FRITZ LEIBER

BULLET WITH HIS NAME

The Invisible Being shifted his anchorage a bit in Earth's gravitational field, which felt like a push rather than a pull to him, and said, "This featherless biped seems to satisfy Galaxy Center's requirements. I'd say he's a suitable recipient for the Gifts."

His Coadjutor, equally invisible and negatively massed, chewed that over. "Mature by his length and mass. Artificial plumage neither overly gaudy nor utterly drab—indicating median social level, which is confirmed by the size of his bachelor nest. Inward maps of his environment not fantastically inaccurate. Feelings reasonably meshed—at least neither volcanic nor frozen. Thoughts and values in reasonable order. Yes, I agree, a satisfactory test subject. Except...."

"Except what?"

"Except we can never be sure of that 'reasonable' part."

"Of course not! Thank your stars that's beyond the reach of Galaxy Center's keenest telepathy, or even ours on the spot. Otherwise you and I'd be out of a job."

"And have to scheme up some other excuse for free-touring the Cosmos with backtracking permitted."

"Exactly!" The Being and his Coadjutor understood each other very well and were the best of friends. "Well, how many Gifts would you suggest for the test?"

"How about two Little and one Big?" the Coadjutor ventured.

"Umm ... statistically adequate but spiritually unsatisfying. Remember, the fate of his race hangs on his reactions to them. I'd be inclined to increase your suggestion by one each and add a Great."

"No—at least I question the last. After all, the Great Gifts aren't as important, really, as the Big Gifts. Besides...."

"Besides what? Come on, spit it out!" The Invisible Being was the bluff, blunt type.

"Well," said his less hearty but unswervingly honest companion, "I'm always afraid that you'll use the granting of a Great Gift as an excuse for some sardonic trick—that you'll put a sting in its tail."

"And why shouldn't I, if I want to? Snakes have stings in their tails (or do they on this planet?) and I'm a sort of snake. If he fails the test, he fails. And aren't both of us malicious, plaguing spirits, eager to knock holes in the inward armor of provincial entities? It's in the nature of our job. But we can argue about that in due course. What Little Gifts would you suggest?"

"That's something I want to talk about. Many of the Little Gifts are already well within his race's reach, if not his. After all, they've already got atomic power."

"Which as you very well know scores them nothing one way or the other on a Galaxy Center test. We're agreed on the nature and the number of our Gifts—three Little, two Big, and one Great?"

"Yes," his Coadjutor responded resignedly.

"And we're agreed on our subject?"

"Yes to that too."

"All right, then, let's get started. This isn't the only solar system we have to visit on this circuit."

Ernie Meeker—of Chicago, Illinois, U.S. of A., Occident, Terra, Sol, Starswarm 37, Rim Sector, Milky Way Galaxy—rubbed his chin and slanted across the street to a drugstore.

"Package of blades. Double edge. Five. Cheapest."

At one point during the transaction, the clerk lost sight of the tiny packet he'd placed on the coin-whitened glass between them. He gave a suspicious look, as if the customer had palmed them.

Ernie blinked. After a moment, he pointed toward the center of the counter.

"There they are," he said, dropping a coin beside them.

The clerk's face didn't get any less suspicious. Customer who could sneak something without your seeing could sneak it back the same way. He rang up the sale and closed the register fast.

Ernie Meeker went home and shaved. Five days—and shaves—later, he pushed the first blade, uncomfortably dull now, through the tiny slot beside the bathroom mirror. He unwrapped the second blade from the packet.

Five shaves later, he cut himself under the chin with the second blade, although he was drawing it as gently through his soaped beard as if it were only his second shave with it, or at most his third. He looked at it sourly and checked the packet. Wouldn't have been the first time he'd absentmindedly changed blades ahead of schedule.

But there were still three blades in their waxed wrappings.

Maybe, he thought, he'd still had one of the blades from the last packet and shuffled it into this series.

Or maybe—although the manufacturers undoubtedly had inspectors to prevent it from happening—he'd got a decent blade for once.

Two or three shaves later, it still seemed as sharp as ever, or almost so.

"Funny thing," he remarked to Bill at lunch, "sometimes you get a blade that shaves a lot better. Looks exactly like the others, but shaves better. Or worse sometimes, of course."

"And sometimes," his office mate said, "you wear out a blade fast by not soaking your beard enough. For me, one shave with a stiff beard and the blade's through. On the other hand, if you're careful to soak your beard real good—four, five minutes at least—have the water steaming hot, get the soap really into it, one blade can last a long time."

"That's true, all right," Ernie agreed, trying to remember how well he had been soaking his beard lately. Shaving was a good topic for light conversation, warm and agreeable, like most bathroom and kitchen topics.

But next morning in the bathroom, looking at the reflection of his unremarkable face, there was something chilly in his feelings that he couldn't quite analyze. He flipped his razor open and suspiciously studied the bright metal wafer, then flipped it closed with an irritated shrug.

As he shaved, it occurred to him that a good detective-story murder method would be to substitute a very sharp razor blade for one the victim knew was extremely dull. He'd whip it across his throat, putting a lot of muscle into the stroke to get through the tangle, and—urrk!

Ridiculous, of course. Wouldn't work except with a straight razor. Wouldn't even work with a straight razor, unless ... oh, well.

He told himself the blade was noticeably duller today.

Next morning, he was still using the freak blade, but with a persistent though very slight uneasiness. Things should behave as you expected them to, in accordance with their flimsy souls, he told himself at the barely conscious level. Men should die, hearts should break, girls should tell, nations perish, curtains get dirty, milk sour ... and razor blades grow dull. It was the comfortable, expected, reassuring way.

He told himself the blade was duller still. Just a bit.

The third morning, face lathered, he flipped open the razor and lifted it out.

"You're through," he said to it silently. "I've had the experience before of getting bum shaves by trying to save a penny by pretending to myself that a wornout blade was still sharp enough, when it obviously couldn't be. Or maybe—" he grinned a little wryly—"maybe I'd almost get one more shave out of you and then you'd fall to pieces like the Wonderful One Horse Shay and leave me with a chin full of steel porcupine quills. No, thanks."

So Ernie Meeker pushed through the little slot beside the mirror and heard tinkle faintly down and away the first of the Little Gifts, the Everlasting Razor Blade. One hundred and fifty thousand years later, it turned up, bright and shining, in the midst of a small knob of red iron oxide excavated by an archeological expedition of multi-brachs from Antares Gamma. Those wise history-mad beings handed it about wonderingly, from tentacle to impatient tentacle.

That day, Ernie felt a little sick, somehow. After dinner, he decided it was the Thuringer sausage he'd eaten at lunch. He hurried up to the bathroom with a spoon, but as he clutched the box of bicarbonate of soda, preparatory to plunging the spoon into it, it seemed to him that the box said distinctly, in a small inward-outward voice:

"No, no, no!"

Ernie sat down suddenly on the toilet seat. The spoon rattled against the porcelain finish of the washbowl as he laid it down. He held the box firmly in both hands and studied it.

Size, shape, materials, blue color, closure, etc., were exactly as they should be. But the white lettering on the blue background read:

AQUEOUS FUEL CATALYST

Dissociates H2O into hemi-quasi-stable H and O, furnishing a serviceable fuel-and-oxydizer mix for most motorcycles, automobiles, trucks, motorboats, airplanes, stationary motors, torque-twisters, translators, and rockets (exhaust velocity

up to 6000 meters per second). Operates safely within and outside of all normal atmospheres. No special adaptor needed on oxygenizer-atmosphere motors.

Directions: Place one pinch in fuel tank, fill with water. Add water as needed.

A-F Catalyst should generally be renewed when objective tests show fuel quality has deteriorated 50 per cent.

U.S. and Foreign Patents Pending

After reading that several times, with suitable mind-checking and eye-testing in between, Ernie took up a little of the white powder on the end of a nailfile. He had thought of tasting it, but had instantly abandoned the notion and even refrained from sniffing the stuff—after all, the human body is mostly water.

After reducing the quantity several times, he gingerly dumped at most four or five grains on the flat edge of the washbowl and then used the broad end of the nailfile to maneuver a large bead of water over to the almost invisible white deposit. He closed the box, put it and the nailfile carefully on the window ledge, lit a match and touched it to the drop, at the last moment ducking his head a little below the level of the washbowl.

Nothing happened. After a moment, he slowly withdrew the match, shaking it out, and looked. There was nothing to see. He reached out to touch the stupid squashed ovoid of water.

Ouch! He withdrew his fingers much faster than the match, shook them more sharply. Something was there, all right. Heat. Heat enough to hurt.

He cautiously explored the boundaries of the heat. It became noticeable about eighteen inches above the drop and almost an inch to each side—an invisible slim vertical cylinder. Crouching close, eyes level with the top of the washbowl, he could make out the flame—a thin finger of crinkled light.

He noticed that a corner of the drop was seething—but only a corner, as if the heat were sharply bounded in that direction and perhaps as if the catalyst were only transforming the water to fuel a bit at a time.

He reached up and tugged off the light. Now he could see the flame—ghostly, about four inches high, hardly thicker than a string, and colored not blue but pale green. A spectral green needle. He blew at it softly. It shimmied gracefully, but not, he thought, as much as the flame of a match or candle. It had character.

He switched on the light. The drop was more than half gone now; the part that was left

was all seething. And the bathroom was markedly warmer.

"Ernie! Are you going to be much longer?"

The knock hadn't been loud and his widowed sister's voice was more apologetic than peremptory, but he jumped, of course.

"I am testing something," he started to say and changed it mid-way. It came out, "I am be out in a minute."

He turned off the light again. The flame was a little shorter now and it shrank as he watched, about a quarter inch a second. As soon as it died, he switched on the light. The drop was gone.

He scrubbed off the spot with a dry washrag, on second thought put a dab of vaseline on the washrag, scrubbed the spot again with that—he didn't like to think of even a grain of the powder getting in the drains or touching any water. He folded the washrag, tucked it in his pocket, put the blue box—after a final check of the lettering—in his other coat pocket, and opened the door.

"I was taking some bicarb," he told his sister. "Thuringer sausage at lunch."

She nodded absently.

Sleep refused even to flirt with Ernie, his mind was full of so many things, especially calculations involving the distance between his car and the house and the length of the garden hose. In desperation, as the white hours accumulated and his thoughts began to squirm, he grabbed up the detective story he'd bought at the corner newsstand. He had read thirty pages before he realized that he was turning them as rapidly as he could focus just once on each facing page.

He jumped out of bed. My God, he thought, at that rate he'd finish the book under three minutes and here it wasn't even two o'clock yet!

He selected the thickest book on the shelf, an overpoweringly dull historical treatise in small print. He turned two pages, three, then closed it with a clap and looked at the wall with frightened eyes. Ernie Meeker had discovered, inside the birthday box that was himself, the first of the Big Gifts.

The trouble was that in that wee-hour, lonely bedroom, it didn't seem like a gift at all. How would he ever keep himself in books, he wondered, if he read them so fast? And think how full to bursting his mind would get—right now, the seven pages of fine-print history were churning in it, vividly clear, along with the first chapters of the new detective story. If he kept on absorbing information that fast, he'd have to be revising

all his opinions and beliefs every couple of days at least—maybe every couple of hours.

It seemed a dreadful, literally maddening prospect—his mind would ultimately become a universe of squirming macaroni. Even the wallpaper he was staring at, which imitated the grain of wood, had in an instant become so fully part of his consciousness that he felt he could turn his back on it right now and draw a picture of it correct to the tiniest detail. But who would ever want to do such a thing, or want to be able to?

It was an abnormal, dangerous, temporary sensitivity, he told himself, generated by the excitement of the crazy discovery he'd made in the bathroom. Like the thoughts of a drowning man, riffling an infinity-paneled adventure-comic of his life as he bolts his last rough ration of air. Or like the feeling a psychotic must have that he's on the verge of visualizing the whole universe, having its ultimate secrets patter down into the palm of his outstretched hand—just before the walls close in.

Ernie Meeker was not a drinking man, then. A pint had stood a week on his closet shelf and only been diminished three shots. But now he did a good job on the sturdy remainder.

Pretty soon the unbearable, edge-of-doom clarity in his mind faded, the universe-macaroni cooked down to a thick white soup uniform as fog, and the words of the detective story were sliding into his mind individually, or at most in strings of three and four. Which, if it wasn't as it ideally should be in an ambitious man's mind, was at least darn comfortable.

He had not rejected the Big Gift of Page-at-a-Glance Reading. Not quite. But he had dislocated for tonight at least the imposed nervous field on which it depended.

For want of a better place, Ernie dropped the rubber tube from the bathtub spray into the scrub bucket half full of odorous pink fluid and stared doubtfully at the uncapped gas tank. The tank had been almost empty when he'd last driven his car, he knew, because he'd been waiting until payday to gas up. Now he had used the tube to siphon out what he could of the remainder (he still could taste the stuff!) and he'd emptied the fuel line and carburator, more or less.

Further than that, in the way of engine hygiene, Ernie's strictly kitchen mechanics did not go, but he felt that a catalyst used in pinches shouldn't be too particular about contaminants. Besides, the directions on the box hadn't said anything about cleaning the fuel tank, had they?

He hesitated. At his feet, the garden hose gurgled noisily over the curb into the gutter; it had vindicated his midnight estimate, proving just long enough. He looked uneasily up and down the dawning street and was relieved to find it still empty. He wished fervently, not for the first time this Saturday morning, that he had a garage. Then he

sighed, squared his shoulders a little, and lifted the box out of his pocket.

Making to check the directions the umpteenth time, he received a body blow. The white lettering on the box had disappeared. The box didn't proclaim itself sodium bicarbonate again—there was just no lettering at all, only blue background. He turned it over several times.

Right there died his tentative plan of eventually sharing his secret with some friend who knew more than himself about motors (he hadn't decided anyway who that would be). It would be just too silly to approach anyone he knew with a more-than-wild story and featureless blue box.

For a moment, he came very close to dropping the box between the wide-set bars of the street drain and pouring the pink gas back in the tank. It had hit him, in a way for the first time, just how crazy this all was, how jarringly implausible even on such hypotheses as practical jokes, secret product perhaps military, or mad inventor (except himself).

For how the devil should the stuff get into his bathroom disguised as bicarb? That circumstance seemed beyond imagination. Green flames ... vanishing letters ... "torque-twisters, translators" ... a box that talked....

At that point, simple faith came to Ernie's rescue: in the same bathroom, he had seen the green flame; it had burned his fingers.

Quickly he dipped up a little of the white powder on the edge of a fifty-cent piece, dumped it in the gas tank without quibbling as to quantity, rapped the coin on the edge of the opening, closed and pocketed the blue box, and picked up the spurting hose and jabbed it into the round hole.

His heart was pounding and his breath was coming fast. That had taken real effort. So he was slow in hearing the footsteps behind him.

His neighbor's gate was open and Mr. Jones stood open-mouthed a few feet behind him, all ready for his day's work as streetcar motorman and wearing the dark blue uniform that always made him look for a moment unpleasantly like a policeman.

Ernie swung the hose around, flipping his thumb over the end to make a spray, and nonchalantly began to water the little rectangle of lawn between sidewalk and curb.

The first things he watered were the bottoms of Mr. Jones's pants legs.

Mr. Jones voiced no complaint. He backed off several steps, stared intently at Ernie, rather palely, it seemed to the latter. Then he turned and made off for the streetcar

tracks at a very fast shuffle, shaking his feet a little now and then and glancing back several times over his shoulder without slowing down.

Ernie felt light-headed. He decided there was enough water in the gas tank, capped it, and momentarily continued to water the lawn.

"Ernie! Come on in and have breakfast!"

He heeded his sister's call, telling himself it would be a good idea "to give the stuff time to mix" before testing the engine.

He had divined her question and was ready with an answer.

"I've just found out that we're supposed to water our lawns only before seven in the morning or after seven in the evenings. It's the law."

It was the day for their monthly drive out to Wheaton to visit Uncle Fabius. On the whole, Ernie was glad his sister was in the car when he turned the key in the starter—it forced him to be calm and collected, though he didn't feel exactly right about exposing her to the danger of being blown up without first explaining to her the risk. But the motor started right up and began purring powerfully. Ernie's sister commented on it favorably.

Then she went on to ask, "Did you remember to buy gas yesterday?"

"No," he said without thinking; then, realizing his mistake, quickly added, "I'll buy some in Wheaton. There's enough to get us there."

"You didn't think so yesterday," she objected. "You said the tank was nearly empty."

"I was wrong. Look, the gauge shows it's half full."

"But then how ... Ernie, didn't you once tell me the gauge doesn't work?"

"Did I?"

"Yes. Look, there's a station. Why don't you buy gas now?"

"No, I'll wait for Wheaton—I know a place there I can get it cheaper," he insisted, rather lamely, he feared.

His sister looked at him steadily. He settled his head between his shoulders and concentrated on driving. His feeling of excitement was spoiled, but a few minutes of silence brought it back. He thought of the blur of green flashes inside the purring

motor. If the passing drivers only knew!

Uncle Fabius, retired perhaps a few years too early and opinionated, was a trial, but he did know something about the automobile industry. Ernie chose a moment when his sister was out of the room to ask if he'd ever heard of a white powder that would turn water into gasoline or some usable fuel.

"Who's been getting at you?" Uncle Fabius demanded sharply, to Ernie's surprise and embarrassment. "That's one of the oldest swindles. They always tell this story about how this man had a white powder or something and demonstrated it once with a pail of water and then disappeared. You're supposed to believe that Detroit or the big oil companies got rid of him. It's just another of those malicious legends, concocted—by Russia, I imagine—to weaken your faith in American Industry, like the everlasting battery or the razor blade that never gets dull. You're looking pale, Ernie—don't tell me you've already put money in this white powder? I suppose someone's approached you with a proposition, though?"

With considerable difficulty, Ernie convinced his uncle that he had "just heard the story from a friend."

"In that case," Uncle Fabius opined, "you can be sure some fuel-powder swindler has been getting at him. When you see him—and be sure to make that soon—tell him from me that—" and Uncle Fabius began an impassioned ninety-minute defense of big business, small business, prosperity, America, money, know-how, and a number of other institutions that defended pretty easily, so that the situation was wholly normal when Ernie's sister returned.

As soon as the car pulled away from the curb on their way back to Chicago, she reminded him about the gas.

"Oh, I've already done that," he assured her. "Made a special trip so I wouldn't forget. It was while you were out of the room. Didn't you hear me?"

"No," she said, "I didn't," and she looked at him steadily, as she had that morning. He similarly retreated to driving.

Stopping for a railroad crossing, he braked too hard and the car stalled. His sister grabbed his arm. "I knew that was going to happen," she said. "I knew that for some reason you lied to me when—" The motor, starting readily again, cut short her remark and Ernie didn't press his small triumph by asking her what she was about to say.

To tell the truth, Ernie wasn't feeling as elated about today's fifty-mile drive as he'd imagined he would. Now he thought he could put his finger on the reason: It was the completely ... well, arbitrary way in which the white powder had come into his

possession.

If he'd concocted it himself, or been given it by a shady promoter, or even seen the box fall out of the pocket of a suspicious-looking man in a trenchcoat, then he'd have felt more able to do something about it, whether in the general line of starting a fuel-powder company or of going to the F.B.I.

But just having the stuff drop into his hands from the sky, so to speak, as if in a crazy dream, and for that same reason not feeling able to talk about it and assure himself he wasn't going crazy ... oh, it is rough when you can't share things, really rough; not being able to share depressing news corrodes the spirit, but not being able to share exciting news can sometimes be even more corroding.

Maybe, he told himself, he could figure out someone to tell. But who? And how? His mind shied away from the problem, rather decisively.

When he checked the blue box that night, the original sodium bicarbonate lettering had returned with all its humdrum paragraphs. Not one word about exhaust velocities.

From that moment, the fuel-powder became a trial to Ernie rather than a secret glory. He'd wake in the middle of the night doubting that he had ever really read the mind-dizzying lettering, ever really tested the stuff—perhaps he'd bring from sleep the chilling notion that in the dimness and excitement of Saturday morning he'd put the water in some other car's gas tank, perhaps Mr. Jones's. He could usually argue such ideas away, but they kept coming back. And yet he did no more bathroom testing.

Of course the car still ran. He even fueled it once again with the garden hose, sniffing the nozzle to make sure it hadn't somehow got connected to the basement furnace oil-tank. He picked three o'clock in the morning for the act, but nevertheless as he was returning indoors he heard a window in Mr. Jones's house slam loudly. It unsettled him. Coming home the next day, he caught his sister and Mr. Jones consulting about something on the latter's doorsteps, which unsettled him further.

He couldn't decide on a safe place to keep the box and took to carrying it around with him day and night. Bill spotted it once down at the office and by an unhappy coincidence needed some bicarb just then for a troubled stomach. Ernie explained on the spur of the moment that he was using the box to carry plaster of Paris, which involved him in further lies that he felt were quite unconvincing as well as making him appear decidedly eccentric, even butter-brained. Bill took to calling him "the sculptor."

Meanwhile, besides the problem of the white powder, Ernie was having other unsettling experiences, stemming (though of course he didn't know that) from the other Gifts—and not just the Big Gift of Page-at-a-Glance Reading, though that still returned from time to time to shock his consciousness and send him hurrying for a few

quick shots.

Like many another car-owning commuter, Ernie found the traffic and parking problems a bit too much for comfort and so used the fast electric train to carry him five times a week to the heart of the city. During those brief, swift, crowded trips Ernie, generally looking steadily out the window at the brown buildings and black stanchions whipping past, enjoyed a kind of anonymity and privacy more refreshing to his spirit than he realized. But now all that had been suddenly changed. People had started to talk to him; total strangers struck up conversations almost every morning and afternoon.

Ernie couldn't figure out the reason and wasn't at all sure he liked it—except for Vivian.

She was the sort of girl Ernie dreamed about, improperly. Tall, blonde and knowing, excitedly curved but armored in a black suit, friendly and funny but given to making almost cruelly deflating remarks, as if the neatly furled short umbrella dangling from her wrist might better be a black dog whip.

She worked in an office too, a fancier one than Ernie's, as he found out from their morning conversations. He hadn't got to the point of asking her to lunch, but he was prodding himself.

Why such a girl should ever have asked him for a match in the first place and then put up with his clumsy babblings on subsequent mornings was a mystery to him. He finally asked her about it in what he hoped was a joking way, though she seemed to know a lot more about joking than he did.

"Don't you know?" she countered. "I mean what makes you attractive to people?"

"Me attractive? No."

"Well, I'll tell you then, Ernie, and I've got to admit it's something quite out of the ordinary. I've never noticed it in anyone else. Ernie, I'm sure your knowledge of romantic novels is shamefully deficient, it's clear from your manners, but in the earlier ones—not in style now—the hero is described as tall, manly, broad-shouldered, Anglo-Saxon features, etcetera, etcetera, but there's one thing he always has, something that sounds like poetic over-enthusiasm if you stop to analyze it, a physical impossibility, but that I have to admit you, Ernie, actually have. Flashing eyes."

"Flashing eyes? Me?"

She nodded solemnly. He thought her long straight lips trembled on the verge of a grin, but he couldn't be sure.

"How do you mean, flashing eyes?" he protested. "How can eyes flash, except by reflecting light? In that case, I guess they'd seem to 'flash' more if a person opened them wide but kept blinking them a lot. Is that what I do?"

"No, Ernie, though you're doing it now," she told him, shaking her head. "No, Ernie, your eyes just give a tiny flash of their own about every five seconds, like a lighthouse, but barely, barely bright enough for another person to notice. It makes you irresistible. Of course I've never seen you in the dark; maybe they wouldn't flash in the dark."

"You're joking."

Vivian frowned a little at that remark, as if she were puzzled herself.

"Well, maybe I am and maybe I'm not," she said. "In any case, don't get conceited about your Flashing Eyes, because I'm sure you'll never know how to take advantage of them."

When he parted from her downtown, pausing a moment to watch her walk away with feline majesty, he muttered "Flashing Eyes!" with a shrug of the shoulders and a skeptical growl. Just the same, he ducked his head as he moved off and he pulled the brim of his hat down sharply.

Afternoons, hurtling home in the five o'clock rush, it was not Vivian but Verna who frequently occupied the seat beside him, taking up rather more space in it than the Panther Princess. Verna was another of his newly acquired and not altogether welcome conversation-pals, along with Jacob the barber, Mr. Willis the druggist and Herman the health-food manufacturer, inventor of Soybean Mush—conquests of his Flashing Eyes or whatever it was.

Verna was stocky, pasty-faced, voluble (with him), coy, and had bad breath—he could see the tiny triangles of pale food between her incisors and canines whenever her conversations became particularly vehement and confidential, which was often. She always had a stack of books hugged to her stomach. She worked in a fur-storage vault, she said, and could snatch quite a bit of time for reading—rather heavy reading, it seemed.

It wasn't very long before Verna was head-over-heels (fearful picture!) infatuated with him. Somehow his friendliness had touched a hidden spring in this ugly, friendless, clumsy girl and for once she had lost her fear of the world's ridicule and opened her hulking heart to another human being. It was touching but rather overpowering, especially since she always opened her mouth too. He learned a great deal about herself, her invalid father, Elizabethan and Restoration poetry, paleontology, an organization known as the Working Girls' Front, Mr. Abrusian, and a brassy Miss

Minkin who sounded like a fiendish caricature of Vivian.

He felt that deliberately avoiding Verna would be a dirtier trick than he liked to think himself capable of. Nevertheless there were times when he seriously wished he'd never acquired whatever power it was—except for Vivian, of course. What the devil, he asked himself for the nth time, could that power be?

That night, in the bathroom, the question came back to him and he impulsively switched off the light and looked into the mirror. He gasped and seemed on the point of shrieking out something, but he only grasped the washbowl more tightly and stared into the mirror more intently.

After about a minute, he tugged on the light again. He was pale. He had convinced himself of the actual existence of the phenomenon that was in reality the third of the Little Gifts: Flashing Eyes.

He couldn't notice anything in the light, but in the dark his eyes gave off a faint blue flash about every five seconds, just as Vivian had said, lighting up his cheeks and eyebrows like some comic-book vampire!

It might be attractive by day, when it just registered as an impalpable hint, but it was damn sinister in the dark! It wasn't much, but it was there—unless the flashes were inside his head and he was projecting them ... blue ... something called the Purkinje effect? ... but then Vivian had actually seen ... oh, damn!

Suddenly he wildly looked around, a little like a trapped animal. Why did it always have to happen in the bathroom, he asked himself—the bicarb, the flame, the blade (if that counted), and now this? Could there be something wrong about the bathroom, something either in the room itself or in his childhood associations?

But neither the bathroom walls nor his minutely searched memory returned an answer.

It was dark in the hall outside and he almost bumped into his sister. He recoiled, stared at her a moment, then threw his hand over his eyes, darted into his bedroom and shut the door.

"Is there something wrong, Ernie?" she called after him.

"Wrong?"

The door muffled his voice. "How do you mean?"

"I mean about your eyes."

"My eyes?" It was almost a scream. "What about my eyes?"

"Don't shout, Ernie. I mean are they painful?"

"Painful? Why should they be painful?"

"I really don't know, Ernie." She was being very patient and calm.

"I mean did you notice anything about them?" He was trying to be the same without much success.

"Just that you put your hand up to them as if they hurt."

"Oh." Great relief. "Yes, they do smart a little. I guess I've been using them too much. I'm putting some eye-drops in them now."

"Can I help you, Ernie? And shouldn't you see an opto ... ocu ... optha ... I mean an eye doctor?"

Ernie answered "No" to both those questions, but of course it took a lot more lying and improvising and general smoothing out before his sister would even pretend to be satisfied and stop her general nagging for the evening. She was getting uncomfortably cagy and curious lately, addicted to asking such questions out of a blue sky as:

"Ernie, when we were visiting Uncle Fabius, did you actually believe that you went out and bought gas?"

That one momentarily brought Ernie's stammer back, something which hadn't troubled him for years.

And when she wasn't asking questions, her quiet studying of him for long minutes was even more upsetting.

Next morning, on the way to the electric train, Ernie made a purchase at the drugstore. When he sat down beside Vivian, she took one look at him and gave a very deliberate-sounding hollow laugh.

"Black glasses!" she said. "I tell him he's attractive because he has Flashing Eyes and within two days he's wearing black glasses. I suppose I should have guessed it."

"But my eyes hurt," Ernie protested. "Sensitive to sunlight, I think." He wished he could explain to her that he'd bought the glasses not only in case he got caught out at night, but also to convince his sister he hadn't been lying about sore eyes. He hadn't

intended to wear them by day and hardly knew why he'd put them on before joining Vivian.

"Spare me your rationalizations," she said. "Your motives are clear to me, Ernie, and they happen to be very commonplace."

She leaned toward him and her voice, little more than a whisper, took on an unexpectedly gloomy, chilling, hopeless tone.

"See these people all around us, Ernie? They're suicides, every one of them. Day by day, in every way, they're killing themselves. People love them, admire them, and it only makes them uneasy. They have abilities and charms by the bushel—yes, they do, even that man with the wen on his neck—and they only try to hide them. The spotlight turns their way and they goof. They think they're running away from failure, but actually they're running away from success."

Ernie looked at them, he couldn't help it, her voice made him, and the ability of Page-at-a-Glance Reading chose that moment to come back to him, only applied to faces instead of letters, and there seemed to be another ability along with it, unclear as yet but frightening. He felt like a very old detective scanning the lineup for the thousandth time.

The black glasses didn't interfere a bit—the dozens of faces in this speeding electric car were suddenly as familiar as the court cards in a deck—and he had the feeling that, like a bunch of pink pasteboards, they were about to be hurled in his face.

My God, he asked himself, flinching, how could you go on living with so many faces so close to you, so completely known?—each street you turned into, each store you entered, each gathering you joined, another deluge of unique features. Ugly, pretty, strong, weak—those words didn't mean anything any more in this drenching of individuality he was getting, and that showed no signs of stopping.

So he hardly heard Vivian saying, "And it's true of you, Ernie—in spades, for your black glasses," and he hardly remembered parting from her, and when he found himself alone he did something unprecedented for him at that time of day—he went to a bar and drank two double whiskies.

The drinks brought the downtown landscape back to normal and stopped the faces printing themselves on his mind, but they left him very disturbed, and the suspiciousness with which he was treated at the office didn't improve that, and Ernie began to wish for ordinariness and commonplaceness in himself more than anything in the whole world. If only, he silently implored, there were some way of junking everything that had happened to him in the past few weeks—except maybe Vivian.

Verna on the train home positively terrified him. She was unusually talkative and engulfing this evening and he thought that if the faces-forever feeling came to him just as she was baring her food-triangles and all, he wouldn't be able to stand it. Somehow, it didn't. Yet the very intensity of his distaste frightened him. Not for the first time, the word "insanity" appeared in his mind, pulsing in pale yellowish-green.

Half a block from home, passing his parked car (with an unconscious little veer of avoidance), he spotted three figures in close conference in front of his house: his sister, a man in dark blue—yes, Mr. Jones, and ... a man in a white coat.

Almost before he knew it, he was in his car and driving away. He truly didn't know what he was going to do, only that he was going to do it, and found a trivial interest in trying to guess what it was going to be. Whatever it was, it was going to dim that yellowish-green word, decrease its type-size, make him a little more able to face the crisis waiting him at home ... or somewhere.

He had a picture of himself getting on an airplane, another of renting a room in a slum, another of stopping the car on a lonely, treeless country road and getting out and looking up to the coldly glimmering Milky Way—why?

That last picture was the most vivid, and when he realized he had actually stopped his car, it was a moment before it would go away. Then he saw he was parked in front of a demolished old apartment building a few blocks from his home. Only yesterday he'd watched the last wall going down. Now, just across the littered sidewalk from him, the old cellar gaped, flimsily guarded in front by a makeshift rail and surrounded on the other three sides by great hillocks of battered bricks. Tomorrow probably (and in fact that was the way it happened) a bulldozer would tumble them forward, filling the cellar with old bricks and brick-dust, leveling the lot.

Now he knew what he was going to do. He unlatched the top over the windshield and pushed the button. Slowly the top folded back over his head, showing the smoke-dark sky, almost night. He hitched up a little in the seat, reached inside his coat, pulled out the blue box he always carried and pitched it into the dark pit across the sidewalk.

He was driving away almost before it landed. Yet through the hum of the motor he thought he heard something call faintly, "Good-by."

The material of the filled-in cellar stayed fairly dry for many years and the atom-bombing, when it finally came, created a partial surface-seal of fused stone over that area. However, the bicarb box fell apart in time; water reached it in little seepings and was accumulated as a non-evaporating fuel-and-oxydizer mix. The amount of this strange fluid grew and grew, eventually invading and filling a now-blind section of the city's old sewer system.

Many tens of thousands of years after that, the buried pool was sensed by the fuel-finders of a spaceship from up Polaris way, which had made an emergency landing on the ruined planet. A well was drilled and the mix pumped up and the centipedal Polarians, scuttling about the bleak landscape, had a fine time trying to explain how such a sophisticated fluid should occur in a seeming state of nature. However, they were grateful to the Cosmic All-Father.

Long before that, Ernie had arrived home in something of a daze. He told himself that he had cast off the most tangible element of his "insanity," but he didn't feel any the better for it. In fact, he felt distinctly apathetic when his sister confronted him and only with an effort did he manage to brace himself for the trial he knew she had in store for him.

"Ernie," she said hesitatingly, "I've come to a decision about something—about a change in our arrangements here, to tell you the truth—and I've gone ahead with it without consulting you. I do hope you won't mind."

"No," he said heavily, "I guess I won't mind."

"I'm doing it partly on Mr. Jones's advice," she added slowly. "As a matter of fact he suggested it."

Ernie nodded. "Yes, I've noticed the two of you conferring together."

"You have? Then maybe you know what I'm talking about."

"Oh, yes." Ernie nodded again and smiled grimly. "The man in white?"

She laughed. "Exactly, the man in white. For a long time, I've thought it was just too much bother for either of us to carry the milk home, and the eggs and my yogurt too. So I decided to have the milkman that Mr. Jones uses make deliveries. Mr. Jones brought him over half an hour ago and it's all arranged. Four quarts a week, one dozen eggs, and yogurt Tuesdays and Fridays."

The Invisible Being and his Coadjutor, backtracking for a checkup, summarized the situation.

The latter said, "So he's already thrown away the Everlasting Cosmetic Knife and the Water Splitter; he seems to be trying to reject the third Little Gift and the first Big One, while he still isn't even conscious of the other two Gifts."

"Cheer up," said the Invisible Being. "It's his life and he's doing what he thinks best."

"Yes," the Coadjutor said, "but he doesn't know he's making these decisions for his

race as well as himself. Sometimes I think Galaxy Center makes it too hard for chaps like him. For instance, that trick of having the images on the box fade back to the old ones."

"Nonsense! We have to take all reasonable precautions that our activities remain secret. He knew that the powder worked. He should have had faith."

"Sometimes it takes a lot of faith."

"You're right, it does." The Invisible Being smiled his Cheshire smile. "You feel a lot for these test subjects, don't you? That's fine, but you've got to remember you can't accept the Gifts for them; that's one thing they have to do themselves, however long they take about it. Which reminds me, I think we ought to set up a recorder here to report the final outcome of the test to Galaxy Center."

"Good idea."

"And cheer up, I say. This test isn't over yet and our featherless biped isn't necessarily licked. If he thinks to link up the third Little Gift with the two Big Ones, he has a pretty sweet setup for making psychic progress—and his race will be Galactic Citizens in a jiffy."

"You're right."

"Moreover, it stands to reason he's soon going to become aware of the Great Gift, and that generally gives a person a jolt and makes him think seriously about other things."

"True enough—though I still have the feeling you intend some sardonic trick in conjunction with the Great Gift. Are you sure you're not planning to leave some other setup here along with the recorder? I notice you've got a spare Juxtaposer in the ship and it bothers me."

"That, dear Coadjutor, is my business. Whatever I do, it won't interfere in any way with the fairness of the tests."

"Sometimes I think the tests are too fair," the Coadjutor observed. "I'd like to be able to ease them up a bit in special cases."

"Confidentially, my friend, so would I."

The Great Gift announced itself to Ernie next morning at 7:53 sharp, when the Special slowed to forty miles an hour to swing past the platform on which he was waiting for the Express.

One moment he was standing morning-weary on the thick wooden planks, looking down through the quarter-inch gaps between them at the cinders five feet below, vaguely conscious of a woman's white-polka-dotted black skirt on one side of his field of vision and a man's brown shoes and briefcase to the other.

Next moment he was in a small cab under which steel rails were vanishing at an alarming speed, and way ahead he could just make out the platform on which he was standing, and something was hurting his head and he was slumping forward and everything was darkening and the cab was leaping forward more swiftly still.

The third moment he was back on the platform, running furiously to get off it. He didn't care who yelled at him or whom he bumped, so long as it didn't slow him down. The people were just blurs anyway and soon he was beyond them. He took in two strides the short flight of wooden steps leading down off the platform proper and spurted the last sixty feet to the stairs leading down to street level. There he stumbled, recovered himself, and chanced a hasty backward look.

There was a tall man at his heels, hugging a briefcase and panting hard. Then, beyond the tall man, he saw the platform rear up like a wooden caterpillar, spilling people against the bright gray morning sky. There was a cosmic crunch and the battered Special, still coming strong, burst through the upreared platform in a blossoming broken-matchstick crown of planks and beams—and big blue sparks where a writhing power wire, snagged by the uprearing platform, was grounding against the first car.

Ernie ducked his head and plunged down the steps ahead.

(That was how I came to meet Ernie Meeker. I was the tall man. As you can imagine, it's quite strange to be standing in a huddle of fresh-washed morning commuters and have the one beside you close his eyes and slump a little and then take off like a bat out of hell—without a word spoken or a thing happened to explain it. I started to laugh, but then I got the funniest feeling of curiosity and terror and I took off after him. It saved my life.

(Afterward, Ernie and I went back to help with the ghastliness, but pretty soon there were more than enough trainmen, firemen, police, and what not, and we got chased off. We had a couple of drinks together and met a few times after and that's how I got some of this story. But my chief sources of information I am not permitted to disclose.)

As the Invisible Being had predicted, Ernie's first brush with the Great Gift gave him a considerable jolt, though he didn't suspect at first that it was a permanent gift.

He analyzed what had happened, quite reasonably, I believe, as a case of second sight. Somehow his mind had been projected into the brain of the motorman of the Special just at the moment the latter had his stroke (the final official explanation too) and

blindly put on more speed instead of reducing it for the approaching curve and station. His second sight saved his life by getting him off the platform before the Special jumped the tracks and ploughed through it.

It certainly gave a jolt to Ernie's habit patterns, as it temporarily did of a great many other people. He started driving his car to work, for one thing, and he took to drinking regularly in the evenings, though not excessively as yet.

He also had the feeling, which he did not try to analyze, that his miraculous escape marked the end of the "strange weeks" in his life, when he'd had such odd illusions or been the victim of such odd circumstances; and, true enough, that first week or so there were no recurrences of his chillingly weird experiences.

But jolts have their infallible Law of Diminishing Effects.

After a few days, Ernie found the traffic and parking problems as nervous and wearisome as ever and he grew envious of the snug commuters meditating luxuriously in their electric coaches. Come the first morning of the third week and he was standing on the rebuilt platform, studying the new planks, ties and rails with a pleasantly morbid interest.

Vivian was not in her accustomed seat nor on the train, as far as he could tell, which did not surprise him, though it disappointed him sharply; the Panther Princess had a stronger hold on his feelings, or at least on his imagination, than he'd realized.

But Verna was on the train home all right; in fact, she gave a small whoop of pleasure when she spotted him. And he had barely sat down beside her when who should come prowling smoothly along but Vivian in a charcoal version of her tailored black armor.

Ernie jumped up and blurted out introductions. Vivian accepted his seat with a certain deliberateness and with a smile that seemed to Ernie to say, "So I'm his morning light-badinage girl, but this is the girl Mr. Meeker goes home with. It's another instance of 'black-glasses' behavior, don't you think? He puts her on whenever he gets afraid he's getting attractive."

The two women started to chat easily enough, however, and shortly Ernie got over his confusion and, smiling down at them from where he swayed in his aisle with his hand lightly touching the back of the seat ahead, was even thinking quite smugly that here in one seat, by gosh, were the woman he wanted and the woman who wanted him. Very interesting to be the man in the middle.

Just at that moment, the power came back to him that made everything feverishly real, expanding his center of attention to his visual horizons, and this time it was only a prelude, for a second gateway opened behind the first—a window into all human

hearts and minds, the power of human insight fantastically sharpened and enlarged. He could "read minds," or at least he knew the motives—the core of values and consciousness—of any person he cared to look at. Most especially, he knew the motives of Verna and Vivian almost as if he were them.

The big thing about Vivian was her fear—no, her conviction, that she wasn't attractive. Every glance her way knocked a hole in the armor of artificial attractiveness she built around herself, and all the hours she devoted to perfecting it, even the desperate worship she lavished on her body, were all utterly lost. A simple relationship with another human being was unthinkable; her armor got in the way and under her armor she knew she was worthless. A man was sometimes attracted to her armor—never to herself!—but as soon as he started to scrutinize it, it began to tarnish and crumple.

She hoped that other people, men especially, had a trace of her own weaknesses, and she sniped away at them constantly to get under the armor to find out. Ernie was one in a long series of such men. She was actually in love with him, but only as one loves a dream, not the real Ernie at all. Physically he was disgusting to her, like most men.

Verna, on the other hand, had absolute confidence that she was sufficiently attractive for all practical purposes. She wasn't in love with Ernie at all. She wanted to make an intellectual conquest of him, add him to her private Brain Trust, her cultured entourage that won Mr. Abrusian's seldom-tendered admiration and broke Miss Minkin's heart, and finally get Ernie to join the Working Boys' Front. He was one of her projects. If it became tactically necessary during her campaign, she knew that Ernie would be only too happy to jump in bed with her, food-triangles and all.

Now in other circumstances (who really knows?), Ernie might have found the courage to accept Vivian and Verna as they really were and work on from there, ruthlessly discarding his false pictures of them—and of himself. He might conceivably have found the strength to accept all people not as shadowy projections of himself, fabricated targets of his desires and aversions, puppets in his private chess games and circuses, but as complete persons with inexhaustible surprises and contradictions, each a microcosm, a universe-in-little with his or her own earth and stars, spaceflight and crawling, heaven and hell.

But under the present circumstances, Ernie was confused. His knowledge of the real Vivian spoiled completely the titillating picture of the Panther Princess, who might submit to him contemptuously in the end—he needed that sex idol more than he needed truth. As for Verna, her stalwart self-reliance and her accurate appraisal of his own motives and possible future behavior were both unbearably humiliating to him. And the delight of really knowing people was completely outweighed, in his tired spirit, by the thought of the lifetime of work that would be involved in adjusting himself to this new knowledge. It was so much more comfortable to work with stereotypes.

The Express was slowing for his station. Both girls were looking at him puzzledly.

"Good-by, Verna. Good-by, Vivian," he said in a set sort of voice. "This is where I get off."

He moved stiffly toward the door. They watched him go, and turned to each other with a frown.

That evening marked the beginning of Ernie's serious drinking. He never saw either of the V-girls again. He took his car or the bus to work; then, for a short period, he took taxicabs, then he lost his job and was working in another part of the city. He became mixed up with a number of other women and crowds, but they are not part of this or any story.

Among other things, his drinking eventually completely confused his memories of abnormal personal powers with his entirely normal illusions of alcoholic ones. And it also seemed to be blotting out the former. Once, at a party, he bet twenty dollars that his eyes glowed in the dark. Next morning he was relieved to discover, after making several anxious phone calls, that he'd lost his bet.

When he finally pulled out of it, some five years later, because of a growing aversion to liquor that he only understood later, the two Big Gifts of Page-at-a-Glance and Mind Reading were gone forever.

The Great Gift had a more durable lodgment in him. From his alcoholic years, he brought hazy memories of accidents avoided because of sudden wrong-ended visions of onrushing cars, alley rollings missed because he'd seen himself reeling along a block away through the eyes of lounging hoodlums. Now, sober again, he had a clear confirmation of it when he left a banquet on a trumped-up excuse because of a disturbing vision of inexplicable rodlike shapes—and read the next day that a hundred of the guests, of whom four finally died, had come down with bacterial food poisoning. Another time, hiking in dry woods, he'd smelled smoke that his companions couldn't—and persuaded them to turn back, avoiding a disastrous flash fire that broke out soon afterward.

He had to admit to himself that he certainly seemed to have the gift of second sight, warning him against threats to his life.

"All right," he told himself, "so forget it. Gifts are upsetting. Even as a kid, you sweated more about your birthday presents than you ever got fun out of them."

Our story has already jumped five years; now it must jump twenty. Ernie is living with his sister again; while he was drinking, they pulled apart, and now they've once more

pulled together. They're having dinner, have arrived at dessert, a big piece of chocolate cake each with satiny thick creamy frosting and filling.

Ernie looks at his piece—and sees himself climbing stairs and clutching at his heart. He thinks of warning his sister, but she's already halfway through her piece. Then she goes on and eats Ernie's.

Ernie's sister didn't get food poisoning, she only got fat, but the incident of the chocolate cake was for Ernie the beginning of a series of peculiar food revulsions and diet experiments that eventually made Ernie instead of his sister the family yogurt-fiend and a regular customer of his old acquaintance, Herman, the health-food manufacturer.

Herman had to admit that Ernie had cooked himself up a pretty good longevity diet for an amateur, though there were some items in it that made the old man shake his head—and he always asserted that Ernie was passing up a good thing in Soybean Mush.

Ernie got his diet tailored to fit his tastes and stuck to it. He had a strong suspicion of what had happened, though he tried not to think about it too often: that his gift of second sight had taken to warning him of the longer-range dangers to his existence; after all, chocolate cake can be as deadly as atomic bombs in the long run.

More years passed. Friends and relatives began to remark quietly to each other that his sister was aging faster. Ernie, they had to admit, was a remarkably well-preserved old gent. Ironic, considering what a drunk he'd been and what strange junk he insisted on eating now.

One day Ernie's self-styled health diet began to pall on him. It didn't revolt him; it merely left him unsatisfied, yet with no yearning for any particular food he could think of. He lived with this yearning for some weeks, meditating on it and trying to guess its nature. Finally he had an inspiration. He headed for Mr. Willis' drugstore.

The bent, silvery-haired man greeted him eagerly; somehow there was a special warmth about the friendships Ernie had made during the "strange weeks" (Verna and Vivian excepted) that put them in a different class from any other of his human relationships.

"Now what can I give you, Ernie?" Mr. Willis asked. "Anything in the place within reason."

"I'll tell you, Bert I'd like to go back in your dispensary—you with me, if you want—and just shop around."

"That's a sort of screwy idea, Ernie. I couldn't sell you any narcotics or sleeping pills, of course—well, maybe a few sleeping pills."

"I wouldn't want any."

"What's the idea, Ernie? Getting interested in chemistry in your old ... You know, Ernie, you just don't look your years."

"Secret of mine. Yes, in a way I've got interested in chemistry."

"Won't talk, eh? I remember, when I first met you, I tagged you for an evening inventor. Well, come on back and shop around. Just don't ask me for elixer vitae, aurum potabile, or ground philosophers' stone."

"Not unless I see 'em."

Afterward, Bert Willis used to say it was one of the most mystifying experiences of his life. For a good half a day, Ernie Meeker studied the rows of jars, canisters and glass-stoppered bottles, sometimes lifting two down together and contemplating them, one in each hand, as if he could weigh the difference. Often he'd take out a stopper and sniff, and maybe, asking permission of Bert with a glance, take up a dab of some powder and taste it.

"You know that game," Bert would say, "where someone goes out of the room and you all decide on an object, or hide one, and he comes back and tries to find it by telepathy or muscle-reading or something? That was exactly the way Ernie was acting. Dog on a difficult scent."

A couple of times, especially when the customers came in, Bert wanted to chase him out, except that Ernie was such a special friend and Bert was so darn curious about it all himself.

In the end, Ernie made a good twenty purchases, including a mortar and pestle and two poisons for which Bert made him sign, though the amounts were less than a lethal dose.

"Actually none of the chemicals he bought were very dangerous," Bert would say. "And none of them were terribly unusual. The thing about them was that, put together, they just didn't make sense—as a medicine or anything else. Let me see, there was sulphur, bismuth, a bit of mercury, one of the sulfa drugs, a tiny packet of auric chloride, and ... I had 'em all on a list once, but I've lost it."

After that, Ernie always mixed a little grayish paste in his cup of yogurt at suppertime.

Ernie stopped aging altogether.

After his sister's coffin was lowered past the margins of green matting into the ground, Ernie shook hands with the minister, walked Bert Willis and Herman Schover to their car and told them he thought he'd better drive home with some relatives who'd turned up. Actually he just wanted to stay behind a while. It was a beautiful blue-and-white summer day; the tidy suburban cemetery had caught his fancy, and now he felt like a quiet stroll.

Ernie followed his little impulses these days. As he sometimes said, "I figure I've got plenty of time. I just don't feel the pressure like I used to."

The last car chugged away. Ernie stretched and started to stroll, slowly, but not like an old man, now that he was alone. His hair had grown whiter in the last few years and his face a little wrinkled, but that was due to the very judicious use of silvering and theatrical liner—people's comments about his youthfulness had gotten wearisome and would, he knew, eventually become suspicious.

Keeping himself oriented by a white tower at the cemetery gate, he arrived at an area that had no graves as yet, no trees either, just lawn. He made his way to the center of it, where there was a gently swelling hummock, and sat down in the warm crinkly grass, resting his back against the slope. The sky was lovely, enough clouds to be interesting, but a great oval of pure blue just overhead—a pear-shaped gateway to space.

He felt no grief at his sister's death, only the desire to think a bit, have a quiet look at his past and another at the great future.

Alone like this, he dared to face his fate for a moment and admit to himself that, all wishful thinking aside, it really began to look as if he were going to live forever, or at least for a very long time.

Live forever! That was a phrase to give you a chill, he told himself. And what to do, he asked himself, with all that time?

Back in the "strange weeks," he'd have had little trouble in answering that question—if only he'd known then what he did now and realized what was being offered him. For, during his sober decades, Ernie had gradually come to a shrewdly accurate estimate of what had happened to him then. He thought of it in terms of having been offered six Gifts and turned down five of them.

Back in the "strange weeks" and armed with the five rejected Gifts (Page-at-a-Glance and Mind Reading were the only ones that counted, though), he could easily have said, "Live forever by all means! Increase your knowledge and understanding until your

mind bursts or is transfigured. Plunge forever into the unending variety of the Cosmos. Open yourself to everything."

But now, equipped to travel only as a snail....

Still, even snails get somewhere. With forever to work with, even four-words-at-a-glance gets you through many, many books. Patient love and dispassionate thought give you human insight in the end, can finally open the tightest shutter on the darkest human heart.

But that would take so very long and Ernie felt tired. Not old, just tired, tired. Best simply to watch the soft clouds—the pear-shaped gateway had become almost circular. To do anything but drift through life, a stereotype among stereotypes, was simply ... too ... much ... work....

At that very moment, as if his thought had summoned the experience into being, another scene filmed over the blue sky and white clouds above him. The sudden humming in his ears—a kind of "audible silence"—informed him that his second sight was at work, warning him of some deadly danger. But this was a more gentle instance of it, for not all his consciousness jumped somewhere else. All through the experience, he was still aware of himself leaning against the grassy hummock, of the restful melancholy of the scene around him, and of the sky overhead. The second scene only superimposed itself on the first.

He was poised many hundreds of miles above the Earth, a ghost-Ernie immune to the airlessness and the Sun's untempered beams. At his back was black night filled with stars. Below him stretched the granulated dry brown of Earth's surface, tinged here and there with green, clumped with white cloud, and everywhere faintly hazed with blue.

Up there in space with him, right at his elbow, so close that he could reach out and touch it, was a tiny silver cylinder about as big as a hazelnut, domed at one end, reflecting sunlight from one point in a way that would have been blinding enough except that Ernie's ghost eyes were immune to brightness.

As he reached out to examine it, the thing darted away from him as if at some imperious summons, like a bit of iron jumping through a magnetic field.

But in spite of its enormous acceleration, Ernie's ghost was able to follow it in its downward plunge. It kept just ahead of his outstretched fingertips.

The brown granules that were Earth's surface grew in size. The tiny metal cylinder began to glow with more than reflected sunlight. It turned red, orange, yellow and then blazing white as atmospheric friction transformed it into a meteor.

Ernie's ghost, immune to friction and incandescence alike, followed it as it dove toward its target—for even though Ernie had never heard of a Juxtaposer and how it brought objects together, he had the feeling, from the dizzy speed of the meteor's plunge, that it yearned for something.

He knew most meteors vaporized or exploded, but this did not, even when Earth's brown surface grew rivers and roads. Suddenly there was a cloudbank ahead; then, in the white, there appeared an almost circular hole toward the very center of which the meteorite plunged.

Everything was happening very fast now, but his ghost senses were able to keep pace. As they plunged through the cloud-ring and the green landscape below grew explosively, he saw the white tower, the trees, the curving drives, and the clearing which was now the target.

There was still time to escape. Lying on the warm grass, with death lancing down from the sky at miles a second, he had merely to roll over.

But it was simply ... too ... much ... work....

Elsewhere near Earth, a recorder sped toward Galaxy Center a message which ended, "Six Gifts tendered, all finally refused. I will now sign off and await pickup with one Juxtaposer."

A little later, a Receiver in Galaxy Center passed the message to a Central Recorder, which filed it in the Starswarm 37 section with this addition: "Spiritual immaturity of Terran bipeds indicated. Advise against enlightenment and admission to Galactic citizenship. Test subject humanely released."

Police, digging into the turf under Ernie's shattered head two days later found the bright bullet, cold now, of course, and untarnished.

"Looks like silver!" one cop said, scratching his head. "Haven't I heard somewhere that the Mafia use silver bullets? So bright, though."

Lieutenant Padilla, later on, lifting the bullet in his forceps to re-examine it for rifling marks, had the same thought about its brightness. By now, however, he knew it was not silver. (What alloy was never satisfactorily determined. Actually it was made of the same substance as the Everlasting Razor Blade.)

This time, although he still found no rifling marks, a tiny dull stretch on the flat end of the cylinder caught his attention. He took up a magnifier and examined it carefully.

A moment later, he put down the magnifier, snatched up the pocketbook found on the dead man and rechecked some cards in it. The bullet dropped from the forceps, rolled a few inches. The lieutenant sat back in his chair, breathing a little hard.

"This is one for the books, all right!" he told himself. "I've heard a lot of people, soldiers especially, talk about such bullets, but I never expected to see one!"

For under the magnifying glass, finely engraved in very tiny letters, he had read the words: ERNEST WENCESLAUS MEEKER.