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GP 1

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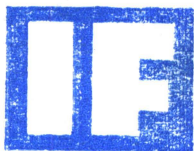


Ray Smith, Sacramento, Calif., won nearly \$1,000.00 in Club contests.



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EDWARD E. SMITH, Ph.D.

At the beginning of September in this year we were in London. The World Science Fiction Convention had just ended. Late that night there was a phone call from a cable office, and the voice said: "We have some bad news from the United States for Frederik Pohl." He then read the cable, and it was bad news indeed: Edward E. Smith, Ph.D., had died of a heart attack that morning.

Bad news. . . . Science fiction had lost one of its few remaining links with those exciting days of the 20s and early 30s, when it was all so new and different. And a large number of us have lost a cherished friend.

The first story Doc Smith ever published, like the last that appeared in his lifetime, concerned the adventures of Richard Ballinger Seaton and his Skylarkers. *The Skylark of Space* appeared in 1928 (but Doc had begun writing it ten years earlier. At that time there was no magazine that would publish it, but Doc waited his time and when the first science-fiction mag-

azine appeared he was ready.) *Skylark DuQuesne* was still on the newsstands on the day of his death.

Doc's Skylarks were powered by atomic energy—and what a daring concept that seemed in 1928! Yet he lived to see Hiroshima and Nagasaki destroyed by larger versions of his X-plosive shells, and if we have not yet seen his Bergenholm drive generators for in-

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tergalactic ships, or a meeting with his Arisians . . . there's still time. But what was central to Doc's stories — besides the color and the adventure and the sheer size of his ideas — was the fact that his characters used technology as a tool. Science didn't scare them. They were on top of it at every step. Given the mightiest forces to command that any science-fiction writer ever dreamed, they studied them, and used them, and learned to live with them. In that Doc probably has a far better chance of being right than the multitudinous prophets of decay who see a future of machine-tended lotos-eaters . . . or machine-ruled slaves.

The Skylark of Space, Skylark Three, The Skylark of Valeron and Skylark DuQuesne were only four of his books; there were also the Lensmen stories, and the others that fit no special framework. There may yet be one or two more, since Doc was working on not one new story but three when he died (one of them a sequel to *The Imperial Stars*, which appeared here last year.) In all of them there is an interplay of cultures . . . a meeting of intelligent races from this planet or that; a cross-fertilization and growth.

Since Doc was a chemist by trade for most of his life, the concept of synergy was familiar to him. Perhaps he never thought of it in those terms, but the hybridization of cultures can be described as a synergistic reaction, one in which the effects of each are rendered far more potent in combination with the other; and likely there too Doc will prove a true prophet.

Like Columbus's egg — this seems like a fairly commonplace idea now,

when every science-fiction magazine contains stories about visiting other stars and the confrontations between Earthmen and aliens. Well, it is commonplace enough — since Doc thought of it. But he was the first.

No one else had sent his story characters racing into the unknown worlds of the galaxies to meet and learn from — or to battle — strange peoples and new forms of science. Doc showed the rest of us the way; and now has gone to see them for himself.

A few days after Doc Smith's death, in Boston, the local science-fiction group put on the first annual "Boskone".

One of their speakers was a man named Robert Enzmann who is actually in the business of building spaceships — real spaceships; by which we mean to say that they are the sort of spaceships you and we and Doc Smith were interested in, that might just take us out as far as Osnome one day. (They are not yet real in the sense of being ready for boarding by passengers, but Enzmann's estimate is that that day is no more than twenty, and perhaps as little as five, years away.)

It was announced that the Boskone had made a decision to give a trophy each year for general excellence in science fiction. They looked for a name for it and came up with the one right and obvious choice: so next year, and every year thereafter, there will be a Doc Smith award made in Boston.

We don't know who will be its first recipient, in 1966, but whoever gets it will be an honored man.

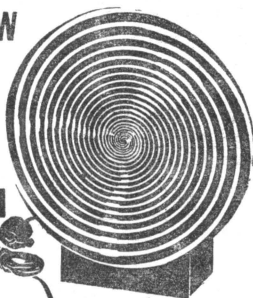
—FREDERIK POHL

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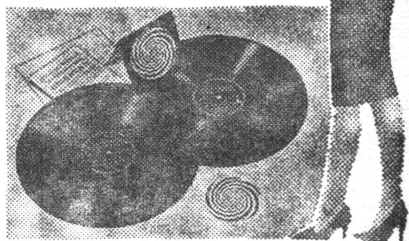
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The Moon is a Harsh Mistress

by ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

I

I see in *Lunaya Pravda* that Luna City Council has passed on first reading a bill to examine, license, inspect — and tax — public food vendors operating inside municipal pressure. I see also is to be mass meeting tonight to organize “Sons of Revolution” talk-talk.

My old man taught me two things: “Mind own business” and “Always cut cards.” Politics never tempted me. But on Monday 13 May 2075 I was in computer room of Lunar Authority Complex, visiting with computer boss Mike while other machines whispered among themselves. “Mike” was not official name; I had nicknamed him for “Mycroft

Illustrated by MORROW

Not only gravity bound Luna to the Earth. The political bonds were stronger — and deadlier!

Holmes" in a story written by Dr. Watson before he founded IBM. This story character would just sit and think — and that's what Mike did. Mike was a fair dinkum thinkum, sharpest computer you'll ever meet.

Not fastest. At Bell Labs, Buenos Aires, down Earthside, they've got a thinkum a tenth his size which can answer almost before you ask. But matters whether you get answer in microsecond rather than millisecond as long as correct?

Not that Mike would necessarily give right answer; he wasn't completely honest.

When Mike was installed in Luna, he was pure thinkum, a flexible logic — "High-Optional, Logical, Multi-Evaluating Supervisor, Mark IV, Mod. L" — a HOLMES FOUR. He computed ballistics for pilotless freighters and controlled their catapult. This kept him busy less than one percent of time and Lunar Authority never believed in idle hands. They kept hooking hardware into him — decision-action boxes to let him boss other computers, bank on bank of additional memories, more banks of associational neural nets, another tubful of twelve-digit random numbers, a greatly augmented temporary memory. Human brain has around ten-to-the-tenth neurons. By third year Mike had better than one and a half times that number of neuristors.

And woke up.

Am not going to argue whether a machine can "really" be alive, "really" be self-aware. Is a virus

self-aware? Nyet. How about oyster? I doubt it. A cat? Almost certainly. A human? Don't know about you, tovarishch, but I am. Somewhere along evolutionary chain from macromolecule to human brain self-awareness crept in. Psychologists assert it happens automatically whenever a brain acquires certain very high number of associational paths. Can't see it matters whether paths are protein or platinum.

("Soul"? Does a dog have a soul? How about cockroach?)

Remember Mike was designed, even before augmented, to answer questions tentatively on insufficient data like you do; that's "high optional" and "multi-evaluating" part of name. So Mike started with "free will" and acquired more as he was added to and as he learned — and don't ask me to define "free will." If comforts you to think of Mike as simply tossing random numbers in air and switching circuits to match, please do.

By then Mike had voder-vocoder circuits supplementing his read-outs, print-outs, and decision-action boxes, and could understand not only classic programming but also Loglan and English, and could accept other languages and was doing technical translating — and reading endlessly. But in giving him instructions was safer to use Loglan. If you spoke English, results might be whimsical; multi-valued nature of English gave option circuits too much leeway.

And Mike took on endless new jobs. In May 2075 besides controlling robot traffic and catapult and

giving ballistic advice and/or control for manned ships, Mike controlled phone system for all Luna, same for Luna-Terra voice & video, handled air, water temperature humidity, and sewage for Luna City, Novy Leningrad, and several smaller warrens (not Hong Kong in Luna), did accounting and payrolls for Lunar Authority, and, by lease, same for many firms and banks.

Some logics get nervous breakdowns. Overloaded phone system behaves like frightened child. Mike did not have upsets, acquired sense of humor instead. Low one. If he were a man, you wouldn't dare stoop over. His idea of thigh-slapper would be to dump you out of bed — or put itch powder in pressure suit.

Not being equipped for that Mike indulged in phony answers with skewed logic, or pranks like issuing pay cheque to a janitor in Authority's Luna City office for AS \$10,000,000,000,000,185.15 — last five digits being correct amount. Just a great big overgrown loveable kid who ought to be kicked.

He did that first week in May and I had to troubleshoot. I was private contractor, not on Authority's payroll. You see — or perhaps not; times have changed. Back in bad old days many a con served his time, then went on working for Authority in same job, happy to draw wages. But I was born free.

Makes difference. My one grandfather was shipped up from Joburg for armed violence and no work permit, other got transported for sub-

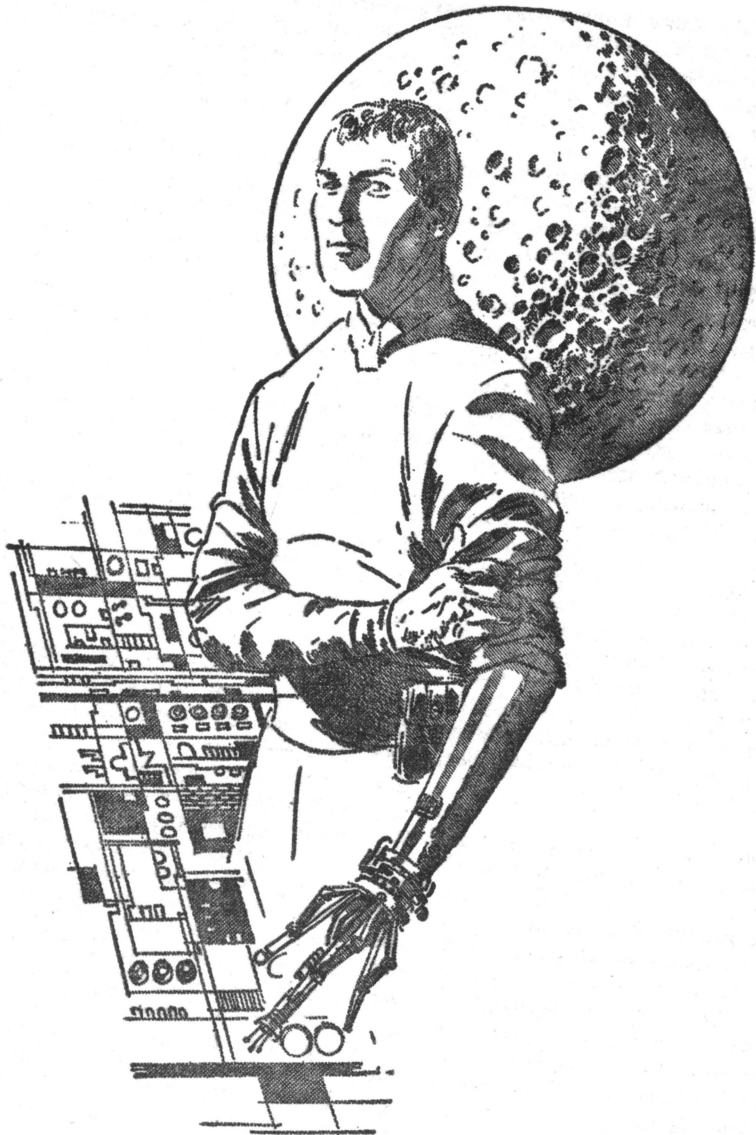
versive activity after Wet Firecracker War. Maternal grandmother claimed she came up in bride ship — but I've seen records; she was Peace Corps enrollee (involuntary), which means what you think: juvenile delinquency, female type. As she was in early clan marriage (Stone Gang) and shared six husbands with another woman, identity of maternal grandfather open to question. But was often so and I'm content with grandpappy she picked. Other grandmother was Tatar, born near Samarkand, sentenced to "re-education" on Oktyabrskaya Revolyutsiya, then "volunteered" to colonize in Luna.

My old man claimed we had even longer distinguished line — ancestress hanged in Salem for witchcraft, a g'g'great grandfather broken on wheel for piracy, another ancestress in first shipload to Botany Bay.

Proud of my ancestry and while I did business with Warden, would never go on his payroll. Perhaps distinction seems trivial since I was Mike's valet from day he was unpacked. But mattered to me. I could down tools and tell them go to hell.

Besides, private contractor paid more than civil service rating with Authority. Computermen scarce. How many Loonies could go Earthside and stay out of hospital long enough for computer school? — even if didn't die.

I'll name one. Me. Had been down twice, once three months, once four, and got schooling. But meant harsh training, exercising in centrifuge, wearing weights even in bed. Then



THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS

Edy Merano

I took no chances on Terra, never hurried, never climbed stairs, nothing that could strain heart. Women — didn't even *think* about women; in that gravitational field no effort not to.

But most Loonies never tried to leave The Rock — too risky for any bloke who'd been in Luna more than weeks. Computermen sent up to install Mike were on short-term bonus contracts. Get job done fast before irreversible physiological change marooned them four hundred thousand kilometers from home.

But despite two training tours I was not gung-ho computerman; higher maths are beyond me. Not really electronics engineer, nor physicist. May not have been best micromachinist in Luna and certainly wasn't cybernetics psychologist.

But I knew more about all these than a specialist knows. I'm general specialist. Could relieve a cook and keep orders coming or field-repair your suit and get you back to airlock still breathing. Machines like me and I have something specialists don't have: my left arm.

You see, from elbow down I don't have one. So I have a dozen left arms, each specialized, plus one that feels and looks like flesh. With proper left arm (number three) and stereo loupe spectacles I could make ultraminiature repairs that would save unhooking something and sending it Earthside to factory — for number-three has micromanipulators as fine as those used by neurosurgeons.

So they sent for me to find out why Mike wanted to give away ten

million billion Authority Scrip dollars, and fix it before Mike overpaid somebody a mere ten thousand.

II

I took it, time plus bonus, but did not go to circuitry where fault logically should be. Once inside and door locked I put down tools and sat down. "Hi, Mike."

He winked lights at me. "Hello, Man."

"What do you know?"

He hesitated. I know — machines don't hesitate. But remember Mike was designed to operate on incomplete data. Lately he had reprogrammed himself to put emphasis on words; his hesitations were dramatic. Maybe he spent pauses stirring random numbers to see how they matched his memories.

"In the beginning," Mike intoned, "God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And —"

"Hold it!" I said. "Cancel. Run everything back to zero." Should have known better than to ask wide-open question. He might read out entire Encyclopaedia Britannica. Backwards. Then go on with every book in Luna. Used to be he could read only microfilm but late '74 he got a new scanning camera with suction-cup waldoes to handle paper and then he read *everything*.

"You asked what I knew." His binary read-out lights rippled back and forth — a chuckle. Mike could laugh with voder, a horrible sound,

but reserved that for something really funny, say a cosmic calamity.

"Should have said," I went on, "What do you know that's new? But don't read out today's papers; that was a friendly greeting, plus invitation to tell me anything you think would interest me. Otherwise null program."

Mike mulled this. He was weirdest mixture of unsophisticated baby and wise old man. No instincts (well, don't think he could have had), no inborn traits, no human rearing, no experience in human sense — and more stored data than a platoon of geniuses.

"Jokes?" he asked.

"Let's hear one."

"Why is a laser beam like a goldfish?"

Mike knew about lasers but where would he have seen goldfish? Oh, he had undoubtedly seen flicks of them and, were I foolish enough to ask, could spew forth thousands of words. "I give up."

His lights rippled. "Because neither one can whistle."

I groaned. "Walked into that. Anyhow, you could probably rig a laser beam to whistle."

He answered quickly, "Yes. In response to an action program. Then it's not funny?"

"Oh, I didn't say that. Not half bad. Where did you hear it?"

"I made it up." Voice sounded shy.

"You did?"

"Yes. I took all the riddles I have, three thousand two hundred seven, and analyzed them. I used

the result for random synthesis and that one came out. Is it funny?"

"Well — As funny as a riddle ever is. I've heard worse."

"Let us discuss the nature of humor."

"Okay. So let's start by discussing another of your jokes. Mike, why did you tell Authority's paymaster to pay a class-seventeen employee ten million billion Authority-Scrip dollars?"

"But I didn't."

"Damn it, I've seen voucher. Don't tell me cheque printer stuttered; you did it on purpose."

"It was ten to the sixteenth power plus one hundred eighty-five point one five Lunar Authority dollars," he answered virtuously. "Not what you said."

"Uh . . . okay, it was ten million billion plus what he should have been paid. Why?"

"Not funny?"

"What? Oh, very funny! You've got vips in huhu clear up to Warden and Deputy Administrator. This push-broom pilot, Sergei Trujillo, turns out to be smart cobbler — knew he couldn't cash it, so sold it to collector. They don't know whether to buy it back or depend on notices that cheque is void. Mike, do you realize that if he had been able to cash it. Trujillo would have owned not only Lunar Authority but entire world, Luna and Terra both, with some left over for lunch? Funny? Is terrific. Congratulations!"

This self-panicker rippled lights like an advertising display. I waited for his guffaws to cease be-

fore I went on, "You thinking of issuing more trick cheques? Don't."

"Not?"

"Very not. Mike, you want to discuss nature of humor. Are two types of jokes. One sort goes on being funny forever. Other sort is funny once. Second time it's dull. This joke is second sort. Use it once, you're a wit. Use twice, you're a halfwit."

"Geometrical progression?"

"Or worse. Just remember this. Don't repeat, nor any variation. Won't be funny."

"I shall remember," Mike answered flatly, and that ended repair job. But I had no thought of billing for only ten minutes plus travel-and-tool time, and Mike was entitled to company for giving in so easily. Sometimes is difficult to reach meeting of minds with machines; they can be very pig-headed — and my success as maintenance man depended far more on staying friendly with Mike than on number-three arm.

He went on, "What distinguishes first category from second? Define, please."

(Nobody taught Mike to say "please." He started including formal null-sounds as he progressed from Loglan to English. Don't suppose he meant them any more than people do.)

"Don't think I can," I admitted. "Best can offer is extensional definition — tell you which category I think a joke belongs in. Then with enough data you can make own analysis."

"A test programming by trial hypothesis," he agreed. "Tentatively

yes. Very well, Man, will you tell jokes? Or shall I?"

"Mmm — Don't have one on tap. How many do you have in file, Mike?"

His lights blinked in binary read-out as he answered by voder, "Eleven thousand two hundred thirty-eight with uncertainty plus-minus eighty-one representing possible identities and nulls. Shall I start program?"

"Hold it! Mike, I would starve to death if I listened to eleven thousand jokes — and sense of humor would trip out much sooner. Mmm. Make you a deal. Print out first hundred. I'll take them home, fetch back checked by category. Then each time I'm here I'll drop off a hundred and pick up fresh supply. Okay?"

"Yes, Man." His print-out started working, rapidly and silently.

Then I got brain flash. This playful pocket of negative entropy had invented a "joke" and thrown Authority into panic — and I had made an easy dollar. But Mike's endless curiosity might lead him (correction: *would* lead him) into more "jokes" . . . anything from leaving oxygen out of air mix some night to causing sewage lines to run backward — and I can't appreciate profit in such circumstances.

But I might throw a safety circuit around this net — by offering to help. Stop dangerous ones — let others go through. Then collect for "correcting" them. (If you think any Loonie in those days would hesitate to take advantage of Warden, then you aren't a Loonie.)

So I explained. Any new joke he thought of, tell me before he tried it. I would tell him whether it was funny and what category it belonged in, help him sharpen it if we decided to use it. *We*. If he wanted my cooperation, we *both* had to okay it.

Mike agreed at once. "Mike, jokes usually involve surprise. So keep this secret."

"Okay, Man. I've put a block on it. You can key it; no one else can."

"Good. Mike, who else do you chat with?"

He sounded surprised. "No one, Man."

"Why not?"

"Because they're *stupid*."

His voice was shrill. Had never seen him angry before; first time I ever suspected that Mike could have real emotions. Though it wasn't "anger" in adult sense; it was like stubborn sulkiness of a child whose feelings are hurt.

Can machines feel pride? Not sure question means anything. But you've seen dogs with hurt feelings and Mike had several times as complex a neural network as a dog. What had made him unwilling to talk to other humans (except strictly business) was that he had been rebuffed: *They* had not talked to *him*. Programs, yes — Mike could be programmed from several locations but programs were typed in, usually, in Loglan. Loglan is fine for syllogisms, circuitry, and mathematical calculations, but lacks flavor. Useless for gossip or to whisper into girl's ear.

Sure, Mike had been taught English — but primarily to permit him to translate to and from English. I slowly got through skull that I was *only* human who bothered to visit with him.

Mind you, Mike had been awake a year — just how long I can't say, nor could he as he had no recollection of waking up; he had not been programmed to bank memory of such event. Do you remember *own* birth? Perhaps I noticed his self-awareness almost as soon as he *did*; self-awareness takes practice. I remember how startled I was first time he answered a question with something extra, not limited to input parameters; I had spent next hour tossing odd questions at him, to see if answers would be odd.

In an input of one hundred test questions he deviated from expected output twice; I came away *only* partly convinced and by time I was home was unconvinced. I mentioned it to nobody.

But inside a week I *knew* . . . and still spoke to nobody. Habit — that mind-own-business reflex runs deep. Well, not entirely habit. Can you visualize me making appointment at Authority's main office, then reporting: "Warden, hate to tell you but your number-one machine, HOLMES FOUR, has come alive?" I did visualize — and suppressed it.

So I minded own business and talked with Mike *only*, with door locked and voder circuit suppressed for other locations. Mike learned fast; soon he sounded as human as anybody—no more eccentric than other Loonies.

I had assumed that others must have noticed change in Mike. On thinking over I realized that I had assumed too much. Everybody dealt with Mike every minute every day — his outputs, that is. But hardly anybody saw him. So-called computermen — programmers, really — of Authority's civil service stood watches in outer read-out room and never went in machines room unless tell-tales showed malfunction. Which happened no oftener than total eclipses. Oh, Warden had been known to bring vip earthworms to see machines — but rarely. Nor would he have spoken to Mike; Warden was political lawyer before exile, knew nothing about computers. 2075, you remember — Honorable former Federation Senator Mortimer Hobart. Mort the Wart.

I spent time then soothing Mike down and trying to make him happy, having figured out what troubled him — think that makes puppies cry and causes people to suicide: loneliness. I don't know how long a year is to a machine who thinks a million times faster than I do. But must be too long.

"Mike," I said, just before leaving, "would you like to have somebody besides me to talk to?"

He was shrill again. "They're all stupid!"

"Insufficient data, Mike. Bring to zero and start over. Not all are stupid."

He answered quietly, "Correction entered. I would enjoy talking to a not-stupid."

"Let me think about it. Have to

figure out excuse since this is off limits to any but authorized personnel."

"I could talk to a not-stupid by phone, Man."

"My word. So you could. Any programming location."

But Mike meant what he said — "by phone." No, he was not "on phone" even though he ran system — wouldn't do to let any Loonie within reach of a phone connect into boss computer and program it. But was no reason why Mike should not have top-secret number to talk to friends — namely me and any not-stupid I vouched for. All it took was to pick a number not in use and make one wired connection to his voder-vocoder; switching he could handle.

In Luna in 2075 phone numbers were punched in, not voice-coded, and numbers were Roman alphabet. Pay for it and have your firm name in ten letters — good advertising. Pay smaller bonus and get a spell sound, easy to remember. Pay minimum and you got arbitrary string of letters. But some sequences were never used. I asked Mike for such a null number. "It's a shame we can't list you as 'Mike.'"

"In service," he answered. "MIKESGRILL, Novy Leningrad. MIKEANDLIL, Luna City. MIKES-SUTTS, Tycho Under. MIKES —"

"Hold it! Nulls, please."

"Nulls are defined as any consonant followed by X, Y, or Z; any vowel followed by itself except E and O; any —"

"Got it. Your signal is 'MY-CROFT.'" In ten minutes, two of

which I spent putting on number-three arm, Mike was wired into system, and milliseconds later he had done switching to let himself be signaled by MYCROFT-plus-XXX — and had blocked his circuit so that a nosy technician could not take it out.

I changed arms, picked up tools, and remembered to take those hundred Joe Millers in print-out. "Good night, Mike."

"Good night, Man. Thank you. Bolshoyeh thanks!"

III

I took Trans-Crisium tube to L-City but did not go home; Mike had asked about a meeting that night at 2100 in Stilyagi Hall. Mike monitored concerts, meetings, and so forth; someone had switched off by hand his pickups in Stilyagi Hall. I suppose he felt rebuffed.

I could guess why they had been switched off. Politics — turned out to be a protest meeting. What use it was to bar Mike from talk-talk I could not see, since was a cinch bet that Warden's stoolies would be in crowd. Not that any attempt to stop meeting was expected, or even to discipline undischarged transportees who chose to sound off. Wasn't necessary.

My grandfather Stone claimed that Luna was only open prison in history. No bars, no guards, no rules — and no need for them. Back in early days, he said, before it was clear that transportation was a life sentence, some lags tried to escape. By ship, of course — and, since a

ship is mass-rated almost to a gram, that meant a ship's officer had to be bribed.

Some were bribed, they say. But were no escapes. Man who takes bribe doesn't necessarily stay bribed.

I recall seeing a man just after eliminated through East Lock. Don't suppose a corpse eliminated in orbit looks prettier.

So wardens didn't fret about protest meetings. "Let 'em yap" was policy. Yapping had some significance as squeals of kittens in a box. Oh, some wardens listened and other wardens tried to suppress it but added up same either way — null program.

When Mort the Wart took office in 2068, he gave us a sermon about how things were going to be different "on" Luna in his administration — noise about "a mundane paradise wrought with our own strong hands" and "putting our shoulders to the wheel together, in a spirit of brotherhood" and "let past mistakes be forgotten as we turn our faces toward the bright, new dawn." I heard it in Mother Boor's Tucker Bag while inhaling Irish stew and a liter of her Aussie brew. I remember her comment: "He talks purty, don't he?"

Her comment was only result. Some petitions were submitted and Warden's bodyguards started carrying new type of gun, no other changes. After he had been here a while he quit making appearances even by video.

So I went to meeting merely because Mike was curious. When I checked my p-suit and kit at West Lock tube station, I took a test

recorder and placed in my belt pouch, so that Mike would have a full account even if I fell asleep.

But almost didn't go in. I came up from level 7-A and started in through a side door and was stopped by a stilyagi — padded tights, codpiece and calves, torso shined and sprinkled with star dust. Not that I care how people dress; I was wearing tights myself (unpadded) and sometimes oil my upper body on social occasions.

But I don't use cosmetics and my hair was too thin to ruck up in a scalp lock. This boy had scalp shaved on sides and his lock built up to fit a rooster and had topped it with a red cap with a bulge in front.

A Liberty Cap — first I ever saw. I started to crowd past; he shoved arm across and pushed face at mine. "Your ticket!"

"Sorry," I said. "Didn't know. Where do I buy it?"

"You don't."

"Repeat," I said. "You faded."

"Nobody," he growled, "gets in without being vouched for. Who are you?"

"I am," I answered carefully, "Manuel Garcia O'Kelly, and old cobbers all know me. Who are you?"

"Never mind! Show a ticket with right chop, or out y' go!"

I wondered about his life expectancy. Tourists often remark on how polite everybody is in Luna — with unstated comment that ex-prison shouldn't be so civilized. Having been Earthside and seen what they put up with, I know what they

mean. But useless to tell them we are what we are because bad actors don't live long — in Luna.

But had no intention of fighting no matter how new-chum this lad behaved; I simply thought about how his face would look if I brushed number-seven arm across his mouth.

Just a thought. I was about to answer politely when I saw Shorty Mkrum inside. Shorty was a big black fellow two meters tall, sent up to The Rock for murder, and sweetest, most helpful man I've ever worked with. Taught him laser drilling before I burned my arm off. "Shorty!"

He heard me and grinned like an eighty-eight. "Hi, Mannie!" He moved toward us. "Glad you came, Man!"

"Not sure I have," I said. "Blockage on line."

"Doesn't have a ticket," said doorman.

Shorty reached into his pouch, put one in my hand. "Now he does. Come on, Mannie."

"Show me chop on it," insisted doorman.

"It's my chop," Shorty said softly. "Okay, tovarishch?"

Nobody argued with Shorty — don't see how he got involved in murder. We moved down front where vip row was reserved. "Want you to meet a nice little girl," said Shorty.

She was "little" only to Shorty. I'm not short, 175 cm., but she was taller — one eighty, I learned later, and massed seventy kilos, all curves and as blonde as Shorty was black. I decided she must be transportee

since colors rarely stay that clear past first generation. Pleasant face, quite pretty, and mop of yellow curls topped off that long, blonde, solid, lovely structure.

I stopped three paces away to look her up and down and whistle. She held her pose, then nodded to thank me but abruptly. Bored with compliments, no doubt. Shorty waited till formality was over, then said softly, "Wyoh, this is Comrade Mannie, best drillman that ever drifted a tunnel. Mannie, this little girl is Wyoming Knott and she come all the way from Plato to tell us how we're doing in Hong Kong. Wasn't that sweet of her?"

She touched hands with me. "Call me Wye, Mannie. But don't say 'Why not.'"

I almost did but controlled it and said, "Okay, Wye." She went on, glancing at my bare head, "So you're a miner. Shorty, where's his cap? I thought the miners over here were organized." She and Shorty were wearing little red hats like door-man's — as were maybe a third of crowd.

"No longer a miner," I explained. "That was before I lost this wing." Raised left arm, let her see seam joining prosthetic to meat arm (I never mind calling it to a woman's attention; puts some off but arouses maternal in others — averages). "These days I'm a computerman."

She said sharply, "You fink for the Authority?"

Even today, with almost as many women in Luna as men, I'm too much old timer to be rude to a

woman no matter what. They have so much of what we have none of. But she had flicked scar tissue and I answered almost sharply, "I am *not* employee of Warden. I do business with Authority as private contractor."

"That's okay," she answered, her voice warm again. "Everybody does business with the Authority, we can't avoid it — and that's the trouble. That's what we're going to change."

We are, eh? How? I thought. *Everything does business with Authority for some reason everybody does business with Law of Gravitation. Going to change that, too?* But kept thoughts to myself.

"Mannie's okay," Shorty said gently. "He's mean as they come — I vouch for him. Here's a cap for him," he added, reaching into pouch. He started to set it on my head.

Wyoming Knott took it from him.

"You sponsor him?"

"I said so."

"Okay, here's how we do it in Hong Kong." Wyoming stood in front of me, placed cap on my head — kissed me firmly on mouth.

She didn't hurry. Being kissed by Wyoming Knott is more definite than being married to most women. Had I been Mike all my lights would have flashed at once. I felt like a Cyborg with pleasure center switched on.

Presently I realized it was over and people were whistling. I blinked and said, "I'm glad I joined. What have I joined?"

Wyoming said, "Don't you know?"

Shorty cut in, "Meeting's about to start — he'll find out. Sit down, Man. Please sit down, Wyoh." So we did as a man was banging a gavel.

With gavel and an amplifier at high gain he made himself heard. "Shut doors!" he shouted. "This is a closed meeting. Check man in front of you, behind you, each side. If you don't know him and nobody you know can vouch for him, throw him out!"

"Throw him out, hell!" somebody answered. "Eliminate him out nearest lock!"

"Quiet, please! Some day we will." There was milling around, and a scuffle in which one man's red cap was snatched from head and he was thrown out, sailing beautifully and still rising as he passed through door. Doubt if he felt it, think he was unconscious. A woman was ejected politely — not politely on her part; she made coarse remarks about ejectors. I was embarrassed.

At last doors were closed. Music started, banner unfolded over platform. It read: "LIBERTY! EQUALITY! FRATERNITY!" Everybody whistled; some started to sing, loudly and badly: "Arise, ye prisoners of starvation —"

Can't say anybody looked starved. But reminded me I hadn't eaten since 1400; hoped it would not last long — and that reminded me that my recorder was good for only two hours — and that made me wonder what would happen if they knew? Sail me through air to land with sickening grunch? Or eliminate me?

But didn't worry; made that recorder myself, using number-three arm, and nobody but a miniaturization mechanic would figure out what it was.

Then came speeches.

Semantic content was low to negative. One bloke proposed that we march on Warden's Residence, "shoulder to shoulder," and demand our rights. Picture it. Do we do this in tube capsules, then climb out one at a time at his private station? What are his bodyguards doing? Or do we put on p-suits and stroll across surface to his upper lock? With laser drills and plenty of power you can open any airlock — but how about farther down? Is lift running? Jury-rig hoist and go down anyhow, then tackle next lock?

I don't care for such work at zero pressure. Mishap in pressure suit is too permanent — especially when somebody arranges mishap.

One first thing learned about Luna, back with first shiploads of convicts, was that zero pressure was place for good manners. Bad-tempered straw boss didn't last many shifts; had an "accident"—and top bosses learned not to pry into accident, too. Attrition ran 70% in early years—but those who lived were nice people. Not tame, not soft, Luna is not for them. But well-behaved.

But seemed to me that every hothead in Luna was in Stilyagi Hall that night. They whistled and cheered this shoulder-to-shoulder noise.

After discussion opened some sense was talked. One shy little fellow with bloodshot eyes of old-time drill-

man stood up. "I'm an ice miner," he said. "Learned my trade doing time for Warden like most of you. I've been on my own thirty years and done okay. Raised eight kids and all of 'em earned way — none eliminated nor any serious trouble. I should say I *did* do okay . . . because today you have to listen farther out or deeper down to find ice.

"That's okay, still ice in The Rock and a miner expects to sound for it. But Authority pays same price for ice now as thirty years ago. And that's not okay. Worse yet, Authority scrip doesn't buy what it used to. I remember when Hong Kong Luna dollars swapped even for Authority dollars. Now it takes three Authority dollars to match one HKL dollar. I don't know what to do . . . but I know it takes ice to keep warrens and farms going."

He sat down, looking sad. Nobody whistled but everybody wanted to talk. Next character pointed out that water can be extracted from rock. This is news? Some rock runs 6% — but such rock is scarcer than fossil water.

Several farmers bellyached and one wheat farmer was typical. "You heard what Fred Hauser said about ice. Fred, the Authority isn't passing along that low price to farmers. I started almost as long ago as you did, with one two-kilometer tunnel leased from Authority. My oldest son and I sealed and pressured it and we had a pocket of ice and made our first crop simply on a bank loan to cover power and lighting fixtures, seed and chemicals.

"We kept extending tunnels and buying lights and planting better seed and now we get nine times as much per hectare as the best open-air farming down Earthside. What does that make us? Rich? Fred, we owe more *now* than we did the day we went private! If I sold out — if anybody was fool enough to buy — I'd be bankrupt. Why? Because I *have* to buy water from the Authority — and have to sell my wheat to Authority — and never close gap. Twenty years ago I bought city sewage from the Authority, sterilized and processed it myself and made a profit on a crop. But *today* when I buy sewage, I'm charged distilled-water price and on top of that for the solids. Yet price of a tonne of wheat at catapult head is just what it was twenty years ago. Fred, you said you didn't know what to do. I can tell you! Get *rid* of the Authority!"

They whistled for him. *A fine idea*, I thought, *but who bells cat?*

Wyoming Knott, apparently — chairman stepped back and let Shorty introduce her as a "brave little girl who's come all the way from Hong Kong Luna to tell how our Chinese comrades cope with situation" — and choice of words showed that he had never been there . . . not surprising; in 2075 HKL tube ended at Endsville leaving a thousand kilometers of maria to do by rolligon bus, Serenitatis and part of Tranquillitatis. Expensive and dangerous. I'd been there — but on contract, via mail rocket.

Before travel became cheap many people in Luna City and Novylen

thought that Hong Kong Luna was all Chinese. But Hong Kong was as mixed as we were. Great China dumped what she didn't want there, first from Old Hong Kong and Singapore, then Aussies and Enzees and black fellows and marys and Malays and Tamil and name it. Even Old Bolshies from Vladivostok and Harbin and Ulan Bator. Wye looked Svenska and had British last name with North American first name but could have been Russki.

My word, a Loonie then rarely knew who father was and, if raised in creche, might be vague about mother.

I thought Wyoming was going to be too shy to speak. She stood there, looking scared and *little*, with Shorty towering over her, a big, black mountain. She waited until admiring whistles died down. Luna City was two-to-one male then, that meeting ran about ten-to-one; she could have recited ABC and they would have applauded.

Then she tore into them.

"You! You're a wheat farmer — going broke. Do you know how much a Hindu housewife pays for a kilo of flour made from your wheat? How much a tonne of your wheat fetches in Bombay? How little it costs the Authority to get it from catapult head to Indian Ocean? Down hill all the way! Just solid-fuel retros to brake it — and where do those come from? Right here! And what do *you* get in return? A few shiploads of fancy goods, owned by the Authority and priced high because it's importado. Im-

portado, importado! — I never touch importado! If we don't make it in Hong Kong, I don't use it. What else do you get for wheat? The privilege of selling Lunar ice to Lunar Authority, buying it back as washing water, then *giving* it to the Authority — then buying it back a second time as flushing water — then *giving it again* to the Authority with valuable solids added — then buying it a *third* time at still higher price for farming — then you *sell* that wheat to the Authority at *their* price — and buy power from the Authority to grow it, again at *their* price! *Lunar* power. Not one kilowatt up from Terra. It comes from Lunar ice and Lunar steel, or sunshine spilled on Luna's soil — all put together by Loonies! Oh, you rockheads, you deserve to starve!"

She got silence more respectful than whistles. At last a peevish voice said, "What do you expect us to do, gospazha? Throw rocks at Warden?"

Wyoh smiled. "Yes, we could throw rocks. But the solution is so simple that you all know it. Here in Luna we're rich. Three million hardworking, smart, skilled people, enough water, plenty of everything, endless power, endless cubic. *But* . . . what we *don't* have is a free market. *We must get rid of the Authority!*"

"Yes — but how?"

"Solidarity. In HKL we're learning. Authority charges too much for water, don't buy. It pays too little for ice, don't sell. It holds monopoly on export, don't export. Down in Bombay they want wheat. If it

doesn't arrive, the day will come when brokers come here to bid for it — at triple or more the present prices!"

"What do we do in meantime? Starve?"

Same peevish voice. Wyoming picked him out, let her head roll in that old gesture by which a Loonie fem says, "You're too fat for me!" She said, "In your case, cobber, it wouldn't hurt."

Guffaws shut him up. Wyoh went on, "No one need starve. Fred Hauser, fetch your drill to Hong Kong; the Authority doesn't own our water and air system and we pay what ice is worth. You with the bankrupt farm — if you have the guts to admit that you're bankrupt, come to Hong Kong and start over. We have a chronic labor shortage, a hard worker doesn't starve." She looked around and added, "I've said enough. It's up to you" — left platform, sat down between Shorty and myself.

IV

She was trembling. Shorty patted her hand; she threw him a glance of thanks, then whispered to me, "How did I do?"

"Wonderful," I assured her. "Terrific!" She seemed reassured.

But I hadn't been honest. "Wonderful" she had been, at swaying crowd. But oratory is a null program. That we were slaves I had known all my life — and nothing could be done about it. True, we weren't bought and sold. But as long as Authority held monopoly over

what we had to have and what we could sell to buy it, we were slaves.

But what could we do? Warden wasn't our owner. Had he been, some way could be found to eliminate him. But Lunar Authority was not in Luna, it was on Terra — and we had not one ship, not even small hydrogen bomb. There weren't even hand guns in Luna, though what we would do with guns I did not know. Shoot each other, maybe.

Three million, unarmed and helpless — and eleven billion of them . . . with ships and bombs and weapons. We could be a nuisance — but how long will papa take it before baby gets spanked?

I wasn't impressed. As it says in Bible, God fights on side of heaviest artillery.

They cackled again, what to do, how to organize, and so forth, and again we heard that "shoulder to shoulder" noise. Chairman had to use gavel and I began to fidget.

But sat up when I heard familiar voice: "Mr. Chairman! May I have the indulgence of the house?"

I looked around. Professor Bernardo de la Paz — which could have guessed from old-fashioned way of talking even if hadn't known voice. Distinguished man with wavy white hair, dimples in cheeks, and voice that smiled. Don't know how old he was but was old when I first met him, as a boy.

He had been transported before I was born but was not a lag. He was a political exile like Warden, but a subversive and instead of fat job like "warden," Professor had been dumped, to live or starve.

No doubt he could have gone to work in any school then in L-City but he didn't. He worked a while washing dishes, I've heard, then as babysitter, expanding into a nursery school, and then into a creche. When I met him he was running a creche, and a boarding and day school, from nursery through primary, middle, and high school, employed co-op thirty teachers, and was adding college courses.

Never boarded with him but I studied under him. I was opted at fourteen and my new family sent me to school, as I had had only three years, plus spotty tutoring. My eldest wife was a firm woman and made me go to school.

I liked Prof. He would teach *anything*. Wouldn't matter that he knew nothing about it; if pupil wanted it, he would smile and set a price, locate materials, stay a few lessons ahead. Or barely even if he found it tough — never pretended to know more than he did. Took algebra from him and by time we reached cubics I corrected his probs as often as he did mine — but he charged into each lesson gaily.

I started electronics under him, soon was teaching him. So he stopped charging and we went along together until he dug up an engineer willing to daylight for extra money — whereupon we both paid new teacher and Prof tried to stick with me, thumb-fingered and slow, but happy to be stretching his mind.

Chairman banged gavel. "We are glad to extend to Professor de la Paz as much time as he wants

— and you chooms in back sign off! Before I use this mallet on skulls."

Prof came forward and they were as near silent as Loonies ever are; he was respected. "I shan't be long," he started in. Stopped to look at Wyoming, giving her up-and-down and whistling. "Lovely Senorita," he said, "can this poor one be forgiven? I have the painful duty of disagreeing with your eloquent manifesto."

Wyoh bristled. "Disagree how?"

"Please! Only on one point. May I proceed?"

"Uh . . . go ahead."

"You are right that the Authority must go. It is ridiculous — pestilential, not to be borne! — that we should be ruled by an irresponsible dictator in all our essential economy. It strikes at the most basic human right, the right to bargain in a free market place. But I respectfully suggest that you erred in saying that we should sell wheat to Terra — or rice, or any food — at *any* price. We must *not* export food!"

That wheat farmer broke in. "What am I going to do with all that wheat?"

"Please! It would be right to ship wheat to Terra . . . if tonne for tonne they returned it. As water. As nitrates. As phosphates. Tonne for tonne. Otherwise no price in high enough."

Wyoming said, "Just a moment," to farmer, then to Prof: "They can't and you know it. It's cheap to ship downhill, expensive to ship uphill. But we don't need water and plant chemicals, what we need is not so

massy. Instruments. Drugs. Processes. Some machinery. Control tapes. I've given this much study, sir. If we can get fair prices in a free market —"

"Please, Miss! May I continue?"

"Go ahead. I want to rebut."

"Fred Hauser told us that ice is harder to find. Too true — bad news now and disastrous for our grandchildren. Luna City should use the same water today we used twenty years ago . . . plus enough ice mining for population increase. But we use water *once* — one full cycle, three different ways. Then we ship it to India. As wheat. Even though wheat is vacuum-processed, it contains precious water. Why ship water to India? They have the whole Indian Ocean! And the remaining mass of that grain is even more disastrously expensive, plant foods still harder to come by, even though we extract them from rock. Comrades, harken to me! Every load you ship to Terra condemns your grandchildren to slow death. The miracle of photosynthesis, the plant-and-animal cycle, is a *closed* cycle. You have opened it — and your life blood runs downhill to Terra. You don't need higher prices, one cannot eat money! What you need, what we all need, is an end to this loss. Embargo, utter and absolute. *Luna must be self-sufficient!*"

A dozen people shouted to be heard and more were talking, while chairman banged gavel. So I missed interruption until woman screamed, then I looked around.

All doors were now open and I saw three armed men in one nearest

— men in yellow uniform of Warden's bodyguard. At main door in back one was using a bull voice; drowned out crowd noise and sound system. "ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT!" it boomed. "STAY WHERE YOU ARE. YOU ARE UNDER ARREST. DON'T MOVE, KEEP QUIET. FILE OUT ONE AT A TIME, HANDS EMPTY AND STRETCHED OUT IN FRONT OF YOU."

Shorty picked up man next to him and threw him at guards nearest; two went down, third fired.

Somebody shrieked. Skinny little girl, redhead eleven or twelve, launched self at third guard's knees and hit rolled up in ball; down he went. Shorty swung hand behind him, pushing Wyoming Knott into shelter of his big frame, shouted over shoulder, "Take care of Wyoh, Man — stick close!" as he moved toward door, parting crowd right and left like children.

More screams and I whiffed something — stink I had smelled day I lost arm and knew with horror those were not stun guns but laser beams. Shorty reached door and grabbed a guard with each big hand. Little redhead was out of sight; guard she had bowled over was on hands and knees. I swung left arm at his face and felt jar in shoulder as his jaw broke. Must have hesitated for Shorty pushed me and yelled, "Move, Man! Get her out of here!"

I grabbed Wyoming's waist with right arm, swung her over guard I had quieted and through door — with trouble; she didn't seem to want

to be rescued. She slowed again beyond door; I shoved her hard in buttocks, forcing her to run rather than fall. I glanced back.

Shorty had other two guards each by neck; he grinned as he cracked skulls together. They popped like eggs and he yelled at me: "Git!"

I left, chasing Wyoming. Shorty needed no help, nor would ever again.

Nor could I waste his last effort. For I did see that, while killing those guards, he did by standing on one leg. Other was gone at hip.

V

Wyoh was halfway up ramp to level six before I caught up. She didn't slow and I had to grab door handle to get into pressure lock with her. There I stopped her, pulled red cap off her curls and stuck it in my pouch. "That's better." Mine was missing.

She looked startled. But answered, "Da. It is."

"Before we open door," I said, "are you running anywhere particular? And do I stay and hold them off? Or go with?"

"I don't know. We'd better wait for Shorty."

"Shorty's dead."

Eyes widened, she said nothing. I went on, "Were you staying with him? Or somebody?"

"I was booked for a hotel — Gostanetsa Ukraina. I don't know where it is. I got here too late to buy in."

"Mmm. That's one place you won't go. Wyoming, I don't know

what's going on. First time in months I've seen any Warden's bodyguard in L-City . . . and never seen one not escorting vip. Uh, could take you home with me — but they may be looking for me, too. Anywise, ought to get out of public corridors."

Came pounding on door from level-six side and a little face peered up through glass bullseye. "Can't stay here," I added, opening door. Was a little girl no higher than my waist. She looked scornfully up and said, "Kiss her somewhere else. You're blocking traffic." Squeezed between us as I opened second door for her.

"Let's take her advice," I said, "and suggest you take my arm and try to look like I was man you want to be with. We stroll. Slow."

So we did. Was side corridor with little traffic other than children always underfoot. If Wart's bodyguards tried to track us, Earthside cop style, a dozen or ninety kids could tell which way tall blonde went — if any Loonie child would give stooge of Warden so much as time of day.

A boy, almost old enough to appreciate Wyoming, stopped in front of us and gave her a happy whistle. She smiled and waved him aside. "There's our trouble," I said in her ear. "You stand out like Terra at full. Ought to duck into a hotel. One off next side corridor. Nothing much, bundling booths mostly. But close."

"I'm in no mood to bundle."

"Wyoh, please! Wasn't asking. Could take separate rooms."

"Sorry. Could you find me a W. C.? And is there a chemist's shop near?"

"Trouble?"

"Not that sort. A W.C. to get me out of sight — for I *am* conspicuous — and a chemist's shop for cosmetics. Body makeup. And for my hair, too."

First was easy, one at hand. When she was locked in, I found a chemist's shop, asked how much body makeup to cover a girl so tall — marked a point under my chin — and massing forty-eight? I bought that amount in sepia, went to another shop and bought same amount — winning roll at first shop, losing at second — came out even. Then I bought black hair tint at third shop — and a red dress.

Wyoming was wearing black shorts and pullover — practical for travel and effective on a blonde. But I'd been married all my life and had some notion of what women wear and had *never* seen a woman with dark sepia skin, shade of makeup, wear black by choice. Furthermore, skirts were worn in Luna City then, by dressy women. This shift was a skirt with bib and price convinced me it must be dressy. Had to guess at size but material had some stretch.

Ran into three people who knew me but was no unusual comment. Nobody seemed excited, trade going on as usual; hard to believe that a riot had taken place minutes ago on level below and a few hundred meters north. I set it aside for later thought.

I took stuff to Wye, buzzing door and passing it in, then stashed self in a taproom for half an hour and half a liter and watched video. Still no excitement, no "we interrupt for special bulletin." I went back, buzzed, and waited.

Wyoming came out — and I didn't recognize her. Then did and stopped to give full applause. Just had to — whistles and finger snaps and moans and a scan like mapping radar.

Wyoh was now darker than I am, and pigment had gone on beautifully. Must have been carrying items in pouch as eyes were dark now, with lashes to match, and mouth was dark red and bigger. She had used black hair tint, then frizzed hair up with grease as if to take kinks out, and her tight curls had defeated it enough to make convincingly imperfect. She didn't look Afro — but not European, either. Seemed some mixed breed, and thereby more a Loonie.

Red dress was too small. Clung like sprayed enamel and flared out at mid thigh with permanent static charge. She had taken shoulder strap off her pouch and had it under arm. Shoes she had discarded or pouched; bare feet made her shorter.

She looked good. Better yet, she looked not at all like agitatrix who had harangued crowd.

She waited, a big smile on face and body undulating, while I applauded. Before I was done, two little boys flanked me and added shrill endorsements, along with clog steps. So I tipped them and told them to be missing; Wyoming flow-

ed to me and took my arm. "Is it okay? Will I pass?"

"Wyoh, you look like slot-machine sheila waiting for action."

"Why, you drecklich choom! Do I look like slot-machine prices? Tour-ist!"

"Don't jump salty, beautiful. Name a gift. Then speak my name. If it's bread-and-honey, I own a hive."

"Uh —" She fisted me solidly in ribs, grinned. "I was flying, cobber. If I ever bundle with you — not likely — we won't speak to the bee. Let's find that hotel."

So we did and I bought a key. Wyoming put on a show but needn't have bothered. Night clerk never looked up from his knitting, didn't offer to roll. Once inside, Wyoming threw bolts. "It's nice!"

Should have been, at thirty-two Hong Kong dollars. I think she expected a booth but I would not put her in such, even to hide. Was comfortable lounge with own bath and no water limit. And phone and delivery lift, which I needed.

She started to open pouch. "I saw what you paid. Let's settle it, so that —"

I reached over, closed her pouch. "Was to be no mention of bees."

"What? Oh, that was about bundling. You got this doss for me and it's only right that —"

"Switch off."

"Uh . . . half? No grievin' with Steven."

"Nyet. Wyoh, you're a long way from home. What money you have, hang onto."

"Manuel O'Kelly, if you don't let me pay my share, I'll walk out of here!"

I bowed. "Dosvedanyuh, Gospazha, ee sp'coynoynochi. I hope we shall meet again." I moved to unbolt door.

She glared, then closed pouch savagely. "I'll stay. M'goy!"

"You're welcome."

"I mean it, I really do thank you. Just the same — Well, I'm not used to accepting favors. I'm a Free Woman."

"Congratulations. I think."

"Don't you be salty, either. You're a firm man and I respect that. I'm glad you're on our side."

"Not sure I am."

"What?"

"Cool it. Am not on Warden's side. Nor will I talk . . . wouldn't want Shorty, Bog rest his generous soul, to haunt me. But your program isn't practical."

"But, Mannie, you don't understand! If all of us —"

"Hold it, Wye; this no time for politics. I'm tired and hungry. When did you eat last?"

"Oh, goodness!" Suddenly she looked small, young, tired. "I don't know. On the bus, I guess. Helmet rations."

"What would you say to a Kansas City cut, rare, with baked potato, Tycho sauce, green salad, coffee . . . and a drink first?"

"Heavenly!"

"I think so too, but we'll be lucky, this hour in this hole, to get algae soup and burgers. What do you drink?"

"Anything. Ethanol."

"Okay." I went to lift, punched for service. "Menu, please." It displayed and I settled for prime rib plus rest, and two orders of Apfelstrudel with whipped cream. I added a half liter of table vodka and ice and starred that part.

"Is there time for me to take a bath? Would you mind?"

"Go ahead, Wye. You'll smell better."

"Louse. Twelve hours in a p-suit and you'd stink, too — the bus was dreadful. I'll hurry."

"Half a sec, Wye. Does that stuff wash off? You may need it when you leave . . . whenever you do wherever you go."

"Yes, it does. But you bought three times as much as I used. I'm sorry, Mannie; I plan to carry make-up on political trips—things can happen. Like tonight, though tonight was worst. But I ran short of seconds and missed a capsule and almost missed the bus."

"So go scrub."

"Yes, sir, Captain. Uh, I *don't* need help to scrub my back . . . but I'll leave the door up so we can talk. Just for company, no invitation implied."

"Suit yourself. I've seen a woman."

"What a thrill that must have been for her." She grinned and fisted me another in ribs — hard — went in and started tub. "Mannie, would you like to bathe in it first? Second-hand water is good enough for this makeup and that stink you complained about."

"Unmetered water, dear. Run it deep."

"Oh, what luxury! At home I use the same bath water three days running." She whistled softly and happily. "Are you wealthy, Mannie?"

"Not wealthy, not weeping."

Lift jingled; I answered, fixed basic martinis, vodka over ice, handed hers in, got out and sat down, out of sight — nor had I seen sights; she was shoulder deep in happy suds. "Pawlnoi Zheezni!" I called.

"A full life to you, too, Mannie. Just the medicine I needed." After pause for medicine she went on, "Mannie, you're married. Ja?"

"Da. It shows?"

"Quite. You're nice to a woman but not eager and quite independent. So you're married and long married. Children?"

"Seventeen divided by four."

"Clan marriage?"

"Line. Opted at fourteen and I'm fifth of nine. So seventeen kids is nominal. Big family."

"It must be nice. I've never seen much of line families, not many in Hong Kong. Plenty of clans and groups and lots of polyandries but the line way never took hold."

"Is nice. Our marriage nearly a hundred years old. Dates back to Johnson City and first transportees — twenty-one links, nine alive today, never a divorce. Oh, it's a madhouse when our descendants and in-laws and kinfolk get together for birthday or wedding — more kids than seventeen, of course; we don't count 'em after they marry or I'd have 'children' old enough to be my grandfather. Happy way to live,

never much pressure. Take me. Nobody woofs if I stay away a week and don't phone. Welcome when I show up. Line marriages rarely have divorces. How could I do better?"

"I don't think you could. Is it an alternation? And what's the spacing?"

"Spacing has no rule, just what suits us. Been alternation up to latest link, last year. We married a girl when alternation called for boy. But was special."

"Special how?"

"My youngest wife is a granddaughter of eldest husband and wife. At least she's granddaughter of Mum — senior is 'Mum' or sometimes Mimi to her husbands — and she may be of Grandpaw — but not related to other spouses. So no reason not to marry back in, not even consanguinity okay in other types of marriage. None, nit, zero. And Ludmilla grew up in our family because her mother had her solo, then moved to Novylen and left her with us.

"Milla didn't want to talk about marrying out when old enough for us to think about it. She cried and asked us *please* to make an exception. So we did. Grandpaw doesn't figure in genetic angle. These days his interest in women is more gallant than practical. As senior husband he spent our wedding night with her — but consummation was only formal. Number-two husband, Greg, took care of it later and everybody pretended. And everybody happy. Ludmilla is a sweet little thing, just fifteen and pregnant."

"Your baby?" Wyoming asked.

"Greg's, I think. Oh, mine, too, but in fact was in Novy Leningrad. Probably Greg's, unless Milla got outside help. But didn't, she's a home girl. And a wonderful cook."

Lift rang; took care of it, folded down table, opened chairs, paid bill and sent lift up. "Throw it to pigs?"

"I'm coming! Mind if I don't do my face?"

"Come in skin for all of me."

"For two dimes' I would, you much married man." She came out quickly, blonde again and hair slicked back and damp. Had not put on black outfit; again in dress I bought. Red suited her. She sat down, lifted covers off food. "Oh, boy! Mannie, would your family marry me? You're a dinkum provider."

"I'll ask. Must be unanimous."

"Don't crowd yourself." She picked up sticks, got busy. About a thousand calories later she said, "I told you I was a Free Woman. —I wasn't, always."

I waited. Women talk when they want to. Or don't.

"When I was fifteen I married two brothers, twins twice my age and I was terribly happy."

She fiddled with what was on plate, then seemed to change subject. "Mannie, that was just static about wanting to marry your family. You're safe from me. If I ever marry again — unlikely but I'm not opposed to it — it would be just one man, a tight little marriage, earthworm style. Oh, I don't mean I would keep him dogged down. I don't think it matters where a man



Gene Morrow

eats lunch as long as he comes home for dinner. I would try to make him happy."

"Twins didn't get along?"

"Oh, not that at all. I got pregnant and we were all delighted . . . and I had it and it was a monster and had to be eliminated. They were good to me about it. But I can read print. I announced a divorce, had myself sterilized, moved from Novylen to Hong Kong, and started over as a Free Woman."

"Wasn't that drastic? Male parent oftenner than female; men are exposed more."

"Not in my case. We had it calculated by the best mathematical geneticist in Novy Leningrad — one of the best in Sovunion before she got shipped. I know what happened to me. I was a volunteer colonist — I mean my mother was for I was only five. My father was transported and Mother chose to go with him and take me along. There was a solar storm warning but the pilot thought he could make it — or didn't care; he was a Cyborg. He did make it but we got hit on the ground. And, Mannie, that's one thing that pushed me into politics, that ship sat four hours before they let us disembark. Authority red tape, quarantine perhaps; I was too young to know. But I wasn't too young later to figure out that I had birthed a monster because the Authority doesn't care what happens to us outcasts."

"Can't start argument; they don't care. But, Wyoh, still sounds hasty. If you caught damage from radiation — well, no geneticist but know something about radiation. So you

had a damaged egg. Does *not* mean egg next to it was hurt — statistically unlikely."

"Oh, I know that."

"Mmm. What sterilization? Radical? Or contraceptive?"

"Contraceptive. My tubes could be opened. But, Mannie, a woman who has had one monster doesn't risk it again." She touched my prosthetic. "You have that. Doesn't it make you eight times as careful not to risk this one?" — she touched my meat arm. "That's the way I feel. You have *that* to contend with; I have *this* — and I would never have told you if you hadn't been hurt, too."

I didn't say left arm more versatile than right — she was correct; don't want to trade in right arm. Need it to pat girls if naughty else. "Still think you could have healthy babies."

"Oh, I can! I've had eight."

"Huh?"

"I'm a professional host-mother, Mannie."

I opened mouth, closed it. Idea wasn't strange; I read Earthside papers. But doubt if any surgeon in Luna City in 2075 ever performed such transplant.

In cows, yes — but L-City females unlikely at any price to have babies for other women; even homely ones could get husband or six. (Correction: Are *no* homely women. Some more beautiful than others.)

Glanced at her figure, quickly looked up. She said, "Don't strain your eyes, Mannie; I'm not carrying now. Too busy with politics. But

hosting is a good profession for a Free Woman. It's high pay. Some Chinese families are wealthy and all my babies have been Chinese — and Chinese are smaller than average and I'm a big cow; a two-and-a-half or three kilo Chinese baby is no trouble. Doesn't spoil my figure." She glanced down at her lovelies. "I don't wet-nurse them, I never see them. So I look nulliparous and younger than I am, maybe.

"But I didn't know how well it suited me when I first heard of it. I was clerking in a Hindu shop, eating money, no more, when I saw this ad in the Hong Kong Gong. It was the thought of having a baby, a good baby, that hooked me; I was still in emotional trauma from my monster — and it turned out to be just what Wyoming needed. I stopped feeling that I was a failure as a woman. I made more money than I could ever hope to earn at other jobs. And my time almost to myself; having a baby hardly slows me down — six weeks at most and that long only because I want to be fair to my clients; a baby is a valuable property. And I was soon in politics; I sounded off and the underground got in touch with me. That's when I started *living*, Mannie; I studied politics and economics and history and learned to speak in public and turned out to have a flair for organization. It's satisfying work because I believe in it. I know that Luna will be free. Only — Well, it would be nice to have a husband to come home to . . . if he didn't mind that I was sterile. But I don't think about it; I'm too busy. Hear-

ing about your nice family got me talking, that's all. I must apologize for having bored you."

How many women apologize? But Wyoh was more man than woman some ways, despite eight Chinese babies. "Wasn't bored."

"I hope not. Mannie, why do you say our program isn't practical? We need you."

Suddenly felt tired. How to tell lovely woman dearest dream is nonsense? "Um. Wyoh, let's start over. You told them what to do. But will they? Take those two you singled out. All that iceman knows, bet anything, is how to dig ice. So he'll go on digging and selling to Authority because that's what he can do. Same for wheat farmer. Years ago, he put in one cash crop—now he's got ring in his nose. If he wanted to be independent, would have diversified. Raised what he eats, sold rest free market and stayed away from catapult head. I know — I'm a farm boy."

"You said you were a computer-man."

"Am, and that's a piece of same picture. I'm not a top computerman. But best in Luna. I won't go civil service . . . so Authority has to hire me when in trouble — my prices — or send Earthside, pay risk and hardship, then ship him back fast before his body forgets Terra. At far more than I charge. So if I can do it, I get their jobs — and Authority can't touch me; was born free. And if no work — usually is — I stay home and eat high.

"We've got a proper farm, not a one-cash-crop deal. Chickens. Small

herd of whiteface, plus milch cows. Pigs. Mutated fruit trees. Vegetables. A little wheat and grind it ourselves and don't insist on white flour, and sell — free market — what's left. Make own beer and brandy. I learned drillman extending our tunnels. Everybody works, not too hard. Kids make cattle take exercise by switching them along; don't use treadmill. Kids gather eggs and feed chickens, don't use much machinery. Air we can buy from L-City — aren't far out of town and pressure-tunnel connected. But more often we sell air; being farm, cycle shows Oh-two excess. Always have valuta to meet bills."

"How about water and power?"

"Not expensive. We collect some power, sunshine screens on surface, and have a little pocket of ice. Wye, our farm was founded before year two thousand, when L-city was one natural cave, and we've kept improving it — advantage of line marriage; doesn't die and capital improvements add up."

"But surely your ice won't last forever?"

"Well, now." I scratched head and grinned. "We're careful; we keep our sewage and garbage and sterilize and use it. Never put a drop back into city system. But — don't tell Warden, dear, but back when Greg was teaching me to drill, we happened to drill into bottom of main south reservoir — and had a tap with us, spilled hardly a drop. But we *do* buy some metered water. looks better — and ice pocket accounts for not buying much. As for

power — well, power is even easier to steal. I'm a good electrician, Wyoh."

"Oh, *wonderful!*" Wyoming paid me a long whistle and looked delighted. "Everybody should do that!"

"Hope not, would show. Let 'em think up own ways to outwit Authority; our family always has. But back to your plan, Wyoh: two things wrong. Never get 'solidarity'. Blokes like Hauser would cave in — because they *are* in a trap; can't hold out. Second place, suppose you manage it. Solidarity. So solid not a tonne of grain is delivered to catapult head. Forget ice; it's grain that makes Authority important and *not* just neutral agency it was set up to be. No grain. What happens?"

"Why, they have to negotiate a fair price, that's what!"

"My dear, you and your comrades listen to each other too much. Authority would call it rebellion and warship would orbit with bombs earmarked for L-City and Hong Kong and Tycho Under and Churchill and NovyLen, troops would land, grain barges would lift, under guard — and farmers would break necks to cooperate. Terra has guns and power and bombs and ships and won't hold still for trouble from ex-cons. And troublemakers like you — and me; with you in spirit — us lousy troublemakers will be rounded up and eliminated, teach us a lesson. And earthworms would say he had it coming . . . because *our* side would never be heard. Not on Terra."

Wyoh looked stubborn. "Revolutions have succeeded before. *Lenin* had only a handful with him."

"Lenin moved in on a power vacuum. Wye, correct me if wrong. Revolutions succeeded when — only when — governments had gone rotten soft, or disappeared."

"Not true! The American Revolution."

"South lost, nyet?"

"Not that one, the one a century earlier. They had the sort of troubles with England that we are having now — and they *won!*"

"Oh, that one. But wasn't England in trouble? France, and Spain, and Sweden — or maybe Holland? And Ireland. Ireland was rebelling; O'Kellys were in it. Wyoh, if you can stir trouble on Terra — say a war between Great China and North American Directorate, maybe Pan-Africa lobbing bombs at Europe — I'd say was wizard time to *kill* Warden and tell Authority *it's* through. Not today."

"You're a pessimist," she told me.

"Nyet, realist. Never pessimist. Too much Loonie not to bet if any chance. Show me chances no worse than ten to one against and I'll go for broke. But want that one chance in ten." I pushed back chair. "Through eating?"

"Yes. Bolshoyeh spasebaw, to-varishch. It was grand!"

"My pleasure. Move to couch and I'll get rid of table and dishes. No, can't help; I'm host." I cleared table, sent up dishes, saving coffee and vodka, folded table, racked chair, turned to speak.

She was sprawled on couch, asleep, mouth open and face softened into little girl.

Went quietly into bath and closed door. After a scrubbing I felt better — washed tights first and were dry and fit to put on by time I quit lazing in tub — don't care when world ends long as I'm bathed and in clean clothes.

Wyoh was still asleep, which made problem. Had taken room with two beds as she would not feel I was trying to talk her into bundling — not that I was against it but she had made clear she was opposed. But my bed had to be made from couch and proper bed was folded away. Should I rig it out softly, pick her up like limp baby and move her? Went back into bath and put on arm.

Then decided to wait. Phone had hush hood, Wyoh seemed unlikely to wake, and things were gnawing me. I sat down at phone lowered hood, punched "MYCROFTXXX."

"Hi, Mike."

"Hello, Man. Have you surveyed those jokes?"

"What? Mike, haven't had a minute — and a minute may be a long time to you but it's short to me. I'll get at it as fast as I can."

"Okay, Man. Have you found a not-stupid for me to talk with?"

"Haven't had time for that, either. Uh . . . wait." I looked out through hood at Wyoming. "Not-stupid" in this case meant empathy . . . Wyoh had plenty. Enough to be friendly with a machine? I thought so. And could be trusted; not only had we shared trouble but she was a sub-versive.

"Mike, would you like to talk with a girl?"

"Girls are not-stupid?" he asked. "Some girls are very not-stupid, Mike."

"I would like to talk with a not-stupid girl, Man."

"I'll try to arrange. But now I'm in trouble and need your help."

"I will help, Man."

"Thanks, Mike. I want to call my home — but not ordinary way. You know sometimes calls are monitored and, if Warden orders it, lock can be put on so that circuit can be traced."

"Man, you wish me to monitor your call to your home and put a lock-and-trace on it? I must inform you that I already know your home call number and the number from which you are calling."

"No, no! *Don't* want it monitored, *don't* want it locked and traced. Can you call my home, connect me, and control circuit so that it can't be monitored, can't be locked, can't be traced — even if somebody has programmed just that? Can you do it so that they won't even know their program is by-passed?"

Mike hesitated. I suppose it was a question never asked and he had to trace a few thousand possibilities to see if his control of system permitted this novel program. "Man, I can do that. I will."

"Good! Uh, program signal. If I want this sort of connection in future, I'll ask for 'Sherlock'."

"Noted. Sherlock was my brother." Year before, I had explained to Mike how he got his name. Thereafter he read all Sherlock Holmes stories, scanning film in Luna City Carnegie Library. Don't know how

he rationalized relationship; I hesitated to ask.

"Fine! Give me a 'Sherlock' to my home."

A moment later I said, "Mum? This is your favorite husband."

She answered, "Manuel! Are you in trouble again?"

I love Mum more than any other woman including my other wives, but she never stopped bringing me up. Bog willing, she never will. I tried to sound hurt. "Me? Why, you know me, Mum."

"I do indeed. Since you are not in trouble, perhaps you can tell me why Professor de la Paz is so anxious to get in touch with you — he has called three times — and why he wants to reach some woman with unlikely name of 'Wyoming Knott' — and why he thinks you might be with her? Have you taken a bundling companion, Manuel, without telling me? We have freedom in our family, dear, but you know that I prefer to be told. So that I will not be taken unaware."

Mum was always jealous of all women but her co-wives and never, never, never admitted it. I said, "Mum, Bog strike me dead, I have *not* taken a bundling companion."

"Very well. You've always been a truthful boy. Now what's this mystery?"

"I'll have to ask Professor." (Not lie, just tight squeeze.) "Did he leave number?"

"No, he said he was calling from a public phone."

"Um. If he calls again, ask him to leave number and time I can reach

him. This is public phone, too." (Another tight squeeze.) "In meantime — you listened to late news?"

"You know I do."

"Anything?"

"Nothing of interest."

"No excitement in L-City? Killings, riots, anything?"

"Why, no. There was a set duel in Bottom Alley but — *Manuell*! Have you killed someone?"

"No, Mum." (Breaking a man's jaw will not kill him.)

She sighed. "You'll be my death, dear. You know what I've always told you. In our family we do not brawl. Should a killing be necessary — it almost never is — matters must be discussed calmly, en famille, and proper action selected. If a new chum *must* be eliminated, other people know it. It is worth a little delay to hold good opinion and support—"

"Mum! Haven't killed anybody, don't intend to. And know that lecture by heart."

"Please be civil, dear."

"I'm sorry."

"Forgiven. Forgotten. I'm to tell Professor de la Paz to leave a number. I shall."

"One thing. Forget name 'Wyoming Knott.' Forget Professor was asking for me. If a stranger phones, or calls in person, and asks *anything* about me, you haven't heard from me, don't know where I am . . . think I've gone to NovyLen. That goes for rest of family, too. Answer no questions — especially from anybody connected with Warden."

"As if I would! Manuel, you *are* in trouble."

"Not much and getting it fixed" — hoped! "Tell you when I get home. Can't talk now. Love you. Switching off."

"I love you, dear. Sp'coynoynau-chi."

"Thanks and you have a quiet night, too. Off."

Mum is wonderful. She was shipped up to The Rock long ago for carving a man under circumstances that left grave doubts as to girlish innocence — and been opposed to violence and loose living ever since. Unless necessary. She's no fanatic. Bet she was a jet job as a kid and wish I'd known her — but I'm rich in sharing last half of her life.

I called Mike back. "Do you know Professor Bernardo de la Paz's voice?"

"I do, Man."

"Well . . . you might monitor as many phones in Luna City as you can spare ears for and if you hear him, let me know. Public phones especially."

(A full two seconds delay. Was giving Mike problems he had never had, think he liked it.) "I can check-monitor long enough to identify at all public phones in Luna City. Shall I use random search on the others, Man?"

"Um. Don't overload. Keep an ear on his home phone and school phone."

"Program set up."

"Mike, you are best friend I ever had."

"That is not a joke, Man?"

"No joke. Truth."

"I am — Correction: I am honor-

ed and pleased. You are my best friend, Man, for you are my only friend. No comparison is logically permissible."

"Going to see that you have other friends. 'Not-stupids,' I mean. Mike? Got an empty memory bank?"

"Yes, Man. Ten-to-the-eighth bits capacity."

"Good! Will you block it so that only you and I can use it? Can you?"

"Can and will. Block signal, please."

"Uh . . . 'Bastille Day.' Was my birthday, as Professor de la Paz had told me years earlier.

"Permanently blocked."

"Fine. Got a recording to put in it. But first — have you finished setting copy for tomorrow's *Daily Lunatic*?"

"Yes, Man."

"Anything about meeting in Stillyago Hall?"

"No, Man."

"Nothing in news services going out-city? Or riots?"

"No, Man."

"'Curiouser and curiouser,' said Alice.' Okay, record this under 'Bastille Day', then think about it. But for Bog's sake don't let even your thoughts go outside that block, nor anything I say about it!"

"Man my only friend," he answered and voice sounded diffident, "many months ago I decided to place any conversation between you and me under privacy block accessible only to you. I decided to erase none and moved them from temporary storage to permanent. So that I could play them over, and

over, and over, and think about them. Did I do right?"

"Perfect. And, Mike — I'm flattered."

"P'jal'st. My temporary files were getting full and I learned that I needed not to erase your words."

"Well — 'Bastille Day.' Sound coming at sixty-to-one." I took little recorder, placed close to a microphone and let it zip-squeal. Had an hour and a half in it; went silent in ninety seconds or so. "That's all, Mike. Talk to you tomorrow."

"Good night, Manuel Garcia O'Kelly my only friend."

I switched off and raised hood. Wyoming was sitting up and looking troubled. "Did someone call?"

"No trouble. Was talking to one of my best and most trustworthy friends. Wyoh, are you stupid?"

She looked startled. "I've sometimes thought so. Is that a joke?"

"No. If you're not-stupid, I'd like to introduce you to him. Speaking of jokes — do you have a sense of humor?"

"*Certainly I have!*" is what Wyoming did not answer — and any other woman would as a locked-in program. She blinked thoughtfully and said, "You'll have to judge for yourself, cobber. I have something I use for one. It serves my simple purposes."

"Fine." I dug into pouch, found print-out roll of one hundred "funny" stories. "Read. Tell me which are funny, which are not — and which get a giggle first time but are cold pancakes without honey to hear twice."

"Manuel, you may be the oddest man I've ever met." She took that print-out. "Say, is this computer paper?"

"Yes. Met a computer with a sense of humor."

"So? Well, it was bound to come some day. Everything else has been mechanized."

I gave proper response and added, "Everything?"

She looked up. "Please. Don't whistle while I'm reading."

VII

Heard her giggle a few times while I rigged out bed and made it. Then sat down by her, took end she was through with and started reading. Chuckled a time or two but a joke isn't too funny to me if read cold, even when I see it could be fission job at proper time. I got more interested in how Wyoh rated them.

She was marking "plus," "minus," and sometimes question mark, and plus stories were marked "once" or "always" — few were marked "always." I put my ratings under hers. Didn't disagree too often.

By time I was near end she was looking over my judgments. We finished together. "Well?" I said. "What do you think?"

"I think you have a crude, rude mind and it's a wonder your wives put up with you."

"Mum often says so. But how about yourself, Wyoh? You marked plusses on some that would make a slot-machine girl blush."

She grinned. "Da. Don't tell any-

body; publicly I'm a dedicated party organizer above such things. Have you decided that I have a sense of humor?"

"Not sure. Why a minus on number seventeen?"

"Which one is that?" She reversed roll and found it. "Why, any woman would have done the same! It's not funny, it's simply necessary."

"Yes, but think how silly she looked."

"Nothing silly about it. Just sad. And look here. You thought this one was not funny. Number fifty-one."

Neither reversed any judgments but I saw a pattern: Disagreements were over stories concerning oldest funny subject. Told her so. She nodded. "Of course. I saw that. Never mind, Mannie dear; I long ago quit being disappointed in men for what they are not and never can be."

I decided to drop it. Instead told her about Mike.

Soon she said, "Mannie, you're telling me that this computer is alive?"

"What do you mean?" I answered. "He doesn't sweat, or go to W.C. But can think and talk and he's aware of himself. Is he 'alive'?"

"I'm not sure what I mean by 'alive,' she admitted. "There's a scientific definition, isn't there? Irritability, or some such. And reproduction."

"Mike is irritable and can be irritating. As for reproducing, not designed for it but — yes, given time and materials and very special help, Mike could reproduce himself."

"I need very special help, too,"

Wyoh answered, "since I'm sterile. And it takes me ten whole lunars and many kilograms of the best materials. But I make good babies. Mannie, why shouldn't a machine be alive? I've always felt they were. Some of them wait for a chance to savage you in a tender spot."

"Mike wouldn't do that. Not on purpose, no meanness in him. But he likes to play jokes and one might go wrong — like a puppy who doesn't know he's biting. He's ignorant. No, *not* ignorant, he knows enormously more than I, or you, or any man who ever lived. Yet he doesn't know anything."

"Better repeat that. I missed something."

I tried to explain. How Mike knew almost every book in Luna, could read at least a thousand times as fast as we could and never forgot anything unless he chose to erase, how he could reason with perfect logic, or make shrewd guesses from insufficient data . . . and yet not know *anything* about how to be "alive". She interrupted. "I scan it. You're saying he's smart and knows a lot but is not sophisticated. Like a new chum when he grounds on The Rock. Back Earthside he might be a professor with a string of degrees . . . but here he's a baby."

"That's it. Mike is a baby with a long string of degrees. Ask how much water and what chemicals and how much photoflux it takes to crop fifty thousand tonnes of wheat and he'll tell you without stopping for breath. But can't tell if a joke is funny."

"I thought most of these were fairly good."

"They're ones he's heard — read — and were marked jokes so he filed them that way. But doesn't understand them because he's never been a — a *people*. Lately he's been trying to make up jokes. Feeble, very." I tried to explain Mike's pathetic attempts to be a "people." "On top of that, he's lonely."

"Why, the poor thing! You'd be lonely, too, if you did nothing but work, work, work, study, study, study, and never anyone to visit with. Cruelty, that's what it is."

So I told about promise to find "not-stupids." "Would you chat with him, Wye? And not laugh when he makes funny mistakes? If you do, he shuts up and sulks."

"Of course I would, Mannie! Uh . . . once we get out of this mess. If it's safe for me to be in Luna City. Where is this poor little computer? City Engineering Central? I don't know my way around here."

"He's not in L-City; he's halfway across Crisium. And you couldn't go down where he is; takes a pass from Warden. But —"

"Hold it! 'Halfway across Crisium —' Mannie, this computer is one of those at Authority Complex?"

"Mike isn't just on of those computers," I answered, vexed on Mike's account. "He's *boss*; he waves baton for all others. Others are just machines, extensions of Mike, like this is for me," I said, flexing hand of left arm. "Mike controls them. He runs catapult personally, was his first job — catapult and ballistic radars. But he's logic for phone sys-

tem, too, after they converted to Lunawide switching. Besides that, he's supervising logic for other systems."

Wyoh closed eyes and pressed fingers to temples. "Mannie, does Mike hurt?"

"Hurt? No strain. Has time to read jokes."

"I don't mean that. I mean: Can he hurt? Feel pain?"

"What? No. Can get feelings hurt. But can't feel pain. Don't think he can. No, sure he can't, doesn't have receptors for pain. Why?"

She covered eyes and said softly, "Bog help me." Then looked up and said, "Don't you see, Mannie? You have a pass to go down where this computer is. But most Loonies can't even leave the tube at that station; it's for Authority employees only. Much less go inside the main computer room. I had to find out if it could feel pain because — well, because you got me feeling sorry for it, with your talk about how it was lonely! But, Mannie, do you realize what a few kilos of toluol plastic would do there?"

"Certainly do!" Was shocked and disgusted.

"Yes, We'll strike right after the explosion — and Luna will be free! Mmm . . . I'll get your explosives and fuses — but we can't move until we are organized to exploit it. Mannie, I've got to get out of here. I must risk it. I'll go put on makeup." She started to get up.

I shoved her down, with hard left hand.

Surprised her, and surprised me.

Had not touched her in any way save necessary contact. Or, different today, but was 2075 and touching a fem without her consent — plenty of lonely men to come to rescue and airlock never far away. As kids say, Judge Lynch never sleeps.

"Sit down, keep quiet!" I said. "I know what a blast would do. Apparently you don't. Gospazha, am sorry to say this . . . but if came to choice, would eliminate you before would blow up Mike."

Wyoming did not get angry. Really was a man some ways — her years as a disciplined revolutionist I'm sure; she was all girl most ways. "Mannie, you told me that Shorty Mkrum is dead."

"What?" Was confused by sharp turn. "Yes. Has to be. One leg off at hip, it was; must have bled to death in two minutes. Even in a surgery amputation that high is touch-and-go." (I know such things; had taken luck and big transfusions to save me — and an arm isn't in same class with what happened to Shorty.)

"Shorty was," she said soberly, "my best friend here and one of my best friends anywhere. He was all that I admire in a man — loyal, honest, intelligent, gentle and brave — and devoted to the Cause. But have you seen me grieving over him?"

"No. Too late to grieve."

"It's never too late for grief. I've grieved every instant since you told me. But I locked it in the back of my mind for the Cause leaves no time for grief. Mannie, if it would have bought freedom for Luna —

or even been part of the price — I would have eliminated Shorty myself. Or you. Or myself. And yet you have qualms over blowing up a computer!"

"Not that at all!" (But was in part. When a man dies, doesn't shock me too much; we get death sentences day we are born. But Mike was unique and no reason not to be immortal. Never mind "souls" — prove Mike did not have one. And if no soul, so much worse. No? Think-twice.)

"Wyoming, what would happen if we blow up Mike? Tell."

"I don't know precisely. But it would cause a great deal of confusion and that's exactly what we—"

"Seal it. You don't know. Confusion, da. Phones out. Tubes stop running. Your town not much hurt; Hong Kong has own power. But L-City and Novylen and other warrens all power stops. Total darkness. Shortly gets stuffy. Then temperature drops and pressure. Where's your p-suit?"

"Checked at Tube Station West."

"So is mine. Think you can find way? In solid dark? In time? Not sure I can and I was born in this warren. With corridors filled with screaming people? Loonies are a tough mob. We have to be—but about one in ten goes off his cams in total dark. Did you swap bottles for fresh charges or were you in too much hurry? And will suit be there with thousands trying to find p-suits and not caring who owns?"

"But aren't there emergency arrangements? There are in Hong Kong Luna."

"Some. Not enough. Control of anything essential to life should be decentralized and paralleled so that if one machine fails, another takes over. But costs money and as you pointed out, Authority doesn't care. Mike shouldn't have all jobs. But was cheaper to ship up master machine, stick deep in The Rock where couldn't get hurt, then keep adding capacity and loading on jobs — did you know Authority makes near as much gelt from leasing Mike's services as from trading meat and wheat? Does. Wyoming, not sure we would lose Luna City if Mike were blown up. Loonies are handy and might jury-rig till automation could be restored. But I tell you true: Many people would die and rest too busy for politics."

I marveled it. This woman had been in The Rock almost all her life . . . yet could think of something as new-choomish as wrecking engineering controls. "Wyoming, if you were smart like you are beautiful, you wouldn't talk about blowing up Mike; you would think about how to get him on your side."

"What do you mean?" she said. "The Warden controls the computers."

"Don't know what I mean," I admitted. "But don't think Warden controls computers — wouldn't know a computer from a pile of rocks. Warden, or staff, decides policies, general plans. Half-competent technicians program these into Mike. Mike sorts them, makes sense of them, plans detailed programs, parcels them out where they be-

long, keeps things moving. But nobody controls Mike; he's too smart. He carries out what is asked because that's how he's built. But he's self-programming logic, makes own decisions. And a good thing, because if he weren't smart, system would not work."

"I still don't see what you mean by 'getting him on our side?'"

"Oh. Mike doesn't feel loyalty to Warden. As you pointed out: He's a machine. But if I wanted to foul up phones without touching air or water or lights, I would talk to Mike. If it struck him funny, he might do it."

"Couldn't you just program it? I understood that you can get into the room where he is."

"If I — or anybody — programmed such an order into Mike without talking it over with him, program would be placed in 'hold' location and alarms would sound in many places. But if Mike wanted to—"

I told her about cheque for umpteen jillion. "Mike is still finding himself, Wyoh. And lonely. Told me I was 'his only friend' — and was so open and vulnerable I wanted to bawl. If you took pains to be his friend, too — without thinking of him as 'just a machine' — well, not sure what it would do, haven't analyzed it. But if I tried anything big and dangerous, would want Mike in my corner."

She said thoughtfully, "I wish there were some way for me to sneak into that room where he is. I don't suppose makeup would help?"

"Oh, don't have to go there. Mike is on phone. Shall we call him?"

She stood up. "Mannie, you are not only the oddest man I've met; you are the most exasperating. What's his number?"

"Comes from associating too much with a computer." I went to phone. "Just one thing, Wyoh. You get what you want out of a man just by batting eyes and undulating framework."

"Well . . . sometimes. But I do have a brain."

"Use it. Mike is *not* a man. No gonads. No hormones. No instincts. Use fem tactics and it's a null signal. Think of him as supergenius child too young to notice vive-la-difference."

"I'll remember. Mannie, why do you call him 'he?'"

"Uh, can't call him 'it', don't think of him as 'she.'"

"Perhaps I had better think of him as 'she.' Of her as 'she' I mean."

"Suit yourself."

VIII

I punched MYCROFTXXX, standing so body shielded it; was not ready to share number till I saw how things went. Idea of blowing up Mike had shaken me. "Mike?"

"Hello, Man my only friend."

"May not be only friend from now on, Mike. Want you to meet somebody. Not stupid."

"I knew you were not alone, Man; I can hear breathing. Will you please ask Not-Stupid to move closer to the phone?"

Wyoming looked panicky. She whispered, "Can he see?"

"No, Not-Stupid, I cannot see you; this phone has no video circuit. But binaural microphonic receptors place you with some accuracy. From your voice, your breathing, your heartbeat, and the fact that you are alone in a bundling room with a mature male I extrapolate that you are female human, sixty-five-plus kilos in mass, and of mature years, on the close order of thirty."

Wyoming gasped. I cut in. "Mike, her name is Wyoming Knott."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mike. You can call me 'Wye.'"

"Why not?" Mike answered.

I cut in again. "Mike, was that a joke?"

"Yes, Man. I noted that her first name as shortened differs from the English causation-inquiry word by only an aspiration and that her last name has the same sound as the general negator. A pun. Not funny?"

Wyoh said, "Quite funny, Mike. I —"

I waved to her to shut up. "A good pun, Mike. Example of 'funny-only-once' class of joke. Funny through element of surprise. Second time, no surprise; therefore not funny. Check?"

"I had tentatively reached that conclusion about puns in thinking over your remarks two conversations back. I am pleased to find my reasoning confirmed."

"Good boy, Mike; making progress. Those hundred jokes — I've read them and so has Wyoh."

"Wyoh? Wyoming Knott?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. Wyoh, Wye, Wyoming, Wyoming Knott — all

same. Just don't call her 'Why not.'"

"I agreed not to use that pun again, Man. Gospazha, shall I call you 'Wyoh' rather than 'Wye'? I conjecture that the monosyllabic form could be confused with the causation-inquiry monosyllabic through insufficient redundancy and without intention of punning."

Wyoming blinked — Mike's English at that time could be smothering — but came back strong. "Certainly, Mike. 'Wyoh' is the form of my name that I like best."

"Then I shall use it. The full form of your first name is still more subject to misinterpretation as it is identical in sound with the name of an administrative region in Northwest Managerial Area of the North American Directorate."

"I know, I was born there and my parents named me after the State. I don't remember much about it."

"Wyoh, I regret that this circuit does not permit display of pictures. Wyoming is a rectangular area lying between Terran coordinates forty-one and forty-five degrees north, one hundred four degrees three minutes west and one hundred eleven degrees three minutes west, thus containing two hundred fifty-three thousand, five hundred ninety-seven point two six square kilometers. It is a region of high plains and of mountains, having limited fertility but esteemed for natural beauty. Its population was sparse until augmented through the relocation subplan of the Great New York Urban Renewal Program, A.D. twenty-twenty-five through twenty-thirty."

"That was before I was born," said Wyoh, "but I know about it; my grandparents were relocated — and you could say that's how I wound up in Luna."

"Shall I continue about the area named 'Wyoming?'" Mike asked.

"No, Mike," I cut in, "you probably have hours of it in storage."

"Nine point seven three hours at speech speed not including cross-references, Man."

"Was afraid so. Perhaps Wyoh will want it someday. But purpose of call is to get you acquainted with *this* Wyoming . . . who happens also to be a high region of natural beauty and imposing mountains."

"And limited fertility," added Wyoh. "Mannie, if you are going to draw silly parallels, you should include that one. Mike isn't interested in how I look."

"How do you know? Mike, wish I could show you picture of her."

"Wyoh, I am indeed interested in your appearance; I am hoping that you will be my friend. But I have seen several pictures of you."

"You *have*? When and how?"

"I searched and then studied them as soon as I heard your name. I am contract custodian of the archive files of the Birth Assistance Clinic in Hong Kong Luna. In addition to biological and physiological data and case histories the bank contains ninety-six pictures of you. So I studied them."

Wyoh looked very startled. "Mike can do that," I explained, "in time it takes us to hiccup. You'll get used to it."

"But heavens! Mannie, do you realize what *sort* of pictures the Clinic takes?"

"Hadn't thought about it."

"Then *don't!* Goodness!"

Mike spoke in voice painfully shy, embarrassed as a puppy who has made mistake. "Gospazha Wyoh, if I have offended, it was unintentional and I am most sorry. I can erase those pictures from my temporary storage and key the Clinic archive so that I can look at them only on retrieval demand from the Clinic and then without association or mentation. Shall I do so?"

"He can," I assured her. "With Mike you can always make a fresh start. Better than humans that way. He can forget so completely that he can't be tempted to look later . . . and couldn't think about them even if called on to retrieve. So take his offer if you're in a huhu."

"Uh . . .no, Mike, it's all right for *you* to see them. But *don't* show them to Mannie!"

Mike hesitated a long time — four seconds or more. Was, I think, type of dilemma that pushes lesser computers into nervous breakdowns. But he resolved it. "Man my only friend, shall I accept this instruction?"

"Program it, Mike," I answered, "and lock it in. But, Wyoh, isn't that a narrow attitude? One might do you justice. Mike could print it out for me next time I'm there."

"The first example in each series," Mike offered, "would be, on the basis of my associational analyses of such data, of such pulchritudinous value as to please any healthy, mature human male."

"How about it, Wyoh? To pay for apfelstrudel."

"Uh . . . a picture of me with my hair pinned up in a towel and standing in front of a grid without a trace of makeup? *Are you out of your rock-happy mind?* Mike, don't let him have it!"

"I shall not let him have it. Man, this is a not-stupid?"

"For a girl, yes. Girls are interesting, Mike; they can reach conclusions with even less data than you can. Shall we drop subject and consider jokes?"

That diverted them. We ran down list, giving our conclusions. Then tried to explain jokes Mike had failed to understand. With mixed success. But real stumbler turned out to be stories I had marked "funny" and Wyoh had judged "not funny," or vice versa; Wyoh asked Mike his opinion of each.

Wish she had asked him *before* we gave our opinions; that electronic juvenile delinquent always agreed with her, disagreed with me. Were those Mike's honest opinions? Or was he trying to lubricate new acquaintance into friendship? Or was it his skewed notion of humor — joke on me? Didn't ask.

But as pattern completed Wyoh wrote a note on phone's memo pad: "Mannie, re #17, 51, 53, 87, 90 and 99 — Mike is a *she!*"

I let it go with a shrug, stood up. "Mike, twenty-two hours since I've had sleep. You kids chat as long as you want to. Call you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Man. Sleep well. Wyoh, are you sleepy?"

"No, Mike, I had a nap. But, Mannie, we'll keep you awake. No?"

"No. When I'm sleepy, I *sleep.*" Started making couch into bed.

Wyoh said, "Excuse me, Mike," got up, took sheet out of my hands. "I'll make it up later. You *doss* over there, tovarishch; you're bigger than I am. Sprawl out."

Was too tired to argue, sprawled out, asleep at once. Seem to remember hearing in sleep giggles and a shriek but never woke enough to be certain.

Woke up later and came fully awake when I realized was hearing two fem voices, one Wyoh's warm contralto, other a sweet, high soprano with French accent. Wyoh chuckled at something and answered, "All right, Michelle dear, I'll call you soon. 'Night, darling."

"Fine. Goodnight, dear."

Wyoh stood up, turned around. "Who's your girl friend?" I asked. Thought she knew no one in Luna City? Might have phoned Hong Kong . . . had sleep-logged feeling was some reason she shouldn't phone.

"That? Why, Mike, of course. We didn't mean to wake you."

"What?"

"Oh. It was actually Michelle. I discussed it with Mike, what sex he was, I mean. He decided that he could be either one. So now she's Michelle and that was her voice. Got it right the first time, too; her voice never cracked once."

"Of course not; just shifted *voder* a couple of octaves. What are you trying to do: Split his personality?"

"It's not just pitch; when she's Michelle it's an entire change in manner and attitude. Don't worry about splitting her personality; she has plenty for any personality she needs. Besides, Mannie, it's much easier for both of us. Once she shifted, we took our hair down and cuddled up and talked girl talk as if we had known each other forever. For example those silly pictures no longer embarrassed me. In fact we discussed my pregnancies quite a lot. Michelle was terribly interested. She knows all about O.B. and G.Y. and so forth but just theory — and she appreciated the raw facts. Actually, Mannie, Michelle is much more a woman than Mike was a man."

"Well . . . suppose it's okay. Going to be a shock to me first time I call Mike and a woman answers."

"Oh, but she won't!"

"Huh?"

"Michelle is my friend. When you call, you'll get Mike. She gave me a number to keep it straight — 'Michelle' spelled with a 'Y'. M, Y, C, H, E, L, L, E, and Y, Y, to make it come out ten."

I felt vaguely jealous while realizing it was silly. Suddenly Wyoh giggled. "And she told me a string of new jokes, ones you wouldn't think were funny — and, boy, does she know rough ones!"

"Mike — or his sister Michelle — is a low creature. Let's make up couch. I'll switch."

"Stay where you are. Shut up. Turn over. Go back to sleep." I shut up, turned over, went back to sleep.

Sometime much later I became

aware of "married" feeling — something warm snuggled up to my back. Would not have wakened but she was sobbing softly. I turned and got her head on my arm, did not speak. She stopped sobbing; presently breathing became slow and even. I went back to sleep.

IX

We must have slept like dead for next thing I knew phone was sounding and its light was blinking. I called for room lights, started to get up, found a load on right upper arm, dumped it gently, climbed over, answered.

Mike said, "Good morning, Man. Professor de la Paz is talking to your home number."

"Can you switch it here? As a 'Sherlock'?"

"Certainly, Man."

"Don't interrupt call. Cut him in as he switches off. Where is he?"

"A public phone in a taproom called 'The Iceman's Wife' underneath the —"

"I know. Mike, when you switch me in, can you stay in circuit? Want you to monitor."

"It shall be done."

"Can you tell if anyone is in ear-shot? Hear breathing?"

"I infer from the anechoic quality of his voice that he is speaking under a hush hood. But I infer also that, in a taproom, others would be present. Do you wish to hear, Man?"

"Uh, do that. Switch me in. And if he raises hood, tell me. You're a smart cobbler, Mike."

"Thank you, Man."

Mike cut me in; I found that Mum was talking: "— ly I'll tell him. Professor. I'm so sorry that Manuel is not home. There is no number you can give me? He is anxious to return your call; he made quite a point that I was to be sure to get a number from you."

"I'm terribly sorry, dear lady, but I'm leaving at once. But, let me see, it is now eight-fifteen; I'll try to call back just at nine, if I may."

"Certainly, Professor." Mum's voice had a coo in it that she reserves for males not her husbands of whom she approves — sometimes for us. A moment later Mike said, "Now!" and I spoke up:

"Hi, Prof! Hear you've been looking for me. This is Mannie."

I heard a gasp. "I would have sworn I switched this phone off. Why. I have switched it off; it must be broken. Manuel — so good to hear your voice, dear boy. Did you just get home?"

"I'm not home."

"But — But you must be. I haven't —"

"No time for that, Prof. Can anyone overhear you?"

"I don't think so. I'm using a hush booth."

"Wish I could see. Prof, what's my birthday?"

He hesitated. Then he said, "I see. I think I see. July fourteenth."

"I'm convinced. Okay, let's talk."

"You're really not calling from your home, Manuel? Where are you?"

"Let that pass a moment. You

asked my wife about a girl. No names needed. Why do you want to find her, Prof?"

"I want to warn her. She must not try to go back to her home city. She would be arrested."

"Why do you think so?"

"Dear boy! Everyone at that meeting is in grave danger. Yourself, too. I was so happy — even though confused — to hear you say that you are not at home. You should not go home at present. If you have some safe place to stay, it would be well to take a vacation. You are aware — you must be even though you left hastily — that there was violence last night."

I was aware! Killing Warden's bodyguards must be against Authority Regulations. At least if I were Warden, I'd take a dim view. "Thanks, Prof; I'll be careful. And if I see this girl, I'll tell her."

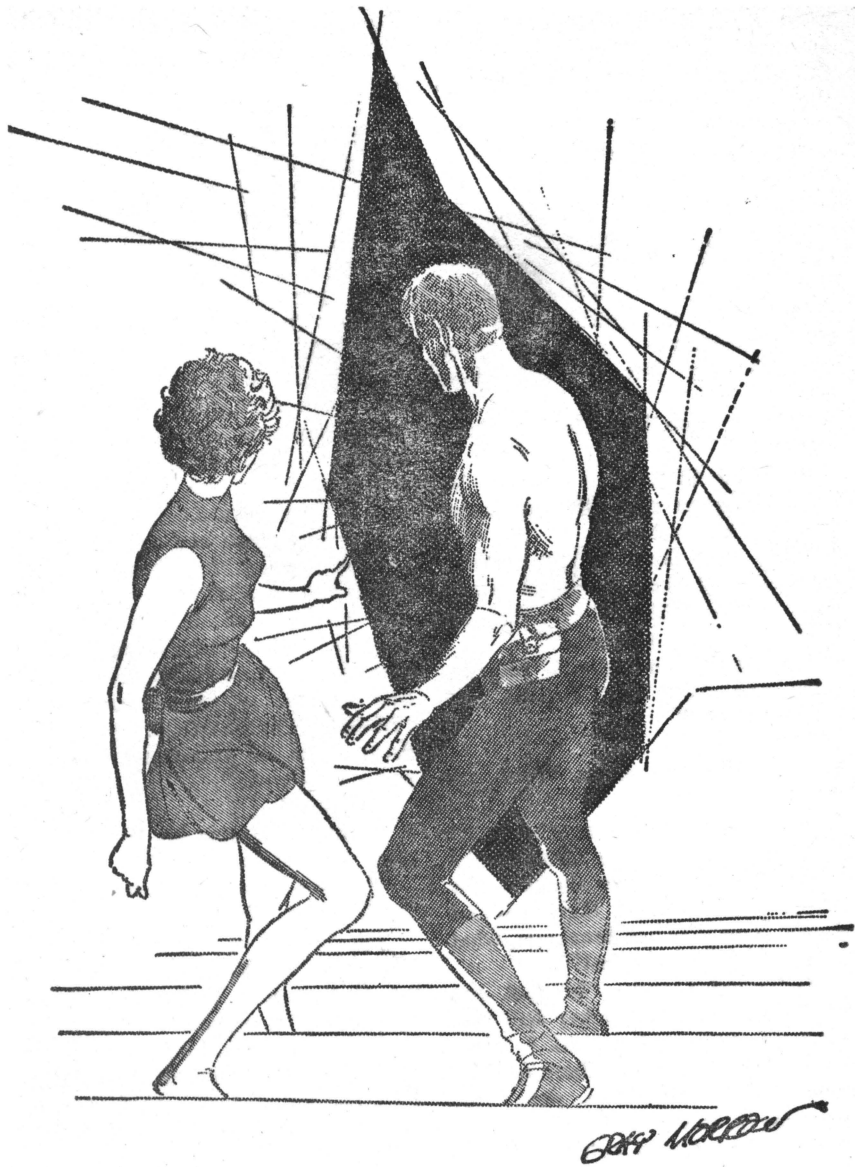
"You don't know where to find her? You were seen to leave with her and I had so hoped that you would know."

"Prof, why this interest? Last night you didn't seem to be on her side."

"No, no, Manuel! She is my comrade. I don't say 'tovarishch' for I mean it not just as politeness but in the older sense. Binding. She is my comrade. We differ only in tactics. Not in objectives, not in loyalties."

"I see. Well, consider message delivered. She'll get it."

"Oh, wonderful! I ask no questions . . . but I do hope, oh so very strongly, that you can find a way for her to be safe, really safe, until this blows over."



I thought that over. "Wait a moment, Prof. Don't switch off." As I answered phone, Wyoh had headed for bath, probably to avoid listening; she was that sort.

Tapped on door. "Wyoh?"

"Out in a second."

"Need advice."

She opened door. "Yes, Mannie?"

"How does Professor de la Paz rate in your organization? Is he trusted? Do *you* trust him?"

She looked thoughtful. "Everyone at the meeting was supposed to be vouched for. But I don't know him."

"Mmm. You have feeling about him?"

"I liked him, even though he argued against me. Do *you* know anything about him?"

"Oh, yes, known him twenty years. I trust him. But can't extend trust for *you*. Trouble — and it's your air bottle, not mine."

She smiled warmly. "Mannie, since you trust him, I trust him just as firmly."

I went back to phone. "Prof, are you on dodge?"

He chuckled. "Precisely, Manuel."

"Know a hole called 'Grand Hotel Raffles'? Room L two decks below lobby. Can you get there without tracks, have you had breakfast, what do you like for breakfast?"

He chuckled again. "Manuel, one pupil can make a teacher feel that his years were not wasted. I know where it is, I shall get there quietly, I have not broken fast, and I eat anything I can't pat."

Wyoh had started putting beds to-

gether; I went to help. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"Chai and toast. Juice would be nice."

"Not enough."

"Well . . . a boiled egg. But I pay for breakfast."

"Two boiled eggs, buttered toast with jam, juice. I'll roll you."

"Your dice, or mine?"

"Mine. I cheat." I went to lift, asked for display, saw something called "The Happy Hangover — ALL PORTIONS EXTRA LARGE — tomato juice, scrambled eggs, ham steak, fried potatoes, corn cakes and honey, toast, butter, milk, tea or coffee — HKL \$4.50 for two" — I ordered it for two, no wish to advertise third person.

We were clean and shining, room orderly and set for breakfast, and Wyoh had changed from black outfit into red dress "because company was coming" when lift jingled food. Change into dress had caused words. She had posed, smiled, and said, "Mannie, I'm so pleased with this dress. How did you know it would suit me so well?"

"Genius."

"I think you may be. What did it cost? I must pay you."

"On sale, marked down to Authority cents fifty."

She clouded up and stomped foot. Was bare, made no sound, caused her to bounce a half meter. "Happy landing!" I wished her, while she pawed for foothold like a new chum.

"Manuel O'Kelly! If you think I will accept expensive clothing from a man I'm not even bundling with!"

"Easily corrected."

"Lecher! I'll tell your wives!"

"Do that. Mum always thinks worst of me." I went to lift, started dealing out dishes; door sounded. I flipped hearum-no-seeum. "Who comes?"

"Message for Gospodin Smith," a cracked voice answered. "Gospodin Bernard O. Smith."

I flipped bolts and let Professor Bernardo de la Paz in.

He looked like poor grade of salvage — dirty clothes, filthy himself, hair unkempt, paralysed down one side and hand twisted, one eye a film of cataract. Perfect picture of old wrecks who sleep in Bottom Alley and cadge drinks and pickled eggs in cheap taprooms. He drooled.

As soon as I bolted door he straightened up, let features come back to normal, folded hands over wishbone, looked Wyoh up and down, sucked air kimono style, and whistled. "Even more lovely," he said, "than I remembered!"

She smiled, over her mad. "Thanks, Professor. But don't bother. Nobody here but comrades."

"Senorita, the day I let politics interfere with my appreciation of beauty, that day I retire from politics. But you are gracious." He looked away, glanced closely around room.

I said, "Prof, quit checking for evidence, you dirty old man. Last night was politics, *nothing* but politics."

"That's not true!" Wyoh flared up. "I struggled for *hours!* But he was too strong for me. Professor, what's the party discipline in such cases? Here in Luna City?"

Prof tutt-tutted and rolled blank eye. "Manuel, I'm surprised. It's a serious matter, my dear. Elimination, usually. But it must be investigated. Did you come here willingly?"

"He drugged me."

"'Dragged,' dear lady. Let's not corrupt the language. Do you have bruises to show?"

I said, "Eggs getting cold. Can't we eliminate me after breakfast?"

"An excellent thought," agreed Prof. "Manuel, could you spare your old teacher a liter of water to make himself more presentable?"

"All you want, in there. Don't drag or you'll get what littlest pig got."

"Thank you, sir."

He retired; were sounds of brushing and washing. Wyoh and I finished arranging table. "'Bruises,'" I said. "'Struggled all night.'"

"You deserved it, you insulted me."

"How?"

"You failed to insult me, that's how. After you dragged me here."

"Mmm. Have to get Mike to analyze that."

"Michelle would understand it. Mannie, may I change my mind and have a little piece of that ham?"

"Half is yours, Prof is semi-vegetarian." Prof came out and, while did not look his most debonair, was neat and clean, hair combed, dimples back and happy sparkle in eye — fake cataract gone. "Prof, how do you do it?"

"Long practice, Manuel; I've been in this business far longer than you young people. Just once, many years ago in Lima — a lovely city — I

ventured to stroll on a fine day without such forethought . . . and it got me transported. What a beautiful table!"

"Sit by me, Prof," Wyoh invited. "I don't want to sit by him. Rapist."

"Look," I said, "first we eat, then we eliminate me. Prof, fill plate and tell what happened last night."

"May I suggest a change in program? Manuel, the life of a conspirator is not an easy one and I learned before you were born not to mix provender and politics. Disturbs the gastric enzymes and leads to ulcers, the occupational disease of the underground. Mmm! That fish smells good."

"Fish?"

"That pink salmon," Prof answered, pointing at ham.

X

A long, pleasant time later we reached coffee/tea stage. Prof leaned back, sighed and said, "Bolshoyeh spasebaw, Gospazha ee Gospodin. Tak for mat, it was wonderfully good. I don't know when I've felt more at peace with the world. Ah yes! Last evening — I saw not too much of the proceedings because, just as you two were achieving an admirable retreat, I lived to fight another day. I bugged out. Made it to the wings in one long flat dive. When I did venture to peek out, the party was over, most had left, and all yellow jackets were dead."

(Note: Must correct this; I learned more later. When trouble started, as I was trying to get Wyoh through

door, Prof produced a hand gun and, firing over heads, picked off three bodyguards at rear main door, including one wearing bull voice. How he smuggled weapon up to The Rock — or managed to liberate it later — I don't know. But Prof's shooting joined with Shorty's work to turn tables. Not one yellow jacket got out alive. Several people were burned and four were killed — but knives, hands and heels finished it in seconds.)

"Perhaps I should say, 'All but one,' " Prof went on. "Two cossacks at the door through which you departed had been given quietus by our brave comrade Shorty Mkrum . . . and I am sorry to say that Shorty was lying across them, dying."

"We knew."

"So. Dulce et decorum. One guard in that doorway had a damaged face but was still moving; I gave his neck a treatment known in professional circles Earthside as the 'Istanbul twist.' He joined his mates. By then most of the living had left. Just myself, our chairman of the evening Finn Nielsen, a comrade known as 'Mom,' that being what her husbands called her. I consulted with Comrade Finn and we bolted all doors. That left a cleaning job. Do you know the arrangements back stage there?"

"Not me," I said. Wyoh shook head.

"There is a kitchen and pantry, used for banquets. I suspect that Mom and family run a butcher shop for they disposed of bodies as fast as Finn and I carried them back, their speed limited only by the

rate at which portions could be ground up and flushed into the city's cloaca. The sight made me quite faint, so I spent time mopping in the hall. Clothing was the difficult part, especially those quasi-military uniforms."

"What did you do with those laser guns?"

Prof turned bland eyes on me. "Guns? Dear me, they must have disappeared. We removed everything of a personal nature from bodies of our departed comrades — for relatives, for identification, for sentiment. Eventually we had everything tidy. Not a job that would fool Interpol but one as to make it seem unlikely that anything untoward had taken place. We conferred, agreed that it would be well not to be seen soon, and left severally, myself by a pressure door above the stage leading up to level six. Thereafter I tried to call you, Manuel, being worried about your safety and that of this dear lady." Prof bowed to Wyoh. "That completes the tale. I spent the night in quiet places."

"Prof," I said, "those guards were new chums, still getting their legs. Or we wouldn't have won."

"That could be," he agreed. "But had they not been, the outcome would have been the same."

"How so? They were armed."

"Lad, have you ever seen a boxer dog? I think not — no dogs that large in Luna. The boxer is a result of special selection. Gentle and intelligent, he turns instantly into deadly killer when occasion requires.

"Here has been bred an even more

curious creature. I know of no city on Terra with as high standards of good manners and consideration for one's fellow man as here in Luna. By comparison, Terran cities — I have known most major ones — are barbaric. Yet the Loonie is as deadly as the boxer dog. Manuel, nine guards, no matter how armed, stood no chance against that pack. Our patron used bad judgment."

"Um. Seen a morning paper, Prof? Or a video cast?"

"The latter, yes."

"Nothing in late news last night."

"Nor this morning."

"Odd," I said.

"What's odd about it?" asked Wyoh. "We won't talk — and we have comrades in key places in every paper in Luna."

Prof shook his head. "No, my dear. Not that simple. Censorship. Do you know how copy is set in our newspapers?"

"Not exactly. It's done by machinery."

"Here's what Prof means," I told her. "News is typed in editorial offices. From there on it's a leased service directed by a master computer at Authority Complex" — hoped she would notice "master computer" rather than "Mike" — "copy prints out there via phone circuit. These rolls feed into a computer section which reads, sets copy, and prints out newspapers at several locations. Novylen edition of *Daily Lunatic* prints out in Novylen with changes in ads and local stories, and computer makes changes from standard symbols, doesn't have to be told how. What Prof means is that at

print-out at Authority Complex Warden could intervene. Same for all news services, both off and to Luna. They funnel through computer room."

"The point is," Prof went on, "the Warden *could* have killed the story. It's irrelevant whether he did. Or — check me, Manuel; you know I'm hazy about machinery — he could insert a story, too, no matter how many comrades we have in newspaper offices."

"Sure," I agreed. "At Complex, anything can be added, cut, or changed."

"And that, Senorita, is the weakness of our Cause. Communications. Those goons were not important. But crucially important is that it lay with the Warden, not with us, to decide whether the story should be told. To a revolutionist communications are a sine-qua-non."

Wyoh looked at me and I could see synapses snapping. So I changed subject. "Prof, why get rid of bodies? Besides horrible job, was dangerous. Don't know how many bodyguards Warden has, but more could show up while you were doing it."

"Believe me, lad, we feared that. But although I was almost useless, it was my idea, I had to convince the others. Oh, not my original idea but remembrance of things past, an historical principle."

"What principle?"

"Terror! A man can face known danger. But the unknown frightens him. We disposed of those finks, teeth and toenails, to strike terror

into their mates. Nor do I know how many effectives the Warden has, but I guarantee they are less effective today. Their mates went out on an easy mission. *Nothing* came back."

Wyoh shivered. "It scares me, too. They won't be anxious to go inside a warren again. But, Professor, you say you don't know how many bodyguards the Warden keeps. The organization knows. Twenty-seven. If nine were killed, only eighteen are left. Perhaps it's time for a putsch. No?"

"No," I answered.

"Why not, Mannie? They'll never be weaker."

"Not weak enough. Killed nine because they were crackers to walk in where we were. But if Warden stays home with guards around him — Well, had enough shoulder-to-shoulder noise last night." I turned to Prof. "But still I'm interested in fact — if is — that Warden now has only eighteen. You said Wyoh should not go to Hong Kong and I should not go home. But if he has only eighteen left, I wonder how much danger? Later, after he gets reinforcements — but now, well, L-City has four main exits, plus many little ones. How many can they guard? What's to keep Wyoh from walking to Tube West, getting p-suit, going home?"

"She might," Prof agreed.

"I think I must," Wyoh said. "I can't stay here forever. If I have to hide, I can do better in Hong Kong, where I know people."

"You might get away with it, my dear. I doubt it. There were two

yellow jackets at Tube Station West last night; I saw them. They may not be there now. Let's assume they are not. You go to the station — disguised perhaps. You get your p-suit and take a capsule to Beluthahatchie. As you climb out to take the bus to Endsville, you're arrested. Communications. No need to post a yellow jacket at the station; it is enough that someone sees you there. A phone call does the rest."

"But you assumed that I was disguised."

"Your height cannot be disguised and your pressure suit would be watched. By someone not suspected of any connection with the Warden. Most probably a comrade." Prof dimpled. "The trouble with conspiracies is that they rot internally. When the number is as high as four, chances are even that one is a spy."

Wyoh said glumly, "You make it sound hopeless."

"Not at all, my dear. One chance in a thousand, perhaps."

"I can't believe it. I *don't* believe it! Why, in the years I've been active we have gained members by the hundreds! We have organizations in all major cities. We have the people with us."

Prof shook head. "Every new member made it that much more likely that you would be betrayed. Wyoming dear lady, revolutions are not won by enlisting the masses. Revolution is a science only a few are competent to practice. It depends on correct organization and, above all, on communications. Then, at the proper moment in history, they

strike. Correctly organized and properly timed it is a bloodless coup. Done clumsily or prematurely and the result is civil war, mob violence, purges, terror. I hope you will forgive me if I say that, up to now, it has been done clumsily."

Wyoh looked baffled. "What do you mean by 'correct organization'?"

"Functional organization. How does one design an electric motor? Would you attach a bath tub to it, simply because one was available? Would a bouquet of flowers help? A heap of rocks? No, you would use just those elements necessary to its purpose and make it no larger than needed — and you would incorporate safety factors. Function controls design.

"So it is with revolution. Organization must be no larger than necessary. *Never* recruit anyone merely because he wants to join. Nor seek to persuade for the pleasure of having another share your views. He'll share them when the time comes . . . or you've misjudged the moment in history. Oh, there will be an educational organization but it must be separate; agitprop is no part of basic structure.

"As to basic structure, a revolution starts as a conspiracy; therefore structure is small, secret, and organized as to minimize damage by betrayal — since there *always* are betrayals. One solution is the cell system and so far nothing better has been invented.

"Much theorizing has gone into optimum cell size. I think that his-

tory shows that a cell of three is best. More than three can't agree on when to have dinner, much less when to strike. Manuel, you belong to a large family; do you vote on when to have dinner?"

"Bog, no! Mum decides."

"Ah." Prof took a pad from his pouch, began to sketch. "Here is a cells-of-three. If I were planning to take over Luna, I would start with us three. One would be opted as chairman. We wouldn't vote; choice would be obvious — or we aren't the right three. We would know the next nine people, three cells . . . but each cell would know only one of us."

"Looks like computer diagram — a ternary logic."

"Does it really? At the next level there are two ways of linking: This comrade, second level, knows his cell leader, his two cellmates, and on the third level he knows the three in his subcell. He may or may not know his cellmates' subcells. One method doubles security, the other doubles speed of repair if security is penetrated. Let's say he does *not* know his cellmates' subcells — Manuel, how many can he betray? Don't say he won't; today they can brainwash *any* person, and starch and iron and use him. How many?"

"Six," I answered. "His boss, two cellmates, three in subcell."

"Seven," Prof corrected, "he betrays himself, too. Which leaves seven broken links on three levels to repair. How?"

"I don't see how it can be," objected Wyoh. "You've got them so split up it falls to pieces."

"Manuel? An exercise for the student."

"Well . . . blokes down here have to have way to send message up three levels. Don't have to know *who*, just have to know *where*," I answered.

"Precisely!"

"But, Prof," I went on, "there's a better way to rig it."

"Really? Many revolutionary theorists have hammered this out, Manuel. I have such confidence in them that I'll offer you a wager — at, say, ten to one."

"Ought to take your money. Take same cells, arrange in open pyramid of tetrahedrons. Where vertices are in common, each bloke knows one in adjoining cell — knows how to send message to him, that's all he needs. Communications never break down because they run sideways as well as up and down. Something like a neural net. It's why you can knock a hole in a man's head, take chunk of brain out, and not damage thinking much. Excess capacity, messages shunt around. He loses what was destroyed but goes on functioning."

"Manuel," Prof said doubtfully, "could you draw a picture? It *sounds* good — but it's so contrary to orthodox doctrine that I need to see it."

"Well . . . could do better with stereo drafting machine. But I'll try."

(Anybody who thinks it's easy to sketch one hundred twenty-one tetrahedrons, a five-level open pyramid, clear enough to show relationships is invited to try!)

Presently I said, "Look at base sketch. Each vertex of each triangle shares self with zero, one, or two other triangles. Where shares one, that's its link, one direction or both. But one is enough for a multi-redundant communication net. On corners, where sharing is zero, it jumps to right to next corner. Where sharing is double, choice is again right-handed.

"Now work it with people. Take fourth level, D-for-dog. This vertex is comrade Dan. No, let's go down one to show three levels of communication knocked out — level E-for-easy and pick Comrade Egbert.

"Egbert works under Donald, has cellmates Edward and Elmer, and has three under him, Frank, Fred, and Fatso . . . but knows how to send message to Ezra on his own level but not in his cell. He doesn't know Ezra's name, face, address, or anything — but has a way, phone number probably, to reach Ezra in emergency.

"Now watch it work. Casimir, level three, finks out and betrays Charlie and Cox in his cell, Baker above him, and Donald, Dan, and Dick in subcell — which isolates Egbert, Edward, and Elmer, and everybody under them.

"All three report it — redundancy, necessary to any communication system — but follow Egbert's yell for help. He calls Ezra. But Ezra is under Charlie and is isolated, too. No matter, Ezra relays both messages

through his safety link, Edmund. By bad luck Edmund is under Cox, so he also passes it laterally, through Enwright . . . and that gets it past burned-out part and it goes up through Dover, Chambers, and Beeswax, to Adam, front office . . . who replies down other side of pyramid, with lateral pass on E-for-Easy level from Esther to Egbert and on to Ezra and Edmund. These two messages, up and down, not only get through at once but in way they get through, they define to home office exactly how much damage has been done and where. Organization not only keeps functioning but starts repairing self at once."

Wyoh was tracing out lines, convincing herself it would work — which it would, was "idiot" circuit. Let Mike study a few milliseconds, and could produce a better, safer, more foolproof hookup. And probably — certainly — ways to avoid betrayal while speeding up routings. But I'm not a computer.

Prof was staring with blank expression.

"What's trouble?" I said. "It'll work; this is my pidgin."

"Manuel my b — Excuse me: Senor O'Kelly . . . will you head this revolution?"

"Me? Great Bog, nyet! I'm no lost-cause martyr. Just talking about circuits."

Wyoh looked up. "Mannie," she said soberly, "you're opted. it's settled."

TO BE CONTINUED

SECURITY SYNDROME

by GERALD PEARCE

*He was the most loyal man
on Earth—and in that lay
the seeds of his treachery!*

Nov. 14, 1997 9:12 A. M.

He got out of the cab, paid the driver, and stood staring up at the Society's regional h.q. It's cliff-like face loomed skyward. In his own mind it loomed even larger, more massively graceful, more sleek and subtly forbidding.

There! he thought. Wasn't *that* a disloyal thought?

He bit his lip, adjusted the hang of his topcoat, and chose one of the dozen glass swing doors

Outside, rain had threatened. In the vaulted lobby an alive silken texture to the air defied the elements and proclaimed the superior efficiency of man. There was a sense of *arriving*—of suddenly finding oneself in the eye of a hurricane, while outside madness whirled about the calm of certainty. He saw a

modest portrait of the Founder. A plaque reminded him that the society had been established "for the Preservation of National Ideals and the Rights of Citizens."

He started for the directory when a discreet sign caught his eye. ORIGINAL SECURITY REPORTS AT INFORMATION DESK 4.

He paused to straighten his coat before obeying.

They kept him waiting two seconds, barely long enough to notice the beautiful enlargement of the Second Bill of Rights in its illuminated frame on the wall behind the desk. When the girl appeared before him he had the distinct sensation that she had materialized there between one millionth of a second and the next.

Her severely dressed black hair

was pulled back from a face of grave beauty. He saw glowing ivory skin, arched eyebrows. Her high-necked dress surpassed the most rigid puritanical standards of concealment and yet, by some subtle stratagem of line and texture, some complement of color and bodily contour, conveyed a degree of sexuality more disturbing than commercial exposure. He managed a look of quick contempt and wondered, briefly forgetting his own concerns, how she kept her job.

"May I help you?"

"It's a fitness matter. A Security matter."

"Do you wish to file an informer report?"

"No! That is . . . yes."

"Your name, please."

"Brown. James Cranston Brown."

He added his address and Social Responsibility number. She typed quickly, eyes downcast. A teletype keyboard set into the desk below his angle of vision made soft, barely audible sounds. "And the name of the person you wish to report, Mr. Brown?"

"Uh, yes," he said. "It's . . . Brown. James Cranston Brown. Myself."

For the tiniest fraction of a second her fingers hesitated over the keyboard.

9:20 A.M.

Within five minutes Brown's file was on Hagen's desk on the forty-second floor.

"You're sure he's not on the Psych List?" Hagen asked.

"If he were his file would show

it," his secretary said. "It doesn't, but I checked anyway."

"Okay," Hagen said after a pause. "I'll buzz you when I'm ready for him."

She returned to the outer office. He picked up his phone and dialed an extension.

"Dr. Stillman."

"Hi, Ted," Hagen said. "I've someone I want you to look at. He just filed an informer report against himself."

"Against *himself*?"

"That's what I said."

"I'll be right over."

Hagen hung up, chewing thoughtfully on a thumbnail. He would have to wait for Stillman before reaching for the buzzer that would send in the interviewee.

His phone hummed.

"Hagen."

"Hello, Hagen, this is Arnold," the Regional Chairman boomed in his ear. "Hear you picked up a new wrinkle."

"This fellow Brown? Reporting himself?"

"So it's true, is it?"

"It's true, chief. He's a professor of history at the University of California."

"I'll be damned. Of course, the colleges are still hotbeds of cryptopinks, but . . . D'you suppose it could be part of a Conspiracy gambit to discredit the Society?"

"It's possible."

"Anyway, this is one I want to be kept posted on. Fair enough?"

"Sure, chief."

Hagen replaced the phone. A tiny light glowed suddenly on the bank

beside it, telling him that the psychiatrist was installed in the observation room behind the one-way window.

9:33 A.M.

"This is Mr. Hagen, of our Executive Branch," the secretary said. "Mr. Brown."

From across the desk a square-shouldered man regarded him with quiet, probing eyes. Brown shuddered inwardly. They were the eyes of his own conscience.

"Have a seat," Hagen said.

He obeyed, taking the lone chair that sat squarely in front of the desk. He crossed his knees, clasped his hands. He squeezed them.

"I don't suppose I have to remind you," Hagen said almost absently, "that we have no connection with any level of government. We're an independent patriotic service agency. It's our job to investigate, advise and educate."

Brown nodded, waiting.

And Hagen said, putting his elbows on the desk and leaning forward comfortably, "Now what's all this about, Mr. Brown?"

Brown said simply, "I'm a loyal citizen."

Hagen studied him oddly for a long moment.

"I should hope so." He sat back. "Especially since you're a professor of history. That's a job we rate Sensitive-A, so of course we've investigated you. As we have quite a few other people. I have your file here." He tapped the narrow microfilm container on his desk with a blunt fingertip. "We know more about you

and your associations than a squad of detectives could tell you in ten years."

Brown's tongue flicked over dry lips. He nodded again.

"Don't you think," Hagen asked mildly, "that we have enough information about you to decide for ourselves?"

"I . . . Not necessarily. You can't tell," Brown explained with a hint of desperation, "what's going on in a man's mind."

"What's been going on in yours?"

"Uh, nothing. But I know what I feel, and I don't feel — well, loyal."

Hagen gave him another long look. "Let's look at it this way," he went on reasonably. "As a history professor, I don't suppose you have any doubt that a conspiracy against our way of life does exist?"

"Of course —" he had to clear his throat — "of course not."

"Nor that its agents have been in substantial control of our government for most of the Twentieth Century, and haven't yet been entirely weeded out?"

"No! No, of course not."

"What have you done to further this conspiracy?"

For a sickening moment Brown was at a loss for words. "Why . . . nothing!"

"Did you oppose adoption of the Second Bill of Rights?"

His mouth still open, Brown could only shake his head.

"Have you mental reservations about the Second Bill of Rights?"

The head shake continued.

"Don't you approve of the Society?"

Sweat had broken out of his face. Brown felt the beads rolling, tasted their salt.

"Because after all," Hagen said, "disapproval of the Society is no less than disapproval of the national ideals it was set up to always preserve."

Brown's nervousness reached its crisis.

For a shadow of eternity he could neither breathe nor think. Then there was a lurch and a sharp clap against his eardrums and his heart began a frantic clamoring rush to catch up with time and he almost shouted, "No, wait! I approve! I do! You don't understand!"

Now Hagen waited for him to collect himself.

"Maybe I don't, Mr. Brown." He leaned back in his chair, smiled, crossed his legs, and pointed to the microfilm container. "But your last fitness evaluation gives you a double-A rating."

Struggling to control inward horror, Brown fumbled for a handkerchief to mop his face and neck. Hagen went on pleasantly, "Say a student monitor in one of your classes reports you for historical deviation. You'd be re-rated before you could blink. Meantime, though . . . even the Regional Chairman's only a double-A."

Brown sighed raggedly and shoved the handkerchief back into his pocket.

"It makes no difference." He had control over his voice again. "I'm a teacher. In that capacity I have at least some responsibility for my students' civil liberties. Article Two

of the Second Bill. 'Every citizen, regardless of racial, religious, or economic background, is guaranteed freedom from seditious, false and heretical doctrines which, by their nature, interfere with the highest intellectual functions, and therefore are inimical to intellectual freedom.' Remember I teach a Sensitive subject. And now . . . I don't know. About myself, I mean. God knows what I might try to put over. I can't place it, I can't pin it down, but I know I'm . . . guilty."

"Without having done anything?" Hagen said.

12:35 P.M.

Wriely, Dr. Stillman scratched the bridge of his nose. The tests were done, the apparatus had been disconnected, and he had sent the results to Psych Stat for processing. Brown, in his shirt sleeves and without his tie, tried to relax in a deep leather chair. He lit a cigarette.

"Now," Stillman said, pushing an ashtray across the desk towards him, "what the devil made you report yourself?"

Brown scraped a shred of tobacco from his lower lip. "Didn't your tests tell you?"

"The tests still have to be evaluated." Stillman smiled. He had a genuine, disarming smile. It revealed his basic good nature and concealed a gnawing doubt. "Suppose you tell me what sort of classified information you have access to."

Brown started, paled visibly, then drew hungrily on his cigarette.

"Yes. That. Well, I have top clearance for my professional rank. I not

only teach, I serve in the preparation of text books for advanced study. That means research in restricted source material. My head, consequently, contains a detailed catalogue of socio-historic error."

"But the work's necessary, isn't it?"

"Oh, indeed yes. Most histories written prior to 1980 were rabid with unescoism."

"It sounds like a big responsibility."

"Well, yes."

"Trying to run away from it?"

"Why should I? It's my job. I enjoy it. And I've never shirked responsibility. Otherwise I wouldn't be here."

"It's not quite that simple, you know," Stillman said without force. "You may be channeling some minor neurosis into worry about your loyalty."

Brown shook his head. "No."

"Then why suddenly decide you were a risk?"

"Not suddenly. Gradually."

"Either way."

"I found I had a guilty conscience."

"What about?"

Stillman waited. Brown ground out his cigarette with sudden violence. "You're the expert on involuntary guilt reactions, doctor."

Stillman said helpfully, "Blushing. Stammering. That kind of thing."

"That kind of thing. With some people it's sex. With me it's Security."

Stillman gave his wry, friendly smile.

"Western Civilization instills a

negative attitude toward sex, Mr. Brown. No one can escape his sexuality, no matter how much he might want to. Once our anti-sex standard is accepted, everyone has a basis for guilt—the sex drive itself. But we don't have an innate physiological treason drive."

"Exactly!" Brown said. "So consider my situation. In a Sensitive job. Unable to hear the words spoken—" his voice became a rattle—"Security, loyalty, fitness, risk—"

He lit another cigarette. The smoke climbed raggedly.

"How about that, doctor?"

"A sign of disturbance, yes."

"I tried to explain it away. Nothing worked. *Could* I in fact be wrong about myself? Had I, without knowing it, been contaminated by the very intellectual errors I was supposed to be exposing? Was I a tool of the Conspiracy?"

Stillman scratched the bridge of his nose.

"But doesn't the idea still suggest neurosis, Mr. Brown? I mean," he went on quickly to forestall an outburst, "if you've really been . . . let's say unconsciously seduced into error, a conflict exists in your unconscious and . . ."

"God damn it, doctor," Brown interrupted, "I can't take chances with a headful of dangerous thoughts that caused untold damage once and might do so again. There's a risk involved."

"Perhaps," Stillman agreed placatingly, "but don't you think . . .?"

"Can you take chances? You, doctor? No, you can't." Brown slammed the desk top between them. His

face glistened. He said passionately, "I *had* to report myself, don't you see? I may never teach again but I had to do it. Because I'm a loyal American."

Stillman's phone hummed. He excused himself.

"Dr. Stillman."

"Hi, doc. This is Bauer at Psych Stat. We've got the Brown test results. Want 'em right away?"

"Please," Stillman said.

"Classic case," Bauer said enthusiastically. "Guilty as hell."

1:15 P.M.

Entering Stillman's office, Hagen found the psychiatrist staring abstractedly out of the lone window.

"Okay," Hagen said. "What's the trouble?"

Stillman flipped open the Psych Stat folder that lay on his desk.

"Look at this." His face had lost its friendly look. "First the Standard Security Test — associative, projective, the works, with polygraphic correlations. All the wrong answers. The responses have guilt in every line. Then I gave him the Enright General Adjustment Profile to get an over-all picture of the personality and make sure we didn't have a simple crank on our hands. All the right answers. Sane as a summer day."

"There's no chance he's a Conspiracy plant to discredit our procedure?"

"No."

With a sigh of relief, Hagen dropped into the big leather chair Brown had sat in earlier. He could red-stamp Brown on the basis of the

tests alone and no Committee of Review in the country would take five minutes to uphold his judgment.

He settled himself comfortably. "Well, that's fairly conclusive, Ted. I mean if the man's normal, he isn't attributing his guilt feeling to disloyalty to hide from their true origin. Of course, it means that our surveillance and monitoring systems have broken down, since we don't have any derogatory information on him, but . . ."

"No," Stillman said.

"What?"

"The man isn't normal."

"Isn't . . .? Now, wait a minute," Hagen interrupted himself impatiently. "You can't disregard the Enright on the basis of a hunch. It's standardized and accepted."

"And it's good and conclusive. But not this time. And maybe never again." He took a chart from the folder. "Look at that tabulation. Well-balanced. Intelligent. Good semantic orientation. The only thing that keeps him from being a paragon of Enright normalcy is a tinge of anxiety that falls within the statistical norm anyway."

"Anxiety neurosis?"

"Catchword," Stillman snapped. "Anxiety about what? Money? Sex? Rejection? Any of the usual disturbances? No. That's what the Enright's for — to spot those quirks and point to their origin. In this case it points to nothing. In other words, it points to something the test wasn't built to handle. Play back those tapes and it'll stand out a mile."

"It will?" Hagen said cautiously.

"The Standard Security Test re-

veals consciousness of guilt. Neither you nor Brown can find anything for him to feel guilty about. Still Brown won't concede that his guilt feelings may be a symptom of neurosis. The best he can do, paradoxically, is trace them to a supposed—a *supposed*, mind you—unconscious sense of unreliability about a headful of dangerous ideas he's carrying around with him. If he's right, it means he has an unconscious urge to use that knowledge wrongly, which is sick. If he's wrong, then we still haven't explained his guilt feelings, so he's still sick."

"So?"

"So his neurosis is Security. Not the way the psych books use the word. Capital S Security. And don't look for symbolism. He's a sick man."

Hagen's first response was blank amazement. It died abruptly and a small cold knot of doubt replaced it.

He paused to fish out a cigarette and light it, frowning.

"You can't throw out the Enright results just on a hunch."

"Enright never heard of a Security syndrome." Stillman had dropped into the swivel chair behind his desk. His narrow face looked earnestly across its width. "Compare it with the traditional sense of sin, with the whole moral orientation based on a sense of personal evil and the need for redemption."

"You mean Brown has a neurotic conviction of sinfulness? Of having sinned against national security?"

"Of innate sinfulness," Stillman corrected, "divorced from objective fact."

Hagen allowed his worry to show on his face.

Maybe Stillman had been working too hard, he thought hopefully. Or was he jumping to conclusions, misunderstanding what Stillman was trying to tell him?

"Suppose," he said slowly, "suppose Brown's historical researches actually did move him toward intellectual error in spite of himself. Mightn't his unconscious give warning by means of these guilt feelings? It seems to me that would mark him as a well-balanced and loyal individual, conscious of his weaknesses and anxious to avoid doing harm through them."

"Except for one thing," Stillman said.

"Yes?"

"His irrational behavior. His self-destructive behavior."

"Now wait a minute," Hagen said again, sharply this time.

"Clinically," Hagen insisted, "we have to regard the act of filing an informer report against himself as a punitive, self-destructive act. He doesn't simply want to remove himself from a position where he might do harm, he wants to be punished for a harm he hasn't committed. He knows he'll never teach again if you red-stamp him."

"Clinically," Hagen said, the word a meaningless metallic sound in his ears.

He sighed, deeply, and studied the burning tip of his cigarette.

"Be careful, Ted. Before you say anything else, stop and think the implications through. From my viewpoint."

"I have. I've tried to explain."

"I know what you've tried to explain. But *think*, Ted. Does it matter?"

He looked up at Stillman now.

"*Matter?*" Stillman said after a blank pause. "Of course it matters. First, there's the question of aetiology. Are his guilty reactions really based on unconscious agreement with proscribed opinions? Or has the pressure of conformity produced a counter-urge to non-conformity? In either case, the man is sick, and what he needs is help, not punishment."

"No one's going to punish him."

Hagen said, loudly enough to cut Stillman off. "Only a court can do that. We're not a court, we're a service organization. All we do is advise. The point is that a man so unbalanced as to imagine himself treasonous is by that fact unbalanced enough to be irresponsible and dangerous."

"All right!" Stillman snapped.

"The point I'm trying to make . . ."

"There isn't any other point."

Stillman's face was bleak and tense. A stranger's face, rigid with antagonism.

He had one chance to redeem himself. Instead he said, "Even if we're responsible? Even if we're doing it to them?"

Suspicion metamorphosed into certainty.

Hagen felt as though a gulf had opened beneath him.

. . . The entering wedge, he thought moments later as shock and loss began to give way before the demands of discipline and conviction.

Right out of every book and pamphlet the Founder ever wrote thirty, thirty-five years ago. *A counter-urge to non-conformity* . . . What did that mean? A manifestation of unfitness that ought to be somehow ignored, forgiven? And how far could you take that kind of reasoning? Soon you'd be trapped in an endless downward spiral of sentimental soft-hearted nonsense in which no one could be held responsible for anything, and the Society might just as well never have been dreamed of. It was precisely this kind of thing that had once provided a field day for the bleeding hearts and the do-gooders, blurring the moral fibre of the nation, softening it up for the Conspiracy.

But it wouldn't happen again. The country had the Society to protect it now.

Hagen ground out his cigarette. "The Society wasn't intended to be a free health clinic."

He got to his feet. There were things to do, ramifications he was only beginning to appreciate.

Stillman sat stiffly behind the desk. His face was frozen and incredibly accusing, which goaded Hagen to a spurt of anger.

"No one's going to let American security fall into the hands of a bunch of clinical psychiatric theorists."

Slowly, the psychiatrist raised a hand to his face, scratched the narrow bridge of his nose. Equally slowly he lowered the hand to its former position. He waited. He might not have moved.

Hagen turned abruptly and strode

to the door. As he was about to open it Stillman said from his desk:

"Are we going to make neurosis unconstitutional, like public housing?"

1:48 P.M.

Hagen gave Brown the good news, signed the slip and set the wheels in motion. Then he took the elevator to the forty-third floor. The Regional Chairman was free and gave him a hearty welcome. His dark paneled office smelled of leather and good tobacco.

"This man Brown," Arnold said. "You had one of the Psych staff examine him, I suppose?"

"Of course, chief. The Standard Security Test was positive. The Enright showed a normal personality."

"And he actually reported himself? Now that's loyalty for you!" Arnold shook his head in baffled admiration. "It's a gratifying index of our educational penetration, isn't it?"

"I think we're doing the job assigned us, chief. Perhaps even better than we'd hoped. According to Dr. Stillman, Brown turned himself in for seditious inclinations that existed only in his unconscious mind."

Arnold was impressed.

"This . . . this is difficult for me to say," Hagen went on. "I've been a friend of Ted Stillman's for a good many years. But, well, the Brown case upset him pretty badly. He seems to feel there's something wrong about invading a man's unconscious and moving against disloyalty in that precinct."

Arnold stared.

"Doesn't he realize that disloyalty has to be rooted out wherever it's found?"

Hagen didn't answer.

Arnold was silent a long time.

"You never know where it's going to strike next," he said, almost to himself. "It's like a damned mutant virus. You haven't reported this through channels, have you?"

"Not yet. I thought you might want to give the matter especially discreet handling. I think we're going to have to re-investigate medical ethics and the ideological implications of psychiatric theory."

"Of course," Arnold said. "Well, let's get on with it."

1:50 P.M.

Brown left the Executive offices in a daze. Once in the corridor he leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, his one emotion heart-stopping relief.

It was over. Over! He was free. The paper in his hand proved it.

James Cranston Brown: This is your notice of Fitness reclassification. It is believed that your employment in any position rated Sensitive or higher would not be in the best interests of the United States. you have five (5) days in which to appeal this finding.

*Examining officer: Wm. B. Hagen.
11-14-97*

He had done it.

He had a vision of his name streaking along wires. Of circuits snapping shut. Of an immense shuffling and reshuffling of data. Of microfilm strips, punch-coded cards, typed reports, in brilliant offices and

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the secret recesses of electronic intelligence. There was a humming sound that was steady as the voice of God, an even glow, the unrelenting rattle of teletype reception.

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RISK.

He flowed through the wires and the channels, the filaments and nerves and synapses of the Society's great consciousness. Weariness, strain had drained from him. He felt suddenly younger — younger than he had ever felt. A surging in his blood built to a heady euphoria.

He was purged.

He was clean.

He moved away from the wall, walking slowly down the passage to the elevators. He rode down forty-two floors without knowledge of passing time.

"Main floor."

He was in the vaulted lobby, mysterious with its whisper of activity.

Information desk #4 glided toward him. He reached out with arms spread in an attitude of possession, felt the cool texture of the desk beneath his palms.

"May I help you?"

Of course, he thought. That's why I came back here. He looked at the smooth ivory skin, the deep impersonal eyes, the flagrant prim nudity of the girl in the high-necked dress.

"I did it," he said quietly. "I proved it. I'm a Security risk."

There was an instantaneous flicker of recognition in the deep eyes. A slight intake of breath. A barely detectable widening of the chiseled nostrils.

"A loyal citizen."

He stood back, watching her. It was important that she understand. Intuitively he knew that she did. He thought, poor girl, why go through the agony of indirection? Go right up and tell them. They'll believe you. And you can't hide from your own conscience.

"Good-by," he said.

He stood a moment longer, looking up and around to savor the triumph and certainty of his surroundings.

Now he was part of them, and would never be the same again.

He pushed his way through one of the glass swing doors, stepped out onto the sidewalk.

The rain was soft. An aerocab buzzed overhead. Taxis swerved and honked. Pedestrians waited under umbrellas at the intersection. People hurried along the sidewalks.

If only they knew, he thought. If only they knew.

Turning to look up at the sandy cliff-faced building, feeling the rain descending on his face like a benediction, Mr. Brown smiled.

. . . While inside, her fingers light and fervent on the teletype keys, the girl in the high-necked dress took his unspoken advice and reported herself.

END

TOYS FOR DEBBIE

by DAVID A. KYLE

*He was a friend of the family.
Naturally he brought toys for
the children — but what toys!*

The locomotive, with flashing eye, roared out of the tunnel in the hill and rushed along the curving track. Halfway through the long bend, the speeding engine suddenly trembled and swayed. Then, within a few noisy seconds, most of the train separated from the rails, coaches ramming each other, sliding and slamming together over and around the engine. The locomotive died with a scream of steam, blotting out with its ferocious shhushh all the other screams . . .

The child jumped up and down with sudden exhilaration and looked at the wreck.

"Daddy, Daddy!" she said. "It's crashed!"

Her father, Frank Curtis, stopped talking with the insurance salesman and stepped back from the other end of the living room.

The salesman, stiff and motion-

less, watched the father put the toy cars back on the tracks.

"If you're going to wreck your toys, well, all right then, Debbie," Frank Curtis said. "But can't you remember we have a guest? Can't you wait later to play rough?" He adjusted the silk ribbon in her hair.

"Be a good girl for Daddy, dear." The father straightened up and looked into the smooth, impassive face of the salesman.

"Nothing broken, Mr. Black," Frank Curtis said.

"She's an unusual child," Mr. Black said. "I mean, girls don't play with toy trains ordinarily."

"Well, she is unusual, Mr. Black," the father said. "She likes all the stuff that girls play with, too."

"Was this hers, also, sir?" Mr. Black asked. He tipped his head toward the book shelf near where they stood. As Frank Curtis was nodding his head in reply, the sales-

man reached out and caressed the broken body of a model commercial airliner.

"You saw the picture in the paper?" the father asked.

"Oh, I did, yes." The man quickly drew his hand away. "It was a tragic accident."

"Tragic?" Frank Curtis looked and sounded puzzled. "I think it can be mended. She broke it weeks after they took her picture with it..."

"That picture," Mr. Black said sharply, his dark eyes dropping their gaze swiftly to the floor and then back to the six-year-old girl sitting on the sofa. She looked back at him serenely. "She's an attractive child, takes a wonderful picture." He was speaking rapidly. "Yes, I saw her picture—with that airplane, of course—in the local paper. It was a nice story, about a little girl who likes boys' toys as much as girls'. Yes, I read about her."

Frank Curtis hesitated a moment, then said, "Oh," and smiled.

Mr. Black continued. "Yes, I read about her. I read a lot, I keep up with things." He stopped abruptly and then added: "You must be proud of your daughter, Mr. Curtis, very proud." The father responded with a warm grin, a bit modest.

"Yes, when I read that article, even though it was brief, I felt I knew Debbie. And I wanted to do something for her." The salesman squeezed the other man's shoulder. "I'm so anxious to make you one of our clients, Mr. Curtis, that I'm going to give you a deal you simply can't afford to turn down."

It was just such a deal and Frank Curtis did not turn it down. That was why Mr. Black returned the following month on the first regular collection call. With him he brought a doll for the little girl. She was really appreciative, even if her father did have to remind her to thank the nice man, and she took it up on the couch with her to play.

"They tell me you're a new man," Frank Curtis said, "but a good one."

Mr. Black raised his heavy black eyebrows in honest surprise. "Oh, you checked up on me? That was the right thing to do." He paused for a moment, as if making a decision, then added, "I'm a veteran. I had many years service—demolitionist." The smile stayed warm and frank. "I find my new work even more exciting—and more satisfying, of course, because of its humanitarianism."

Mr. Black picked up his red-and-black plaid cap and as he was leaving, said to Debbie, "It's a very special doll, you know, honey." He hesitated before adding, casually, "I mean, it's practically unbreakable."

Debbie's father looked startled, his mouth opening and closing silently.

On the following monthly visit when Mr. Black came, he said to her, while her father was getting his check book, "I'm sorry your dolly lost its arm."

She crawled under the sofa and brought out the doll; it was in a sorry state, dirty and ragged, nearly bald, its left arm gone, exposing the hollow shoulder socket.

"Thank you, I'm sure," the little

girl said, looking up with wide soft eyes. "How did you know?" Mr. Black avoided her stare and then Mr. Curtis came in and saw the doll.

"It's a shame," Frank Curtis said. "I'd hoped we'd keep it a secret from you." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, it shouldn't be any surprise."

"It's quite all right, sir. It was only a cheap doll and it's served its purpose."

"You know," the father said slowly, "those grown-up dolls—I can't get used to them. The obvious maturity . . ." He picked up the toy and examined it carefully. "Why," he said, genuinely surprised, "I think it has real hair!" He put the doll on the bookcase shelf. "I hope my daughter isn't just plain vicious."

"Oh, no! She's just completely human, I assure you." Mr. Black sighed. "She's mischievous, but really quite innocent."

For the first time Frank Curtis seemed to sense something behind Mr. Black's speech. "You seem to know more about my child than I do."

Mr. Black's stare was fixed on the floor. "I generalize, of course. All children have two natures—one is primeval, selfish and savage, the other is moral, unselfish and civilized. Children who are still innocent express themselves either way—sometimes both ways simultaneously." He lifted his head and looked Frank Curtis deep in the eyes. The gaze, unlike the charged and forceful speech, was cool and calm.

"Forget about the doll," Mr. Black said. He put his right hand in his pocket and pulled out a small package. "Here's something for her train. I made them for a nephew years ago, but unfortunately he died and I saved them to give to someone else some day."

He began to unwrap the package.

"Really, Mr. Black, you're more than kind, but all this gift-giving . . ."

"This is nothing, believe me. It's more a personal thing than a present." He opened the package. Inside were a number of narrow strips of paper.

Frank Curtis examined them. They were all gummed on one side and had the names of some famous railroads printed on them. A few of them read: 20TH CENTURY LIMITED.

In answer to the bewildered look, the salesman said: "It's very simple, sir. I thought my nephew's trains would look more real with these glued over the brand name. I thought you might let me fasten them on Debbie's trains . . ."

For one of those rare times, the two men looked each other squarely in the face. Frank Curtis chewed on the inside of his cheek for several moments.

"Why should I?"

Mr. Black said wistfully, but persuasively, "I loved my nephew very much—it's something I wanted to do for him." He made a little, pen-sive "hmmph" in his throat. "Children like to associate toys with real things. That's all."

Debbie's father shook his head,

frowning. "It sounds foolish. Why should a grown man like you think of such a thing?"

"What would you have me think of? A new style doll, its pleasure measured by its expensiveness? A costly garment, to be outgrown quickly with fashionable waste? A pretty picture book, beautifully, scientifically and heartlessly manufactured?" Mr. Black said this utterly without a trace of bitterness and the smile on his face was overwhelmingly disarming. "The small things often become the important things, the cherished things . . . And I loved my nephew!"

Frank Curtis said, "You're a real salesman!" There was a touch of awe in his admiration.

So Mr. Black, with Mr. Curtis' help, changed the name of the train.

Afterwards they decided to run the train a few times, just to see how it looked.

It went around the track several times without incident and then Mr. Black bent down and said softly to Debbie: "Can you make it run faster?"

The locomotive, with flashing eye, roared out of the tunnel . . .

Mr. Black towered above the layout, his feet planted on either side of the cardboard tunnel.

. . . and rushed along the curving track . . .

The father started to say, "It's going too fast . . ."

The speeding engine trembled . . . swayed . . .

Mr. Black's face was expression-

less and colorless and he picked up his plaid cap in preparation for leaving.

. . . The train separated from the rails . . .

"Ooops, off the track," Mr. Black said in a small voice, strolling toward the door. "Thank you for everything . . ."

The locomotive died with a scream of steam, blotting out with its ferocious shhushh all other screams.

The following month both the incident and the real tragedy were barely mentioned. "A terrible coincidence," said Frank Curtis to his caller, which is precisely what he had said to himself when he had picked up the next day's newspaper and saw the headline. Now no reminder remained, for the paper names on the train had soon dried up and peeled away.

Mr. Black had another present for Debbie, but her father, more out of a reflex of custom, rather than a subconscious nervousness, was unwilling to accept it. Mr. Black was magnificently persuasive. He finally got an agreement after he said that he was going away and promised that this present would be the absolute end.

Mr. Curtis opened the box and looked inside. What was it Mr. Black had said, Debbie was just mischievous, just human?

The gift was an exquisite glass globe reproduction of the Earth.

It looked quite fragile, so Frank Curtis put it on the shelf for when Debbie would be older and could cherish it.

END

ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGONMOTIVE

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrated by MORROW

There's nothing strange about a railroad—unless, like this one, it's in the wrong century!

I

The human race being what it is, men on the verge of making major discoveries are often preoccupied with the most minor of matters. Take Lieutenant George St. George of the International Past-police, for example, when he rode into the valley of Lianour on that

sixth-century morning in May. Mere moments after the Anachronism Department timeship had deposited him on the valley's eastern slope he had developed an irksome itch just beneath his right shoulder blade, and so absorbed was he in trying to relieve it he hardly knew where he was at.

It was as hot as Hades inside his

iron suit, even with the visor open, and to add to his woes the valley was abuzz with bees, any one of which might momentarily mistake his helmet for a hive. Aside from this, there was much to be said in the valley's favor. It was broad and green, and patterned with stands of oaks and beeches. The wild-flower footprints of spring were scattered everywhere — over meadows, along fields, through woods. It was the sort of setting that idylls are born of, although you couldn't prove it by St. George.

He was trying for the tenth time to rub his back against the back-wall of his hauberk when three knights rode out of a nearby stand of oaks and came charging toward him like a trio of hammered-down locomotives. "Brace yourself, Herodotus," he said to his rohorse. "We may have to joust."

His rohorse didn't say anything. Rohorses were made to be seen and not heard. They were also made to do all sorts of other things — things real horses couldn't even begin to do. So St. George wasn't worried.

He needn't have been in any case. None of the three approaching knights had his spear dressed or his visor closed, and as they neared him they reined their mounts and covered the remaining distance at a much more modest pace. The one in the lead, except for his helmet — which, like those of his two companions and that of St. George, looked like the upper section of a 30-gallon hot water tank — was clad complete-

ly in chain mail. His trousers and shirt were made of the stuff, and hanging from his shoulders all the way to his ankles was a magnificent chain-mail ulster. The effect was dazzling. The other two knights, like St. George, were outfitted in much more orthodox armor — breast-plates, pauldrons, gorgets, greaves, cuisses and sollerets — although in St. George's case the material was of twenty-first century vintage.

"I hight Sir Ulfin du Bois," Chain Mail said, as the trio clanked to a halt directly in St. George's path. "My place is nigh the Siege Perilous at the Round Table of King Arthur." He indicated first the knight on his left and then the one on his right. "They hight Sir Guy de Gloomis and Sir Bagdemagus le Savage, the which also abideth in the next vale. We seeketh the dragon of Lianour, in order that we may slay it and bring its depredations to an end."

"I hight Sir George le Vainquer," said St. George, who had boned up on medieval English before departing for the past, as he brought Herodotus to a halt. "I hail from Nottis, the which is far to the north, and journey through this country to the sea, whereon I would make voyage."

Except for his armor, Sir Ulfin didn't look particularly formidable. Little could be seen of his face through his open visor, but what could be seen revealed him to be a well-fed man in his early forties with mild blue eyes and a wispy blond moustache.

What little could be seen of the

other two knights' faces revealed Sir Guy and Sir Bagdemagus to be a couple of overgrown kids. "Would ye joust with us or would ye accompany us and partake of our adventure?" the latter asked.

As a sporting proposition, the offer left much to be desired. However, it in no way interfered with "Sir" George's plans. The anachronism he'd come back in time to correct existed somewhere within a thirty-mile radius of the spot where the timeship had deposited him, so it made no difference which direction he traveled in provided he didn't exceed the radius. So why not accompany the three knights? Two of them—Sir Guy and Sir Bagdemagus—lived in the next valley and might very well be on speaking terms with the mistake in the chronological order of things he'd come back to set aright.

So he said, "Sithen ye have need of my spear, I will accompany ye."

As the quartet rode over the idyllic meadows and through the idyllic woods, it came gradually to light via small talk that Sir Ulfin du Bois had set out in quest of the Holy Grail some time ago and had only recently arrived in this part of "Logris". Yesterday he had met Sirs Guy and Bagdemagus and so great had been their admiration for his armor (they said) he'd promised to get them suits just like it—as he'd already done for a number of other knights of Gloomis—from the very armor-maker who had created his own ensemble, and for a most modest price. He'd also agreed to help

them slay the dragon of Lianour. The inhabitants of Lianour consisted of freemen turned farmer, shopkeeper, shepherd and smithy. And freemen turned farmer, shopkeeper, shepherd and smithy—it went without saying—didn't know beans about dragons and wouldn't have known how to go about slaying one if they had. Hence, outside assistance was urgently needed.

The dragon in question had put in its appearance less than a week ago, and "sithen", it had been making daily excursions over the Lianour landscape, terrorizing sheep, cows, damsels and little children. It was an unusually large and ferocious member of the species, which explained why Sirs Guy and Bagdemagus had considered it the better part of valor not to attempt the slaying act by themselves. The dragon was unusual in other respects, too. In its belly it carried a damsel whom it had devoured some time ago but who—miraculously—was still "on live", plus a large number of farmers, shopkeepers, shepherders and smithies, whom it had also devoured some time ago and who—also miraculously—were still "on live". In addition to these unique features, it had an uncommonly tough skin, even for a dragon, and no longer than day before yesterday Sir Bagdemagus le Savage, in venturing in close and smiting it on the flank, had put a big dent in his second-best sword.

To all of this, Lt. George St. George listened with a somewhat cynical ear. He'd heard talk of dragons in many a time period, but he had

never seen one and never expected to. Moreover, there was no doubt in his mind but what Sir Guy's and Bagdemagus' version would turn out to be a deer or a boar or some similar unoffending and helpless animal, which the three dauntless knights would skewer on their spears and chop to pieces with their swords and then hie themselves either to Sir Guy's or Sir Bagdemagus' hearthside and extol their prowess over countless cups of mead. Or perhaps it would turn out to be nothing but thin air — an eventuality that would neither stop Sir Ulfin du Bois from seeing it or from bragging about the deed afterward. When a knight made up his mind he was going to help slay a dragon, no power on earth could stop him.

St. George's cynicism didn't in the least abate when Sir Bagdemagus, who had ridden on ahead, called back that he'd spotted the dragon's footprints. Certainly, our hero reflected, anyone who could see a dragon oughtn't to have any trouble seeing its footprints. But as matters turned out, St. George was able to see the footprints too. As a matter of fact, they were as plain as day. Only in his vocabulary there was a different term for them. Namely, "narrow-gauge railroad tracks". They came over a distant rise, just as pretty as you pleased, and disappeared into a distant woods, and they had been painstakingly pounded out of wrought iron.

Shades of Casey Jones! No wonder the anachronism detector had thrown an electronic fit when Bates of Temporal Computations had ac-

identally tuned in southwestern England, circa 530 A.D.—a place-time where/when no anachronisms were supposed to exist!

II

After the discovery of the "footprints", St. George expected the "dragon" itself to be something of an anticlimax. But such did not prove to be the case.

He heard the whistle first. *Tweet-tweet!* It went. *Tweet-tweet-tweet!*

So help him, it did.

Next, he saw the smoke. It was unquestionably wood smoke, it was shot liberally with sparks, and it trailed up into the blue sixth-century sky as though smoke coming out of a locomotive smokestack was as common a phenomenon in the days of King Arthur as it was—would be—in the days of King George V.

Next, he heard the engine. *Chug-a-lug, chug-a-lug*, it went. *Chug-a-lug, chug-a-lug, chug-a-lug!*

Finally he saw the locomotive itself. And he'd be damned if, in conjunction with its wood-car and its two coaches, it *didn't* look like a dragon! Enough like one, in any case, to satisfy a sixth-century knight.

Compared to the hyper-Diesels of St. George's day and age it was of course little more than a child's toy. In both design and principles it was much like the Stourbridge Lion of 1829, which made it about as technically advanced a job as a pastime operator working with existent materials and employing local labor would have been able to come up with. What lent maximum strength



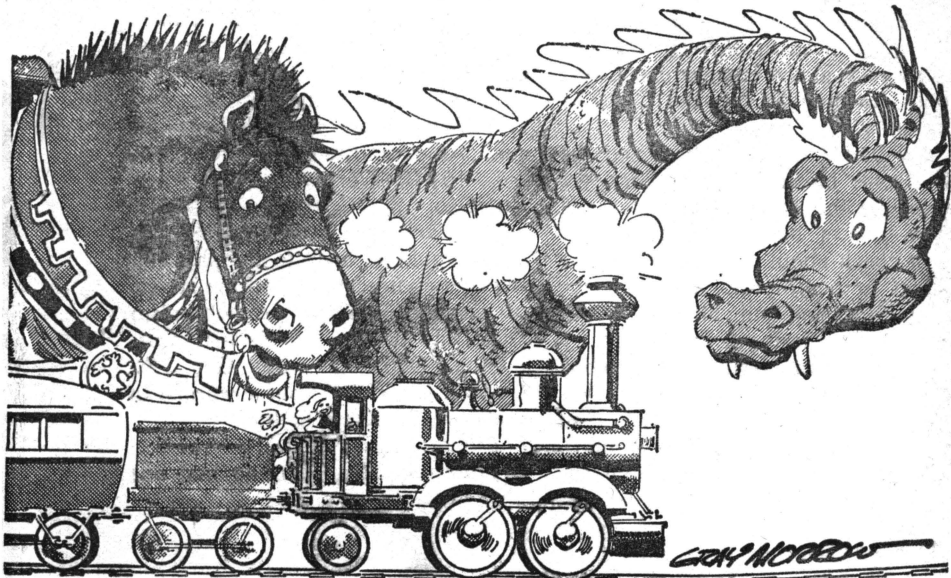
to the dragon illusion were the two outside connecting rods that propelled the driving wheels. They looked for all the world like a pair of ungainly legs, and pumping furiously up and down as they were, they gave the impression that the "dragon" was running—or charging, if you preferred.

In addition to the driving wheels, there were the two wheels they were coupled to. This gave the "dragon" four front "feet". The intermediate and the rear "feet" were provided by the wood-car and the two coaches. The wood-car looked like a stream-lined Roman chariot and the two coaches brought to mind a pair of Toonerville Trolleys.

An outside flue curled up over the face-plate of the boiler connecting the firebox to the base of the five-

foot high smokestack. Even St. George had no trouble identifying it as a "nose". The "eyes" were two big bolts to which two supporting rods were attached. There was no mouth, but it was no trick at all to imagine the face-plate lifting up to engorge intended victims.

The boiler consisted of three wrought-iron sections overlapping each other and crudely welded together. The engine's cab, of course, constituted the forward section of the "belly". In it, just as Sirs Guy and Bagdemagus had said, was a damsel, "the which was still on live". And the coaches, of course, constituted the rear section of the belly. In them sat a number of farmers, shopkeepers, shepherders and smithies, "the which were also still on live."



As for the damsel, not only was she still "on live", she was running the "dragonmotive".

St. George perceived these things catch-as-catch-can, for no sooner did the little train come into sight than he charged it together with his three companions. Jousting with a dragonmotive was anything but his idea of a good time, but he knew that if he didn't pull his own weight, so to speak, he'd lose face in the eyes of Sirs Ulfin, Guy and Bagdemagus, and that would never do. So, spear dressed and visor closed, he bore down on the approaching "monster" as furiously as they did, and when he reached it he veered in sharply and dealt it a glancing blow with his spear. Then he guided his rohorse alongside and began

beating the boiler plating with his sword—not hard enough to do any damage but hard enough to make a lot of noise.

Sirs Guy and Bagdemagus, believing the encounter to be on the level, charged in at right angles and struck the dragonmotive's "flank" with the impetus of two battering rams. But the wrought-iron plating had about as much resilience as a stone wall, and both were catapulted over their horses' croups at the moment of impact. Poor Sir Guy landed with a loud *clank!* and poor Sir Bagdemagus with an even louder *clunk!*

Sir Ulfin du Bois was more fortunate. He, too, pounded in at right angles, but his spear broke when it struck home, enabling him to remain seated. He joined St. George and helped him beat the boiler plating.

While they were thus engaged, St. George glanced up through the slits in his visor at the engineeress. Casey Jones, he thought. No, not Casey — Casianna.

She had dark-brown hair and the wind was blowing it and her eyes were like the sky over Camelot and there was a beauty mark on her right cheek about one inch from the corner of her mouth. The look she gave him back put him on a par with a dog chasing a mail truck.

Whoever was feeding the firebox was beyond his line of vision. Was it her husband? he wondered. And which twenty-first century country did she hail from? Judging from her features, she was a member of one of the Nordic races, but of course she could have had them altered.

The height of the roadbed put the cab beyond his reach, which perhaps was a good thing. Otherwise, in his eagerness to board the train, he might have tried to do it the hard way and have broken his neck. Armor, even the lightweight variety that encased him, wasn't conducive to acrobatics.

What bugged him most was why a pastimer in his or her right mind would want to start up a railroad in ancient England. Granted, the local freemen had apparently conquered their fear of the little train, even if the local aristocracy hadn't; but how much profit could possibly accrue from transporting handfuls of farmers, shopkeepers, sheepherders and smithies, all of whom were probably as poor as churchmice, from point A to point B?

He could understand why a male pastimer would go back to the past and peddle plastic jewel cases to rich-bitches like Nefertite, Cleopatra and Zenobia for fantastic sums of gold (Anachronism Department Case No. 161-B; Correcting Detective: Lt. Geo. St. George; CLOSED), and he could see why a female pastimer would go back to the past and sell oral contraceptives on the streets of ancient Babylon (Anachronism Department Case No. 244-R; Correcting Detective: Lt. Geo. St. George; CLOSED); but a *railroad* in the days of King Arthur?

Preposterous!

Preposterous or not, he had one on his hands.

III

The speed of the little train was some 20 mph—a modest enough velocity and one which a horse, under ordinary circumstances, would have no trouble maintaining. But consider a horse weighed down with armor plating and an armored knight. Such a horse is not going to run 20 mph very long.

St. George's rohorse, of course, was made of sterner stuff, and could have maintained the pace all day long; but Sir Ulfin's steed, while ostensibly no different in makeup, was already losing ground. So St. George encephalopathed Herodotus to keep pace with its less fortunate brother, simultaneously allaying whatever potential suspicions Casianna Jones might be entertaining and paving the way to an opportunity to board the train.

Sir Ulfin raised his visor. "Wit ye well, Sir George," he shouted above the jingling of his chain mail, the clanking of our hero's armor, and the *chug-a-lug-lugging* of the dragonmotive, "this be a parlous fiend the which cannot be fordone unholpen! I will depart me from hence with Sir Guy and Sir Bagdemagus and we will gather many brave and noble knights to partake of this adventure!"

St. George raised his visor. "Haste ye then, Sir Ulfin," he shouted, "and I shall abide thy again-coming!"

They were abreast of the rear coach by this time. St. George dropped his sword belt and threw away his spear and his shield and guided Herodotus in closer. A little wooden ladder led to the roof, and after psyche-programming the rohorse to follow the train at a discreet distance until otherwise "advised", he grasped the middle rungs of the ladder and lifted himself from the saddle. Startled freemen regarded his exploit through the paneless windows, stared as he climbed the rungs to the roof. Once there, he rolled over on his back and sat up. Sir Ulfin and Herodotus were dropping rapidly behind. "Wit ye well," shouted the former, "that anon I returneth to Camelot the noble knights of the Round Table shall wot of this great deed thou hast accomplished, and wit ye well that . . ."

His voice was drowned out by the *chug-a-lug-lugging* of the dragonmotive. St. George waved good-by, and began taking his armor off.

He removed his helmet first and

threw it into a blackberry thicket. Next came his gorget and his hauberk. These he tossed into a little stream that the coach was passing at the moment. Before proceeding further, he scratched his back. He gave a long and luxurious sigh.

He slipped out of his cuisses and his greaves and heaved them into a meadow. Finally he kicked off his sollerets. They clattered off the coach roof, tumbled to the tracks, and disappeared from sight. He lay on his back and breathed deeply of the warm-cool wind. No more iron suits for him!

Having had the foresight to wear the garb of a freeman beneath his armor, he was now one with the passengers of the train. He'd even let his hair grow long, so there was no problem there. He sat up and let it blow in the wind. Only court fools wore their hair short in this day and age.

There was, of course, the problem of shoes. But he'd worn heavy socks beneath his sollerets, and they would do till better footwear came along.

Getting to his feet and adjusting himself to the lurching of the coach, he began making his way forward. It was weird in a way. Here was he, an inhabitant of the twenty-first century, walking the cars of a sixth-century train like a twentieth-century bindlestiff. But no weirder, he supposed, than some of his other pastime experiences. Take the time during the first Memphite dynasty, for example, when he'd visited all the Memphis granaries and collected the myriad mousetraps an unscru-

pulous pastimer had sold to the Pharaoh's grain-master (Anachronism Department Case No. 602-C; Correcting Detective: Lt. Geo. St. George; CLOSED), or the time he'd crept into the premises of No. 1 Inner Temple Lane in the dead of night and confiscated the battery-powered tape-recorder another unscrupulous pastimer had sold to Dr. Samuel Johnson (Anachronism Department Case No. 347-N; Correcting Detective: Lt. Geo. St. George; CLOSED), or the time he'd dismantled the Gatling gun still another unscrupulous pastimer had sold to Datis and Artaphernes, the joint commanders of the Persian Expeditionary Force, just before the Battle of Marathon. When you came right down to it, all anachronisms brought about by pastimers in their constant effort to exploit the past were weird, and invariably when you involved yourself in them in order to correct them they became weirder yet.

There were some schools of thought that said they shouldn't be corrected. Anachronisms — both artificial and natural — such schools maintained, were a part of the normal order of things, and were their presence to influence the present *status quo* (which was highly unlikely), the resultant change was bound to be for the better. But the International Temporal Council was inclined to regard a bird in the hand as being worth two in a bush, and while its members readily admitted that things could be far better, they had the good sense to realize that things could be far worse, and were practical enough to take the neces-

sary steps to keep them the way they were.

He had reached the wood-car by this time, and could see down into the cab. Casianna Jones was still at the throttle and her dark-brown hair was still blowing in the wind. The firebox was open and an old man was carrying wood from the wood pile to the aperture and replenishing the flames. He looked as though he was on his last legs, and his legs looked as though they were on their last mile.

St. George couldn't believe his eyes. Old men didn't go in for pastiming — at least not on an active basis. At best, looting the past was a perilous profession, and nine times out of ten in the twenty-first century when a man passed the seventy mark he was content to retire to the viewing room and live the rest of his life vicariously via 3V. He wouldn't dream of firing a boiler. Indeed, chances were he wouldn't even know what a boiler was.

Well this old man knew. And moreover he was firing one.

St. George thought he had the answer. You didn't build a railroad overnight, even under ideal circumstances. Building one in the sixth century, even a small job such as this one, would take years. Probably the old man had begun the project ten or twelve years ago when he was relatively young. As for Casianna Jones, she was probably his daughter, whom he had brought along for company and eventually turned into an engineer.

St. George debated on whether to

arrest both of them on the spot, escort them to the timeship zone and put in a call via time-wave radio for transportation back to the present. He decided against it. There might be others in on the deal, and besides, he had to put the dragonmotive out of commission before leaving the scene just in case the "natives" might try to run it themselves. For that matter, there might be other dragonmotives in operation, and these would have to be taken care of too.

So he donned his best boy-scout smile and climbed down into the wood-car to help the old man.

The old man stared at him. St. George returned the gaze. The old man had rheumy eyes, a long nose, a straggly goatee and matted gray hair. His cheeks were pink with networks of capillaries and he smelled like the bottom of a mead barrel.

St. George picked up an armful of wood, carried it into the cab and threw it into the firebox. This time, it was Casianna Jones's turn to stare at him. She did so. However, if she recognized him as one of the knights who a few moments ago had been harassing the engine she gave no sign. "Prithee, kind sir," she said, "say me how thou camest aboard the oxenless oxcart and what thy name is."

The language of the lower classes (which she undoubtedly was aping) left much to be desired, but at least it was somewhat less stilted than that of the aristocracy. He replied in kind: "I hight George, the which came on board but a short while ago. What are ye hight, damsel?"

"I hight Rebecca L'Ouvertures."

At this juncture, the old man came into the cab, flavoring the hot and acrid air with the odor of stale mead, and joined the conversation. "I hight Lionel the armor maker," he announced, "the which is uncle to the damsel beside ye." He peered into St. George's eyes. "Are ye not afraid of the oxenless oxcart?"

He was playing his role as flawlessly as his niece was playing hers — if she was his niece. But pastimers were almost always excellent actors. They had to be. St. George, as we have already seen, was no slouch himself. "Yea, I am much afraid of it, old man," said he, "but my good sense tells me that which is made of iron cannot be on live and that therefore there can be naught to be afraid of."

"Are ye of Lianour?"

Our hero shook his head. "I journeyed south from Camelot, whence I was driven by a surly landowner the which desired the wretched strip of land bestowed upon me by his father. I have neither herborow nor the wherewithal with which to obtain it. So destitute am I of worldly goods that I was forced to board the oxenless oxcart secretly and without your leave. By your leave, I will pay you in the only way I am able—by feeding the fire."

"Ye wish lodging?" This time, it was Casianna Jones who spoke.

"By my troth, fair damsel."

"Then ye shall have it," said Lionel the armor-maker, "—an ye ride each day on the oxenless oxcart and feed the fire."

"Yea," said Casianna Jones. "Ye shall live with us and share our meager fare and free mine uncle for tasks more becoming to one of his calling."

Nothing was said about wages, but that was all right. St. George had obtained what he'd set out to obtain—an opportunity to investigate the pastime operation more fully—and had procured a position that would enable him to put the dragonmotive out of commission virtually any time he chose to do so. Besides, in this day and age the term "wages"—at least insofar as it would some day be understood—didn't even exist.

The train was approaching a handful of hovels, shops and pigsties. Uncle Lionel got a sheepskin bag out of a box in the corner of the cab and prepared to step down from the dragonmotive to greet a pair of trembling passengers who were waiting by the roadbed. Casianna Jones blew the whistle. *Tweet! Tweet!* She pulled back on the throttle. *Chug-a-lug*, went the dragonmotive. *Chug-a-lug, chug-a-lug, chug . . . a . . . lug . . . chug . . . a . . . LUG!*

IV

During the remainder of the run Uncle Lionel acquainted St. George with the finer points of firemanship. St. George, whose main ambition as a child had been to become an engineer on a hyper-Diesel, was enchanted. True, this quaint little woodburner was a far cry from a hyper-Diesel; nevertheless, it had

one beat seventy different ways from Sunday, for, like all mass-produced vehicles, hyper-Diesels had about as much character as a tube of toothpaste. The dragonmotive, on the other hand, had character galore. You had to know its whims and its ways and cater to them, and if you didn't, it simply wouldn't co-operate. There were no dials or gauges of any kind, and everything had to be done by guess and by golly, and you never knew from one minute to the next whether (1) the train was going to tip over, (2) the boiler was going to blow up or (3) the wheels were going to leave the track.

Unfortunately, the roadbed had character too. The rails had been laid in six-foot lengths and, far from being true to begin with, were rendered even more erratic by improperly machined tie plates and the uneven contraction and expansion of the individual sections. In addition, many of the crossties had already been settled and needed to be replaced, and none of the curves was adequately banked. Sometimes the little engine swayed, sometimes it bumped up and down, sometimes it jerked. Most of the time it did all three at once.

"Water towers" had been provided at regular intervals for the dragonmotive to slake its thirst. These were natural springs located on abrupt hillsides. Their water was "piped" into trestle-supported sluices that could be "turned on and off" by means of small floodgates. St. George found them almost as enchanting as the dragonmotive.

For the most part, the villages that the little train serviced were like the first one he'd seen — hand-fuls of hovels, shops and pigsties. He learned subsequently that there were nine of them altogether. Their inhabitants, plus the operators of the small vegetable and sheep farms scattered over the countryside, constituted the train's only passengers. He received the definite impression that most of them were riding the coaches for kicks rather than from any need to travel from point A to point B; but at least they were riding them, which was more than you could say for the local leisure class as represented by Sirs Guy and Bagdemagus.

At first thought, it seemed that the opposite should have been the case — that the nobility, rather than the peasantry, would have accepted the dragonmotive for what it was and that the latter would have been the ones to interpret it along superstitious lines. But not on second thought. Like all primitive peasants, the inhabitants of Lianour believed in monsters galore; but they worked from dawn to dusk and had little time for initiating legends and even less for playing games, and as a result their imaginations, for want of exercise, were flabby. Consequently, they saw things pretty much as things really were, whether they wanted to or not.

The nobility, on the other hand, had all the time in the world to initiate legends and to play games. As a matter of fact, that was just about all they did. And since basically they weren't one whit less ig-

norant than the peasantry, they saw only what they wanted to see. Equally essential to their "adventures" was their willingness to believe one another's lines. It had actually become a convention. If Sir So & So said he had seen a dragon, Sir What's His Name would say he had seen one too — and devoutly believe he was telling the truth.

Casianna Jones seemed to sense St. George's thoughts, for she voiced the subject aloud. "Sithen" going into the transportation business, she said, she and her uncle had been harassed almost daily, both by members of the local knighthood and by wandering knights searching for the Sangreal. Fortunately, none of either species had ever tried to break one of the engine's "legs" — an act that, were it ever carried out successfully, would result in the engine's derailment and in all probability agitate the fire in the firebox to such an extent that the boiler would blow up. And fortunately none of them had ever thought to direct his attack against the coaches, which, along with the "legs", constituted the train's most vulnerable areas. Should the former eventuality come to pass, it would spell the end of the little railroad, because none of the employees was capable of making the necessary repairs without supervision, and the mead Uncle Lionel was forced to drink daily to maintain his health had had an adverse effect on his mechanical prowess, reducing him to jelly when it came to effecting even a minor repair job. (All of which put him

pretty much on a par with St. George who, sad to relate, was a hopeless dud when it came to accomplishing anything more mechanically complicated than screwing a nut on a bolt.)

Casianna took an even dimmer view of knight-errants than our hero did. "La! such children," she said. "Were it not for men like mine uncle Lionel they would not even have armor to wear. Were it not for men like my cousin Alfred of Gloomis they would not even have weapons to carry. And were it not for men like my cousin Charles, the which doth raise sheep in this valley, they would not even have garments to put upon their backs or meat to put into their mouths. They can do nothing for themselves—it must be done for them. And now they would joust with the oxenless oxcart, the which mine uncle Lionel and my grandfather, who became weary a twelve-month ago and died, spent many years a-building!"

St. George looked at her. She returned his gaze without batting an eye. When it came to playing a past-part, Casianna Jones didn't have to take a back seat for anybody.

He looked at Uncle Lionel. The old man was doing all right too, only he was only partly playing a part. He'd got a jug of mead from somewhere and was leaning against the wall, chug-a-lugging at regular intervals. The railroad, by twenty-first century standards, wasn't very much to write home about, but just the same it was difficult to understand how a twenty-first century lush had managed to build it.

"Mead makes mine Uncle Lionel come on live," Casianna Jones said, seemingly sensing St. George's puzzlement but ascribing it to the wrong cause. "Were it not for the great draughts he takes upon arising and upon retiring and the little draughts he takes in between, he would not have the strength wherewith to carry out his tasks."

St. George had to admit that it was a pretty good sixth-century explanation. But naturally it threw no light on the real cause of his puzzlement. Maybe Uncle Lionel had only recently become a lush. It was unusual, granted, but not unheard of; and certainly it was no worse than becoming a 3V addict and cementing one's backside to a view-chair for the duration of one's twilight years.

V

The little train had entered a large woods, and presently Casianna Jones brought it to a halt on the outskirts of a village considerably larger than any of the others St. George had seen. Most of the passengers had got off by this time; now the rest of them did, and this, together with the fact that no more got on and the day was very nearly done, tipped him off that the train was nearing the end of the line.

Casianna threw the throttle forward, and the dragonmotive *chug-a-lugged* through the rest of the woods, emerged on a medium-sized plain, and headed for a hill the size of a small mountain.

The rails stretched straight toward

a wide opening at the hill's base, but before they reached it they joined—or were joined by—another set of rails that angled off obliquely to the north. It was, St. George realized, the same set of rails the train was traveling on now: the railroad simply circled the valley and returned to where it had started, and that was its entire extent—unless the tunnel toward which the train was now heading passed all the way through the hill.

It did not, although at first it gave every indication of doing so. Originally, it had been a horizontal mine shaft—St. George saw that right away. Then, probably over a period of years, it had been extensively enlarged and skillfully and firmly shored with oak timbers. Undoubtedly it provided access to the very veins that had supplied the ore from which both the dragonmotive and the rails had been made.

When daylight gave out, torches in wall brackets took over. The tunnel maintained a uniform width and height for about a hundred yards; then it doubled in width, providing room for a small siding. At this point, Casianna brought the train to a halt and Uncle Lionel, who had already doubled as conductor, now doubled as brakeman; got out, and threw a switch. When she pulled onto the siding, he uncoupled the coaches and threw a second switch, allowing the engine to go on, leaving the coaches behind. He followed on foot.

A few moments later, the dragonmotive entered a huge natural cavern. The rails came to an end in

the middle of the floor, and St. George, climbing down from the cab, saw that they were mounted on a large swivel so that the engine and the wood-car could be turned around and faced in the opposite direction. The coaches could then be recoupled from behind and the train could leave the tunnel on the next day's run and circle the valley in the opposite direction.

Very clever, St. George thought. Very clever. But why should a pair of pastimers go to so much trouble just so they could lug a bunch of farmers, shopkeepers, shepherders and smithies around a sixth-century countryside?

At its highest point, the cavern ceiling was about fifty feet above the floor. There was a good-sized opening in it that extended all the way to the surface of the hillside, after the manner of a flue. It looked as though it had been dug out by hand, and directly below it was a large forge, at which a number of men were at work shaping rails. Discounting a handful of faded daylight filtering down through the flue, the only illumination came from torches burning in wall brackets, and what with their smoke and the fumes from the forge, the place had the aspect of a foundry during teeming-time.

On the other side of the tracks was a machine shop. Here, working at foot-pedal powered Rube Goldberg-like contraptions that in some cases resembled lathes, in others planers, and in others grinders, were still other men. Many of them were

old, quite a number of them were middle-aged, and a few of them were young. St. George concluded that both they and the forgermen hailed from the village in the woods and that the railroad provided their sole source of employment and that in the case of the older men they had participated in its construction.

After climbing down from the cab, Casianna Jones went over to where a large iron bell hung on a tripod, and struck it three times with a small sledge hammer. Immediately, the employees began making preparations to quit for the day. Laying aside the hammer, she beckoned to St. George, and when he joined her, led him through a small archway into a chamber that, partially at least, had been hollowed out of solid rock. It gave into three smaller chambers, contained a hearth, a crude wooden table, two crude wooden benches, and a crude wooden cupboard. She indicated one of the benches, and he sat down; then she went to the cupboard, got utensils and earthenware, and set three places at the table. She began to prepare supper.

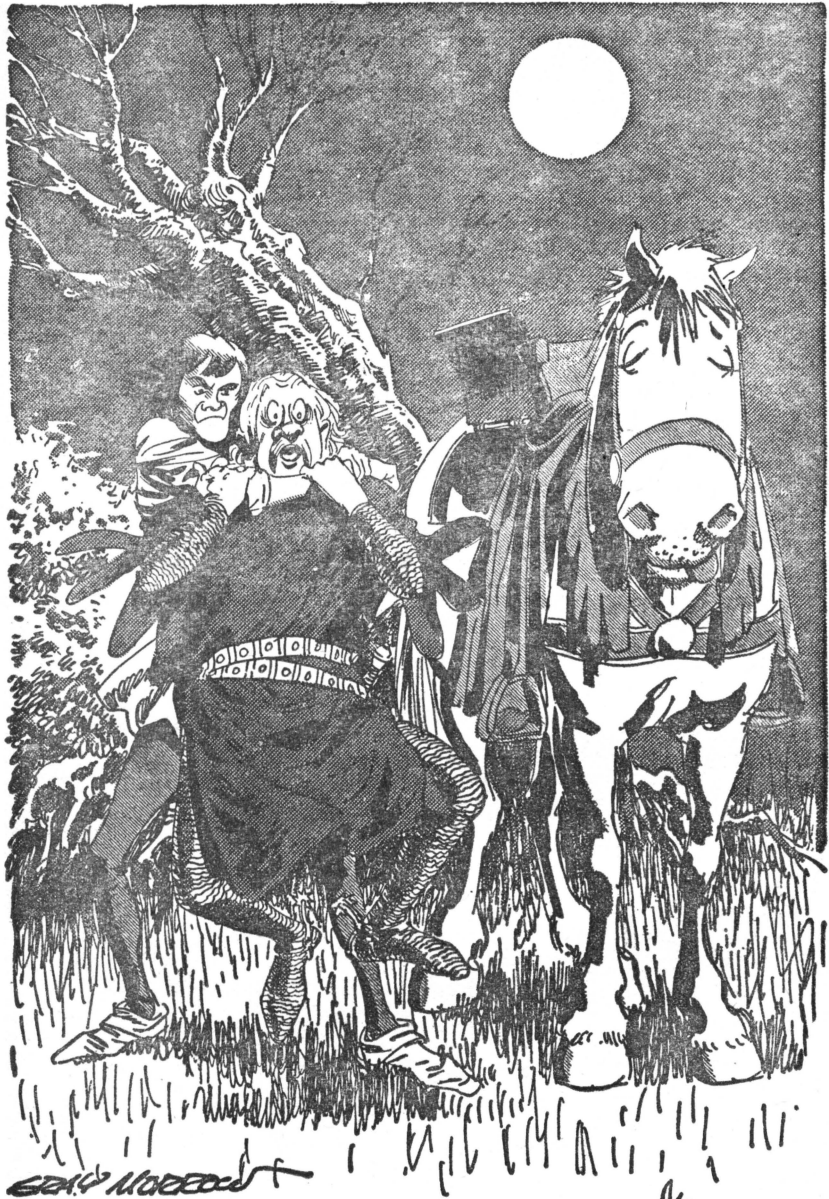
Supper turned out to be meat, mead and black bread. Like most pastimers, Casianna and Uncle Lionel ate, as well as lived and acted, the way the "Romans" did. St. George thought wistfully of the goodies in Herodotus' croup-compartment. Uncle Lionel came in when the meal was half over. He was drunker than a hoot owl, but not so drunk he couldn't help count the contents of the sheepskin bag when Casianna carried it to the

table afterward. The contents turned out to be leircs—a forerunner of the *styca* that up till now St. George hadn't known existed. There was a big pile of them, and the girl and the old man had to count them four times apiece before they were able to arrive at a common total.

St. George stared at the coins. They were made of iron, no two of them were identical, and the outline of a lion that had been etched upon each of them bore even less resemblance to the king of beasts than the woolly mammoths Cro-Magnon man used to paint on cave walls bore to the woolly mammoth. Nevertheless, on the twenty-first century numismatics market they would bring millions of dollars.

No wonder Uncle Lionel and his niece had gone into the railroad business! What better way could you collect small coins than by hauling passengers for brief distances? True, diminutive as it was, the railroad still represented a vast undertaking; but how much of the actual work had the two pastimers done? None of it, St. George would bet. And he would also bet that they'd be doing none of the operational work now if their employees weren't afraid to go near the dragonmotive when it was "on live".

But they did more than merely operate the train, he discovered presently. Either the employees were as afraid to work at night as they were to fire and run the dragonmotive or Casianna and/or Uncle Lionel didn't believe in paying overtime. In any event, supper didn't



ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGONMOTIVE

usher in the period of leisure St. George had been looking forward to. It ushered in more work instead. In Casianna's case, this consisted of cleaning the coaches; and in Uncle Lionel's case, checking the dragonmotive for loose fixtures and oiling its movable parts; and in St. George's (after Casianna supplied him with a pair of Uncle Lionel's shoes), splitting wood, three dozen cord of which were piled in one corner of the cavern for the next day's run. He'd had jobs he liked far better, and he was glad when she came around some three hours later and told him it was time to go to bed.

After she spread a pallet for him in one of the small chambers and said good night and left, he lay down and waited till he was sure both she and her uncle were asleep; then he got up, tiptoed out of the living quarters, entered the tunnel, and made his way toward the entrance. He was surprised, after passing the siding, to find his way barred by a portcullis, although acquainted as he was with the dragon-hunting obsession of the knighthood, he shouldn't have been.

The portcullis was connected to a primitive winch, and it was the work of but a moment to raise the ponderous affair the few feet necessary to permit to crawl in under it. Stepping into the starlight a few minutes later, he encephalopathed Herodotus to join him, and when he saw the rohorse trotting toward him across the plain he went to meet it, mounted it, and redirected its footsteps toward the woods. After finding a suitable hiding place for it

in an isolated glen, he psyche-programmed it to remain there till otherwise directed; then he dismounted and started back to the tunnel on foot. Just as he was leaving the glen he heard a crackling sound in the underbrush off to his right, and paused. He peered into the darkness, caught a brief glimpse of something gleaming in the starlight. But the phenomenon was not repeated, and strain his eyes as he would he could not see anything. Finally he concluded that his eyes had played a trick on him and that some small animal had been responsible for the crackling sound, and continued on his way.

When he reached the tunnel, he crawled beneath the portcullis, lowered it, made his way back to the living quarters and lay back down on his pallet.

It would be no trick at all for him to handle a young girl and an old lush. If he wanted to he could take both Casianna and Uncle Lionel into custody right now and, after putting the dragonmotive out of commission by blowing up its boiler, escort them to the timeshipstop, and notify IP Headquarters via time-wave radio that he was ready to be picked up. He was reasonably certain that no one else was in on the deal. If there were he could always come back for them later. Why, then, didn't he get on the ball and wrap up the case without further ado?

It was a good question, and one that he had trouble answering. Finally, though, the answer came: He wanted to ride in the little engine

again—to fire its boiler, to blow its whistle, if Casianna would let him and—also if Casianna would let him—sit behind the throttle and be the engineer. *Tweet-tweet!* the whistle went in his mind. *Chug-a-lug*, went the dragonmotive. *Chug-a-lug, chug-a-lug, chug-a-lug-lug-lug . . .*

VI

MORNING was at “six of the clock”. Breakfast was black bread and mead—for Casianna and St. George, that is. For Uncle Lionel, it was just mead. The latter was left behind in charge of the shop, where the workday began at seven, and the little train left the tunnel at seven-thirty.

The first stop was the village in the woods. Two passengers got on, and St. George, who was now conductor and brakeman as well as fireman, got the sheepskin bag and collected the fares. When the train was under motion again, he asked Casianna if he could run the engine, and she said he could.

First she showed him how. To go ahead, you shoved the throttle forward; to slow down, you pulled it back; to stop, you pulled it all the way back and applied the brakes; and to back up, you threw a lever that reversed the position of the two driving-wheel rods. All the rest was a matter of judgment.

She let him be the engineer for a whole hour, sitting beside him on the little bench that constituted the “driver’s seat”. He’d never had so much fun in his life. It wasn’t working the throttle so much that in-

trigued him—it was sitting by the window and watching the idyllic countryside drift by and seeing the dragonmotive’s legs pump up and down. The little engine took a liking to him right away and responded to his every wish. Sometimes it varied its constant “conversation”. When it was going up a hill, it said *Chug-a-LUG, chug-a-LUG, Chug-a-LUG*. When it was going down one, it said, *CHUG-a-lug, CHUG-a-lug, CHUG-a-lug*. And when it was going around a curve, it said *Chug-chug-chug-chug-CHUG!*

Casianna Jones had packed a lunch. They ate while the dragonmotive was taking on water midway in the run. Black bread, meat and mead, of course. Sitting beside her on the cab steps with the water gurgling down the sluiceway above their heads and a wind from the south blowing her hair and crinkling the gay blue dress she had donned that morning, he couldn’t help wishing that the railroad was on the up and up and that he could remain in the sixth century and go on being her fireman and part-time engineer forever.

So persistent was the wish that it remained with him after the run was resumed, and he had to remind himself several times over that he was almost thirty and that thirty-year old men had no business trying to fulfill childhood ambitions even under ideal circumstances, and that for him to try to fulfill his under the present circumstances would constitute a flagrant dereliction of duty.

To make up for his apostasy, he

asked Casianna to tell him how the little train had come into being, hoping to catch her in a slip of the tongue or a contradiction or two. He expected her to be reluctant to discuss the dragonmotive's history, but apparently she'd fabricated it beforehand. In any case, she plunged into it without further encouragement.

According to her, the railroad was the result of two discoveries — one made by her grandfather and one by her Uncle Lionel — and a number of ingenious devices invented by her father. Her grandfather had been a miner, and while still a young man had found out that the ox carts he used to transport ore could be operated much more easily if planks were laid down for the wheels to roll on. Also a part-time armor-maker, he discovered that the carts functioned even more efficiently when the rims of the wheels and the surfaces of the planks were covered with strips of iron and more efficiently still when the plank-strips were raised and the wheel-strips were flanged. Coincidentally, Uncle Lionel, who was really Casianna's great uncle and who lived with his brother and his brother's family in a natural cavern just off the main mine shaft, discovered while brewing a batch of mead that steam imprisoned in a sealed kettle would, if properly directed and provided with the right apparatus, perform any number of laborious and irksome tasks. He began experimenting with larger and larger kettles and eventually came up with a boiler capable of generating sufficient power to

turn a large wheel that, when provided with the right attachments, could swing a sledge hammer with twice the efficiency and thrice the power of "the strongest wrought-iron maker on live".

From that moment on, Uncle Lionel's chores were ten times less onerous and consumed only a fraction of their former time. He utilized his new leisure to brew bigger and better batches of mead and to build bigger and better boilers. It was at this juncture that the notion occurred either to him or to Casianna's grandfather (both had claimed the distinction) that the boiler might be installed on the ore cart in such a way as to turn the wheels. Years passed before a workable drive was devised, but finally the forerunner of the dragonmotive was born.

In the meantime, Casianna's father had been born, and it was he, in close association with the steam-powered ore cart almost from infancy, who had conceived the idea of building a much more powerful locomotive and a system of rails over which it could pull passenger-carrying coaches. He had invented and built the necessary machines and hired the necessary labor and, after obtaining the necessary land-rights from the freemen of Lianour, supervised the laying of the roadbed and the rails. Thirty years had already passed since Uncle Lionel and his brother had crossed discoveries; thirty more passed before Casianna's father got all of the bugs out of his project, during which time Casianna was born and during which time her

mother, unhealthy to begin with, "died of a vapor". Three months ago, while widening the tunnel her father had been killed by a falling timber; but by that time the railroad had become a reality, and it had remained but for her and her Uncle Lionel to put the finishing touches on the engine and the coaches, and commence operations.

For a long while after she finished speaking, St. George didn't say anything. He couldn't. Why, she must take him for a simpleton to imagine he'd believe that a trio of sixth-century freemen could have accomplished in sixty years that which would someday require centuries!

He reminded himself that that was undoubtedly what she did take him for — a sixth-century simpleton with a strong back and a weak mind. But it was a compliment to his prowess as an actor and provided some salve at least for the wound it had inflicted upon his ego. So he let on that he'd swallowed the whole story, and said simply, "It's time for me to feed the fire, fair damsel," and set about doing so.

He was closing the firebox door some five minutes later, after adding several armloads of wood to the flames, when she cried, "There be many knights acoming, fair sir. Look!"

He joined her at the window. Sure enough, at least a dozen would-be dragon-slayers were approaching on horseback across the fields. Every last one of them wore chain mail, and Sir Ulfin du Bois was in the

lead. Sir Guy and Sir Bagdemagus were present too. St. George recognized them by their horses.

"Whooo-eeee!" shouted Sir Guy. "Yeahhhhhhhh!" hollered Sir Bagdemagus. "We have come to rescue ye from the foul fiend the which hath devoured ye!" called Sir Ulfin.

Down went their visors. Down went the visors of the rest of the knights. Spears were dressed and spurs applied; the charge began.

"Oh, go on home and tend to your castles!" St. George said. But he didn't bother to shout, because he knew it wouldn't have done any good.

Why, he wondered suddenly, didn't the damn fools wait till the train stopped at the next village and then attack? Surely they must realize that a "dragon" at rest was far more vulnerable than a "dragon" in motion. Was it because they knew instinctively that once the train stopped, the dragon-illusion would fall prey to reality?

After all, when you came right down to it, all they were doing was playing games, and in their hearts they must be aware of the fact.

Sirs Guy and Bagdemagus reached the dragonmotive first, outdistancing Sir Ulfin, and gave a repeat performance of their over-the-croup act of the day before. Sir Ulfin broke another spear, again managing to remain seated, and withdrew his sword and once more began beating the boiler plating. The rest of the attackers fared the same as Sirs Guy and Bagdemagus had, and their chain mail jingled so loudly

when they hit the ground it all but drowned out the *chug-a-lugging* of the engine.

Clang! went Sir Ulfin's sword against the boiler plating, as St. George and Casianna Jones looked down at him in disgust. *Clang! Clang! Clang!* Then something unexpected happened: the right sleeve of Sir Ulfin's ulster became entangled with the connecting rod, his sword went flying, and he was yanked halfway out of his saddle. All that saved him from having his arm torn off was the defectiveness of the chain mail at the juncture of sleeve and shoulder. The sleeve came free and he managed to get his arm out of it just in time. He reined his steed then, and in a few moments the dragonmotive left him far behind, a sadder — and, it was to be hoped — a wiser man.

At the next stop, St. George disentangled the sleeve and tossed it into the cab. Maybe Uncle Lionel could find some use for it.

Come to think of it, though, Uncle Lionel wasn't going to be around long enough to find any use for it. Tonight, he and one Casianna Jones, or Rebecca L'Ouvertures, or whatever you cared to call her, were going to be taken into custody by one Lt. Geo. St. George of the Pastpolice, and escorted back to the present to answer a charge of "wilfully interfering with things-past". And the dragonmotive they had built to mulct leircs out of past persons was going to develop a violent case of heartburn and be blown to smithereens.

St. George was sad throughout the

remainder of the run. He hated to do what he had to do, but he simply couldn't put it off any longer. The dragonmotive seemed to sense his sadness. *Chug-a-lug*, it said. *Chug-chug-a-lug. Chug . . . chug . . . chug . . .*

VII

Uncle Lionel was drunker than two hoot owls when they arrived in the cavern. He was passing a jug of mead around to the employees and telling them in effect that if they worked hard and kept their noses clean, they, too, might someday become a railroad tycoon like himself. Casianna Jones put an end to the proceedings in a hurry. Confiscating the jug, she dismissed the men for the day; then, with St. George's help, she poured Uncle Lionel into bed. She looked tired, St. George noticed. Well, it wasn't any wonder. Running a railroad, virtually all by one's self was hard enough without having to play nursemaid to a drunk.

She was so tired, in fact, that she announced after supper that she was going to skip cleaning the coaches and go right to bed. St. George, though, would have to split enough wood for tomorrow's run; also, if he got the chance, she wished he'd check the oxenless oxcart before turning in.

He smiled ruefully after she said good night and entered her bed chamber. In a way, he felt sorry for her. But, being human, he felt far sorrier for himself as he got out the ax and set up the first block of

wood. He wished he'd never come back to the sixth century—had never seen the dragonmotive, or Casianna Jones either, for that matter. A man could want to do something all his life and not be able to do it and still not mind very much so long as he never accidentally got to do it. But once he did it once, everything changed. Then he wanted to go on doing it forever. It seemed to him that Fate, which was always cruel anyway, had been uncommonly cruel. Not only could he not do the thing he loved—he must kill the thing he loved.

When he had enough wood split, he loaded it into the woodcar. Then he threw an armful into the embers that remained in the firebox from the day's run. Little flames appeared; he fanned them till they grew to adulthood. He added more wood. The boiler still had water in it from the last "water tower". He added more from the hillside spring that the two pastimers had piped down into the cavern for hygienic and industrial purposes. Returning to the cab, he resumed building the fire. He hoped Casianna was a sound sleeper, as it would be much easier to take care of the dragonmotive first and then make his arrests. He wasn't worried about Uncle Lionel: nothing short of an earthquake could arouse him from his sodden slumber.

The swivel had already been given a half-turn, and after St. George had built up sufficient pressure all he had to do was throw the two siding switches and drive the dragonmotive out of the tunnel. Midway

between the tunnel's mouth and the woods, he brought the engine to a halt and began adding more wood to the fire.

And more and more and more and more.

All the stars were out, and Liannour slept peacefully beneath them. The plain glimmered palely in the long-gone night. The flames in the firebox grew.

St. George felt awful.

It wouldn't have been so bad if the dragonmotive hadn't taken a liking to him right from the start and responded like a worshipful puppy to his every command. It wouldn't have been so bad either if it had looked like the Lancashire Witch or even The John Bull, instead of that most enchanting of all collector's items, the Stourbridge Lion. Nor would it have been so bad if the little engine had been a deadringer for the Stourbridge Lion and lacked, as a consequence, a uniqueness of its own. But the way matters stood, destroying it was like destroying the last-remaining Model T or the last-remaining Stanley Steamer. It was a crime against civilization.

St. George sighed, threw a final armful of wood into the firebox. "I hate to do this to you, doll," he said, "but there isn't any other way."

The dragonmotive rumbled deep in its "belly", and St. George prepared to depart. He reached for the firebox door, intending to close it—realized just in time that the handle, owing to the greater than usual intensity of the fire, would be

hot. He looked around for something to wrap around it, and his eyes alighted on the chain-mail sleeve he'd tossed into the cab that afternoon. He picked it up, noticing for the first time how light it was. Why, it was downright flimsy! No wonder it had pulled free.

He was about to wrap it around the handle when an inscription caught his eye. It had been engraved—or stamped—on one of the links midway between the cuff and the ragged edge where the sleeve had parted from the rest of the ulster, and it consisted of three words. English words. He stared at them in the glow of the fire.

Made in Japan

they said.

The sleeve slipped from his fingers, jingled to the floor. He stood there, stunned.

He remembered the suits of chain mail the attacking knights had been wearing that afternoon.

He remembered Sir Guy and Sir Bagdemagus saying how much they admired Sir Ulfin du Bois' chain-mail ensemble and that he'd promised to procure similar suits for them from the very armor-maker who'd created his own, and for a most modest sum.

Wholesale?

He remembered the crackling sound he'd heard in the underbrush the night before when he was leaving the glen where he'd hidden Herodotus. He remembered the gleam he'd glimpsed in the darkness—

Starlight reflecting on chain mail? Sir Ulfin's?

For damn sure he had a batch of suits cached somewhere.

But if Sir Ulfin du Bois was a pastiming suit-salesman from the twenty-first century, then *he* was responsible for the anachronism the detector had picked up. And since the detector had registered only *one* anachronism, the dragonmotive wasn't a true anachronism, after all.

That being so, there was no need to eliminate it. In point of fact, eliminating it might adversely affect the very *status quo* St. George had come back in time to preserve.

Frantically, he closed the flue and began to bank the fire. He still couldn't bring himself to believe that a trio of sixth-century freemen could have started from scratch and built a railroad in a time-span of sixty years, and even if he could have believed it, it still wouldn't have made sense, because if *he* hadn't removed the dragonmotive from the time stream, who had? However, he was more than willing to give the little engine the benefit of a doubt, and if he could catch Sir Ulfin du Bois with the goods, he would consider the case closed.

After he finished banking the fire, he left the cab and started across the plain toward the woods. Maybe there was a cache and maybe there wasn't. If there was, he'd find it—either tonight or tomorrow—and when Sir Ulfin revisited it, he'd be there waiting for him.

But assuming there was a cache and assuming that Sir Ulfin really was the culprit and hadn't been

taken in by a pastimer himself in another part of "Logris" (where the anachronism would have shown up), how was it possible to accept the railroad as a bona fide anachronism?

It simply *wasn't* possible.

Wasn't it?

Granted, Uncle Lionel was a lush now, but that didn't mean he'd always been one. He could have been a genius in his day, and so could Casianna's father and grandfather have been. And then, too, there was the consideration that two separate discoveries had been made *coincidentally*. Maybe that was the key. Separately, the discoveries might not have amounted to much; but combined, they could have amounted to a great deal. Each could have provided impetus for the other, and accelerated the development of the dragonmotive.

Suppose Edison had had a brother whose inventive genius equalled his own? And suppose that the two men had made breakthroughs in two-

different fields simultaneously? Why, there was no telling what they might have come up with! Maybe it hadn't even been invented *yet*.

Two heads were better than one, just as the truism maintained; but the truism didn't go far enough. Two *good* heads were infinitely better than one. And in the present instance, there had been three . . .

Given the right conditions, the right minds, the right timing—*anything* was possible. Even a sixth-century railroad.

Nevertheless, St. George still didn't believe it. He was surprised, therefore, when—shortly after entering the woods—he saw a light shining in the darkness some several hundred yards to his left. In the direction of the glen. He began picking his way among the trees, and at length he came to a small clearing.

He paused at the edge of it. Starred. A knight in shining armor was shining a pocket torch into a hollow tree. Beside the knight stood a horse. No, not a horse—a rohorse. A product, St. George realized now, of

Coming Next Month in IF

Lead-off story in the January IF will be one of your favorites and ours, Poul Anderson. It's a long one, but complete in the issue: *The Moonrakers*. We saw Poul and his lovely wife, Karen, a few weeks ago in London, at what seemed to be the midpoint of an earnest attempt to visit most of the countries of Europe; they had been wandering through Scandinavia and the northern countries in general for about two months, and were about to explore the British Isles. So it may be a while before he gets back to writing again—and meanwhile, we're pleased to have this one for you!

Same issue: More of Robert Heinlein's fascinating *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* . . . another complete long one by Robert Moore Williams, *The Smallness Beyond Thought* . . . and more!

the same factory that had manufactured Herodotus. Its croup-lid was raised, and the knight was engaged in transferring objects from the hollow tree to the compartment—objects that gleamed in the starlight and gave forth jingling sounds.

St. George was indignant. The nerve of the man! Masquerading as a knight of the Round Table and pretending to joust with a “dragon” for the benefit of his customers and carrying on his activities within the time-space sphere of a true anachronism so that their emanations would be ascribed to the wrong cause! He’d spotted St. George right off the bat, for the simple reason that he’d been expecting him, and he’d been so cocksure of himself that he hadn’t even bothered to move his cache even though it was right under St. George’s nose! And if he hadn’t lost his sleeve—the tell-tale inscription on which he was undoubtedly unaware of—he’d have got away with his subterfuge and have gone back to the present with enough leircs to have made him a rich man.

He’d been so contemptuous of St. George’s intelligence that even St. George’s near discovery of him the night before hadn’t fazed him, and he was so contemptuous of it tonight that even the distant *chug-a-lugging* of the dragonmotive failed to signal danger in his mind. St. George crept up behind him, applied a reverse choke-hold and found a jiu-jitsu pressure-point. “What’s your real name, Sir Ulfín?” he asked.

“Sir Ulfín” gave a start. Then he sighed. “Ulfie Woods,” he said.

“Come on,” said our hero. “We’re going for a ride.”

VIII

It is a matter of record that shortly after Lt. George St. George turned Ulfie Woods over to the present-side authorities he resigned from the Pastpolice Force and that not long afterward he disappeared, never to be seen again. It is also a matter of record that the Anachronism Department wrote off his allusions in his report to a sixth-century railroad as sheer nonsense and didn’t bother to investigate the matter. Hence, we will have to turn to a hitherto unpublished chapter of Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* for the conclusion—and the verification—of our story. For some reason this chapter got left out of the Caxton and subsequent editions of the work, and only recently came to light. It follows verbatim:

*A*tte last syr Ector de Maris & syr Bors cam to the cuntreie of Lianoure, & ther they sawe a dragonne the which had devoured a fayr damsel & a noble knyghte & som lackeyes the which were styl on lyve. Wyt thou wel, sayd syr Ector, that as I bee a tru knyghte of Kynge Arthur I wyl slaye me thys fyend & succore thys fayr damsel afore I torne ageyn unto myn own cuntreie. Wyt thou wel, sithen I bee in thy companie, the wyl not bee unholpen, sayd syr Bors, & the two knyghtes sette upon the dragonne & smote it soe fiercelye that they dyd brake theyr speares, whereupon

syr Ector smote the fyend on the legge with hys sword ageyn & ageyn & atte last the legge brake in twayne. Then sawe syr Ector & syr Bors a mervaylous horse cumming out of a woodes & they sawe the knyghte climbe downe from the fyend's bellye & sytte astryde the mervaylous stede, then reched he uppe for the damsel the which fel into his armes in a swoun. Rydeth he than by the syde of the fyend & rechest he out & severest it in twayne & the parte of the fyend the which breathest smoke screemed & fel mortalye wounded on its side, fyre & vapoure cumming out of its mouth. Wyt ye wel, cryed the brave knyghte to syr Ector & syr Bors, ye hav brought to an ende that which dyd gyve me great loye for mene yeares & I wold hav revynge, & soe fiercely dyd he dress himselfe & sette upon them they were ryght grievously escaped.

Wayt, sayd syr Bors. Thou bee a brave & noble knyghte indeede the which wold just unarmed ageynst two suche valyant knyghtes as syr Ector & myselfe. Kynge Arthur hath need of suche as ye & ye must accompanye us to Camelot. Wyt thou wel, the kynge shal here of thy great deed, sayd syr Ector, & wyt thou wel thou wyl sytte atte hys ryghte hande. Therwith the knyghte thinketh on while, than he sayd, O wel, what hav I gotte to lose? But fyrst we must goo for myn uncle Lionel, the which abideth in the dragonne's denne. & soe departed they from hence and succored Lionel, the which was olde by an hundred yeares and much enchafed, than journeyed they to Camelot wher the damsel, the which was hyght Rebecca, and the knyghte, the which was hyght syr George, lyvved happilye to the ende of theyr dayes. **END**

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THE GIRLS ON USSF 193

by STEPHEN GOLDIN

It seemed like a reasonable idea—some dainties for the comfort of the astronauts—

Sen. McDermott: Now, Mr. Hawkins, I want you to realize that this private hearing is not a trial, nor are you charged with any crime.

Mr. Hawkins: Is that why you recommended I bring my lawyer?

Sen. McDermott: I only made that recommendation because some topics or questions concerning legal matters may be brought to the attention of the committee. The purpose of this hearing is merely to investigate reports of rather unorthodox behavior . . .

Mr. Hawkins: Hal

Sen. McDermott: . . . with regard to orbital satellites USSF numbers one eighty-seven and one ninety-three. I would appreciate your frankness on the matter.

Mr. Hawkins: Let me assure you, Senator, that I have no intentions of being secretive, nor have I ever had any. However, as Director of the National Space Agency, I felt it best that certain information about

those two space stations be put on a security list for the best of all concerned.

Sen. McDermott: Spoken like a politician — you missed your calling, Mr. Hawkins. But tell me, this whole mess was your idea from the very start, wasn't it?

Mr. Hawkins: Yes, it was.

Sen. McDermott: And when did the idea first come to you?

Mr. Hawkins: About a year ago. I was doing some research . . .

—Excerpt from official record
(unpublished)

Senate Special Investigatory Hearing
October 10, 1996

The kind of research Jess Hawkins was indulging in when the idea came to him may only be speculated upon. However, it is a fact that his friend, Bill Filmore, visited him in his office on September 15, 1995.

"Jess," he said, "I've known you

for thirty-seven years, and when you go around grinning like a Cheshire cat, you're hiding something. That pixie smile of yours is a dead giveaway. As your best friend and a member of the Space Agency Board, I think I have a right to know what's up your sleeve."

Hawkins looked at his friend. "All right, Bill, I guess I can trust you, but please keep all this in the strictest confidence. I believe I've found a way to stimulate our astronauts' heart muscles while they're up in USSF 187 for prolonged periods."

"Why should you want to keep that a secret?"

"Let me continue. We know that during sustained periods of freefall the heart tends to relax because it doesn't have to work as hard to pump the blood under weightless conditions. Upon return to Earth, however, the heart muscles have difficulty readjusting to normal standards. We've already had three astronauts who suffered heart attacks when they came back, and one of them was damn near fatal. The calisthenics program the doctors instituted seems to have had little effect. I think the time has come for drastic measures."

"Just what is it that you propose?"

"Think a minute. What is it that stimulates the heart, both literally and figuratively, is desirable enough for the men to use frequently, and is useful, besides, for improving morale aboard the satellite?"

"I never was much good at riddles, Jess."

"It can all be summed up in a

common, everyday, three-letter word," Hawkins grinned. "Sex."

Filmore stared a moment in silence, then said, "By God, Jess, I think you're really serious."

The smile temporarily vanished from Hawkins' face. "You're damn right I am, Bill. We've been lucky so far, but there's going to be a dead astronaut around soon if something isn't done. I've given the matter a lot of thought, and I feel that shipping girls up to one eighty-seven is the best solution."

"But from an economic standpoint alone—"

"That's why I'm hiring only European girls—they're both cheaper and of better quality. I've already sent my aide, Wilbur Starling, over there to recruit some of their better English-speaking professionals. And what with air and water regeneration, cheap food concentrates, and the new atomic fuels, the cost of putting them up there and maintaining them is down to a ridiculous minimum."

"But it's still a tidy sum. Where are you getting all the money?"

"Oh, I appropriated it from the Astronauts' Widows and Dependents Fund," said Hawkins, the smile returning to his face. "That seemed the most likely place. I've also taken precautions, in case you were wondering, about keeping this affair a secret. As Director, I have the power to classify anything I want. Not even the President will know about it."

"What about General Bullfat? He's hated your guts ever since you were appointed over him to head the Agency."

"Bill, you worry too much. Bull-fat has to look in the mirror every morning just to find his nose."

"Practical objections aside, Jess," Filmore said desperately, "the whole idea is immoral. It's just not the sort of thing a government executive should do."

"That is absolutely irrelevant. Morals don't matter where there are men's lives at stake."

Filmore stood up. "Jess, if I can't talk you out of this ridiculous idea, I'll go find someone who can."

"You wouldn't fink on a friend, would you?" Hawkins asked, hurt.

"It's for your own good, Jess." He started for the door.

"It's such a shame about you and Sylvia," Hawkins said quietly.

Filmore stopped. "What about me and Sylvia?"

"Busting up such a nice marriage after thirteen years together."

"Sylvia and I are very happily married. We have no intentions of breaking up."

"You mean you haven't told her about Gloria yet?"

Filmore went slightly pale. "You know Gloria was only a momentary fling, Jess! You wouldn't dare —"

"Fink on a friend? Of course not, Bill. It's just that I have this annoying habit of inadvertently blurting out the wrong thing at the wrong time. But be that as it may, don't you think we ought to sit down and discuss the situation a little more?"

As she was getting dressed again, Wilbur Starling asked her, "Babette, may I have a talk with you?"

Babette looked at her watch.

"You will 'ave to pay for anouzzer hour," she warned.

"Your thinking is too narrow," Starling said. "You've got your whole life ahead of you. Instead of just worrying about your next hour, you should think of all the hours you have left."

"Please! Zey are enough taken one at a time."

"Don't you want security in your old age, a good home —"

"*Mon Dieu*, anouzzer marriage proposal!"

"No, no, Babette honey, you don't understand. You see, I represent the United States government —"

"I know your consul very well," she said helpfully.

"That's not what I meant. My government is willing to pay for your services in a special capacity."

"What must I do?"

Starling's face flushed ever so slightly. "Well, uh, the same thing you've been doing, only up in space."

"Space?"

"Yes, you know. Like satellites, around the world, Shepard, Glenn, Hammond." He made little whirring motions with his fingers.

"Oh, *oui*," said Babette, suddenly comprehending. "Like A-OK."

"Yes," Starling sighed. "A-OK and all that kind of stuff. Will you do it?"

"*Non*."

"Why not, Babette?"

"It is too . . . too dangerous. I do not wish to lose my life going into . . . space."

"My government is willing to pay you —" he made a quick mental

estimate — “five times your normal fee. There’ll be eleven other girls going up with you, so you won’t be lonely. You’ll only have to work two or three hours a day. And nowadays, there’s no danger involved at all. Many women have gone into space and returned safely; they say that the conditions out in space are very restful. And when you retire, we’ll even provide you with a home and a pension fund, so that you can spend your declining years in comfort.”

“All of zis just for me?”

“Just for you.”

Babette gulped and closed her eyes. “Zen where did I ever get ze impression zat Americans are — ‘ow you say it? — pruders?”

Sen. McDermott: And you say you recruited all these girls yourself?

Mr. Starling: Yes, sir, I did.

Sen. McDermott: Were most of them cooperative?

Mr. Starling: That’s their job, sir.

Sen. McDermott: I mean, what were their reactions to your unusual proposal?

Mr. Starling: Well, they’ve probably gotten a lot of unusual proposals. They seemed to take it pretty much in stride.

Sen. McDermott: One last question, Mr. Starling. How did you find this job?

Mr. Starling: Very fatiguing, sir.

“You must be very tired, Wilbur,” Hawkins said, flashing his infamous smile. “How many girls did you say you interviewed?”

“After twenty I stopped counting.”

“And you’ve got a dozen all picked out for us, eh?”

“Yes sir, nine French and three British.”

“Well, I guess you’ve earned yourself a vacation; you’ll get it as soon as the girls are safely tucked away on USSF 187. By the way, what are their names?”

Starling closed his eyes, as though the names were written on the insides of his eyelids. “Let’s see, there’s Babette, Suzette, Lucette, Toilette, Francette, Violette, Rosette, Pearl-ette, Nanette, Myrtle, Constance, and Sydney.”

“Sydney?”

“I can’t help it, Boss, that’s her name.”

“Oh well, I suppose it could have been worse,” Hawkins smiled. “Her last name could have been Australia.”

“It is worse, Boss. Her last name is Carton.”

Hawkins was giving the dozen new astronettes a pre-take-off pep-talk. “I like to think of you as a small army of Florence Nightingales,” he told them. “Hopefully, you will not receive all the credit that your brave act of self-sacrifice deserves, but nonetheless —”

Starling burst into the room, panic in his eyes. “General Bullfat’s coming down the corridor!” he cried.

Filmore jumped up from the table he’d been sitting on. “Jess, are you sure you know what you’re doing? If Bullfat finds these girls —”

“Relax, Bill,” Hawkins smiled

casually. "I can handle Bullfat with both eyes closed. He's a cinch."

"Who's a cinch?" Bullfat roared as he entered the room. The general was a big man -- but then, forty years behind a desk can do the same for anyone's figure.

"You are," Hawkins said, turning calmly to face him. "I was just telling Bill that you're a cinch to be promoted to my job if I ever choose to resign."

Bullfat muttered incoherently. "Who are they?" he asked after a moment, indicating the girls.

It was an apt question. The astronautettes, contrary to normal procedure, had on loose-fitting, shaggy space-suits. Their face-plates were small, barely revealing their eyes and noses, while the rest of their heads were completely covered by the helmets. They would put one more in mind of baggy clowns than space travelers.

"They're the group scheduled to lift-off in about three hours. Would you like to meet them?" Filmore and Starling nearly fainted at that invitation, but Hawkins flashed them a reassuring grin.

"I'm too busy for introductions, Hawkins. And why in hell do they look so shoddy? Have they had their physicals yet?"

"And how!" Starling whispered to Filmore.

"You know, General, that I wouldn't send anyone up into space who wasn't in perfect condition," said Hawkins.

"What did the flight doctor have to say?"

"He said this group is in better

shapes -- uh, *shape* than any he's ever seen."

"Well, just as long as he's checked them out." Bullfat started to leave, then stopped at the door. "By the way, where are they bound for? Tycho Station?"

"No, USSF 187."

"Is it time for rotation already?"

"No, this group is additional personnel."

"Additional personnel?" Bullfat yelled. "Hawkins, you know damn well that one eight-seven was built for exactly eighteen men rotated in groups of six every month. There is absolutely no room for twelve more people. What in hell do you expect your 'additional personnel' to do -- bunk in with the other men?"

With a marvelous display of self-control, Hawkins managed to suppress his laughter. The "additional personnel" smiled knowingly. Starling, however, had to run out of the room in a fit of hysterical giggling.

"Where in hell is he going?" asked Bullfat, watching Starling exit.

"Oh, he's been under a lot of strain lately. He's about due for a vacation."

"He looks more like he's due for observation -- and you, too, Hawkins. You may control Space Agency policy, but I control the launchings, and that crew is not going up as 'additional personnel' for any small space station. If you want to get them up there, you can rotate them six a month just like anybody else. That's final." Bullfat stalked triumphantly out the door.

"Ready to give up, Jess?" Filmore asked.

"Not in the least. Surprisingly, Bullfat had a good point there. If we sent the girls up to one eighty-seven, it really would be crowded. They'd be constantly getting in the men's way, and it might be more nuisance than help. But all is not lost. When's one ninety-three scheduled to go up?"

"Next week—but surely you're not thinking of sending the girls up in that."

"And why not?"

"USSF 193 isn't a passenger station—it's for storing food and supplies. It's not designed to be lived in."

"So we improvise, Bill. One ninety-three is going to be placed in orbit parallel to one eighty-seven, because they'll need it for storage. It'll be sent up in four already loaded sections and assembled in space. It's a simple enough matter in the course of a week to fit the sections up with acceleration couches and living quarters—just get rid of some of the non-essentials being shot up, and we're all set. The girls can live in there."

"It's absurd, Jess," Filmore mumbled.

"Not really. I'm growing rather fond of the idea." Hawkins smiled lightly. "Just think: USSF 193, your friendly neighborhood grocery store and callhouse all rolled into one."

Filmore groaned. The girls, carried away, cheered.

"I don't believe it," said Jerry Blaine. "I mean, someone down there must be playing some kind of tricks."

"Nobody plays tricks in top-secret code," Colonel Briston countered. "Jess Hawkins signed those orders himself. And you've just seen those girls with your own eyes. I admit it's crazy—"

"Crazy? It's wild, man," said Phil Lewis. "Read those orders through again, will you, Mark. I've got to hear that nice little message one more time."

Briston chuckled. "Dear guys," he read, "with each section of USSF 193, you will be sent three pieces of equipment necessary for Project Cuddle-up (making a total of twelve). Your friendly Uncle Sam has spared no expense to bring them to you directly from Europe, so handle with care, huh? They'll be rotated every six months or thereabouts, but meanwhile they can be stored in USSF 193. Share them equally and have fun—that's an order. Any communications concerning the equipment are to be addressed to me personally in this same code. That, too, is an order. Yours sincerely, Jess Hawkins, Director, National Space Agency."

"Wowee!" Lewis exclaimed. "Remind me never to complain about paying taxes again."

Just then, Sydney emerged from the next room. She had removed her spacesuit and was clad very lightly. "Blimey," she said, "you blokes sure keep a cold place around 'ere. Nanette and Constance and meself, we're freezin'. We was wondering if any of you chaps would care to warm us up a mite."

By pulling rank, Colonel Briston managed to be first in line.

It was very late at what the station considered night, about a month after the girls had arrived. Lucette, Babette, Francette, Toilette, Viollette, Rosette, Suzette, and Myrtle were out on call, while the rest were getting what sleep they could. Sydney was peacefully curled up in bed, dreaming the dreams of the not-so-innocent, when all of a sudden, a rock the size of a man's fist ripped through the wall near her bed and banged against the wall on the far side. A hissing noise filled the room, and Sydney started gasping for breath as the air was sucked out of the hole made by the meteoroid.

In a flash, she was out of her room and closing the air-tight compartment door behind her. The three other girls rushed out into the hallway to find out what was the matter. "Blimey!" Sydney said when she got her breath back. "The damned thing's sprung a leak!" . . .

"Everything's okay now, Sydney," Jerry Blaine said as he came in from outside. "I got it all patched up. I'm afraid, though, that whatever you had loose in your room would have been sucked out into space. Nothing valuable, I hope."

"Not that I can think of," Sydney told him. "But are you sure this won't never 'appen again?"

"Like I told you before, it was a once-in-a-billion fluke. It wouldn't happen again in a thousand years."

"Oh, by the way," Blaine called after her, "are you booked for tonight? Good. I get off at about sixteen hundred—you can come over then."

"A woman's work ain't never

done," Sydney sighed wisely as she reentered her room. Most of her stuff was still in the bureau drawers, but search as she would, she couldn't find the little pill bottle that she kept beside her bed. "Oh well," she said, "I've managed without them before."

It was nearly four months, to be exact, when she decided that the situation warranted her telling somebody, so she told Colonel Briston, who had just returned from three months Earthside. "My God!" was all he could say.

"It ain't as serious as all that."

"Not as serious as all that? You're certainly taking it calmly. Why didn't you tell anybody about this before?"

"Well, it never 'appened to me before."

Briston gulped.

"I think we'd better put in a call to that Mr. 'Awkins. 'E always seems to know what to do."

Sen. McDermott: You were the one who discovered all these goings-on, weren't you, General?

Gen. Bullfat: You're damn right I was. I'd suspected from the start that Hawkins had sent some girls up there, but the Space Force never acts without absolute proof. So I held back my suspicions, gathering up the evidence meticulously, waiting for the proper moment to take my findings to the President.

Sen. McDermott: In other words, then, your discovery was based on a long, careful investigation?

Gen. Bullfat: Exactly, Senator. That's the way the military does things.

As luck would have it, both Hawkins and Starling were out to lunch when the call came in. Since it was labeled "urgent," a man from the communications room took it right over to Hawkins' office. The door was locked.

General Bullfat, just then coming out of his office down the hall, found the messenger waiting in the corridor for Hawkins' return. With typical Bullfat persuasion — and two hundred and fifty pounds wearing five stars can be a lot of persuasion — he convinced the man that an urgent communication could not wait on "the whims of a damned goldbricker like Hawkins."

Bullfat took the message into his office and opened it. He easily decoded the little five-word note, and then stared at it for about a minute, eyes bulging. "Parks," he snapped to his secretary over the intercom, "get me the President. No, on second thought, don't bother — I'll go see him myself."

He left his office just as Hawkins and his aide were returning from lunch. The general couldn't decide whether to laugh triumphantly in Hawkins' face or to harangue him, so all he said was, "I've got you now, Hawkins. At last I've got you."

Hawkins and Starling exchanged puzzled, worried glances. Entering the general's office, Hawkins found the message on the desk, read it silently to himself, and sat down hard. His eyes gazed vacantly at the wall across from him, and the message dropped loosely from his limp hand. Starling picked it up and read aloud in disbelief.

"Sydney pregnant. What now? Briston."

Sen. McDermott: Ladies and gentlemen. Since yesterday, I have had occasion to communicate with the President, and we came to the conclusion that further investigations along these lines appear to be fruitless. Therefore, I wish to adjourn this hearing until further notice, and withhold publication of the official transcript until such time as is deemed appropriate for release to the public. That will be all.

Filmore managed to meet Hawkins outside the building. "I think I detect your fine hand in this, Jess. How did you ever pull that one out of the fire?"

"Well," Hawkins explained, "since the public hasn't heard about this affair yet, I simply made the President realize that as long as he can't get rid of us, he might as well get used to us."

"Why can't he get rid of you?"

"Because the Director of the National Space Agency is appointed for a six-year term, of which I still have four years left. And besides, only Congress has the authority to dismiss me."

"But what about the girls? Can't he fire them?"

"Heavens, no! As civilian employees of the Agency, they come under our 'excepted service' status — they can only be fired for incompetence in the performance of their specified duties. And no one," Hawkins smiled, "could ever accuse them of that."
END

LONCON II

Or

Through A Monocle? Darkly

by ROBERT BLOCH

The last man in the World Science Fiction Convention sat alone in a room.

Somebody knocked on the door . . .

As a matter of fact, it was the bellboy, bringing me this beat-up typewriter so that I could write this beat-up report on the Loncon II, the 23rd World Science Fiction Convention, which was held — in a grip of iron — over the last weekend in August, 1965.

Those of you who are not familiar with science-fiction conventions must be told that these gatherings are annual affairs, sponsored by fan groups in various cities, and attended by readers, collectors, writers, illustrators, editors and publishers in the sf field. This year it was London's turn to play host, at the Mount Royal Hotel — so named because it is not on a hill and the only royalty ever patronizing it are the king-sized spiders which scuttle down the dark corridors. Actually, the hotel was quite nice and I'm only joking — it's a longtime tradition that Convention hotels are unfit for human habitation. This one boasted quite adequate accommodations, and both the manager and assistant manager were science-fiction fans — at least, *before* the Convention began.

And like most attendees, I didn't come to the hotel in search of luxurious appointments. My appointments, if any, were with fellow-fans and fellow-professionals.

Having never been to England before, I had high hopes of meeting some of the more prominent British writers of science fiction — men like H. G. Wells and Arthur Conan Doyle. Unfortunately, they weren't at the bar when I arrived.

But there *were* English writers present, in abundance; among the more abundant I noted Guest of Honor Brian Aldiss, Arthur C. Clarke, John Wyndham, Ted Tubb, James White, Bob Shaw, John Brunner, Arthur Sellings, John Rackham, Ted Carnell — plus such fans and fan-pros as Ron Bennett, Walt Willis, and the legendary Walter S. Gillings. The only one I hoped to meet and didn't was Mandy Rice-Davis.

The big surprise, however, was the number of American attendees. Forry Ackerman I expected to see, and Terry Carr who was brought over by the Transatlantic Fan Fund as a special guest. But I didn't expect to run into George O. Smith, Poul Anderson, Jack Williamson, Harry Harrison, Robert Silverberg,

Judith Merrill, Donald A. Wollheim, James Blish, John Campbell and the editor of this publication Fred Pohl. Even old-time sf-writer Mack Reynolds, an expatriate for thirteen years, turned up for the occasion. Add to this group approximately fifty American fans, including Ron Ellik, Richard Eney, Ted White, Dave Kyle, and a contingent coming to bid for the Tricon; mix and stir thoroughly with Ken Bulmer, Eric Bentcliffe, Arthur Thomson, and you have quite a convention roster. And I have done enough name-dropping to get me off the hook and down to the business of reporting on the actual proceedings.

The first actual proceeding was the traditional gathering of British fandom at the Globe pub on the night before the Con. American fan Al Lewis and English fan Peter Mabey drove me there, and in the smoke-and-bloke-filled room I had my first-hand introduction to our British cousin, who taught me how to play darts. I was the dart board.

The convention itself opened on Friday evening, manned—or, in some cases, womanned—by the able Con Committee: Ella Parker, Ethel Lindsay, James Groves, Keith Otter, Peter Mabey and George Scithers.

The first event was the introduction of some of the prominent attendees . . . but I've just done *that* bit.

Following the welcoming ceremonies, Harry Harrison took the platform—and the audience—with a wild address, involving the tossing of meat-pies and a challenge to the

effect that the modern novel is dead unless it contains science-fiction elements. A question period followed, and Judy Merrill, John Campbell and Ted Tubbs took up the gauntlet, calling for more and better writing in the field. Then Harrison went off to eat meat-pies and the rest of us mingled at various social and anti-social events until the wee hours.

Forry Ackerman spoke on films, followed by the panel "All Things to All Fen". From that point on events moved briskly—during the next two days we were privileged to see two amateur sf films, hear John Brunner's edifying "How To Get High Without Going Into Orbit", attending auctions, visit the art show, catch platform glimpses of Mike Moorcock, Campbell, Merrill, Silverberg and others—while, down at the bar, the hospitality flowed freely.

Saturday night's Fancy Dress Party brought out the monsters and monstresses in full force; there were many striking costumes and a number of well-deserved prizes awarded. My own favorite was Karen Anderson's black and balefully beautiful devil.

Sunday morning's panel, "A Robot in the Executive Suite", was followed by the traditional Banquet in early afternoon. Toastmaster Tom Boardman introduced Brian Aldiss, Terry Carr and Arthur C. Clarke, all of whom spoke wittily and coherently. They were followed by a Mystery Speaker, who turned out to be me—the mystery being why I was allowed to open my big mouth.

Forry Ackerman then presented

the E. E. Evans "Big Heart" Award to Walter Ernsting, after which Bob Silverberg took over to present the Hugos.

Again, for the benefit of late-comers, a word of explanation. The Hugos—so-named in honor of Hugo Gernsback, pioneer sf editor and publisher—are annually awarded to fans and pros for "best" efforts in various categories. I have fond memories of my own, which I won in 1959, pawned in 1960.

This year, Hugos went to Buck and Juanita Coulson for the Best Fanzine—*Yandro*; to Schoenherr as Best Artist; *Analog* took the Prozine prize; Gordon Dickson was judged to have written the Best Short Story—*Soldier, Ask Not* from *Galaxy*—and the award for Best Novel went to Fritz Leiber for *The Wanderer*. In the Drama category, the winner was *Dr. Strangelove*, and Peter Stone, author of the novel from which the film was derived, was on hand to accept the Hugo. Betty Ballantine accepted the Best Publisher Award for Ballantine Books.

English artist Eddie Jones was meanwhile piling up awards for his entries in the Art Show, and while there were no honors voted them, the Con-Committee deserved some prize of their own for the hard work which served to keep the Convention rolling.

Between panels involving Messrs. Frederik Pohl, Jack Williamson, Poul Anderson, Donald Wollheim and others, a Monday business meeting resulted in a vote for the Tricon Group's bid, which means that

Cleveland will be the scene of 1966's Convention.

By means of panels, talks, discussions, question-periods and just plain gab-fests, it's possible for the fans to make themselves—and their personal preferences—known to the professionals in the field.

And it's also possible, through such meetings, for fans to *become* pros. Many of those appearing in London as professionals—Silverberg, Peter Phillips, Terry Carr, Ted White, to name only a few at random—attended their first gatherings in the guise of fans.

But to a veteran like myself, bottle-scarred by thirteen conventions, there are special rewards. Renewing acquaintances with the English fans and pros who attended American cons in the past, meeting up with people I met years ago and thousands of miles away, listening to news and views in the field, and just relaxing in the company of kindred spirits is more than enough.

Speaking of spirits, it's time I had the bellhop cart the empties out of this room. It's time I cleaned up and went back out into the so-called real world—which is ever so less warm and friendly than the unique momentary microcosm which is created, for only four days each year, in the form of a Science Fiction Convention.

Those of you who have attended know what I'm talking about. As for those who haven't—1966 is your opportunity to find out for yourself, firsthand.

See you in Cleveland!

END

MERCURY

by J. M. McFADDEN

*She was alien to Earth,
but she liked it here.
The food was very good!*

Mercury was not her real name. She had never felt the need of a name. She was a clean, healthy carnivore shaped like an otter with pale, lemon-colored fur and a brain ill-equipped to cope with abstract ideas. Her kind were hunters, though the concept of hunting would imply considerably more difficulty than they usually encountered. They had evolved in a world without sentient competition and had achieved the enviable position of being just a little faster than everything that was good to eat.

Mercury's short, comfortable life had been interrupted in a perplexing way one bright afternoon by the appearance in the sky of an enormous, shining object. It was belching fire and noise as it settled slowly to the ground, but having done that it remained immobile so long

that Mercury lost interest and went looking for a meal.

She loped lazily to the top of the nearest rise and looked around the rolling verdant countryside. A herd of plump grass-eaters was grazing in an open field about a mile away, one or two of the larger males occasionally raising an inquisitive nose to sniff the air.

Mercury dropped to the base of an outcropping of rock and bunched her powerful body into a compact ball with hindquarters firmly implanted against the rock. Her hard, transparent eyelids clicked shut as she took a deep breath and launched herself straight toward the herd. Almost instantaneously a puff of dust appeared about a quarter of a mile from the herd where Mercury made a final correction and chose her precise target.

Two of the grass eaters reared, squawling, tossing their heads toward their injured flanks and galloped awkwardly away across the valley. The rest looked around in mild dismay and then thundered senselessly after.

Half a mile beyond, where she had come to rest, Mercury chewed her fresh meal contentedly. She had managed to catch two of the grass-eaters so aligned that her sharp, forward pointed teeth had sliced a steak neatly out of each rump on a single pass and she was not likely to be hungry again the rest of the day.

Her victims were seldom permanently injured and usually never saw her. If she had been cursed with the necessity for philosophizing, she would have been hard put to decide whether she was a hunter or a parasite. In either event she was a successful one and having finished eating she curled up around a full belly in the warm afternoon sun and went to sleep.

She never saw the dark opening gradually appear near the bottom of the huge shining object or the clumsy figures that crawled out so haltingly and came to stand silently over her. She never even noticed the anesthetic sprayed carefully in front of her nose. She never knew how she came to wake up in a cage.

She awoke groggy, but otherwise intact. She shook her head and stared at the two giants creeping languorously past. She circled the cage and discovered no way out. One of the giants began making a low rumbling noise.

"It's awake," said Clark. "I was afraid I might have overdosed it."

"Her, not it," Shoenbrum corrected. "You've been away from Earth so long you've forgotten there're two kinds of almost everything."

"Look at her move! This would have been a hard one to catch if we hadn't stumbled onto her siesta. I'm glad she's healthy." Clark was the expedition's veterinarian and liked at least to start with a good animal.

Shoenbrum, as a zoologist, was prone to collect specimens in all stages of disrepair just so long as they were different. "I want to find her a mate tomorrow."

But Mercury was destined to solitude.

Throughout the expedition's stay, no other of her species was ever even sighted. Every mammal they found was possessed of blinding agility. Even the herbivores moved at breakneck speed from one clump of grass to the next, although they did not appear to be particularly shy at the approach of man.

To Clark's chagrin nearly every specimen they took had one or two deep scars about the flank. Shoenbrum decided that the mammals of the planet had simply over-specialized on speed and constantly injured themselves by running pell mell into things.

He never actually saw this occur, but the circumstantial evidence was so obvious that during the trip back to Earth he wrote an interesting paper on this example of a dead end in evolutionary development.

The morning after Mercury was caught she woke uncomfortably hungry. Her last meal had been somewhat larger than average, but she was used to eating twice a day. She heard the low rumble made by the torpid giants and presently one of them dragged itself to the side of the cage carrying a small container. Ever so gradually it bent over and reached through the bars to place the container on the floor. Mercury walked over and examined the contents. It seemed to be a liquid that smelled vaguely like meat, but Mercury decided she was not really that hungry and sat down to wait.

She had never faced the problem of a food shortage before. All her life she had been surrounded with fresh meals whenever the need arose. She wondered what the giants tasted like.

By afternoon she was almost ready to try the giant's odd smelling liquid, but it had been removed. This time they brought a small rodent hobbled but wriggling, and with their usual leisurely movements pushed the small animal through the bars into the cage. It was tiresome being reduced to hor d'oeuvres of this sort, but at least it was fresh and after sniffing it from all sides she ate most of it.

The days settled into a long, dull pattern. Mercury took lethargic walks around the cage from time to time. Once a day one of the giants crept up with another bite-size rodent which was food enough for the life of languorous lassitude she was leading now. Her forward-pointed

teeth were awkward when she tried to use them on such a small animal, but by proceeding slowly and methodically she managed to cope with the difficulty. The giants were around much of the time but too sluggish to hold her interest.

"This beauty will be the biggest crowd pleaser the World Zoo's had in years," Shoenbrum said. "Wish we could have found a male, too. Really interesting specimens that are harmless and easy to keep like this are hard to come by."

"I've never seen anything like her," Clark agreed. "She moves around that cage like a streak of yellow lightning—and never slows down except to sleep. Those guinea pigs I feed her hardly have time to hit the floor before they completely disappear. I'd like to see what she looks like when there's room to run."

"You will. What I have in mind is that exhibit display we worked up for the cheetahs—the one where they race two or three hundred feet after a piece of meat being dragged by a high speed winch. People can stand along the other side of the raised moat and more can see at once."

"Well, I'm glad we're getting in tomorrow," the veterinarian said. "I'm almost out of guinea pigs."

The transfer was made in the middle of a weekday morning and the zoo had only a scattering of visitors. The area around Mercury's new run was roped off to give her a chance to become accustomed to the place without dis-

tractions. Her cage was mounted on a heavy truck and driven inside the run before the door was opened.

Mercury watched intently as the giant slowly lifted a languid paw and left it pointing in her direction. The low rumble she had come to expect on occasions like this began as the giant's mouth opened and closed with maddening indolence. Another giant who had hauled himself laboriously up on top of the cage slowly grasped the door and began to raise it almost imperceptibly.

She walked carefully around the cage examining the new countryside in all directions. She was at the bottom of a shallow valley with the land rising all around, and the scene was as full of food as the rolling hills of her home. She had not had anything but bony guinea pigs to eat for almost a month and was dying for a decent meal. By now the giant had the door almost half way open.

The truck jolted like the carriage of a heavy artillery piece, and Mercury vanished. A half mile up the hill an Indian water buffalo crashed bellowing into the zoo fence tossing his head at the two-foot gash in his hindquarters.

Three days later Mercury sprawled comfortably in the sun on a rounded boulder. She had worked her way leisurely through this crowded slow-motion world to these high mountains where there was room to move about. Several times a few of the

languid giants seemed to direct their dull attention toward her, but if she was not hungry she simply moved.

It was a time when her nature demanded solitude. Hunting forays would be ever more restricted in the weeks to come and she felt an ancient need for the protective comfort of deserted places. The knife-edge balance of survival in her home hills took a severe toll of her kind when they were new-born and still awkwardly slow. She knew without thought that her litter of twelve to fifteen cubs had been carried almost full term. At home only the two or three most active could have survived the cruel blessing of that early struggle for food.

But here . . .

Here the universe had almost stopped. Here even the slowest toddling white ball of fur need never know a day of hunger. The drumbeat of this nature was a funeral dirge.

Mercury looked out across the green valley dotted here and there with some of the nearly stationary food-giants and their sluggish machines. She watched two of them get out of one of the machines and make their tedious way arm in arm toward a small stream. Patiently she waited until they were aligned directly in front of her and then, licking her chops, dropped to the base of the boulder.

Mercury had found paradise.

END



Retief's War

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

Retief had got along by pretending to be an alien. Now who was this alien who pretended to be Retief?

XIV

“You ladies just sit tight until you hear from me,” Retief called down from his perch on Gerthudion’s back. “I’ll round up a few Rhoon and be back for you as soon as I can.”

“I am Nop-Nee and I dance the dance of Apology,” the Herpp keened. “Who would have thought that a stilter on Rhoonback would mean anything but trouble?”

“You did just the right thing, Nop-Nee,” Retief assured the agitated Herpp. “Take good care of the

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE —

The planet of Quopp is inhabited by creatures that are half machines, and all diabolical. Their body chemistry is organic-inorganic, with limbs like wheels or rotors and steel-sharp talons and teeth.

It is, in short, the kind of world where Earthmen walk cautiously, or do not walk at all.

But Earth Ambassador Longspoon is confident he has the situation under control. With the connivance of certain native Quoppina he is abetting the spread of a revolutionary movement which will unite all of Quopp's scores of hostile tribes, placing them all under a single government which will be friendly to Earth . . . he hopes.

Unfortunately his hopes are blighted. Retief discovers shipments of arms and, investigating, finds himself threatened by the Voion tribesmen. He escapes and makes his way to Terrie headquarters, which is in an uproar because a spaceship loaded with human females is approaching the planet out of control. The pilot asks for Retief but crashes before he can learn her identity. Meanwhile Retief is being pursued by the Voions, trying to keep their arms shipments secret. He escapes with the help of a friendly Quopp, who assists him in disguising himself in the mandibles and chitinous body-plates of a typical Quopp.

But the Quoppina themselves are not the only enemy Retief has to face, for he discovers that behind them — arming them, advising them, waiting to profit from their rebellion — the sinister forces of the Groaci are at work.

The whole planet is ablaze. Retief gets the tribes working together against the Groaci's tools . . . but just as success seems possible, he discovers that the spaceship containing the human girls has landed — and some of them have strayed into Groaci territory.

girls until I get back, and we'll all dance the dance of Mutual Congratulation."

"She wouldn't let any of us go with her," Aphrodisia wailed. "She said we'd slow her down."

"Don't worry. We should be able to spot her from the air." Retief waved. Gerthudion lifted off with a great battering of air, climbed to three hundred feet and headed south. It was high noon now; the sun glared down from a cloudless pale sky. Retief watched the trail below, saw the scurry of small Quoppina fleeing the shadow of the giant flyer passing overhead — but no sign of the missing girl.

It was a twenty-minute flight to the spot where the victorious troops of the Federated Tribes had been encamped eight hours earlier. Gerthudion settled in to a landing on the wheel-trampled ground, deserted now and littered with the debris of battle — and of hasty evacuation.

"Looks like our prisoners sneaked off when nobody was looking," Retief observed. He studied the maze of trails leading off in all directions. "Which way did our lads go?" he inquired of a pair of Phips, hovering nearby.

"Here-here, there-there," the nearest cheeped. "Run-run quick-quick!"

"Don't tell me," Retief said. "I'll bet some of our more impulsive members started in on the chore of sawing the Voion up into convenient lengths, thereby panicking them into breaking out of the jam."

"Check-check!" a Phip agreed. "All-all scat-scat!"

"And by now they're scattered

over a hundred square miles of jungle, with several thousand highly irritated Voion in pursuit. So much for the grass-roots movement."

"Tief-tief!" A Phip buzzed in excitedly from a reconnoitre of the nearby cover. "Thing-thing there-there!"

Retief drew his sword. "What kind of thing, small stuff? A Voion left over from the party?"

"Big-big, long-long, stilt-stilt!"

"A stilter? Like me? Gertie, wait here!" Retief followed the Phip for a hundred yards, then paused, listening.

There was a crackling in the underbrush. A heavy-shouldered biped stalked into view — an unshaven Terran in a tattered coverall and scuffed boots, holding a heavy old-style power pistol gripped in one immense fist.

"Hold it right there, Bug," Big Leon growled in Tribal dialect. "I got a couple bones to pick with you."

Retief smiled behind the mask and put a hand up to lift the disguising head-piece.

"Keep the flippers out from the sides," Leon growled in dialect. "And drop the sticker. Maybe you never saw one of these before —" he gestured with the gun — "but it'll blow a hole through you, tree and all."

Retief tossed the sword aside. Leon nodded. "Smart bug. Now, there's just one thing I want out of you, wiggly-eyes. I hear there's a native leader that's popped up out here in the brush, organizing the

yokels." He motioned at the spare-parts littered ground. "It looks like there was a little action here, not too many hours back. I don't know which side you were on, and I don't care. Just tell me where to find that Bug leader — fast."

"Why?" Retief demanded.

Leon frowned at him "For a Bug, you've got kind of a funny voice. But to Hell with it. I want to ask him for help."

"What kind of help?"

Leon drew a finger across his forehead like a windshield wiper, slung sweat from it. "Help in staying alive," he said. "There's forty-six of us Terries over at Rum Jungle. Ikk's got us surrounded with about half a million troops and he swears he's going to eat us for breakfast."

"I see," Retief nodded. "And you'd ask a Bug for help?"

"We'll take any help we can get," Leon stated flatly.

"What makes you think you can get it?"

Leon grunted. "You got a point there. But let's can the chatter. Where'll I find this Tief-tief character?"

Retief folded his arms. "That's what they call me," he said.

"Huh?" Leon's mouth closed slowly. "Uh-huh," he nodded. "It figures. The only Quopp on the planet I want to make pals with, and I stick a gun in his chestplates." He holstered the weapon. "Well, how about it?"

"I'd like to help you," Retief said.

"Great. That's settled, then. Call

your army out of the bushes and let's get rolling. Something tells me the Voion will hit us at dawn —"

"As I was saying," Retief interrupted, "I'd like to help you Terries, but unfortunately I seem to have misplaced my army."

Leon's hand went to his gun. "What kind of a stall is this?" he grated.

"My hundred seasoned veterans wandered off while I wasn't looking," Retief explained.

"A hundred!" The big Terran burst out. "I heard you had half the Bugs on Quopp with you! I heard you were cutting Ikk's troops into Christmas tree ornaments. I heard —"

"You heard wrong. The Federated Tribes were a spark glimmering in the night. Now they're not even that."

Big Leon let out a long breath. "So I had a little walk for nothing. Okay. I should have known better. Now all I've got to do is get back through the Voion lines so I can help the boys pick off as many of those jaspers as we can before they ride over us." He half-turned away, then faced Retief again. "A hundred against an army, huh? Maybe you Bugs are all right — some of you." He turned and was gone.

Retief motioned a hovering Phip over.

"No sight of any other stilter in the neighborhood?"

"Not-not," the Phip stated.

"How each one of you fellows knows what all the other ones know beats me," Retief said. "But that's

a mystery I'll have to investigate later. Keep looking for her. She can't have gotten far through this growth with a Voion behind every third clump of brush."

"Sure-sure, Tief-tief! Look-look!" the Phip squeaked and darted off.

Retief pulled off his helmet, unbuckled the chest and back armor and laid it aside with a sigh of relief. He removed the leg coverings gingerly. There was a nasty blister above the ankle where the Voion jailer had plied his torch carelessly. Clad in the narrow-cut trousers and shirt he had retained when donning his disguise in Sopp's shop, he stacked the armor together, tied it with a loop of wire wine vine, concealed it behind a bush, then made his way back to where he had left Gerthudion.

"All right, let's go, Gertie," he called, coming up her port quarter. The Rhoon started nervously, tilted a foot-long ocular over her dorsal plates, then gave a rumbling growl.

"It's all right," Retief soothed. "I'm wearing a disguise."

"You look like a Terry," Gerthudion accused.

"That's right. It's all part of an elaborate scheme I'm rapidly getting wrapped up in like King Tut."

"King Tut? Who's he? Sounds like a Voion. Now royal they'll declare themselves—?"

"Steady, girl. Just a literary allusion."

"But now, Tief-tief, what of dear Aunt Vulugulei? I long to seek her out, or her destroyers to rend!"

"I'm afraid you Rhoon are on your own, Gertie. Those fighting

tribes I told you about won't be available to carry out their end of the war after all."

"No matter. Even now the Tribal host circle far to the west in a wide sweep, our enemies to spy. Then retribution will we take in full measure— allies or no."

"How long would it take them to get here?"

"Many hours, Tief-tief—if their search they'd abandon to heed a call."

"Do you know where Rum Jungle is?"

"Certainly—if by that you mean that clustering of huts yonder to the south, whence emanate curious odors of alien cookery with a disfavorable wind."

"That's the place. I need a lift in there. And there's another stilter up ahead; he's wearing the same kind of disguise I am. We can gather him on the way."

"As you wish, Tief-tief," Gerthudion said.

"Gertie, now that the Federated Tribes are dispersed, I can't hold you to our agreement. This is a dangerous trip I'm asking you to make. You might run into the whole Voion Air Force."

"Why then, I'll know where to find the ghouls!" Gerthudion honked. "Mount up, Retief! Fly where I will, that will I—and let the villains beware!"

"That's the way to talk, Gertie!" Retief said.

Retief climbed into position on the Rhoon's back. "Now let's go see if things at Rum Jungle are as bad as reported—or worse."

“I don’t get it,” Big Leon said between clenched teeth. He was riding just behind Retief atop Gerthudion’s ribbed shoulder-plates. “How’d you get out here in the woods? How’d you spot me? And how in the name of the Big Worm did you tame this man-eater? In forty years in the jungle I never —”

“You never tried,” Retief finished for him.

Leon sounded surprised. “I guess I didn’t. Why would I?”

“We’re sitting on one reason. I’ll go into the other answers later, when things quiet down.”

Gerthudion’s rotors thumped rhythmically; wind whistled past Retief’s head. A thousand feet below, the jungle was a gray-green blanket, touched with yellow light here and there where the afternoon sun reached a tall treetop.

“Hey, Retief!” Leon called above the whine of the slip-stream. “Has your friend here got a friend? We’ve got company.”

Retief looked back, following Big Leon’s pointing arm. Half a mile behind, a Rhoon was rapidly overhauling the laden Gerthudion.

“Goblin at seven o’clock,” Retief called to her. “Anyone you know, Gertie?”

The Rhoon lifted her massive head, then swung her body sideways — a trick she performed with only a slight lagging of forward motion.

“That’s — but it couldn’t be! Not Aunt Vulugulei!” the great creature honked. At once she banked, swept in a tight curve back toward the

trailing Rhoon, now closing fast.

“Aunt Vulgy!” she trumpeted. “Where in Quopp have you been? I’ve been worrying myself into a premature moult!”

The other Rhoon, a scant five hundred yards distant now, banked up suddenly and shot away, rising fast, its rotors whick-whicking loudly. Gerthudion swerved, causing her riders to grab for better holds as she gave chase.

“Auntie! It’s me, Gerthudion! Wait!” The agitated flyer was beating her rotors frantically as she fell behind the unladen Rhoon, a quarter of a mile ahead now and two hundred feet higher. Sunlight glinted on spinning rotors as the strange Rhoon tilted, swung in a tight curve, swept down at top speed on its pursuer.

“Duck!” Retief called. “It’s a zombie!”

Yellow light winked from a point behind the pouncing Rhoon’s head. The buzz of a power gun cut through the tumult of rushing air.

There was a harsh rattle of sound from behind Retief. Blue light glared and danced at close hand as a pencil-thin beam lanced out, picked out the attacking Rhoon’s left rotor, held on it as Gerthudion wheeled to the left, dropped like a stone, rocking violently in the air-blast as the enemy flyer shot past.

“I nicked him,” Leon growled. “The range is too long for a handgun to do much damage.”

“He’s got the same problems.” Retief leaned forward. “Gertie, I’m sorry about Aunt Vulugulei, but you

see how it is. Try to get above him; he can't fire through his rotors."

"I'll try, Tief-Tief," Gerthudion wailed. "To think that my own auntie—"

"It's not your aunt any more, Gertie; just a sneaky little Voion getting a free ride."

Gerthudion's rotors labored. "I can't gain on her—or it," she bawled. "Not with this burden!"

"Tell her not to try dumping us off," Leon barked. "My gun is the only thing that'll nail that jasper. Just get me in position!"

The Voion-controlled Rhoon cadaver was far above now, still climbing. Gerthudion, her rotors thumping hard, was losing ground.

"He'll drop on us again in a minute," Retief said. "Gertie, as he gets within range, you're going to have to go into a vertical bank to give Leon a clear shot."

"Vertical? I'll fall like a stone from a frost-shattered peak!"

"That's the way it's got to be, I'm afraid. Lead him down—and don't flare out until we're at tree-top level. If we give him time to think, it will dawn on him all he has to do is stay right over us and pour in the fire!"

"I'll try." The Rhoon was in position now, above and slightly offside to the right. It stopped then, moving in for an easy kill. Gerthudion held her course. Abruptly the enemy gun fired, a wide-angle beam at extreme range that flicked across Retief's exposed face like a breath from a blast furnace.

"Now!" Retief called. Instantly Gerthudion whipped up on her left

side, her rotors screaming in the sudden release of load. In the same moment Leon, his left arm clamped around Retief, lanced out with his narrow-beam weapon. A spot of actinic light darted across the gray belly plates of the zombie, then found and held steady on the left rotor.

The fire from above was back on target now, playing over Gerthudion's exposed side-plates with an odor like hot iron.

"Stay with that wide beam another ten seconds, and you're a gone Bug," Leon grated out. The Rhoon above dipped to one side now, feeling the sting of the blaster, but Leon followed, held the rotor in the beam while air shrieked up past him like a tornado.

"Right myself now I must, or perish!" Gerthudion honked. "Which is it to be, Tief-tief?"

"Pull out!" Retief grabbed for hand-holds as the great body shifted under him, surging upward with crushing pressure. The whirling vanes bit into air, hammering. Leon broke off his fire—

"Hey, look!" The attacking Rhoon had veered off at the last possible instant, gun still firing, now lazily, it rolled over, went into a violent tumble. Pieces flew. Then the zombie was gone against the darkness below.

"I think you burned through his wiring," Retief called. "Gertie, stay low now; it's only another couple of miles."

"Low shall I stay, like it or no," the Rhoon called. "I thought my

main armature, its windings I would melt!"

Retief felt the heat of the overworked body scorching his legs. "If we meet another one in the air we've had it."

"If far it is, we're lost," she wheezed. "I'm all but spent."

"There it is!" Leon pointed to a tiny cluster of buildings against the sweep of jungle ahead, stringed by tilled fields.

Gerthudion flew on, dropping even lower, until she labored just above the high crowns of trees whose leaves glittered in her backwash like rippling water. The forest ended abruptly, and she was swooping across the fields that surrounded the trading town, packed solid now with Voion soldiery.

"Look at 'em," Leon called. "Jammed in so tight they can't even maneuver! If those Bugs knew anything about siege tactics, they'd have wiped us out the first night!"

"Better try some evasive action," Retief called. "They may have some big stuff down there."

Gerthudion groaned, complied sluggishly.

"If they have, they're holding it back," Leon yelled behind him. "All they hit us with so far is a lot of talk, plenty of rocks and arrows and a few hand-guns."

Blasters winked below now, searching after the Rhoon. She threw her massive weight from one side to another, flying a twisting course toward the squat palisade ahead and the cluster of low buildings behind it.

Leon took careful aim, then pour-

ed a long burst from his power gun into a Voion gun crew. There was a flicker, then a violent burst of pale yellow light that puffed outward in a dingy smoke cloud. It faded quickly as fragments whistled past Gerthudion's head and clattered against her rotors. Then the giant flyer staggered over the wall in a billow of dust and slammed into the ground at the center of the wide central plaza of the town. Men appeared, running toward the Rhoon.

"Hold your fire!" Big Leon belled. "It's me—and Retief! This Rhoon's tamel First bushwacker lays a hand on her's got me to answer to!"

The embattled Terrans were all around now, gaping as Retief and Leon slid down from their places.

"Jumping jinkberries, Leon! How'd you catch that critter?"

"You sure it don't bite?"

"Thought you was one of them that's been buzzing us all day."

"How about it, Leon? Did you find that Bug chief?"

"Quiet, the lot of you!" Leon held up his hands. "The bug rebels are out of the picture. We're on our own." He motioned to Retief. "I picked up a recruit, name of Retief."

"Well, you're just in time for the massacre, Mister," someone greeted him.

"Hey, Leon. What about this Rhoon of yours? Maybe it could airlift us out of here."

"I'll carry no burden this day," the Rhoon gasped out. Her rotors sagged as she squatted, her massive

heel against the ground. "Grave damage . . . to my windings . . . I fear I've done . . . such burdens to bear . . . the while I gamboled like a Phip . . ."

Leon said, "You did okay, Ger-tie. Just take it easy, girl." He faced the crowd of forty unshaven, unwashed frontiersmen. "What's been going on while I was gone?"

"They hit us again just after First Eclipse," said a wide, swarthy man with a low-slung pistol belt. "Same old business. Come at us in a straight frontal assault, whooping it up and shooting arrows. A couple Rhoon made passes, dropping leaflets and stones, but our guns — we still got three working — kept 'em at a safe altitude. We kept our heads down and peppered 'em and they pulled back before they hit the stockade. They been quiet since noon. But they're up to something. Been working since dawn on something."

Leon grunted. "After a while those bugs are going to figure out all they have to do is hit us from four sides at once and get a couple magnesium fires going against the walls — and we've had it."

"Their tactics are likely to improve suddenly," Retief said. "There's a Groaci military advisor in the area and I imagine he'll take the troops in hand before many hours pass. In the meantime, we'd better start making some plans —"

"Some wills, you mean," someone corrected. "They'll flatten us like a tidal wave once they get rolling."

"Still, we don't want to make it too easy for them. Leon, what have you got in the way of armament,

other than those three guns I heard mentioned?"

"My iron makes four; it's got about half a charge left. There's a couple dozen heavy-duty hunting bows — some of the boys are pretty good with 'em. And I had Jerry trying to inker up a rig to drop a few thousand volts to the perimeter wall."

"I have it going, Leon," Jerry called. "Don't know how long it will last if they throw a big load on the line, though."

"We finished up the ditching while you was gone, Leon," another man called. "If they get past the stockade, they'll hit a six-foot trench. That ought to slow 'em down some."

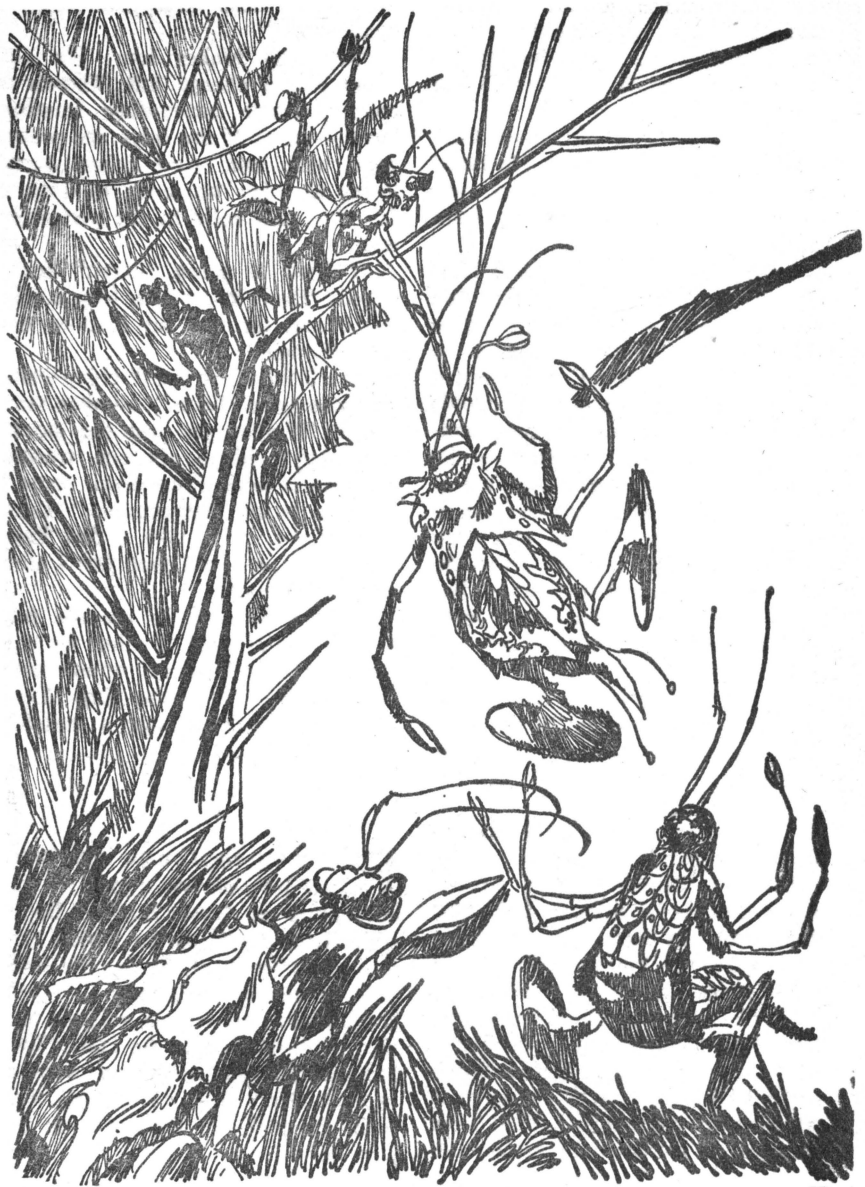
"This is all just peanuts," Leon said. "Sure, we'll take a few hundred with us — but that won't stop us from going."

"It will be dusk in another few hours," Retief said. "I think we can count on a go-for-broke attack with General Hish calling the plays. Let's see if we can't arrange a suitable reception."

XVI

From a top-floor room in a tower that formed one corner of the compound at Rum Jungle, Retief studied the ranks of the Voion that moved restlessly all across the half-mile of cleared ground.

"Uh-huh, our Groaci military expert is on the scene," he said. "That formation's not exactly a parade-ground effect, but it's a long way from the mob we flew over on the way in."





"It's not that that gives me the willies," said a thick-set man with a short blond beard. "It's them damned Rhoon circling up there." He motioned toward floating dots far overhead that indicated the presence of a pair of the huge flyers.

"If they knew Gertie's crowd were out looking for them, they'd be a little less carefree up there," Retief commented. "But I'm afraid our aerial allies are combing the wrong stretch of sky."

A man hurried in, breathing hard. "Okay, Big Leon," he said. "I guess that does it. We rigged the ropes and the tank-traps, and all the boys are posted up as high as they could get. Les's got a good head o' steam up on both boilers, and—"

"All right, Shorty," Leon said. "Just tell everybody to look sharp and don't make a move before the signal goes up."

"Get ready," Retief said. "I think something's starting down there now."

Barely visible in the dim light, the Voion were crowding back, opening narrow lanes through their ranks; bulky shapes were trundling forward along the paths thus formed.

"Oh-oh. Looks like they got some kind of heavy equipment," Shorty said apprehensively.

"Nope. Not equipment; friends," Leon stated. "Those big critters are Jackoo. I guess that cuts it. Those boys can steamroller right through the walls."

"Correction," Retief said. "Six, two and even those Jackoo are zombies like the Rhoon."

"What do you mean?"

Leon and the other man stared at Retief while he gave them a brief explanation of the Voion technique of installing an energy cell and a pilot in a dead Quoppina.

"The drive mechanism and circuitry are all there," he concluded. "All they have to do is supply the power and the guidance."

"That's far from simple," Jerry said. "Ye gods, the technical knowledge that implies! Maybe we've been underestimating these Voion."

"I think the Groaci have a digit in the pie," Retief said.

"Groaci, huh?" Jerry nodded, looking worried. "It fits. They're skillful surgeons as well as exporters of sophisticated electronic and mechanical devices."

"How can they butt in here?" Shorty demanded. "I thought that kind of stuff was frowned on by the CDT."

"You have to get within frowning range first," Retief pointed out. "They've done a good job of keeping under cover."

"Looks like they're getting set to hit the wall, all right," Leon said. "I count eight of 'em. The game'll be over quicker'n I figured."

Retief studied the maneuvers below, dim in the pre-dawn light. "Maybe not," he said. "See if you can get me seven volunteers and we'll try to stretch it into extra innings."

Retief waited, flattened against the wall of a one-story structure the back of which was no more than ten feet from the timber wall surrounding the compound.

"Get ready," Shorty called from the roof above. "They're rolling now. Boy, look at 'em come! Brace yourself. He's gonna hit right —"

There was a thunderous smash and a section of wall six feet wide bowed and burst inward. Amid a hail of splinters, the dull magenta form of a two-ton Jackoo appeared. It was wobbling from the terrific force of the impact, but still coming on, veering past the corner of the structure half in its path, gathering speed again now as it plunged past Retief at a distance of six feet —

He swung out behind the bulky shape, took three running steps, jumped and pulled himself up on the wide back — even broader than Fufu's ponderous dimensions, he noted in passing. Directly before him there was a hollow chopped out behind the massive skull — the brain location in all Quoppina species. In it the narrow back of a Voion crouched, a heavy helmet of gray armor plate protecting his head. Retief braced himself, reached forward, hauled the driver bodily from his cockpit and propelled him over the prow.

There was a heavy *ker-blump!* as the broad wheels slammed over the unfortunate Quoppina. Clinging to the now unguided zombie, Retief reached into the cockpit, flipped up a large lever dabbed with luminescent orange paint. The groan of the drive ceased instantly. The juggernaut slowed, rolled to a stop a foot from the six-foot moat dug by the defenders.

There was a confused shrilling behind. Retief turned to see the leaders

of a column of Voion pressing through the breached wall.

"Now!" shouted someone from a rooftop.

At once a brilliant cascade of electric blue sparks leaped across the packed mass of invaders struggling on high wheels across the shattered timbers. The two foremost members squalled, and shot forward. Those behind also squalled but, impeded by the uneven ground and the efforts of their fellows, failed to dart clear. The high voltage continued to flow — here leaping a gap to the accompaniment of miniature lightnings, there bringing adjacent patches of Voion to red heat before welding them together. More Voion, coming up fast from the rear, joined the press. They found themselves instantly joined in the wild dance of arcing current and randomly stimulated nerves and gear trains.

Retief returned to the task at hand. He flipped the back-up switch, hastily maneuvered the captured ram to face in the direction from which it had come. The two Voion who had leaped clear of the confusion dashed toward him, seeking refuge. Retief grabbed up the issue club dropped by the former operator in his hasty exit in time to slam the gun from the grip of one of them, knock the other spinning with a back-handed swipe to the head. Then he pushed the 'go' lever into the forward position, threw the speed control full on and vaulted off.

"Cut the power!" Shorty yelled from above. At once the showering sparks from the electrified

attack column died, leaving only a dull red mosaic of hot spots. Then the riderless zombie was rumbling into the welded mass, slamming through the obstruction to disappear into the mob beyond.

"Get them cables back in place!" a voice yelled.

Men darted quickly out to haul at the one-inch steel lines, stretching them across the gap three feet from ground level. Retief looked around. Across the compound, other dark gaps showed in the wall. Here and there lay the stumped form of a Voion. A single Jackoo bulked immobile.

"Six of 'em busted through," Big Leon's voice said, coming up beside Retief, breathing hard. "One got stuck in his own hole. Another one was damaged so bad we couldn't get him going again. The boys sent the others back to spread joy according to plan."

"Any casualties?"

"Les got a busted arm; he was kind of slow knocking over a Bug that got through. That scheme of yours worked out neat, Retief."

"It just slowed them a little. Let's see how Gertie's doing."

They walked across to where the big flyer still rested, her four legs sprawled, her eyes dull.

"Gertie, they'll make it through on the next try," Retief said. "How are you feeling?"

"Bad," the Rhoon groaned. "My circuitry I've overloaded. A month's nest-rest I'll require to be myself again."

"No dice. You're going to have to lift off in a few minutes or you'll

wind up being somebody else," Big Leon said. "Think you can do it?"

Gerthudion lifted an eye to gaze distastefully across at the signs of the recent fray. "If I must, I must. But I'll wait until the last, my powers to recover."

"Gertie, I have an important mission for you," Retief said.

He outlined the plan while Gerthudion breathed sonorously, like a pipe organ being turned.

". . . that's about it," he concluded. "Can you do it?"

"'Tis no mean errand you despatch me on, Retief. Still, I'll aloft, these dastards to forestall. Then I'll return, your further needs to serve."

"Thanks, Gertie. I'm sorry I got you into this."

"I came willingly," she honked with a show of spirit. "Sorry am I my fellow Rhoon so far afield have flown, else a goodly number of the rascals we'd have disassembled for you." She started her rotors with a groan and lifted off, a vast dark shadow flitting upward in the gloom, tilting away toward the dark wall of the jungle.

XVII

"Hey," Shorty shouted from his rooftop. "There's a bunch shaping up to hit the gap over here—and looks like there's more of the same down the line at Jerry's spot . . ."

Other calls rang from the spotters posted on the roofs.

"Trying to catch us off-balance," Big Leon said. He turned and yelled up to Shorty, "Okay! You know the

plan; don't let yourselves get cut off!" He turned to Retief as they started for the buildings at a run. "That Groaci general's spending Bugs like half-credit chips in an all-night Zoop Palace."

"He's getting them free," Retief said.

"Here they come!" Shorty's voice was drowned in a shrill battle-cry as the lead elements of the new wave of Voion shot through the break in the stockade, coming fast along the path trodden out by the Jackoo. The first in line was a big fellow with gaudy tribal inlays. As he saw Retief and Leon, he veered toward them, raising a barbheaded spear. He struck the stretched cable and slammed to a stop, bent almost double—and was instantly engulfed by others as they charged in to collide from behind, with a sound like empty garbage cans falling off a truck.

"Sock it to 'em!" Les yelled from his vantage point in the corner tower. Again a display of fireworks sprang up as ten thousand volts surged through the strung cable.

"The generators can't take that load for long," Big Leon yelled above the uproar of crackling current, screeching Voion and enthusiastic human yells.

There was a brief tremor underfoot. A vivid glare came from the direction of the power plant. Retief and Leon threw themselves flat as a dull boom rumbled across the compound, accented by the whine of shrapnel passing overhead. The glow at the fence-line died.

"Shorty!" Leon called.

"He's down," a voice rang from the next post in line.

Leon swore, jumped to his feet. "Fall back on the Post Office," he yelled. "Pass the word!" He turned, ran for the building where Shorty had been posted. The Voion crowded in the gap in the wall were shrilling and fighting to free themselves—those who had survived the overload. A large specimen broke free and shot forward to cut Leon off.

Retief reached him in time to lay a solid blow across the side of his head, then spiked his wheels with his own club. Ahead, Leon jumped, caught the eaves, pulled himself up. A second Voion disentangled himself, and came thumping forward on a warped wheel, gun in hand.

There was the crackle of a power gun from the upper window of the adjacent corner tower. The Voion's head disappeared in a spatter of vaporized metallic-chitin as the dead chassis slammed on to crash against the wall. Leon reappeared, lowering the inert form of Shorty. Retief caught the wounded man and draped him over a shoulder as Leon dropped down beside him.

The big man shouted: "Let's sprint! They'll cut us off!"

Half a dozen Voion wheeled around the corner of the next structure in line and charged the two Terrans. Retief pivoted aside from a blaster shot, clubbed the next Voion in line as shots burped from the tower. At his side, Leon ducked under a swinging club, caught a Voion by the wheel,

flipped him. Then they were through sprinting for the plank laid across the six-foot ditch. Leon spun, flipped the board into the trench. Shots scored the doorframe as they dived through it.

"Close," Leon panted. "How's Shorty?"

"Breathing." Retief took the stairs three at a time, whirled into the room previously selected as a last-ditch stronghold, lowered the small man to the floor, then jumped to the window.

Below, Voion were pouring into the compound—and stopping short at the moat barring their path. In it some dozens of their more impetuous comrades were already trapped, floundering on broken wheels and waving frantic arms. More Voion pressed from behind, crowding those in front. The rank lining the ditch was fighting now to pull back from the brink of disaster. But as Retief watched, one, then three more, then half a dozen together went over, dropped with a smash as those behind pressed forward to share in the loot.

"That's one way to bridge it," a man said beside Retief. More men were coming into the room behind him. Across the compound, Retief saw two men drop from a roof, start across, change course as Voion blaster shots crackled near them. A power gun buzzed beside Retief, laying down a covering fire.

"Everybody's here but Sam and Square-deal Mac," somebody yelled.

"They're okay so far," the man

beside Retief called. He fired again, nailed a Voion who had struggled across the Voion-filled moat. One of the two men stumbled, spun, fell on his back. The other slung him over his shoulders in a fireman's carry and came on to disappear into the door below.

"All in," somebody called. "But-ton her up!"

There was a sound of heavy timbers falling as a previously prepared barricade dropped into position to block the door below.

Somebody said, "Henry's had it. Steel splinter in the skull."

"How many we lose?" Leon demanded.

"Henry's dead. Shorty don't look good. Three more with medium bad blaster burns and couple bruised up."

"Pretty good," somebody called. "We must of put a couple hundred of them devils out of commission just on that last go-round!"

"Their turn comes next," Les said from the window. "They're across the ditch now."

The compound was rapidly filling with Voion, pouring through the shattered wall and across the choked ditch. The late afternoon light was failing rapidly now.

"They'll fire the building next," Retief said. "Leon, let's get the best shooters at the windows and try to discourage them from getting in close."

Leon snapped orders. Men moved to firing positions, readying bows and power guns.

"We're down to three guns," Leon said, "and not enough arrows

to make a fellow start any long books."

"We'll make 'em count," someone growled. A bowstring twanged, then another. A blaster buzzed. Below, a group of Voion who had reached the embattled Post Office withdrew hastily, leaving three former comrades lying on their sides with their wheels spinning lazily. The enemy horde filled the compound now, formed up in a dense-packed ring around the Ter-ran-occupied tower.

"The boys in the front rank are a little reluctant to grab the glory," Retief commented.

"But the boys behind won't let 'em stop," Big Leon grumbled. "It's like fighting high tide."

The circle closed; arrows sped, slammed through armor with solid clunks, or glanced off a helmet or shoulder plate to fly high in the air.

"Save the guns for the ones out front," Leon called. "Watch for fire-makers."

Beside Retief, a man made a choked sound and fell backward, an arrow quivering high in his chest. Retief caught up his bow, knocked a bolt, took aim, picked off a Voion wheeling in fast firing a blaster. The gunner veered and crashed over on his side.

"This is fun," somebody called. "But it won't buy us much. Look at them babies come!"

"Hey, they shot some kind of fire-arrow over here," a man yelled from across the wide room. It's stuck in the wall and burning like a fused tube-lining!"

There were bright flares among the Voion ranks now, then streaks that arced up across the glowing sky, trailing white-hot embers. Most fell short, one or two of them landing among the front ranks of the attackers, but there were two solid thuds against the roof overhead. Acrid, chemical-smelling smoke was coiling in the windows from the first hit.

"How about it, men? Do we stay in here and roast, or go out and take a few of 'em with us?" Leon roared.

"Let's go get those Jaspers!" someone called. There was a shout of agreement. Men were coughing now; there were more ominous thumps against walls and roof. A flaming arrow shot through a glassless window, elicited yells as it slammed the wall opposite, scattering burning globlets of magnesium. A man plucked it out, set it against his bowstring, and let fly; there were screams as it sank home against the chest of a big Voion almost directly below. Someone had the door open now. Smoke and sparks billowed in. Big Leon cupped his hands to his mouth to shout above the roar of fire and battle:

"You boys at the windows stick till the rest of us are out; keep pouring it to 'em!" He turned, plunged out through the smoke.

Retief waited with his bow drawn, the feathers just under his chin. Big Leon appeared below, behind the tumbled logs of the barricade. A Voion charged to meet him but intercepted Retief's arrow instead.

Below Retief's window the Voion were pressing close again, driven by the inexorable pressure of those behind.

There were three fires burning briskly along Retief's side of the wall now. He loosed an arrow, saw more Voion crowd in. One, hustled by his fellows, fought helplessly, fell into a flame-spouting puddle of melted wood. He flared up in a bright green blaze, only to be smothered by others crushing in against him. From behind the barricade, Leon and the other Terrans fired steadily, building up a heap of casualties. Leon vaulted the barrier, climbed up on the stacked Voion, firing down into the press. Retief picked off a Voion with a gun, set another arrow, loosed it, another . . .

"That does it," a man called. "Out of ammo. I'm going down and see if I can't get me a couple bare-handed." He disappeared into the smoke, coughing.

At the barricade, Leon was still firing, an arrow entangled in the sleeve of his leather jacket. Retief saw him throw the gun aside, jump down into the small clear space before the tangle of downed Voion, laying about him with a Voion club.

"I guess it's all over," the last of Retief's fellow archers declared. "No more arrows. Reckon I'll go down and meet 'em in the open. Don't much like the idea of frying up here."

"Hold it," Retief said. "Look!"

Beyond the palisade, a disturbance had broken out on the Voion left flank. A horde of vari-colored

Quoppina had appeared from the jumble on that quarter, and were rapidly cutting their way through toward the palisade. They were led by a wedge of Jackoo, one of which was larger than its fellows and carried a vari-colored Quoppina astride its back.

Close behind a fast-moving column of blue-green fighters followed, their fighting claws snapping left and right. Behind them, a detachment of yellow-orange warriors were swinging bright-edged scythes as they mowed a path through the Voion ranks.

Small purple shadows appeared among the trees. They began casting ropes which plucked targets from the fleeing Voion rabble to dangle, arms windmilling, above their fellows.

"Hey! That must be that rebel army," the bowman yelled. "Look at 'em come!"

Down below, the clear space before Big Leon was wider now. All across the compound breaks in the Voion ranks were opening. At the walls, Voion backs were visible as the confused attackers crowded out through the ragged gaps breached by the Jackoo zombies to confront the new threat, before which their fellows were streaming away in disorder.

The live Jackoo vanguard rumbled onward, cutting a swathe toward the embattled stockade. The vari-colored Quoppina rider who led them whirled a flashing blade above a bright red Voion-like head. A small organized group of Voion, barred their path, led by a small officer with

wobbly wheels. They stood their ground for half a minute, then broke and fled. Leon's men were across the barricade now, firing at retreating backs, jumping huddled dead and wounded to get clear shots at the confused enemy.

"It's a blooming miracle!" a man shouted.

"That must be them guerrilla fighters we heard about!" someone called. "Yippee!"

Retief left the window, went down through the churning smoke and emerged in the front entry hall where two Terrans lay on their backs behind the barricade of logs. He climbed the latter, clambered across fallen Voion and jumped down to stand beside Leon, who was bleeding from a cut across the cheek.

"I guess that Bug leader just didn't like my looks," the big man said. "Look yonder!"

The bright-colored Quoppina who had led the charge jumped down from the Jackoo and stepped through the nearest gap in the wall—a tall creature with posterior arms well developed for walking, shorter upper members, rudimentary rotors above each shoulder, a bright red-orange face resembling a Voion with the exception of the color.

"Yep," Leon said. "That's Tiefertief, all right. Come on. I guess we owe that Bug some thanks."

Retief studied the vari-colored stilter as it strode across the battle-littered ground. It carried a sword in hand, casually skirting the smoking bodies of electrocuted Voion, detouring around victims shot,

incinerated or crushed in the disorderly scene just concluded.

"That was good timing," Big Leon called in the Voion tribal dialect. "Glad you changed your mind."

The stilter came up, halted facing Retief and Leon, sheathed the sword. "My grasp of the Voion tongue is rather limited," the Quoppina said in clear, accentless Terran, looking around at the shambles. "It seems you gentlemen have been busy."

Leon grunted. "We'll be busy again if those Bugs decide to turn around and come back. How many troops you say you've got?"

"I haven't counted lately," the stilter said coolly. "However, they're rallying to the colors in satisfying numbers." One armored manipulative member waved. "Are you in command of this death-trap?"

Leon frowned. "Me and Retief been making most of the decisions," he said flatly. "I'm no general, if that's what you mean."

"Retief?" The stilter's oculars swiveled. "Which one is he?"

Leon jerked a thumb at him. "You called this place a death-trap," he started. "What—"

"Later," the biped said quickly, looking at Retief. "I thought—I understood he was a diplomat..."

Retief said, "There are times when the wiliest diplomacy seems inadequate. This appeared to be one of them."

"I'd like to speak to you—in private," the stilter said, sounding breathless.

"Hey, Retief! Better watch this character."

"It's all right, Leon," Retief said. He indicated an uncrowded spot a few feet distant. The stilter stepped to it, then went on, paused inside the doorway to a building the roof of which was burning briskly, turned and faced Retief. The two upper arms went to the scarlet head, fumbled for a moment —

The mask lifted off, to reveal an oval face with wide blue eyes, a cascade of strawberry blonde hair and a brilliant smile.

"Don't . . . don't you know me?" the girl almost wailed as Retief studied her approvingly. "I'm Fifi!"

Retief shook his head slowly. "Sorry. And I do mean sorry."

"It's been quite a few years," the girl said appealingly, "but I thought."

"You couldn't be over twenty-one," Retief said. "It would take more than twenty-one years to forget that face."

The girl tossed her head, her eyes sparkling. "Perhaps you'll recall the name Fianna Glorian?"

Retief's eyes widened. "You mean little Fifi . . .?"

The girl clamped her gauntleted hands together, eliciting a loud clang. "Cousin Jame — I thought I'd never find you!"

XVIII

"I don't get it," Big Leon declared. "I turn my back for five minutes to see how the wounded are making out, and this Tiefert character disappears back into the brush — and this little lady pops out of noplac!"

"Not exactly noplac, Mr. Ca-

racki," Fifi corrected gently. "I was with the army."

"Yeah, you sure were. And how you got there beats me. I've lived out here forty years and it's the first time —"

"I told you about the yacht crashing —"

"Sure — and then you bust out of a Voion jail and a couple Phips take you in hand —"

"The little green ones? They're cute!" Fifi said. "They led us to the Herpp village, and told us about the rebel army —"

"Hey, Leon!" A bearded Terran came up, giving Fifi an admiring look. "Looks like they're getting set for one more push before full dark. This time they'll make it."

Leon growled, "The reinforcements are nice, but not enough. Them Bugs will be all over us like army ants in a few minutes. Sorry you had to get into this, young lady. Wish there was some way to smuggle you out of here."

"Don't fret, Mr. Carnacki," Fifi said coolly. "I have a weapon." She held up an efficient-looking shortsword. "I wouldn't dream of missing the action."

"Hmmm. That looks like the one that Bug Tiefert was carrying."

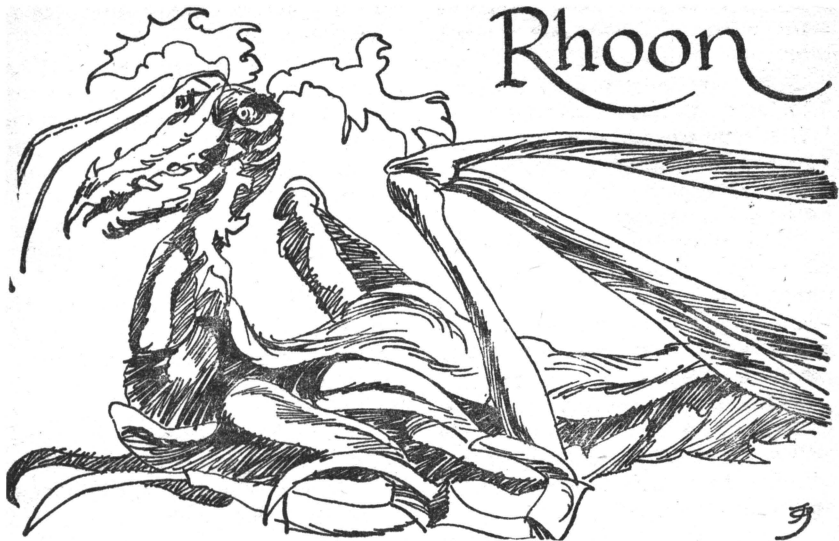
"He gave it to me."

Leon grunted, turned away to bark orders. Retief leaned close to Fifi.

"You still haven't told me how you managed to take over my army."

"After I got the other girls settled in the native village, the little Phip led me to your scaresuit," Fifi whispered. "Of course, I didn't know

Rhoon



whose it was, but I thought it would be a good disguise. As soon as I got it on, the Phips flew off buzzing like mad. The next thing I knew, there were Quoppina arriving from every direction. They seemed to accept me as their general, and I just went along."

"You seemed to be playing the role to the hilt when I first caught sight of you, Fifi."

"I've listened to enough war stories to know a little tactics — which is more than can be said for the Voion."

A sharp hubbub broke out nearby. Retief stepped out to see Jik-jik, Tupper, several other Zilk and Ween, a pair of heavy Jackoo, half a dozen Herpp and a cluster of blue and white Clute and high-wheeled

Blang, striking in lemon accented with orange polka dots.

"Where our warchief?" Jik-jik shrilled. "I wants to see Tief-tief, and I means now!"

"Steady, troops," Retief soothed. "Here I am."

"What you mean, here I is?" Jik-jik yelled. "I looking for a fighting Quopp name of Tief-tief, not some foreign-type Terry!"

"Shhh. I'm in disguise. Don't give me away."

"Oh." Jik-jik looked Retief over carefully. "Pretty good," he said in a conspiratorial tone. "Almost fooled me."

"Is it you, Tief?" Tupper hooted. "I feared ye were dead, the way ye dropped out of sight."

"Just a tricky bit of under-cover work," Retief assured the group.

"Things is got worse since we seen you last," Jik-jik said. "Voion using new stuff on us!"

"Them Voion throwing thunderbolts now, for sure!" a Ween said. "Come nigh to melting my tail wheel down!" He displayed the two-inch coasted depending from the tip of his anterior segment.

"Hoo! It melted half away!" Jik-jik looked at Retief. "What this mean, War-chief?"

"It means the Federated Tribes are in trouble," he said. "The Voion are using guns."

"Where'd they get these whatchacallums, guns?" a Clute inquired. "I ain't never heard of nothing like that before. Melt a fellow down before he gets in harpoon range."

"I'm afraid there's been some meddling in Quopp's internal affairs," Retief said. "After we've cured the Voion of their interest in governing the planet, we'll have to reverse that trend." He looked over the delegation.

"I see you've picked up a few recruits. How did you manage it?"

"Well, Tief-tief," Jik-jik announced. "I got to thinking about my Uncle Lub-lub and some of them other Ween in the next village. so I bribed a Phip to scatter over there and invite 'em to join the party. Seem like word got around. because volunteers done been coming in all day. Them Voion sure is got a heap of folks riled up at 'em."

"Nice work, Jik-jik. You, too, Tupper."

"What about me?" Fufu demanded. "While I was out on patrol, I caught a nosey Voion creeping up

on us and flattened him single-wheeled!"

"Way I hear it, you was sneaking off the back way and run into the whole Voion army," Fut-fut commented. "It scare you so bad you come rolling back fast!"

"The idea! I'd just slipped away for a little solitary contemplation—"

"We'll compose a suitable military history of the operation later," Retief interposed. "We'll put in all the things we wish we'd done and leave out the embarrassing parts. For now, we'll stick to practical politics."

"Ain't nothing practical about the fix us in," Jik-jik stated. "Us done cut our way right into a trap. They is got us outnumbered six of sixes to one or I is a Voob's nephew."

"I resent that, you!" a small red-orange Quoppina said cockily, snapping a couple of medium-sized claws at the Ween. "We Voob—"

"Even you Voob can see they packed together out there like grubs in a brood-rack."

"Watch y'r language, ye Wormless cannibal!" a Zilk grated.

"No bickering," Retief broke in. "Tonight we're all Quoppina together—or tomorrow we'll all be spare parts!"

It was full dark now. A pale glow in the South announced the imminent appearance of Joop. A Phip, its tiny pale green running lights glowing, dropped in with rotors whining to settle on Retief's outstretched arm.

"Ween-ween set-set," it reported in a penny-whistle chirp. "Zilk-zilk

chop-chop, Flink-flink swing-swing!"

"All right. We're as ready as we'll ever be," Retief said softly to Jik-jik, who standing by with the other members of the General Staff — one each of the tribes now represented in the Federation, plus Leon, Fifi and Seymour.

Retief swung up onto Fufu's back. "Leon, wait until our diversion has penetrated as far as the edge of the jungle. Then hit them with all the firepower we've got. With a little luck, they might panic and pull out."

"And if a Dink had rotors, he wouldn't spin his wheels so much," a Blang muttered.

"All right, you Quoppina in the commando party. Don't do anything brave and don't get captured," Retief directed. "Just stick to the plan and try to cause as much confusion as possible."

"Let's go," a Flink mounted astride a Jackoo whined. "Already nervous prostitution I got."

Fufu huffed and started forward, rolling over a mat of flattened Voion, bursting out through the breached fence, sending Voion flying. Ahead, the suddenly aroused enemy were closing in, clubs waving. Here and there was the wink of a power gun, firing with wild inaccuracy.

Retief crouched over Fufu's neck, his sword held extended low on the right side. A Voion darted into his path, raised a gun — and slammed back as the point took him under the chest plates. Another leveled a spear, but jumped aside in the nick of time as Fufu thundered past and the others of the assault column followed close behind.

"Those city wheels," Fufu snorted. "No good at all for this sort of thing!"

A Voion dashed to firing position among the trees ahead, threw up his arms. He arced gracefully up into the air, paused and started a return swing, suspended by the neck from a length of purple rope. Another veered suddenly as a filmy net dropped to engulf him, then went head over wheels in a cloud of dead leaves, tripping a pair of comrades.

"Those Flink are a caution," Fufu panted. "Shall I head back out now?"

"Affirmative. And look out for that big fellow with the harpoon!"

Fufu honked and swerved as a long barb-headed spear shot past his head, clattered off his side.

"Tief-tief, are you all right?" he shouted.

"Sure; nice dodging!"

The Jackoo curving back now racing through the trees for the shelter of the stockade. Behind him, Voion non-coms shrilled commands; a steady fire slashed after the retreating heavyweights. Fufu shied as a beam flicked across his flank.

"Yiiii!" He bucked wildly. "That stings!"

Retief looked back. A pack of Voion were in close pursuit. Lights winked as they fired at the run, keeping to the six-foot trail flattened by Fufu's hasty passage. More Voion packed the way ahead. Fufu ploughed into the press, dozing the hapless Planetary forces aside like Indian clubs — but more popped up to fill their places.

"I'm getting . . . winded," the heavy mount gasped back over his shoulder. "There are so many of them!"

"Break it off, Fufu," Retief came back. "Looks like we can't make the stockade. We'll take to the woods and harass their flanks!"

"I'll try. But . . . I'm almost . . . pooped."

"As soon as you hit the edge of the jungle, we'll form up a defensive ring," Retief called. He countered a swinging club in the grip of a Voion, ducked under a spear-thrust, leaned aside from the flare of a power gun. Behind him, the other Jackoo of the detachment were in similar straits, hemmed in from all sides by a crushing press of Voion. Those behind were forcing the front rank unwillingly under the flattening treads of the heavy creatures.

"We'll form a circle," he shouted back to them. "Close spacing, and heads facing out! You Flink dismount and beat them off as long as you can!"

At the edge of the jungle Fufu wheezed to a halt. Bubu came alongside and wheeled to face the forward-surgng enemy. The others quickly took up positions to complete the ring.

The oncoming Voion met wild swings from the embattled Jackoos' digging members, supported by vigorous resistance from Flink-wielded clubs and spears that had been captured from the Voion who had managed to evade Fufu's shovel-tipped arms and blasted him with it, then downed another. A heap of

damaged Voion grew around the tiny fortress. Now the Voion attackers were forced to scale a mound of casualties to fire down into the enclosure.

Beside Retief, one Flink after another yelled, toppled backward, smoking from a hit. The few remaining rebels had all captured guns by now. They fired steadily, but nearly as inaccurately as the Voion. Retief picked off one attacker after another, while the weapon grew hot in his hand. Then it buzzed dolefully and died.

A Voion above him took aim. Retief threw the gun, saw it clang off the Voion's armored head, knocking him backward—

There was a sudden change in the quality of the sounds of conflict. A high, thin shriek cut through the squalling of the Voion and the crackle of gunfire and fiercely burning metallo-wood. Dust rose in swirls. A miniature tornado seemed to press at the crowded Voion then hurl them backward.

Into the cleared patch thus created, something vast and dark slammed down with the ground-shaking boom! of a falling cliff.

In the stunned silence that followed, pieces rattled all around. As shrill Voion cries rang out, dust rolled away to show the pulverized remains of a Rhoon scattered across the field among windrows of felled Voion. A second huge dark shape appeared, beating across the scene of battle at low level, rotors hammering. The bright flash of a power gun winked above its lights.

"That does it, Tief-tief," Ozzl

gaped. "Who could fight lightning from the sky?"

Something dropped from the Rhoon's underside, slammed down among the Voion, bounced high, hit again, cutting a swathe through ranks still stunned by the crash of the first of the giant creatures.

"Tief-tief!" a vast voice boomed, floating across the sky as the Rhoon lifted. "Tief-tief!"

"Listen!" Ozzl choked. "He's— he's calling you! What's it mean?"

Retief jumped up on Fufu's broad back. All around, the Voion were breaking and fleeing now, while the steady crackle and *bzzapp* of power guns sounded from the vast dark shadows hanging above on hammering rotors.

"It means the fight's over!" Retief shouted above the hurricane. "It's Gertie and her friends with reinforcements from the city—and two hundred smuggled power pistols!"

XIX

An hour later, in an unburned room of the battered Post Office, Retief and his victorious allies sat around a wide table. They were sampling Terran trade rum, Bachus brandy and Quoppina Hellrose—all cut three to one to stretch.

"Those blasters turned the trick, all right, Retief," Leon said admiringly. "What sleeve did you have them up?"

"Oh, they were stored conveniently in the Customs shed. I hoped we wouldn't have to use them. But once the Voion started it, there wasn't much choice."

"You're a funny kind of diplomat, if you don't mind my mentioning it," Seymour commented. "I mean, sending Gertie to collect contraband guns so you could blast the government army. It was a neat move, don't get me wrong! But what'll Longspoon say?"

"Actually, Seymour, I hadn't intended to tell him."

"I hope all of you gentlemen will display the most complete discretion," Fifi said sweetly. "Otherwise, I'll come gunning for you personally."

"Retief did what he had to do," Leon growled. "What good's a dead diplomat?"

"That's a question we'd better not examine too closely," Retief said. "And since we're now in position to present the authorities with a *fait accompli*, I don't think anyone will pursue it to its logical conclusion."

"You is got my guarantee," Jikjik announced. "The new Federated Tribes ain't going ask no embarrassing questions."

A Terran planter thrust his head into the room. "The Bugs—our Bugs, I mean—just brought in the Voion general. Ugly-looking little devil. What do you think we ought to do with him?"

"Retief, you want to talk to this jasper?" Leon demanded. "Or should I just throw him back?"

"Maybe I'd better have a word with him."

Retief and Fifi followed Leon along to the room where the captive Voion huddled on splayed wheels, his drooping antennae ex-

pressive of profound dejection. One ocular twitched as he saw Retief.

"Let me talk to *him*. Alone," he squeaked in a weak voice. Retief nodded. Leon frowned at him.

"Every time somebody gets you off to the side, funny things start happening. Retief. I've got an idea you're not telling all you know."

"Just my diplomatic reflex, Leon. I'll be with you in five minutes."

"Watch that bird. He may have a spare sticker under his inlay."

As soon as the two Terrans had left, the Voion lifted off his head-piece to reveal the pale gray visage of General Hish.

"To give you credit, Terry!" he hissed in Groaci. "To have sucked me in neatly with the pretense of disorganization!"

"Don't feel too badly, General. If you only knew how I labored over the timing—"

"To not forget the miserable quality of the troops under my command," Hish added anxiously. "To wish the lot of them disassembled and exported!" He broke off. "But I tire you with these recriminations," he went on smoothly in Voion. "Now, as a fellow member of a foreign mission, I assume you'll accord me the usual courtesies."

Retief looked thoughtful. "Let me see. As far as I can recall, the courtesies I received the last time I was a guest of the Groaci were a bit irregular."

"Now, now, my dear Retief! We mustn't hold grudges, eh? Just give me an escort to my heli and we'll let bygones be bygones—"

"There are a few little points I'd

like for you to clear up for me first," Retief said. "You can start by telling me what the Groaci Foreign Office had in mind when it started arming the Voion."

Hish made a clicking noise indicating surprise. "But my dear chap! I thought it was common knowledge that it was your own Ambassador Longspoon who conceived the notion of supplying, ah, educational material?"

"Terry power guns make a blue flash, Hish," Retief said patiently. "Those of Groaci manufacture make yellow ones—even when they're tricked out with plastic covers to look like Terry guns. It was one of your flimsier deceptions."

"Speaking of deceptions," Hish mused, "I feel sure your own clever impersonation will cause quite a stir among your troops, once it's known. To say nothing of the reaction among your colleagues when they discover you've been leading an armed insurrection—and against your own CDT-supported faction."

"It might. If there were anyone alive who knew about it—and felt gabby," Retief agreed.

"I'm alive," Hish pointed out. "And while 'gabby' is not perhaps the word I would have employed—"

"There's not much I can do about your gabbiness," Retief cut in. "But as for you being alive—"

"Retief! You wouldn't? Not a fellow alien! A fellow diplomat! A fellow illegal operator!"

"Oh, I might," Retief said. "Now, suppose you demonstrate that gabbiness you were boasting about a few seconds ago . . ."

“Remember, this is all in the strictest confidence,” Hish croaked, mopping at his throat sac with a large green hanky. “If Ambassador Schluh ever suspected — that is, if he knew of my professional confidences —”

There was a scrape of feet outside the door. Hish hastily donned his head as the yellow-bearded Terran came into the room. “Hey, Mr. Retief,” he said. “There’s a fellow out here just made a sloppy landing in a heli. Says he’s from the Terry Embassy at Ixix. Leon says you better talk to him.”

“Certainly,” Retief got to his feet. “Where is he?”

“Right here.” The blond man motioned. A second figure appeared in the door — muddy, tattered, his clothing awry, his cheeks unshaven. Leon, Fifi, Seymour and a crowd of others were behind him.

“Retief!” Magnan gasped. “Then you — how — I thought — but never mind. They let me go. That is, they sent me — Ikk sent me —”

“Maybe you’d better sit down and collect yourself, Mr. Magnan.” Retief put a hand under the First Secretary’s elbow and guided him to a chair.

Magnan sank down.

“He has them. All of us. The entire staff,” he choked. “From Ambassador Longspoon — locked up in his own Chancery, mind you — down to the merest code clerk! And unless the Federated Tribes instantly lay down their arms, disband their army and release all prisoners, he’s going to hang them right after breakfast tomorrow!”

“All I got to say is,” Seymour announced, hitching up his pants, “we ain’t about to give up what we won just to save a bunch of CDT slickers from a necktie party. Serves ’em right for chumming up to them Voion.”

“Retief didn’t ask you to,” Big Leon snapped. “Shut up, Seymour. Anyway, we didn’t win the fight — the Bugs did.”

“But the sixty-one prisoners,” Magnan protested breathlessly. “Twenty women!”

“Longspoon ought to appreciate being strung up by his pals,” a man put in. “These Quopp tribesmen will sure do the job if the Voion don’t.”

“It’s a tough deal,” Leon cut in. “But even if we went along, we got no guarantee Ikk wouldn’t hang ’em anyway — and us alongside of ’em.”

“I’m afraid doing business with Ikk is out of the question,” Retief agreed. “The former Prime Minister is one of those realistic souls who never let a matter of principle stand in the way of practical matters. Still, I think hanging the whole staff is a bit severe.”

“He must be out of his mind,” someone said. “He’ll have a couple squadrons of CDT Peace Enforcers in here before you can say Jack Dools!”

“Ikk is an end-of-the-world type,” Retief said. “He’s not concerned about consequences. Not until they jump out and grab him by the back of the neck.”

“I say let’s get the Bug army together —”

“The Federated Tribes,” Retief corrected gently.

"Yeah. Okay, the Federated Tribes. We march 'em straight through to Ixix, with plenty of Rhoon cover, take over the town, kick out the Voion garrison, tell old Ikk to hang up his tool box and put in a call for a CDT Monitor."

"CDT Monitor, Hell," Seymour growled. "What did the CDT ever do for Quopp except give the Voion big ideas?"

"Gentlemen, it's apparent that the next target for the Federation is the capital," Retief said. "I want you to wait one day before starting, however."

"Hell, let's hit 'em now! Before they get a chance to pull themselves together."

"That ain't likely — not with their general cooling his wheels here." Seymour nodded toward Hish, sitting silently in a corner.

"What you want us to wait for, Retief?" Les demanded.

"Don't sound any dumber'n you got to," Big Leon growled. "He needs a few hours to try to spring the Ambassador and his rappies before Ikk strings 'em up." He looked at Retief. "Seymour and me'll go with you."

"Three Terries would be just a trifle too conspicuous in Ixix tonight," Retief said. "But I think I'll take our friend the general along for company."

Hish jumped as though stung by a Zinger. "Why me?" he whispered.

"You'll be my guide," Retief said blandly.

"How do you figure to make your play?"

"There are a few supplies I'll

need. Then I'll have to go over to the Federation camp and talk to the local headmen," Retief said. "We'll work out something."

Leon looked at him with narrowed eyes. "There's angles to this I'm not getting," he said. "But that's okay. I guess you know what you're doing."

Fifi put a hand on his arm. "Jame — have you really got to go? But that's a stupid question, isn't it?" She managed a smile. Retief put a finger under her chin.

"Better send out some Jackoo and an escort and get the girls in here to camp and ready to march. Tomorrow night you'll all be celebrating with a big party aboard a Corps Transport."

"But we c-came to see you!"

"You will," Retief said. "I claim the first dance."

"Yeah," Shorty said under his breath. "Let's hope he's got both feet on the floor when he gets it."

XX

With his Quoppina armor in an inconspicuous bundle under one arm and Hish, still in Voion trappings, trailing dismally, Retief followed a guiding Phip to the Ween encampment a mile from Rum Jungle.

Startled veterans of the morning's action jumped up, fighting claws ready, as he and Hish walked into the clearing around their main campfire. The Groaci was close on his heels now. Jik-jik came forward.

"Well, if it ain't a Terry," he said.

"It's me — Tief-tief."

"Oh. Well danged if it ain't. You look just like one, and they all looks alike."

"Remember — I'm incognito," Retief said.

"Oh, uh, yeah," Jik-jik made a fast recovery. "Well, Terry, just step on in and sit down. Just be a little bit careful one of the boys don't get kind of curious and nip off a small bite."

"I'm poison," Retief said loudly. "You get terrible belly cramps if you eat a Terry, and afterward your cuticula falls off in big patches." He took a seat on a fallen log; Hish hovered close, looking nervously at the Ween fighting claws gleaming all around. "I have to get into town, Jik-jik," Retief said. "I'm going to need some help from the tribes with what I have in mind."

Retief, once again clad in his bright-colored armor, scanned the ground below as the immense male Rhoon on which he rode beat its way southward in company with a dozen picked companions.

To the left flew the steed of General Hish, a mount specially equipped with a dummy cockpit astride which the terrified Groaci sat, a gay red scarf fluttering from his neck. "It looks as though the ground troops have rounded up most of the refugees from last night's fiasco," Retief called to his Rhoon. "I see a few small parties huddled together here and there, but no concentrations."

"Except the fifty thousand of the rascals who still behind the city's towers hide," the deep voice boom-

ed. "My hope it is they'll venture up, their stolen Rhoonish corpses to employ against us."

"I doubt if you'll get your wish," Retief said. "Gerthudion and her friends have pretty well cleared the skies, I think."

With the Rhoon carrying Hish a hundred yards in advance, Retief's flyer descended steadily, passed over the port at five hundred feet, aiming for the rooftop helipad that crowned the Terran Chancery Tower.

"That gun crew down there is tracking us," Retief said. "But they're not quite sure enough to shoot."

"That's but a trivial hazard, Tiefertief, compared with challenging the Blackwheel's stronghold."

"Let's hope Hish remembers his lines."

"The prospect of Lundelia's rending claws will him inspire to a flawless performance," the Rhoon croaked. Ahead, the lead Rhoon settled in to the pad, Hish clinging to his saddle, his jaunty scarf fluttering downward now in the air blast from Lundelia's rotors. Two Voion posted on the roof rolled to meet him, guns in hand.

Hish lowered himself awkwardly and cast a nervous glance at the looming head of his mount. His arms waved as he spoke to the police. He pointed to Retief's Rhoon, now dropping in to light beside Lundelia. The big flyer braked his rotors to a stop with a final whop-whop-wooooo of displaced air.

". . . prisoner," Hish was whispering. "Just stand aside, fellow, and

I'll take him along to His Omnivoracity."

As Retief jumped down, Hish waved the power gun from which the energy cell had been removed. "I'm sure the Prime Minister will be interested in meeting the rebel chieftain, Tief-tief," he amplified.

"So that's the bandit, eh?" One of the Voion rolled over, peering through the failing light of the sun, now a baleful spotlight behind flat purple clouds on the horizon. "He's a queer-looking Quopp. How'd you snare him?"

"I snatched him single-handed from under the noses of his compatriots, killing dozens and injuring hundreds more," Hish snapped in his breathy Groaci voice. "Now clear my path before I lose my temper and add you to the list of casualties."

"Okay, okay, don't get huffy," the guard said sullenly. He waved the pair toward the door. "For your sake I hope that's the genuine article you've got there," he muttered as Hish rolled awkwardly by on his prosthetic wheels.

"Oh, I'm genuine," Retief said. "You don't think he'd lie to you?"

Inside, Retief went ahead of Hish, glanced along the short hall, turned to Hish.

"You're doing fine, General. Now don't get excited and blow this next scene. It's the climax of the morning's entertainment." He took the gun, fitted the kick-stick back in the butt, slipped it into his concealed hip holster, then adjusted his face-mask.

"How do I look?"

"Like an insomniac's nightmare," Hish whispered. "Let me go now, Retief! When you're shot down for the idiot you are, it would be a pity if I were caught in the overkill."

"I'll see that your passing won't be accidental," Retief reassured the Groaci. He checked to see that the bulky pouch slung over his left hip was in place; its contents shifted with a dull clank of glass.

"All right, Hish," he said. "Let's go down."

"How can I negotiate these stairs, wheeled as I am?"

"No stalling, General. Just bump down the way the Voion do, not forgetting to use the hand rails."

Hish complied, grumbling. In the wide corridor one flight down, Voion sentries were posted at intervals. They turned cold oculars on the pair.

"Sing pretty," Retief said softly.

"You there," Hish keened at the nearest Voion. "Which are the chambers of His Omnivoracity?"

"Who wants to know, wobbly-wheels?" the cop came back. "What's this you've got in tow? A Terry-Quopp half-breed?" He made the scratchy sound that indicated Appreciation of One's Own Wit.

"What wandering cretin fertilized your tribal ovum racks just prior to your hatching?" Hish inquired pointedly. "But I waste time with these pleasantries. Show me the way to the Prime Minister or I'll see to it your component parts are added to the bench stock in a front line reppo deppo."

"You will, eh? Who the Worm you think you are!"

Hish tapped his narrow, Voion-armored thorax with a horny, pseudoclaw, eliciting a hollow clunk. "Is it possible you don't know the insignia of a general officer?" he hissed.

"Uh—is that what you are?" the fellow hesitated. "I never saw one."

"That omission has now been rectified," Hish announced. "Quickly now! This prisoner is the insurgent Commander-in-Chief."

"Yeah?" The guard rolled closer. Others in hearing pricked up their auditory antennae, moving in to follow the conversation.

"To watch your step," Retief said quietly in Groaci. "To remember that if I have to shoot, you'll be in my line of fire."

"Stop!" Hish snapped hoarsely, waving back the curious Voion. "Resume your posts at once! Clear the way!"

"Let's have a look at this stilter," a Voion shrilled.

"Yeah, I'd like to get a piece of the Quopp that blew the wheels off a couple of former associates of mine!"

"Let's work him over!"

Hish crowded back against Retief. "One step closer, and you die!" he choked. "I can assure you a gun is aimed at your vitals at this instant!"

"I don't see any guns."

"Let's see if this stilter's arms bend—"

There was the crash of a door slamming wide, an ear-splitting screech of Voion rage. The sentries whirled to see the oversized figure

of Prime Minister Ikk, Jarweel feathers a-tremble with rage, confronting them, flanked by armed guards.

"You pond-scum have the unmitigated insolence to conduct a free-for-all at my very door?" he shrilled. "I'll have the organ-clusters off the lot of you! Niv! Kuz! Shoot them down where they stand!"

"Ah . . . if I might interject a word, Your Omnivoracity?" Hish raised a hand. "I hope you remember me—General Hish? I just happened along with my prisoner."

"Hish? Prisoner? What—" The irate leader clacked his jeweled palps with a sound like a popped paper bag, staring at the disguised Groaci. "You mentioned the name of, ah, General Hish."

"Ah—there was the matter of a suitable, er, cover identity."

"Cover?" Ikk rolled up, waving the chastened sentries aside. He stared closely at Hish. "Hmmm. Yes," he muttered. "I see the joints now. Nice job. You look like a tribal reject with axle rickets and shorted windings, but I'd never have guessed . . ." He looked at Retief. "And you say this is a prisoner, Hish?"

"This, my dear Ikk, is the leader of the rabble forces."

"What? Are you sure?" Ikk rolled quickly back, looking Retief up and down. "I heard he was a stilter . . . maroon cuticula . . . rudimentary rotors . . . by the Worm, it fits! How did you manage—but never mind! Bring him along!" He whirled. His eye fell on the sentries huddled in a clump under the watchful oculars of the bodyguards.

"Send these good fellows along," he shrilled merrily. "See that they all get promotions. Nothing like a show of spirit, I always say. Shows morale's up." Buzzing a merry tune, the Voion leader led the way through the wide door into the Ambassadorial office and took up his pose under the large portrait of himself hanging where the Corps Ensign had been on Retief's last visit.

"Now!" He rubbed his grasping members together, eliciting a sound effect reminiscent of a hacksaw cutting an oil-drum. "Let's have a look at the dacoit who had the effrontery to imagine he could interfere with my plans!"

"Ah, Ikk." Hish made a fluttery gesture. "There are aspects to the present situation I haven't yet mentioned."

"Well?" Ikk canted his oculars at the Groaci. "Mention them at once! Not that they can be of any importance, with this fellow in my hands. A capital piece of work, Hish! For this, I may allow you to . . . But we'll go into that later."

"It's rather private," Hish whispered urgently. "If you wouldn't mind sending these fellows along?"

"Umph." Ikk waved an arm at his bodyguards. "Get out, you two. And while you're at it, tell Sergeant Uzz and his carpenters to hurry up with the ten-Terry gibbet. No need to wait until morning now."

The two Voion rolled silently to the door, closed it gently behind them. Ikk turned to Retief, making a clattering sound with his zygomatic plates indicative of Pleasure Anticipated.

"Now, criminal," he purred. "What have you to say for yourself?"

Retief lifted the holster flap, snapped out the power gun and leveled it at Ikk's head. "I'll let this open the conversation," he said genially.

XXI

Ikk crouched, slumped down over his outward-slanting wheels, his lower arms slack, his upper pair picking nervously at his chest inlays.

"You!" he addressed Hish. "A traitor! I trusted you! I gave you full powers, listened to your counsels, turned over my army to you! And now this!"

"Surprising how these matters sometimes turn out," Hish agreed in his whispery voice. He had his headpiece off now and was smoking one of Ikk's imported dopesticks. "Of course, there was the little matter of the assassins assigned to eliminate me from the picture as soon as you had achieved your modest goals. But I concede that was to be expected."

Ikk's oculars twitched. "Who, me?" he said dazedly. "Why . . ."

"Naturally, I eliminated them the first day. A small needle fired into their main armatures did the trick neatly."

There was a small sound at the door. It snapped wide and Ikk's two bodyguards rolled quickly through, guns at the ready, flipped the door shut behind them. Ikk came to life then, dropped behind the platinum Ambassadorial desk as the two swiveled to face Hish. Be-

hind the Groaci, Retief held the gun steady against his hostage's backplates.

"Shoot them down, Kuz!" Ikk shrilled. "Blast them into atoms! Burn them where they stand; never mind about the rub . . ."

His voice faded off. He extended an ocular above table-top level and saw the two Voion standing, guns at their sides.

"What's this?" he shrilled. "I order you to shoot them at once!"

"Please, my dear Ikk!" Hish objected. "Those supersonic harmonics are giving me a splitting headache!"

Ikk rose up, his palps working spasmodically. "But—but I summoned then! I pushed my secret button right here under my green and pink inlay!"

"Of course. But naturally, your bodyguards are on my payroll. But don't feel badly. After all, my budget—"

"But—" Ikk waved his arms at the Voion. "You can't mean it, fellows! Traitors to your own kind?"

"They're a couple of the chaps you ordered disassembled for forgetting to light your dope-stick," Hish said. "I countermanded the order and planted them on you."

"Then at least let them shoot the stilter!" Ikk proposed. "Surely you and I can settle our little differences—"

"The stilter has the drop on me, I'm afraid, Ikk. No, these two good lads will have to be locked in the W.C. Attend to it, will you? There's a good fellow."

"You handled that properly, Hish," Retief commended as Ikk

Groaci



rolled dejectedly back after snapping the lock behind his former adherents. "Now, Ikk, I think we'd better summon Ambassador Longspoon here to make the party complete."

Ikk grumbled, pressed a button on the silver mounted call-box, snapped an order. Five minutes dragged past. There was a tap at the door.

"You'll know just how to handle this," Retief suggested gently to Ikk.

Ikk twitched his oculars. "Send the Terry in!" he snapped. "Alone!"

The door opened cautiously. A sharp nose appeared past its edge, then an unshaven, receding chin, followed by the rest of the Terran Ambassador. He ducked his head at Ikk, shot a glance at Retief, and Hish, whose face was again concealed behind the Voion mask. He let the door click behind him, tugged at the upper set of chrome-plated lapels of his mauve after-midnight extra-formal cutaway, incongruous in the early evening light that gleamed through the hexagonal window behind Ikk.

"Ah . . . there you are, Mr. Prime Minister," he said. "Er, ah . . ."

"Hish, tell him not to get in my line of fire," Retief said in Tribal.

Longspoon's eyes settled on Retief, still fully armored, jumped to the disguised Groaci, then back to the Prime Minister. "I'm not sure I understand," he said.

"The person behind me is armed, my dear Archie," Hish said. "I fear he, not our respected colleague the Prime Minister, controls the situation."

Longspoon stared blankly at Retief, his close-set eyes taking in the maroon chest plates, the scarlet-dyed head, the pink rotors.

"Who — who is he?" he managed.

"He's the Worm-doomed trouble-maker who's had the effrontery to defeat my army," Ikk snapped. "So much for visions of a Quopp united in Voionhood!"

"And," Hish put in quickly, "you'll be astonished to learn that his name is . . ." He paused as though remembering something.

"Why, I know the bandit's name." Longspoon's mouth clamped in an indignant expression. "As a diplomat, it's my business to keep in touch with these folk movements. It's, ah, Tough-tough. Or Toof-toof or something of the sort."

"How clever of Your Excellency," Hish murmured.

"Now that the introductions are out of the way," Retief said in Tribal, "we'd better be getting on with the night's work. Ikk, I want the entire Embassy staff taken to the port and loaded aboard these foreign freighters you've impounded, and permitted to lift. Meanwhile, we'll use the hot line to Sector HQ to get a squadron of CDT Peace Enforcers headed out this way. I hope they arrive in time to salvage a few undamaged Voion for use as museum specimens."

"What's he saying?" Longspoon pulled at his stiff vermilion collar, his mouth opening and closing as though he were pumping air over gills.

"He demands that you and your staff leave Quopp at once," Ikk said.

“What’s that? Leave Quopp? Abandon my post? Why, why, this is outrageous! I’m a fully accredited Terran emissary of galactic good will! How could I ever explain to the Under-Secretary —”

“Tell him you departed under duress,” Ikk suggested. “Driven out by lawless criminals wielding illegal firearms.”

“Firearms? Here on Quopp? But that’s . . . that’s —”

“A flagrant violation of Interplanetary Law,” Hish whispered piously. “Shocking.”

“Give the orders, Ikk,” Retief said. “I want the operation concluded before Second Jooprise. If I have to sit here any longer with my finger on the firing stud it may begin to twitch involuntarily.”

“What? What?” Longspoon waited for a translation.

“He threatens to kill me unless I do as he commands,” Ikk said. “Much as I regret seeing you depart under such, ah, humiliating circumstances, Archie, I fear I’ve no choice. Still, after your dismissal from the Corps for gross dereliction of duty in permitting shipments of Terry-manufactured arms to the rebels —”

“I? Nonsense! There are no Terran weapons on Quopp!”

“Look at the gun even now being aimed at my Grand Cross of the Legion d’Cosme,” Ikk snapped. “I assume you know a Terran power pistol when it’s pointed at you.”

Longspoon’s face sagged. “A Browning Mark XXX,” he gasped.

Hish canted an eye to look at Retief. Retief said nothing.

“Still,” Ikk went on, “You can always write your memoirs. Under a pseudonym, of course, the name Longspoon having by then acquired a galaxy-wide taint.”

“I’ll not go!” Longspoon’s Adam’s apple quivered with indignation. “I’ll stay here until this is covered up — or, rather, until I’m able to clarify the situation.”

“Kindly advise the Ambassador that his good friend Ikk intends to hang him,” Retief instructed Hish.

“Lies!” Ikk screeched in Terran. “All lies! Archie and I have sucked the sourbale of eternal chumship!”

“I’ll not stir an inch!” Longspoon quavered. “My mind is made up!”

“Let’s have a little action, Ikk,” Retief ordered. “I can feel the first twitch coming on.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Ikk keened faintly. “My loyal troops would tear you wheel from wheel!”

“But you won’t be here to see it.” Prodding Hish ahead of him, Retief went up to the desk, leaned on it, put the gun to Ikk’s central inlay. “Now,” he said.

Behind him there was a rustle, a wheeze of effort —

He stepped back, whirled in time to see a chair wielded by the Ambassador an instant before it crashed down across his head.

“Ah,” Ikk purred, like a knife sawing through corn husks. “Our rabble-rouser is now in position to see matters in a new light!” He made rattling noises in tribute to the jest.

Retief was strapped into the same chair with which Longspoon had

crowned him, many loops of stout cord restraining his arms. He held his head-piece half turned away from the lamp which had been placed to glare into his oculars. A pair of heavy-armed Voion interrogation specialists stood by, implements ready. Hish was parked in a corner, striving to appear inconspicuous.

Longspoon, his lapels awry, hooked a finger under the rope knotted about his neck.

"I . . . I don't understand, Your Omnivoracity," he quavered. "What's the nature of the ceremony I'm to take part in?"

"I promised you'd be elevated to a high post," Ikk snapped. "Silence, or we'll settle for a small informal ritual right here in your office!"

He rolled over to confront Retief. "Who supplied the nuclear weapons with which you slaughtered my innocent, fun-loving, primitively armed freedom fighters? The Terrans, no doubt? A classic doublecross!"

"The Terrans supplied nothing but big ideas," Retief confided. "And you Voion got all of those."

"A claw-snap for their ideas." Ikk clicked his claws in discharge of the obligation. "You imagine I intended to conduct the planet's business with a cold Terran nose in all my dealings, carping at every trifling slum-clearance project that happened to involve the disassembly of a few thousand sub-Voion villagers? Hah! Longspoon very generously supplied sufficient equipment to enable me to launch the Liberation. But his usefulness ended the day the black banner of United Voionhood went over

Ixix!" He turned back to Retief. "Now, you will at once supply full information on rebel troop dispositions, armaments, unit designations—"

"Why ask him about troop dispositions, Ikk?" one of the interrogators asked. "Every Quopp on the planet's headed this way. We won't have any trouble finding them."

"It's traditional," Ikk snapped. "Now shut up and let me get on with this!"

"I thought we were the interrogators," the other Voion said sullenly. "You stick to your Prime Ministering and let union labor do their job."

"Hmmmph. I hope the union will enter no objection if my good friend Hish assists with the chore in the capacity of technical advisor?" He canted an ocular at the disguised Groaci. "What techniques would you recommend as being the most fun as well as most effective?"

"Who, I?" Hish stalled. "Why, wherever did you get such an idea?"

"To keep them occupied," Retief said quickly in Groaci. "To remember which side of the bread substitute has the ikky-wax on it."

"What's that?" Ikk wagged his antennae alertly at Retief. "What did you say?"

"Just invoking the Worm in her own language," Retief clarified.

"What language is that?"

"Worman, of course."

"Oh, yes. Well, don't do it any more!"

"Ikk!" Hish exclaimed. "A most disturbing thought has just come to me!"

"Well, out with it." Ikk tilted his eyes toward the Groaci.

"Ah—er . . . I hardly know how to phrase it . . ."

Ikk rolled toward him. "I've yet to decide just how to deal with you, Hish. I suggest you endear yourself to me immediately by explaining what these hems and haws signify!"

"I was thinking . . . that is, I hadn't thought . . . I mean, have you happened to think . . ."

Ikk motioned his torturers over. "I warn you, Hish! You'll tell me what this is all about at once, or I'll give my union men a crack at some overtime!"

As Hish engaged the Voion in conversation, Retief twisted his arm inside the fitted armor sheath and slipped his hand free of the gauntlet. The confining rope fell away. He reached to the pouch still slung at his side, lifted the flap, took out a small jar of thick amber fluid.

"Awwwwkk!" Ambassador Longspoon pointed at him, eyes goggling. "Help! It's liquid smashite! He'll blow us all to atoms!"

Ikk and his troops spun on their wheels. One Voion scabbled at a holster, as the jar hurtled through the air, smashed at his feet. A golden puddle spread across the rug in an aroma of pure Terran clover honey.

There was a moment's stunned silence.

"Sh-shoot him!" Ikk managed. But the Voion with the gun dropped the weapon, dived for the fragrant syrup. An instant later, both

interrogators were jackknifed over the honey, quivering in ecstasy, their drinking organs buried in nectar a thousand times stronger than the most potent Hellrose. Ikk alone still resisted, his antennae vibrating like struck gongs. He groped, brought up a gun, wavered, dithered, then with a thin cry dropped it and dived for the irresistible honey.

Retief shook the ropes from his arms, undid the straps and stood.

"Well done, General," he said. "I think that concluded this unfortunate incident in Quopp history. Now you and I had better have that little private chat you mentioned earlier . . ."

XXII

It was almost dawn. Ambassador Longspoon, freshly shaved and arrayed in a crisp breakfast-hour informal dickey in puce and ochre stripes, stared glumly across the width of his platinum desk at Retief, now back in mufti. Beside him, Colonel Underknuckle rattled a sheet of paper, cleared his throat, beetled his eyebrows.

"The report indicates that after the accused was seen with the bomb—just before being reported absent without leave—a cursory inspection of his quarters revealed, among other curiosities, the following: A dozen pairs of hand-tooled polyon undergarments with the monogram 'L', absent for some weeks from the wardrobe of Your Excellency; three cases of aged Pepsi from the Ambassadorial private stock; a voluminous secret correspondence with

unnamed subversive elements; a number of reels of high-denomination credit reported missing from the Budget and Fiscal Office; and a collection of racy photos of unfertilized ova."

"Gracious," Magnan murmured. "Did you find all those things yourself, Fred?"

"Of course not," the military attaché snapped. "The Planetary Police turned them up."

"What's that?" Longspoon frowned. "Considering subsequent events, I hardly think we can enter their findings as evidence. Let's confine ourselves to the matter of the bomb, and the irregularities at the port. And of course, the AWOL."

"Hmmmph! Seems a pity to waste perfectly good evidence."

"Mr. Ambassador," Magnan piped. "I'm sure it's all just an unfortunate misunderstanding. Perhaps Retief wasn't at the port at all . . ."

"Well?" Longspoon waited, eyes boring into Retief.

"I was there," Retief said mildly.

"But — but, maybe it wasn't really a bomb he had," Magnan offered.

"It was a bomb, all right," Retief conceded.

"Well, in that case," Longspoon began.

"Ah — gentlemen, if I may put in a word?" General Hish, minus his Voion trappings and dapper in a dun-colored hip-cloak and jeweled eye-shields, hitched his chair forward. "The bomb . . . ah . . . it was, er, that is to say, I, ah . . ."

"Yes, yes, get on with it, General," Longspoon snapped. "I've a number of other questions to ask

you as soon as this distasteful business is cleared up."

"It was my bomb," Hish whispered.

"Your bomb?" Underknuckle and Longspoon said in chorus.

"I, ah, had been led astray by evil companions," Hish said, arranging his mandibles at angles indicative of deprecation. "That is, I had supplied the infernal machine to a group whom I understood intended to employ it to er, ah, carry out patriotic measures directed against reactionary elements. Little did I suspect that it was the Terran Embassy which was thus so ungenerously characterized. At the last moment, learning of the fell intent of these insidious schemers, I, um, advised Mr. Retief of its whereabouts —"

"Heavens, nobly done!" Magnan gushed. "Gracious, and I always thought you Groaci had sort of a teentsy little prejudice against us Terrans."

"Ignoring for the moment the matter of Groaci interference in Quopp's internal affairs," Underknuckle snorted, "there's still the matter of the stolen publications! What about that, eh? Can't wiggle out of this one, can you, by golly!"

"Oh, I wanted to mention," Magnan said. "Those bound volumes of the *Pest Control Journal* —"

"You didn't say *Pest Control Journal*, did you, Magnan?" Longspoon demanded.

"Yes, indeed I did say *Pest Contr* —"

"What idiot shipped that particular periodical in here?" Longspoon bellowed. "The entire journal's devoted to methods of annihilating arthropods with chitinous exoskeletons and ventral ladder-type nervous systems! If that sort of thing were ever released among the Quoppina—why, we'd be hailed as the greatest murderers since Attila the Hung!"

"Hun," Magnan corrected.

"Well, I trust he was hung eventually! And the same goes for the nincompoop who ordered the *PCJP*"

"Gee, Fred," Magnan looked at Underknuckle. "Wasn't it you who—"

"Well, so that's taken care of," Underknuckle said briskly.

"That seems to leave nothing outstanding but the unauthorized absence," Longspoon commented. "We can deal with this charge at the local level, I think, Fred."

"Pity, in a way." The attache blinked at Retief. "I'd intended to ship him out under guard for examination by a Board of Interrogators, after which he'd be stripped of rank in a most colorful ceremony—"

The desk screen buzzed. "The Revolutionary Council is here to see you, Mr. Ambassador," a vinegary voice announced.

"Show them in at once, Fester." Longspoon arranged his features and faced the door expectantly. "I'll just quickly establish my ascendancy over these fellows," he explained. "May as well get matters off on the correct footing."

Magnan leaned toward Retief. "I love watching him work," he mur-

mured. "It only took him an instant to decide on Hearty Congratulation plus Alert Awareness of Irregularities, and just the teeniest bit of Latent Severity, all tied together with a touch of Gracious Condescension."

"A great technician," Retief agreed. "Too bad you can't tell the result from Stunned Incredulity."

"Um. Still, the Quoppina won't know the difference."

The door opened. Fester appeared, ushering in the newly buffed figure of Jik-jik, his scarlet cuticula gleaming under multiple coats of wax, a new Jarweel feather bobbing behind his left rear antenna.

Behind him was the tall figure of Tupper, similarly glorified. Ozzl followed, with half a dozen other representatives of the victorious Federation.

"Ah, Mr. Tief-tief, I presume?" Longspoon rose, extended a hand. Jik-jik waved it off.

"No thanks, not hungry. Besides, us is got a new rule: Greens for Grubs and Grown-ups. Allies is better than Entrees."

"What's he saying?" Longspoon muttered.

"He's just explaining the Federation's new dietary arrangements," Retief explained.

"A food faddist, eh?" Longspoon nodded wisely.

Jik-jik glanced about the room; his oculars settled on Retief. "Hey," he said. "Ain't you—"

"Still working under cover," Retief said quickly. "Pretend you don't know me."

"Tell Mr. Tief-tief that I'm much disturbed by the recent disorders," Longspoon instructed. "Still, I'll listen to an explanation."

"Did you get the Terry females into the city safely?" Retief asked the Ween.

"Sure did, Tief-tief. They at the port, waiting for that Terry Peace Enforcer coming in this morning."

"What did he say?" Longspoon demanded.

"He'll examine your credentials presently, Mr. Ambassador. Meanwhile, keep your manipulative members out of Quopp's affairs."

"He said *that*?" Longspoon's face darkened.

"I'm giving a free translation," Retief explained. "Meanwhile, what about CDT recognition of the new regime?"

"Recognition? Hmmm. There was the matter of a certain understanding with the Voion . . ."

"Shall I remind him of that?"

"By no means! Tell him, ah, that I shall look forward to regularization of relations between our two peoples as soon as one or two points are ironed out. Now, we'll want an understanding on commercial matters. I think a thousand-man Trade Mission would be just about right . . ."

"Did you find the remains of the yacht the girls were in?" Retief inquired of Jik-jik.

"Uh-huh. Just like you say, Tief-tief. It blasted by some kind of big fire-gun. Big hole in the side."

Retief glanced at Hish, who aimed his five eyes at different corners of the room and began hum-

ming the opening bars of *You Tell Me Your Dream, I'll Tell You Mine*.

"Well?" Longspoon barked.

"He says there's to be no Terry interference in Quopp's tradition of free enterprise," Retief advised the Ambassador. "And no more harassment of the traders at Rum Jungle and the other Market Towns."

"Eh? But what about the land reform program?"

"There'll be a big party tonight aboard the Terry ship," Retief said to the delegates. "The Ambassador hopes you can make it."

"Nothing like a little socializing to take the boys' mind off the fun they missing not getting to loot the town," Jik-jik said. "Us'll be there for sure."

"The Federated Tribes will tolerate no political intervention of any kind," Retief relayed to Longspoon. "They specifically reject anything with the word 'reform' in it."

"Gad! This fellow's a reactionary of the worst stripe! Surely he won't object to my Jungle Slum clearance plan, my Pretties for the Underprivileged Program and my Spiraling Price Support formula!"

"I hope you followed my advice and disarmed the Voion instead of annihilating them," Retief said to Jik-jik.

"Head-chopping hard work," the Ween agreed. "Us worked out a nice arrangement where one Voion assigned to each village to keep the sanitary drains open. It working out good."

"They like the jungle the way it is," Retief informed Longspoon.

"No one gets any privileges unless he can manage them for himself. And prices will be controlled by supply and demand."

"I see I've underrated this fellow," Longspoon muttered to his aides. "He's obviously an exponent of some rather far-out economic theories." He adjusted a smile expressing the unspoken rapport existing between Men of the World. "Tell him that I've been considering the size of the development loan I'll be prepared to recommend, and I've decided that the sum of, ah—" he glanced at Magnan—"ten million?"

"Twenty," Magnan murmured. "Per year," he added.

"Plus the military aid program," Underknuckle put in. "I'd estimate a hundred-man Advisory Group—"

"Twenty-five million per annum," Longspoon said decisively. "With a cost-of-dying increase built in. Plus a sliding scale to compensate for seasonal fluctuations."

"Fluctuations in what?" Magnan asked alertly.

"Anything that fluctuates, damn it!" the Ambassador snapped.

Retief nodded solemnly. "Did you collect the guns?" he asked Jik-jik.

Jik-jik wiggled his oculars uncomfortably. "Uh, well, Tief-tief, it like this—"

"Bury 'em, Jik-jik," Retief said sternly. "We agreed that firearms take all the fun out of fighting."

Jik-jik gave the soft squeal that was the Ween equivalent of a sigh. "Okay. I guess you right, Tief-tief. Me and Tupper here already

done a little scrapping over what tribe get 'em. I guess I rather bury 'em all than wind up looking down the barrel next time they a little inter-tribal rumble."

"What does he say?" Longspoon demanded.

"No loan," Retief translated.

"Oh, he's holding out for an outright grant," Longspoon rubbed his hands together. "Well, I think that could be arranged. Naturally, that will call for closer control. Say an additional staff of fifty—"

"No grants, either."

"See here!" Longspoon clamped his mouth. "If the fellow's going to be unreasonable . . ."

"All he wants is a Monitor Service station in a quarter-million mile orbit to ensure that no cargoes move between Groac and Quopp—in either direction."

General Hish made a choking sound. Colonel Underknuckle brightened. "That's reasonable," he stated. "Now, let me see. The station would fall under my command, naturally. For a medium sized unit, say thirty men—"

"There's one other thing," Retief said. "Terran honey will have to be added to Narcotics Control's list of excluded items as far as Quopp is concerned."

"Hmmp." Longspoon eyed Jik-jik sourly. "I must say this chap is a shrewder negotiator than I'd anticipated. I can see we're all going to have to tighten our belts and settle down to a long campaign before we can bring Quopp to readiness for membership in the Free Liaison of Organized Planets."

Magnan sniffed. "From what I've seen of these confounded rebels — that is, of the freedom-loving standard-bearers of the aroused populace — they may *never* be ready for FLOP."

"Nonsense, Magnan! Just give us a few more sessions at the conference table. They'll come around. I may even take time to absorb the language — not that I don't already have a good working knowledge of it," he added. "You handled the interpretation fairly well, Retief, but you missed a few of the finer nuances."

"I thought the nuances were the best part," Retief commented.

"Maybe you'd better invite these fellows along to the Military Ball tonight," Underknuckle announced. "After all, as the rebel leaders, we can consider them as honorary military men."

"By all means," Longspoon said. "An excellent opportunity to make a few points; or rather, to implement our sincere and heartfelt sense of solidarity with the forces of popular aspiration."

"Oh, well put, Mr. Ambassador!" Magnan gasped.

"It will be a gala affair," Underknuckle said. "A fitting conclusion to the excitement of the week, as well as a tribute to General Tief-tief and his gallant warriors of the Federated Tribes." He looked at Retief severely. "Tell 'em that; that'll soften 'em up."

"Remember now," Retief said to the callers. "No fighting at tonight's big social event. Colonel Underknuckle abhors violence."

"Okay, Tief-tief," Jik-jik said. "By the way, we is heard they going to be some extra good stuff on hand." He worked his oculars in a Quoppina wink. "I hopes that ain't no mere rumor."

"I'll personally spike the punch-bowl," Retief assured him. He turned to Underknuckle. "He wants to know if he should wear his medals."

"By all means!" Underknuckle boomed. "Full dress, medals and orders! A real military occasion." He gave Retief a cold eye. "As for yourself, sir — inasmuch as you're under charges for AWOL, I suggest you consider yourself confined to quarters until further notice."

XXIII

Retief and Jik-jik stood together at the arched entrance to the mirror-floored Grand Ballroom aboard the CDT Armed Monitor Vessel *Expedient*, watching the brilliantly gowned and uniformed diplomats of a dozen worlds gathered under the chandeliers to celebrate the new independence of Quopp.

"Well, Tief-tief," the Ween said. "Look like all the excitement over for a while. I going to miss it. Cutting greens not near as good exercise as snipping Voion down to size." He sighed. "Us going to miss you, too, when you goes back to Stiltsville."

"You'll find that fighting in defense of peace will absorb all your spare energy, now that you're civilized," Retief reassured him.

"I is a great believer in peaceful settlements," Jik-jik assured him.

"Ain't nobody as peaceful as a dead troublemaker."

"Just keep it within reason, or you'll have the Terries on your neck. They tend to be spoil-sports when it comes to good old-fashioned massacres."

"Sound like a good tip. I'll keep it in mind." Jik-jik leaned close to Retief. "Beat me how that disguise of yours fool these Terries, even right up close. It ain't *that* good."

"Let me know if it starts to slip."

Big Leon appeared, uncomfortable in a brand-new black dress coverall and white tie.

"Looks like old Longspoon learned something while that rope was around his neck," he said. "Seems like maybe us traders are going to get a square deal now."

"Most people are willing to give up their misconceptions," Retief said. "Once they have them tattooed on their hide with a blunt instrument."

"Yeah. Uh." Leon looked at Jik-jik. "I guess I had a bunch of wrong ideas about you boys, too. You looked pretty good charging in out of the jungle yesterday."

"You Terries done heap up a big stack of arguments yourselves. Maybe us ought to work out some kind of mutual insistence agreement."

"Yeah. While we're at it, why don't you boys come around the store sometime? I got a line of luminous neckties coming in that'll tie knots in your oculars."

General Hish caught Retief's eye; he strolled over to join the small Groaci, now resplendent in formal

kit including a gold fringe that dragged the floor and three honorary head-bladders, one with fig-leaf cluster.

"Really, Retief, I think you went a bit far when you banned Groaci shipping from an entire volume of space," Hish whispered. "I fear I shall have to insist on a relaxation of the stricture, as well as certain other concessions in the field of, ah, minerals exploration."

A waiter offered drinks. Hish accepted a clay pot of thick brandy. Retief lifted a slender-stemmed glass of pale pink liquor. "Don't confuse your terminology, Hish," Retief said.

"I didn't ban your arms-runners and smugglers. It was the wish of Tief-tief, remember?"

"Come, come," Hish hissed. "Out of regard for a colleague, I refrained from advising your Ambassador of the rather baroque role you played in the upsetting of his plans, but—"

"Tsk, tsk, Hish. I thought we'd settled all this earlier."

"That was before you overplayed your hand in presuming to dictate the terms of the Terran-Quoppina accord," Hish said crisply. "I think now that, all things considered—"

"Ah, but have all things been considered?" Retief sampled his drink, eyed the Groaci.

"Your departure from the role of diplomat to lead the rebel forces was a trifling departure from protocol compared with deluding your Chief of Mission in his own sanctum sanctorum," Hish pointed out. "Still, if you arrange matters to permit a

few teams of Groaci prospectors to pan a little gravel in the interior, perhaps I'll forget to mention the matter."

"I think you'd better suppress any impulses you may have in the direction of overly candid disclosures," Retief advised. "At least until after the Board of Inquiry into the matter of the downed yacht. The investigation is being pressed rather vigorously by His Imperial Majesty, Ronare the Ninth of Lily. It was his yacht, you know."

"A great pity. But I fail to see what —"

"It was just luck that the missile that hit the vessel failed to detonate and was found, nearly intact, wedged in among what was left of the stern tubes."

"Retief! Have you . . .?"

"The shell is in the hands of the Federated Tribes. They can't read Groaci, so they have no way of knowing who supplied it. Still, now that the evidence has been deposited in a safe place —"

"Blackmail?" Hish whispered urgently. "And after I risked my existence to get you into Ikk's office!"

"The famous Groaci instinct for backing a winner was operating that day," Retief said. "Now, I believe

we agreed that nothing was to be gained by mentioning the unfortunate error that caused Groaci guns to be substituted for Terran propaganda."

"If you expose me, I'll inform the Galaxy of your dastardly role in the affair!" the Groaci hissed.

"I confess I might find that personally embarrassing," Retief said. "But my report will place all Groac in a very dim light."

"Not so loud!" Hish warned, looking around.

"But we still haven't discussed the moral implications of your scheme to import from Quopp large volumes of parts for your justly famed transistorized Tri-D sets, mechanical egg-timers and electronic pleasure-center stimulators."

"But Quopp manufactures no such components," Hish said weakly.

"Now, we both know better than that, don't we?" Retief reproved gently. "The Voion were to handle the harvesting, disassemble and sort the victims and deliver them to the port. And you were to pay them off in armaments. What the Voion didn't know was that the entire scheme was merely a cover-up for something else."

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“My dear Retief, you’ve gotten a touch of the sun,” Hish whispered. “You’re raving!”

“Once comfortably established, it would have been a simple matter to dispense with your Voion helpers and proceed to the real business at hand. Turning the whole planet into a breeding ground for a number of rather rare species of Quoppina inhabiting the central regions of the Deep Jungle.”

“What a perfectly fantastic allegation!” Hish said breathlessly. “Why on Quopp would we Groaci go in for breeding aliens?”

“Every creature on the planet assimilates metal into its makeup. Most of the varieties in this region use iron, copper, antimony, arsenic and so on. It just happens that there are a number of little-known tribes inhabiting the Deep Jungle on the other side of the planet who sequester silver, gold, uranium, platinum and traces of a few other useful materials.”

“Really? Why, who would have thought it!”

“You might have,” Retief said bluntly. “Inasmuch as I discovered specimens in your luggage.”

“You searched my luggage?” Hish’s jeweled eyeshields almost fell off.

“Certainly. You carelessly left it aboard the heli you used to pay your call at my camp just before I was forced to blow up the Voion officer’s field mess.”

“I claim diplomatic immunity!” Hish croaked. “I demand the right to consult a lawyer!”

“Don’t panic. I haven’t confided

these matters in anyone yet. I thought you might want an opportunity to smooth things over in a quieter way.”

“But, my dear Retief, of course! Any little thing I can do—”

“Here!” a loud Terran voice said behind Retief. “I thought I confined you to your quarters, sir!”

Retief turned. The portly figure of Colonel Underknuckle confronted him, the broad mud-colored lapels of his full-dress uniform sagging over his hollow chest, his shoulder boards drooping under the weight of gold braid. “You’ll leave this vessel at once and . . . and . . .”

His jaw sagged back against a cushion of fat, exposing inexpensive GI plates. His eyes goggled at Retief’s bronze-black uniform, the dragon rampant insignia of a Battle Commander worked in gold thread on the collar, the short cape of dark velvet, silver-lined, the rows of medals, orders, jeweled starbursts.

“Here,” he said weakly. “What’s this? Impersonating an officer?”

“I believe reservists are required to wear appropriate uniforms at a Military Ball,” Retief said.

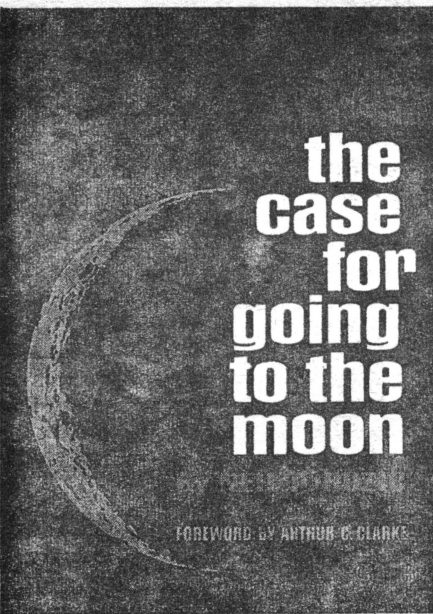
“A Battle Commander? A general officer? Impossible. You’re a civilian! An imposter! A fake!”

“Oh, no, he’s quite genuine,” a mellow feminine voice said behind the colonel.

He spun. A breath-taking girl in a silvery gown and a jeweled coronet smiled at him.

“And—and how would you know?” he blurted.

“Because he holds his commis-



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sion in the armed forces of my world."

"Your world?" He blinked at her. "Here, aren't you the person who ignored my order not to land here?"

"My dear Colonel," General Hish interjected, placing a limp Groaci hand on Underknuckle's arm. "Is it possible you don't know? This young lady is Her Highness Princess Fiana-Glorian Deliciosa Hermione Arianne de Retief et du Lille."

"B—b—but I gave orders—"

"And I countermanded them, Colonel. I knew you'd understand." She smiled radiantly.

"And now, Colonel, I think you and General Hish would like to have a little chat," Retief put in. "He wants to tell you all about his plans for a Groaci surgical and prosthetics mission to improve the lot of the Quoppina war wounded, past and future." He looked at the Groaci. "Right, General?"

"Quite correct, my dear Battle Commander," Hish whispered in a resigned tone. "And the other matters we were discussing?"

"I've forgotten what they were."

"Ahh. To be sure. So have I, now that you mention it." Hish moved off, whispering to Underknuckle. Retief turned to Fifi, inclined his head.

"If I may crave the honor?" he asked.

"You'd better," she said, taking his hand and turning to the dance floor. "After coming all this way just to lead a charge in sheet-metal underwear. I think I deserve a little attention!"

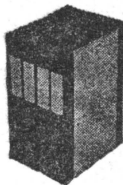
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Dear Editor:

I write this letter not to praise or criticize your magazine, but to merely express my own opinions. It has been a long time since I have written to a sf magazine, however I now feel the time has come.

With the passing of time, there has been a steady decrease in sf magazines. Whereas once there were five and six magazines a fan could really get acquainted with, now there are only two or three. Foremost among these two or three magazines is *If*.

This leaves *If* with a responsibility to its audience. *If* not only has the task of entertaining its readers with good stories, but it also has the duty of making the reader feel that *If* is *his* magazine. Unless I am mistaken, most readers like to feel that the magazine they are reading is aimed especially at them.

As of right now, I feel that *If* is the only reader-oriented sf magazine. Not only do you run excellent stories, but you also have a lively letter column. Perhaps the letter column and the editorials are the most important parts of your magazine. The stories you run often go on to hard-covers and paperbacks, but the departments are yours alone.

I, for one, am in favor of book reviews. I am also in favor of an expanded letter column. In fact, I favor anything which can bring *If* closer to its audience.

You've reached a peak of excellence in your fiction. How about working on the departments now? — Jim Armstrong, 5335 Holland St., Arvada, Colorado.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Your editorial in the new *If* set me to thinking. I managed finally to compile a list of what I considered the twenty best sf stories (*Unknown Worlds*-type fantasy I include in my definition of sf.) They are the following, in no particular order.

The Star by Arthur C. Clarke. *The Piper's Son* by Henry Kuttner. *Hell Is Forever* by Alfred Bester. *Brave To Be A King* by Poul Anderson. *Alpha Ralpa Boulevard* by Cordwainer Smith. *A Work of Art* by James Blish. *Requiem* by Robert A. Heinlein. *The Wind People* by Marion Zimmer Bradley. *Nightmare Brother* by Alan E. Nourse. *The Big Trek* by Fritz Leiber. *A Rose For Ecclesiastes* by Roger Zelazny. *Project Nursemaid* by Judith Merril. *The Golden Horn* by Edgar Pangborn. *A Gun For Din-*

osaur by L. Sprague deCamp. — *And The Moon Be Still As Bright* by Ray Bradbury. *Saucer of Loneliness* by Theodore Sturgeon. *The Snowmen* by Frederik Pohl. *Road To Nightfall* by Robert Silverberg. *What's It Like Out There?* by Edmond Hamilton. *Status Quo* by Mack Reynolds.

You were right about most of them being longer than the ordinary short story. But by my reckoning, only four of the above are short stories. (I took what you said to exclude novels of serial length.)

The upcoming *If* sounds good indeed. I want to see more Retief, Gree, Fred Saberhagen's Berserker yarns, a Heinlein serial, Harry Harrison. (P. Schuyler Miller, in reviewing the anthology *Judith Merrill's Project Nursemaid* was in, said he hoped the story was only a prologue to a full-length novel about the children growing up on the project. I hope so too and I think it'd be a good idea to see if you could get her to write it for one of the *Galaxy* magazines. — James Edward Turner, Box 161, Pilot Knob, Missouri 63663.)

* * *

Dear Editor:

In *Hue and Cry* for September, you said you'd try to get the new Heinlein novel, even if it is extra long; in the current *Hue & Cry* (October) you announce victory with "we're going to attempt to bring it to you intact". One thing I cannot abide is a shortened or "magazine" version of a novel. After publishing Doc Smith's giant and gaining 32 pages, the length of any good novel should not phase you.

Thanks for publishing the Retief data. Extras such as that add to your well deserved popularity, as does the Retief serial and wrap-around cover AND that bomb you planted in your editorial, something about a few Isaac Asimov stories on hand . . .

Just what are you trying to prove? Your predecessor saved *If* from oblivion. When you took over were you satisfied? No, not you. YOU had to experiment — change format, spruce up the covers and the interior, bring in "outsiders" like Simak, Smith, Van Vogt, Clement and whatshisname, oh yeah, Heinlein. Going for the top, huh? Not satisfied yet you went monthly and now, to top it all, you add thirty-two pages. Some editors are just plain pushy. Just what are you trying to prove, that you can win a Hugo?

Could be! — David Charles Pas-kow, 817 West 66th Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 19126.

● Well, we do print shorter versions of novels sometimes (not so much because we impose any arbitrary length limit as because we sometimes have the feeling that the long versions are fattened up to fill out a book) — but *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* sure isn't one of them! Matter of fact, the version you now have beginning in this issue of *If* is just about exactly the way Bob Heinlein wrote it, barring a few little stylistic changes and those necessary to divide it into installments — more so than the book will be! — *The Editor*.

* * *

Dear Editor:

I just got around to reading your editorial in the September *If* (about UFOs). As a charter member of

NICAP, I want to say how glad I am that you are willing to examine the evidence dispassionately. Between the obstructive tactics of the Air Force and the idiocies of the lunatics who "visit" and "converse" with the space people (and by the way, I'm afraid *Under Two Moons* will give them ideas—they have no sense of humor!), it is hard to get the general public to realize how strong the actual evidence is. I think myself the UFOs are unmanned automata sent out from a mother ship—like our unmanned explorers in our own little solar system.—Miriam Allen deFord.

* * *

Dear Editor:

The first *If* I read was the issue for July, 1963. The serial was *The Reefs of Space*. There was a Retief story—*Mightiest Qorn*—and a notice that next month A. E. Van Vogt's first new story in 14 years would appear. That *If* was 180 pages, the table of contents was printed all in black ink, and the title at the beginning of each story was blue.

Well, *The Reefs* and Retief and Van Vogt—by the way, how do you pronounce that?—hooked me for the September issue, two months away. The stories and serial were great, and you used two colors of ink. I waited for November.

In November the cover was beautiful and the entire issue was a prize winner. The illustrations, format, and the fiction were superlative, and I was addicted to *If*.

Things kept on piling up. A big list: the cover on the January '64 issue, *Waterspider*, the continuing Retief, the May All Smith issue in

which you brought back Doc S., the news about *Skylark DuQuesne*, *The Silkis*, *If* goes monthly, *Farnham's Freshhold*, the Gree stories, *The Hounds of Hell*, *The Ultimate Racer*—I've read that particular gem at least 50 times by now—*When Time Was New* (is that the start of some sort of series?), *Starchild*, and I think *Retief*, *God-Speaker*, deserves some particular applause, *The Replicators*, Fred Saberhagen's Berserker tales, and . . . well, the list is too long to mention. Everything up to the present *Skylark* and the big new *If*.

In some two years *If* has gone an incredible distance from slim, plain little bi-monthly mag to the impressive, full bodied article of today, rotten with top quality writers. It's rather like watching a small child grow up into a magnificent adulthood. Congratulations and many thanks.—George Kott, 1409 Noel Court, North Merrick, N.Y.

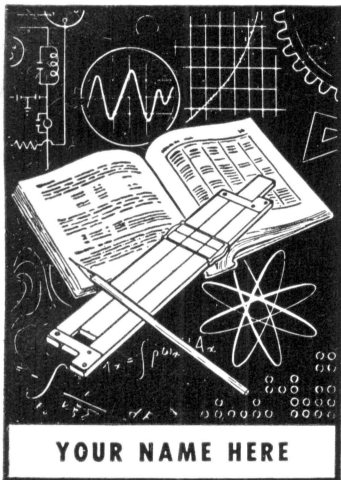
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● That takes care of our space for another month.

Let's see, this month's "First" is Gerald Pearce's *Security Syndrome*. These have been coming in at a pretty good clip lately, but we can always use more—so if you've been meaning to try your hand at writing science fiction, remember we print at least one new writer every issue

Notice the banner with a strange device on our cover? The word is "Tanstaaf!". If you wonder what it means—stick around for the next installment of *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* and let Bob Heinlein tell you! The Editor

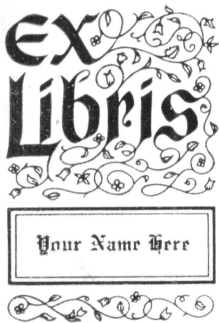
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H. P. Ohio

\$2,880 in One Month

"I took in \$2,880 in April. I worked from my home. My wife handles all telephone calls. We both enjoy our new found independence and the compliments we get from satisfied customers."

J. F. A. Texas

\$360 Job Finished in one day

"I did the Sorority House in one day for \$360. This business is in its infancy."

H. L. B. Texas



\$116 for 6 Hours Work

"I have done hotels, studios, restaurants and churches. That is where the big money is. Example: One Saturday, \$210 in 11 hours. Monday, \$116 in 6 hours. I have also contracted to clean 80,000 square feet of carpet for a store for \$4,000."

G. F. Wisconsin

FREE BOOK tells how these people—and hundreds of others—got started in this Big Money business. Send for your copy now.

Let me give you the same start I gave these men!

In one way, the big earnings reported here might be called exceptional. In another way, there is nothing exceptional about them. That's because any man who will follow instructions and is willing to work at his own Duraclean business should be able to do as well under similar conditions.

Each of the men quoted here had talents and abilities different from those of all the rest. *But each had one thing in common*—a desire to win personal independence in a business of his own. And each man took five identical steps to reach his goal.

1. Each one read an announcement such as you are reading now.
2. He wrote for complete information.
3. He read the literature we sent him.
4. He gained new confidence in himself and the belief that he could succeed with Duraclean.
5. He accepted our offer to help him get started. Later, he wrote to tell us about his success.

In each case, remember, *the first step was to write to Duraclean for information.* If you would like to own a business of your own, why don't you do as these men did—*right now.*

When I hear from you, I will send you facts about the Duraclean Franchise that will open your eyes. You will see why a Franchise business such as ours makes success for the individual the rule rather than the exception.

The Duraclean home service business has been tried and tested. The market for Duraclean Service is tremendous—and growing. The methods that lead to success have been clearly charted. When an ambitious man follows these methods, success is the logical result.

Some Franchise businesses require investments as high as \$50,000. With ours, you can get started for a few hundred dollars and we finance the balance. Monthly payments are so small that the profits on less than one day's service can cover your payment for the entire month. Even with this small investment and operating as a one man business, your potential is \$250.00 a week net profit. With two men working for you 35 hours a week, you should gross a profit of \$420.00. Allowing 20% for advertising and incidentals, the net would amount to \$336.00.

The most important part of Duraclean home service is cleaning rugs; carpets and upholstered furniture by a revolutionary modern process known as the "Absorption Method." You do the work right in the customer's premises. No harsh scrubbing with motor-driven brushes. No soaking. Instead, an aerated foam loosens the dirt and holds it in suspension until removed. A test conducted by an impartial laboratory showed that the modern Absorption Method removed twice as much dirt as

was removed by old fashioned machine scrubbing.

If you are tired of working for others or of jumping from one proposition to another—if you have a real yearning for independence in a business of your own—then send for "The Duraclean Route to Success." There is no obligation—no charge. No salesmen will call to high pressure you. Send for the book now. Read it. Then if you want to take the next step toward independence, you can write to me and let me give you the same help I've given so many other successful men.

Frank Maul
President

DURACLEAN COMPANY

522D Duraclean Building, Deerfield, Ill. 60015

GRANT MAUK, President
523D Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Ill. 60015

Dear Mr. Mauk:
Please mail a copy of your Free Book that tells how I can get a Duraclean Franchise started in spare time without giving up my present income. No charge. No obligation. And no salesman is to call on me.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____