

WHAT DEAD MEN TELL THEODORE STURGEON

He had talked with two dead men and one dead girl, and now he lay in lightlessness. He was conscious, but there was nothing anywhere to which to bring consciousness. This was a black that was darker than any other blackness. A smear of this would make a black hole in precipitated carbon.

His philosophy urged him to take an inventory. This couldn't be just *nothing*. Consciousness itself cannot exist with nothing; they are mutually exclusive. Inventory, then:

Item: A blackness.

Item: Body. Breath warmly moistening the inside edges of his nostrils, coolly drying them. A sluggish heart. Barely resilient pressure on shoulders, buttocks, calves, heels. So the body lay on its back. Fingers on chest. Fingers on fingers. Hands together, then, on the breast. Therefore: Item, body laid out. Well, of course. This was the place where death was. This was the place to discover whether death was death, or life everlasting.

Item: The philosophy itself. The important thing. The thing that all this was about. The philosophy was ... was – Later he could think of that. He had to find death first. So –

Item: Death. Just as surely as there was breath in his nostrils, as surely as he was lying there, death was here. If death found him, death was death. But if he found death, he would find his immortality. Death was here. Here; so –

Item: *Here*. There was nothing to conclude about *here*. *Here* was the place where he lay. It was not a place he had ever been before. There was something he had to find out about it. What? But how could he know?

Look and see, he told himself, and opened his eyes.

A blue-green radiance pressed itself between his lids. He lay with his eyes stupidly unfocused, seeing as little in the light as he had in its absence, until the straight band of lesser brightness directly above him commanded his lenses, and he saw.

He was in a tent. No – not a tent. The walls slanted up to meet overhead, but the juncture of the walls ran forward into blackness and back into blackness. It was a corridor with a triangular cross section, and he was lying on the floor. He sat up. The conscious muscular effort completed his inventory:

Item: Identity. I am me. I am Hulon – I am here.

He knelt, and automatically pulled at his single, simple garment. It was a belted tunic, sleeveless, with wide shoulder straps, and it fell to mid-thigh. He wore nothing else. He pulled at the skirt self-consciously, and examined the belt. It was a half-belt, sewn to the fabric on each side above his hips. It had no buckle; the two ends of material, when laid together, stayed together. He separated them – easily when they were peeled apart, impossible when they were pulled straight – and put them together again.

He looked about him. The floor was about thirty feet wide, and the walls seemed about the same; the cross section was an equilateral triangle. The quiet blue-green radiance flooded the floor around him and, less brilliantly, the walls and the pointed overhead. Before him and behind him, however, was utter blackness, a thick, absorbent dark that coaxed and sucked and beckoned to the light.

There was a death waiting here for him – behind him or ahead – he did not know which, but he knew it was there. He had to find out what death was, before it found him. And he had to find out one other thing, and that had to do with the corridor. He peered into the darkness before him. Was the floor tilted the slightest bit to the right?

He glanced over his shoulder at the other darkness, and steeled himself. *You know you will feel fear behind you. That's natural. It may come up behind you – but be sure. Be quite sure, or you'll have fear to fear, as well as death.*

He rose to his feet, really noticing for the first time that they were bare. The floor was resilient, cool – not cold; and there was a feeling so odd about the floor that he bent quickly and put his hand to it. It was smooth, solid, for all its slight yielding; but in addition there was a sensation of movement in it, as if its surface were composed of myriads of microscopic eddies in violent, tiny motion.

He stood erect. The sensation was very slight under his feet, and so constant that he knew he would ignore it soon. He stepped forward, peering ahead at the floor, which seemed to be not quite canted.

He was mistaken, he found when he had moved ten or twelve paces. *Trick of the light.* The floor ahead still seemed to tilt a little, but it was certainly level under his feet. The light – it moved with him!

He stared around him, and saw only the same featureless floor and two walls. It was as if he were lighted by a spotlight which was concealed from him.

He looked behind him, and just as he turned his head, caught a movement in the corner of his eye. He gasped and leaped to the wall, pressing his back against it, staring into the blackness. There was something – there *was!* A ... a thing, an *eye!*

It was low down, almost on the floor, and it was moving toward him. Toward him, and then away, and then it stopped, and swayed, and came toward him again, and emerged into the light.

It was a bubble. A big bubble, perhaps fourteen inches in diameter, loosely filled, and apparently it derived its motion from the strange mosaic of miniature maelstroms in the floor. It danced and swayed erratically on them, sometimes turning one way, sometimes another, occasionally rolling a little.

Hulon stepped toward it. If it was alive, it paid him no attention. It moved, but quite aimlessly. As Hulon moved, the light moved with him, brightly illuminating the bubble. He watched it cautiously for a moment, and finally went down on one knee near it. He saw his distorted, dancing reflection in its side. It seemed to be filled with a clear, pale-brown fluid. He put out his hand, screwed up his courage, and touched it. It quivered like jelly but made no effort to escape. He waited until it began to roll again and quickly put his hand on the floor in front of it. It bumped off his fingers like a toy balloon, and bounced sluggishly up and down until it rested, waiting for the next capricious movement of the floor under it.

Hulon impulsively reached out and picked it up. It sagged in his hands. He pressed it gently – and it burst, leaving him staring ludicrously at his empty hands. There was a great gush of liquid which disappeared immediately when it reached the floor. There was no sign of a skin or bladder of any kind; the thing was simply gone.

Hulon wiped his hands on his tunic and shrugged. The thing was obviously inanimate. It reminded him that he was a little thirsty, but that was all. Thirsty? Perhaps a thing like this would come in handy. He had no idea how long he might be here before – He shrugged again and sniffed at his fingers. The bubble had left a faint, stimulating tang on them. Hulon nodded. If things got bad –

But couldn't this be the death. Poison? Wait and see, he told himself. *First find out what's at the end of the corridor.* And in a flash he knew that that was what he had been hunting for in the back of his mind – the thing about *here* that he must find out. With the knowledge came the realization that only now did he have all his faculties – that from the moment he had found himself stretched out in the corridor, he had been only gradually regaining them.

How had he got here? What place was this? What was that thought about the two dead men and the dead girl he had talked with? What was the meaning of this fantastic, skimpy garment he was wearing? Where were his clothes? How did the light follow him?

His heart began to thump. He looked at the darkneses, the one which led, the one which followed. Cumulative shock began to take its toll. He turned, turned again, and then stood

stock-still, his jaw muscles standing out, his eyes narrowed.

His nerves screamed “*run!*”

He stood still, trembling with the effort. Slowly, then, he went to the right wall and sat at its foot, his back comfortably against it, his eyes shifting from darkness to darkness; and he began to sort out his thoughts.

“There are thoughts for here,” he muttered, “and thoughts for outside – for before I came here.” He wet his lips, and consciously relaxed his shoulders, which had begun to ache. “I am Hulon. I work at the Empire Theater, projectionist on the day shift.”

He fixed this in his mind, refusing to think of anything else until the thoughts stood clear and alone.

“Now,” he said, speaking softly because the absorbent walls – they seemed to be of the same static-mobile material as the floor – seemed to drink sound the way those darkneses lapped up light. “I will think of *here* first because I am here. Whatever is to happen to me will happen here, and not at the Empire Theater.” Again he waited, fixing the thought on the sturdy walls of his mind until it stopped quivering.

“I don’t know where this place is nor who built it. I do know that I’m here to meet death, and to find out what is at the end of the corridor. I know that if I can find out what kind of death I am to meet here, and if I can discover what is at the end of the corridor, I will live forever. If I do not find out these things, I will die here. I agreed to this, and I came of my own accord.”

He looked up the corridor, and down. He saw no death. He saw in-leaning walls and a floor illuminated by the pool of light in which he was centered. He saw two bottomless mouths of darkness. And with a start he saw another bubble, wandering aimlessly out of the dark to his left. He grinned at himself, and automatically wiped his hands again on his tunic. As he did so, there was a swift movement on the wall opposite. He tensed, stared. There was nothing there. Trick of the light?

What of the light?

He moved his hand over the brief tunic again, and again saw the blurred motion on the wall. A shadow!

He lifted the hem of the tunic, turned it up. The light was not coming to the material, but *from* it! It was luminous, through and through. No wonder the light followed him!

Conclusion made and filed. He waited, but nothing followed it in his mind, so he turned his attention to the events *outside* this place. This compartmentation of ideas was the *modus* of his philosophy, and he needed it now as never before. He completely displaced his attention from his current situation and studied the event which had led to it.

The real beginning was when he wrote “Where is Security?” for *Coswell’s Magazine*, an obscure quarterly review. But his first knowledge of these strange events was the dead man he saw in the Empire Theater.

Remembering it, he was surprised that he had noticed the man at all. There are, at the best of times, three degrees of work for a theater projectionist – attentive, busy, and frantic. All three are intensified when the theater is running revivals, if it happens that the brittle old film is used, rather than remakes. And that particular night he was stuck with three of them – two features and a short, fresh from a theater where the projectionist apparently didn’t believe in splicing film straight across like everybody else, and who cued only two frames instead of four, so that the little flicker of light up at the corner of the screen, which indicated when to change over projectors, was so brief that a man had to have eyes like photocells to see them at all. He missed two of them at one performance, getting a white screen and a gargle from the sound track, and the second time Mr. Shenkman, the manager, came up to the booth and was nice about it. Hulon hadn’t done that in months, and he would have felt very much better

about it if Mr. Shenkman had stamped and cussed, but that wasn't the manager's way, and Hulon had no one to be sore at but himself.

He had three viewing windows through which to see the screen – one by each of the big IPC Simplex projectors with their hissing Magnarcs, and one in the splicing room where the film was stored in a steel, asbestos-chimneyed locker. As he moved about the booth, his attention was almost constantly on these windows and the screen. As each reel approached its end he found himself in a near-ecstasy of concentration, trying to determine which, if any, of these spots and speckles was a scratch on the old film or a cue.

It was unthinkable, then, that his attention should have been drawn to anything else through these windows but the screen. But it was. Perhaps the picture itself – an old World War I epic starring Conrad Veidt – had something to do with it. Whatever it was, as he leaned close to the glass, his foot ready to stamp the change-over switch by B projector, his eye caught the side-loom of the tobacco-filtered light over the loges directly in front of the booth.

A man sat there, his spine stiff and straight – not unnaturally, but as if this were a characteristic. The light edged a strong cheek-bone, a gleaming forehead, and a monocle. There was a slender cigarette-holder – and then the cue-sign winked on the screen, and Hulon's foot came down. Projector A clattered and Projector B's arc began to hiss, the sprockets began to feed, the shields flipped down for A, up for B, and the change was made. Hulon made a slight adjustment for centering, increased the gain by the duplicated volume control directly under the viewing window. Glancing once again at the screen, he walked around the projector and stared at the line of light which was periscoped up from the arc-case and projected between two black lines on a white card, to show the size of the arc-gap. Satisfied, he opened the lower reel-housing of Projector A and unclipped the used reel. As he did so he glanced again at the screen, and again found himself staring at the man in the loges. He knew that man – he was sure of it. And if that was who he thought it was, that man was dead.

He went into the splicing room and put the reel into the rewinding machine, which started automatically as he closed its cover. Again he glanced out of the window, and to his annoyance found that he was not looking at the screen at all, but at the man.

He could have sworn it was Conrad Veidt himself, the famous captain of a score of cinematic U-boats and raiders, the archetype of villainous *Oberleutnant*, the personification of the Prussian martinet.

But Veidt died years ago.

Something touched his shoulders and he grunted and jumped violently.

"Hey," said Frank, the second-shift man, "what's the matter, Hulon? Seein' ghosts?"

"Revivals are full of 'em," said Hulon. He looked at Frank's grinning, easy-going face and decided not to bother him with his hallucinations. "You'll have your hands full tonight, Frank. Here's the schedule. We're eight minutes behind. I blew two changeovers. You'll have to trim the Coming Attractions rushes a couple feet each, and Mr. Shenkman says it'll be O.K. to leave out the Merchants' Association announcement in the second show. Watch the cues. Whoever marked them has a hole in his head. And you ought to see some of the splicing! I've recut and fixed up a few of 'em and" – he opened the fire-proof locker – "I stuck slips of paper in the reels as some of that sloppy work came through. If your want to make it easier for the next guy, you can go on fixing 'em up."

"Gotcha," said Frank. "What do you keep peering out there for? See a chick in the loges you like?"

"Huh?" said Hulon. "Oh ...thought I saw someone I knew. You all ready to take over?" The man in the loges was rising.

"That's why I'm here."

Hulon took down his coat. "O.K., chum. Don't let Hollywood go to your head." Conscious

of Frank's surprise – for he usually stayed for ten or fifteen minutes to bat the breeze – he whipped open the door and went down the ladder two rungs at a time.

The man who looked like Conrad Veidt was silhouetted against the screen as he stalked down the center aisle. Hulon hurried after him, following him to and through the lobby. He breezed past Mr. Shenkman with a bare nod and was beside the monocled man as they went through the wide doors to the street.

I don't want to do this, Hulon thought to himself, *but I'll kick myself for the rest of my life if I don't*. He drew up beside the man at the corner and touched his elbow. "I beg your pardon –"

"Yess?" It was the same voice, too – full and precise.

Hulon said: "You're Conrad Veidt." He had meant to say: "You *look* like –" but the way the man turned, the way his eyebrow arched, were too like what he had seen on the screen to allow any doubt.

"Am I?" said the man, and smiled. "And do you believe in immortality?"

Hulon shuffled his feet. "Well, I ... I guess not. No, of course not."

The man shrugged. "You know Conrad Veit is dead. Obviously you are mistaken. Good day."

"Bye," said Hulon miserably. He watched the man walk away, and stood there feeling very, very foolish.

That was the first dead man, Hulon thought as he crouched against the wall of the strange corridor. Another bubble circled and danced clumsily near him. He kicked at it; it burst and its fluid disappeared into the floor. Now – who was the second?

Leslie Howard – two days later, under exactly similar circumstances: a Leslie Howard picture, a familiar profile in the loges just before Frank relieved him. He remembered wondering, as he hurried after the figure from the past, down the aisle and through the lobby, whether his attention had been drawn purposely this way, by some mysterious means, or whether it was purely accidental. If it was on purpose, what could be the purpose? What was he, that he should receive such attentions from – He lost the thought in the moment of panic in which he stood in front of the theater, peering, thinking he had lost his man. He saw him, then, at the magazine stand, buying a copy of *Coswell's Magazine*. Hulon stepped up to him. "May I have a word with you?"

The man looked at him, his head very slightly held to one side in Howard's well-remembered way. "Certainly, old man."

Hulon wet his lips. He was going to be more cautious this time. "I think you're Leslie Howard."

"The devil you do! Wasn't he killed during the war?"

"So they say."

"Then how could I possibly be?"

"I don't know. I'm not even trying to find that out. Look, whoever you are; please don't think I'm a crackpot. I'm just sort of clutching at straws, I suppose. I've got some – ideas. I do what I can with them, but as far as I can see, it'll take me more than a lifetime to work them all out. When I see someone alive who ought to be dead, something happens to me. I know it must be a resemblance, but in the zillion to one chance that a man might live longer than an average lifetime – much longer, I mean – why, I go hog-wild on it, hunt it out, track it down, just like" – the torrent of words slowed, stopped, and Hulon stood flushing while the other waited politely – "I'm doing with you right now. He laughed uncertainly. "I don't know why I feel I can sound off like this to you."

"I'll take it as a compliment," smiled the other, and clapped him on the shoulder. "But – Leslie Howard was killed, all right. Sorry." And he walked off.

Hulon thought. *No one can know a person's face like a projectionist.*

Day after day, hour after hour these faces are drilled into him; nuances of voice and expression emerge that the public never sees, any more than the public sees the flicker of a starting-cue.

The Leslie Howard man paused and said a word to a girl who stood in the doorway of the haberdashery two doors down from the Empire. She nodded and the man went away. She stood still; Hulon went toward her. *I can just walk by and look at her. There's something –*

As he neared her, she turned, and he gasped. That strange, full-lipped face and spun-aluminum hair ... they used to call her "The Blonde Bombshell." She was dead too. "Jean Harlow," he choked.

She smiled and put out her hand. "How do you do?" she said astonishingly.

He took the hand, his own self-animated to do so. He looked down at the clasped hands as if, at the job, he had found film with triangular sprocket-holes. He looked at her face and blinked. "My name's Hulon –"

"And it's your first name," said the blonde. "I know. Can we go somewhere to talk?"

He noticed under her arm the familiar orange cover of *Coswell's Magazine* – the issue in which his article had appeared. He said. "The Empire Bar has booths."

They went there. *I'll wait*, he thought. *This is crazy; there are too many questions to ask. I'll wait. She knows what she's doing.*

She asked: "How much education have you had, Hulon?"

He helped her with her coat and sat opposite. "Not much. High school. I read some.

"What made you submit to *Coswell's*?"

"They use things like that. I thought I had an important idea. It's part of a ... call it a philosophy, if that doesn't sound too high-falutin', he said.

"It's a philosophy," she said. "We can call things by their names. What a funny, shy sort of person you are, Hulon!"

There was nothing to say to this, so he waited. A waiter came and went. Drinks arrived. "What got you interested in the idea of security enough to provoke an article like this?"

"I'm a theater projectionist. I don't follow pictures too closely, but a lot of what they're about sinks in. Seems to me a lot of real-life people are worried about security, too. I began to listen to people I know talk. A lot of them are worried about it. I began to wonder where it was. Everybody thinks it's somewhere else, never where a man can lay his hand to it and say, 'Here it is. I have it.' So I figured out where it was, and wrote it down, and *Coswell's* printed it. That's all."

"I read the article. But tell me again – where is security?"

"Behind us." He looked at her expectant face, and expanded the statement." No use looking into the future for security because the future doesn't belong to us – it's a dream, a bunch of maybes. No use looking in the present for it because the present is, in time, like a mathematical point – a position, without any area. So the only thing a man has is behind him – his memories. The only thing a man can look forward to is looking back at where he's been. What he has means nothing. What he *has had* is the only thing he can hold on to – the only thing that no power on Earth can touch. And anybody who tries to run security down will come up against that – possessions that nothing can touch, things that really belong to a man. So" – he shrugged – "security is not in the future, a sort of mountaintop that people are climbing to. And it isn't in the present, because 'now' covers such a small area in time that it's non-existent; you can't have security or a cigarette or an automobile in a portion of time so small it can't be measured. It's behind us. It lies only in what we've had and in what we've done."

"That's a startling idea," she said. "It sort of takes away any possibility of self-determination, though, doesn't it? According to your idea, a man can act only in his present,

and the present is too short a time to do anything with.”

“No it isn’t,” said Hulon positively. “You can do this much with your present – you can shape the nature of things to form the best possible memory for yourself. You can form the cross section of the passing time-stream as if you were a diamond die, and give it just the cross section that will suit your memory the best.”

“And that means that there can be no security for *now*, for this minute?”

“No,” Hulon said again. “Security for this minute is a kind of self-confidence that comes from a sort of radar; impulses sent from now, reflecting from things we have been and had and done.”

“Good,” said the girl. “I’m sorry to be catechizing you like this. I had to know whether you retain what you set down or whether you were amusing yourself with a passing idea. Now tell me; is this security business your philosophy?”

“Oh no,” said Hulon. “It’s just part of it. It comes from it.”

“Ah. And have you reduced that philosophy to its essentials? Can you say what it is in a few words?”

“Not yet. Not few enough.” He pondered for a moment. “I can say this much. And mind you, it isn’t as rock bottom as it will be, but it’s as far as I’ve gone, from watching people, and machines, and from reading and listening to music. It’s this:

“What is basic is important.

“What is basic is simple.

“So what is complicated isn’t important. It might be interesting or exciting – it might even be necessary to something else that’s complicated – but it isn’t important.”

She nodded. “That’s good. That’s very good. And – what would you do with an idea like that? Turn the whole world into a gigantic Walden?”

Hulon had not read Thoreau. He missed the reference, and said so. When she explained, he said: “Gosh no. I’m no fanatic, wanting to get everybody back to hunting, fishing and building their own log cabins. All I want to do is to think everything out according to that idea of mine. I mean everything: art and engineering and business and politics. I think I could work it all out, if I had time.”

And then what would you do with it?”

“I’d try to teach it to people – to more and more people, until it got to be a natural way of thinking. The way people let themselves think now just makes trouble. People think if it’s bigger it’s better. They think if a little is good, a lot has just got to be wonderful. They can see the sense of balance in a diet or in a bridge, but they stop too easily at things like that, and don’t try to balance enough other things. Or enough other *kinds* of things,” he added, after a pause. “But all that’s ’way ahead of me. What bothers me now is that I don’t have time to think all this out. I know how big it is, and what a little moment a life is. I could do more with an idea like this if I knew, somehow, that all my thinking wasn’t going to get cut off one fine day by the old man with the scythe.”

“And that’s really important to you?”

“Really important. Basic,” he added, grinning shyly. “So much that if I see someone on the street who ought to be dead, I’ll stop and ask him who he is, just in case – just on the crazy chance that someone might’ve found out how to live longer.”

“How do you know anyone could?”

Hulon spread his hands. “I don’t. But it could happen. Old age is some kind of a biological mistake. Maybe someone has figured out where the mistake was made. Maybe that was done a long time ago. If it had been done, it wouldn’t be the sort of thing you’d advertise in the daily papers. Too many people are afraid of dying. Too many more people want to live so that they can get more and more things, more and more power. People would mob whoever had a treatment like that to sell, and either the wrong people would live long, or the treatment would

overpopulate the Earth, and the human race would war itself out of existence for food and space to live.”

“You’re so right. You have a startling kind of simplicity, Hulon. You drive and drive right to the root of a thing. Suppose there were such a treatment; can you say anything else about the person or persons who might control it?”

Hulon thought for a moment. “I think so. They would be very careful people. They would have to be able to consider the greatest good for humanity above any race or religious or national lines. They would have to be able to think ahead – years, centuries ahead. They would have to be able to hold their hands, keep from interfering when interfering might save thousands of lives. They would have to put pressure here and nudge a little there in quiet ways, so that they would never be found out, and so that humanity would always think it was learning from its own mistakes and nothing else.”

“Do you think you are such a person?”

“No!” Hulon said immediately. “But I know I could be if I lived long enough. I think the right way to be that kind of person.” The statement was simple and sincere, without braggadocio.

The girl considered him for a long, pensive moment. At last she asked him softly: “If there were immortals on Earth, and if they were all you say, what would be their most urgent need?”

Twice, captured by her eyes, he opened his mouth to speak and closed it again. Finally he said: “Recruits.”

She held her gaze on him, unmoving; then she nodded, as if to herself. “How much would you give for a chance to join them?”

“How much have I got? I’d give anything.

“Your life? Would you undertake a test that would kill you if you failed?”

“Of course.”

She swirled her drink, “Hulon. Nothing is unique about that philosophy of yours. There is something unusual about your method. You’ve come a long way on very little material. You think clearly and your motives are clean. That’s not much to go on. If you took such a test, the odds would be very much against you.”

“Tell me,” he asked, wrinkling his brow. “Why would I have to die if I failed?”

“Because you’d know too much.”

“I know a great deal now.”

“You are having a barroom conversation with a girl you picked up,” she said bluntly. “No one would believe a word you might say even if I confirmed it, which of course I wouldn’t. But if – and mind you, I’m still talking ifs – if such a situation did exist, and if you did take such a test, fail it, and emerge from it, you might cause trouble. Such a risk cannot be taken.”

“That makes sense. Well, when do I start?”

She opened her handbag and took out a lipstick. Unscrewing the cap, she slipped a nail file from under the flap of the purse and inserted it into the cap. She worked it deftly forward and back; it fell into two parts, and a small blue pill rolled into the hollow of her hand. She took Hulon’s glass and dropped the tablet in. The liquid began to effervesce violently. She handed it back. “When the effervescence stops, drink it immediately. All of it.”

He took it, held it, waiting, and said gravely: “Are you Jean Harlow?”

She laughed. “Of course not. You had to seek us out, and you had to do it because you might find one case of extended life, and not for any other reason. You passed that part of it, Hulon. We did it this way because you are a projectionist; you could be expected to notice us particularly. We have other ways, too.”

It was the first time she had said “we.” His heart began to pound. Abruptly the activity in

the glass ceased, completely. “May you live forever,” he said, and drank it down.

He could not remember very clearly what happened after that. He saw clearly, he walked steadily, he spoke coherently. There is a linkage between the conscious mind and the memory, through which flows each impression, as noticed, to be stored. And in Hulon, this link was broken, or at least compressed, pinched off, so that any impression, once received, was lost in seconds. He remembered walking, and then a ride – it was a car, but whether a taxi or a private automobile he could not recall – and, after riding for a time which may have been minutes or hours, there was a room with several people in it. The girl was lost somewhere en route; there were other women, but how many or what they looked like was lost to him. There was a man with a stern gray face who talked with him for a long time, and a room with a wheeled table and pale-green cornerless walls. And there was a time when he repeated and repeated two questions:

Where is the end of the corridor?

What death will I meet there?

And the gray-faced man, kindly now, wishing him well, reassuring him, making him certain that he would have his reward if he could answer these questions.

And the next thing had been his awakening here in the green-lit dark.

Hulon rose and stepped to the center of the corridor. He paused and listened. Nothing. He drew a deep breath, turned to the right and began to march down the corridor. The skin on his back crawled occasionally, away from the following darkness, and he did what he could to ignore it. He began to count his paces, looking back as he counted each fifteen. Surely nothing would overtake him in the time it took him to walk fifteen paces.

After a few minutes the counting and turning became automatic, and his senses became quite soothed – almost dulled – by the sameness of his surroundings. Occasionally, he passed one or two of the bubbles doing their purposeless gavotte on the floor. Once he saw two collide, fuse, burst and disappear.

Where was death?

It would have to be death from outside himself, he reasoned. Aside from the fact that the featureless walls and floor gave him nothing to hang himself on, and the complete absence of anything which he might turn on himself, the idea of self-destruction was contrary to the very nature of the test. So, he realized suddenly, was any idea that he might die of hunger or thirst. There was no time limit to his test. Death must present itself to him, or he to it, and that might take days. He must sleep. Would death come to him in his sleep? He shrugged. He could only put off sleep as long as possible and then hope that he would sleep lightly enough to be warned of its approach.

He began to be thirsty. The next bubble he approached took his attention. He stopped and watched it for a moment, then drew a deep breath and picked it up gently. He remembered a story he had read once, called “Goldfish Bowl,” in which two men were trapped by super-intelligences and got their water in globules which were apparently made of just water: when they bit into one they could drink what didn’t spill. Hulon was in a mood to forget everything he had ever learned and simply to use what he saw. Accordingly he pressed his face into the bubble and drew it into his mouth. The surface let go and the bubble ceased to be a bubble, pouring down through his fingers. He cupped his hands and managed to gulp heartily, twice, before all the liquid was gone. It had a flavour something like beef extract and something like the water in which asparagus has been cooked, and he found it delicious. If the fluid had any ill effects, he could not feel them. He wondered for an instant at his own foolhardiness, and then concluded that he must have been told, before he came here, that the bubbles were safe for him.

He began to walk, and the resumption of his attention to the corridor brought sharply to him

that something was different. It had happened gradually, and only his transient concentration on his thirst made it possible for him to notice the difference. It was in the light. It had lost its greenish cast and was now pure yellow.

“ – Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen,” he muttered and looked behind him. Nothing but advancing darkness. “One, two, three –

“Uh!”

The wordless syllable was wrenched from him by the glimmer ahead. It was utterly shocking. It was a feature in the featureless triangle. It was a new color in the dichromatic yellow and black. It was a new factor in the lulling sameness of the corridor. And it was a dead man.

He could tell that the man was dead. It was the sparseness of the flesh about the nostrils, the waxen quality of the wrinkled hands folded so meticulously, the statuesque stillness, and, ever so faintly, the smell.

It was the body of an old, old man. It was laid out stiffly, ankles together, hand folded on the thin chest. It wore a garment like Hulon’s but without the luminescence. It glowed, but obviously by reflection, and the color of that reflection made his eyes ache. It was red.

Hulon approached the corpse slowly and looked down at it. Was this the death he was to meet?

No. Death was here, all right, but there was no question in his mind that the death he sought was his own, not that of anyone else. This was someone else who had found it. This was, if he chose to make it so, evidence that death visited this corridor from time to time.

He knelt and put the back of his hand against the still forehead. It was cold. Hulon stood up, stood back. Who had laid out the corpse?

Well, who had put Hulon there? These were pointless questions. He hesitated a moment longer, and then resolutely turned his back on the corpse and strode on. Before him was the same open blackness. Behind him the glimmer of reflected light dwindled, and blackness paced him. “– Twelve, thirteen, fourteen, look back. One, two, three –”

The light was changing again. When had the pure yellow taken on that orange cast?

He determined not to think. He would watch ahead and behind. He would notice the light. He would drink when he was thirsty and, if he must, he would sleep. If he were to deduce the nature of the death that was here, he wanted more evidence. If he were to find what was at the end of the corridor, he must walk to it. Meanwhile he would not think.

The orange color was deepening, somehow – reddening. He watched as he walked, walked, turned, walked, walked, turned. And at about the moment he recognized it as a yellowless red, a true red, he saw another gleam of light ahead. He was not sure how much later this was – two hours, three – he knew only that he had been walking a long time.

He slowed his pace and approached the glimmer cautiously. Last time it had been a corpse. This time –

He grunted. This time it was a corpse, too. An old man; and again he sensed death. This one was worse to look on than the other. It, too, wore a short tunic, glowing with reflected light which, insanely, was not the same color as the light which struck it. It was pure blue. That was not the horrible thing, though. What horrified Hulon was the pose of the corpse.

It was not neatly laid out like the other. It was tumbled rudely on the floor, not quite in the middle of the corridor, as if it had been thrown there. The tunic was up around its chest and one arm was crumpled underneath in a way impossible unless it had been broken.

For years Hulon had felt that the flesh, once dead, was of little importance, and had regarded the rituals of burial and the somber traditions of *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* mere carry-overs of barbarism. In spite of this he found himself filled with horror and pity at the sight of this poor tumbled thing. He knelt by it, turned it on its back. An eye stared. He closed it gently, gently folded the hands and straightened the legs, and smoothed the tunic.

He stood up, feeling, somehow, better than he had. “You take it easy now, feller,” he said. “Bye now.” He began to walk, walk, turn again. At the first look back the corpse was a corpse; at the second, a dim blue. At the third there was only the respectful, persistent, stalking darkness. After that, only the unchanging, hypnotic triangle in which he walked between shadows.

In due time his tunic was violet, and when he saw the third dead man, the one in yellow, his tunic had turned blue.

The yellow-clad corpse was harder for him to see, somehow. Perhaps it was weariness, perhaps it was the undefining blue which streamed around him, but it took him some moments to discover, as he rolled and pulled the corpse, straightening it out, that it, too, had a broken arm. This one was heaped and tossed, worse even than the last one had been.

He stood over the body, after he had finished, and tried to think. A bubble wandered drunkenly over to him and began to nudge the dead man. Hulon kicked it so hard he hurt his knee. It splashed its liquid all over the corpse’s face and neck.

“Sorry,” said Hulon abjectly. He turned away and began plodding down the corridor, counting aloud “– Nine, ten, eleven –” By the third time he got to “fifteen” and looked back, the darkness had swallowed up the third corpse.

It was a long time later when he came on the next rumped, disordered corpse. He did not touch this one. He moved close enough so that his light – yellow now, after an interminable shift through the greens – would immediately fall on the fourth corpse. It was dressed in red, and had an unnatural arm. Hulon breathed slowly, deeply, through flared nostrils. His eyes were dull and he ached with weariness, and the soles of his feet tingled infuriatingly from their constant contact with the strange irresolute surface of the floor.

If I could sleep for a while, he thought desperately.

A bubble pirouetted into the wall and bounced. He went to it and picked it up in widespread hands. This time he was careful and drank deeply of it. He shook his hands and wiped them on his tunic, and sat down by the wall to rest, and to think if he could. The taste of the bubble liquid was good in his throat. He could feel strength pouring back into his abused tissues. The light seemed to grow brighter, though he knew that it was his clearing eyes that caused it. He pulled his feet in and rested his chin on his knees, and at last thought returned to him.

Four old dead men. He fixed his mind on this and let everything else disappear from his mind. Then he took them in order.

The first was dressed in red, the second in blue, the third, yellow – and the fourth was red again. There was something about these colors that niggled at him. It wasn’t the specific colors; it was the order in which they appeared. There was some sort of regimentation to the colors he had seen.

He put the thought of the dead men’s clothes aside, because, at the moment, he could go no further with it. He closed his eyes and concentrated. The color of his own garment – yellow-green when he awoke here; pure yellow when he found the first corpse; then yellow-orange; orange; orange-red; pure red. The word “primaries” occurred to him. He caught it and held it. *Yellow is to red as red is to blue as* – He shook himself violently. Either he was near something important or he was delirious.

He looked at the corpse. An unremarkable old man, except for his age, which was extreme. What mad system was behind this business of corpses with broken arms? What point was proved, what evidence given, by a collection of ancient and similar cadavers which were somehow associated with the primary colors and broken arms and – and what else was it? Oh yes; they were huddled, dumped out on the floor. Except for the first one, of course.

Colors. A luminous garment – he racked his brains now – which changed from yellow-green to yellow, orange, red, violet, blue, green and yellow again. Spectral.

The light had been yellow when he saw the corpse in red; red when he saw the corpse in blue; and – yes, and blue when he saw the corpse in yellow. And the one he looked at now was the same as the first; the light was yellow and the corpse was dressed in red.

Same as the first! The idea smote him – and he immediately discarded it. There are some things one may not doubt. If this were the same corpse over again, then one of two things was happening; the corpse was being shifted – snatched from the corridor behind him and rushed up and dumped ahead, and being changed in the meantime, to boot – or this corridor was circular. The first hypothesis was ridiculous in terms of the test he was undergoing; the people who controlled it were certainly not going to indulge in fantastic and harmless complications just to annoy him pointlessly. The second – that the corridor was circular – could be believed only if he disbelieved everything his sense of balance and direction and orientation told him. He *knew* he had been walking on a level surface, and in a straight line. Every sense involved told him he had.

And, yet –

He crawled to the corpse and knelt beside it. It *was* very like the one before. And the broken arm, and – suddenly he remembered the vicious kick he had given that bubble, and how it had splashed on the last corpse – or was it the last but one? He couldn't remember, and it wasn't important. He sniffed at his fingers. The refreshing, meaty odour of the bubble-liquid was still on his hands from the last time he had drunk. He bent low over the corpse's still, twisted face.

Unmistakably, the odor was there.

He scrambled back to the wall and huddled there. He clung to a single conviction, that whatever was there, whether he could understand it or not, was here by design, for a specific purpose which involved him. And he knew now, beyond the slightest doubt, that the colors had confused him utterly. It had taken him four encounters to realize it, and he was almost certain that he could expect no more “evidence”. Now, of all times, was the occasion for him to apply the philosophical analysis of which he had been so proud. It seemed a paltry tool indeed.

Could this corridor be circular?

It seemed impossible. Even though he had walked a long way between corpses, he was sure he would have been conscious of the arc. One or another of the walls would have continually crowded him.

With a conscious effort he opened his imaginative faculty. He had read fantasies in which antigravity and gravity-controlling devices had been used. Suppose his corridor really was circular – but vertically, like an automobile tire? And suppose, at its hub, was an artificial gravity device. Would he not then walk in a straight line, turning neither to right nor left, and then come back to his starting point? Such a fantastic device would have to compensate for the Earth constant, of course, but if he could imagine a gravity generator, a gravity insulator was no problem.

He opened his mouth to shout his conclusion – and checked himself. *Wait*. This was only a hypothesis, and did not answer the two questions. It made ridiculous the first one: “What is at the end of the corridor?” and did not answer the second at all: “What death will you meet there?”

No: He must think of something which covered everything – the shape and size of the corridor, the changing colors, the nutrient bubbles, the corpses. *The corpse*.

He stared at the body of the old, old man. “You could tell me –” he muttered. “Think – *think!*”

The corridor couldn't be circular; it just *couldn't*. And yet, if there were some way – If he could ... only – He snapped his fingers. All he had to do was mark the wall or the floor, and walk! If he could come back upon the mark again –

“Mark it how? he asked himself aloud. This crazy surface wouldn't take a mark. Moisture

disappeared on it. The corpse stayed on it; he himself stayed on it, but the resilient surface couldn't be scratched, wouldn't stain.

Use the corpse as a mark, then. But – he could not trust it. He found it tumbled about, and wearing a different tunic each time.

The answer occurred to him. It had undoubtedly been in his mind for minutes, but he could not face it. For a time he crouched there not thinking at all. Gradually, then, he let the terrifying thought emerge. He began to tremble.

He looked at the beckoning blacknesses. He clenched his fists and made a sobbing sound. He rose then, and carefully bent to the corpse, straightening the light old limbs, crossing the hands on the chest, smoothing the scarlet tunic. "Don't go away," he murmured.

He peeled his own belt apart and slipped the shining yellow garment off. Kneeling, he tucked it under the belt the corpse wore, tightening it down until there could be no chance of its coming free by itself. Then naked and terribly alone, he strode into the darkness.

The shadows folded themselves happily about him. He looked back. The golden radiance from his tunic poured upward from the red-clad corpse. And there was something wrong about the floor on which it lay.

He moved closer to the right wall, trailing his fingers lightly along to guide him as he walked into deeper blackness. He looked back again. What he saw made him clutch convulsively at the leaning wall, in a sudden attack of vertigo.

The corpse, as clear and distant as something spotlighted on a stage, was just as he had left it. But between him and the corpse, the floor seemed to have bellied downward, and twisted as well, so that the dead man lay as if on a slanted deck. The slant seemed almost enough to make the body roll, though it did not.

Hulon moved sidewise along the wall, away from the dimming light. The floor where the corpse was seemed to be canting more and more as he moved, and the floor between him and the body seemed to fall downward away from the corpse and up again to him. And in a few minutes the distant picture apparently rotated up and out of sight, and he moved steadily forward into a unthinkable dark.

It must have been a half hour later when he began to whimper. He was hardly aware of it at first. He ground his teeth and walked. His inner conviction was that he had analyzed his situation correctly, and that there was, therefore, nothing to fear. But if he were wrong – what might be lurking in this blackness? What horror might spring at him to rip and tear his soft unprotected flesh, or slide slimily over him, throwing fold after fold of cold wet coils about him?

He heard his own soft whimpering and stopped it abruptly. *You are alone here*, he told himself fervently. *There is nothing to fear*. He stopped, slid down to the floor, huddled up in a foetal posture, to rest. In the quiet, in a blackness so complete that he could see the ruddy flashes of his own pulse, he forced his mind to be still.

Something cold touched his bare hip. He writhed away and screamed, knowing in the same instant that it was one of the bubbles. His heart thumped so hard that he was panicked, suddenly, lest it make so much noise that he could not hear the approach of ... of – *But I'm alone here*, he scoffed.

He fumbled for the bubble, touched it, lifted it and drank quickly. The highly nutrient solution soothed him in and out as he drank and spilled. He rested a moment more and then rose, stretched. *Soon I should see the light*, he thought as he walked. *And if I am right, the light the light should be red, and the old man will be dressed in ... in* – Aloud he began to chant softly as he walked, "Violet, blue, green, yellow, orange, red, violet, blue, green –

Before him, so dimly that it could easily have been a trick over his hypersensitive, straining eyes, he began to see a loom of light. He quickened his pace. Soon, now, he would know.

His whole body strained toward the light, and he became increasingly conscious of the deeper darkness behind him. Almost hysterically he blanked out the ancestral fears which crowded at his bare back and shoulders, which increased as he increased his speed.

And now it was unmistakably light, and the light was red. Hulon laughed, and began to run. He could see the walls now, and again could know the shape of the corridor. Again he saw the floor sweeping down and away from him and then up to the hidden light-source. When the source finally burst upon his vision, he grunted and threw his arm over his eyes. He slowed to a panting walk, slitted his lids, until he could see again.

He saw a tumbled corpse, and it was dressed in blue. Red light and a blue tunic, and he was right! He was right!

He sprinted toward the spraddled, dead figure which, distantly, seemed to be clinging to the wall – a wall which leaned and twisted and joined the leaning and twisting floor under his feet. This gave him no more vertigo, for now he understood it, and his vision was no longer in conflict with the sense of balance and orientation which told him with all the authority of thirty years of refined experience that the floor was level and flat.

He pounded up to the corpse, which was, when he reached it, lying on the level floor on which he stood. He grinned at it. “Thanks, fella,” he chuckled. He took the luminous red tunic and slipped it out of the blue belt of the garment the corpse wore. He slipped it over his head and fastened it. Then he filled his lungs and shouted.

“Come get me! I have the answers!”

His voice was lapped up greedily in the echoless place. Stiffly he waited. Then, shockingly, the light went out.

Hulon stood stiffly in the total dark. *I’ve shot my bolt*, he thought defiantly. *There can’t be any other answer.*

Barely to be heard over his tense breathing, there was a small, steady hiss. An acrid mist swirled into his nostrils. He tried not to breathe, but it made him gasp, and when he did that there was a loud singing in his ears and he fell heavily, quite conscious, quite unable to move.

The hiss ceased. Silence. Then the hum of a suction fan. The acrid smell disappeared. He lay limply, half on his side, for minutes.

A blaze of yellow light hurt his eyes. Somewhere the wall had opened. There were people around him. A girl – the same one he had spoken with first, but her hair was chestnut now. And the gray-faced man, who asked “Can you hear me, Hulon?”

“Yes,” said Hulon clearly.

“You’re ready to give the answers?”

“Yes.”

“The man knelt beside him. “The vapor you just breathed will kill you in two minutes,” he said calmly. “I’ll have a hypodermic here which can keep that from happening. After I give you that – if I do – you will die within two hours. There is further treatment, of course. It’s the one you came here for. It will kill you within ... oh, say twelve or fourteen hundred years if it isn’t renewed. Now: give me the answers, and if they are correct, you’ll get the hypo. Give me your reasoning and if that’s acceptable you get the final treatment. Do you understand? You will die now, or in two hours, or not at all.”

“I understand,” said Hulon steadily. It was odd, being able to speak but not to move.

“What is at the end of the corridor?”

“I am,” said Hulon. It – has no end.”

“What death was waiting for you?”

Hulon said carefully, “Aside from anything you might do to me, there was only one kind of death here, as long as it was warm and I was fed. Old age.”

The hypodermic bit into his shoulder. “Oh, good boy, good boy!” said the girl.

They helped him up when he said his legs were beginning to tingle, and turned him toward

an irregular opening in one wall. He noticed that the surface of the wall seemed violently agitated at the edges of the doorway. He was half carried into a short tunnel with a steel door at the other end. The door swung open at their approach, and they stepped down into what appeared to be a comfortably furnished doctor's office. Hulon was put into an easy-chair near the desk. The gray-faced man sat on the swivel-chair and the girl perched on the edge of the desk. She smiled at him, and he smiled back.

"Look," said the man, pointing to a box on his desk. It looked like a small speaker. He flipped a switch on its side. "This is a microphone. There are a lot of people listening. If they like what they hear, you're in. There's green light and a red light – see? I don't have to explain that much further, eh? Except to tell you that all votes are integrated and it'll take a two-thirds majority to make either light come on. Shall we go ahead?"

"I have something less than two hours," said Hulon wryly. "P'raps we'd better."

The doctor grinned. "Right. Just tell it in your own way; what you figured out about that corridor, and how."

"Well," said Hulon carefully, "the easiest thing to figure out was that it was endless – that is, it turned back on itself in some way. I figured that it has some sort of gravity mechanism under the floor. That right?"

The girl nodded. "How did you think of that?"

"That was the only way it could have worked. It didn't appear to curve to right or left. And at first I guessed that it was a vertical circle, like an automobile tire. But that idea fell down after I tied my tunic to the dead man and walked away from it, and saw the way the corridor twisted. The color of the light was the real tip-off. As I moved through the corridor, it went right around the spectrum. Every time I ran into the corpse, I found that his clothes were a different color – and his colors changed around the spectrum, too. When I was a kid in school we learned the colors by their initials: V, B, G, Y, O, R. Well, if you consider those as six 'points' on the band, you'll see that the color of the dead man's clothes were always two 'points' behind. On top of that, I saw that every time I bumped into the dead man I was one third of the way through the spectrum. So I had three 'thirds' to put together. I met the corpse a third of the way through the spectrum – the corpse's clothes were a third of the spectrum behind the color of mine – and the triangular cross section of the corridor. There's only one explanation that fits all these things, along with the fact that that that poor old fellow was tumbled all over himself each time I came on him. And it's sort of ... hard to describe.

"Try," said the doctor.

"Well," said Hulon, "a while back my relief at the theater, Frank, showed me something that kept me tickled for hours. He'd read about it in a magazine or somewhere. He took a strip of scrap film about eighteen inches long and put the ends together. He turned one end over and spliced'em. Now, if you trace that strip, or mark it with a grease pencil, right up the center, you find that the doggone thing only has one side!"

The doctor nodded, and the girl said: "A Möbius strip."

"That what they call it?" said Hulon. "Well, I figured this corridor must be something like that. On that strip, a single continuous line touched both sides. All I had to do was figure out an object built so that a continuous line would cover all three of three sides, and I'd have it. So I sat down and thought it out.

"If you take a piece of clay and make a long ... uh ... sausage out of it, and then form it so it has a triangular cross section; and then if you bring the ends together and rotate one one hundred twenty degrees and stick'em together, you'd have a figure like that. It would have only one side, like the ... what was it? ... Möbius strip."

"Nice reasoning," said the doctor. "You're quite right. Incidentally, it would have only one edge too."

“It would? I never thought of that. Anyway, I visualized a figure like that, and then imagined one that was hollow, and myself inside it. Now, as for the light, my guess is that it moved through the spectrum one third of the way each time I went around the circle, and all the way through the spectrum when I’d been around three times – that is, when I reached the place where the same ‘wall’ was a floor again. I think the walls of the corridor were a floor, one after the other, I mean.”

“That’s pretty clear. The corridor is what a topologist calls a non-simply-connected continuous trifacial. Now, what’s your guess about gravity?”

“I can only say *what* was done,” said Hulon, frowning. “Not *how*. But it seems to me that the whole corridor was somehow insulated from Earth’s gravity, and that my feet in some way controlled an artificial gravity in the place. In other words, wherever I walked was ‘down’. And that effect only worked lengthwise along any side that was a ‘floor’ at the moment. I mean, if I had turned and tried walking up the wall, it wouldn’t have worked, even though that wall did become a floor later, when I came on it endwise. That’s what tumbled the dead man around like that every time I got him laid out. He’d lie nice and still until a wall beside him became a floor, and the floor on which he lay became a wall. Then he’d simply fall away onto what was now a floor.”

“Good!” said the doctor heartily.

“And have you any idea why you always found him dressed in a different color?”

“Not really. Unless it was just a characteristic of the material to reflect yellow in blue light, red in yellow light, and blue in red light. I don’t know how that could be, but I don’t know how controlled gravity could be either.”

“All right! You’re doing fine. One more question, and we’ll have the vote. Why do you suppose we set up the test just the way we did?”

“Why I ... I imagine so you could test about everything there is to test in a man,” said Hulon. “To see if he can analyze things he observes – even things that are against all his previous experience.”

“That’s right,” smiled the doctor. “Including how badly he can be scared, and still think straight.” He bent to the speaker. “Vote,” he said shortly.

There was a tense pause, and then the green light flickered, went out, lit – and stayed alight.

The doctor clapped his hands together delightedly, and the girl skipped down from the desk and kissed Hulon’s cheek.

“You’re in, boy,” said the doctor. “You’re right all down the line. Antigravity is something we’ve had for a long time. The surfaces in the corridor are coated with a substance that is in superficial molecular motion; we used it because it can’t be marked. Your tunic is treated with a substance that fluoresces right through the spectrum, excited by ultra-high-frequency radio waves. And the dead man – not a real one, by the way – had a tunic treated to do just what you guessed – it reflects light a third of the spectrum away from the color of the light-source. You’ll learn all about these things in time.” He rose. “Let’s get to it.”

Hulon rose with him. He felt wonderful. “And then what?”

“Then you’ll go right back to your job, like the rest of us. You’ll spend a lot of time with your new ‘steady,’ of course, and once in a while you’ll attend a meeting. But by and large, things will be the same.”

“Steady?” asked Hulon.

The girl said, “Me,” and gave him a smile that made his head swim.

“Now this,” said Hulon, “I am going to like!”