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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE KEEPER ***

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Evil men had stolen his treasure, and Raud set out with his deer rifle and his great dog Brave to catch the thieves before they could reach the Starfolk. That the men had nagatron pistols meant little—Raud was the Keeper....

THE KEEPER

by H. BEAM PIPER

When he heard the deer crashing through brush and scuffling the dead leaves, he stopped and stood motionless in the path. He watched them bolt down the slope from the right and cross in front of him, wishing he had the rifle, and when the last white tail vanished in the gray-brown woods he drove the spike of the ice-staff into the stiffening ground and took both hands to shift the weight of the pack. If he'd had the rifle, he could have shot only one of them. As it was, they were unfrightened, and he knew where to find them in the morning.

Ahead, to the west and north, low clouds massed; the white front of the Ice-Father loomed clear and sharp between them and the blue of the distant forests. It would snow, tonight. If it stopped at daybreak, he would have good tracking, and in any case, it would be easier to get the carcasses home over snow. He wrenched loose the ice-staff and started forward again, following the path that wound between and among and over the irregular mounds and hillocks. It was still an hour's walk to Keeper's House, and the daylight was fading rapidly.

Sometimes, when he was not so weary and in so much haste, he would loiter here, wondering about the ancient buildings and the long-vanished people who had raised them. There had been no woods at all, then; nothing but great houses like mountains, piling up toward the sky, and the valley where he meant to hunt tomorrow had been an arm of the sea that was now a three days' foot-journey away. Some said that the cities had been destroyed and the people killed in wars—big wars, not squabbles like the fights between sealing-companies from different villages. He didn't think so, himself. It was more likely that they had all left their homes and gone away in starships when the Ice-Father had been born and started pushing down out of the north. There had been many starships, then. When he had been a boy, the old men had talked about a long-ago time when there had been hundreds of them visible in the sky, every morning and evening. But that had been long ago indeed. Starships came but seldom to this world, now. This world was old and lonely and poor. Like poor lonely old Raud the Keeper.

He felt angry to find himself thinking like that. Never pity yourself, Raud; be proud. That was what his father had always taught him: "Be proud, for you are the Keeper's son, and when I am gone, you will be the Keeper after me. But in your pride, be humble, for what you will keep is the Crown."

The thought of the Crown, never entirely absent from his mind, wakened the anxiety that always slept lightly if at all. He had been away all day, and there were so many things that could happen. The path seemed longer, after that; the landmarks farther apart. Finally, he came out on the edge of the steep bank, and looked down across the brook to the familiar low windowless walls and sharp-ridged roof of Keeper's House; and when he came, at last, to the door, and pulled the latchstring, he heard the dogs inside—the soft, coughing bark of Brave, and the anxious little whimper of Bold—and he knew that there was nothing wrong in Keeper's House.

The room inside was lighted by a fist-sized chunk of lumicon, hung in a net bag of thongs from the rafter over the table. It was old—cast off by some rich Southron as past its best brilliance, it had been old when he had bought it from Yorn Nazvik the Trader, and that had been years ago. Now its light was as dim and yellow as firelight. He'd have to replace it soon, but this trip he had needed new cartridges for the big rifle. A man could live in darkness more easily than he could live without cartridges.

The big black dogs were rising from their bed of deerskins on the stone slab that covered the crypt in the far corner. They did not come to meet him, but stayed in their place of trust, greeting him with anxious, eager little sounds.

"Good boys," he said. "Good dog, Brave; good dog, Bold. Old Keeper's home again. Hungry?"

They recognized that word, and whined. He hung up the ice-staff on the pegs by the door, then squatted and got his arms out of the pack-straps.

"Just a little now; wait a little," he told the dogs. "Keeper'll get something for you."

He unhooked the net bag that held the lumicon and went to the ladder, climbing to the loft between the stone ceiling and the steep snow-shed roof; he cut down two big chunks of smoked wild-ox beef—the dogs liked that better than smoked venison—and climbed down.

He tossed one chunk up against the ceiling, at the same time shouting: "Bold! Catch!" Bold leaped forward, sinking his teeth into the meat as it was still falling, shaking and mauling it. Brave, still on the crypt-slab, was quivering with hunger and eagerness, but he remained in place until the second chunk was tossed and he was ordered to take it. Then he, too, leaped and caught it, savaging it in mimicry of a kill. For a while, he stood watching them growl and snarl and tear their meat, great beasts whose shoulders came above his own waist. While they lived to guard it,

the Crown was safe. Then he crossed to the hearth, scraped away the covering ashes, piled on kindling and logs and fanned the fire alight. He lifted the pack to the table and unlaced the deerskin cover.

Cartridges in plastic boxes of twenty, long and thick; shot for the duck-gun, and powder and lead and cartridge-primers; fills for the fire-lighter; salt; needles; a new file. And the deerskin bag of trade-tokens. He emptied them on the table and counted them—tokens, and half-tokens and five-tokens, and even one ten-token. There were always less in the bag, after each trip to the village. The Southrons paid less and less, each year, for furs and skins, and asked more and more for what they had to sell.

He put away the things he had brought from the village, and was considering whether to open the crypt now and replace the bag of tokens, when the dogs stiffened, looking at the door. They got to their feet, neck-hairs bristling, as the knocking began.

He tossed the token-bag onto the mantel and went to the door, the dogs following and standing ready as he opened it.

The snow had started, and now the ground was white except under the evergreens. Three men stood outside the door, and over their shoulders he could see an airboat grounded in the clearing in front of the house.

"You are honored, Raud Keeper," one of them began. "Here are strangers who have come to talk to you. Strangers from the Stars!"

He recognized the speaker, in sealskin boots and deerskin trousers and hooded overshirt like his own—Vahr Farg's son, one of the village people. His father was dead, and his woman was the daughter of Gorth Sledmaker, and he was a house-dweller with his woman's father. A worthless youth, lazy and stupid and said to be a coward. Still, guests were guests, even when brought by the likes of Vahr Farg's son. He looked again at the airboat, and remembered seeing it, that day, made fast to the top-deck of Yorn Nazvik's trading-ship, the *Issa*.

"Enter and be welcome; the house is yours, and all in it that is mine to give." He turned to the dogs. "Brave, Bold; go watch."

Obediently, they trotted over to the crypt and lay down. He stood aside; Vahr entered, standing aside also, as though he were the host, inviting his companions in. They wore heavy garments of woven cloth and boots of tanned leather with hard heels and stiff soles, and as they came in, each unbuckled and laid aside a belt with a holstered negatron pistol. One was stocky and broad-shouldered, with red hair; the other was slender, dark haired and dark eyed, with a face as smooth as a woman's. Everybody in the village had wondered about them. They were not of Yorn Nazvik's crew, but passengers on the *Issa*.

"These are Empire people, from the Far Stars," Vahr informed him, naming their names. Long names, which meant nothing; certainly they were not names the Southrons from the Warm Seas bore. "And this is Raud the Keeper, with whom your honors wish to speak."

"Keeper's House is honored. I'm sorry that I have not food prepared; if you can excuse me while I make some ready...."

"You think these noblemen from the Stars would eat your swill?" Vahr hooted. "Crazy old fool, these are—"

The slim man pivoted on his heel; his open hand caught Vahr just below the ear and knocked him sprawling. It must have been some kind of trick-blow. That or else the slim stranger was stronger than he looked.

"Hold your miserable tongue!" he told Vahr, who was getting to his feet. "We're guests of Raud the Keeper, and we'll not have him insulted in his own house by a cur like you!"

The man with red hair turned. "I am ashamed. We should not have brought this into your house; we should have left it outside." He spoke the Northland language well, "It will honor us to share your food, Keeper."

"Yes, and see here," the younger man said, "we didn't know you'd be alone. Let us help you. Dranigo's a fine cook, and I'm not bad, myself."

He started to protest, then let them have their way. After all, a guest's women helped the woman of the house, and as there was no woman in Keeper's House, it was not unfitting for them to help him.

"Your friend's name is Dranigo?" he asked. "I'm sorry, but I didn't catch yours."

"I don't wonder; fool mouthed it so badly I couldn't understand it myself. It's Salvadro."

They fell to work with him, laying out eating-tools—there were just enough to go around—and hunting for dishes, of which there were not. Salvadro saved that situation by going out and bringing some in from the airboat. He must have realized that the lumicon over the table was the only light beside the fire in the house, for he was carrying a globe of the luminous plastic with him when he came in, grumbling about how dark it had gotten outside. It was new and brilliant, and the light hurt Raud's eyes, at first.

"Are you truly from the Stars?" he asked, after the food was on the table and they had begun to eat. "Neither I nor any in the village have seen anybody from the Stars before."

The big man with the red hair nodded. "Yes. We are from Dremna."

Why, Dremna was the Great World, at the middle of everything! Dremna was the Empire. People from Dremna came to the cities of Awster and fabulous Antark as Southron traders from the Warm Seas came to the villages of the Northfolk. He stammered something about that.

"Yes. You see, we...." Dranigo began. "I don't know the word for it, in your language, but we're people whose work it is to learn things. Not from other people or from books, but new things, that nobody else knows. We came here to learn about the long-ago times on this world, like the great city that was here and is now mounds of stone and earth. Then, when we go back to Dremna, we will tell other people what we have found out."

Vahr Farg's son, having eaten his fill, was fidgeting on his stool, looking contemptuously at the strangers and their host. He thought they were fools to waste time learning about people who had died long ago. So he thought the Keeper was a fool, to guard a worthless old piece of junk.

Raud hesitated for a moment, then said: "I have a very ancient thing, here in this house. It was worn, long ago, by great kings. Their names, and the name of their people, are lost, but the Crown remains. It was left to me as a trust by my father, who was Keeper before me and to whom it was left by his father, who was Keeper in his time. Have you heard of it?"

Dranigo nodded. "We heard of it, first of all, on Dremna," he said. "The Empire has a Space Navy base, and observatories and relay stations, on this planet. Space Navy officers who had been here brought the story back; they heard it from traders from the Warm Seas, who must have gotten it from people like Yorn Nazvik. Would you show it to us, Keeper? It was to see the Crown that we came here."

Raud got to his feet, and saw, as he unhooked the lumicon, that he was trembling. "Yes, of course. It is an honor. It is an ancient and wonderful thing, but I never thought that it was known on Dremna." He hastened across to the crypt.

The dogs looked up as he approached. They knew that he wanted to lift the cover, but they were comfortable and had to be coaxed to leave it. He laid aside the deerskins. The stone slab was heavy, and he had to strain to tilt it up. He leaned it against the wall, then picked up the lumicon and went down the steps into the little room below, opening the wooden chest and getting out the bundle wrapped in bearskin. He brought it up again and carried it to the table, from which Dranigo and Salvadro were clearing the dishes.

"Here it is," he said, untying the thongs. "I do not know how old it is. It was old even before the Ice-Father was born."

That was too much for Vahr. "See, I told you he's crazy!" he cried. "The Ice-Father has been here forever. Gorth Sledmaker says so," he added, as though that settled it.

"Gorth Sledmaker's a fool. He thinks the world began in the time of his grandfather." He had the thongs untied, and spread the bearskin, revealing the blackened leather box, flat on the bottom and domed at the top. "How long ago do you think it was that the Ice-Father was born?" he asked Salvadro and Dranigo.

"Not more than two thousand years," Dranigo said. "The glaciation hadn't started in the time of the Third Empire. There is no record of this planet during the Fourth, but by the beginning of the Fifth Empire, less than a thousand years ago, things here were very much as they are now."

"There are other worlds which have Ice-Fathers," Salvadro explained. "They are all worlds having one pole or the other in open water, surrounded by land. When the polar sea is warmed by water from the tropics, snow falls on the lands around, and more falls in winter than melts in summer, and so is an Ice-Father formed. Then, when the polar sea is all frozen, no more snow falls, and the Ice-Father melts faster than it grows, and finally vanishes. And then, when warm water comes into the polar sea again, more snow falls, and it starts over again. On a world like this, it takes fifteen or twenty thousand years from one Ice-Father to the next."

"I never heard that there had been another Ice-Father, before this one. But then, I only know the stories told by the old men, when I was a boy. I suppose that was before the first people came in starships to this world."

The two men of Dremna looked at one another oddly, and he wondered, as he unfastened the brass catches on the box, if he had said something foolish, and then he had the box open, and lifted out the Crown. He was glad, now, that Salvadro had brought in the new lumicon, as he put the box aside and set the Crown on the black bearskin. The golden circlet and the four arches of gold above it were clean and bright, and the jewels were splendid in the light. Salvadro and Dranigo were looking at it wide-eyed. Vahr Farg's son was open-mouthed.

"Great Universe! Will you look at that diamond on the top!" Salvadro was saying.

"That's not the work of any Galactic art-period," Dranigo declared. "That thing goes back to the Pre-Interstellar Era." And for a while he talked excitedly to Salvadro.

"Tell me, Keeper," Salvadro said at length, "how much do you know about the Crown? Where did

it come from; who made it; who were the first Keepers?"

He shook his head. "I only know what my father told me, when I was a boy. Now I am an old man, and some things I have forgotten. But my father was Runch, Raud's son, who was the son of Yorn, the son of Raud, the son of Runch." He went back six more generations, then faltered and stopped. "Beyond that, the names have been lost. But I do know that for a long time the Crown was in a city to the north of here, and before that it was brought across the sea from another country, and the name of that country was Brinn."

Dranigo frowned, as though he had never heard the name before. "Brinn." Salvadro's eyes widened. "Brinn, Dranigo! Do you think that might be Britain?"

Dranigo straightened, staring, "It might be! Britain was a great nation, once; the last nation to join the Terran Federation, in the Third Century Pre-Interstellar. And they had a king, and a crown with a great diamond..."

"The story of where it was made," Rand offered, "or who made it, has been lost. I suppose the first people brought it to this world when they came in starships."

"It's more wonderful than that, Keeper," Salvadro said. "It was made on this world, before the first starship was built. This world is Terra, the Mother-World; didn't you know that, Keeper? This is the world where Man was born."

He hadn't known that. Of course, there had to be a world like that, but a great world in the middle of everything, like Dremna. Not this old, forgotten world.

"It's true, Keeper," Dranigo told him. He hesitated slightly, then cleared his throat. "Keeper, you're young no longer, and some day you must die, as your father and his father did. Who will care for the Crown then?"

Who, indeed? His woman had died long ago, and she had given him no sons, and the daughters she had given him had gone their own ways with men of their own choosing and he didn't know what had become of any of them. And the village people—they would start picking the Crown apart to sell the jewels, one by one, before the ashes of his pyre stopped smoking.

"Let us have it, Keeper," Salvadro said. "We will take it to Dremna, where armed men will guard it day and night, and it will be a trust upon the Government of the Empire forever."

He recoiled in horror. "Man! You don't know what you're saying!" he cried. "This is the Crown, and I am the Keeper; I cannot part with it as long as there is life in me."

"And when there is not, what? Will it be laid on your pyre, so that it may end with you?" Dranigo asked.

"Do you think we'd throw it away as soon as we got tired looking at it?" Salvadro exclaimed. "To show you how we'll value this, we'll give you ... how much is a thousand imperials in trade-tokens, Dranigo?"

"I'd guess about twenty thousand."

"We'll give you twenty thousand Government trade-tokens," Salvadro said. "If it costs us that much, you'll believe that we'll take care of it, won't you?"

Raud rose stiffly. "It is a wrong thing," he said, "to enter a man's house and eat at his table, and then insult him."

Dranigo rose also, and Salvadro with him. "We had no mind to insult you, Keeper, or offer you a bribe to betray your trust. We only offer to help you fulfill it, so that the Crown will be safe after all of us are dead. Well, we won't talk any more about it, now. We're going in Yorn Nazvik's ship, tomorrow; he's trading in the country to the west, but before he returns to the Warm Seas, he'll stop at Long Valley Town, and we'll fly over to see you. In the meantime, think about this; ask yourself if you would not be doing a better thing for the Crown by selling it to us."

They wanted to leave the dishes and the new lumicon, and he permitted it, to show that he was not offended by their offer to buy the Crown. He knew that it was something very important to them, and he admitted, grudgingly, that they could care for it better than he. At least, they would not keep it in a hole under a hut in the wilderness, guarded only by dogs. But they were not Keepers, and he was. To them, the Crown would be but one of many important things; to him it was everything. He could not imagine life without it.

He lay for a long time among his bed-ropes, unable to sleep, thinking of the Crown and the visitors. Finally, to escape those thoughts, he began planning tomorrow morning's hunt.

He would start out as soon as the snow stopped, and go down among the scrub-pines; he would take Brave with him, and leave Bold on guard at home. Brave was more obedient, and a better hunter. Bold would jump for the deer that had been shot, but Brave always tried to catch or turn the ones that were still running.

He needed meat badly, and he needed more deerskins, to make new clothes. He was thinking of the new overshirt he meant to make as he fell asleep....

It was past noon when he and Brave turned back toward Keeper's House. The deer had gone

farther than he had expected, but he had found them, and killed four. The carcasses were cleaned and hung from trees, out of reach of the foxes and the wolves, and he would take Brave back to the house and leave him on guard, and return with Bold and the sled to bring in the meat. He was thinking cheerfully of the fresh meat when he came out onto the path from the village, a mile from Keeper's House. Then he stopped short, looking at the tracks.

Three men—no, four—had come from the direction of the village since the snow had stopped. One had been wearing sealskin boots, of the sort worn by all Northfolk. The others had worn Southron boots, with ribbed plastic soles. That puzzled him. None of the village people wore Southron boots, and as he had been leaving in the early morning, he had seen Yorn Nazvik's ship, the *Issa*, lift out from the village and pass overhead, vanishing in the west. Possibly these were deserters. In any case, they were not good people. He slipped the heavy rifle from its snow-cover, checked the chamber, and hung the empty cover around his neck like a scarf. He didn't like the looks of it.

He liked it even less when he saw that the man in sealskin boots had stopped to examine the tracks he and Brave had made on leaving, and had then circled the house and come back, to be joined by his plastic-soled companions. Then they had all put down their packs and their ice-staffs, and advanced toward the door of the house. They had stopped there for a moment, and then they had entered, come out again, gotten their packs and ice-staffs, and gone away, up the slope to the north.

"Wait, Brave," he said. "Watch."

Then he advanced, careful not to step on any of the tracks until he reached the doorstep, where it could not be avoided.

"Bold!" he called loudly. "Bold!"

Silence. No welcoming whimper, no padding of feet, inside. He pulled the latchstring with his left hand and pushed the door open with his foot, the rifle ready. There was no need for that. What welcomed him, within, was a sickening stench of burned flesh and hair.

The new lumicon lighted the room brilliantly; his first glance was enough. The slab that had covered the crypt was thrown aside, along with the pile of deerskins, and between it and the door was a shapeless black heap that, in a dimmer light, would not have been instantly recognizable as the body of Bold. Fighting down an impulse to rush in, he stood in the door, looking about and reading the story of what had happened. The four men had entered, knowing that they would find Bold alone. The one in the lead had had a negatron pistol drawn, and when Bold had leaped at them, he had been blasted. The blast had caught the dog from in front—the chest-cavity was literally exploded, and the neck and head burned and smashed unrecognizably. Even the brass studs on the leather collar had been melted.

That and the ribbed sole-prints outside meant the same thing—Southrons. Every Southron who came into the Northland, even the common crewmen on the trading ships, carried some kind of an energy-weapon. They were good only for fighting—one look at the body of Bold showed what they did to meat and skins.

He entered, then, laying his rifle on the table, and got down the lumicon and went over to the crypt. After a while, he returned, hung up the light again, and dropped onto a stool. He sat staring at the violated crypt and tugging with one hand at a corner of his beard, trying desperately to think.

The thieves had known exactly where the Crown was kept and how it was guarded; after killing Bold, they had gone straight to it, taken it and gone away—three men in plastic-soled Southron boots and one man in soft boots of sealskins, each with a pack and an ice-staff, and two of them with rifles.

Vahr Farg's son, and three deserters from the crew of Yorn Nazvik's ship.

It hadn't been Dranigo and Salvadoro. They could have left the ship in their airboat and come back, flying low, while he had been hunting. But they would have grounded near the house, they would not have carried packs, and they would have brought nobody with them.

He thought he knew what had happened. Vahr Farg's son had seen the Crown, and he had heard the two Starfolk offer more trade-tokens for it than everything in the village was worth. But he was a coward; he would never dare to face the Keeper's rifle and the teeth of Brave and Bold alone. So, since none of the village folk would have part in so shameful a crime against the moral code of the Northland, he had talked three of Yorn Nazvik's airmen into deserting and joining him.

And he had heard Dranigo say that the *Issa* would return to Long Valley Town after the trading voyage to the west. Long Valley was on the other side of this tongue of the Ice-Father; it was a good fifteen days' foot-journey around, but by climbing and crossing, they could easily be there in time to meet Yorn Nazvik's ship and the two Starfolk. Well, where Vahr Farg's son could take three Southrons, Raud the Keeper could follow.

Their tracks led up the slope beside the brook, always bearing to the left, in the direction of the

Ice-Father. After an hour, he found where they had stopped and unslung their packs, and rested long enough to smoke a cigarette. He read the story they had left in the snow, and then continued, Brave trotting behind him pulling the sled. A few snowflakes began dancing in the air, and he quickened his steps. He knew, generally, where the thieves were going, but he wanted their tracks unobliterated in front of him. The snow fell thicker and thicker, and it was growing dark, and he was tiring. Even Brave was stumbling occasionally before Raud stopped, in a hollow among the pines, to build his tiny fire and eat and feed the dog. They bedded down together, covered by the same sleeping robes.

When he woke, the world was still black and white and gray in the early dawn-light, and the robe that covered him and Brave was powdered with snow, and the pine-branches above him were loaded and sagging.

The snow had completely obliterated the tracks of the four thieves, and it was still falling. When the sled was packed and the dog harnessed to it, they set out, keeping close to the flank of the Ice-Father on their left.

It stopped snowing toward mid-day, and a little after, he heard a shot, far ahead, and then two more, one upon the other. The first shot would be the rifle of Vahr Farg's son; it was a single-loader, like his own. The other two were from one of the light Southron rifles, which fired a dozen shots one after another. They had shot, or shot at, something like a deer, he supposed. That was sensible; it would save their dried meat for the trip across the back of the Ice-Father. And it showed that they still didn't know he was following them. He found their tracks, some hours later.

Toward dusk, he came to a steep building-mound. It had fared better than most of the houses of the ancient people; it rose to twenty times a man's height and on the south-east side it was almost perpendicular. The other side sloped, and he was able to climb to the top, and far away, ahead of him, he saw a tiny spark appear and grow. The fire could not be more than two hours ahead.

He built no fire that evening, but shared a slab of pemmican with Brave, and they huddled together under the bearskin robe. The dog fell asleep at once. For a long time, Raud sat awake, thinking.

At first, he considered resting for a while, and then pressing forward and attacking them as they slept. He had to kill all of them to regain the Crown; that he had taken for granted from the first. He knew what would happen if the Government Police came into this. They would take one Southron's word against the word of ten Northfolk, and the thieves would simply claim the Crown as theirs and accuse him of trying to steal it. And Dranigo and Salvadro—they seemed like good men, but they might see this as the only way to get the Crown for themselves.... He would have to settle the affair for himself, before the men reached Long Valley town.

If he could do it here, it would save him and Brave the toil and danger of climbing the Ice-Father. But could he? They had two rifles, one an autoloader, and they had in all likelihood three negatron pistols. After the single shot of the big rifle was fired, he had only a knife and a hatchet and the spiked and pickaxed ice-staff, and Brave. One of the thieves would kill him before he and Brave killed all of them, and then the Crown would be lost. He dropped into sleep, still thinking of what to do.

He climbed the mound of the ancient building again in the morning, and looked long and carefully at the face of the Ice-Father. It would take the thieves the whole day to reach that place where the two tongues of the glacier split apart, the easiest spot to climb. They would not try to climb that evening; Vahr, who knew the most about it, would be the last to advise such a risk. He was sure that by going up at the nearest point he could get to the top of the Ice-Father before dark, and drag Brave up after him. It would be a fearful climb, and he would have most of a day's journey after that to reach the head of the long ravine up which the thieves would come, but when they came up, he could be there waiting for them. He knew what the old rifle could do, to an inch, and there were places where the thieves would be coming up where he could stay out of blaster-range and pick them all off, even with a single-loader.

He knew about negatron pistols, too. They shot little bullets of energy; they were very fast, and did not drop, like a real bullet, so that no judgment of range was needed. But the energy died quickly; the negatrons lived only long enough to go five hundred paces and no more. At eight hundred, he could hit a man easily. He almost felt himself pitying Vahr Farg's son and his companions.

When he reached the tumble of rocks that had been dragged along with and pushed out from the Ice-Father, he stopped and made up a pack—sleeping robes, all his cartridges, as much pemmican as he could carry, and the bag of trade-tokens. If the chase took him to Long Valley Town, he would need money. He also coiled about his waist a long rawhide climbing-rope, and left the sled-harness on Brave, simply detaching the traces.

At first, they walked easily on the sloping ice. Then, as it grew steeper, he fastened the rope to the dog's harness and advanced a little at a time, dragging Brave up after him. Soon he was forced to snub the rope with his ice-staff and chop steps with his hatchet. Toward noon—at least he thought it was noon—it began snowing again, and the valley below was blotted out in a swirl of white.

They came to a narrow ledge, where they could rest, with a wall of ice rising sheerly above them. He would have to climb that alone, and then pull Brave up with the rope. He started working his way up the perpendicular face, clinging by the pick of his ice-staff, chopping footholds with the hatchet; the pack and the slung rifle on his back pulled at him and threatened to drag him down. At length, he dragged himself over the edge and drove the ice-staff in.

"Up, Brave!" he called, tugging on the rope. "Good dog, Brave; come up!"

Brave tried to jump and slipped back. He tried again, and this time Raud snubbed the rope and held him. Below the dog pawed frantically, until he found a paw-hold on one of the chopped-out steps. Raud hauled on the rope, and made another snub.

It seemed like hours. It probably was; his arms were aching, and he had lost all sense of time, or of the cold, or the danger of the narrow ledge; he forgot about the Crown and the men who had stolen it; he even forgot how he had come here, or that he had ever been anywhere else. All that mattered was to get Brave up on the ledge beside him.

Finally Brave came up and got first his fore-paws and then his body over the edge. He lay still, panting proudly, while Raud hugged him and told him, over and over, that he was a good dog. They rested for a long time, and Raud got a slab of pemmican from the pack and divided it with Brave.

It was while they rested in the snow, munching, that he heard the sound for the first time. It was faint and far away, and it sounded like thunder, or like an avalanche beginning, and that puzzled him, for this was not the time of year for either. As he listened, he heard it again, and this time he recognized it—negatron pistols. It frightened him; he wondered if the thieves had met a band of hunters. No; if they were fighting Northfolk, there would be the reports of firearms, too. Or might they be fighting among themselves? Remembering the melted brass studs on Bold's collar, he became more frightened at the thought of what a negatron-blast could do to the Crown.

The noise stopped, then started again, and he got to his feet, calling to Brave. They were on a wide ledge that slanted upward toward the north. It would take him closer to the top, and closer to where Vahr and his companions would come up. Together, they started up, Raud probing cautiously ahead of him with the ice-staff for hidden crevasses. After a while, he came to a wide gap in the ice beside him, slanting toward the top, its upper end lost in swirling snow. So he and Brave began climbing, and after a while he could no longer hear the negatron pistols.

When it was almost too dark to go farther, he suddenly found himself on level snow, and here he made camp, digging a hole and lining it with the sleeping robes.

The sky was clear when he woke, and a pale yellow light was glowing in the east. For a while he lay huddled with the dog, stiff and miserable, and then he forced himself to his feet. He ate, and fed Brave, and then checked his rifle and made his pack.

He was sure, now, that he had a plan that would succeed. He could reach the place where Vahr and the Southrons would come up long before they did, and be waiting for them. In his imagination, he could see them coming up in single file, Vahr Farg's son in the lead, and he could imagine himself hidden behind a mound of snow, the ice-staff upright to brace his left hand and the forestock of the rifle resting on his outthrust thumb and the butt against his shoulder. The first bullet would be for Vahr. He could shoot all of them, one after another, that way....

He stopped, looking in chagrined incredulity at the tracks in front of him—the tracks he knew so well, of one man in sealskin boots and three men with ribbed plastic soles. Why, it couldn't be! They should be no more than half way up the long ravine, between the two tongues of the Ice-Father, ten miles to the north. But here they were, on the back of the Ice-Father and crossing to the west ahead of him. They must have climbed the sheer wall of ice, only a few miles from where he had dragged himself and Brave to the top. Then he remembered the negatron-blasts he had heard. While he had been chopping footholds with a hatchet, they had been smashing tons of ice out of their way.

"Well, Brave," he said mildly. "Old Keeper wasn't so smart, after all, was he? Come on, Brave."

The thieves were making good time. He read that from the tracks—straight, evenly spaced, no weary heel-dragging. Once or twice, he saw where they had stopped for a brief rest. He hoped to see their fire in the evening.

He didn't. They wouldn't have enough fuel to make a big one, or keep it burning long. But in the morning, as he was breaking camp, he saw black smoke ahead.

A few times, he had been in air-boats, and had looked down on the back of the Ice-Father, and it had looked flat. Really, it was not. There were long ridges, sheer on one side and sloping gently on the other, where the ice had overridden hills and low mountains, or had cracked and one side had pushed up over the other. And there were deep gullies where the prevailing winds had scooped away loose snow year after year for centuries, and drifts where it had piled, many of them higher than the building-mounds of the ancient cities. But from a distance, as from above, they all blended into a featureless white monotony.

At last, leaving a tangle of cliffs and ravines, he looked out across a broad stretch of nearly level snow and saw, for the first time, the men he was following. Four tiny dots, so far that they seemed motionless, strung out in single file. Instantly, he crouched behind a swell in the surface

and dragged Brave down beside him. One of them, looking back, might see him, as he saw them. When they vanished behind a snow-hill, he rose and hastened forward, to take cover again. He kept at this all day; by alternately resting and running, he found himself gaining on them, and toward evening, he was within rifle-range. The man in the lead was Vahr Farg's son; even at that distance he recognized him easily. The others were Southrons, of course; they wore quilted garments of cloth, and quilted hoods. The man next to Vahr, in blue, carried a rifle, as Vahr did. The man in yellow had only an ice-staff, and the man in green, at the rear, had the Crown on his pack, still in the bearskin bundle.

He waited, at the end of the day, until he saw the light of their fire. Then he and Brave circled widely around their camp, and stopped behind a snow-ridge, on the other side of an open and level stretch a mile wide. He dug the sleeping-hole on the crest of the ridge, making it larger than usual, and piled up a snow breastwork in front of it, with an embrasure through which he could look or fire without being seen.

Before daybreak, he was awake and had his pack made, and when he saw the smoke of the thieves' campfire, he was lying behind his breastwork, the rifle resting on its folded cover, muzzle toward the smoke. He lay for a long time, watching, before he saw the file of tiny dots emerge into the open.

They came forward steadily, in the same order as on the day before, Vahr in the lead and the man with the Crown in the rear. The thieves suspected nothing; they grew larger and larger as they approached, until they were at the range for which he had set his sights. He cuddled the butt of the rifle against his cheek. As the man who carried the Crown walked under the blade of the front sight, he squeezed the trigger.

The rifle belched pink flame and roared and pounded his shoulder. As the muzzle was still rising, he flipped open the breech, and threw out the empty. He inserted a fresh round.

There were only three of them, now. The man with the bearskin bundle was down and motionless. Vahr Farg's son had gotten his rifle unslung and uncovered. The Southron with the other rifle was slower; he was only getting off the cover as Vahr, who must have seen the flash, fired hastily. Too hastily; the bullet kicked up snow twenty feet to the left. The third man had drawn his negatron pistol and was trying to use it; thin hairlines of brilliance were jetting out from his hand, stopping far short of their mark.

Raud closed his sights on the man with the autoloading rifle; as he did, the man with the negatron pistol, realizing the limitations of his weapon, was sweeping it back and forth, aiming at the snow fifty yards in front of him. Raud couldn't see the effect of his second shot—between him and his target, blueish light blazed and twinkled, and dense clouds of steam rose—but he felt sure that he had missed. He reloaded, and watched for movements on the edge of the rising steam.

It cleared, slowly; when it did, there was nothing behind it. Even the body of the dead man was gone. He blinked, bewildered. He'd picked that place carefully; there had been no gully or ravine within running distance. Then he grunted. There hadn't been—but there was now. The negatron pistol again. The thieves were hidden in a pit they had blasted, and they had dragged the body in with them.

He crawled back to reassure Brave, who was guarding the pack, and to shift the pack back for some distance. Then he returned to his embrasure in the snow-fort and resumed his watch. For a long time, nothing happened, and then a head came briefly peeping up out of the pit. A head under a green hood. Raud chuckled mirthlessly into his beard. If he'd been doing that, he'd have traded hoods with the dead man before shoving up his body to draw fire. This kept up, at intervals, for about an hour. He was wondering if they would stay in the pit until dark.

Then Vahr Farg's son leaped out of the pit and began running across the snow. He had his pack, and his rifle; he ran, zig-zag, almost directly toward where Raud was lying. Raud laughed, this time in real amusement. The Southrons had chased Vahr out, as a buck will chase his does in front of him when he thinks there is danger in front. If Vahr wasn't shot, it would be safe for them to come out. If he was, it would be no loss, and the price of the Crown would only have to be divided in two, rather than three, shares. Vahr came to within two hundred yards of Raud's unseen rifle, and then dropped his pack and flung himself down behind it, covering the ridge with his rifle.

Minutes passed, and then the Southron in yellow came out and ran forward. He had the bearskin bundle on his pack; he ran to where Vahr lay, added his pack to Vahr's, and lay down behind it. Raud chewed his underlip in vexation. This wasn't the way he wanted it; that fellow had a negatron pistol, and he was close enough to use it effectively. And he was sheltered behind the Crown; Raud was afraid to shoot. He didn't miss what he shot at—often. But no man alive could say that he never missed.

The other Southron, the one in blue with the autoloading rifle, came out and advanced slowly, his weapon at the ready. Raud tensed himself to jump, aimed carefully, and waited. When the man in blue was a hundred yards from the pit, he shot him dead. The rifle was still lifting from the recoil when he sprang to his feet, turned, and ran. Before he was twenty feet away, the place where he had been exploded; the force of the blast almost knocked him down, and steam blew past and ahead of him. Ignoring his pack and ice-staff, he ran on, calling to Brave to follow. The dog obeyed instantly; more negatron-blasts were thundering and blazing and steaming on the crest of

the ridge. He swerved left, ran up another slope, and slid down the declivity beyond into the ravine on the other side.

There he paused to eject the empty, make sure that there was no snow in the rifle bore, and reload. The blasting had stopped by then; after a moment, he heard the voice of Vahr Farg's son, and guessed that the two surviving thieves had advanced to the blasted crest of the other ridge. They'd find the pack, and his tracks and Brave's. He wondered whether they'd come hunting for him, or turn around and go the other way. He knew what he'd do, under the circumstances, but he doubted if Vahr's mind would work that way. The Southron's might; he wouldn't want to be caught between blaster-range and rifle-range of Raud the Keeper again.

"Come, Brave," he whispered, looking quickly around and then starting to run.

Lay a trail down this ravine for them to follow. Then get to the top of the ridge beside it, double back, and wait for them. Let them pass, and shoot the Southron first. By now, Vahr would have a negatron pistol too, taken from the body of the man in blue, but it wasn't a weapon he was accustomed to, and he'd be more than a little afraid of it.

The ravine ended against an upthrust face of ice, at right angles to the ridge he had just crossed; there was a V-shaped notch between them. He turned into this; it would be a good place to get to the top....

He found himself face to face, at fifteen feet, with Vahr Farg's son and the Southron in yellow, coming through from the other side. They had their packs, the Southron had the bearskin bundle, and they had drawn negatron pistols in their hands.

Swinging up the rifle, he shot the Southron in the chest, making sure he hit him low enough to miss the Crown. At the same time, he shouted:

"Catch, Brave!"

Brave never jumped for the deer or wild-ox that had been shot; always for the one still on its feet. He launched himself straight at the throat of Vahr Farg's son—and into the muzzle of Vahr's blaster. He died in a blue-white flash.

Raud had reversed the heavy rifle as Brave leaped; he threw it, butt-on, like a seal-spear, into Vahr's face. As soon as it was out of his fingers, he was jumping forward, snatching out his knife. His left hand found Vahr's right wrist, and he knew that he was driving the knife into Vahr's body, over and over, trying to keep the blaster pointed away from him and away from the body of the dead Southron. At last, the negatron-pistol fell from Vahr's fingers, and the arm that had been trying to fend off his knife relaxed.

He straightened and tried to stand—he had been kneeling on Vahr's body, he found—and reeled giddily. He got to his feet and stumbled to the other body, kneeling beside it. He tried for a long time before he was able to detach the bearskin bundle from the dead man's pack. Then he got the pack open, and found dried venison. He started to divide it, and realized that there was no Brave with whom to share it. He had just sent Brave to his death.

Well, and so? Brave had been the Keeper's dog. He had died for the Crown, and that had been his duty. If he could have saved the Crown by giving his own life, Raud would have died too. But he could not—if Raud died the Crown was lost.

The sky was darkening rapidly, and the snow was whitening the body in green. Moving slowly, he started to make camp for the night.

It was still snowing when he woke. He started to rise, wondering, at first, where Brave was, and then he huddled back among the robes—his own and the dead men's—and tried to go to sleep again. Finally, he got up and ate some of his pemmican, gathered his gear and broke camp. For a moment, and only a moment, he stood looking to the east, in the direction he had come from. Then he turned west and started across the snow toward the edge of the Ice-Father.

The snow stopped before he reached the edge, and the sun was shining when he found a slanting way down into the valley. Then, out of the north, a black dot appeared in the sky and grew larger, until he saw that it was a Government airboat—one of the kind used by the men who measured the growth of the Ice-Father. It came curving in and down toward him, and a window slid open and a man put his head out.

"Want us to lift you down?" he asked. "We're going to Long Valley Town. If that's where you're going, we can take you the whole way."

"Yes. That's where I'm going." He said it as though he were revealing, for the first time, some discovery he had just made. "For your kindness and help, I thank you."

In less time than a man could walk two miles with a pack, they were letting down in front of the Government House in Long Valley Town.

He had never been in the Government House before. The walls were clear glass. The floors were plastic, clean and white. Strips of bright new lumicon ran around every room at the tops of all the

walls. There were no fires, but the great rooms were as warm as though it were a midsummer afternoon.

Still carrying his pack and his rifle, Raud went to a desk where a Southron in a white shirt sat.

"Has Yorn Nazvik's ship, the *Issa*, been here lately?" he asked.

"About six days ago," the Southron said, without looking up from the papers on his desk. "She's on a trading voyage to the west now, but Nazvik's coming back here before he goes south. Be here in about ten days." He looked up. "You have business with Nazvik?"

Raud shook his head. "Not with Yorn Nazvik, no. My business is with the two Starfolk who are passengers with him. Dranigo and Salvadoro."

The Southron looked displeased. "Aren't you getting just a little above yourself, old man, calling the Prince Salsavadran and the Lord Dranigrastan by their familiar names?" he asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Those were the names they gave me; I didn't know they had any others."

The Southron started to laugh, then stopped.

"And if I may ask, what is your name, and what business have you with them?" he inquired.

Raud told him his name. "I have something for them. Something they want very badly. If I can find a place to stay here, I will wait until they return—"

The Southron got to his feet. "Wait here for a moment, Keeper," he said. "I'll be back soon."

He left the desk, going into another room. After a while, he came back. This time he was respectful.

"I was talking to the Lord Dranigrastan—whom you know as Dranigo—on the radio. He and the Prince Salsavadran are lifting clear of the *Issa* in their airboat and coming back here to see you. They should be here in about three hours. If, in the meantime, you wish to bathe and rest, I'll find you a room. And I suppose you'll want something to eat, too...."

He was waiting at the front of the office, looking out the glass wall, when the airboat came in and grounded, and Salvadoro and Dranigo jumped out and came hurrying up the walk to the doorway.

"Well, here you are, Keeper," Dranigo greeted him, clasping his hand. Then he saw the bearskin bundle under Raud's arm. "You brought it with you? But didn't you believe that we were coming?"

"Are you going to let us have it?" Salvadoro was asking.

"Yes; I will sell it to you, for the price you offered. I am not fit to be Keeper any longer. I lost it. It was stolen from me, the day after I saw you, and I have only yesterday gotten it back. Both my dogs were killed, too. I can no longer keep it safe. Better that you take it with you to Dremna, away from this world where it was made. I have thought, before, that this world and I are both old and good for nothing any more."

"This world may be old, Keeper," Dranigo said, "but it is the Mother-World, Terra, the world that sent Man to the Stars. And you—when you lost the Crown, you recovered it again."

"The next time, I won't be able to. Too many people will know that the Crown is worth stealing, and the next time, they'll kill me first."

"Well, we said we'd give you twenty thousand trade-tokens for it," Salvadoro said. "We'll have them for you as soon as we can draw them from the Government bank, here. Or give you a check and let you draw them as you want them." Raud didn't understand that, and Salvadoro didn't try to explain. "And then we'll fly you home."

He shook his head. "No, I have no home. The place where you saw me is Keeper's House, and I am not the Keeper any more. I will stay here and find a place to live, and pay somebody to take care of me...."

With twenty thousand trade-tokens, he could do that. It would buy a house in which he could live, and he could find some woman who had lost her man, who would do his work for him. But he must be careful of the money. Dig a crypt in the corner of his house for it. He wondered if he could find a pair of good dogs and train them to guard it for him....

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