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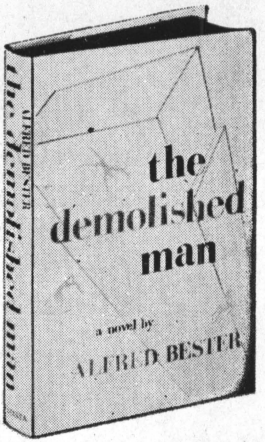

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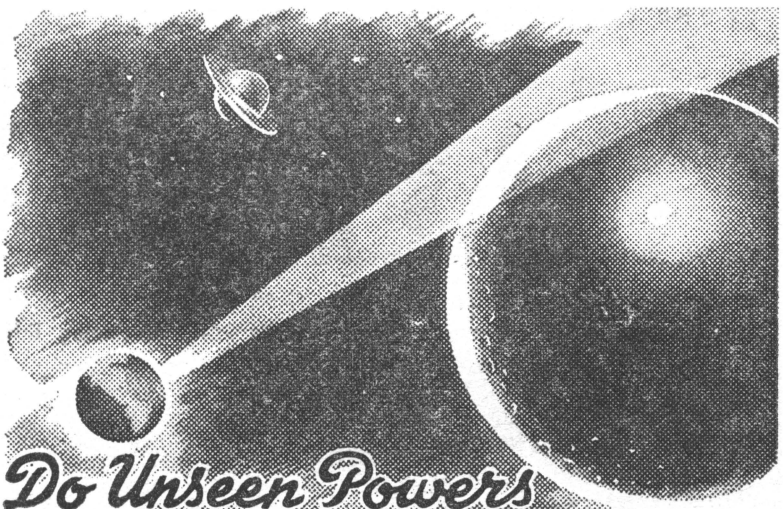

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That's How It Goes

It's easy to get Aperdui. A phone call at the wrong moment — a meal too many — a screen star wearing too many clothes. It's easy. And it's fun . . .

By J. T. McINTOSH Illustrated by Ritter

I

THE four censors watched the takes in silence. When the lights came on in the small projection room, the Second Censor said to the First Censor: "You're quite right. It's not merely undesirably sexy, in fact obscene—there's not even an attempt at an excuse for it. Now if the subject of the film had been historical, or if the climate had been such that—"

"A clear case," said the Third Censor briskly. "I have the names of the actress, producer, director, script-writer and cameramen here. Shall I send them all on to the Transportation Board?"

"If you like," said the First Censor. "But the producer, director, script-writer and cameramen will wriggle out of it. They always do. I guess you'd save everybody trouble if you just send the actress to the Transportation Board."

"I guess so," the Third Censor agreed. "Okay, Sandra Kay goes before the Board tomorrow. I'll attend to the de-

tails. Now let's see that last take again."

The beautiful blonde in the transparent nightdress smiled seductively at them again, undulating even as she lay on a couch.

"Funny how movies used to be cut when the girls wore too few clothes," the Second Censor mused. "Obviously this is only obscene because she's wearing that promiscuous garment. When she takes it off later, the whole thing becomes perfectly respectable."

There was silence until Sandra Kay had finished cavorting about the screen. Then the Third Censor said: "Just to be quite sure we aren't making any mistake about this, let's see that again, huh?"

"YOU haven't even an excuse?" the overseer persisted.

Johnny Horne shrugged. "Well, it seems a little thing, working through the break. I've done it before, and knocked off early."

"Yes, but this time you didn't knock off early. A little thing, indeed! Do you realize that you produced three hundred pairs of shoes above quota? What are we going to do with those three hundred pairs of shoes? Don't you know that as it is we've got a million salesmen trying to increase demand so that we can unload our surplus stocks? And you casually produce an extra three hundred pairs of shoes just because you didn't feel like taking time off for a glass of milk and a smoke!"

"I like working," said Johnny naively.

The overseer went purple. "You like working! When the police bring in a man on a homicide charge, does it do him any good to say 'I like killing?' Sure, you like working! Haven't you ever heard that Earth's Balance Must Be Preserved? How can Earth's Balance Be Preserved if irresponsible youngsters like you insist on making three hundred pairs of shoes above quota?"

"I won't do it again."

"Darn right you won't. I like you, Johnny, but this isn't the first time something like this has happened. I'm sending your name to the Transportation Board."

Johnny was aghast. "You don't mean it? Just for making a few pairs of shoes above quota?"

The overseer raised his eyes to heaven. "Obviously you don't understand, Johnny, and never will understand. That's why you're going before the Board tomorrow."

TUBBY BROOKS sighed contentedly. "That sure was a feed," he said. "Boy, do I like French cooking!"

Kate was draining the last drop of coffee. They were a

strange pair. They looked as if they could have nothing in common. Tubby weighed 230 pounds, and he was not quite five feet five. His little round face was almost hidden by folds of fat, but in the middle of the roundness could be discerned two little round eyes, a little round nose and a little round mouth. Kate weighed less than 100 pounds, and she was five feet eight. She was a broomstick with two small bumps on it.

The truth was they shared quite a lot, including a bed, although they had never got around to marriage. Principally they had gluttony in common. They had the same view of heaven — a place where it was possible to eat all day and most of the night.

Earth was not heaven. No fantastically crowded world could be rich in food. Though there was no actual rationing, Earth was no paradise for people who liked to top off a six-course meal with forty-two hamburgers for filling.

However, they coped with the situation fairly well.

They left the restaurant and Tubby hailed a cab. He didn't give their final destination; he was too wily for that. He named a neutral, unimportant spot and paid off the cabbie when they reached it. Another taxi took them to Bertini's.

"We haven't been here for at least three weeks," Kate murmured. "I've almost forgotten what Italian food tastes like. Let's start with ham and melon, and then have spaghetti a la Bolognese."

They couldn't have dessert; nobody was ever supplied with more than two courses.

Twenty minutes later Tubby sighed contentedly. "That sure was a feed," he said. "Boy, do I like Italian cooking!"

From Bertini's they walked to the Metropole, Kate skipping like a bird as she always did. Tubby breasting the traffic like an aircraft carrier. It was a long way, and they were famished when they arrived.

"Chicken Maryland," Tubby decided.

He never got it. Suddenly there were three cops around them. Tubby blinked at them doubtfully.

One had a notebook. "Okay, Buster," he said. "Explain this. First you ate at the Grill. Then at the Paris Soir. Then at Bertini's. Now you're here. What do you think you are—two sacks of loot on legs?"

They couldn't explain it. At least, Tubby did explain it, tearfully and sincerely, but the cops had no sympathy with the plain, unvarnished truth: "We were hungry."

TOM CAMM added the fourth nutrient solution to the culture in the tank, watching it carefully. The culture

sometimes got sick, just like human digestion, and had to be drained promptly.

The phone rang. Tom looked at it, puzzled, shrugged and went over to pick it up. If a call was switched through to him while he was engaged in such critical work, it must be important.

"Tom?"

"Joan! How in hell did you get the girl on the switchboard to put your call through?"

"I told her it was a matter of life and death, which it is. Tom, we've got to get married right away!"

"You mean . . ."

She giggled. "No, I don't mean that. I mean we're getting a two-room flat. We move in before next Tuesday!"

"Joan, that's great! Most couples have to wait years. How did you . . ." Sudden suspicion sharpened his voice. "You didn't . . . ?"

"No, I didn't, and you should be ashamed of yourself for thinking such a thing. I guess it must be a mistake, but they won't put us out if we get married and move in right away. So we've got to get married the moment you leave the laboratories tonight."

"Sure, Joan. Gee, this is great news! This must be my lucky day."

He wasn't quite so sure about that half an hour later, on the carpet before his boss.

"It's incredible, Camm, absolutely incredible. It wouldn't have surprised me if a young technician had done it, but that *you* should stand casually talking on the phone to your girl friend while behind you a whole vat of culture died . . . Camm, I can still hardly believe it."

"What Joan had to tell me, sir, was—"

"It doesn't matter one tenth of a damn what the girl was telling you! The moment you realized a private call had been switched to you at a critical stage in the process, you should have hung up. If you'd done that, it would have been possible to save the vat."

Tom considered making another appeal, but he knew it was no good. Finally he said simply: "Yes, sir. You're sending me to the Transportation Board?"

"Not only you, Camm, but the girl on the switchboard who let that call through *and* the girl who made it. I'm sorry Camm. But on a world as overcrowded as Earth is, a vat of synthetic food is worth more than the same vat filled with gold, platinum and uranium."

"Yes, sir," said Tom. He was resigned.

It was the end of everything, of course. If Joan agreed, they'd spend this night together and then kill themselves before the interview with the Board.

II

THE next morning seven people collected in a gloomy waiting-room at Transportation House.

There was Sandra Kay, the young, beautiful but not yet famous actress who had offended the censors by wearing too much.

She would never become famous now.

There was Johnny Horne, who liked work so much that he had made three hundred pairs of shoes above quota. If he didn't know by now that the Balance Must Be Preserved, Earth had no further use for him.

There were Tubby Brooks and Kate Rimmer, who had tried to get more than their fair share of an overcrowded world's most vital commodity —food.

There was Tom Camm, whose negligence had resulted in something just as serious— the destruction of food. Joan Liverage, his accomplice in crime. Sylvia Oliver, another accomplice in the same heinous crime.

Joan, who had not agreed to commit suicide with Tom, kept well out of the switchboard girl's way. She might easily become violent.

The middle-aged secretary looked them over indifferently and sent Sandra Kay in first. Her boss would never forgive her if she delayed his making the acquaintance of a gorgeous creature like that by as much as a second.

Sandra Kay looked at the little brown-faced man behind the desk, threw off her fur cape and sat down, crossing her legs so that from where he was sitting he couldn't see her skirt at all. Inwardly boiling with anger, she knew it would do her no good at all to show it.

"Mr. Rawlings?" she said, smiling dazzlingly.

Rawlings had brightened the moment she entered the room.He scrabbled among the papers on his desk. Ah, yes, this must be the actress, Sandra Kay.

"Miss Kay," he said, "the charge against you is that you appeared in an obscene film. More particularly, that you wore erotic and unnecessary garments."

"Just one," said Sandra. "A nightdress. Nothing else."

"You admit the charge, then?"

"I admit I wore a nightdress, yes. What's wrong in that?" She smiled dazzingly at him again, but this time her smile was wasted, for he was looking at the sheet in front of him.

"As an experienced actress, Miss Kay, you know what is permissible and what is not. I understand that it would have been all right if you wore a respectable, opaque nightdress or nothing at all,

but the kind of garment you wore has been ruled dangerously provocative." He looked her up and down. "This I can well imagine to be the case."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Rawlings."

Rawlings coughed. "You have been sent here because you—"

"Now, just a minute, Mr. Rawlings. There has been no criminal charge against me, and if I were to stand trial I guess I'd have a chance of getting off. Why shouldn't I just tell you to go to hell?"

"BECAUSE you might not get off, Miss Kay. In that case you would be sent to a tough, inhospitable, sparsely-populated criminal world such as Roc. Worlds like Roc will never be developed, except as criminal settlements. If you were sent there, you—even you—would have nothing to look forward to but a tough, unpleasant life and an early, unpleasant death. On the other hand, if you accept transportation here and now, you will go to Aperdui, a pleasant world right at the top of the list for development."

"Not Verdan or Mistan?"

"Ah, Verdan." Rawlings suddenly became wistful. "I spent twenty-five years in Verdan, and I can't wait to get back. Most Transportation officials are colonists, you know, Miss Kay. I tell you honestly, I can't wait for my term of duty here on Earth to be over so that I can return to Verdan."

"But I can't go there?"

"I'm afraid not. Verdan is now fully self-supporting, fully developed, able to populate itself without further need of immigrants. It's off the list of Transportation worlds. So is Mistan. But Aperdui is a grand world."

"Population?"

"Only a few thousand at the moment, but—"

"A hick world. No radio, television, cars, trucks, hospitals, cinemas, theaters, washing machines, books, magazines, newspapers—"

"Now there you're wrong, Miss Kay. There is a small emergency clinic, and a mimeographed newspaper is published twice a week."

"Huh," said Sandra. She caught Rawling's eye and held it. "If I went for trial, tell me frankly, what would be my chances?"

"Frankly, Miss Kay, you probably wouldn't get Roc. But you wouldn't be allowed to stay on Earth either. You'd get Aperdui anyway."

"I see." Sandra stood up. "I believe you."

Rawling's eyes ran up her golden legs, caressed her hips, popped at her bust and finally reached her golden head, exhausted.

Although he was a colonist, automatically placing the colonies, any colony, before al-

most everything else, what difference did just *one* colonist make?

"In certain circumstances, Miss Kay," he said, not meeting her eyes, "I might be persuaded to recommend that you be allowed to stay on Earth."

She knew exactly what he meant. She knew what he meant better than he did. He meant that she could remain on Earth as his mistress until the relationship became tiresome, awkward or inconvenient for him, at which time easily the neatest solution would be to withdraw his protection and have her sent to Aperdui to be out of the way.

"Thanks, Mr. Rawlings," she said. "I sure appreciate that. I'll take Aperdui."

RAWLINGS interviewed the other six one by one. None of them had even as good a chance of escaping transportation as Sandra.

"I envy you," he told Tubby Brooks bracingly. "Aperdui will make a man of you, my boy. In a few months you'll be half your present weight. All that fat will drop off, and you'll become lean and hard and bronzed. If I were twenty-five years younger and didn't have friends and relatives on Verdan, I'd be delighted to change places with you."

"What's the food situation on Aperdui?" Tubby asked urgently.

"Food? There's enough, of course. Aperdui has good agricultural land, excellent grazing . . . but then, you see, with the population snowballing as immigrants from Earth arrive, naturally there's never any surplus. Every harvest has to provide for the present population plus the twenty thousand or so who will arrive before the next harvest. There's enough food, my boy. But there's never anything over."

Tubby groaned.

So did Kate when she heard this grim news. Rawlings didn't suggest to Kate that in c e r t a i n circumstances he might be persuaded to recommend that she be allowed to stay on Earth. Too thin, he decided critically.

Tom Camm listened in silence. He was probably the most intelligent of the seven, the one best able to exploit any loophole that might have existed. He was also, however, the one with the strongest case against him. Carelessness with food production on a world as desperately overcrowded as Earth was more than a misdemeanor. He was lucky, indeed, to get the chance of going to Aperdui. He might easily have been sent to Roc.

Rawlings hesitated over Joan. She was thin too, and her mouth was too big. Her legs, however, were nearly as good as Sandra's. In the end, not caring much one way or

the other, he gave her the chance.

Joan considered it for quite a while.

She very much wanted to remain on Earth. Everybody knew that life on the new colonies was hell. Earth never seemed like heaven until suddenly you were faced with the prospect of leaving it for ever.

She would lose Tom if she stayed, of course. Nevertheless, she went on considering it. Finally she decided, however, that if she took advantage of Rawling's offer it probably wouldn't be long until she was before the Transportation Board again for something else. And if that happened she would have lost Tom for nothing.

She said she'd go to Aperdui.

Of the seven, only Johnny Horne could see anything in favor of Aperdui. "You mean I can work as hard as I like?" he said joyfully.

Rawlings nodded. "From what I know of you, my boy, and from my own experiences on a planet like Aperdui, I should say you'll probably become a very successful man. Not one of the richest men in the world, since as far as I can make out you're too honest for that, but pretty comfortable nevertheless. By the time you're forty, when the rough edges of Aperdui will be smoothed out a little, I guess you'll be a pretty important man out there."

"Maybe it won't be so bad at that," Johnny reflected.

"It makes sense, my boy, that a man who works too hard on Earth should be sent to the colonies. That's where a man who works hard ought to be. It'll be years before there are any unions in Aperdui, any upper-limit quotas, any problems of surplus production."

Johnny pondered. Already Sandra Kay, the kind of girl who would never have looked at him if they had both lived out their lives on Earth, was showing signs of interest in him. Sandra was a realist. It had taken her no time at all to readjust and see for herself, by more intuitive methods than Rawlings had used, that a strong, healthy, energetic, enthusiastic young man like Johnny Horne was liable to accomplish a lot more on Aperdui than he could ever have done on Earth.

"Maybe it won't be so bad at that," Johnny said at last.

The telephone girl, Sylvia Oliver, came last . . .

AFTERWARDS, Rawlings delivered a little sermon. It was always much the same. At first he had tried to say something a little different each time, but at the hundredth repetition of what was essentially the same speech the words came out in a treacly flow as if he had turn-

ed the spigot on a barrel of molasses.

"I don't want you to leave here laboring under a sense of injustice," he said earnestly. "The plain fact is, Earth has to get rid of at least ten million people every year. Less than a tenth of that number emigrate voluntarily, despite all the publicity campaigns."

Tom cast an ironical glance at the poster on the wall beside him.

EMIGRATE!
EMIGRATE NOW!
A NEW LIFE AWAITS YOU!
APERDUI IS A LAND OF PROMISE

The girl in the picture was nearly as pretty as that blonde actress. Her eyes invited. *Come to Aperdui and get me. See what's waiting for you if you come to Aperdui. How could anybody be dumb enough not to want to come to Aperdui?*

But there was still, fortunately or unfortunately, a free press. People could read about Aperdui and Roc and Verdan and Mistan. They knew that the worlds the Transportation Board sent settlers to were always frontier worlds where a farm could be a million square miles and the nearest cinema could be twenty light-years away.

Of course, if you were *very* lucky, you might be sent to a world like Verdan or Mistan just before transportation to that world stopped. Verdan was still sparsely populated—indeed, by Terran standards it was uninhabited. But Verdan was self-sufficient. That meant that Verdan had enough people on it to support factories that made cars, electrical appliances and even such luxuries as bottles and mirrors and shaving cream.

It would be a long time before Aperdui reached such a state. No wonder, Tom thought, that only a million idealistic idiots were taken in by the posters each year.

"So more than nine million people have to be *made* to emigrate each year," Rawlings went on. "Preferably more. Twelve million would be best. It makes sense, doesn't it? The colonies need these people desperately; Earth desperately needs to get rid of them. So—"

"So I get sent away," Joan exclaimed, "for ringing up my fiancé to tell him some good news."

Rawlings nodded. "Exactly. What I'm trying to tell you is, it's *not* unfair. You haven't been badly treated, any of you. Only so many convicts can be sent to planets like Aperdui. You wouldn't want to live in a sparsely-populated world with murderers and thieves all around you, would you? So nine million people have to be found. Maybe

you'd rather it was settled by a lottery. The governments of the world decided it would be fairer this way, that's all."

HE looked at Tom. "You needn't have been sent here. You knew that you were in sole charge of a complicated and vital process. The instant you found the phone call was only from—"

"I know," sighed Tom. "I've had all that already."

Rawlings's gaze passed to Joan. "You've been told you musn't phone the laboratories. You chose to ignore that. You, Horne, disregarded clear labor regulations. You two took up more than your fair share of Earth's supplies. And you, Miss Kay, knew perfectly well you were making an obscene film."

"I didn't think it was obscene."

"But you knew the censors would, didn't you?"

Rawlings sighed, knowing they were unsympathetic, and made one final try. "Twenty-five years ago I was in exactly the same position as all of you. I'd falsified a report in an attempt to get a flat, after waiting three years. When I was brought before the Transportation Board, I felt as you feel now. And I'll be honest with you, Verdan seemed to me, when I got there, even worse than I expected. But now, twenty-five years later I —"

"We all know," said Tom. "You envy us. Look, if I spent twenty-five years trying to give up dope and finally succeeded, I'd be glad I'd made it in the end. But that doesn't mean I'd enjoy every minute of the twenty-five years. Cut the cackle — what happens now?"

When they had gone, Rawlings stared gloomily at the papers in front of him. For sheer frustration, this job took some beating. Satisfied settlers were always employed for these interviews, in the hope of sparkling off some enthusiasm in the disgruntled emigrants. But Rawlings hadn't seen any enthusiasm in this bunch. The sooner his contract was up and he could get back to good old Verdan the better.

Then Rawlings brightened a little. At least there was Sylvia Oliver. The kiss she had given him to seal the bargain made his collar feel too tight when he thought about it.

And he needn't feel he was selling out the colonies. A girl like that would be sure to land in trouble again within six months. The reflection salved his conscience.

His conscience didn't bother him because he was cheating the other six, the six who were going to Aperdui. It bothered him because he was cheating Sylvia Oliver by keeping her here on Earth.

III

THEY hadn't much time to get used to the idea of starting a new life on Aperdui. Since passengers were always kept in cocoons, the journey from Earth to Aperdui didn't exist as far as they were concerned.

They were suddenly, very suddenly—too suddenly—just new settlers dumped in the middle of a prairie somewhere in Aperdui.

The tall man in check shirt and filthy breeches—he didn't bother to tell them his name—pointed at the rough shelter and said: "Started your house for you. Always do that for new settlers. Guess there was some mistake about your group. Thought there was a spare woman. Bill Perkins will be mad as hell when he shows."

Johnny found himself the spokesman for the group. "You're not going? We know nothing about this place."

Check Shirt didn't pause on the way to his horse. Over his shoulder he said: "Bill Perkins will be here in a couple hours. No harm you can come to till then."

They watched him ride off slowly in the afternoon heat. Then they looked around.

No Earthman of the eighteenth, nineteenth or early twentieth century would have been much perturbed by what they saw. The country was flat, consisting of grassland, bracken, black rock and occasional small clumps of trees. The scene wasn't unlike early American prairie.

But there hadn't been any American prairie left for a couple of centuries or so, and the three men and three women from Earth saw Aperdui as naked, terrifying wilderness. To them, ground was concrete, horizons were skylines, and the only open spaces were seas (now rapidly being covered with huge floating cities).

By elimination, the crude shelter fifty yards from them must be the "house" Check Shirt had said had been started for them. It consisted of four thick poles supporting a plaited-grass roof. A foot off the ground a rough wooden floor had been constructed. That was all.

There was no road. A truck had borne them across the prairie, jolting so much that they'd hardly been able to see the country.

It was hot, but not too hot. And no more than a hundred yards beyond the shelter was a broad, clear stream — the reason, no doubt, for the choice of site.

"Anyway, we can have a swim," Sandra said, stripping off her clothes.

"There may be fish—crabs —water insects," Tom warned.

"Well, we'll soon find out."

NAKED, Sandra dived into the stream. One by one, as nothing disastrous happened to her, the others peeled and followed her.

Johnny swam upstream after Sandra. He caught her in a clear pool and kissed her. She laughed, threw her hair out of her eyes and swam still further upstream at a rate he couldn't match.

Sandra was still a realist. Although the matter hadn't been discussed among them, they all knew that in conditions like those of Aperdui there would be no bachelors and spinsters except women who couldn't get a man and men who couldn't get a woman. Sandra had to take Johnny or somebody else, and pretty damn quick. She didn't have to marry him — nobody would worry much about marriage during the next twenty years or so. Whether a man and woman living together were married or not didn't matter until there were neighbors. And it would be a long time before there were any neighbors.

Johnny finally caught Sandra far upstream and pulled her to the bank. She let him kiss her but she didn't let him do anything else, not yet. A girl had her pride. One manifestation of this was how long she kept him waiting. It might not be years, months, weeks. It might not even be days. But it had to be at least a few hours no matter what.

When Bill Perkins arrived they were sitting or lying in the sun beside the stream. All of them had put something on, just to prove they were still civilized, even in such a world.

Bill Perkins didn't look civilized at all, though he wore a check shirt and fairly clean shorts. He was tall and lean, thirty or so, heavily tanned, slow-speaking and quick-moving. Johnny, at least, liked him on sight.

Perkins was philosophical about the absence of a spare woman. "Guess I'd better stick around till you've got the hang of things," he said. "Have to move on then, though. Gather round, folks, and I'll try to explain the setup."

"Do you have to talk like a cowboy?" asked Joan, irritated.

HE looked her over for a few seconds before replying. "No," he said mildly. "I could talk like an advertising copywriter, which is what I used to be. With an effort, I could talk like a college professor, considering I once went to college. But somehow there doesn't seem to be much use for ten-dollar words out here. It's surprising how many words I know and don't have to use."

"How's the food situation?" asked Tubby eagerly.

Perkins looked him over too.

Tubby had lost thirty pounds on the trip, but he still looked like a balloon man, especially with his naked belly hanging over the towel which covered his loins.

When Perkins spoke, he didn't answer Tubby's question directly. "First, we get some ground cleared," he said. "Guess we can borrow a horse and plough from the Rosenheims, ten miles thataway. We get the seed for free. And meantime we draw supplies in relation to the acreage we got planted, or intend to plant. The first load arrives by truck at sunset."

"You don't use cash yet?" Johnny inquired.

"Well, we do, but for new settlers it's an abstraction. We'll have to live on credit for a couple of years anyway, and nobody counts the pennies too accurately, any more than you will when another new group is set down ten miles to the east. That won't happen for about five years, anyway. Won't happen at all if you can show you can use more than ten miles of land. There's plenty of land, if you can show it isn't going to be wasted."

"Sheep?" asked Johnny. "Can we stock with sheep?"

Perkins favored him with the same searching scrutiny. This time he seemed to like what he saw. "You could," he said. "But a lot of other guys had heard of Australia before they got here. And, though you probably think you're pioneers, you're too late to make a fortune with sheep. Best bet would be wheat, I'd say. Soil's right for it too."

"Sometimes you say 'we' and sometimes 'you,' " Johnny said. "How long are you staying, Bill?"

"Well, I thought there was an extra woman in this party. Might find one and bring her. If I don't, guess I won't wait any longer than I have to. Maybe a couple of months, to get you started. Any of you know anything about farming? Somebody must, or you wouldn't have been left together like this."

"I do," said Tom. "Via hydroponics."

Perkins gave him the usual slow examination. A good second-in-command, he thought. A man with brains but no drive. Johnny Horne would be the leader.

AT last Perkins turned back to Tubby, whose question had never been answered. "We get the first load of supplies by truck at sunset," he repeated. "There'll be enough to keep us alive and healthy, sure. But by the look of you, mister, you're going to be hungry for about thirty years. It'll be that time before anybody around here will be able to eat until he busts."

A groan escaped Tubby. At the same time Sandra jumped

and slapped her knee. "Something bit me!" she said.

Perkins scrutinized her, too. In white satin shorts and a green ribbon of a brassiere, she looked like a film star, which perhaps was hardly surprising. Above his reach, Bill decided without regret. Besides, Johnny seemed to have claims.

"Mosquito," he said. "It stings some, that's all."

"Didn't mosquitoes used to carry disease?" Joan asked sharply. "Malaria, or something?"

Bill Perkins shrugged. "Never knew of anybody getting sick after mosquito bites here."

"Insects, not only mosquitoes, used to be carriers," Tom said. "Unless there's something to carry, they're pretty harmless. Malaria died out on Earth before the carriers did. The last mosquitoes were clean."

"I thought there were no vehicles on Aperdui except carts," Johnny said. "But a truck brought us here."

"There's about ten trucks on this world, all assembled from parts brought from Earth. There's even a couple of helicopters. But they're for real emergencies. Aren't even brought out for straightforward things like maternity cases."

All the women had been thinking about this already. On Earth it was possible to have babies between television shows. They had already guessed that here things might be slightly different.

They talked about the arrangements for expectant mothers for a while, and then Kate suddenly said: "Where's Tubby? I haven't seem him since —"

The stream was in a slight hollow. When they climbed out of it and looked at the shelter, they saw Tubby right away, hanging from the rafters.

Apart from a few gasps from the women, there was silence. Nobody rushed to cut him down. He was too still for it to be worth while.

Besides, most of them felt that if that was what Tubby wanted, nobody ought to try to take it from him.

Bill looked around and for the first time surveyed Kate. She was thin and stringy. But he liked thin and stringy women, being lean himself.

"Guess maybe I won't be moving on after all," he said.

THE first time the supply truck called it merely dumped supplies and left. The second time, however, it brought a supply officer, Harry Rinker.

Rinker listened as Johnny outlined their plans. Bill Perkins stayed around, silent. Some things the new settlers had to find out for themselves. When Johnny was through, Rinker made quick mental

estimates and told them what he could supply on the basis of the plans presented to him.

It wasn't quite enough to keep the six of them alive.

From there Johnny went to the other extreme. He had presented his minimum aims first. Now he tried his maximum on Rinker.

The supply officer shook his head. The six of them just couldn't do that much, he said. A reasonable compromise was reached.

When Rinker had gone, Johnny turned to Bill, frowning. "I thought it was possible to build up from nothing here? On that basis, we'll be in debt all our lives."

"Well, you need to work pretty hard," said Bill judicially.

"I was transported from Earth for working too hard."

"Were you, now? That's interesting. You'll never be transported from Aperdui for anything like that. Well, look, Johnny, most people are too optimistic about what they can do. That's why Rinker has to be cautious. You can succeed here, like anywhere else, if you have the basic qualities."

"And what are the basic qualities? What's *the* basic quality?"

Bill thought for a moment. Then he said slowly: "I guess it would be knowing when to keep going and when to dig in. The cautious guys, the guys who aren't prepared to risk anything, don't do much better here than anywhere else. And the stop-at-nothing guys, the guys who won't give an inch no matter how badly the breaks run against them, they don't become Rockefellers either. It's the guys who run the tide when things are going good, taking on twice, five times as much as they planned, and dig in the moment the tide starts turning—those guys are the guys who come out on top in a place like this."

Johnny nodded thoughtfully. "Another thing. Why are new groups left to fend for themselves like this, with only one fellow who knows the ropes to help them? Why aren't we mixed in with experienced farmers, who know the conditions and the climate and the planet itself?"

"Well, now, Johnny, new settlements have to be lands of promise. There's got to be something to work for, to live for. Suppose the six of us here did well the first year and better the next and even better the year after. Suppose we had the best goddam farm in the whole of Aperdui, and the best workers. How would we like it if sombody came along and split us all up, sending us in twos to work with new groups just out from Earth?"

"I get it. It's a chance of complete failure, but a chance

of making a big success too."

"Sure."

Johnny took a deep breath. "Well, it's not going to be failure," he said definitely.

WEEKS passed. Months passed. All the women were with child, but by sheer accident it was going to work out that they'd all be able to help each other when the time came.

Nobody was exactly happy, but then, nobody had any time to be miserable.

Aperdui had had a tiny ecology before the Earthmen arrived. There were a few insects, a few birds, a few small animals, chiefly marsupials. There were remains of many more species. No one quite knew yet why or how they had died out. It certainly didn't seem to be because conditions had been too tough for them.

One theory was that one species had killed off most of the others, upsetting the balance so that its own food became extinct too. Even here, Tom realized, the Balance Must Be Preserved.

Certainly this left Aperdui a pretty friendly world for Earthmen, if there were enough of them.

That was the snag.

It wasn't that things couldn't be made on Aperdui. Of course they could, if enough people could and would buy them. But it was no use manufacturing a car and selling it, if a couple of years were going to pass before anybody else wanted a car and had the money to pay for it. And cars weren't much good without roads. And there were no roads. And nobody wanted to go anywhere, anyway.

Tractors, now, everybody wanted tractors. It was still cheaper, however, to get them from Verdan, the nearest manufacturing world, than to make them on Aperdui. And tractors from Verdan cost too much.

On Aperdui, people like Johnny Horne learned the economic facts of life the hard way. A tractor from Verdan cost $65,000. With a tractor they could multiply their production several times, but the tractor would not have paid for itself by the time it had to be scrapped. Nevertheless, the work it had done before it died of old age would eventually pay for it.

Sandra had a son and Kate had a daughter. Joan lost her baby and went on doing the same thing with distressing regularity.

APART from this and a minor flood there were no snags during the first year. The next year the floods were worse. The year after that, worse still. The people of Kayhorn had learned their lesson the first time, however, and while other farms were badly

damaged, Kayhorn lost little or nothing.

There were three houses and a barn now, primitive but solid. In the fourth year they even had running water and water closets—also primitive, but working most of the time.

The five people who had come from Earth looked very different now. Johnny and Sandra were lean and bronzed, twice as tough as they had been when they landed. Kate, surprisingly, had begun to run to fat after her first pregnancy. Joan was pale and moody. She was the one who took least to Aperdui (apart from Tubby), and frequently regretted that she hadn't taken Rawlings up on his offer. If any of her babies had lived things might have been different. Tom was quiet and thoughtful these days. He was the one who did all the figuring.

Tom had always imagined, and so had Johnny for that matter, that in a closed group the natural, inevitable leader would be the most intelligent of them, the one who did the thinking and figuring. It didn't work out that way. Both he and Johnny, not to mention the other four, acknowldeged it.

From the beginning Johnny had taken the decisions. The farm had been called Kayhorn half jokingly at first, but it was soon accepted that Johnny was the boss. Bill Perkins had the experience; Tom Camm had the brains; and Johnny was the boss.

It wasn't until the fifth anniversary of their arrival at Kayhorn — which also, by a strange coincidence, was the fifth anniversary of the three unlegalized marriages — that Sandra said to Johnny, in a tone of surprise: "You know, Johnny — we're happy here."

He grinned. "You and I — and Junior and Mary and Kit and Frances. We're happy."

"And the others too, surely?"

"The kids, yes. Bill, yes. And one of these days Kate will admit that she's getting used to the place. But Tom and Joan . . ."

"Sure, they keep saying this is a hell of a place and they'd give anything to get back to Earth. But people don't always mean what they say."

Johnny didn't argue. He rarely did, and never with Sandra. That didn't mean, however, that he agreed about Tom and Joan.

IV

THE sixth year was the Year of the Tractors. At last the equation balanced. It became worth while making tractors on Aperdui.

Johnny managed not only to buy a tractor but also to put some money into the tractor business.

It was strange, yet typical,

that Tom had to explain to him how and why the business was a good investment, how the profits would be so small at first that Johnny could get a bigger and bigger hold on the tractor business—and yet Johnny invested in it and Tom didn't.

As happiness had crept up on them, so wealth crept up on them. Johnny was not yet thirty; Sandra was twenty-seven. They worked as hard as ever. Yet one day Tom told Johnny that the total value of their joint undertakings, excluding Johnny's tractor stock, was close on a hundred thousand dollars.

Considering that three tractors cost that much, it didn't seem riches beyond the dreams of avarice. That meant that each of the adults, not counting the seven children, was worth about half a tractor. The achievement had to be interpreted: from debt to solvency to money-in-the-bank.

Seven years after farming at Kayhorn began, a road was built through it. And the road actually led to a town. At the moment the town consisted of two farms, a store, a blacksmith's shop and a hall, and it was called, with the usual originality of settlers, New Chicago.

The next year Tom and Joan left Kayhorn. They had the chance of a nearby farm which had failed through mismanagement, and they took it. The parting was not acrimonious; Johnny lent Tom the money he needed. Both farms, Kayhorn and "the Camm place," took on hired men. There were immigrants from Earth these days who preferred working for a wage to starting a farm of their own. And there were people who could afford to employ them.

TAXES started in Kayhorn's tenth year. Nobody paid them with any great enthusiasm, but it was obvious that what had been a frontier world only interested in survival now needed schools, police, hospitals and even a government building somewhere.

On Johnny's thirty-fifth birthday he realized he was a millionaire.

Of course, it was all very theoretical. If he was suddenly told he could go back to Earth provided he sold out within a week, he'd probably not be able to realize much more than a quarter of a million. But that was theoretical too. If he were told that, he wouldn't go.

It delighted him to be able to make things easier for Sandra now. At thirty-three, with five children, she had lost her twenty-two-inch waistline, but with her magnificent bust and hips a twenty-four-inch waistline was more appropriate, anyway. She had worked like a slave for nearly ten years, and now freely acknowledged

that it hadn't done her any harm. Nevertheless, Johnny's greatest happiness these days was that when he came home from work, Sandra was waiting for him. In other words, she hadn't been working at his shoulder all day.

It delighted him to be able to add to the amenities of their home. There was the concrete walk all the way to the road, for example. No need to bring mud into the house any more every time you entered. And gradually the wood-and-grass house was becoming stone and tile. Johnny could have built an entirely new house, but he didn't want that and knew Sandra didn't want it either.

There came the day when the first radio programs started. Johnny and Sandra and the children listened with all the eagerness of the first crystal-set pioneers. The children couldn't understand it at all and, when told the radio converted electrical waves back into sound, went outside to see if they could see the waves in the sky.

Still Bill Perkins and Kate were with them. Kate now almost as fat as Tubby used to be. Kate and Sandra, who had never had anything in common in the old days, were coming closer together now. There was beginning to be a baby-sitting problem again, unknown for years because nobody ever went out for the evening, and Kate and Sandra knew each other's family quite as well as they knew their own. It couldn't be said any more that they had nothing in common. They had their whole lives in common. For the early years back on Earth now seemed as strange and baffling as any dream.

Bill had never changed. He had many chances to leave Kayhorn and take over a farm of his own, as Tom and Joan had done. He never even considered them.

Tom and Joan weren't doing very well. Kayhorn had given them inflated ideas of what could be achieved. They bit off far more than they could chew and, but for continued help from Johnny, the Camm place would have foundered.

ONCE Sandra and Johnny nearly quarreled over the Camms. Johnny's affairs were not quite in their usual prosperous condition, owing to a storm which destroyed nearly a whole crop, when Tom called. Sandra said nothing when Tom was there, but when he departed with all Johnny's spare cash and a note addressed to the bank in New Chicago, Sandra found herself hotly pointing out that he'd said Junior's new bicycle would have to wait meantime, and now he'd given Tom Camm the price of thirty new bicycles — *given* — because

he'd certainly never see his money again.

"I know, Sandra," said Johnny. "Better not tell Junior. He might not understand."

"Well, I don't understand either. That storm cost you thousands, but you can stand it because you're prepared for such things. Tom can't stand it because he isn't. You know he'll never pay you back. How much more are you going to give him?"

"As much as he needs," said Johnny quietly.

And as Sandra drew a deep breath to tell him what she thought of such unrealistic altruism — for Sandra was still a realist — he added quietly: "It's not just friendship, honey. There's such a thing as gratitude."

"Gratitude?" said Sandra blankly.

"Kayhorn owes a lot to Tom Camm. More than you'll ever believe. Sure, I made the decisions, and they were right decisions, most of them. Sure, without Bill we'd have been nowhere. But it was Tom who saw the way every time, who knew what was going to happen if we did this, and what would probably happen if we did that."

"Then why can't he make anything of his own farm?"

Johnny shrugged. "Tom's the kind of fellow who can't make even the decisions he knows must be made. And another thing. Joan. When Joan griped it didn't have the slightest effect on me. Tom could tell me what ought to be done, and what Joan thought about it didn't matter a damn to me. But it's got to matter to Tom. Think how different things were for Tom and me, honey. I have you. Tom has Joan."

There was a long silence. Then Sandra said: "Hell, why don't you hit me or something instead of making me feel a heel? It would be over quicker."

He caught her arm and pulled her down with him, laughing. "Honey, after all these years do I still have to keep telling you? I love you."

"Yes," she said. "You still have to keep telling me."

IN Kayhorn's twenty-first year immigration from Earth stopped. At least, transportation did. There were still a few volunteer immigrants, enough to supplement the news of Earth which the supply ships brought, not enough to affect the general situation one way or the other.

Aperdui still had a smaller population than Earth had had when the Pilgrim Fathers landed at Plymouth Rock. But at last Aperdui had enough.

The last transported colonists were in their twenties, thirties, and forties. The earliest colonists were in their thirties, forties, fifties, and

sixties. And the oldest members of the second generation, the first natives of Aperdui, were as old as the youngest immigrants.

On Johnny and Sandra's silver anniversary, Sandra found her first gray hair.

She frowned at it, twitched it out, and in sudden alarm slipped straps from her shoulders and looked at herself in the full-length mirror. What she saw reassured her.

Still, with all her children married she was hardly a girl any more. Married . . . she suddenly realized that although her children were actually married, legally married, she and Johnny had never gotten around to it. Might be as well, one of these days. It might get to be a slur in little Johnny's later life that his grandparents had never been married.

Tom and Joan came to the party, naturally, but both Johnny and Sandra, not to mention Bill and Kate, were surprised to find them happy for the first time in years. Johnny was even more surprised when Tom took him aside and paid him back every last cent he owed him.

"I didn't hear that the bank had been robbed," Johnny said.

Tom grinned. "I won't tell you about it now. You'll hear soon enough."

And they did, two days later. Tom had been offered an important government job and had sold the farm on better terms than he could have hoped. Land which had been anybody's for the taking twenty-five years ago was beginning to be quite valuable.

Tom and Joan were going back to Earth.

"No wonder Joan was pleased," Sandra said, when they heard about this. "I wonder if they'll be happy now?"

Johnny kissed her on the tip of her nose. "I lent Tom a lot," he said, "but I could never lend him happiness."

"Johnny," said Sandra. "I've been thinking. Will you marry me?"

V

AFTERWARDS, Tom delivered a little sermon, always the same.

"I know you think you've had a raw deal," he said, surveying the eight young men and women in front of him, "but you've got to realize that one way or another Earth has to get rid of at least fifteen million people every year. Would you rather have been shot or gassed?"

Nobody answered.

"Thirty years ago," Tom said, "I was in exactly the same position as all of you. I'd done exactly the same as you, Jones. But now, thirty years later —"

"I know," sneered the chemist. "You envy us. You wish

you were in our shoes. So do we."

"Isn't there any chance, Mr. Camm," said the school-teacher, "of getting transferred to Aperdui instead of Thornton?"

"I'm afraid not. Aperdui is fully self-supporting now. It's off the list of Transportation worlds. It isn't a pioneer world any more. Of course, there's still plenty to be done there . . ."

He sighed. Joan had been desperate to come back.

But on Earth you lived in a tiny room four levels down from the sky. If you went for a walk in the open air, it was on rooftops. The food was meager and always the same. The air was clean and odorless and antiseptic. Even if you had no claustrophobic tendencies, you were oppressed by the knowledge that there were people eating, sleeping, talking, making love, quarrelling and dying within ten feet of you, north, south, east and west, above and below. And beyond them, in all six directions, more people, and beyond them . . .

The tragedy was that the eight bitter young people in front of him were such slaves to the little luxuries of life on Earth that they thought they were being condemned to a living death instead of being granted the boon of freedom, of open space, of discovery. And the frustration of his own position was that he never succeeded in communicating to them the sincerity of his own longing to get out of the sardine-can which was Earth. Even Joan wanted to get back to Aperdui. But he still had three years of his contract to fulfill.

"Thornton is a grand world," he began.

"Look, do we have to hear you talk?" the busted cop demanded. "Send us straight to the spaceport and get it over."

WHEN they had gone, Tom stared gloomily at the papers in front of him. For sheer frustration, this job took some beating. God, how he wished he was back on Aperdui! Johnny would help him to get started again, he knew.

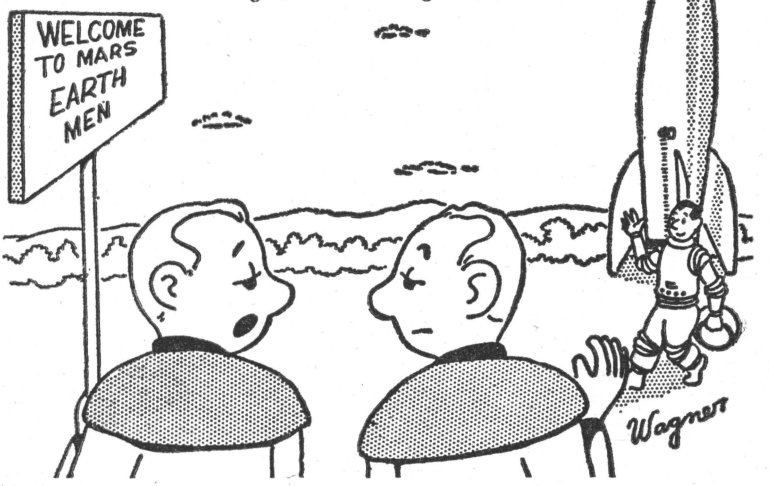
He brightened a little. At least there was the bubble dancer. When she had kissed him to seal the bargain he had suddenly felt thirty years younger, as if he were just setting out for Aperdui again.

And he didn't have to feel he was selling out the colonies by holding her back. A girl like that would be sure to land in trouble again within six months. The reflection salved his conscience.

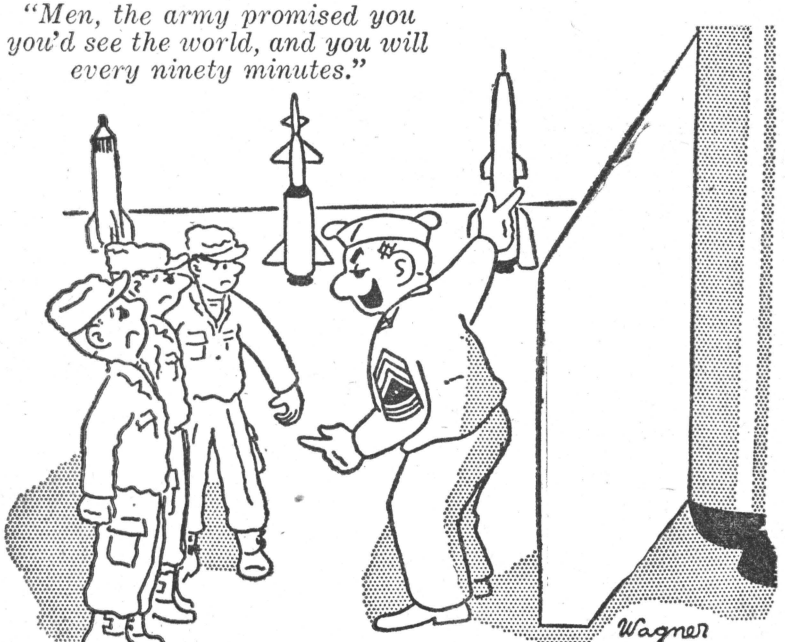
His conscience didn't bother him because he was cheating the other eight, the eight who were going to Thornton. It bothered him because he was cheating the girl by keeping her here on Earth. **END**

IFun

"Some how I'd always thought of them as being small and green."



"Men, the army promised you you'd see the world, and you will every ninety minutes."



By WILLIAM W. STUART

Illustrated by Harman

OUT OF MIND

Nirva was a real bore. The food was always great, the climate tediously fine, the view monotonously lovely, the girls relentessly amiable. But, oddly, everybody went there!

"VACATION trip to Nirva?!?" snapped Secad Screed—Galactic Sector Administrator J. Gomer Screed, a serious-minded man who rarely lost his temper. That was a pity; it was a lousy temper. "A mindless excursion, and completely outside my Sector at that! Woman, are both you and Garten out of your minds? Who do you think is going run my administration with both Garten and I on a childish vacation to this absurd 'Dream Planet' of yours?"

"Well—there is Deputy Assistant Prinot and—"

"Ha! And then what do you suppose would be left of my record here and my prospects of promotion—after Depast Prinot and the others put in five solid weeks wrecking all my work?"

Secast Garten, short, a little chubby, the opposite of his chief (who looked like a deep-thinking, bald stork scheduled for delivery of Sia-

mese quintuplets in a typhoon,) grinned. He was seated out of the direct line of verbal fire, on a rock-hard hassock at one side of the barely furnished S c r e e d apartment. He grinned, knowing what Secad Screed would do with a similar opportunity at Division Hq.

"Oh, now, dear," soothed Mrs. Screed, a mousey, chronically anxious little woman with five years experience as secretary and ten as wife in learning to soothe her husband. "Prinot is such a nice man. Don't worry so about things. Just put them out of your mind; they'll be all right."

"What?" Fifteen years experience she had soothing him, but she never did seem to get the knack of it. Or, perhaps, it was a matter of Screed's conscientiously refusing to be soothed, as a matter of discipline. A wife should know her place. Women being what they were, light minded, he felt it only fair that he should regularly point it out to her. He didn't want to spoil her. And he didn't either—unless it was in the matter of favoring her with his personal attentions weekly, at 11:30 p.m., each Friday.

This was big of him. She was lucky. Secad Screed was a big man, Administrative Officer in full command of a major sun system at only 56, wedded to his work and dedicated to becoming more and more important. Mrs. Screed's position was, in a way, almost bigamous. She had a rich, full fifteen minutes every Friday, and what more could any woman want of life?

At the moment, this one imagined she wanted to take a vacation trip to some nonsensical, little known, semi-mythical dream planet that Garten—the fool!—had been telling her about. "Garten—"

"You are so right, J.G., so right. Give Prinot and those boys an inch and they'll be measuring you out for a grave with it, while they sharpen their knives. Half a chance and they'd foul up your whole Sector Administration. But—you know, sir, after five straight years on the job for both you and me, a five-week vacation is compulsory. We do have our orders."

"Mf-f-f!" That was true and that was the rub. "But we don't have to chase off so far we can't keep an eye on things!"

"Of course, sir. Or—an idea you gave me just the other day, sir—with the recent Truad activity over in Sector Y, we could put this whole system into an emergency invasion alert drill, sir. For the duration—of our vacation. Then every move Prinot makes will have to follow the book—or a court-martial when we get back. With you presiding, eh?"

SECAD Screed smiled a thin smile. "I thought of that, of course, Garten. Clever of you to see it. Given time, I may be able to make a passably capable assistant of you after all."

Garten was necessarily more skilled at soothing Screed than was Mrs. S., whose somewhat special status brought her very limited privileges but considerable job security. Garten had hung on, sometimes narrowly, for some five years now.

"Yes sir. I hope so, sir."

"But not as long as you come up with asinine suggestions for us to throw away valuable time on some scarcely heard of 'dream planet.' Even though Centrad does enforce these foolish compulsory vacations, there is no reason why the time cannot be turned to some useful account."

"But, dear," murmured Mrs. Screed wistfully.

"No! Viola, you seem to have lost whatever few wits you once possessed. Why in the Galactic Universe would I go to some tiny, sink-hole, single planet system not even important enough to have a Service Administration? Even I have scarcely heard of the place. Garten, what ever got into you?"

"Uh—ah, well, sir. You see I—uh—have always admired so your report on waste and extravagance on Primus that you made following your last vacation five years ago just before coming here. The way you toppled the entire Sector Administration, forced a dozen or more early retirements and—"

"And got me my promotion to Secad."

"Yes, sir. A sensational job, and much talked of at Centrad, I know. Well sir, I just thought that, since this Nirva is so little known, something of a mystery you know, and something of a sore point with Centrad too, perhaps it might be ripe for an expose."

"Mph. Nonsense, Garten. Not important enough—though, come to consider, it is odd how little public information there is about the place. Centrad is covering something . . . Hm-m. Never bothered to check the secret files on it myself. Just for curiosity, Garten, what *is* the detail on the thing?"

Mrs. Screed leaned back in her chair; glanced blankly about the bare apartment; picked idly at a cuticle; tried, with apprehensively expressive features, to register total disinterest. Once, before discouragement set in, she had been a modestly pretty young woman. Now she was merely modest.

"Viola," snapped Screed, "go fix some refreshment. Ice water, crackers, something. Can't have you sitting there mooning over this Nirva non-

sense of Garten's. Your mind has too great an affinity for nonsense."

"Yes, sir. Well, sir—"

MRS. Screed threw him a fleeting, timid smile over her shoulder as she left the room through the kitchen door, back of Screed's arm chair. Inside of two minutes she was back, standing very quietly in the doorway with a pitcher of water and a dish of plain, protein crackers on a tray. Garten talked on.

"Nirva, as you know, is the single planet of a small sun off on the fringes of this region of the Galaxy. It seemed so insignificant it was never even visited until something like fifty years ago. Then a questionable prospector ship had a minor breakdown and was forced to come out of an inter-space jump near the Nirva system. The prospectors had been ten years out. They were coming back empty-handed, nothing to show, not one valuable planet found. There they were. Spectroanalysis of Nirva didn't show much, but they decided to check anyway. They were desperate, dreaming out of all reason of a last-ditch success — dreaming of a civilized, friendly planet, hospitable natives, rich beyond belief, foolishly ready for exploitation, eager to load them up with fissionable minerals and so on. You know how those old space tramp adventurers used to be, sir."

"Hmph. Tramps, yes. So?"

"So they landed and discovered Nirva, the Dream Planet. Of course they didn't find that out at the time."

"What did they find?"

"They found a civilized, friendly planet, hospitable natives, rich beyond belief, foolishly ready for exploitation, eager to load them up with fissionable minerals and so on. There wasn't even a communication problem. The people, handsome, human type, were telepathic. Well. Their visit, although no two of the eleven men on the ship could agree on the details, was one glorious celebration. Liquor and no hangovers. Women, the most beautiful in the universe, competing with each other to do everything—I mean *everything* — for the pleasure of the space heroes. In fact, it seemed a space tramp's dream of heaven. They hated to leave."

"If the place was such a degenerate's delight, why did they leave?"

"Just simple greed, apparently. Their ship was loaded with the most valuable cargo in history. They couldn't resist the urge to take it back and cash in; to strut around and be big heroes, men of wealth and power back home. Finally, and with plenty of regrets, they blasted off. A couple of jumps, six months—

travel was slow then, of course—and they landed at the regional capital. They reported their discovery and claims, turned in the cargo for analysis and sale—and, listening for the cheers, sat back to collect their fortunes. Instead of cheers, they got the universal horse laugh."

"A laugh? At a fortune? Why—oh, yes. Of course; turned out they made a pretty stupid mistake about that cargo, eh?"

"WELL, it seemed a funny mistake. Their whole cargo of rare, fissionable elements was nothing but perfectly ordinary sand and rock. Now, this crew was rough, but prospecting was their business. They knew their business. It just wasn't possible that they could have made such a mistake. At first the officials were inclined to drop the whole thing as a pointless hoax. But it *was* so pointless. Somebody was sharp enough to push for an investigation on that account. They rounded up the prospectors, who were all hustling around trying to promote supplies to get them back to Nirva. They got a psychiatric team to run them all through a complete check. The clues to the truth of the matter turned up then; but they were not, at least not generally understood."

"What—?"

"The psychiatric team found that each of the eleven told a similar story, and actually had a similar mental picture of Nirva. But, examined closely, the detail, the artifacts, the—uh—types and—ah—um—habits of the women were startlingly, if not sensationally, different. So different that, in fact, the planet seemed to be perfect. Perfect according to each crewman's idea of the perfect planet. Some of them had pretty crude ideals of perfection, of course. The psychiatric team pushed through an order grounding all members of the crew. All of them ended badly, by the way—seven suicides, two murders, two violent mental cases. The team submitted a completely inconclusive report. Then they proposed that they all be sent to examine Nirva."

"Well? Get to the point, Garten!"

"The expedition went out. It never came back. No word ever came back. The administration jumped to a conclusion that the planet, Nirva, had become hostile and the expeditionary force captured. A battle cruiser, advised to expect resistance and with orders to use all force necessary to pacify the planet and rescue prisoners, was sent out. The cruiser went. It met resistance near Nirva and won a brilliant victory. The

Nirva forces surrendered. The ship landed and officers and crew were feted by the defeated population. Prisoners were rescued. Finally, and with some little reluctance the captain, a devoted family man, gave orders and the cruiser headed back. But—at the first jump away, the prisoners and something like two-thirds of the cruiser's crew vanished. Naturally there was a good deal of excitement.

"Arrant nonsense."

"Yes, sir. Of course. But—two further rescue expeditions ran into much the same thing. It seemed that only individuals with the most vital and binding ties or absorbing interests back home ever came back from N i r v a. Others, especially anyone with the least trace of instability, stayed there."

"A lunatic planet for the feeble-minded!"

"UH—yes, sir. In a manner of speaking. At least the officially approved conclusion regarding Nirva is this. No way to be certain but, presumably, from sample materials and distance observation, it appears a rather ordinary, Earth-type planet physically. It is inhabited by a race, physical characteristics doubtful, probably humanoid, having unique mental properties. Imaginative, very powerful, hypnotic. And, the theory goes, these people exercise a sort of group mind power w i t h individualistic overtones. To all intents and purposes, they modify their physical—and social—s u r - roundings to suit themselves. Each then lives quite literally in a world of his own. The world of his dreams. For visitors from outside, same thing. Each person who lands on Nirva, or even approaches it without a powerful force shield, sees what he imagines he should see. He finds whatever he may be looking for. A man who has mental air castles, you might say, can go to Nirva and move right into them. As they say, sir, the planet of dreams."

"Hallucinations!"

"Yes, sir. But controlled, pleasant—and having all the force, feel and effect of reality. So the theory has it, that is. Of course, travel to Nirva is so restricted as to be almost completely prohibited now and the information wiped from public records. The administration could see that it might become disastrously over popular."

"Why not wipe out the whole lunatic asylum of a system?"

"Ah—yes. Well—uh—perhaps some of the men at the top thought perhaps it might turn out to be useful in—uh—some way."

"There have been rumors of mysterious disappearances of officials. Weakness."

"Yes sir. Exactly."

"A haven for weak-minded idiots to be taken in by stupid, parlor hypnotics. Why should I waste my time and talent exposing something so totally and transparently stupid?"

"Of course, sir. It would be a difficult thing to try to manage. I'm sure—in spite of the enormous publicity and promotional possibilities in clearing up the mystery—that it's not the sort of thing a solid administrator would care to get mixed up in."

The Secad looked interested.

"A perfectly horrible sounding place," interrupted Viola from her doorway, "I had no idea it would be anything like that. It sounds immoral, actually. I wouldn't go."

The Secad looked thoughtful.

"Besides," added Garten, "I'm certain, now I consider it, we couldn't possibly manage to get a clearance to visit Nirva anyway."

"Well, then," said Viola firmly. "You know how the Secad needs a rest. I do hope you can find something more suitable for our vacation than that. Some place that's *quiet* and *respectable* and—"

The Secad looked convinced. "Oh, shut up, Viola. And you too, Garten. If we must go on a vacation, we must—but I shall decide where we will go. Is that clear?"

That was clear.

NIRVA stuck in the mind of Secad Screed. He was, certainly, the sanest, soundest, solidest and most sensible of men. It was not possible to trick him into any hasty, ill-considered action.

Still, it rankled to have Garten and, of all people, Viola tell him he couldn't go to Nirva—and couldn't succeed in doing anything about it if he did.

Of course, it is true that a man can trust no one but himself. It was transparently obvious that Viola and that pipsqueek Garten were trying to con him into taking them to Nirva. But it was an irritation. And maybe the thing did, actually, offer the possibility for something sensational in the way of a coup.

Naturally, Garten and Viola were interested only in the supposed cheap thrills of the dream planet, the chance to escape from practical, business-like reality into some degenerate make-believe. They both needed a lesson. They should be shown how poor and weak a thing a romantic dream is, when brought up short by the trained, superior, analytical administrative mind.

The next day at work he set Garten to work drafting up orders for an emergency invasion alert drill "just in case." He then consulted with his Neuro-Surgeon General.

"Naturally, Dr. Treadmel,

I would never dream of directing any illegal actions within my own jurisdiction—where, of course, I am Secad and therefore the judge of all questions of legality. And of your Department too, Doctor, you may take note. However, the information I am endeavoring to extract from you I shall apply, if at all, solely to the planet Nirva. Not to any of ours."

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, Doctor. Now. You are familiar with hypnotics, are you not?"

"Sir!" The Doctor was hurt. "One of the primary duties—"

"All right. You are familiar with hypnotics. You use them all the time in legal questions, crime, employment interviewing in depth and so on. Naturally. And you are also aware of various measures—yes, yes, I know they are specifically barred by the Public Safety Amendment—some mechanical and some narcotic, that may be taken to counteract or prevent hypnosis. So. My question is this. Would such measures as your low power, hyper-electronic broadcast and your anti-hypnotic drugs be effective against the spell or illusion the inhabitants of Nirva use on visitors and, perhaps, themselves?"

"Well, now, Secad Screed, that is an extremely interesting question."

"I am interested only in the answer, Doctor."

"Uf. Yes, sir. Well, I can see no reason why they wouldn't be effective—always supposing the subjective hypnotic theory of the place is correct. That is—in theory—this group mind, which is supposed to provide the basis, should be totally disrupted by the random or scrambling effect of the electronic broadcast. The drugs, on the other hand, would render the individual who took the drug, during the period of its effectiveness, totally un- or non-receptive to the impulse, whereas—"

"All right, Doctor. You are trying to say, in your obfuscating manner, that the measures would be effective. Right?"

"Subjectively, not taking into account the hypothetical possibility of random foci—and, of course, barring circumstances outside the range of—"

"Doctor! Yes? Or no?"

"Well—uh—yes."

"Doctor, when you have quite finished the duties I am about to assign you, I suggest you visit my legal staff for a game of circumlocution. In the meantime—get me that drug."

"Yes, sir. You understand the limitations—"

"And give Chief Engineer Barstow the specifics for an anti-hypnotic electronic ampli-

fier, suitable for placing in satellite orbit."

"But—"

"Around Nirva. *Good-by*, Doctor!"

And that would take care of that.

OF course Nirva, the Dream Planet, was a fake. It was a fairy story for childish minds, not capable of affecting the mature intellect. But there was nothing like being doubly sure. Secad Screed was always sure.

The only thing that upset him more than being not quite sure was the idea of something being wrong. But of course this never happened.

"All right, Viola," he said that night, after letting her sit, fidgety, looking the question she didn't quite dare to ask all evening long. "So you want to go to this ridiculous planet, Nirva. Don't you?"

"Dear, of course not! Not if you don't think—that is, you said it was stupid. So of course we wouldn't—"

"Please, Viola. You should know better than to try to deceive me. And so should Garten. It is completely and transparently clear to me that both of you are trying to get me to take you to this so-called dream world. Childish escapism. You know that?"

"Yes, of course, dear."

"Very well. We are going."

"Oh! How wonderful. Thank you!"

"Don't thank me now. Later, afterward, you can thank me. When I have done you and Garten the service of showing you the infantile immaturity of your own minds. I am, Viola my dear, going to expose to the Galaxy this tawdry charlatanism for the little carnival illusion that it is. I shall show you the superior mental power of a mind—mine—that can face reality. You, and possibly even Garten, like drug addicts think you can escape from fact into a dream world."

"Oh, no."

"You will learn that there is no escape. I shall show you to yourselves. And you will see that run-down, sink-hole planet of lotus eaters for the degenerate mental slum it truly must be and is."

"Oh? Well, it is good of you to go to so much trouble."

Smugly, "The expose may prove of some advantage in my Service career."

"Of course, dear."

Of course. Of course, there was a period of frantic, forced-draft preparation by certain of the Administration Departments. Garten was voluble in his admiration of the plan for the electronic broadcast, anti-hypnotic satellite for Nirva. On the drugs, he had no comment. He was not, in fact, informed of this part of the plan. Clearance for Secad Screed and party to visit the "Limited Access" Planet, Nirva, was obtained

from Inter-Regional Headquarters with surprisingly, if not suspiciously, little difficulty. Screed smiled a sour little smile. Jealousy, perhaps. He would show them, too.

IN two weeks standard time, they—Secad Screed, Mrs. Viola Screed and Secast Garten—were on the way. It was a small ship, with a crew specially screened for the stop at Nirva, bound for the farther reaches of the Galaxy. At the end of three inter-space jumps it would orbit in to leave them on Nirva. Five weeks later, on the return trip, it would put in again to pick them up.

At the end of the third jump, Secad Screed and party, VIP's certainly, visited the ship's captain in the control room.

"We are coming in to the planet now, Captain," announced Screed informatively. "I want to be certain that the satellite is functioning properly and placed in planned orbit, regular, between sixty and ninety minutes."

"Yes, sir," sighed the captain, a morose-looking man with an anachronistic, drooping moustache, "Believe me, Secad Screed, within my deplorably narrow limits I do know my business. Your satellite is being attended to now. We are within the field of Nirva. We will make our run in, fingers crossed, so you may debark."

"Fingers crossed, Captain? Hmph! Well—let's have a look at the thing on the view screen."

"Sorry—but no, sir. We go in on automatic instruments, with special electric power shield up all the way. I'll cut the shield just long enough for you to land and back up she goes. Likely I'll lose a couple of my crew at that."

"Nonsense! Have you no confidence in the satellite?"

The captain shrugged. "I take no chances."

This was a line of reason Screed could well appreciate —in himself. From the captain it seemed foolishness.

"Surely, Captain, if you were to lose crewmen you could and would insist upon their immediate return?"

"Insist, Secad Screed? How? You do not, I think, have quite the full picture of this thing. Its appeal, the pull of your own personal perfect dream world, is very strong. If I didn't have a wife and six sweet kids back home that I only see a month or two out of the year—well. This Nirva problem is like this. We go in. Down screen. Off you and your party go. My crew? All present. OK, back up with the screen—and *then* we find out who is actually on the ship."

"But if they were all present—?"

"Maybe present; maybe no-

thing-but projected illusions. It is not possible to distinguish. So, say a couple are missing when the screen goes up. Suppose I down screen again. Protest. The natives are all apology. The men return."

"All right then."

"Not exactly. When the screen is up again—maybe instead of two missing, by then I would have four gone. The temptation gets too strong. Fighting it is like doubling bets to get even on a crooked wheel."

"HMPH!" Slack handling. Incredibly slack. It certainly was time a man who knew his own mind took over.

The satellite was orbiting. He had taken an anti-hypnosis pill. So too, although he hadn't bothered to tell them about it, had Viola and Garten, in their coffee. "Well, Captain. Your problems with Nirva are over. I—" he drew himself up in full executive-command stance—"am going to straighten the place out. In five weeks, when you return to pick us up, you will find Nirva, under my administration, a sound, sensible, stable colony. And we three will all return with you."

"Oh?" The captain was a skeptic.

"Of course," said Viola, "When my husband says a thing will be done, you can count it done."

"And this other gentleman, Secast Garten?"

"Naturally, sir. S e c a d Screed is a man of his word. Not even Nirva could alter his determination."

"I see. Well, I'm not a betting man, of course. Regulations. But if I were—"

"Yes, Captain?" S e c a d Screed's voice cracked icily.

"I would like to bet a year's salary that all three of you won't go back with me."

"Well, Captain. As Senior Service Officer aboard, I make the regulations here. I'll just take that bet. A year's salary, against yours. Nice odds for you there, Captain. That is a bet. Garten, you and Viola are witness."

The Captain smiled sourly and nodded. Screed turned on his heel, annoyed. "Come Viola; Garten." Viola bowed her head and followed. Garten lingered a minute.

"Captain? If you'd care to hedge a bit of that bet, I'll take, say, half of it?"

The captain looked at him. An ordinary man. Not young, not old; not big, not small. Just a man, almost extraordinarily ordinary. And certainly not too bright since, as he clearly intended to stay on Nirva, what good would it do him to win half of that old snake Screed's bet? The Captain shook his head. "Thanks, Secast Garten, but since you won't—well. No, thanks, I'll keep it."

Garten shrugged regretfully. "So? Well, I could use the money but no matter. I think you have a good bet, Captain. It's my bet, too."

A half hour and the ship settled gently on the surface of the planet. The three passengers for Nirva were ready at the air-lock.

"Down screen!"

Screed heard the words over the intercom. For a moment a sense of confusion, of uncertainty of purpose touched with dizzying, empty fear, swept over him. Abruptly it was gone. Confidence, more certain and invincible than ever, flooded back. He knew what he must do. And he knew that he would surely do it.

A thrill of anticipatory triumph brought a little twisted smile to his thin lips but, half turning his head toward Viola and Garten, all he said was, peremptorily, "Come."

THEY stood, three small figures, on the surface of Nirva, the dream planet, beside the space ship.

They were edged away from it by a discomforting mental pressure as the ship's force field snapped back on. Nirva. It seemed nothing so much. Pleasant enough, perhaps, but in a shockingly disordered, unimproved sort of way. Much the sort of thing Screed had expected.

There was a bright sun overhead with a slight rosy-pink tint to it, low green hills and some sort of town or settlement in the near distance. The sky was a deep blue, almost purple, dotted with feathery, pinkish clouds. All right. Probably it was quite suitable for exploitation as an agricultural planet. Not too much quick profit in it, perhaps, but well worth salvage.

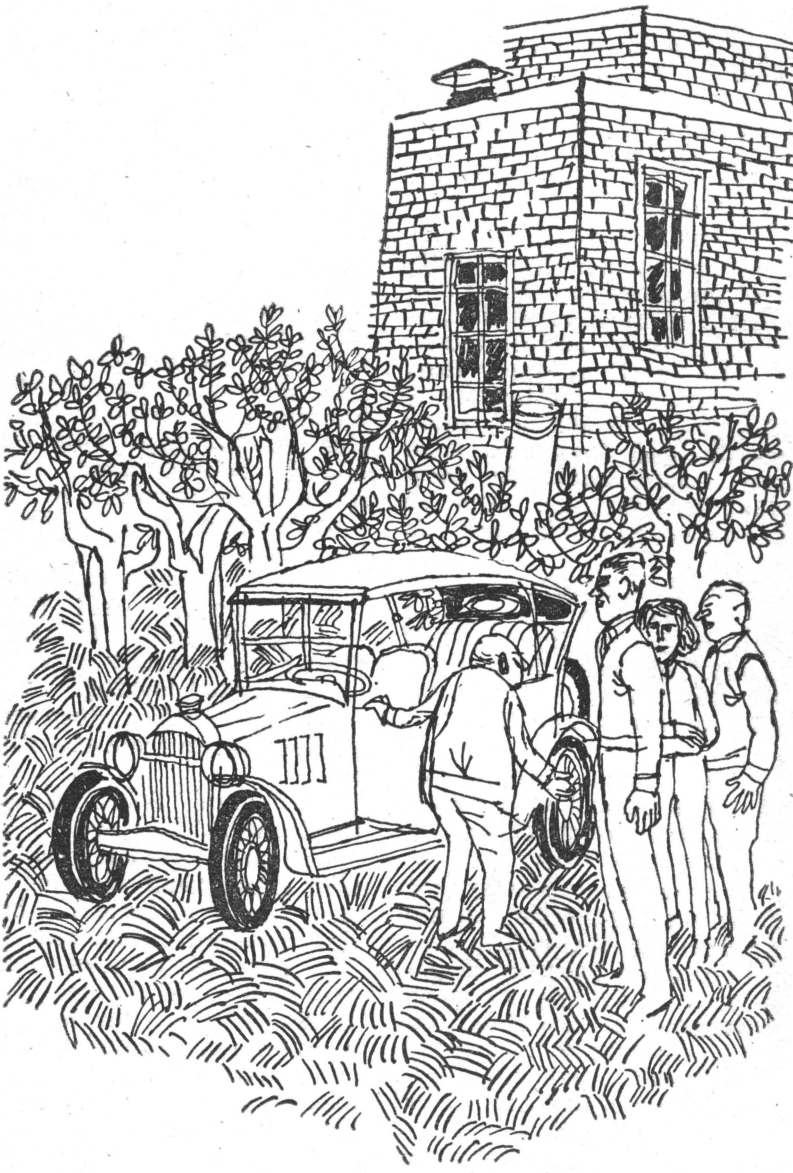
Screed, Viola and Garten were standing near the center of a cleared field, possibly a bungled excuse for a space port. Across it, a ramshackle building leaned tiredly to one side. As the space ship rose silently behind them, some sort of wheeled vehicle started toward them from the building, raising a small cloud of pinkish-white dust as it came.

"How awful," said Viola, echoing Screed's thoughts. "It's so shamefully rundown and neglected looking."

"A Galactic disgrace," agreed Garten from the other side.

"So," said Secad Screed, the leader. "You see?"

The native vehicle, a rattletrap affair reminiscent of ancient earth internal combustion wagons, clattered up. The driver was unclearly human under a slovenly, unkempt exterior; has was also middle-aged, fat and anxious as he stumbled out. "Ah," he said eagerly, "distinguished visitors! And—uh—is it possible—that is, I mean to say,



I—we all in fact, wonder if it could be you who is responsible for the sudden, total change that seems to have affected our—ah—perceptive climate?"

"And if we are," snapped Screed, "it was certainly a degenerative situation that desperately needed changing. You and all your people should thank me for it. And you will."

"Oh yes," said the native. "We already do, indeed. But—uh—the thing is, not that we aren't grateful for the awakening, but it is all so horribly confusing to us. You see, what I mean to say, we don't know exactly what—"

"You need leadership! Strong, efficient leadership."

"That's it exactly. If only you would—"

"I shall." He made an expansive, condescending gesture. "I, with the help of Mrs. Screed—I, by the way, am Secad Screed, the Leader—and my assistant, will take full command of all administration immediately. You will find that I will soon whip you into shape."

"Ah, sir, how can we ever repay you?"

"Perhaps something may be worked out. Now, we must get started. Take me at once to your ruling body."

"Ah. Do you suppose the Council of Dreamers—?"

"Hmph; just the sort of thing we shall have done with once and for all. But we must start someplace, I suppose. Let us proceed."

They all climbed somewhat apprehensively into the vehicle. They proceeded.

Screed proceeded.

HE proceeded, with Viola and Garten cheering and trailing along some little distance to the rear, to carry out his total plan. It was almost too easy.

"Almost," thought Screed as the obedient, grateful citizens of Nirva labored frantically to remake their world into a model Class II, Galactic Service AgPlan. "But then, no one else could ever make a start here. It is simply that, to a mind and character like mine, all things are easy."

He was, not for the first time, mildly surprised at his own brilliance, and totally admiring.

Perhaps he was justified. Certainly both Viola and the sometimes cynical seeming Garten were all awed respect. The reformation of Nirva advanced at a remarkable pace. The people, rudely awakened from a generations-long dream, were confused, aimless, purposeless. Like the bewildered representative at the space port, they wanted nothing more than a firm leader to give them direction. Having apparently no will of their own, they went to work with a will. Screed's will.

Screed was pleasantly surprised. It seemed that before the development of the "dream world of the group mind," some five hundred years before, they had been a progressive people with a modestly advanced technology. With the group mind, all of the old knowledge and technical abilities had, quite inadvertently, been passed on from generation to generation. Direction was all they needed. Having no power of resistance, they accepted it with total obedience. When Screed said, as he often did, "You people are not here to think; you're here to do what I tell you," they smiled in whole-hearted agreement and did just what he hold them. It was delightful.

In five short weeks the reconstruction of Nirva was well advanced. New cities and smoke-belching factories were rising from old ruins. Fields were plowed and sowed.

And the space ship came back.

RELUCTANTLY Screed cut short a series of final instruction conferences with his newly appointed deputy directors and administrators. He picked up Viola and Garten from their quarters in the refurbished ruin of an ancient mansion on a hill overlooking the new capital and they rode to the space port in his vehicle, primitive in design but gleaming, shining like new in the rosy-pink sunshine.

The citizenry lined the roadway, torn between sobs and cheers. Screed, smiling, and sternly gracious, waved a regretful farewell. At the ship he paused for a last word with his senior deputy. In unfamiliar tones of anxious concern, he said, "Now, you have all my memos and instructions. You're sure you can handle it? Carry on just the way I have directed?"

"Of course, glorious supreme leader. In your wisdom you have pointed us the way. We shall not stray."

"Well—everything has been going well, very well. In a way I hate to leave and take the chance on your fouling everything up."

"We shall do our poor best, great leader."

"Yes," said Screed, doubtfully. "True enough. But even so—"

They could feel the space ship's screen cut off. The port opened.

From the vast crowd of Nirvans spread across the space port there came a great whispering noise, something between a sigh and a moan of sad farewell, as Screed turned and followed the other two through the port and into the ship.

"Ah, Captain," said Screed, smiling a thin smile of triumph. "You doubted my abil-

ity to remake Nirva. But now you have seen it. Quite a change, eh?"

"Oh sure. Quite a change. Of course, there always is."

"And, Captain, you will note that we are all here. All three of us. You have, I fear, lost your bet."

The Captain shrugged. "Better get to your cabin now, ready for take off."

In the cabin Screed settled back in a chair and looked up at the other two with an odd air of defiance. "All right," he said, "I did it, didn't I? Just the way I told you."

"Screen on," said the Captain over the intercom.

To the three in the cabin the air seemed to turn shimmery, hazy, indistinct for a moment. Then it cleared.

Garten and Viola stood by the doorway, arm in arm, staring. Screed, Secad Screed, the leader, was gone.

"THERE," said Garten with deep satisfaction, "He did do it."

Viola sighed, smiling. "Darling! He did! It worked just the way you said it would. But I'm still not sure I quite understand why—or how."

"It doesn't really matter. But—you noticed he quit taking the anti-hypnotic pills after the first week?"

"Yes. Did that make any difference? The satellite worked, didn't it? And everything else went just the way he wanted it. It all seemed perfect—for him."

"Sure it did. And that was what he couldn't face losing."

"Hmm?"

"Well, it seemed that everything went exactly the way he imagined it would. The satellite worked. The people followed him. Everything. But maybe we all only imagined it. How can we be sure? After all, those things—plus our purely personal concerns that he was far too busy to take any note of—"

Viola blushed, quite charmingly for a plain, mousy little woman.

"—were what we were expecting too. How can we know, for sure, what was real and what was illusion?"

Viola looked suddenly offended.

"About the planet, I mean."

Viola looked mollified.

"But the planet—I think Screed is running the thing; I'm not sure. As long as he is there, he *knows* he is running it. Here—who knows? That was the chance he couldn't take, the chance his mind refused to face. If he were here, *could he still be sure he was right?*"

Viola smiled the feminine smile that dismisses a question no longer of personal consequence and snuggled closer to Garten. "Well," she said, "at least we know he isn't here. That's all that matters."

END

A SCIENCE FACTION STORY

It isn't science FICTION . . .
and it isn't fact YET . . .
but it will be!

SCIENCE fiction heroes go into space for a limited number of reasons, and the least of them seems to be to make a buck. About the time the reader began to get tired of ships bashing around in space for no ascertainable reason except to give the bug-eyed monster a chance to make a pass at the Earth girl, the writers began to rationalize their presence there. We then had our full measure of the Everest wheeze: why do you want to conquer the stars, Daddy? Because they're *there.* Endless processions of girl scientists rebuffed bug-eyed hordes until rescued by regiments of space-burned swaggerers who were initially inspired only by the existence of Challenge. Then there was the hero, usually as space-burned as the BEM-bombers, out there after Truth.

That the search was expensive was sometimes not mentioned and sometimes not denied. Occasionally a plot demanded that it become a factor, and who was to pick up the tab became that technicality known to writing courses as the Obstacle. But cost, investment, return—these were not for a long time the other technicality known as Motive.

Then along came the asteroid miner, bless his horny-handed heart, and along with him some urgently-needed characterization. At long last someone was doing what you did when you started that ouija-board factory, or whatever it is you do when you're not reading IF. Someone was getting up a stake, learning how, taking his lumps, acquiring some skills and coming back with something to show for it. A lot of these old men named Pop were homespun—and vice versa—to the verge of vertigo, but at least they, and their cousins the traders, worked for a living in a way we could feel we understood. And that's why they were out there.

As we became more sophisticated, "our" space began to be populated with criminals on the lam, espers, idealistic anthropologists anxious to interfere with alien cultures without interfering, playgirls in space-yachts and cowboys who did the walkdown on Deneb instead of Dakota. Extrapolation of certain of our current money-making devices, like advertising, show-biz enterprise, lawyering and mongering real-estate, produced quite a crop of astonishingly good yarns and a great many differing only in setting from the outland oater, or Tonto-on-Titan type. But at their best they all depended on some established cultural matrix — a League or Empire or Corps or Corporation within which to function. Ways to make space pay off had already been found and the story took place long after that had ceased to be a problem.

VERY few, then, are the examples of space science fiction which base themselves on reasonable, product-or-service, investment-and-return bases. It would seem that space flight is by its very nature not an area in which one can earn a dollar. Unless, of course, you put it another way and say that whoever can find a way to make it pay is going to turn himself a classic buck.

If you thought that space flight was doomed to ride solely on the shining shoulders of Challenge, Adventure, National Hardware and the Search for Truth, you were right clear up to (as such things go) yesterday. Obviously, it was time for someone to come up with a way to make space flight pay in some other currency, like maybe Money. Since the crisis is supposed to produce the man, where is he?

Well, he's in and around Murray Hill, New Jersey; he used to write science fiction under the name of J. J. Coupling; his real name is Dr. John Pierce, he's the Director of Research, Communications Principles, at Bell Labs and, finally, he bosses the project which put the famous Echo

satellite up there where you can see it with your own unabashedly naked eye.

Echo, as you know, is a 100-foot aluminized balloon from which radio signals may be bounced. It is, it is hoped, the precursor of a whole family of satellites which will be used for communications; and not since George O. Smith wrote his *Venus Equilateral* series (and excepted himself from our initial sweeping statements) has there been such an ingenious and breath-taking effort.

Echo is a "passive" satellite. That is, it has no guts of its own, but merely serves as a bouncer-backer, with a secondary function as an aid to visual and radio navigation. One plan is to place three of them some 24,000 miles out, on the plane of the equator (Geosmith's "equilateral" idea) and so placed that each would be over its same spot of Earth at all times. Signals could then be relayed instantaneously from and to any spot on earth.

But Pierce and Bell Labs will probably do nothing of the kind, for they already have something better in mind. "Courier" is an "active" satellite and it's just *full* of guts. Couriers can talk to each other and to the ground. They can pick up whole encyclopedias of information at a seconds-long gulp, hang on to it for 45 minutes and then burp it out on the other side of the world on command. And nobody need know what was said except the persons concerned. They can catch a signal, amplify it, throw it to another Courier which throws it to another which can then beam it to the ground. It means TV linkage round the world. It means UN meetings without hassels about hotels. It means a great new surge in the current of people's identification with people the world around. It means education and intercultural exchange—it means, in short, communication in the widest, deepest sense of the word.

And among the most fascinating aspects of it is that Bell Labs is not doing it for Adventure or Challenge. They have facts and figures to prove what submarine cables, plus land lines, plus radio-relay systems would cost to achieve even a part of such communications. By comparison Courier, by half-dozen lots, is for peanuts.

They can also prove that they can make such a system pay money, whatever else it may do for the so-called greater good.

NOW comes (another writers' technical term) the Complication, a plot-switch worthy of a Heinlein or maybe even a William Tenn. For just to prove that history, in providing a man for a crisis,

is generous, here come Messrs. Morrow and Meyer, under the aegis of MIT and the Air Force's Air Research and Development Command, with a method to provide TV, radio, and teletype communication between anywhere and anywhere else on Earth. Further, they claim that they will require only two small and comparatively simple rockets, and they will need no special tracking equipment nor high-precision transmitting and receiving antennas. They say their system will handle many more channels than a communications satellite (but they didn't say what kind) and that they can achieve the same reflective power as Echo with just a handful (9 ounces, to be exact) of hair.

Their idea is to put up a man-made ionosphere, which will bounce radio waves from point to point of itself, and to Earth, the way the natural one does. But theirs would not billow and shift, thin out and thicken, nor would it be affected by sunspots and magnetic storms. It would not ever envelope the Earth, but consist instead of two thin bands, 5 miles wide and 20 miles deep, 6000 miles from Earth, one band on a polar orbit and the other over the equator.

And of course it is not really hair. It will consist of tiny slivers of copper, half as thick as the very finest human hair and barely half an inch long. Such tiny threads will orbit just as contentedly as a plastic bubble or a dead Russian. And these two rings will operate, they tell us, with quality as high, comparatively, as the cost is low, by the technique known as "ionospheric scatter."

The issue, then, as we who are s-f oriented see it, is what happens when (and IF) Bell Labs, which is no welterweight, touches gloves with the Air Force and then begins to debate who puts up what, and to whom the credit goes.

Speaking fictionally, you understand, and strictly in the World of IF, we nod our heads in a pleased way if one system proves best and is used, and we cry congratulations if the other wins out and is used.

But if we were writing this plot we would look at the possibility of one system's proving superior, and the decision going to the other party. That would be what the writer calls Crisis. That would be when we stopped saying IF and started yelling *why?* And what followed would be the thing called Denouement, or, whoever dreamed it would come out *this* way?

What this means, if a system is established which actually pays off in money, is truly what Robert Heinlein so vividly called The End of The Beginning. **END**

He said I was the biggest knuckle-head he ever saw, but I didn't trust him. Sooner or later I knew he'd insult me!

The Connoisseur

By FRANK BANTA

IT is infinitely more satisfactory to purchase wives when they are young. They are vastly more respectful.

Twelve is a good purchasing age. Lisa was twelve when I bargained for her, and she is an illustrious argument for the system.

I recall her excellent father and I facing each other across his gleaming synthol marble table that day. On the table were small metal shells of sweet liquor. And beside the shells were the sedulously gathered treasures I was formally offering for Lisa: A control knob, and a folded painting of one of our Navigator's other-ship visions.

Lisa's father eagerly examined the mirror-bright, chrome surface of the control knob — which I had handed to him with a pretense of casualness — trying to still the trembling of his fingers.

"The last knob on the control board!" he said in an emotion-cracked voice. "How could you have broken it off? We've all been tugging at it for years."

I answered — I hope with no more than legitimate pride —"I managed to get a thin hacksaw blade between the knob and the control board. Then I sawed off the shaft."

He nodded approvingly. "With knuckle-headed men like you aboard ship we will certainly all go to *Hell.*"

I bowed, but I did not let his flattery relax my caution. After all, we were bargaining for his prettiest daughter. What flattering words bear weight in the midst of a sale? He, of course, referred to the ringing sincerity of our Navigator's dying words: "If you knuckle-heads all want to go to *Hell,* just keep dismantling the ship!"

Swinging adroitly to my other item of barter, I mused aloud, "Our Navigator! What a strange, frantic creature he was. Full of the wild, lovely visions which effervesced from his books of fantasy. Imploring us not only to read the books but to believe them — and, failing that, drawing immortal paintings of the fantasies for us to see."

THEREWITH I opened the folded painting and handed it reverently to him. It showed a large globular ship with people living on the *outside* of it. The title of the painting was *Planet.*

Privately I had always thought the thing was wholly unnatural — a curious offbeat of the master's imagination. I was quite willing, despite its great beauty and its origin, to exchange it for something which to me was far more attractive at the moment. Namely a woman.

Lisa lay curled up on the narrow, in-wall couch, with her head propped up by a slim arm. She chewed her synthelgum lazily and surveyed me with mild interest. She was a tender-featured girl, with shimmering black, shoulder-length hair. It was possible to forecast that she would some day be a lovely and gentle-hearted woman.

Her father, notwithstanding his habitually rigid integrity, saw my lively interest in her and tried to increase my generous bid for her by an artifice of delay.

Holding the painting of the master at arm's length, he grumbled critically, "A vision of *Hell* would have been more to my liking. Unhappily our Navigator did not paint one of his radiant visions of that ship. Now, why would he prefer *Planet* to *Hell* — particularly when he described *Hell* as warm and enclosed like our own ship?"

I did not answer his frivolous complaint, knowing full well it was only bartering talk.

He handled the immortal painting with crudely feigned indifference. He could not quite bring himself to let go of it. He was determined to own it, I knew, and he sensed also my resolve to offer no more for Lisa. Yet slyly he determined on an evil course.

For, incredibly, he turned

to tranquil Lisa and asked: "What is your value, lovely child? Does he offer enough?"

And slowly lifting her candid eyes to him she shook her head NO!

"SHALL I bargain with *her* then?" I asked my friend caustically. I will own I was vexed.

Shrewdly he nodded. "Whatever she accepts will be our bargain." Then, laughing at my undignified discomfiture, "It is manifest she is more aware of her value than I."

"Will you be serious? It is not kindly to banter with a woman-child in such an important matter as her future."

But greed now fully possessed him. "I do not joke. Whatever she demands shall be her price." He sipped his sweet wine, hiding his eyes from my displeasure.

Concealing my fury, I turned to Lisa, who now sat up straight on the narrow couch with her long, slender legs folded under her. In the pace of grievous mortification I was not bitter toward her. It was not her fault. For her I extended the tolerance due the innocent.

"What is your cost, child?" I asked. "This control knob and other-ship vision of our Navigator are sufficient to purchase any girl-woman. What will you have?"

Lisa chewed her gum slowly while she formed her serene thought. Then, shaking her oval head, she let fall in a dreamy, singsong voice, "Neither of these! Neither of these!"

Her father leaned forward anxiously. I told her, "There is a limit to your value. I will not give all of my treasures for you, lovely though you are. Choose what thing you will have, and if I can procure it, your father shall have it."

"I'll know it when I see it!" she said, smiling impudently.

THERE was nothing for me to do but go to my apartments and look for other treasures to show her. My thoughts were exceedingly bitter as I gathered the coveted articles one by one in my arms.

"Here." I displayed it to her when I had arrived back at her father's abode. "It is the steering wheel from the lifeboat. Feel its smooth texture, see its ebony luster. It is the only lifeboat steering wheel aboard ship. I had a terrible struggle with it until I broke off the shaft."

She seemed interested. I passed huriedly on to another object. "Here is the handle of the atomic-pile damping rod. It was threaded inside. However, I have managed to grind the interior smooth."

She seemed definitely interested, but I did not linger. I unrolled the last treasure I had brought with me. At the

sight of it her father burst into merry chuckles.

"Yes," I said, smiling with a hint of sadness. "It is the inscrutable message we found protruding from the mouth of a machine some years ago. The machine has the name Teletype engraved upon it. We cannot imagine who put the message inside the machine — if indeed it is a message. But listen to the poetry of its words! I shall read it to you as though it were properly set out on paper instead of being cramped into continuous, senseless lines:

Colony ship, colony ship,
Turn around before it is too late.
You have left the Galaxy.
We are the last planetary system
You will encounter,
For ten thousand years."

Then, seeing her puzzlement, I said hastily, "But, of course, it is too adult for you, Lisa. Its mystery is for the scholar, its abstract beauty for the man of mature years. Come, let us turn back to these other treasures . . ."

It was not easy for her to choose, seemingly, with so much wealth about her. The control knob, the painting, the life-boat steering wheel, the atomic-pile damping-rod handle, the inscrutable poetry — all claimed her interest. But in the end she chose as I wanted her to, and the bargain was struck.

List went to live in the compartment of my concubines that day, and at maturity became a concubine of exotic beauty. She bore her dark-haired children well.

BY the excellence of her father, he and I continued to be good friends. At least once a year I invite him to view the master's painting of *Planet*. We spend many contented hours together. Often through a porthole we watch the rapid movement of distant ships which our Navigator called *stars*, revolving in tiny circles at the side of the ship, making a complete circle in about two minutes. What prompts the behavior of these ships? It is all very curious, and I account myself fortunate that I have in my friend an intense capacity for speculation. Like myself, he is a scholar of honor, capable of long sustained discourse on lofty subjects which round out and deepen the mind. I forgive him his greed.

As I had intended, Lisa took the teletype nonsense message to be her value to her father. May I reiterate, it is infinitely more satisfactory to purchase wives when they are very young ladies? They are vastly more respectful. Admittedly they are saucy. **END**

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SEVEN DOORS

THE thing came down into atmosphere over Lake Michigan at a velocity that should have built shock waves before it; there were none. Radars at the Nike and fighter-interceptor sites along and near the shoreline swept their beams toward the thing in the course of their normal search routine. The hurtling electromagnetic pulses were detoured precisely around the thing, to resume on the other side their straight and echoless flight. The thing was quite unseen.

The descending mass, roughly spherical, hundreds of feet in diameter, slowed its plunge through the early summer night of North America. It hit the lake with hardly a splash, miles from shore.

The man was a stranger, and an alien, and perhaps he was dying. But Kelsey had to choose: He could save the stranger's life—or he could save his own.

By FRED SABERHAGEN ILLUSTRATED BY GAUGHAN

TO EDUCATION

Not for the first time did it find concealment in the waters of Earth. A few people of Earth had been aware of it. Now none of them remembered it.

A JUNE day in Chicago can be uncomfortably hot. This particular day was too miserable, in the opinion of twenty year old Pete Kelsey, for him to spend it all sorting mail inside the Main Post Office. Not if he could find a way out. Besides the heat, it was one of those days when he just didn't feel like working. He didn't quite know why. The job was really all right, though it didn't pay too much. If he stuck with it, he would be able to retire in his early forties.

But today Kelsey's morning, spent running a canceling machine, had been generally unpleasant; and he suspected from the way the mail was running that he would be assigned in the afternoon to a dim acre of the eighth floor, where long neglected bags and piles of low-class mail awaited a slackening of the first-class flow. It would be hot and chokingly dusty there. Kelsey decided to wangle half a day of his accumulated vacation time.

In an hour and a half he was in his rooming house on the North Side. Half an hour after that he was sitting in swimming trunks on one of the massive rocks that guard land from lake along stretches of Chicago's park-and-beach

shoreline, clothing piled beside him, transistor portable blaring something with a beat.

He was almost alone, on the edge of the great city. The rocks rose like stairs for five or six tiers above where he sat near water level, shutting out the sight of green park and distant buildings. To right and left the rock rampart curved out and then away, at about a hundred yards from where he sat, putting him out of sight of the rest of the shoreline. Only two or three other people were in sight, strolling in the cool lake breeze or sunbathing.

If only some nice looking babe would come along now, to stretch out on the rocks for some sun . . . well, he wouldn't hold his breath while waiting for her. The water looked inviting.

The beaches were not officially open yet. He could have gone to one anyway, but he didn't especially care for sand, or for wading a long way out to reach deep water. Here you could dive right in.

He did. The water was cold, making him gasp as he surfaced.

"Better than air conditioning," he told himself aloud, treading water happily. He stroked out a few yards from shore, an easy, confident swimmer.

When he felt the tight sudden grip on his foot his first unthinking reaction was: A joke. One of the guys from work, somehow . . . There was a sting at his ankle . . .

KELSEY had not had time to get really frightened. When he woke, he was calm, but bewilderment came quickly. He was still in swimming trunks, and wet.

He lay on his back on the floor of a small, square, windowless room, staring at a glowing ceiling that provided comfortable illumination. In the center of the ceiling was a metallic disk that looked like a closed door or hatch, with hinges at one side, and at the other small projections that might be an intricate latch.

He rolled over dazedly. He had been swimming, and now . . . an old man lay stretched beside him, eyes closed, breathing heavily, dressed in rags and thinly bearded. The old man's features were Oriental—Chinese, or maybe Japanese. Kelsey had never learned to tell the difference.

Kelsey stood up.

He felt fine, but where was he? Nothing looked familiar. The little room held no furniture. Floor and walls were some featureless neutral-colored stuff he could not identify. Set into one wall was a niche like a sort of berth, possibly just big enough for someone Kelsey's size to squeeze into. A transparent sliding door, now half open, sepa-

rated berth from room.

He looked down at the old man, found him scrawny and ugly and generally unhealthy looking. Maybe when the old man woke up he could tell what this was all about.

This was an odd, silent place. Kelsey paced around, somehow expecting every moment to get an explanation from somewhere. In one wall, just below the low ceiling, air circulated gently through a grill with darkness behind it. In one corner of the floor, a six-inch hole showed the inside of a pipe, leading down into more darkness.

Kelsey investigated the berth-like niche; its door slid in grooves cut into a material that looked like rubber, but felt smooth as melting ice. In the top of the berth was another closed hatch, exactly like the one in the room's ceiling.

He sat on the edge of the berth, scratching his damp head and regarding his unconscious companion.

The utter craziness of the whole business began to soak in on him. He had been swimming . . . He remembered the grab and sting at his ankle. There was no mark, no soreness.

He looked up at the hatch in the ceiling. Was he in a submarine? He had never been aboard any kind of ship. He searched his memory for data from movie and television scenes; what he could remember didn't help any. He formed a vague picture of kidnapping Russian frogmen. He wished he could wake up and find this was all a dream.

THE hatch in the ceiling was easy to reach, but getting it open was another matter. After trying for about a minute, Kelsey quit in annoyance and attempted to wake the old man.

The old guy didn't respond to gentle shaking. Was he drunk? Didn't some Chinese still use opium or something? Kelsey shook harder.

"Hey," he called, self-consciously, his own voice sounding strange in the silence around him. "Wake up!" he said, louder. The old man's head wobbled on his thin neck with the shaking. He breathed. He stayed out.

Kelsey sat on the floor. Maybe the old guy was in bad shape. He would wait a while and try to think this out.

Without warning water began to fountain up from the pipe-opening in the floor, in a jet that carried to ceiling height and filled the room ankle deep in seconds.

After one paralyzed moment Kelsey jumped up and pounded on the ceiling hatch, yelling for help. The only answer was the continued splashing roar in the room.

Remembering the old man, Kelsey spun around. Rising

water framed the wrinkled face. Kelsey jumped to him and lifted him, surprised at the weight he felt. He would have to keep the old man afloat with one hand while he tried to get the hatch open . . . only now did he notice with horror the heavy metal chains that bound the old man's limbs, nearly concealed by the ragged garments. There would be no keeping him afloat!

Water lapped around Kelsey's knees. Was it going to fill the room? The old man . . . Kelsey thought of the berth. He dragged the thin weighted body there, lifted and crammed it in, slid the transparent door shut. It looked like it might be waterproof.

There was no possibility of getting in himself, unless he left the old man out to drown —the thought flitted across his mind, found itself in alien territory, and fled.

Kelsey went back to the ceiling hatch, wading through water that was waist deep and still rising rapidly. He tried to work at the latch methodically, but panic grabbed at his fingers and made them fumble. The water reached his chest. Would it drain out through the ventilator when it got high enough? Would it leave him any air space? He could drown in this room. He was going to drown in this room.

He looked around wildly. The old man lay peacefully behind his transparent door, dry, like an exhibit in some reversed aquarium. There was another hatch in the berth, another way out . . . but no, the hatch in the berth was no different from this one, no use risking two lives.

"Help!" Kelsey shouted. The water had reached the ventilator and kept right on rising. Soon the room would be full; Kelsey was swimming now. "Help!" He twisted at the latch.

The latch stung his hand.

KELSEY woke up again. He lay with his eyes shut for a little while; there was something frightening he might see when he opened them. He could not remember at first what it was . . .

He sat up with a jerk. But he was not drowning now, although still wet and in swimming trunks.

The room was not the same one, but similar. Same glowing ceiling, same ventilator, but no berth. Again a closed hatch, or door, this time in one wall instead of the ceiling.

Another hatch, in the floor, stood open. Kelsey crawled to it and looked down into the room where he had nearly drowned. It was empty of water now, but the floor still gleamed wetly. The sliding door to the berth was open;

the old man was nowhere in sight.

Kelsey sat with his legs dangling through the open hatch, trying to make sense of it all. He couldn't remember climbing up from the lower room, or even getting the hatch open. The latch had stung his hand in a gentle way, leaving no mark or soreness, as something had earlier stung his ankle. Each time he had been knocked out.

Had someone pulled him up here? He looked around nervously. Was he being watched from somewhere?

He couldn't just sit thinking about it. He gripped the edge of the hatch and lowered himself easily back into the first room, noticing as he did so how well he felt physically. He examined the compartment where he had left the old man. Where the hatch had been in the top of it was now a flat metal plate that he could not move with his fingers. He pushed and pounded and yelled some more, with no result.

The ceiling-glow died suddenly in this lower room; the only light now shone down through the open hatch from the room above.

Was someone telling him to move up there?

He climbed up without difficulty. He went to the closed door in the wall and pushed at it uselessly; this one had no latch, but an opening that looked like an odd keyhole. In a small rack beside the door hung ten or twelve odd-shaped metal sticks.

Half-heartedly, Kelsey tried a few more yells and listened to the waiting silence. Well, he could sit around until something happened. Or he could continue to work on the door. He couldn't think of any other course.

He took some of the metal sticks from the little rack and studied them. They all looked as if they would fit the door's keyhole, but no two were shaped exactly alike. He chose one at random, and tried it in the door.

HIS hand got a nasty, grating shock, unlike electricity, unlike the previous gentle knockout stings. He dropped the key and at the same instant heard water gushing up in the room below. Kelsey slammed the floor hatch down and sat on it. Should he try to stop the flood by putting another key in the door? His hand still tingled; he decided not. Was he being punished in some crazy way for trying to open the door, by someone controlling all this, or was he just caught in a chain of accidents?

Soon the muffled water-sound stopped. Gingerly he eased the hatch open; the bottom face of it turned up dripping wet. The room below was full and brimming over.

He didn't like this at all. Could the room he was now in be flooded too? He closed the hatch and saw with horror that a little water came seeping up through it, as if the hatch were made of blotting paper. Yet it looked and felt like hard metal.

He decided to try the door again, shock or no shock. It was better than just waiting here, to maybe drown if the water rose again.

He took another key. He decided to peel off his trunks and try using them for insulation when he held the key and tried it in the door . . . but maybe he could do better than that.

Wasn't one key enough to open a door? Why have so many in the rack? Starting to think, he really saw another detail for the first time: marked above the door was a small number 7.

He had noticed it before without thinking about it; you saw numbers all the time, on doors and lots of other places. But maybe a key would be numbered 7.

There were small numbers engraved on each of the ten keys, but each key bore a number of two or three digits; there was no number 7.

Kelsey looked more closely at the door. Near the keyhole ran a series of numbers in the same neat engraving borne by the keys: 2 6 14 30. None of the numbers matched a key's number. Yet he thought there must be some connection. 2 6 14 30 . . . he sat comparing numbers for what seemed about five minutes before something clicked in his memory, taking him back to the intelligence tests he had experienced in high school. A series of numbers . . . complete the logical sequence, the instructions had said. It was one of those things that teachers thought up to make the smart kids feel good, he had told himself at the time, knowing that he himself wasn't a smart kid. He hadn't tried very hard at the test, feeling there was no point in it. But when they showed him the results, he hadn't done badly at all, in fact a little better than average all along the line.

That had surprised him, because he had never done very well in school. He had never wanted to, because most of the kids he knew sort of sneered at guys who were brains, and the uncle he lived with was always talking down book learning and college guys who thought they knew a lot. His aunt had never said much about it one way or the other.

The numbers: 2 6 14 30. Complete the logical sequence. Well, it was worth a try. 6 was 3 times 2. 14 was—no.

Each number was larger than the one before it. Not double; 2 times 2 was 4, you

had to add 2 more to get 6. 2 times 6 was 12, you had to add 2 . . .

"Yeah!" he said aloud. He ran through the whole series in his mind, twice, to be sure. He looked for, and found, a key numbered 62. There was nothing to be gained by waiting. He drew a deep breath and inserted it.

THE door opened easily; there was no sting, and no sound of water from below. Kelsey let out breath with a relieved whoof.

The room beyond the door was quite similar to the one in which he stood. As he stepped through he found himself facing another door, this one with a number 6 above it. He was certain before he tried it that it was locked.

On the wall near door 6, beside a key rack, was a tiny shelf holding a stack of papers. Kelsey riffled through the papers. Pages from some kind of textbook on English. He thought that nothing he found could surprise him any more.

Engraved beside the new door's keyhole was the word: ADVERB. Kelsey suspected there would not be a key marked ADVERB, and he was right. But each key did have a word on it.

Was some crazy schoolteacher running this place? He pictured some old maid, driven batty by years in a classroom, inheriting a fortune and—nuts.

But memories of school returned once more, informing him that an adverb was one of those things called the parts of speech. He supposed that various teachers had tortured him with the parts of speech at least a hundred times during his twelve years of schooling. How could he ever need to know what an adverb was? Well, he did now.

Kelsey reached for the pages of English textbook and searched through them carefully until he found a list of words exemplifying the category ADVERB. None of the words on the keys were in the list. He would have to think about the category ADVERB and decide which key-word fitted it.

He did.

Again the door opened easily for his chosen key. He was not surprised at the sight of another similar room, and the number 5 above another door. Almost jauntily he walked directly across the new room to study door 5 for a small engraved symbol.

He found the letter H, which might stand for a lot of things.

This time the shelf beside the door was large, holding books, wires, and glass in various shapes that reminded him of what he had seen in his occasional glimpses from

the hallway of the high school chemistry lab. A small metal tub held a clear odorless liquid that might be water, from the lack of smell. Careful, now, he warned himself. But he didn't feel thirsty yet.

There was no keyhole in door 5. A simple latch was sealed under a casing of some clear substance that resisted Kelsey's pushing fingers like iron.

He sighed. He would have to play it by the book, and the books on the shelf were thick and formidable-looking volumes. A glance showed him they were physics and chemistry texts. He groaned.

From somewhere in the rooms behind him came a watery gurgle.

WELL, there was no use just sitting here, and nothing else to do but keep trying to figure a way out. This chemistry business here looked far too hard for him to solve, but it would at least give him something to do.

First, the symbol on the door. A book told him that H represented the element hydrogen. He discovered that it was possible to produce hydrogen from water, given electricity and suitable apparatus. These were provided, the electricity from an ordinary-looking wall outlet. On the shelf was a glass tube of peculiar shape that seemed designed to convey the newly released hydrogen to the seal holding the latch. The little tub was marked H_2O, which he learned meant water.

He went to work with containers and wires and electrodes, following a procedure roughly outlined in the books. After several mistakes and one mild electric shock he had the apparatus working. The seal over the latch melted away like ice in July sunshine. Kelsey wondered idly what the seal was made from; but he didn't much care, as long as he got rid of it.

He had been briefly worried by the realization that the other gas produced, called oxygen, was escaping into the air of the room. He thought the name was familiar, but he wasn't sure until a book assured him he had been breathing the stuff all his life.

Stepping into the next room, and facing door number 4, Kelsey felt almost at home. Before he could do anything else a great sleepiness rose up in him and overcame him. He stretched out on the floor, worried drowsily for a moment about the chance of another flood as he slept, and sank into oblivion.

If he dreamed, he did not remember it when he awoke.

HE sat up alertly, feeling good, remembering instantly all that had happened.

There was another shelf in

this room, it was as big as the last, and he supposed the books and odd-looking junk on it would enable him to open Door 4. But he paused after getting to his feet and stretching, to consider first another puzzle.

He felt refreshed and alert, as if he had just slept eight hours. He had spent an undeterminable time getting through the other rooms, and lying unconscious in them.

However long he had been in this place, he had had nothing to eat or drink since arriving. He didn't want anything now. And another thing; there had been nothing like plumbing in any of the rooms, unless you counted the flooding pipe in the first. It seemed that he didn't need any plumbing.

He felt physically fine in every way. He didn't even want a cigarette.

He had shaved in the morning (this morning? yesterday?) before going to work. He rubbed his face; it was still smooth.

His comfort was eerie, evoking forgotten ghost stories about people who had died without knowing it. Had he really drowned while swimming in the lake?

He breathed. His pulse beat. He kicked a toe rather incautiously against a wall and was painfully convinced of solidity. Were his bodily needs being taken care of while he slept? That was hard to believe; he thought any explanation for all this would be hard to believe. Yet one must be true.

Kelsey walked back through the rooms he had already traversed. Water now filled the second room to the lower edge of the open hatch in the wall. He would have to wade and dive if he wanted another look at the first room, but he saw no point in doing so. On impulse he scooped up water in his hand. It tasted all right.

But he wasn't thirsty.

Whoever was behind this, for whatever unimaginable purpose, seemed to be urging him forward with the threat of flood. There was no way out back here. Whether there would be any way out for him ahead—he told himself there must be.

Kelsey faced the locked door numbered 4. It had a keyhole, and engraved beside it was the word: ETRUSCAN.

Kelsey looked at the now familiar rack of keys, and again felt the impulse to try one at random, to rush through doors—he didn't doubt there would be more of them—as quickly as possible, to get to the bottom of the whole situation. But at door 7, a random try had given unpleasant results. He would keep on solving problems as long as he could, and then

guess the rest if he had to.

Now let's see about ETRUSCAN, he thought, whatever it means. Each key was numbered to correspond to one of the bits of junk on this room's shelf. The bits of junk were pottery, clay or stone, painted or carved in decoration, some whole, some only broken pieces.

There were what looked like textbooks on the shelf again, with covers and a lot of pages missing, as before. This time there were also thick notebooks. Kelsey picked up one of these and found it crammed with neat notes and drawings that were plain enough in detail—but what was it all about?

Grimly, he began to study the mass of archeological field notes, determined to find out which one of the bits of junk was an ETRUSCAN. He read for what seemed a long time, standing there. He did not grow tired of standing, didn't even lean on the shelf. He noticed this but put it out of his mind.

It took a long time. But when the sleepiness came again, and he lay down on the floor, it was in front of a door numbered 3.

HE put aside speculation about how much time was passing, or what it was all about. "All right, I'll play your crazy game," he muttered aloud. He would just accept the absence of any physical need as a blessing, and keep working his way through doors.

He solved a problem in positional astronomy, learning to use mathematics that he had never dreamed existed. Following an instruction book quite unlike any he had ever seen, he programmed a computer that he only vaguely understood, and did not need to understand. The read-out was a tiny orrery, including a ship that Kelsey had to navigate from planet to planet. Not, to be sure, with the complication of changing mass-ratios.

The solar system represented in the model had only six planets, none of them with a sizable moon, which facts suggested nothing to Kelsey. He was satisfied when the scheduled journey was complete, and door 3 clicked open for him.

The test required to open door 2 first appeared somewhat easier. The first half of a musical composition was played repeatedly to Kelsey, through some invisible speaker. Pressing one of a series of numbered buttons brought him the sound of one of four last-halfs, all quite similar. There were books on musical theory, and printed copies of each ending. He listened and studied until he felt sick of all music. Finally he made a choice.

He was mistaken.

The door refused the key. No shock bit at his hand, no sound of rushing water came from the rooms behind him. All was quiet, the eternal quiet of this place that might be expected to get on a guy's nerves, but so far hadn't bothered him.

Evidently his mistake was not to be punished. Kelsey was suddenly angry. That someone could push him around like this, use him for a . . . a . . . . guinea pig. The term floated into his mind; he wondered what it was, exactly, that scientists really did with guinea pigs. When he got out of here he would look it up.

If he got out of here.

When! Now to get this damned door open. The temptation to choose one of the three remaining keys at random was strong; but no, he would try what he honestly thought to be the second most likely piece of music.

This time the key worked. Kelsey stepped through and waited for the sleepiness to come.

DOOR 1. He had anticipated it, in the back of his mind, for what now seemed many days. Would there be a final answer behind it? Or a door numbered O? Or a trick? He had thought perhaps door 1 would be the most difficult of all to open. He went to work as soon as he woke up.

Kelsey built a cathedral. At least the structure somewhat resembled a Gothic church when he was through with it. He built it about three feet high, from blocks about a cubic inch in volume, that clung together like mortared masonry when he fitted one to another. He built it using tiny waldo arms, which were another concept utterly new to him. They worked into a glasslike enclosure that prevented him from reaching directly the simple latch of door 1. In this room the latch was not on the door but on the wall a few feet away. A block in the mechanism kept him from quite reaching the latch directly with the arms.

He had a helper, for the first time. When he pressed a button, a small machine ran from one corner of the enclosure as if anxious to assist him, climbed upon the blocks until it reached the highest point of whatever pile or structure they formed, and reached a tiny arm as far as it could toward the latch.

Kelsey had to build something with the blocks for the robot to climb on, so it could reach the latch. He soon learned that it could not climb a tall narrow spire of blocks; he didn't have enough material to build a massive ramp or stairway. Besides the blocks, he had beams to work with, sticks of varied sizes and shapes, up to a few inch-

es long. Each beam had the word TEMPORARY lettered on it. Kelsey soon found what TEMPORARY meant in this case; if the little robot attempted to climb the structure while any of the beams were in place, the blocks immediately lost their cohesiveness and his whole work collapsed.

A good many of his efforts collapsed from one cause or another, usually while the robot was climbing. The little machine hit the floor hard, but always bounced up and returned to its corner, like an undaunted boxer ready for the next round. Kelsey chuckled at the robot, tried to think of a name for it, and vowed he would have no less patience.

He built and rebuilt, without tiring. There were books on engineering, architecture, and construction; he studied them between attempts. What he needed was a tall structure, with a fairly large top for the robot to stand on while it reached for the latch. Since the amount of blocks was limited, the structure would have to be hollow inside. He used his little beams for temporary support, and discovered the beauty of the arch, and the use of the flying buttress to keep arch-supporting walls from collapsing outward.

There came a time when the robot climbed successfully and stretched itself upward, until the tip of one small metal arm reached the latch, curved over, and pulled precisely . . .

Click!

He had done it. Seven doors.

KELSEY felt excitement such that his hands should have trembled with it, but they remained steady and obedient as machines.

Door 1 swung ajar for him now. He felt an impulse to take the robot with him, but it was still out of his reach behind the glass. And it now hung inanimate from the latch it had opened. It was only a machine.

Almost without pause Kelsey pushed open door 1 and stepped through. An unumbered door faced him from the familiar place in the opposite wall, but something else grabbed his attention immediately—a ladder rose through a hole in the glowing ceiling, and down through the hole came a greenish wavery light that might be a water-mottled reflection of the sun.

Kelsey climbed quickly. Above the room the ladder curved off to become a sort of stairway, inside a tube big enough to hold a crawling man. Climbing around a sharp bend in the tube, Kelsey felt an odd sensation, as if he had been turned upside down for a moment, lost his balance and his visual per-

spective. The feeling passed in an instant; he climbed on, into brighter light.

Some force held clear water up like a lid inside the upper end of the tube; it looked as if the upper end was just under the normal surface of a body of water, with bright light above, as if from a clear sunny sky.

Kelsey was quite practical about wonders by now. He poked a finger into the water-lid above his head, and withdrew it wet but undamaged. He crawled up through the water, and stopped with head and shoulders in the open air and sun, his weight still supported by the tube.

He had emerged into the familiarity of the Chicago shoreline, to very nearly the exact spot where he had felt the grasp and sting at his ankle, a few yards offshore from the rocks. The sun was nearly overhead on a bright warm day. Piled as he had left it he saw his clothing. Above the gentle lapping of wave against rock he heard his transistor portable blaring something with a beat.

The same day!

Mechanically he pushed himself free of the tube and dog-paddled to the rocks. A couple of people were in sight, strolling or sunbathing. The same people. He remembered them now. It was the same hour. Maybe the same minute.

His mind felt blank. He pulled himself up onto the rock and sat staring stupidly. The grab at his ankle, the strange place, the old man, the flood, the tests and the doors, one after another, all had no ties to his reality right now. He felt that in a little while he would convince himself that the whole thing had been a dream—but never quite convince himself entirely. To the end of his life he would carry the doubt, and the wonder . . .

Kelsey entered the water again. He swam out and groped down with his feet. The tube entrance was still where he had left it. Was it always here? Ridiculous. Swimmers and boaters and fishermen would run into it all the time. He ducked under water and opened his eyes and tried to see the—place down there, from the outside, but there was nothing visible except the mouth of the tube, and a few yards of the tube itself in the green murkiness. He gripped the lip of the tube opening, a few feet underwater, and stared downward inside. He could see quite a way.

He came up for air. The thing, the system, whatever it was, whoever controlled it, had released him, hadn't it? He had studied and struggled his way out. What more did he want? Revenge? Maybe. He wanted something. He somehow believed that if he

reported this to someone it would all be gone when they came to look for it.

He remembered the final, numberless, unnecessary door he had seen down there. He looked around with longing at his familiar world, drew a deep breath, and went under water.

GOING down, Kelsey got the same queer sensation at the bend in the tube—as if he was being pulled in a hurry from one place to another. He ignored it and went on.

The room at the foot of the ladder was just as he remembered it. He faced one way and sighted through a line of open doors, through which he had worked his way to freedom. He faced the other way, toward the final door, unnumbered and unlatched.

Kelsey stood quietly for a moment with his hand on the door; then pushed gently. The door swung open. Nothing else happened. Light was dim on the other side. He stepped through and found himself facing a thick-looking translucent wall. He could dimly discern an unfamiliar shape moving in the vagueness beyond it.

"And so the final test is passed," said a man's voice from a speaker over Kelsey's head, making him jump. "The will to open the unnecessary door is yours."

Kelsey backed warily away, and stood holding the door open.

"All right—what's it all about?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

"I am an alien here. My shape is not yours. To see me now might disturb you."

It was quiet except for Kelsey's breathing. He found he believed what he had just been told. Outer space. Jokes about little green men. Not funny now.

"What do you want?" he finally asked. "Why did you put me through all that?"

"I want to go home," said the voice simply and eagerly. "I can do things that seem to you very wonderful, but one thing I cannot do without the willing help of another intelligent mind. That is to drive my ship through the great distances, to make timelike the great intervals, to get home—neither to die of age myself on the way, or to find my world old and my people gone when I arrive . . . can you understand? I must pass many stars to get home."

"You want help, why don't you just ask?"

"YOUR societies must be left to themselves now, for a long time to come, not bothered from outside. This is very important. I must deal only with an individual.

"You have the ability to help me, proven by my tests. I have violated your rights

and subjected you to strange pressures, but I assure you you were never in real danger here. I ask your forgiveness; my need for help is great."

Something suggested to Kelsey that he turn around and scramble up the ladder as fast as he could. Somehow he didn't. "How come you need help?"

"There has been an accident—I am the only one of my kind left alive in this ship. I will explain it in detail if you wish."

"What happened to that old man?" Kelsey demanded suddenly.

"I created his apparent body from a material sensitive to mental forces, using specifications in your own mind. He appeared to you as a being you knew to be intelligent, yet one far from what you think of as your own kind. Still you took what you believed to be a grave risk in order to protect his life. If you elect to go with me, you will gain knowledge that is not well entrusted to one who holds the lives of other beings in contempt. The old man was your first test. He never existed as a person."

"You expect me to believe that—"

"Watch."

An opening dilated in a wall. An amorphous gray lump of stuff flowed out like a huge fat worm onto the floor. It rose, coloring and shaping itself into rags and chains and a smiling Oriental face. It nodded at Kelsey cheerfully; the rags and chains became the rich robe of a mandarin.

"I can speak through the mouth of this image, if you wish," the figure said.

"Better than TV," said Kelsey, sounding idiotic to himself. "Listen, how do you expect *me* to help you?"

"You can, if you are willing. Your mind is good, do not be afraid to let it reach out for things. The work on the trip will not be hard. There will be much time for fun, and I can promise you will not be bored. In four years you can be back on Earth, if you wish, though there is a planet in my home system with people very much like yours which . . ."

"Four years!" But what's the difference, Kelsey thought, I'm not going anyway.

"I regret so long a time. But I and my people will not be ungrateful; there will be compensations . . ."

"Wait a minute." Kelsey backed toward the ladder, the mandarin following him with cheerful eyes. "If you're from —where you say—how come you know so much about us here on Earth? Don't tell me you got it all out of my mind, all those tests. I didn't know all that stuff to begin with."

The mandarin melted down

to a gray puddle and began to flow away. "You are not the first being I have seized, tested, and interviewed on this planet," said the voice from the speaker. "More than nine hundred others preceded you. By now I know you people well enough to test you for ability to give the help I need. You are not the first to be suitable. But I hope you will be the first to accept. I have been hopping this ship from one large body of water to another for several of your years, keeping it hidden from the mass of your people, whom I do not wish to disturb, trying to find one who can and will help me."

KELSEY put a hand on the ladder. Why hadn't he just stayed on shore once he got away? But now he had to keep asking questions. "What happens to the people who don't pass your tests? Or who don't want to go with you?"

There was a little silence. Then the voice from the speaker said: "I am sorry. I forget now in my eagerness that you do not know us, and in the light of your experience you are right to be suspicious.

"I do not mistreat them further. They are set free—as you are now—to return to their normal lives at very nearly the point where I interrupted them. I try to improve their health as some payment for my violation of their constitutional rights."

"You mean, if I had just walked away up there—?"

"I would have bothered you no more. In a very few minutes you would have forgotten the entire incident."

"Thanks," said Kelsey. He turned and went two steps up the ladder quickly, then turned again. "How did you give me all those tests in a few minutes?"

"If you come with me, you can learn that—and many other things."

"I see," Kelsey muttered. Four years out of a guy's life . . . but what am I thinking of? I better get out of here before he changes his mind, and locks me in.

He went up the ladder quickly. Tomorrow would be Tuesday. He would go to the post office, and sort mail. He would do more than that, damn it. He would go to some of the colleges and see what kind of evening classes they had going.

But hadn't the alien said he would forget all about this ship a few minutes after he left it? Maybe he would simply slide back into his old life, and never know the difference. Well, he asked himself angrily, would that be so bad? Besides, a lot of people would miss me if I just took off for four years.

Who, really?

He believed the alien, somehow. If the guy had been ly-

ing he would have named a shorter time than four years.

Kelsey reached the top of the tube, and paused with head and shoulders out of water. Miles to the southwest, out of his sight now behind rocks and park and distant skyscrapers, was the Main Post Office, where he might retire in about twenty years. It was really a big place when you were standing near it, or inside it sorting mail. From here it was nothing, a small hidden box, blind and self-contained under the reach of all the sky.

"I'M ready. Can we move the ship now? Just by thinking about it?"

"Yes, we can, as we are working with the machines. Relax. Now hold *this* pattern in your mind." A thing indescribable in Earthman's words came to Kelsey's consciousness. "Think about it until I come back with another."

"Got it."

At about midnight, each of the higher-frequency radars working in North America cast on its scope a burst of noise. An alert was called, but nothing further out of the ordinary was observed.

And no one on Earth attributed the event to the making timelike of a great interval.

END

WHAT COMES TRUE

. . . there was a disposition on the part of literary journalists at one time to call me the English Jules Verne. As a matter of fact there is no literary resemblance whatever between the anticipatory inventions of the great Frenchmen and (my) fantasies. His work dealt always with actual possibilities of invention and discovery and he made some remarkable forecasts. The interest he invoked was a practical one; he wrote and believed and told that this thing or that thing could be done, which was not at that time done. He helped his reader to imagine it done and to imagine what fun, excitement or mischief would ensue. Many of his inventions have 'come true.' But these stories of mine . . . do no pretend to deal with possible things; they are exercises of the imagination in a quite different field.

—H. G. Wells

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THE USELESS BUGBREEDERS

BY JAMES STAMERS

TO THE SPACE COUNCIL, ASTEROID 4722 WAS JUST ANOTHER ROADBLOCK IN THE WAY OF INTERPLANETARY TRAFFIC. BUT TO THE USELESS BUGBREEDERS IT WAS HOME!

THE previous case was a Weeper, and he lost. So the Space Zoning Commissioners were damp and irritable before I opened pleadings for my client. I tried not to squelch as I approached the bench.

"Not the Flammables again, Mr. Jones?" the fat Commissioner asked nastily, sponging his suit with a sodden handkerchief.

"This was last week, Your Honor."

The thin dark Commissioner stared pointedly at the charred end of the bench nearest the witness seat.

"Indeed it was, Mr. Jones."

The middle Commissioner poised his fingers and looked at the court ceiling; moisture gleamed diamond like on his bald head.

"Now let me see," he intoned. "Correct me if I err, Mr. Jones, but I seem to observe you have a habit of representing somewhat spectacular aliens. Including, in the past six months alone, the Drillers, Whirling Tombs, Fragile Glasses, Erupters, Vibrational Men, Transparent Women — and of course let us not forget the Flammables."

"I assure Your Honor, my present clients will be found

to be sober, hardworking, desirable members of the Galactic Community, seeking only to live on their own asteroid in peace under a democratic system, which . . ."

"Thank you, Mr. Jones. Shall we proceed?"

"And perhaps," added the fat Commissioner, "you may be good enough to leave us with most of our courtroom intact on this occasion."

The thin Commissioner sighed and shuffled his papers.

"You appear, Mr. Jones, to contest a Space Council ruling for the elimination of Asteroid Four Thousand Seven Hundred and Twenty-Two on the grounds, which you allege, that it is a peaceful dwelling of an adult and responsible alien race."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Then let us see your adult, um, Bugbreeder."

I shuffled uncomfortably and splashed the court stenographer who gave me a dirty look.

"A space tramp's name given in the early days of Space, Your Honor. More properly, my clients are the Selective Culturists of Bacteria and Lesser Life."

The fat Commissioner sniffed.

"Bugbreeders will do," he said. "Produce one."

My client hopped off the table and ran nimbly up to the witness seat. He sat there like a small green snowball with large and pointed ears.

"Happy, happy to be here, I'm sure," he said.

Fortunately he had a hand to raise and looked reasonably humanoid as he was sworn in. The caterpillar and semi-jelly cultures make a less favorable first impression, and at this point the Driller had gone excitedly through the floor.

"You are a representative member of your race?" I asked formally.

"Oh, yus. Much."

"And you reside on Asteroid Four Thousand Seven Hundred and Twenty-Two, the permanent dwelling of your race?"

"Oh, yus. Home."

"And although your home presents certain technical difficulties for interplanetary vehicles on the spacerun to the greater planets, you maintain it should be preserved because of your contribution to the culture of the Galactic Community?" I asked.

"Oh, yus."

"Does he understand a word you're saying, Mr. Jones?" asked the bald Commissioner.

"Oh, yus. Not much," said my client cheerfully.

"Hurrmph," I said, and coughed.

"Perhaps I may assist," suggested the thin Commissioner, with a nasty look at me. "What exactly does your race do?"

"Breed bugs, I'm sure. Am head bacteriophysicist name

of Lood. Am good scientist."

"And what exactly do you do with these bugs you raise?"

"Most everything."

"YOUR Honors," I interrupted. "At this point I propose a few simple demonstrations of what Mr. Lood and his people can do."

"May I inquire if either of my learned brethren know any way in which we can charge Mr. Jones with rebuilding costs, if necessary?" asked the bald Commissioner.

"Your Honors, I assure you . . ."

"Proceed at your peril, Mr. Jones."

I walked over to the exhibit table and pointed to a row of jars.

"Exhibits A through G, Your Honors. Samples of food and beverages produced by my clients without raw materials and from the expert culture of bacteria."

I held up a jar full of mauve fungus. It was the most attractive example.

"I would hardly call feeding on funguses a sign of a responsible humanoid race, Mr. Jones."

"Perhaps Your Honor will recall the part played by bacteria in making milk, cheese, wine, beer, bread."

The Commmissioners looked at each other and nodded reluctantly. So I passed the jars up to them, secure in the knowledge they had been tested by the Alien Foods Bureau. I watched the Commissioners unscrew the lids and taste the contents somewhat hesitantly.

"Not bad," confessed the fat Commissioner eventually.

"Quite palatable."

"Of course we already have honey and similar foodstuffs, Mr. Jones."

"Naturally, Your Honor. But Mr. Lood's race can survive without extraplanetary aid. Provided they have sunshine and water, they can breed their spores and bacteria with no other resources."

"You mean," said the thin Commissioner with a dark leer, "that almost any sunny planet would do for them?"

Somewhere along the line my point seemed to have been swept away, so I added hurriedly:

"I offer this evidence purely to show the high degree of civilization of my clients' culture, as cause why they should not be deprived of their native land."

"Oh, yus," my client agreed.

"Mr. Lood," intoned the bald Commissioner, "to stay on your present asteroid you will have to prove that your race offers something that cannot be found elsewhere in the Galactic Community. Now have these funguses of yours any special medicinal values, for example?"

"Please?"

"Can you cure diseases with them?"

"Oh, no."

"Ah," said the thin and fat Commissioners together. "Proceed, Mr. Jones."

THAT put Lood somewhere back behind the twentieth-century discoverers of penicillin and the myecins, and even back behind the pioneer Pasteur. Five hundred years back, in fact.

"Yes. Well. Let's see how my clients handle housing, Your Honors. I think you'll find this quite revolutionary. Mr. Lood?"

Lood hopped off the witness seat and trotted up to the long table normally reserved for attorneys. Lately, I have found my professional colleagues strangely reluctant to stay in court when I have a case, so Lood had the entire table to himself.

He pulled a small jar out from under the table and spread a pile of dust on the tabletop. Then he unscrewed the jar and gently poured nothing out of it onto the dust. Nothing visible, that is. But I assumed it was teeming with viruses and such.

"While Mr. Lood gets this started, Your Honors," I said, hoping the viruses or whatever were not fatal to humans, "may I submit the usefulness of fungus foods for space-travel and for pioneers on inhospitable planets?"

"Are we having difficulties with General Food - Concentrates, the Travelers Capsule Combine and the other ten thousand concerns in this line, Mr. Jones?" the bald Commissioner asked quietly.

You can't say I didn't try. I shut up and watched Lood fuss with the dust on the table.

It started moving as if it were bubbling and Lood stood back.

Slowly, the dust on the table formed itself into a brick, a long eight by six by three inch brick. Lood smiled happily.

"And here, Your Honors," I said triumphantly, "here is automatic housing."

"One brick does not make a house, Mr. Jones."

"If Your Honors will just watch . . ."

The brick slowly elongated and split into two perfect bricks, lying on the table end to end.

"Mass colony action of bacteria, said Lood wisely. "Oh, yus."

The two bricks each split into two further bricks. These divided and multiplied themselves while we watched, out to the end of the table.

"I would like Your Honors to observe the way these bricks overcome natural hazards," I said, getting into my stride.

I pointed to the bricks drooping over the end of the table. A brick fell onto the floor at each end, then built itself up until it joined the line of

bricks on the table, forming a perfect arch at each angle. The line on the table was now three bricks high, so I walked round and stood behind the wall.

"You see, Your Honors, suppose I need a house. I merely combine these suitable microbes and dust. And there we are, a house."

I had to stand on tiptoe to finish the sentence because of the mathematics involved. Every brick was doubling and redoubling itself in just under a minute. And the wall was getting quite impressively high.

"Mr. Jones," called one of the Commissioners.

It was not until I tried to walk round the end of the wall that I found I had been outflanked.

I ran to the nearest wall of the courtroom but the bricks got there first. I heard a rending noise that suggested the other end had gone clean through the opposite wall. As a matter of fact, I saw the astonished face of an attorney entering the main door of the Justice Building as the wall advanced towards him. Then he saw me. He grinned and waved.

I was in no mood to wave back.

"Mr. Lood, Mr. Lood," I yelled. "Can you hear me?"

"Wall too thick, yus," came a muffled answer.

And indeed it was. I had not noticed it, but the wall was expanding sideways as well. I was calculating the approximate thickness when it went up and through the roof of the courtroom.

Fortunately it was a nice sunny day.

HOWEVER, this was no time to sunbathe and I dashed towards the hole in the courtroom wall, where Lood's wall had gone through.

I just got out before a buttress, coming out the wall at right angles, blocked the gap. I remembered something Lood had said about the automatic creation of full-scale houses on a simple standard plan: two rooms, a toilet and a patio.

Outside, the wall was well on the way towards completing its second simple house. This side of the wall was, that is. I could only assume it was doing something similar on the other side. There was no way of getting round and seeing, except by outstripping the wall in a sprint.

I gathered my breath and dignity and ran very rapidly down the length of the wall, round the far mounting tiers of brick, advancing now on the State Library, and back to where I had left the Commissioners and Mr. Lood.

I was faced by a thicket of patios and arched doorways and low-roofed houses.

"Your Honors, Your Hon-

ors," I called hopefully, walking into the maze, in the general direction of what appeared to be an old and ruined war monument. It then occurred to me that this was the outer wall of the courthouse. It stood far off, pointing a stone finger to the sky, as if going down in a sea of brick for the third time.

"Your Honors, Your Honors . . ."

I met them turning a corner.

Unfortunately, they seemed to have found it necessary to crawl through a broken gap of some sort. They were very dusty and had a slightly shredded appearance.

"Ah, Mr. Jones," they said grimly, dusting each other off.

A tremendous crash announced the falling in of the roof of the State Library.

"Well," said the thin Commissioner, "he did say it was revolutionary."

I smiled politely.

"Don't giggle, Mr. Jones, or we'll hold you in contempt."

We wound out of the maze in single file. A pattering behind us announced Lood bringing up the rear.

Once we were out, and about two hundred yards ahead of the advancing walls, patios and houses, the three Commissioners turned on me.

"Mr. Jones," they said with restraint. "You will now stop this reckless building project."

I turned to Lood.

"You must stop it," I said.

"Oh, yus," he agreed, nodding happily. "Most marvelous, no. Ample housing for all and sundry. Homes for peoples. Immediate occupancy. You like basic plan house, yus?"

"Mr. Lood," snarled the fat Commissioner. "The problem on every habitable planet so far has been to find room to build. Earth is congested . . ."

Distant crashing informed me that an unprecedented houseclearing was still going on.

". . . And so are all authorized planets yet discovered. I speak for my learned brethren in saying that this . . . this anthill of yours is one thing the Galactic Community can do without."

"And do without right now," added his bald colleague.

"You wish to stop?" asked Lood.

Small tears filled the periphery of his round eyes.

"Yes," I confirmed brutally. "Can you stop it?"

"Oh, yus. Must have antiseptics."

IT took the fire department four hours of spraying from their copters to reduce the entire housing estate to dust. And then an even blanket of brown feathery residue lay unbroken for several acres, save here and there where the shells of previous buildings

stood up gauntly and accusingly.

"All bugs gone," said Lood sadly.

"But what about this mess?" demanded the bald Commissioner.

"Comes out of air. Floating particles. Process cleans air, too."

A fresh wind from across the blanket of dust came inopportunely to punctuate Mr. Lood's remark. As soon as they could talk again, the Commissioners suggested resuming in another city.

"Assuming, Mr. Jones, you wish to produce further aspects of your, hum, case."

Six red and bleary eyes stared at me from a coating of brown dust of only vaguely judicial appearance.

"I think, Your Honors, the next evidence had better be delivered in the open," I said, and pointed to a nearby park.

Much, if not all, of the dust fell off us as we walked over to the small green hill in the center of the park. The birds twittered, the sun shone, the breeze was fresh; and after the Commissioners had settled on convenient tree stumps, I felt quite hopeful about the third line of evidence. Lood stood optimistically by.

"Your Honors," I said, "you are aware that Earth suffers a grave shortage of metals. Almost all economical quantities have been mined out. Yet, Your Honors —" I paused dramatically —"in the haematin of human blood alone, whose main function is to carry oxygen to the system, there is nearly twice as much iron by weight as oxygen."

"Precisely which of us, Mr. Jones, do you propose to mine first?"

I cleared my throat and let the thin Commissioner's remark pass.

"Merely making the point, Your Honor, that the metal-carrying properties of bacteria have been hardly considered."

This was stretching it a bit because selective breeding of microbes for the recovery of metals in tailings have been developed back in the nineteen-fifties. But so far as I knew, no one had carried it as far as my client race.

"Mr. Lood," I commanded.

"Just one moment, Mr. Jones," said the bald Commissioner drily. "Let us have an outline of this *before* we start."

"Certainly, Your Honor. Mr. Lood will now extract gold from a sample of ocean water we have obtained."

I signalled to the waiting carrier and it came trundling softly over the grass and deposited a large tank on the grass.

"Genuine untouched ocean water, Your Honors," I said, slapping the tank. "Go ahead, Mr. Lood."

The little fellow hopped up to the side of the tank and

emptied another invisible horde from a test tube into the water.

We waited.

"Oh, yus," he said.

And there on the bottom of the tank was an unmistakable sludge of metallic gold, shining speckled in the rays of sunlight bending through the water.

I scooped out a sample and handed it round for the Commissioners to inspect.

"Subject to analysis," grunted the fat one, "this certainly seems to be gold."

"Of course, there is no reason why this should not be done on Earth, as a starting point."

The thin Commissioner paused and looked at my client.

"Does this process affect fish?"

"Oh, yus," said Lood. "Kills all parasites. Fish, reptiles, and such."

"Thank you," said the Commissioner drily.

MR. Lood looked at me apologetically.

"My people too small to tolerate fish," he explained. "Fish most dangerous wild beasts. Oh, yus."

"Never mind," I reassured him. "Your Honors, I feel the court will take a more favorable view of the dry-land operation, then. Taking place as it does in the bowels of the earth, there is no danger to valuable livestock. And here we can demonstrate, for example, simple aluminum extraction, by the progressive reduction and oxidation and reduction of bacteria on a molecular scale.

"I hope," I added, "this experiment will produce visible evidence of this great boon to mankind, though I must ask Your Honors to watch closely."

Lood produced another test-tube, pressed a small hole in the grass with his finger and emptied the tube. The hole darkened.

We all bent over to watch.

Nothing happened.

"Perhaps a dud batch?" I asked eventually.

"Oh, no," said Lood.

We peered intently into the small hole without seeing anything.

Then a faint wisp of steam came out of the hole. I walked over the grass, picked up a long twig, walked back and thrust it into the hole. I could not touch bottom, so something was going on down there.

The edges of the hole began to gleam with white metal. I was about to explain the alumina content of common clay, when the thin Commissioner and the tree stump he was sitting on went down with a whistling sound into a sudden pit that opened beneath him.

I only just caught the third and last Commissioner in time.

We watched his tree stump sinking out of sight togther.

The ground began to quiver uneasily.

"Let us get out of here with all haste."

I followed the direction of the court with proper professional zeal. And we just made it to the safe stressed-concrete surface of the old freeway when the park melted completely into a stark framework of aluminum. Seated in the middle and peering at us through the aluminum cage were the other two Commissioners. They did not seem particularly happy.

Around them in a widening belt there opened up a pit of gleaming aluminum, melting, so to speak, towards the horizon on all sides.

"You realize, I suppose, Mr. Jones," said the bald Commissioner beside me, "that your client is in the process of eating up the Earth." He breathed heavily.

Lood was beaming and hopping up and down at the success of his experiment. I touched him in the general area of a shoulder. He looked at me.

"No," I said firmly, shaking my head.

"No?"

"No!"

His round eyes became tearful and his little green body shook.

"Oh, dear. Oh, dear. Oh, dear."

"Antiseptics?" I asked.

"Oh, yus," he confirmed sadly.

VERY fortunately, the fire department was still observing my client — and me, I suspected afterwards, ridiculous as that may seem.

This time it took them several hours of deep spraying and drilling to confine the area. A vast saucer of aluminum remained.

"Useful for signalling to stars, oh, yus?" asked Lood, hopefully.

"Oh, no," I said.

A threatening cough made me turn round to see the three Commissioners staring at me.

"Mr. Jones . . ."

". . . you have now destroyed the Courthouse, the Public Library and five city blocks..."

". . . and buried them under a filthy layer of dust . . ."

" . . . and reduced a park into a great garbage pit. . . ."

". . . we therefore refuse your claim and give you and your client six hours to get off Earth . . ."

". . . and kindly do not trouble to advise us where the Space Council moves you. We will sleep more soundly for believing that it will be many, many light-years away."

And they turned and walked away, leaving me with my client — and, apparently, my traveling companion.

A quiet and suppressed sobbing made me turn and look

at Lood. He wept dolefully.

"We have nothing," he said. "Oh, no. We have nothing to offer. Nothing that you humans want."

"Well," I said, "that's the way it goes sometimes."

And what, I wondered, was I going to do for a living now?

"Free food," gulped Lood. "Free housing. Free gold and metals. We had all hoped so much from this. Oh, yus."

There did not seem any point in telling him his people were several hundred years too late. Once upon a time he would have been hailed as a savior of a starving and poor human race, a great benefactor of mankind. Now he was just a nuisance. And I was another for letting him loose.

"Well," I assured him, "you have got one guest until they shift you off your asteroid. Me. Free food and housing will suit me fine. And maybe we'll find some very backward part of the Galaxy where they need gold and such.

"It's a pity," I added, as we started to walk towards the spaceport, "that you can't control these bacteria of yours."

"Can control."

"It didn't look like it, my friend."

"Oh, yus. Can control bodily leucocytes, corpuscles and such. Perfect cell replacement easy."

I looked down at him.

"If it's all that easy," I said. "I suppose your old men can run faster than your houses."

"No old men," said Lood.

"Well, old whatever-you-are's."

"No old. Not die. Oh, yus. Perfect cell replacement."

I stood very still.

"Do you mean you never die?" I asked.

"Oh, yus. Never die."

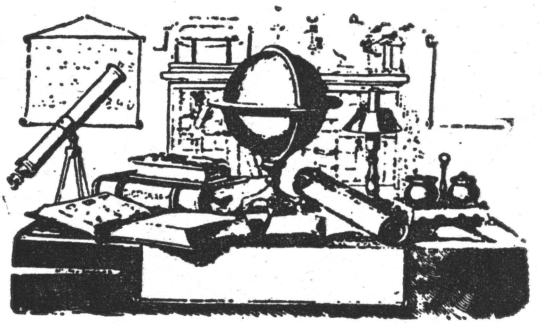
"Can teach?" I asked.

"Oh, yus. Most simple," smiled Lood. "Can teach all men not die. Not ever."

But I was off running after the three Commissioners, yelling until they stopped and stood waiting for me . . .

END

★ ★ ★ ★ ★



science briefs

BY the time this is in print, you may already have been irritated, once in a while, by background static riding in on the carrier wave of your favorite radio station. If it isn't Junior fiddling with a light-bulb or your neighbor's gas-powered mulch-spreader with no suppressor on the plug, it could be Phantom, a double side-band radio system being tried out by the Armed Forces. Designed by General Electric, the method impresses information on the far outside edges of the band you're listening to, without affecting the middle at all, thus finding literally thousands of newly available communications channels.

Some of the satellites equipped with microphones have reported pings, pops, raps and bangs of an unexpected loudness. Professor Whipple of Harvard concludes that the noises are caused by extremely fine dust in orbit around the Earth, very possibly the remains of comets. There seems to be a concentration of it at about 80 miles altitude. Professor Whipple feels that none of it is large enough to do appreciable damage, and that the noise is more a static-electricity phenomenon than

a physical impact. He suggests, however, a thin outer shell for man-carrying capsules, so insulated that such noise could not reach the pilot. Harmless it may be. But it could be a terrifying experience.

We've all marvelled at developments in microfilming, whether it was at the fantastic savings in the old-newspaper files at the major libraries, or the International Geophysical Year weather readings — thousands upon thousands of them, taken from points all over the world for over eighteen months, and by microfilming reduced to a stack one man might lift. Now comes the National Bureau of standards with a camera quite capable of putting all the pages of this issue on a piece of film just big enough to make an eye-patch on Liberty's portrait on a dime. *Time* magazine says that it could put the 27,357 pages of the Encyclopedia Britannica on the back of a match-book. In spite of cloak-and-dagger tales about entire paragraphs being concealed in a comma between clauses of a Dear John letter (and this gimmick could include John's life record double-spaced, even if it was John Dillinger) the new camera will probably not be used for practical microfilming. Working on the principle of what happens when you look through the wrong end of a telescope, the apparatus is so choosy about focusing and so subject to interference from vibration (BuStandards envelopes the camera and the object to be photographed in a massive steel jacket suspended from springs) and dust (each single letter is about the size of a single hoof-and-mouth disease germ) that it will be kept at work primarily at the job it was designed for—testing the resolving power of photographic emulsions.

Pity the poor cancer—it must be as worried today as a polio bug! A brilliant advance in radiotherapy is reported from St. Thomas Hospital in London, England. The patient is placed in a giant tank which is supported horizontally only at one end. Round the tank rotate two massive therapy heads containing cobalt 60 — 2000 curies of it. Precisely aimed, they rotate about a central point which is the cancer — meaning that other tissues get only transient radiation while the cancer gets it constantly. The reason for the sealed tank is that it enables the patient to breathe high-pressure oxygen, and the reason for that is that cancer cells are often deficient in oxygen and therefore up to three times less sensitive to radiation as normal ones. This technique brings up the concentration of oxygen in the can-

cer while the radiation beams are clobbering it. To accomplish this, the patient must breathe high-pressure oxygen through a mask. And to make this possible, his entire body must be pressurized — hence the tank. The entire apparatus is walled in by thick concrete, with a five-inch-thick viewing window of leaded glass and remote controls. With heavy artillery like this around, cancer might as well give up and go!

Contrary to the beliefs and/or wistful hopes of many a s-f aficionado, biologically alien life—that is, alien to Earth norms—is unlikely or impossible, so good-by boron beast with cuprous blood, farewell silicon monsters! Dr. George Wald, a Professor of Biology at Harvard, asserts not only that living organisms everywhere must be constructed of hydrogen, carbon, oxygen and nitrogen, but that they must also have water and radiation — specifically that between 300 and 1100 microns — available.

On the other hand, perhaps you feel more at home in the universe now!

You may take this as a joke, grin and laugh it off; you may feel offended, and say this is no place for such information and advice. Either way, any way — keep it in mind.

The information: Dr. Leon Rosen of the United States Public Health Service says that the isolation of the virus of infectious hepatitis is "the No. 1 unsolved problem of contemporary virology." Infectious hepatitis is a liver disease for which there is no known cure. It is on the increase, and is now the third most prevalent disease in the U.S. Seldom deadly, it is acutely debilitating and a great masquerader, being difficult to diagnose and so far impossible to treat except by rest and good diet. It is not the same thing as serum hepatitis, a rare and dangerous disease caught from improperly sterilized injection needles. Infectious hepatitis can be caught in several ways, like polluted water, but most of it comes from person-to-person contact and its source is always the lower intestine. There is only one sure thing you can do about it, for yourself and your children, if any: *Wash your hands every time!*

Earthbound Dr. Kurt Komarek of New York University has thought his way out of disaster on the moon! He reasoned that oxygen supply on a space ship is necessarily limited, and even with a completely efficient recycling system — plants, for example, returning oxygen and absorbing CO_2 — there is still a certain amount aboard, in or out of combination. And it cannot

go up or stay the same: it *must* go down. Especially after landing, with airlocks in use, and with inevitable escape from suit joints, etc. Recalling the amount of iron in meteorites, and knowing it must be combined with something, and that probably oxygen, Dr. Komarek tried heating a meteorite in a hydrogen atmosphere. There was oxygen all right — 4 pounds for each 100 pounds of meteorite! As it left the heated material, it combined with the hydrogen to form water vapor, from which the oxygen could be separated by electrolysis. He calculates that by processing not more than 200 pounds of meteorites a month, enough oxygen could be recovered to replace the losses of a 5-man team indefinitely!

Certain aspects of the "scientific attitude" could well be copied by the rest of humanity. Years ago nations began to pool weather information; this work was correlated and was vastly expanded during the International Geophysical Year, and now continues at a high level. The recently opened Tokyo Weather Central is the fifth large information center to be opened round the world. There is a constant free exchange of information in weather covering the entire northern hemisphere, including Russia and the United States. Another example: in preparation for the IGY, many long-range experiments were prepared far in advance. One of these was a seismograph station on bedrock deep underground in the city of Budapest. Seismic tracings from that laboratory can be seen today showing disturbances from Russian tanks as the 1956 fighting rolled back and forth through the city. These faint squiggles on paper tape speak eloquently of the single-mindedness of the scientists who stayed on the job in their laboratory, never missing a reading or an entry, while their personal world fell to pieces on the streets above.

Dr. David Nachmansohn, Professor of Biochemistry at Columbia, has announced remarkable new findings on the exact nature of nerves and their operation. It seems that the "bio-electricity" present in body fluids, in the form of sodium ions, is blocked from entry into a nerve by a fatty substance. This substance is made permeable by the chemical acetylcholine after it combines with a certain protein in the barrier. The nerve may then conduct. But if it conducted longer than a few millionths of a second the nerve might become paralyzed. So another substance, the enzyme cholinesterase, acts to destroy the compound. All this to scratch your nose! **END**

By ALLEN KIM LANG Illustrated by GAUGHAN

CINDERELLA

I

THE First Vice-President of the William Howard Taft National Bank and Trust Company, the gentleman to whom Miss Orison McCall was applying for a job, was not at all the public picture of a banker. His suit of hound's-tooth checks, the scarlet vest peeping above the vee of his jacket, were enough to assure Orison that the Taft Bank was a curious bank indeed. "I gotta say, chick, these references of yours really swing," said the Vice-President, Mr. Wanji. "Your last boss says you come on real cool in the secretary-bit."

"He was a very kind em-

STORY

What a bank!
The First Vice-President was a cool cat — the elevator and the money operators all wore earmuffs— was just as phony as a three-dollar bill!

ployer," Orison said. She tried to keep from staring at the most remarkable item of Mr. Wanji's costume, a pair of furry green earmuffs. It was not cold.

Mr. Wanji returned to Orison her letters of reference. "What color bread you got eyes for taking down, baby?" he asked.

"Beg pardon?"

"What kinda salary you bucking for?" he translated, bouncing up and down on the toes of his rough-leather desert boots.

"I was making one-twenty a week in my last position," Miss McCall said.

"You're worth more'n that, just to jazz up the decor," Mr.

Wanji said. "What you say we pass you a cee-and-a-half a week. Okay?" He caught Orison's look of bewilderment. "One each, a Franklin and a Grant," he explained further. She still looked blank. "Sister, you gonna work in a bank, you gotta know who's picture's on the paper. That's a hunnerd-fifty a week, doll."

"That will be most satisfactory, Mr. Wanji," Orison said. It was indeed.

"Crazy!" Mr. Wanji grabbed Orison's right hand and shook it with athletic vigor. "You just now joined up with our herd. I wanna tell you, chick, it's none too soon we got some decent scenery around this tomb, girlwise." He took her arm and led her toward the bank of elevators. The uniformed operator nodded to Mr. Wanji, bowed slightly to Orison. He, too, she observed, wore earmuffs. His were more formal than Mr. Wanji's, being midnight blue in color. "Lift us to five, Mac," Mr. Wanji said. As the elevator door shut he explained to Orison, "You can make the Taft Bank scene anywhere between the street floor and floor five. Basement and everything higher'n fifth floor is Iron Curtain Country far's you're concerned. Dig, baby?"

"Yes, sir," Orison said. She was wondering if she'd be issued earmuffs, now that she'd become an employee of this most peculiar bank.

The elevator opened on five to a tiny office, just large enough to hold a single desk and two chairs. On the desk were a telephone and a microphone. Beside them was a double-decked "In" and "Out" basket. "Here's where you'll do your nine-to-five, honey," Mr. Wanji said.

"What will I be doing, Mr. Wanji?" Orison asked.

The Vice-President pointed to the newspaper folded in the "In" basket. "Flip on the microphone and read the paper to it," he said. "When you get done reading the paper, someone will run you up something new to read. Okay?"

"It seems a rather peculiar job," Orison said. "After all, I'm a secretary. Is reading the newspaper aloud supposed to familiarize me with the Bank's operation?"

"Don't bug me, kid," Mr. Wanji said. "All you gotta do is read that there paper into this here microphone. Can do?"

"Yes, sir," Orison said. "While you're here, Mr. Wanji, I'd like to ask you about my withholding tax, social security, credit union, coffee-breaks, union membership, lunch hour and the like. Shall we take care of these details now? Or would you —"

"You just take care of that chicken-flickin' kinda stuff any way seems best to you, kid," Mr. Wanji said.

"Yes, sir," Orison said. This

laissez-faire policy of Taft Bank's might explain why she'd been selected from the Treasury Department's secretarial pool to apply for work here, she thought. Orison McCall, girl Government spy. She picked up the newspaper from the "In" basket, unfolded it to discover the day's *Wall Street Journal,* and began at the top of column one to read it aloud. Wanji stood before the desk, nodding his head as he listened. "You blowing real good, kid," he said. "The boss is gonna dig you the most."

Orison nodded. Holding her newspaper and her microphone, she read the one into the other. Mr. Wanji flicked his fingers in a good-by, then took off upstairs in the elevator.

BY lunchtime Orison had finished the *Wall Street Journal* and had begun reading a book an earmuffed page had brought her. The book was a fantastic novel of some sort, named *The Hobbit.* Reading this peculiar fare into the microphone before her, Miss McCall was more certain than ever that the Taft Bank was, as her boss in Washington had told her, the front for some highly irregular goings-on. An odd business for a Federal Mata Hari, Orison thought, reading a nonsense story into a microphone for an invisible audience.

Orison switched off her microphone at noon, marked her place in the book and took the elevator down to the ground floor. The operator was a new man, ears concealed behind scarlet earmuffs. In the car, coming down from the interdicted upper floors, were several gentlemen with briefcases. As though they were members of a ballet-troupe, these gentlemen whipped off their hats with a single motion as Orison stepped aboard the elevator. Each of the chivalrous men, hat pressed to his heart, wore a pair of earmuffs. Orison nodded bemused acknowledgment of their gesture, and got off in the lobby vowing never to put a penny into this curiousest of banks.

Lunch at the stand-up counter down the street was a normal interlude. Girls from the ground-floor offices of Taft Bank chattered together, eyed Orison with the coolness due so attractive a competitor, and favored her with no gambit to enter their conversations. Orison sighed, finished her tuna salad on whole-wheat, then went back upstairs to her lonely desk and her microphone. By five, Orison had finished the book, reading rapidly and becoming despite herself engrossed in the saga of Bilbo Baggins, Hobbit. She switched off the microphone, put on her light coat, and rode downstairs in an elevator filled with earmuffed, silent, hat-clasping gentlemen.

What I need, Orison thought, walking rapidly to the busline, is a double Scotch, followed by a double Scotch. And what the William Howard Taft National Bank and Trust Company needs is a joint raid by forces of the U.S. Treasury Department and the American Psychiatric Association. Earmuffs, indeed. Fairy-tales read into a microphone. A Vice-President with the vocabulary of a racetrack tout. And what goes on in those upper floors? Orison stopped in at the restaurant nearest her apartment house—the Windsor Arms—and ordered a meal and a single Martini. Her boss in Washington had told her that this job of hers, spying on Taft Bank from within, might prove dangerous. Indeed it was, she thought. She was in danger of becoming a solitary drinker.

Home in her apartment, Orison set the notes of her first day's observations in order. Presumably Washington would call tonight for her initial report. Item: some of the men at the Bank wore earmuffs, several didn't. Item: the Vice-President's name was Mr. Wanji: Oriental? Item: the top eight floors of the Taft Bank Building seemed to be off-limits to all personnel not wearing earmuffs. Item: she was being employed at a very respectable salary to read newsprint and nonsense into a microphone. Let Washington make sense of that, she thought.

IN a gloomy mood, Orison McCall showered and dressed for bed. Eleven o'clock. Washington should be calling soon, inquiring after the results of her first day's spying.

No call. Orison slipped between the sheets at eleven-thirty. The clock was set; the lights were out. Wasn't Washington going to call her? Perhaps, she thought, the Department had discovered that the Earmuffs had her phone tapped.

"Testing," a baritone voice muttered.

Orison sat up, clutching the sheet around her throat. "Beg pardon?" she said.

"Testing," the male voice repeated. "One, two, three; three, two, one. Do you read me? Over."

Orison reached under the bed for a shoe. Gripping it like a Scout-ax, she reached for the light cord with her free hand and tugged at it.

The room was empty.

"Testing," the voice repeated.

"What you're testing," Orison said in a firm voice, "is my patience. Who are you?"

"Department of Treasury Monitor J-12," the male voice said. "Do you have anything to report, Miss McCall?"

"Where are you, Monitor?" she demanded.

"That's classified information," the voice said. "Please speak directly to your pillow, Miss McCall."

Orison lay down cautiously. "All right," she whispered to her pillow.

"Over here," the voice instructed her, coming from the unruffled pillow beside her.

Orison transferred her head to the pillow to her left. "A radio?" she asked.

"Of a sort," Monitor J-12 agreed. "We have to maintain communications security. Have you anything to report?"

"I got the job," Orison said. "Are you . . . in that pillow . . . all the time?"

"No, Miss McCall," the voice said. "Only at report times. Shall we establish our rendezvous here at eleven-fifteen, Central Standard Time, every day?"

"You make it sound so improper," Orison said.

"I'm far enough away to do you no harm, Miss McCall," the monitor said. "Now, tell me what happened at the bank today."

Orison briefed her pillow on the Earmuffs, on her task of reading to a microphone, and on the generally mimsy tone of the William Howard Taft National Bank and Trust Company. "That's about it, so far," she said.

"Good report," J-12 said from the pillow. "Sounds like you've dropped into a real snakepit, beautiful."

"How do you know . . . why do you think I'm beautiful?" Orison asked.

"Native optimism," the voice said. "Good night." J-12 signed off with a peculiar electronic pop that puzzled Orison for a moment. Then she placed the sound: J-12 had kissed his microphone.

Orison flung the shoe and the pillow under her bed, and resolved to write Washington for permission to make her future reports by registered mail.

II

AT ten o'clock the next morning, reading page four of the current *Wall Street Journal*, Orison was interrupted by the click of a pair of leather heels. The gentleman whose heels had just slammed together was bowing. And she saw with some gratification that he was not wearing earmuffs. "My name," the stranger said, "is Dink Gerding. I am President of this bank, and wish at this time to welcome you to our little family."

"I'm Orison McCall," she said. A handsome man, she mused. Twenty-eight? So tall. Could he ever be interested in a girl just five-foot-three? Maybe higher heels?

"We're pleased with your work, Miss McCall," Dink Gerding said. He took the chair to the right of her desk.

"It's nothing," Orison said, switching off the microphone.

"On the contrary, Miss McCall. Your duties are most important," he said.

"Reading papers and fairy-tales into this microphone is nothing any reasonably astute sixth-grader couldn't do as well," Orison said.

"You'll be reading silently before long," Mr. Gerding said. He smiled, as though this explained everything. "By the way, your official designation is Confidential Secretary. It's me whose confidences you're to keep secret. If I ever need a letter written, may I stop down here and dictate it?"

"Please do," Orison said. This bank president, for all his grace and presence, was obviously as kookie as his bank.

"Have you ever worked in a bank before, Miss McCall?" Mr. Gerding asked, as though following her train of thought.

"No, sir," she said. "Though I've been associated with a rather large financial organization."

"You may find some of our methods a little strange, but you'll get used to them," he said. "Meanwhile, I'd be most grateful if you'd dispense with calling me 'sir.' My name is Dink. It is ridiculous, but I'd enjoy your using it."

"Dink?" she asked. "And I suppose you're to call me Orison?"

"That's the drill," he said. "One more question, Orison. Dinner this evening?"

Direct, she thought. Perhaps that's why he's president of a bank, and still so young. "We've hardly met," she said.

"But we're on a first-name basis already," he pointed out. "Dance?"

"I'd love to," Orison said, half expecting an orchestra to march, playing, from the elevator.

"Then I'll pick you up at seven. Windsor Arms, if I remember your personnel form correctly." He stood, lean, all bone and muscle, and bowed slightly. West Point? Hardly. His manners were European. Sandhurst, perhaps, or Saint Cyr. Was she supposed to reply with a curtsy? Orison wondered.

"Thank you," she said.

He was a soldier, or had been: the way, when he turned, his shoulders stayed square. The crisp clicking of his steps, a military metronome, to the elevator. When the door slicked open Orison, staring after Dink, saw that each of the half-dozen men aboard snapped off their hats (but not their earmuffs) and bowed, the earmuffed operator bowing with them. Small bows, true; just head-and-neck. But not to her. To Dink Gerding.

ORISON finished the *Wall Street Journal* by early afternoon. A page came up a

moment later with fresh reading-matter: a copy of yesterday's *Congressional Record.* She launched into the *Record,* thinking as she read of meeting again this evening that handsome madman, that splendid lunatic, that unlikely bank-president. "You read so *well,* darling," someone said across the desk.

Orison looked up. "Oh, hello," she said. "I didn't hear you come up."

"I walk ever so lightly," the woman said, standing hip-shot in front of the desk, "and pounce ever so hard." She smiled. Opulent, Orison thought. Built like a burlesque queen. No, she thought, I don't like her. Can't. Wouldn't if I could. Never cared for cats.

"I'm Orison McCall," she said, and tried to smile back without showing teeth.

"Delighted," the visitor said, handing over an undelighted palm. "I'm Auga Vingt. Auga, to my friends."

"Won't you sit down, Miss Vingt?"

"So kind of you, darling," Auga Vingt said, "but I shan't have time to visit. I just wanted to stop and welcome you as a Taft Bank co-worker. One for all, all for one. Yea, Team. You know."

"Thanks," Orison said.

"Common courtesy," Miss Vingt explained. "Also, darling, I'd like to draw your attention to one little point. Dink Gerding—you know, the shoulders and muscles and crewcut? Well, he's posted property. Should you throw your starveling charms at my Dink, you'd only get your little eyes scratched out. Word to the wise, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Sorry you have to leave so suddenly," Orison said, rolling her *Wall Street Journal* into a club and standing. "Darling."

"So remember, Tiny, Dink Gerding is mine. You're all alone up here. You could get broken nails, fall down the elevator shaft, all sorts of annoyance. Understand me, darling?"

"You make it very clear," Orison said. "Now you'd best hurry back to your stanchion, Bossy, before the hay's all gone."

"Isn't it lovely, the way you and I reached an understanding right off?" Auga asked. "Well, ta-ta." She turned and walked to the elevator, displaying, Orison thought, a disgraceful amount of ungirdled rhumba motion.

The elevator stopped to pick up the odious Auga. A passenger, male, stepped off. "Good morning, Mr. Gerding," Miss Vingt said, bowing.

"Carry on, Colonel," the stranger replied. As the elevator door closed, he stepped up to Orison's desk. "Good morning, Miss McCall," he said.

"What is this?" Orison demanded. "Visiting-day at the zoo?" She paused and shook

her head. "Excuse me, sir," she said. "It's just that . . Vingt thing . . ."

"Auga is rather intense," the new Mr. Gerding said.

"Yeah, intense," Orison said. "Like a kidney-stone."

"I stopped by to welcome you to the William Howard Taft National Bank and Trust Company family, Miss McCall," he said. "I'm Kraft Gerding, Dink's elder brother. I understand you've met Dink already."

"Yes, sir," Orison said. The hair of this new Mr. Gerding was cropped even closer than Dink's. His mustache was gray-tipped, like a patch of frosted furze; and his eyes, like Dink's, were cobalt blue. The head, Orison mused, would look quite at home in one of Kaiser Bill's spike-topped *Pickelhauben;* but the ears were in evidence, and seemed normal. Mr. Kraft Gerding bowed—what continental manners these bankers had!—and Orison half expected him to free her hand from the rolled-up paper she still clutched and plant a kiss on it.

INSTEAD, Kraft Gerding smiled a smile as frosty as his mustache and said, "I understand that my younger brother has been talking with you, Miss McCall. Quite proper, I know. But I must warn you against mixing business with pleasure."

Orison jumped up, tossing the paper into her wastebasket. "I quit!" she shouted. "You can take this crazy bank . . . into bankruptcy, for all I care. I'm not going to perch up here, target for every uncaged idiot in finance, and listen to another word."

"Dearest lady, my humblest pardon," Kraft Gerding said, bowing again, a bit lower. "Your work is splendid; your presence is Taft Bank's most charming asset; my only wish is to serve and protect you. To this end, dear lady, I feel it my duty to warn you against my brother. A word to the wise . . ."

"N'est-ce pas?" Orison said. "Well, Buster, here's a word to the foolish. Get lost."

Kraft Gerding bowed and flashed his gelid smile. "Until we meet again?"

"I'll hold my breath," Orison promised. "The elevator is just behind you. Push a button, will you? And *bon voyage.*"

Kraft Gerding called the elevator, marched aboard, favored Orison with a cold, quick bow, then disappeared into the mysterious heights above fifth floor.

First the unspeakable Auga Vingt, then the obnoxious Kraft Gerding. Surely, Orison thought, recovering the *Wall Street Journal* from her wastebasket and smoothing it, no one would convert a major Midwestern bank into a luna-

tic asylum. How else, though, could the behavior of the Earmuffs be explained? Could madmen run a bank? Why not, she thought. History is rich in examples of madmen running nations, banks and all. She began again to read the paper into the microphone. If she finished early enough, she might get a chance to prowl those Off-Limits upper floors.

Half an hour further into the paper, Orison jumped, startled by the sudden buzz of her telephone. She picked it up. *"Wanji e-Kal, Datto. Dink ger-Dink d'summa."*

Orison scribbled down this intelligence in bemused Gregg before replying, "I'm a local girl. Try me in English."

"Oh. Hi, Miss McCall," the voice said. "Guess I goofed. I'm in kinda clutch. This is Wanji. I got a kite for Mr. Dink Gerding. If you see him, tell him the escudo green is pale. Got that, doll?"

"Yes, Mr. Wanji. I'll tell Mr. Gerding." Orison clicked the phone down. What now, Mata Hari? she asked herself. What was the curious language Mr. Wanji had used? She'd have to report the message to Washington by tonight's pillow, and let the polyglots of Treasury Intelligence puzzle it out. Meanwhile, she thought, scooting her chair back from her desk, she had a vague excuse to prowl the upper floors. The Earmuffs could only fire her.

Orison folded the paper and put it in the "Out" basket. Someone would be here in a moment with something new to read. She'd best get going. The elevator? No. The operators had surely been instructed to keep her off the upstairs floors.

But the building had a stairway.

III

THE door on the sixth floor was locked. Orison went on up the stairs to seven. The glass of the door there was painted black on the inside, and the landing was cellar-dark. Orison closed her eyes for a moment. There was a curious sound. The buzzing of a million bees, barely within the fringes of her hearing. Somehow, a very pleasant sound.

She opened her eyes and tried the knob. The door opened.

Orison was blinded by the lights, brilliant as noonday sun. The room extended through the entire seventh floor, its windows boarded shut, its ceiling a mass of fluorescent lamps. Set about the floor were galvanized steel tanks, rectangular and a little bigger than bathtubs. Orison counted the rows of tanks. Twelve rows, nine tiers. One hundred and eight tanks. She walked closer. The tubs were laced together by strands of

angel-hair, delicate white lattices scintillating with pink. She walked to the nearest of the tubs and looked in. It was half full of a greenish fluid, seething with tiny pink bubbles. For a moment Orison thought she saw Benjamin Franklin winking up at her from the liquid. Then she screamed.

The pink bubbles, the tiny flesh-colored flecks glinting light from the spun-sugar bridges between the tanks, were spiders. Millions upon millions of spiders, each the size of a mustard-seed; crawling, leaping, swinging, spinning webs, seething in the hundred tanks. Orison put her hands over her ears and screamed again, backing toward the stairway door.

Into a pair of arms.

"I had hoped you'd be happy here, Miss McCall," Kraft Gerding said. Orison struggled to release herself. She broke free only to have her wrists seized by two Earmuffs that had appeared with the elder Gerding. "It seems that our Pandora doesn't care for spiders," he said. "Really, Miss McCall, our little pets are quite harmless. Were we to toss you into one of these tanks . . ." Orison struggled against her two *sumo*-sized captors, whose combined weights exceeded hers by some quarter-ton, without doing more than lifting her feet from the floor. ". . . your flesh would be unharmed, though they spun and darted all around you. Our Microfabridae are petrovorous, Miss McCall. Of course, once they discovered your teeth, and through them a skeleton of calcium, a delicacy they find most toothsome, you'd be filleted within minutes."

"Elder Compassion wouldn't like your harming the girl, Sire," one of the earmuffed *sumo*-wrestlers protested.

"Elder Compassion has no rank," Kraft Gerding said. "Miss McCall, you must tell me what you were doing here, or I'll toss you to the spiders."

"Dink . . . Dink!" Orison shouted.

"My beloved younger brother is otherwise engaged than in the rescue of damsels in distress," Kraft said. "Someone, after all, has to mind the bank."

"I came to bring a message to Dink," Orison said. "Let me go, you acromegalic apes!"

"The message?" Kraft Gerding demanded.

"Something about escudo green. Put me down!"

SUDDENLY she was dropped. Her mountainous keepers were on the floor as though struck by lightning, their arms thrown out before them, their faces abject against the floor. Kraft Gerding was slowly lowering himself to one knee. Dink had entered the spider-room. With-

out questions, he strode between the shiko-ing Earmuffs and put his arms around Orison.

"They can't harm you," he said. She turned to press her face against his chest. "You're all right, child. Breathe deep, swallow, and turn your brain back on. All right, now?"

"All right," she said, still trembling. "They were going to throw me to the spiders."

"Kraft told you that?" Dink Gerding released her and turned to the kneeling man. "Stand up, Elder Brother."

"I . . ."

Dink brought his right fist up from hip-level, crashing it into Kraft's jaw. Kraft Gerding joined the Earmuffs on the floor.

"If you'd care to stand again, Elder Brother, you may attempt to recover your dignity without regard for the difference in our rank." Kraft struggled to one knee and remained kneeling, gazing up at Dink through half-closed eyes. "No? Then get out of here, all of you. *Samma!*"

Kraft Gerding arose, stared for a moment at Dink and Orison, then, with the merest hint of a bow, led his two giant Earmuffs to the elevator.

"I wish you hadn't come up here, Orison," Dink said. "Why did you do it?"

"Have you read the story of Bluebeard?" Orison asked. She stood close to Dink, keeping her eyes on the nearest spider-tank. "I had to see what it was you kept up here so secretly, what it was that I was forbidden to see. My excuse was to have been that I was looking for you, to deliver a message from Mr. Wanji. He said *I* was to tell you that the escudo green is pale."

"You're too curious, and Wanji is too careless," Dink said. "Now, what is this thing you have about spiders?"

"I've always been terrified of them," Orison said. "When I was a little girl, I had to stay upstairs all day one Sunday because there was a spider hanging from his thread in the stairway. I waited until Dad came home and took it down with a broom. Even then, I didn't have appetite for supper."

"Strange," Dink said. He walked over to the nearest tank and plucked one of the tiny pink creatures from a web-bridge. "This is no spider, Orison," he said.

She backed away from Dink Gerding and the minuscule creature he cupped in the palm of his hand. "These are Microfabridae, more nearly related to shellfish than to spiders," he said. "They're stone-and-metal eaters. They literally couldn't harm a fly. Look at it, Orison." He extended his palm. Orison forced herself to look. The little creature, flesh-colored against his flesh, was nearly invisible, scuttling around the bowl of his hand.

"Pretty little fellow, isn't he?" Dink asked. "Here. You hold him."

"I'd rather not," she protested.

"I'd be happier if you did," Dink said.

ORISON extended her hand as into a furnace. Dink brushed the Microfabridus from his palm to hers. It felt crisp and hard, like a legged grain of sand. Dink took a magnifier from his pocket and unfolded it, to hold it over Orison's palm.

"He's like a baby crawdad," Orison said.

"A sort of crustacean," Dink agreed. "We use them in a commercial process we're developing. That's why we keep this floor closed off and secret. We don't have a patent on the use of Microfabridae, you see."

"What do they do?" Orison asked.

"That's still a secret," Dink said, smiling. "I can't tell even you that, not yet, even though you're my most confidential secretary."

"What's he doing now?" Orison asked, watching the Microfabridus, perched up on the rear four of his six microscopic legs, scratching against her high-school class-ring with his tiny chelae.

"They like gold," Dink explained, peering across her shoulder, comfortably close. "They're attracted to it by a chemical tropism, as children are attracted to candy. Toss him back into his tank, Orison. We'd better get you down where you belong."

Orison brushed the midget crustacean off her finger into the nearest tank, where he joined the busy boil of his fellows. She felt her ring. It was pitted where the Microfabridus had been nibbling. "Strange, using crawdads in a bank," she said. She stood silent for a moment. "I thought I heard music," she said. "I heard it when I came in. Something like the sighing of wind in winter trees."

"That's the hymn of the Microfabridae," Dink said. "They all sing together while they work, a chorus of some twenty million voices." He took her arm. "If you listen very carefully, you'll find the song these little workers sing the most beautiful music in the world."

Orison closed her eyes, leaning back into Dink's arms, listening to the music that seemed on the outermost edge of her hearing. Wildness, storm and danger were its theme, counterpointed by promises of peace and harbor. She heard the wash of giant waves in the song, the crash of breakers against granite, cold and insatiable. And behind this, the quiet of sheltered tide-pools, the soft lub of sea-arms landlocked. "It's an ancient song," Dink said.

"The Microfabridae have been singing it for a million years." He released her, and opened a wood-covered wooden box. He scooped up a cupful of the sand inside. "Hold out your hands," he told Orison. He filled them with the sand. "Throw our singers some supper for their song," he said.

Orison went with her cupped hands to the nearest tank and sprinkled the mineral fishfood around inside it. The Microfabridae leaped from the liquid like miniature porpoises, seizing the grains of sand in mid-air. "They're so very strange," Orison said. At the bottom of the tank she thought she saw Ben Franklin again, winking at her through the bubbling life. Nonsense, she thought, brushing her hands.

DINK took her to the elevator and pressed the "Down" button. "Don't come up here again unless I bring you," he said. "The Microfabridae aren't dangerous, despite what my brother told you, but some of our processes might involve some risk to bystanders. So don't take any more tours above the fifth floor without me as your guide. All right, Orison?"

"Yes, Dink."

The elevator stopped. "Take the lady to her office," Dink told the bowing, earmuffed operator. "And Orison," he said, just before the door closed, "I'm really not a Bluebeard. See you this evening."

Dink Gerding, wearing an ordinary enough suit, well-cut, expensive, but nothing extraordinary for a banker, called for Orison at seven. He'd look well, she thought, slipping into the coat he held for her, in a white uniform brocaded with pounds of spun gold, broad epaulettes, a stiff bank of extravagantly-colored ribbons across his chest; perhaps resting his right hand on the pommel of a dress saber. "Dink," she asked him, "were you ever in the Army?"

"You might say I'm still in an army," he said, turning and smiling down at her from that arrogant posture of his. "I'm a corporal in the army of the gainfully employed; an army where there's little glamor but better pay than in the parades-and-battles sort. What makes you ask, Orison?"

"Because of the way you stand and walk, Dink," she said. "Like an Infantry captain from Texas."

"I'm flattered." Dink Gerding said, holding open the lobby door for her. "The car's just around the corner."

"I met your brother, Kraft, earlier today, just before he and the Earmuffs caught me up on eighth floor," Orison said. "He's no Texan, that one. A Junker, maybe. I'm afraid I don't much care for your brother, Dink."

"To be my elder brother is

Kraft's special misfortune," Dink said. "I understand he was quite loveable as a boy. Here's our transportation."

The car was a Rolls-Royce Silver Wraith, splendidly conspicuous beside the curb of the Windsor Arms, reducing that nobly-named establishment by contrast to more democratic proportions. The ubiquitous Mr. Wanji, liveried in a uniform nearly as ornate as the one Orison had visualized for Dink, only his earmuffs clashing with the magnificence of his costume, sprang from the driver's seat, raced around the limousine and stood at attention holding the door for Orison and her escort. The front door of the Rolls was marked, she observed, with a gold device of three coronets. At the center of the triangle they formed was the single letter "D."

The Rolls negotiated the city streets with the dignity of the *Queen Elizabeth* entering a minor harbor. "I thought you bankers aspired to the common touch," Orison remarked. "I expected you to come for me in a taxi, or perhaps a year-old Ford you drove yourself."

"Wanji is a better driver than I. So I have him drive me," Dink explained. "We each do the work we're trained for. I assist Wanji in balancing his checkbook, for example. As for this car, it belongs not to me, but to my family. My family owns most of the toys I play with." He paused. "I've been thinking, Orison, of acquiring a most valuable property for myself alone."

"A nice little seventy-meter yacht?" Orison inquired. "Or the island of Majorca, perhaps?"

"Something even grander," Dink said. "You, Miss McCall."

"But, Dink!"

The Rolls glided to the curb. Wanji jumped out and snapped open the door. "Sire!" he said, and saluted as Dink disbarked. Orison took Dink's hand and stepped to the curb, acknowledging Wanji's bow to her with a princess smile. She'd come a long way from the secretarial pool.

THE doorman of the restaurant, instructed as to the importance of these clients by their tableau at the curb, ushered Dink Gerding and Orison McCall into the presence of the maitre d'. When the doorman had been rewarded with a crackling handshake, the headwaiter led them through the crowd of groundlings as though they were accompanied by fife and drums. The table to which he bowed them, while not the most conspicuous, was without doubt the finest the management had to offer. The *Reserved* sign was swept aside with a gesture that indicated that there were no reservations where Mr. Dink Gerding

was concerned. Mr. Gerding justified the maitre's confidence in him with another green-palmed handshake.

"Dink," Orison whispered across the table. "That was a fifty-dollar bill you gave him."

"Yes, it was," Dink admitted. "I felt that fifty was enough."

"Quite enough," Orison assured him.

The wine-steward, wearing a chain that could have held a tub to mooring, absorbed Dink's instructions with the air of a chela attending the dying words of his guru. The two waiters poised themselves reverently at his shoulders, waiting the revelation of his order. "We'll begin . . ." Dink began.

"Dink, I'd like a lobster," Orison said.

"I'd not advise lobster," Dink said thoughtfully. "I'm afraid that lobster won't agree with you this evening."

"Dink, lobster is what I want," Orison insisted. "Haven't you heard of the Nineteenth Amendment?"

"Very well, feminist," Dink said. He turned to the waiter at his right. "The lady will have a lobster." He turned to the left. "As for me, a saddle of venison, and such accessory furniture as you may choose to accompany it." The waiters bowed and retreated.

"Why do you insist on being boss, even after banking-hours?" Orison asked.

"Being boss is not my nature, but is my training," Dink said. "It seems to me, Orison, that you American women resent the dignity of being served by an adoring man."

"I prefer dignities to be more democratic," she said. "Why, in any case, should you be exercised by my choosing lobster for dinner? My digestion is my own affair, isn't it?"

"YOUR question," Dink said, resting his elbows on the table, "requires a two-part answer. *Imprimus*: everything you do interests me, Orison, inasmuch as you are my future bride. Please make no comment at this point. Allow me to enjoy for the moment the male privilege of unimpeded speech. *Secundus*: I once wished to be a doctor, had not my career been chosen by my father. I still pursue the study of medicine as a hobby. I didn't wish you to order lobster because I'm certain that you'll be unable to enjoy lobster."

"I've eaten it before," Orison said. "Except for the engineering difficulties in getting through the shell with all those little picks and nutcrackers and nail-clippers, I had no trouble to speak of. Dink, are you a foreigner?"

"What makes you think I may be?" he asked.

"The crest of your car, the earmuffs on most your staff at the Bank and the fact that

you seem to think a woman's opinion nothing more than a trifle. There's a beginning," Orison said.

"What's wrong with earmuffs?" Dink demanded. "Everybody wears earmuffs."

"Not everybody," Orison said. "Not in April. Not bank officials. Not indoors, in any case."

"Must report this to the Board," Dink said, taking a notebook from his pocket and scribbling. "Must find alternative. No earmuffs indoors."

Perfect, Orison thought, near tears. He's perfect. He'd sit astride that milk-white charger like a round-table knight, sturdy and lean and honest-eyed. Dink is perfect, she thought, except only that he's insane.

Dink tucked his notebook back into his vest-pocket. "If I were a foreigner," he asked, "would it make any difference to you?"

"Your nationality should concern me as little as my diet concerns you," Orison said.

"You said *should*," Dink pointed out. "That means that you are concerned with me. Therefore, I will formally invite you to marry me." He held up his hand as Orison began to speak. "I warn you, Orison, there are only two answers possible to my proposal. Only *Yes* or *Some day*."

"What if I said no?" Orison asked.

"I'd interpret it as Some day," he said, and smiled.

"You know nothing about me," Orison protested.

"But I do," Dink said. "I know you're good. I know that you've fallen half in love with me, and I entirely in love with you, in this half-day in April that we've known each other."

"No," Orison said, gripping tightly the edge of the table.

"That means, Some day," he said.

The lobster arrived in post-mortem splendor, borne on a silver tray, brick-red, garnished with sprigs of parsley and geranium, served with the silver instruments designed for his dissection and the bowl of baptismal butter. "Oh . . ." Orison said, turning her eyes away from the supper she'd selected. "It's horrible!"

"You've no appetite for lobster?" Dink asked.

"I'd as soon eat boiled baby," Orison said, pressing her napkin against her lips.

"Take it away," Dink instructed the waiter. "The lady will have the same order as I." The crustacean, red but undismembered, was again borne aloft by the waiter to be returned to the scene of his martyrdom. "Try a little of the wine, Orison," Dink suggested, tipping a splash of the Riesling into her glass. "It will clear your head."

SHE sipped. "It helps," she admitted. "What do you suppose happened to me, Dink?

It's as though all of a sudden I'd become allergic to lobster."

"In a sense you are, darling," Dink said.

"Such a strange thing," she said.

"Don't let these strange things worry you, Orison," Dink said. "Think this: for everything in the universe, there's an explanation. If you understand it or not, the explanation's still there, curled up in the middle of the mystery like Pinocchio in the belly of his whale. Just have faith in the essential honesty of the universe, Orison, and you'll be all right."

"A comforting philosophy," Orison said. "I can't imagine an explanation for my sudden distaste for lobster, though."

"Such things happen," Dink assured her. "I have a friend, for instance, who holds life in such reverence that he eats only vegetables. Isn't that strange? And he worries, this very good friend of mine, that perhaps vegetables have souls, too; and that perhaps it is no more moral to destroy them for his food than it is to roast and ingest his fellow animals."

"So what does this friend of yours eat?" Orison asked.

"Vegetables," Dink said. "But he worries about it. He's now proposing to confine his diet to cakes made from algae. His argument is that if vegetables have souls, algae have very small souls indeed; and that they suffer less in being eaten than would, say, a cabbage or an apple. His guilt may be numerically greater, eating algae. But it will be qualitatively less."

"Has this micro-vegetarian friend of yours thought of psychotherapy?" Orison asked.

"Often," Dink said. "But he maintains that he's much too old to pour out his mind to a stranger; too set in his patterns to change. He fears most of all, he says, that he might be made uncomfortable in new ways."

"We all do," mused Orison.

"Do I make you uncomfortable in a new way?" Dink asked.

"You're strange," Orison said. "Your Bank is fantastic. All in all, this is the most peculiar day I've ever lived."

"I promise you, Orison, that someday you'll understand why the sight of lobster made you ill this evening, why so many of the people at the Bank wear earmuffs, why I seem foreign. You'll understand the work of the singing Microfabridae and you'll meet Elder Compassion; you'll know why Wanji was excited about the escudo green; and someday soon, this most of all I promise you, you'll love me, and be my wife. Hah! Here are the comestibles. Let's talk of topics less vital than love and earmuffs. Let's talk of the weather, and Mr. Kennedy, and the orchestra."

V

ABSTRACT of Transcript, Monitor J-12, to U.S. Treasury Department Intelligence:

"Miss Orison McCall's report from Potawattomi, Indiana, was delayed by one hour. Contact was established at 00:10 hours. Details follow herewith:

"J-12: CQ, CQ, CQ, CQ.

"Miss McCall: If you'd been a minute later, I'd have been sound asleep, dreaming bad dreams.

"J-12: Is the job wearing you down?

"Miss McCall: It's exciting and mysterious. Nothing like Washington. The boss of Taft Bank appears to be a man named Dink Gerding. He's six feet tall and slim, his hair is clipped short as a dachshund's, and he walks like an Olympic skier. The other men at the bank bow when they meet him, and some of them get all the way down onto the floor when he's angry. Do you suppose this means something?

"J-12: Everything means something.

"Miss McCall: He said that. Dink did. For everything in the universe, he said, there's an explanation.

"J-12: Not so. I mean that everything that people do in banks is explainable. Not all the universe is logical — the tax-structure, for instance, or the ways of women.

"Miss McCall: I'm not required to put up with male chauvinism from a pillow, Mister, no banns having been published between us.

"J-12: Sorry, beautiful. Here are instructions from the Chief. He wants to know why some members of the Taft Bank staff wear earmuffs, and he wants details of what goes on upstairs. He wants you to get to know this Dink Gerding better. Over.

"Miss McCall: Roger, Wilco, and Aye-Aye. Meanwhile, get philologists working on this. The sentence, *Wanji e-Kal, Datto. Dink ger-Dink d'summa,* means, more or less, 'This is Wanji. I'd like to speak to Dink Gerding.' This message was received by me at Taft Bank this morning, evidently by accident. Check also possible meaning of the phrase, 'Escudo green is pale.'

"J-12: Will do.

"Miss McCall: Good night, then; wherever you are.

"J-12: Good night, beautiful. Out."

Report of Treasury Intelligence on six words of presumed foreign-language message:

"*Datto* may be Tagalog *chief*. *Summa* is Latin *sum*. Total message is nonsense in fifty languages. The clear message, *Escudo green is pale* probably a code. Escudo is Portuguese currency presently equal to U.S. $0.348. End of Report."

Confidential report (on scratchboard) *of Elder Com-*

passion to H.R.H. Dink ger-Dink, Prince Porphyrogenite of Empire, Heir-Apparent to the Throne, Scion of the Triple Crown, Count of the Northern Marches, Admiralissimo of the Conquest Forces of Empire, Captain-Commander of the XLIIth Subversion-and-Conquest Task Force (Sol III):

"She whispered to her pillow, local time 2 A.M., 'I love him.'"

ORISON hadn't gone to sleep easily. She'd suppressed information from J-12, saying nothing to him about the Microfabridae, surely the most striking objective discovery of her two days' spying within the Taft Bank. More central in her thoughts than her disloyalty to the Treasury Department, though, was Dink Gerding. He'd told her that she was half in love with him. He was half wrong, she thought. "I love him entirely," she whispered, not knowing that J-12 — in carelessness, not subterfuge—had left the receiver-switch open to the pillow she'd made her confidante.

The Wall Street Journal greeted her the next morning, curled up in her "In" basket. She'd just switched on her microphone and said "Good morning" to her invisible listener when Mr. Wanji stepped from the elevator. His ears, she saw, were bare today. But they were pink — a shocking, porcelain, opaque, Toby-mug shade of pink.

She looked away from this latest manifestation of peculiarity in banker's ears. "Good morning, Mr. Wanji," she said.

"Hi, doll," Wanji said. "The brain-guy says you don't have to read out loud any more. Just read quiet-like. Dig?"

"Yes, sir," she said. "Shall I take notes on anything in particular?"

"Naw," Wanji said. "The brain-guy, he remembers everything."

"The brain-guy?" Orison asked. "Is that Dink Gerding?"

"Naw. Dink's the boss. The brain-guy is the man who makes the wheels go round," Wanji said. He pressed the "Up" button of the elevator. As Wanji embarked, Orison observed that the elevator operator had the same shocking-pink ears.

Had those earmuffs been designed to hide this pinkness, the symptom of some rare and disfiguring disease? Orison returned to her newspaper, reading silently as ordered, wondering what obscure Pinocchio of sense was curled up in the belly of this whale of illogic. The elevator, she noticed with the housekeeping bit of her mind, was running much more than usual today, up and down like a spastic yo-yo. Whatever the mysterious business of the William Howard Taft Nation-

al Bank and Trust Company might be, there was a lot of it being done.

Her telephone buzzed. Orison switched off her microphone. "Miss McCall here," she said, feeling very efficient and British.

"This is Mr. Kraft Gerding," she was told. "I need you at the National Guard Armory right away, Miss McCall. Will you come right over?"

"Yes, sir," Orison said. She gathered up her purse and coat and pressed the elevator button. The operator ushered her into his car as though she were his queen, and the elevator the paramount plane of the royal flight. Standing behind him as he piloted them downward five floors, Orison studied the man's ears. They were that awful, artificial pink, as though enameled. Pancake makeup? Orison wondered. The ears, now the earmuffs were off, might be the clue to that fish-of-understanding she sought. Orison dampened a fingertip and applied it to the edge of the man's ear.

He turned and stared. "A fly," Orison explained. "I brushed it off."

"Oh. Thank you. Here's the street floor, Miss McCall."

"Thank you." Orison stepped from the lobby to Broadway, refusing to examine her fingertip until she was well beyond the shadow of the Taft Bank Building. Now she looked at it.

A sort of pink paint was showing there. And where she'd touched the elevator operator's ear to remove the makeup, the flesh beneath had shown a brilliant, eggplant purple.

ORISON was greeted at the National Guard Armory by Auga Vingt, mistress of malice. "How lovely of you to come right over, darling," she said. "Kraft is waiting for you in the office of Company C."

"Thank you, darling," Orison purred. She clutched her purse as she walked up the indicated stairway, Miss Vingt behind her.

Kraft Gerding was in full uniform behind a desk marked "Commanding Officer," but his was not the uniform of the U.S. Army. It was the sort that Mr. Wanji had worn as Dink's chauffeur, its splendor squared. "Good morning, Miss McCall," Kraft Gerding said, standing. "I'm so happy you could come. We need you here."

"What am I to do, sir?" Orison asked.

"Your presence is the full extent of your services required, my dear," he said. "You see, you're my hostage. My brother's interest in your welfare is so marked that I determined to seize you as collateral for his cooperation. We've begun a revolution, Miss McCall. You'll stay with us until victory. Colonel the Margravine Auga Vingt, Comman-

der of the Royal Refreshment Corps, will act as your hostess. Colonel, please take Miss McCall to her quarters."

"Now look here, bud!" Orison said.

"The proper address to Mr. Gerding is 'Your Royal Highness,' darling," Miss Vingt said, accompanying her point of protocol with a jab at the small of Orison's back. "Come along, darling."

"I'm not going anywhere until I've telephoned Dink," Orison said.

"Terribly sorry," said Colonel Auga Vingt. "Our telephone has just gone out of order." Two bravos wearing U.S. Army fatigues — surely the largest such uniforms ever sewn together — stepped into the room. They were enormous men, menacing, purple of ear. "Will you walk along like a good girl, or shall I have my pets carry you?" the odious Auga asked.

"I'll walk," Orison decided. "What's more, I'll sue."

"All in good time, darling," Auga Vingt said.

ORISON'S cell was large enough to be a ballroom, comprising as it did the entire basement of the armory. A cot had been unfolded in one corner, next to a parked half-track, and three olive-drab blankets were stacked upon it. "Home, darling," Colonel Vingt said.

"I hope you realize that kidnapping is a Federal offense," Orison said.

"So is seizing an armory," her warden explained. "Of course, the U.S. Army doesn't realize we've got it, yet. They drill here only on Mondays." She turned and spoke quickly to the two guards, using what was apparently the same language Wanji had employed over the telephone. The guards bowed, then each chose a vehicle for his guard-post. One seated himself behind the wheel of a weapons-carrier, the other posting himself, cross-legged, on the steel hatch of a Sherman tank.

Auga Vingt turned to leave. "Hey," Orison said. "You're not going to abandon me here with these two gorillas."

"But, darling, I am!" the obnoxious Auga replied. "If you're worried about your virtue, rest easy, lamb. I can assure you that my thugs are safe as kittens, providing only that you make no attempt to escape. They are required, you see, to confine their romantic aspirations to members of the Royal Refreshment Corps of appropriate rank. Since they speak no English, nor any other tongue you're likely to have heard of, they won't be much company. But they will be loyal in their attendance."

"Let me out of here!" a man's voice shouted, the sound echoing among the ranks of tanks, half-tracks, weapons-carriers, and jeeps.

"Who's that?" Orison demanded.

"Your fellow-prisoner," Auga explained. "Until quite recently, he was Commanding Officer of C Company. Your keepers have strict orders not to let you two speak to one another. But I must get on with my duties, charming as I find your company. Good day, darling."

"Drop dead," Orison suggested.

AFTER the door had slammed behind Auga Vingt, and the key had chattered in its lock, she sat at the edge of her cot. The two guards watched her as casually as though she were just another item on the Motor Company's T.O.&E. This is what she got for playing it coy with Washington, Orison thought. If she'd clued J-12 in on the Microfabridae, she'd at least have been given some technical help. Then someone might have been there to blow the whistle when she disappeared from the Taft Bank Building. As things stood now, no one would know of her abduction until her pillow called tonight at eleven-fifteen and got no answer. A long time off, she thought. Perhaps she could get some help from the imprisoned commander of C Company, she thought. Orison stood and called out, "Hey, there! Can you hear . . ."

A large palm suddenly closed over her mouth. The guard who'd been seated atop the tank had sprung down and appeared beside her as suddenly as a circus trick. Experimentally, he removed his hand from her mouth. ". . . me?" Orison completed her query, and was shut off again.

"Five by five," the male voice answered. "Who are . . ." The other guard was gone now, and presumably stood beside the captain as his fellow stood beside Orison. There was silence for five minutes, Orison having trouble breathing, struggling until it became apparent that no action of hers would have the slightest effect on the mountainous bulk of her muffler. Then he removed his hand. Orison, out of breath, her lesson learned, stayed quiet. The guards resumed their seats aboard the rolling-stock.

There must be another way to signal her fellow-prisoner, Orison thought. Tapping? She clicked an S-O-S on the side of a jeep with her pen. Her guard appeared beside her as quickly as before, and took the pen to stick it in his pocket. She was, it appeared, effectively in solitary confinement.

Orison stood up to see if the guard minded. Apparently not. She walked about the huge basement. She'd never before seen so much military hardware outside an Armed Forces Day parade. Impressive, all this steel. A ramp led up to a

door the size of a barn-side, also steel, bolted. If she could get inside a tank, and close the hatch, and somehow get the monster up that ramp to ram that door, she'd make an impressive call for help, Orison thought. She put one foot atop a tank-tread when a large arm reached around her and set her aside. Her guard, silent-footed, had been following all through her tour.

Orison returned to her cot.

Great deal, she thought. From desk to dungeon in an hour and a half. She'd battled with shadows, earmuffed shadows, and had got herself set in an amateur jail guarded by a pair of purple-eared apes. Nothing to do but wait.

Four feet crashed onto concrete, two figures bowed till the palms of their hands brushed the floor. *"T'ink,"* the newcomer said. The two guards backed to their vehicles and resumed their seats.

"Orison, my dear!" It was Kraft Gerding, all unction and teeth, advancing upon her like the loser at tennis, hand outstretched. "I hope you haven't been unduly discommoded," he said.

"I HAVEN'T been commoded at all," Orison said. "No one showed me the way. Would you mind explaining this chivaree to me, Mr. Gerding?"

"I'd be delighted to explain, my dear," Kraft Gerding said, bowing. "May I sit?" he asked, waving a hand toward her cot.

"You may fall on your dreadful face, for all I care," Orison said.

"You must learn to speak like a queen," Kraft said, seating himself on the cot beside her. "Otherwise, of course, you are perfect."

"Of course," Orison said. "I can't say the same for you."

"I grow on one," Kraft said. "You wonder, no doubt, how the William Howard Taft National Bank and Trust Company became a battleground; why many of our employees have ears the color of day-old bruises; why Wanji was so exercised by the color of escudoes; and what the work is that the Microfabridae sing at. No?"

"Yes," Orison said.

"May I smoke?" Kraft Gerding asked, bringing a cheroot from an inner pocket of his fieldmarshal's uniform.

"Smoke, glow, burst into flame. It's all the same to me," Orison said.

Kraft Gerding lit his cheroot with the air of an acolyte igniting incense. Then, puffing, "Accident," he said, "has made you privy to a *coup d'etat*. Our Empire, you see, is based on porphyrogeniture. Thus my brother, Dink, is the Heir Apparent. I, his elder brother, conceived before our father became Emperor, am merely Margrave of the North,

Prince Royal of the House of Dink, Colonel-General of the Forces of the Triple Crown, Grand Duke of the Zilf Archipelago and Holder of the Keys to the Royal City of Chilif."

"How unassuming can you get?" Orison asked.

"Your un-knowledge is deeper than I bethought me," Kraft Gerding said, smiling, scooting a little wester on the cot. Orison moved one hipsbreadth further to the west.

"Very well," Kraft said. "As a primer, thus: my brother Dink ger-Dink, heir through accident of tradition to the Triple Crown of Empire; I, his elder, better brother; and our officers and exiles—these latter common criminals, marked for men's contempt with purple ears — constitute the XLIIth Subversion-and-Conquest Task Force of the Empire of Dink. This mighty Empire, for your information, lies some distance off in the southern skies of Earth."

"How far off?" Orison asked.

"As far," Kraft Gerding said, "as all your men since Adam have run in pursuit of beauty." He scooted further west.

Orison made still further westering. "You come from some foreign planet?" she asked.

"No longer foreign, my dear," Kraft said. "Our planet, our triple footstool, welcomes young Earth to share our ancient wisdom and relax under the shadow of our might."

"And I, young Earth, tell you, Kraft Gerding, to go sail a saucer," Orison said.

KRAFT GERDING stood up. "Come with me, my dear. I'll show you the greenery that establishes me as Emperor Apparent of the planet Earth." He strode to a steel door, took a key from his pocket, and unlocked it. "Behold!" he said, flinging the door open.

Orison stepped into the basement room, a cube some fifty feet in each dimension. She found herself in a corridor between huge walls of bundled paper. Kraft Gerding, behind her, pried a packet from the wall and handed it to her. "This, my dear Orison, is the lever with which I'll overturn the Earth," he said.

The bundle was banded with a strip of paper bearing the legend, "$5,000 in 50's." Each bit of paper in the bundle bore the portrait of President U. S. Grant. "This room," Kraft Gerding said, "contains some four hundred million dollars in U.S. currency. I intend with this money, and as much more as I need, to subvert and purchase a nation. The United States will then be the beachhead for the world."

"Counterfeits," Orison said.

"But perfect counterfeits," Kraft said. "The paper was manufactured by the master-

craftsmen of Chilif. The inks were compounded by the chemists of that same capital city of Empire. The plates were cut by twenty million engravers, the Microfabridae of the Storm-Planet, supervised by Elder Compassion, an ancient of the slothful race that inhabits the planet nearest our mother sun. This is but one of my treasuries. I have many such. There is the Threadneedle Room, filled with pounds-sterling, in ones, fives, fifties and hundreds. There are other rooms, boxes, trunks and trucks filled with all the currencies of Earth. I am ready now to purchase this planet from its owners. No violence, you see. Just subterfuge."

"It's violence enough, to ruin a planet," Orison said.

"It beats war," Kraft Gerding said, drawing on his cheroot.

"And that disgusting Miss Vingt?" Orison asked. "What does she do in your forces of subversion?"

"Colonel the Margrave Auga Vingt is commander of the Royal Refreshment Corps," Kraft said. "You understand that it wouldn't do to allow our men, the purple-eared scum of three planets, to live off the land in the delicate matter of women. Colonel Vingt's Corps both maintains morale and prevents incidents of fraternization that Earthmen might deplore with their fists and guns." Kraft chuckled. "You'll be amused to hear that Auga Vingt has an ambition to become my Empress, once I have overthrown my brother's tyranny and taken over Earth."

"I must sit down," Orison said.

"By all means, my dear," Kraft said. He tipped over a stack of bundled twenty-dollar bills as a hassock for her comfort.

"COULD I have a cigarette?" Orison asked.

"Do." Kraft Gerding removed a pack from his pocket and lighted it for her, passing it from his lips to hers. Orison, hiding her feelings of distaste for this intimacy, drew on the cigarette. "Perhaps I might have a drink as well?" she asked. "All this is making me rather dizzy."

"It is dizzy-making," Kraft conceded. "In an instant, my pet." He strode from the treasure-room, shouting in his native language to the guards.

Orison tugged a twenty-dollar bill from one of the bundles on which she'd been sitting and held it to the tip of her cigarette, drawing to make it hot. The paper glowed, but the tiny patch of fire died out almost at once. She fumbled in her purse. There it was—her bottle of nail-polish remover. She splashed the aromatic fluid over the bundled money and again touched her cigarette to it. The paper

flared. Flames ran in upstream rivers through the stacks above.

Orison ran to the nearest jeep and turned the key. The gears were unfamiliar to her, but she mastered them sufficiently to get moving forward toward the steel doors. Up the ramp she rolled, her feet braced down hard on the accelerator, wedged into her seat. The jeep struck the steel doors and bounced back the ramp to the sound of a giant Chinese gong, its engine stalled. Groggy, Orison dismounted and ran to the door. She pounded on the steel with both fists, shouting for help.

An arm encircled Orison, and she heard behind her the door of the money-room slam shut. "The blaze will smolder itself out in a moment, my dear," Kraft Gerding said. He spoke to the guard who held her, and she was released. "I doubt that you've destroyed more than a million dollars' worth of your local paper with your prank," he said. "Five minutes' press-run. I've brought you a spot of brandy. I daresay you can use it. Arson is thirsty work."

He held out his hand. One of the purple-eared guards produced a silver tray with a decanter and two balloon-glasses, poured them a quarter full and presented the glasses to his chief, bowing deeply. Kraft took one glass, giving the other to Orison. "A toast?" he asked. "To the success of my rebellion. To our inevitable marriage. And to the health of our progeny, who are, my dear, to inherit the Earth. A shotgun toast," he said.

Orison dashed her brandy toward his face. Kraft turned, catching the shower against his left ear, where it trickled down to stain the braid of his epaulette. He glared and raised his hand in a most unchivalrous gesture, then stopped himself. One of the guards produced a silken cloth to blot him dry.

"The word 'shotgun' was perhaps ill-chosen," Kraft said. "The spirit you show, dear Orison, is a quality most appropriate to the future Empress of Earth."

"Keep away from me," Orison said.

"OUR ceremony of betrothal is simple," Kraft said. He put his sword-arm about her waist. "You need only hear me say the words, 'I, Rex-Imperator, take thee to wife,' and then bow, in the presence of witnesses of my choosing. You'll be as noble as any princess conceived in the Purple Chamber of the Palace of Chilif."

"I'd rather die than marry you," Orison said.

"You've established the parameters of the possible rather neatly, my dear," Kraft Gerding said. "You will be-

come my wife, and Empress-Apparent of Earth, or you will shortly be the loveliest corpse on this fair planet. My will is heaven's law, you understand. My word carries the sanction of two suns, and my anger breeds massive destruction. I ask of you your one slight person. In return, I offer to share with you my greatness. You will rule with me in the palace I have chosen —I forget its name, but it is presently used as the tomb of the lady who invented the brassiere — the Taj Mahal, that's it. Perhaps we could rename it. Answer quickly, now; great deeds are deeds of impulse: marry me!"

"You're mad," Orison said.

"When a man has the power I have, he cannot be called a madman, for his mind shapes the world to his dreams. There is then, you see, no disorientation," Kraft said. "You've had a good ten seconds now to decide. Shall I call my wedding-guests or my executioner?"

"Dink will never let you marry me," Orison said.

"His suit has come so far as that?" Kraft said. "No matter. I'll destroy him."

"Please leave me, Your Excellency," Orison said. "I need time to think."

"I am clay in your lovely hands," Kraft said, bowing. "I grant your wish."

"If I might ask another boon, Your Excellency," Orison said, "I'd like to talk with Dink."

"And so you shall," Kraft promised her. "Tomorrow, perhaps. With my brother in chains and you in the regalia of an Empress." He bowed again, and left her. The door-lock clicked after him. The two huge guards closed in on either side of Orison and led her back to her cot. When she had seated herself, they withdrew to their perches on the Army vehicles.

VII

I MIGHT as well have joined the Marine Corps instead of the Treasury Department, Orison thought, resting her fists on her knees. She had no weapons now, nothing to help her break out from this steel-shuttered cellar. What's more, the only clear evidence she had of the crime these extraterrestrials were plotting was a single counterfeit twenty-dollar bill wadded up in her hand. It looked entirely genuine, she thought. It was perhaps too perfect for her purpose. It was quite possible that this bill could be established as a counterfeit only by the unlikely discovery of a genuine note with the same serial-number. The paper-makers and chemists of Chilif, the engraving millions of Microfabridae, had done their work too well.

Suddenly, across Orison's

field of regard there danced dozens of brilliant, five-pointed stars—over the weapons-carriers and the tanks, the jeeps and the two lolling guards, the concrete floor and the steel doors. Orison rubbed the heels of her hands into her eyes, but the stars were still there. "Don't worry," someone said. "I painted the stars on the backs of your eyes only to get your attention." The stars disappeared, and Orison heard again the music of the Microfabridae, a singing almost unhearable.

"Who's that?" Orison demanded, her voice uncertain.

"Don't speak. You'll frighten the guards," the mysterious voice said. "We have had long association, Orison. It was I who, so close in empathy with you, prevented your eating lobster, for example. Earth's lobster is a distant relative of mine. I could not see you ingest one without feeling deep qualms. And it is to me you have been reading, filling my mind with knowledge and amusement while I was engaged in the dull work of projecting the images of currency to the Microfabridae at work at their printing-plates. I am known as Elder Compassion, and I am your friend."

"And Dink's friend?"

"His especially," the voice said. "Our business right now is to help you escape. We must know exactly where you are, Orison."

"I'm in the basement of the National Guard Armory," Orison said softly. "Where are you?"

"I'm on the ninth floor of the Bank building," Elder Compassion said. "Yes, that means telepathy, of a weak and uncertain sort. I am not one of the true telepaths, those gold and mighty minds I can hear trumpeting in the night. I can but whisper, and eavesdrop a bit in minds that let me. And is the fact that I speak within your ear and listen to the currents that make words within your mind so much more mysterious than your pillow that whispers?"

"TELL me what to do," Orison said.

"Look at the entrance of your basement," Elder Compassion said. Orison stared at the steel doors at the top of the ramp. "Yes, Dink. You're in the right place." The inner voice ceased for a moment; and into Orison's mind flashed a picture of those doors seen from outside. An automobile was parked a dozen feet from the door. Dink's car! Wanji was at the wheel and Dink, grandly uniformed, was beside him. A pink, animate thread dipped down from the trunk of the Rolls and began working its way toward the steel doors. Microfabridae, Orison guessed. Then the picture in her mind flicked off, and she was alone again.

She watched the doors at the top of the ramp.

For ten minutes or so, there was nothing new to be seen. Then—a pinpoint of light, a tiny movement. "Look away," Elder Compassion said within her. "We don't want to make your guards suspicious."

From the corner of her eye Orison could see the thin pink line approaching the Sherman tank upon which one guard was sitting, at ease but alert. The line of Microfabridae split into two columns, and one set out toward the second guard, seated in his weapons-carrier, facing the little room where C Company's commanding officer was imprisoned.

Orison knotted her fists to keep from screaming, reminding herself that these creeping things weren't spiders. She heard, faint at first, but growing at the edge of her consciousness, the song of the Microfabridae. The twin columns were thicker now. It seemed impossible that the guards hadn't yet seen them. A living thread oozed up the side of the tank and busied itself a moment at the guard's ankles.

"What's going on?" the captain, Orison's fellow-prisoner, shouted from his hidden cell.

"Mmmmf," the guard assigned to the captain replied. Then he was entirely silent.

Orison stood. Her own guard was strapped to the steel of his tank by a hundred strands of Lilliputian thread. A thin net of the stuff, fine as angel-hair, covered his mouth. The second guard, in the weapons-carrier, was bound in the same manner. He stared at Orison and moved his jaw, but could say nothing. "They'll not be injured," Elder Compassion told her. "It is impossible for me to allow a living being to be hurt. Now, go look at the man who just called out."

Orison went to the cell where the Captain was, avoiding as she walked the pools of Microfabridae scattered about the floor. The man stood in a barred room, evidently designed as the toolroom of the motor-pool, his hands around the bars. "Good afternoon," he said. "What's going on here?"

"We're getting out," Orison told him.

"ASK him if he can drive a tank," Elder Compassion whispered to Orison. "Those steel doors are too well built to be quickly opened by our little locksmiths."

"Can you drive a tank, Captain?" Orison asked.

"Miss, I piloted one of those M4E8 Sherman's across Europe sixteen years ago. I've still got the strength to pull a landrel. But you'll have to get me out there to do it; because there isn't room in this cell."

"I'll get you out," Orison promised.

"You want the Microfabridae to chew through the lock?" the voice-in-her-head asked gently.

"That's what I had in mind," Orison said.

"I know," Elder Compassion said. "Please look at the lock, so that I may direct our little friends to it."

Orison gazed at the lock. A line of Microfabridae snaked up the steel door-frame and entered the keyhole. From inside the door came a chittering sound, like a clock gone berserk. Then the crustacea reformed and marched down the door to the floor. Orison pressed the door-catch. The eviscerated lock gave way.

The captain stepped out to stare at the Microfabridae. "Miss," he said, "you and I could make a fortune with a team of those trained termites. There isn't a bank in the country that could stand up against us."

"It's been thought of," Orison said. "Help me get this man down from the tank, please, and we'll be on our way." Between them they lifted the cocooned guard, wrapped like a larva in Microfabridaean silk, to the cot, the little workers snipping with their chelae the threads that had bound him to the steel.

"Can you unlock the steel doors?" Orison asked.

"I don't have the key," the Captain said.

"Then we'll have to go through them," Orison said. "Can we do it?"

"We've got thirty-five tons to roll up that ramp," the captain said. "If we can't bust out with a punch like that, shame on us. Seems kind of rough on the taxpayers to bulldoze through that expensive door."

"If we don't make it out of here, those taxpayers may find themselves paying their thirty per cent to someone less friendly than Uncle Sam," Orison said. She clambered up the side of the tank and tugged at the hatch.

"Let me," said the captain. He opened the hatch and dropped inside. "You sit here to my right. We're going out the hard way, and buttoned up." He closed the hatch, then reached over his left shoulder to tug the master battery switch, squeezed together the twin butterfly switches on the panel and grabbed hold of the steering-landrels. "Hold on, Miss. We're headed for sunlight."

THE Sherman's thirty-five tons were rolling along at ten miles an hour when its bow met steel. Concrete splinters flew from the sides of the door, which crumpled as the tank fisted into its middle. The door broke free of its supports and slammed outside, forming a deckway over which the treads of the tank crunched. The captain killed the engine and opened the hatch. He

boosted Orison out, and followed her.

"Orison! Over here!" Dink Gerding s h o u te d. Orison leaped from the tank and ran toward the Rolls-Royce. "Get down!" Dink shouted again. He ran to seize her, and threw her to the ground. "And stay down!" He was up, drawing his sword. There was a crash. A smear of lead appeared on the concrete beside Orison. Dink, bellowing rage, was running down the ramp into the armory basement, his sword raised.

Kraft Gerding stood at the head of his troops at the foot of the ramp. In hand he had an Army .45. He shouted to his men, a dozen purple-ears, dressed in fatigues, each as big and ugly as the two who'd been guarding Orison and the Captain. They strained forward to follow him—but fell like ten-pins, tripped up by strands of web knitted between their ankles by fast-working Microfabridae. "Don't stop him, Elder Cousin!" Dink shouted, his words evidently meant for the mysterious brain-guy, Elder Compassion, in the ninth floor of the Taft Bank Building. "This I must do," Dink said.

Kraft Gerding dropped the automatic and slicked his sword from its scabbard. The blade, Orison saw, rising to her feet, was by no means an ornament. It looked most naked and competent. Dink advanced upon his brother, each holding his sword at the ready like scorpions ready to do battle. "It would distress me to wound you, elder sibling," Dink said.

"*Lese majesty* or no, my liege," Kraft shouted, "I intend to chop you to stew-meat!" Their blades met and clashed, the swordsmen taking the shock of their contact with skillful springing of their arms and shoulders. Behind the clash of steel, Orison heard a new sound, the scream of a siren. A second siren called out, and both grew louder. "The police!" Wanji shouted. "Stop it, Sires!"

The captain stood beside Orison. "I've seen *Hamlet* played," he said, "but the sword-fight was nowhere near so violent as this. Who are these two nuts, anyway?"

"My fiance, and the man who, if he lives, will be my brother-in-law," Orison said.

"Excuse me," the captain said.

ORISON gripped the captain's arm and tried not to cry out at Dink's danger. Kraft parried his brother's blade, raising it high and to his right. Then he went in like a flash, hacking his edge down toward the juncture of shoulder and neck. Dink fell aside. Kraft's sword bit concrete. Dink flipped his sword in a jeweled arc, slamming Kraft's blade from his hand

to spin end-over-end through the air like a drum-majorette's baton. Kraft's sword slammed to the pavement. In an instant a pool of Microfabridae had covered it, binding the steel to the concrete with strands of their angel-hair.

Dink advanced on his brother, backing him against the bulk of the Sherman tank.

Kraft Gerding stood with his hands at his sides, his face composed in dignity, waiting for the coup de grace. "Bind the traitor, Elder Cousin," Dink said, addressing an ear not present. Microfabridae, obedient to the command they alone heard, rolled in little waves across the steel door and knit Kraft in a web from ankles to larynx. The police were very near now, their sirens dying as they slowed to halt. Dink sheathed his sword. "Wanji!" he called. "Put him in the car. It is time that we withdraw." Wanji ran up to the cocooned figure, saluted, and dumped Kraft Gerding across his shoulder like a giant spool of silk. The Microfabridae flowed to the Rolls and pooled themselves somewhere in its trunk. "To the Bank, Wanji," Dink ordered, seating himself beside his driver. Orison sat in the back, next to the trussed-up Kraft.

Police appeared, whistling and brandishing their revolvers. One occupied himself with kicking at Kraft's grounded sword, tied to the pavement by tendrils tougher than steel wire. Another guarded the ankle-bound purple-ears, obviously unable to believe what he was seeing. "You in the car there, stop!" a police officer shouted. Wanji, erect and unheeding at the wheel, took the limousine around the corner of the armory and down the street toward the Bank.

"You'd have done better, brother, to have killed me," Kraft Gerding said, straitjacketed in silk.

"Killing would seem appropriate, although our Elder Cousin declares it unlawful," Dink said over his shoulder. "Your crime is treason against the Triple Crown, attempted assassination of the Heir Apparent, mutiny and kidnap. What punishment would you mete out to an officer so turpitudinous, were you Defender of the Crowns?"

"I would have him put to death in a manner befitting his station," Kraft said. "I would not bind him like a sausage and pelt him with taunts."

"Perhaps you can gain a special dispensation from Elder Compassion, allowing me to grant you a properly noble death," Dink said. "We'll ask him, if you like."

THE William Howard Taft National Bank and Trust Company was closed, the os-

tensible reason given by an easel set up in front of the glass doors of the front entrance: "National Holiday: Birthday of Millard Fillmore." One of the loyalist Purple-Ears materialized behind the glass as the Rolls rolled up to the curb, and unlocked the doors.

Wanji and the guard carried Kraft Gerding between them into the bank-lobby, Dink relocking the doors behind them. A knot of spectators gathered on the sidewalk outside, shading their eyes, examining with much conversation the sign, the purple-eared guard, the uniformed Wanji and Dink and the figure trussed up like a rolled carpet on the parquet floor. "I think this busts up your counterfeiting ring, Dink," Orison said. "What now?"

"That is, darling, precisely the question I want to ask our brain-trust, Elder Compassion," Dink said. "He is both our leader and in a sense our warden, you see. He came with us to Earth to guarantee that we in no way violate the principle of reverence for life in our conquest of your planet."

The elevator appeared, piloted by another of the Purple-Ears. "Nine," Dink snapped. Wanji and the guard towed the packaged Kraft aboard.

The anteroom into which the elevator door opened on ninth floor smelled of ozone and dryness. Faint music vibrated the desert air. "Bach?" Orison asked.

"Scarlatti," Dink said. "His music consoles Elder Compassion for the violence of men. Here — you'll need these." He handed Orison a pair of almost opaque goggles, the sort that welders wear. "Come on," he said, tugging Orison through a door.

Even with the heavy goggles, the room beyond was brilliant beyond belief, a Sahara summer-solstice noon in brightness. The floor was covered by tons of sand, duned up against the windows in waves that would have disheartened a camel. The music now was almost as oppressive as the heat and the light. Great booming gouts of sound came from every direction. Suddenly, as though responding to Orison's mental protest, the music stopped. The lights dimmed somewhat.

"We have come, Elder Cousin," Dink announced to the sand.

"I speak to the lovely woman," an interior voice said to all of them. "Do not fear me, Orison, though I will seem to you a most hideous worm. My world nestles next its sun. I, made to fit a homeworld that would seem a Hell to you, could hardly be expected to conform to green Earth's standards of beauty. Reflect, Orison, that I wish you well."

SOMETHNG dragged itself across a dune. "My God!" Orison whispered, gripping Dink's right arm with both her hands.

"Orison, this is my mentor and my dearest friend," Dink said. "His name is Elder Compassion. He is older than the language you speak. And he is, though housed in strange flesh, a Man of Good Will."

The thing that squatted across the mid-room dune was twelve feet long from the tip of the arched scorpion-telson to the twin pincers that formed a chitinous mustache beneath its mouth. It stared at her with a pair of compound eyes the size of hub-caps. "I'll not weary you further with squeezing words into your minds," the interior voice said. "Bring me the writing-boards, Son and Cousin."

"Cornet!" Dink snapped. "Bring scratchboards."

"Sire!" A young officer ran back to the anteroom and came back with a stack of blackened boards, one of which he set up in the sand before the monster, glancing nervously over his shoulder at the lance-like tip that quivered in the air above him. "It is a fearsome thing, this killing-tool my body is equipped with," the voice said, "and embarrassing. It is rather as though your good Gandhi had been forced to carry a submachine gun through life." The cornet scrambled out of way through the sand, and the giant sting lowered itself to the scratchboard.

The words he inscribed into the blackness were written in a delicate italic, hardly larger than human penmanship: "My son, she is lovely."

"It is gracious of you, Elder Cousin, to recognize beauty in a form so unlike your own species," Dink said, bowing.

There was a mental chuckle. "Her mind, you clod!" the monster sketched in the scratchboard. "Her lovely, lovely mind."

"I am pleased that you ratify my choice of wife, Elder Cousin," Dink said.

"She will assist you in the most difficult task ever a scion of the Triple Crown had to accomplish, Son and Cousin," Elder Compassion wrote. "She will aid you in preparing the Golden Worlds to accept Coca-Cola."

"Your meaning, Elder Cousin, is hidden from my poor understanding," Dink said.

"I mean this," Elder Compassion sketched on his scratchboard. "You came for conquest bearing with you the seeds of violence, and thus defeat. You came to subvert Earth by pandering to Earth's greed. You were yourself, through the agent of your greedy brother, rendered impotent. Violence has been done. We must now retreat, making such amends as we can. In the years that will soon be upon

us, Earth's men will follow us to the Golden Worlds, where you, as Emperor, and Orison, Empress, will greet them."

"To the ship, then?" Dink asked. "What will we do with the rebels? With Kraft, my brother?"

"They have earned the payment of exile," Elder Compassion wrote. "We will leave them here."

DINK turned to the young officer. "Cornet, assist our Elder Cousin to the ship," he ordered. He turned to two of the purple-ears. "Take Kraft to the vault," he said.

Orison spoke to the monster. "Sir," she said, "you spoke of making amends for the damage you have done. You must first of all destroy the paper with which you'd hoped to ruin us."

"I'll give those orders, Orison," Dink said.

"What will be done about the counterfeit money you've already spent, financing your subversion?" she asked.

Elder Compassion was writing on his board. "Three miles beneath this city lies a vein of gold," he wrote. "The Microfabridae are this minute plumbing the earth to reach it. We will leave full payment for our fiscal sins."

Dink took Orison's hand. "You'll come with us?" he asked.

"I will, Dink."

"Then I, Rex-Imperator, Son of the Triple Crown, Prince Porphyrogenous of Empire, take you to wife," he said.

"If you're sure this is quite legal," Orison said, "I do."

"There are voices all about us," Elder Compassion spoke in their minds. "The traitor, Kraft, is in the vault, bound and seated in the midst of wealth. We must go, or there will be more violence."

"The moment the Microfabridae have left their golden payment for our folly, Elder Cousin, guide them to the ship," Dink said. "I long to show my Princess her dominions."

"She is the first," the voice spoke again. "The first of the irresistible conquerors from Earth."

END

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Handsome, athletic, debonair,
a man of powerful charm as well as solid worth,
I'd give anything
to conquer my one real fault —
my darned modesty!

The Flying Tuskers Of K'niik-K'naak

BY JACK SHARKEY

I HAVE trod many tangled jungles, explored the floors of innumerable oceans and braved death in so many forms that a man less magnificent than myself would have died of fright. But if there is one event that stands out in my perfect memory that can still raise a goosebump or two on my broad tanned shoulders, the event is when I went hunting for the flying tuskers of K'niik-K'naak. There we were,

myself and my faithful old purple Andromedan guide, Mimp, out in the vast blue-white desert of Polaris III, looking for the flying tuskers.

K'niik-K'naak, the region we trod, was much feared by the Polaris III natives. They were a superstitious bunch anyway, who panicked at the very thought of being trampled or gored, and never ventured into the region of the tuskers. I, a man of clear head and no nonsense, laughed at their primitive fancies. I set out nonetheless into the desert, with only the barest rudiments necessary for survival. We could get none of the local boys for bearers, so Mimp had to carry everything. Naturally I had to have both hands free to use my Moxley .55, the best ray-rifle you can buy anywhere in the colonized universe.

Aside from the ray-rifle, I carried nothing save a fourteen-inch carbon-steel bolo knife slung to my belt, my ever-present calabash pipe, crammed full of steaming Yekkweed—expensive to have imported from the Martian canals, but I buy it by the carton — and my trusty f9-ultiflex binoculars on a short platinum chain.

Mimp struggled along behind me as we set off into the desert. Even his mighty plum-hued muscles quivered under the load of our gear, which included an inflatable pseudolog hut (with fireplace, an optional extra), a double-oven radium-powered cookout stove and a seven-pound crate of signal flares, just in case we got lost.

THREE days we ranged the shifting blue-white sands of K'niik-K'naak, watching everywhere for signs of the herd we'd heard occurred in that region. Nothing.

"Keep sharp lookout," I snapped at Mimp, over my shoulder. Mimp was like a brother, but you have to keep these aliens in their place.

"Yes, Bwana," said Mimp. (He called me Bwana, always.) "Soon we come to waterhole."

I didn't ask him how he knew. Andromedans have a knack for geography. In many ways, they're almost as good as an Earthman. "Good," was all I answered. It was short, to the point, and showed who was boss.

Onward we trekked, a sunburnt duo casting long bronze shadows across the burning sands of K'niik K'naak. A thin plume of Yekkwood fumes marked our passage. It was nearly sunset when we spotted the pink glitter of that sickening slop that is the Polaris III excuse for water. I stood watching the sunset, while Mimp unloaded all the gear and began to set up camp. As the last rays faded in the sky, I turned and entered the pseudolog hut Mimp had inflated.

Hard on his lungs, of course, but I hadn't wanted to burden him with the extra weight of a hand-pump. I'm a stern man, but I'm fair.

He had my slippers laid out beside the armchair by the fire and a cool mint julep awaiting me on the small teakwood taboret. He was busying himself in the kitchenette, whipping up a quick souffle with one hand and tossing a small salad with the other.

"Hurry it up there," I growled jovially. "Time is money, time is money!" A bit of friendly joshing is good for the relationship; shows Mimp I'm tolerant of him sharing the same quarters, without actually making me act like an equal, if you know what I mean.

"I hurry, Sahib," said Mimp. "Coming up." (He always called me Sahib.) He rushed across the room and began setting the table, with my pearl-handled silverware.

"No, not there," I yawned, picking up my julep and settling back into the armchair. "I think I'd like the table nearer the piano, so you can play Chopin Nocturnes while I dine." I added, as a kindly afterthought, "You can reheat your share of the souffle later, after I've gone to bed." Personally, I hate cold souffle.

"Yes, Effendi." said Mimp. (He always called me Effendi.) Rapidly, he moved the table over to the Steinway, set out the finished souffle and salad and then hurried to the piano and began laboriously plunking out glorious melody. I took a sip of my julep, then spat it out on the carpet.

"Mimp!" I roared, incensed. "Did you make this drink with Polaris III water?"

Craven and cowering, he fell at my feet, whining for mercy. But I was adamant. You let an alien take an inch, and the next thing, he's swiped a parsec. "The knout," I said, keeping my voice emotionless and holding out my hand.

"Please, Kimosabe," whimpered Mimp, "I dared not use the water in the canteens. You know that Polaris III water is poisonous to us Andromedans, while you Earthmen can tolerate it."

"I can *not!*" I raged.

"I was speaking medically," he mewed piteously.

"And I, esthetically," I snarled. "The knout, now, and be quick about it."

He scurried on all fours to the bureau where I kept my odds and ends, and came crawling back with the brutal leather whip. I weighed the infraction, decided that three stripes should be lessen enough and I laid them onto his bare back with a steady hand. "Now," I said, wearied by the effort, "play something gay and lilting."

Hastily, he dragged himself to the Steinway and complied.

Dinner was really delicious.

NEXT morning, before sunup, we lay in wait for the herd behind a rock beside the waterhole. The sky was growing pale saffron near the horizon, then light yellow, and finally glaring brass as the sun arose. (By "sun," I mean the star Polaris, of course. Our sun is a star, you know. Or did you? *I* knew, naturally.) Then, afar off, I espied the bulky blobs in the sky that were the flying tuskers of K'niik-K'naak. No man had ever hunted one before. I felt pretty proud, let me tell you.

Onward they came through the air, their large skin-type gray wings flapping stolidly up and down, about three strokes to the mile. Enormous creatures they were, with fiery little eyes, and long trailing trunks that had a wicked little hook at the tip. But the thing that really caught one's eye was their tusks. Ten of them. Eight originating in the mouth, and one in either foreknee. Each tusk was seven feet in length, long, white, straight-tapered and flawless. But not ivory, not on these babies. Pure pearl. That lovely lustrous calcareous concretion! Each tusk would bring fifty thousand interplanetary credits on the open market. And there were ten per elephantine beast, and at least sixty of them in the herd.

"Look at that, will you!" I cried to Mimp. "Look, feast your ugly eyes on that gleaming fortune swooping down upon us, Mimp!"

"I look, I feast," he murmured servilely, huddled behind me behind the rock behind the tree. Aliens tend to be cowardly when their lives are in danger.

Carefully, I raised the rifle and took a bead on the youngest beast in that descending herd. It's slightly illegal to shoot the fledglings, but after all, I wasn't going to bring him *back* with me, so no one would know. It's just that I find that when I shoot the eldest in a herd of wildlife, the others miss their protector and flee. But if I shoot one of the babies, the elder ones stay around to protect it, and I get to kill lots more. Nasty, perhaps, but that's the hunting game for you.

Anyhow, I took this bead on the beasts. I was just in the act of depressing the firing stud when an unwonted lightness in the weapon caught my attention. Irritated, I cracked open the firing chamber. *"Mimp!"* I growled, in one of my rare real wraths. "You didn't *load* the ray-rifle! Even a Moxley .55 is no damned good without cartridges!"

"A thousand pardons, boss," muttered Mimp, inclining his loathsome lavender face in a subservient bow. "I go get."

He wriggled away across the sand and into the hut, fortunately not disturbing the herd, which was now kneeling on the slope above the waterhole and inhaling that putrid pink liquid through their trunks. I drooled a bit, seeing the rainbow glint of sunlight on those magnificent tusks. Seconds passed, then minutes. The herd was practically slaked, and still no crawling Mimp reappeared from the hut.

Soon they'd fly off, and cost me a fortune.

I was already pretty much in hock after paying the fare to Polaris III from Earth. (I'd been able to save a little by listing Mimp as baggage, and storing him in the hold for the flight.) Angry, irked, and pretty well enraged, I moved swiftly toward the hut on hands and knees, scuttling in the doorway as fast as I could, lest the herd see me and flee, or attack.

IN the parlor, I stood erect, and glanced about. There was no one in sight, but the back door was open. *"Mimp!"* I bellowed, stamping across the carpet. "Where are you, you off-color blemish!?" No reply. "This means six stripes with the knout!" I warned him.

Then I heard a faint sound, not unlike that of a fourteen-inch bolo knife being brought down hard upon the inflating-valve of a pseudolog hut. I felt at my belt. My bolo was missing. "Mimp!" I hollered, much too late.

Then the whole damned room, piano, fireplace, carpet, armchair and all, snapped in upon me, and I was wound up with those rubberized walls tighter than the center of a golfball. I think I must have swooned, then.

Much, much later, by dint of tooth, fingernail and sheer grit, I had gnawed, clawed and wrenched my way free of the collapsed hut. A stunning sight met my eyes. All about the waterhole, the flying tuskers were still kneeling. Every one of them was dead and already beginning to rot. But the infuriating thing was that not one of them had so much as an inch of tusk any more.

Every beast had been detusked, the priceless pearl shafts lopped off flush with the thick gray hides. *Mimp!* And with *my* bolo knife, already!

At least he'd left me a canteen. I tasted it. *Pffaugh!* Pink Polaris III slop! The dirty little—! But I saved it anyhow. I had a long lonely walk back to town ahead of me.

And there it was that I learned even worse news.

Mimp had alreday sold the tusks and was on his way back to Andromeda, with a fortune in his breechclout. I swore revenge, then and there, but was

unable to carry it out, since I was short the rocketfare back to Earth and the authorities. (It seems that Polaris III is a neutral planet. Even the mighty word "Earthman" carries no weight there.) So I had to hock the piano, my precious Moxley .55 and what could be salvaged of the soufflé, and even then I was only able to book passage as near Earth as Sirius II.

Luckily, they had a consulate there. I was able to secure a ride home, after some weeks' wait. By then, however, it was too late to avenge myself.

Mimp, with his stolen fortune, had paid off his planet's debt to Earth. Andromeda IV (his home planet) declared its independence, and the Earth authorities throw up their hands and shrug whenever I hint at extraditing him. Seems he's the new emperor there, or something. They can't afford to antagonize him. Damn!

However, I suppose you're wondering just why I get goosebumps when I recall the flying tuskers of K'niik-K'naak. Well, it wasn't so much the danger from the beasts, nor the hideous heat of that desert, nor my long, painful sojourn beneath the Steinway in the shrunken hut that was so bad.

It was those tuskers. Know how they died? Mimp had poisoned the waterhole. Unsporting, and all that, but the thing that nags my brain is: Why didn't *I* think of that?

Me! Bested by a lousy purple alien!

What's the universe coming to? **END**

THUS SPAKE NIETZCHE

Nietzche believed in an extinction which was not eternal. The entire world, according to him, was a mechanical dashing about of material atoms forming endless combinations. In course of time, he held, any given combination was bound to repeat itself; consequently each of us, after aeons of extinction, would find himself repeating his past life. The theory was glib nonsense. Nietzche was completely ignorant of science and did not know that the Second Law of Thermodynamics expressly forbids any such repetition of a past state of the material world.

—J. W. Dunne
An Experiment with Time

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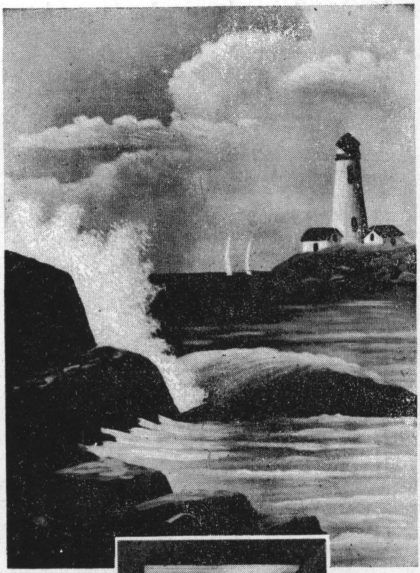

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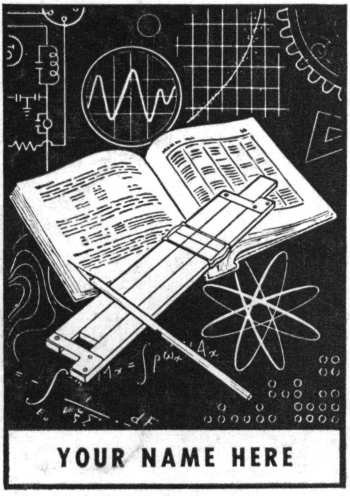

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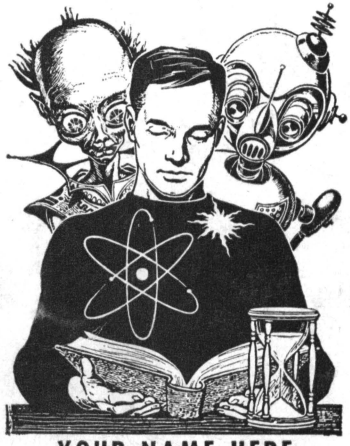

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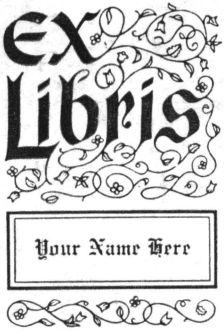

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