

He stopped. He had been standing beside the door of the shed. As the static crackled, he saw the bird of paradise dive for a closer look. The static stopped when the bird returned to its slow-circling higher altitude.

"That's strange," Drake said. "Did you see that, Bill? The bird came down and the static went on at the same time."

"I saw it," Sorensen said. "Think it means anything?"

"I don't know. Let's see." Drake took out his field glasses. He turned up the volume of the receiver and stepped outside where he could observe the jungle. He waited, hearing the sounds of the chess game three or four hundred miles away.

"Come on now, move."

"Give me a minute."

"A minute? Listen, I can't stand in front of this bleeding set all night. Make your—"

Static crackled sharply. Drake saw four wild pigs come trotting out of the jungle, moving slowly, like a reconnaissance squad probing for weak spots in an enemy position. They stopped; the static stopped. Byrnes, standing guard with his rifle, took a snap shot at them. The pigs turned, and static crackled as they moved back into the jungle. There was more static as the bird of paradise swept down for a look, then climbed out of range. After that, the static stopped.

Drake put down his binoculars and went back inside the shed. "That must be it," he said. "The static is related to the Quedak. I think it comes when he's operating the animals."

"You mean he has come sort of radio control over them?" Sorensen asked.

"Seems like it," Drake said. "Either radio control or something propagated along a radio wavelength."

"If that's the case," Sorensen said, "he's like a little radio station, isn't he?"

"Sure he is. So what?"

"Then we should be able to locate him on a radio direction finder," Sorensen said.

Drake nodded emphatically. He snapped off the receiver, went to a corner of the shed and took out one of their portable direction finders. He set it to the frequency at which Cable had picked up the Rabaul - Bougainville broadcast. Then he turned it on and walked to the door.

THE men watched while Drake rotated the loop antenna. He located the maximum signal, then turned the loop slowly, read the bearing and converted it to a compass course. Then he sat down with a small-scale chart of the Southwest Pacific.

"Well," Sorensen asked, "is it the Quedak?"

"It's got to be," said Drake. "I located a good null almost due south. That's straight ahead in the jungle."

"You're sure it isn't a reciprocal bearing?"

"I checked that out."

"Is there any chance the signal comes from some other station?"

"Nope. Due south, the next station is Sydney, and that's seventeen hundred miles away. Much too far for this RDF. It's the Quedak, all right."

"So we have a way of locating him," Sorensen said. "Two men with direction finders can go into the jungle—"

"—and get themselves killed," Drake said. "We can position the Quedak with RDFs, but his animals can locate us a lot faster. We wouldn't have a chance in the jungle."

Sorensen looked crestfallen. "Then we're no better off than before."

"We're a lot better off," Drake said. "We have a chance now."

"What makes you think so?"

"He controls the animals by radio," Drake said. "We know the frequency he operates on. We can broadcast on the same frequency. We can jam his signal."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Am I sure? Of course not. But I do know that two stations in the same area can't broadcast over the same frequency. If we tuned in to

the frequency the Quedak uses, made enough noise to override his signal—"

"I see," Sorensen said. "Maybe it would work! If we could interfere with his signal, he wouldn't be able to control the animals. And then we could hunt him down with the RDFs."

"That's the idea," Drake said. "It has only one small flaw—our transmitter isn't working. With no transmitter, we can't do any broadcasting. No broadcasting, no jamming."

"Can you fix it?" Sorensen asked.

"I'll try," Drake said. "But we'd better not hope for too much. Eakins was the radio man on this expedition."

"We've got all the spare parts," Sorensen said. "Tubes, manual, everything."

"I know. Give me enough time and I'll figure out what's wrong. The question is, how much time is the Quedak going to give us?"

The bright copper disk of the sun was half submerged in the sea. Sunset colors touched the massing thunderheads and faded into the brief tropical twilight. The men began to barricade the copra shed for the night.

## VI

DRAKE removed the back from the transmitter and scowled at the compact mass of tubes and

wiring. Those metal boxlike things were probably condensers, and the waxy cylindrical gadgets might or might not be resistors. It all looked hopelessly complicated, ridiculously dense and delicate. Where should he begin?

He turned on the set and waited a few minutes. All the tubes appeared to go on, some dim, some bright. He couldn't detect any loose wires. The mike was still dead.

So much for visual inspection. Next question: was the set getting enough juice?

He turned it off and checked the battery cells with a voltmeter. The batteries were up to charge. He removed the leads, scraped them and put them back on, making sure they fit snugly. He checked all connections, murmured a propitiatory prayer, and turned the set on.

It still didn't work.

Cursing, he turned it off again. He decided to replace all the tubes, starting with the dim ones. If that didn't work, he could try replacing condensers and resistors. If that didn't work, he could always shoot himself. With this cheerful thought, he opened the parts kit and went to work.

The men were all inside the copra shed, finishing the job of barricading it for the night. The door was wedged shut and locked. The two windows had to be kept

open for ventilation; otherwise everyone would suffocate in the heat. But a double layer of heavy mosquito netting was nailed over each window, and a guard was posted beside it.

Nothing could get through the flat galvanized-iron roof. The floor was of pounded earth, a possible danger point. All they could do was keep watch over it.

The treasure-hunters settled down for a long night. Drake, with a handkerchief tied around his forehead to keep the perspiration out of his eyes, continued working on the transmitter.

AN hour later, there was a buzz on the walkie-talkie. Sorensen picked it up and said, "What do you want?"

"I want you to end this senseless resistance," said the Quedak, speaking with Eakins' voice. "You've had enough time to think over the situation. I want you to join me. Surely you can see there's no other way."

"We don't want to join you," Sorensen said.

"You must," the Quedak told him.

"Are you going to make us?"

"That poses problems," the Quedak said. "My animal parts are not suitable for coercion. Eakins is an excellent mechanism, but there is only one of him. And I must not expose myself to unnecessary dan-

ger. By doing so I would endanger the Quedak Mission."

"So it's a stalemate," Sorensen said.

"No. I am faced with difficulty only in taking you over. There is no problem in killing you."

The men shifted uneasily. Drake, working on the transmitter, didn't look up.

"I would rather *not* kill you," the Quedak said. "But the Quedak Mission is of primary importance. It would be endangered if you didn't join. It would be seriously compromised if you left the island. So you must either join or be killed."

"That's not the way I see it," Sorensen said. "If you killed us—assuming that you can—you'd never get off this island. Eakins can't handle that ketch."

"There would be no need to leave in the ketch," the Quedak said. "In six months, the inter-island schooner will return. Eakins and I will leave then. The rest of you will have died."

"You're bluffing," Sorensen said. "What makes you think you could kill us? You didn't do so well today." He caught Drake's attention and gestured at the radio. Drake shrugged his shoulders and went back to work.

"I wasn't trying," the Quedak said. "The time for that was at night. *This* night, before you have a chance to work out a better sys-

tem of defense. You must join me tonight or I will kill one of you."

"One of us?"

"Yes. One man an hour. In that way, perhaps the survivors will change their minds about joining. But if they don't, all of you will be dead by morning."

Drake leaned over and whispered to Sorensen, "Stall him. Give me another ten minutes. I think I've found the trouble."

Sorensen said into the walkie-talkie, "We'd like to know a little more about the Quedak Cooperation."

"You can find out best by joining."

"We'd rather have a little more information on it first."

IT is an indescribable state," the Quedak said in an urgent, earnest, eager voice. "Can you imagine yourself as *yourself* and yet experiencing an entirely new series of sensory networks? You would, for example, experience the world through the perceptors of a dog as he goes through the forest following an odor which to him—and to you—is as clear and vivid as a painted line. A hermit crab senses things differently. From him you experience the slow interaction of life at the margin of sea and land. His time-sense is very slow, unlike that of a bird of paradise, whose viewpoint is spatial, rapid, cursory. And there are many oth-

ers, above and below the earth and water, who furnish their own specialized viewpoints of reality. Their outlooks, I have found, are not essentially different from those of the animals that once inhabited Mars."

"What happened on Mars?" Sorensen asked.

"All life died," the Quedak mourned. "All except the Quedak. It happened a long time ago. For centuries there was peace and pros-

perity on the planet. Everything and everyone was part of the Quedak Cooperation. But the dominant race was basically weak. Their breeding rate went down; catastrophes happened. And finally there was no more life except the Quedak."

"Sounds great," Sorensen said ironically.

"It was the fault of the race," the Quedak protested. "With sturdier stock — such as you have on this

planet—the will to live will remain intact. The peace and prosperity will continue indefinitely."

"I don't believe it. What happened on Mars will happen again on Earth if you take over. After a while, slaves just don't care very strongly about living."

"You wouldn't be slaves. You would be functional parts of the Quedak Cooperation."

"Which would be run by you," Sorensen said. "Any way you slice

it, it's the same old pie."

"You don't know what you're talking about," the Quedak said. "We have talked long enough. I am prepared to kill one man in the next five minutes. Are you or are you not going to join me?" Sorensen looked at Drake. Drake turned on the transmitter.

Gusts of rain splattered on the roof while the transmitter warmed up. Drake lifted the microphone and tapped it, and was able to hear



the sound in the speaker.  
"It's working," he said.

AT that moment something flew against the netting-covered window. The netting sagged; a fruit bat was entangled in it, glaring at them with tiny red-rimmed eyes.

"Get some boards over that window!" Sorensen shouted.

As he spoke, a second bat hurtled into the netting, broke through it and tumbled to the floor. The men clubbed it to death, but four more bats flew in through the open window. Drake flailed at them, but he couldn't drive them away from the transmitter. They were diving at his eyes, and he was forced back. A wild blow caught one bat and knocked it to the floor with a broken wing. Then the others had reached the transmitter.

They pushed it off the table. Drake tried to catch the set, and failed. He heard the glass tubes shattering, but by then he was busy protecting his eyes.

In a few minutes they had killed two more bats, and the others had fled out the window. The men nailed boards over both windows, and Drake bent to examine the transmitter.

"Any chance of fixing it?" Sorensen asked.

"Not a hope," Drake said. "They ripped out the wiring while they were at it."

"What do we do now?"  
"I don't know."

Then the Quedak spoke to them over the walkie-talkie. "I must have your answer right now."

Nobody said a word.

"In that case," the Quedak said, "I'm deeply sorry that one of you must die now."

## VII

RAIN pelted the iron roof and the gusts of wind increased in intensity. There were rumbles of distant thunder. But within the copra shed, the air was hot and still. The gasoline lantern hanging from the center beam threw a harsh yellow light that illuminated the center of the room but left the corners in deep shadow. The treasure-hunters had moved away from the walls. They were all in the center of the room facing outward, and they made Drake think of a herd of buffalo drawn up against a wolf they could smell but could not see.

Cable said, "Listen, maybe we should try this Quedak Cooperation. Maybe it isn't so bad as—"

"Shut up," Drake said.

"Be reasonable," Cable argued. "It's better than dying, isn't it?"

"No one's dying yet," Drake said. "Just shut up and keep your eyes open."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Cable said. "Dan, let me out."

"Be sick where you are," Drake said. "Just keep your eyes open."

"You can't give me orders," Cable said. He started toward the door. Then he jumped back.

A yellowish scorpion had crept under the inch of clearance between the door and the floor. Recetich stamped on it, smashing it to pulp under his heavy boots. Then he whirled, swinging at three hornets which had come at him through the boarded windows.

"Forget the hornets!" Drake shouted. "Keep watching the ground!"

There was movement on the floor. Several hairy spiders crawled out of the shadows. Drake and Recetich beat at them with rifle butts. Byrnes saw something crawling under the door. It looked like some kind of huge flat centipede. He stamped at it, missed, and the centipede was on his boot, past it, on the flesh of his leg. He screamed; it felt like a ribbon of molten metal. He was able to smash it flat before he passed out.

Drake checked the wound and decided it was not fatal. He stamped on another spider, then felt Sorensen's hand clutching his shoulder. He looked toward the corner Sorensen was pointing at.

Sliding toward them were two large, dark-coated snakes. Drake recognized them as black adders. These normally shy creatures were coming forward like tigers.

THE men panicked, trying to get away from the snakes. Drake pulled out his revolver and dropped to one knee, ignoring the hornets that buzzed around him, trying to draw a bead on the slender serpentine targets in the swaying yellow light.

Thunder roared directly overhead. A long flash of lightning suddenly flooded the room, spoiling his aim. Drake fired and missed, and waited for the snakes to strike.

They didn't strike. They were moving away from him, retreating to the rat hole from which they had emerged. One of the adders slid quickly through. The other began to follow, then stopped, half in the hole.

Sorensen took careful aim with a rifle. Drake pushed the muzzle aside. "Wait just a moment."

The adder hesitated. It came out of the hole and began to move toward them again . . .

And there was another crash of thunder and a vivid splash of lightning. The snake turned away and squirmed through the hole.

"What's going on?" Sorensen asked. "Is the thunder frightening them?"

"No, it's the lightning!" Drake said. "That's why the Quedak was in such a rush. He saw that a storm was coming, and he hadn't consolidated his position yet."

"What are you talking about?"  
"The lightning," Drake said.

"The electrical storm! It's jamming that radio control of his! And when he's jammed, the beasts revert to normal behavior. It takes him time to re-establish control."

"The storm won't last forever," Cable said.

"But maybe it'll last long enough," Drake said. He picked up the direction finders and handed one to Sorensen. "Come on, Bill. We'll hunt out that bug right now."

"Hey," Recetich said, "isn't there something I can do?"

"You can start swimming if we don't come back in an hour," Drake said.

**I**N slanting lines the rain drove down, pushed by the wild southwest wind. Thunder rolled continually and each flash of lightning seemed aimed at them. Drake and Sorensen reached the edge of the jungle and stopped.

"We'll separate here," Drake said. "Gives us a better chance of converging on him."

"Right," Sorensen said. "Take care of yourself, Dan."

Sorensen plunged into the jungle. Drake trotted fifty yards down the fringe and then entered the bush.

He pushed forward, the revolver in his belt, the radio direction finder in one hand, a flashlight in the other. The jungle seemed to be animated by a vicious life of its

own, almost as if the Quedak controlled it. Vines curled cunningly around his ankles and the bushes reached out thorny hands toward him. Every branch took a special delight in slapping his face.

Each time the lightning flashed, Drake's direction finder tried to home on it. He was having a difficult time staying on course. But, he reminded himself, the Quedak was undoubtedly having an even more difficult time. Between flashes, he was able to set a course. The further he penetrated into the jungle, the stronger the signal became.

After a while he noticed that the flashes of lightning were spaced more widely apart. The storm was moving on toward the north, leaving the island behind. How much longer would he have the protection of the lightning? Another ten or fifteen minutes?

He heard something whimper. He swung his flashlight around and saw his dog, Oro, coming toward him.

His dog — or the Quedak's dog?

"Hey there, boy," Drake said. He wondered if he should drop the direction finder and get the revolver out of his belt. He wondered if the revolver would still work after such a thorough soaking.

Oro came up and licked his hand. He was Drake's dog, at least for the duration of the storm.

They moved on together, and the thunder rumbled distantly in the north. The signal on his RDF was very strong now. Somewhere around here . . .

He saw light from another flashlight. Sorensen, badly out of breath, had joined him. The jungle had ripped and clawed at him, but he still had his rifle, flashlight and direction finder.

Oro was scratching furiously at a bush. There was a long flash of lightning, and in it they saw the Quedak.

**D**RAKE realized, in those final moments, that the rain had stopped. The lightning had stopped, too. He dropped the direction finder. With the flashlight in one hand and his revolver in the other, he tried to take aim at the Quedak, who was moving, who had jumped—

To Sorensen's neck, just above the right collarbone.

Sorensen raised his hands, then lowered them again. He turned

toward Drake, raising his rifle. His face was perfectly calm. He looked as though his only purpose in life was to kill Drake.

Drake fired from less than two feet away. Sorensen spun with the impact, dropped his rifle and fell.

Drake bent over him, his revolver ready. He saw that he had fired accurately. The bullet had gone in just above the right collarbone. It was a bad wound. But it had been much worse for the Quedak, who had been in the direct path of the bullet. All that was left of the Quedak was a splatter of black across Sorensen's chest.

Drake applied hasty first aid and hoisted Sorensen to his shoulders. He wondered what he would have done if the Quedak had been standing above Sorensen's heart, or on his throat, or on his head.

He decided it was better not to think about that.

He started back to camp, with his dog trotting along beside him.

— ROBERT SHECKLEY

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# The Nuse Man

If you ever dig Ur and find one man buried seven times — here is the nastily simple explanation.

BY MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Illustrated by WOOD

**I**DON'T know why, really, the nuse man comes to call on me. He must realize by now I'll never order a nuse installation or an ipsissifex from him; I consider them as dangerous as anything our own lethal age has produced. Nuse, which is a power source that the nuse man describes as originating on the far side of 3000 A.D., is the worse of the two, but the ipsissifex, a matter duplicator, is bad enough.

And though I listen to the nuse man's stories, I can hardly be considered a sympathetic audience. I suppose he drops in because I can always be depended on for a cup of tea and some toast and marmalade.

"Hello," he said as I answered the bell. "You've aged in the last six months."

Before I could wrap my tongue around the obvious *et tu* (he was

looking terrible—his clothes looked as if they had been slept in by machinery, and there were bruises and cuts and lumps all over his face) he had pushed past me into the living room and was sitting down in my husband's easy chair. The dachshunds, who have never liked the nuse man, were growling at him earnestly. He put his feet up on the fireplace and lay back in the chair on his spine.

"Ahhhhhh!" he sighed, and then, to me, "Put more butter on the toast than you did last time."

When I came back with the tea, he was standing by one of the bookcases looking at Woolley's little book, *Ur: The First Phases*.

"Silly book," he grumbled. "That stuff about the plano-convex bricks is all wrong."

"What do you know about it?" I asked him.

"I sold a nuse installation to King Nebu-kalam-dug of Ur of the Chaldees on this last trip."

"Oh, yes? Well, the home office ought to be pleased with you. Perhaps they'll give you a vacation back in your own time."

The nuse man made no direct answer, but his battered, lumpy face grew dark. He bit into a slice of toast so savagely that I feared for his iridium alloy teeth.

"Don't tell me that something went wrong with the nuse *again!*" I cried.

This time he couldn't have an-

swered if he had wanted to. He had choked over some toast crumbs, and I had to beat him on the back and pour tea down him before he could speak.

"Why are you so prejudiced against nuse?" he demanded at last. "The nuse had nothing to do with it. It was the king and the priests that birded it up."

"I'll bet."

**T**HE nuse man's face turned even redder. It was a shade or two darker than the lapels around the waist of his trousers. "I'll tell you all about it!" he said passionately. "You be the judge!" "Oh, Lord." There was no polite way of getting out of it. "All right," I said.

"Everything was going fine," the nuse man began, "until the old King, Nebu-kalam-dug, died. I'd sold him a nuse installation—"

"General or special?"

"Special, of course. Do I look like fool enough to put a general nuse installation into the hands of a lot of 3000 B.C. yaps? I sold him a special nuse installation in exchange for a stated number of Sumerian gold artifacts, so many on installation and so many each lunar month until the price was paid."

"What were the artifacts?"

"Gold wreaths and necklaces and jewelry. Of course, gold's nothing. Only good for lavatory daises. But the workmanship was interesting

and valuable. I knew the home office would be pleased. Then the old yoop died."

"What killed him?"

"His son, Nebu-al-karsig, poisoned him."

"Oh."

"Everybody in the court knew it, but of course nobody would talk about it. I was sorry the old king died, but I wasn't worried, because I thought I could work out the same sort of deal with the new king. Even when I saw how scared the court ladies looked when they were getting ready for the funeral, I didn't apperceive. And then the soldiers came and arrested me!"

"What had you done?" I asked suspiciously.

"Nothing. They were short little tzintes with big muscles, and they wore sort of skirts out of sheepskin with the wool twisted into bunches to look elegant. They wouldn't say a word while they were arresting me. Then I found out I was supposed to be strangled and put in the royal tomb with the dead king."

"Why?"

"Because I'd been one of the old man's special friends. At least, that was what young Nebu-al-karsig said. The prime minister and two or three of the councilors were being strangled along with me."

"Gosh."

"I argued and argued, and talked and talked. I told the young king

we hadn't been such good friends as all *that*. And finally he said, very well, I could go with the court ladies in the death pit."

"Were you scared?"

"Of course I was scared," the nuse man said irritably. "I didn't have my chronnox—they'd arrested me in too much of a hurry for that—so I couldn't get into another time. And I had no way of getting in touch with the home office. Certainly I was scared. And then there was the indignity—somebody from when I come from, to be killed by a lot of primitive button heads. It made me sore."

HE slurped at his tea. "When we got to the pit," he continued, "they were just closing the old king's tomb up. You understand, the tomb was at the bottom of the pit, and there was a ramp leading down into it. They hung matting over the sides of the pit, to cover the earth, and then they backed old Nebu-kalam-dug's war chariot down the ramp; he'd want his chariot in the next world. Then the rest of us went down the ramp into the pit."

"Who was 'us'?" I asked curiously.

"Oh, harpists and singers and court ladies and slaves and soldiers and attendants. If anybody didn't want to go, the soldiers had spears they used for prodding. I counted, and there were fifty-eight of us."

"Pretty barbarous," I said sympathetically.

"Nobody from your period has any right to call *anything* barbarous," the nuse man said severely. "I've seen some bad ages, but yours—! Anyway, there we were."

"The funeral services began. The harpists twanged on their harps and the singers sang in high falsetto voices. It sounded awful. The priests chanted prayers from the edge of the pit above. The soldiers passed around an opiate in little bronze cups for us to drink. The priests prayed some more. It was beginning to get dark. Then they started shoveling earth in on us."

"Were you sorry for the others?" I asked.

"I was more sorry for myself. It was their era, and if they wanted to die in it, that was their business. After all, they thought that when they woke up they'd go on serving old Nebu-kalam-dug in the next world. I didn't—and even if I had, he was nobody I'd want to serve."

"How did you get out?" I asked quickly. I did not like the thought of the scene in the death pit, even if it had taken place so many thousands of years ago.

"I got under the car of the chariot to shelter myself from being crushed. After a long while, the earth stopped coming in and I decided the mourners had gone away. I didn't have my chronnox, and, as I told you, I couldn't get in touch

with the home office. But I was wearing an ipsissifex. I started materializing myself up through the earth of the pit."

"You *didn't!*" I said incredulously.

"I did, though. Each 'me' was a little farther up through the earth layer of the pit."

"You mean there are five or six 'you's buried back there in Ur of the Chaldees?"

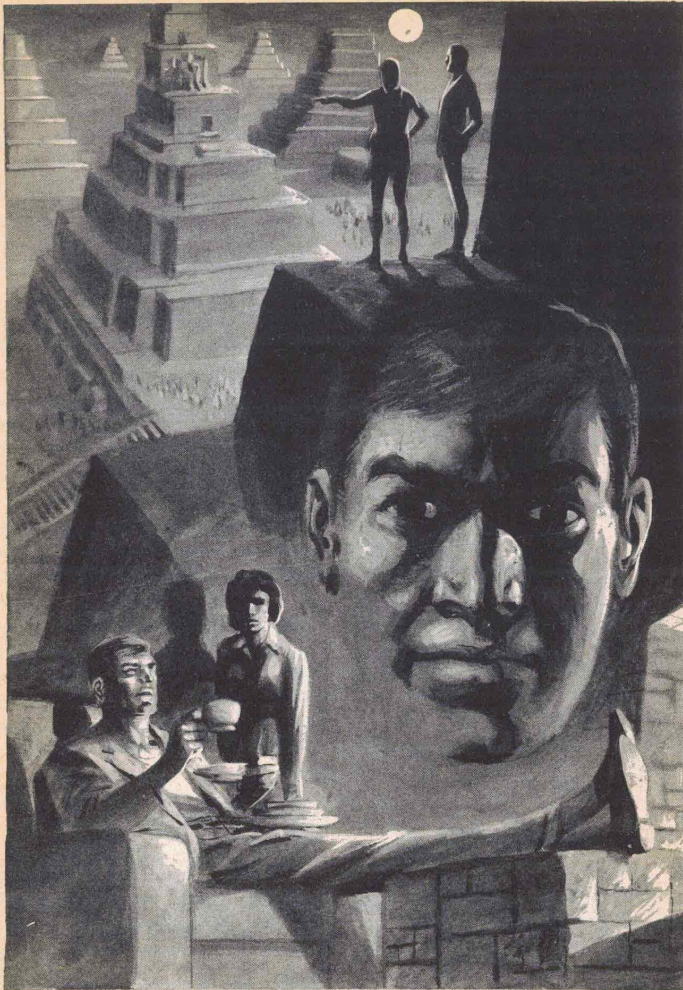
"Seven. Of course they weren't *really* alive—you know how an ipsissifex is."

IT was the first time I had ever heard the nuse man admit that one of the devices he was peddling might have a flaw.

"I clawed my way up through the last few inches of dirt without any more materializations," he said, "and started walking up the ramp. There was a soldier on guard at the top. When he saw me, his spear began to shake. It shook so much he could hardly hold it. The moon was coming up, and my shadow fell in front of me on the ramp."

"He licked his lips and swallowed before he could say anything. 'Get back in the pit and die,' he said finally. 'What are you doing out here? You're supposed to serve our lord Nebu-kalam-dug in the other world. Go on back and be dead.'"

"I didn't say anything. I just



kept walking closer to him. When I was about two feet away, he dropped his spear and ran.

"I didn't have any trouble getting in at the palace, either. Young Nebu-al-karsig was playing checkers on a fiddle-shaped board with one of his girls when I walked into the great hall. When he saw me, he jumped up and the board fell to one side and the pieces rolled over the floor. I said, 'My lord Nebu-al-karsig, I am harder to kill than your noble father was.'

"He had turned a dirty greenish tan. He said, 'I saw — I saw —'

"I sat down on the floor in front of him and bumped my head on it a couple of times to show I was going to be polite. Then I said, in a deep, serious voice, 'A magician cannot die until his time has come, my lord. Shall we discuss extending the nuse installation I made for your respected sire?' And he said, 'Yes, let's.'"

"It's a wonder he didn't try to poison you," I commented.

"Scared to," the nuse man said briefly. "Anyhow, we agreed I was to increase the nuse installation by one third, and in return Nebu-al-karsig was to pay me twice as many gold artifacts each lunar month as his father had, and for half again as long. It took a lot of figuring and explaining by the royal scribes before the king could understand the terms of the agreement, but he finally was satisfied with the arith-

metic. Oh, and I got my old rooms in the palace back."

"What did the special installation do?" I poured the last of the tea into the nuse man's cup and went out to the kitchen to put water on to heat for more.

"It made bricks," he said when I came back. "Beautiful, even, true, symmetrical mud bricks. Nebukalam-dug had been crazy about those bricks, and even Nebu-al-karsig thought they were pretty neat. You should have seen the adobe junk the brickmakers had been turning out by hand — sloppy, roundish affairs, all different sizes, with straw sticking out of them. Yes, my installation made bricks."

"What did they use the bricks for?" I asked.

"For ziggurats — stepped temple pyramids. They made the first story black, the second white, the third red, and the last blue. Sometimes, just for a change, they'd do an all-blue or an all-red pyramid.

"For a while, everything was fine. Ziggurats were going up all over the place, and the skyline of Ur altered rapidly. The priests were pleased because all those ziggurats meant more priests were needed. Nebu-al-karsig was pleased because he was going down in history as the greatest ziggurat builder of his dynasty. And I was pleased because I was getting a lot of elegant artifacts. Then things started to go sour."



"The nuse," I murmured. "I knew it."

THE nuse man glared at me. "It . . . was . . . not . . . the . . . nuse!" he said, biting off the words. "What happened was the brick-makers started to get sore. They were out of jobs, you see, because of the nuse. And the bricklayers were almost as badly off. They were working twelve hours a day, seven days a week, without any overtime, trying to use up all the bricks. Pretty soon there would be riots in the streets.

"Nebu-al-karsig asked me what I thought he ought to do. I told him, let the brickmakers into the bricklayers' guild. That way he'd have twice as many men to build ziggurats. So he issued a decree. And then there were riots in the streets.

"What," said the bricklayers, "let those dirty sheep's livers into our union? When they haven't served a seven years' apprenticeship?" "What," said the brickmakers, "be forced to give up our noble art, sacred to Nintud since time immemorial, in exchange for slicking mud paste over heartless mechanical bricks?" Then both sides shrieked "Never!" and barricades, made out of brick baskets and cobblestones, began to go up everywhere.

"I suppose the fuss would have died down in time. People—as your age has learned — can get used to

anything. But Nebu-al-karsig was sleeping badly. Palace gossip had it that he'd wake up screaming from dreams about his father. He asked the priests what the cause of the trouble was, and they told him that some of the minor gods, those who hadn't got ziggurats yet, were mad at him. The people in Ur had about four thousand gods. So he decided to have the nuse installation turn out more bricks.

"Every morning, as soon as it was daylight, a bunch of shave-headed priests would file into the nuse factory. They'd stand in front of the installation, concentrating, for an hour, and then a new batch of priests would come. They kept that up all day. Nuse, of course, is basically a neural force. By the end of the day, bricks would be simply pouring out of the brick hoppers. Even to me, who had nothing to do with laying them, seeing all those mountains and mountains of bricks was very discouraging.

"I tried to argue with Nebu-al-karsig about it. I told him as politely as I could that he was endangering his throne. But he'd never liked me, and after the episode of the brickmakers' guild, he hadn't trusted me. He wouldn't listen. I decided it was time I got out of Ur.

"I had one more installment of artifacts due me. I would collect that and then leave. By now the chest of artifacts in my bedroom was almost full.

"The day of the installment came and went, and no artifacts. I mentioned it to Nebu-al-karsig and he showed his teeth at me. But on the next day, ten or twelve priests came to my rooms with a little box. The head priest opened it and gave it to me. In it were the missing artifacts.

"They weren't quite what my contract called for, but I was glad to get them. I thanked the head priest for them as nicely as I knew how, and he smiled and suggested that we have a drink. I said fine, and he poured it out. One of the minor priests was carrying goblets and the wineskin. I put out my hand for the cup and the head priest — did I tell you I'd put a small general nuse installation in my rooms?"

I THOUGHT back. "No, you didn't."

"Well, I had," said the nuse man. "I wasn't going to be bothered with slow, stupid slaves waiting on me. I put out my hand for the cup and the priest went sailing up in the air. He hit on the ceiling with a considerable thump. Then he went around the room, floating just at eye-level, and whacked solidly against each of the four corners. He hit the fourth corner harder and faster than he had the first. I could see that his mouth was open and he looked scared.

"There was a kind of pause

while he hovered in the air. Then he went up and hit the ceiling, came down toward the floor, up to the ceiling, down again, up, hovered, and then came down on the floor for the last time with a great crashing *whump!* He landed so hard I thought I felt the floor shake. I knew he must be hurt.

"I stood there frozen for a moment. I couldn't imagine what had happened. Then it came to me. The drink in my cup had been poisoned. I suppose Nebu-al-karsig hadn't had nerve enough to do it himself. And the nuse installation in my room hadn't let the head priest get away with it.

"A nuse never makes a mistake. 'The airy servitor. Don't think, use nuse.' The more I sell it, the more I'm convinced that it's wonderful stuff. This time it had saved my life. I couldn't help wishing for a minute, though, that it had just tipped over the poisoned cup quietly, because banging a priest around like that was sure to be sacrilege.

"The other priests had been as surprised as I was. Now they began to mutter and heft the clubs they were carrying. The nuse might be able to handle all of them at once, but I didn't wait to find out. I made a dash into the next room and bolted the door.

"I was wearing my chronnox. All I had to do was grab my chest of artifacts and go to some other time. I made a dive under the bed for