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a deadly secret weapon from a strange world

SILENCE IS DEADLY

By Lloyd Biggle, Jr.



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WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

OCTOBER 1957

All Stories New and Complete

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A Game of Marbles by Mel Hunter

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Editor's REPORT

To paraphrase *Alice in Wonderland*: "The science fiction writing business gets curiouser and curiouser." We've often been entranced by the professions which writers pursue for their livelihood. Beside professional writers of television and movie scripts, we have doctors, engineers, university professors who teach everything from biophysics to ancients languages, anthropologists, insurance investigators, advertising men, lawyers, chemists and newspapermen. However, two writers who are new to IF's pages are unique even in such distinguished company. Lloyd Biggle, Jr. (who wrote *Silence is Deadly* for this issue; and is also responsible for *The Tunsmiths* and *On The Dotted Line*) is the only writer we know of who has a PhD in music. He claims the longest epic he ever wrote was a 450 page thesis on Antonius Brumel the 15th century composer. However, he doesn't feel that this is exactly a direct approach to becoming a science fiction writer! Harry Lorayne, who

wrote what we think is a nice satiric little comment on our TV-ridden lives (*The Poors*), was until a few years ago considered one of the top card manipulating magicians in the country. Now memory is his business. He spends most of his time traveling around the country doing lecture demonstrations on what can be done with a trained memory. This, incidentally, includes remembering the names and faces of his entire audience after meeting them only once; memorizing the order of an entire deck of cards which has been shuffled by a volunteer; memorizing the entire issue of any chosen current magazine, etc. He's so good at it that he's been featured in Ripley's *Believe It Or Not* column!

Collecting such oddities about our authors brings another thought to mind, one which most editors wonder about—What about our readers? What do they do? Why do they read science fiction? What makes you, the reader, pluck IF from the newsstands? We'd really like to compile a list of statistics concerning you. Too many people still suffer from "shame" about needing to defend science fiction as their favorite reading matter; and we'd like to print some rebuttals to help both science fiction and them. Drop us a note, tell us what you do, what hobbies you pursue, what you like in science fiction and what makes you buy IF. Is it writers whose yarns you know you'll like? Is it covers? (That, of course, brings up the point about just what sort of illustrations you do like on

your covers.) How would you feel about no illustrations at all? How about featured articles like the recent *Face of Mars* by Dr. Richardson or the one about *Why Guided Missiles Can Not Be Controlled?* We'll print statistics as they come in—bet you'll be surprised to find what distinguished company you keep when you read IF. As an added incentive to make you take pen, pencil, crayon or quill in hand, we'll send a first edition of IF to the first one hundred letter writers.

We've had so many favorable comments on our **FIRST WORLD OF IF** anthology (reader comments, newspaper and magazine reviews) that we're planning another one real soon—a "second world." This time, we plan to reprint novelettes from our first six years. Some of our readers have already sent in suggestions about which ones they'd like to see.

Frank Riley, who's been absent from IF's pages for far too long (busy as a beaver with TV and movie assignments) has sent us an unusual story for the December issue. *A Computer Named Eddie* is the title, and Eddie and his inventor are something really unique in detective teams. A missing X-15 guided missile and plenty of red tape and security problems all promise something exciting and new in the realm of science fiction. So don't miss *A Computer Named Eddie!*

Bob Silverberg (the man with the

13 by-lines and more than 170 stories to his credit) is also pounding away on a new short novel for IF. Incidentally, Bob, who writes full time himself, has as a spouse one of the few female electronics engineers extant in the United States.

If you're planning to be in New York City at all within the next month or two, make it a special point to see *A Visit to a Small Planet* at the Booth Theater. You may have seen it on TV, but for a science fiction fan the expanded version is a must. It's a smash hit even on hard-bitten Broadway. Take Aunt Matilda too, because even the most determined anti science-fictioneer will be delighted with Cyril Ritchard and Eddie Mayehoff. After the black eye science fiction got with *Night of the Auk* a recent Broadway flop, this play with its delightful whimsy and humor may take the curse off for a good many years to come. Let's hope that Hollywood picks this one up (including Ritchard and Mayehoff) and gives everyone a chance to see what good entertainment science fiction can be.

Our June cover has started what seems to be an interesting little controversy in several quarters. The picture was titled "Kodachrome from the Files of the First Mars Expedition," and showed theoretical ships about to make a landing on the red planet. So far we've had several letters in which people want to know why the government has

(Continued on page 83)



Virgil
Finlay

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

*What was the secret weapon of this primitive planet where
people lived in mute terror? No earthman had ever seen
it, and there was but one way to find out . . .*

SILENCE IS DEADLY

BY LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.

IT WAS AN inter-galactic crisis, with border clashes between the Federation and the menacing Haarvian Empire strewing space with searing debris and threatening to erupt into total war. The War Department of the Federation pinpointed the critical area, pinpointed the critical planet, and requested permission to act. The politicians

refused. And while the admirals chaffed angrily and the politicians fussed helplessly, Space Intelligence went to work with its usual quiet efficiency.

Space Intelligence sent in agents, one at a time, and in twos and threes—specialists and non-specialists, bold youngsters and wily veterans, professionals and uniquely-

qualified amateurs. And one at a time, and by twos and threes they disappeared without a trace. Space Intelligence lost seventeen men in two months, and then it called in Bran Hilford.

"You'll have to go native," he was told. "It'll require some surgery."

Hilford grinned happily. In his forty years with Space Intelligence, he'd had his body reshaped in more ways than he cared to remember. He'd had ears, nose and mouth altered and re-altered. His head had been egg-shaped, balloon-shaped, and square. The irises of his eyes had been tinted a dozen different colors. As a veteran of missions on two hundred worlds, he knew that anything was commonplace under at least one sun. "Go ahead," he said, "and butcher me up."

And they did.

During the curious convalescence that followed, Hilford became increasingly puzzled about his new assignment. He asked for details, and got nothing. "No one here is qualified to indoctrinate you," he was told. "We have an expert coming, and you'll go back with him. He'll give you as much as he can in space. It won't be enough, and you'll probably get killed, but there's a crisis . . ."

Hilford shrugged patiently. He lounged about with hands and head swathed in bandages. He could hear only with a communicator clapped tightly against his head, the volume turned up to what should have been an ear-shattering level. He could not account for the

peculiar feeling in his hands. Because there was nothing else for him to do, he waited and said nothing, and eventually the day came when his bandages could be removed.

Hilford sat stiffly on the edge of his bed, hands extended in front of him. A pretty young nurse deftly peeled the bandages from his hands. A second nurse, not so pretty, shot curious glances at him as she unrolled yards of bandage from his head. The doctor hovered nearby, his round face puckered anxiously. Hilford saw his lips move, and heard nothing.

He had confidently assumed that his hearing would improve as the bandages came off. It did not. Silence enveloped and stifled him. A pair of surgical scissors slipped from nervous fingers, and fell with noiseless impact. The doctor, dancing about apprehensively, overturned a chair, and Hilford's eyes followed it as it crashed soundlessly. He coughed, and let the word, "Damn!" explode from his lips. He heard neither.

The last of the bandages dropped away, and the nurses stepped back. The doctor bounded forward, gripped Hilford's head firmly, and studied it critically. Hilford waited submissively, felt the doctor's skillful fingers prodding his head, felt his own hands caught up for a rapid examination.

Suddenly the doctor backed away, grinning. The nurses grinned. The three of them stood together, lips moving excitedly, hands gesturing. Hilford moved his hands, as though to push aside the void of

silence that surrounded him.

His hands. Left hand, thumb and five fingers. Right hand, thumb and five fingers. He examined the extra fingers with studious bewilderment, tried to move them, and gaped at the stiff response.

A nurse thrust a mirror in front of him. The reflection stared back at him—his face, but not his face. "Damn!" he bellowed, and the word dropped into nothingness. His face stretched smooth and unbroken from the point of his chin to the taut dome of his bald head. His ears were gone.

Hilford lurched to his feet and advanced angrily. The doctor dropped his arms and stood helplessly before him, pink face wrinkled with merriment. The nurses clutched their sides as laughter shook their trim bodies. Hilford watched them, strained against the noiseless impact of their laughter, and finally slumped dejectedly back onto his bed.

Ernst Wilkes, the Sector Chief of Intelligence, moved his bulky figure into the room, stood for a moment regarding Hilford, and dismissed the doctor and nurses with a gesture. He tossed Hilford a communicator, and tested a chair apprehensively before he settled his weight upon it.

"Where are my ears?" Hilford demanded.

Wilkes' wheezy voice floated faintly, far away. "Deep freeze. You can have them back when you finish this assignment. If you finish it. If you want them back, that is. You'll be two pounds lighter without those atmosphere flaps,

and you might find—I just got in. Sorry I had to be away when you reported here. Know anything about Kamm?"

Hilford started. "The silent planet. So that's why I lost my ears!"

"Right. Sense of hearing is atrophied in all life forms. They've even lost the external vestiges of any hearing apparatus."

Hilford searched his memory. "Kamm—never been in that sector. The natives have some kind of odd religious cult, haven't they? Rep-tiles?"

"Birds. Wish I could tell you about it, but I can't. There aren't many experts on Kamm, and we've just lost some of our best men. You'll get as much as there is time for on the ship. Zorrel just got in, and he's to go back with you. He's waiting now. Ready to leave?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

Wilkes grunted, and struggled to his feet. "I'm giving you six months leave when you finish this. But you'll probably get killed."

At the space port, Wilkes introduced Hilford to Mark Zorrel, who was young, six-fingered, and earless. "He's in charge of you until you reach Kamm. The main problem will be language, and he'll see that you get that, and as much else as there's time for. Once you land, you're in full charge. Zorrel will act as your assistant."

Hilford shook the communicator gently, and returned it to his head. "Give me that again. Who's in charge of what?"

"Oh, hell," Wilkes said. "We

have a base on a Kamm moon. You'll get your orders there. Get aboard, now, and—luck." He waddled away.

"Take good care of my ears," Hilford called after him. He turned to Zorrel. "Let's get on with it."

Zorrel shook his head, and grinned. He spread his hands in front of Hilford, and the twelve fingers flashed bewilderingly. Finally he spoke, in the harsh, expressionless tones of an unused voice.

"The language of Kamm. Communicators are much too uncertain, and too inconvenient, if those doctors did any job at all on your ears. I'll tell you as much as I can when you've learned how to talk."

Hilford followed Zorrel up the ramp, stiffly and doubtfully exercising his two newly-acquired fingers.

THEY LANDED on Kamm at night, in a rolling meadow near the sea, and dawn found them toiling along a rough, winding coastal road. They plodded beside a clumsy wooden peddler's cart, drawn by a shaggy, stupid, ox-like animal that Hilford's mind called an ox because he knew no verbal equivalent for the Kammian sign language. They wore baggy trousers and short capes, so startlingly colored that Hilford's hands had been too paralyzed to comment on them when he first saw them. They wore the squat, scarlet hats that were the Kammian badge of their profession.

They were itinerant peddlers,

one of the two Kammian classes—outside of the nobility and the wealthiest merchants—that could travel about freely, Seamen made up the other class, but an intelligence agent disguised as a seaman worked under a decided handicap. He was bound to attract attention if he got very far inland.

As soon as it was light enough to see each other's hands, they began to talk. "Damned barbarous civilization," Hilford signaled, "when you can't talk in the dark."

He found this sign language the worst thing he'd encountered in all of his intelligence service. It had grammar, even an uncomfortably rigid syntax. Some words—names, places, important artifacts—had a single sign or gesture. Others were literally spelled out. Hilford floundered at every turn because he had to keep thinking of verbal equivalents for what he was talking about.

And what should he call this Province? The Flat Province, from the Kammian gesture; but it was rolling country, and even mountainous farther inland. And what should he call its ruler? The sign for ruler he interpreted as "Duke", and the erect second and sixth fingers on the right hand made the ruler of the Flat Province the Duke Two Fingers. It was screwy, but it was the only way he could keep things straight.

Zorrel's young face, good-looking despite its lack of ears, was frowning critically. His hands moved slowly, with a sarcastic flourish. "You're still talking with one hell of a foreign accent. Don't bend your sixth finger like that.

It puts the whole thing in a kind of familiar tense, and that's a rank insult when you talk with a stranger."

Hilford straightened the offending finger. "I was wondering if this stuff could be derived from a spoken language."

Zorrel's hands spoke peevishly. "Scholars have been arguing about that for years. Me, I let them argue."

Hilford exercised his fingers thoughtfully. The idea that he could be tripped up on such a minor matter as a bent finger—that any Kammian peasant might spot him instantly as an alien—was highly disturbing. He would have to let Zorrel run things for a few days, until he became wiser in the ways of Kamn. He would have to stay in the background—and keep his hands shut.

"Let's get back to geography," Zorrel's fingers signaled. "Show me the capital cities of the twelve provinces. And watch that accent."

They talked busily, reviewing names and places.

At mid-morning they topped a steep hill and looked down on the great and prosperous city of 00. It was market day, and half of the ten thousand population seemed to be thronging the market place that sprawled along the harbor. Zorrel's remarks changed abruptly to the brisk chatter of peddlers as they met their first passers-by, and they moved on into the market place.

They backed their cart into place at the end of a long row of peddlers' carts, and Zorrel, with a wink and a shrug, began to display his mer-

chandise to the people who had already gathered to see what the new cart had brought. Hilford stood nearby, pushed his scarlet peddler's hat farther back on his bald head, and struggled heroically to keep from gaping at the scene spread out before him.

He was surrounded by a riot of color. Bold, iridescent patterns ornamented each woman's billowing skirt and contrasted with the rich, dark tones of the loose-fitting bodices. The men's clothing, from the baggy, full-length trousers to the short capes, was a startling maze of lurid, irregular stripes and jagged, multicolored lines. Children followed along sedately, amusing miniatures of their parents.

Each man wore the brightly-colored, distinctive headdress of his trade. The woman of 00 wore no hat, but her long, flowing hair was a bewildering rainbow stirring gently in the tangy sea air. Hilford reminded himself for the hundredth time not to stare, and stared again, wondering if the women dyed each hair individually.

The peddlers' carts, the stalls, the stubby, rectangular sails that were barely visible above the low-lying, barge-like ships in the harbor beyond the market place, the houses and shops of 00 that could be seen in the distance, even the cobblestones underfoot—all were a tumult of color, some loud and gaudy, some exquisitely patterned masterpieces of sensitive shading and contrast.

The faces of the people were solemn, almost sullen, among the gay surroundings. Hilford watched

for a long time before he grasped an answer, and then he saw the explanation in every gesture, in every hesitant purchase, in every pale face. These people were frightened. Even the children were frightened.

Most awesome of all was the silence. Hilford found himself straining to hear the hum of the crowd, the shouts, the piercing cries of the hawkers, the murmuring conversation—and he heard nothing. Wooden shoes clapped noiselessly on the cobblestones. Women and peddlers haggled with soundless gestures. Itinerant musicians, such a prominent feature of market places on many worlds, were not to be found. Instead, there were shabby performers shaping whirling discs of color into exotic patterns for small groups of townspeople who watched intently, but did not applaud.

Kamm, the silent planet. Silence hung heavily about Hilford. So fantastic did it seem as he watched the slow-moving crowds, watched the triangular-shaped metal coins fall noiselessly onto the hawkers' trays, watched a battered hand cart being wheeled past without a single creak or rattle, watched insects buzzing in furious silence over a soggy pile of sea mollusks, that he felt compelled to cry out himself.

But he knew the sound would drop from his lips unheard.

The sight of a black cape startled Hilford into alertness. Soldier, policeman—they were one and the same on Kamm, and their black clothing and black, fur-

trimmed hats made them stand out sharply among the brightly-apparelled populace. This Black-Cape walked slowly past, whirled suddenly to stare curiously, and then stopped a short distance away with his eyes fixed intently upon Hilford.

"Well, now," Hilford told himself. "A peddler on market day who stands around gaping and does not peddle is not behaving normally, and Blackie spotted that with one glance. It may be a primitive planet, but the police aren't stupid!"

He glanced at Zorrel, who was working with enthusiasm but not much success to sell hand-carved figurines of the hideous Kammian Holy Bird to the passers-by. Hilford caught Zorrel's eye, winked, and sauntered out to lose himself in the crowd. He carried with him Zorrel's warning frown.

"It wouldn't do for me to try to peddle," he mused, "but there's nothing wrong with my looking over the wares of my competitors. All the peddlers are doing that."

He moved with the crowd, making an enormous circle of the market place, and began to work in towards the center. The sun was high overhead, and his pangs of hunger prodded him into action. He stopped to buy some pastry, and after due hesitation also had a mess of seaweed measured out for him. It was one of the penalties of his profession. To masquerade as a native, he had to eat—and apparently enjoy—native food. Tucking his purchases under his arm, he walked on towards the center of the market place, where the fab-

ulous Kammian Holy Bird floated life-like at the top of a thirty-foot pillar.

Metal or stone, it was—Hilford could not decide, because it was painted in dazzling colors. It was the most vicious bird of prey Hilford had seen on any of his two hundred worlds. Its wings spanned a good ten feet from tip to tip, its eyes gleamed wickedly, its knife-like talons were poised to clutch and tear, and the huge, tapering beak was drawn back to strike.

Hilford stared at it, and shuddered. According to legend, he knew, such birds were once the rulers of Kamm. According to legend, they still existed somewhere on Kamm's single continent. But Space Intelligence agents had never seen one, nor found a citizen of Kamm who had seen one. The bird's heavy shadow seemed symbolic, in that market place of the Flat Province, where the citizens lived in mute, brightly-colored terror.

Glancing back, Hilford saw the Black-Cape again, this time moving towards him purposefully. Hilford uneasily threaded his way through the crowd, and tried to move faster. "It's this peddler's hat," he told himself. "They could spot a peddler a mile away." But there was compensation. He could also spot a Black-Cape from a good distance. He pushed his way forward, and when he looked back again the Black-Cape had given up the chase and was standing respectfully at attention. At the same time the crowd began to draw back in alarm.

A luxurious, gaudy carriage

moved slowly across the market place, pulled by two of the ox-like creatures. Behind it staggered a man of Kamm, his nude body painted gruesomely, and behind him marched ranks of the black-caped police, solemnly swinging their sabers.

Hilford had to give way with the crowd and humbly avert his eyes, but he had time to survey the scene before him and mentally photograph the occupants of the carriage.

One was the notorious Duke Two Fingers, who lounged in resplendent black robes and kept his bloated, evil face staring disdainfully straight ahead. The appearance of the other occupant brought Hilford up short in amazement and forced him to risk another glance at the carriage. He was a huge, rough-looking man in native dress, but he had one physical attribute which stamped him unmistakably as alien to the planet of Kamm. He had ears.

The police strapped their victim to the pillar, and their ranks filed past him in orderly manner, each man swinging his saber. The victim writhed in soundless agony as blood dripped from a multitude of slashing cuts in his back. The Duke Two Fingers and his companion watched impassively, but the citizens began to edge cautiously away. The market place thinned out, and Hilford could see crowds of people moving up the narrow streets of 00, towards home.

Hilford moved on, and another glance over his shoulder showed him that Black-Cape was following

him again. His hands seemed to be signaling something. Was Hilford being ordered to halt? Other Black-Capes were closing in on the market place, questioning the citizens, questioning the peddlers, scowling suspiciously at everyone. Hilford made his way towards the far side of the market place, along the harbor, where the Black-Capes seemed fewer.

A Kammian directly ahead of him staggered suddenly, spun around, and clutched his arm, pain mingling with astonishment in his face. A dull red began to obliterate the gay colors of his shirt sleeve, and a brightly plumed dart protruded from his arm.

With reflexes long trained to alertness, Hilford was running before his mind had completely grasped what was happening. A man's purple hat fell to the ground in front of him, a dart embedded in it. Hilford ran at a crouch to make himself a smaller target, and his mind thundered angrily, "The dogs! Shoot in a crowded market place with women and children about!"

Darts were whizzing past from several directions when he reached the last line of peddlers' carts. The peddlers gaped, and frantically dove for cover. A dart caught in Hilford's cape as he slipped between two carts. He hurdled a low stone wall, and found himself on the narrow quay, barren except for an occasional, weather-worn storage shack. It was a dead end, a natural trap. There was no hiding place.

Hilford did not hesitate. He

ducked into the sheltering shadow of a storage shack, crossed the quay in three leaping strides, dove to the deck of a ship, and crept quickly behind the stubby cabin.

He plucked the dart from his sleeve and tossed it overboard. From the lining of his cape he produced a green seaman's hat. The peddler's hat was quickly concealed in the cape. He had lost the seaweed somewhere along the way, but he still clutched the pastry. He settled himself on a bench in the stern of the ship, a piece of pastry in each hand, and munched calmly as he watched the choppy waves come rippling across the bay towards him.

The ship was evidently a fishing boat, and its stench was overpowering. The silence was nerve-racking. When they came—and he was certain they would come—there would be no warning footstep, no shouted inquiry. Should he face the shore, and answer questions from a distance? He gambled on boldness—boldness, and confident innocence, and indignation.

He was leaning back with one foot on the low wooden railing, completely relaxed, when rough hands seized him and jerked him erect. Hilford reacted instantaneously, with a rage what was not feigned. He whirled and charged into Black-Cape, shoving him back. Then, apparently recognizing the costume for the first time, he halted and stood his ground, glowering.

"Where is the peddler?"

Hilford leered insultingly, and spoke as well as he could with the pastry clutched in his hands. "A sea-going peddler?"

Black-Cape controlled his anger with difficulty. "Have you seen a peddler?"

"Over there," Hilford said, gesturing towards the market place, "I saw a thousand. Here there are none."

Black-Cape spun around and strode towards the tiny cabin. He was out again an instant later, hurrying away without another glance at Hilford. Hilford returned to his bench, leaned back restfully, and munched on the pastry. He was hungry.

For two hours Black-Capes prowled the quay. Hilford stole uneasy glances at them. What had gone wrong? He looked like a Kammian, as far as he knew he acted like a Kammian, and yet—one glance, and the Black-Cape had been after him. It boded no good for his mission.

He muttered a fervent prayer of thanks for Zorrel. The extra hat had been Zorrel's idea. The figurine of the Kammian Holy Bird that Hilford wore around his neck was also Zorrel's idea. Concealed in its gaping beak was a miniature stungun. Clearly Zorrel was a bright young agent who could take care of himself. And he knew Kamm.

Black-Capes were still standing watchfully at intervals along the quay when Hilford left the ship. He did not want to risk explaining his presence to a returning seaman, and he wanted to reassure Zorrel of his safety. If the young agent thought Hilford had been taken, he might proceed according to some plan of his own, and they

would become separated.

Hilford avoided the Black-Capes, exchanged the traditional crossed-thumb greeting with a passing seaman, and turned into the market place through a break in the stone wall. He moved through the first row of peddlers' carts, glanced about quickly, and whirled to interest himself in an innocuous pile of ornamental wooden daggers.

There were more Black-Capes than civilians in the market place, and thirty feet from Hilford they swarmed about Zorrel's cart, while Zorrel himself was being led protestingly away. Stealing sidewise glances, Hilford saw the Black-Capes kick the ox into position, and get the cart started after Zorrel. With them, concealed in the cart, went the transmitter that was Hilford's only means of communication with the Space Intelligence Base on Kamm's largest moon.

He turned his back on the pleading peddler, and walked towards the quay. Ten hours after his arrival he was alone and helpless on this most weird of all weird worlds. Staying alive was a secondary matter. He had a mission, and he scarcely knew how to begin. He sat down on the edge of the quay, not twenty feet from a stony-faced Black-Cape, dangled his feet over the water, and searched his mind for a plan of action.

THE FEDERATION'S problem on Kamm was a simple one—it was trapped in its own ethics. No world had ever been coerced into joining the Federation,

or even into trading with it. When the first Federation ships landed on Kamm, they were greeted coldly and invited to leave. They left promptly.

The Federation continued to send periodic missions, and eventually established tenuous trade relationships. After a hundred and seventy-five years, the relationships were still tenuous. The Federation landed one trading ship each month, with a small assortment of simple luxury goods for the wealthy and the noble. The Federation received in return an assortment of hand-manufactured claptrap that was promptly jettisoned in space. The gesture of friendship was considered worth the expense.

In the meantime, the Federation pushed well beyond Kamm, and eventually ran headlong into the expanding Haarvian Empire. Suddenly it found itself facing a powerful enemy, and menaced from within its boundaries by a strategically located hostile and independent world. If the Haarvian Empire formed an alliance with Kamm, the results could be acutely embarrassing—perhaps even disastrous.

Kamm was a primitive world, militarily weak, and the obvious solution was a fast, ruthless conquest. But the very structure of the Federation rested upon an abhorrence of force. Time might have resolved the dilemma, but now the Federation had no time.

Six months before Kamm had committed an act of deliberate, brutal violence. A Federation trading commission, making a routine courtesy call upon the most power-

ful Kammian nobleman, had failed to return to its ship. The following morning the members of the commission were found in the streets of 00—gruesomely murdered.

“Unfortunate,” the Duke Two Fingers had said. “These bandits will . . .”

But the Federation disregarded the bandits. The murdered men were not robbed, and their deaths could only have been caused by an advanced type of weapon completely unknown to the Federation. The five members of the commission had died simultaneously, and from the same cause—a severe cranial hemorrhage, with profuse bleeding from the nose, mouth and ears. There was no sign of external injury. A painstaking pathological examination ruled out poison or bacteria. And the use of an unknown weapon pointed directly at the Haarvian Empire.

The Federation established a base on the largest Kammian moon, for Space Intelligence and the 654th Fleet. A detector screen was set up around the planet, and the fleet began to make an alarming catch of Haarvian reconnaissance ships. Space Intelligence had always kept a few agents on Kamm, for training and study purposes. These were ordered into the Flat Province, and they promptly disappeared. Space Intelligence sent in more agents, and lost them.

Kamm’s single continent was divided into twelve provinces, and in theory the twelve rulers were equals. In fact, one duke completely dominated the others through his control of a planet-wide police

force. His power evidently derived from the religion of Kamm, since he held the title, *Keeper of the Bird*, and the police—or soldiers—of the Bird swore fealty not to the man, but to the title.

The *Keeper of the Bird* was chosen, Space Intelligence believed, in some kind of lottery. He held that honor for a period roughly five years long, determined by the complicated interaction of Kamm's three moons, and at the end of that time, at a place and time shrouded in secrecy, the dukes met to choose a new *Keeper of the Bird*.

The constant shifting of the focal point of power had kept peace on Kamm for centuries, and preserved the independence of the twelve provinces. In all of Kamm's recorded history no duke had ever served two consecutive terms as *Keeper of the Bird*—until the Duke Two Fingers had received his first fifteen years before. He was now finishing his third consecutive term, and the opinion advanced by Space Intelligence was a mere phrasing of the obvious. If the *Keeper of the Bird* was actually chosen by lot, the Duke Two Fingers had a system.

Of the twelve dukes, only the Duke Two Fingers was openly hostile to the Federation. It was he who was suspected of dealing with the Haarvian Empire. It was in his Flat Province that the trade commissioners had been murdered and the best agents Space Intelligence could supply were inexplicably disappearing. And as *Keeper of the Bird* he could dominate the other dukes, and force them to oppose the Federation.

This was the basis for the orders that Space Intelligence handed to Bran Hilford. Find out when and where the dukes meet to choose their next *Keeper of the Bird*. Find out how the choice is made. If possible, see that the choice does not fall to the Duke Two Fingers for a fourth consecutive time. Above all else, track down the secret weapon that the Haarvian Empire has given to Kamm.

"It's the weapon that bothers us," scholarly-looking Admiral Lantz had told Hilford. There were deep furrows of worry in his face. "Kamm couldn't trouble us with its own resources. We could seal it off, and let the diplomats work things out. But we don't dare wait. Haarn may have given that weapon to Kamm just to see if we have a defence against it. If we don't come up with a solution—quickly—we'll have to attack Kamm."

"That could be disastrous," Hilford said.

"The government would probably fall," the admiral admitted. "And it would label the Federation as a militant aggressor, which is something we've avoided for centuries. But we have no choice. That weapon must work on an electronic wave principle, and its range might be measured in light years. It could wipe out the entire population of a planet. It could kill every man in an entire fleet before our ships could get within striking distance. We simply do not dare let the Haarvians see that we fear that weapon. We know the next *Keeper of the Bird* will be chosen soon. I'm giving you just thirty days. If you

can't supply us with the answers we want in that time, we'll have to risk an attack, and hope that surprise will outweigh the advantage of that weapon."

"I'll do my best," Hilford said.

"You know about the way our agents have been disappearing?"

"Yes," Hilford said. "I know about that."

The admiral nodded, and said solemnly, in a tone of voice that clearly implied that he never expected to see Hilford again, "Good luck."

Hilford sat watching the waves ripple across the harbor, and wondered what had gone wrong. In the market place, the Black-Cape had taken one glance at him and recognized him as an alien. He was certain of that. But then—on the fishing boat he had been taken for a Kammian seaman. Certainly changing his hat hadn't made the difference.

And Zorrel—Zorrel had had two years of experience in the rural areas of Kamm, and he was a bright young agent. And he had been snapped up like a novice on his first day in 00.

Looking up suddenly, Hilford saw a ship approaching, clumsily tacking across the broad bay towards the quay. He watched it idly, thinking to pick up a few seafaring points, and then lost interest. When he looked again the ship was hovering fifteen feet from the quay, and its captain stood atop the low cabin gesturing at him wildly.

"Look away, you sniveling dirt digger! On your lazy feet, you de-

praved son of a sway-backed ox! Look away!"

Startled, Hilford struggled to his feet. A deck hand swung deftly, and a thick rope shot at Hilford. He ducked out of the way, stumbled, and fell on his back on the muddy cobblestones. Momentarily stunned, he lay there with the heavy rope across his chest. Two passing seamen seized the rope and hauled lustily. They were joined by others, and the ship was slowly drawn towards the quay.

Hilford got to his feet, shook his head confusedly, and started uncertainly to walk away. The ship's captain whirled about, took a long leap from the top of the cabin to the quay, seized Hilford's shoulders, and spun him around. He towered over Hilford, a huge, brawny, red-faced man, and his hands shook with anger as he flashed them under Hilford's nose.

"Dirt digger! Sniveling dirt digger! When does a seaman refuse to look away? Don't think I won't report this. I'll have you back digging before your ship sails." He gave Hilford a long, hard look. "I've never seen you before. You're too old to be an apprentice. Who are you, anyway? Let's see your credentials."

Hilford tried to be indignant, and managed it badly. "Who do you think you are?"

"Who do I think I am? Why, you sniveling dirt digger, I'll show you . . ."

His hands clamped vice-like on Hilford's throat. Seamen were gathering around them, and Hilford's bleary eyes saw a multitude of Black-Capes coming on the run.

The hands relaxed suddenly. The captain backed away and stood with his hands silent, looking almost respectful. A hand gripped Hilford's arm firmly, turned him around, and led him along the quay. He glanced at the man beside him, expecting to see the ominous black cape, and saw instead a flash of color and the high-peaked, green hat of a sea captain. Ahead of them, two Black-Capes halted, and respectfully kept their distance.

Hilford meekly allowed himself to be led to the far end of the quay, aboard a large ship, and into the cabin. The captain barred the door, pointed at a chair, and seated himself across the table. He poured a sparkling liquid into two glasses, and shoved one at Hilford.

His hands spoke bluntly. "I am Captain Fist. Your name?"

He was a slim, almost fragile-looking man, small for a Kammian, but Hilford sensed the hardness his slight frame concealed, and respected him. His bronze face was calm and confident, his dark eyes alert and penetrating. It was, Hilford thought, an honest face. This captain was intelligent, rather than cunning. He would outmaneuver a man, but he would not deceive him. He was obviously someone of importance, and he had saved Hilford, there on the quay—but why? Hilford raised his glass, to stall for time.

The captain's fingers moved slowly. "I understand that your *real* name would have no meaning on Kamm. But surely the Federation gave you a Kammian name. You

are from the Federation, aren't you?"

Hilford choked, sputtered into his glass, and dropped it. It shattered, and the liquor collected in a shimmering puddle on the table top. Captain Fist nonchalantly produced a rag, cleaned up the mess, and sat back to look inquiringly at Hilford.

Hilford made his comment a weak question. "Federation?"

The captain smiled. "My last trip to 00. That will be sixty days ago—sixty-five. The Mother Moon was full." He paused to fill another glass for Hilford. "One night I found a man on the beach. He wore a peddler's hat, and there were five darts in his body. He was dead."

"Describe him," Hilford said.

"He was a small man, middle-aged. His hair was reddish, like that of many people of the Round Province. He looked like a native of Kamm. His hands had six fingers. But when we examined his body, seeking to identify him, we found his feet had only five toes."

Hilford nodded thoughtfully. Six fingers, six toes. Naturally. Space Intelligence had been careless there, which wasn't normal. But then—the Black-Capes didn't have X-ray vision. It wasn't his toes that had given him away.

"Was the man your friend?" the captain asked.

Hilford made a quick decision that was no decision at all. He had to trust this man. "No," he answered. "But I knew of him."

The captain gestured his understanding. "The following night, the

Black-Capes were chasing another man, outside of 00, along the shore. They trapped him on the beach, and he was wounded, but he ran into the water and swam out to sea. I went with two of my men in a small boat, and we found him—alive. I took him to the home of the wife I have in 00, and I found that he, too, had six fingers on each hand, but only five toes on each foot. He trusted me, and from him I learned of the Federation.”

“The Federation,” Hilford said, “has been in contact with Kamm for nearly two hundred years. There has been a trading ship each month . . .”

“I learned of the Federation from the peddler I plucked from the sea. The great dukes do not honor the people of Kamm with dangerous knowledge. The League has long attempted to learn about the ships from the sky—without success, until I found the peddler.”

“What happened to the peddler?”

“I left him in 00 with my wife. He ignored my advice and went to the market place. He never returned.”

“The Federation has sent many such men to the Flat Province in the last six months. All have disappeared.”

“Of course,” the captain said.

Hilford did not understand his matter-of-fact attitude. “They have been good men—men as accustomed to live on strange worlds as you are accustomed to travel the sea. They have been carefully trained in the language and ways of Kamm. And still they disap-

peared. Why?”

“I guessed who you were,” the captain said, “because you wore the seaman’s hat and did not know the ways of seamen. Once you were inside this cabin I was certain. If you were to walk over to the market place, the first Black-Cape you passed would arrest you.”

“Why?”

The captain poured another drink for himself, and downed it quickly. He looked at Hilford in amusement, but his hands moved almost apologetically. “By your smell,” he said.

Hilford sank back, and struggled to control his amazement. Kamm, the silent planet. Kamm, where the natives had lost their hearing, and gained in its place super-sensitive senses of sight and smell. Some of the manifestations were obvious—the astonishing use of color, this captain thinking nothing of putting to sea in the dark to look for a solitary swimmer, even—if he hadn’t been such a dunce as to overlook it—the incredible number of peddlers in the market place who dealt in perfumes.

Suddenly he understood the miracle of his escape. Not even the Kammian nose could cope with the odors that blended along the quay—fresh and decaying fish, a variety of imported foodstuffs, pungent stacks of drying seaweed. On the fishing boat, the Black-Cape’s sense of smell had been completely frustrated, and he was reduced to simply looking for a peddler.

And the sudden disappearance of the other Intelligence Agents—once

they invaded the market place of 00, it would only be a matter of time before the Black-Capes noticed the distinctive odor of the alien. Perhaps it was already familiar to them, from the men of the trading missions. And once they understood, they needed only to stroll about, sniffing deeply. The agents, with their clumsy olfactory equipment, could have no inkling of how they were betraying themselves. No wonder Space Intelligence had been losing agents!

"I know," the captain signaled, "that the Federation wants nothing that would not be good for the people of Kamm. I pledge you the full support of the League."

"The League?"

"The Seamen's League, of which I am also captain."

"I'll need your assistance," Hilford said.

The clasped hands, right to left and left to right, bending their wrists until their forearms touched.

"Now," the captain said, "I'll take you home. You'll carry a basket of overripe fish, just in case. You must not be careless, like the peddler I plucked from the sea."

THE CAPTAIN did not live in 00 proper, but in a small seamen's village a short distance to the east of the metropolis, along the shore. Hilford carried a basket of fish, which were fully as overripe as the captain had promised. The captain's hands spoke busily as they walked, and Hilford had to strain to follow them in the gathering darkness.

"The League," the captain said, "is independent of any duke. The Duke Two Fingers likes us no better than we like him. Years ago, when he was first chosen *Keeper of the Bird*, he tried to rule the League. The League defied him, and he arrested all the seamen who were in 00." He grinned, his white teeth flashing disdainfully. "It lasted for sixty days. No more ships came to the Flat Province. The duke placed his Black-Capes on ships of the League, and told them to be seamen. Most of them were lost in the first storm. In the end, the duke paid the League for the ships and for the affront to the seamen. Since then he has not molested the League, and though we do not bow down to him, we avoid giving him cause for anger."

Hilford nodded.

"You must not move your head," the captain said, looking at him sharply. "You move your hand—so."

Hilford repeated the gesture, and the captain grinned approvingly. "We will make a good Kammian of you. The Duke Two Fingers himself will not be able to tell you from a native of the Flat Province—as long as you carry the fish!"

Hilford did not find it amusing. He knew there were times when a basket of fish could be a definite handicap to a Space Intelligence Agent.

In the captain's modest but brightly-painted house Hilford joined the captain and his wife for their evening meal. Kammian etiquette wisely prohibited conversation when the hands had better

things to do, and they ate without exchanging a word. As soon as they had finished, the wife cleared the table and discreetly vanished. The captain sat staring at the table, absently chewing on a piece of seaweed. Hilford was suddenly seized by weariness. He had been under constant activity and nervous strain for eighteen hours. He shook his head resolutely, and straightened up. He'd had a blazing piece of good fortune, but he had actually accomplished nothing.

The captain looked up quickly, and echoed his thought. "There is much to be done. Some officers of the League are coming—those that are in port. They will be here soon."

"Their help will be welcome," Hilford said.

The captain busied himself with the arrangements. He brought in chairs until the small room was crowded. On the arm of each chair he hung an oil lamp and lit it. The light was focused through a slot to fall across the hands of the person occupying the chair—a Kammian device to aid night conversation.

Hilford's mind began to shape plans. The cart was the most important thing. He must find the cart, and repossess the transmitter. He could then let Base know he was still operating, and ask for a postponement of the deadline. With the help of the League, he should eventually be successful—if only he could have time . . .

He awakened suddenly, catching himself as his body pitched forward. The room was full of men, all sitting calmly at attention, all waiting patiently for him to awake.

He experienced a momentary consternation at having fallen asleep. He turned apologetically to his host, and the captain began his introduction as if nothing had happened.

"Our guest is of the men who send the ships from the sky. They call themselves the Federation. We discussed this at our last meeting. This man is here to help the people of Kamm. The League will give him every assistance within its power, and all of us will guard his presence here with our lives."

All eyes were on Hilford. "There was a peddler," he said slowly, "who was taken in the market place today by the Black-Capes. He was my assistant. I must know what has been done with him. I must know what has been done with his cart."

"We will learn what we can," the captain replied.

"The cart is important. I must have the cart."

The captain glanced about the room, and his hands formed a Kammian name. A young man at the rear stood up and extinguished his lamp. "I understand," he signaled, and turned and went out.

"I saw a man in the duke's carriage today," Hilford said. "He was not of this planet."

"The man with the holes in his head," the captain said. "Evil meets with evil in the duke's carriage."

"Do you know where he comes from?"

The circle of hands remained motionless. "Two such men have been seen with the duke," the captain said finally. "We know no more than that."

"Six months ago," Hilford said, "men of the Federation called on the Duke Two Fingers. Their call was a gesture of friendship, which is made each year. The next morning the men were found in the streets of 00, murdered."

"It is the duke's way of doing things," the captain said simply.

"Anything I could learn of this crime would be of value."

He followed the captain's gaze as it swept quickly about the room. No hand moved. The captain's fingers shaped another name, and a seaman extinguished his lamp and went out. Attention returned to Hilford.

"There are matters which I must attend to in person," Hilford said. "What can be done to make me smell like a Kammian? I cannot carry fish everywhere I go." There was no reply. "Would it be fitting for me to use a perfume that would hide the odor?"

Smiles flickered on the seamen's faces. "A male does not use perfume," the captain said bluntly. "And yet—there is a perfume maker in 00. He is a good man. He might make you a perfume that would cancel your odor, and no more. Perhaps tomorrow . . ."

"Why not tonight?"

"It would be dangerous for the perfume maker. We seamen can frequent the drinking places at night and wander about undisturbed. That is expected of seamen. But the citizens of 00 must be in their homes two hours after sundown. It can mean death if the Black-Capes find them on the streets."

"Then let your perfume maker be a seaman," Hilford said.

Puzzled faces stared at Hilford, and there was the confused movement of shifting feet and fingered protests. "I do not understand," the captain said. "He is a perfume maker . . ."

Hilford fumbled in the lining of his cape, and donned his scarlet peddler's hat. "Look—I'm a peddler."

The captain's face wore a startled expression. "Of course!" He dispatched a young seaman, with an extra seaman's hat concealed under his cape.

"When is the next *Keeper of the Bird* to be chosen?" Hilford asked.

"Only the dukes know."

"Where is the choice made?"

"Somewhere in the mountains, it is said. Only the dukes know. And perhaps the most trusted Black-Capes."

"Do all the dukes attend?"

"Yes. The southern dukes journey by sea to 00, and the northern dukes journey by sea to the Triangular Province. Where they meet, only the dukes know."

Hilford did a quick review of his geography. The mountain range ran along the center of Kamm's long, narrow continent. So the dukes would travel the northern or southern seas to the center of the continent and journey inland, to meet in the mountains. It would not be difficult for them to keep their meeting place a secret. Kammian commerce moved by sea. Roads were few in the interior, and probably few people ever ventured to cross the mountains.

Hilford felt encouraged. This was more than Space Intelligence had learned in the previous two centuries. "Here is our objective," he said. "The liberation of the people of Kamm must proceed slowly. We wish to avoid violence. The first step must be to secure the appointment of another duke as *Keeper of the Bird*."

The captain gestured sadly. "That is impossible."

"We of the Federation often find ourselves called upon to do the impossible."

"That is impossible," the captain said again. "The duke's younger brother is High Priest of the Bird."

Hilford's response was unnecessarily and futilely vocal. "Ah!" he exclaimed. So that was the basis for the duke's system in the lottery.

One seaman leaned forward. It was the brawny, red-faced captain who had nearly throttled Hilford that afternoon. "I sail tomorrow for the Round Province," he said. "When I return, I bring the Duke One Thumb to 00."

"He comes to take part in the choice of a new *Keeper of the Bird*?"

"The Duke One Thumb does not visit the Flat Province out of love for its duke."

"Is the Duke One Thumb a friend of the League?"

"Not openly. But seamen feel welcome in the Round Province."

"Would it be possible for me to talk with the Duke One Thumb?"

"It might be arranged."

The door swung open, and the perfume maker entered—a tall, gangling man who looked ludicrous

in a seaman's hat much too large for him. He carried a heavy box, and the situation had evidently been explained to him. He looked about the room, sniffed, made his way directly to Hilford, sniffed again, and grimaced distastefully. His long face had an almost comically mournful expression.

He set down the box, and his delicate fingers moved concisely, gracefully. He would have, Hilford thought, a beautiful Kammian accent. "It may be difficult," he said, "but I shall work at it."

"Work in the next room," the captain said.

The door swung open and a seaman charged in, fingers moving frantically. "Black-Capes coming!"

The captain pushed Hilford's chair aside, knelt with a knife in his hand, and pried up a small square of flooring. He signaled to Hilford. "Quickly!"

Hilford lowered himself down. The space under the floor was shallow, and he stood with his head and shoulders above the floor of the room. "The perfume maker?" he asked.

"Quickly!"

He ducked under, and the trap closed over him. The darkness was absolute—not so much as a crack of light entered around the trap. He edged forward until his fingers touched damp earth. He found himself in a scooped-out area perhaps three strides square. In one corner there was a box, and he sat down. The waiting began.

On a normal planet he would have heard the police making a noisy entry, heard their bullying

questions, and had some idea of how things were going. On Kamm he heard nothing—and when the trap opened, he would not know if it meant safety or capture.

But he was a veteran intelligence agent, and he did not waste energy in worrying about a situation that he could not control. He relaxed in the darkness, leaned back against the damp wall of his hiding place, and dozed off.

Light was falling dimly through the opened trap when he awoke, and the captain was shaking him. They climbed out, closed the trap, and took their seats. The seamen faced him calmly, as if nothing had happened.

“All that trouble for nothing?” Hilford asked.

Captain Fist looked gloomy. “I do not like this. Not for years have there been so many Black-Capes in our village. They inquired after the seaman I brought home with me.”

“That means . . .”

“It means a seaman, or a member of his family, is in the pay of the Black-Capes. We must proceed cautiously. By tomorrow they will have compared reports with the Black-Capes that were on the quay today. They will want to know what I did with the seaman who behaved so awkwardly.”

“What did you tell them about the seaman you brought home?”

“I brought no seaman home,” the captain said. “I brought the perfume maker. Of course in the dusk some fool may have mistaken the color of his hat.” He smiled slyly. “The perfume maker is conferring with the League about some

perfume which he wishes to export. He will be my guest until morning. And early tomorrow the awkward seaman will ship on a boat bound for the Round Province. He will be seen going aboard by a Black-Cape who will recognize him—we shall see to that. And I have already sent out a small boat to meet him down the coast and bring him back after dark tomorrow. We should hear no more of the matter.”

“It is well arranged,” Hilford said.

The perfume maker came in from the next room, and dabbed Hilford in unlikely places with a pungent, colorless liquid. The assembled seamen sniffed carefully, and Captain Fist delivered the verdict.

“No,” he said. “You have blended one evil scent with another. It hides nothing.” He turned quickly to Hilford. “Apologies, but . . .”

“Quite all right,” Hilford said.

The perfume maker turned away sadly. “It is difficult,” his graceful fingers signaled. “But I shall work at it.”

Hilford briefed the seamen carefully on the Federation point-of-view, and found them vaguely disappointed. They had expected, perhaps, armed assistance against the Duke Two Fingers, and they had to resign themselves to a more subtle kind of revolution. Four times the perfume maker tiptoed in to test a new concoction, and registered four more failures. The meeting lasted until dawn, and Hilford was given a hearty breakfast and sent on his way.

He walked to the quay closely surrounded by a dozen seamen. Several carried baskets that were awesomely tainted with the odor of the previous day's fish. The brawny captain left Hilford standing on board his ship in full view of the passers-by, and walked away. He returned a few minutes later, in jocular conversation with a Black-Cape. The Black-Cape went his way, laughing heartily.

"I asked him," the captain told Hilford, "if he remembered the spectacle you made of yourself yesterday. He did. I told him that you men from the north are all ignoramuses, but by the time I got you back from the Round Province you'd either be dead, or a seaman. It won't surprise me if you jump ship before the return trip." He landed a hearty slap on Hilford's back and nearly sent him over the railing.

Well down the coast and out of sight of land, Hilford transferred to a small fishing boat. The boat returned after dark, and landed him near the seamen's village. Captain Fist met him on the beach, and led him to a nearby shack.

"The Black-Capes have been to the village twice today," he said. "I don't like it. I'm afraid this place is not safe for you. I've arranged for you to stay in 00."

"I place full trust in your judgment," Hilford said.

"The second time they came they discovered the trap in the floor. Nothing there, of course, but it definitely means that I have a traitor in the League. I went personally to complain to the Captain

of the Black-Capes. He gave me profound apologies. These are unsettled times, he said, and the police take no action that is not necessary. I told him that if the seamen are molested further I'll move League Headquarters to another province and keep the seamen out of 00 until the times are less unsettled. They're suspicious about something, and they don't know quite what it is."

"Did you learn anything about my friend, the peddler?"

"Nothing. We continue to try. But I'm afraid you will not see him again. He has probably been taken away."

"Away? Where?"

"To the mountains. No prisoners return from the mountains."

"What happens to them?"

"The Duke Two Fingers is reviving the old ways. No one knows for certain, but we guess. In the past, a bloodthirsty duke used animals. The Duke Two Fingers uses men."

Hilford was staggered. Human sacrifice?

Captain Fist's eyes blazed. "I have revered the Holy Bird all my life, as a man of Kamm should. But holiness that demands the life of a man is not holiness. It is evil. Now—we go to 00."

HILFORD WAS installed in an inn, next door to his friend the perfume maker. His quarters were a secret room on the third—and top—floor. Its dimensions were seven feet by five feet, and he re-measured it a dozen times the first day. He entered, a panel closed be-

hind him, and he was both hidden and trapped.

Captain Fist dutifully visited him once each day, and twice he brought news. A witness had seen the duke's Black-Capes dumping the bodies of the murdered trade commissioners from carts in the dingy alley where they were found the next morning. A group of prisoners had been seen leaving for the mountains. Zorrel was probably among them—if he was not already dead.

The days passed. Once the Black-Capes raided the inn. They found nothing, but Hilford's uneasiness was heightened, and the captain did not disguise his worry about the traitor in his organization.

"It is not one of my officers," he said. "He suspects that I meet you here at the inn, but he does not know of the secret room. When I find him I shall feed him to the fish."

The perfume maker regularly sent over new mixtures for Hilford to try. And each time a seaman would take one studious sniff and inform Hilford that he still smelled obnoxious.

The days passed, and on the fifth day in the inn Hilford decided that he could wait no longer. He brought up the subject of Zorrel's cart. The captain had discovered nothing. There was no indication that the duke's agents had disposed of it, so it was assumed that the duke had converted it to his own use.

"I must find that cart," Hilford said. "It will take me two minutes to remove the hidden equipment,

and I must have it."

That evening there was a crowded meeting in Hilford's secret chamber, and an expedition was organized. The duke's carts and wagons were parked in a meadow near his walled estate. There were two sentries who circled the area, keeping its perimeter constantly in view. The sentries were more a matter of form than necessity. No resident of 00 would steal from the Duke Two Fingers.

"I will deal with the sentries," Hilford said. "I need only to get within fifteen paces of them."

"No Black-Cape sentry would allow a seaman to get that close," the captain said. "You'd have three darts in you before you got within twenty paces."

"I won't be a seaman," Hilford said, a bit jauntily. "I'll be another Black-Cape."

The seamen gazed at him in open-mouthed admiration. Clearly, these men from the Federation were brilliant fellows.

Hilford felt that the captain's plans were overly elaborate, but his protests were silenced. The expedition set out the following night, as soon as it was dark, wearing black capes and hats borrowed from the duke's official tailor. Other seamen were stationed at intervals from the wood near the duke's estate to the market place on the other side of 00. And in the market place seamen were ready to start a roaring fire if a diversion was necessary. A fire in 00 was a serious matter, and would take priority over any cart theft.

Hilford moved out of the shadows of the wood and strode towards the sentry, giving him the stiff-armed Black-Cape salute. At ten paces he triggered a focused beam from his stun-gun, and the sentry folded up into a paralyzed heap. He was dragged into the shadows, and a black-caped seaman took his place. The other sentry was quickly dealt with. Black-caped seamen stationed themselves at intervals among the carts, and one accompanied Hilford—not to assist him, but to keep watch and let him know if trouble came. There were no shouts of warning on Kamm.

Hilford turned his attention to the carts, and was startled by the number of them—dozens, lined up in precise rows. Did the Duke Two Fingers have some passion for collecting ox carts? But no—these would be intended as military transport. The duke was planning the conquest of Kamm!

He moved quickly from cart to cart. Some he could dismiss with a glance, but many were the same type as Zorrel's cart, and he had to probe the interior for the concealed panel that hid the transmitter.

He moved as quickly as possible, and his escort lurked behind him and signaled, "Haste!" every time Hilford looked at him. They reached the end of the first long row and started on the second, and suddenly the escort gripped Hilford's arm. They ran together, dodging among the carts, and in the soft light of Kamm's three moons Hilford saw waves of Black-Capes racing down on them from

all directions. As he ran, he cursed himself for allowing such elaborate preparations. Too many seamen had known of the raid, and the League's traitor had struck again.

Hilford wielded his stun-gun at medium power, and bowled over ranks of Black-Capes. They darted through the break in the encircling lines, and raced for the woods. In the dim light Hilford could not tell friend from foe, but evidently the seaman could. He directed Hilford's attention to shadows leaping towards them, and turned him away from others. Hilford sprayed at long range with his stun-gun. He could do no more than momentarily daze the pursuers, but seconds were what they needed.

The black-caped seamen passed them, running for the woods, and Hilford held his ground to fight a delaying action. "Two missing," his escort signaled. "Can't wait." Darts were flashing past them. Hilford pointed the stun-gun as he ran, and sprayed again at long range. A dart stabbed into his arm, and he scarcely felt it. In the direction of 00 flames were leaping high into the air, and the pursuing Black-Capes seemed not to notice them. Hilford wondered if the diversion was coming too late.

They had just reached the edge of the trees when a dart struck Hilford squarely in the back. He stumbled, crashed headlong into a tree, and lost consciousness.

He came to, and opened his eyes to see a Black-Cape bending over him. He closed his eyes quickly, and weakly raised his hand to his

throat. They had not taken the Holy Bird. He still had his stun-gun, which meant he had a chance to escape. But he felt horribly weak. He would need strength.

He opened his eyes again, and saw the Black-Cape grinning at him. It was his seaman escort. He lay on the narrow cot in his cramped secret room.

"We carried you," the seaman signaled. "The Black-Capes left us for the fire."

Hilford's fingers moved feebly. "Your captain is a wise man."

"The captain has been arrested," the seaman said. "So have the other officers—all the Black-Capes could find. You've been unconscious for six hours."

"What happens now?"

"We have given the duke one day to release the seamen. If he does not, we will leave 00, and no more ships will come to the Flat Province."

"The duke will not care, now," Hilford said. "He has traitors among the seamen, and they will train men to sail the duke's ships. The duke will need his own ships to conquer Kamm, because he knows the men of the League would not help him."

"Men do not learn in a day to sail the seas of Kamm."

"The duke has plenty of time. Or he thinks he has, if he is chosen again to be the *Keeper of the Bird*."

The seaman looked worried. Hilford was frantic with worry. It would be morning, now, and he had just twenty-two days before the Federation would strike. He did not

dare tell that to the seamen. If a traitor took word of the attack to the duke, the Haarns would know, and what was planned as a quick conquest would turn into bloody, all-out war.

He gave way to his weakness, and slept.

When he awoke Captain Fist was there, with a doctor. There was grim sympathy in the captain's face. "It grieved me to hear of your wounds," he said. "It was noble of you to sacrifice yourself for my seamen, but you are the important one. You should have saved yourself."

"It grieved me to hear of your imprisonment," Hilford said. "Especially so since I was responsible."

"You were not responsible. The duke has never loved the League, and he is quick to blame us for any of his troubles."

"Have you found your traitor?"

The captain's fingers formed words that were strange to Hilford—rousing, seaman profanity. "I shall find him. And he will be lost at sea on his next voyage."

"Perhaps there is more than one," Hilford suggested.

"It is possible. The Duke Two Fingers has a large purse. But the duke is not yet ready to fight the League. Later, perhaps, but not now."

"We risked much for no gain," Hilford said. "I heard that two men were lost."

"They were captured. They were wearing black capes, so there was nothing to identify them as seamen. But they were also released. That I do not understand."

"The duke is crafty. He would like to know what we were seeking among his carts. He hopes to find out, so he turned everyone loose, expecting us to try again. But we won't try again. It would be useless."

"You are not strong, now," the captain said. "You have lost blood, and you need rest. When you have recovered, we will make new plans."

"Yes," Hilford said. "When I have recovered." He saw his dead-line marching relentlessly towards him, one day at each stride. Now there were twenty-one.

Hilford spent three days in the grip of a blazing fever, while the worried Kammian doctor ministered to him clumsily. The captain made his daily visits. The perfume maker came with new mixtures, and Hilford indifferently submitted to his dabbings. More failures. He slept and woke, and sometimes someone was there—the captain, or the perfume maker, or the doctor, or another seaman. Sometimes he was alone. It did not seem to matter.

On the fourth day he awoke and found a stranger in the room—a short, rotund man whose flaming red hair was offset by the black of his flowing robes. He was watching Hilford curiously. "I am the Duke One Thumb," he said. Hilford stirred weakly, and struggled to sit up. "No," the duke's chubby fingers told him. "You need rest. I have a great admiration for a man who braves the impossible."

"Nothing is impossible," Hilford said.

The duke bowed respectfully. "The captain has informed me of your wish to see me. How may I serve you?"

"I would like to make you the next *Keeper of the Bird*," Hilford said, and knew immediately that it sounded ridiculous, coming from a sick man, from a helpless fugitive.

The duke answered matter-of-factly, "Impossible."

"Do not all dukes have an equal chance?"

The duke hesitated. "Yes. All dukes have an equal chance. The Duke Two Fingers and his brother, who is the High Priest of the Bird, have made certain changes in the way the choice is made, but the changes are not new. The same procedures were in use at the time of my grandfather's grandfather. So all dukes should have an equal chance, but the Duke Two Fingers will be chosen."

"How is the choice made?"

"I cannot tell you. Only the dukes and the Priests of the Bird are privileged to know."

"Do you approve of the giving of lives of men to the Bird?"

The duke paled. "You know *that*? But . . ." He was thoughtful. "I know there have been rumors. No, I do not approve. It is a terrible thing. A sickening thing. But *I* cannot change it."

"You would do things differently if you were *Keeper of the Bird*?"

"There are many things I would do differently."

"You won't tell me how the choice is made? For Kamm?"

"I have sworn my oath. I cannot tell."

"Did you know that the Duke Two Fingers plans to rule all of Kamm?"

"I have guessed."

"But you still cannot tell me how the choice is made?"

The duke said nothing, but he met Hilford's gaze firmly. He was not, Hilford thought, the irresolute weakling he had expected. He would be a good man. Firm, but honest. The Federation could deal with such a man.

"You know that I am of the Federation?" he asked.

"Yes. The Federation has always been just in its dealings with Kamm."

"You know that the Duke Two Fingers has guests from the sky who are not of the Federation?"

He grimaced, and answered disgustedly, "Yes. They are evil men. Fit companions for the Duke Two Fingers."

"Have they given the duke weapons?"

"No. They have refused to give the duke weapons." He smiled at Hilford's surprise. "I have my own sources of information," he said.

"Did you know that the men of the Federation's trade commission were murdered by some strange and powerful weapon?"

"I heard of the deaths. I do not understand them, but I do not think the Duke Two Fingers has such a weapon."

"Perhaps his evil guests used it."

"That is possible. Yes, it must have happened that way."

Hilford felt that he had reached an impasse. The duke was the one man he was likely to meet who

could tell him everything he needed to know. And the duke had sworn an oath, and he was a man who would honor his oath.

"The chosen duke is called *Keeper of the Bird*," Hilford said suddenly. "Why?"

The duke looked at him curiously. "Because he is the *Keeper of the Bird*."

"A real Bird? A live Bird?"

"Of course."

"I did not know such Birds actually existed."

"Many of them exist. One is chosen at the same time that the duke is chosen, and entrusted to his care for the term of his office."

"Entrusted to his care," Hilford mused. "He is responsible for it, then. Supposing the duke is negligent?"

The Duke One Thumb smiled. "He will not be negligent. It is always a young and healthy Bird, and the *Keeper of the Bird* lavishes tender care upon it. He would guard it with his life. If it were to die, he would lose his office immediately, and he could never hold the office again."

"I understand. And the *Keeper of the Bird* rules all the Black-Capes on Kamm."

"Yes. But he can send them into another province only when a duke requests them. And the other dukes can have no armed men outside of their personal guard, unless they request them of the *Keeper of the Bird*. My personal guard is large, and there are few Black-Capes in the Round Province."

A neat arrangement for an ambitious *Keeper of the Bird*, Hilford

thought. By controlling the Black-Capes, he alone, of all the dukes, could raise a standing army. When his army was large enough, he could take over all of Kamm.

But he would have to have a powerful army, because the other eleven dukes would unite against him if he attacked one. With Kamm's scanty resources it would take time to plan a full-scale conquest. It would take more than a five-year term as *Keeper of the Bird*.

A lottery which shifted the power from duke to duke at regular intervals had been a sound system. But once a duke rigged the lottery and got himself chosen for several consecutive terms, the entire balance of power on the planet was upset. The Duke Two Fingers was finishing his third term. A fourth would enable him to conquer Kamm.

"When is the next *Keeper of the Bird* to be chosen?" Hilford asked.

"I cannot tell you that."

"It must be soon, or you would not be here."

"That much you know. I cannot tell you more."

Hilford struggled weakly, and pushed himself into a sitting position. "I will be present when the choice is made. I will make you the next *Keeper of the Bird*."

The duke clasped Hilford's hands, and bent forward until their forearms touched. "You are a brave man. Unfortunately, it is impossible. It would mean your death, and it would be a terrible death." He slid open the panel,

and turned again before he stepped through. "Your life would be given to the Birds."

THE PERFUME maker had been respectfully waiting for the duke to leave. He stepped through the panel, solemn as usual, and handed Hilford a small bottle. "Mixture number thirty-one," he said sadly.

"I'm afraid your task is even more impossible than mine," Hilford said.

"I shall succeed. I have had worse tasks. The Duke Two Fingers himself once gave me a worse task, and I accomplished it."

"What need did the duke have for perfume?"

"He wanted a scent that the Birds would not like."

"The Holy Birds?" Hilford straightened up attentively.

"Yes. They are most repulsive creatures. I worked for weeks. I would drench a rodent with scent and put him in their cage, and they would eat him. My two hundred and sixty-third mixture was a success. The rodent was perfectly safe with them—until the scent wore off. Then they tore him to pieces. It was not pleasant, seeing those Birds every day. I did not sleep well for weeks afterwards."

"You saw them at the duke's palace?"

"Yes."

"I thought the *Keeper of the Bird* kept only one bird."

"These were brought by the duke's brother, who is a Priest of

the Bird. I think the priests wanted something to protect themselves from the Birds, and I do not blame them. Anyway, that was years ago—long before the Duke Two Fingers became *Keeper of the Bird*. Perhaps he uses it himself, now, with a Bird in his palace. I mixed him a new batch only a month ago."

"You are the first person I've met, outside of the Duke One Thumb, who has ever seen a live Bird."

"The Duke Two Fingers pledged me to secrecy. You are the first I have ever told."

"I shall respect your confidence," Hilford said. "And I shall give your mixture thirty-one the usual critical test."

The perfume maker smiled wistfully. "I shall commence mixture thirty-two, just in case."

Captain Fist came in the evening, and sat for a long time with his fingers silent, looking weary and troubled. "I must leave you," he said finally. "I have rarely stayed in 00 for so long, and the Black-Capes are suspicious. Now they follow me everywhere. So I must make a short voyage. I'll be back in ten days, and less if the winds favor me. You will be well looked after—I promise that."

"Thank you," Hilford said. He had never felt more helpless. He was too weak to leave his hiding place, and if he did the first Black-Cape that happened along would arrest him. And he could no longer fully trust the League.

"I will see you as soon as I return," the captain said. He arose

to go, stepped towards the panel, and suddenly whirled about and stared incredulously. Twice he raised his hands to speak, and dropped them.

"What's the matter?" Hilford asked anxiously.

"I just noticed. I no longer smell you!"

"Mixture thirty-one," Hilford said gleefully. "Tell the perfume maker to send up a large bottle."

After the captain had gone, he made his plans. He would have to get out of 00. Whatever else he might learn in the capital city of the Duke Two Fingers, he could not finish his assignment there. And if he stayed longer, the League's traitor might learn of his hiding place.

He left only a note of thanks for the seamen, and carrying the large bottle of scent that the jubilant perfume maker had delivered, he slipped out of the inn into the dark streets of 00.

He wore his seaman's hat until he was clear of the town. Once a Black-Cape stopped him, and as Hilford gripped his stun-gun the policeman noticed his hat and passed him by with a nod. Outside of 00 Hilford changed to the peddler's hat, and struck out along the grassy ruts of the cart path that led northwards towards the mountains.

He tired quickly, but he doggedly kept a firm pace and pushed himself onwards. The sun rose, and slowly added its brisk warmth to his feverish discomfort. Soon each staggering stride became a

matter of forced concentration.

He pushed his weakened body forward until mid-morning, and he collapsed in a scant patch of shade on a hilltop, with the buildings of 00 still visible on the southern horizon. He could go no farther.

To the north, he saw a small village of scattered, colorful houses, a peddler with ox and cart plodding up the hill towards him—and, in the hazy distance, the beckoning, snow-covered mountains. He struggled to his feet, and stopped the peddler. In five minutes of oblique negotiations he purchased ox, cart and merchandise at a price that roughly equaled their sound value times ten. In the village he disposed of half the merchandise to a wily old shopkeeper at a ruinous loss, and stocked up on food. Once clear of the village, he climbed into the half-empty cart and fashioned a cramped resting place for himself.

A swat across its hindquarters started the ox. It lurched dumbly forward along the path it had followed less than an hour before, having no apparent interest either in where it was going or where it had been. Hilford watched anxiously to see if it would follow the path without supervision. When it did, he lay down and fought the agony that stabbed his wounds as the cart rocked and bumped over the ruts. Finally his exhaustion triumphed, and he slept.

It was dark when he awoke. The northward track lay ahead of him in the dim moonlight, and the ox was plodding along indifferently.

He got out and staggered beside it for a time, attempting to exercise his cramped muscles, but the effort proved too much for him. He led the ox off the main track and into the shelter of some trees to rest.

He did not know when the dukes would leave 00, or how fast they could travel. His only hope lay in reaching the mountains ahead of them. If he could do that, he might have a chance.

And the attack would come in sixteen days.

The following day he suffered a relapse. He lay in his cart, burning with fever, while the ox moved patiently onwards. Day blurred into night and became day again, and he lost track of time. Perhaps the ox rested when it grew tired, or perhaps not. Perhaps his cart met travelers along the way, or perhaps not. He did not know.

He was able, finally, to get out of the cart and walk beside the ox. He knew that five days had passed, and perhaps it was six or seven. He walked, and rested, and his strength began to return to him. The next morning, from the side of a mountain slope, he looked down on the scraggly forested, rolling plain, and saw a long, brightly colored caravan creeping towards him—animals, carts, attendants and the royal personages of the six southern dukes. He moved on, and his ox panted and strained as it hauled the cart up a steep mountain pass.

Kamm's belt of conical mountains appeared to be of volcanic origin, and the peaks on the southern fringe were arranged confusedly

—now humped closely upon one another, now widely spaced. The rough cart path went its winding way among the lofty trees, passing between two mountains with scarcely a ripple in elevation, then pointing its way steeply upwards a thousand feet for the next pass.

Hilford pushed forward, disdaining food and sleep, until exhaustion had overcome him again, and the skin of the toiling, perspiring ox hung in flabby folds. On the morning of his third day in the mountains he came upon a broad, wooded valley. He lashed the ox furiously, forcing it into a stumbling run. He must cross the valley before the dukes' party came out of the pass. He must not be seen.

By noon he had crossed the valley and gained the refuge of the tree-covered slope on the opposite side. He rested, and the ox collapsed in its harness. He could safely go no farther, he thought. Now he must wait until the dukes had passed him, and follow them.

The long caravan descended into the valley in mid-afternoon, crossed it, and set up camp on the north side. As darkness came on, Hilford looked down on the bright fires with satisfaction. Everything had gone according to plan. In the morning, he would let them pass him, and then follow. But he must not oversleep.

He awoke with the first light of dawn in his face, and hurried to look down on the sprawling camp. There was little sign of activity. He returned to his cart, ate, and relaxed while the ox grazed con-

tentedly on the forest bushes. At noon, cooking fires dotted the camp. The attendants finished their meal, and retired to their tents. Oxen were tethered out to pasture. Carts were parked neatly around the perimeter of the camp. The dukes were evidently in no hurry.

Puzzled, Hilford turned away and walked to the top of the pass. He looked down into the valley to the north, and to his amazement he saw another camp site—the oxen, the carts, the colorful tents.

Understanding came suddenly, and crushed him. This was the camp of the northern dukes. Only the dukes could enter the Temple of the Bird, and they had left their retinues and gone on alone, and he had lost them. His exhausting journey had been wasted.

But he still had a few days—five, perhaps—and the dukes would not undertake a long journey by themselves. The Temple of the Bird should be within a day's walk of the camps. There should be some kind of path or road leading to it. The Temple would need supplies.

A movement through the trees to his left startled him. He leaped to his feet, gripping his stun-gun, and saw that his ox had pulled loose and was wandering about seeking choice leaves to munch. With a grin, he turned and hurried away through the trees. He was a peddler, seeking his strayed ox.

He found the path just as darkness was falling, a meandering foot path that led up out of the valley. He quickly lost it in the darkness, but he knew its general

direction, which was up, and he kept moving. An hour later he saw a flash of light on the mountain slope, far above him.

But he found nothing—no imposing Temple with brightly-painted facade, no buildings, no signs that humans had passed that way. He wandered on in the darkness, feeling the deep chill of the mountain air, feeling the weakness that he had been unable to shake off in his relentless struggle to reach the mountains.

A cloud choked off the last feeble glimmer of the smallest Kammian moon. He slowed his pace, and peered uncertainly ahead of him. Suddenly his foot found emptiness, and he struggled for balance, lost it, and tumbled downwards.

He landed on a metal framework ten feet below the surface, and found himself in a caged airshaft, about six feet in diameter. Before he could collect his confused senses pain stabbed at his arm, and he jerked away and stood in the center of the cage while the giant, hideously colored Holy Birds of Kamm fluttered greedily about him. One swooped up from below and slashed at his ankle. The bars formed a perfect ladder, and he made a rush to climb out and was forced back by tearing talons and ripping beaks. He experienced a wave of dizziness, with a throbbing, pounding sensation in his head. While he stood there in bewilderment, he saw in the dim light far below a black-hooded Priest of the Bird staring up at him. The priest whirled suddenly, and ran.

IT WAS A small, barren room hewn out of rock. Three black-hooded priests filed in, paused to sniff Hilford carefully, and took their seats. He sniffed them in turn, and caught a powerful, pungent odor that seemed at the same time agreeable and repulsive. He found an element of humor in the situation. He might have said, "We have something in common, gentlemen. We patronize the same perfume maker." But the grim-looking priests would not have appreciated the joke.

He stood before them, tottering weakly, blood flowing from his arm and ankle, and told his story. The elder priest leaned forward as he finished, and Hilford found the haughty nose and cruel features vaguely familiar. This would be the younger brother of the Duke Two Fingers.

He moved his fingers languidly, bored to have such a trifle brought to his attention. "A stray ox was found this evening," he said. "Your story may be true. If so, that is unfortunate. You have had the high honor of seeing the Holy Birds of Kamm. You have entered the forbidden Temple. Your life is forfeited to the Birds."

The two younger priests led Hilford away. They passed through a labyrinth of corridors, straight, curving, ascending, descending, branching off. They passed through a barred door, and another, and Hilford was shoved forward into a long room that was nothing more than a wide, barren corridor. Bars closed silently behind him.

At the far end were more bars,

and half a hundred men of Kamm stood about, or squatted, or stretched out on the damp rock floor. Sobs shook one man's huge frame—the only evidence of his silent weeping. Hilford's searching gaze photographed the faces, and suddenly found one that was familiar. Zorrel!

The young agent walked towards him, grinning happily. They stood close together, so their fingers could have some privacy. "Now there are five of us," Zorrel said.

"Three other agents here?"

"Such as they are. Their morale isn't exactly good. They've been treated badly, and they've had the misfortune to see what happened to some other agents." He stopped suddenly, and fingered Hilford's blood-soaked sleeve.

"My introduction to the Birds," Hilford told him.

"Then I don't need to explain."

"About the birds, no. About this layout, yes."

"Come," Zorrel said. He led Hilford to the far end of the room, and they stood looking out through the bars upon an enormous, domed, circular arena. At intervals around the sides there were pairs of barred openings about the size of a large door—one at floor level, and one directly above it. In the center of the arena was a cage—just big enough, Hilford thought grimly, to hold a man.

"This is the lottery where the *Keeper of the Bird* is chosen, and other important matters are decided," Zorrel said. "Each duke has his own royal box—the upper openings. There are twelve of them.

When the great moment comes, the arena is filled with birds, and the victim is placed in the cage. The lower doors are opened, and the cage is hoisted up to the dome. All the victim has to do is get from the center of the arena over to one of the lower doors before the birds tear him to pieces. The first few don't get very far, but eventually the birds have their hunger satisfied, and they lose interest. The victims get farther and farther, and finally one makes it. And whatever door he escapes through, that duke is the next *Keeper of the Bird*. Pleasant little game, isn't it?"

Hilford shuddered. He'd had his share of experience with barbarism and violence and human sacrifice, but only with the most primitive civilizations. It had seemed natural, there. Here it was only gruesome.

"Generations ago, they stopped using humans and changed to animals," Zorrel went on. "But the Duke Two Fingers is reviving the old customs. It's a nice thing for the victim that finally makes it. He receives high honors, and he might even marry a daughter of a duke, if one is available. For the ones that don't make it, it isn't so nice."

"When is the lottery to take place?"

Zorrel laughed sardonically. "Any minute, now. We—" his gesture swept the bare room—"are the victims. Wonder if the Birds think old men are tougher eating than young men. You might stand a better chance than a young, tender morsel like me."

Hilford stood looking thoughtfully out at the arena.

"There's no escape that way," Zorrel said. "And you know what's at the other end—two barred doors, and a couple of squads of priestly guards. Once the festivities start, they're going to be more interested in watching the arena than us." He patted his stun-gun. "That would be a good time to take over this place."

"I've picked up a fair amount of information myself," Hilford said. "I think I have most of the picture, now. The question is, what do we do with it?"

"The question is, how do we get out of here?"

"We're intelligence agents," Hilford said. "We have an assignment."

"All right—I'm with you. Better not count too much on the others. And I'll tell you one thing." He patted the stun-gun again. "If they put me in that arena, the Birds are going to regret it. A full charge would kill a Bird."

"That wouldn't solve anything. It wouldn't even get you out alive. The priests would tear you apart if the Birds didn't. Your gun's charge won't last forever, and mine is pretty well gone now."

"So what do we do?"

"I want to snoop around, and talk to our fellow victims."

He moved back up the room, passed by one man who was gripped in a coma of trembling fear, and stopped beside a small, wizened oldster who grinned at him cheerfully.

"Don't get discouraged," he said to Hilford. "Maybe you'll be lucky, like me."

"Lucky in what way?"

"My number doesn't come up. Been here four years, and—here I am. They don't call my number. Food is good, quarters aren't bad, and they don't give you much work to do. It isn't a bad life if you don't mind being herded down here on Holy Days and the like."

Hilford jerked a thumb at the arena. "You enjoy what goes on there?"

"I don't let it bother me. Sure—I tell myself it might be me, in there. But it isn't, and I'll die of old age before they get to me."

"You've been here four years," Hilford said. "How many lives have you seen given to the Birds?"

"Don't know. Couple of hundred, maybe. Of course, on Holy Days it's only one. I never saw a Choice. They say they use a lot of us for a Choice."

Hilford walked on. He found the three intelligence agents, talked with them briefly, and left them. They had been badly mistreated. Marks on their hands suggested torture. They had been starved, and they were almost too weak to walk. He'd have to get them out, of course, if he could. But he couldn't count on them for assistance.

Suddenly a familiar odor caught his attention, bitter and pungent, vaguely irritating, vaguely pleasant. He turned towards it and saw a lean, bronze young man of unmistakable physical hardness. He studied his face carefully. He had seen him somewhere—in a crowd, perhaps, where the face had been only one of many.

But only one group of Kammians achieved that physical condition. He was a seaman. And he was generously anointed with the scent of the Priests of the Bird.

"That's a potent perfume you wear," Hilford said.

The seaman glanced at him sullenly, and said nothing.

"The League will be pleased to know who their traitor is."

The seaman started. He smiled slowly. "They were bound to get you, sooner or later. And the League will never learn from *you*."

"Give my regards to the Duke Two Fingers," Hilford said.

He turned, and walked back to Zorrel. Odd, he thought, how suddenly the inexplicable is unraveled. He knew who the League's traitor was—or one of the traitors. And he knew how the Duke Two Fingers rigged the lottery.

He explained to Zorrel, who scoffed, at first, and then displayed a refined mastery of Kammian profanity. "Then the whole thing is a farce," he said. "They call some numbers to put on a good show for the other dukes, and then they send this fellow in. And the birds won't touch him. And he walks through the Duke Two Fingers' door, and the show is over."

"For another five years."

"We can arrange an accident for this seaman. At least the lottery would be genuine."

"Too many witnesses," Hilford said. "And it wouldn't help the situation. All the priests would have to do is douse another prisoner with scent, and show him where the Duke Two Fingers' door is."

"So what do we do about it?"

"Nothing. I checked that door, and it can only be opened from the other side. There's no way out of here. We'll have to wait until they take us somewhere else."

"What if they try to feed us to the Birds?"

"Let me know if you figure out something."

They sat down along the wall, and waited. Hilford glanced again at the arena. There were caged air vents in the ceiling, but the one that had trapped him opened into a smaller room. Enormous natural caves, he decided, altered by generations of priests to suit their purposes. The religion of Kamm would provide fascinating study material for some young Federation ethnologist—if he were lucky enough to survive to collect it.

A door opened, and the black-robed, black-hooded priests marched in. The prisoners were summarily lined up against the wall, and a young priest moved down the line painting red numbers on their foreheads.

"The paint rubs off easily," he said. "Any man found with a bare forehead will be given to the Birds immediately."

Perspiration trickled down many foreheads, but Hilford noticed that no one brushed it away.

There was movement in the arena. A Bird dove hungrily at their barred door, and swooped upwards. Momentary panic followed, as pale prisoners milled back away from the arena and the priests angrily sought to restore order. Four priests entered the

arena, and calmly walked towards the cage in the center. The air was suddenly filled with enormous, flapping wings as the birds descended voraciously, and then veered away. The priests pushed the cage towards the door where the victims were waiting. The Choice was about to be made.

The High Priest himself strode the length of the room with a retinue of priests trailing behind him. He stood for a moment looking out at the arena. Apparently satisfied that all was in order, he turned, and a metal jar was passed to him. He shook it sideways, then upright, until a disc dropped out of a slot in the bottom. He looked down, signaled indifferently, "Thirty-seven," and kicked it away. A young priest retrieved it, and number thirty-seven, a giant of a man, brushed Hilford's arm as he toppled to the floor in a dead faint.

Priests stripped off his clothing, the door swung back, and he was shoved into the cage. The priests slowly pushed it to the center of the arena, and left it. A signal, and the cage jerked upwards.

Those in the room watched with a compulsion born of horror. Crouching, number thirty-seven bolted for the side of the arena as soon as the cage was clear of him. The first Bird plummeted downwards, raked his back, and sent him sprawling. He rolled onto his back, lashing out with arms and legs. Somehow he clutched a Bird by the wing, and there was a momentary stir of alarm among the priests.

But another Bird found his eyes,

and another his throat. Then the struggle was over and the feast began. The cage was lowered, and the priests, ignored by the Birds who fought over thirty-seven's remains, returned the cage to the doorway.

The High Priest shook the jar again. "Number forty-two."

The priests dragged him forward, and four years of luck ran out on the wizened little man who thought to die of old age. Fear paralyzed his legs, and the priests had to support his body while they stripped off his clothes. They rudely stuffed him into the cage.

When the cage went up, he slumped to a kneeling position, covering his face with his hands. For a terrible moment the Birds took no notice of him. Then one circled slowly, and landed on his back. Pain goaded him into a furious struggle, but he had waited too long. He never did regain his feet.

The High Priest raised his jar, and the bloody game continued. The fifth victim called was the bronze young seaman. He strode forward manfully, but once in the arena he acted the part of a terrified victim. He ducked and dodged, stumbled and fell, struggled to his feet lashing out at the Birds. But he remained untouched, and he worked his way to one side of the arena, and suddenly darted through an open door.

The door swung shut. All the lights in the royal boxes save one were extinguished. The Duke Two Fingers was chosen *Keeper of the Bird* for another five years.

"The end of a mission," Zorrel said.

Hilford shrugged. "Or the beginning of a mission."

Tension in the room relaxed immediately. The High Priest strutted out, the prisoners wiped the numbers from their foreheads, and the priests organized the group into a double column and marched it away. Hilford and Zorrel held back, and were last in line.

"Prisoners are kept ten in a room," Zorrel said. "The rooms are a long way from the exit—at least from where I came in. These corridors wind all over the place. I'm not sure I could find my way out."

Hilford glanced around. "We'll have to be careful. Those darts they shoot can be painful."

The procession moved on through the network of corridors. They took a last turn, and came to a row of barred doors. A priest counted off ten prisoners, slammed the door on them, and barred it.

"Look up ahead," Hilford said. "The corridor branches off. Where does it go?"

"I don't know."

Hilford moved to conceal his fingers from the priests. "When our turn comes, we'll make a dash for it. If we can get around the corner, we'll be safe from the darts, and we can knock them off a couple at a time as they come after us. We might be lucky."

"I'll be right beside you."

The fourth group of ten was counted off, and there were six men left. A priest jerked the next door open, and stood blocking the

corridor. When Hilford's turn came, he leaped and struck once, and shoved the priest's crumpled body aside as he raced for the fork in the corridor. He sensed Zorrel's presence close behind him. They reached the fork and made the turn before the first darts flashed past. The startled priests had been slow to react.

They were in a short passageway that branched off in three directions. An oil lamp overhead cast eerie reflections. They whirled and stood with stun-guns ready.

"Full power," Hilford signaled. It wouldn't do to have the men come to in a few minutes and describe what had happened.

The first priests came charging around the turn. In a matter of seconds a dozen bodies lay on the corridor floor. They stripped two of the men, dragged their bodies into an empty room, and donned their black robes and hoods. They strolled calmly back the way they had come. No one questioned them, but it took them all of half an hour to find the exit.

They moved down the mountain path in the cold air of early dawn, ignoring the priests on sentry duty. As soon as they reached the protection of the trees, Hilford stopped.

"Head straight west until you find the cart track that leads north through the mountains," he said. "Follow the track to the top of the pass. My cart is hidden in the trees maybe fifty feet to the west. In the cart you'll find a large bottle of perfume that smells like nothing you've ever smelled before. Take a quick bath in it, and it'll make you

smell like a man of Kamm."

Zorrel started. "So that's it!"

"That is it. Once you are smelling properly, get down into the camp in the south valley, and snoop around among the carts to see if the Duke Two Fingers accidentally used ours for his trip north. I don't think anyone will question what a priest does. If you find the transmitter, tell Headquarters to call the whole thing off. We'll fill them in later."

"What are you going to do?"

"Finish our assignment. And you'd better trade stun-guns with me. Mine is low."

Zorrel slipped the cord over his head, and handed the hand-carved Holy Bird to Hilford. "If you're going back in there, you'll need it." He took Hilford's gun, and disappeared into the trees.

Hilford chose his position carefully. He had to be invisible, and yet have a clear field of vision himself. He searched along the path, and finally settled down in a cluster of bushes ten feet from the trail. He did not know how long he would have to wait. He was thirsty and hungry, and weary from lack of sleep. He hoped he could hold out.

An hour went by, and two hours. He fought to keep awake in the dreary silence. Suddenly he saw a flash of movement. A file of black-robed priests came into view. The Duke Two Fingers walked haughtily across his field of vision. Hilford knelt and trained his stun-gun on the path. The procession was moving rapidly, and he would only have

a fraction of a second.

More priests passed, and suddenly Hilford saw the thing he was waiting for. A cage, towering grotesquely on the mountain path. It was all of eight feet tall, and black cloth was draped inside the bars, with a foot of air space left at top and bottom. Two black-robed priests strained under its weight at each corner.

As Hilford took in these details his finger closed instinctively on the trigger. A focused beam at full power, from a distance of ten feet, would kill or permanently disable a man. It would certainly kill a bird.

And as the cage passed from his view there was a convulsive flutter, and a Holy Bird of Kamm tumbled to the floor of the cage.

Consternation followed. The priests set down the cage, opened it, and tenderly lifted out the Bird. Terror and uncertainty gripped their faces. The Duke Two Fingers came charging back up the trail. Other black-robed dukes came forward, pushing their way through the excited crowd of priests. Hilford sensed that a furious argument was under way, but the fluttering fingers were concealed from him. The High Priest strode anxiously down the trail, and disappeared into the crowd.

Hilford held his position, and waited. The procession finally turned, assumed a semblance of order, and marched back up the mountain towards the Temple of the Bird.

Hilford followed at a safe distance, and accosted one of the sen-

tries at the entrance to the Temple. "What was all the excitement about?"

The sentry wore a dazed expression. "The Bird is dead! The *Keeper of the Bird* is deposed!"

Hilford confidently reentered the Temple, and moved through the corridors at as fast a pace as was consistent with the dignity of his black robes. He found the corridor where the prisoners were confined, and opened the fifth door.

There were only four men in the room, since Hilford and Zorrel had escaped. They sprang to their feet and stood humbly at attention.

"Which one of you would like to escape?" Hilford demanded.

They stared at him dumbly.

He picked the youngest one, pulled the bright cape from his shoulders, and clothed him in the stolen black garments. "Bar the door as you go out," he said. "If you wander around long enough, you should find the exit. Good luck!"

The amazed man darted out, and they saw him shove the bar into place.

One of the other prisoners suddenly recognized Hilford. "You killed the priests!" he said, his fingers trembling with excitement.

Hilford dropped onto a straw-padded bunk. "Aren't you grateful?" he asked. He was thoroughly exhausted. He twisted uncomfortably, and drifted off to sleep.

HE WAS awakened abruptly, and herded into the corridor with the other prisoners. The two

lines were formed, and they marched back along the winding passageways, to the room that opened into the arena. The scene was much the same as it had been before, but with a significant difference. The royal box of the Duke Two Fingers was dark. The door under his box remained closed. He had allowed a Holy Bird to die, and he was disqualified.

The bewildered prisoners were backed against the wall for numbering. The High Priest entered stormily, and seized the metal jar. At that moment a prisoner from Hilford's room stepped forward, and pointed at Hilford.

"Him—he's the one that killed the Holy Priests!"

The High Priest whirled on Hilford, stepped close, sniffed doubtfully.

"No," he signaled.

The prisoner gestured excitedly. "He escaped, and then he came back wearing a black robe."

The High Priest stared coldly at Hilford. "Take off his shoes," he said finally. The High Priest studied his five-toed feet incredulously. "Take him first," he said. The informant grinned broadly, and froze in terror a moment later when the High Priest gave him his reward by adding, "And take him second."

Hilford was quickly stripped. Hands clutched at his carving of the Holy Bird, and he clasped it to him protectingly. The High Priest stepped forward, saw what it was, and sneered. "Let him have it!" Hilford was shoved into the cage, and priests began pushing it into the arena.

Birds flapped excitedly far above, and several dove on the priests and veered off. Hilford waited calmly in the center of the arena while the priests hurried away. He set his stun-gun at low intensity, with the broadest beam the small gun could supply. It might be fatal to kill a Bird, he knew; and it would certainly be fatal if he did not keep them away. If his first setting was not the right one, he might not have a chance to adjust it.

The cage jerked upwards.

He stood in the center of the arena, pivoting slowly, with both hands extended above his head. One hand grasped the stun-gun. His posture was that of one invoking the gods. His audience was about to witness a miracle, and it would be best for Hilford if somehow it got the idea that it was a Holy Miracle.

The first Bird plummeted downwards, struck the gun's beam, and fluttered comically away. Another came close enough to receive a vague shock, and circled warily. Then there was a sudden rush, and the air above him was filled with beating wings.

He continued to pivot, and a sudden wave of dizziness came over him. His head throbbed painfully. He staggered, nearly fell, and began to edge towards the side of the arena. A Bird came at him from the rear at arm level, underneath the beam. Hilford's blurring vision caught it just in time. He tilted the gun, and the Bird dropped to the floor of the arena, shuddered, and waddled away with its wings trailing helplessly. Hilford resumed his

wavering pivot, and saw it flap into the air again.

He was twenty feet from the wall of the arena, close enough to see the face of a duke who looked down on him hopefully. But it was not the duke he wanted. Another bird came at him at arm level, but circled back before he could aim the gun. The Birds were becoming cautious, and their rushes broke off farther and farther above him. But his head was a pounding, tearing agony, and he sensed that he was losing consciousness. He staggered on, arms still extended over his head, passing one duke's box after another searching for a familiar face.

Suddenly he saw a flash of red hair. He summoned his last, failing strength, dashed for the open door, and collapsed as a priest swung it shut behind him.

He was pulled to his feet, draped in black robes, and led up a flight of stone steps. The Duke One Thumb stepped forward to greet him, stared at his face in open-mouthed astonishment.

"I have kept my promise," Hilford told him, and collapsed again.

The duke helped him onto a cushioned dais, and knelt beside him. His hands trembled with excitement. "It is a miracle!"

Hilford sank back weakly. "We must be cautious," he said. "I do not trust the Duke Two Fingers."

"There's nothing he can do *now*. I must reward you. All my daughters are married, but perhaps . . ."

"Later," Hilford said. "The Duke Two Fingers . . ."

Suddenly solemn, the Duke One

Thumb got to his feet. "We will go to the High Priest. He must give me my credentials and my Bird."

Priests made up a respectful escort. They entered the sumptuous quarters of the High Priest, where the walls were draped with black cloth and the furniture was plushly upholstered in black. The High Priest was there, with a dozen lesser priests. The Duke Two Fingers faced him arguing fiercely.

"The Bird was sickly."

"The Bird was young, and in good health."

"Surely I cannot be guilty of negligence if it dies before it reaches 00—before it is even out of the mountains!"

Hilford understood the turmoil taking place behind the frosty countenance of the High Priest. He might circumvent custom by subterfuge, by drenching a prisoner with a repellent scent, but he could not do it openly without tearing asunder the entire religious structure and undermining his own position. The priests knew the High Priest was the brother of the Duke Two Fingers, and they were watching alertly. Would he dare to disregard the venerable tradition they were all sworn to uphold?

"The Bird was given into your position," he said. "The law speaks plainly."

The Duke Two Fingers suddenly noticed the Duke One Thumb and his party, and he whirled angrily. "Your choice was not in order. It was made by an alien. Aliens are not permitted in the Temple." He turned on the High Priest. "The

law speaks plainly on that. You have brought aliens into the Temple."

"I have offered their lives to the Birds, as is proper. The Birds alone have decided the outcome."

Hilford's glance swept over the black-hooded men standing by the Duke Two Fingers, and he praised space for his photographic memory. One face he had seen, his first day on Kamm, in the duke's carriage. And that face had had ears.

He turned to the Duke One Thumb. "The Duke Two Fingers has brought aliens into the Temple," he said. "The priest on his right—remove his hood and you will see the signs."

The little duke moved decisively. He strode forward, jerked the hood from the man's head, and stood staring. Ears!

No one moved. The High Priest's face was icily calm. "All present will remove their hoods," he said.

Glittering weapons flashed suddenly, but a wave of priests overwhelmed the men. Hoods were ripped from the heads of the Duke Two Fingers' escort. Two more pairs of ears were revealed to the startled priests.

The High Priest turned slowly, and faced his brother. The long struggle for power between the two men blazed hatefully in the looks they exchanged. Each man had attempted to use the other, and each had failed. And Hilford guessed that when the Duke Two Fingers had commenced his dealings with the men of Haarn, he had not taken his brother into his confidence.

Now the brother had his revenge.

He stepped back, and his fingers slowly spelled out his verdict. "The law speaks plainly. The life of an outsider in the Temple belongs to the Birds. And be he duke or commoner, the life of one who willfully brings an outsider into the Temple . . ."

The little Duke One Thumb raised both hands. "Only the dukes pass judgment on the life of a duke."

The High Priest lost his calmness. He rushed at the Duke One Thumb, his fingers screaming his rage. "In the Temple of the Bird I am the master!"

"The law of Kamm does not stop at the door of the Temple," the little duke said.

Hilford watched tensely. The High Priest poured out threats and invective. The Duke One Thumb tossed his red head scornfully, and kept his calm gaze on the High Priest until he turned away uneasily. "When will the dukes sit in judgment?" he asked.

"Immediately," the little duke said.

The High Priest gestured at the Duke Two Fingers. "Take him away."

The duke sprang back, and appealed to the priests. "I am the *Keeper of the Bird*. Your oath is sworn to me. I command you . . ."

The priests swarmed over him, and led him away. The High Priest pointed scornfully at the men of Haarn. "Give them to the Birds."

Somehow Hilford felt no desire to see the Duke Two Fingers come to judgment. He was not certain that he would be admitted, so he

followed along after the men of Haarn. They were thrust into the arena without ceremony. They were not even stripped. For a few minutes they milled about confusedly, looking vainly at the closed doors that ringed the arena. As the first Birds descended upon them one slipped out of his robes and whipped them through the air. The action startled the Birds, and they circled warily.

They quickly regained their confidence, and as they circled closer strange things happened to the men of Haarn. They collapsed and groveled on the bare rock floor. Their hands tore futilely at the smooth surface. Blood spurted from their ears, and their arms and legs flailed weakly and were still. Hilford wearily turned away from the sickening ripping of talons. His assignment was completed. He had identified the Kammian secret weapon.

AT THE Federation Base on Kamm's largest moon, Hilford was finishing his report. "Following the execution of the Duke Two Fingers, his nephew was installed as ruler of the Flat Province. He is an intelligent and conscientious young man, and he should make an excellent duke. No more agents of Haarn have been discovered, and we doubt that there are more. Men with ears would find it difficult to hide on Kamm. The new *Keeper of the Bird* is an honest and courageous man with an instinct for leadership. He has the complete support of the Sea-

men's League, and he will welcome advisors from the Federation. The next five years should see a dramatic change of direction in the history of Kamm."

Hilford seated himself, and indulged in a fit of coughing. The unaccustomed vocal exercise had sadly irritated his throat. He leaned back and studied the faces before him—the military brass, the diplomatic brass, the intelligence brass.

The diplomatic brass spoke first, and Hilford fumbled for a communicator, turned up the volume, and listened.

"I move that we commend Special Agent Hilford for an excellent piece of work."

An agitated Admiral Lantz leaped to his feet, his scholarly face flushed with excitement. "The secret weapon! You didn't mention the secret weapon!"

"That calls for a special report," Hilford said. "Zorrel?"

The young agent hurried out, and returned with some scientific apparatus which the distinguished audience eyed suspiciously.

"I've recorded some bird talk from the Kammian Holy Bird," Hilford said. "Would you like to hear it?"

The muttered assent did not reach him through the communicator. He asked again, and Admiral Lantz bellowed, "Yes!"

"I'll let you hear it for exactly five seconds. And please note—this is an oscillograph. It gives us a picture of sound waves. You can listen to this sound and watch it at the same time."

He stood with a stop watch in

his hand, and Zorrel turned off the machine when he signaled.

"I didn't hear a thing," the admiral called. "And that line never moved. There's nothing there but silence."

"Ah! Remember—Kamm is the silent planet. This is silent bird talk."

The admiral got to his feet with the air of one about to stomp out, and was hauled back into place by another admiral. Ernst Wilkes called to Hilford, "Go on, please." The Sector Chief of Intelligence looked amused.

"I promise you, gentlemen," Hilford said politely, "that this is the deadliest silence in the universe. We'll wait five minutes, and then I'll give you step two."

While they waited, Zorrel adjusted the oscillograph. He darted to the door and led in a giant griff hound, conveniently borrowed from a sentry.

"In the first test," Hilford said, "the oscillograph was set to register sounds within the normal range of human hearing—roughly up to 25,000 cycles. Now I'll move the upper limit as far as it will go. Watch again, for five seconds."

The line on the oscillograph suddenly twisted convulsively. At the same time Hilford was flung to the floor as the dog dashed against him in a frantic effort to escape. Zorrel leaped to switch off the machine, and the dog crept under a table and howled mournfully.

"You see, gentlemen," Hilford said, "how deadly that silence is. The dog can hear it—or part of it. You can't hear a thing, but all the

same you are being bombarded with a peculiarly oscillating sound wave of a murderous intensity. With that machine at normal volume, every person in this room would be dead within a minute—except Zorrel and I, because we have no ears at the moment. And we'd be acutely uncomfortable.

"The Holy Bird is a legendary monster on Kamm, for good reason. Folklore claims that the birds once ruled the planet, and it may be right. Somewhere back in the dim mists of antiquity those birds began to develop a peculiar method of catching their prey, and as their power developed it had a tremendous impact on the entire course of evolution on Kamm. Their prey had to evolve also, or become extinct. That was the course of Kamnian evolution. The birds developed more power, their prey developed more immunity. Finally the birds became all-powerful, and their prey became completely immune. Man adapted to the birds by losing his hearing, and eventually, his ears. And when his hearing was gone and he became the ruling species on the planet, he continued to fear the birds. He captured them, and worshipped them."

There was a long silence, interrupted by Wilkes. "What happened to the trade commissioners?"

"We can only guess. By accident or on purpose, the Duke Two Fingers exposed them to his private

bird. He was probably shocked himself, at what happened, and because he feared the Federation he had the bodies dumped into the street. And now, if no one wants to hear it again, Zorrel will erase the bird talk. We don't want an innocent technician committing suicide by accident. When does my leave start?"

"Immediately," Wilkes said. "Two months."

"You promised me six months."

"I can't spare you for six months. Where do you want to go? Some nice quiet resort?"

"I want my ears back," Hilford said. "And then I'm going to spend all six months in the aft cabin of a space tug, listening to the engines."

A diplomat waved his arm anxiously. "What about the future of Kamm?"

Hilford was suddenly serious. "The Kammiens don't realize it, but normal men could never invade Kamm. One Holy Bird, turned loose in an enemy camp at night, could wipe out an army. Even if an invader attempted to kill all the birds, he could never be certain that there wasn't one left, and one would be enough. Aliens will live on Kamm only with the gracious permission of the natives. The future of Kamm is definitely for Kammiens. Or, to put it another way—" he grinned broadly "—that planet is for the birds!"

END

The scientific humanist doesn't pretend that every experience of life can be forced into a test tube or that every interest can be weighed on scales. He knows that something in everything always escapes the technique of measurement. —Max Otto

What Is Your Science I. Q.?

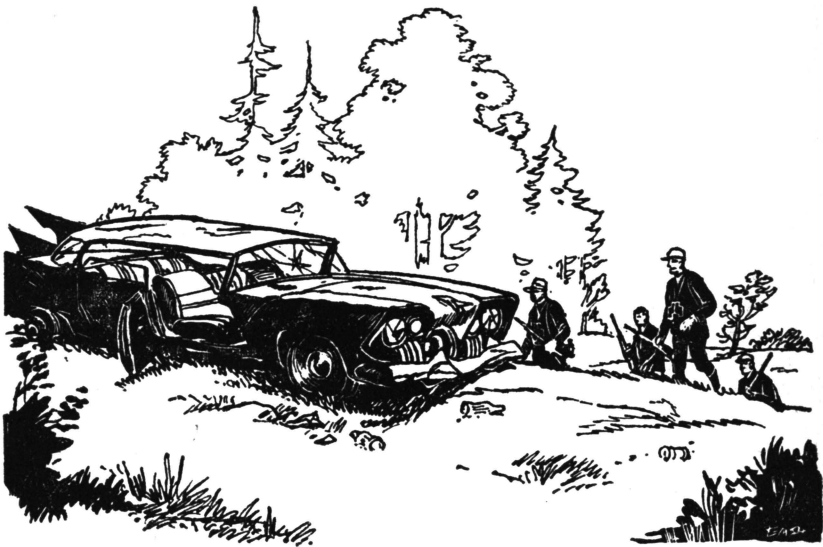
THIS QUIZ is guaranteed to test your knowledge of daily science as well as facts you often read about in science fiction. Count 5 for each correct answer. You should score 65. Over 85 makes you a whiz. Answers on page 119.

1. What have viruses and rickettsias in common?
2. A perfect number is one which is the sum of all the numbers which divide it except itself. Name the first two.
3. What part of a plant acts as a "photobattery"?
4. Which of the body's waste products is reused by the body?
5. What everyday substance can be used to replace quartz as a light polarizing part of a microscope?
6. What have tsunamis and seicheing in common?
7. What three kinds of nuclear reactions are now known?
8. What element is produced by the decaying of potassium 40?
9. How many first magnitude stars can be seen from the northern hemisphere?
10. In walking at ordinary speed, how fast does the moving foot pass the stationary one?
11. Name six of the eight trace elements which play a vital role in the health of the human body.
12. What current in the South Atlantic is similar to the Gulf Stream in the North Atlantic?
13. Energy for photosynthesis in plants is obtained chiefly from which portions of the visible spectrum?
14. Kinetin is the name of the chemical in the human body that causes _____.
15. If you reduced the volume of a sound by adding more sound, what phenomenon of sound would you be using?
16. What are the four kinds of stresses?
17. According to biology, which chromosomes produce males in a fertilized egg?
18. What have the temperatures -273.1 C and -459.6 F in common?
19. How many times could a ray of light circle the equator in one second?
20. In reference to the theory of prime numbers, what is the peculiarity of the number two?



The hunters were necessary, of course—but there was the other side of the picture too.

The first of the morons, as they were popularly called, though they were totally lacking in intelligence, were born in 1971, eleven years after the Mutual Retaliation phase of the big war—that-no-one-started, the majority of them near the big, bombed-out cities. By 1973, with the aid of the electron microscope, the scientists had learned all about it. Parents and offspring were steri-



Illustrated by Ed Emsch

lized and the offspring placed in state institutions. By 1983 there were too many of them. A new solution to the impossible situation was tried, large isolated areas in the south where the climate was mild were made into preserves for them. In the wilds the morons banded into small herds that showed no inclination to roam. By 1985 no more of the morons were being born,

thanks to the sterilization of all parents carrying the contaminated gene. It was thought the problem was permanently solved, through perfect cooperation between science, the government, and the public. If the contamination had not been weeded out of the race one fourth of every generation for all the future would have been without any intelligence whatever.

PRESERVE

But here and there had been natural births, unattended by a doctor; and parental love coupled with fear of being sterilized and thus denied further parenthood had brought into existence a few thousand unsterilized morons, hidden away in attic rooms or in basements. And to these parents the Preserves offered the logical solution too—drive into the nearest Preserve and turn the child loose with its kind. Thus, a new generation came into being in the scattered herds, and by 2010 A.D. a new problem had come into being. Thanks to impurities in the moron strain or to wandering renegades—or both—a few normally intelligent offspring were appearing in the herds. There was danger of these recontaminating the race, if they left the herds, learned to speak, wear clothes . . .

In 2010 the government attempted a mass sterilization of the herds but the herds were too wild by now, and the males too dangerous, so the sterilization program was abandoned and a new plan substituted. The government Hunters came into being, small patrol groups whose job was to pick off the renegades and any members of the herds that were intelligent.

“HI-HI-HI!” Big One shouted, and heaved erect with the front end of It.

“Hi-hi-hi,” Fat One and the dozen others echoed more mildly, lifting wherever they could get a hold on It.

It was lifted and borne forward

in a half crouching trot.

“Hi-hi hi-hi-hihihi,” Elf chanted, running and skipping alongside the panting men and their massive burden.

It was carried forward through the lush grass for perhaps fifty feet.

“Ah-ah-ah,” Big One sighed loudly, slowly letting the front end of It down until it dug into the soft black soil.

“Ahhh,” Fat One and the others sighed, letting go and standing up, stretching aching back muscles, rubbing cramped hands.

“Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah,” Elf sang, running around and in between the resting men. He came too close to Big One and was sent sprawling by a quick, good humored push.

Everyone laughed, Big One laughing the loudest. Then Big One lifted Elf to his feet and patted him on the back affectionately, a broad grin forming a toothy gap at the top of his bushy black beard.

Elf answered the grin with one of his own, and at that moment his ever present yearning to grow up to be the biggest and the strongest like Big One flowed through him with new strength.

Abruptly Big One leaped to the front end of It, shouting “Hi-hi-HI!”

“Hi-hi-hi,” the others echoed, scrambling to their places. Once again It was borne forward for fifty feet—and again and again, across the broad meadowland.

A vast matting of blackberry brambles came into view off to one side. Big One veered his course toward it. The going was uphill now, so the forward surges shortened to

forty feet, then thirty. By the time they reached the blackberries they were wet and glossy with sweat.

It was a healthy patch, loaded with large ripe berries. The men ate hungrily at first, then more leisurely, pointing to one another's stained beards and laughing. As they denuded one area they leaped to It, carried it another ten feet, and started stripping another section, never getting more than a few feet from It.

Elf picked his blackberries with first one then another of the men. When his hunger was satisfied he became mischievous, picking a handful of berries and squashing them against the back or the chest of the nearest man and running away, laughing. It was dangerous sport, he knew, because if one of them caught him he would be tossed into the brambles.

Eventually they all had their fill, and thanks to Elf looked as though they were oozing blackberry juice from every pore. The sun was in its mid-afternoon position. In the distance a line of white-barked trees could be seen—evidence of a stream.

"Hi-hi-hi!" Big One shouted.

The journey toward the trees began. It was mostly downhill, so the forward spurts were often as much as a hundred feet.

Before they could hear the water they could smell it. They grunted their delight at the smell, a rich fish odor betokening plenty of food. Intermingled with this odor was the spicy scent of eucalyptus.

They pushed forward with renewed zeal so that the sweat ran

down their skins, dissolving the berry juices and making rivulets that looked like purple blood.

When less than a hundred yards from the stream, which was still hidden beyond the tall grasses and the trees lining its bank, they heard the sound of voices, high pitched—women's voices. They became uneasy and nervous. Their surges forward shortened to ten feet, their rest periods became longer, they searched worriedly for signs of motion through the trees.

They changed their course to arrive a hundred yards downstream from the source of the women's voices. Soon they reached the edge of the tree belt. It was more difficult to carry It through the scatterings of bushes. Too, they would get part way through the trees and run into trees too close together to get It past them, and have to back out and try another place. It took almost two hours to work through the trees to the bank of the stream.

Only Elf recognized the place they finally broke through as the place they had left more than two days before. In that respect he knew he was different, not only from Big One and other grownups, but also all other Elfs except one, a girl Elf. He had known it as long as he could remember. He had learned it from many little things. For example, he had recognized the place when they reached it. Big One and the others never remembered anything for long. In getting It through the trees they blundered as they always had, and got through by trial

and error with no memory of past blunderings.

Elf was different in another way, too. He could make more sounds than the others. Sometimes he would keep a little It with him until it gave him a feeling of security almost as strong as the big It, then wander off alone with It and play with making sounds. "Bz-bz. Walla-walla-walla-rue-rue-la-lo-hi. Da!" and all kinds of sounds. It excited him to be able to make different sounds and put them together so that they pleased his hearing, but such sounds made the others avoid him and look at him from a safe distance, with worried expressions, so he had learned not to make *different* sounds within earshot of the others.

The women and Elfs were upstream a hundred yards, where they always remained. From the way they were milling around and acting alarmed it was evident to Elf they could no more remember the men having been here a few days before than the men could remember it themselves. It would be two or three days before they slowly lost their fear of one another. It would be the women and their Elfs who would cautiously approach, holding their portable Its clutched for security, until, finally losing all fear, they would join into one big group for a while.

Big One and the others carried It right to the water's edge so they could get into the water without ever being far from It. They shivered and shouted excitedly as they bathed. Fat One screamed with de-

light as he held a squirming fish up for the others to see. He bit into it with strong white teeth, water dripping from his heavy brown beard. Renewed hunger possessed him. He gobbled the fish and began searching for another. He always caught two fish for any other man's one, which was why he was fat.

Elf himself caught a fish. After eating it he lay on the grassy bank looking up at the white billowing clouds in the blue sky. The sun was now near the horizon, half hidden behind a cloud, sending divergent ramps of light downward. The clouds on the western horizon were slowly taking on color until red, orange, and green separated into definite areas. The soft murmur of the stream formed a lazy background to the excited voices of the men. From upstream, faintly, drifted the woman and Elf sounds.

Here, close to the ground, the rich earthy smell was stronger than that of the stream. After a time a slight breeze sprang up, bringing with it other odors, that of distant pines, the pungent eucalyptus, a musky animal scent.

Big One and the others were out of the water, finally. Half asleep, Elf watched them move It up to dry ground. As though that were what the sun had been waiting for, it sank rapidly below the horizon.

The clouds where the sun had been seemed now to blaze for a time with a smoldering redness that cooled to black. The stars came out, one by one.

A multitude of snorings erupted into the night. Elf crept among the

sleeping forms until he found Big One, and settled down for the night, his head against Big One's chest, his right hand resting against the cool smooth metal of It.

ELF AWOKE with the bright morning sun directly in his eyes. Big One was gone, already wading in the stream after fish. Some of the others were with him. A few were still sleeping.

Elf leaped to his feet, paused to stretch elaborately, then splashed into the stream. As soon as he caught a fish he climbed out onto the bank and ate it. Then he turned to his search for a little It. There were many lying around, all exactly alike. He studied several, not touching some, touching and even nudging others. Since they all looked alike it was more a matter of *feel* than any real difference that he looked for. One and only one seemed to be the It. Elf returned his attention to it several times.

Finally he picked it up and carried it over to the big It, and hid it underneath. Big One, with shouts of sheer exuberance, climbed up onto the bank dripping water. He grinned at Elf.

Elf looked in the direction of the women and other Elfs. Some of them were wandering in his direction, each carrying an It of some sort, many of them similar to the one he had chosen.

In sudden alarm at the thought that someone might steal his new It, Elf rescued it from its hiding place. He tried to hide it behind him when any of the men looked

his way. They scorned an individual It and, as men, preferred an It too heavy for one person.

As the day advanced, women and Elfs approached nearer, pretending to be unaware at times that the men were here, at other times openly fleeing back, overcome by panic.

The men never went farther than twenty feet from the big It. But as the women came closer the men grew surly toward one another. By noon two of them were trying to pick a fight with anyone who would stand up to them.

Elf clutched his little It closely and moved cautiously downstream until he was twenty feet from the big It. Tentatively he went another few feet—farther than any of the men dared go from the big It. At first he felt secure, then panic overcame him and he ran back, dropping the little It. He touched the big It until the panic was gone. After a while he went to the little It and picked it up. He walked around, carrying it, until he felt secure with it again. Finally he went downstream again, twenty feet, twenty-five feet, thirty . . . He felt panic finally, but not overwhelmingly. When it became almost unendurable he calmly turned around and walked back.

Confidence came to him. An hour later he went downstream until he was out of sight of the big It and the men. Security seemed to flow warmly from the little It.

Excitement possessed Elf. He ran here and there, clutching It closely so as not to drop it and lose it. He felt *free*.

"Bdlboo," he said aloud, experimentally. He liked the sounds. "Bdlboo-bdlboo-bdlboo." He saw a berry bush ahead and ran to it to munch on the delicious fruit. "Riddle piddle biddle," he said. It sounded nice.

He ran on, and after a time he found a soft grassy spot and stretched out on his back, holding It carelessly in one hand. He looked up and up, at a layer of clouds going in one direction and another layer above it going in another direction.

Suddenly he heard voices.

At first he thought the wind must have changed so that it was carrying the voices of the men to him. He lay there listening. Slowly he realized these voices were different. They were putting sounds together like those he made himself.

A sense of wonder possessed him. How could there be anyone besides himself who could do that?

Unafraid, yet filled with caution, he clutched It closely to his chest and stole in the direction of the sounds.

After going a hundred yards he saw signs of movement through the trees. He dropped to the ground and lay still for a moment, then gained courage to rise cautiously, ready to run. Stooping low, he stole forward until he could see several moving figures. Darting from tree to tree he moved closer to them, listening with greater excitement than he had ever known to the smoothly flowing variety of beautiful sounds they were making.

This was something new, a sort of game they must be playing. One

voice would make a string of sounds then stop, another would make a string of different sounds and stop, a third would take it up. They were good at it, too.

But the closer he got to them the more puzzled he became. They were shaped somewhat like people, they carried Its, they had hands and faces like people. That's as far as the similarity went. Their feet were solid, their arms, legs, and body were not skin at all but strangely colored and unliving in appearance. Their faces were smooth like women's, their hair short like babies', their voices deep like men's.

And the Its they carried were unlike any Elf had ever seen. Not only that, each of them carried more than one.

That was an idea! Elf became so excited he almost forgot to keep hidden. If you had more than one It, then if something happened to one you would still feel secure!

He resisted the urge to return to the stream and search for another little It to give him extra security. If he did that he might never again find these creatures that were so like men and yet so different. So instead, he filed the idea away to use at the earliest opportunity and followed the strange creatures, keeping well hidden from them.

Soon Elf could hear the shouts of the men in the distance. From the behavior of the creatures ahead, they had heard those shouts too. They changed their direction so as to reach the stream a hundred yards or more downstream at about the spot where Elf had left. They

made no voice sounds now that Elf could hear. They clutched their strangely shaped long Its before them tensely as though feeling greater security that way, their heads turning this way and that as they searched for any movement ahead.

They moved purposefully. An overwhelming sense of kinship brought tears to Elf's eyes. These creatures were *his kind*. Their differences from him were physical and therefore superficial, and even if those differences were greater it wouldn't have mattered.

He wanted, suddenly, to run to them. But the thought of it sent fear through him. Also they might run in panic from him if he suddenly revealed himself.

It would have to be a mutual approach, he felt. He was used to seeing them now. In due time he would reveal himself for a brief moment to them. Later he would stay in the open and watch them, making no move to approach until they got used to him being around. It might take days, but eventually, he felt sure, he could join them without causing them to panic.

After all, there had been the time when he absented himself from the men for three whole days and when he returned they had forgotten him, and his sudden appearance in their midst had sent even Big One into spasms of fear. Unable to flee from the security of the big It, and unable to bear his presence among them without being used to him, they had all fallen on the ground in a fit. He had had to retreat and wait until they re-

covered. Then, slowly, he had let them get used to his being in sight before approaching again. It had taken two full days to get to the point where they would accept him once more.

That experience, Elf felt, would be valuable to remember now. He wouldn't want to plunge these creatures into fits or see them scatter and run away.

Also, he was too afraid right now to reveal himself even though every atom of his being called for their companionship.

Suddenly he made another important discovery. Some of the Its these creatures carried had something like pliable vines attached to them so they could be hung about the neck! The thought was so staggering that Elf stopped and examined his It to see if that could be done to it. It was twice as long as his hand and round one way, tapering to a small end that opened to the hollow inside. It was too smooth to hold with a pliable vine unless— He visualized pliable vines woven together to hold It. He wasn't sure how it could be done, but maybe it could.

He set the idea aside for the future and caught up with the creatures again, looking at them with a new emotion, awe. The ideas he got just from watching them were so staggering he was getting dizzy!

Another new thought hit him. He rejected it at once as being too fantastic. It returned. Leaves are thin and pliable and can be wrapped around small objects like pebbles. Could it be that these creatures were really men of some

sort, with bodies like men, covered with something thin like leaves are thin? It was a new and dizzy height in portable securities, and hardly likely. No. He rejected the idea with finality and turned his mind to other things.

He knew now where they could reach the stream. He decided to circle them and get ahead of them. For the next few minutes this occupied his full attention, leaving no room for crazy thoughts.

He reached the stream and hid behind some bushes where he would have a quick line of retreat if necessary. He clutched It tightly and waited. In a few moments he saw the first of the creatures emerge a hundred feet away. The others soon joined the first. Elf stole forward from concealment to concealment until he was only fifteen feet from them. His heart was pounding with a mixture of fear and excitement. His knuckles were white from clutching It.

The creatures were still carrying on their game of making sounds, but now in an amazing new way that made them barely audible. Elf listened to the incredibly varied sounds, enraptured.

"This colony seems to have remained pure."

"You never can tell."

"No, you never can tell. Get out the binoculars and look, Joe."

"Not just yet, Harold. I'm looking to see if I can spot one whose behavior shows intelligence."

Elf ached to imitate some of the beautiful combinations of sounds. He wanted to experiment and see

if he could make the softly muted voices. He had an idea how it might be done, not make a noise in your throat but breathe out and form the sounds with your mouth just like you were uttering them aloud.

One of the creatures fumbled at an It hanging around his neck. The top of it hinged back. He reached in and brought out a gleaming It and held it so that it covered his eyes. He was facing toward the men upstream and stood up slowly.

"See something, Joe?"

Suddenly Elf was afraid. Was this some kind of magic? He had often puzzled over the problem of whether things were there when he didn't look at them. He had experimented, closing his eyes then opening them suddenly to see if things were still there, and they always were; but maybe this was magic to make the men not be there. Elf waited, watching upstream, but Big One and the others did not vanish.

The one called Joe chuckled. "The toy the adult males have would be a museum piece if it were intact. A 1960 Ford, I think. Only one wheel on it, right front."

Elf's attention jerked back. One of the creatures was reaching over his shoulder, lifting on the large It fastened there. The top of the It pulled back. He reached inside, bringing out something that made Elf almost exclaim aloud. It was shaped exactly like the little It Elf was carrying, but it glistened in the sunlight and its interior was filled with a richly brown fluid.

"Anyone else want a coke?"

"This used to be a picnic area," the one called Joe said, not taking his eyes from the binoculars. "I can see a lot of pop bottles lying around in the general area of that wreck of a Ford."

While Elf watched, breathless, the creature reached inside the skin of his hip and brought out a very small It and did something to the small end of the hollow It. Putting the very small It back under the skin of his hip, he put the hollow It to his lips and tilted it. Elf watched the brown liquid drain out. Here was magic. Such an It—the very one he carried—could be filled with water from the stream and carried around to drink any time!

When the It held no more liquid the creature dropped it to the ground. Elf could not take his eyes from it. He wanted it more than he had ever wanted anything. They might forget it. Sometimes the women dropped their Its and forgot them, picking up another one instead, and these creatures had beardless faces like women. Besides, each of them carried so many Its that they would feel just as secure without this one.

So many Its! One of the creatures held a flat white It in one hand and a very slim It shaped like a straight section of a bush stem, pointed at one end, with which he scratched on the white It at times, leaving black designs.

"There're fourteen males," the one called Joe whispered. The other wrote it down.

The way these creatures did

things, Elf decided, was very similar to the way Big One and the other men went at moving the big It. They were very much like men in their actions, these creatures.

"Eighty-five or six females."

"See any signs of intelligent action yet?"

"No. A couple of the males are fighting. Probably going to be a mating free-for-all tomorrow or next day. There's one! Just a minute, I want to make sure. It's a little girl, maybe eight or nine years old. Good forehead. Her eyes definitely lack that large marble-like quality of the sub-moron parent species. She's intelligent all right. She's drawing something in the sand with a stick. Give me your rifle, Bill, it's got a better telescope sight on it than mine, and I don't want her to suffer."

That little It, abandoned on the ground. Elf wanted it. One of the creatures would be sure to pick it up. Elf worried. He would never get it then. If only the creatures would go, or not notice him. If only—

The creature with the thing over his eyes put it back where he had gotten it out of the thing hanging from his shoulder. He had taken one of the long slim things from another of the creatures and placed the thick end against his shoulder, the small end pointed upstream. The others were standing, their backs to Elf, all of them looking upstream. If they would remain that way, maybe he could dart out and get the little It. In another moment they might lose

interest in whatever they were watching.

Elf darted out from his concealment and grabbed the It off the ground, and in the same instant an ear shattering sound erupted from the long slim thing against the creature's shoulder.

"Got her!" the creature said.

Paralyzed with fright, Elf stood motionless. One of the creatures started to turn his way. At the last instant Elf darted back to his place of concealment. His heart was pounding so loudly he felt sure they would hear it.

"You sure, Joe?"

"Right through the head. She never knew what happened."

Elf held the new It close to him, ready to run if he were discovered. He didn't dare look at it yet. It wouldn't notice if he just held it and felt it without looking at it. It was cold at first, colder than the water in the stream. Slowly it warmed. He dared to steal a quick glance at it. It gleamed at him as though possessed of inner life. A new feeling of security grew within him, greater than he had ever known. The other It, the one half filled with dried mud, and deeply scratched from the violent rush of water over it when the stream went over its banks, lay forgotten at his feet.

"Well, that finishes the survey trip for this time."

Elf paid little attention to the voice whispers now, too wrapped up in his new feelings.

"Yes, and quite a haul. Twenty-two colonies—three more than ten

years ago. Fourteen of them uncontaminated, seven with only one or two intelligent offspring to kill, only one colony so contaminated we had to wipe it out altogether. And one renegade."

"The renegades are growing scarcer every time. Another ten or twenty years and they'll be extinct."

"Then there won't be any more intelligent offspring in these colonies."

"Let's get going. It'll be dark in another hour or so."

The creatures were hiding some of their Its under their skin, in their carrying cases. There was a feeling about them of departure. Elf waited until they were on the move, back the way they had come, then he followed at a safe distance.

He debated whether to show himself now or wait. The sun was going down in the sky now. It wouldn't be long until it went down for the night. Should he wait until in the morning to let them get their first glimpse of him?

He smiled to himself. He had plenty of time. Tomorrow and tomorrow. He would never return to Big One and the other men. Men or creatures, he would join with these new and wonderful creatures. They were *his kind*.

He thought of the girl Elf. They were her kind, too. If he could only get her to come with him.

On sudden impulse he decided to try. These creatures were going back the same way they had come. If he ran, and if she came right with him, they could catch up with the creatures before they went so far they would lose them.

He turned back, going carefully until he could no longer see the creatures, then he ran. He headed directly toward the place where the women and Elfs stayed. They would not be so easily alarmed as the men because there were so many of them they couldn't remember one another, and one more or less of the Elfs went unnoticed.

When he reached the clearing he slowed to a walk, looking for her. Ordinarily he didn't have to look much. She would see him and come to him, smiling in recognition of the fact that he was the only one like her.

He became a little angry. Was she hiding? Then he saw her. He went to her. She was on her stomach, motionless as though asleep, but something was different. There was a hole in one side of her head, and on the opposite side it was torn open, red and grayish white, with—He knelt down and touched her. She had the same inert feel to her that others had had who never again moved.

He studied her head curiously. He had never seen anything like this. He shook her. She remained limp. He sighed. He knew what would happen now. It was already happening. The odor was very faint yet, but she would not move again, and day after day the odor would get stronger. No one liked it.

He would have to hurry or he would lose the creatures. He turned and ran, never looking back. Once he started to cry, then stopped in

surprise. Why had he seen crying, he wondered. He hadn't hurt himself.

He caught up with the creatures. They were hurrying now, their long slender Its balanced on one shoulder, the big end resting in the palm of the hand. They no longer moved cautiously. Shortly it was new country. Elf had never been this far from the stream. Big One more or less led the men, and always more or less followed the same route in cross country trips.

The creatures didn't spend hours stumbling along impossible paths. They looked ahead of them and selected a way, and took it. Also they didn't have a heavy It to transport, fifty feet at a time. Elf began to sense they had a destination in mind. Probably the place they lived.

JUST AHEAD WAS a steep bank, higher than a man, running in a long line. The creatures climbed the bank and vanished on the other side. Cautiously Elf followed them, heading toward a large stone with It qualities at the top of the bank from whose concealment he could see where they had gone without being seen. He reached it and cautiously peeked around it. Just below him were the creatures, but what amazed Elf was the sight of the big It.

It was very much like the big It the men had, except that there were differences in shape, and instead of one round thing at one corner, it had one at each corner and rested on them so that it was

held off the ground. It glistened instead of being dull. It had a strange odor that was quite strong.

The creatures were putting some of their Its into it, two of them had actually climbed into it—something neither Elf nor the men had ever dared to do with their own big It.

Elf took his eyes off of it for a moment to marvel at the ground. It seemed made of stone, but such stone as he had never before seen. It was an even width with edges going in straight lines that paralleled the long narrow hill on which he stood, and on the other side was a similar hill, extending as far as the eye could see.

He returned his attention to the creatures and their big It. The creatures had all climbed into it now. Possibly they were settling down for the night, though it was still early for that . . .

No matter. There was plenty of time. Tomorrow and tomorrow. Elf would show himself in the morning, then run away. He would come back again after a while and show himself a little longer, giving them time to get used to him so they wouldn't panic.

They were playing their game of making voice sounds to one another again. It seemed their major preoccupation. Elf thought how much fun it would be to be one of them, making voice sounds to his heart's content.

"I don't see why the government doesn't wipe out the whole lot," one of them was saying. "It's hopeless to keep them alive. Feeble-mindedness is dominant in them. They can't be absorbed into the

race again, and any intelligent offspring they get from mating with a renegade would start a long line of descendents, at least one fourth of whom would be mindless idiots."

"Well," another of them said, "It's one of those things where there is no answer. Wipe them out, and next year it would be all the blond haired people to be wiped out to keep the race of dark haired people pure, or something. Probably in another hundred years nature will take care of the problem by wiping them out for us. Meanwhile we game wardens must make the rounds every two years and weed out any of them we can find that have intelligence." He looked up the embankment but did not notice Elf's head, concealed partially by the grass around the concrete marker. "It's an easy job. Any of them we missed seeing this time, we'll probably get next time. In the six or eight visits we make before the intelligent ones can become adults and mate we always find them."

"What I hate is when they see us, those intelligent ones," a third voice said. "When they walk right up to us and want to be friends with us it's too much like plain murder, except that they can't talk, and only make moronic sounds like 'Bdl-bdl-bdl.' Even so, it gets me when we kill them." The others laughed.

Suddenly Elf heard a new sound from the big It. It was not a voice sound, or if it was it was one that Elf felt he could not possibly match exactly. It was a growling, "RRrr-RRrrRRrr." Suddenly it was re-

placed by still a different sound, a "p-p-p-p-p" going very rapidly. Perhaps it was the way these creatures snored. It was not unpleasant. Elf cocked his head to one side, listening to the sound, smiling. How exciting it would be when he could join with these creatures! He wanted to so much.

The big It began to move. In the first brief second Elf could not believe his senses. How could it move without being carried? But it was moving, and the creatures didn't seem to be aware of it! Or perhaps they were too overcome by fear to leap out!

Already the big It was moving faster than a walk, and was moving faster with every heartbeat. How could they remain unaware of it and not leap to safety?

Belatedly Elf abandoned caution and leaped down the embankment to the flat ribbon of rock, shouting. But already the big It was over a hundred yards away, and moving faster now than birds in flight!

He shouted, but the creatures didn't hear him—or perhaps they were so overcome with fright that

they were frozen. Yes, that must be it.

Elf ran after the big It. If he could only catch up with it he would gladly join the creatures in their fate. Better to die with them than to lose them!

He ran and ran, refusing to believe he could never overtake the big It, even when it disappeared from view, going faster than the wind. He ran and ran until his legs could lift no more.

Blinded by tears, he tripped and sprawled full length on the wide ribbon of stone. His nose bled from hitting the hard surface. His knees were scraped and bleeding. He was unaware of this.

He was aware only that the creatures were gone, to what unimaginable fate he could not guess, but lost to him, perhaps forever.

Sobs welled up within him, spilled out, shaking his small naked body. He cried as he hadn't cried since he was a baby.

And the empty Coca Cola bottle clutched forgotten in his hand glistened with the rays of the setting sun . . .

END

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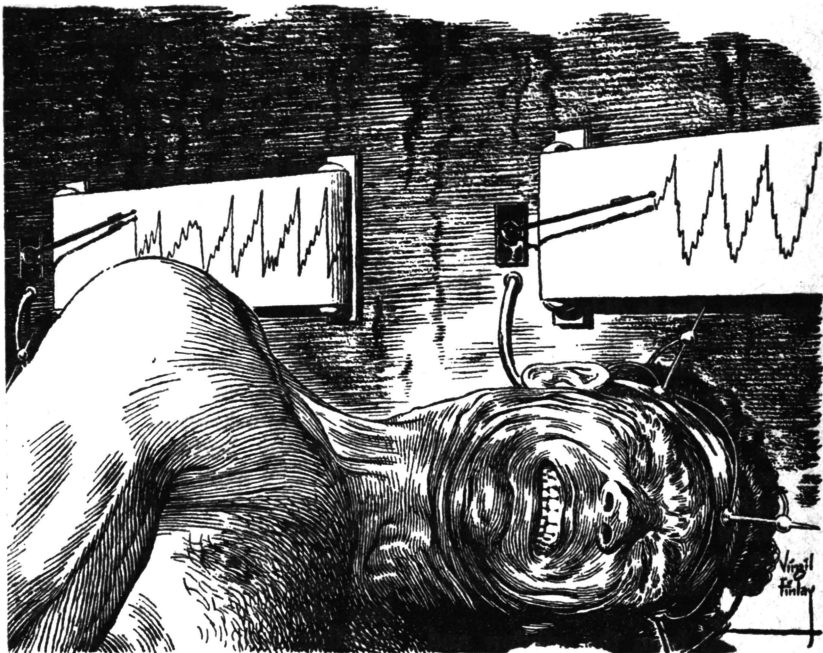
BY BRYCE WALTON



Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

DARK

*Sooner or later it would happen, and after that he wouldn't
ever have to worry again. He'd be dead, or worse,
one of the silent living dead.*



WINDOWS

I WAS SUDDENLY wide awake and listening. A gray light the color of wet charcoal lay over the chilled room. There it was again. Plain and sharp through the thin wall separating my room from that of old man Donnicker, the shoemaker.

Maybe he was sick. No, that wasn't it. Another muted cry of

pain, then a choking sound, and the unmistakable thud of a falling body. An odd whirring sound clicked off. Then a voice said, "Grab the verminous legs of this subversive, Marty. Let's get him in the wagon."

"You gave him too much bip. He looks deader than Einstein."

"I said grab his legs."

A door shut. I went to the window. I was shivering in the morning chill. A black car moved away down the broken pavement. It swerved to miss a large mudhole in the middle of the street and an old woman with burlap wrapped around her feet didn't move fast enough. She flew across the sidewalk like a ragged dummy and lay in a heap.

Goodbye, Donnicker. I had seen the black car before. Donnicker was dead. But it didn't bother me. I never had anything to do with neighbors, anybody I didn't know had a top clearance. I was clear and intended to stay that way.

You just never knew. Donnicker had seemed like a true patriot. My carefully distant and casual observations of him had led me to believe he was as happily stupid as I was. But he had been hiding something.

I turned from the window and started the day's routine that had been the same for as long as I could remember. I warmed up some mush on the gas burner. At seven, as always, the Tevee warmed up, and Miss Info with the lacquered lips smiled at me. ". . . and so don't worry, citizens. The past is dead. The future is assured, and tomorrow will only be another today. And today we are safe and care-free."

Amen. She said it every morning, but it was nice hearing it again. Then the news came on. There was a pile of junked tractors, trucks and harvesting machines, smashed and rusting. Then a line of farmers working with hoes and hand-

guided ploughs drawn by horses.

"Machines took away sacred routine work from citizens. Eggheads built the machines to disrupt and spread the disease of reason. We are now replacing machines at the rate of a million a week. Soon, all of us will again be united in the happy harmonious brotherhood of labor. And when you see a rusting machine, what you are seeing is another captured Egghead, frothing and fuming in its cage . . ."

At a quarter to eight I walked ten blocks to work. There were the usual hectic early morning traffic jams. Wagon-loads of produce and half-starved horses blocking the streets. The same man was beating a nag with a board. A wagon piled with fruit and vegetables was stuck in a pot hole in the pavement. Two men were carrying a spinning wheel into the front of an apartment building. A peddler was selling oil lanterns, wicks and kerosene out of a barrel. The same women and boys in dirty sheepskin jackets were hauling rickshaws.

I really didn't see anyone or speak to anyone. I didn't know anyone. I knew I was safe and had nothing to worry about. Once a week I used up my GI liquor chit at a bar with a Security seal on the window. Twice a week, I slept over at a GI brothel, where every girl had a Security clearance number tattooed on her thigh.

I had nothing to worry about.

I was passed through three gates by guards and went to my little cage inside Pentagon Circle, local headquarters of the Department of

Internal Security.

Until that Tuesday morning I couldn't remember ever having done anything but sort colored cards. My chief qualification for my job: I wasn't color blind. When a green card with figures on it meaning nothing to me came out of a slot in the wall, I pushed it into a green slot that led somewhere into a filing department. When a red card came out, I pushed it into a red slot, and so forth. There were cards of fifteen colors.

Another qualification: my unconscious efficiency. I never had even a hint of an abstract thought. I never remembered yesterday, let alone the day before. And until that Tuesday morning I never made even a tiny mistake.

I had no idea what I was doing. Nor was I at all curious. Curiosity was highly suspect. Curiosity was dangerous in the best of all possible worlds. It was ridiculous in a state where people had never had it so good.

Cards sped from my hands always into correct slots. Care-free hours slipped painlessly by into the dead past. I was sure I was safe and not thinking at all. I was a blessed blank. And then all at once—

"The eyes are the windows of the soul."

The thought meant nothing to me, except it was wrong, it didn't belong in the routine. The routine flew to pieces. My efficiency blew up. I felt like a shiny bottle in a row of bottles with a sudden crack running down the middle. Red cards hit blue slots. Green cards

hit yellow slots. Cards piled up, spilled over the floor. The more I tried to return to my efficiency, the worse everything was.

My suit was wet with sweat. I thought of Mr. Donnicker. If a man's routine broke, it could only be because some inner guilt was disrupting his harmony. A happy person is an efficient person. Inefficiency is the symptom of a guilty conscience.

"Mr. Fredricks," a voice whispered. "You're replaced here."

A cold paralysis gripped me.

"Get up, Fred."

I jumped out of my chair. A thin, stooped little man in a cheap gray suit and dull eyes took my place. In no time at all he had straightened out my mess. Cards were blurs moving into the right slots.

A wide, fattish man in a wrinkled dark suit was watching me out of curiously shining eyes. He carried a black briefcase. I had seen the black briefcases before. Special Police Agent.

He opened the door of my cage and motioned for me to go out ahead of him. "Say goodbye to all this, Fred."

I felt the smile on my wet face as I nodded and tried to feel grateful while at the same time trying to suppress the flood of fear coming up through me and turning to sickness in my throat.

I simply couldn't be afraid. I had nothing to hide. And if I was hiding something inside me I didn't know about, I should feel glad to have it detected and get it all cleaned out.

"My name is John Mesner," he said as we walked down the corridor. I couldn't say anything. I felt like a string someone was beginning to saw on with a rusty knife.

Mesner's office somewhere upstairs was a dingy room with a dusty desk and a couple of chairs. The walls were made of cracked concrete lined with dusty filing cabinets. The window was so soiled I could barely see the shadows of bars through the panes.

Mesner sat down, put his feet on the desk. He took an apple out of his desk drawer and started peeling it slowly with a small penknife.

"You scared, Fred?"

"Of course not."

He smiled, held out a long ribbon of apple peel and dropped it on the floor. "You're scared, Fred."

I put my Personology Card on his desk right in front of him. "I just had a quarterly brain-check a week ago. There it is."

I stopped myself somehow from yelling out wildly as he stabbed the card with his penknife, then tore it in little pieces and dropped them on the floor.

"You've got nothing to be afraid of, Fred. But it'll probably take you a while to realize it." He went on peeling the apple. He had thick hands, stubby fingers, and the nails were dirty. He had a round pale face, a receding chin, thinning hair, and an absurd little red cupid bow mouth.

I tried not to hear the moaning sound that seemed to come from the other side of a door to Mesner's right. He got up, went to the door,

opened it. "Shut that guy up," he said. He shut the door and sat down again. He sliced off a bite of apple and pushed it into his mouth.

"To make it short, Fred. I've investigated you thoroughly. And I can use you here in SPA. You're being transferred."

My throat was constricted. I leaned against the desk. "I don't understand, sir. I don't know anything about Police Work. I'm only a clerk, a card-sorter. I don't have any qualifications. And you can see—my card."

"A couple of field-trips with me, Fred, and you'll be a veteran."

"But why me?"

"You're already in the Security Department for one thing. That makes it convenient. Also, your Intelligence Quotient."

"It's a low eighty," I said. "That's the average. I'm well below normal, and this brain-check showed I was lower this time than the last. So how could my IQ make any difference?"

"Curiosity killed the cat, Fred."

I managed to sit down before I fell down. It was impossible that I should really become an agent in the SP, the most powerful and feared organization in the state. What then was Mesner really up to? One work error shouldn't have snagged me. I'd never been guilty of thinking above a rudimentary and socially acceptable level. My IQ was unquestionably low. I was little more than a moron. So why was I frightened. Why did I feel guilty? Why was Mesner interested?

Mesner stood up and dropped the apple core on the floor.

"We're going on a field-trip now, Fred. Your indoctrination as an SPA man is beginning."

Mesner piloted the heliocar. Mesner said the only heliocars left in operation belonged to SPA. He dropped it on a plot of dried grass on the side of a forested hill in the Tennessee Mountains. Until we got out of the heliocar, I didn't know Mesner had a gun. I couldn't remember having heard of a gun or seen one before, but Mesner told me all about guns. He slid the rifle out of a canvas case, checked it, called it his favorite little field piece. Then he handed me his black briefcase.

He led the way down a narrow path. It was a quiet sunny day. Squirrels ran between the trees. Birds hopped and sang up in the leaves.

In front of a gray, dilapidated shack was a rickety wagon. Two men were lifting a sack out of the rear of the wagon. They wore ragged overalls and no shirts and they were both barefoot.

Mesner yelled. "You. Dirksons! This is a security check."

The shorter one started to run. Mesner shot him in the back of the head. The tall man grabbed up a piece of iron with a hooked end and started yelling as he ran toward us.

"Open the briefcase," Mesner said calmly.

I opened it. Mesner leaned the rifle against a tree. He knelt down, brought a metal disc out of the briefcase attached to a wire. He turned a dial on a bank of controls

inside the case. I heard a whirring hum. The tall hillbilly screamed. He stretched up on his toes, strained his arms and neck at the sky, then fell twitching on his face.

Mesner walked toward the hillbilly and I stumbled after him. I was going to be sick, very sick. The sun worked like pins in my eyeballs.

Mesner drew a round metal cap which he called a stroboscope from the case, fitted it on the hillbilly's head. The metal strip had a disc hanging down in front of the hillbilly's eyes and about two inches away.

Mesner worked the dials and the flicker began blinking off and on, faster and faster, then slower, then faster again as the hillbilly's eyes stared into it unblinkingly. His muscles began to twitch. He beat the ground with his flat hands. Grasshoppers jumped across his face.

Mesner pointed out to me that I was watching an on-the-spot brain-probe. The brain-prober, or bipper, as Mesner called it, was so effective he hardly ever had to use the other items in the case such as the psychopharmaceuticals, drugs, brain shock gadgets, extractors, nerve stretchers and the like.

Mesner sat on his haunches, worked the flicker and lit a cigarette. "These brain-wave flickers correspond to any desired brain-wave rhythm. You play around and you'll get the one you want. They talk. What they don't say comes out later from the recorder. With this bipper you can get anything out of anyone, almost. If you don't

get the info you want it's only because they don't have it. It burns them out considerably in the process, but that's all to the good. They're erased, and won't do any meddling thinking again."

The hillbilly wasn't moving now as the flicker worked on his eyes and activated desired mental responses.

"Dirkson," Mesner said. "What happened to your sister, Elsa?"

"Don't know. She runned away."

"She was blind wasn't she? Wasn't she born blind?"

I felt an icy twist in my stomach.

"That's right. Borned blind as a bat."

"What happened to her?"

"Runned away with some river rat."

"You've hidden her somewhere, Dirkson. Where?"

"I ain't hid her nowhere."

Mesner turned a dial. The hillbilly screamed. His body bent upward. Blood ran out of his mouth. He was chewing his tongue. Mesner stood up and frowned. "Guess he didn't know. If he knew he'd have told us. He's no disguised Egghead. Just a damn collaborating, bottle-headed jerk."

I went over behind some brush and was sick. The hillbilly would never answer any more questions, I knew that much. Now he was laughing and babbling and crawling around on his hands and knees.

"It's rough at first, Fred. No matter how patriotic you are, and how much you hate Eggheads, it's always rough at first. But you should get used to it."

"What—I mean why—?"

"The Dirksons didn't show for their quarterly brain-check. You assume they're hiding something. It turns out they're not, then you haven't lost anything. Of course you have to burn them out a little to question them. But better to burn one innocent bottlehead than let one double-dome slip away." Mesner turned and looked at me. "Isn't that right, Fred?"

"Of course it's right," I said quickly. Mesner smiled at me.

ON THE WAY back to Washington, Mesner piloted the heliocar casually. He leaned back, smoking cigarettes, the ashes streaming down the front of his soiled lapels.

"I think you'll work out fine in SPA, Fred."

I was still sick. I had a throbbing ache in my head and sweat kept stinging in my eyes. I nodded numbed agreement with Mesner.

"I appreciate your trying to make an SPA man out of me," I finally managed to say. "But could you have made some mistake? Gotten the wrong file or something?"

"No. Your IQ is a nice low eighty, Fred. But you're just not aware that you have what is technically known as a quiescent IQ."

"What's that?"

"You're a true patriot, Fred. We both know that. So don't be scared. You know the sick and evil danger of a high IQ and so you've put an unconscious damper on your own intelligence. You're not really so dumb, Fred."

"But I am," I said quickly.

"No, Fred. You think you are, and you look and act normally stupid and believe me, Fred, I admire your patriotic suppression of your intelligence, even from yourself. But a fact is a fact, and you're not so dumb."

"I'm not pretending. I'm not a subversive—"

"Easy now," Mesner said. "You're not a subversive, that's right. A real subversive knows he's smart, is proud of it and consciously tries to hide it from others. But you loathe your own inherent mental ability, and you've been able to freeze its operation, conceal it even from yourself. Now realize this, Fred. The only place we can allow intelligence to operate is inside the Government. The Government must have a slightly superior thinking capacity in order to run things—for the present anyway."

"But any IQ above eighty is subversive. It says in the—"

"That's an ideal, a goal for the future, Fred. When the transition's been made, when the last Egghead is captured and put away, then all of us will be normal. We'll get ourselves bipped, and burn our excessive intelligence down to the eighty mark. But until that time, Fred, some of us—especially the SPA—have to keep our wits about us. An unfortunate necessity that we pray will soon be ended."

I gazed numbly out through the plastic canopy at the white clouds streaming past. He was trying to get some admission out of me, I thought. That was the only explanation. Working some subtle game with me. But that was absurd

on its face, because I was way below normal.

"My IQ's no good for you then," I said. "I just don't see—"

Mesner interrupted with an impatient laugh. "You're a hell of a lot brighter than you let yourself admit that you are, Fred. That's all I'm saying. You know it's a terrible thing to be smart, so you keep it under wraps. But now you know there's nothing to be afraid of. You know it's legal for a while longer to be smart as long as you're in SPA. Now you can start opening up, releasing your mental capacity. Believe me, Fred, it's for the good of the state. I know it sounds like a paradox, but that's how it is."

"How can it be good when it's such an evil thing?"

"Because right now it's a necessary evil. SPA has problems, Fred. There are still a lot of Eggheads running loose, causing trouble. And the doubledomes still loose are the toughest ones to catch, and that's our job. We've got to track down the old maniac physicists, chemists, engineers, professors, psyche-boys and the like who are still working underground. Until they're all caught Fred, we've got to live with our own filthy brains. Because you see it takes brains to catch brains."

"But I have hardly any brains at all," I insisted.

"You'll see, Fred. You'll see."

Before I left his office that evening he gave me an SPA identity card. My name and face were on it. Suddenly it seemed impossibly official. All at once, I was one of

the most feared and powerful men in the State. Only I knew that the only one I really feared was me.

That card supposedly gave me a free hand. It could take me anywhere, even into top-secret departments in Security. With it, I was immune to curfew laws, to all social restrictions and regulations. But when I went for a walk that evening, I knew I was being followed. Wherever I went, eyes watched me constantly. Shadows moved in and out of gray doorways and dissolved around corners.

After nine, after the curfew sirens howled down the emptied streets, I walked fast toward the ancient rooming house in which I thought I had always lived. Hundreds of silent gray women and children came out onto the streets and began cleaning them with brooms. One by one, the gas lights along the rubbled streets went out. I started to run through shadows, and footsteps moved behind me.

A drunken man came out of an alley and staggered down the broken pavement where weeds grew. A black car whisked him away. But no black car stopped for me. I saw no one with a black briefcase either. I saw only shadows, and felt unseen eyes watching me.

The old woman who had been run down by a black car still lay there on the sidewalk. No one dared approach that corpse to get it off the streets. No one knew who it was, or why it was dead. No one would take any chances. One was just as suspect from associating with a guilty corpse as a living neighbor named Donnicker.

Upstairs, I saw a splotch of blood on the hall floor. This time I knew it was Donnicker's. It reminded me of the Dirksons now. And of who could say how many others?

I lay down and took all three of tomorrow's tranquilabs. We were allotted a month's supply of tranquilabs at a time, and we were all compelled by law to take three a day. They knocked out worry and anxiety usually. But now they didn't seem to do me much good. I couldn't seem to go to sleep. This had never happened to me before.

Maybe Mesner was right. Maybe I did have a high IQ but wasn't consciously aware of it. This being true, then I *had* to be in SPA. SPA was the only place a high IQ could be tolerated.

What really bothered me the most, of course, was why I should be worried about anything. If my IQ was useful, I ought to be glad of it. A true patriot should be glad also to have unconscious subversive elements detected. A true patriot would be grateful for whatever treatment could cleanse him. What was the matter with me? Didn't I want to be purified, cleansed? Didn't I want to be bipped a little?

I didn't trust Mesner. I didn't believe he really wanted me to help him track down Eggheads. But so what? If he was trying to find out something about me, I ought to be glad to cooperate.

Only I wasn't.

I had bad dreams. I dreamed of Dirkson babbling and crawling and smiling at me with his bloody mouth. He kept smiling and whispering to me: "I never did know

nothing, and now I'm just all burned out."

I dreamed of old man Donnicker being dragged down the stairs.

Then I dreamed that Mesner came in and looked down at me sleeping. A light bulb came down from the ceiling. It turned bright, then dull, then bright, then dull.

Mesner smiled as he lit a cigarette. "That really bothered you didn't it, Fred. Bipping the Dirkson boy."

"It made me sick."

I wanted to wake up. I tried my best to wake up because I felt that if I didn't wake up now, I never would. I would die in my sleep.

"Let's talk about it, Fred. I'm uneasy about it myself sometimes. I've bipped so many of them, maybe my conscience bothers me. You think it might bother a man's conscience, Fred?"

"What do you mean, conscience?"

"Maybe you think there's something immoral about bipping a man."

"If the State does it, it's right," I said. "If it helps bring about the Era of Normalcy and absolute and permanent stability, then any method is right."

Was that the correct answer? I was beginning to feel confused. Thoughts, words all jumbling up. There was an orthodox thought and an orthodox answer for everything. I'd learned them all. But had I answered this one correctly?

"That's right, Fred. But the old crackpot Egghead moralists used to say that the end doesn't necessarily justify the means. They would

claim that bipping a man was wrong, and that no good results could ever come from it. They would say that a destructive means would always create a destructive end. Violence, they said, could only create more violence. What do you think of that, Fred?"

"That's wrong," I said. "That's confusing, double-dome stuff."

"I know. But we've got to identify with Egghead thinking if we can. No matter how repulsive it is, we've got to understand how they think if we're going to track them down and put them away. Now think hard, Fred. Have you ever heard a man say, 'Better that the whole world should die than that one man's brain should be invaded against his will.'"

"No, no, that's subversive," I screamed.

There was more dream, more questions, more and more confused answers. I woke up in a cold sweat. I found several electronic spyeyes concealed about the room. Just outside my door I saw one of Mesner's cigarette butts. It was yellowed with spittle, twisted and pinched in the way his always were.

I didn't know if all of that night, or only part of it had been a dream. I didn't know if Mesner had actually been questioning me in my sleep or not. The spy-eyes could do that. But I knew Mesner had been outside my door. Probably he had been questioning my dreams.

THAT DAY was worse than the night. Mesner had said to wait until I heard from him, but there

was no word from him that day. I tried more tranquitabs. The hell with tomorrow's supply. They didn't help me. A blinding headache hit me at regular intervals.

What was Mesner using me for? What did he want from me? What was I supposed to know?

The Educational Teevee came on also at regular intervals.

“. . . so if you might think, Citizens, that a machine could do your simple work better, just remember what a terrible thing the machines did to us during the cataclysmic age of reason. As you know, the machines were invented to replace human labor by Eggheads who have always tried to destroy normal, comfortable and simple ways of life. The disease of free-thought was only possible after the machines replaced human beings, gave us the time to develop excessive and self-destructive thinking . . .”

I watched the light outside my window turn a duller gray then black, and after that an edge of white moon slid partly across the pane.

Why should I care what Mesner was trying to get out of me? If it was subversive then I should be glad to get rid of it. If I was clear and clean, then I had nothing to worry about. Why wasn't I simply bipped like Donnicker and Dirkson had been? Why should a true patriot care?

I shivered and stared into the darkness. Something horrible had happened to me. For the first time I realized I was entertaining unpatriotic thoughts. I didn't want to

be bipped. And I knew that when Mesner finished with me, I would be bipped. When he found out whatever I was supposed to know, I'd join Dirkson and the rest of them. It had been all right, going along with the routines, as long as I actually hadn't seen what happened to a man if he didn't.

I didn't want to be erased. Whatever I was, I suddenly wanted to stay me, guilty or not. Maybe this attitude was all that Mesner wanted to be sure of. But I doubted it. Because a simple bipping would have determined that.

I didn't think I could stomach any more of Mesner's field-trips. On the other hand I had to go along. It all seemed to boil down to whether I wanted to get bipped now or later.

“Bipping isn't bad at all,” Mesner had said yesterday. “After you're bipped, you can do routine work like everyone else, never worry again about worrying. That guy who replaced you, for example. He was bipped. He's never made a mistake for 20 years. He never will.”

I closed my eyes. I thought of all the happy bottleheads walking the streets, out on the farms, doing their routine work, happy and care-free as long as they didn't worry. Human vegetables, the erased ones, and the terrified ones who didn't know they were even scared. Cities full of dull-eyed ciphers, and now that I was outside it a little, I could see them with an awful clarity.

And I thought—how many are as dumb as they appear to be?

How many were just too frightened and numbed to think? How many would stay frightened and numb so long that they would never be able to think even if they sometime decided to try?

It was easy enough to assume that too much intelligence was an evil, a virus to be burned out. Was it better to have too little and become like the hillbilly?

Oh, Mesner had set my so-called quiescent IQ going all right. But how far would it go before it had gone far enough for his purpose?

THAT NIGHT I had another bad dream. Only it didn't really seem so bad as it should have been. A blind man was talking to me. Then I dreamed that a blind girl with a seeing-eye dog was looking at me. She was about fifteen, maybe younger, dressed in a plain flowered dress tied in back with a ribbon. She had a soft round face and her eyes were wide and opaque. The girl and dog seemed to come out of a mist and they whispered to me. It was frightening, but important, and I didn't remember what it was.

I woke up shivering. I seemed to smell wet hair, and the window was open. I couldn't remember whether I had shut the window before I went to sleep or not.

Mesner called me early the next morning.

He looked the same in his wrinkled suit with the food stains on the lapels, and peeling an apple.

"Fred, have you ever heard a phrase sounding like '. . . and the

blind shall lead them?'"

I appeared to be trying to think about it, then said I had never heard anything like that.

"You're positive about that?"

"I don't remember it."

"You mean you might have, but you just can't remember it."

"I didn't say that. I doubt if I ever heard such a phrase."

"What about this one, '. . . and the blind shall see again.'"

"No, I said.

"You're sure?"

I looked directly at him and he stopped peeling the apple. "If I'm supposed to have such a damn high quiescent IQ, why not let me in on a few things?"

"What few things?"

"These references to the blind. The Dirksons. Some blind girl named Elsa. What are you trying to find out?"

"I thought maybe you remembered something, that's all. I'm pretty much in the dark myself. All I have are a few clues and theories."

"Clues, theories, about what?"

"Eggheads. Sabotage. What the crackpots could build, they can best destroy. They're blowing up factories, manufacturing and power plants, machines, production."

"That's sabotage? I thought the whole idea in bringing about the Era of Normalcy was to do away with all mechanization. Do everything with the hands, like in the good old days."

"That's an ultimate goal, Fred. Drudges don't think. They're happier. But the transition has to be more gradual. The Eggheads want

to take away all mechanization at once, create chaos and anarchy. They figure that will cause the bottleheads to revolt against the Government. We can't catch the saboteurs. The saboteurs inside a blown-up factory, for example, we never know who they are. We bip every worker, not a sign of a saboteur. So whoever does the dirty work is a mindless tool of the Egghead underground, having no memory of having committed sabotage. Who are the couriers, the ones who make vital contact between the Egghead underground and the saboteurs? The dumb saboteur has to get his highly complex directives from the Eggheads. Who are the couriers?"

"Why ask me?"

"I know this much, Fred. Blind people are used as couriers."

My knees felt weak. I couldn't say anything. All I could think about was my dreams.

"I want to show you something, Fred." Mesner led me through the other door. A bleak concrete cubicle, no windows, a damp walled gray cell. Two naked men lay on slabs. Stroboscopes on their heads. Behind them, styluses recorded brain-wave patterns on moving white strips. One of the men, the one on the left, was blind. His eyes staring up into the flicker were opaque.

"Look at those brain-wave recordings, Fred. They're getting the same stimulus. We can give a thousand bottleheads this stimulus with the flicker, and get identical responses. But not the blind boys. We can't successfully bip a blind

boy. The brain-waves are radically different and we've never figured out a way of codifying them. A blind bastard's never *seen* anything. The seeing eyes are trackers, like radar. But a blind boy takes in reality and records it and keeps it in a different way. We can't get at the code easily. But I'm getting it. I've bipped plenty of blind boys and I'm getting it, Fred. The blind are used for couriers. I know that much. For the simple reason that we can't bip meaningful info out of their scrambled think-tanks."

The naked men on the slabs moaned. One of them opened his mouth and a bloody foam spread over his chin.

"What I'm looking for now is a known courier who is also blind. Then I can bip him, and check the info with the code I've worked out."

He unbuttoned his coat and took a black hand-gun out of a holster strapped beneath his arm. "Meanwhile, Fred, these bottleheads have had it. They're burned out."

I heard the two sharp echoing reports as Mesner shot them in the head. One of them beat his heels on the slab. Mesner pointed the smoking revolver. "Even dead, the blind brain records differently. See there?"

I leaned against the wall. Through a crumbled hole down in the corner of damp concrete, I saw two red eyes and heard the rat squealing.

"Let's go, Fred. We've got some important field-trips on today's schedule. And you still have a lot to learn."

We went to Chicago. We set up some hidden electronic spy-eyes in a big apartment building. They were to be checked later for evidence of someone there who was hiding an IQ of over a hundred.

And that afternoon we ran down a renegade bio-chemist hiding in a tenement. He had disguised himself for a number of years as a plumber. Mesner bipped him, and an official Security heliocar came down from Washington to take him away.

When Mesner finished with the old man he was hopping around like a monkey, making grotesque faces, giggling and yelling. Tevee cameramen were on hand. A reporter was commenting on the capture of another, “. . . insane crackpot who has been living here under an assumed name while plotting and planning and building some diabolical machine with which to blow up the city. Our department of Internal Security excercising its eternal vigilance, captured him in time . . .”

Mesner and I took the heliocar back up into a clear blue sky and headed for Sauk City.

“Do you wonder, Fred, why we just don’t kill them after they’re bipped?”

“What could it matter?”

“It doesn’t to them, but to us it matters. Public likes their scapegoats alive. More satisfying to hate live people. Public likes to see their dragons behind bars, humiliated, treated like crackpots. Makes a bottlehead feel good to see an Egg-head dancing like a monkey. Also prevents martyrs. Living men are

never martyrs.”

“So why are we going to Sauk City?” I asked. I wanted to change the subject.

Mesner had information that an ex-professor from some long-extinct University had been concealing a high IQ after having supposedly purged himself of it years before. He was supposed to have been caught by a brain-probing spy-eye and was reported to have an IQ of over 160.

Mesner talked of such an IQ as though it was a living time-bomb that might go off any minute and blow Sauk City and the entire State to hell. He shot the heliocar along at 500 miles an hour. He held the T-Bar in one hand and lit cigarettes with the other.

“What upset you so much, Fred? I mean that morning when I interrupted you sorting cards?”

I felt a warning click in my head. I remembered it. *The eyes are the windows of the soul.*

Mesner, I thought, couldn’t look into the windows of a blind man. Could I?

It hadn’t been my own thought that had disrupted my idyllic, care-free life sorting cards. Mesner had said it to me.

“Just the unexpected break in the routine,” I said. “You’ve already explained it. My quiescent IQ is just too high to be a successful card-sorter.”

“It wasn’t *what* I said?”

“What did you say? I’ve forgotten.”

“The eyes are the windows of the soul. But I was only quoting, Fred. Some crackpot said that long ago.”

"Why probe me about blind people? I never knew any."

"Ninety percent of a human being's mental activity is underground, like most of an iceberg is under water. How much of your past can you remember, Fred?"

"Very little. The past is dead. Why should I remember it?"

"Because a good intelligence depends on the past. Memory is a part of it. Without a past, you don't have a brain. And we've got to release our brains, Fred, for awhile. Until we can catch saboteurs and Eggheads."

"I guess I've just been a patriot too long," I said.

"Remember attending Drake University ten years ago, Fred?"

"Sure," I said, fast, as though it was unimportant. I was really beginning to sweat. "I can remember if you keep prodding me. Sure, I can. So what? I purged myself. I forgot it. Schools weren't illegal then."

"But we've got to reawaken all those past memories, Fred. Make our brains work better, even if a lot of doubledome stuff comes up. You remember a psyche prof named O'Hara?"

I felt suddenly dizzy, sick. A wavering wheel started turning in my head. I managed to stop it from turning so fast. "I don't remember that at all," I said.

"Then of course you wouldn't remember that he was blind?"

In the darkness behind closed lids I could see patterns of light begin to flicker and threatening whispers dug at a fogging curtain.

"Don't push it, Fred. It'll come.

I'm patient. If I weren't, then by this time I would be bipped myself and safely put away."

He would get it all right, I knew. Sooner or later he would tap it. First I would tap it, then Mesner would tap it. And after that I never would worry again. I'd never worry about remembering or forgetting anything. I wouldn't even be me. A body with a bipped brain would walk around doing routine work, and looking like me. But I'd be dead. I didn't want to die that way. Genuine physical death would be all right. But not that, not that bipping treatment.

Mesner turned quickly and caught me staring at the outline of the handgun under his coat. He smiled. "You want one of these, Fred?"

"Not yet," I said. "I don't remember enough yet. I'm not smart enough yet."

"Tell me when you're ready."

By the time we closed in on the professor in an old deserted house on the outskirts of Sauk City, he had managed to hang himself to a waterpipe in the basement. He wore a pair of ragged pants. He was terribly thin and his hair was white, and his toothless mouth gaped open and his jaws sucked in. I had never seen anyone appear so pitiful and so harmless as that old man hanging there.

We untied the rope and the body fell to the floor. Mesner took a small disc from his case and put it over the dead man's heart, then stood up. "He's too dead. We should have gotten here a few min-

utes earlier.”

He seemed tired as he sat down on a soggy box. His hands were dirty with coal dust and a smudge of it was on his face.

This is it, I thought. Now was as good a time for it as any, because there wasn't any good time for it. He had all the advantage. And the longer it went on, the greater advantage he would have. It was only a question of time anyway, and I couldn't stand waiting.

I lunged at him. I heard the faint whining sound, saw the flash and the glint of the disc coming out of his pocket. A sudden, painless paralysis hit me and I was helpless on my knees looking at Mesner. He just stared at me morosely, tired, irritated a little.

“You should know better, Fred. You're smart.”

“Go to hell,” I said.

He shook his head. “Not now, Fred. Nor you either. It isn't me you want to get, Fred. You just don't want to get bipped. You ought to trust me. I don't want to bip you, now or ever. I mean it. We need brains to catch Eggheads and that's my job. You're valuable. Everybody getting bipped, it isn't easy to get smart people these days.”

“Bip me now then, you bastard. Get it over with.”

“You'd better trust me. I'm being honest. Some of these other orthodox jerks in Security, they wouldn't fool with you. They would bip you sooner than look at you.”

“Why don't you?”

“I've told you, for God's sake. You're a bright guy, and I'm

eager to learn. And I don't want to burn up any important info.”

Then I got it. Then I knew why he was keeping the bipper off me.

I thought about it all the way back to Washington while Mesner fed himself apples. I was supposed to have valuable unconscious info. Mesner wanted it. But the old crackpots were right. The means not only created the ends, but could destroy the ends if the means were bad enough. You probe and pry into a man's brain deep and hard enough and you come up with nothing. Your methods have destroyed the end. You've burned out the truth you're trying to get.

Mesner was trying to get info from me without burning it up.

The bastard was trying to have his bloody cake and eat it. But the insight didn't make my position any easier. He was going to get it some way. His talking and hinting and probing was designed to awaken vital memory in me, get it up into total consciousness where he could get at it with his instruments without the danger of burning it up.

Soon as he got what he wanted he would bip me. I couldn't keep him from getting it because I didn't know what it was. I couldn't keep on suppressing something if I didn't know what it was, and I knew that no one can consciously suppress knowledge in himself in any case.

FOR TWO MORE days I didn't hear from Mesner. I indulged in feverish and ridiculous escape fantasies. There could be no escape

for me. The educational voices from the Tevee drifted in and out.

“. . . the greatest threat to man's happy survival is reason. Man was never intended to go above a certain mental level and become thereby a victim of his own imagination and complex fears. This disease of reason has been carried to its final suicidal limit by Eggheads . . .”

No mention of sabotage. The care-free public must not hear of such disquieting things. All the public heard 24 hours a day was a voice telling them about the evils of reason. The destructiveness of overly-developed brains, and the vicious criminality of Eggheads.

After listening to that long enough, and having all subversive level IQs purged, who could believe otherwise? How many believed otherwise now? Did I? What in hell did Mesner want to dig out of me? Who, what, why was I?

I was still a bottle. But now there were countless cracks appearing in it.

Then Mesner called, said we were going on another field-trip that next afternoon. All right, I said. Someway or other, I knew, I would make this my last trip with Mesner.

He had located a blind man, he said, who he knew had been a courier, a blind man definitely linked up with a recent sabotaging of a motor parts plant somewhere in Illinois.

Mesner looked down on the shanty town from a high bluff above the river. The river rats' shanties were built half in, half out

of the water, some of them on stilts, some of them actually consisting of dilapidated houseboats.

Mesner said river rats were worse rebs even than hillbillies. They drifted up and down the rivers. You staged a raid and they dissolved away into the river like rodents. Many of them skipped quarterly brain-checks, but no one knew how many. Birth and death records weren't kept by river rats.

I walked ahead of Mesner down a winding gravel path into rotting reeds by the river, then we followed another muddy path toward the shanties. Frogs and insects hummed. A path of moonlight moved across the water. A ribby hound dog slunk away from me. A ragged kid looking wilder than the hound, ran across the path and slipped soundlessly into the muddy water.

Mesner pointed out the blind man's shack. Then he looked at me and smiled with that absurd little cupid bow mouth. "This isn't the time either, Fred. If you think we're not covered, you're wrong. You couldn't run fifty feet before they burned you down."

We walked nearer the loosely boarded and sagging shack.

"You take the back, Fred. Just remember, better later than now. And be careful. When these river rats get stirred up, they can cause a hell of a row. The entire goon squad would have to move in and there would be a mass bipping spree."

Mesner crept nearer, then whispered. "No light. You can't even tell if one of them's at home after

dark. Why do they need a light? Go on, watch the back door, Fred. And don't let this one slip by."

I heard the front door crash inward. A man wearing only tattered pants ran out. He was thin and ribby like the dog, and I could see the moonlight shining on the opaque whiteness of his eyes.

He ran directly at me. And I knew I wasn't going to try to stop him. But I didn't know why. Then Mesner came out and fired a small gun, smaller than the one under his coat. It wasn't the same. This was a nerve-gun and it curled the synaptic connections between neurons.

The blind man collapsed and lay like a corpse at my feet. I knelt down and felt of him. Mesner whispered for me to drag the old man inside. I hooked my hands under his shoulders and pulled him into the shack. It didn't matter to me now, nor to the blind man, I thought.

He hardly weighed anything. His eyes were fixed in a white silence as Mesner shone a small flashlight into them. Then Mesner shut both doors and pulled a ragged cloth across the single window.

He opened his case. He put the stroboscope on the blind man's head. The bluish light began to flicker over the staring opaque eyes. I saw the nerve-gun lying on the floor beside Mesner's hand.

"You're too late," I said. "He's dead. I wouldn't have dragged him in here if I hadn't known he was dead."

Mesner was breathing thickly. His fat round face was pale and

shiny with sweat. "I know he's dead. He must have gulped a fast-action poison soon as I came in the door. Maybe even the blind boys are deciding things are getting too hot."

Mesner worked the stroboscope. "But he's dead," I said.

"Brain cells are the last to die," Mesner said. "Maybe I can pick up a little info yet."

It burst out of me then as from an abscess. The bottle cracked into a thousand fragments. I lunged at Mesner. He seemed to roll away from me, and then he squatted there in the flickering light. He leveled the gun at me.

"So you're beginning to wake up, Fred!"

Probing a dead man. Questioning the dead. Even a corpse was sacred no longer. The vile and horrible bastards, all of them.

"I don't care what happens to me," I said.

"That's noble of you."

"I'm going to kill you."

"Why?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Maybe I wouldn't agree, but I'll understand, Fred. I know what you're thinking. What I'm doing now is just too much. Right? The final indignity one human being could inflict on another, right? A human mind should be sacred, even if it's dumb. Even if it's dead. Especially if it's dead. Right, Fred?"

I started around the rickety table toward him.

"Now it's set off, Fred. You're fired up now. That's what I've been waiting for. You were planted to sabotage Security itself, Fred,

and I always knew that. Now we're going to find out all the rest of it. Now it's squeezing out of your unconscious, and we can drain it, empty it all out. They put a lid on your mind, Fred, and I've taken it off. Put on the ethical pressure, put it heavy on your idealistic Egghead morality, steam it up hot, blow the lid off. It's working, Fred."

"Is it?" I said. "I don't remember anything that would do you any good. I just know that it's wrong, the final horrible fraud. It isn't intelligence you guys want to wipe out, Mesner. Not your own, not the big wheels in power. It's only certain kinds of thinking, undesirable thoughts, attitudes you don't like. Those are what you have to purge."

"Right, Fred. Only the wrong kind of Eggheads. Me, hell I'm an Egghead too. Remember the prize pupil in your psych class at Drake University, Fred?" Mesner laughed. "That was me."

"You can kill people," I said. "You can't burn a sense of what's right or wrong out of people. That old dead blind man there has preserved something you can't touch."

"Too bad you won't be around to see how wrong you are, Fred. We can make people whatever we damn well want them to be. Your old ethical pals worked out the methods. We're using it for a different end."

The front door squeaked. I felt a moist draft on my face, and a whisper in my brain. A few words. I don't remember what they were. But they were a key that opened floodgates of self-understanding

and awareness. I remembered a lot then, a lot of things and feelings that warmed me. I had a wonderful sense of wholeness and I was no longer afraid of being bipped, or afraid to die.

There was an expression of complete triumph on Mesner's face, and he knew what had happened to me and he wanted it, all of it, sucked away into his briefcase. Just the same, the whisper from the doorway distracted his attention and I went for him.

In that second of time, I saw the little blind girl who had whispered that triggering phrase for my release, and behind her, the seeing-eye dog. She was utterly unafraid and smiling at me. Courage she was saying. And I could share it with her.

She had sealed her own death in order to make me whole again.

I smashed the flashlight off the table into the wall and my weight drove Mesner onto the floor. I managed to grab his arm and we lay there in the dark straining for the nerve-gun. I began to hear the whir of heliocars. I twisted Mesner's arm up and around and released the nerve-gun's full charge directly into his face. A stammering scream came out of him. It was the scream of something not human. A full charge of that into the brain, it must have curled up the intricate connections and short circuited his brain into an irreparable hash.

I took the blind girl's hand and we ran toward the river. The sky was crossed with search beams. And in the deep darkness by the

river I was suddenly as blind as the girl who held my hand. We kept running and stumbling through the reeds. I felt her hand slip from mine. Then something hit me.

It wasn't a localized impact, but something seemed to have hit me all over and moved through me as though my blood suddenly turned to lead.

I tried to find the girl. I tried to crawl to the river, into the river. And near me I heard the girl say softly, "Goodbye now, Mr. Fredricks. Don't worry, because you'll be brave."

"Thanks," I said. "Little girl, what's your name?"

She didn't answer. I tried to call out to her again in the darkness, but I couldn't move my lips. Paralysis gripped me, and after that blackness, with the lights sometime later beginning to flicker against my tearing eyes, and then the horror.

THE INQUISITION ended sooner than I thought it would. After the awful intrusion, there isn't any farther awareness of time. After you are thoroughly invaded, after your private soul, every naked cell of your brain is peeled open, exposed to the raw glaring light, after that you no longer care. What is you has been obliterated the way a shadow is eaten by the burn of cold light.

Your identity is gone. They take it. You are theirs, all of you belongs to them. You feel them pouring out your mind down to the

pitiful dregs as though they are pouring cups of coffee.

The pain is a shredding, ripping, raveling horror. After that there is no feeling at all, and this is worse.

I told them everything I knew. What I couldn't tell, they tapped, tearing chunks out the way you would rip pages and chapters out of a book.

The responsible humanists, scientists, intellectuals had known what was coming. They prepared for it, and set up the plan before the last days of the Egghead purge. They set up the future saboteurs by a long intricate process of psychodynamic conditioning. They did it in the Universities before the schools were purged. Promising students were selected, worked on.

Fredricks, a psychology student, was subjected to repeated hypnotic experiments. A blind Professor named O'Hara did most of it. It was all there finally in Fredrick's head, but then it was all suppressed and finally Fredricks himself forgot that he knew. A delayed hypnotic response pattern, an analogue, is set up. Later it will be triggered off by a phrase, a word, a series of words repeated at conditioned response intervals.

Ten years later he was working inside, inside Security itself. When circumstances were right, a blind courier was to have triggered off Fredrick's suppressed knowledge allowing him to sabotage the entire Department of Records and Scientific Method. So many scientists and intellectuals had already been purged that few remained among the available personnel of Security

who could have repaired a simple gasoline motor without a step-by-step chart taken from the Department of Records.

It would have been a master coup for the underground.

But Mesner had traced Fredrick's identity back to Drake University, back to O'Hara. He had gotten suspicious, and removed Fredricks from Security.

The blind girl had whispered the key phrase just the same, in order that Fredricks might face the ordeal of the inquisition with as much pride, strength, and courage as possible.

"Only a free man, a man who fully respects himself as an individual and a human being," Fredricks told his inquisitors, "only a man who has learned why he is living, can die like a man."

Then they killed me.

They tried to get more out of me, but what they wanted to know, I knew nothing whatever about. I knew nothing about the underground, or the headquarters of the Eggheads.

But by then I was dead, and what they did was of no importance. I was no longer me. There was no awareness of being me. I had joined Dirkson and the renegade biochemist and all the others.

I was hopping up and down in a cage before the Tevee cameras, and a reporter was talking to millions of smiling, care-free citizens and telling them how another vicious crackpot had been captured just in time to avert some terrible disaster which would have disturbed the status quo.

Then I was taken away.

"Are you awake now, Mr. Fredricks?"

I opened my eyes. I was in a clean white room lying near a barred window. An attractive nurse smiled at me. She was holding a clipboard and making notations on a report pad.

"How do you feel now, Fred?" Painfully, I turned and saw several ghosts standing and sitting on the other side of the bed. I could see a door behind them, partly opened onto a softly lit corridor.

There was Dr. Malden, a famous anthropologist whom I had last seen in a newspaper headline during the purge. And Dr. Marquand, Nobel Prize winner in electrobiology. And Dr. Martinson, one time head of the UN Research Foundation. Dr. Rothberg, social psychologist. All dead, all purged, bipped and confined years ago. All ghosts.

Only they were there. And they were alive, and they seemed glad to see me. All I knew was that I was alive again. I was aware of being me. And somehow I knew that these forgotten names were also alive again.

Rothberg handed me a cigarette and the nurse lit it for me. I remembered that once I had liked cigarettes.

"So what's happened," I said. My voice was weak. My insides felt as though they were filled with grinding pieces of broken razor blades.

"You're in Zany-Ward No. 104," Dr. Rothberg said.

"I don't believe I quite understand," I said carefully.

"You will," Dr. Rothberg said. "Let's just say for a starter that when a man is bipped and brought here, we try to put him back together again. It's a long painful process. Sometimes he's not quite the same, but we've done pretty good work. We rebuild burned-out circuits. We have to know exactly what you were before you were bipped, and we try to duplicate the pattern. Regeneration is slow and rough. You'll be all right."

They shook hands with me and smiled down at me and went out. The pretty nurse gave me a pill and I lay back and thought about it. It was logical enough, and I started to laugh. During the months after that while the slow process of re-learning and regeneration continued, I learned more about the Zany-Wards. Serious as it was, and

as much as there was yet to be done, it was always amusing.

As Eggheads were apprehended and confined, they were rehabilitated, put back together again, in a way you could say fissioned. The Eggheads are the inmates. They run the Zany-Wards which are used also as bases of operation in a continuing attempt to disrupt the Era of Normalcy. Great scientific labs are concealed underground.

When Security inspection committees appear on the scene, we all put on our acts. We dance, make faces, act like monkeys and giggle.

Doctor Rothberg told me yesterday that if our sabotage work doesn't soon cause people to rebel against the Era of Normalcy, it won't be long before we'll be the only sane people left in the world.

END

EDITOR'S REPORT

(Continued from page 3)

kept this mission secret so far, how we got the photos and when the expedition got back. We've also heard from folks who seem to be having some pretty hot arguments about whether or not these are real Kodachromes. We love a good argument ourselves and would like to keep this going, but our conscience compels us to admit that the whole thing is nothing more than a nice piece of imaginative illustrating by Mel Hunter. Mel went even further and furnished "blueprints" for the theoretical ship, on the front cover. Now if someone would care to build one . . .

Last minute notes: Harlan Ellison is now in the army at Fort Benning, Georgia; but has his typewriter along to finish novel commitments. Henry Slesar has just written, directed, produced and photographed a 45-minute movie spoofing the advertising business. His agent has also just sold one of his stories to the Alfred Hitchcock program. Gnome is going to publish a book version of Riley and Clifton's science fiction award winner *They'd Rather Be Right*.

Don't forget to drop us that note about you. The statistics can't pile up too fast—if we must, we can borrow a computer from our neighbor I.B.M.
—ekw

*The tenth son of a tenth son was very sick, but it was written
that he would never die. Of course, it was up to
the Earth doctor to see that he didn't!*

THEY DIDN'T realize they were in trouble until it was too late to stop it. The call from Morua II came in quite innocently, relayed to the ship from HQ in Standard GPP Contract code for crash priority, which meant Top Grade Planetary Emergency, and don't argue about it, fellows, just get there, fast. Red Doctor Sam Jenkins took one look at the flashing blinker and slammed the controls into automatic; gyros hummed, bearings were computed and checked, and the General Practice

R_x

BY ALAN E. NOURSE



Illustrated by Ed Emsh

Patrol ship *Lancet* spun in its tracks, so to speak, and began homing on the call-source like a hound on a fox. The fact that Morua II was a Class VI planet didn't quite register with anybody, just then.

Ten minutes later the Red Doctor reached for the results of the Initial Information Survey on Morua II, and let out a howl of alarm. A single card sat in the slot with a wide black stripe across it.

Jenkins snapped on the intercom. "Wally," he yelled. "Better get up here fast."

"Trouble?" said the squawk-box, sleepily.

"Oh, brother," said Jenkins. "Somebody's cracked the Contract Code or something."

A moment later a tall sleepy man in green undershorts appeared at the control room, rubbing his eyes. "What happened?" he said. "We've changed course."

"Yeah. Ever hear of Morua II?"

Green Doctor Wally Stone frowned and scratched his whiskered chin. "Sounds familiar, but I can't quite tune in. Crash call?" His eye caught the black-striped card. "Class VI planet . . . a plague spot! How can we get a crash-call from *this*?"

"You tell me," said Jenkins.

"Wait a minute. Seems to me there was some sort of nasty business—"

Jenkins nodded heavily. "There sure was. Five successive attempts to establish a Contract with them, and five times we got thrown out bodily. The last time an Earth ship landed there half the crew was summarily shot and the others came home with their ears cut off. Seems the folks on Morua II didn't want a Contract with Hospital Earth. And they're still in the jungle, as far as their medicine goes. Witch doctors and spells." He tossed the Info-card down the chute with a growl. "So now we have an emergency call from them in a Contract code they couldn't possibly know."

The surgeon in the green undershorts chewed his lip. "Looks like somebody in that last crew spilled the beans before they shot him."

"Obviously."

"Well, what are we doing on automatics? We're not *going* there, are we?"

"What else? You know the law. Instantaneous response to any crash-priority call, regardless of circumstances—"

"Law be damned," Stone cried. "File a protest with HQ. Cancel the course bearings and thumb our noses at them!"

"And spend the next twenty years scrubbing test tubes." Jenkins shook his head. "Sorry, it took me too long to get aboard one of these tubs. We don't do that in the General Practice Patrol, remember? I don't know how Morua II got the code, but they got it, and that's all the farther we're supposed to think. We answer the call, and beef about it later. If we still happen to be around later, that is."

It had always been that way. Since the first formal Medical Service Contract had been signed with Deneb III centuries before, Hospital Earth had laboriously built its reputation on that single foundation stone: immediate medical assistance, without question or hesitation, whenever and wherever it was required, on any planet bound by Contract. That was the law, for Hospital Earth could not afford to jeopardize a Contract.

In the early days of galactic exploration, of course, Medical Services was only a minor factor in an expanding commercial network that drew multitudes of planets into social and economic interdependence; but in any growing civiliza-

tion division of labor inevitably occurs. Other planets outstripped Earth in technology, in communications, in transport, and in production techniques—but Earth stood unrivaled in its development of the biological sciences. Wherever an Earth ship landed, the crew was soon rendering Medical Services of one sort or another, whether they had planned it that way or not. On Deneb III the Medical Service Contract was formalized, and Hospital Earth came into being. Into all known corners of the galaxy ships of the General Practice Patrol were dispatched—"Galactic Pill Peddlers" forging a chain of Contracts from Aldebaran to Zarn, accepting calls, diagnosing ills, arranging for proper disposition of whatever medical problems they came across. Serious problems were shuttled back to Hospital Earth without delay; more frequently the GPP crews—doctors of the Red and Green services, representing the ancient Earthly arts of medicine and surgery—were able to handle the problems on the spot and by themselves.

It was a rugged service for a single planet to provide, and it was costly. Many planets studied the terms of Contract and declined, pleasantly but firmly—and were assured nevertheless that GPP ships would answer an emergency call if one was received. There would be a fee, of course, but the call would be answered. And then there were other planets—places such as Morua II . . .

The *Lancet* homed on the dismal grey planet with an escort of eight

ugly fighter ships which had swarmed up like hornets to greet her. They triangled her in, grappled her, and dropped her with a bone-jarring crash into a landing slot on the edge of the city. As Sam Jenkins and Wally Stone picked themselves off the bulkheads, trying to rearrange the scarlet and green uniforms of their respective services, the main entrance lock burst open with a squeal of tortured metal. At least a dozen Moruans poured into the control room—huge bearlike creatures with heavy grey fur ruffing out around their faces like thick hairy dog collars. The one in command strode forward arrogantly, one huge paw leveling a placer-gun with a distinct air of business about it. "Well, you took long enough!" he roared, baring a set of yellow fangs that sent shivers up Jenkins spine. "Fourteen hours! Do you call that speed?"

Jenkins twisted down the volume on his Translator with a grimace. "You're lucky we came at all," he said peevishly. "Where's your Contract? Where did you get the Code?"

"Bother the Contract," the Moruan snarled. "You're supposed to be physicians, eh?" He eyed them up and down as though he disapproved of everything that he saw. "You make sick people well?"

"That's the general idea."

"All right." He poked a hairy finger at a shuttle car perched outside. "In there."

They were herded into the car with three guards in front and three behind. A tunnel gulped them

into darkness as the car careened madly into the city. For an endless period they pitched and churned through blackness—then suddenly emerged into a high, gilded hall with pale sunlight filtering down. From the number of decorated guards, and the scraping and groveling that went on as they were hurried through embattled corridors, it seemed likely they were nearing the seat of government. Finally a pair of steel doors opened to admit them to a long, arched hallway. Their leader, who was called Aguar by his flunkies, halted them with a snarl and walked across to the tall figure guarding the far door. The guard did not seem pleased; he wore a long purple cap with a gold ball on the end which twitched wildly as their whispered conference devolved into growling and snarling. Finally Aguar motioned them to follow, and they entered the far chamber, with Purple-Hat glaring at them malignantly as they passed.

Aguar halted them at the doorway. "His Eminence will see you," he growled.

"Who is His Eminence?" Jenkins asked.

"The Lord High Emperor of All Morua and Creator of the Galaxies," Aguar rumbled. "He is the Tenth Son of a Tenth Son, and it is written that he can never die. When you enter, bow," he added.

The Tenth Son of a Tenth Son couldn't have cared less whether they bowed or not. The room was dark and rank with the smell of sickness. On a pallet in the center lay a huge Moruan, panting and

groaning. He was wrapped like a mummy in bedclothes of scarlet interwoven with gold; on either side of the bed braziers flickered with sickly greenish light.

His Eminence looked up at them from bloodshot eyes and greeted them with a groan of anguish that seemed to roll up from the soles of his feet. "Go away," he moaned, closing his eyes again and rolling over with his back toward them.

The Red Doctor blinked at his companion, then turned to Aguar. "What illness is this?" he whispered.

"He is afflicted with a Pox, as any fool can see. All others it kills—but His Eminence is the Tenth Son of a Tenth Son, and it is written—"

"Yes, yes, I know. He can never die." Sam gave Wally a sour look. "What happens, though, if he just up and does?"

Aguar's paw came down with a clatter on the hilt of his sword. "*He does not die.* We have you here now. You are doctors, you say. Cure him."

They walked to the bedside and lifted back the covers. Jenkins took a limp paw in his hand. He finally found a palpable pulse just below the second elbow joint. It was fast and thready. The creature's skin bagged loosely from his arm.

"Looks like His Eminence can't read," Wally muttered. "He's going fast, Doc."

Jenkins nodded grimly. "What does it look like to you?"

"How should I know? I've never seen a healthy Moruan before, to

say nothing of a sick one. It looks like a pox all right."

"Probably a viremia of some sort." Jenkins went over the great groaning hulk with inquiring fingers.

"If it's a viremia, we're cooked," Stone whispered. "None of the drugs cross over—and we won't have time to culture the stuff and grow any new ones—"

Jenkins turned to Aguar. "How long has this gone on?"

"For days," the Moruan growled. "He can't speak. He grows hot and cannot eat. He moans until the Palace trembles."

"What about your own doctors?"

Aguar spat angrily on the floor. "They are jealous as cats until trouble comes. Then they hide in the caves like chickens. See the green flames? Death flames. They leave him here to die. But now that is all over. We have heard about you wizards from Hospital Earth. You cure all, the stories say. You are very wise, they say. You balance the humors and drive forth the spirits of the Pox like devils." He gave them a terrible grin and tightened his hand on the gold-encrusted sword. "Now we see."

"We can't promise," Jenkins began. "Sometimes we're called too late—but perhaps not in this case," he added hastily when he saw the Moruan's face. "Tenth Son and all that. But you'll have to give us freedom to work."

"What kind of freedom?"

"We'll need supplies and information from our ship. We'll have to consult your physicians. We'll need healthy Moruans to examine—"

"But you will cure him," Aguar said.

Jenkins took a deep breath and gripped his red tunic around his throat tightly. "Sure, sure," he said weakly. "You just watch us."

"BUT WHAT DO you think we're going to do?" the surgeon wailed, back in the control room of the *Lancet*. "Sam, we can't touch him. If he didn't die naturally we'd kill him for sure! We can't go near him without a Bio-survey—look what happened on Baron when they tried it! Half the planetary population wiped out before they realized that the antibiotic was more deadly to the race than the virus was . . ."

"Might not be such a bad idea for Morua," the Red Doctor muttered grimly. "Well, what did you expect me to do—politely refuse? And have our throats slit right on the spot?" He grabbed a pad and began scribbling. "We've got to do *something* just to keep alive for a while."

"Yeah," said Wally. "What, for instance?"

"Well, we've got a little to go on just from looking at them. They're oxygen-breathers, which means they manage internal combustion of carbohydrates, somehow. From the grey skin color I'd guess at a cuprous or stannous heme-protein carrying system. They're carnivores, but god knows what their protein metabolism is like—Let's get going on some of these specimens Aguar has rounded up for us."

They dug in frantically. Under

normal conditions a GPP ship would send in a full crew of technicians to a newly-Contracted planet to make the initial Bio-survey of the indigenous races. Biochemists, physiologists, anatomists, microbiologists, radiologists—survey workers from every Service would examine and study the new clients, take them apart cell by cell to see what made them tick.

Certain basic principles were always the same, a fact which accelerated the program considerably. Humanoid or not, all forms of life had basic qualities in common. Biochemical reactions were biochemical reactions, whether they happened to occur in a wing-creature of Wolf IV or a doctor from Sol III. Anatomy was a broad determinant: a jelly-blob from Deneb I with its fine skein of pulsating nerve fibrils was still just a jelly-blob, and would never rise above the level of amoeboid yes-no response because of its utter lack of organization. But a creature with an organized central nervous system and a functional division of work among organ systems could be categorized, tested, studied, and compared, and the information used in combating native disease. Given no major setbacks, and full cooperation of the natives, the job only took about six months to do—

For the crew of the *Lancet* six hours was seven hours too long. They herded cringing Moruan "volunteers" into the little ship's lab. Jenkins handled external examinations and blood and tissue chemistries; Stone ran the X-ray and pan-endoscopic examinations.

After four grueling hours the Red Doctor groaned and scowled at the growing pile of data. "Okay. It seems that they're vaguely humanoid. And that's about all we can say for sure. I think we're wasting time. What say we tackle the Wizards for a while?"

Aguar's guards urged the tall Moruan with the purple cap into the control room at gunpoint, along with a couple of minor medical potentates. Purple-hat's name was Kiz, and it seemed that he wasn't having any that day.

"Look," said Jenkins intensely. "You've seen this illness before. We haven't. So you can at least get us started. What kind of course does it run?"

Silence.

"All right then, what causes it? Do you know? Bacteria? Virus? Degeneration?"

Silence.

Jenkins' face was pale. "Look, boys—your Boss out there is going to cool before long if something doesn't happen fast—" His eyes narrowed on Kiz. "Of course, that might be right up your alley—how about that? His Eminence bows out, somebody has to bow in, right? Maybe you, huh?"

Kiz began sputtering indignantly; the Red Doctor cut him off. "It adds up," he said heatedly. "You've got the power, you've got your magic and all. Maybe you were the boys that turned thumbs down so violently on the idea of a Hospital Earth Contract, eh? Couldn't risk having outsiders cutting in on your trade." Jenkins rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "But somehow it

seems to me you'd have a whale of a lot more power if you learned how to control this Pox."

Kiz stopped sputtering quite abruptly. He blinked at his confederates for a long moment. Then: "You're an idiot. It can't be done."

"Suppose it could."

"The Spirit of the Pox is too strong. Our most powerful spells make him laugh. He eats our powders and drinks our potions. Even the Iron Circle won't drive him out."

"Won't it, now! Well, we have iron *needles* and potions that eat the bottoms out of their jars. Suppose *they* drive him out?"

The Moruan was visibly shaken. He held a whispered conference with his henchmen. "You'll *show* us these things?" he asked suspiciously.

"I'll make a bargain," said Jenkins. "You give us a Contract, we give you the power—fair enough?"

More whispers. Wally Stone tugged at Sam's sleeve. "What do you think you're doing?" he choked. "These boys will cut your throat quicker than Aguar will—"

"Maybe not," said Sam. "Look, I've got an idea—risky, but it might work if you'll play along. We can't lose much."

The whispers stopped and Kiz nodded to the Red Doctor. "All right, we bargain," he said. "After you show us."

"Now or never." Jenkins threw open the door and nodded to the guards. "I'll be in the sickroom in a very short while. If you're with me, I'll see you there. If not—" He fingered his throat suggestively.

As soon as they had gone Jenkins dived into the storeroom and began throwing flasks and bottles into a black bag. Wally Stone watched him in bewilderment. "You're going to kill him," he moaned. "Prayers, promises, pills and post-mortems. That's the Medical service for you."

Sam grinned. "Maybe you should operate on him. *That* would open their eyes all right."

"No thanks, not me. This is a medical case and it's all yours. What do you want me to do?"

"Stay here and try your damndest to get through to HQ," said Sam grimly. "Tell them to send an armada, because we're liable to need one in the next few hours—"

IF THE TENTH Son of a Tenth Son had looked bad before, three hours had witnessed no improvement. The potentate's skin had turned from grey to a pasty green as he lay panting on the bed. He seemed to have lost strength enough even to groan, and his eyes were glazed.

Outside the royal chambers Jenkins found a group of green-clad mourners, wailing like banshees and tearing out their fur in great grey chunks. They stood about a flaming brazier; as Jenkins entered the sickroom the wails rose ten decibels and took on a howling-dog quality.

Aguar met him at the door. "He's dying," he roared angrily. "Why don't you do something? Every hour he sinks more rapidly, and all you do is poke holes in the healthy

ones! And then you send in *this* bag of bones again—" He glowered at the tall purple-capped figure bending over the bed.

Jenkins looked sharply at Kiz, and the wizard nodded his head slowly. "Try being quiet for a while," Jenkins said to Aguar. "We're going to cure the Boss here." Solemnly he slipped off his scarlet tunic and cap and laid them on a bench, then set his black bag carefully on the floor and threw it open. "First off, get rid of those things." He pointed to the braziers at the bedside. "They're enough to give anybody a headache. And tell those people outside to stop the racket. How can they expect the Spirit of the Pox to come out of His Eminence when they're raising a din like that?"

Aguar's eyes widened for a moment as he hesitated; then he threw open the door and screamed a command. The wailing stopped as though a switch had been thrown. As a couple of cowering guards crept in to remove the braziers, Red Doctor Jenkins drew the wizard aside.

"Tell me what spells you've already used."

Hurriedly, Kiz began enumerating, ticking off items on hairy fingers. As he talked Jenkins dug into the black bag and started assembling a liter flask, tubing and needles.

"First we brewed witches' root for seven hours and poured it over his belly. When the Pox appeared in spite of this we lit three red candles at the foot of the bed and beat His Eminence steadily for one hour

out of four, with new rawhide. When His Eminence protested this, we were certain the Spirit had possessed him, so we beat him one hour out of two—"

Jenkins winced as the accounting of cabalistic clap-trap continued. His Eminence, he reflected, must have had the constitution of an ox. He glanced over at the panting figure on the bed. "But doesn't *anybody* ever recover from this?"

"Oh, yes—if the Spirit that afflicts them is very small. Those are the fortunate ones. They grow hot and sick, but they still can eat and drink—" The wizard broke off to stare at the bottle-and-tube arrangement Jenkins had prepared. "What's that?"

"I told you about the iron needles, didn't I? Hold this a moment." Jenkins handed him the liter flask. "Hold it high." He began searching for a vein on the patient's baggy arm. The Moruan equivalent of blood flowed back greenishly in the tube for an instant as he placed the needle; then the flask began to drip slowly.

Aguar let out a horrified scream and raced from the room; in a moment he was back with a detachment of guards, all armed to the teeth, and three other Moruan physicians with their retinues of apprentices. Sam Jenkins held up his hand for silence. He allowed the first intravenous flask to pour in rapidly; the second he adjusted to a steady drip-drip-drip.

Next he pulled two large bunsen burners and a gas tank from the bag. These he set up at the foot of the bed, adjusting the blue flames

to high spear-tips. On the bedside table he set up a third with a flask above it; into this he poured some water and a few crystals from a dark bottle. In a moment the fluid in the flask was churning and boiling, an ominous purple color.

Kiz watched goggle-eyed.

"Now!" said Jenkins, pulling out a long thin rubber tube. "This should annoy the Spirit of the Pox something fierce." He popped the tube into the patient's mouth. His Eminence rose up with a gasp, choking and fighting, but the tube went down. The Red Doctor ground three white pills into powder, mixed in some water, and poured it down the tube.

Then he stepped back to view the scene, wiping cold perspiration from his forehead. He motioned to Kiz. "You see what I'm doing, of course?" he said loudly enough for Aguar and the guards to hear.

"Oh, yes—yes! Indeed, indeed," said Kiz.

"Fine. Now this is most important." Jenkins searched in the bag until he found a large mortar which he set down on the floor. Squatting behind it, he began tapping it slowly with the pestle, in perfect rhythm with the intravenous drip . . . and waited.

The room was deathly still except for a heavy snuffing sound from His Eminence and the plink-plink of the pestle on the mortar. The flask of purple stuff gurgled quietly. An hour passed, and another. Suddenly Jenkins motioned to Kiz. "His pulse—quickly!"

Kiz scampered gratefully over to the bedside. "A hundred and

eighty," he whispered.

Jenkins' face darkened. He peered at the sick man intently. "It's a bad sign," he said. "The Spirit is furious at the intrusion of an outsider." He motioned toward the mortar. "Can you do this?"

Without breaking the rhythm he transferred the plinking-job to Kiz. He changed the dwindling intravenous bottle. "Call me when the bottle is empty—or if there is any change. Whatever you do, *don't touch anything.*"

With that he tiptoed from the room. Four murderous-looking guards caught Aguar's eye and followed him out, swords bared. Jenkins sank down on a bench in the hall and fell asleep in an instant.

They woke him once, hours later, to change the intravenous solution, and he found Kiz still intently pounding on the mortar. Jenkins administered more of the white powder in water down the tube, and went back to his bench. He had barely fallen asleep again when they were rousing him with frightened voices. "Quickly!" Aguar cried. "There's been a terrible change!"

In the sickroom His Eminence was drenched with sweat, his face glistening in the light of the bunsen burners. He rolled from side to side, groaning hoarsely. "*Faster!*" Jenkins shouted to Kiz at the mortar, and began stripping off the sodden bedclothes. "Blankets, now—plenty of them."

The plink-plink rose to a frantic staccato as Jenkins checked the patient's vital signs, wiped more

sweat from his furry brow. Quite suddenly His Eminence opened bleary eyes, stared about him, let out a monumental groan and buried his head in the blankets. In two minutes he was snoring softly. His face was cool now, his heart-beat slow and regular.

Jenkins snatched the mortar from Kiz, and with a wild flourish smashed it on the stone floor. Then he grabbed the wizard's paw, raising it high. "You've done well!" he cried to the bewildered physician. "It's over now—the Spirit has departed. His Eminence will recover."

THEY ESCORTED him in triumphal procession back to the *Lancet*, where Wally Stone stared in disbelief as Jenkins and Kiz bowed and hugged each other like long-lost brothers at a sad farewell. "I finally got through to somebody at HQ," he said as the Red Doctor climbed aboard. "It'll take them twenty days at least to get help, considering that Morua is not a Contract planet and we're not supposed to be here in the first place, but that's the best they can do . . ."

"Tell them to forget the armada," said Jenkins, grinning. "And anyway, they've got things all wrong back at HQ." He brandished a huge roll of parchment, stricken through with the colors of the seven Medical Services of Hospital Earth. "Take a look, my boy—the juiciest Medical Services Contract that's been written in three centuries—" He tossed the Contract in the dry-

storage locker with a sigh. "Old Kiz just finished his first lesson, and he's still wondering what went on—"

"So am I," said the Green Doctor suspiciously.

"It was simple. We cured His Eminence of the Pox."

"With what? Incantations?"

"Oh, the incantations were for the *doctors*," said Jenkins. "They expected them, obviously, since that was the only level of medicine they could understand. And incidentally, the only level that could possibly get us a Contract. Anyway, I couldn't do very much else, under the circumstances, except for a little supportive therapy. Without a Bio-survey we were hamstrung. But whatever the Pox is, it obviously involves fever, starvation and dehydration. I knew that His Eminence could assimilate carbohydrates, and I took a long gamble that an antipyretic wouldn't hurt him too much—"

Wally Stone's jaw sagged. "So you treated him with sugar-water and aspirin," he said weakly. "And on that you risked our necks."

"Not quite," said the Red Doctor. "You're forgetting that I had one other prescription to use—the oldest, most trustworthy healer-of-all-ills known to medicine, just as potent now as it was a thousand years ago. Without it, Hospital Earth might just as well pack up her little black bag and go home." He smiled into the mirror as he adjusted the scarlet band of the Red Service across his shoulders. "We call it Tincture of Time," he said.

END

This may prove to you that

Television can change your

life more than you think!



THE POORS

BY HARRY LORAYNE

THE WORLD newspapers had heralded the event for months. "The First Personal Visit from Outer Space" was the most important headline of the decade. Now there were perhaps sixty thousand people crowding behind

Illustrated by Paul Orban

ropes and guards at the Earth Interspace Airport, waiting patiently for Mr. Kramvit of Planet Six.

Fourth Vice President Vincent J. Carrowick had been selected to be Mr. Kramvit's guide for the length of his visit. He was waiting now, with Secretary Gordon, in the airport's executive office.

Carrowick spoke first, "Well, this is it. I've spoken to Kramvit at least eight times on the Vidcope phone, but I'm as nervous as a contestant right now."

Gordon eyed the screen which was noting the ship's approach. "I don't see why you should be. You know what he's like basically. Their bodies and physical capabilities are the same as ours, and most of the people of Six speak English almost as well as we do, by now."

He looked at Carrowick, "Are their Vidcopes going to stay on Kramvit during his entire visit?"

Carrowick spoke slowly, "Yes. At least they're going to try; on all six of the Planets. Kramvit's going to carry a pin microphone on his person all the time. So they should see and hear us no matter where we are."

"How long do you intend to be out of the country with him?" asked Gordon.

"Well, most of his time will be spent here, visiting all fifty-three states. We'll take one cruise to pay token visits to the heads of all countries first, then back here until he goes home. Hey! He's landing, let's go!"

. . . After over an hour of welcoming speeches, photographs and newspaper reporters, Marryl Kram-

vit was alone in the executive office with Vice President Carrowick and Secretary Gordon.

"If we didn't know you were from Six, we would certainly take you for an Earthman," Carrowick was saying, "Why, your clothes, your coloring, everything about you is just the same!"

Kramvit smiled and said, "Well, thank you. Physically, of course, we are the same. The clothes—well, ours are quite a bit different, as you know. I had these made by a superb tailor who copied them from our Vidcope screens.

"Many of our females," Kramvit continued, "have already started to wear some of your ladies' styles, and quite becoming they are."

Carrowick put on his cloak, and said, "Well, let's be on our way. You're to meet our President for lunch, and then we start our tour, if that's all right with you."

"Why, of course, that's why I'm here, and I'm anxious to see your world. Particularly America."

The trip around the world had gone as smoothly as could be expected. Were it not for the multitudes that gathered at each airport in order to catch a glimpse of Kramvit, it would have been just perfect. Kramvit, however, was as cordial to the throngs as he was to the heads of their respective countries. He was a fine good will ambassador. A little flicker of disappointment was usually evident when the people saw for themselves that this man from another world looked and acted just as they did.

All in all, Carrowick was quite

pleased, and he and Kramvit were now in the Vincent and Marryl stage, except in public.

"Well, you've been in most of the countries of the Earth," said Carrowick, as they relaxed in the private plane, "and visited forty of our States of America. What do you think, Marryl?"

"I'm pleased, of course," answered Kramvit. "You're aware, I'm sure, Vincent, that Six and the other five planets of the Orb are a bit farther advanced than Earth. But, I don't think it will be very long before you're up to us.

"I've been able to understand almost everything I've seen," he continued, "and I've made notes of what I couldn't understand; *one thing*, Vincent, you haven't explained to me at all."

"What's that?"

"Well, so far as I can see, there are only two economic classes here on Earth. I've seen what appear to me to be only very wealthy people and very, very poor people. I've also noticed," here Kramvit smiled, "that you have sort of avoided these poor people, and what I assume to be their dwellings. I've seen glimpses of the squalor and terribly poor sections in each of your states so far."

Carrowick seemed a bit shocked, but Kramvit continued. "Also, you have addressed almost all of the working people with whom we've been in contact as Poor Mr. Jones and Poor Miss Smith, and so on. While those of the wealthy class, you simply addressed as Mr. or Mrs. Why?"

Carrowick *was* shocked. "Didn't

you know? No, I see you really didn't. I'm terribly sorry, Marryl, we here on Earth take it so much for granted, and I assumed it was the same all over the Orb."

"No, I don't know what you mean," said Kramvit, "on Six and the others, we have our quota of poor people. We also have a middle class, (in which I think I would belong) and some very wealthy people. But the definite dividing line here, I don't understand.

"I know some of your ancient history, but I've noticed complete integration wherever I've been. I've seen absolutely no discrimination as far as color, faith or religion is concerned. I saw no caste system at all, even in India, and inter-marriage, it seems, has become completely acceptable."

"That is so," interrupted Carrowick. "We've had no such prejudice at all as long as I've been alive. It has avoided a lot of trouble. Nobody has been able to think up a reason for a war, since."

"Then why," asked Kramvit, "have I seen these Pooors, as you call them, sitting only in the rear of busses? Why have I not seen one of these unfortunate looking people in any of the restaurants in which we've eaten, or for that matter, in most any public place?"

"The reason for them not being in any of the restaurants is simple. They can't afford the prices. Haven't you noticed all the Vid-cope, or V.C. centers here?"

"Yes, I have."

"You've seen some of the V.C. shows, haven't you?"

"I didn't pay much attention to

them," answered Kramvit. "I'm not much for V.C. Incidentally, we call it T.V., for television, at home. Many of our people have become quite addicted to it in the last few years. I can take it or leave it alone. Usually the latter, I'm afraid."

Carrowick asked, "Aren't all your shows Qua shows?"

"I'm sorry, what is a Qua show?"

"You're jesting, of course," laughed Carrowick. "They were once called Quiz shows. Now, they're Quas, for question and answer, I guess."

"Oh, yes," said Kramvit, "we do have many of those."

"Why, that's *all* we have here, on commercial V.C." exclaimed Carrowick. "And, there's the obvious answer to your original question!"

"The answer? I'm sorry, I don't see what you mean."

"It's simple," said Carrowick. "The Poores are people who have never been a contestant on a Qua show! The wealthy are those who either have been winners, or whose ancestors were."

It was Kramvit's turn to be shocked. "I don't believe it."

"Oh, yes, it's true," said Carrowick. "Of course, some of the Poores *have* been contestants, but didn't win."

Kramvit was staring at Carrowick. "You are quite serious, aren't you?"

"Of course," answered Carrowick, "the situation has been so, for perhaps two hundred years—we've come to take it for what it is."

"I'll wager that the Poores don't

take it quite as calmly as you do. Don't tell me that they're satisfied with their position."

"I wouldn't say they were satisfied," was the answer, "but they know no other way of life, and don't have much choice in the matter."

Kramvit was finding it difficult to picture the situation. "Well, as I've told you," he said, "we have T.V. on Six, but we've been stressing variety and drama shows. Don't you have any big V.C. stars, like comedians or singers here?"

"No, we don't. I've never seen any variety or drama shows on V.C."

"I'm surprised. You see, we have been using all the air time, or most of it, for entertainment purposes. Commercially, T.V. is just a baby with us. We've been using it much longer than you have, technically, but not commercially. I'd say that we've had sponsored shows for about fourteen years."

"Oh, then it is a comparatively new thing with you," said Carrowick. "We've had commercial Vidcope for over five hundred years."

Kramvit shook his head. "I still can't see why your Poores have to live in such poverty. Don't they get paid on their jobs?"

"Why, sure they do," answered Carrowick, "but their rate of pay is not particularly high. You see, only the Poores do all the menial and service work; aside from high service positions like government work, of course. There are so many Poores and so few jobs for them, that those that work are little better off than those that don't."

"I see," said Kramvit, "and is there no protection for these unemployed? I mean Social Security or unemployment insurance, which I know you did have a long time ago."

"No, there isn't. We had to stop that because if we kept it up we'd have no workers at all." replied Carrowick. "Believe me, Marryl, I don't particularly like the situation. We've tried integration in one or two sections, but only riots resulted. I think that eventually we'll eliminate some of the prejudices, but it can't be pushed or hurried. It'll take many years to do it. I'm sure I won't live to see it gone completely."

"And," asked Kramvit, "have you been a winner on a Qua show?"

"Oh, no. I'm not one of those nouveau riche; my great grandfather won eight million dollars, tax free, when he was just a boy. That took care of us, and will take care of us from here on in."

"I see," said Kramvit. "Vincent, I want to visit some of these people in their homes. Will you take me?"

Carrowick was shocked again. "I don't think you'll enjoy it, Marryl. Do you really feel it's necessary?"

"Please don't refuse me, Vincent. I do feel it's important. I've understood almost everything I've seen here on Earth. Either because we've been faced with it ourselves on Six, or I've read about it. But this is entirely new to me."

"All right" - agreed Carrowick reluctantly. "I'm supposed to show you anything you want to see, but you won't like it."

"Let me be the judge of that."

THEY HAD RIDDEN to the end of the upper level moving street in comfortable armchairs. All of Carrowick's arguments couldn't swerve Kramvit from his idea of visiting some Poores. Kramvit was just about through with his explanation of how all the automobiles on Six drove underground, and didn't have to use the lower street level, as they did here; when they came to the end of the moving street.

Now they were both walking through the filthy, garbage laden streets of the Poores' village. The smell wrinkled Carrowick's nose, and he was not displeased to see that Kramvit wasn't quite enjoying it, either.

"Doesn't the sanitation department know about this?" asked Kramvit. "Don't they ever remove this dirt?"

"No," answered Carrowick, "the Poores have to carry it to appointed garbage dumps themselves. They let it pile up until even they can't stand it, then they usually get rid of some of it."

He went on to explain that in all the cities, except in Poor villages, all garbage receptacles led to giant underground incinerators. Here the fires burned continually. But in the hot weather, the heat from these fires was used as power to run an underground air conditioner, so that all the streets were cooled. In the wintertime, of course, these same fires warmed the cities and highways.

As they walked, they were both aware of the many Poores scrounging and searching in the debris. They

were also aware of the silence that fell as they neared groups of people. The Poores just stared at them, and talked excitedly when they were out of earshot.

"They're not used to seeing any of us in their villages," remarked Carrowick.

Kramvit smiled, somewhat bitterly, it seemed to Carrowick, "No, I shouldn't think they would be."

As they rounded a corner, Kramvit pointed to a car parked about a hundred feet away. It was almost leaning against a broken down shack, and was so dirty that it was impossible to make out its color.

"How did that get here, Vincent? Surely, nobody here can afford a car."

Carrowick laughed, "No, they can't. That happens to be this year's Sputzmobile, one of our most expensive cars. Although you wouldn't know it from the looks of that one. They are given as consolation prizes to losers on almost all the larger Qua shows."

"I see. Why don't those people sell the cars? It seems to me they could use the money."

"I guess they could," answered Carrowick. "But to whom could they sell it? Very few of us ever buy a second hand car. We all change our cars as soon as the new ones appear. Anyway, most of the losers want to keep them; they consider it a mark of distinction."

He frowned, and continued, "They drive them around the villages whenever they can beg, borrow or steal some regular grade atomic pellets. And, whenever they can maneuver through these streets.

Those that own them sort of look down their noses at the other Poores. They consider themselves aristocrats of their village, because they, at least, have been called to appear on a Qua. Actually, they're to be pitied, they're worse off than the others."

"Why is that?" asked Kramvit.

"Well, once they've appeared on a Qua show, and lost, they'll usually never be asked again. That's the worst of it, since they have nothing more to look forward to. Also, I believe that most of the Poores leave whatever jobs they may have, as soon as they get the call. They feel it's beneath their dignity somehow. No Poor that gets on a Qua ever expects to lose. Of course, once they do lose, they can't get their jobs back. Because when they leave it's like creating a vacuum—all the Poores in the vicinity flock to apply for his position."

They were just adjacent to one of the Poores' houses at the moment, and Kramvit asked if he could visit the people that lived there. Carrowick said he could, but he doubted if they'd find anyone home. It was after four o'clock, and the large network Quas had already begun. All the Poores that could navigate would be at the large open air V.C. centers, which were usually located near the garbage dumps.

These centers were sometimes miles away from many of the Poores, but that's where they were, no matter what the weather, from four in the afternoon to eleven at night, when the Quas finished and the news flashes began.

These centers consisted of a large

empty lot, many of which got the overflow from the adjacent garbage dumps, with two scopes seemingly suspended about six feet off the ground in the middle. They were rectangular; about five feet long, and four feet wide. Only a little over an inch thick, the pictures appeared on both sides of each scope. They were at right angles to each other, so that the picture could be seen from any part of the lot.

Carrowick knocked on the old wooden door. There was no answer, and they were about to turn away, when the door opened creakily to display an elderly man. He was clean, except for the dirty rags that were tied around his throat.

Carrowick explained who they were, and the elderly gentleman invited them in.

"Come in, come in. I'm honored by your visit," he said in a hoarse voice. "Well, now I'm almost glad that I have this bad throat, otherwise I would be at the center, and I'd have missed your visit. By the way, my name is Poor Mr. Alex Smith."

The shack consisted of two rooms, one of which was obviously a bedroom. Obviously, because there were a number of flattish mounds of rags, straw and excelsior on the floor, which could serve no other purpose than for sleeping. It was completely devoid of any furniture. The room they were in was the combination living-room, dining room and kitchen. A few old chairs, some crates and a wobbly card table on a bare floor just about filled the room.

Carrowick and Kramvit intro-

duced themselves, and Kramvit started to ask Poor Mr. Smith questions. These were all answered eagerly, and Kramvit was almost convinced that the Poores didn't mind their situation too much; they were all quite used to it.

Poor Mr. Smith asked some questions of Kramvit too, and was answered good naturedly. He showed particular interest in the pin microphone Kramvit wore, and seemed awed when he was told that he was probably being seen and heard by people on Six at this very moment.

While Carrowick showed signs of impatience over the length of the visit, Kramvit asked Smith, "Tell me, my friend, wouldn't you like to see some entertainment on V.C.? Comedians or singers, or dancers, perhaps?"

Poor Mr. Smith laughed, "Why no. Comedians and singers? Who wants to see them when we can watch some lucky souls winning anywhere from one to sixty-four million dollars, or more. I remember about forty years ago, Mr. Krackel, our largest food pill manufacturer at that time, tried something like that."

"Oh, did he?"

"Yes. He had the biggest two hour Qua show on the scopes. His daughter liked to sing, and she talked him into devoting the first fifteen minutes to singing. Well," Smith laughed, "that was the last time he tried that. I read that the ratings for the show that evening went down to zero. The studio was swamped with angry letters. Everyone wanted to know why

fifteen minutes of a good Qua show was wasted with such nonsense."

Kramvit smiled and said, "Yes, I can understand that. Tell me, Poor Mr. Smith, what would you do if you won on a Qua?"

"I'd try to help my people, of course. Perhaps like Legislator Brown. He's an ex-Poor, you know, but he worked himself up the hard way. Won a Qua, then studied and studied, and finally made the Legislature. He's the one that passed the law to give us our V.C. centers. He's a great man."

"That's a worthy ambition," said Kramvit.

"Do you people on Six have Qua shows, too?" asked Poor Mr. Smith.

"Yes. But not as many as you do."

"And do you have Poores like me on your planet?"

Kramvit said that they didn't, and went on to explain a little of the situation of Six and the other five planets.

Poor Mr. Smith was amazed. He couldn't believe that there was any place that didn't have Poores.

"Well, don't let it happen, then," he said. "Don't do it. Don't let those Qua shows take over." His voice seemed to be getting stronger, or was it just louder, now.

He leaned closer to Kramvit, his head only a foot away from the pin microphone, and almost shouted, "Do you hear me? Don't let it happen to you." He was near to sobbing now. "Be smart, stay happy—stop those Quas. They'll only . . ."

Carrowick practically pulled Kramvit out the door, and started

to hurry away.

"Well," said Kramvit, "you told me that they didn't mind their situation too much; Poor Mr. Smith almost had me believing the same thing, but he sure didn't convince me."

"He's just a sick, old man," was Carrowick's answer.

KRAMVIT HAD insisted on visiting another Poor village the next day. Earlier, this time, so that they'd find most of the people home. After five or six visits, Kramvit was persuaded to leave by Carrowick, who reminded him that he was to appear on Earth's largest Qua show himself that very evening. Kramvit didn't want to appear, but Carrowick convinced him that all preparations had been made. This was Earth's way of honoring him, and he simply mustn't and couldn't refuse. Also, his own people would be watching for him on the show. Kramvit had to agree to do it.

When they had arrived at the studio, Kramvit was amazed at the hustle and bustle that went on around them. The usual investigations, interviews and testing that contestants went through were eliminated for Kramvit, since he was an honored guest.

Air time approached rapidly, and Kramvit couldn't help feeling a bit apprehensive. He wasn't used to appearing before multitudes of this size, and it all made him feel uncomfortable. Carrowick assured him that there was nothing to fear; this was simply a good will ap-

pearance. The questions he would have to answer would all be in the science category, and he should have no trouble with them.

Finally, Kramvit found himself standing in the wings of the vast stage. The previous contestant was just answering his last ten part question. He answered all the parts correctly, and left the stage to loud applause. Now the Master of Ceremonies asked who was to be the next guest. A booming voice whose body was nowhere to be seen, went through a flowery introduction of Marryl Kramvit. Two beautiful young ladies, dressed in almost nothing, appeared on each side of him. As the voice finished the introduction, the girls all but dragged him into camera range.

Kramvit jumped with fright as eight young men, each over six feet tall, heralded his entrance with long, loud trumpets. He shook hands with the Master of Ceremonies, chatted for a while, and finally was told to get ready for his questions.

The first group of queries pertained to his particular field, and he answered them correctly and easily. It took about ten minutes to arrive at the \$10,000 question. Kramvit knew that if and when he reached a million dollars, he would be asked to come back in a week, which of course he couldn't do, to tell if he would go for two million or keep the one he had. He made a mental note to ask Carrowick as to the fate of those who stopped at one or two million. He wondered if they were looked down upon too.

Right now, the M.C. was telling him that he would have to enter the sound proof booth for the \$10,000 question. The booth appeared from nowhere, and he was escorted into it by the two lovely, almost nude, young ladies, who didn't seem to hear the trumpet blasts from the eight young men.

When the door of the booth clicked shut, the booth moved out and over the studio audience, and finally came to a stop in mid-air. There were no wires or cables to be seen attached to the booth, but this didn't bother Kramvit, since he knew the principles involved. He did feel quite ridiculous, hanging suspended, with hundreds of faces upturned to watch him.

It seemed to him that they must be awfully uncomfortable with their necks craned like that. But he knew that the producers of the show were only interested in the effect on the home viewers.

Kramvit lost count of the questions he answered, but he was now being told that he was going for \$500,000. A half million dollars! That was the largest amount of money given away on the biggest quiz show on Six; here it was just the beginning.

The question consisted of sixteen parts, and he answered them without interruption until the fourteenth part. After he gave his answer to this one, the M.C. asked him to repeat it. He did, hesitantly, and saw the M.C. look nervously towards the control booth.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kramvit, that's not the correct answer."

(Continued on page 120)



Illustrated by Paul Orban

puppet government

BY GEORGE REVELLE

BRANDON WAS looking at his desk again. An artificial grin spread across the narrow face of the Secretary of Interior who was watching him closely. The Secretary's pencil-thin fingers continued to toy with the small,

Year after year they came back, despite his

constant refusals. And still Brandon couldn't

figure out why he was so important . . .

wood figure he was holding. "Brandon," he tried to lie gracefully, "You're a card. A real card."

Brandon shifted his position, brought his attention back to the thin man with the receding hairline. He couldn't, for the life of of him, remember anything humorous he had said or done. He was too tired to be jovial. The past few days had sapped his strength. He was exhausted and there were still two more interviews scheduled.

Good Lord, he thought. Two more! He found his eyes wandering back to his desk. He would never finish the papers in time. That would mean a severe penalty.

"Come now, Brandon. Admit it. You *know* you want to work for us in Interior."

"Right now I don't know anything," Brandon said wearily. "My head is tired and clouded. I can't think straight." He rubbed his hand across his forehead, wondering how much longer he would be able to continue to say no to their requests. He had almost found himself agreeing with the thin man a few moments ago. That wasn't good.

Brandon leaned back in the contour chair and let some of the

strength seep back into his outstretched legs. Each year at this time they would begin to wander in with their strange, outlandish offers of positions with the government. It was perplexing.

"Why me?" he asked suddenly. "Why in Interior? I know nothing about such work?"

The thin man leaned forward, "Because you are a good man, Brandon. And we need good men these days. Government is big business and we want the top positions filled with the best men we can get. Besides," the Secretary laughed softly, "you're wasting your time playing with dolls."

"They aren't dolls!" Brandon said indignantly.

"So they aren't dolls."

"There is a difference," Brandon insisted. "You make is sound as if I'm in my second childhood."

"All right. Puppets!" The thin man shifted in his chair. He ran his lean fingers over the hand-painted figure he was holding in one hand. "But you can see my point."

Brandon shook his head. That was it. He couldn't see the point. His puppets were becoming world

famous, the result of reviving the almost lost art of hand carving. He was earning a fair living at it. He could see no reason for a change.

"Think of the prestige if you come with us. You will be heading a department of your own," the Secretary said.

Brandon wrinkled his brow, thinking of how his name was already associated with his puppets. If only they would leave him alone, if only there wasn't so much paper work waiting for him on his desk, he would be able to spread out, expand, really have a going business. But they had to keep pestering him with worthless offers that they knew he couldn't handle, wasting his time, especially now when time was of the essence. The paper work on his desk had to be completed by midnight. He would never finish it now.

Brandon felt the beginning of a headache. Because of the paper work he hadn't had time to touch a new puppet in months. Now these damn interviews were keeping him from the desk work. It was a vicious circle leading to ruin.

"You will be serving your Country, Brandon," the Secretary said strongly. "Not fiddling with dolls."

"I told you . . ."

The Secretary held up his hand. "I know. Puppets."

Brandon got up and walked to the window and looked out at the setting sun. It was hard to define; there were some things words couldn't explain. All the offers had been good ones. But a man had to have some rule, some yardstick to

guide him. Brandon had his. He wanted to be useful, that wasn't too much to ask. Life was too short to waste laboring in a position he wasn't fitted for. If he took Interior's offer all that would be ended. He would be caught in a web which allowed no escape.

Brandon turned. "I'm afraid, Mr. Secretary, that you don't understand my position. It isn't that I feel above being employed by the President. I have all the respect in the world for him and his office. I have nothing but respect for you . . ."

"Then what is it, Brandon?"

"I don't think I would be happy taking orders from some one else."

"We all have a boss, Brandon."

"I haven't."

The Secretary grinned. "You can head your own department. The President and myself will be the only ones you will have to answer to, I promise."

"That's what I mean," Brandon answered softly.

The Secretary felt his face flush. "You *are* insinuating that you are above working for the President, Mr. Brandon!" he said stiffly.

"You're twisting words." Brandon's voice was determined. "It's just that I like to work alone. I like to put my hat on and go, whenever, and wherever I please."

The Secretary shook his head "Brandon! I happen to know that you haven't been off this estate, this property of yours, in the past five years."

"That doesn't alter a thing. I can go, anytime I please. I have no reason to leave now. But when I do, I won't feel obligated, I won't have

to ask permission."

The Secretary relaxed. "You can do that in the department anytime you wish. Visit the conservations, then, when you are tired of traipsing around, you can come back and write up a report or two." The Secretary cleared his throat. "Just for the records, of course."

Brandon sighed. "Of course. Just for the records." He brushed back his thick, black hair and sat down. Damn it. Why couldn't they leave him alone? That was all he wanted, to be left alone. He was sick of all this. They knew he wasn't fitted to be a clerk in any of the departments. Yet they wasted his time offering him important positions, as if the title would persuade him. Why?

"We could outlaw your doll-making," the Secretary said casually.

Brandon shrugged his shoulders. "Harmonics did that with my music writing, remember! I didn't always do hand-carving."

The Secretary remembered. He had had an indirect hand in that. It had been thought that if Brandon was suddenly without income he might easily be persuaded to accept a position. They hadn't counted on Brandon's resourcefulness, nor his stubbornness.

The thin man leaned back in his chair, looked again at the doll thing resting in one hand. The man was clever; there was a life-like quality to the doll. Brandon was an artist and it would be a shame to take him out of circulation. Yet what could he do? The President had insisted on the visit again this year,

knowing full well that Brandon would turn down the offer.

Suddenly, the Secretary felt sorry for Brandon. The man was breaking down and didn't realize it. His face was drawn and pale. He looked dog-tired.

"Won't you change your mind, Brandon?" the Secretary asked softly. "With Interior you will have an opportunity to get out into the sunlight. It will be a healthy life visiting the many conservations we have situated around the country; it will agree with you, I'm sure."

Brandon sighed. "I'm afraid, Mr. Secretary, that we are both wasting our time. I have a tremendous amount of paper work to finish before midnight tonight and I am tired. I also have a few more interviews before I can get at it." Brandon got up, "So if you don't mind—"

The thin man looked at Brandon searchingly. "Won't you reconsider?"

"I'm afraid not," Brandon answered.

The Secretary paused at the door. "See you next year, then!"

"Next year," Brandon answered flatly.

THE SECRETARY of Interior hardly spoke to the young man waiting by his vehicle. He wanted to get away from there as soon as possible. These yearly visits to Brandon always upset him, made him feel like a cad. It would be days before he shook the unwanted feeling.

"How did it go?" the young

man asked eagerly.

The Secretary took in the youngish face, the confidence flowing from the eyes. Evans always managed to give that youthful impression, yet he wasn't really a young man. In a way the thin man envied Evans . . . with one exception, of course. This would be Evan's first visit to Brandon. Some of the confidence would be gone when he walked out of Brandon's house.

"I said how did it go?" Evans repeated.

The Secretary shrugged his thin shoulders. "As usual. He refused."

Evans showed white, even teeth. "Is he tired?"

"Very."

"Excellent," Evans said "And the paper work. Is it worrying him?"

The thin man studied Evans. No, he didn't envy the man any longer. Evans had no feelings; it was written on his face. "The paper work is worrying him to death." he heard himself say.

"Wonderful!"

The Secretary became conscious of the small figure he was holding in his hand. He had walked out with one of Brandon's creations! Suddenly, he slammed it to the ground. The paint chipped and cracked. The small head rolled loosely across the lawn. Evans looked at him queerly.

"I think *you* need a rest," the young man said softly, unsmiling.

"Brandon is a good man. I hate to see him broken. He has a lot of talent. But not for the work we're offering him. It isn't right, grinding him into the dirt the way we are."

Evans leaned over, picked up the broken puppet. One arm was twisted at an odd angle, the clown suit was torn and dirty. Evans tried to fit the head back on the small body. Finally he succeeded.

He looked at the Secretary of Interior. His eyes seemed different. "I have a position he can fill and do a good job. He won't refuse. I'm sure." Evans walked away, toward Brandon's house, still holding the broken figure.

Brandon stood on the veranda looking across his small estate, in the direction of the city. The site of the government was located there. Perhaps that was why he was so reluctant; he lived too close to it, had it around him day in and day out. The Government was ubiquitous, omnipresent and omnipotent. It dominated every conversation, every business, every life from birth to death. Lately it even seemed that every one he came in contact with held a position with some agency connected with the government.

"Mr. Brandon!"

"I know," he answered without turning. "You're from Labor."

"We've never met!"

Brandon turned and took in the lean individual who called himself Evans. Quite different from the one who had called last year. That one had been old and grumpy. Brandon's lips parted: "I assumed. All the other departments have been here except Revenue. I didn't see Wilson standing outside; I've heard he's out of the country. That leaves you."

"You could have been wrong, you know." Evans said.

"How?" Brandon asked without fully caring.

"Revenue has been split. There are two departments now. Revenue and Taxation. Taxation handles income from taxpayers only."

"Big deal," Brandon said harshly, remembering his desk piled high with papers.

"They say you are a stubborn man, Brandon."

"Stubborn?"

"Quite."

"Let's say I'm content with my lot."

"Are you really, Brandon?"

Brandon took in the young man's wide shoulders, the face that was almost too young for such a responsible position. For just an instant he had felt that this man would be different, that there might be a challenge here. He could see he was wrong. The man was going to offer him a position.

"Let's get to the point," he said hurriedly. "I'm happy making puppets and I feel no need for a change."

"I'm glad you are happy, Mr. Brandon."

"Good. Then there is no need to continue. I refuse your offer." Brandon was getting irritated. He didn't wait for an answer, he walked past Evans, into the house.

He stood by his desk. The pile of papers was still resting there, waiting for him. He had hoped, in some magical way, that they might have vanished. A foolish thought, he knew.

"Income tax?" he heard Evans

say from his shoulder.

Brandon nodded wearily. Evans reached over and picked up a form. He frowned. "Complicated!"

"Each year it gets worse," Brandon said listlessly.

"I've never had to file one," Evans said.

Brandon lifted one eyebrow.

"Government employees never do. We are paid a flat sum and our subsistence is taken care of. Calculators and computers adjust our salary each year in proportion to the expense of the government. We have been operating out of the red that way for years. It works out fine."

Brandon ran his hands through the papers and forms. Why then did he have to wade through this mess each year when it could be made so simple? He had been staggering under the load.

"You're an independent, Brandon," Evans said. "You stay in business for yourself because you dislike working for someone else. Isn't that right?"

"You might say that."

Evans dangled a handful of papers in front of Brandon's brown eyes. "You are working for someone else now. The tax department."

"Not exactly. I don't have to answer to anyone."

Evans snorted. "Not even the tax collector?"

"Not unless I make an error," Brandon said stubbornly. "And I won't. I'm becoming an expert on this. When a man spends one hundred days a year working on these damn things he learns quite a bit. There will be no errors."

"One hundred days!" Evans laughed. "Soon it'll be every day of the year. Then where will you be?" He looked directly into Brandon's eyes. "Can't you see? You're in the web already, working a third of the year without compensation."

Evans pulled from his pocket the broken puppet he had picked up from the driveway outside Brandon's house. He laid it in front of Brandon on the pile of income tax blanks. "Soon you'll be without income; your business will deteriorate from lack of attention."

Brandon said nothing.

Evans moved to the contour chair and sat down. He closed his eyes. "You've been out of circulation a long time, Brandon. The world is changing. Government is big business, one of the largest, and it's expanding. We need more men, good men."

Evans opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling. "You said you've become an expert on forms. Would you consider taking a position as head of the tax department?" he asked abruptly.

Brandon lifted his gaze from the desk. "I thought you were with labor?"

"I could arrange it." Evans closed his eyes again.

"But . . ."

"Think, Brandon. As chief of the bureau, you won't have to answer to anyone, not even the President. You've seen the mess the forms have become. You can straighten it out."

"I don't think . . ."

"I'll have it put in writing that no one will bother you."

Brandon stared at the papers on his desk. For the first time they were offering him a position he understood, one he could handle. It would be a challenge. He would be in a position to eliminate three-quarters of that damn paperwork. God knew how many like himself were gradually getting snowed under each year.

Brandon played with the puppet. The silly face stared back at him with a fixed, smiling expression. "Tell me, Evans," he asked idly. "Why so much effort to locate me in a government position? I've had no special training; this is the first offer I'm even qualified enough to accept." He lifted the puppet face high, gazed at its face. "For ten years I've been pestered."

Evans laughed as he pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket. "You have determination and will power. We need that type of nature these days more than ever." Evans' smile became wide "And you will be one less taxpayer we will have to worry about now. You'll be on our side."

Evans pushed all the forms from Brandon's desk with a sweep of his tanned hand. "Forget all of that, Brandon, forever. No more taxes for you. This is the last form you will have to sign. It appoints you Secretary of Taxation, *carte blanche*."

"You had all this prepared?" Brandon said in amazement.

Evans' smile grew wider. "We knew you couldn't refuse an intelligent offer, one where you would be useful."

"We!"

"The cabinet and myself."

Brandon picked up the pen, twisted it between his fingers. Evans was right, of course. He would be useful. Half those damn forms were filled with worthless nonsense that could easily be eliminated. Deductions should be higher; small, independent business should be given a break. And he could handle the job—that was important.

"Just sign on the bottom line," Evans said smoothly, pushing the broken puppet out of the way.

The puppet fell to the floor and the head came off again. "Forget it," Evans said quickly.

Brandon studied the other man's face before he reached over and picked up the little figure. It was a funny creature with a large, silly-looking balloon nose. Brandon handled it tenderly, looking at it thoughtfully. Finally he said: "My puppets. What happens to them?"

"I don't understand?"

"Children enjoy them," Brandon answered.

"I'm afraid you don't understand, Brandon," Evans shook his head. "I'm offering you a full time position. You can make them—as a hobby of course—give them away, but you can't sell them. That would give you an income again, mean more tax forms."

"But I couldn't hope to produce them for nothing," Brandon insisted. "Not on a large scale, not on the fixed salary that you mentioned!"

"They aren't important, Brandon."

Brandon's lips became a firm,

straight line. For the first time it was clear to him why he had been so reluctant to give up his work. His music had pleased people, just as his puppets were doing now. He was getting satisfaction out of his work. He was giving people something no one else seemed to be able to give them. Accepting a position he couldn't handle, working for someone else had nothing to do with it . . .

"I've changed my mind," he said quietly.

"Changed your mind?" Evans stared at the pen Brandon had carefully laid down on the desk; disbelief disfiguring his face. "You intend fighting *that* each year?" he pointed at the mad array of papers he had strewn at Brandon's feet. "You're willing to risk not having any time at all to work on your puppets against security and a life of ease?"

"I'm willing," Brandon answered. "Now I think you'd better leave Mr. . . ."

"Evans!"

"Mr. Evans. I might be able to finish these damn things before the midnight deadline."

Evans opened his mouth but Brandon was already showing him the way to the door, shoving something in his hand.

EVANS CLIMBED into his car and slumped down on the seat beside the President. He looked at the new puppet Brandon had forced into his hand before he could refuse.

"Is Brandon Secretary of Taxa-

tion?" the President asked hopefully.

Evans shook his head from side to side. What had gone wrong? They had known Brandon was a stubborn man, that was why things were done as they were. The offering of worthless positions had been a feint. He should have grabbed at something he could handle. And the tax forms! That was supposed to be the last straw. They had been loaded, prepared just for Brandon, to break his resistance. Yet they had failed. Why?

"Did he suspect?" The President eyed Evans.

"I don't think so, Sir." Evans said. "I had the pen in his hand. He was ready to sign. Then something went wrong. I can't understand it!"

The President looked the other way, found his eyes fastened on his own reflection on the window. The cabinet had been wrong thinking it was a job for a psychologist like Evans. Brandon was an individual, a decided rarity in this day and age.

"I'm glad," the President said softly to the glass.

"What was that, Sir?"

The President turned. "I said, I'm glad he didn't sign."

"You can't mean that, Sir!"

"But I do."

"Do you realize what this means? Brandon was the last taxpayer. We've been forced to operate an entire bureau just to process his forms. It's the only department operating in the red. He's the only person not employed by the government, the only one still operat-

ing a private business!"

Evans found himself clenching the puppet tightly in his fist. "We will break him. I know we will. Next year it will take him 365 days to compute his tax. I promise."

"Next year," the President said firmly, "Brandon will get a short form. One that he can complete in ten minutes. Do you understand, Evans?"

Evans' forehead creased. "I'm afraid—"

The President looked back at his reflection on the glass. "We don't want to make the boss angry now, do we Evans?"

"The boss, Sir?"

"Brandon, of course," the President smiled. "After all, the government works for the taxpayers, Evans—and Brandon is the last taxpayer. He's our boss, son. The only boss we have left."

"Mr. President. If I might—"

The President returned his gaze to Evans. "I think we've forgotten something over these past years, Evans. Something very important."

"What is that, Sir?"

The President removed the puppet from Evans' limp fingers. "If the sole purpose of the government is to serve the taxpayers—and there were no more—how could we justify our existence in office?"

The President ran his finger under the chin of the little puppet, "Do you mind if I keep this, Evans?" he asked softly. "I'd like to take it home to my granddaughter. She's never seen a puppet, I'm sure she'll love it."

The tiny figure seemed to smile approvingly.

END



A revolution in astronomy, second only to the invention of the telescope itself, is foreseen in electronic devices called image converters. These tubes, now being tested by the Farnsworth Electronic Corporation and R.C.A., promise to increase ten-fold the power of instruments in present use. They will also boost by an equivalent amount the light-gathering use of all telescopes to which they are attached. Image converters change light to electrons, greatly multiply the number of electrons, then change the tiny negative particles back into light again; the light, much intensified, falls on a photographic plate. Routine use of these converters for photographing the heavens may bring discoveries which will require Mankind to reconsider the universe, as Einstein's theory once did.

A "five-year plan" for a manned rocket ship which will cross half the continent in 20 minutes is now in the drawing board stage. Dubbed the Griffon, the ship would carry a light-weight pilot, not over 150 pounds, weigh more than 65,000 pounds at take-off, and shoot 75 miles up into space in about five seconds. Then it would level off, reenter the atmosphere, and glide

the rest of the way to its destination. The Griffon would have provisions for control either by the pilot or by ground stations. If the pilot lost consciousness at any time during flight, small auto-control systems would take over until he recovered. These could be similar to the units developed for V-2 rockets. The motor would use a combination of gasoline and liquid oxygen for fuel; and since the liquid oxygen would be kept at 300 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, some of it could be used to keep the ship cool. The ship would be able to land at present day airports and would have a landing speed of about 150 miles per hour.

Middle East oil may be towed to its buyers in giant "sausage skins" holding 9,000 tons when the government-backed experiments of two Cambridge University engineers are completed. The hope of the developers is that the nylon oil barges, nicknamed Nobs, will solve the current oil tanker shortage. The plan is to make an inner container of nylon, covered by a plastic skin, one-quarter to one-half an inch thick. The completed "sausage skin" tanker, 60 feet long and weighing 20 tons empty, could then be flown or shipped to the oil port and rolled around a drum. When full of crude oil, the Nob would be four-fifths submerged and could be towed by a loaded tanker or tug at 10 to 15 knots in normal weather conditions. With a tug at each end, it might be possible to guide one through the Suez Canal. The inventors are confident that the bul-

let-proof Nob would just bounce off if it were to hit a rock or dock wall at the suggested speeds.

In the near future you may be going to the doctor to get a periodic fever for immunization against influenza-type diseases. Recent studies have shown that the danger factor is only a small element in the virus and it can emerge only through a tiny "escape hatch" in the lining that surrounds the virus. Armed with this knowledge of the structure of the virus, biophysicists think it will be possible to alter the disease carriers and so render them harmless. This in turn could lead to radically different methods of immunization, such as using diathermal machines to create artificial fevers in people that will leave them immune to diseases caused by viruses.

A space ship that can be made cheaply with the know-how and materials on hand was described at a recent Rocket Society meeting. Called the "Snooper" by the designers, the ship is a non-return, robot rocket propelled by ions, armed with television, radar, communications equipment and auxiliary power supply systems. Since the propulsion system obtains its thrust by the electrical acceleration of ionized gases to extremely high velocities (657,000 feet per second), a nuclear reactor is used to produce the electrical field necessary to accelerate the ions. The reactor would also supply power for the three-quarters of a ton of instruments to be carried by the vehicle.

The Snooper would look somewhat like a giant moth with wings spreading out for 66 feet from the back end. The wings would dissipate the excess heat generated by the nuclear reactor. The designers propose lifting the ion rocket into an orbit around the earth by chemical fuels similar to those suggested for an intercontinental ballistic missile. After Snooper reaches the orbit, the wings are spread and the instrument section is extended far forward of the reactor to avoid radiation damage.

An ultrahigh speed camera that can take pictures at a rate of 4,000,000 per second has been perfected by Precision Technology, Inc., Livermore, California. An especially designed electronic tube called an image converter is the heart of the camera. The tube picks up light images by means of a photosensitive cathode at one end. These images are then transferred electronically to a viewing screen at the other end, where the picture is recorded on film. By using extremely short electrical pulses, the tube can be turned on and off again almost instantaneously. The tube and the accompanying electronic circuits act both as the camera's shutter and as its means for moving images across the face of the stationary recording film. As many as five exposures can be made on a single plate of film with exposure times as short as 20 micro-seconds or less than one-fiftieth of a millionth of a second.

Army recruits may soon be receiv-

ing their shots from a spray gun instead of a hypodermic needle. The automatic jet injection syringe uses a high-speed spray that takes less than a second to penetrate the tissue beneath the skin. The hand-held gun is powered by a small hydraulic pump, connected to it by a rubber hose, and can be fired continuously until the vaccine bottle sitting at the back of the gun is empty. The gun can be cocked and reloaded in a matter of six seconds and no sterilization is needed between injections, since the tip of the injector nozzle does not actually touch the skin. The jet velocity of the vaccine is 700 feet per second when it comes out of the nozzle and, though not always painless, it causes less discomfort than hypodermic needles.

Jet planes may soon be given a 100-mile-per-hour boost through the use of an alloy that would increase operating temperatures in jet engines about 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Developed by the Westinghouse Electric Corporation, the metal, an alloy of iron, nickel, chromium, molybdenum, titanium and boron was designed to help push back what is called the "second heat barrier" being met by supersonic planes. This heating occurs in the engine, where white-hot gases from the burning fuel push against turbine blades. Since a jet engine gets its operating energy by increasing the temperature of the air passing through it, the greater the air temperature increase the more thrust a given engine will produce and the faster the plane

will fly. The alloy is intended as a structural material for use in the jet's turbine section, and will enable the operation of jet engines to be increased to temperatures much higher than are now possible.

Window panes and lenses of metal have been developed by the Raytheon Manufacturing Company which allows invisible heat rays from sub-zero targets to reach a supersensitive infrared detector. Made of a silicon material, these new optical parts may make it possible to detect enemy ships, planes and missiles from longer distances in total darkness without revealing the observer's position. By "seeing" colder objects, a plane equipped with an infrared detector could sense the relatively "cold" parts of a target craft like the nose and the wing sections, as well as the warm parts such as the engines. Such systems would be silent and would not broadcast signals revealing their positions.

The Army's package power reactor has recently begun operation. It is the first of a new breed of atomic power plants that can be transported by air to remote sites, there to operate reliably for long periods without new fuel. The present pioneer plant can generate approximately 2,000 kilowatts of electricity. Installed in isolated bases in the Arctic and Antarctic, such plants will also be able to supply steam for heating as a by-product. The power package reactor is expected to be as important to land outposts as the atomic submarine.

Hue AND Cry

Sirs:

In nearly every science fiction story I have ever read, in *If* and other magazines, there is one great glaring anachronism: Man.

The century may be the 25th or the 30th. Earth is either blooming like a garden spot, and out exploiting all the other planets; or Earth is withering away, a victim of atomic wars or simply too many hydrogen bomb tests. But has Man changed since the 20th century? Not a whit.

If science is going to save the world from itself, the saucers, the inter-galaxy border disputes, and if we are all going to work a ten hour week and the Welfare departments are going to take care of us all, it seems inevitable that Man is going to change a great deal in the process. Not only will he grow fatter, taller, blonder, cleaner and conceivably dumber, he is going to

have an entirely different batch of pressures and react in totally different ways. But does this happen in science fiction stories? No!

Among the sciences, that of gadgetry is the only one, and while its present-day advance is more obvious (and more frightful) than others, the social sciences are gaining too, and it is certain that the children growing up are a different breed of cats than their still depression-and-war-haunted parents. And *their* children are going to be even more strange, unless there are more depressions and wars to recondition them to attitudes resembling those of present-day adults.

If Man is going to triumph over his environment, Mars and the saucers, he will probably lose what is presently one of his few endearing traits: his humility. If a man with humility and all its attendant virtues survives (to be the hero of a science fiction story) his background will need to be utterly unusual. But this is never pointed out in a science fiction story: the boy scout hero who knocks out the bad guy is a "normal" man for his century. And for that matter, how did the bad guy get there? Because the homogeneity presently considered so desirable will prevent his development too. If the sociologists get their way, the world of tomorrow is going to be one sans hero or villain, in which everybody works for a paternal government or corporation, and looks and thinks and talks just like everybody else.

Something on which nearly all the writers of the genre agree is that tomorrow is going to be singu-

larly humorless. All joke-crackers are, *per se*, suspect and looked upon as a 20th century anachronism. Presently, it is true, a joke teller is barred from serious office-holding, but must we look upon this as an irreversible trend? Must we assume that we will never have another Mencken, and that the gathering clouds of grimness are never going to be cleared away? Man's laughter—and Man has been in some pretty tough spots—echoes down through the centuries; I think that science fiction writers condemn humor forever on too little evidence.

But then let us consider the stories in which Man has lost. He has polluted his own planet with radioactivity, and little Noah-like figures are seen departing in rattle-trap rockets. But he still hasn't changed at all. With a stiff upper lip and a 20th century dignity, he blasts off to another planet, there, we may assume, to carry on just as before.

Here I think the writers err on the side of optimism. If Man is content to let his planet be destroyed, and by nobody but himself, we may feel safe in concluding that he will then be so lethargic, so corrupted and possibly so plain disinterested, that an end to everything will be the only solution. Perhaps he will even retain a little humility in this case, and realize that so cantankerous a beast as Man has no business destroying more than one planet.

The writers also seem to be un-inventive in the matter of governmental forms. They seem to believe

that there is no choice except present-day democracy or one or another form of dictatorship; but both of these are fairly recent inventions and it doesn't seem possible that Man, who so dearly loves to invent things, isn't going to come up with more variations on the theme. It's interesting to note that the higher forms of government that the aliens always talk about so evasively are possible only because the aliens are so highly developed that they don't need any governing. But no matter how far into tomorrow a writer looks, he never seems to think that such things can develop here. Man with all his foibles, so prone to err, and consequently so lovable, is always let off because of a sentimental pang on the part of the visiting aliens; for even the aliens have 20th century humanoid weaknesses.

As Thurber says, "The proper study of Mankind is Man, says Man."

—E. Mueller

Guanajato, Gto., Mexico

Dear Mr. Quinn:

Having just finished James Gunn's GREEN THUMB in the April issue, I find that I cannot agree with his contention that "chance rules the universe". While Heisenberg's uncertainty principle does set an "unsuspected limit on the accuracy with which we can describe physical situations" does this not apply solely on the subatomic level? My own reading and thinking (as a sociologist) on the subject has led me to accept Korzybski's

conclusion that the uncertainty principle does not abolish determinism, but rather it "requires the transforming of the two-valued Aristotelian logic into the infinity-valued semantics of probability".

In other words, "free will" is still a legal, moral and cultural fiction (whether useful or otherwise) and science has not yet reached the end of the road, simply because indeterminism on the subatomic level does not necessitate indeterminism on any other level. I would have liked to see the story end with Gunn's "universal genius", who should have known better, straightening out the overspecialized physicist on the full implications and limitations of the Heisenberg principle.

Sincerely,
—Edd Doerr
Indianapolis, Ind.

Sirs:

An invasion of Earth by Martians used as a plot for a radio play once threw thousands of people into a panic. They tuned in after the play had started and mistook fiction for fact. The police were inundated with phone calls from all parts of the state from terrified people supposedly in the path of the advancing men from Mars.

The idea was not new. Hollywood producers and writers of space fiction have often used the same format. In fiction, the Earth peoples have always been the victims of the grotesque, super-scientific beings with vast ant-like heads

and antenna-like limbs who invaded the Earth with the intention of conquering and enslaving its people.

The truth could be just the reverse. If Martians and Venusians exist, and modern astronomy suggests there may be millions of inhabitable planets, then THEY will be contemplating our well advanced plans for moon flight and exploration with a sense of impending catastrophe. If and when we master the mysteries and hazards of space travel, and begin to wander through the trackless vastnesses of galactic space in our space ships and rockets, what would be the result?

We named Mars the Planet of War for no other reason than the fact that it was red. Its redness was innocent enough. It is only the result of great swirling clouds of dust that constantly sweep over its arid plains and deserts. If Earth were called the Planet of War it could be so named with far more significance. If peace loving peoples exist on other worlds than our own, how would Earth history read to them? They would not need to go back 500 years, or even 50; five years or even five months would be enough. What would they think of the butchery of Budapest? Of the cries of the ill-fated Jews of Brodnow as the open box-cars of the death freights rumbles through the freezing night toward Siberia? Or of Belsen and Dachau? What of the horror and mortal agonies of London and Coventry as they were reduced to shambles in World War II?

In World War I, the scarlet

Flanders Poppies spread a carpet of crimson loveliness over the gashes and scars of war; but in World War II, the sons of those quietly sleeping beneath the ground had to drive their lumbering tanks over the same battlefields and tear them open again.

What of the seven little Vietnamese boys fleeing from the Communists, who, led by their tongueless teacher, came staggering out of the forest with chopsticks which had been driven through their eardrums still protruding from their heads? If there are dwellers on mighty Betelgeuse, what would their reaction be to the hungry children prowling like timber wolves among the ruins of bombed cities in the tragic aftermath of war?

In the not-too-distant future we expect to be able to project some kind of missile onto the lunar surface. We may be ready scientifically for the great adventure into space; but are we ready morally?

Maybe the blinding glares of our atomic explosions flashed a warning understood by distant watching eyes, like the glowing campfires in the vanguard of an invader. The deepest apprehension would fill the

hearts of any intelligent beings at the prospect of being indoctrinated into Earth practices in this 20th century. The Kefauver Committee indicates that drug addicts from 12 to 20 years old will pay more than one billion dollars for marijuana, heroin and other life-wrecking drugs this year. In the same period, to raise this huge fortune thousands of major crimes will be committed ranging from armed robbery to murder.

Man stands at the most awe-inspiring moment in his arduous climb from stone age to science. At long last he has raised his sights to the stars. Now is the time for Homo Sapiens to pause, take stock, clean house. He knows the Golden Rule, now is the time for him to apply its medication to the open sores of the world's wounds.

Let him learn to beat his swords into ploughshares and his spears into pruning hooks, then instead of spreading consternation from Rigel to the one trillion galaxies in the bowl of the Big Dipper, he will come as a welcome ambassador bringing tidings of peace.

—C. H. Duncombe
Tulsa, Oklahoma

WHAT IS YOUR SCIENCE I.Q.?

ANSWERS: 1—Both are parasites. 2—6 (1, 2, 3,); 28 (1, 2, 4, 7, 14). 3—Chloroplasts. 4—Uric acid. 5—Cellophane. 6—Both are tidal phenomena. 7—Fusion, fission, catalyzation. 8—Argon. 9—15. 10—12.8 m.p.h. 11—Iron, copper, zinc, manganese, cobalt, iodine, boron, molybdenum. 12—Brazil Current. 13—Red and blue-violet. 14—Growth. 15—Wave cancellation. 16—Tension, shear, bending, compression. 17—Y chromosomes. 18—Both are absolute zero. 19— $7\frac{1}{2}$ times. 20—It is the only even prime number.

THE POORS

(Continued from page 103)

Kramvit felt himself being lowered towards the stage. He was helped out of the booth by the young ladies, and escorted to the M.C. No trumpets, now. The audience was silent as the M.C. thanked Kramvit, and told him how honored he was to be the first to welcome the first visitor from another planet on V.C. He also told him how sorry he was that Kramvit had lost.

Kramvit walked off stage while the audience applauded.

... "The funny thing is, I really knew the answer," Kramvit

was saying to Carrowick, with a sheepish grin. "I was just so nervous. I'm not accustomed to this at all."

"Well," said Carrowick, "it's nothing to worry about. As I said, it was just a good will appearance."

They were leaving the studio, when a young man in uniform approached Kramvit.

"Excuse me, sir, a Phonogram for you."

Kramvit looked at the envelope and saw that it was from the High Council of Six. He turned the envelope over and read the name.

It was addressed to, "*Poor Mr. Marryl Kramvit*"!

END

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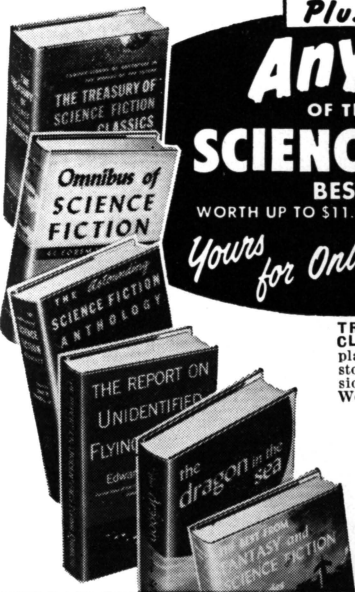
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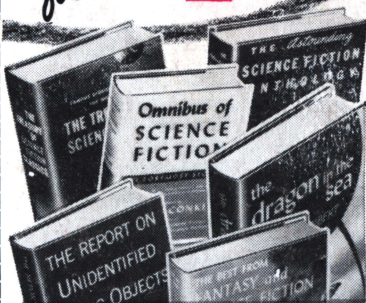
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