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# HAPPINESS IS A WARM SPACESHIP

James Tiptree, Jr.

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## TO KILL A WORLD

Irwin Ross

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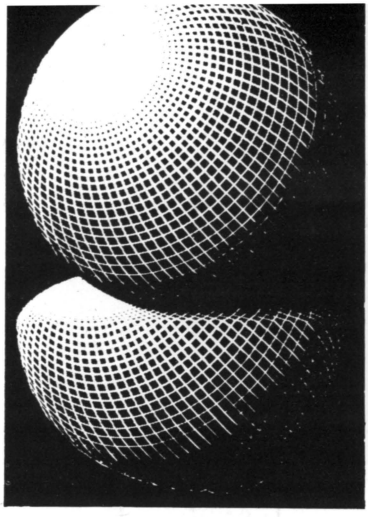
Barry Weissman



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# WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

ALL NEW STORIES



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# EDITOR'S PAGE

## The Dream Keepers

EIGHTEEN hundred tomorrow's children had finished eating a dead thing. The air was thick with dreams. Something unhuman was alive in the room and the dreamers all knew it. They were children only in terms of tomorrow—tonight they were ageless and bright. And old and young.

Whatever was alive in that room had come at their bidding—as they themselves had come. They had the power to evoke—like so many witches—not only the Unknown and the Things That Were To Be but each other. And sometimes all three were the same. Now everyone attending was what the others had called into being—they were each other's creations—and out of the three hundred and sixty-five nights of the year this night was theirs.

They had shed their other realities like outergarments before entering the room and here no one knew them. They themselves did not know.

They were wordmasters—therefore futuremasters—and words flew in the room. Most were spoken by one of their number who stood in the light. The rest sat in the dimness, replete with and alert from the dead thing they had eaten, waiting for their thing, their nightthing, to take shape. They knew it was there but not how it looked or felt to the senses.

The scene ending the 1969 World Science Fiction Convention banquet in St. Louis wore the aura of a seance—except that it had nothing to do with ghosts. Only the food had been dead. The people present belonged to tomorrow. They ranged from students through doctors, lawyers, educators, to scientists and—topping all, of course—the writers and the fans who are the dream-keepers.

They had paid brief honors to their quick yesterdays and were reaching for the future where none of them had been. And now their man in the light—Harlan Ellison—was calling down the hovering unhuman who was feeding in the air thick with dreams.

He gave it a name—and down it came. Words flew and clashed, creating energy, friction and heat—for tomorrow can have no name. The unhuman gobbled the words and the dreams and the night grew gravid with Things To Come.

And before that huge alive unhuman unborn, tomorrow's tumultuous children grew silent. We filed out of the vast rooms, out of the dimness and the light—and I for one had the feeling that each had taken the dream of the one and made it his and her own.

This page is for the man in the light, without whom many things would not be.

—JAKOBSSON

*These great minds were Rosicrucians...*

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# HAPPINESS IS A WARM SPACESHIP

JAMES TIPTREE, Jr.

*Every male aboard had a minority problem, a race problem—and the same damn girl problem!*

THE rainbow floods were doused. The station band had left. Empty of her load of cadets, the F.S.S. *Adastra* floated quietly against the stars. The display of First Assignments in the station rotunda was deserted. The crowd had moved to the dome lounge, from which echoed the fluting of girls, the braying and cooing of fathers, mothers, uncles and aunts, punctuated by the self-conscious baritones of the 99th Space Command class.

Down below, where the Base Central offices functioned as usual, a solitary figure in dress whites leaned rigidly over the counter of Personnel.

"You're absolutely certain there's no mistake?"

"No, it's all in order, Lieutenant Quent." The girl who was coding his status tabs smiled. "First officer, P.B. *Ethel P. Rosenkrantz*, dock eight-two, departs seventeen thirty—that's three hours from

now. You have to clear Immunization first, you know."

Lieutenant Quent opened his mouth, closed it, breathed audibly. He picked up the tabs.

As he strode away a tubby man wearing a *Gal News* badge trotted up to the counter.

"That lad is Admiral Quent's son. What'd he get, Goldie?"

"I shouldn't tell you—a peebee."

"A what? No!"

She nodded, bright-eyed.

"Sweetheart, I'll name you in my will!" He trotted off.

In the medical office Quent was protesting, "But I've had all my standard shots a dozen times!"

The M.O. studied a data display which stated, among other things, that Quent was a Terra-norm human male, height 1.92 m., skin Cauc tan, hair Br., eyes Br., distinguishing marks, None. The data did not mention a big homely jaw and two eyebrows which tended to meet in a straight line.

"What's your ship? Ah, the *Rosenkrantz*. Take off your blouse."

"What do I need shots for?" persisted Quent.

"Two fungus, one feline mutate, basic allergens," said the M.O., briskly cracking ampoules.

"Feline what?"

"Other arm, please. Haven't you met your fellow officers?"

"I just got this rancid assignment twenty minutes ago."

"Oh. Well, you'll see. Flex that arm a couple of times. It may swell a bit."

"What about my fellow officers?" Quent demanded darkly.

The M.O. cracked another ampoule and cocked an eye at the display.

"Aren't you the son of Admiral Rathborne Whiting Quent?"

"What's that got to do with my being assigned to a clobbing peebee?"

"Who knows, Lieutenant? Politics are ever with us. I daresay you expected something like the *Sirian*, eh?"

"Well, men considerably below me on the ratings did draw the *Sirian*," Quent said stiffly.

"Clench and unclench that fist a couple of times. No, unclench it too. Tell me, do you share your father's, ah, sentiments about the integration of the Federal Space Force?"

Quent froze. "What the—"

"You've been in space a year, Lieutenant. Surely you've heard of the Pan Galactic Equality Covenant? Well, it's being implemented, starting with a pilot integration program in the peebees. Three of your future fellow officers were in here yesterday for their pan-human shots."

Quent uttered a wordless sound.

"You can put on your blouse now," said the M.O. He leaned back. "Life's going to be a bit

lumpy for you if you share your father's prejudices."

Quent picked up his blouse.

"Is it prejudice to think that everyone should have his own—"

"'Do you want your boy's life to depend on an octopus?'" recited the M.O. wryly.

"Oh, well, there he went too far. I told him so." Quent wrenched his way into his dress blouse. "I'm not prejudiced. Why, some of my—"

"I see," said the M.O.

"I welcome the opportunity," said Quent. He started for the door. "What?"

"Your hat," said the M.O.

"Oh, thanks."

"By the by," the M.O. called after him, "*Gal News* will probably be on your trail."

QUENT stopped in mid-stride and flung up his head like a startled moose. A small figure was trotting toward him down the corridor. His jaw clenched. He took off down a side corridor, doubled through a restricted zone and galloped into the rear of the freight depot.

He shoved his tabs at a gaping cargoman. "My dittybox, quickly."

Box in arms, he clambered into a cargo duct, ignoring the chorus of yells. He made his way down the treads until he came to an exit in the perimeter docks. He climbed out into the spacious service area of the *Adastra* from which he had debarked two hours before.

The inlet guard grinned. "Coming back aboard, Lieutenant?"

Quent mumbled and started off around the docking ring, lugging his box. He passed the immaculate berths of the *Crux*, *Enterprise*, *Sirian*, passed the gleaming courier docks, plodded on into sections crowded with the umbilical tubes of freighters and small craft and criss-crossed with cables and service rigging. He stumbled and was grazed by a mobile conveyor belt whose driver yelled at him. Finally he came to an inlet scrawled in chalk "P B ROSEKZ". It was a narrow, grimy tube. Nobody was in sight.

He set down his box and started in, trying not to rub his white shoulders against the flex. The tube ended in an open lock which gave directly into a small wardroom cluttered with parcels and used drinking bulbs.

Quent coughed. Nothing happened.

He called out.

A confused sound erupted from the shaftway opposite. It was followed by a massive rear end clad in shorts and a shaggy gray parka. The newcomer turned ponderously. Quent looked up at an ursine muzzle set in bristly jowls, a large prune of a nose.

"Who you?" demanded the ursinoid in thick Galactic.

"Lieutenant Quent, First Officer, reporting," said Quent.

"Good," rumbled the other. He surveyed Quent from small bright eyes and scratched the hair on his belly. Quent had erred about the parka.

"You know refrigerate for storage?"

"Refrigerant?"

"Come. Maybe you make some sense."

Quent followed him back into the shaftway and down a dark ladder. Presently they came to a light above an open hatch. The ursinoid pointed to a tangle of dripping tubes.

"What's it for?" Quent asked.

"Make cold," growled the other. "New model. Should not slobber so, *Vernt*?"

"I mean, what's it refrigerating?"

"Ants. Here, you take. Maybe better luck."

He thrust a crumpled folder into Quent's hand and shouldered past him up the ladder, leaving a marked aroma of wet bear rug.

The leaflet was titled: *Temperature-Controlled Personnel System Mark X5 Series D, Mod., Appvl. Pdg.* Quent peered into the hatch. Beyond the pipes was a dim honeycomb of hexagonal cubicles, each containing a dark bulge the size of a coconut. He heard a faint, chittering sound. Quent began to examine the dialed panel beside the hatch. It did not seem to match the leaflet diagram. Somewhere above him the ladder clanked.

"Futile," hissed a voice overhead. Quent looked up. A thin gray arm snaked down and plucked the folder from his grasp. Quent had a glimpse of bulging, membranous eyes set in a long skull. The head retracted and its owner clambered down. It, or he, was a lizardlike biped taller than Quent, wearing a complicated vest.

"You are Quent—are new first officer," the creature clacked. Quent could see its tongue flicker inside the beaked jaws. "I am Svensk. Welcome aboard. You will now go away while I adjust this apparatus before the captain buggers it completely."

"The captain?"

"Captain Imray. Hopeless with mechanisms. Do you intend to remain here chattering until these ridiculous ants decongeal?"

Quent climbed back to the wardroom, where somebody was trying to sing. The performer turned out to be a short, furry individual in officer's whites with his hat on the back of his head and a bulb of greenish liquor in one brown fist.

"*Il pleut dans mon coeur comme il pleut dans la ville*," caroled the stranger.

He broke off to pop round yellow eyes at Quent.

"Ah, our new first officer, is it not? Permit me." Incisors flashed as he grabbed Quent by the shoulders and raked sharp vibrissae across Quent's cheeks. "Sylvestre Sylla, at your service."

Quent exposed his own square teeth.

"Quent."

"Quent?" Sylla repeated. "Not Rathborne Whiting Quent, Junior?"

Quent nodded, coughing. The wardroom seemed to reek of musk.

"Welcome aboard, First Officer Quent. Welcome to the *Ethel P. Rosenkrantz*, patrol boat. Not, of course, the *Sirian*," Sylla said unctuously, "but a worthy ship, *voyons*. I trust you are not disappointed in your first assignment, First Officer Quent?"

Quent's jaw set.

"No."

"Permit me to show you to your quarters, First Officer."

Sylla waved Quent to the upper ladderway, which opened from the wardroom ceiling. Above the wardroom was a section of cubicles for the crew, each accessible by a flexible sphincter port. Beyond these the shaftway ended in the bridge.

"Here you are, First Officer," Sylla pointed. "And your luggage, sir?"

"I left it outside," said Quent.

"Doubtless it is still there," replied Sylla and dived gracefully through another sphincter.

Quent climbed down and exited from the tube in time to rescue his dittybox from a grapple. As he wrestled it up the shaftway he could hear Sylla promising to defeather Alouette.

THE cubicle proved to be slightly smaller than his cadet quarters on the *Adastra*. Quent sighed, sat down on his hammock gimbal, took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. He put his hat back on and took out his pocket recorder. The recorder had a played message tab in place. Quent flicked the rerun and held it to his ear.

*Ping-ping-ping*, went the official channels signal. He heard a sonorous throat-clearing.

"Congratulations on your Academy record, Lieutenant. Your mother would have been, um, proud. Well done. And now, good luck on your first mission. One that will, I trust, profoundly enlighten you."

The recorder pinged again and cut off. Quent's frown deepened. He shook his head slowly. Then he took a deep breath, opened his dittybox and rooted through a bundle of manuals. Selecting one, he pushed out through the sphincter and climbed up to the bridge.

In the command chair the ur-

sine Captain Imray was flipping fuel selectors and grunting into the engineroom speaker. Quent looked around the small bridge. The navigator's console and the computer station were empty. A little old man in a flowered shirt sat in the commo cubby. He glanced around and batted one baggy eye at Quent, without ceasing to whisper into his set. He had a gray goatee and yellow buckteeth.

The first officer's chair was beside the shaft ladder. Quent removed a parcel from the seat, sat down and opened his manual. Captain Imray ceased grunting. Quent cleared his throat.

"Shall I take over the check, sir? I gather you are go through phase twenty-six."

The ursinoid's eyes widened.

"Some help I get," he boomed. "Sure, sure, you take."

Quent activated his console.

"Gyro lateral thrust, on," he said, manipulating the auxiliary.

He heard no reply from Engines.

"Gyro lateral thrust, on," Quent repeated, thumbing the engine-room channel.

"Morgan don't say much," remarked Captain Imray.

"The engineering officer?" asked Quent. "But—but you mean he would respond if the function were negative, sir?"

"Sure, sure," said Imray.

"Gyro torque amplifiers, on," said Quent. Silence. "Primary impellor circuit, live," he continued grimly and worked on down the check. At: "Pod eject compensator—" a brief moan came from Engines.

"What?"

"Morgan says don't bother him, he done all that," Imray translated.

Quent opened his mouth. The main voder suddenly began barking.

"Control to peebee *Rosy*! peebee *Rosy*, prepare to clear dock at this time. Repeat, peebee *Rosy* to station north, go! peebee *Kip* four-ten, repeat, four-ten. Control to peebee *Kip*, dock eight-two now clearing. Repeat, peebee *Kip* green for dock eight-two."

"Morgan, you hear?" boomed Imray. "We green for go, Morgan?"

A faint squeal from Engines.

"But Captain, we're only at check-phase thirty," said Quent and ducked as Lieutenant Sylla hurtled out of the shaft to land in the navigation console with a rattle of claws. Sylla slapped the screens to life with one hand while punching course settings with the other. Imray and the como gnome were yanking at their webs. From below came the clang and hiss of the disengaging lock. The next instant the station gravity went off.

As Quent pawed for his own web he heard Imray bellowing something. The auxiliaries let in and the *Ethel P. Rosenkrantz* leaped to station north.

QUENT hauled himself down to his chair, trying to orient the wheeling constellations on the screens.

"How's she look, Morgan?" Imray was asking. "Green we go out?"

Another hoot came from Engines. Sylla was smacking course settings with one furry fist.

"Svensk! Appleby! You set?" Imray bawled.

"But Captain—" Quent protested.

Sylla kicked the fix pedal, twiddled his calibrator and dropped the fist.

"*Gesprüch*!" roared Imray and slammed home the main drive.

Quent's head cleared. He was crosswise in his seat.

"With no web is risky, son," said Imray, shaking his jowls.

"We weren't due to go for forty-five minutes!" expostulated Quent. He righted himself as acceleration faded. "The check is incomplete, sir. Control had no right—"

"Apparently the first officer did not hear the four-ten," said Sylla silkily.

"Four-ten?"

"Four-ten is ship in bad trouble, must dock quick," Imray told him.

"But that should be three -three- delta- ex- four- one- otto point with the vessel's designation."

"Doubtless in the star class vessels First Officer Quent is used to," said Sylla. "Here he will find life less formal."

"What was the four-ten, Pom?" called a clear sweet voice.

Quent twisted. Looking up from beside his elbow was a dazzling girl-face framed in copper curls. Quent craned further. The rest of her appeared to meet the wildest demands of a man who had spent the last year on a training ship.

"Huh?" he asked involuntarily.

"Hi," said the apparition, waving her hand irritably in front of Quent's nose and continuing to gaze at the commo officer.

"The *Kip*," said the little man over his shoulder. "That's the peebee *Kipsuga Chomo*, sir," he waggled his goatee at Quent. "Three hundred hours with some contaminant gas. They sealed up in the bridge but Ikky had to bring 'em in by himself. Not much air in these here peebees."

He turned back to his board.

Quent glanced around. Three hundred hours was over two weeks. He shuddered.

"But why didn't—"

"Why did not someone come to their rescue?" Sylla cut in. "The first officer forgets. Patrol boats

are the ones that go to the rescue. Who comes to aid a patrol boat? Only another patrol boat—in this case ourselves, who were sitting at Central awaiting our new first officer. *Tant pis*, they were only a gaggle of nonhumans—"

Imray swatted the air crossly.

"Now, now, Syll."

"Soup's hot," said the girl. "Ooh! My jam."

She reached a slim white arm around Quent's ankles. Quent, tracking closely, saw that the parcel he had displaced had collided with the gimbals—together with his hat—and was exuding a rosy goo.

"Tchah!" She snatched it up and departed down the shaft.

Quent picked up his hat and shook it. Jam drops drifted onto his leg.

Captain Imray was clambering into the shaftway.

"The first officer will take the first watch, is that not correct?"

Without waiting for an answer Sylla sailed past the captain and vanished. Only the commo officer remained absorbed in his inaudible dialog.

QUENT collected the floating jam in his handkerchief and wedged the cloth under his seat. Then he kicked off on a tour of the cramped bridge. The screens were, he saw, inoperative under drive. He pulled up to the library computer and signaled for their course data display. Instead of the requested data the voder came on.

*I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide*
*Is a wild call and a clear call*

Quent reached for the erase.

"Don't do that, sir," the commo man said.

"Why not? I want some data."

"Yes, sir. But that's Lieutenant Sylla's setup, sir. Very fond of water poetry, he is. Just leave it, sir, Lieutenant Svensk will get whatever you want."

Quent glared at the computer, which was now reciting:

*Degged with dew, dappled with dew,*
*Are the groins of the braes . . .*

He switched it off.

"Perhaps you would be so good as to inform me of our course and of the parameters of our patrol sector?" he asked icily. "I am Lieutenant Quent, First Officer."

"Yessir, Lieutenant." The little man's face split in a grin that sent his goatee pointing at his buck teeth. "Pomeroy here, sir. Lester Pomeroy, Ensign. Sure is good to see a fellow human aboard, sir, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Not at all, Ensign," said Quent.

"I guess maybe you feel a bit put out, sir," Pomeroy went on in

a confidential tone. "Them enaitches prob'ly never even introduced themselves—right, sir?"

"Well, I haven't had time to look over the roster yet."

"What roster?" Pomeroy chuckled. "Anything you want to know, sir, just ask Pomeroy. You want to know the gen? Well, there's Captain Imray, he's from Deneb way. Navigator, Lieutenant Sylla—I don't know exactly where he's from. He's what they call a lutroid. Puts on terrible strong when he's wrought up. And Lieutenant Svensk, he's Science when he's set low of course, and conversely he's Guns when the need arises. His vest, see? And then there's me for Commo and Morgan for Engines—he don't say much. Wait till you meet Morgan. And there's our combat team—but they don't count."

"Why not?" asked Quent dazedly.

Pomeroy gave a nervous giggle.

"They're froze, that's why. And froze they'll stay. Nobody wants to get them boys out."

"But I know the one you're itching to meet, Lieutenant. Miss Mellicent Appleby, Logistical supply. Ain't she a treat? Cooks up a storm, too. But there's one thing she don't supply, I better warn you, sir." His grin faded. "She don't supply no Appleby. So far, anyhow."

Pomeroy paused, waited. Quent said nothing.

"Now, you ask about our patrol beat—no, sir," The old man broke off as Quent moved to the display tank. "No use to try that, sir. Svensk has it stressed up as a psoodospace—some crazy snake game. But it's simple. We're Sector Twelve, like a big piece of cake, see?" He gestured. "Here we are at the point. That's Base Central. First stop is right close in—that's Strugglehome. If they're all green we go on to Davon Two. If they're not hurting we swing over to Turlavon and Ed. And if nothing comes up we dock in at Midbase. If they haven't any grief we hang around and check Route Leo—service the beacons and so forth—and then we hit the Chun Complex. That's a mess. When we're through there we make the long hop out to Farbase—and if they're all quiet we start on around through Goldmine and Tunney and Sopwith and so on, back home to Central. Eighteen mail colonies, one route and two bases. Takes about a hundred and twenty days, provided nothing comes up."

"What sort of thing is apt to come up, Mr. Pomeroy?"

"Distress calls, wrecks, jitney duty for some royal groundhog going from here to there, wonky beacons, exploding mail, field freeze-ups, ghost signals, flying wombats—you name it, we get it sooner or later." His poached eyes rolled mournfully. "We're the

boys that do the dirty. If it's too clobby to mess with, lay it on the peebees. Take our last tour. Everything was tight till we hit the Chung Complex. They got a crust instability on a little water planet and both their big ships blowed out on the other side of the system. So we have to ferry the bleeders off—and *they* won't go without their livestock. Thirty-three days hauling octopuses, that's what."

Quent frowned

"In a Space Force vessel?"

"Ah, them en-aitches don't care," Pomeroy grimaced.

Quent kicked back to his chair in silence.

"Never you mind, Lieutenant," the little man commiserated and hoisted an amber bulb, his wrinkled neck working.

He wiped the bulb with his shirttail.

"Have some Leo Lightning, sir?"

"Quent jerked upright. "Drinking on the bridge?"

Pomeroy winked broadly.

"Captain Imray don't care."

"Mr. Pomeroy," said Quent firmly. "I appreciate your intentions—but there will be no drinking on this bridge while I am O.C. Kindly stow that bulb."

Pomeroy stared blankly.

"Yes, sir," he said at last and turned to his board.

The bulb remained in plain sight.

Quent opened his mouth, closed it. Muscles flickered in his square, unhandsome countenance. A clamor was rising from the wardroom below. Svensk's clack, Sylla's waspish tenor mingled with the captain's boom. The officers on board were clearly not a harmonious team. Presently they subsided and the ladder clanked as they retired to rest.

Quent sighed through his teeth and picked up the jam-spattered manual. The *Ethel P. Rosenkrantz*, of which he was first officer, was in full star drive with twenty-three essential operational procedures, all his responsibility, unchecked.

## II

FIVE hours later the ladder clanked again and the hulk of Captain Imray heaved up to the bridge. He was followed by Lieutenant Sylla in free glide. The lutroid landed in his console with a passing flick that made Pomeroy jump for his bulb.

"Twenty-twenty hours, First Officer Quent relieved by Captain Imray," said Quent formally to the log.

"Sure, sure, I take her, son," chuckled Imray, settling himself. "You go look Appleby, *vernt?*"

"I am going to make a preliminary inspection of the ship, Captain."

"Good." Imray beamed. "See how conscience the humans, Syll? From them example you could learn."

"*Sans doute*," snarled Sylla. "It is also possible that our first officer feels a need to familiarize himself with the humble patrol boat. It perhaps did not engage his attention during his training as a future star-class admiral."

"Now, Syll," growled Imray.

"Come on Lieutenant, sir," Pomeroy pulled Quent's sleeve.

Quent's right fist unballed slowly. He followed the little man into the shaft.

In the wardroom Pomeroy helped himself from a net of wrapped sandwiches and settled down with his bulb at the gimbaled table. Quent surveyed the room. It was a cylinder with walls composed of lockers in which, according to his manual, were stored suits, tools, repair and grappling rigs, fuse panels and oxy supply. These could be checked later. On his left was the lock and a slave screen, now blank. Across from the lock was a pantry cubby and the shaftway down which he had first followed Imray.

Quent hustled to the shaft and started aft. The next section contained the main food stores, a small galley-cum-infirmary, waste intakes and the fore quadrant of the regeneration system which ran through several sections of the hull. He glanced through its hatch panel at a lighted mass of culture trays and continued along the dim shaft, vaguely aware that his feet were encountering a filmy substance. He was now passing more sphincters which gave access to cubicles for transient passengers and package mail.

"Must you trample on my laundry, Lieutenant?" inquired a soprano voice in his ear.

Miss Appleby's head protruded from a port behind him. Her gaze was directed toward his leg, which seemed to be wrapped in turquoise silk.

"Oh. Sorry." He disentangled, trying not to kick. "I'm doing a tour of the ship."

"Well, do your touring some place else, please," she said. "These are my quarters."

"All these?" He gestured.

"When we haven't any transients, I don't see why not."

He parted a port at random and looked in. The cubicle was draped in fluffy stuff and the hull wall sparkled with holograms. Quent had the impression of an offensively healthy character in ceaseless action. He moved to another cubicle—it proved to be full of bundles tied with bows. Not mail.

He tried another, Miss Appleby's head revolving as she watched him. This one held what appeared to be a private kitchen and it smelled of fudge.

"These wires," he called back to the head. "Are they authorized?"

"Captain Imray never objected. Please get on with it. I'm trying to take a bath."

Quent peered. There were indeed rainbow droplets in the curls around her delicate ears. He licked his lips.

"Yes, ma'am," he said absently, drifting toward her.

"By the way, Lieutenant," said the charming head. "Did you notice those holos in there?"

"Very nice." He drifted faster, smiling.

"Didn't you recognize them?"

"Should I?" he beamed.

"Yes, I think so," she said calmly. "That's my fiance, Bob Coatesworth. Vice Admiral Robert B. Coatesworth. Think it through, Lieutenant."

With a soft sucking sound her head fanished back into the cubicle.

Quent halted. He pounded his fist slowly against his head—several times. Then he resumed his journey aft.

BEYOND the bulkhead he found emergency pod inlets, which would require a careful check, and the refrigerant storage quadrant he had met before. He peered through the view panel. The drip seemed to have stopped.

The regeneration chamber ended here, giving room for the landleg stabilizers and the *Rosenkrantz's* small-weapons turrets, all of which he would have to go over in detail later on. This ship was old. The manual referred to it as a heavy-duty, primitive type, equipped for planetside landings. Was the system still operational? Pomeroy had told him that their mail exchange was normally conducted from orbit.

Through the next bulkhead the shaft opened into the echoing gloom of the main cargo hold. This felt dank, perhaps in memory of the octopi. He made his way along the hull past the airsled and the cradles filled with mail pods. He gave the main cargo hatch a brief check and turned to the engineroom hatchway.

The hatch refused to open.

"First officer to Engineer," he said to the speaker. "Open up."

The engineroom was silent.

"The first officer speaking," he said more loudly. "Open the hatch."

The speaker gave a squeal that sounded like, "Blow."

"What's wrong?" Quent shouted. "Open up."

"Blo-oo-oo-ow," moaned the speaker.

"I'm inspecting the ship. Engineer, undog this hatch."

No reply.

Quent pounded on the grille.

"First Officer Quent," said Sylla's voice from the hold voder. "The captain requests that you cease annoying the engineer."

"I'm not annoying the engineer. He won't let me in."

"Better you try some other time, son," said Imray's rumble.

"But—yes, sir," Quent gritted.

He pounded his head again, less gently. Then he started back through the hold, pursued by the dim sound of bagpipes from Engines. The shaft was now empty of Miss Appleby and her laundry. Pomeroy was still in the wardroom, nursing his bulb.

"Morgan throw you out, sir? Them en-aitches got no respect."

Quent silently helped himself to sandwiches and a tea bulb and rummaged through the casette locker until he recognized some Sector Twelve names—Strugglehome, Turlavon, the Chung Complex. He carried the lot to his cubicle, carefully stowed away his stained dress whites and slung his hammock cocoon. The sandwiches turned out to be delicious. Before he had heard through the data on Turlavon his eyelids closed.

"Wake up, Lieutenant."

Quent came to half out of his cubicle and with Pomeroy hanging onto his arm.

"You was having nightmares, sir."

The little man's left eye seemed to be swelling shut. Across the way Svensk's bony head poked out. Imray and Sylla were peering down from the bridge. They were all grinning.

"Uh—sorry."

Quent disengaged himself and pulled back into his cabin.

"Orbit in an hour, sir," Pomeroy called. "Strugglehome."

• •

IN THE twenty ship days to Midbase Quent acquired considerable enlightenment. At Strugglehome he asked Sylla to show him the mail-pod exchange routine. Here he learned that the slow man on a pod grapple can get a set of mashed fingers. The lutroid apologized effusively. By Davon Two Quent's hand was in shape to help Svensk prepare a shipment from the culture chamber. The big saurian became animated in the fetid warmth and treated Quent to a harangue on phytogentics. Quent finally told him to go away. He then learned, too late, that the chamber hatch controls were defective on the inside. Three hours later, when Miss Appleby decided to investigate the pounding noises, Quent was purple from breathing $CO_2$ and she had to help him out.

"Wha's girl doing on this thing anyway?" he gasped.

"Oh, a lot of us log officers take en-aitch tours," she dimpled. "It's so restful."

Quent shuddered and clamped

his big jaw.

About Appleby herself he learned that she spent all her time in her cubicles fixing up her trousseau and her hoard of stuff for her future home. The amount of loot she had astonished him. But she seemed to have been equally effective in loading up the *Rosenkrantz'* T.E.—the ship bulged with stores. She also emerged on the dot with excellent meals, which seemed to be Captain Imray's chief interest in life.

During the hop to Turlavon Quent made two more efforts to get into Morgan's domain and was rebuffed. He settled down to learning the ship bolt by bolt, manual in hand.

Turlavon passed without incident. At Ed they had to wait for the planet station crew to finish harvesting. For three whole watches Quent struggled with unstable orbits, until he learned that Ed had enormous masscons and that someone had disassembled the ship's grav-mass analyzer. He bore it all stoically but his jaw was corded with knots which seemed to have been there before. He had, after all, been an admiral's son for a long time.

AT MIDBASE they lay into the main cargo umbilical to offload a flywheel for the station gyros. The delay at Ed had thrown them out of synch with Base time and the station dark-period caught them early. Quent used the chance to check over the ship's exterior valve seals. He had worked back to the main lock when his hand light picked up a small gray creature flitting past the aft fins. It was about a meter tall and roughly humanoid.

Quent called out. The figure accelerated and vanished among the dock belts.

Quent frowned after it and went into the wardroom. Captain Imray was grunting over his greenbook tabs. The others were on the bridge, listening to the station newscast.

"Morgan," said Quent. "Would he be about so high—and gray?"

Imray leaned back and rubbed his prune nose.

"That's him. He go now listen is them gyros all right. Like a mother for gyros is Morgan."

"He must have left by the engineroom crash hatch." Quent pointed to the panel. "Why isn't the telltale light on?"

"The first officer's appetite for the minutest details of our humble craft is truly admirable," yawned Sylla, lounging in. "If it were not so tedious."

"Mr. Sylla, if that hatch lock—"

"Sure, sure," said Imray. "But Morgan never leave nothing open. Not Morgan. He like to come, go, private, *vernt?*"

"Do you mean that you've al-

lowed Morgan to kill the telltale circuits, Captain?"

"The mammalian insecurity syndrome," remarked Svensk, unfolding himself out of the shaft. He was playing with a small wire toroid which changed shape disturbingly. "The leaky-womb phobia," he creaked.

"Captain Imray," said Quent, "by regulation it's my responsibility to oversee the engineroom. With your permission, this would seem to be the time for me to take a look."

Imray squinted at him.

"Morgan very sensitive being, son, very sensitive." He wiggled his big black-nailed hands to show Morgan's sensitivity. Quent nodded and started aft.

"Nothing touch, son," Imray called after him. "Morgan—"

The engineroom personnel hatch was still dogged. Quent went to the hull and unbolted a pod cradle, revealing a duct panel designed to service the life-support conduit to Engines. He unscrewed the panel and tugged. It did not move. He displaced another cradle and found a magnetic contraption with no discoverable leads. He summoned Svensk, who arrived unhurriedly and gave it a brief inspection.

"Can you open this?"

"Yes," said Svensk, and started back through the hold.

"Mr. Svensk, come back. I want you to open this lock."

"The semantic confusions you homotherms get into are beyond belief," croaked Svensk. "Are you not aware that Morgan desires this to remain closed?"

"As first officer of this ship I am ordering you to open it."

"When I said I could open it—I meant with the proper tools."

"What are the proper tools?"

"Linear force must be applied in the presence of a certain set of alternating pressures in a gaseous medium."

He arched his long neck. Quent scowled at him.

"Pressures? Mr. Svensk, are you deliberately—" Quent suddenly stabbed his wrench at the saurian. "It's a sonic lock, isn't it? Set for . . . Mr. Pomeroy, bring that recorder in the wardroom locker back here. I want you to imitate Morgan's voice."

Reluctantly Pomeroy tooted while Quent tugged. The panel slid open. Quent found himself looking into a pitch-dark tangle instead of the shining banks and alleyways of a normal engineroom.

"What in the name of space—"

Quent reached into the filaments.

"Sir, I wouldn't do that," warned Pomeroy.

"Fascinating!" Svensk's skull-head came over Quent's shoulder.

"What is that mess?"

"I fancy it is part of the sensor system by which Morgan maintains contact with the stress structure of his mechanisms. I had no idea he had achieved anything so extensive."

"Just close it up, please, sir," Pomeroy begged.

Quent stared into the web.

"I'm going in," he gritted.

From behind them came a piercing wail. Quent spun and a gray wraith flew at his face, spitting sparks. He reeled back, his arms over his eyes. The hatch clashed shut.

The lights went out. The hold voder broke into a skirling, howling din. Quent heard Svensk pounding away and stumbled after the sound. The wardroom voder began to roar. Quent found his hand light and rushed to the bridge. The deck was a bedlam of noise and every console was flashing. Svensk and Sylla were yanking out computer cables. Quent slammed down the circuit breakers. There was no effect. The hideous din yammered on.

"Nothing to do but get out till he calms down," Pomeroy yelled in Quent's ear. "Thank the Lord we aren't in space."

THE others had left. As Quent went out Miss Appleby flew past in a whirl of turquoise silk.

"You idiot," she raged. "Look at what you've done."

Imray stood glowering on the deck. Svensk towered at full height, his eyes veiled in membranes. Sylla paced with ears laid back and there was a decided pungency in the air.

Quent slammed the lock but the uproar reverberating through the *Rosenkrantz* was clearly audible.

"He's got an override on those circuits," Quent fumed. "I'm going in there and cut off his air."

"Asinine," grated Svensk. "We are in air."

"His water, then."

"To do so would render the refrigerant exchange inoperative."

"There must be something—what does he eat?"

"Special concentrates," snapped Miss Appleby. "I stocked him with a year's supply at Central."

Quent kicked a freight belt.

"In other words, Morgan runs this ship."

Imray shrugged angrily.

"He run it—we run it—we go," he growled.

"When Space Force Monitor hears about this it'll be Morgan who goes," Quent told them darkly.

Sylla spat.

"The first officer has forgotten the *Kipsuga Chomo*. Or perhaps he recalls the four-ten which inconvenienced him?"

"What?" Quent turned on the lutroid. "I have forgotten nothing, Mr. Sylla. What has the *Kip* to do

with Morgan?"

Imray shook his jowls.

"No, Syll, no!"

Svensk coughed.

"Look, sir," said Pomeroy. "Morgan's fixing to make a night of it. He don't quit. How's for you and me to go by the office and see about a place to sleep?"

Miss Appleby sniffed.

"That would be useful."

The din continued unabated. Quent went off with Pomeroy to the Midbase station offices, where they found one billet for a female only. Midbase was bulging with colonists awaiting transfer on Route Leo. In the end the male complement of the *Rosenkrantz* settled down to doze uncomfortably on a textile shipment and to endure the jibes of the cargomen when the lights came on.

Horrible sounds came from the *Rosenkrantz* all morning. After noon mess Morgan appeared to tire. The officers went warily back on board.

"Have to give him time to cool down," said Pomeroy. As if on cue the voders erupted briefly. A few minutes later they did it again. The others went to their hammocks, leaving Quent in the wardroom to brood.

He was still there when Miss Appleby came in.

"I'm afraid I was rude to you, Lieutenant Quent."

He looked up dully. She seemed to be all aglow.

"Actually what you did was ever so lucky for me."

She smiled. She set down her parcel and served herself tea and a cookie. Instead of taking them to her quarters she came back and sat down at the table with an excited wiggle.

Quent's eyes opened. He sat up.

"That Mrs. Lee," she confided happily. "You know, the colonist? She's got twenty meters of Gregarin passamenterie. It took me all day to talk her into swapping me one meter for a petite suit liner and a case of bottlehots. I'd never have got it if we hadn't been held up, thanks to you."

She glowed at him over the tea.

"Well, I—"

"It'll make the vest of all time for Bob," she sighed. "Bob loves vests—off duty, of course."

Quent put his head back on his fists. He had been raised with two older sisters.

"That's—great."

"You're depressed," she observed.

Quent heaved a sigh and shook his head. Against his better judgment he found himself looking into her large green eyes.

"Miss Appleby," he blurted. "When I came on this ship I was completely unprejudiced against nonhumans. Completely. I welcomed the chance to show my father that other beings were just as

fit to serve in space as—" His voice faded. "Now I just don't know. This mess—that insufferable Morgan—"

"Yours is a strange reaction, Lieutenant. We girls always say it's much safer on a ship with one of Morgan's people. They'll do anything for the ship. Like the *Kip*, you know."

"What do you know about the *Kipsuga*?"

"Why, just that their engineer saved them. He got them to Central. Ikka somebody. Pom says he died."

Quent frowned.

"Funny they didn't tell me about him."

"Probably your father is the reason they keep things from you —don't you think, Lieutenant?" She stood up, hugging her parcel. "They're fine people," she told him earnestly. "You just have to understand their ways. That's what Bob says. He says a lot of Space Force officers are prejudiced without knowing it."

Quent looked up at her. She radiated Galactic amity.

"Could be," he said slowly. "Miss Appleby, maybe I haven't —"

"Try a little harder," she encouraged him. "That Mrs. Lee said a newsman was asking about you."

"It is time to eat."

The harsh croak cut her off. Svensk unfolded himself from the ladder.

"Right away."

Appleby vanished. Svensk turned a suspicious eye on Quent.

"Serpent," jeered Sylla, bouncing down, "You reptiles did not understand that time existed until we provided you with thermal vests. At home we have still the taboo against eating lizards because of their unfortunate tendency to putrefy while torpid."

"Activity fails to correlate with intelligence," Svensk clacked haughtily.

"On the other hand," Sylla licked his vibrissae. "Our primates are regarded as quite palatable. Braised, naturally, with just a *rien* of celery. Amusing, is it not, First Officer Quent?"

Quent exhaled carefully.

"If you feel so, Mr. Sylla." He stretched his mouth sideways in a lifelike smile. "Excuse me, I believe I'll lie down."

The silence behind him lasted so long he almost wondered about it.

## III

THE next fortnight was spent laboriously servicing beacons along Route Leo. The beacons were elderly M20s, which Quent had cursed while navigating from the *Adastra*. Now he found their trouble lay in the bulky shielding

which attracted dust, thus building up electrostatic imbalances that distorted the beacon's spectrum and eventually its orbit. They had to be periodically cleaned and neutralized. The job required long hours and close cooperation among crewmen. By the fourth and last beacon Quent's jaw had developed a permanent ache.

"Have you not yet finished, First Officer?"

Quent was clinging awkwardly to the far end of the slippery kinetic bleeder. Above him Sylla wriggled through the beacon grids with the agility of his otter forbears, warping his vacuum line expertly as he went.

"It is clear that the Academy does not contemplate its graduates shall endure the indignity of labor," Sylla jibed.

"I admit I'm inexperienced in this and not as fast as you are," Quent said mildly. "Mr. Svensk. Where are you casting that sweep line?"

"As per your request, down," said Svensk from the far side. "Although it seems senseless."

"I meant down here—toward me," Quent took a deep breath. "Not toward the center of gravity of the beacon-ship system. A loose way of speaking, I'm afraid."

"Lieutenant Quent, sir," said Pomeroy's voice from the ship. "If you wouldn't mind sir, could you turn your volume down a bit? There seems to be some sort of grinding sound in your speaker and the *Greenhill* signal is awful weak, sir."

*Greenhill*, a colony ship out of Midbase, was running a check on the beacon calibrations as it went by.

Quent swore and snapped off his helmet speaker. A moment later he felt a jerk on his lines and found himself revolving in space two meters from the end of the bleeder. His line had no tension. When he stopped his tumble he saw that Svensk had fouled him with the sweep and was departing over the limb of the beacon. Sylla was nowhere in sight.

"Do you want your life to depend on an octopus?" Quent muttered under his breath. He reached for the speaker switch, then paused. His orbit was decaying. He straightened out and began to breathe measuredly.

The others had gone inboard and unsuited when Quent finally finished clearing the bleeder shaft. In the wardroom he stumbled into Miss Appleby taking a server of food to Imray's cubicle.

"I want you to know I'm trying," he told her wearily.

"That's the spirit, Lieutenant."

She would make a super admiral's wife, Quent realized.

The *Greenhill* confirmed the

beacon calibrations and the *Rosenkrantz* headed out to the Chung Complex. When she came out of drive her screens lit up in glory. The Chung was a cluster of colored suns, warm and inviting after the bleakness of Route Leo.

"Don't you believe it, sir." Pomeroy broke the thread of his crochet work against his stained frontals. "I dread this place, I do." His eyes rolled as he reached for his bulb. "All en-aitches here. Under water, too, most of 'em, the slimy things. Even Mr. Sylla hates them."

Despite Pomeroy's forebodings the first calls passed off with only routine problems of mail and message exchange. The little man continued to follow Quent about, mumbling gloomity. He was also dosing himself with increasing quantities of Leo Lightning whenever he could sneak off the bridge.

"Let Pomeroy tell you, sir," he grumbled in the night watches, "They're devils down there. We shouldn't have any dealings with things like them. Pomeroy knows. Pomeroy's seen sights no Humans had ought to bear. Worms. Worms is the least of it." His goatee bobbed over his scrawny adam's apple. "Worms and worse."

The Chung orbits continued without troubles other than those provided by Svensk and Sylla—and even these two appeared to be letting up. Quent's only view of the "worms and worse" was on the ship's screens. Most of the alien commo officers were aquatic. A few did appear wormlike and two had tentacles. There was one truly repellent squid affair with unidentifiable organs floating around its eye stalks. There was also a rather genial dolphinoid to whom Pomeroy was vitriolic. They were the ones who had required transport for the octopi.

"I'm a broadminded man, sir," Pomeroy told Quent that night. "Tolerant, Pomeroy is. I put up with 'em." He hiccuped. "No choice. Pomeroy's sunk low. I don't deny it. But them things down there—" He shuddered and hitched closer confidentially. "They think they're as good as humans, sir. Just as good as you, or better. What'll happen when them things decides they wants to come in the Force, sir? Expect a human to take orders from a worm?" His bloodshot eyes bored anxiously into Quent's.

"Mr. Pomeroy. In case you are under the impression that I share my father's views on nonhumans in the Space Force, you are mistaken."

"You're a tolerant man, sir. But a person can't help wondering—"

"Kindly wonder to yourself in future, Mr. Pomeroy," Quent said coldly. "For your informa-

tion, I am fully in favor of the integration program. If a being is a competent spacer, I don't see that his personal appearance enters."

Pomeroy closed his mouth and turned back to his board in offended silence. Presently he paid a prolonged visit to the wardroom and returned, wiping his mouth. For several watches he spoke only when Quent addressed him.

AT THE last Chung stop they picked up a short-range freight shuttle whose jockey needed a lift to Farbase. The jockey was a smaller version of Svensk. They got his shuttle stowed without mishap and the *Rosenkrantz* went into drive for the long run out to Farbase. Quent's eyebrows began to unknot.

The run was made in comparative peace, for Quent. Svensk and the freighter pilot bankrupted each other at some exotic topological game, while Sylla occupied himself with trying to key a poetry-scanning function into the computer. Imray grew increasingly taciturn and spent long hours in his cubicle. Sometimes Quent would hear him in rumbling argument with one of the others. Quent devoted himself to a discreet inspection of the ship's wiring and managed not to upset Morgan. Things seemed to be settling down.

This impression strengthened when they got to Farbase. They exchanged the mail and off-loaded the freight shuttle with dispatch. Pomeroy actually changed his shirt. He and the others set off to call on another peebee, the *Jasper Banks*, which was there en route to a long distance job. Miss Appleby went after the depot officer who had promised her a set of Chung pearl glasses for herself and a case of fish-eggs for the mess. The small, bleak station offered Quent no diversion. He decided to go out and check over the exterior antennae.

He was suiting up when he heard the others coming back on board. He climbed to the bridge to find them preparing to take off.

"Call Appleby," Imray grunted curtly. "We go now."

The next leg was to the sector rim colonies of Goldmine, Tunney and Sopwith. They ship lifted off with scarcely another word exchanged by its officers. And as soon as they were in drive Imray left the bridge.

The short run to Goldmine was made in thickening silence. Imray stayed in his cubicle. The others seemed on edge. Only Pomeroy had anything to say—he kept pestering Appleby for reports on Imray's health.

"He says his heart bothers him but he won't let me use the medi-

cal analyzer," she informed them. "His appetite's good, though."

"He's due to retire soon, sir." Pomeroy shook his head.

Imray did not appear on the bridge at Goldmine. When they were on course for Tunney he called Quent to his cabin.

"Is no good," he said hoarsely as soon as Quent's head came through the sphincter. The ursinoid's muzzle looked haggard and his fur was staring.

"You take over, son." He gestured feebly, dislodging an empty server.

"Sir, I think you should let Miss Appleby bring the medikit."

Imray groaned.

"Medicals can nothing do for old age. Little pills I try. No good."

"We'll turn back to Farbase hospital."

"What they do? Torture me only. I know. With my people—goes quick. You captain. I tell Morgan mind you."

"You're ordering me to take over as acting captain, sir?"

Imray nodded, his little eyes roving feverishly.

"But—"

"No but. You captain."

Imray's eyes closed and his breathing became noisy.

Quent studied him, scowling.

"Yes, sir," he said slowly. "I'll have Pomeroy patch you into the record log."

One of Imray's eyes glinted briefly and closed again.

Quent withdrew into the shaft of the *Rosenkrantz*. His first command. All the knots which had been smoothing from his face came back, tighter than before.

To his surprise the others accepted the situation without comment, beyond Sylla's sarcastic use of his new title. Morgan, too, proved as good as Imray's word. He continued silent but during the maneuvers at Tunney the energics were flawless. Quent's frown deepened.

He took to roaming the ship at odd hours, sleeping little and poorly. They were now at the farthest leg of their patrol, running along the sector rim to Sopwith. On their starboard the Galaxy was unpatrolled and largely unknown. Quent spent hours at the scanners. He had seen wild space before from the bridge of the mighty and virtually invulnerable *Adastra*. From a peebee with four small rockets and only meteor shielding it looked decidedly wilder. Quent dreamed of nucleonic storms and got up to check over the sensors again. Crawling back into the cocoon, he heard:

*Toujours j'entends la mer*
*qui fait du bruit,*
*Triste comme l'oiseau*
*seule . . .*

QUENT groaned and pulled the cocoon flaps over his ears to shut out the mechanical drone from the bridge. Sylla was making the computer translate poetry into his native Ter-French. Presently the droning was replaced by incomprehensible wrangling.

Quent sighed and jackknifed out of his cocoon. It was nearly his shift and they would be coming into Sopwith soon.

In the shaft he found Pomeroy backing out of Imray's cubicle, bulb in hand.

"How is he, Mr. Pomeroy?"

The little man wagged his head, bleary eyed, but said nothing.

In the wardroom Miss Appleby was setting out fresh smoked ham she had wangled at Tunney.

"Just coffee, thank you," Quent told her.

She smiled sympathetically at the standing furrow in his brow and vanished back to her storerooms.

Quent took his coffee up to the bridge, relieving Svensk and Sylla, and settled wearily to hear a data tape. Pomeroy straggled into his cubby and began to doze. In the wardroom the other two continued to argue fitfully.

Suddenly Pomeroy sat up.

"Sopwith, sir. Seems to be a bit of trouble."

"What type of trouble, Mr. Pomeroy?"

"Too early to tell yet, sir. Mostly noise."

Sopwith was a nonhuman affiliated planet whose native name was Szolphuildhe. The native race was described as small, timid, pinkish in color, bipedal and probably bisexual, with a fibers-and-ceramics technology. It was human-habitable but no humans lived there.

"Sounds like they been attacked by a band of marauding monsters," Pomeroy reported presently. "Says they came in a skyboat—wait a minute, sir." He squinted, listening. "About them monsters, sir. Appears like they're humans."

"Humans?"

"That's how the kinds describe 'em, sir. Like us."

"What are they doing to the Sopwithians?"

"Seems they're eating 'em, sir."

"Eating them, Mr. Pomeroy?"

Pomeroy nodded. Quent leaned over the shaft and called Svensk. The big saurian head appeared.

Quent asked, "What human spacers could have landed here and attacked the natives or—ah—exploited them as food?"

Svensk's raised his eye membranes reflectively.

"Possibly you refer to Drakes?"

"What are Drakes?"

"The Drakes, as they call themselves, are a band of humans, strength unknown, base unknown,

possessing not less than five spaceships, who maintain themselves by sporadic raids upon shipping and colonies," Svensk creaked. "Until recently reported only in Sector Ten, they—"

"One of our little sector problems." Sylla grinned. He bounded to his console and began to polish his claws. "Quite beneath the notice of the Academy."

"Navigator, a sensor orbit,

please. Mr. Svensk, let's pick up the location of that vessel as soon as possible. Mr. Pomeroy, ask them where that sky-boat is, how big it is, how many attackers and what weapons."

The Sopwith commo officer believed that the ship had come down somewhere northeast of the port city. It was bigger and brighter than the sun, carrying at least five hands of monsters. They spouted burning flames which made no noise.

"That's thirty of 'em," said Pomeroy. "As to their weapons, Drakes would have lasers, flamethrowers, grenades and maybe a rocket-launcher or two, groundside. Them kinks don't know ships or weapons, sir. Flinging stones is about it, with them."

They still had not located the alien ship when the Sopwith city area went into night. The Sopwith commo officer on the ground was growing balky.

"He says the monsters are coming in again," Pomeroy reported. "Listen."

The voder gabbled wildly, gave out a string of shrieks and cut off.

"That's it, sir. He's taken off. Well, there'll be no business here. We'd better log up the report and get on."

"MR. SVENSK, what's that field like?" asked Quent thoughtfully.

The lizard was absorbed in his sensor adjustments.

"Mr. Svensk. Is that field usable?"

Svensk reared up.

"Very primitive."

"Navigator," Quent said icily.

"Landing trajectory to field, please."

Three pairs of eyes rounded on him.

"Landing?" Sylla licked his chops. "The acting captain is perhaps unaware that patrol boats do not—"

"I've inspected our system, Mr. Sylla. It's fully operational. In case you're concerned, my training has included the landing of comparable craft."

"But sir," protested Pomeroy, "What about Morgan? He don't like going planetside, sir."

Quent glanced at the voders and cleared his throat.

"Mr. Morgan, there is an emergency on this planet and we must land. I count on your cooperation. Mr. Sylla, is that course ready?"

"Set," snapped Sylla through his teeth.

Quent engaged the auxiliaries and started to code in the autopilot. As he touched it the familiar din cut loose from the voder.

"Mr. Morgan." Quent rapped the speaker. "Stop that racket. We must land, do you understand? I'm taking us down!"

To the din was added a crackling sputter and the lights jumped. Svensk dived for his computer leads.

"Stop that, Morgan. Stop it. I'm going to land or I'll crash the ship. Hear that—you'll crash us."

"In the name of the Path," Imray came from the shaft. "What?"

"It's our duty to land, sir," Quent said. "Emergency on the planet."

Imray burst onto the bridge, paws over his ears. He stared at Quent.

"I'm committing us."

Quent slammed the manual override.

Imray grabbed up his speaker.

"Morgan—Morgan, boy, it's me." Imray's voice sank to a huge croon. "Be good boy, Morgan—down we must go. I swear you, for little minute only—ship it will not hurt. Morgan! You hear, Morgan? Morgan boy, listen Imray—ten meters superconductors I get you. Beautiful."

The uproar dwindled to a mewling in Imray's speaker.

"You let us go down nice, Morgan, *vernt?*"

Silence. Imray clapped his fist to his chest and his head slumped.

"Is too much, son," he wheezed and retreated down the shaft.

"Counting to autopilot," said Sylla. Quent coded feverishly as deceleration grabbed them. On the screens the arid, undistinguished planet whirled closer.

The autopilot took hold unceremoniously and spiraled them in, shaken but right side up. When the roil cleared they looked across a moonlit field to a cluster of sheds around the antennae rig. There were no lights.

"They've all sloped off, sir," said Pomeroy. "Nothing we can do here till morning."

"Mr. Pomeroy, you speak the native language," said Quent. "I will meet you at the cargo lock. Have the sled ready."

"But sir—"

"Mr. Svensk, am I correct that we need no special masks or suiting on this planet?"

Svensk gave a sighing exhalation.

"No need," he croaked.

They followed Quent in silence while he broke out two field kits and two ballistic hand lasers. At the cargo lock he opened both ports and ordered Pomeroy into the sled.

"Lieutenant Sylla, you will take over the ship. One of you will be on the bridge at all times. If we're not back by sunrise, make what investigation you can without endangering the ship. If you can't help us without hazard to the ship, lift off at once and signal the facts to Farbase. Understood?"

Sylla's eyes were popping.

"Understood, Acting Captain!"

He sketched a salute.

Svensk watched in silence, his bony head folded to his shoulders in the gravity.

Quent launched the sled out into the moonlight. The country below was flat scrubland gashed by a few dark arroyos, now dry. The city was a huddle of hive-like buildings with a central plaza. Quent hovered by a torch-lit structure, a shrine. Nothing moved.

"No damage visible so far. We'll go down and talk to the chief."

"Be careful, sir." Pomeroy warned uneasily.

In the plaza they pounded and shouted at the door of the largest hive-house. It was finally opened by a small squat Sopwithian entirely draped in a softly gleaming robe.

"Tell him we're friends. Where's the chief?"

The doorkeeper scuttled off on his knuckles, robes jingling. The inside of the adobe hive was a labyrinth of basket-work passages, every surface bossed with bits of metal and colored tassels. The native returned, beckoning, and they scrambled up a wicker corridor to a chamber where an even broader Sopwithian in a shinier robe sat impassive in a lanterned alcove. The ceiling was so low even Pomeroy had to squat.

He gurgled at the chief, who replied briefly, now and then flapping his long robed forelimbs with a sharp jangle. The raiders, Pomeroy reported, had burned several farms northeast of town and carried off the families. Herdsmen had spied them roasting and eating the captives beside their ship.

"All right," said Quent. He ducked his head to the chief and they scrambled out to their sled.

HE TOOK off in a howling rush northeast. Beyond the town the pasture scrub stretched barren to a line of mesa, all brightly lit by the big moon. Here and there were small beehive farms set in irrigated gardens.

"Where are those burned farms?" Quent peered. "Where's that ship?"

"Take care, sir," Pomeroy pleaded. "Them Drakes'll come on us like devils—"

Quent began to fly a low search pattern. As he circled a farm heads popped out.

"They're scared to death, sir. Think we're Drakes. Pitiful."

"Frightened." Quent frowned around the moonlit horizon. "Ah, what's that?"

Pomeroy writhed nervously.

"That's a burnt one, all right. No need to look farther."

Quent circled the blackened shell. Suddenly he skidded the sled into the farmyard and jumped out, kicking ashes. In a moment he was back and flung the sled airborne. He seized the speaker.

"Quent to *Rosenkrantz*. I've found that ship."

The speaker crackled. Quent fended off Pomeroy's arm, deftly appropriating the little man's laser.

"Do you read, *Rosenkrantz?*"

"The ship is where, Acting Captain?" asked Sylla's voice.

"About fifty kiloms northeast of field, in a canyon," Quent told him. "There is also a raiding party in sight, headed this way. They are armed. They have sighted me. Now hear this: You will signal Farbase at once and prepare to lift ship. I'm going after these raiders. Repeat, signal Farbase and secure ship. I am now being fired on. Out."

Knocking Pomeroy into the corner, Quent yanked out the speaker leads and slammed the sled at top speed back toward the field.

"Sir—Lieutenant Quent, sir, don't—"

Quent ignored him. Presently he cut power and glided around the end of the field at bush level. They whispered out to the ship, dodged behind a landleg and came upon Svensk and Sylla in the open port.

Quent vaulted out, weapon in hand.

"Have you signaled as ordered, Mr. Sylla?"

The lutroid shrugged.

"But what was one to report, Acting Captain?"

"Precisely," snapped Quent and started for the bridge with both lasers in his belt. They followed.

Imray hulked in the command chair. He eyed Quent in silence, arms folded over his massive chest.

"Feeling better, sir?" Quent snarled. He wheeled and thrust his jaw into Sylla's muzzle. "I'll tell

you why you failed to signal Farbase. And why you two were hanging out in the open lock when I ordered you to secure ship. Because you know damn well there are no raiders here."

He had his back against the screens now and a laser drawn.

"No ship! No Drakes. It's all one big farce and all of you are in it. You, you clown Pomeroy—you, Captain Imray! What are you trying to hide? Smuggling? Extortion? Or do I have to pound it out of you?"

He heard a rustle, saw Svensk's hand at his vest controls.

"No, no, Svenka," Imray growled. "Battles we don't need." He shook his head heavily. I told you—Drake business no good."

"Agh, your Drakes, the whole thing stank from the start. Let me tell you something, gentlemen." Quent shook the laser at Sylla, "You jeer about my training but there's a thing you don't know about Academy life. In the years I've been a cadet I've been hazed and hoaxed and put on by experts. Experts." His voice rose. "Caristo, what I've put up with. And you, gentlemen, are a clobbing bunch of amateurs. Tri-di gigs,"

He snorted, glaring contemptuously at them. No one spoke.

"You didn't think I caught on when you handed me the ship? Cooking up some way to gash my record. Here in Sopwith—I was supposed to pass it up, wasn't I? Oh, yes. And you—" He stabbed the laser at Pomeroy—"You were going to bugger the log so you could show I refused to aid aliens against humans, right? Then bring charges? But why? I'll be rotated out soon enough—why did you have to ruin me, too?" He scowled. "My father. Blackmail. You've got something going. I'm going to take this ship apart right here on the ground. It's on record that you're unfit for duty, Captain. You didn't think of that when you got so clobbing elaborate!"

They gaped at him. Sylla's pupils swelled, contracted.

"I tell you, smart boy," Imray grunted. He scratched his chest. "Son, you mistake—"

A shrill mew from Engines split the air. Imray jerked around. He yanked at his webs.

"I got you, boy."

"Hold it," shouted Quent. "Don't try—"

SYLLA and Pomeroy dived for their consoles. Svensk was vanishing down the shaft.

"I said hold it." Quent grabbed the override lever. "You're staying right here."

"Sit, son, sit," Imray rumbled. "Is danger, I swear by the Path. If don't go up, lose ship."

"That's straight, sir. We'll be killed if you don't let us up."

Sylla was coding frantically, his

crest fur ridged. The cargo lock clanged.

"If this is another—" Quent rasped.

He released the lever and began to web up one-handedly, laser ready.

Imray's hand smacked down and several invisible mountains fell on them as the *Rosenkrantz* careened off-planet to full drive.

"Back side moon, Syll," Imray wheezed.

"All right. What goes?"

"Drakes," said Pomeroy.

"You trying to go on with this?"

Svensk was scrambling out of the shaft, headed for his console. He brushed against Quent's laser. On the screens the moon was ballooning up. They rushed across the terminator into darkness.

"Drakes is real, son," Imray told him. "Catch ship on dirt—we finish. Is maybe judgment on us. Boys, they smell us?"

"I rather think they may not." Svensk's clack seemed to have been replaced by a cultivated Gal Fed accent. "Morgan sensed them just below the horizon and our emissions should have decayed by the time they get around."

Frowning, Quent watched Imray braking to stability over the dark craters of the moon whose lighted side has guided his ground search.

"They're coming around," said Pomeroy. "Listen."

A confused cawing filled the bridge. Quent made out the word *kavrot* in coarse Galactic. A kavrot was a repulsive small flying reptile that infested dirty freighters.

"Talking about us," Pomeroy grinned. His goatee no longer waggled. "Kavrots, that's us. Doesn't sound like they know we're here, though."

He cut the voder.

"Braking emissions," said Svensk. "It appears they're going down."

Quent pushed up and moved in behind the lizard, laser in hand. Svensk did not look up.

"If this is another gig—"

He studied the displays. Nobody paid attention.

"*Captain?*" Sylla's fist was up.

## IV

IMRAY grunted and the *Rosenkrantz* began to glide silently on her docking impellors down toward the sunlit peaks at the moon's eastern horizon. Sylla's paw beckoned Imray left, pushed right, dipping, banking as the mountains rose around them. His fist chopped down, Imray cut power and they floated under a peak outlined in crystal fires. They were just shielded from the field on the planet below.

"Last pass coming up," said Svensk. "Splendid. They've blown up the field antennae. That eliminates our trace. Sitting down,

now."

"From which one deduces?" asked Sylla.

"From which one deduces that they either do not know we are here or do not care, or have some other plan. We could be going into a trap?"

"First one best," said Imray.

"They're going to send out a party."

Pomeroy patched in and they heard the harsh voices now augmented by clangings.

Quent stowed the lasers by his console.

"Are they human?"

Imray nodded gloomily.

"Is a judgment, boys. They going to mess up."

"Eating the natives?"

"Maybe better so," Imray growled. "No—we don't know exact what they do. They come here once only, burn two farms, go quick. Why they come back?"

"You will recall my hypothesis at the time," said Svensk.

Sylla made a frying sound.

"Yes. Crude but effective." Svensk nodded. "The adobe shells should make excellent hearths and the heat developed would be adequate to refine out most of the metals."

Pomeroy caught Quent's look.

"You saw the metal in their houses? All woven in, even on their clothes. Every house is loaded, accumulation of centuries. Haven't a cat's use for it—purely religious. They pick it up on ritual collecting trips. Spicules, nuggets, it's all scattered around in grains in alluvial rubble. You couldn't mine it. Point is, there's tantalite, osmiridium, maybe some palladium. Big price around here. When we found those farms burned, Svensk noticed they'd been at the ashes. Metal was gone. He figured they'd come back for more, burn the town out. And the damnfool Sops run in when they're scared." He grimaced, not comically.

"Why wouldn't they make the natives bring it to them?"

"Never get it. Sops are difficult. Much simpler this way. Also hairier, Drake style."

"If this is true, it's our clear duty to stop it," said Quent.

"Son," said Imray, "Space Force is long way away. We here, only. What they got down there, Svenka?"

"Sector Ten was quite correct," said Svensk. "Unmistakable. They have succeeded in repairing that A.E.V. The shield was on for a minute just now."

Quent whistled.

"Do you mean they've got an Armed Escort Vessel? That shield will be a phased englobement—they can sense and fire right through it."

"Drake damn good spacer," Imray told him. "Always watch. We try sneak in, we get fireball

in nose. We stuck, looks like."

"*Je me demande*," said Sylla, "How do they propose to conflagrate the city?"

"A good point," Svensk stretched. "The farms, of course, were fired with portable flamers. This seems a slow method. Possibly irksome as well. I fancy they may intend to use the ship as a mobile torch."

"If they hover that low," Quent said thoughtfully, "they could only use the top half of their shield. An A.E. shield forms in two hemispheres. Same for the sensor field, too. They can't englobe fully much below a thousand meters."

"Ahe!" exclaimed Sylla. "One could thus attack them under the belly, *non*? But—we cannot get our ship from here to there undetected. And the sled, it functions only in the air . . . If only we possessed a space-to-air attack pod!"

"You do," said Quent.

They stared at him.

"The aft rocket turret. Look at you manual."

"Manual," said Imray blankly.

"In a few early peebees, the aft rocket cell is demountable and converts to a module capable of limited in-atmosphere function," Quent recited. "The empennage is sealed flush to the hull. You unbolt a stabilizer fin and swivel it around for the delta. I checked it over—it's there. Didn't you ever notice the shielding and lock on that thing?"

"Fantastic," said Svensk. "Now you mention—but how is it powered?"

"You couple on an emergency booster and impellor unit from the ship's drive after the thing is set up and the pilot is inside. Preferably a spare, if you have one—you'll recall that my inspections terminated at the engineroom bulkhead," he said bitterly.

"You sure manual say all that, son?" Imray demanded. "This thing work?"

"Certainly," Quent snapped. "How do I know if it works?"

Sylla licked his chops.

"Thus, one could employ the thrust while concealed by this moon, and descend without power, avoiding detection because of the small size, and brake after one is below their horizon. One then approaches silently at ground level, on impellors—and when the enemy elevates himself, boom." He sprang to the shaft. "Let us view this marvel!"

In the hold Quent showed them the old demount levers, long since obstructed by mail-pod racks.

"One wonders how orthagonal a trajectory this thing would endure," said Svensk.

"Thermallium," Quent shrugged. "If the delta didn't come off."

"Somebody going to get killed bad." Imray peered suspiciously

into the turret. "For engine I must talk Morgan. Pfoo!"

"You talked him into harassing me easily enough," said Quent.

"No, that natural," grunted Imray, hauling over to the speaker.

"Someday that spook will meet a Drake and find out who his enemies are," said Pomeroy's voice from the bridge. "They have a party in the city now. Looting. Gives us some time."

"*Allons*, the suits," called Sylla from the ladder.

IN AN hour's sweating hullwork they had uncoupled the turret and dogged it to the fin. The old sealant was vitrified but the assembly went in with surprising ease.

"That stuff will burn off," said Quent. "What a contraption!"

"The aerodynamics of a rock," Svensk murmured. "Pod-chutes, perhaps, could be attached to these holes? I suggest as many as possible."

"The engine approaches!" Sylla popped out of the turret as the massive shape of Imray appeared around the *Rosenkrantz'* stern, propelling a drive unit bundled in a working shield.

"Two, gross nanocircuits must I get," he grumbled as they all wrestled the inertia of the big unit. They brought it into line with the turret lock. Imray glanced in.

"You check how it steers, Syll?"

"That rather mystifying secondary panel on the rocket console," said Svensk. "Perfectly obvious, once the power leads were exposed. I shall have no trouble."

His long figure contorted as he groped for the control of his thermal vest. Sylla slid between him and the turret.

"This is no swamp for overheated serpents. Desist—you will be worse than the ants. It is I who go, of course."

"So." Imray turned on Quent, who was moving in on the other side. "You want go, too?"

Quent grabbed the lock.

"I'm the obvious choice."

"Good," said Imray. "Look here."

He tapped Quent on the shoulder with one oversized gauntlet and suddenly straightened his arm. Quent sailed backward into Sylla and Svensk. When the three sorted themselves out they saw that Imray had clambered into the turret, which he filled compactly.

"Close up engines, boys," he blared jovially into their helmets. "Watch tight, is hot. Syll, you set me good course, *vernt?*"

The three lieutenants glumly coupled the drive unit, bolted and thermofoamed the extra chutes and piled back up to the bridge.

"Foxed you, didn't he?" Pomeroy sobered. "They're still tearing up the chief's house. We may have them figured all wrong."

The screens showed Imray's vehicle lurching past on a climbing course above the dark moonscape.

"Svensk, explain to him the navigation." Sylla crouched over his console. "He must modify to azimuth thirty heading two eighteen or he will burst into their faces at once. Now I devise the settings for his burndown."

"Sure, sure," said Imray's voice. They saw his rocket module yaw to a new course. "Svensk, what I do with pink button?"

"Captain," Svensk sighed, "if you will first observe the right-hand indicators—"

"At least the impellors work," said Quent.

Pomeroy fretted: "This is all guesswork."

Svensk was now relaying the burn configuration, which the ursinoid repeated docilely enough.

"At one-one-five on your dial, check visual to make sure you are well below their horizon. Do not use energy of any sort until you are two units past horizon, Captain, that is vital. After that you are on manual. Brake as hard as you can, observing the center limit display and—"

"After that I know," interrupted Imray. "You take care ship. Now I go, *vernt?*"

"You are now go," said Sylla, motioning to Pomeroy.

"Gespro-oo—" trumpeted the voder before Pomeroy cut it.

"What does that mean?" asked Quent.

"I've never known," said Svensk. "Some obscure mammalian ritual."

"Our Captain was formerly a torch gunner," Sylla told Quent. "But perhaps you—"

"I've heard of them," said Quent. "But I thought—"

"That's right," said Pomeroy. "Ninety-nine per cent casualties. Flying bombs, that's all. He can run that thing, once he gets down."

"He will be out of the moon's shadow and into their sensor field in fifteen seconds," said Svensk. "One trusts he remembers to deactivate everything."

POMEROY switched up. They heard Imray humming as he tore planet-ward at full thrust. Sylla began chopping futile cut-power signals. The humming rumbled on. Pomeroy squeezed his eyes, Sylla chopped harder. Svensk sat motionless.

The rumble cut off.

"No more emissions. His course appears adequate," said Svensk. "I suggest we retire to a maximally shielded position and signal Farbase."

"Impellors, Mr. Morgan," said Quent.

When Sylla put up his fist Quent followed it until they

reached a deep crater which would block the scatter of their star-to-star caller.

"If we're in luck," said Pomeroy, "Farbase can get their teakettle here in three days, plus or minus a week. All they have is a ferry for picking up pieces. Bound to be pieces—of somebody." He sighed. "Let's get back where we can hear 'em."

They tiptoed back to the horizon. The Drakes below them gave no sign of detecting the approach of Imray's meteor. Neither did they reveal any intent to use their ship to fire the town. As the moon on which the *Rosenkrantz* was riding sank below the horizon of the field they were obliged to leave it and maneuver into full sun-blast. Quent's eyes burned; he was becoming aware that he had scarcely slept for a week.

"If only we could give one little burn planetward," Sylla chafed. "How soon, my scientific friend?"

"With their drive off—well—they would be able to read ship-sized burst from our present orbit for at least another hundred degrees of planetary rotation," said Svensk. "Don't you agree, Quent?"

Quent nodded wearily. "And that A.E.V. has about double our acceleration and six times our rocket range and can turn inside us. We wouldn't have a prayer."

He had said it twice before.

The lutroid spat dryly and put his elbows on his console. Pomeroy sat, hands cupped over his earphones, motionless.

"Emission," said Svensk suddenly. "Imray is down and braking."

"That damn ship hasn't even budged," Pomeroy said. "I can still hear them yakking to the shore party. We're all wrong."

"Still braking. It just occurs to me, there was space for two more chutes."

"He requires rather two more gravity webs," said Sylla. "He is mad."

"Torchers," said Pomeroy.

"There is some distortion for which I cannot compensate," Svensk complained. "He is very close to their horizon—ah—I believe he has managed to deflect."

"That ship isn't going anywhere," Pomeroy fumed.

"If I could suppress this wretched bias," said Svensk. "He is on impellors now, I think. But moving very erratically."

"He finds perhaps a ravine." Sylla was kneading his console.

"Toward the field again," said Svensk. "Much too near. One fears that he is omitting to wait for them to lift."

"The old maniac will sail right onto their screens," Pomeroy groaned.

"While we sit here," Sylla muttered.

"If he's in that canyon back of the field," said Quent, "he might sneak under their shield. Provided they weren't looking. It's a fairly broad target. Can he—"

Sylla's head had snapped around.

"He understands to shoot," he told Quent.

"Can I rely on that, Mr. Sylla?"

Quent met the lutroid's yellow stare.

"Accelerating on the same line," Svensk announced. "Dismal."

"Got it!" Pomeroy shouted. "Secure locks—but there isn't time. Up, you bastards! Up!"

"How long before he cuts their line of sight, Mr. Svensk?"

"This detestable—at ground level, maximum two minutes. Much too close. They're bound to spot him."

"Over to me on manual, Mr. Sylla," said Quent. "If you can get to the wrecking lasers it'll help the display. Ready, Mr. Morgan?"

The lutroid shot over him and down the shaft.

"Stay braced and warn Appleby!" Quent yelled after him, coding for drive. "If Imray can hit what he shoots at, this'll distract them. If not—"

He rammed home the lever and they pitched in their webs. As the screens faded the planet bloomed up and swirled crazily.

"We're in their sensors now," gasped Svensk. "I believe—"

"They're lifting." Pomeroy was plastered on his board. "They see us."

Quent bent the *Rosenkrantz* into an atmosphere-grazing turn. Pomeroy was struggling to move a switch. The bridge filled with Drake voices, reverberating lashback. A siren honked.

The voder cut off. For a flash Quent thought his eardrums had gone but as acceleration topped out he heard the others fill their lungs.

"Their shield does appear to have collapsed," said Svensk. "I can't be positive in this—"

"He got them!" Pomeroy yelled. "Power's gone! Wait—they're coming back on emergency. Listen to 'em cry!"

Noises blared from the Drake ship.

"Where's Imray?"

Quent threw in the retros and they pitched again. Sylla came scrambling out of the shaft and hung onto Imray's chair.

"Where is he?"

"I can't at the moment," Svensk protested. "The resultants—"

"Listen." Pomeroy tuned the uproar to ululating wails. "The Denebian national anthem." He flopped back in his seat, grinning. "Might as well go get him—that ship's dead in the dirt. He cracked one up their landleg sock-

et while they were gawking at us. Must have been bloody under 'em!"

Quent jolted to a thump on the back. Sylla climbed down, grinning.

Svensk arched his neck—his bony beak was not adapted for expression.

"Is he all right?" called Appleby's voice. "I fixed some hot jam truffles."

"So that was the anomaly," said Svensk. "Incredible. The nutritive drive of the human female."

"Bloody good, too," said Pomeroy. He jerked to his board. "Holy Space—"

"What is it?"

"The *Jasper* just hailed us," he told them. "She's coming by. Five minutes earlier and we'd all been up the pipe."

He sagged again and reached for his bulb.

"By the Path!" Imray howled on the voder. "You pick me up or I *sprucher* you too."

QUENT was clumsy with exhaustion by the time they got the rocket module stowed and the hot drive unit back to Morgan. He glanced at the wrecker ports and then followed the others to the bridge where Pomeroy was watching the grounded Drakes.

"I take over, son." Imray sprawled in his command chair, wrinkling his hide luxuriously. "Watch tight. Bad mess they get loose before Farbase come."

He chomped a jam tart.

"Are you all ready for the bad news?" Pomeroy wheeled around to face them. "Remember that *Gal News* man we ducked at Farbase? He's on the shuttle. Coming here."

Imray choked.

"Wants to interview you," Pomeroy pointed at Quent. "And Appleby, too."

Quent shut his eyes.

"He can—why won't they let me alone?"

Absently he fingered the laser by his console.

"Admiral Quent's son in battle with Drake pirates," Pomeroy grinned sourly, "While Admiral Coatesworth's fiancée cheers? His board's all lit up."

"This rather cooks it," said Svensk.

Sylla was drumming his claws.

They all looked at Quent.

"What you tell him, son?"

"Tell 'em." Quent muttered exhaustedly. "Why, I'll tell 'em the ship stinks and your computer is full of mush—and the engineroom is a fugnest—" his voice rose—"infested by a spook who has you so terrorized you have to bribe him to move ship. And my fellow officers are a set of primitive jokers captained by a maniac who has to resort to physical

force—and the only humans who can stand the ship are an unshaven alcoholic and a madwoman who buggers the sensors with fudge-machines and underwear." He rubbed his neck. "My first ship. Look, I'm going to sack out, right?" He pushed off for the ladder.

"You tell them that?" Imray demanded, beaming. "Flying fugnest?"

"Hell no, why should I? It's not true."

He pulled into the shaft and rammed into Imray's hard paw.

"Son, you got to."

*"Huh?"*

"Tell them can't stand. Want new job. Must!" Imray was shaking them both for emphasis.

"Wait—one—minute." Quent disengaged himself. "That's exactly what you were putting me on to think, wasn't it? But why?" He frowned around at them. "Why? I mean, hell, I'm for integration."

"Precisely the problem," said Svensk.

Imray whacked his thigh exasperatedly.

"Who you think build this boat?"

"Well, it's a human design—"

"Human fix up. Is build by Svensk's people, original. Was part their navy. Space Force say, indefinite loan. Little boats, you never hear, Space Force come along, make treaty. Suck up little boats. Even ants they got some type space boat, *vernt*, Svensk?"

"More of a pod, I believe." Svensk crossed his long legs.

"Something, anyway. Son, you think like your father say, all en-aitch people want integrate with Space Force?"

"Well, uh," said Quent. "The Gal Equality party."

"Sure, sure." Imray nodded. "Some en-aitch people want be officer big starship, is fact. Also fact, en-aitch people want have say in Gal Council. But is different here."

He leaned back, folded his arms.

"Here is original en-aitch space force, us little boats. We been on these boats long time. Long, long time. We been patrol since was no sector, eh, Syll? When humans come with us, is only individual humans. One here, one there. Pom know. But we not integrated with you. You is integrated with us."

"Bravo!" cried Sylla.

"Hear, hear," said Svensk gravely.

"But, what—" said Quent.

"The captain means," Pomeroy told him, "that he's not about to get integrated with the Space Force. None of us are. We do our job. They can stow their sociological programs. Their directives. Channels. Personnel fitness profiles. Rotation and uptraining tours. Pisgah! If this integration trial business goes green, we've

had it. And—" he poked his finger at Quent— "you are a prime test case, Lieutenant."

"Even Morgan they steal," Imray rumbled angrily.

Quent opened his mouth, closed it.

"We were so confident," said Svensk. "It did seem ideal, when you turned out to be Admiral Quent's son. We felt it would be simple to impress you as being, as it were, quite unintegrable." He sighed irritatedly. "I may say that your determined optimism has been a positive nightmare."

"Let me get this straight." Quent scowled. "You wanted me to yell so hard for reassignment that the program would be shelved?"

"Correct."

Sylla slapped his console. The others nodded.

"What about this flimflam here in Sopwith?"

"Too fancy," grunted Imray.

"We were getting desperate," said Pomeroy. "You just wouldn't discourage. So we thought maybe we could work it the other way, build up a case that would convince the Gal Eq crowd that humans weren't ready to, ah—" He looked away. "Well, you figured it."

"I knew you were out to clobber me," Quent said grimly. "Only I thought it was my father."

"It was in no way personal, Quent," Sylla assured him heartily. "Believe me, we would do the same for anyone, *non*?"

"But this is insane!" Quent protested. "How can you? I mean, do you realize my father got me assigned here? He's sure I'll come around to his way of thinking and furnish him with political ammunition to use against integration."

"That rather optimises things, doesn't it?" Svensk rattled his neckplates. "Increased familial solidarity is a plus value for primates."

Quent snorted.

"What were you supposed to be, Mr. Spock? I knew damn well you're a Gal Tech graduate. You should have taken the course on oedipal conflicts. Also the one on ethics," he added acidly. "Some primates set quite a value on truth."

"But you've got to help us, Lieutenant," Pomeroy said urgently.

Quent was preoccupied. "How many languages do you speak, anyway? There was a Pomeroy who wrote some text—"

"Lieutenant! Look, we'll all help fix up a tale of woe you can give them—"

"Are you serious?" He looked at them, appalled. "You expect me to falsify my official duty report? Lie about you and the ship?"

"What one little lie?" Imray's voice sank to the crooning tone he used on Morgan. "Son, you good spacer. Save ship, *vernt*? You say this integration nonsense okay, we

finish. You not let Space Force mess up old *Rosy*, son."

"But goddammit," Quent exploded. "It's not just one lie. It'd go on and on—investigations, appeals—my father smirking around with the Humanity Firsters trumpeting every word I said on one side—and the Gal Eq people reaming me from the other. I'd never be free of it. Never. How could I function as a space officer?"

He rubbed his head wearily. "I'm sorry. I'll say as little as possible, believe me. But I will not put on any act." He turned to go below.

"So stubborn, the humans," Sylla snarled.

Quent continued down the ladder.

"Wait, Quent," said Svensk. "This publicity you dread can't be escaped, you know. Suppose you say nothing. The facts speak for themselves. Gal Eq will be delirious: *Arch-racist's Son leads Non-human Attack on Human Pirates*, for starters. Prolonged cheers. All-Gal network showing the hero and his en-aitch pals. I daresay they'll nominate you for the next Amity award. Really, you're just as well off doing it our way."

Quent stared at him in horror.

"Oh, no. No." He began to pound his forehead on the ladder. "It's not fair." His voice cracked. "I thought when I got to space they'd let me alone. It 's been bad enough being Rathborne Quent Junior, but this —spending the rest of my life as a—a ventriloquist's dummy for Integration politics. Everywhere I go! Every post, my whole career. How can I be a spacer?"

Imray was shaking his head. "You natural victim social situation, son, looks like. Too bad." He exhaled noisily, and licked a piece of jam off his fist. "So, is settled. You going help us, *vernt?*"

Quent lifted his head. His jaw set.

"No, I told you. That's out," he said bleakly, "I didn't come into the service to play games." His voice trailed off. "Call me next watch, right? We're all pretty weary."

"Sure, sure," said Imray. "Syli, Svenka, you boys go. We got time think something."

"Forget it," Quent told him. "There's no way out of this one." he sighed, hauling down the shaft. "I wish I could just disappear."

He stopped dead and looked up thoughtfully.

"Ah-ah," he said.

He climbed back up and collected the lasers. The last thing he remembered was leaning back on his hammock fully dressed with a laser in his hand.

GAL newsmen yelled at him, crowds jostled him. The bridge

of the *Adastra* swarmed with kavrots. Quent came groggily awake, sure that he had heard a lock open. But the ship seemed to be normal. He sank back and dreamed that he was wearing a clangorous glass uniform. When the cocoon grabbed at him Quent struggled to consciousness. The *Rosenkrantz* was going into full star drive.

He plunged into the shaft and found himself nose to nose with an unknown girl.

"Gah!"

"Hello, Lieutenant," she said. "Want some breakfast?"

She was a dark girl in silver coveralls.

"Who—who're you?"

"I'm Campbell, your new log off," she smiled.

"Drakes." He hurled himself headlong for the bridge. "Where are they? What's happened?"

"Hi, there," said Pomeroy. The others looked up from their consoles. They seemed to be drinking coffee.

"Where are we headed? Where did she come from?"

"Sit, son," said Imray genially.

The dark girl bobbed up to place a bulb of coffee on his console.

"Is she a Drake?"

"Good heavens, no."

She laughed. Quent blinked. The conformation under the coverall was interesting.

"I'm a duck," She vanished.

Dazedly Quent gulped some coffee.

"How long was I asleep? Farbase—they've come and gone, right?"

"Not likely." Pomeroy snorted. "They won't get to Sopwith for thirty hours yet."

"But who's watching the Drakes?"

"The *Rosenkrantz*, who else?" said Sylla, dead-pan.

"What? Captain Imray, what is going on?"

Imray waved his paw.

"Problem finish, son." He belched comfortably. "We fix, eh, boys?"

"Oh, God." Quent squinted at them. He gulped some more coffee. "Mr. Pomeroy, you will explain yourself."

"Well, you can forget about that newsman and all that," Pomeroy told him. "When he gets to Sopwith he'll find the *Rosenkrantz* and he'll find Miss Appleby all right—but he won't find you. Nobody'll find you."

"Why not?" Quent glared around nervously.

"Because you are no longer on the *Rosenkrantz*," said Svensk. "Brilliant, really, your notion of disappearing. Since we could scarcely remove you from the *Rosenkrantz*, we simply removed the *Rosenkrantz* from you." He stretched pleasurably. "Solves everything."

*"What have you done now?"*

"Observe!" Sylla pointed to the

sealed log certificates.

Quent pulled himself over warily.

"P-B 640T J-B," he read. "But's that's wrong. That's not—"

"Peebee *Jasper Banks*, that is." Pomeroy chuckled. "We're the *Jasper Banks* now, see?"

"What?" Quent pawed at the case. "Those are official seals. You—"

"Not to worry, it's just temporary. Jasper owed us a couple of favors. They were glad to oblige. Fact, they wanted to head back to Central anyway. So we just traded registry and log officers and gave them our mail. They took over the Drakes, see?"

"But that's—"

"Beautiful," Pomeroy nodded. "*Gal News* can pull the *Jasper* apart, they never heard of you. No one ever actually saw you on *Rosy*, did they? He'll figure it's some garble. Has to—there's Appleby, all as advertised. And the Drakes. He'll have to be satisfied with that.

Quent took some more coffee. He felt like a man trying to shake off a bad dream.

"And the beauty part," Pomeroy went on, "*Jasper's* an all-Human peebee. That'll really befuddle them."

"No integration aspect left," said Svensk. "Gal Eq will be dashed."

"It can't work. It's—what about Appleby?"

"I hope this one as good cook," muttered Imray.

"Appleby's fine—she never heard of you," Pomeroy assured him. "Morgan let her have these crystals she's always wanted, see?"

"Uh. But—they're going back to Central as us? What happens there? Personnel. My father."

"Personnel," Pomeroy scoffed. "They're dingled up half the time. They won't get their circuits flushed till we've swapped back."

"But my father—" Quent yelped. "When do we trade back?"

"When we intersect, *bien sure*," said Sylla.

"When's that? Hold it. Wasn't the *Jasper* headed on some job away out?"

"That's right," said Pomeroy. "The wild sector. Thirteen-zed, they call it. Wasn't due to start patrol there for a while but they got this emergency call. So they sent out the *Jasper*. That's us, now."

"Quite remote and unexplored, really," said Svensk, stretching. "Challenging."

"New patrol good job," Imray grunted. "You want be spacer, son, *vernt*? Nobody mess your career out there." He scratched his broad chest contentedly. "Integration program? Pfoo! Never catch."

"You mean we start patrolling out there? And they take our old one. When do we trade back with

*Jasper*?"

"Assuming our circuit is, say, twice the length of theirs," Svensk ruminated, "and assuming they keep near schedule, the perinode should precess around—"

"Spare me."

Quent's big jaw began to grind and he breathed forcefully. The reaction pushed him slowly out of his console. He hooked one leg around his seat back and hung over them scowling.

"My career," he said tensely. "Your unspeakable solicitude... Sixty days on my first duty I find myself involved in an actionable conspiracy. First officer of a vessel under fraudulent certification, on an illegal course in defiance of orders—without one clobbing prayer of ever getting back into anything resembling legal status. My career. Who'd believe me? What happens when—gentlemen, did it never cross your conniving minds that this is a general courts offense?" He reached out and laid his hand on the emergency starcall cradled between him and Imray. "My only sane course is to bring this to a halt right now—regardless."

He yanked the caller from its cradle.

They gaped at him. Sylla's ears folded back.

"Lieutenant, no," said Pomeroy.

Quent fingered the starcall. His solemn face was corded.

"What's the nature of this emergency, Mr. Pomeroy?"

"Some en-aitch trouble," Pomeroy spread his hands. "Signal split before they got much. They gave the *Jasper* some stuff—"

"Three argon cylinders, one case of mudbinds, one pan-venom kit," said Miss Campbell from the shaftway. "And an incubator."

She placed a breakfast server on Quent's console and departed.

"You figure it, sir," Pomeroy chuckled hopefully.

Quent's face did not soften. He tapped a square nail on the starcall, slowly, desperately. Nobody moved. Sylla's leg muscles bunched stealthily; Quent's free hand drifted to the laser. There was a faint slithering sound. Quent's jaw jerked around to Svensk.

The big saurian's fingers came away from his vest and he stretched ostentatiously, jogging the computer.

*Roll on, thou deep and dark*
*blue ocean, roll!*
*Ten thousand fleets*

Quent slapped it silent with the laser. He lifted the starcall.

"No, son, no," Imray protested.

Quent drew a deep breath. For a moment the *Jasper Banks* née *Rosenkrantz* fled on through the abyss in humming silence. The aroma of bacon drifted through

her bridge. Quent's face began to work convulsively.

"*Kavrots*," he muttered.

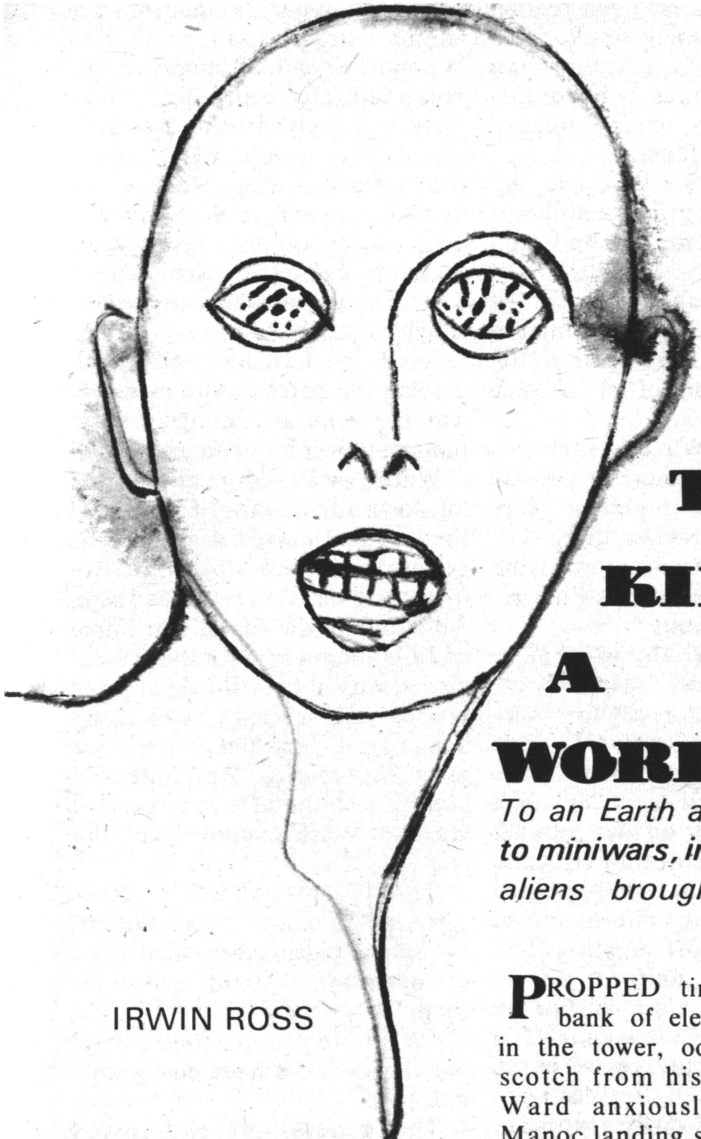
He let out an inarticulate howl.

Sylla's reflexes carried him into the bow grips and Pomeroy dived under his board. They goggled at Quent. He was making a wild whooping noise which they could not at first identify.

Then Pomeroy crawled out, grinning, and Imray's shoulders started to quake.

Quent roared on. His face was astounded, like a man who hasn't heard himself guffawing wholeheartedly in years. Invisible around him, ghosts of the *Adastra*, *Crux*, *Sirian* shriveled away.

"All right," he gasped, sobering. He pushed the starcall and the laser back in place and reached for his breakfast. "Kavrots. So be it. Who's on watch in this fugnest?"



# TO KILL A WORLD

*To an Earth accustomed to miniwars, indestructible aliens brought microwar!*

IRWIN ROSS

PROPPED tiredly against a bank of electronic receivers in the tower, oozing sweat and scotch from his pores, Colonel Ward anxiously scanned the Manoc landing strip for General Metzger's C-52. The general could

have only one reason for visiting Manoc at this time—to check on rumors that its commanding officer was derelict in his duties and drinking to a degree unbecoming an officer.

The squawk box kept nagging at him. He paid little attention to it. Radar had picked up something. That something was streaking along at seventy thousand feet and at an estimated two thousand miles per hour. Should an element of jets be sent up?

"Disks." Ward sneered. "Meteors." He connected radar and leaned over the box to give emphasis to his words. "Sergeant, if you track just one more flying saucer and interrupt me, I'll—get on the ball, sergeant."

He snapped at the towerman. Didn't he know that General Metzger was coming in? Why hadn't he aborted that last flight of jets and cleared the runways?

Ward slammed the door going out. In the jeep, on the parking ramp, he lit his fifteenth cigarette since 0700 that morning. Ashes fell on his immaculate uniform and he brushed them off angrily. The sharply pressed uniform was in atonement for the scotch. For six months, while his reputation declined, he had progressed in the art of being the well-dressed man.

What was a military man, anyway? Did he wear the bullet scar, canting over a bloodshot eye like an extra eyebrow, as a badge of honor? Should he laugh at being grounded, physically decayed at forty and shelved behind a desk? Should he complacently accept the fact of his wife's death —her destruction before his very eyes from cancer? Or did a man, even a military man, have a right to seek whatever it was that other men sought in bottles?

Well, he had had it all. Including the bottles. And now here was the general coming to sit in judgment over his conduct.

Ward saw a C-52 go around and let down for landing. He started the jeep and moved it ahead. The general climbed slowly, stiffly from the ship. That was a bad sign. Adjutants in the Eighth Air Force had run for cover when the general moved with that stiff-legged walk. He was a large man, with a full head of iron-gray hair and an iron-gray mustache. He squeezed himself silently, after one puzzled glance at Ward's uniform, into the jeep.

SIX pilots stood stiffly at attention in the green-plushed office at operations. Ward glared at them.

"What are you men doing here? No flights are scheduled for this morning."

The general placed himself quietly into a corner—watching.

"It's come back," one of the pilots said. "We'd like to make a gunnery run on it."

"Sir!" Ward snapped. "What's come back?"

"The missile, sir, that radar's been tracking. It buzzed the tower five minutes ago. They've plotted its course—it's swinging in a hundred-mile circle and reducing speed. About mach one."

Ward frowned. What did they expect him to do? Buckle their harnesses for them?

"If the thing's circling, then it's not a meteor," he growled, singling out the flight leader. "Why didn't you alert your element and take after it?"

"Your orders were—"

"If you can't think for yourself you're not qualified to lead men. Adams, you take over the flight. Ruppert, you fly his wing. Now get out of here."

The general said nothing. He had obviously come simply to observe. And observe he would.

In ten minutes the desk squawk box began chattering. It was the tower. The towerman had the thing in his glasses, guessed it was traveling at about three hundred miles per hour. It seemed to be letting down for a landing. He could see Adams' flight firing tracers and rockets at it, without effect. Yes—it was landing. About five miles out, on the desert.

Ward looked at the general. The grilling would have to wait. This headache came first —something spotted by radar, estimated to travel at fabulous speeds, unmarked, unknown. Maybe even a guided missile. But who in the world would fire a missile at Manoc—when there were New York and Washington?

"I'll send out a demolition crew to bring it in," he told tower.

IT WAS neither a meteor nor a disk.

It lay, not mangled from impact, lightly on the hangar floor. Machined as smoothly as an artillery shell, devoid of jutting airfoils or rocket tubes.

The general touched the nose section, where a delicate script was engraved in the metal.

"It's a guided missile," he said. "Russian, probably."

Ward rubbed his hand over the script. "Maybe," he said. "I'll get a cryptograph man over here."

He looked at the thing warily, disliking what it meant— the fuss and red tape it would occasion.

Two thousand miles per hour? No wings?

The sergeant cryptographer arrived. Ward hurried off to rendezvous with a bottle of scotch. Back at the hangar at 1755 he heard the sergeant through a slight rosy haze.

"I can bust codes based on a known language. If this is a

language the U.N. ought to be informed. You need a philologist."

Not a sound from the missile. Demolition experts pronounced that it might explode. Might not.

"Check again," Ward ordered.

The general eyed him curiously.

They said there was no other check they could make.

"Bust it open," the general ordered gruffly.

Ward frowned. He was still C.O. here. He faced the general.

"Hold on. We'll get an impression of that script before anyone blows himself up. You can take it back to Washington. Sergeant, post a guard here and keep the area clear —until I say otherwise."

The general smiled wryly. By 2100 hours he was airborne.

Ward, feeling burned out sucked the bottle. The general would wire his request for Ward's resignation from Washington. It was a fact, written in his eyes. Ward felt relieved. There was nothing now to hold him—he had no front to maintain. He opened another bottle.

At 2318, slightly fuzzy, he wired Chicago. They said they would put a philologist aboard a jet.

He was not yet drunk when, five hours later, the philologist arrived.

Ward shook the old man's hand somberly.

"Had to get you here fast, Dr. Neuman," he explained, "to decipher a script we can't identify. SOP on delivered but unidentified packages is to check on the sender. It might be a bomb. You understand that this is top secret?"

The doctor smiled ruefully. An hour later he had ceased smiling.

After two days, Ward noticed, Dr. Neuman's face had become actually grim. Ward sweated out the general's TWX, drank scotch and played poker at the officers' club with Major Vickers, Chief Flight Surgeon; Captain Hutchinson, Assistant; and the bartender.

On the third day old Dr. Neuman placed a paper on Ward's desk.

Ward stared at it. "We didn't think it was Russian," he said. "No earthly origin? Well, I'll be damned."

COLONEL WARD stood by while they opened the "can." The general's TWX had come, blunt, unembellished. He would get a jolt when, together with Ward's complying notice of resignation, he received the TWX about the script being Martian. No philologist had called Martian, of course—simply no earthly origin. Alien intelligence.

They pried open the can.

Ward watched a mechanic peer inside the hole.

Then: "Jesus—God! There's somebody in here."

It was human, all right. Strapped to a bulkhead, sucking oxygen from a metal mask.

Medics carried it to the hospital, where it lay, unconscious.

It was out of form, as though having lived in a twisted world —limbs swollen at the extremities and tapering inward toward the body, giving it a comic-strip appearance. Head ovoid and smooth with features that seemed to be painted on like those on an Easter egg. And washed all over with an egg-yolk yellow.

Martians looked like that, huh? Venusians? Who?

No earthly origin.

Ward returned to operations and smoked one cigarette off the end of another. Stubble adorned his chin. He felt better with the stubble and with the uniform rumpled. In a couple of days he would be out for good and able to slouch around in sneakers and a T-shirt.

Then Hutchinson called from the hospital. Major Vickers, he said, had suddenly conked out. He was turning egg-yolk yellow.

Something stirred in Ward's brain. Something cold and nebulous formed into a premonition.

The phone kept ringing. Within an hour it had informed him that five medics had dropped and turned yellow— that they vomited violently, then lay like dead men.

Ward slapped a quarantine on the whole post.

Captain Hutchinson jeeped from the hospital. Disheveled and exhausted, he had not wanted to break away.

"You need a drink," Ward said. He poured the liquor. "What do you think, Captain?"

The phone jangled again. It was the tower—General Metzger's ship was over the field, radioing for landing instructions.

Ward hesitated. He plugged in a desk mike.

"Sorry, General—we've got an epidemic here. Field one hundred per cent restricted."

"Metzger speaking. I've got your replacement aboard. Give me landing instructions. Ward—no nonsense."

Ward took a deep breath.

"General, get this. I've notified MATS and Flight Service. If you touch a wheel to Manoc, I'll have to slap you in the guardhouse. This is an emergency. The field is quarantined and restricted."

He watched through the window as the General's C-52 flew over the runway once, wheels up, banked and headed back east. He grinned wryly, visualizing Metzger trying to fit this development into headquarters SOP.

Hutchinson had poured and swallowed another drink.

"Colonel, we've worked like dogs and can't stop it. It's one of two things."

He reached for the bottle. Ward snatched it.

"You've had enough. This is no time to get drunk."

The captain stared at him, tense, almost sneering.

"Isn't it?"

Ward turned, chopping down his anger. He snapped his fingers at the clerk across the room.

"Sergeant, I want you to close all post bars for an indefinite period. Absolutely no drinking." He faced Hutchinson. "Let's get to work, Captain. If you have any opinions, state them."

Hutchinson's face went slowly white. He spoke swiftly.

"Only theories. That thing at the hospital is no Terran, as they say in space fiction. We've established that. We find he's polluted with an unknown but highly contagious disease. Deduction—wherever he comes from might be plagued with the disease."

"Rats leaving the sinking ship?"

"Yes."

"Any alternate theory?"

The captain looked squarely at Colonel Ward.

"Disease warfare," he said. "Invasion."

COLONEL WARD, in his quarters, bent over a microscope and scrutinized the slide that came with the report from the hospital lab. After several minutes of concentrated effort he saw flat specks suspended in the fluid of a lung section.

He pushed back the microscope, touched fingertips and brooded. His eyes rested longingly on the bed but he shook his head savagely to clear it, left the room and trudged toward operations.

Martian invasion. Mars was all he knew of outer space. So why not Mars? And disease warfare—dreaded by all and outlawed by every country. Perhaps now a reality. It seemed incredible. Who would have supposed that beings out there would launch a ship packed with disease germs? Navigated by a suicide pilot—who himself was the bomb?

You could not keep a thing like this hidden. His cryptographed OP messages to Washington had finally resulted in alarm. Even Metzger reversed his field and began slashing red tape. He organized an airlift and had it running within thirty-six hours. Stuff was dumping into Manoc by the ton.

Ward turned almost eagerly into operations. Senses a little sharper, brain a little freer, like muscles after exercise. Two days ago he had anticipated slipping away to Mexico. Now he soothed a frightened corporal—his ser-

geant clerk had toppled—in the office. He made hourly personnel-health checks. The latest check had one half of the post flat on its back.

One half of Manoc's personnel knocked out in thirty-six hours. Those were heavy casualties. How many enemy casualties? None.

Hutchinson reported by phone at 1100.

"This Martian doesn't have a trace of rational thought, Colonel," he said. "Damn funny—our clinical tests indicate he has the thought pattern of a low-order mammal. What's that figure?"

"To me it totals zero. Dammit, Hutchinson, how could an irrational creature navigate a space ship from Mars—or anywhere—to Earth? How could a low-order mammal build the thing in first place?"

"That's your problem," Hutchinson said. "I'm a doctor. I'll run some more clinical tests."

What about the alien ship? Ward phoned the hangar and quizzed Morgan, flight engineer. Morgan sounded incredulous.

"We've dismantled the thing," he said. "You won't believe this—it's got an atomic propulsion system. An atom engine no bigger'n my fist. And, man, has it got power! Can't even estimate. And we couldn't find any controls aboard. No radio. No nothing."

Ward sighed. No controls. And yet the thing had been flown in at two thousand miles per hour. And it had landed perfectly.

SOMEWHERE in his mind had to be some knowledge, some germinal fact that he could utilize to build a campaign against the egg-headed Martian and his stampeding germs before the news broke and plunged the country into hysteria. All his training could not have been for nothing.

But you could not bomb bacteria. Send troops in against them? Gas? Tanks? Flame throwers?

Or could you?

He dialed the phone.

"Hutchinson? Collect every conceivable concoction—serums, antitetanus, smallpox vaccine, sulfa drugs, penicillin, the works—and squirt it at those bacteria. Throw the whole damn medical book at them."

But Hutchinson answered distractedly, as though he hadn't heard.

"Colonel, your Martian or whatever is convalescing. Yeah. Not a trace of bacteria in the last blood test. And that's not all—"

Ward frowned in bafflement. Trapped behind this steel desk, he felt a bond with the infantryman who huddled helplessly in a foxhole while hell raged all around.

He grunted, "Get over here, Hutchinson. On the double."

When the captain arrived, he seemed to recognize Ward with difficulty.

"Maybe we'd better have a drink, Colonel."

Ward poured two stiff ones.

"We did an interesting test yesterday." Hutchinson spoke slowly. "We ran an electroencephalograph on your Martian. You know, the machine that records electrical pulsations of the brain and translates thought processes and—ah—sensations electronically. Well, we got definite but unexpected results."

Ward nodded noncommitally. He moved a finger around the edge of his glass.

"The encephalograph indicated that over a hundred separate brain-wave patterns were emanating from the alien."

Ward looked up. "What?"

"The same as if we'd focused the device on a crowd. Multiple thought sources. Multiple brains."

Ward's frown deepened. "Previously you reported the Martian was irrational. Now he has a multiple brain. Make sense."

"You figure the sense of it." Hutchinson bridled. "I never attended Command and Staff School. Today we tested other sick patients—and each gave multiple brain-wave response. Then we ran a dozen airmen, not yet sick, through the encephalograph test. Each registered one cohesive thought pattern. It doesn't make sense. Yesterday the Martian was lousy with germs and registering multiple thought sources. Today he's germ-free and indicating a single source."

"Are you certain the encephalograph is reliable?" Ward asked hollowly. He brooded for a time, then placed a hand gently on Hutchinson's shoulder. "All right, Captain. Thanks. I'm going to make a check of my own. Have some microscopes sent to the hangar. Then get some sleep. You're going to need it."

After Hutchinson had left, Ward drove the jeep to Hangar Two.

"Who's in charge here—Morgan? Morgan, how do you figure this ship was navigated out there to Earth and landed safely—without controls and only an unconscious man aboard?"

"It don't figure, Colonel. Maybe some kind of telepathic control."

"Morgan, this is important. Dismantle the Martian ship. Completely. Examine every atom of it with a microscope."

"We already—"

"I mean literally. Get some rest first. I'll send around microscopes from the lab. Use them and report what you find."

He drove back to operations. A thought was seeded on the edge of

his brain.

THE corporal leaped up when Ward entered operations. Ward blinked.

"What's the matter with you, Corporal? Get a messenger here on the double."

The corporal tripped over his own feet in his haste to reach the door. Ward frowned at him.

"Hold on, Corporal. Where you going? I meant for you to telephone and—" He stopped. "Something's wrong. Sick?"

The corporal trembled.

"N-no. But Captain Hutchinson is, sir, now. And he was here only a few . . . It's contagious. Maybe we'd better—" Ward sighed. He had been dreading this.

"Don't leave this room," he said. "You're losing control of yourself."

The corporal's expression was pathetic.

"But nine-tenths of the post has got it. Fifty men are dead. In a couple of hours it'll be too late—"

*Nine-tenths. . .*

Ward marveled. Nine-tenths of his force was already wiped out. He saw the frightened clerk moving toward the door. With one hand he opened a drawer and removed a gun—an Army .45 Colt automatic.

"Corporal," he said quietly. "If you attempt to bolt from this room and start a panic— I'll have to kill you. We've got to keep the germs here, isolated on this post, at all costs."

The sight of the gun seemed to unnerve the corporal completely. He sobbed and jerked the door open.

Ward fired. The report crashed, surprisingly loud, in the narrow office. The corporal dropped.

By an effort of will—so great that it stiffened every muscle in his body and covered him with sweat—Ward managed to concentrate on the central problem.

Martian disease . . .

Hutchinson was knocked out. He would never know what hit him.

He picked up the jangling phone. The caller was Private Dean at Hangar Two. He said Morgan had dropped fifteen minutes ago.

Ward straightened up.

"All right. Don't get panicky, Dean. Did you use the microscopes I had sent over?"

He listened to Dean's voice a long time, then hung up, ordered a messenger from communications and began to write.

> TWX to Gen. Metzger,
> The Pentagon,
> For cryptograph.
> Classification: Top Secret
> COMPLEXION OF INVASION HAS CHANGED. MICROSCOPIC CONTROLS. INSTRUMENTS FOUND NOSE SEC-

TION MARTIAN SHIP. CONCLUDED EGGHEAD NOT REAL MARTIAN. MARTIANS INTELLIGENT, ORGANIZED. MARTIANS ARE BACTERIA REPEAT MARTIANS ARE BACTERIA.

He could accept it once he faced it: More or less. Hundreds of brainwave patterns emanating from a diseased patient suggested inevitably that the bacteria had brains which were spraying out electric pulsations that a machine could record. A logically inescapable deduction. Martians—or whoever—were bacteria.

And now the proof. Morgan and Dean had detected small, invisible—(except to microscopes)—controls in the nose section of the dismantled ship. Bacteria-size controls. Too infinitesimal to activate or test. Bacteria had navigated the compact ship across space—it was their invasion.

Was the strategic problem simpler now? It was worse. Ordinary bacteria were bad enough. Brainy bacteria were impossible. An equally impossible conjecture followed. Would they form a league—an alliance—with the bacteria here on earth?

Was he cracking up?

He walked to the window and gazed out at the airstrip. He saw sleek jets and rockets lined up on the ramps. Jets that he couldn't fly—that nobody now would be able to fly.

He was alone. Vickers was gone. Hutchinson was gone. The general was remote in Washington.

What was the latest check? Sixty-five men? Sixty-five men out of two thousand were left on active status. A thriving post had been reduced to tomblike silence in a few days.

There was a way left, possibly, to stop them. Of what use was he as a military man if he could not stop the enemy? If he failed the microbes would advance. They would spread beyond Manoc, utilizing lizards and birds, perhaps as transportation; reach a man, then hop from man to man and finally creep over the whole of Earth, reducing mankind everywhere to supine flesh.

Moving slowly to the desk, pondering, he picked up the slide, held it up reflectively and drew a lighter from his pocket. Thoughtfully he applied flame to the slide, holding it firm until the specimen turned black, the plastic cracked, and his fingers burned.

"Dead Martians," he mused aloud, dropping the charred slide into the wastebasket beside the scotch.

He picked up the phone.

"Get me General Metzger in Washington," he said. "The Pentagon."

NOW he had plenty of time. Time to shower, shave and

change into fresh uniform. Even to sleep. He walked over to the hangar.

It was a good try, he thought, fingering the script engraved on the nose section. The next try would be his. The script, a metal document of celestial data, had enabled old Dr. Neuman to pin it down as the creation of an alien intelligence aware of vistas unavailable to man. Of course it was only guesswork but other ships might follow this one. So that whatever he did could prove inconclusive. His day—and the days of his kind—were probably done. There was no time left for soldiers, for the military—he might buy a little time for those who would take over. Whether human or bacteria. He had felt useless for some time.

The humanlike Martian? You could only suppose about him, too. A kind of cattle—or food. Carried their food right along with them. Smart? Maybe they had abandoned Mars—or another home planet—because their human cattle, ravaged by disease, were dying off.

He trudged back to operations, stepped gingerly over the corpse in his doorway and sat behind the desk. It might, he found himself thinking, have been interesting to talk with intelligent germs. What did germs think about, anyway?

Did they love and hate?

It was daylight when Colonel Ward awoke, hearing a faint, throaty drone in the distance. He shuffled to the window and peered out. The urge to vomit gnawed at him but he fought it down.

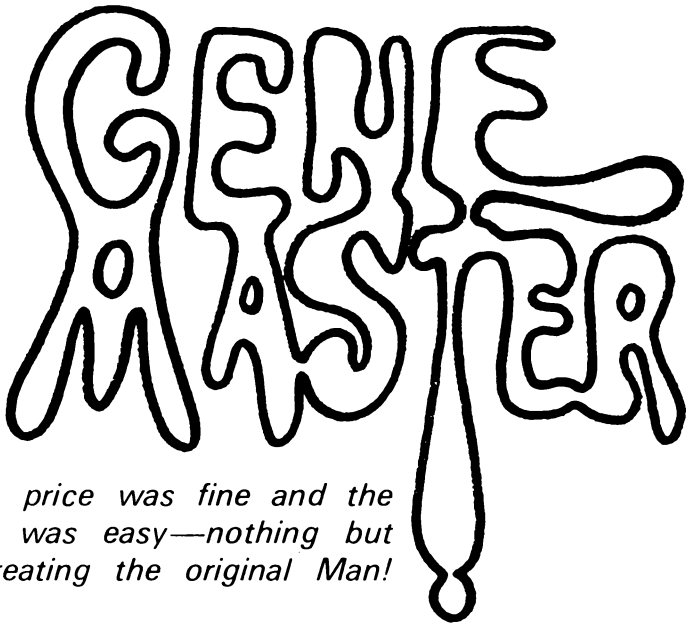
He thought a moment about his wife, seeing her face and hearing her clearly in his mind, feeling a kind of pride.

But it was rather humiliating, Colonel Ward thought, to have space conquered by bacteria. Put a man in his place, didn't it?

By craning his neck he could see the bomber high up, cruising at about fifteen thousand feet, just a flash in the sunlight. In a few seconds it would be over the field. He looked at his watch. Right on time. A good man, the general. Dependable.

He stared out at the field, watching for it. But he didn't get to see much. Only a sudden blinding glare, then a hurricane of smoke, mushrooming up and out.

In a second, it was over. ✱




*The price was fine and the job was easy—nothing but recreating the original Man!*

BARRY ALAN WEISSMAN

*Genemaster, genemaster, make me a man,*
*Quick as you can,*
*Any type man,*
*Genemaster, genemaster, true can't you see,*
*A Galaxy's waiting for we?*
Child's song, circa 234 G.E.

THERE is a town called Raega, on a planet of the same name, located somewhere in the Western Arm of the Galaxy. It's far off the main trade routes, and a bit rustic, but I like it. It's home. There is always a carnival atmosphere about Raega, with all its various types of humanity, their foods, dialects, ceremonies and customs. I have a shop there, a modest one-man procurement agency located on a cobbled dark alley off the main street, and I do a moderately good business.

It was just before lunch, 2 Juli 4515 G.E., that the man came in-

to my shop. I always keep dates. It's a nervous habit due to a slight hyperthyroid condition in my inheritance from my parents. Other things also are from my parents: ambition, drive, high intelligence —but no beauty.

"Beauty is a relative thing—" so goes an ancient folk saying of the neoAstritions I remember hearing once. It's not true in cases like mine. But I shouldn't complain. I was not bred for beauty. My genes were not chosen for ugliness either. It is simply a side effect, gene-linked to one of my necessary virtues.

But I'm rambling. This guy now, tall, about three meters, with large purple wings and a medallion of office on a golden throat chain, came into the place as if he could buy it with one fingernail. (He probably could; they looked as if they were painted with platinum.) Some high mucky-muck from out near the Rim, planetary monarch or something. I remembered seeing his face in the dailies on several occasions.

"May I help you, sir?" I opened, unsure of the correct form of address.

"Are you Gentle-hom denJan?" he asked, glancing around at the place. It is a bit dingy. But I don't live here, nor does my business allow much time to straighten it up.

"Yes, I am, and you?"

He straightened up and announced with as much dignity as possible, "I am honored to be President denZarkos of the Royal Taran Hereditary Dictatorship."

"I am very pleased to meet your highness. If you will but have a seat?"

He looked around him, then daintily deposited his posterior in a chair by the desk, folding one satin-clad leg over the other and wrapping his counterbalanced tail around his waist like a belt. I bet myself that he could really fly on his home world; those wings did not look like just ornamentation.

"I have a zoo," he said. "A modest little affair, only about five hundred basic stocks. Naturally it would be impossible to get all the diverse strains in the galaxy. I doubt if the number is even finite." He looked at me for agreement. I nodded, and he went on. "I settled for only the representative stocks, and completed what I considered the best zoo in this Arm about five cycles ago. Recently, however, a visiting diplomat from Centar imformed me that I am lacking a most important species. An Original."

"An Original? But surely, sir, the most up-to-date information indicates that man arose separately on over one thousand worlds. I believe that it's called the Convergent Evolution Theory. The idea of an Original is a myth dating back to before any species had achieved space travel and

each believed that it was the sole holder of intelligence in the universe. Why, the finds on—"

"No, you're wrong. But I am amazed at your wealth of knowledge. The diplomat, a *very* important person, I might add, assured me that recent discoveries on a small world near Centar predate all other discoveries by well over a billion cycles, and clearly show that the race was just beginning space travel at that time. He didn't come right out and say it, but, he obviously believes that it is the Original's original world; the cradle of humanity. It's called—" he shuffled through some papers in his pouch and then came up with one and read from it— "called Terra."

"And you wish one of the inhabitants for your zoo?"

"No. If that were the case I would have just dispatched a capture expedition. Unfortunately, the present locals are the survivors of a reseeding project. They are just dirty barbarians. I want an Original, as he was in the earliest days. Without this most basic of all basic stocks my zoo is valueless. I must have one. I understand that your procurement agency is the best in this Sector, perhaps in the whole Quadrant, although—" he glanced around the room once more— "it certainly doesn't look businesslike."

"Well, your grace, I'm pleased that you have come to us," I said, ignoring his last remark. "I'll certainly do my best to locate an Original for you. But I doubt if there is one available, anywhere. And even if there is it will be extremely expensive to obtain."

"I was prepared for both eventualities. As for cost, here—" he handed me a credacard— "is one million Imperial Credits. I will give you an additional million upon delivery to Tara. If you can't find a natural Original, I will accept a copy, of at least 95± 2% genetic true characteristics. Genotype, mind you, not just phenotype. And it should breed true, under suitable micromanipulation of DNA, so as to get a diploid individual from haploid gametes."

"Very well, your grace. I'll do my best."

He stood and folding his dignity about him like a cape looked around the office again. Then he sniffed once and departed.

"ALWAYS begin with the first step; it helps to keep one from tripping over one's own feet." My father once told me that in a fit of inventing proverbs. It's good advice, and I generally follow it. The first step on this job was a visit to Doc's place.

Doc was an old transferest. Fems who had been directed by the Genetics Board to bear a child with undesirable (to them) chromosomes could go to Doc and he would remicromanipulate the

DNA of the fetus into genes more of their liking. It played hob with the class lines, a Titanoid bearing a Prime, for example, but if the fem had enough money Doc didn't care. Once the zygote was born (or hatched if that was the case) it was not often removed. The Genetics Board usually thought that it was due to their error somewhere in the original handling of the selection process. That occurred all the time; too hard not to make errors down there at the atomic level. Anyway, they didn't want to penalize the victim any more than she had already been. Highly illegal act, transferring. Doc had done the same job for a while on his home world of Segal VII, but he hadn't watched the percentages. The local G.B. found that too many fems were all of a sudden giving birth to unselected offspring, differing from the selected characteristics by as much as eighty to ninety per cent. They began searching for wild factor in the equations and found Doc at the other end of an umbilical cord. He would have been shortened then and there but he was a distant relative of the local duke, so he was merely exiled.

Here he is much more careful. He set up a bakery as a front (good bread, too) and slowly wormed his business into the average deviation curve. Here he minds the percentages with a vengeance; if caught operating on Raega would lose his head.

Doc was waiting on a customer when I came in. He nodded me over to a corner while the woman to whom he was speaking, about seven months gone I noticed, gave me suspicious looks. Then he continued:

"Now, now, my dear," he said. "If you had come to see me five, or even four, months ago I could have helped you." He glanced at her swollen belly. "But now I'm afraid that it's too late. I'm really terribly sorry." His antennae literally wiggled in sympathy. "Irreversible changes have occurred in your metabolism," he continued. "making it possible for you to carry a Glanceroid zygote. The new fetus, no matter what genes, would not be able to adapt to those conditions, and your body could not change to meet its requirements at this late stage. And then there's the matter of size. The new fetus would be at least thiry percent smaller. . . . And many more reasons. Impossible."

She turned and left, probably cursing Doc under her breath. She'd birth the kid, grow him a bit and send him off to the mines like the government wanted. Then she'd get caught again and be back to Doc's door in a year or so. I know the type well.

"Well, Goodman Jan, what

can this humble abortionist do for you today? I just got in some fine Lambian fetuses. Give them some biostim and about two days and you could have a couple of real nice combination valet-body guards. Or is it a few hot rolls you'll be having?"

"Neither, Doc," I answered. "How about an Original instead? For business, not pleasure. And what was that word: aaborshtonist?"

"Abortionist. Ancient form of my profession, although not as skilled. They were harassed and persecuted also." He shook his head sadly, then brightened up. "An Original? You mean the original type of man, don't you?"

I nodded.

"An Original. Hummm. How much?"

"I'm getting two mill. I'll give you one-third."

"I could use some money. To expand the bakery and so forth," he gestured. "I don't believe that you'll find any naturals, and you don't either or you wouldn't have come to me, right?"

I nodded again, coming over to sit on the counter.

"What is it?" Doc asked. "Your client doesn't believe in the Convergent theory?"

"No, apparently he's got some unreleased info indicating a Divergent Evolution idea and is convinced that we all came from one stock 'way back when. Says we all come from a world called Terra, near Centar."

"It's certainly possible, although you couldn't tell now with the way we play around with the chromosomes. But look, Jan, I can assemble any thing you want me to, and I do mean any thing, but I have to know what characteristics to chose for. I can't just pick them out of the air."

"Especially since the client stipulated a guaranteed $95\pm$—2% Original type genotype."

"Well then, how are we going to get the characteristics?"

"What about your computers? And your books?"

"Jan, now I'm surprised at you. I'm not a wizard and the computer isn't magic. We can't pick facts out of the air. Before you walked in here today I firmly believed that we all evolved separately. Now you expect me to have a gene-chart on file of the characteristics belonging to a creature that I didn't believe in ten minutes ago."

"I guess not." I stood to leave.

"Wait, Jan. I didn't say that it was impossible. I can do quite a lot, but I need some leads. If only I had a little more to go on. . . ."

"All right, Doc, I'll see what I can do."

"Good! And meanwhile I'll go below and see what the computer can turn up in the way of univer-

sal constants in metabolism and so forth." He showed me to the door. "Good luck to you, Jan, and good hunting!"

"And the same to you, Doc."

FROM Doc's place I took an aircab to the more legitimate Man Market.

Raega is a big, well-populated world. Most basic types, I would guess at least ninety per cent of all those basics in the galaxy, can be found represented in at least one individual somewhere, if only in the gamete banks and zygote farms of the Man Market, where one can purchase embryos of any size, shape and eating habits, from methane-breathing Cajians to a building-sized, rock-metabolism Mercoid. Naturally it was my next stop. I didn't expect to be so lucky as to run into a vendor in Originals. That would have been too much to ask. But maybe I could get a lead or two, and maybe even a few characteristics.

As we flew lazily over the sprawling slums that stretch outward from the rich center of town my mind turned over the problem. Where next? A visit to Terra itself? With the high pay involved that was a definite possibility.

Below me I noticed the start of a fight between a couple of young Titans with shiny blades on their fingers and a group of rainbow-winged Pteroids. The Titans had a grudge, their bellies were empty and the Pteroids' were full. Off to the side I could just see the first policemen pushing their squat forms through the crowd of various shapes and sizes that had gathered to watch the diversion. They were too late; one of the Pteroids was down and hacked to death before the cops arrived to quell the disturbance with slashing stun guns. Then the entire scene was gone behind me.

Smells of alien cookery, of sweat from a dozen kinds of sweat glands, of disease and filth that had lain in the streets for uncountable days, of lust and hatred and old, old grief came up at me from the ground. This was humanity 4515. This was the genus *Homo*. Our species varied with the individual: Titan, Mercoid, Pteroid, Moid, a thousand more, a type for each inhabitable world in the galaxy. The planets would not adapt to us so we had to change to survive on them. And here we are today, shattered into splinter species, hating and feeding on one another, competing with one another for our common heritage of life. The race of men, 2 Juli 4515. Did all of this come from just one spark of intelligence arising on a long forgotten world-let out near the Rim in the dark ages past?

I'm a romantic; I wondered what he looked like, that first

man. That one who was brash enough to challenge the universe, and smart enough to win his bet—only to lose himself, that essence that was him, among the overwhelming reaches of the galaxy and the infinity of different molds he had to pour his intellect into to suit that infinity of conditions so that he might win. So that we would be here now, alive and kicking, in all our varied shapes.

The cab landed and woke me out of my dreaming.

"That'll be three and six, Man."

"Here, have a five and keep the change, Man."

The driver shook his tail at me in thanks and the cab lifted.

I checked every livestock dealer up and down the Market. No luck. No one had even heard of Terra, or Terrans, or Originals. One Joe said that he had a Lamarkoid gamete, and was that good enough?

"Nope," I told him. "It has to be one hundred per cent Terran."

ANYWAY, the Man Market is near the Central Post Office so I didn't lose much time. I walked the two blocks there, through avenues of steamy bars and dope joints, noisy crowds and shouting vendors selling cakes and pottery and human beings, then up the sleeping steps into the green coolness of the Post Office.

Mitar was in, the first bit of luck on this job.

"Hello, Mitar, what's new?" I asked.

"C over lambda equals nu," he said, and then smiled at his little joke. "What can I do for you today? The usual, or do you want to mail a letter?"

"The usual. The usual rates?"

He nodded. "Come on in."

See, it's this way. Everybody on Raega gets letters. It's a law. A couple of decades ago a politician promised us a good postal system during his campaign, and surprisingly came through with it after his election. So now we have the most accurate Post Office in this Arm of the galaxy, with computers and everything to handle all the mail. And for the computers to do a good job they must have a record of every individual on the planet, their names, addresses, and their types, their species classification if you like. Occasionally, when I have to locate someone or some type real quick, I rent use of the main computer from Mitar, a swarthy Telocian with four all-seeing eyes in a row around his head who happened to be supervisor for the main P.O. He never asks me what programs I use and I never ask him what he does with the money I give him. It is not exactly illegal. They haven't caught us so they haven't passed a law against it.

He showed me to the computer and then left, closing the door silently behind him. I set up my programs and fed them in. A few minutes later came the feedout:

NO LISTINGS ON ORIGINAL PERIOD NO LISTINGS ON PRIME HOMO PERIOD NO LISTINGS ON TERRAN TYPE PERIOD ONE LISTING OF TERRAN CITIZEN AT PRESENT ON RAEGA PERIOD NAME: GOODMAN TEN APLA PERIOD LOCUS: RAEGA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL WARD C-175 BED A34 TYPE DESIGNATION: TRUE TERRAN SECONDARY SEED PJT. NUMBER 1275431-A PERIOD END OF PROGRAM PERIOD.

Things were beginning to break.

Hospitals are usually thought to be antiseptically clean, I understand, but Raega Memorial is a charity place, and is kept up (or rather not kept up) by public taxes. Consequently the building is a hospital in name only. It is understaffed, and the staff underpaid. This doesn't attract the best medics. The victims live (and die) in smelly squalid wards built to hold fifty and containing over two hundred in small cramped beds that are shared. Too many patients, too few beds and too little care make Raega Memorial a nearly automatic death trap. Although some do escape, they tell me.

The last attempt at hospitalness was a coat of white paint on the walls applied about a decade ago. Now even this last attempt was gone; the once white walls were dirty and grease-smeared, written all over, chipped and, in some places, peeled right down to the rusty metal framework.

The only attempt at grouping the patients was by their financial status; partially self-supporting, unable to be self-supporting, and the less fortunate. Goodman ten-Apla fit into the last catagory.

I found him in a small bed in the cheapest ward in the whole filfilthy place, playing a form of poker with his bed-partner, a Sart type with a large cancerous growth on its feeding appendage.

"My name is denJan and I'd like to speak to you a moment, Goodman tenApla," I said, going up to him. He looked up from his cards suspiciously.

"Eh, what's that? Me?" he said in a raspy voice. "I know my rights! You can't toss me out while I'm sick—and I'm sick, terribly terribly sick! Right now, youngster, I'm in more pain than you ever felt in your life. Oooh! Oooh!" He clutched his stomach and went into some very convincing convulsions, sending the cards flying and therefore somewhat upsetting the Sart, who, I saw, had a

winning hand. "Call a doctor! Call a nurse! I'm dying!"

The Sart tried the bed button to summon aid. It sizzled in his hand, gave off some pretty purple smoke and died. He stumbled out of the bed cursing freely in his native tongue, an indescribable series of grunts and clicks, and staggered off down the corridor to fetch an attendant. I felt this had gone far enough.

"Cut the dramatics, citizen. I'm not here to kick you out," I said, tossing him a golden Imperial to prove my point. He stopped the sound effects and made it disappear, then glared at me again.

"Who are you, if you're not an inspector? Who else but an inspector would want to see me?"

"I understand that you come from Terra."

"Oh ho, so that's what it is. Yes, lad, I came from Sol IV in my youth, and how I wish that I had never left! I still remember coming burrowards in the late afternoon, the twin moons high in the sky over the crimson sand dunes. But that was long ago, and what does that have to do with you? Customs, emigration?"

"No, I'm not connected with the government in any way." This seemed to relax him slightly. "I'm looking for native Terrans—conducting a survey—" I lied, "and wonder if you would be so kind as to permit me to take a small skin sample for our records?"

"You want my genes, huh? Are you a genelegger? Oh well, you can have 'em, I'm not so tight with 'em any more. Too old to have a natural child, and it would be nice to know that I'm leaving someone behind. Yeh, you can have 'em—" he suddenly grew shrewder— "for a price." He looked around at the decrepit surroundings. "I hate this place. But an old man's got to stay somewhere. You can have your sample, use it for what you will, but for one hundred Imperials."

I chewed on that for a minute. "All right, it's a deal."

"Too quick, youngster," he laughed. "You were prepared to pay more. Two hundred credits!"

"That's not fair, we had a deal! One hundred and fifty!"

"One seventy-five!" He was a sly old dog.

"One sixty."

"Oh, all right, if you throw in an ambulance ride to the Viceroy Hospital. I'm too old to argue long."

"Done."

I got the sample, a couple of cheek smears and a cc of blood. Around then the nurse for the ward showed up with the Sart, and I explained how Goodman ten Apla was transfering to the Viceroy. She called for an ambulance on her belt radio.

"Good riddance," she told me,

and spit at a Thart who was moaning over in a corner.

Before the stretcher men arrived I asked Dug about his home system.

"Four's the only inhabitable world," he told me. "Three is really in a more favorable condition, but the atmosphere is poisonous, too many hydrocarbons and ozone —it probably was inhabited at one time but it can't support human life now."

Then the boys arrived and lifted him onto the stretcher. He winked his third eye at me as they carried him out to the waiting car like a lord. Now he had money, and now I had some genes. Not originals, but close.

NOW back at Doc's. He wasn't in front so I rang the bell on the glass counter. A door opened behind the pastry section and out stepped Doc, a big smile on his face.

"I've got some good news," we said in unison, then I laughed. "You first."

He collapsed into a chair. "After you left I got an inspiration to pay a visit to the local organ bank." He looked smug.

"And—" I started, but he refused to complete the sentence. Doc just sat there smiling. Something was up his sleeve.

Finally, "Come on in here. I want to show you something."

So for the first time I entered Doc's secret laboratory. It isn't large but it is well equipped for its function. An old electron microscope, ancient really, but well cared for, stood in a corner of the small room flanked by rows of chemical reagent bottles, stands of micro-manipulating tools—and all dominated by a mark XIX Geniac computer on the opposite wall. In the center of the room was a wide bench of shiny metal with a mobile optical scope set up on one side and a white porcelain pan on the other. Within the pan I could see a brownish-red something about the size of my fist.

"What is it?" I asked.

"What does it look like?" Doc was feeling playful.

"A . . . heart?" As if to reassure me it thumped once.

"Right! And on the first guess too. You'd be good on a quiz show, Jan. It is indeed a heart, but what a heart! Four thousand years old at least and maybe more."

"Where did you get it?"

"I told you," he said, smiling. "The organ banks. It's so old that they can't use it on any present types. Wouldn't fit. So they just kept it, for years, in the back of the banks, absorbing nutrient without producing anything. I managed to convince the staff that they didn't want it any more. The convincing, by the way, set you

back one hundred Imperials. It isn't an Original, I don't think, but it will give us a good idea as it is older than the oldest records of artificial DNA manipulation. Now what's your good news?"

I told him of my experiences and gave him the sample bottles.

"Well, well, well," he said, taking them over to the microscope. "Jan, my boy, we might, just might, have enough now." He made a slide and looked at it for a minute. Then he glanced at me. "Why don't you wait outside for a minute while I check a few things? I hate having people looking over my pseudo-shoulder while I work."

I could see Doc was deep in the problem. He didn't even look up as I closed the door behind me. And through the supposedly sound-proofed panels I could distinctly hear him whistling, *My Mother Was a Test-tube, My father Was a Wrench*. Doc was happy in his work.

Three hours later he came out of his inner sanctum, sweat in beads on his brow despite the air-conditioning. "Whew! That was a hard one. Your added characteristics from that fellow in the hospital did the trick. What a screwy metabolism! no chloroplasts, no plug-ins, no A-converters, only a simple food-oxidation system. And I had to keep reintegrating the DNA; it kept trying to resume the normal shape instead of returning into the Original but I finally got it."

"You mean we have an Original? Alive? Already?"

"Eh? Oh, sure, that's what I've been telling you. Come into the back, Jan, come in." He waved me in, followed, then pointed to the optical scope. Under it was now a small pseudouterus with Doc's gleaming tools still wet by the side. "Look in there. Go ahead, look, it wouldn't bite."

I saw a cell in the scope, or rather a small clump of cells. I don't know much about embroyology but I would have certainly called it a beautiful blastula. As I watched, a couple of cells divided, their cytoplasm and tiny nuclei duplicating themselves in perfection.

I looked up smiling. "We did it! You did it! Is it within the stipulated genotype limits of the client?"

"According to Mabel here the chances are that it is a 97+2% pure blood Original." He slapped the computer affectionately. "And Mabel is never wrong. Because he's our first born I made him a nice boy, Jan. Think of that, Jan," he beamed. "We're the parents of a beautiful unmutated Terran *Homo* . . . an Original, perhaps the first Original born in over two million years. Say, what species is he? *Neo-originalis?*"

"Why not sentiens," I asked after a moment of thought to recall my neoathenian.

"Right you are!" Doc got out some old brandy, Algol V 4501 vintage. "Here's to our son," he toasted. "*Homo sentiens!*"

A MAIL ship of the Empire carried us from Raega to Deneb II, past Sertain and Wolff, and then to the silver towers of Gromatch's old port. There I booked passage on the tramp trader *Dipper Lass*, which carried us through the Scorpion Cluster and down King Ampteps' belt, with stops to see the Golden Islands of Twilight on Ran III and the Emerald Hills of Tobaris. On Novecentaurs we boarded a regular Rim-bound liner which eventually brought us to the free port of Sastral on Harnlock VI, ten parsecs from Tara of the Red Suns. President Zarkos's launch was waiting there for us. I had 'grammed ahead the date of our arrival.

We followed a zigzag course across the Galaxy, that child and I, he down in his freeze case in the hold and me in first class when there was such. Around Tarsus I woke him up and introduced him to the universe. A fine lad he was, aged by biostim to a healthy fifteen cycles and with a good quick intelligence. Finally we arrived on Tara.

I won my bet; Zarkos could fly, and flying he and his retainers came down from their castled peaks to meet us at the main port of Tara, the three red suns high in the sky glistening off their silvered wings done in the latest fashion.

"Marvelous, marvelous," he said, his eyes widening as he saw my companion. "I never really allowed myself to believe that you could do it. But here he is. An Original. The only Original, and he's all mine."

"I'm happy that you're pleased, my lord," I said, against the crisp breeze coming in from the green ocean beyond the port's southern border.

"Pleased? I'm overwhelmed! Here, the rest of your pay," he handed me a credacard for the sum and I handed the lad over to two of his servants.

"Goodbye, Gentlehom denJan, and many thanks." Zarkos flapped his wings a few times to get up speed and then strode off into the air.

"Goodbye, Papa Jan," said the boy, his five yellow eyes misty with tears. The servants positioned themselves on either side of him and they rose in unison, the lad waving his tentacle at me. "Thanks for everything."

I watched them for a few minutes, hypnotized by the beauty of their soaring forms. So that was what we all were, way back when. Why, he could fly better than they

could!

IT was just after lunch, 14 Dekember 4515 that the second man came into the shop. He was a squat one, half a meter tall and six wide, with twelve thick feet, two thicker arms and a brillant metallic toga wrapped around his bulk like a shaggy red skin.

"May I help you, sir?"

"Yeth," he said with an interesting accent. "I understhanth that you hath procured an Original for the thzoo of Prethident Thzarkos of Thara?" He waited a minute, unsure of himself.

"And . . ." I interjected.

"I . . . I altho hath a thzoo . . ."

"I see."

So I called Doc. This one will be a girl, and a pretty thing too, all blue and green and with four bright golden wings like her brother. A full-blooded 97±2% unmutated Terran Original little girl. How happy they must have been, way back when. They are so beautiful.

And I am so ugly.

Ah, well. That's life for you. ★

## FORECAST

**DOWNWARD TO THE EARTH**

. . . Read that as a quote from Ecclesiastes—or read it as ROBERT SILVERBERG telling it like it is when future Man liberates Planet Belzagor—with powerful, timely, down-to-Earth pertinence to "like it is" on Earth today!

DON'T WAIT FOR **DOWNWARD TO THE EARTH** TO MAKE THE SF BEST-SELLER LISTS AS A NOVEL. READ IT AS A BEGINNING BIG SERIAL IN NEXT MONTH'S **GALAXY** ALONG WITH OTHER BEST, NEWEST AND MOST RELEVANT SCIENCE FICTION LIKE:

Phyllis Gotlieb's
THE DIRTY OLD MEN OF MAXSEC
Norman Spinrad's
DEAD END
Ron Goulart's
BROKE AND HUNGRY AND NO PLACE TO GO
James E. Gunn's
THE MAN WHO WOULD NOT

***PLUS***

Robert S. Richardson's factual space-science adventure of tomorrow:

**HOW TO KIDNAP A MOON**


*Men were for the Mother Sections—*
*except for the untamed Wild Ones.*

ALFRED COPPEL

THE Teacher's voice droned on in the stuffy room. Jere, weary from a six hour patrol, could scarcely stay awake. Her head bobbed and Ella jabbed an elbow into her ribs. "Keep your eyes open," Ella whispered.

Jere straightened with an effort and squared her shoulders. A weight of weariness was pressing down on her and she had the rebellious thought that patrolling wasn't fit work for a woman. Ella was looking disapprovingly at her, lips compressed. Jere squirmed uncomfortably, more conscious of the hard bench and the glaring light than of the Teacher's endless repetitions.

At least, Jere thought, she

might try to make it interesting.

But the Teacher, a major, was grinding out the same line, the lesson that never changed. If Jere had heard it once, she had heard it a thousand times.

All right, she thought sulkily, I believe it. It's all true. So what?

The major was saying that San Francisco was entitled to free access to natural resources: oil, metals, men—whatever was left. And that was the reason for the war. It seemed to Jere that the Three-Cornered War had been going on ever since she could remember. When it wasn't against Los Angeles and Denver, it was against Phoenix and, say, Seattle. There simply was not enough of anything left to go around—particularly men.

At 2100 hours the class ended and the Scouts filed out of the classroom stiffly, aching from two hours on those hard benches.

From the window of the small room she shared with Ella and two other girls of her section, Jere could see the bomb-shattered city spread out below. There were few lights, but the rubble was bathed in cold moonlight. To the north were the towers that the older women claimed once supported a bridge across the narrow mouth of the bay. In the west, the ruins of what had once been Oakland glowed with an eerie radioactive incandascence.

"Bomber's moon tonight," Ella said uneasily.

"Denver has no planes," Jere replied, slipping off her uniform blouse.

"They have missiles," Ella declared. "While you were flying, a dud landed in the bay." She sniffed scornfully. "Interception was terrible."

"Interception generally is." Jere lay gratefully on her hard cot and closed her eyes. But Ella stood at the window, contemplating the moonlight. "Jere," she said. "Did you hear about the men?"

JERE opened her eyes. "Which men?"

"The ones Captain Moira's raid captured yesterday."

"How many?"

"Eighteen, I think."

Jere whistled softly. "Denvers?"

"No. Angelinas."

"That will bring a reprisal, all right. Those Los Angeles bitches won't lose eighteen men without a fight." She pursed her lips, staring at the ceiling. "Where are they now?"

Ella shrugged. "In the breeder pens." She gave a short, bitter-sounding laugh. "We won't get any."

"Men aren't for the Fighting Sections, Ella," Jere said gently.

"Why aren't they?" Ella demanded. "We do all the work, take all the risks."

"Men are for the Mother Sections, Ella," Jere said. "It's always been that way." And then, because she could see that Ella was unplacated by her answer, she added: "Pen-men are no good anyway. You've seen them."

Ella sat down on her cot and kicked off her flight boots. "What would you know about it?"

"Nothing," Jere admitted. "But I know some Mother Section people who've had wild ones. They say they are much handsomer."

"Savages," Ella said. "Some of them can't even be tamed. They have to be killed. Pen men are better."

"Maybe." Jere stretched and closed her eyes again. Once, when she was still a young girl, she remembered that she had had dreams about a world in which there was a man for each woman —a strange sort of world without ruins or missiles or Three-Cornered War. It had been pleasant to dream like that, but she had told someone—she couldn't remember now who—and Psych Section had taken her into analysis and explained the dreams away. It was always dangerous, they told her, to dream like that. Such ideas, even in sleep, endangered the Matriarchy. For three months she had gone to sleep with a somnoteacher whispering to her. The dreams had never came back. though she remembered them.

THE undulating wail of the attack alarm interrupted her drowsing reverie. A harsh voice crackled from the wall speaker.

*"Radarplot has picked up jetcraft a hundred miles south of the city. All Interception Section pilots man their planes. All Scout Section pilots stand by to assist. Mother Sections to shelter."*

"So Denver has no planes," Ella said breathlessly, pulling on her boots.

"Angelinas, dear," Jere said, getting to her feet. "They have Beenine Ones. Damn them, anyway."

In the far distance the flak guns began their usual futile hacking at the sky. The whine of jets warming and milling about on the flight decks filled the city.

Ella and Jere ran down the corridors crowded with women toward the hangar deck. From the Mother Section areas, a great sobbing and shrieking filled the building with noise. Far underground, the precious men were herded into deep shelters.

On the hangar deck there was some measure of order. Interceptors were being trundled out to the flight deck and a few ground-to-air missiles were being readied. The two-seat scout craft were being refueled and armed.

Jere found her own ship near the end of the line. Her radar operator, a thin-faced girl with dark

stringy hair showing beneath her helmet, was standing by.

"Are we fueled, May?" Jere asked, struggling into her flight gear.

"They haven't fixed the tail gun," May said unhappily. "Is it the Angelinas, Miss Jere? Oh, Mother! I was afraid it would be them ever since I heard about the men. Those Angelinas really fight, they do."

"We'll do all right, May," Jere said with an assurance she did not really feel. She was thinking about the multiple pom-pom guns on the Beenine Ones. "Those airplanes are old as the hills."

May cast a doubting eye at the scarred flank of their own machine. "So are ours," she said sourly.

THE steady firing of the flak guns ceased as the first flight of interceptors took the air. The silence was thick. Then the thin, whispering noise of the Beenine Ones came down on the waiting city. Jere estimated there were at least five of them.

"Why are we always fighting, Miss Jere?" May demanded suddenly. "Bombing and stealing and fighting all the time—"

"*May!*"

"I'm sorry, Miss Jere," May said. "I didn't mean to talk like that. I'm nervous, I guess—"

"All right," Jere said. "We both know better than to ask questions like that. Thank the Mother there wasn't anyone from Security Section to hear you or I'd be riding without radar tonight. Let's forget it."

"Thank you, Miss Jere," May said heavily.

*"Scout Section aircraft stand by to support interception."* The words of the Flight Controller came from the wall speakers, cutting through the clanger of the hangar deck.

"Interception flubbed it again," May said bitterly.

As though to accent her words, there came the sound of explosions in the distance.

"Along the Embarcadere," Jere said. "Damn them!"

*"Blue Scout Section scramble!"* the speaker shrieked.

This is a bad one, Jere thought. The Angelinas were really seething tonight.

"We'll be next, May," Jere said. "We can't wait for the gun. Get aboard."

SITTING in the vibrating jet, she could see Ella's red-winged craft moving into the catapult. There was a jet of steam, glowing blue-white from the engine, and then Ella was gone, climbing into the night.

Overhead a fission bomb flared, sun-bright at seventy thousand feet. It etched the city in light,

blotting out the moon.

Jere wondered how many fission bombs the attackers were carrying, and whether they were new bombs or weapons found in some ancient stockpile.

Her practiced eyes flicked over the battered instrument panel. The turbine was vibrating badly but there was not a machine shop in San Francisco capable of repairing it to original specifications and the motor itself was nearly a hundred years old. It dated from the time before the Three-Cornered War, a time when there were still men who could fly and work and fight. The old women said they did not fight other cities in those days; Jere wondered if such a time had ever really been. The Teachers said the Matriarchy had always existed. Yet the legend was that once there had been as many men as women and that the men had been the rulers. It seemed impossible. *Those soft-fleshed breeders?* The old women claimed it was so, swore it by the Mother. They told of a greater war that had decimated the male population until there were so few that women had to fight for them. *Breed or die. The cause—*

We fight, all right, Jere thought bitterly. We fight for a handful of men, even though half of them are sterile or breed monsters and have to be destroyed. We fight for a puddle of uncontaminated water, a pile of hard coal, a half-ruined factory or a barren field.

"*Red Flight scramble!*"

The command drove the rebellious thoughts from her mind and she rolled the jet forward toward the gaping mouth of the hangar and the catapult. Her lips moved silently in the short prayer she had used before battle since girlhood.

*Mother, protect your daughter Jere, defend our city, give us victory and fertility and unmarked young—*

AS she emerged onto the catapult deck, Jere could see the waterfront burning. The sight brought a surge of hatred for the women in the bombers.

The catapult crew was signaling for her to rev up. She throttled the uneven engine with a practiced hand.

"Ready, May?" she asked into the intercom.

The girl's reply came back, scratchy and indistinct. "Ready, miss. I wish we had the gun, though; I really do."

"Don't worry about it now," Jere snapped. "How's the radar?"

"I have power, miss," May said.

The Red Flight leader was on the starboard catapult, now vanishing down the deck, spitting sparks from her half-tuned engine. Jere saw her ship vanish below the level of the runway and dip into the canyons between buildings.

She held her breath until she saw the glowing jet-trail of the airplane clear of obstructions and climbing.

The catapult officer was waiting for Jere's signal. The engine was not developing full power, but Jere gave the signal anyway. The jet picked up speed with a rush. The dim blue lights at the end of the runway hurtled under the sharply swept back wings and they were airborne, banking low over the burning Embarcadero and swinging out over the dark waters of the bay.

Jere set the airplane into maximum climb configuration and turned back over the city.

"Any contact, May?" Jere asked.

"I have them, miss. They're at seventy thousand feet, heading two four five degrees. Probably making another bomb run."

That's exactly what they're doing, Jere thought. Trying to get the breeding houses and the men in the shelters. What they couldn't keep, they would destroy if they could.

A streak of fire fell out of the sky. An interceptor shot down. Jere felt the hot anger of battle. This world, she thought, this bleak world is my world. Maybe things were different once, but this is what it was like *now*. Women were born to fight, not dream—

"Fly zero five one," May said.

JERE swung the jet to the new heading, still climbing. The moonlight was taking on the peculiar crystal brilliance of high flight. The altimeter needle touched 50,000 feet. Contrails of ice streamed from the wingtips.

"Change course to zero five five," May said through the interphone. "I have four bogies."

Jere banked the jet until the gyro held steady on the new course. "Anything from IFF?"

"Nothing, Miss Jere," May's voice said in the helmetphones. "We might just be the only ones up here except *them*."

From the misty moonlit earth below, a trio of rocket trails came streaking up and past them. There was a fiery blast as a great bomber disintegrated above and ahead of their track.

"Oh, Mother," May said. "They actually hit something."

"That will shake them up," Jere said with satisfaction.

Pieces of the burning bomber spiraled down, spinning and fluttering like a fiery rain. Jere zigzagged the jet skillfully to avoid them.

"We're up with them, miss," May said. "You can pick them up on your screen now—if you can get it working."

The tiny radarscope in Jere's cockpit flicked on and the bombers were there, three of them now,

etched in green light. Jere centered them on the grid and armed the wing rockets.

"Closing," Jere reported.

"I'll be on the guns," May said.

The altimeter needle hovered near seventy thousand feet. The sky was black as pitch and the stars and moon glittered like jewels. Ahead, Jere caught a glimpse of metal flanks and the bluish glow of the Beenine Ones' jets.

Far, far below there was a sudden fireball and a rising mushroom of flame. The bombers banked away toward the south.

"That was a bad one," May whispered in a choked voice. "Oh, that was really a bad one."

Mother damn them, *damn them*, Jere thought. We try to live and they come up here with their bombers and their raiding—

SHE was thinking of the heavy women of the Mother Sections cowering in the shelters as she triggered the first salve of rockets, watching them burning out of the pods and rushing away and down.

"Missed," May reported. "Just to the right and low."

Jere closed further on the fleeing bombers and armed her second salvo. There were flashes up ahead and the wobbly trail of tracers streaking past at unbelievable speeds. The pom-pom guns on the bombers searched for the pursuing jet. May had swung the turret around, forgetting about the useless tailgun. She was firing over Jere's head at the dark shapes ahead. The cockpit was filled with the odor of cordite and the airframe vibrated to the heavy thudding of the 40mm guns.

Jere centered in her grid the last bomber in the line ahead and pressed the trigger. Rockets raced out and vanished into the glow of the bomber's engines. The Beenine One turned into a blob of oily fire and began to break up. A kill, Jere thought exultantly.

"Parasite fighter, miss!" May shouted.

A tiny jet had left the parent bomber and was somewhere behind them. Jere's mouth went dry; she pulled the scout around in a tight turn. The wingtips stalled and she lost speed and altitude correcting. Small fireballs flashed past her cockpit. The parasite was closing in from behind and Jere knew she could not shake free.

She felt suddenly very tired, her movements of the controls were leaden, hopeless. She heard the crash of metal tearing and the whine of pressure escaping from the cockpit.

"Miss! Help me, Jere—I'm hit!"

"May!"

No reply. Jere shoved the nose of the airplane down into a slant-

ing dive. The parasite followed. An explosive shell burst on the wingtip. The jet buffeted and began to spiral steeply. *Mother, protect your daughter Jere—*

The cockpit was filled with smoke and wisps of flame.

"May! Eject!"

There was no reply. Jere cast off the shoulder harness and twisted around to look back. She saw nothing but fire. She braced against the back and fired the ejection seat. The sudden cold took her breath away. She was falling. She remembered the ribbon chute streaming out. Then nothing.

JERE opened her eyes in bright sunlight. There was grass under her and for a time she didn't realize what it was. She had never before been out of the city except while flying.

A man squatted by her side; a man unlike any Jere had ever seen. She thought—*a wild one.*

He was burned dark from the sun and he was dressed in rough clothes made of animal skins. His face was black-bearded and across his bare shoulders rested a rifle of archaic design.

"We heard the fight last night," he said.

Jere did not reply. Her hands touched the pockets of her flight suit. Nothing had been taken. The flight chart was still folded at her thigh, the packet of emergency rations was at her hip. The man had gathered up her parachute and rolled it into a pack.

"You mama's girls are really making a mess of things, you know," the man said.

Jere ignored that and sat up. "Where is this place."

"Near Saratoga."

"What's Saratoga?"

"It used to be a town. He shifted easily on his haunches. He was a young man and his movements had a wild thing's litheness.

"How far from the city?" Jere asked.

He smiled, showing sharp white teeth through the dark bush of his beard. "What city?"

"San Francisco, of course," Jere said, frowning. "Did you take me for an Angelina?"

"You all look alike to me," he said, amused.

"How far?" Jere asked again.

"Sixty miles maybe. Depends on how you go."

"Can you read a map?" Jere asked.

The man laughed. "I think so."

Jere took the chart from her pocket. "Then show me."

The man moved nearer. He had a strange, wild smell. His finger tapped the open chart. "Here," he said. "Here's where we are. And here—" He moved his finger to the west, to a spot in the mountains where one of the ancient roads crossed a stream. "Here is where we are going."

Jere drew away. "I must get back," she said.

"Yes? Why?"

Jere stood up and looked down at the still squatting man. What would this savage know about a woman's duty? It would be useless to explain.

The man said carelessly, "You can't get back. There's no way through the mines and the wire."

JERE said nothing. All the Flying Section people knew the path through the defenses. The Teachers saw to that Pilots who crashed and survived needed to know.

The man shook his head. "Women," he said. "You've done a great job, you have. You've shut yourself up in the cities and with all the fighting you do, no one can get near enough to change things." He stood up and looked appraisingly at Jere. "You fight mostly over men, don't you?"

"Men," Jere said. "Not wild animals."

The man picked a blade of green grass and put it between his lips. "You may have something there," he said. "But seems to me you're missing a bet. There are men about, even if they are a bit on the woolly side. Men who would like to get things started again."

He showed his teeth in a savage kind of smile.

Jere had been listening to him, conscious of the strange and archaic accent of his speech, and now she could *feel* his looking at her. Her skin goose-pimpled.

"Like the old days," Jere said scornfully.

"The old days weren't so bad, I hear tell," the man said. "I know men didn't do such a good job of running the world, but you women haven't done even as well."

"We survive," Jere said.

"So do we," the man said. "And our women are women. In the cities they tell you men are no good, don't they?"

Jere did not reply.

"Sure they do. Because there aren't enough to go around."

Jere said, "I don't have to listen to this."

The man stood beside her. "The hell you don't," he said.

Jere stared at him.

"Because, little mama's girl, you belong to me now. I found you."

Jere said incredulously, "You're insane."

"I must be," he said, showing his teeth again, "even to think about taking another city woman. You fighters are all devils to get along with, but I've done it before and I guess I can do it again."

"'—*another* city woman—'?" Jere was too stunned to say more.

"I have three wives. You'll be the fourth. Two of them are from Phoenix. They were shot down raiding Frisco. I found them and

patched them up. They were hell on wheels for a while, but they learned. Life isn't so bad out here, you know. We get along. And some day there will be enough of us men to go back to the cities or what's left of them and make you crazy dames quit bombing each other all to hell."

*"Mother!"* Jere backed away from him and turned to run, but he moved so swiftly that she hardly knew what struck her. There was a stinging pain across her face that brought the tears to her eyes and his hand was on her wrist.

"You'll learn, too," he said with that white smile. "Now come along like a good girl."

HE told her that the settlement he had shown her on the map was a day and a half's journey. He had been hunting when he found her.

She followed him in a daze, stumbling along over her on the ground. He went slowly. Out of concern for her?

By nightfall they had arrived at the lower reaches of the stream. The water, to her surprise, was uncontaminated. She watched while he stripped and bathed—always with his rifle near at hand. "Now you," he said.

Jere bathed in the cold water while he sat on the bank looking at her.

He shot a brace of small birds, a variety unknown to Jere, who had seen only the ugly seagull mutations that infested the city. She ate the sweet flesh as the sunlight faded from the sky.

"You're being a sensible girl," he said approvingly. "There's no use fighting the inevitable. You'll like it, living free. No crazy women trying to bomb you. No playing soldier. It's a good life out here."

"Why don't the men come back to the cities?" Jere asked, thinking of the strength it would give San Francisco to have a few men like this one in the pens.

"Why, first off, there are the defenses. I suppose we could manage them if we wanted to work all together. But mainly it's because we don't have many weapons and there aren't very many of us." He grinned at her in the firelight. "We wouldn't take to being a natural resource much, though I guess there's worse ways to earn you keep. But some of us are sterile from the radiation, too. You know they'd never keep a sterile man alive in the cities. Breed or die, isn't that what they teach you?"

Jere nodded slowly.

"In my settlement we have hundred and sixty men. We get along, take care of ourselves and our women—"

JERE felt her heart begin to pound. "*How* many men did you say?"

He laughed. "A hundred and sixty."

A hundred and sixty men, a *wealth* of men, if only half of them were breeders. Jere stared at the fire.

"Our settlement will grow into a town one day," the man said. "And we won't have to hide from the city raiders then. And after that, we'll find other towns and *then* we'll all get together and go back to the cities and stop all this fighting. Things will be different. Maybe you and I won't live to see it, but our children will, that's sure."

The firelight flickered and danced. Our children, Jere thought. Our children. She said softly, "It's a strange dream."

He moved closer to her. The smell of him was disturbing, unfamiliar. A hundred and sixty men—

She sat, not moving, while he touched her. Mother, Mother—

"Don't fight me," he said.

Jere closed her eyes. He was surprisingly gentle. She could feel his beard against her face. It was not harsh as she had thought it would be, but soft. Very soft.

"You've never had a man."

Jere, her eyes still closed, shook her head slowly.

"You'll see."

She said, whispering, "My name is Jere."

He laughed as the night grew darker and the fire fell to a bed of embers. "Isn't this better, Jere?"

"Of course."

"You'll be all right."

"I'll be all right.

She could hear him laughing quietly and saying with gentle derisiveness, "Mama's girl—mama's girl."

Gently he took her into his arms.

JERE lay awake beside the man, listening to his heavy, regular breathing. The stars that peeped through the dark boughs overhead seemed closer than she had ever seen them.

She twisted onto her side to look at him. He slept, satiated. She looked away, and sat up, remembering.

Presently, she covered herself against the cold and got to her knees, reaching.

The map. Yes. It was there. The settlement. That too.

She knelt for a time, not moving. Thinking. Remembering. Things could be different. The men.

She stood up now, a small, taut figure in the darkness. The man stirred, opened his eyes.

"Jere—?"

Men were careless. Men should be cared for.

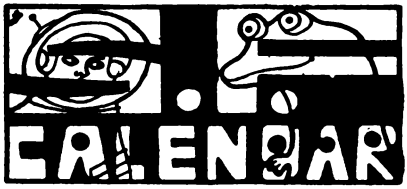
She leveled the rifle and fired. The man arched his back and made a hurt sound. Jere fired again. The shot echoed, died.

A hundred and sixty men. *One hundred and sixty—*

Dawn was breaking as Jere gathered her gear and began walking. She was thinking: A raiding party *Mother, protect your daughter Jere, forgive your daughter Jere, defend our city, make us strong—*

A hundred and sixty men. No, a hundred and fifty-nine. Still a triumph.

As she walked, she tried to remember. What was it he had kept calling her? Oh, yes. So right. Mama's girl. ★




*July* 3-5, 1970. WESTERCON XXIII. Will be held in Santa Barbara, California. Guest of Honor: Jack Williamson; Fan Guest of Honor: Rick Sneary. Memberships: $3.00 through June 22; $5.00 at the door. For information: Westercon XXIII, Box 4456, Downey, California 90241.

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*October 30-November* 1, 1969. SECONDARY UNIVERSE II and SECOND ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY OF AMERICA. At the University of Wisconsin, Green Bay. The Secondary Universe is open to the first 300 registrants ($5.00 fee); the Tolkien Conference is open to all ($1.00 fee if not a member of the Tolkien Society of America). For information: Ivor A. Rogers, University of Wisconsin—GB, Green Bay, Wisconsin 54302.

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*November* 15-16, 1969 PHILCON. At Warwick Hotel, 17th and Locust, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Principal speaker will be Anne McCaffrey. Membership: $2.00. For information: Tom Purdom, 4734 Cedar Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19143.

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*March* 27-29, 1970. SFCon '70. At Hilton Inn, San Francisco Airport, California. Pro Guests of Honor: Miriam Allen de Ford and E. Hoffman Price. Fan Guest of Honor: Felice Rolfe. Memberships: $3.00 now, $4.00 after January 1st, $5.00 at the door. For information: Quinn Yarbro, 369 Columsa #5, Berkeley, California 94707.

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*April* 3-5, 1970. MINICON 3. At the Andrews Hotel, Minneapolis. For information: Jim Young, 1948 Ulysses Street, N.E., Minneapolis, Minnesota 55418.

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*April* 10-12, 1970. LUNACON/EASTERCON. At the Hotel McAlpin, Herald Square, New York City. Advance registration: $2.00. For information and registration: Devra Langsam, 250 Crown Street, Brooklyn, New York 11225.

# THE STORY OF OUR EARTH

Willy Ley

## The Conquest of the Land

OF ALL the areas where living things are in evidence there is one that has always held a special fascination for experts as well as laymen. Every vacationer who ever walked barefoot along a beach knows it though he may not know its technical name. It is the "littoral zone"—from Latin *littorae*, which means "shores."

When used by a zoologist, the term "littoral zone" means the stretch of land between the highest tide and the lowest ebb plus the sand spits and boulders that show at low ebb even though they are still surrounded by water.

It was, of course, in the littoral zones that life was able—"forced" might be a better word—to climb out of the water and settle on land. We can still see every day what happens in the littoral zone. Here a jellyfish, thrown ashore by a wave, has succumbed, its watery body already disintegrating. There a sea star is still struggling; its tougher body can stand exposure to the air for a longer period. Some crabs, though water-breathers, expose themselves to the air willingly, they have learned that scavenging is good in the littoral zone.

All it needs is a change of the life forms involved and you have a

picture of the littoral zones of the Cambrian period. The one and major problem is that we are likely to have a somewhat biased picture of what the Cambrian life forms were—because the various inhabitants of the waters near the littoral zone do not fossilize equally well. The chances that a clamshell will fossilize are excellent—they are still reasonably good for a crab—but they are poor for a worm and negligible for a jellyfish.

The situation reminds me of a walk along the shores of one of the many lakes in the vicinity of Berlin when I was a student. There were three of us, all budding naturalists, and we did not stay together. I lingered in a swampy area to watch dragonflies and frogs. The others walked ahead. When we met again and discussed what we had seen, somebody overhearing our conversation might easily have concluded that we had taken three different walks. I reported that a frog, disturbed by my approach, waited for an average of a little less than a minute before it cautiously stuck its head out of the water again. One of my two companions described an especially luxuriant specimen of Sagittaria sagittifolia (a water-loving plant with arrow-shaped leaves) and told that at this or that place forget-me-nots grew in such profusion that they looked like a blue lawn. The third recited a list of all the birds he had seen and all the bird-calls he had identified.

What had been personal bias on that occasion is replaced by the bias of the fossil record when Cambrian life forms are under discussion. Open any book, professional or popularized, to the chapter on the Cambrian period and you see trilobites, trilobites and then some more trilobites. Wasn't there any profusion of other life?

THE name itself is actually the result of a mistake. Fossil trilobites had been found in various ancient rocks and learned men had called them *concha triloba*—the three-lobed clam. In appearance they looked somewhat like the so-called sow-bugs that scurry away when you pick up a flat stone. Some don't run but curl up and it was soon noticed, once people started paying attention to fossils, that there were curled-up trilobites.

Did this mean they were insects?

It has to be borne in mine that before 1800 the word "insect" had a much wider meaning than now. When Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778), the great classifier of both plants and animals, came to the creatures with jointed appendages, he created the class *Insecta*. In 1800 George Leopold Dagobert, Baron de Cuvier (1769-1832), to-

day known as the "father of paleontology," decided that this was too big a pigeonhole. He separated the *Crustacea* (crabs of all kinds) into a separate class. One year later Jean Baptiste, Chevalier de Lamarck (1744-1829), designated eight-legged *Arachnida* (spiders and scorpions) as still another class, restricting the term "insects" to six-legged beetles, flies, butterflies, dragon flies, etc. Today the group Linneaus called *Insecta* is the phylum *Arthropoda* (joint-footed) with the classes Crustaceaus (crabs), Arachnids (spiders), Myriapods (millipedes and centipedes) and the true Insects.

To go back to the question of whether the trilobites were "insects," it has just been explained that they could have been quite a number of different things if the word insect was used in the Linneaen sense. But at least one man, the British geologist Shaw, thought them to be true insects, namely caterpillars. The problem was that nobody knew whether they had legs or not. Shaw reasoned that the legs, if any, must be preserved in the curled-up specimens. He secured a large number of them (nearly 3,500) and sliced through each. There were a number of doubtful cases, but 270 specimens clearly showed legs. Shaw had just published his findings when better fossil specimens were exhumed that revealed clearly the presence of many pairs of legs.

There could be no doubt any more that the trilobites had been anthropods. Since they had had more than three pairs of legs and had, as proved by other evidence, been water-living, certainly they had not been true insects.

WHAT they were still is not easy to say, however. The trilobites became extinct early in earth's history and living arthropods show no resemblance to them except a superficially similar shape, as in the case of the sowbugs. There is just one exception. The horseshoe crab *Limulus*, just before hatching, has a faint trilobite aspect. It so happens that *Limulus* is a very old (and odd) creature that succeeded in surviving through about half a dozen geological periods, so that a relationship is at least possible. In spite of the name horseshoe crab, *Limulus* is an arachnid, related to the spiders.

The simple fact is that the trilobites do not fit into any classification of living animals. The trilobite world was different, and the neatly separated classes of our time had yet to emerge. The trilobites combined characteristics of arachnids and crustaceans and—since the later insects must have had precursors in forms that were

not yet insects—even a few faint insectlike characteristics. In size the trilobites ranged from half-inch specimens to giants about a foot in length. Quite a number had remarkably large eyes. The guess is that this was an adaptation to muddy waters near river mouths rather than to a nocturnal existence.

The question of what they ate, of course, is tied up with the question of what was around for them to eat. One likely victim, for which we have fossil evidence, was the annelid (segmented) worm. The common earthworm is the variety best known to landlubbers but other kinds still swarm in all the seas. The picture of trilobites, as numerous then as shrimps are now, burrowing in bottom mud to hunt burrowing worms appears as a kind of prelude to the conquest of the land. Hunter as well as hunted are both in a mixture of water and land; at one time one is going to try to escape into what is merely wet land and the other is going to follow.

That trilobites did crawl around on land during the latter part of the Cambrian period was proved for the first time, to my knowledge, by the American paleontologist Charles D. Walcott. He found them in the so-called Potsdam sandstone—dating back to the Upper Cambrian period—of New York State and adjacent areas in Canada. He published his findings in 1912 (*Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections*, Vol. 57), ascribing the tracks to the trilobite genus *Protichnites*, for which he had counted a total of 17 pairs of legs!

> Such a series of feet would make varied and complex series of tracks that would differ in depth, definition and details of grouping with the varying degree of consistency and hardness of the surface... I have fine trilobite trails made on the surface of sandy mud that show the imprint of a considerable portion of the legs. On a hard surface the animal touched only the extremities of the legs, but on a muddy surface the terminal joint would sink in and other joints would leave an impression...

So wrote Walcott. In 1918 he published another report titled *Appendages of Trilobites* (same publication, Vol. 67) in which he described trilobite tracks of a greater age. They came from Middle Cambrian layers of the Colorado Grand Canyon region.

THE trilobite tracks were comparatively easy but other Cambrian tracks from Canada, first described by Sir William

Logan, were a challenging puzzle.

One sandstone slab from Bidwell's Crossing (Essex County, New York) measures 30 feet in length and 10 feet in width, showing 25 tracks. Each is about 5 inches wide, with a length up to 15 feet. The tracks look like a miniature ladder with an oval impression measuring 5 by 15 inches at one end. The farmer, B.H. Palmer, who first noticed the fossil on his property, was convinced that the responsible creatures had been giant snakes and was dismayed because he could not find an explanation in his Bible.

Well, they certainly were not snakes, but what were they? Sir William Logan had guessed the tracks might be those of large marine snails. Later scientists, after some hesitation, agreed. It must be mentioned that among the tracks that end in an oval impression can be found such impressions without a track to go with them. The accepted explanation is that a wave threw a number of the large sea slugs on the shore. Some of them died immediately, leaving the oval impression where their bodies had decomposed. The others crawled for some distance, but succumbed before they reached the water.

In any case, it has become clear that during the Cambrian period not only trilobites abounded but also annelid worms and large marine slugs. In addition the remains of small crustaceans other than trilobites have been found, as well as impressions of jellyfish that expired ashore. The existence of echinoderms (sea urchins, sea stars and sea lilies) is also proved, though fine fossils of these types are more frequent later—in Silurian and Devonian deposits.

But except for short excursions by trilobites, no land-life yet. According to the fossil record, the conquest of the land must have taken place after the Cambrian period. The handbooks are silent about the Ordovician period that immediately followed the Cambrian. But things begin to take an interesting turn during the aforesaid Silurian and Devonian periods, which followed the Ordivician and had a combined duration of about 100 million years.

One event—without any influence, incidentally, on the future of evolution—was the appearance of enormous water-living arachnids, the sea scorpions. *Eurypterus*, from Silurian deposits of the island of Oesel (now Saaremaa) in the Baltic is the oldest known. It grew to an overall length of 4 feet. The Devonian *Pterygotus* from the red sandstone of Scotland (the quarry workers, when they come across one, pass the word through the foreman that they found another "seraphim") reached more than 7 feet in length.

BUT another and far more important event was the appearance of the first fishes, the earliest animals with backbones. These did indeed influence the course of evolution, and profoundly.

Of course, they had to have ancestors. And it so happens there is a living form that at least hints how those ancestors must have been constructed. The animal in question is about 4 inches long and looks so much like a slug that its first discoverer, the physician Peter Simon Pallas, believed it to be one. About sixty years after the discovery, that is to say around the year 1840, Johannes Muller recognized that it was related to the vertebrates and a few decades later the evolutionists made it famous under the name of *Amphioxus*. As far as I know, no fossil relative of *Amphioxus* has been found even though one could have turned up anywhere in geological history after the Cambrian.

The most primitive fossil fish known is probably *Birkenia* from the Upper Silurian of Scotland. There early fishes were finless, except for a tailfin, as are the living lampreys. Interestingly enough *Birkenia*, again like the lampreys, shows eight round gill openings arranged in a straight line.

By the time *Birkenia* was swimming around, other types of fishes had appeared. Most did not live beyond the Carboniferous period. The most unusual of these types, technically the *Antiarchi*, were fully armored with bony plates—one wonders against what contemporaries. An important point is that the other ancient fishes were found in marine deposits while *Birkenia* comes from freshwater deposits. By the end of the Silurian period the oceans probably had grown salty, though to a lesser degree than they are now.

If there was a differentiation between saltwater and freshwater fishes one can easily assume there also was a differentiation between saltwater and freshwater plants. Somehow it seems likely that freshwater plants, rather than saltwater ones, invaded land. Freshwater varieties could climb a river's banks, first partly exposed to the air and then wholly so except for the roots that remained in wet ground.

We don't have fossils of such plants. They probably rotted away completely after they died. But we do have fossils of a very early forest that grew in a river delta near the beginning of the Devonian period. The fossil trees turned up in the Catskills not far from New York City in 1930 and 1931 when excavations for a dam cut into the old river deposits. The existence of definite land plants for the early Devonian is documented by these finds.

As for Devonian land animals

there is no documentation yet; a so-called three-toed footprint from the Devonian of Warren County, Pennsylvania, first described by Othniel C. Marsh in 1896, is a very doubtful case. It could be almost anything, including the impact of a windblown piece of dead wood from a tree.

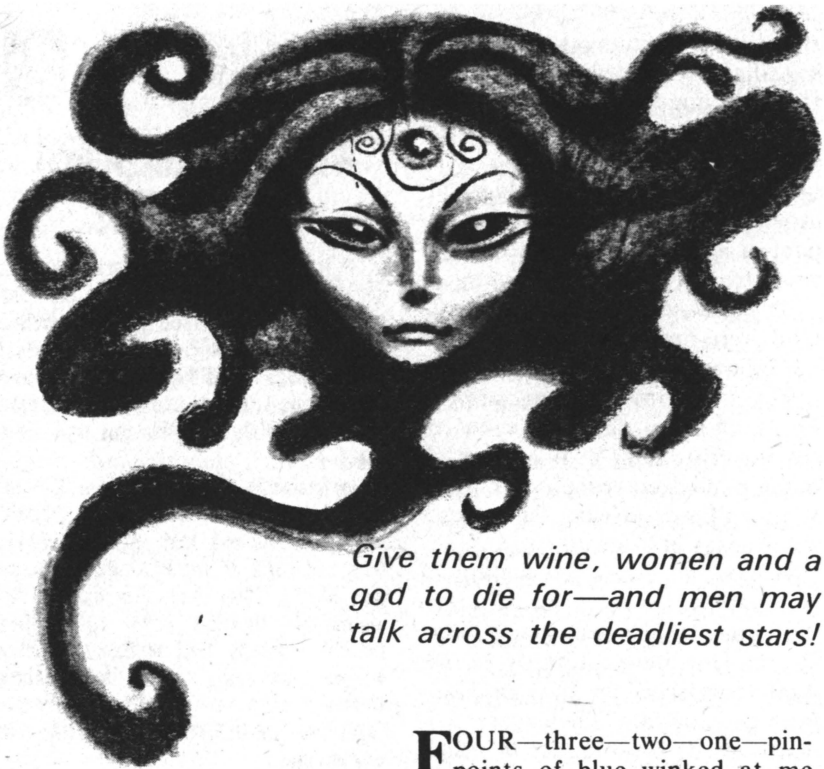
The first animals to venture on land were probably arthropods, to be followed by some freshwater fishes. Even now there are several kinds of fishes that come out of the water of their own volition. A much publicized recent example is the "walking catfish" that infests some areas of Florida.

A strange track, consisting of two parallel lines of straight impressions, is known from Nova Scotia. The description by H. M. Ami (published in 1903 in Halifax) concluded: "They were evidently made by some fin or spine-like appendage attached to the body of the organism, which may have been that of an *acanthodian* or other early form of fish existing in the early Devonian lake, sea or estuaries of Nova Scotia."

The Devonian period, then, is the time when the land was invaded by living things which, however, still stayed close to water

(TO BE CONTINUED)

(Because of its merit, and in tribute to his memory, *IF* is completing publication of this work, Willy Ley's last.)



*Give them wine, women and a god to die for—and men may talk across the deadliest stars!*

# BY CIVILIZED STANDARDS

NEAL BARRETT, Jr.

FOUR—three—two—one—pinpoints of blue winked at me from the jewel-studded belt, ringed me in cobalt color. The knot between my shoulders relaxed, I quickly fingered the answering code across the half-mile of blackness to *Lincoln III*.

"All right, sir. They're on us—receiving and recording."

Grier nodded and let out a strained breath. The aliens were letting us keep comm open from their ship to ours. It was a positive sign, anyway.

"Okay," said Grier. "give 'em your message, Lieutenant."

In rapid service shorthand I voced the figures scrawled on my pad into a detailed report for *Lincoln's* exec. Detailed, maybe, is the wrong word. We had no instruments aboard the alien ship. There was nothing to see in the dimly lit lock. And feelings are something you can't transmit in the pulses of sub-voc code.

We had all sensed part of it when the jarring clang of alarms had brought us to *Lincoln's* bridge. The feeling had been there when the dark shape had blotted out Alpha Centauri. Beth Rainer had moved close to me, had touched my arm. We had stared a long moment at the golden spiral circled in black on the alien hull—a great, blazing galaxy hinting at unknown empires.

Beth, her eyes held by the dark ship, had said, "Jake—Jake, I'm cold."

And she had said all there really was to say.

"Lieutenant?"

Grier was above me, Grange stood back near the far wall.

"*Lincoln* get all that, Jake?"

I nodded. "Tom acknowledged—I'm keeping open so he can monitor. We'll have to give him what visual he gets. They're letting sound out but there are still no pictures."

Grier frowned. "Figures. I'd do the same if they were on *Lincoln*. Keep the visitors busy enough so nobody gets nervous—but don't get careless."

He eased himself down on the lock's deck and leaned against the smooth wall.

I sent a short, quick sub-voc to *Lincoln: Tom—nothing doing yet. We wait.*

Sharp lines of tension etched Grier's face. Strained patches of white limned Johnny's mouth. And similar signs on me, I was sure. As the captain had suggested, the aliens' delay might or might not be a bit of practical psychology. Whatever it was—it worked. Seconds have a way of becoming hours when imagination is the most solid reference point around.

We were invited—affirmative. That open port and steady blink had been plain enough. But an invitation's no guarantee of how the party's going to work out. The old unknown, then. A simple enough challenge. How could we resist?

"Okay—easy does it."

I followed Grier's eyes to the far wall. A wide port whispered aside where no port had been before.

Grange gave a low whistle. I could see his point. It looked as if we'd stumbled into the alien equivalent of the Royal Barge. I glanced at Grier. He was viewing the whole scene with a cold eye.

The corridor stretched thirty feet from the open port. The walls

on either side were sculptured in a dark, polished wood—alien patterns intertwined in complex detail to meet in a vaulted ceiling over our heads.

The floor was carpeted in muted tones of mottled gold. It resembled nothing I could remember seeing before, still—I kneeled for a closer look and the hackles climbed the back of my neck. I had forgotten I was aboard a ship that stopped at unknown ports among the stars, places where beasts with pelts that size might

"Jake," Grier asked, "are your eyes any better than mine? One Christmas tree bulb would flood this place with brilliance. Is that supposed to be another door down there or just more decoration?"

I squinted. The corridor seemed to end in the same sculptured wood as the walls. The dim amber light would obscure any indentation farther than a few feet away.

Grier let out a breath.

"Okay. Let's get on with it."

He turned away quickly but I caught a hint of something behind his steady gaze. His alertness was not too hard to figure—we were all very much aware of the fiction of our open line to *Lincoln*. The contact was comforting unless you thought too much about it—how it was as tenuous and as easily cut as a strand of thread.

Earth is new in space, a child at the edge of its crib. *Lincoln III* was the first ship to break the bounds and venture into the dark beyond Pluto. We had no misconceptions about the alien ship that darked *Lincoln*. Wherever it came from, it had not been confined by the slow velocity of light—it had eaten the years between the stars.

WE STOPPED a few feet from the sculptured walls that marked the corridor's end.

"I'm fighting an irresistible urge," I told Johnny Grange, "to turn around and see if that door behind us is still open. I'll be damned if I'll give in to it."

Grier scowled at me.

"Don't," he said simply.

He laid a hand on the smooth wood, running his fingers along polished curves, pressing the surface at several likely-looking points. I gave him a hand, leaning into the wall and testing it with various random pressures.

"They've got their own way of doing things, skipper," I said. "Maybe it's the old Oriental patience bit."

Grange shook his head.

"It's the sophomore psych bit, Jake. And why not? Works, doesn't it?"

"I wonder," I said aloud without quite meaning to, "if we'd be so anxious to get in if we knew what was on the other side."

The captain grinned.

"Glad you're with us, Jake. You've brightened an otherwise dull day."

"Captain—"

Grier and I jerked around. Johnny was standing back, watching a thin black line form on the polished wall. It parted. Panels slid silently aside.

I COULD try. I could say eyes widened, hearts fell into stomachs. Won't do. Take a culture, let it stew a couple of million years, get born into that culture and grow up in its pattern. Now go out and climb inside an alien ship and walk into a room where everything took a different direction. That same number of millions of years ago. Your heart beats a little faster—but you don't react as you thought you would. You can't, because you need something to react to—and it simply isn't there. Not in the room that really was not a room at all and certainly not in the alien faces and forms.

They were seven—standing together in a close huddle. Watching us from big, shining eyes like deer caught in headlights. They were human—or near enough—so close that the difference only magnified how far away they really were.

They all stood over six feet, slender, almost no shoulders. Pale skin over sparsely covered skulls. wide cheeks, narrow nostrils. Mouths were bloodless scars. And unsmiling.

One of the tallest stepped forward, stopping a good fifteen feet away. His voice was high, steadily pitched.

"*Emora Sourain*—..

Grier glanced at me out of the side of his vision and pointed to himself.

"Nathan Grier," he said, then pointed to the alien. "Emora Sourain."

The tall alien shrank back. He spoke rapidly to his friends and they stared at Grier with pure loathing.

Grier's face was chiseled in tone. He pulled Johnny and me together.

"What happened? If it wasn't his name, it should mean person, human, friend—something." He cursed silently. "How does he figure I gave the wrong answer, Jake?"

I shrugged. I had been glancing around the room, vocing quick descriptions back to *Lincoln*. The deal was anything but easy. A maroon beam extended from one side of the room to the other, eight feet off the floor. A gray, pancake-sized object veined with copper-colored stripes hung from the ceiling by a thin wire.

"Captain, take a look around. Maybe that's your answer. We aren't even on the same wave length. It doesn't figure that

there's nothing here that looks like anything we've ever seen before. They've got two arms. two legs and a head. They could use nearly anything on *Lincoln* as well as we could—so where are the chairs and tables?"

"I know," said Grier stonily. "I don't like it."

I glanced back at the huddle. The head man stepped forward again—no, he only looked like the head man. He was older, his eyes sunk deeper into his nearly hairless skull. His gaze wandered across all our faces and back again but it always stopped at Grier.

"Jake," said the captain, "give me your pad and pencil. We should have thought of this in the first place."

I handed him the items and he began to fill the page with symbols. He drew a planetary system around a star, a geometric bisection, an angle, addition in simple domino fashion—the whole works. He tore off the sheet and handed it to the alien.

The elder peered at the paper in Grier's hand, then squinted suspiciously at Grier himself. Finally he reached out cautiously and grabbed the paper quickly.

You could chew the tension. He held the paper close to his face, stared at it, turned it over and studied the blank backside. Then he glared at us and dropped it to the floor. We watched it flutter away hopelessly.

Grier swallowed hard. "So much for science. What in—now what's he doing?"

The alien had plunged a hand inside the folds of his clothing and pulled out a dark object. He clutched it tightly until the veins stood out and throbbed on his arm. He moved cautiously toward us. The head man broke from the group and grabbed the elder's fist.

"*Yutevaar*," he said. His voice held a strained, pleading note.

"*Yutevaar ni ci.*"

The elder went livid with anger. His face reddened to blackness under the amber light.

"*Rywai*," he spat out, flinging the other's hand away. "*Rywai ti ci.*"

The first alien trembled and shrank back. The elder composed himself, stepped right up to Grier and extended his hand. He opened the thin fist slowly.

"*Corofinti.*"

We looked. It was a crescent-shaped piece of stone that might have come from a river or stream anywhere on Earth. Just a plain piece of stone—black, with chips of gray.

"*Corofinti.*"

There was a certain plea for understanding in his eyes but his voice remained haughty, demanding.

I could hear the wheels turning

in Grier's head. He could run into trouble any way he went. If he kept quiet they might very well chop us on the spot. But any response at all had an even better chance of bringing on the same action. He did the only thing he could—he kept his mouth shut and stood perfectly still.

The alien closed his fist slowly, put the object carefully back into his clothing and kept his eyes locked on Grier. The tendons in his face tightened and his thin nostrils clamped in upon themselves.

"*Yildi*," he spat, "*ti yildi*."

He jerked around and stalked back to his group.

I let out a deep breath.

"Anyone want a loose translation of *yildi*?"

"No," said the captain grimly, "I got that one." He glanced quickly at the aliens, then back at me. "Jake, is Tom still with us? Check. I want an acknowledgement."

I TRIED. Tom blinked back immediately. Grier fingered the voc on my belt, quickly instructed Buddington to run all our tapes through to the Beagle Beacon—and gave the ominous orders to set the Beagle for an Alpha Centauri orbit and keep his finger on the button.

When he finished his face was hard, ashen gray. He had let his exec know there was a good chance the Beagle was all that would ever leave the *Lincoln*.

"All right," he said. "I think we have maybe three minutes to find a way to get through to these people. Let's have ideas—quick."

"One more wrong idea," I began, "theirs or ours—"

Grier shook his head.

"Doesn't matter. There's no question which way we go, is there, Jake? We have to connect. Speech is out. Group or self identification isn't what it ought to be. I'll forget the business with the rock—no use wasting time on that one. What does that leave us?"

"There's something very wrong about our having messed up with the symbols," said Grange. "People who build spaceships know triangles and squares and—"

"Damn it." Grier jabbed a fist into his hand. "They do know it, Johnny, but they're looking for something they figure is more basic than that—something we haven't even considered, something—"

"Something," broke in Grange, "that they understand and we recognize they understand."

Grier stared at him. He opened his mouth, then shook his head and grabbed my pad and pencil. He sketched for a moment at a furious pace, then tore off the sheet and passed it to Grange.

"That meet your qualifications, Johnny? Something they under-

stand and something we know they're very much aware of."

Johnny held out the paper. It was a neat copy of the big galactic spiral circled in black on the hull of the alien ship. I felt a vast sense of relief. I could see the same feeling reflected in Johnny's eyes.

"Now," said Grier, "is it right? Exactly right? Jake, check with Tom—he can see the thing. We can't afford to go second class anymore."

Tom, Beth and several others joined in describing the symbol in minute detail. According to them we were as close as we could be without an actual photo of the emblem.

Grier took a deep breath and stepped forward. The aliens dropped into dead silence. Then the elder raised his arm and pointed to the paper, then lowered it until his long finger pointed directly at the floor between them.

The implication was all too clear. The muscles tightened visibly along the captain's back but he carefully placed his drawing on the floor and stepped away from it.

The elder moved forward, picked it up without taking his eyes from us. Finally he brought it to his face and looked. He gave a sudden, sharp gasp and stared at Grier. He jerked around quickly, flinging his robes wide and thrusting the paper high above his companions' heads.

"*Zarakrindi!*" he shouted.

The alien huddle moaned.

"*Zarakrindi*!" he repeated, pointing with a trembling finger at the drawing.

Eager hands grasped for the paper. It passed quickly through the group.

The elder stepped forward again and faced Grier. His arms came up from his sides until two palms were held out openly before us.

"*Zarakrindi*," he said. "*Ti yasu ci Zarakrindi.*"

A wide grin spread across his tight features.

I let out a deep breath. Johnny grabbed my arm. Sweat was standing out in little beads on the captain's face but he was smiling.

"Jake—what's the word from *Lincoln*? You bring 'em up to date?"

"Didn't have to do much, sir," I told him. "They got most of it—and they're breathing a little easier over there, too."

A dark wooden table and delicately contoured chairs appeared. Three aliens thrust glasses of cold, dark liquid into our hands.

I glanced questioningly at Grier.

"Drink it," he said flatly. He looked at the aliens and smiled broadly. "If they didn't probe our body chemistry in the lock, well—cheers."

He turned up the glass and drained it.

I closed my eyes and poured the drink down quickly. It was cool, pungent, a dusty wine with a slight breath of some unworldly spice. The aliens nodded happily and downed drinks of their own. The elder offered me another glass and I reached out with a smile and froze. I could feel Grange tense beside me.

Over the alien's shoulder I could see the head man entering the room from a port on the far wall. Beside him, walking with the bearing of a queen, was a woman.

"Jake," the Captain said dryly, "it appears we have more in common than we thought."

I NODDED. No question about it—the girl would have turned eyes anywhere on Earth. I said the similarities between the two races only magnified our differences—and the girl was no exception. But her particular qualities magnified those differences in an entirely unexpected direction. The large dark eyes were compelling, exotic. Dark hair hung to her shoulders like thin strands of feathered silk and her narrow lips curved in a warm and secret smile. She was covered in a long, transparent sheath as delicate as a spider web and the body beneath was painted in a complex pattern of gold. She was covered in a long transus. The aliens bowed. We bowed back and the girl inclined her head.

"*Zarakrindi*," said the elder. He pointed to the tiny amulet around her neck. "*Zarakrindi*."

She wore a replica of the emblem on the side of their ship, the drawing Captain Grier had drawn moments before. We smiled and nodded. The girl and the alien elder smiled and nodded back.

"Now what?" Johnny asked.

"Smile and nod, son," Grier said out of the corner of his mouth, "smile and nod and drink your wine."

The elder looked at Grier and raised a thin brow.

"*Ti val Zarakrindi*?" he asked. "*Ti val*?"

He looked at Grier. Then at the girl.

"Jake," said Grier, "there's not much doubt, is there?"

"Nope," I said and I could feel a small, unpleasant itch in the back of my head. "Whatever she is, she's royalty of some kind—and I've got an idea they want to know if we've got one, too."

Grier's eyes bored into mine for a long moment.

"Captain—" I began.

"Lieutenant. Tell Buddington I want Beth Rainer over here in ten minutes—ten flat."

"Sir—"

He shook his head.

"Sorry, Jake. I don't like it either. We don't have a hell of a big choice, do we? Tell Tom I want her dolled up like a queen—jewels, gown, the works—and if there's any gold paint or powder sitting around in the shop, use it. And Jake—"

"Sir?"

"Tell Buddington I mean now. We can't nod and smile and down white lightning all night."

I didn't like it. Not at all. Beth wasn't a lot safer where she was if anything went wrong but I preferred her on the Lincoln anyway.

In eight minutes, I relayed the word to the captain that Beth was on her way. Half a second later an alien messenger brought the news to the elder. He smiled at Grier, pointed to the girl, then gestured in the direction of *Lincoln*.

"*Val ti Zarakrindi*," he said, "*ti val ci*."

The captain nodded. It was a safe gesture for now. We had guessed right. The aliens wanted female royalty and that they would definitely get.

I had quickly briefed Beth on the image she was to convey. She knew exactly what to expect—well, all you could expect without actually being there. Buddington said her costume was something else again and Beth snapped back that it was no way for a lady to appear in public—human or alien.

"Beth—you okay?"

She was only fifty yards from the ship.

"Doing fine, Jake," she said lightly. "What time do I come down the runway?"

"The band's warming up, honey—bulging eyeballs from two worlds are waiting for Breathless Beth and her—"

"Jake—" I caught the slight break in her voice even over the sub-voc.

"Jake—I'm flat scared out of my wits."

"It's okay, Beth. Everything's okay."

Seconds later she was in the lock and Grange met her with a courtly bow for the benefit of alien observers. Then he signaled that Beth and he were starting down the sculptured corridor.

TOM was right. Even the aliens seemed to agree Beth's costume was something else. She had pulled a coal-black bikini out of some hiding place—I had certainly never seen it before—and fashioned a long silver cape out of the wardroom drapes. The drapes were held together at her neck by Buddington's flashy diamond solitaire, immediately under a bright sapphire choker I had seen Beth wear the evening before we left Earth. Finally someone in the lab had done a neat—and quick—job of patterning her body with a fair-

ly intricate network of gold.

We had ordered royalty and Beth Rainer was an authentic Space Queen.

Grier bowed.

"Gracious Queen Beth," he said soberly, "if the boys at Johns Hopkins could only see you now."

Johnny and I kept straight and solemn faces.

Beth inclined her head gracefully.

"Knock if off, Mighty Captain of Space," she told him, "or I'll slug you right in the snoot."

I shot a glance to our left. The aliens were taking in the Earthman's ritual with all ears. The girl could not keep her dark eyes off Beth. The elder smiled benevolently but I knew Grier, Johnny, Beth and I had the same gnawing thought—what was going to happen if someone suddenly realized we had not the faintest idea of what was going on?

"*Zarakrindi,*" said the elder, "*Zarakrindi ti—*" and the alien faction muttered agreement.

He looked at us, then turned his eyes on the alien queen.

"*Dha ei.*"

The girl faced Beth and bowed low. Beth glanced at Grier and Grier moved his eyes slightly downward. Beth returned the bow. The aliens approved.

The alien girl turned away and laid her hand on the elder's arm. He passed her along to a guide and the two moved solemnly through a portal in the far wall.

The elder turned back to us.

"*Ri, bhenei, ti.*"

Alien bearers appeared with more wine and the elder began chattering with two companions. We were abruptly left to ourselves.

"Okay," Beth said shakily, "what was all that about?"

I haven't the slightest," I said. "It's been a kind of nervous pattern, Beth. Strictly by ear. We could have muffed the whole thing just as easily."

Beth nodded solemnly.

"Do I go, too—now that the princess has taken off?"

Grier shook his head.

"I don't think so. If they'd had it in mind I think we would have caught it. Sorry." He smiled. "I'm afraid you're a member of the act, Beth."

Beth shrugged.

"Captain," I said, "I hate to be a wet blanket but where do we go from here? Does everyone come over to our house for drinks? And after that—what?"

"You named the game, Jake," he said solemnly. "We play it by ear. Like you say, we got lucky. Now we have to hold on to it."

"The sooner we call this off and get back to *Lincoln*—" Johnny started, then caught himself and shut up.

Grier grinned at him tiredly. "You're getting it now, Johnny.

All we have to do is figure out how to say goodbye."

We smiled. And nodded. And tried to keep our minds off the too obvious fact that those big shiny eyes had pretty fair sets of brains between them—or they couldn't have launched a ship like this one. And they had to know we were very much aware of the spiral symbol on their hull—that we were in touch with our own ship and capable of throwing Beth into the act to cover something we didn't understand at all.

It was not so easy to remember we were not dealing with familiar minds—that the same group that made no attempt to understand circles and squares fell for a phony Space Queen production. I think we knew it had worked only because they wanted very badly to have it work. Unless I was sadly mistaken, it was a little more than that. I was fairly sure they had just proven—to themselves, at least—the universality of their religion. And that, of course, is a pretty big plum for even aliens to pass up.

"JAKE—" Beth touched my arm nervously and I looked past her at the alien group. They were muttering excitedly to themselves. The elder smiled, then turned away from us and bowed low toward the far wall. The others hurriedly took up the cue.

The wall slid aside without a sound. The aliens raised their eyes and murmured softly.

In the entranceway was an intricate sculpture of the galactic emblem mounted on a circle of black. Two aliens we had not seen before wheeled it a few steps forward, then backed away.

It was our first look at alien art. From a distance it seemed to be made of some pale, translucent material that glistened softly under the amber lights. The galactic center shot golden spiral arms twisting in complex curves to the edge of darkness—and each arm was intertwined with a thousand tiny strands weaving dizzy circles through the structure. The spiral itself and the space-black circle were covered with countless pinpoints of gold.

"Okay," said Grier softly. "We're still on familiar ground. Just take it slow and easy."

"*Zarakrindi*," said the elder.

He solemnly indicated the golden emblem. He turned his head and nodded slightly. Two aliens appeared again from the far door with another wheeled black circle. It was exactly like the first. Only this one was blank. The sculpture was missing.

I glanced quickly at Grier. He shrugged imperceptibly. Beth squeezed my arm tightly. Behind us Johnny whistled almost soundlessly between his teeth.

An alien much younger than the

others stepped through the portal. He carried a long flat case of carved black wood in his arms. He held it carefully, almost reverently. The elder faced him and accepted the case. He returned the younger's bow with a slight nod.

Then he walked directly toward us and handed the case to Captain Grier.

HE GESTURED toward the empty black circle.

"*Zarakrindi ti ruri*," he said.

Tiny beads formed on Grier's brow. He understood exactly what the elder had in mind and I shared his sudden, desperate sense of frustration. Everything we had done to buy precious seconds had driven us one step closer toward a final act where bluffs would not work.

"All right," he said finally, "we'll have to give it a try, Jake. There's nothing else for it, is there?"

He spoke to me but his eyes never left the elder. His voice was deadly calm.

"The box," he said. "It's fairly heavy. It probably holds tools of some kind, hopefully something I'll recognize. Where the materials are, I can't guess."

"Captain," predicted Johnny, "they'll show up. They know damn well we didn't lug art supplies over here."

The captain chuckled softly. Beth laid her hand on his arm and stepped forward after the elder. The elder looked pleased.

Grier and Beth stopped a few feet from the far wall, between the blank circle and the golden spiral. Johnny and I moved up a few steps behind them.

The sculpture seemed a less than hopeless design now, its twisting patterns not impossibly complex—but the touch of an alien hand was even more startlingly evident.

The elder smiled softly and spoke to Grier in such muted tones only a whisper of his voice reached Johnny and me. Grier listened but his eyes never strayed from the golden spiral.

Something bothered him, I knew. It was something I sensed, too. There was a raw, primitive, almost pagan aura about the spiral that started the hackles rising on the back of my neck. I felt I was on the brink of remembering something I didn't really want to remember at all.

And then, quite suddenly, both of us knew. Maybe seconds apart. It was all there. Something we had left behind us a thousand years ago had come from the stars to find us again.

Then Grier moved.

He jerked around swiftly and shoved Beth behind him. His palm struck out and chopped sharply against the elder's throat.

Beth sprawled between us. I dropped quickly to the right and rolled toward her. Grier crouched low, moving away from the fallen alien, the black box a short club in his hand. He crabbed quickly to the left to reach her and a green flicker of light flicked across the room and brushed once against his chest. He folded quietly into a motionless bundle. The long case slipped from his fingers, spilling a rain of yellow blades and razored curves and a thousand golden pins.

I reached Beth, passed her, scooped up a sharp sliver of gold and wondered if I had the second I needed to do her the last favor I could. A pencil of green brushed my arm and I heard Johnny Grange sigh and drop behind me.

Beth's pale fist was tight against her lips. Her eyes were locked in final fear on the space-black circles. One that belonged to her and one that held the tortured curves and twisted strands that had been her golden sister from a million stars away. I moved, my hand flashing sharp and golden, and met her eyes for a quick second before green blinked in an alien hand and reached out to find me. ★

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# Reading Room

LESTER DEL REY

HARRY WARNER, Jr., has managed to remain one of the real Big Name Fans of science fiction for more than thirty years without seeming to stir up any rancor or indulging in fan feuds. He has gone on writing for almost every fanzine with patience and care year after year, never giving any sign that he considered himself an important man in the field. He has attended a few science-fiction functions but most who think they know him well have never met him. He has been called the Hermit of Hagerstown (Maryland) but the appellation is improper—he has proven a cordial host on numerous occasions.

All this while Harry has been quietly observing the scene and collecting more information about major events than most of their participants knew was available. Now he has written a book about the decade from 1940 to 1950—*All Our Yesterdays,* by Harry Warner (Advent, $7.50).

More than any other book dealing with the fannish background of our field, this is a singularly honest and objective study. Harry offers his own judgments at times—but always cautiously and against a documented background of facts that lets the reader form his own opinions. I took part in many of the events chronicled and find no errors worth mentioning. Nor do I find evidence of bias that could interfere with the un-

(*Please turn to page 151*)

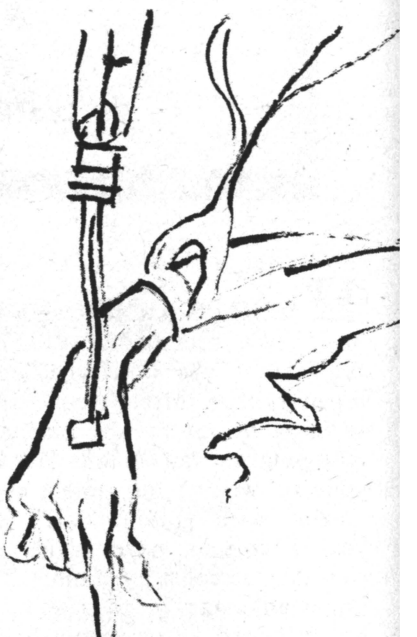
# THE SEEDS OF GONYL

## PART II

Keith Laumer

### WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

*JEFF MALLORY awoke. The dawn was strange and misty. His war wound throbbed. He seemed to have fatigued and aged during the night,—even his clothes, business suit and shoes, shirt and tie,*



*were worn, all but used up, and he needed a haircut.*

*Dressed, he looked through his bedroom window. The good suburban neighborhood was unkempt this morning. The neighbor's lawn featured cast-off junk. His own usually well-kept home showed neglect.*

*He went down to breakfast. GILL, the woman he loved and had married, looked tired and slovenly. The normally well-stocked cupboard was bare. The two younger children—MARLY and RANDY—were ruder than they usually were. The kitchen stank of garbage. And LORI, Jeff's teenager, was missing entirely.*

*Gill explained, as she would to a child or a sick man. Jeff owned no business. She and he worked—as did everyone else they knew—at the Star Tower. She pointed at the window.*

*The mist outside had lifted. Jeff saw a huge tower in the distance, dominating the town. The structure, several hundred feet in dia-*

*She seemed to have been been erased. Gill denied that Lori had ever existed. The neighbors did not remember her. Her room in the house had vanished. Other pertinent bits of Jeff's life had melted away as if he had merely dreamed them—his burgeoning business, his plans for the future.*

*meter, seemed to have grown there overnight but Gill behaved as if it had stood there forever.*

*Becoming aware of an intruder —at once human and nonhuman— in the house, Jeff tried to fight. The intruder easily knocked him out and when Jeff came to, Gill was gone. Where and what was*

*reality? Jeff knocked a hole in a plaster wall where Lori's room used to be and found the room but no Lori.*

*Outside—neighbors who had known Lori had no recollection of her. They all seemed enslaved by the alien masters of the Star Tower, remembered no other existence. Jeff encountered more of the aliens, fought them and managed to escape. His hunt for Lori took him to Sally Hodges, once Lori's friend—and at Sally's he encountered a lawless group of refugees who believed that the country had been invaded by the Russians.*

*Jeff was unable to convince them otherwise, finally had to flee for his life. Sally, although she thought he was suffering from delusions, accompanied him in a commandeered truck. They were captured by soldiers and taken to a U.S.—Russian military encampment under the command of Colonel Strang.*

*The encampment was isolated, self-contained. Both Strang and the Russians were convinced they were fighting Chinese Communists and Jeff's theory of semi-human aliens failed to impress anyone. He and Sally separated. Then Jeff was forcibly "drafted" into Strang's "army."*

## IV

THE barracks was a former cow barn, converted to troop use by the addition of a plywood floor and an assortment of beds ranging from antique four-posters to brand-new Sears, Roebuck cots. Men in uniform, both Russian and American, looked Mallory over as Brozhny conducted him to a stained and lumpy mattress on a makeshift frame at the far end of the long room. The odor of the former occupants was, if possible, stronger here than in the rest of the building.

"What about the girl?" Mallory asked. "What's Strang got in mind for her?"

"Speak with more respect of the good colonel," Brozhny said softly. "For your own safety."

"Lieutenant, do you believe me?"

"I'm sorry, no. I have no belief in walking department-store dummies who operate a factory—"

"But you believe in an invisible army of Chinese fanatics? Who suddenly learn enough space technology to launch thousand-man transports high enough to make a deep-space approach and soft-land in the middle of the country? Who ignore military objectives to capture a prairie town? Who consolidate their victory by bunching up to make a perfect target—and then sit there and wait for Strang's next move?"

"There are many things about this curious war that puzzle me, Mr. Mallory. But I find your sto-

ry even more puzzling. Why should intelligent aliens behave in this way? Why were you alone immune to their control? Why have none of the rest of us seen such creatures?"

"Brozhny," Mallory said urgently, "get me out of this Boy Scout camp. If I can find a clue to what's going on, prove that I'm telling the truth—"

"Out of the question," the Russian said. "The colonel is right in one respect—we need every man."

"For what? To sit here on this broken-down farm and play soldier?"

"We are gathering strength as a force, readying ourselves," the Russian said. "When the time comes we will launch our counterattack."

"You think an infantry mob can do what the whole Army and Air Force—U.S. and Russian—couldn't do?"

"As the colonel said—we have plans, Mr. Mallory. Be patient."

A lean, craggy-faced, big-fisted man in U.S. greens and a technical sergeant's chevrons strolled up, looked Mallory over. The newcomer's lip lifted to show yellow horse teeth. Brozhny made brief introductions and left. The sergeant propped his fists on his hips and squinted his eyes at Mallory.

"You and the Russki are pals, hey?" He spat on the floor in the general direction of the door. "Well, the sweet talk is over. You're in the Army now. I'm Sergeant Gaunt. You work for me. First job for you is latrine detail."

"I'm not in the Army," Mallory said. "I'm a civilian. I was brought here at gunpoint by my pal, the lieutenant—"

"Don't talk back to me, boy!" The sergeant prodded Mallory's chest with a finger as hard as a pistol barrel. "You've been called to the colors legal and proper."

"In that case I'm in the wrong place. I'm a reserve major. I'll take my gold leaves now."

"Officer, eh?" Gaunt's mouth curved in a V. "Any proof?"

"I left my wallet in my other pants."

"Ain't that too bad? Looks like you're lying. I don't like that, Private. I reckon you'll be on latrine for a while." He turned and roared a name. "Chubb!" A runty soldier with jug ears and corporal's stripes hustled over. "Set him to digging slit trenches. See he digs 'em deep."

"Let's go," he said to Mallory.

Chubb tipped his head, fingered his carbine.

Mallory followed the noncom out into the cold wind and to a barn, there to be handed a long-handled spade. Then the noncom marched Mallory around behind the building to a rectangular screen of canvas strips mounted on poles.

"You heard the man. Dig 'em deep."

Mallory fell to work, handling the shovel awkwardly.

"What's the matter with your arm?" Corporal Chubb asked.

"I picked up a few splinters from an imaginary explosion."

Chubb grunted. Mallory dug. After an hour he had finished one trench—a foot wide, two feet deep, twelve feet long.

"All right, that's enough," Chubb said. He was shivering, hands thrust deep in his pockets. "I reckon you can break for chow now. Sarge never said you couldn't eat."

Chubb escorted him to a long tent from which steam and sour food odors emanated. In the canvas-smelling gloom inside, he picked a greasy tray from a stack, joined the serving line. As he held out the tray, his eyes met those of the server.

"Lori!" he said.

SHE stared at him wide-eyed. The big ladle in her hand dropped unnoticed.

Mallory leaned toward her and whispered swiftly, "Don't let them know." Then, in a normal voice, he said, "What a surprise to see you here."

Lori leaned toward him. Her lips moved. Tears filled her eyes.

"How—when?"

"I arrived a couple of hours ago," he said. "Courtesy of Lieutenant Brozhny."

"I can't believe it. I thought you were dead."

"I'm alive, all right—"

"Hey, you—the new guy. Move it along," Corporal Chubb called.

"Lori—I'll see you in a few minutes."

Chubb hustled Mallory along the line. "Nix on the dames. You want to get both of us in hot water?" I took a chance just bringing you in here. Sarge prob'ly meant for you to eat cold chow on the job."

"She's an old friend, Chubb."

"You ain't got no friends, mister. Just keep your nose clean and leave the women alone. You figure it out. You do your job and show your loyalty and maybe you get privileges. It's up to the colonel."

Chubb led the way to a small table in a corner. The food was surprisingly good—meat, potatoes and gravy, bread, green vegetables, strawberries and cream, fresh coffee.

"We eat good here," Chubb said. "It ain't a bad life unless you're on the colonel's list. Just don't make no waves—like with the dames."

"How long have you been here?"

"Couple of months," Chubb said. He swallowed coffee, wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "What did you do to rile Strang?"

"Turned down a job offer."

"Wasn't smart," Chubb grunted. "Why'd you do it?"

"I have other plans."

Chubb grunted. "Better forget it and get with the program. He's got it all doped out. Got to give him credit, he gets things done. Good thing, too. Wasn't for him, be nobody doing anything. He seen what needed doing, got some men together, started organizing things. Now we're getting somewhere. We're not licked yet, by God."

"Getting where?" Mallory asked.

"Getting set to hit 'em. Hit 'em

hard."

"With what? Bows and arrows?"

"He's got it doped out," Chubb repeated. "He knows."

"Corporal," Mallory said, "I want to talk to the girl. Just for a few moments. How about it?

"You crazy? I told you—"

"She's an old friend of mine."

"Tell that to Strang."

"All you have to do is—"

"Shut up, you!" Chubb barked. "Comes of trying to treat you decent. Maybe Sarge was right about you."

As they walked into the barracks Sergeant Gaunt rose from an armchair and strolled over.

"How's the new boy, Chubb? Give you any trouble?"

Chubb glanced at Mallory. "No trouble."

"Good. Hey, you," Gaunt said as Mallory started past. "I didn't dismiss you, boy. You're on kitchen detail tonight. Pots and pans. Nice clean work. Don't bother to sit down. You're late now. Mess sergeant won't like that."

Chubb opened his mouth.

"Don't say it, Chubb," Gaunt grated. "I'll decide when a recruit needs a break."

Chubb clamped his jaw shut, nodded.

"What are you waiting for?" Gaunt barked at Mallory.

"For dismiss orders."

"Don't try me, boy," Gaunt said, and jerked his thumb. "Pots and pans, on the double."

FOR three full hours Mallory scraped grease from cooking vats, elbow deep in scummed water. The mess sergeant, a round-faced, paunchy man with tufts of gray hair over his ears, watched him obliquely. When the supply of pots was exhausted he assigned Mallory to scraping soot from the fireboxes of wood-burning bake ovens. Mallory worked steadily, in silence. At midnight the NCO gruffly told him to take a break, gestured to a table where a plate of steak and eggs, toast, coffee waited.

"Thanks, friend," Mallory said. "Where's the latrine?"

The NCO gestured. Mallory left the mess tent, walked across the muddy farmyard to the barbed-wire enclosed area designated as the women's barracks. A guard armed with an M-16 stood at the lone gate under the glare of a small floodlight. Mallory walked directly up to the man. The sentry watched him come. When Mallory was a few feet away the sentry shifted his rifle and opened his mouth to speak.

Mallory charged, rammed his right fist hard into the sentry's stomach. As the man grunted explosively and doubled over, Mallory struck down at the back of the neck. His victim fell on his face and lay still. After dragging him behind a stack of cordwood, Mallory pushed the gate shut, walked to the nearest tent. A plump woman in a lumpy skirt and an unbuttoned fatigue jacket was just emerging through the fly. She halted when she saw him, slapped the jacket shut.

"Say, what are you—"

"I want Private Lori Mallory,

Sergeant," he said briskly. "Which tent?"

The woman hesitated, tucking back a strand of sandy hair.

"Just who are you? I never seen you before."

"Major Disaster. I just hit camp. Snap it up, Sergeant. Which tent?"

The woman pointed with a plump forefinger.

"Number three, sir."

"Thanks."

"But you can't go in there."

"Of course not. I want you to get her for me."

"Well—I'll see if she's able to talk to you." The woman waddled along the catwalk, poked her head into the tent. A moment later she withdrew, came back past Mallory without a word. Lori appeared, looking anxious. She saw Mallory, hurried to him, her smile fighting her tears.

"Dad—how marvelous to see you—" She huddled against him, her arms around him. "Dad, it was awful, thinking I was all alone."

"You're not alone, honey." Mallory patted her back. He gripped her shoulders, looked into her face. "Lori, I have news for you. The best news in the world. Your mother is alive, and the kids—"

"Dad," Lori's grip on his arm was convulsive. "Are you sure?"

"I was with them two days ago."

"But—where?"

"At home. In Beatrice."

Lori's face rippled like a reflection in disturbed waters.

"Dad, you couldn't have—" she whispered. "The Chinese—"

"There are no Chinese in Beatrice," Mallory said. "I doubt there are any this side of the Pacific. That's a delusion of Strang's—"

"Dad—Colonel Strang is a fine man. He's making order out of this chaos."

"Strang is a dangerous lunatic," Mallory said. "He intends to destroy Beatrice. His plan is crazy enough to work. If it does, he'll kill Gill and the kids along with a few thousand other people."

"There's no one left alive in Beatrice," Lori said. "The Chinese massacred them all. That's why we have to—"

"That's what Strang thinks—but he's wrong. There are no Chinese in Beatrice. We've been invaded, Lori—but not by any human enemy. They're alien creatures. Things from some other planet, I believe. They have fantastic powers of hypnosis. The people in the city are like sleepwalkers. They've been enslaved and they aren't even aware of it. There's a tower—an immense structure—where they work every day on some uncomprehensible project."

LORI was staring at him in horror. "Dad—what are you saying?"

"I know, dear. I've already been told it's a fantasy I dreamed up to protect myself from the knowledge that Gill and the kids are dead. But they're not dead, Lori. Believe

that, if you can't believe anything else."

Lori shook her head.

"I can't, Dad," she whispered. "I'm sorry. They're gone. I know they're gone, I've gotten used to the idea—"

"You thought I was dead, too," Mallory said. "But I wasn't."

"That's different—" she began. Then: "How did you get away? You were at home when they attacked—"

"Never mind. I'm afraid you wouldn't believe me. And there's no time now. We've got to get away from here first. Afterward we'll talk."

"What do you mean? Dad, you can't—"

Mallory cut in on her protest. "Which tent is Sally in?"

"Mine—number three. But Dad—if you're talking about—"

"Did someone mention my name?" Sally spoke from behind them. "When they called Lori out, I knew it was you, Jeff," she caught Mallory's arm possessively. "We're leaving now?"

"Dad, you can't mean this!" Lori gasped. "You're planning to desert?"

"That's a pretty harsh word, Lori. Escape would be closer to the truth."

"You can't," Lori said. "The colonel is counting on you—on all of us."

"Don't be a fool, Lori," Sally said. "If Jeff thinks we should go he has a good reason."

"What possible reason? Where would we go?"

"To the house, of course. It's not far north of here."

"Dad, you're not thinking of trying to get back into Beatrice?"

"No—not yet. Not until we have help. I mean the Old House, Lori. We can rest and—"

"Please talk sense. What old house?"

Mallory felt a sudden sense of disorientation. He shook his head. Was he mixing dreams with reality?

"Never mind, Lori." He shut off the train of thought. "We've no time to waste. There's an unconscious guard lying a few feet from the gate. Someone may stumble over him at any moment."

"What old house?" Lori repeated. "I think I understand. The house is another of your fantasies, like invaders from space and Mother's being alive. You needed a place to escape to—so you've invented a house. But, Dad—there isn't any house. There's no place to go. Colonel Strang offers the only possible hope of our ever rebuilding anything."

"I won't argue with you, Lori. We're going. Now."

Mallory caught her hand. She pulled away.

"You can't go. I won't let you."

"Lori, for God's sake—"

"No, for your sake, Dad. I guess you'll hate me now but maybe later you'll realize I was doing it for you—"

Lori brought a brass whistle to her lips. Sally sprang, knocked it from her hand. In the next instant

Mallory had caught Lori's wrists.

"My God, Lori, has Strang brainwashed you?"

"Colonel Strang is a wonderful man, a real leader. He's the only one with the strength and the vision to do what has to be done. I won't betray him!"

A shout came from the direction of the gate: "Corporal of guard—on the double!"

Mallory took a step. Lori threw herself at him, wrapped her arms around his neck. Feet were running toward the gate.

"Hey—down that way—" a rough voice yelled.

Mallory lifted Lori bodily, set off at a heavy run along the dark aisle between the tents that led to the tangled wall of shrubbery at the rear of the compound. A shot boomed behind them.

Sally gave a sharp cry. Mallory skidded to a halt. Sally had fallen to her knees, holding her left arm.

"Go on, Jeff," she gasped. "Don't wait for me."

Lori whirled on her father.

"Give yourself up, Dad. They shoot deserters."

"If they catch them," Mallory rapped. "It's up to you, Lori."

Another shot whanged nearby.

"Take care of her," Mallory said swiftly. "And of yourself."

He ran for the shadows.

Behind him he heard Lori shout: "That way—that way—"

As he plunged into the shrubbery he looked back, caught a glimpse of Sally crouched in the glow of a pale light—and of Lori running toward the advancing men, pointing in a direction away from the one he had taken.

## V

MALLORY covered three miles in the next three hours, mostly on his stomach. A drizzling rain started up, accompanied by fog. Vehicles blundered past on the roads, their headlights soaked up by the mist. Men called and beat the brush but none came closer to him than fifty yards.

When he emerged on a hard-surfaced road the lights of Strang's encampment were a pink glow in the sky behind him. There were no stars. The rain had stopped but the wind was bitter. Mallory's injured arm felt swollen to giant size.

*Got to get under shelter. Find transport, get past Strang's patrols. There'll be some kind of authority in Omaha. Military headquarters. Unless that was the first target to go. . .*

He gave up the effort to think further ahead than the immediate future. Shelter first, rest, food if possible, rebandage the arm. That was enough for now. Maybe more than enough.

Earlier the wind had been blowing from the east. He'd have to assume it still was. Keeping it on his right, he started along the road. He recognized it as the route along which Brozhny had escorted

him and Sally less than twelve hours earlier. It seemed like days ago. He thought of Sally with a bullet in her flesh—of Lori, torn two ways by pressures too great for her to handle. He thought of Gill, of Randy and Marla.

*Don't think. Just walk. . .*

*How far?*

*Until you come to something. . .*

WHAT HE came to was a group of large buildings, tall, flat-fronted, mansard-roofed, rising among century-old trees at the crest of a rise. Lights glowed. Over the whisper of the wind he heard faint sounds—a voice, the thud of a slamming door, the chug of a power generator.

Mallory left the road, approached through a ploughed field across the angle of the rising ground. He saw trees and tangled growth ahead. He pushed through, encountered a high brick wall. It took him a quarter of an hour made hell by his injured arm to climb into the lower branches of a beech to which dead autumn leaves still clung. He worked his way out, let himself down on top of the wall, then dropped inside.

The ground was smooth here and had the feel of dead lawn. He came to a path, followed it along a curving route through wild-grown shrubbery. The walkway debouched into a narrow drive that extended back past the main building. Dimly Mallory made out a parked vehicle—pink light winked from a reflector.

Directly opposite him, twenty-five yards away, was a lighted window. Mallory stared. He saw a tall man with coppery hair seated at a desk, writing. The civilized scene was reassuring. Mallory had to approach someone for help. A scholarly man in a quiet study seemed as good a bet as he was likely to find.

Mallory crossed the dry grass to a driveway. He had taken two steps along the pavement when glare struck him in the face.

He stood still, his hands clear of his sides. Two men emerged from the concealment of a tall, untrimmed juniper hedge. One was lean, long-armed, with a crooked-jawed face and a bedraggled beard below a red plastic baseball cap. He wore a rain-blackened mackinaw, tight jeans three inches too short for his long shins, high-topped shoes. His companion—shorter, older, plump, covered by a shiny black raincoat—carried a compact crossbow, quarrel in place, finger on the trigger. Both men eyed Mallory warily.

"Where you come from?" the thin one barked. "Why you sneaking around here?"

"I was looking for a place to get out of the weather."

"One of Strang's bunch, hey? What's the matter? Tired of evil

and sin?"

"I'm tired of evil, all right," Mallory said. "And I haven't gotten in on my share of the sin lately."

The thin man took a quick stride forward and swung a backhanded blow. Mallory, off guard, ducked back. The pain of the sudden movement was like an ice pick in his flesh. The plump man backed a step, raising the crossbow. Black fog rose to obscure Mallory's vision. He shook his head, tried to blink the mist away.

"Hey—he's hurt, Wiss." The crossbowman's voice penetrated a high-pitched hum that filled Mallory's head. "He's out on his feet."

"He'll be hurt more before he's done," Wiss said from far away. "Let's search him. Let's see what he's got on him."

The plump man held his weapon ready while the other patted Mallory's pockets.

"Nothing," the thin one said and stepped away. "Go ahead, Deebs. What are you waiting for?"

"My God, Wiss. You expect me to shoot a man in cold blood?"

"But you can take the name of the Lord in vain. Give me that bow. I'll do it."

Wiss halted abruptly as Deebs pivoted to cover him with the crossbow.

"Stay back, Wiss. I warned you before."

Wiss lifted his hands.

"All right, all right. Don't get jumpy."

Deebs backed away, covering both Mallory and the lean man.

"We'll take him up to the house. You first, Wiss, where I can keep an eye on you."

THE light in the room was too bright. Mallory's shoulder throbbed. His head felt soft and bruised, his eyes gritty. A faint odor of ammonia hung in the air.

The man with the coppery hair —glossy, arranged in meticulous waves above an imposing forehead—smiled gently at him from behind the desk. The man had a ruddy, pink-cheeked complexion, a well-shaped but longish nose, unusually red lips, a sharp, jutting chin.

"Suppose you account for yourself, eh?" he said in a resonant rather nasal voice. He waved a small vial of what Mallory saw was smelling salts under his nose, sniffing gently, smiling faintly. "I understand you're from Strang's camp."

"Colonel Strang tried to draft me into his army," Mallory said. "I didn't want to be drafted. I left."

"Oh?" The shiny-haired man

pushed his lips out, nodding sagely. "I thought Strang posted sentries."

His tone was mildly skeptical.

"I made a diversion. The rain helped."

The seated man glanced at Deeb standing beside the desk, a drop of water trembling on the tip of his nose.

"Brother Henry seems to feel you came here to spy on us."

"He's wrong." Mallory looked around the room. It was large, high-ceilinged, with buff and brown walls, a row of large double-hung windows, roller shades, net curtains. Book shelves lined two walls. A long table held more books. A dictionary and a globe had their own stands. "What is this place?"

"You're on the grounds of Revelation College—in the dean's library, to be precise. I'm Brother Jack Harmony." He paused as if awaiting recognition. When Mallory said nothing he frowned a little.

"Why did Strang send you?"

"I've told you—I'm on my own—"

"No insolence," Brother Jack said sharply. For an instant his large, pale eyes glared bleakly. Then he relaxed and twitched his lips into his smile. "How many men does Strang have now?"

"A few hundred, I suppose."

Brother Jack nodded. "Guns? Ammunition?"

"They seemed to be well armed."

Brother Jack's eyes narrowed. "When is he planning his attack?"

"You seem to know more about him than I do. I was in his camp only a few hours—"

"But he is planning such an attack?"

"So he says."

"You see?" Brother Jack looked at Deebs with a pitying expression. "And you thought I was imagining things."

"I never thought that, Brother Jack—"

"Get out, Henry," Harmony said mildly. "I want to talk with our guest in private."

Deebs left the room. Brother Jack indicated a chair, waited until Mallory was seated.

"I'm surrounded by fools," he said. "They know nothing, understand nothing." He leaned forward, looking shrewd. "What sort of deal is Strang offering?" he asked crisply.

"Mr. Harmony, I wish you'd rid yourself of the idea that I'm working for Strang."

"Call me Brother Jack—I've put aside all titles." Harmony looked speculatively at Mallory. "Now, you and I know how to accommodate." His eyes slid aside from Mallory, roved around the

room, came back to Mallory.

"I hope so, Brother Jack."

"Now, if—in order to survive—it becomes necessary for a man to come to terms with forces of the Opposition, well—a man can't serve God if he's dead, can he? You see, I'm realistic. I've seen how the Pit has opened, spawning its imps in the world of man. I can read the writing on the wall. The time of God's ascendency is on the wane—just temporarily, of course. He's testing us, you see—to determine who deserves to live and who doesn't."

"I'm afraid this is over my head, Brother Jack."

"Don't lie to me, man." Harmony showed his teeth, even, white and false. "You've seen them. I know it. I can detect their mark in your eyes?"

"Seen whom?"

"The imps. The spawn of Satan. The living dead."

"I SAW them in Beatrice," Mallory said. "Imps or aliens, they've taken over the city. As far as I know, they've made no effort to expand their beachhead. You're the first man I've met who doesn't think I had hallucinations."

"Satan's clever," Brother Jack said. "Oh, I underestimated him. I'll confess to you that for years I was skeptical in my heart. I spoke the word of God but in my private thoughts I was an unbeliever. That's why He loosed Satan on the world, you see. I admit it. I'm the guilty one!"

"I'm sure there were plenty of others," Mallory said. "The question is, what's being done about it?"

"No others," Brother Jack said. "Just me. I'm the one God put his finger on. But I'll survive. I know it's His will. It's His way of testing me. And I'll measure up."

"That's fine, Brother Jack. Where is the nearest regular authority? Was Omaha hit?"

"Your coming was just as I predicted." Harmony nodded. "I knew the call would come."

"Do you have a short-wave radio?" Mallory asked.

"You're a hard man to deal with," Harmony snapped. "Very well—out with it! You want me openly to come in with you, am I right?" Sweat glistened on the high forehead.

"Brother Jack, all I'm interested in is locating what government is left, if any, and doing what I can to combat whatever it is that's invaded the country."

"I see I've given you the wrong impression," Harmony said. "You won't let a man even save his face, will you? All right—let's talk plain. I'm a realist. When resistance is hopeless a man has a duty to save his own life."

"Look, Brother Jack—if you have a car I could take—"

"I won souls for Christ even when I preached empty lies,"

Harmony stated flatly. "Just think what I can do for Satan."

"You're off the beam. Harmony," Mallory said. "I didn't come here to make a deal with you."

The shiny-haired man slid open a desk drawer, cased out a Colt .45 automatic. His fingers curled lovingly around the grip. He weighed the gun on his palm, then deftly pointed it at Mallory, the butt resting on the desk.

"You can have the others," he said. "They're nothing. Expendables. Do as you like with them. But you need me. Strang knows that. Otherwise he wouldn't have sent you."

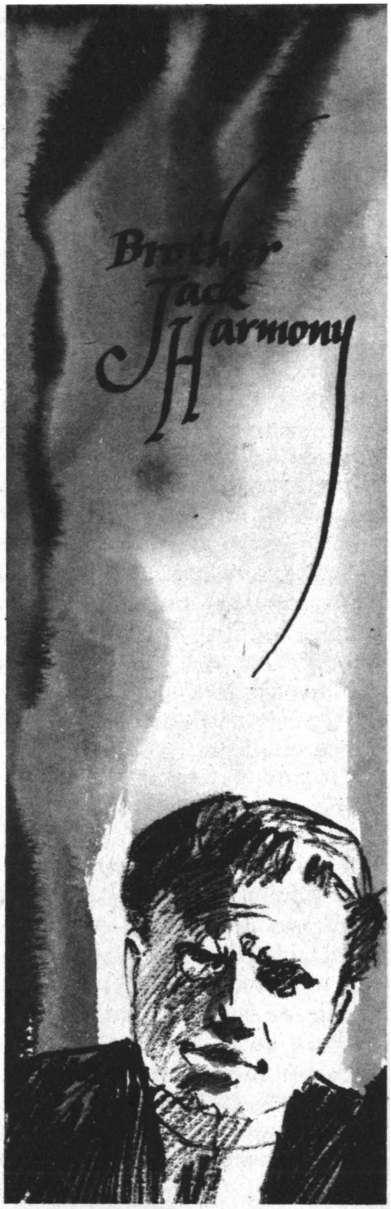
The door burst open. Deebs entered the room, the crossbow in his hands, his face flushed, his eyes shocked. An Oriental-looking youth stood behind him.

"You're selling us out!" he blurted.

"You listened, eh? That's too bad, Brother Deebs." Brother Jack shifted the pistol, raised the muzzle slightly. "Goodbye, Brother Deebs," he said and fired point-blank.

Deebs spun, fell face down across the desk. Mallory came to his feet, froze as the gun swung to cover him. The Japanese boy made a mewing sound and backed away.

"Now, you spent time with Strang." Harmony addressed Mallory as if nothing had hap-



pened. "You must have seen him consorting with the Fiend. Tell me, is it true Satan takes the shape of a small black boy with a hump on his back and a tuft of red hair like a goat's beard dangling from his nose?"

His eyes were fixed on Mallory's. His mouth hung slightly open.

"I didn't see anyone fitting that description," Mallory said.

"He has a thousand forms," Harmony said. "Oh, I've seen some of them. In my boyhood he appeared to me as a giant black dog one night, but I drove him away with God's curse. Later he came to me in the form of scarlet women, painted and perfumed—I knew then that he was stronger than God." He jerked the gun at Mallory. "Speak up."

"The ones I saw look like poorly manufactured men," Mallory said carefully.

"How do they speak?"

"Very politely—even when they're killing you."

"Like the words of scarlet women." Harmony nodded. "That was what gave them away. At first I was afraid. I confess the weakness. I ran with the others. Then Satan singled me out and made me halt and turn back. Oh, it was in my heart to do the bidding of the Evil One!" Harmony looked at Deeb, sprawled across the table on his back, his face a red ruin, his feet clear of the floor. "That one fooled me. He took the shape of a man but now he's given it up again."

Harmony had lowered the gun—it hung in his hand, pointing at the floor. Mallory took a step toward him and the weapon snapped up.

"Don't make any foolish moves," Harmony snarled. "I was a combat Marine before the Call came—I never qualified below Sharpshooter. You stand back over there, beside Tanaka."

Mallory complied. The small man was leaning against a bookcase, his hands clutched together, shivering.

"Oh, it's hard sometimes to hear the voice of God," Harmony said. "Now, at first I thought you were Strang's agent—then you spoiled it all. Now I just don't know."

"Brother Jack—" the Japanese boy began in a thin whine.

"Shut up," Mallory said. "Brother Jack's in no mood to be argued with."

"Good. You've seen I'm in earnest," Brother Jack said. "And you saw how I dealt with Henry. Are you ready to give me Strang's terms? Satan's terms?"

"No," Mallory said. "But I know how to kill the imps."

Harmony looked at him solemnly along the barrel of the gun.

"You know better than that,"

he said. "Satan's minions can't die like mortal creatures."

"I killed one. Maybe more than one."

"That's your last lie," Harmony snapped. "But I'll show your Master I'm worthy. Kneel."

He brandished the Colt.

THE Japanese lad made a thin sound and started to fall forward. Mallory swung toward him. Harmony jumped to his feet, started around the desk. His hip collided with Deeb's feet. The body skidded, tangling limply with Brother Jack's legs. The gun went off and the glass door of the bookcase shattered behind Mallory. Brother Jack stumbled, went down. His head struck the corner of the desk with a sound like an axe hitting a seasoned oak log. He flopped sidewise and lay still, blood spreading in his glossy hair.

Mallory turned at a sound. Wiss was standing in the doorway, holding a crossbow at the ready.

"Oh, boy," Wiss said.

He licked his lips. He lowered the point of aim to Mallory's abdomen. His eyes flicked past his target, back to Mallory's face, away again.

"Killed all three, did you? I heard three shots."

"Two shots," Mallory said. "Tanaka's not dead."

"Yeah?" Wiss said. He advanced a step. "Now it's my turn. Where do you want it? Through the stomach? In the lungs? How about right in the mouth? Open your mouth, you black snake of sin."

"Then you'll have to dispose of the bodies alone," Mallory said.

Wiss nipped a chapped lip with long yellow teeth. He looked troubled. He nodded. He cut his eyes toward Brother Jack. His gaze lingered.

"All right. Him first. You think he meant it—about leaguing with Satan? That why you shot him?"

"He fell. Hit his head on the desk."

"Turn him over."

Mallory did as ordered. Wiss frowned down at the corpse.

"I don't see where it went in."

"He wasn't shot. He fired at me. Deeb tripped him up."

Wiss motioned Mallory back, then stepped forward to stare down with a fascinated expression at Deeb.

Tanaka groaned and sat up.

"All right, Tanaka," Wiss said. "You can help."

Tanaka was speaking softly in Japanese and crying.

"Pick him up," Wiss said to Mallory.

Mallory took the dead man's wrists, hoisted him into position for a fireman's carry. Mallory's knees buckled as the weight came on him. He went down hard.

Wiss kicked him. Tanaka

sobbed. Mallory crawled from under the corpse.

"I've lost some blood myself," he said. "I'm afraid I can't help you."

"You can walk," Wiss said. "That will be some help. I won't have to carry you out."

"That's a point," Mallory said.

He climbed to his feet, feeling dizzy and sick.

"Let's go," Wiss said.

WISS following him, Mallory stepped out into a lengthy dark hall lined with oversized doors. Their pebbled-glass panels were marked by numbers lettered in old-fashioned style. His feet echoed on the tiles. Moonlight shone through the window at the stairway landing. The house was a split-level. In the lower hall, Wiss directed him toward the rear.

"Don't walk so fast," Wiss said. "Why be in a hurry?"

"I didn't kill Deebs," Mallory said. "Brother Jack did the shooting. I didn't have a gun, remember?"

"I'm enjoying this," Wiss said. "This is what I've always wanted. Turn left."

They were in a narrower, darker hall. There were mops and brooms against the wall, a trash cart.

"It's hard to fight sin," Wiss said. "You start out to look for sin and seems like you can't find it. The bad ones act virtuous to your face—and then behind your back they make their pact with Satan."

"Brother Jack knew a lot about Satan," Mallory said.

"Me more than him," Wiss said. "You outsmarted Jack—but you're not going to outsmart me. You're going to die. Out that way."

Mallory saw a fire-door. He pushed a release bar. The door swung outward. He stepped down to a bricked path margined by garbage cans. The trees stood up stark and aloof against moonlit clouds.

"That way," Wiss said. "I'll bury you in the garden. I'll cover you with manure."

The cold air cleared Mallory's head slightly. The urgency of the nausea retreated.

"I'm going to be sick," he said. "Try not to shoot me until I get through." He turned aside, leaned against a tree and made a retching sound. From the corner of his eye he saw Wiss lower the crossbow. He moaned, put his hands to his stomach—and jumped for the shelter of the bole.

Wiss yelled. A crossbow bolt clattered through dry branches to Mallory's left. He ran a weaving course among the saplings, circling back toward the house. Wiss was shouting, crashing through the brush. Mallory fell, rolled.

Wiss charged past him, ten feet

away. Mallory counted to twenty, rose and started back along his path as silently as possible. The sound of Wiss's passage halted abruptly. Mallory stopped, resumed his progress when Wiss again grew noisy.

The lower drive widened in front of a converted barn. A dark-colored sedan was parked there, its front bumper against the weathered siding. Mallory came up on it from the left side, opened the door, slid behind the wheel. The keys dangled from the ignition. He took two deep breaths and turned the key.

The starter groaned. Mallory pumped the gas pedal. The engine caught. He slammed the gears into reverse, backed, cutting the wheel hard. He braked, gunned forward. Wiss darted into view beside the house. As Mallory roared past at a distance of six feet, he saw the bow swing up into firing position, tracking him.

Glass shattered behind him. The metal bolt stood quivering in the padded plastic of the right side of the dash. Mallory switched on the headlights in time to swing the curve of the drive. The gates loomed ahead, massive as a portcullis. Mallory closed the distance to them at sixty miles per hour.

At the last instant he threw himself sideways on the seat. The shock knocked him against the right-hand door. He pulled himself erect in time to see one panel of the gate, bent almost double, slide off the hood and bounce away into the underbrush. The car was in a skid, its rear coming around to the right as it left the road. Mallory caught the wheel, steered into the skid, crashed through dry stalks and saplings, plunged down through a ditch, back up again.

He coasted to a stop on the road.

He brushed glass chips from his face, wiped blood from one eye. The windshield was smashed. One headlight was out. The other was knocked out of line so that its beam pooled twenty feet ahead of the car. The engine, still running, clattered rhythmically.

Mallory's head was ringing with a high, wavering tone, like an idling transmitter. He hitched himself back under the wheel and tried the accelerator. The car moved ahead awkwardly. Mallory could feel the drag of an out-of-line wheel. The steering mechanism pulled at his hands.

Slowly, like an injured animal, the car moved down the road.

## VI

MALLORY put ten miles between himself and Revelation College before he allowed himself the luxury of pulling to the road shoulder. He had suffered a

number of minor facial cuts and a painful chest bruise. His injured arm ached with a deep implacable persistance. His head felt hot, his stomach empty. The lump behind his right ear was swollen and tender. He touched it and pain shot down along his jaw, upward across the top of his skull. The cold wind gusting in through the broken windshield had chilled him to the bone.

"Progress report," he said, and was startled at the hoarse, croaking quality of his voice. "Item one—I've gotten clear of Beatrice. I know what I saw there. Item two—I've found Lori alive and as well as could be expected. Item three—"

He paused, trying to order his thoughts. Thinking was hard. He needed rest, food, drink—a doctor.

"Later," he said firmly. "Right now the question is the next move. Dawn will come in a few hours. Strang's men will be out. They're between me and Omaha—I think. I need a road map." He opened the glove compartment, bending the crossbow bolt aside to allow the door to drop. He found worn gloves—which he put on—a crumpled paper cup, a greasy screwdriver and a much-folded map. The dash lights provided enough illumination for him to study it.

As closely as he could estimate, Strang's headquarters lay a mile or so west of the main road north—too close for him to risk that route. The alternative was to skirt wide to the east, then double back.

"Would help if I knew where I was," he muttered through lips stiff with cold. He had to think out loud to make sense to himself. "Have to make a guess. Headed east from Strang's camp. Still headed east—unless the wind has changed—"

It seemed to be blowing straight at him now. Couldn't count on the wind. Best bet was to drive on until he saw a route marker or came to a town, then correct course accordingly.

"So that's settled," he told himself. "Unless I run out of gas—or overheat—or pass out and run into a tree."

The car's front end was badly out of line. The wheels set up a bone-shaking vibration at fifteen miles per hour. The steering was stiff. He could smell hot oil.

"Radiator's probably punctured," he muttered. "Lucky it's a cold night."

He came up to an intersection with a rutted blacktop road, slowed, made a left turn, went on for a quarter of a mile before he braked to a halt.

"Why did I turn?"

He mumbled the question. His voice sounded in his ears like that of a stranger but he found speak-

ing aloud necessary to concentration. Suddenly the concept frightened him. Was his mind going? He forced himslef to think silently. What ensued was a curious, partly vocalized, partly silent dialogue.

*Have to work my way north . . .*

Sound again: "No. Wrong. Worked it out, decided to head east, hit main road—

*This way. It's not far now . . .*

"What's not far?"

He shook his head, staring out through broken glass at the weed-choked ditch illuminated by the lone headlight.

*The house. Have to get to the house, rest, get warm . . .*

*Sure, the house . . . funny I forgot about it. Right, have to get to the old house . . .*

He started up, drove on another hundred yards.

"Wait a minute," he said and jammed on the brake.

The sudden stop jerked his head painfully but also served to clear it.

"Going nuts," he said." "Thoughts all confused."

*House . . . old place, stone, high gables, horses in the drive, gas lanterns on tall poles, smell of stables. Home. But not home. Remember it from . . . long time ago. Small boy. Have to go back. Something wonderful there. Waited long time . . .*

"Imagining things," he said loudly and rubbed his face. "Or am I? Is there an old house? Seems as if it's been in the back of my mind ever since I left Beatrice. Even before. But it's nonsense. Old family manse? Crazy. Isn't any old family manse. Besides, I have to avoid heading back—"

*But I have to go there. I've already waited too long . . .*

"All right." He laughed raggedly. "What the hell? There's a way to settle it—I'll go have a look, get it off my mind, get back to business. And maybe there'll be food and a bed." He looked ahead along the crooked secondary road. "But what makes me think this road will lead me to it?"

*You know the way. It's not far now. Get to the house. Then you can rest . . .*

"All right, Mallory. Maybe it's the still, small voice of conscience. Follow your nose. It can't lead you any farther astray than you already are."

He put the car in gear, crawled ahead along the rutted track.

NOW that he had given in to the compulsion Mallory felt curiously resigned—as if he were no longer a lone swimmer in choppy seas but a passenger on a ship for whose course he bore no responsibility. There might be reefs and tides ahead but for the moment he could simply cling to the rail and ride. He wondered vague-

ly how far he had come. Two miles? Three? What would he find at the end of the road? The question seemed academic, remote. His job now was simply to steer—and stay awake.

The faint *whop-whop-whop* of beating rotors intruded on his thoughts. Looking back, he saw a copter's navigation lights bobbing a hundred yards above the treetops, three hundred yards behind him. A searchlight speared down, fingering the ground, sweeping closer along the trail of roiled dust.

His reactions were sluggish, clumsy, as he cut his single headlight, wrenched the wheel to the left. The car slammed down through a shallow ditch, up again into a ploughed field. He saw a clump of trees ahead. He steered for it, felt the wheels losing traction. Something dragged under the car. The vehicle wallowed, came to rest, nose high. Mallory jumped out, almost fell, ran stumbling across the furrows and toward the trees. Under their cover he worked his way up a wooded slope toward the higher ground ahead.

The copter circled the stalled car, hovered, then dropped in to land near it. Moments later it lifted again.

Mallory pushed on through thick underbrush and interlaced branches. He heard shouts behind him. Handlights flickered through the thickets. Overhead, the copter beat the air, its light raking the hillside. The trees thinned. Mallory scrambled up over a bare outcropping of granite, ran on among twisted pines that gripped the rock with roots like arthritic fingers.

He saw a path winding upward, closed on both sides by dense walls of growth. Mallory heard feet scrape rock close behind him. He plunged off the path, forcing his way back into the brush. He had gone no more than twenty feet when a vertical wall of rock barred his way. He slumped to the ground, gasping for breath.

*End of the line . . .*

Voices came, accompanied by sounds men made, breaking through brush.

"Must have doubled back. You men spread out there, beat the brush for him."

"Jig two-five. Let's have that light over here, a hundred yards upslope and to your right."

The copter hammered its way overhead. Mallory lay where he was, listening to the sounds of search. He dozed. After a while the sounds went away. He rose stiffly to his feet and began seeking a route past the stone wall.

He found it twenty feet to the left of the pocket where he had sheltered from the hunt. Crumbled stone led up in a stairlike slope. He climbed it, scraped low

under tangled berry bushes—and was looking across a weed-grown lawn at the house.

IT STOOD high—even higher than he had pictured it. The architecture was unlike anything he had ever seen—massive, monumental, ancient and forbidding. He walked forward slowly, finding an overgrown flagstone path that led past a worked-stone horse trough where a trickle of water still bubbled over a mossy curve of rock. Patches of dry stalks indicated what had once been flower beds. A fallen trellis dropped over a cracked stone bench.

To one side, the remains of wooden sheds sagged in advanced decay. He crossed a graveled drive, barely discernible among the weeds. Pale moonlight reflected from high windows like blind eyes.

A flight of wide, leaf-littered steps led up to a stone-balustraded terrace. At the top, across the broad veranda, a carved door of corroded metal half again as high and wide as normal was set in the granite wall under a semicircle of stained glass. In the center of the door was an ornate latch in the shape of a griffin's head.

Mallory gripped the ring, turned it. The door swung in. He stepped into a wide, high entry hall, with stained flowered walls, tarnished mirrors framed in peeling gilt, a pendant chandelier of antique cut.

On the floor at his feet lay the dead body of a man.

SOMEWHERE a cricket *chirred* monotonously. Water dripped with a slow, patient cadence. Wind boomed under the high eaves.

Mallory circled the corpse. It was lying with one hand outflung, the head turned to one side, long hair, glossy black, curling about the back of the powerful neck. The body was clothed in a long coat of bottle green, tight fawn-colored trousers. Shiny black boots reached halfway to the knee. Ruffled lace showed at cuff and throat. The man had been dead, Mallory estimated, hours rather than days. The face was hollow-cheeked, greenish pale—but visible deterioration had barely begun.

He walked into a large room filled with shadows. Starlight gleamed down through high windows hung with rotted drapes, silvered cracked and curling parquet floor, partially masked by the remnants of heavy carpets. Faded wallpaper of baroque design peeled from the walls above dark wood paneling. He saw massively framed pictures, portraits of men and women in antique costume. Heavy chairs and sofas were ranged across the room, their horsehair upholstery reduced to tatters through which rusted

springs and discolored padding showed.

Mice scuttled ahead of Mallory as he crossed the big room, lurched through an arch into a second room, this one lined with bookshelves filled with cockroach-pitted spines. Papers were scattered among the drifted dust across the decayed carpet. Gusts of cold wind filtered in through a broken window almost choked by the foilage of the branch that had grown through it.

A grand staircase led up in a wide sweep to a second floor. Mallory climbed it. The high-ceilinged bedrooms here were furnished in the same ornate style and were in the same state of decay as the rooms below.

At the back of the house Mallory discovered a kitchen with high wooden counters, a coal stove, a hand pump beside the cast-iron sinks. A door looked out on a weed-choked garden with paths and a fountain almost obscured by wild-growing shrubs. A tree with a trunk a foot in diameter grew up through the tumbled flagstone of a terrace. Far back, the ruins of a gazebo were visible among shoulder-high growth.

"What does it mean?" Mallory asked himself aloud. "What is this place? Have I ever been here before?"

He was afraid to question himself silently. His mind was a stranger to him.

HE TURNED and found himself looking at a high narrow, brown-painted door set in a wall paneled with inch-wide strips. He tried the brown porcelain knob. The door swung inward, disclosing a dusty landing above a flight of steep wooden steps.

Mallory stared down into the total blackness. A dank odor of wet masonry and toadstools rose to his nostrils.

"Hello," he called. "Anybody home?"

His voice gave back a muffled echo. He felt light-headed, unreal.

"Came this far," he muttered. "Might as well see it all."

Unsteadily, clinging to the worn wooden handrail, Mallory started to descend. Halfway down he had to stop and wait for dizziness to pass. At the bottom he fumbled in a pocket, brought out a book of matches. He struck one with difficulty. The guttering light showed him a stone floor, the bulk of an ancient coal-burning furnace, a coal bin behind it, sagging ceiling beams and, at the far side of the cavernous cellar, a small door of heavy planks bound with iron.

"That way," he grunted as the match faded and winked out. He lit another, circled rotting wooden crates stacked in his path, tried the big iron handle. It turned with a dry rasp of rusty metal. The

door swung back to reveal a small room lined with shelves filled with mason jars. A few of the jars had burst, lay in shards among the tarry remains of their contents.

"Store room," he muttered. "Jams and jellies just like mother used to make."

There was a sharp *snick*, as of an oiled metal bolt sliding home. A line of light appeared in the wall, widened as a panel slid back smoothly into the masonry wall.

Mallory was looking into a room with walls of smooth gray, a floor of dull-polished black. The entire ceiling glowed with an even white light. He saw bulky shapes. Safes? Television sets? They were spaced along a side wall. Above them a row of six-inch disks of pale radiance flickered and writhed. He walked straight ahead into the room. As he passed the door a bright point of light winked on in the wall opposite, dazzling him. He turned his face away. The light winked off. He heard a brief clatter—like the sound of an electric typewriter operated at top speed.

Mallory took a step backward. A sound on his left made him turn. A rectangular section of wall, three feet by six, pivoted open slowly. A room was visible through the opening.

An illuminated ceiling shed a harsh glow on a glittering framework erected over a flat, padded slab on which lay a man so withered that at first Mallory assumed that he was looking at a mummified corpse.

But the wizened head turned. Dim eyes stared.

"Algoric, thank God you've come," said a voice like the rustle of dry leaves.

MALLORY wiped a hand across his eyes. When he looked again nothing had changed. He took a step into the room. Warm air touched his face. His pulse beat heavily in his head. His vision blurred. He crossed to the cot, looked down at the shrunken body, cocooned in wires and tubes linking it to a machine around it. He touched a bone-thin arm. It felt dry, cool—but alive.

"I guess you're real," he said. "As real as the rest of it. Who are you? What is this place?"

"You're late, Algoric," the whispery voice said. "I've waited—so long. But you're here at last. I pray it's not too late."

"Too late for what?"

"I'm sorry for everything that happened, Algoric. But I'll try to make amends."

"What are we talking about?" Mallory demanded. "Are you my hallucination, or am I yours?"

He laughed, then leaned against the framework of the machine as another wave of dizziness rose over him like black water.

". . . size of the task force," the old voice was whispering. "Will they arrive in time? Ah, it's late, so late. But who could have known? And now—"

The old man's eyes focused again on Mallory's face. A startled expression tightened the oldster's sagging features. He raised his head an inch.

"You're not Algoric. Who are you? How—"

He fell back, his eyes vague.

Mallory leaned over the semiconscious man.

"Wake up. Who are you? Talk to me."

The ancient't face was slack. His lips moved but no sound passed them. A dangling wire caught Mallory's eye. It had the look of a disconnected lead. A few inches from its tip was an empty socket of the right size to fit the jack. He plugged it in. At once indicator lights winked on on the console beside the cot. A soft whirr of pumps started up. An articulated metal arm deployed, lowered a spongy pad to contact with the old man's chest, moved gently over it. Other muted clicks and hummings followed—a complex apparatus was going into action. The old man's face spasmed, went slack. His breathing deepened. His thin body twitched and relaxed. Mallory sensed that he had gone into a deep sleep.

"Good idea," he said, feeling the stiffness of his lips, the thickness of his tongue. "Me, too.Talk later—if I'm not already dreaming."

Awkwardly, painfully, like a man in a daze, he pulled off his coat, rolled it, lay on the warm floor and tucked the garment under his head. Total fatigue was like a scythe cutting all the wires that had kept him going for the past thirty-six hours.

WHEN HE awoke the old man was watching him from bright feverish eyes.

"Ah, you're back," he croaked. "I've been thinking—Algoric sent you in his place. But where is he? Why didn't he come?"

"I don't know anyone of that name."

Mallory rose to his feet. His headache had dwindled to merely a dull soreness but his arm was stiff and painful. His stomach felt as if it held the embers of a coal fire.

The old man looked stricken. His thoughts seemed to wander. He shook his head and gazed again at Mallory.

"What is the month?"

"February."

The old man groaned. "Time is the traitor," he said. "What has passed out there?"

"Lots of things," Mallory said. "Let's start with the invasion. They've set up their HQ in Bea-

trice. Alien creatures, imitation humans. Hundreds of them. They've hypnotized everyone in the city. They don't seem to be anywhere else. The country's disorganized—in a state of shock or worse. Radio and TV seem dead. I saw no signs of the army or any king of organized authority. People are accepting old answers—blaming each other, Satan or communists. Or are simply trying to accept and survive."

The old man made a distressed sound.

"Disaster, disaster— Again he seemed to pull himself together with an effort. "How did you come here?"

"That's what I intended to ask you," Mallory said. "This place—I had an image of it in my mind but not as it is. I saw it full of life and light and activity. There were horses, and people in old-style clothing. It was like a dream that kept pulling at me. So I came—I don't know how, but I seemed to know the way."

"I failed," the old man muttered. "How could it end like this? Betrayal, hatred, death—and worse than death."

"I answered you," Mallory said. "Now answer me. Who are you? What is this place?"

"It doesn't matter now, young man. Too late, too late—"

"Tell me anyway."

The other shook his head wearily. "You wouldn't understand—or even believe me."

"Try me."

"How could you? You know nothing of—the other world, the great world."

"I know we've been invaded by creatures that are not of this earth," Mallory said. "What are they? What do they want?"

"Want? You misunderstand, Mallory. They want nothing, they know nothing—not as you and I want and know."

"They want something badly enough to invade the planet."

"No. Invade is not the correct word," the old man said. "Your planet is not occupied—it's infected. They're not invaders. They're a disease."

## VII

"THE MONE," the old man said, "is a single organism whose being is implicit in a multitude of discrete units. It arose eons ago on a world in some far galaxy. Perhaps at first it was a simple virus, mindless and bodiless, existing only as a pattern to be impressed on living cells, devouring them, spreading, growing.

"But it is the basic trait of life—even the half-life, the pseudo-life, of a virus—to seek to expand. It is conjectured that in time the Mone came to be the dominant—indeed, the only—organized mat-

ter on its native world. It—or they—developed—not intelligence but a system of instinctive reactions to situations, comparable to the ability of some of your native insects to construct elaborate nests, weave geometric webs, erect traps, store food, herd other insects navigate, communicate, all without true thought. And like other organized matter the Mone was faced with a choice—evolve or die. It evolved.

"We have no way of knowing the intermediate steps by which the Mone occupied its native system, then learned to cross interstellar distances—or the process by which it elaborated its ultimate, sophisticated methods of survival. We do know that when it crossed intergalactic space to reach our galaxy, it had become a force of fearsome potency. Its encapsulated germ plasm could endure the rigors of cold, vacuum, time, until the warmth of a sun drew it close. Reacting to the gravitational wells of planets, a spore pod would steer itself to a world—and it mattered not on what kind of world it found itself. It was infinitely adaptable, capable of thriving in molten magma or on bare ice at a degree or two above zero absolute—or in an atmosphere of incandescent gas. In response to exterior conditions the germinal units would ready themselves. Then the pod would burst, releasing a thousand self-sufficient embryonic creatures equipped to cope with local conditions, however severe—to grow, construct a nest for the Queen Mone, support and feed her until her spawning time. Then, with the planet seeded by worker-forms, the next phase was entered. This time all effort was concentrated on the creation of millions upon millions of pods, each packed with the seeds of a new planet-infecting force. In six months—or a year—or a century—when the planet was exhausted—the pods would be launched from the stripped world, spreading the plague outward from star to star at a geometric rate. In a million years—or less—the entire galaxy would be only a dead husk from which all life had been stripped as wheat is stripped from a field by locusts."

"Spores," Mallory broke the ensuing silence. "Viruses. The things I saw were big, powerful. They used tools, spoke—"

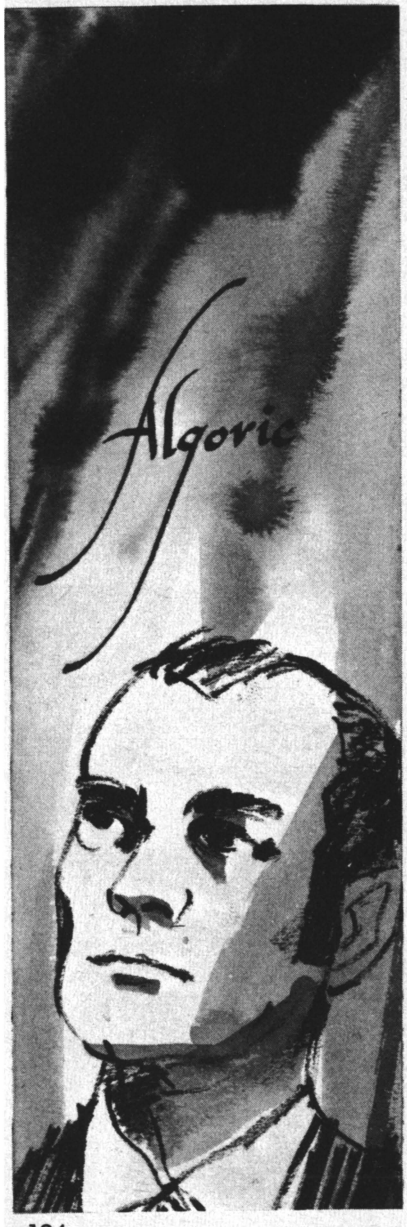
"Your chromosomes bear the genetic pattern which determines your form, your abilities. This pattern varies from species to species, phylum to phylum. In the Mone the only pattern is adaptability. Earthly species adapt to environment by evolution over a long period. The Mone has evolved the ability to make instant adaptation of its chromosomes to meet whatever pressures it senses await the newly spawned generation."

"All this doesn't explain what's happened to Gill—to everyone. Why couldn't I make her understand that something was wrong? And why was my daughter's room sealed? Why?"

"The Mone uses whatever natural resources it finds. Workers are needed to construct the nest, to prepare the special foods and supply the physical needs of the Queen Mone. Here it seized on a cadre of humans, instilled in its slaves a false image of the world and of their roles, supplied them with false motivations to make them docile and productive. As for the sealed room—if the girl were missing, the parents might best be soothed by deleting her from their memories and eliminating all evidence of her existence. A protective field that creates a sense of illness in interlopers effectively discourages interference."

"And where do you come in?"

"A Mone infection on a distant world escaped the notice of galactic authorities until too late—the cell spored before it was destroyed. Many of the spore pods were tracked and destroyed, but many were lost. An object only inches long, composed of inert organic material, is a difficult target to seek out in the depths of space. Therefore we established a spherical shell of Watcher Stations on outlying worlds, alert for the ap-




proach of pods. They are detectable at solar distances by our instruments.

"This is such a station. Two men were assigned to man it—dedicated men, prepared to wait out the long years of the vigil—watching for an event of only remote statistical likelihood—for space is wide and worlds are many. One of the two men was Algoric. I, Gonyl, was the other."

"GO ON," Mallory said. "If there are alien invaders—or an alien infection—I suppose there could be extraterrestrial undercover agents watching for them. But what went wrong? How did they get past you?"

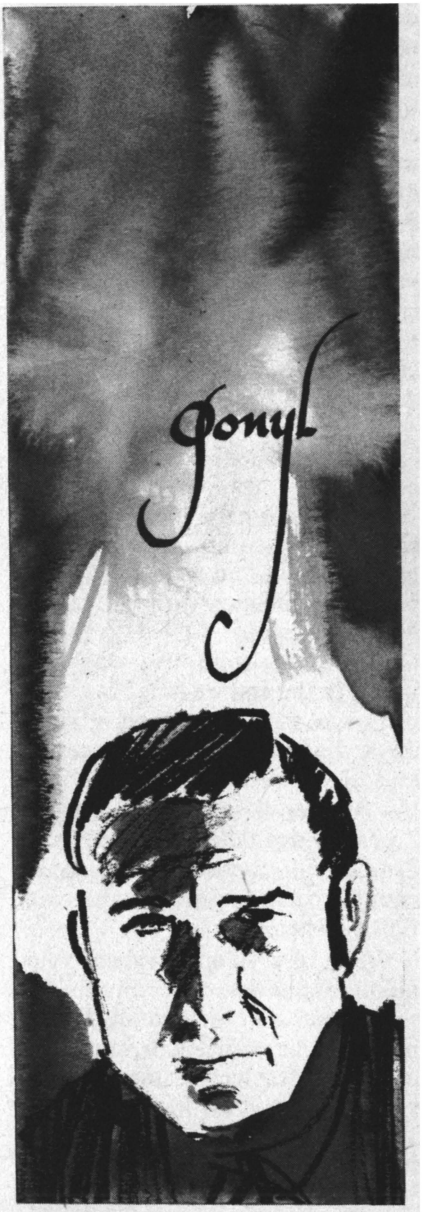
The old man seemed not to notice Mallory's question.

"We were intrigued when we realized that this world bore a native human population. We chose this area for its remoteness—near the heart of an almost empty continent. The year was eighteen-twenty-seven. We felt we had chosen well. The histories of human cultures on numberless worlds led us to predict that a thousand years would pass before the creeping settlement of the land reached us.

"We soon realized our error. We should have acted at once to transfer our installation to a still more remote area: Alaska, Siberia, Antarctica. But we were nor-

mal men. We were reluctant to exile ourselves in a frozen tundra. We rationalized. We accomodated. In the end we welcomed the availability of the society of our own kind. We used our equipment to decorate and furnish our spartan station in a style aping that of the distant centers of such local civilization as existed. We constructed gardens and a road, learned the local speech. We were still young, possessed of limitless wealth in synthesized gold. Life was rich—even here on a primitive planet so far from our birthworld. Our house was filled with music, gaiety, the loveliest of women, the cleverest of men. We had the finest wines, the best foods. We hunted, we danced, we entertained. And time passed.

"Algoric was the first to see what was coming. We had watched the advance of the native culture from the Age of Wood to the Age of Coal in two of your brief generations. Your population had quadrupled and already the first telegraphs were in use. The experiments in internal combustion, electric power and wireless told us that in another few decades your technology would have outstripped the capacity of our initial security arrangements. It was plain that soon we would have to find a new site, rebuild our monitor beacon



in such a way as to preserve its undetectibility.

"Plain to me, that is. Algoric laughed at me. You see—he had come to love a native woman. He would not leave her. The threat of the Mone, he said, was no more than a fever fancy, a madman's delusion. Even those who had sent us here reckoned the chances at no more than one in millions that we would ever be called on to raise the alarm. He would be a fool to throw his life away for that remote eventuality.

" 'In exile, I've built a new existence,' " he railed at me. " 'Would you have me leave it behind now to camp on some desolate ice sheet and wait a thousand years in loneliness for that which will never come?' "

"I was insistent. He was adamant. In the end we fought.

"I was a powerful man in those days. But he was more powerful, and driven to a frenzy by lust for his native woman. He left me here for dead and, after smashing such of the equipment as he could reach without my help, fled with her.

"But I survived—broken, crippled, shattered, yet alive. The machines that would have repaired me, maintained my youth and health, were smashed beyond repair, but I was able in time to reactivate the scanning beacon and renew the vigil.

"I closed the house. And to protect myself from casual intrusion, modified the exterior to present the appearance of neglect and abandonment, erected protective fields that projected an aura of desolation and confusion. Against Algoric my measures were more specific. I set up a tuned band that would affect only his specific cortical pattern —that would drive him mad with pain if he came within the interdicted distance.

SO THE years passed. Twice Algoric approached. Each time I heard his telepathic calls to me, his frantic pleas to be allowed to return. The woman was long dead. His folly had turned to bitter ashes. But though my heart was torn I was adamant, He had broken the sacred oath. I could no longer trust him.

"One day I detected a faint echo from deep space. I monitored it, watched it grow until there was no longer any doubt: A Mone space pod had passed the orbit of Pluto and was falling sunward with gradually increasing velocity. In short, the dreaded day was approaching. The Mone was here.

"I knew at once what I must do. The transmitter forming the heart of this station is so designed that it cannot be activated by a single mind. The complex code

key that unlocks its mighty forces consists of two complementary, interlocking concept-grids. I had been entrusted with one. Algoric possessed the other.

"I alone had detected the approaching menace—but the efforts of both of us were required to alert the Great Worlds to our danger.

"We had once been close friends, Algoric and I. We knew the patterns of each other's minds well enough to maintain contact over planetary distances. I called to him—and he came.

"I knew the risk I was taking but there was no choice open to me. I dropped my protective barriers, allowed him to enter. For the first time in half a century we stood face to face.

"I told him that the past must be forgiven, our differences forgotten. Our duty now was plain—to join in sending the translight pulse that would bring a Galactic force to burn out the infection before it could spread.

"But he refused. Against all duty and tradition of the Watchers, he refused. We had lost enough, he said, sacrificed enough. Now it was too late to save the planet—the Galactic force would arrive to find only the Mone's abandoned spawning nest, a million empty pod-launching sites perched on the sterile rock of a looted world. And even if the pods had not yet been broadcast, planet-wide sterilization would be required to destroy the ripening spore pods. And in that holocaust we too would die.

"Instead, he babbled, we should use the capability of the no-space transmitter to escape from this doomed world to a place of safety. There were a thousand planets on which we could disappear into the population mass, regain all the benefits of the Great Civilization given up when we had volunteered so long ago.

"I refused—as he must have known I would. He demanded that I deliver to him my portion of the code symbol—and when I would not, he raged, begged, wheedled. In the end he would have killed me—but I laid hands on a hidden weapon and, as he struck me down, I shot him.

"I fell. He did not, though I think my shot struck home. I lost consciousness and when I reawakened, he was gone. My head was clearer then. Too late, I saw the folly of what I had done. Algoric gone—alone—and I dying. Who now would stand between the Mone and a helpless world? But perhaps he would return. With great difficulty I managed to deploy the life-support cage and place myself in it, as you see me now. I called to him. There

was a faint response, dim and far away. I called again—again and again, as I summoned strength. Sometimes I sensed a response, sometimes nothing. And I waited.

"And now—instead of Algoric, a stranger." The old man's head slumped back; his skeletal hands twitched as if to clutch at some vanished opportunity. "Algoric," he muttered. "If I could but have known—"

"Algoric's dead, Gonyl," Mallory said sharply. "You and I are still alive. What can we do?"

Gonyl made an animal sound of despair. "Nothing—nothing. Human weakness, criminal weakness. And yet—could you have known Riane in her youth—"

"Riane," Mallory murmured. "It seems to me I've heard that name."

"Tall, graceful as a willow, eyes of that strange, pale blue, hair black as Zenith. A better man than Algoric would have counted a world well lost for her. And yet, if only my own faith been stronger—"

"I remember now," Mallory frowned thoughtfully. "In the dream the stories Uncle Al used to tell me—" Mallory broke off, his face tight. "The dream—this house—and Uncle Al. The clothes he wore—"

"Yes, yes?" Gonyl was staring up at him, perplexed. "What?"

"Old man," Mallory said, "I have a hunch my imaginary Uncle and your friend Algoric were the same man."

"I THINK I begin to understand," Gonyl said. "The house you've described seeing in your dream is, of course, this house as it was half a century ago—as it was when Algoric had last seen it. His appearance to you was, of course, a telepathic contact, not a true dream."

"Why? How?"

"There must have been a reason," Gonyl said. "Algoric was not a man given to caprice—" He looked at Mallory, startled. "Of course—That's the likeness I saw. You have his eyes, his mouth, his bearing."

"Are you trying to tell me that Algoric was my father?"

"Not your father. But your grandfather, perhaps—or your great-grandfather. Of course. No wonder he took an interest in you, visited you in the mind if not in the flesh—"

"Why not in the flesh? God knows I could have used a relative. I was brought up an orphan."

"Riane must have aged and died long, long ago. His family would have grown to adulthood while he aged not at all. In the end it would have been necessary for him to 'die' or disappear, to be believed dead, never to

reappear. But he could have maintained knowledge of his descendants. He could have seen to your care and established a mind-link with you in infancy, before the pattern of acculturation made such contact impossible."

"Could have, yes. But why?"

"Why not? Algoric was a man like other men. Though he had powers most do not possess. But—"

"But what?"

"There must have been another reason. He had told you of this station so that you sensed my call—my need of you." Gonyl's expression was one of dawning hope. "He abandoned his post but perhaps he had a change of heart about his duty. It's possible that he selected you to carry on if he should fail. Why lead you here unless you brought with you the thing I need?"

"All I brought was myself," Mallory said. "And it looks as if that's not going to help."

"Of course you're not consciously aware of it—but have it you must—buried in your mind, waiting for the time when it would be needed. And the time is now."

"You'd better spell it out, old man."

"The code pattern, Jeff Mallory. The missing half of the key that will unlock the transmitter. You have it—you must have it."

"Sorry. I wouldn't know a code pattern if it crawled up my leg."

"It would be deeply buried, inaccessible to any ordinary probe. But you can uncover it."

"If I can—I don't know how."

"Find a chair. Sit here beside me, close enough that I may touch you. Then close your eyes, relax your body. And remember, remember—"

LEANING back in the big wooden chair he had brought down from the kitchen, Mallory listened to the whispering voice, letting his thoughts rove back in time . . .

It was night. The lights had been dimmed in the hall outside the big bedroom where he lay in his bed, one of four in the high-ceilinged room. The others were already asleep. He could hear their soft breathing in the dark. But he lay awake, watching the moon through the branches of a leafless tree outside the curtained window. It had been a cold, wintry day. The afternoon ball game had been canceled and instead there had been "music appreciation" in the library under the watchful eye of the tutor. And afterward; at dinner, Miss Wincher had read aloud another chapter of *David Copperfield*. It made him unhappy to think about David Copperfield. It was pleasanter to think of Uncle Al.

Perhaps Uncle Al would come again soon—tonight?

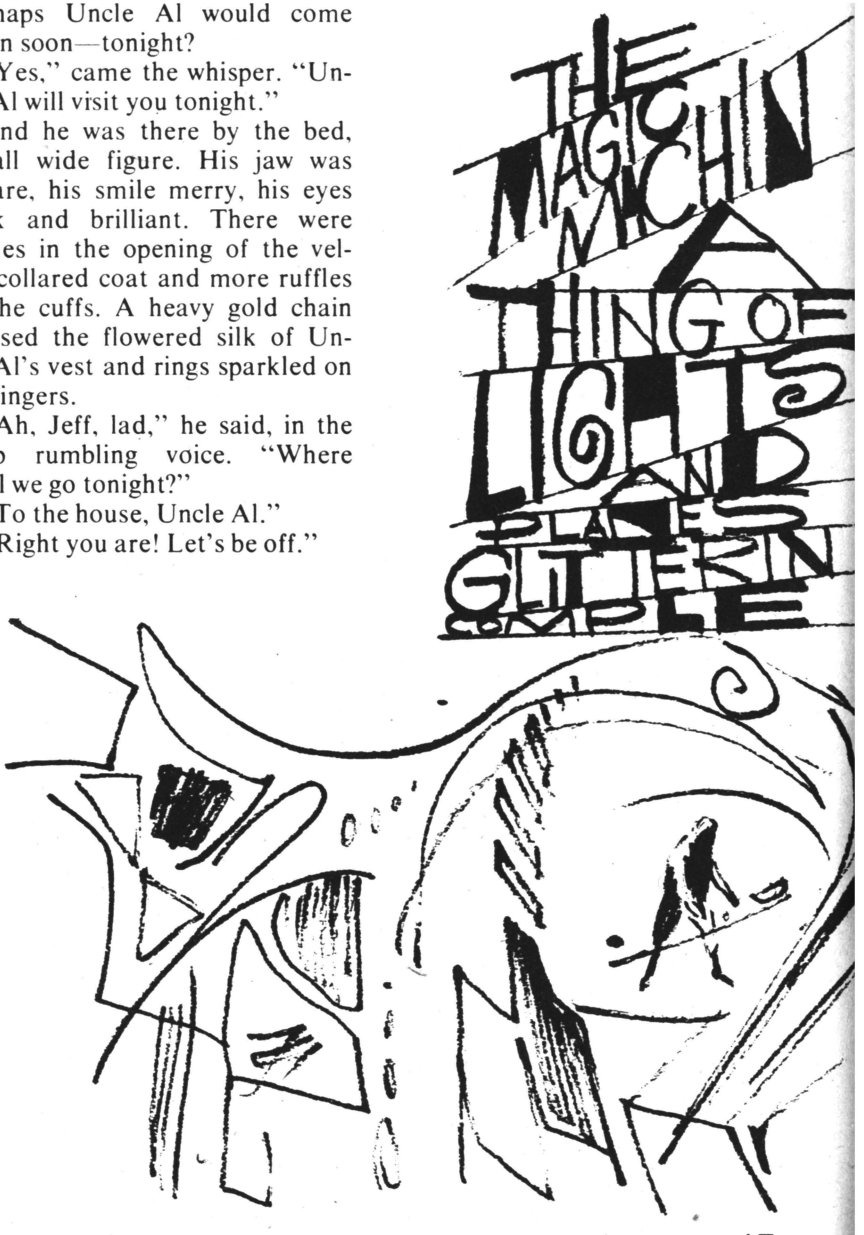
"Yes," came the whisper. "Uncle Al will visit you tonight."

And he was there by the bed, a tall wide figure. His jaw was square, his smile merry, his eyes dark and brilliant. There were ruffles in the opening of the velvet-collared coat and more ruffles at the cuffs. A heavy gold chain crossed the flowered silk of Uncle Al's vest and rings sparkled on his fingers.

"Ah, Jeff, lad," he said, in the deep rumbling voice. "Where shall we go tonight?"

"To the house, Uncle Al."

"Right you are! Let's be off."




He was drifting beside Uncle Al. Uncle Al was strolling unconcernedly along, smoking a big black cigar, just as though there were solid ground under his feet instead of open air. The sky was full of moonlight and, far below, the earth was like a game-board spreading to the horizon and set out with toy houses and roads and forests. They swept higher, sailing down through great moonlit

cloud canyons, soaring like birds with no more effort than a tilt of the hand for steering. Then they swooped into graceful descent.

The house stood on a hilltop, blazing with light. There were carriages on the curved drive; glossy horses pranced, snorting mist from their nostrils. Men in high hats and capes, women in bright gowns, crossed the wide veranda, entered through the open door under the jeweled fanlight.

They passed through the wall, not bothering with the door—a trick young Mallory had always meant to ask about. Then they were in the room where the magic machine rested on its platform, a thing of lights and planes and glittering complexities.

"There it waits," Uncle Al said. "In vain—we hope. And yet—some day they may come. And they're villains, Jeff, lad. We mustn't let them carry out their schemes, eh? No one but you and I know about them, Jeff—you and I and one other. That's our secret, you see, the secret we must never tell.

"Now, these scoundrels we watch for—they always send their calling card ahead. It's not a thing you or I can see, lad. But the machine can see it. And when it does—if it does—it tells us. And we know what to do, eh, Jeff?"

"I'm not sure, Uncle Al. That part's hard. It's not as much fun as the rest. It makes my head hurt."

"A bright head like yours, Jeff? The head of a lad who can fly, walk through walls and share the secret of the machine? Nonsense. Your head can do it, boy. Try! With me, now—first we picture the primary matrix, thus—"

It was like remembering the whole multiplication table all at once—like thinking of every move in a chess game at the same time—like looking at the parts of a jigsaw puzzle laid out on a table and seeing in one glance where each part fit every other part.

"I can't, Uncle Al. The first part slides away when I try to fit the next piece."

"Slowly, lad, one segment at a time. Make it, build it, fix it in place. Then go on to the next—like this—"

It was like balancing a chair on two legs on a high wire—like catching mist in your hands. There was no one in the world but himself and Uncle Al. There were no walls, roof, sky—no space. Only the bright, intangible abstractions, the elusive configurations that slipped aside, dissolved, shifted into new shapes. But, urged and guided by the deep, friendly voice, he tried and tried again. And at last the parts began to fall into place, their

shifting and flowing tamed. Suddenly the matrix flowered about him, as beautiful and as complex as the anatomy of an orchid diagramed in light.

"That's it, Jeff, lad. Good. Good. Now hold it. Don't let it slip away while we move on to the secondary pattern."

Thoughts were coral shapes cast in lead, soft and gray and impossibly heavy. He pushed and tugged at them with fingers of smoke while eons passed. And one by one he intertwined form with intricate form, erecting a structure of concept that overlay the glowing matrical pattern as flesh overlays bones. He was tired—so tired! It was a task that had gone on forever, that would never end. Somewhere, far away and unreal, was an easier, softer existence, remote now as forgotten dreams. But for him there was only the ever-accelerating, outgrowing mosaic that seemed to swell now of its own dynamic growth-urge, completing itself like a living creature that drives from embryo to maturity under the relentless pressure of genetic compulsion.

And at last it was complete. He gazed, bemused, on the blinding beauty of the fifth-order Galactic code complex, listening as Uncle Al gave him his instructions.

Then blackness descended over him, washing him down, down, into welcoming Nirvana . . .

IT WAS a long struggle back to consciousness. He tried to weave the thin, insistent voice into a dream in which he drifted without thought or care over a rosy landscape spreading far below. But what he heard was not Uncle Al's comforting rumble—this was someone else, some intruder who would drag him back to face bleak reality. But he would not go. He had earned his rest.

"Wake up, Jeff Mallory," the voice crackled. "Wake up."

He opened his eyes. For an instant—before the last of the dream concept dissolved—he saw the room as a curiously temporary arrangement of energy quanta in the form called matter, shaped as an environment for the curious protoplasmic aggregations known as human beings.

Then there was a shifting. The ceiling was only a ceiling. The walls were just walls. And the old man who looked at him from burning eyes—what was he?

"You have it," Gonyl said. "I saw it in your face."

"Maybe," Mallory said vaguely. "I saw things—remembered things I hadn't thought of in years. Things I wouldn't have believed I could ever forget."

"Now we must act quickly. Wheel me across to the rectangle you see incised on the floor—

there."

The old man pointed with a trembling finger at the spot.

"Not so fast, Gonyl," Mallory said. "Give me time to collect my thoughts."

"I can spare no time now, Jeff Mallory. Wheel me to the platform."

"You're in a little too much of a hurry, Gonyl. I want—"

"To perdition with what you want," Gonyl spat the words. "Must you force me to extreme measures?"

The impact in Mallory's brain was like a silent blow from a hammer made of ice. Light and darkness whirled chaotically.

Through the maelstrom, Gonyl's voice cut sharp and clear: "While you dozed, I took the precaution of establishing a control pattern over your brain, Jeff Mallory. You will do as I command you. Now."

The blindness cleared. Mallory's head rang with a high, insistent humming. His fingertips felt numb, his limbs remote. He found himself standing, moving to the wheeled cot on which the old man lay, turning it, rolling it across to the indicated position.

*Now . . .*

Gonyl's voice spoke inside his head, a firm and resonant voice, such as the feeble quaver might once have been. The platform stirred underfoot. They were dropping down through a black-walled shaft into darkness. Abruptly light blossomed around them as the platform came to rest at the side of a gray-walled passage.

"That way," Gonyl commanded.

Numbly Mallory wheeled the cart along the corridor to the left, emerged into a circular chamber, empty except for a black drum at its center.

Above the squat black cylinder a mote of light came into being. It grew brighter, expanding into a dazzling sphere of glowing mist which solidified, glazed over, became a mirror-bright sphere eight feet in diameter that rested on the pedestal at the center of the room. Gonyl uttered a strange, croaking sigh.

Again Mallory felt the touch of the old man's thoughts among his own.

*Now, Jeff Mallory . . .*

At once, the key pattern formed in his mind, met and matched the counterpattern . . .

The polished surface of the sphere blushed over as if a breath of moisture-laden air had touched it. Color flickered and darted across its face. A point of utter blackness came into existence at the center of the convexity he and the old man faced. It dilated, spreading swiftly outward until only a glowing rim remained to encompass a disk of blackness sprinkled with sparkling points of

light like a circular window looking out onto the night sky.

"Place me inside," Gonyl ordered.

*"Now, Jeff lad,"* Uncle Al's voice spoke clearly in Mallory's mind.

It was as if a door had opened, flooding his brain with a crystalline light. In utmost clarity he saw the contours of the abstraction that was his mind field, saw how it was gripped in a web of thought force, saw how and where to touch it.

And was free.

"All right," he addressed the withered mask of amazement and dawning fear that stared up at him. "I've heard all your lies, Gonyl. Now tell me the truth."

(TO BE CONCLUDED)

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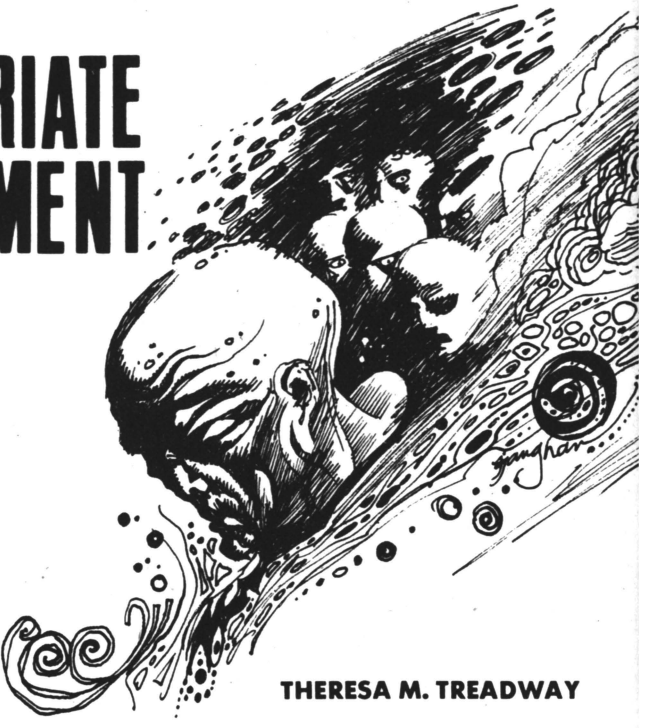
an *IF* first

# APPROPRIATE PUNISHMENT



**THERESA M. TREADWAY**

***She is 27 and this is her first fiction submission anywhere—although she initially attempted an sf story at the age of 13. She has spent the intervening years polishing her thoughts and her style. The job she has on the launching pad in this month's IF has a fine patina and her target lies at a harder reach than the moon. But some day heaven may alter her blood-chilling Planet of Hell!***

SILENTLY and quickly the Samponi carried their frail burden through the night. The sky was black, moonless, but stars shone faintly through the heavy atmosphere. Two walked ahead with torches to light the way and frighten away the jungle beasts. Two walked behind with their precious burden, the dying body of an old man. His name was Gorofin and he was as yet unaware that this was to be his last night on his beloved planet. It was his judgment time.

WHEN GOROFIN woke from his sleep he was still tired. He lay quietly, eyes closed. His failing heart beat erratically. His lungs wheezed and struggled for each painful breath. He stirred and felt tiny, sharp objects digging into his back. Something was wrong. The silence, the objects he was lying on—this could not be his familiar hut.

The silence about him was absolute. He strained his ears but could not hear the usual jungle sounds. The sleepy fog in his brain began to lift and slowly he opened his eyes.

Before him loomed a tall white candle. It was fully six feet in height and one foot in diameter. Its orange flame burned steadily. Above him were a million starlike objects that reflected the orange light so brilliantly it hurt his eyes. Walls encrusted with more of the crystalline objects sloped away on all sides.

Jewels, he thought. *I'm in the Cave of Jewels, where all Samponi are brought to die . . .*

The old man felt a chill run through him. His bony, clawlike fingers clenched and unclenched. Another chill hit him. He stretched out a wrinkled, trembling hand to pull the white robe over his exposed feet. In doing so, he raised his head and shoulders and fell back, exhausted. His straining heart beat like a jungle drum. Through half-closed eyes he watched the candle burn. Little beads of wax rolled down its sides and were gradually forming foothills around the base of the candle. Some beads dropped with little plopping noises.

*Amazing—it's so quiet I can even hear the wax drop from a candle . . .*

*As the candle burns, so does your life . . .*

The words of the ancient legend began to come back to him. Gorofin had not thought of the

legend in many years, not since he had been forced to learn it as a child. In fact, he hadn't thought of much else besides beautiful women, black wine, and long days spent by the emerald lake.

*It has been a good life,* he reflected. *But now it must end. Now I must sleep . . .*

Gorofin closed his eyes and thought back to the years when he was a young man, strong and handsome and much adored by the women of the Samponi tribe. He had been the best dancer in the village and had preferred entertaining the women to going out on the hunt with the village men. For this he had been disliked by many men but their opinion had not bothered him. He had lived only to please women, to fish and dream away the long idyllic days of the planet's eternal summer.

The Samponi led a simple life, as did all the tribes on the jungle-covered planet. Food was plentiful and war was unknown. Gorofin's had been a happy existence—and a long one. The average lifespan was three hundred and seventy years. Gorofin had lived longer than most. He was four hundred years old.

He sighed. The jewels under his back had become like burrowing needles. He looked again at the candle. It was a few inches shorter and the foothills of wax were growing.

*In the last hours of your life shall the candle flicker and the Eyes of Flame come to judge you . . .*

The old man dozed. He slept while the candle burned down and down until it was a mere stump of what it had been.

GOROFIN'S eyes opened spasmodically. He glanced around, terrified. Something was different. He looked at the pile of melted wax and saw the flame flicker. It began to change color, from orange to red to green and back to orange. It jumped and danced like something possessed.

A sharp chill hit him. It raced down his back and legs. He began to shiver uncontrollably. He shut his eyes tightly and began silently to recite the words of the ancient legend. At first they came easily, though he had not thought of them in more than three hundred years.

*And it shall come to pass that on the last day of your mortal life you shall be placed in the Cave of Jewels, dressed in a white robe. And the jewels of the cave shall be lit by one large candle to symbolize the shortness of the mortal flame. As the candle burns, so does your life. In the last hours of your life shall the candle flicker and the Eyes of Flame come to judge you. If you are found wanting the Eyes of Flame shall speak appropriate punishment befitting the scope of your sins . . .*

There was more but the rest escaped him. Something about a Planet of Hell. What was it?

Gorofin's heart raced frantically and his breath came in wheezing gasps. His fear knew no limits, for

he had never believed the old legend. As a child he had joked about it. His mother had scolded him, aghast at his blasphemy. Memories burned in the old man's mind.

Gorofin opened his eyes and the Eyes of Flame looked at him. They hung above the candle, two giant orbs the color of the flame that danced wildly beneath them.

Gorofin was trembling convulsively, sharp chills wracking his body. His dark eyes were bulging and his once golden skin had turned the grayish white of death. His heart threatened to beat itself to a pulp.

And then, suddenly, the chills passed and a delicious ease flowed through his aching body. The pain in his lungs vanished and his thudding heart slowed until he could no longer feel its beat. Gorofin relaxed and let the coolness pervade every cell of his body.

The flame of the candle was now only a foot from the floor. Gorofin no longer cared about the candle or the Eyes of Flame. He felt content, tranquil and at peace.

The Eyes spoke.

*Gorofin . . .*

There was no voice, really, no sense of speaking, just a hearing, like hearing one's own thoughts.

He answered aloud with the proper words.

"Yes, Eyes of Flame and Bearer of Eternal Life, I am your servant."

*Gorofin, I have come to judge you. Do you feel that you are worthy of Eternal Life?*

The old man was quite sleepy now. He wanted only to sleep, sleep forever. He fought off the desire with great effort, knowing instinctively that he could not sleep until he had been judged. He thought a long time before he answered.

"I don't know. I never believed in you until now. Does that make me unworthy?"

*Not entirely. Many are like you —souls who wasted their mortal lives with idle dreams and constant indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh. I have forgiven worse than you. I demand only that you feel a sincere repentance for your sinful life and ask forgiveness of those who judge you . . .*

"Those?"

*We are many who speak. But we speak as one . . .*

Gorofin, since he felt no sincere repentance, could not bring himself to say the words that would bring him Eternal Life. Besides, he knew he could not lie to the Eyes of Flame, for they could see into the deepest recesses of his mind.

"I cannot ask your forgiveness, for I do not feel that I have led a sinful life. I did not believe in you because I was born with a mind that demanded facts to back up what was presented to me as truth. I was a dreamer. I did not go on the hunt, but stayed in the village or fished in the lake. I do not feel it was a wasteful life, for I brought joy to many women."

*Joy? You brought joy? You charmed the maidens and spoiled them for their husbands. You did*

*not go on the hunt because you were lazy. And you refused to do any meaningful work to improve the lot of your village and your tribe. Your life was full of sins. Gorofin, think again . . .*

The old man felt a great sadness for he knew that if he had his life to live over he would live it as he had. He felt no repentance.

*Gorofin, do you know of the Planet of Hell?*

"I have heard of it, but I cannot remember exactly what the legend says about it."

*Then I will refresh your memory. There is a planet not of this galaxy where souls are sent for punishment. The souls on that planet suffer unimaginable agonies. Agonies that the people of this world could not begin to visualize—such things as war, starvation, disease and mental agonies beyond belief. It is the only planet of its kind in this universe. Other universes hold similar planets. They all serve the same purpose. Do you wish to be sent there?*

"No, of course not."

*I will give you one more chance. It will be your last. You may have a few minutes to search your conscience before I ask for your answer . . .*

Gorofin was silent for many minutes. The candle was now a pile of wax and the flame was almost out. The Eyes watched him, pulsating slightly. The flame of the candle became dimmer. Coolness overtaking him made it difficult for him to think.

*I now ask for your answer. Do you repent of your sins and ask the forgiveness of those who judge you?*

Gorofin replied, searching out each word carefully, "I wish I could please you by responding in the manner you wish me to. But in all honesty I cannot ask your forgiveness for sins which I do not feel I committed. My answer is the same."

The old man sighed as he felt the remnants of life drain from his body. The Eyes, the candle and the cave began to recede from his vision. He felt himself sinking into a quiet, swirling blackness. The voice that was no voice but rather an intimate realization reached him in his last moments.

*Gorofin, you have been judged and found wanting. We are all agreed on your sentence. You are banished to the Planet of Hell, there through miserable suffering to learn perfection and truth. For only through your soul's perfection will you achieve Eternal Life. May you learn well . . .*

The flame died.

SEEN from space, the blue-green planet was lovely. But its beauty was deceiving.

East of the Pacific but west of the Atlantic, south of the Great Lakes but north of the Gulf of Mexico, on a sunny day in June, a baby was born to Willie and Violet Hawkins. He was a beautiful baby, with skin as black as coal. They named him Gordon. ★

*(Continued from page 105)*
derstanding of what went on in those days of growth from our wild youth to our somewhat respectable early maturity.

A case in point is the affair of Claude Degler or John Chrisman. I read a whole set of diatribes about and by Degler at the time and I've watched a myth grow around this fan that still continues to spread in science fiction. I met the young man at the Philcon in 1947—before I knew that the John Chrisman I was talking with was really Claude Degler. All I can say is that he was then doing nothing that earned him the treatment he received when Bob Tucker recognized him, and I spent at least three hours with him in fairly general conversation. (I do recognize, however, that a lot of his writing as Degler had been as wild as legend makes it.)

Harry Warner covers the Degler-Chrisman episode at considerable length—and with a fair amount of detail I had never been able to discover before. I think this is the first time the matter has been made public in a way that I can accept as an honest attempt to find the truth.

This is a book that deserves to be treated as a work of considerable scholarship in the field and as a piece of serious history. I can think of no other man who could have done as good a job and few could have equaled it for completeness. If future students ever need a work dealing with this period in a microcosmic field as rich as this, they will find all they need in the book. The price is fairly stiff for such a book but amply justified. There are pictures of many of the major fans of the era—and I'm still puzzled about how Harry managed to find some of them. An excellent work of its kind.

GOING from fact to fancy, I find that most major work done in the last few months is more in the field of fantasy than in straight science fiction. The major piece of news for readers who are willing to flex their minds beyond what science may some day do is the recent announcement that Ballantine Books is scheduling a series of adult fantasies. These will bring back into print some of the great novels that have long needed publication in soft covers. Lin Carter is acting as editor of the series.

The first book in the group is *The Blue Star*, by Fletcher Pratt (Ballantine Books, 95¢). This originally appeared in one of the Twayne Triplets in 1952, where it could never have received the readership it deserved.

Fletcher Pratt was a gallant and beloved friend of mine but I was never impressed with his sci-

ence fiction. I had always considered him a writer of fact rather than fiction. He had, of course, collaborated with L. Sprague de Camp on a series of delightful stories for *Unknown* but I rather assumed that these were largely written by de Camp.

Then I read *The Blue Star*. It knocked my preconceptions to shards. Pratt was a magnificent writer of fiction, a superb stylist, and a man who could form an integrated concept of a world and a whole set of people that exceeded the grasp of most novelists. This is a universe that might have been, where the laws of nature differ from those recognized and have their effects on the rules governing human conduct. But while one is reading about it the world he describes is far more real than many found in the contemporary novel scene.

The book deals with witchcraft —but a witchcraft which offers nothing without payment in full. And it gives a world history that I still find more convincing in fact and feel than almost anything I've known in the worlds of science fiction. Unfortunately, it begins with a rather pointless and stilted prologue to set the scene and reverts in the end to a somewhat better but needless epilogue. But if the reader will skip them completely, nothing will be lost.

It was after reading this novel that I began desperately looking for another I had missed, though I knew that George U. Fletcher was the penname of Pratt. This book is also currently available, and should be a must for every sword-and-sorcery fan who likes an adult handling of such material.

*The Well of the Unicorn*, by Fletcher Pratt (Lancer Books, 75¢), may well be the best other-universe story written before the Tolkien books became popular. It's a brawling, boisterous and completely delightful story of a young man who sets out to overcome the forces of empire in a vaguely Scandinavian world—and who accomplishes his aim with the help of Meliboe, an enchanter. The book was written by a man who was an expert on real history and real warfare. Background details—including an askew view of the religion of the world, something too often neglected—and the characterizations are rich and compelling to an adult reader.

These two other-world creations of Fletcher Pratt represent all of his fiction in novel form that I can recommend. But two such fine books would have been enough to make a splendid reputation as a novelist for any other man and I'm delighted to see them both in print.

*Moondust*, by Thomas Burnett

Swann (Ace, 50¢), is another matter. Swann has done some excellent "historical" fantasy in the past. His stories of the Etruscans and their godlings have faltered at times but have contained high moments. Swann generally has displayed an excellent feeling for the unexpected but logical development that makes good fantasy worth reading.

This novel shows neither the delights in invention nor poignant feelings that have previously been so strong in his work. The nonhuman and semihuman creatures here arouse no warmth and hardly any compassion. The invented background doesn't blend in smoothly with real history. It sticks in the craw on the way down and then keeps upsetting the stomach after it has finally been swallowed.

This is basically the story of the fall of the walls of Jericho. It begins in the tent of Joshua outside those walls. But don't expect the account to deal with Hebrew myths. The action carries rapidly into the city to involve a series of events somehow mixed up with Cretan and Egyptian beliefs. Then it leaves all traces of the world of its time behind and goes underground—literally—to a world of intelligent beasts that are the masters of the arcane knowledge of the time. These are simply ugly and unrewardingly dull.

The story of Rahab, the harlot of Jericho, and her demoniac possession might have held at least some poignancy. But I could find very little here. Partly, this was because the first-person narrator in the story seemed to lack any real understanding that she had any feelings of her own.

In the end, of course, the walls tumble and Joshua triumphs. It really doesn't matter, since he's of no great importance to the tale and since so little of this concerns either him or the real people of the city.

Any author can be forgiven for a slip now and then. But we don't have to buy such slips. And this is a book better left unread if you have enjoyed Swann's other work.

Somewhat closer to science fiction is a series of stories that tell of a swordsman on another world, much like the exploits of John Carter on Barsoom. *Priest Kings of Gor*, by John Norman (Ballantine Books, 75¢), is the third in this series, and surprisingly better than might have been expected.

The first two in the series were far too close to the Burroughs stories in detail and handling and far too distant from them in talent. They deal with Tarl Cabot, who is snatched from Earth to another world, where he becomes a mighty swordsman and battle chief. This time the planet is a counter-Earth, and 180 ° around the sun from

Earth, and hence invisible to us. (Its effect on other planets would be noticed, however, so we could spot it. Anyhow, such an orbit is a lot harder to negotiate than a trip to Mars or Venus.)

There we have the usual panoply of primitive races at war with each other, run by a distant set of priests. There are the strange beasts and the stranger women who are the prizes of the fighting men. The first two books left me feeling it was just Barsoom-Pah! Tarl Cabot goes through the usual routine of falling in love, rescuing the damsel, and then being shot back to Earth just as he should be settling down to a happy life of killing and loving.

Surprisingly, the third book begins to take on a life of its own. Much of the beginning is still somewhat routine in its plotting, but the action moves convincingly and Cabot begins to come alive and develop some characteristics of his own. He has been Hero—now he becomes Hero with feelings and attitudes of his own. He goes off in search of his mate but it soon begins to look as if this is more duty than desire. His desires humanly begin to attach themselves to other and far more interesting females along the way. And his powers begin to shape into more believable and personal ones than the cut-and-slash skill that seemed his only virtue before.

The real story develops when he finally penetrates the lair of the priest kings of Gor, the counter-Earth. If we were prepared for the usual set of human but evil practitioners of a false religion that controls the planet, we soon find we were wrong. These priest kings are a lot closer to Brackett than to Burroughs. They definitely are not human and their philosophy is alien to anything Cabot has found before.

Naturally, there is a war between sides, with Cabot as the pivot. But it isn't as cut-and-dried as his other battles, and the humans and almost-humans mixed up with him begin to develop individuality. The priest race becomes the real center of interest. And in the end, after a scene that involves emotion rather than motion, the whole affair is far more mature and interesting than could be expected.

I don't know how much further Norman can go with his series, since he has used up the chief mystery of the planet. But this is a fairly good adventure story, and I'll be interested in watching his development from now on. If he can continue doing his own work instead of what seems pure imitation, he might well capture the basic interest that was what we really felt about Barsoom.

MARTIN CAIDIN should be

a name known to science-fiction readers, though I suspect fewer know him than should. He was an avid fan of the field when he was a youngster and his letters can still be found in some of the old back issues. He showed promise of becoming an *enfant terrible*. Then he disappeared into the maw of World War II.

He came back determined to be a writer. He wrote war books and flying books and space books. He became one of the leading writers about the affairs of NASA. I first saw him as a NASA expert when we were together several times on an all-night radio program.

The last time I met him, he was talking about being determined to write a work of fiction—science fiction. I never doubted that he would. After making much of his reputation and income from promoting NASA, he hauled off and wrote a book attacking much of what they were doing because he was convinced his views should be expressed.

The work came out as *Marooned* (Bantam, 1965, 75¢). And while it was not a great piece of science fiction it was better than a lot of books that were reviewed favorably in the book columns. But it was not labeled as science fiction, and a lot of readers never knew it belonged in our field.

Now he has another book: *The God Machine*, by Martin Caidin (Bantam, 75¢). In many ways this is a smoother piece of fiction, displaying better development of his characters than found in his earlier work. But the book has something more and indicates that Caidin was again doing something he felt had to be done.

The story deals briefly with the men who have created the master computer that will handle all our war efforts. Into this computer has gone everything we know and, to protect it from human tampering, it has been made almost invulnerable and totally autocratic. The "hero" is a computer-man who begins to suspect that the robot is actually taking over the men supposed to control it as well as leading the world straight to nuclear catastrophe. The story deals with the efforts of the computer and the man to kill each other. And Caidin knows enough about both sides to make the fight a good one.

But underlying the action is the feeling that Caidin is mainly trying to tell us how it really is in the world of burgeoning military power. But at the end the message is not complete. The hero has to stage his final fight for story purposes. And while the device is ingenious, it seems contrived. During that fight the main theme suffers badly.

The book is worth reading. And if—as I hope—Martin Caidin will

go on to handle his basic theme more completely in either a sequel or another novel of unrecognized science fiction, it may be worth looking for.

Caidin is not yet a really first-class novelist. But if I know him —and if he'll get to know himself a little better—I'd hate to take any bets against his turning out to be the absolute master of most who are now recognized in either science fiction or the mainstream as major novelists. He's learning to transfer his inner intensity to the printed page. And in an era where compassion too often substitutes weakly for passion, that is a talent much to be prized.

★

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# HUE and CRY

***Readers write—and wrong!***

Dear Editor:

Has Arthur C. Clarke let his dreams of joining the higher-reputation bracket of scientists go to his head? Has he forsaken all his many science-fiction fans of yesterday and today? I wonder about this because a new printing—the tenth U.S. printing—of his *Childhood's End* bears a legend on the copyright page saying "the opinions expressed in this book are not those of the author." Or it could be this not indicates that he is sliding toward the new wave fiction, with its false teachings away from science. I think real science and such things as the Apollo moon trip have been increasing the interest in science fiction and will continue to do so.

I came to the reading and enjoyment of science fiction about 1958, and since then the field seems to be trying to get away from the whole idea on which it was based. (I'm trying to complete my collection, and desperately attempting to find the April 1926 first issue of *Amazing Stories!*) I look back on Clarke's "Against the Fall of Night" as one of the most enjoyable stories I happened to buy in the magazines. I cannot see why he should be other than proud of the expanded version, *Childhood's End*. I can't understand his disclaimer.

And while Clarke seems to be flying away from science fiction, what about Isaac Asimov? The first of his two published *Caves of Steel* novels was back in *Galaxy* for 1953. He still owes us a third and final novel. I hope it is forthcoming.

Last year, the British *Science Journal* ran a special issue on robots and had the good Dr. Asimov round it off with his summary of his laws of robotics from his earlier stories. This is a monthly journal devoted almost entirely to the fields of hard science. It is the first science journal that I've seen which publishes s-f book reviews. I think that is something!

When I heard that the British author John Wyndham had recently passed away, I had just finished a story from a 1950 magazine entitled "The Living Lies," by John Beynon (whom

I believe must have been J.B. Harris, or John Wyndham). It was great science fiction and I shall miss his stories. With his passing, I feel we have lost a master of science fiction, one of the few who handled this genre real well.

Now to get to the main point of writing this letter, which is to suggest a few ideas on letters to the editor. For example, how about a new magazine from the *Galaxy* family with a whole issue dedicated to—you guessed it—letters to the editor, covering all past issues of the magazines you have published? Can you see the idea? Well, if not, let's have some fun like that in the old *Thrilling Wonder* and *Startling Stories*. They had grand letter departments. —Edward M. Osachie, 954 West 7th, Vancouver 9, B.C., Canada.

*And after we finish with the letterzine, maybe we can bring out a magazine with letters dealing only with letters about the letters we publish, and after that... Nope, can't see it. But we could use some of the Old Sarge's zest or the great fights that took place in the letters to* Planet Stories. *Start shooting.*

*Clarke's disclaimer was probably just self-defense against all the sapheads who took the ending of the book to mean that he was one of them and that he meant We All Must Be Saved By The Great Ones From Beyond. That basic idea made for good romantic fiction, but it isn't his real opinion—despite what happened in 2001. Anyhow, last time I saw him a few months ago, he was still a red-hot s-f fan. As to Asimov, his failure to complete the plotted-out third novel is the result of severe writer's cramp, suffered when he is signing all the contracts high-paying fact book publishers keep forcing on him.*

*The loss of John Beynon Harris, or John Wyndham, is one we all will feel keenly for a long time. He has been imitated much too often, but almost never equaled for the disaster story told with intensity and honesty, as well as for many other types of fiction.*

Dear Editor:

I am continually astounded by the ignorance of some of your readers. Take for example Bill Wolfenbarger, whose letter you published in your January issue. The first thing he states is that traditional s-f has been written for years without style and the "new wave" introduces the concept of style in s-f. I may be ignorant of his concept of style, but I thought Henry Kuttner under his penname of Lewis Padgett had style; and J.W. C. as Don Stuart had style; or Jack Vance or Theodore Sturgeon or Cordwainer Smith or even Roger Zelazny. But he may define style as smooth-talking that covers up lousy story-telling.

He goes on to call his new wavicle writers "astronauts of inncer space." I may be wrong but the only "astronauts of inner space" are called psychologists, and even some of them are on the wrong track.

Your magazines are a nice complement to the rest of the s-f mags. Suggestions for improvement: Let Lester write some editorials; get more Niven, Harrison, Anderson, occasional essays by Moskowitz; get the coherent Zelazny; get Joe Poyer. Cut out the green pages. And most important, get the next thing Heinlein puts out.

Sure wish R.A. Heinlein would hurry up and finish his superhouse. He hasn't had an original story published in 3 ½ years and it's getting pretty hard to classify him as a contemporary s-f writer. Perhaps you should hire a task force of engineers and construction workers and get it

done. I promise to yell "Vote for *If* for a Hugo" and run through the halls of the St. Louiscon if you can get him writing again. —Matt Hickman, 708 20th Street, West Des Moines, Iowa.

*Don't buck that "inner space," Matt. Maybe some of the new waivers do have inner space where you and I think we keep our gray matter—if inner space is as empty as outer space. I dunno who started the "inner space" cliche', but I don't think anyone who had the least idea of good style could ever take such empty noise seriously. Anyhow, you have to realize the boys defending the new rave don't use their words with the same meaning we learned. To them, style isn't clarity and reasonable elegance; they mean tricks, such as what passes for experimental style—and even their use of experimental is special, since they're copying, not really experimenting. If they really liked style, they might take a look at the best stylist who ever wrote science fiction, long before most of them had professors to explain such things—Stephen Vincent Benet. He knew there was no fight between story and style; he used both.*

*You'll get most of your wishes, sooner or later. Lester's writing a column for* Galaxy *with complete editorial freedom, and the green pages are already out. As for Heinlein—well, he finished his house without help from us, and I hear he's now doing another novel.*

Dear Editor:

The duplication of American and Russian efforts in their space programs has often been pointed out in the press. However, the first time I have seen any mention of cooperation suggested was in the *Galaxy* editorial for May. Is such an event so unlikely that it could only be proposed in a science *fiction* magazine? I would like to see the idea plugged in newspapers the world over and put on the agenda of NASA and the UN. Space exploration is too big for any one nation to go it alone. It is more than just "bigger than both of us," as the hero used to say. Both America and Russia have had to curtail and slow down their programs because of the huge expenditure necessary. Many other nations are interested, but although prosperous in worldly terms they cannot afford to finance their own space experiments. So why not form a League of Space, perhaps within the framework and with the cooperation of the United Nations? Why not get cracking NOW, and bring the future forward—and let our own generation experience some of the exciting possibilities? —J. Galvin, 10 Windmill Crescent, Castlecroft, Wolverhampton, Staffs, England.

*Cooperation makes excellent sense, and in a half-hearted way it was begun. American explores the moon, Russia works on space stations; one concentrates more on Venus, the other on Mars. But that is pretty uncoordinated. Still, I'm a little uncertain about the UN angle. There's too much chance for every little nation there to throw obstacles in the way while somehow never paying freight. And can you imagine how the astronauts would be chosen? Arab bloc rejects all Jewish candidates; France turns down all who speak English; and the African bloc demands reparations for white seizure of the moon, etc. When any world organization can handle something like the Mid-East or the two Chinas, or take over the arms reduction plan, I'll be glad to see it take over space. Until then—well, we're doing it all wrong, but we're at least twenty years ahead of what the UN might have done in space!*

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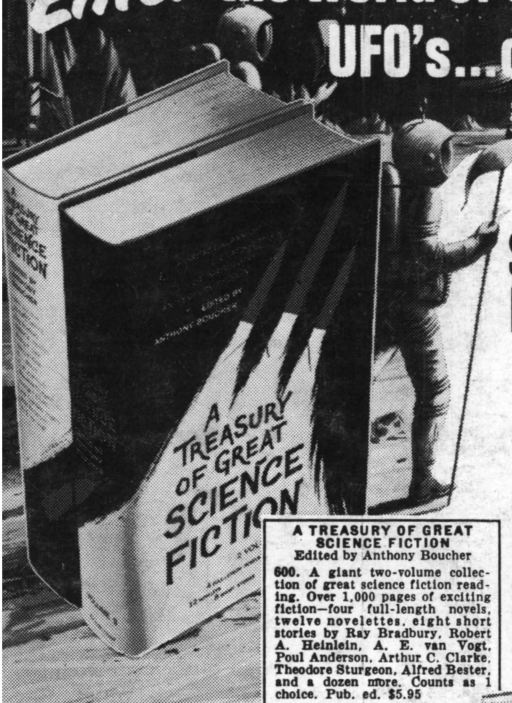


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