

WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

MAY 1952

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**JUNGLE IN
THE SKY**

By Milton Lesser

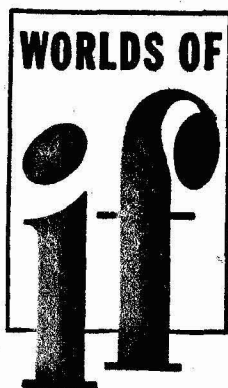
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WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

MAY 1952

All Stories New and Complete



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NOVEL

JUNGLE IN THE SKY by Milton Lesser 4

NOVELETTE

INFINITY'S CHILD by Charles V. DeVet 96

SHORT STORIES

WELCOME MARTIANS by S. A. Lombino 57

IT TAKES A THIEF by Walter Miller, Jr. 68

THE BEAST by John W. Jakes 85

RESURRECTION SEVEN by Stephen Marlowe 125

DREAMER'S WORLD by Bryce Walton 136

THE REVEALING PATTERN by Alvin Heiner 151

FEATURES

EDITORIAL 2

PERSONALITIES IN SCIENCE FICTION 63

GUEST EDITORIAL by James V. Taurasi 94

SCIENCE BRIEFS by Ezra Shaw 119

THE POSTMAN COMETH 158

Cover by RALPH JOINER

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A chat with the editor . . .

A SCIENTIFIC study was recently called to my attention in which it was concluded that people who can't get up in the morning, aren't necessarily lazy. I hailed the study with much personal gratification because I have always found it difficult to rise and shine with the morning sun. In fact, I am such a difficult case that I can quote my wife as follows:

"Junior, it's time for breakfast. Go up and lead your father down the stairs lest he fall and break his neck."

"Junior, show your father where his grapefruit is before he starves to death."

After breakfast, I am always the last one up from the table. I sit thinking of all the logical reasons why I should drop dead, until my wife says, "Wake up and go to work, stupid, or you'll find your name scratched off the payroll."

This dire possibility is usually effective, and I drag myself to the office, hoping the place has burned down.

A ROUND NOON, things get better. I begin to breathe. My heart starts fluttering and gradually assumes an even, steady beat. By mid-afternoon I am in pretty good shape, and at quitting time, a no

more bright nor alert individual can be found for miles around. Life becomes a great adventure; living a joy. About midnight, my peak of efficiency is reached. Then, around three A.M., comes a cry from the bedroom: "Get in here and get to bed, you nighthawk. You must have been born backwards."

This accusation has always made me cringe. The onus of being a misfit has not been taken lightly. But now, along comes this blessed report, telling me I am not alone—that there is a great suffering fraternity of which I have unknowingly been a member.

IT SEEMS there are two kinds of people. Those who wake up early in the morning at the peak of their efficiency and run down gradually until bedtime. And their exact opposites, who start in low gear, advance to second, and come finally into high with every brain cell popping. In truth, the members of this unhappy clan are out of step with everyone else. But it is not a result of laziness nor habit. It has to do with the structure of their genes, and is as inherent as traits of disposition—as impossible to change as a cowlick—as deeply rooted as a tendency toward baldness.

The scientific report states that persons of this type should reverse their living cycle—arise at sunset, when their efficiency is at its peak; retire when everyone else is going to work. Unfortunately the economic scheme forbids this to most of us. There aren't enough night jobs to go around, and those of us who commute would always find the trains running in the wrong direction.

BUT science—and not fiction—has come to our rescue. We aren't lazy and shiftless. We're just backwards, and we must wipe the stain from our good names.

So arise, Children of the Night! Spread the word. The Club for Citizens in Reverse is now in the making. The first meeting will be in your editor's office at four A.M. tomorrow morning.

I THINK our cover this month is something to be really proud of. When Ralph brought it in I took one look at it and got out the office bottle—coke of course. We drank to the masterpiece and then my troubles started. With H. G. Wells not available, to whom could I assign the writing of the lead novel? A name flashed automatically. Milton Lesser, that dynamic young man with the magic typewriter.

Milt arrived in response to a phone call and I showed him the cover. He said, "Gosh!"

"I'd like a twenty-five thousand word novel that will do it justice."

"What's your idea plotwise?"

"You're the writer, not I."

"But if it's a stinker it bounces," he mused.

"How true."

Milt went home and phoned that evening. "How do you like 'Jungle In The Sky?'"

"It listens fine. Swell title."

Milt stopped coming around for some weeks. Then one day he wandered in with a manuscript.

I made a noise like an editor and asked, "Any rubber in it?"

He grinned like a cat right after dinner and stalked out, leaving the manuscript in my hands. A couple of hours later I called him and said, "You forgot your check, genius. Want me to mail it?"

I had just finished reading one of the best plotted, smoothest written, ably done space yarns anyone ever handed me.

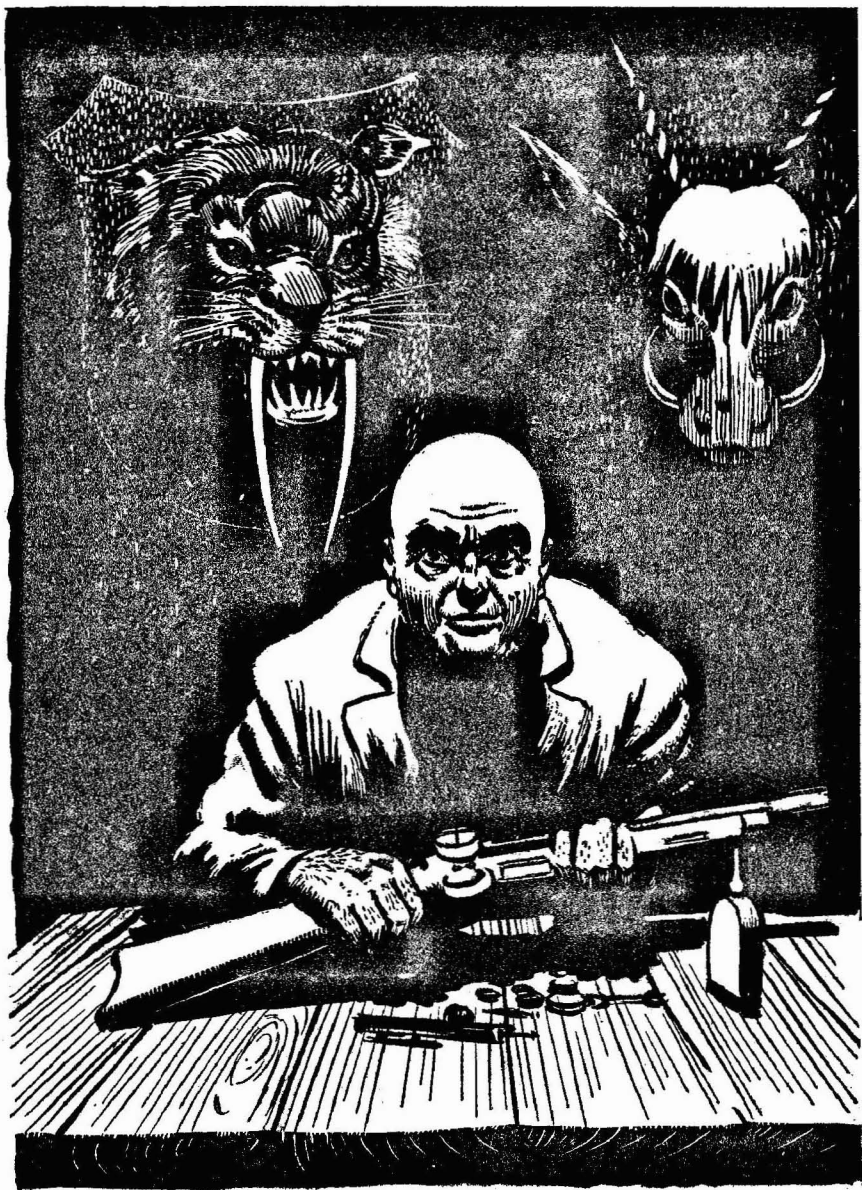
WE ARE EAGERLY awaiting comment on the Ray Palmer article in this issue. It was one of the toughest jobs ever to come my way. Even the more so because Ray is one of my best friends, and the article had to be, above all, entirely objective. Did you ever try to write objectively about one of your best friends? It's not easy. But Ray is "copy" and the article was screaming to be written.

And now that it's in print I can't even call Ray and say, "I was only fooling; chum."

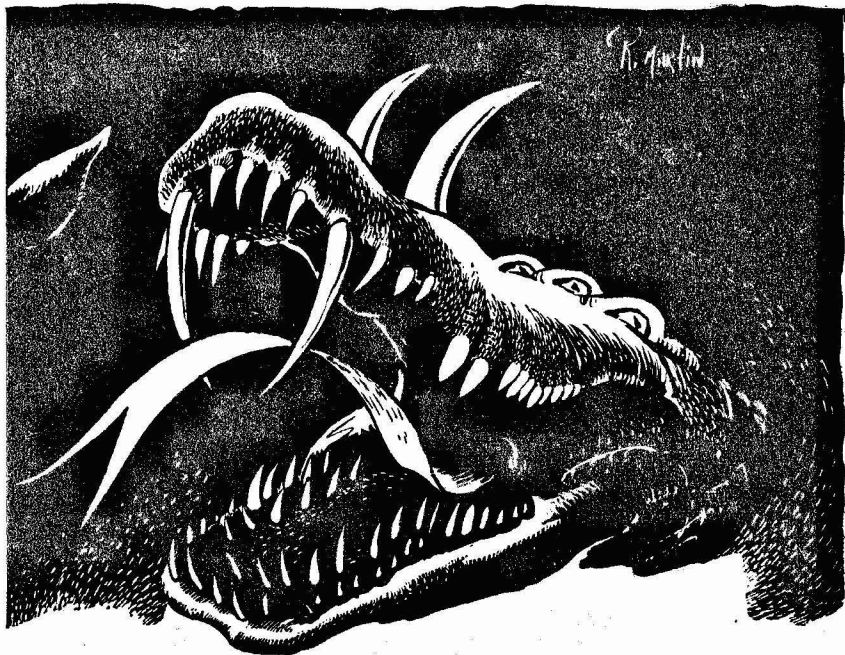
Because I wasn't.

I'D LIKE to tell you about our mail and how it was tossed at me in one great big lump. You see IF lives in Kingston, New York with Publisher Jim Quinn, but I'm located some fifty miles south in a

Continued on page 56



The big man looked at home among his trophies.



The hunters wanted animals that lived on far Ganymede—though not as badly as the animals wanted the hunters.

Jungle in the Sky

By Milton Lesser

THE BIG MAN looked at home among his trophies. Somehow his scowl seemed as fierce as the head of the Venusian swamp-tiger mounted on the wall behind him, and there was something about his quick-darting eyes which reminded

Steve of a Callistan fire-lizard. The big man might have been all of them wrapped into one, Steve thought wryly, and there were a lot of trophies.

He was the famous Brody Carmical, and rumor had it he was

worth a million credits for each of the many richly mounted heads.

"So you're fresh out of school with a degree in Extra-terrestrial zoology," Carmical grumbled. "Am I supposed to turn cartwheels?"

Steve cleared his throat. "The Placement Service thought you might have a job—"

"I do, I do. That doesn't mean any young pup who comes along can fill it. Ever been off the Earth, Mr. Stedman?"

"No."

"Ever been off the North American continent?"

"No."

"But you want to go galavanting around the Solar System in search of big game. Tell me—do you think they have a Harvard club on every stinking satellite you'll visit? Do you think you can eat beefsteak and drink martinis in every frontier-world dive? Let me tell you, Mr. Stedman, the answer is no."

"Try me, sir. That's all I ask—try me."

"We're not running a school, Mr. Stedman. Either a man's got it or he hasn't. You haven't. Come back in ten years. Ship out around the Solar System the hard way, and maybe we can use you then—if you still remember what you learned about Extra-terrestrial zoology. What in space ever made you study extra-zoo, anyway?"

"I found it interesting," Steve said lamely.

"Interesting? As a hobby, it's interesting. But as business, it's hard work, a lot of sweat, a lot of danger, squirming around on your soft belly in the muck and mud of a dozen worlds, that's what it is. Just

how do you think Carmical Enterprises got where they are? Sweat and grief, Mr. Stedman." Carmical yawned hugely and popped a glob of chocolate into his mouth. His fat lips worked for a moment, then his Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

Steve got up, paced back and forth in front of the desk. "I won't take no for an answer, Mr. Carmical."

"Eh? What's that? I could have you thrown out of here."

"You won't," Steve told him calmly. "Maybe I'm just what the doctor ordered, but you'll never know until you try me. So—"

"So nothing! I said this isn't a school."

"They tell me the *Gordak* leaves on a ten-world junket tomorrow. All I ask is this: let me ship along as the zoology man. Then, if you're not satisfied, you can leave me at your first port-of-call—without pay."

Carmical smiled triumphantly. "You know where we space out for first, Mr. Stedman? Mercury, that's where. I'd love to see a sassy young pup like you set loose on Mercury in one of the Twilight Cities."

"Is it a deal?"

"It sure is, Stedman. It sure is! But I warn you, we'll expect perfection. You'll not have a chance to profit from your own mistakes. You won't have a chance to make mistakes. One slip and you've had it, is that understood?"

"Yes."

"I'm not going, of course," Carmical said, patting his great paunch and saying with the action that he was too old and too fat for space. "But I'll hear all about the

way you were stranded on Mercury, among a lot of Merksies and—”

Steve smiled grimly, said: “No you won’t. Next time you see me will be after the ten-world junket. Whom do I ask for on the *Gordak*?”

Carmical dialed for a bromo, watched it fizz in the glass, drank it, belched. “T. J. Moore’s in charge,” he told Steve. “Old T. J.’s a mighty rough taskmaster, Stedman. Don’t say you weren’t warned.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, I’ll hear about how you were stranded on Mercury,” Carmical predicted.

“You’ll see me after the ten-world junket,” said Steve, and closed the door softly behind him.

PIT-MONKEYS scurried about the great jet-slugged underside of the *Gordak*, spraying fresh zircalloy in the aft tubes. Spaceport officers were everywhere in their crisp white uniforms, checking cargo, giving terse directives to the crew of the *Gordak*, lounging importantly at the foot of the gangplank.

“Name?” one of them snapped at Steve.

“Stedman.”

The man flipped through a list of the expedition’s members. “Stedman, huh? I don’t see—oh, here it is, in pencil at the bottom. Last minute addition, huh Stedman?”

“Something like that,” Steve admitted.

“Well, climb aboard.”

And then Steve was walking up

the gangplank and into the cool metal interior of the *Gordak*. His palms were clammy, and he wondered if any of the crewmen within the ship noticed the sweat beading his forehead. He’d managed to come this far with a surprising degree of objectivity, and only now did reaction set in, causing his heart to beat fiercely and his limbs to grow weak. *That T. J. Moore must have been spawned in hell*, Charlie had said—and now Charlie was dead. Because of T. J. Moore? Indirectly, perhaps, but T. J. Moore was responsible. Or, if you looked at it on a different level, the cut-throat competition between *Carmical Enterprises* and *Barling Brothers Interplanetary* was to blame. It didn’t matter, not really. Charlie was dead. That alone mattered.

A big man with incredibly broad shoulders, hair the color of flame and a florid face to match it, came stalking down the companionway. Steve said, “I wonder if you know where I can find T. J. Moore.”

The giant smiled. “You crew or expedition?”

“Expedition,” said Steve, extending his hand. “Steve Stedman’s my name.”

The hand that gripped his was hard and calloused. “I’m Kevin McGann, boy. Sort of a liaison man between the crew and the expedition, only they call me the Exec to make everything official. Better take some advice—don’t look for T. J. now. T. J.’s busy doing last minute things, and T. J. hates to be disturbed. Why don’t you wait till

after *Brennschluss*, when we're out in space?"

"It can't wait, I've got to see that Moore knows I'm aboard and under what conditions, because I don't want to be thrown off this ship at the space-station. If Moore doesn't like the conditions, Mr. Carnical can be called. But after we blast off it'll be too late."

Kevin McGann shrugged. "It's only advice I gave you, boy. You'll find T. J. down on the third level looking over the cargo holds. Good luck." And McGann took a pipe from his pocket, tamping it full, lighting it and staring with frank, speculative curiosity at Steve. "Stedman, eh?" he mused. "The name's familiar."

"You think about it," said Steve, and made his way toward the third level. Perhaps some of them aboard the *Gordak* had known Charlie, and McGann, being the Exec, must have been around a long time.

The third was the lowest level of the *Gordak*, or that part of the ship nearest the tubes with the exception of the fission-room itself. Here on the third level were the cages which, in the months that followed, would hold the big game brought within the *Gordak*. But the word cage, Steve realized, can be misleading. A rectangular enclosure, its wall composed of evenly spaced bars—that's a cage. But the bubble-cages of the *Gordak* were something else again; precisely as the name implied, they were huge bubbles of plastic, complete with remote-controlled airlocks. You could pump in any kind of atmosphere, from Jupiter's lethal meth-

ane-ammonia mixture to the thin, oxygen-starved air of Mars, and under any desired pressure, too.

And now on the third level a battery of experts was busy checking the bubble-cages for defects, since a leak *after* some noxious gas had been pumped into one of the bubbles could mean death for everyone aboard the *Gordak*. Steve stood there nervously for what seemed a long while. He let his gaze rove up and down the third level, but he only saw the coverall-clad technicians checking the bubble-cages. Kevin McGann had said he could find Moore here, but unless Moore zipped on a pair of coveralls himself and joined in the work—which certainly seemed unlikely—then Moore wasn't around.

SOMEONE TAPPED Steve's shoulder. Startled, he whirled around. A woman stood there, just behind him, staring at him insolently. She was tall, as tall as Steve himself, with her close-cropped blond hair peeking out around the edges of a black cap. She wore what looked to Steve like a glossy black Martian sand-cape which she let fall straight down behind her so that it almost brushed the floor. Under it, she wore a brief pair of shorts, also black, and a halter. She was muscular in that lithe, feminine way which had grown so popular in the twenty-second century—the century which had finally seen women come abreast of men in all sporting activities and surpass them in some which required special grace and lithe-limbed skill.

"I hope you found whatever you're looking for," she said. She spoke with a complete lack of warmth which startled Steve for the second time in a few moments.

She was a beautiful woman, he realized, but she looked so completely incongruous among the coveralled men that Steve found himself whistling softly. "I never expected to find a girl here," he admitted. "Not on this expedition."

"What's the matter, are you old fashioned? This is the twenty-second century, the enlightened century, remember? There's nothing a girl can't do if she sets her mind to it. A recent survey shows that forty-percent of the homemakers in the U.S.N.A. are men, sixty percent women. Okay, it's only logical that some of the remaining forty percent of females have some tough jobs, too."

"I read the books of the feminist movement," Steve assured her. "But it's going to take a lot to convince me of that. Me and a lot of other people, I suspect."

"Is that so, Mr. Smart-guy? Are you a member of the expedition?"

"Yes."

"Well, anytime you want to hustle down to the gym with me and go a few rounds, let me know."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious."

"Well," Steve said, deciding to change the subject and feeling utterly ridiculous about the whole conversation, "let's forget it. I was looking for T. J. Moore."

The woman smiled coldly. "That's me. I'm T. J. What do you want?"

"I—uh—what? You're T. J.? You—a girl?"

"Will you please hurry with whatever you want to tell me? I haven't got all day."

"My name's Stedman." Steve felt his composure returning. The fact that T. J. Moore was a woman didn't make any difference. But unconsciously, Steve regarded her as a member of the weaker sex, and a large chunk of her fearsome reputation vanished because of it. "I wonder if Mr. Carmical contacted you—"

"He sure did, Stedman."

"Good, then we can—"

"Maybe you think it's good. I think it stinks. Listen, Stedman, maybe you think you can pull the wool over my eyes like you did over Brody Carmical—but you can't. He didn't recognize your name, I did. No kid brother of Charlie Stedman's going to make trouble for me because he thinks I was responsible for his brother's death."

"I didn't say—"

"You didn't have to say. I can see it in your face. But get this straight, Stedman. Your brother died on Ganymede three years ago—of natural causes, that is, if you can call some of the local fauna 'natural causes'. He worked for *Barling Brothers Interplanetary*, so I guess the rivalry between them and us didn't help. But no one killed him."

"I didn't say—"

"Is that all you can say, 'you didn't say'? Try to tell me why you came aboard the *Gordak*; go ahead, try."

"I'm an expert in Extra-terrestrial zoology, and you needed one."

Mr. Carmical hired me."

"I know that. But I guess I also know a thing or two which Brody Carmical doesn't. All right, Stedman. You come as far as Mercury. But one slip, just one slip—"

"Okay, T. J.," Steve said, almost jauntily. "I'll watch my step."

"I'm the *Gordak's* captain. You'll call me that. Captain—is it clear?"

"No," said Steve, and laughed. The ten-world junket would be a hard, driving, gruelling ordeal come what might, and he wouldn't kowtow to T. J. Moore, male or female, here at the beginning. "No," he said again, forcing the laughter out. "This isn't a military ship, so you won't impose any arbitrary discipline on me."

The woman laughed too, but it was more effective. "I won't, won't I? Once we leave Earth, Stedman, everything we do is dangerous. Everything. I've got to have full authority, every order obeyed at the drop of a hat. Understand?"

"No."

The woman removed the black cap from her head, and Steve noticed, not without surprise, that her pale blond hair wasn't close-cropped after all. It had been piled up inside the cap, and now it spilled down loosely about her shoulders. Smiling, she dropped the cap to the floor. "Pick it up," she said.

"Are you kidding? I'm an expert on Extra-terrestrial zoology. That's what Mr. Carmical hired me for. If you want that hat picked up, better do it yourself." Vaguely, Steve wondered if Charlie had met the woman those final days on far Ganymede, had fought with her

tooth and nail for some priceless specimen—and lost, with no witness but the bleak, desolate topography of the Jovian moon.

The woman turned away from him, called: "LeClarc! LeClarc, come here."

ONE OF THE coveredalled figures approached them, a thick-thewed man whose muscular strength couldn't be hidden by the baggy clothing. Not as tall as Steve or the woman, he was broad of shoulder and thick through the chest. He had a dark face and deep-set black eyes, and a thin scar ran the length of his right cheek, from eye to chin. "Yes, Captain?"

"Stedman here is new. He questions my authority. I wondered if you'd like to work him over some—"

"A pleasure," growled the stocky, gnarled Frenchman, and swung his right fist up in a quick, blurring motion.

Steve didn't have time to parry it. The blow caught him flush on the mouth and jarred his teeth, sent him crashing back against the wall where he slid down slowly until he was sitting on the floor. Groggily, he got to his feet, wiping his bloody lips with the fingers of one hand. LeClarc, chuckling, hit him once more before he could quite pull himself together. The right hand slammed against his stomach this time, driving the wind from his lungs.

He started to fall, but he clawed at LeClarc's middle as he went

down, and held on. Still chuckling, LeClarc cuffed him about the ears almost playfully, but the open-palmed blows stung him and sent wild rage coursing through his blood. Clearly, that was the idea. LeClarc was enjoying himself—but LeClarc wanted him to fight back.

Steve got a hand up in front of his body, palm up, and drove it against the Frenchman's chin. He felt the neck snap back sharply, heard the sudden click as LeClarc's teeth met with savage force. Bel-lowing, the Frenchman came at him again, fighting southpaw and bringing a roundhouse left from back behind his body.

But Steve's wind had returned and now he sobbed air in great gulps. He ducked the wild swing and found the Frenchman wide-open, poured lefts and rights to the man's midsection. LeClarc, stunned now, brought his guard down. Steve was in no hurry. He chased the dazed LeClarc around an ever-widening circle, was dimly aware that the other technicians had stopped their work to watch. He jabbed with his left hand, covering the olive face with purple welts. He held the right cocked but did not throw it. Soon, though, he could hear the other technicians—who probably liked a good brawl—muttering. The idea, as they saw it, wasn't to cut LeClarc up completely but instead, to win swiftly.

Shrugging, Steve realized that the anger he felt for the woman had blinded him, and after that, he unleashed his right hand, felt the searing contact with LeClarc's jaw, saw a couple of teeth clatter off the wall as the Frenchman's mouth

flew open. Sagging first at the knees, then the waist, LeClarc fell to the floor and huddled there inertly.

Steve turned to the woman, spoke out of fast-swelling lips. "You're the Captain and I only work here, Teejay," he made the initials sound like a name. "So I'll take your orders—provided they make sense. That one about the cap didn't. If you want it picked up, you'd better stoop for it yourself."

Not looking back, he climbed the stairs toward the second level, wiping his bloody lips with a handkerchief.

IT WAS Kevin McGann who showed him around the *Gordak* after *Brennschluss*. Newton's second law of motion carried the ship forward through the near-vacuum of space now, and it would continue that way, plowing ahead at seven miles per second until it was caught and slowed by the space-station's gravity. There the bunkers would be reloaded with slow-fission plutonium for the long dash sunward to Mercury.

"... and through there you'll find the fission-room," Kevin was saying. "That's about the size of it, boy. But I warn you to keep away from the fission-room long as that red light is blinking. Everything inside gets pretty hot, and there's enough radiation to kill an army unless the shields are up. Even then, I'd recommend a vac-suit."

"I'll remember that," Steve said, lighting a cigarette.

"Word gets around a ship like

the *Gordak* pretty fast. I didn't see your fight with LeClarc, but I sure heard enough about it. There's only one man aboard ship who can beat the Frenchman in a fair fight, and—"

"You?" Steve wanted to know. But it was hardly a question. It looked to him like Kevin could take on two LeClarcs with no trouble at all.

"Yes, boy. Me. But now there are two of us, and you've made yourself an enemy. LeClarc doesn't forget easy, so you'd better be on your guard."

"I'll remember that, too," said Steve, laughing. "But it looks like you keep warning me about something all the time, Kevin. Why?"

"You're Charlie Stedman's kid brother, aren't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, but how did—"

"How did I know, boy? It's written all over your face, and Charlie may have been with *Barling Interplanetary*, but a lot of us knew him. Charlie was the best, boy."

"Thanks. Kevin, how did Charlie die?"

The giant shrugged eloquently. "I don't know. It was T. J. who found him out on Ganymede. She was out tracking an anthrovac, and you don't track anthrovacs in crowds. Well, it seems Charlie had landed for Barling, and Charlie had the same idea."

"He never told me Teejay was a woman, but he said once she must have been reared in hell."

Again, Kevin shrugged. "It's open to question, boy. I don't like T. J., but I like working for her. You take a man like LeClarc, he'll die for T. J. All she'd have to do is

ask him, and he'd die. You see, boy, big game hunters don't come any smarter. Trouble is, T. J. knows it and flaunts it. Also, she's a woman but she's strong as a man and knows that, too. She dares you to fight her every step of the way, and it takes a big man to—"

"I thought you said Charlie was the best!"

"And I still do. But a man's got to have some flaws. Maybe he couldn't take T. J. and had to let her know. The same thing happened to you, after only five minutes. The gals have won their spurs in every field which was strictly masculine a hundred years ago. Men tend to resent that, especially when a talented woman like T. J. let's them know it, and no bones about it. So, that's T. J."

"Yeah," said Steve, frowning. "That's Teejay."

"What's the trouble, boy?"

"I've got to find out what happened to Charlie, that's all. But Teejay's going to be a problem."

"The grandmother of all problems, you mean. With all of that, though, she can still be all female when she wants to be. Maybe Charlie fell for her—"

"Charlie falling for that cheap, no good—"

"Careful, boy. She's my Captain, and a good one. I wouldn't ship out on the *Gordak* if I didn't think so. Careful." Then Kevin smiled. "You'll learn, in time. Anyway, Charlie was a good-looker and attractive to the girls, he was romantic—so maybe T. J. fell for him, too. Then they had a parting of the ways and—"

"Sure!" Steve exploded. "Sure,

they fell in love or something only Charlie forgot to mention in any of his letters she was a woman. You're barking up the wrong tree, Kevin."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'm only talking off the top of my head, boy. But it's worth considering." Kevin jabbed a thick finger against his calloused palm. "What I'm getting at is this, whether they made love or not, I don't think T. J. would kill anyone out of cold blood."

"I'll think about it," said Steve, and then a whistle shrilled through the length of the ship. They were nearing the space-station, half as far from Earth as Luna, and deceleration came upon them gradually and would continue to increase until they all had to bed down in the accel-hammocks for landing.

Unexpectedly, Teejay herself was checking in the members of the expedition as their two-hour stop over at the station drew to an end. As he approached her along the gangplank, Steve looked down and saw the station-men wheeling the small but tremendously heavy plutonium bunkers under the ship, each compact unit weighing a couple of tons with its concrete shielding.

"Well, Stedman," said the woman, the broad black sand-cape wrapped around her completely now, as if only the members of her crew had the right to see what lay beneath it, "I see you've never watched a ship getting ready for blast off."

"That's right," Steve admitted. "First trip out."

"You want some pretty sound advice? I'd suggest you stay here at the station and wait for the first Earthbound ship."

"Thanks," said Steve. "But Mr. Carmical hired me at least as far as Mercury, so that's where I'm going."

Teejay grinned. "You're a plucky kid, Stedman. All right, Mercury it is—but LeClarc can do the honors when it's time to see you off the *Gordak* for good. He doesn't exactly like you, Stedman."

"I've been told that."

"All right, move along. There's a whole line of men I've got to check in behind you."

A plucky kid, Steve thought, and laughed. She'd called him that, although he knew she'd probably have a hard time matching his twenty-five years. Well, she'd spent her life in space and on the frontier worlds. Maybe that did make a difference.

Five minutes later, they blasted clear of the space-station on an orbit that would intersect the Mercurian ellipse at perihelion. From there, the *Gordak* would visit Venus, Mars, the planetoid Ceres, the four large Jovian moons. Titan and Uranus. Ten worlds in all the hunters would touch on—and each world would offer up its native fauna for the *Brody Carmical Circus*. Steve wondered if there'd be trouble with *Barling Brothers Interplanetary*. There generally was. But then he smiled without mirth, for the chances were he'd never get beyond the first landing on Mercury, anyway.

THERE WERE fifty men in the *Gordak's* crew and another thirty-odd in the expedition, and a space ship being the complicated, labyrinthine device that it is, it wasn't too strange that Steve failed to encounter LeClarc until immediately before landing on Mercury. Then the *Gordak's* deceleration tubes had cut in and Steve found the most readily available accel-hammock in the general lounge. The Frenchman was stretched out on the cushions three feet from him.

LeClarc said, "This will be a terrible, hot place."

"I know. At perihelion, Mercury's not much more than thirty million miles from the sun." If the Frenchman wanted to bury the hatchet, fine.

LeClarc strained to raise himself on his elbows against the increasing deceleration. "Sure," he said, "a hot place. After you foul up, Stedman, my vote will be to leave you on the hot side instead of giving you passage to the twilight zone."

The Frenchman was being illogical and pointlessly childish. "I didn't ask you to fight with me," Steve told him. "Why don't we forget all about it?"

"If you want to, forget. I, LeClarc, never forget."

"By space, LeClarc—" the voice came from the other side of the lounge "—then you're a spoiled little child." It was the big Exec officer who spoke, Kevin McGann.

LeClarc did not answer. Kevin winked at Steve, then set his face grimly against the bone-crushing deceleration. Fifteen minutes later, they landed at Furnacetown. The

names of the new frontier settlements, Steve thought with a grin, were as picturesque as the names of the old Wild West towns.

There was a huge, priceless matrix of ruby far below the surface near Furnacetown, and the frontier settlement existed to mine from it. But the place was named aptly, for here on the hot side of Mercury, the temperature was hot enough to melt tin and lead. A community of half a thousand hearty souls, Furnacetown shielded itself from the swollen, never-setting sun with a vacuum-insulated dome and a hundred million credits worth of cooling equipment. Even so, the atmosphere within the dome was a lot like New Orleans on a sultry summer day.

The mayor of the town, a man named Powlaski, met them at the landing field. "It's hot," said Teejay, offering her hand and shaking with the plump official, man-fashion.

"It's always hot, Captain Moore. At any rate, be happy that you've beaten Barling here this time."

"Oh, did we? Good. We'll need three asbestos suits, Powlaski. I never did trust plain vac-suits on the sunward side of this boiling mess of a planet. Say, has anyone got a cool drink? I'm roasting."

Someone wheeled out a portable refrigerator and the synthetic gin-and-orange stored therein tasted to Steve's thirsty lips almost like the real thing. Then LeClarc, who had ventured into one of the squat buildings with Powlaski's lieutenant, a middle-aged woman, returned with three heavy asbestos suits draped ponderously over his

arm. Their combined weight was perhaps two hundred pounds, but it became negligible under Mercury's weak gravity.

"We're ready," he said, extending one of the suits to Teejay and helping her slip it on over her shorts and halter. This was the first time that Steve had ever seen her without the black cape, which seemed a sort of affected trade-mark.

"Three suits?" Steve demanded. "What for?"

"The third one's for you, Stedman," the woman told him. "I know your job is to see that the game stays alive in our bubble-cages, but I don't think it would hurt if you had a look-see at the stone worm in its own environment."

"That's not what I meant," Steve told her. "Why LeClarc?"

Teejay shrugged, zipping up the suit. "Because I said so, that's why. Also, LeClarc's something of an expert on the inner planets and he goes wherever I do, anyway."

"Sort of a bodyguard," the Frenchman purred, strapping a neutron gun to the belt of his asbestos suit. "Hey, who's got those helmets?"

And then Steve felt them slipping the thick, clumsy helmet over his head. Kevin stood nearby and the Exec looked like he wanted to say something, but Steve's helmet had snapped into place and from that point he could only talk by radio—and over the crackling interference of the swollen sun, at that.

Moments later, he'd stepped through an airlock at the side of the Furnacetown dome and

plodded out on the surface of Mercury.

ON VENUS there was the thick, soupy atmosphere and the verdant tropical jungles. On Mars, the rusty desert and the ruins of an eon-old civilization. But on Mercury you knew at once that you trod upon an alien world. At perihelion, the sun swelled to almost four times its size as seen from Earth, and because Mercury's tenuous atmosphere had boiled off into space half a billion years ago, the sky was black. The sun had lost its spherical shape, too. Great solar prominences licked out at the blackness, and the visible corona seemed to swell and pulse.

Underfoot, Steve could feel the crunchy ground powdering beneath his asbestos boots with every step. And far off toward the horizon, a jagged ridge of blood-red mountains bit at the black sky like festering, toothless gums.

Before long, Teejay's voice sang in Steve's earphones. "Over here, you boys." And Steve could see her crouching, shapeless in the loose asbestos suit, off to his left. The sun's heat had parched a long, snaking crack in the surface and Steve lumbered over to it clumsily, letting his shadow fall across the crevice. "Those stone worms are umbra-tropic," he called, and waited.

"I don't wonder," said Teejay, looking up at the sun through the smoked goggles of her helmet.

The stone worms, Steve knew, were attracted by darkness—hence

they generally dwelled in the deepest crevices, although a man's shadow might bring them to the surface. He'd never seen a stone worm, but he'd read about them and seen their pictures.

"You'll see something very unlovely," Teejay predicated. "The stone worm isn't a carbon-basic animal, but a silicate creature with a sodium-silicon-nitrogen economy. It's about four feet long and kind of like some ghastly white slug. It—hey, Stedman, get on your toes!"

The worm was coming.

It poked its head up out of the crevice first, and then the slug-like body followed, curling quite instinctively until the whole thing lay in Steve's shadow. Four feet long and a foot across at the middle, it looked like the product of nightmare. The head was one huge, lidless, glassy eye—with a purple-lipped mouth where the pupil should have been! The mouth opened and shut like that of a fish, but when Steve lifted the monster by its middle and brought it out into the sun, the lips puckered completely shut and the white slug began to thrash dangerously.

But under the influence of the sun's heat it soon subsided. Trouble was, Steve thought vaguely as they made their way back toward Furnacetown with the quiescent monster, the sun's heat did not subside. Probably, it was his imagination, but the sun had seemed to become, if anything, stronger. He looked at the others, but they merely walked forward, completely unconcerned. Maybe he'd tired himself subduing the stone worm, for he knew that might seem to intensify the heat.

Inside his asbestos suit, Steve began to sweat. It did not start slowly, but all at once the perspiration streamed down his face and body.

It was then that his left leg began to burn. Down below the knee it was, a knife-edged burning sensation which became worse with each passing second. Someone had heated a knife white-hot, had applied its sharp point to the nerve-endings of his leg—and then twisted. It felt like that.

Screaming hoarsely, Steve fell, watched through burning eyes as the stone worm commenced crawling laboriously away. It was Le-Clarc who went after the worm and retrieved it, but Teejay knelt at Steve's side and, surprisingly, real concern was in her voice when it came over the radio.

"What's the trouble, Stedman?"

"I don't know," Steve gritted. "I'm hot all over—and my leg feels like it's on fire. Yeah, right there—ow!—go easy!"

Teejay frowned or at least Steve guessed she frowned by the way she spoke. "There's nothing much we can do about it, Stedman. Seems to be a hole—just a pinprick, but a hole—in the asbestos. It's a wonder you weren't screaming bloody murder before this. How's the air?"

It was getting hard to breathe, Steve realized, but dimly, for his senses were receding into a fog of half-consciousness. Something hissed in his ears and he knew Teejay had turned the outside dial of his air-pump all the way over. It made him feel momentarily better, but the pain still cut into his leg.

"I've got the worm," said Le-Clarc. "But what happened to

him?" He asked the question innocently—too innocently.

Teejay didn't answer. Instead: "Can you walk, Stedman?"

"I—I don't think so."

"Then I'll carry you. But remember this: if we get you back all right, you can thank the twenty-second century feminist movement. Can you picture an old-fashioned gal slinging a man over her shoulder and toting him away to safety like a sack of grain? Here we go."

And she got her arms under Steve's shoulder, tugging him upright and swinging him across her back in a fireman's carry. He felt in no mood to question her motive, but he could sense the triumph in her as if she had said, "See, I'm as strong as a man, and don't you forget it."

In spite of himself, he couldn't help responding to the unspoken challenge. "Sure," he said, "I can thank the feminist movement, but more than that I can thank Mercury's light gravity, Teejay. We're lucky I don't weigh more than fifty pounds here."

An hour later they arrived back at Furnacetown, but by then Steve was unconscious from the pain.

"**H**OW ARE YOU feeling, boy?" It was Kevin McGann, the battered, unlit pipe clamped tightly between his teeth as he spoke.

Steve sat propped up in a bed in the *Gordak's* infirmary, his left leg wrapped in bandages from knee to ankle. "Pretty good, I guess. Kind of weak, but there's no pain."

"You're lucky the Captain got you back here in time. Four inches of your calf was cooked third degree, but she carried you back here soon enough to cut it away before deep decomposition, and spray on syntheplasm. You'll be as good as new in a week, and no scar, either. Thanks to the Captain, boy."

"Yeah," Steve admitted. "Sure. But what I want to know is this: how did it happen?"

Kevin shrugged his massive shoulders. "I won't make any accusations, boy, not without positive proof. But I took the liberty to examine your suit, and it looked to me like someone had punctured a small hole almost all the way through. The heat did the rest."

"You mean LeClarc?"

"I never said that. But LeClarc was the one who got the suits, so he—more than anyone—was in a position to do something like that. Further than that I won't carry it. This is not an accusation."

"Suits me," Steve told him. "And thanks, Kevin. But after this, Frenchie had better watch his step. Are we out in space again?"

"Yes. Passed *Brennschluss* forty-eight hours ago."

"What?"

"Sure. They had you doped up for two days, till the syntheplasm had a chance to set."

"How soon can I get out of bed?"

"Depends. If you don't mind hobbling around on crutches, today probably. If you want to wait till you can walk, four or five days. What's your hurry, boy?"

"I've got to take care of that stone worm, remember?"

"Say, that's right! No one knew what to do, so they suspended it in a deep freeze until you could go to work. A hideous brute, I might add."

"Will you ask the doctor to give me some crutches? Swell. First, though, I'd like a good meal. And listen, Kevin—I guess Teejay saved my life, at that. Want to tell her I'd like to see her?"

"Of course," said Kevin, and left the white-walled infirmary, grinning from ear to ear.

By the time Teejay arrived, Steve was eating his first solid meal in two days. "Hello," he said. He almost found himself adding, "Captain"—but he checked the impulse just in time.

"McGann tells me you're ready to get to work today."

"That's right."

"Good. That stone worm won't stay in ice indefinitely—not when it lives on the sun-side of Mercury."

"Teejay, I want to—well, I want to thank you for saving my life."

The woman opened her cape, reached inside, took a pack of cigarettes from an inside pocket and puffed on one until it glowed. "Don't thank me," she said coolly. "It really isn't necessary. You're the only extra-zoo man aboard, Stedman, so we needed you. I'd have saved a valuable machine under the same circumstances."

"Well, thanks anyway."

"There's one thing more, Stedman. As far as I'm concerned, you haven't proven yourself yet. So the same conditions apply to our next landing point."

"Where's that?"

"Venus, of course. Do you think

I want to play hop-scotch all over the Solar System? Well, you finish your meal and give that stone worm a nice comfortable bubble to live in." And Teejay departed.

LATER, AFTER he'd evacuated the air from one of the bubble-cages and increased the temperature to seven hundred degrees Fahrenheit, after he'd supervised a slow warming process for the worm and seen it deposited, still drowsy, in the bubble with sufficient quantities of silicon-compounds to keep it well fed, Steve hobbled with his crutches to the general lounge. Teejay sat there with half a dozen of the Venusian experts, for the hunt would be much more protracted on that teeming jungle-world. The woman stood up at once and crossed the floor to Steve. "How's the worm?"

"Fine." He always felt a little edgy and on his guard when the woman spoke to him.

"And how's the extra-zoo expert's bum leg?"

"Coming along, I think."

Teejay turned to the six men seated around the lounge, said: "This is Steve Stedman, our extra-zoo man—at least temporarily. Stedman, Phillips knows more about amphibians than any man alive, Ianello is our aboreal expert, Smith ferrets out the cave-dwelling mammals—we hope, Waneki goes floundering around after sea-monsters, St. Clair is—"

Then something buzzed shrilly on the adjacent wall, and Teejay flipped a toggle switch. "Captain here."

"Radio from Earth, Captain. Mr. Brody Carmical himself."

"Is that so?" said Teejay, her eyebrows lifting. "Give me a circuit." And, a moment later, "What's the trouble, Brody?"

The big man's voice came through faint and metallic over more than fifty million miles of space. "Plenty, T. J., Barling decided to start in the middle this year. Some of our—er, contacts told us his ship's rocketing for Ganymede, and fast. You'll have to get there first if you can, naturally."

"We'll get there," said Teejay, quite grim, and cut the connection.

Steve had time to think one thought before he was swept along in the general rush, crutches and all, after the woman galvanized into activity. She might take orders from Brody Carmical, but she even had a way with the big man, making him bow to her—perhaps unconsciously.

Teejay was yelling and pointing, it seemed, in all directions at once. "Hey you, Ianello, shake a leg down to the fission-room and tell 'em to start straining. Smith, get me Kevin McGann on the intercom. Waneki, you can forget all about those Venusian sea-monsters and tell the docs to be ready for plenty of acceleration cases. You better bed down right now, Phillips, you're not as strong as the rest of us, not with sixty years of junketing behind you. Hello, McGann? Listen, Mac, I want the entire crew assembled in General inside of ten minutes. Yeah, expedition too. Everyone but those boys down in fission. And tell your orbit-man to figure a way to get us off this trajectory and on a

quick ellipse from here to the Jovian moons. Yes, that's what I said—the Jovian moons."

She paused long enough to take a breath and turn to Steve. "Well, Stedman, we'll be dropping down over your brother's grave on Ganymede before you know it. Maybe then you'll be able to remove that chip from your shoulder."

"Me? From *my* shoulder? Sister, you've got things backwards."

But the woman pivoted away, and Kevin's voice bleated over the intercom: "Crew and expedition—all to general lounge on the double! You boys in fission stay put, Captain's orders. This is urgent."

Almost before Kevin's voice had stopped echoing through the corridors, LeClarc popped into the lounge. "You wanted me, Captain? May I help?"

"I wanted everyone. Everyone can help. Just sit still till the rest of 'em get here."

LeClarc appeared hurt, but he took a seat in glum silence. In twos and threes the members of the crew began to drift in, wild rumors circulating among them in whispers. Finally, LeClarc counted noses and told his Captain that everyone except the fission crew was present.

Teejay nodded, stepped to the center of the floor. She removed her cape and dropped it, discarding it so suddenly and yet with such a polished flourish that a complete silence fell upon the large room almost at once.

She paced back and forth, her bare, lithe limbs flashing under the green-glowing wall panels. "You've all come to know that cape," she said, her voice strident and alive.

"It's a sort of affectation I have. But it's not necessary. Like everything that's not necessary, it must be discarded, at least temporarily. Men, we're in serious trouble."

Just like that, inside of a few seconds, she had them eating out of the palm of her hand. She went on to say that Barling's ship had already blasted off from the Earth for Ganymede, how, unless their efforts here on the *Gordak* were Herculean and then some, Barling's ship would reach Ganymede first. "And you all know what that would mean," she continued. "Like the elephant of two centuries ago, the Ganymeden anthrovac is the one solid necessity for any circus sideshow. But the anthrovacs have a way of going into hiding when they're disturbed. So, if Barling gets to Ganymede first, we've had it. We can all start looking for jobs after that, do you understand? I want full acceleration from here to Ganymede, as soon as we can get the new orbit plotted. Nothing but the immediate problem—to reach the Jovian moons before Barling—nothing else matters. If I tell you to work two shifts and go without sleep one night, you will do that. If I decide that a man must go beyond the shieldings in fission, he'll climb into a vac-suit and hope for the best. It's going to be like that, men, and I can't help it. I crack the whip and you jump. Any questions?"

She stood dramatically, hands on hips, somehow poised on tip-toes without straining, a tall, impressive and quite beautiful figure.

"Yes," said one of the orbiteers. "I have a question. Can I get to

work on the new orbit at once?"

There were hoarse shouts of approval, some applause and a scattering of deep-throated laughter. Steve watched Teejay walk off her improvised stage, complete master of the situation. If it were humanly possible for the *Gordak* to reach Ganymede before Barling, they'd do it.

IN THE WEEKS which followed, Steve learned something of what the big Exec officer had meant that first day he had spoken about Teejay. She drove her men relentlessly and some of them may have resented it. But she drove herself as well, and once when a crewman had gone beyond the shieldings to repair the mechanical arms which regulated the flow of powdered plutonium fuel from the bunkers and had emerged with a serious case of radiation sickness, Teejay donned a vac-suit and went in herself to finish the job.

Most of the men liked her. Some, frankly, did not. But all of them knew they served under a captain as good as any.

Two days before landing on Ganymede, Teejay gathered her chief lieutenants for a final planning session. Kevin was there, and LeClarc, and a tall, wraith-thin man with a bushy head of white hair named Simonson, and Steve. Teejay spread a chart out and peered down at it intently. "This is Ganymede Northeast," she said, indicating the circled, central area of the map. "It is here that, for some reason, the anthrovacs gather. And

here inside the circle is an area of one thousand square miles which Mr. Simonson has marked off—yes, Stedman, the red square. We'll be operating there. If the Barling ship has landed ahead of us, we can assume the same for them."

Teejay paused to light a cigarette, then crushed it out after her first puff. "The darn smoke gets in my way when I try to think," she smiled, and went on, "Anyway, here's the square. We'll be using the crew and the expedition—everyone aboard ship—because we're in a hurry. Simply put, we'll be a bunch of beaters to drive the anthrovacs together at the center of the square. Then, well, then it's up to Mr. Simonson and Stedman. Any questions?"

"Yes, Captain," said LeClarc. "Just how do we get the anthrovacs aboard ship?"

"Don't ask me. But you might ask Mr. Simonson."

The bushy-haired man named Simonson grunted. "Umm-mm. There are several ways. We could set up elaborate traps, such as Thorndyke employed two years ago, and—"

"Can't," Teejay objected. "No time."

"Why don't we just clobber them?" LeClarc suggested. "A few might die, but we'll get the specimens we want."

Steve shook his head. "You don't know your anthrovacs. Chase them and they'll try to run away. But hurt them—just hurt one of them so the rest of them can see—and they'll swarm all over you until either all the men or all the anthrovacs are dead, or both. No,

there's another way."

"What's that?" Teejay leaned forward, chin cupped in hands, definitely interested.

"Anthrovacs are non-breathers. Most gasses won't hurt them, but you can give them a good, old-fashioned oxygen jag with the slightest whiff of pure oxygen."

"I've heard of that," Simonson said.

"Sort of like getting them drunk, isn't it, boy?" Kevin wanted to know.

But LeClarc wasn't satisfied. "I still say we ought to clobber them. We can't waste time experimenting with any crazy jags."

"It's no experiment," Steve told him coldly. "It works."

"I still say we ought to—"

"Clobber them, I know," Teejay finished for him. "If there's any clobbering to be done, LeClarc, I'll let you know. Meanwhile, we're trying Stedman's plan. Any further questions?"

And, when no one spoke: "Good. Mac, I want you to let Mr. Simonson and Stedman pick three men to help 'em. You're to divide the rest of us into groups of half a dozen each, with each group serving under a leader. I'll give each leader a designated area in that square, so there won't be a lot of bumbling around when we land on Ganymede. LeClarc!"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Take yourself a group of three idle technicians and check all the vac-suits. If there's any trouble, make sure it's repaired before we land. What are you gawking at me like that for?"

"I only thought—"

"What? What did you think? Speak up, man!"

"I thought you would have a job of more import for me. Had you, for example, decided that we ought to clobber—"

"Clobber, clobber, clobber! Will you shut up and get to work?"

"Yes, Captain." And more than a little stooped of shoulder, LeClarc left the lounge.

Teejay didn't pause for breath. "You, Stedman! What's so funny? What are you laughing about?"

"Nothing. It's just the way LeClarc—"

"Forget it, before you get clobbered."

GANYMEDE.

After the landing, an unreasoning fear gripped Steve tightly. It wasn't anything he could put his finger on, but he felt it gnawing at the fringes of his mind, probing, seeking, thrusting for a way in. There was nothing to be afraid of, and Steve smoked one cigarette after another while the six-man parties disembarked to take up their beater-stations on the edges of the square.

Ganymede, he recited to himself, is the largest satellite in the Solar System. 664,200 miles from Jupiter, it has a diameter of thirty two hundred and six miles, or bigger than the planet Mercury and almost as large as Pluto. It swings around Jupiter in a little over seven Earth days and in appearance the moon-scape's enough like Luna to be a twin-brother, except for fat, bloated Jupiter hanging in the sky.

What was there to be afraid of? Steve didn't know. His brother had died on Ganymede—and the circumstances of Charlie's death still bordered on the mysterious. Well, he'd see for himself about that. Did the fear crawl around the edges of his brain because he thought Teejay was responsible? But that didn't make sense, for to a certain degree he'd thought that all along. Unless the appalling thought of having to fight Teejay and her whole loyal crew had taken hold of him unconsciously.

"What are you moping about, boy?"

"Huh? Oh, Kevin. Nothing much, I guess. I—"

"You look to me like you've seen a ghost. What is it, scared?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess so."

"So what? Buck up, boy."

"I don't want to be scared, Kevin."

"Who does?"

"That's not what I mean. It's one thing to say that if you aren't—"

"Who isn't? Don't look at me, boy. And didn't you watch all the men trooping outside with the blood drained from their faces, and their eyes sort of big and too bright behind the face-plates? We're all scared."

"But why?"

"Mean to say you spent so much time on zoology and forgot about other things? Like, for instance, Ganymede-fear?"

"Huh? How's that?"

"Everyone is afraid, Steve. Everyone. Whenever a man gets near Ganymede, he suddenly becomes afraid. It's some sort of a

psychological or maybe para-psychological phenomenon and none of the medicos could ever figure it out. It isn't the kind of fear that paralyzes, boy, but still, it holds on all the time a man's on Ganymede and it doesn't leave until he blasts off again. Didn't you ever hear about that?"

"No. That is, I knew it happened somewhere, but I forgot where."

"Well, that's all there is to it, boy."

"All! Don't you think it's enough? Something lurks out there, something makes people afraid, and we've never been able to find out why, but you say—"

Teejay came up and smiled at them, but there was something grim about her smile. "You can always tell when someone comes to Ganymede for the first time. He's jumpier. Just relax, Stedman. By the time they start beating the anthro-vacs in toward the *Gordak* you'll be feeling better—and raring to go to work with that oxygen-jag stunt of yours, too." And she added, "Say, have you been watching your stone worm?"

"He sure has," Kevin told her. "He took me down there yesterday and that worm's been growing fat on all the sand he's fed it. Sand—for food, that's what the worm eats. Imagine how that would settle the over-population problems on Earth if people, too, could eat sand."

"Yes, and then—" Teejay was speaking again—but words, just words, and Steve stopped listening. It occurred to him all at once that they were engrossed in their meaningless conversation for one reason only—to keep the fear from their

minds. If you thought about something else, the fear would retreat at least in part, and if you could hold a conversation about everything and nothing, that was even better.

Steve almost jumped off the floor when a metallic voice blared forth from the loudspeaker, echoing and re-echoing in the near-empty room.

"Captain! Captain, this is Moretti, Group Seven."

"Go ahead, Moretti," Teejay said into the mike. "I'm listening."

"Who the devil's on radar, Captain?"

"Why—no one! We forgot."

"There's a ship coming down. We can see it plain as day out here."

"What ship?" Teejay asked softly, but they all knew the question was totally unnecessary.

Moretti's voice jumped an octave as he cried: "It's Barling!"

WITHIN TEN minutes, all the beaters had been called in. Barling's big ship, the *Frank Buck*, snorted back and forth angrily on its landing jets.

"Are they gonna land or ain't they gonna land?" someone said as Kevin broke out the neutron guns and saw that every third man had one.

"Depends on their boss," said Kevin. "If he figures we can be scared off, he'll land. Otherwise, maybe he'll go away."

"Not that little stinker," Teejay told him. "Not Schuyler Barling. He won't go away. Will the fact that we're here first matter? It will

not, for Schuyler knows we can't prove it. You ought to know better than to hope for that, Kevin. No, we can figure that Schuyler will move in on us."

"What happens then?" Steve demanded.

Teejay shrugged her bare, beautiful shoulders. "That I don't know. Schuyler may be a stinker and may be predictable, but he's not *that* predictable. Hey, it looks like the *Frank Buck* is coming down!"

The big ship, Steve saw, was doing precisely that. Its jets had been cut, and the ship fell like a stone. Twice its length separated it from the rubble-strewn pumice when the pilot kicked his jets over again, and something seemed to slap the *Frank Buck* back up toward the starry sky. The result was a first-rate landing.

"That would be Schuyler showing off," said Teejay wearily. "He must have been born in a tube and weaned on jet-slag, and he sure lets you know it."

Fifteen minutes later, Schuyler Barling and three of his officers entered the *Gordak*.

Barling got out of his vac-suit first, a tall, handsome man of about thirty, with short-cropped blond hair, pale blue eyes and petulant lips. "Captain Moore," he said, bowing slightly from the waist. Making fun of Teejay.

"Mr. Barling." As ever, the woman seemed cool and unruffled.

"With us," said Schuyler Barling, "it's in the family. I work for my father. Obviously, it means something to me whether he succeeds or not. But you, Captain Moore, you're a hired hand. You work for Brody Carmical, on a paycheck.

Therefore, your loyalty could not possibly be as strong as mine, and—"

"Get to the point!"

"We arrived here on Ganymede almost simultaneously. One of us will have to leave."

"It didn't look simultaneous to me."

Barling ignored her. "Yes, one will have to leave, because the anthrovac is frightened off easily and unless a hunt is carried on with the utmost precision and timing, no one will catch any anthrovacs."

"Go on," said Teejay. She spoke quietly, but Steve knew the woman well enough to realize her temper was coming to a boil, inside.

"My *Frank Buck* got here first," Barling told her blandly. "Therefore, you will leave."

"That's a stinking lie!" Teejay cried. "We were here first and you know it."

"Who can prove it? The *Frank Buck* landed first." Barling's hand flashed down to his waist, came up gripping a neutron gun. "If we have to, we'll force you to leave."

Teejay stood with hands on hips, facing him. "I know I'm not conducting myself like a lady, but then, this is the twenty-second century," she said, smiling—and struck out with her balled right fist. It bounced off Barling's jaw with savage force and the man stumbled back against the wall and crashed to the floor, his neutron gun clattering away. Barling shook himself, tried to rise. He got to hands and knees, then fell forward on his face.

Teejay whirled on his officers. "All right, get him out of here! Come on, move."

THE THREE men looked at each other. None of them did anything.

"You see, boy?" said Kevin, grinning. "That's our Captain and we'll fight for her. She won the beauty pageant five years ago in Ceres-town, and she can fight like a man. She's a woman for the stars, and we're proud to—"

"Shut up," said Teejay. "That won't get us anywhere."

By now, Barling had stirred, had come up, dazed, into a sitting position. He rubbed his jaw, winced. "Assuming we return to our ship, we still won't leave Ganymede. Not without our anthrovac."

"Nor will we."

"But you had to hit me! You had to flaunt your—"

"No one told you to draw your gun."

"—flaunt your Amazonian prowess."

"Stop sniveling, Schuyler. I think we'll have to reach some sort of a compromise, but I'll dictate terms, not you."

"Yes?" Barling growled up at her. "Who says we'll obey?"

"Oh, get up off the floor! You look so silly, sitting there and rubbing your chin.

Barling stood up, retrieving his gun but holstering it. Kevin watched him, toying with his own weapon—not pointing it at anyone in particular, but tossing it back and forth idly from hand to hand.

"Give us twenty four hours," said Teejay. "We'll look for our anthrovac. In that time, none of your men is to leave the *Frank Buck*. After that, you get twenty four hours, and we're confined to the *Gordak*. Then

us, then you. And so on, till one of us gets his anthrovac. Then he pulls out and the other is left here. Is it a deal?"

Barling considered, said: "Well, yes—with one change. *We* get the first twenty four hours."

"No."

"Then you can forget your deal, Captain Moore."

"Well, then let's toss for it." Teejay reached into a pocket of her cape, flipped a coin to Steve. "Here, Stedman. You toss it."

"Who gets to call?" Barling demanded.

"Do you want to?"

"Well—"

"Good. Then I will. Ladies first, you know. Go ahead, Stedman."

Steve tossed the coin, and Teejay cried: "Heads!"

Palming the coin, Steve flipped it over on the back of his left hand, peered at it. Staring up at him was the metallic likeness of Angus Mac-Namara, first man to reach the planet Mars. "Heads," said Steve, and one of Barling's officers came over to verify it.

Barling shook his head stubbornly. "How do I know it isn't a phony, a two-headed coin?"

Teejay glared at him. "That's insulting, Schuyler."

"Well, I'd like to look at it. How do I know—"

"You don't. But I said it's insulting. So, if you want to see the coin, you'll have to fight me!"

"Never mind," said Barling, climbing into his vac-suit. "You get first try." And all of them garbed in their vac-suits once more, the men of the *Frank Buck* departed.

"Get those beaters out again!"

Teejay was calling into her microphone, and Kevin grasped Steve's arm, said:

"Go ahead, boy. Look at the coin."

Steve did. It had two heads.

And later, Teejay said to him: "Listen, Stedman. All the beaters are out now, but frankly, I don't trust Schuyler."

Steve said he did not blame her, and Kevin was there to nod his red head.

"So, Stedman, the beaters have their jobs to do. That's almost everyone. But temporarily at least, it leaves you and Mac here with nothing to do."

"That's true," said Kevin.

"But not for long, Mac. Schuyler may try something, I don't know what. You two are probably the strongest men on this ship. I know what you can do, Mac—and I saw a sample of Stedman at work when he had that little run-in with Le-Clarc. All right: you two hop into a couple of vac-suits. That is, if Stedman's ready to fight for us if he has to—"

Steve chuckled. "I don't go around carrying two-headed coins, Teejay, but I know a rat when I see one. I'll go, and your friend Schuyler better not try anything." Almost, he was surprised at his own words. Teejay had a way of commanding respect, and if he didn't watch himself, he'd be talking like Kevin soon. Well, perhaps the woman merited it. . . . His thoughts took him that far, and then he remembered Charlie. "I'll go," he said again, almost growling.

"But you still have a chip on your shoulder—well, never mind. I'll ex-

pect quarter-hourly reports from you two."

"You'll get them," said Kevin, and climbed into his vac-suit.

INCREDIBLY, Steve found himself out on the bleak, desolate surface of Ganymede, walking with Kevin past the long, silent length of the *Frank Buck*. And here, outside the confining walls of their spaceship, the Ganymede-fear seemed stronger. Steve felt it as something palpable, clutching at his heart and constricting it, bringing sweat to his forehead and clouding the inside of his helmet with moisture.

Fear—of what?

Not of the frontier world itself, surely. Not of some unknown menace lurking out among the craters and ringwalls. No, for while Ganymede was not yet as familiar as Mars or Venus, mankind still had explored it extensively. There were the strange anthrovacs, animals which looked like over-sized and less brutish gorillas but which were not protoplasm creatures and which took their energy directly from sunlight and cosmic radiation. But that was all—no other life existed on Ganymede, and the anthrovacs on their frigid, airless world were something of an oddity.

Then what caused the fear? And was the fear responsible in any way for what had happened to Charlie?

"Hey, Steve—snap out of it!" Kevin's voice, floating in thinly on the intercom.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, Kevin. Sure. It's that fear, sort of gets you out

here. You can't help it."

"I know. A ship seems to cut it off to some extent, boy. But it's around, lurking, waiting to get you."

"What do you mean, waiting to get you?"

"Well, not directly. But it makes you make mistakes. Men have died that way—paying so much attention to the fear that they didn't pay enough attention to whatever was happening."

"Kevin, do you know anything about how Charlie died you haven't told me?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. It's kind of vague, boy. Teejay went out alone and when she came back—why, she looked scared. That's common enough on Ganymede—everyone looks scared. But Teejay looked puzzled and confused also, and that's not like her. She wouldn't talk much for a time, and when she did she just said she'd found Charlie Stedman, your brother, dead."

"Where?"

"What do you mean, where? Out here on Ganymede, naturally."

"No, I mean exactly where. What was done with the body?"

"That I don't know," said Kevin, and Steve could picture him frowning inside his helmet.

"Well—listen, Kevin! Do you hear something?"

"Hear something? How can you hear anything on Ganymede, with no air to carry it? Except on the radio, of course. I hear you, but get a grip on yourself, boy."

"No. I hear something. There it is, louder. My God, Kevin! My God—" And clumsily in his vac-

suit, Steve began running away across the pumice.

"Hey, come back! Back here, you crazy fool—" Kevin charged after him, taking long, ungainly strides in the light gravity. But Steve was quicker and soon the distance between them increased and Kevin realized he wouldn't be able to overtake Steve at all.

"Come back! What do you hear, boy? At least tell me that."

Steve told him, and ran on. Amazed, Kevin lumbered back toward the *Gordak*.

"But what made him do it?" Teejay demanded, later.

"I told you all I know, Captain. He said he heard something and started running. I chased after him, couldn't catch him. He told me what he heard."

"What?"

"Well, you won't like this, because it doesn't make sense. But he said he heard his brother—calling him. Charlie Stedman, calling."

"Charlie Stedman is dead." Suddenly, Teejay was curt, pre-emptory.

"That's what I thought, too."

"Forget it. It's the Ganymede-fear, Mac. Somehow it got to Stedman stronger than it got to most people. Maybe his brother was hit that way, too. Maybe, right now, Stedman is off his rocker, running out across the pumice somewhere, shouting his brother's name into the soundless void of space."

"We'll have to find him," said Kevin.

"How can we, Mac? He's got air for five or six hours, and Ganymede is big."

"I'm going to take a set of shoul-

der-jets and go looking for him, Captain. I hope you won't try to stop me. I'm going either way."

Shrugging, Teejay went to a cabinet, handed Kevin a pair of shoulder-jets, which he strapped at once to his vac-suit. The woman took another suit and another pair of jets. "Once I heard voices out here on Ganymede, too," she said. "So did Charlie Stedman. They killed Charlie and they almost killed me. Enough's enough, Mac. I'm going with you."

THE RINGWALL was not very large. Slowed by his vac-suit, a man might cover its diameter in half an hour. But Steve did not traverse the circular area. Instead, he climbed the ringwall laboriously and then made his way down, tumbling and sliding, to the rocky floor of the shallow crater.

The voice came from within it—from within the crater. It could not be! He told himself that more than once. The rock of Ganymede itself might carry sound, but you'd feel it only as a throbbing through the soles of your boots, for the vacuum of space which encroached on all sides could not transmit sound-waves.

That was science. That was elementary. But the voice whispered in his ears, ebbing and flowing, first loud, then soft—and science be damned.

Charlie was calling. *I am Charlie Stedman. I am Charlie Stedman*—That was all, but it was enough. Charlie's name, and Charlie's voice.

"It can't be happening," Steve

said, aloud, and heard his own voice roaring inside the helmet. It drove the other voice, the impossible voice, out for a moment, but it returned. Around the inner circumference of the ringwall Steve ran, seeking a source for the impossible. Sobbing, stumbling, he plunged ahead. It was only when he returned to his starting point, a needle-like pinnacle of rock, that he realized his supply of air would be exhausted in three hours.

"He couldn't have gone much farther than this, Mac."

"We've got plenty of air, Captain. I'm not giving up—"

The two figures soared on spurting jets a hundred feet above the surface of Ganymede. When Teejay went higher every few moments, she could barely make out the two spaceships, far away to the left. Occasionally she saw the beaters working in teams of six, cumbersome tanks of oxygen strapped to their backs.

"Did you hear the voice, Mac?"

"No."

"Had Stedman been drinking?"

"That's ridiculous. The boy was with us, and you saw for yourself."

"True. And I've said that the voices of Ganymede are no strangers to me, anyway. Maybe I was trying to rationalize."

"We'll see when we find Steve."

"If we find him. The fear can make you do crazy things out here, Mac. Like going for too long without sufficient oxygen."

"That's what I'm worrying about."

A phonograph needle caught in

one groove, spinning out its brief message over and over again—that was the voice. *I am Charlie Stedman*. And the ringwall might have been the record, Steve thought bitterly, except that it was utterly deserted. He hadn't covered its entire rock-strewn area; an army of searchers would be necessary to do that. But he had seen enough to convince him that—

The thought fled.

Coming toward him over the floor of the ringwall was a huge anthrovac, walking erect with a shuffling gait. Charlie's voice grew louder.

"It's no good, Mac. We can't find him."

"As soon as we turn back he's as good as dead."

"Our air won't last forever," Teejay said.

"He's got even less."

"Ten more minutes?"

"All right, ten. But why did you come out here with me if you're ready to give up so easy?"

"Who said I am? I'm trying to be practical, Mac. Listen, I saved Stedman's life once already—and stayed out on the hot side of Mercury longer than a person should, too. I like Stedman, but if we ever find him, better not say that or I'll break your neck, hear? So I want to find him, but I don't want to sacrifice your life or mine in the attempt. Is that clear?"

Kevin said that it was.

A moment later, Teejay climbed higher. Half a thousand feet above the surface of Ganymede she circled. Abruptly, she leveled off at a hundred feet again, said:

"There's something over there, Mac. In that ringwall."

"What?"

"I don't know. Movement. A big figure and a little one. The big one seems too large for a man, but the smaller—well, let's go."

The anthrovac paused a dozen yards from Steve. There had been nothing hostile in its movements to begin with, and now it might have been a statue for all the activity it displayed. From crown of head to small, handlike feet, it stood almost a yard taller than Steve, but it did not have the great-muscled girth of a gorilla. Instead, it looked quite manlike, except for the incredibly broad shoulders, the thick, matted hair covering its entire body, the too-long arms, the nine feet of height.

Did the voice emanate from it?

Now that the creature had approached him, Steve wasn't sure. The voice continued, pulsing and throbbing in his ears like the Ganymede-fear itself—but *in his ears*. Not from the bleak terrain around him, and certainly not from the anthrovac.

"I'm going crazy," he said, aloud, driving the voice away temporarily. "No. No, I'm not, because I realize it too soon. A crazy man doesn't realize it and doesn't warn himself about it—certainly not at the outset." But did that mean the voice had any real existence? How could it?

I am Charlie Stedman. . .

Smiling bleakly, Steve picked up a loose chunk of rock, tossed it at the anthrovac. The creature merely swung its huge body gracefully at

the hips, avoiding the missile. Then it stooped, found a stone for itself, hurled it at Steve. He ducked, feeling completely and tremendously foolish. He should have been prepared, for the anthrovacs are playful and can mime almost any human action.

He did not duck in time. He felt the stone *thunk* against his helmet, peered with horror at the glassite inches from his face until he saw that it hadn't cracked. Grinning now, he shook his fist at the creature, watched it duplicate the motion with its great hairy hand. It was a game, Steve told himself, a lot like the meaningless conversation Teejay and Kevin had had to dispell the Ganymede-fear.

But if the anthrovac could mime human actions, perhaps the anthrovac could also mime voices! That would necessitate telepathic powers, naturally. But the anthrovac, like many denizens of terrestrial forests and tundras, changed its habits immensely in captivity. A captured anthrovac, one which had been reared with one of the circus troupes, could never tell you what a wild anthrovac was like. And a wild anthrovac, somehow living on airless Ganymede and taking its energy directly from cosmic and solar radiation, might be able to do anything.

I am Charlie Stedman. . .

Steve carried the thought to its logical conclusion. Suppose an anthrovac—*this* anthrovac which faced him now—had somehow heard Charlie speaking. Charlie might have been introducing himself to someone: "I am Charlie Stedman."

But the hypothesis wasn't much more than a bubble, and it burst completely when Steve remembered he was the only one who could hear the voice.

"Hey, Stedman! You trying to kill yourself?"

Steve whirled, looked up. Two figures, no more than vaguely human in their cumbersome vac-suits, hovered over him, jetting around in circles. The anthrovac had seen them too—and now, apparently alarmed by the twin forms floating just out of reach, the creature turned and bounded away over the uneven terrain.

"What gave you that idea?" Steve called into his intercom. "The anthrovac wasn't looking for trouble."

"I don't mean that, stupid." Teejay had a way of jarring him back to reality with a few words. "I mean, how much air have you left?"

Steve looked at the gauge. "Enough to return to the *Gordak*, provided I get on my horse."

"We'll walk with you, then," said Teejay, and dropped to the ground at his side. "I think I'll hold onto your arm, too. You're liable to go wandering again, and we might not be able to find you."

Kevin alighted, switched off his jets. "How about the voice, boy? Do you still hear it?"

"Why—no! But I did a minute ago, until the anthrovac ran away."

"That's peculiar."

"There's a lot that's peculiar out here on Ganymede, Kevin. I think—"

"Stop thinking and start walking," Teejay told him.

Less than two hours later, they reached the *Gordak*. A vac-suited man met them at the airlock, and Steve saw LeClarc's face through the glassite helmet.

"I'll bet you were worried," said Teejay.

"Sure," LeClarc answered, drawing a neutron gun from his belt. "See, my Captain, I'm so worried I can hardly think straight. Will the three of you please turn around and march over to the *Frank Buck*?"

They were too stunned to do anything else.

"DON'T MIND ME," Kevin said, within the *Frank Buck*. "If I'm confused it's merely because I can't believe this. Not you, LeClarc, not you."

They'd been ushered into the main lounge of the *Frank Buck*, a ship of about the *Gordak's* dimensions, but two or three years older. LeClarc stood there with his neutron gun, watching them carefully. In a few moments, Schuyler Barling joined them, a greasy salve covering the discoloration on his jaw. The jaw looked painfully swollen too, and Barling rubbed it speculatively. "I won't forget this," he growled briefly to Teejay, then turned to LeClarc. "Kevin McGann I know, but what about this man?"

"Stedman?" said LeClarc. "You'll want him, because he's the extra-zoo man on the *Gordak*. If you took McGann and the woman alone, they still might be able to do their work on Carmical's ship. But with Stedman your prisoner as well,

their hands are tied over there."

"What is this?" Teejay demanded defiantly. "What's the meaning of—"

"Will you be quiet and let me do the talking?" Barling interrupted her. "It was LeClarc who radioed and told me your coin had two heads. If you wanted to play the game that way, I wasn't going to stand by and let you. So—"

"So," LeClarc took up the thread for him, "we got together, Mr. Barling and I."

"But you, LeClarc," said Kevin. "You'd jump through a fire-hoop into a pit of acid if Captain Moore told you to."

"Would I?" LeClarc chuckled softly.

"Yes. Yes, you would."

"Perhaps there was a time I'd have done that, McGann. Perhaps. But then I thought the Captain needed me, and wanted me to help her, too. Now, with you and Stedman—well, LeClarc isn't so important, is he?"

"So that's it!" Kevin roared. "You're jealous. Not jealous the way a man should be, when he loves a woman, but jealous because you believed Captain Moore had discarded you—had decided you weren't such an essential cog in the *Gordak* machine."

"Shut up." LeClarc took a quick step toward Kevin and hit him, hooking his left fist at the bigger man's jaw. Kevin staggered but did not go down. Bellowing, he charged at LeClarc, but the Frenchman waved him off with the neutron gun.

"Stop it, LeClarc!" Barling snapped. "I didn't have you bring

them here to make a shambles of the lounge. Just stand off in the corner—that's right, there—and watch them. I'll do the talking."

"You realize, of course," Teejay told him calmly, "that this is kidnapping."

"Is it? Who is to say? You never entered the *Gordak*; LeClarc met you within the airlock. For all your crew knows, the three of you are out on Ganymede somewhere—with not much air left. After a time, they'll have to give you up as dead. With the Captain gone, and the Exec, and the expert on Extra-terrestrial zoology—their expedition won't amount to much. It looks to me like old man Carmical will be without a circus this year, unless he resorts to a strictly terrestrial shindig."

"What happens then?" Teejay wanted to know.

"Well, I'll be frank with you. I haven't decided. I can't simply return you to civilization, of course."

"Of course," Teejay echoed him acidly.

"Then you'd be able to holler 'kidnapper'. It would seem that you give me only one alternative. Ah—excuse me a moment."

A trio of men had entered the lounge and the leader, a stocky man of about thirty-five, was beaming. "We've got three," he said.

"Splendid, splendid. In that case, nothing remains to keep us on Ganymede."

"Chief, I'm sure glad of that. This place can give you the heebies, and you never know why. Those three anthrovacs should be a fine core to build your circus around, though."

"Three anthrovacs?" Teejay cried, her composure fading for the first time. "You've got three anthrovacs?"

Barling nodded. "LeClarc here was good enough to tell us Stedman's plan. A first-rate idea, as you can see, only we were able to carry it out. Frankly, I wasn't so optimistic at first."

"Let's get back to us," Teejay suggested. "You were saying . . .?"

"Umm-mm, yes. There's only one alternative, and much as I regret—"

"What is it? What's the alternative?"

"Please, must I say it? I think you know, and there's no need for me to—"

"No, I want to hear it."

"Suit yourself," said Barling. "The only solution is this: we'll have to eliminate you."

"When?"

"The sooner the better. But Captain Moore, you're making me feel—"

"That's all I wanted to know!" Teejay cried, and hurled herself at Barling. "We might as well try to escape while we still have a chance."

AFTER THAT, things happened almost too fast for Steve to follow. Kevin got the idea at once, charging at LeClarc before the Frenchman had time to gather his wits. The neutron gun hissed violently, searing a three-inch chunk out of the ceiling. But then LeClarc was struck by two hundred pounds of Kevin McGann, and

went down before the onslaught.

Something exploded against Steve's jaw and he did a quick flip and landed on his back. He'd hardly had time to declare himself in the battle, when one of Barling's men had jumped him. Now the man came down atop him, flailing with both fists, but Steve chopped at his face with short, clubbing blows and scrambled to his feet while the man caught his breath.

Steve didn't wait, plunging toward the man with murder in his eyes—and failed to reach him. An arm circled his neck from behind and he was dragged to the floor again, by the second of the three anthrovac hunters. He rolled over, saw Kevin and LeClarc off to his right, standing toe-to-toe and slugging. And beyond them, Teejay was cuffing Barling around the lounge with lusty, man-sized blows. Barling went down under the onslaught, falling at the woman's feet, but then the third hunter had grasped her swirling black cape from behind, throwing it over her head and tripping her. She fought blindly as she went down, taking the hunter with her; and with Barling, they became a tangled melee of thrashing arms and legs.

Steve rolled out from under the second hunter, but the first one met him halfway and pole-axed him down to the floor again with a hard right hand. Sobbing, clutching at the man's legs, Steve began to pull himself upright and got a knee in his face. He went down again, and this time everything in the room receded into a vague, shadowy fog.

When Steve could see again, there was still no order to the chaos.

He hadn't lived a violent life like Kevin or Teejay—such things were not part of his background, although he'd boxed in college and won the light-heavyweight championship, too. But there was something different, something elemental about a free-for-all brawl.

LeClarc lay on his back, supine. He looked out of it for the duration, which still set the odds at four to three against the trio from the *Gordak*. Right now Kevin held his own with the two hunters who'd done Steve in, at least temporarily. But that couldn't last, for both were big, muscular men. And Teejay? She was a woman, so perhaps the odds were even worse. Steve smiled grimly as he clambered to his feet to help Kevin. Teejay was a woman, but she was the new twenty-second century woman, and proud of it. The third hunter kicked and thrashed helplessly on the floor as she held him in a head-scissors and at the same time fended off Barling—who was crawling around them and looking for an opening. Teejay, definitely, was an asset.

Steve got to hunter number three quickly, pulling him off Kevin and straightening him with an uppercut. After that, it was a set-up. Steve pounded once and then again with his left hand at the man's midsection, then finished by crossing his right and feeling it crunch against the man's jaw.

"Now I see how you could take care of LeClarc that first day!" Kevin yelled, and promptly polished off the other hunter with a blow that lifted him completely off the floor.

As one, they whirled around to

face the other side of the room. Barling and his henchman had finally got the upper hand. Teejay lay on her side, her hands behind her back. Not unconscious, she was completely spent, and an almost equally exhausted Barling was attempting to tie her hands with the black cape. The hunter sat there, dull-eyed, watching them. It was Kevin who lifted the hunter and hurled him away, and when Steve rolled Barling over and pushed him against the wall, the man did not resist.

Teejay climbed to her feet, unsteadily. "I—guess I'm growing—soft," she panted. "Maybe—I don't know—maybe training and muscle-toning from—infancy—aren't the answer. A gal just isn't cut out for rough and tumble fighting." Her hand flashed up to her forehead, the back of it resting against her brow. "Ooo, Steve, catch me—"

She fainted in his arms.

Somehow, they got Teejay into her vac-suit. The walls of the lounge were sound-proofed, and the struggle had attracted no one. Silently they made their way out of the lounge and through the corridors of the *Frank Buck*, heading for the airlock. Steve toted Teejay over his shoulder, and remembering Mercury, felt very good about it. He ached all over from the fight and he knew he'd need some mending. But she'd called him Steve, and that—suddenly and ridiculously—was most important.

"What's going on here?" A crewman met them in the corridor and bellowed his challenge.

Kevin raised the neutron gun he had taken from LeClarc.

He never used it.

A fraction of a second later, the *Frank Buck* blasted off from the surface of Ganymede, and sudden acceleration threw them all to the floor. As Steve was to learn later, no hands were at the controls. No human hands.

"THIS, ROUGHLY, is the situation," began Barling, pacing back and forth, speaking out of swollen lips and averting the right side of his face with its puffy cheek and blackened eye. "We are all in this together, and—"

"You hypocrite!" cried Teejay. "Six hours ago, you wanted to kill us. Now, because something unexpected pops up, you change your mind. Temporarily, for as long as you can use us, is that it?"

"No. If we can get out of this I'll forget about killing, provided you forget about kidnapping."

"Well . . ."

"You haven't any other choice, Captain Moore."

"He's right," Kevin admitted. "But what's the trouble we're in, Mr. Barling?"

"Six hours ago you three jumped us and almost made your escape. But the *Frank Buck* took off; suddenly, without warning. *None of my men was at the controls.*"

"That doesn't make sense," Steve objected.

"I didn't think so, either. I almost don't know how to explain it, what I've seen with my own eyes after my men held you in detention here in the lounge."

"Why don't you begin at the be-

ginning?" Teejay said, and yawned.

"Don't be funny. Somehow, the anthrovacs escaped from their bubbles and—"

"What?" This was Steve, more than slightly incredulous. "Anthrovacs are mild creatures and unless they're attacked they won't do anything violent."

"That's what I thought, Stedman. I don't know what to think now. The anthrovacs escaped—and freed all the other animals. We've been out longer than the *Gordak*, we have a couple of dozen prize specimens. Lead by the anthrovacs, they've taken over the ship."

"Now you're joking," Teejay told him. "They're all brainless, those creatures, except for the anthrovacs."

"They *were* brainless, Captain Moore. But not now. Now they behave logically, with a purpose, and they've taken over the *Frank Buck* from stem to stern—all except those animals that need a special sort of atmosphere to breathe, and they've remained in their bubbles.

"Otherwise, the animals took over. And I suppose you can imagine—the crew was too astounded to resist, especially since the anthrovacs had gotten hold of neutron guns and seemed to know how to use them. Result—we've all been disarmed, we're prisoners aboard our own ship, and bound for I don't know where."

"Sounds crazy to me," Teejay said, and stalked toward the door.

Steve took a quick step after her, but Barling held him back. "Let her find out for herself, Stedman. Then maybe we can talk sense."

Teejay opened the door, stepped

out into the corridor. Tensely, Steve waited, ready to bolt after her at the first indications of trouble. But what he heard was a yelp of surprise from the woman, and then she came running back into the lounge, slamming the door behind her.

"A Martian desert cat!" she cried. It didn't do anything; it just stood there, all ten feet of it, looking at me!"

"Then you believe me?" Barling demanded. "As I see it, we must have been struck by some cosmic radiation which mutated the animals, and—"

"No," Steve told him bluntly. "That's impossible. First place, any such change would have to be selective. *All* the animals wouldn't be affected. And more important, mutation takes generations to manifest itself. You never see the change at all in the original creature. Look at Earth, way back in the early years of atomics. Genes were mutated at those two Island cities—Nagasaki and, umm-mm, I forget the name of the other. Anyway, Genes were mutated, but it took over two hundred years for those mutations to become apparent. See what I mean?"

"I do," said Barling. "And that's precisely why I think we ought to fight this thing together. I had an idea, you helped me with it. We can continue like that."

"Well," Steve nodded, "we have a first-class problem on our hands. We can't do anything about it until we know what's going on—only the mystery's a little deeper than you think. First, I heard a voice out on Ganymede. My brother's voice."

"Your brother's?" Barling

scratched his head. "Oh, wait a minute! You must mean Charlie Stedman who was killed out here a few years back?"

"Yeah, Charlie. You can't hear voices on Ganymede, but I heard them, inside my head. Also, don't forget the Ganymede-fear. I'd say the three things will fit together when we begin to learn what's going on."

"Provided we can find out," Teejay told him. "You can keep your scientific mysteries for a while, Steve. What I want to know is this: where are we going, and why?"

"Ask your desert cat out there." Kevin's laughter was sour.

"What we need is a good turn-coat," Teejay assured him. "Someone who can go out among the animals and ask questions. I'm joking, of course, but if anyone could do it, it would be that rat, LeClarc."

Steve frowned. "That's not as funny as it sounds. Has anyone seen LeClarc since the fight?"

"No!" Kevin slammed fist against palm.

Steve was about to answer, but quite suddenly the lights blinked out. Somewhere outside, a dozen animals roared their fear. Within the lounge, Kevin commenced cursing lustily and an involuntary moan escaped Barling's lips.

The darkness was the bleak, utter black of deep space. Further, Steve realized, the steady humming of the fission engines had ceased.

Minutes later, impossible pain gripped him and flung him, sobbing to the floor. He'd never felt anything like it, a gripping, grinding, twisting torment which tried to turn him inside out. He heard the

others dimly, reeling about the lounge and falling to the floor, and in the darkness someone fell near him.

"Steve? Steve, is that you?" Teejay . . .

"Yeah." The pain seemed to come in waves, and Steve gritted his teeth when the second turned out to be worse than the first. He reached out with his hand, found Teejay's and squeezed it. "Hold on, kid. It can't last forever."

"It better—not."

When her hand tensed in his, then relaxed, Steve knew she'd fainted. And soon after that, his own senses reeled and deserted him.

Teejay's hand was still tightly clenched in his when he regained consciousness. A dozen feet from them, Kevin sat up, shaking his head slowly back and forth. Schuyler Barling lay stretched out on his stomach.

"Whatever happened," Kevin growled, "I didn't like it."

Teejay extricated her hand, looked at Steve, smiled. "It's still awful quiet outside."

It didn't remain that way for long. As if Teejay's words had been a signal, a voice boomed at them from the wall-microphone. "We have landed. All humans will please file out into the main corridor in an orderly fashion and make their way to the airlock."

Schuyler Barling sat up groggily.

Teejay said, "I could swear I know that voice from somewhere."

"And I," Kevin told them. "It's familiar, though I can't place it."

Steve felt his heart pounding. The voice was Charlie's.

THEY STOOD on a flat, grassy plain which stretched halfway to the horizon and then began to undulate into low hills. And far off, shrouded by purple mists, a range of mountains loomed distantly.

Purple mist; a purplish cast to the sky; a fiercely bright blue sun. "What world is this?" said Kevin.

The crew of the *Frank Buck*—a hundred men—stood in a long, thin file outside the ship. They'd balked at first, but silently, the three anthrovacs had ferreted them out with their neutron guns, never uttering a sound, merely motioning with the weapons. Of the other animals Steve saw nothing, but within the corridors of the *Frank Buck* he'd encountered a sand crawler and a desert cat, both dead.

The seconds fled, became minutes. When half an hour had passed, the crew became restless and some of them ambled off on the grassy plain until one of the anthrovacs herded them back. The *Frank Buck's* Exec, a short, wiry man, strode within the ship and came out a few moments later, scratching his head. "I can't understand it," he said. "None of the instruments work. I thought we could just pile back into the ship and blast off, but apparently someone has other ideas."

Someone did.

Someone came striding across the plain, a small dot of a figure at first. He came closer.

Steve ignored the anthrovacs, ran forward. "Charlie!" he cried. "Charlie!"

The man was shorter than Steve, and stockier. His eyes searched Steve's face briefly, and he said:

"Should I know you?"

"Should you! I'm your brother!"

"Interesting, but quite impossible."

The words hardly registered, and Steve babbled on, "We thought you were dead. It was Teejay here who reported back to Earth saying you'd died on Ganymede. Now you're alive and—" Abruptly he whirled, turned to Teejay. "You lied, damn you! Here's Charlie, see? Charlie was never dead. But you said—"

"I said Charlie was dead." The woman met his gaze levelly. "He was. I know a dead man when I see one. He was dead."

"But—"

"But nothing. I don't know who this is. I can't explain it. That has nothing to do with what happened on Ganymede years ago."

"Yes? Then what did happen? Why did Charlie write once that you must have been spawned in hell? You never did want to tell me what happened on Ganymede, did you? Maybe Charlie can."

"That is my name, Charlie Stedman. It is the name this body has always had, although when I do not inhabit it I assure you I am not Charlie Stedman," the stocky man said. "You see, the original inhabitant of the garment—the body—was destroyed. The name applied to the body as well as the inhabiting mind. The language remained engraved in the brain cells, and impersonal parts of the memory, too. In that sense, I am Charlie Stedman. Does it satisfy you?"

"Hell, no," said Steve, bewildered. Mystery had been piled upon mystery, with no solution in sight. And grim confusion turned to

grimmer anger as he faced Teejay once more. "All right, start talking. Just how did you find Charlie? And what made him hate you like that? Talk, damn you!"

"Okay, I will. But I don't know why Charlie hated me, and that's the truth. I only met him once or twice and—unless it was Schuyler here. Hey, Schuyler!"

Barling joined them. "What do you want?"

"Answer this question: do you make a practise of poisoning the minds of your crew against me?"

"Well, I don't know what you mean by poi—"

Teejay grabbed a handful of his shirt and twisted, constricting the collar about his throat. "Answer me," she said. "And no run around."

"I—I guess so. It's only business, Captain Moore. The more they hated you, the more they'd be willing to fight you in the hunt every step of the way."

"How about Charlie Stedman?"

"I don't remember. Probably, it was like that."

Teejay flung him away from her. "Does that satisfy you, Steve?"

"For that part, yes. But what about the rest of it?"

"Not much to tell. I was out alone on Ganymede, a few miles from the ship. I thought I heard voices, sort of inside my head. I went forward to explore, just like you did, and also like you, I almost didn't have enough air to get back. Especially since I found your brother on the way."

"And he was dead?" As he spoke, Steve looked at his brother, standing right there in front of him, and

wondered if anyone ever asked a more impossible question.

"Yes. He was dead. I don't know how he died, but I placed my ear against the chest of his vac-suit. The heart-beat is amplified through it, you know. But there wasn't any. After that, I ran back to the *Gordak*, and I had barely enough air to make it. I reported Charlie's death, of course."

Charlie's death. Well, she sounded sincere. But there was Charlie, standing two paces to her right and apparently listening to an account of his own demise. *

CHARLIE CLEARED his throat. Quite evidently, it wasn't Charlie at all, but Steve could think of the man in no other way, for down to the smallest physical detail, he was Charlie. "That will suffice," he said. Again, it was Charlie's voice, but expressionless. "Enough of bickering. You will all march with me toward those hills, and we have a long journey before sunset."

The nine-foot anthrovacs took up their positions one on each side of the column and one behind it, and no one disobeyed. Once Steve looked back over his shoulder and saw the purple mists had almost completely swallowed the *Frank Buck*.

Then the irony of the situation struck Steve and he smiled—almost. He'd come to Ganymede after anthrovacs. But he'd left the satellite under an anthrovac guard! Fine thing. A mighty hunter was he! Clear across the universe to be bagged by his own game!

Obviously, Steve thought as they marched on, the blue day-star was not Earth's sun. Somehow, in a matter of moments, they'd left the Solar System entirely. He knew that theories had been advanced about traveling through something called sub-space, something which could make flight to the farthest stars almost instantaneous, since sub-space existed outside the space-time continuum. And that wrenching from one spatial plane to another might explain the tremendous pain they'd undergone, too. But surely the *Frank Buck* had never been equipped for such flight. The whole concept of sub-space flight was strictly theoretical and hadn't even reached the drawing-board stage.

Then how had it happened?

Kevin had some vague, half-formed ideas on the subject, and he let Steve know about them. "It's a puzzler, boy. They took us a long way, space alone knows how far. I don't pretend to know why; we can't figure that out, not yet. But I know this: they could not have done that without help. Someone had to bring the ship."

"The anthrovacs?" Steve suggested.

"Not the anthrovacs. For all their handling neutron guns and taking the *Frank Buck* over, they're just big apes to me. Maybe they were able to take the ship off Ganymede, but no more than that. They had help, boy, and from the inside."

"Who? Who do you mean?"

"I'm not sure I know. But look at it this way. The *Gordak* wasn't taken, the *Frank Buck* was. Why? I'll tell you why, or at least I'll tell you one possibility. There were

scores of men on each ship, but while the *Gordak* had only one animal—the stone worm you got on Mercury—the *Frank Buck* had dozens. All right so far, boy? Well, here's what I think: *whoever took the ship wanted both men and animals.*"

"I still don't understand."

"I'm not sure I do, either. Let's get back a little. The *Frank Buck*, not the *Gordak*, was taken. Strange, isn't it, that just before that happened LeClarc bolted our ranks and joined the enemy! Does that mean LeClarc had to be on the *Frank Buck* before anything happened? And where'd he get to, anyway? I haven't seen him since the fight; I don't think anyone has. Now, a man spends years idolizing a woman—I've been around, and I think I told you LeClarc would have done anything for Captain Moore. Suddenly, he gets sulky because he's out of favor with her, and decides on a double-cross.

"It smells bad, boy. Sure, he was sulky, but the LeClarc I knew would have come crawling to Captain Moore, anyway. This one didn't." Kevin paused, ran a hand through his red hair. "Maybe it means he isn't the same man. Maybe it means he's something like that thing which calls itself your brother. That's not Charlie Stedman and you know it. Trouble is, boy, you can't admit it to yourself."

"I won't argue about it," Steve replied. "But you're off the beam there. Charlie doesn't remember me, but LeClarc's memory seemed fine."

"That's true, Steve. I can't explain it, except like this: whatever

happened to both of them, we don't know a thing about it. Maybe it works in a different way on different people. Maybe because Charlie was dead first, his personal memories were a loss, but LeClarc's weren't because he might have been possessed alive."

"Possessed?"

"Yes, possessed. Oh, not by spirits, that's for sure. But possessed nevertheless. I won't say the anthrovacs were possessed, for we don't know enough about them to begin with. But look at those other animals now, the ones that died. You won't deny that something took over their brains?"

"Damned right I won't. But I still don't see how it all adds up."

"Nor do I," said Kevin. "Unfortunately, the brutes seemed to have perished in transit from Ganymede to here, wherever here is. It could be that the strain on their brain-tissue, with sentience and intelligence taking over where before only sentience had resided, was too great."

Kevin paused, then concluded: "whatever the reason, whatever the reason for all of it—I think you'll find LeClarc knows all about it."

The blue sun had neared the horizon and the purple mists had become cool and chilling at journey's end. It was then that they saw LeClarc.

THE COLUMN of men had traversed the grassy plain, had climbed steadily through the region of undulating hills. And suddenly, hidden until the last moment by a rise in the terrain and spread out at

the foot of the higher mountains, they saw a city. Circular, walled, pleasantly pastel-tinted despite the purple gloom, it lay before them, lights which might or might not have been electricity winking on to dispel the gathering darkness.

And there, at the city's gateway, stood LeClarc. LeClarc—and not LeClarc. The man seemed as much LeClarc as the short stocky figure who led the procession seemed Charlie Stedman. "Welcome to Uashalume," he said, and Steve pulled up short at the sound of his voice. There was something of the volatile Frenchman in it, but something else which was alien.

"You will be billeted in temporary quarters for the night," LeClarc continued. "You will of course have no need for such quarters after tomorrow's bazaar."

"Of course, my foot!" Teejay cried petulantly. "See here, LeClarc, we've been getting orders and directives without knowing what they mean or why they were given or—"

"Must you be so impatient?" LeClarc's smile was almost devoid of mirth. "You've come one hundred thousand light years, and surely you can wait until morning."

"Light years!" This was Steve.

And Kevin, "One hundred thousand!"

The academic problem didn't bother Teejay as much as the human one. She said, defiantly, "What he needs is a good swift kick."

LeClarc failed to wait for that, or anything else. Chuckling, he led the first anthrovac through the high-arched stone gateway and the other two creatures herded the humans

in after him. Charlie—although obviously, the man was not Charlie—went on ahead with LeClarc, and Steve had to restrain Teejay with a few terse words.

The purple mists cloaked the city completely now, and as they plodded along a wide roadway, Steve half-saw figures watching them from the darkness. He could not make the figures out, however, and he heard nothing but the sounds their feet made on the stone roadway.

Presently, they came to a smaller, divergent path which led back to the base of the wall. Here, in deepest shadow, was their destination—a squat, rectangular building carved from stone. A gate creaked and clanged open before them; they streamed through, weary after hours of forced march; the gate clanged resoundingly behind them. Charlie had not entered with them, nor LeClarc, nor the an thro vacs. It took Steve only a moment to discover the gate had been securely fastened from the outside.

"I guess we bed down here for the night," he said, grinning ruefully.

Teejay shrugged, wrapped the black cape tightly about her. It was cold and damp in the one large chamber which took up the interior of the building. In the center of the place stood a stone table, and on it a gas lamp which flickered and spluttered and cast grotesque shadows as the men wandered about. There were no beds, no furniture of any sort except for the table. And the two small peep-hole windows were fifteen or more feet off the ground.

The crew of the *Frank Buck* gathered in small, anxious knots and whispered grimly among themselves. After a time, men circulated between one group and another, and finally one of them, evidently designated as spokesman for the rest, approached Schuyler Barling.

He seemed nervous, frightened, unsure of himself. "Captain Barling, my name's Steiner, and the fellows thought that—well, that I might speak for them. We don't know what's going on, but we do know this much: we don't like it."

"I can't blame you," said Barling.

"Point is, sir, we want you to do something about it."

"Eh? Me? What can I do?"

"We don't know that, sir. But a spaceman's a peculiar individual; some say he's got characteristics you won't find elsewhere, and one of them is this: he has complete confidence in his captain."

"Why, thank you, Steiner."

"Me, I work in fission. I like to have that confidence and the rest of the men, they like to have it too. When they lose it, they're kind of at a loss. We don't want to think we've lost it here, sir."

"What do you want me to do?" Barling was restless, fidgety, twisting his hands together.

"Lead us, sir. Tell us you can get us out of here. Tell us we must be prepared to fight behind you and maybe to die, but lead us."

"But how can you expect me to lead you when I don't know what's happening? How can I plan for escape when I don't know what it is we have to escape from?"

"There's talk among the men,

sir," Steiner went on. "Some of them are for you, although I'll be frank. There aren't many, sir. But they need a leader, all of them agree on that. What they want to know is this: are you their man?"

Barling squared his thin shoulders arrogantly. "I'm the *Frank Buck's* Captain."

"The *Frank Buck* lies behind us in those purple mists, sir. Could you find it? Finding it, could you make it run again?"

"I don't know."

"Then the fact that you captain the *Frank Buck* doesn't mean much. We've decided that leaves us without a leader, sir. We need a leader."

Barling smiled coldly. "Are you trying to tell me the men have selected you?"

"No, sir. I'm not. But the majority of the men have their choice—and that is Captain Moore. We who have been with the *Frank Buck* longest have heard a lot of bad talk about Captain Moore, but that changes completely whenever we make planetfall. The talk in all the frontier towns is all in Captain Moore's favor. When there are decisions to be made, sir, we'd like her to make them."

"A woman? When all your lives may be at stake?"

ONE OF THE three hunters who'd fared so poorly in the lounge fight strode forward, saying: "Look at yourself, sir. You're beaten and battered, and that's Captain Moore's work. Did her sex matter then?"

Barling reddened, said nothing.

"We have a pressing need for a leader," Steiner continued. "Our behavior cannot be chaotic. The leader must plan for us, and we must be prepared to carry out those plans with no hesitation. We must have faith in our leader."

Teejay joined them, grinning. "Thank you, Mr. Steiner. There was a time not long ago when what you've just finished saying would have meant more to me than anything. Literally, more than anything. But would you think it strange if you hear that I don't think that now?"

"What do you mean?" Steiner demanded.

"I'm a twenty-second century female, strong as a man and proud of it. Too proud, Mr. Steiner, for I've spent my whole life trying to prove it. Plenty of men have cursed me for it, I'll bet, and I guess they were right."

"So I don't want that job you offer. It took a kind of free-for-all brawl to make me realize it, but a woman's still a woman, and that's one thing I had to learn. I fought your Captain Barling and I beat him. Probably, I could do it again. But I—well, I was fighting with Captain Barling and saying to myself all the time, 'This is stupid. What are you—a girl—doing this for? Don't you know you shouldn't go around fighting like a man?'" Steve noticed in the dim light that Teejay had begun to blush. "I hate to bare my life before you like this, Mr. Steiner, but the way it adds up I've suddenly found I've had enough of fighting and galavanting around. So the answer is no: I won't be your captain. The way I

feel now, I can't be."

"Where does that leave us?" Steiner asked her sullenly. "We don't think Captain Barling can do the job, whatever the job turns out to be. It's one thing to serve on a largely automatic ship under Captain Barling, but another thing to have to take his orders here—wherever we are."

"May I make a suggestion?" Teejay asked. And, after Steiner nodded and most of the men grumbled their assent: "There are two men here who can lead us the way we should be led. One is Kevin McGann, Exec of the *Gordak*; the other is Steve Stedman."

A stir of surprise passed among the men. It was one thing to offer their allegiance to the Captain of another ship—and an unusual thing at that—but quite another to offer it to a couple of men they hardly knew. The men began heated discussions once more, louder this time, and Teejay drew Steve off into a corner.

"Does that surprise you?"

"It sure does, Teejay. On both counts. But I'll tell you this: I think I could like you a lot better in your new role, and—Teejay?"

"What?" Her voice was soft and he felt her hand snuggle into his.

"I—I like you plenty right now." He slid his arms around her waist, drew her toward him, one small part of his mind expecting a round-house right-handed wallop from the old Teejay. But she merely sighed contentedly and slipped her arms around his neck. He kissed her—tentatively at first—then long and deep, and Teejay's eyes were all aglow when he finished.

"You lug," she said, "if you didn't do something like that, and soon, I was going to be an Amazon just once more to make you do it."

Someone—Steve saw it was Steiner—stood before them clearing his throat. "Captain Moore?"

"Yes?" Teejay hardly saw him.

"The men have decided to accept your recommendation. McGann and Stedman it is, Captain Moore. They bark and we'll jump. And we'll be hoping something comes of it."

"If it's at all possible, they'll get us out of here," Teejay predicted, and squeezed Steve's hand.

"Any orders, sir?" Steiner looked at Steve.

"Umm-mm, no. Except that we'd like to have this corner to ourselves for a while."

"Done," said Steiner, smiling and striding away.

"I have one order," Kevin called out loudly, and silence fell on the room quite abruptly. "Let's all get the hell to sleep before we're too tired to do anything when morning comes."

A PURPLE-BLUE dawn crept in through the two small windows, bringing strange bird-sounds with it. Steve was stiff and chilled and he'd slept badly on the hard stone floor. The groans and frowns all around the room showed him he wasn't the only one. Teejay slept like a baby, the cape wrapped about her, and she didn't arise until one of the men began to bang on the stone and metal door.

"Is it morning?" said Teejay,

coming into Steve's arms almost before she was fully awake. "I had the nicest dreams, darling!"

Abruptly, Steve whirled away from her. The door had begun to creak in ponderously on little-used hinges.

An anthrovac bent and came within the chamber, bearing a bath-tub-sized bowl of what looked like hot, steaming cereal. It was deposited near the table, along with a dozen or so stone spoons. Foolishly, one of the men darted for the doorway. Reaching out with a long, hairy arm, the anthrovac scooped him up by the scruff of the neck and flung him back inside. He got to his feet with a nasty gash on his forehead which Teejay bandaged with a strip of cloth ripped from the hem of her black cape.

The spoons were passed around after that, and the men of the *Frank Buck* dug into the gruel with gusto. It had been fifteen hours since any of them had eaten and surprisingly, the gruel turned out to be quite palatable, with an appealing, nut-like flavor.

The anthrovac waited fifteen minutes, then lifted the huge bowl and departed with it. But the door didn't close fully.

Charlie Stedman came through it.

"Good morning," he said. "We're a little late, and we'll have to hurry if we want to reach the bazaar in time for opening."

"Are you sure we want to?" Kevin demanded sarcastically.

And Steiner suggested: "Maybe you'd like to answer a few questions first."

"Sure." This was Teejay. "About

a thousand questions."

It was as if the man hadn't heard them at all. "Outside a vehicle awaits you. There is room for all, provided each man occupies one of the squares you will find marked off on the floor. Let's go."

Angry, sullen, but still thoroughly bewildered, the men trooped outside.

The vehicle was a sort of bus, although the noise of a gasoline engine or the purring of a fission engine would have shocked Steve here on the world called Uashalume. As it turned out, the bus started with a whining whistle which quickly climbed to the supersonic and faded beyond the level human ears could reach. Within the vehicle there were no seats, but the floor had been divided into two-foot squares, a thin white line marking off each box. When each man had occupied his square, the bus slipped away from the squat building and was soon streaking down the roadway at a good clip.

Steve saw other buildings, most of them squat and shapeless. And now, with the coming of daylight, he could see some of the inhabitants of Uashalume. He'd steeled himself for it. He hadn't expected human beings. Any variety of six-legged, multi-tentacled, bug-eyed creatures would have been strictly in order.

He gasped.

He got more than he bargained for. Hardly two of the creatures gazing in at them were alike! The differences were not those you might expect to find among the members of a particular species. The differences were *extreme*.

A furry thing hovered alongside

the open-windowed bus on six gauze-like wings.

Multiple eyes stared up at them out of a pool of amorphous protoplasm.

A bony, stick-like creature with four arms and one cyclopean eye covering almost its entire head peered at them.

An ecto-skeletoned monstrosity made clicking noises as they passed.

Big horrors and little horrors.

Steve found himself laughing harshly. What did all his knowledge of Extra-terrestrial zoology amount to now? Extra-terrestrial—that meant the Solar System, one tiny, inconsequential corner of a great galaxy. But here, here on Uashalume, denizens of a hundred Solar Systems might have been gathered.

Why?

Such utterly different creatures—each conforming to a particular environmental niche—would not be found together. Unless someone had probed the depths of space for life-forms that might all be capable of surviving on Uashalume, as, indeed, humans could survive there! But why? The question returned, taunted him. Again, such a gathering wouldn't be out of direct choice. If each of the creatures seemed so completely strange, so horrible, so ludicrous to human eyes—they probably appeared that way to one another as well.

Steve wondered how some of them might describe the obnoxious, featherless, hairless bipeds which walked upright on two limbs and carried two other limbs for more varied purposes than walking. Bipeds which called themselves humans. And that, precisely, was the

point. Such a gathering stemmed from no natural cause. Such a gathering had been imposed arbitrarily, but for what purpose? And what, if anything, did the bazaar have to do with it? A bazaar of the worlds, bringing together for trade, creatures of every form and size and color? Steve doubted that somehow, for the bazaar would lack a universal means of exchange, and even if barter were resorted to, how could totally alien life-forms assess the value of completely foreign produce? They couldn't.

That left Steve with nothing but a lot of half-formed questions and no answers at all.

He had a hunch he'd begin to get some answers when the bus reached its destination. As with the inhabitants of Uashalume, he was to get more than he bargained for.

THEY MILLED about in confusion on a large raised platform under the blue sun. A sea of impossible creatures rolled and seethed on all sides of them, shutter-eyes, pin-hole eyes, simple light-sensitive receptors, multiple-tube eyes—hundreds of varieties all intent upon them.

Steve heard voices around him on the platform, confused, alarmed. "What's happening?"

"This place looks like an auction block!"

"Look at those creatures, will you?"

"Are we for sale or something?"

The human voices faded into a meaningless babble. Someone else was speaking, but not aloud. It was



like Charlie Stedman's voice, that day on Ganymede. Steve heard it inside his head and this time—because they all stood about more bewildered than ever—he knew that the *Frank Buck's* crew heard it too.

"Friends of Uashalume," the voice purred mentally, "here, at opening day of the bazaar, we have a most unusual treat. Most unusual. Two of us, as you know, have already tested the models in question, and we find them entirely satisfactory."

Charlie Stedman and LeClarc stepped forward, bowed.

"For the rest of you, one hundred choice specimens! We set no fixed price, but let this be said about the new garments. They are unspoiled, virgin material; they've not been used-before. You'll find them stimulating for that reason alone, I'm sure. As for the vital statistics, they vary in height from three and a half to five *klars*; in weight from fifteen to twenty-nine *jarons*; they are a bisexual lot, although only one female of the species is present; their intellectual capacity is on the seventh level, their better minds can attain to problems of relativity and universal field; emotionally, they have twice the range of any previous garment!"

The voice paused significantly, permitted that point to sink in. "Yes, twice the range. We none of us have ever experienced such strong, vital emotions. Can you imagine, twice the emotional range of the *scouradi* of Deneb XIX! It means a new way of life for those among us who select some of these humans for their own.

"Now, the auction-master will

please step forward."

"We *are* for sale," Steiner gasped.

It was Charlie Stedman who came to the fore, climbing the auction-block and looking around him. After a time, he singled out Steiner and pulled the man forward by an elbow. "The first specimen is typical," he droned in English, and Steve figured he spoke mentally to the assembled throngs, reeling off the height, weight, and other vital statistics for Steiner. Finally: "What am I bid?"

Mental voices sang out, one after another:

"Three *char!*"

"Four."

"Six."

"Ten *char.*"

"Ten?" The man who was Charlie Stedman laughed. "Ten *char* indeed! One hundred is not enough."

The bidding continued, became hot, became a contest between two mental voices. Steiner went for seventy-four *char*, whatever a *char* was.

They took him down and carted him away, struggling. It looked like an ugly scene would develop, for a score of men surged toward the front of the block angrily. But some of the creatures held what looked like strange, possibly lethal weapons, and Kevin growled: "Not now! There's no sense getting all of us killed. Relax, and we'll see."

Grumbling, the men subsided, and Kevin turned to Steve: "If this isn't the damndest cosmic joke of all."

"What do you mean?"

"We're hunters, big game hunters. We go out into space to hunt for specimens, only this time we've

become specimens ourselves! This time we weren't the hunters, but the quarry!"

The auction continued, and one by one the men were sold. Once one of them, a radar technician, bolted and ran. He was cut down quite efficiently by one of the hand-weapons and Charlie Stedman asserted it was a pity one of the specimens had been lost. "Keep your tempers," Kevin said grimly as a wave of anger washed over the auction block. "I don't like it any more than you do, but we won't fight until we understand—and then perhaps we'll have a chance."

WHEN HALF the men had been taken, Charlie Stedman reached for Teejay and dragged her forward. "This," he said, "is the female of the species. You will notice the long hair atop her head and the twin out-thrust developments of the upper ventral region; these are the marks of distinction. And for two reasons we will demand a special price for the female.

"First, we are primarily interested in these humans for emotion. Stronger garments we have, and garments which live longer. But none attain to the human emotional level. And, among the humans, the female is capable of stronger surges of emotion, perhaps because in general she is physically weaker and must compensate for it, although, from what I've seen, this particular specimen is a physical match for the others.

"Second, one specific high degree of emotion is possible only when a

male and a female are in one another's presence. Therefore, whichever one of you owns the female can be certain of that added stimulus, and, as a consequence, certain of a more satisfactory garment from the emotional point of view. Now, what am I offered?"

Teejay went for three hundred *char*.

Kevin had to circle Steve's body with his huge arms and hold him firm as they took Teejay away. He'd found the woman quite suddenly, and he loved her all the more for it. His potential worst enemy had become his lover. And now, brief hours later she was taken from him, perhaps forever. "Let go of me! Get your filthy hands off me. That's Teejay they're taking! Teejay!"

"And they'll take you too. But you're going alive, not dead. Stand still and let them get on with this."

"Don't you realize what they've been talking about?" Steve shouted his rage. "They'll *wear* us, like clothing. They'll get inside our brains and share our bodies with us, like they've done with all these other creatures. Did you think these monsters were all native to Uashalume? I wouldn't be surprised if none of them was. They've all been taken, as we have, from their own worlds. They all live here—as clothing. Maybe the masters don't have physical form at all, maybe they're just mental essence.

"And all they want to do is run the gamut of our emotions. They know how to play with emotions, too. Remember the Ganymede-fear, Kevin?"

"I remember, boy." Kevin still held him.

"Well, that was their work. Probably, Ganymede was their base in our Solar System, although it's possible they first got into LeClarc's brain on Mercury. And Kevin, all those theories you had were right!"

"Yes, I know. And sub-space—"

"The hell with that. They're taking Teejay and they may take all of us and spread us out all over the face of this world. We'll never find each other. We'll—"

"You're next, Steve Stedman."

It was Charlie's voice, and Steve felt Kevin release him with a word of warning, felt himself drawn to the front of the block. Somehow, he found he was incredibly objective as the bidding began. He was claimed for one hundred fifty *char* and led away by a creature with a stilt-like body and six arms. Or rather, he thought, that was the garment. But the real creature—the mental entity within it—had grown tired of last year's cloak, and Steve was to take its place.

Moments later, Steve's buyer whisked him away in a smaller version of the bus that had taken the *Frank Buck's* crew to the bazaar. On the outskirts of the city, the car stopped. Steve climbed out, followed the stilt-figure up a flight of stairs as a round, fat, furry creature bounced up behind him with a weapon.

Inside, the place looked like a laboratory. And at the center of the room squatted a great round tank, large enough to hold a man. A green liquid boiled within it, but somehow Steve got the impression of boiling without much heat. He became absorbed in the idea, reached up over the lip of the tank

to verify it on a thoroughly peculiar impulse.

Something struck him from behind. He staggered to his knees and tried to keep his eyes opened. The hard stone floor slammed against his face as he lost consciousness.

HE WAS floating, and when he could see again, a murky green haze surrounded him.

Floating, completely submerged!

He felt no desire to breathe. He did not have to breathe at all. It was as if his life had been suspended completely, as if there was no need for his body to carry out its normal functions. But he wasn't dead. He could open his eyes and stare at the green liquid, and he could think.

And after a time, vague forms appeared outside. He saw the walls of the laboratory and the shining instruments—through green murk. And he saw something else moving about, a shadowy form. The stilt-like creature?

Abruptly, sharp pain lanced from the front of his skull to the back. Briefly. And it did not repeat itself.

A voice whispered, "You are struggling. Do not struggle, for it can only prolong the inevitable. Transfer takes time, of course; but the longer it takes the more unpleasant it will be for you."

"Go to hell."

It was then that the pain came back—stronger. And something almost physical pushed in at his mind, something ugly, unclean, wet with a damp, chilling moisture which brought twinges of fright. *Like the Ganymede-fear, but more intense.*

"To struggle is useless."

The wet feeling, like fingers now, fingers which oozed slime, clung to his brain, probed it, bore inward.

"Why struggle? I think you will make a good fit."

"Go away. Damn you, go away!"

"I see the auction-master was right. Emotionally, you are strong."

The fingers departed, came back again, more insistent. No longer wet, they were digits of fire now, burning, burning.

Steve screamed soundlessly and fainted.

When Steve came to, he was outside the tank. He was tired and did not feel like walking. Nevertheless, he walked. At first he did not understand. He thought: *I will sit down and rest.*

His body failed to obey, continued walking.

"We share this body," the voice whispered to him, within his skull. "You are merely an observer as long as I am awake. I am in control. Henceforth, I dwell in this body."

"I want to sleep."

"You will learn that your mind can sleep while your body does not. And the body interests me, human. The body is capable of strong emotion. I want to feel that emotion."

The place, Steve realized later, was a sort of proving-grounds. He felt himself walking, walking. He reached the edge of a cliff, stared down from giddy heights. He felt himself tetering on the edge, saw jagged rocks far below him. He jumped. He did not want to, but he jumped.

"We'll be killed!" he cried, icy fear making his heart pound.

"That is fear," said the voice in his skull. "That is wonderful fear. So strong—"

Something cushioned their fall, slowly. It was that, Steve knew. *Their* fall, not his alone. For the creature shared it with him.

He tumbled, but slowly, like a feather, like a wraith of fog. He alighted on the rocks with hardly a jar, cushioned by some advanced application of a force-field. A large cube of metal was there to convey them to the top once more.

After that, he became giddy. He did not know why, but the impulse to laugh was too strong to resist. He laughed until it grew painful, laughed until the tears came to his eyes.

"That is joy," said the voice. "I can instill joy in you. But the way you express it, that is unique. More!"

And Steve's laughter bubbled up insanely again. The creature was wrong—not joy. Hysteria, more nearly. Unused to emotions, the creature could not tell them apart.

Something grabbed his arms and held it. A giant vise which could crush and twist. He saw nothing, realized that it was some mental trick—but thoroughly effective. His arm was being wrenched from its socket, slowly, terribly.

He clenched his teeth, groaned. From somewhere far off, the voice laughed calmly. "I like that. Oh yes, I do. I like your reaction to pain."

An intense loathing he had never before experienced took hold of him. At first he thought it was another trick, but he could sense alarm in the creature which shared him. The loathing, then, was his body's

reaction to its parasite. Almost, he could feel the creature squirming, and he gave free reign to the emotion.

"Stop!" The voice was strident, alarmed.

I hate you, Steve thought intensely. *I hate you*.

"Stop! I warn you, you will kill us with that, or drive us insane."

Vertigo followed the loathing as the creature fought back. Steve was tired, suddenly more tired than he'd ever been. He sank back into blackness, knew even as his senses fled that his mind alone would sleep, not his body. With two minds, the body would not sleep at all—and in a matter of months it would perish of fatigue. But the creature within him feared his hatred, and that he must remember.

THE DAYS followed each other in a slow, tortuous procession. Nothing seemed to satiate the parasite, for each day it strove for new emotions, and after a time Steve learned he could frustrate it by regarding everything as unreal, imaginative, non-existent.

Sometimes, the guest slept when the host did not. At such times, Steve found, he had freedom of a sort. His field of action was not circumscribed in any way except that violent activity would awaken the parasite. Steve toyed with his freedom, timorously at first, then grew more confident. He played with it, basked in it after steady days of control. He even discovered he could use the telepathic abilities of his uninvited mental guest.

He missed Teejay, wondered

about her, longed for her. His astonishment was so extreme when he first heard her voice within his head that he almost awakened the parasite.

"Steve? Steve, is that you?"

"Teejay—"

"I've been trying to reach you. When these creatures sleep, we can use *their* minds."

"Then you're all right?"

"I'm as all right as can be expected, Steve. But they've been running me through all sorts of emotional mazes. My clothing is torn and they don't care about it. My skin is torn and bruised. They don't care about that, either. They'll run us down. Did you notice all the other creatures here? Some of their bones are broken—if they have bones—and they've never been set. They're bruised and bloody and infected and the parasites don't care! Why should they, they can get new bodies? But Steve—oh, Steve, I've never felt so unclean in all my life and it's just as if I've been defiled and—"

"Take it easy, Teejay. Thinking like that won't help."

"I hate them. Oh, I hate them. I—"

"Listen. I want you to concentrate like that. Hate weakens them. Remember how the animals aboard the *Frank Buck* died? Well, since our emotions are so much stronger than the parasites, maybe, maybe—"

"You mean it could work in reverse?"

"I don't know."

"You want me to try, darling?"

"Yes—no! We can't do it now. If it works, we'd still be leaving a hun-

dred men here. They're doomed, Teejay. We're all doomed unless we can do something about it, and soon. But at night they sleep. Yeah, they sleep at night! If we can contact the others, and make a concentrated effort of it, using the telepathic powers of the parasites—"

"Shh! That's enough, Steve. My friend here is getting up. I can feel him stirring inside my head. Shh, later!"

At the end, hope had made Teejay her old spunky self again. But when Steve's own master awakened, that hope seemed mightily slim indeed.

Each night they managed to contact two or three of the others, and the word was supposed to be passed on. Finally, it was arranged. The night for action was decided upon, and for some few of them it would be a gamble, for there was no guarantee that all the parasites would be asleep. Once the attempt was made, however, there would be no turning back. Whoever was left behind—was left behind.

Provided the plan worked at all.

THE CREATURE was asleep again.

"I hate you," Steve said quietly. Silence.

"I hate you." He thought it now, thought it with all his being—and somehow he could sense the thought was being reinforced as scores of men concentrated on it around the city. The mind within him stirred sluggishly, but he pushed it under again. Hate, hate, hate.

Hadn't the creature said it could

kill them both? A gamble. Everything was a gamble. Naturally the parasite would say that.

Steve began to sweat, physically. He was weak and the muscles of his arms and legs trembled. His mind found the strange telepathic channel of the parasite, traveled inward along it—with hatred. That, at least, was easy. He did *hate* the creature so thoroughly and so completely that the feeling pushed everything else from his mind.

A concert of hatred, all over the city. And slumbering masters who might or might not awaken.

"Stop!" A clarion command inside his skull. The parasite was fighting back.

Steve tumbled to the floor, lay there writhing. Two minds fought for control of his body, and he was being pushed back and out of control. He got to his feet stiffly, strode to a cabinet, took out a knife. He stared at the knife, fascinated, pointed it toward his chest.

"One of us must die, human, but it shall not be I!"

He drove the knife inward, slowly, an inch at a time toward his chest. He felt the point sting, saw a thin trickle of blood. For a moment, he fought to possess his arms and the knife with them. That was a mistake—almost, a fatal one.

The parasite wanted that, for, in such a battle, it would win every-time. Perhaps it could not fight his hatred, but it could fight anything else he had to offer.

The knife went in, scraped against a rib.

Steve yelled hoarsely, drenched every atom of his soul in hatred. Slowly, he withdrew the knife,

watched bright red blood well up after it.

Something tugged at his mind, slipped away—first scalding, then wet. It oozed out, and pain blurred Steve's vision as he tumbled to the floor again.

When he got up moments later and managed to staunch the flow of blood, he knew the parasite had perished.

BARELY SIXTY of them met near the city gate—grim and weary, most of them with fresh wounds. Steve's joy was an emotion the dead parasite would have loved to share when he saw Teejay among the sixty. Kevin was there too, and Steiner. Surprisingly, Schuyler Barling seemed more sprightly than the rest.

"LeClarc?" Steve demanded.

"He was the first," said Kevin. "Stronger control, perhaps. He's among those who could not make it."

"Maybe they're still alive."

"No," Teejay told him. "I saw three men die, horribly. Most of the others probably did, too."

"Don't you see, boy, we can't chance survival for all of us to seek out one or two who might still be alive! It wouldn't be fair." Kevin shook his head grimly.

Steve knew he was right. He was far too exhausted to argue, anyway. "Then we'll go as we are?"

"Well, there are half a dozen others in the gate-house now, forcing information from some of the hosts."

"What information?"

"About sub-space, boy. A hunter

named McSweeney was possessed by a scientist of sorts, and he learned the sub-space gear is a compact little device which a man can carry. They store a few dozen of 'em in the gate-house, and—hello!"

Half a dozen men emerged from the stone structure, and one of them fell as a beam of energy seared out and caught him. A variety of creatures streamed out after them, triggering strange weapons. Soon the fighting became general, and it looked for a time as though the humans—without weapons of any sort—would be slaughtered. But Steve grabbed one of the stilt-creatures, twisted its neck quickly, heard a sharp cracking sound. The creature fell and Steve plunged down with it, coming up with the hand-weapon and firing into the ranks that bore down upon them.

As others of the aliens fell, men retrieved their weapons, fighting back with ever-increased firepower, although their numbers were decreasing. And battling thus, they broke through the gate and out among the purple-misted hills. Hissing beams of energy emitted sufficient light to see by, and Kevin's voice could be heard roaring above the sounds of fighting:

"Stick together! If a man's lost in this purple fog, he's done for! Stick together!"

It was a nightmare. Steve fought shoulder to shoulder with Teejay. Now that he'd been reunited with her, there'd be no more separation, he vowed silently. Not unless he died here on the purple world.

Energy beams crossed back and forth as the men retreated, stumbling and darting among the little

hillocks. Time lost its normally rigid control. Hours might have been minutes, or the other way around. Time became utterly subjective, with each man living in his own particular continuum. For Steve it seemed at least a short version of eternity until they reached the *Frank Buck*. And when they did, dawn was streaking the horizon with pale blue radiance, casting a deep purple shadow from the ship to where they fought.

It was Kevin who reached the airlock first, Kevin who sprung it open. Two by two they filed in, still facing the aliens and firing their weapons. At the last moment—when fully half of those who remained had entered the ship—the three anthrovacs appeared, came loping across the plain toward them.

Steve cut the first one down and drew careful aim on the second. It wasn't necessary. The third anthrovac abruptly turned on its fellow and sent it reeling, senseless, with one blow. In the confusion, its parasite must have been careless, must have relaxed its control. The anthrovac, which made a habit of miming men, whirled and began to wreck havoc among the pursuers.

It helped turn the tide of battle, and with Steve and Teejay, it was the last to enter the ship.

"TWENTY-TWO of us," Kevin said grimly. "There are twenty-two who survived." They all sat about, nursing their wounds. The ship had flung itself through hyper-space, now hovered

a million miles off Ganymede.

"You're wrong. There's are twenty-three." It was Charlie Stedman. In the darkness and confusion, he'd managed to fight his way back with them. But why?

"Charlie!" Steve forgot the question. "You're free too."

Charlie lifted a neutron gun. "No. You're wrong. None of us is free. You'll find a ship has followed you here. And you're going to follow it back."

Of course, Steve thought dully. Charlie was dead. Charlie could not return as himself. But they were right back where they started from, for the creature who was Charlie could force their return.

Kevin stood near the viewport, spoke grimly. "He's not lying. There's a ship out there."

Schuyler Barling smiled coldly, took up his position near Charlie. "You all rejected my command once," he said. "You shouldn't have. I had no desire to come back to Earth like that. I've also learned that I can share my body on an equal basis with my master, something none of you would consider. Now we'll take you back."

Almost eighty men had died—for nothing. Steve held Teejay's hand briefly, released it. One life more wouldn't matter, and if there were a chance. . . .

"Charlie, don't you remember anything?"

"What should I remember?"

"I'm your brother."

"That much I knew when I called you on Ganymede. But there are no emotional ties. Keep back!"

Steve took a step toward him. "You're my brother, and you

wouldn't kill me. You can't."

It was wild, impossible, and he knew it. The creature was not his brother, had not been his brother for years. Yet if some small vestige of his brother's emotional memories remained—

"Keep back, I warn you!"

Steve could see the finger tightening on the trigger when he dove. His shoulder jarred Charlie's knees, and they went down together, rolling over and over on the floor. The neutron gun hissed once, between them, and Charlie relaxed.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth for a moment, and he said, "Steve." He died that way, with the smile still on his lips.

Schuyler Barling was laughing and screaming, froth flecking his chin. The delicate balance between parasite and host had been entangled, possibly beyond repair. Neither could dominate, and the result was a hopeless, gibbering hulk of a man.

"Poor devil," said Kevin. "He'll get psychiatric treatment on Earth, if that will help."

Steve crossed to the airlock, climbed into a spacesuit.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Teejay wanted to know.

"You're forgetting about the other ship. We haven't got a blasting cannon on the *Frank Buck*, and there isn't one down on the *Gordak*, either. But with no absorbing medium in space, one of these neutron guns can be a potent weapon." Steve clamped the fishbowl helmet down over his head and activated the airlock.

Soon he stood outside, with noth-

ing but space on three sides of him. On the fourth, his magnetic boots gripped the *Frank Buck's* steeloid hull as he set himself, ready to fire the small hand gun.

Energy flared brightly from its muzzle, and the other ship, a slim, sinister shape miles off in the void, flared up with it and dissolved in a shower of sparks and mist. But the neutron gun had a kick which dislodged Steve from the hull and sent him spinning off into space.

Through the lock-port, no more than four feet away, he saw Kevin donning a vac-suit. The big Exec reached out to grab him but his arm fell a full foot short. All at once, Kevin was dwarfed by the anthrovac as the big animal joined him, scratching its head as Kevin reached out hopelessly into space. The gap was increasing.

Did the anthrovac understand? No, Steve thought; an anthrovac could no more understand than a parrot could actually talk. But like a parrot, an anthrovac could mimic.

A huge hairy arm reached out into space, the hand locking on Steve's gauntleted fist. He was drawn back into the *Frank Buck* and to safety, and it was many minutes before they could stop the anthrovac from probing out experimentally into empty space.

"YOU KNOW," Steve told Teejay and Kevin later, "I think at the last minute my brother understood."

"It looked that way to me, boy," Kevin nodded. "So he died happy. But there's a lot of work for Earth

to do. We'll have to clear the System of anything that remains here of Uashalume's power. And then maybe someday we'll have to get up an expedition and clean out that foul place."

"One good thing came from it," Steve told them. "We've got sub-space drive now, and the stars are ours." He lit a cigarette, frowning. "But I think we ought to go easy on our game-hunting, and you can tell that to Brody Carmical or anyone else, Teejay. Those creatures out there were hunters too, you know."

"Forget about the past, will you?" Teejay snapped at him, then

grinned when he looked hurt. "I still feel unclean, Steve. I'd love to sit in a hot bath for about twenty-four hours straight."

Steve grinned back. "If we were married, I could scrub around your shoulder-blades for you."

Kevin cleared his throat ominously. "They made me Captain of this ship, didn't they. What are we waiting for?"

The ceremony was brief, and after it, Steve and Teejay hustled back to the recreation rooms and swimming pools with a bar of strong soap, a couple of washcloths, and a lot of pleasant ideas.

THE END

A chat with the editor . . .

Continued from page 3

pleasant little town called Patterson—New York, not New Jersey—so I spend quite a little time on the road between points.

About a week after our first issue hit the stands, I drove up to Kingston wistfully hoping there'd be a couple of dozen letters from fans and friends wishing us success. Well, a dozen, maybe, or at least a few postcards.

I got into the office and asked Miss Bogert, our gal Monday-Friday, "What's with the IF correspondence?"

"Over there," she said, pointing. I looked but all I could see was an old dirty canvas sack.

"Come again."

"In the bag."

"In the bag!"

It rocked me back on my heels. Mail for IF, loaded into a big canvas sack and brought over personally by Uncle Sam. I had never before in my life gotten mail the same way Sears Roebuck gets it. The thrill was memorable.

The total figure for the first nine days on the newsstands was six hundred and twenty-four letters and cards. This, according to our very able distributors, is much better than completely satisfactory and slightly less than phenomenal.

I was plenty embarrassed because I'd reserved only two pages for our letter column. From now on, much more space will be allocated.

Continued on page 93

Only one question seemed important in this huge space venture: Who was flying where?

Welcome, Martians!

By S. A. Lombino

THE ONLY SOUND was the swish of the jets against the sand as the big ship came down. Slowly, nose pointed skyward, a yellow tail streaming out behind the tubes, it settled to the ground like a cat nuzzling its haunches against a velvet pillow.

Dave Langley peered through the viewport.

"I feel kind of funny," he said.

A tremor of excitement flooded through Cal Manners' thin frame. "Mars," he whispered. "We made it."

Gently, the fins probed the sand, poking into it. Cal cut the power and the big ship shuddered and relaxed, a huge metal spider with a conical head.

Cal peered through the viewport, his eyes scanning the planet. Behind him, Dave shrugged into a space suit, gathered up his instruments.

"I'll make the tests," Dave said.

"Keep the starboard guns trained on me."

Cal nodded. He walked Dave to the airlock and lifted the toggles on the inner hatch. Dave stepped into the small chamber, and Cal snapped the hatch shut.

He walked quickly to the starboard guns, wiggled into the plastic seat behind them and pitched his shoulders against the braces. Outside, like a grotesque balloon, Dave stumbled around on weighted feet, taking his readings.

What's out there? Cal wondered. *Just exactly what?*

He tightened his grip on the big blasters, and trained the guns around to where Dave pattered in the sand. Dave suddenly stood erect, waved at Cal, and started lumbering back toward the ship. Cal left the guns and went to the airlock. He stepped into the chamber closed the toggles on the hatch

behind him, and twirled the wheel on the outer hatch. He was ready to move back into the ship again when Dave stepped through the outer hatch, his helmet under his arm.

"It's okay, Cal. Breathable atmosphere. And the pressure is all right, too."

Cal let out a sigh of relief. "Come on," he said. "Get out of that monkey suit. Then we'll claim the planet for Earth."

They went back into the ship, and Dave took off the suit, hanging it carefully in its locker. Both men strapped on holsters and drew stun guns from the munitions locker. They checked the charges in their weapons, holstered them, and stepped out into the Martian night.

It was cold, but their clothing was warm and the air was invigorating. Cal looked up at the sky.

"Phobos," he said, pointing.

"And Deimos," Dave added.

"Ike and Mike."

"Yeah." Dave smiled.

"How do you feel, Dave?" Cal asked suddenly.

"How do you mean?"

"Mars. I mean, we're the first men to land on Mars. The first, Dave!"

They were walking aimlessly, in no particular hurry.

"It's funny," Dave said. "I told you before. I feel kind of—"

THE MUSIC started abruptly, almost exploded into being, tore through the silence of the planet like the strident scream of a wounded animal. Trumpets blasted raucously, trombones moaned and slid, bass drums pounded a steady

tattoo. Tubas, heavy and solemn like old men belching. Clarinets, shrill and squealing. Cymbals clashing.

A military band blaring its march into the night.

"Wha—"

Dave's mouth hung open. He stared into the distance.

There were lights, and the brass gleamed dully. A group of men were marching toward them, blowing on their horns, waving brilliant banners in the air.

"People," Cal said.

"And music. Like ours. *Music just like ours.*"

The procession spilled across the sand like an unravelling spool of brightly colored silk. Children danced on the outskirts of the group, hopping up and down, screaming in glee. Women waved banners, sang along with the band. And the music shouted out across the sand, a triumphal march with a lively beat.

A fat man led the procession. He was beaming, his smile a great enamelled gash across his face. The music became louder, closer, ear-shattering now.

"Welcome," the shouts rang out.

"Welcome."

"Welcome!"

"English!" The word escaped Dave's lips in a sudden hiss. "For God's sake, Cal, they're speaking English."

"Something's wrong," Cal said tightly. "This isn't Mars. We've made a mistake, Dave."

The fat man was closer now, still grinning, his stomach protruding, a gold watch hanging across his vest beneath his jacket. He wore a white

carnation in his buttonhole. A hom-burg, black, was perched solidly atop his head.

"They're human," Dave whispered.

The fat man stopped before them, raised his hands. The music ceased as abruptly as it had begun. He stepped forward and extended his hand.

"Welcome home," he said.

Welcome *home!* The words seared across Cal's mind with sudden understanding.

"There's some mistake . . ." he started.

"Mistake?" The fat man chuckled. "Nonsense, nonsense. I am Mayor Panley. You're back in New Calleth, gentlemen. The city is yours. The *world* is yours! Welcome home."

"You don't understand," Cal persisted. "We've just come from Earth. We've just travelled more than 50,000,000 miles through space. We're from Earth."

"I know," the mayor said, "I know."

"You know?"

"But of course. Isn't it wonderful?"

The crowd cheered behind him, telling the night how wonderful it was.

Cal blinked, turned to Dave. The mayor put his arms about the two men. "We've been watching your approach for weeks. I'll have to admit we were a little worried in the beginning."

"Worried?"

The mayor began chuckling again. "Why yes, yes. Not that we didn't think you'd make it. But there were some who . . . ahh, here

are the television trucks now."

The trucks wheeled across the sand, just like the thousands of trucks Cal had seen back on Earth. The television cameras pointed down at them, and the men stood behind them with earphones on.

"Smile. Smile," the mayor whispered.

Cal smiled. Dave smiled, too.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Mayor Panley said to the cameras, "It is the distinct honor of New Calleth. . ."

The crowd raised their voices, drowning out his voice. The banners waved, yellow, red, blue, orange. Welcome, welcome, welcome.

". . . the distinct honor of New Calleth to be able to welcome home Bobby Galus and Gary Dale."

"Galus! Dale!" the voices sang, "Galus! Dale!"

"Galus!"

"Dale!"

"Just a second," Cal interrupted. "You don't understand at all. Those aren't our . . ."

"Four years in space," the mayor continued, "four years among the stars. To Earth and back, fellow citizens, for the glory of Mars."

"You've got that twisted," Cal said. "We didn't . . ."

The mayor took Cal's elbow and turned him toward the cameras.

"You were in space for four years, weren't you Captain Galus?"

"Yes, we were. But it wasn't . . ."

"Space!" the mayor gushed. "Limitless space. The first men to land on Earth."

Again the cries of the crowd split the night.

"Across the stretches of sky," the

mayor continued. "Across the unchartered wilderness above, across the . . ."

THERE WERE banquets and more banquets, and women of every size and shape. The city of New Calleth went all out to welcome the space travellers. Bobby Galus and Gary Dale.

At the end of a week of festivity, the mayor came to Cal and Dave.

"Have you enjoyed your stay, boys?" he asked.

"It was swell," Cal said, "but you've got things all. . ."

"I was wondering when you planned on leaving for the capitol. Don't misunderstand me. We'd like you to stay as long as you want to, but. . ."

"For God's sake," Cal snapped, "will you please listen to me?"

Mayor Panley was visibly shaken. "Why, of course, Captain Galus. Of course. Why, certainly."

He lapsed into silence.

"I'm not Bobby Galus," Cal said. "And this isn't Gary Dale."

The mayor nodded his head. "You're . . . not . . . Galus and Dale," he said slowly.

"That's right," Cal said. "We didn't go to Earth. We came from there. This is the first time we've ever been on Mars. Do you understand? We're Earthmen."

"Earthmen?" The mayor considered this for a second and then burst out laughing. "Why, that's preposterous. Absolutely preposterous!" His laugh rose in volume to a bellow. "Oh, you're joking. I should have known. You're only joking."

"We're not joking. This is all some kind of a horrible mistake. We're the first men to land on Mars. You've got to understand that," Dave pleaded.

The mayor was still laughing. He walked to the door and opened it. "All right, boys, have your little joke. You've earned the right to it. I'll make arrangements for you to leave for Dome City in the morning." He shook his head and chuckled again. "Earthmen. Tch-tch." And then he was gone.

They sat alone in the hotel room. It looked like any Earth hotel they'd ever been in. A big soft bed. A wall telephone. Two dressers. Two armchairs. A big mirror over one of the dressers. A television set on the other dresser.

"This is screwy," Dave said. "Is it possible we're back on Earth? Is it possible the joke is on us? Maybe everyone is just ribbing us. Maybe we've been going around in circles for four years. Maybe. . ."

"No," Cal said. "We're on Mars all right. I don't know exactly how to explain it, but I've got an idea."

"What's that?" Dave asked.

Cal shrugged. "Probably all wrong, of course. But it has something to do with comparable development of cultures on different planets."

"You mean Mars is in exactly the same state of development as Earth?"

"Something like that. You know the theory. Give two different places the same materials to start with, and their cultures will run parallel to each other for the rest of their existence."

"Sure," Dave said. "But these

guys Galus and Dale. How the hell could we possibly be mistaken for them?"

"I don't know." Cal leaned back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "Maybe we'll find out in Dome City."

"Maybe," Dave repeated hollowly.

THE PRESIDENT of the planet greeted their ship in Dome City. There were more parades, banners, bands, banquets, reporters, cameras, confetti, women, speeches, presentations.

And at last, they stood before the President's desk, two bodyguards standing on either side of him. He was a thin man, slightly balding, with rimless glasses.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I don't have to tell you how pleased I am."

Cal took a deep breath. "We've been trying to tell Mayor Panley," he said, "that we are not Galus and Dale."

The President smiled. "I know. He told me of your little joke."

"It's not a joke."

The President cocked an eyebrow. "No?" He looked at his bodyguards. "Has space affec . . . did you feel any ill effects in space?" he asked.

Cal grimaced. "Oh great! Now he thinks we're psycho. Look, can't you get this through your heads? *We are from Earth.* We never heard of Galus and Dale. My name is Calvin Manners, and this is David Langley."

"Very interesting," the President said. He tapped his finger on the back of his other hand and stared

at the two Earthmen.

He reached over toward the intercom on his desk then and pressed a button.

"Yes?" a woman's voice asked.

"Miss Daniels, will you bring in the photos of Capt. Galus and Lt. Dale, please?"

"Yes, sir."

The President turned to the two men again. "Those are your ranks, are they not?"

"Yes, but we're in the United States Army."

"The *what*?"

"The United States Army. The United States is a country on Earth."

"Really? Now we're getting somewhere. What else does Earth have? What is it like? Are the inhabitants intelligent?"

"Yes, we are. *We're* Earthmen, can't you understand that?"

"I think you're carrying this joke a little too far, gentlemen. A joke is a joke, but we've spent millions of dollars on your trip. Really, this is no time for banter."

Cal opened his mouth, ready to protest, just as the outside door swung wide. An attractive blonde in a smart suit stepped into the room and walked to the President's desk. She kept her eyes glued to the two Earthmen, dropped two large photographs on the desk, and turned. She stared over her shoulder at Cal and Dave until she was gone.

The President smiled knowingly. "The women are falling all over you two, I imagine."

"We're both married," Cal said drily. "We don't care for all this. . ."

"Married?" The President was shocked. "I thought we'd distinct-

ly chosen unmarried men for the job. Strange."

"We've got wives on Earth," Dave said.

"Ah-ha," the President said. "Then they are intelligent beings. Pity, pity."

A tinge of anticipation curled up Cal's spine. "Pity? Why a pity? Why do you say that?"

"Well, you know. Surely you realized this was the only flight we could afford."

"What?"

"For the meantime, anyway. We may attempt another flight in fifty years, sixty perhaps, maybe more. But you've already proved space travel, Capt. Galus. The achievement is ours. All we need now is money to . . ."

"Damn it, I'm not Capt. Galus," Cal shouted. "And we've got to get back to Earth. I've got a kid, Mr. President. He's six years old and . . ." Cal stopped abruptly. "Oh, this is all nonsense. Why am I arguing with you? Can't you understand that we are Earthmen? What do we have to do to prove it?"

The President sighed and turned over the photographs on the desk. They were glossy prints of two men in uniform. They were young men, in khaki, smiles on their faces.

One man looked exactly like Calvin Manners.

The other strongly resembled David Langley.

"Here are your photographs," the President said. "This is you, captain, and you, lieutenant. They were taken before the trip. You're

younger, of course."

Cal stared at the photograph. It could have been he. The nose was a little sharper, perhaps, and the face thinner. But it could have been he. *It could have been he!*

"It's a freak accident," he shouted. "A coincidence in two parallel cultures, a . . ."

He saw the look on the President's face then. It was a cold look, and a suspicious one. Cal stopped speaking, sweat staining the arm-pits of his uniform shirt.

The President grinned again. "That's better. I understand the strain of space, gentlemen, but we must be practical, mustn't we?"

He paused. "Shall we talk about Earth now?"

THE ONLY sound was the swish of the jets against the grass as the big ship came down. Slowly, nose pointed skyward, a yellow tail streaming out behind the tubes, it settled to the ground like a cat nuzzling its haunches against a velvet pillow.

In the distance, the lights of New York danced crazily, gleaming from a thousand spires that scratched the sky. The radios blared forth excitedly, and the police cars screamed through the night as they rushed to City Hall to pick up the mayor.

Inside the ship, Gary Dale peered through the viewport.

"I feel kind of funny," he said.

A tremor of excitement flooded through Bobby Galus' thin frame.

"Earth," he whispered. "We made it."

Personalities

IN SCIENCE FICTION

RAYMOND A. PALMER

*While his circulation climbed,
the stf world wondered*

EARLY IN 1944, a letter addressed to the Discussions column of *Amazing Stories*, was opened by Howard Browne, then managing editor of the Z-D pulp chain. The letter was signed by a resident of Pennsylvania named Richard S. Shaver. Browne read the letter, snorted with characteristic honesty, and tossed it into the wastebasket. Browne's exact remark relative to the letter is not recorded. Possibly it contained the word "crackpot". The gist of it was certainly: "That's the last anyone will ever see of that."

But Browne was wrong. He reckoned without the subsequent activities of a much-debated genius named Raymond A. Palmer, then editor of *Amazing*, known throughout the stf field as *rap*, those being the initials with which he signed editorials. Palmer retrieved the letter, visualized its possibilities—possibilities which would have entirely escaped nine editors out of ten—

and the so-called Shaver Mystery was born.

The Shaver Mystery did many things. It attracted a great many people; it angered a great many other people; it became the most widely discussed of all science fiction facets, bringing howls of denunciation from not only the organized fan clubs, but also from some of the most widely circulated and highly respected magazines in the nation, several of which lashed out bitterly at this "highly dangerous nonsense".

And—not to be overlooked—the Shaver Mystery added an extra 50,000 copies per month to the circulation of *Amazing Stories*, the bellwether of the Ziff-Davis pulp chain.

A good many students of the unusual made exhaustive investigations into the phenomenon salvaged so astutely from Browne's wastebasket. But the vast majority of them erred in basic procedure. They sought answers to such questions as: *What* is the Shaver Mystery? *Who* is Richard S. Shaver?

Their prime question should have been: *Who* is Raymond A. Palmer?

Shaver himself is of minor interest in the investigation of the

science fiction bombshell which bears his name. He was—and still is—a highly competent writer concerning whom, Palmer states:

Shaver encouraged by the publication of the letter, sent the rest of his secret—the story of the Titans, Atlantis, and the caves of today. 10,000 words of "A. Warning To Future Man", to be printed as a letter without pay. He had no thought of being an "author". So I rewrote, making it 31,000, largely Palmer. I still have the original manuscript if anyone would like proof it was not submitted as a story. It wasn't. Only the secret. And with that, Shaver would have rested.

But I wanted to show . . . writers aren't geniuses, or even special people, or even "educated". Just so they know 800 words and have an imagination. Shaver had both.

No one could disagree with this last except to suggest that *rap* far understates the extent of Shaver's vocabulary. Shaver wrote—under his own name and many pen names—the original drafts of all the stories hinging upon the mystery. But above and behind him loomed the figure of Raymond A. Palmer, eliminating almost completely, Shaver's importance as a subject for investigation relative to the works in question.

PALMER'S early history was highlighted by appalling misfortune, great adversity and high courage. He was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on August 1st, 1910. At the age of seven he was

run over by a truck and permanently crippled.

This last is worthy of note because there is reason to believe it engendered within him a bitterness he never outgrew. It also may be responsible for at least a portion of the brilliance of Palmer's mind. He has many friends, but to arrive at the point of really knowing him is a long and difficult process at which few have succeeded. His most discernible characteristic is beyond doubt a never-yielding determination. He is a prolific writer, and he speaks of his early struggles in that field:

If I knew an editor was in the market for a story, he'd have to buy it from me. If he wanted a sixty-thousand word novel, I'd have it there when the doors opened. If he wanted a five, or a ten, or a fifteen-thousand worder, I'd be there with it before anybody else.

As a result of this energy and the ability to produce, he sold an astounding amount of fiction. Three and a half million words, a good percentage of which he produced while functioning for eight years as a sheet metal worker; ten years as a bookkeeper; four years as an estimator in the building trades.

Palmer's noteworthy career really began when he was offered the editorship of *Amazing Stories* in 1938. The title was purchased by William Ziff from The Teck Publishing Company, and Palmer took over the editorial chair in Chicago.

From some strange whim rather than of necessity, Palmer followed the Spartan pattern the first few months of his editorship, spending each day exactly 37c for food. This

amount was divided into a nickel for breakfast, eleven cents for lunch, and a nightly banquet upon which he squandered twenty-one cents.

Later, as the circulation of his magazine climbed, Palmer allocated somewhat more of his funds to the inner man.

After 1938, things got steadily better in the fiction field. Under Palmer's guidance, the Ziff-Davis string expanded. Western, detective, and adventure books were added. These Palmer turned over to new editors, keeping for himself *Amazing Stories* and a partial hand on the helm of *Fantastic Adventures*, its companion book. So, when Shaver's letter figuratively jumped into Palmer's hands, he was ready for it. And he knew, that readers of science fiction were ready for it.

After the first reader-reaction, Palmer went to Pennsylvania for a personal visit with Shaver, gave him the green light, and went back to Chicago to check circulation figures. They were indeed gratifying. Letters began pouring in, abusing Shaver and praising him.

SHAYER'S case was based on information he claims to have received—voices which spoke to him, first through a turret lathe upon which he worked in a war plant. Many correspondents claimed company with Shaver in hearing the voices. Other correspondents took the view that Shaver was plain nuts—that his copy was dangerous and should be removed from the newsstands. The

fan clubs cluttered the mails with wrathful epistles, boycotting Palmer's "mystery" and consigning it to damnation. Then the club members dashed to the stands for the next issue of *Amazing* to see if their letters had been published.

Palmer smiled, published them, and published more Shaver. Circulation zoomed.

JUST what all the shouting was about is hard to determine. An understanding revulsion was felt in some quarters to the heavy sex-and-sadism flavor of the copy. It had a distinct Kraft-Ebbing touch and could hardly be rated as cheerful reading.

There appeared to be no great secret nor any unsolvable mystery. The so-called mystery appeared to be the premise-frame upon which Shaver hung reams of erotic copy. The voices to which Shaver's remarkable ear was attuned, told him of a race of superior beings who purportedly inhabited the earth untold ages ago. This race functioned with benefit of mechanical gadgetry far in advance of our present equipment of that type.

This advanced race, Shaver tells us, held sway over an inferior race of beings who bore them no good will whatever and would have done them in had the opportunity presented itself. They were held in check however.

Eventually, the superior race, entirely familiar with space-travel, set out for greener planets. The inferior race, termed "deros", was left behind with all the advanced

equipment known in the story-series as "mech".

And, Shaver vows, the deros are still with us; living in caves under the earth, and doing their very best to make things miserable for those who live topside. There are no tricks to which the deros will not stoop. They cause men to fail in both business and social life. They arrange nervous breakdowns. They jammed up Editor Palmer's typewriter and stole pertinent copy off his desk. They man the flying saucers that have bewildered our population for some time.

Shaver's source of information was bottomless; he put it into stories; Palmer printed the stories. Circulation continued its happy ascent.

Such a bomb as this one, however, was slated by the very nature of things for a final explosion of some sort. The explosion came abruptly—when the public clamor for an execution reached the ears of William Ziff in the front office.

ZIFF-DAVIS is a large company. They publish a number of magazines other than those in their pulp chain. Also, at the time in question, they were publishing both hard-cover books and a series of smaller volumes retailing below a dollar. Mr. Ziff is a civic-minded individual who gave and still gives a great deal of his time to projects outside his firm. For these reasons, he probably gave little attention to the pulp group, knowing it to be in competent hands. So it is entirely probable that when he first heard

mention of the Shaver Mystery, he knew far less about it than the average reader of science fiction; stf being a field of letters in which Mr. Ziff had little time to pleasure himself.

But he made a point of looking in on the works of Mr. Shaver and had but one comment: "Kill it."

Palmer has an added explanation: *I had decided to go into the publishing business on my own. Naturally I would have to quit when I brought out a book in competition with Z-D. So I thought ahead—two years—and asked myself if Howard Browne . . . could handle this hot potato. . . . I couldn't saddle my successor with a bomb like that. So I tapered the Mystery off, then killed it myself. I worked it so Ziff would disapprove.*

Another example of Palmer's ability is the Jesse James affair. This was probably his greatest promotional attempt. Its failure was due to circumstances beyond his control. He states:

I had befriended the wife of a former Chief of Detectives (1901) of St. Louis and who "knew" Frank James and all the other "boys" personally [In both cases the quotes are Palmer's]. She came to me with a revelation that a Dalton, out west, had told her he was JJ and would she act as a confidante for his story or confession. She brought photos. I compared ears, decided Dalton really was James. I paid her way and that of her husband, to Oklahoma to find out. Her husband identified the man positively. . . . I went to the nearest radio commentator—the story was off . . . Today half of America believes it really

was Jesse and the other half laughs. Me? I know it was Jesse. I have the proof . . . Jesse's dead now. Just a few weeks ago. For the last time. There'll never be another claimant. I made sure of that . . .

PALMER left a great deal unsaid in his statement. A great deal which indicates the laughing half of America has by far the best case. One interesting sidelight on the affair was that the couple who brought Palmer the great news also offered proof that Billy the Kid (William Bonney) and Quantrall, the Missouri raider, were alive and well. If the evidence of these people is to be taken, it must be assumed that no one really dies.

Mathematically, the chance of Dalton being James, are exactly twenty to one; that including James himself and the nineteen pretenders who have come forward through the years. And Palmer is probably right in the assertion that the last James has been buried. There are very few men aged one hundred and ten with the strength to come forward.

Two points, still unmentioned relative to the James affair, are important in that they indicate Palmer has never deviated an inch from his basic and admirable talent—that of selling magazines. When the Dalton-James proposition came to light, Palmer secured a contract and began immediately planning a Jesse James Western Magazine. At the same time he set his eye on the Chicago Railroad Fair and thought what a publicity scoop it would be

if the roads would recognize and honor Dalton-James by allotting him a day in their program. This, Palmer believed—and rightly so—would be the clincher.

But Major Lennox Lohr, in charge of the affair, didn't care whether Dalton was James or not. He took a dim view of honoring a man whose name was synonymous with lawlessness. Immediately upon the heels of this decision, Palmer's interest in Dalton became strictly academic.

So the Shaver Mystery and the affair Dalton-James, have two points in common. Neither can stand up under even preliminary examination. And both are amazingly good copy.

Labeling both of them hoaxes may be construed as criticism of Palmer. It is not meant to be. This is a day of supersalesmanship. Hoaxes far more dangerous and sinister are arranged in advertising agencies every day. Claims made in blatant print relative to deodorants, cigarettes, trusses, and dozens of other products are far more preposterous than the assertion that a lot of little men called deros are giving us a bad time. This last becomes almost probable when lined up beside a statement that a bar of soap will make a woman beautiful in two weeks.

So, in these times of drab and unconvincing falsehood, there is still something to be thankful for. A Palmer promotion has the touch of genius. It has zing, sparkle, and true showmanship. It can be spotted a mile away by the bright lights. The thing to do is sit back and enjoy it. —PWF



"Are you ready for me, Asir?"

*Strange gods were worshipped on Mars.
But were they so clever? They'd lost their
own world.*

It Takes a Thief

By Walter Miller, Jr.

THE ANCIENT GODS, *our Fathers, rode down from the heavens in the Firebirds of the Sun. Coming into the world, they found no air for the breath of their souls. "How shall we breathe?" they asked of the Sun. And Sun gave them of His fire and beneath the earth they kindled the Blaze of the Great Wind. Good air roared from the womb of Mars our Mother, the ice burned with a great thunder, and there was air for the breath of Man.*

—FROM AN OLD MARTIAN LEGEND

A thief, he was about to die like a thief.

He hung from the post by his wrists. The wan sunlight glistened faintly on his naked back as he waited, eyes tightly closed, lips moving slowly as he pressed his face against the rough wood and stood on tiptoe to relieve the growing

ache in his shoulders. When his ankles ached, he hung by the nails that pierced his forearms just above the wrists.

He was young, perhaps in his tenth Marsyear, and his crisp black hair was close-cropped in the fashion of the bachelor who had not yet sired a pup, or not yet admitted that he had. Lithe and sleek, with the quick knotty muscles and slender rawhide limbs of a wild thing, half-fed and hungry with a quick furious hunger that crouched in ambush. His face, though twisted with pain and fright, remained that of a cocky pup.

When he opened his eyes he could see the low hills of Mars, sun-washed and gray-green with trees, trees brought down from the heavens by the Ancient Fathers. But he could also see the executioner in the foreground, sitting spraddlelegged and calm while he chewed a blade

of grass and waited. A squat man with a thick face, he occasionally peered at the thief with empty blue eyes—while he casually played mumblety-peg with the bleeding-blade. His stare was blank.

"Ready for me yet, Asir?" he grumbled, not unpleasantly.

The knifeman sat beyond spitting range, but Asir spat, and tried to wipe his chin on the post. "Your dirty mother!" he mumbled.

The executioner chuckled and played mumblety-peg.

After three hours of dangling from the spikes that pierced his arms, Asir was weakening, and the blood throbbed hard in his temples, with each jolt of his heart a separate pulse of pain. The red stickiness had stopped oozing down his arms; they knew how to drive the spike just right. But the heartbeats labored in his head like a hammer beating at red-hot iron.

How many heartbeats in a lifetime—and how many left to him now?

He whimpered and writhed, beginning to lose all hope. Mara had gone to see the Chief Commoner, to plead with him for the pilferer's life—but Mara was about as trustworthy as a wild hüffen, and he had visions of them chuckling together in Tokra's villa over a glass of amber wine, while life drained slowly from a young thief.

Asir regretted nothing. His father had been a renegade before him, had squandered his last ritual formula to buy a wife, then impoverished, had taken her away to the hills. Asir was born in the hills, but he came back to the village of his ancestors to work as a servant

and steal the rituals of his masters. No thief could last for long. A ritual-thief caused havoc in the community. The owner of a holy phrase, not knowing that it had been stolen, tried to spend it—and eventually counter-claims would come to light, and a general accounting had to be called. The thief was always found out.

Asir had stolen more than wealth, he had stolen the strength of their souls. For this they hung him by his wrists and waited for him to beg for the bleeding-blade.

*Woman thirsts for husband,
Man thirsts for wife,
Baby thirsts for breast-milk
Thief thirsts for knife . . .*

A rhyme from his childhood, a childish chant, an eenie-meenie-miney for determining who should drink first from a nectar-cactus. He groaned and tried to shift his weight more comfortably. Where was Mara?

"**R**EADY for me yet, Asir?" the squat man asked.

Asir hated him with narrowed eyes. The executioner was bound by law to wait until his victim requested his fate. But Asir remained ignorant of what the fate would be. The Council of Senior Kinsmen judged him in secret, and passed sentence as to what the executioner would do with the knife. But Asir was not informed of their judgment. He knew only that when he asked for it, the executioner would advance with the bleeding-blade and exact the punishment—his life,

or an amputation, depending on the judgment. He might lose only an eye or an ear or a finger. But on the other hand, he might lose his life, both arms, or his masculinity.

There was no way to find out until he asked for the punishment. If he refused to ask, they would leave him hanging there. In theory, a thief could escape by hanging four days, after which the executioner would pull out the nails. Sometimes a culprit managed it, but when the nails were pulled, the thing that toppled was already a corpse.

The sun was sinking in the west, and it blinded him. Asir knew about the sun—knew things the stupid council failed to know. A thief, if successful, frequently became endowed with wisdom, for he memorized more wealth than a score of honest men. Quotations from the ancient gods—Fermi, Einstein, Elgermann, Hanser and the rest—most men owned scattered phrases, and scattered phrases remained meaningless. But a thief memorized all transactions that he overheard, and the countless phrases could be fitted together into meaningful ideas.

He knew now that Mars, once dead, was dying again, its air leaking away once more into space. And Man would die with it, unless something were done, and done quickly. The Blaze of the Great Wind needed to be rekindled under the earth, but it would not be done. The tribes had fallen into ignorance, even as the holy books had warned:

It is realized that the colonists will be unable to maintain a tech-

nology without basic tools, and that a rebuilding will require several generations of intelligently directed effort. Given the knowledge, the colonists may be able to restore a machine culture if the knowledge continues to be bolstered by desire. But if the third, fourth, and Nth generations fail to further the gradual retooling process, the knowledge will become worthless.

The quotation was from the god Roggins, *Progress of the Mars-Culture*, and he had stolen bits of it from various sources. The books themselves were no longer in existence, remembered only in memorized ritual chants, the possession of which meant wealth.

Asir was sick. Pain and slow loss of blood made him weak, and his vision blurred. He failed to see her coming until he heard her feet rustling in the dry grass.

"Mara—"

She smirked and spat contemptuously at the foot of the post. The daughter of a Senior Kinsman, she was a tall, slender girl with an arrogant strut and mocking eyes. She stood for a moment with folded arms, eyeing him with amusement. Then, slowly, one eye closed in a solemn wink. She turned her back on him and spoke to the executioner.

"May I taunt the prisoner, Slubil?" she asked.

"It is forbidden to speak to the thief," growled the knifeman.

"Is he ready to beg for justice, Slubil?"

The knifeman grinned and looked at Asir. "Are you ready for me yet, thief?"

Asir hissed an insult. The girl

had betrayed him.

"Evidently a coward," she said. "Perhaps he means to hang four days."

"Let him then."

"No—I think that I should *like* to see him beg."

She gave Asir a long searching glance, then turned to walk away. The thief cursed her quietly and followed her with his eyes. A dozen steps away she stopped again, looked back over her shoulder, and repeated the slow wink. Then she marched on toward her father's house. The wink made his scalp crawl for a moment, but then . . .

Suppose she hasn't betrayed me? Suppose she had wheedled the sentence out of Tokra, and knew what his punishment would be. I think that I should like to see him beg.

But on the other hand, the fickle she-devil might be tricking him into asking for a sentence that she *knew* would be death or dismemberment—just to amuse herself.

He cursed inwardly and trembled as he peered at the bored executioner. He licked his lips and fought against dizziness as he groped for words. Slubil heard him muttering and looked up.

"Are you ready for me yet?"

ASIR closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. "Give it to me!" he yelled suddenly, and braced himself against the post.

Why not? The short time gained couldn't be classed as living. Have it done with. Eternity would be sweet in comparison to this ignomy. A knife could be a blessing.

He heard the executioner chuckle

and stand up. He heard the man's footsteps approaching slowly, and the singing hiss of the knife as Slubil swung it in quick arcs. The executioner moved about him slowly, teasing him with the whistle of steel fanning the air about him. He was expected to beg. Slubil occasionally laid the knife against his skin and took it away again. Then Asir heard the rustle of the executioner's cloak as his arm went back. Asir opened his eyes.

The executioner grinned as he held the blade high—aimed at Asir's head! The girl had tricked him. He groaned and closed his eyes again, muttering a half-forgotten prayer.

The stroke fell—and the blade chopped into the post above his head. Asir fainted.

When he awoke he lay in a crumpled heap on the ground. The executioner rolled him over with his foot.

"In view of your extreme youth, thief," the knifeman growled, "the council has ordered you perpetually banished. The sun is setting. Let dawn find you in the hills. If you return to the plains, you will be chained to a wild hüffen and dragged to death."

Panting weekly, Asir groped at his forehead, and found a fresh wound, raw and rubbed with rust to make a scar. Slubil had marked him as an outcast. But except for the nail-holes through his forearms, he was still in one piece. His hands were numb, and he could scarcely move his fingers. Slubil had bound the spike-wounds, but the bandages were bloody and leaking.

When the knifeman had gone,

Asir climbed weakly to his feet. Several of the townspeople stood nearby, snickering at him. He ignored their catcalls and staggered toward the outskirts of the village, ten minutes away. He had to speak to Mara, and to her father if the crusty oldster would listen. His thief's knowledge weighed upon him and brought desperate fear.

Darkness had fallen by the time he came to Welkir's house. The people spat at him in the streets, and some of them flung handfuls of loose dirt after him as he passed. A light flickered feebly through Welkir's door. Asir rattled it and waited.

Welkir came with a lamp. He set the lamp on the floor and stood with feet spread apart, arms folded, glaring haughtily at the thief. His face was stiff as weathered stone. He said nothing, but only stared contemptuously.

Asir bowed his head. "I have come to plead with you, Senior Kinsman."

Welkir snorted disgust. "Against the mercy we have shown you?"

He looked up quickly, shaking his head. "No! For that I am grateful."

"What then?"

"As a thief, I acquired much wisdom. I know that the world is dying, and the air is boiling out of it into the sky. I wish to be heard by the council. We must study the words of the ancients and perform their magic, lest our children's children be born to strangle in a dead world."

Welkir snorted again. He picked up the lamp. "He who listens to a thief's wisdom is cursed. He who

acts upon it is doubly cursed and a party to the crime."

"The vaults," Asir insisted. "The key to the Blaze of the Winds is in the vaults. The god Roggins tells us in the words—"

"Stop! I will not hear!"

"Very well, but the blaze can be rekindled, and the air renewed. The vaults—" He stammered and shook his head. "The council must hear me."

"The council will hear nothing, and you shall be gone before dawn. And the vaults are guarded by the sleeper called Big Joe. To enter is to die. Now go away."

WELKIR stepped back and slammed the door. Asir sagged in defeat. He sank down on the doorstep to rest a moment. The night was black, except for lamp-flickers from an occasional window.

"Ssssst!"

A sound from the shadows. He looked around quickly, searching for the source.

"Ssssst! Asir!"

It was the girl Mara, Welkir's daughter. She had slipped out the back of the house and was peering at him around the corner. He arose quietly and went to her.

"What did Slubil do to you?" she whispered.

Asir gasped and caught her shoulders angrily. "Don't you *know*?"

"No! Stop! You're hurting me. Tokra wouldn't tell me. I made love to him, but he wouldn't tell."

He released her with an angry curse.

"You *had* to take it sometime,"

she hissed. "I knew if you waited you would be too weak from hanging to even run away."

He called her a foul name.

"Ingrate!" she snapped. "And I bought you a hüffen!"

"You *what?*"

"Tokra gave me a ritual phrase and I bought you a hüffen with it. You can't *walk* to the hills, you know."

Asir burned with dull rage. "You slept with Tokra!" he snapped.

"You're jealous!" she tittered.

"How can I be jealous! I hate the sight of you!"

"Very well then, I'll keep the hüffen."

"*Do!*" he growled. "I won't need it, since I'm not going to the hills!"

She gasped. "You've got to go, you fool! They'll kill you!"

He turned away, feeling sick. She caught at his arm and tried to pull him back. "Asir! Take the hüffen and *go!*"

"I'll go," he growled. "But not to the hills. I'm going out to the vault."

He stalked away, but she trotted along beside him, trying to tug him back. "Fool! The vaults are sacred! The priests guard the entrance, and the Sleeper guards the inner door. They'll kill you if you try it, and if you linger, the council will kill you tomorrow."

"Let them!" he snarled. "I am no sniveling townsman! I am of the hills, and my father was a renegade. Your council had no right to judge me. Now I shall judge *them.*"

The words were spoken hotly, and he realized their folly. He expected a scornful rebuke from Mara, but she hung onto his arm

and pleaded with him. He had dragged her a dozen doorways from the house of her father. Her voice had lost its arrogance and became pleading.

"Please, Asir! Go away. Listen! I will even go with you—if you want me."

He laughed harshly. "Tokra's leavings."

She slapped him hard across the mouth. "Tokra is an impotent old dodderer. He can scarcely move for arthritis. You're an idiot! I sat on his lap and kissed his bald pate for you."

"Then why did he give you a ritual phrase?" he asked stiffly.

"Because he likes me."

"You lie." He stalked angrily on.

"Very well! Go to the vaults. I'll tell my father, and they'll hunt you down before you get there."

She released his arm and stopped. Asir hesitated. She meant it. He came back to her slowly, then slipped his swollen hands to her throat. She did not back away.

"Why don't I just choke you and leave you lying here?" he hissed.

Her face was only a shadow in darkness, but he could see her cool smirk.

"Because you love me, Asir of Franic."

He dropped his hands and grunted a low curse. She laughed low and took his arm.

"Come on. We'll go get the hüffen," she said.

Why not? he thought. *Take her hüffen, and take her too.* He could dump her a few miles from the village, then circle back to the vaults. She leaned against him as they moved back toward her father's

house, then skirted it and stole back to the field behind the row of dwellings. Phobos hung low in the west, its tiny disk lending only a faint glow to the darkness.

He heard the hüffen's breathing as they approached a hulking shadow in the gloom. Its great wings snaked out slowly as it sensed their approach, and it made a low piping sound. A native Martian species, it bore no resemblance to the beasts that the ancients had brought with them from the sky. Its back was covered with a thin shell like a beetle's, but its belly was porous and soft. It digested food by sitting on it, and absorbing it. The wings were bony—parchment stretched across a fragile frame. It was headless, and lacked a centralized brain, the nervous functions being distributed.

THE GREAT creature made no protest as they climbed up the broad flat back and strapped themselves down with the belts that had been threaded through holes cut in the hüffen's thin, tough shell. Its lungs slowly gathered a tremendous breath of air, causing the riders to rise up as the huge air-sacs became distended. The girth of an inflated hüffen was nearly four times as great as when deflated. When the air was gathered, the creature began to shrink again as its muscles tightened, compressing the breath until a faint leakage-hiss came from behind. It waited, wings taut.

The girl tugged at a ring set through the flesh of its flank. There was a blast of sound and a jerk. Nature's experiment in jet propulsion soared ahead and turned into the

wind. Its first breath exhausted, it gathered another and blew itself ahead again. The ride was jerky. Each tailward belch was a rough lurch. They let the hüffen choose its own heading as it gained altitude. Then Mara tugged at the wing-straps, and the creature wheeled to soar toward the dark hills in the distance.

Asir sat behind her, a sardonic smirk on his face, as the wind whipped about them. He waited until they had flown beyond screaming distance of the village. Then he took her shoulders lightly in his hands. Mistaking it for affection, she leaned back against him easily and rested her dark head on his shoulder. He kissed her—while his hand felt gingerly for the knife at her belt. His fingers were numb, but he managed to clutch it, and press the blade lightly against her throat. She gasped. With his other hand, he caught her hair.

"Now guide the hüffen down!" he ordered.

"Asir!"

"Quickly!" he barked.

"What are you going to do?"

"Leave you here and circle back to the vaults."

"No! Not out here at night!"

He hesitated. There were slinking prowlers on the Cimmerian plain, beasts who would regard the marooned daughter of Welkir a delicious bit of good fortune, a gustatory delight of a sort they seldom were able to enjoy. Even above the moan of the wind, he could hear an occasional howl-cry from the fanged welcoming committee that waited for its dinner beneath them.

"Very well," he growled reluc-

tantly. "Turn toward the vaults. But one scream and I'll slice you." He took the blade from her throat but kept the point touching her back.

"Please, Asir, *no!*" she pleaded. "Let me go on to the hills. Why do you want to go to the vaults? Because of Tokra?"

He gouged her with the point until she yelped. "Tokra be damned, and you with him!" he snarled. "Turn back."

"*Why?*"

"I'm going down to kindle the Blaze of the Winds."

"You're *mad!* The spirits of the ancients live in the vaults."

"I am going to kindle the Blaze of the Winds," he insisted stubbornly. "Now either turn back, or go down and I'll turn back alone."

AFTER a hesitant moment, she tugged at a wing-rein and the hüffen banked majestically. They flew a mile to the south of the village, then beyond it toward the cloister where the priests of Big Joe guarded the entrance to the vaults. The cloister was marked by a patch of faint light on the ground ahead. "Circle around it once," he ordered.

"You can't get in. They'll kill you."

He doubted it. No one ever tried to enter, except the priests who carried small animals down as sacrifices to the great Sleeper. Since no outsider ever dared go near the shaft, the guards expected no one. He doubted that they would be alert.

The cloister was a hollow square

with a small stone tower rising in the center of the courtyard. The tower contained the entrance to the shaft. In the dim light of Phobos, assisted by yellow flickers from the cloister windows, he peered at the courtyard as they circled closer. It seemed to be empty.

"Land beside the tower!" he ordered.

"Asir—please—"

"Do it!"

The hüffen plunged rapidly, soared across the outer walls, and burst into the courtyard. It landed with a rough jolt and began squeaking plaintively.

"Hurry!" he hissed. "Get your straps off and let's go."

"I'm not going."

A prick of the knife point changed her mind. They slid quickly to the ground, and Asir kicked the hüffen in the flanks. The beast sucked in air and burst aloft.

Startled faces were trying to peer through the lighted cloister windows into the courtyard. Someone cried a challenge. Asir darted to the door of the tower and dragged it open. Now forced to share the danger, the girl came with him without urging. They stepped into a stair-landing. A candle flickered from a wall bracket. A guard, sitting on the floor beneath the candle glanced up in complete surprise. Then he reached for a short barbed pike. Asir kicked him hard in the temple, then rolled his limp form outside. Men with torches were running across the courtyard. He slammed the heavy metal door and bolted it.

Fists began beating on the door. They paused for a moment to rest, and Mara stared at him in fright.

He expected her to burst into angry speech, but she only leaned against the wall and panted. The dark mouth of the stairway yawned at them—a stone throat that led into the bowels of Mars and the realm of the monster, Big Joe. He glanced at Mara thoughtfully, and felt sorry for her.

"I can leave you here," he offered, "but I'll have to tie you."

She moistened her lips, glanced first at the stairs, then at the door where the guards were raising a frantic howl. She shook her head.

"I'll go with you."

"The priests won't bother you, if they see that you were a prisoner."

"I'll go with you."

He was pleased, but angry with himself for the pleasure. An arrogant, spiteful, conniving wench, he told himself. She'd lied about Tokra. He grunted gruffly, seized the candle, and started down the stairs. When she started after him, he stiffened and glanced back, remembering the barbed pike.

As he had suspected, she had picked it up. The point was a foot from the small of his back. They stared at each other, and she wore her self-assured smirk.

"Here," she said, and handed it casually. "You might need this."

THEY stared at each other again, but it was different this time. Bewildered, he shook his head and resumed the descent toward the vaults. The guards were battering at the door behind them.

The stairwell was damp and cold. Blackness folded about them like a shroud. They moved in si-

lence, and after five thousand steps, Asir stopped counting.

Somewhere in the depths, Big Joe slept his restless sleep. Asir wondered grimly how long it would take the guards to tear down the metal door. Somehow they had to get past Big Joe before the guards came thundering after them. There was a way to get around the monster: of that he was certain. A series of twenty-four numbers was involved, and he had memorized them with a stolen bit of ritual. How to use them was a different matter. He imagined vaguely that one must call them out in a loud voice before the inner entrance.

The girl walked beside him now, and he could feel her shivering. His eyes were quick and nervous as he scanned each pool of darkness, each nook and cranny along the stairway wall. The well was silent except for the mutter of their footsteps, and the gloom was full of musty odors. The candle afforded little light.

"I told you the truth about Tokra," she blurted suddenly.

Asir glowered straight ahead and said nothing, embarrassed by his previous jealousy. They moved on in silence.

Suddenly she stopped. "Look," she hissed, pointing down ahead.

He shielded the candle with his hand and peered downward toward a small square of dim light. "The bottom of the stairs," he muttered.

The light seemed faint and diffuse, with a slight greenish cast. Asir blew out the candle, and the girl quickly protested.

"How will we see to climb again?"

He laughed humorlessly. "What makes you think we will?"

She moaned and clutched at his arm, but came with him as he descended slowly toward the light. The stairway opened into a long corridor whose ceiling was faintly luminous. White-faced and frightened, they paused on the bottom step and looked down the corridor. Mara gasped and covered her eyes.

"Big Joe!" she whispered in awe.

He stared through the stairwell door and down the corridor through another door into a large room. Big Joe sat in the center of the room, sleeping his sleep of ages amid a heap of broken and white-ning bones. A creature of metal, twice the height of Asir, he had obviously been designed to kill. Tri-fingered hands with gleaming talons, and a monstrous head shaped like a Marswolf, with long silver fangs. Why should a metal-creature have fangs, unless he had been built to kill?

The behemoth slept in a crouch, waiting for the intruders.

He tugged the girl through the stairwell door. A voice droned out of nowhere: "*If you have come to plunder, go back!*"

He stiffened, looking around. The girl whimpered.

"Stay here by the stairs," he told her, and pushed her firmly back through the door.

Asir started slowly toward the room where Big Joe waited. Beyond the room he could see another door, and the monster's job was apparently to keep intruders back from the inner vaults where, according to the ritual chants, the Blaze of the Winds could be kindled.

Halfway along the corridor, the voice called out again, beginning a kind of sing-song chant: "*Big Joe will kill you, Big Joe will kill you, Big Joe will kill you—*"

He turned slowly, searching for the speaker. But the voice seemed to come from a black disk on the wall. The talking-machines perhaps, as mentioned somewhere in the ritual.

A few paces from the entrance to the room, the voice fell silent. He stopped at the door, staring in at the monster. Then he took a deep breath and began chanting the twenty-four numbers in a loud but quavering voice. Big Joe remained in his motionless crouch. Nothing happened. He stepped through the doorway.

BIG JOE emitted a deafening roar, straightened with a metallic groan, and lumbered toward him, taloned hands extended and eyes blazing furiously. Asir shrieked and ran for his life.

Then he saw Mara lying sprawled in the stairway entrance. She had fainted. Blocking an impulse to leap over her and flee alone, he stopped to lift her.

But suddenly he realized that there was no pursuit. He looked back. Big Joe had returned to his former position, and he appeared to be asleep again. Puzzled, Asir stepped back into the corridor.

"*If you have come to plunder, go back!*"

He moved gingerly ahead again. "*Big Joe will kill you, Big Joe will kill you, Big Joe will kill—*"

He recovered the barbed pike

from the floor and stole into the zone of silence. This time he stopped to look around. Slowly he reached the pike-staff through the doorway. Nothing happened. He stepped closer and waved it around inside. Big Joe remained motionless.

Then he dropped the point of the pike to the floor. The monster bellowed and started to rise. Asir leaped back, scalp crawling. But Big Joe settled back in his crouch.

Fighting a desire to flee, Asir reached the pike through the door and rapped it on the floor again. This time nothing happened. He glanced down. The pike's point rested in the center of a gray floor-tile, just to the left of the entrance. The floor was a checkerboard pattern of gray and white. He tapped another gray square, and this time the monster started out of his drowse again.

After a moment's thought, he began touching each tile within reach of the door. Most of them brought a response from Big Joe. He found four that did not. He knelt down before the door to peer at them closely. The first was unmarked. The second bore a dot in the center. The third bore two, and the fourth three—in order of their distance from the door.

He stood up and stepped inside again, standing on the first tile. Big Joe remained motionless. He stepped diagonally left to the second—straight ahead to the third—then diagonally right to the fourth. He stood there for a moment, trembling and staring at the Sleeper. He was four feet past the door!

Having assured himself that the

monster was still asleep, he crouched to peer at the next tiles. He stared for a long time, but found no similar markings. Were the dots coincidence?

He reached out with the pike, then drew it back. He was too close to the Sleeper to risk a mistake. He stood up and looked around carefully, noting each detail of the room—and of the floor in particular. He counted the rows and columns of tiles—twenty-four each way.

Twenty-four—and there were twenty-four numbers in the series that was somehow connected with safe passage through the room. He frowned and muttered through the series to himself—0,1,2,3,3,3,2,2,1 . . .

The first four numbers—0,1,2,3. And the tiles—the first with no dots, the second with one, the third with two, the fourth with three. But the four tiles were not in a straight line, and there were no marked ones beyond the fourth. He backed out of the room and studied them from the end of the corridor again.

Mara had come dizzily awake and was calling for him weakly. He replied reassuringly and turned to his task again. "First tile, then diagonally left, then straight, then diagonally right—"

0, 1, 2, 3, 3.

A hunch came. He advanced as far as the second tile, then reached as far ahead as he could and touched the square diagonally right from the fourth one. Big Joe remained motionless but began to speak. His scalp bristled at the growling voice.

"If the intruder makes an error,

Big Joe will kill."

Standing tense, ready to leap back to the corridor, he touched the square again. The motionless behemoth repeated the grim warning.

Asir tried to reach the square diagonally right from the fifth, but could not without stepping up to the third. Taking a deep breath, he stepped up and extended the pike cautiously, keeping his eyes on Big Joe. The pike rapped the floor.

"If the intruder makes an error, Big Joe will kill."

But the huge figure remained in his place.

STARTING from the first square, the path went left, straight, right, right, right. And after zero, the numbers went 1, 2, 3, 3, 3. Apparently he had found the key. One meant a square to the southeast; two meant south; and three southwest. Shivering, he moved up to the fifth square upon which the monster growled his first warning. He looked back at the door, then at Big Joe. The taloned hands could grab him before he could dive back into the corridor.

He hesitated. He could either turn back now, or gamble his life on the accuracy of the tentative belief. The girl was calling to him again.

"Come to the end of the corridor!" he replied.

She came hurriedly, to his surprise.

"No!" he bellowed. "Stay back of the entrance! Not on the tile! No!"

Slowly she withdrew the foot that

hung poised over a trigger-tile.

"You can't come in unless you know how," he gasped.

She blinked at him and glanced nervously back over her shoulder. "But I hear them. They're coming down the stairs."

Asir cursed softly. Now he *had* to go ahead.

"Wait just a minute," he said. "Then I'll show you how to come through."

He advanced to the last tile that he had tested and stopped. The next two numbers were two—for straight ahead. And they would take him within easy reach of the long taloned arms of the murderous sentinel. He glanced around in fright at the crushed bones scattered across the floor. Some were human. Others were animal-sacrifices tossed in by the priests.

He had tested only one two—back near the door. If he made a mistake, he would never escape; no need bothering with the pike.

He stepped to the next tile and closed his eyes.

"If the intruder makes an error, Big Joe will kill."

He opened his eyes again and heaved a breath of relief.

"Asir! They're getting closer! I can hear them!"

He listened for a moment. A faint murmur of angry voices in the distance. "All right," he said calmly. "Step only on the tiles I tell you. See the gray one at the left of the door?"

She pointed. "This one?"

"Yes, step on it."

The girl moved up and stared fearfully at the monstrous sentinel. He guided her up toward him.

"Diagonally left—one ahead—diagonally right. Now don't be frightened when he speaks—"

The girl came on until she stood one square behind him. Her quick frightened breathing blended with the growing sounds of shouting from the stairway. He glanced up at Big Joe, noticing for the first time that the steel jaws were stained with a red-brown crust. He shuddered.

The grim chess-game continued a cautious step at a time, with the girl following one square behind him. What if she fainted again? And fell across a triggered tile? They passed within a foot of Big Joe's arm.

Looking up, he saw the monster's eyes move—following them, scrutinizing them as they passed. He froze.

"We want no plunder," he said to the machine.

The gaze was steady and unwinking.

"The air is leaking away from the world."

The monster remained silent.

"Hurry!" whimpered the girl. Their pursuers were gaining rapidly and they had crossed only half the distance to the opposing doorway. Progress was slower now, for Asir needed occasionally to repeat through the whole series of numbers, looking back to count squares and make certain that the next step was not a fatal one.

"They won't dare to come in after us," he said hopefully.

"And if they do?"

"If the intruder makes an error, Big Joe will kill," announced the machine as Asir took another step.

"Eight squares to go!" he muttered, and stopped to count again.

"Asir! They're in the corridor!"

Hearing the rumble of voices, he looked back to see blue-robed men spilling out of the stairway and milling down the corridor toward the room. But halfway down the hall, the priests paused—seeing the unbelievable: two intruders walking safely past their devil-god. They growled excitedly among themselves. Asir took another step. Again the machine voiced the monotonous warning.

"If the intruder makes an error . . ."

HEARING their deity speak, the priests of Big Joe babbled wildly and withdrew a little. But one, more impulsive than the rest, began shrieking.

"Kill the intruders! Cut them down with your spears!"

Asir glanced back to see two of them racing toward the room, lances cocked for the throw. If a spear struck a trigger-tile—

"Stop!" he bellowed, facing around.

The two priests paused. Wondering if it would result in his sudden death, he rested a hand lightly against the huge steel arm of the robot, then leaned against it. The huge eyes were staring down at him, but Big Joe did not move.

The spearmen stood frozen, gaping at the thief's familiarity with the horrendous hulk. Then, slowly they backed away.

Continuing his bluff, he looked up at Big Joe and spoke in a loud voice. "If they throw their spears

or try to enter, kill them."

He turned his back on the throng in the hall and continued the cautious advance. Five to go, four, three, two—

He paused to stare into the room beyond. Gleaming machinery—all silent—and great panels, covered with a multitude of white circles and dials. His heart sank. If here lay the magic that controlled the Blaze of the Great Wind, he could never hope to re-ignite it.

He stepped through the doorway, and the girl followed. Immediately the robot spoke like low thunder.

"The identity of the two technologists is recognized. Hereafter they may pass with impunity. Big Joe is charged to ask the following: why do the technologists come, when it is not yet time?"

Staring back, Asir saw that the robot's head had turned so that he was looking directly back at the thief and the girl. Asir also saw that someone had approached the door again. Not priests, but townspeople.

He stared, recognizing the Chief Commoner, and the girl's father Welkir, three other Senior Kinsmen, and—Slubil, the executioner who had nailed him to the post.

"Father! Stay back."

Welkir remained silent, glaring at them. He turned and whispered to the Chief Commoner. The Chief Commoner whispered to Slubil. The executioner nodded grimly and took a short-axe from his belt thong. He stepped through the entrance, his left foot striking the zero-tile. He peered at Big Joe and saw that the monster remained mo-

tionless. He grinned at the ones behind him, then snarled in Asir's direction.

"You're sentence has been changed, thief."

"Don't try to cross, Slubil!" Asir barked.

Slubil spat, brandished the axe, and stalked forward. Big Joe came up like a resurrection of fury, and his bellow was explosive in the vaults. Slubil froze, then stupidly drew back his axe.

Asir gasped as the talons closed. He turned away quickly. Slubil's scream was cut off abruptly by a ripping sound, then a series of dull cracks and snaps. The girl shrieked and closed her eyes. There were two distinct thuds as Big Joe tossed Slubil aside.

The priests and the townspeople—all except Welkir—had fled from the corridor and up the stairway. Welkir was on his knees, his hands covering his face.

"Mara!" he moaned. "My daughter."

"Go back, Father," she called.

Dazed, the old man picked himself up weakly and staggered down the corridor toward the stairway. When he passed the place of the first warning voice, the robot moved again—arose slowly and turned toward Asir and Mara who backed quickly away, deeper into the room of strange machines. Big Joe came lumbering slowly after them.

Asir looked around for a place to flee, but the monster stopped in the doorway. He spoke again, a mechanical drone like memorized ritual.

Big Joe is charged with announc-

ing his function for the intelligence of the technologists. His primary function is to prevent the entrance of possibly destructive organisms into the vaults containing the control equipment for the fusion reaction which must periodically renew atmospheric oxygen. His secondary function is to direct the technologists to records containing such information as they may need. His tertiary function is to carry out simple directions given by the technologists if such directions are possible to his limited design.

Asir stared at the lumbering creature and realized for the first time that it was not alive, but only a machine built by the ancients to perform specific tasks. Despite the fresh redness about his hands and jaws, Big Joe was no more guilty of Slubil's death than a grinding mill would be if the squat sadist had climbed into it while the Marsoxen were yoked to the crushing roller.

Perhaps the ancients had been unnecessarily brutal in building such a guard—but at least they had built him to look like a destroyer, and to give ample warning to the intruder. Glancing around at the machinery, he vaguely understood the reason for Big Joe. Such metals as these would mean riches for swordmakers and smiths and plunderers of all kinds.

ASIR straightened his shoulders and addressed the machine. "Teach us how to kindle the Blaze of the Great Wind."

"Teaching is not within the designed functions of Big Joe. I am charged to say: the renewal reac-

tion should not be begun before the Marsyear 6,000, as the builders reckoned time."

Asir frowned. The years were no longer numbered, but only named in honor of the Chief Commoners who ruled the villages. "How long until the year 6,000?" he asked.

Big Joe clucked like an adding machine. "Twelve Marsyears, technologist."

Asir stared at the complicated machinery. Could they learn to operate it in twelve years? It seemed impossible.

"How can we begin to learn?" he asked the robot.

"This is an instruction room, where you may examine records. The control mechanisms are installed in the deepest vault."

Asir frowned and walked to the far end of the hall where another door opened into—another anteroom with another Big Joe! As he approached the second robot spoke:

"If the intruder has not acquired the proper knowledge, Big Oswald will kill."

Thunderstruck, he leaped back from the entrance and swayed heavily against an instrument panel. The panel lit up and a polite recorded voice began reading something about "President Snell's role in the Eighth World War". He lurched away from the panel and stumbled back toward Mara who sat glumly on the foundation slap of a weighty machine.

"What are you laughing about?" she muttered.

"We're still in the first grade!" he groaned, envisioning a sequence of rooms. "We'll have to learn the

magic of the ancients before we pass to the next."

"The ancients weren't so great," she grumbled. "Look at the mural on the wall."

Asir looked, and saw only a strange design of circles about a bright splash of yellow that might have been the sun. "What about it?" he asked.

"My father taught me about the planets," she said. "That is supposed to be the way they go around the sun."

"What's wrong with it?"

"One planet too many," she said. "Everyone knows that there is only an asteroid belt between Mars and Venus. The picture shows a planet there."

Asir shrugged indifferently, being interested only in the machinery. "Can't you allow them one small mistake?"

"I suppose." She paused, gazing miserably in the direction in which her father had gone. "What do we do now?"

Asir considered it for a long time. Then he spoke to Big Joe. "You will come with us to the village."

The machine was silent for a moment, then: "*There is an apparent contradiction between primary and tertiary functions. Request priority decision by technologist.*"

Asir failed to understand. He repeated his request: The robot

turned slowly and stepped through the doorway. He waited.

Asir grinned. "Let's go back up," he said to the girl.

She arose eagerly. They crossed the anteroom to the corridor and began the long climb toward the surface, with Big Joe lumbering along behind.

"What about your banishment, Asir?" she asked gravely.

"Wait and see." He envisioned the pandemonium that would reign when girl, man, and robot marched through the village to the council house, and he chuckled. "I think that I shall be the next Chief Commoner," he said. "And my councilmen will all be thieves."

"Thieves!" she gasped. "Why?"

"Thieves who are not afraid to steal the knowledge of the gods—and become technologists, to kindle the Blaze of the Winds."

"What is a 'technologist', Asir?" she asked worshipfully.

Asir glowered at himself for blundering with words he did not understand, but could not admit ignorance to Mara who clung tightly to his arm. "I think," he said, "that a technologist is a thief who tells the gods what to do."

"Kiss me, Technologist," she told him in a small voice.

Big Joe clanked to a stop to wait for them to move on. He waited a long time.

*Here was a test for the bravest of explorers.
A monster that prowled a grim planet and
hid behind phantoms.*

THE BEAST

By John W. Jakes

THE FORWARD cabin of the little ship was unbearably hot. Corrigan and Wingfield sat stripped to the waist, their fingers working numbly on the keys of the data recorders in each wall. Beyond the curving glass of the cabin window lay the arid noonday wilderness of the tiny world, a rocky jumbled wasteland sweltering under an immense yellow sun.

Corrigan sighed loudly and pushed back his sandy hair. "Joe, I quit. It's just too damned hot."

Wingfield, a squat dark-haired man with large black eyes and a weak, shapeless mouth, turned around and stared at him. "Cut it out, Vince," he said in a wheedling tone. "We've only got two more days to chart this place and move on. After all, there are six more hunks of stuff around this sun, and we've got to do them all this trip."

Wearily, Corrigan nodded and

turned back to the keys. They were filmed with a faint coating of sweat. If all the other six are like this, Corrigan thought grimly, we'll go nuts. Nothing but heat and yellow desert. No life of any kind, or at least none we've seen. Well, it would be better to get it over. He set his fingers down on the keys and began to type, wrinkling his nose at the fetid sweaty smell of the cabin. He wondered idly how long it would be before the walls melted.

A few minutes later Wingfield spoke to him. "Hey, Vince."

Corrigan turned around again, grateful for the relief. "What is it?"

"I just thought of something. Morse isn't back yet."

Corrigan frowned. "He can take care of himself. Where'd he go?"

"Out to check some of the rock formations up the hill."

Corrigan gestured aimlessly. "Don't worry." Morse was a big

*Her pleading stayed his hand.
When he fired, it was too late.*



Leona H. Coe

man, heavy-bodied and efficient. Of them all, Corrigan thought—of the three of them in Galactic Mapping Ship Number Eighteen—Morse was the most capable.

"That was an hour and a half ago," Wingfield said scowling. "He should be back. I—I didn't think about it. I got so busy working that I didn't remember about him."

"It's too hot for thinking," Corrigan said sourly, "Your brains fry." He got up from the recorder. "Come on, let's go have a look. Only don't bitch about not getting any work done." Deep down, Corrigan was glad for a chance to go outside, even if the heat was worse. The routine monotony of the job was beginning to wear on all of them.

Wingfield reached into a wall locker and extracted one of the big-barreled magnesium fire rifles. "I think I'll take this along," he said as they headed for the port. "Just in case."

"There isn't anything to shoot," Corrigan said, pulling the port open. "Not a living thing. Just rocks and desert and that sun." He dropped to the ground and immediately felt the blood begin to heat within his body.

Fifty yards below the place where the ship lay settled on the side of the hill, the bluff dropped away steeply. And far down lay the desolate yellow wasteland of a valley. That valley as yet remained unexplored.

THEY WENT around the ship, Corrigan in front, and started up the hillside. They picked their

way among the large porous boulders, each of them the same yellowish hue of the sun. They had gone about five hundred yards when Corrigan stopped, sniffing. His stomach turned over inside of him.

"Wingfield," he said. "Smell that?"

Wingfield turned his head from side to side. "Sweet . . ." he said softly. "I've smelled that stuff before, or something like it. What is it?"

Corrigan leaned up against a boulder and looked straight at his companion. "You'll think I'm crazy, but it smells like some kind of dope. Martian hashish, maybe. I've smelled it in plenty of dives back in the System."

Wingfield nodded. "It's not exactly the same, though. There's something—well—" He fumbled for a word and then laughed sheepishly. "—different."

Corrigan thought silently for a minute. He gazed up at the yellow ball of the sun and said, "That means something grows in this place. Something's alive, to make that smell."

"I don't know," Wingfield said dubiously. "It might be anything. You can't make inferences about life outside our System on the basis of our own reference points. Things can just be too different."

"We never smelled it before!" Corrigan said testily. "I think we'd better look for Morse." He started up the hill.

They reached the top of the hill and looked around. Corrigan went in one direction, Wingfield the opposite way. They searched through

the fallen jumble of yellow rocks for ten minutes. Then Corrigan heard Wingfield calling him.

"Hey Vince. Come here. Quick!"

He went at a trot. He could see Wingfield's head above one of the boulders. Wingfield was staring at the ground, his eyes wide with sick horror. Corrigan jumped a pile of small boulders and came up to him.

"What's wrong, Joe, what—"

Corrigan looked down.

It was Morse, lying on his back, eyes wide open as he stared unblinkingly into the heart of the yellow sun. He'd been cut, slashed—mutilated to a point beyond all comprehension.

"His lips are moving," Corrigan whispered. "Look at them."

"Maybe he's trying to tell us something."

Corrigan knelt down, trying to keep from feeling sick. He put his ear close to Morse's mouth and listened. A minute later he got up and faced Wingfield. "He keeps mumbling. I caught a couple of things. He said *big* and *black animal* and *I saw my wife*."

"The heat," Wingfield muttered thinly. "The heat got him. He fell."

"Don't be stupid," Corrigan snarled. "Something tore his belly open. Something *alive*!"

Morse was scrabbling in the yellow dust, trying to raise himself on his elbows. He screamed in a final burst of strength. "I saw my wife! I saw her!" And then he fell back. A fine powdery cloud of yellow dust rose about his body. He would not speak nor move again.

"Something alive killed him," Corrigan said again. The narcotic smell of the air made him sick. He

tried to think clearly. Wingfield stood by, staring at the corpse who had been their friend, holding tightly to the stock of the magnesium rifle.

"I guess we'd better go back to the ship and find something to bury him with," Corrigan said, thinking aloud. He hesitated. "No—we could put him in the refrigerator locker and take him back to the System for burial. I think—"

Suddenly, Wingfield yelled out—incoherently.

CORRIGAN whirled, staring to where his companion pointed. His eyes swept up the curve of the large boulder directly above them. His body went cold, even in the heat of the yellow sun. Wingfield made little whimpering noises.

The beast crouched on top of the boulder, watching them with huge bonfire eyes. It was over twelve feet long, built like some fantastic dark panther, with burnished ebony flanks that shone in the sunlight. A long barbed tail switched in the air behind it. Its claws caressed the surface of the boulder, making tiny scratching sounds, and its jaws hung open.

Corrigan and Wingfield stood frozen, watching the alien thing in horror. Corrigan could see the blood on its claws, smell the overpowering narcotic odor rising from its skin. Slowly the muscles in its hide began to ripple. Corrigan knew it was going to spring.

Wingfield was somewhere behind him with the rifle. Corrigan whispered loudly, "Shoot, Joe."

He heard Wingfield giggle. "It's

Tommy. Hello, Tommy. And Jane. What are you two doing here?"

The beast was rising now, gathering strength to come slashing down on them in its black sleek fury. Corrigan whirled around. The magnesium rifle lay where it had fallen and Wingfield was giggling and pointing his finger at the side of the boulder. "Hello Tommy boy, how are you?"

"Joe!" Corrigan grated. "Pick up—" He stopped. Behind him he heard the beast snarl.

There was no time for Wingfield now. Corrigan leaped forward, shoving him out of the way. One hand scooped up the rifle even as he was turning. The beast leaped from the boulder as Corrigan raised the rifle. The black body was above him when he slapped the trigger bar.

A ball of white fire whined upward and smashed into the black stomach. The beast squalled as Corrigan dived from its path. Then it was gone. Corrigan's shot had saved his own life but it hadn't bagged the game.

Shaken, he turned to Wingfield who was nodding his head vacantly.

"Why didn't you use the rifle?" Corrigan said angrily.

"I couldn't. My little boy Tommy was standing right there with Jane—plain as day." He pointed at the boulder.

"You're crazy," Corrigan said. He felt weak and terrified from the experience. He wondered if he had killed the beast or merely wounded it. "We'd better get back to the ship," he said. Wingfield nodded emphatically.

"I'm sure it was they," he said.

Corrigan had his own ideas. As he trudged along, he thought of the tiny blue Martian *tkriss* cats who possessed the power of seeking into a human mind, lighting upon a thought-image and conjuring it up by some hypnotic process before the watcher's eyes. The beast was evidently a much higher variation of the phenomenon.

AS THEY walked down the hill, Corrigan noticed large sticky stains on the sand at regular intervals. He knelt down and sniffed. The narcotic stench filled his nostrils. He got up and said to Wingfield, "I shot the thing in the stomach. It must still be alive."

"Listen, Vince," Wingfield protested, "I saw Tommy and Jane. I swear to God I did. Please believe me! And what was it that Morse said? He saw his wife?"

"I believe you," Corrigan said. His mind raced ahead. The wound trail led down the hill past the ship and over the edge of the bluff. Leaving Wingfield outside, Corrigan hurried into the ship and returned with field glasses. The two men went to the edge of the bluff and Corrigan raised the glasses to his eyes, staring down to the yellow sunburnt valley.

"There!" he exclaimed. The beast was moving slowly over the floor of the valley, its black coat shimmering in the sun, the trail of narcotic life fluid leaking from the wound along the ground. He turned to Wingfield.

"We've got to go after it. Right now."

"W—what?"

"You heard me."

"Vince, we can't!" Wingfield's face contorted in terror. "It'll kill us. There's no sense. Look what it did to Morse. His stomach—oh—" He covered his face with his hands.

"I'm going anyway," Corrigan said. "It's wounded. It can be killed. And it may come back."

Wingfield clutched his arm. "You wouldn't leave me alone, would you?"

"I'm going after it," Corrigan said stubbornly, remembering the way Morse had laughed with them the night before. "You can do as you like."

Slowly Wingfield's shoulders formed a defeated curve. "I'll go with you," he muttered. "What other choice have I got?"

Corrigan said nothing. The two men stood on the lip of the cliff for a few more minutes, gazing out at the yellow alien desert below where the black dot that was the beast moved slowly, painfully toward the bluffs ringing the desert on the opposite side.

Corrigan wondered absently what image the beast would pick from his mind. Probably his wife, back in the System. He remembered her accurately. Slender, corn-colored hair, the slightly prominent nose, the always-smiling mouth.

The beast was clever. It could keep its fiery yellow desert kingdom to itself, free from alien invaders in silver rockets. Create the image, confuse, and divert attention. The frightened victim feared for himself as well as for the terribly real image, suddenly created and dreadfully concrete. "Lord!" Corrigan

muttered, "can any man stand against it?" He knew full well what Wingfield had gone through. And Morse, before he had died.

"We'd better get started," he said. "And we'd better take a couple of extra rifles along."

They started back up the hill toward the ship. The round yellow sun burned down on their backs, making the sweat run. Corrigan thought of the beast and wondered how he would feel when they caught up with it, watching his wife being stalked. Could he remember the image was not real? He wondered—about both himself and Wingfield.

They picked up enough food supplies from the rocket to last them overnight. Wingfield strapped the pack onto his back. Corrigan took two fully loaded magnesium fire rifles in addition to the one Wingfield carried. They started down the steep side of the bluff, following the trail of the wound in the hot light of mid-afternoon.

When they reached the valley floor and began to trudge through the sand in the path the beast had taken, Wingfield spoke for the first time.

"Vince, *why* do we have to go after it?"

"The thing killed Morse."

"But couldn't we just get in the ship and jet off and do the rest of the mapping from the air? That way it couldn't come back to get us. We'd be safe."

Corrigan shook his head doggedly. There was a basic bitterness in his eyes Wingfield had noticed before; deep, as though long-rooted and grown over through the years.

"I'm going on. The thing killed Morse. He was my friend, Joe."

"He was mine too," Wingfield whined, "but I want to stay alive. I want to—"

"Shut up," Corrigan said sharply. His feet sloughed through the sand.

Wingfield said something under his breath.

THEY walked for two more hours. The sun became unbearably hot and Corrigan felt as though his brain was frying slowly. His eyes hurt and the yellow landscape became shot through with deep flashes of crimson. Wingfield breathed loudly and kept falling behind. The muscles in Corrigan's legs ached, but he kept moving, holding one of the rifles in his right hand. The other was slung across his back.

Wingfield dropped his canteen. "The hills aren't getting any nearer. My canteen's empty."

Corrigan turned on him angrily. "You know I didn't bring mine. That water was for both of us."

"I can't help it," Wingfield said angrily. "I was thirsty, Vince. I can't help it." They staggered on for a few more minutes, finally coming to the top of a sloping rise.

They stood there panting heavily. Suddenly Wingfield cried, "Look, Vince, look!"

The city lay on the desert a half a mile away.

It lay white and sparkling and cool in the sun, white terrace on white terrace, utterly alien and strange in the middle of the burn-

ing yellow sand. The buildings towered up and up, their white marble walls covered with cool green vines. Fountains played with flashes of crystal and blue on the terraces. The city stood entirely deserted.

"Look at those fountains!" Wingfield shouted. "There's your water for you!" he began to run.

Corrigan followed him, vaguely troubled. There was something about the city that he did not like, something that gave him a strange feeling of evil when he thought about it. But he did not stop running. The water was inviting and he could almost hear its musical splashing as they reached the first of the buildings.

The trail of the beast vanished at the edge of the city. Corrigan hardly noticed it. The streets through which they walked were shadowed and cool. They moved slowly now, savoring the blue coolness of those shadows, shrinking from the occasional patches of sunlight cutting down between the terraces. The city was refreshing, a dream-like haven in its quietness.

"It's wonderful!" Wingfield breathed. "So still and peaceful. I want to find one of those fountains."

They rounded a corner into an open court. White marble terraces faced a large circular pool of deep blue water with an ornate fountain in its center. Wingfield staggered forward, dropping his pack on the ground, leaving the rifle with it and rushing forward. He fell on his stomach, his mouth close to the pool's edge.

Corrigan, a few feet behind him, heard him cry out.

THE BEAST rose from the center of the pool, cleaving the water cleanly, not making a single ripple in the calm liquid surface. Its eyes glared balefully and the black tail twitched. Wingfield staggered back, grabbing up his rifle as the beast advanced slowly, making snuffling sounds.

Suddenly Corrigan knew what was wrong. *The city*. The city was the Martian ruins at Red Sands, back in the System. He had visited the place as a boy. It was one of thousands of memories in his brain and the beast had chosen it . . . *my God*, Corrigan thought, *the selectivity and the power*. . . .

"There's Tommy!" Wingfield shouted. Corrigan jammed the rifle butt against his hip but he was powerless to slap the trigger bar. The beast stood at the edge of the pool now, snarling.

"Get back!" Corrigan's words were a moan.

"I can't shoot!" Wingfield screamed. "Tommy's right in front of him!"

"Not Tommy," Corrigan sobbed. "Anne! Anne!"

Wingfield's body blocked his view of the beast. Corrigan ran a few steps to the right, shouting warnings to his companion. But Wingfield was making motions in the air as if he were struggling with an invisible human being.

Corrigan raised the gun again. He girded his will—strained against it—trying to fire. He could not.

The beast crouched now, slaver-ing—sure of its power. And around about them, the city began to crumble away. The fountains dried up; the vines and the plants with-

ered to nothing. Only the beast remained, crouching in the sun, its bonfire eyes shining.

Corrigan wept. He was powerless to fire. His arms sagged. Now Anne stood before the beast, her hair the exact corn color that he remembered. She wore the dress she had been wearing on the last day he had seen her, and she was smiling. The smile seemed suddenly insane. She stared at Corrigan and smiled.

It's not my wife, Corrigan's mind screamed. It's not my wife standing there holding me powerless. If I fire, my slug will *not* tear the life from her body! No! No! But he knew it would and he could not fire the gun.

An *image*. He thought of each letter of the word separately, thought of them and made pictures of them, big as the tallest buildings of Earth. He thought of the word in lights, billions of candle powers blinking on and off. *Image. Image. Image.*

But it did no good. No more good than it would have done Wingfield who was on his knees crooning to his loved ones.

The beast grinned hideously, and Corrigan knew it was well aware of its complete power. It crouched there, playing with them and it seemed to say to Corrigan:

You know she's false but it does you no good—that knowledge. My power lies deeper. Your loyalty and love are your weaknesses now.

Its tail lashed and it seemed to be deciding which to kill first. It chose Corrigan, possibly from the instinct he was the stronger of the two, though it apparently made lit-

tle difference. It crept toward him, toying with him the while—playing with him.

And Corrigan grinned. He raised his gun and sent five flaming slugs from its muzzle to smash the slaver's maw until the great beast-skull was a red stub spouting blood. He lowered the rifle, still grinning without mirth.

"You're a stronger man than I am," Wingfield said. He looked as though he had passed through a long and wasting illness.

"No. Weaker, if anything."

"You fired at it twice."

"The first time it hadn't concentrated on me."

"But the second time it did."

"When it showed me Anne, I was helpless."

"But—"

"It got cocky. It wouldn't let well enough alone."

"I don't get it."

Corrigan did not answer directly. He stared straight ahead through bleak eyes. "My father was the devil's own nephew. It was bad for me. Worse for my mother. She died very young."

"Good God! You mean—"

"I've often regretted passing up the chances I had to kill my father."

After a while they got back to the ship. They climbed in and sailed away with the body of Morse in the ice box.

—————THE END—————

A chat with the editor . . .

Continued from page 56

All of us here in Kingston are going to make IF better and better as the days go by. We understand full well that thirty-five cents is not easily come by in these times of ever rising costs. So every one of our issues must be the best that can be bought or we wouldn't feel very happy about taking your money.

DID IT ever occur to you how many different tastes are catered to by the corner newsstand? It was brought home to me rather forcibly by the fact that IF's companion mag is a book of strange

and mysterious true stories titled STRANGE. It is edited by Jim Quinn and has caused me to be thrown into contact with several top name writers. Fine fellows, all, and no mean manipulators on the typewriter, but their field of operation and mine are so utterly alien to each other that we scarcely spoke the same language.

The specialized fiction fields include love stories, detective stories, sport yarns, true confessions and true crime, to name but a few. A complete list would fill a directory.

However, you and I both know what all those readers are missing. Aren't you glad you're a science-fiction fan?

—PWF

GUEST EDITORIAL

By James V. Taurasi

Editor Fantasy Times

NUMBERING only about 50 members in the late 30s, organized fandom is still small compared with the readership of sf magazines, but 2,000 experts on science fiction are a great help to the editors and publishers who want to know what their 80,000 more or less readers want. And that is just what fandom is; a core of experts, who make a hobby of reading, collecting and commenting on science-fiction.

Do they render the sf editor any worthwhile service? You bet they do. Besides telling the editors their wants and dislikes they mirror the likes and dislikes of the readership. They also keep a weather eye open for any author who might slip in a plagiarized story. An example of this is the case of an Australian science fiction magazine, where a few authors were copying American sf stories and selling them as their own. A science fiction fan armed with a collection of USA science-fiction magazines showed the Australian editor what was going on, and of course the authors were given the gate. In years past, right here in the USA, it was the work of sf fans that obtained payment for

stories for the authors when the publisher of certain sf magazines was slow in doing so. Also this group, through their amateur publications, keep the editors and publishers informed of what goes on in the field. Many editors and publishers would never know their magazines were being reprinted legally or otherwise, outside the United States if it was not for the fan collector.

FANDOM is not organized under one unit, as many readers are led to believe, because the members of science fiction fandom, just can't agree. They—like the general readership—have different ideas of what a story should be, and their likes and dislikes differ a great deal. No one group of fandom will give the editor any idea of what to print, but fandom as a whole will give the editor a good idea of what the readers want. And unlike the regular readers, this group will not just stop reading the magazine if they are displeased. Fandom will howl plenty and make sure the editors know about it. A wise sf editor will keep himself informed on what fan-

dom thinks of his magazine, and thus know what his readers think.

And, let's not forget the advertising angle in connection with stf fandom. Free advertising is given to the professional magazines amounting to thousands of dollars by the activities of stf fandom. Each year, for example, the fans hold a world stf convention. Usually this brings about newspaper, radio, television and magazine reports. Who gains by these reports? The professional magazines of course. Sure, some editors will state that they were the ones who steered the reporters to the conventions to get those writeups. Right they are, but try and get those writeups without the convention! Also most editors are cooperative in aiding the conventions with donations of illustrations, manuscripts and covers. These donations are the main means of paying off a convention. But the auction of these items gives that professional magazine more publicity than that money could ever obtain.

ACTUALLY the cooperation between fandom and the professionals has always been very high and gets stronger every year. Both the fans and the editors realize that neither can get along without the other. Fandom is only there because there are science fiction magazines and books. Without them, fandom would soon die out. This almost happened in Australia when a ban was put on all stf magazines coming in from the USA. A relaxing of this ban, plus the birth of an Australian stf magazine, saved fandom there

from an untimely death. The same thing would happen in the United States and England if all professional magazines should fold. While on the other hand if all stf fandom should quit, the profession magazines would in a short time lose all their sparkle and pep and become as any other pulp magazine. This zombie-like existence would cause many to lose much of their general readers and thus fold.

LIKE any other group, fandom has its own quota of crack-pots and drive not only the rest of fandom, but the professional editors to the nearest bar. But fandom has a way to clean its own house and these crack-pots either change their tunes or drop out. Fandom also has a way to clean up the professional field when the editor gets out of line and forgets that he is supposed to edit a science fiction magazine. Certain editors have found out what it is to have a large group of fans on their necks. The pressure that fandom can bring about is enormous. With their 200 plus amateur magazines and thousands of letters, they can make and have made many an editor cry "uncle" and wish he had never gotten off the straight and narrow path of science fiction.

All in all, we have a unique situation found in no other field of literature. A situation that will lift our brand of literature to heights never even dreamed about in other fields. A situation where both the editors and readers gain. A situation that could never be applied to any other field. Fandom—the watch-dog of science fiction.



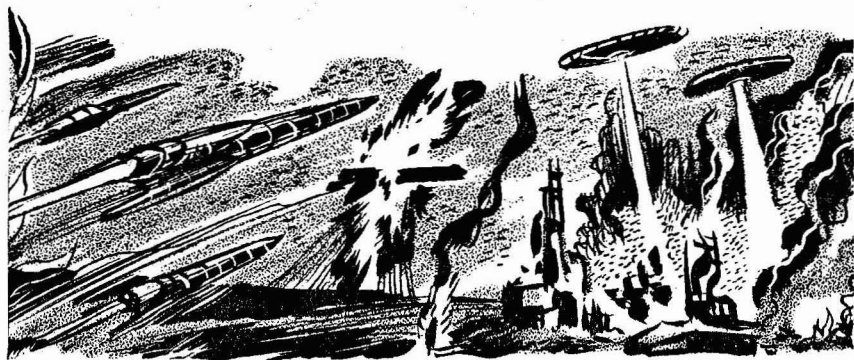
"You must kill Koski," the leader said. "But I'll be dead before I get there," Buckmaster replied. "What's that got to do with it?" the leader wanted to know.

Infinity's Child

By Charles V. DeVet

THE SENSE of taste was always first to go. For a week Buckmaster had ignored the fact that everything he ate tasted like flavorless gruel. He tried to make himself believe that it was some minor disorder of his glandular system. But

the eighth day his second sense—that of feeling—left him and he staggered to his telephone in blind panic. There was no doubt now but that he had the dread Plague. He was glad he had taken the precaution of isolating himself from his



family. He knew there was no hope for him now.

They sent the black wagon for him.

In the hospital he found himself herded with several hundred others into a ward designed to hold less than a hundred. The beds were crowded together and he could have reached to either side of him and touched another ravaged victim of the Plague.

Next to go would be his sense of sight. Hope was a dead thing within him. Even to think of hoping made him realize how futile it would be.

He screamed when the walls of darkness began to close in around him. It was the middle of the afternoon and a shaft of sunlight fell across the grimy blankets on his bed. The sunlight paled, then darkened, and was gone. He screamed again. And again.

He heard them move him to the death ward then, but he could not even feel their hands upon him.

Three days later his tongue refused to form words. He fought a nameless terror as he strove with all the power of his will to speak. If he could say only one word, he felt, the encroaching disease would have to retreat and he would be safe. But the one word would not come.

Four horrible days later the sounds around him—the screams and the muttering—became fainter, and he faced the beginning of the end.

At last it was all over. He knew he was still alive because he thought. But that was all. He could not see, hear, speak, feel, or taste. Nothing was left except thought; stark, terrible, useless thought!

Strangely the awful horror faded then and his mind experienced a grateful release. At first he suspected the outlet of his emotions had somehow become atrophied as had his senses, and that he was peaceful only because his real feelings could not break through the numbness.

However, some subtle compulsion within him—some power struggling in its birth-throes—was beginning to breed its own energy and he sensed that it was the strength of that compulsion that had subdued the terror.

He was at peace now, as he had never been at peace before. For a time, he did not question—was entirely content to lie there and savor the wonderful feeling. He had lost even the definition of fear. No terror now from the slow closing of the five doors; no regrets; no forebodings. Only a vast happiness as he seemingly viewed life, suffering, and death as a man standing on a cliff looking out over a great misty valley.

But soon came wonder and analysis. He looked backward and thought: *It was a world, but not my world. These are memories but not my memories. I lived them and knew them—yet none of them belongs to me. Strange—this soul-fiber with which I think—the last function left to me—is not a soul-fiber I have ever known before.*

And he knew.

I have never existed before this moment.

He could not prove it nor explain it there in the dark house of his thinking. But he knew it was true.

He wondered if he had taken

over the body and mind—complete with all the mental trappings—of some other being. Or whether he had been just now conceived, full-blown and with memories of a synthetic past perhaps implanted also in the minds of those with whom he was supposed to have come in contact. He did not know. He was only sure that, before this moment, he had not been.

WITH the realization came the certainty that he would not die. The force he felt within him—he was not certain whether it was a part of himself, or the evidence of an outside control—was too powerful.

The inner spontaneity gathered strength until it became a striving, persistent vital force, a will of imperious purpose. It moved him and he moved his tongue and spoke. "I will not die!" he shouted.

Some time later he grew aware that his sense of hearing had returned. He heard a voice say, "He was in the last stages about an hour ago, before he spoke. I thought I'd better call you."

"You did right," a second voice answered. "What's his name?"

"Clifford Buckmaster."

They're talking about me, he thought. Like a burst of glory, sight returned. He looked up and saw two men standing beside his bed. The older man wore a plain black suit. The younger was dressed in the white uniform of a doctor.

"He can see now," the older man said. His was a voice Buckmaster disliked.

"It looks as if he's going to re-

cover," the doctor said. "That's never happened before. Do you want me to leave him here with the dying ones?"

"No. Wheel him into your office. And leave us alone there. My name is James Wagner. You have, of course, heard of me. I am the Director of Security."

Buckmaster still rested in his hospital bed. They had screwed up the back until he sat almost straight. In his mouth there was a slight tang and knew the sense of taste returned. When he was able to feel again he would be entirely well. Yes, he'd heard of Wagner before. He nodded.

"And I know who you are," Wagner said. "You are one of the Underground that is trying to overthrow the General. That is correct, is it not?"

Almost with surprise Buckmaster felt Wagner's words register in his mind. His implanted memories were still strange to him. But he recalled them quickly.

Twenty years before, in 1979, the great Atomic War had ended. In the beginning the two giants faced each other across the separating oceans. No one was certain who sent the first bomb across in its controlled rocket; each side blamed the other.

The methods of each were terrible in their efficiency. The great manufacturing cities were the first to go. After them went the vital transportation centers.

Striving mightily for an early advantage each country forced landing armies on the enemy's shores. The armies invaded with their hundreds of thousands of men—and

the bombings continued.

The colossus of the western hemisphere had set up autonomous launching stations, so that if and when their major cities had all been bombed, their ruling bodies decimated and scattered—even if there were no longer any vestiges of a central authority—the launchings would continue.

The autonomous units had been a stroke of master planning, so ingenious that it was logical the giant of Eurasia had devised a similar plan.

BY THE time the bombs had all been used, or their stations rendered incapable of functioning, the major cities were blackened, gutted, inoperative masses of destruction. Soon the invading armies no longer received orders, or supplies of rations and arms. When this happened they knew governments they represented had ceased to exist. They were forced to live by the ingenuity of their commanders and their ability to forage. They could not even capitulate; there was no one to whom they could surrender.

Those armies with weak commanders fell apart and one by one their men died at the hands of hostile natives, or hunger.

The armies under strong commanders, like General Andrei Koski, of the Eurasian command, carved themselves a place in their new environment.

Koski had landed with a force of seventy thousand on the east coast of old Mexico. His army was different from the other invaders

only in a secret weapon which they brought with them. The weapon's appearance was simple but it carried the potentiality of destruction for a world.

Acting under previous orders from his government, Koski began moving northward, and was soon cutting a swath a hundred miles wide up the west bank of the Mississippi. By the time he reached the southern border of Minnesota he realized from what he saw on all sides, that for all practical purposes the war was over. His only choice now was to find a means of survival for himself and his men.

When Koski reached Duluth he circled the city. Almost miraculously it had escaped the bombs. Its population was only a little over two hundred thousand, and Koski still retained nearly fifty thousand hardened fighting men.

However, Duluth, Koski found, was governed by Earl Olson, an ex-brigadier and a man equally as strong as himself. The city was fortified, and garrisoned by a force of well trained civilians who would fight to their death to defend their city and families. And they were well led by Olson.

Koski knew he could capture the city if he decided to, but the price would be too dear. He moved on along the lakeshore and took over the city of Superior. Here he entrenched himself solidly and set up an efficient military government.

By law every woman in the city still capable of bearing children was forced to take two husbands, at least one of which must be a Ruskie, as the invaders were called by the natives. In this way

Koski insured a plentiful supply of children, most of whom would be loyal to him.

A bonus of ten thousand dollars was offered to any woman from the outlying districts who would move to Superior and take two of its citizens in marriage. After the first hesitation, the girls and young women and widows flocked in from their barren farms and hamlets.

By the end of twenty years the city had grown to near one hundred fifty thousand.

Duluth in the meantime grew to three hundred thousand. Earl Olson ruled absolutely, but wisely and well. Between the two cities an alert truce held through the years and mutually advantageous trade flourished.

Koski, in his city, held all authority in his own tight grip, administered by his former officers and backed by the undeviating loyalty of his soldiers. His rule was stern and when necessary, bloody. It might have been bloodier except for the threat of intervention by Olson.

THERE ARE always men who fret under the hand of tyranny and the Underground had gradually risen until it grew into a powerful organization. Its demands were for a representative government chosen by vote of the people. This, of course, Koski refused. As a consequence the Underground formed an active resistance, with the avowed purpose of killing Koski. A retaliatory blood bath was prevented only by the threat of intervention by Olson, who had many

friends in the Underground, especially his brother-in-law, Lester Oliver.

But right now none of this seemed very important to Buckmaster. Not important enough for him to bother answering.

"Answer when you're spoken to!" Wagner roared.

For a moment Buckmaster deliberated not replying. Just how unusual was the difference he had discovered in himself? Could he be hurt by someone like Wagner? He decided to wait until later to put it to the test.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked.

"I'm going to lay my cards on the table," Wagner said. "I want you to come over to our side."

Still not very interested, Buckmaster asked, "Why should I?"

"I think I can give you some very good reasons. In fact, unless you're a bigger fool than I think you are, I can convince you that it is the only wise thing to do. Because of your relatively smaller numbers, the Plague has caused havoc in your Underground."

"Yes," Buckmaster answered. "But we will have a vaccine before long." He knew this was purely bluff.

"Possibly." Wagner pulled his cheeks up but his eyes remained chilled and cold. He had the trick of smiling mirthlessly. "But even if I were to grant you that, we estimate that already nearly half of your organization is dead from the Plague. There will be more before you can do anything. The rest we can hunt down at our leisure. So you see, even if we let you live,

you'd soon be a man without a party."

"We could start all over again if we had to." The first signs of feeling came back with a twinge of pain at the tip of the little finger on his left hand.

"I doubt it very much."

"What would I be expected to do?" Buckmaster asked.

"Simply this. Go back among your former comrades and act normal. But let me know what they're planning. In time we'd get them anyway, but with your help, the job will be easier—cleaner, let us say."

"In other words, you want me to act as the Judas ram?"

"Call it what you like," Wagner's eyes narrowed. "Just remember that you've nothing to lose."

"And after?"

"You can name your own price. Within reason, of course."

"And if I refuse?"

WAGNER LAUGHED. It wasn't necessary for him to answer. Buckmaster had seen the results of Wagner's sadism in the past. Whatever else might be mystifying to him he knew one thing: The instinct of self-preservation was still as strong as ever. He did not want to take the chance that the extraneous will he felt within him would be strong enough to combat what Wagner would try to do to him.

"Let's say I agree," he said.

"What comes next?"

"Can you move your limbs yet?" Wagner asked.

Buckmaster flexed his fingers and lifted his arms. "I believe I'm

strong enough to walk," he said.

"By the way," Wagner inquired, "have you any idea why you didn't die?"

Buckmaster shook his head.

"Well, no matter. Lie back and relax. Now look into my eyes. Concentrate on the right one."

Buckmaster knew what was coming now. Mind contact!

Subtly he felt the first tentative probe of Wagner's thought antenna. One part of his brain accepted it passively, but another part used the probe as a bridge.

Wagner's thoughts seemed unguarded. Buckmaster easily read everything there. He had to hide his surprise at what he learned. Things that Wagner, by no process of logic would ever reveal to him. Reflections concerning the Plague. Remembrances of snatches of conversation with the General. Wagner's relations with women. Sex occupied many of his thoughts. The fear of Olson was there, in spite of Wagner's brave words earlier.

Then Buckmaster read about himself in Wagner's mind and was certain something was wrong here. He saw that Wagner had no intention of ever letting him live, no matter how useful he might be. There was death for himself as soon as that usefulness was over.

"Damn it," Wagner cursed, "relax. Let your mind open up to me. Are you deliberately trying to get yourself back in trouble by being stubborn?"

Then he knew. The contact had been one-way. He had read Wagner's mind because Wagner had not realized he could do it, and had not thrown up a guard.

Cautiously Buckmaster let fragments of careful thoughts escape. The moment he lowered the barriers of his mind he felt Wagner's power beat against him, wave upon wave. The sensation was frightening.

Wagner seemed satisfied. Buckmaster could read very little in his mind now.

"Done," Wagner said. "Now, one last warning. Don't try to double-cross me, or you'll regret the day you were born."

Buckmaster's choices of action were very few. He doubted that he could make it but at least he should try to get to Duluth.

At the toll bridge across the arm of the lake he bought a ticket. Nobody bothered him. He breathed easier as he rested against the iron railing waiting for the gate to open; then stopped breathing as a tall man—one of the Ruskiens—leaned over beside him and said, "It won't work, friend."

Buckmaster tore up his ticket. Strangely, there was a sense of relief. The force—the presence within him—whatever it was, wanted him to return to his friends. It didn't compel him, it used no coercion. It merely presented good reasons for doing so. He could do more good there than by fleeing, it suggested. And, so strongly as almost to blot out all other emotions, was the implanted desire—an urgent, compelling command—to stay and kill Koski.

As Buckmaster started back, the thought struck him: Was he merely a pawn being moved by this inner power? Did he no longer have free-

dom of action? Was his will still his own?

WAGNER was annoyed to receive the summons from Koski. He fumed inwardly as he mounted the stairs to the General's second floor receiving room. It was always humiliating to be summoned like a common officer when he was in fact the ruler of the city.

Koski had slipped badly during the past few years but Wagner knew better than to put the old figurehead out of the way. He needed the power of that prestige until he had made his own position impregnable.

Originally Wagner had been an unlettered lad from the steppes. When he had been made Koski's orderly, he had used his native cunning and slyness to ingratiate himself with the old commander. Soon Koski had made him his personal adjutant. From that advantageous position of trust it had been relatively simple for him to use his insidious talents to secure advantages for himself.

During the process of organizing Superior's government Wagner had used his influence to get his own adherents appointed to key posts. By the time Koski began to succumb to the ravages of senility, Wagner held the most powerful position in the city—that of Security Administrator.

By now Koski was so far gone that he did not even realize he did not rule; that the city's functions had come under the control, direct and indirect, of Wagner.

"You wanted to see me, Sir?"

Wagner asked.

"Yes," the General answered, the shaggy hairs of his eyebrows meeting in a frown. "Have the doctors found a remedy for the Plague yet? It has gone so far now that soon the manpower we must have for the Campaign will be threatened."

"Not yet, Sir, but they are within sight of it." Wagner was always careful to keep the scorn he felt from his voice. The old dodderer was useful and must be pampered—for awhile.

The General still clung to his dream of the Campaign. His ultimate plan, from the time he had taken over Superior, had been to use the city as a base from which to spread his rule, until he had control of the entire continent—in the name of the mother country, of course. He had never let himself see that it was but a dream. He was certain that he would find other pockets of his fellow-men who, like himself had set up autonomous governments. With their aid he still hoped for an ultimate victory over the enemy. This would always remain enemy territory to him.

"If we don't stop the Plague before it spreads to our own men, I'll be forced to use the Weapon," Koski growled. His great bony features had lost all power of expression except their habitual scowl, but his voice was still deep and vibrant. "I'll kill every man, woman, and child in the country!"

Wagner had to admire the will to destruction that still rode the old man. He may have weakened in his mind but he had never softened. And the Weapon? It was the one secret that Wagner had not been

able to learn.

"Yes, Sir," Wagner agreed. "If you should ever feel the need to use the Weapon, I ask you to remember that my only wish is to be of aid to my General."

Koski's washed blue eyes grew crafty. "I fully realize that. But I will need no help. You may accept my compliments and withdraw."

Wagner muttered a soft oath under his breath as he bowed humbly.

"AS YOU can see, I didn't die," Buckmaster said. The two chairs in the small room were occupied by the men he faced. He sat on a steel-framed bed.

"No." Lester Oliver was thoughtful. "I'm wondering why you didn't. Do you have any explanation?"

"Only something that you wouldn't understand, unless it happened to you," Buckmaster answered. "I couldn't explain it."

"Try." Oliver spoke softly, but Buckmaster knew that behind that softness Oliver hid a bulldog tenacity.

Carefully, patiently Buckmaster told about the Force, trying to make them sense it as he had.

"You feel then," Cecil Cuff, the other man in the room, said, "that you're in the grip of something over which you have no direct control?"

"Yes."

"Are you certain that it is not the contact Wagner imposed on you?"

"It came before Wagner was present," Buckmaster replied.

Cuff turned to Oliver. "I know he believes what he is saying," he

said. "But it's obvious that his mind has been tampered with. If we let him live, we'll be taking the risk that the General and Wagner are getting at us, through him."

"That's right," Oliver answered. "I think he should be killed," Cuff said.

Oliver was thoughtful for a long moment. "What do you think, Clifford?" he asked gently. He always called Buckmaster by his first name.

Buckmaster breathed deeply. "Naturally I want to live," he answered. "But from the viewpoint of the Underground, I suppose Cuff is right."

"You say that you feel that this Force is a protective one," Oliver said. "Does it seem to you that perhaps we couldn't kill you—that it would prevent us?"

Buckmaster searched for words to express his thoughts. "I feel," he said, "that it won't let me be killed. It seems that I have a mission to fulfill, and that it won't let me die—at least not until I accomplish what it desires. However, I feel also that it will, or can, do nothing concrete to prevent my being killed. It will probably aid me by convincing you that it would be better to let me live."

"Do you feel that its purpose might be much the same as ours, and that it will attempt to convince us of that?" Oliver asked.

"Something like that," Buckmaster answered. "At least the urge to kill Koski is so strong within me that I know I would not hesitate if I had the chance, even if it meant my own life."

"Would you attempt to stop us if we tried to kill you?"

"No."

Oliver closed his eyes. He was silent for so long that it seemed he must be sleeping. But Buckmaster knew that Oliver's brain worked with lightning speed while his body reposed. Oliver was the most intelligent man he had ever known. He was head of the Underground solely because he was the fittest man for the job.

FINALLY Oliver spoke. "We'll come back to it later," he said. "Did you learn anything that might help us, Clifford?"

"I learned that the Plague is spread by contact—only after the first symptoms show themselves. I read that in Wagner's mind before he realized that I was reading his thoughts."

"That will help. You say you made contact before you became *en rapport* with Wagner. Can you control what you let him learn through you?"

"I believe I can, but I can't be certain."

"If you could be certain, we wouldn't have to kill you," Oliver said.

"You would be taking a chance," Buckmaster replied.

"We can't afford to take any chances," Cuff said. "He—"

"You're forgetting one thing, Cecil," Oliver interrupted. "As things stand right now, we're a lost cause. The Plague has killed many of our best men. The only thing that keeps Koski from staging a blood-bath is his fear of Governor Olson in Duluth. And pretty soon he won't have to fear that. We have

only to lose another key dozen and Olson will have no friends here to aid."

"May I offer a compromise?" Buckmaster asked. "As matters stand now, our only chance of winning freedom from Koski's savage rule is to kill him. And to do that we will have to kill Wagner first. Am I correct?"

"Yes." Oliver raised his head. "What do you have to suggest?"

"Let me try to kill Wagner. If I succeed our cause will have taken a big step. If he kills me first, then you've lost nothing more than if you'd killed me yourselves."

After a barely perceptible hesitation Oliver nodded in agreement.

For the rest of the day Buckmaster improvised a simulated course of action to let seep through to Wagner whenever he felt a probe. He kept his mind blank otherwise and was quite certain that he carried on the deception well. He caught nothing from Wagner in return that was not deliberately let through. He suspected that his own control was as good. Though he had not had the practice at this that Wagner had.

Toward evening he improvised a crisis. The Underground was plotting something big, he transmitted. He made the need for action imperative and asked for a personal interview. At first Wagner demurred. He wanted Buckmaster to stay on and give first hand reports. Buckmaster gave hints in return that he was suspected by the other members, and indicated that he must leave while still able to. Finally Wagner agreed.

"You realize the risk you're tak-

ing, coming with me, Cecil?" Buckmaster asked.

"I do," Cuff said with his unchangeable reserve. "But you'll need my help."

Buckmaster wished he himself could remain as cool. His own nerves felt like wires that had been drawn too tightly.

Cuff was tall and robust, with a pessimistic outlook on life. He seemed to sit back and watch life and its peoples as a spectator, willing to fight ruthlessly for what he believed was right, but never expecting to discover anything fine enough in his fellow men to hope for anything better from them. He had touched the borders of an existence that was mean and hard and dirty and he had long ago despaired of finding anything else. Yet there was nothing apathetic about his personality. Life's illusions were gone, but its fascination remained.

"I DIDN'T think you trusted me too much," Buckmaster said.

Cuff acknowledged the statement by nodding his head. "I believed that you might be under Wagner's power. Wagner is a brute trying to break us. On this trip you're going to make your own heaven or hell, and if you've got the courage to face it, I'll back you up."

In the Administration Building the girl at the information desk told them, "The Director will see you in a moment." She led them into a waiting room.

Three hard-faced men, all wearing black shirts, came in. They had the mark of killers about them.

"Stand up."

They checked Buckmaster and Cuff for weapons. None was found. All five took the elevator to the sixth floor.

Wagner was seated at his desk waiting for them when they walked into his office. He smiled his mirthless smile. "I see you brought company," he said. "We'll get two birds with one stone."

Buckmaster knew then that there was little use trying any further deception. Wagner knew. If he were able to squeeze through just a short ten seconds the job could still be done. The three bodyguards stood a few yards behind them.

"I have something here that will interest you," Buckmaster said. Slowly, unhurriedly, but wasting no motion, he unbuttoned one flap on his shirt and reached a hand inside.

He peeled back the long strip of adhesive tape covering the cavity below his ribs. He pulled out the small single-shot derringer concealed there. He aimed from the waist and put the bullet into the middle of Wagner's smile.

The smile cracked, and the crack became a shatter, spreading in all directions. Buckmaster saw the trap then. He had shot at a reflection of Wagner. It had been a cleverly arranged mirror deception.

Cuff turned to run through the door they had entered. But Buckmaster was so certain any attempt to escape would be in vain that he did not even move. Cuff found the three guards blocking the doorway.

Buckmaster watched Wagner enter from opposite the cracked mirror. There were two more of his bodyguards with him.

When the guards closed in Cuff

struggled until they spun him back against the wall where his head crashed with a dull crunch. All the fight went out of him and he slumped in the arms of the men who held him.

Two of the guards held Buckmaster's arms.

"A couple of fine birds," Wagner said as he stood in front of them.

Cuff straightened with an effort of will and shook his head until his vision cleared. He leveled his glance at Wagner. "You're a mongrel cur," he said unemotionally, "licking at the General's boots. He'll throw you another scrap for this day's work." Both he and Buckmaster knew that he sealed his own fate with the words. The one thing Wagner could not tolerate was ridicule, worse in the presence of his own men.

Buckmaster caught the hard flat explosion in his face and pain in his eardrums as the gun that appeared in Wagner's hand went off.

As he watched Cuff slump he knew the man was beyond torture. He suspected that this was what Cuff had wanted. He had taken the easy way out.

Buckmaster leaned his shoulders back and then with sudden violence pulled his arms free from the guards' grip. He slapped Wagner across the mouth with his left hand and brought his right fist around in a short arc that crushed the bone in Wagner's nose.

He made no resistance as the guards grabbed him and twisted his arm cruelly behind his back. The hurt from Wagner's shattered nose brought a bright glisten of pain into his eyes.

"That was a mistake," Wagner said, the depth of his anger making his voice soft and husky, "I'm going to make you whine like a dog."

THE GENERAL was suffering the tragedy of a strong man whose mind was turning senile—and who realized it. Only the two alternative objectives remained virile; the Campaign and, that failing, the Weapon. The Weapon gave him his only solace in times of trouble. Now, going down into the basement of his house, he sought it out again. Letting himself through two thick concrete doors, which he opened with a key that he wore about his neck at all times, he entered the room that held his potentially terrible secret.

The outer contour of the Weapon was a rectangular frame of rough lumber. Inside was a metal box, and in this reposed a semi-glutinous mass of liquid. Nothing more. On the shelf above rested a bottle of aqua fortis. Quite simple substances—apart. Together they could spell the destruction of a world.

The Dictator himself, had given Koski his instructions long before, back in the homeland.

"General," you are being sent with an army, but its purpose is to protect your Weapon, and to bring it into a position of maximum effectiveness, rather than to fight. You fully understand, I hope, that if you ever have to use it, your mission will certainly be fatal to yourself?"

"I understand, Sir," Koski answered. "I am thankful for the honor you have done me."

"Your mission is to carry the Weapon to a central location on the North American continent. I believe you have the force necessary to accomplish that."

Koski nodded but said nothing.

"The component ingredients of the Weapon I know no better than you yourself. It was developed at the Institute. Its special faculty is its ability to free hydrogen from the moisture in the air, and to start a chain reaction. The physicists tell me that it will sear most of the continent once it starts reacting. About the only spot that would be spared are the dry regions, and maybe not even those. Just one thing you must remember—do not use it unless you are certain that the war is definitely lost. Do you understand the importance of that command?"

"I do," Koski answered. "But wouldn't it be better to use it as soon as possible? The lives of my men and myself would be a small price to pay for victory."

"True, except for one big question," the Dictator replied. "The explosive is so deadly that it was impossible to experiment. There is no such thing as a little bit of it. Consequently we are not certain of its effects. We expect, and hope, that it will dissipate itself as it spreads too far from its initial explosion point, but we cannot be certain. It is possible that, once released, it will devastate the entire world. You see now why it must be used only as a last resort?"

Many times since Koski had gone over that conversation in his mind. Had the war been lost? Neither side had come through with functioning governments. Therefore,

what course should he take? Perhaps the invaders even now ruled the homeland. Would he gain, or would he lose the last chance for ultimate victory by setting off the explosive?

During the rare moments when his mind cleared, Koski realized the small chance the Campaign would have. At such times the Weapon beckoned. He knew then that the Campaign would never be completed in his lifetime. Wagner, however, was a very good man, with all the ideals of his country. He would carry on.

It needed only a slight variation in the trend of events, to tip that scale one way or the other. Even now the General held the bottle of aqua fortis in his hand—undecided. The fate of the world teetered.

"You aren't so pretty anymore," Wagner said.

"Neither are you," Buckmaster answered through battered, bloody lips. He wondered where he found the strength to keep taunting Wagner. He could feel that his face was a lumpy mess. One eye was closed and blood, running down into the other, kept blinding him. Every muscle in his body ached from the pounding it had taken, and he suspected that his left arm was broken. He sagged in his bonds.

Wagner, he knew, was deliberately gauging the punishment. He meant to torture him to the verge of death, but he did not intend to let him die without further torment. Buckmaster wondered how much more he could stand.

Long ago he had despaired of any help from the Force. He had

felt nothing since the torture started. It was evident that it couldn't do anything, or would not, to stop this orgy of sadism. And he knew that any subtle attempts to divert Wagner from his sadistic pleasure would be useless.

Wagner had all the instruments required for refined torture here. It was evident that he had used them many times in the past. He strapped Buckmaster's wrists to a waist-high wooden rack.

"You'll be pleased to know that I have made a thorough study of the human anatomy," Wagner said. "Therefore, when I begin cutting off your limbs, one joint at a time, you won't have to worry. I'll see that you do not die—and also that you retain consciousness. I wouldn't want you to miss the exquisite delicacy with which I perform the operations. You'll be a basket case when I get through."

Wagner picked up a short scalpel with an edge honed to a fine, razor sharpness. "This is a delicate little experiment that I find very effective," he said.

He lifted Buckmaster's right index finger and cut deeply through the flesh of its tip. The intense acuteness of the sensitive nerves made the agony unbearable. Wave after wave of shock sensations struck at his nerve fibers as the blade traced a raw red path through another finger-tip.

Sickness gathered in his stomach and retched up into his throat to gag him. He sucked in great gulps of air until at last he could stand no more pain and welcome oblivion blanked him out.

He returned to consciousness to

find Wagner still there—waiting.

"Tsk, tsk," Wagner chided. "So you're not so tough, after all? And just when it was getting interesting."

This time Buckmaster did not have the strength to defy him. He was beaten. He prayed that Wagner would tire of his pleasure before he had to stand any more. He wanted to go out still a man, and not a broken hulk, tearful, pleading, begging for mercy.

"I think you're ready for something a bit more subtle," Wagner said. He concentrated his gaze on Buckmaster's eyes and slowly, cruelly built up a mental strain. The mind contact still held. Buckmaster realized that Wagner had been keeping this until he was too mentally whipped to fight back.

He was surprised then to feel that he fought off the pressure with little strain to himself. Still lurking there in his mind, was the Force, quiet, hardly felt, but virile, with a sense of dynamic quiescence potency! Hope came where all hope had been dead.

Something within him throbbed like electricity, and he sent a bolt of mental energy at Wagner's head.

The shock of the emotional concussion brought blood bursting from Wagner's nostrils and eye sockets. A red tide poured from his lips. His head dropped loosely and Buckmaster knew that Wagner was dead even before he fell from his chair.

Buckmaster sat astounded at the demonstration of power. He sat for a moment listening to the inner voice that sent up its answers to his silent questions. No, it hadn't been

able to help him before. Its power was not physical. No, it could not help him escape. From here he was on his own. The only satisfaction he received was the closer entity he had found between himself and the Force. It seemed to him now that it did not come from the outside. Rather it was an essential part of himself. Or, more exactly, he was a part of that Force.

Buckmaster worked his wrists backwards in their thongs until he forced the leather straps over the bases of his hands. Thus he was able to bend his wrists. Slowly, painfully, he brought up his right leg until his foot rested next to his right hand. The left foot next. Once he almost lost his balance. But at last he stood with his feet straddling his hands.

He exerted all the strength of his leg, arm, and trunk muscles. The pain from his broken arm was a sickening thing but slowly the leather bands began to tear loose from the rivets that held them. A last mighty exertion and he was free.

Wagner had a private elevator. Buckmaster entered and went to a ground floor. He walked out of the building through a tradesmen's entrance into a dusky alley.

Keeping his good arm in front of his face he staggered around the corner and into a drugstore and reached a phone booth without being observed. He put in a call and crouched in the phone booth for the ten long minutes it took Oliver to come for him.

"Two weeks aren't very long to get you well, Clifford," Oliver said, "but I'm afraid it's all the time we

have. I'm sorry."

"You did your best," Buckmaster answered. "At least you've got me pretty well patched up."

"The last reports were that the police have drawn a ring around this district, and that they're closing in."

"Do we have any way out?"

"I hate to have to say this," Oliver said slowly. "But the rest of us can get out—if we don't take you with us."

BUCKMASTER had expected this. It seemed that he had known from the beginning that he would never live to see the end of this adventure.

"It's all right. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No. They won't stop us if you aren't along. You're the man they're after. If there were any way I could help you by staying, I'd never leave. But I'd only be captured with you, and nothing gained."

"Of course I understand." Buckmaster rested his hand for a moment on the old leader's shoulder. "Don't feel badly about it, Lester. The men need you. You owe it to them to get out if you can."

Oliver gripped his hand. "Before I go I want you to know how grateful we are for the help you've given us. Without Wagner the General won't be nearly as hard to handle. And one other thing: I don't want you to hope too much, but there's still a chance we may be able to get you out. I'm trying a long shot. So if someone comes for you, go with him. In the meantime, keep

your chin up."

They shook hands again. Buckmaster surmised that Oliver was trying to give him something to cling to while he waited for the end. Then he was alone.

Three hours later Buckmaster spotted the first of his executioners: One of the Ruskijs that walked with studied unconcern across the street.

Almost at the same time he heard a rap on the rear door of the apartment. He drew the gun Oliver had left with him and walked slowly to the door. "Who is it?"

"Oliver sent me for you," the voice on the other side of the door answered.

"Come in with your hands up." Buckmaster flattened himself against a side wall and shoved his gun into the ribs of a tall young man.

"Who are you?"

"My name is August Gamoll," the man said. Somehow the name was familiar. He should recognize it, Buckmaster thought. Abruptly he did.

"What are you trying to do?" Buckmaster asked harshly. "Make a small-time hero of yourself with this grandstand play?"

"Not at all," Gamoll answered. "I'm the long shot Oliver mentioned."

"You're lying."

"Then how would I know what Oliver said?"

"It may be a lucky guess. Why should I trust you?"

"Mainly because you have no choice. What have you got to lose?" He was a cool character.

Buckmaster shrugged. He hated

this playing it blind, but the fellow was right. "O.K.," he said. "You might as well take your hands down. Let's go."

They went down the stairs. At the rear exit Gamoll looked out. He wore no hat. The wind from the alley fluffed the hair on the side of his head.

"All clear," Gamoll said. "Make a dash for it. When you get in the carriage lie low. Now!"

The die was cast, Buckmaster decided. He'd play it to the hilt now, all or nothing. He sprinted across the dirt of the alley and jerked open a door of the carriage. He threw himself inside and hugged the floor.

Soon the carriage began to roll. When they had travelled about a half block it stopped. Buckmaster drew in his breath. This was the critical point. If Gamoll could bluff his way through now the rest would be comparatively easy.

"Give me an escort, Captain," he heard Gamoll say. "I don't want to get tied up here. I understand there's going to be some shooting soon."

"That's right, sir," a crisp military voice answered. "It's best that you get out fast. I'll send one of my men with you."

The carriage started forward again. A half-hour later it stopped once more.

"You may get up now," Gamoll said. "We're going inside. Stay close to me."

BUCKMASTER was not surprised when he alighted and found himself near a side door to

the General's private residence.

"I don't get all this," Buckmaster said. "You've had me here for six days now, and I've only seen you twice. Why should the General's son be hiding me?"

"Quite simple. I don't like his methods, or his government, any more than you do. Oliver knew that when he sent his message to me asking for help."

"Do you mean to say that you'd help us kill your own father?"

"As to that," Gamoll said, "if you'll notice, my hair and eyes are brown."

"So?"

"Koski's eyes and my mother's are blue. You probably know that it is genetically impossible for two-blue-eyed people to have a brown-eyed son."

"Then you're not his son?" Buckmaster was silent for a minute. "That's why you took the name of your mother's other husband," he mused.

"If you remember, when the law was passed that each woman must have two husbands, the General set the example by marrying a woman who already had a husband. He knows that I am not his son biologically, but I am legally, and I have full inheritance rights. He was too smart—as well as legally exact—to disown me."

"That means you'd automatically become the government head if the General died?"

"Yes. But you're wrong if you think that I am doing this from any selfish motive. If I succeed, I'll institute a democratic form of government at my first opportunity."

"I'll wait until I see it," Buck-

master answered cynically. "But if it's true, are your ideals strong enough to help us kill him?"

For the first time Gamoll seemed uncertain of himself. "Why is it necessary to kill him, especially now that Wagner is dead? We both know that Wagner did the actual ruling. And the General is an old man, without much longer to live. We'll win if we do no more than stand by."

"He must die—and soon!" Buckmaster exclaimed, surprised at the vehemence of the words. So vital had been the command, that he knew what he had said was true: Koski *must* die, in the very near future. Though he himself was not certain of the need for such urgency.

"I suppose I understand," Gamoll said, a trifle uneasily. "You have to act in self-defense. If you don't kill him, he will probably be able to kill many more of your men before he dies. But try to see his side. He is the representative of a Cause that is just—to his way of reasoning; so right and so just that he will do anything to advance it. Whatever we may think of him, his conscience is clear. I only ask you this: If you can see your way clear to attain your ends without killing him, will you let him live?"

For another nine days Buckmaster stayed with Gamoll. He had nothing to occupy his time. In idle curiosity he went through the books in Gamoll's library. The young man owned many good books.

Before long Buckmaster's idle browsing turned to an intent search. For the first time he began finding

clues to the mystery that rode within him.

His first clue, he thought, was a passage he read in a physics book entitled, "The Limitations of Science," by Sullivan: *Research has changed our whole conception of matter. The first step was the experimental demonstration that there exist little electrified bodies, very much smaller than a hydrogen atom, called electrons. Measurement was made with the result that the "whole" mass of the electron was found to be due to its electric charge. This was the first indication that the material universe is not the substantial, objective thing we had always taken it to be. Matter began to thin away into the completely spectral thing it has now become. The notion of "substance" had to be replaced by the notion of "behavior".*

He passed readily from physics to the more fertile field of philosophy with the groping statement of Voltaire: *I have seen that which is called matter, both as the star Sirius, and as the smallest atom which can be perceived with the microscope; and I do not know what this matter is.*

He pursued this quest readily with the philosopher Schopenhauer and passed almost imperceptibly into metaphysics: *I will never believe that even the simplest chemical combination will ever admit of mechanical explanation; much less the properties of light, heat, and electricity. These will always require a dynamical explanation.*

If we can ferret out the ultimate nature of our own minds we shall perhaps have the key to the exter-

nal world.

Let us say, then, that repulsion and attraction, combination and decomposition, magnetism and electricity, gravity and crystallization, are Will.

Will, then, is the essence of man. Now what if it is also the essence of life in all its forms, and even of "inanimate" matter? What if Will is the long-sought-for, the long-despaired-of, "the thing-in-itself"—the ultimate inner reality and secret essence of all things?

Buckmaster perceived that these men were catching glimpses of something which they called Will, Order, Thing, Absolute, and other names but which were all very probably the same thing—and also that which he sought. Eagerly he read on.

His next clue came from Bergson: *Thought may begin with its object, and at last, in consistency, be driven, by the apparent necessities of logic, to conceive all things as forms and creatures of mind.*

Quickly he passed on to Spinoza where he found a wealth of food for thought. *Is the body merely an idea?*

Is all the mentality that is scattered over space and time, a diffused consciousness that animates the world?

There is but one entity, seen now inwardly as mind, now outwardly as matter, but in reality an inextricable mixture and unity of both.

Eternal order . . . that betokens the very structure of existence, underlying all events and things, and constituting the essence of the world.

Substance is insubstantial, that it is form and not matter, that it had nothing to do with that mongrel and neuter composite of matter.

Bruno said: *All reality is one in substance, one in cause, one in origin; mind and matter are one.*

Descartes' conception of a homogeneous "substance" underlying all forms of matter intrigued him for a time, and he wrestled mentally with the classic quotation, *I think, therefore I am.*

Berkeley wrote: *A "thing" is merely a bundle of perceptions—i. e., classified and interpreted sensations.*

Hegel: *The Absolute, transcending the individual limitations and purposes, and catching, underneath the universal strife, the hidden harmony of all things. Reason is the substance of the universe.*

Leibniz: *Although the whole of this life were said to be nothing but a dream, and the visible world nothing but a phantasm, I should call this dream or phantasm real enough, if, using reason well, we were never deceived by it.*

FOR A TIME Buckmaster left the philosophers and read poetry. He found germs of what he sought in some of them, as Goethe's, *The force which draws the lover, and the force which draws the planets are one.*

He found it beautifully in a stanza of Wordsworth's.

Something
Whose dwelling is the light of
the setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the
living air,

*And the blue sky, and the mind
of man;—*

*A motion and a spirit, all objects
of all thought,*

And rolls through all things.

In the main, however, he found in the poets that the grains of wheat were too few amidst the chaff and returned to philosophy.

Most of these excerpts, he felt, were clues to the enigma of himself. He knew that these great minds had touched on the very mystery that puzzled him. Once again he felt on the verge of *understanding*. Did he have all the pieces? Could he fit them into the pattern, if he but knew how? Or must he need to learn more?

Suddenly he found the explanation in a book of essays by, the incongruity of it struck him as ironical, an anonymous writer. He read:

For a time, during the middle ages, the theory that all the world, and even the universe, were figments of one giant imagination, swayed the thinkers of the world. The intellect in which this imagination centered was focused in one man, and one man only, in the whole of existence. That man was the one man who "thought." All other men, all other matter, were but imagined props with no actual existence. That man is the one who "thinks!" "You"—and only "you," the person who is reading this—in the whole world. It does not matter what your name might be. It might be. . . .

Clifford Buckmaster knew then the mystery of life, who he was, and why. He no longer concentrated, but his eyes read on: *At first glance*

it would seem that there is a concerted conspiracy to avoid acknowledging this fact. Learned men, acquiring wisdom, come to the brink of the great discovery, and then deftly skirt it, blinding themselves to its evidentness. However, on second thought the reason is obvious. The theory is anarchistic; it carries the seeds of its own futility. If they were ever to admit the truth of it, all reason for everything—their very discovery, their very thoughts—would be futile. So they refuse to recognize it.

Your obvious question is, How can I tell you this? Who am I—the writer of this essay? The answer is quite simple. I am merely a figment of your imagination, as is everything else about you!

At last he knew. His first sensation was one of awful, empty solitude. He was one creature—alone. Alone in a universe!

He was an entity living in a dream world. All about him were the figments of an imagination—presumably his own. And even knowing, he still had no control of events—like a dream that cannot be halted or changed. The people about him were automatons, in fact they possessed no actual substance. Even his own body was but a figment—but he could be hurt! He had experienced the most acute pain, and very probably he could be killed.

He had, however, little time to brood on it. At that instant in his reflections Gamoll jerked open the library door and walked in.

"The worst has happened," he exclaimed. "The security police

have caught Oliver."

"What can we do?" Buckmaster still could not regard Gamoll, or Oliver and his friends, as nonentities.

"I hate to say this," Gamoll said, "but you'll have to get out. I may be able to help Oliver escape, but I'll be powerless if they learn that I'm connected with the Underground."

"They probably wouldn't hesitate to kill you also," Buckmaster said.

"That wouldn't be too important, if my dying would accomplish anything," Gamoll said. "But the Underground's only hope seems to be my keeping clear."

Slowly, almost unobtrusively, a vision rose up before Buckmaster's eyes. Gamoll's features clouded, became vague, and were gone. In his place stood the General. In the General's hand was a bottle, and before him a wooden frame, holding a metal box with its lid open. Buckmaster realized that what he was seeing was happening in some other part of the building. He could see cement walls in the room in which the General stood. Probably the basement, he thought.

Within him the Force commanded! He must get to the General, and kill him. The world was on the brink of disaster. And time was running out.

GRADUALLY the whole composite vision vanished and he saw the handsome features of Gamoll again. He knew what he had to do now.

"I'm leaving immediately," he said.

Closing the library door behind him he walked unhesitatingly down a long hallway. To either side of him, painted on the walls, were murals, depicting peasants in the fields, harvesting grain. Idly he observed the painted figures as he walked, with his brain chilled and numbed of almost all emotion. The painted figures possessed as much reality as anything else about him, he thought disinterestedly.

He walked down steps and across an inner courtyard, his legs moving stiffly, lifelessly.

He continued up the steps on the far side of the courtyard, his mind shutting out everything around him except the door ahead. When he reached there he stopped. Here, he knew, he was at the crossroads. He could move straight ahead through the door, or he could walk around the house and enter the basement through the back. That was the longer way, but probably the safer. And the Force urged the second choice.

A mood of black frustration swept over him and some perverse stubbornness of his human nature rebelled at this supine abnegation. He knew that he was going to die, and his one last defiant act would be to die in a way of his own choosing. He walked straight ahead.

As he opened the door and stepped into a long green-carpeted room he found himself facing three guards. They held guns and the guns were all aimed at him.

Even before he observed that the guards were firing, he felt the killing slugs enter his body. He knew the bullets had reached vital organs

and that he was about to die. Within him he felt the Force, angry and rebuking.

He felt a wrench at the core of his body structure—and he was walking — walking — endlessly — down a long corridor. On the walls to either side of him were the figures of harvesters painted on yellow murals. His body was alive and vital. He walked on, through a doorway and out into a courtyard before he realized what had happened. The Force had turned time backward! He was once more on his way to shoot Koski. He was exactly the same as he had been the last time but with the addition of his memories of having been shot. And the silent warning that came to him never to expect another second chance. That could not be repeated.

This time when he came to the fatal door there was no surge of rebellion and he did not hesitate. He walked around the house until he came to the basement entrance. Cement steps led downward. Two guards were waiting for him there. One guard fell as Buckmaster fired, but he knew with a terrible certainty that he would not be able to kill the other in time to save himself.

The guard's bullet crashed into Buckmaster's diaphragm and his body jerked once but it did not stop its determined pacing forward. Buckmaster fired again but even as he did he felt a second bullet enter his body. It pierced his heart and he knew that he was dead. With dimming vision he watched the guard fall over on his side as his own bullet found its mark.

Even as Buckmaster realized that the bitter fever of life was over for him he knew that his body would not stop. Without any directive from the brain it was using the last of the suspended energy in its blood and muscles to walk forward, driving with an awful exertion.

On he walked into the cement lined room. The General stood there, oblivious to the noise about him. The hair on the crown of his head parted violently as the bullet from the gun in Buckmaster's hand hit its mark.

The gun became a weight too heavy for Buckmaster's lifeless fingers and dropped to the floor. The last spark of life flickered for a brief moment where it had fled in some inner recess of his brain and he felt the Force for the last time. Two words it spoke. "Well done," and he knew that at last his job was finished. Now he would return home!

BUCKMASTER had reasoned well, considering his natural limitations. But the truth he had discovered was, like most truths, only part of a greater truth.

In the far reaches of infinity, beyond the outermost boundaries of space, a thought-voice spoke. "Am I going to die?" it asked.

"Not now," a second entity answered. "The crisis is past."

"Will the sickness come again?"

"Not this particular form of malevolent psychosis," the second entity replied. "But perhaps you had better tell me all the facts you know so that I can advise you about the future."

"My project, I still believe, was magnificent," the sick entity began. "From the energy of my essence I materialized a world of infinitesimal creatures. I gave them time and space, and built a background of a universe for their wonderment and speculation. They dwelt on their world, lived their lives, and made their tiny, though admirable, advances as they saw their destiny. And then, suddenly, when all seemed beautiful, something went wrong, and I was ill unto death. What did I do that was not right?"

"I believe you made your mistake when you gave your creatures free will. They developed their malignancies, as well as their admirabilities. When they developed a malignancy of such virulence that they were in a position to destroy themselves, you made yourself vulnerable to death, through them. The shock of that devastation to you would have killed you. Tell me, were your creatures aware that they were figments of your mind?"

"Some grasped inklings of it, though none were certain. One, a Baruch Spinoza, came as close to the truth as it was possible, for their finite minds. He wrote: *We are the fitting forms of a being greater than ourselves, and endless while we die. Our bodies are cells in the body of the race, our race is an incident in the drama of life; our minds are the fitful flashes of an eternal light. Our mind, in so far as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking, which is determined by another mode of thinking, and this*

one again by another, and so on to infinity. That was magnificent. While others who caught inklings of the truth believed that I was an ultimate being, he realized that I, too, had an ultimate being whom I worshipped."

"Also, if he had been able to perceive how close you were to death," the second entity said, "he would have realized that you were mortal, which no ultimate being can be."

"How were you able to circumvent the disaster that so nearly befell me?"

"I sent a segment of my own mentality into your conceived world. I gave it a name, implanted a memory of a past into its mind, and that same memory into the minds of those creatures with whom it was supposed to have come into contact, in its past. Through that segment I was able to destroy the awful potentiality, as well as the creature who controlled it. The secret now rests with the dead."

"Is there any chance of a similar recurrence?"

"That chance will always exist as long as you persist in allowing your creatures to have free will. I would advise you to destroy it."

For a time the patient was silent. "No," it said finally, "without that free will their existence and my entire project would be futile. I will let the free will remain and bear any consequences."

"That, of course, is your own choosing," the other said.

And so man kept his greatest possession.

SCIENCE BRIEFS

By Ezra Shaw

The Eternal Riddle

IS THERE life on other planets? What kind of life? Does it exist in any one of the forms recognizable to us? Or does the spirit of life—if any—which may emanate elsewhere than on Earth breed a species totally unfamiliar to anything we can possibly imagine?

Before looking for the answer to these questions, it is necessary to know certain facts about the make-up of the planets. First—do they have atmosphere?

Atmosphere consists of a body of gases—an aggregation of molecules in a state of perpetual motion—surrounding a planet. The density of the gaseous atmosphere of the Earth or of any other planet decreases with an increasing distance from the surface of the planet. Near the upper limit of the atmosphere, where the density is very low, the molecules will travel for a considerable distance between collisions with other molecules. If a molecule in this region happens to rebound after a collision in an outward direction and with a speed much greater than the average speed, it may escape into outer space, provided that it does not come into collision with any other molecule.

For any particle, whether large or small, to be able to escape altogether, it is necessary that its veloc-

ity exceed a certain critical value—the velocity of escape. This value is important in considering planetary atmospheres.

A STONE dropped from a certain height falls to the ground with an accelerated velocity because of the attracting force of gravity. If the stone is projected upwards with a velocity equal to that at which it hits the ground, its velocity will progressively decrease.

Now—forgetting gravitational attractions of other bodies in the atmosphere—if the stone is dropped towards Earth from an infinitely great height, it will fall with a gradually increasing velocity which, when it reaches the ground, will have a definite velocity value. Using “V” as the velocity value, “G” as the value of the constant of gravitation, “M” for the mass of the Earth and “a” as its radius:

$$V^2 \text{ equals } 2GM/a$$

Now, if the stone is projected upwards with a force equal to the velocity V, it will reach an infinitely great distance before it comes to rest; if it is projected with a velocity less than V, it will eventually come to rest and then fall back to Earth, because any velocity less than V corresponds to the velocity acquired in falling to the ground from a

height that is finite. Thus, the stone can only get completely away from the Earth if its initial velocity is equal to or greater than V . This is why V is called the "velocity of escape".

To determine the velocity necessary for any body to escape from the Earth, simply substitute the values for the constant of gravitation, and for the mass and radius of the Earth. In this way it can be found that the velocity of escape from the Earth is 7.1 miles a second.

NOT A single molecule of the Earth's atmosphere can possibly escape into outer space unless its velocity exceeds the escape velocity. But whenever a molecule rebounds away from the Earth with a speed greater than the escape velocity, it will escape from the Earth's gravitation, provided that it does not collide with any other molecule. A loss of the faster moving molecules from the outer layers of the atmosphere is inevitable.

There are various mathematical principles concerning the velocity of escape of a molecule from its atmosphere. The actual calculations were made some years ago by Sir James Jeans, who found that if the velocity of escape is four times the average molecular velocity, the atmosphere would be practically completely lost in 50,000 years. If the velocity of escape is four and a half times the average molecular velocity, the atmosphere would be lost in 30,000,000 years. If the velocity of escape is five times the average molecular velocity, 25

thousand million years would be required for complete loss.

On the basis of these figures, then, the large planets as Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune, may be expected to have atmosphere much more extensive than that of Earth. Venus' would be comparable to Earth's. The atmosphere of Mars is probably considerably thinner than that of Earth, while Mercury and the Moon would have little or no atmosphere.

The Spectroscope

ASSUMING that a planet has an atmosphere, the spectroscope is used to study the composition of the planet. This instrument contains one or more prisms, the light from the planet is passed through the spectroscope, and spreads out into a band or spectrum showing the colors of the rainbow. Each point in the spectrum corresponds to the definite wave-length.

If sunlight is being analyzed—the light being admitted through a narrow slit—the spectrum becomes crossed by thousands of fine dark lines, each of which corresponds to a definite wave-length and a definite intensity.

When an electric spark from between two pieces of iron is passed through, the spectrum shows a considerable number of bright lines, spaced at irregular intervals and of different intensities. This particular series of lines is produced by no other element but iron.

In a similar way, every other element has its own characteristic spectrum. If light from a hot in-

candescent source which has a continuous spectrum showing all the colors of the rainbow is passed through the vapor of iron at a lower temperature, the continuous spectrum of the hot source will be crossed by a number of dark lines, each of which is exactly identical in wave-length with one of the bright lines in the spectrum of the incandescent iron vapor. Such a spectrum is called an absorption spectrum. The lines in the spectrum of the Sun are of this nature. The hot interior of the Sun would give a continuous spectrum, but the cooler outer layers absorb the radiations of various wave-lengths, thus producing the dark lines.

These fine dark lines are known as the Fraunhofer lines—so named after the physicist who first investigated them.

Investigation of the spectrum of sunlight proves that iron is contained in the Sun. Similarly, the presence of many other elements are detected, as well as some fairly reliable conclusions as to their abundance.

The Effect of Atmosphere

ONE COMPLICATING factor, however, enters into the analysis of light from the Sun. Since we make our observations from the bottom of Earth's atmosphere, the light from the Sun has to pass through this atmosphere before it reaches us, and some of it is of necessity absorbed in the atmosphere. Consequently, some of the absorption lines that are present in the observed spectrum of the Sun

do not originate in the Sun, but in Earth's atmosphere.

Of particular importance is the absorption produced by the small amount of ozone in the atmosphere. This is so strong that all of the light of wave-length shorter than 0.000012 inch is completely absorbed, and none of the light in this region—the ultra-violet region of the spectrum—is accessible to observation.

In analyzing the spectrum of the Sun, the question arises regarding both the absorptions that originate in the Sun itself and those that are produced by Earth's atmosphere. There are two ways in which the absorptions of terrestrial origin can be identified:

(1) Compare the spectra of the Sun taken at different altitudes. The lower the altitude of the Sun, the longer the path that the light from the Sun has to travel through the atmosphere in order to reach Earth.

(2) Compare the spectra of light from the east and west limbs of the Sun. Since the Sun rotates on its axis in about 27 days, the west limb is moving away from Earth while the east limb moves towards us. There is a slight separation between the corresponding absorptions in the light from the two regions. The absorptions that originate in our atmosphere are not affected by the Sun's rotations; these coincide in position in the spectra of the light from the two opposite limbs. If, then, the spectra of the eastern and western limbs of the Sun are photographed simultaneously or in immediate succession on the same plate, the absorptions of Earth ori-

gin can be immediately picked out, because they consist of all the absorptions that coincide in position in the two spectra.

THE SECOND method is more advantageous than the first because it does not necessitate the comparison of spectra obtained at different altitudes and at different times.

The planets are cool bodies having no intrinsic light of their own. A planet is seen only by means of the light from the Sun that falls upon it and is reflected. As the sunlight penetrates into the atmosphere of the planet, it is partially scattered and partially absorbed. The depth to which it penetrates depends upon the nature and extent of the atmosphere; in some cases the light may not even reach to the surface of the planet. Since the light will bear some impress of its passage into and out of the atmosphere of the planet, when it is analysed by the spectroscope, absorptions that have originated in the atmosphere of the planet may be revealed which will give some clues to the nature of the atmosphere. An absorption in the atmosphere of the planet that does not correspond with any absorptions produced in the atmosphere of the Earth will be easily noted. Where, however, the absorptions will coincide with those produced by the same substances in the Earth's atmosphere, care is required to decide whether these arise in the atmosphere of the Earth, or whether they include the effect of absorptions originating in the atmosphere of the other planet.

The two substances whose presence in the planetary atmosphere is of the greatest significance for the possibility of the existence of life, are oxygen and water vapor, and it is these two substances whose presence may be most difficult to establish.

There are two methods to distinguish whether an absorption is of terrestrial origin or of planetary origin:

(1) Compare the spectrum of the planet with that of the Moon, obtaining the two on the same night and as nearly as possible to the same time, and at equal altitudes. Since the Moon is devoid of atmosphere, if any absorption is present it must originate in that of the planet.

(2) The second method is based on the displacement of the absorption lines in the light from a moving source at a time when the planet is approaching or receding from the Earth most rapidly. The relative motion will displace the absorption due to the planet's atmosphere with respect to those due to our own atmosphere, and in this way it is possible to detect planetary absorptions of low intensity. This method is a very delicate one, and is especially useful for deciding whether substances that are present in our own atmosphere are also present in the atmosphere of the other planet.

Temperature—a Decisive Factor

TO EVEN CONSIDER the possibility of life on a particular planet, it is necessary that we have some general idea of its temperature conditions. Mercury—which

has very little or no atmosphere—always keeps the same side toward the Sun. Suppose this planet has no heat output of its own, but that there is an exact balance between the heat that it receives from the Sun and that which it radiates into space. It would be simple to estimate the temperature of its surface by figuring according to Stefan's law—that the total radiation from a body is proportioned to the fourth power of its absolute temperature. Using this observed value and equating the energy received and radiated, the highest temperature at any point on the surface of a planet that always turns the same face to the Sun, can be found, provided that the planet has no atmosphere and that it is a body that completely absorbs all the radiations falling on it. The dark side of the planet which receives no heat from the Sun would be extremely cold.

If the planet does not always turn the same side to the Sun, the effect of its rotation would be to lower the noonday temperature and to raise the night temperature. The faster the rotation, the smaller the difference between the day and night temperatures. For a sufficiently fast rotation, there would be no difference between day and night temperatures at any place on the planet; there would be, however, a variation of temperature with latitude, because the average rate of reception of heat from the Sun depends on the latitude.

COMPLEX meteorological effects come into play on a

planet that possess an atmosphere and, as on Earth, temperatures at any one place may differ considerably from day to day. The general effect of an atmosphere, then, is a smoothing-out of the temperature differences between day and night, because there will be a persistent tendency for heat to be carried from the warmer to the cooler parts of the surface by warm air moving into colder regions and cold air moving into warmer regions.

Too, the atmosphere of the Earth, and probably most planetary atmospheres, are opaque in many regions of the infra-red, corresponding to long wave-length radiations. Most of the solar heat is transmitted by the atmosphere, warming the surface of the planet, and much of this heat is radiated again as radiation of considerably longer wave-length, to which the atmosphere is opaque. The temperature is therefore raised considerably. The atmosphere exerts a blanketing effect by preventing the escape of the radiations of long wave-length. Then the fall of temperature at night become less rapid.

The Nature and Use of the Bolometer

ALARGE TELESCOPE in conjunction with a sensitive detector of radiation, is used to measure the radiation received on the Earth from the planets. A bolometer or a thermocouple may be used for detecting and measuring the radiation. In the bolometer, the

radiant energy is focused on to a minute strip of platinum which forms one arm of an electrical circuit known as a Wheatstone's bridge. A similar strip, shielded from the radiation, forms a second arm of the bridge, which is balanced against the first. When the radiant energy falls on the first arm of the bridge, it is heated, its resistance is increased, the balance of the bridge is upset and a current flows through the galvanometer of the bridge. The deflection of the galvanometer provides a measure of the intensity of the radiation falling on the bolometer. The thermocouple consists of a small junction of two tiny strips of different metals. When the junction is heated, a thermoelectric current, whose strength is proportional to the intensity of the radiation, flows through the circuit and is measured by a sensitive galvanometer. A highly sensitive thermocouple will detect the heat from a candle at a distance of three miles.

THE THERMOCOUPLE or bolometer provides a measure of the total radiation from the

planet, as modified by absorption in the Earth's atmosphere. A slight correction must be applied to the measures to allow for this effect. A measure of the total planetary radiation is obtained when it is applied. This consists in part of reflected sunlight and in part of the low-temperature long-wave radiation from the planet itself. It is the latter portion that provides information about the planet's temperature. It is necessary, therefore, to separate it from the portion that is merely reflected sunlight. The separation is easily effected by placing a small transparent vessel containing water in the path of the rays. The water transmits the portion of the radiation of relatively short wave-length—the reflected sunlight portion—but is opaque to the long-wave planetary portion. Thus, the true heat radiation from the planet is measured.

If atmosphere and temperature have a similarity to that of Earth's, we can safely assume that the planet has life similar to that here on Earth. But if these factors vary in any great degree, then living matter—if such exists—will be in a nature of which we have no knowledge.

Ten miracles were arranged for the age-long flight. But they reckoned without—

RESURRECTION SEVEN

By Stephen Marlowe

THE SEVENTH tub shook gently, stimulating the hypothalamic region of Eric's brain for the first time in almost two centuries. After a time, his limbs trembled and his body began to shiver. The liquid in which he floated boiled off at a temperature still far below that which would permit his body to function.

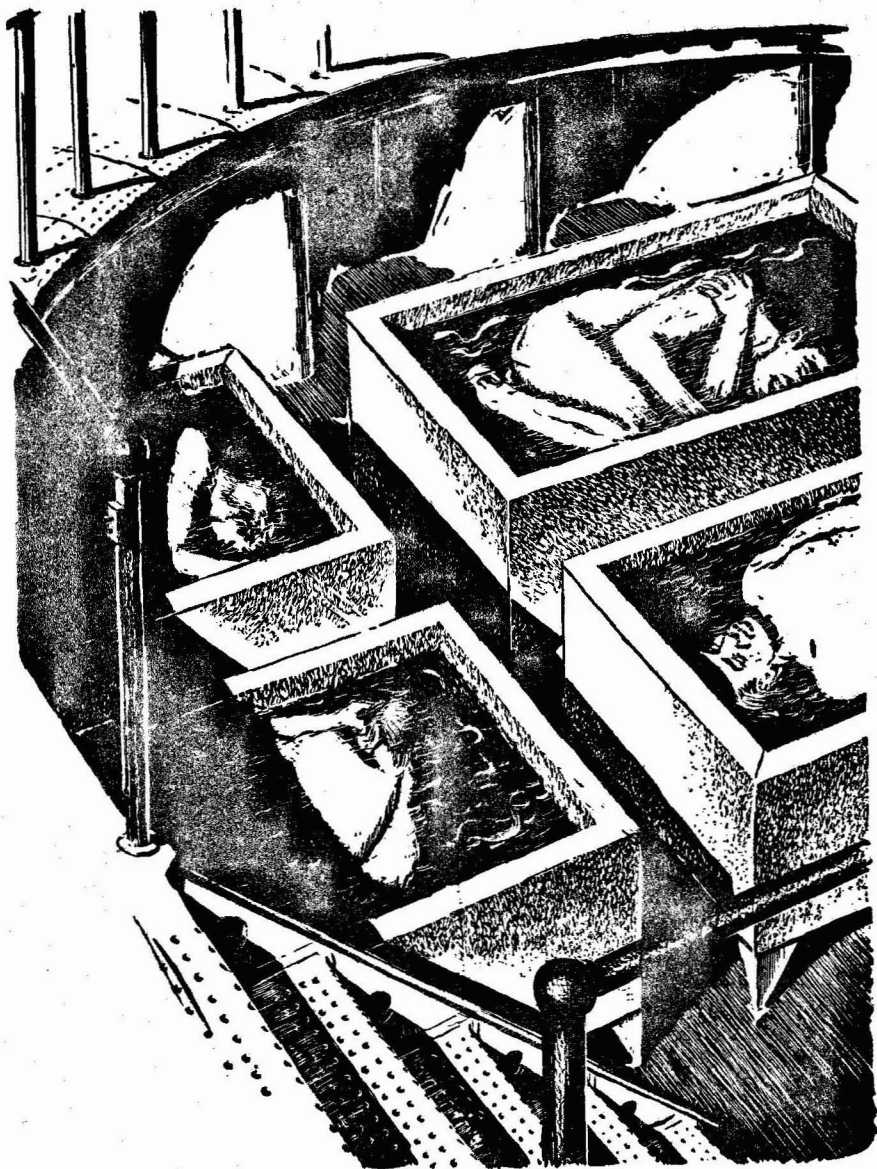
By the time all the liquid was gone he had uncurled and lay at the bottom of the tub. Now his heart pumped three hundred times a minute, generating warmth and activating his central nervous system. It took many hours for his heart to slow—not back to the one beat every two minutes it had known for a hundred-seventy five years, but to the normal rate of about seventy per minute. By then

his body temperature had climbed from below freezing to 98° F.

Eric lay in stupor for a week, while fluids flowed into the tub and massaged his muscles, while fatty tissue slowly turned into strength. Finally, he climbed from his tub.

He found the locker which bore his name, and opened it. Six other lockers were open and empty, as were six tubs. He found that hard to believe. It had seemed only a night of deep and dreamless sleep, no more. But each empty tub stood for twenty-five years, each open locker meant a man had gone and lived his time with the new generations of the ship, perhaps had sired children, had died with old age.

Eric found his clothing on a



*At intervals of twenty-five years,
they would arise to police the ship.*

hook, took it down. Yesterday—he laughed mirthlessly when he realized that had been almost two hundred years ago—Clair had told him something about a note. He found it in the breast pocket of his jumper, stiff and yellow. He read:

Darling: I will be ashes in the void between the stars when you read this. That sounds silly, but it's the truth—unless I can give old Methuselah a run for his money; I sadden when I think that you will be gone tomorrow, the same as dead. But if they need ten and if you are one who can withstand suspension—what can we do? Know that my love goes with you across the ages, Eric.

I just thought of something. You'll be the seventh of ten, with the last one coming out at planet-fall. If you live to be a real gray-beard, you might even see the landing on the Centaurian planet. I love you. Clair—

If Clair had married, her great grandchildren might be alive now. Her great great grandchildren would be Eric's age. Clair's progeny, not Clair—because Clair was dust now, a light year back in space—

He found a package of cigarettes in his jumper, took one out and lit it. He must not think of the past, not when it was only history now although he still felt very much a part of it. Today mattered, today and the new generations on the ship.

It crossed his mind that they might regard him almost as a god, a man who had seen Earth, who

had slept while generations lived and died, who came from his impossible sleep and would live with them now to see that everything was going according to plan.

Three minutes after he started the mechanism, the door slid ponderously into the wall. It would open more simply from the other side, he knew, but then only Eric and the three who still slept could turn its complex tumblers. For a long while he stood there on the threshold and then he watched the door slide back into place.

THE CORRIDOR glowed with soft white light, which meant it was daytime on the ship. Dimly in the distance, Eric heard voices, children at play. Would they know of him? Would their parents know? Was he expected?

Eric came closer. Through a doorway he could see the children, three of them, although they had not yet seen him. A chubby, freckle-faced boy said:

"Let's play Lazarus. I must be the Captain, and you, Janie, you can be the crew. George, you be Lazarus."

George was a big ten-year-old with dark hair. "Like heck I will! It was your idea, you be Lazarus, smart guy."

Eric stepped through the doorway. "Hello," he said. "Can you take me to your folks?"

"Who're you, Mister?"

"Hey, I don't know him! Where'd he come from?"

The girl, Janie, said, "Lookit his clothes. Lookit. They're different."

The children wore loose tunics,

pastel-tinted, to their knees. Freckle-Face said: "You know what to-day is, doncha?"

George frowned. "Yeah, holiday. We're off from school."

"What holiday, stupid? Which one?"

"I—I dunno."

"Lazzy-day!" Janie cried. "That's what it is. Then he's—he's—"

"Lazarus!" Freckle-Face told her, and, as if on one impulse, the three of them bolted away from Eric, disappeared through another doorway.

He did not follow them. He stood there, waiting, and before long he heard footsteps returning. A man entered the room, tall, thin, middle-aged.

"You are Eric Taine," he said, smiling. "I'm sorry no one was around to greet you, but the way we had it figured, you wouldn't come out till later this afternoon. History says that's how it worked with the six before you, about four P.M. It's just noon now. Will you follow me, please?"

Then the man flushed faintly. "Excuse me, but it isn't often we meet strangers. Everyone knows everyone else, of course. My name is Lindquist, Mr. Taine. Roger Lindquist."

Eric shook hands with him, stiffly, and he thought for a moment the man did not know the gesture. "Ah yes, handshaking," Lindquist laughed. "We simply show empty palms now, you know. But then, you don't know. I rather imagine you'll have a lot to learn."

Eric nodded, asked Lindquist if he might be shown about the ship.

There was a lot he had to see, to check, to change if change were needed.

"Relax, my friend," Lindquist told him. "I'd—ah, like to suggest that we postpone your tour until you've met with our Council this afternoon. I'd very much like to suggest that."

Eric shrugged, said: "You know more about this than I do, Mr. Lindquist. We'll wait for your Council meeting."

"**T**HUS, MR. TAINE," said Captain Larkin, hours later, "tradition has it that you become a king. King Lazarus Seven—with six Lazaruses before you. The first one, the histories say, was a joke. But it's stuck ever since. The people like this idea of a king who comes to them every twenty five years—and they've dubbed him with the name Lazarus, well, because if he didn't come back from the dead, he came back from something a lot like it."

Eric nodded. "What happened to Alan Bridges?"

"Who?" This was Lindquist.

"Alan Bridges, the man before me—your Lazarus Six."

Captain Larkin cleared his throat. "He's dead, Mr. Taine."

"Dead? He'd only be in his fifties now—"

"I know. Sad. It was disease, hit him soon after he came to us. Lazarus Six had a very short reign. Didn't he, Mr. Lindquist?"

"He certainly did," Lindquist agreed. "Let's hope that Lazarus Seven is here to step down for Eight—and to watch Nine come in,

fifty years from now!"

Cheers filled the room and Eric smiled briefly. That reminded him of Clair's note. Clair—

"So," said Captain Larkin, "you'll be crowned tomorrow. After that, your people will see you, King Lazarus Seven on his throne. Don't disappoint us, Mr. Taine. Their tradition means a lot to them."

"It should," Eric said. "The planners made it that way. With nothing but space outside, and the confining walls of the ship, they needed something to bind them together."

"Yes, that's true. But the people, as you'll see, have come up with some of their own traditions over the years." Captain Larkin ran a hand through his graying hair. "Like your kingdom, for example. You'll see, Mr. Taine—or should it be Lazarus now, eh?" He laughed.

"If you'd like," Eric said. He did not relish the idea particularly, but then, it was their show. Still, he had everything to check—from astro-gation to ethics—and he would not want to be delayed by pomp and ceremony. Well, there was time enough for that. Now he felt weary—and that made him chuckle, because he had just concluded a hundred-seventy five year nap.

They took him to his quarters, where the six before him had lived. There he ate in silence, food from the hydroponic gardens on a lower level of the ship. The line of light under his door had turned from white to a soft blue. It was night on the ship.

Eric showered and got into bed, but although he was tired he could not fall asleep. He had expected to

be an efficiency expert of sorts; that was his job; but they told him, matter-of-factly, that he would be a king. Well, you could expect change in nearly two hundred years, radical change. And if indeed their tradition were deep-rooted, he would not try to change it. The planners had counted on that to keep them going; because there could be no environmental challenge to goad them. Just an unreal past and an unreal Earth which Eric and their great-great grandparents had seen, and an even more unreal future when, someday far far off, the ship reached the Centaurian System.

Softly, someone knocked at his door. The sound had been there for many moments, a gentle tapping, but it had not registered on his consciousness. Now, when it did, he padded across the bare floor and opened the door.

A girl stepped in from the corridor, pushing him before her with one hand, motioning him to silence with the other. She closed the door softly behind her, soundlessly almost, and turned to face him.

She wore the knee-length tunic popular with this generation, and it covered a graceful feminine figure.

"PLEASE," the girl said. "Please listen to me, Eric Taine. I may have only a few moments—listen!"

"Sure," he smiled. "But why all the mystery?"

"Shh! Let me talk. Have you a weapon?"

"Yes, I carry a pistol. I don't fancy I'll need it, though."

"Well, take it with you and go

back where you came. If anyone tries to stop you, use your weapon. They have nothing like it. Then, when you get there—" Her voice came breathlessly, and it made Eric laugh.

"Hold on, Miss. Why should I do that? Don't tell me there's a plot and someone wants to usurp the new king before he's crowned? No? What then?"

"Stop making fun of me, Eric Taine. I'm trying to save your life." She said it so seriously, her eyes so big and round, that Eric half wanted to believe her. But that was fantastic. From what could she possibly be saving him?

The words came out in a rush as the girl spoke again. "The ship is not on course. For twenty five years it has been off, heading back to Earth—"

"To Earth! That's crazy."

"Listen, please. They killed Lazarus Six. He was a scapegoat. They watched the old films of Earth and felt they had been cheated out of their birthright. Why should they live here, alone in space? they said. Why should their children's children face the hardships of a new world? They didn't ask for it. It was thrust upon them by the planners, by your generation. If they knew how to get into your room of tubs, they would have killed you. Now there is a mock ceremony, everything is blamed on the new Lazarus, and the people feel better when he is killed. I know, my mother told me. You can ask her—"

The girl was about twenty, Eric thought. A wild-eyed thing now, who so wanted him to believe her

impossible story. Her breath came quickly, in little gasps, and Eric tried to hide the smile on his face.

"You're laughing at me! Stupid, stupid—please—And when you get back to your room of tubs, awaken your friends, the three who remain. You four can control the ship, put it back on course, teach the people—Ooo, stop laughing!" She pouted prettily, "All of us, we're not all like that. We who are not can help you."

Eric chuckled softly. "You try to picture it," he told her. "I'm sorry, but everything's been sweetness and light, and you come in here with a wild notion—"

"It isn't wild, it's the truth. Why don't you ask to check our course before they make you king?"

He could do that, all right. But they'd be wondering what mad neurosis compelled his actions, and he did not want that, not when he might have so much to do.

"Check it," she pleaded. And when he shook his head, she told him, "You're acting like a child, you know. The records say you are twenty-five, and you've slept for seven times that, but still. All you have to do is check. Please—"

The door burst in upon them, and Lindquist stood there, with Captain Larkin and two others.

Lindquist shook his head sadly. "I thought so," he said.

Captain Larkin nodded. "A Cultist child. Shame, isn't it?"

One of the other men strode forward, and the girl cowered behind Eric. "Don't believe them!" she waived. "Lies—"

"There are so many of them," Lindquist explained. "Apparently,

we're in an area of high radiation now, Mr. Taine. So many of our people are deranged. I won't guess at the cause, except to say it's probably outside the ship."

The man came around Eric, tch-tch'd when the girl jumped on the bed and stood trembling against the headboard. "Now, Laurie," the man coaxed. "Come on down, there's a good girl."

Eric wanted to help her, but he checked the impulse. He only felt protective. There could be nothing in the girl's story. Best if they took her and treated her.

"... a whole cult of them," Lindquist was saying. "All lacking something up here." He tapped his head. "They don't trust anyone, only members. Think we're doing all sorts of foolish things. I don't know, what would you call it in your day. Paranoia?"

Eric said he didn't know, he was not a psychologist. He watched silently with Lindquist and Captain Larkin as the two other men took Laurie, struggling, out the door. She kicked, bit, and cried lustily. Once her dark eyes caught Eric's gaze, held it, and she whimpered, "I don't care if they kill you! I don't care—"

They started down the corridor, after Lindquist said, "You've had a hard day. I think we'd better let you sleep."

"She told you someone wanted to kill you?" Captain Larkin said, shaking his head slowly. "What can we do, Lindquist?"

"Well, we just better hope whatever's causing this sort of thing is left behind in space soon. Goodnight Mr. Taine."

"Goodnight, Lazarus," said Captain Larkin.

ERIC recognized at once the great hall in which he had danced that last night with Clair. Now Clair was gone.

The place was crowded—probably the ship's entire population. Lindquist led him through the crowd, and he could not tell what their faces showed. There were mumblings of "Lazarus" and "king"—but why did he get the faint suggestion of mockery? Oddly, what Laurie said had troubled him—he had had a bad night's sleep, and it left him irritable. Poor girl. He wondered how many more there were like her. Well, in time he could find out, after this nuisance of a coronation had become history.

"Ah, Taine," Captain Larkin said as Lindquist brought him to the dais. "As you can see, all the people are ready. I hope you won't think the ceremony foolish. Are you ready?"

Eric nodded, watched a man raise trumpet to lips, blow one clarion note. A hush fell over the hall.

"I am honored to present King Lazarus Seven to you," Larkin proclaimed in a loud clear voice. "He has been sent, as you know, by the planners."

Hoots from the crowd. Eric frowned. He had thought they would respect the planners, the men whose vision had sent Man—here in this ship—outward bound to the stars.

Larkin's voice was honey now. "Don't judge our new king by those

who sent him. Don't—"

Laughter, and shouts of "Hail, Lazarus!" The people, Eric suddenly realized, were almost primitive. Larkin and Lindquist and a handful of others ran the ship, had somehow maintained the science of another generation. But the lack of conflict, of challenge, had sent the people down a rung or two on the ladder of civilization. Handpicked, their ancestors had been—but they were a common mob.

Someone cried, "He's seen Earth. Ask him to tell us about Earth!"

"Ask him!"

Captain Larkin smiled. "Tell them, Taine. Tell your new subjects. You have so little time."

"What do you mean, so little time?"

"Tell them!" And Larkin turned away, laughing.

They were primitive, these people, and as the girl Laurie had said, they needed a scapegoat. They didn't like it here on the ship. There had been a first generation which had known Earth and could savor its flavor through the long years like a delicate wine, and there would be a last which could get out on the Centaurian planet, stretch its legs, and build civilization anew. But these in between were in limbo. They lived and they died on the ship, and it wasn't their idea. They would breed so that the ship would still have a crew when it reached Centauri. That was their function. But they didn't like it.

All this went through Eric's mind. Perhaps the girl had no psychosis, perhaps her warning had been sincere. He wondered if the long sleep had dulled his instincts,

his reflexes.

He told them of Earth, of its wonders, of the wide meadows he remembered, of the wind, brisk in spring, which brought the sweet-scented rain, of summer and the big harvest moon which followed, of a hundred other things.

Glair! Clair! Did you marry, have children? There was that Lou Somebody who you'd flirt with to make me jealous, but we both knew he loved you. I wonder.

He spoke of the planners, of the proud day when all the world had seen them off, the video jets flashing by, circling, to send their pictures to the waiting millions.

The planners, he told them, had a vision. It was the same vision which had first taken man—an ape with a brain that held curious half-formed thoughts that gave him a headache—down from the trees. A vision which would carry him one day to the farthest stars and beyond.

They shouted. They stamped on the floor. They laughed.

"What about us? We didn't have any say, did we? Who wants to spend his whole life in this tin can?"

"I don't know—" One of them at least was dubious, but the crowd stilled him. What of Laurie and her Cult? He did not see the girl anywhere in the great hall.

"We've had enough, Captain. Too much, I'd say!"

Larkin looked smug. Lindquist was grinning. No one did anything to stop them as the crowd surged forward, threatened.

Watching them, only now beginning to realize the whole thing, Eric remembered history. Mock-kinghood was nothing new in the scheme of primitive cultures. In ancient Babylonia, in Assyria—elsewhere—The mock king ruled for a day and the people came to him with their troubles. The king, cowering on his throne-of-a-day could perhaps see his executioner waiting. The real king had nothing to lose: the pent up dissatisfaction of his people would drown the mock-ruler like a wave, and after it was all over the king would return to his throne with more power than before.

ROUGH HANDS reached up, grabbed at him. Fists shook, voices threatened. Someone pulled his boot, and Eric sat down on the dais, breathing heavily.

He got up fast, before they could swarm all over him, yanked the gun from his jumper, poked it against Larkin's ribs. "You know what this is?"

"Yes—a gun."

"Well, call your friends off or I'll kill you. I'm not joking, Larkin. Call them off—"

"I can't. Look at them, a mob. What can I do now?"

"You'd better do something, because soon you won't have a chance to do anything. Now!"

Larkin made a motion to the trumpeteer. He blew two loud notes this time, and uniformed men appeared, brandishing clubs. Evidently, they were on hand in case the crowd became too wild, threatened Larkin, Lindquist and the other

nameless rulers.

With their clubs they beat the mob back, slowly, held them off as Eric pushed Larkin before him. The crowd surged close, fought once or twice with the guards on their immediate flanks. Once Larkin tried to bolt away, but thereafter Eric held him firmly until they reached an exit.

Together they sprinted down a corridor, Larkin puffing and staggering. "Beat it," Eric told him. "Go on, scram!"

"You won't kill me as I run? I know that thing can kill over long distances—"

"Don't give me any ideas," Eric said, but he felt a little sick as Larkin ran, whimpering, back toward the hall. This man was their ruler, their leader.

He found the door, activated its mechanism, waited impatiently while he heard the sounds of pursuit. Something clanged against the door, and again. They were throwing things. Eric ducked, felt pain stab at his shoulder.

He could see their faces in the corridor when the door began to slide clear. He slipped in, punched the levers that would close it again, saw a hand and a leg come through the crack, heard a scream. The limbs withdrew, and Eric watched grimly as it slid all the way shut.

Lazaruses Eight, Nine, and Ten, he thought, as he went to the three remaining tubs. For a moment he gazed down through the pinkish liquid at the men curled up, sleeping their long sleep.

He shook the tubs gently. All it would take was that—direct motion. Once that had started the

cycle, each sleeper's hypothalamus took over, twenty-five, fifty, and seventy-five years ahead of schedule. He watched them twitch, shiver, slowly uncurl, watched the vapors rising from their tubs. He had plenty of time.

In a week, he helped them from their tubs. They were ready to listen—smiling baby-faced Chambers, gaunt Striker, rotund Richardson.

He explained, slowly. He told them everything.

"My God," Striker said when he had finished.

"Be thankful you could get back here, lad," Richardson told him. "What do we do now?"

"What *can* we do?" Chambers demanded. Then: "Will you look at that—a hundred seventy five years and I haven't even grown a beard!"

They all laughed, and the tension was broken. "We go back," Eric said, "armed to the teeth. It won't be difficult. Some of them will die, but we can set the ship on its course again, teach them—I'd hate to see the disappointment on Earth if we went back after six generations."

Striker frowned. "Have we the right to kill?"

Eric said, "look—they might get back to Earth someday—their progeny a bunch of savages; the hope and dreams of the race reduced to—nothing. We can kill if we have to."

It was agreed. Without saying anything, Striker himself activated the lock.

"Lazarus" and "death." It was Striker who shot them where they stood, before they could use the clubs.

After that, they fired shots into the air, and people ran screaming away from them. Their first rush carried them almost to the control room and briefly Eric remembered when he had looked out from there with Clair at the bright faraway stars. But he could not quite picture Clair's face. He tried to, but he saw the girl, Laurie. . . .

A dozen uniformed men stood before the control room. They looked badly frightened, but they stood their ground, then advanced.

"What do we do now?" Chambers asked. "We couldn't get them all, not before—"

There was a rush behind them as a score of figures marched into the corridor. "We're trapped!" Striker cried.

Eric grinned. "I don't think so." He had seen Laurie in the vanguard of the newcomers.

They did not have to use their guns, not as they had been meant to be used. They fought with tooth and nail, using the guns as clubs. But mostly, they stood back and watched their allies tear into the guards.

The girl Laurie cried: "I told you there were some who believed, Eric Taine. I told you!"

They reached the control room door, battered at it. Half a dozen men came up with a great post of metal, heaved. The door shuddered. Again. Again. It crashed in.

Lindquist and Larkin stood there, over a great pile of charts and books. "You won't take this

TWO MEN with clubs rushed them in the corridor, howling

ship on to Centauri," Larkin yelled.

A little flame flickered at the end of the tube in his hand. He crouched.

"If those are the astrogation charts—" said Striker.

Eric dove, caught Larkin's midsection with his shoulder, threw the man back. They struggled on the floor, and dimly Eric was aware of others who held the writhing Lindquist. Larkin fought like a snake, twisting, turning, gouging.

Eric, out of the corner of his eye, saw Lindquist breaking loose, watched him running with the brand to the pile of charts. A shot crashed through the room, echoing hollowly. Lindquist fell over his charts.

Now Eric had Larkin down, was pinning him, felt the man's hands twisting, clawing at his stomach, saw them come away with his gun. They grappled, and Eric cursed himself for forgetting the gun. Larkin held it, laughed, squeezed the trigger as Eric pushed clear.

Then the laughter faded as Larkin stared stupidly at the gun he had not known how to use. Larkin gasped once, held both hands to the growing red stain on his middle.

"DEAD," Richardson said later. "They're both dead. You know, I think it's better this way. They would have been trouble. But now—now all we have to do is find the course again, turn the ship around—"

"It'll mean two extra generations in space," Chambers said. "They've

been heading back for Earth twenty-five years."

With Eric, he studied the charts, assembled them, punched a few buttons on the computing machine. "Like this," Eric said. He twirled a few dials. "It takes a long time with the overdrive, but we'll be back on course in three years."

For a while he gazed out the port, fascinated by the huge sweep of the Milky Way, clear and beautiful in the black sky. When he turned back and away from it, Laurie stood beside him.

"Hello, Lazarus."

"Very funny," he said. "Call me Taine—better still, call me Eric."

"Eric, then. Hello, Eric."

He grinned. "I guess you're not psychotic, after all."

"Nope. Normal as can be. But take my great great grandmother, now. She was really neurotic. She married, all right, but they say she really carried a torch all her life."

There was laughter in the girl's eyes as she spoke. Eric had seen other eyes like that. So familiar. So beautiful.

"I am Laurie Simmons," the girl told him. "My great great grandfather's name was Lou Simmons. His wife was Clair. My mother has a book of hers, of poems she wrote to Eric."

"Tell me about them, Laurie." A lovely girl; as pretty as her great great grandmother. No—prettier—and part of today. "Never mind, Laurie. Just tell me about yourself."

He knew Clair would like it this way.

*They wanted a world without war.
The answer was simple: Stay in bed.*

Dreamer's World

By Bryce Walton

A WARNING HUM started somewhere down in the audoviso.

Greg stared. Perspiration crawled down his face. This was it. This was the end of the nightmare. This had to be Pat Nichols.

After seventy-two hours in which Greg had had to do without anesthesia! Seventy-two hours of reality! Seventy-two hours of *consciousness!* Consciousness. Reality.

Greg didn't know how he'd managed to remain sane.

It seemed incredible that a man who had advanced to Stage Five in the Dream Continuity Scale, and who had been in anesthesia most of the time, could suffer seventy-two hours of boring, drab, dreary and revolting reality. And still be sane.

Pat Nichols was the answer. Her body faded into slim and luscious focus on the three-dim screen. Her brooding eyes and wide mouth that curled so reprovingly.

She had gone psycho. Had fled from the Cowl into the dreadful Outside, seventy-two hours ago. Gone to join that fanatical group of Venusian Colonists, those outlaw schizoids who planned to start over on Venus.

"Pat!" Greg's hand reached as though she weren't just a three-dim image. "Listen, Pat! Thank the Codes, you haven't blasted yet. I've been crazy, waiting for this call. Pat, I can't even go into integrated anesthesia without you around. My dreams don't seem to focus right."

"That's too bad, Greg," she said.

He moistened his lips slowly. He slid his hand toward the warning button beneath the table. Her eyes didn't notice, never left his face. Accusative, sad eyes.

He felt sick. He pushed the button. Now! Now Drakeson up on the apartment roof would trace the point of her call. He'd chart her location with the rhodium tracker



In his mind was the certainty: This is no dream.

beams. Then the two of them would go and pick Pat up and prevent that insane, suicidal, one-way trip to Venus.

She might consider it a very unfair thing, but then she was psycho. She'd be glad of it, after she was brought back, brain-probed, and re-conditioned. The thought made Greg even more ill. Brain-probing and re-conditioning involved months of a kind of mental agony that no one could adequately describe. The words were enough to give anesthetic nightmares to any Citizen. But, it was for the good of the Cows, and of the psychos.

Her voice was sad too, like her eyes. "I was hoping you would join me, Greg. Anyway, I called to tell you that in about five hours, we're blasting. This is goodbye."

He said something. Anything. Keep her talking, listening. Give Drakeson a chance to employ the rhodium tracker, and spot her location.

A kind of panic got loose in Greg's brain. "Pat, don't you have any insight at all? Can't you see that this is advanced psychosis, that—"

She interrupted. "I've tried to explain to you before, Greg. But you've always preferred anesthesia. You loathe reality. But I'm part of reality."

Yes. He had dreams. The anesthetic cubicles. Stage Five where a man was master of thalamic introjection, dream imagery. A stage where any part of reality was supposed to have faded into utter inconsequence. But Pat Nichols had always been a part of his conditioned personality pattern. By tak-

ing her out of it, fate had struck him with an unbalance in psyche that disturbed the sole objective of life—to dream.

"But that's a suicide trip, Pat, and you'll never have a chance to be cured of your schizophrenia, even if you do get to Venus—"

Her interruption had weariness in it.

"Goodby, Greg. I'm sorry for you. That silly status quo, and futile dreaming. It will never let you realize what a fine man you are. You'll decay and die in some futile image. So goodbye, Greg. And good dreaming."

She was gone from the screen. Maybe from earth, unless he got out there and stopped her before that suicide ship rocketed out from its hidden subterranean blast tube.

GREG HURRIED. He didn't realize he could function so rapidly in the world of physical reality. In seconds he had zipped thin resilient aerosilk about his body, and was running across the wide plastic mesh roof toward the helio-cruiser in which Drakeson was waiting.

Greg felt the physical power flow as he ran. It sickened him. The conditioners kept the body in good shape, but only to allow the cortical-thalamic imagery faculties to function better. Actual physical business like this was revolting to any Cowl citizen. Any sort of physical and materialistic activity, divorced from anesthesia, might be a sign of encroaching psychosis.

That was the fear. That fear of psychosis that might lead to vio-

lence. To change. The Cows over the Cities protected them from any physical interference with an absolutely stabile, unchanging and static culture. But the Cows hadn't been able to protect the Citizenry from insanity. During the past year, psychosis had been striking increasingly, without warning, indiscriminately.

Greg dropped down beside the thin ascetic figure at the controls. He grabbed Drakeson's arm.

"Did you pick it up, Drake?"

"Uh-huh," Drakeson drawled. His mouth was cynical, his gray eyes somber. "Traced it down to a ten meter radius, but it's underground. About five miles out of Old Washington, just inside the big radioactivated forest east of the Ruins. About half an hour's flight as the crow might fly. If there was a crow left."

"Then let's go. Lift this gadget out of here!"

A spot of nausea bounced into Greg's stomach at Drakeson's reference to what the big Chain blow-up had done to almost all high cellular life forms, including crows. Only insects and a few shielded humans had withstood the radiation. Most higher complex cellular organisms had paid for their complexity. But thanks to the establishment of the Cowled Cities and the Codes of non-change, non-violence, they wouldn't have to pay again. No chance for social change now that might lead to another such disaster.

If they could only trace the cause for this psychosis epidemic—

Greg hadn't thought about it at all until Pat had started talking pe-

culiarly, then when she had broken up completely and left the Cowl, then it had hit home, hard.

The heliocruiser lifted slowly under Drakeson's awkward guidance. Only the Controllers, the Control Council Guards, could work the gadgetry of the City with practiced ease. Everybody else, naturally, was conditioned to various anesthesia states, and had no reason to deal with materialistic things.

The cruiser lifted until it was flying directly beneath the opaque stuff of the Cowl, lost in the dazzling rainbows of sunlight shattering through.

Drakeson said. "We'll keep up here. Maybe the Controllers won't see us."

"What?" A peculiar coolness slid along Greg's spine.

"Maybe they won't see us," repeated Drakeson, and then he smiled wryly. "Listen, Greg. You're way ahead of me in the Dream Continuity. You're a lot further away from reality than I am. More impractical. So listen to a word or two before we try to break through the Cowl.

"We've never been Outside, don't forget that. It's dangerous. You haven't considered any of the angles. For example, I picked up a couple of shielding suits which you hadn't thought of. And two small wrist Geigers. If I hadn't thought of them, then we'd probably have been contaminated with hard radiation out there, and would have been thrown into the septic pools for about six months."

Greg shivered. That would have been very bad.

"It's deadly out there; poisonous,

Greg. Only the insane have wanted to go Outside for the last few years, and only the Controllers have been out, and then only to try to track down the hiding places of the Colonists. You hadn't considered that, but I did. So I had to steal a couple of heat-blasters from the Museum . . ."

"You what?" Greg stared at the two deadly coiled weapons Drake-son dragged from beneath the seat. "Do the Controllers know?"

"They've probably found out by now, or will very soon," Drakeson looked grim. "They'll be after us with sky-cars and para-guns. And they're sure to slap a psycho label on us. They would anyway, probably, for just going Outside. But having destructive forbidden weapons on us, they're sure to, and we couldn't go Outside without weapons, Greg."

That was right, Greg knew. Paralysis guns wouldn't have been enough out there. Drakeson said softly:

"Is she worth it, Greg? We may have to be brain-probed. Is she worth that kind of pain?"

GREG'S stomach seemed to tie up in knots. Brain-probing, psychometry. Greg whispered hoarsely. "She's worth it, Drake. And besides, it's ridiculous to think that we'll be suspected. I'm only interested in preventing Pat from making that suicide trip. The Controllers have the same interest."

"But that's their job. You and I aren't supposed to be concerned with reality. They've gotten very sensitive this last year. They can't

take any chances. At the least sign of disintegration, they have to apprehend and send you to psychometry."

Greg said. "You trying to get out of your bargain, Drake? If you don't want that carton of Stage Five dream capsules, then—"

"Oh no, I'll take a chance to get that carton. I never thought I'd get a chance to experience such premature dreams. It's worth the gamble, we might get away without being probed."

Greg's head ached. Reality always gave him a headache. He wasn't used to it. A man who had reached Stage Five had been an anesthesiac too long to find reality comfortable.

"I know the Codes," Greg whispered. "Legally, there's no reason to be apprehended just for leaving the Cowl. And as for the blasters, well—we can drop them off, hide them, if the Controllers get after us."

The cruiser moved down the sloping arc of the Cowl toward the dark patch that Greg recognized as a merging chamber. The plastic spires of the City reached up around them as though reaching for the sun. Only a few human figures could be seen far below, on roofs, and in the streets. A few low stage humans not in anesthesia.

Greg crawled into the shielding suit. He took over the unfamiliar controls while Drakeson got his own shielding suit on. They weren't heavy, but were sluggish material that could throw off ordinary radiation.

Behind him Greg heard Drake-son's harsh yell. "Sky-cars! Ten of

them! Shooting up out of the Control Tower and coming right toward us! Merge, and merge fast, Greg, if you still want to go Outside."

Inside the thick sheeting of the suit, Greg's skin was soaked with perspiration. His face was strained as he moved the cruiser into the first lock chamber. The cruiser had to move through a series of locks to the Outside. A precaution to keep bacteria, radiation, other inimical elements from coming in while an exit from the Cowl was being made.

One by one the locks opened and closed as grav-hooks pulled the cruiser through. It was a precariously balanced culture, this one inside the Cowls, Greg thought. Like living inside a gigantic sealed test-tube. Any slightly alien elements introduced into that test-tube could make it a place of sealed death in a short time. A rigidly controlled, non-changing environment. That was fine, except that some humans within it had a habit of changing, and for the worse. Retrogression, psychosis.

Psychometry was trying frantically to find the cause. It seemed obvious that the Venusian Colonists might be causing psychotics to appear in order to swell their ranks of volunteers to go to Venus to start a "new dynamic, progressive order." Madness. Suicide.

Progressive evolutionary philosophies meant change, and change might lead anywhere. But eventually it could only lead to another horrible *Chain*. One Chain had been enough.

The earth had been thoroughly

wrecked. The few survivors had set up the anti-reality standards, the Cowls and the Codes—and the Controllers. They established the Dream Continuity that led to the various anesthetic stages.

But people went insane. They disagreed. They fled the Cowls. Venusian Colonial Enterprises resulted. It was organized insanity. A neatly planned psychosis, with grandiose delusions of justification. They would save humanity! Madness. Schizophrenia.

Venusian Colonization had been organized three years before. At least four known spaceships had been constructed, stocked, and blasted. They changed their subterranean hideouts after each blast. It had just never occurred to Greg that Pat could go psycho and join them.

It was even more ridiculous for the Controllers to suspect *him* of being psycho.

He felt a little better as the cruiser broke out beyond the Cowl and into the blazing natural sun of noon. It blinded Greg. Frightened him a little.

He'd never seen the sun before, except dimmed by the Cowl.

He sent the cruiser climbing rapidly above the weird grotesque terrain. Drakeson jumped into the seat beside him. His face was white.

"Open the converter feed valves wide, Greg! Clear open! The Control cars aren't stopping at the merger. They're coming on through. They're right behind us."

Greg looked back. Ten sky-cars, and within neuro-gun range. He jerked the converter wide open. Acceleration slammed him back hard.

He knew now what fear was. In dreams you never suffered it.

THE AUDIO in the control panel cracked out.

"Dalson! Drakeson! Turn around! Re-enter the Cowl. Return immediately. This is a Control Council order. Do so or we fire with full charge neuro-blasts."

Paralysis guns. And full blast. Greg swallowed. They meant business. And without even a formal enquiry!

Drakeson said in a whisper. "What are we going to do?"

Greg didn't know. How could they think he was psycho?

Drakeson licked his lips. "I don't want to go under the brain-probers, Greg. Nobody does. I don't want to be re-conditioned. I want to stay like I am. I'm not psycho. And they'll brain-probe us sure if we don't turn around and go back. And even if we do—"

The audio's cold impersonal voice said:

"This is the last order. The neuro-guns are ready to fire."

Greg's mind ran in mad circles. He tried to think. He felt Drakeson move, and then he saw Drakeson's hand with that infernal injection solution jiggling around in a big hypodermic syringe.

"I've just given myself another shot, Greg. You'd better have another right now. If we land down there we'll need all the adrenolex we can get."

Greg hardly felt the injection as he tried to think, clarify his situation. I'm not psycho, he thought desperately. I'm doing something a

little bit different, but it isn't psychosis.

But good integrated citizenry would not fight against the orders from Control. All right. He would submit to brain-probing. But he'd get Pat out of that trap she was in first. He might be able to talk her out of it if he could get to her personally, be with her a while. The Controllers certainly couldn't. They'd drive her away into space as soon as she saw them.

The solution. A legality. He knew the Codes didn't he?

He yelled back at the pursuing sky-cars via the audio:

"Don't fire those neuro-guns. This is Greg Dalson speaking. There's a law against any aggressive destructive action on the part of any Citizen."

The audio replied. "The neuro-guns aren't destructive. Temporary paralysis."

Greg said. "This cruiser is at a high altitude and traveling fast. If you paralyze us now, the cruiser will crash. By using the neuro-guns on us, you will be destructive, homicidal."

A dead silence greeted this statement. Greg went on. "I'm a Stage Five citizen. Legally, there's no restriction against going outside the Cowl. I'll report your action and attitudes to the Council if you fire those neuro-guns."

Drakeson choked something unintelligible. His face was deathly pale. "Clever," he whispered. "But that clinches it. When we do go back, it's psychometry for us, Greg."

Finally the audio answered. The voice was not so cold. It had a tinge

of emotionalism. It said. "A technicality, but it does prevent us from firing the neuro-guns. However, we feel it our duty to remain with you until you do return to the Cowl. Because of the recent epidemic of psychosis, we find this authorized by the Control Council. . . ."

Greg savagely flipped off the audio. Drakeson said. "If they stay on our trail, we'll lead them right to Pat. They'll scare her away before you get a chance to talk with her, and try to prevent her from going on the ship."

"I know," Greg said. "I know. We've got to figure something—"

He looked down at the fantastic semi-organic flora below. "How far to go yet, Drake?"

"About three minutes."

"All right. We'll set the cruiser down here, and walk to where Pat is."

Drakeson choked. "That's suicide," he said. "We won't have a chance."

GREG DIDN'T have time to be surprised at his own actions. He pulled Drakeson's hands away from the controls. Drakeson was trying to stop him from bringing the cruiser down.

Drakeson gasped. "Even with the heat-blasters, we'll never get a hundred meters away from where we land. I figured on landing directly over the place—"

"So will the Controllers," Greg said. He hurled Drakeson back, heard him sprawl on the mesh flooring where he lay, half sobbing.

Greg angled the ship down abruptly. "As soon as we land, I'm

running for it," he called back. "The Controllers will be down there swarming all over us, and I don't want to lead them to where Pat is."

Drakeson crawled over to the bunk and sat on it. "All right," he said. "I'm with you. It's too late to get out of it now. For a carton of premature dreams, I've gotten myself stuck with a psycho tag. I'm stuck with it anyway, now. Might as well go on, and stay out of the brain-probers as long as possible."

Greg felt a tingling crawl up his wrists as they dropped down above the gigantic, semi-organic forest. Mutated cells in the process of change had played havoc with the pre-Chain life forms. According to what little he had gotten from info-tapes, there was no longer any distinction or at least very little, between organic and inorganic life, outside the Cows.

Psycho. He'd still argue with Drakeson about that, but he didn't have time. He wasn't psycho. As soon as he persuaded Pat to abandon the flight, they'd give themselves up, return to the Cowl, and things would return to normal, to anesthesia, Stage Five, then Six, then Seven, on to the final eternal dream.

That's the way it was going to be.

And if they had to suffer the hells of brain-probing and the awful ego-loss of re-conditioning, then they would do that too. It was for the good of the Cows, the preservation of the Codes. A noble sacrifice. Must be no change. No menace to stability. Any suggestion of change made one suspect.

Greg's eyes misted as he brought

the cruiser to a half-crash landing. Even as he tried to bring his blurred vision into focus, he was running to the exit. He had the sliding panel open. He was up to his knees in writhing tendrils. He was running through a crimson twilight.

Behind him, he heard Drakeson tearing through the tendrils, and clutching vines. Overhead he could hear the drone of the sky-car's atomurbinic motors. Whether they would land and continue the search on foot through the deadly forest, Greg couldn't know.

He didn't know anything about the Controllers' methods. "How far, Drake," he yelled through the interperson audio. Drakeson came running up beside Greg. Severed strings of torri, still living life-stuff writhed from his shoulders and legs.

"I'd say about half a mile straight ahead. That's a long way through this nightmare."

Greg screamed. A broad mushroom-like growth had opened a mouth. A gigantic, sickeningly gray mouth full of deadly, flesh-eating acid.

A flower-bright vine with great tensile strength raked Drakeson in toward that gaping maw.

Drakeson's arms were held tight against his sides. He was straining—helpless. Through the glassine mask of his helmet, Greg saw Drakeson's face turning red with constriction.

His voice came to Greg in a burst of fear. "The gun, Greg! The heat-blaster—quick—"

Greg leaned forward, staring in rigid fascination. Fleishy stocks swayed toward him. Other mouths opened, petal mouths. Gigantic floral traps, and cannibal blooms.

"Greg! Greg!" Drakeson was framed now by that great cannibal maw.

Greg had the heat-blaster up. He had it leveled. But he couldn't depress the firing stud.

"Drake! I can't! I can't!"

How could any integrated man be deliberately destructive? How could any sane person—kill?

"I can't—Drake—" The awful conflict seemed to rip through his body. He felt the sweat, hot and profuse, rolling down his face. He concentrated on that gun, on his finger, on the firing stud.

The cannibal blossom was closing. Sticky juices dripped over Drakeson. He was screaming. Greg's finger lifted. He could not fire.

The Codes said no destruction. No killing. The Codes had been established after the great Chain disaster. Violence begets violence, the Codes said. And once begun, it was accumulative, like the snowball rolling down hill.

Greg sagged. His knees buckled. He sprawled out in the slippery muck. Tendrils swished softly and hungrily around him. He heard a shout. He tried to twist his head. Figures blurred before his eyes, and he heard the deadly *chehowww-wwww* of a terrific blast.

The last thing he remembered before the dark wrapped him up softly and warmly, was the cannibal plant exploding in a million fragments of stringy tissue, and Drakeson falling free.

I didn't fire, he was thinking. Someone else saved Drakeson. But I think I might have done it. My finger—it was moving—bending—

or was it? No. I couldn't have been destructive. Couldn't have killed.

CONSCIOUSNESS came back to Greg. Painfully. It came back slowly and it took a long time. He lifted his eyelids. He raised himself to a sitting position. He stared down a gloomy, phosphorescent corridor. It was obviously subterranean. It was damp, chill. Cold luciferin light glowed from lichen on walls and low ragged ceiling.

It was long and it finally curved, he decided. But he could look back into a long slow curve of corridor and ahead into the same. Here and there, the mouths of branch corridors came in.

He looked at his hand. It still clutched the butt of the heat-blast-er.

He felt strange. The surroundings were very real, yet they seemed somehow not real. The shock of trying to fire that blaster when the sanity in him shrieked "No!" had been too much for him. The shock had blanked him out.

He breathed a deep sigh of temporary relief and triumph. He hadn't killed. He thought of Drake-son. Somebody had saved him. Someone had killed. Not the Con-trollers. They could employ only the neuro-guns to paralyze. So he decided that Colonists had probably saved Drake-son.

Terror gripped Greg then. He remembered Drake-son yelling at him, the distended eyes, the straining face. And how he himself had almost given in, had almost killed.

Had almost gone psycho.

But he hadn't. That was the im-

portant thing. He was still a sane, integrated part of the Cows and the Codes. And after a test like that, he figured that nothing could break him. Let them send him to psy-ychometry. Let them clamp on the brain-probers and leave them on for months. They'd not find any psycho-tendencies in Greg Dalson.

Greg tried to reason. But he had no place, no foundation, for a be-ginning. He didn't know where he was, or why he had been left here. He knew that someone, the Colo-nists probably, had saved Drake-son from that plant thing. Some mental pressure had blacked him out, he thought, and then what? He didn't know.

Which way? It didn't seem to matter. He started walking.

He was bone-weary. His head throbbed. His eyes burned. And he was afraid. He had gotten himself into a completely un-Codified situa-tion. He was lost, helpless, outside the protection of the Cows, the Codes, and anesthesia.

He was surrounded by reality. Reality in all its essential horror. Conflict. Physical danger. Uncer-tainties. Materialistic barriers. All the old shibboleths that the Cows and the Codes and the anesthesiac dreams had protected him from.

And all because of Pat Nichols.

But he'd stood a big test. And he'd won. He hadn't killed. He wasn't destructive. He—

The cry touched his ears and died. It was too violent and filled with pain and terror to make any definite impression the first time. He crouched. His eyes distended. The scream came again, and this time it chopped through him. His

nerves seemed to shrivel and curl beneath the repeated onslaughts of the screams.

Then he was running. He didn't know why, except that he had to run. He ran with fearful, gasping desperation. But he didn't know why.

HE RAN past the mouth opening into the main corridor. Then came back and ran into the darker, strangely-lighted artery. He ran harder. And yet he wasn't running. Not all of him. As he ran, he was conscious of some undefinable, but terrific conflict.

Beneath the suit, his skin burned with sweat. He felt the rigid pattern of tensed neck and jaw muscles.

I don't feel at all familiar. Something's very wrong. Everything's wrong. I'm displaced, like something that has slipped into an alien dimension.

He stopped, quickly. His heart seemed to swell, burst with terror. Terror and something else. The something else came, and with it came horror of itself. The emotion, and then horror of the emotion. He stood shivering, his teeth clacking like an ancient abacus.

"Pat!" He screamed her name. The cry pounded back into his ears inside the helmet.

This wasn't Drakeson. This was Pat. Pat was going to die now. Not Drakeson.

The walls were—*alive*. They were not like the walls of the corridors. This was a circular chamber, and the walls were sagging and undulating like part of a giant's flesh.

He heard heavy sluggish sounds.

Masses of the gray viscous stuff sagged, changed form, remolded itself into monstrous shapes.

Pat! Only her face and part of her upper body were visible now. The shielding of her suit had been cracked wide open by pressure as the semi-organic thing, whatever it was, had closed around her.

The walls rushed in as Greg stumbled drunkenly. The ceiling sagged lower. Long knobs fell, like globules of paste, then lengthened into shapeless tendrils that snapped out at Greg.

He fell back.

Pat's scream penetrated again. No beauty remained in her face now. Her eyes were sick. Her lips were loose and trembling.

"Greg—help me—help me—see what it does—the others—"

He saw the others then. Maybe he hadn't noticed before, because his mind didn't want him to see.

Husks. Pallid wrinkled husks, sucked dry and shriveled. Several figures not recognizable anymore, hardly recognizable as human. Just vaguely human, broken, sucked dry.

His mind seemed covered by a grotesque shadow. His flesh crawled and his throat turned dry, and perspiration made a stream down his throat. He felt his eyes looking down at his right hand.

It held the heat-blaster. The skin felt tight as though it would split as he gripped the heavy butt of the coiled weapon.

He concentrated on the finger that was frozen on the firing stud. If he could destroy, then he was insane. His experience with Drakeson, that had been no test at all com-

pared with this. This was Pat. Pat, and she was dying—dying unspeakably.

This was the great test of his sanity. He concentrated on the finger. He must keep it frozen. He must back out of here. Get away, get back to the Cowl, back to anesthesia and sleep.

The finger raised slowly from the stud. His feet lifted as his body moved fitfully back, back, back—

“Greg—help me, Greg—”

Her eyes stopped him. They tumbled into terrible clarity. She whispered starkly.

“Greg—help me—kill it, Greg. For me— Kill it.”

He felt his lips part in a great and terrible cry of torture. His shoulders began to twitch slightly. His arms and fingers took up the jerky rhythm. Horror and a violent crimson flood of unfamiliar emotions mushroomed like a volcano of madness. Something began crumbling away.

He lurched forward. He felt the heat-blaster heaving, throwing out its deadly load. The gun had weight and power in his hand as he crouched lower and moved in.

The power load swathed in long slicing arcs. Steam and sickening stench fell around him. He moved in. He stumbled forward kicking out to right and left at the quivering slices of stuff that were falling around him.

Destruction. Kill. Death. This was all three, and in a giant, almost inconceivable quantity.

Her face through the steaming cloud. Her throat moving as she swallowed. Brightness, the brightness of disbelief and impossibility

coming into her eyes.

He kept moving in until the monstrous mutated gray thing was thoroughly dead. Until every separate tendril and patch was blasted to smoke. Then he lifted her broken body in his arms.

Tears fell on the opaqueness of his helmet. “I’m sorry, Pat,” he choked. “I’m sorry it didn’t happen sooner. I’m sorry I waited too long—but it isn’t easy—to let yourself go insane.”

Something was wrong. Pat! Pat! She seemed to be fading away from him, drifting away, melting into tattered veils of cloud. Her face became only two bright glad eyes, then they, also melted together into a radiant pool. He toppled into the pool. He sank down, a wonderful lifelessness spreading through him.

He closed his eyes. Something was beginning to be very funny. In the thickening dark, he laughed a little. And in that laugh was a crazy, climbing note of—triumph.

HE OPENED his eyes. He was laughing, in a kind of soft hysteria. He was on a couch. Not a dream couch, but just a plain hard bed. He sat up stiffly. Pain tingled down his legs. He saw Pat Nichols. And another. A man. He remembered him vaguely, one of the first who had escaped from the Cowl. His name—yes—he remembered now. Merrol.

Pat Nichols, alive, and smiling. Very beautiful too in a brief aerosilk bra and shorts and sandals. Her hair was a dark lovely cloud flowing down over bare shoulders.

“Hello, Greg,” she said softly.

"Welcome to—the Colonists."

"What?" He swung his legs around. "I don't understand. Not entirely."

Merrol, a gaunt elderly man, nodded from behind a desk. Merrol's hair was gray and sparse. Strange, seeing a man who showed age. Within the Cows, one never grew physically old.

Pat said, "This is Ralph Merrol, Personnel Director of Venusian Colonization Enterprises."

Greg's numbness was filtering away beneath Pat's warm glad eyes. He raised his hand. The heat-blaster was still gripped in his fingers. It evidently hadn't been fired.

"It was all illusion," he said. "The scene in the cavern. It never happened?"

Merrol's care-lined face nodded. "It happened, but in your mind, Greg. We rescued you and Drake-son from the cannibal plant. We brought you here. You had lost consciousness. We put you under the hypnosene rays, and put you through an experience that was quite real to you. We proved something to ourselves, and to you. Greg—you're sane now."

Greg tried to understand. The thing didn't make sense yet, but the glimmerings of the truth were beginning to solidify in his aching brain.

"Sane? But I killed. I wanted to kill. I wanted to destroy, and I did. That's hardly the actions of a—sane man."

Merrol smiled thinly. "From our point of view it is, Greg. We consider ourselves sane. We consider the Cowled Cities, and the Codes insane. It's relative I supposed, but

I think we can convince you, if we haven't already."

Greg looked at Pat. She smiled. He smiled back. "Justified or not," he whispered. "I'm here. Sane or insane, I'm one of the Colonists now I guess. Unless I want to return to the Cows, be probed and re-conditioned."

Pat whispered. "Do you, Greg?"

He shook his head. "Not now. I'm tired. I don't want to now. Maybe I never will. All I want now, is rest."

Merrol leaned across the desk. "Before you rest, you'd better get a few things straight, Greg. We want you to be convinced that you're doing the right thing. We feel that the big Chain blowup shocked the whole human race into a mass psychosis, comparable to individual cases of hysteria, schizophrenia, escape from reality. That's why the non-change, non-aggressiveness Codes were established. Also, the anesthesia, the Dream Continuity Scale—nothing but hysteria on a mass and planned basis."

Merrol got up. He walked around and sat down beside Greg.

"Carried out to its inevitable end, this could only lead to mass racial suicide. That's obvious. It was a static dead end. A few people recovered from the psychosis. They escaped, and formed the Colonists. But their own welfare wasn't the most important thing.

"They concerned themselves then with the freeing of the Citizens of the Cows from their psychosis. The world is untenable on a large scale now, due to radioactive poisoning. It will remain untenable for some time. Meanwhile we decided to

Colonize Venus. We've established Colonies there. Thriving communities, but the important thing is this, Greg—it's given new impetus and enthusiasm to those who become sane and escape the Cows. It presents a big challenge and solidifies the cure.

"It's bigger than Control has any idea that it is. It will take a long time yet, but we'll win. You have noticed the increase in so-called insanity in the Cows. It really means just the opposite. Our numbers are increasing by leaps and bounds."

Greg said. "The Controllers think you're using some psychological or physical pressure to create these—cures."

Merrol smiled. "We've got a recruiting system. Drakeson, for example, is a spy. We have spies all over the Cows."

Greg stared. "Drakeson?"

A door opened. The lean cynical man entered, nodded, and stood beside Pat. His eyes shone more brightly as he looked at Greg.

"That's right," Drakeson said. "Remember the two injections. I said they were adrenolex. They weren't. Our spies inside the Cows are equipped with a supply of a certain aggression factor. It used to be called Kappa, or K, for killer. This factor is handed down through the generations in the general cell protoplasm. It forces aggressive tendencies. It makes a man capable of physical aggressive action, and able to kill, if he has to. High motivation is required though, in most cases. With you, my probable death wasn't enough. It took the vision of Pat here in the clutches of a monster to make the

Kappa factor work on you, Greg."

Greg rubbed his eyes. Pat came over and he took her hand, held it tightly. A warmth came out of her and into him, into his mind.

DRAKESON went on. "We isolated the Kappa factor, made it into solution. We all have it, even the anesthetic citizens of the Cows, but the mass shock psychosis won't let it work. However, a strong overload of Kappa injection will sometimes break the psychosis, force the person back into an aggressive personality, capable of destruction. Each individual carries an armament of between 200 and 800 particles of the Kappa factor after we give an injection. It took 1600 particles to break your suicidal hysteria."

Pat squeezed his hand. Greg looked up. He grinned with a kind of glad embarrassment.

"I don't know yet whether to thank you or not. Frankly though, I do feel better."

He thought of the Cows. Test-tubes, glass cages, and dreams that led finally to the final anesthesia, death. He shuddered, and tried to push the memory out of his mind. It seemed unhealthy now. Unclean and—yes, it did seem insane.

He raised his eyes to the ceiling. He saw the self-inverting three dimensional mechanism that had given him that starkly real adventure in which he had been able to kill, for Pat. A dream sequence, partly hypnotic, partly created by cathode image activating the multi-phase AC. A high harmonic of multi-phase AC field hanging over

him, and a focusing radiator. Dream. Nightmare.

He looked at Pat. "I think I'll take reality now," he said softly. He felt the pull on his arm, and he got up. She led him through a door and into a soft twilight. He held her tightly against him.

She whispered. "The ship's waiting for us, Greg. The next ship. You're already on the passenger list. You see, I knew you'd come with us. I was hoping so desperately, I couldn't think any differently."

He kissed her. He held her more tightly as though—as though—

He felt her warm muscles tense against him. Her eyes widened.

"Greg! What is it?"

He shook his head. "I—I got to

wondering if this too, might not be just a dream. I've been in anesthesia too long maybe. How can I know what's real and what isn't real?"

He felt her warm moist fingers on the back of his neck. He felt her lift on her toes, pull his face down. She kissed him. Her voice was husky, and her breath was warm on his lips.

"Do you know now, Greg? Is this a dream?"

He shook his head. His voice was hoarse.

"No—no—this isn't a dream."

She laughed softly. They moved away, down the corridor toward the ship.

THE END

His story reads like fantasy—yet Science has never disproved it!

AT THE AGE of ten he caused his bowl of oatmeal to skip about the breakfast table, and furniture to be lifted by unseen hands. At thirteen he was prophesying events, even death, with alarming accuracy. At twenty-five he was holding spellbound men—scholars, emperors, scientists, critics—whose names ring in the pages of history!

Daniel Home was probably the greatest medium the mod-

ern world has ever known. His feats were more than amazing—they were supernatural. Witnesses could hardly believe their eyes, yet they had to—for no one could ever refute him!

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STRANGE

On sale at all newsstands — 35 cents

The Reamer mansion was on trial. It announced its own verdict—guilty!

THE REVEALING

Pattern

By Alvin Heiner

HE WAS a man easily smiled at; a little birdlike individual carrying an umbrella and wearing upon his pink face a look reminding of happy secrets about to be revealed. He came to my desk during the midafternoon lull and said, "I am Professor Jonathan Waits. I have come to avail myself of your facilities."

I had never heard it put quite that way before, but from Professor Waits, it did not sound stilted. It was the way you would expect him to put it. He beamed at the ceiling and said, "What a fine old library, my dear. I must bring Nicholas some time."

I gave him the smile reserved financial supporters and unknown quantatives and asked, "Could I be of service?"

He didn't get to it immediately. "I understand this library is fairly

crammed with old records—data on the historical aspects of this area. Personal histories and such."

He had a way of radiating his own cheerful mood. "Oh yes," I assured him. "It's an exceptional day when we don't sweep a D.A.R. or two out of the aisles come closing time."

This, according to his laugh, was quite good. He said, "I'm sure we'll get on splendidly, Miss—?"

"—Hopstead."

"Are you a native?"

"A New Englander from way back," I assured him. "Some of my ancestors used to drink buttered rum with Captain Rogers."

"Then possibly you'd like to know about my work."

"I certainly would." And, strangely enough, I did.

"I am a researcher into the—well, the unusual."

"Psychic research?" I inquired, wanting him to know we New Englanders were not dullards.

"No. Nothing to do with the supernatural at all. My work is to prove that all occurrences, however mysterious, are the logical result of previous actions of individuals; that superstitions are the result, not so much of ignorance, but lack of knowledge."

While I wrestled with that one, he said, "Maybe I could be a trifle more explicit."

"That would help."

His bright little eyes got even brighter. "Do you know, by chance, of the Reamer mansion over in Carleton?"

I certainly did. It was some thirty miles from Patterson, but as a child, I'd visited the place. All children within the radius had visited the Reamer mansion at least once. It was an ancient fifteen room cockroach trap with such a history of death and violence behind it as to cause the kids to walk on tiptoe through its silent rooms. I told the professor I knew about it.

"It has been vacant for fifteen years," he observed.

"And will be vacant for twice fifteen more, I imagine."

"That's just the point. Superstition. Otherwise solid and sane people wouldn't dream of moving into the Reamer mansion. And it's so silly."

"It is?"

"Of course. And that's why I'm here. I intend to prove, so the most stubborn will understand, that the house itself has nothing whatsoever to do with its own grim past; that the people who lived in it are to

blame."

It was a dull day and he was such an apparently sincere little man that I decided to keep the conversation alive. "I'm afraid you'll have a hard time proving it. Let's see—the first one was old Silas Reamer. He committed suicide there. That was sometime around 1925. Then—"

"—His son, Henry Reamer, was found dead under mysterious circumstances two years later. Murder was obvious, but nothing has ever been done about it."

I frowned in mock severity. "I don't like the way you put that, Professor. Do you imply that we New Englanders condone violence?"

"Oh, not at all. There were just—no clues, from what I've learned. The next unfortunate, a renter named Miles McCormick, was found dead along with his wife and child as a result of lethal gas from a faulty stove."

"That happened the year I was born. We have the old newspapers here, telling about it."

"Those reports, along with other material are what I wish to study," Professor Waits said, then went on. "The house stood vacant for five years, until a Johnathan Hays bought it."

"But Johnathan Hays never moved in. He died of a heart attack while carrying a chair through the front door."

He beamed on me. "You are a remarkably alert young woman; well up in local history."

"With no credit to me. You'd be hard put finding a citizen around

here who doesn't know the history of the Reamer mansion."

"Not 'of the Reamer mansion', my dear. Of the people who just happened to reap their ill-fortune there."

"You insist the house had nothing to do with it?"

"Nothing whatever."

PROFESSOR—I wonder if you know how big a bite you've taken? If you go up in the hills hereabouts you'll find whole families living in dirt-floor houses. You'll find children who never heard of a bath or a telephone. But you won't find one person who would live in the Reamer mansion for a salary paid promptly every Saturday morning."

"Nonetheless," Professor Waits replied, "the so-called jinx of the mansion, or any other maligned locality, is a matter of monstrous coincidence. The truth lies hidden in the lives of the people involved. I've been ferreting out that truth."

"You mean this isn't a beginning, Professor?"

He grasped his umbrella in a manner indicating he meant to spear a dragon in case there were any around, and said, "Oh my no! I've been tracing the lives of the principals in this drama for some time. It involves long, tedious work. I must not only dig into the lives of the unfortunates themselves, but also into those of kin; even—in some cases—friends."

"What did you find out about the murder?"

He evaded neatly. "I am not seeking a killer as such. Relative to

that facet of the case, I am more interested in Henry Reamer himself. A very wise man once said, 'If you would understand violence, look also into the heart of the murdered'. A man carries the seeds of his destiny in his own soul."

"And you intend to prove it?"

"I am finding more proof every day. Soon I shall publish a paper which will startle the thinking world."

I could see the Professor wasn't one to be backed into any corners. "And how can I help in this work?"

"I am tracing at the moment, certain details in the life of Mabel Tutworthy, an aunt of Silas Reamer. Unauthenticated legends indicate she killed an eight-point buck once, with her bare hands, and dragged it home across ten miles of forest."

"I've heard that, and it's probably true. You think it has something to do with what happened to Silas?"

"—And his son Henry."

"I think you'll find what you want in that section by the south window. It's devoted to local history."

"Thank you, my dear." He moved away, reminding me somehow, of a happy retriever going into a lake after a duck. Halfway to the shelves, he halted suddenly and turned. "Did you know that seventy percent of the accidents happen to twenty percent of the people?"

I didn't, but I refused to admit such backwardness. "I certainly do. Amazing, isn't it?"

"That is one of the pillars upon which my work is based."

"And there are others?"

"Seven in all."

He didn't tell me what the other six were. Instead he disappeared into local history and left me with the latest best seller I was reading under the counter lest some child come in and be stripped of all innocence by one glance.

It was two hours before Professor Waits reappeared. He carried a small blue notebook in one hand and a stub pencil in the other. He was positively beaming. "A gold mine," he said. "A veritable gold mine. Did you know that Ezekial Webb, a cousin of William Tutworth was gored by a bull in the year 1862?"

"No—really?"

Then I was truly ashamed of myself. He was such a pleasant, sincere little man and he got such fun out of life. But he misinterpreted my boorishness for true enthusiasm and said, "It's a fact! Imagine! Walking in here and finding one of the links I've hunted for months. I'm indebted to you, my dear, for directing me to that book shelf."

I could have told him he was under no obligation; that I got, each week, the coolie stipend of twenty eight dollars for doing just that; but I didn't want him starting an investigation into peonage system practiced in libraries and schools.

Then something in the little man's manner, sobered me. "Professor—exactly why are you doing this?"

He blinked. "I have plenty of money. I have the time. It interests me. And I feel it a worthy occupation; gathering knowledge through which people may know the true causes of misfortune; may throw off

the yoke of superstition."

"You feel, then, that nothing happens by chance?"

"My dear," he said, solemnly, "in this ordered universe there can be no such thing. Action and achievement—cause and result. The revealing pattern of each man's actions is in the pasts of himself and his antecedents."

"And by proving this you will exonerate the Reamer mansion of all guilt?"

He smiled. "You are a most intelligent young lady. Most intelligent! I shall see a great deal of you in the weeks to come."

IT WAS not a distasteful prospect. I liked the Professor and was glad he liked me. After he left I went back and found not a single book out of place. I liked him even more.

Two weeks passed before I saw Professor Waits again. He came in out of the sunshine, carrying his black umbrella and wearing the same black string necktie. I was busy at the time, finding an acceptable book for Mrs. Winsolow's little Freddie who was in bed with the pip. When I got clear, Professor Waits was deep in his research and I did not disturb him.

He came pattering out just before closing time and I was struck by the somber—almost sad—expression he wore.

"Did you have trouble finding what you wanted, Professor?"

"Oh no. The records are most voluminous. It's just—well, the *nature* of my discoveries."

"Bad?"

"Very bad, Miss Hopstead. Do you know who Henry Reamer's murderer was?"

"No."

"Miles McCormick, the renter who died there so tragically with his family."

I didn't quite know how to respond; whether I should faint or scream for the police. I settled for a philosophical comment. "A case of justice by a higher power."

"You mean McCormick's death?"

"Of course."

"On the contrary. There was no connection at all between the two events. McCormick and his wife and child died because they violated a certain law, but not necessarily a law on the statute books."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow that."

"Look at it this way, Miss Hopstead. You are walking through a dark room. A door is standing open. You come into violent contact with the edge of it. What happens?"

"A broken nose? A black eye."

"Precisely. The fact you didn't know the door was there didn't protect you from the consequences."

This of course, I was forced to concede.

"Now let's go a step further by taking, as example, a lower mentality than our own. A horse, knowing nothing of the laws of electricity, would step on a high voltage wire and never know why it was electrocuted. In such a case, the animal would violate a law it did not know existed."

I was beginning to see what he was driving at. "You mean—"

"We are far above the horse in

mentality and understanding but there are still many laws we do not understand. That is what my work involves."

I insisted upon being heard. "You mean a lot of apparently innocent things we do are really electric wires."

He beamed. "Exactly. When we reap misfortune it is because we violate some law. Ignorance of that law doesn't change the end-result one iota."

"And you're trying to find out what these—these booby traps are?"

"Oh I know many of them already. My paper will surprise the world. I'm working on a more advanced phase of the problem now. I am tracing a pattern of interlocking violations to show that the scene of the end-results can be only sheerest coincidence. I want to banish once and for all the superstition-stigma attached to scenes of repeated misfortune and violence."

"The Reamer mansion."

"That's right. And now I must be going, Miss Hopstead." He gave me the departing smile and started for the door.

"Professor Waits."

"Yes?"

"About Mabel Tutworthy. Did she really drag that buck ten miles?"

"No. It was only a fawn. And she killed it less than a mile from her cabin."

"And the murder of Henry Reamer. What proof—?"

"Nothing the police would be interested in. It was the end-result of a cause they won't understand until my work is published and given study."

He opened the door, looked around, smiled. "This is certainly a fine old building. I *must* bring Nicholas with me the next time."

With that, he was gone.

I FOUND myself looking forward to his next visit. I looked and looked and a month passed and a tall, serious-faced youth came into the library and waited until I'd finished checking in Mrs. Garvey's returns.

"I understand," he said, "that you have an immense store of local history in this library?"

"The section by the south window."

"Thank you." He peered at me through thick lenses. "Thank you Miss—"

"—Hopstead."

"Miss Hopstead. I am Nicholas Worthy. Possibly you knew a friend of mine. Professor Waits? I am carrying on his work."

"Carrying on—? Did something happen to—?"

"Oh. Then you didn't hear. It was most tragic. Professor Waits died of pneumonia. A great loss—a great loss."

I was deeply shocked. My feeling was that of losing a close friend. "No, I hadn't heard. It must have been very sudden."

"It was. He was advanced in years, you know, and after he fell, pneumonia set in quickly. They were unable to save him."

"The Professor had an accident?"

"Yes. He fell down the main staircase of the Reamer mansion and broke his hip."

—THE END—

Latch on to the next **if!**

WITHOUT DOUBT, the greatest thing that's happened to science-fiction in the last year is a young man named Walter Miller Jr.—the lad who writes "with the brilliance and fury of an angry angel". Proof of his ability lies in the fact that his stories are becoming harder and harder to acquire. But **IF** was lucky!

So don't miss **LET MY PEOPLE GO**, the lead novel in the July issue of **IF**, by Walter Miller Jr., on sale May 5th.

QUOTING *our contemporaries*

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION

John W. Campbell Jr.

Because there is no distinguishing mark save their own accomplishments, no presently-accepted basis of "race" distinction makes any important sense whatsoever. *Homo superior* is here—but only by his works can you find him. Confucius, Einstein, George Washington, Moses, Plato, Christophe, the Black Napoleon, and Abraham Lincoln all belonged to one race, the race of Imperial Man—*homo superior*.

And each was a mongrel hybrid—even as you and I!

GALAXY

H. L. Gold

Good Lord the world today is loaded with ifs! So crammed, crowded, bulging with ifs jostling each other, in fact, that it's a pure bafflement to see writers turning the same ones over and over, looking for some new bump never before noticed on the use-worn surfaces.

AMAZING STORIES

Howard Browne

Mary and Joe Dokes get so fed up with fact they want a few hours of escape. So they do what men and women have done for centuries. They sneak

off into the fairy world of romance, adventure, action . . . The world of dreams. A priceless world given us by a kindly Creator Who knew the going would get tough at times; Who knew there would be cold dreary facts to burn on this tired old planet and that we would need moments of blessed escape.

STARTLING STORIES

Samuel Mines

Writers of fiction have always had stern competition from life, which has a way of being startling, fantastic and wonderful on its own. When World War II actually got under way, after the *sitzkrieg*, the speculations of writers were completely eclipsed by the stunning drama of events which outclassed all imaginings. Many a writer at that point was heard to remark that there was no sense in making up drama, for it simply could not compete with the newspaper headlines.

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

Lila Shaffer

Thou shalt love all thy neighbors throughout the land and entertain them well, lest they stop buying thy magazine, thus making for long, hungry days.

THE
Postman
COMETH ...

PHILLIPS IS BEST

Dear Mr. Fairman:

The March issue of IF was tops. I saw the gal with the tiger looking at me from the mag rack and I said to myself: "Huh! What's this? IF? No know."

Then I saw Rog Phillip's name on the cover. Rog is one of my favorites. I've read his "So Shall Ye Reap" four times. So I took a copy of IF home and sure 'nough! Rog's "Old Martians" was the best story. He got a mood into it that actually scared me, as if one of the Old Martians was looking over my shoulder. Look out, Rog. They might get you for showing them up.

The rest of the ish rates thusly in my book. Two: "Twelve Times Zero." It got better as it went along. Think maybe it should have been longer. Three: "Black Eyes And The Daily Grind." I got a laugh out of Black Eyes. And the illo was good. Four: I guess it has to go to "Never Underestimate." It's real Sturgeon but maybe a weensy bit too slick. Five: The rest of the ish.

By the way—why no illo credits except on the cover? The artists work hard too.

All in all a fine ish with a terrific

cover. But how come no fanzine revues?

—John Coleman

It seems to us, John, that fanzines are pretty well covered by other magazines in the field. So we decided to use the space for features not found elsewhere. If enough fans tell us we're wrong, we'll change our policy.

* * *

HOWARD, TAKE A BOW

Dear Ed:

Something new! A science fiction magazine with intelligent articles. The one on Bob Tucker and his news letter was tops. Enjoyed it even more than the excellent stories. Notice you're writing up Palmer and the Shaver Mystery in your next issue. Will be watching for it.

Also, congratulations to Howard Browne on his "Twelve Times Zero." He did something rarely done in science fiction—made it sound convincing. I caught myself almost believing it.

—Milo Spence

* * *

CRITICISM—

Dear Ed:

Picked up a copy of your magazine on the stand and figured it was new because I hadn't seen it before. And I thought to myself, maybe this one's got something new in the way of writers. But no. There they were on the cover. The same old hacks who turn out ninety per-

cent of today's science fiction.

Why don't you get smart and come up with some brand new names? Some writers with a fresh slant on? Science fiction is waiting for a magazine like that but it looks like you have missed the boat.

This is meant as honest criticism and I hope you will print it but I'll bet you won't.

—Janet Steiner

Aren't you being a little harsh, Janet. The writers in the March issue of IF are on the top of a highly competitive field. They stay there because they are able to produce good fiction. If better stories are submitted to IF or any contemporary magazine by new names, those stories are bought. The fact that authors like Sturgeon and Phillips are in print again and again proves they do a better job than other writers new or old. We read every script submitted and we like new writers. We hope to buy many "first" stories.

* * *

— AND PRAISE

Dear Mr. Fairman:

Hooray for IF—it's terrific; Maybe you'd like to use that as a slogan. If so, send me a buck. Seriously, your magazine hit the stands with a bang. There were eight copies on the rack when I got there. I bought one. That night I met a friend of mine and sent her down to get one. She said there weren't any left so I'm going to give her mine.

Theodore Sturgeon's story is one of the cutest I ever read. Imagine

if that *really* happened (blush-blush). I haven't read the cover story by Howard Browne yet. I'm writing first so as to get in line to win an original manuscript. Yummy! And keep IF coming!

—Nora Parsons

We certainly will keep IF coming, Nora. And we hope you win one of the manuscripts. Let us know what you think of Twelve Times Zero.

* * *

SORRY

Dear Ed:

How come no artist's names except the cover? Who ever heard of a science fiction book, or any other fiction book, without the names of the artists?

—Paul Liebowitz

* * *

WE LIKED IT TOO

Dear Ed:

"Of Stegner's Folly" was great—just like the old days. Hang onto Shaver and you're in. For my money, anyhow.

—Art Wister

* * *

That's all the letters we have room for this trip. We'll arrange for more space in the future. Incidentally, the winners of our manuscript contest will be announced in July issue—on the stands May 5th. Better have your news dealers reserve a copy.

PUZZLE DOERS . . .



ASK your news dealer for this

big-value magazine of puzzles! Over 100 scintillating new word puzzles to test your skill! Crosswords, Askews, Skeletons, Word Chains, Slidograms, Cryptograms, Diagramless, Crostics, Round-and-Round, Movie Puzzles, Radio Puzzles, Television Puzzles—hours and hours of fun and thought-provoking entertainment for all puzzle lovers! . . . Ask for **QUALITY CROSSWORD PUZZLES** whenever you are looking for puzzle pleasure! . . . At all newsstands—only 25 cents!

THE
magazine
THAT'S
really
DIFFERENT

WHO was this man? . . . At the age of three his cradle moved in a queer manner. At ten he caused his oatmeal bowl to skip about the table and furniture to be lifted by unseen hands. At thirteen he was prophesying events with alarming accuracy. At twenty-five he astounded the world with his supernatural powers. . . Read about this amazing person in *The Fabulous Circles of Nine* in the May issue of **STRANGE**—now at all newsstands — 35 cents.

