

In this issue . . .

A few months ago we commented on having heard of a new drink called a Lord and Lady, which for some reason reminded us that we had not heard of any new science fiction drink ideas lately. In "Storm Over Sodom," Robert F. Young refers to an interesting sort of concoction, but is, regrettably, more specific about its effects than its properties. We are still waiting hopefully. . . .

Coming next month . . .

. . . an All Star Issue, featuring a longish novelet by Philip Jose Farmer—"Prometheus"—which is a sequel to "A Few Miles" (Oct. 1960 F&SF), and a novelet by Zenna Henderson—"Return"—which is a new story of the People. The rest of the issue is not yet definite, but will be drawn from such stories as: "The Beetle," by Jay Williams, "Saturn Rising," by Arthur C. Clarke, "Night Piece," by Poul Anderson, "All the Tea in China," by R. Bretnor, "Something Rich and Strange," by Randall Garrett and Avram Davidson, "Softly While You're Sleeping," by Evelyn E. Smith . . . and others. Also, of course, Isaac Asimov on Science, and Alfred Bester on Books (Mr. Bester, incidentally, will turn in that column from this month's blast to an examination of some of the good things on the current science fiction scene). . . . To be sure of not missing any of these, you might do well to fill in the simple little form below. . . .

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One of the attractive aspects of Brian Aldiss' work is its pleasant unpredictability. There is something about his stories which makes them quite unlike those of other writers in the field, and no group of his stories gives any clear indication of what his next will be like. . . . The present novelet is, we think, a most intriguing example of science fantasy, and it does give an indication of what to expect next, because Mr. Aldiss is doing a series of novelets on the most unusual world he creates in "Hothouse" . . . the second of which, titled "Nomansland," will be along in two or three months.

HOTHOUSE

by Brian W. Aldiss

*My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more
slow.*

ANDREW MARVELL

I

The heat, the light, the humidity—these were constant and had remained constant for . . . but nobody knew how long. Nobody cared any more for the big questions that begin "How long . . .?" or "Why . . .?" It was no longer a place for mind. It was a place for growth, for vegetables. It was like a hothouse.

In the green light, some of the children came out to play. Alert

for enemies, they ran along the branch, calling to each other in soft voices. A fast-growing berry-whisk moved upwards to one side, its sticky crimson mass of berries gleaming. Clearly it was intent on seeding and would offer the children no harm. They scuttled past it. Beyond the margin of the group strip, some nettle-moss had sprung up during their period of sleep. It stirred as the children approached.

"Kill it," Toy said simply. She was the head child of the group. She was ten. The others obeyed her. Unsheathing the sticks every child carried in imitation of every adult, they scraped at the nettle-moss. They scraped at it and hit

it. Excitement grew in them as they beat down the plant, squashing its poisoned tips.

Clat fell forward in her excitement. She was only five, the youngest of the group's children. Her hands fell among the poisonous stuff. She cried aloud and rolled aside. The other children also cried, but did not venture into the nettlemoss to save her.

Struggling out of the way, little Clat cried again. Her fingers clutched at the rough bark—then she was tumbling from the branch.

The children saw her fall onto a great spreading leaf several lengths below, clutch it, and lie there quivering on the quivering green. She looked up pitifully.

"Fetch Lily-yo," Toy told Gren. Gren sped back along the branch to get Lily-yo. A tigerfly swooped out of the air at him, humming its anger deeply. He struck it aside with a hand, not pausing. He was nine, a rare man child, very brave already, and fleet and proud. Swiftly he ran to the Headwoman's hut.

Under the branch, attached to its underside, hung eighteen great homemaker nuts. Hollowed out they were, and cemented into place with the cement distilled from the acetoyle plant. Here lived the eighteen members of the group, one to each homemaker's nut—the Headwoman, her five women, their man, and the eleven surviving children.

Hearing Gren's cry, out came Lily-yo from her nuthut, climbing up a line to stand on the branch beside him.

"Clat falls!" cried Gren.

With her stick, Lily-yo rapped sharply on the bough before running on ahead of the child.

Her signal called out the other six adults, the women Flor, Daphe, Hy, Ivin, and Jury, and the man Haris. They hastened from their nuthuts, weapons ready, poised for attack or flight.

As Lily-yo ran, she whistled on a sharp split note.

Instantly to her from the thick foliage nearby came a dumber, flying to her shoulder. The dumber rotated, a fleecy umbrella whose separate spokes controlled its direction. It matched its flight to her movement.

Both children and adults gathered round Lily-yo when she looked down at Clat, still sprawled some way below on her leaf.

"Lie still, Clat! Do not move!" called Lily-yo. "I will come to you." Clat obeyed that voice, though she was in pain and fear.

Lily-yo climbed astride the hooked base of the dumber, whistling softly to it. Only she of the group had fully mastered the art of commanding dumbles. These dumbles were the half-sentient spores of the whistlethistle. The tips of their feathered spokes carried seeds; the seeds were strangely shaped, so that a light breeze

whispering in them made them into ears that listened to every advantage of the wind that would spread their propagation. Humans, after long years of practice, could use these crude ears for their own purposes and instructions, as Lily-yo did now.

The dumber bore her down to the rescue of the helpless child. Clat lay on her back, watching them come, hoping to herself. She was still looking up when green teeth sprouted through the leaf all about her.

"Jump, Clat!" Lily-yo cried.

The child had time to scramble to her knees. Vegetable predators are not so fast as humans. Then the green teeth snapped shut about her waist.

Under the leaf, a trappersnapper had moved into position, sensing the presence of prey through the single layer of foliage. It was a horny, caselike affair, just a pair of square jaws hinged and with many long teeth. From one corner of it grew a stalk, very muscular and thicker than a human. It looked like a neck. Now it bent, carrying Clat away, down to its true mouth, which lived with the rest of the plant far below on the unseen forest Ground, slobbering in darkness and wetness and decay.

Whistling, Lily-yo directed her dumber back up to the home bough. Nothing now could be done for Clat. It was the way.

Already the rest of the group was dispersing. To stand in a bunch was to invite trouble from the unnumbered enemies of the forest. Besides, Clat's was not the first death they had witnessed.

Lily-yo's group had once been of seven underwomen and two men. Two women and one man had fallen to the green. Among them, the eight women had born twenty-two children to the group, four of them being man children. Deaths of children were many, always. Now that Clat was gone, over half the children had fallen to the green. Only two man children were left, Gren and Veggy.

Lily-yo walked back along the branch in the green light. The dumber drifted from her unheeded, obeying the silent instructions of the forest air, listening for word of a seeding place. Never had there been such an overcrowding of the world. No bare places existed. The dumbles sometimes drifted through the jungles for centuries waiting to alight.

Coming to a point above one of the nuthuts, Lily-yo lowered herself into it by the creeper. This had been Clat's nuthut. The headwoman could hardly enter it, so small was the door. Humans kept their doors as narrow as possible, enlarging them as they grew. It helped to keep out unwanted visitors.

All was tidy in the nuthut. From the interior soft fibre a bed had been cut; there the five year old had slept, when a feeling for sleep came among the unchanging forest green. On the cot lay Clat's soul. Lily-yo took it and thrust it into her belt.

She climbed out onto the creeper, took her knife, and began to slash at the place where the bark of the tree had been cut away and the nuthut was attached to the living wood. After several slashes, the cement gave. Clat's nuthut hinged down, hung for a moment, then fell.

As it disappeared among huge coarse leaves, there was a flurry of foliage. Something was fighting for the privilege of devouring the huge morsel.

Lily-yo climbed back onto the branch. For a moment she paused to breathe deeply. Breathing was more trouble than it had been. She had gone on too many hunts, borne too many children, fought too many fights. With a rare and fleeting knowledge of herself, she glanced down at her bare green breasts. They were less plump than they had been when she first took the man Haris to her; they hung lower. Their shape was less beautiful.

By instinct she knew her youth was over. By instinct she knew it was time to Go Up.

The group stood near the Hollow, awaiting her. She ran to

them. The Hollow was like an upturned armpit, formed where the branch joined the trunk. In the Hollow collected their water supply.

Silently, the group was watching a line of termights climb the trunk. One of the termights now and again signalled greetings to the humans. The humans waved back. As far as they had allies at all, the termights were their allies. Only five great families survived here in the all-conquering vegetable world; the tigerflies, the treebees, the plantants and the termights were social insects, mighty and invincible. And the fifth family was man, lowly and easily killed, not organised as the insects were, but not extinct—the last animal species remaining.

Lily-yo came up to the group. She too raised her eyes to follow the moving line of termights until it disappeared into the layers of green. The termights could live on any level of the great forest, in the Tips or down on the Ground. They were the first and last of insects; as long as anything lived, the termights and tigerflies would.

Lowering her eyes, Lily-yo called to the group.

When they looked, she brought out Clat's soul, lifting it above her head to show to them.

"Clat has fallen to the green," she said. "Her soul must go to the Tips, according to the custom.

Flor and I will take it at once, so that we can go with the termights. Daphe, Hy, Ivin, Jury, you guard well the man Haris and the children till we return."

The women nodded solemnly. Then they came one by one to touch Clat's soul.

The soul was roughly carved of wood into the shape of a woman. As a child was born, so with rites its male parent carved it a soul, a doll, a totem soul—for in the forest when one fell to the green there was scarcely ever a bone surviving to be buried. The soul survived for burial in the Tips.

As they touched the soul, Gren adventurously slipped from the group. He was nearly as old as Toy, as active and as strong. Not only had he power to run. He could climb. He could swim. Ignoring the cry of his friend Veggy, he scampered into the Hollow and dived into the pool.

Below the surface, opening his eyes, he saw a world of bleak clarity. A few green things like clover leaves grew at his approach, eager to wrap round his legs. Gren avoided them with a flick of his hand as he shot deeper. Then he saw the crocksock—before it saw him.

The crocksock was an aquatic plant, semi-parasitic by nature. Living in hollows, it sent down its saw-toothed suckers into the trees' sap. But the upper section of it, rough and tongue-shaped

like a sock, could also feed. It unfolded, wrapping round Gren's left arm, its fibres instantly locking to increase the grip.

Gren was ready for it.

With one slash of his knife, he clove the crocksock in two, leaving the lower half to thrash uselessly at him. Before he could rise to the surface, Daphe the skilled huntress was beside him, her face angered, bubbles flashing out silver like fish from between her teeth. Her knife was ready to protect him.

He grinned at her as he broke surface and climbed out onto the dry bank. Nonchalantly he shook himself as she climbed beside him.

"'Nobody runs or swims or climbs alone,'" Daphe called to him, quoting one of the laws. "Gren, have you no fear? Your head is an empty burr!"

The other women too showed anger. Yet none of them touched Gren. He was a man child. He was tabu. He had the magic powers of carving souls and bringing babies—or would have when fully grown, which would be soon now.

"I am Gren, the man child!" he boasted to them. His eyes sought Haris's for approval. Haris merely looked away. Now that Gren was so big, Haris did not cheer as once he had, though the boy's deeds were braver than before.

Slightly deflated, Gren jumped about, waving the strip of crock-

sock still wrapped round his left arm. He called and boasted at the women to show how little he cared for them.

"You are a baby yet," hissed Toy. She was ten, his senior by one year. Gren fell quiet.

Scowling, Lily-yo said, "The children grow too old to manage. When Flor and I have been to the Tips to bury Clat's soul, we shall return and break up the group. Time has come for us to part. Guard yourselves!"

It was a subdued group that watched their leader go. All knew that the group had to split; none cared to think about it. Their time of happiness and safety—so it seemed to all of them—would be finished, perhaps forever. The children would enter a period of lonely hardship, fending for themselves. The adults embarked on old age, trial, and death when they Went Up into the unknown.

II

Lily-yo and Flor climbed the rough bark easily. For them it was like going up a series of more or less symmetrically placed rocks. Now and again they met some kind of vegetable enemy, a thimble or a pluggyrug, but these were small fry, easily dispatched into the green gloom below. Their enemies were the termights' enemies, and the moving column had already dealt with the foes in its

path. Lily-yo and Flor climbed close to the termights, glad of their company.

They climbed for a long while. Once they rested on an empty branch, capturing two wandering burrs, splitting them, and eating their oily white flesh. On the way up, they had glimpsed one or two groups of humans on different branches; sometimes these groups waved shyly, sometimes not. Now they were too high for humans.

Nearer the Tips, new danger threatened. In the safer middle layers of the forest the humans lived, avoided the perils of the Tips or the Ground.

"Now we move on," Lily-yo told Flor, getting to her feet when they had rested. "Soon we will be at the Tips."

A commotion silenced the two women. They looked up, crouching against the trunk for protection. Above their heads, leaves rustled as death struck.

A leapy creeper flailed the rough bark in a frenzy of greed, attaching the termight column. The leapy creeper's roots and stems were also tongues and lashes. Whipping round the trunk, it thrust its sticky tongues into the termights.

Against this particular plant, flexible and hideous, the insects had little defence. They scattered but kept doggedly climbing up, each perhaps trusting in the blind law of averages to survive.

HOTHOUSE

For the humans, the plant was less of a threat—at least when met on a branch. Encountered on a trunk, it could easily dislodge them and send them helplessly falling to the green.

"We will climb on another trunk," Lily-yo said.

She and Flor ran deftly along the branch, once jumping a bright parasitic bloom round which tree-bees buzzed, a forerunner of the world of colour above them.

A far worse obstacle lay waiting in an innocent-looking hole in the branch. As Flor and Lily-yo approached, a tigerfly zoomed up at them. It was all but as big as they were, a terrible thing that possessed both weapons and intelligence—and malevolence. Now it attacked, only through viciousness, its eyes large, its mandibles working, its transparent wings beating. Its head was a mixture of shaggy hair and armour-plating, while behind its slender waist lay the great swivel-plated body, yellow and black, sheathing a lethal sting on its tail.

It dived between the women, aiming to hit them with its wings. They fell flat as it sped past. Angrily, it tumbled against the branch as it turned on them again; its golden-brown sting flicked in and out.

"I'll get it!" Flor said. A tigerfly had killed one of her babes.

Now the creature came in fast and low. Ducking, Flor reached

up and seized its shaggy hair, swinging the tigerfly off balance. Quickly she raised her sword. Bringing it down in a mighty sweep, she severed that chitinous and narrow waist.

The tigerfly fell away in two parts. The two women ran on.

The branch, a main one, did not grow thinner. Instead, it ran on for another twenty yards and grew into another trunk. The tree, vastly old, the longest lived organism ever to flourish on this little world, had a myriad trunks. Very long ago—two thousand million years past—trees had grown in many kinds, depending on soil, climate, and other conditions. As temperatures climbed, they proliferated and came into competition with each other. The banyan, thriving in the heat, using its complex system of self-rooting branches, gradually established ascendancy over the other species. Under pressure, it evolved and adapted. Each banyan spread out further and further, sometimes doubling back on itself for safety.

Always it grew higher and crept wider, protecting its parent stem as its rivals multiplied, dropping down trunk after trunk, throwing out branch after branch, until at last it learnt the trick of growing into its neighbour banyan, forming a thicket against which no other tree could strive. Their complexity became unrivalled, their immortality established.

On this great continent where the humans lived, only one banyan tree grew now. It had become first King of the forest, then it had become the forest itself. It had conquered the deserts and the mountains and the swamps. It filled the continent with its interlaced scaffolding. Only before the wider rivers or at the margins of the sea, where the deadly seaweeds could assail it, did the tree not go.

And at the terminator, where all things stopped and night began, there too the tree did not go.

The women climbed slowly now, alert as the odd tigerly zoomed in their direction. Splashes of colour grew everywhere, attached to the tree, hanging from lines, or drifting free. Lianas and fungi blossomed. Dumbler moved mournfully through the tangle. As they gained height, the air grew fresher and colour rioted, azures and crimsons, yellows and mauves, all the beautifully tinted snares of nature.

A dripperlip sent its scarlet dribbles of gum down the trunk. Several thinpins, with vegetable skill, stalked the drops, pounced, and died. Lily-yo and Flor went by on the other side.

Slashweed met them. They slashed back and climbed on.

Many fantastic plant forms there were, some like birds, some like butterflies. Ever and again, whips and hands shot out.

"Look!" Flor whispered. She pointed above their heads.

The tree's bark was cracked almost invisibly. Almost invisibly, a part of it moved. Thrusting her stick out at arm's length, Flor eased herself up until stick and crack were touching. Then she prodded.

A section of the bark gaped wide, revealing a pale deadly mouth. An oystermaw, superbly camouflaged, had dug itself into the tree. Jabbing swiftly, Flor thrust her stick into the trap. As the jaws closed, she pulled with all her might, Lily-yo steadying her. The oystermaw, taken by surprise, was wrenched from its socket.

Opening its maw in shock, it sailed outward through the air. A rayplane took it without trying.

Lily-yo and Flor climbed on.

The Tips was a strange world of its own, the vegetable kingdom at its most imperial and most exotic.

If the banyan ruled the forest, *was* the forest, then the traversers ruled the Tips. The traversers had formed the typical landscape of the Tips. Theirs were the great webs trailing everywhere, theirs the nests built on the tips of the tree.

When the traversers deserted their nests, other creatures built there, other plants grew, spreading their bright colours to the sky.

Debris and droppings knitted these nests into solid platforms. Here grew the burnurn plant, which Lily-yo sought for the soul of Clat.

Pushing and climbing, the two women finally emerged onto one of these platforms. They took shelter from the perils of the sky under a great leaf and rested from their exertions. Even in the shade, even for them, the heat of the Tips was formidable. Above them, paralysing half the heaven, burned a great sun. It burnt without cease, always fixed and still at one point in the sky, and so would burn until that day—now no longer impossibly distant—when it burnt itself out.

Here in the Tips, relying on that sun for its strange method of defence, the burnurn ruled among stationary plants. Already its sensitive roots told it that intruders were near. On the leaf above them, Lily-yo and Flor saw a circle of light move. It wandered over the surface, paused, contracted. The leaf smouldered and burst into flames. Focussing one of its urns on them, the plant was fighting them with its terrible weapon—fire.

"Run!" Lily-yo commanded, and they dashed behind the top of a whistlehistle, hiding beneath its thorns, peering out at the burnurn plant.

It was a splendid sight.

High reared the plant, display-

ing perhaps half a dozen cerise flowers, each flower larger than a human. Other flowers, fertilized, had closed together, forming many-sided urns. Later stages still could be seen, where the colour drained from the urns as seed swelled at the base of them. Finally, when the seed was ripe, the urn—now hollow and immensely strong—turned transparent as glass and became a heat weapon the plant could use even after its seeds were scattered.

Every vegetable and creature shrank from fire—except humans. They alone could deal with the burnurn plant and use it to advantage.

Moving cautiously, Lily-yo stole forth and cut off a big leaf which grew through the platform on which they stood. A pluggyrug launched a spine at her from underneath, but she dodged it. Seizing the leaf, so much bigger than herself, she ran straight for the burnurn, hurling herself among its foliage and shinning to the top of it in an instant, before it could bring its urn-shaped lenses up to focus on her.

"Now!" she cried to Flor.

Flor was already on the move, sprinting forward.

Lily-yo raised the leaf above the burnurn, holding it between the plant and the sun. As if realising that this ruined its method of defence, the plant drooped in the shade as though sulking. Its flow-

ers and its urns hung down limply.

Her knife out ready, Flor darted forward and cut off one of the great transparent urns. Together the two women dashed back for the cover of the whistlehistle while the burnurn came back to furious life, flailing its urns as they sucked in the sun again.

They reached cover just in time. A vegbird swooped out of the sky at them—and impaled itself on a thorn.

Instantly, a dozen scavengers were fighting for the body. Under cover of the confusion, Lily-yo and Flor attacked the urn they had won. Using both their knives and all their strength, they prized up one side far enough to put Clat's soul inside the urn. The side instantly snapped back into place again, an airtight join. The soul stared woodenly out at them through the transparent facets.

"May you Go Up and reach heaven," Lily-yo said.

It was her business to see the soul stood at least a sporting chance of doing so. With Flor, she carried the urn across to one of the cables spun by a traverser. The top end of the urn, where the seed had been, was enormously sticky. The urn adhered easily to the cable and hung there in the sun.

Next time a traverser climbed up the cable, the urn stood an excellent chance of sticking like a

burr to one of its legs. Thus it would be carried away to heaven.

As they finished the work, a shadow fell over them. A mile-long body drifted down towards them. A traverser, a gross vegetable-equivalent of a spider, was descending to the Tips.

Hurriedly, the women burrowed their way through the platform. The last rites for Clat had been carried out: it was time to return to the group.

Before they climbed down again to the green world of middle levels, Lily-yo looked back.

The traverser was descending slowly, a great bladder with legs and jaws, fibery hair covering most of its bulk. To her it was like a god, with the powers of a god. It came down a cable, floated nimbly down the strand trailing up into the sky.

As far as could be seen, cables slanted up from the jungle, pointing like slender drooping fingers to heaven. Where the sun caught them, they glittered. They all trailed up in the same direction, toward a floating silver half-globe, remote and cool, but clearly visible even in the glare of eternal sunshine.

Unmoving, steady, the half-moon remained always in the same sector of the sky.

Through the eons, the pull of this moon had gradually slowed the axial revolution of its parent planet to a standstill, until day

and night slowed, and became fixed forever, day always on one side of the planet, night on the other. At the same time, a reciprocal braking effect had checked the moon's apparent flight. Drifting further from Earth, the moon had shed its role as Earth's satellite and rode along in Earth's orbit, an independent planet in its own right. Now the two bodies, for what was left of the afternoon of eternity, faced each other in the same relative position. They were locked face to face, and so would be, until the sands of time ceased to run, or the sun ceased to shine.

And the multitudinous strands of cable floated across the gap, uniting the worlds. Back and forth the traversers could shuttle at will, vegetable astronauts huge and insensible, with Earth and Luna both enmeshed in their indifferent net.

With surprising suitability, the old age of the Earth was snared about with cobwebs.

III

The journey back to the group was fairly uneventful. Lily-yo and Flor travelled at an easy pace, sliding down again into the middle levels of the tree. Lily-yo did not press forward as hard as usual, for she was reluctant to face the breakup of the group.

She could not express her few thoughts easily.

"Soon we must Go Up like Clat's soul," she said to Flor, as they climbed down.

"It is the way," Flor answered, and Lily-yo knew she would get no deeper word on the matter than that. Nor could she frame deeper words herself; human understandings trickled shallow these days.

The group greeted them soberly when they returned. Being weary, Lily-yo offered them a brief salutation and retired to her nuthut. Jury and Ivin soon brought her food, setting not so much as a finger inside her home, that being tabu. When she had eaten and slept, she climbed again onto the home strip of branch and summoned the others.

"Hurry!" she called, staring fixedly at Haris, who was not hurrying. Why should a difficult thing be so precious—or a precious thing so difficult?

At that moment, while her attention was diverted, a long green tongue licked out from behind the tree trunk. Uncurling, it hovered daintily for a second. It took Lily-yo round the waist, pinning her arms to her side, lifting her off the branch. Furiously she kicked and cried.

Haris pulled a knife from his belt, lept forward with eyes slitted, and hurled the blade. Singing, it pierced the tongue and pinned it to the rough trunk of the tree.

Haris did not pause after throwing. As he ran towards the pin-

ioned tongue, Daphe and Jury ran behind him, while Flor scuttled the children to safety. In its agony, the tongue eased its grip on Lily-yo.

Now a terrific thrashing had set in on the other side of the tree trunk: the forest seemed full of its vibrations. Lily-yo whistled up two dumberers, fought her way out of the green coils round her, and was now safely back on the branch. The tongue, writhing in pain, flicked about meaninglessly. Weapons out, the four humans moved forward to deal with it.

The tree itself shook with the wrath of the trapped creature. Edging cautiously round the trunk, they saw it. Its great vegetable mouth distorted, a wiltmilt stared back at them with the hideous palmate pupil of its single eye. Furiously it hammered itself against the tree, foaming and mouthing. Though they had faced wiltmilts before, yet the humans trembled.

The wiltmilt was many times the girth of the tree trunk at its present extension. If necessary, it could have extended itself up almost to the Tips, stretching and becoming thinner as it did so. Like an obscene jack-in-the-box, it sprang up from the Ground in search of food, armless, brainless, gouging its slow way over the forest floor on wide and rooty legs.

"Pin it!" Lily-yo cried.

Concealed all along the branch

were sharp stakes kept for such emergencies. With these they stabbed the writhing tongue that cracked like a whip about their heads. At last they had a good length of it secured, staked down to the tree. Though the wiltmilt writhed, it would never get free now.

"Now we must leave and Go Up," Lily-yo said.

No human could ever kill a wiltmilt. But already its struggles were attracting predators, the thimpins—those mindless sharks of the middle levels—rayplanes, trapper-snappers, gargoyles, and smaller vegetable vermin. They would tear the wiltmilt to living pieces and continue until nothing of it remained—and if they happened on a human at the same time . . . well, it was the way.

Lily-yo was angry. She had brought on this trouble. She had not been alert. Alert, she would never have allowed the wiltmilt to catch her. Her mind had been tied with thought of her own bad leadership. For she had caused two dangerous trips to be made to the Tips where one would have done. If she had taken all the group with her when Clat's soul was disposed of, she would have saved this second ascent. What ailed her brain that she had not seen this beforehand?

She clapped her hands. Standing for shelter under a giant leaf, she made the group come about

her. Sixteen pairs of eyes stared trustingly at her. She grew angry to see how they trusted her.

"We adults grow old," she told them. "We grow stupid. I grow stupid. I let a slow wiltmilt catch me. I am not fit to lead. Not any more. The time is come for the adults to Go Up and return to the gods who made us. Then the children will be on their own. They will be the group. Toy will lead the group. By the time you are sure of your group, Gren and soon Veggy will be old enough to give you children. Take care of the man children. Let them not fall to the green, or the group dies. Better to die yourself than let the group die."

Lily-yo had never made, the others had never heard, so long a speech. Some of them did not understand it all. What of this talk about falling to the green? One did or one did not: it needed no talk. Whatever happened was the way, and talk could not touch it.

May, a girl child, said cheekily, "On our own we can enjoy many things."

Reaching out, Flor clapped her on an ear.

"First you make the hard climb to the Tips," she said.

"Yes, move," Lily-yo said. She gave the order for climbing, who should lead, who follow.

About them the forest throbbed, green creatures sped and snapped as the wiltmilt was devoured.

"The climb is hard. Begin quickly," Lily-yo said, looking restlessly about her.

"Why climb?" Gren asked rebelliously. "With dumberers we can fly easily to the Tips and suffer no pain."

It was too complicated to explain to him that a human drifting in the air was far more vulnerable than a human shielded by a trunk, with the good rough bark nodules to squeeze between in case of attack.

"While I lead, you climb," Lily-yo said. She could not hit Gren. He was a tabu man child.

They collected their souls from their nuthuts. There was no pomp about saving goodbye to their old home. Their souls went in their belts, their swords—the sharpest, hardest, thorns available—went in their hands. They ran along the branch after Lily-yo, away from the disintegrating wiltmilt, away from their past.

Slowed by the younger children, the journey up to the Tips was long. Although the humans fought off the usual hazards, the tiredness growing in small limbs could not be fought. Half way to the Tips, they found a side branch to rest on, for there grew a fuzzy-puzzle, and they sheltered in it.

The fuzzypuzzle was a beautiful, disorganised fungus. Although it looked like nettlemoss on a larger scale, it did not harm hu-

mans, drawing in its poisoned pistils as if with disgust when they came to it. Ambling in the eternal branches of the tree, fuzzypuzzles desired only vegetable food. So the group climbed into the middle of it and slept. Guarded among the waving viridian and yellow stalks, they were safe from nearly all forms of attack.

Flor and Lily-yo slept most deeply of the adults. They were tired by their previous journey. Haris the man was the first to awake, knowing something was wrong. As he roused, he woke up Jury by poking her with his stick. He was lazy; besides, it was his duty to keep out of danger. Jury sat up. She gave a shrill cry of alarm and jumped at once to defend the children.

Four winged things had invaded the fuzzypuzzle. They had seized Veggy, the man child, and Bain, one of the younger girl children, gagging and tying them before the pair could wake properly.

At Jury's cry, the winged ones looked round.

They were flymen!

In some aspects they resembled humans. They had one head, two long and powerful arms, stubby legs, and strong fingers on hands and feet. But instead of smooth green skin, they were covered in a glittering horny substance, here black, here pink. And large scaly wings resembling those of a vegetable bird grew from their wrists to their

ankles. Their faces were sharp and clever. Their eyes glittered.

When they saw the humans waking, the flymen grabbed up the two captive children. Bursting through the fuzzypuzzle, which did not harm them, they ran towards the edge of the branch to jump off.

Flymen were crafty enemies, seldom seen but much dreaded by the group. They worked by stealth. Though they did not kill unless forced to, they stole children. Catching them was hard. Flymen did not fly properly, but the crash glides they fell into carried them swiftly away through the forest, safe from human reprisal.

Jury flung herself forward with all her might, Ivin behind her. She caught an ankle, seized part of the leathery tendon of wing where it joined the foot, and clung on. One of the flymen holding Veggy staggered with her weight, turning as he did so to free himself. His companion, taking the full weight of the boy child, paused, dragging out a knife to defend himself.

Ivin flung herself at him with savagery. She had mothered Veggy: he should not be taken away. The flyman's blade came to meet her. She threw herself on it. It ripped her stomach till the brown entrails showed, and she toppled from the branch with no cry. There was a commotion in the foliage below as trappersnappers fought for her.

Deciding he had done enough, the flyman dropped the bound Veggy and left his friend still struggling with Jury. He spread his wings, taking off heavily after the two who had born Bain away between them into the green thick-
et.

All the group were awake now. Lily-yo silently untied Veggy, who did not cry, for he was a man child. Meanwhile, Haris knelt by Jury and her winged opponent, who fought without words to get away. Quickly, Haris brought out a knife.

"Don't kill me. I will go!" cried the flyman. His voice was harsh, his words hardly understandable. The mere strangeness of him filled Haris with savagery, so that his lips curled back and his tongue came thickly between his bared teeth.

He thrust his knife deep between the flyman's ribs, four times over, till the blood poured over his clenched fist.

Jury stood up gasping and leant against Ivin. "I grow old," she said. "Once it was no trouble to kill a flyman."

She looked at the man Haris with gratitude. He had more than one use.

With one foot she pushed the limp body over the edge of the branch. It rolled messily, then dropped. Its old wizened wings tucked uselessly about its head, the flyman fell to the green.

They lay among the sharp leaves of two whistle-thistle plants, dazed by the bright sun but alert for new dangers. Their climb had been completed. Now the nine children saw the Tips for the first time—and were struck mute by it.

Once more Lily-yo and Flor lay siege to a burnurn, with Daphe helping them. As the plant slumped defencelessly in the shadow of their upheld leaves, Daphe severed six of the great transparent pods that were to be their coffins. Hy helped her carry them to safety, after which Lily-yo and Flor dropped their leaves and ran for the shelter of the whistle-thistles.

A cloud of paperwings drifted by, their colours startling to eyes generally submerged in green: sky blues and yellows and bronzes and a viridian that flashed like water.

One of the paperwings alighted fluttering on a tuft of emerald foliage near the watchers. The foliage was a dripperlip. Almost at once the paperwing turned grey as its small nourishment content was sucked out. It disintegrated like ash.

Rising cautiously, Lily-yo led the group over to the nearest cable of traverser web. Each adult carried her own urn.

The traversers, largest of all creatures, vegetable or otherwise, could never go into the forest.

They spurted out their line among the upper branches, securing it with side strands.

Finding a suitable cable with no traverser in sight, Lily-yo turned, signalling for the urns to be put down. She spoke to Toy, Gren, and the seven other children.

"Now help us climb with our souls into our burnurns. See us tight in. Then carry us to the cable and stick up to it. Then good-bye. We Go Up. You are the group now."

Toy momentarily hesitated. She was a slender girl, her breasts like pearfruit.

"Do not go, Lily-yo," she said. "We still need you."

"It is the way," Lily-yo said firmly.

Prizing open one of the facets of her urn, she slid into her coffin. Helped by the children, the other adults did the same. From habit, Lily-yo glanced to see that Haris was safe.

They were all in now, and helpless. Inside the urns it was surprisingly cool.

The children carried the coffins between them, glancing nervously up at the sky meanwhile. They were afraid. They felt helpless. Only the bold man child Gren looked as if he was enjoying their new sense of independence. He more than Toy directed the others in the placing of the urns upon the traverser's cable.

Lily-yo smelt a curious smell in the urn. As it soaked through her lungs, her senses became detached. Outside, the scene which had been clear clouded and shrank. She saw she hung suspended on a traverser cable above the tree tops, with Flor, Haris, Daphe, Ily and Jury in other urns nearby, hanging helplessly. She saw the children, the new group, run to shelter. Without looking back, they dived into the muddle of foliage on the platform and disappeared.

The traverser hung ten and a half miles above the Tops, safe from its enemies. All about it, space was indigo, and the invisible rays of space bathed it and nourished it. Yet the traverser was still dependent on Earth for some food. After many hours of vegetative dreaming, it swung itself over and climbed down a cable.

Other traversers hung motionless nearby. Occasionally one would blow a globe of oxygen or hitch a leg to try and dislodge a troublesome parasite. Theirs was a leisureliness never attained before. Time was not for them; the sun was theirs, and would ever be until it became unstable, turned nova, and burnt both them and itself out.

The traverser fell fast, its feet twinkling, hardly touching the cable, fell straight to the forest, plunging towards the leafy cathedrals of the forest. Here in the air

lived its enemies, enemies many times smaller, many times more vicious, many times more clever. Traversers were prey to one of the last families of insect, the tigerflies.

Only tigerflies could kill traversers—kill in their own insidious, invincible way.

Over the long slow eons as the sun's radiation increased, vegetation had evolved to undisputed supremacy. The wasps had developed too, keeping pace with the new developments. They grew in numbers and size as the animal kingdom fell into eclipse and dwindled into the rising tide of green. In time they became the chief enemies of the spider-like traversers. Attacking in packs, they could paralyse the primitive nerve centres, leaving the traversers to stagger to their own destruction. The tigerflies also laid their eggs in tunnels bored into the stuff of their enemies' bodies; when the eggs hatched, the larvae fed happily on living flesh.

This threat it was, more than anything, that had driven the traversers further and further into space many millenia past. In this seemingly inhospitable region, they reached their full and monstrous flowering.

Hard radiation became a necessity for them. Nature's first astronauts, they changed the face of the firmament. Long after man had rolled up his affairs and retired to

the trees from whence he came, the traversers reconquered that vacant pathway he had lost. Long after intelligence had died from its peak of dominance, the traversers linked indissolubly the green globe and the white—with that antique symbol of neglect, a spider's web.

The traverser scrambled down among the upper leaves, erecting the hairs on its back, where patchy green and black afforded it natural camouflage. On its way down it had collected several creatures caught fluttering in its cables. It sucked them peacefully. When the soupy noises stopped, it vegetated.

Buzzing roused it from its doze. Yellow and black stripes zoomed before its crude eyes. A pair of tigerflies had found it.

With great alacrity, the traverser moved. Its massive bulk, contracted in the atmosphere, had an overall length of over a mile, yet it moved lightly as pollen, scuttling up a cable back to the safety of vacuum.

As it retreated, its legs brushing the web, it picked up various spores, burrs, and tiny creatures that adhered there. It also picked up six burnurns, each containing an insensible human, which swung unregarded from its shin.

Several miles up, the traverser paused. Recovering from its fright, it ejected a globe of oxygen, attaching it gently to a cable. It paused. Its palps trembled. Then it headed out towards deep space,

expanding all the time as pressure dropped.

Its speed increased. Folding its legs, the traverser began to eject fresh web from the spinnerets under its abdomen. So it propelled itself, a vast vegetable almost without feeling, rotating slowly to stabilise its temperature.

Hard radiations bathed it. The traverser basked in them. It was in its element.

Daphe roused. She opened her eyes, gazing without intelligence. What she saw had no meaning. She only knew she had Gone Up. This was a new existence and she did not expect it to have meaning.

Part of the view from her urn was eclipsed by stiff yellowy whips that might have been hair or straw. Everything else was uncertain, being washed either in blinding light or deep shadow. Light and shadow revolved.

Gradually Daphe identified other objects. Most notable was a splendid green half-ball mottled with white and blue. Was it a fruit? To it trailed cables, glinting here and there, many cables, silver or gold in the crazy light. Two traversers she recognised at some distance, travelling fast, looking mummified. Bright points of lights sparkled painfully. All was confusion.

This was where gods lived.

Daphe had no feeling. A curious numbness kept her without motion or the wish to move. The

smell in the urn was strange. Also the air seemed thick. Everything was like an evil dream. Daphe opened her mouth, her jaw sticky and slow to respond. She screamed. No sound came. Pain filled her. Her sides in particular ached.

Even when her eyes closed again, her mouth hung open.

Like a great shaggy balloon, the traverser floated down to the moon.

It could hardly be said to think, being a mechanism or little more. Yet somewhere in it the notion stirred that its pleasant journey was too brief, that there might be other directions in which to sail. After all, the hated tigerflies were almost as many now, and as troublesome, on the moon as on the earth. Perhaps somewhere there might be a peaceful place, another of these half-round places with green stuff, in the middle of warm delicious rays. . . .

Perhaps some time it might be worth sailing off on a full belly and a new course. . . .

Many traversers hung above the moon. Their nets straggled untidily everywhere. This was their happy base, better liked than the earth, where the air was thick and their limbs were clumsy. This was the place they had discovered first —except for some puny creatures who had been long gone before they arrived. They were the last

lords of creation. Largest and lordliest, they enjoyed their long lazy afternoon's supremacy.

The traverser slowed, spinning out no more cable. In leisurely fashion, it picked its way through a web and drifted down to the pallid vegetation of the moon. . . .

Here were conditions very unlike those on the heavy planet. The many-trunked banyans had never gained supremacy here; in the thin air and low gravity they outgrew their strength and collapsed. In their place, monstrous celeries and parsleys grew, and it was into a bed of these that the traverser settled. Hissing from its exertions, it blew off a great cloud of oxygen and relaxed.

As it settled down into the foliage, its great sack of body rubbed against the stems. Its legs too scraped into the mass of leaves. From legs and body a shower of light debris was dislodged—burrs, seeds, grit, nuts, and leaves caught up in its sticky fibres back on distant earth. Among this detritus were six seed casings from a burnurn plant. They rolled over the ground and came to a standstill.

Haris the man was the first to awaken. Groaning with an unexpected pain in his sides, he tried to sit up. Pressure on his forehead reminded him of where he was. Doubling up knees and arms, he pushed against the lid of his coffin.

Momentarily, it resisted him. Then the whole urn crumbled into

pieces, sending Haris sprawling. The rigours of total vacuum had destroyed its cohesive powers.

Unable to pick himself up, Haris lay where he was. His head throbbled, his lungs were full of an unpleasant odour. Eagerly he gasped in fresh air. At first it seemed thin and chill, yet he sucked it in with gratitude.

After a while, he was well enough to look about him.

Long yellow tendrils were stretching out of a nearby thicket, working their way gingerly towards him. Alarmed, he looked about for a woman to protect him. None was there. Stiffly, his arms so stiff, he pulled his knife from his belt, rolled over on one side, and lopped the tendrils off as they reached him. This was an easy enemy!

Haris cried. He screamed. He jumped unsteadily to his feet, yelling in disgust at himself. Suddenly he had noticed he was covered in scabs. Worse, as his clothes fell in shreds from him, he saw that a mass of leathery flesh grew from his arms, his ribs, his legs. When he lifted his arms, the mass stretched out almost like wirigs. He was spoilt, his handsome body ruined.

A sound made him turn, and for the first time he remembered his fellows. Lily-yo was struggling from the remains of her burnurn. She raised a hand in greeting.

To his horror, Haris saw that

she bore disfigurements like his own. In truth, at first he scarcely recognised her. She resembled nothing so much as one of the hated flymen. He flung himself to the ground and wept as his heart expanded in fear and loathing.

Lily-yo was not born to weep. Disregarding her own painful deformities, breathing laboriously, she cast about, seeking the other four coffins.

Flor's was the first she found, half buried though it was. A blow with a stone shattered it. Lily-yo lifted up her friend, as hideously transformed as she, and in a short while Flor roused. Inhaling the strange air raucously, she too sat up. Lily-yo left her to seek the others. Even in her dazed state, she thanked her aching limbs for feeling so light.

Daphe was dead. She lay stiff and purple in her urn. Though Lily-yo shattered it and called aloud, Daphe did not stir. Her swollen tongue stayed dreadfully protruding from her mouth. Daphe was dead, Daphe who had lived, Daphe who had been the sweet singer.

Hy also was dead, a poor shrivelled thing lying in a coffin that had cracked on its arduous journey between the two worlds. When that coffin shattered under Lily-yo's blow, Hy fell away to powder. Hy was dead. Hy who had born a man child. Hy always so fleet of foot.

Jury's urn was the last. She stirred as the headwoman reached her. A minute later, she was sitting up, eying her deformities with a stoical distaste, breathing the sharp air. Jury lived.

Haris staggered over to the women. In his hand he carried his soul.

"Four of us!" he exclaimed. "Have we been received by the gods or no?"

"We feel pain—so we live," Lily-yo said. "Daphe and Hy have fallen to the green."

Bitterly, Haris flung down his soul and trampled it underfoot. "Look at us! Better be dead!" he said.

"Before we decide that, we will eat," said Lily-yo.

Painfully, they retreated into the thicket, alerting themselves once more to the idea of danger. Flor, Lily-yo, Jury, Haris, each supported the other. The idea of tabu had somehow been forgotten.



"No proper trees grow here," Flor protested, as they pushed among giant celeries whose crests waved high above their heads.

"Take care!" Lily-yo said. She pulled Flor back. Something rattled and snapped like a chained dog, missing Flor's leg by inches.

A trappersnapper, having missed its prey, was slowly reopening its jaws, baring its green teeth. This

one was only a shadow of the terrible trappersnappers spawned on the jungle floors of earth. Its jaws were weaker, its movements far more circumscribed. Without the shelter of the giant banyans, the trappersnappers were disinherited.

Something of the same feeling overcame the humans. They and their ancestors for countless generations had lived in the high trees. Safety was arboreal. Here there were only celery and parsley trees, offering neither the rock-steadiness nor the unlimited boughs of the giant banyan.

So they journeyed, nervous, lost, in pain, knowing neither where they were nor why they were.

They were attacked by leapy-creepers and sawthorns, and beat them down. They skirted a thicket of nettlemoss taller and wider than any to be met with on earth. Conditions that worked against one group of vegetation favoured others. They climbed a slope and came on a pool fed by a stream. Over the pool hung berries and fruits, sweet to taste, good to eat.

"This is not so bad," Haris said. "Perhaps we can still live."

Lily-yo smiled at him. He was the most trouble, the most lazy; yet she was glad he was still here. When they bathed in the pool, she looked at him again. For all the strange scales that covered him, and the two broad sweeps of flesh that hung by his side, he was still good to look on just because he

was Haris. She hoped she was also comely. With a burr she raked her hair back; only a little of it fell out.

When they had bathed, they ate. Haris worked then, collecting fresh knives from the bramble bushes. They were not as tough as the ones on earth, but they would have to do. Then they rested in the sun.

The pattern of their lives was completely broken. More by instinct than intelligence they had lived. Without the group, without the tree, without the earth, no pattern guided them. What was the way or what was not became unclear. So they lay where they were and rested.

As she lay there, Lily-yo looked about her. All was strange, so that her heart beat faintly.

Though the sun shone bright as ever, the sky was as deep blue as a vandalberry. And the half-globe in the sky was monstrous, all streaked with green and blue and white, so that Lily-yo could not know it for somewhere she had lived. Phantom silver lines pointed to it, while nearer at hand the tracery of traverser webs glittered, veining the whole sky. Traversers moved over it like clouds, their great bodies slack.

All this was their empire, their creation. On their first journeys here, many millenia ago, they had literally laid the seeds of this

world. To begin with, they had withered and died by the thousand on the inhospitable ash. But even the dead had brought their little legacies of oxygen, soil, spores, and seed, some of which later sprouted on the fruitful corpses. Under the weight of dozing centuries, they gained a sort of foothold.

They grew. Stunted and ailing in the beginning, they grew. With vegetal tenacity, they grew. They exhaled. They spread. They thrived. Slowly the broken wastes of the moon's lit face turned green. In the craters creepers grew. Up the ravaged slopes the parsleys crawled. As the atmosphere deepened, so the magic of life intensified, its rhythm strengthened, its tempo increased. More thoroughly than another dominant species had once managed to do, the travelers colonised the moon.

Lily-yo could know or care little about any of this. She turned her face from the sky.

Flor had crawled over to Haris the man. She lay against him in the circle of his arms, half under the shelter of his new skin, and she stroked his hair.

Furious, Lily-yo jumped up, kicked Flor on the shin, and then flung herself upon her, using teeth and nails to pull her away. Jury ran to join in.

"This is not time for mating!" Lily-yo cried.

"Let me go!" cried Flor.

Haris in his startlement jumped up. He stretched his arms, waved them, and rose effortlessly into the air.

"Look!" he shouted in alarmed delight.

Over their heads he circled once, perilously. Then he lost his balance and came sprawling head first, mouth open in fright. Head first he pitched into the pool.

Three anxious, awe-struck, love-struck female humans dived after him in unison.

While they were drying themselves, they heard noises in the forest. At once they became alert, their old selves. They drew their new swords and looked to the thicket.

The wiltmilt when it appeared was not like its Earthly brothers. No longer upright like a jack-in-the-box, it groped its way along like a caterpillar.

The humans saw its distorted eye break from the celeries. Then they turned and fled.

Even when the danger was left behind, they moved rapidly, not knowing what they sought. Once they slept, ate, and then again pressed on through the unending growth, the undying daylight, until they came to where the jungle gaped.

Ahead of them, everything seemed to cease and then go on again.

Cautiously they approached. The ground underfoot had been badly uneven. Now it broke altogether into a wide crevasse. Beyond the crevasse the vegetation grew again—but how did humans pass the gulf? The four of them stood anxiously where the ferns ended, looking across at the far side.

Haris the man screwed his face in pain to show he had a troublesome idea in his head.

"What I did before—going up in the air," he began awkwardly. "If we do it again now, all of us, we go in the air across to the other side."

"No!" Lily-yo said. "When you go up you come down hard. You will fall to the green!"

"I will do better than before."

"No!" repeated Lily-yo. "You are not to go."

"Let him go," Flor said.

The two women turned to glare at each other. Taking his chance, Haris raised his arms, waved them, rose slightly from the ground, and began to use his legs too. He moved forward over the crevasse before his nerve broke.

As he fluttered down, Flor and Lily-yo, moved by instinct, dived into the gulf after him. Spreading their arms, they glided about him, shouting. Jury remained behind, crying in baffled anger down to them.

Regaining a little control, Haris

landed heavily on an outcropping ledge. The two women alighted chattering and scolding beside him. They looked up. Two lips fringed with green fern sucked a narrow purple segment of sky. Jury could not be seen, though her cries still echoed down to them.

Behind the ledge on which they stood a tunnel ran into the cliff. All the rock face was peppered with similar holes, so that it resembled a sponge. From the hole behind the ledge ran three flymen, two male and one female. They rushed out with ropes and spears.

Flor and Lily-yo were bending over Haris. Before they had time to recover, they were knocked sprawling and tied with the ropes. Helpless, Lily-yo saw other flymen launch themselves from other holes and come gliding in to help secure them. Their flight seemed more sure, more graceful, than it had on earth. Perhaps the way humans were lighter here had something to do with it.

"Bring them in!" the flymen cried to each other. Their sharp, clever faces jostled round eagerly as they hoisted up their captives and bore them into the tunnel.

In their alarm, Lily-yo, Flor and Haris forgot about Jury, still crouching on the lip of the crevasse. They never saw her again. A pack of thimpins got her.

The tunnel sloped gently down. Finally it curved and led into another which ran level and true.

This in its turn led into an immense cavern with regular sides and a regular roof. Grey daylight flooded in at one end, for the cavern stood at the bottom of the crevasse.

To the middle of this cavern the three captives were brought. Their knives were taken from them and they were released. As they huddled together uneasily, one of the flymen stood forward and spoke.

"We will not harm you unless we must," he said. "You come by traveler from the Heavy World. You are new here. When you learn our ways, you will join us."

"I am Lily-yo," Lily-yo proudly said. "Let me go. We three are humans. You are flymen."

"Yes, you are humans, we are flymen. Also we are humans, you are flymen. Now you know nothing. Soon you will know, when you have seen the Captives. They will tell you many things."

"I am Lily-yo. I know many things."

"The Captives will tell you many more things."

"If there were many more things, then I should know them."

"I am Band Appa Bondi and I say come to see the Captives. Your talk is stupid Heavy World talk, Lily-yo."

Several flymen began to look aggressive, so that Haris nudged Lily-yo and muttered, "Let us do what he asks."

Grumpily, Lily-yo let herself and her two companions be led to another chamber. This one was partially ruined, and stank. At the far end of it, a fall of cindery rock marked where the roof had fallen in, while a shaft of the unremitting sunlight burnt on the floor, sending up a curtain of golden light about itself. Near this light were the Captives.

"Do not fear to see them. They will not harm you," Band Appa Bondi said, going forward.

The encouragement was needed, for the Captives were not prepossessing.

Eight of them there were, eight Captives, kept in eight great burn-urns big enough to serve them as narrow cells. The cells stood grouped in a semicircle. Band Appa Bondi led Lily-yo, Flor and Haris into the middle of this semicircle, where they could survey and be surveyed.

The Captives were painful to look on. All had some kind of deformity. One had no legs. One had no flesh on his lower jaw. One had four gnarled dwarf arms. One had short wings of flesh connecting ear lobes and thumbs, so that he lived perpetually with hands half raised to his face. One had boneless arms trailing at his side and one boneless leg. One had monstrous wings which trailed about him like carpet. One was hiding his ill-shaped form away behind a screen of his own excre-

ment, smearing it onto the transparent walls of his cell. And one had a second head, a small wizened thing growing from the first that fixed Lily-yo with a malevolent eye. This last captive, who seemed to lead the others, spoke now, using the mouth of his main head.

"I am the Chief Captive. I greet you. You are of the Heavy World. We are of the True World. Now you join us because you are of us. Though your wings and your scars are new, you may join us."

"I am Lily-yo. We three are humans. You are only flymen. We will not join you."

The Captives grunted in boredom. The Chief Captive spoke again.

"Always this talk from you of the Heavy World! You *have* joined us! You are flymen, we are human. You know little, we know much."

"But we—"

"Stop your stupid talk, woman!"

"We are—"

"Be silent, woman, and listen," Band Appa Bondi said.

"We know much," repeated the Chief Captive. "Some things we will tell you. All who make the journey from the Heavy World become changed. Some die. Most live and grow wings. Between the worlds are many strong rays, not seen or felt, which change our

bodies. When you come here, when you come to the True World, you become a true human. The grub of the tigerfly is not a tigerfly until it changes. So humans change."

"I cannot know what he says," Haris said stubbornly, throwing himself down. But Lily-yo and Flor were listening.

"To this True World, as you call it, we come to die," Lily-yo said, doubtingly.

The Captive with the fleshless jaw said, "The grub of the tigerfly thinks it dies when it changes into a tigerfly."

"You are still young," said the Chief Captive. "You begin newly here. Where are your souls?"

Lily-yo and Flor looked at each other. In their flight from the wilt-milt they had heedlessly thrown down their souls. Haris had trampled on his. It was unthinkable!

"You see. You needed them no more. You are still young. You may be able to have babies. Some of those babies may be born with wings."

The Captive with the boneless arms added, "Some may be born wrong, as we are. Some may be born right."

"You are too foul to live!" Haris growled. "Why are you not killed?"

"Because we know all things," the Chief Captive said. Suddenly his second head roused itself and declared, "To be a good shape is not all in life. To know is also

good. Because we cannot move well we can—*think*. This tribe of the True World is good and knows these things. So it lets us rule it."

Flor and Lily-yo muttered together.

"Do you say that you poor Captives rule the True World?" Lily-yo asked at last.

"We do."

"Then why are you captives?"

The flyman with ear lobes and thumbs connected, making his perpetual little gesture of protest, spoke for the first time.

"To rule is to serve, woman. Those who bear power are slaves to it. Only an outcast is free. Because we are Captives, we have the time to talk and think and plan and know. Those who know command the knives of others."

"No hurt will come to you, Lily-yo," Band Appa Bondi added. "You will live among us and enjoy your life free from harm."

"No!" the Chief Captive said with both mouths. "Before she can enjoy, Lily-yo and her companion Flor—this other man creature is plainly useless—must help our great plan."

"The invasion?" Bondi asked.

"What else? Flor and Lily-yo, you arrive here at a good time. Memories of the Heavy World and its savage life are still fresh in you. We need such memories. So we ask you to go back these on a great plan we have."

"Go back?" gasped Flor.

"Yes. We plan to attack the Heavy World. You must help to lead our force."

VI

The long afternoon of eternity wore on, that long golden road of an afternoon that would sometimes lead to everlasting night. Motion there was, but motion without event—except for those negligible events that seemed so large to the creatures participating in them.

For Lily-yo, Flor and Haris there were many events. Chief of these was that they learned to fly properly.

The pains associated with their wings soon died away as the wonderful new flesh and tendon strengthened. To sail up in the light gravity became an increasing delight—the ugly flopping movements of flymen on the Heavy World had no place here.

They learned to fly in packs, and then to hunt in packs. In time they were trained to carry out the Captives' plan.

The series of accidents that had first delivered humans to this world in burnurns had been a fortunate one, growing more fortunate as millennia tolled away. For gradually the humans adapted better to the True World. Their survival factor became greater, their power surer. And all this as

on the Heavy World conditions grew more and more adverse to anything but the giant vegetables.

Lily-yo at least was quick to see how much easier life was in these new conditions. She sat with Flor and a dozen others eating pulped pluggyrug, before they did the Captives' bidding and left for the Heavy World.

It was hard to express all she felt.

"Here we are safe," she said, indicating the whole green land that sweltered under the silver network of webs.

"Except from the tigerflies," Flor agreed.

They rested on a bare peak, where the air was thin and even the giant creepers had not climbed. The turbulent green stretched away below them, almost as if they were on Earth—although here it was continually checked by the circular formations of rock.

"This world is smaller," Lily-yo said, trying again to make Flor know what was in her head. "Here we are bigger. We do not need to fight so much."

"Soon we must fight."

"Then we can come back here again. This is a good place, with nothing so savage and with not so many enemies. Here the groups could live without so much fear. Veggy and Toy and May and Gren and the other little ones would like it here."

"They would miss the trees."

"We shall soon miss the trees no longer. We have wings instead."

This idle talk took place beneath the unmoving shadow of a rock. Overhead, silver blobs against a purple sky, the transversers went, walking their networks, descending only occasionally to the celeries far below. As Lily-yo fell to watching these creatures, she thought in her mind of the grand plan the Captives had hatched, she flicked it over in a series of vivid pictures.

Yes, the Captives knew. They could see ahead as she could not. She and those about her had lived like plants, doing what came. The Captives were not plants. From their cells they saw more than those outside.

This, the Captives saw: that the few humans who reached the True World bore few children, because they were old, or because the rays that made their wings grow made their seed die; that it was good here, and would be better still with more humans; that one way to get more humans here was to bring babies and children from the Heavy World.

For countless time, this had been done. Brave flymen had travelled back to that other world and stolen children. The flymen who had once attacked Lily-yo's group on their climb to the Tips had been on that mission. They had taken Bain to bring her to the

True World in burnburns—and had not been heard of since.

Many perils and mischances lay in that long double journey. Of those who set out, few returned.

Now the Captives had thought of a better and more daring scheme.

"Here comes a traverser," Band Appa Bondi said. "Let us be ready to move."

He walked before the pack of twelve flyers who had been chosen for this new attempt. He was the leader. Lily-yo, Flor, and Haris were in support of him, together with eight others, three male, five female. Only one of them, Band Appa Bondi himself, had been carried to the True World as a boy.

Slowly the pack stood up, stretching their wings. The moment for their great adventure was here. Yet they felt little fear; they could not look ahead as the Captives did, except perhaps for Band Appa Bondi and Lily-yo. She strengthened her will by saying, "It is the way." Then they all spread their arms wide and soared off to meet the traverser.

The traverser had eaten.

It had caught one of its most tasty enemies, a tigerfly, in a web, and had sucked it till only a shell was left. Now it sank down into a bed of celeries, crushing them under its great bulk. Gently, it began to bud. Afterwards, it would head

out for the great black gulfs, where heat and radiance called it. It had been born on this world. Being young, it had never yet made that dreaded, desired journey.

Its buds burst up from its back, hung over, popped, fell to the ground, and scurried away to bury themselves in the pulp and dirt where they might begin their ten thousand years' growth in peace.

Young though it was, the traverser was sick. It did not know this. The enemy tigerfly had been at it, but it did not know this. Its vast bulk held little sensation.

The twelve humans glided down and landed on its back, low down on the abdomen in a position hidden from the creature's cluster of eyes. They sank among the tough shoulder-high fibres that served the traverser as hair, and looked about them. A rayplane swooped overhead and disappeared. A trio of tumbleweeds skittered into the fibres and were seen no more. All was as quiet as if they lay on a small deserted hill.

At length they spread out and moved along in line, heads down, eyes searching, Band Appa Bondi at one end, Lily-yo at the other. The great body was streaked and pitted and scarred, so that progress down the slope was not easy. The fibre grew in patterns of different shades, green, yellow, black, breaking up the traverser's bulk when

seen from the air, serving it as natural camouflage. In many places, tough parasitic plants had rooted themselves, drawing their nourishment entirely from their host; most of them would die when the traverser launched itself out between worlds.

The humans worked hard. Once they were thrown flat when the traverser changed position. As the slope down which they moved grew steeper, so progress became more slow.

"Here!" cried Y Coyin, one of the women.

At last they had found what they sought, what the Captives sent them to seek.

Clustering round Y Coyin with their knives out, the pack looked down.

Here the fibres had been neatly champed away in swathes, leaving a bare patch as far across as a human was long. In this patch was a round scab. Lily-yo felt it. It was immensely hard.

Lo Jint put his ear to it. Silence.

They looked at each other.

No signal was needed, none given.

Together they knelt, prizing with their knives round the scab. Once the traverser moved, and they threw themselves flat. A bud rose nearby, popped, rolled down the slope and fell to the distant ground. A thinpin devoured it as it ran. The humans continued prizing.

The scab moved. They lifted it off. A dark and sticky tunnel was revealed to them.

"I go first," Band Appa Bondi said.

He lowered himself into the hole. The others followed. Dark sky showed roundly above them until the twelfth human was in the tunnel. Then the scab was drawn back into place. A soft slobber of sound came from it, as it began to heal back into position again.

They crouched where they were for a long time. They crouched, their knives ready, their wings folded round them, their human hearts beating strongly.

In more than one sense they were in enemy territory. At the best of times, traversers were only allies by accident; they ate humans as readily as they devoured anything else. But this burrow was the work of that yellow and black destroyer, the tigerfly. One of the last true insects to survive, the tough and resourceful tigerflies had instinctively made the most invincible of all living things its prey.

The female tigerfly alights and bores her tunnel into the traverser. Working her way down, she at last stops and prepares a natal chamber, hollowing it from the living traverser, paralysing the matter with her needletail to prevent it healing again. There she lays her store of eggs before climbing

back to daylight. When the eggs hatch, the larvae have fresh and living stuff to nourish them.

After a while, Band Appa Bondi gave a sign and the pack moved forward, climbing awkwardly down the tunnel. A faint luminescence guided their eyes. The air lay heavy and green in their chests. They moved very slowly, very quietly, for they heard movement ahead.

Suddenly the movement was on them.

"Look out!" Band Appa Bondi cried.

From the terrible dark, something launched itself at them.

Before they realised it, the tunnel had curved and widened into the natal chamber. The tigerfly's eggs had hatched. Two hundred larvae with jaws as wide as a man's reach turned on the intruders, snapping in fury and fear.

Even as Band Appa Bondi sliced his first attacker, another had his head off. He fell, and his companions launched themselves over him. Pressing forward, they dodged those clicking jaws.

Behind their hard heads, the larvae were soft and plump. One slash of a sword and they burst, their entrails flowing out. They fought, but knew not how to fight. Savagely the humans stabbed, ducked and stabbed. No other human died. With backs to the wall they cut and thrust, breaking jaws, ripping flimsy stomachs. They

killed unceasingly with neither hate nor mercy until they stood knee deep in slush. The larvae snapped and writhed and died. Uttering a grunt of satisfaction, Haris slew the last of them.

Wearily then, eleven humans crawled back to the tunnel, there to wait until the mess drained away—and then to wait a longer while.

The traverser stirred in its bed of celeries. Vague impulses drifted through its being. Things it had done. Things it had to do. The things it had done had been done, the things it had to do were still to do. Blowing off oxygen, it heaved itself up.

Slowly at first, it swung up a cable, climbing to the network where the air thinned. Always, always before in the eternal afternoon it had stopped here. This time there seemed no reason for stopping. Air was nothing, heat was all, the heat that blistered and prodded and chafed and coaxed increasingly with height.

It blew a jet of cable from a spinneret. Gaining speed, gaining intention, it rocketed its mighty vegetable self out and away from the place where the tigerflies flew. Ahead of it floated a semicircle of light, white and blue and green, that was a useful thing to look at to avoid getting lost.

For this was a lonely place for

a young traverser, a terrible-wonderful bright-dark place, so full of nothing. Turn as you speed and you fry well on all sides . . . nothing to trouble you. . . .

. . . Except that deep in your core a little pack of humans use you as an ark for their own pur-



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poses. You carry them back to a world that once—so staggeringly long ago—belonged to their kind; you carry them back so that they may eventually—who knows?—fill another world with their own kind.

For remember, there is always plenty of time.

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