Chapter I

"What a paradox, what a fearful reproach, when the distinction of a few hundred miles—nay, as many feet or even inches!—can transform heinous crime to simple unqualified circumstance!"

—Hm. Balder Bashin, in the Ecclesiarchic Nunciamento of Year 1000 at Foresse, on the planet Krokinole.

"Law cannot reach where enforcement will not follow."

—Popular aphorism.

Excerpts from "Smade of Smade's Planet," feature article in *Cosmopolis*, October, 1523:

Q: Do you ever get lonesome, Mr. Smade?

A: Not with three wives and eleven children.

Q: Whatever impelled you to settle here? A rather dismal world, on the whole, isn't it?

A: Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I don't care to run a vacation resort.

Q: What kind of people patronize the tavern?

A: People who want quiet and a chance to rest. Occasionally a traveler from inside the Pale or an explorer.

Q: I've heard that some of your clientele is pretty rough. In fact—not to mince matters—it's the general belief that Smade's Tavern is frequented by the most notorious pirates and freebooters of the Beyond.

A: I suppose they occasionally need rest too.

Q: Don't you have difficulty with these people? Maintaining order, so to speak?

A: No. They know my rules. I say, 'Gentlemen, please desist. Your differences are your own; they are fugitive. The harmonious atmosphere of the tavern is mine and I intend it to be permanent.'

Q: So then they desist?

A: Usually.

Q: And if not?

A: I pitch them into the sea.

■

Smade was a reticent man. His origins and early life were known only to himself. In the year 1479 he acquired a cargo of fine timber, which, for a whole set of obscure reasons, he took to a small stony world in the middle Beyond. And there, with the help of ten indentured artisans and as many slaves, he built Smade's Tavern.

The site was a long narrow shelf of heath between the Smade Mountains and Smade Ocean, precisely on the planet's equator. He built to a plan as old as construction itself, using stone for the walls, timber beams and plates of schist for the roof. Completed, the tavern clung to the landscape, as integral as an outcrop of rock: a long two-storied structure with a high gable, a double row of windows to front and rear, chimneys at either end venting smoke from fires of fossil moss. At the rear stood a group of cypress trees, their shape completely appropriate to the landscape.

Smade introduced other new features into the ecology: in a sheltered valley behind the tavern he planted fodder and garden truck; in another he kept a small herd of cattle and

a flock of poultry. All did moderately well, but showed no disposition to overrun the planet.

Smade's dominion extended as far as he cared to claim—there was no other habitation on the planet—but he chose to assert control only over an area of perhaps three acres, within the bounds of a whitewashed stone fence. To occurrences beyond the fence Smade held aloof, unless he had reason to consider his own interests threatened: a contingency which had never arisen.

Smade's Planet was the single companion of Smade's Star, an undistinguished white dwarf in a relatively empty region of space. The native flora was sparse: lichen, moss, primitive vines and palodendron, pelagic algae which tinctured the sea black. The fauna was even simpler: white worms in the sea-bottom muck; a few gelatinous creatures which gathered and ingested the black algae in a ludicrously inept fashion; an assortment of simple protozoa. Smade's alterations of the planet's ecology could hardly, therefore, be considered detrimental.

Smade himself was tall, broad and stout, with bone-white skin and jet-black hair. His antecedents, as has been mentioned, were vague, and he never had been heard to reminisce; the tavern, however, was managed with the utmost decorum. The three wives lived in harmony, the children were handsome and well-mannered, Smade himself was unfailingly polite. His rates were high, but his hospitality was generous, and he made no difficulties about collecting his bill. A sign hung above the bar: "Eat and drink without stint. He who can and does pay is a customer. He who cannot and does not pay is a guest of the establishment."

Smade's patrons were diverse: explorers, locaters, Jarnell

technicians, private agents in search of lost men or stolen treasure, more rarely an IPCC representative, or "weasel", in the argot of the Beyond. Others were folk more dire, and these were of as many sorts as there were crimes to be named. Making a virtue of necessity, Smade presented the same face to all.

To Smade's Tavern in the July of 1524 came Kirth Gersen, representing himself as a locater. His boat was the standard model leased by the estate houses within the Oikumene, a thirty-foot cylinder equipped with no more than bare necessities: in the bow the monitor–autopilot duplex, a star-finder, chronometer, macroscope and manual controls; midships the living quarters with air machine, organic reconverter, information bank and storage; aft the energy block, the Jarnell intersplit and further storage. The boat was as scarred and dented as any; Gersen's personal disguise was no more than well-worn clothes and natural taciturnity. Smade accepted him on his own terms.

"Will you stay awhile, Mr. Gersen?"

"Two or three days, perhaps. I have things to think over."

Smade nodded in profound understanding. "We're slack just now; just you and the Star King. You'll find all the quiet you need."

"I'll be pleased for that," said Gersen, which was quite true; his just-completed affairs had left him with a set of unresolved qualms. He turned away, then halted and looked back as Smade's words penetrated his consciousness. "There's a Star King here at the tavern?"

"He has presented himself so."

"I've never seen a Star King. Not that I know of."

Smade nodded politely to indicate that the gossip had

reached to the allowable limits of particularity. He indicated the tavern clock: "Our local time; better set your watch. Supper at seven o'clock: just half an hour."

Gersen climbed stone stairs to his room, an austere cubicle containing bed, chair and table. He looked through the window, along the verge of heath between mountain and ocean. Two spacecraft occupied the landing field: his own and another ship, larger and heavier, evidently the property of the Star King.

Gersen washed in a hall bathroom, then returned to the downstairs hall, where he dined on the produce of Smade's own gardens and herd. Two other guests made their appearance. The first was the Star King, who strode to the far end of the room in a flutter of rich garments: an individual with skin dyed jet-black, eyes like ebony cabochons as black as his skin. He was taller than average height, and carried himself with consummate arrogance. Lusterless as charcoal, the skin dye blurred the contrast of his features, made his face a protean mask. His garments were dramatically fanciful: breeches of orange silk, a loose scarlet robe with white sash, a loose striped gray and black coif which hung rakishly down the right side of his head. Gersen inspected him with open curiosity. This was the first Star King he had observed as such, though popular belief had hundreds moving incognito through the worlds of man: cosmic mysteries since the first human visit to Lambda Grus.

The second of the guests apparently had just arrived: a thin middle-aged man of indefinite racial background. Gersen had seen many like him: miscellaneous uncategorized vagabonds of the Beyond. He had short coarse white hair, a sallow undyed skin, an air of diffident uncertainty. He ate without

appetite, looking back and forth between Gersen and the Star King in furtive speculation, but presently his most searching glances were directed toward Gersen. Gersen tried to avoid the increasingly insistent gaze; the least of his desires was involvement in the affairs of a stranger.

After dinner, as Gersen sat watching the play of lightning over the ocean, the man sidled close, wincing and grimacing in sheer nervousness. He spoke in a voice which he tried to keep even, but which trembled nevertheless. "I assume that you are here from Brinktown?"

From childhood Gersen had concealed his emotions behind a careful, if somewhat saturnine, imperturbability; but the man's question, jangling upon his own alarms and tensions, startled him. He paused before replying, gave a mild assent. "As a matter of fact, I am."

"I expected to see someone else. But no matter. I've decided that I can't fulfill my obligation. Your journey is pointless. That's all." He stood back, teeth showing in a humorless grin — obviously braced against an expected dire reaction.

Gersen smiled politely, shook his head. "You mistake me for someone else."

The other peered down in disbelief. "But you are here from Brinktown?"

"What of that?"

The other made a forlorn gesture. "No matter. I expected — but no matter." After a moment he said, "I noticed your ship. Model 9B. You're a locater, then."

"Correct."

The man refused to be discouraged by Gersen's terseness. "You're on your way out? Or in?"

"I've been out. I can't say that I've had luck."

The other man's tension suddenly gave way. His shoulders sagged. "I own to the same line of business. As to luck?" He heaved a forlorn sigh, and Gersen smelled Smade's home-distilled whiskey. "If it's bad, no doubt I have myself to blame."

Gersen's suspicion was not completely lulled. The man's voice was well-modulated, his accent educated. In itself it indicated nothing. He might be precisely as he represented himself, a locater in some sort of trouble at Brinktown. Or he might be otherwise: a situation entailing a set of hair-raising corollaries. Gersen would vastly have preferred the company of his own thoughts, but he made a courteous gesture. "Do you care to join me?"

"Thank you." The man seated himself gratefully, and with a new air of bravado seemed to dismiss all of his worries and apprehensions. "My name is Lugo Teehalt. Will you drink?" Without waiting for assent he signaled one of Smade's young daughters, a girl of nine or ten, wearing a modest white blouse and long black skirt. "I'll use whiskey, lass, and serve this gentleman whatever he decides for himself."

Teehalt appeared to derive strength either from the drink or from the prospect of conversation. His voice became firmer, his eyes clearer and brighter. "How long have you been out?"

"Four or five months," said Gersen, in his role of locater. "I've seen nothing but rock and mud and sulfur . . . I don't know whether it's worth the toil."

Teehalt smiled, nodded slowly. "But still—there's always excitement. The star gleams, you notice a circlet of planets, you ask yourself, will it be now? And time after time: the smoke and ammonia, the weird crystals, the winds of monoxide, the rains of acid. But you go on and on and on. Perhaps

in the region ahead the elements coalesce into nobler forms. Of course it's the same slime and black trap and methane snow. And then suddenly: there it is. Utter beauty . . ."

Gersen sipped his whiskey without comment. Teehalt apparently was a gentleman, well-mannered and educated, sadly come down in the world.

Teehalt continued, half talking to himself. "Where the luck lies, that I don't know. I'm sure of nothing. Good luck looks to be bad luck, disappointment seems happier than success . . . But then, bad luck I would never have recognized as good luck, and called it bad luck still, and who can confuse disappointment with success? Not I. So it's all one and life proceeds regardless."

Gersen began to relax. This sort of incoherence, at once engaging and suggestive of a deeper wisdom, could not be imagined among his enemies. Unless they hired a madman? Gersen made a cautious contribution: "Uncertainty hurts more than ignorance."

Teehalt inspected him with respect, as if the statement had been one of profound wisdom. "You can't believe that a man is the better for ignorance?"

"Cases vary," said Gersen, in as easy and light a manner as was natural to him. "It's clear that uncertainty breeds indecision, which is a dead halt. An ignorant man can act. As for right and wrong—each man to his own answer."

Teehalt smiled sadly. "You espouse a very popular doctrine, ethical pragmatism, which always turns out to be the doctrine of self-interest. Still, I understand you where you speak of uncertainty, for I am an uncertain man." He shook his thin sharp-featured head. "I know I'm in a bad way, but why should I not be? I've had a peculiar experience." He finished

the whiskey, leaned forward to gaze into Gersen's face. "You are perhaps more sensitive than first impression would suggest. And possibly younger than you seem."

"I was born in 1490."

Teehalt made a sign which could mean anything, searched Gersen's face once more. "Can you understand me if I say that I have known over-much beauty?"

"I probably could understand," said Gersen, "if you made yourself clear."

Teehalt blinked thoughtfully. "I will try." He considered. "As I have admitted to you, I am a locater. It is a poor trade — with apologies to you — for eventually it involves the degradation of beauty. Sometimes only to a small extent, which is what a person such as myself hopes for. Sometimes there is only small beauty to corrupt, and sometimes the beauty is incorruptible." He made a gesture of his hand toward the ocean. "The tavern harms nothing. The tavern allows the beauty of this terrible little planet to reveal itself." He leaned forward, licking his lips. "The name Malagate is known to you? Attel Malagate?"

For a second time Gersen was startled; for a second time the reaction failed to reach his face. After another slight pause, he asked casually, "Malagate the Woe, so-called?"

"Yes. Malagate the Woe. You are acquainted with him?" And Lugo Teehalt peered at Gersen through eyes which had suddenly gone leaden, as if the mere act of naming the possibility had renewed his suspicion.

"Only by reputation," said Gersen, with a bleak twitch of a smile.

Teehalt leaned forward with great earnestness. "Whatever you may have heard, I assure you, it is flattery."

"You don't know what I have heard."

"I doubt if you have heard the worst. But nevertheless, and the astounding paradox . . ." Teehalt closed his eyes. "I am locating for Attel Malagate. He owns my ship. I have taken his money."

"It is a difficult position."

"When I found out—what could I do?" Teehalt threw up his hands in an excited extravagant gesture, reflecting either emotional turmoil or the effects of Smade's whiskey. "I asked myself this over and over. I did not make this choice. I had my ship and my money, not from an estate house, but from an institution of dignity. I did not think of myself as a common locater. I was Lugo Teehalt, a man of parts, who had been appointed to the post of Chief Explorer for the institution, or some such folly—so I assured myself. But they sent me out in a 9B boat, and I could no longer delude myself. I was Lugo Teehalt, common locater."

"Where is your boat?" asked Gersen, idly curious. "There is only my own and the Star King's out on the landing field."

Teehalt pursed his lips, in another onset of wariness. "I have good reason for caution." Teehalt glanced right and left. "Would it surprise you to learn that I expect to meet—" he hesitated, thought better of what he had planned to say, and sat silently a moment, looking into his empty glass. Gersen signaled, and young Araminta Smade brought whiskey on a white jade tray, upon which she herself had painted a red and blue floral border.

"But this is inconsequential," said Teehalt suddenly. "I bore you with my problems . . ."

"Not at all," said Gersen, quite truthfully. "The affairs of Attel Malagate interest me."

"I can understand this," said Teehalt after another pause.

"He is a peculiar combination of qualities."

"From whom did you have your boat?" Gersen asked ingenuously.

Teehalt shook his head. "I will not say. For all I know you may be Malagate's man. I hope not, for your own sake."

"Why should I be Malagate's man?"

"Circumstances suggest as much. But circumstances only. And in fact I know that you are not. He would not send someone here whom I have not met."

"You have a rendezvous, then."

"One I don't care to keep. But—I don't know what else to do."

"Return to the Oikumene."

"What does Malagate care for that? He comes and goes as he pleases."

"Why should he concern himself with you? Locaters are twenty to the dozen."

"I am unique," said Teehalt. "I am a locater who has found a prize too precious to sell."

Gersen was impressed in spite of himself.

"It is a world too beautiful for degradation," said Teehalt. "An innocent world, full of light and air and color. To give this world to Malagate, for his palaces and whirligigs and casinos—it would be like giving a child to a squad of Sarkoy soldiers. Worse? Possibly worse."

"And Malagate knows of this?"

"It is my unfortunate habit to drink rashly and talk wildly."

"As you do now," suggested Gersen.

Teehalt smiled his wincing morose smile. "You could tell Malagate nothing he does not already know. The damage was done at Brinktown."

"Tell me more of this world. Is it inhabited?"

Teehalt smiled again, but made no answer. Gersen felt no resentment. Teehalt, beckoning to Araminta Smade, ordered Fraze, a heavy sour-sweet liquor reputed to include among its constituents a subtle hallucinizer. Gersen signified that he would drink no more.

Night had long settled over the planet. Lightning crashed back and forth; a sudden downpour began to drum on the roof.

Teehalt, lulled by the liquor, perhaps seeing visions among the flames, said, "You could never find this world. I am resolved that it shall not be violated."

"What of your contract?"

Teehalt made a contemptuous motion. "I would honor it for an ordinary world."

"The information is on the monitor filament," Gersen pointed out. "The property of your sponsor."

Teehalt was silent so long that Gersen wondered if he were awake. Finally Teehalt said, "I am afraid to die. Otherwise I would drop myself and boat and monitor and all into a star."

Gersen had no comment to make.

"I do not know what to do." Teehalt's voice became soft, as the drink soothed his brain and showed him visions. "This is a remarkable world. Beautiful, yes. I wonder if the beauty does not conceal another quality which I can't fathom . . . just as a woman's beauty camouflages her more abstract virtues. Or vices . . . In any event the world is beautiful and serene beyond words. There are mountains washed by rain. Over the valleys float clouds as soft and bright as snow. The sky is a deep dark sapphire blue. The air is sweet and cool — so fresh that it seems a lens. There are flowers, though not very many.

They grow in little clumps, so that to find them is like coming on a treasure. But there are many trees, and most magnificent are the great kings, with gray bark, which seem to have lived forever.

"You asked if the world were inhabited. I am forced to answer yes, though the creatures who live there are strange. I call them dryads. I saw only a few hundred, and they seem a race ages old. As old as the trees, as old as the mountains." Teehalt shut his eyes. "The day is twice the length of ours; the mornings are long and bright, the noons are quiet, the afternoons are golden, like honey. The dryads bathe in the river or stand in the dark forest . . ." Teehalt's voice dwindled, he appeared to be half asleep.

Gersen prompted him. "'Dryads'?"

Teehalt stirred, raised in his chair. "It's as good a name as any. They're at least half plant. I made no real examination; I dared not. Why? I don't know. I was there — oh, I suppose two or three weeks. This is what I saw . . ."

Teehalt landed the battered old 9B on a meadow beside a river. He waited while the analyzer made environmental tests, though a landscape so fair could not fail to be hospitable — or so thought Teehalt, who was scholar, poet, wastrel in equal parts. He was not wrong: the atmosphere proved salubrious; allergen-sensitive cultures tested negative; micro-organisms of air and soil quickly died upon contact with the standard antibiotic with which Teehalt now dosed himself. There seemed no reason why he should not immediately go forth upon this world, and he did so.

On the turf in front of the ship Teehalt stood entranced. The air was clear and clean and fresh, like the air of a spring

dawn, and utterly silent, as if just after a bird call.

Teehalt wandered up the valley. Stopping to admire a grove of trees, he saw the dryads, who stood gathered in the shade. They were bipeds, with a peculiarly human torso and head structure, though it was clear that they resembled man in only the most superficial style. Their skin was silver, brown, green, in sheens and splotches; the head showed no features other than purplish-green bruises, which seemed to be eye-spots. From the shoulders rose members like arms, which branched into twigs and then leaves of dark and pale green, burnished red, bronze-orange, golden ocher. They saw Teehalt and moved forward with almost human interest, to pause about fifty feet distant, swaying on supple limbs, the crests of colored leaves shimmering in the sunlight. They examined Teehalt and he examined them, in a mutual absence of fear, and Teehalt thought them the most entrancing creatures of his experience.

Teehalt remembered the days which followed as idyllic and utterly calm. There was a majesty, a clarity, a transcendental quality to the planet which affected him with an almost religious awe. Presently he came to understand that he must leave shortly or succumb psychically, give himself completely to the world. The knowledge afflicted him with an almost unbearable sadness, for he knew that he would never return.

During this time he watched the dryads as they moved through the valley, idly curious as to their nature and habits. Were they intelligent? Teehalt never answered the question to his own satisfaction. If not intelligent, he thought, surely they were wise. Their metabolism puzzled him, and also the nature of their life-cycle, though gradually he acquired at least a glimmer of enlightenment. He assumed at first that they derived energy from some sort of photosynthetic process.

Then one morning, as Teehalt contemplated a group of dryads standing immobile in the marshy meadow, a large winged hawk-like creature swooped down, buffeted one of the dryads to the side. As it toppled Teehalt glimpsed two white shafts, or prongs, extending from the supple gray legs into the ground, which at once retracted. The hawk creature ignored the toppled dryad, but scratched and tore at the marsh and unearthed an enormous white grub. Teehalt watched with great interest. The dryad apparently had located the grub in its subterranean burrow and had pierced it with a sort of proboscis, presumably for the ingestion of sustenance. Teehalt felt a small pang of shame and disillusionment. The dryads were evidently not quite as innocent and ethereal as he had thought them to be.

The hawk-thing lumbered up from the pit, croaked, coughed, flapped away. Teehalt went curiously forward, stared down at the mangled worm. There was little to be seen but shreds of pallid flesh, yellow ooze and a hard black ball, the size of Teehalt's two fists. As he stared down, the dryads came slowly forward and Teehalt withdrew. From a distance he watched as they clustered about the torn worm. It seemed to Teehalt that they mourned the mangled creature. But presently, with their supple lower limbs, they brought up the black pod and one of them carried it away high in its branches. Teehalt followed at a distance and watched in fascinated wonder as close beside a grove of slender white-branched trees the dryads buried the black pod.

In retrospect Teehalt wondered why he had attempted no communication with the dryads. Once or twice during the time of his stay he toyed with the idea, and let the thought drift away—perhaps because he felt himself a gross and un-

pleasant intruder. The dryads in their turn treated him with what might be courteous disinterest.

Three days after the black pod had been buried Teehalt had occasion to return to the grove. To his astonishment he saw a pallid shoot rising from the ground above the pod. At the tip pale green leaves already were unfolding into the sunlight. Teehalt stood back, examined the grove with new interest: had each of these trees grown from a pod originated in the body of a subterranean grub? He examined the foliage, limbs, and bark, finding nothing to suggest such an origin.

He looked across the valley, to the great dark-leaved giants: surely the two varieties were similar? The giants were majestic, serene, with trunks rising two or three hundred feet to the first branching. The trees grown from the black pods were frail; their foliage was a tenderer green, the limbs were more flexible, and branched close to the ground—but the species were clearly related. Leaf shape and structure were almost identical, as was the general appearance of the bark, supple and rough-textured, though the bark of the giants was darker and coarser. Teehalt's head swarmed with speculations.

Later the same day he climbed the mountain across the valley. Crossing the ridge he came down upon a glen with precipitous rocky walls. A stream rushed and splashed through mossy boulders and low fernlike plants, falling from pool to pool. Approaching the brink Teehalt found himself on a level with the foliage of the giant trees, which here grew close beside the cliff. He noted dull green sacs, like fruit, growing among the leaves. Straining, risking a fall, Teehalt was able to pluck one of these sacs. He carried it down the mountainside and across the meadow toward the boat.

He passed a group of dryads who, fixing their purple-green

eye bruises on the sac, became rigid. Teehalt observed them with puzzlement. Now they approached, their gorgeous fans quivering and shimmering in agitation. Teehalt felt embarrassed and guilty; evidently by plucking the sac he had offended the dryads. Why or how he could not fathom, but he hastily sought the concealment of his ship, where he cut the sac. The husk was pithy and dry; down the center ran a stalk from which depended white pea-sized seeds, of great complexity. Teehalt inspected the seeds closely under a magnifier. They bore a remarkable resemblance to small under-developed beetles, or wasps. With tweezers and knife he opened one out on a sheet of paper, noting wings, thorax, mandibles: clearly an insect!

For a long while he sat contemplating the insects which grew on a tree: a curious analogue, so Teehalt reflected, to the sapling which sprouted from a pod taken from the body of a worm.

Sunset colored the sky; the distant parts of the valley grew indistinct. Dusk came and evening, with the stars blurring large as lamps.

The long night passed. At dawn when Teehalt emerged from his boat he knew that the time of his departure was close at hand. How? Why? He had no answer. The compulsion nevertheless was real; he must leave, and he knew he would never return. As he considered the mother-of-pearl sky, the curve and swell of the hills, the groves and forests, the gentle river, his eyes went damp. The world was too beautiful to leave; far too beautiful to remain upon. It worked on something deep inside him, aroused a queer tumult which he could not understand. There was a constant force from somewhere to run from the ship, to discard his clothes, his weapons, to merge,

to envelop and become enveloped, to immolate himself in an ecstasy of identification with beauty and grandeur . . . Today he must go. "If I'm here any longer," thought Teehalt, "I'll be carrying leaves over my head with the dryads."

He wandered up the valley, turning to watch the sun swell into the sky. He climbed to the ridge of the hill, looked east over a succession of rolling crests and valleys, rising gradually to a single great mountain. To west and south he glimpsed the glimmer of water; to the north spread green parkland, with a crumble of gray boulders like the ruins of an ancient city.

Returning into the valley Teehalt passed below the giant trees. Looking up he noticed that all the pods had split and now hung limp and withered. Even as he watched he heard a drone of wings. A hard heavy pellet struck his cheek, where it clung and bit.

In shock and pain Teehalt crushed the insect, or wasp. Looking aloft he saw others—a multitude, darting and veering. Hastily he returned to the ship, dressed in a coverall of tough film, his face and head protected by transparent mesh. He was unreasonably angry. The wasp's attack had marred his last day in the valley, and in fact had caused him the first pain of his stay. It was too much to expect, he reflected bitterly, that paradise could exist without the serpent. And he dropped a can of compressed insect repellent into his pouch . . . though it might or might not be efficacious against these half-vegetable insects.

Leaving the ship, he marched up the valley, with the insect's bite paining him still. Approaching the forest he came upon a strange scene: a group of dryads surrounded by a buzzing swarm of wasps. Teehalt approached curiously. The dryads, he saw, were under attack, but lacked any efficient

means of defense. As the wasps darted in to settle on the silver skin, the dryads flapped their branches, rubbed against each other, scraped with their legs, dislodging the insects as best they could.

Teehalt approached, filled with horrified anger. One of the dryads near him seemed to weaken; several of the insects gnawed through its skin, drawing gouts of ichor. The entire swarm suddenly condensed upon the unfortunate dryad, which tottered and fell, while the remaining dryads moved sedately away.

Teehalt, impelled to disgust and loathing, stepped forward, turned the can of repellent upon the nearly solid mass of wasps. It acted with dramatic effectiveness, the wasps turning white, withering, dropping to the ground; in a single minute the entire swarm was a scatter of small white husks. The dryad under attack also lay dead, having been almost instantly stripped of its flesh. The dryads who had escaped were now returning, and, so Teehalt thought, in a state of anguish and even fury. Their branches quivered and flashed; they marched down upon him with every indication of antagonism. Teehalt took to his heels and returned to his ship.

With binoculars he watched the dryads. They stood about their dead comrade in a state of anxiety and irresolution. Apparently — or at least it seemed so to Teehalt — their anguish was as much for the withered insects as the dead dryad.

They clustered over the fallen body. Teehalt could not observe exactly what they did, but presently they arose with a glossy black ball. And Teehalt watched them carry it across the valley toward the grove of giant trees.