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Graveyard of Dreams

By H. Beam Piper

*Despite Mr. Shakespeare,
wealth and name are both dross compared with
the theft of hope--
and Maxwell had to rob
a whole planet of it!*

Standing at the armor-glass front of the observation deck and watching the mountains rise and grow on the horizon, Conn Maxwell gripped the metal hand-rail with painful intensity, as though trying to hold back the airship by force. Thirty minutes--twenty-six and a fraction of the Terran minutes he had become accustomed to--until he'd have to face it.

Then, realizing that he never, in his own thoughts, addressed himself as "sir," he turned.

"I beg your pardon?"

It was the first officer, wearing a Terran Federation Space Navy uniform of forty years, or about ten regulation-changes, ago. That was the sort of thing he had taken for granted before he had gone away. Now he was noticing it everywhere.

"Thirty minutes out of Litchfield, sir," the ship's officer repeated. "You'll go off by the midship gangway on the starboard side."

"Yes, I know. Thank you."

The first mate held out the clipboard he was carrying. "Would you mind checking over this, Mr. Maxwell? Your baggage list."

"Certainly." He glanced at the slip of paper. Valises, eighteen and twenty-five kilos, two; trunks,

seventy-five and seventy kilos, two; microbook case, one-fifty kilos, one. The last item fanned up a little flicker of anger in him, not at any person, even himself, but at the situation in which he found himself and the futility of the whole thing.

"Yes, that's everything. I have no hand-luggage, just this stuff."

He noticed that this was the only baggage list under the clip; the other papers were all freight and express manifests. "Not many passengers left aboard, are there?"

"You're the only one in first-class, sir," the mate replied. "About forty farm-laborers on the lower deck. Everybody else got off at the other stops. Litchfield's the end of the run. You know anything about the place?"

"I was born there. I've been away at school for the last five years."

"On Baldur?"

"Terra. University of Montevideo." Once Conn would have said it almost boastfully.

The mate gave him a quick look of surprised respect, then grinned and nodded. "Of course; I should have known. You're Rodney Maxwell's son, aren't you? Your father's one of our regular freight shippers. Been sending out a lot of stuff lately." He looked as though he would have liked to continue the conversation, but said: "Sorry, I've got to go. Lot of things to attend to before landing." He touched the visor of his cap and turned away.

The mountains were closer when Conn looked forward again, and he glanced down. Five years and two space voyages ago, seen from the afterdeck of this ship or one of her sisters, the woods had been green with new foliage, and the wine-melon fields had been in pink blossom. He tried to picture the scene sliding away below instead of drawing in toward him, as though to force himself back to a moment of the irretrievable past.

But the moment was gone, and with it the eager excitement and the half-formed anticipations of the things he would learn and accomplish on Terra. The things he would learn--microbook case, one-fifty kilos, one. One of the steel trunks was full of things he had learned and accomplished, too. Maybe they, at least, had some value....

The woods were autumn-tinted now and the fields were bare and brown.

They had gotten the crop in early this year, for the fields had all been harvested. Those workers below must be going out for the wine-pressing. That extra hands were needed for that meant a big crop, and yet it seemed that less land was under cultivation than when he had gone away. He could see squares of low brush among the new forests that had grown up in the last forty years, and the few stands of original timber looked like hills above the second growth. Those trees had been standing when the planet had been colonized.

That had been two hundred years ago, at the middle of the Seventh Century, Atomic Era. The name of the planet--Poictesme--told that: the Surromanticist Movement, when the critics and professors were rediscovering James Branch Cabell.

Funny how much was coming back to him now--things he had picked up from the minimal liberal-arts and general-humanities courses he had taken and then forgotten in his absorption with the science and tech studies.

The first extrasolar planets, as they had been discovered, had been named from Norse mythology--Odin and Baldur and Thor, Uller and Freya, Bifrost and Asgard and Niflheim. When the Norse names ran out, the discoverers had turned to other mythologies, Celtic and Egyptian and Hindu and Assyrian, and by the middle of the Seventh Century they were naming planets for almost anything.

Anything, that is, but actual persons; their names were reserved for stars. Like Alpha Gartner, the sun of Poictesme, and Beta Gartner, a buckshot-sized pink glow in the southeast, and Gamma Gartner, out of sight on the other side of the world, all named for old Genji Gartner, the scholarly and half-pirical adventurer whose ship had been the first to approach the three stars and discover that each of them had planets.

Forty-two planets in all, from a couple of methane-giants on Gamma to airless little things with one-sixth Terran gravity. Alpha II had been the only one in the Trisystem with an oxygen atmosphere and life. So Gartner had landed on it, and named it Poictesme, and the settlement that had grown up around the first landing site had been called Storisende. Thirty years later, Genji Gartner died there, after seeing the camp grow to a metropolis, and was buried under a massive monument.

Some of the other planets had been rich in metals, and mines had been opened, and atmosphere-domed factories and processing plants built. None of them could produce anything but hydroponic and tissue-culture foodstuffs, and natural foods from Poictesme had been less expensive, even on the planets of Gamma and Beta. So Poictesme had concentrated on agriculture and grown wealthy at it.

Then, within fifty years of Genji Gartner's death, the economics of interstellar trade overtook the Trisystem and the mines and factories closed down. It was no longer possible to ship the output to a profitable market, in the face of the growing self-sufficiency of the colonial planets and the irreducibly high cost of space-freighting.

Below, the brown fields and the red and yellow woods were merging into a ten-mile-square desert of crumbling concrete--empty and roofless sheds and warehouses and barracks, brush-choked parade grounds and landing fields, airship docks, and even a spaceport. They were more recent, dating from Poictesme's second brief and hectic prosperity, when the Terran Federation's Third Fleet-Army Force had occupied the Gartner Trisystem during the System States War.

Millions of troops had been stationed on or routed through Poictesme; tens of thousands of spacecraft had been based on the Trisystem; the mines and factories had reopened for war production. The Federation had spent trillions of sols on Poictesme, piled up mountains of stores and arms and equipment, left the face of the planet cluttered with installations.

Then, ten years before anybody had expected it, the rebellious System States Alliance had collapsed and the war had ended. The Federation armies had gone home, taking with them the clothes they stood in, their personal weapons and a few souvenirs. Everything else had been left behind; even the most expensive equipment was worth less than the cost of removal.

Ever since, Poictesme had been living on salvage. The uniform the first officer was wearing was forty years old--and it was barely a month out of the original packing. On Terra, Conn had told his friends that his father was a prospector and let them interpret that as meaning an explorer for, say, uranium deposits. Rodney Maxwell found plenty of uranium, but he got it by taking apart the warheads of missiles.

The old replacement depot or classification center or training area or whatever it had been had vanished under the ship now and it was all forest back to the mountains, with an occasional cluster of deserted buildings. From one or two, threads of blue smoke rose--bands of farm tramps, camping on their way from harvest to wine-pressing. Then the eastern foothills were out of sight and he was looking down on the granite spines of the Calder Range; the valley beyond was sloping away and widening out in the distance, and it was time he began thinking of what to say when he landed. He would have to tell them, of course.

He wondered who would be at the dock to meet him, besides his family. Lynne Fawzi, he hoped. Or did he? Her parents would be with her, and Kurt Fawzi would take the news hardest of any of them, and be the first to blame him because it was bad. The hopes he had built for Lynne and himself would have to be held in abeyance till he saw how her father would regard him now.

But however any of them took it, he would have to tell them the truth.

The ship swept on, tearing through the thin puffs of cloud at ten miles a minute. Six minutes to landing. Five. Four. Then he saw the river bend, glinting redly through the haze in the sunlight; Litchfield was inside it, and he stared waiting for the first glimpse of the city. Three minutes, and the ship began to cut speed and lose altitude. The hot-jets had stopped firing and he could hear the whine of the cold-jet rotors.

Then he could see Litchfield, dominated by the Airport Building, so thick that it looked squat for all its height, like a candle-stump in a puddle of its own grease, the other buildings under their carapace of terraces and landing stages seeming to have flowed away from it. And there was the yellow block of the distilleries, and High Garden Terrace, and the Mall....

At first, in the distance, it looked like a living city. Then, second by second, the stigmata of decay became more and more evident. Terraces empty or littered with rubbish; gardens untended and choked with wild growth; windows staring blindly; walls splotched with lichens and grimy where the rains could not wash them.

For a moment, he was afraid that some disaster, unmentioned in his father's letters, had befallen. Then he realized that the change had not been in Litchfield but in himself. After five years, he was seeing it as it really was. He wondered how his family and his friends would look to him now. Or Lynne.

The ship was coming in over the Mall; he could see the cracked paving sprouting grass, the statues askew on their pedestals, the waterless fountains. He thought for an instant that one of them was playing, and then he saw that what he had taken for spray was dust blowing from the empty basin. There was something about dusty fountains, something he had learned at the University. Oh, yes. One of the Second Century Martian Colonial poets, Eirrarsson, or somebody like that:

*The fountains are dusty in the Graveyard of Dreams;
The hinges are rusty and swing with tiny screams.*

There was more to it, but he couldn't remember; something about empty gardens under an empty

sky. There must have been colonies inside the Sol System, before the Interstellar Era, that hadn't turned out any better than Poictesme. Then he stopped trying to remember as the ship turned toward the Airport Building and a couple of tugs--Terran Federation contragravity tanks, with derrick-booms behind and push-poles where the guns had been--came up to bring her down.

He walked along the starboard promenade to the gangway, which the first mate and a couple of airmen were getting open.

Most of the population of top-level Litchfield was in the crowd on the dock. He recognized old Colonel Zareff, with his white hair and plum-brown skin, and Tom Brangwyn, the town marshal, red-faced and bulking above the others. It took a few seconds for him to pick out his father and mother, and his sister Flora, and then to realize that the handsome young man beside Flora was his brother Charley. Charley had been thirteen when Conn had gone away. And there was Kurt Fawzi, the mayor of Litchfield, and there was Lynne, beside him, her red-lipped face tilted upward with a cloud of bright hair behind it.

He waved to her, and she waved back, jumping in excitement, and then everybody was waving, and they were pushing his family to the front and making way for them.

The ship touched down lightly and gave a lurch as she went off contragravity, and they got the gangway open and the steps swung out, and he started down toward the people who had gathered to greet him.

His father was wearing the same black best-suit he had worn when they had parted five years ago. It had been new then; now it was shabby and had acquired a permanent wrinkle across the right hip, over the pistol-butt. Charley was carrying a gun, too; the belt and holster looked as though he had made them himself. His mother's dress was new and so was Flora's--probably made for the occasion. He couldn't be sure just which of the Terran Federation services had provided the material, but Charley's shirt was Medical Service sterilon.

Ashamed that he was noticing and thinking of such things at a time like this, he clasped his father's hand and kissed his mother and Flora. Everybody was talking at once, saying things that he heard only as happy sounds. His brother's words were the first that penetrated as words.

"You didn't know me," Charley was accusing. "Don't deny it; I saw you standing there wondering if I was Flora's new boy friend or what."

"Well, how in Niflheim'd you expect me to? You've grown up since the last time I saw you. You're looking great, kid!" He caught the gleam of Lynne's golden hair beyond Charley's shoulder and pushed him gently aside. "Lynne!"

"Conn, you look just wonderful!" Her arms were around his neck and she was kissing him. "Am I still your girl, Conn?"

He crushed her against him and returned her kisses, assuring her that she was. He wasn't going to let it make a bit of difference how her father took the news--if she didn't.

She babbled on: "You didn't get mixed up with any of those girls on Terra, did you? If you did, don't tell me about it. All I care about is that you're back. Oh, Conn, you don't know how much I missed you ... Mother, Dad, doesn't he look just splendid?"

Kurt Fawzi, a little thinner, his face more wrinkled, his hair grayer, shook his hand.

"I'm just as glad to see you as anybody, Conn," he said, "even if I'm not being as demonstrative about it as Lynne. Judge, what do you think of our returned wanderer? Franz, shake hands with him, but save the interview for the *News* for later. Professor, here's one student Litchfield Academy won't need to be ashamed of."

He shook hands with them--old Judge Ledue; Franz Veltrin, the newsman; Professor Kellton; a dozen others, some of whom he had not thought of in five years. They were all cordial and happy--how much, he wondered, because he was their neighbor, Conn Maxwell, Rodney Maxwell's son, home from Terra, and how much because of what they hoped he would tell them? Kurt Fawzi, edging him out of the crowd, was the first to voice that.

"Conn, what did you find out?" he asked breathlessly. "Do you know where it is?"

Conn hesitated, looking about desperately; this was no time to start talking to Kurt Fawzi about it. His father was turning toward him from one side, and from the other Tom Brangwyn and Colonel Zareff were approaching more slowly, the older man leaning on a silver-headed cane.

"Don't bother him about it now, Kurt," Rodney Maxwell scolded the mayor. "He's just gotten off the ship; he hasn't had time to say hello to everybody yet."

"But, Rod, I've been waiting to hear what he's found out ever since he went away," Fawzi protested in a hurt tone.

Brangwyn and Colonel Zareff joined them. They were close friends, probably because neither of them was a native of Poictesme.

The town marshal had always been reticent about his origins, but Conn guessed it was Hathor. Brangwyn's heavy-muscled body, and his ease and grace in handling it, marked him as a man of a high-gravity planet. Besides, Hathor had a permanent cloud-envelope, and Tom Brangwyn's skin had turned boiled-lobster red under the dim orange sunlight of Alpha Gartner.

Old Klem Zareff never hesitated to tell anybody where he came from--he was from Ashmodai, one of the System States planets, and he had commanded a division that had been blasted down to about regimental strength, in the Alliance army.

"Hello, boy," he croaked, extending a trembling hand. "Glad you're home. We all missed you."

"We sure did, Conn," the town marshal agreed, clasping Conn's hand as soon as the old man had released it. "Find out anything definite?"

Kurt Fawzi looked at his watch. "Conn, we've planned a little celebration for you. We only had since day before yesterday, when the spaceship came into radio range, but we're having a dinner party for you at Senta's this evening."

"You couldn't have done anything I'd have liked better, Mr. Fawzi. I'd have to have a meal at Senta's before really feeling that I'd come home."

"Well, here's what I have in mind. It'll be three hours till dinner's ready. Suppose we all go up to my office in the meantime. It'll give the ladies a chance to go home and fix up for the party, and we can have a drink and a talk."

"You want to do that, Conn?" his father asked, a trifle doubtfully. "If you'd rather go home first..."

Something in his father's voice and manner disturbed him vaguely; however, he nodded agreement. After a couple of drinks, he'd be better able to tell them.

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Fawzi," Conn said. "I know you're all anxious, but it's a long story. This'll be a good chance to tell you."

Fawzi turned to his wife and daughter, interrupting himself to shout instructions to a couple of dockhands who were floating the baggage off the ship on a contragravity-lifter. Conn's father had sent Charley off with a message to his mother and Flora.

Conn turned to Colonel Zareff. "I noticed extra workers coming out from the hiring agencies in Storisende, and the crop was all in across the Calders. Big wine-pressing this year?"

"Yes, we're up to our necks in melons," the old planter grumbled. "Gehenna of a big crop. Price'll drop like a brick of collapsium, and this time next year we'll be using brandy to wash our feet in."

"If you can't get good prices, hang onto it and age it. I wish you could see what the bars on Terra charge for a drink of ten-year-old Poictesme."

"This isn't Terra and we aren't selling it by the drink. Only place we can sell brandy is at Storisende spaceport, and we have to take what the trading-ship captains offer. You've been on a rich planet for the last five years, Conn. You've forgotten what it's like to live in a poorhouse. And that's what Poictesme is."

"Things'll be better from now on, Klem," the mayor said, putting one hand on the old man's shoulder and the other on Conn's. "Our boy's home. With what he can tell us, we'll be able to solve all our problems. Come on, let's go up and hear about it."

They entered the wide doorway of the warehouse on the dock-level floor of the Airport Building and crossed to the lift. About a dozen others had joined them, all the important men of Litchfield. Inside, Kurt Fawzi's laborers were floating out cargo for the ship--casks of brandy, of course, and a lot of boxes and crates painted light blue and marked with the wreathed globe of the Terran Federation and the gold triangle of the Third Fleet-Army Force and the eight-pointed red star of Ordnance Service. Long cases of rifles, square boxes of ammunition, machine guns, crated auto-cannon and rockets.

"Where'd that stuff come from?" Conn asked his father. "You dig it up?"

His father chuckled. "That happened since the last time I wrote you. Remember the big underground headquarters complex in the Calders? Everybody thought it had been all cleaned out years ago. You know, it's never a mistake to take a second look at anything that everybody believes. I found a lot of sealed-off sections over there that had never been entered. This stuff's from one of the headquarters defense armories. I have a gang getting the stuff out. Charley and I flew in after lunch, and I'm going back the first thing tomorrow."

"But there's enough combat equipment on hand to outfit a private army for every man, woman and child on Poictesme!" Conn objected. "Where are we going to sell this?"

"Storisende spaceport. The tramp freighters are buying it for newly colonized planets that haven't been industrialized yet. They don't pay much, but it doesn't cost much to get it out, and I've been clearing about three hundred sols a ton on the spaceport docks. That's not bad, you know."

Three hundred sols a ton. A lifter went by stacked with cases of M-504 submachine guns. Unloaded, one of them weighed six pounds, and even a used one was worth a hundred sols. Conn

started to say something about that, but then they came to the lift and were crowding onto it.

He had been in Kurt Fawzi's office a few times, always with his father, and he remembered it as a dim, quiet place of genteel conviviality and rambling conversations, with deep, comfortable chairs and many ashtrays. Fawzi's warehouse and brokerage business, and the airline agency, and the government, such as it was, of Litchfield, combined, made few demands on his time and did not prevent the office from being a favored loafing center for the town's elders. The lights were bright only over the big table that served, among other things, as a desk, and the walls were almost invisible in the shadows.

As they came down the hallway from the lift, everybody had begun speaking more softly. Voices were never loud or excited in Kurt Fawzi's office.

Tom Brangwyn went to the table, taking off his belt and holster and laying his pistol aside. The others, crowding into the room, added their weapons to his.

That was something else Conn was seeing with new eyes. It had been five years since he had carried a gun and he was wondering why any of them bothered. A gun was what a boy put on to show that he had reached manhood, and a man carried for the rest of his life out of habit.

Why, there wouldn't be a shooting a year in Litchfield, if you didn't count the farm tramps and drifters, who kept to the lower level or camped in the empty buildings at the edge of town. Or maybe that was it; maybe Litchfield was peaceful because everybody was armed. It certainly wasn't because of anything the Planetary Government at Storisende did to maintain order.

After divesting himself of his gun, Tom Brangwyn took over the bartending, getting out glasses and filling a pitcher of brandy from a keg in the corner.

"Everybody supplied?" Fawzi was asking. "Well, let's drink to our returned emissary. We're all anxious to hear what you found out, Conn. Gentlemen, here's to our friend Conn Maxwell. Welcome home, Conn!"

"Well, it's wonderful to be back, Mr. Fawzi--"

"No, let's not have any of this mister foolishness! You're one of the gang now. And drink up, everybody. We have plenty of brandy, even if we don't have anything else."

"You telling us, Kurt?" somebody demanded. One of the distillery company; the name would come back to Conn in a moment. "When this crop gets pressed and fermented--"

"When I start pressing, I don't know where in Gehenna I'm going to vat the stuff till it ferments," Colonel Zareff said. "Or why. You won't be able to handle all of it."

"Now, now!" Fawzi reproved. "Let's not start moaning about our troubles. Not the day Conn's come home. Not when he's going to tell us how to find the Third Fleet-Army Force Brain."

"You *did* find out where the Brain is, didn't you, Conn?" Brangwyn asked anxiously.

That set half a dozen of them off at once. They had all sat down after the toast; now they were fidgeting in their chairs, leaning forward, looking at Conn fixedly.

"What did you find out, Conn?"

"It's still here on Poictesme, isn't it?"

"Did you find out where it is?"

He wanted to tell them in one quick sentence and get it over with. He couldn't, any more than he could force himself to squeeze the trigger of a pistol he knew would blow up in his hand.

"Wait a minute, gentlemen." He finished the brandy, and held out the glass to Tom Brangwyn, nodding toward the pitcher. Even the first drink had warmed him and he could feel the constriction easing in his throat and the lump at the pit of his stomach dissolving. "I hope none of you expect me to spread out a map and show you the cross on it, where the Brain is. I can't. I can't even give the approximate location of the thing."

Much of the happy eagerness drained out of the faces around him. Some of them were looking troubled; Colonel Zareff was gnawing the bottom of his mustache, and Judge Ledue's hand shook as he tried to relight his cigar. Conn stole a quick side-glance at his father; Rodney Maxwell was watching him curiously, as though wondering what he was going to say next.

"But it is still here on Poictesme?" Fawzi questioned. "They didn't take it away when they evacuated, did they?"

Conn finished his second drink. This time he picked up the pitcher and refilled for himself.

"I'm going to have to do a lot of talking," he said, "and it's going to be thirsty work. I'll have to tell you the whole thing from the beginning, and if you start asking questions at random, you'll get me mixed up and I'll miss the important points."

"By all means!" Judge Ledue told him. "Give it in your own words, in what you think is the proper order."

"Thank you, Judge."

Conn drank some more brandy, hoping he could get his courage up without getting drunk. After all, they had a right to a full report; all of them had contributed something toward sending him to Terra.

"The main purpose in my going to the University was to learn computer theory and practice. It wouldn't do any good for us to find the Brain if none of us are able to use it. Well, I learned enough to be able to operate, program and service any computer in existence, and train assistants. During my last year at the University, I had a part-time paid job programming the big positron-neutrino-photon computer in the astrophysics department. When I graduated, I was offered a position as instructor in positronic computer theory."

"You never mentioned that in your letters, son," his father said.

"It was too late for any letter except one that would come on the same ship I did. Besides, it wasn't very important."

"I think it was." There was a catch in old Professor Kellton's voice. "One of my boys, from the Academy, offered a place on the faculty of the University of Montevideo, on Terra!" He poured himself a second drink, something he almost never did.

"Conn means it wasn't important because it didn't have anything to do with the Brain," Fawzi explained and then looked at Conn expectantly.

All right; now he'd tell them. "I went over all the records of the Third Fleet-Army Force's occupation of Poictesme that are open to the public. On one pretext or another, I got permission to examine the non-classified files that aren't open to public examination. I even got a few peeps at some of the stuff that's still classified secret. I have maps and plans of all the installations that were built on this planet--literally thousands of them, many still undiscovered. Why, we haven't more than scratched the surface of what the Federation left behind here. For instance, all the important installations exist in duplicate, some even in triplicate, as a precaution against Alliance space attack."

"Space attack!" Colonel Zareff was indignant. "There never was a time when the Alliance could have taken the offensive against Poictesme, even if an offensive outside our own space-area had been part of our policy. We just didn't have the ships. It took over a year to move a million and a half troops from Ashmodai to Marduk, and the fleet that was based on Amaterasu was blasted out of existence in the spaceports and in orbit. Hell, at the time of the surrender, we didn't have--"

"They weren't taking chances on that, Colonel. But the point I want to make is that with everything I did find, I never found, in any official record, a single word about the giant computer we call the Third Fleet-Army Force Brain."

For a time, the only sound in the room was the tiny insectile humming of the electric clock on the wall. Then Professor Kellton set his glass on the table, and it sounded like a hammer-blow.

"Nothing, Conn?" Kurt Fawzi was incredulous and, for the first time, frightened. The others were exchanging uneasy glances. "But you must have! A thing like that--"

"Of course it would be one of the closest secrets during the war," somebody else said. "But in forty years, you'd expect *something* to leak out."

"Why, *during* the war, it was all through the Third Force. Even the Alliance knew about it; that's how Klem heard of it."

"Well, Conn couldn't just walk into the secret files and read whatever he wanted to. Just because he couldn't find anything--"

"Don't tell *me* about security!" Klem Zareff snorted. "Certainly they still have it classified; staff-brass'd rather lose an eye than declassify anything. If you'd seen the lengths our staff went to--hell, we lost battles because the staff wouldn't release information the troops in the field needed. I remember once--"

"But there *was* a Brain," Judge Ledue was saying, to reassure himself and draw agreement from the others. "It was capable of combining data, and scanning and evaluating all its positronic memories, and forming association patterns, and reasoning with absolute perfection. It was more than a positronic brain--it was a positronic super-mind."

"We'd have won the war, except for the Brain. We had ninety systems, a hundred and thirty inhabited planets, a hundred billion people--and we were on the defensive in our own space-area! Every move we made was known and anticipated by the Federation. How could they have done that without something like the Brain?"

"Conn, from what you learned of computers, how large a volume of space would you say the Brain would have to occupy?" Professor Kellton asked.

Professor Kellton was the most unworldly of the lot, yet he was asking the most practical question.

"Well, the astrophysics computer I worked with at the University occupies a total of about one million cubic feet," Conn began. This was his chance; they'd take anything he told them about computers as gospel. "It was only designed to handle problems in astrophysics. The Brain, being built for space war, would have to handle any such problem. And if half the stories about the

Brain are anywhere near true, it handled any other problem--mathematical, scientific, political, economic, strategic, psychological, even philosophical and ethical. Well, I'd say that a hundred million cubic feet would be the smallest even conceivable."

They all nodded seriously. They were willing to accept that--or anything else, except one thing.

"Lot of places on this planet where a thing that size could be hidden," Tom Brangwyn said, undismayed. "A planet's a mighty big place."

"It could be under water, in one of the seas," Piet Dawes, the banker, suggested. "An underwater dome city wouldn't be any harder to build than a dome city on a poison-atmosphere planet like Tubal-Cain."

"It might even be on Tubal-Cain," a melon-planter said. "Or Hiawatha, or even one of the Beta or Gamma planets. The Third Force was occupying the whole Trisystem, you know." He thought for a moment. "If I'd been in charge, I'd have put it on one of the moons of Pantagrue."

"But that's clear out in the Alpha System," Judge Ledue objected. "We don't have a spaceship on the planet, certainly nothing with a hyperdrive engine. And it would take a lifetime to get out to the Gamma System and back on reaction drive."

Conn put his empty brandy glass on the table and sat erect. A new thought had occurred to him, chasing out of his mind all the worries and fears he had brought with him all the way from Terra.

"Then we'll have to build a ship," he said calmly. "I know, when the Federation evacuated Poictesme, they took every hyperdrive ship with them. But they had plenty of shipyards and spaceports on this planet, and I have maps showing the location of all of them, and barely a third of them have been discovered so far. I'm sure we can find enough hulks, and enough hyperfield generator parts, to assemble a ship or two, and I know we'll find the same or better on some of the other planets.

"And here's another thing," he added. "When we start looking into some of the dome-city plants on Tubal-Cain and Hiawatha and Moruna and Koshchei, we may find the plant or plants where the components for the Brain were fabricated, and if we do, we may find records of where they were shipped, and that'll be it."

"You're right!" Professor Kellton cried, quivering with excitement. "We've been hunting at random for the Brain, so it would only be an accident if we found it. We'll have to do this systematically, and with Conn to help us--Conn, why not build a computer? I don't mean another Brain; I mean a computer to help us find the Brain."

"We can, but we may not even need to build one. When we get out to the industrial planets, we may find one ready except for perhaps some minor alterations."

"But how are we going to finance all this?" Klem Zareff demanded querulously. "We're poorer than snakes, and even one hyperdrive ship's going to cost like Gehenna."

"I've been thinking about that, Klem," Fawzi said. "If we can find material at these shipyards Conn knows about, most of our expense will be labor. Well, haven't we ten workmen competing for every job? They don't really need money, only the things money can buy. We can raise food on the farms and provide whatever else they need out of Federation supplies."

"Sure. As soon as it gets around that we're really trying to do something about this, everybody'll want in on it," Tom Brangwyn predicted.

"And I have no doubt that the Planetary Government at Storisende will give us assistance, once we show that this is a practical and productive enterprise," Judge Ledue put in. "I have some slight influence with the President and--"

"I'm not too sure we want the Government getting into this," Kurt Fawzi replied. "Give them half a chance and that gang at Storisende'll squeeze us right out."

"We can handle this ourselves," Brangwyn agreed. "And when we get some kind of a ship and get out to the other two systems, or even just to Tubal-Cain or Hiawatha, first thing you know, we'll be the Planetary Government."

"Well, now, Tom," Fawzi began piously, "the Brain is too big a thing for a few of us to try to monopolize; it'll be for all Poictesme. Of course, it's only proper that we, who are making the effort to locate it, should have the direction of that effort...."

While Fawzi was talking, Rodney Maxwell went to the table, rummaged his pistol out of the pile and buckled it on. The mayor stopped short.

"You leaving us, Rod?"

"Yes, it's getting late. Conn and I are going for a little walk; we'll be at Senta's in half an hour. The fresh air will do both of us good and we have a lot to talk about. After all, we haven't seen each other for over five years."

They were silent, however, until they were away from the Airport Building and walking along High Garden Terrace in the direction of the Mall. Conn was glad; his own thoughts were weighing too heavily within him: I didn't do it. I was going to do it; every minute, I was going to do it, and I didn't, and now it's too late.

"That was quite a talk you gave them, son," his father said. "They believed every word of it. A couple of times, I even caught myself starting to believe it."

Conn stopped short. His father stopped beside him and stood looking at him.

"Why didn't you tell them the truth?" Rodney Maxwell asked.

The question angered Conn. It was what he had been asking himself.

"Why didn't I just grab a couple of pistols off the table and shoot the lot of them?" he retorted. "It would have killed them quicker and wouldn't have hurt as much."

His father took the cigar from his mouth and inspected the tip of it. "The truth must be pretty bad then. There is no Brain. Is that it, son?"

"There never was one. I'm not saying that only because I know it would be impossible to build such a computer. I'm telling you what the one man in the Galaxy who ought to know told me--the man who commanded the Third Force during the War."

"Foxy Travis! I didn't know he was still alive. You actually talked to him?"

"Yes. He's on Luna, keeping himself alive at low gravity. It took me a couple of years, and I was afraid he'd die before I got to him, but I finally managed to see him."

"What did he tell you?"

"That no such thing as the Brain ever existed." They started walking again, more slowly, toward the far edge of the terrace, with the sky red and orange in front of them. "The story was all through the Third Force, but it was just one of those wild tales that get started, nobody knows how, among troops. The High Command never denied or even discouraged it. It helped morale, and letting it leak to the enemy was good psychological warfare."

"Klem Zareff says that everybody in the Alliance army heard of the Brain," his father said. "That was why he came here in the first place." He puffed thoughtfully on his cigar. "You said a computer like the Brain would be an impossibility. Why? Wouldn't it be just another computer, only a lot bigger and a lot smarter?"

"Dad, computermen don't like to hear computers called smart," Conn said. "They aren't. The people who build them are smart; a computer only knows what's fed to it. They can hold more information in their banks than a man can in his memory, they can combine it faster, they don't get tired or absent-minded. But they can't imagine, they can't create, and they can't do anything a human brain can't."

"You know, I'd wondered about just that," said his father. "And none of the histories of the War even as much as mentioned the Brain. And I couldn't see why, after the War, they didn't build dozens of them to handle all these Galactic political and economic problems that nobody seems able to solve. A thing like the Brain wouldn't only be useful for war; the people here aren't trying to find it for war purposes."

"You didn't mention any of these doubts to the others, did you?"

"They were just doubts. You knew for sure, and you couldn't tell them."

"I'd come home intending to--tell them there was no Brain, tell them to stop wasting their time hunting for it and start trying to figure out the answers themselves. But I couldn't. They don't believe in the Brain as a tool, to use; it's a machine god that they can bring all their troubles to. You can't take a thing like that away from people without giving them something better."

"I noticed you suggested building a spaceship and agreed with the professor about building a computer. What was your idea? To take their minds off hunting for the Brain and keep them busy?"

Conn shook his head. "I'm serious about the ship--ships. You and Colonel Zareff gave me that idea."

His father looked at him in surprise. "I never said a word in there, and Klem didn't even once mention--"

"Not in Kurt's office; before we went up from the docks. There was Klem, moaning about a good year for melons as though it were a plague, and you selling arms and ammunition by the ton. Why, on Terra or Baldur or Uller, a glass of our brandy brings more than these freighter-captains give us for a cask, and what do you think a colonist on Agramma, or Sekht, or Hachiman, who has to fight for his life against savages and wild animals, would pay for one of those rifles and a thousand rounds of ammunition?"

His father objected. "We can't base the whole economy of a planet on brandy. Only about ten per cent of the arable land on Poictesme will grow wine-melons. And if we start exporting Federation salvage the way you talk of, we'll be selling pieces instead of job lots. We'll net more, but--"

"That's just to get us started. The ships will be used, after that, to get to Tubal-Cain and Hiawatha and the planets of the Beta and Gamma Systems. What I want to see is the mines and factories reopened, people employed, wealth being produced."

"And where'll we sell what we produce? Remember, the mines closed down because there was no more market."

"No more interstellar market, that's true. But there are a hundred and fifty million people on Poictesme. That's a big enough market and a big enough labor force to exploit the wealth of the Gartner Trisystem. We can have prosperity for everybody on our own resources. Just what do we need that we have to get from outside now?"

His father stopped again and sat down on the edge of a fountain--the same one, possibly, from which Conn had seen dust blowing as the airship had been coming in.

"Conn, that's a dangerous idea. That was what brought on the System States War. The Alliance planets took themselves outside the Federation economic orbit and the Federation crushed them."

Conn swore impatiently. "You've been listening to old Klem Zareff ranting about the Lost Cause and the greedy Terran robber barons holding the Galaxy in economic serfdom while they piled up profits. The Federation didn't fight that war for profits; there weren't any profits to fight for. They fought it because if the System States had won, half of them would be at war among themselves now. Make no mistake about it, politically I'm all for the Federation. But economically, I want to see our people exploiting their own resources for themselves, instead of grieving about lost interstellar trade, and bewailing bumper crops, and searching for a mythical robot god."

"You think, if you can get something like that started, that they'll forget about the Brain?" his father asked skeptically.

"That crowd up in Kurt Fawzi's office? Niflheim, no! They'll go on hunting for the Brain as long as they live, and every day they'll be expecting to find it tomorrow. That'll keep them happy. But they're all old men. The ones I'm interested in are the boys of Charley's age. I'm going to give them too many real things to do--building ships, exploring the rest of the Trisystem, opening mines and factories, producing wealth--for them to get caught in that empty old dream."

He looked down at the dusty fountain on which his father sat. "That ghost-dream haunts this graveyard. I want to give them living dreams that they can make come true."

Conn's father sat in silence for a while, his cigar smoke red in the sunset. "If you can do all that, Conn.... You know, I believe you can. I'm with you, as far as I can help, and we'll have a talk with Charley. He's a good boy, Conn, and he has a lot of influence among the other youngsters." He looked at his watch. "We'd better be getting along. You don't want to be late for your own coming-home party."

Rodney Maxwell slid off the edge of the fountain to his feet, hitching at the gunbelt under his coat. Have to dig out his own gun and start wearing it, Conn thought. A man simply didn't go around in public without a gun in Litchfield. It wasn't decent. And he'd be spending a lot of time out in the brush, where he'd really need one.

First thing in the morning, he'd unpack that trunk and go over all those maps. There were half a dozen spaceports and maintenance shops and shipyards within a half-day by airboat, none of which had been looted. He'd look them all over; that would take a couple of weeks. Pick the best shipyard and concentrate on it. Kurt Fawzi'd be the man to recruit labor. Professor Kellton was a scholar, not a scientist. He didn't know beans about hyperdrive engines, but he knew how to do library research.

They came to the edge of High Garden Terrace at the escalator, long motionless, its moving parts rusted fast, that led down to the Mall, and at the bottom of it was Senta's, the tables under the open sky.

A crowd was already gathering. There was Tom Brangwyn, and there was Kurt Fawzi and his wife, and Lynne. And there was Senta herself, fat and dumpy, in one of her preposterous red-and-purple dresses, bustling about, bubbling happily one moment and screaming invective at some laggard waiter the next.

The dinner, Conn knew, would be the best he had eaten in five years, and afterward they would sit in the dim glow of Beta Gartner, sipping coffee and liqueurs, smoking and talking and visiting back and forth from one table to another, as they always did in the evenings at Senta's. Another bit from Eirrarsson's poem came back to him:

*We sit in the twilight, the shadows among,
And we talk of the happy days when we were brave and young.*

That was for the old ones, for Colonel Zareff and Judge Ledue and Dolf Kellton, maybe even for Tom Brangwyn and Franz Veltrin and for his father. But his brother Charley and the boys of his generation would have a future to talk about. And so would he, and Lynne Fawzi.

--H. BEAM PIPER

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