

fantastic

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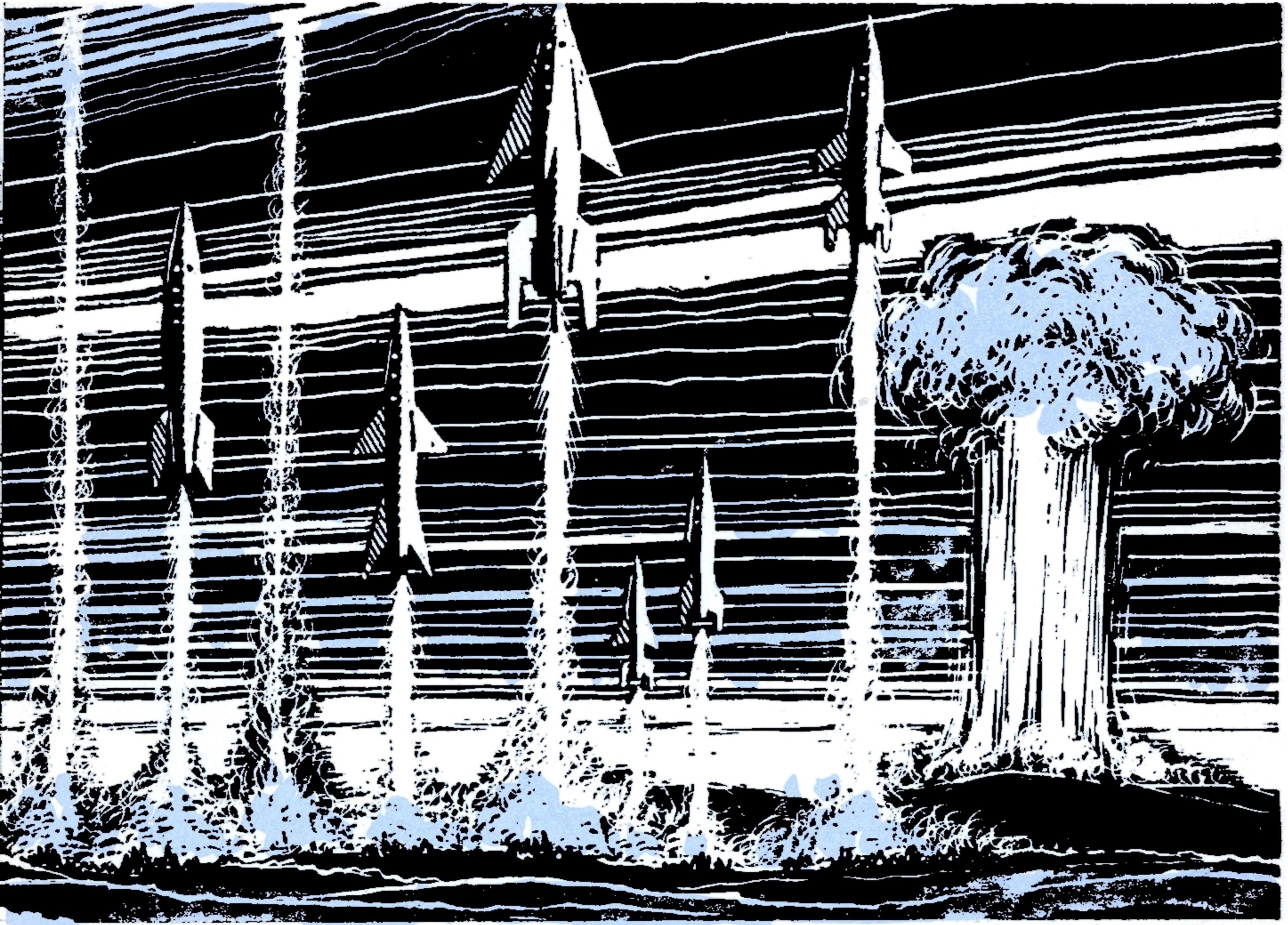


THE WORLD IS SO PEOPLE

BY DEAN EVANS

What do we want? Freedom from sickness, from hunger, from work, from war? Well, we're getting there. Every month or so science finds a new drug to whip an old disease, builds a new machine to tote that bale, or digs up a new synthetic food out of old inner tubes. War may be the last to go, since it will take a lot more than aureomycin to cure human nature.

Dean Evans contemplates this ultimate Utopia with jaundiced eye and tells you where the real danger lies, in this sardonic satire of a world in which man gets rid of everything that can possibly plague him . . . including, finally, man himself!



THREE was no war! *War*. The very word was like something under glass in a museum, that people could wander in and take a look at and grin. Like that. A nasty, dried-up dead word.

There was no work! With the machines, work was unnecessary. The wonderful, wonderful, *wonderful* machines.

There was no disease! No sickness! Death, to be sure, but only old-age death. Not sick death.

There was no noise! (At least, not since Doctor Roodin's new Ordinance of Universal Silence, commonly referred to as USO.)

There was, indeed, nothing at

all save for wonderful lazy-fat, lolly-gagging under the sun; that quiet-warmthed, tender-touching, zephyr-down cradle of the Enlightened Race.

Oh, there was *one* thing. Something amusing. An ancient saying Doctor Roodin had preserved for humor's sake. It went like this:

"Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field.

"In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return unto the ground. . . ."

A quaint bit. Author unknown.

Ah, with Doctor Roodin at the thought-controls of the world, it was such a lovely place! If it only weren't for that young widow and her child out in the desert. She was the only one who couldn't see the light. That horrid, horrid woman!

Doctor Roodin's eyes swept the vast hall. He had hot-looking eyes, eyes with a burning message. Under his eyes were dark lines like purple half-moons. He was a tall, gaunt man, a man who leaned forward when he walked as though he were bucking a strong wind. He had long arms, long hands on the ends of those arms. At the moment he was dressed in black.

Doctor Roodin placed one of his long hands on the speaker's stand and opened thin lips. He said slowly, and in a voice that seemed to suck the very breath out of the listening crowd: "Earth is temptation."

He paused after that. A little time went by. Then he spoke again. "Have we come a long, long way?"

"Have we come a long long way?" It was an undulating answer from the massed human throats. They knew what he meant.

"I say this. We *have* come a long long way. And yet, Earth is temptation."

He stopped. The cameras

moved in a little. He waited for them, blinking very slowly with his hot, dark eyes.

"Hear now. There was a promise made in the ancient days of long ago. There was a time and an hour given; and yet no man was to know that time nor that hour. No man!"

He paused again. He wiped his long hand over his thin lips. He waited. And when he continued he spoke even more slowly than before.

"Hear this," he said. "There were beasts on the face of the earth. The Brontosaurus. The Dinosaur. The Ichthyosaurus. Monsters of Creation. Who could kill these monsters? And yet, they have passed. They have fulfilled their time.

"And then came man. Cave man. Stone man. Bronze man. Brutes. What power, what force, could kill such as these? But they, too, have passed. They, too, have fulfilled their time.

"Lastly, we. I say *we*, for we here are in no way different from the earliest of us. We have fulfilled our time, but we have not passed. I say, we have *fulfilled our time!* There is nothing we have not done, have not seen, have not heard, have not thought. Is there anything new under the sun? Not, alas, any more."

He stopped once more. The cameras moved, adjusted. The gaunt man waited. The crowd

was expectant, but quiet. A feather, falling, would have boomed like a cannon in that vast sea of silent, upturned faces.

Doctor Roodin spoke again. "There was a promise made in the ancient days that this day, too, would pass. The time was not known. The hour was not known. No man, it was said, could know the hour. Well, has it come? Have we not fulfilled our time?" His voice suddenly dropped to a whisper of a note. "I say, look about you. Weigh the planet if you seek the truth. And having weighed it, ask yourselves this question: how long then must we wait?

"While we stay there will yet be we. For no man on earth can stop begetting. Earth herself is the mother of temptation. Harken now. I make this pronouncement unto you. We shall *not* sow forever. The time of fallow is now. How many billions of us have passed along this way? The Earth is heavy with the weight of the memory of man. I say unto you: The world itself is so very *people!*"

He stopped. He looked out one last time at the hushed crowd. Then he bowed slightly, wiped a long hand at his brow and stepped back from the speaker's stand. There was a deadly stillness out in the vast hall for a long long while. And then, and slowly, methodically, even politely, the

massed crowd began to file out and away.

The Doctor had spoken. It was not a completely understood thing he had said. Conversely, it was not a thing to be concerned about. Did not the Doctor have the good of the world like a blanket around his heart?

Davey Harrington blinked his ten-year-old eyes at the television screen. He looked away from it, looked over at his mother. He started to smile and his smile seemed to have in it some of the young disgust which filled his small soul.

"The Doc is so very nuts!" he said.

Mirene's eyes flickered. She didn't smile. She wanted to. Lord, it was funny enough. She said, instead, and in a very serious voice: "Don't jest, Davey. There's nothing to jest about in what he said. He's insane, yes. But not funny insane."

Davey frowned. He didn't actually feel like smiling anyhow. There was something in his mother's voice that somehow made it an un-smiling matter.

"What did he mean?" he asked simply.

His mother did smile then. A nice, young-mother smile. "I'm not sure," she said. And then she got up and went across the room and ran a rumpling hand through her son's hair and gave him a play-

ful shove. "Off to bed with you, young man. Somebody's got to irrigate the corn field tomorrow. I wonder who it could be?"

"Me, huh?" he said, and grinned. He raised his face and accepted the good-night kiss. And then he went out of the room. The closing of a door somewhere else in the house echoed his passing.

After that the woman sat down again and put her face in her cupped hands and stared at the blank, now-silent screen across the room. She looked as though she were brooding. In truth, she was.

Mirene and Ed had married when Ed was twenty and she just seventeen. It had been eleven years ago — and just at the time when Roodin's peculiar genius was being felt with a certain insidious delight all over the world. They'd gone on a desert honeymoon that lasted almost three months. It wasn't until they again returned to the city that the startling thing had made itself known to them. Doctor Roodin had taken over the world. Like that. Governments, tribes, everything. And at first his influence seemed a benign thing. He proposed, for example, simple leisure for the world. The days of work had been fulfilled, he said. Why, then, work?

Delightful!

Machines were designed and

built. Then other machines were designed, built, for the taking care of the first machines. And then still others. It was like hiring a guard and then hiring another guard to watch the first guard; and then still a third to watch the second. Surprisingly, it had worked well. The machines tackled the two most important problems first — and solved them. They produced food in tremendous abundance. Next, they solved the problem of the worldwide distribution of that food on a strictly mechanical basis. No human labor was involved.

At that point a temporary halt was made in Doctor Roodin's world-plans while still newer machines (to replace the first machines as they should eventually wear out) were designed and built and then set in watchful waiting over the entire world.

But after that the plan had gone forward again. Disease was licked. Ah, there had been an ingenious thing! Rocket ships had been sent up and out of the atmosphere of the Earth. Once outside, they had set a course around the periphery of the world like tiny glinting stationary knives with the Earth a spinning apple being pared. An invisible screen was laid down as they hovered; a screen of certain isotopic substances which, being heavy, was subject to the pull of gravity. Hence, like an all-embracing cur-

tain it fell earthward through the atmosphere, killing all disease as it came. When it settled at long last it was as though a mammoth sanitary spread — a very table-cloth of a thing — had dropped on the whirling globe. After that there was no disease ever.

Simply delightful!

Oh, there were luxuries! There were gleaming Mobile-Units-Think (a splendid new invention, it resembled in appearance the old-fashioned sedan) that ran on Mirror-Roads as smooth as the name they borrowed. Everybody had one — or several, since they were entirely free. Jewelry? What do you like? Emeralds? Rubies? Diamonds? Have a handful, they're small.

It followed — naturally — nobody spent the winters in the colder zones any more. There was no reason for it. And freeze your panties? Don't be absurd.

But before all this had entirely come about the insidious little something came creeping in. Ed had mentioned it one night. It was about at the time when the first machines were being completed. Ed had stared at Mirene over the supper table one night (Davey wasn't a member of the family yet — not quite yet, that is) and he'd said in a strangely frightened voice: "Hey, Baby, what's this all about? The machines, I mean. When they're all

done and in operation — well, what then?"

And Mirene, knowing a little something of the way he felt, for she too had thought of it, had nevertheless laughed and said: "Leisure, Honey! Barrels and barrels of nice easy leisure. Praise the Lo'd!"

"Is that funny?" Ed's voice got sudden-sharp. And she had blinked in surprise at him as he got up and went over to the window and stared moodily out at the dying sun as it fell over the last of the mountains and went splashing down into the sea.

The next night he mentioned it again, but rather progressively this time. He said at once when he had come home from work: "I've been talking to a couple of guys. They feel like I do about it. And you know something? The Super of the plant was one of the guys. The big gear himself. He —"

"Hey!" Mirene had broken in, laughing. "What's it all about?"

"Why . . ." Ed had looked momentarily puzzled. And then not puzzled at all. "Oh! I was talking about last night, of course. What comes after the machines, remember?"

She had known then how close to his basic self this thing had been to him. And that had been the start. After that little groups had sprung up all over the world feeling as he did. Not condemning the machines; not condemning

Doctor Roodin. Just not liking the ideas somehow, and being a little fearful of the future at the same time.

But the machines were put into operation. Food? How much can you eat? Free, that is. Clothing? All you want. Gratis, naturally. Housing? What kind of a place have you always longed for? And where would you want it located? Step right in, it's yours for the living.

Like that it had been.

And the little bands of wondering, thinking men grew thinner with each passing month. But Ed was still one of the few. He worried. Maybe he worried too much, Mirene thought.

Free this. Free that. Anything your little heart desires. Friend, just *think* on it, it's yours!

At about that time Doctor Roodin made one of his pronouncements. The libraries of the world were to be destroyed. Reason? It was simple. Libraries were archives. Archives were records preserved as evidence. *Sic*: the libraries must go, since any evidence amassed by a world as miserable as the world had assuredly been before Doctor Roodin had taken over would now be totally worthless. Even more, a shame slapped in the now-enlightened face of mankind.

Certain things were preserved, though. Some witty sayings by

men who had lived way ahead of their time, for example. Some humorous bits. Some (pitifully few of these) profound thoughts of the ancient ones gone before. Bits.

A little later came the second pronouncement: the law must go. There was a howl over that one. Scared, they were, you see. The clergy — what there was left of it — chimed in here, too.

In place of the law, Doctor Roodin offered his famous Three Commandments:

1. Thou shalt have no superstition.
2. Thou shalt abhor the ancient things, clinging only to the new.
3. Thou shalt rest and enjoy thy days, since they are few at best.

There was a punishment for violators: *Shun-ment*.

The clergy screamed. For a while it looked as though something might come of it. But no. At about that time somebody high in ecclesiastical circles had opportunely come forward with the theory that Doctor Roodin was indeed the long-awaited Savior of Mankind. The *Modern Messiah*. Hallelujah! The idea caught on. After all, wasn't everything he had thus far proposed of benefit to mankind? Wasn't everything he had instituted been given in the spirit of



love? Free? All right, a dictator if you must use the word. But what a dictator!

There was no war any more. War does not thrive in the face of international apathy. Besides, there has to be a reason for war. There were few murders, and those few grew less and less as weeks went on. How, indeed, could anybody be bothered with killing anybody else when everybody is so busy just having good, new-fashioned fun? Oh, all the old old sins fell by the wayside; no reason any more for them. Besides, once remove the stigma and what have you? No more sin. As simple as that.

Somewhere along the line little Davey had been born. And somewhere along the line Ed had broken one of the Commandments. Probably all of them. Sometimes Ed acted like a dog

with a bone in its teeth. He was given shun-ment, of course. And here had been the point of decision for Mirene. She had looked forward to the bright new future of Doctor Roodin's world. Then she had looked backward at the bleak future of Ed's lifelong exile-to-be. She had sighed — but had chosen the latter. If you love a guy, there can't be any half-way about it. Little Davey, the baby, went along too. Poor little tot, people said.

Shun-ment in Ed's case meant exile on a ten-thousand-acre-tract of sage-brush land in the most god-forsaken part of the old Nevada Territory. Nobody ever went there any more.

At first there were quite a few shun-ment cases. There were even a few who went into exile voluntarily. Thin numbers, these. The thinkers. But that didn't last long. Around that time came the su-

perbly clever achievement of the no-disease. Doctor Roodin's followers were legion then. How can you hold out against a man who gives something like that to suffering humanity? The band of hold-outs waned, finally disappeared.

The final blow came when Doctor Roodin offered amnesty to the shun-ment cases. Ah, how could man have greater love for his fellow than that? Forgiveness and reinstatement among the happy, happy, resting peoples of the world. Who in their right senses would hesitate in the face of *that*?

Ed did.

By now it was a fetish with Ed. He snarled at the very mention of the good Doctor's name. And when the good doctor had even gone so far as to send an emissary, a fat and puffing, obviously over-eating, over-relaxing, very ball of a man with the fresh green olive branch of friendship, Ed had promptly slapped the man silly. Not content with that, he kicked him bodily down the long and rocky terrace from their house to the Mirror-Road below. He had bundled him into the Mobile-Unit-Think which he came in and — since the fat man was quite dead by that time — Ed himself had done the necessary willing. He willed the car directly to Roodin's Headquarters, and as fast as it could go.

Mirene and Ed had worked hard after that. You have to work hard when you're scrounging a living off the desert. There were the cows, chickens, pigs. There were the vegetable gardens. There was the 'dobe cooler to be built in which potatoes, beets, turnips, squash and the like had to be stored. In all the world no one worked except Ed and Mirene. Mirene took it well. She loved her husband and was proud of him. Ed himself took it with the ferocity of a she-lion defending cubs. Under his lashing fist some of those barren acres were pummeled into fertility.

When little Davey was in his sixth year, Doctor Roodin got his patiently awaited revenge. It wasn't a good revenge. It wasn't the revenge of one man over another man. It was, instead, the revenge of a shrunken, embittered and quite nasty old woman.

It had come about in this way: Ed had been struck by a rattlesnake. And in this lovely, wonderful world where everything was free for the asking, Doctor Roodin had set a particularly impossible price on the serum which would have saved Ed's life. He demanded public apology. Mirene, wide-eyed, scared, had begged Ed to give in.

He said he'd die first.

In the manner of the proud, he did.

The night of his burial, Mirene had taken crayon and in large letters had written across the living-room wall something that had stuck in her memory from her early childhood training. It wasn't much:

"There is an evil which I have seen under the sun . . . the fool foldeth his hands together and eateth his own flesh."

From the old forgotten Bible, of course. In fact, two separate quotations, and both from Ecclesiastes. In this case they seemed to go together well.

Three times after that she had tried to kill him. She had gone down to his Headquarters with one of Ed's hunting knives concealed in her clothing. Three times she had failed. You can't kill a god. And Roodin was a god. Ask anybody.

And now this. Mirene lifted her head out of her hands and tried to recall his exact words. She couldn't; at least not all of them. But seven stood out like burning brands for anyone who would raise his eyes and look.

The time of the fallow is now!

Wearily, she went to bed. She was to find out soon what he had in mind.

It was about noon of a day two or three weeks later. Mirene was in the house at the moment. Little Davey was out in the east field

on the tractor, guiding the gear-driven posthole digger. Doing the work of a man — and ten years old. Mirene had just come from the kitchen and glanced idly out the front window when she saw the first glimpse of it, a Mobile-Unit-Think coming down the road: the first to pass in months.

But it did not go by. It pulled up on the Mirror-Road directly in front of and below the house. A man got out, climbed slowly up the rock-laden high terrace. Mirene went to the door.

"You're not welcome here," she said coldly.

"Precisely!" The man was short. Short speech, short square face, short square body on short legs. "This is not a social call, Madam!"

In spite of her sudden anger Mirene felt like laughing. The man looked as though he felt this degrading thing happening to him was some punishment left over from a former incarnation. His tight mouth curled at one corner. His eyes flicked, darting, around the living room, saying things as they went. Critical things, judging things.

"Then you can turn around and get down the way you came up!" Mirene rapped it.

"Silence! This visit is official, Madam!" He gave her a look filled with a great deal of distaste, then took from his pocket a document and began to read.

"Proclamation: On the Great Day of Universal Rest, it is decreed the inhabitants of this earth shall meet at appointed places, be identified, and transported to the rendezvous chosen. In your particular case . . ." he frowned slightly as if remembering ". . . that place will be a point north of here on the Mirror-Road exactly four hundred and fifteen miles distant. The Identity-Station will be set up and also the take-off field. Do I make myself clear?"

Mirene's face looked composed. "Is there reason behind this insanity?" she said quietly.

It didn't faze him. He said at once and quickly: "I have been instructed to inform you about what the rest of the entire world has already known and rejoiced over for the last two weeks. The world's inhabitants are to cease living, Madam! Simply and completely. Our Great Saint —"

"He's got that far, has he?"

The man never heard or, if he did, pretended he didn't. ". . . Our Great Saint has decreed thus. In preparation, great numbers of space-traveling ships have been designed and built. The population is to be transported en masse in these ships to a point in outer space not subject to the gravitational pull of the earth. There, we humans will sleep, awaiting the end of the fallow period."

He paused. He peered over at

the woman as at a backward child. "Is this perfectly understood?"

Mirene didn't answer. She stared at him for one incredulous instant and then went out to the kitchen. When she returned she was carrying one of Ed's old deer rifles and it was pointed directly at the short, square man.

"The speed of a bullet is known," she said distinctly. "But unknown is the speed of your own two legs. Is *this* perfectly understood?"

The short man paled, but not for long. He went out of the house and down the rock-strewn terrace in slightly less than no time at all.

They sent a woman the next time. She came in the evening when Mirene and Davey were both home and in the living room together. The woman was a blonde like Mirene. She even looked a little like Mirene, same figure, same age: that brief period in a woman's life when at the approaches to the thirties she can be more desirable than at nineteen. There was one great difference between them, however. The visitor had a peculiar softness about her, and a strange, almost fanatical cast in her dark brown eyes.

"I hope we'll be friends," she said to Mirene.

Mirene didn't comment on that.

The woman said then, and very

softly, almost kindly: "I hope I won't make the same mistake that was made before. I think you know I'm hoping that, Mrs. Harrington."

Mirene didn't answer that one either. She was a little too surprised to answer anything.

The woman smiled. "You don't know what it's like," she breathed. "You haven't any idea. Let me tell you, won't you?"

Mirene looked over at Davey. He was staring bug-eyed and a little suspiciously. They didn't have many guests, it was only natural he would react like that.

"All right," she said. "I'll listen, if that's what you want from me."

The woman nodded and smiled again. Her brown eyes seemed to become glowing things, things with a wonderful message the text of which the world has awaited far too long.

"He's a saint," she said. "If you knew him as I know him, you'd say that, too."

Mirene's lips began to curl. "We've had saints like him before. Lots of them. He did a very saintly act when he let my husband die."

"Your husband killed a man," the woman reminded gently. And then she abruptly went to Mirene and put a hand on Mirene's shoulder for an instant. "Forgive me," she said quickly. "That was cruel of me."

Mirene stared. "That's all right. Get on with it."

"There isn't much. It's just that Doctor Roodin is the most wonderful man who ever lived. He is the Christ and the Buddha and the Aton all rolled into one. He *loves* the world."

In a sense that was laughable, but somehow Mirene did not laugh. The strange conviction of this woman who looked so very much like herself was a disturbing thing. The woman continued to talk after a moment.

"He has done marvelous things for humanity, Mrs. Harrington. You know that, surely, no matter how you might feel personally about him. For some unaccountable reason your little family has chosen to remain aloof, but you must admit that nothing which he has done has been anything but good. He has given the world surcease from labor. From war. From hardship of any kind. From disease, even. He has torn the misery of the ages away from mankind's eyes. You know that."

"He's made a world of soft-living degenerates, that's what he's done!" Mirene said it sharply.

"Has he? Really, now? Has there been anything but happiness and contentment anywhere that you know of? You know I speak the truth. And now, the greatest boon of all is being offered, Mrs. Harrington. And that's what I'm

here for. To explain it to you."

She stopped. She looked down at her hands which were now folded peacefully in her lap. Then she looked up at little Davey, who was staring bright-eyed at her. She smiled a friendly little smile at him.

She said, still looking at him but speaking to Mirene: "In the last book of the old Bible we were told there would someday be an end to this world, Mrs. Harrington. We, that is, Doctor Roodin and in fact all humanity, believe that prediction to be a true one. As we know, other species here on Earth have had their day. They came and they went. Man, Earth's greatest product, has a day as well. But, unfortunately, no one knows when that day will be. The day of our ending, I mean, of course. But we feel — and Our Saint has taught us this — that we have fulfilled our time. We have stayed here long enough. We have suffered long enough. We have waited and we have waited. There is no one who can tell how much longer we must yet wait. And for what, under these vaulting skies of heaven? If you look at it sensibly you must agree. What a pity to continue procreation! Alas, what a senseless, senseless thing! And that is why we are to call a halt to Nature's strange progression. If the heavens will not come to man — then man will go to the heavens. Our myriad

little ships will be asteroids. Miniature planets. The highest attainment of the race of man will go to the skies and await the coming of the Day."

"*Dead.*" It was one bitter word clipped from Mirene's lips.

The woman waited. There was still that gentle smile on her face. When Roodin had sent her he had chosen well. Mirene took a long breath. She shook her head as if to clear it. Then she leaned forward and spoke quietly herself but with a terrible emphasis regardless.

"Very well. If you and the rest of the world will do this terrible obsessed thing, then do it and may God forgive the sadism of your leader. But there is one thing you seem to be completely overlooking. I am not one of your number. Neither is my child. We are *shun-ment* cases, remember?"

"By choice alone, Mrs. Harrington."

"By sane choice! And let me tell you something. I don't understand this attitude on the part of your — your Saint as you call him. We're *shun-ment*. Let him go if he wants to. Let the whole world go after him. But leave me alone, do you hear? Tell him I said that. Three simple words: leave me alone!"

Even then the woman's smile did not disappear. It altered somewhat, but still remained. She

looked for a moment straight into the eyes of Mirene. For a moment. Then she turned her head and looked over at little Davey who, during all this, had not uttered a sound.

Still looking at him, she said in almost a whisper: "I'm very much afraid I have to remind you that will not be possible, Mrs. Harrington."

"What do you mean?" Mirene's eyes flew to Davey, flew back to the woman.

"Don't you know? Don't you really know?"

"Davey stays with me where he belongs!" Mirene yelled it.

"That is just the trouble, don't you see. We cannot allow that."

There wasn't anything else after that. The woman came over to Mirene, offered her hand. Mirene ignored it. The woman sighed, turned, smiled at Davey and went out of the house. And Davey was the first to break the long silence which followed.

"What did she mean, Mother?" he said.

But Mirene wasn't telling him that. Not yet. She wasn't admitting the meaning of the woman's words even to herself — just yet.

The Great Day of Universal Rest was on the first of September. You could be deaf, dumb and blind and yet know that. No effort was considered too great to acquaint the peoples — *all* of the

peoples — all over the world.

The morning following the woman's visit Mirene had gone out and looked at the old brown hills to the west. They seemed far away. In the clear hard light of dawn they seemed very far away indeed. Sighing, she went in the house again and awakened Davey. And nearly all of that day they spent in moving food and clothing and a few cows away from the house. For the next several days they did this. Davey wanted to know why. Ten thousand times he wanted to know why. Mirene wouldn't tell him. On the sixth day they reached the hills with their burdens. The seventh Mirene spent studying them. On the eighth she found what she had hoped to find: an abandoned mine. It wasn't much, the wooden mine-face itself had rotted and half fallen away years before. But Mirene had smiled grimly when she came upon it. Together the two of them laboriously moved their small possessions down its slender shaft. After that they went back to the house.

On the fourth day before the Great Day, it began. Three Mobile-Units-Think came along the Mirror-Road. When they got to the house the occupants of the cars got out, started to come up the terrace. Mirene was prepared for them. She cut all three down with Ed's old rifle. Two men left behind in the cars returned the

fire, but it was not effective. It's hard to hit a small target inside a house, and especially when you cannot see that target.

When Mirene's fourth shot nicked even one of those in the cars they sped, panic-stricken, down the long silvery Mirror-Road and away from the house.

Mirene and Davey didn't go near the three dead men. All the rest of that day they spent painting on the side of the house that faced the road this message in huge red letters:

COME AND GET US.
COME AND GET KILLED!

They did not accept the invitation.

In the black of the final night Mirene and little Davey set out for the old brown hills to the west. They had to walk seven hours to get to the abandoned mine shaft. Mirene bedded Davey down as comfortably as it was possible. She spent the remainder of the night herself at the mouth of the shaft. What was to come would come soon now.

It did. It came as dawn was breaking silver and cold from the east and the purple-red of the sun was trailing along reluctantly behind. It came in the form of wings. Mirene looked from her position at the mouth of the mine.

It wasn't a space-traveling ship. You don't have to be an aero-

nautical expert to tell the difference. It came low and thundering, as a bomber does. It came low and circling. It circled three times. And then it began to climb and go away at the same time. But it didn't stay away for long. It came back from the east as the light of dawn itself did. It came fast, it came high. As it approached it dropped what it had come to drop and Mirene threw herself face down on the hard earth away from it.

The atomic blast left nothing of the house, of course. Nor of the barns. Nor of the pastures, nor of the fences. Nor even of the fences little Davey had been putting up in the east field. Mirene was too far away to see it, but that mushrooming ball of a cloud told all she had to know.

It didn't stop the sun. Nothing man has invented can stop the sun. The sun came ponderously, its angry, purple-red light turning slowly brighter like a rheostat-controlled lamp under the steadily urging fingers of a god. Mirene got to her feet and leaned wearily against an old four-by-four of the rotted mine-face. She lifted her head and looked up into its warm but not yet blinding glow. Well, they were gone. By now they were all little asteroids. Miniature planets, as the blonde woman had said. They had gone out into space to stand on some distant corner of the sky like a man wait-

ing for his wife; not knowing when she was coming but expecting hopefully she would.

Well, all right. That left a pretty large world for just two small people, didn't it? *And the meek shall inherit the earth.*

She didn't feel especially meek. She didn't feel anything. Not yet. It was much too soon for feelings.

She sighed, turned to the shaft and went down. She found little Davey lying, bundled up, in one of the lower levels where she had left him. But he wasn't asleep. Nobody could have slept after that ship came across the second time. His eyes stared, wide-open, up at Mirene.

"What was that noise, Mother?" he said in a small, trying-not-to-be-but-scared-anyhow voice.

Mirene forced a grin to show to him. "An atomic explosion," she said. "The last one on Earth for

quite a little while, I imagine. Did you sleep all right?"

He nodded. Some of his scare dissolved under the warmth of her grin as scare always does when a mother is close by. He shoved the blankets partly away. Then he got up on one elbow.

"I've been wondering something, Mother," he said.

"You have? Tell me."

He nodded. "You remember that lady who came to visit us the day before — before . . ." He didn't finish it.

Mirene's grin slowly left her lips and eyes.

"What did she mean, Mother?" He looked up at her. There was a patiently waiting look in his eyes. An untroubled look. But then that changed and he blinked and suddenly looked anxious. "What are you crying for, Mother?" he asked.