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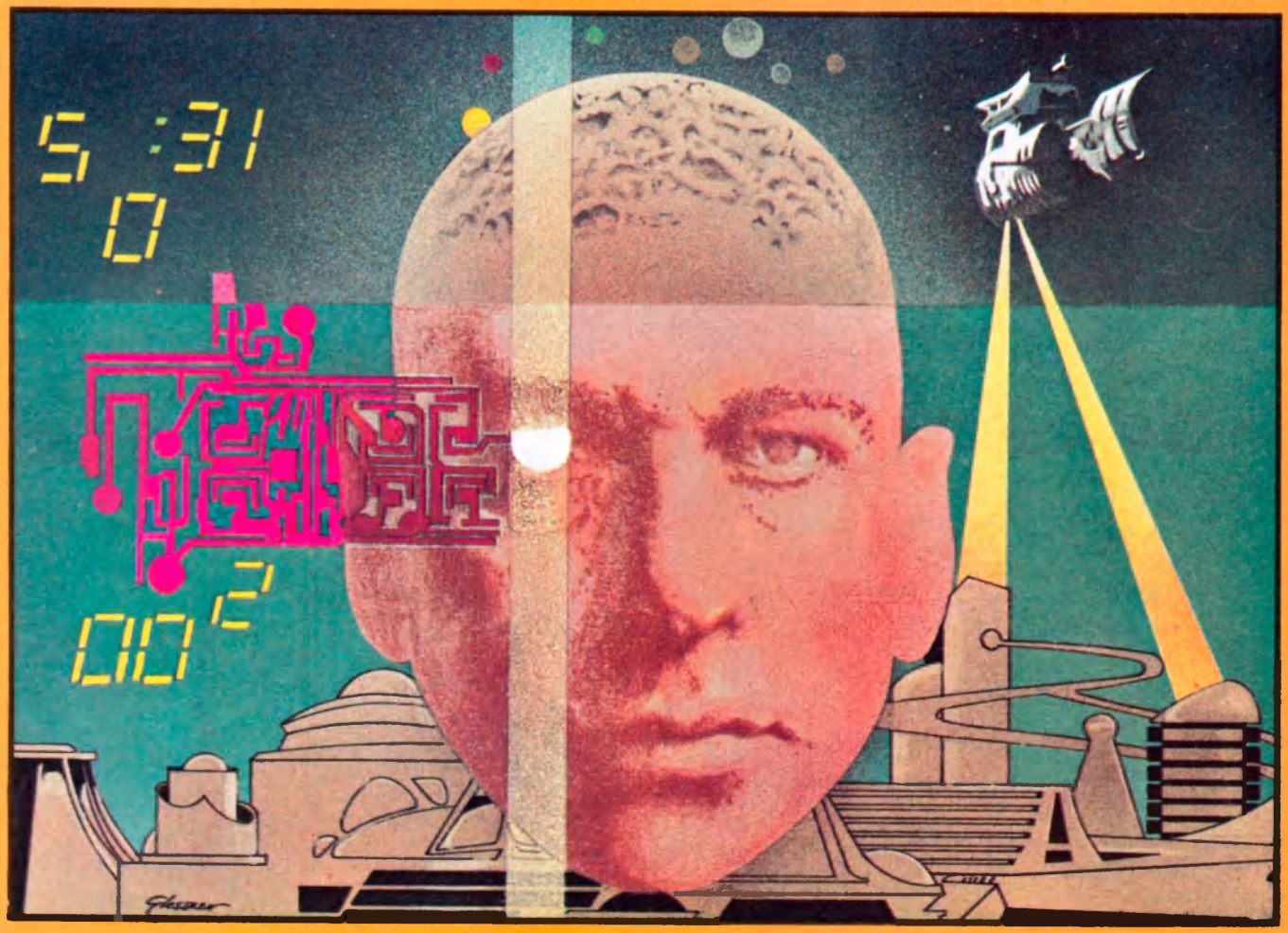

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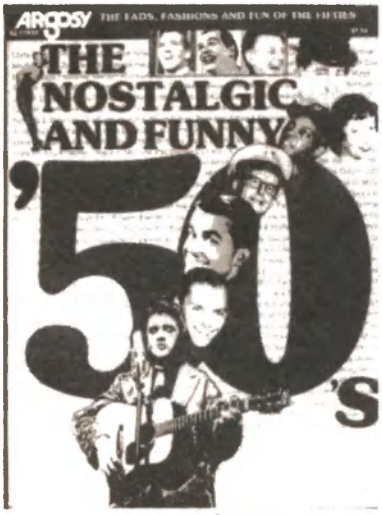


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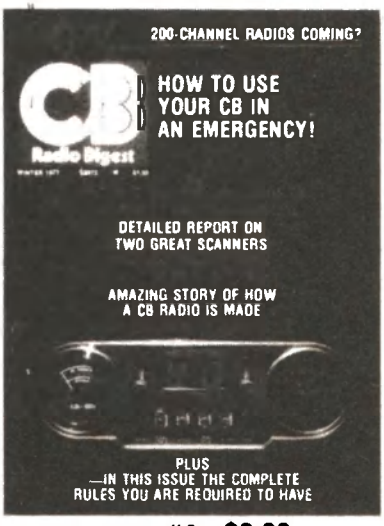


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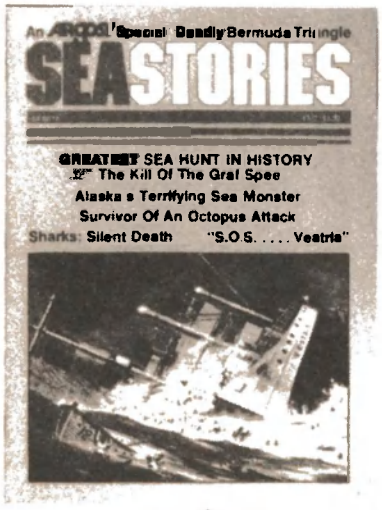


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# First Life

By Roger Dee

*Not till his last son disowned him*
*did he know for what he had built,*
*for whom he had fought—*
*for whom he would finally die—*
*this heir of the ages—*
*who hated the thing he begat!*

**I was pretending to study Chapter XIV of Hill's Fourth** Grade Geography when the Little Ship landed in our front yard. I wasn't really studying, because I had leafed through Hill's Geography at school one afternoon and I knew it by heart—but I couldn't tell my mother and father that, any more than I could tell them I knew Carmig was sending the Little Ship tonight. They'd have thought I was imagining things again, the way they used to think before I got old enough to hide the difference between us.

My father was reading a book and Mother was watching a telemovie when the roar and blue flash came, just outside our living room windows.

"*What was that?*" my father said, and dropped his book. My mother turned off the telescreen and looked at me. "Donnie, are you all right?"

I put down the geography book and went to her, and for a minute, I almost wished the Little Ship hadn't come. It was the first time I had guessed, really, how hard it was going to be.

"It looked like a meteor," my father said. He went to the window, and his eyes got round. "No, it's a ship, a little ship no bigger than a copter. Edna, it's landed in your petunia bed!"

He didn't mistake it for a bomb or anything like that. You couldn't think of bombs and of the Little Ship at the same time, because it was too beautiful, too sleek and shiny and trim, almost like a toy but not a toy either. I couldn't see it yet, but I knew how it looked because Carmig had described it often when he came at night from Out There. It was a real ship. It was small because it only had to be big enough.

It only had to be big enough to hold *me*.

It had come for me tonight, and I was going to get in it and let it take me away from my mother and father and Corky, our brown spaniel, because I didn't belong with them any more.

I was growing up. I was Adolescent, Carmig said, and that meant I couldn't stay around regular people any longer. They'd find out about me if I did, and then they'd hate me. I belonged with Carmig and the Others now, Out There among the stars.

My father and mother went out on the front porch to look at the Little Ship, and I went with them.

They didn't call the police, because they were not the kind of people to need police. My father taught psychology at the University, and he was smarter and quieter than most men. My mother was like him, never bothering much with things outside her home and family. Those were the things that mattered, she said, so why worry about other things that can't be helped?

They stood on the porch and watched the Little Ship cool, my father smoking his pipe and letting the moon gleam on his glasses. It never occurred to either of them to be afraid, because they were not ordinary people. If they had been, I'd never have known about Carmig and the Others and about the great things They were doing Out There.

"It's a lovely thing," my mother said. "But so *small!* Howard, do you suppose—"

I knew what they were thinking. They were wondering if the Little Ship held little people from one of the planets, maybe Mars, and if the passengers would look more like spiders than like men. They couldn't know that there were no people in the Little Ship, nor that it hadn't come from our system at all. It came from a soft, green world that swung around a bright yellow sun out in the Milky Way, a sun nobody here ever saw because it was lost in the great star-whirl of the *Eta Carinae* nebula.

My father didn't answer. He must have been more like me, and so more like Them, than I had thought, for he seemed to understand something of what I felt when I looked at the Little Ship.

"You're all excited, Donnie," he said. "Does it frighten you, boy?"

My mother put her arm across my shoulders. "Donnie, I never saw you look so strange! Perhaps we'd better go inside with Corky until we know more about this thing."

I wanted her to hold me like that forever, but I shook her arm away because I was afraid I might weaken now, at the last minute. I wanted more than anything to get into the Little Ship and go sailing across space to Carmig and the Others, but I wanted to stay with my mother and father too. I had known it wouldn't be easy to go, but I hadn't understood how hard it could be to say good-by.

"Go inside with your mother, Donnie," my father said.

**A bell tinkled inside the Little Ship then, and I knew it** was a signal that the hull had cooled enough to let me open the door. Carmig and the Others would be waiting for me to say good-by. They would know how I felt and They would be sorry for me, but They would be a little

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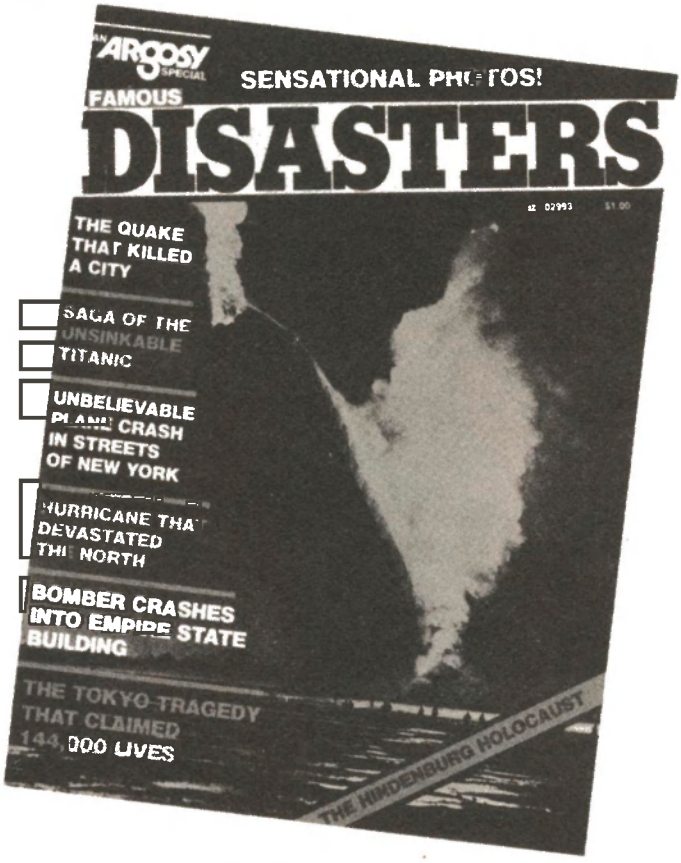


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afraid too that I might not be strong enough to give up what I had here. I used to ask Carmig why They didn't just come for me in the night when everyone was asleep and it would be easier to get away, but Carmig explained that. It would be cruel, he said, and They couldn't endure cruelty. I had to go because I was one of Them, but They couldn't steal me from my parents. It wouldn't be right. And besides that They couldn't run the risk of meeting anyone, of letting people know about Them.

"I'm all right," I said, moving away when my mother tried to catch my hand. "Don't worry about me. I'll be all right, always. But Carmig has sent the Little Ship for me, and I've got to go now."

I went down the steps, and the door of the Little Ship opened to let me in.

"Wait, Donnie," my father called. He came down the steps after me, hurrying to catch me before I could reach the Little Ship. "You've dreamed of something like this, and now you're imagining things again. Stop, Donnie!"

They couldn't believe me, of course. This was something that couldn't happen, something impossible.

"I'm sorry," I said, and put out the force-ring that Carmig had taught me to make. It stopped my father as if

he had walked into a wall of glass.

His face went pale as ice, and his eyes stared. "Donnie," he whispered. "Donnie, what have you done?"

My mother went to him, and the fence stopped her too.

It hurt terribly to push them away like that, when I wanted instead to run and hold them tight. But I was afraid to trust myself, so I backed across the lawn toward the Little Ship.

**The Others had their own world Out There, and men must never know about Them.**

"He's serious about this thing, Edna," my father said. "And God help us, I'm afraid he knows what he's doing!"

My mother began to cry. "Stop him, Howard—don't let him go!"

But they couldn't stop me.

I wanted to tell them where I was going, and why. I didn't want to go without a word and leave them there to lie awake at night wondering what had happened to me. But Carmig had warned me not to tell anyone. Carmig and the Others had their own world Out There, and men must never know about Them. Men would go on their own way, learning simple things slowly, and some day they would reach the stars themselves. But they must never know about the Others, or there would be trouble for everybody.

"I'd like to tell you everything," I said when I reached the door of the Little Ship. "But I can't. They've sent for me, and I have to go. And I can't come back, ever."

I was right when I said my father wasn't an ordinary man. A little more, I think, and he'd have been one of Them.

"You don't have to tell me everything, Donnie," he said. "I think I can guess. You're one of the new race, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm one of Them."

My mother didn't understand. "New race? But you're our son, Donnie—you're not different!"

But there was a difference, and my father had guessed what it was, adding up all the little strangeness I had shown before I got old enough to hide them. He drew my mother back from the force-ring and put his arm around her.

"Poor old Pithecanthropus died out, Edna," my father said, trying to smile. "And the Cro-Magnons killed off the Neanderthalers. We've had our day—why should we complain when it's our turn to be dispossessed?"

He didn't have it just right, but still it gave me a little glow of pride to know that he understood so much of it. It eased a little the pain of going, too, because I knew he would understand why I went.

"But you're not being dispossessed," I said. "We are the ones being driven out. We can't live among men because men can't endure Us when We grow up, and because We can't endure danger and discord. That's what Carmig says. That's why We're building a new world Out There, where men can't go."

Still my mother didn't understand. "But you're a man, Donnie! Those Others may be mutants and freaks, but you—"

"They're not freaks," I said. "Only the radiation mutants are monsters, Carmig says. We are the *right* ones, who split naturally off the planet's parent stock. Some day there's going to be more of Us, a great many more, and then there'll be no limit to what We can do."

**My father managed a smile then, but it wasn't his** old, warm one. "I can see that, Donnie . . . God bless you, boy. Don't forget us."

I wanted to go back up the steps and tell them good-by the right way, but I knew I couldn't do it. I'd lose my nerve if I gave in that much.

"I'll remember," I said. "I won't forget. Not ever."

"Forget?" my mother said. "But we'll see you again, Donnie! You'll come back to us, won't you?"

"I can't come back," I said. I couldn't tell her why. It would have hurt her, and We can't endure cruelty.

Corky nosed the screen open and came out on the porch wagging his silky tail and looking up at my father with soft, worshipping eyes.

"The dog would understand," my father said. "But it wouldn't matter to him. There's no question in Corky's mind of equality with *us*, is there? We could scold or strike him and he'd come back, cringing but still loving, still keeping his place. We're gods, to him."

He drew my mother closer, and for the first time I felt the bitterness in him. "That's why Donnie can't come back to us, darling, because there will be as great a gulf between an adult Donnie and us as there is between us and Corky."

There was pride in his bitterness, the pride of his kind that had made men strong enough to bear Us. And the pride and bitterness of men would keep them forever from meeting Us on common ground, even in the days to come when they finished their long, slow climb and spread out among the stars.

For by then We would be gone from the stars to some far universe where men could never come.

"No, it wouldn't work," I said, "because you are men and not dogs. And We are neither."

The door closed softly behind me when I stepped inside, and I could feel the Little Ship trembling eagerly as it lifted toward the stars. ●

# The Land Of Lost Content

By Chad Oliver

***Into the forgotten past they fled the holocaust of man's ultimate savagery—and none save one dying, fighting outcast knew that—the world they had chosen was a tomb!***

*That is the land of lost content,*
*I see it shining plain,*
*The happy highways where I went*
*And cannot come again.*
*—A. E. Housman.*

**The trial by Council was unreal to Brighton;** a confused fantasy of smoke, shadows, and droning voices. All of the people—tragic reminders of a dying race—were there in the old council chamber, but they filled hardly a third of the seats. Lawrence, the aged Head of Council, and his ten Council Members faced Brighton and Lynna and the people. His voice, still strong with the strength of a once-powerful man, echoed hollowly through the vault.

"You know the laws of our people?"

"Yes."

"Yet you have gone to the forbidden land?"

"Yes."

"You are aware that you may be punished by death if this Council so decrees?"

"Yes."

"Speak, then, in your own defense."

Brighton faced the Council, feet wide apart, eyes blazing. This was insane. His crime was that he was alive in a world of corpses. What could he say to these people? How do you talk to the dead, the dying, the uncaring?

He tried.

"Look around you," he commanded. "Look at the empty seats. With every meeting of the Council there are fewer of us. Soon there will be none left, and then whom will the Council have to rule?"

A rustling in the shadows.

"Lynna and I are known to you, all of you. We have all lived together in peace; we have done you no harm, we have committed no crime against you. We have tried to find life in this sick world, life for ourselves and for our people, and we have not let children's superstitions stand in our way. We have found a way to life—to the roof of the world!"

Electricity in the air.

"This is your chance, our chance. What are you afraid of? What have you to lose—you *cannot* lose anything on a journey from death to death. Are you going to allow meaningless laws to cut you off from a chance for life? If you kill us, you kill yourselves. Think—for once in your lives, *think!*"

Angry murmurs.

"He mocks the law!" cried Wentworth.

"Let him speak," Lawrence said wearily.

"Crazy, crazy," voices whispered.

Brighton said, "Listen to me!"

His mind filled with his dreams of the roof of the world, he talked—talked for hours and told his people what he knew, what he thought, what he believed. They laughed at him.

"Are you through?"

"Yes—yes, I'm through."

The Council debated out loud, in open session.

"Broke the law, that's what counts!"

"Impossible. . . ."

"Never been done before. . . ."

"Always been that way. . . ."

"Defy the gods. . . ."

"Wrong to change. . . ."

"Insult. . . ."

"Our wise ancestors. . . ."

"Crazy. . . ."

"Kill him!" yelled Wentworth. "Kill him!"

Mutterings among the people.

Lawrence raised his hand. There was silence.

"I am an old man," he said quietly. "I see death all around me. We are too few to kill each other needlessly. This man, and the woman with him, have not harmed our people. But they have broken the law."

He paused. Then: "They have broken the law," he repeated gravely. "That fact cannot be altered. No man can be permitted to break the law with impunity. Our ancestors, in their wisdom, gave us the laws by which we live. It is our duty to see that they are enforced."

He looked at Brighton and Lynna, regret in his eyes.

"It is the judgment of Council," he said, "that the prisoners shall be executed when seven sleep periods have expired. That is all. The Trial by Council is over."

Brighton took Lynna by the hand and the Council Guards led them out of the chamber. The people watched them blankly. They didn't care; it made no difference to them. They were apathetic, slow, already dead. Brighton and Lynna emerged into the cold world of rocks and caves and shadows.

"The fools," he whispered slowly. "The blind, dead, stupid fools!"

**Brighton had begun to think when he was twenty years old.** The others, almost all of them, were dying—slow and pale and weak. But Brighton still had the spark. He began

Could he bring them through, all of them? Or was he leading them only to suicide?

to ask questions.

He did not question the people, for he knew that he would find no answers among them. He turned to the world around him. He flung his questions at the clammy rock that made a vault of gloom above his head. He asked the cold water, the air, the fires in the pits. He asked the black shadows that crawled on the walls of the world.

His mind was a whirlpool of confusion, and his strange eyes made him a stranger to his people. His eyes blazed through them, beyond them, seeking, demanding. He was dissatisfied, but he did not know what was wrong, or why. He neither knew what he was looking for, nor where to seek it. But he tried. He had to try.

Was the world all there was? What would happen if you dug further into the rock—what if you dug and dug until—until what? Would you come to an end to the rock, an end to the world? How *could* it end? What could possibly lie beyond matter? Air? Nothing? If there were nothing there, what held the world together?

What about the old songs that no one understood? The legends, the superstitions, the gods who had lived on the roof of the world? Why were his people dying?

Brighton had to know. He had Lynna, and a few friends. But the others were suspicious of him. He was haunted by an age-old, timeless spectre—the ghost of loneliness that stalked through the world with him, the terrible loneliness of the man nobody understands.

He decided to go to the Old Man.

**The Old Man had had a name once, but it had been** forgotten. He was just the Old Man. His face was lined and he had a dirty white beard. He lived in an isolated niche in the wall of the world and everybody thought he was crazy.

He had used to talk a great deal in his youth, but few people had ever listened seriously to him. Minds were sluggish and the fires of life were burning low. He had gradually been driven within himself, and now he sat nodding before the fire pit, silent and alone.

The Old Man looked at Brighton and saw himself—himself as he once had been. Skin that was pale but not dead, black hair, sensitive features, restless eyes. And something else. Something forever beyond analysis that set Brighton apart.

"Sit down, lad," the Old Man said. "I have been waiting for you."

Brighton sat at his feet. He instantly recognized that he had at last found someone to talk to, and so he said nothing. He listened. The Old Man talked and spun a web of dreams in his mind.

He told the stories he had heard from his father, who had heard them from his father before him. Wonderful, incredible stories about the gods who had lived on the roof of the world, in an enchanted land of warmth and light.

There had been many gods, the Old Man said. Many more than the number of people who now lived in the world. Perhaps there had been as many as a million of them, although that was, of course, hard to believe. They had grown and prospered. They built fantastic cities and had green, succulent things to eat instead of eyeless fish and synthetics.

But even the gods had not been perfect. They had fought one another and, conceived better and better means of destroying themselves—nothing like the crude clubs and knives the world used now. They made killing their business. Being gods, they were terribly efficient—they finally set off an inferno of flames and plague germs and death. They annihilated themselves.

Almost. A few escaped, hiding in a hole in the roof of the world. But they were trapped. They were afraid to go back into the flames and the germs. Upheavals of rock had sealed them in. Their fear of the horror from which they had escaped translated itself, in time, into laws and taboos and superstitions. Generations crept by, and the gods began to die. They became stagnant and dull. They forgot that they had ever been gods. The world around them was the only world they knew and they lived in the darkness like animals.

Brighton stood up, tense, his fists clenched.

"We are the gods," he said slowly. "We are the gods!"

"We were the gods," the Old Man whispered. "Once."

He turned back to the fire pit and closed his eyes. Brighton looked at him but couldn't speak. His mind in a turmoil, he ran back through the rocks to Lynna.

**They finally set off an inferno of flames and plague germs and death. They annihilated themselves.**

**The next sleep period, in the silence and the flickering of** the smoldering fires, Brighton set out to find the roof of the world. With Lynna, he picked his way through the rock passages, their flaring torches casting grotesque shadows on the world around them.

"What will we find?" asked Lynna. Her hushed voice was hollow in the darkness.

"I don't know," Brighton said. "Nothing, probably. But we may find everything."

"Everything?"

"Everything that counts."

They were silent then. For a long time they passed through old and little-used passages, where twisted columns hung from above and pushed up from below. The cold water oozed through the wet walls.

"You're very sure, aren't you?"

"Yes."

They stopped on a high shelf. The world lay before

them, dark and still. Brighton shivered and put his free arm around Lynna. He lifted his torch high and listened to the slow drip of water somewhere in the vast sable distance.

"Look," he said softly. "Look at the rocks and the emptiness and the cold. We don't belong here. We weren't made for this. This is for the snakes and the fish, the white fish without eyes. You know what I'm trying to say—you know, don't you, Lynna?"

"I know. We have to try to find something else—have to try even if we never find it."

"Lynna, you know why."

"Yes. For us," Lynna said, and smiled at him.

Brighton nodded and held her closer. For them. For them and for others like them. In her own way, Lynna understood. He was grateful for her. If she hadn't understood, if there hadn't been someone to turn to in this bleak world—Brighton didn't like to think about it.

They went on through the empty passages, pausing occasionally to replenish their torches with chunks of the rock that burned. They were alone and tired and uncertain. But they went on. Something made them go on.

"This part of the world is forbidden," Lynna said. "What if the Council finds out?"

"They are fools."

"But they are the law."

"The law will have to be changed."

"Do you think that there really are . . . things out here? Like the stories say? What if there are?"

"I don't know."

They went on. They crawled and stumbled and climbed, until their legs turned to lead and their minds went blank with fatigue. Then they made a fire pit and slept on the damp rocks. Somewhere, water dripped coldly.

**When they awoke, they both thought they heard sliding,** reptilian sounds in the dark recesses of the world. They looked at each other, but said nothing. They swallowed some food concentrate, drank chill water from their containers, and set out again through the rocks.

They were utterly alone in the world—more isolated than ever because of the faint slithering and the lonely drip of the water in the silence. Brighton was worried. What if he were wrong? What if the world went on like this forever, all rocks and desolation and cold? What if he found a passage to the surface and it proved to be a hideous tunnel that crawled with death and disease from the roof of the world? Most legends, most superstitions, had a grain of truth in them somewhere.

"How much longer?" Lynna asked. Her voice was tired.

Brighton shook his head. "If we go back," he said, "we go back for keeps."

They went on.

"The world is getting smaller," Lynna said suddenly. "It doesn't feel as big."

She was right. They quickened their steps, pushing through the rocks with new spirit and energy. The walls of the world closed in on them almost perceptibly, until they found themselves in a narrow cave. The end of the world danced before their eyes in the flaring light of their torches—a pile of broken, jumbled rock that clogged the passage.

Brighton thrilled, his heart hammering in his throat. He scrambled forward and pulled at the rocks. They were too large to move. But they were loose. He sat down on a boulder and looked at Lynna.

"We've found it," he said quietly. "The way to the roof of the world. The way back."

"We may have found it," Lynna said. "But we can't use it. We could never get all those rocks out. They may go on for miles."

"We can't use it *now*," Brighton corrected her with new confidence. "We'll go back and get help."

"What if they won't help? What if it doesn't go anywhere? What if death still lies at the other end?"

Brighton kissed her.

"They've got to help," he whispered. "And there is death all around us where we are; the people are dying. They don't have much to lose. We've got to try."

They started back. The rocks cut at their feet and their torches threw twisted shadows on the walls of the world. When they stumbled back into the inhabited part of the labyrinth of caves, Wentworth was waiting for them with the Council Guards.

**Condemned to death, Brighton slept the sleep of** exhaustion in the prisoners' cave—a dank hole in the eternal rock, a cell within the greater rock prison that was the world. He dreamed the same dream over and over again. He was running across a flat, endless surface, gasping for breath, his feet torn and bleeding. He could see an enchanted land of warmth ahead of him—see it clearly with its brilliant greens and blues. He had to get to it, *had to!* He fought his way nearer and nearer, his heart pounding in his throat. He forced his tired body across the featureless plain. He fought for air, bit his lips until the blood came and trickled down his chin. He was closer—he could almost touch it! He reached out for it, sobbing—and watched it writhe away into a hideous horror of rocks and death and cold black water full of blind, laughing fish.

He woke up in a cold sweat. Someone was calling him.

"Brighton? Brighton, can you hear me?"

He scrambled to his feet, shuddering. He leaned against the wall of the cave and made himself relax.

"Yes," he said. "I can hear you. Who is it? What do you want?"

"It's Wilson," the muffled voice answered. "Hang on—we're going to get you out of there. You're taking us up."

Lynna pressed close to him, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

"What about the guards?" Brighton asked. "Can you

move that rock away from the entrance? Who's with you?"

"Don't worry," Wilson's voice assured him. "We'll get you out."

Brighton felt hope surge up within him again. There were others, then! The people were not all dead, not all fools. The Old Man had been at the trial, silent, thinking his own thoughts. And there must have been others—others in whom the spark of life still smoldered under the ashes of the centuries, others who still thought for themselves. They had been lost in the crowd where they had always been, not saying anything, waiting.

He heard the chink of metal and the murmurs of the men as a metal bar was rammed in behind the rock. The rock groaned and swung back. He felt lightheaded and dizzy. They were free.

He walked out with Lynna into the sleeping world, taking deep draughts of the cool air. He shook Wilson's hand wordlessly and looked around him. There were four others with Wilson—Hatcher, MacDonald, James, and Hayes. Two guards lay sprawled on the rocks with their skulls crushed.

"We had to do it," Wilson said, nodding at the dead bodies. "There was no other way."

Brighton looked a question at him.

"We believed you," Wilson said simply. "We're ready to take a chance with you, no matter what the others think."

Brighton did not waste words in thanks. "Are there any others?" he asked.

"Over at my place," Wilson replied.

"Let's go then," Brighton said. "We've only got a few hours to work in, and we've got plenty to figure out."

The seven shadowy figures moved quietly among the flickering fire pits, their shuffling feet sending hushed echoes through the darkness of the sleeping world.

**There were nineteen of them in all, besides Brighton and** Lynna—nine men, nine women, and the Old Man, who was alone. Against them stood the world with its three hundred people.

Brighton listened to them talk and forced himself to think clearly. He had to think straight now and he knew it. This was their chance. If they missed it, there would never be another. He watched the others, eyes narrowed, as they crouched around the blazing fire in an inner cavern of Wilson's home.

There was Wilson, who wanted an armed rebellion—twenty-one of the living against a world of the dead. There was Hatcher, who wanted to keep the whole affair secret and furtive. There was James, who wanted to force the Council to back them up. And there was Hayes, who was in favor of doing something in a general way, but who was too cautious ever to decide upon a single course of action.

He listened to them all, weighing and balancing carefully what each man said. He had to be right. He had to be sure. Time was running out; the world would be awake soon, and he and Lynna must not be found in Wilson's home. He turned to the Old Man, who had been sitting motionless before the fire, eyes glittering, saying nothing.

"What do you think?" he asked him. "What should we do?"

The Old Man looked up, his dirty white beard etched in the glow from the fire. His weary face was stamped with the strange contradictions of time—resignation and rebellion, bitterness and love, despair and hope.

"Brighton," he said quietly, as if the two of them were alone, "you are a leader. The others feel your strength and they trust you. The decision is yours to make. I am very old; perhaps I have lived too long already. But the others—the people here in this room, the death-touched automatons left in the world, the countless generations that may never be born—are depending on you. A burden of inconceivable significance, a destiny that no one here may possibly grasp, rests on you. It is too much to ask of any man; no man can be infallible, no man can be right every time. And yet, for reasons that you know, you must try. You must do the best you can."

Brighton looked at him, and at the others huddled around the great fire. He was staggered by the realization, full and complete, of what the Old Man had said. The dark, tangled webs of fate and the unguessed and unknowable paths of history had somehow, incomprehensibly, led to this—to this fugitive cavern, to these few souls, to him. And he was no superman, no being touched with supernatural powers. He was only a man. Was that enough?

He faced them all, with icy doubt gnawing inside him and a resolved determination in his lonely eyes—eyes that were lonely for the life he had never lived, the world he had never known.

"We must make a break, clean and simple," he told them flatly. "It is too late—it may have always been too late—for stealth and politics and halfway measures. We have got to choose one way or the other and stick to it. There will be no going back."

Silence. The fire threw great shadows on the walls.

"We must leave here—now, within the hour—and hack and tear our way through to the roof of the world—to life or to death. If there are any among you who are afraid, now is the time to get out. You will not be harmed and no one need ever know that you were with us in this room."

For a moment, nothing. Then, slowly, wordlessly, two men got to their feet—Hatcher and Lewis. Taking their women with them, they walked out of the cavern. They were ashamed and they did not look back.

"All right," Brighton said to the rest, his heart warming to them. "Thank you for your confidence. We haven't much time—get all the tools and the food and the weapons you can carry and bring them back here. We start in an hour. Be careful; don't let anyone see you. If you are seen, it is your responsibility to make sure that it is not reported to the Council before we have a chance to


*continued on page 63*

# Child Of The Green Light

By Leigh Brackett

*Between sun and space,*
*a gallant little band*
*fought to pierce the dread secret of Mercury's orbit*
*—that the human race might endure!*

**Son felt the distant, ringing shiver of the metal under** him. The whole close-packed mass of broken hulks shifted slightly with the impact, turning wheel-like around the shining Light.

Son half rose. He'd been sprawled full length on the crest of the wheel, trying to make the Veil get thin enough to see through. They had both seen that it was thinner than ever, and Aona, on the other side of it, had danced for him, a misty shifting light beyond the queer darkness.

Several times he thought he had almost seen her outlines.

He could hear her mind now, tickling his brain with impish thought-fingers.

She must have heard his own thought change, because she asked, "What is it, Son? What's happened?"

"Another ship, I think." Son rose lazily, the green Light from below rippling around him like clear water.

He looked out over his domain, feeling the savage sun-fire and the spatial cold of the shadows touch his naked body with little whips of ecstasy. His face was a boy's face, handsome and bright-eyed. His fair head burned like a torch in the blinding glare.

The sun made a blazing canopy across half the sky. The rest was open space, velvet dark and boundless, flecked with the little fires of the stars.

Between sun and space lay the wheel, built of space ships that lay side by side, over and under and sometimes through, broken and bent and dead, bound close by the power of the Light.

The Light, lying below Son's naked feet, at the very heart of the wheel, burning green through the packed hulks—the Light that was his bridge to Aona.

Son's blue eyes, unshaded, looked for the wreck. He knew it would be a wreck. Only one ship in the wheel, the one in which his memories began, was whole.

Then he stood quite still, staring, feeling every muscle tense and tighten.

He saw the ship, lying high on the outer rim of the wheel. It was not broken. Tubes burned red at the front end. There was a door opening in the side. Things began to come out of it.

Things shaped like Son, only thick and clumsy, with queer gleaming bulbs on their heads.

A strange contracting shiver ran through Son. Since sound and breath had gone, and the effigies that lay in his ship had ceased to move, nothing had stirred on the wheel but Son himself.

In the broken ships there was never anything but scraps of odd substance, scattered as though by some bursting inner force. Son and Aona had talked idly of living beings, but Son hadn't bothered his head about them much.

He was Himself. He had the sun, and space, and Aona. It was sufficient.

Aona said impatiently, "Well, Son?"

"It's a ship," he answered, with his mind. "Only it isn't wrecked, Aona, there are living things coming out of it."

He stood staring at the Veil, and the misty light beyond.

"Aona," his mind whispered. "In my head I'm cold and hot all at once. I want to go and do, but I don't know where or what. What's the matter with me, Aona?"

"It's fear," she told him softly. "I have it, too."

Son could feel it, pulsing from her mind. In all the years of life he had never felt it before. Now it had him by the throat.

Aona cried, "What if these creatures should harm you, or the Light?"

"You have said that nothing in this universe could harm me now. And—" Son shivered—"no one would do what has to be done to destroy the Light."

"But these creatures—we don't know what knowledge they may have. Son, if anything should happen . . ."

Son raised his arms to the darkness.

"I don't want you to be afraid, Aona. Tear away the Veil!"

"I can't, darling. You know neither of us can, until the Veil of itself passes behind you."

"How long, Aona?"

She laughed, with an attempt at her old sweet teasing. "How long is 'long' in your world, Son? How long have you lived? How long have we talked? No one knows. Only, the Veil grows thinner every time we meet, every time we talk like this.

"Stay by the Light, Son. Don't let anyone harm it!"

Son's blue eyes narrowed. "I love you," he said quietly. "No one shall harm the Light."

"I'll stay with you," she said. "They won't be able to see—yet."

Son turned and went, across the tumbled plain of dead ships, with Aona's misty light following beyond the blurred and pulsing dark.

**There were seven of the invaders. They stood in a close** knot beside their ship, staring at the green fire of the Light. Three of them began to dance clumsily. The others placed shapeless hands on each other's shapeless shoulders and shook and pounded.

Son's eyes were as sharp as the spearpoints of the stars. He lay behind a steering-jet housing, watching, and he saw with shock that there were faces under the glittering helmets.

Faces very like his own.

There were three round, smooth faces. They belonged to the ones who danced. There was one deeply lined face with bushy eyebrows and a framing straggle of white hair. Then there were two others, which Son

sensed to be of different races.

One was round and green and small, with shining eyes the color of space, and a mouth like a thin wound. The other differed from the first three only in subtle points of line and shape, but its face was like a mask beaten out of dark iron, with deep-set sullen eyes.

The seventh face drove all the others out of Son's mind. It was bronzed and grim and strong, with some driving inner force about it that was like the pulse Son felt beating in space, when he lay on the crest of the wheel watching the sun and the burning stars.

This last man seemed to be the leader. He turned to the others, his mouth moving. Then the mouths of the others moved also. Presently five of the invaders turned. Son thought they were going away again.

But two of them—the white-haired one and the one with the dark, vital face—started together, out across the broken plain of ships. And Son tensed where he lay.

They were heading toward the heart of the wheel, where the glow of the Light danced like the fire-veils of the sun.

Who knew what knowledge, what powers they might have? Son called to Aona, and followed, keeping out of sight, his blue eyes narrowed and hard.

They were almost over the Light when Son heard the first human thought-voice, as though the power of the Light brought it out. It was faint and indistinct. He could catch only fragments.

". . . here, inside Mercury's orbit . . . heat! . . . found it, after five years . . ."

That was the bronzed man speaking. Then—

"Yes, thank God! Now if we can . . ."

Son wished the voices were clearer. There was a terrible, disturbing urgency about them.

The invaders paused where the green light was strongest, at the heart of the wheel.

The mind of the grim, dark man said, "Down there."

He started to lower himself into a crevice between two hulls. And Son, driven by a sudden stab of anger, leaped up.

He came striding across the searing metal, naked and erect and beautiful, his fair head burning in the sunlight.

He flung up one corded arm, and his mind cried out, "No! You can't go down."

The invaders straightened, staring. The face of the bronzed, strong man went white, the lines of it blurring into slackness. The white-haired man swayed on his feet.

"The radiation's getting me, Ransome," he whispered. "I'm having hallucinations."

"No. No, I see it, too." The eyes of the bronzed man burned into Son's. "A man, naked in open space."

He stumbled forward, his gaze fixed on the powerful body outlined against the stars.

Son watched him come, conscious of a curious pulsing excitement. Anger, resentment, fear for the Light, and something else. Something like the first time he had spoken to Aona through the Veil.

The bronzed man stopped before him. His lips moved in that queer way they had. Son heard his mind speaking, faintly.

"What are you?"

"I am Son," he answered simply. "What do you want with the Light?"

Again he heard the faint mind-voice. "You can't understand me, of course. I don't know what you are, god or demon, but don't try to stop us! For God's sake, don't make it any harder!"

"But I do understand. You can't go down there."

Ransome turned. "Dick," he said, "Lord only knows what this—this creature is, or what it will do. But we've got to get down there and study this thing. If it tries to stop us, I'll kill it."

Dick nodded his white head. His face was lined and very tired. "Surely nothing will stop us now," he said. "Not now."

"I'll cover you," said Ransome. Dick slid down into the crevice. The bronzed man drew something from his belt and waited.

Son stepped forward, anger and fear cording his muscles.

The dark man said, "I don't want to kill you. I have no right to kill you, because of what you are. But that thing down there is going to be destroyed."

Son stopped, quite still. A great flaming pulse shot through him. And then he gathered himself.

The spring of his corded thighs carried him full over the crack down which the white-haired man had gone. One long arm reached down. The hand closed angrily on smooth glass.

The helmet shattered. Son had a momentary glimpse of a lined, weary face, upturned, faded eyes staring in unbelieving horror. Then the flesh of the face split into crimson ribbons, and the body under the space suit altered strangely.

**Son got up slowly, feeling strange and unsteady in his** thoughts. He hadn't wanted to destroy the man, only to make him come back.

He became aware, then, of Ransome, standing with a metal thing in his hand, staring at him with eyes like the savage, dying red stars.

"It didn't touch him," Ransome's mind was saying. "A heat ray strong enough to fuse steel, and it didn't touch him. And Dick's dead."

Ransome hurled the gun suddenly into Son's face.

"Do you know what you've done?" his mind shouted. "Dick was a physicist—about the only one with any knowledge that hasn't died of old age. He might have found the way to destroy that thing. Now, if our weapons don't work on it . . .

"The effect is accelerating. Every child born since the Cloud is horribly susceptible. There isn't any time any more for anything. There won't be anyone to follow us, because now there's no time to learn."

Ransome stepped close to Son. His head was thrown

back, his face a grim, hard mask streaked suddenly by little shining things that ran from those savage eyes.

"You don't know what that means, do you? You don't know how old Dick was, with his white hair and his wrinkles. Thirty-six! Or me. I'm nineteen—nineteen. And my life is already half gone.

"All over the Solar System it's like that, because of this hellish thing that came in the Cloud. We've hunted the System for over five years, all of us that could, for a thing that wouldn't react to any test or show on any instrument. And when we found it . . ."

He stopped, the veins knotted across his forehead, a little muscle twitching in one lean cheek.

Then, very calmly, he said, "Get him, boys."

Son jerked around, but it was too late. The five who had stayed in the ship were all around him. For a long time Son had been conscious only of these two men, and the strange confusion in his mind—a confusion made worse, somehow, by those mysterious crystal drops running from Ransome's eyes. They caught him, somewhere, deep.

Ropes of light metal fell around him. He fought like a Titan in the naked blaze of the sun. But they were experts with their ropes. They caught his wrists and ankles, dividing his power, baffling him with tenuous cords of elastic strength.

Son knew that his mass was still sufficiently in phase to be subject to such laws as gravity and tension. He fought. But presently he was spread-eagled on the burning metal, helpless.

The man with the face like beaten metal and the sullen eyes said, "We were watching from the ship. We thought we must be crazy when we saw this—man standing out here. Then we thought you might need help."

He stopped, staring at Son. "The heat ray didn't touch him."

"No," said Ransome quietly. "That's how he got Dickson."

The one with the queer green face snapped, "Dickson's dead?"

Ransome nodded. "Down in the crack there. We were trying to get down to study the light. He—it didn't want us to go."

The green-faced one said, "My God!"

"Quite. Arun, you and one of the boys guard the ship. Teck, you mount guard here with the other. Greenough, come with me."

One of the round-faced ones stepped forward. His eyes were light blue, oddly empty in spite of their brightness. He looked down at the crevice where Dickson's body was, and his mind said, "I'm afraid. I don't want to go down there. I'm afraid."

"Come on, Greenough," Ransome snapped. His lips started to move again, and stopped abruptly.

Son caught the thought, "Got to hurry. God knows what this radiation will do to us, right on top of it."

"Sir," said Greenough jerkily, "what if there are more like him down there?"

Ransome turned his grim, hard face on the boy. Son felt again that force, the strength that pulsed between the stars.

"Well," said Ransome, "what if there are?"

He turned and slid down into the crevice.

Greenough closed his pale, scared eyes, licked his lips, and followed.

**Teck, the man with the sullen eyes, laughed—a biting** mind-sound as hard as his jaw-line. "Hell of a gunnery officer."

Arun said absently. "He's only eleven." His eyes, purple-black and opaque as a dark nebula, swung jerkily from Son to the crevice where Dickson lay, and back again.

Teck was a big man, as big as Son, but Arun topped him by a foot. He was very slender, moving with a queer rubbery grace.

"What if we can't do it?" he said suddenly. "What if our weapons won't work on it any more than they did on *him?*"

"Then," answered Teck evenly, "the last generation of mankind will die of old age within fifty years." His sullen gaze roved over Son, over and over, and his mind was whispering to itself.

"Mutation," he said abruptly. "That's it. Complete change of cellular structure, metabolism, brain tissue, everything. Mutation in the living individual. I wonder how long . . ."

"Look at that green light," whispered Arun. "Remember how it filled the whole sky when we came into the Cloud? Cosmic dust, the scientist said. Temporary effect. But it stayed, when the Cloud went."

His long, thin arms came up in a blind sort of gesture. "We were millions of miles away, then. What will it do to us now?"

Teck studied his hands. "We're not aging, anyway. Concentrated effect is probably different. Feel anything?"

"Deep. Deep inside me. I—"

"Your cellular structure is different from ours, anyway."

Arun swayed slightly, watching the green light pulse up from below. Beads of sweat ran down his face.

"Yes," he whispered. "Different. You know how the Cloud affected us on Tethys. If our life-span were not almost three times as long as your—"

He bent suddenly over Son, and more of the queer shining things were trickling out of his eyes.

"For five years we've watched our people die, hunting for this thing. Dick was our only chance. And you, you damned freak—"

He lifted his long arms again, as though to cover his head. "I'll get back to the ship now," he said abruptly, and turned.

Teck hesitated for a heartbeat, scowling at Arun.

He plunged downward toward the light . . .

The door of the Little Ship opened to let me in . . .

*continued on page 54*

# Half-Past Fear

By John Jakes

*He was lost in time—a fugitive from the past, which would not have him alive—and the future, which refused to accept him dead. . . .*

**He came walking out of the city. Behind him rose the** slender graceful towers, lost against a morning sky of intense eye-hurting blue-white. The scene, with the stranger walking, had for a moment the unreal appearance of a photograph taken when the sun made bubbles of reflection in the lens.

Mrs. Childs sat on the porch, holding tightly onto the arms of the rest chair. She knew he was coming toward her house. He had seen the sign in fluorescent letters above the front porch. *Room.* He had been walking, and searching for a place to stay, and now he was coming up the front walk, and she had an empty room. She wished that she could tear down the sign, hide it, anywhere. The desire burned through her without reason, but she sat on the porch and didn't move.

He came up on the porch and set his black leather suitcase down. "Pardon me," he said, "but do you have a room available?" His tone was polite, soft, but strangely accented.

"Yes," she said after a long pause, "yes, I do." The words gave her time to look at him, to see what reason there could be for her terrible fear.

He was rather short. His body was not fat, and yet it was not trim like her husband's. His was a kind of solid fatness. He had a round face and small blue eyes and a sunburnt mustache that drooped and gave him a rather sad expression.

His clothes disturbed her. He wore a black coat with a little round velvet collar. And the sun was so hot! It was almost as if he had seized the clothing out of an ancient refuse bin when he had had no time to choose his wardrobe properly.

"My name," he said, "is Vincent Deem. I just arrived in this city. I will need a place to stay for a time."

She got up, trying to control her fear. "Well, you can come in if you want to, and I'll show you the room."

They went upstairs, to the front, and she pointed out the small video set on the dresser, plus the health ray over the bed and the blue shielded glass in the windows. "The rent is thirty solars a month," she said at last.

"I'll take it," he said, smiling pleasantly.

She didn't like the smile.

"Do you want the money now?" he asked.

"Yes, if you please. That will include meals."

He unbuttoned his black coat and dug his hand into the pocket of his trousers. Hastily, he drew it out, as if he had just remembered something.

His face got very red. "I'm . . . I'm afraid I have nothing but large bills. I'll have to have one changed later today and pay you this evening, if that'll be all right."

"Yes, that will do."

She hurried from the room and left him making small unpacking noises behind the closed door. In the kitchen, she began to prepare lunch. Her hands were shaking. She glanced at the wall chron. David and Sari would be home in half an hour.

She poured some food concentrate into a self-warming container and set it on the metal top of the stove. A little of the fragrant liquid spilled over and burned her hand.

She stared down at the pink area on her skin, fascinated. For some reason, something intangible, she had sensed, she did not want her husband David or her daughter Sari to ever set eyes on Mr. Deem.

**But they came home to lunch, laughing together, David** from the vitamin plant, Sari from school. They were much alike, with tanned faces and clear, happy smiles. Her anxiety was temporarily relieved.

David was dipping a spoon into the concentrate with obvious relish when she finally said, "We have a new boarder."

"Oh?" He popped the spoon into his mouth, smacking his lips loudly. Sari giggled.

"His name is Deem, Vincent Deem. He came this morning."

"What's his line of work?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"Is he a salesman or something? Just passing through?"

"Maybe he's an ogre." Sari laughed, eyes flashing, "Like in the story you read me last night."

Mrs. Childs clanked her spoon loudly on the table. "Sari. Don't say things like that."

David looked at her, surprised at her strident tone. "Dear, is anything the matter?"

"I don't know, David. He's very nice, but for some reason, I can't explain it, he frightens me."

"No use getting frightened over nothing." He dipped another spoonful of concentrate.

"He should be here, for lunch," she said all at once. "I didn't hear him go out."

"It's nothing to get really worried about," David reassured her.

"I know it's silly, David, and I'm sorry, but he's . . . I don't know . . . strange. His clothes, for one thing. Small differences . . . in cut . . . they're not like ours."

"He speaks English?"

"Oh, yes. Again, that's strange. His accent. . . ."

"An ogre," Sari chortled. "A big, big wicked ogre. . . ."

David glared at her. "Young lady, your mother told you not to say that."

Sari looked down at her dish and became silent.

Mrs. Childs tried to laugh. It was not a very successful laugh. It was weak and half-hearted. She shook her head vaguely and rubbed her eyes. "I guess I'm tired. I'll lie down after lunch. I'll be all right."

At one, David went back to work and Sari went back to school. Mrs. Childs tried to rest, but she couldn't. She was nervous. The sun, even through the filtered glass, was irritating to her eyes. Mr. Deem hadn't returned. Finally, she took her shopping bag and walked out of the house toward the market. She needed some things from there anyway. Perhaps she had been in the house too long.

She spent an hour in the market, an hour wandering through the aisles of chrome and color, and by the time she had picked out everything she wanted, the tenseness had gone out of her.

---

**Mrs. Childs walked home feeling little hands of coldness all over her body.**

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Julia, her favorite checking robot, greeted her cheerfully, its metallic eyes lighting up. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Childs," its metallic voice grated.

"Hello, Julia." Mrs. Childs fed the groceries into the opening provided. There was a hum of machinery, and the groceries slid out the other end, neatly boxed.

"One and two-thirds solars," Julia grated.

Mrs. Childs inserted two notes into the proper slot and the change rattled out through the return tube. As she picked up the box, Julia said, "There was a friend of yours in here about two hours ago."

She stopped. "Who?"

"Mr. Vincent Deem." Mrs. Childs could almost see the internal banks of memory files working. "He wanted to write a check and cash it, but we had no record of him in our files. He gave you as a reference. I hope that was all right with you."

"Yes, Julia, of course."

"He is very strange," the machine said. "Very strange indeed. He wished to know what year it was. I told him 2054 and he seemed happy and surprised."

Air caught and choked in her throat. She held on tightly to the box of groceries.

Julia said, "Nice to see you again, Mrs. Childs. Come in often." The electric eyes blinked and the metal voice said, "Next customer, please."

**The street was cold. The sun still shone brightly, but Mrs.** Childs walked home feeling little hands of coldness all over her body. She went reluctantly, fearfully up the walk, opened the door and closed it. She listened.

She sensed that he was in the house.

There was a creaking from the front room, as of a body being lifted from a chair. Footsteps thunked solidly on the floor. Mr. Deem appeared in the alcove, blinking his little blue eyes in the dim interior light and touching his sunburnt mustache. Mrs. Childs set down her groceries and began to take off her coat hastily, awkwardly.

"It certainly is a lovely day," Mr. Deem commented.

"Yes, very nice," Mrs. Childs replied emptily, wondering what could be wrong with the thing he had said to make her feel the way she did. And how did she feel? Standing there beside him, she groped for the word, found it in a maze of others. She didn't know if it expressed her relation to him, or his to her, or both. It was, horribly, right.

*Alien. . . .*

"I saw the park a few blocks away," Mr. Deem said, seating himself again. "All the children were out, playing and having fun. It was delightful."

She glanced nervously at the wall chron. "You must excuse me, but I have to make dinner. Sari will be home any moment now, and my husband comes at four."

"Sari?" His eyes were a bit wider, interested.

"My . . . my daughter. She goes to school."

And Mrs. Childs hurried into the kitchen and left Mr. Vincent Deem fiddling with the video set.

Preparing dinner was a terrible affair. She kept getting lost in mazes of carrot slices and potato peelings. Finally, she gave up and opened three large cartons of Complete-A-Meal. She was in no condition to do any actual cooking.

Sari banged into the house on schedule, said hello to Mr. Deem in a breezy tone, and went out to play.

David came home and kissed his wife, and then he and the new boarder sat in the front room discussing the current news. Mrs. Childs listened, trying to make noise in the kitchen as if she were busy. David seemed to do all the talking. Mr. Deem never said much besides yes and no, generally agreeing or disagreeing according to David's tone of voice.

At dinner, Mr. Deem hardly said anything. Sari chattered away about school, and the boarder made requests for the salt or the pepper or the cream. He kept watching Sari, though, and it made Mrs. Childs nervous.

After dinner Sari went upstairs to her room to study. Mr. Deem was in the front room, still pottering with the video. David was helping his wife to carry dishes out to be washed.

She put her hand on his arm. "David. I want to go talk

to him after we finish the dishes."

"All right. I was planning to anyway. I want him to feel at home."

"No, I don't mean talk like that. Find out things about him."

David frowned a bit reprovingly. "Are you still worried?"

"Yes, David, yes, I can't help it."

"Well, I'm not going to cross-examine him, but I will ask him some questions if you want me to." He laughed. "I feel like a spy. Let's get these dishes out of the way."

When they were settled nervously on the edges of their chairs, Mrs. Childs noticed with inward satisfaction that David was uneasy. He had caught it, too. The strange vocal inflections. The strange, somewhere-out-of-place clothes.

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**Her hand came up tightly against her mouth. Terrified, she stood looking at the things lying on the bottom of the black bag.**

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**Mr. Deem stared at the video screen with his small blue** eyes. A comedian was introducing a rising young starlet from the movie capital on Catalina Island.

"Tell me, uh, Deem," David said nervously, pulling a cigarette out of a tray and waiting for it to light itself, "what line of work are you in?"

"Insurance."

David nodded. "Um Here?"

"No. In another city."

"oh."

"Are you planning to be here permanently?" Mrs. Childs asked in a pointed voice.

"Yes, I believe I am," the large man replied. He paused and then said rather softly, "I had to leave that other city. I . . . I had some trouble."

*Now*, thought Mrs. Childs, *now, oh now.*

"I hope you don't mind me talking about it," Deem went on, "but a man has to talk to someone."

"Go right ahead," David said, looking significantly at his wife. She felt a bit ashamed, because she had thought that he would hide anything that was wrong in his past.

"A woman worked in my office," Deem said. "A very fine woman. I loved her very much." His voice now was warm and soothing, and not the least bit frightening. Mrs. Childs decided that he sounded . . . well . . . sincere.

"But the lady was married and had two small children. She realized she had a duty to the children, and we were trying to work something out when her husband got wind of it.

"There had been nothing between us, you understand, absolutely nothing but deep affection. He thought there was more. We had . . . words. I felt that I had better leave the city." He stared at the floor in a melancholy way. "It was very unpleasant."

David smiled warmly. "And so you came here to make a new start."

"Exactly," Vincent Deem said.

The tension was relieved. They talked for an hour or so more, about this and that. Again Mr. Deem did little more than say yes or no, as if he wasn't interested in the happenings of the world, or didn't know a thing about them, but then, Mrs. Childs thought, there were people like that. It was nothing to hold against a man.

Later that night, as she and David lay side by side in the cool darkness of their bed, she felt his hand fasten on hers.

"Mr. Deem certainly doesn't have what you might call a scarlet past," David said gently.

"No, he doesn't. I'm sorry, David. . . ."

"Don't be. It's better that we settled it."

"I worry too much, David."

"I know, I know. But he's harmless."

"Um." She nodded sleepily and touched his cheek. She loved her husband very much, and lying there in the cool dark, she was not afraid.

Next morning, she went busily about her housework, even humming a little. David and Sari were gone, and Mr. Deem had announced his intention to visit the various insurance companies and see about a position.

She knew, with an inner smile of delight, that she was saving his room until last. Carefully, she made his bed and dusted the dresser with the neat array of masculine toilet articles lined up on top of it.

Curiosity was a kind of small tickling inside of her. One by one, she opened the drawers in the dresser. Shorts, handkerchiefs, socks, white shirts. In the closet, two more suits and the black overcoat. On the floor, the suitcase.

Everything else was in order. She tapped the black suitcase with her foot. There was a dry rustling inside. She bent down and pulled the zipper back and looked into the bag.

Her hand came up tightly against her mouth. She held it there, pressing it against her teeth, hurting, looking at the things lying on the bottom of the black bag.

Three wilted red roses and a gun.

She knew what they were, from pictures. But . . . she couldn't think about it. The breath made loud windy whispers as it came out of her mouth. She ran downstairs to the bookcase and pulled out a volume of *The Historical Encyclopedia*. Several minutes later, she put it back, her hands trembling violently.

She went to the phone and called David.

It took them awhile to reach him at the vitamin plant. When he finally came, he was irritable.

"Helen, for pete's sake, I'm busy. What is it now. . . ."

"David, I looked in his suitcase!"

"Whose?"

"Mr. Deem's. He's got things in it."

"Listen, Helen. . . ." David sighed in an exasperated fashion. "What exactly are you talking about?"

"The things in his bag. I've seen pictures of them. A gun."

"What?"

"Yes, that's what I said, a gun. And three flowers. Wilted. Three red roses."

There was silence from the other end of the connection, then a noise of swallowing.

"Helen. . . ."

"I looked it up in the encyclopedia, David," she breathed. "I looked up the list of all the things that were destroyed in the world during the Great War. I thought I remembered, but I wanted to be sure."

"It's right, Helen."

"I know, David—oh, I know." She was almost sobbing. She tried to get control of herself, and when she spoke, it was in a dry croaking whisper. "David, there haven't been any guns or flowers on the face of the Earth since 1993!"

**Again there was silence. And then came David's voice,** harsh and strained. "I don't understand it. But I'll come home. Right away." The phone clicked down and she was alone in the house.

The front door closed.

Mr. Deem walked in, smiling.

*Stop it,* her brain screamed. *Get that look off your face. Don't let him know. Don't let him see that you know. Don't. . . .*

Mr. Deem stopped smiling.

"What is the trouble, Mrs. Childs?"

She tried to speak calmly. She tried to think of calm, ordinary words to say, but she cried out instead, "Where did you get those things in your suitcase? Where did you get them?"

He shook his round head and his sunburnt mustache seemed to droop even more. "I was afraid you might find them," he said sadly. "But I didn't know where else to put them. You would have found them any place."

"They don't have things like that on Earth any more," she whispered. "There haven't been things like that for sixty years."

"I know," he said. "I come from that time."

"You. . . ." Her hand caught at her throat.

"Yes, Mrs. Childs. Please come upstairs with me while I get the gun."

Dumbly she went ahead of him, too sick and frightened to even think about protesting. He went to the closet and got out the gun and the three dead roses. He pointed the gun at her. She noticed his eyes, intense now, the peaceful quality gone. She wanted to scream.

"Let's go downstairs," he said, pointing the gun at her stomach.

They sat in silence in the living room, Mr. Deem holding the gun on her with the roses cradled in his lap. Outside, the sun was warm, and the buildings of the city looked clean and tall and strong. The dim living room was suddenly very far away from the world outside.

"You were by the phone when I came in," Deem said at last. "I suppose you called your husband."

She nodded weakly, too sick to cry.

After a while Sari came home. She laughed first, and then she grew frightened, and ran to her mother, and Mr. Vincent Deem pointed the gun at both of them. It was the same when David came home. Mrs. Childs knew it would be. They were not people accustomed to violence. It was a strange and entirely unreal thing to them.

But Mr. Deem was real, and he had the gun pointed at all three of them now.

It was well past noon before he spoke again. Sari had her head cradled in her mother's lap and David sat on the couch.

"I must kill you," Mr. Deem said, as if he were announcing his intention to go to the movies. "You know about me. I've got to move on. They'll have a man after me."

"Where do you come from?" David said fiercely.

"From the year 1991."

"That's impossible. . . ."

"No. Check the list in the encyclopedia. On that list is a machine for time travel, at the Time Travel Institute. I worked there. The machine was destroyed in the war."

"Why did you come here?"

"To this house? Chance. . . ."

"I mean now, to this year?"

"There was a woman. Only I did not work in insurance. All of us worked at the Institute. She was a lovely woman, the only one who has ever loved me.

"We would take long walks, on Saturday, with her children. They all loved red roses. But I hated her husband! I wanted to marry her, but she said she didn't love me that much and that she was going to stay with him. He was a horrible man, a walking table of statistics. I hated her, then, too, and her children. One night when her husband was working late, she and the children came by to pick him up. I took this gun and killed them."

He shook his head like a drunken man, remembering. "That is very long ago, although it is only a few days, back there. She loved roses. I went out and bought six dozen roses and put them all around the bodies. The blood and the roses. . . .

"And then I took the time machine. Trips had been made before, an hour, two, into the past. I set the mechanism for the future. I packed my clothes and the gun and the roses and went into the machine, and came into the city looking for a room, the very same city, sixty years later."

Deem rose quickly. A young man was coming up the front walk. He rang the door bell.

"Answer it," Deem whispered. "Say nothing. Send him away."

*continued on page 62*

# Star Tamer

By Alfred Coppel

*Not for Cannon were the ship-worn paths of space—the easy, well-charted highroads from moon to planet and back—but the inward passage through the sun's embrace —where a ship flashes into flaming gas— and a man into a spaceman's myth!*

**There are still plenty of old-timers around the** Transmercurian yards who remember Joe Cannon personally. In fact with their lies and exaggerations, they are fast turning Joe into a latter day legend—a cross between Paul Bunyan and Mortimer Snerd. One old gaffer swears Joe landed a Hawk Class ship in the middle of Union Square because he was late for a date at the Plaza, and another claims Cannon was the only moon-pilot ever to lose a rocket on a coral reef. That, if memory serves, would be the old RS *Moonsprite*, and there is a grain of fact in the story. The *Moonsprite's* tubes fizzled five hundred kilometers out and he dumped her into the Pacific. The coral reef was an anticlimax. Water landings were, after all, SOP in emergencies before the Nullgrav made space-piloting such a lead-pipe cinch for the yokelry.

So like all legends, the ones about Joe Cannon have a little truth in them. A smidgin or so. And for better or worse Joe was famous. He was a pioneer, though he would hesitate to say so himself. Hesitate, mind you, not refuse. A veteran, no less. A veteran of every sort of misfortune and freak accident that could befall a rocketman. Burned tubes, gimpy gyros, runaway piles, the works. He seemed to attract trouble like honey attracts bees. And as if that weren't enough, Joe had ideas. All kinds. About deep-space navigation and everything concerned with it. Ideas such as only a pilot on the Earth-Moon run could have about Outside.

Joe plotted orbits. Impossible orbits. He had reams of charts, shelves of them. And he worked on them every minute that he wasn't jetting—or in the hospital recuperating from the latest backhand of Dame Fortune.

Just plain Keplerian ellipses weren't good enough for Joe Cannon. He tried hyperbolas, parabolas, multidimensional spirals. And trouble rode his shoulders like a pet monkey. Finally it happened. His company, Lunar Lines, Incorporated, got fed up. The medics ran him through the psych mill, classified him "accident prone" and clipped his wings close to the hide. Lunar Lines took him off the regular run in March of '13, gave him a pat on the back, a lapel button, and a small pension. At twenty nine, he was a washed-up has-been, through with moon-piloting. This was in March.

In May the payment of the pension was indignantly stopped. Joe was gainfully employed. In fact, he was biting the hand that fed him. Boosting was always one of Lunar Lines most lucrative sidelines. Ships were leaving Luna for the Deep Space Colonies by the dozen, and

Lunar supplied all the takeoff assists. They did, that is, until Step Takeoffs, Ltd. set up a quonset on the Tycho ramp. Joe Cannon was in business for himself.

Step Takeoffs, Ltd. consisted of one quonset, thirty square meters of floor-space in the Luna Community Maintenance Depot, a blondine secretary, a rusty bazooka registered as the RS *Gay Lady*, and *Captain* Joe Cannon.

The quonset, floorspace, and secretary need no further description or mention. Suffice it to say that all were put to their best use. The *Gay Lady* was something else again. She was fat—almost as fat as she was long—and girded around with eighty tubes of a thousand kilos thrust each. Her nose was deeply concave to accommodate the girlish sterns of the sleek deep-spacers, and four magnaclaws, gymbal mounted, hung limply at the end of four articulated cranes. Looking at her as she squatted on her broad fins, one had the impression of a four-legged crab standing on its head.

And if these qualities were not enough to make her unique on the Moon—or elsewhere—there was the fact that Joe had contrived to give her three times the boost of any bazooka Lunar Lines had in Tycho.

You have probably forgotten by now the clumsy way in which the first deep-space flights were launched, so it might be worthwhile to mention it.

The Colonies, on Mars and Europa, were far away and for at least eighteen months out of twenty inaccessible.

Planets are like that. They refuse to stay neatly in line. So ships that left the Earth-Moon System for Outside had to carry fuel and plenty of it. Free-fall was all right for explorers, but, as the Colonies grew, things got commercial and spacers had to travel at least a third of the way under drives.

Unfortunately, takeoffs, even from the Moon, used fuel like mad; so the booster set-up was established at the Tycho space-port. It worked like this:

The bazooka was set up on the ramp with the spacer on top of it, grappled and secure. It would carry the full load of the takeoff and reach the best velocity commensurate with its limitations of range and the spacer would take it from there. It was, of course, important that the bazooka should not become carried away with enthusiasm before cutting the spacer free. This happened sometimes, and the bazooka was left without enough fuel for braking and the return to Luna. A powerful telescope set up in the right places can still pick out the frozen hulks that are the remains of too-lusty boosts. They circle the sun in long ellipses, like dark comets. . . .

Generally, however, the system worked—in spite of aborts, fadeouts and navigational goof-offs. The bazookas established the orbits of the spacers and waved them off with a high velocity and light purse and everyone was satisfied. At least the skippers who rode off with Joe Cannon seldom complained. He delivered in kilometers per second and strictly conventional trajectories, keeping his dreamy ideas to himself. "He gave us a clean orbit," was the highest praise for a boost-pilot, and Joe came in for his share of the kudos. Why, a few of his satisfied customers even came forward to speak for him at the meeting of the Board of Inquiry after the *Gay Lady* vanished with the *Martian Queen* clutched firmly in her magnaclaws. . . .

Say what you like—Joe had friends. The skippers who happened to be in Tycho that night drank toasts to him and there were even a few beery eulogies. Then they went their separate ways, each probably wondering what would happen to "those poor devils" out on the Europa Colony now that Joe Cannon had goofed off and bollixed their one feeble chance for survival.

**The truth of the matter is that Joe Cannon would never** have gotten the *Martian Queen* boost job except for the extra dig the *Gay Lady* boasted.

He was in Luna Control swapping lies with Wilkinson, the tower operator, when the first feeble cry came in from Europa.

It was nearing the end of the long Lunar day and dark shadows from the crater rim were beginning to stretch out over the spaceport. Lights were on in all the quonsets, filling the black shadows with yellow gaps. A crescent Earth hung low on the eastern horizon against the light of space and the stars.

Both Mars and Jupiter were heading into conjunction with the sun, and no ships were scheduled to leave Tycho for deep-space for six months or more. It was what old Moon hands called "the quiet time."

Cannon and Wilkinson were well into the third round of wild tales when the lights on the deep-space transceiver began to flash.

It was a message from Europa Colony, relayed in by the transsender in Syrtis Major. Reception was poor, almost unreadable. Solar interference filled the speaker with hissing confusion. But Wilkinson was good at his job, and when the speaker was still at last, he had the important part of the message.

A mutated form of virus pneumonia was sweeping the Europa Colony and medical supplies were exhausted. Aid was needed, and badly—and quickly.

Only Jupiter and its moons were sliding around behind the sun where they would remain for three months at least. A round-about trip on the fastest spacer available—the RS *Martian Queen*—would take nine weeks. And in nine weeks there wouldn't *be* any Europa Colony.

Cannon got the boost job. Not because of the crazy idea he started peddling about a perihelion orbit—perihelion orbits were impossible to spacecraft of the time—but because the *Gay Lady* had more power and quick speed to offer than any of Lunar Lines' bazookas.

"But *why* is a perihelion orbit impossible?" Joe demanded of the Senior Dispatcher at the briefing. "I've

explained how it can be done. I'm willing to bet my neck on it!"

"You would," the Dispatcher said drily. He was a Lunar Lines man, himself. "But only you."

If Joe expected any moral support from the *Martian Queen's* captain, he was doomed to disappointment. The grizzled oldster—he was almost forty—shook his head slowly.

"Captain," Cannon protested hotly, "If you crawl out to Europa on a peripheral orbit you'll be just in time to bury those poor devils. You know that."

"No," Captain Bullis said bluntly. "I can't risk my ship."

"Lunar Lines wouldn't permit it," the Dispatcher said, and that clinched it. Lunar owned the *Martian Queen*.

"You," said Joe Cannon angrily, "Are a pair of slobs. Lily-livered slobs." And with that he turned on his heel and left, making his way toward the *Gay Lady's* ramp with blood in his eye.

At H-hour minus ten, Joe Cannon was settled back into his shock harness. There are ways, he told himself, lots of ways. His face was pale and grim and he was thinking of the medical supplies the *Queen* carried and what they might mean to Europa Colony if they could get there on time.

He felt a pang as he looked around the *Gay Lady's* control. This would be his last trip in her. Captain or no Captain, Lunar Lines or no Lunar Lines, that stuff in the *Queen* was going to get where it was needed—and damn fast. But it was going to cost plenty. It was going to cost him, Joe Cannon, plenty.

The shots of graviniliphine he'd absorbed were slowing down his body processes and depressing him terribly. No matter how often he dosed himself with the G-resistant drug, it was always the same. As it took effect under the Moon's one-sixth gravity, Joe felt as though the universe were slipping down the drain—head first.

Slowly, the familiar tears formed in his eyes and streaked his cheeks. No one, he thought bleakly, cared what happened to those poor Europans. People were a cruel, hard lot. The station medics had even refused the loan of an extra case of graviniliphine ampules. Of course, they hadn't any idea that he was planning to pile on enough Gs to kill a man protected by only a normal dosage—but it still showed man's inhumanity to man, the way they refused to let him have the stuff! He patted the bulging case of stolen ampules resting beside him sorrowfully. It seemed that every man just had to look out for himself. No one cared at all. Not for the Europans, or Joe, or the poor, doomed *Gay Lady*. . . .

Bullis' voice came into his headset as the technicians joined the spacer to the bazooka with an umbilical cord of wrist-thick cables.

"Ready when you are, Captain Cannon. I want as near seven thousand meters per second as you can give me—on chart orbit 3225. Any questions?" His tone indicated that there should be none.

"Just one, Captain," Cannon replied. "Are you sure you won't reconsider my offer?"

"It's out of the question. The *Queen* hasn't enough speed for a perihelion run. The ship that has hasn't been built yet."

"The *ship*, no. The *ships* . . ."

Bullis cut him off. "Out of the question, I say. Anything else?"

Cannon shrugged. Well, no one could say he hadn't tried. His eyes strayed to the chart pinned to his panel-board. It was not orbit 3225. It wasn't anything vaguely resembling it. And it called for a terminal velocity of thirty thousand meters per second—a good twelve thousands better than the Queen's flat-out best. *I'd better be right*, Cannon told himself, *I'd better be one hundred percent right. Or else.*

He spoke into the chest mike with deceptive docility. "Just as you say, Captain Bullis. Stand by for tube check."

One by one, the eighty tubes that ringed the *Gay Lady's* ample waist flickered into brief life. The bluish fire lit the dark spaceport and quickly faded.

"Control from *Gay Lady*. Tubes four and twenty six show carbon yellow. Send scrapers on the double." Joe wasn't ordinarily that particular, but this time everything had to be perfect. The *Lady's* last boost had to be better than perfect.

A crew of radiation-suited workmen appeared and crawled into the superheated tube openings. Within two minutes, they were through and clear and Joe had tested the tubes again. They were right. The tower reported H minus three. Cannon swallowed hard. For what seemed an eternity, doubts assailed him. He could be wrong as well as the next guy. Better even, if the records counted for anything. And if he was wrong this time—the *Lady* and the *Queen* would join the Europan colonists in whatever place the good Lord kept for idiots who thought men belonged among the stars. . . .

"H minus One," Wilkinson's voice sounded in metallic in Cannon's helmetphones.

"*Queen* ready," reported Bullis from above. "All secure for takeoff."

Joe activated the pressure pumps of his acceleration harness and checked the *Lady's* oxygen flow. Warning lights flashed on the panel. "*Lady* ready," he said hollowly.

"Tower watch on chart orbit 3225," Wilkinson reported. "Radar net on. Stand by to launch ships."

In his telescreen, Cannon could see the chrome red warning light flashing atop the tower. The ramps were clear, blast shields in place. Beyond the tower and the clustered quonsets, Joe could see the rising crescent of Earth, blue-green against the stars.

"H minus thirty seconds," Wilkinson said, "Twenty-five, twenty, fifteen, ten, nine, eight, seven—"

Joe almost changed his mind then. His gauntleted hand

reached out for the timers to set up the conventional orbit. He had no right, he told himself, to risk the *Queen* and the lives of her crew on his hairbrained idea. And he had no right to throw away the *Gay Lady* and lay himself open to a charge of piracy or worse—if he lived.

But the count was in his ears, and habit was too strong. As Wilkinson's voice reached "five" his hand came to rest on the firing studs instead of the orbital timers. At "three" his fingers tightened on the cold metal.

"—Two—*one!*"

Joe rammed the stud home and thunder shook the Gay Lady . . .

**Roiling flames splashed the concrete apron of the** ramp. Wilkinson leaned forward, watching through the tinted steelglass of the tower. No matter how often seen, the rising of a spacecraft is a stirring sight. The fire boils out of the nozzles, splashing and dancing in the blackness of the Lunar shadows, brightening and banishing them. The ships sway slightly as their gyros bite in, and the lift begins. Very slowly at first, and then with shocking swiftness, they move away from the emprisoning soil. A column of fire is their pedestal, and it grows long and angry.

Then the column of fire parts company with the soil as though glad to be free and it follows the vanishing ships up, up into the night, a streak of man-made lightning among the vastnesses of eternal night. . . .

Underway, Joe felt better. The pulsing beat of the Lady's tubes was like a tonic to him. Under the steadily increasing G, the effects of the graviniliphine vanished, leaving him almost comfortable.

There were problems now, but purely technical ones. He checked again to make sure that his projected orbit cleared Roche's Limit. It did. Barely. But by enough to guarantee that the *Martian Queen* wouldn't end up a cloud of rivets and scrap circling Sol.

He let himself hope that the *Queen's* refrigeration system was working properly, because in about a week it was going to start getting awfully hot. A frown creased his face. Perhaps he wouldn't need to worry about that. Bullis might not take him aboard when he found out what was happening. Bullis looked like the kind of man who wouldn't appreciate the kind of fast and loose game Joe had worked on him. And the acceleration sickness he must be suffering now, thought Joe with a sudden grin, wouldn't make him more tractable either. The *Lady* was really pouring it on, and Bullis, not expecting so much quick push, hadn't let himself be drugged with graviniliphine.

The indicator showed a velocity of seven thousand meters per second. That was good, even for the *Lady*. But it wasn't good enough. Not by about five thousand per second. Joe swallowed hard. He'd let himself hope that he might be able to save enough to pull the *Lady* out. The dials showed him he had been kidding himself. Almost half the fuel was gone already. He'd be lucky to get the required speed to get the *Queen* past Roche's Limit. A cold feeling moved into the pit of his stomach. Could he have been wrong, after all? Had he blasted himself and two ships into eternity on a half-cocked, unworkable orbit?

Joe wasn't a religious man, but he began praying then. Praying hard.

**Captain Bullis of the *Martian Queen* was a sharp man** with a calculator and slide-rule. He'd had to be to get command of the one ship Lunar Lines had equipped for the long hauls of Outside.

The painful effects of too many G's, too long, began to wear off slightly after nine hours under way, and though still a trifle unsteady, he began to check his boost-pilot's work.

Five minutes later the cables, connecting the *Martian Queen* to the *Gay Lady*, were sizzling.

"Cannon! *Cannon, I say!*" Bullis roared, "*Answer me!*"

Joe pondered the advisability of pretending intership communications were dead. Bullis sounded mad. Maybe even a little worse than mad. Hysterical, perhaps.

Regretfully, Joe Cannon acknowledged Bullis' call.

"You idiot! You bungling, stupid, thick-skull! What in the name of all the seven hells do you think you're doing?"

"I've established an orbit, Captain," Joe said softly.

There was a sound like bacon frying on the other end of the intercom. "Orbit! Orbit! I've just checked your blasted orbit! We're just sixty-one degrees off my charted arc! You've pitched us all into the Sun, you . . . you!" Bullis seemed to be having trouble finding words.

"I'll have you grounded for this! I'll have you hung for piracy! Cannon! Are you listening to me?"

It was a strange thing, Joe thought as he snapped off the intercom, how little threats meant in the face of real danger. He was risking everything on one throw of the dice. Step Takeoffs would be made if the orbit he'd charted paid off. The Europa Colony would back him with their last cent of savings and the loss of the *Lady* would be nothing more than a sentimental misfortune. Sad, but necessary. On the other hand, he reflected with a qualm, if he were wrong—Bullis' threats would mean nothing at all. For a few moments, he pondered the moral question posed by his usurpation of the authority that normally belonged to the *Queen's* Captain. It really wasn't right for him to risk the *Queen* and the lives of the men aboard her on an untried scheme. Still, one had to weigh their lives against the lives of all the doomed men, women and children in the Europa Colony. Everything, thought Cannon, was relative. All for one and one for all—and the devil take the hindmost.

He drove the *Gay Lady* harder. Her fuel was vanishing fast and her velocity wasn't enough yet. Eight five hundred meters per second. *Thirty five more,* Lady, he pleaded mentally, *only thirty five more.*

The point of no return came and passed almost unnoticed. There was no returning for Joe Cannon. He


*contined on page 59*

# Doom Ship

By Henry Guth

**Lefty waved frantic arms, but the little boat came on, tubes flaring daintily . . .**

**Lefty cringed. He kept staring out the viewport, trying** to dispel what he hated to believe he had seen. He peered intently at utter blackness.

"Come away from there," Wang urged. "You've been watching for hours. There's nothing there but space."

Lefty squirmed loose from the knotty hand that gripped his wide shoulder. "I saw it," he insisted. "Huge red ship. Long and sleek and red."

Lefty remembered. It had loomed up first when they crossed the asteroid belt, then later near Jupiter's orbit. He'd seen it clearly, through the viewport in his cabin.

But no one did anything. The *Tripoli* drove steadily on toward its doom.

"Come along," said Wang, tugging gently at his arm. "You can't stay here and look forever. We'll have a bottle of vodde with the captain."

"Vodde?" said Lefty, vaguely. He glanced guiltily at Wang. Could Wang know?

He glued his face to the lens. "I saw it," he said stubbornly, blinking red-rimmed eyes. "A huge ship out there, ports lighted up. . . . Sponsons in rows along the hull. Following us—all the way from the asteroid belt. Like a ghost, out there."

"Sure," Wang said. "But your eyes are swelled up. You have to rest now, Lefty." He peered out, shook his gray head and pulled Lefty away from the viewport. He gave him a gentle push down the passageway. "They'll be needing you for the third watch in the engine room."

Lefty shuffled reluctantly down the passageway, lead-soled boots thudding the deck plates.

They pushed into the officers' mess, on the after top deck, snugged in over number three jet. The *Tripoli's* captain, a pinch-nosed Martian, looked up from his bottle. Three men in gray officers' uniforms, nodded briefly.

"Lieutenant Wang, sir," said Want, saluting snappily. "And Ensign Lefty Shark. We've come for refreshments."

"Relax," said the captain sourly. He cracked a Martian bevel nut with blunt teeth. "You Neptunian dogs have ritual in your bones, I believe. Now Lefty here," he smiled slantwise, "hasn't saluted in a decade. That's the kind of man I like under me—independent thinker. Resourceful."

"Yes, sir," Wang said, unoffended.

Lefty perched on a too-soft foam chair, and peered past the flat table top, out the *Tripoli's* observation port, into the blackness of space.

He shoved aside the bottle that Wang offered him. There was too much drinking aboard this ship. And too much laxity.

"Is he still at it?" young Commander Pladgett sneered. Gold navigator's stripes glittered on his cuffs as he tilted himself a glass of vodde. "It's about time the Earth Terminal grounded him. He's been charting things in space that aren't there, ever since I came aboard."

"Yeah," said Torso, opening the stiff neck of his chief pilot's tunic. "Hypersensory eyes he has, which a smart young navigator like you could use. But you wouldn't be knowing about that. That happened three years ago." He grinned tolerantly. "We were all radiation sick from the blast. But he was down the engine room when the pile blew. Aye, Lefty took the full force of it, he did."

Lefty thought he saw a shark-like snout floating in space outside the ship. But when he blinked, it wasn't there.

No, they didn't know. He wouldn't be alive if they did. He'd be a frozen hulk in space—in place of the Venusian engineer they'd shoved out the airlock for fouling the atom pile on that disastrous run. But it was Lefty's drunkenness that had fouled that pile; his brain-sodden negligence that had killed two engineers and nearly destroyed the *Tripoli*—when he had stupidly replaced a contaminated damper plate with another dangerously active one that should have been jettisoned. The knowledge was a festering wound in his mind. He lived with it, day and night.

"I don't know who they are," Lefty muttered ominously. "But we won't reach Neptune. We'll die in space. Captain—"

The captain scowled. "Here, here, lad. We're not arming the *Tripoli* to ward off a hallucination." His white, domed forehead creased deeply. "We've got a zonium cargo and a thousand passengers to cart to the Neptune in the quickest possible time. The *Tripoli* has a fleet record to maintain. You tend to your engine room, lad, and that's enough."

Pladgett grinned. "The captain will attend to all hallucinations personally."

The captain flushed and scowled.

"I think Lefty's a hazard," Pladgett went on,

unabashed. "To the ship and to the passengers and to us. He should be dumped in the nearest psycho colony."

Lefty frowned uneasily and angrily. Damn Pladgett! Always riding him. Always chasing down to the engine room to mock him and upset the routine. You would think the only fellow Earthman aboard would listen.

Could Pladgett possibly guess?

He saw a red blur of light out the viewport, slipping past the ship.

"There it is!" he shouted, jumping up. A bottle of vodde fell to the deck and shattered. "Look, look!" he cried, pointing with a rigid arm. He stared furiously around at the blank faces. "Didn't you see it? *Didn't you?*" he screamed.

Wang's chair scraped, and Lefty felt himself being pushed firmly into a sitting position. "Sure," said Wang. "A huge red ship, sponsons bulging along the hull." He pressed Lefty's shoulder and glanced around. "We saw it, Lefty," he said.

"Maybe invaders from another star," scoffed Pladgett, over the top of his bottle. "Invisible heathens from Arcturus, hellbent on tracking this ship and raying it to atoms. Or maybe a ghost cruiser, haunting us, trying to drive us crazy."

"I don't know," Lefty mumbled hollowly. "But there's death waitin, this trip."

Wang mused. "There *are* some unexplained piracies, Commander. You've heard newscasts reporting scattered incidents the past six months. Why is General Box aboard with a crew to guard the zonium?"

Pladgett waved a smooth hand. "Search me, Hawkshaw."

The captain's face twitched. He pointed a knob-knuckled finger at Wang. "Forget all that sludge, Mister. There's probably nothing mysterious about the piracies. Pirates are clever skunks, but not invisible."

"Of course, sir," Wang said. "I was only—"

A musical bell chimed softly.

"Third watch," snapped the captain, lurching to his feet. "That'll be all, gentlemen." He stared doubtfully at Lefty. "You're in charge of the engine room. That's a responsibility. Don't let anything interfere with it."

Lefty's skin jumped and he glanced away from the captain. "Yes, sir," he said fiercely.

**He wound carefully into the bowels of the ship,** avoiding viewports and trying to concentrate on the watch ahead.

Ensign Ack frowned as he entered the cavernous engine room. Pointing to the bulkhead chronometer, he said, "You're—what's the matter?"

"Nothing!" Lefty growled. He squeezed the catwalk handrail and glared down into the pit at the roaring tubes. "You're relieved. Sorry I'm late."

Ensign Ack grimaced puzzledly, shrugged, and stalked from the engine room.

Lefty's heart skipped. He climbed slowly down the ladder, and stood on the solid plates of the pit deck spotting his crew of three busily working engineers. He scuffed from one to the other.

"Oxygen?"

"At sixty in the pipe, sir."

"Readings normal? Jet flow constant?"

"Everything normal, sir."

Lefty checked personally, making double sure, but treated his men with anxious respect—they would not die through his negligence.

"Smooth work," he said. "But don't relax."

He swung to the catwalk, and clattered across the yawning pit, to the whirring dynamo and the ranks of reserve batteries, some now being recharged. He gravely studied dials until they showed full charges. He began disconnecting them, snapping off thick couplings with habit-skilled hands that were more sensitive to this job than any other. Around machinery, Lefty worked without thinking. Metal was alive and responsive to him.

Then he remembered the red ship, and his hands slipped with sweat. They brushed a naked cable, burned bitingly and rapidly grew swollen blisters. He gaped at skin that rose in bubbles and burst with popping sounds. The hands throbbed.

With lead gloves he sheathed the cable and reconnected it.

Sharp voices rose from below.

"Damn your insolence!"

"But, sir, you—"

Lefty craned to look into the pit. He glimpsed gold-striped cuffs and slack white overalls at the tube heads jutting from the after bulkhead.

Scrambling hastily down the cleated ladder, he approached the glaring couple. His mouth, tightened when he identified the Tripoli's young navigator, Pladgett.

"What's the trouble here?" he asked, as calmly as possible.

"I'm sorry, sir," the engineer said. "But he was—"

"Insubordination," snapped Pladgett. He stood stiffly, glaring.

Lightnings of anger flickered through Lefty. "Your authority is out of bounds here," he said. "Keep a civil tongue in your head."

Lefty demanded of his engineer, "Now, what was it?"

The engineer braced himself. "He was tampering with the jet equipment, sir. These tube heads—"

"Space rot! Merely looked at the blamed things!"

Cold blasts of fury washed over Lefty. His trembling finger indicated the engine-room exit. "Please confine your curiosity to the top deck, commander," he said. "There's sensitive machinery here."

Pladgett's face purpled. "I've a perfect right to any part of this tub below top deck. Don't strain your luck, Lefty."

Lefty controlled himself with an effort. "Very well. But keep your hands in your pockets." He strode off, pounding his heels on the deck.

Recharging absorbed him again. Flurries of movement from below pricked his ears, but he paid no attention.

"Still charting pirate invaders?" Pladgett's voice mocked suddenly over his shoulder.

Lefty made no sign that he had heard. But he remembered the red ship, and a weight settled in his stomach. He felt the closeness of death.

"Think they might board us?"

Lefty worked silently, wondering.

"Do you see anything besides—"

Footfalls rattled across the catwalk. The engineer's voice said, "There's something funny, sir. Jet pressure is down. We can't build it up."

Lefty squinted up at the engineer's white face. He turned abruptly, spurted along the catwalk and plunged down the ladder.

Lefty waved frantic arms, but the little boat came on, tubes flaxing daintily . . .

The compressor, zonium-ribbed and blocky, squatted solidly against the tube heads. He poked around it, muscled fingers probing. No part that he touched seemed out of place or broken.

Rapidly, with tools, he unsealed the housing. The globular, lead-lined pressure chamber within throbbed to his anxious touch.

He straightened up, fingers prickling, and said levelly to the engineer, "Report this topside immediately, and include Commander Pladgett's tampering in your report."

"See here! I—"

"The commander was across the pit, sir," said the engineer. "He couldn't have done this."

Lefty said, "You didn't watch him every second. Make the report."

Pladgett's face whitened, and his mouth froze to a tight inverted crescent. "You damned, drunken—"

Lefty hit him with a Stillson wrench, furiously.

Pladgett went down. His head clanged on the deck.

Fingers loosening, Lefty dropped the wrench. A thick fog uncoiled from him, and left him gasping. He stared helplessly at the slumped uniform on the pit floor.

Brushing his eyes, he paced to the ship's telescreen, countersunk in the forward bulkhead, and pressed the control-room stud. Glancing briefly at the screen, he switched to captain's quarters. He was about to try the chart room, when the captain's voice bellowed from above the pit.

"What's happened down here? Why have you stopped the jets?"

He crabbed, stiff-legged, down the ladder.

**Lefty fiddled nervously with the compressor. It was** irrational, but even now he thought of the red ship.

"What is it, what is it?" the captain said, testily. He chewed a bevel nut with clicks of his teeth.

"He was—tampering," said Lefty, shakily, probing in the compressor. Instruments lay strewn around him on the deck. "The trouble's inside. We'll dismantle."

The captain glared. "You belong in irons, Lefty, for striking a superior officer. What's got into you? Get us underway immediately. Later—"

The telescreen shrilled a piercing whistle, but Lefty ignored it. So did the captain.

"Pladgett's a fool," the captain grumbled. "Had no business down here." He munched impatiently. "Can't you speed things up?"

The captain strode over and punched a stud. "What is it!" he shouted.

Chief Pilot Torso's image flickered and glowed on the screen. "What in the name of space is happening in the engine room?" he demanded. "I can't pilot a ship if—oh, it's you captain."

"Stop playing with that telescreen!" the captain said. "We're busy!" He added ruefully, "Temporarily broke down, Torso. Relax."

"Yeah," Torso said. "Relax it is. It won't be long. I'm hoping."

The captain darkened the screen. He scowled briefly at Lefty, then stiffly mounted the ladder.

Lefty flung away his tool, skittering it across the deck.

"Needs a major overhaul," he said bitterly. "We'll have to jettison torch." He climbed to his feet and frowned bafflement at the compressor, cursing Pladgett in his mind, feeling surrounded by malicious forces. He wavered unsteadily.

"You sick, sir?" the engineer said, grasping his arm. "You'd better relax."

Lefty jerked free. "Don't start that!" he cried.

He pulled himself feverishly up the ladder and lurched out into the passageway. He aimed himself toward the powertool storage hold.

A round, thick-lensed viewport appeared and Lefty automatically went to it. He felt the strange lack of vibration in the ship as he pressed his face against the lens. Muscles around his eyes strained, and he stared intently at the darkness of space.

His breath hissed explosively.

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**The ship clung tenaciously alongside the Tripoli, a great shark-like bulk, looming in the void.**

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**There it was—the red ship—hanging in the void, a bare** thousand yards to starboard, drifting silently; a flicker of vivid blue playing about its rear jet cluster.

The ship kept pace; it clung tenaciously alongside the floating *Tripoli,* a great shark-like bulk, looming in the void. Sponsons stood out like warts from the metal hull, and gun-slot seams made thin black circles on the red metal. But . . . Lefty gasped, and clawed crooked fingers at the steel bulkhead.

*The sponson.* Amidships. A long black gun-snout protruded from it, and nebulous flickering light flowed toward Lefty. It boiled silently against the *Tripoli's* hull, drenching it.

Lefty's eyes burned with horror. He backed away from the port, bumping the opposite bulkhead, and flattened himself against it. "Ray gun, ray gun," he mumbled, and gazed with hypnotized eyes at the livid energy pouring from the red ship's gun.

He felt someone tugging at him, trying to pull him loose from the bulkhead.

"Come now," said Wang. "You're quivering like you had the d.t.'s." He tugged gently.

Lefty clawed Wang's hands away. He lurched to the port and flattened his nose against it. "That's it, that's it, that's it!" he cried. "They're raying us down. Great Jupiter—they're raying us down!"

"Here, here," said Want, tugging. "Don't go to pieces, Lefty."

Lefty screamed. "You idiot! They've paralyzed the compressor! We can't budge!"

Wang peered out the viewport. "Sure," he said sadly. He frowned thoughtfully. "Pladgett's in sick bay. I can't blame you, Lefty, for creasing his skull. It may take some of the swelling out. But now you have to get hold of yourself."

"Look!" shouted Lefty. "The ship, the ship!" He stared with terror-stricken fascination at the implacable red hull.

"Don't clutter up the passageway!" a deep voice boomed.

Wang twirled around, stiffened, and executed a smart salute. "General Box, sir," he said. "We—"

"At ease!" boomed the Martian, "What's all this mumbo-jumbo?" His great bulk quivered.

Lefty leaped back from the port. "General! Look! Spraying us with that ray—You're protecting the cargo—Blast them out of the sky!"

"Who? What?" said the general.

"It's all right," sighed Wang. "He sees a ship, sir. A huge warship. They're raying us down." He shook his head significantly.

"What, what?" The general glared at Lefty.

"Radiation sickness," whispered Wang. "Really not serious, sir. Only—"

Impotent rage overwhelmed Lefty. He banged out his frustration against the lens with his fist. "Idiots!" he said.

**The telescreen whistled determinedly. Its blinker light** flashed off and on.

Ignoring it, Lefty stiffened his mouth to an unnaturally straight slash and rummaged through his cabin locker. He dragged a bulky spacesuit from its case.

He felt faintly, mingled with grim resolve, a sense of impending relief.

Even General Box refused to protect the ship. Something was terribly wrong. They hadn't seen the menace, or else—was it possible?—they didn't want to.

He writhed into the spacesuit, and stood listening.

The deck plates were silent beneath the magnetized soles of his boots. The ship was dead and motionless. The loudspeaker over his bunk oozed soft music, coming from the orchestra in the passenger salon amidships. It sounded strangely unreal.

"I like resourceful men," the captain had said.

Lefty screwed on the helmet, blocking out all sound. He thrust a metal-piercing rocket gun in his belt and jerked open the door. He clumped grimly into and down the passageway, snapping on his earphones.

The airlock seemed to beckon.

Muffled thuds vibrated the metal plates and sent Lefty staggering ponderously into the shadow of a connecting passageway. Two executive officers paced by, complaining in clipped Venusian over the breakdown.

Lefty went on. He plowed ahead, carrying the weight of his suit with difficulty. He ignored luring portholes.

A sickening premonition of death came to him. And a faint, wistful promise of deliverance.

Wandering crewmen made him duck twice more before he reached the bulging airlock. Then he was grasping the wheel with tight, eager hands, and spinning the inner lock open.

The ship's speaker intoned, "All passengers, attention. All passengers. We expect to be under way in ten minutes."

Lefty grimaced. Poor blind fools. He sent a lingering glance down the ship—his ship—and squeezed into the airlock.

The final lock creaked open. Air whooshed out. Suit folds bulged with sudden whacking, metallic sounds.

He squinted carefully out the peep-hole port.

The great, red hull loomed alongside, its protruding gun silent. It floated, portholes gleaming, menacing and invisible to ordinary men. Behind it, space yawned into black infinity.

Lefty pushed out onto the projecting platform sliver. The lock clanged shut behind him.

**It was utterly still. Lefty could hear only the beat of his** own heart.

His head throbbed, his eyes burned, and his body shivered with cold sweat. Across the void hovered the immense red hull. He gasped at the size of it.

*Death in space,* his mind said. *Payment in full.*

Could they detect him, a tiny speck flattened against the *Tripoli's* dusky flank?

Lefty pressed feet against the plates, hesitated, and pushed.

As though shot from a gun, he flew out.

Sucking air, he braced himself for the crash against the red hull.

*He went through the ship.*

Choking off an oath of amazement, he clawed at his belt for the rocket gun.

Livid flame spewed from the rocket tube. It cut a fiery path into the black void, slowing his hurtling body abruptly.

He floated back, snapping off the tube, and tensed himself. The hull bulged up. It swelled until plate seams showed to his straining eyes. He gripped the rocketgun butt.

*He floated again through the ship. . . .*

*continued on page 61*

# The Last Dark

By La Selle Gilman

*Only flaming destruction remained for Earth,*
*the day the final struggle began*
*between the men who thought they were the planet's elite*
*—and the tiny group who could prove they were!*

**It was an elderly yak-herder who found the thing. He** was tranquilly tending his hairy oxen on the bleak, storm-swept plateau when an airplane plunged screaming out of the sky where black winds raged. It crashed into the ice of a frozen lake, scattering wreckage and debris in all directions.

The herdsman, a solitary and melancholy greybeard with skin like dried orange peel, considered this occurrence with calm detachment for a week or so, and then picked up some of the pieces, saving what he considered of value and not bothering with stray arms and legs. Among the salvage was a small metal box, labeled: *This Side Up, Handle With Care* and *Fragile*. Another stencil explained: *Made in US*—but the rest of the lettering had been scraped off in the crackup.

When he opened the box, he immediately recognized the contents as an atomic bomb. Studying it through slitted eyes, he saw that it was a simple weapon, poorly constructed by amateurish armorers, but he noted with some amusement that, crude as it was, it might be fairly effective if its awkward mechanism would release the elusive chain reaction. The yak-herder at the time happened to be meditating on the second of the four sublime verities—*Trshna*, that the cause of all pain is but desire, and was engaged in a study of the chain-of-causation, the *Pratityasamutpada*. This coincidence led him to contemplate the device itself, a cumbersome, thirty-pound ball about the size of his own head.

So he set it aside as a doorflap-stopper for his woolly *yurt* and it served him as an object of revery until spring winds melted the snows and opened the high passes of the Kunluns and the Himalayas.

When, finally, the ragged old man moved his herd out past the salt flats and across the lonely, barren tablelands to the great monastery at Tashi-lunpo, he took the battered metal box along. He had concluded that the learned Keeper of the Archives, or perhaps even the honored Custodian of the Museum of Primitive Cultures, might deign to add this ugly object to the great collection of oddities and curiosities from the Outside. When he had crawled into the presence, fur cap in hand, and humbly submitted it, the yellow-robed official in charge accepted it with reluctant indifference, pointing out that the museum was already overstocked with exhibits of ancient war implements such as the spear, the match-lock and the spacerocket.

But after the Custodian was respectfully informed of the circumstances by which this unworthy relic had arrived on the Roof of the World, he was mildly interested. He rewarded the herder, a celibate philosopher until then, with a plump middle-aged widow, a gallon of hundred-proof koumiss and a fourth-hand copy of the sacred sutras, hand-illumined by an ancient holy man.

The Custodian then carried the box to the Department of Antiquities at Shigatse, where he delivered it to the Research Bureau.

Dr. Sbrong-tsan, the Director of the Bureau, exclaimed the queer inscriptions on the box but made very little of them except, of course, for their general significance. He pointed out to his bowing assistant that while the lettering was in English, that meant nothing since none of the Outside tribes wished to admit ownership of such a thing and would attempt to conceal the origin by various childish subterfuges; hence the printing might just as well be in Sanskrit, or Russian—or Icelandic.

"However," the Director said thoughtfully, swinging a silver earring against his high cheekbone, "though these silly warnings may be extraneous—I doubt very much if this quaint cracker would go off with all that unwieldy mass of U-235 jammed into a mold—I think the matter should be brought to the attention of the Minister of Security. It's the first tangible evidence we've received that the barbarians have actually reached some understanding of atomic energy and its more basic uses, and His Excellency needs a jolt. He's become much too complacent of late."

The kowtowing assistant dared to lift his eyebrows. "Surely," he muttered, "you've seen our extensive field reports on the last interclan disturbances. Hiroshima and Bikini and all that—"

"I know," Dr. Sbrong-tsan said testily. "Our observers at Los Alamos and Omsk have kept us well-informed, but it's really been largely hearsay. Mere speculation on their groping advances through nuclear fission, the mass production of their uninspired discoveries, and so on. This is something we can put our finger on."

He put his smooth, yellow finger on the bomb. "Here is an example of what all their hysterical and supposedly secret bustle is about—a stupid little explosive charge that probably didn't cost more than a million and a half paper dollars. They boast of it, on their blatting radios, as


A great mass of Outsiders came sailing in from the nearer planets.

'the world's most potent destructive force!' There's a belly-laugh for you. Even if some cunning clan could produce them like barleycakes and set them off all at once, they wouldn't make a half-respectable earthquake. I believe they're trying these out in their antique submarines and guided missiles, but they haven't even learned how to detonate all the plutonium yet; it's effective only to the extent of about one-tenth of one percent, and the rest goes to waste. Imagine! And their knowledge in this field, as in most fields, is still most elementary."

The assistant discreetly withdrew and hurried off to the Street of Ten Million Manuscripts to bone up on atomic versus metaphysical power.

**When midsummer opened the caravan trails, Dr.** Sbrong-tsan made a business trip to the capital at Lhassa, and carried the heavy box in his baggage though it was nearly a full load for one of the camels. After he had arrived in the Forbidden City, he took it to the Security Office in the Potala.

He was conducted by a hooded guard down a long, dim corridor, up several flights of narrow stone steps, and through a series of galleries to a brass-bound door, and was received with utmost ceremony. He always disliked the atmosphere of the Office, a chilly hole lit by soft, green lantern-glow and hung with rustling lamaistic banners of faded silk; it stank of incense rising from burners by an altar to the Four Kings. But the Minister, loafing in a plain red sportsrobe beside a tea-table, greeted him casually.

"Hmm," His Excellency said, having glanced at the strange object and read the Director's report, "what in the devils d'you make of it, eh?"

The Director shrugged. "I've consulted with a number of our technicians and the experts at the Tibetan Science Institute. The ethnologists are rather impressed. They re-emphasize that these Outside tribes have certain peculiar instincts and tendencies toward self-destruction. Seems to be part of their biological equipment. While they've made practically no progress in recent centuries from a truly cultural or intellectual standpoint, they apparently have reached a definite milestone with this lethal little gadget."

"Have you been to see the Dalai about it?"

"I haven't seen the Bogdo-Lama yet. He's busy experimenting with improving the climate in the Sanpo valley."

The Minister reflectively trickled his jade prayer beads through his hands, and his veiled eyes were dreamy. "Yes," he said, "he's been getting in the last shipments of grain and fruit seeds from the Southern Hemisphere, and is anxious to start the new nurseries. Claims we're now practically self-sufficient. . . . Just what would this bomb do if it were to burst?"

"Not much," Dr. Sbrong-tsan smiled. "Wipe out a city or two, perhaps. Create an amount of radioactive spray in a strategic harbor, but that would affect only a limited area. And if it were smuggled into a town and exploded in a cellar, it probably wouldn't damage more than a few blocks."

"How about dust?"

"It couldn't be effectively dispersed except in very large amounts, deposited accurately. Their poorly stockpiled dust decays, you know, which is a disadvantage—to them."

"What I'm getting at," the Minister said with patience, "is, what damage could this contraption do, say, to Lhassa?"

"Ah," the Director murmured. "There's a point. While this is little better than a toy, it could do terrific harm to our sacred Potala, inside which we are now seated, and knock out all the lamaseries and temples in town. There might be a death toll of around ten thousand among the monks, and thousands more among the traders of sheep and carpets in the bazaars. Deform and stunt the children, and make our women more loathsomely ugly than they are—"

"Siva forbid!"

"There'd be a bit of radioactivity to cope with. . . ."

"That's all I wanted to know!" the Minister said decisively, sitting up straight. "This thing has gone too far! Who do those upstart savages out there in the hinterlands think they are, anyway? One of their bungling airplanes-drivers could accidentally drop a load here as easily as in a remote salt lake, and the center of our civilization would be endangered. Despite our intricate and extensive system of underground lead-lined suburbs we're vulnerable, and I'm damned to the hundred-and-eighth Hell if we're going to redesign Lhassa and the whole cradle of mankind to guard against such stupidity!"

"What do you propose?" Dr. Sbrong-tsan asked with caution.

"We'll put Plan Nirvana into effect immediately, that's what! I've already got the supreme go-ahead from the Sovereign Pontiff and the Council to act whenever I deem it necessary for reasons of security."

"I don't think I'm entirely familiar—"

"Plan Nirvana," His Excellency repeated shortly. "Extinction. Blow 'em out!"

"Yes, yes, but by what means? Do you plan to use the global virulent bacteriological spray?"

The Minister snorted. "You know, doctor, your conversation makes you a touch old-fashioned. Of course not the spray. Their medicine men just might have something cooking up their sleeves to combat that; it's too uncertain. Sprays against pests aren't always completely effective, remember."

"There's the rockets," the Director said, hesitating. "And of course the resettlement project on the moon."

"Not too feasible either. I've talked it over with our lunar authorities. They say our new colony there isn't ready quite yet to handle a sudden influx of two million

Tibetans. Besides, that's negative, a defeatist way of dealing with this annoying problem. Tantamount to a retreat before the barbaric hordes. No, we'll simply annihilate 'em. They've been getting far too cocky for the last half millennium and we should have taken action long ago, when they first discovered firearms, or America, or thereabouts. You can't confine 'em on reservations, you know—they're too unruly and haven't the faintest notion of obeying international law. One world, they yap! We'll show 'em one world!"

**Dr. Sbrong-tsan walked slowly back through the** twisting, narrow streets to his caravanserai, thoughtfully observing the great city in its bowl of crystal mountains, peering up at the houses set like nests on the crests of wide terraces. He strolled along the granite flagstones between high buildings with leaning white walls; the way respectfully opened for him through crowds of hawkers and horsemen, lamas and soldiers, dogs and donkeys. The mammoth Potala rose above it all, chalky white as if sculptured in alabaster, and set sharply against a turquoise sky.

**The Nirvana Bomb was the most refined distillate of atomic energy ever produced, and was enclosed in a platinum casing the size of a melon-seed.**

A breeze blew over the ancient plane trees in the inn courtyard, their moving tops like green enamel. The Director sought his apartment and climbed into an ass' milk bath. He lay back in the obsidian tub, eating a bowl of curds and tsamba, and considered Plan Nirvana. He had only a superficial knowledge of modern weapons and methods of wiping out populations. In a vague way, he was in favor of it. As long as the Outsiders brawled and spawned among themselves and kept strictly away from the frontiers, he didn't care what mad follies they indulged, and if they decimated each other, so much the better. But when they began encroaching on his native fastness on the Roof of the World and carelessly scattered these absurd but alarming jimcracks about, it was time to take positive steps.

"After all," the Director said aloud, as though to reassure himself, "we've got along perfectly well without 'em for several thousand years. They're just a nuisance."

A shaven-polled attendant had entered with a jar of hot milk to warm his bath, and said, "Huh?"

"Have you ever seen an Outsider?" Dr. Sbrong-tsan asked him.

"Sure," the muscular youth replied, rubbing goat-gland oil into the Director's wiry hair. "I seen a coupla explorers they had in a cage in a sideshow down by the Karma Temple about fifty years ago. Pale-lookin' jerks. They had another one, too; he was a missionary, though, so the guards took him up to work in the uranium mines."

"I can't see what possible advantage there would be to us to permit them to continue to go on," the Director said absently. "They'll only get themselves into a worse mess than they're in now, and eventually involve us. We've got to protect our own interests when we're threatened. Uncivilized races just shouldn't play with fire."

"I'll tell you," the attendant confided, "I wouldn't give you a plugged amulet for a whole reincarnation of 'em. Conduct 'em to the other shore—that's my motto!"

The motto which was spread far and wide throughout the land by the evening's telepathy broadcast was not exactly that, though it bore the same connotation. Dr. Sbrong-tsan was resting in his luxurious quarters when he received the Minister's public announcement launching Plan Nirvana, and the word that was passed was: "Obliterate the Habitat!"

This, the Minister explained to the fascinated populace, was to be accomplished by the Nirvana Bomb. Everyone knew about it, of course, so he didn't go into detail. It was the most refined distillate of atomic energy ever produced, and was enclosed in a platinum casing the size of a melon-seed. It would be removed from the vaults of the national laboratories deep beneath the city the following morning, and a staff of competent armorers would carefully lower it into the yawning mouth of the awesome Blow-Hole in the Ramo-Chee courtyard. When it had reached the core of the earth, about noon, it would be touched off. The occasion, the Minister added benignly, would be a general holiday.

"You all recognize the necessity for this defensive action," he said, "and I'm sure you all know that it's the only humane and civilized course to take. An ounce of prevention, so to speak. We have stocked the country with every known species of useful birds, beasts and fishes, in pairs, and with all the seeds of all desirable vegetation. We've never had much need for the Outside, of course, beyond a trivial token trade in block-tea and gewgaws. All they've ever wanted from us, in their ignorance, were yak-tails and gold. What they use the tails for I'm blasted if I know, unless it's to attach them to their savage costumes for war dances. As for the gold, we dug it up from the earth and sent it to them and they put it back in a hole in the ground again, which is just another example of their I.Q."

The telepathic screens throughout the country rocked with laughter.

"Now don't be alarmed when the signal is given," His Excellency added. "The explosion will cause you no inconvenience. There will be sixteen thousand yellow-gowned lamas stationed at key points along all the borders, concentrating intensely on their vast spiritual powers of levitation to lift our realm bodily and absorb the shock. You'll hardly feel a thing, and it won't

hurt a bit. Just relax and repeat the ritualistic formulas. Thus we shall attain true liberation. . . . There will be dancing in the streets starting immediately afterward, and refreshments will be served by the Council until midnight. Now, are there any questions?"

There was a moment of silence and then came the mutter of an aged hermit from an ice-cave in the distant peaks of the Karakorum. "Yes," he said in a hollow voice, "how is this act to be reconciled with my teachings of benevolence to all living things, even the fleas that infest my rags and the most noxious vermin that plague me?" Two million telepathios breathlessly waited.

"Quite simply," the Minister replied in a cheerful and reasonable shade of thought. "They won't be living things any longer. They'll be nothing. Now then, do you approve?"

"We do!" the screens roared the collective answer with enthusiasm.

"So be it," His Excellency murmured, and signed off.

The Director sat up quite late that night, smoking several pipes of opium and twisting the knobs and dials of his powerful radio. He tuned in everything he could find in the ether: soap operas and quiz shows, comedians and commentators, mystery dramas, town meetings, swing bands, newscasts, farm bulletins, the team of Crosby and Godfrey, and listened intently even to the commercials. Then he switched it all off for the last time and went to bed. He slept badly and had dreams, but blamed it on the poor quality of the domestic poppy.

**He stood, drawn and haggard, the next day on the** balcony of the inn listening to the deep vibrations of the noonday gongs from the temples. There were immense crowds in the streets and courtyards, still and expectant. The people, with faces the color of mud, stood waiting calm and powerful in their rough red jackets and their black pantaloons tacked into long boots with turned-up toes; some carried the short, double-curved yataghans and among them moved cowled lamas chanting over their revolving prayer wheels. The city swarmed with beasts and peoples, and above it the banners whipped in the wind.

They all knew that the boundaries and everything beneath them had been completely insulated and the air purifiers were working, but they were a little uneasy. They need not have been. When the Nirvana Bomb was exploded, it was a disappointment to the sensation-seekers, though a surprising relief for most. They expelled a mass sigh.

The shock was so gentle that it did not even stir the leaves of the Bo-trees. There were no terrifying gales or shattering quakes or vomiting walls of volcanic flame, as the rumormongers had predicted. Dr. Sbrong-tsan himself felt a slight jar, and heard the faintest of subterranean rumbles. A large puff of black, greasy smoke rose majestically from the courtyard of the Ramo-Chee Temple into the heavens, belched up from the mouth of the fearful Blow-Hole, and the howling upper winds sweeping above the encircling mountain barrier snatched it away. The Director experienced a slight uneasiness in the pit of his stomach and a moment of undefinable uneasiness in his mind. That was all. Then the cymbals clashed, the gongs roared, trumpets brayed and flutes twittered and the deep and resonant bellow of the great lama-horns began. The monks raised up their arms, standing in their brick-red vestments, and the tension broke. The people shouted, and began to dance and feast.

The Director returned uncertainly to his apartment and sank down on a silken couch, waiting for the Minister of Security to appear on the telepathic screen. He did not wait long. His Excellency was suddenly there, full of news and self-satisfaction.

**Every living thing had vanished completely, all in the flick of an eyelash. No leaf, no green blade of grass, no fruit or flower had survived. And, of course there were no more men.**

"The obliteration of the habitat has been accomplished," he announced. "All is well. Our levitators did a splendid job. Splendid! They raised up our land by all the corners and held us suspended so neatly that I doubt if one dish has been broken, or a single rock rolled down the mighty slopes of Everest." He chuckled. "You'll note I've used the Outside designation for our holy mountain. Just a bad habit—these things are forgotten slowly, Now, if you'll be patient and stay tuned to me, I'll have further flash reports as they come in from the outposts. . . ."

Dr. Sbrong-tsan mixed himself a stiff bhang-and-soda and tried to be patient. Presently the Minister was back.

"Everything was gone off as scheduled, just as our scientists worked it out several hundred years ago," he said blandly. "The border patrols say that beyond the frontier, as far as super-radar can reach, every living thing has vanished completely, all in the flick of an eyelash. It was there, and then it was not. No leaf, no green blade of grass, no fruit or flower survives. The streams and lakes have disappeared in steam. No animal or fish or fowl moves in the gray, empty and barren desert beyond our mountain walls. And, of course, no man—there are no more Outsiders."

The Director stirred restless and gulped his drink.

"I might say," the Minister added, "that it will be unnecessary to send out expeditions to verify the forecasts. It is safe to say that the entire earth is exactly

like that part of it which we can observe. The oceans are gone, making the continents indistinguishable. My friends, we have at last attained the true liberation!"

There was a great deal of confused cheering on the screen, and the sound of swelling music, with the big horns groaning. Dr. Sbrong-tsan shut off his screen.

Through the sunny afternoon he sat in his room, moodily drinking bhang-and-soda. It occurred to him that the Minister had overlooked one thing—by obliterating the habitat, he had eliminated all future threat to the security of the land, had thereby inadvertently obliterated his own job. He would probably have to retire to one of the isolated lamaseries to earn his living. This reflection only faintly revived the Director's spirits.

He sat by the window in the dusk, watching the celebrations in the streets and the last rays of the sun as they set the sparkling eternal snows all afire in the towering ranges and tumbled, jagged peaks. There were no clouds in the sky and he remembered that the Science Institute had previously announced that this condition would have no appreciable effect on the weather, since the Roof of the World was too high to be seriously whipped by the wild, dry hurricanes that now scourged the ravished earth beneath. Counter-storm measures had been taken.

**After a time, the stars came out and the red moon rose,** round and full. He stared at the chilly orb for a long while and then on impulse switched on his screen again and called the manager of the colony there. It took some moments to make the contact, and when he did the manager sounded distraught. But the men on the moon were usually that way, under the stress and strain of new conditions, and Dr. Sbrong-tsan, who had considerable influence, managed to hold the fellow's distracted attention.

"Look here," the Director said, "how do things appear down here from your point of view?"

"Like bloody hell!" the manager said bitterly. "Worse than this place, if that's possible. What a mess!"

"D'you mean everything?"

"Everything but where you are, of course. You look like a nice, cozy, green spot of fungus on the yellow dome of a skull!"

"What an indelicate simile," Dr. Sbrong-tsan said sharply. "You mean an island paradise, perhaps, or a Garden of Eden? Or possibly the crest of Ararat?"

"Call yourselves what you like; I wish that I were only there. I haven't time for figures of speech right now." The manager sounded very agitated. "I'm awfully busy. They're here, you know!"

"They're here? Who's there?"

"Nobody bothered to consult me about this damned Nirvana Bomb, of course," the manager wailed. "No! I'm just exiled up here to take the brunt of the invasion. But I could have warned you if I'd been given a chance."

"Invasion? Warned? Whatever are you babbling about?" (But the Director had a sensation of dropping into a deep, dark pit, for he thought he knew all too well. He had been expecting and dreading this.)

"The invaders are here, you dimwit! They've already landed on the dark side, and are setting up their launching gear for the final lap to Earth. There's nothing we can do about it except sit and twiddle our thumbs now. But you'll be catching it soon as they arrive there, because the radiations don't faze them a bit."

"Who, dammit?" Dr. Sbrong-tsan yelled furiously.

"How should I know who? Never saw any of this kind before. A great mass of Outsiders that's come sailing in from the general direction of the nearer planets, though I can't easily describe 'em. I can't even make any sense out of them except they've been waiting for this chance and now you've given it to them. When they saw what had happened they came right on over. And, my friend, if you think your local Outsiders were barbarians, wait until you get a load of these babies!"

The Director was trembling so violently he could not lift his hand to turn off the screen. "Good Lord!" he mumbled. "Won't we ever get a little peace in this world?"

"Hell, no!" the manager snapped, and then he shrieked and the screen was abruptly empty.

After some minutes, Dr. Sbrong-tsan rose, but he was shaking so badly he had a difficult job getting his glass to his lips. Then he stood swaying, his eyes glazed, and stared up at the moon. Finally he tore his gaze away from that still, hypnotic sphere and shuffled aimlessly about the apartment. In the shadows, he stumbled over an obstruction, and peering down at it he saw that it was the metal box he had showed to the Minister. The box the old yak-herder had found.

He looked at it for a time, and his trembling gradually left him. He glanced out of the window and saw gayly-colored lights in the offices of His Excellency the Minister in the upper reaches of the looming Potala across the courtyard. He heard music and laughter.

The Director picked up the box and went out on his balcony into the moonlight. He was quite familiar with the simple mechanism that exploded this rude bomb, it was no more mysterious to him than a bow and arrow. He thought, *Better an archaic atom blast than starting all over again with a new set of Outsiders.*

Suddenly he went at it with a silent, efficient ferocity, working with great haste. When he had done the job of arming it, he set it again on the stone floor and picked up his half-empty glass. He looked once more at the moon, but saw nothing unusual there. A spasm of doubt and fear crossed his mind, and he firmly banished it.

"You can't win," he told himself calmly. "There'll always be more of 'em, somewhere. Stars and lice. . . . So what the forty-ninth Hell!" He bared his teeth, gathering his sweeping robe about him, and squinted his almond eyes toward the sky.

The bomb went off. ●

# Eternal Earthling

By Walter Kubilius

*No man could cross that sinister barrier*
*without meeting the brain that had conceived it*
*—a solid wall, made out of time itself!*

**Jim Carrington splashed in the waters of** Hillsboro's only river, only a few feet away from the Wall, and taunted his playmates. None of them could swim, and once when he tried to push Jack Baker into the river his only response was violent fear.

"Fraidy cats!" Jim yelled. He saw a speckled trout swim by and then dove down for it. He bruised himself on the rocks in the river and as he scrambled upward the palm of his hand struck the bottom of the Wall. *The palm of his hand struck the bottom of the Wall!* It was no more than an inch thick and if he had wanted to he could have swam right under it, and into the forbidden Outside.

"You know we're not supposed to be near the Wall," Baker said, "the radiation is liable to kill us."

"Nuts," Jim said, scrambling up the grassy bank, "If there was any radiation . . . oh, forget it." He was about to say that if there was any actual atomic radiation outside the water would be poisonous and the fish would be contaminated and deadly. Yet he had been drinking that water and eating the fish as long as he could remember. There was no poison, even though they came from the forbidden Outside. Ergo, the schoolbooks were all wrong.

He dressed quickly, picked up his textbooks and raced the boys back to Hillsboro. Pop was at the tractor wheel as usual, his farmer's eye upon that Sun which looked like a burning piece of paper plastered against the Wall. The Sun was 93,000,000 miles away, so the books said, but to Jim it still looked as if it were a part of the Wall.

"Have a good time?" Pop asked. He always asked the same question in the same way, just as Mom always had their meals ready in the same way. "Oh, it was all right," Jim said, "but I sure hope that Baker would break his neck. He gives me a pain."

He put his books in the barn and then did some of the farm chores, feeding the pigs, chickens, cows, and horses. "Pop," he asked when his father came back from the field, "why do you keep the horses since you never use them? You might as well sell them."

Pop thought for a moment. "Don't rightly know," he said, "We farmers always have horses. Do they bother you?"

"No, pop."

**Old Doc Barnes, Hillsboro's one and only practitioner,** visited the farm on the following night and put Jim through another one of his rigorous examinations. He listened to Jim's heart, took samples of his blood and sweat and examined them under a portable microscope and then made notations in a large black boat that had Jim's name on the front cover.

"Perfect health," Doc Barnes said as he unstrapped the pressure belt and started packing his instruments back into the three bags he brought with him. "As sound as Robinson's election program, and nothing wrong with you that fried steak and mashed potatoes can't cure."

Jim dressed. "Why do you examine me so often?" he asked.

Doc Barnes looked surprised. "Why, son, we've got socialized medicine now that Robinson's elected. It's the law, you know. Didn't you learn it in school?"

"Yes, I know," Jim said, "but why is it you never examine Pop? He's a citizen, too. Yet you only worry about me."

There was a flicker of doubt in the doctor's eyes and then the same, kind, cheerful voice. "Why, of course I do! You're simply not around when I examine your father and mother. In fact, I'm glad you reminded me so I can give them a good physical check-up. We need it every month, you know."

"Sure," Jim said. When the Doc went to Pop's bedroom an idea flashed through the boy's mind. In a sense it was spying, but the suspicion that something was wrong in Doc Barnes' hearty friendliness had long bothered Jim. It was nothing that he could identify. Was there something wrong with Jim that made the doctor so concerned with him? He spent two or three hours on Jim's monthly examination. At most he could examine five people a day, or a hundred and fifty a month. A hundred and fifty a month! There were about 10,000 people in Hillsboro and Doc Barnes was the only doctor he had ever heard of.

He went quietly upstairs to the attic and pushed back a bookcase covering a wide crack in the floor. By bending down he could see through to the floor beneath and hear the conversation.

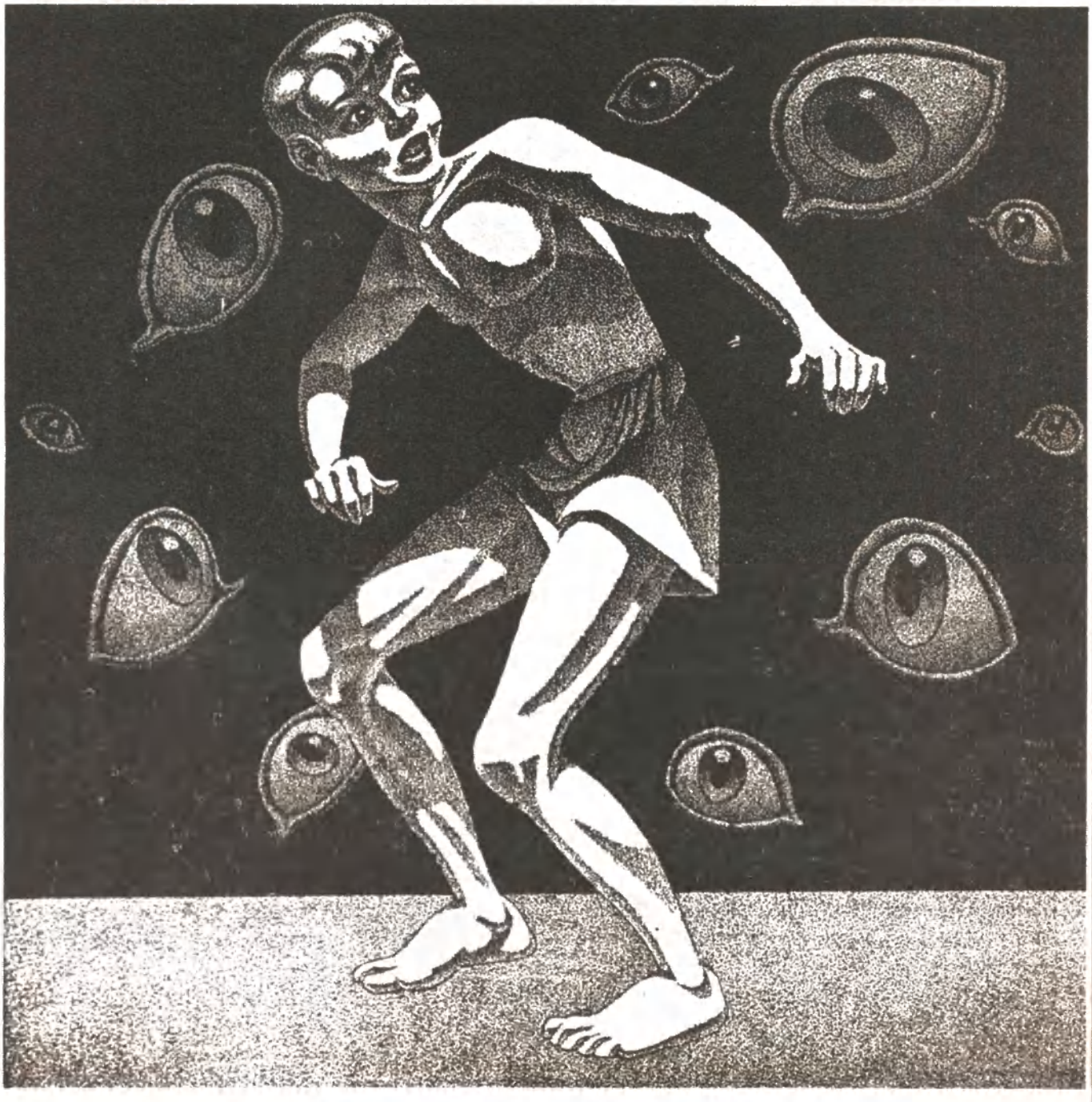
"The boy has asked why I do not examine you," Doc Barnes was saying, his voice flat and monotonous, "We will stay here for a while to satisfy him."

Then they remained sitting like stone statues in immovable chairs—Mom, Pop, and Doc Barnes.

Jim crept silently down the stairs to the porch and waited patiently until Doc Barnes left the house.

"Did you examine the folks?" Jim asked.

"I sure did," Doc Barnes said, "Gave 'em the most thorough examination I ever gave anybody. You can rest



Who was Jim Carrington that they should exert so much effort to keep him in ignorance?

assured, son. there's not a thing wrong with them." He patted Jim on the shoulders and then went back to his car and rode into town. Jim watched him go before going into the parlor. Doc Barnes did not stop at a single other farmhouse on the road.

**"Here's today's paper, son," Pop said, giving him the** copy of the *Hillsboro Daily Chronicle*. There was no world news on this January 15, 1993, and President Robinson and Vice-President Koshbino spent the day giving tedious reports on the economic recovery program. It was the local news which hit Jim like a brick thrown into his face. Jack Baker was dead. He had fallen from a tree and broken his neck. Jim felt sick.

"Sold the horses today," Pop said, "Made a good profit on them."

"That's swell." Jim said, the words like sawdust in his mouth. His head was whirling. His eyes could no longer focus on the words of the newspaper and the vague suspicion he had long been feeling approached one more step towards final understanding. He knew Jack Baker who never swam and, what was much more important, never climbed trees, and the knowledge that he had wished for his death made him feel like a murderer. Like some rumbling out of a whirling void, he heard his father's voice, "How are you getting on at school?"

"I hate it," Jim said, the tension in him breaking out and the accumulation of many doubts making themselves heard, "It's the other boys. I—I can't explain it. They either know too much, or not enough. I think I could learn more by myself in the library."

As soon as the anger broke, it flurried and died and soon the incident was forgotten. He did the chores around the farm and spent his free time swimming in the River at a spot where the banks widened near the Wall. He did not dive near the Wall, nor attempt to pass under it to the Outside where poisoned fumes and deadly gases scorched the ground and made one breath of air a sentence of death. Yet the water was clear and good.

A few days later Pop gave him a letter from the Board of Education for Hillsboro. It was a brief announcement declaring that because of increased tax contributions to the nation's recovery program, Hillsboro had to reduce its appropriations for education. The school was hereby closed, and those students who wished could secure adult privileges at the Public Library where Miss Wilson would be glad to confer with them.

It was the sort of privilege that Jim had long dreamed of. His hungry eyes had often feasted upon the long galleries of book shelves, all lined with thick layers of dust as if the knowledge of all the Earth had been stored here and forgotten. In their pages he would find the answers to Baker's death, the dishonesty of Doc Barnes, and perhaps even the mystery of the Wall and what was really outside.

Miss Wilson, head librarian for the adult division, was a thin, white-faced woman with the same kind of blank smile that Doc Barnes wore. She perched on a high stool beside her desk at the entrance. "What would you like to read?" she asked, "I have here a very good book on natural history which you might like, or would you prefer some adult fiction? Here is a splendid—"

"If it's all right, I'd like to just look around for myself."

"—novel about farm life and how a young man developed a process that doubled his agricultural yield."

"May I go in?" Jim asked, exasperated by the long lecture which droned from Miss Wilson's lips. She stopped suddenly, looked blankly at him as if listening to someone, and then smiled.

"Of course. You can take out any books that you like. Do you know how to use the catalogue?"

"Yes, yes." Jim said, hurriedly moving into the deserted library. The long rows of book stacks stretched almost endlessly through the huge vaulted chamber. Jim's nose twitched at the pleasant musty odor of age that clung about the cloth and leather-bound volumes. He studied some of the titles, pulled the books from the shelves and with a gusty breath blew off the layer of dust upon the fore-edge and flicked through the pages. The books of fiction, which occupied more than half the shelves, did not interest him. He wandered through the sections on science and particularly through the 900's where the history books were. Unlike the fiction books that were practically untouched, there were huge empty spaces in the shelves, bright exposed metal gleaming where numbers of books had been suddenly removed.

On some of the books there were curious scratches upon the dusty covers, as if oddly shaped hands had picked them up and then decided to put them back upon the shelves.

"Perhaps," Jim said, "the books about the Wall are classified separately."

He went to the rows of catalogue drawers in the center of the library and pulled out the one labeled Wa-Wun. There were no books on the subject of the Wall or any little carrying information about it. There were several that carried the word "Outside" in them, but none of the books dealt with what Hillsboro meant when "Outside" was mentioned. He thought there might be some other term for "Wall" that he had not heard, and he began to look through the listings of "Screen," "Ceiling," "Barrier," "Barricade," and everything he could think of or find in the dictionaries. The catalogue seemed to be thorough, even though quite a number of the index cards had been ripped out, as he could tell by the scraps of paper remaining, but there was nothing about the Wall in any of them.

Dismayed, he tried to be satisfied with a few history books and brought them to Miss Wilson for recording.

She glanced at the titles, smiled brightly, and stamped the due dates on his card. "Find everything you want?" she asked.

"No," he said, somewhat angry as he slipped the books under his arm, "I couldn't find anything about the Wall."

Her smile faded. "The Wall?"

"Yes," he exclaimed, irritated at what was clearly some sort of effort to hide the truth from him, "The Wall, Ceiling, Dome, whatever you want to call it, that's all around Hillsboro. Why doesn't anyone ever mention it? I wouldn't have even known it was there if I didn't go swimming near it. There's not a single book about it in the whole library."

Miss Wilson regained her composure. "Of course there is," she said very sweetly as if talking to an unreasonable child. "Have you tried the catalogue?"

"Yes, and there's no card for it."

"You must be mistaken," she said. "I'll help you look for it when you return next week."

"Sure," Jim said, certain that some sort of excuse would be found. He sensed the existence of a strange conspiracy. What was there to hide?

**"Pop," he asked after the evening chores were done and** they were seated on the porch, listening to the crickets and watching the clouds roll by the face of the moon, "Just what is the Wall?"

Pop put down his paper and looked speculatively off toward the horizon where the translucent Wall dug into the earth just beyond that line of hills. "It's been there long before you was born," he said, "Sort of a defense against the Outside, if I remember rightly."

"What's Outside?" Jim asked quietly.

Pop picked up his paper and started reading to show that he didn't feel like talking much. "Heck, everybody knows that. Poison gas and gamma radiations and stuff like that. It'd kill everybody if it got in."

Jim thought of the clean fresh water and the healthy fish that flowed from under the Wall. He wanted to ask Pop but the newspaper was now a barrier between them.

There was not enough light to read by so Jim looked out across the fields and up to the inverted Dome through which the stars could be seen. There seemed to be peace and contentment outside and not the death and horror his father hinted at. When Pop left the porch Jim took his place under the lamp and read through the history books. Most of them were very old, dating back to 1970. Since there was no mention of the Wall in them or the atomic wars which made the Wall necessary, Jim concluded that the Wall was built between 1970 and '75, when he was born.

Jim picked up the next book, "History of the United Nations," published in 1992. It was only one year old yet had the strange appearance of great age, the pages stained and crinkly. He looked closely at the title page and read the small print that made his heart pound. "Ninth edition," the tiny letters said, "Revised and corrected by the author, January 2039."

*It's a misprint,* Jim reasoned, *for this is only 1993.* Nevertheless he turned hastily towards the back pages and began reading:

> F. T. Robinson, during whose presidential administration the United Nations secured a lasting peace, died in a rocket crash in 2001. Koshbino served as president until the expiration of his term in 2002, and the election of Ghafa Benjamin occurred the following year.
>
> During Ghafa's administration the Planet Commission continued its efforts to build a successful extra-galactic vessel but these were without success until 2038.
>
> The gradual elimination of farming communities, begun during Robinson's term as president, continued under the new administration. The artificial manufacture of food by reprocessing industrial waste had revolutionized social customs, particularly in the frequent distressing economic dislocations—

Jim Carrington put the book aside, bewildered by the massive history of great events which were yet to occur. President Robinson was alive, for he had seen his calm, dignified face on the television screen many times. As for the artificial manufacture of food supposedly convulsing the nation's economy, there was not the slightest evidence of it in Hillsboro. Pop plowed the field with his tractor and the wheat, oats, and rye were delivered to town where they were stored in warehouses, presumably for shipment to other Wall-surrounded cities. If food could be manufactured, there was no point in growing it here. If it could not be manufactured then the history book was some sort of fraud.

He hurriedly skimmed through the pages searching for some reasonable explanation. The more he read, the more confused he became. There was no mention of any world-wide atomic conflagration in 1970 and not the slightest indication anywhere that Wall-enclosed cities existed or were ever considered.

There were creaking sounds in the driveway and Jim looked up to see Doc Barnes' battered car come to a stop. The medic waved to him, and then came puffing up the porch steps. "Evenin', Jim," he said, "Thought I'd drop by and say hello."

"Pop and Mom are in the parlor if you want to see them."

Doc Barnes eased himself with a grunt in the porch rocking chair and wiped his sweating forehead with a rumpled handkerchief. "Nothing important," he said, "just returning from a call and thought I'd drop by and rest a while." He glanced around him and saw the books on the floor beside Jim. "Been reading a lot, son?"

"Yes," Jim said cautiously, "a couple of history books."

"Never could see anything interesting in history," Doc Barnes said, "I always felt the physical sciences had more challenge in them. There's nothing more thrilling than examining a bug under a microscope. Come down to my lab sometime and I'll show you some fascinating aspects of scientific research."

**Doc Barnes talked on and the guarded suspicion which Jim** felt gradually faded away. He scarcely understood half the words the doctor used in explaining the anatomy of atoms and how molecular velocities could be measured.

"History has no meaning," Doc Barnes said, "and you'll never find truth there. Study the sciences where all evidence can be weighed and measured. It's the only road to truth."

"What is the Wall?" Jim asked suddenly.

"Crushed matter," Doc Barnes said unhesitatingly, "It's a mixture of bare nuclei and free, unattached electrons. Ordinarily such an electronic gas would expand and dissipate but for layers of transparent matter which keep it within set confines. The wall is then completely impenetrable to everything but harmless sun and starlight, and yet it can be touched without danger. It was built in 1975, during the planet-wide war which rendered so much land radioactively dangerous."

"If that's true," Jim said, knowing that the moment of decision had come, "why is it there's no mention of the Wall or even the war in this history book?"

He opened the book triumphantly and passed it over to the Doctor. He did not know the elements of the conspiracy, but he was sure that Doc Barnes was part of it. The Wall was an important element of their lifes yet there was never any mention of it in the Library which was supposed to hold the sum of human knowledge. Doc Barnes' face was set and hard as he read the pages that Jim opened before him. He flipped the leaves, glancing at the years marked at the head of each page—1970—1980—1990—1995—2000—2035. It was not only a history of the past, it was a history of the future as well, and nowhere was there any mention of the Wall.

"What year is this?" Jim demanded. Here at least was his chance to grope with the mystery of his life. Who was he? What was he? As a boy he remembered nothing but Pop and Mom in the Hillsboro farm, but as he grew older he began to realize certain inconsistencies. His slightest wishes seemed to become automatic law. He recalled how Doc Barnes seemed to live only to look after Jim, and the whole town of Hillsboro was joined in a conspiracy to keep him in ignorance of certain things. Perhaps he was imagining these things—but they had become too frequent. This book was the first proof he had found for his suspicions. It clearly proved that not only was there no Atomic War and no need for a Wall, but that even the date was a lie.

"What year is this?" he demanded again.

"1993, of course," Doc Barnes said, uneasily.

"Then what is this book?" Jim asked, almost violently, "Is it possible to foretell the future?"

"Of course not," Doc Barnes said, "the future is closed to us. As for this book, I'm sorry that it disturbed you for it is obviously a hoax. It was probably published as some sort of college thesis in speculative history. That is frequently done in some of the universities, the idea being to test the applicant and see whether he has mastered the various theories of social history. Economic and anthropologic factors as determinants in history are considered quite valid in some colleges. Incidentally, Jim, would you like to go to college a year or so from now? I have some friends at Harvard and they might accept you."

Jim tore the book from Doc Barnes' hands. "You're not telling me the truth!" he said hotly. "This is no Ph. D. thesis or even any attempt at hoaxing somebody. It's a textbook, pure and simple, only it's a textbook from the future that does not mention any Atomic Wall or any Wall around Hillsboro or any other place. Why isn't the Wall mentioned anywhere else? I've looked through all the history books in the library and nowhere is the Wall even hinted at. Why?"

"Oh come now," Doc Barnes said, reaching into his medical kit and fumbling for some instrument. I'm sure you're mistaken. When you visit the library again, ask one of the attendants to help you."

Jim watched Doc Barnes' hand come out of the black bag. Between fore and index fingers was the transparent body of a hyperdermic, with thumb securely placed against the plunger.

"What are you going to do?" Jim asked, becoming afraid.

"Nothing important," Doc Barnes said, "These are some vitamins. They will help improve your appetite."

"My appetitie is all right," Jim said, slowly standing up and stepping back to the porch wall. Doc Barnes also arose and stepped near him.

"Don't be afraid," Doc Barnes said, "This won't hurt at all."

Jim ducked beneath the upraised arm, kicking aside the books that littered the porch. He was not fast enough and Doc's arm plunged down and the needle jabbed into his shoulder. "Pop! Mom!" he screamed, and then tumbled into darkness.

**In the morning Jim arose and had breakfast with Pop,** wondering if the events of last night were only a dream. "Doc Barnes was here last night," he said to his father.

"Yeah?" Pop said, "I didn't hear him."

"We had a long talk," Jim said doubtfully, "I—I think I fainted."

"Maybe you been reading too much," Pop said, "You looked all right when I saw you go to bed."

Jim finished the rest of his meal in silence. On the porch he picked up four library books, the fifth being missing, and returned them to the Library.

Instead of Miss Wilson there was a young, round-faced man in a steel gray suit at the recording desk. He took Jim's books and stamped his library card.

"She's no longer here," he said in answer to Jim's question, "The Board transferred her to another library. Inefficient, I understand, for many of the books were misplaced on the shelves and entered incorrectly in the catalogue."

Jim took his card and looked on the "due" list. "I still have one book home," he said.

The librarian shook his head. "You must be mistaken. You've returned all the books listed on your card. What is the title?"

"History of the United Nations."

The librarian studied a list before him. "I'm sorry, but there's no such book listed. Do you know when it was published?"

Jim bit his lip. "2038."

The librarian smiled, "You are joking, of course."

Knowing further talk would be useless, Jim went into the library. That book would never be found, he knew, for Doc Barnes had taken it. The "vitamin" injection was only a sedative to enable the doctor to steal the book and make Jim think the whole incident a dream. The new librarian was also part of the conspiracy around him, just as Miss Wilson had been. He had learned one thing in his talk with Doc Barnes, and that was not to trust anyone. For all he knew every man and woman in Hillsboro, not excepting his own father and mother, was part of that mysterious alliance to keep him from learning the truth—whatever that truth might be.

He went to the catalogue drawers, determined to make one final search for some book that might have a passing reference to the Wall or the Atomic War that necessitated its construction. The chance remark of the new librarian that Miss Wilson was inefficient had prepared him for the shock. One-third of the Wa-Wun catalogue drawer was filled with index cards listing various books about the Wall.

He went to the shelves in the History Department and the formerly empty spaces were now filled with brightly bound new books printed on clean, glossy paper. Their title pages were all stamped, "Copyright, 1993."

There was no dust on any of them. Before he opened any of the pages he knew these books would contain only the sort of information "they" wanted him to believe. He read:

> In 1970, after the outbreak of the disastrous Inter-continental Atomic War which depopulated the world, construction of Wall-enclosed cities began. Thanks to the Wall, which is impervious to atomic attack or radiation, civilization has been permitted to survive. Today, in 1993, only a handful of Wall-enclosed cities remain to carry on Man's struggle for self-preservation on a planet continually swept by atomic storms whose deadly fumes are held back only by the Wall—

Jim thought of the clean, fresh water that flowed from under the Wall, and put the book back on the shelf. Only the first book had told the truth. There had been no Atomic War and the Wall was not designed to keep poison fumes out, *but to keep him in Hillsboro.*

Why? There was no one that Jim could ask, for everyone was part of that indefinable, mysterious group which he could only call *they*. What was their purpose? Who was Jim Carrington that they should exert so much effort to keep him in ignorance? He thought he had enough evidence in the history book with which to confront them and demand an explanation, but Doc Barnes had taken it away from him. Very well, then, he would find additional proof and when he confronted them with their lies, they would be forced to tell the truth.

**That evening Doc Barnes came again to visit him. "Just** thought I'd pass by," the doctor said as he sat down upon the porch rocking chair. "Hadn't see you for some time. Been feeling all right?"

Jim nodded. "Funny thing," he said. "I had a queer dream about you last night."

Doc Barnes fanned himself. "Dreams have very little significance. I would just forget about it."

"Doc," Jim said slowly, "if I asked you an important question, would you give me an honest answer? You know that last night was no dream, and I know it. Would you answer just one question honestly?"

The doctor kept on fanning himself as he looked out across the field to where the stars could be seen through the invisible Wall.

"What's your question, Jim?" he asked not turning to look into Jim's eyes.

"Tell me," Jim said, "am I—am I *different from everybody else?*"

The aurora borealis could be seen, its brilliant colors like some curtain hanging over Hillsboro. Both Doctor and boy stared at it.

"Why do you ask?"

" 'Cause I feel it."

Doc Barnes considered this and asked, with a strange note of regret in his voice, "You're not happy here?"

Jim shook his head, not daring to speak.

"Then what do you want?"

Jim pointed to the aurora whose vivid colors seemed to be draped somewhere halfway between the horizon and the dome of the never seen but always-sensed Wall.

"I want to go Outside," Jim said, knowing now what it was that had rankled within him for so many years. "I want to see what is on the other side of the Wall."

There was a sad expression on Doc Barnes' face, as if he knew what was there but could not voice his knowledge. It was not a thing that inspired fear or horror—as a world wracked with atomic poisons might—but something which was sad and lonely.

"I'm sorry," Doc Barnes said. There was nothing more to add, for in the doctor's inflection Jim could hear the refusal which *they* gave to his request for permission to leave Hillsboro.

"All right," Jim said, pretending to resign himself to the doctor's unwillingness to tell him the nature of the truth. He knew that if he were ever to learn the reason for

the secrecy and deception he would find it only Outside—on the other side of the Wall.

When Doc Barnes had left and Jim was in bed, the plan slowly formed in his mind. The Carrington house was located on the outskirts of Hillsboro, only a few miles from the Wall itself. The aurora had died and there was no moon that night. He could reach the Wall within a few hours.

Jim crawled out of bed and dressed quickly and then climbed out of his window to step gingerly upon the porch. He jumped to the soft ground and then headed for the river. Despite the darkness he walked rapidly and after three hours reached the point where the river flowed from underneath the Wall.

Jim stood on the brink for a moment, calculating the risks he took, and then plunged downward. He held his breath as he slid down against the glass-like substance of the Wall, his fingers clutching for the edge. He found it, gripped tight and pulled himself through against the rapid river current. Something slapped in his face, he kicked at the vague shadow in horror and then remembered that it might be a fish. His lungs now starved for precious air, he started to rise. If Doc Barnes and the history books were correct, he would die with the first breath when he reached the surface, and eventually they would find his corrupted body in the bed of the stream.

He kept on rising, and when his head broke the surface his lungs breathed in fresh, cool air. Pantingly he rested against the Wall, fighting the down-current that threatened to pull him back into Hillsboro. In the pitch darkness he could see nothing. After catching breath, he pushed himself away from the Wall and swam towards where the river bank might be. His tired hands clutched at the shore and he dragged himself upward and then rested upon the grassy bank.

While he lay there, breathing and waiting for the pounding of his heart to subside, he knew that the first step in his effort to find out the truth was successful. The Outside was not deadly. The air was fresh and clean, and nowhere around him could he see the atomic volcanos that were said to throw their deadly missiles against the Wall. He had no equipment to measure radiation, but if there were no deadly fumes and he was still alive, he had a right to assume that the whole story was fictitious and there was no deadly radiation whatever.

It was too dark for Jim to see any part of the horizon. A glimmer of moonlight shot through the clouds and for a moment Jim thought he saw a series of immense domes in the distance. The moon hid once more and again he was in total darkness. Placing his fingertips upon the wall he cautiously walked forward and found himself upon some curving embankment that curled upward around the Wall. In place of steps there were a series of deep indentations which made it difficult for him to secure good footing. He found at eye level against the Wall a rail which served as a sort of guide. Using this, he drew himself along.

**When the moon broke through again he was astonished to** see the entire town of Hillsboro stretched before him as a sort of huge diorama. He could see clearly every single house and street and the familiar woodlands where he had played as a boy.

The road on which Jim walked rose higher, still hugging the Wall and he knew that while he could see through the Wall into Hillsboro, vision was possible only in this one direction. He had often stared through this same section of Wall and seen only a vague haze which everyone assured him was only mist or fog.

Hillsboro, from the height where he stood, did not look like New York or Moscow, or any of the other really big cities of the Earth which he had seen pictured in some of the older history books. Rather it had a bit of all of them, and he now understood who he was and why he was so important.

The truth became evident when he reached up about one fourth of the height of the ramp, and touched the first of three small projections beneath the rail.

As he did so a clear, sharp thought formed itself in his mind.

*Species: Man.*

He looked about him, thinking someone had spoken. He touched the first level again. Once more the thought rang in his mind.

*Species: Man.*

This was some sort of telepathic communication, he realized, and then touched the second level.

*Habitat: Third Planet, Sun. Farm area in temperate zone of northern hemisphere.*

Third level.

*Special note: A remarkable feature of this unique exhibit is the actual presence of a living, warm-blooded, oxygen-breathing Man among the Robot-Duplicate models. For many centuries the Museum had attempted to maintain living colonies but all experiments had failed. As the Third Planet became settled by colonists from . . ., Man specimens became increasingly difficult to obtain. It is believed that Jim Carrington, as the Man Specimen contained in this exhibit is named, is the last of his species, his small tribe having annihilated itself rather than submit to taming by . . . scientists. Jim Carrington was brought to . . . and this model constructed by the Museum directors. It is complete with Robot-Duplicate Models of all known types of Man Specimens. The extraordinary skill with which the exhibit was prepared is attested to by the fact that even at this moment the last living Man Specimen, Jim Carrington, is not aware of the true situation. The model you see is a typical Earth community as it existed two hundred years ago.*

Jim Carrington knew who he was at last. There was a slithering motion on the ramp and he turned to face the Keeper of the Natural Habitat Zoo.

Before he saw the alien, a last furtive thought-message thrust itself upon his mind:

*Caution! Do not feed or harbor escaped specimens. Deliver them immediately to the dissection chambers.* ●

# Oblivion Quest

By Wilbur S. Peacock

*On a blasted, dying Earth*
*they molded Man's yesterdays*
*—three inhuman creatures,*
*whose only tie to humanity*
*was a deathless hatred*
*for those who gave them birth!*

**Bill stirred lazily at the stream's edge, amusing himself** by trying to snare a red-winged fish with the looped tip of his tail. He had fine control of the appendage ordinarily, but the fish were too fast and slippery, and the hairless appendage could not grasp. But he persisted, barely conscious of Ted and Andy at his back, still working at the machine.

Jim divided his attention evenly between Bill and the working men, nictilian lids dropped against the glare of the midday sun. His paws were folded across his scaly chest, and his gill covers stirred uneasily, even though he was now breathing air.

"You think it will work, Bill?" he asked suddenly. "You ask me, I think Andy is crazy."

"Damn!" Bill said and snatched his tail from the riling water. Tiny teeth marks were on the pink flesh, oozing green blood. He waved the tail slowly in the air, easing the pain, before answering, "Who knows," he finally admitted. "I'm a warrior, not a scientist. My job is to kill Barkell—not figure a way to get at him!"

"You guys talk too much," Ted telepathed in sudden biting anger. "You should be helping us."

He fitted a base panel of shining quartz into place with his lower hands, the two other pairs steadying and locking the base into place. Then he scurred back on spider legs, hid body-head dome tilting a bit as he studied the cube which was almost finished.

"Phooey!" Bill said, and ate a handful of wild nasturtiums. "What the hell do we know about time travel and time machines!" He patted the disintegrator gun at his waist. "The only machine I know is Betsy here, and I don't want to know any other."

Andy scowled with his left head, his right intent on the electrical connections he was trailing from the huge dis-battery to the cube's outlets. His left head's single eye frowned in contempt. Bill shrugged; scientists always thought they were better than a warrior.

"Well, we are," Andy's right head lifted and said.

"Bellywash!" Bill said, and began fishing again, his tail's tip darting through the water after the restless fish. "If it weren't for the warriors, you'd all be dead."

"We will be, anyway, unless this works," Ted telepathed from his mouthless, eyeless body-head. "The plague's moving from the craters like a grass fire, and nothing can stop it."

"So we die," Jim hissed, his forked tongue flicking at flies. "Hell, the world's dead, so why should we keep on living!"

Despite themselves, they all looked across the plains at the great glittering field of crystallized earth which was the limit of their domain to the west. There had the bombs ripped and smashed and glowed in the birth pangs of begetting death. There no man could live, not even now, for nothing could grow in the glassy earth, and rays, while weak, still struggled upward in a miasma of waiting agony.

And thus it was across the world, for man in his last gush of suicide had loosed the power of the sun in a war which had cleansed the earth of its crawling life almost entirely. Two weeks had the war lasted, hate and fear and destruction spreading like a mold over everything. Cities had vanished, and towns, and villages, and out of billions only a few million had survived, hiding like slugs in caverns, murdering for the few remains which made life possible, crawling like maggots about a corpse, intent only on living, forgetting all else.

And so the years had passed, and decades, and centuries; and the final war became history, and then a legend, and then an old-wives' tale and was finally forgotten. A few things remained, scattered—indestructible weapons, a few books printed on better paper—but which the average man could not read—and the will to exist which would be the last to go. There were other things, of course, but they had vanished, or their uses forgotten, through the centuries. Life existed, but no two things were alike, for bomb bursts had set genetic patterns away.

Civilization had wearily lifted its head, but differently now, a thing of colonies, of anarchy; where warriors dominated all. Most did not think, they existed—and when a man became a thinker, he became a thing of suspicion, to be driven away from normal creatures.

Andy had been one of those, for his twin brain had given him the strange sense of rationalizing many things. He had learned to read, as though the ability was a racial instinct brough to the surface. He had rooted out and digested many books, and from his reading had come a thought, a wild improbable idea, born of desire and the plague and a thousand reborn memories of times he had never seen.

Ted had been the catalyst which exploded the idea into existence. From his refuge at the east of the glowing plains where men had driven him because he too could think, he had telepathed a message to Andy and drawn him to safety. Ahead of hunting warriors, Andy had come, there to hide and plan, the precious crumbling


"The World's dead, so why should we keep on living . . ."

manuscript of a vanished scientist clutched tightly in one hand. They had come together, he and Ted, and when the plague of the glowing lands struck full force, they were ready with their plan.

Jim had been their first recruit, his scaly body quiescent, his reptilian eyes quartz-cold, as he listened. Not that he cared about the other people, but that he wished to live.

"It is all here," Andy had explained, and tapped a decayed book, made of some ancient skin and written in an ink which only complete dissolution could erase. "There truly was a final war. There were more people on Earth than there are leaves in a forest. They fought on the land and in the air and in and on the water. I do not understand why they fought, for this writer does not say. But they slew each other with a weapon so terrible that nothing could stand in its way.

"They fought and they died, and the world died with them. They had everything they needed for existence, and still they fought."

Andy shuddered delicately, his heads turning toward each other in mutual horror, while Jim watched, his body half in the water, his gill covers opening and closing in gentle fluctuations.

"And what must I do?" he hissed.

**And they told him, told him of the things which must still** lie in the drowned city beside the ocean. Metals were there, and crystal and quartz and many other things which could be used. With those, and with the knowledge Andy possessed, Ted could fashion the machine whose creator was vanished dust, whose purpose had never been tested, whose existence now might save a world which would live no longer than it would take the death from the glowing pains to sweep wherever people still clustered.

"It is a chance," Andy explained patiently, for Jim was not a true thinker. He was a reptile-man and his thought processes were slow. "This writing is of a machine with which a man can travel in time."

He saw Jim's reaction as the thought slowly penetrated, and then he sensed that full understanding had not come. So he explained further.

"Time and the past are fluid," he said, seeking for simple words. "If a man could travel into the past, he could change the future, which is the present. The future is a thing which can be changed by anybody. A murder, an accident, a decision to mate with somebody else, all of those set up a history pattern. Each is different, and yet each is co-related, for all deal with a stream of existence which must some day reach a common end."

"I don't understand," Jim said.

But Bill did. He was not a thinker, but he was a warrior and so his mental processes were on a higher level than Jim's.

"You mean I go back somewhere and kill this Barkell—and there is no war, and we live in a different world, and none of us will die from the plague?" he asked.

"That's it," Andy agreed. "This machine, if it works, will take you to a time before the final war. It will place you in conjunction with this man Barkell. You will shoot him to death with your hand weapon—and thus he cannot invent the ultimate weapon with which humanity was enabled to destroy itself in a final war."

Bill frowned, wrinkling his furry cheeks. "I don't get it," he said finally. "I'm supposed to kill him with a weapon—which he will not be able to invent if he dies."

They sat in silence, while Andy's two heads communed silently. Then Andy shrugged.

"I don't understand it, either," he admitted. "But it has to work. It's our only chance for survival." He spread his hands. "This writer talks about parallel lines of existence, but I don't really understand. Maybe if you succeed, we'll be alive here, but with the world no longer blown to hell. Maybe we'll live as other people, not knowing a thing of what has gone in the past. What I do know is that man is doomed now, for there is no fighting the plague."

Bill ate a handful of grass, thinking, but really absorbing nothing of what he had heard. Killing was his business, and it seemed logical that killing a menace might make him safer.

"Why me?" he said at last.

"Because you must be more like those humans who lived then than any of the rest of us. You've one head and two arms and two legs, and the men then looked like that. I've read of clothes, but I don't know what they are."

"I do, huh?" Bill said, admiring his body in the pool. He arched his tail and ruffled the fur along his back. He winked his eyes and bared his yellow fangs, and was pleased with what he saw. So those vanished people had looked like him, eh!

"What do I do, huh?" he asked.

"We'll build this machine, Ted and I," Andy said. "We've got the instructions. 'Course, we're not certain the thing will work, but it's worth the try. Anyway, we'll build the machine and you'll get into it. When it stops, you get out and look up this Barkell, who should be nearby, if calculations work out. Kill him and then return to the machine, which will bring you back."

Bill rippled his satiny fur. "Maybe it'll kill me," he said.

"Maybe," Andy agreed. "Afraid?"

Bill shrugged. "I saw a man with the plague," he said. "He just slumped down into pulp. I'm more afraid of that."

**That, of course, had been weeks before. Now the machine** grew from the rocky ground in glittering splendor. It was a cube, yet the lines somehow merged and flowed and seemed to lack solidity. It was hollow, and except for a small control box the size of a fist, empty. A bladelike switch would activate the machine, a fingertip pressure all that was needed to move it.

Ted worked at it now, fitting the electrical leads. Gold

they were, crudely made and extruded from metal Jim had found in a sunken city. Ted's hands worked competently, for his mutation line had followed one wherein all was sacrificed for delicacy of movement.

A pale wind stirred in the glowing lands, and its heat thrust at the four men clustered about the machine. Faint and far away could be heard the signaling of sending drums of the people. They were moving, going blindly, only hoping to leave the horror of the plague behind.

Andy listened for a moment, then turned back to the machine. Jim watched from cold sleepy eyes, then turned and vanished without a sound into the stream which led to the ocean. He was hungry, and the stunted weird fish were waiting. His share in this was over, and he felt no curiosity as to the outcome.

Bill watched Jim disappear, then ceased his futile fishing with his tail.

He drew the dis-gun at his waist and idly aimed it about, liking its feel. Some day, but not in his lifetime, the energy would drain from the small coil at its butt. Until that time, he was master of all men.

He speculated upon the thought that he would kill a man already long dead. But the thought made no sense, and so he discarded it, content in the knowledge that no matter where he was, nothing could stand against him and the gun.

And Ted, moving about on his spider legs, was strangely content. He was a builder in a world where nothing was created. He cared little about the world as it was now, and its future meant nothing to him. Philosophy was for men like Andy, with their books and theories and worries about men still not born. He would have liked living in the age of which Andy could speak so brilliantly. Men created then, built with their hands and brains, and in that age he would have been supreme. And maybe, he permitted himself the thought, if this experiment succeeded, he would be a builder and creator in this new age.

Andy, watching the final tie-in of the leads to the glowing cube, felt the urgency of panic-doubt in his twin minds. *Men must live, he knew. Their destiny lay further* than a shining pool of protoplasm into which the plague was turning them. They must survive and grow and live and . . .

He sighed, barely conscious that Jim was gone. Ted was almost through now, but one lead to connect. Then must come the desperate gamble. It must succeed, it would succeed. If the machine worked, then Bill would snuff out the existence of the man who had created this nightmare of the future. When he died, then the weapon could not be invented; and without that invention, a line of parallel existence-history would be created. The world and the future and its people would live.

"It's ready," Ted telepathed them.

"Good!" Bill came lithely to his feet, holstering the gun. "I was getting a bit fidgety. What do I do?"

Andy strode forward and lifted the top panel of the crystal cube. Perspiration was on his faces, and his heads touched as though in mutual sympathy.

"You get in the cube and close it up," he said, "When you're ready, push that control forward. If everything works, you'll arrive in Barkell's time and but a short distance from where he is. When you want to return, you just reverse the process. Remember the machine can make but one round trip, so don't make any mistakes."

"I won't," Bill promised, and came to the cube, pausing. "I'll know this Barkell?"

Andy nodded. "You have his body index implanted in your mind by hypnosis. You can make no mistake. When you see him, you'll automatically recognize him. Shoot, then, shoot to kill, and then return."

"All right," Bill said, and slid into the cube.

He slipped the top panel into place. He could see out now, but all was distorted. He settled himself, then reached for the switch. Without thought, without hesitation, he thrust the tiny prong forward.

There was no sound. Ted and Andy had stepped back, caught by the blind urgency of the moment. They saw Bill sink into place and the cube close. Like watching a swimmer in deep water, they saw his hand come forward and move the switch.

Air shimmered and the cube seemed to settle. A breeze stirred, air rushing in to close the semi-vacuum. The cube and Bill were gone, and from far across the land the people's drums beat the soft susurration of waves against a cliff.

**Here was terror, here was something such as Bill had never** thought existed. This was a world he could not understand. Trees grew almost to the sky, branches spreading fantastically. The earth was soft and dry, and the grass was long and thick and furry, not as it was in his time. The air was cool, and there were a thousand unknown odors.

But he was a warrior, and so he went forward, leaving the cube where it had appeared in the small glade. He glided through the shadows, gun in his hand.

A rabbit stirred, and the dis-gun hummed, blasting it from existence. Almost paralyzed with shock at its rude appearance, Bill gritted his teeth and went forward. Slowly courage returned, as knowledge of the power of his gun filled his mind.

He came to the edge of the trees and looked across the cleared ground at the house. It was blocky and terrifying in the night; and he did not understand its purpose. But he could see light within, and so he judged people must be there, although how lamps could create such light, he did not know.

*continued on page 66*

**He speculated upon the thought that he would kill a man already long dead.**

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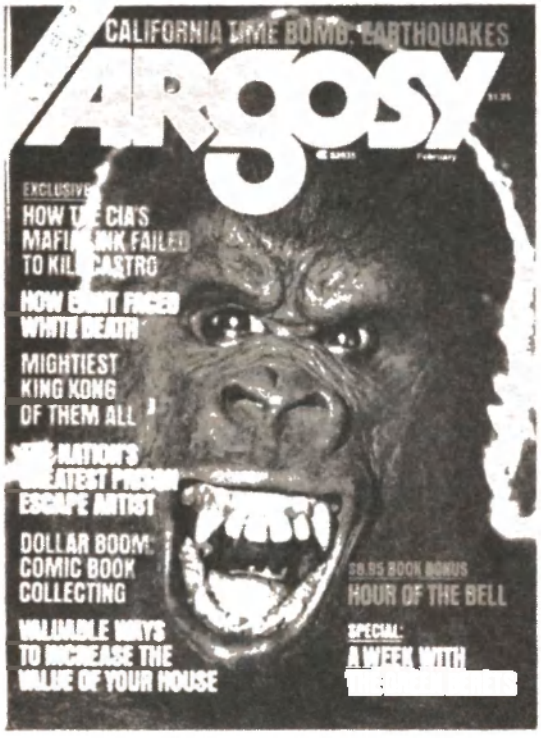


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**Green Light** *from page 20*

Son lay, then, in black, utter dark.

"Now then," said Teck. "Back to the ship, both of you."

The boys stumbled off across the broken ships. Son could see them, out in the glare beyond his prison shadow. Teck waited until their backs were well turned.

The beam of his heat gun flickered briefly, twice. Two crumpled shapes fell and were still. Teck turned, smiling tightly.

"No need to have a whole race of supermen." He inspected the spiderweb of metal ropes that bound Son, and nodded, satisfied.

"When you get hungry enough for energy, you'll tell me how to destroy the light. And then—" His hard dark face was cut deep with triumph, his eyes fierce with dreams.

"After I destroy the light, the aging process will stop. People will start to live again. And I'll be virtually a god, untouchable, impervious."

He laughed, softly and deep within him, rolling Son's head with his foot.

"You wouldn't know what that means, would you? Think it over while I'm down taking care of Ransome!"

He turned and slid down into the crevice.

Son cried out in anguish, "Aona!"

**The Veil, the darkness that was everywhere and** nowhere, that was all through the wheel and yet not of it, shimmered and swirled.

"Son! Son, what has happened?"

His mind had been too busy to tell her before. Now he hesitated, thinking of Teck clambering down to kill the man with the strength of the stars in him; thinking of Arun's agony and Greenough's fear and the tired face of the man he had killed; thinking most of all of the strange shining drops that ran from their eyes.

"Aona, what is age?"

"We had it, long ago. The legends hardly remember, except that it was ugly, and sad."

"What are years?" He tried to give her the thought as he had taken it from their minds. But the idea was so alien to him, the time-concept so vague in itself, that he couldn't make himself clear.

She said, "I don't know, Son."

"And Aona—what is death?"

"No one knows that, Son. It's like sleep, only one never wakens. But we live so long before it comes, there's time for everything. And even in the little part of our universe that's left, there are so many worlds to see."

Already, there in the shadow, he was hungry for the sun. He would starve for energy if he couldn't get free. He gathered himself to try . . .

And then, quite suddenly, it happened. The thing he'd waited all his life for. He looked into the shimmering blur of the Veil and cried, "Aona! Aona! I can see you!"

He surged against his ropes, aflame inside him with a joy like the fire of the sun itself.

The Veil was still there hiding most of Beyond. But it was clearer and thinner. He could see the slim, silver shaft of her standing against soft, blurred colors, could almost see the luminous brightness of her eyes.

"Oh darling," she cried. "Almost!"

Everything, all memory of the invaders and their alien troubles, left Son's mind. He stared hungrily into the Veil, watching the pale blur of her face steady, become clear.

"You're beautiful," he whispered. "Beautiful as a blue star."

"And you . . . Oh Son, go down to the Light. The force is strongest there. The Veil will pass more quickly."

"But I can't. I'm tied." He told her briefly what had happened.

She laughed. "You've changed since then. The ratio has changed. More of your atoms are vibrating in phase with my universe than with yours. From now on the change will be very swift. Try again!"

He tried, pitting his strength against the ropes. Slowly their resistance slackened. His wrists and ankles slid through them, as though they were heavy smoke.

He rose and shook himself, and looked once more at the wheel and the stars and the blazing sun. Then he turned to Aona, and a pulse of joy rose in him until he thought surely his head would burst.

He plunged downward, toward the Light.

---

**He stared hungrily into the Veil, watching the pale blur of her face become clear.**

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**He found that he had no need to clamber through the** broken ships. The matter of their metal walls resisted him as water resists a swimmer, no more. He went downward through the green light that grew stronger as he went, until it was like the water at the bottom of a green lake.

Aoan followed, running on little white feet across pale blue grass, with a great sweep of sky growing clearer behind her. Her silver draperies whipped in something she had called a wind. Her eyes were silvery, too, tilted with impish piquancy, and there was a crest of some feathery stuff on her head, burning red-gold like his own sun.

His mind shouted to hers and hers laughed back, and the barrier between their universes was growing thin.

It was almost a shock to Son to see Teck crawling through a doorway in the wrecked saloon of a liner, just above the Light itself.

Then he stepped in front of him, the thing they called a heat gun in his hand.

"Sit down, Arun."

"You heard Ransome's orders." The Tethysman was trembling.

"In the Martian Drylands, where I come from," murmured Teck, "men sometimes get what we call *esht*—desert-fear. They take other men's water and *vaards*, and run away. You're the engineer, Arun, and even without me to do the navigating. . . . Sit down, Arun."

The Tethysman sat, a fluid folding of thin length. The two round-faced boys stood by, not moving nor speaking, the fear so strong in their minds that Son could hear it shouting.

He saw and heard all this with a small part of his brain. Most of it was thinking of the Light and the men working their way down to the queer hole where it lay among the tangled ships.

This talk of age and years and dying and humanity meant nothing to him. In all his universe there was only himself, the wheel, the sun, the distant stars, and Aona. There was no day or night, no time.

He was angry and afraid, full of hatred and resentment and a queer tearing at his throat, as though he had lost some vital part of him—the Light. Were they going to take the horrible way of destruction that Aona had told him of? Or did they know another way?

He tensed his corded body against the metal ropes, and his mind cried out, "Aona!" as though he were seeing her vanish forever beyond the Veil.

**The Martian said, softly, "He used to be human. I** wonder . . ." He leaned forward suddenly. "Can you hear me?"

Son answered, "Yes." He was beginning to realize something. The mouth-movements of these men had something to do with speaking, and their clearest, loudest thoughts came with them.

Teck must have caught the motion of his eyes, for he cried out.

"Yes! But you can't speak, because you don't breathe air. Probably lost both lungs and vocal cords. You must be a telepath. I'll bet that's what you are!"

The Martian's dark-iron mask of a face was eager; his sullen eyes full of little sparks.

"You hear me think, is that it? Nod your head once, if you do."

Son hesitated, studying the men with narrow eyes. If he talked with them, he might find out how much they knew. He nodded.

Teck was quite still for a moment. Arun sat rigid, staring with eerie purple eyes at the Light.

"How long have you been here?" asked Teck.

Son shook his head.

"Where did you come from?" Again Son shook his head, and Teck asked, "You know no other place than this?"

Again the negative.

Teck drew a long breath.

"You must have been born here, then. In one of the first ships swept up by the magnetic force of this thing as it passed through the Solar System. Then your ship cannot have been wrecked. Probably the counter-pull of some planet saved it, as our new Elker drive saved us."

His deep eyes blazed. "Your body was the same as mine, once. How long would it take to change me to a being like you?"

Arun got up suddenly. "I've got to get back to the ship."

Teck's gun hand was steady. "Sit down!"

Arun's thought rose tightly. "But I've got to! Something's wrong—" Teck's gun thrust forward menacingly. Arun sat down again, slowly. The green light wavered around him, making his face curiously indistinct.

Teck's thought hammered at Son.

"You know what the light is?"

Son hesitated, sending Aona a rapid question.

Her mind said, "No! Don't tell, Son. It might help them destroy it."

He shook his head. "No."

Teck's lips drew back. "You're lying," he said, and then whirled around, his dark hard face taut.

Arun had risen, and the single wild shriek in his mind stabbed Son's brain so that he writhed in his shackles.

The two boys backed off, their faces white and staring. Even Teck drew back a bit, and his gun hand trembled.

Arun was changing. Son watched tensely, forgetting for a moment even his agony of fear for the Light.

The lines of the green, smooth face of the Tethysman blurred and shifted in the green light, like something seen under water. Strange, writhing terrors shook his body.

His mind cried out with his moving lips: "Something's happening to me. Oh, God! And all for nothing . . ."

He staggered forward. His eyes were night-black and luminous, horribly steady in that blurred face, fixed on Son.

Son knew, lying there chained, that he was in deadly peril. Because Arun was on his own plane, though a little past him.

"All for nothing—mankind lost," wailed the thought-voice. "I'm going blind. No. *No!* I'm seeing—*through* . . ."

His scream shivered cold as space along Son's nerve-channels. The tall, rubbery form loomed over him, bending closer . . .

**One of the boys fainted quietly, rolling like an ungainly** bundle into a deep shaft between two wrecks. Teck caught his breath.

"I'm not through with him yet," he muttered, and raised his gun.

The glassite helmet melted and ran. The head and the glowing purple eyes beneath it were untouched.

And then no one moved, nor spoke. Arun's head and face quivered, merging imperceptibly into the blurred darkness of the Veil.

Aona cried out suddenly, "He's coming through!" And then, "No!" The change was too swift. Too many atoms in transition. He's caught . . ."

Shivering against Son's mind, like the single wild shaft of a distant comet, came Arun's thought.

"No, not here! Not here—*between!*"

And then he was gone. His space suit crumpled down, quite empty.

Teck swayed, the dark hardness of his face bleached and rigid. "What did he mean—'between'?"

Son lay quite still, hearing Aona sob beyond the Veil. He knew. Aona had told him. Between universes—the darkness, the nothingness, the nowhere. He felt the cold dark crawling in his mind.

Teck laughed suddenly, biting and defiant. His deep eyes were fixed on Son, sprawled like a young god in the raw blaze of the sun.

"By the gods," he whispered, "it's worth the risk!"

Greenough came stumbling up out of the crevice.

**There was something terrible and unholy in that child's shallow-eyed face on a man's strong body.**

He looked more like a child than ever. His round face was dazed and bewildered, screwed up strangely. Even to Son, there was something terrible and unholy in that child's shallow-eyed face on a man's strong body.

Teck drew a slow breath. Son felt a dark, iron strength in him, different from the strength of the bronzed Ransome, that was like the beat of space itself, but great, too. Great and dangerous.

"What did you find out?" asked Teck. "Where's Ransome?"

Son's brain burned within him with fear, though he saw that the green Light was still unchanged.

"Down there," said Greenough, and whimpered. He blinked his eyes, moving his head and pawing at his helmet as though to clear it.

"I only looked at it a minute. It was too little and too big all at once, and I was frightened."

Teck caught him by the shoulders and shook him roughly. "Looked at what?" he demanded. "What's happened?"

"At the light," said Greenough, in a far-away voice. "We found it inside a ship. We could look right through the metal. I only looked a minute because I was frightened. I was frightened, I was . . ."

Teck's strong hands snapped his teeth together. "What was it?"

Greenough's shallow eyes wandered to his. "Ransome says it's part of another universe. He's still there, looking. Only . . ."

Greenough's voice broke in a little hiccough. "Only he can't see any more."

Son felt a great surge of relief. The Light was safe, so far.

Greenough slipped suddenly from Teck's hands, sitting wide-legged on the battered hull.

"I'm scared," he said. "I want Mama." Big slow drops ran down his cheeks, and again Son was stirred by something deep and strange.

Teck turned slowly to Son. "He was six years old when the Cloud came. You can build a man's body in eleven years, but not his brain." He was silent, looking down with deep, intense eyes.

**He spoke, after a bit, slowly and deliberately.**

"So it's part of another universe. Diluted by distance, its radiation speeds human metabolism, causing swift age. Concentrated, it changes the human organism into an alien metabolism, alien flesh.

"Slim almost made it through, but his peculiar chemical balance destroyed him. You must be in the same transition stage, but much slower, being passed by the changing of your basic vibratory rate into another space-time continuum."

Son couldn't hide the sudden flicker in his eyes. He hated this dark Martian suddenly, this man who guessed so much.

"So it's true," said Teck. "Confirmation of the old conception of coexisting universes on different vibratory planes. But how would you know, unless—unless you can talk to that other universe?"

He laughed at the bitter look in Son's blue eyes.

"Afraid, aren't you? That means you have something to hide, or protect." He dropped suddenly to one knee, catching his fingers in Son's fair hair.

"Look at me. I want to watch your eyes. You do know what that light is, and how it can be destroyed. If I could get a body like yours, and still not cross over . . .

"Do you feed on the green light, or the sun?"

The question came so quickly that Son's eyes flicked to the canopy of fire overhead, before he could stop them. Teck sat back on his heels with a long, slow sigh.

"That's all I needed," he murmured. "Your friends on the other side evidently can't help you, or you'd be free now." He rose abruptly. "Greenough! You, there, sailor! Help me get thise loose hull-section over here."

The two pale, empty-eyed boys rose obediently and helped. The heavy metal plates, uptilted by the force of the original crash, were not far from Son. They had only to heat the bottom with cutting torches and bend it.

Ransome crouched on the deck before him, his back turned, quite still.

The Martian's hard lips smiled. He drew his heat gun.

Son stopped, the sheer happiness of the moment shattered. His dark hatred for this man came back, his instinctive loathing of what the fingers of his mind had brushed against in Teck's brain. Also, dimly, it had to do with Ransome.

Hardly realizing what he was doing, he sprang at Teck.

His arm sheared harmlessly through the matter of Teck's helmet and head. Son realized then that he had no more power over the stuff of his universe.

But Teck started and cried out, and his aim was spoiled. The heat beam flicked across Ransome's shoulder, melting a little hole in the fabric of his space suit.

The Martian's sullen, fiery eyes were wide.

**"So humanity dies, because one of its sons has no concept of time."**

"You've changed," he whispered. "Like Arun. I can see through you."

Then, furiously he shouted, "Damn you! *Look out!*"

He lurched sideways, but he was just too late. A searching tongue of heat ranged across him, across Son and the metal wall behind him, leaving a little molten trail. It rose and fell methodically, weaving a net of death across that whole space.

Teck's space suit collapsed. Son witnessed again, this time with a curious satisfaction, the disruption of an alien organism.

Alien. Yes. And yet . . .

He turned to see Ransome crouched on one knee, holding the shoulder of his suit with one hand and the heat gun—not firing now—in the other.

His eyes were open, but they didn't see. Son knew what had happened. Ransome had looked too long at the Light, and the distances, the planes and angles and curves of it had pulled his sight too far.

Son said, "He's dead."

Ransome nodded. "I heard his mind die. This thing down here—I can hear you, too. I couldn't, up there."

A strange, subtle thrill crept along Son's consciousness. Something in him reached out to that mind, strong even now, strong as the pulse-beat of space.

"You're not bad," said Ransome. "You just don't understand. I don't suppose you could, although you were human once."

He dropped the gun, as though it didn't matter any more. "I'm going to die, you know. There's a hole in my suit. In a few minutes the air will leak out. But there's no time here, is there? And you've forgotten, what air is, or why I need it."

The bronzed, grim face smiled, but it was not humorous. "So humanity dies, because one of its sons has no conception of time."

**Son!" It was Aona calling, peering through the thinning** Veil.

Ransome lifted his head. "Who's that?"

Son said. "It's Aona. She's waiting for me." His surroundings were getting indistinct.

The Veil was passing.

"Aona. Someone you love. Son—that's what she called you, isn't it? Son, what is this light? Where did it come from?"

The strength of Ransome's mind was bright and terrible. It was like the fire of a dying star.

"It's—Aona, you tell him." Son's thoughts were strangely chaotic.

"It's a part of my universe," she said slowly. There was a quality of stillness in her thought, a subtle forerunner of fear. "Something happened, in one small corner of space, to the electrical tension that holds the fabric of the universe together. There was a release of energy so unthinkably vast . . ."

Her burning crest drooped as she shivered. "Scraps of our universe were hurled right through the walls of vibration that separate us from other spacetime continua. Only a very little bit of ours survived.

"The bit of our universe in yours, vibrating at a different basic rate, makes a sort of bridge between us, by altering atomic speeds. Son has changed almost completely. Only a few of his atoms now vibrate in phase with your universe."

Ransome nodded. "And that alien vibration is destroying us. Can't you take it back?"

Aona shook her glowing head. "We could not possibly generate enough energy to draw it back." Her silvery, tilted eyes went to Son, and the terror in them stabbed him.

"I hear you," said Ransome softly. "Then there is a way."

Aona whispered, "Yes."

All Son's being went out to her. And yet, some tiny scrap of his mind clung to Ransome's, as though to something he must not lose.

"I don't understand," he said slowly. "Years, age, time—they mean nothing."

"No." Ransome's grim dark head strained back in his helmet. His face was veined and glistening with sweat.

"Think of it this way. You love Aona. She's

beautiful—I can hear that in your mind. Suppose that now, while you looked at her, she were to wither and crumple and die . . ."

He broke off, as though fighting for strength. Not the pulsing strength of his mind, but the power of his body. When his thought came again, it was weaker.

"Look at your own body, Son. Think of it, now, growing weak and ugly and bent . . ."

He staggered up suddenly, his eyes like the last embers of a dying sun, fixed on nothingness.

"You're mankind's only hope, Son. Son. Remember the people who called you that. They were human. Remember. Son—of humanity."

Ransome's suit collapsed with a rush. Son shut his eyes.

"Son," he whispered. "His thought said—" He couldn't phrase it clearly, only that it meant coming from something, being a part of it, as he, already, was part of Aona.

**He plunged off, rushing through the dissolving matter of his universe.**

And Aona whispered, "I feel it growing in your mind. Oh, Son . . ."

He could see the flowers around her feet now, the distant fires of some great sun. A strange tremor shook his body, a shifting and changing. The Veil was thinner.

"Son, they're not your people any longer. You couldn't even understand."

"No. No, but I could *feel*." He turned abruptly. "There's something I have to do. Quickly."

He plunged off, rushing through the dissolving matter of his universe. Up, and into the ship he thought of as his, though he had left it long ago. He hated it, down here away from the sun.

Aona followed him, her feet like little, white stars in the grass.

**Things grew dimmer, more vague. Son had only to** wait, to put off thinking until it was too late. But something drove him on.

Presently, he stood in the cabin of his ship, looking down at the still effigies. The people who had called him Son.

He shivered with something more than the shock of change. These still faces—Dickson's face, and Arun's, and Ransome's.

These still shapes, that had touched him and called him Son and shed queer, shining drops from their eyes. Something caught at him, wrung him so that he cried out.

"I don't want to. Aona, I don't want to. But I must!"

Her thought was a mere tremor across his mind. "I think I knew, when he spoke to you. I try to think, if they were my people, suffering and dying—"

"I don't want to, Aona. But he said—Son of humanity."

Only to postpone, to wait until it was too late. The Veil was so thin. Son beat his hands together, very softly. Then, blindly, he rushed back toward the Light.

Something had got hold of him, was driving him. He knew it was right. But he wanted to fight it, to hold it off until it couldn't hurt him.

And he was afraid.

He stopped in the ship above the Light where Ransome lay dead. He raised his corded arms and cried, "No! I can't. I don't understand!"

He saw Aona watching him on her shining hilltop, not moving or speaking. And slow, silver drops rolled from her tilted eyes and down her cheeks.

Then he knew. Then he was calm and steady, and not very much afraid. Because he understood why the bright drops had rolled from the eyes of the strange men.

He smiled at Aona. He took a long, sweeping look at the sun and the sky and the blowing grass, and the silver shaft of her standing in the midst of it.

Then he went slowly down toward the Light.

He knew what would happen. Aona had told him. Most of his substance was in her universe now. Part of it was still in his own. But there were atoms in him just changing. Atoms that were—Between.

Because of the atoms that matched its own, he could penetrate the Light. The atoms in transition would set up a vibration in the Light that had not been in Son, because of the balancing pull of two universes.

The vibratory balance of the Light would be destroyed, because Son's universe had no hold on it. It would be pushed back through the wall of that universe, but not back to its own.

A little green roundness that could be held in his hand, that yet was not round at all and that stretched into soaring distance. Color and line and form that melted and flowed and were not.

Son went, without stopping, straight into the heart of the Light.

For an instant, or an eternity, he was lost in chaos. He knew nothing—whether he moved or was still, whether he saw the black-green rushing darkness or whether it was only the picture of his own fear.

He didn't fight. He caught only two things to him in his mind—Ransome's strength and Aona, standing on her shining hilltop.

An instant, or an eternity. And then there was stillness, a cessation. Son opened his eyes and looked about—at the space Between. ●

was committed from the time the *Lady* lifted from Tycho. Slowly, very slowly, the velocity built up. Nine thousand. Ninety three hundred. Joe watched the tube temperatures with pounding heart. They were riding the red lines and rising fast. Bullis' communication light was flashing angrily, demanding his attention. Joe ignored it.

An hour passed. Two. The *Lady* groaned with an effort that had never been built into her. Sweat streaked Cannon's face as the velocity inched higher with agonizing slowness. Ten thousand five hundred meters per second—and the tube temperatures well into the red danger zones. If the tubes melted, the *Queen* and the *Lady* were finished. Joe didn't want to let himself think of what it would be like to plunge into the Sun. The very thought brought icy sweat to his face. Bullis' light still flashed. *I'll have to talk to him*, thought Joe. *May as well get it over with.*

"Captain Bullis, this is Cannon—"

The Captain's voice sounded strangely febrile and unsteady, but cold with hell's own fury.

"All right, Cannon," the intercom said weakly, "You've gotten your way and killed us all. If the acceleration doesn't finish us, Sol will. We're committed to your perihelion orbit. Start . . . talking . . ."

"I'm not going to start telling you how sorry I am, if that's what you mean," Cannon said shakily, "Maybe I'm wrong and maybe not, but here goes. Get this. I'm pushing the bazooka for all she's got. If I can get twelve thousand meters per second out of her, we're in business. The *Queen* is good for twenty in space and that'll be enough to get us through outside to Roche's Limit. . . ." Joe found himself talking fast and not wanting to think about what a small mistake in calculation would mean. "When I get to twelve, we'll cut the *Lady* free, and—"

"And I'll take you aboard, is that it?" Bullis spoke as though the words were icy droplets on his tongue.

"I . . . well. . . ." Joe swallowed hard. "Yes, Captain. That's about it."

"Your figures check—on paper," Bullis said faintly. "Since there's nothing else to be done, we'll have to try it." He paused. "But Cannon—"

"What is it?"

"If . . . I'm alive when . . . you step aboard this . . . ship—I'm going to . . . beat the living hell out of you. . . ."

Joe grinned in spite of himself. "It's a date," he said.

**Outside the ships, the black night of space keened** silently. It seemed to be waiting, Joe Cannon thought, for one mistake. One error, however small, so that it could claim the human lives within the shells of the *Queen* and the *Lady* for its personal prizes.

As the hours passed, the abused power plant of the *Gay Lady* moaned. The speed stood steady at eleven thousand meters per second, flat out, and it refused to rise further. Cannon, space-suited now, and ready for the jump into the *Queen*, lay in the harness, staring at the instruments before him in frustration. It had never occurred to him that the *Lady* would fail. Eleven thousand. Not enough. Not enough by one thousand. Joe choked back the bitter taste of failure that crowded into his throat.

No! There had to be a way! Cannon glared at the unresponsive dials. One thousand meters. He looked away, around the cluttered interior of the straining bazooka. She wouldn't hold together much longer. Already, her seams were parting here and there under the strain and the air pressure in the cabin was dropping—

*Air pressure!* Without daring to let himself hope he sprang into action. The atmosphere cylinders were stacked near the valve. He snatched the small repair torch and slammed the faceplate on his helmet.

Within seconds, he was outside on the hull, clinging to the metal with magnetic shoes and welding fast a cylinder to the plates. All around him the black night of Outside loomed vast and incredibly lonely. The Sun blazed hungrily far below, dimming by comparison the flickering light of the *Lady's* tubes.

Ten times Cannon returned to the interior of the ship, each time for a cylinder that was welded securely just above the flaming drive-tubes surrounding the *Lady*.

When at last it was done, Joe inched around the circumference of the *Lady*, setting improvised nozzles of alloy tubing so that their open ends rode just above the atomic fire of the drives.

He wished fervently for some sort of remote control system, but there was none. This trick had to be turned by hand. Joe Cannon's hand.

He swallowed hard and opened the valve on the first cylinder. A jet of liquid oxygen shot from the improvised nozzle and into the roaring blast of the tubes. The universe seemed to vanish in a white gout of fire. The *Lady* trembled to the violence of oxy-atomic fission. Joe fell backward, clinging to the hull plates. He could feel the ship's slight increase in speed. He was on the right track! Quickly he moved from cylinder to cylinder, spilling liquid oxygen into the exhaust of the tubes. The *Lady* trembled her protest, and the stern hull plates, unable to withstand the heat of the reinforced flame, began to melt.

Joe staggered back into the control room. The velocity was increasing. Eleven thousand five hundred. He stuffed the stolen gravitiniliphine into the outer pockets of his suit and made ready to move quickly. The needle climbed higher. Eleven thousand eight hundred.

The control room was suddenly insufferably hot. The progressive melting of the stern plates was becoming faster, superheating the whole ship.

Then suddenly, with the sound of a lava blister bursting, the tortured metal gave way. A jagged hole appeared for one insane instant, outlining the nebulous streak of the Milky Way. Then the contents of the *Lady*, Joe Cannon among them, went spilling out into space, her atmosphere freezing into globules of ice that joined the cloud of debris circling her and the *Queen* like a ring of moonlets.

The blowout did it. With her last life, the *Lady* pushed the *Queen* up to twelve thousand. Fighting his way through the spinning debris, Joe Cannon knew it. The orbit would work. The proper velocity had been attained. He was laughing with hysterical glee as he banged on the airlock of the *Martian Queen*.

The Lady fell away as the *Queen's* tubes flared into life. Joe saw her drop back from his perch near the *Queen's* valve. This was the first trip, he thought grandiosely, on a route that one day men would call Cannon's Orbit!

There would be ships designed for it. A new Company, perhaps, offering quick trips to Mars and Europa by skirting Roche's Limit—well Sunward of Mercury. There would be a fancy name for it, too. Something simple, but appropriate—*Transmercurian!*

**Joe clung to the *Queen's* outer plates banging with his** armored fists on the valve. There was no response. Joe felt his enthusiasm flag. Was it possible, he asked himself, that Bullis would leave him out here to die like a dog just because he had taken a few necessary liberties?

He banged harder. The night of space seemed to leer hungrily at him, and he felt very small and lonely. Still the lock remained adamant.

After what seemed a long, long time, a crack of light split the starlit gloom. The valve was swinging open—very slowly. Joe clambered into the *Queen* filled with unease and misgivings. He had thought the problems were over, but suddenly it came to him that he had overlooked something important—something *very* important—in his rash desire to prove the orbit. . . .

Bullis was waiting for him—alone. He stood in the glare of the flurotubes, a crumbling wraith. His face was grey and emaciated and he rocked back and forth unsteadily on his feet. Cannon knew that look. It was acceleration sickness. Bullis had taken too much for too long without the proper protection of graviniliphine.

Cannon felt the blood drain out of him, leaving him stunned and cold. In his haste and eagerness, he had almost killed Bullis. And Bullis hadn't complained—feeling that once they were commmitted to Cannon's orbit, life-saving graviniliphine was forever out of reach!

Bullis took a step forward, half-falling. Cannon didn't know whether or not the man was trying to hit him. He felt sick, wishing Bullis *could* hit him—hit him hard enough to beat some sense into his head.

Bullis sprawled out at Cannon's feet, his mouth working spasmodically. "Crew—help my . . . crew . . ." he gasped.

Then Cannon was on his knees, stripping off the wrapping that held the graviniliphine ampules, breaking out a sterile needle, and thrusting the stuff into Bullis' emaciated arm.

Cannon stayed on his knees, too, for the rest of the trip. Bullis, weak and lachrymose from the drug, helped him dose the rest of the *Queen's* people, but Cannon never forgot how near he'd come to killing those spacemen. An oversight, they told him jokingly, but Cannon could feel their thoughts. A clown. That's what they were thinking, he was sure of it. It had been a near thing. So for the rest of the trip, Cannon stayed on his knees—figuratively, of course. Actually, he was in the brig.

It was after the *Queen* was safely down and the medical supplies on their way to Europa that Captain Bullis let Cannon out and took him into his cabin.

"Cannon, my boy," Bullis said, "That was a great piece of astrogation you did. I must admit it. Rash and ill-advised, perhaps, but mathematically perfect."

Cannon's spirits began to rise.

"Of course," Bullis continued, "You almost wrecked my ship, you did wreck yours and you almost killed my men." He paused, still weak, Cannon thought, from his bout with acceleration sickness. "However, I do appreciate the fact that we got the job done. That's the important thing, isn't it?"

Cannon beamed. "Yes, sir."

"You should be rewarded," Bullis told him.

Cannon shrugged modestly. "Really, Captain—"

"I insist."

"Well, then—" Joe, rashly, put out his hand.

Bullis swung. His fist connected with the point of Cannon's jaw and sent him sprawling. Cannon got to his feet. Bullis knocked him down again.

He stood over him, but Cannon stayed where he was. Wisely. Bullis wasn't as weak as he had thought.

"It worked this once, Cannon," Bullis said. "By the grace of the gods of space. But next time—if there ever is a next time for you—*think. Think, dammit!*"

Cannon thought. He spent a long time thinking. About the orbit and what it would take to make it safe and practicable. Bullis helped, too. Not with fists, though he probably felt like it many times. He rode herd on Cannon unmercifully. It was the beginning of a painful friendship for Joe.

Painful, but rewarding.

Transmercurian runs regular perihelion flights now. Cargo, mail and sometimes passengers—if they can stand the mammoth dosages of graviniliphine the acceleration makes necessary.

Cannon and Bullis are partners in the line and doing well, but there's one thing they never talk about. Other men can discuss the beginning of their friendship rationally. Cannon always feels like ducking when Bullis mentions theirs. That first handshake was a thrill Cannon won't ever forget. His jaw still aches when he thinks of it. ●

**Doom Ship** *from page 35*

Lefty swore frantically. He played the ray with reckless abandon, maneuvering himself *inside* the ship.

Now . . . he gripped the gun-butt.

Stiff with fear, he waited. Senses spun. He concentrated, taxing his mind and his muscles.

Slowly objects took shape around him. The soft sheen of burnished metal streaked his vision now. And through it the portholes of the liner *Tripoli*, floating, detached dots of light. Lefty waited, straining and thinking. He fingered the rocket gun. He tightened dry lips. The hull took shape around him.

Who were these silent, flickering invaders? Where were they? He itched and craved to see them, to tear and maim them. He waited grimly.

It seemed a long time. The hull took shape too slowly. It seemed to hang in his vision, shimmering, and wouldn't grow solid.

Maybe Pladgett had guessed. He was shrewd and cynical. But how could he? How could anyone?

The heat was going out of Lefty's suit. He could feel it escaping.

Then he saw, as though in a dream, the *Tripoli's* jets flare out. They burst in a glory of flame.

"Great Jupiter!" he choked. "She's under way—"

And he watched, with strange detached curiosity, as the *Tripoli* began forging ahead. It gathered speed and pulled rapidly away, trailing a livid wake. Soon it was a speck in black velvet space, and then even that winking out.

Lefty felt afraid.

He could see nothing. He seemed alone in the universe. All around him stretched utter, deserted blackness.

He felt the cold of space seeping in.

---

**Who were these silent, flickering invaders? Where were they?**

---

**Voices. He heard them, coming scratchily from all sides,** chattering in his earphones, welling from empty space.

"After them, imbeciles!"

Plaintively, "But it's impossible, master. Impossible to budge—unless the object moves away. We're wedged between dimensions!"

Lefty's pulse hammered.

"Drivel! What object inhabits empty space?" Scratchy growls in his earphone disks. "Haven't we shuttled back and forth at will?"

"We don't know. We only—"

He could see them more plainly now. Cruel-faced men with gray skin of weathered slate, contorted in the nebulous fog.

"Pack of imbeciles! Break through!"

Lefty's legs quivered. A wad of dust obstructed his throat.

Silence. Complete.

He concentrated, painfully, until ice drops of sweat moistened his brow. That babble—of dimensions. Marauders from another space . . . wedged between dimensions. Because of an object.

"There, master! Floating in space! A man!" A rusty-hinge gasp. "Blocked us in mid-transition. See—he's almost visible now."

A gaping, saw-toothed visage waved eerily before Lefty's eyes.

"How in the name of— Back idiots!"

"We cannot budge, master. Two objects cannot occupy the same space at—"

Lefty started, bruising his skull on the plastic helmet dome. A man . . . that was himself! He, Lefty, was holding off the devils. Holding them trapped between dimensions!

By heaven, Pladgett *had* been a fool! They had all been fools. There *were* pirates.

Atomic radiation performed strange surgeries. It did unpredictable things. There was the famous space pilot who became sensitive to radio frequencies after a blast of it. Lefty could see things that no one else could see.

"Another minute, fools—we'd have paralyzed them."

Teeth clicking in a frozen laugh, Lefty gloated. He lifted his gun to fire a mocking bolt through the nebulous ship.

Then, afar off, a pinpoint of light appeared. Approaching. Growing and assuming shape.

The *Tripoli!*

**Shivering, Lefty watched the ship swing in a tremendous** arc, and begin scouring the area.

"More power, idiots!"

Lefty thought, *They can't move. Not while I'm here.* . . .

The *Tripoli* sniffed space like a Martian hound.

. . . *If I flare this rocket, Torso will see it and rush to pick me up. Then* . . .

"Impossible, Master."

"Again! Blazes! We'll not only ransack the cargo, we'll blast them to atoms!"

The *Tripoli* suddenly stopped. It swung around, flamed red and streaked toward him on a line. Torso had spotted him.

The *Tripoli* hove to, popped open an airlock and tossed out a lifeboat.

Lefty waved frantic arms.

But the little boat came on, tubes flaring daintily.

With a choke of desperation, Lefty raised the rocket and triggered. A bolt sizzled across the lifeboat's prow.

The boat slowed, hesitated, and came on. A man hunched under the plastic bubble—Pladgett!

Lefty groaned. He took murderous aim.

Hot bolts sliced grooves in the plastic canopy.

The boat stopped dead. Lefty's earphones crackled and sputtered.

"It's all right, Lefty," Pladgett's voice soothed. "It's me, Pladgett."

Gloating babble rose around Lefty. They'd detected Pladgett. Could see him.

"The red ship!" he screamed, distracted.

"Sure," said Pladgett nervously. "Sure. You're holding off the red ship." He swiveled his head searchingly from side to side. "But you've done enough now. Plenty. Come aboard."

Lefty's limbs felt brittle as glass. Should he permit Pladgett to rescue him? Then quickly train the *Tripoli's* guns on these menacing devils and hope to stop them?

There was warmth aboard the Tripoli.

"Imbeciles! Hold up! A rescue is pending." Harsh laughter.

But the devils would get through. They'd get through fast. And this time they might destroy the *Tripoli*. Lefty moaned against the marrow-grinding cold and made his decision.

He slowly, sadly leveled the rocket, dead on the lifeboat's canopy.

"Don't slide an inch nearer, Pladgett."

The lifeboat hung in space, a scant fifteen yards away.

"Commander Pladgett!" the earphones bellowed. "Come aboard!"

Pladgett's face showed anxiously through the clear plastic canopy. All the arrogance was gone from it. "I don't know, Captain," he muttered. "I think . . . there's something out there."

"You've had your ten minutes!" the captain roared. "You've shown us you can navigate. Come aboard at once!"

Lefty waited. "Beat it, Commander," he growled calmly. "Captain's orders."

"You pack a hard wallop, Lefty," Pladgett said. He swung the boat slowly. "I know you can hold them off. So long, Lefty."

Cries of rage welled from the red ship.

"So long," Lefty said.

He watched the small boat, until it was gulped up by the *Tripoli's* air lock. Then the great ship, jets howling, swung ponderously, boiled space to white heat and swirled away on a hot orange wake.

Lefty tried to lift an arm in salute. But it was frozen and would not flex.

Never mind. He didn't have to move. He had only to stay here, now, and the red ship would stay with him.

He no longer felt the cold of space.

Lefty settled himself. "Maybe now," he said, smiling at the pain-free numbness of his flesh and the awed silence about him, "I can have a long, peaceful sleep." ●

**Half Past Fear** *from page 25*

Mrs. Childs walked shakily to the front door, opened it. The young man tipped his hat. She noticed the same strangeness about his clothes.

"I'd like to see Vincent Deem, please."

Mrs. Childs clutched the door frame.

"Who is it?" Deem shouted.

The young man had a gun in his hand. He pushed past Mrs. Childs into the living room.

"Steady, Deem," he said.

The big man seemed to lose his strength. The gun sagged. The roses lay on the floor by his feet. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I came through the machine. I've been here since yesterday, hunting you. I've checked everywhere. Finally, the market down the street gave me your address. I've come to take you back to stand trial."

"You can't make me go," Deem said calmly. "I know you can't. I'm here now."

The young man shook his head. "I checked the records here in the city. You were in an insane asylum until three years after the Great War. Then you tried to escape. You were killed. That means you went back."

"No," Deem shouted, "no, I'm here now. . . ."

"You've got to go back. Your death is already recorded."

Deem took a lunging step toward Mrs. Childs. The young man shouted. David grabbed Deem and struggled with him for a minute. Sari began to cry. Deem's gun went off.

And he fell on top of the roses and lay bleeding on them.

David took his wife in his arms.

The young man sent Sari upstairs.

"I don't understand it," David mumbled. "The death was recorded."

"Time is strange," the young man said clumsily. "Travel in time. Paradoxes. . . ."

"You'll be all right," David said to his wife, his arm around her.

"Twice dead, and the roses," she kept repeating, "twice dead, and the roses. . . ." ●

**Lost Content** *from page 14*

get away. Good luck."

There was a murmur of voices. Men and women filed out of the room, smiles on their faces. Brighton was proud of them. He put his arm around Lynna and read approval in the Old Man's eyes. He stood silently, gazing into the fire, thinking.

**He faced them all with a resolved determination in his lonely eyes—eyes that were lonely for the life he had never lived, the world he had never known.**

**While the world was still hushed with sleep, Brighton led** them out. Seventeen shadows filed through a ghost world they were leaving forever, loaded down with all that they could carry. They were careful to make no sound. Furtively, almost holding their breaths, they slipped through the world like sleep-walkers in a sleeping land.

Brighton set a fast pace through the twisted tunnels. No one complained. The dark figures picked their way steadily through the rocks, their flaming torches throwing crawling shadows on the wet walls of the world. Voices murmured, and echoes crept back and forth, chasing themselves through the dead tunnels.

Brighton led them on, his eyes restless in the uncertain light. The sounds of clambering feet almost concealed the cold, distant drip of water—but he could still hear it. It trickled relentlessly in his brain. He was tired, and he knew that the others would have to stop and rest. He stopped them in a small alcove and watched with burning eyes as they collapsed in exhaustion on the hard rocks. He forced himself to stay awake, his hand on Lynna's shoulder as she slept.

Unasked, Wilson sat up with him, shivering. Brighton looked at the prone figure of the Old Man. He was pathetic in his weakness, and yet, even in sleep, his strength was evident. He had said nothing since their flight, but had kept up wordlessly. Brighton wondered about him—the one man who had understood him best. How long could he last? What kept him going? Would he ever see the world of his dreams?

"How much further?" Wilson asked.

"We should make it in a few hours now," Brighton said.

"Do you think we can really get through?"

"I don't know. We have a chance."

"What if we break through and find that the world is still deadly, the way it was when the gods fled from it?"

"Well, if it is we won't have much time to worry about it," Brighton smiled. "We'll have to wait and see; that's all."

Wilson yawned and gazed blankly at the darkness around them. Brighton watched him with tired eyes. He was a good man, Wilson. He deserved something better than death. Brighton felt sick inside. Could he bring them through, all of them? Or was he leading them only to suicide? The blind leading the blind! He shook his head and pressed his fingers to his throbbing temples. It was hard to keep awake—he noticed that Wilson was dozing now. He was alone.

Brighton stuck it out for five hours and then he got the others up. They yawned and trembled in the chill of the caves. They looked at the darkness around them and listened to the cold drip of the water. They didn't know that Brighton had not had any rest. They swallowed some food concentrates and drank some water.

They went on.

When they stumbled into the blocked tunnel that marked the end of the world that they had known, Brighton wasted no time. He was numb with exhaustion and his eyes were streaked with red, but he drove his unwilling brain to think clearly. He divided the men and women into shifts and instructed them in clearing away the choking rocks. He got the work started and left word that he was to be called at the first sign of anything unusual. Then he found a welcome hollow in the wall of the world and surrendered himself to instantaneous sleep.

Brighton's sleep was a strange fantasy of white emptiness across which black splotches of sound marched from the world around him. He was aware of, but did not hear, the disembodied mutter of voices, the clatter of rocks, the clank of tools.

The hours whispered by, until the white blankness became alive with black spots that whirled and expanded and grew into oceans of black through which poured currents of phantom sound. Something. . . .

"Brighton!"

"Wake up, Brighton. Wake up, wake up, wake—"

He moaned and rolled over on the damp rocks.

"Brighton—the people, the Council! They're coming!"

Sleep vanished as if it had never been; consciousness hit Brighton like a splash of cold water. He leaped to his feet, senses acutely alert.

**It was true. Someone was coming. He could hear the** sounds of voices and scuffling feet. He turned to James, who had awakened him.

"Quickly now! How many of them are there?"

"About a hundred, I think." James' voice was frightened, nervous. "That's what Hayes said; he saw them first."

Brighton nodded, surprised at his own calm.

"Come on," he said, working his way back to the others. They stood among heaps of excavated rock, waiting for him. There was no panic, but they looked uncertain. He took over, reassuring them with his

confidence.

"Take it easy," he told them. "We can handle anything they can throw at us."

*Can we?* a voice within him whispered.

"Two of you hide in the rocks on each side. The rest of you line up. Grab anything that you can use as a weapon. Don't do anything until I give the word."

*It's five to one against us if they fight.*

"Now just hang on—don't worry."

*What if we lose: What if we lose?*

They waited.

The light of their torches preceded the men from the Council. The sound of their voices became an ominous, muted rumble. Wentworth came into view, with the others behind him. Brighton couldn't count them all.

"We've got the Decree of Council," Wentworth said smugly. "We're not going to let you defy the gods and destroy the world!"

The others roared their approval.

"You've got five minutes to get out of here," Brighton told him flatly. There was no hint of his inner anxiety in his voice.

Wentworth laughed—fat, pompous, dead-white, "You're not bluffing us, Brighton! We're five to one against you. Maybe you don't like this world, but we do—and we intend to go living with it. You're not going to kill us with your wild ideas!"

The others pressed forward behind him, shouting.

"We're not bluffing," Brighton said coldly. Something wihin him laughed at this patent lie. "If you come any closer not one of you will live ten seconds."

Wentworth hesitated and Brighton knew that he had to follow through with something—anything. It was now or never. He tried to relax his tense muscles and motioned the others to stay where they were. He advanced toward Wentworth alone, his closed hand, palm upward, outstretched.

"We're not bluffing," Brighton repeated, walking slowly forward. "Before you murder yourself and everyone with you I think you'd better have a look at what I have in my hand. Not all the old weapons were lost. We've found some of them, and we're ready to use them."

Wentworth watched him uncertainly. Would it work? Brighton knew that the centuries of dull lethargy had not been without effect; these people had no stomach for a real fight. Wentworth couldn't be *sure* that there was nothing in his hand—and Wentworth was anything but eager to risk Wentworth's life.

Brighton stopped when he was still several paces from Wentworth. His hand remained outstretched, but at too high an angle to enable Wentworth to see anything clearly. He was cool now; he had himself under control. He isolated the corner of his mind that was a black pit of fear. He refused to think about what would happen if he failed.

"Have a look, Wentworth," he said softly. "Have a look and then see how much fighting you want to do."

In spite of himself, Wentworth edged closer. "You haven't got anything in your hand," he said without conviction.

"You'd better have a look, Wentworth. In two minutes my men will use their weapons. Have you ever seen a man burned to a black cinder?"

There was silence except for the nervous breathing of the men. Wentworth was afraid to move closer and Brighton stood where he was, waiting.

"One minute, Wentworth," Brighton said.

**One minute there was the interminable rock ahead of them and the next—light.**

The men behind Wentworth murmured uncertainly. Wentworth moved closer hesitantly, straining to see what was in Brighton's hand. Brighton waited until exactly the right moment. Then, with desperate speed, he took one quick step forward, caught Wentworth's fat shoulder with his outstretched hand, and spun him around. Wentworth shrieked and Brighton whipped his right arm into an iron lock around his neck. His left hand unsheathed his knife and pressed the sharp blade into Wentworth's flabby neck until the blood came. The thing was all over in seconds.

"All right," Brighton whispered coldly. "Tell them to get out of here—fast, or you're a dead man."

Wentworth's pale body trembled with fear. "Go back," he screamed. "Go back, go back!"

His men whispered among themselves and began to press forward, fingering their weapons. Brighton cut into Wentworth with the knife.

"No," Wentworth yelled. "Don't come any closer. He'll kill me—and you'll be responsible, all of you. You know the penalty for killing a Council Guard! The gods will avenge me! Go back—go tell the Council what happened. Go back, go back—"

The men stopped in confusion. They looked at Wentworth, the sweat pouring from his white face. They looked at Brighton, his eyes meeting theirs with steady strength. They looked at the men lined up against the end of the blocked passage, ready and waiting. Slowly, muttering, they turned and began to retrace their steps through the dark tunnel of twisted rock. The light from their torches vanished and the sound of their voices was lost in the distance.

Brighton put his knife away and turned the shaking, terrified Wentworth around.

"The hero," he whispered. "The hero!" He hit him once and left his fat body lying in a heap on the rocks. He didn't know whether he was alive or dead, and he didn't

much care.

"Come on," he said to the others. "Let's get back to work."

**Time dragged on and the hours blended together into one** blurred vision of sweat and metal and rock. They hacked and tore the rocks out of the tunnel and piled them in the wide passage through which they had come, accomplishing the double purpose of clearing the tunnel and establishing a protective wall behind them. They dug and chipped and hauled until it seemed that they had never done anything else.

They had no way of knowing what sort of progress they were making—the rocks ahead might extend for miles or inches. They didn't know. It might never end. No one, not even Brighton, knew for certain where they were going. The world around them might well be all there was.

The end was a shock. One minute there was the interminable rock ahead of them and the next—light. A tiny square of light, no larger than a man's fist and more brilliant than fire. It hurt their eyes. They fell back, staring at it.

Brighton couldn't think. In a daze, he crawled into the tunnel and tore at the choking mass of rocks with a strength he never knew he possessed. The intense, incredible beam of light stabbed through his white skin. It widened perceptibly as he strained at the rocks. Others joined him and they fought the rocks in a frenzy of unreasoning joy.

They were suddenly—out. They were out, and Brighton staggered down a rocky hill, trying to adjust his stunned eyes. He couldn't see, but an unaccustomed warmth swept over him and he was conscious of a ball of fire floating over his head. The soft air was sweet and moving gently. He fell face downward in some spongy stuff that was like moss but wasn't. The heat beat on his back. He stared at the strange floor of this new world and touched it with his hands. It was green.

His vision cleared a little and he made out a cool shadow beneath a dark shaft with green branches. He crawled into it and called to the others. He didn't know what he said, but they came. He was beyond thought. His eyes were adjusting. He could see.

It was impossible—wonderfully, deliriously impossible. After a lifetime of darkness and encircling rocks, he saw color and broad, rolling fields. A vivid blue with drifting patches of white arched over his head. Green plains surrounded him and he could see towering mountains in the distance. The sweet air caressed his face.

He found Lynna's hand and pressed it wordlessly. They had found it. They had found what had been the home of the gods. It lay all around them, and the gods had come home again.

"Look," Wilson said finally. "The ball of fire—it's falling."

It was true. The sun was settling gently in the west, throwing long, cool shadows across the green world. Outlined on the horizon, they could see the jumbled ruins of what might once have been a city.

The Old Man was silent, tears in his eyes, content just to look at last on the world he had dreamed of for so long. Brighton watched the hot sun settle across the green fields and knew what it meant to be happy.

"It will be back," he said, nodding at the distant ball of flame. "It must go around the world."

They were silent as the soft shadows crept across the land and they lighted their torches. It was not yet dark, but they could sense the coming of the night.

"I say let's go back and close that tunnel," Hayes said finally. "We gave them their chance and they didn't take it. This is our world now—we fought for it and we found it. They haven't earned a share in it."

"They wouldn't fit in," James agreed. "We should start over now. We've got a chance really to do something—and they're not going to ruin it!"

There was a general murmur of agreement.

The Old Man shook his head. "There is room enough for all," he said quietly.

Brighton sat in the cool breeze and wondered. It was true that the others had had a chance and had not taken it. Indeed, they had actively opposed them and would have killed them all if they had been able. They had condemned him to death, and Lynna with him. They were riddled with superstition, dull, weak. They could contribute little and might do great harm.

Still—he didn't know. They were his people, he had lived his life among them. They could not be all bad. And there were the children—pitifully few with their lost, hopeless eyes.

"No," he said finally. "We won't block the tunnel again. If we're going to start over again, that would be a bad beginning. We won't seek them out—they would kill us if we did. But if they come to us in peace we won't harm them. It is not for us to say who is to die and who is to live."

He whispered to Lynna and left her where she was. Alone, he walked through the green grass and the soft breezes of a summer evening, torch in hand. He could not know the strange cycles and destinies that were lost in the waiting vastnesses of time. He was ignorant of the full significance of this tiny moment, lost and forgotten in the shadows of history. But he did sense, as for the first time he saw the splendor of the stars, that he and what he had done had an importance far beyond his wildest imaginings.

He walked through the starlit fields of what a few hundred yards before had been Atlantis, breathing the sweet night air. He wondered about the future, and about himself and his people. Could they succeed where gods had faltered? He shook his head. Probably, almost undoubtedly, they would fail.

But they would try, for that was what it meant to be a man. ●

**Oblivion Quest** *from page 52*

And inside the house Barkell sat at his desk and propped his aching head with chemical-stained hands. Three men watched inscrutably, plain ordinary men, yet creatures who held the destiny of a world in their grasp.

"It won't work," Barkell said tiredly, stupidly. "I've gone over my formula a thousand times. There is a factor missing, and I can't find it."

The first watcher grunted softly.

"You'll find it," he said. "Good Lord, Barkell, you have to. If you fail us now, then we'll be wiped out."

The second man nodded. "Total war is but months away," he said through thin lips. "We must have your weapon."

Barkell shook his head. "I'm quitting," he said. "I'm whipped." His hand smashed at the blueprints on the desk. "It's pure theory, nothing more."

The third man stirred. "We've put fifteen million in that theory, Barkell. We'll put more if need be. But you'll turn out that weapon."

"I can't," Barkell cried from a haggard face. "I've tried, but I can't do it. Something's missing, and I can't find it."

The second man said: "Barkell, I'm warning—"

Outside, Bill leaped lithely to the window sill. For a moment sheer horror at the sight of the identical monsters within held him rigid. Then his subconscious mind recognized Barkell, and he raised his gun.

The shot blasted echoes in the room, and the bullet caught Bill squarely through the chest. He was going forward, and the bullet twisted him aside. His dis-gun hummed, and the back wall of the building dissolved and vanished without sound. One instant it was there, and the next, gone.

The first man sucked in a deep breath, still watching the body. He didn't know the rear wall was gone, none knew it, yet.

"Hell," he said. "I'm sorry. I saw the gun and I thought it was an assassination attempt." He gazed at the body below. "I'm sorry about your monkey."

Barkell had discovered the rear wall was gone now, and despite the blind unreality of the moment, he came about the desk and bent over the body. Two foot tall it was, maybe less, and there was a belt about its waist, and the miniature squat gun lay close to the black hand.

Gingerly he picked up the gun, inadvertently touching the firing stud. The desk and its papers and the chair and the rear of the floor vanished almost without sound.

"Oh, my Lord!" he whispered, and he examined the dis-gun with the sense that he was catching glimpses of a dream half-remembered.

"What is it?" the second man said.

"It's my weapon—but changed, altered!"

Perspiration broke on Barkell's head. "It—it works!"

"But you said—"

"Look," he cried, "that coil is energized by the—"

Barkell had found his weapon, and now the future of the world was assured. ●

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