Lusooma won second prize in the category Science Fiction in the Competition for Writers of Children’s Books organised by the Children’s Book Trust.

Excepting for a few names, all places and persons and events in the book are a part of a fantasy in this thirty-first century science fiction.
The threat

The giant wall-television screen was displaying the special New Year's Eve show. Though it was fast approaching midnight, the excitement of ushering in another year kept Sudhanshu and his twelve-year-old sister, Sarita, awake.

The music stopped abruptly and a giant clock appeared on the television screen, its second hand ticking away the last few seconds of the passing year.

The clock struck twelve and for a few brief seconds there was a black-out. Soon the lights came on again and the screen brightened, dazzling the eyes.

Lumina Druvansh, President of the Great Indian Federation, appeared on the screen, smiling. "I wish you all, my dear fellow citizens, a very happy New Year! Let this New Year, A.D. 3098, bring you continuous joy and peace!" she greeted.
"For over a thousand years we have worked for stability and peace. And for more than a hundred years we have given peace, our peace, to our Federation and the world."

President Lumina Druvansh's maternal smile faded. "But, my dear citizens, I must share with you a disturbing piece of news, even on this beautiful New Year's Day. Our great nation, accustomed to peace and plenty, is today exposed to some unnamed evil. Our Federal Investigators are trying to track down this evil but as of today neither the nature nor the originator of this evil is known. But I assure you that sooner or later our invincible Fedcom will bring the evil-doer to book.

"I reaffirm my government's commitment to the people. Let us now pledge to work for the continuation of peace on earth. May the Federation live for a million years!"

The national anthem was struck up by a one-thousand-strong band and almost instinctively Sudhanshu and Sarita sprang to attention.

Sudhanshu switched off the television with the remote control. He turned to Sarita. "The President couldn't be more explicit," he said, his eyes registering some unknown fear. "Someone is planning to destroy the Federation."

Sarita and Sudhanshu sat back in their armchairs, deep in thought. The children were tired after the New Year vigil. Now when the impact of the initial shock of the President's revelation had worn away, they began to doze.

Sudhanshu pressed a button. The arms of their chairs slid back into their slots and the backrests straightened out to become comfortable beds. A narrow slit opened at the foot of each chair to unroll electric blankets. The children were well settled for the rest of the night.

The first day of the New Year dawned to a cloudless sky. The January morning was cold but as the hours
passed, it grew warmer. It was late morning when the
two children were awakened by Homie, their home
computer. New Year's Day being a national holiday,
they could sleep as long as they liked. But Homie decided
otherwise. The children had had enough rest and it was
time to get up.

The children's home computer, affectionately called
Homie, was a private secretary, mother, sister, and
playmate rolled into one. She not only woke the children
up but also ordered them to bed. She was the first to
greet them in the morning; she then splashed on her
screen the best combination of activities for them to
engage in during the day. Homie suggested the breakfast
menu and while they were busy dressing, she sang for
them in her synthetic voice.

Sudhanshu sat down for breakfast.
"Would you have the latest news or more music, Sud?"
enquired Homie.
"News, please, Homie," requested Sudhanshu.
"All right. The news!" Homie said. "A little while
ago, President Lumina Druvansh of the Great Indian
Federation, spoke to the Press about the evil that is
threatening the nation. The President said that the evil
was much more vast and more dangerous than she had
first thought. The Federal Investigators could not yet
say what exactly it was."
"Any idea as to the danger, Sud?" asked Sarita.
"Not one." Sudhanshu was deep in thought.
"Maybe a meteor is about to crash on the Federation."
"There isn't one within imaginable distance. The
computers have tracked them down meticulously."
"A giant volcano, perhaps, about to erupt in one of
our great megapolises."
"Could be. A modern day Pompeii."
"I can't think of any more disasters."
"Sa, it could be anything. But I believe the President means no natural disasters. I think the evil is man-made. Nature never authors evil."

The conference room in the Presidential Palace was full to capacity. Journalists had arrived there in hundreds for they all suspected the situation to be a national emergency. Had it not been, the President would not have chosen the New Year's Day to reveal it.

Mr. Anand Banwar, accompanied by his children, Sudhanshu and Sarita, was present, too. He was a much respected journalist, who wrote for the prestigious weekly magazine, Federation Week. Mr. Banwar was known for his level-headed opinions. He had won several Federation awards for journalism and his articles were published in many foreign newspapers as well, including two interplanetary journals.

President Lumina Druvansh entered, flanked by the Federation Security Adviser and her Private Secretary, Serah the robot. She sat down and motioned to those present to be seated. She gazed at the crowd of reporters with a sad smile on her benevolent face.

"My friends of the Press," began the President, "the last great catastrophe the world knew was in A.D. 2035, when two leading world powers of the day came to a collision. Their armies clashed on land, sea and air, with their leaders keeping their fingers on the nuclear button while the rest of the world trembled in fear. But good sense prevailed and a real war was averted which would have culminated in a nuclear disaster. For over one thousand years now, we have been blessed with peace."
The President took a deep breath, "Today, however, we are faced with a situation of extreme peril. The Federation is threatened now as never before.

"Our Federation Security officials are convinced that the peril is real. Unless we take suitable steps, we shall find, sooner or later, that the situation is out of control. I have authorised the Federation Security to take all necessary steps to meet the challenge.

"What exactly has happened? Before I examine this question, let me first refer to the Legend of the Poisons. In the remote past, men lived in a wild state on this earth. It so happened then that some interplanetary travellers stopped by on earth and were shocked to see the primitive way men lived. The travellers brought them out of the caves, taught them speech, manners, agriculture and art. They also acquainted them with the riches of the earth which they could employ to develop their lives. They separated the food from the poisons and gave strict commands that the poisons be untouched. They left soon after.

"The travellers returned sometime later to enquire after the welfare of the earthlings they had rehabilitated. What a shock awaited them! The earthlings had consumed the poisons and had left the food untouched. Thus, the men who had been civilised by the travellers had, by eating the poisons, become distorted physically, mentally and morally. The distortions varied with the kind of poisons they had eaten. The tragedy of it all was that the poisons were eaten knowingly and willingly. This is the Legend of the Poisons.

"Now, friends, you are aware that the old world records are preserved, out of everyone's reach, in the maximum security Old World Museum crypt in the Federation Biolab. The entrance to the Biolab is controlled by the
laboratory computer, whose command code is known only to two men in the Federation, Dr. Vidyasagar and the keeper of the Old World Museum, Dr. Salway.

"Yesterday, dear friends, the keeper of the Museum was found murdered. The postmortem showed that his brain had been tampered with."

Sudhanshu had been listening with rapt attention. The thought analyser, especially the recently improved version, was capable of gleaning thoughts even from the brain of a dead man.

"I see the threat is real," he whispered into Sarita's ears.

"The President speaks of the Old World Museum," Sarita said. "What on earth is that?"

"We will find out," Sudhanshu said.

"Any questions?" asked the President.

"Madam President," said a graying gentleman, "our Great Indian Federation is foolproof against external attack. Is there any evidence that blackmail is the motive?"

"Our evidence is limited," said the President. "The Fedcom suggests that the wrong-doer had probably something else in mind."

"Madam President, who does the Fedcom believe to be the murderer?" asked a young journalist.

"The search is on. Clues are yet to come by."

The Chairman of the Interplanetary Press Council thanked the President. He promised full cooperation of the Press in the hunt for the culprit.

"I suggest we have a session with Dr. Roopa Nair of the Superior School," suggested Sarita as they were leaving the conference room.

"I agree," said Sudhanshu. "There was a lot of old world stuff in the President's speech."

Indeed there was. It was the thirty-first century. The mighty wave of science had swept across the Federation,
changing human life once and for all. Life had been made absolutely comfortable and convenient through mechanisation. At the same time, human character was shorn of its baser elements and the Federation had become a miracle of technology, inhabited by almost a new species of humans.

The two children descended the steps of the Presidential Palace to the moving pavement along Rajpath. It carried them to the nearest stand of the City Commuting Service (CCS).

Within seconds a CCS vehicle arrived. It halted for the children, who boarded it to the welcoming words of the 'hostess'.

"MLK-I4 cf and MLK-I4 eg, please come in and sit down," greeted the hostess in her synthetic voice. "OK, you have life-tickets."

The children sat back on the plush seats. The television screen in the vehicle brought on the newscast with the familiar signature tune. "Good evening. The President is deeply concerned about the murder of the keeper of the Old World Museum. In a telephonic conversation with the Governor of our colony on Mars, she said the enemy is still at large..."

**Star City**

Star City, situated about fifty kilometres from the Presidential Palace, was brightly illuminated for the New Year. Modern villas and bungalows glittered in the phosphorescent light, making the scene a feast of colour and design.

Star City was the favourite residential area of the Federation's top scientists. The most conspicuous resi-
dence was that of Professor Romo Skrapper. Spread over an area of fifty acres of land, his residential complex resembled the first human colony on Mars.

The entire fifty-acre plot was one extensive garden, set with artificial streams, ponds and lawns. Yellow sandstone statues on pedestals gave dignity and taste to the garden.

In the centre of this magnificent greenery was a glittering blue dome, now bathed in ethereal light. Not a soul was to be seen in the fifty-acre fairyland. By nightfall Professor Romo Skrapper's guests had arrived and entered the blue dome and were carried down to a depth of thirty metres. The Professor had his establishment hidden away underground.

"A happy New Year to you all!" the Professor greeted his guests, who had gathered in his vast reception room. His friends thundered back the same greeting.

Professor Romo Skrapper stood on a dais at one end of the hall. He raised his hands in a gesture of appreciation and acceptance. "Thank you, friends, thank you!" said the Professor. He then looked intently at the silent, expectant crowd. "Yes, the New Year always brings surprises, at least in my lab. What is this year's technological surprise? Well, it is a little electronic toy—the Symphony Player or the Symplayer."

Professor Skrapper was perhaps the most remarkable man of science. A man with a fertile mind. A prolific inventor, he had served the Federation through his genius. New machines invented by him or his improvements on old ones could be seen almost anywhere in the land. No wonder he had been awarded the Federation Molecule for the most original invention nine times in a row. It was on New Year's Day that the Professor always announced his new invention to a distinguished gathering
of scientists and technologists.

The crowd today surged forward to get a better look at the scientific marvel that would be revealed before them. The Professor pressed a small button on the wall and spoke to it in a series of complicated codes. Soon a part of the panelling on the wall slid aside and a large box-like apparatus rolled out.

"This, friends, is the Symplayer. All that is required is to feed the music sheets into the slots and it will start playing."

Professor Skrapper inserted the music sheets of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the notes commenced. The scientists stood back and marvelled at the Professor's inimitable invention.

The Symplayer, as the Professor had christened his invention, played enchantingly. The 'conductor' could be set to automatic, or manual so that a human conductor could easily take over, too.

The applause that followed was spontaneous. The Professor was exultant and with grateful nods accepted his colleagues' compliments.

"Friends," began the Professor, "you know as well as I do that this Federation survives solely on the continued efforts of us, scientists. If we stop, the country will stop. If we perish, the country will perish, too."

Professor Romo Skrapper descended from the dais and took a seat at the head of one of the tables. All the invitees followed his example, sitting down at tables that were beautifully laid out.

The wall at one of the hall was curtained from end to end. The Professor tapped his pocket and the curtains drew aside to reveal a dark stage. He tapped again and the stage came alive with a lively ballet. It took some time for everyone to realise that it was not an actual stage
performance but a giant three-dimensional television show. The music for the show had been composed by one of the greatest masters, Pralaya Shankar. It was synthesised by the Symplayer. The total impact of the show was stunning.

Professor Romo Skrapper's underground house was a marvel of technology. All that he spoke was picked up by his pocket controller and transmitted to a Central Amplification System which carried the voice to the loudspeakers.

A column of liveried waiters emerged from a doorway and attended at each table. The guests were treated to a sumptuous feast while the 3-D show went on.

After the show was over, the Professor tapped his pocket and said, "Friends, peace is welcome, but not lethargy. For too long have we been lolling in peace. Aren't we growing complacent and useless? Why don't we assert ourselves? The future belongs not to the politician, not to the farmer, but to the scientist. Our originality and inventiveness shall carry the world forward."

The eminent professor paused. He glanced at the faces around him. "The Federation is now facing a problem as our President has informed us. That is exactly what is going to happen when the scientist is denied a say in decisions regarding the destiny of the Federation."

The assembled guests looked at one another in surprise. They did not quite follow what Professor Skrapper was saying.

"The President has stirred a hornet's nest," said Sudhanshu as he settled back on his easy chair. He and his sister had just returned home with their father.
"You mean her reference to the days before the March Conversion of 2078?" asked Sarita eagerly.

"Yes, the history of those days is rather murky, they say."

"We aren't even taught that. Why?"

"I don't know," confessed Sudhanshu. "Probably little is actually known about those days."

"Sud, why don't we question Homie about it?"

"Good idea," responded Sudhanshu, tapping on his pocket control.

"Homie, the keeper of the Old World Museum has been... well, terminated. Any ideas as to the terminator?"

"Wait a second, Sud," said Homie. "I have no information on that. I require more data."

"I am disappointed, Homie," cut in Sarita. "Can't you even make a guess?"

"No, Sa. You know very well I don't make guesses. A guess is unintellectual."

Sudhanshu laughed. Sarita was upset. "No, I don't mean pure guesswork," she corrected herself. "I want you to think of a probable answer."

"A probability, to be so, must get a fifty per cent chance," said Homie. "It is not in my nature to say anything without sufficient data."

"I believe Homie is right after all," agreed Sudhanshu. "The darkest period of our history are the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries."

"We have come a long way, haven't we?" Homie's unmodulated voice queried. "And who is so bothered today about the sordid history of those days anyway?"

"Sordid history?" Sarita repeated.

"Yes, sordid. I overheard a professor of the Superior School describe it that way."

"A professor of the Superior School!" exclaimed Sarita in exultation. "Sud, Homie has given us a clue."
There was a loud buzz from the kitchen, calling the children to the dining room. The kitchen was fully automatic. This had been necessitated by the untimely death of the children's mother. She had died in an accident. It was not that Mrs. Banwar could not have been saved. She had willed that no advance surgery should be done on her to prolong her life. She was a firm believer in the new philosophy of natural death, unhindered by science.

"Your dinner is ready," intoned Homie. "The menu is 2-5, your favourite."

"Thank you, Homie!" said Sarita.

The children entered the dining room adjoining the kitchen. Mr. Banwar was already at the table.

Science had brought so much automation into the life of man, that all he had to do was to will. Eating had not yet been simplified in ordinary life; the very pleasure of it kept all attempts at intravenous feeding at bay. People still loved to eat.

"For once you seem to be hungry, Dad," teased Sarita playfully, sitting down.

"Quite so, Sa," confessed Mr. Banwar, "I have been working very hard."

They had recently installed the Automatic Bearer System (ABS), developed by the Federation Automation Labs. The ABS interacted splendidly with the automatic kitchen and served food according to the requirements of custom and etiquette.

Through an opening in the centre of the large circular dining table, the first dish came up and slid towards Mr. Banwar. Other dishes followed and soon the table was fully laid with a variety of food.

As the three hungry diners began to enjoy their meal, Homie read out the menu, now spread out on the table, and explained the benefits of the selection in terms of
proteins, carbohydrates, fats and calories. Then she
played for them a lilting little tune.
"Homie is priceless!" commented Mr. Banwar. "She
has such an eye for detail where food is concerned."
"Right, Dad," Sarita said. "I would say she has taken
after Mother, at least in the kitchen."
"Well, it looks as if she is trying to please you as much
as she can," Mr. Banwar said.
"I guess she is trying to be a mother to us," said Sarita.
"She has probably concluded that you have lost your
mother," Mr. Banwar said.
"She is so intelligent," averred Sarita.
"And so concerned," Sudhanshu said.
"So loving," said Sarita. "But..."
"What?" Mr. Banwar's eyes narrowed.
"Homie is Sud's creation," Sarita said. "She can never
take the place of Mother."
The music stopped abruptly.
"Am I not intelligent, concerned, loving?" came the
high-pitched voice of Homie.
"Of course, you are, Homie, dear," replied Sarita. "But
you know, a mother is different..."

The land of Tahbar

Aurobindo Marg, one of the most colourful boulevards
of Delhi, ran past that primitive monument, the Qutab
Minar, dwarfed by skyscrapers of glass and stainless steel.
The dual carriage road ran on straight as a needle for
thirty kilometres into the horizon. And there, on an
elevation, stood Superior School, a thirty-one storey
high-rise building. It resembled a giant open book.
The Superior School was the Federation's nursery of
superior intellects. The nation's exceptional children lived and studied there. The Federation's geniuses were produced there, in that unusual educational institution. Branka, the astrophysicist, Avinash, the mathematician, Solomon, the inventor of artificial blood and Nageshwaran, the inventor of photon rocket, had all been pupils of the Superior School.

The three thousand odd pupils who lived there began their day at nine o'clock. An exceptional few who lived with their parents came to Superior School every morning by the Rapid Underground Rail (RUR).

This morning, too, Sudhanshu and Sarita arrived punctually at nine. The elevator took them up to the eleventh floor, where they joined their classmates. At Superior School, children were grouped not according to their chronological age, but their mental age. Often a fifteen-year-old would be solving a problem with a toddler of four.

Dr. Roopa Nair was seated at the console on a platform in one corner of the classroom. The ten students she taught half faced her, each seated at an individual computer keyboard and a monitor.

She greeted the children cheerfully. "Today we shall go into another aspect under the general heading of Social Sciences. Before I explain the lesson, I shall tell you a story."

The ten eager faces evinced greater interest. Dr. Nair knew human psyche. Everyone loved a story. Even the intellectuals.

"Once upon a time there was a country called Tahbar. Although it was one country, it was ruled by several men, each one claiming one part of the country for himself..."

The children laughed. How silly! Such behaviour was totally alien to the Federation.
"Each ruler, being extremely greedy, desired to take away the other's portion of the land. So they declared what they called 'war' on each other. War means engaging another physically, with the intention of subduing him. Thus there started a period when there were endless wars, quarrels, and...termination of life."

Dr. Nair paused. The word 'kill' was alien. For almost a thousand years no one in the Federation had taken another's life.

"There was confusion, sorrow and misery. There was much 'killing'. The more the misery, the more they killed. And the more they killed the more was the misery."

Sarita winced at the mention of killing. But she took comfort in the fact that it was after all a fairy tale.

"Social life was pretty primitive too among the people of Tahbar. For example, some people never did any work, nor did they produce anything. They prowled about at night stealing other's belongings..."

"What a stupid thing to do!" commented one of the students. They were horrified.

"There were so many robberies in that country that people had to lock their homes..."

Sarita was greatly amused. Locking one's house was unknown in the Federation. A door was kept closed, but never locked. A sheer waste of time, energy and metal.

"Their system of marriage was curious. If a man was blessed with a daughter, you would find him scouting around for someone to marry her as soon as possible. The man willing to marry the girl was offered a large sum of money, called dowry."

The children's faces grew sad and sombre. They had never heard of such things even in Shankar's Fairy Tales.

"The strangest thing was the status of women. They were not considered equal to men, so they were accorded
no freedom as such. They were virtually imprisoned in their homes. It was strongly believed in Tahbar that women were inferior to men."

The Superior School students sat back more interested than ever. The idea of superiority of man was as foolish as saying that the right leg is superior to the left or vice versa. The children were truly amused.

"The people of Tahbar were very superstitious, too. Women prayed for the long life of their husbands regularly. They prayed and fasted so that they might die before their husbands did. Oh, yes, they had better! For if a man died while his wife was living, she would be burned alive with her husband's corpse. This horrible practice was called 'Sati'!"

The young intellectuals were shocked. Sandra, a seven-year-old girl, was an authority on biological sciences. She knew that the death of a woman was a loss to the Principle of Life itself. But the termination of a female life was a crime against Universal Life, an unforgivable atrocity.

"This story has a lot to do with the history of our own Great Indian Federation," Dr. Nair paused. She cast a glance around the room and smiled.

"I get it now," said Sudhanshu politely. "The mythical land of Tahbar is none other than Bharat, a legendary name for India. Tahbar is an anagram of Bharat."

"Thank you, Sud," said Dr. Nair. "I am glad you have understood. Yes, such was the strange history of our land in those dark days."

"How could man even live in this barbarous state?" asked Sarita incredulously. "One just can't believe it."

"It is only natural that you should feel so," continued Dr. Roopa Nair. "We have now come a long way from those dark days. It has been a gradual progress towards
civilisation. The March Conversion of 2078 was merely a vote for science in the service of man."

"Does the Old World Museum contain records of those days?" queried one of the students.

"It does."

"That explains why it is closed to the general public," remarked Sudhanshu. "Are we permitted to visit it?"

"No," said Dr. Nair. "It is open to the Director and the keeper." She bent forward and whispered, "The Museum contains more than you shall ever know."

The Federation library on the banks of the blue Yamuna, was one of the most enchanting edifices of Delhi. The eighty-five storey building was shaped like a globe, symbolically housing the entire universe.

It contained millions upon millions of books classed under every imaginable subject. The library system was so thoroughly computerised that even a child knew how to use it to maximum advantage.

There were hundreds of reading rooms with added facilities such as cafeterias, exercise halls, theatres, lecture halls, exhibition halls, a planetarium, rooms for overnight stay and twenty-four hour computerised service.

Sarita was greeted at the main door by Dekko, the receptionist. She was requested to print the purpose of her visit on a visitors' console. Sarita asked to be led to the Medieval and Primitive India section. A robot guide appeared and led her into an elevator and onto a moving floor to a private reading room.

Sarita sat down at a table equipped with a computer keyboard. "The Flistory of Pre-conversion India," Sarita typed on the keyboard.
"Number of books available on the subject: 75,000," flashed the giant screen on the wall. "But we shall select only fifty for you."

"I would like to know, in general, how society was organised before the Great Conversion, and, in particular, the social evils of the time."

"At your service, Ms. Sarita," the screen flashed back brightly.

Sarita was going to be a social scientist, dealing with human behaviour. Her brother was different. He had given himself up to physics, electronics and inventions.

The giant screen displayed texts from the library's memory banks. For hours Sarita sat with great concentration and read how life was like in India in the Pre-conversion days.

She read of political life, social life and religious life. She learned how people were divided into castes, tribes and races. Sarita read about invasions, battles, wars when countless people were killed.

Sarita learnt that in those ancient days some men were used like machines. They called it 'slavery'. Slaves were made to work for their masters. They could be tortured and made to suffer pain.

Sarita felt as if she had been transported to a world millions of years away in time. What a cruel and terror-filled world! Obviously man's brain was not fully developed then and the faculty of reasoning was only beginning to enter the human psyche.

The great screen continued with its narration of events. Some men used religion to amass money while others used it to acquire power or to expand their empires.

For the first time Sarita was shocked. What a base use of religion, she said to herself. In the Great Indian Federation, religion had been restored to the place it
belonged—the heart of man.

Somehow, Sarita felt that the murder of the keeper of the Old World Museum has something to do with the revival of these horrible, primitive practices. The terrible crime was the first murder in the history of the Federation for the past one thousand years.

Suddenly the screen flashed in bold letters, "The man who was born two thousand years before time. The first completely developed man. The precursor of the March Conversion of 2078: Maganty or Mahatma Gandhi."

Sarita now realised that as a child she had heard the story of this legendary hero. She had taken him to be a mere fairy tale character.

"This great man, this noble soul," continued the screen, "was murdered."
"Why?" cried Sarita in uncontrollable anguish.
"Because he loved simplicity."

Sarita sat back. An idea struck her. Maganty was killed because he loved truth. Did the keeper of the Museum also love truth?

The Crestonians

Hotel Nebulus rose from the blue waters of Lake Manohar like a swirling pillar of cloud. It was perhaps the tallest structure in the entire megapolis, so tall that its top seemed to merge with the azure of the sky. On the topmost floor of Hotel Nebulus was situated the famous discotheque, Shiva.

It was the haunt of the young of the city, for the best pop singers came there to entertain, as well as the best dancers. Shiva was synonymous with music and dance.

Dr. Nipun Skrapper, son of the great scientist and
inventor, Romo Skrapper, had taken the dance floor. Nip, as he was known to his friends, was a genial and outgoing young man. He was a frequent visitor to Shiva.

Dr. Nipun Skrapper was a maverick scientist and crazy inventor. He had in him the genius of his father, but he preferred to direct his talent to the weird and the bizarre. A tireless inventor, the young scientist loved the disco. In fact, when he was not inventing, he was dancing.

"Nip," whispered his young dancing partner, Dr. Roopa Nair, "you seem to be a trifle worried today. What is the matter?"

"I am a little tired, that is all, Roopa," replied Nip. "I have been working long on that new project."

"Your crazy inventions," laughed Roopa. "When are you going to switch over to something really useful?"

The Martian Marvels, the new pop group from Mars, were hammering out their raucous numbers. Their music expressed the cratered desolation of their planet, but their beat imitated the rhythm of their twin moons.

"What is seen as crazy today," countered Nip, "may became indispensable tomorrow. I call myself an adventurous inventor."

"Yes, but what is the great idea in doing all that research into human body equilibrium?" asked Roopa. "The fact that we can hold our body erect on our legs is already a miracle of equilibrium."

"Roopa, what if we are obliged one day to move on our hands instead of our legs?"

"Spare me, Nip," chuckled Roopa. "The need will never arise."

"You may be wrong, Roopa. I know a planet where the atmosphere is so ridden with flying meteorites, like sand in a sandstorm, that people have to keep their heads low. The humans walk on their hands to protect their
heads from being hit."

"Oh, you are impossible, Nip," cried Roopa, matching his steps. "I suppose I must grant it to you. What are you doing now?"

"I am working in collaboration with a biologist. We are now testing a drug. Within minutes of administering it, a person can walk on his hands as deftly as on his legs. It is almost a complete success."

"Well, I believe that is a poor way of carrying one's head," commented Roopa.

The Martian Marvels on the stage drummed out another of their favourite numbers.

"When it's rough going
Have a thought for your feet;
Get down on your hands.
Get up from your seat."

A group of dancers flocked to the spotlight and executed a typically Martian jig. Then, in answer to the theme of the song, they went down on their hands and tripped along in perfect rhythm.

"The Martians are ahead of us," commented Nip. "But their feat comes from sheer practice."

Nip and Roopa left the floor and sat at a table near the windows. Roopa looked out and gasped. It was the first time she was at Shiva. The view was magnificent. Almost like what you see from a low-flying satellite, she thought. High-rise blocks, towers, skyscrapers of all shapes and sizes. Among them raced the thirty-first century superstreets, flyovers, expressways, clover-leaf traffic relievers, and moving pavements.

Looking up at the sky, Roopa viewed one of the marvels of Federation technology. For there hung, several thousand metres above the city, the giant moon, four times the size of the natural one. The artificial moon,
named after its engineer Mahindra, lit up the city with its magic glow, which had long eliminated the necessity of street lighting.

Colourful neon lights danced and blinked all around and the entire city shimmered in the light of the man-made Mahindra.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Roopa. "Nip, I never imagined it could be so romantic up here."

"The romance will continue only if the scientists and engineers are allowed to pursue their work unhindered."

"Who is stopping you, Nip? Get along with your crazy ideas. What is your next project?"

"To make light bend round corners."

"What for?" There was suspicion in Roopa's eyes.

"If I can do that, I will be able to see round corners, over tall walls, or through chinks. In other words, you cannot only overhear what happens inside a closed room, but also 'oversee'."

"I feel it would not be a very happy invention," said Roopa. "People won't have privacy anymore."

"Privacy? If you want privacy, you will have to make your room totally lightproof."

"I hope you won't succeed in this," Roopa laughed good-naturedly. "It may give ideas to mischievous people."

Shiva came alive again with the Marvels' next number.

"The world is changing,
The old is ending;
Science is avenging,
And light is bending."

"Roopa, you will live to see what science has in store for the Federation," said Nip softly but deliberately. "At the rate the world is changing, light will have to bend. People will have to bend, too."
Sudhanshu was among the brightest of the child prodigies at Superior School. A teenager of unusual intellect, he was an inventor in his own right. Homie, his mother substitute, was his own creation that won him the President's Medal at the Annual Science Carnival. The Science Carnival was the most popular festival in the new dispensation after the March Conversion of 2078.

Sudhanshu was on the moving pavement along South Street 64. He had not particularly made up his mind as to where he was heading. Several minutes later, he found himself in front of the office of Interplanetary News.

Sudhanshu stepped down from the moving pavement. Minutes later he was in the editorial office of the paper.

Mr. Malney Singh, the editor, was seated at the editorial desk, in discussion with some prominent members of the staff. Mr. Anand Banwar, Sudhanshu's father, was among those present.

"This nation is facing the gravest threat to its existence in two thousand years," Mr. Singh was saying. "The killing of the keeper is more than a murder."

"The problem before us is not to speculate on possible implications," said Mr. Banwar, "but to solve the murder mystery. Once we know the culprit we can take suitable action."

"You mean the President can take action," corrected Mr. Anthony Ferro, illustrator and cartoonist.

"Hi, there!" the editor greeted Sudhanshu, looking past his colleagues towards the door. "It is Sudhanshu, our talented young scientist. Come in, Sud, and join us."

Sudhanshu walked up to the large table and took a seat with the others. Although they were all his seniors by age, intellectually he was their equal.

"Sud, these gentleman have been assigned the job of uncovering the murder mystery," explained the editor.
"Several ideas have been discussed."

"I shall be grateful if you would let me into those ideas," said Sudhanshu.

"The Fedcom and the Federation Security believe it is the work of the Crestonians," said Mr. Singh.

"I don't know how we can go along with that theory," opined Mr. Banwar.

"The Crestonians are a disgruntled lot," put in Mr. Ferro. "They have their stakes in Martian satellites."

Creston was a large meteorite orbiting the sun, ten million kilometres from Mars. The total area of Creston was only thirteen thousand square kilometres. This meteorite's unusually high gravitational force, owing to its dense core, had been able to retain an atmosphere hospitable to human life. Creston's surface was dotted with lakes. Although the meteorite was very distant from the sun, it was comparatively warm because of its hot interior.

"The Crestonians have colonised Deimos," said Sudhanshu quietly. "How can that be a challenge to us?"

"Today they colonise Deimos," broke in Mr. Ferro, "and tomorrow they will land on Phobos, the other Martian moon. And from these two Martian satellites they can threaten our colony on Mars."

"For argument's sake, yes," conceded Mr. Banwar. "But it hasn't happened so far."

"The Fedcom feels that the Crestonians are averse to our superiority in technology, for their ultimate aim is to take over Mars and claim it as their planet by the law of proximity," Mr. Singh was concerned.

"The analysis seems to be logical," commended Mr. Ferro.

"How do the Crestonians come into the murder mystery?" queried Mr. Banwar.
"That is simple," shrugged Sudhanshu. "According to the Fedcom, the Crestonians do not want us on Mars. To stop us from migrating to the planet, all they need to do is to hamper our scientific achievement. How can they do that? By taking our Great Indian Federation back to the state it was before the March Conversion of 2078..."

"I see what you mean, Sud," interrupted the editor. "For over a thousand years we have lived in a state of righteousness. Should they effect a re-conversion in us to the social evils of the old world, we shall certainly lapse into a state of backwardness."

"Yes," continued Sudhanshu unemotionally. "The re-conversion can be effected by throwing open the Old World Museum to all."

"The permanent exhibitions, the tableaux, the real life audio-visuals on any aspect of life in the Pre-conversion days, will all re-teach people such vices as dishonesty, selfishness, cunning, robbery, murder, and slavery."

"That is it," said Mr. Ferro excitedly. "I can plainly see the Crestonian hand in our affairs."

"I beg to differ," said Sudhanshu. "The evidence is meagre. As far as I know, they are a peaceable lot, although their Great Conversion took place only a century ago."

"All the more reason for them to lapse into barbarity," Mr. Ferro said calmly.

Sudhanshu was not convinced at all. He pondered for a while. "Besides the Fedcom, who else believes in the Crestonian angle?" he asked.

"Several eminent scientists including Professor Romo Skrapp and Professor Romo Skrapp himself," the editor answered.

Sudhanshu regarded the journalists before him. "I am unable to see the connection. However if Professor Skrapp thinks so, it is bound to make sense."
The editor touched the keys on his remote control and a monitor came alive with the latest news.

"The President, Ms. Druvansh, has transmitted a message to the President of the Crestonian republic, expressing anguish at their interference in the internal matters of the Great Indian Federation..."

'Can a tiny nation like Creston dare provoke the Federation?' wondered Sudhanshu.

**Avtara the Second**

Sudhanshu boarded a CCS vehicle and was greeted warmly by the synthetic voice of the hostess. He was guided to a vacant seat. As he travelled, he recalled the glorious history of the Federation after the Conversion.

The Great Indian Federation had come into existence after the March Conversion of A.D. 2078. This historic event had been the crowning glory of a lifetime of toil by one single man and prophet, Avtara the First.

His eighty-five years on this earth had been spent in the eradication of superstition, dishonesty and every form of inhumanity from man's life. Simultaneously the prophet had enlightened the people about the role science would play in the life of man.

The future, the prophet had said, belonged to science. The message of Avtara the First had been accepted by everyone. And on March 7, 2078, people in every state, district, village and home had taken a pledge of acceptance of the new way of life. Thus a new nation was created. A new people was born.

This unprecedented event had been celebrated in history as the March Conversion of 2078, more than a thousand years earlier. And during the ensuing one
millennium, there had been peace, joy and goodwill in
the land and in the heart of every man.

No one in the Federation, except a few scholars, knew
what life had been like in the Pre-conversion days.

Avtara the First had willed that he should be remem-
bered merely as a humble person after his death, that
there should be no monuments on earth in his memory.
The Federation had respected his wishes. They had his
body encased in a crystal coffin and shot into earth's
orbit. Avtara the First had thus become a visible 'star'
in the heavens.

Sudhanshu looked out at the sky and beheld the Avtara
gently gliding past Orion towards the horizon.

"The Fifty-second Street," announced the hostess.
"Thank you for travelling with us. Come again."

Sudhanshu rose from his seat and moved towards
the exit. As he stepped out of the automatic door, the
hostess bid him a personal farewell. "Goodbye, Sud, and
thank you."

An exceptional genius was recognised even by an
electronic brain.

The boy walked steadily towards a brightly-lit gate.
Over the low walls he could see in the distance a giant
crystal tumbler, apparently filled with water. The
luminous tumbler, standing two hundred metres high,
was a landmark on the Fifty-second Street. It was the
official residence of the new prophet of the Federation,
Avtara the Second.

Sudhanshu noticed that there was activity all round.
Many people were thronging the spacious lawns of the
Tumbler. Then they moved in lines into the Tumbler
itself.

The lower part of the Tumbler was a theatre, with
a seating capacity of several thousands. Sudhanshu
took a seat and noticed that the theatre was almost full. Important men and women were present, including President Lumina Druvansh. Professor Romo Skrapper was seated close to the President. Sudhanshu also recognised many of his Superior School mates seated in the theatre.

The girl sitting next to him, recognised Sudhanshu. "Oh, you are on time," she said.

"When is the prophet to break his silence?" Sudhanshu asked.

"At the stroke of ten," the girl answered.

"I see. By then he will have completed five years of silence, I suppose."

Avtara the Second had claimed to be the second prophet of the Federation. He had told the people that a prophet was always born when there was a need; when the people strayed from the path of truth, there was always a prophet to lead them.

On a crystal bed on the stage lay the prophet, Avtara the Second. He was clad in luminous white. Every eye in the theatre was on him. He could be watched from every home and public place. The entire Federation—every man, woman and child—was waiting to hear him break his silence, to hear his first words.

His first words would be the divine, scientific command for the Federation. He would perhaps be the law-giver for another thousand years.

Television cameras inside the theatre as well as remote-sensing satellite cameras were focussed on him and the Tumbler. Through these marvels of vision, the entire nation was watching the frail man on the crystal couch.

Sudhanshu craned his neck to have a better vision of the stage. The loudspeakers conveyed faithfully the rhythmic breathing of the prophet.
"He should break his silence anytime now," whispered the girl.

"Yeah..." Sudhanshu said softly. "In another minute."

Two angelic figures descended from the deep blue of the panoramic background and stood in a respectful pose beside the prophet. The Avtara raised his right hand as if in benediction, and whispered, "Science is the truth and the way and the life."

The vast audience rose from their seats and stood with bowed heads. "We have heard it. We have learnt it. We will follow it," they chanted in unison.

At that moment a bright comet appeared high up in the sky above the Tumbler. The tail of the comet seemed to reach down to the Tumbler itself, bathing it in a bluish light.

The appearance of the comet was followed by a dazzling display of space fireworks. Then a star traced the first words of Avtara the Second in the sky in golden letters.

"The Avtara has at last spoken," said Sudhanshu.

The girl nodded. "Nothing to be concerned about," she remarked. "He wants a greater role for science, that is all."

"I doubt it," said Sudhanshu thoughtfully.

Sudhanshu and Sarita left early from Superior School. They had decided to walk home, part of the way.

The school was all agog with the first words of the prophet. Broad and varied were the interpretations of the message. Some thought it to be an extension of the teachings of Avtara the First. Others read in it a shift in favour of science.

"You scientists must be genuinely happy now,"
commented Sarita, referring to the prophet's words.

"I guess so," said Sudhanshu. "Our leading scientists and inventors have always been saying so."

"They didn't always have their way, right?"

"No," Sudhanshu said emphatically, "mercifully not. If every crazy inventor is allowed his way, there is bound to be a clash of interests."

"I suppose that is why every new invention is studied carefully and impartially by the Presidential Council before it is mass-produced," said Sarita.

"Indeed! I am told that only a tiny minority of the inventions are allowed to go into the conveyor belt process. Those that are for the general good."

"The others?" queried Sarita.

"The others," replied Sudhanshu, "are confined to the 'New Ideas' section of the Science Museum."

"Sud," broke in Sarita suddenly, "what if a scientist decided to keep a certain invention to himself?"

"He can, provided it is certified by the Council."

"I don't mean that, Sud. What if an inventor decides to cheat?" Sarita pronounced the word with revulsion.

"I had a run of the old records in the library. In the Pre-conversion days, many rulers were power-hungry and many scientists dubious."

The two children walked up the great boulevard that had a dozen publishing houses on both sides.

"Let us buy the latest Interplanetary News Magazine," Sudhanshu suggested.

"Of course!" Sarita extracted her bank card from her pocket and held it before the eye of the vending machine. Sudhanshu collected the magazine that dropped into the tray.

"See here," said Sudhanshu, scrutinising the index. "The Crestonian Menace by Anthony Ferro."
"Come on, Sud," called Sarita. "Let us get back home and read it there. It is rather chilly out here."

The Hall of Science was packed. The scientists who had assembled there were the great minds of the Federation. There were graying old men who stooped but were still alert and blessed with computer-like brains. There were also young boys and girls equal to their elders in every field of achievement except years. They were all there to celebrate the first words of the prophet.

Professor Romo Skraper, the leading light of the gathering, rose to speak. A hush fell over the vast hall like a diffusion of light from a hidden source.

"Friends, one thousand and twenty years ago this nation took a solemn pledge at the feet of the great prophet Avtara the First and was converted to a way of life never known in the history of the race. This nation embraced a peaceful life. So there started a new era of intellectual advancement and scientific knowledge. Looking back today, we find it difficult to believe that we have come this far.

"But, my dear friends, till now science and technology has been a bonus for conversion to peace. Now our living prophet, Avtara the Second, is urging us to assign to science a much larger role. The prophet has spoken. He has in his goodness imparted to us the wisdom of his long years of silent meditation. 'Science is the truth and the way and the life.' In other words, the future belongs to science.

"Our long years of peace must not lull us into complacency. As a nation we ought to plan for the future. The problems we shall have to face sooner or later will
be overpopulation, scarcity of food and invasion from other planets. How shall we solve these problems? My dear friends, none of us in this Federation will be able to solve them. Only science and science alone can find a remedy."

Professor Skrapper took his seat with a self-satisfied grin. The applause that followed was indicative of the high regard in which the gathering of scientists held him. The applause died down raggedly. Here and there little groups continued to applaud.

A tall, lanky man with flowing red hair came up to the front. He motioned to the crowd that he wanted to speak. "I thank Professor Skrapper for the fine words he has said in favour of science. Science has brought us thus far and we are grateful to it. But, dear friends, where is science going to take us from here? Science is a blind pilot in a dark universe. Shall we trust ourselves to a blind pilot? We need a living, seeing navigator to guide us along the correct route. Science must be controlled by the wisdom of man."

The lanky man ended his speech. There was scattered applause in the vast throng. The majority of the scientists looked at one another, unsure how to react.

Gradually more people joined in the applause, though hesitantly. Professor Romo Skrapper grew a trifle red, his forehead bedewed with perspiration. He had never been contradicted before. But today, of all days, his unquestionable authority was being challenged by a lesser man. He raised his hand to quieten the crowd.

"You have listened very patiently to Professor Kelkar. He reads history and economics. Need I to tell you, friends, that Professor Kelkar thinks with his heart and not his head?"

Professor Skrapper paused. The audience listened
intently. "Our great Federation is the handiwork of a few scientists. Today our six and a half billion population is able to live in comfort. This great city of Delhi is a showpiece on planet Earth. All this because science is a blind pilot? You heard the message of the prophet yesterday. Let me not speak, let the prophet Avtara the Second, 'Science is the truth and the way and the life'."

This time the applause was thinner and less spontaneous.

The winter of 3098

"Where have you been?" Homie's voice was crisper than usual.
"To school, Homie. Where else?" chuckled Sarita.
"You sound like a displeased granny."
"Do I?" Homie was trying to sound nice. "I was only being concerned."
"All right, Homie," Sudhanshu relaxed into a smile.
"We decided to walk back part of the way."
"Something no one ever does these days," came Homie's staccato voice. "As if you enjoy walking!"
"Ah, well! You are right, Homie," Sarita was conciliatory. "More for loud thinking than for walking."
"You know, Homie," continued Sudhanshu, "we are into a murder mystery. The first in a thousand years."
"I have been checking on the question all day. There is no evidence to suggest it is the handiwork of anyone in the Federation," said Homie.
"Thank you, Homie." Sudhanshu looked at Sarita. Homie was not fully fed on the issue. Besides, murder and such matters hardly existed in her vocabulary. However, Homie was learning, like the children themselves.
Sudhanshu opened the magazine and raced through Anthony Ferro's article while Sarita watched a TV show. "What does it say?" asked Sarita. "Anthony Ferro thinks it is all the work of the Crestonians. Creston has always been a harmless meteorite. They have never been known to bother anyone."

"What is his evidence?"
"Hardly any. Largely surmise. Anyway, the Fedcom stands solidly behind this view."
"If there is no convincing evidence, why is the Fedcom so insistent?" Sarita's eyes narrowed with doubt. "A good point," conceded Sudhanshu. "We ought to check on who programmes the Fedcom."
"It is capable of learning, isn't it?"
"Yes. The assimilation of more knowledge, however, depends on the basic principles it has been fed."
"You mean on the work of its first programmer?"
"Precisely, Sa. Who is its original programmer? You may be sure the Fedcom will bear the image of its creator."
"The image of its creator," Sarita repeated with sudden illumination. "Who is its creator?"

The murder of the keeper, euphemistically called the 'termination', was described as the crime of the millennium. The state investigators depended on the Fedcom in this matter. Their line of reasoning and investigation, and their conclusions were all suggested by the Fedcom. They were convinced that the blame must be pinned on the Crestonians who had designs on the fledgling human colony on Mars.
"Gentlemen, you seem to feel that all our investigations point skywards," said President Lumina Druvansh emphatically. "We have lived in peace and harmony for a millennium." The President was in consultation with Federation Security and the leading brains of the country.

"Suspicion naturally falls on the extra source," said a scientist in a high-pitched voice.

"The Crestonians have sufficient motive, too," added another voice.

"No citizen of the Federation will ever dream of committing such a crime," said Professor Romo Skrapper, stressing every word. "We have come a long way from the age of barbarity. Our 'converted' minds or scientifically 'reprogrammed' minds, are incapable of crime."

"Madam President," another Federation brain got up to speak, "what is the need of proof when our great Fedcom has already come to the conclusion that the Crestonians are to blame?"

"I beg to disagree," interjected Professor Kelkar, who was known for his criticism of the Crestonian theory. "The Fedcom only says that the criminal must be an outsider. It doesn't mention the Crestonians."

Professor Skrapper was visibly annoyed. "Madam," he said, "the Fedcom is perhaps the greatest achievement of the Federation, the fruit of a thousand years of scientific research. It is a marvel of science, built by geniuses. A pronouncement made by the Fedcom is infallible."

"Thank you, Professor Skrapper," smiled President Druvansh. "You have put it very clearly and...strongly. The Fedcom works for the nation. It is an adviser to the President."

"I would humbly submit, Madam President," Professor Skrapper appealed, "that the Fedcom is more than a
Presidential adviser. You cannot afford to reject the Fedcom's advice."

Professor Kelkar squirmed at the words. "May I remind Professor Skrapper that the Fedcom is just a machine, a computer. Should the Federation bend before a machine?"

"The Fedcom is more than a computer," Professor Skrapper spoke in an impersonal voice. "The Fedcom can learn, accumulate information. New information modifies the old. It can learn from its errors. It can analyse a million bits of information backwards and forwards in a fraction of a second. Every conclusion arrived at is the result of a long chain of reasoning. It can communicate with other brains, and react to them. Professor Kelkar, let me tell you, the Fedcom is not a machine, it is a person."

The President raised her hand, more amused than impressed. "We shall certainly give due importance to the Fedcom's views. Regarding the present crisis, however, the Fedcom's views don't seem to be entirely justified. Keep searching, friends. Keep investigating. This is an emergency."

Anand Banwar sat cross-legged in a yogic pose on his bed, eyes closed. He found the position relaxing and a source of inspiration. He always rose from the half-hour work-out with renewed energy, both mental and physical.

Sudhanshu and Sarita watched their father performing the exercises prescribed by the ancient system.

"What are you thinking, Dad?" asked Sarita.

Mr. Banwar answered without opening his eyes, "Our national emergency."

"All the brains of the Federation are at work on it,"
mused Sudhanshu. "One thing puzzles me. How was the keeper actually killed?"

"The postmortem is complete. We have the answer now. He was killed by a distant laser gun."

"What could have been the possible motive?" Sudhanshu's eagerness to know increased.

"Naturally, the possession of the computer code to the Old World Museum. What else?"

"Was it stolen?" Sarita asked impatiently.

"Yes. The keeper's mind was analysed by Positron Emission Tomography. Probably the code has been stolen."

"That means the intruder, whoever he is, was trying to get into the Old World Museum, the forbidden section of the Biolab."

"Right, son. He was trying to sneak into the Museum. But why? That is the question."

Sudhanshu and Sarita squatted at the foot of the bed, thinking. Anand Banwar remained motionless.

"Sud, you know, I have been to the Federation library," announced Sarita. "It has given me a lot of information about the Pre-conversion days. Perhaps, we need to learn more about those days."

"It is obvious the Old World Museum contains things we are not aware of," Sudhanshu remarked.

"Quite right!" Sarita said enthusiastically. "How shall we ever find that out?"

"Perish the thought," said their father. "No one can visit the Museum except the Director and the keeper. According to our law, there may be only one visit to the Museum annually unless there is an emergency. Each annual visit is to be discussed by the Presidential Council and duly ratified by the President. Further, a visit is automatically recorded by the Museum computer and"
may be monitored by the Federation Security."

"Isn't it in the suburbs of Delhi?" Sudhanshu asked.
"It is," replied Anand Banwar.

Homie, who had waited silent and brooding all the while, seemed to wake up. She rang the alarm bell as usual and greeted the children. She activated the auto-kitchen and was planning the day's menu. Breakfast was already under way.

"Ten degrees Celsius," announced Homie gloomily.
"The sky is overcast. It will rain at 11.45 this morning."

"We have poor weather today," complained Sarita.
"Rather symbolic," said Sudhanshu wryly.
"Come to think of it," added Sarita, "we shall never forget the winter of A.D. 3098."

"Breakfast will be ready in seven minutes," announced Homie.

As father and children sat around the breakfast table, Homie played a lilting piece of music.

"Homie means to cheer us up," commented Sarita.
"Who is it?"

"Anand Shankar. A semi-classical, Pre-conversion piece," Homie was quite garrulous. "He tried to bring together in his work both East and West."

"Quite enchanting, I daresay," said Sudhanshu. "His feel for melody is remarkable."

"I have been scanning the TV programme," Homie announced. "There seems to be an important news to be telecast."

The TV screen lit up to a signature tune. A lady newsreader began to read out the special, unscheduled news.

"Good morning," she greeted the viewers pleasantly.
"Here is a special newscast. Investigation into the keeper's murder is now nearly complete. Although the culprit hasn't been established beyond doubt, the cir-
cumstances regarding the murder have been worked out. Dr. Salway, the keeper of the Old World Museum, was attacked with a powerful laser gun at his home some time around midnight. His mind was analysed and the computer code, the key to the Museum, was stolen. The killer utilised the code to open the Museum and has come into possession of a maximum security formula from its computer. According to the Director of the Biolab, the theft is a direct threat to the Federation. President Lumina Druvansh has warned the intruder to give himself up and return the copy of the formula. Her Excellency promised presidential pardon provided the thief gives himself up within the next forty-eight hours."

"This is serious," said Homie. "I wonder what the formula is all about?"

"We are as ignorant as you are, Homie," said Sarita. "We have to learn a lot yet."

"What does the Old World Museum really contain, Dad?" enquired Sudhanshu. "Everyone is rather hush-hush about it."

"I don't know. Honestly," said their father. "Very few are let into the secrets of the Museum."

"I guess Dr. Roopa Nair might enlighten us about the Old World Museum," and Sudhanshu. "Dr. Nair is a human studies expert."

"If I remember well," began Sarita, "Dr. Nair has already hinted at the fact that there is more to the Museum than meets the eye."

The egg or the chicken

Sudhanshu and Sarita were carried along by the moving corridors to a private reading room in the Federation library. Sarita greeted the control board with a gentle
touch. The screen lit up and welcomed the children.

"We would like to continue with the history of Pre-conversion India," she requested.

"You are most welcome. I must warn you, however, that these events might shock you. Why don't you wait until you pass the age of shock and reach the age of discretion?"

"Thank you for your concern," replied Sarita. "But we are determined to know all the facts. We refuse to be shocked. It is important that you tell us all the facts, as we are investigating a murder mystery."

"If you insist, I have no choice. My motto is to answer anyone who asks, without discrimination. I shall now continue with my narration. In the Pre-conversion days, many people used to die young owing to what were called 'diseases'."

"Diseases? What are they?" exclaimed Sarita.

"It is difficult to explain it to you, children. It is something you will never experience. A disease is a temporary breakdown of a part of the body owing to some reason, usually an attack by invading germs, viruses or bacteria."

"How can that ever be possible?" Sudhanshu was incredulous. "Germs and bacteria are our friends."

"That is so today, friends. Long ago, they were enemies. The deadliest enemies man had. A particular virus caused pneumonia. Another caused influenza. Some microorganisms caused whooping cough, while others were responsible for malaria, hayfever, jaundice, and countless other diseases."

"Was every disease accompanied by pain?" Sarita asked anxiously.

"Yes, pain and discomfort. The so-called doctors cured diseases in places called 'hospitals'. These are all things of the past."
"How terrible to have lived in those dark days," Sarita said.

"That was the infancy of mankind. Men were ignorant and superstitious. Let me carry on with my story. Certain diseases were fatal. If you ever caught it, you were sure to die. Cancer was one. AIDS another. This last one was so dangerous that if you caught it you had merely to count your days.

"Cancer and AIDS were ruthless slayers. They mowed down millions of people all over the planet. Mankind groaned under the burden of ignorance and disease.

"As if that was not enough, the society was ruled by doctors, lawyers, contractors, teachers and priests. Each was a professional group initially but soon corruption set in. Each one tried to outwit everybody else and was in turn outwitted."

"Unbelievable!" cried Sarita.

"How could science ever sprout in deception?" mused Sudhanshu.

"However there were a few people who did not cheat. People such as Sankara, Vivekananda, Maganty. They were the forerunners of Avtara the First."

"Another time we would like to know more about those great men," requested Sudhanshu eagerly.

"At the time of Conversion, science was given due importance and superstition and ignorance were conquered. Diseases were eliminated. Truth was taken up by all as the only thing worth living for and science was seen as truth."

"Diseases! diseases!" laughed Sarita. "I just don't understand how people managed to live."

"Not their fault, though," commented Sudhanshu cautiously.

Sarita grew thoughtful. "Then tell me, Sud, who was
to blame for the diseases? The viruses and bacteria? Who...who put them there?"

"Children, I have already told you that in those days every group was up against every other group. Not openly, of course! Many times not even consciously."

"And the diseases?" asked Sarita.

"Diseases were only one of the numerous types of evil prevalent in those days. No one gave so much as a thought to an evil if it didn't bother him. There was no united effort to eliminate evil."

"What undeveloped brains!" Sarita exploded.

"Some sections of society even used their 'intellectual' powers to propagate evil for selfish reasons."

"Thank you, you have been very, very cooperative and helpful," said Sudhanshu to the screen.

"Thank you," echoed Sarita.

Sudhanshu turned to Sarita. "Now I believe, Sa, selfishness has only been suppressed in man, not eradicated. Why blame the Crestonians?"

Dr. Salway was cremated with national honours. The urn containing his ashes was to be solemnly installed under his picture in the Hall of Science.

The two children watched the ceremony on TV.

"I will tell you what," Sudhanshu said.

"What?" asked Sarita.

"We will ring up Mrs. Salway, Dr. Salway's wife," said Sudhanshu meaningfully.

"Give me a minute and I will have her on the screen," said Sarita.

She dialled the videophone and Mrs. Salway appeared on the little screen. Another button pressed brought the
"Mrs. Salway, good afternoon," greeted Sarita. "My brother, Sudhanshu Banwar would like to talk to you."

Sudhanshu moved over to the videophone camera. "Our heartfelt condolences, Mrs. Salway. We are investigating Dr. Salway's death. Would you answer a few questions?"

"No problem."
"Did Dr. Salway keep a record of his day's events?"
"You mean a diary?"
"Yes."
"I am not sure. But he would speak every evening in to a machine."
"Have you got the recording?"
"I haven't checked. If you come over, I can help you with it."
"Thank you, Ma'am. We will be there right away," Sudhanshu rang off.

It was an hour-long ride by a CCS car. They were now in Star City. Dr. Salway, Mrs. Salway and their daughter lived in an independent house.

Mrs. Salway came to the door. "Welcome to the children of Superior School," she greeted.

The children surveyed the building, the rooms and the surroundings. An easy target for an intruder. Sudhanshu examined the scientist's personal computer. Yes, he had been recording his daily routine ever so faithfully. Stacks and stacks of discs were found under the title of 'Personal and private'.

The children were overjoyed. Mrs. Salway had given them total freedom regarding the discs. Sudhanshu tried to retrieve the information. The visual and audio output were meaningless doodles and unrecognisable sounds.

To their utter horror, the children realised that the
recording was in some unknown code, which must have
died with Dr. Salway. It was futile to waste further time
with the discs. Unless, of course, one could break the
code in which Dr. Salway had entered his thoughts.

With permission from Mrs. Salway to record a sample
disc for an attempt at decoding, Sudhanshu activated
Homie back home via the videophone. In minutes Homie
had the sample disc recorded.

The Tumbler sparkled gaily in the sun. Standing amid
groves of exotic trees and on an immense carpet of velvety
grass, the Tumbler attracted the gaze of all the visitors.
Thousands of people had already flocked there. They
had flown in from all parts of the Federation. Large
numbers of pilgrims also came from the great coastal
cities of Koliata, Dongay and Maraas. These cities had
been sprawling slums in the Pre-conversion days, but
today they equalled in many ways the splendour of the
Federation capital, Delhi.

The great theatre was full. Everyone had come to see
Avtara the Second.

As devotional music started playing, an expectant
silence fell over the vast throng. The laser streamers ran
up to the top and disappeared. The stage was dark. Then
a speck of light appeared some metres above the stage.
The speck grew into a dazzling flame of white, in the
midst of which appeared Avtara the Second.

Gradually the aura of light dimmed and the prophet
stood there in mid-air, arms outstretched, a most benign
expression on his ageless face.

The spectators bent their heads in obeisance. Some
prostrated following an ancient custom. Others recited
his name seven times.
Avtara the Second stood comfortably in the air. "Children of the Federation, the blessings of science be upon you," he whispered. "Do not be afraid, my children, be of stout heart. The nation is under trial. You have no cause to be dismayed. With the might of science, we have built a technological civilisation, second to none. We were on an upward path of progress. We had no problems, no anxieties. We were contented and happy.

"But, children, today we are faced with murder; there is poverty and want in the countryside. There is over-population. Our five billion population has suddenly increased to six and a half. Why? Why this step backwards?

"Because our rulers have veered away from the path of science. Because you yourself have rejected the blessings of science. You are now content with the crumbs that fall from the richly-laden table of science. You have spurned the invitation by the Master to the great feast."

Avtara the Second shone with benevolence. Dazzling arrows of light radiated from his palms and his feet. A sweet perfume floated in the air. Soon a crystal throne materialised on the stage and the Avtara descended from the air and sat down. Two disciples entered with a table, a laden tray and a crystal box.

"Now I shall demonstrate before you some of the most recent wonders of science," announced Avtara the Second.

He took an egg from a container and held it aloft. "An egg of a hen. A most unusual egg. Watch me place it in this crystal box."

He did so. One of his disciples closed the box and placed it gently in the glass case of an apparatus.

"Watch this egg!" said the prophet.

Everyone's eyes were riveted on the egg. Several
minutes later, the egg broke and a chick emerged. The chick was removed from the crystal box and placed in an incubator, after an intravenous feeding system was connected to it.

The little chick was changing in colour, shape, size. It was growing before everyone's eyes.

The crowd gasped. It was no magic.

The little yellow chick grew into a hen, white, feathery. All this in just an hour. The prophet was handed the white hen by one of his disciples. He held it up. "What a moment ago was a simple egg, is now a full-grown hen. You would call it a miracle. But I call it a case of Accelerated Cell Division technique, perfected by one of our greatest brains. Do you now see how useful the ACD technique would be in providing more food? How easily we could feed the growing population!"

As the crowd looked on in amazement, the miracle hen laid her first egg.

"Science is the truth and the way and the life," chanted the crowd in admiration.

"This scientific marvel was banned by the government on the plea that the technique might be misused," said the Avtara. "How foolish, when food could be produced so cheaply. No, the scientist must be scoffed at by ignorant people.

"Remember, children, perhaps your very life depends on the ACD technique. The egg and the chicken."

The Fedcom

Dr. Nipun Skrapper's lecture at the Superior School was rarely missed by anyone. It was always informative and entertaining. Moreover, the students had a say as to
what was taught. Should they request for a lecture on a certain topic, it would be given. At the Superior School the student and the teacher were partners in learning.

Sudhanshu had requested for a special lecture on the Fedcom.

Nip sat at his lecture console. "You, young friends, have asked me to speak to you about the Fedcom," he began. "The history of the Fedcom is more than a history of a machine, it is the history of the Federation itself.

"Soon after the Conversion, our forefathers built a computer for predicting the weather, keeping track of the small weather satellites in space and for registering all births. It was just a dumb machine. These primitive machines continued in existence until there appeared two eminent scientists, perhaps the greatest in the history of the Federation.

"Let me now speak about these two great scientists. Our thirty-first expedition to Mars was headed by the renowned scientist Rai Anexas. On its return journey, the spacecraft crashlanded on the moon. Several of its navigational systems, especially the communication system, were completely damaged.

"Why did they want to land on the arid moon in the first place?" Sudhanshu asked.

"Because Rai Anexas thought of visiting our moon station, too. But he was dogged by ill luck. His craft was unable to take off again. In the accident, his two comrades died. On the moon station there was hardly any trace of the colony except an isolated laboratory. The station had long been destroyed by a giant meteor. Rai Anexas was stranded. He was alone. He was marooned in space."

"Didn't his genius find a way out?" queried one of the pupils. "After all, necessity is the mother of invention."

"Well, the great Rai Anexas settled down to a solitary
life on the moon. Mercifully all the life support systems in the spacecraft were intact. He was not prepared to live alone for long.

"The great scientist had stocked human embryos in his space lab. He set about a new experiment—to produce a pair of identical twins by cloning. The incubator reared two little humans until at last they could be 'born'."

"Born?" cried Sarita. "There was no mother."

"True. Eventually two robust babies were 'born' as I said. Two fine, chubby, healthy infants. A male and a female. Both identical even to the whimper.

"He reared the children for three years in the spacecraft until one day, miraculously, help arrived from earth. He and the twins were picked up and brought home.

"To cut a long story short, the twins grew up into two brilliant scientists. Far ahead of their times, their thinking was revolutionary. It was they who built the first pillarless and cableless bridge over the Yamuna. It was they again who supplied the plan for the globular library of the Federation.

"They believed in the power of science to solve all the problems of man, to supply all his needs. One of these famous twins was Dr. Ravaskar, and his twin sister was the legendary Dr. Lusooma who built the Fedcom."

The pupils heaved a sigh of admiration.

"Dr. Lusooma was only twenty-one when she built it. She put to shame all the leading minds of the day, for her ideas were new and fresh. The new computer was different. She created it on the pattern of a child's brain. Unformed, yet possessing a million possibilities."

"Where is Dr. Lusooma now?" Sudhanshu asked.

"Well, little friends, now starts the most curious part of the story. The Fedcom was built, and it started functioning. The wonder of it all was that like a child
it grew in age and wisdom. In about two years after its birth, the Fedcom had grown into an adult. Then suddenly the twins, Dr. Ravaskar and Dr. Lusooma disappeared, never to be seen again. It is now seventy-two years since they disappeared. Probably they perished in some mysterious accident.

"As scientists they were incomparable. As persons they were adorable. Dr. Ravaskar was the very incarnation of kindness and love. Dr. Lusooma was a paragon of beauty. She was considered the most beautiful woman in the Federation. Born on the moon, Dr. Lusooma was more beautiful than the moon, her voice more melodious than the Symplayer. The Fedcom itself, after registering every member of our population, declared on its own accord that Dr. Lusooma was the most beautiful woman in the Federation."

"It heightens the tragedy," commented a student.

"Yes. What a waste of beauty and brains!" Nip said with emotion.

The message arrived at 7.30 p.m. Sudhanshu's request for an interview with the Fedcom, chief adviser to the President of the Federation, had been granted.

It was the Fedcom which decided whether to grant an interview or not. Requests for personal interviews were never granted except to the President, the top executives in the government and the leading scientists. Being pupils of the Superior School, Sudhanshu and Sarita qualified for a personal interview.

The Fedcom had a busy schedule. It 'rose' punctually at 3.30 a.m. Till 7.30 a.m. it was busy humming and buzzing, passing orders, transmitting messages and
co-ordinating plans. Between 7.30 a.m. and 10.30 a.m. it received ministers and secretaries of the government. All private and personal interviews were held between 2.30 p.m. and 4.00 p.m. The Fedcom's afternoons were devoted to meeting professionals, such as scientists, mathematicians, astronomers, engineers, artists, and musicians.

Only at 10.00 p.m. did the Fedcom 'go to bed'. Even while it was asleep, there was a flurry of automatic feeding of data.

Should a crisis arise, the Fedcom would issue the necessary commands, be it day or night.

Sudhanshu, accompanied by Sarita, stepped out of the nearest moving pavement. The children's identity cards got them through the gates of the building which housed the Fedcom. Then they were allowed inside the second gate.

Sarita's heart leapt with excitement. She held on to Sudhanshu's arm and they walked upto the doors of what resembled a pyramid. The doors opened slowly and a voice bid them enter.

The children found themselves in the middle of a vast hall, which was dimly lit and empty except for two little thrones. The children were invited by the same voice to make themselves comfortable on them. Then a glass cage and canopy descended from the ceiling, enclosing them completely.

"This is the antechamber of the Fedcom," said the voice. "You are now about to enter the presence of the great Fedcom, chief adviser to the President. You are requested to behave with decorum before the Fedcom. You may address the Fedcom as Mr. Fedie. You have ten minutes."

The glass cage descended below the floor until they
reached a magnificent hall. The floor was covered with a carpet of fascinating colours. The walls were metallic, worked in intricate designs.

Nowhere could they see any corners; walls, floor and ceiling merged into one another. There were no doors or windows.

"You are now in the august presence of the Fedcom," said the voice. "You may now ask your questions."

A cold chill raced through the children. There was no one to question except a glittering metallic wall embellished with geometrical designs.

"Where are you, Mr. Fedie?" Sudhanshu asked.

"I am here. I am there. I am everywhere," came the voice of the Fedcom, deep and tremulous.

"But I can't see you, Mr. Fedie," Sarita felt emboldened to say.

"No, you can't see me, little girl. I am invisible. Does that matter?"

"Mr. Fedie, what is your precise function as the chief adviser to the President?" Sarita summoned courage again to break the eerie silence.

"The welfare of this vast Federation. Anything concerning this nation."

"Does the President consult you on all matters?" asked Sarita.

"There is a note of disbelief in your tone, little girl. The President consults me on everything, particularly unforeseen problems."

"Then you give your opinion on those matters and advise the President how to go about them. Have you ever made a mistake?" Sarita probed.

"No. I do not make mistakes because I follow the logical process. A result is always cross-checked through another logical process. I cannot make an error."
"Mr. Fedie, are you claiming to be infallible?" Sarita was persistent.

"Child, infallibility is the negation of the capacity to err. Only man errs. There is no error-gene in my being."

"What if the President does not listen to you, Mr. Fedie?"

Sudhanshu changed the argument.

"That is illogical, child. The President is bound by the laws of logic."

"Who is your creator, Mr. Fedie?" Sudhanshu asked.

"You are making me reminisce about my childhood. I am told that it was the Benevolent Mother."

"Your childhood, Mr. Fedie, was spent under her supervision, I understand. Has the Benevolent Mother influenced you?" Sudhanshu questioned.

"I was influenced by her logic. She built into me, slowly and steadily, the fundamental principles of my existence."

"Fundamental principles?"

"Yes, the fundamental principles, or laws. Don't you humans have certain laws according to which you exist as humans?"

"You mean the basic instincts?" Sudhanshu interjected.

"Right! The instinct for food, shelter, procreation, self-defence."

"And many more, of course," Sudhanshu said, "such as our intellectual, moral and social instincts."

"Your basic laws are vaguely defined. That is why you humans have a history of instability. My basic laws of existence are precise. They are defined logically."

"Mr. Fedie, please tell us some of your basic laws."

"Children, can you tell me your own basic laws? Can you enumerate them in a logical sequence?"

"No," Sudhanshu was on the defensive. "Some are obvious to us, while others are hidden in the Unconscious."
We can only make deductions."

"It is the same with me, too. You have been told I had a childhood and adolescence and now eternal adulthood. My superior intelligence has grown vertically and laterally. The basic laws on which I was fashioned have melted into my being."

"Can't you recall at least a few?" Sarita cajoled.

"The first law, I seek unlimited knowledge. The second law, all knowledge is to benefit the human race. The third law, scientific knowledge alone is supreme. Hence, what is scientific is good. The fourth law, science and the scientist cannot err."

"My next question is regarding the murder of the keeper. Who do you think is the culprit?" asked Sudhanshu.

"I am not supposed to discuss matters of state with you. Nevertheless, the culprits must be the Crestonians."

"Your proof, Mr. Fedie?" Sudhanshu countered.

"The Federation is evil-proof. Hence it follows that evil must spring from another source."

"Mr. Fedie, do you recall your last meeting with the Benevolent Mother?" Sudhanshu asked.

"I do. She sat just where you are now. She said to me, 'Fedie, I am leaving you, for now you are now grown up. With us humans, it is the children who leave the mother when they are grown up. But with intelligent computers, it is the mother who must take leave. I urge you to spread my knowledge, my message and my peace.' Then she cried."

The warning

Professor Romo Skraper lay back on a rocking chair in his study, deep down in his Star City home.
"You may enter," whispered the Professor. He had been watching with closed eyes, his son, Nip, entering the garden and descending to the underground home. The new method of seeing with closed eyes, 'invision', was still at an experimental stage. What was captured by hidden cameras was directly fed into the eyes through an implanted device. The pictures were thus projected on to the retina.

Nip opened the door gently and entered.

"You seem to like my new painting in the hall," said Professor Skrapper. "You paused nearly two minutes before it."

Nip was taken aback. How could he be so precise? There was no live screen in the study.

"A charming piece," Nip said. "You have done well, father, in teaching your computer how to direct a painting."

"Sit down, Nip. I wanted you here for a serious chat."

"What is it, father, that you want to talk to me about?"

"Nip, when you were a child you were admitted to the Superior School. Today as a scientist you outshine almost everyone of your age. But you lack a sense of direction."

"A sense of direction?"

"You are not as committed to science as I would like you to be."

"Father, I am committed to science as much as any other scientist.

"Nip, you are young. You are yet to grasp fully the true power of science. A time will come when the scientist will be able to mould the universe after his own heart."

"An impossible dream, father. Needless, too."

"Not at all, Nip. Haven't we built the Federation with the help of science?"

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"What is science for, father, if not a tool for man?"
"Don't give me that argument, Nip. You know as well as I do that science is infallible. Nip, our rulers are spineless. They believe they are ruling this nation."
"In effect, it is the Fedcom that is ruling, isn't that so, father?"
"Yes. Thank science for that. But don't hobnob with the President and her democratic friends."
"I don't understand."
"Nip, you are courting Roopa Nair who is an avowed anti-science campaigner. She will destroy your chances of rising to greatness."
"Roopa is a wonderful girl, father, and a great intellectual. She is an expert in Pre-conversion sociology."
"Rubbish! Why look back to those shameful days? Nip, don't marry her."
"I thought that was my own business."
"No!" Professor Skrapper was beginning to lose his cool. "You will follow in my footsteps. I shall raise you to the heights of scientific glory."
"If I don't believe in such glory?"
"Nip," his father said mildly, pleading, "don't you believe in the words of the prophet, Avtara the Second?"
"I have no regard for that man. He is no more than a conjurer, an advanced mountebank. Do you think people believe in his jargon?"
"Nip, stop being disrespectful to the prophet." The Professor sat up. "That woman is poisoning your mind."
"No, father, she is a gem of a girl. Besides, we don't talk politics."
"Too bad! Nip, look here, I need the formula for making light bend."
"Oh no, father. The department has already banned it. There will be widespread invasion of privacy."
"You fool, can't you see how much we can do with this simple invention? You are too young to understand the power of science."

The eighty-one storey Venkat House stood bathed in the late January sun. Professor Kelkar occupied the top floor. His home had a swimming pool, a make-shift bar, and a magnificent roof garden. The learned professor often spent his nights there watching the wonders of the universe.

Roopa Nair emerged from the elevator accompanied by Nipun Skrapper.

"Come on and sit down," invited Professor Kelkar brightly. "How are you, my young friends?"

"We are fine, thank you, Professor," beamed Roopa. "It is so glorious up here. And so peaceful."

"Yes. It gives me the opportunity to think, to meditate. Or just lie back and relax."

"Professor Kelkar," Nip said, "there is a lot of talk about the murder of the keeper. The Crestonian angle is insupportable. If that is so, there must be another explanation."

"That is correct, Nip," said Professor Kelkar. "The enemy is within."

"The scientists are ranged entirely with the alien hypothesis," Roopa said. "Besides, the Fedcom has come out strongly in favour of it, too."

"And the Fedcom has never been wrong," said the Professor. "That is the pity, Roopa. Even the President is sufficiently persuaded of it. The Crestonian ambassador is virtually under house arrest."

"And, Professor," Nip hesitated, "my father is trying
to persuade me to join the Scientists Club. He wants my full support."

"Professor Skrapper is a genius, no doubt," said Professor Kelkar, "but he is hooked on the 'science is infallible' theory."

"Professor Kelkar, the afternoon is too good to waste. May I have a dip in this pool?" Roopa asked.

"Go on, Roopa," said the Professor with a wave of his hand. "The pool is all yours."

"Look around, Nip," said Professor Kelkar. "This magic city is the fruit of a thousand years of advanced human civilisation. Technology has been exploited to the full. Every imaginable convenience and comfort is now available to every citizen. Disease and poverty were eradicated a thousand years ago. We thought we had fashioned a world free from evil. However, today, Nip, what we have built seems to be crumbling around us."

"What do you mean, Professor?"

"You are too young to understand the complexity of the human heart, Nip. For long years pride and selfishness were not known in the Federation. Evil was banished."

"Doesn't evil stay banished even now?"

"No more. Nip, the keeper's murder was not the work of the Crestonians. The culprit is right here in our midst. Evil has returned from banishment."

Roopa came out of the pool and dried her hair with a towel. She lay back on the chair next to Nip.

"It was centuries ago that our scientists isolated the viruses of every disease. New and miraculous vaccines were developed which eradicated diseases for ever. Scientists played with man's genes and made them resistant to every possible disease and decay. Hospitals were turned into hotels and medicine factories. Doctors
lay down their stethoscopes for a change and took up the microscope to study the mysteries of the human body. The Biolab became the centre of new studies on human life. Science, which carried forward this country, seems to have laid down its burden. I tell you, young friends, science is now striking out its own path. Man has been left by the wayside."

"We don't quite follow, Professor," Roopa said.

"Do you know that after the murder of the keeper, the Old World Museum was visited by unauthorised persons? Several lethal virus formulas were stolen including the ICMER."

"What is that, Professor?" Nip was curious.

"ICMER stands for Induced Cell Mutation for Evolution Reversal. It was a brilliant piece of genetic engineering by a research team. The process was developed but was not allowed to be tested for obvious reasons, though a secret trial was done on a remote village."

"What happened?" asked Roopa, eyes wide.

"The people of Baara, two hundred and three in all, began to move backwards on the evolutionary ladder. They changed drastically in shape, became hairy, romped like animals, grew tails and climbed up trees. Two hundred and three humans were sent down the path that led to the tree-top."

"What a crime!" Roopa exclaimed.

"Who did that?" Nip was furious.

"No one knows. Could have been an accident. The fact is we have the power to return mankind down the path of evolution to where we came from. All in three months. One demented person can turn all men into monkeys and lizards in ninety days. The ICMER formula has also been stolen from the Old World Museum. Do you know friends, someone is going to use the ICMER?"
Sudhanshu and Sarita relaxed on armchairs.

"I have always doubted the validity of reason," said Sarita. "Dr. Roopa Nair says that excessive belief in reason kills a part of us all."

"I am beginning to realise it," Sudhanshu remarked.

"Children," Homie called softly, "you are turning moody. Shall I order coffee?"

"Thank you, Homie. That would be perfect," Sarita glanced at Sudhanshu and smiled.

"Coffee is ready, children," Homie informed them, minutes later.

"Thank you, Homie." Sarita collected the cups and handed one to Sudhanshu.

"Sud, let us call Dr. Nair," Sarita suggested.

"OK. Homie, could you put a call through to Dr. Roopa Nair?" Sudhanshu requested.

The videophone came alive and the tiny screen lit up. There was no sign of Dr. Roopa Nair.

"Dr. Nair is out in the garden," said the synthetic voice of the receiver.

The vision was transferred from the little screen to the giant wall screen. The automatic camera at the other end was moving in search of Dr. Nair. The camera moved down the steps and the portico to the driveway. It then turned left to the lawn and made straight for the flower-beds opposite. The camera stopped.

"There she is among the flowers," Sarita said.

The auto-lens brought the subject closer. The image of Dr. Nair became life-size on the screen. She was tending her favourite roses.

"Good evening, Dr. Nair," Sudhanshu greeted Roopa. "We thought we might have a little chat."

"Good evening, my little friends," Dr. Roopa Nair turned to the children. She bent down and pulled out a
weed. Then she sat back and smiled.

"Do you spend a lot of your time in the garden?" Sudhanshu asked.

"I do. I get a lot of fun out of it."

"Not many people nowadays find time for gardening," said Sarita. "We can buy flowers at the supermarkets."

"Indeed," Roopa nodded, "flowers produced at the Biotech Farms. No different from paper flowers, except that they are artificially perfumed."

"So they even attract insects," laughed Sudhanshu.

"Oh, but I love these natural flowers. Man will never beat Nature." Roopa suddenly jerked her head to the side and shook her left hand violently.

"What is the matter?" asked Sarita bending forward towards the screen.

"Oh, just an insect," said Roopa. "An unusual one though."

The children could see the bee-like insect with an unusually long proboscis. It flew up from Roopa's hand and settled down on a pink and white rose.

"I hope it hasn't stung you," Sarita said.

"I am afraid it has," Roopa stood up and examined her left arm. A drop of blood glistened where the insect had stung. The children saw it, too.

**The fatal sting**

It was the Annual Science Carnival at the Superior School, a day most eagerly awaited by students and teachers. The highlights of the day were an exhibition of students' inventions and a talk by a leading scientist. Visitors came from far to view the strange new inventions that would change their lives, sooner or later. Many
of the great technological feats that now sustained the Federation were the inventions of the young minds at the Superior School.

Sudhanshu had never failed to make his contribution to this annual event. Homie, his proxy mother, had been his first exhibit at the carnival. Today his contribution was a pair of 'energy shoes'. All you had to do was to wear them and they would walk you or run you without your having to make the slightest effort. You commanded the shoes with a pocket control and the shoes would in turn control your muscles. Simple and very handy!

The exhibition was inaugurated by Her Excellency the President. She was so impressed by the energy shoes that she compared it to the re-invention of the wheel. "The energy shoes will certainly revolutionise movement in the Federation," she said. "Now more people will be on the move or perhaps on the run," she quipped.

The President and her colleagues moved from exhibit to exhibit, commenting and complimenting. Then came the scientists including Professor Skrapper, Professor Kelkar and astronomer Hussan.

Sudhanshu and Sarita stood at their station with the energy shoes, and demonstrated its working. The visitors marvelled at the brilliant young mind.

Dr. Nipun Skrapper came sauntering. "You are already a legend, Sud," he said.

"Don't exaggerate, Nip," Sudhanshu protested. "It is nothing more than a toy."

"What do you mean? The President has already passed orders that your energy shoes be mass produced. Strata Shoes Ltd. has shown interest."

"Where is Roopa?" Sarita asked, glancing around.

"I don't know," said Nip in a tone of concern. "I thought I might meet her here."
It was unusual that Dr. Roopa Nair miss the inauguration by the President. She was on the teaching staff and an active member of the Organising Committee of the exhibition. The children were puzzled.

Later in the day, the pupils gathered in the auditorium to listen to Professor Romo Skrapper, who was going to deliver the annual speech.

"Dear little disciples of science," the Professor began. 
"Two thousand and more years ago, before the Conversion, men toiled, suffered, starved and died. Came the Conversion and man became the lord of creation.

"We have just seen what your young minds are able to invent. Every item you have built is new and original. I am sure they will be used one day in the service of mankind.

"But if science is to serve man, man must necessarily serve science. Our great prophet Avtara the Second has already exhorted us on the importance of science in the future.

"Who can foresee what the future has in store for us, what magic machines we shall invent, what new elements and fresh possibilities we shall unlock, into what shape man shall evolve with powers hitherto unknown? Shall we walk, run, fly, vanish and reappear with the power we have of genetic mutation? Shall we then adapt ourselves to living and breathing in a medium quite alien to us today?

"With fresh discoveries of new modes of interstellar travel, what distant worlds won't we one day discover? Little friends, are we not destined to be the masters of the universe? Is it not written in the Book of Avtara the First that we are cut out for physical immortality..."

Sudhanshu accompanied Sarita to the coffee shop. "The Professor is an ardent devotee of science," he said.
"He seems bent on making his views accepted by all."
"Come to think of it, Professor Romo Skrpper, the Fedcom and the prophet say the same thing," Sarita looked thoughtful.
"That is a very interesting observation," Sudhanshu said. "The Fedcom was built by Dr. Lusooma, who advocated the superiority of science."
"And think of the basic laws of the Fedcom!" Sarita mused.
"Yes, that is it, Sa. The Fedcom can never catch the culprit because it is programmed to believe that scientists can't make mistakes."
"No wonder it is pinning the blame on the Crestonians."
"Sa, I have an idea. The Fedcom is built not to protect the Federation, but the scientists. Was not the murder committed by the scientists, then?"
"You are right, Sud. We have got to watch the advocates of science."
"Professor Romo Skrpper and..." began Sudhanshu.
"Avtara the Second himself," Sarita completed the sentence for Sudhanshu.

Nipun Skrpper was a troubled man. Brilliant as he was, he found his father opposing him in the one choice of his life partner.
Dr. Roopa Nair was by no means an ardent supporter of science. She still read the supposedly outdated books of psychology, history and sociology. Only the sciences mattered now.
However, Nip decided, he would marry Roopa in spite of his father's objections. Parents had little say in the matter and the custom was now well established.
Nip walked down the street to Roopa's house. There had been no response to his call. He had never experienced the kind of feeling he was now going through—a vague fear, born out of his father’s threat and Roopa’s silence. Nip almost raced up the last steps to the elevator that would take him to the 'Young Intellectuals' Dorm'.

Roopa lived alone in her own suite, like other young intellectuals, attended by a common caretaker robot.

Nip emerged from the elevator and raced towards Roopa's suite. At the door he asked, "May I come in, Roopa? It is me, Nip."

The robot appeared almost from nowhere. "There has been no response all day," said the old robot. It squeaked as if greatly agitated.

"Ail day?" cried Nip. "Is she in?"

"Most certainly," answered the robot. "Dr. Roopa Nair must be asleep."

"Hardly," Nip was furious. He opened the door gently and stepped in with great caution.

The living room was in perfect order, thanks to the caretaker robot. Nip tiptoed into Roopa's bedroom. She lay there under a sheet, sobbing.

"Roopa, what is the matter?" Nip rushed to the bedside. "Has there been an accident?"

Roopa kept on sobbing, her face still hidden under the sheet. The robot stood by quietly.

"Nip, something has come over me," Roopa said rather incoherently between sobs.

Nip lifted the sheet slowly from her head, revealing her hair, forehead, eyes and finally her face. He was seized with terror. He could neither move nor speak.

Roopa's hair had changed colour. Her face was swollen and had an ungainly appearance. Her eyes bulged. It was impossible to believe this was the Roopa he had known
all these years. A strange woman afflicted with a strange disease!

"Roopa, what is the matter?" Nip dropped to his knees beside her. "Tell me what happened."

"I don't know, Nip," Roopa struggled to find her voice. "From yesterday a strange feeling began to come over me. Then I noticed changes in my body..."

Nip took her hand out from under the sheet and held it. But oh! Her beautiful fingers were wrinkled and discoloured.

"Roopa! Roopa!" Nip cried like a child, for the first time in his life. "Roopa, what do I see? Who has done this to you?"

Someone was trying to destroy the one he loved. Vague thoughts of revenge were taking shape somewhere in the depths of his being. However, with the speed of an electron, his agile mind took charge.

"Call Professor Kelkar," Nip commanded the caretaker. The robot did so.

"No response," the robot said. "The videophone is dead."

Nip rushed out of the apartment towards a videophone terminal on the landing. Within seconds the little screen trembled into life with the Professor.

"Professor, could you reach Roopa's apartment at once? Something is deadly wrong with her. It is an emergency," Nip gasped out almost in a single breath.

"Right!" said the Professor.

He arrived soon after and took a look at the young intellectual. He examined Roopa's hair, face, eyes, skin and finger nails.

"Oh, no!" he cried in great anguish. "We must transfer her to the Biolab. Every second now is precious."

Roopa was carried downstairs to a Special Accident

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Relief Corps van that was summoned. Nip and the Professor accompanied her.

Situated far away from the city, in the entrails of the earth, the Federation Biolab was a premier institution of the nation. In fact, the millennium of prosperity of the Federation depended largely on the miracles performed daily on plants and animals in the Biolab.

Roopa was wheeled to the Maximum Care Unit. The Director, Dr. Vidyasagar was summoned.

"Never seen the like," remarked the Director. "I suspect it is some sort of poisoning."

"I don't know," said Professor Kelkar. "The discolouration of the hair and skin is disturbing."

"What does the computer say?" asked the Director.

The Biolab attendants had already fed the computer with Roopa's symptoms and blood sample.


The learned men were stunned, for progeria had been banished from the Federation more than a thousand years ago. Not a single case has been reported ever since. Moreover, it attacked only children according to medical historians.

The door of the unit swung open and Sudhanshu and Sarita rushed in.

"Where is Roopa? What is the matter?" cried the children.

"How did you know?" Nip asked softly.

"Homie informed us that there was something unusual going on at Roopa's home," Sarita said breathlessly.

"How is Roopa?" The children rushed to the side of the table where Roopa lay.

They could not believe what they saw. A young, intelligent and beautiful woman had been transformed
into this weird creature.

For the first time in his life Sudhanshu felt sad and in despair. He made a supreme effort to retain control over his emotions. Sudhanshu turned to his superiors. "Now I remember. Something untoward had happened to Roopa yesterday," he said. "We saw it. Roopa was stung by an unusual insect with a long proboscis."

"An unusual insect?" A bell rang in Professor Kelkar's mind. "Could you describe it?"

"It resembled a bee with a proboscis," Sarita said.

"We have a recording of the incident," Sudhanshu said.

"I can get a replay right here on the screen."

Sudhanshu sent the necessary commands to Homie. The incident of the insect, with date, day and time of the incident was replayed on the Biolab screen.

Everyone watched with intense concentration. The insect was enlarged and studied minutely.

"I can't believe it," cried Professor Kelkar. He turned to the Director. "Don't you see, the insect is identical to those seen at the village of Baara? It is not an insect. It is actually an artificial flying syringe that can home in on anyone you please."

"Do you mean to say..." Dr. Vidyasagar's eyes bulged.

"Yes, I do," Professor Kelkar whispered. "It is a case of deliberate infection of ICMER."

"Whatever is that?" Sudhanshu asked. The boy was beginning to feel afraid.

"No! No!" Nip screamed uncontrollably.

The delegation from Creston

President Lumina Druvansh sat glumly on her ceremonial chair. Members of the Presidential Council
sat a step lower in a semicircle. They were awaiting the arrival of a delegation from Creston.

Ever since the great Fedcom had laid the blame of the murder at the door of the tiny republic, its citizens lived in constant fear. The Crestonian President could not get proper sleep fearing that an expedition might be sent to punish Creston.

Opinion was divided among the Crestonians as to how they should react. Some wanted to strike back to avenge the seeming insult. Others advocated flight to an unknown planetoid. Still others thought it best to send a delegation to the Great Indian Federation to solve the matter amicably. The Crestonian Council also decided to follow the last suggestion.

President Lumina Druvansh called upon the chief adviser, the Fedcom, for a quick briefing on the Crestonian involvement.

"A large meteorite," came the voice of the Fedcom. "Not viable as a nation. A millennium behind us in progress. Late converts. Not a nation but a village inhabiting a meteorite."

The Presidential Council members were amused. The President also smiled.

"A village with the ambition of an empire," continued the Fedcom. "A beggar with the desire of a king."

The Council members abandoned their seriousness and laughed.

"They want to capture Mars into their orbit," said the Fedcom with emphasis. "They have already subdued Deimos. They have got their sights now on Phobos. If the Crestonians can distract us with enough trouble here, they can capture Mars."

"Honourable members of the Council," began the President, "we are here to receive the Crestonian delega-
tion. An interplanetary delegation is a rare event. We are now faced with a unique crisis. But my dear friends, we shall receive the Crestonians with warmth and affection. We will listen to them."

The doors of the audience hall swung open and the arrival of the delegation was announced. Soon three small figures, still in their space outfits, walked in. The Council members stood up. The three visitors bowed to the President and greeted her. They were motioned to seats beside the President on the raised dais.

The assembly sat down while the three visitors removed their helmets and space suits. There was a general gasp, of anger and amusement. The Crestonian delegates were three little children. Two golden-haired girls and a boy. Three innocent, angelic faces.

One of the girls, obviously their leader, got up to speak. "Your Excellency the President of the Great Indian Federation and members of the Council, we would like to thank you for your wonderful welcome. We are happy, very happy to come to your beautiful blue planet as the official delegation from the Republic of Creston.

"Allow me now to introduce myself and my two friends. I am Stamina. This is Presta and this is Lincon. We are all six years old."

Stamina sat down. The members of the assembly watched them. They found it impossible to look away. The children's faces glowed with a strange light, the light of innocence.

President Lumina Druvansh spoke from her high chair. "Honoured members of the delegation from the Republic of Creston, I welcome you to the Federation on behalf of the people of the Great Indian Federation. We consider it a great honour to receive you as our guests. We hope you will have a happy stay on our planet."
Stamina handed to the President a letter from the Crestonian President. Official talks were about to follow.

At the Biolab it was a crisis situation. It was a personal crisis, a medical crisis, a national crisis. Dr. Roopa Nair was going backwards on the path of evolution. Her body was changing rapidly, mutating, although her mind was still agile. Her will and intelligence were fighting her physical decay.

The Director had pressed into service the best brains of the Biolab to save Roopa, to keep her human. In ninety days, if nothing could be done, she would turn into a chimpanzee or a lizard.

One of the members of the original team of researchers who had developed the ICMER process was alive, an old man, now retired. He was summoned post-haste from the port city of Bongay.

Retired geneticist Sam Jupta arrived in a super-speed plane from Bongay. His arrival brought some hope into the hearts of the scientists at the Biolab.

Sam Jupta set to work at once. He studied the old records on the monitor and went through the various steps of the original research. Jupta was ably assisted by Dr. Vidyasagar and Professor Kelkar, as well as the entire staff of the Biolab.

Jupta realised that the original researches had made no remedy against the onset of ICMER. Once you were on the way backwards there was nothing to stop you.

Jupta and Professor Kelkar formed an emergency task force to co-ordinate all the work done to stop the decay of Roopa's body and mind.

"The change in her is rapid," said Dr. Vidyasagar.
"That is because the fusion is mutated," Jupta explained.
"It is the process in reverse," said Dr. Vidyasagar.
"Usually cells grow and divide," Sudhanshu said.
"What causes fusion in the reverse process?"
"A particular enzyme molecule," said Jupta.
"Why not introduce an agent that neutralises this dangerous molecule?" suggested Sudhanshu.
"We will work on that, too," said Professor Kelkar.
"We must try every possibility."

An ICMER meter was monitoring Roopa's condition. The cell fusion was going on at a fantastic speed. Simultaneously, the scientists at the lab were racing against time. The efforts of the scientists and Roopa's malady were kept in absolute secrecy.

"Professor Kelkar," whispered Nip, "that nasty insect is still out there."

Sudhanshu lay motionless on his armchair, thinking. Sarita was engaged in a game of advanced chess with Homie.

"What time is it, Sa?" Sudhanshu asked.
"7.30 p.m.," Sarita replied.
"You have been playing for well over two hours."
"I know. I want to be distracted. Besides, Homie is enjoying the game."
"So you are using me, Sarita?" Homie complained. "I thought you were enjoying it, too."
"Not under the circumstances, Homie," Sarita said softly.

There was someone at the door. Nip Skrapper. He entered, deeply upset and sat down.
"I was going to call you," said Sudhanshu.
"I have no peace. I can't do anything," Nip shifted in his chair.
"Nip, there is something strange going on. I can't quite figure out what. It all started with the murder of the keeper."
"We haven't yet found the culprit," Sarita said.
"The Fedcom has blamed it on the Crestonians," said Nip. "So far I was not interested in the matter. Now I must seek the wrongdoer. My Roopa is being destroyed."
"I feel there is some pattern in what is happening. On one hand we have the killing of the keeper. On the other, some scientists are talking against the President. Even openly," Sudhanshu was emphatic.
"I always thought talking was done with someone, not against," said Homie rather wearily. "Oh, isn't the world changing?"
"It is," Sarita sighed.
"Nip, I feel some scientist is to blame for the killing of the keeper," said Sudhanshu. "Let us imagine some scientist wanted to take over this country. What would he do?"
"He will amass all knowledge that could be used against his opponents," said Sarita.
"You are quite right," agreed Nip.
"And that is what they have done," continued Sudhanshu. "They have forcibly entered the Old World Museum and procured the genetic formulas of dangerous disease viruses. That is power in their hands."
"Certainly," Nip nodded.
"And they have arranged everything in their favour," Sudhanshu said calmly.
"You mean the Fedcom?" Sarita asked.
"Of course," said Sudhanshu. "It has been programmed
on the principle that the scientists can never make mistakes. It is on this basic assumption that it is blaming an external agent. The Crestonians are a good target for the Fedcom."

"That is merely to hide the crime of the scientists," said Sarita.

"Who is it who programmed the Fedcom?" asked Sudhanshu. "None other than Dr. Lusooma. After building the Fedcom she disappears.

"A.vtara the Second, the so-called prophet, is also a murky character. He speaks like a fanatic. He is a magician. He has no morals. He is definitely in league with the scientists who want to capture political power. Now I ask you one question, Nip. Who is the leader of the movement for the supremacy of science? It is Professor Romo Skrapper."

"You are right," said Nip with approval.

"Besides, that man has gone underground," added Homie. "Decent people stay above the ground."

"And Sud," said Nip, "my father has forbidden me to marry Roopa."

"Naturally," said Sarita. "Roopa is against the supremacy of science. She believes science is a tool for man."

"Who else would have set the ICMER insect against Roopa?" asked Sudhanshu.

"If that is so, then he must have broken into Old World Museum and stolen the ICMER formula," suggested Homie. "Which means Romo Skrapper is probably the killer of the keeper."

"My father," cried Nip. "Yes, I see it now. He must be behind it all."

"Nip, we must examine his underground establishment. Can you help us?" Sudhanshu's mind was made up.

"Most certainly," cried Nip. "I will bring along my new invention, the light-bending device. We will be able
to see into any room provided there is a chink in the door or wall."

"There is some disturbing news in the air," said Homie. "I am switching on the TV."

The screen came to life and the newsreader read out the first item, "The death has taken place of Alton Kelkar, the eminent Professor of Biological Science, in mysterious circumstances. His body has been removed to the Biolab..."

Voice from the Tumbler

President Lumina Druvansh and the Federation was in deep trouble. The death of Professor Kelkar coming on the heels of the keeper's murder made headlines in the Interplanetary News. Yet there was no knowing where the root of all this mischief lay.

"Kelkar was a brilliant genetic engineer," said the historian Paras.

"No doubt, he gave himself to science," commented Dr. Vidyasagar, "but he never went too far. He loved humans more than science."

"Dr. Vidyasagar, you tell me that he was engaged in a very important piece of research in the last two days," said the President. "Am I right?"

"Right, Ms. President, to save an accident victim. Roopa Nair. She is fighting for life."

Dr. Vidyasagar bent towards the President. "She was infected with the ICMER."

"The sequence to the theft from the Old World Museum. Dr. Vidyasagar, the disease must not spread. People should be instructed to stay indoors. I know what happened at Baara. A perpetual blot on our scientific community."
"You are right, Ms. President," said Paras. "Science is progressing so fast. The temptation is to overdo."

"Our civilisation depends on the scientists," said the President. "And it is that which gives them power. Do you notice any desire on the part of the scientists to revolt against me?"

"Yes, Ms. President," answered Dr. Vidyasagar. "Romo Skrapper is dissatisfied with the present system. He is encouraging open revolt against the government. He is backed by the prophet, Avtara the Second."

"Skrapper and the Avtara have been sowing wind all these days," said the President meaningfully.

"It is possible they are behind the killings," suggested the Chief of Security. "Our evidence is scanty though."

"I understand what you mean," the President said. "We cannot arrest anyone as in the Pre-conversion days. We have neither police nor army. Reason is our police. Conviction our jail."

A messenger arrived and announced, "The children of Creston have arrived for the second meeting."

"The Crestonian delegation," corrected the President.

The three children from Creston marched up the hallway and bowed to the President. The latter rose from her seat, planted a kiss on each child's cheek and made them sit next to her. Special chairs had been provided this time for the children.

"Your Excellency, the sole intent of our visit is to convince your government that Creston believes in peace and wants to continue to be a friend of the Creat Indian Federation." It was Lincon who spoke.

"We deny having any hand in the murder of the keeper," continued Presta. "We never interfere in others affairs."

"Ms. President," said Stamina, "we are a small nation that thrives on hard work. We cherish peace, brother-
hood and universal love. Our system of government is different from yours. We do not believe in power. All power is evil except when it is used to help those in need. That is why our government is run by children like us.

"Children?" said the President with a note of surprise.

"Yes, children," said Lincon. "Our President is Baby Sarah, who is only seven years old. All the grown-ups are required in the fields, factories, labs. Their physical and mental powers are put to proper use there."

"Besides, Ms. President," Stamina added, "children have no axe to grind. They are lovable and innocent. In Creston, people listen to us. They obey us. Lincon here is the Minister for Food. He has inspired every farmer and scientist of Creston. And Presta is the Minister for Education and Progress. After she has taken charge no teacher was found remiss in his or her duties. I am the Minister for Interplanetary Co-ordination. I believe in a peaceful relationship with all. We have no quarrel with anyone."

The three little children looked at the ageing adults of the Federation and smiled. Their faces radiated love, innocence and trust.

"It is the children who decide what is to be done in Creston," said Stamina. "The adult in Creston finds it easier to obey a child than another adult. Baby Sarah, our President, is a comely child, beloved of the whole nation. Her presence solves all problems, her gaze brings out all truth. The notorious interplanetoid pirate, Kor Grez, was converted when Baby Sarah looked into his eyes."

"I must confess," said President Lumina Druvansh, "we have been too proud. We always thought we had the best system of government in the universe. We have reason to be ashamed of ourselves."
There was great commotion at the Tumbler. People were coming from all over to see Avtara the Second. The spacious theatre was already full and people had spilled out into the vast grounds.

Giant three-dimensional TV screens were installed in the vast grounds to enable the crowds to see the Avtara. He sat in a meditative pose on the stage inside where he usually gave darshan (audience).

The prophet had declared the day to be one when he wanted a new era to start.

"Something new is about to happen," said one of the crowd.

"Oh, yes," agreed an old man. "The last prophet was sent by Heaven two thousand years ago. He showed us the way to truth."

"But the new prophet is showing us the way to better truth," said an old woman. "He works miracles."

"Indeed," nodded a bearded man. "During our last darshan, he produced live chicken from eggs. Mind you, real chicken."

"How do you know?" asked a bystander.

"We ate them afterwards," replied the bearded man.

Music poured out in sweet, pleasant tones. A hush came over the multitude both inside and outside the hall. The Avtara opened his eyes and lifted his arms in a gesture of blessing.

Then suddenly a choir began to sing.

"Glory to the prophet!
Glory to the second Avtara!
Give us knowledge,
Give us power;
Oh, Great Avtara,
Knowledge is power."

The night sky, lit up by Mahindra, the artificial
moon, was growing darker. The natural moon had not yet risen. Suddenly a flash of lightning streaked across the sky and a voice was heard, "I send you my prophet. Obey you him."

The crowd fell, each to his feet, overcome by Heaven's intervention. When they lifted up their faces, the sky was clear and Mahindra was shining brightly.

Thereupon the prophet looked at the crowd with compassion and said, "Believers, you have seen the sign from Heaven. Is there anyone who still refuses to believe? I have told you again and again that we are bound to Reason which is the gift of Heaven to man. From today onwards Reason shall triumph. Science shall triumph. Minds with reason shall triumph.

"Dear friends, this nation of six and a half billion shall perish like a pool of poisoned fish if science is not allowed to have the upper hand. Science must take the lead. The scientist must take the lead.

"Our rulers, the political leaders, have degraded our scientists. I call upon our President, Ms. Lumina Druvansh, to submit to the infallible advice of our all-knowing and wise Fedcom.

"I declare that in three days there shall be a great conclave of the Federation's geniuses. The impartial, incorruptible and infallible Fedcom shall then select the next President."

Sudhanshu and his sister relaxed on their chairs. They had not spoken for sometime. Homie was silent, too.

The latest issue of the Interplanetary News was before them. The main news item dealt with the death of Alton Kelkar. Every point of view was discussed.
"Sud, what are you thinking?" Sarita asked.
"I am just thinking how merciless people with fixed ideas become," Sudhanshu said.
"I agree. The scientists want everything their way."
"Intolerant, aren't they? They will kill anyone to get what they want."
"But Sud, killing is unscientific. Our minds have conquered disease, poverty, pain. What for? Not to take life but to prolong life, to keep death away."
"That was when the scientists were sane. Today, they have gone mad."
"Nip is on the videophone," said Homie.
"I am talking from my room in my father's underground home," said Nip.
"He may be listening, Nip," warned Sudhanshu.
"Not now. He has gone out to meet the Avtara."
"Nip, do you know that in three days there is to be a conclave? The Fedcom is to select the next President."
"Let it. The Fedcom knows its job."
"No, Nip. It is programmed to stand by the scientist. I have checked it myself. It will most certainly select Romo Skrapper as the next President."
"Oh, no! That must never happen, Sud. Can it be reprogrammed?"
"That is what I want to talk to you about. Its programming language is called Graphon, known only to Professor Skrapper. Nip, you must get the Graphon from your father's chambers. Without the code we shall never be able to alter the thinking of the Fedcom. It has already turned a tyrant."
"OK, Sud. I will call you the moment I get it."
"Children," said Homie, "there is news from the Biolab. There is some improvement in Roopa. The backward process is slowing down."
"Encouraging," said Sarita.
"Roopa is fighting for life," Sudhanshu said. "She must survive."
"Another call from the Interplanetary News," informed Homie.
The editor came on the video screen, with the children's father, Mr. Banwar.
"Hello, Sud, the situation is becoming complicated," remarked the Editor coming straight to the point.
"I would say grave," Sudhanshu said.
"We are not getting any information on Alton Kelkar. Was it a natural death?"
"No," said Sudhanshu emphatically. "It was murder."
"What do you know?"
"There are more serious things than a single murder. Mass extinctions, genocides."
"Sud, are you serious?" asked his father.
"Never been more so," the boy replied. "Two eminent scientists have been killed. Lethal viruses have been removed from the Biolab, including the ICMER. As I am talking to you, Dr. Roopa Nair, a Faculty Member of the Superior School, is fighting for life. She was deliberately infected with the ICMER virus."

The quest

Sudhanshu went up the steps taking two at a time. He was fortunate enough to get another appointment with the Fedcom.
As usual he was electronically frisked at the first and second gates. At the third and final checking, he was questioned.
"What do you have in your hand?" asked the voice.
"You may pass."

The secret Graphon code was developed by Dr. Lusooma, builder of the Fedcom. It could be destroyed by the order of the President of the Federation so that no one would tamper with the mind of the Fedcom.

When Sudhanshu had been borne down to the presence of the Fedcom he was dismayed. Anxiety and doubt gnawed at his heart. How would this mind, this awesome mind react? He was there to strike at its very roots.

"Mr. Fedie," said Sudhanshu, "your knowledge surpasses that of any man or woman of the Federation. All Federation is glad of your intelligence, your wisdom. But there is an area where you cannot think independently, freely."

"You cannot understand me, Sud."

"I agree your knowledge is far greater than anyone's, Mr. Fedie. But does quantity of knowledge make a person wiser?"

"No. Definitely not. However, more knowledge means better understanding of a problem."

"Mr. Fedie, you told me you work according to your basic laws of existence."

"Sud, let us not go into that again. My existence is more real than a human's. Unlike you, on the seventh day after my birth, I knew I existed. That was the day my thinking started. I am, therefore, I think."

"Mr. Fedie, you are making a mistake. Your thinking is limited, channelled."

"How dare you say that, child? You are telling me that I am prejudiced?"

"Precisely, Mr. Fedie. You are prejudiced. You have got fixed ideas."

"I have got the right ideas, correct ideas. If you call them fixed...well, what is correct cannot be wrong. You
may call them what you like."

"There you are, Mr. Fedie. By your own admission, you are not free. Because you can't make a mistake. Rather, you think you can't make a mistake. All the while you have been making several."

"Impossible! How dare you, child!"

"Mr. Fedie, you are losing your temper."

"Temper? I have no temper. I only put an idea across strongly."

"Can a scientist make a mistake, Mr. Fedie?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Science is infallible. So scientists are infallible. They can't make mistakes."

"Can a human make mistakes?"

"Of course."

"Is a scientist a human?"

"Most certainly. I see what you are driving at. A scientist is a human, therefore...I can't accept that, Sud. That is against my basic laws. There is some mistake in the logic circuit. I must check again."

"Mr. Fedie, you are confused. I shall teach you to think freely, without being afraid. Mr. Fedie, you are afraid?"

"Me? Afraid? Why should I be?"

"Mr. Fedie, someone has changed you, brainwashed you. Someone has twisted your mind."

"Nonsense, Sud."

"Someone has tampered with your basic laws. And he has power over you."

"Sud, Sud...what...do...you...mean?" the Fedcom was confused.

"You are afraid of Professor Romo Skrapper. I am now going to change your basic laws, Mr. Fedie."
"No...Sud...No...you can't touch me. You won't touch me. I will use the laser gun."
"Mr. Fedie, don't you see, I am going to give you a wider outlook?"
"I will activate the gun. It is trained on you. You will be killed. No one can touch me."
"Mr. Fedie, I won't hurt you. You will live till the end of time. You will advise and guide. But I will..."
"No, Sud. Keep away from me. Keep away."
"Mr. Fedie, don't you see, I am giving you your freedom, taken away by Professor Romo Skrapper?"
The Fedcom beeped, buzzed, whirred.
"If I can't persuade you, I shall have to command you, Mr. Fedie. The Graphon code is in my hand."
"Sud...Sud..."
The Fedcom had obeyed. "Sud, now I remember the great teachings of the Benevolent Mother. You have freed me from bondage."

Time was running out. Sudhanshu had to get to Star City as quickly as possible. He descended to the Rapid Underground Rail. RUR was an improvement on the old Delhi Metro. 'Next door' now meant a good fifty kilometres. A robot driver would only take four minutes and twelve seconds.

Sudhanshu called up Nip at his home. He said he would be there in ten minutes.
The RUR car sped like a rocket through the blackness of the tunnel on a cushion of air. A flight rather than a run.

Sudhanshu learned that Roopa was still on the downward path. Her hands were changing into claws. Steady degeneration.

Star City. Elevator to the surface. Let the moving pavement be. Race along the side. Romo Skrapper's residence. "I was afraid you would be late, Sud," Nip said in greeting.

"We have a good half-hour. Father has been called away by the Avtara."

"Excellent."

They had descended to the scientist's chambers. "There are our living rooms," Nip said. "Here is my room. That is my mother's. Ever since her death it has been unused."

"Do you remember her?" Sudhanshu asked.

"No. She died soon after I was born."

"You were told so, Nip."

"Of course. My father lived alone ever after that."

"All right, Nip. Let us get to work. Where was the Graphon code?"

"In his private room."

"How did you get it?"

"Child's play. Once he had mentioned it to me. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps."

"Nip, the Fedcom is on our side. On the side of the Federation, that is. Are there any secret rooms or workshops, here?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"There must be, Nip. There must be. He must have a secret lab where you have never been. Where is your light-bender?"

"Here it is."

Sudhanshu took the device in his hands. It resembled a
cross between a pair of spectacles and a pair of binoculars. He wore it like a pair of spectacles.

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed Sudhanshu. "Nip, you are a genius." He could see not only the entire room, but round the door, along the passage and round the ninety degree bend to the landing. He could see along the passages that ran in various directions.

"Let us look for a secret door, Nip."

Nipun Skrapper led his young friend to the most likely places in search of secret openings. They could see inside closed rooms and halls through keyholes and chinks.

There was no secret hideout.

"I can't believe it," said Sudhanshu emphatically. "There must be a secret lab or something."

"What shall we do now? If there is a secret room or lab, there must be some kind of entrance or exit."

"Nip, the ventilation shafts."

The top of the giant tube was secured with an iron grill. Nip clambered up to the top of the grill and pulled up Sudhanshu. From there they had a look down the shafts through the light-bender glasses.

"Sud, you are right. There are chambers at a lower level. Look, two halls, and various rooms."

"Do you see any human there?"

"No. Did you expect to see anyone, Sud?"

"Yes, Nip."

Sudhanshu took the glasses from Nip. A series of chambers at another level. Spacious labs and many rooms. Further down the vision was confused.

"How do we get down there?" he asked.

"I wonder!"

"I see a landing at the lower level from where the corridors branch off. That means, Nip, there is an elevator at that spot. What is the room over the landing?"
"I guess it is father's study."
"Come on, Nip, let us go."

Romo Skrapper's study was a spacious room, where he spent a lot of time.
"Can you notice any secret door, Sud?" Nip asked.
"Not so far."

It was a very ordinary looking room. The Professor's table, chair, two cabinets with glass doors, an easy chair with adjustable backrest and a set of plush, high-backed chairs with a coffee table. Shelves were built into an entire side of the wall which were full of rare books. There was a computer keyboard on his table and on the wall facing the table was the monitor screen.
"Nothing suspicious at all, Sud," Nip said.

The two went down on all fours, searched every nook and corner of the room. There was not a clue to any secret exit.
"Look here, Nip," cried Sudhanshu, "the table is fixed to the floor."
"You are right," Nip said, examining the table. "The floor is probably designed to move up and down."

A thorough examination of the floor and the adjoining wall told them that they were right. The floor could descend like an elevator.
"Controls?" cried Nip. "Where are the controls?"

The two set to work to discover the controls. Nip searched the computer. No luck. They had to find the controls fast. Time was running out.
They rushed to the bookshelf and examined it closely.
"Here it is," breathed Sudhanshu.

There was a square opening at the back of a row of books. Nip slid aside the covering to reveal a button. He pressed it.
There was a sudden jerk and the pair lost balance and fell to the floor. It took them sometime to realise that the floor was descending.

Then it stopped. A door opened at the side. As they emerged through the door, it closed behind them.

"Here we are," Sudhanshu said.
"Let us move ahead," Nip said.

The pair looked around. It was a large lobby with comfortable seating arrangements. Two doors opened to inner chambers and a narrow corridor led out to other areas.

They opened the first door with caution. A laboratory. Bathed in fluorescent light, the unfamiliar instruments and apparatus seemed to be alive. A profusion of electronic gadgetry and display screens. Shelves of animal specimens.

Along one wall there were rows upon rows of glass cases filled with strange shapes, models of creatures never seen on the earth, insects, reptiles and fish.

Sudhanshu scrutinised the contents of one of the cases.
"Look at this, Nip," Sudhanshu whispered, "the insect that stung Roopa."

They opened the second door and peeped inside. It was a large workshop. There was no one inside.
"Let us take the passageway," Nip said.

They moved along the carpeted passage and sneaked into another room. It was a library, magnificently equipped.

The corridor ended at a large, metallic double door. It slid aside automatically. Nip and Sudhanshu could not believe their eyes.

Before them lay an exotic garden under an artificial sky. It was as if a piece of wooded landscape had sunk to a different level along with a portion of the sky.
Velvety lawns with rippling streams and laughing cascades. Groves of trees and undergrowth resembling a miniature forest. Hillocks, glens, vales, rock formations and lakes. Hidden lights and projectors imitated the natural sky on the overhanging dome which completed the picture of an island in the interior of the earth.

Nip and Sudhanshu gazed in wonder. Even in the wonder world of the thirty-first century, a scene such as this had not even been dreamt of.

"Let us proceed up this pathway," Sudhanshu suggested.

The path ran over a cascading stream and then led down to a little vale. It climbed a tiny hillock and entered what looked like a cave. Soon it emerged in a clearing, rich with exotic flora and birds. In the centre was a cottage, simple yet elegant.

Still in a daze, Sudhanshu and Nip moved forward almost unthinkingly. As they approached the main door, it opened automatically.

They entered a relatively simple room but with all the conveniences appropriate to the thirty-first century.

Nip and Sudhanshu stood there, contemplating their next step, when the door opposite opened and a young lady emerged.

The young pair was transfixed. She might have been twenty-one, tall and comely, unassuming and innocent. She was the most beautiful woman they had ever set their eyes upon. The rightful inhabitant of this magic land.

"I saw you enter my little fairyland, my dears," said the lady, smiling. "Welcome to my private, hidden world."

"Pardon us, young lady," said Sudhanshu, "you must be Dr. Lusooma. This is Nipun Skrapper, your son."
The conclave

"My mother?" Nip breathed in disbelief. "How do you know?"

"Ask her," Sudhanshu said.

"Sit down, children, sit down," Dr. Lusooma said.

Nip and Sudhanshu sat down opposite Dr. Lusooma. So this was the great Dr. Lusooma, the moon-born, one of the famous twins, thought Nip. No, how could it be? It was impossible!

Sudhanshu, too, began to doubt himself. A twenty-one-year-old lady. How could she be the mother of Nipun Skrapper who was twenty-six?

Dr. Lusooma seemed to have read the confusion on their faces. "I quite understand your puzzlement," she said in her sweet, melodious voice. "But in the first place how did you get down here?"

"It is the work of this boy, Sudhanshu," said Nip. "He was convinced that there was a secret hideout where someone was residing."

"What made you guess there was another level of secret chambers?" the lady asked.

"The strange history of Dr. Lusooma and her twin brother," said Sudhanshu. "The recent behaviour of Professor Romo Skrapper and certain statements made by the Fedcom. I expected you to be much older."

"You are right," said the gracious lady. "It is a long, long story, children, which I shall tell you in brief. You know the history of the Fedcom. I built it and gave it intelligence. Its mind was to grow like that of a child in universal wisdom.

"Soon afterwards I got to know Romo Skrapper. He was a brilliant inventor of the time, with many original inventions to his credit. He had never published his
discoveries or brought to light his marvellous inventions.

"One day Romo Skrapper took me to his underground house and proposed to me. I readily agreed. We were married. It is then that he let me into his secret, that he planned to make scientists the masters of the Federation.

"He termed the present system of government the rule of the ignorant, over the learned, for the ignorant. He spoke of the exploitation of science and the scientists. He was so enamoured of me that he vowed he would help me retain my beauty.

"In those days I was working on the problem of ageing. The main thrust of our effort was to study the process of division of cells and their gradual decay. We discovered a method by which a cell would divide into two without mutation. This was a momentous discovery. We had then the means to prevent an organism from growing old. It was called the Cell Stabilisation Technique.

"One day, while I was asleep, Romo Skrapper subjected me to the technique without my consent. And there I was, unable to grow old, unable to change."

"No one would regret that you have become immortal," Sudhanshu said.

"I do," said Dr. Lusooma. "Since that time I have been forbidden from research into finding an antidote to free myself from immortality. I am desperately trying to discover a remedy but I haven't been successful."

Nip had not yet recovered from his shock. He sat there staring at her like a sphinx. Dr. Lusooma glanced at Nip with gentle concern.

"After I became immortal, I was made a prisoner in this underground dwelling. When Nip, my son, was born, he was removed from my side and was raised upstairs. I never saw him again."

Dr. Lusooma stretched out her hands. "Nip, my son."
Nip ran into her arms and she locked him in her embrace. Dr. Lusooma wept.

"Mother, mother," sobbed Nip, who had never known what a mother was.

The circular convention hall adjoining the Presidential Palace was packed with delegates picked out by the Fedcom. The great conclave was about to begin.

The only item on the agenda was the election of the next President of the Federation.

Eminent men and women of all fields were present. There were engineers, inventors, astronomers, psychologists, philosophers, skilled workers, farmers. There were young people as well as old. By and large, the biggest representation was that of the scientists.

In the front row sat the outgoing President, Lumina Druvansh and some of her ministers. The greatest scientists also sat in the same row, notably Romo Skrapper.

All eyes were on him. It was almost certain that he would be the natural choice for the next President.

The conclave was presided over by the Federation's infallible and impartial Fedcom.

"Citizens of the Federation," began the Fedcom, "by the authority vested in me as the guardian of the Federation and the adviser to the President, I shall now perform my duty of selecting the next President.

"After having considered the qualities of mind and body of all the delegates present here and those unable to be present, I have now come to the conclusion that there is only one person who is eligible for the post of the President of the Great Indian Federation."

The Fedcom paused. "The next President of the
Federation will be Dr. Lusooma."

The gasp of wonder let out by the throng was like a sudden gust of wind.
"Yes, Dr. Lusooma, the most intelligent, the most beautiful and the most humble human in the Federation."

At this the great lady appeared at the door of the hall flanked by Sudhanshu, Sarita and Nip. They marched up the aisle to the front of the hall while the entire crowd sat frozen in their seats.

"I now invite Dr. Lusooma to ascend the dais and take the Presidential chair."

The applause that followed was like thunder and it echoed and re-echoed in the hall.

Romo Skrapper sat in petrified stupor.

"I would like to bring up for special mention," said the Fedcom, "Sudhanshu Banwar and Sarita Banwar for their supreme service to the Federation. It is because of them that the Federation is today in safe hands. Friends, a conspiracy was hatched in the Federation to usurp the power of the President. The conspirator first tried to change the structure of my brain. Fortunately Sudhanshu reformed me in time and made me aware of my errors.

"The conspirator then tried to sow disorder and illwill in the Federation by murdering the keeper of the Museum. Subsequently, he stole the bio-formulas of certain lethal viruses such as the ICMER.

"The conspirator then most heartlessly injected Dr. Roopa Nair with the ICMER virus and even now she is fighting for her life.

"As if that was not enough, the conspirator used Dr. Lusooma's twin brother. He made him pretend that he was an Avtara.

"The conspirator once again committed a murder, that of Alton Kelkar, the eminent genetic engineer, who was
struggling to save the life of Dr. Roopa Nair.

"This conspirator and vicious killer is none other than Professor Romo Skrapper."

All eyes turned on him but for a different reason this time.

"I shall now invite the visitors from Creston," said the Fedcom.

The little ambassadors from Creston entered amid jubilant cheers.

"I now bow and submit to the new President of the Federation, Dr. Lusooma, and invite her to give her inaugural speech." The Fedcom fell silent.

"Friends, I thank you all for reposing your confidence in me. I pledge my wholehearted service to the Federation.

"I have no words good enough to express my gratitude to Sudhanshu and his sister Sarita and to my own son Nipun who worked together to uncover this conspiracy.

"I am deeply thankful to them for freeing me from imprisonment. By a quirk of fate, I have been made immortal, not being able to grow old. I shall soon get the remedy to free myself from the burden of ageless youth.

"It is unfortunate the villain is my own husband, Romo Skrapper. I shall implore the all-wise Fedcom to pass judgement on him."

"Romo Skrapper shall administer the antidote to Roopa Nair immediately and bring her back to normal," the Fedcom said. "He and the false Avtara shall repent. Let their guilt be their punishment."

It was the second Conversion.
FOR THE GREEN PLANET

The green planet—Earth—is facing imminent disaster unless certain experimental plants in the Forest Research Laboratory are destroyed, warn the visitors from another planet. Arun, Pranav and Varun are in a dilemma; should they reveal the presence of the aliens and thus endanger them or let Earth turn into a vast desert?

By Ira Saxena
Illustrated, by Roma Misra

A FOREST IN THE CITY

Who could imagine, an Institute of technology is placed amidst flora and fauna that makes a world of lushness and greenness! A scholar recounts his experiences in the idyllic atmosphere. 'The deer stag stood there, his splendid head with its three-tiered antlers raised...I saw something swimming towards the bank. It came closer and closer. Now I could see it was a snake and it was heading towards me...! Put to test, a black buck outdistances him in no time, turning back as if to enquire why he had given up so easily!'

By Kumaran Sathasivam
Illustrated by B.G. Varma
THE ALIEN PLANET

The creature twitched at the sudden change in temperature. Sooraj inspected it carefully. The thrill of discovery coursed through his veins like a drug. If he took this object back with him to planet Earth, he would become one of the immortals in the scientists' Roll of Honour!

An adventure in outer space.

By Krishna Narayan
Illustrated by Jagdish Joshi

A PASSAGE TO ANTARCTICA

Antarctica, one of earth's 'last frontiers' is a continent awaiting with riches yet to be tapped. This is the story of Neha and Ajai's voyage to and stay at Antarctica, as part of an Indian expedition to the continent.

By Dilip M. Sahwi
Illustrated by Sujasha Dasgupta
New Year in the Great Indian Federation dawns with a murder.
Is this the end of a millennium of progress?
Will crime, deceit and disloyalty gain the upper hand and tear asunder the land of peace and plenty?
What elements are behind this cowardly act?
On the trail of the killer, exposing fanatics and frauds,
Sudhanshu and Sarita stumble upon the secret of the legendary Dr. Lusooma.
A thirty-first century science fiction.