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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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ALL STORIES IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

THE STORY BEHIND THE COVER...

"Shock" is an emotion-charged noun, all too often overused. But it has the right connotations for a full-dress review of the mind-numbing implications which would confront a rocket ship explorer from Earth if he should land on an unknown planet and stumble on the skeleton of a man like himself, clad in the mouldy remnants of a spacesuit perhaps just a little different from his own.

For a moment he would probably stand motionless, too bewildered and appalled to summon reason to his aid. Then, gradually, his shock reactions would subside. He would begin to reason logically and scientifically. The need for human solidarity is strong in all of us. In all probability he would first remind himself that the discovery could be shared, that he need not add its burden of horror to the loneliness of an alien world in complete isolation from his fellows.

One can imagine him turning quickly, and seeking the support of others, for there is no rapport between men linked together by a common bond of hardship and danger that does not remain spiritually active at all times. He would see perhaps tiny figures moving over the plain, other rocket ships descending. He would know himself to be part of a human totality vastly resourceful and infinitely painstaking.

On the other ships would be specialists in a dozen explorative fields. Biologists and chemists, geologists and meteorologists, anthropologists and anatomists. Surely the skeleton of an unknown man should present no insurmountable problem to the multitude of skills and resources encased in living brains, beneath space helmets still shining and unblemished.

One can imagine him waiting. What wild surmises would arise to baffle him? To each individual would come a different imaginative challenge, for no two men are alike in the avenues of wonder and mystery they may choose to explore.

Soon the tiny figures will grow larger and he will be hailed from afar. But already he is in communication with them, and the walkie-talkie in his clasp is a symbol of man's everlasting closeness to his fellows, and the power of science to make a mockery of all barriers, spatial or otherwise.

FRANK BELKNAP LONG

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christmas on mars

by . . . Irving E. Cox, Jr.

The children hardly dared believe in the Star. But when Christmas came to Mars not even cruelty and hate could dim its brightness.

FLORENCE DAVISON hated Mars. She made herself believe that she did, holding fast to the self-deception with all the strength of her will, turning her futile fear of the emergency outward against the inanimate shape of her world. She told herself repeatedly and with bitterness that, even under good conditions, Mars was no place to bring up children.

She wanted to go home. She wanted them to evacuate the colony. That she forced herself to believe too. It was time for Joe and Sharen to come to know the Earth. They had no emotional understanding of what home meant—not of the little things that counted. They had never seen a normal city, a green country farm, a mountain glen.

"Go on with the story, Mommy." The tug of Sharen's tiny hand pulled Mrs. Davison back to the present, to the crushing weight of the emergency. She forced a smile as she ran her fingers through Sharen's yellow hair.

"And after the Child was born,"

When men and women leave the familiar hills and valleys of home, and boldly seek out new horizons just how much of the past walks with them? How much that is bright and shining and worth preserving—and how much that is bad? Surely war is bad—and man's cruelty to man. Should the great gifts be treasured, and the rest courageously tossed aside? Irving E. Cox, Jr., has an answer strangely wondrous, awaiting your reading delight.

Mrs. Davison said, "three Wise Men from the desert brought Him gifts and—"

"What's a desert?" Joe asked. He was twelve, five years older than Sharen, and he was peculiarly alert to words which had terrestrial implications which he didn't understand.

"It's a little like the flatlands of Mars," his mother explained, "except that the Earth isn't red. And a desert is very hot—not a barren, cold waste, like the flatlands."

She smiled at her son.

"But how did the Wise Men know where to find the Child?" Joe persisted.

"There was a bright star in the sky—brighter than the Sun. The Wise Men followed it until they came to Bethlehem, where the Child lay in the Manger."

"Oh, Mommy, that's silly!" Sharen said, with a peal of childish laughter. "Everybody knows the stars can't move. If that happened, how could the supply freighters ever find their way from the Earth to Mars?"

Mrs. Davison bit her lip, suppressing tears. A child on Mars grew old and wise too fast; Colonizing hardships had robbed her children of all the charming innocence of childhood. In place of the wonder, the adventurous golden dreams born of fairy tales and folk legends, Joe and Sharen knew only the arid realities of interstellar physics.

"Don't cry, Mom," Joe said gently. "Sharen didn't mean to spoil it."

"Of course she didn't." Mrs. Davison managed a smile again. "It's my fault, Joe. My nerves are on edge. If they can't compromise and hold joint operation together—" She broke off suddenly, clenching her fists. She had made a solemn bargain with herself not to talk about the emergency with the children. Not unless the worst happened. Not until they began to evacuate the colony.

"Tell us the rest of the story," Joe asked. "Especially the part about the tree."

It had always puzzled Mrs. Davison that Joe and Sharen should be so much more intrigued by the more superficial aspects of Christmas, but subconsciously she realized that the fault was her own. Every year, at Christmas time, Mrs. Davison made a ritual of telling the children the story of the Christ Child. But she dwelt far more lovingly and tenderly on the kind of celebration she remembered from her own childhood.

For the moment that she talked, she was back in the living room of her father's home. She could smell her mother's cookies, just out of the oven, and the penetrating fragrance of evergreen. She could hear the carols from the church on the corner. She could see the glow of the multi-colored lights and the tall, red candles.

"We always had a tree," she said softly, "even in the years when my

father was poor—before he became a director of the Rocket Project at White Sands."

Before she met Al and married him, Mrs. Davison thought. Before they volunteered for the Martian settlement. With such soaring, bright hope, such splendid dreams of the world they were going to build. And it had ended in this—in the creeping terror of the emergency that was destroying joint operation.

"All our presents were wrapped in bright paper and ribbons," she told her children, "and put under the tree. Sometimes people opened their packages on Christmas Eve. We never did. Father always made us wait until the next morning, because it was such fun to pretend that Santa Claus had brought our gifts. It was so awful—and yet so wonderful!—having to wait so long."

"You'd like to have a tree again, wouldn't you, Mom?" Joe inquired. "Then maybe you wouldn't worry so much and be so upset."

She was choked with inexpressible pain. Blindly she reached for her son's hand. She couldn't let him think that. She couldn't let the children blame themselves.

The wall buzzer beside the telescreen clattered insistently.

"Shall I get it?" Joe volunteered.

"No!" Mrs. Davison cried. "It might be— Go down and play in the sunroom, both of you."

The children departed obediently. With trembling fingers she pulled the response lever beside the telescreen. The static lines dissolved slowly. Her husband's face swam into focus. He was calling from a public booth in the colony below the dam.

"They've ordered the evacuation," he informed her grimly. His face was tense, his jaw hard. "The block-headed idiots have closed down the joint operation of Mars."

"It's war, Al?" she whispered.

"In about twenty-four hours—with all the trimmings. These fool politicians on the Earth don't know what they're playing around with. If they use half the weapons they have the know-how to make—" There was a shudder in his voice.

"The Oriental League is responsible, Al."

"Don't talk like a Jingo. Our side is as much to blame."

"How much time do we have before we have to leave?"

"Four hours," he answered bitterly. "Four hours to evacuate a hundred thousand people!"

"But that's impossible. We don't have enough ships to move even ten thousand."

"And to what? Are they trying to make sure we'll all be captive on the Earth when the politicians blow it apart?"

"Are you coming back to the dam, Al?"

"As soon as I get the lift. Sin Lo went up ahead of me."

"I'll pack our things. I—I don't

think I'll tell the children until you get here."

She broke the connection and turned slowly away from the blank screen. With indefinable emotion she looked at the big, central room of her home. Unlike the city in the valley below the dam, the house was covered by a transparent dome and kept alive with sterile, throbbing air machines, since the artificial atmosphere of Mars still collected in the low pockets of the land. It would be another century before the air would be normally breathable above a thousand feet.

Another century? But that meant nothing, now. The joint operation was finished. The colony was being evacuated.

Florence Davison walked along the wall, looking at the shelves that held Al's books. Priceless books, brought to Mars at an exorbitant postal rate. But Al didn't like the microfilm libraries. He was old-fashioned enough to want Joe and Sharen to know real books.

She had a sudden vision of Al's books lying in the deserted dome above the Martian dam—lying unopened, unused, unread, as the slow centuries passed. In some infinite tomorrow they would crumble into dust, when the atmosphere dome finally gave way and collapsed.

Or perhaps the house and the books and the city under the dam would some day be found by another humanoid race, from another world. They would look with amazement upon the indecipherable relics of a transplanted civilization, an enigma which had apparently existed in a void, with neither past nor future.

"No past," Al had said once. "That's the strength of our colony. We start anew. We can build tomorrow with no strings attached."

Reluctantly Florence Davison began to remember the way it had been when she and Al first came to Mars, fifteen years before on their honeymoon, young, full of hope, eager to make Mars over in the shape of their dreams. She hadn't hated the red planet then. She had loved the cold, red wastelands, the bare mountain peaks. She had endured the hardships of readjustment willingly, because the joint operation had seemed the finest monument ever made to the sanity of man.

With sudden insight, she realized it was not Mars she hated, but the long-mounting tension of the emergency on Earth. Joint operation was a failure not because the colony had not found the stamina to survive, but because the Earth, had decreed its death. Al had been wrong. The strings of the past were still tied fast to Mars. The folly of terrestrial politicians had created the Martian disaster.

Like the emergency itself, the joint operation of the colony had been the result of the blindest sort of chance. Rockets from the two unions of nations which divided the Earth between them had landed simultaneously on Mars, and laid

claim to the planet. The incident might have provoked a war. Instead, the nations of the Earth had compromised on the joint operation of the planet.

For generations an exactly equal number of colonists from each group of nations had been sent to the Martian colony. And on Mars the people of the Earth learned to live together, after having been divided for centuries by incompatible ideological barriers.

Mrs. Davison moved past the shelves of books and came to the cabinet of stereo-prints which she had made on various exploratory expeditions away from the city. The photographs were her hobby. She was particularly proud of the color detail. The prints, too, would have to be left behind. Her father might like to see them, since he had never been to Mars even though he had directed the colonization for twenty years. Yet nothing could justify the space the prints would take in a crowded evacuation ship.

What, finally, would Mrs. Davison be able to take with her? A few essential items of clothing, a toy or two for the children. Nothing else. Nothing to remind her of her domed house on Mars. Not a single precious relic of the wonderful dream she was losing.

She entered the incline that led down into the sunroom. Below her she could hear the faint chatter of the children. Mrs. Davison paused on the incline, as she always did, awed by the magnificent view. This was the essence of Mars, a distillate of the beauty and the potential power of the red planet.

The Davison house was perched on the southern span of the dam, eight thousand feet above the city nestling deep in a red-walled canyon. Behind the dam was the lake of artificially created water, glowing purple in the late afternoon sunlight. Down the face of the dam tumbled the step-roof pattern of the extraction plant, which gulped endless tons of the iron-oxide crust of Mars and removed the oxygen locked in the compound.

A large portion of the extracted gas was released into the valley of the city. Slowly, over many decades, the atmosphere of Mars had been reconstituted so that man could now live comfortably without oxygen masks in the lower altitudes.

A part of the oxygen extracted from the red soil was artificially combined with hydrogen to create the water behind the dam, equally essential to the survival of the colony. Through giant conduits the water was fed down the canyon wall into the city, the drop of more than a mile making hydroelectric power to run the machines of the colony.

Air, water, electricity: the weapons by which man had conquered a dead world. And the dam was the symbol of the conquest, a bright memorial to the success of the joint operation.

Across the canyon, on the northern span of the dam, stood a

domed house identical to the Davison's. There Sin Lo and his family lived. Sin Lo, representing the Oriental League, and Al Davison, from the union of terrestrial nations which called themselves Free, were engineers co-operatively in charge of the dam and the power plant. Panels in both houses controlled the flow of water and the pounding extraction machines. Neither panel could function independently of the other. That the dual control had functioned so well was a tribute not so much to the efforts of Al Davison and Sin Lo, but to the spirit of the Martian colony.

The sunrooms of both houses bulged over the upper roof of the power plant, transparent bubbles gleaming in the setting sun. Like bright Christmas ornaments. The comparison brought a wrench of pain to Florence Davison's heart. She thought of the interrupted ritual of the Christmas story; and she remembered again that tonight was Christmas Eve.

The night of hope and of immortal promise in an unrealized dream of the brotherhood of man. But tonight the Davisons would be aboard an evacuation rocket, headed back to Earth, and to the chaos of war. How could she find it in her soul to talk again of the Christ and the Star of Bethlehem?

Joe and Sharen were not in the playroom. She saw them in the transparent-walled communication tube which joined the two dam-top houses. The tube curved for more than an eighth of a mile beneath the central span of the dam. Built originally as a convenience for the two engineers who operated the plant, the Sin Los and the Davisons had used the tunnel as a co-operative playroom.

The space was ideal for the children, both Joe and Sharen and the three young Sin Los. In the tube they had ample room to ride their bicycles and to fly their cardboard rocket ships, the noise of their play being nicely insulated from the rest of the house. Sometimes in the evening the Sin Los and the Davisons would eat a picnic supper in the tube, at a point where they could look down upon the city at the bottom of the canyon.

All that pleasant companionship was gone, too. The inexplicable black magic of politicians on the Earth—millions of miles away across the void of space—had transformed the Sin Los into enemies. Florence Davison tried to understand what that really meant, but only the words made any kind of sense. The emotional concept was beyond her. For fifteen years she had had an intimate, easy friendship with Madam Sin Lo. In an instant that relationship was destroyed because men on another world could not compromise their differences. It made no sense. How could remote strangers have the power to tear their lives apart?

"Mommy!" Sharen sprang up

when she saw her mother and ran through the tube. "Come see what we've made for you."

Joe was full of excitement, too. "Is it right, Mom?"

Mrs. Davison saw a strange apparatus made of metal strips and bits of green paper cut with tiny, sawtooth edges. The weird creation, towering in the center of the tube, puzzled her because she was thinking of the emergency. She stood frowning, trying to guess what Joe and Sharen had intended. In the background she saw the three Sin Lo children, also waiting with quiet patience for her nod of approval.

Sharen looked crestfallen. "Don't you know what it is? Did we make it wrong, Mommy?"

"It's a Christmas Tree," Joe explained. He added, with a disappointed smile, "Supposed to be, anyway."

"What part isn't right, Mommy?"

This grotesque thing of metal and paper was their translation of Mrs. Davison's story, their version of an evergreen which neither of them had ever seen. They had made it to please her. She must at least pretend to be pleased. She said, "Why, it's lovely. Exactly what I wanted."

She put her arm around her son's shoulders, but Joe pulled away. "No, it isn't, Mom. You're just saying that."

Chiang, the eldest of the Sin Lo children, intervened, "Maybe it's the lights, Joe. You said your Mom told you—"

"Yes, that's it, isn't it?" Joe asked anxiously. "We have to have lights on the tree, don't we?"

"And a little white one on the very top," Sharen added. "That's the most important of all, because it stands for the Star of Bethlehem."

"I think we can rig up an outlet," Chiang suggested. "And I know where we can get some colored lights."

Mrs. Davison said uncomfortably, "I'm sure you could do a fine job, Chiang, but Joe and Sharen can't play any more just now."

"Why not, Mom? It's still light. We don't have to go to bed for hours. Besides, it's Christmas Eve and you always let us—"

"We have—things to do." Things to do! Packing a few pieces of clothing so they could leave the only world the children had ever known; uprooting the security of their loves. How could she tell them that? How could she make them understand?

"May we help?" the youngest Sin Lo offered.

Mrs. Davison glanced at the three Oriental children. An acute sense of shame paralyzed her soul. These three children had grown up with hers. Now they were enemies. Could she ask Joe and Sharen to believe that? Warfare was an adult madness, beyond the natural sanity of childhood.

She saw Madam Sin Lo coming toward them from her side of the

dam. The small, dark-haired, Oriental woman was beautiful in the traditional dress of her people. Only on very formal occasions had Florence Davison ever seen Madam Sin Lo wear her national costume. Normally she wore the warm, plastic slacks and blouse which were favored in the colony. The reason for the Oriental dress today seemed obvious. This was indeed a very special occasion—the dissolution of joint operation, the death of the colony. Subtly the dress marked the barrier that had come abruptly between them, the approaching holocaust of war.

Madam Sin Lo gathered her children close to her. Her face was serene, inscrutable, yet deep sorrow lay behind the placid mask of her features.

"It is very difficult," she said emotionlessly.

"Why must we go through with it?" As the words were wrung from her, Mrs. Davison brought into focus all the vague resentment hidden until then in the well of her subconscious. The words by-passed the censor of convention. She saw the situation with stark clarity. Earth gave the orders, and the Martian colony was expected to obey with the blind faith of an obedient child. But why? Why? Mars had grown up. The colony had the right to think for itself!

"Why?" Madam Sin Lo repeated the question in a soft whisper. "Because nothing else occurs to us. The past—Earth itself—is too much a part of us."

"But this conflict means nothing to Mars!"

"Less than nothing. I don't even know the causes for the war. Yet my people are involved, so I must be. As individuals you and I will always treasure the long friendship we have shared. That feeling will never change, but we belong in our own national groups, too. There the individual doesn't count. We are all fragments of mankind. If man goes mad and destroys himself, we are a part of that madness. It is futile to struggle against something so terribly inevitable."

She held Mrs. Davison's hand for a moment before she turned and walked toward the northern side of the dam. Florence Davison walked back to her own sunroom, Joe and Sharen beside her.

By that time the sun was behind the jagged hills, and the pale yellow of the Martian sunset washed into the encroaching black of night. A few scattered stars were visible through the transparent roof. Unconsciously Mrs. Davison sought out the bright glow of the Earth, an emerald lying upon the soft velvet of infinity. It was her world, her home and place of origin. Yet she felt a violent detestation for it, impotent and exhausting.

"Mommy, can we go back and finish our tree?" Sharen asked.

"I—I don't believe there'll be time, dear."

"Chiang will find the lights, and

it'll only take a minute to make it right."

"This is Christmas Eve," Joe reminded his mother. "You said you always had your tree lighted then." His eyes grew wistful.

After a pause, Sharen said, "With a white light on top. Mommy, how could one of the stars be so bright just on the night Jesus was born?"

"Stupid!" her brother chided her. "He could make anything happen that He wanted."

"It must have been scary. If I'd been one of the Wise Men, I think I'd have started to cry."

They went up the incline into the big room. Mrs. Davison snapped on the overhead lights. She saw her husband in the lift entry. Three armed soldiers were with him. They came into the domed house together. The soldiers were carrying cases of explosives, which they set down heavily on the floor beside the lift.

Al was tall and thin, still distinguished and youthful looking at forty-five, with gray flaking his dark hair. But now his face was drawn and tight.

He said tensely, "We're having trouble with the evacuation. The people in the city are refusing to board the rockets, so there's been a change of plan." He nodded toward the trio of soldiers. "They came along to help us out."

"Tell her later," one of the men urged flatly. "You've got to get your things. We've less than twenty minutes before they make the pickup."

Al sent the children back into the sunroom. He and his wife climbed the circular, metal stairway to the sleeping alcoves above the bog room. As soon as the panel door closed behind them, he seized her hands in his.

He spoke to her quietly.

"The last word we had from Earth, Flo, was that the war had already started. They didn't even keep the truce they promised us for the evacuation."

She felt a surge of hope. "Then the people can't possibly leave the colony and—"

"I thought of that, too. It won't work. The military units from both sides have taken over the colony. We've no arms to resist them. I can't even contact Sin Lo or the other members of the colony council. As a matter of fact, I'm saddled with three guards—they tell me for my protection. Actually I'm in custody so they can be sure I won't attempt anything on my own."

"If the colonists won't board the evacuation ships, what can the army do, really? There aren't more than a thousand of them here in the colony."

"But they're armed and we've never been allowed to have weapons. It's a question of prestige, Flo—on both sides. We're all supposed to want to run home and join in the general carnage. If we don't—" His voice dropped to a

whisper. "If we don't, they get at us through our children."

"And you let Joe and Sharen go back to the sunroom, with those men—"

"Orders, Flo." He clenched his fist and turned away from her. "I'm going to blow up the dam."

"The dam?" she gasped. "And wipe out the city?"

"It's supposed to be part of the strategy of war. If I don't do it, the Orientals will."

"You can't, Al! All those people in the colony—"

"If it was myself alone, I'd tell the army to go to hell. But they have you and the kids."

"We don't count—not that much."

"To me you do."

"Could we ever face each other again—could we ever love again—if we saved ourselves at such a cost?"

"You have to be a realist about this, Flo. If I don't do it, someone else will. Sin Lo, maybe. The other side is bringing the same sort of pressure against him, of course. That's what war means. Idiocy becomes heroic. As they brought me up in the lift, I turned this thing over a thousand times in my mind. Believe me, there's no other way out for us. If I could gain anything by the sacrifice of myself I'd do it. But the army would simply eliminate us and do the job themselves."

"Then let it be that way, Al."

"And earn a martyr's page in the history that will never be written? I see only one chance, Flo. They're going to evacuate us—you and me and the kids—after the dam blows. On Earth I might find intelligent people willing to listen to sense before we blow civilization to bits. We've learned to live together here, men from every nation. We could on Earth, too. Peace is as simple as that."

She took his hand and looked deep into his face. "Al, do you honestly believe that?"

Her voice was pleading.

He averted his eyes. "I have to, Flo."

"We're different because we're colonists. We came here to make a new world. The people who chose to remain on Earth have never lifted up their eyes as we have."

"You're wrong, Flo," he said hoarsely. "Wrong!" He flung himself away from her.

She understood, then, the kind of tortured reasoning that the emergency had clamped upon his mind. It made a wall she could not break. With pity, she realized that he was acting with a distinctively manlike devotion and courage that made him blind to any other consideration. To save her and to save his children he was sacrificing his belief in the colony. How could she make him understand that he owed a greater devotion to Mars than to his family? Frantically she searched her mind for the proper words, for pleadings vivid enough to make

him realize that the colony came first.

And then it was too late. There was an impatient knock on the paneled door.

"What's keeping you, Davison?" one of the soldiers asked.

"We'll be right out," Al answered. He flung a pile of clothing together, strain showing in his eyes. They went down the steps into the big room, the guard's boots drumming a military beat behind them. Mrs. Davison went to the incline to call Joe and Sharen out of the sunroom, but a soldier's hand clamped painfully on her arm.

"Let them stay where they are, lady. When your husband follows the emergency regulations we'll have time enough to get your kids out."

"I—I just wanted to tell them not to become frightened."

The man grinned. That's the kind of cooperation we like to see. Go right ahead, lady."

As she turned back toward the mouth of the incline she suddenly saw how she could convince her husband, how she could make him understand the narrow, selfish limits of the choice he had made. She called Joe softly.

"Yes, Mom?"

"You and Sharen can play a little longer." She added slowly, fully aware of the risk she took, "Will you finish the tree for me? Try to put the lights on it, just as they should be. And light it before you call me."

"Sure thing, Mom! I promise."

Al Davison and two of the men slipped oxygen helmets over their heads, and shouldered their cases of explosives. They left through the airlock. Through the transparent walls of the incline tube she watched them as they moved along the catwalk at the summit of the dam, three straight, black figures silhouetted against the sunset sky.

She glanced down anxiously at the tube which curved beneath the center span. If the lights on the grotesque metal tree came on in time, Al would see the children. He would understand, then, that to destroy the dam would be to kill the very thing he wanted most to save.

Perhaps it would be no more than an empty gesture. The soldiers were armed. Yet Florence Davison had a mystical conviction that if her husband began to fight for what he believed in a courage and strength undreamed of would be his.

The third soldier, who had been left behind to watch her, crossed the incline to her side. "Why are you so nervous, Mrs. Davison?" he asked. "Everything's going to be all right."

She made no reply. "You know," he said, glancing up at the stars, "I just remembered that it's Christmas Eve. I guess you know I just got here this afternoon—when they brought in the evacuation ships. Never thought I'd be spending Christmas so far from

home. I don't suppose you people up here ever have a tree, or anything like that."

"We make out," she said stiffly.

He gestured toward the gorge beneath the dam. "You've built a real city down there. It seems a shame to destroy it. My idea is we ought to throw out the Orientals, and keep the colony for ourselves. But I guess the high brass wouldn't go for that. You colonists stick so close together, it wouldn't work out."

"So the high brass decides to exterminate us all."

"What else *can* we do? You colonists won't take the evacuation ships. And when the dam goes, we can blame it on the Orientals." He gnawed on his underlip. "But it seems a shame, somehow—to blow up a city on Christmas Eve."

Suddenly, from the crest of the dam, they heard the sputter of gunfire. Mrs. Davison saw shadowy figures emerging from the domed house on the northern span. Sin Lo and soldiers from the Oriental military unit!

She recognized the boxes they carried and ironically she realized their objective was the same as Al's. In the hysteria of war the minds of all men functioned in strangely similar ways. Destroy what generations of men had labored to create. That was the abiding virtue of war.

One of the men with Al crumpled to his knees on the dam. The other flung himself flat on the rough stone, spraying the northern span with gunfire. Sin Lo's men, taken by surprise, twisted and fell. As they lay sprawled in grotesque attitudes the Oriental engineer seized the boxes of explosives and ran toward the center of the dam. The soldier with Al sprang up, but his ankle turned on the stone, and he fell screaming into the abyss of the city.

Al sprang at Sin Lo. An hour ago they had been friends. Now they were trapped in the ancient madness of man, struggling blindly to commit an act of war which each of them would have recognized, in a more rational hour, as the most fantastic sort of foolishness. As they fought they collided with the cases of explosives, knocking several of them harmlessly into the deep water behind the dam.

Mrs. Davison stood wringing her hands helplessly as the soldier guarding her ran through the airlock to help Al. In his excitement he forgot to put on an oxygen mask. Outside the domed house he drew his gun, but collapsed unconscious in the thin, cold air before he could use it.

The light of the children's tree came on then, glittering gem-like against the well of blackness in the city gorge. If only it could have happened before Al and Sin Lo had begun to fight! It might have restored their reason, for all five children were in the tube beneath the dam.

Mrs. Davison had only one recourse left. Her symbolic gesture

had failed. She must save the children before Al or Sin Lo succeeded in blowing up the dam. First she hauled the unconscious soldier back through the airlock, so he would not die in the thin atmosphere. She disarmed him swiftly, then ran down the incline to the tube.

The five children were standing beside the tree. Sharen took her mother's hand eagerly.

"See, Mommy. We even have the Star of Bethlehem on the top, just the way it is in your story."

As she looked up at the tree, Mrs. Davison beheld a miracle. At the top of the dam Al and Sin Lo had stopped struggling, and were standing arm in arm. Al waved.

Then both men ran through the Sin Lo house and emerged into the tube. Madam Sin Lo was with them, her eyes shining strangely.

Al took his wife in his arms. "We had to fake the fight," he whispered as he kissed her, "we had to knock the dynamite into the water. What other choice had we? There was a guard in the house with you. We had no idea what he might do if he became suspicious."

"You had this planned?"

"Yes. Sin Lo and I planned it before we left the council meeting this morning. It was obvious that both army units would try to destroy the dam. It was up to Sin Lo and me to save the city. After the war started, we knew they'd be too busy destroying themselves to worry about us. Tonight was the only time that mattered.

"I couldn't tell you the truth, Flo. I wanted your reactions to be genuine—the real thing—when I left you alone in the house with one of the bully boys. I see you disposed of him somehow."

"He disposed of himself, Al, when he—"

There was a noise on the incline from the sunroom. They both turned. The soldier Mrs. Davison had rescued from the dam stood leaning weakly against the wall, fumbling at his empty holster.

"You pulled a deal," he said thickly. "You can't—" He staggered.

Sin Lo and his wife caught him and lowered him gently to the floor.

"Thanks," the soldier muttered. "Maybe it was just as well—on Christmas Eve. A shame to destroy a city when—" Suddenly he stiffened, and pointed at the canopy of stars visible above the transparent tube. There was terror in his voice. "It's happened! *They've blown the world apart!*"

Mrs. Davison saw the green pinpoint of Earth suddenly expand with glowing fire, saw it become momentarily as bright as a new sun in the heavens.

Sharen began to jump up and down with excitement. "Mommy! Mommy! It's a real Star of Bethleham—and on Christmas Eve!"

For a moment no one spoke. The glow faded and was gone. A planet —a green haven called home—had dominated the sky for a split-sec-

ond in the long roll call of eternity. Now it was gone forever, drifting dust scattered across the Galaxy.

Slowly Al Davison reached for Sin Lo's hand. They stood silent beside the grotesque skeleton of metal and paper which masqueraded as a holiday tree.

"The new Star of Bethlehem," Al said softly.

"Our pledge of peace, my friend. The ties of the past are gone, and we shall always remember—for we have seen the Star."

"You know, Mommy," Sharen whispered, with subdued awe, "I wasn't frightened at all. It was kind of—kind of wonderful. I know just how the Wise Men must have felt many thousands of years ago."

the doll that does everything

by . . . Richard Matheson

It's a mistake to buy a problem child a scientific wonder toy—unless you're a parent with a wicked bent for infanticide!

THE POET SCREAMED, "Devil spawn! Scrabbling lizard! Maniacal kangaroo!"

His scraggy frame went leaping through the doorway, then locked into paralysis. *"Fiend!"* he gagged.

The object of this mottled-faced abuse squatted oblivious in a snowbank of confettied manuscript. Manuscript delivered of sweaty gestation, typewritten in quivering agony.

"Foaming moonstruck *octopus!* Shovel-handed *ape!"* The blood-laced eyes of Ruthlen Beauson bagged gibbously behind their horn-rimmed lenses. At hipless sides, his fingers shook like leprous string-beans in a gale. Ulcers within ulcers throbbed.

"Hun!" he raged anew, *"Goth! Apache!* Demented nihilist!

Saliva dribbling from his teething maw, little Gardner Beauson bestowed a one-toothed grin upon his palsied sire. Shredded poetry filtered through his stubby fists as the semi-spheroid of his bottom hovered dampishly above each lacerated amphibrach with iambic variation.

Richard Matheson is a writer of unusual brilliance, persuasiveness and charm. Last summer Gold Medal Books published his I AM A LEGEND, *the first science-fiction title to be listed by that company. It won high acclaim from the experts in both the science fiction and fantasy fields, prize-winning mystery novelist, William Campbell Gault calling it "The most terrifying book you'll ever read." Into this little story Mr. Richard Matheson has instilled a terror quite as breathless, acidulously barbed with wit.*

Ruthlen Beauson groaned a soul-wracked groan. *"Confusion,"* he lamented in a trembling voice, "Untrammeled farrago."

Then, suddenly, his eyes embossed into metallic orbs, his fingers petrified into a strangler's pose. "I'll do him in," he gibbered faintly, "I'll snap his hyoid with a brace of thumbs."

Upon this juncture, Athene Beauson, smock bespattered, hands adrip with soppy clay, swept into the room like a wraith of vengeance resurrected from the mud.

"What *now?*" she asked, acidulous through gritted teeth.

"Look! *Look!*" Ruthlen Beauson's forefinger jabbed fitfully as he pointed toward their sniggering child. "He's destroyed my *Songs of Sconce!*" His 20-90 eyes went bulgy mad. "I'll carve him," he foreboded in a roupy whisper, "I'll *carve* the shriveled viper!"

"Oh . . . *look out,*" Athene commanded, pulling back her butcher-bent spouse and dragging up her son by his drool-soaked undershirt.

Suspended over heaps of riven muse, he eyed his mother with a saucy aspect.

"Whelp!" she snapped, then let him have one, soundly, on his bulbous rump.

Gardner Beauson screeched in inflammatory protest, was shown the door and exited, his little brain already cocked for further action. A residue of clay upon his diaper, he waddled, saucer-eyed, into the plenitude of breakables which was the living room as Athene turned to see her husband on his knees, aghast, in the rubble of a decade's labor.

"I shall destroy myself," the poet mumbled, sagging shouldered. "I'll inject my veins with lethal juices."

"Get up, get up," said Athene crisply, face a sour mask.

Ruthlen floundered to his feet. "I'll kill him, yes, I'll kill the wizened beast," he said in hollow-hearted shock.

"That's *no* solution," said his wife, "Even though . . ."

Her eyes grew soft a moment as she dreamed of nudging Gardner into a vat of alligators. Her full lips quivered on the brink of tremulous smiling.

Then her green eyes flinted. "That's *no* solution," she repeated, "and it's time we solved this goddam thing."

Ruthlen stared with dumb-struck eyes upon the ruins of his composition. "I'll kill him," he divulged to the scattered fragments, "I'll—"

"Ruthlen, *listen* to me," said his wife, clay-soaked fingers clenching into fists.

His spiritless gaze lifted for a moment.

"Gardner needs a playmate," she declared. "I read it in a book. He needs a playmate."

"I'll kill him," mumbled Ruthlen.

"Will you *listen!*"

"Kill him."

"I tell you Gardner has to have a playmate! I don't care whether

we can afford it or not, he needs a playmate!"

"Kill," the poet hissed. "Kill."

"I don't care if we haven't got a cent! You want time for poetry and I want time for sculpturing!"

"My *Songs of Sconce.*"

"Ruthlen Beauson!" Athene screamed, a moments' time before the deafening shatter of a vase.

"Good God, what *now!*" Athene exclaimed.

They found him dangling from the mantelpiece, caterwauling for succor and immediate change of diaper . . .

THE DOLL THAT DOES EVERYTHING!

Athene stood before the plate glass window, lips pursed in deep deliberation. In her mind, a vivid balance see-sawed—grave necessity on the one side, sterile income on the other. Implastic contemplation ridged her brow. They had no money, that was patent. Nursery school was out, a governess impossible. And yet, there had to be an answer; there *had* to be.

Athene braced herself and strode into the shop.

The man looked up, a kindly smile dimpling his apple cheeks, welcoming his customer.

"That doll," Athene inquired. "Does it really do the things your placard says it does?"

"That doll," the salesman beamed, "is quite without comparison, the nonpareil of toycraft. It walks, it talks, it eats and drinks, dispenses body wastes, snores while it sleeps, dances a jig, rides a see-saw and sings the choruses of seven childhood favorites." He caught his breath. "To name a few," he said. "It sings 'Molly Andrews'—"

"What is the cost of—"

"It swims the crawl for fifty feet, it reads a book, plays thirteen simple etudes on the pianoforte, mows the lawn, changes its own diapers, climbs a tree and burps."

"What is the price of—"

"And it grows," the salesman said.

"It . . ."

"Grows," the man reiterated, slit-eyed. "Within its plastic body are all the cells and protoplasms necessary for a cycle of maturation lasting up to twenty years."

Athene gaped.

"At one-oh-seven-fifty, an obvious bargain," the man concluded. "Shall I have it wrapped or would you rather walk it home?"

A swarm of eager hornets, each a thought, buzzed inside the head of Athene Beauson. It was the perfect playmate for little Gardner. One-hundred-seven-fifty though! Ruthlen's scream would shatter windows when he saw the tag.

"You can't go wrong," the salesman said.

He *needs* a playmate!

"Time payments can easily be arranged." The salesman guessed her plight and fired his *coup de grâce.*

All thoughts disappeared like chips swept off a gambling table.

Athene's eyes caught fire; a sudden smile pulled up her lip ends.

"A boy doll," she requested eagerly, "One year old."

The salesman hurried to his shelves . . .

No windows broke but Athene's ears rang for half an hour after.

"Are you *mad?*" her husband's scream had plunged its strident blades into her brain. *"One-hundred-seven-fifty!"*

"We can pay on time."

"With *what?*" he shrieked. "Rejection slips and *clay!*"

"Would you rather," Athene lashed out, "have your son alone all day? Wandering through the house — *tearing — cracking — ripping — crushing?*"

Ruthlen winced at every word as if they were spiked shillelagh blows crushing in his head. His eyes fell shut behind the quarter-inch lenses. He shuddered fitfully.

"Enough," he muttered, pale hand raised, surrendering. "Enough, *enough.*"

"Let's bring the doll to Gardner," Athene said excitedly.

They hurried to the little bedroom of their son and found him tearing down the curtains. A hissing, taut-cheeked Ruthlen jerked him off the windowsill and knuckles rapped him on the skull. Gardner blinked once his beady eyes.

"Put him down," Athene said quickly. "Let him see."

Gardner stared with one-toothed mouth ajar at the little doll that stood so silently before him. The doll was just about his size, dark-haired, blue-eyed, flesh-colored, diapered, exactly like a real boy.

He blinked furiously.

"Activate the mechanism," Ruthlen whispered and Athene, leaning over, pushed the tiny button.

Gardner toppled back in drooling consternation as the little boy doll grinned at him. "Bah-bi-bah-bah!" Gardner cried hysterically.

"Bah-bi-bah-bah," echoed the doll.

Gardner scuttled back, wild-eyed, and, from a wary crouch, observed the little boy doll waddling toward him. Restrained from further retreat by the wall, he cringed with tense astonishment until the doll clicked to a halt before him.

"Bah-bi-bah-bah." The boy doll grinned again, then burped a single time and started in to jig on the linoleum.

Gardner's pudgy lips spread out, abruptly, in an idiotic grin. He gurgled happily. His parents' eyes went shut as one, beatific smiles creasing their grateful faces, all thoughts of financial caviling vanished.

"Oh," Athene whispered wonderingly.

"I can't believe it's true," her husband said, gutteral with awe . . .

For weeks, they were inseparable, Gardner and his motor-driven friend. They squatted down together, exchanging moon-eyed glances, chuckling over intimate jollities and, in the general, relishing to the full their drooly tête á

têtes. Whatever Gardner did, the doll did too.

As for Ruthlen and Athene, they rejoiced in this advent of near-forgotten peace. Nerve-knotting screams no longer hammered malleus on incus and the sound of breaking things was not upon the air. Ruthlen poesied and Athene sculpted, all in a bliss of sabbath privacy.

"You see?" she said across the dinner table of an evening. "It was all he needed; a companion," and Ruthlen bowed his head in solemn tribute to his wife's perspicacity.

"True, 'tis true," he whispered happily.

A week, a month. Then, gradually, the metamorphosis.

Ruthlen, bogged in sticky pentameter, looked up one morning, eyes marbleized. "Hark," he murmured.

The sound of dismemberment of plaything.

Ruthleen hastened to the nursery to find his only begotten ripping cotton entrails from a heretofore respected doll.

The gloom-eyed poet stood outside the room, his heartbeat dwindling to the sickening thud of old while, in the nursery, Gardner disemboweled and the doll sat on the floor, observing.

"No," the poet murmured, sensing it was *yes*. He crept away, somehow managing to convince himself it was an accident.

However, early the following afternoon at lunch, the fingers of both Ruthlen and his wife pressed in so sharply on their sandwiches that slices of tomato popped across the air and into the coffee.

"What," said Athene horribly, "is that?"

Gardner and his doll were found ensconced in the rubble of what had been, in happier times, a potted plant.

The doll was watching with a glassy interest as Gardner heaved up palmfuls of the blackish earth which rained in dirty crumbs upon the rug.

"No," the poet said, ulcers revivified and, "No," the echo fell from Athene's paling lips.

Their son was spanked and put to bed, the doll was barricaded in the closet. A wounded caterwauling in their ears, the wife and husband twitched through wordless lunch while acids bred viler acids in their spasmed stomachs.

One remark alone was spoken as they faltered to their separate works and Athene said it.

"It was an accident."

But, in the following week, they had to leave their work exactly eighty-seven times.

Once it was Gardner thrashing in pulled-down draperies in the living room. Another time it was Gardner playing piano with a hammer in respondence to the doll's performance of a Bach gavotte. Still another time and time after time it was a rash of knocked-down objects ranging from jam jars to chairs. In all, thirty breakables broke, the cat disappeared and the floor showed

through the carpet where Gardner had been active with a scissors.

At the end of two days, the Beausons poesied and sculpted with eyes embossed and white lips rigid over grinding teeth. At the end of four, their bodies underwent a petrifying process, their brains began to ossify. By the week's end, after many a flirt and flutter of their viscera, they sat or stood in palsied silence, waiting for new outrages and dreaming of violent infanticide.

The end arrived.

One evening, suppering on a pitcherful of stomach-easing seltzers, Athene and her husband sat like rigor-mortised scarecrows in their chairs, their eyes four balls of blood-threaded stupor.

"What are we to *do?*" a spirit-broken Ruthlen muttered.

Athene's head moved side to side in negating jerks. "I thought the doll—" she started, then allowed her voice to drift away.

"The doll has done no good," lamented Ruthlen. "We're right back where we started. And deeper still by one-oh-seven-fifty, since you say the doll cannot be exchanged."

"It can't," said Athene, "It's—"

She was caught in mid-word by the noise.

It was a moist and slapping sound like someone heaving mud against a wall. Mud or—

"No." Athene raised her soul-bruised eyes. "Oh, *no.*"

The sudden spastic flopping of her sandals on the floor syncopated with the blood-wild pounding of her heart. Her husband followed on his broomstick legs, lips a trembling circle of misgiving.

"My figure!" Athene screamed, standing a stricken marble in the studio doorway, staring ashen-faced upon the ghastly sight.

Gardner and the doll were playing *Hit the Roses on the Wallpaper,* using for ammunition great doughy blobs of clay ripped from Athene's uncompleted statue.

Athene and Ruthlen stood in horror-struck dumbness staring at the doll who, in the metal doming of its skull had fashioned new synaptic joinings and, to the jigging and the climbing and the burping, added flinging of clay.

And, suddenly it was clear—the falling plant, the broken vases and jars on high shelves—*Gardner needed help for things like that!*

Ruthlen Beauson seered a grisly future: i.e., the grisly past times two; all the Guignol torments of living with Gardner but multiplied by the presence of the doll.

"Get that metal monster from this house," Ruthlen mumbled to his wife through concrete lips.

"But there's no exchange!" she cried hysterically.

"Then it's me for the can opener!" the poet rasped, backing away on rocklike legs.

"It's not the doll's fault!" Athene shouted. "What good will tearing up the doll do? It's *Gardner.* It's that horrid thing we made together!"

The poet's eyes clicked sharply

in their sockets as he looked from doll to son and back again and knew the hideous truth of her remark. It *was* their son. The doll just imitated, the doll would do whatever it was—

—*made to do.*

That was, precisely, to the second, when the idea came and, with it, peace unto the Beauson household.

From the next day forth, their Gardner was a model of deportment, the house became a sanctuary for blessed creation.

Everything was perfect.

It was only twenty years later, when a college-going Gardner Beauson met a wriggly sophomore and blew thirteen gaskets and his generator that the ugly truth came out, to the horror of everyone.

the laminated woman

by . . . Evelyn E. Smith

Shakespeare could never have imagined a *green* Juliet. But there are no barriers a great romantic love cannot scale.

GEORGE GANNETT had spent a long, hard day at the laboratory, processing new processes and developing new developments with which to bemuse all solvent femininity. He had looked forward to sitting down in his living room and relaxing with a drink. And now his own robodoor was refusing to recognize him again.

"Who shall I say is calling, please?" it inquired in its company voice.

"Once and for all, it's me!" George yelled. "And you'd better let me in, or I'll break you down!"

"Rudeness will get you nowhere," the door replied, reluctantly opening just wide enough for George to squeeze through. "What's more, if you break me down, you'll have to pay through the nose to have me fixed. I'm a delicate and expensive piece of machinery."

George wasn't going to bandy words with a piece of machinery, no matter how delicate and expensive, so he merely grunted and strode through. The door closed a fraction of a second too soon,

When you consider the varieties of people who will in all probability populate the near future the irrepressible George Gannett of this utterly delightful excursion into the star-bright realms of unorthodox fantasy should not too greatly surprise an Evelyn-Smith-enchanted-reader. For the lady waves a Prospero wand here, with a whimsical magic all her own.

catching him smartly in the rear. He gave a loud yelp.

The strange looking woman reclining on the off-white *directoire* couch in his living room looked up in annoyance. Long emerald hair rippled down each side of a chartreuse-gold face, sparked with flame-colored eyes. All the rest of her well-turned body was the same metallic chartreuse-gold, for the Burgundy novalon negligee was so sheer it did little to affect color and nothing to impair visibility. Her voice was a low, throbbing basso.

"I do wish you would come in more quietly, George," she boomed. "You know I have sensitive nerves."

He stopped in the entry and peered at her. "Is that still you, Muriel?" he asked doubtfully.

"Of course it's me!" she replied, irritated. "Who else would I be?"

"Well, I didn't recognize you!"

Muriel gazed at herself complacently in the full-length ethenoid mirror opposite the couch. "I should hope not," she said, sucking in her stomach so that the flame-tipped breasts stood out like cornucopias. The green breasts, George thought sadly, were even more anaphrodisiac than the aquamarine ones had been.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall," she addressed the looking-glass, "who is the fairest one of all?"

"The fairest lady on this planet," the mirror said in a dispirited voice, "is Muriel Felicia Gannett."

"Aah, it'd say that no matter what you looked like," George told her. He went over to the robobar. "It's fixed to do that. . . . Martini," he ordered, clicking on the mechanism. "Extra dry."

"You don't have to bring that up," Muriel pouted, "even if it is true. After all, you did buy the glass to uplift my ego. It's just throwing away money if you set out to hurt my feelings yourself. Besides, I *am* beautiful. I certainly paid enough—anyway, you did."

". . . Sorry," said the robobar, "but I'm all out of synthogin. How about an Alexander or an Angel's Kiss?"

George clenched his fists. But it was stupid to take out his anger on the machine. He strode over to the couch and put his face close to Muriel's.

"You went and forgot to order synthogin again, didn't you? After I'd told you nine hundred and sixty-three times we were running low!"

Muriel abandoned her Mme. Recamier pose to shrink to the other side of the couch. "Well, I've been so tied up at the beauty parlor the last few days, I. . . ."

He glared at her. It would give him a great deal of pleasure to kick a small piece of furniture, but even the smallest piece of furniture these days was quite likely to kick back. It would give him even greater pleasure to kick Muriel. But, since the old twentieth-century blue laws were still in force, it was wiser for him to stick to simple opprobrium.

"You know what—I think you

look terrible! The last time was bad enough, but now you look positively awful. Just when I was almost getting used to that foul turquoise hair, you had to go and change it for this mouldy green stuff. . . . How about a Manhattan, then?" He turned back to the robobar.

"Can do," the machine agreed. There was a pleasant gurgling and chinking inside its compact silvery casein body. George felt a little better, but not much.

"Fuddy-duddy," Muriel said, arranging herself more gracefully on the couch. "I know what you'd like—you'd like me to look the same month after month. If you had your way, people would begin to recognize me in the street! Which is silly, because I'm really your best advertisement—"

"What I want to know," he interrupted, "is why that sadistic door always recognizes you, when you look different all the time, and keeps on repudiating me, when I always look exactly the same?"

"You can say all you like about inanimate machines," Muriel observed darkly, "but I tell you, George Gannett, they *know.*" She took up a hand mirror and examined her teeth in it.

"Mrs. Zelkin," George said, "has a mirror that says she's the fairest in all the welkin. That's the whole universe, lots more than just one lousy planet. . . .".

"The fairest lady. . . ." began the mirror.

"It's just on account of the rhyme!" Muried said loudly. "You know what that Mrs. Zelkin looks like—not that it really ever seemed to bother you."

". . . on the planet is. . . ."

"You shouldn't have used the word *mirror,* George!" Muriel yelled. "That just sets it off!"

". . . Muriel Felicia Gannett!" the mirror shrieked. "ThefairestladyonthisplanetisMurielFeliciaGannett!"

"Besides," Muriel continued, dropping her voice to a more conversational tone, "everybody knows there aren't any people anywhere except on Earth, so it doesn't matter about being most beautiful anywhere else."

"How about those Alpha Centaurians?" George demanded, accepting a glass from the robobar. "And what's the idea of the kumquat instead of a cherry?"

"It's the latest thing," retorted the machine. "And no use giving me an argument because I'm all out of cherries."

Muriel gazed at herself lovingly in both mirrors. "The Alpha Centaurians aren't people. They're monsters, and don't count."

"Don't count, eh?" George repeated. "Well, just remember this, my girl: they nearly succeeded in taking Earth less than fifty years ago. We were just lucky they didn't know enough about our technology to prepare themselves with the right kind of weapons."

Muriel patted her emerald hair. "They didn't take any beauty prizes,

though, and that's what we were talking about. I saw an Alpha Centaurian on *Emily Purvis, Girl Spaceman.* Of course it was an actor made up to look like one, but they go to a lot of trouble to make their details very authentic. For the children, you know. . . . Ugh," she shivered, "scaly green monsters!"

George dropped into a compression-moulded aminoplastarmchair and dialed for his slippers. "Say, this Manhattan isn't bad at all," he conceded. "I'll have another," he told the robobar.

". . . so this Alpha Centaurian who kidnapped Emily fell in love with her, and, instead of eating her, he—"

"That's silly," George said, accepting his drink. "Stands to reason we'd be just as repulsive to them as they are to us. We don't have to worry about what they'll do to our women if war breaks out again. It's what they'll do to our civilization—such as it is."

A small scuffling on the plastorug indicated that his slippers had come. Kicking off his shoes automatically, he thrust out his feet. The slippers were tight and they had a funny texture.

"You just don't care what happens to me or the American way of life."

He bent over to look down. His feet were trying to wedge themselves into a pair of high-heeled plastisatin mules.

"Oops!" Muriel interrupted herself. She got up languidly to retrieve them. "I forgot to take mine out of the slipper-server. After all, I *am* home all day."

She went into the bedroom to put away the mules, but she didn't bring George's slippers when she returned.

George got up and fetched his own, thinking it might almost be worth-while to let himself be captured by the Alpha Centaurians, if they'd do something horrid to Muriel. But, after he'd sat down and put on his pseudocalf slippers and carefully filled his hookah with the finest Saturnian synthesis, he began to feel more tolerant. When he'd finished his third Manhattan, he even grew mellow.

"I still remember how you looked when I first met you," he sighed, gazing sentimentally at his wife. "You had purple eyes and long pink curls. You were the prettiest girl I'd ever seen."

"You should know pink hair went out *years* ago," Muriel said, plugging into his hookah. "Nobody wears pastels any more."

"But you're still the same little girl underneath, aren't you?" he asked amorously. "I think the green is kind of pretty after all. Very feminine." *And,* he thought, *after all, on Venus all the mlonki are green in the twoog.*

She jumped off her couch and ran to the other side of the room. "Don't you dare *touch* me, George Gannett!" she boomed. "You know perfectly well it'll take days before this new glyptal finish is set per-

manently. You just want to spoil everything."

"What's the good of having a wife if I'm hardly ever allowed to come near her?" he complained. "Think I married you for your brains or something?"

Her red eyes flashed real fire and the tips of her breasts followed suit. *Those beauty parlors,* George thought with reluctant admiration, *did really thorough jobs. Of course they had the finest materials to work with—that is, if they used the resinoids manufactured by his firm, and all the better places did.*

"I'm not a chattel of yours, George Gannett!" she thundered. "I'm an individual and I have my rights!"

"Why in hell did you get that awful voice put in?" he asked. "It makes everything you say sound like a recitative from *Boris Godounov.*" He glared at her indignantly.

"All the girls are baritones this year," she said, "so I thought I'd go them one better. And it's a lot easier on the ear than your voice any day—you sound like an asthmatic crow."

She returned warily to her couch as he sat down again. "Why don't you have something done about it? You know, being satisfied with your natural attributes isn't a sign of virility—just smugness."

"Pooh, who wants a green woman anyway," George retorted, puffing moodily at his hookah. "I prefer 'em pink."

"Pink? Why, that's vulgar. It's almost natural. Like that little tart in Number Seventy-three."

"What litle tart?" George asked, immediately interested.

"Some vulgar little colonial or something who sublet the Beasley's place a couple of weeks ago. Honestly, I don't know where to look when I see her coming. Her face is so naked. All the girls on the block are talking about it. Can you imagine, her hair is brown. *Brown!*"

"Imagine that!" George said, doing so. A lovely brown shade, the exact hue of a young mouse's coat. He remembered his mother had had hair of just that color. His father had referred to it in those terms not once but many times.

"And her skin is just skin color and her clothes—why, you can't even see through them!"

"It's people like that who are ruining the neighborhood," George agreed, wondering whether Muriel had used the word *tart* in a literal or a figurative sense. "Number Seventy-three, did you say?" he asked meditatively.

The next morning George lingered casually outside the smooth methacrylate door of Number 73 on his way to work, hoping to catch a glimpse of the tenant, but he had no luck. On his way home that evening, he walked slowly past the house, but there was no sign of her. By nightfall he was quite reconciled to Muriel's being green, but she still hadn't set enough for handling. The chartreuse-gold was

made by a special new synthesis, she told him smugly, that took longer to harden. He couldn't argue with her, because he'd invented that particular process himself.

It was on the morning of the third day that George finally managed to catch a glimpse of the woman in 73. She was standing on the front step of her little house, fending off the impassioned advances of the postman.

"Just lemme hold your hand; that's all I ask," the civil servant was pleading. "I wanna be able to touch skin again instead of phthalic anhydride resin. I wanna hold a woman in my arms, not an artifact."

"Please," the girl was saying fearfully. "Please don't!" And she was a girl. With her you could tell, because her face was—and even George blushed when he saw this—completely nude.

Muriel had not been indulging in hyperbole. The stranger's lips were a dull pink, her eyes an exquisite faded blue, her face genuine flesh color. Her hair was all he had ever dreamed of—the exact color of a rodent's fur. And her clothes were not only opaque, they were sacklike and of some organic material, concealing who knew what organic delights underneath.

George controlled himself sternly. For all her bold appearance, he could see that this was a pure woman who just didn't know Earthways. She was no hussy. The very way she shrank from the postman as he begged, "Just one kiss from your muculent lips and I'll die happy!" proved she was a nice girl.

George knew how to handle the whole thing, for hadn't he once, during an illness, been forced to watch *Emily Purvis, Girl Spaceman* regularly for a whole week? It was full of situations like this. He strode up to the postman.

"How dare you annoy this young lady, you scoundrel?" he demanded, knocking the other man down without waiting for an answer.

The blow was not a hard one, for the postman, having already been kneeling before the girl, attempting to kiss the hem of her skirt, did not have far to go. The chief damage done was to the mailbag. Letters and first-class packages littered the tiny Mercurian stripplegrass lawn and overflowed onto the Zelkins' place next door.

The mailman sat up in a welter of fugitive correspondence. "You shouldn't ought to have done that, Mr. Gannett," he said sadly. "Interfering with the U. S. mails. It's not right."

"Interfering with U. S. citizens isn't right either," George declaimed, looking out of the corner of his eye to see how his noble behavior was impressing the girl. But she had gone, and the door was shut behind her.

"Honest, Mr. Gannett," the postman whined, "I don't know what came over me all of a sudden. I'm not like this as a rule. But did you see her hair. It isn't blue or green!"

"It isn't violet, or even orange,"

George agreed dreamily. "It's just brown, like weathered tree bark."

"Or a puddle filmed over with ice in winter," added the postman. Both of them sighed, thinking their own thoughts.

George clapped the other man on the shoulder. "It's okay, fella," he said expansively, "I won't tell on you. Just make sure you don't annoy Miss. . . ."

"Johnson," the postman said. "Jane Johnson. Kind of poetical-like, isn't it?"

George thought. "Yes, it does have a sort of musical ring to it. Well, you just don't annoy Miss Johnson any more, see?"

"Yessir," the postman said humbly. "I don't know what came over me. Mostly I hate the ladies I deliver mail to."

He trudged up the street with his bag, innocently unaware that the automatic vortex sewer had lightened his burden by several packages.

George lifted his hand to knock on the door of Number 73. Surely a gentleman could do no less than inquire whether she had suffered any injury from the harrowing experience. But no, he wouldn't do anything as obvious as that. He would wait, and let her wonder.

So he sprinted up his walk, whistling. "Hiya, kid," he greeted the door. "Open up. It's poppa."

"What's with you?" asked the door, astonished, as it opened to its full width. "You drunk or something?"

"Just exhilarated," George returned over his shoulder as he entered the living room and swept Muriel into a mad embrace, crushing his face against the tacky plastic. There was a strong odor of isophthalic acid.

"Look what you've done, you idiot!" she stormed, as he released her. The vivid green from her hair and her mouth streaked across the lighter tone of her cheeks and forehead.

"I think it looks kind of interesting," he said jovially. "Sort of a zebra effect. Take a look in the mirror. Maybe the firm oughta feature something novel like that."

"The fairest lady. . . ."

"George Gannett!" Muriel boomed.

". . . on this planet is Muriel Felicia Gannett."

"It's okay, honey," he said quickly, "you go back to the beauty parlor tomorrow and have it fixed, no matter how much it costs. Have the overnight express job. Spare no expense. Say, we've just put a new iridescent polka dot hair effect on the market. Maybe you ought to try it on that green; it should look pretty special."

"Why, George," Muriel thundered tenderly. "George, you—you're really sweet. I think I'm going to kiss you for that, since I'm going to have the job done over anyway."

"Never mind, dear," he said. "I'm not so sure I like the taste of isophthalic."

Skin, he thought. *Real soft pink*

skin—not an alkyd resinoid coating. He turned to the robobar.

"Gimme an Angel's Kiss," he said.

"Coming right up, boss," said the bar.

The next day, when Muriel went to the beauty parlor, George didn't go to the lab—as a member of the firm he could get away with it. He spent the morning superintending the kitchen robocook in the delicate art of making pseudocreampuffs. Although the machine was one of the latest models, it had a heavy hand with pastry and needed close watching.

In the afternoon, bearing a covered plastoplate in his hand, he knocked at the door of Number 73.

"Nobody's home," said the door firmly. "Go away."

"Would you tell Miss Johnson that I've come to ask about her health after her nerve-racking experience yesterday? I brought along some cakes my wife baked," he added casually. "She thought Miss Johnson might enjoy them."

There was subdued whispering inside. Finally an eye appeared at the peephole—a limpid, watery-blue eye.

"You—you *are* the man who defensed me against the postalman yesterday," said a sweet, high voice with a foreign accent. So she was a colonial, as Muriel had guessed. "It was excessively kind of you—so brave. . . ." Her voice was very thin, almost a squeak. He had never heard anything so lovely before.

"My wife's feelings would be terribly hurt if you didn't try her pseudopuffs," George insinuated. "She does so want to be friends, only she's a little shy. She'd have come over herself, only she's spending a couple of days at the beauty parlor—had a little accident."

The door opened a little way, and she stood there, peering out suspiciously.

Her beautiful mouse-brown hair was drawn back behind her ears and fastened in a neat bun. There were real freckles on her tilted nose, as she looked up at him through her charming period spectacles.

"Excessively kind of you," she repeated hesitantly, twisting her fingers. "Your wife—she is the tall lady with the blue hairs?"

"If you mean this month, that's Mrs. Zelkin. Last month she was green. This month my wife is green; last month she was turquoise."

"You mean they—" her mouth opened in dismay—"they change from month to month? I was thinking they were all different peoples."

"They do change, but don't *you* do it, bab, my dear. You just stay as sweet as you are." He smiled in a carefully paternal way at her and proffered the pseudopuffs, making sure to keep the plastoplate just out of her grasp. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Yes, of course. Pleasant to come in."

"Thank you." He stepped over the threshold.

She backed away, keeping a safe distance from him. The house was nondescript, but then the Beasleys never had had much taste. The woman had actually used to run around with baby blue skin and shocking pink hair. He'd never bothered much with her.

"W-won't you sit yourself?" Miss Johnson indicated a woven plastic motochair.

"After you," he said with old-fashioned courtesy. That was the kind of stuff to hand this kind of dame.

She brightened. "Of course," she said with more assurance. "That's right."

She sat down in one motochair and he sat in the other. "Tell me about—about—" she began, and he cleared his throat, preparing to give her the thirty-minute autobiography "—about your wife."

"About my *wife?* About *Muriel?*"

"Yes." The girl twisted her fingers. "How she looks the way she does? How they all look the way they does? The womans, I mean? Mans look just the way anticipated, but they comport differently. I had not thought they would be so . . . so affectionful. Especially since—well, I am *plain*. . . ."

George didn't deny this. "You're from one of the outer planets, aren't you?" he asked kindly.

The girl flushed pink. George couldn't remember ever having seen a woman blush before. Nobody had developed blushing plastic yet. It would probably be a big seller, especially if you could shade it in the different fashionable colors. For instance, blue-skinned girls could flush navy, scarlet ones, wine . . . but this was no time to be thinking about business.

"It is so palpable?" she murmured. "I feel verily awkward and—and embarrassing. I know I'm so different from the other womans here."

"Don't let it worry your little head." George pressed the button that made his chair move closer to hers. "It's refreshing to see a girl as sweet and unspoiled as you are; that's what it is. All the women on the block are madly jealous of you."

"But I do not desire them to be!" she wailed, investigating the controls of her chair with hasty interest. "I am wishful for them to like me. I crave to be friends with them—and I do not know how to achieve the aforesaid effect."

"They will like you," he assured her.

He pattered her hand. It was cold, but it didn't have the slickness of plastic. It was real skin. Underneath that baggy garment she was probably covered with skin all over. He licked his lips.

"Soon as they get to know you and see what a nice home-type girl you really are, they'll want to be friends with you."

Of course he wouldn't want her to set a trend. A fine thing if she became a new vogue and all the

women turned nautral again. Business would go pfft. He'd make sure she didn't get to be friends with the other women. Let them all be plastic surfaced; all he wanted was just one unlaminated girl for himself.

"Do I not looking like a nice girl?" she asked, troubled.

"You look different," he said, "and I guess they feel that anything alien isn't quite nice." His lips brushed the back of her cool neck. "But I think you're *quite* nice, baby."

She jumped with a cry that, he told himself, was only a conventional maidenly squeal. It only *sounded* like a shriek of terror. "Mr.—er—you *must not* do that. No, I mean *really!*"

Her chair bounced toward him and then, as she finally pressed the right button, raced away with greater speed than was commensurate with the rules of polite behavior.

George regarded her with the expression of languorous amusement designed to make provincials feel like clods. " 'Fraid of a little kiss, child?"

She twisted her hands nervously. "No, it is not that. Yes, it is, it is! I do not know you sufficiently, Mister—er—?"

"Gannett, George Gannett. You call me George." He moved his chair toward her. "And how are you going to get to know me better if . . . ?"

"George!" she exclaimed, pressing a button which sent her chair rocking wildly back and forth. Losing patience with the mechanism, she sprang to her feet and got behind the robobar. "But I *do* want to know you beter, George . . . and your wife . . . and everybodies. I want to know all of you!"

As he reached across the robobar, his sleeve caught the switch and activated the machine. "Cad!" it said.

He turned it off and advanced upon Jane around the side. "Why don't you begin getting to know me first, and then . . . ?"

"No, no!" she cried. "Pleasant, George—not yet! Tell me—" she licked her dull pink lips, "about yourself, your workings. What do you *do*, George?"

"I'm in plastics," he answered. "Dull stuff. You wouldn't be interested."

"But, on the contrariwise—" her blue eyes shone behind the thick lenses, "I find them fascinating. Pleasant to tell me all about plastics, George."

And, to his amazement, that was what he did for the next two hours; he told her about plastics. Which was not the program he'd had in mind for the afternoon at all.

The girl had everything, he reflected, as he cheerfully wended his way homeward. Maybe she needed warming up a little, but she sure as hell was a good listener—and that was almost as important as doing other things well.

He was looking forward to a cozy

evening—even alone, for, since Muriel would be spending the night at the beauty parlor, he would at least have the opportunity of choosing his own vidiprogram.

"Let's have some news," he told the TV set, as he switched it on.

"News?" asked the video incredulously. "*News?* Who listens to news? We *never* listen to news."

"We do now," George said. "C'mon, shake a tube and get me a newscast."

"You're the boss," the machine said, "but I always say no news is good news." Chuckling hoarsely to itself, it projected a cube of light containing the figure of a tall, thin youth with iridescent apricot hair and plum-colored tights.

Oh, God! George said to himself. *They're starting on the men now.* If the trend kept up, he'd be in an especially vulnerable position. Because of his field of work, he'd be almost forced to change color.

"Ditmars Detachable Eyebrows now bring you the latest world-wide news," the young man said in a bored manner. "The meeting of the big three powers—Earth, Mars, and Jupiter—on Earth's moon is still continuing, but so far no details of the conference have been released to the press. . . . The Cold War with Alpha Centauri shows indications of blazing up again; observers report having seen Centaurian space ships off Pluto. . . ."

He casually removed an eyebrow. "Ditmars' Detachable Eyebrows are what the busy housewife and the tired businessman have been asking for. You don't have to spend hours in the beauty parlor having them affixed. You can put them on yourself by yourself—no fuss, no bother, and so simple a child can do it. Our Kiddies Model retails for the ridiculously low sum of three dollars and ninety-eight cents, while. . . ."

"Turn that off," George ordered.

"Told you so," the television set pointed out, obeying. "Now what'll we have instead? There's a very nice extraterrestrial pop concert—'Music of the Spheres.'"

"Turn yourself off too."

"Oh, very well," the video said. "But I do wish Muriel would hurry up and come back home. She knows how to handle machinery." It clicked itself off.

. . . detachable eyebrows . . . for the tired businessman. . . . The handwriting was on the wall. If he'd kept in touch with Advertising, they might have tipped him off. . . . But, no, they would know how he felt about it. Head-in-the-clouds technologist, they thought him; when he realized what was happening, it would be too late. . . .

He turned on the robobar. "Gimme a straight rye—double."

"No ginger ale? How's about a teeny-weeny splash of soda?"

George pounded the bar with his fist. "Don't *you* tell me what to do, you, you machine! You just do what *I* tell you, and that's all. Gimme a triple rye."

The machine obeyed with a mechanical sniff.

Glass in hand, George strolled over to the mirror to look at himself. Maybe he wasn't handsome, but he liked himself the way he was—a plain, unvarnished man. Eyebrows were only the first step. Then there would be skin lacquer and hair polish, false ear lobes and new voice boxes. . . .

Perhaps on one of the outer planets he could find peace during his lifetime. Fashions were slow to take on there. Look at Jane, for instance. If he were to go live wherever she came from, he'd be safe from the relentless advance of progress. He could sell his interest in the firm; that would give him enough to live on comfortably for the rest of his life, even enough to keep two in modest comfort. Jane couldn't like this planet, no matter why she'd come there in the first place. And he didn't want that sweet, innocent girl to be corrupted.

"Finest little girl I ever saw," he told the robobar as he took his sixth triple rye. The machine kept an offended silence.

As for Muriel, she could always get herself another husband; she always did seem to prefer other husbands anyway. He made a face at the image in the glass.

"And wherever I'm going to live from now on, there isn't going to be a mirror in the place, do you hear me?"

"The fairest damsel on this planet. . . ."

"Lemme out of here!" George demanded of the robobar. It didn't open fast enough.

". . . is Muriel Fe—"

George picked up the robobar and hurled it at the mirror. There was a dull thud, a series of piercing shrieks, and silence. Plastic couldn't break, but it certainly could bend.

"That for all servomechanisms!" George said.

The robodoor opened hastily.

George strode up to Number 73. "This is George Gannett," he ordered. "Lemme in."

"It's awfully late," the door remonstrated. "Not at all a conventional hour for calling."

"This is very important. Urgent." He banged on the door in defiance of etiquette. "Lemme in, do you hear me?"

The door opened and Jane stood there. "What is it, George?" she shrilled sweetly.

"I've got to talk to you, Jane." He leaped over the threshold and reached out to take the girl in his arms. The door swung shut, foiled. She retreated.

"No, no, you don't understand," he explained, advancing upon her. "I want to marry you."

"But hu—you're monogamous, are you not?" Jane retreated further into the room. "What occurred to your wife? You have annihilated her?"

"No, as far as I know she's still at the beauty parlor. I'm going to divorce her. I'll mention it to her when she gets out of the mandrels.

She won't mind; she's been divorced before. Jane, I love you—I want to go back with you wherever you come from. What is it . . . Saturn, Uranus, Neptune? I'll go to the ends of the Solar System with you. Even an asteroid."

"No, you do not understand." She shrank from him. Yet he was sure that behind the antique spectacles the light of love was gleaming. She was just shy.

He grabbed her in his arms. "Jane, I love you—"

"George. . . ." she wriggled, trying to free herself, "I . . . I must confess I am not altogetherly indifferent to you myself. But there exists something you do not know . . . that I feel you should know."

However, she could not help yielding to his advances, melting in the ardor of his passion.

Literally melting!

George stepped back to look at her in astonishment. The real pink skin, the real mouse-brown hair, the real freckles—they were all dissolving into a pool of plastic at her feet. Even her baggy dress liquefied. Underneath she was an iridescent green with smooth, neatly overlapping scales. The false blue eyes attached to her spectacles dropped off, revealing orbs of a luminous red.

He had seen pictures of her—or, rather, her kind—before. "You're an Alpha Centaurian!"

She twisted her fingers and they fell off, revealing dainty claws underneath. "Whew," she said, "that is a relievement. I am much more comfortful now. I do hope I have not been an overwhelming shock to you, George."

"Well," he said judiciously, "I won't deny that this certainly is a surprise."

"I am regrettable," she apologized. "Attracting the sex in opposition was the last thing I intended to do when I came here. As a matter of factness, working from the documentaries our last reconnaissance team fought back from here, I believed I had made myself of extreme unattractiveness." She sighed. "I guess you simply cannot do anything about the emergence of personal magnetism."

"You're an undercover agent," George deduced, looking at her sinuous new form with interest. "But you're still a female anyway. And a mammal. And how!"

"Yes, I am an undercover agent," she agreed, "*but,*" she went on, "it is all in a good cause. We do not want to warfare on you, George. That was all a vast error the last time—of course I was not hatched then, but I have studied all about it. We do crave to be friends with you, learn all about your advanced technology which we admire so lavishly. All these lovely synthetic things . . . how do you ever manage to imagine them?"

"There's such a thing as having too much technology," George observed pensively. "Besides, it looks to me as if you folks aren't doing so bad at all. Golly, you have inter-

stellar flight and plastic that actually blushes and feels like skin."

"But your plastic has much greater heat resistance," she returned courteously. "You have high temperature thermosets, while we have to make do with old-fashioned themoplasts. That's why," and the jade green of her scales turned to hunter, "I was forced to resist your advances. At ninety-eight point six degrees Fahrenheit, I run."

"Then you don't find me repulsive?" George asked anxiously. "Even though I am of another species?"

She turned almost olive. "Well, you see, I have devoted so considerable of my existence to a study of human beings that they seem almost real. I discover you intriguing, exotic, piquant. . . ."

"I think you're piquant too," George said, touching a scale with the tip of one finger. It was cool, yet vibrant to the touch. He liked it. "Very piquant, in fact." She was a much nicer shade of green than Muriel.

"Oh, George," Jane said, lowering her eyes, "it is just like *Romeo and Juliet* almost, is it not? I read it in the courses of my research. So romantic—we do not have anything like Shakespeare up on Alpha Centauri."

"Up on Alpha Centauri," he asked anxiously, "you don't wear these plastic coatings or paint or anything when you're fixed up, do you?"

"Oh no, George," she said, her red eyes shining with a glow Muriel's plastifacts could never equal. "We are our own natural selves all the time."

"Then look here," he said eagerly, "if your people really want peace with mine, why don't we—you and I—sort of symbolize it by getting married? I love you, Jane. On you, green looks good."

"I . . . I love you too, George," she admitted. "But do you think you would be happy on Alpha Centauri? It is much different from the Solar System, you know—in more ways than you can fancy."

"I know I'll love it!" he said enthusiastically. All his problems seemed solved. "I can open a little lab there and show your people how to make plastics that'll resist thermal decomposition, and your people can show me how to make plastic that blushes and feels like skin. . . . Only I think I personally like the feel of scales better than that of skin."

He took her in his arms. "Pleasant, George," she begged. "Not now. . . ."

"Now, darling," he said. "I've only got your word for it that you're not covered with still another thermoplastic lamina. You fooled me once; this time you've got to *prove* you're heat resistant!"

thank you, member

by . . . Roger Dee

A fanatic's granitelike purpose may wreck a universe — and even himself. But wondrously effective was the time-tested Milasian cure.

THE TOURISTS had arrived by night, when the impersonal dark of the moonless little world had joined with the weariness of their long passage to subdue interest in a stopover so many lightyears from the popular routes. It followed that the four of them should be surprised, and a little disconcerted, to find when they went down after breakfast to join the Proctor on his terrace that Milasia was a great deal more, and less, than they had expected.

The guest house was of warm brown native stone, its comfortable lines so mellowed by skeins of clinging vines that it seemed from the terrace a part of the hillside upon which it was built. Below the terrace lay a long, quiet valley, as fresh and clear of detail as a picture just painted, its meadows still asparkle with dew.

A stream, bordered with ferns wonderfully tall and delicate enough to sway like green puffs of mist under the wings of butterflies as bright as autumn leaves, wound through the near foreground. Be-

Did you ever see a Portuguese Man of War, riding the waves of a tropical sea with its snowy crests resplendent in the dawn? It's a single vast organism, and yet each tiny cell is an individual in its own right, contributing wisely to the whole. Could all intelligent life in the universe be similarly a part of some greater organism, breasting an unknown sea, as Roger Dee has so fascinatingly suggested here? A startling idea, truly!

yond, at the foot of rising, wooded hills, a tiny lake caught the sunlight and threw it back with a curious effect of filtered softness, while on its open water a flock of what might have been geese swam placidly.

"It's far too beautiful to be a penal colony," Olive Waring said. She was a writer, in collaboration with her husband, of very successful teleplays, and such wanton misuse of Arcadian perfection jarred upon her sense of aesthetic rightness. "What a shame, to spoil this little paradise with the punishment of a few murderers!"

"Milasia isn't really a place of punishment," the Proctor said mildly. "Rehabilitation would be a better word, I think."

He held a chair for her at the terrace table, seating himself only when Fentress and Graves and Hubert Waring had found places of their own. He watched them with an interest that was part grave amusement and part outright wonder at his own kind. Across their faces passed the inevitable procession of reactions—interest, surmise and ready conclusion—which his forty years of experience with sightseers had made long familiar.

"Rehabilitation?" Hubert Waring said, when he saw that the Proctor did not mean to pursue at once his conversational gambit. He was the statistician of his team, the meticulous craftsman, bent always on correct alignment of fact and motive and content to leave to his more sensitive wife the creative details of character and temperament. "But Milasia is a dumping-ground for criminals too hardened for readjustment by the best psychomedical panels in the Galaxy, sir. How can you rehabilitate such incorrigibles?"

"Specifically," Fentress said, joining in with the insatiable curiosity of a sociomatics professor on sabbatical tour, "how can you reconstruct such a psychopathic monster as Paul Renneker?"

"They've sent Renneker here?' Olive Waring asked, and looked about her sharply. But there was less of alarm than of professional interest in her surprise. She was, after all, a successful writer of teleplays, and there might be a great many fascinating—and profitable—facets to the personality of a murderer.

"Renneker came here three days ago," the Proctor said. "But my staff and I will have no part in his actual rehabilitation. We leave that to the Milasians, who never fail."

He touched an antique silver callbell, and its clear tinkling brought a servant down from the guest house. A tall and very old man he was, with hair and beard like blown sea-foam and serene blue eyes that smiled from a face as fresh and unworn as a boy's. The old man brought a tray with plain, small cups and two white pots of native design.

"Coffee," the Proctor said, "is the perennial boon of the ages."

When the old man had poured for them, he said, "Thank you, Member," and the attendant went away without having spoken.

"Perhaps the wisest, and humblest, of those ever treated by the Milasians," the Proctor said, following the old man's retreat with respectful eyes. "And therefore a servant by choice when we are honored with visitors. An eloquent testimony to the Milasians' corrective ability, I may say, since he was in his time one of the most dangerous men in the Galaxy."

They sipped their coffee and murmured the polite surprise expected of them, recognizing the Proctor's right to direct the conversation. But each of them, with his own degree of resignation, privately estimated the dullness of the reminiscence they saw in the offing. For a moment Graves, who was younger than the others and who alone of the four had a definite purpose in stopping over at Milasia, seemed about to speak. But he withheld his comment when he saw that the Proctor meant this time to continue . . .

The Proctor, as an elderly host will who has all the time in the world, and who understands fully the hold given him by social usage over his company, did not come immediately to the point.

"I see as many as I can of your teleplays," he remarked to Olive and Hubert Waring. "I admire them intensely, not only for their entertainment factor but for their instruction in the shifting social nuances. The tenor of galactic life changes so swiftly, except out here on our obscure peripheral worlds, that I should find it hard to keep abreast of my own kind but for such detailed treatments."

The Warings could only murmur appreciatively, and wait. The Proctor smiled at Fentress, in turn, over the rim of his coffee cup. "And I promise you, sir, as much as I know—though that will be little enough—of the rehabilitation of criminals condemned to finish their lives on Milasia."

He had not quite settled on Graves' probable purpose in stopping off at this penal outworld, but discovered it now by the simple, if obvious, expedient of saying: "And you, sir . . ." and permitting his sentence to trail away unfinished.

Graves was quite willing to declare his interest. "I undertook this peripheral tour, sir, in the hope of learning what became of an uncle of mine, my mother's brother, who disappeared fifty years ago in this sector of space.

"I never saw him, since I was born much later, and—to be quite frank—should have been happy to forget him but for my mother's family concern in his fate. He was a professional demagogue. He was one of those militant religionaries who used to pop up periodically to excite the people until Jose Quebarra's philosophy of social unity arrived to displace their deism. His name—"

"Was Adrian Penn," Fentress finished for him, caught up in an excitement of professional pleasure which made him forget for the moment the course of amenities. "So that's why your face was so familiar when we met! You bear a powerful family resemblance to photographs I've seen of—"

He broke off, coloring in embarrassment, when he saw Graves' look and understood the extent of his offense. "I'm terribly sorry, sir, but I simply . . . I'm a professor of sociomatics, you know, on Algol IV, and it was the founding of my science that—well, Adrian Penn is a standard example in lecturing to students of pre-Quebarra fanaticism. I am so familiar with his career up to the time of . . ."

He floundered to a stop. "I am truly sorry, sir. It was an unpardonable crudity."

Graves could not do less than accept the apology. "It was a professional enthusiasm, sir, and in no sense offensive. As a designer of ceramics patterns, I sometimes forget myself so far as to do the same when my field comes under discussion."

He bowed to Fentress, who returned the courtesy gratefully, and dismissed the incident by continuing to the Proctor as if he had not been interrupted: "His name was Adrian Penn, sir."

"I remember him perfectly," the Proctor said. "He came here at the height of his career, on an evangelical tour of the newer peripheral worlds. That was long before Milasia became a penal world. I was not Proctor then, but a very junior Galactic representative. Still I remember Adrian Penn, for all the time that has passed, as if he had come only yesterday."

Graves, in his pleasure at finding himself near the end of his search, almost repeated Fentress' interruptive blunder. The tedious months had added to his earlier disapproval of his vanished uncle a share of personal resentment. He had come to think of Adrian Penn as a gaunt and vehement fanatic, ascetic and intolerant, and he was eager to confirm that conception.

"Physically," the Proctor said, "he was a large man, in his middle forties, with graying hair and a quiet, unremarkable voice. It would be as impossible now as it was then to define his unusual personal power, but I think that it lay entirely in his certainty. For he *was* certain. He was one of those few men in the course of history to be given that unshakable conviction of rightness which has nothing to do with reason, and which admits of no need for justification.

"Nothing succeeds, it has been said for millenia, like success; and nothing convinces as surely as conviction. With Adrian Penn there was no middle ground, and his singleness of mind was a persuasion more powerful than any argument."

"A fanatic," Graves could not resist murmuring.

"In the same sense," the Proctor agreed, "that Quebarra was fanatical in his insistence that social unity must be a better panacea than religion. Adrian Penn was born a man of conviction. If his interest had turned to politics, or to any field other than religion, he would have been as great a power there. He had one asset, his conviction, and one virtue, his persistence. He went about his work the moment he set foot on Milasia."

He put down his coffee cup and sighed. "I was in command of the little Galactic post here at the time, and it was necessary that I record the purpose of his visit. 'There are souls here,' he said. 'I am here to save them.'

"When I explained that the Milasians were not men, though very like us in form, he smiled at my quibbling. He had settled all such arguments, in the clarity of his own conviction, long before. 'The term *world,*' he said, 'has grown to include not one planet, but a universe of planets. The term *man* has extended to cover all thinking beings in His shape.'

"I was too new to Milasia to know more of the natives than that they were humanoid and seemed amicable. I doubted that they would welcome an alien evangelist's exhortations, and suggested that they might forcibly resent his proselytizing. He answered me with the same intent purpose: 'Saul of Tarsus and the Caesars fought the truth, but accepted it. So shall these.'

"I could not restrain him, for at that time his followers numbered billions, and Galactic policy directed that he be treated with respect. His influence, as a matter of fact, was in a fair way to initiate a religious renaissance that might have affected the course of history."

His gaze, wandering in reminiscence to the valley, found the stir of movement which he had anticipated since dawn: a man, surrounded by a flock of curious geese, swimming strongly across the little lake.

The Proctor rose at once and excused himself to Graves. "I promised our friend Fentress earlier to explain to him as much as I can of criminal rehabilitation on Milasia. You will forgive me if I postpone the remainder of our talk?"

Fentress put in quickly, "I owe him a double courtesy, sir. I should be happy to surrender my privilege."

"Not at all," Graves said, since, again, he could not do less. "We are all interested. My uncle can wait."

The Proctor bowed. "With such an object lesson approaching, the moment is really too fortunate to let pass."

In the valley, the man came out of the lake and shook himself vigorously, standing erect and naked in a sun-bright shower of sparkling drops. For a moment he looked about as if orienting himself. Then he walked out upon the meadow

toward the terrace and the guest house above.

The Proctor moved to the terrace-edge to watch, and his visitors joined him.

"Our latest Member," the Proctor said. "Once a condemned murderer, arriving now a new man after his three days of reconstruction among the Milasians—Paul Renneker."

He smiled in apology when they drew back instinctively. "It was thoughtless of me to put it so dramatically. In my later years, I may have become more direct than considerate. But I assure you that there is no danger."

He directed himself to Fentress while they watched Renneker striding toward them up the meadow. "I warned you, sir, that I could tell you little about this reshaping of character, because that ability is peculiar to the Milasians. My staff and I are concerned only with the new Member's physical needs after the reconstruction has been effected."

Olive Waring, more sensitive to nuance than the others by reason of her sex and calling, understood the shadow of weariness that touched the Proctor's face and said at once, "Shouldn't we be more comfortable if we sat? We haven't finished our coffee, you know." They sat as before, and the Proctor smiled faintly when each of them turned his chair to keep the approaching figure of Renneker before them rather than behind.

"I am completely baffled," Fentress said, "by this ability of your Milasians to work a mental cure beyond the best psychomedicians in the Galaxy."

"And I," the Proctor answered. "I worried the problem for years before admitting defeat, but to this day I am certain only of its physical details. The penal ship lands on the opposite hemisphere of Milasia —which is very much like this one, except for our guest house, the only building on the planet—and puts out its felon to shift for himself. The prisoner is quite free, but in whatever direction he turns he soon meets with a group of Milasians.

"He does not attempt to harm them, no matter how vicious he may have been. The Milasians talk with him and pass him from group to group, always in this direction, until within a period of three days—sometimes less, but never more—he reaches the guest house and we find him completely cured of his aberration. From that time, he is a Member."

Olive Waring leaned forward, her fine eyes bright with interest. "Please, may I impose on courtesy to ask why no one has ever discovered what it is that the Milasians *do?* I have never heard of a thing so intriguing, or so mysterious!"

The Proctor made a helpless gesture. "They have told me that the only way to understand their treatment is to undergo it, and they will treat only the dangerously aberrated. Their ability is peculiar to themselves, without counterpart any-

where in the Galaxy, and beyond that they are not able to explain. Can you imagine a method of explaining musical harmony to a man born deaf?"

She thanked him and sat back, her expression thoughtful. Fentress reclaimed his conversational privilege to ask, "And what are these reconstructed felons like, sir?"

"They are exactly as they were before," the Proctor said, "except for the mending of the abnormality that had made them what they were. After reconstruction, they are like the Member who served us coffee just now: gentle, unselfish and humble."

There was silence for a moment while they watched Renneker climbing the slope toward the terrace. Graves took the relinquished lead to ask, "Will you tell us what a *Member* is, sir?"

"The concept is a difficult one," the Proctor said, "but in essence, the Milasians believe that all intelligent life in the Galaxy is one vast, composite whole. They believe that each individual, no matter the world on which it lives, is an impletion to that whole so long as it follows the natural pattern of behavior set for it by its ecology.

"Each serves a peculiar need to the overall organism, but if any single unit should deviate in a manner harmful to its fellows, then the entity that contains it as a part must suffer to the extent of the damage done by that deviation. It is for this reason that the Milasians undertake to reconstruct our incorrigibles, to make them harmonious units—Members—of that galactic being."

They were silent again until Olive Waring said musingly, "I never heard such a belief advanced before, but it has a feel of truth. The thought that each different species may serve a particular purpose to that total entity strikes a chord of reason, too. How strange it would be if these Milasians, unrecognized out here on their little peripheral world, should be the Galaxy's conscience!"

Her fellow visitors smiled in appreciation of her fancy, but the Proctor looked at her with new respect. "You may be more right than you suppose," he said. "The Galaxy owes a great deal to Milasia already. Jose Quebarra, who founded the science of sociomatics to replace religion in our culture, visited here forty years ago and adapted his philosophy of social unity from the teachings of the Milasians."

Fentress was manifestly eager to pursue the subject, but Graves, to whom he still owed a courtesy, intervened, and Fentress surrendered his lead without protest. "Forty years?" Graves said. "Why, that was only ten years after my uncle disappeared."

The Proctor accepted the reminder with ready grace. "Since I have discharged my first promise," he said to Graves, "it is high time I remembered my second. There is very little more to tell about your

uncle, however, for immediately after our first meeting he went among the Milasians to convert them to his belief."

"And that's all?" Graves said, disappointed by an ending so inconclusive. "You didn't see him again, sir?"

"Oh, yes. He came back to the outpost four days later, quite unharmed. But he wasn't the same."

Olive Waring made a pleased little cry, and when Graves looked blank, said like a teacher coaching a backward pupil: "Don't you see? Adrian Penn didn't convert the Milasians. They converted *him!*"

The Proctor confirmed her guess. "They did, indeed. He served us coffee less than an hour ago."

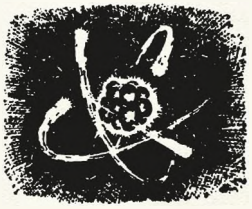
Renneker's appearance on the terrace made a brief interruption while the Proctor greeted him and led him, like a new child to his schoolroom, into the guest house. Returning, the Proctor found Graves recovered from the shock of his discovery but puzzled by a minor inference.

"I can understand that my uncle's religious movement might have been a peril," Graves said. "But other historic issues of the day—the threat of rebellion in the older colonies, and the industrialist cartel's effort to turn the Galaxy into a financial oligarchy, to name two—must have been as serious. Yet you spoke of my uncle as the most dangerous man of his time."

"The movement was of no importance," the Proctor said. "It was the man himself, with his peculiar strength of conviction in his own inherent rightness, that represented the danger. He was so strong that his strength was an aberration in itself. If he had shifted in his later years to a more inflammable issue, he might have turned the Galaxy back a thousand years. His reconstruction at the hands of the Milasians proved that power beyond doubting."

They fell quiet again, sobered by his earnestness, until Hubert Waring, the meticulous craftsman and student of motive, said finally: "I think I see, sir. The Milasians have never needed more than three days to rehabilitate the stubbornest of criminals, but for Adrian Penn . . ."

"You're quite right," the Proctor said. "For poor Adrian, they needed four."



talent for the future

by . . . John Christopher

Babes in the woods were the two gifted scientists in the chill tremendous future. Only Peters had a card up his shabby sleeve.

THE ADVERTISER had bought two blank lines above and below the advertisement, proper. It stood out prominently half way down the classified column. It ran:

Time travel. Men with the following qualifications required: 1. First-class general scientific background, with appreciation of applied science and technology: experience in industrial and scientific liaison useful. 2. Skilled field sociologist or public opinion specialist. 3. Completely unqualified. Payment in each case will be £500, for one evening. Box B 326.

It produced a record postbag. The applications were winnowed down to a final list of three. These three letters ran as follows:

1.

Dear Sir,

I have B.Sc., M.Sc., and D.Sc. degrees (*Oxon*) in physics. My doctorate thesis was on some aspects of the Brownian movement in relation to sedimentation and the settling rate of slurries. I now hold an editorial position on the technical jour-

John Christopher is widely known as a top-echelon mystery story writer who has taken occasional "flyers" into science fiction and science fantasy. This story is very English in atmosphere and setting, and that doth greatly please us, for in an adventure of the kind presented here there is nothing quite so apropos as a few stray wisps of gray London fog.

nal, *Precision Machinist*. If I understand correctly, you are offering payment of £500 for an evening's work in connection with time travel, regardless of results. I shall be glad to offer you my services.

Yours faithfully,
Henry Crake.

2.

Dear Sir,

My personal view is that you are quite crazy. I do not believe that anything you can say or do will alter this conviction. If you are sufficiently unbalanced to give me £500 for an evening's work, I shall be most happy to oblige you, providing the work is (a) legal, and (b) not suicidal.

I worked, or rather attended, for a degree in psychology at the London School of Economics, but failed to take the degree. Since then I have done a certain amount of market research, and rather more of advertising copywriting. I have also had some sketches published in *Punch*. Is this a record?

Yours sincerely
J. Carter Stackpole.

3.

Dear Sire,

I do'nt kno exacly waht it is you want, but if its' a quiston of £500, I'm on. I hav'nt got any qualificatons at all.

Yours respecfully
A. Peters.

IN EACH CASE, the reply was that the writer should present himself at a Mayfair address, at seven o'clock on a specific evening. They met, and recognized each other, outside the house. Stackpole took the initiative in talking, speaking, naturally enough, to the other educated member of the trio.

"You'll be the scientist, I take it," he said. "I *believe* I'm the sociologist, although it's just possible that I'm the unqualified specimen." He turned interrogatively to Peters. "You wouldn't be the sociologist, I suppose?"

The very light inflection of sarcasm was water off a duck's back as far as Peters was concerned. He was an insignificant little man, with a ginger moustache and an expression of wariness.

"Don't know, guvnor. I applied for number three."

Stackpole nodded, smiling thoughtfully at him. "My name's Stackpole," he said. "You know, I can't believe in that five hundred, but the address is solid enough. If it isn't time travel, at a place like this, it's probably the white slave traffic. It should be interesting, at least."

Crake said: "Yes, I'm the scientist. Name of Crake. *Have* you rung?"

"Not up to now." Stackpole thumbed the bellpush. "And what's your name, Number Three?"

"Peters, guvnor. Alf Peters."

A manservant opened to them. "Good evening, gentlemen. Sir

Gregory is expecting you. Would you come this way, please?"

Crake looked startled. He repeated, half to himself: "Sir Gregory?" Stackpole watched him acutely.

"Something ring a bell?"

They were proceeding along a narrow but sumptuous corridor. Crake said: "I'm not sure . . ."

The butler led them into a square room of medium size, lined with books. The view from the window, which would otherwise have been of an extremely depressing mews back, was limited by an evergreen creeper trained on poles barely three feet from the glass. Stackpole went across to look out.

"What it is to be rich," he commented, "and fence off the world's squalor with an elaborately trained rhododendron. Or whatever it is. But if you're rich enough, I suppose the outside world's irrelevant."

The butler had left them. Within a few minutes the door opened —in fact it swung open violently and crashed against the woodwork —and a portly elderly gentleman, not much taller than Peters though a great deal wider, came in. Crake, when he saw him, said involuntarily: "Sir Gregory!"

"So you do know him," Stackpole observed. "Introduce us."

Sir Gregory laughed. "I'll do it myself. I'm Gregory Macobs. You gentlemen will have answered my advertisement. Let me see—you will be Mr. Crake, you will be Mr. Stackpole, and this will be Mr. Peters." He had them right. "You are prepared to help me with my little job?"

Crake began cautiously. "Of course . . ."

"Of course," Sir Gregory repeated. "We can take the 'of courses' for granted. You will be able to take all reasonable precautions."

Stackpole said: "Sir Gregory Macobs. Yes, indeed. Fellow of the Royal . . . and didn't you do the work on vector analysis for a complex of magnetic and electric fields. You got the Nobel Prize in . . . let me see . . ."

"Never mind. It was some years ago. You please me, Mr. Stackpole. Not because of your knowledge of my scientific past in itself, but because the person I really wanted for your job was one with all-round interests, and an ability to assess the social scene. I found it rather difficult to define."

Crake said, half accusingly: "You dropped right out of everything, Sir Gregory. I didn't even realize you were still alive."

"I know, I know! Science forgets its workers very quickly. Unlike literature, which commonly keeps its highest eminence for someone who hasn't worked for a quarter of a century, I dropped out because I didn't want to be interrupted and, perhaps more to the point, because I didn't really believe myself that the line I was working on would lead where it gave every indication of leading. I didn't care for the prospect of being made a fool of

by publishing results that might not come out. Well, they've come out, and I still don't know that I will publish . . ."

Crake said: "I'd like to see your work, Sir Gregory." His voice had a soothing note. Sir Gregory looked at him sharply.

"Let us get one thing straight," he said. "Each one of you came here tonight in the happy conviction that I was mad and the hope of getting five hundred pounds for nothing. You are to be proved wrong in the conviction and right, more or less, in the hope. You, Mr. Crake, will not be shown my figures. The work I have been doing for eight years cannot possibly be run over in a few minutes.

"One of my earlier results gave me proofs of the four fundamental equations Einstein postulated. I have established certain facts about the underlying structure of the universe and have shown, to my own satisfaction, that we live in a closed continuum of time and space in which the factors of conservation of energy and mass are limitlessly interchangeable. Theoretically, transfer of mass to any point of the physical universe is possible, but I have found it impossible to get over the local gravitational effect . . ."

He gazed at them. "Do any of you know what I'm talking about?"

Peters continued a solemn stare, begun some time before. Stackpole said cheerfully: "Haven't a notion."

Crake said: "Given the clue—that it's to do with time travel—I should guess that what you mean is that earth gravity persists during the . . . the effect. So that, whereas otherwise the object might finish up anywhere between here and the edge of the universe, as it is it travels with this planet and is translated only in time. I must say, you've got over one difficulty that's always struck me about the theory of time travel."

Sir Gregory had been looking at Crake critically. "Yes, you'll do, too. That leaves one." He wheeled on Peters. "I want someone without any talent at all for the job I had proposed for you. I want the common citizen. Well, are you common enough?"

Peters said uneasily: "I think so, guvnor. I come from Woolwich."

"Not your origin, man! I'm not interested in your social life. Play any musical instrument? Trained in any special trade—*any?*" Peters was shaking his head. "What's your job?"

"I'm not actually in work—not right now, guvnor. I've done a bit on the docks, and I've helped with a barrow selling fruit. You know."

"I know." Sir Gregory looked at him thoughtfully. "Yes. I think you will do."

Stackpole said: "Would it be too much to ask why you want people with our particular qualifications—or lack of them?"

"I was going to explain that. Have a drink?" There was a general noise of agreement, and Sir Gregory went to a cabinet and re-

turned with a bottle and four glasses on a tray. "I take it nobody objects to Scotch." He poured the glasses almost to the brim.

"Now then." He cleared his throat. "I think I have made it sufficiently clear that I have found a way of traversing time—or that I have convinced myself that I have. I should stress here that there is no danger to any of you in this experiment. Mr. Crake will be able to examine the apparatus I shall use, and can satisfy himself, and you other two also, that it contains nothing that could be lethal.

"To make matters doubly sure, I have a gentleman in an adjacent room from one of the big insurance companies. He has prepared a form of insurance, which I am backing, guaranteeing to your personal nominees the individual sums of a hundred thousand pounds each in case of your death, and a *pro rata* division of that sum to you yourselves in the case of any disablement resulting from the work you will do tonight.

"Now—why do I want you particular three? The point is that I have a natural curiosity about the future, the more so since I shall see only a very small portion of it now. The ideal thing would be to travel in time myself, and perhaps I may do this eventually. For the present I am the only person who can man the controls at this end.

"So I am sending a scouting party into the future, and I want it to be the kind of scouting party that will give me the most satisfactory information about that future. I have fixed a time of five hundred years as a provisional target. I want you to look at the latter half of the twenty-fifth century for me. I want a man who will be most likely to assess accurately the state of scientific and technological development of the world at that time. That's you, Crake.

"You, Mr. Stackpole, will have the task of weighing up the social conditions of that world, and giving me as clear a picture of it as you can manage. Mr. Peters here is the guinea-pig. I simply want him to express his reactions to the inevitably fantastic scene you will encounter. He does not need to understand it at all clearly, or to be very articulate in describing things. I shall get my full descriptions from you other two gentlemen. From Mr. Peters I want no more than an emotional reaction—what the man in the street of the twentieth century thinks of the pattern of life of the twenty-fifth. Very possibly he will be utterly bewildered by it all. That in itself will be a valuable reaction."

Stackpole had finished his whiskey. Sir Gregory silently pushed the bottle towards him, and with as silent an acknowledgment, Stackpole refilled his glass.

Crake said: "It sounds simple enough. On the other hand, the way things are going . . ." He laughed briefly, in a high key. "We may fall into the hands of savages.

What *pro rata* value have you put on our scalps?"

"The transfer of mass," Sir Gregory said. "That is, in this case, of your bodies and the small envelope of air immediately surrounding them, will be accomplished by warping the basic substance of the space-time continuum."

He glanced briefly and sardonically towards Crake. "One of the minor by-products of my work has been the resurrection of the ether, though not, perhaps, in quite its old form. This warping is an unstable condition, although the instability, as I see it, would progressively diminish."

"What the hell," asked Stackpole, "does that mean?"

Sir Gregory nodded to Crake. Crake said: "The mass transferred would gradually adjust itself to its new environment—if nothing interrupted you could stay in the new time era."

"Exactly," said Sir Gregory. "Fortunately a certain harmonic wave, during the period of instability, can resolve the situation into its original equilibrium." He turned to Crake again. "That is why you need not worry about those hypothetical savages. Your return to this time era depends on you yourselves, and you can actuate it whenever you wish. I have no control over you once I have sent you forward in time. You will each wear, on a wrist band, a very small transmitter. The simple matter of pressing a button will cause your return."

Stackpole commented: "Cast iron."

Sir Gregory refilled all the glasses, including Stackpole's, which was again empty.

"If it has not already occurred to you, it probably will occur that there is nothing to stop you pressing the button as soon as you arrive in the twenty-fifth century. I shall not be able to gauge the length of time you have spent in the future, because you will return to the exact temporal point from which you left. You could concoct some story of what the future was like, and provided you were very clever and were able to combine on the *same* story, you might possibly be able to deceive me and collect your five hundred under false pretences."

His glance lingered on Peters. "But apart from my confidence in your integrities, I doubt if you all have the imagination for it, and, of course, it would have to be a joint deception. In any case, I am banking to a certain extent on natural curiosity—in the case of Mr. Crake and Mr. Stackpole at least—making you in fact anxious to investigate the world of the future in as full a way as you can."

Sir Gregory picked his glass up, but put it down again without drinking. He went on abruptly.

"That point does not worry me, but there is one point that does. You, Mr. Crake, and you, Mr. Stackpole, are quite talented men. I require you to be talented for the purpose of this trip, but I cannot

be blind to the possibility that your talents may defeat my ends. The plain fact is that a talented man may find the world of the future an irresistible attraction.

"In a number of ways I conceive the possibility that he would command a high position in the society of that era. You may prefer not to return, gentlemen. I have placed the premium on return at what I think is a high figure, but five hundred pounds may seem small beside the rewards the future can offer you. If events should turn out this way, I can only hope your loyalty to me as your employer will be strong enough."

He smiled to Peters. "I hope you will not take my reference to the talents of these gentlemen amiss, Mr. Peters. At any rate, the wages are the same."

Peters grinned. "And that's enough for me, Sir Greg'ry."

"You may rest assured, Sir Gregory," Crake said, "That Mr. Stackpole and I will stand by the terms of our agreement."

Stackpole gave a slight hiccup. "True blue, an' all that. Good for us, Crakey boy. Another drink, Sir Gregory?"

Sir Gregory removed the bottle from Stackpole's reach. He said gently: "You had better retain something of your faculties for facing the unknown. Now, if you are ready, gentlemen . . ."

The business with the man from the insurance company was conducted in Sir Gregory's study. The men took it very calmly. From there they returned to the corridor, and down a winding spiral staircase to the basement. The dividing walls had been removed and the whole basement floor turned into a physical laboratory. Beside one wall there was an elaborate-looking apparatus to which was attached what looked like a metal door frame. Sir Gregory pointed to it.

"Run your eye over that, Mr. Crake. I think you will judge it harmless enough."

Peters was standing still in the middle of the floor, eyeing the scene distrustfully.

Stackpole said quietly to Sir Gregory, "There is one little thing. I can't speak for the other two, but I still think you're crazy. Clearly intelligent, but crazy. If we tell you afterwards that nothing has happened, you are prepared to believe us? No withholding the cash unless we come through with a blow-by-blow picture of the future?"

"You have my word for it, Mr. Stackpole," Sir Gregory said. "Providing you are all agreed, I believe you."

Crake returned to them. "That's a very odd helical mesh in the diaphragm . . . I find the geometry of it rather disturbing . . . and I take it those are quartz crystals in the transmitter . . . a piezoelectric effect? . . . for that matter, the motor . . ."

"Will it blow our heads off, old man?" Stackpole asked with exag-

gerated patience. "That's the essential question."

"No, of course not. I can't see that it will do anything at all. I really . . ."

Stackpole said: "That's all right. We get paid just the same if it doesn't work. I wanted that confirmed again, too."

"Then we might as well go ahead with things," Sir Gregory said briskly. "Fasten these bracelets round your wrists."

He handed them each a bracelet carrying a square metal box, about one and a half inches square and half an inch deep. The box had a projecting button.

"That's the thing you press to return. You can safely stay up to a week, but I should prefer you to stay no more than three days in the future."

"Blimey, three days!" Peters said.

"Don't worry," Sir Gregory told him. "These two gentlemen will look after you."

He went across to the machine, and stationed himself beside an instrument panel. He called to them above the low throb of the motor, which he had switched one.

"All I require you to do is to walk across the room towards me, and continue walking through this frame arrangement." They stood irresolutely. "Just start walking, gentlemen!"

He watched them come towards him, reach the frame, and pass through it. Three of them reached the frame. Three of them walked through. But only two reached the other side . . .

Stackpole said: "He sent you this note." It read:

"Sorry, guvner. But I cul'd'n't tell you much aniways. These gentilmen will be beter at that, I got no fambly to speke off, So you can scrub the fiv hunderd nicker. Yours sincerly, Alf. Peters."

"Now," Sir Gregory said, "what does it mean? What does it *mean?*"

Stackpole looked at him. His expression was cynical, but it was also nervous, tired, bewildered.

"I should tell you about the future first, shouldn't I? That's what you are paying us for. I suppose I'll be able to squeeze something out in due course. Right now I can only tell you that I can't tell you anything. It's gigantic, tremendous, unbelievable. They were kind to us. They didn't know who we were but they treated us well. And we couldn't make head nor tail of anything. Their social life . . . no. How can I tell you anything when I didn't understand anything. As for their science . . ."

Crake said, in a wooden voice: "Believe me, Sir Gregory, your time machine looks like a child's toy beside the things I saw. I couldn't begin to think what any of them were for."

Sir Gregory said explosively: "But Peters—" He waved the grubby note in the air. "What the hell does this mean? What happened to Peters?"

Crake put a hand up and rubbed his forehead. He said vaguely: "Peters . . ."

Stackpole began to laugh; there was an hysterical edge to his voice. Sir Gregory went over to an instrument cupboard and brought back a whiskey bottle. Stackpole took it eagerly and drank deeply before passing it on to Crake.

He said, more steadily: "You were worried about the possibility that Crake and I might find our talents so much in demand in the twenty-fifth century that we would prefer to stay there. That's a laugh! I'd hate to take the high school curriculum in that world. We could neither of us have made a living in fifty years of sweating. But it didn't even cross your mind that it might be true of Peters."

"Peters!" Sir Gregory said. "Peters had no talents. I asked him—and I chose him for that reason."

"He didn't think it worth mentioning." Stackpole laughed again. "The talent that's just as valuable—more valuable—in a world of the future that Crake and I didn't begin to understand—and he didn't think it worth mentioning!"

Sir Gregory said, very slowly: "And what was the talent?"

Stackpole took the bottle back from Crake and drank even more deeply.

"Didn't I mention it either? . . . The gambler's lucky card trick. He was a wizard at it."

down with the tyrants

by . . . Hal Ellson

In a police state a man may be destroyed or driven mad by the ripping out of a telephone. But not a man who dares to think.

THE VOICE over the phone said, "The Commissar will arrive at noon. On your toes. You'll hear from me again."

Roberts smashed the phone into its cradle as quickly as he could. But he knew the other one at the end of the line had ended with the usual: "Down with the tyrants!"

Dead silence in the vault now as he waited for the phone to ring again. When it did he could barely lift the instrument.

The harsh voice of one of the anonymous listeners said, "Comrade Roberts?"

"Speaking."

"Number Three checking. You received an outside call some moments ago."

For a second he wanted to deny it, but he knew that his every word had been recorded. He admitted receiving the call.

"From whom?" The question was asked quickly to elicit an uncontrolled response, a slip of the tongue. But Roberts had nothing to give away.

"Don't know," he answered.

"Did you recognize the voice?"

Take a novel with the fascinating title of DUKE, *mix it thoroughly with a goodly measure of popular acclaim and book sales totaling well over a million copies, and juxtapose it with the unusual brilliance of a top-bracket writing personality, and you'll understand the sort of excitement an editor is bound to feel when he gets a brand new short story by Hal Ellson on one of his rare, deftly executed excursions into science fiction.*

"I did. I've heard it before."

"And yet you can't identify this person?"

"Certainly not."

"Perhaps you can explain why he calls you."

"I understand he has regularly called the Commissar . . ."

"Comrade Roberts, I must warn you, you haven't answered the question."

"Sorry. Perhaps he knows I'm in charge of Records."

There was an ominous pause at the other end of the wire. Then the same voice, harsher now: "We know he is aware of that, but why did he warn you?"

Cold sweat had broken out on Roberts' brow. He was gripping the phone, frightened, desperate for an answer that would satisfy. Finally he found his tongue.

"I think his object is clear enough," he explained. "He is attempting to spread suspicion and confusion among us. I dare say, you must have received a call yourself."

The last was a shot in the dark and it hit home. Number Three gasped, then recovered and said, with a new authority, "And how would you happen to know that?"

"A guess. He's been calling all of us. It's part of his game. Soon we'll be afraid of each other. We are already. We . . ."

"Careful, Roberts."

He had said too much and again he was frightened, but Number Three relented.

"All right," he said, "carry on."

The line went dead. Roberts cradled the phone and saw himself in the huge mirror that fronted the vault, a pale frightened stranger. Behind his reflection the dark aisle fled back into the vast vault where the files lay—thousands of names in a great silent crypt. Names of the dead, of those starving in concentration camps, or wasting away in the mines, of those to be executed, and those under suspicion who would soon be whisked into oblivion. Enemies of the State. *Is my caller among them?* Roberts asked himself.

He was sure he wasn't. All the real enemies had been liquidated. The others whose names were in the files were "necessary" victims to keep the masses aware of the awful power of the State.

Only one free man left, only one who dared fight back. The rest frightened, beaten cowards. Thinking like this was wrong, he knew, treasonable and terrifying. Yet when he remembered that clear ringing voice over the phone his heart warmed. One free man left, fearlessly fighting back. The odds were against him, granted. But Roberts dared to hope, wanting the old freedom that had been lost.

There must be others too, he told himself. But we're afraid. We need a leader, someone . . . It came to him then that they did have a leader, that not all was lost. Confusion and suspicion were already splitting the Party as that anonymous voice spread havoc.

But alone, how could the man succeed? What was his purpose—to play with death? Roberts suddenly realized that his goal was not death, but life—to stir anew the desire for freedom which the State had trampled.

Thrice a red light flashed in the vault, and he stiffened with fear. Noon. The Commissar was arriving. For a moment he couldn't move. What did this visit mean? The red electric eye seemed to grow larger and larger, and he felt himself yielding to its hypnotic power.

At last he pressed the necessary button. The red eye turned green. Hidden wheels began to revolve inside the wall.

"Alert-bells" rang beyond the thick walls of the vault, and echoed through long corridors. The enormous door was swinging to, letting in cooler, fresher air, and the bells were setting up a harsh brassy hammering.

Suddenly the hammering stopped, the vault door ceased moving, the green eye of light blinked out. Silence. Then footsteps in the corridor.

The Commissar came through the doorway monocled, stiff, carrying his stick, a tall, powerfully-built man with a bulldog's heavy undershot jaw and a curiously tilted delicate nose—the incongruous result of plastic surgery.

Roberts was already standing.

"Comrade Roberts!"

"Sir."

"You know what this is all about?"

"I recceived a call saying you were coming."

"From whom?"

"One who calls himself an enemy of the State. He has no name."

"And never will." The Commissar smiled and produced a gold cigarette case. He offered Roberts a cigarette and said, "Sit down, relax. You have nothing to fear."

Roberts took the cigarette and sat down. But he was more frightened now. The Commissar lit up and threw a leg over the desk.

"I know about the call, and you are not under suspicion," he said. "If you were you would not be sitting here now."

That appeared to be true. But Roberts knew that tomorrow or the next day he might be no more than a name in one of the files.

"You are wondering why I am here," said the Commissar.

Roberts had no answer. The Commissar expected none.

"A personal visit from me sometimes creates great apprehension," he went on. "I realize that, and I am also aware of the importance of your position."

He had reached forward and picked up the wire that connected the phone. He regarded it idly, then said, "A rather antique instrument, don't you think?"

"In what way?" Roberts asked, knowing this was no idle question.

"Since its invention it has barely been improved upon. More, it has

a habit of ringing at the most inopportune moments—say when one is too busy to give it attention."

Roberts nodded agreement, still wondering what was coming.

"One works better without one around. Don't you agree?"

"But . . ."

"So in the interest of precision and security," said the Commissar, smiling broadly now, "we will eliminate the instrument."

With that, he made a sudden movement and ripped the phone from the wall almost without effort, then laughed at Roberts' astonishment.

Roberts began to ask for an explanation, wanting to know how he could possibly handle requests from Headquarters. The Commissar halted him.

"A new teletype is on the way," he said. "Automatically it eliminates the possibility of all disturbing calls from outside. It is also a much better security measure, for if you happen to be busy you need not pick up the message at once. It will be on the tape. It goes without saying that the tape will be filed."

The Commissar stood up, stick under his arm. "Now you will not be disturbed," he continued. "Furthermore, there will be no leaks." He was smiling again, and Roberts froze, sensing another meaning beyond his words.

He left then and two mechanics entered the vault, carrying a teletype. In a half hour's time they set it up, tested it and left.

Roberts pressed the button and the big vault door swung closed. He examined the machine right off. Teletypes in general were not new to him—yet this one was. It frightened him.

Perhaps because it was a symbol, more than that, an inhibiting device which took away his tongue and eliminated the voices of others, cutting him off from the world outside and making the vault a tomb.

Suddenly the machine came to life. It hummed and then the tape began to move, slowly at first, and as each letter appeared the electric impulse which brought it to life produced a sound which, in a series, evoked a pounding rhythm.

"Testing, testing," came the message in black type. Then: "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog. Signing off. Answer please. What's with the machine? Roderick."

He sat down, set the switch, and typed back: "Machine okay. Message clear. Roberts."

A second later the machine began to pound. "Testing again. All good men come to the aid of their country. How is that?"

A perfectly innocent sentence and yet he was frightened. What did Roderick really mean, he asked himself. What does he expect me to say? In the next moment he realized that this might be a trap of some sort and that Roderick was not the one sending the message.

"Type clear," he sent back. "Signing off. Work to be done."

He flipped the key and the machine went dead.

The vault was silent now. He felt entombed. No sound from the world outside, no light of day. Only those files behind him filled with the names of the dead, the slave-laborers, the missing, and those on the blacklist who soon would disappear.

Fear immobilized him though there was work to do. Some minutes later the machine began to pound. He went to it and grabbed the tape.

"Check S. F. Smith," the message said. "Hold card. Roderick."

A routine task. He switched on the flood lights and went back into the vault. Behind him he heard the machine pounding again and he thought of the comparison the Commissar had made. A telephone would have brought him back. The tape would hold the message. He found the card on Smith. It was in the general files. A large black S on the card—which meant the man was under suspicion.

When he came back to the machine, the message was waiting for him. "Change status on Smith. Mark 'M.' "

"M" for mines. He had marked such cards before. This time his hand shook.

The day went on. Time lagged. Occasional requests for information came over the teletype, nothing important, nothing unusual. Then, late in the afternoon, in a long lull, he dozed at the desk and far away he thought he heard the machine pounding with a new and furious tempo.

Part of a dream, he told himself, and suddenly he came awake. The machine was quiet. Idly he stared at it, afraid without knowing why. Then he picked up the tape and there was the message. "Down with the tyrants," repeated six times—and Roderick's name.

Stunned, he shook his head. This wasn't real. It couldn't be.

The machine started up again, and a new message came over like a frantic cry. "My God, what happened? Answer quick."

Roberts flipped the switch and typed back: "What do you mean?" and waited.

"What message did you receive?"

Confused before, now he was frightened. Yet he had to answer.

"Must be a joke," he typed back. "Did you send the message?"

"No."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I," came the answer on the tape. Then: "I left my machine to go for coffee. When I came back I saw that on the tape. But I didn't type it. I swear I didn't. I don't know what happened."

Roberts didn't answer. The machine began to pound again. He read from the tape: "You have to believe me. You've got to help me, Roberts."

"How?" he typed back.

"Tear the tape. Get rid of that message. You know what it means."

He hesitated for a long while.

Roderick was a friend. He wanted to help him, and yet he couldn't. If it was a trap, he'd be caught. If Roderick was telling the truth, as he thought he was, he still couldn't help him. Both of them would become victims.

He threw the switch and typed back slowly, painfully, with full knowledge of what he was doing: "Sorry. Regulations state tape must be kept intact. Suggest you report incident."

No answer to this. A terrible silence expanded in the vault. The minutes dragged into hours. At six o'clock his relief appeared. He snipped the tape, signed it and left the building.

Nine o'clock the next morning he entered the vault, hung up his coat and, as he turned to the desk, the machine began to hum. Then a message: "File on John Roderick." Ten rapid dots followed and the message was concluded with: "D"—"E."

"D" for deceased. "E" for executed.

Stunned, he sat staring at the machine for some minutes, then at last typed back: "Okay. Roberts."

But nothing was okay. Something had happened, a terrible mistake, some ghastly trick played. Roderick dead, but innocent. He was sure of that, for Roderick was one of the weak ones like himself who belonged to the State, who didn't have the guts to rebel or even think of it.

Or didn't I really know him? Had he harbored treasonous thoughts? But how did that tie in with the message on the tape which had sent him to his doom? He wasn't insane, wouldn't have dared to send it.

The red light flashed on the vault-door. Roberts pressed the release button and the light turned green. The door began to swing open.

Outside in the corridor heels clicked. The Commissar! A moment later the tall, monocled figure entered the vault. Roberts stood to attention.

"At ease." The Commissar tapped the teletype with his stick and said, "How do you like the new machine?"

"Efficient."

The cryptic answer made the Commissar smile. "Quite. You really don't know how much." Then: "Of course, you realize what happened to Roderick."

"The message came a moment ago, but . . ."

"But what?"

"I didn't think . . ."

The Commissar cut him off. This time he laughed. "That was the trouble with Roderick," he explained when he finally stopped laughing. "He thought."

Puzzled, Roberts stared. The words didn't make sense. "I'd always believed Roderick was faithful to the cause," he said. "I don't see how he . . ."

"Overtly faithful," said the Commissar. He wore an amused smile

now. "But action doesn't always indicate truth. The one who shouts the loudest is not the greatest patriot."

"But . . ."

The Commissar slapped him on the shoulder. "Nor is he the greatest who seems to work hardest for the cause."

Afraid, Roberts knew he had to speak. It was utterly necessary now, for he was moved as never before by something new, a paralyzing fear of the unseen.

"But if Roderick worked for the cause, if he was one of us—" he paused, wetting dry lips—"if anyone truly serves the State, how can he be guilty of the opposite?"

The Commissar seemed more amused, as if he had been waiting for this question.

"I'm glad you mentioned that," he said. "As you are aware, this is not Nineteen Sixty. These are trying times which test the souls of men. A decade ago ignorance gave your question relevance. Today we are aware of a new malady, a schizophrenic splitting of a new nature in which a man is guilty of treason without knowing it, one who to all appearances and by his very actions in demonstrating his faith nevertheless still is guilty."

"How . . ." Roberts began.

"This is not as far-fetched as it may seem—nor is it really new. Out of fear, a man may demonstrate his loyalty to the State; consciously he may even believe himself loyal. Subconsciously he may be anything but."

"In other words, he doesn't know he is disloyal. Is that what you're saying?"

"Exactly."

"Then if he himself doesn't . . ."

"Yes, go on, Roberts."

"How could anyone else know?"

The Commissar was smiling now. "Ah, the expected question. Let me put it this way. The State has solved that little problem. The State solves everything. By the way, you made out the card on Roderick?"

"Not yet."

"Of course you'll take care of it." The Commissar struck the teletype with his stick. A significant gesture. Then he turned on his heels and walked to the door. There, he swung around and said, "Any messages from our enemy?"

"No, sir."

"Except for yesterday."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Your tape, remember? Didn't the machine carry Roderick's message?"

"Yes."

"Our enemy was in touch with him. We know that he planted the seed of treason in his mind. His own thought became Roderick's. Poison spreads. You might say that the message came by proxy." The Commissar smiled again. "The evil thought precèdes the evil deed. It is dangerous to think."

The Commissar left. The vault door swung slowly back into place.

Utter silence now. Confused and frightened, Roberts didn't move.

One thing he was certain of, the State was entering a new phase, about to use a new weapon. Thought would be regulated. The Bureau of Propaganda would begin a campaign to press for new "modes" of thinking. Minds would be "bathed," patterns of proper thinking established and drummed into the people. This would happen.

As for Roderick's disloyalty and the explanation of his behavior, Roberts couldn't believe that. They couldn't determine his unconscious, nor define his thoughts, he told himself—and yet he wasn't sure.

The State's technicians and psychologists had solved other problems with machines and techniques. Confessions, for instance, which meant death to the one who confessed, were exacted with ease. Had they conceived something capable of registering the secret "thoughts" of a man's unconscious?

No, he told himself but he was more afraid now. To calm himself, he attacked his usual routine tasks, then made out the card for Roderick and started toward the back of the vault.

It was then that it occurred to him what the State had achieved. It wanted him to be afraid and had already succeeded by leading him to believe the possibility that his unconscious "thoughts" could be detected. Fear was the bludgeon.

But it's a lie he told himself. They can't tell. At that moment he knew what had happened to him, to everyone. They were no longer men but slaves, robots, names for the files.

And it was too late now, nothing could save them. Perhaps it was anger or the deepest despair, for he cried out within himself, *Down with the tyrants!*

At that moment the teletype began to pound. He was deep in the vault but he heard it, and he thought of the Commissar's words —"An efficient machine." It was true. All their machines were efficient.

He filed Roderick's card and returned to his desk. The teletype was silent. He picked up the tape and froze. On the thin strip of paper there were the words— "Down with the tyrants!"

The machine began to pound again, the new operator at Headquarters sending a message: "What's the idea? Answer immediately."

"Don't understand. I didn't send that message, didn't touch the machine," Roberts typed back.

The machine pounded again, furiously, then went dead. A terrible silence filled the vault.

"Thought you knew what you were handling," the message read. "This is the new 'thought' machine. Following orders, I've reported your message. Signing off. Don't communicate."

Roberts dropped the tape and sat there for some minutes, trying to

refuse the insane episode, telling himself it was a nightmare from which he had to waken.

Then an alarm bell rang, harsh, metallic, and the red eye on the vault door lit up. He pressed the button and it turned green. The door started to open. The alarm-bell grew louder, he heard quick footsteps, angry voices. The S Men.

He felt one last moment of terror and then suddenly he was free of it, unafraid, no longer believing in this cult of fear and oppression and possessed of a new and contradictory knowledge—that the real danger was not in thinking but the failure to use one's mind.

In a flash he saw that, and the first S Man came through the doorway. In that moment he realized what the Commissar had meant in saying— "To think is to act."

He had taken an automatic from the desk. He raised it now and shot the S Man. The others didn't come through the doorway. He heard a murmur of voices, then the red eye flashed on the door and it began to close.

He knew what that meant. Slow starvation. Suffocation. Poison gas. Whatever method suited the mood of the Commissar. Knowing him, Roberts had reason to believe he would allow him time to die, make him suffer, exploit this incident for purposes of propaganda.

But he was glad now, unafraid. He turned to the mirror in front of the vault and saw a new person. His eyes went to the teletype. He picked up a chair and smashed the machine. Then he turned and faced the vault. The records. He had to destroy them. But how? There wasn't time and he had no means of doing away with them.

Frantic, he stood there. Then a hissing which became louder by the moment attracted his ear, a strange odor that made his nostrils tingle. Ammonia fumes. He retreated toward the back of the vault and the odor followed—a deadly gas. He put a handkerchief over his nose and held his breath as long as he could.

Then the idea struck. Ammonia fumes were explosive.

He could destroy the records if he worked fast enough.

He struck a match and as the flame leaped up it was snatched away by a huge black paw. In a split second flame filled the vault, then, with a shattering roar, burst free.

In the darkness that followed, walls collapsed and the whole building went down in a heap of rubble and twisted steel.

that for a hermitage

by . . . Ed M. Clinton, Jr.

Like a Greek god unaging in the dawn of the world the Earthman seemed. But with him walked a secret—tragic beyond belief.

Nor iron bars a cage·
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for a hermitage

THE SUNSET was a living curtain of fire, red and grape-purple, creeping across the curdled sky. Zwasir sprawled languidly on the grassy hilltop and watched it, his hands folded behind his sparse blue head of hair. Behind him, balanced with precarious uncertainty on its seared and sooted tail, rested their ship, and far below, spreading out from the foot of the hill, was the Earth city.

He regarded the city thoughtfully. It was so very close—yet, in some odd, paradoxical fashion, it seemed as far away as when they had begun their ill-fated journey across the Galaxy.

Zwasir looked around, startled by the sound of footsteps clicking on the ship's rampway. Rensis, the navigator, approached him.

"Stop wondering, Zwasir," he said, grunting as he sat down beside the anthropologist.

Zwasir shrugged. "I really wasn't *wondering*. Not any more. I think

In its more cosmic aspects modern science fiction has largely concerned itself with man's eventual conquest of the stars. But sometimes the shoe is on the other foot, and we see ourselves through alien eyes. How harsh and unsympathetic would those eyes be, if tragedy dogged our footsteps by night and by day? In this unusual story Ed Clinton, Jr., has supplied the most heart-warming of answers, with a poetic insight you won't soon forget.

I've given that up." He gestured toward the multi-colored sky. "I was just enjoying the view."

Rensis subsided, folding his hands around his knees. Zwasir saw that he watched the city—not the changing palette of the sky.

"What are the others saying?" he ventured finally, eyeing Rensis closely.

The navigator hunched forward. "I guess they're in about your frame of mind. Korlen's ready to give up. If I were in your shoes, though, Zwasir, I wouldn't admit it had me down." He flashed a grin. "After all, *you're* the anthropologist."

Zwasir felt himself being drawn irresistibly into a discussion that he knew was futile. It had happened a hundred times in the ten days they had been on the planet. "Being an anthropologist doesn't give me mystical powers." He waved a hand in a hopeless gesture. "Maybe it's a social custom. It's even conceivable they don't *want* us to feel at home." He fell back, and the grass yielded crunchingly beneath him. "I'm watching the sunset," he insisted firmly.

Rensis shook his head. "It's more than that, I'm sure. I'm no anthropologist, but I've seen a lot of crazy cultures, Zwasir. We've walked the crooked path through a lot of weird social customs. But we've never been *ignored—*"

Zwasir grunted, and did his best not to hear the navigator's voice. After all, was it *his* fault if the damned Earthmen wouldn't pay any attention to them? He plucked some grass and gnawed on it, letting his eyes trace a smear of green in the sunset sky. Of course, it *was* a bit startling, and discouraging: the first truly humanoid form their culture had ever encountered in centuries of Galactic exploration refusing even to *see* them.

He thought back to his visit to the Earth city six days before. They had been puzzled from the first, for there had been no visible reaction to the landing of their ship on the hill above the city. Ignored, they had gone down to the city to investigate. By special request he had accompanied Korlen, who was the captain of the expedition.

They had walked the crowded streets, approaching numerous individuals, and making their presence as clearly apparent as possible, short of committing an actual act of violence.

They might as well have been panes of glass—so completely had they been ignored.

He snarled softly, realizing that he had drifted painfully far from his affirmed objective of watching the sunset.

"Rensis," he growled, "please go away. You're spoiling this show."

Rensis shrugged. "Sorry," he muttered, staring moodily down into the dusk-shadowed city.

Zwasir sprawled out on his back and stared skyward, watching the clouds shift colors. It was a magnificent sunset. The sky was now

packed with loose clouds and the darkening purple of night seemed to be rushing like an ermine-fringed curtain toward the west.

"Zwasir," said Rensis softly.

"Oh, in the name of space, let me alone!"

"Zwasir," repeated the navigator insistently, "we've been discovered."

"Discovered? Hell, we've been up here visible for a hundred miles—" Then the real import of Rensis' words struck him. He sat up abruptly, nearly dislocating his spinal column in the process.

Rensis was pointing, his trembling outstretched finger aiming straight down the hill. Zwasir followed the jabbing digit with his eyes.

A figure was coming up the hill. An Earthman!

Zwasir stood up slowly, all thought of the sunset banished from his mind. "Rensis," he whispered, "don't move. Don't call out. Let me take care of this."

Rensis nodded, staring at the Earthman.

The man from Earth arrived at the top of the hill, and halted. He planted his hands on his hips, and stood for an instant squinting at them.

Instantly Zwasir raised his hand and waved.

The Earthman grinned, waved back, and came trotting forward.

A ferment of exciting theories bubbled through Zwasir's mind, but he thrust them aside. Now, if ever, was the time for a calm appraisal of the multitude of cultural sensitivities the Earthman must, of necessity, possess.

The Earthman came up to them, still grinning. He wore the bright and colorful clothes typical of those Zwasir had seen in the city: loose trousers, shirt open at the throat, and sandals of polished leather. And, like all the other Earthmen, he affected close-cropped hair. The similarity between him and Zwasir's own people struck the anthropologist again, more deeply than ever before. With it came a twinge of regret that they had encountered so much difficulty in establishing relations with a race so close ethnologically.

Zwasir smiled back, touching his chest. "Zwasir," he said, and then gestured toward the seated navigator. "Rensis."

The Earthman's grin widened. "Tony," he announced in a thin, vaguely nervous voice, tapping his chest as Zwasir had done.

Zwasir gestured toward the grass, and sat down. Tony sat beside him.

Thought Zwasir: *He came to us. Let his curiosity consume him. In a week I've tamed mine.* Then he wondered if it really *was* curiosity that had driven the Earthman up the hill.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Korlen and the biologist, Drosen, standing at the lock, watching.

The three on the grass remained in silent communion, merely exchanging nods, until the last of the

sun's light faded, and the sky became sprinkled with stars. Then Zwasir rose, and motioned toward the ship. Tony nodded, smiling, and rose also, followed by Rensis. The three of them climbed quickly up the ladder, and passed into the ship.

It was not until then that Zwasir realized how much he liked the Earthman and the tension of the past week slipped completely from him. . . .

The sun blazed hotly down on them as they descended the hill, in single file and silently. Drosen and the navigator Rensis had been left to guard the ship. The others, Zwasir trailing, followed the smiling Earthman down the wild green hillside without any serious qualms.

In the two weeks which had elapsed since Tony's appearance, a little language rapport had been established, some rough spots ironed out. Zwasir grumbled to himself as they strode down the hill. He still wasn't quite satisfied. When you got right down to it, they knew nothing more, really, than they had before Tony's arrival.

"*I* saw the ship," Tony had said, when Korlen had questioned him about the strange way the expedition had been ignored.

"*I* saw you on the streets," he had replied in answer to another question. "*I* shall make them see you."

Always—*I*. Cultural ritual? Perverse social etiquette? Identification of the individual with the total race? Zwasir snorted and ran thick fingers through his loose, fine hair. He had been outvoted at every turn. What good did being an anthropologist do him? They only paid him heed when they wanted their mysteries explained.

"Wait!" Came Tony's voice suddenly from ahead, halting them in mid-stride at the foot of the hill. The city lay almost before them. Zwasir studied it with narrowed eyes, carefully refreshing his memory of his first visit.

Mintrill, the physicist-engineer-Jack of all scientific trades came trotting back, his brow beaded with sweat. He mopped his face with a hairy hand.

"Zwasir," he said, "this is an *advanced* culture!"

Zwasir nodded, still lost in thought.

"They're certainly handling elementary atomics, at least," Mintrill continued.

"We saw no identifiable installations when we were down here before," amended Zwasir. "But all the secondary aspects seemed to be present."

Korlen was eyeing Tony as the Earthman moved, cautiously, across the grassy sward by the edge of the city. "An engineer's city, eh, Mintrill?" he muttered.

The engineer nodded. "Yes—like one of our cities two and a half centuries ago. Obviously designed as a whole unit. Notice how it *begins* abruptly, supplies the living machines necessary, and ends. It

doesn't straggle, peter out." Mintrill wiped his sweat-sprinkled forehead again. "It's *hot*," he complained.

"Look at friend Tony," Korlen broke in, nodding toward the Earthman. "Wonder what he's up to?"

"I think he's *afraid*," snapped Zwasir. He sat down on the grass and leaned forward, arms on knees. "I think he's checking to see if we've been spotted."

Korlen mused, pursing and unpursing his lips. "It does seem that way. Though if he's their ambassador—"

"That's your conclusion," said Zwasir impatiently, glancing up at the captain. "If you'll remember, I took exception to your evaluation."

"He's coming back," said Mintrill, licking sweat from the corners of his mouth.

Zwasir heaved himself back to his feet. The three of them moved toward Tony, who was beckoning to them now, excitedly.

"I was about to say," muttered Korlen, "that if he's their ambassador there may be a special reception awaiting us which he has to check on, to make sure nothing goes wrong."

"That's what I'm afraid of," agreed Zwasir, aware that some of his bitterness had crept into his voice. He felt the tiny weapon under his armpit.

Korlen shot him a glance of mixed annoyance and wonderment but Zwasir merely tipped his head down and smiled to himself, shrugging.

A wide, paved highway swept out from the city, and swerved in a shining curve past the foot of the hill. As they advanced, a silent, swift vehicle that must have been twenty feet in length rushed noiselessly past them. Zwasir stared after it until it disappeared from view. It was moving, he estimated, at well over a hundred miles an hour.

He felt Mintrill's fat fingers dig into his arm. "Did you see that? Did you see it, Zwasir?"

Zwasir nodded. He saw as well, far down the road and approaching the city, two more cars, equally swift, equally large, and moving with the same unnatural absence of sound.

Tony had halted by the side of the road, and stood waiting for the cars to pass. The instant they vanished, he waved Korlen's group forward. In awed silence they followed him to the other side, walking afterwards on the thick grass beside the highway.

"I hear no brass bands," growled Zwasir.

"Now, look," objected Korlen, his face reddening, "I'm getting tired of listening to such nonsense."

The city began, as Mintrill had observed, abruptly. The grassy sward ended, and the highway became all at once a main thoroughfare. Moving walkways sprang from the grass at its edge, an edge marked by the sheer solidly con-

structed walls of towering buildings.

Mintrill trembled with excitement. He ran his fingers together and mopped his forehead, and blew breath out of his rounded lips as he stared, almost glassy-eyed, at the vista before him. From where they stood the view was clear and unimpeded, sweeping straight through the city to the woods beyond. Nor was it a small city.

"Look at those buildings!" gasped Mintrill. "What *engineers* these people are! What artists! Korlen, how tall would you say that amber tower is?"

One car, then two more, rushed swiftly past them. The city streets were filled with people moving about, reclining on benches on the walkways, chattering, and gesturing. They all appeared smiling and happy, and completely at their ease.

Tony ascended the nearest walkway, and motioned the others to follow. Korlen stepped forward, then Mintrill. The engineer hardly seemed to care where his feet fell so absorbed was he in examining the panorama of the city.

Zwasir trailed after, somewhat fearfully. He touched again the weapon he carried hidden under his jacket.

"Where are you taking us, Tony?" he called out finally, irritation sharpening his voice.

A crowd of Earthmen walked past, paying them no heed. Mintrill blinked after them while Zwasir cursed.

"To Government House," announced Tony, "as I said I would. When *I* have taken you to Government House, *then* you will be seen."

He strode, with an eager impatience, down the walkway, adding his own speed to the not inconsiderable motion of the moving strip. Mintrill looked down, and realized for the first time that the parts of the walkway which were near the center of the strip moved faster than did the outer edges. He blinked in amazement, and Zwasir followed his gaze. The stripway seemed to melt rather than move. Incredibly, there was no apparent division at any point into portions of varying speed.

Mintrill crouched and touched his finger to the material of the strip, moving it perpendicularly to the direction of its motion. He jerked his hand back, and blinked again.

"I can't feel the difference," he muttered.

He stared down, and tried again, this time very gingerly. "How do they do it?" he exclaimed. He looked up at Zwasir as he arose, somewhat abashed. "Do you know, I think they may be *ahead* of us!" The words were spoken reluctantly, as if he would have preferred to remain silent, but had to be honest with himself.

"I wouldn't know," grunted Zwasir. "I'm only the anthropologist." He liked their situation less with each passing moment.

They came to a heavily crowded section of the city, still riding the endless stripway which even carried them around corners without any inertial disturbance. The streets here were alive with silent, swift vehicles. Crowds swept by on other walkways which crisscrossed below and above them, or simply melted into cloverleaves with the same fluid ease with which they achieved their varied speed. From rampways atop tall buildings jet-planes rose on silent wings of flame, or dropped on voiceless power cushions.

And they moved among the Earthmen, unseen, unnoticed, and unwelcomed.

Unwelcomed, thought Zwasir. There was something deadly in that lack of welcome, something that made his flesh crawl. It was rather like looking through a panel of one-way glass. They could see in, but the Earthlings couldn't see out.

He watched these strangely indifferent people as they walked along the stripway, cataloguing information for future reference. They seemed to be a singularly gentle and non-aggressive people who took pride in the hundreds of little marks of personal courtesy which were taking place all around him. The old men, for example, graciously stepped aside to give the younger men precedence, while the women crooned and sang to their youngsters on the streets, tenderly escorted by their mates.

Korlen touched his arm. "We're here, I think. This must be Government House."

Zwasir glanced up. They had approached a spreading, almost enfolding entranceway that masked the face of a huge spire of a building, softly pink in color, a masterpiece of sensitive, graceful engineering in all respects. Emblazoned over the doorway was the curious symbol of a globe encased in a box.

It was the first time Zwasir had seen the object, and it struck him instantly as a strange symbol, indeed, for so free-seeming a society. *The world in a box!*

The stripway ended and they stood facing Government Building. "Watch him," Zwasir warned quickly, nodding toward the Earthman Tony, who had begun to walk toward the entranceway. "Did you bring a weapon?"

Korlen nodded, his face grim.

Mintrill shrilled, "Look!"

A squad of uniformed men were approaching from down the street.

"We might have known," began Zwasir. He stepped back. "We're interlopers. We've violated some crazy law, I'll wager." His hand slid under his jacket.

Quickly the squad of six surrounded Tony. The Earthman stopped as if in terror, and gazed back helplessly at Korlen, and Mintrill.

"Help me!" he pleaded. His voice had lost its confidence, and his eyes were wide with fright.

Irrelevantly, a question popped into Zwasir's startled mind.

Why haven't they space travel?

He remembered the strange symbol: the world in a box. He looked around. *Far in advance of our society.*

The man in charge of the uniformed group touched Tony's arm. As he spoke Zwasir switched on his portable recorder, and by listening intently he managed to understand what the man said. Tony at least had taught the language reasonably well.

"Come along," the guard said, "you've had your game."

Tony gestured toward Korlen. "But—I've brought them!"

The guard smiled gently. "Come, now, Tony, you know better. How often must we tell you? *There are no men from space.*"

Zwasir's jaw began to sag. His eyes lifted slowly, filmed with astonishment, to the great bas-relief symbol over the archway.

Tony struggled as strong hands grasped him. "But they're *there,* I tell you. They fed me. I talked to them!"

The gentleness slipped from the guard's face, and he slapped Tony sharply, with the thick-knuckled back of his hand. "Enough of that. We'll take you back now."

Tony fought and shouted, but he could do nothing against six men, and in a moment they had him straitjacketed, and were marching him past the men from space.

"See?" he screamed. "See? There they are! Oh, please, pay attention to me! You can touch them! Mel Rank—reach over! You can touch Zwasir, the tall one, and Korlen, the captain, stands right beside you!"

Zwasir cursed sharply to himself, and comprehension began to come —comprehension of an impossible thing which answered everything. He stepped in front of the guard leader, and looked hard into the man's eyes.

The blue eyes flickered, squinted, tried to avert Zwasir's stare.

"But you *do* see me, don't you?" whispered Zwasir hoarsely. And then he shouted, as loudly as he could, "Can you *hear* me, too, Mel Rank?"

"Zwasir, what—" began Mintrill.

The guard came forward steadily, his eyes still flickering, his face peppered with a hundred tiny palsies.

"Mel!" shouted Zwasir, swinging into step beside him. "Do you hear me? I am from space, from another star! Look at me, Mel!"

Mel Rank moved on, his face grown pale. His glance flickered from side to side, as if to see if anybody had observed his discomfiture. Zwasir paced beside him, his shoulders hunched, his fists clenched desperately.

"Speak to me, Mel. I am from space. See, I am different! I have six fingers, and you have five. I have blue hair, and none of your people do. Can you deny that I am walking beside you, and talking to you?"

Mel Rank shuddered.

Zwasir looked at the other guards. They were not talking. Each

seemed almost to see him in their failure to notice him but each was consciously busy struggling with Tony.

"Tony!" Zwasir whirled toward the writhing, screaming Earthman. "Are they *all* crazy?"

"Yes!" cried Tony. *"All* of them. Oh, I'd have told you, but I was afraid you wouldn't believe me. But they're all crazy, and they won't pay any attention to me!"

Zwasir put his hand on Mel Rank's shoulder.

Instantly the whole group halted. Far behind, Zwasir's companions still stared while the people of Earth moved unconcernedly by, except for an occasional glance at the struggling Tony.

"You *do* feel my hand on your shoulder, don't you, Mel?" said Zwasir softly. "Can you deny that you really think I'm here?"

Mel screamed. He staggered, and fell to the ground, sobbing and moaning.

His men rushed forward, and gathered him up.

"I'm sorry, friend," muttered Zwasir, touching the guard's shoulder with a gentle hand. "But we had to know." He shook his head. "Good-bye, Tony."

He walked back to Korlen and Mintrill, both of whom stood staring at him in slack-jawed amazement.

"Zwasir, what in blazes did you think you were doing?" cried Korlen.

"Finding out."

"Finding out what?" he asked.

"Why they have no space travel."

Mintrill pursed his lips. "I wondered about that myself. All this"—he swept his arm in a circling gesture—"and no space travel."

"And hence, why they can't see us," finished Zwasir.

"Eh?" Korlen shook himself. "Come on, let's get out of here before there's trouble we won't be able to cope with."

"By all means," nodded Zwasir. "But there's no hurry. They'll never see us."

They began to walk, Korlen in the lead and moving at a fast pace. "I wish I were as sure as you," he said to Zwasir.

Mintrill said slowly, "How could you find out just by shouting at that poor devil of a guard?"

"The guard's despair was only the proof." Zwasir turned, and pointed back at the symbol over the entrance to Government Building. "That's the key. The world in a box."

Mintrill eyed him narrowly. "Yes, I saw that."

Zwasir shook his head. "They have no space travel, yet their science and engineering is perfectly capable of it. One amongst them sees us—and he's a crazy man."

"Crazy because he sees us?" asked Korlen, panting with effort.

"No. A crazy man who *also* sees us. Because only a crazy man would be able to see us."

"Eh?"

"Mel could not deny my pres-

ence. But could he admit it to himself, and stay sane?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Mintrill. "I think—"

Zwasir smiled, but it was a smile touched with infinite pathos. "They can't," he said.

"Can't what?" demanded Korlen, exasperated.

"Can't fly in space." Zwasir patted his chest. *"Physically can't,"* he went on to explain carefully.

"I don't get it," began Korlen, and then he did. And when he did, his face darkened with understanding, and everlasting compassion.

"Slow down, Korlen," urged Zwasir. "They'll never see us."

They moved slowly out of the city and back to their ship, and in a little while they were gone from Earth.

THE MARCH OF DAMES

The exceptional brilliance of Evelyn E. Smith's short story, THE LAMINATED WOMAN, *brings forcibly to mind just how gratifying a part our fair sex contributors have played in enriching the contents of* FANTASTIC UNIVERSE. *In the last five issues we have published no less than eight memorable stories by women writers of unusual narrative talent, and each has evoked a memorable reader response. In the stories of Evelyn Goldstein there is a suspense and a compassionate understanding rarely breathtaking—a singing flame quality diffused through a web of high poetry. In those of Margaret St. Clair and Idris Seabright a sparkling sophistication and maturity of style, a wit and exuberance seldom equaled and never surpassed by their male counterparts in the field. Then we have Marcia Kamien with her lyrical insight into the minds and hearts of Martian-born children. Gerda Rhoads with her star-bright gift of satire and whimsey unlimited. And Marion Zimmer Bradley with her sensitive perception and elusive charm. Yes, we owe a great deal to the ladies, and it is a debt which we acknowledge with pleasure and justifiable pride. More, ladies, more!*

the big-hearted racehorse

by . . . Dal Stivens

He was the strangest of horses. He loved everybody and wanted to be loved in return. If only he hadn't tried so desperately hard!

THERE WAS ONCE a racehorse who suddenly, and without reason, found he could understand human speech. Up till then he had been the most contented of horses. But from that moment on he never knew another day's happiness. He was a simple, gentle horse who loved everybody—his owner, his trainer, the jockeys and stable boys, and he thought that they, in turn, loved him. But it just wasn't so. Before long he was hearing them talking about a "bag of bones," "lion's tucker," "crock," "moke," and "useless illiterate," and realized with a shock that they were applying these epithets to him!

In the stall on his left was another racehorse, also a bay like himself, and to him the owner, the trainer, the jockeys and stable boys ladled out terms like "you beaut!," "you trimmer!," "you bobby-dazzler!," "sizzler!," and "pearler!"

The bay racehorse thought over this difference a great deal, and decided that the other bay racehorse must be even more beautiful than he was. The next time they were exercised together, to put it to the

Set Dal Stivens down in a never-never land of talking animals just a little less pathetic than the most bedraggled of human waifs, and he's certain to come up with a tale almost La Fontainean in its magic sympathy and wit. He's done it again in this enchanting little story of a horse as dumbly lovable as a gift-bearing leprechaun in size twelve shoes.

test, he started comparing himself with the other horse. He looked at his own legs and then at those of the other horse and, though he honestly tried not to favor himself, he couldn't see any difference.

He noticed then that the other horse had a white blaze, in the shape of a lozenge, on his forehead.

"Ah! That must be why they think he is so beautiful," he cried to himself.

In the stall on his right was a little chestnut filly and he turned to her now and said, "Excuse me, my dear, but have you any idea how I might get a blaze in the middle of my head between the eyes?"

"Would you mind saying that again?" asked the little filly. "I'm afraid I didn't follow you."

So the bay racehorse repeated his question, and even broke his first sentence up into three smaller units. When he had finished, she looked at him in astonishment and cried, "But you *are* crazy! You have a blaze exactly like the other racehorse." Then she added, "The trouble with you is that you think too much!"

After this humiliating rebuff, the bay racehorse decided the difference between himself who was abused, and the other racehorse who was praised, had nothing to do with beauty and sought other reasons.

That evening, one of the stable boys filled his manger up with chaff and muttered, "You greedy illiterate! You're always filling your gut!"

The bay racehorse took this to heart, and decided he would eat very little in the future in order to win the love of the stable boys, his trainer and his owner. Though it took a lot of will power, he ate very little for three days consecutively. On the fourth morning the food pangs were so strong that he shut his eyes when he saw the stable boy coming round to fill up the manger. He hoped the stable boy would now be pleased when he saw how little he had eaten. But the stable boy didn't say a word.

He simply turned and departed.

All the fourth and fifth days the bay racehorse ate nothing, and waited for the owner, the trainer and the stable boys to praise him. But that they stubbornly refused to do. On the sixth morning, when the stable boy came around again to fill the manger he looked in the bay's stall and muttered something about some horses being so vivid-colored useless they preferred to starve. Then he passed on to the stall on the left, and when the favored horse rushed up to the manger and began eating greedily, exclaimed admiringly, "You beauty! You're always on your tucker!"

This confused the bay racehorse still more. After a sleepless night he decided that his unpopularity had nothing to do with food. So he had a good tuck in, and cleaned up all his manger, going at it so greedily that the boy came round and filled it up again.

"So you're back on it, uh!" said

the boy. "If I had any say, I'd send you to the knacker."

The racehorse didn't know what a knacker was, but the boy's tone upset him a great deal. All that day and the next, though he was a bit faint from starving himself, he kept his ears open and what he learned about knackers from the stable boys horrified him. He deccided that whatever he did, he wasn't going to allow himself to be sent to a knacker.

He concentrated hard, and it wasn't long before he began to realize that what made the men pleased with the other racehorse and displeased with him had something to do with what happened when they were put in floats, and taken to a dreary place where all they did was run up and down in front of a lot of humans.

The racehorse tried to sound the other horses out on what they thought made the men pleased with them. But being a shrewd animal now, where before he had been frank and open, he kept his own ideas to himself. And he didn't let on that he could follow human speech.

"I think it has something to do with the way I step out to the band," said the bay racehorse on his left.

"Oh, no!" said the little chestnut filly. "It has something to do with the colored ribbons they put in our tails. You will notice that the men who ride us wear gay shirts. It makes them feel happy."

"It has nothing at all to do with bands or ribbons," said the black stallion. "It's obviously the way we run—the way we lift our legs, and so forth. Style, as you might say. I'm a great believer in doing things correctly."

"You're talking through your nose-bag," said the gray horse. "It's connected in some way with that white post thing we run past."

The bay racehorse kept his own counsel. But he was certain that the gray horse, who had singled out the white post, was right, and the next day, when he was taken to the race meeting, he kept a sharp watch on his rival.

At the course he saw that the bay racehorse from the stall on his left ran to the front as the field neared the white post, and passed the post still in front by a good three lengths. Afterwards he heard the owner and the trainer telling each other what a beauty, a pearler and a trimmer the other racehorse was.

"That's it!" said the bay racehorse. And when his turn came he waited until he was near the post, and, though he was still a bit weak from his fasting, managed to run swiftly to the front, and was able to keep just as far ahead of the other horses as his rival had done. And when his jockey rode him back, his owner and trainer came running up, and he expected they would call him a beauty and a pearler, at least. But, instead, all he heard was:

"I don't know what got into this mug!"

However, as they didn't call him anything worse, the bay racehorse was not too discouraged. He was convinced now he was on the right track, and he told himself that if he continued to keep his ears open, he would solve the problem.

The other horse was taken out of his stall again during the afternoon, and again he heard men shouting and cheering. Then his rival came back, dripping with foam, and the trainer said to the owner: "What did I tell you? He was a street in front at the post."

As he spoke the trainer threw his arms round the rival's neck and planted a kiss on his nose, and another on the blaze. And the owner did the same, and they called him a beauty, a trimmer, a bobby-dazzler, a sizzler, a pearler, a rip-snorter, a honey, a bon-tosher and everything complimentary they could think of.

Then the bay racehorse was sure that he was on the right track. To win kisses and a string of names from his trainer and his owner, he had to be a street ahead of the other horses when they went past the white post. The only trouble was he had not seen his rival on the second occasion and therefore did not know what a street was.

For the next week he kept his ears open, but though the owner, the trainer and the stable boys talked a great deal, there was never anything said that could help him find out what he wanted to know.

Once he thought he was getting warm because the owner and the trainer stopped outside his rival's stall and the owner said:

"You trimmer! Won by streets, didn't you? Out of the box!"

"What about this slob?" asked the owner the next day, nodding towards the bay racehorse.

"We could put him in the two-mile," said the trainer. "For the exercise."

"Okay, let him do something for his tucker," said the owner.

The contempt in the owner's voice didn't upset the bay racehorse as much as it might have done earlier, and he didn't even wriggle an ear when the owner and the trainer solemnly agreed that his rival was certain to do something out of the box in the two-mile. The bay racehorse decided that streets, and out of the box must mean one and the same thing and as soon as the owner moved away, he started asking the other horses what a street was. He phrased his question in a cunning manner so that he would not give anything away.

"A street, eh?" said the little chestnut filly. "Well, it's—that is—I mean—what do you want to worry your head about such things for? Who wants to know what a street is?"

"A street?" said the black stallion. "Why, yes, that's something we gallop up."

"Straight! It's not a street but a straight," said the gray horse

scornfully. "You never get things right."

The bay racehorse retired to the back of his stall and thought things over. He decided there was something in the gray horse's theory but —he felt convinced it was not the full explanation. Though he listened hard for the rest of that week and all of the next week, he came no nearer to learning what a street was.

The morning of the two-mile race came along and still the bay racehorse had not learned what a street was. He only knew he had to win by a number of them, whatever they were. If he didn't win it would be the end of him because on the previous evening the owner had come along and said:

"Unless he does something out of the box tomorrow, it's the knacker for him!"

"Save your money and send him now," said the trainer.

"Money!" said the owner. "We'll make a packet with our little trimmer."

Though his position was now desperate, the bay racehorse did not give up trying. All the way to the meeting he crowded up to the top end of the float so that he could eavesdrop on the driver, and the stable boy. For a time he heard nothing that helped, and then, to his delight, when the float was stopped by traffic, the driver said, "This is a lousy street, at any time."

The bay racehorse whinnied with delight, and trotted smartly to the back of the float to peer out at the street, which obviously must be the thing the float was rumbling over.

"My," said the racehorse to himself, "a street is a very long place. It doesn't seem possible that my rival could win by a number of these."

The bay racehorse was on his toes for the race of his life. When the barrier went up, he bounded out so fast he nearly unseated his jockey. With great thrusts of his thighs he raked the turf, and within a few seconds he had shot to the front and was racing away from the field —and his rival.

"I suppose I could call that a street, without fooling myself," said the bay racehorse. "But it's not a number of them." And he went still faster, so that his jockey gave up any ideas he might have had of controlling a horse gone mad and clung to the pommel, and the lead grew to half a mile.

"You could call that a couple of short streets," said the bay racehorse to himself. "But whether a couple is a number, I don't know. But a horse can only do his best. Or better."

And he did even better, and the lead stretched to three-quarters of a mile and, though the bay racehorse tried ever so hard, he had scarcely improved on that before he went flashing past the white post.

The bay racehorse could hear the

humans on the course shouting and yelling, and it filled him with great joy because he thought they must be saying nice things about him. But as he listened more closely, he heard them shouting, "Swindler! Thief! Diddler! Roughie! Cheat! Rub them out!" and many other uncouth things besides.

This puzzled the bay racehorse. But he forgot all about them when he saw his owner and trainer running to meet him.

"They'll hug me, at least, for winning by a couple of streets, even if they don't kiss me on the nose and on the blaze," he told himself.

But instead of a hug, let alone a kiss on the blaze, first the owner and then the trainer belted him over the nose.

And, instead of calling him a beauty, a pearler, and a dazzler, if not adding a sizzler, honey, rip-snorter and bon-tosher, the owner greeted him with: "You barmy bag of bones!"

And the trainer cried: "You crazy moke! You crack-brained illiterate!"

And the jockey: "You flaming slob, look where you've landed us!"

"In the jug!" groaned the owner.

"Out for life!" said the trainer.

"Whole stable!" said the jockey.

"All that beautiful money lost!" cried the owner.

"All that lovely dough gone!" cried the trainer.

"All that bonzer sugar vamoozed!" cried the jockey.

"You addle-pated bundle of horse hide—" said the owner, starting in again, and when he was finished, he was followed in turn by the trainer, the jockey, and later by all the stable boys.

After that, the bay racehorse's heart was utterly broken and when a few days later the knackers came and took him and all of the racehorses away, he hadn't even a corner intact to care what was happening to him or even to ask himself whether there wasn't a moral in all of it.

In fact, he was so quiet when the knackers drove him along the street that the little chestnut filly quite approved of his demeanor.

"For once, you're not fussing and asking questions. You're obviously learning sense at last. I told you not to worry."

once, in the saddle

by . . . Ralph Williams

Establishing a base on the moon is a grim struggle all the way. But there's glory in it, too—and memories for a man to cherish.

THE BULL-HORN said suddenly, "Flight 31 now loading from tunnel six, departure in fifteen minutes. Passengers please go aboard at once."

The wire gate at the bottom of the steps swung open. "Up this way, please," the attendant said.

Wells picked up his brief-case and kissed his wife. "I'll bring you a Moon-flower," he promised. He went quickly up the steps with the other passengers and out onto the ramp, studying the ship with interest as he walked over to the loading tower.

It was a new M-47, the first spacecraft to be designed from scratch as a commercial carrier. *Rocket Week* had used a whole issue on it, he remembered—X4310 nuclear engines, twenty thousand meter exhaust velocity, single-stage with liquid-fuel take-off booster, direct to the Moon in five hours.

Not much like the old days, Wells thought.

Inside a color scheme guaranteed to be easy on eyes suffering their first bout with space-sickness. In-

Here is a story to think about—a documentary with a background of such utterly compelling realism that you seem to be standing with Wells and Webster and the Finnish kid, with Dutch and the Colonel in the shadow of the lunar peaks, with a pumice-plain whiteness dazzling your eyes, and a song of tomorrow in your heart. Ralph Williams has written many an exciting yarn, but never a more brilliantly executed one than this.

dividual decks staggered spirally around the cylindrical passenger compartment, shielding their mechanism and the calves of ladies above from unauthorized eyes. And there were magazines and TV, not to mention a handsome stewardess who could be summoned by a button.

A long, *long* way from the old days.

Some new ideas in control too, Wells remembered as he buckled himself in. After they got in free-fall, he'd have to go up forward, and take a look around the flight deck.

He unbuttoned his cuff and rolled back his sleeve for the AA shot as the stewardess came down the spiral stair to his level.

She glanced over his arrangements and nodded approvingly. "You've been here before, huh?" she said softly as she bent over his bared arm to pinch the skin up for the needle.

Wells smiled. "Not in anything as fancy as this," he admitted.

She smiled back. "They build 'em better all the time." She swabbed at his arm with a wad of cotton and went on to the next passenger.

A lot pleasanter, Wells thought, than having a Corps medic jab you with a rusty needle as you filed in the hatch.

Not everything had changed, of course. There was still the thud of the closing hatch, the rumble of the loading tower moving away, the dim sound of the siren outside, the sudden muted roar of pre-mainstage burning.

And there was still acceleration.

With these engines, they could trade power for passenger comfort, and they did. But Wells had been a long time away from acceleration. The 3g lift felt like a lot more.

It was uncomfortable, but not unpleasant to a man who had known it as part of his daily life in his youth, and with it came one of those sudden flashbacks Wells had come to cherish in recent years. Like all good pilots, a big part of Wells' memory lived in his kinesthetic receptors. As he grew older and more sedentary, often he found some turn or twist of his body, some unusual attitude, bringing vividly to mind an almost forgotten moment of the past.

Sometimes these memories were of childhood. He would be climbing a stair, and his hand would brush the rail just so, and for just an instant he would be five years old again, going reluctantly upstairs to bed on Christmas Eve, with a mysterious stir and bustling already in the air.

More often, he was reminded of his young manhood, the time he had spent in space, when everything that happened had been important and new.

That was the way it was now.

Quite suddenly, as the acceleration hit, he was no longer in a passenger couch on Flight 31. He was back twenty years ago, five hundred miles over Mare Imbrium,

holding a 9g intercept curve for the pip that was the supply rocket just starting to let down for the enemy base.

His ankle, the one he had broken in that sloppy landing when he came into Earth Station Two on manual with the cabin hulled and the telecontrol shot away, was cramping badly under the acceleration. He had eaten too much breakfast and taken one too many drinks the night before, and when he got back in to Moon Station he had a date with a USO girl he had met the night before.

Sharp and clear in the viewscreen, rising like a wall beside him in this attitude, was the familiar pock-marked face of the Moon. It slid slowly by as he flashed parallel to its surface at ten miles a second. Just off his port and starboard quarters his wingmen followed his lead with iron precision, both tracking off his computer on telecontrol. The silent bursts of defensive ground fire sprinkled the void sparsely around him—but they were too late, too late. He knew with a savage exultation, that the supply rocket was a dead duck, nothing could stop them now, they would bore in and clobber it and be gone before any really concentrated fire could catch them.

He was back in the passenger couch again, forty years old, lifting off Earth at 3g.

That had been the day they lost the Dutchman, he remembered now, he had almost forgotten it. They had dumped their loads and were pouring on the coal to get away from the ground fire when Dutch caught it, the first he had known was when the other suddenly faded away from the line he had been drawing on Wells' port landing jack and plunged after his missiles into the opening flare of the exploding supply rocket. It had all been over in a fraction of a second. There was nothing you could do about it, at those speeds less than a heartbeat separated the quick from the dead.

That was the thing that made it, Wells thought. War is never fun, but flying the one man interceptors around the Moon had not been like war. It was more like a gambling game for enormous stakes. There were no messy corpses about, a man was there and in the flick of an eyelash he was not, and nothing to remind you of him but an empty bunk that was soon filled again. Death, because it was as likely to come suddenly from a man's own lack of skill or momentary carelessness as from enemy action, was remote and impersonal.

A man lived at the height of his capacity, holding disaster at bay through iron discipline and the speed of his reflexes. Only those survived who owned or developed a monstrous sureness and self-confidence, who took pleasure from playing tag with death.

There could be a lot in it, for a young kid full of beans.

Swinging around the Moon, let-

ting gravity draw you in to a few thousand yards from the peaks flicking by alongside, then suddenly firing, at the precise split second, to come roaring up over a ring-wall with your rockets going into the target at five miles a second plus their own breakaway speed.

Riding out to apogee halfway between Earth and Moon, drifting slowly in the no-man's land there on picket duty to catch missiles Earthbound for American cities, with time to look at the stars and think and wonder if men would ever reach them, too.

Leaves back on Earth, coming into Muroc and catching a hop over to San Francisco, knowing that somewhere ahead there was a girl you did not yet know, a girl you could choose from fifty thousand beautiful girls in bars and at dances and for the week of your leave she would be all yours.

With the gold rocket over your breast pocket and the bars, later the leaf, on your cap, you didn't even have to ask for anything. People fell all over themselves to force it on you.

Pretty big stuff for a kid who couldn't even vote yet.

At the Moon Base, of course, there was Rosie's. How Rosie had got there and how, once there, she got her liquor, no one knew—and no one inquired too closely. She had a corner off the pump repair shop. They would come into the place arm-in-arm, by twos and threes, to drink and sing to the beat-up accordion the dark-haired kid from Missiles played.

What was the name of that boy, now, the Finnish kid from the upper peninsula who sang the dirty songs with the Swedish brogue, the one who had spent that leave with him in Tia Juana, the one who caught it when his fire went out on the lift from Moon Base?

Well, it didn't really matter. He was gone now, a long time gone.

Cut-off caught Wells by surprise. He had meant to clock the lift by his watch, but had forgotten about it. For a moment he seemed to spin wildly, as they went into free-fall, and then old reflexes, helped by the AA shot, took over. He touched the button that shaped the couch into a chair and unbuckled his upper body.

The stewardess came drifting back along the well inside the stair, pulling herself along the life-line. "Are you all right, sir?" she asked solicitously.

"Fine," he said, and she moved quickly on to the next man, who quite obviously was not so fine.

Most women looked graceless and unhappy in free-fall. For one thing their clothes were not designed for it. That woman up forward, Wells thought, with the full skirt and the little tight jacket with the padded shoulders, very stylish of course, but she was going to be embarrassed when she tried to move around.

The stewardess, though, was dressed sensibly in tight-cuffed

slacks and a loose sweater that would not ride up when she raised her arms. She looked competent and completely at home.

He fished one of his Reserve cards from his pocket—he still kept up his Reserve status—and handed it to her when she came back from checking her passengers.

"Would you give this to the captain, please, and tell him I'd like to come forward for a few minutes?" he asked.

"Why, certainly, Colonel Wells," she said.

She was back in a few minutes, smiling warmly. "Captain Webster says he'd be very happy to have you come up on the flight deck."

"Thank you." He swung over and hitched onto the life-line, going up monkey-on-a-string style—legs stiff and feet pressed together, the line passing between the insteps, and a quick one-handed pull with the line running free in the lightly closed hand for guidance and braking.

Superficially, there didn't seem to be much change on the flight deck. It looked just about like any big military rocket, but fancier. Control design tends to harden early and change very slowly, even when the functions controlled undergo radical revision. Webster was a chunky, competent looking young fellow in his middle twenties, and it turned out he knew Wells, at least by reputation.

"I've heard my uncle mention you often, sir," he said. "He flew with you in the old First Fighter. I've got a picture here somewhere." He leafed through his wallet and passed a dog-eared color positive to Wells.

The picture showed two young men, dressed in the ridiculous military style of two decades ago, grinning hugely as they leaned on each other's shoulders in a deliberately unmilitary pose. One of them was Wells, and the other—

"Well, by George!" Wells said with pleasure. "Pete Webster! I remember that picture, the Dutchman took it back at Muroc, just before we lifted for the Moon. How is Pete nowadays?"

"He's back on the East Coast, raising chickens. Saw him just a couple of weeks ago." Webster turned to the co-pilot. "Jimmy, slide off that couch and let the colonel sit down. I suppose you'd like to see what we've got that's new, sir?"

Wells admitted he would, and Webster ran over the board with him. The article in *Rocket Week* had been comprehensive enough, but there are operational details of interest to a pilot that are never covered in print. For several minutes they discussed technical pros and cons.

"That's quite an engine you've got back there, too," Wells said. "How many pounds do you draw for 3g at take-off gross?"

"We don't figure thrust in pounds of mass, now. It still indicates, for a safety check, but that's

what we use this integrating fuel flow meter for. This switch here locks the meter into the pump control, giving a continuously variable delivery to match the fuel weight decrement. No figuring at all, we just feed in fixed load weights and the acceleration we want, the machine does the rest."

"Say, that's pretty nice," Wells said admiringly. "What do you boys *do* to earn your pay nowadays, with all this automatic gear?"

Webster grinned. "Just ride along, like the rest of the passengers. Don't tell anybody, the stockholders haven't found it out yet."

The stewardess came up presently with sandwiches and coffee, and Webster introduced her. Her name was June Bryce. Webster explained to her what the tiny button in Wells' lapel meant, while Wells flushed with not unpleasurable embarrassment. She came close and examined it, properly impressed.

"You might have read about the time my uncle and Colonel Wells brought that fellow in with the dead engine," Webster said. "That was really flying, they don't make flyers who can do things like that any more."

She confessed she had not, and Webster told her about it.

It had been a pretty tricky proposition, at that, Wells thought. The Dutchman's pump had gone out on the let-down for Moon Base. "My fire's out!" he said suddenly on the command frequency. "Stand clear below!" Dutch had been on top, luckily, with Pete next and Wells leading them in, all on tele-control for landing. Wells glanced up in the nose screen and saw him coming like a load of bricks with the prop knocked from under. "Cut her, Pete!" he yelled, and slapped the disconnect on his own board. In those days, there was no fuel to spare, they came in low and fast and made their let-downs at high-g. Dutch was almost abreast Pete now, and all three were dropping like lead, with the hard cold Moon just five miles down.

He could never remember afterward how the idea had come to him, or even whether it was his idea or Pete's, in a case like that a man acted first and thought about it later. The next clear picture he had, he had tangled one of his landing jacks with Dutch's, Pete had snagged another on the other side, and they were pouring on the coal on manual to get the hell up out of there, with a big jagged peak so close behind the rocket flare was splashing on it.

There was no use even thinking about a regular approach, and they didn't have enough fuel to get up and orbit. They found the first clear spot and dumped down, all three tangled together in one big juicy pile of scrap iron.

As it happened, there was a radar outpost there, just half a mile from where they hit, and that was another story—

"It was about twenty hours from the Base by tractor," Wells told

them, "and there was this O'Brien, a prospector, regular old Moon-rat. He'd managed to hang on when they evacuated the civilians, and was running a bar in the camp, making whiskey out of dehydrated spuds and raisins and whatever else he could scrape up. Also, there was a detachment of WACs. Somebody had got the bright idea that women might stand the isolation better than men.

"Base sent a crew out with tractors to patch up our ships, and we got orders to stick around and fly them out. Well, when those mechanics found out about those WACs and O'Brien, it took them three weeks to get those rockets flyable. I tell you, by the time we got out of there, Pete and Dutch and I were *glad* to get away."

Webster grinned. "Yeah, my uncle told me about that. After the word got around, they had to keep a repair crew in there permanently; about every other day some fly-boy was dropping in on an emergency let-down. Did you know O'Brien was still there, Colonel?"

"No! What's he doing?"

"Still running his bar. There's quite a town there, now, they opened up a big ice vein back under that hill the relay tower was on. A lot of people go out to his place from the Base, too. It's only fifteen minutes or so on the shuttle now. If you'd like to, sir, I'll take you out there tonight."

"Why, thanks, if it wouldn't be too much trouble," Wells said. "I haven't seen old O'Brien for twenty years."

The stewardess' eyes were sparkling excitedly. "Could I go too?" she asked. Wells looked at her.

"You certainly can," he said warmly. "You folks are staying at the government hostel, I suppose?" They nodded. "Fine, I'll pick you up in the bar after dinner, we'll have a drink and then go on out."

He leaned back, smiling to himself, remembering—the bar knocked together of radar equipment cases, O'Brien's heavy scarred face leaning over it, the feel of a girl's body dancing to the scratchy records, the taste of what O'Brien called whiskey, even heavily doctored up with pineapple juice.

"We're coming up for intial approach," Webster said. "You want to help me shoot it, Colonel?"

Wells grinned over at him. "Why not?" He settled himself into the couch, fitting his head against the bone conduction headphone, and began to buckle in. Jimmy took the check pilot's couch behind.

"Approach control, Flight 31," Webster said. "Initial approach check."

"Control, affirm. Switch to test."

Wells flipped the switch. "Test, check," he said.

"Test, affirm," he heard Webster say. Of course, "affirm" was the way they said it now, "check" and "roger" were old-fashioned. He should know that.

"Clutches," the controller's crisp, routinized voice said.

The knob was not where it should have been, they had moved it. Wells' fingers scrabbled frantically over the panel, feeling for it.

"Clutches!" the controller repeated impatiently. He felt fingers close over his hand, guiding it to the knob, and saw that the co-pilot, Jimmy, had swung over beside him. He twisted the knob quickly. "Locked in," he said.

"Get back in that couch, Barron," Webster said sharply.

They ran through the rest of the check with no further trouble.

"Minus two," the controller said. "Switch to manual."

"Manual, affirm," Wells said, and heard Webster echo him.

"Your fix is Sirius plus three, minus five. Align."

Wells flicked the gyro clutch. The response was faster than he had expected on a big ship like this, he overshot on the first try. His reflexes were still good, though, he came back dead on.

"Sirius plus three, minus five, affirm fix," he reported. He was getting back his confidence now, there was nothing to it really, once a man had learned to handle a rocket, he never forgot.

"Pile hot," the controller said. He glanced at his board and heard Webster answer: "Pile hot, affirm."

"Minus one. Switch to control. Stand by to monitor."

"Control, affirm."

"Pre-main," came in firm tones.

There was a soft rumble from aft. Wells glanced at his gauge.

"Burning."

"Pump."

Now what the hell was that? The pump didn't start till main-stage burning. What was the fellow talking about? Wells looked at Webster in startled inquiry. Webster started to lean over toward Wells' board, then suddenly changed his mind, snapping the main disconnect instead.

"Refusing control," he said. "Cancel approach. Wait."

The co-pilot was at Wells' side again, clinging to his couch. He pointed to a light on the board. "Fuel integrator," he said softly. He flipped a switch and the light changed color. "Locked in, now." He glanced over at Webster. "I tell you, Captain," he said. "We'll only be under 2g. I'll wedge in here alongside."

Webster shook his head silently, looking appraisingly at Wells, and Wells shook his head also. "No," he said, "you take it, kid. This thing's too hot for me, I'm too rusty."

He slid out of the co-pilot's position and swung back to the other couch. He heard Webster calling control again as Jimmy buckled in:

"Delay mechanical. O.K. now. Give us a new approach."

He listened to them run crisply through the check, and then they fired for a few minutes and then were in free-fall again until final.

June brought up some more coffee and Webster told some more stories about his uncle and Jimmy told some about Mars, where he had pulled a tour of active duty in fighters the year before, but Wells did not feel much like talking now.

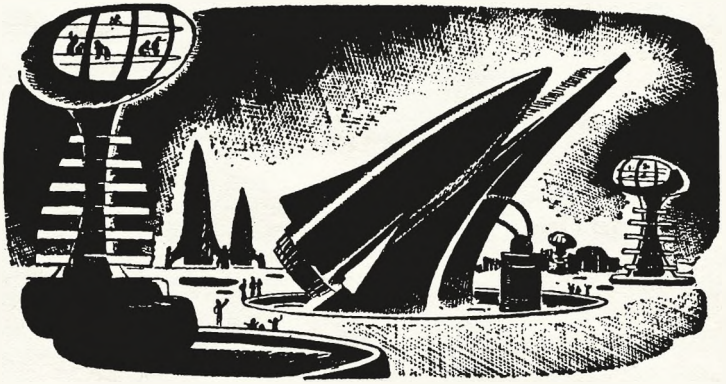
He wished simply to remember.

After awhile he went back to the passenger compartment and buckled into his couch, dropping it so he could lay back and rest. He put on his glasses—lately he had begun to need glasses, just for reading—and took some reports he needed to check from his briefcase and began studying them.

June came back through the cabin, checking belts for the letdown, and winked at him. "See you," she whispered.

He smiled back at her mechanically, wondering how he had come to let himself in for this. To hell with it. He'd call Webster from his room, tell him he couldn't make it. After all, he was up here on business, not to go partying.

Kids like that, they'd never miss him anyway.



compassion circuit

by . . . John Wyndham

It's comforting to hear a robot say: "I'll take care of you!" But it can be terrifying, too.

BY THE TIME Janet had been five days in the hospital she had become converted to the idea of a domestic robot. It had taken her two days to discover that Nurse James *was* a robot, one day to get over the surprise, and two more to realize what a comfort an attendant robot could be.

The conversion was a relief. Practically every house she visited had a domestic robot. It was the family's second or third most valuable possession, the women tending to rate it slightly higher than the car, the men, slightly lower. Janet had been perfectly well aware for some time that her friends regarded her as a nitwit or worse for wearing herself out with looking after a house which a robot would be able to keep spick and span with a few hours' work a day.

She had also known that it irritated George to come home each evening to a wife who had tired herself out by unnecessary work. But the prejudice had been firmly set. It was not the diehard attitude of people who refused to be served

The author of this story is a British novelist of considerable prominence. You'll perhaps best remember him as the man who put the fearsome triffids into science fiction, but he has written a goodly number of short stories too, featuring other entities quite as chilling on worlds men never made. So be warned! The robot Mr. Wyndham has created here is so scientifically believable you may meet her tomorrow, at least in a dream!

by robot waiters, or driven by robot drivers or who disliked to see dresses modeled by robot mannequins.

It was simply an uneasiness about them, about being left alone with one—and a disinclination to feel such an uneasiness in her own home.

She herself attributed the feeling largely to the conservatism of her own home which had used no house-robots. Other people, who had been brought up in homes run by robots, even the primitive types available a generation before, never seemed to have such a feeling at all. It irritated her to know that her husband thought she was *afraid* of them in a childish way. That, she had explained to George a number of times, was not so, and was not the point, either. What she *did* dislike was the idea of one intruding upon her personal, domestic life, which was what a house-robot was bound to do.

The robot who was called Nurse James was, then, the first with which she had ever been in close personal contact and she, or it, came as a revelation.

Janet told the doctor of her enlightenment, and he looked relieved. She also told George when he looked in in the afternoon, and he was delighted. The two of them conferred before he left the hospital.

"Excellent," said the doctor. "To tell you the truth I was afraid we were up against a real neurosis there—and very inconveniently, too. Your wife can never have been strong, and in the last few years she's worn herself out running the house."

"I know," George agreed. "I tried hard to persuade her during the first two years we were married, but it only led to trouble, so I had to drop it. This is really a culmination. She was rather shaken when she found out the reason she'd have to come here was partly because there was no robot at home to look after her."

"Well, there's one thing certain. She can't go on as she has been doing. If she tries to she'll be back here inside a couple of months," the doctor told him.

"She won't now. She's really changed her mind," George assured him. "Part of the trouble was that she's never come across a really modern one except in a superficial way. The newest that any of our friends has is ten years old at least, and most of them are older than that. She'd never contemplated the idea of anything as advanced as Nurse James. The question now is what pattern?"

The doctor thought a moment. "Frankly, Mr. Shand, your wife is going to need a lot of rest and looking after, I'm afraid. What I'd really recommend for her is the type they have here. It's something pretty new, this Nurse James model. A specially developed high-sensibility job with a quite novel contra-balanced compassion-protec-

tion circuit. A very tricky bit of work, that.

"Any direct order which a normal robot would obey at once is evaluated by the circuit, weighed against the benefit or harm to the patient, and unless it is beneficial, or at least harmless, it is not obeyed. They've proved to be wonderful for nursing and looking after children. But there is a big demand for them, and I'm afraid they're pretty expensive."

"How much?" asked George.

The doctor's round-figure price made him frown for a moment. Then he said: "It'll make a dent. But, after all, it's mostly Janet's economies and simple-living that's built up the savings. Where do I get one?"

"You don't. Not just like that," the doctor told him. "I shall have to throw a bit of weight about for a priority, but in the circumstances I shall get it, all right. Now, you go and fix up the details of appearance and so on with your wife. Let me know how she wants it, and I'll get busy."

"A proper one," said Janet. "One that'll look right in a house, I mean. I couldn't do with one of those levers-and-plastic-box things that stare at you with lenses. As it's got to look after the house, let's have it looking like a housemaid."

"Or a houseman, if you like?"

She shook her head. "No. It's going to have to look after me, too, so I think I'd rather it was a housemaid. It can have a black silk dress, and a frilly white apron and cap. And I'd like it blonde—a sort of darkish blonde—and about five feet ten, and nice to look at, but not *too* beautiful. I don't want to be jealous of it . . ."

The doctor kept Janet ten days more in the hospital while the matter was settled. There had been luck in coming in for a cancelled order, but inevitably some delay while it was adapted to Janet's specification. Also it had required the addition of standard domestic pseudo-memory patterns to suit it for housework.

It was delivered the day after she got back. Two severely functional robots carried the case up the front path, and inquired whether they should unpack it. Janet thought not, and told them to leave it in the outhouse.

When George got back he wanted to open it at once, but Janet shook her head.

"Supper first," she decided. "A robot doesn't mind waiting."

Nevertheless it was a brief meal. When it was over George carried the dishes out and stacked them in the sink.

"No more washing-up," he said, with satisfaction.

He went out to borrow the next-door robot to help him carry the case in. Then he found his end of it more than he could lift, and had to borrow the robot from the house opposite, too. Presently the pair of them carried it in and laid it on the

kitchen floor as if it were a featherweight, and went away again.

George got out the screwdriver and drew the six large screws that held the lid down. Inside there was a mass of shavings. He shoved them out, on to the floor.

Janet protested.

"What's the matter? *We* shan't have to clean up," he said, happily.

There was an inner case of woodpulp, with a snowy layer of wadding under its lid. George rolled it up and pushed it out of the way, and there, ready dressed in black frock and white apron, lay the robot.

They regarded it for some seconds without speaking.

It was remarkably lifelike. For some reason it made Janet feel a little queer to realize that it was *her* robot—a trifle nervous, and, obscurely, a trifle guilty . . .

"Sleeping beauty," remarked George, reaching for the instruction-book on its chest.

In point of fact the robot was not a beauty. Janet's preference had been observed. It was pleasant and nice-looking without being striking, but the details were good. The deep gold hair was quite enviable—although one knew that it was probably threads of plastic with waves that would never come out. The skin—another kind of plastic covering the carefully built-up contours—was distinguishable from real skin only by its perfection.

Janet knelt down beside the box, and ventured with a forefinger to touch the flawless complexion. It was quite, quite cold.

She sat back on her heels, looking at it. Just a big doll, she told herself—a contraption. A very wonderful contraption of metal, plastics, and electronic circuits, but still a contraption, and made to look as it did only because people would find it harsh or grotesque if it should look any other way.

And yet, to have it looking as it did was a bit disturbing, too. For one thing, you couldn't go on thinking of it as "it" any more. Whether you liked it or not, your mind thought of it as "her." As "her" it would have to have a name; and, with a name, it would become still more of a person.

"'A battery-driven model,'" George read out, "'will normally require to be fitted with a new battery every four days. Other models, however, are designed to conduct their own regeneration from the mains as and when necessary.' Let's have her out."

He put his hands under the robot's shoulders, and tried to lift it.

"Phew!" he said. "Must be about three times my weight." He had another try. "Hell," he said, and referred to the book again.

His brow furrowed.

"The control switches are situated at the back, slightly above the waistline. All right, maybe we can roll her over."

With an effort he succeeded in getting the figure on to its side and began to undo the buttons at the

back of her dress. Janet suddenly felt that to be an indelicacy.

"I'll do it," she said. Her husband glanced at her. "All right. It's yours," he told her.

"She can't be just 'it.' I'm going to call her Hester."

"All right, again," he agreed.

Janet undid the buttons and fumbled about inside the dress. "I can't find a knob, or anything," she said.

"Apparently there's a small panel that opens," he told her.

"Oh, no!" she said, in a slightly shocked tone.

He regarded her again. "Darling, she's just a robot—a mechanism."

"I know," said Janet, shortly. She felt about again, discovered the panel, and opened it.

"You give the upper knob a half-turn to the right and then close the panel to complete the circuit," instructed George, from the book.

Janet did so, and then sat swiftly back on her heels again, watching.

The robot stirred and turned. It sat up, then it got to its feet. It stood before them, looking the very pattern of a stage parlormaid.

"Good day, madam," it said. "Good day, sir. I shall be happy to serve you . . ."

"Thank you, Hester," Janet said, as she leaned back against the cushion placed behind her. Not that it was necessary to thank a robot, but she had a theory that if you did not practice politeness with robots you soon forgot it with other people.

And, anyway, Hester was no ordinary robot. She was not even dressed as a parlormaid any more. In four months she had become a friend, a tireless, attentive friend. From the first Janet had found it difficult to believe that she was only a mechanism, and as the days passed she had become more and more of a person.

The fact that she consumed electricity instead of food came to seem little more than a foible. The time she couldn't stop walking in a circle, and the other time when something went wrong with her vision so that she did everything a foot to the right of where she ought to have been doing it. These things, certainly, were just indispositions such as anyone might have, and the robot-mechanic who came to adjust her paid his call much like any other doctor. Hester was not only a person; she was preferable company to many.

"I suppose," said Janet, settling back in the chair, "that you must think me a poor, weak thing?"

A thing one must not expect from Hester was euphemism.

"Yes," she said, directly. But then she added: "I think all humans are poor, weak things. It is the way they are made. One must be sorry for them."

Janet had long ago given up thinking things like: "That'll be the compassion-circuit speaking," or trying to imagine the computing, selecting, associating, and shunting that must be going on to produce

such a remark. She took it as she might from—well, say, a foreigner.

She said: "Compared with robots we must seem so, I suppose. You are so strong and untiring, Hester. If you knew how I envy you that!"

Hester said, matter of factly: "We were designed. You were just accidental. It is your misfortune, not your fault."

"You'd rather be you than me?" asked Janet.

"Certainly," Hester told her. "We are stronger. We don't have to have frequent sleep to recuperate. We don't have to carry an unreliable chemical factory inside us. We don't have to grow old and deteriorate. Human beings are so clumsy and fragile and so often unwell because something is not working properly.

"If anything goes wrong with us, or is broken, it doesn't hurt and is easily replaced. And you have all kinds of words like pain, and suffering, and unhappiness, and weariness that we have to be taught to understand, and they don't seem to us to be useful things to have. I feel very sorry that you must have these things and be so uncertain and so fragile. It disturbs my compassion-circuit."

"Uncertain and fragile," Janet repeated. "Yes, that's how I feel."

"Humans have to live so precariously," Hester went on. "If my arm or leg should be crushed I can have a new one in a few minutes. But a human would have agony for a long time, and not even a new limb at the end of it—just a faulty one, if he were lucky. That isn't as bad as it used to be because in designing us you learned how to make good arms and legs, much stronger and better than the old ones. People would be much more sensible to have a weak arm or leg replaced at once, but they don't seem to want to if they can possibly keep the old ones."

"You mean they can be grafted on? I didn't know that," Janet said. "I wish it were only arms or legs that's wrong with me. I don't think I should hesitate . . ."

She sighed. "The doctor wasn't encouraging this morning, Hester. I've been losing ground and must rest more. I don't believe he expects me to get any stronger. He was just trying to cheer me up before . . . He had a funny sort of look after he'd examined me. But all he said was I should rest more. What's the good of being alive if it's only rest—rest—rest?

"And there's poor George. What sort of a life is it for him, and he's been so patient with me, so sweet. I'd rather anything than go on feebly like this. I'd sooner die . . ."

Janet went on talking, more to herself than to the patient Hester standing by. She talked herself into tears. Then presently, she looked up.

"Oh, Hester, if you were human I couldn't bear it. I think I'd hate you for being so strong and so well. But I don't, Hester. You're so kind and so patient when I'm silly,

like this. I believe you'd cry with me to keep me company if you could."

"I would if I could," the robot agreed. "My compassion-circuit—"

"Oh, *no!*" Janet protested. "It can't be just that. You've a heart somewhere, Hester. You must have."

"I expect it is more reliable than a heart," said Hester.

She stepped a little closer, stooped down, and lifted Janet up as if she weighed nothing at all.

"You've tired yourself out, Janet, dear," she told her. "I'll take you upstairs. You'll be able to sleep a little before he gets back."

Janet could feel the robot's arms cold through her dress, but the coldness did not trouble her any more. She was aware only that they were strong, protecting arms around her.

She said: "Oh, Hester, you are such a comfort. You *know* what I ought to do." She paused, then she added miserably: "I know what he thinks—the doctor, I mean. I could see it. He just thinks I'm going to go on getting weaker and weaker until one day I'll fade away and die. I said I'd sooner die, but I wouldn't, Hester. I don't want to die . . ."

The robot rocked her a little, as if she were a child.

"There, there, dear. It's not as bad as that—nothing like," she told her. "You mustn't think about dying. And you mustn't cry any more. It's not good for you, you know. Besides, you won't want him to see you've been crying."

"I'll try not to," agreed Janet obediently, as Hester carried her out of the room and up the stairs . . .

The hospital reception-robot looked up from the desk.

"My wife," George said. "I rang you up about an hour ago."

The robot's face took on an impeccable expression of professional sympathy.

"Yes, Mr. Shand. I'm afraid it has been a shock for you, but as I told you, your house-robot did quite the right thing to send her here at once."

"I've tried to get on to her own doctor, but he's away," George told her.

"You don't need to worry about that, Mr. Shand. She has been examined, and we have had all her records sent over from the hospital she was in before. The operation has been provisionally fixed for tomorrow, but of course we shall need your consent."

George hesitated. "May I see the doctor in charge of her?"

"He isn't in the hospital at the moment, I'm afraid."

"It is—absolutely necessary?" George asked, after a pause.

The robot looked at him steadily, and nodded, said, "She must have been growing steadily weaker for some months now."

George nodded.

"The only alternative is that she will grow weaker still, and have

more pain before the end," she told him.

George stared at the wall blankly for some seconds. "I see," he said bleakly.

He picked up a pen in a shaky hand and signed the form that she put before him. He gazed at it awhile without seeing it.

"Will—will she have a good chance?" he asked.

"Yes," the robot told him. "There is never complete absence of risk, of course. But there's a very good chance of complete success."

George sighed, and nodded. "I'd like to see her," he said.

The robot pressed a bell-push. "You may *see* her," she said. "But I must ask you not to disturb her. She's asleep now, and it's better for her not to be awakened."

George had to be satisfied with that, but he left the hospital feeling a little better for the sight of the quiet smile on Janet's lips as she slept.

The hospital called him at the office the following afternoon. They were reassuring. The operation appeared to have been a complete success. Everyone was quite confident of the outcome. There was no need to worry. The doctors were perfectly satisfied. No, it would not be wise to allow any visitors for a few days yet. But there was nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

George rang up each day just before he left, in the hope that he would be allowed a visit. The hospital was kindly and heartening, but adamant about visits. And then, on the fifth day, they suddenly told him she had already left on her way home. George was staggered. He had been prepared to find it a matter of weeks. He dashed out, bought a bunch of roses, and left half a dozen traffic regulations in fragments behind him.

"Where is she?" he demanded of Hester as she opened the door.

"She's in bed. I thought it might be better if—" Hester began, but he lost the rest of the sentence as he bounded up the stairs.

Janet was lying in the bed. Only her head was visible, cut off by the line of the sheet, and a bandage around her neck. George put the flowers down on the bedside table. He stooped over Janet and kissed her gently. She looked up at him from anxious eyes.

"Oh, George, dear. Has she told you?"

"Has who told me what?" he asked, sitting down on the side of the bed.

"Hester. She said she would. Oh, George, I didn't mean it. At least, I don't think I meant it. She sent me, George. I was so weak and wretched. I wanted to be strong. I don't think I really understood. Hester said—"

"Take it easy, darling. Take it easy," George suggested with a smile. "What on earth's all this about?"

He felt under the bedclothes and found her hand.

"But, George—" she began.

He interrupted her. "I say, darling, your hand's dreadfully cold. It's almost like—" His fingers slid further up her arm. His eyes widened at her, incredulously. He jumped up suddenly from the bed and flung back the covers. He put his hand on the thin nightdress, over her heart—and then snatched it away as if he had been stung.

He staggered back.

"God! *NO!*" he said, staring at her.

"But George. George, darling—" said Janet's head on the pillows.

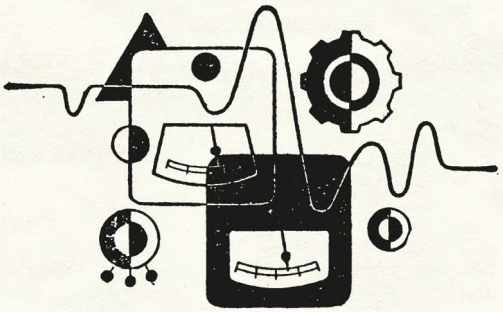
"NO! *NO!*" cried George, almost in a shriek.

He turned and ran blindly from the room.

In the darkness on the landing he missed the top step of the stairs, and went headlong down the whole flight.

Hester found him lying in a huddle in the hall. She bent down and gently explored the damage. The extent of it, and the fragility of the frame that had suffered it disturbed her compassion-circuit very greatly. She did not try to move him, but went to the telephone and dialed.

"Emergency?" she asked, and gave the name and address. "Yes, at once," she told them. "There may not be a lot of time. Several compound fractures, and I think his back is broken, poor man . . . No. There appears to be no damage to his head . . . Yes, much better. He'd be crippled for life, even if he did get over it . . . Yes, better send the form of consent with the ambulance so that it can be signed at once . . . Oh, yes, that'll be quite all right. His wife will sign it."



the stranger was himself

by . . . Poul Anderson

Throughout the universe of stars pitfalls incalculable await the Earthborn. But this, surely, was the most deadly trap of all!

ONE MOMENT he was standing on the platform under the eyeless gaze of machines he did not understand; the next he was in a room of steel, and there was another man with him. The transition was so swift that Dunham could not grasp it. For seconds he stood, weaving on his feet, while the after-image of the machines faded, and the knowledge that he was no longer on the platform struck him with all the force of a physical blow.

The shock was so great that he lost his balance, and toppled forward. Instantly intolerable pain stung his hands and knees, jarring him back toward alertness. He swore—the sound seemed curiously redoubled—and raised his head.

Unfamiliar eyes locked with his across the wide width of the room. The stranger was also crouched on all fours, his mouth just closing on an oath. Dunham took him in with one sweeping glance. A big fellow he was, clad in a gray coverall exactly like Dunham's and with close-cropped reddish-brown hair like Dunham's too. His rugged face bore an old scar which ran the

Last month we welcomed Theodore Cogswell to our pages for the first time, in a truly vivacious novelette. We take the same covetous pride in bringing you a story by Poul Anderson, another science-fiction great. He has appeared before in FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, *but never with a yarn quite so typically Andersonian, with all of the qualities which made his* HELPING HAND *so remarkable an exploration of the cosmically strange and terrifying.*

length of one cheekbone and there was another scar on his bared chest.

The two men spoke simultaneously.

"WWhhoo tthhee hheellll aarree yyoouu??"

Echoes shivered about the double voice, ringing in the polished steel room with a trip-hammer eeriness. Dunham's hand dropped to his hip. Then he cursed, remembering he'd left his blaster in the spaceship. The stranger's hand dropped too, and his curse was a similar one and it came at the same time.

Terrifiedly then, the truth dawned on Dunham. The mouth which sagged as did his own, and the gray eyes which opened with a sudden wildness to show the whites were no longer unfamiliar—no longer the features of a stranger. It was like standing before a mirror —a mirror which did not reverse the image presented to it.

The stranger was himself!

Again they cried out, and their voices echoed in the steel-walled room, in the same nightmare fashion.

They walked toward each other, holding out their hands as blind men might have done, and as Dunham advanced he could feel cold sweat running down from his armpits. This was madness, a thing beyond all reason.

The room was utterly quiet. Only the muffled ring of boots on steel and the heavy breathing of two men broke the stillness, and in that silence Dunham had time to remember that he was the only man on what was thought to be an uninhabited planet lying fifty light years from the farthest advance base of humanity! The silence was smothering. It was more than a mere absence of sound, it was a negation of sound which seemed to have a peculiar life of its own, and to be threatening his very existence.

In the exact center of the room, they met. Slowly, jerkily, their extended fingers touched, and were yanked back as if by invisible bands of energy. For a long moment, they stood silently staring at each other.

Two shivering breaths came in unison, and two voices spoke in a near-whisper: "Let's be reasonable about this. We have to figure out what—"

And then, in a sudden panicky rush of anger: "Stop! You must stop that insane parroting act!"

The echoes jeered at them, and they recoiled again, the gray cloth wrinkling identically with the heaving of their chests.

Again there was silence. With a deliberate effort of will Dunham forced himself to reason rationally. The terrifying experience was actually happening to *him!*

No—to *them!*

The problem was to find out *how* it had happened, and what to do about it.

He looked around the chamber, at every gleaming aspect of the steel cubicle he'd investigated before. Measuring about five meters square by two meters high—his own head

was actually not much below the ceiling—it appeared to be a completely featureless, right-angled box. In the precise center of the ceiling was a circular door which he had previously opened from outside to explore the interior with his eyes. The door had a very ordinary knob on it, and it was not locked. The knob had been in the exact middle of the circle, he remembered. It was on this side too. At least, he supposed it was, though an elliptical steel sleeve with a major axis of about ten centimeters, and a minor axis of about eight, ran symmetrically around the diagonal of the room which separated the two Dunhams and covered it completely.

He was growing oppressively aware that the room was hot. The sun was high by now—both Dunhams glanced at their wrist chronos simultaneously—and the metal box was becoming a bake-oven.

He thought, not so irrelevantly: *A shot of straight whiskey would help!* Well—there were medical supplies in his ship, and the door wasn't locked. All he had to do was reach up into the sleeve above him, turn the knob, let the door fall open, and chin himself out over the flat top of the cubicle. Then it would be only a few kilometers' hike to the cruiser—

But the other Dunham!

They stared at each other, with a hideous, shivery remembrance of half-forgotten legends. The *Doppelgänger,* the *fylgjh,* the fetch. If you see yourself you will soon die! Dunham shrugged the nonsense off. He was a practical, unromantic man, and the problem to be met was tragically real and immediate.

"Who are you, anyway? Can't you answer me without parroting my words? God—"

Both of them stopped, staring with narrowing eyes at each other. Then both tried it again, slowly:

"Look! We can settle this later."

Once again there was silence. The room was hot, and still, lighted only by fluorotubes arranged along both walls, apparently with the thought of absolute symmetry. The polished steel showed only a dim double reflection of two men, poised and bristling.

Decision. Once they were out of the ghastly oven, they could talk or fight, or do whatever seemed wise. Dunham stepped rapidly forward to the middle of the room. So did his double. Two right hands reached up simultaneously for the sleeve—

And there was room in the sleeve for only one.

"Get out of my way! I'll open it."

Wildly, they looked with utter desperation into each other's eyes.

Dunham Oliver was one of a breed which he had lived and fought, and died, and been born again, throughout human history. The frontier scout, the mountain man, the Voortrekker, always moving on ahead of his race, always with a fierce hunger in him for something he could not name.

The frontiersman doesn't like being a cog in an overgrown civilization. But he does like wealth and the joys of adventuring. So he goes boldly out beyond the horizons of the known, and brings back whatever he can find that has saleable value.

If he's lucky, he can eventually retire with a fortune that will enable him to go on doing as he pleases in the quagmires of civilization. If not, he becomes a sodden supplicant in a dreary outpost, or leaves his bones for the carrion birds.

Dunham fully intended to be among the lucky. But so far, his fortune had only extended to a half share in a creaky old scoutship, and a chance to investigate further. His partner had died on an unnamed world with a native slingspear through his ribs. Rather than go back, Dunham had pushed resolutely on through the galaxies at the fringe of the star-maps. It had been brutal work, running a ship alone intended for two men. But it might pay—it just might!

The interstellar Voortrekker is not quite the uneducated, two-fisted, hard-drinking adventurer who is his stereotype in the folk writings of Earth. You can't navigate a spaceship without a first-rate knowledge of physics, chemistry, and astronomy, and you won't last long on a new planet without adding biology, bacteriology, and xenology to your list of accomplishments. Dunham's intelligence was above average, when he cared to use it, and he had quickly seen the possibilities of this distant world.

An Earth-type planet circling a G2 star was quite a find in itself and the broken shards of what must have been a mighty civilization better still. There were resplendent prizes awaiting the man who made that kind of discovery. But what he might succeed in picking out of the ruins might be even more valuable. There was no telling. Dunham had landed near a dead city, made routine tests, and gone out to explore.

It soon became evident that animal life had become extinct on the planet, though it had obviously existed at one time. As a result, the forests which encroached on the long-dead metropolis were not as luxuriant as might have been expected. The old balance of nature was gone and a new one had not been found. The craters which scarred the planet's face made that tragedy clear enough. The ghastly joke of the war to end wars which had really succeeded! Whatever the ultimate weapon, it had been *too* good, and none of the city's inhabitants had lived to brag about it.

Dunham was interested in finding exactly what that weapon had been like, and whether its construction and operating principle might just possibly be duplicable. Suppose, for example, that it could be used to wipe out pathogenic bacteria. Usefulness meant money, per-

haps wealth undreamed of, in the pockets of Dunham Oliver.

There had been murals on most of the city walls, faded by millennia of rain and wind, but still traceable. The builders of the vanished civilization had looked rather humanoid, if you discounted details, and there had been a great and cruel pride on their faces. Dunham had shivered a little, in the warm bright stillness of day, and looked away.

He had not found their weapon. But he had found a box of rustproof, enduring steel in a relatively undamaged part of the ruins. Ascending to the top, he had opened the door, and stared down into the chamber below, wondering what purpose it served. He had closed the door afterward. Now he realized what a mistake that had been.

A thick-walled, stone shed stood against one side of the cubicle. It had contained what looked like electronic and magnetic equipment, arranged in a manner incomprehensible to him. And it was still operating! He could hear a low hum and see the pulses of light in some of the tubes. The mad thought struck him that somewhere, far down underground, a nuclear converter might still be working.

Excited, he had stepped up on a platform for a closer look at what seemed to be an automatic control panel. And then he was inside the box, and there were two of him.

The double Dunham stepped back from the center, breathing hard. It was useless to talk. What was needed was thought.

Think, man, think! What has happened? What devil's trap is this? How do I get out of it?

How had the duplication of himself been accomplished?

A robot—Dunham rejected the idea as preposterous. Whatever those machines could do, he felt convinced that they could not duplicate him in metal and plastic—

Or could they?

A cold dread took possession of Dunham's mind as the truth grew on him. Matter duplication! He'd heard they'd been working on that, back on Earth. Theoretically it was possible. Some kind of beam might be capable of scanning an object atom by atom, using the scanner signal to direct a mechanism which built up a perfect copy out of a matter bank, or out of raw energy. It was largely the electronic complexity of the problem which had stumped the human engineers so far.

Apparently the engineers of this perished civilization had solved the problem.

But if that were so, why hadn't they invented space travel? Well—maybe they hadn't been interested. Maybe they'd preferred to fight one another, and not the darkness between the stars. They'd actually gone one step further, and developed a beam which could assemble the duplicate persons and objects at a distance, without a receiver.

Did that mean that the original Dunham was still outside?

The two Dunhams turned, and beat on the walls until their fists were bloody. They screamed until their throats were raw.

When they stopped and turned around, the silence fell again. The room was a drum. Dunham One would have heard and investigated, if he still lived. But did he live? Wasn't it possible that the machine had dissolved Dunham One instantly, perhaps using him as the most vital part of a matter bank which had created two new Dunhams?

The two Dunham's shivered together, their mouths tightening. But surely it was only a question of definition. The ego, the continuity of memory, which was Dunham Oliver's essential self, still lived. The pattern had been reproduced perfectly and Dunham was not dead, any more than it could be said that a man died when the gradual processes of metabolism replaced the atoms in his body with other atoms.

Would it not have been more true to say that he now lived twice? The same recording had been used to create two new Dunham patterns —simultaneously, at identical distances from their respective corners of the symmetrical room. Which of them was the "real" Dunham? It was a meaningless question. They both were. Identical patterns in identical environments! Naturally all their actions would be identical and simultaneous, if you accepted the law of cause and effect. Right down to the last minute stirring of molecules in their body-cells—

A forced grin, a sigh of agonized relief that the weirdness had been brought down to understandable scientific terms.

But scientific understanding couldn't get them out of the room. It was growing hotter by the minute and their tongues had begun to swell in their cottony mouths. They were hideously convinced that unless they got out they would be dead of thirst before long—or of asphyxiation as the air got fouler.

It didn't make sense. Two strong men—with nothing to prevent their geting out except a doorknob which had to be turned. Dunham fished desperately in his pockets, and brought out a gold coin. He started to speak, then realized the other was sharing his thoughts. *Heads I go first, tails you go. . . . No, don't you toss. . . . Oh, all right, we'll match for it. . . . No, let's say that heads wins. . . .*

Two coins spun, landing with a clank that rang as one. *Tails.* Dunham waited for his double to open the door.

So did the other Dunham.

They tried again. *Two heads.* Both Dunhams stepped forward, and—both stopped.

Of course! Even the fall of a coin is determined by a million tiny factors of balance and force which would be the same for both of us.

Dunham sucked in a worried, tormented breath. Confound it,

there must be *some* way to break the deadlock! He gathered his muscles, and sprinted toward the door.

The two bodies crashed together just beneath it. Wildly, Dunham shoved at the other. An identical shove sent him lurching back. He cursed and came in swinging. The other Dunham's fist lanced toward him, and he rolled with the punch. Two fists grazed two left cheeks.

Then they were on the floor, kicking and gouging and slugging and sobbing, gone crazy with fear. When at last the fight was stopped by mutual exhaustion they looked dully at each other. As Dunham studied the damage done to his twin—one eye blacked, clothes ripped, left cheek badly bruised—he realized that he looked *exactly* the same!

They had not budged from beneath the steel sleeve. Every force tending toward Dunham's right had been cancelled by an equal force moving in the same direction.

Glancing up, Dunham could just make out the doorknob at the end of the tube. It was like a little drunken eye watching him. So easy to turn—and yet so impossible!

Unsteadily they rose to their feet and tried to rip the sleeve loose. Each force was nullified by an equal and opposite pull. When they finally hit on the idea of applying torque in a tangential effort of rotation nothing happened. The thing appeared to be atom-welded. Their eyes met in mutual sympathy and horror.

The deadlock *had* to be broken! If only one of them could do just one thing that the other couldn't do identically and simultaneously. They tried moving about, retreating to corners of the room, in a desperate effort to break up the symmetrical arrangement. The attempt failed dismally.

Eventually they sat down, and regarded each other mutely. The brief burst of hatred had died in the violence of the fight. They now knew that nothing could be solved by hatred. They were in the ghastly predicament together, and had to solve it together—but in such a way that neither of them annulled what the other did.

Dunham slumped back against the wall. It was blistering on his wet back and the air seemed almost to sizzle in his nostrils. Worse, his thirst had become nearly intolerable. It was like a wild beast clawing at his tongue and throat.

Why had the builders made this trap? Had they intended it as a torture chamber?

Inhuman indeed would be such a revenge, slaying your enemy twice! No—more likely, it was an intelligence test, designed for officer candidates. Their civilization had been utterly ruthless. Either the victim thought his way out of the dilemma, or he died.

Dunham clenched his fists, and cursed in a whisper. It was enough to drive a man insane. He was dying just when he had won every-

thing he had fought and struggled to gain.

His thoughts raced furiously.

There would be no particular awkwardness about having two of himself in the universe. Space was big enough, and there were enough women to go around. There'd be enough money, too. Under the Discoveries Act, he'd be entitled to one per cent of the profits from a matter duplicator which in a few years might well be sufficient to support a thousand Dunhams in luxury. Meanwhile, he had a crewmate—the best one imaginable—to help him get his ship home.

If they could escape. Otherwise they'd die in identical pain at exactly the same moment—a moment which couldn't be long delayed.

Curse it, we can't be trapped like this! We're free human beings, both of us. We've got free will if we only can find a way to make use of it—They looked at each other, aware of sharing the same thoughts. *Is there telepathy between us? No, probably not! But it will be inherently impossible to find out for sure unless we can get out of here.*

Dunham passed a weary hand across his eyes. If only it weren't so hot! His brain seemed to be frying in his skull. He had to think—had to! There was no other way out of the oven.

Identity could never be perfect. There was always a limit of accuracy to any machine, all aside from Heisenberg's uncertainty principle itself. These two Dunhams were merely possessed of an extraordinarily high degree of similarity. If they waited long enough, the small accumulated errors would add up till the difference between them grew sufficient for one of them to act independently of the other. But that might take days, and they had only hours.

The instant they broke the deadlock, it would stay broken, for then their environments would not be identical any longer. As soon as they got out of this symmetrical hell, into the blessed disorderliness of sky and wind and trees, their experiences would become still more different.

They'd probably get in each other's way a lot, at first. But it wouldn't be any serious problem. In a few years of varied and contrasting experience, they'd actually be two different people. The similarity would persist all their lives, but not enough to matter.

The only difficulty was to establish some order of precedence now. "*I* will go open the door." At the moment, what did the word "I" mean? It was completely immaterial through whose eyes you looked, from whose side you told the story. It would be exactly the same story in either case.

No time for such philosophical theorizing. What counted was getting out.

Assume it isn't just a death-trap. I—we—have to assume that much, at least, or give up right now. Then

there must be a way out. That means there must be something in this hell-born environment which is not symmetrical, which can be used to single one of us out. But what? I can't see—

If only the builders had had the decency to install a coin-flipping machine . . . No, that wouldn't have worked either. Each Dunham would have said, "Heads, I do it."

They looked at each other again, turning a little darker under the fever-flush of heat. It was not good having someone else around who knew you so well, knew all your sins and failings and secret thoughts . . . No, the hell with that. He, Dunham, had not been any saint. But he wasn't too ashamed of his life. He'd had fun, and he hadn't harmed anyone too much unless they'd had it coming, and—

They spoke, trying to break the loneliness and silence of nearing death: "Isn't there anything—" They gave up quickly. Asking each other identical and unanswerable questions was worse than not talking at all.

They got up and paced, hands behind their backs, swearing in a bitter mumble. There must be a way out, there must be!

A tossed coin hadn't worked. A fight hadn't worked. No kind of game or contest would work if its aim was to single one of them out and— Wait! Let the other Dunham guess which hand, held behind his back, contained— No, that was out too.

They grinned at each other, wearily. Dunham was shocked by the drawn face opposite him. Did he look that bad?

Up and down, up and down they paced, in a silent sizzle of bone-dry air. Where was the selective factor, the random element, the way out? How hope to find it before death came, when you were dying already?

Random factor, random factor . . . Hell take the builders! If they'd had souls, he hoped they were frying as he was. The air was draining him, withering him, wild molecular dance beating tom-toms on his skull. This is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends, this is the way—

Random factor—too hot to think—

Hot!

The double whoop shivered the steel walls.

The motion of gas molecules is not uncaused, but it *is* random. Here physics speaks of a phenomenon so complex that it can only be analyzed statistically. In a large volume of air, the molecules are evenly dispersed throughout. But if you take very small cells, a fractional millimeter on a side, the chances are that no two of them will have an identical distribution.

A coin is big and heavy. It would take a strong breeze to influence its fall. But there are lighter objects.

Two identical men stood in a box of steel. Each of them pulled a hair from his head—the same hair?—and dropped it. Each of them puffed hard to stir up the heat-boiling air still more. The hairs drifted lazily, borne on tiny convection currents. *The one whose hair lands first will open the door.*

"Okay, pal, that settles it."

Dunham Oliver—it doesn't matter which one—went over to the middle of the room and put his arm up the metal sleeve and turned the knob.

The door fell open.

the pompous asteroid

by . . . Winston Marks

The asteroid was too pompous to refuse a dare. So the space duel that ensued was out of this world.

CHIEF PETTY OFFICER Spud Hurley awoke with a distinct impression that his privacy had been grossly violated. Being the sole occupant of a half-crippled scout ship bound for the repair base on Luna, he snorted at the idea and looked accusingly at the half-empty whiskey bottle he had smuggled aboard when he left the fleet 84 hours ago out near Jupiter.

He felt quite sober, yet the memory of something prickly probing about in his brain was still strong and unshakable. He peeled himself out of the tautly strung hammock and let it twang into place between stanchions, its netting flopping around the elastic cords.

Whiskey cured some things and aggravated others. A man could go nuts in a hurry if he started worrying about someone peering over his shoulder on a dead-head, solo hop like this.

His fingernails dug absently at his itching ribs under the acceleration jacket whose zipper was sealed on. They knew damned well he'd have long since stripped it off if it weren't a court martial offense to arrive with the bosun's seal broken, or even crudely reset.

Here is a story of the cosmically mathematical, of considered equations gone preposterously haywire. We guarantee that it will thrill and chill you as all of Winston Marks' stories seem to do, with malice aforethought.

Regulations! All this planet-recon scooter could muster was two gees, but we must go by the book. We must gird our loins and make like gut-bustin', full-blast-off space-swabbies, and let the sweat trickle where it may.

He reached for the whiskey and stopped. It was almost time to go into free flight, and not even an old iron-belly like himself could handle free fall and alcohol.

The second verse of the ribald navy chant, *Venus de Mars,* came to mind:

What lungs! What thighs!
What tongues and eyes—
That double osculation!
Like space free-fall
And alcohol—
My God, what a sensation!

No, as much as he longed for a comforting nip of the liquor, he wouldn't risk the head-whirling, stomach-wrenching vertigo. Moving his small, muscular body easily against the puny two gees, Spud stuffed the bottle in his ditty bag and stowed the bag in a locker.

He climbed up into the tiny control room and stared at the stars. All present and accounted for, he reported to himself. Sinking into the captain's seat, he flipped the switch that activated all the communications gear. Out of sheer boredom he strained the ether for some sign of communication, knowing full well his tiny, mobile equipment was too weak to converse with the fleet. Luna's station, some eight days away, had plenty of give and take on the magnetic band, but you didn't just call in to shoot the breeze with main base, not with a lieutenant commander on the monitoring console.

Only the hiss of cosmic radiation was audible, and he was about to cut the switch when his peripheral vision caught a glare on the radar scope. His head snapped to the left, and he lunged heavily for the gain control to cut it down before the screen browned off. A moment later he whistled through dry lips.

He had a neighbor.

As he made the observation, the tubes in the automatic alarm system warmed up and began honking a warning. The red proximity light soaked the "office" with its sanguinary glare, top intensity, and no wonder! He had to switch the search scope to the ten-mile range before he could separate the intruder from the dot that indicated his own position in space.

Four miles!

He slapped the transmitter key closed and roared, "Ahoy there! Stand off! Stand off!"

But even as he screamed, the huge, glowing spot on the scope told him this was no Earth ship. Not even a Star-Class capital ship made a splotch like a Texas ranch.

He heaved out of his seat to a side port and stared out, muttering oaths in seven dialects. Sol's rays caught the object quartering, but it was ample to reveal its gigantic hulk

to be a pocked, ragged-rimmed asteroid several miles in diameter.

Slowly he fought back the initial panic with the spaceman's adage, *You never see the one that hits you.* These chunks of flotsam traveled at velocities that—

What was an over-grown meteor doing in this sector?

Spud knew his trajectory would scarcely brush the edge of the asteroid belt, out where nothing but the most impalpable dust existed between Jupiter and Mars.

His awe deepened with the seconds, for it became increasingly apparent that the asteroid was neither approaching nor receding, but was matching his course precisely.

This couldn't be! The little scout-ship was still accelerating. Now that he had overtaken the monster rock, he should be passing it—fast. But the great shape that blotted out a thousand acres of stars stood off exactly abeam, ominously matching velocity. It meant only one thing. It was guided and propelled by some intelligent force.

Back at the transmitter Spud pressed the tx key again. "Ahoy there, asteroid! Do you read me?"

Silence. He advanced the power to maximum and tried again. "Ahoy there, do you read me!"

A flat, metallic voice spanked into his speaker. "Yes, I've read you—from cover to cover, to use your own vernacular."

Spud's hackles bristled at the abrupt acknowledgment. Ignoring the strange remark, Spud beamed. "Ahoy, asteroid! Who is aboard?"

"Aboard?" came the reply. "I'm aboard myself."

Spud Hurley was a practical individual. He believed what his eyes saw and, normally, what his ears heard, but it was impossible to make an intelligent inference from such a foolish statement.

"Knock off the double-talk, and quit breathing down my neck. I'm on sealed instruments, fixed orbit to Luna under Federation orders. By what authority do you approach within the fifty-thousand mile limit of a naval vessel?" he demanded.

"Would you mind easing the power of that filthy magnetic radiation you are using? I heard you quite well on low-power."

"Then why didn't you answer?" Spud eased off the antenna loading as he spoke.

"Thank you. That's better. Now what was the question?"

Spud sputtered with exasperation. "I want to know who you are and why you are tailing me?"

"Who am I? Well, let me see. Your puny verbalized communication is so primitive—do you have words to—oh, yes. You would refer to me as a—heavenly body. An asteroid, I believe the term would be."

"Yeah, yeah, that I can see!" Spud said. "But who is aboard? By what authority do you—"

"I told you. I am aboard myself. I am a living, thinking entity, even as you are—although, I beg of you,

consider this an extremely rough comparison."

The English was perfect, but the tone was bored, haughty and disinterested, like an admiral inspecting a boot camp sewer.

Chief Petty Officer Spud Hurley's appetite for communication was rapidly vanishing. In all his fourteen years at space he had never encountered a talking asteroid, nor had he heard of one. Galey's Galactic Guide made no mention of the subject, and naval S.O.P., as Spud had once memorized it, ignored such a contingency.

"Look, whoever you are," Spud pleaded, "I am required to report all contacts in the log. Now will you make sense, so they won't psycho me when they read my report? Asteroids in this galaxy don't talk—"

"Yes, so I've determined. Strange, isn't it? On the other hand, who would have expected to find *an organic life form?*"

"What's strange about that? All life is organic!"

"Hah! I've moved through a billion galaxies, and this is my first experience with a life-form that depends upon a ridiculous carboniferous-chemical-reaction for existence. And a life-span of less than—than a century, your time! How fragile! How precarious! Why do you bother to live at all?"

Sweat broke out heavily on Spud Hurley's face, and he groaned. If he wasn't insane, he was experiencing man's first inter-galactic contact with an intelligent being—and there wasn't even a junior grade lieutenant around to advise him and verify the interview.

Now he wasn't making sense himself. "How can a big hunk of random matter be a thinking individual when it isn't even alive?" he demanded.

"Your erroneous assumption is a product of flatulent logic. I am quite alive. Your science has not yet discovered that *self-awareness is not a function of life.* Quite the contrary. *Life, in its multitude of possible manifestations, is simply a product of self-awareness.* An elementary etiological insight that even short-lived savages should have grasped, since you lay claim to 'time-binding.' "

"That's fantastic! You mean that every blade of Earth-grass, every ant, bacteria and virus has self-awareness?"

"To a limited degree—like yourself. Don't confuse self-awareness with mere physical agility, however. For all the fragility of your particular life-form, you have a rather remarkable mobility and manual dexterity, judging from the contents of your mind—which I examined an hour ago while you slept."

So that was the nasty sensation that had awakened him! Spud tightened with indignation and growing resentment. "If you know everything in my mind why are you following me?"

"You will lead me to more of

your kind," the voice said. "Obviously, you are a low-grade specimen, and I am curious to examine the mental emanations of your superiors before I pass through your system. There is something unique in this galaxy, and I haven't quite determined what it is—other than this stupid, carbon-life phenomenon. The over-specialized and under-developed organ you call your brain shed no light on the matter."

Spud flushed. The inter-galactic source of the remark made it no less an insult. Before he could retort, however, another question claimed priority.

"How do you move that slag heap around?" he asked. "I don't see any rocket tail."

"Gravitic alignment to selective interstellar polarities on the—on the—" The metallic voice broke off. "Sorry, your limited vocabulary prevents me from expressing it. However, with your rudimentary physics you would be incapable of comprehension, anyway. Suffice it, that I can arrange my internal structure to avail my crystalline ferromagnetic elements of the vast, universal power-flux."

With a brief shudder, the little scout ship's rockets cut out, and Spud found himself recoiling slowly from his cushion in free fall. "Well," he remarked, "if you stay with me I hope you are capable of decelerating at three to five gees, because we are both on a collision orbit with Luna."

He pushed off for the side port to see if the asteroid had stopped accelerating to match velocities. It had, but something else claimed his attention instantly. The vast blob still showed its bright, rough crescent, but now a sprinkle of blue-white, brilliant flashes erupted all over the darker area, and a shrill audio note screamed at him over the open speaker.

"What in the universe is that?" the voice demanded at last. For a moment Spud was at a loss, then the infinitesimal sound of the microscopic meteor dust of the asteroid belt came to his ears as it pinked at the hull of his scout.

"We're moving into the asteroids," he explained. "But we're on the very outside edge, and I have no idea why this dust is cutting up so much fireworks on your surface. I'm getting the same stuff over here."

"You can't be!" the asteroid declared. "Every strike is blasting a pit in me in which you could hide that entire vessel of yours."

As the voice spoke, the great mass moved in a curved plane parallel to their present orbits until it was now about four miles abaft Spud's starboard beam, 180 degrees from its original position.

Meanwhile, the whispering strikes of high-velocity dust continued unchanged on the scout's hull, and the hellish, blue-white explosions continued to pock the asteroid. The change of relative positions now converted it into a three-quarter "moon."

"See, I told you," Spud rubbed it in. "You're still catching it. Brother, you must be allergic to—"

A fearful explanation welled up in his mind and choked him off, an explanation in terms of the long-scoffed-at theory of the existence of *contra-terrene matter.* At a distance of four miles, these little motes of matter should have given off only pin-points of light-energy when they struck the asteroid. Instead they were erupting with a violence that could only mean complete atomic disintegration!

The voice was still flat, but it quickened with alarm. "Earthman, I'm losing mass!"

"Yeah," Spud retorted, "and don't think I won't get mine chewed out when I try to make them believe this back at the base."

"Lead me out of this quickly," the voice wailed. "Mass is critical."

"Your tail will be worse than critical if you try to set down on Luna. Mister, you're *contra-terrene!*"

"Never mind that absurd concept. Get me out of here!"

"Keep your pants on," Spud assured. "Like I said, we're on the very edge of the belt. Be out in a few seconds. There, see? It's easing off already."

The flashes were diminishing, and the barely audible flicks on the scout's hull stopped altogether, since it presented such a tiny target compared to the asteroid.

"What fearful mass your nasty little space debris carries!" the voice exclaimed. "What ever prevented the destruction of your little craft?"

"Mass, nuts! I told you. You are made up of *contra-terrene matter.* The charges on your atomic particles are reversed. Your electrons are positive, and your nucleus carries a negative charge."

"Yes, yes, I read that fantastic idea in your mind when I scanned it a bit back, but it's utter nonsense. In a billion galaxies I've never encountered such a thing. Why should your so-called Milky Way galaxy defy the construction of the universe?"

"While you're asking questions, put in for a better reason why space dust makes you light up like a 3-D pin-ball game."

"Don't be impertinent, you—you protoplasmic whelp."

"Aw, look now, you found better cuss-words in my mind than that." Spud smiled and he jabbed the needle deeper. "If you're so confounded omniscient, why did you turn to me to get you out of the dust back there?"

"I'd expect even a savage to have a map of his own back yard."

The triumphant wrinkled grin faded from Spud's radiation-burned face, as he remembered the asteroid's stated intention of accompanying him to the surface of Luna.

"See here, I'm not kidding about this *contra-terrene* theory. Maybe you got a better explanation, but if you haven't, let's be staying away from Luna."

"Shut up! I'm thinking," he said.

In the frightful silence of free-fall, the faint hum of the communication transformers sounded like a swarm of bees in a blanket. Spud tried to estimate the magnitude of the blast that would occur if a hunk of *contra-terrene* the size of the asteroid were to contact Earth's moon. Suppose the initial blast sent chunks of it wheeling earthward? Or would the instant release of energy blow the moon itself apart or ignite a nova of blue-white flame that might engulf Earth, vaporize her waters, burn off her air and—

"Impossible. Quite impossible," the voice announced.

"What's impossible?"

"That two kinds of matter should exist. The probabilities are infinitely better that your tiny craft slipped through the asteroid belt without striking any of the large particles that were moving so remarkably rapid."

"I tell you that was nothing but dust," Spud insisted. "The asteroid belt is carefully charted, and my orbit avoided the dense area by more than ten thousand miles. Do you think we are stupid enough to take chances like that?"

"Are you questioning the cognizance of a mind that was old before your pimple of a planet was more than a puff of tepid gas?"

"I'm telling you it's suicide to touch down on any planet or satellite in this system."

"Twaddle!" And with this flat rejection of Spud's warning, the asteroid sank into radio silence.

Desperately the Chief P. O. advanced the power of his transmitter and shouted into the microphone, but his traveling companion refused even to express annoyance at the racket.

After a bit, however, the monitor on Luna cut in faintly, demanding to know what in hell the ruckus was.

Spud identified himself, his ship and destination. Then, drawing a deep breath, he launched into a full explanation of his unplanned, unwelcome and unsettling rendezvous in space.

The petty officer at the other end heard him out then requested, "Standby, please." In about one minute he said, "Would you please repeat your whole message for Commander Puttrey? Frankly, I got so interested I forgot to tape it."

"Is the commander there now?"

"He's right here. Go ahead."

"Commander, you've got to send up a mission to intercept this asteroid that's following me. It's miles across, and it's in a dead collision orbit with Luna."

"Wait a minute, Chief," the official said. "You're in free flight, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Then if this asteroid does exist outside your imagination, you'll lose it fast when you begin decelerating. Your orbit takes this into consideration. The asteroid's doesn't. It will miss us by half a million miles."

"But I won't lose it. This asteroid intends to follow me in, decelerate with me and land on Luna," Spud said sadly.

"Well, now," the commander said with a low rasp that had a metallic ring of its own, "that's just mighty neighborly of it. If it's a gentleman, we'll give it a drink of the same stuff you're on." Now his voice rose to a crescendo of impatience. "Dammit, Hurley, if you're a chief, you should know better than to mix free fall and alcohol."

Spud dropped his voice and tried to explain but his heart wasn't in it. "You haven't heard the worst. This asteroid is *contra-terrene matter*—you know, negative-positive, instead of positive-negative. If we let it sit down on Luna—"

That tore it, but in an unexpected way. The officer had a sense of humor, and it came to his rescue at last. His wracking laughter rang in Spud's ears like a death knell.

"Hurley, Hurley, I don't know whether to court martial you or decorate you for pulling the tallest tale in twelve star systems. What is your pilot rating, incidentally?"

"Fourth class, sir, but I—"

"Just rated for landings, eh? All right, promise me you won't touch the controls until you sober up. Will you do that, old boy? Promise me that, and I'll personally take you over to the officer's club and buy you a drink—provided you tell the boys your story. Is it a deal? Oh, one thing more—I can't wait to hear this—how did you figure out that this asteroid is *contra-terrene matter?*"

Spud played it straight to the last. "Because it lit up like a Christmas tree when we came through the rim of the dust belt. Blue-white flashes damned near blinded me. I took nothing but the usual dusting, and we are only four miles apart."

"Very well," Commander Puttrey said when he was able to control his laughter. "The drinks are on me, but remember, you promised not to touch the controls until you sober up."

"Yeah!" Spud snarled back and he slammed open the tx key without adding "sir." He hadn't made any such promise, but he might as well have. What good would it do to take evasive action? If the moon blew and took Earth with it, he had no place to sit down, inadequate fuel to return to the fleet or another planet, and too weak a transmitter to contact anyone for rescue.

Of course, if he used deflection power now—he *could* lead the asteroid off into space. Sure, be a big, fat hero! And who would ever know about it? Luna station would write off the scout ship, and Puttrey would submit a transcript of their conversation as proof of Spud Hurley's drunken incompetence.

Yet what choice did Puttrey leave him?

He didn't feel like being a hero under these conditions. If he could have thought of a way to avoid the

risk to Earth, he would have jammed the asteroid down Puttrey's throat, but even a good jolt to Luna's orbit could have serious consequences to Earth. He didn't dare join the risk.

There must be another way! If he could only convince the asteroid that—

Another chilling alternative occurred to him. Suppose he simply rammed the scout ship into the big, egotistical hunk of animated rock? That should be convincing. Do it real slow like. Then there would be no question that high velocity had anything to do with the explosion. Indeed, it might wipe out the whole menace.

Yes, there were two distinct ways of achieving the status of a dead, unsung hero: Lead the intruder off into space, and die of asphyxiation; or smack him, and have it over with.

The memory of the eye-hurting blasts when the tiny space-specks bombarded the asteroid came back to him vividly. If such a minute particle could release so much energy, what would a whole pound of metal do? Something, say, the size of a baseball that a man could pitch?

Recreational facilities being sharply limited aboard Federation scout ships, there were no baseballs, metal or otherwise. But the tool kit yielded a short wrench that hefted satisfactorily in his hand. Damn! Why not?

The air-lock was so small, and his pressure suit so bulky that he had to hang outside the hull to have throwing room. Spud had been outside a ship's hull on several occasions in space, but never had he faced such a tremendous celestial body so close at hand.

His arm trembled as he drew it back stiffly and threw with all his strength. The silvery magnesium alloy wrench flew end over end, glinting in the sun until it was a flickering spark that finally disappeared straight for the center of the asteroid. Not a bad aim. Of course, a guy who couldn't pitch a duster to this slugger had better turn in his suit.

Back inside, Spud checked the radar scope on fine calibration. Yes, the distance was almost exactly four miles. Guessing the velocity of the wrench to be roughly 40 miles per hour, it should take about six minutes, plus or minus two, to make contact.

He ripped off the helmet and touched the transmitter key. "Ahoy, you asteroid! I've called your hand. I'm about to prove to you that there are two kinds of matter. If I succeed will you abandon your plan to sit down on Luna?"

"That," said the metallic voice, breaking silence at last, "is a most particularly insane question, but one which I am not amazed to hear from you. No sane intellect will deliberately destroy itself."

"It's a deal, then?"

"I have learned all that is contained in that pallid puff-ball you

call your brain—including quite a number of infantile speculations. Your conjecture upon the existence of *Contra-terrene matter* indicates virtually a complete ignorance of the mathematics of probability. I will admit there does seem to be something different in this galaxy. I feel it, intuitively. This is the only reason I bothered to converse with you after scanning your brain. But I see it was a waste of time."

"All right, we both know how stupid I am. Now let's see how smart you are?" Spud challenged. "Just supposing such opposing types of matter do exist in the universe, how much opposite mass making contact with you would be necessary to destroy you? Come on, wizard, figure that one out!"

"An elementary problem, even translating into your units of measure. I would estimate 2.1784 ounces of pure, contra-iron would develop enough energy to dissipate my mass in vapor."

"Two ounces? Good Lord!"

"Why do you exclaim?"

"I'll have wrench left over," Spud said.

"Wrench?"

"Yeah, wrench! I just heaved a two-pound wrench smack at your equator. I dare you to hold still for it."

"Do you think you can destroy my convictions with such an inanely dramatic threat? I accept your challenge, provided you retain your own relative position."

"That's not fair," Spud objected. "I'm getting out of here a couple hundred miles. You see, I'm acting on my convictions, too."

"Very well. You can't escape me, anyway. I shall report to you when your deadly wrench joins battle with my poor, perverse mass," was the sneering, sarcastic reply.

"It's a deal." Spud pushed over to the controls, unsnapped the automatics and laid on three gees side-thrust without delay. The scout sidled away from the asteroid, five miles, fifteen—Spud switched the radar to the one-hundred-mile scale—twenty-five, miles, forty-five, eighty—

The flash was soundless, but it enveloped the control room in a white fury that blazed even through his clenched eye-lids and protecting hands.

Numbly he reached for the controls to return on course, and the levers blistered his fingers. Later when he checked the outer port of the air-lock, his guess was correct. The skin of the scout would look like a wrinkled prune from the outside, and they'd have to cut him a new exit at Luna. Silently he blessed the impulse that sent him flashing away before the instant of impact.

He pulled his ditty bag out of the locker, extracted the bottle of whiskey, wrapped the hammock around him securely and pulled the cork to sniff with anticipation.

In another 24 hours the automatics would kick into deceleration.

A few shots would go well then. But the sweetest drink of his life was the one Commander Puttrey was going to buy him. And somehow, Spud had a feeling it wouldn't be at the officer's club—not after they tried to figure out how he managed to make an outside weld on the exit port from the inside.

Bernard Papy —dreamer

by . . . Theodore Pratt

The world didn't have too high an opinion of Bernard Papy. All he could do was change tomorrow!

BERNARD PAPY wasn't much of a young man. At least you didn't think so upon first meeting him. He was twenty-one, slight, short, and he wore huge dark-rimmed glasses on his thin eager face. He was so frail that the army draft board had turned him down, adding another insult to the many Bernard had suffered all his life.

The only son of a millionaire manufacturer of corrugated carton boxes, Bernard was a great disappointment to his father. He showed no aptitude for the business at all. When that became clear his father let him alone, paying little attention to him. The boy rattled around in the huge Papy mansion set in a private park just outside of Washington, D. C. He had his own suite of rooms, including his private library with books lining all four walls.

Books were Bernard's main interest. He read them all the time. Only a very few modern books. Mostly ancient tomes telling of witchcraft, strange doings in psychic phenomenon and esoteric happenings in the occult. Some of them

Although Theodore Pratt is a fairly new name in the science-fiction sweepstakes he has won silver screen acclaim, and a deserved renown in the field of general fiction. The most famous of his trilogy of Florida novels published by Gold Medal has a title which has always intrigued us: THE BAREFOOTED MAILMAN. *In some ways the Bernard Papy of this exciting story is a mailman too—faring forth barefooted into the great unknown.*

dealt with thought-transference and extra-sensory perception, not the phony popular Sunday supplement kind, but scientific works by college professors based upon long, carefully-controlled experiments.

Bernard had one other interest. He liked to dream. He had extremely vivid dreams, and he loved them. He enjoyed living both in the unreal world he could conjure up in his daydreams and the involuntary dreams that came to him at night. Bernard lived in his dreams more than he did in the actual world.

The first time he noticed anything extraordinary about his dreaming happened when he was twenty. One night he dreamed that a prominent government official in Washington had been murdered in particularly brutal fashion, by being shot in the stomach with a shotgun. The next morning, upon picking up the newspaper at breakfast, Bernard nearly jumped out of his chair. There, on the front page, was an exact description of his dream; the official had been killed precisely as it had appeared to him in the night.

Bernard was slightly frightened. He had long wondered if he might be psychic. There had been other manifestations, ever since he was a small boy. He had known, or felt he had known, that his mother was dead before he was told that she had died. He dreamed it one night and the following morning, upon appearing before his father and being informed his mother was dead he had replied, "Yes, I know."

His father had noticed nothing, thinking one of the servants had told him.

Bernard became more cognizant of possessing certain powers not known to other people when his father one afternoon said good-bye to him before leaving on a week's trip to the south to visit some of his paper plants. He saw his big, burly, gruff parent go out to the car and be driven away to the airport. Then Bernard went upstairs to his library, lay down on the couch, and took a nap.

Later he roused himself for dinner. Going downstairs he entered the dining room. He showed no surprise at seeing his father already seated at the head of the table. Taking his own seat, which the butler held for him, he turned to his father.

"Hello, Father," he said casually.

" 'Hello?' " his father cried incredulously. "You sound pretty offhand. I thought you'd be surprised to find out that I didn't go south."

Dreamily, Bernard replied, "Why, no; I knew."

"You knew?" demanded his father. "How could you know? I only just came back. You've been upstairs all this time and as far as I know no one told you. Or did somebody tell you?"

Bernard shook his head. "No one told me."

"Then," asked his father sarcastically, "may I ask how you knew?"

"Why," said Bernard, "I dreamed it."

"You—?" His father glared at him, then asked, "And what reason did you dream as to why I didn't go?"

"Your office reached you at the airport to say paper price regulation is being debated tomorrow and you'd better stay in Washington."

"How could you know that? Who's helping you to play tricks on me?"

Bernard saw it would be better to pass the matter off as a bad joke. "I'm sorry, Father."

His father waved the whole thing away. "Okay," he said, and dropped the subject.

Only then did it strike Bernard himself as being quite exceptional. But he said nothing.

The clincher came one night when he dreamed that a friend of his, George Deeter, bought a new, expensive hat in a fashionable men's store in downtown Washington. In his dream he saw George put the hat on his head and walk out of the store. George had no sooner gained the street than a brisk gust of wind blew the hat off his head and took it high in the air down the street to be lost in the crowd. George ran after it, but failed to recover it.

The day after he had this dream Bernard telephoned to George, doing so around noon. Lightly he asked, "Lost any hats lately?"

"How did you know?" demanded George testily. "I bought one and it blew off and I lost it as soon as I left the shop."

For a moment Bernard couldn't answer. He hadn't seriously expected George to corroborate his dream. But that wasn't the thing that excited Bernard. It was the time element involved.

His heart beat rapidly when he said, "Wait a minute—when did this happen, yesterday or today?"

"It happened this morning," said George.

"Oh," said Bernard in a small voice. He blinked behind his glasses.

"What's the matter?" George asked.

"Nothing."

"You sound funny," George accused, "and what's the idea you knowing about my hat? How did you—?"

Bernard hung up. He didn't want to talk about it any more.

He wanted only to think about it. Certain highly sensitive people were supposed to be aware of events, even at a distance, as they happened. His own ability seemed to go even farther than that. There were two things to consider:

1. He dreamed about actual events *before* they happened.

2. Because of this was he, in some way, responsible for them happening? That is, did his dreams cause them to occur?

The second possibility terrified him. He knew, of course, that mind could influence matter. The brain did this every day, with every per-

son. Psychosomatic illness was an example. The powers that lay in the mind had been little explored, were hardly realized.

Bernard had always been impressed with the practice of voodoo workers making a doll effigy of a person they wanted to die, placing pins in the tiny figure, and then the real person dying. This phenomenon had never been satisfactorily explained except in the instance of the person picked out to die learning of the effigy and then being influenced by superstitious fear into actually dying. That was mind over matter quite clearly. There were other things of like nature, many of them, described in Bernard's books.

Had he, beyond himself, applied much the same process through the medium of his dreams? Could he, by dreaming them, bring actual events about?

Bernard had a good imagination and the possibilities this opened up made him gasp himself. He was intensely patriotic. Though scared at the idea of being a soldier it had been a disappointment when the draft rejected him. Perhaps now he could more than make up for that. If his powers were as he believed they might be he contemplated the idea of dreaming dead the dictator of the Asiatic country that had embroiled the world in war tension for so long.

At first it seemed absurd even to Bernard. But there had been his dreams of actual events that turned out, later, just as he dreamed them.

Of course he could try it without letting anyone know. But he felt that if he could do it the Government, especially the Defense Department, should know in advance. In that way they could take full advantage of it.

Bernard decided to risk being laughed at. At dinner that evening he asked his father if he knew any army generals; Bernard thought he had better go high.

"Know a slew of them!" his father barked. "Why?"

"Could you," Bernard inquired timidly, "get me to see one of them?"

"What for?" his father demanded.

Bernard had no intention of telling his father and thus exposing himself to ridicule and refusal. Besides, it should remain a secret.

"I'm sorry I can't tell you, Father," he said, "except I would appreciate it if you can get me to one of them, preferably in the Pentagon."

"Where else do army generals hang out?" his father rumbled. He gazed quizzically at his ineffectual son. "All right," he agreed, "but don't make a damn fool out of me." He didn't seem to care about Bernard making a fool of himself.

The next day Bernard received a telephone call. An army captain, phoning from the Pentagon, introduced himself as the aide to General Bromley. If young Mr. Papy would present himself at a certain

door in a certain corridor on a certain floor of the Pentagon at three sharp that afternoon the general would be glad to see him.

Bernard drove his own car to keep the appointment. After presenting his identification he was ushered by several people through several offices and finally into the presence of General Bromley, a ruddy-faced man in his sixties who waved him to a chair, gave him a penetrating glance.

"Well, Mr. Papy," he said, "your father said you would like to see me."

Bernard felt a good deal of awe before the general. "Now that I'm here," he said tentatively, "I'm afraid I'm going to sound ridiculous to you."

The general gave him a penetrating stare again. "Your name is Bernard, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go ahead, Bernard," the general invited, leaning back in his chair, "and be ridiculous."

Bernard, at first hesitantly, and then with growing fervor, related the dreams he had had, and their outcomes. He concluded by proposing, "So you see, sir, I thought if I could dream that the dictator—"

General Bromley no longer sat back in his chair. He sat up straight in it and he frowned at Bernard, "Are you trying to tell me," he interrupted, "that you think you can dream him dead?"

Bernard faltered, "Well, I thought after George's hat—well, yes, sir."

The general rose. He glanced once again at Bernard before he said, "You're being ridiculous all right. Utterly and completely."

"You don't—?"

"I don't."

"I see." Bernard blinked.

"I'll be frank," the general went on. "Your father didn't tell me he had an imbecile for a son."

Bernard went white. He got to his feet and stammered, "If I could prove to you—let you know beforehand of things that will happen—would you believe me then?"

The general admitted, "I might."

"All I want," Bernard requested, "is to be able to reach you at any time of the day or night."

Dryly the general conceded, "I'll fix it—if you've got anything to reach me with."

"Thank you," said Bernard and remembered to add, "Sir."

Back home Bernard realized again that if his power worked at all he could still dream the dictator dead without the general. But he was still sure that the Defense Department ought to know about it before it happened, so as not to be caught offguard. He decided to try to dream of other things first, and shuddered at the possibility that in spite of his resolve he might dream of the death of the dictator before he was ready.

Ten nights later Bernard dreamed that a big secret atom bomber of the U. S. Air Forces was

flying over the Alleghenies when trouble developed in one of its jet engines. The trouble was so severe that the three million dollar plane went out of control.

Bernard could see it very plainly. He even saw the designating number on its wings. He saw the men in the plane and how they reacted when they knew their plane was going down at so many hundreds of miles per hour that there was no chance to bail out. The radio operator had only just time to send out a few words. The plane crashed, killing all aboard.

Bernard awakened from his dream in a high sweat. He snapped on his bedside light. It was two o'clock in the morning. No matter what the time he knew what he had to do. He took up the telephone and called the number of the Pentagon.

It was some time before Bernard could get through to the general. He insisted that the general had made arrangements to contact him. Papers were checked. Finally Bernard was given the general's home phone number.

The general barked at him grumpily over the line. Bernard described the accident in detail, giving a description of the plane and its number, and saying, "I don't believe it has happened yet, but it will. Maybe you can stop—"

"You're crazy!" the general exploded. "Now, listen, I don't want any more of this! The orders for you to reach me are rescinded!"

Bernard heard him slam down the receiver.

At first Bernard thought the general might be right and that he was crazy. Then he remembered his former dreams and saw the plane again quite vividly. He felt helpless.

He waited the next day until late in the afternoon for the phone call he knew would come.

The general still barked but he wasn't so grumpy this time. "I want you to give me the number of that plane again."

Bernard gave it to him.

The general said, in a slightly awed, shaken voice, "Now I want you to get over here as fast as you can. And don't say anything to anybody about any of this, not even your father—you haven't done that, have you?"

"No, sir."

The general wasn't alone this time when Bernard was ushered into his office. Half a dozen other officers, none of them under the rank of major, were there. They examined Bernard as though he might be some very special species of rare bug. He shrank under their gaze.

The general said patiently but firmly, "Now, Bernard, we want you to tell us how you learned there was any such thing as the type of plane you told me about, how you knew its designation, how you knew the place of its flight, and how you knew it crashed last night."

"Why," said Bernard, "I dreamed it."

The officers glanced at each other.

For several hours Bernard was asked the same question in various ways, with deviations about his other dreams. One inquiry that always came back was the time of Bernard's dream of the plane, which he repeated was approximately two A. M.

"The plane fell a little after four A. M.," the general told Bernard.

"I knew it was after my dream," said Bernard. "That's why I told you to stop the plane."

The officers stared first at Bernard and then at the general. Tacitly they conceded that no one could blame the general for not believing this strange youth. One of them asked, nervously, of Bernard, "You'd think he *made* it happen."

"I did," said Bernard. He knew that now. He felt guilty and culpable.

"Do you know," General Bromley demanded, "that that would be sabotage?"

"But I didn't mean to do it," Bernard protested. "I couldn't help it. It was my unconscious—not me—that is, I don't know exactly how it happens, except that—well, it does." He stared, humbly, from behind his big glasses.

The officers looked at each other. General Bromley indicated for them to leave, admonishing, "No matter how aberrant this sounds, nothing that was said here goes out of this room." They nodded, and left, glancing back at Bernard.

The general paced for a moment and then stopped. "I don't know what to make of it at all," he said. "Ordinarily, we would want further proof. But after last night—no, we don't care for any more of that. What you said before—about the dictator . . ."

Bernard was surprised at himself for being certain now, or almost sure. "I can do it," he declared.

The general gave him his penetrating glare. "If belief and faith could do it," he said, "you sound as if you have both."

Bernard, in direct contradiction of this, now faltered. "Except—to kill—even him. I keep thinking of those flyers last night."

Roughly, the general said, "That's done—if it was done at all in the way you say. The other thing—would it make you feel any better if you were enlisted in the army and given orders to do it?" He stared at Bernard intently.

Bernard brightened. "It would make me feel a lot better."

"We'll commission you—say, a captain?"

"Just an enlisted man. If you don't mind."

"Have it your own way."

"Can I wear a uniform?"

"You'd better not. This had better be top secret." The general spoke as if it were so secret that it still wasn't to be believed. He went through the process of getting Bernard inducted into the army. When this was done the general, sounding

a little crazy even to himself, asked Bernard, "When will you do it?"

"Right away." He amended, "If I can."

The general showed signs of exploding again. "But you said you could!"

"Dreams are funny," Bernard told him. "Sometimes when you want them to come, they won't."

"You'll let me know—?"

"As soon as it happens."

As Bernard left, the general reached to the top secret drawer in his desk for a drink.

Bernard tried to dream of the dictator. He went to sleep every night determined to dream of him. He resolved to dream of his death. But no dream came.

He endeavored to force it. He obtained biographies of the dictator, numerous articles about him, and read them avidly. He put up pictures of him all over his rooms. The dictator's face was the last thing he saw at night before going to sleep.

One night he did dream of him. But it was only to see him walking down a street. No one appeared from a doorway to shoot him. The dictator simply walked on, unmolested.

The more he tried to dream about the dictator being killed or dying the more he seemed unable to do so. Finally Bernard realized he was trying too hard. He was too tense. He stopped thinking about it, no longer read about the dictator, and took his pictures down from the walls.

One day the general called and asked, "Anything, Dreamer?"

"Nothing," Bernard reported in despair.

That night he had a dream. He was standing in the dictator's bedroom. He was the dictator's valet. The dictator was asleep. In his hand Bernard held a heavy poker. The poker seemed to be a rifle of the U. S. Army. It was proper for Bernard to have this weapon, for in addition to being the dictator's valet he was also an enlisted man in the U. S. Army.

General Bromley was there, too. The general now gave Private Papy an order. "Do your duty, soldier," he was told.

Bernard did his duty. He wielded the poker.

He was bathed in perspiration when he awakened this time. It was done. With agitation he grabbed his telephone and got the general on the wire.

"He's dead," he reported.

"Who?" asked the general, sounding sleepy.

"The dictator."

"Oh," said the general, "this is the Dreamer."

"Yes, and he's dead—or it will happen soon."

With some indulgence, the general inquired, "How did it happen?"

Bernard told him. When he was through he accused the general, "You don't believe me."

The general became completely serious. "Son," he said, "I don't know if I do or not. All I know is that you're in earnest. And because of that we're prepared to be ready for any eventuality. If you're right your country owes you its greatest gratitude; the entire world does."

"Thank you," said Bernard.

He knew there wouldn't be anything in the morning paper, but he glanced quickly at its front page to be sure. There was nothing. He half expected something on the radio that morning, or at least that afternoon. There was nothing.

For three days there was nothing. Then he called the general. "I don't know what to say," Bernard told him. "It was vivid in my dream, but maybe it didn't work."

"Son," the general said, "even if it did work they wouldn't be letting it out yet. They'd want to do it their way. Incidentally, if you did do it we could never acknowledge it. For one thing, people wouldn't ever believe it. I wouldn't even get in touch with you again."

"That's all right," said Bernard.

It hit the world that night over the radio. The announcement was explosive. The dictator was dead. He had been bludgeoned to death by his own valet, a capitalistic spy. The valet had been executed, by shooting, in the head.

Bernard had succeeded. He had carried out his soldier's orders. Now there was more prospect of peace in the world than there had been for many years.

Bernard felt strange all that day. He thought of the valet being shot. For no apparent reason he recalled voodoo workers sticking pins in doll effigies of people they wanted dead. That night Bernard slept uneasily. And he had another dream. He dreamed that a man entered his bedroom. The man held a revolver in his hand. He pointed it at Bernard's head.

Bernard saw all of this in his dream but could not do anything about it. He just watched, terrified. The man fired. Bernard felt a terrible blow against the side of his head. Another came and then a third, but he didn't know anything about the last two.

When they found him, the next morning, he was dead. There were no bullet holes in his head. Beyond ascribing the cause of his death, vaguely, to heart failure, no doctor could say exactly how it happened.

Bernard's father, looking down upon him, said bitterly to himself, "Why couldn't he have been like other sons? Why couldn't he have amounted to something, done something worthwhile?"

—Continued from back cover

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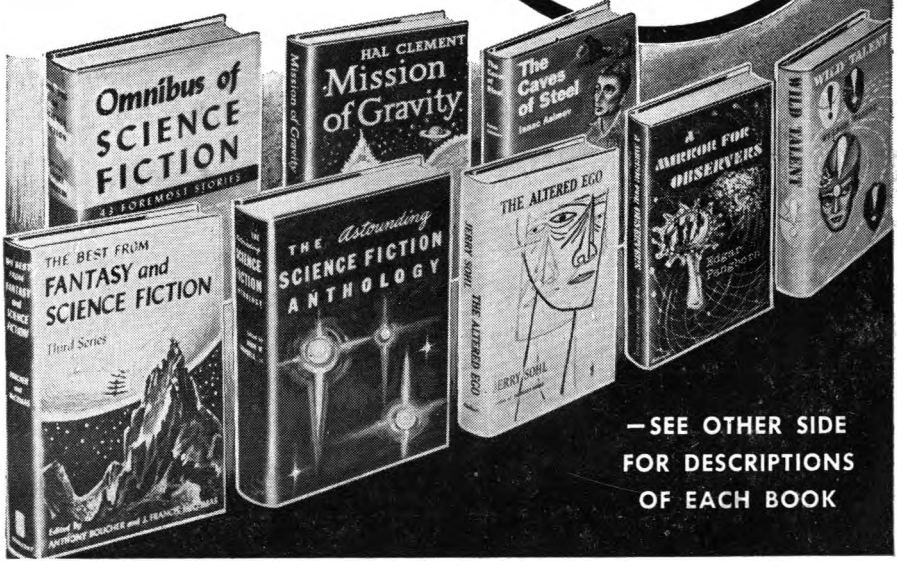

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