locked. Ganil brushed past her and went in, shutting it behind him. No servant came; the house was dark, silent. They had all been taken, all the Learners, they would all be questioned and tortured and killed.

"Who's that?"

YIN stood on the stair-landing, lamplight bright on his white hair. He came to Ganil and helped him up the stairs. Ganil spoke very fast: "I was followed here, a girl from the shop, Lee's daughter, if she tells him he'll recognize your name, he'll send the guards here—"

"I sent the others away three days ago." At the sound of Yin's voice Ganil stopped, stared at the old man's creased, quiet face, and then said childishly, "Look," holding out his right hand, "look, like yours."

"Yes. Come sit down, Ganil."

"They condemned him. Not

me, they let me go. He said he couldn't teach me, I couldn't learn. To save me—"

"And your mathematics. Come here now, sit down."

Ganil got control of himself, and obeyed. Yin made him lie down, then did what he could about cleaning and bandaging his hand. Then, sitting down between Ganil and the glowing fire, he gave a wheezy sigh. "Well," he said, "now you're a heresy suspect. I've been one for twenty years. You get used to it . . . Don't worry about our friends. But if the girl tells Lee and your name gets linked with mine . . . We'd better leave Edun. Separately. But tonight."

Ganil said nothing. To leave his shop without the Overmaster's permission meant excommunication, the loss of his mastership. He would be barred from his own trade. What could he do, with his crippled hand, where could he go? He had never been out of Edun in his life.

The dead silence of the house spread out above and below them. Ganil strained to hear sounds down in the street, the tramping of a troop of guards come to re-arrest him. He had to get out, to get away, tonight—"I can't," he said abruptly. "I have to be—to be at the College tomorrow, at noon."

Yin knew what he meant. Again the dead silence closed

round them. The old man's voice was weary when he finally spoke. "That's the condition of your release, eh? All right; go do it; you don't want them hunting you through the Forty Towns as a condemned heretic. A suspect isn't hunted, merely outcast. Get some sleep now, Ganil. I'll meet you in Keling. Leave as soon as you can; and travel light . . ."

\* \* \*

When Ganil left the house late in the morning, however, he carried something with him, a roll of papers hidden under his cloak, each sheet covered edge to edge with Mede Fairman's clear writing: "Trajectories," "Speed of Falling Bodies," "The Nature of Motion . . ." He had seen none of the other Learners. Only riff-raff and the idle and the women gathered to see a heretic die. A priest ordered Ganil to stand at the very front of the crowd.

They brought Mede out just before noon. Ganil glimpsed his face; it was very white, all his deformity exposed, the atavistic pallor of skin, hair, eyes. There was no drawing-out of the scene; a gold-robed priest raised his crossed arms in invocation to the Sun that stood, unseen, at noon behind the pall of clouds, and as he lowered his arms torches were set to the stacks of wood round the stake. Smoke curled up, the same grey-yellow

as the clouds. Ganil stood with his injured hand in its sling pressed hard against the roll of papers under his cloak, repeating silently, "Let the smoke suffocate him first . . ." But the wood was dry and caught quickly. He felt the heat on his face, on his scarred temple. Beside him a young priest tried to draw back, could not because of the pressing, staring, sighing crowd, and stood still, swaying a little and breathing in gasps. The smoke was thick now, hiding the flames and the figure among them. But Ganil could hear his voice, not soft now, loud, very loud. He heard it, he forced himself to hear it, but at the same time he listened in his spirit to a steady voice, soft, continuing: "What is the Sun? Why does it cross the sky? . . . Do you see how I need your numbers . . . For XII, write 12 . . . This is also a figure, the figure for Nothing."

The screaming had stopped, but the soft voice had not.

Ganil raised his head. The crowd was drifting away; the young priest knelt on the pavement by him, praying and sobbing aloud. Ganil glanced up at the heavy sky and then set off alone out through the city gate, northward, into exile and towards his home.

THE END