



THE BIG
FRONT YARD
AND OTHER STORIES

THE COMPLETE
SHORT FICTION OF
CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

VOLUME TWO





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Introduction by David W. Wixon



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CLIFFORD D. SIMAK: LEARNING ALL THE WORDS

“I’m looking for an alien, too. All of us, I think, are looking for your alien.”

—Clifford D. Simak, in “So Bright the Vision”

Clifford Donald Simak was born on August 3, 1904, on a ridge-top farm a few miles from the village of Millville in Grant County, Wisconsin – a farm that belonged to his mother’s parents. Cliff’s grandfather, Edward “Ned” Wiseman, had been a member of the Second Wisconsin Volunteer Cavalry during the Civil War, taking part in the battles at Vicksburg and Gettysburg, and Cliff eventually became the proud possessor of Ned’s cavalry saber. Cliff’s grandmother, Ellen Wiseman (née Parker) seems to have had a special place in Cliff’s heart, to judge by his clear use of her as his model for Ellen Forbes in “Over the River and Through the Woods” and his frequent uses of the names “Parker” and “Ellen.” (Cliff also named his daughter after her.)

The Wiseman farm was located atop the broad, tall bluffs on the south side of the Wisconsin River. From just a little farther along the ridge, one can easily see, off to the west, the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers.

Cliff’s parents were John Lewis Simak and Margaret “Maggie” Olivia Wiseman Simak. The two met when John, who had emigrated at age twelve from a small town near Prague in the area that would become the Czech Republic, came to work for Ned Wiseman. John would eventually clear some land for himself and build a log cabin just to the east of the Wiseman farm to be a home for the small family, which would later come to include a younger son, Carson.

As was not uncommon in the early part of the twentieth century, Cliff, having been born on a farm, never had a birth certificate. And he never missed it, he told me, except on one occasion, in the fifties when his newspaper wanted to send him out of the country on assignment. He could not get a passport until he got his mother to attest that she had indeed given birth to him in the United States.

Cliff started his education at what was known as a “country school,” located a mile and a half from his home – a distance he walked every day. It was one of those stereotypical old-time schools in which students of all ages sat in a single room, to be taught by the same teacher. When finished in the little school, Cliff went to high school a few miles to the south, in the town of Patch Grove. To get there he rode a horse – an ornery gray mare, as he described her; he would say that although he loved her, and although he was sure she loved him, those feelings did not keep her from trying to kick him if she could.

The Wiseman and Simak farms were surrounded by woods where game abounded, cut by streams filled with fish, and the young Cliff Simak had the time of his life there. His boyhood, he would later say in an interview, was a sort of “Tom Sawyer existence” filled with hunting, fishing, and coon hunting with horses and coon dogs – when the farm chores were done for the day. Later he would comment that although it was the twentieth century, life in that rural setting was much like living in pioneer days: He swam in exactly the kind of creeks he would later describe in stories, he rose before dawn to help with the morning chores, he went barefoot in the summers ...

So how did he go on to become both a high-level newspaperman and a writer of award-winning fiction? It must have been built into him – he remembered that by the age of five, he knew he wanted

to be a newspaperman, having been told by his mother that newspapers print all the news from all over the world, and that they print the truth. His family had a tradition of gathering around while one of the parents read aloud from a book or newspaper.

Cliff would later tell me that by the age of eight, he had developed a goal to learn all the words there were, and it may be no coincidence that the Simak family stone in the little cemetery between Bridgeport and Patch Grove depicts an open book – a Bible, no doubt, but still ...

Finishing second in his high school class, Cliff took a two-year teacher-training program and then taught school, over the course of the next three years, at a number of small towns in the area. Already an avid reader of Verne, Wells, and Burroughs, when he chanced on a copy of *Amazing Stories* in 1927, he became a regular reader of the science fiction magazines.

It was while teaching in Cassville, a very small town, that Cliff, attending the local movie theater, met a young woman from the nearby town of Glen Haven. She was Agnes Kuchenberg, known always as Kay, and she would later become his wife.

In 1927 or 1928 the Simak family removed to Madison, the state capital, where Cliff attended the University of Wisconsin (studying journalism), Carson went to high school, and John went into carpentry and masonry. The new occupation did not work out well for John, and when Kay and Cliff got married in April of 1929 and decided that he would drop out of the university to take a job working for a newspaper in Michigan, the rest of the family returned to the ridge.

Cliff started as a reporter at the *Iron River Reporter*. He quickly got a column of his own, called “Driftwood,” and within a few years had moved up to be editor. It was during this period that he began to try his hand at writing fiction.

He had already sold a number of stories when, in August 1932, the couple left Iron River for Spencer, Iowa, where Cliff became editor of the *Spencer Reporter*, and in July 1934 he moved on to North Dakota to become editor of the *Dickinson Press*.

At about that time, the Spencer newspaper was purchased by a Kansas City newspaper company which persuaded Cliff to return to Spencer and convert the paper from a semiweekly to a daily. That went well, and the company made him a sort of troubleshooter, transferring him first to Excelsior Springs, Missouri, then to Worthington, Minnesota, and finally to Brainerd, Minnesota.

In 1939 Cliff took a job at the copy desk of the *Minneapolis Star*, and within a few years he became chief of the copy desk. Years later, he could still remember that the day he started to work for the *Star* was June 16. In 1949 he would become the paper’s news editor, and he stayed with the *Star* and its successors in various capacities until his retirement in 1976.

It’s hard to know just when Cliff started writing stories himself. He kept a series of journals in which he recorded some of his submissions and sales – and occasionally other events – but he was sporadic, at best, in his data entry, and it appears that some of his journals did not survive. Although although one of the surviving volumes contains a notation that a story entitled “Mutiny on Mercury” was submitted to a magazine at the end of 1930, there’s no way to tell if that was his first attempt to write or submit fiction. The story was initially rejected, but Cliff’s first sale came soon after, in 1931.

There was, however, one period during which Cliff left the *Star*. Early in World War II he accepted a job working for an intelligence agency of the US government. The nature of the job is not known, but it required Cliff and Kay to pack up their car and drive to Seattle ... a trip that was probably torturous since there were no freeways in those days – in fact, Kay recorded in her diary that it wasn’t too long before they repacked the car, put it on a train to Seattle, and took another train themselves.

The stay in Seattle was short, though, and they returned to Minnesota before the end of 1942 – the newspaper was eager to have Cliff back.

That began a period during which Cliff churned out short stories in a number of genres, all the while working full time at the paper. In 1947 the Simak family had a son, Richard Scott, and in 1951 a daughter, Shelley Ellen.

In the fifties, Cliff began moving into the writing of novels – although he would always keep his hand in the short story field. And it was during this period too that he began to win awards for his fiction – awards that had not even existed in his first two decades in the field.

Clifford D. Simak retired from the *Minneapolis Tribune* (the *Star's* successor) in 1976. He would continue writing, publishing his last novel, *Highway to Eternity*, in 1986. Predeceased by his beloved Kay, he died in Minneapolis in 1988.

David W. Wix

THE BIG FRONT YARD

“The Big Front Yard,” which started out identified in Cliff’s notes as “Rats in the House,” the “Errand Boy,” and then “A Mouse in the House,” before reaching its final name, may be the most lauded of the author’s short fiction, even beyond the fact that it won the Hugo Award. I say this because it’s a story that people often mention when speaking of Clifford D. Simak. And few stories have a submission history like this one: the story was sent to Galaxy Magazine on April 2, 1958, only to be rejected and returned on the fourteenth; it was sent to Astounding on the following day and accepted there on the twenty-eighth – all this action, including two submissions, occurred in less than a month.

The exotic and unusual is most effectively seen when positioned next to the commonplace.

—dw

Hiram Taine came awake and sat up in his bed.

Towser was barking and scratching at the floor.

“Shut up,” Taine told the dog.

Towser cocked quizzical ears at him and then resumed the barking and scratching at the floor.

Taine rubbed his eyes. He ran a hand through his rat’s-nest head of hair. He considered lying down again and pulling up the covers.

But not with Towser barking.

“What’s the matter with you, anyhow?” he asked of Towser, with not a little wrath.

“Whuff,” said Towser, industriously proceeding with his scratching at the floor.

“If you want out,” said Taine, “all you got to do is open the screen door. You know how it is done. You do it all the time.”

Towser quit his barking and sat down heavily, watching his master getting out of bed.

Taine put on his shirt and pulled on his trousers, but didn’t bother with his shoes.

Towser ambled over to a corner, put his nose down to the baseboard and snuffled moistly.

“You got a mouse?” asked Taine.

“Whuff,” said Towser, most emphatically.

“I can’t ever remember you making such a row about a mouse,” Taine said, slightly puzzled. “You must be off your rocker.”

It was a beautiful summer morning. Sunlight was pouring through the open window.

Good day for fishing, Taine told himself, then remembered that there’d be no fishing, for he had to go out and look up that old four-poster maple bed that he had heard about up Woodman way. More than likely, he thought, they’d want twice as much as it was worth. It was getting so, he told himself, that a man couldn’t make an honest dollar. Everyone was getting smart about antiques.

He got up off the bed and headed for the living room.

“Come on,” he said to Towser.

Towser came along, pausing now and then to snuffle into corners and to whuffle at the floor.

“You got it bad,” said Taine.

Maybe it’s a rat, he thought. The house was getting old.

He opened the screen door and Towser went outside.

“Leave that woodchuck be today,” Taine advised him. “It’s a losing battle. You’ll never dig him out.”

Towser went around the corner of the house.

Taine noticed that something had happened to the sign that hung on the post beside the driveway. One of the chains had become unhooked and the sign was dangling.

He padded out across the driveway slab and the grass, still wet with dew, to fix the sign. There was nothing wrong with it – just the unhooked chain. Might have been the wind, he thought, or some passing urchin. Although probably not an urchin. He got along with kids. They never bothered him like they did some others in the village. Banker Stevens, for example. They were always pestering Stevens.

He stood back a ways to be sure the sign was straight.

It read, in big letters:

HANDY MAN

And under that, in smaller lettering:

I fix anything

And under that:

ANTIQUES FOR SALE

What have you got to trade?

Maybe, he told himself, he’d ought to have two signs, one for his fix-it shop and one for antiques and trading. Some day, when he had the time, he thought, he’d paint a couple of new ones. One for each side of the driveway. It would look neat that way.

He turned around and looked across the road at Turner’s Woods. It was a pretty sight, he thought. A sizable piece of woods like that right at the edge of town. It was a place for birds and rabbits and woodchucks and squirrels and it was full of forts built through generations by the boys of Willow Bend.

Some day, of course, some smart operator would buy it up and start a housing development or something equally objectionable and when that happened a big slice of his own boyhood would be cut out of his life.

Towser came around the corner of the house. He was sidling along, sniffing at the lowest row of siding and his ears were cocked with interest.

“That dog is nuts,” said Taine, and went inside.

He went into the kitchen, his bare feet slapping on the floor.

He filled the tea kettle, set it on the stove and turned the burner on underneath the kettle.

He turned on the radio, forgetting that it was out of kilter.

When it didn’t make a sound, he remembered and, disgusted, snapped it off. That was the way he went, he thought. He fixed other people’s stuff, but never got around to fixing any of his own.

He went into the bedroom and put on his shoes. He threw the bed together.

Back in the kitchen the stove had failed to work again. The burner beneath the kettle still was cold.

Taine hauled off and kicked the stove. He lifted the kettle and held his palm above the burner. In a few seconds he could detect some heat.

“Worked again,” he told himself.

Some day, he knew, kicking the stove would fail to work. When that happened, he’d have to get it to work on it. Probably wasn’t more than a loose connection.

He put the kettle back onto the stove.

There was a clatter out in front and Taine went out to see what was going on.

Beasly, the Horton’s yardboy-chauffeur-gardener-et cetera was backing a rickety old truck up the driveway. Beside him sat Abbie Horton, the wife of H. Henry Horton, the village’s most important citizen. In the back of the truck, lashed on with ropes and half-protected by a garish red and purple quilt, stood a mammoth television set. Taine recognized it from of old. It was a good ten years out of date and still, by any standard, it was the most expensive set ever to grace any home in Willow Bend.

Abbie hopped out of the truck. She was an energetic, bustling, bossy woman.

“Good morning, Hiram,” she said. “Can you fix this set again?”

“Never saw anything that I couldn’t fix,” said Taine, but nevertheless he eyed the set with something like dismay. It was not the first time he had tangled with it and he knew what was ahead.

“It might cost you more than it’s worth,” he warned her. “What you really need is a new one. This set is getting old and –”

“That’s just what Henry said,” Abbie told him, tartly. “Henry wants to get one of the color sets. But he won’t part with this one. It’s not just TV, you know. It’s a combination with radio and a record player and the wood and style are just right for the other furniture, and, besides –”

“Yes, I know,” said Taine, who’d heard it all before.

Poor old Henry, he thought. What a life the man must lead. Up at that computer plant all day long shooting off his face and bossing everyone, then coming home to a life of petty tyranny.

“Beasly,” said Abbie, in her best drill-sergeant voice, “you get right up there and get that thing untied.”

“Yes’m,” Beasly said. He was a gangling, loose-jointed man who didn’t look too bright.

“And see you be careful with it. I don’t want it all scratched up.”

“Yes’m,” said Beasly.

“I’ll help,” Taine offered.

The two climbed into the truck and began unlashng the old monstrosity.

“It’s heavy,” Abbie warned. “You two be careful of it.”

“Yes’m,” said Beasly.

It was heavy and it was an awkward thing to boot, but Beasly and Taine horsed it around to the back of the house and up the stoop and through the back door and down the basement stairs, with Abbie following eagle-eyed behind them, alert to the slightest scratch.

The basement was Taine’s combination workshop and display room for antiques. One end of it was filled with benches and with tools and machinery and boxes full of odds and ends and piles of just plain junk were scattered everywhere. The other end housed a collection of rickety chairs, sagging bedposts, ancient highboys, equally ancient lowboys, old coal scuttles painted gold, heavy iron fireplace screens and a lot of other stuff that he had collected from far and wide for as little as he could possibly pay for it.

He and Beasly set the TV down carefully on the floor. Abbie watched them narrowly from the stairs.

“Why, Hiram,” she said, excited, “you put a ceiling in the basement. It looks a whole lot better.”

“Huh?” asked Taine.

“The ceiling. I said you put in a ceiling.”

Taine jerked his head up and what she said was true. There was a ceiling there, but he’d never put in.

He gulped a little and lowered his head, then jerked it quickly up and had another look. The ceiling still was there.

“It’s not that block stuff,” said Abbie with open admiration. “You can’t see any joints at all. How did you manage it?”

Taine gulped again and got back his voice. “Something I thought up,” he told her weakly.

“You’ll have to come over and do it to our basement. Our basement is a sight. Beasly put the ceiling in the amusement room, but Beasly is all thumbs.”

“Yes’m,” Beasly said contritely.

“When I get the time,” Taine promised, ready to promise anything to get them out of there.

“You’d have a lot more time,” Abbie told him acidly, “if you weren’t gadding around all over the country buying up that broken-down old furniture that you call antiques. Maybe you can fool the city folks when they come driving out here, but you can’t fool me.”

“I make a lot of money out of some of it,” Taine told her calmly.

“And lose your shirt on the rest of it,” she said.

“I got some old china that is just the kind of stuff you are looking for,” said Taine. “Picked it up just a day or two ago. Made a good buy on it. I can let you have it cheap.”

“I’m not interested,” she said and clamped her mouth tight shut.

She turned around and went back up the stairs.

“She’s on the prod today,” Beasly said to Taine. “It will be a bad day. It always is when she starts early in the morning.”

“Don’t pay attention to her,” Taine advised.

“I try not to, but it ain’t possible. You sure you don’t need a man? I’d work for you cheap.”

“Sorry, Beasly. Tell you what – come over some night soon and we’ll play some checkers.”

“I’ll do that, Hiram. You’re the only one who ever asks me over. All the others ever do is laugh at me or shout.”

Abbie’s voice came bellowing down the stairs. “Beasly, are you coming? Don’t go standing there all day. I have rugs to beat.”

“Yes’m,” said Beasly, starting up the stairs.

At the truck, Abbie turned on Taine with determination: “You’ll get that set fixed right away? I’m lost without it.”

“Immediately,” said Taine.

He stood and watched them off, then looked around for Towser, but the dog had disappeared. More than likely he was at the woodchuck hole again, in the woods across the road. Gone off, thought Taine, without his breakfast, too.

The teakettle was boiling furiously when Taine got back to the kitchen. He put coffee in the maker and poured in the water. Then he went downstairs.

The ceiling was still there.

He turned on all the lights and walked around the basement, staring up at it.

~~It was a dazzling white material and it appeared to be translucent – up to a point, that is. One could see into it, but he could not see through it. And there were no signs of seams. It was fitted neatly and tightly around the water pipes and the ceiling lights.~~

Taine stood on a chair and rapped his knuckles against it sharply. It gave out a bell-like sound almost exactly as if he'd rapped a fingernail against a thinly blown goblet.

He got down off the chair and stood there, shaking his head. The whole thing was beyond him. He had spent part of the evening repairing Banker Stevens' lawn mower and there'd been no ceiling there.

He rummaged in a box and found a drill. He dug out one of the smaller bits and fitted it in the drill. He plugged in the cord and climbed on the chair again and tried the bit against the ceiling. The whirling steel slid wildly back and forth. It didn't make a scratch. He switched off the drill and looked closely at the ceiling. There was not a mark upon it. He tried again, pressing against the drill with all his strength. The bit went *ping* and the broken end flew across the basement and hit the wall.

Taine stepped down off the chair. He found another bit and fitted it in the drill and went slowly up the stairs, trying to think. But he was too confused to think. That ceiling should not be up there, but there it was. And unless he went stark, staring crazy and forgetful as well, he had not put it there.

In the living room, he folded back one corner of the worn and faded carpeting and plugged in the drill. He knelt and started drilling in the floor. The bit went smoothly through the old oak flooring and then stopped. He put on more pressure and the drill spun without getting any bite.

And there wasn't supposed to be anything underneath that wood! Nothing to stop a drill. Once through the flooring, it should have dropped into the space between the joists.

Taine disengaged the drill and laid it to one side.

He went into the kitchen and the coffee now was ready. But before he poured it, he pawed through a cabinet drawer and found a pencil flashlight. Back in the living room he shined the light into the hole that the drill had made.

There was something shiny at the bottom of the hole.

He went back to the kitchen and found some day-old doughnuts and poured a cup of coffee. He sat at the kitchen table, eating doughnuts and wondering what to do.

There didn't appear, for the moment at least, much that he could do. He could putter around all day trying to figure out what had happened to his basement and probably not be any wiser than he was right now.

His money-making Yankee soul rebelled against such a horrid waste of time.

There was, he told himself, that maple four-poster that he should be getting to before some unprincipled city antique dealer should run afoul of it. A piece like that, he figured, if a man had any luck at all, should sell at a right good price. He might turn a handsome profit on it if he only worked right.

Maybe, he thought, he could turn a trade on it. There was the table model TV set that he had traded a pair of ice skates for last winter. Those folks out Woodman way might conceivably be happy to trade the bed for a reconditioned TV set, almost like brand new. After all, they probably weren't using the bed and, he hoped fervently, had no idea of the value of it.

He ate the doughnuts hurriedly and gulped down an extra cup of coffee. He fixed a plate of scraps for Towser and set it outside the door. Then he went down into the basement and got the table TV set and put it in the pickup truck. As an afterthought, he added a reconditioned shotgun which would be

perfectly all right if a man were careful not to use these far-reaching, powerful shells, and a few other odds and ends that might come in handy on a trade.

II

He got back late, for it had been a busy and quite satisfactory day. Not only did he have the four-poster bed loaded on the truck, but he had as well a rocking chair, a fire screen, a bundle of ancient magazines, a old-fashioned barrel churn, a walnut highboy and a Governor Winthrop on which some half-baked slap-happy decorator had applied a coat of apple-green paint. The television set, the shotgun and fifty dollars had gone into the trade. And what was better yet – he'd managed it so well that the Woodman family probably was dying of laughter at this very moment about how they'd taken him.

He felt a little ashamed of it – they'd been such friendly people. They had treated him so kindly and had had him stay for dinner and had sat and talked with him and shown him about the farm and even asked him to stop by if he went through that way again.

He'd wasted the entire day, he thought, and he rather hated that, but maybe it had been worth it to build up his reputation out that way as the sort of character who had softening of the head and didn't know the value of a dollar. That way, maybe some other day, he could do some more business in the neighborhood.

He heard the television set as he opened the back door, sounding loud and clear, and he went clattering down the basement stairs in something close to panic. For now that he'd traded off the table-top model, Abbie's set was the only one downstairs and Abbie's set was broken.

It was Abbie's set, all right. It stood just where he and Beasley had put it down that morning and there was nothing wrong with it – nothing wrong at all. It was even televising color.

Televising color!

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and leaned against the railing for support.

The set kept right on televising color.

Taine stalked the set and walked around behind it.

The back of the cabinet was off, leaning against a bench that stood behind the set, and he could see the innards of it glowing cheerily.

He squatted on the basement floor and squinted at the lighted innards and they seemed a good deal different from the way that they should be. He'd repaired the set many times before and he thought he had a good idea of what the working parts would look like. And now they all seemed different, although just how he couldn't tell.

A heavy step sounded on the stairs and a hearty voice came booming down to him.

“Well, Hiram, I see you got it fixed.”

Taine jackknifed upright and stood there slightly frozen and completely speechless.

Henry Horton stood foursquarely and happily on the stairs, looking very pleased.

“I told Abbie that you wouldn't have it done, but she said for me to come over anyway – He told Hiram, it's in color! How did you do it, man?”

Taine grinned sickly. “I just got fiddling around,” he said.

Henry came down the rest of the stairs with a stately step and stood before the set, with his hands behind his back, staring at it fixedly in his best executive manner.

He slowly shook his head. “I never would have thought,” he said, “that it was possible.”

“Abbie mentioned that you wanted color.”

“Well, sure. Of course I did. But not on this old set. I never would have expected to get color on the set. How did you do it, Hiram?”

Taine told the solemn truth. “I can’t rightly say,” he said.

Henry found a nail keg standing in front of one of the benches and rolled it out in front of the old fashioned set. He sat down warily and relaxed into solid comfort.

“That’s the way it goes,” he said. “There are men like you, but not very many of them. Just Yankee tinkerers. You keep messing around with things, trying one thing here and another there and before you know it you come up with something.”

He sat on the nail keg, staring at the set.

“It’s sure a pretty thing,” he said. “It’s better than the color they have in Minneapolis. I dropped in at a couple of the places the last time I was there and looked at the color sets. And I tell you honestly, Hiram, there wasn’t one of them that was as good as this.”

Taine wiped his brow with his shirtsleeve. Somehow or other, the basement seemed to be getting warm. He was fine sweat all over.

Henry found a big cigar in one of his pockets and held it out to Taine.

“No, thanks. I never smoke.”

“Perhaps you’re wise,” said Henry. “It’s a nasty habit.”

He stuck the cigar into his mouth and rolled it east to west.

“Each man to his own,” he proclaimed, expansively. “When it comes to a thing like this, you’re the man to do it. You seem to think in mechanical contraptions and electronic circuits. Me, I don’t know a thing about it. Even in the computer game, I still don’t know a thing about it; I hire men who do. I can’t even saw a board or drive a nail. But I can organize. You remember, Hiram, how everybody snickered when I started up the plant?”

“Well, I guess some of them did, at that.”

“You’re darn tooting they did. They went around for weeks with their hands up to their faces to hide their smart-Aleck grins. They said, what does Henry think he’s doing, starting up a computer factory out here in the sticks; he doesn’t think he can compete with those big companies in the east, does he? And they didn’t stop their grinning until I sold a couple of dozen units and had orders for a year or two ahead.”

He fished a lighter from his pocket and lit the cigar carefully, never taking his eyes off the television set.

“You got something there,” he said, judiciously, “that may be worth a mint of money. Some simple adaptation that will fit on any set. If you can get color on this old wreck, you can get color on any set that’s made.”

He chuckled moistly around the mouthful of cigar. “If RCA knew what was happening here this minute, they’d go out and cut their throats.”

“But I don’t know what I did,” protested Taine.

“Well, that’s all right,” said Henry, happily. “I’ll take this set up to the plant tomorrow and turn loose some of the boys on it. They’ll find out what you have here before they’re through with it.”

He took the cigar out of his mouth and studied it intently, then popped it back in again.

“As I was saying, Hiram, that’s the difference in us. You can do the stuff, but you miss the possibilities. I can’t do a thing, but I can organize it once the thing is done. Before we get through with

this, you'll be wading in twenty dollar bills clear up to your knees."

"But I don't have —"

"Don't worry. Just leave it all to me. I've got the plant and whatever money we may need. We'll figure out a split."

"That's fine of you," said Taine mechanically.

"Not at all," Henry insisted, grandly. "It's just my aggressive, grasping sense of profit. I should be ashamed of myself, cutting in on this."

He sat on the keg, smoking and watching the TV perform in exquisite color.

"You know, Hiram," he said, "I've often thought of this, but never got around to doing anything about it. I've got an old computer up at the plant that we will have to junk because it's taking up room that we really need. It's one of our early models, a sort of experimental job that went completely sour. It sure is a screwy thing. No one's ever been able to make much out of it. We tried some approaches that probably were wrong — or maybe they were right, but we didn't know enough to make them quite come off. It's been standing in a corner all these years and I should have junked it long ago. But I sort of hate to do it. I wonder if you might not like it — just to tinker with."

"Well, I don't know," said Taine.

Henry assumed an expansive air. "No obligation, mind you. You may not be able to do a thing with it — I'd frankly be surprised if you could, but there's no harm in trying. Maybe you'll decide to tear it down for the salvage you can get. There are several thousand dollars worth of equipment in there. Probably you could use most of it one way or another."

"It might be interesting," conceded Taine, but not too enthusiastically.

"Good," said Henry, with an enthusiasm that made up for Taine's lack of it. "I'll have the boys carry it over tomorrow. It's a heavy thing. I'll send along plenty of help to get it unloaded and down into the basement and set up."

Henry stood up carefully and brushed cigar ashes off his lap.

"I'll have the boys pick up the TV set at the same time," he said. "I'll have to tell Abbie you haven't got it fixed yet. If I ever let it get into the house, the way it's working now, she'd hold on to it."

Henry climbed the stairs heavily and Taine saw him out the door into the summer night.

Taine stood in the shadow, watching Henry's shadowed figure go across the Widow Taylor's yard to the next street behind his house. He took a deep breath of the fresh night air and shook his head to try to clear his buzzing brain, but the buzzing went right on.

Too much had happened, he told himself. Too much for any single day — first the ceiling and now the TV set. Once he had a good night's sleep he might be in some sort of shape to try to wrestle with it.

Towser came around the corner of the house and limped slowly up the steps to stand beside his master. He was mud up to his ears.

"You had a day of it, I see," said Taine. "And, just like I told you, you didn't get the woodchuck."

"Woof," said Towser, sadly.

"You're just like a lot of the rest of us," Taine told him, severely. "Like me and Henry Horton and all the rest of us. You're chasing something and you think you know what you are chasing, but you really don't. And what is even worse, you have no faint idea of why you're chasing it."

Towser thumped a tired tail upon the stoop.

Taine opened the door and stood to one side to let Towser in, then went in himself.

He went through the refrigerator and found part of a roast, a slice or two of luncheon meat, a dried out slab of cheese and half a bowl of cooked spaghetti. He made a pot of coffee and shared the food with Towser.

Then Taine went back downstairs and shut off the television set. He found a trouble lamp and plugged it in and poked the light into the innards of the set.

He squatted on the floor, holding the lamp, trying to puzzle out what had been done to the set. It was different, of course, but it was a little hard to figure out in just what ways it was different. Someone had tinkered with the tubes and had them twisted out of shape and there were little white cubes of metal tucked here and there in what seemed to be an entirely haphazard and illogical manner, although, Taine admitted to himself, there probably was no haphazardness. And the circuit, he saw, had been rewired and a good deal of wiring had been added.

But the most puzzling thing about it was that the whole thing seemed to be just jury-rigged – as if someone had done no more than a hurried, patch-up job to get the set back in working order on an emergency and temporary basis.

Someone, he thought!

And who had that someone been?

He hunched around and peered into the dark corners of the basement and he felt innumerable and many-legged imaginary insects running on his body.

Someone had taken the back off the cabinet and leaned it against the bench and had left the screws which held the back laid neatly in a row upon the floor. Then they had jury-rigged the set and jury-rigged it far better than it had ever been before.

If this was a jury-job, he wondered, just what kind of job would it have been if they had had the time to do it up in style?

They hadn't had the time, of course. Maybe they had been scared off when he had come home or scared off even before they could get the back on the set again.

He stood up and moved stiffly away.

First the ceiling in the morning – and now, in the evening, Abbie's television set.

And the ceiling, come to think of it, was not a ceiling only. Another liner, if that was the proper term for it, of the same material as the ceiling, had been laid beneath the floor, forming a sort of boxed-in area between the joists. He had struck that liner when he had tried to drill into the floor.

And what, he asked himself, if all the house were like that, too?

There was just one answer to it all: *There was something in the house with him!*

Towser had heard that *something* or smelled it or in some other manner sensed it and had dug frantically at the floor in an attempt to dig it out, as if it were a woodchuck.

Except that this, whatever it might be, certainly was no woodchuck.

He put away the trouble light and went upstairs.

Towser was curled up on a rug in the living room beside the easy chair and beat his tail in polite decorum in greeting to his master.

Taine stood and stared down at the dog. Towser looked back at him with satisfied and sleepy eyes, then heaved a doggish sigh and settled down to sleep.

Whatever Towser might have heard or smelled or sensed this morning, it was quite evident that as of this moment he was aware of it no longer.

Then Taine remembered something else.

He had filled the kettle to make water for the coffee and had set it on the stove. He had turned on the burner and it had worked the first time.

He hadn't had to kick the stove to get the burner going.

III

He woke in the morning and someone was holding down his feet and he sat up quickly to see what was going on.

But there was nothing to be alarmed about; it was only Towser who had crawled into bed with him and now lay sprawled across his feet.

Towser whined softly and his back legs twitched as he chased dream-rabbits.

Taine eased his feet from beneath the dog and sat up, reaching for his clothes. It was early, but he remembered suddenly that he had left all of the furniture he had picked up the day before out there in the truck and should be getting it downstairs where he could start reconditioning it.

Towser went on sleeping.

Taine stumbled to the kitchen and looked out of the window and there, squatted on the back stool was Beasly, the Horton man-of-all-work.

Taine went to the back door to see what was going on.

"I quit them, Hiram," Beasly told him. "She kept on pecking at me every minute of the day and I couldn't do a thing to please her, so I up and quit."

"Well, come on in," said Taine. "I suppose you'd like a bite to eat and a cup of coffee."

"I was kind of wondering if I could stay here, Hiram. Just for my keep until I can find something else."

"Let's have breakfast first," said Taine, "then we can talk about it."

He didn't like it, he told himself. He didn't like it at all. In another hour or so Abbie would show up and start stirring up a ruckus about how he'd lured Beasly off. Because, no matter how dumb Beasly might be, he did a lot of work and took a lot of nagging and there wasn't anyone else in town who would work for Abbie Horton.

"Your ma used to give me cookies all the time," said Beasly. "Your ma was a real good woman, Hiram."

"Yes, she was," said Taine.

"My ma used to say that you folks were quality, not like the rest in town, no matter what kind of air they were always putting on. She said your family was among the first settlers. Is that really true, Hiram?"

"Well, not exactly first settlers, I guess, but this house has stood here for almost a hundred years. My father used to say there never was a night during all those years that there wasn't at least one of us Taine beneath its roof. Things like that, it seems, meant a lot to father."

"It must be nice," said Beasly, wistfully, "to have a feeling like that. You must be proud of this house, Hiram."

"Not really proud; more like belonging. I can't imagine living in any other house."

Taine turned on the burner and filled the kettle. Carrying the kettle back, he kicked the stove. But there wasn't any need to kick it; the burner was already beginning to take on a rosy glow.

Twice in a row, Taine thought. This thing is getting better!

“Gee, Hiram,” said Beasly, “this is a dandy radio.”

“It’s no good,” said Taine. “It’s broke. Haven’t had the time to fix it.”

“I don’t think so, Hiram. I just turned it on. It’s beginning to warm up.”

“It’s beginning to – Hey, let me see!” yelled Taine.

Beasly told the truth. A faint hum was coming from the tubes.

A voice came in, gaining in volume as the set warmed up.

It was speaking gibberish.

“What kind of talk is that?” asked Beasly.

“I don’t know,” said Taine, close to panic now.

First the television set, then the stove and now the radio!

He spun the tuning knob and the pointer crawled slowly across the dial face instead of spinning

across as he remembered it, and station after station sputtered and went past.

He tuned in the next station that came up and it was strange lingo, too – and he knew by then exactly what he had.

Instead of a \$39.50 job, he had here on the kitchen table an all-band receiver like they advertised in the fancy magazines.

He straightened up and said to Beasly: “See if you can get someone speaking English. I’ll get on with the eggs.”

He turned on the second burner and got out the frying pan. He put it on the stove and found eggs and bacon in the refrigerator.

Beasly got a station that had band music playing.

“How is that?” he asked.

“That is fine,” said Taine.

Towser came out from the bedroom, stretching and yawning. He went to the door and showed he wanted out.

Taine let him out.

“If I were you,” he told the dog, “I’d lay off that woodchuck. You’ll have all the woods dug up.”

“He ain’t digging after any woodchuck, Hiram.”

“Well, a rabbit, then.”

“Not a rabbit, either. I snuck off yesterday when I was supposed to be beating rugs. That’s what Abbie got so sore about.”

Taine grunted, breaking eggs into the skillet.

“I snuck away and went over to where Towser was. I talked with him and he told me it wasn’t a woodchuck or a rabbit. He said it was something else. I pitched in and helped him dig. Looks to me like he found an old tank of some sort buried out there in the woods.”

“Towser wouldn’t dig up any tank,” protested Taine. “He wouldn’t care about anything except a rabbit or a woodchuck.”

“He was working hard,” insisted Beasly. “He seemed to be excited.”

“Maybe the woodchuck just dug his hole under this old tank or whatever it might be.”

“Maybe so,” Beasly agreed. He fiddled with the radio some more. He got a disk jockey who was pretty terrible.

Taine shoveled eggs and bacon onto plates and brought them to the table. He poured big cups of coffee and began buttering the toast.

“Dive in,” he said to Beasly.

“This is good of you, Hiram, to take me in like this. I won’t stay no longer than it takes to find a job.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly say –”

“There are times,” said Beasly, “when I get to thinking I haven’t got a friend and then I remember your ma, how nice she was to me and all –”

“Oh, all right,” said Taine.

He knew when he was licked.

He brought the toast and a jar of jam to the table and sat down, beginning to eat.

“Maybe you got something I could help you with,” suggested Beasly, using the back of his hand to wipe egg off his chin.

“I have a load of furniture out in the driveway. I could use a man to help me get it down into the basement.”

“I’ll be glad to do that,” said Beasly. “I am good and strong. I don’t mind work at all. I just don’t like people jawing at me.”

They finished breakfast and then carried the furniture down into the basement. They had some trouble with the Governor Winthrop, for it was an unwieldy thing to handle.

When they finally horsed it down, Taine stood off and looked at it. The man, he told himself, who slapped paint onto that beautiful cherry wood had a lot to answer for.

He said to Beasly: “We have to get the paint off that thing there. And we must do it carefully. Use paint remover and a rag wrapped around a spatula and just sort of roll it off. Would you like to try it?”

“Sure, I would. Say, Hiram, what will we have for lunch?”

“I don’t know,” said Taine. “We’ll throw something together. Don’t tell me you are hungry.”

“Well, it was sort of hard work, getting all that stuff down here.”

“There are cookies in the jar on the kitchen shelf,” said Taine. “Go and help yourself.”

When Beasly went upstairs, Taine walked slowly around the basement. The ceiling, he saw, was still intact. Nothing else seemed to be disturbed.

Maybe that television set and the stove and radio, he thought, was just their way of paying rent to me. And if that were the case, he told himself, whoever they might be, he’d be more than willing to let them stay right on.

He looked around some more and could find nothing wrong.

He went upstairs and called to Beasly in the kitchen.

“Come on out to the garage, where I keep the paint. We’ll hunt up some remover and show you how to use it.”

Beasly, a supply of cookies clutched in his hand, trotted willingly behind him.

As they rounded the corner of the house they could hear Towser’s muffled barking. Listening to him it seemed to Taine that he was getting hoarse.

Three days, he thought – or was it four?

“If we don’t do something about it,” he said, “that fool dog is going to get himself wore out.”

He went into the garage and came back with two shovels and a pick.

“Come on,” he said to Beasly. “We have to put a stop to this before we have any peace.”

IV

Towser had done himself a noble job of excavation. He was almost completely out of sight. Only the end of his considerably bedraggled tail showed out of the hole he had clawed in the forest floor.

Beasly had been right about the tanklike thing. One edge of it showed out of one side of the hole.

Towser backed out of the hole and sat down heavily, his whiskers dripping clay, his tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth.

“He says that it’s about time that we showed up,” said Beasly.

Taine walked around the hole and knelt down. He reached down a hand to brush the dirt off the projecting edge of Beasly’s tank. The clay was stubborn and hard to wipe away, but from the feel of the tank was heavy metal.

Taine picked up a shovel and rapped it against the tank. The tank gave out a clang.

They got to work, shoveling away a foot or so of topsoil that lay above the object. It was hard work and the thing was bigger than they had thought and it took some time to get it uncovered, even roughly.

“I’m hungry,” Beasly complained.

Taine glanced at his watch. It was almost one o’clock.

“Run on back to the house,” he said to Beasly. “You’ll find something in the refrigerator and there’s milk to drink.”

“How about you, Hiram? Ain’t you ever hungry?”

“You could bring me back a sandwich and see if you can find a trowel.”

“What you want a trowel for?”

“I want to scrape the dirt off this thing and see what it is.”

He squatted down beside the thing they had unearthed and watched Beasly disappear into the woods.

“Towser,” he said, “this is the strangest animal you ever put to ground.”

A man, he told himself, might better joke about it – if to do no more than keep his fear away.

Beasly wasn’t scared, of course. Beasly didn’t have the sense to be scared of a thing like this.

Twelve feet wide by twenty long and oval shaped. About the size, he thought, of a good-size living room. And there never had been a tank of that shape or size in all of Willow Bend.

He fished his jackknife out of his pocket and started to scratch away the dirt at one point on the surface of the thing. He got a square inch free of dirt and it was no metal such as he had ever seen. It looked for all the world like glass.

He kept on scraping at the dirt until he had a clean place as big as an outstretched hand.

It wasn’t any metal. He’d almost swear to that. It looked like cloudy glass – like the milk-glass goblets and bowls he was always on the lookout for. There were a lot of people who were plain nuts about it and they’d pay fancy prices for it.

He closed the knife and put it back into his pocket and squatted, looking at the oval shape that Towser had discovered.

And the conviction grew: Whatever it was that had come to live with him undoubtedly had arrived with this same contraption. From space or time, he thought, and was astonished that he thought it, for he had never thought such a thing before.

He picked up his shovel and began to dig again, digging down this time, following the curving side of this alien thing that lay within the earth.

And as he dug, he wondered. What should he say about this – or should he say anything? Maybe the smartest course would be to cover it again and never breathe a word about it to a living soul.

Beasly would talk about it, naturally. But no one in the village would pay attention to anything the Beasly said. Everyone in Willow Bend knew Beasly was cracked.

Beasly finally came back. He carried three inexpertly made sandwiches wrapped in an old newspaper and a quart bottle almost full of milk.

“You certainly took your time,” said Taine, slightly irritated.

“I got interested,” Beasly explained.

“Interested in what?”

“Well, there were three big trucks and they were lugging a lot of heavy stuff down into the basement. Two or three big cabinets and a lot of other junk. And you know Abbie’s television set. Well, they took the set away. I told them that they shouldn’t, but they took it anyway.”

“I forgot,” said Taine. “Henry said he’d send the computer over and I plumb forgot.”

Taine ate the sandwiches, sharing them with Towser, who was very grateful in a muddy way.

Finished, Taine rose and picked up his shovel.

“Let’s get to work,” he said.

“But you got all that stuff down in the basement.”

“That can wait,” said Taine. “This job we have to finish.”

It was getting dusk by the time they finished.

Taine leaned wearily on his shovel.

Twelve feet by twenty across the top and ten feet deep – and all of it, every bit of it, made of the milk-glass stuff that sounded like a bell when you whacked it with a shovel.

They’d have to be small, he thought, if there were many of them, to live in a space that size, especially if they had to stay there very long. And that fitted in, of course, for if they weren’t small they couldn’t now be living in the space between the basement joists.

If they were really living there, thought Taine. If it wasn’t all just a lot of supposition.

Maybe, he thought, even if they had been living in the house, they might be there no longer – for Towser had smelled or heard or somehow sensed them in the morning, but by that very night he’d paid them no attention.

Taine slung his shovel across his shoulder and hoisted the pick.

“Come on,” he said, “let’s go. We’ve put in a long, hard day.”

They tramped out through the brush and reached the road.

Fireflies were flickering off and on in the woody darkness and the street lamps were swaying in the summer breeze. The stars were hard and bright.

Maybe they still were in the house, thought Taine. Maybe when they found out that Towser had objected to them, they had fixed it so he’d be aware of them no longer.

They probably were highly adaptive. It stood to good reason they would have to be. It hadn’t taken them too long, he told himself grimly, to adapt to a human house.

He and Beasly went up the gravel driveway in the dark to put the tools away in the garage and there was something funny going on, for there was no garage.

There was no garage and there was no front on the house and the driveway was cut off abruptly and there was nothing but the curving wall of what apparently had been the end of the garage.

They came up to the curving wall and stopped, squinting unbelieving in the summer dark.

There was no garage, no porch, no front of the house at all. It was as if someone had taken the opposite corners of the front of the house and bent them together until they touched, folding the entire

front of the building inside the curvature of the bent-together corners.

He now had a curved-front house. Although it was, actually, not as simple as all that, for the curvature was not in proportion to what actually would have happened in case of such a feat. The curve was long and graceful and somehow not quite apparent. It was as if the front of the house had been eliminated and an illusion of the rest of the house had been summoned to mask the disappearance.

Taine dropped the shovel and the pick and they clattered on the driveway gravel. He put his hand up to his face and wiped it across his eyes, as if to clear his eyes of something that could not possibly be there.

And when he took the hand away it had not changed a bit.

There was no front to the house.

Then he was running around the house, hardly knowing he was running, and there was a fear inside of him at what had happened to the house.

But the back of the house was all right. It was exactly as it had always been.

He clattered up the stoop with Beasly and Towser running close behind him. He pushed open the door and burst into the entry and scrambled up the stairs into the kitchen and went across the kitchen in three strides to see what had happened to the front of the house.

At the door between the kitchen and the living room he stopped and his hands went out to grasp the door jamb as he stared in disbelief at the windows of the living room.

It was night outside. There could be no doubt of that. He had seen the fireflies flickering in the brush and weeds and the street lamps had been lit and the stars were out.

But a flood of sunlight was pouring through the windows of the living room and out beyond the windows lay a land that was not Willow Bend.

“Beasly,” he gasped, “look out there in front!”

Beasly looked.

“What place is that?” he asked.

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

Towser had found his dish and was pushing it around the kitchen floor with his nose, by way of telling Taine that it was time to eat.

Taine went across the living room and opened the front door. The garage, he saw, was there. The pickup stood with its nose against the open garage door and the car was safe inside.

There was nothing wrong with the front of the house at all.

But if the front of the house was all right, that was all that was.

For the driveway was chopped off just a few feet beyond the tail end of the pickup and there was no yard or woods or road. There was just a desert – a flat, far-reaching desert, level as a floor, with occasional boulder piles and haphazard clumps of vegetation and all of the ground covered with sand and pebbles. A big blinding sun hung just above a horizon that seemed much too far away and a funny thing about it was that the sun was in the north, where no proper sun should be. It had a peculiar whiteness, too.

Beasly stepped out on the porch and Taine saw that he was shivering like a frightened dog.

“Maybe,” Taine told him, kindly, “you’d better go back in and start making us some supper.”

“But, Hiram –”

“It’s all right,” said Taine. “It’s bound to be all right.”

“If you say so, Hiram.”

He went in and the screen door banged behind him and in a minute Taine heard him in the kitchen.

He didn't blame Beasley for shivering, he admitted to himself. It was a sort of shock to step out your front door into an unknown land. A man might eventually get used to it, of course, but it would take some doing.

He stepped down off the porch and walked around the truck and around the garage corner and when he rounded the corner he was half prepared to walk back into familiar Willow Bend – for when he had gone in the back door the village had been there.

There was no Willow Bend. There was more of the desert, a great deal more of it.

He walked around the house and there was no back to the house. The back of the house now was just the same as the front had been before – the same smooth curve pulling the sides of the house together.

He walked on around the house to the front again and there was desert all the way. And the front was still all right. It hadn't changed at all. The truck was there on the chopped-off driveway and the garage was open and the car inside.

Taine walked out a ways into the desert and hunkered down and scooped up a handful of the pebbles and the pebbles were just pebbles.

He squatted there and let the pebbles trickle through his fingers.

In Willow Bend there was a back door and there wasn't any front. Here, wherever here might be there was a front door, but there wasn't any back.

He stood up and tossed the rest of the pebbles away and wiped his dusty hands upon his britches.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a sense of movement on the porch and there they were.

A line of tiny animals, if animals they were, came marching down the steps, one behind the other. They were four inches high or so and they went on all four feet, although it was plain to see that the front feet were really hands, not feet. They had ratlike faces that were vaguely human, with noses long and pointed. They looked like they might have scales instead of hide, for their bodies glistened with rippling motion as they walked. And all of them had tails that looked very much like the coiled-wire tails one finds on certain toys and the tails stuck straight up above them, quivering as they walked.

They came down the steps in single file, in perfect military order, with half a foot or so of spacing between each one of them.

They came down the steps and walked out into the desert in a straight, undeviating line as if they knew exactly where they might be bound. There was something deadly purposeful about them and yet they didn't hurry.

Taine counted sixteen of them and he watched them go out into the desert until they were almost lost to sight.

There go the ones, he thought, who came to live with me. They are the ones who fixed up the ceiling and who repaired Abbie's television set and jiggered up the stove and radio. And more than likely, too, they were the ones who had come to Earth in the strange milk-glass contraption out there in the woods.

And if they had come to Earth in that deal out in the woods, then what sort of place was this?

He climbed the porch and opened the screen door and saw the neat, six-inch circle his departing guests had achieved in the screen to get out of the house. He made a mental note that some day, when he had the time, he would have to fix it.

He went in and slammed the door behind him.

“Beasly,” he shouted.

There was no answer.

Towser crawled from beneath the love seat and apologized.

“It’s all right, pal,” said Taine. “That outfit scared me, too.”

He went into the kitchen. The dim ceiling light shone on the overturned coffee pot, the broken cup in the center of the floor, the upset bowl of eggs. One broken egg was a white and yellow gob on the linoleum.

He stepped down on the landing and saw that the screen door in the back was wrecked beyond repair. Its rusty mesh was broken – exploded might have been a better word – and a part of the frame was smashed.

Taine looked at it in wondering admiration.

“The poor fool,” he said. “He went straight through it without opening it at all.”

He snapped on the light and went down the basement stairs. Halfway down he stopped in utter wonderment.

To his left was a wall – a wall of the same sort of material as had been used to put in the ceiling.

He stooped and saw that the wall ran clear across the basement, floor to ceiling, shutting off the workshop area.

And inside the workshop, what?

For one thing, he remembered, the computer that Henry had sent over just this morning. Three trucks, Beasly had said – three truckloads of equipment delivered straight into their paws!

Taine sat down weakly on the steps.

They must have thought, he told himself, that he was co-operating! Maybe they had figured that he knew what they were about and so went along with them. Or perhaps they thought he was paying them for fixing up the TV set and the stove and radio.

But to tackle first things first, why had they repaired the TV set and the stove and radio? As a sort of rental payment? As a friendly gesture? Or as a sort of practice run to find out what they could about this world’s technology? To find, perhaps, how their technology could be adapted to the materials and conditions on this planet they had found?

Taine raised a hand and rapped with his knuckles on the wall beside the stairs and the smooth white surface gave out a pinging sound.

He laid his ear against the wall and listened closely and it seemed to him he could hear a low-key humming, but if so it was so faint he could not be absolutely sure.

Banker Stevens’ lawn mower was in there, behind the wall, and a lot of other stuff waiting for repair. They’d take the hide right off him, he thought, especially Banker Stevens. Stevens was a tight man.

Beasly must have been half-crazed with fear, he thought. When he had seen those things coming up out of the basement, he’d gone clean off his rocker. He’d gone straight through the door without even bothering to try to open it and now he was down in the village yapping to anyone who’d stop to listen to him.

No one ordinarily would pay Beasly much attention, but if he yapped long enough and wild enough they’d probably do some checking. They’d come storming up here and they’d give the place a going over and they’d stand goggle-eyed at what they found in front and pretty soon some of them would have worked their way around to sort of running things.

And it was none of their business, Taine stubbornly told himself, his ever-present business sense

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