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BY LESTER DEL REY



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THE FROZEN PLANET

“IT is rather unusual,” Magnan said, “to assign an officer of your rank to courier duty, but this is an unusual mission.”

Retief sat relaxed and said nothing. Just before the silence grew awkward, Magnan went on.

“There are four planets in the group,” he said. “Two double planets, all rather close to an unimportant star listed as DRI-G 33987. They’re called Jorgensen’s Worlds, and in themselves are of no importance whatever. However, they lie deep in the sector into which the Soetti have been penetrating.

“Now—” Magnan leaned forward and lowered his voice—“we have learned that the

Soetti plan a bold step forward. Since they’ve met no opposition so far in their infiltration of Terrestrial space, they intend to seize Jorgensen’s Worlds by force.”

Magnan leaned back, waiting for Retief’s reaction. Retief drew carefully on his cigar and looked at Magnan. Magnan frowned.

“This is open aggression, Retief,” he said, “in case I haven’t made myself clear. Aggression on Terrestrial-occupied territory by an alien species. Obviously, we can’t allow it.”

Magnan drew a large folder from his desk.

“A show of resistance at this point is necessary. Unfortunately, Jorgensen’s Worlds

are technologically undeveloped areas. They're farmers or traders. Their industry is limited to a minor role in their economy—enough to support the merchant fleet, no more. The war potential, by conventional standards, is nil."

Magnan tapped the folder before him.

"I have here," he said solemnly, "information which will change that picture completely." He leaned back and blinked at Retief.

"ALL right, Mr. Councilor," Retief said. "I'll play along; what's in the folder?"

Magnan spread his fingers, folded one down.

"First," he said. "The Soetti War Plan—in detail. We were fortunate enough to make contact with a defector from a party of renegade Terrestrials who've been advising the Soetti." He folded another finger. "Next, a battle plan for the Jorgensen's people, worked out by the Theory group." He wrestled a third finger down. "Lastly; an Utter Top Secret schematic for conversion of a standard anti-acceleration field into a potent weapon—a development our systems people have been holding in reserve for just such a situation."

"Is that all?" Retief said. "You've still got two fingers sticking up."

Magnan looked at the fingers and put them away.

"This is no occasion for flippancy, Retief. In the wrong hands, this information could be catastrophic. You'll memorize it before you leave this building."

"I'll carry it, sealed," Retief said. "That way nobody can sweat it out of me."

Magnan started to shake his head.

"Well," he said. "If it's trapped for destruction, I suppose—"

"I've heard of these Jorgensen's Worlds," Retief said. "I remember an agent, a big blond fellow, very quick on the uptake. A wizard with cards and dice. Never played for money, though."

"Umm," Magnan said. "Don't make the error of personalizing this situation, Retief. Overall policy calls for a defense of these backwater worlds. Otherwise the Corps would allow history to follow its natural course, as always."

"When does this attack happen?"

"Less than four weeks."

"That doesn't leave me much time."

"I have your itinerary here. Your accommodations are clear as far as Aldo Cerise. You'll have to rely on your ingenuity to get you the rest of the way."

"That's a pretty rough trip, Mr. Councillor. Suppose I don't make it?"

Magnan looked sour. "Someone at a policy-making level has chosen to put all our eggs

in one basket, Retief. I hope their confidence in you is not misplaced."

"This antiac conversion; how long does it take?"

"A skilled electronics crew can do the job in a matter of minutes. The Jorgensens can handle it very nicely; every other man is a mechanic of some sort."

Retief opened the envelope Magnan handed him and looked at the tickets inside.

"Less than four hours to departure time," he said. "I'd better not start any long books."

"You'd better waste no time getting over to Indoctrination," Magnan said.

Retief stood up. "If I hurry, maybe I can catch the cartoon."

"The allusion escapes me," Magnan said coldly. "And one last word. The Soetti are patrolling the trade lanes into Jorgensen's Worlds; don't get yourself interned."

"I'll tell you what," Retief said soberly. "In a pinch, I'll mention your name."

"You'll be traveling with Class X credentials," Magnan snapped. "There must be nothing to connect you with the Corps."

"They'll never guess," Retief said. "I'll pose as a gentleman."

"You'd better be getting started," Magnan said, shuffling papers.

"You're right," Retief said. "If I work at it, I might man-

age a snootful by takeoff." He went to the door. "No objection to my checking out a needler, is there?"

Magnan looked up. "I suppose not. What do you want with it?"

"Just a feeling I've got."

"Please yourself."

"Some day," Retief said, "I may take you up on that."

II

RETIEF put down the heavy travel-battered suitcase and leaned on the counter, studying the schedules chalked on the board under the legend "ALDO CERISE—INTERPLANETARY." A thin clerk in a faded sequined blouse and a plastic snakeskin cummerbund groomed his fingernails, watching Retief from the corner of his eye.

Retief glanced at him.

The clerk nipped off a ragged corner with rabbitlike front teeth and spat it on the floor.

"Was there something?" he said.

"Two twenty-eight, due out today for the Jorgensen group," Retief said. "Is it on schedule?"

The clerk sampled the inside of his right cheek, eyed Retief. "Filled up. Try again in a couple of weeks."

"What time does it leave?"

"I don't think—"

"Let's stick to facts," Retief said. "Don't try to think. What time is it due out?"

The clerk smiled pityingly. "It's my lunch hour," he said. "I'll be open in an hour." He held up a thumb nail, frowned at it.

"If I have to come around this counter," Retief said, "I'll feed that thumb to you the hard way."

The clerk looked up and opened his mouth. Then he caught Retief's eye, closed his mouth and swallowed.

"Like it says there," he said, jerking a thumb at the board. "Lifts in an hour. But you won't be on it," he added.

Retief looked at him.

"Some... ah... VIP's required accommodation," he said. He hooked a finger inside the sequined collar. "All tourist reservations were canceled. You'll have to try to get space on the Four-Planet Line ship next—"

"Which gate?" Retief said.

"For... ah...?"

"For the two twenty-eight for Jorgensen's Worlds," Retief said.

"Well," the clerk said. "Gate 19," he added quickly. "But—"

Retief picked up his suitcase and walked away toward the glare sign reading *To Gates 16-30*.

"Another smart alec," the clerk said behind him.

RETIEF followed the signs, threaded his way through crowds, found a covered ramp with the number 228 posted over it. A heavy-shouldered man with a scarred jawline

and small eyes was slouching there in a rumpled gray uniform. He put out a hand as Retief started past him.

"Lessee your boarding pass," he muttered.

Retief pulled a paper from an inside pocket, handed it over.

The guard blinked at it.

"Whassat?"

"A gram confirming my space," Retief said. "Your boy on the counter says he's out to lunch."

The guard crumpled the gram, dropped it on the floor and lounged back against the handrail.

"On your way, bub." he said.

Retief put his suitcase carefully on the floor, took a step and drove a right into the guard's midriff. He stepped aside as the man doubled and went to his knees.

"You were wide open, ugly. I couldn't resist. Tell your boss I sneaked past while you were resting your eyes." He picked up his bag, stepped over the man and went up the gangway into the ship.

A cabin boy in stained whites came along the corridor.

"Which way to cabin fifty-seven, son?" Retief asked.

"Up there." The boy jerked his head and hurried on. Retief made his way along the narrow hall, found signs, followed them to cabin fifty-seven. The door was open. Inside, baggage was piled in the cen-

ter of the floor. It was expensive looking baggage.

Retief put his bag down. He turned at a sound behind him. A tall, florid man with an expensive coat belted over a massive paunch stood in the open door, looking at Retief. Retief looked back. The florid man clamped his jaws together, turned to speak over his shoulder.

"Somebody in the cabin. Get 'em out." He rolled a cold eye at Retief as he backed out of the room. A short, thick-necked man appeared.

"What are you doing in Mr. Tony's room?" he barked. "Never mind! Clear out of here, fellow! You're keeping Mr. Tony waiting."

"Too bad," Retief said. "Finders keepers."

"You nuts?" The thick-necked man stared at Retief. "I said it's Mr. Tony's room."

"I don't know Mr. Tony. He'll have to bull his way into other quarters."

"We'll see about you, mister." The man turned and went out. Retief sat on the bunk and lit a cigar. There was a sound of voices in the corridor. Two burly baggage-smashers appeared, straining at an oversized trunk. They maneuvered it through the door, lowered it, glanced at Retief and went out. The thick-necked man returned.

"All right, you. Out," he growled. "Or have I got to have you thrown out?"

Retief rose and clamped the

cigar between his teeth. He gripped a handle of the brass-bound trunk in each hand, bent his knees and heaved the trunk up to chest level, then raised it overhead. He turned to the door.

"Catch," he said between clenched teeth. The trunk slammed against the far wall of the corridor and burst.

Retief turned to the baggage on the floor, tossed it into the hall. The face of the thick-necked man appeared cautiously around the door jamb.

"Mister, you must be—"

"If you'll excuse me," Retief said, "I want to catch a nap." He flipped the door shut, pulled off his shoes and stretched out on the bed.

FIVE minutes passed before the door rattled and burst open.

Retief looked up. A gaunt leathery-skinned man wearing white ducks, a blue turtleneck sweater and a peaked cap tilted raffishly over one eye stared at Retief.

"Is this the joker?" he grated.

The thick-necked man edged past him, looked at Retief and snorted, "That's him, sure."

"I'm captain of this vessel," the first man said. "You've got two minutes to haul your freight out of here, buster."

"When you can spare the time from your other duties," Retief said, "take a look at

Section Three, Paragraph One, of the Uniform Code. That spells out the law on confirmed space on vessels engaged in interplanetary commerce."

"A space lawyer." The captain turned. "Throw him out, boys."

Two big men edged into the cabin, looking at Retief.

"Go on, pitch him out," the captain snapped.

Retief put his cigar in an ashtray, and swung his feet off the bunk.

"Don't try it," he said softly.

One of the two wiped his nose on a sleeve, spat on his right palm, and stepped forward, then hesitated.

"Hey," he said. "This the guy tossed the trunk off the wall?"

"That's him," the thick-necked man called. "Spilled Mr. Tony's possessions right on the deck."

"Deal me out," the bouncer said. "He can stay put as long as he wants to. I signed on to move cargo. Let's go, Moe."

"You'd better be getting back to the bridge, Captain." Retief said. "We're due to lift in twenty minutes."

The thick-necked man and the Captain both shouted at once. The Captain's voice prevailed.

"—twenty minutes... uniform Code... gonna do?"

"Close the door as you leave," Retief said.

The thick-necked man

paused at the door. "We'll see you when you come out."

III

FOUR waiters passed Retief's table without stopping. A fifth leaned against the wall nearby, a menu under his arm.

At a table across the room, the Captain, now wearing a dress uniform and with his thin red hair neatly parted, sat with a table of male passengers. He talked loudly and laughed frequently, casting occasional glances Retief's way.

A panel opened in the wall behind Retief's chair. Bright blue eyes peered out from under a white chef's cap.

"Givin' you the cold shoulder, heh, Mister?"

"Looks like it, old-timer," Retief said. "Maybe I'd better go join the skipper. His party seems to be having all the fun."

"Feller has to be mighty careless who he eats with to set over there."

"I see your point."

"You set right where you're at, Mister. I'll rustle you up a plate."

Five minutes later, Retief cut into a thirty-two ounce Delmonico backed up with mushrooms and garlic butter.

"I'm Chip," the chef said. "I don't like the Cap'n. You can tell him I said so. Don't like his friends, either. Don't like them dern Sweaties, look at a

man like he was a worm."

"You've got the right idea on frying a steak, Chip. And you've got the right idea on the Soetti, too," Retief said. He poured red wine into a glass. "Here's to you."

"Dern right," Chip said. "Dunno who ever thought up broiling 'em. Steaks, that is. I got a Baked Alaska coming up in here for dessert. You like brandy in yer coffee?"

"Chip, you're a genius."

"Like to see a feller eat," Chip said. "I gotta go now. If you need anything, holler."

Retief ate slowly. Time always dragged on shipboard. Four days to Jorgensen's Worlds. Then, if Magnan's information was correct, there would be four days to prepare for the Soetti attack. It was a temptation to scan the tapes built into the handle of his suitcase. It would be good to know what Jorgensen's Worlds would be up against.

Retief finished the steak, and the chef passed out the baked Alaska and coffee. Most of the other passengers had left the dining room. Mr. Tony and his retainers still sat at the Captain's table.

As Retief watched, four men arose from the table and sauntered across the room. The first in line, a stony-faced thug with a broken ear, took a cigar from his mouth as he reached the table. He dipped the lighted end in Retief's coffee, looked at it, and dropped it on the tablecloth.

The others came up, Mr. Tony trailing.

"You must want to get to Jorgensen's pretty bad," the thug said in a grating voice. "What's your game, hick?"

Retief looked at the coffee cup, picked it up.

"I don't think I want my coffee," he said. He looked at the thug. "You drink it."

The thug squinted at Retief. "A wise hick," he began.

With a flick of the wrist, Retief tossed the coffee into the thug's face, then stood and slammed a straight right to the chin. The thug went down.

Retief looked at Mr. Tony, still standing open-mouthed.

"You can take your playmates away now, Tony," he said. "And don't bother to come around yourself. You're not funny enough."

Mr. Tony found his voice.

"Take him, Marbles!" he growled.

The thick-necked man slipped a hand inside his tunic and brought out a long-bladed knife. He licked his lips and moved in.

Retief heard the panel open beside him.

"Here you go, Mister," Chip said. Retief darted a glance; a well-honed french knife lay on the sill.

"Thanks, Chip," Retief said. "I won't need it for these punks."

Thick-neck lunged and Retief hit him square in the face, knocking him under the table. The other man stepped back,

fumbling a power pistol from his shoulder holster.

"Aim that at me, and I'll kill you," Retief said.

"Go on, burn him!" Mr. Tony shouted. Behind him, the captain appeared, white-faced.

"Put that away, you!" he yelled. "What kind of—"

"Shut up," Mr. Tony said. "Put it away, Hoany. We'll fix this bum later."

"Not on this vessel, you won't," the captain said shakily. "I got my charter to consider."

"Ram your charter," Hoany said harshly. "You won't be needing it long."

"Button your floppy mouth, damn you!" Mr. Tony snapped. He looked at the man on the floor. "Get Marbles out of here. I ought to dump the slob."

He turned and walked away. The captain signaled and two waiters came up. Retief watched as they carted the casualty from the dining room.

The panel opened.

"I usta be about your size, when I was your age," Chip said. "You handled them pansies right. I wouldn't give 'em the time o' day."

"How about a fresh cup of coffee, Chip?" Retief said.

"Sure, Mister. Anything else?"

"I'll think of something," Retief said. "This is shaping up into one of those long days."

"THEY don't like me bringing yer meals to you in yer cabin," Chip said. "But the cap'n knows I'm the best cook in the Merchant Service. They won't mess with me."

"What has Mr. Tony got on the captain, Chip?" Retief asked.

"They're in some kind o' crooked business together. You want some more smoked turkey?"

"Sure. What have they got against my going to Jorgensen's Worlds?"

"Dunno. Hasn't been no tourists got in there fer six or eight months. I sure like a feller that can put it away. I was a big eater when I was yer age."

"I'll bet you can still handle it, Old Timer. What are Jorgensen's Worlds like?"

"One of 'em's cold as hell and three of 'em's colder. Most o' the Jorgies live on Svea; that's the least froze up. Man don't enjoy eatin' his own cookin' like he does somebody else's."

"That's where I'm lucky, Chip. What kind of cargo's the captain got aboard for Jorgensen's?"

"Derned if I know. In and out o' there like a grasshopper, ever few weeks. Don't never pick up no cargo. No tourists any more, like I says. Don't know what we even run in there for."

"Where are the passengers we have aboard headed?"



"To Alabaster. That's nine days' run in-sector from Jorgensen's. You ain't got another one of them cigars, have you?"

"Have one, Chip. I guess I was lucky to get space on this ship."

"Plenty o' space, Mister. We got a dozen empty cabins." Chip puffed the cigar alight, then cleared away the dishes, poured out coffee and brandy.

"Them Sweaties is what I don't like," he said.

Retief looked at him questioningly.

"You never seen a Sweaty? Ugly lookin' devils. Skinny legs, like a lobster; big chest, shaped like the top of a turnip; rubbery lookin' head. You can see the pulse beatin' when they get riled."

"I've never had the pleasure," Retief said.

"You prob'ly have it perty soon. Them devils board us nigh ever trip out. Act like they was the Customs Patrol or somethin'."

There was a distant clang, and a faint tremor ran through the floor.

"I ain't superstitious ner nothin'," Chip said. "But I'll be triple-damned if that ain't them boarding us now."

Ten minutes passed before footsteps sounded outside the door, accompanied by a clicking patter. The doorknob rattled, then a heavy knock shook the door.

"They got to look you

over," Chip whispered. "Nosy damn Sweaties."

"Unlock it, Chip." The chef opened the door.

"Come in, damn you," he said.

A tall and grotesque creature minced into the room, tiny hoof-like feet tapping on the floor. A flaring metal helmet shaded the deep-set compound eyes, and a loose mantle flapped around the knobbed knees. Behind the alien, the captain hovered nervously.

"Yo' papiss," the alien rasped.

"Who's your friend, Captain?" Retief said.

"Never mind; just do like he tells you."

"Yo' papiss," the alien said again.

"Okay," Retief said. "I've seen it. You can take it away now."

"Don't horse around," the captain said. "This fellow can get mean."

The alien brought two tiny arms out from the concealment of the mantle, clicked toothed pincers under Retief's nose.

"Quick, soft one."

"Captain, tell your friend to keep its distance. It looks brittle, and I'm tempted to test it."

"Don't start anything with Skaw; he can clip through steel with those snappers."

"Last chance," Retief said. Skaw stood poised, open pincers an inch from Retief's eyes.

"Show him your papers, you damned fool," the captain said hoarsely. "I got no control over Skaw."

THE alien clicked both pincers with a sharp report, and in the same instant Retief half-turned to the left, leaned away from the alien and drove his right foot against the slender leg above the bulbous knee-joint. Skaw screeched and floundered, greenish fluid splattering from the burst joint.

"I told you he was brittle," Retief said. "Next time you invite pirates aboard, don't bother to call."

"Jesus, what did you do! They'll kill us!" the captain gasped, staring at the figure flopping on the floor.

"Cart poor old Skaw back to his boat," Retief said. "Tell him to pass the word. No more illegal entry and search of Terrestrial vessels in Terrestrial space."

"Hey," Chip said. "He's quit kicking."

The captain bent over Skaw, gingerly rolled him over. He leaned close and sniffed.

"He's dead." The captain stared at Retief. "We're all dead men," he said. "These Soetti got no mercy."

"They won't need it. Tell 'em to sheer off; their fun is over."

"They got no more emotions than a blue crab—"

"You bluff easily, Captain. Show a few guns as you hand

the body back. We know their secret now."

"What secret? I—"

"Don't be no dumber than you got to, Cap'n," Chip said. "Sweaties die easy; that's the secret."

"Maybe you got a point," the captain said, looking at Retief. "All they got's a three-man scout. It could work."

He went out, came back with two crewmen. They hauled the dead alien gingerly into the hall.

"Maybe I can run a bluff on the Soetti," the captain said, looking back from the door. "But I'll be back to see you later."

"You don't scare us, Cap'n," Chip said. "Him and Mr. Tony and all his goons. You hit 'em where they live, that time. They're pals o' these Sweaties. Runnin' some kind o' crooked racket."

"You'd better take the captain's advice, Chip. There's no point in your getting involved in my problems."

"They'd of killed you before now, Mister, if they had any guts. That's where we got it over these monkeys. They got no guts."

"They act scared, Chip. Scared men are killers."

"They don't scare me none." Chip picked up the tray. "I'll scout around a little and see what's goin' on. If the Sweaties figure to do anything about that Skaw feller they'll have to move fast; they won't try nothin' close to port."

"Don't worry, Chip. I have reason to be pretty sure they won't do anything to attract a lot of attention in this sector just now."

Chip looked at Retief. "You ain't no tourist, Mister. I know that much. You didn't come out here for fun, did you?"

"That," Retief said, "would be a hard one to answer."

IV

RETIEF awoke at a tap on his door.

"It's me, Mister. Chip."

"Come on in."

The chef entered the room, locking the door.

"You shoulda had that door locked." He stood by the door, listening, then turned to Retief.

"You want to get to Jorgensen's perty bad, don't you, Mister?"

"That's right, Chip."

"Mr. Tony give the captain a real hard time about old Skaw. The Sweaties didn't say nothin'. Didn't even act surprised, just took the remains and pushed off. But Mr. Tony and that other crook they call Marbles, they was fit to be tied. Took the cap'n in his cabin and talked loud at him fer half a hour. Then the cap'n come out and give some orders to the Mate."

Retief sat up and reached for a cigar.

"Mr. Tony and Skaw were pals, eh?"

"He hated Skaw's guts. But with him it was business. Mister, you got a gun?"

"A 2mm needler. Why?"

"The orders cap'n give was to change course fer Alabaster. We're by-passin' Jorgensen's Worlds. We'll feel the course change any minute."

Retief lit the cigar, reached under the mattress and took out a short-barreled pistol. He dropped it in his pocket, looked at Chip.

"Maybe it was a good thought, at that. Which way to the Captain's cabin?"

"THIS is it," Chip said softly. "You want me to keep an eye on who comes down the passage?"

Retief nodded, opened the door and stepped into the cabin. The captain looked up from his desk, then jumped up.

"What do you think you're doing, busting in here?"

"I hear you're planning a course change, Captain."

"You've got damn big ears."

"I think we'd better call in at Jorgensen's."

"You do, huh?" the captain sat down. "I'm in command of this vessel," he said. "I'm changing course for Alabaster."

"I wouldn't find it convenient to go to Alabaster," Retief said. "So just hold your course for Jorgensen's."

"Not bloody likely."

"Your use of the word 'bloody' is interesting, Cap-

tain. Don't try to change course."

The captain reached for the mike on his desk, pressed the key.

"Power Section, this is the captain," he said. Retief reached across the desk, gripped the captain's wrist.

"Tell the mate to hold his present course," he said softly.

"Let go my hand, buster," the captain snarled. Eyes on Retief's, he eased a drawer open with his left hand, reached in. Retief kned the drawer. The captain yelped and dropped the mike.

"You busted it, you—"

"And one to go," Retief said. "Tell him."

"I'm an officer of the Merchant Service!"

"You're a cheapjack who's sold his bridge to a pack of back-alley hoods."

"You can't put it over, hick."

"Tell him."

The captain groaned and picked up the mike. "Captain to Power Section," he said. "Hold your present course until you hear from me." He dropped the mike and looked up at Retief.

"It's eighteen hours yet before we pick up Jorgensen Control. You going to sit here and bend my arm the whole time?"

Retief released the captain's wrist and turned to the door.

"Chip, I'm locking the door. You circulate around, let me

know what's going on. Bring me a pot of coffee every so often. I'm sitting up with a sick friend."

"Right, Mister. Keep an eye on that jasper; he's slippery."

"What are you going to do?" the captain demanded.

Retief settled himself in a chair.

"Instead of strangling you, as you deserve," he said, "I'm going to stay here and help you hold your course for Jorgensen's Worlds."

The captain looked at Retief. He laughed, a short bark.

"Then I'll just stretch out and have a little nap, farmer. If you feel like dozing off sometime during the next eighteen hours, don't mind me."

Retief took out the needler and put it on the desk before him.

"If anything happens that I don't like," he said, "I'll wake you up. With this."

"WHY don't you let me spell you, Mister?" Chip said. "Four hours to go yet. You're gonna hafta be on yer toes to handle the landing."

"I'll be all right, Chip. You get some sleep."

"Nope. Many's the time I stood four, five watches runnin', back when I was yer age. I'll make another round."

Retief stood up, stretched his legs, paced the floor, stared at the repeater instruments on the wall. Things had

gone quietly so far, but the landing would be another matter. The captain's absence from the bridge during the highly complex maneuvering would be difficult to explain...

The desk speaker crackled.

"Captain, Officer of the Watch here. Ain't it about time you was getting up here with the orbit figures?"

Retief nudged the captain. He awoke with a start, sat up.

"Whazzat?" He looked wild-eyed at Retief.

"Watch officer wants orbit figures," Retief said, nodding toward the speaker.

The captain rubbed his eyes, shook his head, picked up the mike. Retief released the safety on the needler with an audible click.

"Watch Officer, I'll...ah...get some figures for you right away. I'm...ah...busy right now."

"What the hell you talking about, busy?" the speaker blared. "You ain't got them figures ready, you'll have a hell of a hot time getting 'em up in the next three minutes. You forgot your approach pattern or something?"

"I guess I overlooked it," the Captain said, looking sideways at Retief. "I've been busy."

"One for your side," Retief said. He reached for the captain.

"I'll make a deal," the captain squalled. "Your life for—"

Retief took aim and slammed a hard right to the captain's jaw. He slumped to the floor.

Retief glanced around the room, yanked wires loose from a motile lamp, trussed the man's hands and feet, stuffed his mouth with paper and taped it.

Chip tapped at the door. Retief opened it and the chef stepped inside, looking at the man on the floor.

"The jasper tried somethin', huh? Figured he would. What we goin' to do now?"

"The captain forgot to set up an approach, Chip. He outfoxed me."

"If we overrun our approach pattern," Chip said, "we can't make orbit at Jorgensen's on automatic. And a manual approach—"

"That's out. But there's another possibility."

Chip blinked. "Only one thing you could mean, Mister. But cuttin' out in a lifeboat in deep space is no picnic."

"They're on the port side. aft, right?"

Chip nodded. "Hot damn," he said. "Who's got the 'tater salad?"

"We'd better tuck the skipper away out of sight."

"In the locker."

The two men carried the limp body to a deep storage chest, dumped it in, closed the lid.

"He won't suffercate. Lid's a lousy fit."

Retief opened the door

went into the corridor, Chip behind him.

"Shouldn't oughta be nobody around now," the chef said. "Everybody's mannin' approach stations."

AT the D deck companionway, Retief stopped suddenly.

"Listen."

Chip cocked his head. "I don't hear nothin'," he whispered.

"Sounds like a sentry posted on the lifeboat deck," Retief said softly.

"Let's take him, Mister."

"I'll go down. Stand by, Chip."

Retief started down the narrow steps, half stair, half ladder. Halfway, he paused to listen. There was a sound of slow footsteps, then silence. Retief palmed the needler, went down the last steps quickly, emerged in the dim light of a low ceilinged room. The stern of a five-man lifeboat bulked before him.

"Freeze, you!" a cold voice snapped.

Retief dropped, rolled behind the shelter of the lifeboat as the whine of a power pistol echoed off metal walls. A lunge, and he was under the boat, on his feet. He jumped, caught the quick-access handle, hauled it down. The outer port cycled open.

Feet scrambled at the bow of the boat. Retief whirled and fired. The guard rounded into sight and fell headlong.

Above, an alarm bell jangled. Retief stepped on a stanchion, hauled himself into the open port. A yell rang, then the clatter of feet on the stair.

"Don't shoot, Mister!" Chip shouted.

"All clear, Chip," Retief called.

"Hang on. I'm comin' with ya!"

Retief reached down, lifted the chef bodily through the port, slammed the lever home. The outer door whooshed, clanged shut.

"Take number two, tie in! I'll blast her off," Chip said. "Been through a hundred 'bandon ship drills..."

Retief watched as the chef flipped levers, pressed a fat red button. The deck trembled under the lifeboat.

"Blew the bay doors," Chip said, smiling happily. "That'll cool them jaspers down." He punched a green button.

"Look out, Jorgensen's!" With an ear-splitting blast, the stern rockets fired, a sustained agony of pressure...

Abruptly, there was silence. Weightlessness. Contracting metal pinged loudly. Chip's breathing rasped in the stillness.

"Pulled nine G's there for ten seconds," he gasped. "I gave her full emergency kick-off."

"Any armament aboard our late host?"

"A popgun. Time they get their wind, we'll be clear. Now all we got to do is set tight

till we pick up a R and D from Svea Tower. Maybe four, five hours."

"Chip, you're a wonder," Retief said. "This looks like a good time to catch that nap."

"Me too," Chip said. "Mighty peaceful here, ain't it?"

There was a moment's silence.

"Durn!" Chip said softly.

Retief opened one eye. "Sorry you came, Chip?"

"Left my best carvin' knife jammed up 'tween Marbles' ribs," the chef said. "Comes o' doin' things in a hurry."

V

THE blonde girl brushed her hair from her eyes and smiled at Retief.

"I'm the only one on duty," she said. "I'm Anne-Marie."

"It's important that I talk to someone in your government, Miss," Retief said.

The girl looked at Retief. "The men you want to see are Tove and Bo Bergman. They will be at the lodge by night-fall."

"Then it looks like we go to the lodge," Retief said. "Lead on, Anne-Marie."

"What about the boat?" Chip asked.

"I'll send someone to see to it tomorrow," the girl said.

"You're some gal," Chip said admiringly. "Dern near six feet, ain't ye? And built, too, what I mean."

They stepped out of the door into a whipping wind.

"Let's go across to the equipment shed and get parkas for you," Anne-Marie said. "It will be cold on the slopes."

"Yeah," Chip said, shivering. "I've heard you folks don't believe in ridin' ever time you want to go a few miles uphill in a blizzard."

"It will make us hungry," Anne-Marie said. "Then Chip will cook a wonderful meal for us all."

Chip blinked. "Been cookin' too long," he muttered. "Didn't know it showed on me that way."

Behind the sheds across the wind-scoured ramp abrupt peaks rose, snow-blanketed. A faint trail led across white slopes, disappearing into low clouds.

"The lodge is above the cloud layer," Anne-Marie said. "Up there the sky is always clear."

It was three hours later, and the sun was burning the peaks red, when Anne-Marie stopped, pulled off her woolen cap and waved at the vista below.

"There you see it," she said. "Our valley."

"It's a mighty perty sight," Chip gasped. "Anything this tough to get a look at ought to be."

Anne-Marie pointed. "There," she said. "The little red house by itself. Do you see it, Retief? It is my father's home-acre."

Retief looked across the

valley. Gaily painted houses nestled together, a puddle of color in the bowl of the valley.

"I think you've led a good life there," he said.

Anne-Marie smiled brilliantly. "And this day, too, is good."

Retief smiled back. "Yes," he said. "This day is good."

"It'll be a darn sight better when I got my feet up to that big fire you was talking about, Annie," Chip said.

They climbed on, crossed a shoulder of broken rock, reached the final slope. Above, the lodge sprawled, a long low structure of heavy logs, outlined against the deep-blue twilight sky. Smoke billowed from stone chimneys at either end, and yellow light gleamed from the narrow windows, reflected on the snow. Men and women stood in groups of three or four, skis over their shoulders. Their voices and laughter rang in the icy air.

Anne-Marie whistled shrilly. Someone waved.

"Come," she said. "Meet all my friends."

A man separated himself from the group, walked down the slope to meet them.

"Anne-Marie," he called. "Welcome. It was a long day without you." He came up to them, hugged Anne-Marie, smiled at Retief.

"Welcome," he said. "Come inside and be warm."

They crossed the trampled snow to the lodge and pushed through a heavy door into a

vast low-beamed hall, crowded with people, talking, singing, some sitting at long plank tables, others ringed around an eight-foot fireplace at the far side of the room. Anne-Marie led the way to a bench near the fire. She made introductions and found a stool to prop Chip's feet near the blaze.

Chip looked around.

"I never seen so many perty gals before," he said delightedly.

"Poor Chip," one girl said. "His feet are cold." She knelt to pull off his boots. "Let me rub them," she said.

A brunette with blue eyes raked a chestnut from the fire, cracked it and offered it to Retief. A tall man with arms like oak roots passed heavy beer tankards to the two guests.

"Tell us about the places you've seen," someone called. Chip emerged from a long pull at the mug, heaving a sigh.

"Well," he said. "I tell you I been in some places..."

Music started up, rising above the clamor.

"Come, Retief," Anne-Marie said. "Dance with me."

Retief looked at her. "My thought exactly," he said.

CHIP put down his mug and sighed. "Derned if I ever felt right at home so quick before," he said. "Just seems like these folks know all about me." He scratched behind his right ear. "Annie

must o' called 'em up and told 'em our names an' all." He lowered his voice.

"They's some kind o' trouble in the air, though. Some o' the remarks they passed sounds like they're lookin' to have some trouble with the Sweaties. Don't seem to worry 'em none, though."

"Chip," Retief said, "how much do these people know about the Soetti?"

"Dunno," Chip said. "We useta touch down here, regler. But I always jist set in my galley and worked on ship models or somethin'. I hear the Sweaties been nosin' around here some, though."

Two girls came up to Chip. "Hey, I gotta go now, Mister," he said. "These gals got a idea I oughta take a hand in the kitchen."

"Smart girls," Retief said. He turned as Anne-Marie came up.

"Bo Bergman and Tove are not back yet," she said. "They stayed to ski after moonrise."

"That moon is something," Retief said. "Almost like daylight."

"They will come soon, now. Shall we go out to see the moonlight on the snow?"

Outside, long black shadows fell like ink on silver. The top of the cloud layer below glared white under the immense moon.

"Our sister world, Gota," Anne-Marie said. "Nearly as big as Svea. I would like to visit it someday, although

they say it's all stone and ice."

"Anne-Marie," Retief said, "how many people live on Jorgensen's Worlds?"

"About fifteen million, most of us here on Svea. There are mining camps and ice-fisheries on Gota. No one lives on Vasa and Skone, but there are always a few hunters there."

"Have you ever fought a war?"

Anne-Marie turned to look at Retief.

"You are afraid for us, Retief," she said. "The Soetti will attack our worlds, and we will fight them. We have fought before. These planets were not friendly ones."

"I thought the Soetti attack would be a surprise to you," Retief said. "Have you made any preparation for it?"

"We have ten thousand merchant ships. When the enemy comes, we will meet them."

Retief frowned. "Are there any guns on this planet? Any missiles?"

Anne-Marie shook her head. "Bo Bergman and Tove have a plan of deployment—"

"Deployment, hell! Against a modern assault force you need modern armament."

"Look!" Anne-Marie touched Retief's arm. "They're coming now."

Two tall grizzled men came up the slope, skis over their shoulders. Anne-Marie went forward to meet them, Retief at her side.

The two came up, embraced the girl, shook hands with Re-

tief, put down their skis. "Welcome to Svea," Tove said. "Let's find a warm corner where we can talk."

RETIEF shook his head, smiling, as a tall girl with coppery hair offered a vast slab of venison.

"I've caught up," he said, "for every hungry day I ever lived."

Bo Bergman poured Retief's beer mug full.

"Our captains are the best in space," he said. "Our population is concentrated in half a hundred small cities all across the planet. We know where the Soetti must strike us. We will ram their major vessels with unmanned ships. On the ground, we will hunt them down with small-arms."

"An assembly line turning out penetration missiles would have been more to the point."

"Yes," Bo Bergman said. "If we had known."

"How long have you known the Soetti were planning to hit you?"

Tove raised his eyebrows.

"Since this afternoon," he said.

"How did you find out about it? That information is supposed in some quarters to be a well-guarded secret."

"Secret?" Tove said.

Chip pulled at Retief's arm.

"Mister," he said in Retief's ear. "Come here a minute."

Retief looked at Anne-Marie, across at Tove and Bo

Bergman. He rubbed the side of his face with his hand.

"Excuse me," he said. He followed Chip to one side of the room.

"Listen!" Chip said. "Maybe I'm goin' bats, but I'll swear there's somethin' funny here. I'm back there mixin' a sauce knowed only to me and the devil and I be dog if them gals don't pass me ever dang spice I need, without me sayin' a word. Come to put my soufflé in the oven—she's already set, right on the button at 350. An' just now I'm settin' lookin' at one of 'em bendin' over a tub o' apples—snazzy little brunette name of Leila—derved if she don't turn around and say—" Chip gulped. "Never mind. Point is..." His voice nearly faltered. "It's almost like these folks was readin' my mind!"

Retief patted Chip on the shoulder.

"Don't worry about your sanity, Old Timer," he said. "That's exactly what they're doing."

VI

"WE'VE never tried to make a secret of it," Tove said. "But we haven't advertised it, either."

"It really isn't much," Bo Bergman said. "Not a mutant ability, our scholars say. Rather, it's a skill we've stumbled on, a closer empathy. We are few, and far from the old home world. We've had to

learn to break down the walls we had built around our minds."

"Can you read the Soetti?" Retief asked.

Tove shook his head. "They're very different from us. It's painful to touch their minds. We can only sense the sub-vocalized thoughts of a human mind."

"We've seen very few of the Soetti," Bo Bergman said. "Their ships have landed and taken on stores. They say little to us, but we've felt their contempt. They envy us our worlds. They come from a cold land."

"Anne-Marie says you have a plan of defense," Retief said. "A sort of suicide squadron idea, followed by guerrilla warfare."

"It's the best we can devise, Retief. If there aren't too many of them, it might work."

Retief shook his head. "It might delay matters—but not much."

"Perhaps. But our remote control equipment is excellent. And we have plenty of ships, albeit unarmed. And our people know how to live on the slopes—and how to shoot."

"There are too many of them, Tove," Retief said. "They breed like flies and, according to some sources, they mature in a matter of months. They've been feeling their way into the sector for years now. Set up outposts on a thousand or so minor planets

—cold ones, the kind they like. They want your worlds because they need living space."

"At least, your warning makes it possible for us to muster some show of force, Retief," Bo Bergman said. "That is better than death by ambush."

"Retief must not be trapped here," Anne-Marie said. "His small boat is useless now. He must have a ship."

"Of course," Tove said. "And—"

"My mission here—" Retief said.

"Retief," a voice called. "A message for you. The operator has phoned up a gram."

Retief unfolded the slip of paper. It was short, in verbal code, and signed by Magnan.

"You are recalled herewith," he read. "Assignment canceled. Agreement concluded with Soetti relinquishing all claims so-called Jorgensen system. Utmost importance that under no repeat no circumstances classified intelligence regarding Soetti be divulged to locals. Advise you depart instanter. Soetti occupation imminent."

Retief looked thoughtfully at the scrap of paper, then crumpled it and dropped it on the floor. He turned to Bo Bergman, took a tiny reel of tape from his pocket.

"This contains information," he said. "The Soetti attack plan, a defensive plan instructions for the conver-

sion of a standard anti-acceleration unit into a potent weapon. If you have a screen handy, we'd better get started. We have about seventy-two hours."

IN the Briefing Room at Svea Tower, Tove snapped off the projector.

"Our plan would have been worthless against that," he said. "We assumed they'd make their strike from a standard in-line formation. This scheme of hitting all our settlements simultaneously, in a random order from all points—we'd have been helpless."

"It's perfect for this defensive plan," Bo Bergman said. "Assuming this antiac trick works."

"It works," Retief said. "I hope you've got plenty of heavy power lead available."

"We export copper," Tove said.

"We'll assign about two hundred vessels to each settlement. Linked up, they should throw up quite a field."

"It ought to be effective up to about fifteen miles, I'd estimate," Tove said. "If it works as it's supposed to."

A red light flashed on the communications panel. Tove went to it, flipped a key.

"Tower, Tove here," he said.

"I've got a ship on the scope, Tove," a voice said. "There's nothing scheduled. ACI 228 by-passed at 1600..."

"Just one?"

"A lone ship, coming in on

a bearing of 291/456/653. On manual, I'd say."

"How does this track key in with the idea of ACI 228 making a manual correction for a missed automatic approach?" Retief asked.

Tove talked to the tower, got a reply.

"That's it," he said.

"How long before he touches down?"

Tove glanced at a lighted chart. "Perhaps eight minutes.

"Any guns here?"

Tove shook his head.

"If that's old 228, she ain't got but the one 50mm rifle," Chip said. "She can't figure on jumpin' the whole planet."

"Hard to say what she figures on," Retief said. "Mr. Tony will be in a mood for drastic measures."

"I wonder what kind o' deal the skunks got with the Sweaties." Chip said. "Prob'ly he gits to scavenge, after the Sweaties kill off the Jorgensens."

"He's upset about our leaving him without saying goodbye, Chip," Retief said. "And you left the door hanging open, too."

Chip cackled. "Old Mr. Tony don't look so good to the Sweaties now, hey, Mister?"

Retief turned to Bo Bergman.

"Chip's right," he said. "A Soetti died on the ship, and a tourist got through the cordon. Tony's out to redeem himself."

"He's on final now," the tower operator said. "Still no contact."

"We'll know soon enough what he has in mind," Tove said.

"Let's take a look."

Outside, the four men watched the point of fire grow, evolve into a ship ponderously settling to rest. The drive faded and cut; silence fell.

INSIDE the Briefing Room, the speaker called out. Bo Bergman went inside, talked to the tower, motioned to the others.

"—over to you," the speaker was saying. There was a crackling moment of silence; then another voice.

"—illegal entry. Send the two of them out. I'll see to it they're dealt with."

Tove fipped a key. "Switch me direct to the ship," he said.

"Right."

"You on ACI 228," Tove said. "Who are you?"

"What's that to you?"

"You weren't cleared to berth here. Do you have an emergency aboard?"

"Never mind that, you," the speaker rumbled. "I tracked the bird in. I got the lifeboat on the screen now. They haven't gone far in nine hours. Let's have 'em."

"You're wasting your time," Tove said.

There was a momentary silence.

"You think so, hah?" the

speaker blared. "I'll put it to you straight. I see two guys on their way out in one minute, or I open up."

"He's bluffin'", Chip said. "The popgun won't bear on us."

"Take a look out the window," Retief said.

In the white glare of the moonlight, a loading cover swung open at the stern of the ship, dropped down and formed a sloping ramp. A squat and massive shape appeared in the opening, trundled down onto the snow-swept tarmac.

Chip whistled. "I told you the Captain was slippery," he muttered. "Where the devil'd he git that at?"

"What is it?" Tove asked.

"A tank," Retief said. "A museum piece, by the look of it."

"I'll say," Chip said. That's a Bolo *Resartus*, Model M. Built mebbe two hunderd years ago in Concordiat times. Packs a wallop, too, I'll tell ye."

The tank wheeled, brought a gun muzzle to bear in the base of the tower.

"Send 'em out," the speaker growled. "Or I blast 'em out."

"One round in here, and I've had a wasted trip," Retief said. "I'd better go out."

"Wait a minute, Mister," Chip said. "I got the glimmerin's of a idear."

"I'll stall them," Tove said. He keyed the mike.

"ACI 228, what's your au-

thority for this demand?"

"I know that machine," Chip said. "My hobby, old-time fightin' machines. Built a model of a *Resartus* once, inch to the foot. A beauty. Now, lessee..."

VII

THE icy wind blew snow crystals stingingly against Retief's face.

"Keep your hands in your pockets, Chip," he said. "Numb hands won't hack the program."

"Yeah." Chip looked across at the tank. "Useta think that was a perty thing, that *Resartus*," he said. "Looks mean, now."

"You're getting the target's-eye view," Retief said. "Sorry you had to get mixed up in this, Old Timer."

"Mixed myself in. Durn good thing, too." Chip sighed. "I like these folks," he said. "Them boys didn't like lettin' us come out here, but I'll give 'em credit. They seen it had to be this way, and they didn't set to moanin' about it."

"They're tough people, Chip."

"Funny how it sneaks up on you, ain't it, Mister? Few minutes ago we was eatin' high on the hog. Now we're right close to bein' dead men."

"They want us alive, Chip."

"It'll be a hairy deal, Mister," Chip said. "But t'hell with it. If it works, it works."

"That's the spirit."

"I hope I got them fields o' fire right—"

"Don't worry. I'll bet a barrel of beer we make it."

"We'll find out in about ten seconds," Chip said.

As they reached the tank, the two men broke stride and jumped. Retief leaped for the gun barrel, swung up astride it, ripped off the fur-lined leather cap he wore and, leaning forward, jammed it into the bore of the cannon. The chef sprang for a perch above the fore scanner antenna. With an angry *whuff!* anti-personnel charges slammed from apertures low on the sides of the vehicle. Retief swung around, pulled himself up on the hull.

"Okay, Mister," Chip called. "I'm going under." He slipped down the front of the tank, disappeared between the treads. Retief clambered up, took a position behind the turret, lay flat as it whirled angrily, sonar eyes searching for its tormentors. The vehicle shuddered, backed, stopped, moved forward, pivoted.

Chip reappeared at the front of the tank.

"It's stuck," he called. He stopped to breathe hard, clung as the machine lurched forward, spun to the right, stopped, rocking slightly.

"Take over here," Retief said. He crawled forward, watched as the chef pulled himself up, slipped down past him, feeling for the footholds

between the treads. He reached the ground, dropped on his back, hitched himself under the dark belly of the tank. He groped, found the handholds, probed with a foot for the tread-jack lever.

The tank rumbled, backed quickly, turned left and right in a dizzying sine curve. Retief clung grimly, inches from the clashing treads.

The machine ground to a halt. Retief found the lever, braced his back, pushed. The lever seemed to give minutely. He set himself again, put both feet against the frozen bar and heaved.

With a dry rasp, it slid back. Immediately two heavy rods extended themselves, moved down to touch the pavement, grated. The left track creaked as the weight went off it. Suddenly the tank's drive raced, and Retief grabbed for a hold as the right tread clashed, heaved the fifty-ton machine forward. The jacks screeched as they scored the tarmac, then bit in. The tank pivoted, chips of pavement flying. The jacks extended, lifted the clattering left track clear of the surface as the tank spun like a hamstrung buffalo.

The tank stopped, sat silent, canted now on the extended jacks. Retief emerged from under the machine, jumped, pulled himself above the anti-personnel apertures as another charge rocked the tank. He clambered to the turret,

crouched beside Chip. They waited, watching the entry hatch.

Five minutes passed.

"I'll bet Old Tony's givin' the chauffeur hell," Chip said.

The hatch cycled open. A head came cautiously into view in time to see the needler in Retief's hand.

"Come on out," Retief said.

The head dropped. Chip snaked forward to ram a short section of steel rod under the hatch near the hinge. The hatch began to cycle shut, groaned, stopped. There was a sound of metal failing, and the hatch popped open.

Retief half rose, aimed the needler. The walls of the tank rang as the metal splinters ricocheted inside.

"That's one keg o' beer I owe you, Mister," Chip said. "Now let's git outa here before the ship lifts and fries us."

"THE biggest problem the Jorgensen's people will have is decontaminating the wreckage," Retief said.

Magnan leaned forward. "Amazing," he said. "They just keep coming, did they? Had they no inter-ship communication?"

"They had their orders," Retief said. "And their attack plan. They followed it."

"What a spectacle," Magnan said. "Over a thousand ships, plunging out of control one by one as they entered the stress-field."

"Not much of a spectacle," Retief said. "You couldn't see them. Too far away. They all crashed back in the mountains."

"Oh." Magnan's face fell. "But it's as well they did. The bacterial bombs—"

"Too cold for bacteria. They won't spread."

"Nor will the Soetti," Magnan said smugly, "thanks to the promptness with which I acted in dispatching you with the requisite data." He looked narrowly at Retief. "By the way, you're sure no...ah... message reached you after your arrival?"

"I got something," Retief said, looking Magnan in the eye. "It must have been a garbled transmission. It didn't make sense."

Magnan coughed, shuffled papers. "This information you've reported," he said hurriedly. "This rather fantastic story that the Soetti originated in the Cloud, that they're seeking a foothold in the main Galaxy because they've literally eaten themselves out of subsistence—how did you get it? The one or two Soetti we attempted to question, ah..." Magnan coughed again. "There was an accident," he finished. "We got nothing from them."

"The Jorgensens have a rather special method of interrogating prisoners," Retief said. "They took one from a wreck, still alive but unconscious. They managed to get

the story from him. He died of it."

"It's immaterial, actually," Magnan said. "Since the Soetti violated their treaty with us the day after it was signed. Had no intention of fair play. Far from evacuating the agreed areas, they had actually occupied half a dozen additional minor bodies in the Whate system."

Retief clucked sympathetically.

"You don't know who to trust, these days," he said.

Magnan looked at him coldly.

"Spare me your sarcasm, Mr. Retief," he said. He picked up a folder from his desk, opened it. "By the way, I have another little task for you, Retief. We haven't had a comprehensive wild-life census report from Brimstone lately—"

"Sorry," Retief said. "I'll be tied up. I'm taking a month off. Maybe more."

"What's that?" Magnan's head came up. "You seem to forget—"

"I'm trying, Mr. Councilor," Retief said. "Good-bye now." He reached out and flipped the key. Magnan's face faded from the screen. Retief stood up.

"Chip," he said, "we'll crack that keg when I get back." He turned to Anne-Marie.

"How long," he said, "do you think it will take you to teach me to ski by moonlight?"

FND

**Never look in a mirror —
some day it may look back!**



MIRROR IMAGE

By DANIEL F. GALOUYE

THE thin trembling man leaned forward tensely in his chair, his face drawn. His eyes, set deep in their sockets, were dull and expressionless. Yet they were oddly alive with an irrepressible anxiety.

"I've got to get back." His voice was a grim whisper and his hands went white at the knuckles where they clung to the armrests as he tried to rise.

Two men, dressed in the short-sleeved, white uniform of the institution, stepped forward ominously.

Shuddering, the man sank back hopelessly into the chair.

Across the desk Dr. James Stanton studied him intently—for the moment disregarding the two older men who

sat on the doctor's right and left. "Perhaps, Professor Yardley," Stanton said pleasantly, "you will be allowed to return home—after we have finished our business here."

Yardley's lips tightened. "You have no intention of letting me go back to my laboratory." His pleading voice became acid. "But you can't keep me here!"

Leaning back in a chair that creaked under his broad frame, Dr. Justin Leonard smiled patiently and raised a bushy eyebrow. "There may be disastrous consequences if we don't release you, Professor?"

Yardley sighed forlornly but his tone was strong, his words resonant with sincerity.

ty. "The consequences, sir, are unimaginable!"

"To yourself?" Dr. Dennis Morgan, stout and bespectacled, leaned forward. "To us? Or to the world in general, Professor?"

Yardley ran a hand through his sparse white hair and dropped his gaze to the floor. "You'll never let me go," he muttered. His eyes darted accusingly from one observer to the other. "You're a commission, aren't you? You're to decide whether I'm mad! You're sitting in judgment on me!"

His gaze leaped from Stanton to the middle-aged woman who sat against the wall, her hands folded prudently in her lap. "You're responsible, Lydia!" he accused. "You arranged this!"

"Now, Uncle Baldwin," the woman answered indulgently, "we're only doing what we think best."

He turned to Stanton. "Don't you understand her motivation, doctor? I'm a wealthy man. I like to pursue scientific truths, no matter how unorthodox they may seem. I spend considerable money for equipment for my basement laboratory—money which might otherwise eventually pass on to my niece and nephew. But they don't want to wait! They—"

"Please, Professor." Stanton was reproving. "You mustn't excite yourself." He studied Yardley thoughtfully. Then, "All right, Professor.

I'll be candid. We are a sanity commission. We will decide your degree of mental fitness. Now, hadn't you better cooperate?"

Yardley relaxed. The two guards relaxed with him. "All right, then," he said submissively, "if there's no other way..."

"Fine!" Stanton smiled warmly. "Now, I understand—"

"Do you have a mirror?" the professor cut in.

"A mirror?"

"Yes, any reflecting surface will do."

Stanton looked wary.

Yardley explained, "A simple demonstration may save a good deal of time."

Stanton cleared his throat. "I'm afraid we shall have to stick to procedure. Now, I understand—rather, your niece tells me—that you have dedicated a good many years to the investigation of a certain theory."

"Thirty years."

"Will you tell us about it, Professor." It was a directive, not a question.

"As I have already said, it's unorthodox and you'll probably—"

"The theory, Professor," Stanton insisted.

"Very well." Yardley yielded, his words hollow with resignation. "Our world is co-existent with another. For every particle on this side—no matter how minute or how large—there is an identical

particle on the other. For every individual, every animal, every force here, there is a counterpart in the other world."

STANTON'S frown became a half-smile. Lydia Frame's did not. They traded glances. "The mirrors, uncle," Lydia suggested eagerly, "tell them about the mirrors like you tell everybody else."

Yardley stared reproachfully at her.

"There is more to the theory?" Leonard asked.

"More?" Yardley repeated. "Much more. As my niece suggests, I shall tell you about the mirrors. Reflecting surfaces—" his eyes flashed eagerly—"are not reflecting surfaces at all! There is no such thing as looking into a mirror and seeing an image of yourself! Mirrors are *windows*—windows that allow us to look into this other world which exists in us, around us, with us!" He paused, breathing erratically.

Stanton exchanged cautious glances with the other psychiatrists. The guards became rigidly attentive.

Yardley went on with more vocal restraint. "There is a force that exists between the reciprocal worlds or planes of existence . . . a force which guarantees that every causal effect in this world will be duplicated in exactly the same space and time, in the other—"

"In other words," Stanton interrupted, suppressing an amused smile, "the force—"

"Let me finish!" Yardley cut in. "The reciprocal nature of the force determines that if you write a letter in this world your counterpart will write a letter in the other. If you walk in front of a mirror in this plane, the other you will do the same thing in the other plane. If you leave this building and proceed to another to stare into a new mirror your duplicate will do the same thing simultaneously."

One of the guards snickered, then shrank visibly and resumed his stern expression under Stanton's reprimanding glare.

"Does this have anything to do," Dr. Morgan asked, "with the — er — contraption you built in your basement?"

"Make him tell you about it, doctor," Lydia begged.

The door opened behind Stanton as a young blonde girl came in with a bulging file folder and deposited it on the desk.

Yardley staring through the open door, sprang to his feet. The guards seized his arms.

Stanton turned to follow the professor's incredulous stare into the other room. Yardley's eyes were locked on a full-length mirror that reflected his own erratic motions as he attempted to break free from his captors.

But they held on grimly and he went limp. "Good

Lord!" he exclaimed hopelessly. "They've got Yardley over there too!"

Unperturbed by the episode the blonde casually left the office, closing the door after her. The guards lowered the professor into his chair.

"You've got to take me back to the laboratory!" Yardley begged Stanton. "Don't you see that with both of us captured there's no one left to—"

"The contraption, Professor," Stanton reminded him.

Yardley sighed and his shoulders sagged. "Yes, I built what my niece calls a 'contraption.'"

"Two of them," Lydia corrected. "Two contraptions and the mirror, uncle. Tell them about it."

"Mirror?" Stanton questioned.

"Yes," Lydia explained. "One entire wall of the basement is a mirror. That piece of glass must have cost thousands. It's a single pane. Had to tear out the side of the house to install it."

Stanton returned his attention to the professor. "What are these contraptions?"

DISTURBED, Yardley ran bony fingers through his hair. "Twenty years, doctor," he began emotionally. "It took twenty years to detect the presence of the force, another five years to study it and another five to learn how to modify it."

"And now," Morgan sug-

gested, "you have mastered the force which insures that articles and actions will be duplicated between the two worlds?" He made a vain attempt to hide his smile.

Yardley shook his head. "Control it? No. Affect it? Yes. I learned that I could disrupt the force. By erecting a counter-field, I found I could effect actions in this world that were entirely independent of actions in the other. This counter-force made it possible for me to light a cigarette here and discover that in the other plane—the one seen beyond the mirror—I hadn't quite finished the previous cigarette . . . had evidently decided to take one more puff."

The guard nearer Yardley laughed again. This time Stanton made no attempt to constrain him.

"You mean," Stanton asked, "that your image in the mirror did not reflect *your* actions?"

"Crudely put that's what happened," Yardley replied. "But it required many experiments before I detected any such result. You see, even though at one particular instant the force might be disrupted, freeing me and the other Baldwin Yardley from reciprocating motions, it required several hours before the divergency of our movements across the mirror became perceptible.

"We speculated on the

cause. And we decided we were such exact duplicates, with identical reflexes and responses, that even though we suddenly became mutually independent, several hours would probably pass before one of us acted in an uncharacteristic manner—like impulsively extinguishing a cigarette prematurely.”

Leonard rose. “Really, Dr. Stanton, is it necessary to continue? I have another appointment—” he withdrew his fountain pen—“and I believe I’m quite ready to sign the form.”

Yardley sprang up, then sat down again as the guards moved toward him. “You’ve got to believe me!” he shouted. “Good God, Stanton! They’ve got to believe one of us Yardleys!”

Stanton motioned Leonard back into his chair. “If we don’t believe you, Professor ... then what?”

“Sir,” Yardley suggested gravely, “would you enjoy meeting yourself on the street? Finding yourself involved in an argument with two identical women, each claiming to be your wife? Can’t you appreciate what would happen? Millions would suffer unbearable mental harassment in the grim realization that a mirror does more than reflect images! The world would develop a phobia toward mirrors. Then, when the two worlds found out that entry was mutually possible,

each would become the limitless victim of the other’s vices.

“Wouldn’t it be simple to murder an enemy, flee to the other world and let authorities wrangle hopelessly over the identity of the actual murderer? And might not the Paris in this world assume that it was the rightful capital not only of this world’s France but also of the other world’s? Wars would start twice as easily, be twice as horrible and—”

“Am I to understand,” Dr. Morgan asked, smiling, “that you’ve found means of—er—walking through mirrors. Pardon—windows?”

YARDLEY went rigid with resentment. “You’re humoring me—all of you! Well, let me recount a recent experiment—number thirty-eight of the current series.

“I activated the dissonance crystal and waited for the charges to build up. As I stood patiently beside the amplification lenses, I stared at the Yardley in the mirror.

“He stared back at me. Then, suddenly he raised his hand and scratched his cheek! Mind you, he did this *before* the charge in the crystal had built up sufficiently to throw the inter-world force out of rhythm!

“That could mean only one thing—diverse movement was actually *independent* of subsequent exposures to the crys-

tal after the initial exposure! In simple terms—a single exposure is all that is needed to interrupt the force permanently. After that exposure it is possible for Yardley One and Yardley Two to continue acting independently!

“Furthermore any material object with which Yardley One or Yardley Two come into contact is also permanently removed from the field of reciprocating forces. I found that out in experiment thirty-nine, after turning off the ceiling light in the basement. Later a man from the equipment supply company made a delivery. He turned on the overhead light. *But the reflection of the bulb in the mirror did not light up!* What is more serious is the fact that as a result of the man’s contact with the affected light switch he will eventually be affected too, as will every object he comes in contact with! It’s a chain reaction.”

Leonard and Morgan looked at each other in evident annoyance. But Stanton continued to stare reservedly at the professor.

Yardley went on. “But back to experiment number thirty-eight, which I’m sure you gentlemen will find most fascinating. I had just—and I might add needlessly—activated the crystal and had observed that the other Yardley was already displaying independent movement. Confused, I walked over to the mirror.

He approached his own mirror too.

“Did you notice it?” I asked.

“The free motion?” he answered. “Yes, I noticed. Yardley, I’m afraid.”

“That the field might not have to be rebuilt each time we want to act independently? That, once activated, our divergent natures might continue independent of further field stimulation?”

“Then you’ve been thinking about it too,” he said with something like consternation.

“I’m afraid so,” I answered. “And I’m frightened.”

“Reciprocating insects buzzed around each of our heads, landed on our cheeks. We both slapped. I’m afraid the other Yardley was faster—his reflexes were a bit more accurate. He killed his insect. I missed mine.

“The surviving mosquito or whatever it was darted toward the mirror. *It flew through the mirror!*”

The professor was momentarily silent, staring at each of the psychiatrists in turn. “We hadn’t even considered the possibility that beside being windows between the worlds, mirrors might also be doors,” he continued. “I’m afraid that we were both stunned by the realization.

“But the other Yardley recovered first. He seized an ornate stiletto on his desk and hurled it at the mirror. *It came through!* Landed at my

feet. Then *he* stepped through—into *our* world!”

Stanton absently thumbed through a stack of papers on his desk, his chin resting on the back of his other hand.

“Naturally,” Yardley went on, “we were elated at the discovery. We could see only the beneficial results. Two worlds with the possibility of an interchange of knowledge that each would acquire individually as the divergent development continued after we built a door powerful enough to encompass the entire world.

“But I’m afraid the beautiful icing successfully concealed the awful cake. On further thought, we arrived independently at the decision that contact would never be feasible—that the best course was for us to destroy the crystals and lenses and allow everything to return to normal.

“Sadly, we burned our notes and disconnected lenses and crystals. We left only the hulls of consoles which had housed priceless equipment.”

Yardley compressed his lips. “But that did not return conditions to normal, gentlemen. Weeks passed and still Yardley and I were independent of each other—were showing no indications of being drawn back into the bi-universal design of reciprocity! And further experimentation proved the more horrible truth:

“Objects with which we came in contact were immedi-

ately being removed from the effects of the natural force! Lydia bought me a new desk lamp. The other Lydia bought the other Yardley a new desk lamp. The boy from Colfax’s Department Store who delivered the lamp in our world walked out of the door a full ten seconds before his image left the basement wall mirror! When he returned the next day with a replacement for the dented base his image did not return at all!”

“HE didn’t notice it?” Stanton asked, humoringly.

“I was behind the mirror housing at the time,” Yardley explained. “He couldn’t see my reflection. My overhead light was on, but the other Yardley’s wasn’t. I guess the boy thought the reflection was really an extension of the room.

“The other Yardley and I discussed the matter immediately with grave concern. And we were fortunate. By pooling our mental resources, we were able to design the counter-field—or reverse-image—reflectors.

“By building a powerful counter-activator we felt we would meet with success by flooding the entire area with sufficiently strong vibrations to rock ourselves and the objects we had come in contact with back into the reciprocity design. We would then destroy all the equipment and

discontinue the experiments."

Stanton asked patiently, "And this other activator—did it work?"

"You fool!" Yardley rose shaking. "Don't you realize that's the reason I must get back to the laboratory? Yardley and I had barely completed our work when your strong-arm men came bursting in."

There was silence in the room.

"Will you let me go back home?" Yardley begged. "Just for a day! That's all I ask! Just long enough time to activate the counter-reflectors. Lord, man—you've got to! Just think—each object I came in contact with will come in contact with other objects and those will influence still others in an endless chain reaction. It may take a few days—but soon there'll be pandemonium! And it will spread. It may take years—even centuries—but eventually the whole world will be freed from the force that insures reciprocity!"

"I'm afraid, dear uncle," Lydia said mildly, "that even if they did allow you to return home, you'd find things quite different in the basement."

"No!" he shouted hoarsely.

"Yesterday, just after you were taken away, the carpenters and moving men came. They removed the mirror first, then your other contraptions. Really, uncle, the base-

ment will make an excellent rumpus room—after they get it all cleared out."

The professor shook uncontrollably. "You've got to let me get more equipment!" he begged Stanton. "The counter-reflector must be rebuilt!"

The guards stood close to him, on the alert. Stanton merely stared pityingly. The blonde entered again and walked toward the desk with another folder.

"If I can prove it," Yardley demanded eagerly, "will you let me go back?"

Before Stanton could reply the professor reached into his inner coat pocket and withdrew a stiletto. The guards dived for his arm. The blonde and Lydia screamed in shrill duet.

But Yardley had already thrust his hand back over his shoulder. He hurled the dagger forward. Stanton ducked. The blade flew well over his head and into the reception room.

"Take him, boys," Stanton directed.

The sound of shattering glass came from the outer office.

"Damned good thing you ducked," said Leonard to Stanton as one of the guards locked Yardley's arms behind him and the other plunged a hypodermic needle into the wrinkled skin of his neck.

"You don't understand!" Yardley gasped, falling back into the chair. "I was only

showing that the stiletto would go *through* the mirror. It was the one that the other—Yardley—threw to me.”

His head lolled forward and he braced himself in the chair with difficulty.

“Fools!” Yardley rasped weakly, casting dazed eyes in their general direction. “Don’t understand ... periods of fluctuation ... happens once in a while ... when force slips back toward resonance ... happened often at first ... rare now ... soon permanent dissonance ...”

His chin fell on his chest and one of the attendants caught him to prevent his falling from the chair.

The guard said, “This bird had an answer for everything.”

Lydia rose and pressed a handkerchief to the inner corners of her eyes, although it was obvious to everyone that there was no moisture there. “Will he be all right, doctor?” she asked solicitously.

“As well as can be expected. We will send him to surgery immediately. There will be a simple leucotomy—an incision into the prefrontal lobe of the brain. You and your husband have already signed the necessary papers.”

“I know, but how—how will it affect him?”

“Oh, he’ll be quite all right—physically. There will be immediate relief of the psychasthenia. And in a few days he will be able to return home.

However, you will find him rather simple mentally. His personality will be gone, but he will not be a menace. I’m afraid he’ll require the constant attention of a nurse, though.”

“I understand, Doctor Stanton.” Lydia wiped her dry eyes again and left.

THE guards placed the professor on a table that was wheeled into the room and pushed him out a side entrance.

Stanton returned to the work at his desk.

Ten minutes later there was another buzz. “You’re wanted in the clinic, doctor. There’s a delivery boy from one of the department stores who is quite uncontrollable.”

“Tell them I’ll be there shortly,” he instructed absently, somewhat annoyed at the interruption.

Shortly after he walked into the outer office. The stiletto lay on the floor in front of the cracked and broken mirror. An irregularly shaped area of glass reflected only part of his image, the broken edge slicing across his hip and severing one of his legs.

He smiled wearily. The image smiled back.

“That was one hell of a case!” Stanton muttered, putting on his hat.

The reflection paused to wipe the sweat band in his hat and nodded agreeably. “Damned if it wasn’t.” **END**

Spawning Ground

They weren't human. They were something more — and something less — they were, in short, humanity's hopes for survival!

By **LESTER DEL REY**

THE Starship *Pandora* creaked and groaned as her landing pads settled unevenly in the mucky surface of the ugly world outside. She seemed to be restless to end her fool's errand here, two hundred light years from the waiting hordes on Earth. Straining metal plates twanged and echoed through her hallways.

Captain Gwayne cursed and rolled over, reaching for his boots. He was a big, rawboned man, barely forty; but ten years of responsibility had pressed down his shoulders and put age-feigning hollows under his reddened eyes. The starlanes between Earth and her potential colonies were

rough on the men who traveled them now. He shuffled toward the control room, grumbling at the heavy gravity.

Lieutenant Jane Corey looked up, nodding a blonde head at him as he moved toward the ever-waiting pot of murky coffee. "Morning, Bob. You need a shave."

"Yeah." He swallowed the hot coffee without tasting it, then ran a hand across the dark stubble on his chin. It could wait. "Anything new during the night?"

"About a dozen blobs held something like a convention a little ways north of us. They broke up about an hour ago and streaked off into the clouds." The blobs were a peculiarity of this planet about which nobody knew anything. They looked like overgrown fireballs, but seemed to have an almost sentient curiosity about anything moving on the ground. "And our two cadets sneaked out again. Barker followed them, but lost them in the murk. I've kept a signal going to guide them back."

Gwayne swore softly to himself. Earth couldn't turn out enough starmen in the schools, so promising kids were being shipped out for training as cadets on their twelfth birthday. The two he'd drawn, Kaufman and Pinelli, seemed to be totally devoid of any sense of caution.

Of course there was no ob-

vious need for caution here. The blobs hadn't seemed dangerous, and the local animals were apparently all herbivorous and harmless. They were ugly enough, looking like insects in spite of their internal skeletons, with anywhere from four to twelve legs each on their segmented bodies. None acted like dangerous beasts.

But *something* had happened to the exploration party fifteen years back, and to the more recent ship under Hennessy that was sent to check up.

HE turned to the port to stare out at the planet. The Sol-type sun must be rising, since there was a dim light. But the thick clouds that wrapped the entire world diffused its rays into a haze. For a change, it wasn't raining, though the ground was covered by thick swirls of fog. In the distance, the tops of shrubs that made a scrub forest glowed yellow-green. Motions around them suggested a herd of feeding animals. Details were impossible to see through the haze. Even the deep gorge where they'd found Hennessy's carefully buried ship was completely hidden by the fog.

There were three of the blobs dancing about over the grazing animals now, as they often seemed to do. Gwayne stared at them for a minute, trying to read sense into the

things. If he had time to study them...

But there was no time.

Earth had ordered him to detour here, after leaving his load of deep-sleep stored colonists on Official World 71, to check on any sign of Hennessy. He'd been here a week longer than he should have stayed already. If there was no sign in another day or so of what had happened to the men who'd deserted their ship and its equipment, he'd have to report back.

He would have left before, if a recent landslip hadn't exposed enough of the buried ship for his metal locators to spot from the air by luck. It had obviously been hidden deep enough to foil the detectors originally.

"Bob!" Jane Corey's voice cut through his pondering. "Bob, there are the kids!"

Before he could swing to follow her pointing finger, movement caught his eye.

The blobs had left the herd. Now the three were streaking at fantastic speed to a spot near the ship, to hover excitedly above something that moved there.

He saw the two cadets then, heading back to the waiting ship, just beyond the movement he'd seen through the mist.

Whatever was making the fog swirl must have reached higher ground. Something began to heave upwards. It was

too far to see clearly, but Gwayne grabbed the microphone, yelling into the radio toward the cadets.

They must have seen whatever it was just as the call reached them. Young Kaufman grabbed at Pinelli, and they swung around together.

Then the mists cleared.

Under the dancing blobs, a horde of things was heading for the cadets. Shaggy heads, brute bodies vaguely manlike! One seemed to be almost eight feet tall, leading the others directly toward the spacesuited cadets. Some of the horde were carrying spears or sticks. There was a momentary halt, and then the leader lifted one arm, as if motioning the others forward.

"GET the jeeps out!" Gwayne yelled at Jane. He yanked the door of the little officers' lift open and jabbed the down button. It was agonizingly slow, but faster than climbing down. He ripped the door back at the exit deck. Men were dashing in, stumbling around in confusion. But someone was taking over now—one of the crew women. The jeeps were lining up. One, at the front, was stuttering into life, and Gwayne dashed for it as the exit port slid back.

There was no time for suits or helmets. The air on the planet was irritating and vile smelling, but it could be

breathed. He leaped to the seat, to see that the driver was Doctor Barker. At a gesture, the jeep rolled down the ramp, grinding its gears into second as it picked up speed. The other two followed.

There was no sign of the cadets at first. Then Gwayne spotted them, surrounded by the menacing horde. Seen from here, the things looked horrible in a travesty of manhood.

The huge leader suddenly waved and pointed toward the jeeps that were racing toward him. He made a fantastic leap backwards. Others swung about, two of them grabbing up the cadets. The jeep was doing twenty miles an hour now, but the horde began to increase the distance, in spite of the load of the two struggling boys! The creatures dived downward into lower ground, beginning to disappear into the mists.

"Follow the blobs," Gwayne yelled. He realized now he'd been a fool to leave his suit; the radio would have let him keep in contact with the kids. But it was too late to go back.

The blobs danced after the horde. Barker bounced the jeep downward into a gorge. Somewhere the man had learned to drive superlatively; but he had to slow as the fog thickened lower down.

Then it cleared to show the mob of creatures doubling back on their own trail to confuse the pursuers.

There was no time to stop. The jeep plowed through them. Gwayne had a glimpse of five-foot bodies tumbling out of the way. Monstrously coarse faces were half hidden by thick hair. A spear crunched against the windshield from behind, and Gwayne caught it before it could foul the steering wheel. It had a wickedly beautiful point of stone.

The creatures vanished as Barker fought to turn to follow them. The other jeeps were coming up, by the sound of their motors, but too late to help. They'd have to get to the group with the cadets in a hurry or the horde would all vanish in the uneven ground, hidden by the fog.

A blob dropped down, almost touching Gwayne.

He threw up an instinctive hand. There was a tingling as the creature seemed to pass around it. It lifted a few inches and drifted off.

Abruptly, Barker's foot ground at the brake. Gwayne jolted forward against the windshield, just as he made out the form of the eight-foot leader. The thing was standing directly ahead of him, a cadet on each shoulder.

The wheels locked and the jeep slid protestingly forward. The creature leaped back. But Gwayne was out of the jeep before it stopped, diving for the figure. It dropped the boys with a surprised grunt.

THE arms were thin and grotesque below the massively distorted shoulders, but amazingly strong. Gwayne felt them wrench at him as his hands locked on the thick throat. A stench of alien flesh was in his nose as the thing fell backwards. Doc Barker had hit it seconds after the captain's attack. Its head hit rocky ground with a dull, heavy sound, and it collapsed. Gwayne eased back slowly, but it made no further move, though it was still breathing.

Another jeep had drawn up, and men were examining the cadets. Pinelli was either laughing or crying, and Kaufman was trying to break free to kick at the monster. But neither had been harmed. The two were loaded onto a jeep while men helped Barker and Gwayne stow the bound monster on another before heading back.

"No sign of skull fracture. My God, what a tough brute!" Barker shook his own head, as if feeling the shock of the monster's landing.

"I hope so," Gwayne told him. "I want that thing to live—and you're detailed to save it and revive it. Find out if it can make sign language or draw pictures. I want to know what happened to Hennessy and why that ship was buried against detection. This thing may be the answer."

Barker nodded grimly. "I'll try, though I can't risk drugs on an alien metabolism." He

sucked in on the cigarette he'd dug out, then spat sickly. Smoke and this air made a foul combination. "Bob, it still makes no sense. We've scoured this planet by infra-red, and there was no sign of native villages or culture. We should have found some."

"Troglodytes, maybe," Gwayne guessed. "Anyhow, send for me when you get anything. I've got to get this ship back to Earth. We're overstaying our time here already."

The reports from the cadets were satisfactory enough. They'd been picked up and carried, but no harm had been done them. Now they were busy being little heroes. Gwayne sentenced them to quarters as soon as he could, knowing their stories would only get wilder and less informative with retelling.

If they could get any story from the captured creature, they might save time and be better off than trying to dig through Hennessy's ship. That was almost certainly spoorless by now. The only possible answer seemed to be that the exploring expedition and Hennessy's rescue group had been overcome by the aliens.

It was an answer, but it left a lot of questions. How could the primitives have gotten to the men inside Hennessy's ship? Why was its fuel dumped? Only men would have known how to do that.

And who told these creatures that a space ship's metal finders could be fooled by a little more than a hundred feet of solid rock? They'd buried the ship cunningly, and only the accidental slippage had undone their work.

Maybe there would never be a full answer, but he had to find something—and find it fast. Earth needed every world she could make remotely habitable, or mankind was probably doomed to extinction.

THE race had blundered safely through its discovery of atomic weapons into a peace that had lasted two hundred years. It had managed to prevent an interplanetary war with the Venus colonists. It had found a drive that led to the stars, and hadn't even found intelligent life there to be dangerous on the few worlds that had cultures of their own.

But forty years ago, observations from beyond the Solar System had finally proved that the sun was going to go nova.

It wouldn't be much of an explosion, as such things go—but it would render the whole Solar System uninhabitable for millenia. To survive, man had to colonize.

And there were no worlds perfect for him, as Earth had been. The explorers went out in desperation to find what they could; the terraforming

teams did what they could. And then the big starships began filling worlds with colonists, carried in deep sleep to conserve space.

Almost eighty worlds. The nearest a four month journey from Earth and four more months back.

In another ten years, the sun would explode, leaving man only on the footholds he was trying to dig among other solar systems. Maybe some of the strange worlds would let men spread his seed again. Maybe none would be spawning grounds for mankind in spite of the efforts. Each was precious as a haven for the race.

If this world could be used, it would be nearer than most. If not, as it now seemed, no more time could be wasted here.

Primitives could be overcome, maybe. It would be ruthless and unfair to strip them of their world, but the first law was survival.

But how could primitives do what these must have done?

He studied the spear he had salvaged. It was on a staff made of cemented bits of smaller wood from the scrub growth, skillfully laminated. The point was of delicately chipped flint, done as no human hand had been able to do for centuries.

"Beautiful primitive work," he muttered.

Jane pulled the coffee cup away from her lips and snort-

ed. "You can see a lot more of it out there," she suggested.

He went to the port and glanced out. About sixty of the things were squatting in the clearing fog, holding lances and staring at the ship. They were perhaps a thousand yards away, waiting patiently. For what? For the return of their leader—or for something that would give the ship to them?

Gwayne grabbed the phone and called Barker. "How's the captive coming?"

Barker's voice sounded odd. "Physically fine. You can see him. But—"

Gwayne dropped the phone and headed for the little sick bay. He swore at Doc for not calling him at once, and then at himself for not checking up sooner. Then he stopped at the sound of voices.

There was the end of a question from Barker and a thick, harsh growling sound that lifted the hair along the nape of Gwayne's neck. Barker seemed to understand, and was making a comment as the captain dashed in.

The captive was sitting on the bunk, unbound and oddly unmenacing. The thick features were relaxed and yet somehow intent. He seemed to make some kind of a salute as he saw Gwayne enter, and his eyes burned up unerringly toward the device on the officer's cap.

"Haarroo, C a b b a a n!" the thing said.

"CAPTAIN Gwayne, may I present your former friend, Captain Hennessy?" Barker said. There was a grin on the doctor's lips, but his face was taut with strain.

The creature nodded slowly and drew something from the thick hair on its head. It was the golden come^o of a captain.

"He never meant to hurt the kids—just to talk to them," Barker cut in quickly. "I've got some of the story. He's changed. He can't talk very well. Says they've had to change the language around to make the sounds fit, and he's forgotten how to use what normal English he can. But it gets easier as you listen. It's Hennessy, all right. I'm certain."

Gwayne had his own ideas on that. It was easy for an alien to seize on the gold ornament of a captive earthman, even to learn a little English, maybe. But Hennessy had been his friend.

"How many barmaids in the Cheshire Cat? How many pups did your oldest kid's dog have? How many were brown?"

The lips contorted into something vaguely like a smile, and the curiously shaped fingers that could handle no human-designed equipment spread out.

Three. Seven. Zero.

The answers were right.

By the time the session was over, Gwayne had begun to understand the twisted speech

from inhuman vocal cords better. But the story took a long time telling.

When it was finished, Gwayne and Barker sat for long minutes in silence. Finally Gwayne drew a shuddering breath and stood up. "Is it possible, Dog?"

"No," Barker said flatly. He spread his hands and grimaced. "No. Not by what I know. But it happened. I've looked at a few tissues under the microscope. The changes are there. It's hard to believe about their kids. Adults in eight years, but they stay shorter. It can't be a hereditary change—the things that affect the body don't change the germ plasm. But in this case, what changed Hennessy is real, so maybe the fact that the change is passed on is as real as he claims."

Gwayne led the former Hennessy to the exit. The waiting blobs dropped down to touch the monstrous man, then leaped up again. The crowd of monsters began moving forward toward their leader. A few were almost as tall as Hennessy, but most were not more than five feet high.

The kids of the exploring party...

BACK in the control room, Gwayne found the emergency release levers, set the combinations and pressed the studs. There was a hiss and gurgle as the great tanks of

fuel discharged their contents out onto the ground where no ingenuity could ever recover it to bring life to the ship again.

He'd have to tell the men and women of the crew later, after he'd had time to organize things and present it all in a way they could accept, however much they might hate it at first. But there was no putting off giving the gist of it to Jane.

"It was the blobs," he summarized it. "They seem to be amused by men. They don't require anything from us, but they like us around. Hennessy doesn't know why. They can change our cells, adapt us. Before men came, all life here had twelve legs. Now they're changing that, as we've seen.

"And they don't have to be close to do it. We've all been outside the hull. It doesn't show yet—but we're changed. In another month, Earth food would kill us. We've got to stay here. We'll bury the ships deeper this time, and Earth won't find us. They can't risk trying a colony where three ships vanish, so we'll just disappear. And they'll never know."

Nobody would know. Their children—odd children who matured in eight years—would be primitive savages in three generations. The Earth tools would be useless, impossible for the hands so radically changed. Nothing from the ship would last. Books could

never be read by the new eyes. And in time, Earth wouldn't even be a memory to this world.

She was silent a long time, staring out of the port toward what must now be her home. Then she sighed. "You'll need practice, but the others don't know you as well as I do, Bob. I guess we can fix it so they'll believe it all. And it's too late now. But we haven't really been changed yet, have we?"

"No," he admitted. Damn his voice! He'd never been good at lying. "No. They have to touch us. I've been touched, but the rest could go back."

She nodded. He waited for the condemnation, but there was only puzzlement in her face. "Why?"

And then, before he could answer, her own intelligence gave her the same answer he had found for himself. "The spawning ground!"

It was the only thing they could do. Earth needed a place to plant her seed, but no world other than Earth could ever be trusted to preserve that seed for generation after generation. Some worlds already were becoming uncertain.

Here, though, the blobs had adapted men to the alien world instead of men having to adapt the whole planet to their needs. Here, the strange children of man's race could grow, develop and begin the long trek back to civilization. The gadgets would be lost for

a time. But perhaps some of the attitudes of civilized man would remain to make the next rise to culture a better one.

"We're needed here," he told her, his voice pleading for the understanding he couldn't yet fully give himself. "These people need as rich a set of bloodlines as possible to give the new race strength. The fifty men and women on this ship will be needed to start them with a decent chance. We can't go to Earth, where nobody would believe or accept the idea—or even let us come back. We have to stay here."

She smiled then and moved toward him, groping for his strength. "Be fruitful," she whispered. "Be fruitful and spawn and replenish an earth."

"No," he told her. "Replenish the stars."

But she was no longer listening, and that part of his idea could wait.

Some day, though, their children would find a way to the starlanes again, looking for other worlds. With the blobs to help them, they could adapt to most worlds. The unchanged spirit would lead them through all space, and the changing bodies would claim worlds beyond numbering.

Some day, the whole universe would be a spawning ground for the children of men!

END

TOLLIVER'S

ORBIT

was slow — but
it wasn't boring. And it would
get you there — as long as you weren't
going anywhere anyhow!

By H. B. FYFE

Illustrated by BERNKLAU

JOHNNY Tolliver scowled across the desk at his superior. His black thatch was ruffled, as if he had been rubbed the wrong way.

"I didn't ask you to cut out your own graft, did I?" he demanded. "Just don't try to sucker me in on the deal. I know you're operating something sneaky all through the colony, but it's not for me."

The big moon-face of Jeffers, manager of the Ganymedan branch of Koslow Spaceways, glowered back at him. Its reddish tinge brightened the office noticeably, for such of Ganymede's surface as could be seen through the transparent dome outside the office window was cold, dim and rugged. The glowing semi-disk of Jupiter was more

than half a million miles distant.

"Try not to be simple—for once!" growled Jeffers. "A little percentage here and there on the cargoes never shows by the time figures get back to Earth. The big jets in the home office don't care. They count it on the estimates."

"You asked any of them lately?" Tolliver prodded.

"Now, *listen!* Maybe they live soft back on Earth since the mines and the Jovian satellite colonies grew; but they were out here in the beginning, most of them. *They* know what it's like. D'ya think they don't expect us to make what we can on the side?"

Tolliver rammed his fists

into the side pockets of his loose blue uniform jacket. He shook his head, grinning resignedly.

"You just don't listen to me," he complained. "You know I took this piloting job just to scrape up money for an advanced engineering degree back on Earth. I only want to finish my year—not get into something I can't quit."

Jeffers fidgeted in his chair, causing it to creak under the bulk of his body. It had been built for Ganymede, but not for Jeffers.

"Aw, it's not like that," the manager muttered. "You can ease out whenever your contract's up. Think we'd bend a good orbit on your account?"

Tolliver stared at him silently, but the other had difficulty meeting his eye.

"All right, then!" Jeffers snapped after a long moment. "If you want it that way, either you get in line with us or you're through right now!"

"You can't fire me," retorted the pilot pityingly. "I came out here on a contract. Five hundred credits a week base pay, five hundred for hazardous duty. How else can you get pilots out to Jupiter?"

"Okay I can't fire you legally—as long as you report for work," grumbled Jeffers, by now a shade more ruddy. "We'll see how long you keep reporting. Because you're off the Callisto run as of now! Sit in your quarters and see

if the company calls that hazardous duty!"

"Doesn't matter," answered Tolliver, grinning amiably. "The hazardous part is just being on the same moon as you for the next six months."

He winked and walked out, deliberately leaving the door open behind him so as to enjoy the incoherent bellowing that followed him.

Looks like a little vacation, he thought, unperturbed. He'll come around. I just want to get back to Earth with a clean rep. Let Jeffers and his gang steal the Great Red Spot off Jupiter if they like! It's their risk.

TOLLIVER began to have his doubts the next day; which was "Tuesday" by the arbitrary calender constructed to match Ganymede's week-long journey around Jupiter.

His contract guaranteed a pilot's rating, but someone had neglected to specify the type of craft to be piloted.

On the bulletin board, Tolliver's name stood out beside the number of one of the airtight tractors used between the dome city and the spaceport, or for hauling cross-country to one of the mining domes.

He soon found that there was nothing for him to do but hang around the garage in case a spaceship should land. The few runs to other domes seemed to be assigned to drivers with larger vehicles.

The following day was just as boring, and the next more so. He swore when he found the assignment unchanged by "Friday." Even the reflection that it was payday was small consolation.

"Hey, Johnny!" said a voice at his shoulder. "The word is that they're finally gonna trust you to take that creeper outside."

Tolliver turned to see Red Higgins, a regular driver.

"What do you mean?"

"They say some home-office relative is coming in on the *Javelin*."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Tolliver. "Outside of the way they keep handing out soft jobs to nephews, I mean."

"Aah, these young punks just come out for a few months so they can go back to Earth making noises like spacemen. Sometimes there's no reason but them for sending a ship back with a crew instead of in an economy orbit. Wait till you see the baggage you'll have to load!"

Later in the day-period, Tolliver recalled this warning. Under a portable, double-chambered plastic dome blown up outside the ship's airlock, a crewman helped him load two trunks and a collection of bags into the tractor. He was struggling to suppress a feeling of outrage at the waste of fuel involved when the home-office relative emerged.

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She was about five feet four and moved as if she walked lightly even in stronger gravity than Ganymede's. Her trim coiffure was a shade too blonde which served to set off both the blue of her eyes and the cap apparently won from one of the pilots. She wore gray slacks and a heavy sweater, like a spacer.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said, sliding into the seat beside Tolliver. "By the way, just call me Betty."

"Sure," agreed Tolliver thinking, *Ohmigod! Trying already to be just one of the gang, instead of Lady Betty! Is her old man the treasurer, or does he just know where bodies are buried?*

"They were making dates," said the girl. "Were they ribbing me, or is it true that none of the four of them goes back with the ship?"

"It's true enough," Tolliver assured her. "We need people out here, and it costs a lot to make the trip. They found they could send back loaded ships by 'automatic' flight—that is, a long, slow, economical orbit and automatic signalling equipment. Then they're boarded approaching Earth's orbit and landed by pilots who don't have to waste their time making the entire trip."

HE followed the signals of a spacesuited member of the port staff and maneuvered out of the dome. Then he

headed the tractor across the frozen surface of Ganymede toward the permanent domes of the city.

"How is it here?" asked the girl. "They told me it's pretty rough."

"What did you expect?" asked Tolliver. "Square dances with champagne?"

"Don't be silly. Daddy says I'm supposed to learn traffic routing and the business management of a local branch. They probably won't let me see much else."

"You never can tell," said the pilot, yielding to temptation. "Any square inch of Ganymede is likely to be dangerous."

I'll be sorry later, he reflected, but if Jeffers keeps me jockeying this creeper, I'm entitled to some amusement. And Daddy's little girl is trying too hard to sound like one of the gang.

"Yeah," he went on, "right now, I don't do a thing but drive missions from the city to the spaceport."

"Missions! You call driving a mile or so a *mission*?"

Tolliver pursed his lips and put on a shrewd expression.

"Don't sneer at Ganymede, honey!" he warned portentously. "Many a man who did isn't here today. Take the fellow who used to drive this mission!"

"You can call me Betty. What happened to him?"

"I'll tell you some day," Tolliver promised darkly. "This moon can strike like a vicious animal."

"Oh, they told me there was nothing alive on Ganymede!"

"I was thinking of the mountain slides," said the pilot. "Not to mention volcanic puffballs that pop out through the frozen crust where you'd least expect. That's why I draw such high pay for driving an unarmored tractor."

"You use armored vehicles?" gasped the girl.

She was now sitting bolt upright in the swaying seat. Tolliver deliberately dipped one track into an icy hollow. In the light gravity, the tractor responded with a weird, floating lurch.

"Those slides," he continued. "Ganymede's only about the size of Mercury, something like 3200 miles in diameter, so things get heaped up at steep angles. When the rock and ice are set to sliding, they come at you practically horizontally. It doesn't need much start, and it barrels on for a long way before there's enough friction to stop it. If you're in the way—well, it's just too bad!"

Say, that's pretty good! he told himself. *What a liar you are, Tolliver!*

He enlarged upon other dangers to be encountered on the satellite, taking care to impress the newcomer with the daredeviltry of John Tolliver, driver of "missions"

across the menacing wastes between dome and port.

In the end, he displayed conclusive evidence in the form of the weekly paycheck he had received that morning. It did not, naturally, indicate he was drawing the salary of a space pilot. Betty looked thoughtful.

"I'm retiring in six months if I'm still alive," he said bravely, edging the tractor into the airlock at their destination. "Made my pile. No use pushing your luck too far."

His charge seemed noticeably subdued, but cleared her throat to request that Tolliver guide her to the office of the manager. She trailed along as if with a burden of worry upon her mind, and the pilot's conscience prickled.

I'll get hold of her after Jeffers is through and set her straight, he resolved. *It isn't really funny if the sucker is too ignorant to know better.*

REMEMBERING his grudge against the manager, he took pleasure in walking in without knocking.

"Jeffers," he announced, "this is... just call her Betty."

The manager's jowled features twisted into an expression of welcome as jovial as that of a hungry crocodile.

"Miss Koslow!" he beamed, like a politician the day before the voting. "It certainly is an honor to have you on Gany-mede with us! That's all,

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Tolliver, you can go. Yes, indeed! Mr. Koslow—the president, that is: your father—sent a message about you. I repeat, it will be an honor to show you the ropes. Did you want something else, Tolliver?"

"Never mind him, Mr. Jeffers," snapped the girl, in a tone new to Tolliver. "We won't be working together, I'm afraid. You've already had enough rope."

Jeffers seemed to stagger standing still behind his desk. His loose lips twitched uncertainly, and he looked questioningly to Tolliver. The pilot stared at Betty, trying to recall pictures he had seen of the elder Koslow. He was also trying to remember some of the lies he had told enroute from the spaceport.

"Wh-wh-what do you mean, Miss Koslow?" Jeffers stammered.

He darted a suspicious glare at Tolliver.

"Mr. Jeffers," said the girl, "I may look like just another spoiled little blonde, but the best part of this company will be mine someday. I was not allowed to reach twenty-two without learning something about holding on to it."

Tolliver blinked. He had taken her for three or four years older. Jeffers now ignored him, intent upon the girl.

"Daddy gave me the title of tenth vice-president mostly as a joke, when he told me to

find out what was wrong with operations on Ganymede. I have *some* authority, though. And you look like the source of the trouble to me."

"You can't prove anything," declared Jeffers hoarsely.

"Oh, can't I? I've already seen certain evidence, and the rest won't be hard to find. Where are your books, Mr. Jeffers? You're as good as fired!"

The manager dropped heavily to his chair. He stared unbelievably at Betty, and Tolliver thought he muttered something about "just landed." After a moment, the big man came out of his daze enough to stab an intercom button with his finger. He growled at someone on the other end to come in without a countdown.

Tolliver, hardly thinking about it, expected the someone to be a secretary, but it turned out to be three members of Jeffers' headquarters staff. He recognized one as Rawlins, a warehouse chief, and guessed that the other two might be his assistants. They were large enough.

"No stupid questions!" Jeffers ordered. "Lock these two up while I think!"

Tolliver started for the door immediately, but was blocked off.

"Where should we lock—?" the fellow paused to ask.

Tolliver brought up a snappy uppercut to the man's

chin, feeling that it was a poor time to engage Jeffers in fruitless debate.

In the gravity of Ganymede, the man was knocked off balance as much as he was hurt, and sprawled on the floor.

"I *told* you no questions!" bawled Jeffers.

The fallen hero, upon arising, had to content himself with grabbing Betty. The others were swarming over Tolliver. Jeffers came around his desk to assist.

TOLLIVER found himself dumped on the floor of an empty office in the adjoining warehouse building. It seemed to him that a long time had been spent in carrying him there.

He heard an indignant yelp, and realized that the girl had been pitched in with him. The snapping of a lock was followed by the tramp of departing footsteps and then by silence.

After considering the idea a few minutes, Tolliver managed to sit up.

He had his wind back. But when he fingered the swelling lump behind his left ear, a sensation befuddled him momentarily.

"I'm sorry about that," murmured Betty.

Tolliver grunted. Sorrow would not reduce the throbbing, nor was he in a mood to undertake an explanation of why Jeffers did not like him anyway.

"I think perhaps you're going to have a shiner," remarked the girl.

"Thanks for letting me know in time," said Tolliver.

The skin under his right eye did feel a trifle tight, but he could see well enough. The abandoned and empty look of the office worried him.

"What can we use to get out of here?" he mused.

"Why should we try?" asked the girl. "What can he do?"

"You'd be surprised. How did you catch on to him so soon?"

"Your pay check," said Betty. "As soon as I saw that ridiculous amount, it was obvious that there was gross mismanagement here. It had to be Jeffers."

Tolliver groaned.

"Then, on the way over here, he as good as admitted everything. You didn't hear him, I guess. Well, he seemed to be caught all unaware, and seemed to blame you for it."

"Sure!" grumbled the pilot. "He thinks I told you he was grafting or smuggling, or whatever he has going for him here. That's why I want to get out of here—before I find myself involved in some kind of fatal accident!"

"What do you know about the crooked goings-on here?" asked Betty after a startled pause.

"Nothing," retorted Tolliver. "Except that there are some. There are rumors, and I

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had a halfway invitation to join in. I think he sells things to the mining colonies and makes a double profit for himself by claiming the stuff lost in transit. You didn't think you scared him that bad over a little slack managing?"

The picture of Jeffers huddled with his partners in the headquarters building, plotting the next move, brought Tolliver to his feet.

There was nothing in the unused office but an old table and half a dozen plastic crates. He saw that the latter contained a mess of discarded records.

"Better than nothing at all," he muttered.

He ripped out a double handful of the forms, crumpled them into a pile at the doorway, and pulled out his cigarette lighter.

"What do you think you're up to?" asked Betty with some concern.

"This plastic is tough," said Tolliver, "but it will bend with enough heat. If I can kick loose a hinge, maybe we can fool them yet!"

He got a little fire going, and fed it judiciously with more papers.

"You know," he reflected, "it might be better for you to stay here. He can't do much about you, and you don't have any real proof just by yourself."

"I'll come along with you, Tolliver," said the girl.

"No, I don't think you'd better."

"Why not?"

"Well ... after all, what would he dare do? Arranging an accident to the daughter of the boss isn't something that he can pull off without a lot of investigation. He'd be better off just running for it."

"Let's not argue about it," said Betty, a trifle pale but looking determined. "I'm coming with you. Is that stuff getting soft yet?"

Tolliver kicked at the edge of the door experimentally. It seemed to give slightly, so he knocked the burning papers aside and drove his heel hard at the corner below the hinge.

The plastic yielded.

"That's enough already, Tolliver," whispered the girl. "We can crawl through!"

HARDLY sixty seconds later, he led her into a maze of stacked crates in the warehouse proper. The building was not much longer than wide, for each of the structures in the colony had its own hemispherical emergency dome of transparent plastic. They soon reached the other end.

"I think there's a storeroom for spacesuits around here," muttered Tolliver.

"Why do you want them?"

"Honey, I just don't think it will be so easy to lay hands on a tractor. I bet Jeffers already phoned the garage and

all the airlocks with some good lie that will keep me from getting through."

After a brief search, he located the spacesuits. Many, evidently intended for replacements, had never been unpacked, but there were a dozen or so serviced and standing ready for emergencies. He showed Betty how to climb into one, and checked her seals and valves after donning a suit himself.

"That switch under your chin," he said, touching helmets so she could hear him. "Leave it turned off. *Anybody* might be listening!"

He led the way out a rear door of the warehouse. With the heavy knife that was standard suit equipment, he deliberately slashed a four-foot square section out of the dome. He motioned to Betty to step through, then trailed along with the plastic under his arm.

He caught up and touched helmets again.

"Just act as if you're on business," he told her. "For all anyone can see, we might be inspecting the dome."

"Where are you going?" asked Betty.

"Right through the wall, and then head for the nearest mine. Jeffers can't be running *everything!*"

"Is there any way to get to a TV?" asked the girl. "I ... uh ... Daddy gave me a good number to call if I needed help."

"How good?"

"Pretty official, as a matter of fact."

"All right," Tolliver decided. "We'll try the ship you just came in on. They might have finished refueling and left her empty."

They had to cross one open lane between buildings, and Tolliver was very conscious of moving figures in the distance; but no one seemed to look their way.

Reaching the foot of the main dome over the establishment, he glanced furtively about, then plunged his knife into the transparent material.

From the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Betty make a startled gesture, but he had his work cut out for him. This was tougher than the interior dome.

Finally, he managed to saw a ragged slit through which they could squeeze. There was room to walk between the inner and outer layer, so he moved along a few yards. A little dust began to blow about where they had gone through. He touched helmets once more.

"This time," he said, "the air will really start to blow, so get through as fast as you can. If I can slap this piece of plastic over the rip, it may slow down the loss of pressure enough to give us quite a lead before the alarms go off."

Through the faceplates, he saw the girl nod, wide-eyed.

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As soon as he plunged the knife into the outer layer, he could see dusty, moist air puffing out into the near-vacuum of Ganymede's surface. Fumbling, he cut as fast as he could and shoved Betty through the small opening.

Squeezing through in his turn, he left one arm inside to spread the plastic sheet as best he could. The internal air pressure slapped it against the inside of the dome as if glued, although it immediately showed an alarming tendency to balloon through the ruptured spot.

They'll find it, all right, Tolliver reminded himself. *Don't be here when they do!*

He grabbed Betty by the wrist of her spacesuit and headed for the nearest outcropping of rock.

It promptly developed that she had something to learn about running on ice in such low gravity. Until they were out of direct line of sight from the settlement, Tolliver simply dragged her.

Then, when he decided that it was safe enough to pause and tell her how to manage better, the sight of her outraged scowl through the faceplate made him think better of it.

By the time we reach the ship, she'll have learned, he consoled himself.

IT was a long mile, even at the pace human muscles could achieve on Ganymede.



They took one short rest, during which Tolliver was forced to explain away the dangers of slides and volcanic puff-balls. He admitted to having exaggerated slightly. In the end, they reached the spaceship.

There seemed to be no one about. The landing dome had been collapsed and stored, and the ship's airlock port was closed.

"That's all right," Tolliver told the girl. "We can get in with no trouble."

It was when he looked about to make sure that they were unobserved that he caught a glimpse of motion back toward the city. He peered at the spot through the dim light. After a moment, he definitely recognized the outline of a tractor breasting a rise in the ground and tilting downward again.

"In fact, we *have* to get in to stay out of trouble," he said to Betty.

He located the switch-cover in the hull, opened it and activated the mechanism that swung open the airlock and extended the ladder.

It took him considerable scrambling to boost the girl up the ladder and inside, but he managed. They passed through the airlock, fretting at the time required to seal, pump air and open the inner hatch; and then Tolliver led the way up another ladder to the control room. It was a clumsy trip in their space-

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suits, but he wanted to save time.

In the control room, he shoved the girl into an acceleration seat, glanced at the gauges and showed her how to open her helmet.

"Leave the suit on," he ordered, getting in the first word while she was still shaking her head. "It will help a little on the takeoff."

"Takeoff!" shrilled Betty. "What do you think you're going to do? I just want to use the radio or TV!"

"That tractor will get here in a minute or two. They might cut your conversation kind of short. Now shut up and let me look over these dials!"

He ran a practiced eye over the board, reading the condition of the ship. It pleased him. Everything was ready for a takeoff into an economy orbit for Earth. He busied himself making a few adjustments, doing his best to ignore the protests from his partner in crime. He warned her the trip might be long.

"I told you not to come," he said at last. "Now sit back!"

He sat down and pushed a button to start the igniting process.

In a moment, he could feel the rumble of the rockets through the deck, and then it was out of his hands for several minutes.

"That wasn't so bad," Betty admitted some time later.

"Did you go in the right direction?"

"Who knows?" retorted Tolliver. "There wasn't time to check *everything*. We'll worry about that after we make your call."

"Oh!" Betty looked helpless. It's in my pocket."

Tolliver sighed. In their weightless state, it was no easy task to pry her out of the spacesuit. He thought of inquiring if she needed any further help, but reminded himself that this was the boss's daughter. When Betty produced a memo giving frequency and call sign, he set about making contact.

It took only a few minutes, as if the channel had been monitored expectantly, and the man who flickered into life on the screen wore a uniform.

"Space Patrol?" whispered Tolliver incredulously.

"That's right," said Betty. "Uh . . . Daddy made arrangements for me."

Tolliver held her in front of the screen so she would not float out of range of the scanner and microphone. As she spoke, he stared exasperatedly at a bulkhead, marveling at the influence of a man who could arrange for a cruiser to escort his daughter to Ganymede and wondering what was behind it all.

When he heard Betty requesting assistance in arresting Jeffers and reporting the manager as the head of a ring

of crooks, he began to suspect. He also noticed certain peculiarities about the remarks of the Patrolman.

FOR one thing, though the officer seemed well acquainted with Betty, he never addressed her by the name of Koslow. For another, he accepted the request as if he had been hanging in orbit merely until learning who to go down after.

They really sent her out to nail someone, Tolliver realized. *Of course, she stumbled onto Jeffers by plain dumb luck. But she had an idea of what to look for. How do I get into these things? She might have got me killed!*

"We do have one trouble," he heard Betty saying. "This tractor driver, Tolliver, saved my neck by making the ship take off somehow, but he says it's set for a six-month orbit, or economy flight. Whatever they call it. I don't think he has any idea where we're headed."

Tolliver pulled her back, holding her in mid-air by the slack of her sweater.

"Actually, I have a fine idea," he informed the officer coldly. "I happen to be a qualified space pilot. Everything here is under control. If Miss Koslow thinks you should arrest Jeffers, you can call us later on this channel."

"Miss Koslow?" repeated the spacer. "Did she tell you—well, no matter! If you'll

be okay, we'll attend to the other affair immediately."

He signed off promptly. The pilot faced Betty, who looked more offended than reassured at discovering his status.

"This 'Miss Koslow' business," he said suspiciously. "He sounded funny about that."

The girl grinned.

"Relax, Tolliver," she told him. "Did you really believe Daddy would send his own little girl way out here to Ganymede to look for whoever was gypping him?"

"You ... you ...?"

"Sure. The name's Betty Hanlon. I work for a private investigating firm. If old Koslow had a son to impersonate—"

"I'd be stuck for six months in this orbit with some brash young man," Tolliver finished for her. "I guess it's better this way," he said meditatively a moment later.

"Oh, come on! Can't they get us back? How can you tell where we're going?"

"I know enough to check takeoff time. It was practically due anyhow, so we'll float into the vicinity of Earth at about the right time to be picked up."

He went on to explain something of the tremendous cost in fuel necessary to make more than minor corrections to their course. Even though the Patrol ship could easily catch the slow freighter,

bringing along enough fuel to head back would be something else again.

"We'll just have to ride it out," he said sympathetically. "The ship is provisioned according to law, and you were probably going back anyhow."

"I didn't expect to so soon."

"Yeah, you were pretty lucky. They'll think you're a marvel to crack the case in about three hours on Ganymede."

"Great!" muttered Betty.

"What a lucky girl I am!"

"Yes," admitted Tolliver, "there are problems. If you like, we might get the captain of that Patrol ship to legalize the situation by TV."

"I can see you're used to sweeping girls off their feet," she commented sourly.

"The main problem is whether you can cook."

Betty frowned at him.

"I'm pretty good with a pistol," she offered, "or going over crooked books. But cook? Sorry."

"Well, one of us had better learn, and I'll have other things to do."

"I'll think about it," promised the girl, staring thoughtfully at the deck.

Tolliver anchored himself in a seat and grinned as he thought about it too.

After a while, he promised himself, I'll explain how I cut the fuel flow and see if she's detective enough to suspect that we're just orbiting Ganymede!

END

THE VALLEY OF THE

HENRY stopped and squatted in the underbrush, well hidden from the path but close enough to see the coming group. Within a minute they became visible. There were twenty-five to thirty boys, girls and youths walking slowly in ragged groups, talking and laughing. The youngest were ahead, a group just entering their teens, dressed like the rest in jackets and shorts, with sandals of plast on their feet. The dark, synthetic cloth made them a uniformed body.

Henry's nose wrinkled in distaste. Again his hideaway would be invaded and he would have to move on. But where to?

They were opposite him now, a bare twenty feet away. Most of them looked as alike as brothers and sisters, logically enough; there was not one who wasn't a cousin in some degree to the others. Plump, round-faced and dull-eyed, they lived from cradle to grave according to custom. It was the custom, when they were old enough to feel the urge, to join a group like this. Together they tramped the valley from spring to fall, gathering fruit and nuts as they came in season. When a couple felt like settling down they awaited a vacant Mastership—a plot of orchard and the house that went with it—and moved in. They took over the responsi-

His sin was curiosity — his crime was witchcraft — but Henry's real offense against his strange world was that it was dying — and he wanted it to live!

MASTERS

bilities of the place and bred or adopted the three children necessary to hold it. They remained there until they became Elders. Then they moved into Town, where they worked in the factories, idled and gossiped until death overtook them.

They were ignorant, superstitious, living out their dull routine as generations before them had. Only a few questioned it. Almost none made any active challenge.

The youngsters sighted the tavern and made for it at a dead run, wanting to claim favorable bunks before the others arrived.

Henry was impatient. Ants were crawling over his foot, but it would never do for him

to be seen, especially in the woods. One didn't go into them. They were inhabited by goblins, ghosts and fearsome animals.

Finally they were past. He straightened, started to step into the path, then squatted again quickly. Coming alone, behind the others, was the girl.

Her slimness and pale hair made her stand out from the rest. His thoughts had been upon her since that day when his group passed the house of her father, an avocado Master, down in the lower valley. She had called to them to wait, had run inside to come back with her two pouches, one for her personal belongings, the other for food. Liv-

ing on a fruit diet as they did, they ate most of their awakened hours.

"I'm Theta!" she called out happily as she joined them. "Mama says I'm old enough to go with you." She recognized a cousin and ran over to join her, her hair a spot of brightness among the dark. He wanted her from that moment, but she was far too young. He would have to wait.

COMING towards Theta from the opposite direction was the slap of flat feet.

In a moment Henry recognized Ole. He was considerably older than the others; his only object in life was enjoying all the young girls who joined the group. He was a bulky dullard and a bully, his eyes small and mean.

It was evident that he was looking for the girl. A pleased expression spread over his face when he saw her. She stopped abruptly, looking about for a way to flee, but the path was enclosed by woods and Ole was on her.

"Leave me alone!" she cried in anger as his hand closed about her wrist. Henry could see disgust for him in her eyes. Why didn't she let him have what he wanted and be done with him? That was the way most of the girls responded.

"Won't have anything to do with me, eh?" gloated Ole.

"Think you are too good for us! I been watching you, asking about you. None of the boys have had you ... but you won't get by me!"

Henry felt a surge of sympathy for her, fed by his dislike for the other. He slipped into the path. He was almost up to them before he was seen. Ole swung about, still holding the girl. Henry stopped six feet off.

"Why don't you let her alone if she doesn't want you?" he asked with deceiving mildness, apparently relaxed.

There was startled fright in Ole's eyes. Henry had appeared so suddenly, from nowhere. Worse, he was proscribed. He was accused of learning witchery.

Henry was taller than Ole, but thin and almost weak looking. This would be something to boast about: capturing the witch singlehanded, bringing him in for punishment!

"Make me let her alone, then!" he challenged.

It was usual to boast and strut before fighting. Henry took the advantage of immediate attack. He sprang at the other, catching him before he unhandled the girl, with a right to the jaw, a left to the belly.

Theta ran about fifty feet down the path, then turned to watch. Ole, head down, was closing in to grip his opponent, but Henry stepped to

one side, coming up with a blow to Ole's right eye. Ole raised his guard and Henry sank both fists into the other's stomach.

Ole doubled up.

There was no fight in him. He plunged past Henry, down the path towards the tavern. Henry faced the girl. She came towards him without hesitation.

"Thank you," she said. "I shouldn't have left the others. I didn't think he had noticed."

She walked slowly towards the tavern, Henry beside her. The past year had made her taller, filled her out. Yet the sweetness of her expression was the same, and the vitality in her face and eyes.

"He's been after you then?"

She nodded. "Him and a couple of others."

It was just a turn in the path to sight of the tavern. Henry halted.

"You seem to forget I'm proscribed," he reminded her.

"I don't care! I like you—always have." Her voice became tragic, "Why did you go into that awful learning house?"

"I got tired of wondering—wondering what kept the food in the bins fresh, how it got from the hoppers in the fields to the bins. What made the light and heat. Where the water came from."

"But the Old Ones did it all by magic!"

"What kind of magic?" His face had a slightly mocking expression. "If that was so why are things beginning to break down? Magic should go on forever."

FROM the direction of the tavern came sounds of shouting. He smiled at her. "You'd better go on before they think I've turned you into a bat."

"Henry—" she began, but she had lingered too long. The whole group rounded the turn, trotting, their faces twisted in superstitious fury. They raised their arms when they sighted the two. Each hand had a stone in it.

"She's one of them too!" screamed fat, malicious Heccla, seeing a chance to vent her envy. "They're planning something! Throw! Throw!"

Her voice was a hysterical shriek. Henry saw the stones in the air. Grasping the girl's wrist he drew her into the brush beside the path.

He stopped his flight under an ancient tree and let go her wrist.

"See," he said, "even to speak to me is dangerous."

She tossed her head and brushed the hair from her brow, her eyes scornful. "I don't care. I'm sick of them."

"You can go back. Give them some fancy tale about my hexing you, but say that you crossed two sticks or something and got away."

She looked him squarely in

the face, her own composed and determined. "I'd rather stay with you."

He dropped to a jutting rock and scraped at the dead leaves with the heel of his sandal.

"It's not nice," he began, "the life I live. Hiding in the woods by day, sneaking into deserted houses or taverns at night for food and warmth. I've been doing it all summer now, and that's bad enough. In a month the Masters of these upper levels will be closing their houses and the taverns, moving to town for the winter. Everything on the lower levels will be taken up. They expect me to be starved into surrender."

Theta dropped to her knees beside him.

"I'd rather be with you. I've wanted to be with you ever since I first saw you. But you never seemed to notice me."

"I noticed you." He placed a hand over hers. "But you were so young looking, so sweet. I was waiting for you to grow up a little more. Then, when I found an open Mastership, I was going to ask you to share it with me."

Theta felt a tingling happiness. Her face flushed, her eyes brightened.

"Henry!" she cried. "I've always wanted you! That's why I never..."

He put an arm about her and pulled her close. They sat that way for minutes.

"I'll give you a Mastership!" he cried out. "I'll give you the whole valley!" He pushed her shoulders around until she was facing him. "What is your first wish, Mistress of the Valley?"

"Something to eat," she said promptly.

Henry made a rueful face. "My dear, that is something you will have to become used to: being hungry. But fortunately I know of a ruined and deserted house where the bins are still operating."

The forest they were in filled a steep-sided ravine. He followed it for some distance, then started abruptly up the left-hand slope to a low-crowned crest planted with apple trees. A hundred yards away was the house.

One corner of it was crushed by a fallen tree. The low sun made shafts of light through the trees as Henry approached it cautiously, Theta behind him. He entered through the broken wall into what was once a bedroom, then through a door into the remainder of the house.

It was a typical living room they entered, with the regular ration of furnishings. The visiphone and visiscreen were set into the inner wall; a calendar clock was over the front door, its dial marked with symbols for planting, pruning, cutting and picking. The hand was approaching the latter symbol, Henry

went through into the kitchen, leaving her to watch through the window. He returned with a basket of mixed fruit.

She reached for an avocado, plucking her knife from its sheath with the other hand.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" Henry cried. "You are a sinner now, remember?" He pushed the basket towards her. "Fill your pouch first, eat later."

They ate, keeping an eye on the path towards the house until dark. No one moved at night except on extreme emergency, and then only with lanterns and noise. Without lights on other than the normal glow of the walls they retired to one of the undamaged bedrooms.

"See?" she said, with a rippling, contented laugh. "I waited for you."

II

IT was still dark when they filled their pouches to capacity and slipped from the house.

"What will we do now?" Theta asked.

Henry looked down. "I don't know. I had something planned, but..."

"What was it?"

"I was going to climb up the mountain, past the top defrost towers and the force fence, to the top of the ridge."

She stared at him, her eyes

round. "Why, that's the edge of the world! You might fall off!"

"Not if I'm careful."

Only a few in the valley could boast of going beyond the top row of defrosters, fewer yet of even going within looking distance of the force fence. Beyond it, tradition said, lived great beasts that could eat a man with one bite. While the ridges that bounded the valley on three sides, to the east, west and north, were the edges of the world, from which one dropped off into bottomless space.

To the south, where forest enclosed the mouth of the valley, tradition was vague, but the edge must be off there somewhere.

It had taken Henry all summer to build up his determination. But now, up was the only direction it was safe to go.

"If you're not afraid, I'm not either," Theta said. "Let's go."

Carrying the basket with its remaining supply of fruit between them, they started up the slope. It was only a short distance to the top defrosters. These only went into action at blossom time for the apples and other highland fruits.

From there to the force fence was a steep climb through rocks and brush. Their pace grew slower as they approached the fence.

Their eyes scanned the rocks and scant brush for signs of the great beasts, but they saw none. Higher yet, about a quarter of a mile, was the top of the ridge. The edge of the earth.

Theta pressed against him. "I'm scared," she murmured.

Henry's face became set. "We said we were going," he said curtly. "You can stay if you wish." He selected rocks for both hands.

The force fence only gave them a strong tingling sensation. The plast sandals insulated them somewhat. The slope became steeper, but there was no indication of any great beasts. Too excited to stop and rest, although they were breathing heavily, they pressed onward.

Would it be night down there, over the edge of the world? Stars shining? Would it be daylight and clouds?

The top of the ridge was a hundred feet away ... ten. Henry flung himself on the ground so if he became dizzy he would not lose his balance and fall. Theta did the same. Side by side, they crept the remaining distance.

What they saw made them stare in open-mouthed amazement.

BEFORE them was another ridge running out from the northern range. It was pretty much like the one they were on.

Between it and them was

another valley. Defrost towers rose from among the trees. Over the top of the opposite ridge, they could see still another. The northern mountains were lost in the blue distance.

The shock to both was unnerving. Steeled to look out into Limbo, they found a valley much like their own.

Together they turned and looked back into what could be seen of their own valley.

Even in shape the two were roughly similar. They could see the tall, slim defrost towers, an occasional house and the geometrical designs of the groves and orchards with their orderly rows of trees. There was Town at the lower end of the valley. And there, at the upper end, was something they never knew existed; a large, ivy-clad building that stretched from cliffside to cliffside. And yet above that was a still, blue lake.

Henry looked ahead again.

There was a difference in the other valley. There were no orderly rows of fruit trees, only thick forest like that which grew only in their ravines or beyond the foot of the valley. The defrost towers looked down on multicolored autumn foliage, even in the bottom of the valley where everything should be green.

Why weren't there fruit trees for the defrosters to protect? What kind of a crop

did this valley grow? Henry scrambled to his feet.

Theta looked up at him. "What...?"

"I'm going down there."

"What for?"

"To see what they grow. What kind of people they are."

"They might..."

He smiled down at her. "I've become an expert at not being seen," he assured her. "I've had them pass five feet away."

Theta got up. "I'm coming, too."

They reached the force fence, but there was no irritation. The forest started immediately and it was fairly clear of underbrush. There were no paths to be seen, no sounds of harvesters, no unfamiliar trees. Even on the floor of the valley there were no signs of life, although they had seen and avoided several houses.

Henry stopped suddenly, staring ahead.

"What's the matter?" Theta asked.

Wordlessly Henry pointed to the bole of a dead and rotting tree. Its straight trunk had branches coming out of it in orderly rings, its top cut off to make the branches spread at ladder distance above the ground.

It leaned drunkenly against a supporting tree.

"Avocado," he said. "This was once a grove."

The normal fear of the un-

familiar swept over Theta. "I want to get out of here. It scares me," she quavered.

Henry glanced up at the sun. "Too late to cross over now," he said. "We'll find a house."

He turned and looked about. There should be one close, on the slope of the ridge so as not to take up useable land. He sighted one and made for it. From the outside it looked no different from those in their own valley.

Beside it was an old apple tree with some emaciated fruit on it. At least they wouldn't starve. As the house was obviously empty he went around to the back, got a picking ladder off the rack and plucked enough fruit to fill their pouches, although it was unflavorable. Not until then did they venture to the front door and push it open.

AS far as they could see it was like the houses in their valley, only it was cold, with a chill dampness. Light gray dust covered everything; cobwebs festooned the walls. That it had not been lived in for years, perhaps generations, was evident. Theta clung to his arm, shivering and afraid. Henry shook her off. He strode to the kitchen and pulled open a bin. In the bottom was dust, smelling faintly of peaches.

"We'll clean out a bed-

room for the night," he said, re-entering the living room.

In the bedroom the westerly sun poured light through a dust-covered window, putting the bed somewhat in shadow. It, too, was covered with dust, turning the everlasting blankets into a color uniform with the room. Their movements stirred up dust that danced as motes in the streaming sunlight as if to bar their way across the room. They walked into it. Their eyes could now see clearly what was beyond.

Theta screamed and sprang back.

Protruding beyond the upper edges of the blankets were two skulls!

They were outside, breathing heavily, before they realized they had moved. Henry stared at the still open door, at the black hole through the white wall. It was the first time they had seen the aftermath of death. For their people, there were places into which bodies were placed. From them they vanished like all other refuse.

Shaken by the horror of it, they plunged into the forest in panic.

The sun dropped behind the ridge; the air chilled. Bones or no bones they had to find shelter for the night. Fire, naked flame, they never had seen or knew existed. Heat came from the walls of houses, with warm clothing and blankets.

Henry's lips firmed. Dead ones or no dead ones, they had to find something to keep them warm during the night.

Another house appeared. With fast beating hearts they entered. It was now warmer inside, but still chilly. They would still need coverings.

"Stay here," Henry said.

He strode into the nearest bedroom. Without stopping to look around, he stepped to the bed. Closing his eyes, he snatched off the bedding and fled into the livingroom.

Together, crouched in a corner, the bedding around them, they spent the night.

Sleep did not come immediately. Henry stared into the darkness, reviewing the day, putting together what he had discovered.

"It all fits," he said aloud.

"What does?" Theta asked.

"The forest, the dead trees, dead people. Something happened to everything, perhaps all at once. To the defrosters, the heaters, the bins. It must have been in winter. They crept into bed to keep warm, then starved to death. All of them."

"No, no!" Theta cried.

"But it did. And it's beginning to happen to us. Each year something stops working. The time may come when nothing works."

"We can't do anything..."

"Yes, we can."

"What?"

"Find out why—and try to stop it!"

III

AT dawn, stiff and shivering, they stumbled outside and by unspoken consent started directly up the slope.

By full daylight they found themselves in a chestnut grove. They stopped to fill their pouches. The last mile was made in the hot warmth of the sun. At the top of the ridge they stopped to rest.

As they did, they feasted their eyes on the orderly groves below them. But Henry's eyes were seeking out the squares of brown among the green of the lower valley. He counted twenty. Far more than he realized. The defrosters had gone dead at intervals, years apart.

His eyes crept up the valley to the structure at its head, with the captive lake behind it. It must be the House of the Old Ones the old stories told about but no one had ever seen. From it they had worked the magic that made the valley what it was. There, they said, they could be seen and heard to speak.

If he could get to see the Old Ones, ask them questions, perhaps they would tell him what should be done.

"Where are we going now?" Theta asked.

"To the House of the Old Ones. Up there," he said, pointing. "Perhaps they can tell us something."

She clutched his arm. "You can't!" she cried. "They'll... they'll..."

"They'll what?"

"I don't know! Something awful!"

"That's what they said about the learning house, but there was nothing in it but dust. I found, from the size of the chairs, that you had to start learning almost from the time you walked. I didn't even know how to start!"

"Then you didn't learn anything?"

"Nothing."

He came to his feet. "You don't have to go if you don't want to."

"I go where you go," she said with stubborn determination.

They had to dip down below the force fence to find water, then keep to the harvested portions where the Masters had gone to Town for the winter. They were lucky in finding houses where the keys had been lost, and thus had been left unlocked.

It was noon the next day when they forced themselves through the brush to find themselves within feet of their destination. With Henry leading they skirted it, looking for an entrance. Close to the center they found a deep indentation with a pair

of doors at its inner end. Cautiously, over the accumulated leaves and rubble, they moved toward them, wondering how to get inside.

The moment Henry came within three feet of them they flew open, inwards.

Theta screamed and sprang back. Henry stopped, startled.

"It's nothing to be scared of," he reassured her. "They say that the doors of Hall in Town used to open this way until someone broke a glass button on the wall. Come on."

There was another pair of glass doors that opened the same way as they approached. They led to a large reception room with a desk and chair opposite the door, chairs in a row along the wall. The floor was red tile, with a white line, about six inches wide, circling around to a door to the left.

Behind the desk was another door.

"**SIGHTSEERS,**" said a voice from out of nowhere that made Theta scream, "will follow the white line through the door to the left. Those with business in the offices will consult the receptionist. Please proceed."

Almost in a state of trance, Henry led the way along the white line. The door opened and admitted them, then a second door.

Here everything was spot-

less, dustless, though no one had been there for years.

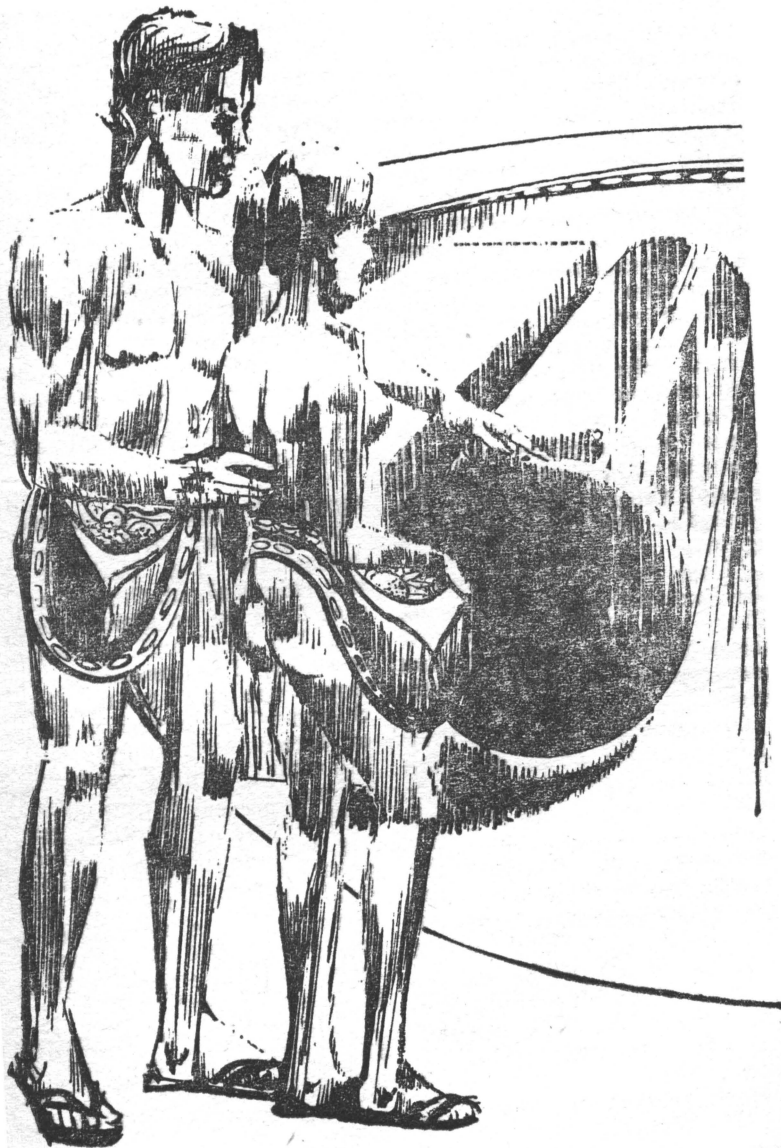
"You are now in the generating room," the voice began again. "The humidity is zero. All dirt and dust has been removed. What you bring in with you will be gone in five minutes."

They were on a balcony, looking down into a large space. On the floor below them seemed to be a huge cylinder, suspended between two metal-covered blocks. Only by the glimmering reflections from its polished surface could one tell that it was revolving.

"Before you is the main generator," the voice began again. "If you look closely you will note that the armature shaft does not touch its supporting bearings. It is held in suspension by polarized barumal obtained from Mars, so there is no friction and no wear. It is powered by water reduced to hydrogen and oxygen. The excess gases are used in the hoppers and storage bins to force out the air and preserve the foods on their way to their destinations. Some gas is piped to the disposal plants, in which all organic matter is converted into fertilizer."

Henry felt let down, cheated. It was just an empty building containing soundless machinery and a recorded lecture. No Old Ones. Nothing he wanted.

"Now behind you," the



voice began again, "you can see into the Control Room. From there every machine, store or house can have its power cut on or off. And if anything goes wrong with its circuit a button on the board flashes red until it is repaired. The glowing red button close to the window is the master switch that will shut off everything in case of an emergency, such as an earthquake."

Theta pressed her nose to the glass window. "Just think," she breathed, "push that and everything stops!"

Perhaps that's what happened in the other valley, thought Henry. Someone pushed the red button...then couldn't get things going again.

"Now follow the line to the next room and be seated. There you will be shown how the complex of the valley was constructed and how it operates."

On entering the hall they found several rows of seats facing a large screen. Soft music began as they entered. The hall darkened and the screen lit up, showing the valley as it was before the work began. Forest mainly, a few farms scattered along the narrow bottoms.

What startled Henry was that they were *above* the valley, looking down as they seemed to drift through the air. So the old tales were right! The Old Ones could

fly through the air! Here was proof of it.

He sat on the edge of his seat, breathing hard, waiting to see the Old Ones, giant of stature, who could tear a tree out of the ground or shovel away a mountain.

But the first humans he saw were men like himself and those in the valley. Men who pointed at places while others squinted in that direction through strange instruments. He wished he could follow the talk, but the men pronounced words differently and used many he had never heard. He had to use his eyes instead of his ears.

THEY started to work right where he was—he recognized the outlines of the ridges about them—but it was done by no giant extending his hand and showering magic. Big machines dug away the ground. Other things with no visible means of locomotion brought building materials up a broad road where there was not even a path now. A little man, graying and wrinkled, answered questions of their invisible guide, and, as he did, he gave directions to others. Was he one of the Old Ones, not as large as himself, no older than his father?

Behind him on the screen the building Henry was in was going up. And men were making it, ordinary men, not magic.

Were the Old Ones just ordinary men, their magic not strange words and motions but machines they manipulated with their hands and feet? They were not gods, just men who had begun to learn sitting in the little chairs in the learning house.

He watched them dig the trenches from the groves-to-be to the hidden storage bins, put in the pipes lined with gravity-repellent barumal, lay the snakelike cables that he had seen occasionally where erosion had exposed them. He saw the building of Town, the Master's houses and the final planting of the groves. The record ended.

Henry remained staring at the blank screen until Theta nudged him and brought him back to the present.

The white line led on, past large offices on one side, on the other windows looking down into a vast storeroom that contained parts for repairing everything in the valley. The Old Ones knew that, some day, things would start breaking down and had prepared for it. They had not prepared for life dropping into routine, interest in progress being lost.

What need was there to spend years in school when everything was already done for you?

The picture had shown some buildings close to the cliffs on one side that looked

like the apartment houses in Town. They broke through the brush and found one.

Other than for dust it was in good condition. The food bins were filled, but the contents had dried to the hardness of stone. As soon as they were emptied they began to refill; but it was two days of constant emptying before eatable fruit began to appear.

By the end of a week they had the rooms they needed cleaned and some of the brush about the place cut clear.

It left Henry free to roam the plant. He sat again and again through the record of construction, understanding a little more each time. He noted, for instance, where what was now forest at the entrance to the valley was once farmland, laid out in squarish, varicolored fields. He found his way into the control room, discovered how to trace the lines from the board to their end on the large map on the wall across from the board.

One day, while it was snowing heavily above the permanent defrosters, he heard a buzzer sound and saw a light turn from green to red. He traced it down. It was the damaged house where they had first taken refuge.

There was plenty of time to ponder. Each time it ended in the same question and the same conclusion. Some-

thing had to be begun before it was too late. The valley had to be stirred out of its antipathy.

But how?

One morning, before dawn, he sat up in bed. Theta asked what was wrong.

"I'm going to the meeting in Town at Peach Blossom Time," he announced. "Something has to be done."

Theta clutched his arm. "You can't! They'll kill you!"

"I have to! Do you want our children, or our children's children, to die like those people on the other side of the ridge?"

"No, but..."

"I have to go—have to make them listen."

IV

THE Peach Blossom Time Meeting was always the best in the year. Those not already in Town were on the nearby bottom groves. After it, the Masters would return to the upper orchards, and the youth work parties would start their rounds. During the three-day meeting there would be dances and parties, an exchange of news while the assembled Elders would judge disputes, pass on the qualifications of Masters, deposing the lazy and unfit, selecting couples to take their places. It was the one time of the year when Henry could get the ear of everyone.

They traveled down unseen, slipping into unlocked houses for food and the night. They entered Town at the beginning of the first meeting. They made it unrecognized to the Hall.

It was not crowded. The day was bland; most preferred to stay outside and watch the proceedings on the visiscreen. Henry and Theta slipped into a section to one side and awaited the clearance of the immediate business of the Elders.

There was none of importance. Within an hour all that was pending was cleared up. The Senior Elder, emaciated and with shaking hands, faced the audience.

"Any further business?" he quavered.

Henry stood up. "Yes," he called out. "Something very important."

Theta fully intended to follow him, but she found she could not move. It was as if she was tied to the chair. The more practical of the two, she knew that the men he was facing would refuse to face the facts. All he was doing was placing himself in their hands. And that meant death!

The elders peered in his direction as he gained the aisle. Ole twisted about in his seat and was the first one to recognize him. For a moment he stared open-mouthed.

"It's Henry Callis!" he cried out. "He's proscribed

for learning witchery! Grab him!"

Henry stopped before him. Ole's words became a gurgle and dried up.

"If I'm a witch," Henry said loudly, "I'm a good person to keep away from. Whether I am or not, I have something important to tell you. And all of you had better listen!"

He started again for the platform, those along the aisle shrinking back as he passed. The Elders, from fat to withered, with the same uneasy expressions on their faces, watched silently as he climbed to the stage and faced them. He could feel their chill hostility. He knew now that he had done wrong but it was too late to undo it. He stopped a short distance from their table, half turned so the audience could hear him.

"I have been living in the houses of the Old Ones at the head of the valley, beyond the defrosters and the forest above them. And I also have been up to the top of the East Range, expecting to look over the edge of the world. But what I saw was another valley just like this one. It had a force fence, defrosters, hoppers, houses. Everything this valley has, except for one thing: living inhabitants. There were people in the houses. Dead people. Reduced to bones, the

bones of people who had died from hunger and cold when everything in their valley suddenly ceased to work.

"That is what sent me to the House of the Old Ones, to see if I could find out what had happened. I found out there that the Old Ones were not giants who did things with magic, but people like ourselves who used machinery to make things. Just as we make clothing with machinery here in Town. They had machines that could fly through the air. They could go the length of the valley in an hour in a road machine. With machines they built these buildings, dug the trenches for the hoppers, did everything. They were just men. Men who had studied in the learning houses from the time they were tiny children. And I found out more..."

He stopped to take a quick look about the still hall. He felt the hostility.

"And I found out more," he repeated. "I found that, in this valley, twenty banks of defrosters have already failed. Eleven houses cannot be used, plus two taverns and one factory here in town. It shows that our own system is breaking down. Some day—perhaps tomorrow, perhaps not until the time of our grandchildren—everything will stop as it did in the next valley. If we want to keep living, we must start to learn how to keep these

machines running. At the House of the Old Ones there is a vast store of parts and visigraph records showing how it should be done. I ask you all to come up and see the record they have there of building the things in the valley! See the machine that keeps everything running. Then let me have a band of youths to start studying the records until we find out how to keep things running."

There was silence after he finished. The Elders eyed him, uneasy, suspicious.

From the seats of the hall came Ole's voice.

"Don't believe him!" he shouted. "He wants to get us up there so he can bewitch us—like he did Theta! Take him out and stone him!"

Someone on the other side of the hall echoed the cry. In a moment it seemed that everyone was roaring it, rising in their seats, shaking fists. The Senior Elder motioned to the Hallmaster. He stepped forward with two husky assistants who grabbed Henry.

"Put him in the strong room," quavered the Senior Elder. "Keep him there until the day for punishment."

Roughly Henry was pushed around, led out a rear door to the stage. The day of punishment! Three nights and two days to live!

HE awoke the morning of the third night feeling cold. He opened his eyes to

find himself in total darkness.

For a moment he thought himself free, hiding out in some deserted building, that all that had happened lately was a dream. But from outside he heard a panicky voice crying that the lights in his apartment were out and it was getting cold.

It had happened! Far sooner than he expected, it had happened!

But what would Theta do? She had gotten away, he was sure, as no one mentioned her. Theta, that was it! She had gone to the plant, pushed the button, condemning herself and all the others to death! But that was not like Theta. She was too clever...

That was it! Why hadn't he thought of it! It was a message, a challenge, a tool which he could use to free himself—get them to help him!

More relaxed, he lay back. Dawn was already showing up over the ridge. More people would be getting up, more people rushing out into the streets in panic. They would remember him, come to his cell imploring him to do something. He would demand what he wanted. They could comply—or face disaster.

What should he demand?

Someone came down the street shouting for the Senior Elder. The volume of excited voices increased with each minute: voices demand-

ing to know why there was no light, no heat, no water. Asking each other if they had them. Hysteria mounting each minute.

Perhaps it would be a time before they thought of him, but they would be before him before the day was over.

"It's that witch in the strong room!" bellowed Ole's voice outside. "He did it by magic! Kill him before he strikes us all dead!"

The cry was taken up, "The witch, kill the witch! He did it! He is right in there, kill him!"

Cold terror seized Henry.

Theta's scheme was back-firing! There would be no reasoning with a superstitious, hysterical mob! Well, at least it hurried things up by a few hours. More composed, he came to his feet as they burst through the back door of the Hall and stampeded towards the door to the cell.

He even smiled slightly. If they thought him a witch...

The key was in the lock. They had no difficulty getting in. He stood in the center of the room, the slight smile still on his lips.

He raised his forearm to a horizontal position, pointed his index finger in their direction.

"Who wants to die first?" he cried above the noise they made.

The onrush into the cell stopped abruptly, those in

front pushing back against those behind them. They followed his finger with fascinated eyes as he fanned it across the group of them. He stopped, his finger pointing to a fat, applecheeked grovemaister. The man shrieked, turned about and began fighting his way back into the corridor.

One man was tripped up and fell. There was a wild shriek of terror. Men shouted that he was killing the leaders by magic. To Henry it seemed only an instant before the passageway was back in its usual silence. He stepped out of his cell. He could see a mass of people about the street door surrounding the panicked men. The passage in the other direction seemed empty.

He turned that way, passed onto the rear of the stage, felt his way across it in the darkness to the steps and down into the aisle. Calmly and without haste he passed through the front doors into the next street and walked, unrecognized in the half light and excitement, out of town.

IT was dark when he arrived in the upper valley.

Theta was sitting at a table. She sprang up and rushed into his arms with a glad cry.

"It worked! They let you go?"

He looked about. "You turned the power back on?"

"No. The plant and these buildings have a separate power source of their own. I wasn't going to touch it until I knew you were safe."

He drew an apple from a bin and munched it. "We'd better turn things on again before the fruit spoils. Come on..."

The button, Henry knew, turned on as well as off. Henry pressed down the button, stepped back to watch the large battery of lights flash on, but nothing happened. Had Theta somehow wrecked—ah! The red buttons all began to glow again. Then, a minute later, a bank of lights switched to green, then another and another. But Henry noted that an occasional light did not change.

Within the hour the board was lighted up completely.

Henry could barely stumble back to his quarters as the reaction set in compounded with disappointment. He flung himself on his bed.

"I have failed," he kept muttering. "I have failed in everything. They won't listen. No one will!"

Theta wisely kept silent and covered him up.

On the second day they heard the sound of a group breaking their way through the forest. They slipped into the brush, ready to retire to a hiding place they had ready. But the dozen people who appeared in the clearing did not have the look of a vengeful

mob. Several were almost elderly, some were boys, two were young women.

Henry stepped into the open, but not too close to them. "What do you want?" he demanded.

They looked at each other, waiting for the other to speak first.

"What do you want?" Henry directed his question to an elderly grovemaker.

"I want to know what's happening," he began. "My hopper has stopped working, my defrosters were dimming. They blame me..."

A young man, strong, with alert eyes, stepped forward. "You are right about that other valley," he said. "I have been in it myself. I don't want that to happen here. I want to learn."

"I do too!" shrilled one of the teenagers. "I sneaked into a learning house, too, but I couldn't understand."

The others gave their reasons, all varied, but with the same intent: they wanted to learn. Sometimes how to repair an individual object, others longed for general knowledge. But they were willing to face the rest of the valley with him to get it.

Henry took a deep, happy breath. There would be others. Slowly but surely the group would grow.

"Come in," he said. "Rest and eat. Then we'll start making plans." **END**

MONOLITHS AND MIRACLES

SOME years ago this department, wearing, and reacting with, short pants, read in *Weird Tales* an enchanting story written in that pulp-poetic style which was so easy to come by then, and which is so seldom seen any more; it was about a bird type ET whose space ship landed here to be met (I forget the exact circumstances) by a prosodic misfit with whom this bird fell in love-real-love. The point, I think, was that it had to be love-real-love, extra-mundane, even ethereal, because nothing else was possible, this chick being a chick. At the end she popped him into her space ship and off they went into infinity murmuring poems to each other.

I didn't understand the love-real-love bit at that age and at this age I still don't. What made the story stick in my mind so was that once they were aboard she reached

out the claw he wasn't holding and plucked a string which gave out a deep pure note, upon which the doors slid shut and the ship took off.

It pleased me because in those days, as in these days, sf's space ships were one tangled mass of wiring, controls were toggles, rheostats, jewel-lights, dials, meters and buttons, and gross operations like opening doors or disposing of dishes were done with handwheels and levers. Every time I was flung a bowl of this electrical spaghetti with relay sauce I swallowed it. But there was always something about it that didn't quite agree with me.

IT was not until many years later, when I saw a folio of fifty-year-old pen-and-ink drawings which purported to predict the future—our present—that I realized what had bothered me about the clut-

tered consoles and the braided festoons of wire under them.

These drawings were in many respects astute and thoughtful predictions. There were aircraft and there were streets choked with traffic and there were clusters of tall buildings. That the buildings ran only eight and nine stories and the aircraft were mostly blimp-like balloons were errors only in degree; the artist certainly had the right idea. The one thing in which he was dead wrong was in the nature of the traffic, which, but for some bicycles and a handcart or two, was exclusively horse-drawn.

It simply never occurred to the man that one day soon there just wouldn't be any horses in the streets.

It's an easy mistake to make, and one can forgive it in the sf of the thirties. It is not so easy to forgive in today's space yarns. One of the balloons in the folio was powered by two horses running on a treadmill. Most of the space-ship controls in current sf are operated by IBM cards or tapes, which in its way is quite as ludicrous; the computer is merely hitched, like the horses, to the same old knobs and dials.

It would seem that a good hard creative effort needs to be made to give our faithful readers a glimpse of something in the future at least as original as a pure-plucked

string. Especially since here-and-now science bids fair to relegating circuits and wiring to the bin where they threw the gasoliers.

A recent release from Westinghouse contains three diagrams of a device—it happens to be a light telemetering system—and a listing of components and specifications for each. *Yesterday's* had a volume of 4 cubic inches, weighed 26 grams, had an input of 5 watts, 16 components, 18 soldered connections. *Today's* takes up 1 cubic inch, weighs 7 grams, eats $\frac{3}{4}$ of a watt, has 14 parts and 15 soldered junctions. *Tomorrow's* (and that means tomorrow morning, gentle reader) takes up less than a thousandth of a cubic inch, weighs a fiftieth of a gram, uses three fiftieths of a watt, has (count 'em) one component, and two soldered junctions.

This isn't miniaturization; not exactly. Miniaturization does wonders as far as it goes, as for example when they packed a whole radio transmitter and receiver, as well as pulse-counting, arming, power supply and firing gear, into the front end of anti-aircraft shell... a space that wouldn't accomodate two king-size decks of cigarettes. Make everything smaller and you shuck off dead weight and increase ruggedness; you pay dearly for it in increased demands for precision and in

the acquisition of some truly vicious problems in heat dissipation.

WESTINGHOUSE (and others) have attacked the problem from a totally new direction. Investigating the nature of solids, and especially those puzzling substances called semi-conductors, they have come up with a long string of what they call "molecular electronic systems" and have already taken them out of the laboratory-curiosity stage. They have a phonograph hooked up to a dime-sized preamp and a half-dollar-sized amplifier which delivers an honest 5 watts at a clean frequency response from 0 to 20,000 cycles. They have a thing no bigger than a biscuit where 110 volts AC goes in one side and 9 volts DC comes out the other—9 DC volts without waver or flicker. They can show you a radio with two amplifying stages which will tune right across the broadcast band and which consists of a stack of six wafers each smaller than a dime. If you'd like to get technical, they'll demonstrate a number of thumbnail-sized monoliths—a word which means 'single rock'—which are respectively a 2-stage video amplifier, a frequency-selective amplifier with notch filter in a feedback loop around the amplifier structure; a choice selection of multivibrators; a variable potentiometer; a goodly

THEODORE STURGEON

number of multiposition switches; an analog-to-digital converter; and a two-stage peltier-effect cooler for bringing the temperatures of infrared detectors down to efficient-handling levels.

Had enough? The researchers haven't. For example, they've done away with the old frequency-crystal, sandwich-transistor techniques of sawing ingots, x-ray orienting, lapping, etching and polishing. They don't so much *make* monoliths as *grow* them. They can grow a pure germanium ribbon, an eighth of an inch wide and a few thousandths thick, continuously at 6 to 12 inches a minute; and still that isn't all. They can carry on diffusion, plating and evaporation processes on the crystal as it leaves the melt, producing, just for example, a string of miniscule amplifiers which can be cut off at any length to give any desired gain. And as if that were not enough, they are just perfecting a process for the continuous production of two-and three-layer sandwiches of these semiconductors, so that soon they'll have really sophisticated, infinitesimal, starve-at-the-input flood-at-the-output devices by the yard.

Isn't it past time, then, to get the horses off the streets and the washboards out of the back yard, and clean up those control consoles? **END**

●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

The Girls From Fieu Dayol

They were lovely and
quick to learn —
and their only faults
were little ones!

UP until the moment when he first looked into Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's *History of English Literature*, Herbert Quidley's penchant for old books had netted him nothing in the way of romance and intrigue. Not that he was a stranger to either. Far from it. But hitherto the background for both had been bedrooms and bars, not libraries.

On page 21 of the Taine tome he happened upon a sheet of yellow copy paper folded in four. Unfolding it, he read:

asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj

Cai: Sities towms copeis wotnid. Gind snoll doper nckli! Wilbe Fieu Dayol fot ig habe mot toseo knwo—te bijk weil en snoll doper—Klio, asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj

Since when, Quidley wondered, refolding the paper and putting it back in the book, had high-school typing students taken to reading Taine? Thoughtfully he replaced the book on the shelf and moved deeper into the literature section.

He had just taken down Xenophon's *Anabasis* when he saw the girl walk in the door.

Let it be said forthwith that old books were not the only item on Herbert Quidley's

penchant-list. He liked old wood, too, and old paintings, not to mention old wine and old whiskey. But most of all he liked young girls. He especially liked them when they looked the way Helen of Troy must have looked when Paris took one gander at her and started building his ladder. This one was tall, with hyacinth hair and liquid blue eyes, and she had a Grecian symmetry of shape that would have made Paris' eyes pop had he been around to take notice. Paris wasn't, but Quidley's eyes, did the job.

After coming in the door, the girl deposited a book on the librarian's desk and headed for the literature section. Quickly Quidley lowered his eyes to the *Anabasis* and henceforth followed her progress out of their corners. When she came to the O's she paused, took down a book and glanced through it. Then she replaced it and moved on to the P's...the Q's...the R's. Barely three feet from him she paused again and took down Taine's *History of English Literature*.

He simply could not believe it. The odds against two persons taking an interest in so esoteric a volume on a single night in a single library were ten thousand to one. And yet there was no gainsaying that the volume was in the girl's hands, and that she was riffling through it with the air of a seasoned browser.

Presently she returned the book to the shelf, selected another—seemingly at random—and took it over to the librarian's desk. She waited stately while the librarian processed it, then tucked it under her arm and whisked out the door into the misty April night. As soon as she disappeared, Quidley stepped over to the T's and took Taine down once more. Just as he had suspected. The makeshift bookmark was gone.

He remembered how the asdf-;lkj exercise had given way to several lines of gibberish and then reappeared again. A camouflaged message? Or was it merely what it appeared to be on the surface—the efforts of an impatient typing student to type before his time?

He returned Taine to the shelf. After learning from the librarian that the girl's name was Kay Smith, he went out and got in his hardtop. The name rang a bell. Halfway home he realized why. The typing exercise had contained the word "Cai", and if you pronounced it with hard c, you got "Kai"—or "Kay". Obviously, then, the exercise had been a message, and had been deliberately inserted in a book no average person would dream of borrowing.

By whom—her boy friend?

Quidley winced. He was allergic to the term. Not that he ever let the presence of a boy friend deter him when he set

out to conquer, but because the term itself brought to mind the word "fiance," and the word "fiance" brought to mind still another word, one which repelled him violently. I.e., "marriage". Just the same, he decided to keep Taine's *History* under observation for a while.

HER boy friend turned out to be her girl friend, and her girl friend turned out to be a tall and lissome, lovely with a Helenesque air of her own. From the vantage point of a strategically located reading table, where he was keeping company with his favorite little magazine, *The Zeitgeist*, Quidley watched her take a seemingly haphazard route to the shelf where Taine's *History* reposed, take the volume down, surreptitiously slip a folded sheet of yellow paper between its pages and return it to the shelf.

After she left he wasted no time in acquainting himself with the second message. It was as unintelligible as the first:

*asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf
;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj
asdf ;lkj Cai: Habe wot-
nid ig ist ending ifeder-
erer te. T'lide sid Fieu
Dayol po jestig toseo
knwo, bijk weil en snoll
doper entling— Yoolna.
asdf ;lkj asdf ;lkj asdf
;lkj asdf ;lkj*

Well, perhaps not quite as unintelligible. He knew, at least, who Cai was, and he knew—from the reappearance of the words *wotnid*, *Fieu Dayol* and *snoll doper*—that the two communications were in the same code. And certainly it was reasonable to assume that the last word—*Yoolna*—was the name of the girl he had just seen, and that she was a different person from the *Klio* whose name had appended the first message.

He refolded the paper, replaced it between the pages, returned the book to the shelf and went back to the reading table and *The Zeitgeist*.

Kay didn't show up till almost closing time, and he was beginning to think that perhaps she wouldn't come around for the pickup till tomorrow when she finally walked in the door. She employed the same tactics she had employed the previous night, arriving, as though by chance, at the T-section and transferring the message with the same undetectable legerdemain to her purse. This time, when she walked out the door, he was not far behind her.

She climbed into a sleek convertible and pulled into the street. It took him but a moment to gain his hardtop and start out after her. When, several blocks later, she pulled to the curb in

front of an all-night coffee bar, he followed suit. After that, it was merely a matter of following her inside.

He decided on Operation Spill-the-sugar. It had stood him in good stead before, and he was rather fond of it. The procedure was quite simple. First you took note of the position of the sugar dispensers, then you situated yourself so that your intended victim was between you and the nearest one, then you ordered coffee without sugar in a low voice, and after the counterman or counter-girl had served you, you waited till he/she was out of earshot and asked your i.v. to please pass the sugar. When she did so you let the dispenser slip from your fingers in such a way that some of its contents spilled on her lap—

"I'm terribly sorry," he said, righting it. "Here, let me brush it off."

"IT'S all right, it's only sugar," she said, laughing.

"I'm hopelessly clumsy," he continued smoothly, brushing the gleaming crystals from her pleated skirt, noting the clean sweep of her thighs. "I beseech you to forgive me."

"You're forgiven," she said, and he noticed then that she spoke with a slight accent.

"If you like, you can send

it to the cleaners and have them send the bill to me. My address is 61 Park Place." He pulled out his wallet, chose an appropriate card, and handed it to her—

Herbert Quidley: *Profiliste*

Her forehead crinkled. "*Profiliste?*"

"I paint profiles with words," he said. "You may have run across some of my pieces in the Better Magazines. I employ a variety of pseudonyms, of course."

"How interesting." She pronounced it "aninteresting."

"Not famous profiles, you understand. Just profiles that strike my fancy." He paused. She had raised her cup to her lips and was taking a dainty sip. "You have a rather striking profile yourself, Miss—"

"Smith. Kay Smith." She set the cup back on the counter and turned and faced him. For a second her eyes seemed to expand till they preoccupied his entire vision, till he could see nothing but their disturbingly clear—and suddenly cold—blueness. Panic touched him, then vanished when she said, "Would you really consider word-painting my profile, Mr. Quidley?"

Would he! "When can I call?"

She hesitated for a moment. Then: "I think it will be better if I call on you. There are quite a number of

people living in our—our house. I'm afraid the quarters would be much too cramped for an artist like yourself to concentrate."

Quidley glowed. Usually it required two or three days, and sometimes a week, to reach the apartment phase. "Fine," he said. "When can I expect you?"

She stood up and he got to his feet beside her. She was even taller than he had thought. In fact, if he hadn't been wearing Cuban heels, she'd have been taller than he was. "I'll be in town night after next," she said. "Will nine o'clock be convenient for you?"

"Perfectly."

"Good-by for now then, Mr. Quidley."

He was so elated that when he arrived at his apartment he actually did try to write a profile. His own, of course. He sat down at his custom-built chrome-trimmed desk, inserted a blank sheet of paper in his custom-built typewriter and tried to arrange his thoughts. But as usual his mind raced ahead of the moment, and he saw the title, *Self Profile*, nestling noticeably on the contents page of one of the Better Magazines, and presently he saw the piece itself in all its splendid array of colorful rhetoric, sparkling imagery and scintillating wit, occupying a two-page spread.

It was some time before he

returned to reality, and when he did the first thing that met his eyes was the uncompromisingly blank sheet of paper. Hurriedly he typed out a letter to his father, requesting an advance on his allowance, then, after a tall glass of vintage wine, he went to bed.

IN telling him that she would be in town two nights hence, Kay had unwittingly apprised him that there would be no exchange of messages until that time, so the next evening he skipped his vigil at the library. The following evening, however, after readying his apartment for the forthcoming assignation, he hid himself to his reading-table post and took up *The Zeitgeist* once again.

He had not thought it possible that there could be a third such woman.

And yet there she was, walking in the door, tall and blue-eyed and graceful; dark of hair and noble of mien; browsing in the philosophy section now, now the fiction section, now moving leisurely into the literature aisle and toward the T's...

The camouflage had varied, but the message was typical enough:

*fdsa jkl; fdsa jkl; fdsa
jkl; fdsa jkl; fdsa jkl;
fdsa jkl; Cai: Gind en
snoll doper nckli! Wot-*

nid antwaterer Fieu Dayol hid jestig snoll doper ifedererer te. Dep gogensplo snoll dopers ensing! —Gorka. fdsa jkl; fdsa jkl; fdsa jkl; fdsa jkl;

Judging from the repeated use of the words, *snoll doper* were the topic of the day. Annoyed, Quidley replaced the message and put the book back on the shelf. Then he returned to his apartment to await Kay.

He wondered what her reaction would be if he asked her point-blank what a *snoll doper* was; whether she would reveal the nature of the amateur secret society to which she and Klio and Yoolna and Gorka belonged. It virtually had to be an amateur secret society. Unless, of course, they were foreigners. But what on earth foreign organization would be quixotic enough to employ Taine's *History of English Literature* as a communications medium when there was a telephone in every drugstore and a mailbox on every corner?

Somehow the words "what on earth foreign organization" got turned around in his mind and became "what foreign organization on earth" and before he could summon his common sense to succor him, he experienced a rather bad moment. By the time the door chimes sound-

ed he was his normal self again.

He straightened his tie with nervous fingers, checked to see if his shirt cuffs protruded the proper length from his coat sleeves, and looked around the room to see if everything was in place. Everything was—the typewriter uncovered and centered on the chrome-trimmed desk, with the sheaf of crinkly first-sheets beside it; the reference books stacked imposingly nearby; *Harper's*, *The Atlantic* and *The Saturday Review* showing conspicuously in the magazine rack; the newly opened bottle of bourbon and the two snifter glasses on the sideboard; the small table set cozily for two—

THE chimes sounded again. He opened the door.

She walked in with a demure, "Hello." He took her wrap. When he saw what she was wearing he had to tilt his head back so that his eyes wouldn't fall out of their sockets.

Skin, mostly, in the upper regions. White, glowing skin on which her long hair lay like forest pools. As for her dress, it was as though she had fallen forward into immaculate snow, half-burying her breasts before catching herself on her elbows, then turning into a sitting position, the snow clinging to her skin in a glistening veneer;

arising finally to her feet, resplendently attired.

He went over to the sideboard, picked up the bottle of bourbon. She followed. He set the two snifter glasses side by side and tilted the bottle. "Say when." "When!" "I admire your dress—never saw anything quite like it." "Thank you. The material is something new. Feel it." "It's—it's almost like foam rubber. Cigarette?" "Thanks... Is something wrong, Mr. Quidley?" "No, of course not. Why?" "Your hands are trembling." "Oh. I'm—I'm afraid it's the present company, Miss Smith." "Call me Kay."

They touched glasses: "Your liquor is as exquisite as your living room, Herbert. I shall have to come here more often." "I hope you will, Kay." "Though such conduct, I'm told, is morally reprehensible on the planet Earth." "Not in this particular circle. Your hair is lovely." "Thank you... You haven't mentioned my perfume yet. Perhaps I'm standing too far away... There!" "It's—it's as lovely as your hair, Kay." "Um, kiss me again." "I—I never figured—I mean, I engaged a caterer to serve us dinner at 9:30." "Call him up. Make it 10:30."

THE following evening found Quidley on tenterhooks. The *snoll-doper* mystery had acquired a new

tang. He could hardly wait till the next message transfer took place.

He decided to spend the evening plotting the epic novel which he intended to write someday. He set to work immediately. He plotted mentally, of course—notes were for the hacks and the other commercial non-geniuses who infested the modern literary world. Closing his eyes, he saw the whole vivid panorama of epic action and grand adventure flowing like a mighty and majestic river before his literary vision: the authentic and awe-inspiring background; the hordes of colorful characters; the handsome virile hero, the compelling Helenesque heroine... God, it was going to be great! The best thing he'd ever done! See, already there was a crowd of book lovers in front of the bookstore, staring into the window where the new Herbert Quidley was on display, trying to force its way into the jammed interior... *Cut to interior.* **FIRST EAGER CUSTOMER:** Tell me quickly, are there any more copies of the new Herbert Quidley left? **BOOK CLERK:** A few. You don't know how lucky you are to get here before the first printing ran out. **FIRST EAGER CUSTOMER:** Give me a dozen. I want to make sure that my children and my children's children have a

plentiful supply. BOOK CLERK: Sorry. Only one to a customer. Next? SECOND EAGER CUSTOMER: Tell me quickly, are...there...any...more...copies...of—

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ...

Message no. 4, except for a slight variation in camouflage, ran true to form:

a;sldkfj a;sldkfj a;sldkfj
a;sldkfj Cai: *Habe te
snoll dopers ensing?*
Wotnid ne Fieu Dayol
*ist ifederereret, hid jestig
snoll doper. Gind ed,
olro—Jilka. a;sldkfj
a;sldkfj a;sldkfj a;sldkfj*

Quidley sighed. What, he asked himself, standing in the library aisle and staring at the indecipherable words, was a normal girl like Kay doing in such a childish secret society? From the way she and her correspondents carried on you'd almost think they were Martian girl scouts on an interplanetary camping trip, trying for their merit badges in communications!

You could hardly call Kay a girl scout, though.

Nevertheless, she was the key figure in the *snoll-doper* enigma. The fact annoyed him, especially when he considered that a *snoll doper*, for all he knew, could be anything from a Chinese fortune cooky to an H-bomb.

He remembered Kay's odd accent. Was that the way a

person would speak English if her own language ran something like "*ist ifedereret, hid jestig snoll doper adwo?*"

He remembered the way she had looked at him in the coffee bar.

He remembered the material of her dress.

He remembered how she had come to his room.

"I didn't know you had a taste for Taine."

Her voice seemed to come from far away, but she was standing right beside him, tall and bewitching; Helenesque as ever. Her blue eyes became great wells into which he found himself falling. With an effort, he pulled himself back. "You're early tonight," he said lamely.

She appropriated the message, read it. "Put the book back," she said presently. Then, when he complied: "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"I'm going to deliver a *snoll doper* to *Jilka*. After that I'm going to take you home to meet my folks."

The relieved sigh he heard was his own.

They climbed into her convertible and she nosed it into the moving line of cars. "How long have you been reading my mail?" she asked.

"Since the night before I met you."

"Was that the reason you spilled the sugar?"

"Part of the reason," he said. "What's a *snoll doper*?"

She laughed. "I don't think I'd better tell you just yet."

He sighed again. "But if Jilka wanted a *snoll doper*," he said after a while, "why in the world didn't she call you up and say so?"

"Regulations." She pulled over to the curb in front of a brick apartment building. "This is where Jilka lives. I'll explain when I get back."

He watched her get out, walk up the walk to the entrance and let herself in. He leaned his head back on the seat, lit a cigarette and exhaled a mixture of smoke and relief. On the way to meet her folks. So it was just an ordinary secret society after all. And here he'd been thinking that she was the key figure in a Martian plot to blow up Earth—

Her folks!

Abruptly the full implication of the words got through to him, and he sat bolt-upright on the seat. He was starting to climb out of the car when he saw Kay coming down the walk. Anyway, running away wouldn't solve his problem. A complete disappearing act was in order, and a complete disappearing act would take time. Meanwhile he would play along with her.

A station wagon came up behind them, slowed, and matched its speed with

theirs. "Someone's following us," Quidley said.

"Probably Jilka."

Five minutes later the station wagon turned down a side street and disappeared. "She's no longer with us," Quidley said.

"She's got to pick someone up. She'll meet us later."

"At your folks?"

"At the ship."

The city was thinning out around them now, and a few stars were visible in the night sky. Quidley watched them thoughtfully for a while. Then: "What ship?" he said.

"The one we're going to *Fieu Dayol* on."

"*Fieu Dayol*?"

"Persei 17 to you. I said I was going to take you home to meet my folks, didn't I?"

"In other words, you're kidnapping me."

She shook her head vehemently. "I most certainly am not! Neither according to interstellar law or your own. When you compromised me, you made yourself liable in the eyes of both."

"But why pick on me? There must be plenty of men on *Fieu Dayol*. Why don't you marry one of them?"

"For two reasons: one, you're the particular man who compromised me. Two, there are *not* plenty of men on *Fieu Dayol*. Our race is identical to yours in everything except population-balance between the sexes. At

periodic intervals the women on Fieu Dayol so greatly outnumber the men that those of us who are temperamentally and emotionally unfitted to become spinsters have to look for *wotnids*—or mates—on other worlds. It's quite legal and quite respectable. As a matter of fact, we even have schools specializing in alien cultures to expedite our activities. Our biggest problem is the Interstellar statute forbidding us the use of local communications services and forbidding us to appear in public places. It was devised to facilitate the prosecution of interstellar black marketeers, but we're subject to it, too, and have to contrive communications systems of our own."

"But why were all the messages addressed to you?"

"They weren't messages. They were requisitions. I'm the ship's stock girl."

APRIL fields stretched darkly away on either side of the highway. Presently she turned down a rutted road between two of them and they bounced and swayed back to a black blur of trees. "Here we are," she said.

Gradually he made out the sphere. It blended so flawlessly with its background that he wouldn't have been able to see it at all if he hadn't been informed of its existence. A gangplank sloped down from an open

lock and came to rest just within the fringe of the trees.

Lights danced in the darkness behind them as another car jounced down the rutted road. "Jilka," Kay said. "I wonder if she got him."

Apparently she had. At least there was a man with her—a rather woebegone, wilted creature who didn't even look up as they passed. Quidley watched them ascend the gangplank, the man in the lead, and disappear into the ship.

"Next," Kay said.

Quidley shook his head. "You're not taking *me* to another planet!"

She opened her purse and pulled out a small metallic object. "A little while ago you asked me what a *snoll doper* was," she said. "Unfortunately interstellar law severely limits us in our choice of marriageable males, and we can take only those who refuse to conform to the sexual mores of their own societies." She did something to the object that caused it to extend itself into a long, tubular affair. "This is a *snoll doper*."

She prodded his ribs. "March," she said.

He marched. Halfway up the plank he glanced back over his shoulder for a better look at the object pressed against his back.

It bore a striking resemblance to a shotgun. **END**

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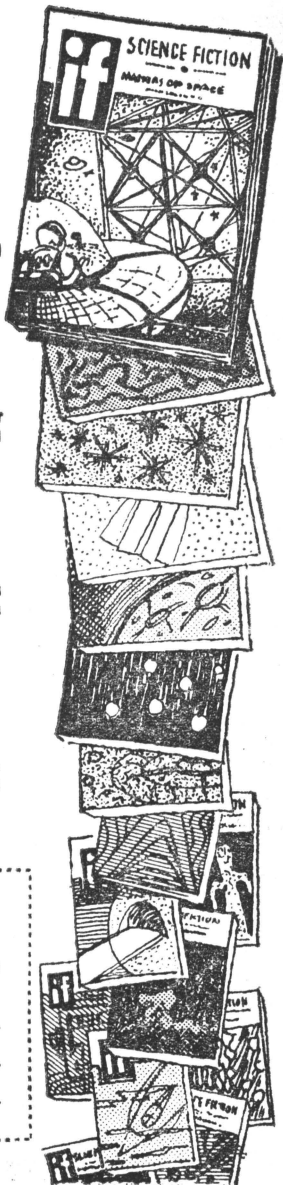
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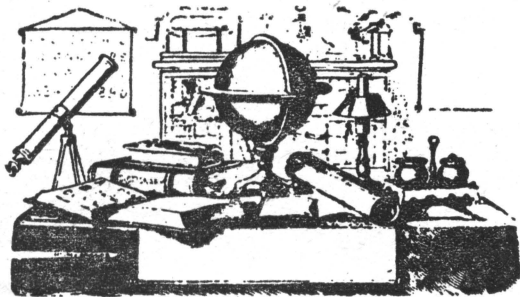
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science briefs

THEY said the atom was indivisible, and then we learned about electrons and nuclei. Now we learn that inside the nucleus are neutrons and protons, and inside the proton is a core surrounded by two clouds of positive electricity. The neutron has a cloud of positive electricity surrounding a cloud of negative electricity surrounding a core, in such a way that the electrical total is neutral. The clouds are made up of mesons. Dr. R. Hofstadter of Stamford, who informs us of all this, says of mesons that they are probably units of the force that binds the atoms to-

gether. Dr. W.H. Bostick of Stevens Institute reports that quantum theory demands that elementary particles—mesons, among some 30 others—have infinite mass, and quantum theorists just have to ignore this. Dr. Bostick maintains that the particles are toroidal, or doughnut-shaped, and says that this is the only way he can account for what physicists have called a mystery: the particles' mass, spin, charge and magnetic moment.

Lichens have no roots, and this incidental information may hold up or even cancel the most science-fictiony of

all projected science projects, the creation of a new harbor at Cape Thompson, Alaska, by means of atomic bomb blasts. It seems that lichens absorb many times the fallout that rooted plants do, since they get it right out of the air and not diluted up through the ground. Caribou eat lichens and Eskimos eat caribou. Even now, caribou show five times the strontium 90 in their bones and antlers than they should, considering that Alaska averages only about 20% as much fallout as the rest of the country abandoned.

SCIENCE NON-FICTION STORY

Once upon a time there was a clever man named Gernot Zippe who was fascinated by our efforts to get U-235 out of a mixture with U-238 so we could make atom bombs. We tried it with a centrifuge but found it would need one which would spin at 40 thousand rpm without flying to bits, so we built one of the biggest factories in the world, the K-25 plant at Oak Ridge, and did it by gaseous diffusion instead. So Mr. Zippe went ahead and designed such a centrifuge anyhow and while he was interned in Russia he built one. Then he built another one at the University of Virginia. Now he's back in Germany and has a factory all his own where he

builds lots of them. Brazil just bought two. They only cost about five grand apiece, and 50 of them could get you a hundred pounds of pretty pure U-235 in a year, which is quite enough for anyone anywhere, wouldn't you say? Talks in Geneva are designed to curb bomb manufacture by anyone, but Mr. Zippe doesn't mind; the talks take so long.

We wish this was a science fiction story.

If you drink, don't tranquilize, and vice versa, warn research scientists at Madison State Hospital in Indiana. Their tests indicate that meprobamate, the active ingredient in several tranquilizers, adds an alarming amount of muscle to that one-for-the-road.

The Argonne National Laboratory has topped every story you've ever heard about weird Government jobs. They hire squirrels. Perhaps "hire" is the wrong word; nobody pays the squirrels. Dr. T.M. Tahmisian hangs around giant redwoods until a squirrel knocks down a seed cone, which he then swipes. The purpose is to study the effects of radiation on living things, and some of this timber has been living for 30 centuries or more. The squirrels save the good doctor from having to climb some two or three hundred feet to get his pine cones. **END**

**She was everybody's sweetheart
— but not every man's at once!**

LORELEI

By CHARLES V. DeVET

SEVEN days stranded on Europa. Seven days without hope. The courage that had sustained me, like the numbness after a fatal blow, was beginning to slip away. All that seventh day my nerves balanced on a thin jagged edge. And that night the anamorph visited me in my bubble cubicle.

I caught the sheathed rustle of a crinoline skirt and a scent of Peri fragrance, and I knew she had come. Stubbornly I kept my face averted, and tried my best not to think of her. If I did I was lost. My fingers dug into the sponge fabric beneath me until they ached. I sucked breath deep into my lungs and held it.

I wanted no visitors. But

that of course was why she had come. She had a way of divining who needed her most, the one whose morale was nearest breaking.

"Poor Bill," she murmured. She knelt beside me. I felt her forehead press against my temple and a tear—from eyes which I knew would now be a clear candid blue, deep in the shadows, appearing almost black—traced a salty path down my cheek.

The wall of my resistance broke. I reached up impulsively and pulled her to me. She was all soft, yielding femininity, live and warm and vibrant, the antidote to the raw need that was like a bleeding wound deep within.

Still I tried to resist. I sum-

moned my last dregs of resistance and pushed her roughly from me. I opened my eyes, deliberately keeping my mind locked against her.

She swayed back at my shove.

I saw that her features had not yet set into the mold she had probed from my mind. Her head was round and shapeless, with doughy white skin and the characterless face of a baby. The auburn mat on her head was loose and coarse, with a consistency that was hair and yet not hair; her body was too thin, too rigid, too stringy.

Yet she was Lois. Sweet, gentle, loving Lois, the bride I had left behind on Earth, the girl I would never see again. Lois.

My breath came out in a ragged sigh of surrender, and my mind opened to her unconditionally.

She altered visibly as I watched. It was too late to go back now. Lois stood before me, full-fleshed and delicately tall, with her rich brown hair curling inward at the ends, and her shapely shoulders all honeyed-gold from the sun. Her supple body was straight, poised and proud, her head back and her breasts pressing against her blouse. Just as I remembered her.

I could have sent her away no more than I could have stopped the beat of my heart. "Hi, hon," I whispered.

She laughed happily, and sat on the mat beside me and rumbled my hair. We kissed gently, tentatively. I pulled her closer. As we kissed again she kept her eyes open, looking at me sideways in her fondly teasing way. "It's good to be back, dear," she breathed against my cheek...

Long she lay at my side, regarding me with eyes that were filled with her love, her only movement the throb of a pulse beneath my fingers as they fondled her arched throat. I sighed contentedly. At the moment I was filled with a warm serenity that had quite effectively subdued my anxiety.

Once a man let himself go, there was no companion, male or female, who could compare with the anamorph. She caught his every thought, crested the tides of his every mood. She became the idealization of woman, without flaws, formed and molded into a perfection beyond possible actuality, her beauty and desirability greater than any real woman's could ever be.

When full rapport had been achieved she was able to keep mentally ahead of a man. She could gauge his every reflex, and match her speech and actions to every subtle anticipation.

I felt almost happy then. The tragedy of being stranded here was something apart, and the reality was the delightful woman-creature warm against

me...until at last my passions grew sated with the luxuriance of her charms and I slept.

IN the morning the anamorph was gone.

Eight other men had fears that must be eased. She might have spent parts of the night with any one or all of them. The thought would have been distasteful, except that absence made the sense of her less all-pervading. I even experienced a kind of grateful relief. I was able to regard her now, not as the real Lois I wanted, but as merely a source of solace I had badly needed.

The anamorph's presence during the night had drained all my pent-up frustrations. I was not happy, but I no longer felt the desperate loneliness and need that had goaded me before. I dressed leisurely and went out into the main compartment of the bubble.

Except in the sleeping rooms the plastic walls were transparent. I looked outside at the surface of Europa, covered with a white material I had been told was solid carbon dioxide.

A mild storm was brewing. The hydrogen, helium and methane in the atmosphere were colorless, and the argon and krypton too minute to be detected without instruments. But I could see and hear small particles of liquid ammonia as they pattered against the plastic wall. The bubble sagged in several places. But there

was no danger of it collapsing.

In the space ship galley (to which the bubble had been attached) I found the captain, Mark Burgess, and the anamorph having coffee.

She was no longer Lois. Now she was an older woman, with a bit of added weight and thickness. She was still beautiful, but more matronly than she had been as Lois. About her was none of the warm-blooded ardor she had displayed the night before. And no remembrance of it in her eyes.

I poured a cup of coffee.

"Just how long do you figure we've got?" I asked Burgess

"Mr. Lutscher—" he addressed me by my last name, as was his custom with junior officers—"I will not equivocate. We have fuel enough to furnish us with heat and electricity for well over a year. But our food will last less than two months, even with strict rationing."

So there it was. In two months we'd probably all be dead.

SOMEONE back on Earth had erred badly. In their calculations every item had been gauged closely, as was necessary. But they should have allowed safety margin.

The take-off had been calculated nicely. Ships had already been sent to the moon and to Mars. But this was the first trip this far out. We had

not intercepted Europa quite as plotted. We had to chase it halfway around Jupiter, and land with the satellite going away, rather than meeting us. After we landed and new calibrations been made, we made a discovery. Our fuel was too short for the return trip.

Kohnke was our lone hope. A metallurgist, he knew the properties of the ship's pile.

But Kohnke was insane.

I had not liked the man from the first. With his nervous, subservient personality, he had been a constant irritant in the confining quarters of the ship. And during the early weeks of the flight I observed the slow dawning of an awful awareness in our weak-charactered member. He was realizing for the first time the prodigious and unpredictable forces to which he had exposed himself. Soon he was convinced of the certainty of death.

He did not have the mental stamina to cope with that certainty. When we missed Europa on the first pass, Kohnke's mind cracked.

My attention returned to the anamorph. She was staring at me now, her features white and strained. She must have read what I had been thinking of Kohnke.

What was there about the crazed man that frightened her so? I wondered again.

I went out into the bubble. The rocket man, Andrews and

I spent the next several hours adding another compartment to the main room. Andrews fed dirt into the hopper of the converter while I operated the nozzle.

This was more difficult than the original bubble had been. Normal air pressure was enough to keep that expanded; but here we had to make supports and rig up an auxiliary vent. Also it was cold near the walls, a cold that sucked at the heat in our bodies; Europa has a mean temperature of -140° Centigrade.

When our job was finished I left Andrews at the door of his cubicle. I glanced back and saw that he hadn't gone in. He was standing with his head down and his shoulders slumped.

Andrews I had always regarded as an extrovert, and a good man. He was big, active and almost always cheerful. Even his bald head seemed to add to his masculine virility. He had a vast fund of stories. Everyone liked him.

I suspected, however, that his bland acceptance of our predicament was not all it seemed. He was an instinctive psychologist. He was doing his part to keep up the spirits of the rest of us. In my judgment Andrews was quite a man.

But now his capacity for dissimulating had apparently reached its limit.

At that moment a woman-

LORELEI

form drifted past me from the ship. The anamorph had come to perform her self-appointed duty.

She was a robust woman now with a body designed for love-making, the wide-hipped form made to propagate the race with healthy offspring. Her dress was cut low at the neck, innocently immodest.

Andrews looked up, still brooding.

It was he who had discovered the anamorph, the second day after our landing. Where she had come from, or how she had gotten through the plastic wall without rupturing it, we never did learn. She had had this identical form when Andrews found her.

The anamorph began to dance. A slow, languid pirouetting. The sound of a wordless crooning song reached me. The tempo of her dance heightened and her wide green skirt came up around her waist, exposing fair thighs.

Andrews grunted and shifted position. Abruptly he reached out and grasped her wrist. "Come here, baby," he said hoarsely.

The anamorph kicked and squealed in mock protest as Andrews swept her off her feet and into his arms, but she made no real effort to free herself as he strode with her into his compartment.

THE next morning when I stopped in with Kohnke's breakfast I found him wearing a gold crown.

CHARLES V. DeVET

With strictly amateur knowledge, I had diagnosed his illness as schizophrenia, and this latest display seemed to confirm the diagnosis. Now he had escaped harsh reality into a world of his own, a world where he was obviously a personage of considerable eminence.

Kohnke smiled at me and greeted me condescendingly. I went along with his delusion. If I were to help him it was good that he accepted me as part of his world. I sat at his feet and made as one of the unseen audience he was addressing. I was wryly amused a few minutes later when I understood who he thought he was.

However, it was the gold crown that fascinated me. Where had he gotten it? There could be only one answer. And if what I suspected was true, there were startling implications.

I had to speak again soon with the anamorph...

She did not keep me waiting.

I returned to my compartment. The pseudo-Lois entered soon after and stretched out indolently on my cot. "You wanted to see me, Bill?"

Incongruously I found myself staring at her low-heeled shoes, the ones she always wore when we danced at the Prom. I restrained the impulse to take her in my arms. "I saw the crown you made for Kohnke," I said carefully,

making a special effort to keep my inner thoughts hidden. "It's beautiful."

"Thank you."

Those simple words meant much to me. I had succeeded in getting her to admit that she had made the crown.

Which meant we still had a chance!

"Then you'll be able to make the fuel we need," I said casually.

Her expression became wary, shifting instantly to petulance. She reached over and put one hand on my arm. "Why do you want to leave me, Bill?"

I TRIED to explain, but she couldn't or wouldn't understand.

I tried another tack. "Why are you afraid of Kohnke?" I asked. My theory was that she did not understand insanity, and so her inability to follow the illogical thought processes of the demented man frightened her.

"He is so intelligent," she startled me by saying.

"He's crazy," I protested.

"What is crazy?"

"His reasoning faculties do not function properly."

She seemed to be reading my thoughts carefully, trying to understand better what I meant. After a minute she smiled and her teeth showed white and even against her tan. "Isn't it possible that his mind works too swiftly for you to follow, and the only

way you can explain your lack of understanding is to say that he is insane?"

So that was why she feared Kohnke. To her he was a brilliant intellect. So great that she could neither understand nor influence him as she did the others of us. His aborted reasoning, his sudden shifts of interest, his small concern with a situation that aroused our distress, were all evidence of that superior intellect. I did not try to disabuse her of the belief. It fitted well with my semi-formed plan.

"He is like the Masters," the anamorph interrupted my thoughts.

I quickly took up the diversion she offered: I did not want her to see what lay in my thoughts. Also she had aroused my curiosity. "Who are the Masters?" I asked.

"I'm not certain. I think..." Her voice trailed off. "I'm never too sure that what I'm thinking are my own thoughts, or what I'm reading in your mind, or have read in others," she said. "Perhaps if I looked away from you..."

"Many years ago the Masters landed on this small world to make repairs on the meteor shield of their space ship," she began again in a low voice. "They were passing through this part of the Galaxy on their way home from a distant planet. I belonged to one of them. For some reason they left me behind when they

LORELEI

went away." She stopped talking, saddened by the recollection of her desertion.

I saw her in a new light then. She had been a pet, a plaything, who perhaps had strayed just before ship leaving time.

She nodded, smiling brightly. "A pet," she exclaimed, clapping her hands. "That is right." I realized then, with mild astonishment, that she was not very intelligent. Her apparent wit and sharpness before had been only reflections of what she read in our minds.

"Are you all Kohnke's pets?" she caught me unprepared.

I coughed uncomfortably, and shook my head.

HER mood changed. "I've been so lonesome, Bill. When I do not belong to someone I am so unhappy. But I won't be unhappy anymore." For the first time I felt sorry for her.

"Bill?" Her voice was timid. "Do you believe I will be punished for leaving the Masters? I did not mean to."

"Who would punish you now?" I asked.

"The Masters' God. They always told me he would punish me if I were bad. And he is such a terrible God." Her expression became bright with hope. "Is your God terrible, Bill?"

I tried to reassure her, to pacify this naive creature

with her own private terrors, but she must have read in my mind how our Christian God could also be terrible in his wrath and justice, for she gave a small cry and pulled herself close to me.

Several minutes went by while she trembled in my arms and wept disconsolately. Finally she quieted and in a young girl's voice asked, "May I use your hanky, daddy?"

In surprise I held her out from me and saw that now she was my daughter, Joanie, with her newly bobbed hair, and her sweet face still wet with tears.

Of course. While I held her I had been thinking of her as a child. As my child, Joanie.

I wiped away her tears and blew her nose.

I thought swiftly. Perhaps this was my opportunity. Speaking as I would have to Joanie I asked gently, "Won't you help us get the fuel we need, honey?"

"I can't." Her childish wistfulness was replaced by the stubbornness I had encountered before.

I was careful to restrain my impatience. "You could come with us to Earth," I argued, without raising my voice. "You wouldn't be lonesome there."

"I couldn't live that long out of the sun," she answered.

"How did you live on the Master's ship?" I asked.

"They could bring the sunlight inside. You can't."

"Isn't there any way we could keep you alive?" I asked.

She shook her head.

Which left nothing except my desperate plan.

BURGESS made the preparations I requested, without question, and I returned to Kohnke. It took me some time to get him in the frame I wanted. When he began to blubber, "I want to go home, I want to go home," I led him from the ship.

The anamorph was outside, as I knew she would be. The men were all in the ship.

I bowed deeply to Kohnke

and turned to the anamorph. "He would speak with you," I said impressively.

Her eyes widened with apprehension. I was not concerned about her reading my thoughts now. What she read in Kohnke's mind would be more believable to her.

"We must have fuel!" I shouted at Kohnke. "She can give it to us!" I pointed at the anamorph. "Command her!"

Kohnke concentrated his wild gaze on the girl and mouthed something inaudible.

The anamorph drew back. Her features seemed to lose their character, to be melting together.

This was the critical moment. "Tell her about your Father," I commanded.

His lips writhed damply and he began again his inarticulate muttering.

The anamorph cried out plaintively and covered her face with her hands. I shifted my attention to the pile of soil I had asked Burgess to prepare.

It quivered, flattened...and hardened into six fuel ingots!

Twenty minutes later we were in space.

Our last glimpse of the anamorph was the dejected figure of a small girl, standing alone in the middle of the bubble.

She had had to obey Kohnke, of course. For she believed what she read in his mind.

And Kohnke thought he was the Son of God.

END

LORELEI

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CALL HIM NEMESIS



By DONALD E. WESTLAKE Illustrated by BERNKLAU

THE man with the handkerchief mask said, "All right, everybody, keep tight. This is a holdup."

There were twelve people in the bank. There was Mr. Featherhall at his desk, refusing to okay a personal check from a perfect stranger. There was the perfect stranger, an itinerant garage mechanic named Rodney (Rod) Strom, like the check said. There were Miss English and Miss Philicoff, the girls in the gilded teller cages. There was Mister Anderson, the guard, dozing by the door in his brown uniform. There was Mrs. Elizabeth Clayhorn, depositing her husband's pay check in their joint checking account, and with her was her

ten-year-old son Edward (Ed-die) Clayhorn, Junior. There was Charlie Casale, getting ten dollars dimes, six dollars nickels and four dollars pennies for his father in the grocery store down the street. There was Mrs. Dolly Daniels, withdrawing money from her savings account again. And there were three bank robbers.

The three bank robbers looked like triplets. From the ground up, they all wore scuffy black shoes, baggy-kneed and unpressed khaki trousers, brown cracked-leather jackets over flannel shirts, white handkerchiefs over the lower half of their faces and gray-and-white check caps pulled low over

their eyes. The eyes themselves looked dangerous.

The man who had spoken withdrew a small but mean-looking thirty-two calibre pistol from his jacket pocket. He waved it menacingly. One of the others took the pistol away from Mister Anderson, the guard, and said to him in a low voice, "Think about retirement, my friend." The third one, who carried a black satchel like a doctor's bag, walked quickly around behind the teller's counter and started filling it with money.

It was just like the movies.

The man who had first spoken herded the tellers, Mr. Featherhall and the customers all over against the back wall, while the second man stayed next to Mr. Anderson and the door. The third man stuffed money into the black satchel.

The man by the door said, "Hurry up."

The man with the satchel said, "One more drawer."

The man with the gun turned to say to the man at the door, "Keep your shirt on."

That was all Miss English needed. She kicked off her shoes and ran pelting in her stocking feet for the door.

THE man by the door spread his arms out and shouted, "Hey!" The man with the gun swung violently back, cursing, and fired the gun. But he'd been moving too fast, and so

had Miss English, and all he hit was the brass plate on Mr. Featherhall's desk.

The man by the door caught Miss English in a bear hug. She promptly did her best to scratch his eyes out. Meanwhile, Mr. Anderson went scooting out the front door and running down the street toward the police station in the next block, shouting, "Help! Help! Robbery!"

The man with the gun cursed some more. The man with the satchel came running around from behind the counter, and the man by the door tried to keep Miss English from scratching his eyes out. Then the man with the gun hit Miss English on the head. She fell unconscious to the floor, and all three of them ran out of the bank to the car out front, in which sat a very nervous-looking fourth man, gunning the engine.

Everyone except Miss English ran out after the bandits, to watch.

Things got very fast and very confused then. Two police cars came driving down the block and a half from the precinct house to the bank, and the car with the four robbers in it lurched away from the curb and drove straight down the street toward the police station. The police cars and the getaway car passed one another, with everybody shooting like the ships in pirate movies.

There was so much confu-

sion that it looked as though the bank robbers were going to get away after all. The police cars were aiming the wrong way and, as they'd come down with sirens wailing, there was a clear path behind them.

Then, after the getaway car had gone more than two blocks, it suddenly started jouncing around. It smacked into a parked car and stopped. And all the police went running down there to clap handcuffs on the robbers when they crawled dazedly out of their car.

"Hey," said Eddie Clayhorn, ten years old. "Hey, that was something, huh, Mom?"

"Come along home," said his mother, grabbing his hand. "We don't want to be involved."

"IT was the nuttiest thing," said Detective-Sergeant Stevenson. "An operation planned that well, you'd think they'd pay attention to their getaway car, you know what I mean?"

Detective-Sergeant Pauling shrugged. "They always slip up," he said. "Sooner or later, on some minor detail, they always slip up."

"Yes, but their tires."

"Well," said Pauling, "it was a stolen car. I suppose they just grabbed whatever was handiest."

"What I can't figure out," said Stevenson, "is exactly

what made those tires do that. I mean, it was a hot day and all, but it wasn't *that* hot. And they weren't going that fast. I don't think you could go fast enough to melt your tires down."

Pauling shrugged again. "We got them. That's the important thing."

"Still and all, it's nutty. They're free and clear, barrelling out Rockaway toward the Belt, and all at once their tires melt, the tubes blow out and there they are." Stevenson shook his head. "I can't figure it."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," suggested Pauling. "They picked the wrong car to steal."

"And *that* doesn't make sense, either," said Stevenson. "Why steal a car that could be identified as easily as that one?"

"Why? What was it, a foreign make?"

"No, it was a Chevvy, two-tone, three years old, looked just like half the cars on the streets. Except that in the trunk lid the owner had burned in 'The Scorpion' in big black letters you could see half a block away."

"Maybe they didn't notice it when they stole the car," said Pauling.

"For a well-planned operation like this one," said Stevenson, "they made a couple of really idiotic boners. It doesn't make any sense."

"What do they have to say

about it?" Pauling demanded.

"Nothing, what do you expect? They'll make no statement at all."

The squad-room door opened, and a uniformed patrolman stuck his head in. "The owner of that Chevvy's here," he said.

"Right," said Stevenson. He followed the patrolman down the hall to the front desk.

The owner of the Chevvy was an angry-looking man of middle age, tall and paunchy. "John Hastings," he said. "They say you have my car here."

"I believe so, yes," said Stevenson. "I'm afraid it's in pretty bad shape."

"So I was told over the phone," said Hastings grimly. "I've contacted my insurance company."

"Good. The car's in the police garage, around the corner. If you'd come with me?"

ON the way around, Stevenson said, "I believe you reported the car stolen almost immediately after it happened."

"That's right," said Hastings. "I stepped into a bar on my route. I'm a wine and liquor salesman. When I came out five minutes later, my car was gone."

"You left the keys in it?"

"Well, why not?" demanded Hastings belligerently. "If I'm making just a quick stop—I never spend more than five minutes with any one

customer—I always leave the keys in the car. Why not?"

"The car was stolen," Stevenson reminded him.

Hastings grumbled and glared. "It's always been perfectly safe up till now."

"Yes, sir. In here."

Hastings took one look at his car and hit the ceiling. "It's ruined!" he cried. "What did you do to the tires?"

"Not a thing, sir. That happened to them in the hold-up."

Hastings leaned down over one of the front tires. "Look at that! There's melted rubber all over the rims. Those rims are ruined! What did you use, incendiary bullets?"

Stevenson shook his head. "No, sir. When that happened they were two blocks away from the nearest policeman."

"Hmph." Hastings moved on around the car, stopping short to exclaim, "What in the name of God is that? You didn't tell me a bunch of *kids* had stolen the car."

"It wasn't a bunch of kids," Stevenson told him. "It was four professional criminals, I thought you knew that. They were using it in a bank hold-up."

"Then why did they do that?"

Stevenson followed Hastings' pointing finger, and saw again the crudely-lettered words, "The Scorpion" burned black into the paint of the trunk lid. "I really don't know," he said. "It wasn't

there before the car was stolen?"

"Of course not!"

Stevenson frowned. "Now, why in the world did they do that?"

"I suggest," said Hastings with heavy sarcasm, "you ask them that."

Stevenson shook his head. "It wouldn't do any good. They aren't talking about anything. I don't suppose they'll ever tell us." He looked at the trunk lid again. "It's the nuttiest thing," he said thoughtfully...

That was on Wednesday.

The Friday afternoon mail delivery to the *Daily News* brought a crank letter. It was in the crank letter's most obvious form; that is, the address had been clipped, a letter or a word at a time, from a newspaper and glued to the envelope. There was no return address.

The letter itself was in the same format. It was brief and to the point:

Dear Mr. Editor:

The Scorpion has struck. The bank robbers were captured. The Scorpion fights crime. Crooks and robbers are not safe from the avenging Scorpion. WARN YOUR READERS!

Sincerely yours,
THE SCORPION

The warning was duly noted, and the letter filed in the wastebasket. It didn't rate a line in the paper.

II

THE bank robbery occurred in late June. Early in August, a Brooklyn man went berserk.

It happened in Canarsie, a section in southeast Brooklyn near Jamaica Bay. This particular area of Canarsie was a residential neighborhood, composed of one and two family houses. The man who went berserk was a Motor Vehicle Bureau clerk named Jerome Higgins.

Two days before, he had flunked a Civil Service examination for the third time. He reported himself sick and spent the two days at home, brooding, a bottle of blended whiskey at all times in his hand.

As the police reconstructed it later, Mrs. Higgins had attempted to awaken him on the third morning at seven-thirty, suggesting that he really ought to stop being so foolish, and go back to work. He then allegedly poked her in the eye, and locked her out of the bedroom.

Mrs. Higgins then apparently called her sister-in-law, a Mrs. Thelma Stodbetter, who was Mr. Higgins' sister. Mrs. Stodbetter arrived at the house at nine o'clock, and spent some time tapping at the still-locked bedroom door, apparently requesting Mr. Higgins to unlock the door and "stop acting like a child." Neighbors reported to the po-

lice that they heard Mr. Higgins shout a number of times, "Go away! Can't you let a man sleep?"

At about ten-fifteen, neighbors heard shots from the Higgins residence, a two-story one-family pink stucco affair in the middle of a block of similar homes. Mr. Higgins, it was learned later, had suddenly erupted from his bedroom, brandishing a .30-.30 hunting rifle and, being annoyed at the shrieks of his wife and sister, had fired seven shells at them, killing his wife on the spot and wounding his sister in the hand and shoulder.

Mrs. Stodbetter, wounded and scared out of her wits, raced screaming out the front door of the house, crying for the police and shouting, "Murder! Murder!" At this point, neighbors called the police. One neighbor additionally phoned three newspapers and two television stations, thereby earning forty dollars in "news-tips" rewards.

BY chance, a mobile television unit was at that moment on the Belt Parkway, returning from having seen off a prime minister at Idlewild Airport. This unit was at once diverted to Canarsie, where it took up a position across the street from the scene of carnage and went to work with a Zoomar lens.

In the meantime, Mister Higgins had barricaded him-

self in his house, firing at anything that moved.

The two cameramen in the mobile unit worked their hearts out. One concentrated on the movements of the police and firemen and neighbors and ambulance attendants, while the other used the Zoomar lens to search for Mr. Higgins. He found him occasionally, offering the at-home audience brief glimpses of a stocky balding man in brown trousers and undershirt, stalking from window to window on the second floor of the house.

The show lasted for nearly an hour. There were policemen everywhere, and firemen everywhere, and neighbors milling around down at the corner, where the police had roped the block off, and occasionally Mr. Higgins would stick his rifle out a window and shoot at somebody. The police used loudspeakers to tell Higgins he might as well give up, they had the place surrounded and could eventually starve him out anyway. Higgins used his own good lungs to shout obscenities back and challenge anyone present to hand-to-hand combat.

The police fired tear gas shells at the house, but it was a windy day and all the windows in the Higgins house were either open or broken. Higgins was able to throw all the shells back out of the house again.

The show lasted for nearly an hour. Then it ended, suddenly and dramatically.

Higgins had showed himself to the Zoomar lens again, for the purpose of shooting either the camera or its operator. All at once he yelped and threw the rifle away. The rifle bounced onto the porch roof, slithered down to the edge, hung for a second against the drain, and finally fell barrel first onto the lawn.

Meanwhile, Higgins was running through the house, shouting like a wounded bull. He thundered down the stairs and out, hollering, to fall into the arms of the waiting police.

They had trouble holding him. At first they thought he was actually trying to get away, but then one of them heard what it was he was shouting: "My hands! My hands!"

They looked at his hands. The palms and the palm-side of the fingers were red and blistering, from what looked like severe burns. There was another burn on his right cheek and another one on his right shoulder.

Higgins, thoroughly chastened and bewildered, was led away for burn ointment and jail. The television crew went on back to Manhattan. The neighbors went home and telephoned their friends.

On-duty policemen had been called in from practically all of the precincts in

Brooklyn. Among them was Detective - Sergeant William Stevenson. Stevenson frowned thoughtfully at Higgins as that unhappy individual was led away, and then strolled over to look at the rifle. He touched the stock, and it was somewhat warm but that was all.

He picked it up and turned it around. There, on the other side of the stock, burned into the wood, were the crudely-shaped letters, "The Scorpion."

YOU don't get to be Precinct Captain on nothing but political connections. Those help, of course, but you need more than that. As Captain Hanks was fond of pointing out, you needed as well to be both more imaginative than most— "You gotta be able to second-guess the smart boys"—and to be a complete realist— "You gotta have both feet on the ground." If these were somewhat contradictory qualities, it was best not to mention the fact to Captain Hanks.

The realist side of the captain's nature was currently at the fore. "Just what are you trying to say, Stevenson?" he demanded.

"I'm not sure," admitted Stevenson. "But we've got these two things. First, there's the getaway car from that bank job. The wheels melt for no reason at all, and somebody burns 'The Scorpion' onto the

trunk. Then, yesterday, this guy Higgins out in Canarsie. He says the rifle all of a sudden got too hot to hold, and he's got the burn marks to prove it. And there on the rifle stock it is again. 'The Scorpion'."

"He says he put that on there himself," said the captain.

Stevenson shook his head. "His lawyer says he put it on there. Higgins says he doesn't remember doing it. That's half the lawyer's case. He's trying to build up an insanity defense."

"He put it on there himself, Stevenson," said the captain with weary patience. "What are you trying to prove?"

"I don't know. All I know is it's the nuttiest thing I ever saw. And what about the get-away car? What about those tires melting?"

"They were defective," said Hanks promptly.

"All four of them at once? And what about the thing written on the trunk?"

"How do I know?" demanded the captain. "Kids put it on before the car was stolen, maybe. Or maybe the hoods did it themselves, who knows? What do *they* say?"

"They say they didn't do it," said Stevenson. "And they say they never saw it before the robbery and they would have noticed it if it'd been there."

The captain shook his head. "I don't get it," he admitted.

"What are you trying to prove?"

"I guess," said Stevenson slowly, thinking it out as he went along, "I guess I'm trying to prove that somebody melted those tires, and made that rifle too hot, and left his signature behind."

"What? You mean like in the comic books? Come on, Stevenson! What are you trying to hand me?"

"All I know," insisted Stevenson, "is what I see."

"And all I know," the captain told him, "is Higgins put that name on his rifle himself. He says so."

"And what made it so hot?"

"Hell, man, he'd been firing that thing at people for an hour! What do you *think* made it hot?"

"All of a sudden?"

"He noticed it all of a sudden, when it started to burn him."

"How come the same name showed up each time, then?" Stevenson asked desperately.

"How should I know? And why not, anyway? You know as well as I do these things happen. A bunch of teen-agers burgle a liquor store and they write 'The Golden Avengers' on the plate glass in lipstick. It happens all the time. Why not 'The Scorpion'? It couldn't occur to two people?"

"But there's no explanation—" started Stevenson.

"What do you mean, there's no explanation? I just gave

you the explanation. Look, Stevenson, I'm a busy man. You got a nutty idea—like Wilcox a few years ago, remember him? Got the idea there was a fiend around loose, stuffing all those kids into abandoned refrigerators to starve. He went around trying to prove it, and getting all upset, and pretty soon they had to put him away in the nut hatch. Remember?"

"I remember," said Stevenson.

"Forget this silly stuff, Stevenson," the captain advised him.

"Yes, sir," said Stevenson...

The day after Jerome Higgins went berserk, the afternoon mail brought a crank letter to the *Daily News*:

Dear Mr. Editor,

You did not warn your readers. The man who shot all those people could not escape the Scorpion. The Scorpion fights crime. No criminal is safe from the Scorpion. **WARN YOUR READERS.**

Sincerely yours,
THE SCORPION

Unfortunately, this letter was not read by the same individual who had seen the first one, two months before. At any rate, it was filed in the same place, and forgotten.

III

HALLOWE'EN is a good time for a rumble. There's too many kids around for the

cops to keep track of all of them, and if you're picked up carrying a knife or a length of tire chain or something, why, you're on your way to a Hallowe'en party and you're in costume. You're going as a JD.

The problem was this schoolyard. It was a block wide, with entrances on two streets. The street on the north was Challenger territory, and the street on the south was Scarlet Raider territory, and both sides claimed the schoolyard. There had been a few skirmishes, a few guys from both gangs had been jumped and knocked around a little, but that had been all. Finally, the War Lords from the two gangs had met, and determined that the matter could only be settled in a war.

The time was chosen: Hallowe'en. The place was chosen: the schoolyard. The weapons were chosen: pocket knives and tire chains okay, but no pistols or zip-guns. The time was fixed: eleven P.M. And the winner would have undisputed territorial rights to the schoolyard, both entrances.

The night of the rumble, the gangs assembled in their separate clubrooms for last-minute instructions. Debs were sent out to play chicken at the intersections nearest the schoolyard, both to warn of the approach of cops and to keep out any non-combatant

kids who might come wandering through.

Judy Canzanetti was a Deb with the Scarlet Raiders. She was fifteen years old, short and black-haired and pretty in a movie-magazine, gum-chewing sort of way. She was proud of being in the Auxiliary of the Scarlet Raiders, and proud also of the job that had been assigned to her. She was to stand chicken on the southwest corner of the street.

Judy took up her position at five minutes to eleven. The streets were dark and quiet. Few people cared to walk this neighborhood after dark, particularly on Hallowe'en. Judy leaned her back against the telephone pole on the corner, stuck her hands in the pockets of her Scarlet Raider jacket and waited.

At eleven o'clock, she heard indistinct noises begin behind her. The rumble had started.

At five after eleven, a bunch of little kids came wandering down the street. They were all about ten or eleven years old, and most of them carried trick-or-treat shopping bags. Some of them had Hallowe'en masks on.

They started to make the turn toward the schoolyard. Judy said, "Hey, you kids. Take off."

One of them, wearing a red mask, turned to look at her. "Who, us?"

"Yes, you! Stay out of that street. Go on down that way."

"The subway's this way,"

objected the kid in the red mask.

"Who cares? You go around the other way."

"LISTEN, lady," said the kid in the red mask, aggrieved, "we got a long way to go to get home."

"Yeah," said another kid, in a black mask, "and we're late as it is."

"I couldn't care less," Judy told them callously. "You can't go down that street."

"Why not?" demanded yet another kid. This one was in the most complete and elaborate costume of them all, black leotards and a yellow shirt and a flowing black cape. He wore a black and gold mask and had a black knit cap jammed down tight onto his head. "Why can't we go down there?" this apparition demanded.

"Because I said so," Judy told him. "Now, you kids get away from here. Take off."

"Hey!" cried the kid in the black-and-yellow costume. "Hey, they're fighting down there!"

"It's a rumble," said Judy proudly. "You twerps don't want to be involved."

"Hey!" cried the kid in the black-and-yellow costume again. And he went running around Judy and dashing off down the street.

"Hey, Eddie!" shouted one of the other kids. "Eddie, come back!"

Judy wasn't sure what to do



next. If she abandoned her post to chase the one kid who'd gotten through, then maybe all the rest of them would come running along after her. She didn't know what to do.

A sudden siren and a distant flashing red light solved her problems. "Cheez," said one of the kids. "The cops!"

"Fuzz!" screamed Judy. She turned and raced down the block toward the schoolyard, shouting, "Fuzz! Fuzz! Clear out, it's the fuzz!"

But then she stopped, wide-eyed, when she saw what was going on in the schoolyard.

The guys from both gangs were dancing. They were jumping around, waving their arms, throwing their weapons away. Then they all started pulling off their gang jackets and throwing them away, whooping and hollering. They were making such a racket themselves that they never heard Judy's warning. They didn't even hear the police sirens. And all at once both schoolyard entrances were full of cops, a cop had tight hold of Judy and the rumble was over.

Judy was so baffled and terrified that everything was just one great big blur. But in the middle of it all, she did see the little kid in the yellow-and-black costume go scooting away down the street.

And she had the craziest idea that it was all his fault.

CAPTAIN Hanks was still in his realistic cycle this morning, and he was impatient as well. "All right, Stevenson," he said. "Make it fast, I've got a lot to do this morning. And I hope it isn't this comic-book thing of yours again."

"I'm afraid it is, Captain," said Stevenson. "Did you see the morning paper?"

"So what?"

"Did you see that thing about the gang fight up in Manhattan?"

Captain Hanks sighed. "Stevenson," he said wearily, "are you going to try to connect every single time the word 'scorpion' comes up? What's the problem with this one? These kid gangs have names, so what?"

"Neither one of them was called 'The Scorpions,'" Stevenson told him. "One of them was the Scarlet Raiders and the other gang was the Challengers."

"So they changed their name," said Hanks.

"Both gangs? Simultaneously? To the same name?"

"Why not? Maybe that's what they were fighting over."

"It was a territorial war," Stevenson reminded him. "They've admitted that much. It says so in the paper. And it also says they all deny ever seeing that word on their jackets until after the fight."

"A bunch of juvenile delinquents," said Hanks in dis-

gust. "You take their word?"

"Captain, did you read the article in the paper?"

"I glanced through it."

"All right. Here's what they say happened: They say they started fighting at eleven o'clock. And they just got going when all at once all the metal they were carrying—knives and tire chains and coins and belt buckles and everything else—got freezing cold, too cold to touch. And then their leather jackets got freezing cold, so cold they had to pull them off and throw them away. And when the jackets were later collected, across the name of the gang on the back of each one had been branded 'The Scorpion.'"

"Now, let me tell you something," said Hanks severely. "They heard the police sirens, and they threw all their weapons away. Then they threw their jackets away, to try to make believe they hadn't been part of the gang that had been fighting. But they were caught before they could get out of the schoolyard. If the squad cars had showed up a minute later, the schoolyard wouldn't have had anything in it but weapons and jackets, and the kids would have been all over the neighborhood, nice as you please, minding their own business and not bothering anybody. That's what happened. And all this talk about freezing cold and branding names into jackets is just some smart-alec punk's

idea of a way to razz the police. Now, you just go back to worrying about what's happening in this precinct and forget about kid gangs up in Manhattan and comic book things like the Scorpion, or you're going to wind up like Wilcox, with that refrigerator business. Now, I don't want to hear any more about this nonsense, Stevenson."

"Yes, sir," said Stevenson.

THE reporter showed up two days later. He was ushered into the squad room, where he showed his press card to Stevenson, smiled amiably and said, "My editor sent me out on a wild-goose chase. Would you mind chatting with me a couple minutes?"

"Not at all," said Stevenson.

The reporter, whose press card gave his name as Tom Roberts, settled himself comfortably in the chair beside Stevenson's desk. "You were the one handled that bank job down the street back in June, weren't you?"

Stevenson nodded.

Roberts gave an embarrassed chuckle and said, "Okay, I've got just one question. You answer no, and then we can talk about football or something. I mean, this is just a silly wild-goose chase, frankly. I'm a little embarrassed about it."

"Go ahead and ask," Stevenson told him.

"Okay, I will. Was there the word 'scorpion' connected with that bank job at all? In any way at all."

Stevenson looked at the reporter and smiled. He said, "As a matter of fact, Mr. Roberts, there was."

Roberts blinked. "There was?"

"Yes, indeedy. There certainly was." And Stevenson told him the full story of the bank job.

"I see," said Roberts dazedly when Stevenson was finished. "I see. Or, I don't see. I don't see it at all."

"Your turn," Stevenson told him. "Now you tell me what made you ask that."

"This," said Roberts. He reached into the inside pocket of his sport jacket and withdrew a business-size envelope, which he handed over to Stevenson.

It was another crank letter, in the same newspaper clipping form as the first two. It read:

Dear Mr. Editor,

The bad boys were captured. They could not escape the Scorpion. I left the mark of the Scorpion on their jackets. Criminals fear the mark of the Scorpion. They cannot escape. This is my third letter to you. You should warn all criminals to leave the city. They cannot escape the Scorpion. **WARN YOUR READERS.**

Sincerely yours,
THE SCORPION

Stevenson read the letter. "Well, well," he said.

"He says that's the third letter," Roberts pointed out. "We asked around in the office, and we found out who got the first two. They were both back a ways. The first one was early in the summer, and the guy who read it remembered it said something about a bank robbery. So I was sent out this morning to check up on bank robberies in June and July. You're the third one I've talked to this morning. The first two figured me for some kind of nut."

"MY Captain figures me the same way," Stevenson told him. "What about the second letter? Or, wait, don't tell me, I'll tell you. It's that guy in August, the one who ran amok over in Canarsie."

"Right you are," said Roberts. "How did you know?"

"I was there. He left his mark on the rifle stock."

"Okay," said Roberts. "So there's something in it, after all."

"There's *something* in it," said Stevenson. "The question is, what?"

"Well," said Roberts, "what have we got so far? Somebody—call it person or persons unknown, for the fun of it—is stepping in every once in a while when there's a crime being committed. He stops it. He calls himself the Scorpion, and he uses some pretty dizzy methods. He melts automobile tires, makes

a rifle too hot to hold, makes knives and leather jackets ice cold—how in heck does he *do* things like that?"

"Yeah," said Stevenson. "And just incidentally, who is he?"

"Well," said Roberts, "he's a kid, that much is obvious. That whole letter *sounds* like a kid. Talking about 'the bad boys' and stuff like that."

"What do you figure, some scientist's kid maybe?"

"Maybe," said Roberts. "His old man is working on something in his little old laboratory in the cellar, and every once in a while the kid sneaks in and makes off with the ray gun or whatever it is." Roberts laughed. "I feel silly even talking about it," he said.

"I'd feel silly, too," Stevenson told him, "if I hadn't seen what this kid can do."

"Can we work anything out from the timing?" Roberts asked him. "He seems to show up once every couple of months."

"Let me check."

Stevenson went over to the filing cabinet and looked up the dates. "The bank job," he said, "was on Wednesday, June 29th. At eleven o'clock in the morning. That Higgins guy was on—here it is—Friday, August 5th, around noon. And this last one was on Hallowe'en, Monday, October 31st, at eleven o'clock at night."

"If you can see a pattern in there," Roberts told him,

"you're a better man than I am."

"Well, the first two," Stevenson said, "were in the daytime, during the summer, when school was out. That's all I can figure."

"Why just those three?" Roberts asked. "If he's out to fight crime, he's pretty inefficient about it. He's only gone to work three times in four months."

"Well, he's a kid," said Stevenson. "I suppose he has to wait until he stumbles across something."

"And then rush home for Daddy's ray gun?"

Stevenson shook his head. "It beats me. The only one that makes sense is the second one. That one was televised. He probably saw it that way. The other two times, he just happened to be around."

"I don't know," said Roberts. "Does a kid happen to be around twice in four months when there's crimes being committed? Now, the Hallowe'en thing, I can see that. A kid is liable to be out wandering around, maybe go off to a strange neighborhood after he's done with his trick-or-treat stuff. Hallowe'en is a good time for a kid to see some other kids breaking a law. And the thing in Canarsie, like you say, he probably saw that on television. But what about the bank job?"

"That was the first," said Stevenson thoughtfully. "That was what set him off. He was

there at the time. Just by accident. And he saw they were getting away, so he zapped them. And right away he put the drama into it, right on the spur of the moment he decided to be the Scorpion. Then he sent the letter to your paper. But nothing else happened, and the paper didn't print anything about his letter or what he'd done, and he kind of forgot about it. Until he was watching television and saw the Higgins thing. Pow, the Scorpion rides again. And then it died down again until a couple of nights ago he saw the rumble, and pow all over again."

"What you're saying," Roberts told him, "is that this kid wanders around with Daddy's zap gun all the time. That doesn't seem very likely."

"Face it," said Stevenson. "Daddy's zap gun isn't the likeliest thing I ever heard of, either. I don't know how the kid does this. For that matter, it's only an educated guess that it's a kid we're after."

"Okay," said Roberts. "So what do we do now?"

"Now," said Stevenson, "I think we talk to the captain. And then I have a feeling we'll be talking to the FBI."

IV

JUDY Canzanetti was a frightened girl. First, there had been that crazy thing in the schoolyard, and then be-

ing dragged in by the police, and then being chewed out by Mom, and now here she was being dragged in by the police again, for absolutely nothing at all.

They were all there, in the big empty room like a gymnasium in the police station, the guys and debs from both gangs, all milling around and confused. And the cops were taking all the kids out one at a time and questioning them.

When the cop pointed at her and said, "Okay. You next," Judy almost broke into tears.

This wasn't like anything she knew or anything she could have expected. This wasn't like after the rumble, with the guys wisecracking the cops, and nothing to worry about but a chewing-out from Mom. This was scary. They were taking people out one at a time to question them. And nobody was coming back into the room, and who knew what happened to you when it was your turn?

"Come on," said the cop. "Step along."

She stepped along, numb and miserable.

There were four men in the room to which she was led. They were sitting behind a long table, with notebooks and pencils and ashtrays on the table. In front of them was a straight-backed armless chair. The cop sat her down in the chair, and left the room.

One of the men said, "Your

name is Judy Canzanetti, is that right?"

"Yes, sir." It came out a whisper. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Yes, sir."

"You don't have to be frightened, Judy," said the man. "You aren't going to be accused of anything. My name is Marshall, Stephen Marshall. This gentleman on my right is Stewart Lang. We're with the FBI. That gentleman there is Mr. Stevenson, and he's a detective from Brooklyn. And that there is Mr. Roberts, and he's a reporter. And we all simply want to ask you one or two questions. All right?"

The man was obviously trying to calm her down, make her relax. And he succeeded to some extent. Judy said, "Yes, sir," in a small voice and nodded, no longer quite so frightened.

None of the four men were particularly frightening in appearance. The two FBI men were long and lean, with bleak bony faces like cowboys. The detective was a short worried-looking man with a paunch and thinning black hair. And the reporter was a cheerful round-faced man in a loud sport coat and a bow tie.

"Now," said Marshall, "you were present at the time of the gang fight on Hallowe'en, is that right?"

"Yes, sir. Well, no, sir. Not exactly. I was down at the corner."

Mister Marshall smiled briefly. "On lookout?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I see. And do you remember seeing anyone present at all aside from the boys in the two gangs and the police?"

"NO, sir. That is, not except a bunch of little kids. They came along just before the co—the police."

"A bunch of little kids?"

The detective named Stevenson said urgently, "Did you recognize any of them?"

"No, sir. They weren't from around the neighborhood."

Marshall said, "You'd never seen them before?"

"No, sir. They were just a bunch of little kids. Grade school kids. They were out with costumes on and everything, playing trick-or-treat."

"Did they go near the schoolyard at all?"

"No, sir. Except for one of them. You see, I was supposed to keep people away, tell them to go around the other way. And these kids came along. I told them to go around the other way, but they said they had to get to the subway."

"The subway?" echoed Stevenson.

"Yes, sir. They said they were out too late anyway and it was a long way to go to get home."

The man named Marshall said, "You said one of them *did* go down by the schoolyard?"

"Yes, sir. I told them all to go around the other way and the one kid said, 'Hey, they're fighting,' or something like that, and he ran down the street. I tried to stop him. But he got away from me."

"And then what happened?" asked Stevenson.

"Then I saw the fuzz—the police coming. I ran down to warn everybody. And all the guys were jumping around throwing their coats away."

"And the little boy?"

"I didn't see him at all any more. Except after the police came. I saw him go running around the corner."

"What did this boy look like?" Stevenson asked.

"Gee, I don't know, sir."

"You don't know?"

"No, sir. He was in his Hallowe'en costume."

The four men looked at one another. "A costume," said the one named Roberts, the reporter. "My God, a costume."

"Yes, sir," said Judy. "It was all black and gold. Tight black pants and a yellow shirt and a black cape and a funny kind of mask that covered his face, black and gold. And a kind of cap like maybe a skull cap on his head, black, only it was knit. Like the sailors wear in the Merchant Marine."

"Black and gold," said Roberts. He seemed awed by something.

"So you can't identify this boy at all," said Stevenson forlornly.

"One of the other kids called him Eddie," she said, suddenly remembering.

They spent fifteen minutes more with her, going over the same ground again and again, but she just didn't have any more to tell them. And finally they let her go.

MR. Featherhall and Miss English were distant but courteous. It was, after all, banking hours. On the other hand, these four men were police and FBI, on official business.

"It has been a rather long time," Featherhall objected gently. "Well over four months."

"It seemed to me," said Miss English, "that the police took the names of all the people who'd been here at the time of the robbery."

"There may have been other people present," suggested Marshall, "who left before the confusion was over. There are any number of people in this world who like to avoid being involved in things like this."

"I can certainly appreciate their position," said Miss English, reminiscently touching her fingertips to her head.

"Miss English was very brave," Featherhall told the policemen. "She created the diversion that spoiled their plans."

"Yes, we know," said Marshall. "We've heard about what you did, Miss English."

"To tell you the truth," she

said primly, "I was most concerned about the boy. To be exposed to something like that at his tender—"

"Boy?" interrupted Stevenson rudely. "Did you say boy?"

"Why, yes," said Miss English. "There was a little boy in here at the time, with his mother. Didn't you know?"

"No, we didn't," said Marshall. "Could you describe this boy?"

"Well, he was—well, not more than ten years old, if that. And he—well, it has been a long time, as Mr. Feathedhall said. He was just a child, a normal average child."

"Not exactly average," said Stevenson cryptically.

"You said he was in here with his mother," said Marshall.

"That's right. I've seen her in here a number of times."

"Yes, of course," said Marshall.

"Has she been here since the robbery?" asked Stevenson.

"Yes, I believe she has."

"So that you would recognize her if you saw her again."

"Yes, I would. I'm sure I would. She almost always comes in with the boy. Or, no, she doesn't, not any more. Not since school started. But she did all summer."

"She comes in often, then."

"I believe so," said Miss English. "Fairly often."

Marshall produced a small

card, which he handed to Miss English. "The next time she comes in," he said, "we'd appreciate it if you'd call us at that number. Ask for me, Mr. Marshall."

"I will," said Miss English. "I surely will."

THE four of them sat talking in Marshall's office.

Tom Roberts had his shoes off, his feet on the windowsill, his spine curved into the chair and a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He had one eye closed and was sighting between his socked feet at the building across the way.

"The thing that bothers me," he said, the cigarette wagging in his mouth, "is just that I'm sure as I can be that I'll never get to write a word of this story. You gimlet-eyed types will clamp down on this kid, and that'll be the end of it. Security, by George. National defense. I wonder whatever happened to freedom of the press."

"The press overworked it," Marshall told him.

"The thing is," said Lang, "whatever weapon or machine this boy is using, it's something that the government knows absolutely nothing about. We've sent up a report on the effects of this thing, whatever it is, and there's been the damnedest complete survey of current government research projects you can imagine. There is nothing at

all like it even on the drawing boards."

"Whatever the boy is using," said Marshall, "and wherever he got it from, it isn't a part of the government's arsenal of weapons."

"Which it *has* to be," Lang added. "Can you imagine a weapon that selectively increases or decreases the temperature of any specific object or any specific *part* of an object? From a *distance*? I wouldn't like to be sitting on a stockpile of hydrogen warheads with somebody aiming that weapon at me. He simply presses the 'hot' button, and blooey!"

"You see a jet bomber coming," said Marshall. "You point the weapon, press the 'cold' button, and flame-out. That pilot bought the farm."

"What *I'd* like to know," said Lang, "is where he got his hands on this thing in the first place. Not only is there no machine or weapon we know of which can do this sort of thing, but our tame experts assure us that no such machine or weapon is possible."

"Great," said Stevenson. "We're looking for a ten-year-old kid armed with a weapon that no adult in the country could even imagine as possible."

The phone rang at that point, and for a second no one moved. They all sat and looked at the jangling phone. Then Marshall and Lang

moved simultaneously, but it was Marshall who answered. "Marshall here."

The others watched him, heard him say, "Yes, Miss English. Right." And reach forward on the desk for pad and pencil. "Right, got it. You're sure that's the one? Right. Thank you very much."

Marshall cradled the phone, and looked at the others. "The woman came in. Her name is Mrs. Albert J. Clayhorn, and she lives on Newkirk Avenue. Miss English said the number would be near East 17th."

"Five blocks from the bank," said Stevenson.

"And about eighty blocks from Higgins' house," said Roberts. "That's why it took him so long to go to work that time. He saw what was happening on television, grabbed his weapon and his trusty bike and went riding out to Canarsie. The Scorpion rides again!"

Marshall looked at his watch. "It's only a little after one," he said. "We can talk to the mother before the boy comes home."

"Right," said Stevenson, getting to his feet.

V

MRS. Elizabeth Clayhorn was a short, roundish, pleasant-faced woman in a flower-pattern apron. She looked at the identification Marshall showed her, and

smiled uncertainly. "FBI? I don't under— Well, come in."

"Thank you."

The living room was neat and airy. The four men settled themselves.

Marshall, uncomfortably, was the spokesman. "I'm going to have to explain this, Mrs. Clayborn," he said, "and frankly, it isn't going to be easy. You see—" He cleared his throat and tried again.

"Well, here's the situation. Someone in New York has a rather strange machine of some sort—well, it's sort of a heat machine, I suppose you could say—and we've traced it, through its use, to, uh—well, to your son."

"To Eddie?" Mrs. Clayhorn was looking very blank. "Eddie?"

"I take it," said Marshall, instead of answering, "that your son hasn't told you about this machine."

"Well, no. Well, of course not. I mean, he's just a little boy. I mean, how could he have any sort of machine? What is it, a blowtorch, something like that?"

"Not exactly," said Marshall. "Could you tell me, Mrs. Clayhorn, what your husband does for a living?"

"Well, he runs a grocery store. The Bohack's up on Flatbush Avenue."

"I see."

Lang took over the questioning. "Are there any other persons living here, Mrs. Clayhorn? Any boarders?"

"No, there's only the three of us."

"Well, is Eddie interested in anything of a, well, a scientific nature? In school, perhaps?"

"Oh, Lord, no. He hasn't had any real science subjects yet. He's only in the fifth grade. His best subject is history, but that's because he likes to read, and history is all reading. He got that from me, I read all the time."

"He doesn't have one of these junior chemistry sets, then, or anything like that?"

"No, not at all. He just isn't interested. We even got him an Erector set last Christmas, and he played with it for a day or two and then gave it up completely and went back to reading."

"The thing is," said Stevenson, with ill-concealed desperation, "he does have this machine."

"Are you sure it's Eddie?"

"Yes, mam, we're sure."

"Mrs. Clayhorn," said Marshall, "the boy does have this machine. The government is very interested in it, and—"

"Well, I don't see how a ten-year-old boy—but if you say so, then I suppose it's so. Of course, he'll be home from school at three-thirty. You could ask *him*, if you want."

"**W**E'D rather not, just yet," said Marshall.

"We think it might not be the best idea. As you say, Eddie is very interested in read-

ing. He's been using this machine, and, uh, well, he's been making a big secret out of it, like the characters in comic books. We wouldn't want to spoil that secret for him, at least not until we actually have the machine in our own possession."

"I see," said Mrs. Clayhorn doubtfully.

"Mam," said Stevenson, "we don't have any sort of search warrant. But we would like to take a look in Eddie's room, with your permission."

"Well, if you really think it's important—"

"It is," said Marshall.

"Then, I suppose it's all right. It's the door on the right, at the end of the hall."

The three men, feeling large and cumbersome, searched the boy's room. It was a boy's room, nothing less and nothing more. The closet floor and shelves were stacked with comic books, there were baseball trading cards in the top bureau drawer, there were pennants on the walls. There was no heat machine, nor any hint of a heat machine.

"I just don't know," said Marshall at last.

"Unless he carries it all the time," said Lang.

"Sure," said Stevenson. "That's why he had it with him in the bank that day."

"Maybe," said Marshall. "I just don't know. You know, I don't really believe there is a machine."

"Of course there is," said

Stevenson. "We've seen what it can do."

"Oh, I'm not denying the boy caused those things. But I just have the completely insane conviction that there isn't any machine." Marshall shrugged. "Ah, well, never mind. Let's go back and soothe the mother."

They soothed her, which took some doing, not because she was at all worried, but because she was so curious she could hardly sit still. But Marshall, by looking very stern and official, and by speaking in round long-syllabled sentences, finally convinced her that the welfare of the nation was absolutely dependent upon her not mentioning anything at all about this visit to Eddie, under any circumstances.

"We'll be back to talk to the boy in a day or two," Marshall told her. "In the meantime, we'd prefer him not to be forewarned."

"If you say so," she said, frowning.

THE school principal, a gray battleship named Miss Evita Dexter, was irate. The idea that pornographic materials were being sold in her schoolyard was absurd. It was ridiculous. It was unheard-of.

Stevenson assured her that, adjectives notwithstanding, it was happening. And they were going to have a shakedown of the student body whether

Miss Dexter liked it or not. Detective-Sergeant Stevenson and his associates, Marshall and Lang, were going to go through the student body with a fine tooth comb.

Neither Marshall nor Lang had mentioned the fact that they were from the FBI.

The search began at nine forty-five in the morning, and ended at ten past twelve.

On the persons of three eighth-grade boys, they found pornographic photos.

On the person of Eddie Clayhorn, they found absolutely nothing...

Abner Streitman Long was a government expert. He was more or less a government expert in the ready reserve, since he had never once been called upon to use his expertise for the government.

Not until now.

Abner Streitman Long was Resident Professor of Psychology at Mandar University. He was also one of the world's foremost and best-known experimenters in the area of parapsychology, also called Extra-Sensory Perception, also called psionics.

The government, as a matter of principle, didn't believe in psionics. But the government, also as a matter of principle, kept a psionics expert handy, just in case.

The "just in case" had maybe happened.

Professor Long sat in Marshall's office and listened stolidly to the problem. The

expert was a tall, barrel-chested man with a fantastic shock of white hair exploding out in all directions from his head. His nose was bulbous, his jaw out-thrust, his eyes deepset, his ears hairy, his hands huge and his feet huger. He looked like a dressed-up lumberjack, of the old school.

He listened, and they talked, and every once in a while he nodded and said, "Huh." His voice was, predictably, basso profundo.

THEN they were finished, and Professor Long summed it all up. "He changes the temperature of objects. Yes?"

"Yes," said Marshall.

"You looked for a machine. Yes?"

"Yes, and we didn't find it."

"And your thermodynamics people said no such machine could exist anyway, yes?"

"That's right."

"Then why did you look for it?"

"Because," said Marshall desperately, "we'd seen it in action. That is, we'd seen the result of its use."

"Yes," said the professor. He sucked on his lower lip and abstractedly watched his thumbs twiddle. "Pyrotic," he announced at last.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Marshall.

"Pyrotic," repeated the professor. "Yes? Yes. Pyrotic. Do you know what that is?"

"No," said Marshall.

"Good," said the professor. "Neither do I. But I have a theory. There are more theories than there are phenomena. That always happens. But listen to this theory. The mind reaches into the object on the molecular level, and adjusts the molecules, so. The temperature changes. Do you see?"

"Not exactly," said Marshall doubtfully.

"Neither do I. Never mind. I know lots of theories, none of them make any sense. But they all try to explain."

"If you say so," said Marshall.

"Yes. I say so. Now. As a psychologist, I will tell you something else. This boy has made this a secret, yes? The Scorpion, he calls himself, and, like his heroes of the comic books, he uses his power for good. Shazam, yes? Captain Marvel."

"Yes," said Stevenson, nodding emphatically.

"Now, what happens if you go to this boy and tell him, 'We know you are the Scorpion? Your secret is out.' What happens then?"

"I don't know," said Marshall.

"Think," suggested Professor Long. "Batman, let us say, or Superman. Quite apart from fighting crime, what is the major task confronting these heroes? That of maintaining the secrecy of their identity, yes?"

The four men nodded.

"Now," said Professor Long, "to the mind of a ten-year-old boy, what is the implication? The implication is this: If the secret of the identity is lost the power of the hero is also lost. This is the clear implication. Yes?"

"You mean this boy wouldn't be able to do it any more if we went and talked to him?" asked Lang.

"I don't say that," cautioned the professor. "I do say this: He will *believe* that he has lost the power. And this belief may be sufficient to destroy the power. Yes?"

"In other words," said Marshall, "you're saying that we can't ask this boy how he manages his stunt, because if we do then he probably won't be able to manage it any more."

"A distinct possibility," said the professor. "But only a temporary possibility. The drama of the Scorpion will not, I imagine, survive puberty."

"But will the *ability* survive puberty?"

"No one can know. No one can even guess."

"Now, here's the thing," said Marshall. "Not downgrading your theories at all, Professor, they are nevertheless still only theories. Frankly, given my choice between an impossible machine and a boy with the power to *think* things hot and cold, I'll give the impossible machine the

edge. At this point, accepting the idea of the machine, our next move is simple. We go ask the boy to give it to us. From what you say, we can't even do that."

"My best advice," said the professor, "would be to keep the boy under careful surveillance for the next three or four years. Gradually get to know him, carefully work out a long-range program involving his reading habits, the attitudes of his teachers and parents, the sort of external stimuli to which he is—"

"Fellas," said Roberts suddenly. "Oh, fellas."

They turned to look at him. He was in his favorite pose, shoes off, feet up on the windowsill. He was now pointing at the window. "Do you fellas see what I fella see?" he asked them.

They saw. The window was frosting. It was a rainy, humid mid-November day, and moisture was condensing on the window pane. It was condensing, and then it was freezing.

It didn't take long. No more than a minute passed from the time Roberts noticed the thing beginning until the time it was complete. And then they watched various specific sections of the window defrost again.

It was a very strange looking window. It was covered with frost, but there were lines of bare window, as though the frost had been

scraped away. The lines formed letters, and the letters formed words, and the words were:

POO. MOM TOLD ME.

"My God," said Marshall.

"Well, well, well, well," said Stevenson.

"Yes," said Professor Long. He nodded, and turned away from the window to look at the door. "You may come in now, Eddie," he called.

The door opened, and Eddie Clayhorn stood there, in civilian clothes. He beamed at the window. "That was tricky," he said.

"So," said Professor Long. "I was mistaken, eh? Exposure does not spoil things, is that it?"

"Sometimes," said Eddie Clayhorn, "the hero has one or two trusted friends on the police force who know who he is and give him tips about criminals. But they never tell anybody."

"Of course!" said Professor Long. "And we are *your* trusted friends. Yes?"

"Sure. But you can't tell my parents or anybody."

Roberts leaned forward and gingerly touched the frosted window. It was cold, very cold. He turned and looked with awed eyes at Eddie Clayhorn.

Slowly, he smiled. "Scorp old boy," he said, "you can just call me Tonto. Kimo-sabe!"

END

HUE AND CRY

GOOD to hear from you all! It's nice to get a mailbag full of comments and suggestions, especially when so many of them show so much hard thinking about what ought to go into making up a first-class science-fiction magazine.

Regarding the kind of stories, I am reasonably sure that most of the readers want stories that make them THINK, and which deal with current trends, such as *The Junkmakers*. The present trend to planned obsolescence must be reversed, also too great conformity and many other aspects of our time. Your writers can do this. I am a profound believer that the pen is mightier than the sword.

Leslie D. Carr
Winchendon, Massachusetts

Our writers can do *anything!* —Anything, that is, except know how to satisfy readers who don't send letters in to give us the benefit of their opinion.

When I received the July *If* in the mail about two weeks ago and happened to glance at the back page... Suffice it to say that I almost fainted when I saw my name there! I enjoyed all the features this time; but should really appreciate an editorial. Book reviews would be happily welcomed back... Please run a lettercol that takes from 10-16 pages of the mag and don't print those shorty things... I would also be extremely pleased to see a fanzine review appear in *If*.

Lawrence Crilly
Elizabeth, New Jersey

Let's see. We won't be running an editorial, book reviews or fanzine reviews for at least the immediate future; we won't be running 10 to 16 pages of letters ever (unless the editor goes out of his mind); and we will, as you see, run "shorties" —even when we have to cut them!

Lawrence, you just can't win 'em all.

If needs a letter column. The only way for an S-F mag to improve its quality is for the readers to get on the ball and tell the editor what needs improvement.

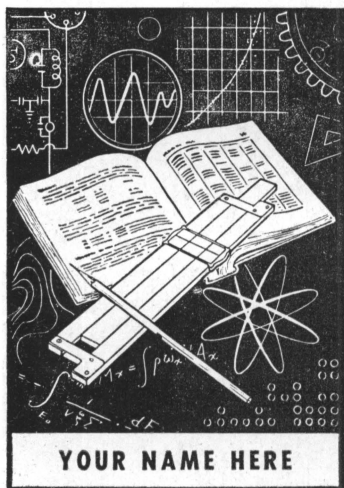
My big gripe about *If* is the distribution. In this town there hasn't been one copy on the newsstands for over a year. If you want your circulation to improve, get *If* on the newsstands where people can buy it.

Irwin Sternberg, Jr.
Tucson, Arizona

Yes, we'd like that. How do we go about doing it?

That, apologetically, is that for this month. Next issue we hope to have maybe three pages of letters instead of this inadequate one—planned for it this issue, in fact, but the type wouldn't stretch. See you then!

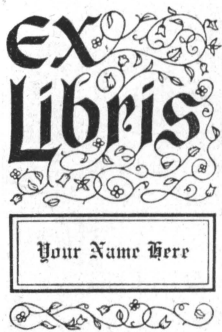
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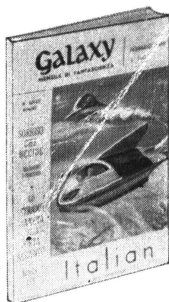
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