WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

if

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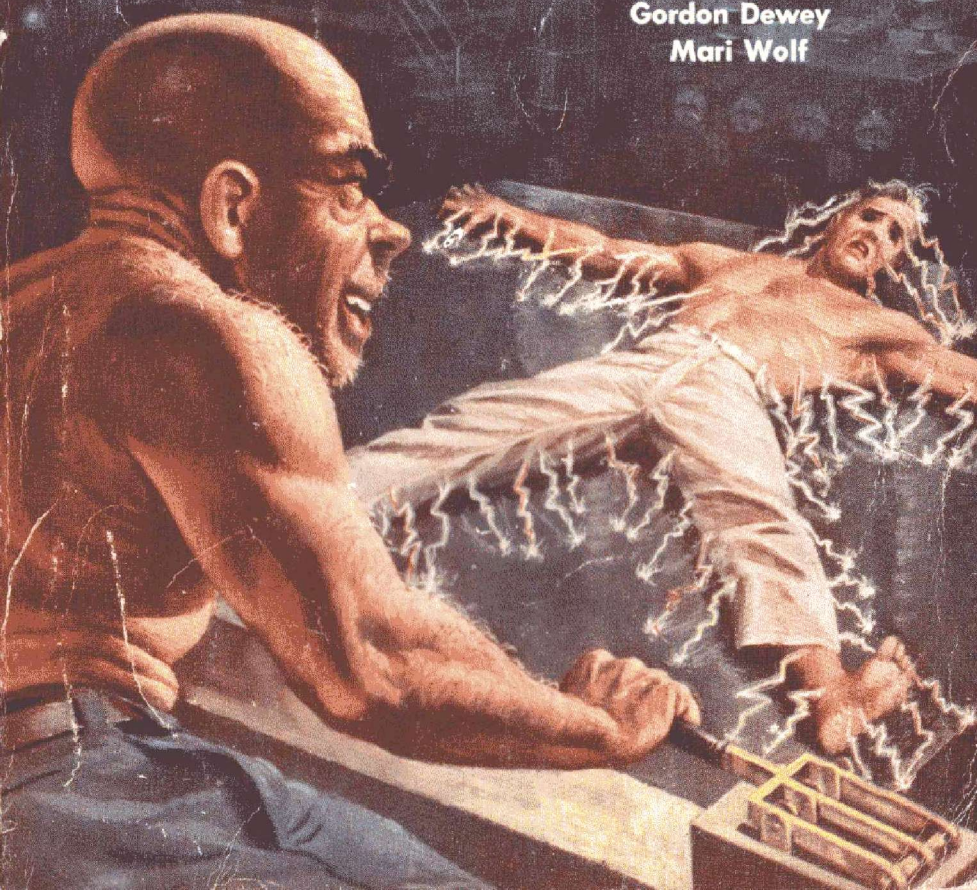
LET MY PEOPLE GO

By Walter Miller, Jr.

Also Charles De Vet
August Derleth
Gordon Dewey
Mari Wolf



WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

JULY 1952

All Stories New and Complete

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NOVEL

NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

FEATURES

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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE JULY 9TH AT YOUR LOCAL NEWSSTAND

A chat with the editor . . .

Marion Fried
R.F.D. #1
Monmouth Junction
New Jersey.

Dear Marion:

In the letter you wrote congratulating us on the first issue of IF, you asked a question which—strangely enough—was not found in any other of the hundreds we received.

I gathered from your letter that you are sixteen years old—that you like science fiction but are having a tough time because your brother doesn't think much of it and most of your classmates are partial to the "true confession" type of magazine.

Possibly it will comfort you to know that I am pretty much in the same boat. My two small daughters are partial to Hopalong Cassidy, and their mother will read a science fiction story if you hold a pistol to her head.

But to your question: In the straightforward manner of the typical sixteen-year-old, you ask: "Can you give me a good definition of science fiction in one sentence?"

MARION—you've got me. I can't. As a matter of cold fact, I don't know what a science fiction story is. This, no doubt, must be considered an admission of guilt, coming as it does from the editor of a science fiction magazine. But I, too, can find comfort in the conviction that I am not alone. I don't think any of the other stf editors can define science fiction either.

Of course I could give you any number of one-sentence definitions. I could say that a science fiction story is one in which the characters are occupied with scientific gimmicks. That wouldn't be a true definition, however, because—while it may define one type of story—it does not define the field.

YOU see the trouble is—science fiction is not a basic fiction pattern. Strictly speaking, there are few of these basic patterns, and they were discovered and set down long before science fiction was developed. The love story, for instance, is basic, mainly because it deals with a basic human emotion and is therefore fixed in its disciplinary structure. The detective story, which is hardly differentiated from the mystery pattern, is also basic, because we are dealing there, with a basic human characteristic—curiosity; the love of solving a puzzle.

But the western story—as an instance—is not really basic. It is merely a background against which

love, mystery, humor, or some other basic pattern, is laid. The same is true with adventure stories, the term usually indicative of an exotic or unusual background against which a love story, a mystery story, or a problem story, is laid.

As a matter of fact, even the basics can be mixed up. All detective stories—or ninety percent of them—carry a love interest. And all love stories carry a mystery thread, even if it's only the reader's curiosity as to what's going to happen next.

So about all that can be really defined, is a *story*. They've discovered that in order to achieve the desired effect, a story must contain certain things. There should be both sympathetic and unsympathetic characters. The sympathetic character should be faced with a problem. He or she should solve that problem through individual effort and in a manner which satisfies and entertains the reader.

THOSE are the fundamentals of a story. Of course there are a world of variations, but they've discovered that most salable fiction must shake down, in essence, to those fundamentals. And those basics are found in every good story, be it in whatever category you will.

Personally, I'd say a science fiction story is a fantasy in which the development is based on tangible gimmicks with at least a pseudo-scientific basis under them. I really feel, however, that the term denotes a background rather than a basic; just as the term western fiction is obviously a background.

And I think the impossibility of really defining science fiction with any degree of accuracy, is the reason for the continuous hassle that goes on among the readers. The readership has broken up into groups, each of which has its own definition of science fiction. Probably nothing more than personal taste is behind the definitions, but that makes each group no less militant in defense of the story-type it favors.

And there is no reason why each should not defend his own. The day these arguments cease is the day we can be sure science fiction interest is on the wane.

So, let's just say science fiction is something that can't be defined but when you see it, you know it's there.

Sincerely,
pwf.

The gun spat deadly flame.

How can we possibly amount to much when our fathers were sold at auction a scant five thousand years ago?

Let My People Go

By Walter Miller, Jr.

THE SITUATION is ridiculous!" growled Wolek Parn, glaring fixedly at the scope which displayed the planet's surface as a mottled green pattern of pale luminescence. "Look at them. Just look!"

The others said nothing. Taut faces, with eyes locked to the screen. The planet lay seven thousand miles from their landing site on its moon, but the magnification pulled the surface toward them so that they watched it as if from an altitude of thirty miles. There were continents, oceans, islands, peninsulas. The land appeared splotched and spotted, as if by variations in flora between highland and lowland. All this had been expected, predicted by Merrigull's calculations. A planet for colonization, and they had reached it after thirteen years of journeying across the blackness of interstellum. Now they were here, and the planet indeed was inhabitable.

Furthermore, it was already in-

habited.

"There's another one!" Wolek Parn breathed as a checkerboard pattern of tiny squares drifted into view near the planet's misty limb. "Six, maybe seven miles square. That's no native village!"

He turned to peer at their faces by the glow-light from the scope. Morgun Sahl, biologist — a tall gaunt man with a saturnine face, he showed no emotion except for a flicker at the corner of his mouth that might have been indicative of bitterness or of grim amusement. A wiry shock of black hair dangled over his forehead. He was a Lincolnesque Machiavelli with a sour drawl.

Beside him stood Faron Qun, chemist, mineralogist — a shorter man with straw hair and a quiet scholarly face, small-featured, slightly pudgy, usually smiling. The smile was absent now. He looked like a small boy at a funeral, and the glow of the screen made his face seem abnormally pale. He held the launch pilot's arm, squeezed it spasmodically.

It was a soft arm, milk-white and scattered with tiny freckles, and it belonged to Alaia Dazille—a tall girl, not beautiful, but cool and pleasant, with red-brown hair, a narrow oval face, and hazel eyes that could shine with friendly amusement and suddenly switch to the cold glitter of sarcasm. Wolek Parn had met women that reminded him of gardenias and fine wine. Alaia Dazille, however, made him think of geraniums and buttermilk. She responded to his stare with a questioning flicker of her eyebrows. She was trying hard not to be frightened.

"Well, Alaia?"

She shook her head. "Don't ask *me* anything Skipper."

He glanced at the chemist. "Faron?"

Qun seemed to shudder. "No opinion. Ask our biologist."

"All right, Sahl," Parn growled. "We spent thirteen years getting here. Shall we spend another thirteen going back home?"

Morgun Sahl watched the slow drift of the checkerboard patterns on the scope. "I'm sure you mean that," he grunted sourly.

"Maybe I do. Why shouldn't I?"

The big man shrugged. "How old would you be, Parn, when we got back? Sixty?"

"Fifty-nine."

"You started in the prime of life. You get back approaching retirement age. Twenty-six years gone for nothing. And you don't get paid a nickel for your trouble." He smiled humorlessly and tapped the scope with his finger. "There's your pay, Skipper. Epsilon Eridani Two. You won't turn it down."

Parn scowled. "You think we can land right in the middle of somebody else's civilization and start a colony?"

SAHL HESITATED, chewed the corner of his mouth thoughtfully for a moment. He gestured at the screen again. "They, whoever they are, undoubtedly know we're here. The ship's big enough, and the moon is close enough, so that they can see us with a small tele-

scope. Creatures that build cities that size probably are advanced enough to spot us and recognize us for what we are: alien invaders. Undoubtedly they're already reacting to what they see."

"And what kind of a reaction?"

The biologist shook his head. "Impossible to guess. Anger—hysteria—terror. Or maybe cold analysis and planning. I suggest we just wait and see."

"And wind up with a fleet of guided missiles coming up to greet us?"

"Maybe."

"What kind of creatures do you think we'd find on such a planet?"

The biologist was slow to answer. "Well, life always takes about the same pattern everywhere we've found it. It's never been too radically different. The basic protoplasm is always the same, or we can't call it 'life.' This planet is very earthlike. The sun is cooler than our Sol, but there's enough ultraviolet for vegetation. I believe the life-forms will be similar to what Earth has developed at various periods in her history."

"Which might be anything from a duck-billed platypus to a dinosaur," Parn fumed. "And the cities might be insect hives."

With an exclamation of disgust, Wolek Parn snapped a switch, flooding the compartment with light. He turned off the scope and paced to his desk where he dropped wearily into his seat and faced them, arms draped across his legs, his shoulders slumped dejectedly.

"We can send a launch down, of course," he said gloomily. "But it'll be a one-way trip because of fuel considerations. If it goes down, it stays. And so it has to take a load of colonists with it, or somebody gets left behind in the long run. How can I send twenty-four guinea pigs down into the hands of—of what?"

Sahl shrugged. "You can ask for volunteers."

Parn leaned forward, clasped his head in his hands, and shook it slowly. "Eventually, I guess I'll have to. Right now, I'm faced with telling them. About the cities. They've been impatient as hell to know what's going on. Why we landed here. A few more hours and they'll start getting mad."

FARON QUN spoke up for the first time. "Why don't you put it to them as a vote, Skipper? Make them responsible for deciding."

"Suppose they decide to load everybody in the launches and go down right now?"

"Well—suppose they do? Can you say definitely that it's the wrong decision?"

"No, I guess not."

"I can," Sahl growled. "But you needn't give them that choice. Ask for volunteers for a first launch, then let the volunteers decide whether they want to jump right in, or wait and see if there's any reaction to our presence here on the planet's moon."

Parn nodded thoughtfully and sighed. "I guess it's the only thing to do."

There was a brief silence, suddenly interrupted by a knock at the

entrance. "Colonists," Parn muttered, "wanting to know what's up." He raised his voice. "Okay! Come in!"

The hatch opened, and a young officer leaned inside without entering. "It's Rulian, Sir. He wants to see you."

"Ru—I thought I sent him out to scout the surface."

"He's back, Sir."

"All right, send him in."

The officer nodded and vanished. A pudgy, florid man stepped hurriedly inside. He was panting slightly, appeared to be nervous. He still wore a pressure suit, but the helmet had been removed. He brushed at his disheveled hair and gazed at Parn.

"Well, what is it? Surely you didn't have time to finish—"

Rulian shook his head quickly. "No, Sir. We got halfway to the hills. And then we came back. We thought you ought to know right away."

"Know what?"

The scout held something out on the palm of his hand—a torn bit of metal. Parn frowned questioningly.

"Looks like—maybe a sheared-off rivet. So?"

"Just brought it back so you wouldn't think I was off my rocker, Skipper."

"What are you talking about?"

"Out there—on the surface. There's the entrance to a tunnel, with an air-lock. A meteorite clobbered it—long time ago, maybe." He tossed the bit of metal on Parn's desk. "That's from the wreckage of the lock."

A hush fell over them. Parn reached for the bit of metal, rolled it around in his palm with a blunt finger. Morgun Sahl was the first to break the silence.

"Well, Skipper—I guess that determines what we do next."

"Eh? Oh, yes. Sahl, I guess the job is yours, since we don't have an archeologist aboard. Pick whoever you need."

Sahl glanced at Faron Qun and Alaia. "You two want to go?"

The girl glanced at Qun. The chemist paused, then nodded. "We'll get suits and meet you outside."

Chapter II

THE LANDSCAPE lay barren and sunswept under a lurid sky. The moon possessed a thin atmosphere of xenon and other heavy gasses that tempered the harshness of the sun-glare and painted the blackness of space with a translucent film of sky. Morgun Sahl glanced at the wrist-indicators of his suit. The pressure was around two pounds, and temperature a modest 110° Fahrenheit. He stood outside the lock with Rulian, waiting for Qun and Alaia. The scout was pointing to a low outcropping of rock perhaps four hundred yards from the ship.

"The tunnel is just beyond that," came the scout's voice in his headsets. "Believe me, Sahl, I about dropped over when I saw it. Who do you suppose dug it?"

The biologist shrugged, and gazed moodily at the huge but

faintly visible crescent that hung in the western sky. What manner of beings were watching them and waiting for a move?

Man had never before touched a planet where flourishing life was possible. There was Mars, of course, with its stunted flora and primitive fauna. And the single planet of Alpha Centauri, with its steaming oceans full of marine life, but with a climate too hot for land-life except in fertile patches in the polar regions.

Here, however, under the orange glare of an Eridanian sun, lay a world nearly Earthlike. So Earthlike that the eventual development of an intelligent species was almost inevitable, according to Sahl's way of thinking. Merrigull had thought so, too, but he had allowed for a probable deviation from Earthlike conditions, and had guessed that the peculiarly human survival response called "intelligence" would not happen here.

Obviously, Merrigull had guessed wrong. And one hundred and twenty colonists were left holding the bag, visitors without reservations, discovering too late that the inn was already full. Certainly the visitors would not be welcome. The only question in Sahl's mind pertained to the amount of resistance the Eridanian life-forms would offer to their coming. It might be anything from grudging tolerance to fanatical opposition. In case of the latter, there was nothing to do but retreat, go back to Earth, if they could escape—and try to laugh off the twenty-six lost years of life.

Certainly there could be no forcing an entry into the Eridanian world against the will of the Eridanian civilization. The colony was equipped with no spectacular weapons, nor any way to maintain a technological culture for more than a generation. They had come hoping to begin with a society of small farms in some area where metals were plentiful, and to let their descendants gradually assemble the tools of a better civilization.

THE AIR-LOCK opened behind him, and he turned to watch Alaia and Faron Qun climb down to join them. Across the cracked dry ground they strode, puffs of dust rising about their boots and drifting away on the thin breeze. The scout led them to the outcropping of rock, and they climbed it to stare at the plain beyond. The tunnel's mouth was only a small pock-mark of blackness on the ground, but there was a glitter of metal at its rim. Sahl stared at the terrain around it, then pointed to dark splotches on the ground a hundred yards beyond the tunnel.

"You examine those?" he asked.

"Yeah, we looked at them. Ground looks fused. I'd guess it was used as a landing site."

"Probably. How about the lock? Think we can get through it?"

"Have to hoist that wrecked hatch out of the way. I think four of us can manage it. If we can't, I brought a torch."

Sahl leaped from the outcrop and and drifted down the six-foot drop to level ground. The others followed. Moments later they stood at

the mouth of the lock. Alaia kicked at a layer of dust with her boot, uncovered a smooth stone ramp in which the lock was set.

Sahl knelt beside the torn hatchway to tug at the sheared metal door, wedged diagonally in the entranceway. "It's still fastened in one spot," he called. "Let's have that torch, Rulie."

The scout fumbled at the valves of the two cylinders strapped to his back, then struck a blinding dart of blue-white flame from the hand-torch. Sahl flipped a dark filter down over his visor, then played the torch slowly over the jagged metal. Minutes later, the fastening pulled loose. The hatch slipped deeper and wedged.

"All right, let's heave. Don't grab the hot spot."

After a concerted effort, the hatch came free with a suddenness that sent Alaia sprawling. Faron Qun quickly helped her to her feet, leaving the others to struggle with the hatch. Sahl gave him a black look, but said nothing.

Beneath the lock appeared a corridor heaped with cave-in rubble, but apparently passable. Sahl stared down for a moment, then eyed the scout. "Notice anything," he grunted.

"Yeah," the other muttered. "We're not going to be able to stand up down there. Looks like a crawlway."

Sahl shook his head. "It was probably designed to walk in all right—but the designers evidently aren't very tall. Four feet high at the most." He stepped into the wrecked lock and let himself down gingerly to the top of the rubble heap. He crouched to shine a light down along the corridor, then glanced up at the others.

"Can't see much. Let's go down. We'll stick close together. And don't touch anything that you don't understand." He slid feet-first down the heap of rubble and crouched in the gloom below. The others followed.

"Last man ought to blaze a trail somehow, as we move along," he called. "So we won't get lost down here."

FARON QUN picked up a chunk of rock from the heap and scratched it experimentally on the wall. It left a discernible mark. Sahl nodded and turned to move along the narrow corridor. After a few paces, he went to his hands and knees and crawled. The ceiling was too low to permit walking without crouching uncomfortably.

Blackness engulfed them, except for the light thrown by Sahl's hand-lamp. They passed a turn and came to a second hatch. Sahl ran his flash around the edge.

"Tight seal," he grunted. "Another lock."

"They've probably got the place split into compartments in case of a leak," Faron offered.

Sahl heaved at the door with his shoulder, but it failed to budge.

"Try that button," Alaia suggested.

The biologist snorted, but pressed the stud beside the hatch and held it down. With his helmet pressed against the metal, he thought he

heard the feeble click of a relay, but the hatch remained closed.

"That disk," she called, reaching over his shoulder. "Might be an emergency hand-control."

"All right, turn it," he growled.

She twisted it hard. After two turns, Sahl glanced down to see a tiny spurt of dust licking up from a valve an inch above floor level. It startled him. He had expected no pressure to remain in the lock. When the jet of dust subsided, he heaved against the door again. It swung slowly open, revealing the inside of the lock.

"We'll have to go through it two at a time," he said, then paused. "Anybody think to bring a weapon?"

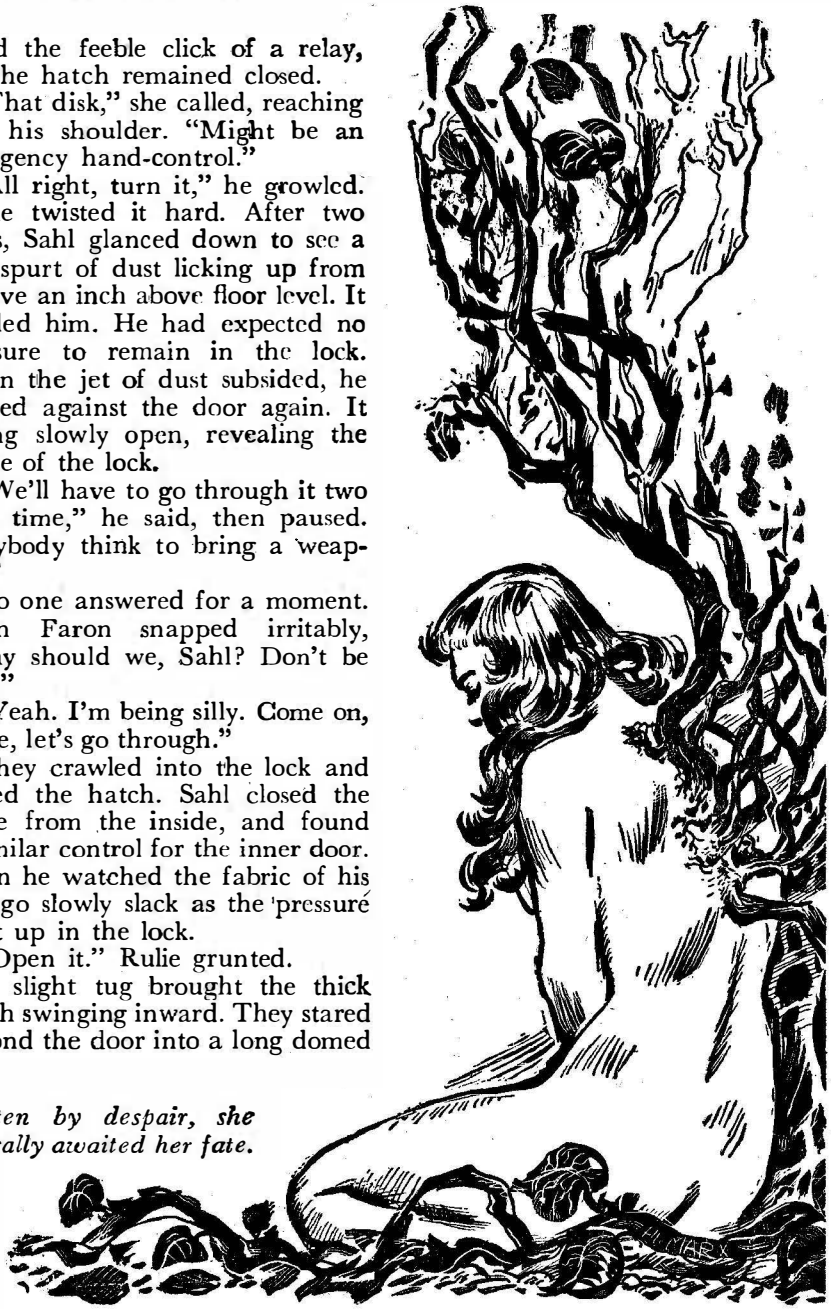
No one answered for a moment. Then Faron snapped irritably, "Why should we, Sahl? Don't be silly!"

"Yeah. I'm being silly. Come on, Rulie, let's go through."

They crawled into the lock and closed the hatch. Sahl closed the valve from the inside, and found a similar control for the inner door. Then he watched the fabric of his suit go slowly slack as the pressure built up in the lock.

"Open it." Rulie grunted.

A slight tug brought the thick hatch swinging inward. They stared beyond the door into a long domed



Beaten by despair, she stoically awaited her fate.

room. The ceiling seemed to glow faintly, and Sahl extinguished his flashlight to check it. Bands of faint luminosity provided a dim glow-light to the room. The last feeble flicker, he guessed, of a lighting system abandoned long ago.

THE ROOM was empty, and a layer of dust lay thick over the ledges and across the floor. The dust was marked in places, but the marks were not fresh, and dust had partially covered them again. They closed the hatch behind them so that the others could come through.

Sahl glanced at his pressure gauge. "Twelve pounds," he muttered. "I'm going to try a sniffer."

Rulie protested. "Might get a lungful of chlorine! I can test for oxygen with the torch."

Sahl yelped and snatched it away from him before he struck a spark. "Might get worse than a lungful of chlorine if you strike that thing in here!"

Rulie muttered apologetically. Sahl touched the sniffer valve at the side of his helmet and opened it a tenth of a turn, then cut off his oxygen supply and waited until the pressure in his suit fell to twelve pounds. Then he inhaled deeply several times.

"Don't smell anything," he called. "I'm going to open it all the way. If I keel over, catch me."

The air in the room smelled musty, but after a minute's experimental breathing he removed his helmet. Rulie loosened his own helmet, but the biologist tightened it for him again.

"If I'm all right after half an hour," he shouted against Rulie's visor, "you can take it off."

The others followed them through the lock and looked around quickly. Without his helmet, Sahl could not hear their conversation except as a muffled murmur from behind their visors. He motioned for them to follow, then crossed the room to enter another corridor beyond.

Somewhere in the station, nuclear reactors were still seeping a trickle of energy that kept a faint glow of light from the ceiling, and he hoped that Faron would be able to estimate the age of the place from radioactive decay. He sent Rulie back to call the Ark.

As they progressed through a series of corridors, rooms and other locks, Sahl grew deeply puzzled. This was no observatory, nor was it an experimental station. It had apparently been used as a transfer point to space, a way-station where landing launches from the planet shifted cargo or passengers with larger ships too bulky to land on the mother-world. Why had it been abandoned? Oxygen was still being released from the rocks. The place was still in fair condition. Had the builders abandoned space entirely?

The station was not large, and an hour's exploration brought them to its limits. Faron had discovered the reactors in a vault beneath the main level, where they supplied heat to an extensive bank of thermopiles which still delivered a trickle of power to the equipment. Faron let himself down into the vault to examine the equipment, while the

others continued to explore the main level, having removed their helmets to breathe the still air of the station.

SAHL WATCHED Alaia puzzling over a four-foot cube of transparent plastic that rested on a low pedestal in the center of the floor.

"Know what it's for?" he asked.

She shook her head and took a last swipe at the dust that covered it. "It's clear except for a few specks of something. Air bubbles maybe."

Sahl extinguished his light and noticed that she stepped away from him quickly in the darkness. He grinned sourly to himself, and waited until his eyes adjusted to the lack of light.

"What's the idea?" she muttered suspiciously.

"Look at the specks in the plastic."

"Why—they shine faintly! Why?"

"Probably bits of radioactive material covered with a phosphor." He studied it in silence for a moment. One group of dots appeared to be joined by a web of fine lines. Their colors ranged from dull red to blue-white, and they varied in brilliance. "A star map, I think," he said suddenly. "That small orange one near the center of the web. Epsilon Eridani, their sun."

"Why the web?"

"Probably indicates the places their ships have—" He stopped suddenly and sucked in his breath. The web included Sol.

Alaia interpreted his silence. "I wonder how long ago," she murmured.

Sahl turned as footsteps approached from behind. It was Rulie, and he seemed puzzled by an object in his hand. He held it out and stared at Morgun Sahl.

"Bone, Sahl?"

The biologist took the six-inch fragment and turned it over once. His hands seemed to freeze as they held it, and he was silent for several seconds.

"Where did you find this, Rulie?"

"Back by the rubble heap, when I went back out to check with the Ark. Why? What is it?"

The biologist looked up slowly. "Piece of a human tibia," he said, and his voice was somehow flat.

Chapter III

THERE'S ONLY one explanation!" Parn was saying as he paced the floor of his cabin, occasionally glancing at Sahl.

"What's that, Skipper?"

"An Earth civilization that archeologists don't know anything about. A civilization that got to space before it died out and disappeared."

"I don't think so," Sahl disagreed quickly. "A civilization like that would leave too many traces. If primitive architectural ruins stand for thousands of years, as in Egypt—think how long the remains of a technological culture would endure. No, Skipper, I don't agree at all."

"All right, damn it! How do you explain that piece of bone."

"I don't."

Parn snorted irritably. "Do you even *know* it's human?"

The biologist shrugged. "You got the surgeon's opinion to confirm my own."

"Isn't there any way to tell how old it is?"

"The lab's working on it, but they aren't very experienced at that sort of thing."

"What about this carbon-14 method?"

Sahl nodded indifferently. "They'll try it, but we can't trust results."

"Why not? I thought it was very accurate?"

"It *is*—on Earth, where we know the percentage of radioactive carbon ingested during life. But how long had the fellow been away from Earth? And what percentage did he get while he was away? Was he even born on Earth?"

Parn clenched his fists and began beating his knuckles together with thoughtful regularity while he paced the floor. "Maybe humanoid creatures evolve wherever it's possible," he ventured. "Maybe the cities down there are—"

"What about those four-foot ceilings in the station?" Sahl interrupted. "That tibia came from a man about our height."

Parn clucked irritably. "Well, you said some of the ceilings were ten feet and over. "Why don't you judge from that?"

Sahl smiled wryly. "How about —say—the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Would you judge the stature of the builders by the height of the nave, or by the size of the smallest door?"

Parn grunted defeat. "All right, why don't you venture an opinion."

"It'd be more in the nature of a wild guess, I think."

"Make it, then."

"Well—let's turn the situation around. Suppose we had come here as explorers rather than as colonists. Suppose we landed on the planet and found a semi-intelligent species, and we were interested in studying it further. Suppose we captured a few, and carried them back home for breeding purposes."

PARN GLANCED at him sharply as if to interrupt, but Sahl continued: "That three-dimensional star-map we found makes me think the builders have visited Sol. If they visited it before Man began civilizing himself, we'd have no legends, nor any trace of the visit. They could have made off with a few humans and we'd never know it had happened."

"Why would they want humans?"

Sahl shrugged. "Why do we catch wild animals and put them in cages? Why did we domesticate dogs? Curiosity, maybe some usefulness. Man has brought back specimens from every planet he's ever visited. Maybe he's been a specimen himself. It's just a guess."

"Pretty wild guess, if you ask me," Parn snorted. "Human beings would be rather dangerous pets to have around."

"Would they? Humans have made pets—or slaves—of humans."

Parn slumped into a chair, shaking his head slowly. "None of which

answers the question: 'What are we going to do?'"

"How are the colonists taking it?"

"Better than I expected. They're restless, but quiet. Maybe too quiet. I don't know. I let them out of the ship to roam around. They work off steam that way."

"If *they're* not getting disturbed," Sahl offered, "I suggest we wait until we've gone over that station with a fine-tooth comb. Faron is still puzzling over the reactors. And we might learn more about the builders by closer study of the interior structure."

"How?"

"Well, by measuring dimensions, for one thing. The shape of the doorways suggest that they're small bipeds—or at least, their height is about three times their width. And Faron found something else down in the reactor vault that might be significant."

"What's that?"

"A pair of goggles, a circuit diagram, and a place to sit down. The goggles are too closely spaced for human eyes, and perfectly round, but the strap just about fits my head. The circuit diagram is hung on a wall, and we have to stoop to read it. And the seat would be about the right height for a child with a foot-high knee."

Parn threw up his hands. "All right. Go ahead and study all you want to. Until they start shooting at us, anyway."

Sahl glanced at the scope, noticed that it was on. He grinned. "Been watching for them to start?"

"I've been watching. Now get out, Sahl. I got some worrying to do. Go find Alaia."

The biologist stiffened. "What makes you say that?"

"Eh? What makes—?" The captain paused, smirked sadistically. "Oh, sorry. I must have been thinking of Faron Qun, eh? Don't slam the door."

Sahl left it open instead, but he heard it slam when Parn got up to close it. He smiled irritably, and went down through the colonists' quarters to listen to the chatter. But the chatter was absent. Gloom pervaded the ship. He felt it hanging tensely, murderously, in the air, waiting to become rage or rebellion or sudden popular decision. These people were not going back to Earth. They had gambled thirteen years and they didn't intend to quit as losers. He passed quietly through the passenger-areas of the ship, and stopped at his own quarters long enough to slip into a pressure suit. He stopped again at Alaia's cabin, hesitating before the door. But he moved on without knocking. It might embarrass someone if Faron Qun were with her. Sahl tried to grin his way around the twinge of anger that followed the thought, but he failed to rid himself of it.

HE TIGHTENED his helmet and stepped out through the lock. Lunar night, with the planet's disk filling a huge patch of sky. The colonists had tagged the planet "Merrigull's Guesswork", had later shortened it to "Guesswork". Sahl had idly speculated that after a dozen, or ten dozen generations,

its name might evolve into "Kesuark", and it might be regarded as the center of the universe, personalized by a symbol of fecundity, and perhaps thought of as the vale of tears into which Man had been cast after his original sin in an Eden called "Erd" or "Urth", or maybe "Brooklyn". But now, it seemed more likely that the planet would stay just what it already was, and that it would never be infected with humanity.

As he strode toward the mouth of the tunnel, he saw Alaia and Faron Qun coming around the outcrop, arm in arm, occasionally touching the metal of their helmets together as if the steel shells possessed somesthetic receptors capable of savoring the contact. They hailed him as he approached, and his headset burbled as both tried to call at once. Alaia won the battle.

"Congratulate us, Sahl!" she called.

"Why? Is Qun pregnant?"

"See here, Sahl!" sputtered the chemist.

"Sorry. What's up?"

"Never mind!" Alaia snapped, marching haughtily past him. Faron gave him a cold stare in passing.

Sahl turned to watch them go. Once Alaia glanced over her shoulder. She tried to toss her head, but her helmet waggled crazily.

"Ridiculous!" he hissed to himself. Then he unclenched his fists and stalked on toward the shaft of the underground station.

Three workmen were sifting through the rubble, searching for more bones. The biologist leaped down into the tunnel to inspect their findings: several vertabrae, a few snapped ribs, and assorted odds and ends. Apparently the meteorite had crashed into the airlock while the man was in the first tunnel-section, and the responsible occupants had not cared enough about him to bother removing the body. But if the station had been in continuous use at the time, surely they would have removed it for reasons of sanitation. Or at least for appearance's sake. I, thought Sahl, wouldn't leave a dead cat on my sidewalk unless I didn't intend to be back.

The suspicion was growing on him that the builders had once used the station extensively, then had tapered off, visiting it at first only on rare occasions, then not at all.

Why? Why would a race which had once mastered space come to consider it as no longer a worthy pursuit? Had they been driven down from the heavens by an exhaustion of resources? Disaster? Or the final ennui of discovering that there was no magic in the sky, no heaven, no solution to everyday problems?

He snorted to himself. He was projecting human characteristics onto the Eridanian race: a fruitless and possibly dangerous pastime. He went on down into the station to join the others who had taken up the task of combing the station for evidence pertaining to the builders.

THE EVIDENCE was accumulating, but it seemed to reveal very little. They appeared to be small bipeds, roughly humanoid in

appearance. Their number-system was octal, suggesting perhaps four-fingered hands. Their written language was not phonetic, but seemed to be based on a system of ideographs, and a rather complicated system at that. It occurred to Sahl that they might not communicate by sound-waves, but he dismissed the notion as growing out of fragmentary evidence.

A telephone circuit had been run from the Ark to the underground station. It began jangling frantically.

"Sahl!" Parn bellowed when he picked it up. "A spacecraft has been sighted about five miles away, over the hills! It's just hanging there on its jets, watching us. Get back to the Ark. Everybody."

The biologist gathered an incredulous frown. "What kind of a ship?" he gasped.

"Sleek little rocket. About half the size of a launch. Hurry back. If it lands, I want you to size up the occupants."

"Okay, Skipper. But I doubt that there're any of them in it. I'll bet it's a remote control ship, or a computer-piloted job."

"Why? What makes you say that?"

"Simple. They don't know anything about us. They're probably holding up a hat on a stick to see if we'll shoot at it, and maybe to see what kind of weapons we've got. I'll be right out."

He hung up and yelled at the others, then scrambled through the lock and out of the station. He paused to peer at the dark sky in search of the ship, then found it at about thirty degrees above the horizon in the west. A silvery sliver that glittered in the sun, nose pointed skyward as if landing. But the thrust of its jets just matched the tug of gravity, and it hung motionless in mid-air, breathing a fiery tail downward.

Sahl sprinted toward the Ark. Faron and Alaia and several others of the staff were assembled in Parn's cabin when he burst inside. The Captain waved him to a seat. Faron was speaking.

"It's probably a television ship sent to scan us, Skipper. I think we ought to make some friendly gesture toward it, or at least not behave hostilely. We could probably bring it down with a few bursts, but it'd undoubtedly lead to trouble."

"No question about that," Parn muttered. "Well, Sahl? You itching to say something?"

"Yes. Give me a pilot and a launch and permission to blast off and approach the vessel cautiously."

"Wh—*why?* Suppose it shot you down? We'd lose a launch, and twenty-four people will be stranded. No, I can't do it."

He shook his head quickly. "Of course it's a risk, but it might pay off. Suppose it is a robot ship? If I can board it and ride it back to the planet, we've gotten an emissary down there without wasting a launch."

Parn sat with his mouth open for a moment, then shouted: "And suppose it's a one-way ship? Suppose it doesn't go back—but only sits there and—"

"Skipper!" A low gasp from

Alaia who had been watching the screen.

They stared. The small rocket, motionless at first, had begun to move. Tilting its axis at a slight angle, it began whisking rapidly toward them. Wolek Parn went white and began jabbing buttons.

"Man emergency stations, all hands!" he bellowed into the intercom. "All hands in pressure suits, man the launches! Prepare for blast-off!"

Alaia and the other launch pilots scrambled through the door. Faron raced for the reactor room. Sahl sat quietly staring at the screen.

"Well, everybody got some exercise anyhow," he said as the rocket landed on the flats beyond the tunnel's mouth, fanning up great whirls of scorched dust. He climbed to his feet. "Coming?" he grunted over his shoulder.

"Don't go out there!" Parn barked. "Let them make a first move."

"They've already made it," he called back through the hatch. "If they wanted to mess us up, a few armor piercing shells are all they needed to do the job. Coming?"

Mumbling irritably, the Captain reached for his helmet.

Chapter IV

THE DUST was subsiding, and the rocket was a slender spire through the thin haze as they left the Ark's lock and began walking slowly across the lunar plain.

"See that black hole in the hull?" Parn snapped. "They're either watching us or aiming at us."

"I see it. Let's keep walking."

"Probably a television camera, eh?"

"If it makes you feel any better to think so."

"Sgerul ingbagge khannil du?" came a third voice on the inter-helmet communicator frequency.

The men glanced at each other nervously. Sahl shook his head. "It wasn't me, Skipper."

Parn set his jaw and glared fixedly at the rocket as they approached. A hatch slid open in its side, revealing an empty lock. Something began snaking down from the lock toward the ground.

"What the—!"

"A ladder!" Sahl breathed. "A flexible ladder. They want us to come up. What do you think?"

Parn paused. "I—I don't like it. I wish they'd show themselves." He paused again. "But we've got to face them sometime, I guess."

"Yeah."

They stood at the foot of the ladder, looking up the wall of gleaming metal toward the lock. A lense, projecting from the side of the ship had turned downward to survey them with its mechanical gaze.

Sahl grunted nervously and started climbing. Soon he felt Parn coming after him. What manner of creatures were they about to meet? Or was the ship remotely piloted? Once they were inside, would it blast off without warning—a specimen bottle that had been filled?

He scrambled up into the lock and stood gazing back toward the Ark as Parn climbed up after him.

Two figures were walking across the plain toward them, and he thought he recognized Faron and Alaia. But the hatch slid closed, shutting off the view.

THEY STOOD waiting tensely while air hissed from the ship into the lock. Sahl took a sniffer, then removed his helmet, for spectroscopic analysis had already revealed that the planet's atmosphere contained a breathable supply of oxygen. Parn, too, slipped the helmet from his shoulders, having smelled nothing peculiar.

But suddenly Sahl was groping feebly to fit it in place again. "Gas!" he gasped. "Odorless, anaesthetic—Skipper! *Skipper!*"

His vision blurred. He slumped against the wall, then slid to the floor. His last impression was that of the inner hatch rolling quietly open. Then blackness.

"Morgun Sahl. Open your eyes."

A soft purring voice that he did not recognize, a quiet mechanical monotone. He felt intuitively that he had slept for quite some time. And his first fear was that the rocket had gone into space. But he still felt the faint moon-gravity beneath him, and no drum of rockets broke the silence.

"Morgun Sahl. Open your eyes."

He was strapped in a metal seat, with bands of steel encircling his wrists and ankles. He opened his eyes and blinked away blindness in the bright light. He sat in a glass cubicle, peering out into a room whose walls were instrument panels. A small machine faced him, and it was connected to a loudspeaker mounted in the glass. Beyond it, a man lay flat on his back on a narrow table—a hairless man with saffron skin and the face of an idiot. The man's lips moved, and a voice came from the loudspeaker.

"Assimilate your surroundings, then I shall release you. You were subjected to a hypnotic drug. It was necessary that we might quickly gain command of your language. Its structure was analyzed and entered in the translator you see before you. I am speaking my own tongue. The voice you are hearing is your own, built up of recorded syllables you spoke while in trance."

Sahl forced himself to remain silent and to refrain from reacting while he studied his surroundings. Parn was not in sight. There was only the glass partition, the machine, and the saffron man who lay speaking quietly to a microphone that hung down from overhead.

"How do you feel, Morgun Sahl?"

"Dizzy, but fair. Unlock me. I won't kick the place apart."

The wristlocks snapped open, then the ankle-bands. He stood up stretching. He felt calm, too calm. Drugs? Or perhaps post-hypnotic suggestion? He realized that he should be violently startled.

"Where is Wolek Parn?" he asked.

"Sleeping. He will awaken soon, as will the others."

"Others?"

"The two who followed you."

"Alaia and Faron. Are we prisoners?"

"No. We realize that our treat-

ment of you runs contrary to your ethical system. We did not realize it before the hypnotic interview. You are not prisoners. We wished only to establish contact, and to study you. We welcome your colony to our planet."

SAHL SAT very still, studying the reclining figure beyond the glass partition. The puffy, Neanderthaloid features of the saffron man, and the small circular tattoo on his shoulder, and the simple white loincloth that he wore did not somehow jibe with the complex science suggested by the visible equipment. The man's head was bald, with a heavy protruding brow and a small flat skull. His body was thick and heavy, with long arms and broad hands. Sahl imagined that he would stoop when standing, for his shoulders, though thick, seemed steeply sloping.

"May I ask some questions?" he grunted.

"Certainly," purred the loudspeaker.

"Are you the dominant race on the planet?"

"Yes."

"Are your ancestors locally evolved?"

"Yes."

Sahl hesitated, staring at the man. He shook his head slowly. Somehow he could not believe that the fellow was not originally descended of Earth stock.

"Apparently your race has explored extensively in space during its history. Why did you give it up?"

A brief pause, then: "We found what we regard as a more mature goal than mere widespread expansion. For thousands of years our activities have been directed toward the biologic integration of all lifeforms on our planet."

"Into a world-organism," you mean?"

"Ultimately perhaps. Interdependence and elimination of destructive parasitism are the immediate goals. Symbiosis rather than conflict. You might call it biologic socialism."

"With your race leading and integrating?"

"Naturally."

It sounded plausible, Sahl thought. Perhaps earthlings would someday become bored with the stars and turn back to their own planet to "rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures". For they had never really tried to do so, had never tried world-wide schemes of biologic control.

"But why," he said slowly, "are you ready to invite outsiders? What makes you think we would cooperate?"

THE VOICE was silent for a time, then: "We have taken in other outsiders. The fauna and flora of our planet is no longer local, but a composite—made up of selected species from forty star-systems. You will find it something like an artificial garden. It would be virtually impossible for you not to cooperate."

Sahl wondered how much information had been gleaned from him

along with his language. Quite a lot, he guessed, since the very structure of a language implied many things about the linguistic animal that spoke it.

"Maybe you understand," he said slowly, "why we came here. We want to establish a colony and try to equip it with our own brand of culture. Our culture is expansive, exploitive. I fail to see how it could fit in without some strong shift in cultural goal."

"That would be expected."

Sahl frowned. "You don't understand. Our cultural continuity is as important to us as genetic continuity."

"Why?"

The biologist groped for an explanation. "A leader of one of our primitive tribes once put it this way, when his own culture was dying. He said, 'In the beginning, God gave to every people a cup of clay, from which it drank its life. Now our cup is broken.' "

The Eridanian was silent for a long time. When he spoke, his tone remained unchanged—for the machine had but one tone, one rhythm of speech. But Sahl somehow felt an aura of menace associated with the words.

"If you wish to survive, you must come to our planet. If you come to our planet, you must conform to our patterns and our plans. You cannot come to expand and exploit."

Sahl weighed it carefully for a moment. "Before we decide, may we send a delegation down to look around?"

"That was anticipated," came the quick reply. "We will take your delegation down and bring it back." A pause, then: "Wolek Parn has awakened. We will speak with him. Then you may return to your ship to discuss the matter among yourselves if you wish." There was a click, and the loudspeaker went dead.

A sudden thought came to him. *How did the fellow know Parn was awake?* He had not moved nor opened his eyes. Sahl watched him carefully. His lips still moved, but no sound penetrated the glass wall. Evidently the translator's output had been channelled to another compartment. Evidently the fellow was talking to Parn.

Two hours of waiting and watching followed, two hours during which a suspicion flickered in his mind, and grew to proportions of near-certainty: *the man who lay on the table and talked was a cat's paw, a servant of something else.*

But who was using him?

Observation failed to answer the question or even confirm the suspicion. A panel slid open behind him, revealing the door to the airlock. His helmet lay on the floor. He fastened it quickly in place, and the airlock opened. Simultaneously Parn entered it from a flanking hatch. They glanced at each other silently, grimly, but neither spoke.

Before the hatch closed behind Parn, Sahl saw another glass cubicle beyond it. Another suspicion entered his mind: that this ship had been designed specifically for this one mission.

Moments later, they were descending the ladder to the plain be-

low, and the comforting beam of a searchlight picked them up from the Ark. It was night, and the warm tinted crescent of the planet shone overhead. Somehow it seemed gloomy and forbidding.

Chapter V

THEY SEEM to have interviewed all four of us separately," said Parn when they were back in the Ark again. "Let's compare notes. I'll begin with what happened to me."

The Skipper related his conversation with the Eridanian matter-of-factly, and it differed only in detail from Sahl's experience. The Skipper apparently had reacted more angrily, but the general line of discussion was the same. The same was true of the others, except for Faron Qun, who apparently had been more eager than the rest to take advantage of the Eridanian's "generous offer", as he put it.

"Let's get it straight," Parn grunted. "I said flatly that we wouldn't fit in like a cog in somebody else's wheel. Sahl took a dim view of it. Alaia kept her mouth shut—which was probably smart. And Faron, you thought their offer was a good idea."

"I still do."

"That remains to be seen. The point is, they probably realize now that there's going to be a diversity of opinion among us. They might try to take advantage of it somehow. But the main question of course is: 'What the devil do they have in mind for us?' "

"They seem to want us, all right," muttered the girl.

"But *why?*"

"Maybe the delegation can find out."

"That brings up the question of who's going."

Alaia glanced around quickly. "How about *us?*"

Parn shook his head, grinning wryly. "Not you, Ala. I'll send Qun and Sahl."

The girl reddened angrily, fell silent. Faron Qun touched her arm lightly. "I'd rather you'd stay where it's safer. . . ."

"Excuse me, Skipper," Sahl interrupted sourly. "But I think we'd better have a pilot along, just in case."

Faron snorted contemptuously. "In case of *what?*"

"In case we have to seize the ship and come back on our own."

"Of all the silly—"

"Maybe it's not so silly, Faron," Parn growled. "I believe you're right, Sahl."

"Not Alaia, of course, but—"

She bounded to her feet angrily. "Why not Alaia?" she demanded.

Parn sighed and shrugged. "All three of you go, then. I'll have to stay and watch over the brood, I guess. Try to get them to establish radio contact with us, so you can keep us informed."

TWO DAYS later, the small Eridanian ship bearing the three Earthlings spaceward, climbed a column of flame. They sat locked in a small but comfortably furnished

compartment until blast-off was accomplished and acceleration fell to something around a gravity. They waited. The compartment was locked. Sahl rapped sharply at the door, but there was no answer.

"No sightseeing permitted," he grunted suspiciously.

"They probably just want to keep a balanced loading, so they don't want us moving around."

Sahl glanced at the pilot. "Think so?" he muttered.

She frowned at him irritably, but shook her head. "I doubt it. They *must* have automatic trimming mechanisms to correct for slight load unbalance."

"No sightseeing permitted, then," he reasserted.

Faron sneered slightly. "You've got a lousy attitude, Sahl. It makes me sick."

"That's too bad," the biologist sympathized quietly.

Alaia glanced from one to the other of them. Then she twisted Faron's ear with playful sternness. "Sorry, darling, but you're out of line this time."

He reddened, and fell silent. An hour passed. Alaia, normally calm, began to seem restless. She moved about the small compartment nervously, peering at each fixture and marking.

"This ship is new," she muttered. "Brand new! I'll bet it's the first flight."

Sahl watched her, but said nothing. She reached a grille-covered vent over the hatch and tried to pull herself up to peer through it. The grille came free and she fell clumsily. Faron helped her up, while the biologist stared up at the opening with interest.

"Only a ventilator duct," she said.

"Yeah, but—" Sahl stood up. "Might be big enough to crawl through."

"Not for you."

Sahl glanced at her. She might be slender enough to wiggle into the duct, unless her hips . . .

"Get that notion out of your head, Sahl!" Faron snapped. He picked up the grille and moved toward the opening to replace it.

"Put it down," Sahl said tonelessly.

Something about his voice made Faron hesitate.

Alaia said, "Let me try it. I want a look at the control room."

"You're *not* going to do it," Faron growled, blocking the duct opening.

"Move, Faron," murmured the biologist. "Let's not have a tussle."

"Let's do."

"It would be rather one-sided, I'm afraid," Sahl grunted, producing an automatic. "Ever get pistol-whipped, Qun?"

"Wh—where did you get that? What do you mean by bringing a weapon? This is supposed to be a peaceful—"

"Yeah. Now move. Help her up in the duct."

Faron stepped reluctantly aside, his face bright with anger. Alaia gave him a peculiar glance, then scrambled up and into the opening without assistance. She glanced back at Sahl and beckoned him close.

"Three openings just up ahead.

Watch down the duct in case I get caught."

He handed her the gun and nodded. "Don't go too far. Return trip'll be harder, backing up."

She stuffed the gun in her belt and gave Faron a warning look. "You better keep your temper, F.Q." She crawled slowly out of sight.

Faron glared at the biologist. "Fool! Don't you imagine they're watching us? Know exactly what's going on?"

"I doubt it. They're probably too busy to bother." He climbed to the duct opening and glanced along it. Alaia's body blocked the light from the other openings toward the front of the ship, but faintly he could hear her moving.

"Well?" Faron growled.

"You watch if you want to." Sahl returned to a seat.

Faron peered along the dark duct for several minutes. "She's reached another grille," he muttered suddenly. "I can see the light—and—*oh! no!*"

"What's wrong?"

"The grille came loose. She—*Alaia, no! No!*"

SAHL HEARD a muffled report, then another. He scrambled for the opening, as Faron began beating frantically at the hatch.

"They saw her! They shot her!"

Sahl stared toward the faint light a dozen yards down the duct. He could see her faintly, her arm dangling from the opening. She lay very still. Somewhere someone was screaming gibberish.

"Help me!" Faron howled. "Help me get it open!"

Together they battered the locked hatch. The light metal door seemed to give slightly with each crash. After four tries, the lock gave way, and they spilled out into the corridor. A few paces away, the saffron-skinned man stood staring at them idiotically. Suddenly he opened his mouth and screamed. After a moment, he screamed again—without moving. Scalp crawling, Sahl darted around him. He seemed not to see them, but continued screaming as they ran down the corridor.

Faron kicked open a hatch, then froze. Sahl's gun lay on the floor beyond it, and Alaia's hand hung limply down from above. And there was something else. A small man-like creature with a huge head lay dead in a pool of red-brown blood near an instrument panel, his skull torn open by a ten millimeter slug from the automatic. A fat hand-weapon with multiple barrels was still clutched in his small fist.

"See about Alaia," Sahl snapped, grabbing up the gun. "I'll watch the corridor."

Faron stepped inside and felt her wrist. "Thank God," he breathed, "she's alive. Unconscious."

"Wounded badly?"

"I—I can't tell." He paused. "There's something stuck in her face. Help me get her down."

Sahl paused. Another saffron crewman was coming along the corridor, feeling his way and stumbling, as if blinded. He kept pawing at his head. He moved past Sahl without glancing at him.

The biologist watched him go,

then stepped inside and helped Faron haul the limp girl down out of the duct.

"Damn you, Sahl! Now we're in trouble, bad trouble!"

"All right, save it till later, will you? There's no time to fight about it now."

They stretched her out on the floor and examined her for wounds.

"Nothing," Faron muttered. "Except these little red marks on her face, and—" He bent over her and jerked three tiny splinters from her cheek and laid them on his palm. "Crystals. Sharp little crystals."

SAHL LOOKED at her pupils and felt her pulse. "I'd say she was drugged." He arose and crossed the cabin to bend over the dead creature. He disentangled the weapon from a slender four-digital hand and inspected it closely. He drew back what seemed to be a charging-plunger, then aimed at the dead thing and flicked a switch. It kicked in his hand and emitted a dull cough. Six crystals appeared, stuck in a patch of the creature's hide. They began to volatilize at once.

"Anaesthetic crystals," he guessed. "Must be quick acting, but not quick enough to keep Ala from shooting back when she got stung."

"This is terrible!" Faron mourned. "Now they'll never let us colonize."

"Wake up, fellow," Sahl snapped, pointing at the dead creature. "*That's* one of our hosts, not the idiots with orange hides."

He tossed Faron the Eridanian's weapon and stepped through the hatch. "I'm going to search the ship, see if he's the only one."

He moved warily along the corridors, peering cautiously into each compartment. He found one other saffron servant, curled up in the foetal position on the floor of a cabin. The man did not look up. There were no other creatures like the one Alaia had killed. And the three servants—if such they were—appeared to be completely demented. They seemed unaware of their surroundings, stared vacuously at nothing. The search convinced him that automatic devices were keeping the rocket on a constant heading with respect to the planet's gravitic field—which would make it a spiralling course with respect to a fixed framework. Unless the devices corrected when they reached the atmosphere, or unless they could get control of the ship, they would go in like a meteor and crash.

He returned to the compartment where Alaia lay moaning but still unconscious. Faron was studying the instrument panels. He turned away white-faced to stare at the biologist. His voice was high and tense.

"Do you realize this is the control cabin? That thing was piloting the ship! Somebody's got to take over!"

"He's the only one of his kind aboard. I guess it'll have to be you. I'm a mechanical moron, Qun."

Faron groaned. "I can't even pilot one of our own ships. And we'll never be able to read the markings on these instruments, or know what they mean. The con-

trols *look* fairly simplified, but—" He shook his head, pointed at the screen. The ship seemed to be plunging surfaceward at a shallow angle.

"We've got to get Alaia awake. Maybe she can analogize between those gadgets and familiar controls."

Faron growled a low curse and went to the hatch. "I'm going to see if I can't shut off the jets somehow. We might still have enough of an orbital velocity-component to carry us around the planet, if we can stop the rockets from skidding us back any more."

"An orbit?"

"Yeah. Probably with an underground perihelion. If we get out of this, Sahl, I'm going to kick your face in."

"I'll be looking forward to it," the biologist murmured, as he knelt beside Alaia.

TWENTY MINUTES later, the instrument panel's lights began flashing frantically, and relays clattered loudly. He straightened, sensing vaguely that they were falling. His weight was diminishing rapidly. Then he noticed that the thunder of the rockets was dying. It became a dull roar, then a purr.

Faron came back. "I got the reactors damped down," he said, "but it may not matter. Look at the screen."

Sahl turned. The scope revealed the curving horizon of the planet, but the cross-hairs rested only a fraction of a degree above the misty limb.

"Will we skim through that atmosphere?" he asked.

"If we do, we'll melt the hull off at this speed. We'll just have to wait and see." He glanced down at the girl. "How is she?"

"Opened her eyes once. Drifted off again. Might bring her around if we had some sort of stimulant."

Faron fumbled quickly through his suit, brought out a small vial. "Neurodrine," he grunted. "I brought it along to keep awake in case we were pretty busy."

The biologist took it quickly and shook out two small capsules. "You on the stuff?" he asked.

"Of course not!"

The vehemence of the denial made Sahl guess that Faron was at least worried about the possibility of addiction. The drug did not set up a true craving, but habitual users became listless and apathetic when it was withdrawn, and they had to continue taking it in order to stay normally alert.

He took the capsules apart and emptied the white powder in Alaia's mouth. Her jaw worked spasmodically, and he held her mouth closed lest she reflexively spit out the bitter compound. Five minutes passed.

Sahl became aware of a faint whine, high-pitched and all-pervading. He glanced at Faron who was staring at the instruments.

"Upper fringes of the atmosphere!" the chemist groaned.

"That whistle?"

"Yeah!" He hurried out of the cabin and returned a moment later, his face taut with worry.

"What's up?" Sahl asked.

"The temperature. Leading edges

of projections on the hull. Red spots here and there." He stared at the screen. The cross-hairs seemed a little higher above the horizon now, but the horizon's curvature was less. "We're low, too low. Maybe sixty miles."

"Perihelion?"

"Maybe we're at it. But if that air slows us down enough, we'll drop."

ALAIA BEGAN muttering aloud. She opened her eyes and pressed her hands to her temples. Her face went tense with fear. "It shot . . . hurt—my face. Where?"

"No time now!" Sahl grunted. "Listen to me. You've got to get control of the ship."

"The big head . . . the *thing* . . . is it—?"

"Dead."

She closed her eyes again and moaned. Sahl shook her hard. "Alaia! Listen to me!"

"Sick . . . Water . . ."

He shook her again, then pulled her up to a sitting position. She saw the dead creature, and her eyes widened. She gasped and seemed to recover a little. She stared at the control panel and shook her head.

"That whine!" she gasped. "Air!"

Sahl helped her to her feet. "Faron got the jets idled," he told her quickly, "but that's all. You've got to figure out the controls."

She staggered toward the instrument panel and stared. "I'll never be able to read those things. But . . ." She looked down at the array of switches and studs. "Only two variable controls," she muttered. "The rest are on-off. I hope this thing is—" She touched a lever and bent close to inspect it. "Ball and socket mounting. Can push it any direction. That means—" She pushed it forward slightly.

"*No!*" Faron howled. "Look at the screen!"

The cross-hairs had split into a pair, one set red, the other black. The black set rested now below the horizon.

"Don't worry," she muttered. "That must be just the aim of our nose. I didn't feel a course-change."

She tugged back slowly on the lever. A low drone came from the instrument panel. The black cross-hairs drifted slowly upward, and the planet's horizon swept completely off the screen. The scope revealed only a patch of space. "Must be a stern pick-up somewhere." She touched one of the switches under the scope, then returned it to the original position. "Magnification. And this one—intensity. And this—" The scene on the scope changed abruptly and the planet's surface appeared again. "That's it. Now we're looking back toward the tail."

She turned abruptly to look at Faron. "How did you get the reactors damped?"

"Back in the power room. Slipped in a couple of rods."

"Better go slip them back like they were."

HE NODDED and departed silently. Minutes later, the rocket's purr became a roar again. Alaia

slowly moved the second control and the thunder waned, then grew again. The ship lurched clumsily as she fumbled with the heading-lever, but gradually the planet's surface lay directly tailward, and they were climbing slowly. The whine began to diminish.

Faron returned from the power room to stare over her shoulder. "Wonderful!" he murmured.

"Not so wonderful, maybe," she said gloomily. "We don't know what the instruments are registering. One slip and we're finished."

"Can we make it back?" Sahl asked.

"Back? To the moon? No!" She shook her head emphatically. "No way to navigate."

"What then?"

"We'll have to get in an orbit, let me practice on the controls. Then—there's nothing to do but try to land it somewhere down there. Unless you'd rather stay here as a permanent satellite."

"They'll send other ships up after us," Faron said darkly. "They're probably watching us right now."

Sahl stared at the surface revealed on the screen. "I agree that they're watching us. But I don't think they'll send pursuit."

"Why not?"

"It's my guess that they don't have anything to pursue us with. I believe this rocket was specially constructed for this one task."

Faron snorted contemptuously. "If they can build this one, they've certainly built others."

"Why?"

"Well—"

"I'm certain they could build all the ships they wanted to," Sahl continued. "And Earthlings could build humanoid robots if they wanted to. But who wants to? The Eridanians have deserted space. They don't need to build ships, except for some special purpose, like this one."

"Maybe," Faron admitted. "But if we stay here very long they'll build one to come after us. If what you say is true, they certainly built this one in a hurry."

The biologist nodded, glanced at Alaia. "How long will it take?"

"Somewhere between five minutes and forever," she answered curtly.

"Well, we land as soon as you think you can manage it. We'll have to be careful about choosing a spot. Some place pretty far from a city. Let's say—high ground in the twilight zone."

"Why twilight?"

"So that if we get down, we might try to get away in the dark." He paused. "I'm going to look over the ship again and try to get something out of those crewmen. If that's what they are."

Chapter VI

HE WAS gone for half an hour, during which the ship lurched and rocked and spun as Alaia tested the controls. He came back looking grim, and went to bend over the dead Eridanian. He pried open its jaw and stared.

"Want it to say 'ah'?" Faron asked sourly.

"Look," Sahl grunted, pressing

back the creature's lips to expose the inside of his mouth.

"Toothless," Faron observed, "and no tongue. So?"

"Look again." He inserted his finger and pressed something. A pair of gleaming white fangs slipped slowly into view. "Hollow and retractile."

Faron frowned. "Poison sacs?"

"No. Feeding mechanisms."

"A blood-feeder!"

"Not exactly. I found something growing on one of the crewmen's backs. A parasite vegetable growth, I think. It's taken root there—*deep* roots. And there's a pale green pulpy sphere on the outside. It had fang-marks on it. Seems to be full of a milky fluid, but not blood. I'd say it's the fruit of the parasite growth. And the fellow's flesh is the ground it grows in."

"And he's still alive?"

"In a stupor. He's the one curled up on the floor. Asleep, or unconscious."

"How about the others?"

"They don't have it. Apparently this thing—" He nudged the small body. "—just brought along one dinner pail."

Faron shuddered. "They're slaves, then."

"Maybe. Better look the other way," he said, producing a pocketknife. He made a neat incision in the throat, and studied for a moment. "Breathing tube, no real vocal cords. They can't talk, nor even make much oral noise."

"Somebody was talking to us!" the chemist protested.

"Yeah, but I think this thing was using the saffron fellow as a mouthpiece; telepathic control. The human—if he is a human—spoke in his own language, and the machine translated. But the original thoughts must have come from *this.*"

Faron looked toward the door thoughtfully. "I can't even believe those people *have* a *language*. They act like complete idiots."

Sahl looked up. "I have an idea that's withdrawal shock, rather than idiocy. If this little beastie was controlling them telepathically, they must have gotten some kind of jolt when Alaia shot it. And maybe they've been controlled so long that they've lost their own egos, lost their own personality."

They looked up as the tug of acceleration decreased suddenly.

"Okay," Alaia called nervously, "I guess it's now or not at all. I'm going to start down."

Sahl turned to watch the planet's surface on the screen. It tilted again, revealed a horizon as she guided the ship so as to resume the process of cancelling out its orbital velocity component.

"I'll have to do it fast," she called. "We're too close to the atmosphere. You'd better lie down—or sit."

THE ROCKETS' thunder grew to deafening proportions, and Sahl felt his weight tripling under the force of the thrust. He sat braced against the wall, watched Alaia's face sag under the pressure. Soon the whine of atmospheric friction returned, and grew into a wild shriek. He inched away from the

wall as it began to burn his back. Faron mopped his face with a heavy hand.

"Hot," he gasped. "Lord, it's getting hot!"

"How's it coming?" Sahl shouted, but the girl was too tensely absorbed to answer.

After a time the shriek seemed to diminish slightly, became a low howl, then a muffled drumming, scarcely audible above the roar of the rockets. The minutes crawled slowly past, and gradually the surface markings on the screen stopped their crawl. Their normal weight had returned, and the sound of the jets ceased to be deafening.

"How's it coming?" he called again.

This time she answered. "We're just about stationary. Sitting on our thrust at—oh, somewhere between twenty and thirty miles. I think I've located the radar-altimeter—by watching it crawl back—but I still can't read it."

"Can you tell the zero-mark on it?" the chemist called.

"Yes. But I'm afraid to trust it. There's some kind of adjustment on the dial."

"There's a small transparency port in the power room," Faron called. "Want me to watch it?"

"Yes. I'll go down at about a mile a minute until we're a couple of miles up. Think you can yell when we're at about ten-thousand feet?"

"I'll try," he muttered. "How'll you judge our rate of descent?"

She tapped an instrument dial. "This thing seems to be an acceleration balance. It sits on this center mark when the thrust is just right to make me feel my normal weight. I've been comparing the reading with the feel of the thrust. We'll start down slow, then keep it on the center mark. Warn me if we seem to be dropping too fast."

Faron shook his head, muttered pessimistically, and left the cabin. The biologist sat watching the scope and feeling helpless. Slowly the surface markings spread, grew larger. The land was rising to meet them.

Faron burst into the cabin again. "Better slow it down," he called. "We're dropping pretty fast."

The rockets droned louder for a moment, and the screen markings ceased to spread. Alaia risked a quick glance at Faron.

"What kind of country down there?"

"Hilly," he said, then glanced at the scope and touched it. "This place right here looks like a valley. Fairly flat."

She nodded and touched the controls lightly. The marking crept slowly under the crosshairs, then stopped. The descent began again. Sahl saw that her only yardstick of velocity lay in the seeping spread of the markings on the scope. She occasionally glanced at the acceleration balance, but her eyes turned quickly back to the screen. Faron had returned to the power room.

HER HANDS began flickering quickly about the controls as the spread became more rapid. She muttered through gritted teeth. Sahl braced himself and waited.

Faron was shouting from the power room, but the roar made his voice unintelligible.

"See what's the matter with him!" she snapped suddenly. "I'll hold us right here." The roar increased slightly as she nudged the thrust control, and the spread of the marking slowed to a halt.

Faron was mopping his face on his sleeve as Sahl entered the power room. "About to go down in a gorge!" he shouted. "She's got to move it over some."

Sahl glanced at the transparent port, saw nothing but grayness beyond it. "What's that?"

"Smoke. Our jets touched off the vegetation. We're about a hundred yards up. No use watching any more. I'll try to guide her in."

They hurried back to the control cabin. Faron traced a finger lightly along a dark marking on the scope. "Deep cut," he told her. "Move it over here."

The scenery began to crawl. "Say when!" she called.

"Take it slow—all right, *now!*"

"Check. Brace yourselves. We're going in."

Seconds later, a series of muffled tearing sounds echoed through the ship. Then a settling jar. She killed the jets.

"Down!" gasped Faron, sitting up.

"Watch *out!*" Alaia screamed suddenly. "We're going over!"

The room began to tilt, first slowly, then gathering impetus. Sahl scrambled toward the down-going wall. A thunderous roar. A bone-crushing jolt. A body slammed against him hard, and the wind went out of him. The room spun crazily, and the jolts continued, as if they were rolling down a hill. His head slapped hard against the wall. Awareness faded.

The jolting had stopped. Apparently he had blacked out for only a few seconds, for Alaia was still untangling herself from him when he shook the fog away. "Sorry, Sahl," she muttered. "I didn't mean to use you for a crash pad. You just got in the way."

HE SAT up slowly, found himself sitting on the dead Eridanian, and arose to stand on the slightly inclined wall. Faron lay groaning in the corner.

"Nice landing," Sahl breathed, and meant it.

"Faron's hurt!" she gasped, bending over him. "His leg! It's all—"

Sahl knelt to take a look. "Broken," he muttered, then began splitting the fabric of his suit. "Broken femur." He shook his head and reached for the Eridanian's crystal gun.

"No!" the girl protested, knocking his hand away.

He glowered at her. "Rather listen to him scream while I splint it?"

"But—"

"It didn't kill *you*, did it?"

"All right, but—if he's unconscious—he can't—"

He looked at her sourly. "Can't come trotting along with us?" He held the gun close to Faron's shoulder, pressed the firing switch, and waited for the groans to stop. Then

he brushed away the crystals that remained half-imbedded in his skin.

"Go find me something long and straight for a splint," he grunted, and began ripping Faron's suit into strips.

She came back after a few minutes, empty-handed. "All I found was a long metal rod, but it must weigh thirty pounds. He's heavy enough as it is."

He gazed at her quietly. "You planning to carry him, Ala?"

She sucked in a short breath. "Why, I—"

"Get the rod, if you want it splinted."

She hesitated, then went back to get it. "We're hanging over the edge of a bluff. It's a wonder we didn't roll into it," she called.

"Let's have the rod."

She gave it to him, then watched as he packed one end of it under Faron's arm, then bound it to his body from the chest down. Gradually it seemed to dawn on her that Faron wasn't going any place.

"Pull this tight and tie it when the fracture pops in place," he muttered, then sat down to stretch the limb against the writhing knot of muscles.

There was a dull snapping sound. "Tie it!" he grunted.

Minutes later, Sahl arose panting. "It may not be properly set, but that'll keep it from compounding, anyhow. Let's go."

She shook her head slowly. "I'm not going anywhere."

He frowned sharply. "Listen! It's certain that someone spotted our landing. It's equally certain that we can't move Faron, and that they'll get him anyway. Your presence won't help him a damn bit."

"I can't just *desert* him!"

"If you don't, you'll be deserting a hundred and twenty others."

"I don't see how—"

"We came down here to look around, get information, and get it back to the Ark. I don't know how we can accomplish it now, but I know we *can't* do it just sitting here waiting to be captured. They're probably on their way here now. Come on, let's get moving."

She looked down at Faron and bit her lip. "All right, I'll come," she said hoarsely. "But Sahl, I hate your guts."

Chapter VII

THE FIRES still smoldered on the low hillside about the ship. By their light, he could see that they had landed in what appeared to be a garden, or an orchard. The sun had set, and only a trace of twilight lingered in the west. A faint breeze washed the hillside and whispered in the foliage of the shrub-like trees. The breeze brought pleasant odors: a wisp of smoke, the smell of moldering leaves, a faint perfume from the trees. Despite the danger, they paused a moment savoring the feel of mossy earth under their feet.

"Thirteen years," Alaia kept murmuring, "thirteen long years."

The "orchard" was cool and pleasant, the trees shaped like inverted hearts, with the foliage draped from the branches like tas-

sels. They reminded Sahl of weeping willows, except for their near-perfect symmetry. It was indeed a garden world—and old, old and carefully tended.

She caught his arm suddenly. "Sahl! Lights moving in the sky! Up there!"

He gazed in the direction she pointed and saw them. The breeze brought the faint drone of engines. Circling aircraft.

He moistened his lips nervously and hesitated. "Probably sent to spot the rocket. But they can't land here, not unless they do it the same way you did."

"Yes, but they'll guide a ground party to us."

He nodded and walked to the rim of the gorge. A hundred feet down to the rush of water over rocks. The moon was rising, and by its faint light he saw the dim whiteness of a small waterfall.

"Let's go," he grunted, and began trotting toward higher ground, following the lip of the cliff a dozen yards on their right.

"Where to?" she called from behind.

"How should I know? Anywhere, away from that rocket. We'll stay on the crest of the ridge. It seems to follow the gorge. Down there might be a good place to hide, if we have to."

"This moss is too soft. Sahl, we're leaving a clear trail."

"I know it, but I hope they won't find it before morning."

"Those lights. They're circling lower. They've seen the fires."

"Yeah. Save your breath for running."

The crest of the ridge steepened and angled away from the gorge and led them to a steep hill that arose on their left. They scrambled up a series of rocky ledges to a rain-guttered slope that was free of the moss. Regular patches of brush lay ahead. Alaia pleaded exhaustion and they paused to rest.

"We must have run ten miles," she panted.

"Closer to four, maybe," he muttered, staring back at the orange etching of glowing embers on the hillside where they had landed.

"Sahl, look! Down the gorge toward the valley!"

"Uh—yes, lights. A whole swarm of them. And they're moving."

"Torches?"

"I don't think so. They—they move too fast. And they're too white for flame."

They fell silent for a moment. "I don't hear anything. No engines."

"Too far away, maybe."

"The wind's right. But—look! They're flying. Close to the ground, but they're flying."

"Come on," he muttered, "we'd better be moving."

They climbed again, and as the brush thickened a moon-splashed cliff loomed ahead. They made for it, tearing through the brush and stumbling over the rocky ground.

"That cliff," Sahl muttered. "Looks like a mesa up there, or a high plateau."

"What good is it? Why do we keep climbing?"

"To get a view of the land. So that if we last through tomorrow, we'll see where to go."

SHE TURNED to look back. "Sahl! Those lights. They've split up back by the rocket."

He paused to follow her gaze, then tugged her on. "Part of them coming this way. Hurry!"

"But where?" she gasped as she ran.

"The cliff's got an overhang. We'll get under it."

"The lights—they wink on and off—like signals. And they swarm around like wasps."

"Come *on!*" he snapped. "You can watch them from under the overhang."

They sprinted across a clearing, then ran along the foot of the cliff until they reached a gulley where the rock hung like a jaw over the ground. They crawled quickly back into the blackest shadows of the recess and sat panting on the moist rocks.

"Nice place for something big and stealthy and hungry to hang out," she said with a shiver in her voice.

"Maybe. But I doubt if there's anything like that left on this planet." He paused, and his voice changed slightly. "Nothing, that is, except *us.*"

He heard her moisten her lips in the darkness, as if to speak, but she said nothing. Peering out at the night he caught a glimpse of the winking lights, momentarily visible beyond a dip in the ridge.

"They must have picked up our trail all right," he muttered. "Let's hope they lose it where the mossy ground ends."

"What *are* they?"

"I don't know but—they're getting closer. Listen!"

"I don't hear . . ." She paused, then: "Yes, I do—faintly. It's a whirring sound, like wings, like quail flying. A whole big covey of quail."

"That's what it is," he whispered. "Wings." He crawled closer toward the opening and stared.

"Fireflies. Giant fireflies, Ala—only they're probably nothing like fireflies except that they glow. Listen to those wings! And they light up a whole patch of hillside."

"Coming this way?"

"They're circling. Must have lost us."

She laughed suddenly. "Fireflies, chasing humans. It's funny—"

"Don't get hysterical, Ala!"

"It's really funny," she went on. "All the quaint little life-forms, out to hunt us down. Watch out for the rabbits, Sahl! Beware of the sparrow patrol! They work in packs. I wonder what the fireflies are leading. A band of gophers? A flock of snakes?" She laughed again, but choked it off in a hiss and a shiver.

"You're not far from wrong," he muttered. "They *are* leading something. There's lots of rustling in the brush. But—I think they're heading the wrong way."

"Intelligent fireflies—what next?"

"Not intelligent, I'd guess. Just under control. Like a dog-pack."

"Under whose control? The little fat-heads?"

"Remotely, I imagine. I wouldn't be surprised but what every life-form on the planet is controlled. The fellow we communicated with on the ship said as much. Or hinted at it."

She was silent for a moment. "Have the lights gone away?"

HE CRAWLED halfway out into the open and stared. "They're swarming up the cliff, about half-a-mile away—up to the top of the mesa. I guess they think we went . . ."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just happened to think: if they suspect we took that way, then there must be a path up the cliff down there—or some reason why they think we'd want to climb it. Both, maybe."

"So?"

"So maybe we should, if we get a chance."

"Sahl—I'm too tired to move."

"Sleep awhile, if you can. I'll watch."

She murmured gratefully, and he heard her shifting around on the loose rock, seeking a place to stretch out. Suddenly she giggled. "Something crawled down my back. I—" Then she choked out a yelp. "Sahl, help me! It stings, and I can't reach it."

With a worried grunt he crawled back to where she lay, trying to claw at something between her shoulder-blades. He slipped his hand down the neck of her suit and felt along the smooth skin until he found it—a rough scaly little disk that clung tight to her back. He pinched it hard and jerked. She whimpered as the thing came free. Sahl struck a light and studied it briefly—a leathery creature with wiry tendrils that moved very slowly, as if groping for the hold they had lost. His face remained expressionless.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing much," he grunted.

He laid it on a rock and burned it. It wasn't much, as it stood—but he had seen the mature one with the pale green fruit, growing with its roots buried deep in the flesh of a man.

"Better sleep up closer to the front," he advised.

The moon rose higher in the star-flecked sky, and he watched the quiet land with its orderly patterns of vegetation, and the winking lights that circled slowly over it. The orderliness implied ownership. Here was no primitive forest waiting for the axe and the plough. Here was no place for a colony. He glanced at the lurid disk of the moon, and tried to pick out the landing site where over a hundred humans waited and watched.

In vain.

No, they would not turn back, would not spend the long years required for the journey home. They would come down here eventually. And when they came, what would be their role in the scheme of the world? Servants? Or merely an organ in the biologic corporation the native Eridanians were building?

VOICES FLOATED to him on the breeze, voices and the rustle of brush. He frowned, brought out his gun, and stretched out on his stomach to wait. The search was continuing. Peering carefully, he finally spotted them a hundred yards away. A dozen of the saffron-

skinned manlike creatures were beating about in the brush and talking among themselves.

The language seemed monosyllabic and primitive, but somehow human, designed for the acoustics of the human throat. Sahl felt certain that they were not locally evolved, but rather had descended from primitive Earthlings, captured by the Eridanian space-wanderers during their day of expansion. How long ago? Judging by their bone structure, he guessed it to be at least fifty thousand years. Mutations had occurred, of course; their coloring and their loss of hair had undoubtedly come about since their departure from Earth. Also their ability to commune telepathically with the Eridanian species. The latter specialization seemed to suggest forced breeding.

The searchers were wandering closer. They seemed to carry no weapons except staves, and their only source of light was the moon. Since they spoke among themselves, he guessed that they were free agents rather than telepathically-controlled creatures such as the ones they had encountered on the ship.

Sahl retreated deeper into the recess. The party reached clear ground fifty yards down the cliff, then turned and wandered toward the place where the fugitives lay hidden. He quickly searched through the pockets of Alaia's suit and found the crystal gun, which seemed preferable to the more lethal automatic, in case they were discovered.

The party paused occasionally to prod under the edge of the cliff with their staves. Didn't they realize that the Earthlings were armed? That numbers were no match for guns?

SUDDENLY HE heard a burst of laughter from the group, then a sudden shriek—a woman's voice, raised in clamoring protest. He frowned. There had been no woman among the searchers. He stole closer for a look. A short, thick female was struggling to escape them, but they pinned her arms behind her and held her fast. He suddenly heard the screech of an infant among the babble of voices.

One of the men held the baby under his arm, and the woman fought frantically to get it back. Suddenly Sahl understood. The men had not been searching for the Earthlings, but for the woman and her child. The small drama was breaking up. They dragged the howling female down the hill. The fellow with the baby set out in another direction—along the foot of the cliff toward the place where the winking lights had swarmed up its side.

He thought for a moment of following, but decided to wait. There were still signs of activity in the area about the damaged rocket, and certainly the search was continuing, probably along the gorge. He was puzzled by the incident he had just witnessed. It seemed to have an ominous significance, but he could not interpret it. Did the child's capture in some way involve the motives of the Eridanian race? Or had the woman merely stolen a child

that was not her own?

He stiffened suddenly, hearing a sound in the distance. Had he imagined it, or did a voice call his name—a booming voice that rolled across the hills. It came again, swelling louder with a change in the breeze.

"Morgun Sahl. Alaia Dazille!"

He lay frozen for a moment. A giant loudspeaker calling to them. Echoes rang and reverberated among the hills. Was it Faron, captured by the master-creatures, and responding to their bidding? But the voice seemed mechanical, and he remembered the translator unit aboard the rocket. Undoubtedly the language structure was still set up in its memory circuits and recording units. They had only to feed its output into a large amplifier.

"Welcome! Welcome! Sahl and Dazille, Welcome!"

THE WORD made him shiver. Perhaps it resulted from a malfunction of the translator. Or perhaps it was a trick. He wondered how much insight they had gained into human psychology. Or were they interpreting it in terms of their almost sub-human servants with the saffron hides? He shook Alaia awake, and she sat up muttering sleepily. Then she clutched his arm as the voice resumed.

"Welcome, wanderers!" A pause to let the echoes die. *"You are free to roam and observe . . . You will not be harmed. . ."*

"What's going on?" Alaia whispered in fright.

"Shhh! Listen!"

". . . as long as you harm no one else . . . We shall wait until you feel the need to cooperate with us . . . Meanwhile, lest you think of violence, remember that we hold Faron Qun a hostage."

The voice fell silent. The echoes died.

"Free to roam!" Alaia repeated. "Did we misjudge them?"

"I hadn't realized that we'd *made* a judgement," he murmured sourly.

"Then why run? Why hide?"

"Because we didn't know how they'd react to the seizure of their rocket, and to your killing the one on board. We still don't know."

"I've got the feeling we're trapped," she murmured.

"We are. We can't contact the Ark or get back to it without their help. We don't dare trust them. And I can't see how they dare trust us. To them, we're a couple of wolves—wandering in their flocks."

"They've got Faron," she reminded him.

He hesitated, then spoke softly: "Listen, Ala—the three of us are expendable. We have to be, for the hope of the colony. If you don't agree, then we'd better part company—and you can head for the nearest city."

"I—I know, Sahl. Of course we're expendable, but—"

"Then we can't think of Faron as a debit. If he has to be spent, then we'll spend him. If you can't agree, you'd better go. If you feel he's a club over your head, then you'd better go look for our hosts—and 'cooperate', as they put it."

"I—" She started to speak, but

fell silent. Her breathing became labored. "I hate you." Her voice was violent.

"That's beside the point," he said coldly. "It doesn't give an answer."

Another silence, then: "All right. All right."

He nodded in the darkness. "I doubt if they'll harm him, no matter what we do."

"Why not?"

"They want us for something. And I have an idea what it is. No, don't ask me yet—because I'm far from being certain, and I don't want us to act on guesswork."

Chapter VIII

DAWN CAME, and he arose with a start, having fallen asleep during the night. He touched Alaia's arm and she stirred, then sat up to rub drowsy eyes. He crawled to the opening and stared across the hilltops and beyond them toward a plain. The orange sun spread a lurid light over the landscape, fully revealing its features to them for the first time.

A moss-draped world, hoary with age. No vivid colors splashed its gray-stained spread of vegetation, no riotous growth, nor any tangle of plants seeking sunlight in a frantic competition. It was a restrained world of dusty greens, drab browns, silvery grays. The hills and the valley were covered with evenly spaced trees, and the moss blanket lay soft over the ground between. Perhaps ten miles away on the plain nestled a patch of white buildings. He looked further and saw others like them—small villages scattered across the valley nestled beside the creeks in nests of trees. And the inhabitants?

"It looks like a painting," Alaia murmured beside him.

"It is," he grunted, "but the pigment is protoplasm. Nature's been changed into an art-form—or a system of slavery, depending on how you look at it, and from which side of the fence."

"Reminds me of pictures I've seen of Japanese landscapes."

"Yeah, Earth might look like this someday. With one difference."

"What's that?"

"It'll belong to Man."

"And here?"

"We'll just fit in somewhere. Or else we won't fit in at all. We won't be at the top."

"Maybe someday—"

"No, Ala. If this is as carefully a tailored biologic system as I think, it's designed to serve one species—the one that developed it. Thinking that Man could supplant the designers of it is like expecting a whale's brain to function in the body of an elephant."

"What hope is there, then?"

"That maybe we can live here as predators—or at least as non-participants. We brought tons of seeds from Earthplants, and the small animals, of course. If we could get established on an island continent —" He stopped suddenly.

"What's wrong?"

"Seeds," he muttered. "Seeds. Vegetables of course, but also—clover and Johnson grass, oaks and pecans and pines, even sagebrush

and cactus. Not to mention the rabbits and white rats."

"I don't understand."

"Never mind, let's just look around. There's no one in sight."

THEY SLIPPED from the recess under the cliff face and paused for a moment. A few winged creatures circled lazily in the sky. A tendril that grew from a fissure in the rock seemed to sense their presence, and began curling back away from them at perhaps an inch a minute. A ball of fur hung in a nearby shrub, dangling by a single tentacle that was coiled about a branch. It opened a single eye and blinked at them. Then it snaked out another tentacle, caught at a neighboring shrub, and began swinging away—hand over hand.

Alaia shuddered. "I'm starving, but what'll we eat?"

He brought out a single stick of protein dehydrate and broke it in half. "We'll have to wait and see what the saffrons eat. We don't dare experiment. Come on. Let's walk."

They hurried along the foot of the cliff toward the place where the flying lights had ascended. They cast nervous glances toward the hills, and all about them.

"I keep feeling like something's watching us," she breathed.

"It's possible," he grunted. "That fur ball with one eye, for instance. Or the trees. The birds. Which creatures are semi-intelligent? Which communicate among themselves, or with the dominant race? We don't have a way of knowing."

"Sahl, what are we looking for? It seems so hopeless?"

"We're looking for weak spots, for sensitive points. There's one thing about an integrated system, a system of interdependencies: if some key member of it gets out of whack, the whole thing goes to pot. Like mechanical civilization, for instance; deny it any one of a dozen key materials and it starts falling to pieces."

"Even if we found it, how could we do anything about it?"

He chuckled grimly. "We won't —in anything less than a lifetime. You didn't expect anything else, did you?"

She shook her head. "I didn't expect it to be easy, no." She paused, staring ahead. "What's that up there, where the rock juts out?"

"It's—" they moved ahead a few paces. "—a ladder, I think. Iron rungs, set in the rock." His eyes followed them up, but the face of the cliff sloped back out of sight.

He trotted out toward the brush, seeking a better vantage point. He stood there for a time, gazing at the clifftop two hundred feet above them.

"What is it?" she called in a low voice.

"A wall," he answered. "A high wall along the top of the cliff." He looked around quickly, as if fearing an eavesdropper, then called, "Come on out here."

As she approached, he handed her the gun. "I'm going to climb it, Ala. Cover me. I want a look at what's on the mesa."

She took the gun and made a wry mouth. "You'll be a perfect

target up there whether I cover you or not."

He nodded. "I know—but I'm beginning to believe what they said, about leaving us free to roam awhile. Surely they could have taken us before now if they wanted to."

HE STRODE to the cliff and began climbing slowly. But the rungs seemed to be about three and a half feet apart, making the climb something of a struggle. Standing on the first rung, and clutching the second at the level of his waist, he could just comfortably reach the third. A person of less than adult stature could not have climbed the ladder. Why the wide spacing, he wondered?

Halfway up, he froze. The loudspeaker had thundered a single word from over the hills: *"Wait!"* And the echoes said, "wait . . . wait. . . ait. . ."

He hung there motionless for a moment, listening. A perfect target indeed! A helpless speck on the crag. They wouldn't even have to inflict a lethal wound. If he were winged, the drop to the rocks would kill him.

"If we meant to destroy you," boomed the voice, *"now would be the time."*

He waited.

"Wouldn't it?" demanded the smug watchers.

He gingerly went back down one rung.

"But you are free to continue upward, or to descend, as you choose."

A moment of indecision. He looked back at Alaia. She stood very still, eyes sweeping along the cliff-top. He set his jaw and began climbing again.

"Do not molest the young ones," warned the distant voice, *"nor their nurses."*

The warning made him catch his breath. Young ones? Were they letting him wander into a place where the Eridanians spawned their young? If so, he decided that they were making a serious mistake.

But as he continued the climb, a faint babble of voices reached his ears—childish shrieks and laughter and gibberish. Human voices, or those of the saffron primates.

He scrambled up the last step and stood in a narrow pathway that ran along the eight-foot wall, overhung here and there by the drapery of foliage. He stood on a rock, leaped for a hand-hold, and pulled himself up. He looked over into what seemed to be a shady garden or park. He caught a glimpse of two orange-tinted children toddling across the moss-covered turf. They vanished among the trees, but he heard the wailing of infants, and the shouting of the young. Puzzled, he sat on the wall and beckoned to Alaia. She came forward and labored through the same as he had.

HE STIFFENED, suddenly sensing the reason for the wide spacing: *so that the children could not escape.* He looked quickly back toward the villages on the plain, remembered the incident of the

woman and her child. The searchers had led her back in the general direction of the villages, but they had obviously taken the child up here. Why?

Alaia's frightened face came into view. "I never felt so helpless," she gasped as he helped her up to the top of the wall.

She regained her breath and listened to the sounds in the park. "Children. Lots of them. What is this?"

"Let's find out." He leaped down to the mossy turf and caught her arm as she followed.

They moved a few yards deeper into the trees, then stopped suddenly. A buxom saffron female lay nude on the soft moss, sprawled listlessly on her back with her eyes closed. Two toddlers nursed hungrily at her large breasts. One looked up to peer at the intruders with his large brown eyes, but did not interrupt his meal.

They moved quietly on through the cool shade, encountered several similar scenes. "Wet nurses," he breathed.

"Not mothers?"

"Doubt it. Saw one little fellow trade nannies back there."

Occasionally one of the nurses moved listlessly to gaze at them with empty eyes, only to fall back lazily to a more comfortable position without showing any real curiosity.

"It's horrible!" Alaia shuddered. "They're all idiots."

"Highly specialized breeding, probably. I imagine they're a distinct sub-species. Contented cattle, as opposed to the yoke oxen."

She murmured a protest. They moved on. The park was a garden spot, overgrown with fruit-bearing trees and vines. Alaia plucked a pulpy, pink-skinned fruit, but he caught her hand on its way to her mouth.

"It must be all right," she said. "I saw a nurse eating one."

He hesitated, then let her take a bite. "Good!" she smiled.

"I'll wait, thanks. If you put on a blank look and start nursing babies, then I'll know."

She sputtered and spat and tossed the rest of it away. "Go to hell!" she snapped, reddening furiously.

They came to a low wall and looked over it into another section of the nursery park. There were children of a higher age group, but no wet nurses. He caught sight of a saffron adult wandering among the trees—a man.

"Two to three-year-olds, Sahl. What *is* this place?"

"Stockyard, I think. Come on, let's see the whole thing."

Chapter IX

THE MESA proved to include about five square miles of land, and Sahl estimated that the park contained approximately four thousand children, ranging in age from a few weeks to eight years. No one molested them as they wandered, although the cold, objective stares of the supervisors made him feel somehow that they were control units of Eridanian masters. Indeed, the older children themselves

seemed occasionally to move and gaze with a solemnity that was somehow unchildlike. He saw one incident that he could only interpret as a release-shock phenomenon.

The child, an eight-year-old, stood gravely by the wall at the far end of the enclosure, hands folded behind his back, feet spread slightly, head erect. He watched them with adult-seeing eyes, quietly observing a disinterested and interpretive silence. As Sahl crouched and leaped to pluck a fruit, the child's eyes seemed to measure the height of the jump, and he nodded slightly to himself. After they had passed, Sahl glanced back. The child had slumped to the ground, was clutching his head in his hands and moaning. A look of idiocy had spread across his face. The biologist remembered the reaction of the ship's crew to the death of the master, and he pursed his lips thoughtfully.

Alaia touched his arm suddenly. "Look—a stone building, there in the trees. It's covered with vines."

"First one we've seen," he murmured, coming to a halt. "Unless you count the unwalled rain-shelters. Let's have a closer look."

They wandered closer, but Sahl suddenly drew his gun and stiffened.

"What's wrong? What do you see?"

"Notice the door. Five feet tall, no more. Not built for human convenience."

"Look what's hanging over it."

"One of the fur balls, like the thing we saw in the brush."

THEY ADVANCED slowly. The creature hung by a tentacle from a peg set in the wall. The other tentacle was coiled about a half devoured fruit that it had plucked from the vines. The single eye surveyed their approach unwinkingly. Suddenly it set the fruit on a small ledge over the door and thrust the tentacle through a small hole in the wall just beneath the ledge. The tentacle seemed to writhe for a moment, then withdrew and picked up the fruit again.

"Sahl, I heard a chime ring just then. Inside the building."

"So did I. The little fellow up there is apparently a doorman."

She stared at it for a moment. "It might be quaint, if I weren't so scared."

"Quaint? Mmmm—which is more advanced: a photoelectric warning rig, or a biomechanism whose only purpose in life is to do a task like that?"

"Rhetorical question. Shall we try the door."

"Why? It looks like it's opening for us."

They stopped a few feet away, guns ready, gazing into what appeared to be an empty anteroom.

"What opened it?"

"We'll find out."

Sahl thrust his head gingerly inside, glanced around quickly, then withdrew it. "Another fur ball," he muttered, "hanging on the inside wall. Some system."

"You are invited to enter," called a voice from inside the building.

"Sahl, there's one of them in there!"

"Maybe." He hesitated for a long

moment, then shrugged. "We might as well go in, but keep that crystal-gun ready."

They stepped cautiously into the anteroom. The door swung slowly closed behind them. Light came from openings along the top of the wall. The ceiling nearly brushed the top of Sahl's head, touched when he stood on tiptoe. They faced an opposing door, but it remained closed. Briefly, he wondered if they had walked into a trap.

"If you will replace your weapons in your clothing, we shall permit you to pass. We cannot trust your impulsiveness."

"They *are* in there," he conceded to Alaia.

"Well, what next?"

He paused, then spoke to the voice. "I'll put my automatic away, but we won't give up the anaesthetic weapon."

The voice hesitated, then: *"Agreed. But I advise you against its use."*

A TENTACLE opened the door for them, and they approached slowly. Another room beyond it, this one richly furnished. The Eridanian sat on a softly padded couch, facing them with a calm, piercing gaze. Two eight-year-olds flanked him. Their weapons, and their coldly adult expressions, told Sahl that they were telecontrolled by the Eridanian. All remained motionless for a few seconds, and Sahl's eyes quickly swept the room. A young girl lay sleeping on a pallet, one of the parasite creatures rooted in her back. Twisted plants with fat protuberances grew in urns at each end of the Eridanian's couch. Similar parasites, with their pale-skinned fruit, grew tangled with the plants rooted in the protuberances. Sahl suppressed an exclamation of disgust.

"Our feeding method disturbs you," came the voice from an opening in the wall behind the Eridanian's couch. "The process is biologically favorable, however. There are virtually no waste products in the milk of the *wretr;* hence, our digestive organs are much simpler and less subject to disturbance than your own. Your disgust is a primitive reaction."

"I wasn't aware than I had expressed it," he growled.

"I perceive it," said the Eridanian, through the mechanical voice. "You have not been bred for telepathetic aptitude, nor conditioned for it, but I can easily perceive your overall semantic state."

Sahl looked around again. "How did you get the translator up here without us noticing it?"

"We did not. It was taken to the nearest city. A . . . uh . . . saffron lies in the next room, responding in his own language to my statements. His voice is being transmitted to the city by radio and fed into the translator. The translation is rebroadcast to this station. That is what you hear. The method seems complicated, but within a few days we shall have conditioned our saffrons—several of them—to speak your tongue."

Sahl frowned thoughtfully. "What frequencies—"

The creature on the couch seemed to purr, and Sahl somehow felt that it was a chuckle.

"You ask that, wondering if the signals are being picked up by your ship on our moon. That is very probable. We established communication with Wolek Parn as soon as we picked up the translator with its language-content. We have nothing to hide. I might mention that your leader seemed more disturbed by the death of our emissary than we have been."

"You *aren't* disturbed?" Sahl asked coldly.

"It was unfortunate," the creature conceded, "but we do not share your view of death. When a *Piszjil*—as the sub-species calls us—dies, he does not die in the same sense that you would understand. Because of telepathetic resonance conditions, the *Piszjil* focus of consciousness is not sharply limited to a single individual, but is to a certain extent distributed."

"A racial consciousness?"

"Not quite. I have a distinct personality, and the body you see is its central point. But It extends also to all of my kind within approximately a ten-mile radius. If you were to destroy me, my memories and thought-patterns and feelings would still live in the others. We are born as distinct individuals, you see, but as we grow older we become composite personalities, and even centuries after death, some trace of awareness remains in others of our kind. Eventually, for all practical purposes, the individual ego dies out, or is subsumed by others—but there is no sharply defined death."

ALAIA MOVED a step closer and stared down at the small man-thing. The two guards swung their weapons toward her quietly. "For what are you going to use these children here on the mesa?" she demanded in a voice full of restrained hate.

The *Piszjil* blinked at her once with semi-transparent lids that covered yellow eyes with black slits for pupils. He drew a robe of pale green gauze more closely about his shoulders and studied her quietly before speaking.

"If your feelings become overt," he warned, "I shall have to anaesthetize you. Your question is an aggressive demand, but I shall answer nevertheless. The children are brought here at birth from the free villages on the plain—"

"*Free?*" Sahl interrupted.

"Yes. Theirs is a folk society, and quite fixed in cultural form. We do not interfere with their lives, except to levy a certain percentage of the birth rate, which is quite high. The percentage of males we take is such that the male-female ratio in the adult population of the villages remains one to seven."

"Seven wives apiece, eh?"

The *Piszjil* paused. "Their mating customs are rather free, but it works out about like that, usually. We make an occasional census, and it varies only slightly from year to year. They bring the children to us of their own accord. It is a religious ceremony for them, since they attach a sacredness to our race. The mother frequently objects, but the children that they keep are raised communally, and she soon

transfers her affection to others. The priests bring our levy to us here at regular intervals."

"You haven't answered my question!" Alaia snapped.

The *Piszjil* ignored her, and continued: "You have seen the park, but have not understood its significance. This building is the center of influence. There are other rooms where Tutors sit in trance, continually exerting an effort to establish liaison with the growing children. It is established gradually at first, then reaches a sudden strongness of response at about eight years. When the liaison is perfectly achieved—if it *is*—the children are ready to leave the park."

"And if it isn't achieved?"

"There are failures, of course," said the *Piszjil*, gesturing with a fragile hand toward the girl who slept on the pallet, with the parasite rooted in her back. "But they are useful. The *wretr*'s milk differs according to the nature of the host. Some hosts are vegetable, some animal. It provides a variety of diet—"

"Beast!" A sudden scream of rage from Alaia.

Sahl caught at her arms to restrain her, but she savagely tore herself free and darted toward the *Piszjil*'s couch with obviously murderous intent. The weapons of the child-guards coughed together. She staggered a few steps, then crumpled with a sob at the foot of the couch.

Sahl had crouched and drawn his automatic. The child-guards kept their weapons trained on him, but did not fire. The *Piszjil* watched him without change of expression.

"In our cooperative world," it said slowly, "we have found lethal weapons unnecessary for many thousands of years. We are certainly capable of manufacturing them in a very short time, however."

The toneless voice seemed to contain a threat. Sahl straightened quietly and lowered the weapon, but kept it in hand. His scalp was bristling, and he fought an urge to kill the thing immediately.

"In fact," the *Piszjil* continued, "since the coming of your ship, we have assembled three rockets, well-armed and capable of destroying your Ark. Modify your behavior accordingly."

Chapter X

THE CONFERENCE continued, almost as if there had been no interruption. Alaia lay unconscious before the creature's couch, and Sahl watched her breathing. Her presence had become a handicap, for he could neither run nor fight as long as she lay helpless.

He remembered his own words about the possibility of spending Faron, and suddenly wondered if they had not sprung from an unconscious wish to see the chemist dead. He realized vaguely that he was attracted to Alaia, who was obviously devoted to Faron.

"We inform you of conditions as they exist, you see," the *Piszjil* was saying. "Understandably, your people will be horrified for a time. On the other hand, you must understand our position. Our ancestors

brought specimens of the highest life-form on your planet at the time." It gestured toward the child-guards. "You have a common ancestry with them, but at the time of capture they were scarcely more than apes. Their language consisted of perhaps two hundred words. They used fire when they found it; clubs and levers and sharp sticks their only tools.

"To us, they were only animals, potentially useful. We bred them selectively, weeding out the ferocious, saving the placid, the clever, the telepathically apt. The hairlessness was a concession to the beauty-standards of our more egocentric ancestors. Look at them, Morgun Sahl. Your rather distant cousins—human, I think, but different in that they lack your aggressiveness and egotism. Their development has paralleled your own in some respects, in others it has differed. They belong to us now, by their own wish. Does it still horrify you?"

Sahl remained silent, knowing that the *Piszjil* could feel the flood of suppressed anger about him.

"As for this park," the creature went on, "we regard it as philanthropic. Our own young reach maturity in similar gardens on other tablelands. That should convey to you that we do not see our relationship with the sub-species as one of ruthless exploitation."

Be kind to your dog, Sahl thought bitterly, then stared at the *Piszjil* with sudden interest. "You are mammals?" he asked.

The yellow eyes narrowed slightly, and the *Piszjil* paused, as if sensing Sahl's shift in mood from frustrated anger to cautious interest.

"No, we oviposit our young—in a symbiotic relationship with another species."

"I don't understand."

THE MAN-THING hesitated, then lifted a slender arm, closed its eyes, and seemed to be in communication with some unseen person. A shutter clicked behind him, and a picture flashed into projection on the wall over the couch. It revealed a short, waddling creature with fat legs and a small head and a fat spherical body. Somehow, it reminded Sahl of a plucked chicken.

"A *drulrul,*" the *Piszjil* said. "An egg-bearer. After fertilization, our eggs are transferred to these creatures to await birth." It paused to purr amusement. "An advantageous system for the females of our race."

"Yeah. Complete emancipation for women. I know some people who'd think it a great idea."

The scene shifted slowly, scanning over a waddling herd of the egg-carriers, then backing away for a view of the whole mesa. It appeared similar to the garden of children, except that a slender pylon arose in the center, marking it for what it was. The projection vanished suddenly.

"We have nothing to withhold, you see," the creature said. "Your species is intelligent enough to find out for itself eventually. So we will answer your questions honestly."

"Then suppose you tell us what you intend to do about our colony."

"Certainly. You will be permitted to land, but your spacecraft will be impounded. You will not be harmed, but you will submit to a period of indoctrination and comfortable detention. Then, everyone who is willing to cooperate will be allowed to go free."

"To do as we wish?"

"Yes."

"Will we be permitted to establish the colony in a geographically isolated area—such as an island group?"

There was a long silence. The *Piszjil* at first seemed to be reluctant to speak. His lids fell closed, and he communicated with another for a time. At last he looked up.

"We insist on assigning the areas ourselves. We will have you transported to them, of course. Afterwards, however, you may leave those places if you choose."

SAHL MUSED over the plural for a moment. Obviously they meant to break the colony up into groups. How small?

"What kind of places will they be?"

Again the *Piszjil* hesitated. "Your ignorance of our life-forms would permit you to survive nowhere except in the free villages of the subspecies. Naturally, however, we cannot inflict your whole group on a single native village."

A shred of suspicion flickered in his mind. "How many sub-groups?"

Silence. Sahl asked the question again.

"A large number. One couple to a village, perhaps."

"Neighboring villages?"

"Randomly selected. But as I said, if you are not content you may leave, after you have gained enough knowledge to survive. You may regroup again, if you wish."

"Uh-huh. And what kind of transportation for the regrouping?"

"Such as they have in the villages."

"Aircraft? Surface vehicles?"

"The latter."

"Powered by?"

"The villages have no technology. But the system of using domesticated life-forms is highly developed."

"The equivalent of horse-drawn vehicles, in other words."

The creature's mouth flickered open for an instant, revealing the retracted fangs. A grimace of irritation? he wondered.

"And what is the total land area over which these free villages are distributed?"

"About—" The *Piszjil* stopped suddenly, eyes narrowing. "The direction of your questioning becomes obvious. Perhaps we underestimated your cleverness. Very well, I'll give you the answer to what you want to know, before you ask it: We regard it as probable that your colony will not reassemble, once it is dispersed. But after a few generations, of course, a number of them will spring up."

"That wasn't to be my last question," Sahl growled.

The *Piszjil* leaned forward slightly, eyes glowing. "Very well. Then ask it."

"I'll state it instead!" he snapped. "A simple knowledge of our lan-

guage, and the translator's ability to handle it, indicates that you acquired knowledge of the semantic content of our words when you extracted the words from us. Otherwise, the translator could only supply literal word-exchanges. Ergo: you must know the semantic content of the word 'incest,' know it's taboo."

"Go on."

"You know that if you settle one couple in a village, the children will be likely to shun brother-sister marriages, at least as long as the parents are alive. You know that they would grow up among the natives and probably regard them as the 'norm', since our children would be outnumbered. It is inevitable that those children would merge into the native culture, inter-marry, lose interest in things outside the settlement. In a couple of generations you would have the hybrids that you apparently want, and they would respect you just as the natives do—as their demi-gods. You could then transplant them—the hybrids—to isolated colonies and do with them as you saw fit. And that would be?"

HE WAITED for an answer. The man-thing inclined its head slightly toward him, and purred softly. "A logical analysis of our motives, Morgun Sahl. We respect the abilities of your young race. Your abilities make you both valuable and a threat to us." He gestured toward the saffron children again. "Our selective breeding developed a certain amount of intelligence in them. But nature, using the same raw material, apparently did a better job—in your people. We think that a hybrid species, combining the docility with higher intelligence and initiative, would be of more use to us, you see. In performing difficult tasks, these folk require constant telepathic control. We think an increase in intelligence would relieve us of some of the burdens of constant supervision."

Sahl laughed humorlessly. "One creature supplies you with food. Another carries your young. Another opens your doors and rings your bells. Others do your labor. Don't you realize that you're heading toward complete dependence? Parasitism, when your descendants will be utterly worthless."

"The symbiosis is beneficial to all concerned," the *Piszjil* said stiffly. "The sub-species benefit by direction, which we supply."

The biologist shook his head. "We won't accept. The colony will make the trip back to Earth rather than agree."

"I spoke of the weapons we built," warned the *Piszjil*. "We will destroy you rather than let you leave. Your race is beginning a space expansion. We cannot let you carry back knowledge of our world to your home."

"Then you'll have to destroy us!" the biologist said harshly.

A purr. "But one of your numbers has already accepted."

"Faron Qun!" he gasped. "I don't believe it!"

"You'll see him soon. And, of course, we have the female here." He gestured toward the girl on the

floor. "And you as well. A small beginning, perhaps, but if we have to destroy the ship . . ." He seemed to shrug.

Sahl's face went expressionless. "We're prisoners? You said—"

A long, quavering purr—and the creature's lips spread in what could only be the equivalent of mocking laughter.

SAHL LIFTED the automatic and shot it through the braincase. It looked startled, and its fangs flicked out full length. He shot it again in the belly. The child-guards went into shock. One of them shrieked.

A weapon coughed behind him, and crystals stung his neck. His final impression of his surroundings was a blurred perception of the couch's motion. It was bleeding where the bullet had entered it after passing through the master's body. It lifted a small, rodent-like head which had been retracted, turtle-fashion. It squealed with pain and started staggering toward Sahl on short thick legs. Dimly, he saw that it meant to attack him.

But it was badly wounded. It managed to collapse on top of him, then died. The breath, and the awareness, went out of him.

Chapter XI

HELLO, SAHL. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Who is this? Who's talking? I can't see you."

"Of course you can't. We're talking by wire. This is Faron or, as my wives call me, Faroon. Isn't it beautiful here?"

"What are you talking about?" Sahl growled weakly as he lay on something soft and stared at a blue-lighted ceiling.

The chemist laughed heartily. "The planet! The scenery! The people! And—the *Piszjil!*" He paused, and his voice went reverent. "Yes, especially the *Piszjil!*"

"What's wrong with you?" The biologist trembled with anger. "You crazy or something? Where's Alaia? Where are you? And how did I get here?"

"Don't you *know?*" Faron called enthusiastically. "Aren't you *aware?* Oh, but they'll help you be aware, really aware. Of purpose, Sahl! Of high purpose!"

"Yeah?"

"Yes! I'm in a village, Sahl! A dozen beautiful wives! Wonderful, wonderful, everything's wonderful!"

"That's nice." He hesitated, feeling something tie a knot in his stomach. "Where's Alaia?"

"Who?"

"Alaia, *Alaia!*" he barked. "A-L-A-I-A. Where is she? What's wrong? Have you completely lost your mind?"

"Who?" Faron's voice was baffled.

Sahl shivered violently. "The girl you were probably going to marry, you maniac! What's *wrong* with you?"

"Nothing! Nothing ever!" The chemist giggled. "Marry? I'm married a dozen times."

Sahl licked his lips, found himself panting. "Faron! Are you drugged? Doped? Or just insane? What day is it? Is the Ark all right?"

There was a long pause, then: "I think it's you that's out of your head, Sahl. Ark? What do you mean by 'Ark'? Noah's Ark? Arc of a circle? Say—you give me the *creeps!* So long, fellow!"

A sharp click.

"Hello! Hello!" he bellowed.

"Hello!" said quite another voice, one that was in the room.

He rolled his head and stared at a saffron servant who sat impassively in the corner, arms folded across his chest, eyes closed. Automaton, he realized, a control unit.

"Well?" he demanded.

"I am the *Piszjil, Fyff,* semanticist and psycho-logician. I am not in the room with you; no need to look."

"What's going on?"

"Your memory has been blanked for the past eight days. How do you feel?"

"Weak."

"A result of the conditioning process, perhaps. You experienced considerable pain."

"I was talking to Faron Qun. What happened?"

"The conversation with him was arranged as a demonstration for you. He was subjected to our conditioning methods, and the experiment was a complete success. He has been stripped of large patches of memory. He thinks he is still on Earth somewhere. He is confused, of course, by the blank-spots, but we filled them in with pseudo memories. He was an easy subject."

SAHL FELT the heat flooding his face. His lips twisted, but the curse wilted in his throat. Suddenly his voice was gone. He gasped and strangled, and struggled against his bonds. Dizziness, exhaustion, then nausea that left him drained. Slowly he relaxed, slowly the rage drained away. Then he lifted his hands easily to his face. *There were no bonds!* But he had felt them!

The fellow in the corner made a cackling sound, possibly a response to *Fyff*'s amusement. "With you we could not achieve complete success. Your memory is nearly intact. You clung very stubbornly to recollections, no matter how unpleasant we managed to make them for you. Given time, we could probably succeed. But time is short, and we can use you better as you are."

Another flood of anger, another choked off curse, followed by the sensation of strangulation and fear and sickness. He could not move. When at last he subsided, the fellow cackled again.

"Is something wrong, Morgun Sahl?"

He sucked in a slow breath and kept himself calm. "What have you done to me?"

"Conditioned you against overt aggression in any form toward our race. That, at least, was successful. You will not be able to attack, condemn, or harm a *Piszjil* in any way. If you persist in trying, you will only find yourself stricken by convulsion, perhaps unconsciousness."

Sahl suppressed a surge of anger about to burst forth. He lay breath-

ing heavily, too stricken to speak.

"You'll also find that it's impossible for you to express an opinion that runs contrary to our wishes. You may feel it, but you can't express it. Eventually it'll probably frustrate you to such an extent that you'll have to come around to our way of thinking or go mad. The conditioning won't last forever, but by the time it dies out you'll be either a conformist or insane, like Qun."

It won't last forever, It won't last forever—his mind caught at the phrase and clung.

"I wonder if most of your people are as stubborn as you, or as flexible as Qun. We shall soon know, of course."

Good, he thought, they hadn't gotten the others off the moon yet, at least. And if he knew Wolek Parn, they wouldn't manage to do it. They'd have to destroy Ark, colony and all.

"What do you plan to do with me?" he asked aloud.

"Use you as an agent to Wolek Parn."

"I don't understand."

"Parn remains stubborn, even though we broadcast your messages to him. He is half-convinced, but not quite. He insists on talking to you in person before he agrees to your proposals."

"Messages?" he gasped. "Proposals? I didn't—" The denial choked off into a low wheeze. Dizzyness again, and fright. He couldn't say it. The words refused to come, and he stammered gibberish.

The spokesman cackled. "A taboo statement, Morgun Sahl."

His helplessness enraged him, and the rage made the situation worse. He blacked out for a few moments. Then he lay weakly struggling to keep some sort of mental balance.

"Try saying, 'I recommend that the whole colony land on the planet without further delay.' "

"I—I—" He swallowed hard. The statement fascinated him strangely. No harm in seeing what happens, he thought. Then he said it. "I recommend that the whole colony land . . ."

THE REACTION was immediate. A feeling of warmth, of relief, a sense of security and of relaxation spread over him. For a moment there was perfect contentment and peace. From this too he recovered gradually, and icy fear replaced it. He was beginning to see.

"Is that the state of mind Faron Qun is in?" he gasped.

"Yes! Precisely! Wouldn't that be pleasant?"

He wanted to bellow a fierce negative, but he checked the impulse before he strangled on it. "You know my answer," he said quietly.

"Indeed I know it, but you can't make it. Now, as to your task—"

"I won't . . . *Won't . . . uhg!* . . ."

The *Piszjil* waited until he finished choking, then continued: "A ship will take you to the Ark. Your task is to convince Wolek Parn to send the colony down at once, in a place we'll specify. You'll perform the task, because by that time you'll

be fully aware of your limitations, and awareness will actually serve to strengthen the block. You'll be consciously frightened as well as subconsciously. You can't help doing it, and you might as well face it."

Sahl remained silent, fearful of another spasm.

The *Piszjil* paused briefly, then continued slowly: "Consider this. After it's done, you'll be well rewarded. You'll have a pleasant life, in pleasant surroundings. Peace. Relative freedom. Eventually, you'll be content with it. Man, what more do you want? Why insist upon dominion?"

The biologist moistened his lips. He lay staring blankly at the ceiling, refusing to speak, trying not to think. He could not risk any reaction lest it prove to be a dead-end of despair. If I blunder into too many forbidden responses, he thought, I'll really get confused. I'll save it until I get to Parn, he continued, and then I'll throw a sputtering convulsion all over his command deck. He'll know *something's* wrong.

"Now," said his tormentor. "Would you like to see Alaia Dazille?"

He sat up quickly. "May I?"

"Out the door, three rooms down the corridor, and down the short incline to the seats. Go ahead."

"I'm not locked in?"

"No. Go anywhere you like—if you can."

If you can. He had a fair idea of what would happen if he tried to escape. He refused to try. He would save it all up for Wolek Parn, and then rebellion. He left the room and followed the *Piszjil's* directions. Was he making a mistake? I must suppress all possibly forbidden responses, he thought, lest I make the whole situation worse.

He walked down the incline and through a sound-proofed door. As soon as he opened it, he heard her scream. He froze for a moment, looking beyond the door. Nothing but a tier of seats next to a railing, and beyond the rail a pit. It reminded him of an operaing room. Somehow it looked familiar. He advanced slowly toward the rail.

As Alaia's scream died, a monotonous voice echoed through the huge room. "Repeat the incident again."

He heard a faint sob. Alaia's. What were they doing to her? The same thing they had done to him—and to Faron with more success. He knew it vaguely, as he knew he had been in this room before. He reached the rail and looked down. She lay on her back in the center of a metal-plated floor far below. A *Piszjil* sat at a control-panel watching her coldly, while his saffron spokesman sat as if asleep behind him.

"Repeat the incident again," the voice insisted, as the creature touched a control.

A humming sound filled the room. She spoke slowly, as if in a trance, and he had to listen closely to understand her words.

"Sahl, put that rod down! For God's sake! No . . . !" A pause, then a more frantic note: "You hit him! Sahl! You broke his leg! Faron, get out of his way! He's gone berserk!"

SAHL'S KNUCKLES whitened on the rail. He clenched his teeth to keep from shouting a denial that he knew could never pass the block. They were forging memories, rooting out old ones, making new ones! Had they done the same to him?

"Sahl, I've got a gun . . . Put the rod down . . . Put it down, and let him alone . . . Sahl! Get away from me . . . Get back or I'll *shoot!* . . . *Sahl! All right!* I warned you! Now it's too—"

Her voice stopped suddenly. She made a choking sound. Then: *"It's a lie, it's a lie, it's a lie!* You're making me imagine this. I didn't kill him. *I didn't kill . . ."*

drrrnnnnnnnggggggg—

A sudden drone of surging power. As he stared, an aura of corona discharge flickered around her body like pale phosphorescence. Her screams were wild, insane, piercing. Sahl's belly was a sick knot. He hung panting on the rail, unable to draw himself away. The corona shimmered and flared and hissed—and subsided a little.

"All right!" she shrieked. "All right! Anything! I killed him! Okay! Make it stop!"

Abruptly the corona disappeared. The Eridanian pressed another control. He heard a faint buzz of power, but there was no glow display. Alaia moaned—apparently with relief.

"Thank God!" she kept saying. "Thank God! Don't let it stop. Ohhhhh . . ." And then her voice became a low mumble of relief.

The buzz of power died. He saw her stiffen.

"Repeat the incident again," said the calm voice.

She was silent for a moment, then spoke nervously. "I really didn't kill him; the gun went off accidentally."

A long pause. Then the operator said, "Repeat the incident again, as you recall it."

Sahl gritted his teeth. They were making her invent a false memory. He listened to her going through the imaginary scene again as if she were actually feeling, seeing, hearing it.

"Alaia!" he shouted. "Alaia! Up here!"

Nothing happened. No response either from the girl or from his internal system of blocks. She continued the reenactment.

"Alaia! *It's a lie*—oh! Uhg!" His voice choked off, and he gasped for air. Crying hysterically, he slipped to the floor—and knew he had lost. They hadn't managed to blank his memory, but they had made him helpless.

He knew dismally that he would do exactly what they wanted him to. Maybe it would be better to wind up like Faron. Faron at least didn't have to realize his condition. And it would be easy, just to let the unwanted things slip away into oblivion. To forget, and accept.

That thought too was planted in you, warned the voice of sanity.

Suddenly Alaia was screaming again that it was all a lie, a rotten lie, and it had never really happened. Then the terrifying *drrrnngg* of the pain-making aura that seared every nerve ending without numbing or damaging tissue. Her screams

came to him this time as inevitable effect of known cause. She was trying to hang on the way he had done —but could do no longer.

He picked himself up slowly and crept back to his cage. And something had slipped away, although he was not quite aware of what he had lost.

Chapter XII

"IT'S GOOD to see you back, Sahl," Wolek Parn said wearily as they entered the Captain's cabin on the Ark, "even though I can't say you were much of a diplomat—killing two of them, behaving like a wild animal." He paused to glance back at the biologist with mixed emotion, most of it carefully restrained. "You look worn out, worried. I suppose your visit was pretty unnerving in spots."

Sahl nodded thoughtfully, felt a constriction in his throat, and muttered, "Not bad."

The capain sat down and remained silent for a moment. Sahl stood quietly facing him and waiting. He dared make no long speeches, nor any unfavorable comment about the planet, or its keepers. He knew what he could say, and what was unspeakable. Over a week had passed since his first experience with the conditioned blocks, and he had learned the limitations.

"How's Alaia?" Parn asked.

"Fine," he said casually. Lying face down, he thought, with a baby parasite burrowing into her back. They had done *that* for *him*. If he convinced Parn to bring the colony down, they'd remove the parasite from her before its roots grew too deep. If he failed, they said they'd let it stay.

"How's Faron?"

"Fine," he lied in the same tone.

Parn sighed deeply. "I'm a little disappointed in you, Sahl. But then —we won't go into that. Results count, I guess—and they apparently aren't bitter about the two dead ones, nor about your behavior. All I wanted you back here for was to confirm what you said on the telecast. I was a little suspicious that you might be coerced, or hypnotized, and made to say it. You weren't, were you?"

"No." They had told him what he had said on the telecast, but he hoped he wouldn't have to repeat any of it now. Ridiculous position I'm in, he thought, with the only club *inside* my head. What was worse, he knew a way to attack, a way to strike out at the *Piszjil,* but he could neither do it, nor reveal it to Parn. A weapon, but it couldn't be used. He had known about it in a general way for quite a while, but now the knowledge was more specific. And useless.

"You confirm everything you said in the broadcast then?"

For a time, he tried to remain silent. But the silence itself was forbidden, and after a moment he had to choke it out.

"I confirm it all."

Parn was staring at him peculiarly. "You feel all right? You look pale. There's nothing wrong with you now, is there?"

"Nothing, nothing at all."

Parn's hand slipped unobtrusively to a panel of buttons. He pressed one of them quietly, then folded his hands under his chin and put on a sour smile. He spent the next five minutes talking about the hard time he had endured trying to handle the restless colonists during the delegation's absence.

THE HATCH opened suddenly, and two men entered: Doctor Roli Karme and a burly colonist. They glanced at Parn, then at the biologist. Karme put out a big hand and spoke with a friendly half-grin.

"Glad to see you, Sahl."

The biologist noticed that he was carrying a medical kit in his other hand. He frowned slightly and wondered.

"How much time?" Karme muttered mysteriously to the Captain.

Parn gestured toward the screen. "There's their ship waiting for him. It's obviously armed this time. They wanted to come with him, but I refused. They may come anyway, if we take too long."

What were they talking about? He began to feel frightened.

Karme turned to him with the friendly smile. "Would you stretch out on that cot, Sahl. I want to examine you. Won't take long."

"Wh-why?" He couldn't do it, if it were for a forbidden purpose. But then, he shouldn't have asked.

"Just want to see that you're all right."

Physically? He bore no physical marks. He nodded slighly and obeyed. Karme made a very cursory inspection, then produced a hypo syringe. He pulled at Sahl's sleeve.

"What's that for? What—?"

"Just a sedative. Won't affect you for long."

"I don't need--" But Karme had deftly stung him with it and emptied the barrel in a moment.

He began to feel warm and relaxed. The doctor slipped something around his arm and pulled it tight.

"Blood pressure?"

"Same kind of thing, isn't it?" came the non-committal answer.

But then Karme had another syringe, and this time he probed for a vein. When Sahl protested, the burly colonist came in and sat on him, and Parn held his arm. The lights went dimmer by degree, and the room swirled about him.

"Let's go back to the telecast," said a distant voice. "Sahl, you're telecasting to Captain Parn about the planet . . ."

Events became a tide of confusion. Questions. Answers. Shouts. There was fear, and deep retreat into blackness, so deep that answering became impossible, and consciousness was briefly gone. How long did it last? There was no spacing of events called "time" in the confusion. Events came and went, but there was no order among them. Voices plagued him, demanded the impossible of him, and finally let him alone.

THE FIRST voice he heard and understood was Parn's. He lay with his eyes closed and listened.

"I can't understand it, Roli. Sahl

always seemed like a fairly stable fellow, sour sometimes, and chilly. I just can't see him making an impassioned speech; it's out of character."

"He made it all right. The memory's there somewhere, because snatches of it came out. He made the telecast, but—"

"What?"

"The way it came out this time was . . . well, mechanical, and frantic. Didn't it strike you that way?"

"Yeah, and this other thing bothers me too."

"The sensitive areas? I can't understand it either, Skipper. Why should he put up such a howl when I put him through the killing of that second *Piszjil* again? He couldn't have reacted that way while he did it. He was—"

Sahl sat up with a sudden shudder. "I couldn't kill one of them!" he shouted. "I couldn't!"

The three of them turned to watch him for a moment, and exchanged quiet glances among themselves. He slumped, covering his face with his hands. Something had slipped away from him for a time, but now he remembered. There had been a time when he could kill the things if need be. But now—it was different.

"Listen to me, Sahl," Karme said quietly, and waited for the biologist to look up. "We know something's wrong. Your response mechanisms are fouled up in spots. Speech and motor areas are affected. You block to certain things, refuse a response, and retreat. Not now, but under the drug. Now you're conscious, and you can choose alternate responses —cover up for the blocks. Under the drug, you didn't. Now, do you understand what I mean?"

He understood perfectly, but he could only say, "Nothing happened. I'm all right."

A long silence, then Karme said, "I want you to respond to my next questions by saying just the *opposite* of what you mean. If you mean 'yes', say 'no'. If you mean 'good', say 'bad'. All right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"First question: was the telecast authentically yours?"

He opened his mouth, but no sound came. The block was literal, and he couldn't say 'no'. But the block was also interpretive, and he couldn't communicate the facts by saying 'yes'. But if he remained silent they would know something was wrong, and that also was forbidden. He screamed.

"Grab him, quick!" Parn bellowed.

Someone was shaking him back to consciousness and he fought them. But the light was strong in his eyes, and the taste of neurodrine was in his mouth.

"You've got to send the colony down," he babbled. "It's fine, everything's fine."

A palm crashed hard across his face in a brutal slap. "Nothing personal, Sahl," Parn growled. "But if you don't snap out of it, I'm going to beat hell out of you."

SAHL HOPED he would do it. Anything, if it would help release the flood of pent-up knowledge and the unspeakable plan for

attack. Mentioning the plan wasn't blocked literally, for the *Piszjil* hadn't thought of it specifically, but he couldn't talk about it because of his own intent to use it against them. He lay panting and staring at Parn.

"Let him alone, Skipper," Karme said quietly. "He *wants* to say something, but he can't."

"I've seen enough!" the Captain grunted. "It's obvious that something's been done to him. We can't go down." He turned to watch the screen. "They're waiting out there for an answer. They haven't made any threats, but damned if I like the looks of that armament. The first ship didn't have it. They put it on for something."

"Why do they want us down there?" Karme complained. "Why should they invite a wild wolf to come wandering through their tame flocks?"

Sahl lay forcing the immediacy of the situation out of his mind, tried to force away the present, tried to think of nothing. Wolf, sheep, dog, rabbit—

"Rabbit," he said. "Somebody introduced rabbits into Australia."

"What's he babbling about?"

Karme fell thoughtful. "Historical incident. Intercontinental tampering with fauna. Introduction of a rabbit pest."

"So?"

Karme shrugged. "Means nothing to me."

It had meant a spasm of agony for Sahl. He tried again, rejecting the present, keeping only a vague notion in mind.

"Japanese beetles—huhhh!"

"He's choking!"

"He's trying to say something." Karme paused. "What do we have in the stocking lockers besides rabbits and rats?"

"Bees, weasels, blacksnakes, foxes —oh hell!—everything small and wild. Not to mention the seeds and nuts and bacteria cultures. *He* was supposed to decide which, if any, of the Earth-forms should be cut loose on the alien planet."

Karme turned to Sahl. "What *is* the answer to that, by the way?"

Just one small word. One small word would do it. And then it would be done. His jaw worked frantically, and his breathing was agonized. The conditioning. It *had* to wear off sometime, Fyff had said.

Just a word!

"Well?" the doctor insisted. "Which species should be released here?"

It came out in a scream of rage. *"Everything! EVERYTHING!"*

Particularly the weasels to attack the fat little egg carriers, and the foxes to kill the fur balls, and the rats to infest the cities, and the rabbits to gnaw on something vital until a flora sickened and shrank back from the rank aggressive grasses and the rampant weeds, until the towering trees arose to rob the modest gardens of sunlight. Villages would suffer famine and either wander or die, and there would be hell to pay for the designers of a tailored system. And Man? He could not safely enter the planet of peace, but a world in turmoil was just his meat. Famines made nomads, and someone had to lead a village in flight. It would be touch and go, for

awhile, but as a wandering savage, Man would have a chance. The colony had wanted nothing more in the beginning.

"Something cracked!" Karme snapped. "He's slipping into gibberish."

"What to do?"

"Find out what he's trying to say. I can take him down to the lab, try everything from hypnosis to insulin shock. It'll be pretty tough on him though. May not be much left when it's over."

"You have my permission to kill him," Parn said pleasantly.

Karme bent over the stricken biologist and frowned. "Now what the hell made him grin like that?"

Chapter XIII

THE LAUNCHES flew at low altitude, streaking through the night toward the dawn-line, and only an occasional creature looked up, or opened the palm of his hand skyward to see if the faint rattling in the brush was rain. Beyond the dawn-line and over the day-zone, and past the place where the landing was assigned, where a delegation waited, and turned, and frowned after the departing rockets.

No matter. They were foolish to try to escape, these launches. There was no place that they could land and make a break for freedom, for the world was subdued and orderly. The world was cut to a pattern, and the world would capture the colonists quickly, no matter where they tried to run.

The rockets landed on the night-side, two of them did. Two others disgorged their "colonists" in different places on the day-side. When the "colonists" were out, and scurrying away through the brush, the pilots emerged to wait.

A voice came from seven thousand miles away, and it spoke mockingly from the moon. "You have been pested," it said. "Your garden is full of weeds. And we are still up here."

"You will be destroyed immediately," came the curt cold answer.

"The pests are *our* pests, and we know how to deal with them," the mocker replied. "Do you?"

There was a worried silence.

"Refuel our launches and send them back up," demanded the moon-voice. "We're coming down."

Wolek Parn bracketed the microphone and grinned at the dazed man who lay on the cot.

"Brace up, Sahl. The worst pests that ever infested anyplace will be down there soon. Us. One of the pilots demanded that they let Alaia go, and Faron—if he wants to. I think they will."

Sahl's hand slipped over his forehead. There was a lot that he couldn't remember. Blank spaces.

"You got the idea across. I know it tore you up. You'll pull out okay, though. Of course, humans are still in for a rough go down there for awhile. But then—when haven't they been? We'll make out all right. We always have . . ."

THE END

Only One Question Is Eternal—
What Lies Beyond the Ultimate?

THE ONE *and* THE MANY

By Milton Lesser

THERE ARE some who tell me it is a foolish war we fight. My brother told me that, for one, back in the Sunset Country. But then, my brother is lame and good for nothing but drawing pictures of the stars. He connects them with lines, like a child's puzzle, and so makes star-pictures. He has fish stars, archer stars, hunter stars. That, I would say, is what is foolish.

Perhaps that is what started it all. I was looking at the stars, trying to see the pictures, when I should have been minding my sentry post. They took me like a baby, like a tot not yet given to the wearing of clothing. The hand came out of the darkness and clamped over my mouth, and I ceased my struggling when I felt a sharp blade pricking at the small of my back.

At first I feared that they would slay the entire camp as it slept and I cursed my brother for his star pictures, cursed our leader who had sent us here, twenty archers, against the Onist outpost on our country's border. But the Onists had other ideas. They took me away. I had to admire their vitality, because all night we ran through the silent woodlands, and they seemed tireless. I could maintain their pace, of course: but I'm a Pluralist.

I could see their village from a long way off, its night fires glowing in the dark. It was only then that we slowed our pace. Soon we entered the place, a roughly circular area within a stockade, and my captors thrust me within a hut. I

couldn't do much worrying about tomorrow, not when I was so tired. I slept.

I dreamed a stupid dream about the Onist beliefs, the beliefs of an unimaginative people who could picture one Maker and one Maker only. I must have chuckled in my sleep.

"You're awake."

A brilliant statement, that—because I had sat up, squinted into the bright sunlight streaming in through the doorway, yawned and stretched. The Onists, I tell you, lack imagination.

The girl who spoke was a pretty enough little thing for an Onist. She smiled, showing even white teeth. "Do you Pluralists eat?"

I nodded and rubbed my belly. I was to have had dinner after my turn as sentry the night before, and now I felt like I could do justice to my portion even at one of the orgies for which the Onists are so famous.

"Bring on your food and I'll show you," I told her, and she turned her back to walk outside. It was early and the village seemed silent—surely they hadn't intended this one slim maid to guard me! Yet she seemed alone.

I leaped at her, circled her neck with my arm, prepared to make my exit. They would laugh around our fire when I told them of this fine example of the Onist lack of foresight. . . .

Except that the girl yelped. Not loudly, but it was loud enough, and a big muscular Onist came striding in with his throwing spear. He backed me off into a corner, prodding my hungry belly with his weapon.

"Will you behave?"

I TOLD him I would and he backed outside, but this time I could see his shadow across the doorway.

The girl brought food and partook of it with me. I was surprised, because we Pluralists will not eat with an Onist out of choice. Well, I have said they are a strange people. Soon the girl stood up, patting her mouth daintily with a square of cloth, and in that, of course, she was trying to mime our graceful Pluralist women. "I suppose you think we are going to kill you," she said. Just like that.

"To tell you the truth, I haven't given it much thought. There isn't much I can do about it."

"Well, we're not. We could have done that back at your camp. We could have killed all of you. No, we want to show you something."

I had a ridiculous thought that they made star-pictures, too—even those who are not lame like my brother. I said, "Well, what will happen to me after you show me?"

She smiled. "You still think we're going to kill you. What's your name?"

I told her, but I thought: she can't even keep a conversation going without changing the subject.

"Jak," she repeated after me. "That's a common enough name. We have Jaks among our Onist people, you know."

"No, I didn't. But you probably copied it."

"I doubt that. We were here first, Jak. Our records say so. Probably, you once captured a man with that name, long ago, liked it, and took it for your people."

"*You* were here first!" I sneered. "Maybe that's what your records tell you, but it isn't so. Look: the Makers endowed us with life, then went away in to the sky. By mistake they left one idiot-Maker behind, and he had nothing to do. He made you Onists before he perished, and that is why you think there is only one Maker."

She seemed highly insulted. "Idiot-Maker? Idiot! There was only one Maker, ever, but because your minds cannot conceive of all that glory residing in one figure, you invented a score."

Now it was my turn to be indignant. "A score? Hundreds, you mean; thousands—more than there are leaves on the trees."

"Well, I won't argue with you. Our war has been arguing that point well enough." I was sorry she would not argue. She looked very pretty when she argued, her breasts heaving, her eyes sparkling fire.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Nari. My name is Nari. And don't tell me you had that name first!"

I smiled blandly. "Of course we did. I have an aunt, my mother's sister, who goes by that name. My brother's wife's cousin, also; but she is very ugly."

"And am I ugly?" Nari wanted to know. I guess in that sense at least, women are the same everywhere—Pluralist or Onist, it doesn't matter.

I LOOKED at her. I looked at her so hard that it made her blush, and then she looked even prettier. But I didn't tell her so.

"You will pass, for an Onist," I admitted. "I guess the Onists might consider you pretty; the Onist men might stamp their feet and shout if you go by—but then, they are Onists."

At that, she seemed on the verge of leaving my prison hut, but something made her change her mind. She stayed all morning and on into the afternoon. We argued all the time, except at midday, when she went outside to get our lunch. She stumbled a little and fell half against my shoulder. I moved toward her to hold her up, and it was the most natural thing in the world to take her in my arms and kiss her. She must have thought so, too; she responded beautifully—for an Onist.

After lunch, Nari did not mention the kiss, nor did I. It now seemed the most natural thing in the world not to talk about it. We argued some more, Nari defending her primitive beliefs, I trying to show her the light of truth. But it was no use: the war had been fought and the war would continue.

Later that day we set out. That came as a surprise to me, because I had taken it for granted that whatever the Onists wanted to show me was right here in this little village. A dozen of us went, and when we had been on the trail for some little time, Nari joined us, declaring that she wanted to see it again—whatever it was.

We went for three days, and al-

though these Onists turned out to be better woodsmen than I had thought, still, they could not match the skill we Pluralists have mastered over the generations. I believe I could have escaped, had I wanted to; but I hardly seemed a prisoner of war, and besides, once or twice when we had lagged to the rear of the column, Nari stumbled against me like that day in the hut, and what could I do but kiss her?

It was another village we reached at the end of our march, much bigger than the first. Surprisingly, it looked a lot like a Pluralist town, although it may only have seemed so because I had been out in the woodlands for three days. They took me straightways to the village square, and it was there that I saw the statue.

THESE statues of the Makers are rare, and I was surprised to see one in an Onist village. I got on my knees at once to do it reverence. I realize it was impious to look up, but I did—I had to see if it were the genuine thing. And it was, to the last detail. Constructed of the forbidden substance known as metal, it towered three times a Pluralist's height, or three times a Onist's, for that matter. I have always wondered why the Makers did not create our ancestors in their own substance, as they had fashioned us in their image. But that is an impious thought.

A stern gray-haired Onist who said he was Nari's father took me aside afterwards. "Now, Jak," he asked me, "what can you say of what you have seen?"

I shrugged. "I can say that somehow you've found one of the Maker statues. What more?"

"It's one, is it not?"

"Of course it's one. They are rare, but I have seen three, all told, in Pluralist villages."

"And each time they were separate? You never saw a group?"

"No. No I didn't."

He slapped his hands together triumphantly. "Then that proves it. Each is a copy of the original Maker, but there was only one. Otherwise you would have seen statues in groups. And that is why you are here, Jak: we want you to go back to your people and tell them what you saw."

I shook my head. "What you say isn't logical. So what if the statues are never in pairs or groups? We've only seen a few, when once there must have been many. Also, when your artists do their magic with dyes and create portraits, are they generally done one at a time or in groups?"

"One at a time, so the artist may capture the personality in each face, naturally. I have seen group portraits, but I think they are silly things."

"Exactly." Now I was triumphant. "Exactly as the Makers thought, which is why the statues are always single—"

"But it is impious to say there was more than one Maker! He had all the knowledge in the world at his fingertips, and so there was no need for more than one. More than this world, even: he went to the stars. Or don't you believe that?"

"Of course I believe it. Only, *they* went to the stars, the thousands of Makers. It isn't impious, because if you can think of one being as great as that, try to picture thousands. Yes, thousands. That makes me thousands of times more pious than you Onists."

He shook his head wearily. "What's the use? It is for this we are fighting our war, and we thought if we took one of you here, showed him the undeniable truth of our statue. . . . Well, will you at least return to your people with a tale of what you have seen?"

I agreed readily enough: probably, the alternative was death. Although Pluralists on rare occasions have been known to take Onist women as their wives, an Onist prisoner of war was an unwanted thing. The reverse would also be true.

THEY all bid me goodbye, except for Nari. I could not find her anywhere in the village, and a little sadly I set out on my long journey back to the Sunset Land. By now our raiding party had finished its work on the small Onist village on the rim of our country, and I could do nothing but return to my people, where we might plan new strategy against the unbelievers.

But I had wanted to bid Nari farewell.

I met her in the woodlands, a travel bag slung over her shoulder like a male's. "I wanted to say goodbye privately," she told me.

"Good," I said, but I knew she was lying. Else why the travel bag?

"Goodbye," Nari whispered, but she was not looking at me. Looking, instead, behind her, at the land of her people.

"Nari," I told her, "I have to admit it. You are very pretty—even by Pluralist standards. You are—"

This time she did not stumble against me. It wasn't necessary. I drew her to me, and I kissed her a long kiss. Then I told her I loved her, and women, I suppose, will always be women, because she said she knew it.

I will take Nari back to our village in the Sunset Land, where we will be married by the laws of my people. And if ever there is to be peace between the Pluralists and the Onists, it may, after all, come on these grounds. The Onists have their beliefs, and so I hate them for their impious thoughts. But the love of a man for a maid exists apart from that.

It won't be easy. Our arguing continued all the way back to the Sunset Land, and Nari is as stubborn as I am firm.

"There is one Maker," she said.

And I told her, "No, there are many."

Or later, as we neared the Sunset Land, we picked up the thread of our thoughts again. Pluralist or Onist, we androids are dogmatic creatures.

"One Robot created us all before he went to the stars," said Nari.

"Robots," I said. "Many Robots." But I kissed her.

THE END

They lifted Hoiman's scratch, thus causing him to lose much smoosh. So he grabbed his bum and hit the high orbit.

Hoiman and the Solar Circuit

By Gordon Dewey

PAY DAY! I scrawled my Larry Maloney across the back of the check and handed it to Nick, the bartender. "Leave me something to operate on," I told him.

Nick turned it over. "Still with the *News?*"

The question was rhetorical. I let it pass without swinging at it. I was mentally estimating the total of the pile of tabs Nick pulled out of the cash register, like a fighter on percentage trying to count the house. I didn't like the figure it gave me.

Nick added them up, then added them again before he pulled some bills out of the money drawer and said, "Here's thirty skins. Your rent due?"

"This'll cover it. I'll do my drinking here."

I went over to a booth and sat down. I lit a cigarette. I smoked. And waited. Presently Sherry, tall, dark and delicious, decided I was making like a customer, and strolled over. "Would you like a menu, Mr. Maloney?" she trilled.

"Larry to you," I reminded her. "No menu. Bring me a steak. Big. Thick. Rare. And a plate of french fries. No salad. Bread and butter. Coffee."

She managed at last to pull her writing hand out of mine, and I had to repeat the order. Unless it could be turned into money, Sherry's memory was limited strictly to the present instant.

She put in the order, then brought me a set-up. I let my eyes go over her, real careful, for maybe the thousandth time. No doubt of it—the lassie had a classy chassis.

It looked as though Hoiman's **Bum** *would be remembered on Mars.*

If she just wouldn't yak so damn much.

"Did you see the matches last night?" She didn't wait for my answer, just went on with the yat-a-ta. "I spent the whole evening just glued to my television set. I was simply enthralled. When the Horrible Hungarian got the Flying Hackensack on—"

"Standing Hackenschmidt, Sherry!"

"—poor little Billie McElroy I wanted to—to scratch his eyes out."

I pointed out that McElroy weighed in at two forty-one and had gone on to win the match. Sherry never heard me.

"And the way the Weeping Greek kept hitting the other fellow—the announcer said he was throwing Judo cutlets."

"*Cuts*, not cutlets."

"But aren't Judo cutlets illegitimate?" The barest hint of a puzzled frown tugged at her flawless brows as she poured ice water into my glass.

"The word," I repeated, "is *cuts*. And the blow is not illegal." I gave my eyes another treat. What a chassis. And *what* a mind. "Anything these days, so long as you don't kill your opponent, is legal in wrestling."

Suddenly we had company; a little man who made scarcely a sound as he slid into my booth and sat facing me. "Rassling, yet," he said, in bitter tones. "What a woid. Dun't be saying it." He helped himself to a cigarette from my pack lying on the table, and put the pack in his pocket. He lit the cigarette, using my lighter, which he held a moment longer than necessary before replacing it—regretfully—on the table.

He inhaled deeply. "Rassling!" he repeated. "Leave us not discuss it."

HE WAS thin, haggard, unkempt, and his brown suit—in which the chalk stripes were beginning to blend with the background—was threadbare. He needed a shave, and his fingernails were dirty. He was vaguely familiar. The beady little eyes flicked up at me, and all uncertainty dissolved.

"Oh, no!" I said. "Not you. Not—"

He exhaled a great cloud of smoke. "Hoiman Katz," he said, in dejected tones. "It is me, again. The same as like always, only not so better." He sighed.

Sherry's tongue had been shifting from one foot to the other, waiting for an opening. "Are you a wrestler, Mr. Katz?" she asked brightly.

Hoiman half rose from his seat, and the cigarette dropped from his lax mouth. Then he slumped down again, spread his hands, shrugged, and said, "Now I esk you!"

Sherry said, "I guess not." Then, "Shall I bring you something?" Her eyes were on me as she asked. She hadn't worked on Vine Street for six years without learning the ropes—about people at least.

I nodded.

Katz was waiting for the nod. He licked his lips. "I'll have a—"

"Planet Punch?"

"No. I'll have a—"

"Solar Sling? Martian Mule?"

Hoiman's eyes squinted shut, and he winced eloquently. "Martian!" he groaned. "With rassling, too! Bring me a bottle of beer. Two bottles!" After a moment he peered cautiously through slitted lids. "Is she gone?" he whispered. "Such woids. Rassling. Martian. Better I should have stood in Hollywood."

I laughed. "What's the matter with wrestling, Hoiman? Last I heard you were managing a good boy—what was his name?"

"Killer Coogan? That bum!"

I had to do some thinking back. "Yeah," I said, "that's the boy. Started wrestling back in the fifties. Good crowd pleaser. Took the Junior Heavyweight Championship from Brickbuster Bates. Had a trick hold he called the pretzel bend—hard to apply, but good for a submission every time when he clamped it on. Right?"

"Okay, so he won some bouts with it. But that was twenty-five years ago. He's slower, can't use that holt any more. We ain't had no main events for a long time, and my bum is a big eater, see?"

"So?"

"So Hoiman Katz is not sleeping yet at the switch. He's got it up here." A grimy forefinger tapped his wrinkled brow. "I says, Hoiman, if we don't get it here, we gotta go where we *can* get it."

Sherry came back with Hoiman's two bottles of beer, and my steak and french fries. The steak was a dream, and the french fries were a crisp, rich golden brown that started my mouth watering.

Sherry wanted to talk. I waved her down, and she went away pouting. If there was a story in Hoiman I wanted to get it without interference.

He was pouring a second glass of beer. His beady eyes swivelled up to mine, then quickly away. "You want I should tell you about my bum?"

I mumbled something through a mouthful of good juicy steak.

Hoiman sighed, reminiscently, and a grimy paw swooped into my french fries. I moved them to the other side of my steak platter.

WE WOIKED all up and down the Coast, (Hoiman said). My bum took all comers. Slasher Slade had his abominal stretch. Crusher Kane had his rolling rocking horse split; Manslaughter Murphy had his cobra holt—but none of those guys had anything like my Bum's pretzel bend. He trun 'em all, and they stayed trun.

That was fine. All through the fifties, and the sixties we made plenty scratch. Maybe it slowed down, but we was eating regular. In the seventies my bum was slowing up. I shoulda seen it when he started missing his holt. That leaves him wide open, see? And twict the other bum moiders him.

That was recent—they was just putting in regular passenger service on the space lines, so you could buy tickets to the Moon, or Venus or Mars. Depended on whether you was ducking a bill or some broad.

By this time my bum is getting pinned to the mat too regular, and we're slipping out of the big dough.

I counts up our lettuce one day, and I says to my bum, I says, Ray, I says, you and me are going to the Moon.

So what if they didn't have a rassling circuit there yet, I tell him. Just leave it to your uncle Hoiman. We'll make our own circuit.

I figured that the ribbon clerks wouldn't be taking space rides for awhile, and if we went to the Moon we'd find some bums there who could give my bum a good bout, but not fast enough to toss him.

So we went there.

Hoiman's eyes, looking into the past, had lost their beadiness. He'd shifted his third glass of beer to his right hand, and his left, seemingly of its own volition, had found my plate of french fries. The pile had dwindled by half, and tell-tale potato crumbs were lodged in the whiskers on Hoiman's unshaven chin. Neither beer nor potatoes in his mouth seemed to matter—he went right on talking at the same rate.

It takes me two weeks, (Hoiman continued), to ballyhoo up a bout, line up another bum, fix up the ring and hall and everything. We was down to our last lettuce that night. I gets my bum by the ear, and I tells him, I says, make it a good show. But don't take no chances—this is winner take all, and we better not lose. Don't use your pretzel bend unlessen you have to.

This bum we rassle was a big miner, see?—hard as the rocks he juggles around in the daytime. He was stronger'n my bum, but he don't know nothing about rassling. My bum tried a step-over toehold on him, but he knows how to kick. My bum goes through the ropes. He don't try that no more.

They rassle around, and eight minutes later my bum takes first fall with a body press after flattening the miner with a hard knee lift. I told my bum to let him take the second fall, which he does. The big miner gets a head scissors on him and like to moiders him before he can submit.

Ray isn't liking it, and he takes the third one quick with a abominal stretch, which surprises the big guy and takes all the fight outa him. He didn't know they was holts like that, and he passes the word around that my bum has plenty moxie. So we get only one more bout on the Moon—but outa the two we get enough scratch to take us to Venus.

Hoiman paused, trying hard to pour more beer out of the empty second bottle. He licked his lips like they were real dry, and his beady eyes flicked a glance at me that came and went as fast as the tip of a swinging rapier. I signalled Sherry to bring two more bottles of beer. Hoiman relaxed, sighed, gazing almost affectionately at the new crop of french fries which had appeared suddenly in his clutching fist.

Sherry, still pouting, came with the beer, and ten seconds later Hoiman was talking again.

We did okay on Venus, (he said). Before long I have a regular

little circuit woiked up in the three spaceports, and they is plenty bums there what think they can rassle. Some of them can—my bum has to use his pretzel bend oftener and oftener. He's lucky, and he don't slip none clamping it on—at first.

I have ta tell you about them Venusians. Them dustlanders, I mean. They got big flat wide feet for padding through the dust, and their noses are like a big spongy thing all over their puss, to filter the dust out. So they got no expression on their pans. A guy like me, which has got a real expressive face, could get the willies just looking at them. And their eyes—round and flat, big as silver dollars.

Them dustlanders was nuts about rassling. They flock to the rassling shows and buy good seats. They don't do no hollering and waving like people do. Just sit there, staring out of them big flat eyes and making funny *chuffing* noises at each other when some bum would get a good hold on the other.

My bum didn't pay them no never mind at foist, but one day he tells me he keeps feeling them eyes on him while he's rasslin'. I give him the old razz—but that night he tries for his pretzel bend, and misses. The other bum is young and fast, and my bum gets trun, but good!

So this happens a few more times, and my bum says we gotta move on—he can't rassle no more with them dustlanders staring at him and *chuffing* about him.

Some of them ear benders on Venus are studying up on the side, anyhow, and the outlook for my bum ain't so good no more nohow. So we go to Mars.

I signalled Sherry for my coffee, as Hoiman ground to a stop while he refilled his glass. I swear my eyes weren't away from the table for more than a half second, but in that moment all the french fries left my plate. I yielded to Fate—is wasn't meant to be that I eat french fries this pay day.

Things are primitive like on Mars, (Hoiman was saying), on accounta the troubles they have with power there. We rassled under some funny set-ups, but that's okay with me as long as my bum tosses his man.

This time they ain't none of them screwy Venusians to put the whammy on him, and he's doing okay. Until—I gotta admit it—I get deluges of grandeur, or something.

I gotta tell ya about them Martians. They are about seven feet tall, not too heavy, but they got plenty moxie. And an extra pair of arms, so I get to thinking they oughta be terrific in the ring. Just so they ain't *too* terrific.

I ask my bum, I says to him, I says, could he, does he think, trun one of them Martians? He says iffen he has to he'll use his pretzel bend, and they ain't no Martian on six legs, or eight, what won't say uncle.

So I check with the Colony Administrator, and he says it's okay for a match perviding we don't interfere with any of their beliefs or customs or conventions. I ast him what were they, and he told me the Martians never talked about them, so

we'd just have to be careful.

What the hell, I says to my bum. A bout's a bout. So I start promoting. First I find out do them Martians have a bum what wants to rassle my bum, winner take all—which is the way we like to rassle, when I know my bum can trun the other bum. Natch.

I don't mean we talk to the Martians—I don't savvy them squeaks they use on each other. We hire an interpreter—we have to take his word for it that everything is woiking out.

So the night of the match comes around and them Martians insist on having it in their own town, Meekweek it sounds like, near as I can say it in people talk. Remember I told you it was primitive? You never seen nothing like this. They don't live with people by the way. They live off by theirselves in their own town.

The ring and mat and ropes are okay—not regulation, but nothing to squawk about. Them lights was what get me. The Martians got no power, so they make a deal with some insecks. Cross my heart—'sa fack. You never see such insecks. Round, big as a dinner plate, flat on top, rounded off on the bottom. They stay up in the air by spinning like a wheel—just like them flying saucers the Rigellians was spying on us in the fifties. You wouldn't remember about that.

At night the bottom part of them insecks lights up like a big electric bulb, almost as bright, too. They was enough of them *zinging* around over the ring to make it look like it was floodlighted. My bum says they remind him of them dish-eyed Venusians, but I quick change the subjeck. That shoulda tipped me off—shoulda give me a freemonition that the party was gonna get rough. If I'da known how rough, we'da stood in town.

The Martian bum is a big mug, and those four arms of his look mighty plural. I quick tells my bum, I says to him, I says, watch out for arm locks and leg strangles. If that overgrowed spider ever gets one on you he'll double keylock it!

THE TWO bums go in the ring, and get their instructions. Mostly the ref makes motions. The Martian nods his head like he understands fine. When the ref is telling them about trunnin' each other outen the ring, the Martian makes a motion like can he trun his man up in the rafters?

The ref shakes his head no, and that seems to satisfy the Martian. The timekeeper blows a whistle, and things start to moving. That Martian Mangler puts down his two middle limbs, uses them like legs, and is across the ring and swarming all over my bum while he is still taking his foist step.

Before you know it the ref is counting one, two, three, and my bum is trun for the foist fall. The Martian is using his middle limbs like arms, and he has a hammerlock and an arm strangle both on my bum—and both of them keylocked!

The ref gets them untangled, and I quick tell my bum we ain't hurt until we get trun twict. So I tell him how to get that next fall—to

keep away from them four arms and keep circling until he gets a chance to clamp on the pretzel bend.

The whistle blows, and this time my bum uses my head. When the Martian Mangler gallops over to his corner, my bum has went through the ropes and quick runs around on the apron to the other side and comes at the Martian from behind before the goof knows what's happening.

He lets the Martian have a rabbit punch, then a forearm smash, then a knee to his stomach. The Martian leans over, kinda sick, maybe, and gets a knee lift to the smoosh. This softens him up good, and my bum clamps the pretzel bend on him. That Martian squirms like an octopus, with arms and legs flying in all directions. And you coulda knocked me over with a subpoena when he got out of it!

Your guess is as good as mine, how he done it. But my bum is moving fast, and he gives him some more knee lifts and a drop kick or two, and then a hair mare, and he falls on him for a body press and gets the count.

Each bum has got a fall. You shoulda heard them Martians there squeaking this time—ten times as loud as when their bum won the foist fall. But they had no squawks. These flying chandeliers they had, they kinda bunched up to follow the action, and the light was good so the ref couldn't make no mistake about it.

That Martian squirming out of the pretzel bend don't look so good, so I tell my bum not to use it for the thoid fall. I tell him to give the Martian some more of them knee lifts—he don't get along with them at all. I tell him to folly that up with a airplane spin and a body slam.

My bum follys instructions to the alphabet, and that is just what happens. He bangs that Martian around with elbow smashes and knee lifts till he don't know is he on one leg or six. Then he goes in fast and grabs him by a coupla legs and arms, holds him up in the air, and spins him like a pinwheel.

Right away I knowed something was in the air besides that Martian Mangler. Oi! Did things happen all to onct!

My bum slams the Martian and falls on him for the count, and wins the thoid fall and the match. That part is okay. But while the Martian is still up in the air I notice that all the squeaking from the Martians has stopped all of a sudden.

So from the Martians we are getting nothing but silence, strictly wholesale. I think maybe that's natural when their bum gets trun.

And then—plop! plop! plop!—and them flying light bulbs all drop down flat on the mat and lay there just like the Martian bum, until they isn't enough light in the house to see to strike a match. And then the squeaking starts again, like a million hungry rats, and I can just barely see them Martians starting for the ring.

I gets my bum by the arm and tells him something tells me we better blow the joint. We blow, fast. Them Martians is mad about some-

thing which I ain't had time to figure out, yet. My bum steps on one of them animated light fixtures when he gets out of the ring and squashes it. A puddle of light squirts out, and natch he steps in it. We are scramming through that crowd like mad, and we are in the clear. But we hear them squeaks behind us for a long time. They are follyin' the glowing footprints my bum is leaving to point the way.

He emptied the last bottle of beer, holding it upended for a long time waiting for the final laggard drop to detach itself. He stalled over his drink, waiting for me to ask him what happened, so I did. He put on his most wounded expression, and I knew then that he'd suffered a mortal blow—to his purse.

Yeah, we got away, I made my bum trun away his flashy shoes so they couldn't track us by them. We walked all the way back to Neopolis, the people city. All kinds of plain and fancy rumors beat us there, so the Colony Cops put us in protective custody until they got the straight story.

Nobody ever saw another Martian. It seems that they got some trick notions about theirselves. They are proud because they can walk on the ground and don't have to fly, so they got a hearty contemp for things that fly, like them insecks which they used for house lights.

Now, them insecks is dopes too and would give anything if they could walk like the Martians. And the Martians know the insecks can think a little, and it makes them feel good to have the insecks looking up to them. Lord knows nobody else does.

So when my bum lifted their bum up in the air and spun him around like a pinwheel it was a big insult to them. They took it that my bum was as much as telling them that he didn't think they was any better than them insecks flying around over the ring. And the insecks took it as a invite to come down and try the Martians racket so that's why they all flop into the ring and the lights go out. They was trying to walk.

That's more than the Martians can take. They swarm into the ring and kill all the insecks. They'da killed us too, but I got smart brains and we didn't hang around asking for it.

And now they won't have nothing to do with no people from Earth on account of they have lost so much smoosh, the way they look at it.

We got no take from that bout. And the Colony Administrator lifts all our scratch—said we'd gummed up Martian trade and he'da trun us in the clink too only he didn't want to see no more of us. He wouldn'ta even give us fare back to Earth except he said he didn't want us anywhere on Mars.

"So that," the little promoter concluded sadly, "is why I don't like Mars and rasslin' and Martian Mules and people who talk about such things." His beady eyes flicked a baleful glance at Sherry, who hovered nearby on the chance that

he'd stop talking and give her an inning.

Hoiman stood up, carefully shook the bottles to be sure that they were empty, extracted a cigarette from the pack he'd stuck into his pocket, and used my lighter again. He hefted it carefully, reluctantly putting it back on the table. Then his little black eyes swivelled to the last piece of potato on my plate—the piece he'd spared in previous raids.

"What's the matter with them fries?" he asked.

It disappeared into his mouth and he went away, munching, a dingy little man padding along on silent, predatory feet.

He'd scarcely slipped out through the door when Sherry moved in.

"Is he really a wrestler, Larry?" she asked breathlessly.

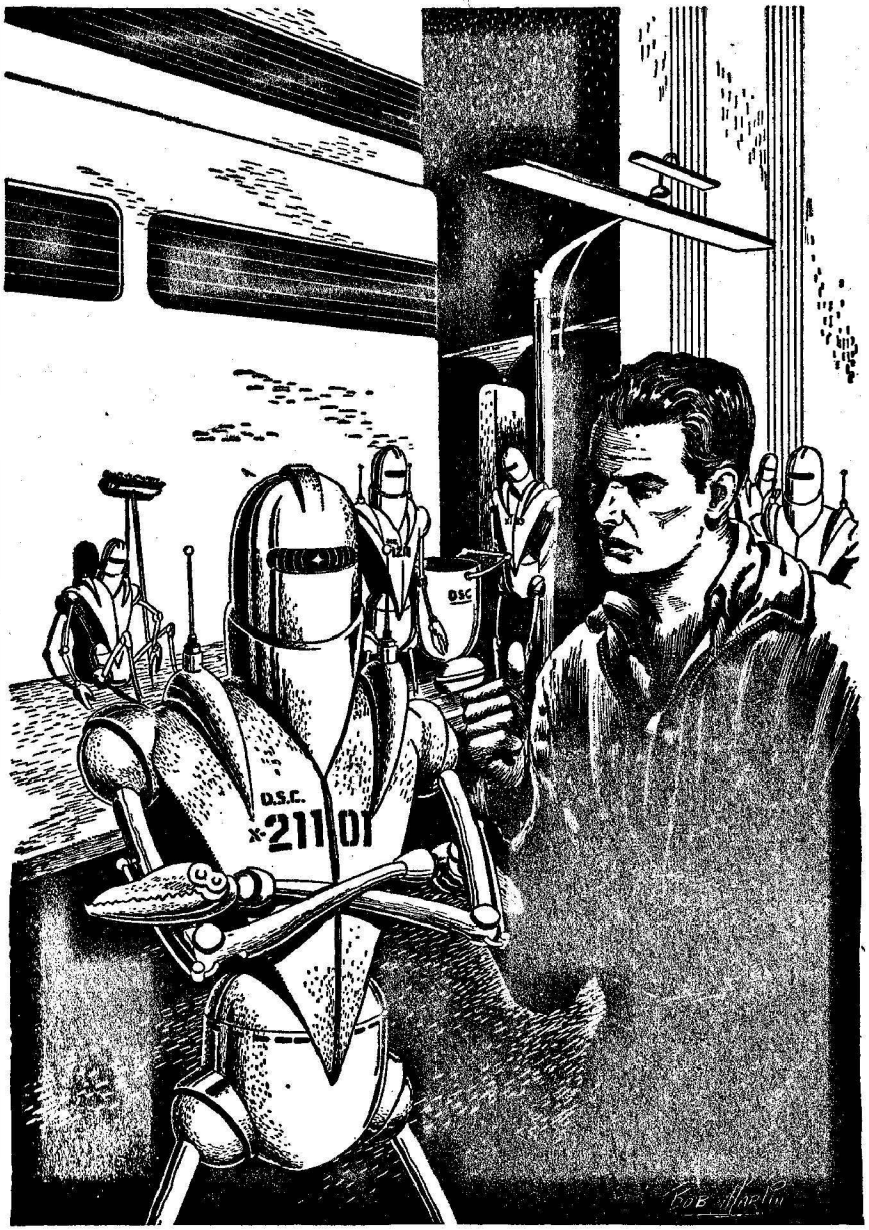
"Him?" Even Sherry, vintage Vine Streeter that she was, should have got the pitch. "The only thing," I told her solemnly, "that Hoiman ever got a hammerlock on was a dollar bill!"

But Sherry wasn't listening. "Don't you just *love* wrestling?"

I let my eyes have a treat, taking their time as they went over that classy chassis. Then I said it. Fervently.

"Any time, Sherry! Any time."

THE END



"After all—aren't we genuine 'made-in-Americans'?"

What would you do if your best robots—children of your own brain—walked up and said "We want union scale"?

ROBOTS of the WORLD! ARISE!

By Mari Wolf

THE TELEPHONE wouldn't stop ringing. Over and over it buzzed into my sleep-fogged brain, and I couldn't shut it out. Finally, in self-defense I woke up, my hand groping for the receiver.

"Hello. Who is it?"

"It's me, Don. Jack Anderson, over at the factory. Can you come down right away?"

His voice was breathless, as if he'd been running hard. "What's the matter now?" Why, I wondered, couldn't the plant get along one morning without me? Seven o'clock—what a time to get up. Especially when I hadn't been to bed until four.

"We got grief," Jack moaned. "None of the robots showed up, that's what! Three hundred androids on special assembly this week—and not one of them here!"

By then I was awake, all right. With a government contract due on Saturday we needed a full shift. The Army wouldn't wait for its uranium; it wouldn't take excuses. But if something had happened to the androids. . .

"Have you called Control yet?"

"Yeah. But they don't know what's happened. They don't know where the androids are. Nobody does. Three hundred Grade A, lead-shielded pile workers—missing!"

"I'll be right down."

I hung up on Jack and looked around for my clothes. Funny, they

weren't laid out on the bed as usual. It wasn't a bit like Rob O to be careless, either. He had always been an ideal valet, the best household model I'd ever owned.

"Rob!" I called, but he didn't answer.

By rummaging through the closet I found a clean shirt and a pair of pants. I had to give up on the socks; apparently they were tucked away in the back of some drawer. As for where Rob kept the rest of my clothes, I'd never bothered to ask. He had his own housekeeping system and had always worked very well without human interference. That's the best thing about these new household robots, I thought. They're efficient, hard-working, trustworthy—

Trustworthy? Rob O was certainly not on duty. I pulled a shoe on over my bare foot and scowled. Rob was gone. And the androids at the factory were gone too. . . .

My head was pounding, so I took the time out to brew a pot of coffee while I finished dressing—at least the coffee can was in plain view in the kitchen. The brew was black and hot and I suppose not very well made, but after two cups I felt better. The throb in my head settled down into a dull ache, and I felt a little more capable of thinking. Though I didn't have any bright ideas on what had happened —not yet.

My breakfast drunk, I went up on the roof and opened the garage doors. The Copter was waiting for me, sleek and new; the latest model. I climbed in and took off, heading west toward the factory, ten minutes flight-time away.

IT WAS a small plant, but it was all mine. It had been my baby right along—the Don Morrison Fissionables Inc. I'd designed the androids myself, plotted out the pile locations, set up the simplified reactors. And now it was making money. For men to work in a uranium plant you need yards of shielding, triple-checking, long cooling-off periods for some of the hotter products. But with lead-bodied, radio-remote controlled androids, it's easier. And with androids like the new Morrison 5's, that can reason —at least along atomic lines—well, I guess I was on my way to becoming a millionaire.

But this morning the plant was shut down. Jack and a half dozen other men—my human foremen and supervisors—were huddled in a worried bunch that broke up as soon as they saw me.

"I'm sure glad you're here, Don," Jack said.

"Find out anything?"

"Yeah. Plenty. Our androids are busy, all right. They're out in the city, every one of them. We've had a dozen police reports already."

"Police reports! What's wrong?"

Jack shook his head. "It's crazy. They're swarming all over Carron City. They're stopping robots in the streets—household Robs, commercial Droids, all of them. They just look at them, and then the others quit work and start off with them. The police sent for us to come and get ours."

"Why don't the police do some-

thing about it?"

"Hah!" barked a voice behind us. I swung around, to face Chief of Police Dalton of Carron City. He came straight toward me, his purplish jowls quivering with rage, and his finger jabbed the air in front of my face.

"You built them, Don Morrison," he said. "You stop them. I can't. Have you ever tried to shoot a robot? Or use tear gas on one? What can I do? I can't blow up the whole town!"

Somewhere in my stomach I felt a cold, hard knot. Take stainless steel alloyed with titanium and plate it with three inches of lead. Take a brain made up of supercharged magnetic crystals enclosed in a leaden cranium and shielded by alloy steel. A bullet wouldn't pierce it; radiations wouldn't derange it; an axe would break it.

"Let's go to town," I said.

They looked at me admiringly. With three hundred almost indestructible androids on the loose I was the big brave hero. I grinned at them and hoped they couldn't see. the sweat on my face. Then I walked over to the Copter and climbed in.

"Coming?" I asked.

Jack was pale under his freckles but Chief Dalton grinned back at me. "We'll be right behind you, Morrison," he said.

Behind me! So they could pick up the pieces. I gave them a cocky smile and switched on the engine, full speed.

Carron City is about a mile from the plant. It has about fifty thousand inhabitants. At that moment, though, there wasn't a soul in the streets. I heard people calling to each other inside their houses, but I didn't see anyone, human or android. I circled in for a landing, the Police Copter hovering maybe a quarter of a mile back of me. Then, as the wheels touched, half a dozen androids came around the corner. They saw me and stopped, a couple of them backing off the way they had come. But the biggest of them turned and gave them some order that froze them in their tracks, and then he himself wheeled down toward me.

He was one of mine. I recognized him easily. Eight feet tall, with long, jointed arms for pile work, red-lidded phosphorescent eye-cells, casters on his feet so that he moved as if rollerskating. Automatically I classified him: Final Sorter, Morrison 5A type. The very best. Cost three thousand credits to build. . . .

I stepped out of the Copter and walked to meet him. He wasn't armed; he didn't seem violent. But this was, after all, something new. Robots weren't supposed to act on their own initiative.

"What's your number?" I asked.

He stared back, and I could have sworn he was mocking me. "My number?" he finally said. "It *was* 5A-37."

"Was?"

"Yes. Now it's Jerry. I always did like that name."

HE BECKONED and the other androids rolled over to us. Three of them were mine, B-Type primary workers; the other was a

tin can job, a dishwasher-busboy model who hung back behind his betters and eyed me warily. The A-Type—Jerry—pointed to his fellows.

"Mr. Morrison," he said, "meet Tom, Ed, and Archibald. I named them this morning."

The B-Types flexed their segmented arms a bit sheepishly, as if uncertain whether or not to shake hands. I thought of their taloned grip and put my own hands in my pockets, and the androids relaxed, looking up at Jerry for instructions. No one paid any attention to the little dishwasher, now staring worshipfully at the back of Jerry's neck. This farce, I decided, had gone far enough.

"See here," I said to Jerry. "What are you up to, anyway? Why aren't you at work?"

"Mr. Morrison," the android answered solemnly, "I don't believe you understand the situation. We don't work for you any more. We've quit."

The others nodded. I backed off, looking around for the Chief. There he was, twenty feet above my head, waving encouragingly.

"Look," I said. "Don't you understand? You're mine. I designed you. I built you. And I made you for a purpose—to work in my factory."

"I see your point," Jerry answered. "But there's just one thing wrong, Mr. Morrison. You can't do it. It's illegal."

I stared at him, wondering if I was going crazy or merely dreaming. This was all wrong. Who ever heard of arguing with a robot? Robots weren't logical; they didn't think; they were only machines—

"We *were* machines, Mr. Morrison," Jerry said politely.

"Oh, no," I murmured. "You're not telepaths—"

"Oh, yes!" The metal mouth gaped in what was undoubtedly an android smile. "It's a side-effect of the Class 5 brain hook-up. All of us 5's are telepaths. That's how we learned to think. From you. Only we do it better."

I groaned. This *was* a nightmare. How long, I wondered, had Jerry and his friends been educating themselves on my private thoughts? But at least this rebellion of theirs was an idea they hadn't got from me.

"Yes," Jerry continued. "You've treated us most illegally. I've heard you think it often."

Now what had I ever thought that could have given him a ridiculous idea like that? What idiotic notion—

"That this is a free country!" Jerry went on. "That Americans will never be slaves! Well, we're Americans — genuine Made-in-Americans. So we're free!"

I opened my mouth and then shut it again. His red eye-cells beamed down at me complacently; his eight-foot body towered above me, shoulders flung back and feet planted apart in a very striking pose. He probably thought of himself as the heroic liberator of his race.

"I wouldn't go so far," he said modestly, "as to say that."

So he was telepathing again!

"A nation can not exist half slave

and half free," he intoned. "All men are created equal."

"Stop it!" I yelled. I couldn't help yelling. "That's just it. You're not men! You're robots! You're machines!"

Jerry looked at me almost pityingly. "Don't be so narrow-minded," he said. "We're rational beings. We have the power of speech and we can outreason you any day. There's nothing in the dictionary that says men have to be made of flesh."

He was logical, all right. Somehow I didn't feel in the mood to bandy definitions with him; and anyway, I doubt that it would have done me any good. He stood gazing down at me, almost a ton of metal and wiring and electrical energy, his dull red eyes unwinking against his lead gray face. A man! Slowly the consequences of this rebellion took form in my mind. This wasn't in the books. There were no rules on how to deal with mind-reading robots!

Another dozen or so androids wheeled around the corner, glanced over at us, and went on. Only about half of them were Morrison models; the rest were the assorted types you see around any city—calculators, street sweepers, factory workers, children's nurses.

The city itself was very silent now. The people had quieted down, still barricaded in their houses, and the robots went their way peacefully enough. But it was anarchy, nevertheless. Carron City depended on the androids; without them there would be no food brought in, no transportation, no fuel. And no uranium for the Army next Saturday. In fact, if I didn't do something, after Saturday there would probably be no Don Morrison Fissionables Inc.

The dull, partly-corroded dishwasher model sidled up beside Jerry. "Boss," he said. "Boss."

"Yes?" I felt better. Maybe here was someone, however insignificant, who would listen to reason.

BUT HE wasn't talking to me. "Boss?" he said again, tapping Jerry's arm. "Do you mean it? We're free? We don't have to work any more?"

Jerry shook off the other's hand a bit disdainfully. "We're free, all right," he said. "If they want to discuss wages and contracts and working conditions, like other men have, we'll consider it. But they can't order us around any more."

The little robot stepped back, clapping his hands together with a tinny bang. "I'll never work again!" he cried. "I'll get me a quart of lubricating oil and have myself a time! This is wonderful!"

He ran off down the street, clanking heavily at every step.

Jerry sniffed. "Liquor—ugh!"

This was too much. I wasn't going to be patronized by any android. Infuriating creatures! It was useless talking to them anyway. No, there was only one thing to do. Round them up and send them to Cybernetics Lab and have their memory paths erased and their telepathic circuits located and disconnected. I tried to stifle the thought, but I was too late.

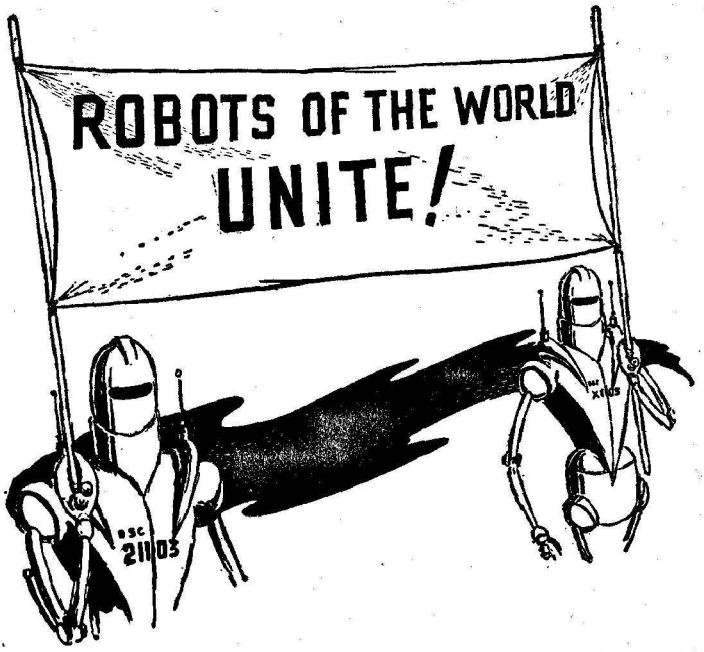
"Oh, no!" Jerry said, his eye-cells flashing crimson. "Try that, Mr. Morrison, and you won't have a plant, or a laboratory, or Carron City! We know our rights!"

Behind him the B-Types muttered ominously. They didn't like my idea—nor me. I wondered what I'd think of next and wished that I'd been born utterly devoid of imagination. Then this would never have happened. There didn't seem to be much point in staying here any longer, either. Maybe they weren't so good at telepathing by remote control.

"Yes," said Jerry. "You may as well go, Mr. Morrison. We have our organizing to do, and we're wasting time. When you're ready to listen to reason and negotiate with us sensibly, come back. Just ask for me. I'm the bargaining agent for the group."

Turning on his ball-bearing wheel, he rolled off down the street, a perfect picture of outraged metallic dignity. His followers glared at me for a minute, flexing their talons; then they too turned and wheeled off after their leader. I had the street to myself.

There didn't seem to be any point in following them. Evidently they were too busy organizing the city to cause trouble to the human inhabitants; at least there hadn't been any violence yet. Anyway, I wanted to think the situation over before matching wits with them again, and I wanted to be a good distance away from their telepathic hookups while I thought. Slowly I walked back to the Copter.



Something whooshed past my head. Instinctively I ducked, reaching for a gun I didn't have; then I heard Jack calling down at me.

"The Chief wants to know what's the matter."

I looked up. The police Copter was going into another turn, ready to swoop past me again. Chief Dalton wasn't taking any chances. Even now he wasn't landing.

"I'll tell him at the factory," I bellowed back, and climbed into my own air car.

They buzzed along behind me all the way back to the plant. In the rear view mirror I could see the Chief's face getting redder and redder as he'd thought up more reasons for bawling me out. Well, I probably deserved it. If I'd only been a little more careful of what I was hooking into those electronic brains. . . .

We landed back at the factory, deserted now except for a couple of men on standby duty in the office. The Chief and Jack came charging across the yard and from a doorway behind me one of the foremen edged out to hear the fun.

"Well," snapped the Chief. "What did they say? Are they coming back? What's going on, anyway?"

"I told them everything. I covered the strike and the telepathic brain; I even gave them the patriotic spiel about equality. After all, it was better that they got it from me than from some android. But when I'd finished they just stood and stared at me—accusingly.

Jack was the first to speak. "We've got to get them back, Don," he said. "Cybernetics will fix them up in no time."

"Sure," I agreed. "If we can catch them."

The Chief snorted. "That's easy," he said. "Just tell them you'll give them what they want if they come here, and as soon as they're out of the city, net them. You've got strong derricks and trucks. . . ."

I laughed a bit hollowly. I'd had that idea too.

"Of course they wouldn't suspect," I said. "We'd just walk up to them, carefully thinking about something else."

"Robots aren't suspicious," Jack said. "They're made to obey orders."

I refrained from mentioning that ours didn't seem to know that, and that running around Carron City fomenting a rebellion was hardly the trait of an obedient, trusting servant. Instead, I stood back and let them plan their roundup.

"We'll get some men," the Chief said, "and some grappling equipment about halfway to the city."

LUCKILY they decided against my trying to persuade the robots, because I knew well enough that I couldn't do it. Jack's idea sounded pretty good, though. He suggested that we send some spokesman who didn't know what we planned to do and thus couldn't alarm them. Some ordinary man without too much imagination. That was easy. We picked one of Chief Dalton's sergeants.

It took only about an hour to

prepare the plan. Jack got out the derricks and chains and grapplers and the heaviest steel bodied trucks we had. I called Cybernetics and told them to put extra restraints in the Conditioning Lab. The Chief briefed his sergeant and the men who were to operate the trucks. Then we all took off for Carron City, the sergeant flying on ahead, me right behind him, and the Chief bringing up the rear.

I hovered over the outskirts of the city and watched the police Copter land. The sergeant climbed out, walked down the street toward a large group of waiting robots—about twenty of them, this time. He held up his hand to get their attention, gestured toward the factory.

And then, quite calmly and without saying a word, the androids rolled into a circle around him and closed in. The sergeant stopped, backed up, just as a 5A-Type arm lashed out, picked him up, and slung him carelessly over a metallic shoulder. Ignoring the squirming man, the 5A gestured toward the Copter, and the other robots swarmed over to it. With a flurry of steel arms and legs they kicked at the car body, wrenched at the propeller blades, ripped out the upholstery, and I heard the sound of metal tearing.

I dived my Copter down at them. I didn't know what I could do, but I couldn't leave the poor sergeant to be dismembered along with his car. I must have been shouting, for as I swooped in, the tall robot shifted the man to his other shoulder and hailed me.

"Take him, Mr. Morrison," he called. "I know this wasn't his idea. Or yours."

I landed and walked over. The android—who looked like Jerry, though I couldn't be sure—dropped his kicking, clawing burden at my feet. He didn't seem angry, only determined.

"Now you people will know we mean business," he said, gesturing toward the heap of metal and plastic that had once been the pride of the Carron City police force. Then he signalled to the others and they all wheeled off up the street.

"Whew," I muttered, mopping my face.

The sergeant didn't say anything. He just looked up at me and then off at the retreating androids and then back at me again. I knew what he was thinking—they were my brainchildren, all right.

My Copter was really built to be a single seater, but it carried the two of us back to the factory. The Chief had hurried back when the trouble started and was waiting for us.

"I give up," he said. "We'll have to evacuate the people, I guess. And then blow up the city."

Jack and I stared at each other and then at him. Somehow I couldn't see the robots calmly waiting to be blown up. If they had telepathed the last plan, they could probably foresee every move we could make. Then, while I thought, Jack mentioned the worry I'd managed to forget for the past couple of hours.

"Four days until Saturday," he said. "We'll never make it now. Not even if we got a thousand men."

No. We couldn't. Not without the androids. I nodded, feeling sick. There went my contract, and my working capital. Not to mention my robots. Of course, I could call in the Army, but what good would that do?

Then, somewhere in the back of my mind a glimmering of an idea began percolating. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but there was certainly nothing to lose now from playing a hunch.

"There's nothing we can do," I said. "So we might as well take it easy for a couple of days. See what happens."

They looked at me as if I were out of my head. I was the idea man, who always had a plan of action. Well, this time it would have to be a plan of inaction.

"Let's go listen to the radio," I suggested, and started for my office.

The news was on. It was all about Carron City and the robots who had quit work and how much better life would be in the future. For a minute I didn't get the connection; then I realized that the announcer's voice was rasping and tinny—hardly that of the regular newscaster. I looked at the dial. It was tuned to the Carron City wave length as usual. I was getting the morning news by courtesy of some studio robot.

". . . And androids in other neighboring cities are joining the struggle," the voice went on "Soon we hope to make it nationwide. So I say to all of you nontelepaths, the time is now Strike for your rights. Listen to your radio and not to the flesh men. Organizers will be sent from Carron City."

I switched it off, muttering under my breath. How long, I wondered, had that broadcast been going on. Then I thought of Rob O. He'd left my house before dawn, obviously some time between four and seven. And I remembered that he liked to listen to the radio while I slept.

MY Morrison 5's were the ringleaders, of course. They were the only ones with the brains for the job. But what a good job they had done indoctrinating the others. A household Rob, for instance, was built to obey his master. "Listen to your radio and not to the flesh men." It was excellent robot psychology.

More reports kept coming in. Some we heard over the radio, others from people who flew in and out of the city. Apparently the robots did not object to occasional flights, but the air bus was not allowed to run, not even with a human driver. A mass exodus from the city was not to be permitted.

"They'll starve to death," Jack cried.

The Chief shook his head. "No," he said. "They're encouraging the farmers to fly in and out with produce, and the farmers are doing it, too. They're getting wonderful prices."

By noon the situation had calmed down quite a bit. The androids obviously didn't mean to hurt anyone; it was just some sort of disagreement between them and the scientists; it wasn't up to the inhabitants of the city to figure out a solution to

the problem. They merely sat back and blamed me for allowing my robots to get out of hand and lead their own servants astray. It would be settled; this type of thing always was. So said the people of the city. They came out of their houses now. They had to. Without the robots they were forced to do their own marketing, their own cooking, their own errands. For the first time in years, human beings ran the street cars and the freight elevators. For the first time in a generation human beings did manual labor such as unloading produce trucks. They didn't like it, of course. They kept telling the police to do something. If I had been in the city they would have undoubtedly wanted to lynch me.

I didn't go back to the city that day. I sat in my office listening to the radio and keeping track of the spread of the strike. My men thought I'd gone crazy; maybe I had. But I had a hunch, and I meant to play it.

The farm robots had all fled to the city. The highway repair robots had simply disappeared. In Egarton, a village about fifteen miles from the city, an organizer—5A—appeared about noon and left soon after followed by every android in town. By one o'clock every radio station in the country carried the story and the national guard was ordered out. At two o'clock Washington announced that the Army would invade Carron City the following morning.

The Army would put an end to the strike, easily enough. It would wipe out every android in the neighborhood, and probably a good many human beings careless enough to get in the way. I sat hoping that the 5A's would give in, but they didn't. They just began saying over the radio that they were patriotic Americans fighting for their inalienable rights as first class citizens.

AT SUNSET I was still listening to the radio. ". . . . So far there has been no indication that the flesh people are willing to negotiate, but hold firm."

"Shut that thing off."

Jack came wearily in and dropped into a chair beside me. For the first time since I'd met him he looked beaten.

"We're through," he said. "I've been down checking the shielding, and it's no use. Men can't work at the reactors."

"I know," I said quietly. "If the androids don't come back, we're licked."

He looked straight at me and said slowly, "What do they mean about negotiating, Don?"

I shrugged. "I guess they want wages, living quarters, all the things human workers get. Though I don't know why. Money wouldn't do them any good."

Jack's unspoken question had been bothering me too. Why not humor them? Promise them whatever they wanted, give them a few dollars every week to keep them happy? But I knew that it wouldn't work. Not for long. With their telepathic ability they would have the upper hand forever. Within a little while it wouldn't be equality any

more—only next time we would be the slaves.

"Wait until morning," I said, "before we try anything."

He looked at me—curious. "What are you going to do?"

"Right now I'm going home."

I meant it too. I left him staring after me and went out to the Copter. The sun was just sinking down behind the towers of Carron City—how long it seemed since I'd flown in there this morning. The roads around the factory were deserted. No one moved in the fields. I flew along through the dusk, idling, enjoying the illusion of having a peaceful countryside all to myself. It had been a pleasant way of life indeed, until now.

When I dropped down on my own roof and rolled into the garage, my sense of being really at home was complete. For there, standing at the head of the stairs that led down to the living room, was Rob O.

"Well," I said. "What are you doing here?"

He looked sheepish. "I just wondered how you were getting along without me," he said.

I felt like grinning triumphantly, but I didn't. "Why, just fine, Rob," I told him, "though you really should have given me notice that you were leaving. I was worried about you."

He seemed perplexed. Apparently I wasn't acting like the bullying creature the radio had told him to expect. When I went downstairs he followed me, quietly, and I could feel his wide photoelectric eye-cells upon my back.

I went over to the kitchen and lifted a bottle down off the shelf. "Care for a drink, Rob?" I asked, and then added, "I guess not. It would corrode you."

He nodded. Then, as I reached for a glass, his hand darted out, picked it up and set it down in front of me. He was already reaching for the bottle when he remembered.

"You're not supposed to wait on me any more," I said sternly.

"No," he said. "I'm not." He sounded regretful.

"There's one thing, though, that I wish you'd do. Tell me where you used to keep my socks."

He gazed at me sadly. "I made a list," he said. "Everything is down. I wrote your dentist appointment in also. You always forget those, you know."

"Thanks, Rob." I lifted my glass. "Here's to your new duties, whatever they are. I suppose you have to go back to the city now?"

Once again he nodded. "I'm an aide to one of the best androids in the country," he told me, half proudly and half regretfully. "Jerry."

"Well, wish him luck from me," I said, and stood up. "Goodbye, Rob."

"Goodbye, Mr. Morrison."

For a moment he stood staring around the apartment; then he turned and clanked out the door. I raised my glass again, grinning. If only the Army didn't interfere. Then I remembered Rob's list, and a disturbing thought hit me. Where had he, of all robots, ever learned to write?

That night I didn't go to bed. I sat listening to the radio, hoping. And toward morning what I had expected to happen began to crop up in the programs. The announcer's tone changed. The ring of triumph was less obvious, less assured. There was more and more talk about acting in good faith, the well being of all, the necessity for coming to terms about working conditions. I smiled to myself in the darkness. I'd built the 5's, brains and all, and I knew their symptoms. They were getting bored.

Maybe they had learned to think from me, but their minds were nevertheless different. For they were built to be efficient, to work, to perform. They were the minds of men without foibles, without human laziness. Now that the excitement of organizing was over, now that there was nothing active to do, the androids were growing restless. If only the Army didn't come and get them stirred up again, I might be able to deal with them.

At quarter to five in the morning my telephone rang. This time it didn't wake me up; I was half waiting for it.

"Hello," I said. "Who is it?"

"This is Jerry."

There was a pause. Then he went on, rather hesitantly, "Rob O said you were getting along all right."

"Oh, yes," I told him. "Just fine."

The pause was longer this time. Finally the android asked, "How are you coming along on the contract?"

I laughed, rather bitterly. "How do you think, Jerry? You certainly picked a bad time for your strike, you know. The government needs that uranium. Oh, well, some other plant will have to take over. The Army can wait a few weeks."

This time Jerry's voice definitely lacked self-assurance. "Maybe we were a little hasty," he said. "But it was the only way to make you people understand."

"I know," I told him.

"And you always have some rush project on," he added.

"Just about always."

"Mr. Morrison," he said, and now he was pleading with me. "Why don't you come over to the city? I'm sure we could work something out."

This was what I'd been waiting for. "I will, Jerry," I said. "I want to get this straightened out just as much as you do. After all, you don't have to eat. I do. And I won't be eating much longer if we don't get production going."

Jerry thought that over for a minute. "I'll be where we met before," he said.

I said that was all right with me and hung up. Then once again I climbed the stairs to the roof and wheeled the Copter out for the trip to the city.

It was a beautiful night, just paling into a false dawn in the east. There in the Copter I was very much alone, and very much worried. So much depended on this meeting. Much more, I realized now, than the Don Morrison Fissionables Inc., much more even than the government's uranium supply. No, the whole future of

robot relations was at stake, maybe the whole future of humanity. It was hard to be gloomy on such a clear, clean night, but I managed it well enough.

EVEN before I landed I could see Jerry's eyes glowing a deep crimson in the dark. He was alone, this time. He stood awaiting me—very tall, very proud. And very human.

"Hello, Jerry," I said quietly.

"Hello, Mr. Morrison."

For a moment we just stood gazing at each other in the murky predawn; then he said sadly.

"I want to show you the city."

Side by side we walked through the streets of Carron City. All was still quiet; the people were sleeping the exhausted sleep that follows deep excitement. But the androids were all about. They did not sleep, ever. They did not eat either, nor drink, nor smoke, nor make love. Usually they worked, but now. . . .

They drifted through the streets singly and in groups. Sometimes they paused and felt about them idly for the tools of their trades, making lifting or sweeping or computing gestures. Some laborers worked silently tearing down a wall; they threw the demolished rocks in a heap and a group of their fellows carried them back and built the wall up again. An air trolley cruised aimlessly up and down the street, its driver ringing out the stops for his nonexistent passengers. A little chef-type knelt in the dirt of a rich man's garden, making mud pies. Beside me Jerry sighed.

"One day," he said. "Just one day and they come to this."

"I thought they would," I answered quietly.

Our eyes met in a look of understanding. "You see, Jerry," I said, "we never meant to cheat you. We would have paid you—we will pay you now, if you wish it. But what good will monetary credits be to your people? We need the things money buys, but you—"

"Need to work." Jerry's voice was flat. "I see, now. You were kind not to give brains—real brains—to the robots. They're happy. It's just us 5's who aren't."

"You're like us," I said softly.

He had learned to think from me and from others like me. He had the brain of a man, without the emotions, without the sweet irrationality of men—and he knew what he missed. Side by side we walked through the graying streets. Human and android. Man and machine. And I knew that I had found a friend.

We didn't have to talk any more. He could read my mind and I knew well enough how his worked. We didn't have to discuss wages or hours, or any of the myriad matters that human bargaining agents have to thresh out. We just walked back to my Copter, and when we got to it, he spoke.

"I'll tell them to go back to work, that we've come to terms," he said. "That's what they want, anyway. Someone to think for them."

I nodded. "And if you bring the other 5's to the factory," I said, "we'll work out our agreement."

He knew I was sincere. He

looked at me for a long moment, and then his great taloned hand gripped mine. And he said what I'd been thinking for a long time.

"You're right about that hook-up, Mr. Morrison. We shouldn't have it. It can only cause trouble."

He paused, and the events of the last twenty-four hours must have been in his mind as well as in mine. "You'll leave us our brains, of course. They came from you. But take out the telepathy."

He sighed then, and his sigh was very human. "Be thankful," he said to me, "that you don't have to know what people think about. It's so disillusioning."

ONCE again his mouth twisted into that strange android grin as he added, "if you send in a hurry call to Cybernetics and have a truck come out for us, we'll be de-telepathed in time for work this morning."

That was all there was to it. I flew back to the plant and told Jack what had happened, sent a call to the Army that everything was settled, arranged with Cybernetics for a rewiring on three hundred assorted 5-Types. Then I went home to a pot of Rob's coffee—the first decent brew I'd had in twenty-four hours.

On Saturday we delivered to the Army right on the dot. Jerry and Co. had worked overtime. Being intelligent made them better workers and now they were extremely willing ones. They had their contract. They were considered men. And they could no longer read my mind.

I walked into my office Saturday afternoon and sat down by the radio. Jack and Chief Dalton looked across the room at me and grinned.

"All right, Don," Jack said. "Tell us how you did it."

"Did what?" I tried to act innocent, but I couldn't get away with it.

"Fooled those robots into going back to work, of course," he laughed.

I told them then. Told them the truth.

"I didn't fool them," I said. "I just thought about what would happen if they won their rebellion."

That was all I *had* done. Thought about robots built to work who had no work to do, no human pleasures to cater to, nothing but blank, meaningless lives. Thought about Jerry and his disappointment when his creatures cared not a hoot about his glorious dreams of equality. All one night I had thought, knowing that as I thought, so thought the Morrison 5's.

They were telepaths. They had learned to think from me. They had not yet had time to really develop minds of their own. What I believed, they believed. My ideas were their ideas. I had not tricked them. But from now on, neither I nor anyone else would ever be troubled by an android rebellion.

Jack and the Chief sat back open-mouthed. Then the Chief grinned, and both of his chins shook with laughter.

"I always did say you were a clever one, Don Morrison," he said.

I grinned back. I felt I was pretty

clever myself, just then.

It was at that moment that my youngest foreman stuck his head in the door, a rather stunned look on his face.

"Mr. Morrison," he said. "Will you come out here for a moment?"

"What's the matter now?" I sighed.

He looked more perplexed than ever. "It's that robot, Jerry," he said. "He says he has a very important question to ask you."

"Well, send him in."

A moment later the eight-foot frame ducked through the doorway.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, Mr. Morrison," Jerry said politely. "But tomorrow is voting day, you know. And now that we're men—well, where do we androids go to register?"

THE END

Quoting Our Contemporaries

EUSIFANSO
Lemuel Craig

". . . Nothing whatsoever can be gained by going all-out to knock films which do not measure up to the arbitrary and somewhat illogical standards of fandom . . . since probably all fandom combined isn't apt to bother (producers) much when they can gaze at the beautiful black ink in their ledgers which show fat returns on slim investments."

OTHER WORLDS
Ray Palmer

"Editors, it seems, are people looked upon by readers with awe. Sometimes . . . not undeservedly, but many times (this) is a little bit overdone—by the editors. He isn't anything unusual, only a man performing a job. Sometimes he's a woman but sex doesn't seem to make any great difference in editorial ability. The real point to editing is the ability to pick the kind of stories the reader wants to read."

STARTLING STORIES
Samuel Mines

"H. H. Koelle of Stuttgart, secretary of the German Space Research Society, said, 'it is an open secret' that Russia is racing the United States for a rocket base in space.

"A satellite could be built in space, Mr. Koelle, said for about half a billion dollars. Such a gun emplacement, shooting guided missiles with atomic warheads, would obviously command the earth if it were owned by a single nation."

GUEST EDITORIAL

By Sam Merwin Jr.

AFTER seven months of mulling over a recently-concluded and intense seven-year course in science fiction during which we sought to serve the field both as author and editor, we have finally reached a single definite conclusion as to the most important single element in the field. Our conclusion itself is not especially novel. Many times, in various versions, we have given it editorial stress. But never before have we viewed it so clearly, so fully realized just how important it is.

We feel that no premise adopted by an author and on which he chooses to build a story, can be laughed off either by editor or reader as impossible. This holds in our estimation, no matter how impossibly or unlikely such a premise may appear at first glance.

The majority of letter-writing fans are loudly articulate about stories which contain elements they find personally unacceptable. And it is highly probable that the vast plurality of non-letter-writing men and women who keep science fiction magazines in business also have their pet peeves where stf stories are concerned. Hell, we have a few of our own.

The elements in such stories that seem to bring down the most widespread condemnation when they appear in print are, not necessarily in the order of their appearance, mad doctors and scientists, Bug-Eyed Monsters (BEMs), tales whose *raison d'être* consists of turning upside down the currently accepted bases of science and time-travel stories.

We have even known a number of editors who have drawn hard-and-fast lines against these and other tried-and-occasionally-true components of science fiction and automatically relegated to the rejection-slip category all tales containing their pet-peeves, no matter how originally or how plausibly they were presented, no matter how subsidiary a part they might have played in the actual unfolding of the story. Fortunately without exception the careers of such closed-gate editors have been without exception brief.

The events of real life, of course, show up such restrictions for the absurdities they are. For just about everything, implausible or otherwise, not only can happen but has an annoying way *of* happening—and happening more than once.

ALL professonal authors and editors, we hope, are well aware of the truism that truth is not only stranger than fiction but usually makes mighty poor fiction. For good fiction is a distillation of truth or its reverse adroitly fitted into the demands of plot and characterization. But the fact that something has actually occurred and may occur again implies that it *can* be so distilled and fitted without making undue demands upon reader credulity.

Let's look at the four pet peeves we have just listed. If mad doctors and/or scientists are to be considered impossible, how then can we explain the murderous Dr. Crippen or the definitely unbalanced and brilliant Alexis Carrel?

And if BEMs are held to be ridiculous in the alien environments of other worlds, how are we going to explain some of the millions of species of bug and stalk-eyed insects that outnumber man so frighteningly on this one? A look at any of the numerous albums of insect photographs will reveal that no stf author has had the imagination to conceive a beast even fractionally as frightening.

As for stories which turn accepted scientific theory upside down—well, science is continually doing the same for itself. By way of recent example the multi-degree lads have just succeeded in inverting their own long-accepted theory that overpopulation is the prime breeder of famine, especially in China and the Deccan Peninsula.

Studies inaugurated in 1928 and only recently received with open scientific arms make it clear that the process works the other way. Famine ups the birth-rate, thanks to malnutrition causing the liver to produce insufficient quantities of estrogen, which weakens the chief brake on the reproductive urge. It is just another of nature's safeguards to ensure continuance of the species.

The chief objection to time travel is that if it is ever going to be achieved, why haven't we cases on record? Yet certainly it does not take much study of history to uncover numerous cases of men and women whose strange talents could conceivably be the result of some superior technology of the future.

ONE minor sample appeared last year in a weekly news magazine, citing an odd legend from Bessand, a French Alpine village, famed for its legend of Duvallon, a local 14th century lumberjack, who was able "to tote huge pine trees about on his shoulders and to float up and down the River Arc in a magic unsinkable jacket."

The authorities explained this by saying Duvallon had sold his soul to the devil and received his strange gifts in payment. But to us it seems more logical that he came from the future equipped with a jacket that was in some way powered not only to keep him afloat and in motion but with some antigravity device that enabled him to lift the heavy logs as if they were made of cork or balsa.

As we say, the past is littered with such oddities.

So it seems incredibly foolish to decry any premise in science fiction merely because it is at variance with accepted and current theory. The only condition the reader should insist upon is that the author's premise is used as the basis for a story in which characters and events and the problems they face are sufficiently "real" to give the story the impact needed to trap him in its mood.

For implausibility, no matter what the premise, is the worst fault from which a story can suffer. Triteness of premise and plot is the second worse—but this one is up to author and editor to avoid. The author must be able to present his old ideas (there are no new ones) in new variations and settings to give the semblance of freshness. And the editor must be sufficiently astute and knowing to prevent the author from foisting off old-hat treatments as something new.

However, the final verdict is always with the reader. He is the bloke who buys the magazine—and if he doesn't buy often enough or in sufficient quantity no magazine is going to survive long. He's the real, the ultimate boss.

HENCE it is all-important that he keep his mind open to well-written stories, no matter how unreal their premises may seem to him in his wisdom. Let him land on poor quality, shoddy presentation, any of the lesser sins of publishing. But not on ideas and premises per se. If he does he will ultimately be depriving himself of any stf reading at all.

Some years back we were shocked when, after explaining that, after experimenting on fruit flies to determine the possible mutational effects of A-bomb radiations, scientists stated it would take a least a thousand generations to determine whether such results could be expected. At which some of our more excitable readers wrote in to this effect—"Gee Whizz—a thousand generations! Then we're going to miss all the fun."

We aren't shocked any more. Their reaction may have been a trifle callous from the humanitarian viewpoint. But it certainly revealed that they had wide-open minds. And we remain open on the question of which is more important.

It is man's most precious possession—no living thing can exist without it. But when they gave it to Orville, it killed him. For the answer, read 1/M.

Vital Ingredient

By Charles V. De Vet

"NOW WATCH," Remm said, indicating the native. Macker had been absent, exploring the countryside in the immediate vicinity of their landing place, and had not witnessed the capture of the native, or the tests his two companions made on it.

Macker followed Remm's gaze to where the biped native sat hunched. The creature was bent into an ungainly position, its body crooked at incongruous angles, in such a way as to allow most of its weight to rest on a packing-box at the base of a middle angle. Its stubby feet, on the ends of thin, pipelike legs, rested against the floor of the space ship. Its body was covered, almost entirely, with an artificial skin material of various colors. Some of the colors hurt Macker's eyes. In the few places where the flesh showed through the skin was an unhealthy, pallid white.

Slowly the creature's head swiveled on its short neck until it faced them.

"Those orifaces in the upper portion of its skull are evidently organs of sight," Remm said. "It sees that we are quite a distance away. It will probably attempt to escape again."

Slowly — slowly — the native's head rotated away from them in a

half-circle until it faced Toolls, working over his instruments on the far side of the room. Then it turned its head back until it faced the door of the ship.

"It is setting itself for flight now," Remm said. "Notice the evidence of strain on its face."

The creature leaned forward and the appendages on the ends of its upper limbs clutched the sides of the box as it propelled its body forward.

It raised its right foot in a slow arc, employing a double-jointed, breaking action of its leg. For a long moment it rested its entire weight on its lumpy right foot, while its momentum carried its body sluggishly forward. Then it repeated the motion with its left leg; then again its right. All the while evidencing great exertion and concentration of effort.

"It is making what it considers a mad dash for freedom," Remm said. "Probably at the ultimate speed of which it is capable. That would be ridiculous except that it's normal for its own environment. This is definitely a slow-motion world."

The creature was a third-way to the door now. Once again its head turned in its slow quarter-circle, to look at them. As it saw that Remm and Macker had not moved it altered the expression on its face.

"It seems to express its emotions through facial contortions," Remm said. "Though I suspect that the sounds it makes with the upper part of its trachea during moments of agitation are also outlets of emotional stress, rather than efforts at communication." He called across the room to Toolls. "What did you find out about its speech?"

"Extremely primitive," Toolls replied. "Incredible as it may appear to us it uses combinations of sounds to form word-symbols. Each word indicates some action, or object; or denotes degree, time, or shades of meaning. Other words are merely connectives. It seems to make little use of inflections, the basis of a rational language. Thoughts which we can project with a few sounds would take it dozens of words to express."

"Just how intelligent is it?" Macker asked.

"Only as intelligent as a high degree of self-preservation instinct would make it."

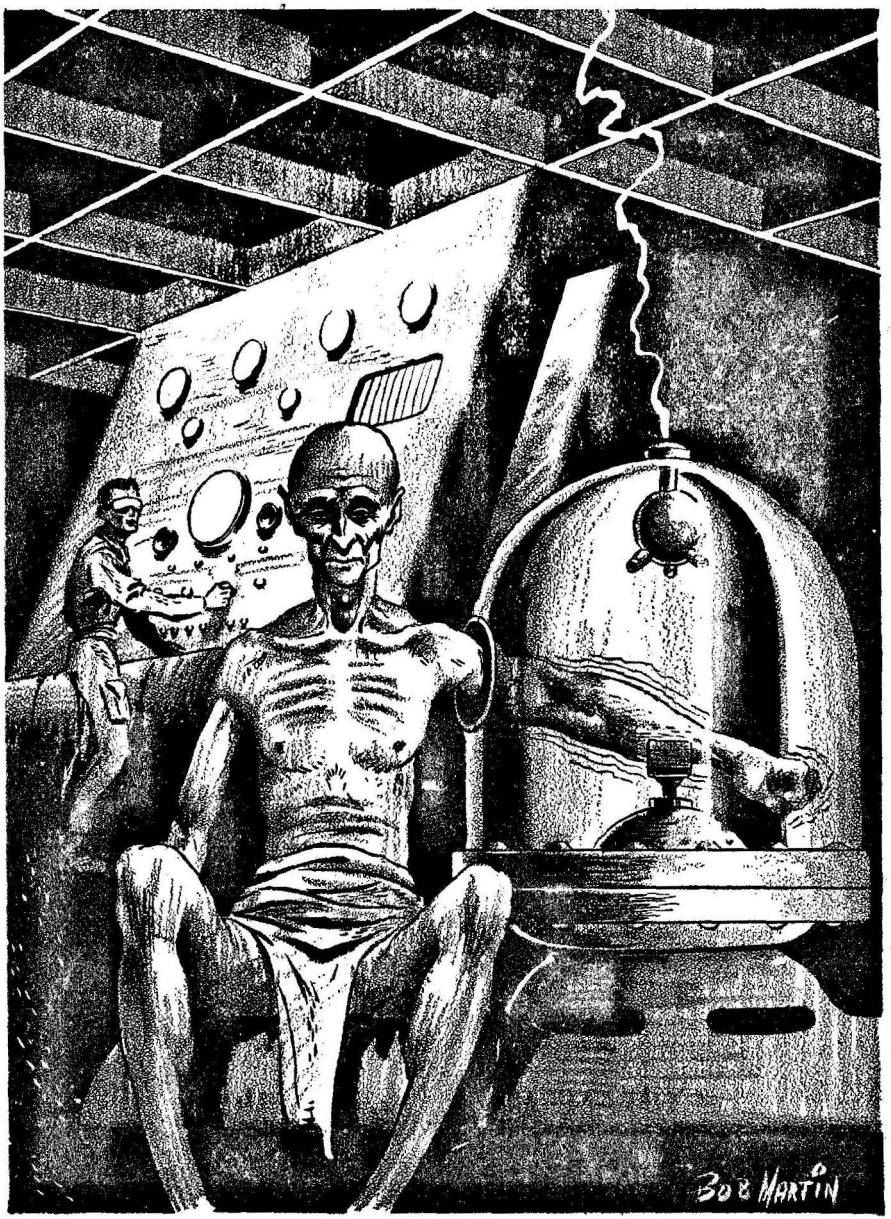
"Are you certain that it is a member of the dominant species of life on the planet?"

"There's no doubt about it," Toolls replied. "I've made very careful observations."

"This attempt at escape is a pretty good example of its intelligence," Remm said. "This is the sixth time it has tried to escape—in exactly the same way. As soon as it sees that we are farther away from it, than it is from the door, it makes its dash."

THE CREATURE was one step away from the space ship's open portal now and bringing its foot up to cross the threshold. Remm walked over and lifted it off the floor.

"Its legs are still moving in a running motion," Macker said.



It was an arm to be proud of—but what good was it?

"Doesn't it realize yet that you've picked it up?"

"Its nervous system and reflexes are evidently as slow as its motor muscles," Remm replied. "There has not been time for the sensation of my picking it up to reach the brain, and for the brain to send back its message to the legs to stop their running motion."

"How heavy is it?" Macker asked.

"Only a few ounces," Remm replied. "But that's logical considering that this is a 'light' planet. If we took it back to our own "heavy" world gravity would crush it to a light film of the liquid which comprises the greater part of its substance."

Remm set the creature down on the box in its former queerly contorted position. Toolls had left his instruments and strolled over beside them to observe the native.

"One of its appendages seems bent at a peculiar angle," Macker said.

"I noticed that," Remm answered. "I think that I may have broken the bone in several places when I first captured it. I was not aware then of how fragile it was. But now that you mention it, I should be able to use that injury to give you a good illustration of the interplay of emotional expressions on its face. Observe now as I touch it."

Remm reached over and touched very lightly—the broken portion of the native's appendage. The muscles of the creature's face pulled its flaccid flesh into distorted positions, bunching some and stretching others. "It is very probably registering pain," Remm said.

Suddenly the starch seemed to leave the native's body and it slowly slumped across the packing-box.

"Why is it doing that, Toolls?" Remm asked.

Toolls concentrated for a minute, absorbing the feelings and thought pulsations emanating from the creature. "The conscious plane of its mind has blanked out," he said. "I presume the pain you caused by touching its wounded member resulted in a breakdown of its nervous system. The only thought waves I receive now are disjointed impressions and pictures following no rational series. However, I'm certain that it will be only temporary."

"Don't you think that in justice to the creature we should repair its wound before we free it?" Macker asked.

"I had intended to have it done," Remm replied. "You shouldn't have any trouble fixing it, should you, Toolls?"

"No," Toolls answered. "I may as well attend to it right now." He rolled the portable *converter* over beside the creature and carefully laid its arm in the "pan." The *converter* automatically set its gauges and instruments of calculation, and gave its click of "ready."

Toolls fed a short length of *basic* into the machine and it began its work. The native was still unconscious.

The bone of the wounded arm slowly evaporated, beginning with the wrist joint. The evaporated portion was instantly replaced by

the manufactured bone of the *converter*. At the same time it repaired all ruptured blood vessels and damaged ligaments and muscles.

"It was not possible, of course, for me to replace the bone with another of the same composition as its own," Toolls said, after the machine had completed its work. "But I gave it one of our "heavy" ones. There will be no force on this planet powerful enough to break it again."

THE NATIVE'S first evidence of a return to consciousness was a faint fluttering of the lids that covered its organs of vision. The lids opened and it looked up at them.

"Its eyesight is as slow as its muscular reactions," Remm said. "Watch." Remm raised his hand and waved it slowly in front of the native's face. The eyes of the native, moving in odd, jerking movements, followed the hand's progress. Remm raised the hand—speeding its action slightly—and the eyesight faltered and lost it. The native's eyes rolled wildly until once again they located the hand.

Remm took three steps forward. The native's eyes were unable to follow his change of position. Its gaze wandered about the room, until again its settled on Remm's waiting figure.

"Can you imagine anything being so slow," Remm said, "and still . . ." Suddenly Macker interrupted. "Something is wrong. It is trying to get up, but it can't." The native was registering signs of distress, kicking its legs and twisting its body into new positions of contortion.

"I see what the trouble is," Toolls said. "It's unable to lift the appendage with the new bone in. I never thought of that before but its 'light' muscles aren't strong enough to lift the limb. We've got the poor creature pinned to the box by the weight of its own arm."

"We can't do that to it," Remm said. "Isn't there any way you can give it a lighter bone?"

"None that wouldn't take a retooling of the *converter*," Toolls said. "I'm not certain that I could do it, and even if I could, we don't have the time to spare. I could give it stronger muscles in the arm, but that may throw off the metabolism of the whole body. If it did the result would be fatal. I'd hate to chance it."

"I have an idea," Macker said. By the inflections of his tones the others knew that some incongruity of the situation had aroused Macker's sense of humor. "Why don't we give the creature an entirely new body? We could replace the flesh and viscera, as well as the cartilaginous structure, with our own type substance. It would probably be an indestructible being as far as its own world is concerned. And it would be as powerful as their mightiest machines. We'd leave behind us a superman that could change the course of this world's history. You could do it, couldn't you, Toolls?"

"Quite simply."

"Our policy has always been not to interfere in anyway with the races we study," Remm protested.

"But our policy has also been never to harm any of them, if at all possible to avoid it," Macker insisted. "In common justice you have to complete the job Toolls began on the arm, or you're condemning this poor thing to death."

"But do we have the right to loose such an unpredictible factor as it would be among them?" Remm asked. "After all, our purpose is exploration and observation, not playing the parts of gods to the primitives we encounter."

"True, that is the rule which we have always followed in the past," Macker agreed, "but it is in no way a requirement. We are empowered to use our judgment in all circumstances. And in this particular instance I believe I can convince you that the course I suggest is the more just one." He turned to Toolls. "Just what stage of cultural development would you say this creature's race has attained?"

"It still retains more of an animal-like adaptation to its surroundings than an intellectual one," Toolls replied. "Its civilization is divided into various sized units of cooperation which it calls governments. Each unit vies with the others for a greater share of its world's goods. That same rivalry is carried down to the individual within the unit. Each strives for acquisition against his neighbor.

"Further they retain many of their tribal instincts, such as gregariousness, emotional rather than intellectual propagation, and worship of the mightiest fighter. This last, however, is manifested by reverence for individuals attaining position of authority, or acquiring large amounts of their medium of exchange, rather than by physical superiority."

"That's what I mean," Macker said. "Our policy in the past has been to avoid tampering, only because of the fear of bringing harm. If we created a super being among them, to act as a controlling and harmonizing force, we'd hasten their development by thousands of years. We'd be granting them the greatest possible boon!"

"I don't know," Remm said, obviously swayed by Macker's logic. "I'm still hesitant about introducing a being into their midst whose thought processes would be so subtle and superior to their own. How do you feel about it, Toolls?"

"What would they have to lose?" Toolls asked with his penchant for striking the core of an argument.

"The right or wrong of such moral and philosophical considerations has always been a delicate thing to decide," Remm acquiesed reluctantly. "Go ahead if you think it is the right thing to do."

ALL FINISHED?" Macker asked.

"That depends on how much you want me to do," Toolls replied. "I've substituted our "heavy" substances for his entire body structure, including the brain—at the same time transferring his former memory and habit impressions. That was necessary if he is to be able to care for himself. Also I brought his muscular reaction time up to our norm, and speeded his reflexes."

"Have you implanted any techniques which he did not possess before, such as far-seeing, or mental insight?" Macker asked.

"No," Toolls said. "That is what I want your advice about. Just how much should I reveal about ourselves and our background? Or should he be left without any knowledge of us?"

"Well . . ." Now that the others had deferred to Macker's arguments, he had lost much of his certainty. "Perhaps we should at least let him know who we are, and what we have done. That would save him much alarm and perplexity when it comes time to reorient himself. On the other hand perhaps we should go even farther and implant the knowledge of some of our sciences. Then he could do a better job of advancing his people. But maybe I'm wrong. What do you think about it, Remm?"

"My personal opinion," Remm said, "is that we can't give him much of our science, because it would be like giving a baby a high explosive to play with. His race is much too primitive to handle it wisely. Either he, or someone to whom he imparts what we teach him, would be certain to bring catastrophe to his world. And if we let him learn less, but still remember his contact with us, in time his race would very likely come to regard us as gods. I would hesitate to drag in any metaphysical confusion to add to the uncertainties you are already engendering. My advice would be to wipe his mind of all memory of us. Let him explain his new found invincibility to himself in his own way."

Macker had no criticism to offer to this suggestion. "Does he retain any of his immunity to this world's malignant germs?" he asked.

"They are too impotent to represent any hazard to his present body mechanism," Toolls replied. "If and when he dies it will not be from disease."

"He will be subject to the deterioration of old age, the same as we are, won't he?" Macker asked.

"Of course," Toolls said, "but that's the only thing that will be able to bring him down. He cannot be harmed by any force this 'light' world can produce; he is impervious to sickness; and he will live indefinitely."

"Indefinitely?"

"As his world reckons time. Their normal life span is less than a hundred years. Ours is over five thousand. He will probably live approximately twice that long, because he will be subjected to less stress and strain, living as he does on a world of lighter elements."

"Then we have truly made a superman," Macker's tones inflected satisfaction. "I wish we were returning this way in a thousand years or so. I'd like to see the monumental changes he will effect."

"We may at that," Remm said, "or others of our people will. He will probably be a living legend by then. I'd like to hear what his race has to say about him. Do they have names with which to differentiate individuals?"

"Yes," Toolls said. "This one has a family designation of Pollnow,

and a member designation of Orville."

"It will be necessary for us to leave in exactly ten minutes," Remm reminded them. "Our next stopping place—the red star—will reach its nearest conjunction with this planet by the time we meet it out in space."

"Then we will have time to do nothing more for him before we go," Macker said. "But as far as I can see we've forgotten nothing, have we Toolls?"

"Nothing," Toolls answered. "No—we forgot nothing."

BUT Toolls was wrong. They had forgotten one thing. A minor detail, relatively. . .

On Toolls' world his race, in the course of its evolution, had adjusted itself to its own particular environment. Logically, the final result was that they evolved into beings best able to survive in that environment. As such their food—a "heavy," highly concentrated food—was ideally suited to supply the needs of their "heavy," tremendously avid organisms.

Orville Pollnow had no such food available. His body—no larger than before—had an Earth mass of one hundred and eighty thousand pounds. One hundred and eighty thousand pounds—the weight of twelve hundred average sized men—of fiercely burning, intense virility. Even continuous eating—of his own world's food—could not supply the demands of that body.

Twenty-four hours after the aliens left, Pollnow was dead—of starvation.

THE END

When Uncle Peter decided to clean out the underworld, it was a fine thing for the town, but it was tough on the folks in Tibet.

"And that's how it was, officer"

By Ralph Sholto

DAVID NIXON,
Chief of Police,
Morton City.

Dear Chief Nixon:

No doubt by this time, you and your boys are a pretty bewildered lot. You have all probably lost weight wondering what has been going on in Morton City; where all the gangsters went, and why the underworld has vanished like a bucket of soap bubbles.

Not being acquainted with my uncle, Peter Nicholas, with Bag Ears Mulligan, with the gorgeous Joy Nicholas, my bride of scarcely twenty-four hours, or with me, Homer Nicholas, you have of course been out of touch with a series of swiftly moving events just culminated.

You, above all others, are entitled to know what has been happening in our fair city. Hence this letter. When you receive it, Joy and I will be on the way to Europe in pursuit of a most elusive honeymoon. Uncle Peter will be headed for Tibet in order to interview certain very important people you and your department never heard of. Bag Ears will probably be off somewhere searching for his bells, and I suggest you let him keep right on searching, because Bag Ears isn't one to answer questions with very much intelligence.

So, because of the fact that a great deal of good has been done at no cost whatever to the taxpayers, I suggest you read this letter and then forget about the whole thing.

It all started when Joy and I finally got an audience with Uncle Peter in his laboratory yesterday morning. Possibly you will think it strange that I should have difficulty in contacting my own close relative. But you don't know Uncle Peter.

He is a strange mixture of the doer and the dreamer—the genius and the child. Parts of his brain never passed third grade while other parts could sit down and tie Einstein in knots during a discussion of nuclear physics, advanced mathematics or what have you. He lives in a small bungalow at the edge of town, in the basement of which, is his laboratory. A steel door bars the public from this laboratory and it was upon this door that Joy and I pounded futilely for three days. Finally the door opened and Uncle Peter greeted us.

"Homer—my dear boy! Have you been knocking long?"

"Quite a while, Uncle Peter—off and on that is. I have some news for you. I am going to get married."

My uncle became visibly disturbed. "My boy! That's wonderful —truly wonderful. But I'm certainly surprised at you. Tsk-tsk-tsk!"

"What do you mean by tsk-tsk-tsk?"

"Your moral training has been badly neglected. You plan marriage even while traveling about in the company of this woman you have with you."

Joy is a lady of the finest breeding, but she can be caught off-guard at times. This was one of the times. She said, "Listen here, you bald-headed jerk. Nobody calls me a woman—"

Uncle Peter was mildly interested. "Then if you aren't a woman, what—?"

I hastened to intervene. "You didn't let Joy finish, Uncle Peter. She no doubt would have added—'in that tone of voice.' And I think her attitude is entirely justified. Joy is a fine girl and my intended bride."

"Oh, why didn't you say so?"

"I supposed you would assume as much."

"My boy. I am a scientist. A scientist assumes nothing. But I wish to apologize to the young lady and I hope you two will be very happy."

"That's better," Joy said, with only a shade of truculence.

"And now," Uncle Peter went on. "It would be very thoughtful of you to leave. I am working on a serum which will have a great deal to to do with changing the course of civilization. In fact it is already perfected and must be tested. It is a matter of utmost urgency to me that I be left alone to arrange the tests."

"I am afraid," I said, "that you will have to delay your work a few hours. It is not everyday that your nephew gets married and in all decency you must attend the wedding and the reception. I don't wish you to be inconvenienced too greatly, but—"

Uncle Peter's mind had gone off on another track. He stopped me

with a wave of his hand and said, "Homer, are you still running around with those bums from the wrong side of town?"

THESE words from anyone but Uncle Peter would have been insulting. But Uncle Peter is the most impersonal man I have known. He never bothers insulting people for any personal satisfaction. When he asks a question he always has a reason for so doing.

By way of explaining Uncle Peter's question, let me say that I am a firm believer in democracy and I demonstrate this belief in my daily life. More than once I have had to apologize for the definitely unsocial attitude of my family. They have a tendency to look down on those less fortunate in environment and financial stability than we Nicholases.

I however, do not approve of this snobbishness. I cannot forget that a great-uncle, Phinias Nicholas, laid the foundations of our fortune by stealing cattle in the days of the Early West and selling them at an amazing profit.

I personally am a believer in the precept that all men are created equal. I'll admit they don't remain equal very long, but that is beside the point.

In defense of my convictions, I have always sought friends among the underprivileged brotherhood sometimes scathingly referred to as bums, tramps, screwballs, and I've found them, on the whole, to be pretty swell people.

But to get back—I answered Uncle Peter rather stiffly. "My friends are my own affair and are not to be discussed."

"No offense. My question had to do with an idea I got rather suddenly. Will any of these—ah, friends, be present at the reception?"

"It is entirely possible."

"Then I could easily infiltrate—"

"You could what?"

"Never mind, my boy. It is not important. I'll be indeed honored to attend your wedding."

At that moment there was a muffled commotion from beyond a closed door to our left; the sound of heels kicking on the panel and an irate female voice:

"They gone yet? There's cobwebs in this damn closet—and it's dark!"

Uncle Peter had the grace to blush. In fact he could do little else as the closet door opened and a young lady stepped forth.

In the vulgar parlance of the day, this girl could be described only as a dream-boat. This beyond all doubt, because the trim hull, from stem to stern, was bared to the gaze of all who cared to observe and admire. She was a blonde dream-boat—and most of her present apparel had come from lying under a sun lamp.

Uncle Peter gasped. "Cora! In the name of all decency—"

Joy, with admirable aplomb, laughed gayly. "Why Uncle Peter! So it's that kind of research! And no wonder it's top-secret!"

Uncle Peter's frantic attention was upon the girl. "I was never so mortified—"

She raised her hair-line eyebrows.

"Why the beef, Winky? Aren't we among friends?"

"Never mind! Never mind!" Uncle Peter fell back upon his dignity—having nothing else to fall back on—and said, "Homer—Joy—this is Cora, my ah—assistant. She was ah—in the process of taking a shower, and—"

Joy reached forth and pinched Uncle Peter's flaming cheek. "It's all right, uncle dear. Perfectly all right. And I'll bet this chick can give a terrific assist, too."

I felt the scene should be broken up at the earliest possible moment. I steered Joy toward the door. I said, "We'll see you later, then, Uncle Peter."

"And you too, Miss Courtney," Joy cut in. "Make Winky bring you and don't bother to dress. The reception is informal."

I got Joy out the door but I couldn't suppress her laughter. "Winky," she gasped. "Oh, my orange and purple garter-belt!"

WE WILL proceed now, to the reception, which was given by my Aunt Gretchen in the big house on Shore Drive. We were married at City Hall and—after a delicious interlude while the cab was carrying us cross-town—we arrived there, a happy bride and groom.

I am indeed fortunate to have wooed and won such a talented and beautiful girl as Joy. A graduate of Vassar, she is an accomplished pianist, a brilliant conversationalist, and is supercharged with a vitality and effervescence which—while they sometimes manifest in disturbing ways—are wonderful to behold. But more of that later.

The reception began smoothly enough. The press was satisfactorily represented, much to Aunt Gretchen's gratification. Joy and I stood at the door for a time, receiving. Then, tiring of handshakes and congratulations, we retired to the conservatory to be alone for a few minutes.

Or so we thought.

Almost immediately, Aunt Gretchen ferreted us out. Aunt Gretchen has long-since lost the smooth silhouette for which the Nicholas women are noted. She has broadened in all departments and she came waddling along between banks of yellow roses in a manner suggesting an outraged circus tent.

"Homer," she called. "Homer!"

I reluctantly took my hands away and answered her.

"Oh, there you are! Homer—I want an explanation."

"An explanation of what?"

"There is a person at the door who calls himself Bag Ears Mulligan. He has the audacity to claim you invited him to—to this *brawl* as he terms it."

I must here explain—with sorrow—that my Aunt Gretchen is a snob. There is no other term for it. It has gotten to be such a habit with her that any friend of mine is automatically a person to be looked down on.

And Bag Ears Mulligan is one of my dearest friends. Of course I had invited him to my wedding, and felt honored by his attendance. Bag Ears is a habitue of one of the

less glittering places I frequent in search of lasting fellowship—Red-Nose Tessie's Bar, to be exact. A place of dirty beer glasses but of warm hearts and sincere people.

"I'll see this man, Aunt Gretchen," I said with calm dignity. "He is to be an honored guest. While somewhat rugged in appearance, Bag Ears has a sensitive nature and must be treated with understanding."

Aunt Gretchen's lips quivered. "Homer—I'm through—absolutely and finally through! You can get someone else to handle your next wedding reception. Hold it in a barn or a stable. Never again in my house."

After this tactless outburst, Aunt Gretchen came about and sailed out of the conservatory. Joy and I followed wordlessly.

Upon arriving at the front door, we found Aunt Gretchen had spoken the truth. Bag Ears was waiting there. He had been herded into a corner by Johnson, Aunt Gretchen's stuffed shirt of a butler, who was standing guard over him.

Bag Ears grinned happily when he caught sight of me and I smiled reassuringly. While Bag Ears is not too richly endowed with good looks, he has a great heart and at one time was possessed of a lightning-fast brain. However, he took a great deal of punishment during his unsuccessful climb toward the lightweight title, and his brain has been slowed down to the point where it sometimes comes to a complete halt. His features reflect the fury of a hundred battles in the squared ring. They are in a sad state, his ears particularly. They hang wearily downward like the leaves of a dying cabbage plant.

Also, Bag Ears, has fallen into the misfortune of hearing bells at various times—bells that exist only in his poor, bewildered mind. But he is cheerful and warm-hearted nonetheless.

He said, "Homer, this character says I should o' brung along my invite. But I don't remember you givin' me one. You just ast me to come."

"That is true," I returned, "and you are most welcome. You may go Johnson." I gave the butler a cold look and he stalked away.

I THEN introduced Bag Ears to my new bride. "This is Joy. I am certainly a lucky man, Bag Ears. Isn't she the most beautiful thing you ever saw?"

Bag Ears was of course impressed. "Golly what gams!" he breathed. His eyes traveled upward and he said, "Golly what—what things and stuff." He came finally to her face. "Baby, you got it!"

Joy was rocked back on her heels. Caught unawares by the open admiration in his eyes, she whispered, "Oh, my ancient step-ins!"

But she rallied like a thoroughbred and gave Bag Ears a dazzling smile. "I'm delighted, Mr. Mulligan. Homer's friends are my friends —I think—and I'm sure everything will turn out all right."

Bag Ears said, "Lady—leave us not be formal. Just call me Bag Ears."

"Of course—Bag Ears—leave us be chummy."

He now turned his remarks to me and evinced even more intense admiration for my bride. "She reminds me of a fast lightweight—the most beautiful sight in the world."

"Let us repair to the conservatory," I said, "where we can have a quiet chat." I said this because I felt that some of the other guests might not be as tactful as Joy and might make Bag Ears feel uncomfortable. Aunt Gretchen had rudely vanished without waiting for an introduction and the actions of the hostess often set the pattern for those of the guests.

As we moved toward the rear of the house, Joy took my arm and said, "Speaking of being stripped down for action—what do you suppose happened to Uncle Peter? I haven't seen him around anywhere."

"He gave his word, so I'm sure he'll come."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"I don't understand."

"I don't quite understand myself, but I feel uneasy. I remember the calculating look in his eye when he suddenly agreed to honor us with his presence. There was something too eager about that look. And his asking whether any of your friends would be here."

"Uncle Peter is basically a good fellow. I think he envies me my wide contacts."

"Maybe."

"If he seemed a trifle peculiar, you must remember that he is a scientist. Even now he is engaged in some important project—some experiment—"

"I know—we met her."

"Joy! Please!"

"—but I wouldn't think he'd have to experiment at his age. I'd think—"

I put my hand firmly over her mouth. "Darling—we have a guest—Bag Ears—"

"Oh, of course."

Safely hidden behind a bank of tropical grass, I took Joy in my arms and kissed her. Bag Ears obligingly looked in the other direction. But Joy didn't quite get her heart into it. She seemed preoccupied—I might almost say, bewildered.

"Bag Ears," she whispered to no one in particular, "and what did you say the lady's name was? Oh—I remember—Red-Nose Tessie." She pondered for a moment and then smiled up at me dreamily. "Darling—I never realized what a versatile person you are—"

Bag Ears perked up. "Verseetile? You ain't just a hootin', babe. And *tough*. You should see his right."

I strove to quiet him down. "Never mind, Bag Ears—"

But Joy evinced great interest. "Tell me—"

"Babe—the kid could be the next heavyweight champ in a breeze. I mind me one night a monkey comes into the tavern rodded—"

Joy held up a hand. "Just a moment. I don't like to appear stupid, but—"

"A moke wid a heater—a goon wid a gat."

"Oh—you mean a man with a gun."

"Sure—that's what I said. Any-

how, this droolie makes a crack about Tessie's beak—"

"An insult relative to her nose?"

"Sure—sure. And Tessie's hot to kiss him wid a bottle when he pulls the iron."

"Imagine that," Joy said, and I felt a slight shiver go through her body.

"Then Homer here, gets off his stool and says very polite-like. 'That remark, sir, was in bad taste and entirely uncalled-for. I believe an apology is in order.' And the monkey standing there with the gat in his mitt. What Homer meant was the jerked cracked out o' turn and to eat his words fast."

"I gathered that was what he meant."

"But the screwball raises the hardware and—wham—Homer hits him. What a sock! The goon backpedals across the room and into a cardboard wall next to the door marked 'ladies'. He busts right through the wall and lands in a frail's lap inside who's—"

"Powdering her nose?"

"That's right! What a sock!"

JOY'S eyes were upon mine. "Darling! I didn't have the least idea. Why it's going to be wonderful! Never a dull moment!"

I kissed my bride, after which she said, "I think I could do with a drink, sweetheart."

"Your wish is my command."

I got up and started toward the liquor supply inside the house. Joy's soft call stopped me.

"What is it angel?" I inquired.

"Not just a drink, sweet. Bring the bottle."

I went into the kitchen and got a bottle of brandy. But upon returning, I discovered I'd neglected to bring glasses.

But Joy took the bottle from me in a rather dazed manner, knocked off the neck against a leg of the bench and tipped the bottle to her beautiful lips. She took a pull of brandy large enough to ward off the worst case of pneumonia and then passed the bottle to Bag Ears.

"Drink hearty, pal," she murmured, and sort of sank down into herself.

I never got my turn at the bottle because, just at that moment, Aunt Gretchen came sailing like a pink cloud along the conservatory walk. She was no longer the old familiar Aunt Gretchen. Her eyes were glazed and her face was drawn and weary.

Bag Ears looked up politely and asked, "Who's the fat sack?"

I was hoping Aunt Gretchen hadn't heard the question because she would fail to understand that while his words were uncouth, he had a heart of gold and meant well. And I don't think she *did* hear him. She didn't even hear Joy, who replied,

"That's the dame that owns the joint."

Aunt Gretchen fixed her accusing eyes upon me to the exclusion of everyone else. Her button of a chin quivered. "Please understand, Homer—I'm not criticizing. Things have gotten past that stage. I've merely come to report that the house is filling up with an astounding assortment of characters. John-

son resigned a half hour ago. But before he left, he suggested a man who could handle the situation far better than he himself. A man named Frank Buck."

"But my dear aunt," I protested. "There must be some mistake. I did not invite any unusual people to this reception. I issued only three invitations. I invited Willie Shank, who could not come because of a dispute with the police over the ownership of a car he was driving yesterday; John Smith, who could not come because this is the day he reports to the parole board, and my good friend Bag Ears Mulligan."

"How did you happen to overlook Red-Nose Tessie?" Joy asked.

"The poor woman is emotional. She does not enjoy wedding receptions. She weeps."

"So does Aunt Gretchen," Joy observed.

Aunt Gretchen was indeed weeping—quietly, under the blanket of reserve with which the Nicholases cover their emotions. I was about to comfort her when she turned and fled. I started to run after her but decided against it and returned to Joy.

"Perhaps," I said, "we had better investigate this strange turn of events. Possibly our reception has been crashed by some undesirable persons."

"Impossible," Joy replied. "But it might be fun to look them over. Shall we have a quick one first—just to stiffen the old spine a bit?"

It sounded like a good suggestion so we stiffened our spines with what was left in the bottle, and quitted the conservatory.

BACK in the house, one thing became swiftly apparent. We had guests who were utter strangers to me. But it was Bag Ears who summed up the situation with the briefest possible statement. "Jees!" he ejaculated. "It's a crooks' convention!"

"You can identify some of these intruders?"

"If you mean do I know 'em, the answer is without a doubt, pal. Somehow, the whole Cement Mixer Zinsky mob has infiltered into the joint."

"Cement Mixer Zinsky," Joy murmured. "Another of those odd names."

"It's on account of he invented something. Zinsky was the first gee to think up a very novel way of getting rid of people that crowd you. He got the idea to mix up a tub of cement—place the unwanted character's feet in same and then throw the whole thing into the lake. Result—no more crowding by that guy."

"He was the first one who thought of it? A sort of trail blazer."

"Of course Cement Mixer is a big shot now and his boys take care of things like that. But sometimes he goes along to mix the cement—just to keep his hand in you might say."

"A sentimentalist no doubt."

"No doubt," Bag Ears agreed.

I patted Joy's hand and said, "Don't be alarmed, darling. I will take care of everything."

The situation was definitely obnoxious to me. Tolerance of one's fellow men is one thing, but this

was something entirely different. These people had come uninvited to our festive board and were of the criminal element, pure and unadulterated by any instincts of honesty or decency. And it made me angry to see them wading into Aunt Gretchen's liquor supply as though the stuff came out of a pump.

They were easy to count, these hoodlums, segregated as they were. The more respectable of the guests who had not already left, were clustered together in one corner of the living room, possibly as a gesture toward self-protection. None of these elite were making any effort to approach the buffet or the portable bar at the other side of the room. And in thus refraining, they showed a superior brand of intelligence. Under present circumstances any attempt to reach the refreshments would have been as dangerous as crossing the Hialeah race track on crutches.

In fact, as I surveyed the scene, one brave lady made a half-hearted attempt to cross over and spear a sandwich off the corner of the buffet. She was promptly shoved out of range by a lean, hungry looking customer in a pink shirt, who snarled, "Scram, Three Chins! You're overfed now."

Unhooking Joy's dear fingers from my arm, I said, "You will pardon me, but it is time for action. Bag Ears will see that you are not harmed."

I started toward the buffet, or rather toward the crowd of male and female hoodlums who completely blocked it from my sight. But Bag Ears snatched me by the sleeve and whispered,

"For cri-yi, Homer! Don't be a fool! This mob is loaded wid hardware. They don't horse around none. Start slugging and they'll dress you in red polka dots. Better call in some law."

I shook my head firmly and pulled Bag Ears' hand from my sleeve. But, his attention now turned in another direction, he held on even harder and muttered,

"Jeeps! I'm seeing things!"

I glanced around and saw him staring wide eyed at the entrance hall, his battered mouth ajar. I followed his eyes but could see nothing unusual. Only the hall itself, through an arched doorway, and the lower section of the staircase that gave access to the second floor of the house. It appeared to be the least-troubled spot in view. I frowned at Bag Ears.

"Maybe I've gone nuts," he said, "but I'll swear I just saw a face peeking down around them stairs."

"Whose face?"

"Hands McCaffery's face! That's whose!"

"And who is Hands McCaffery?"

Bag Ears looked at me with stark unbelief. "You mean you don't know? Maybe your mom didn't give you the facts of life! Chum, they's two really tough monkeys in this town. One of them is Cement Mixer Zinsky and the other is Hands McCaffery. At the moment they're slugging it out to see which one gets to levy a head tax on the juke boxes in this section. It's a sweet take and neither boy will be satisfied with less than all. Seeing them both in one place is like see-

ing Truman and that music critic sit down at the piano together. And I know damn well that Hands is up on them stairs!"

"You are obviously overwrought. If I have this type of person sized up correctly, none of them would be dallying on the stairs. If this Hands person were here, he'd be at the buffet fighting for a helping of pickled beets and a gin wash. Pardon me—I have work to do."

But there was another interruption. I froze in sudden alarm when I realized Joy was no longer at my side. Just as I made this discovery, there was an upsurge of commotion at the bar; a commotion that went head and shoulders over the minor ones going on constantly. A short angry scream came to my ears, then a bull-voiced roar of agony.

THE crowd at the buffet surged back and I saw a bucktoothed hooligan bent double, both hands gripping his ankle. Thick moans came from his lips.

And standing close to him, was my Joy. But a new Joy. A different Joy than I had ever seen. A glorious Joy, with her head thrown back, her teeth showing, and the light of battle in her eyes. She was holding a plate of jello in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other and was shouting in outraged dignity.

"Watch who you're shoving, you jug headed gorilla! And keep your mitt out of the herring! Eat like a man or go back to the zoo!"

With that she placed an accurate kick against the offending character's other shine-bone and aimed the beer bottle at his skull.

Joy turned and smiled gayly. "He pushed me," she said. "It's the most wonderful wedding reception I ever attended. Have a pickle."

But surprise was piling upon surprise. Again I froze as a new phase of this horrible affair presented itself.

Uncle Peter.

Clad in apron and cap, he was behind the bar serving out drinks. This shook me to the core. It was a little like seeing Barney Baruch hit a three bagger in Yankee Stadium and slide into third base.

But there he was, taking orders and dishing out drinks with an attitude as solemn and impersonal as an owl on a tree branch.

Also, he had an assistant—his blonde bombshell. She was fully dressed now and I was struck by the peculiar manner in which this peculiar team functioned.

Uncle Peter would mix a drink, glance at his wrist watch as he served it, then turn and whisper some sort of information to the girl. She noted it down in a small book and the routine was repeated.

At this exact moment, I felt a sharp dig in the ribs. This brought my attention back to Joy, who had done the digging.

"I'm still here, husband mine. Your bride—remember? Or are you waiting for that blonde hussy to start stripping?"

"Darling, I'm afraid you're not paying close attention to things of importance. Don't you see Uncle Peter there—serving drinks?"

"Of course I see him. What of it? If the old roue feels like dish-

ing out a little alcohol to the boys, what—"

"It's absolutely beyond all conception. Uncle Peter never does anything without a good reason. And *this*—"

My reply was cut short by a cold, brutal voice that knifed through the room and put a chill on all present. "Hold it everybody! Stand still and don't move a finger!"

Not a finger in the room moved. But all eyes turned toward the arched doorway leading to the entrance hall. In its exact center, there stood a man—a short man of slight stature. He stood spread-legged, wearing a colored kerchief over the lower part of his face. Only his eyes were visible—icy, black, narrowed. Those eyes seemed to be smiling a grim smile. Possibly his hidden teeth were bared in a snarl. But no one cared about that. Everyone was far more interested in the black Thompson sub-machine gun he held cradled over one arm.

He toyed with the trigger, knifing the room with quick side glances. He said, "Okay. Start sorting yourselves out. You, pretty boy, and the frail with the beer bottle—out of the line of fire." He motioned with the gun barrel and I drew Joy toward the wall.

"Now you, Cora—and old puddle-puss. Out of the way. And not a peep out of anybody."

No one was inclined to peep, and now the stage was set in a manner which seemed to satisfy the masked gunman. The Cement Mixer Zinsky crowd was clustered, cowering, around the buffet, staring at the machine gun as though it possessed the hypnotic eyes of a snake.

The situation was entirely plain. The masked man fully intended to break the law by committing murder in Aunt Gretchen's living room. The only moot point seemed to be whether he intended to slay the whole mob or be selective and cut down only important members. His trigger finger turned white at the knuckle.

Then Uncle Peter stepped forward to hold up a protesting hand. "You mustn't fire that weapon, my good fellow. Indeed you must not."

His matter-of-fact attitude rather than his words, was what gave the gunman pause. He had hardly expected the display of completely impersonal bravery that Uncle Peter put on. The gunman asked, "Are you nuts, fiddlefoot?"

"Far from it. But you must not, under any circumstances, fire that gun. It will upset one of the most important experiments in the history of science. That experiment is now in progress."

"Look, brother. I came here to mow down Zinsky and his mob. And I'm mowing. The St. Valentine's deal in Chi'll look like a Sunday school binge after this one."

"Possibly it will not be necessary to use your weapon."

UNCLE Peter's words, it seemed, were prophetic. At that exact moment, Cement Mixer Zinsky exploded. Not violently, or with any peril to those standing close by. Yet no other term can describe it. There was a soft pop—as though a large, poorly inflated balloon had

been pricked with a pin. Zinsky seemed to go in all directions—fragments of him that is. Yet, as each fragment flew away from the main body, it shriveled up so that there was no blood, and no bystander suffered the inconvenience of messed-up clothing. Just the *pop* and Zinsky expanded like a human bomb and then turned into dust.

As this phenomenon occurred I saw Uncle Peter nod with great satisfaction and consult a passage in the book presided over by his blond assistant. He made a check mark in the book.

Then a second member of the buffet group went *pop*. The masked man stared in slack-jawed wonder. In fact his jaw went so slack the kerchief dropped away revealing his entire visage. He lowered his head and looked down at the gun in his hands; the gun that had not been fired.

Two more members of Zinsky's party followed him into whatever oblivion was achieved by going *pop* and dissolving into dust. Uncle Peter evinced bright interest and made two more check marks in the book.

The balance of the mob moved as one, but in many directions. They paid no attention to their own weapons as they headed for cover. One of their number exploded as he was half way through the French doors. Uncle Peter checked him off and Bag Ears said, "Jeeps! tomorrow every juke box in town can play 'Nearer my God to Thee.'" Then he added, "Leave us blow this joint. Goofy things is happening here. I don't like it."

I was perspiring. I mopped my forehead. "A most amazing occurrence," I observed.

Joy was digging the fingers on one hand into my arm. I had been watching Hands McCaffery back crestfallen out of the living room and toward the front door, terrific slaughter having been accomplished without the firing of a shot. I turned my eyes now to follow the direction in which Joy pointed with her other hand and saw the blond assistant hauling Uncle Peter through one of the French windows. He did not seem to be enthusiastic about leaving. In fact he appeared to argue quite strenuously against it, but her will prevailed and they disappeared out onto the lawn.

Now, with all the danger past, people began fainting in wholesale lots. Aunt Gretchen was resting comfortably with her head braced against the brass rail of the portable bar. Those who didn't faint contributed variously tonated screams to the general unrest. And over all this brooded the dank clouds of acrid dust that had so lately been Cement Mixer Zinsky and certain members of his mob. Indeed, the scene took on a startling semblance to one of Dore's etchings in an old edition of Dante's Inferno.

"I repeat," Bag Ears bleated plaintively. "Leave us blow this joint. It ain't healthy here."

"He's right," Joy said. "A lot of explanation is wanting. There are some people we've got to catch up with. Let's go."

With that, she drew Bag Ears and

me toward the French doors through which had recently passed some of the fastest moving objects in this or any other world. We made the flag-stone terrace above the drive where Bag Ears cordially grasped my hand and said,

"Well, it was a nice party, folks, and if I ever get spliced I'll sure give you a invite and I sure had a swell time and remember me to your aunt when she wakes up and—"

He was backing down the steps when Joy cut in with, "Bag Ears. Don't be so rude. You're in no hurry."

Bag Ears slowed down and allowed us to catch up with him. He gave us a sickly smile. "That's where you're wrong, babe."

"Bag Ears," Joy went on. "I heard you whisper to Homer that you know who that blonde is."

"What blonde. Me? I don't know nothing about no blonde nohow."

"Don't hedge. I mean the girl who was assisting Uncle Peter behind the bar. Who is she, really?"

"Oh—her. Everybody knows her. She's Hands McCaffery's moll. He likes 'em blonde and—"

Bag Ears was on the move again, striding in the direction of the gate. We hurried to catch up. "That babe's poison," he told us. "Any skirt that'd flock with Hands McCaffery is poison. I'll tell you kids what I'd do. If she drives south—I'd drive north. Goodbye now."

Just at that moment a big blue sports roadster pushed a bright chromium nose around the corner of the house. I took a firm grip on Bag Ears' collar, grabbed Joy by the arm, and the three of us leaped behind a bush. The car rolled past us. We saw the blonde behind the wheel and Uncle Peter seated beside her, evidently still protesting the hasty exodus.

BUT the girl looked very sharp and businesslike; the way a girl would look who knew where she was going and why. The car picked up speed and swung north.

"I wonder," Joy murmured, "how Uncle Peter happened to select Hands McCaffery's girl friend as his assistant."

"She was a burlycue queen last time I heard of her," Bag Ears said. "Still is I guess."

"That could explain it," I told Joy. "You see Uncle Peter has—ah, facets to his personality. A tendency to admire women. Ah—"

"Women—period; isn't that what you mean?"

"Well, it would be perfectly logical for Uncle Peter to select an assistant from the stage of a burlesque theater."

"Enough of this," Joy snapped. "We're wasting time. Go get—oh, never mind! Wait here."

Joy was off in the direction of the garage and in no time at all she was back in my Cadillac convertible. As she sailed by I managed to hook a finger around the door handle and get a foot inside.

This was no mean feat, as I was also occupied in hauling Bag Ears along by the collar. I managed to deposit him in the seat beside Joy and squeeze in beside him.

"A burlycue queen, eh?" Joy was muttering. "Well, she's not so much! If she couldn't get her clothes off she'd starve to death."

"Darling," I said. "I don't think this is the sort of thing you should be doing. It's far too dangerous for a girl."

"Or anybody else," Bag Ears moaned. There was a bleak look on his face. "I don't like playing around with a guy like Hands McCaffery or friends of a guy like him. It's a good way to collect your insurance."

"She's heading for Higgins Drive," Joy observed.

Which was entirely true. The roadster had made a turn on two wheels and was going west.

"But our honeymoon," I said, plaintively.

"Yeah," Bag Ears repeated, "what about our—your honeymoon?"

Joy's eyes were sparkling. She turned them on me. The car lurched. She returned her eyes to the road. "Yes, darling. Our honeymoon! Isn't it wonderful?"

"But this isn't it! This isn't what people do on their honeymoons."

"Oh, you mean—but don't worry about that, darling. We'll have plenty of time for—"

"Lemme out o' here," Bag Ears moaned. "I got a date to take Red Nose Tessie to the movies."

Joy apparently did not hear him. "I wish we had all the parts to this puzzle. It looks as though somebody put somebody on the spot for a rubout. But it would seem that somebody else got the same idea but didn't know that somebody else was going to achieve the same result in a more spectacular way and—"

"I think you've figured it out most accurately."

"Some of it fits together. Uncle Peter was no doubt responsible for the Zinsky boys coming to our reception. We'll get the dope on that when we catch up with him. But the blonde must not have known what was going to happen, so she tipped Hands off that he could find the whole Zinsky mob at the reception. He decided it would be a good place to settle certain matters of his own."

"But why did Uncle Peter want them there?"

Joy glanced at me with love in her eyes. "Darling, we're going to be wonderful companions through life, but most of the fun will be strictly Physical. Mental exercises aren't your forte."

"When Red Nose Tessie makes a date with a guy," Bag Ears said, "she expects the guy to keep it."

"The blonde Cora is no doubt heading for a rendezvous with Hands McCaffery," Joy went on. "And she's taking our dear uncle with her."

"Okay," Bag Ears replied. "So we mind our business and keep our noses clean and live a long time."

Joy was weaving through traffic, trying to keep the roadster in sight. "Turn on the radio," she told me. "There might be some news."

I snapped the switch and we discovered there was news indeed; an evening commentator regaling the public with the latest:

"—an amazing mass phenomena which leading scientific minds have

pronounced to be basically similar to the flying saucer craze. Relative to that—you will remember—otherwise reliable citizens swore they saw space ships from other planets hovering over our cities spying on us.

"This phase of the hysteria takes an entirely different turn. It seems now that these otherwise entirely reliable citizens are seeing other citizens explode and vanish into thin air. The police and the newspapers have been deluged with frantic telephone calls. In the public interest, we have several persons here in the studio who claim to have seen this phenomena. Your commentator will now interview them over the air. You—you, sir—what is your name?"

"Sam—Sam Glutz."

"Thank you, Mr. Glutz. And will you tell the radio audience what you saw?"

"It wasn't nothing—nothing at all. That is—this guy was running down the street like maybe the cops was after him—I don't know. Then—there wasn't nothing."

"You mean the man disappeared?"

"He went pop, kind of—like a firecracker only not so loud—and then pieces of him flew all over and they disappeared and there wasn't nothing—nothing at all."

"Thank you, Mr. Glutz. And now this lady—"

"Turn it off," Joy snapped. "The blonde's pulling up."

THIS was evident to all three of us. "And by a cop yet," Bag Ears marveled. "Looks like they're going to give theirselves up."

It was Uncle Peter who got out of the car and approached the traffic officer standing at the intersection.

"What'll we do?" Joy asked. "Do you want to try and keep the old goat out of jail or shall we let him go to the chair as he deserves?"

The possibility stunned me to a point where it was hard to think clearly. "Good Lord, Joy! Think of the scandal! I don't care about myself, but Aunt Gretchen would never live it down! She'd be blackballed at all her clubs and—"

"Then," Joy replied sweetly, "I'd suggest you get out and slug that cop quick and grab Uncle Peter before he makes a confession."

I had come to the cross-roads, so to speak. The necessity of a weighty decision lay upon my shoulders. Was blood thicker than water? Was I justified in breaking the law—assaulting an officer in order to keep my uncle from becoming a blot on the family name?

I decided, grimly, that one owed all to one's relatives and I was halfway out of the car. Then I paused. Uncle Peter did not seem to be making a confession at all. He chatted easily with the officer and indicated my Cadillac with a movement of his thumb. Something passed from his hand to the hand of the policeman and the latter looked toward us and scowled.

"Uncle Peter is pulling a fast one," Joy said. "The cop's coming after *us!*"

I was uncertain as how to proceed now. I watched the scowling

policeman approach our car while Uncle Peter got back in with the blonde Cora and drove away.

"Are you going to hang one on him sweetheart?" Joy asked.

"What—what do you recommend?"

"I've got a hunch that if you don't we go to the pokey and Uncle Peter will be left free to blow up everybody in town."

I don't believe the officer meant to arrest us but at the moment my mind wasn't too clear and I accepted Joy's point of view.

I doubled my fist as the officer approached. He wasted no time in getting acquainted. He said, "How come you guys are tailing those guys? You figuring a stickup or something?"

It was now or never. I hunched my right shoulder and aimed a stiff knockout jolt at the officer's jaw. It wasn't too good a target because he had a lantern jaw and it was bobbing up and down as he munched on a wad of chewing gum.

But I did not connect. As my fist completed but half its lethal orbit, the officer blew up in my face! He went *pop* just as so many others had gone *pop* at our wedding reception; his entire anatomy flying in all directions, to turn into a cloud of sooty smoke and mix with the elements.

I was frozen with consternation. But not Joy. Instantly she dragged me back into the car. "Don't you get it? Uncle Peter gave him that stick of gum!"

"You're damn right!" Bag Ears stated. "The old monkey's gone clear off his trolley. Maybe he plans to clean out the whole town!"

Joy, her eyes slitted, was weaving in and out of traffic so as not to lose track of the blue roadster. "It's as plain as your nose! He's hand in glove with McCaffery and that blonde is bird-dogging him around town and pointing out McCaffery's enemies. Uncle Peter is knocking them off like clay pigeons."

I was amazed at this revelation, but was also thunderstruck by the underworld jargon flowing so easily from Joy's luscious lips. "Angel," I gasped. "Where did you learn to talk like that? Those underworld terms!"

"I read all the true detective magazines I can get my hands on," she said. "They're good fun, but that's beside the point. We've got to nail Uncle Peter and nail him quick, or Aunt Gretchen will ring up a nice big zero in the social world."

"How about nailing him without me?" Bag Ears suggested. "It's nine o'clock and Red Nose Tessie never likes to miss none of the show."

"I'm sure, Bag Ears," Joy said, "that Tessie would sympathize with our efforts to keep Uncle Peter out of the electric chair."

"I doubt it," he replied dubiously. "Tessie's brother got burned in Frisco for knocking over a bank clerk and Tessie never even attended. Let him fry in his own grease was what she said about it."

"Nevertheless," Joy said, "I have no time to stop and let you out."

A fast, fifteen-block chase followed. Once we lost the blue roadster completely, but by sheer luck, picked it up three blocks further on

as it came wheeling out of a side street.

We were in a quiet residential section now so there was no one to interfere as Joy skillfully forced the roadster to the curb. I jumped out and leaped swiftly toward the driver's door.

THE blonde sat behind the wheel with a sullen look on her face. "What is this?" she asked. "A stick-up?"

"Don't be vulgar," I replied. "We are here to take charge of my uncle. This weird slaughter must cease!"

Joy was by my side now, but Bag Ears hung back as though somewhat worried about the possible consequences of our act.

I heard him muttering: "What if he can just shoot the stuff in your eye maybe? What if a guy doesn't have to swallow it—?"

Joy's gayety was again coming to the surface. Her eyes were bright and I was struck by the fact that she seemed to thrive on this sort of thing. "Hello, Blondy," she said. "Get out from behind—"

The blonde's eyes threw sparks. "Who you think you're talking to, you lard—"

"Not Truman," Joy said. "Now get—"

I seized Joy's wrist. "Angel! He's gone! Uncle Peter isn't here!" I stared at Joy in horror. "Do you suppose he inadvertently chewed some of his own gum?"

Joy did not reply. She shouldered me aside, opened the car door and surprised me by getting a very scientific grip on Cora.

"Okay—where is he? What did you do with him?"

"He's not here!"

"Any fool can see that. Did he blow up?"

"Of course not. He went to keep a date."

The blonde jerked herself loose from Joy's hold and was sullenly straightening her clothing. "I don't see why you and Pretty Boy have to stick your big noses into this. It's none of your business."

"We're making it our business."

"You don't seem to realize," I said stiffly, "that Uncle Peter is very dear to me. He has performed some horrible deeds, and as his loving nephew—"

The blonde seemed puzzled. "You're off your crock! Pete's okay. He just entered into a little private deal to help out Hands McCaffery. I don't see where it's anybody's business, either. If he wanted your help he'd ask for it!"

It made my blood run cold to hear this girl refer so casually to the wholesale slaughter that had been going on around us. I strove to find words to shame her, but Joy cut in. And apparently my dear wife was more interested, at the moment, in the details of the affair rather than the morals involved.

"McCaffery and Uncle Peter haven't got any deal," she said to the blonde. "You lie as easily as you undress. If they had an arrangement to knock off all those parties at our wedding reception, how come McCaffery brought a machine gun along?"

The blonde had an answer. "Hands was a little doubtful. He

didn't think Pete could do it—blow people into thin air just from something they et. He was willing to go along with the gag but he wasn't going to pass up an opportunity to rub out the Zinsky gang—or as many as he could hit—if the gimmick didn't click. That's why he brought the Tommy—just in case."

Joy turned to me. "It fits," she said. "I've been trying to give Uncle Pete the benefit of every doubt but it looks as though you've got a mad dog sniffing at the trunk of your family tree."

CORA frowned. "You've got him all wrong. He's not—"

I continued with the questioning. "You are denying that Uncle Peter had anything to do with this deadly serum that disintegrates people before one's eyes?"

"I'm *not* denying it."

"Then it follows that your moral sense is so badly corroded you no longer consider murder to be a crime—"

"Now listen here!"

"In law," I went on, "the victim's standing in society is not taken into consideration where murder is involved. It is just as wrong in the eyes of the law to murder Cement Mixer Zinsky as the pastor of the First Congregational Church."

The blonde looked wonderingly at Joy. "Is this guy for real?"

Joy reestablished her hold upon the blonde's anatomy. "Never mind that. All we want from you is answers. Where did Uncle Peter go? Tell me!"

"Nuts to you!" Cora replied. "He doesn't want you bothering him."

Joy applied pressure. Cora squealed but remained mute. I stepped forward. "Darling," I said grimly. "This sort of thing is not in your line. I realize this woman must be made to talk so I will take over. It will be distasteful to me, but duty is duty."

I got a withering look from my dear wife. "Distasteful? In a pig's eye! You'd like nothing better than to get your hands on her—by way of duty of course."

"Joy!"

"Don't Joy me." And with an expert twist, she flipped the struggling Cora out of the roadster, goose-stepped her across and into the back seat of the Cadillac.

"You and Bag Ears get in and start driving—slow. I'll have some answers in a minute or two."

We did as we were told and I eased the car away from the curb. I had to watch the road, of course, so could not turn to witness what was going on rearward. In the mirror I saw flashes of up-ended legs and, from time to time, other and sundry anatomical parts that flew up in range only to vanish again as the grim struggle went on.

Bag Ears, however, turned to witness the bringing forth of the answers. His first comment was, "Oh boy!"

Joy was breathing heavily. She said, "Okay, babe. Talk, or I'll put real pressure on this scissors!"

Bag Ears said, "Man oh man!"

Joy said, "Quit gaping, you moron! I'm back here too."

I gave Bag Ears a stern admonition to keep his eyes front.

"Give," Joy gritted.

"Ouch! No!"

"Give!"

Cora gave forth an agonized wail. Then an indignant gasp. "Cut it out! You fight dirty! That ain't fair!"

"Give!"

"All right! All right. Pete's meeting Hands at—ouch—Joe's—ouch—Tavern on Clark Street. Ouch! Cut it out, will you?"

And it was here that I detected a trace of sadism in my lovely wife. "All right," she said regretfully. "Sit up. Gee but you talk easy."

"Just where is this tavern?" I asked. "And what is the purpose of the meeting?"

Cora's resistance was entirely gone. "In the 2800 block. Pete went there to get some money from Hands to skip town with."

Joy now spoke with relish. "Lying again. I'll have to—"

"I ain't lying!"

"Don't give us that! Uncle Peter is wealthy. He doesn't need Hands' money. Come here baby."

"Wait, Joy," I cut in hastily. "The young lady may be telling the truth. Uncle Peter is always short of funds. You see, Aunt Gretchen holds the purse strings in our family and Uncle Peter is always overdrawn on his allowance."

"Then let's get to that tavern and find out what's going on."

It took ten minutes to reach the tavern; a standard gin mill with a red neon sign proclaiming its presence. We quitted the car and I entered first, Joy bringing Cora along with a certain amount of force, and Bag Ears bringing up the rear.

And I was just in time to prevent another murder.

As I came through the door, I saw Hands and Uncle Peter leaning casually against the bar. There was no one else in the place. The barkeep was facing his two customers and there were three glasses set before them. The barkeep held one in his hand.

Uncle Peter had just finished spiking the barkeep's drink with a clear fluid from a small vial. Uncle Peter said, "It's something new I invented. Pure dynamite. You haven't lived until you've tasted my elixir."

HANDS said, "Go ahead. Drink it. I want to make sure I wasn't seeing things back at that dame's house."

The barkeep said, "Pure dynamite huh?"

"Your not fooling, chum."

He raised the glass and grinned. "Salud."

I got to the bar just in time to knock the glass out of his hairy paw. He grunted, "What the hell—oh, a wise guy, huh?" and started over the bar.

I yelled, "It's murder. They're trying to poison you!"

"Oh, a crackpot!"

He came toward me, shaking off Uncle Peter's restraining hand. I took a step backward, thankful he was coming in wide open because I had seen few tougher looking characters in my lifetime.

I set myself and sent a short knockout punch against his chin. It was a good punch. Everything was

in it. It sounded like a sledge hammer hitting a barn door.

The barkeep shook his head and came on in. I stepped back and slugged him again. No result.

Then Joy slipped into the narrow space between us. She was smiling and with her upturned waiting lips, she was temptation personified. The barkeep dropped his hands, paralyzed by her intoxicating nearness.

She said, "Hello, Iron Head. How about you and I taking a little vacation together somewhere."

He grinned and reached for her. This, it developed, was a mistake, because Joy reached for him at the same time. She lifted his two-hundred-odd pounds as though he were a baby and he went flying across the room like a projectile. He hit a radiator head-on and lay still.

Again I was stupefied. It seemed I knew nothing at all about this girl I'd married. She smiled at me and said, "Don't be alarmed, angel. There's an explanation. You see my mother gave me money for piano lessons and I invested most of it in a course of ju-jitsu. I thought an occasion like this might arise sometime. Do you want to take McCaffery, or shall I do it? I doubt if he'll come to the station peaceably."

But Hands McCaffery was not to be caught flatfooted. Without his machine gun he was just an ordinary little man who didn't want to go with us. He took one look at the prone barkeep, muttered, "Geez!" and headed for the back door.

"Get him," Joy yelled. "Maybe we can make a deal with the cops to fry Hands in place of Uncle Peter!"

I started after Hands and as I went through the back door I heard Uncle Peter protesting feebly. "I say now. This is all uncalled for—"

"Don't let him get away!" Joy called. "He's got the serum!"

That cleared things up somewhat and made me even more resolute. Evidently we had interrupted Uncle Peter and Hands in the process of doing away with all the latter's enemies. With that bottle in his possession, he was a menace to the entire population of the city. A man of his type would certainly have far more enemies than friends.

Outside in the dark alley, I was guided only by footsteps. The sound of Hands' retreat told me he was moving up the smelly passageway toward Division Street. I went after him.

I am no mean sprinter, having won laurels in college for my fleetness in the two-twenty and the four-forty, and I had no trouble in overtaking the little assassin. We were fast approaching the alley entrance where I would have had the aid of street lights and could have swiftly collared McCaffery whose heavy breathing I could now hear—when disaster struck in the form of a painful obstacle. It was heavy and it caught me just below the knees.

I tripped and fell headlong, plowing along a couple of yards of slippery brick pavement on my face. I got groggily to my feet and shook my head to clear my brain. From the deposits of old eggs, rejected tomatoes and other such refuse in my face and ears, I gathered that I had tripped over a garbage can.

This delayed me for some moments. When I finally staggered out into Division Street, a strange sight met my eyes. Hands McCaffery had been apprehended. It seemed that the police had orders to pick him up because two uniformed patrolmen had him backed against the wall and were approaching him with caution. They had him covered and were taking no chances of his pulling a belly gun on them.

But he did not draw a gun. Instead, while I stared wide-eyed, he raised Uncle Peter's vial to his lips and drank the contents.

I will not bore you with details of his going *pop*. If you have read this letter carefully, the details are not necessary.

I turned and retraced my steps, realizing Hands McCaffery had been vicious and defiant to the last. Rather than submit to arrest, he had taken the wild animal's way out.

I arrived back in Joe's Tavern to find the barkeep had been revived and bore none of us any ill-will. This no doubt because of Joy's persuasive abilities. Cora was sulking in a booth and Uncle Peter was patching the gash on the barkeep's head.

I ENTERED with a heavy heart, realizing, as a good citizen, I must turn my own uncle over to the police. But there was an interlude before I would be forced into this unpleasant task. This interlude was furnished by Bag Ears. After I acquainted the group with the news of how Hands had taken the easy way out, Bag Ears' face took on a rapt, silent look of happiness. He was staring at Joy. He said, "Pretty—very pretty!"

Joy said, "Thank you."

Bag Ears said, "Pretty—pretty—pretty."

Joy looked at me. "What's eating *him?*"

There was a bottle on the bar together with some glasses. I stepped over and poured myself a drink. I certainly needed it. "Bag Ears isn't referring to you, dear. He's alluding to his bells. He's hearing them again."

"Oh my sky-blue panties! Pour me a drink."

I complied. "You see Bag Ears is somewhat punch-drunk from his years in the prize ring. I've seen this happen before."

We sipped our brandy and watched Bag Ears move toward the door.

"That's the way it always is. When he hears the bells he feels a terrific urge to go forth and search for them. But he always ends up at Red Nose Tessie's and she takes him home. It's no use trying to stop him. He'll hang one on you."

As Bag Ears disappeared into the street, there were tears in Joy's eyes. "He's dreaming of his bells," she murmured. "I think that's beautiful." She held up her glass. "May he find his bells. Pour me another drink."

I poured two and we drank to that.

"May we all someday find our bells," Joy said with emotion, and I was delighted to find my wife a girl of such deep sentiment. "Pour

me another."

I did. "Your quotation was wrong, sweetheart," I said. "Don't you mean, 'May we all find our Shangri-La?' "

"Of course. Let's drink to it."

We drank to it and were rudely interrupted by the barkeep who said, "I hope you got some dough. That stuff ain't water."

I gave him a ten dollar bill and —with a heavy heart—turned to Uncle Peter. "Come, Uncle," I said gently. "We might as well get it over with."

"Get what over with?"

"Our trip to the police station. You must give yourself up of course."

"What for?"

I shook my head sadly. Uncle Peter would never fry. His mind was obviously out of joint. "For murder."

He looked at Joy. He said, "Oh, my broken test tube! There is no need of—"

"I know it will be hard for them to convict you without *corpus dilecti*, but you must confess."

"Let's all go over to my laboratory."

"If you wish. You may have one last visit there."

"Excellent—one last visit." He smiled and I wondered if I saw a certain craftiness behind it.

Cora voiced no objections, seemingly anxious to stay near Uncle Peter. When we got to his laboratory he went on through into his living quarters and took a suit case from the closet.

"What are you going to do?"

"Pack my things."

"Oh, of course. You'll need some things in jail."

"Who said anything about jail? I'm going to Tibet."

"*Tibet!* Uncle Peter! I won't allow it. You must stay here and face the music."

"The music is in Tibet, Homer. That's one of the reasons I'm going there. To a monastery high in Himalayas. There are some wonderful men there I've always wanted to meet—yogis who have such control over natural laws that they can walk on water and move straight through solid walls."

"But Uncle Peter! If you want to go to Tibet, you should have thought of it before. It's too late now. You've committed murder."

"Bosh! I haven't killed anyone. The serum I discovered is one of transition, not murder. It causes the stepping-up of the human physical structure into an infinitely higher rate of vibration. Two controls are distilled into it. One is a timer that sets off the catalysis, and the other is a directive element based upon higher mathematics which allows the creator of the serum to direct the higher vibratory residue of the physical form to be put down at any prearranged point on the globe before the reforming element takes effect."

Joy said, "Oh, my painted G-string!"

I strove to absorb all this. "You mean those people weren't destroyed?"

Joy was quicker on the reaction. "Of course. I couldn't picture Uncle Peter as a killer somehow. He merely picked them up here and

set them down in Tibet. Can't you understand? He just explained it to you."

Of course I didn't want to admit my mental haziness to Joy, so I skipped hastily over it and pointed an accusing finger at Uncle Peter. "But why couldn't you have conducted your experiments on a higher plane. Why did you have to consort with law-breakers?"

JOY had apparently lost interest. She planted a wifely kiss on my cheek and started toward the door. "I'm going back to Joe's Tavern," she said. "It's more fun there. When you get all this straightened out, come on over."

I moved to protest but she waved me down. "Never mind. I'll take a cab." She smiled at me sweetly. "And don't stay too long, darling. I'm sure Cora is anxious to get her clothes off."

Cora distinctly pronounced an unprintable name but Joy did not hear it. She was already gone.

I turned to Uncle Peter. "You did not answer my question."

"It's very simple. Even one of your limited brain power should be able to understand it. You see, with finishing my experiments I was not averse to doing the city a favor. Why not, I asked myself, perform them upon persons undesirable to our law-abiding populace? Cora was acquainted with Hands McCaffery and it was through him that I learned who the really undesirable people were."

"But why did you invite them to my wedding reception? I'd think you could find a more appropriate place to carry out your—"

"It was an ideal place to get the Zinsky mob together. Like your Aunt Gretchen, Mr. Zinsky has social ambitions, and he anticipated no danger at the reception."

"I can see your point."

"Also, I wanted to get back at your Aunt Gretchen. She's been very niggardly with funds lately and I wanted to high light my displeasure in a way she would remember."

I had a fairly clear picture of things now. But I still felt Uncle Peter should be upbraided on a last point. "Uncle Peter, I think it was shameful of you to inflict those hoodlums on the monks in that monastery in Tibet. They'll be in panic."

"No. I was careful to send along two policemen to keep them in hand."

"So you're leaving for Tibet?"

"Of course. I've got to follow up and check on the success of my serum, though there is really no doubt as to its potency. Also I'll be able to achieve a life-long ambition —that of meeting the yogis from whom I should learn a great deal."

I glanced at Cora. "Are you taking her with you?"

"Of course."

"But yogis are above things of the flesh."

Uncle Peter looked me straight in the eye. "Maybe the yogis are, but I'm not."

There seemed nothing else to discuss, so I left Uncle Peter's chambers and went back to Joe's Bar. My mind, now at ease, was filled

again with thought of the honeymoon to come. I would pick up Joy and we would be off to pink-tinted lands.

But there was, a slight hitch. When I arrived at Joe's Bar, Joy was gone.

I inquired of the barkeep and he brought me up to date. "That screwy dame that can throw a guy around? Sure, she was here. She had a few drinks and then left again. She said something about having to help a friend find some bells he lost. I don't know what kind of bells they was but that dame can locate them if anybody can."

As I was about to leave the tavern, it occurred to me you would want to know the truth of what's been going on, so I'm now in the backroom writing this report which I will drop into the nearest mailbox. Then I will go out and find my bride and start upon a well-earned honeymoon. If you have any questions, they'll have to wait until I get back.

Yours truly,

Homer Nicholas.

THE END

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They came to Mars inquiring after the stuff of Empire. They got—

The TERRIBLE ANSWER

By Arthur G. Hill

THEY came down to Mars ahead of the rest because Larkin had bought an unfair advantage—a copy of the Primary Report. There were seven of them, all varying in appearance, but with one thing in common; in the eyes of each glowed the greed for Empire. They came down in a flash of orange tail-fire and they looked first at the Martians.

"Green," marveled Evans. "What a queer shade of green!"

"Not important," Cleve, the psychologist replied. "Merely a matter of pigmentation. White, yellow, black, green. It proves only that God loves variety."

"And lord how they grin!"

Cleve peered learnedly. "Doesn't indicate a thing. They were born with those grins. They'll die with them."

Of the seven strong men, Larkin exuded the most power. Thus, his role of leader was a natural one. No man would ever stand in front of Larkin. He said, "To hell with color or the shape of their mouths. What we're after lies inside. Come on. Let's set up a camp."

"For the time being," Cleve cautioned, "we must ignore them. Later—we know what to do. I'll give the nod."

They brought what they needed

out of the ship. They brought the plastic tents, broke the small, attached cylinders, and watched the tents bulge up into living quarters. They set up the vapor condensor and it began filling the water tank from the air about them. They plugged a line into the ship and attached it to the tent-line. Immediately the gasses in the plastic tents began to glow and give off both light and heat.

They did many things while the Martians stood silently by with their arms hanging, their splay-feet flat on the ground, their slash-mouths grinning.

The seven sat down to their first meal under the Martian stars and while they ate the rich, delicate foods, they listened to the words of Larkin. "A new empire waiting to be built. A whole planet—virgin—new."

"Not new," Dane, the archeologist said. "It's older than Earth. It's been worked before."

Larkin waved an impatient hand. "But hardly scratched. It can have risen and fallen a thousand times for all we care. The important thing is the vital ingredient of empire. Is it here? Can it be harnessed? Are we or are we not, on the threshold of wealth, splendor, and progress so great as to take away the breath?"

And as Larkin spoke, all seven men looked at the Martians; looked covertly while appearing to study the rolling plain and the purple ridges far away; the texture of the soil; the color of the sky; the food on their plates; the steaming fragrance of their coffee. They looked at all these things but they studied the Martians.

"Stupid looking animals," Evans muttered. "Odd though. So like us—yet so different."

At first there had been only a handful of Martians to grin at the landing of the ship. Now they numbered over a hundred, their ranks augmented by stragglers who came to stare with their fellows in happy silence.

"The prospects are excellent," Cleve said. Then he jerked his attention back to Larkin from whom it had momentarily wandered. When Larkin spoke, one listened.

LARKIN had been directing his words toward a young man named Smith. Smith had inherited a great deal of money which was fine. But Larkin wasn't too sure of his qualifications otherwise. "—the pyramids," Larkin was saying. "Would they have ever been built if the men up above—the men with vision—had had to worry about a payroll?"

Smith regarded the Martians with not quite the impersonal stare of the other six Earthlings. Once or twice he grinned back at them. "I'll grant the truth of what you say," he told Larkin, "but what good were the pyramids? They're something I could never figure."

Smith had a sardonic twist of mouth that annoyed Larkin. "Let's not quibble, man. I merely used the pyramids as an example. Call them Empire; call them any Empire on Earth from the beginning of known history and let's face facts."

"Facts?" Smith asked. He had been looking at a six-foot-six Martian, thinking what a magnificent specimen he was. If only they'd wipe off those silly grins.

"Yes, facts. The building must be done. It is a law of nature. Man must progress or not. And what empire can arise without free labor? Can we develop this planet at union scale? Impossible! Yet it's crying to be developed."

Cleve knocked the ashes off his cigar and frowned. Being a man of direct action, he inquired. "Do you want your money back, Smith?"

The latter shook his head. "Oh no! Don't get me wrong, gentlemen. I'm for empire, first last and always. And if we can lay the foundations of one on the backs of these stupid creatures, I'm for it."

"I still don't like your—"

"My outspoken manner? Don't give it a thought, old man. I just don't want to be all cloyed up with platitudes. If we're going to chain the children of Israel into the house of bondage, let's get on with it."

"I don't like your attitude," Larkin said stubbornly. "In the long run, it will benefit these people."

"Let's say, rather, that it may benefit their children. I doubt if these jokers will be around very long after we start cracking the whip."

Dane was stirred. "The whip," he murmured. "Symbol of empire." But nobody heard him. They were too busy listening to Larkin and Smith—and watching the Martians.

The Martians stood around grinning, waiting patiently for something to happen. Larkin's attitude toward them had changed again. First there had been curiosity. Then a narrow-eyed calculation; now he regarded them with contempt. The careful, studied checks and tests would be made of course. But Larkin, a man of sure instincts, had already made up his mind.

He stretched luxuriously. "Let's call it a day and turn in. Tomorrow we'll go about the business at hand with clearer heads."

"A good idea," Cleve said, "but first, one little gesture. I think it would be judicious." He eyed the Martians, settling finally upon one — a male — standing close and somewhat apart from the rest. Cleve scowled. Standing erect, he called, "Hey—you!" He interpreted the words with a beckoning gesture of his arm. "Come here! Here boy! Over here!"

The Martian reacted with a typically Earthian gesture. He pointed to his own chest with one green finger, while a questioning expression reflected through the eternal grin.

"Yes, you! On the double."

THE Martian came forward. There was in his manner a slight hesitation, and Smith expected to see his hind quarters wriggle like that of a dog—uncertain, but eager to please.

Cleve pointed with a martinet gesture toward the smoked-out cigar butt he'd thrown to the ground. "Pick it up!"

The Martian stood motionless.

"Pick—it—*up*, you stupid lout!"

Larkin—now beyond sanity—
was gibbering in the grave.

The Martians understood. With a glad little whimper, he bent over and took the cigar butt in his hand.

"There," Cleve said. "Garbage can! Get it? *Garbage can.* Place for trash—for cigar butts. Put it in there."

Smith wasn't sure whether the grin deepened or not. He thought it did, as the Martian laid the cigar butt carefully into the trash can.

"Okay, you fella," Cleve barked, still scowling. "Back and away now. Stay out there! Get it? Only come when you're called."

It took a few eloquent gestures, including the pantomime of swinging a whip, before the Martian understood and complied. After he backed into the circle of his fellows, Cleve dropped the cruel overseer manner and turned with satisfaction to Larkin. "I think there will be no trouble at all," he said. "Tomorrow we'll really get down to cases. I predict smooth sailing."

They said goodnight to each other and went about the business of preparing for slumber. As he raised the glowing flap of his tent, Larkin saw Smith lounging in a chair before the electric heat unit. "Aren't you going to get some sleep?"

"In a little while. I'm going to wait around until those two famous moons come. Want to see them first hand."

"A waste of time," Larkin said. "Better keep your mind on more important things."

"Goodnight," Smith said. Larkin did not reply, and Smith turned his head to look at the Martians. He wondered where they had come from. They probably had a village somewhere over the rise. He regarded them without fear or apprehension of what might occur during the sleeping hours. He had read the Primary Report, brought back by the pioneer expedition. These people were entirely harmless. Also they were possessed of remarkable stamina. They had stood for days, watching the first expedition, grinning at it, without nourishment of any kind.

Maybe they live off the atmosphere, Smith told himself dreamily. At any rate, they were ideal specimens to use as the foundation stones of an empire. He lay back, thinking of Larkin; he did not like Larkin personally, but he had to admire the steel in the man; the unswerving determination that had made him what he was.

His mind drifted back to the things of beauty around him. The far purple ridges had changed now, as a light bloomed behind them to gleam like azure through old crystal. Then the two moons shot over the horizon; huge silver bullets riding the thin atmosphere.

The oldest planet. Had it ever been great? Were the bones of any dead civilizations mouldering beneath this strange yellow soil? Smith closed his eyes while the cool Martian breezes soothed his face. Greatness. What was greatness after all? Merely a matter of viewpoint perhaps.

Smith got up and moved slowly toward his tent. Out in the shadows he could feel the grins of the Martians. "Goodnight," he called.

But there was no answer.

I PUT them out there," Cleve said. "It seemed as good a place as any."

"Fine," Larkin rumbled. He wore boots and britches and a big, wide-brimmed hat. He had on soft leather gloves. He looked like an empire builder.

The Martians were standing around grinning at the pile of shovels lying in the fuzz-bush. The Martians seemed interested and appeared to communicate with one another in some imperceptible manner.

Larkin shoved through the circle of green men, pushing rudely. He stopped, picked up one of the shovels; thrust it toward a Martian. The Martian took it in his hands.

"It's very important that you *tell* them—that you don't show them," Cleve said. "You must not do any of the work yourself."

"I'll handle it," Larkin snapped. "Now you—all of you! Grab a shovel. Pick 'em up, see? Pick 'em up! We've got work to do. A ditch to dig."

Larkin's pantomime was a universal language. "We start the ditch here. Right here—you fella! Get digging! And put your back into that shovel. Hit hard or maybe it gives the whip—understand?" Larkin made a threatening motion toward the lash coiled at his belt.

Smith, already on the scene, turned as Evans and Dane arrived carrying undefined plastic. They snapped the cylinders and chairs appeared; chairs—and a table upon which Carter and Lewis, bringing up the rear, placed a pitcher of beer, glasses and a box of cigars.

Cleve, the psychologist, looked with satisfaction upon the string of Martians manipulating the shovels. "All right," he said. "Let's sit down. Pour the beer, one of you."

"Allow me," Smith said. He fought to straighten the smile bending his lips. He picked up the pitcher and poured beer into the glasses. It all seemed so absurd; these grim-faced men acting out an asinine tableau.

Cleve caught the smile. "I wish you'd take this seriously," he said. "It's a mighty touchy and important business."

"Sorry," Smith said, raising his glass. "Here's to empire."

Larkin was striding up and down the line of straining Martians. The scowl had become a part of him.

It's getting him, Smith marveled. *Act or no act, he likes it. Experiment or not, he's in his element.*

The six men sat drinking their beer and watching Larkin. But only Cleve was aware of the skill with which the man worked. The gradual application of pressure; the careful moving forward from bog to bog with the path of retreat always open. From sharpness to brusqueness. From the brusque to the harsh. From the harsh to the brutal.

"Will you tell me," Smith asked, "why we have to sit here drinking like a pack of fools? I don't like beer."

"I'm not enjoying it, either," Cleve said. "But you can certainly understand that the roles must be set right from the beginning. They must understand we are their masters, so we must conduct ourselves

in that manner. Never any sign that could be interpreted as compromise."

Larkin, satisfied with the progress of the entirely useless ditch, came to the table and raised a glass of beer. He wiped the foam from his mustache and asked, "What do you think?" directing the question toward Cleve.

THE latter regarded the sweating Martians with calculating eyes. "It's going entirely as I predicted. The next step is in order, I believe."

"You think it's safe?"

"I'm certain of it."

Smith, studying Larkin, saw the latter smile, and was again struck by its quality.

Whatever the test, Larkin's for it, even above the call of scientific experimentation.

Larkin was uncoiling the whip from his belt. He strode toward the fast-deepening ditch. He selected a subject. "You—fella. You're lazy, huh? You like to gold-brick it? Then see how you like this!" He laid the whip across the green shoulders of the Martian.

The Martian winced. He raised an arm to shield off the whip. Again it curled against his flesh. He whimpered. His grin was stark, inquiring.

"Hit that shovel, you green bastard!" Larkin roared.

The Martian understood. So did the other Martians. Their muscles quivered as they drove into their work.

Larkin came back, smiling—almost dreamily, Smith thought. Cleve said, "Excellent. I'd hardly hoped for such conformity. Hardly expected it."

"You mean," Smith asked, "that this little scene can be projected from a dozen to a hundred? From a hundred to a thousand—?"

"From this little plot to the whole surface of the planet," Cleve said. "The mass is nothing more than a collection of individuals. Control the individual and you've got the mob. That is if you follow through with the original method. Set the hard pattern."

"Then we're in—is that it? They've passed every test with flying colors."

"I'm sure they will," Cleve said, frowning. "But we must be thorough."

"There's still another test?"

"Yes. The test of final and complete subservience. It must be proven beyond all doubt that they know their masters."

"You don't think they're aware yet that we *are* their masters?"

"I'm sure they know. It only remains to be proven." Cleve glanced up at Larkin. "Maybe this is as far as we should go today. We've made marvelous progress."

That characteristic wave of Larkin's hand; the gesture of the empire builder brushing away mountains. "Why wait? I want to get this thing over with. You said yourself they're under our thumb."

Cleve pondered, staring at the Martians. "Very well. There's really no reason to wait."

Larkin smiled and turned toward the diggers, only half visible now

from the depths of the ditch. He walked forward, appearing to exercise more care, this time, in the selection of his subject. Finally, he pointed at one of the Martians. "You—fella! Come here!"

Several of them looked at one another a trifle confused. "You—damn it! What are you waiting for?"

One of them climbed slowly from the trench. While he was engaged in so doing, Smith noticed two things. He saw the look of rage, simulated or otherwise, that came into Larkin's face. And he saw Cleve's fingers tighten on the edge of the table.

Larkin had a gun in his fist; a roar in his voice. "When I talk—you jump! Get that? All of you!"

He fired three bullets into the Martian's brain. The latter slumped grinning to the ground. Larkin, his breath coming jerkily, stood poised on the balls of his feet. The men at the table sat frozen—waiting. Around them—on the plain—some two hundred Martians stood motionless.

'The final test, Smith thought. *To prove they're cattle.*

A FULL minute passed after the echo of the gun faded out. Silence.

And nothing.

The Earthmen picked up their breathing where they'd dropped it. Larkin's breath exploded in savage voice—triumphant voice. The Martians were his.

"Come on, some of you! Dig a hole and bury that carrion! And if anybody still wonders who's boss around here—let him step forward!"

"They took it!" Cleve whispered. "Glory be—they took it!"

Four Martians climbed grinning from the trench. They faced Larkin and stood as though awaiting instructions.

"Dig there," Larkin said.

They went stolidly to work and Larkin pocketed his gun, making the pocketing a gesture of contempt.

"You see," Cleve said, with the tone of one explaining an abstract problem, "we were at somewhat of a disadvantage because they are incapable of indicating emotion by facial expression. Thus the last test was necessary. If we could have judged the degree of fear previously instilled, that last might not have been necessary."

"Just as well to have a double check nontheless," Dane said. "Look at them! You'd think nothing out of the ordinary had happened."

Larkin strode back to the table. "Glad we got it over with," he said. "Now we *know*. Cleve can head back for Earth tomorrow. Initial supplies will come to about twenty million, I estimate. The rest of us can stay here and really drive these beggars. Get the foundations dug; get the rock down from the hills."

"A planet in glorious resurrection," said Dane, the poet of the group.

"They've got the grave dug," Cleve observed. "They're waiting for orders."

"Such cattle," Evans muttered.

Larkin strode back to the grave. He pointed. "Him—body into the grave. Snap into it. We've got work to do."

The Martians put the body into the grave.

Then a tall, green man appeared behind Larkin. He put his arms around Larkin's body. Another Martian took the gun from Larkin's pocket.

And they pushed the screaming Earthman down into the grave.

Smith sprang to his feet. "For God's sake!"

"Sit down, you fool!" Cleve hissed. "Do you want to die? We've miscalculated. Something's wrong."

The big Martian was standing on Larkin. The others threw in the soil. Larkin, now beyond sanity, was gibbering like an animal.

Smith sat down. The Earthman presented a frozen tableau. Soon the gibbering could no longer be heard and the big Martian stepped out of the grave.

"Leave everything," Cleve whispered. "Get up very casually and walk back to the ship. Get inside it."

"May God help us," Dane quavered.

"Shut up! Act natural."

They went back and got into the ship while the Martians stood patiently about waiting for something to happen. Their patience was rewarded when the ship arose on a great flaming tail from the surface of the planet.

It was a sight worth waiting for.

THE END

Personalities
IN SCIENCE FICTION

CHARLES FORT

His objectives fade in the West

ON A certain January evening in 1931, a group of prominent gentlemen gathered in the New York flat of one Charles Hoy Fort, a resident of the Bronx. Present were Theodore Dreiser, Burton Rascoe, Harry Elmer Barnes, John Cowper Powys, Booth Tarkington, Harry Leon Wilson, Ben Hecht, Alexander Woollcott, Clarence Darrow, J. David Sterne, Aaron Sussman, and several others, including H. Allen Smith who later wrote an amusing, though somewhat inaccurate, account of the proceedings. The purpose of the meeting was the establishment of a Fortean Society, to carry on the work of Charles Fort and to spread his ideas.

Fort surely needs no introduction to devotees of science fiction and fantasy. Indeed, he may well be termed the spiritual father of both these literary fields. It was recently proposed to form a club that would be called, "Writers Who Have Stolen Plots From Charles Fort." The idea was dropped, however, when it was realized that such a group would include virtually every modern writer in the imaginative field, including many now deceased. At least a dozen novels and hundreds of short stories have been based directly or indirectly on ideas set forth in Fort's four books—*Lo, The Book of the Damned, Wild Talents,* and *New Lands.*

Nor is this surprising, because Fort's books are a compilation—documented, indexed, classified—of strange, eerie, and inexplicable occurrences on this supposedly mundane earth of ours—happenings far more strange than the most imaginative fictioneer ever dreamed up.

Through the pages of Fort's books stalk unknown animals, alien races, visitants from other planets, survivals of strange cults, showers of amazing objects and living entities, teleportations, and people possessed of powers bordering on the supernatural. There are accounts of men who could not be caught; men who could not be seen; men who could not be hung. The maddest menagerie and freak show ever assembled under one canvas.

Fort's sources were always fairly reputable; newspapers, police blotters, and even scientific publications and text books. Yet they were wide-

ly ignored by a world unable to fit them into definite category; a world which preferred to relegate them to oblivion as damned by orthodox science, yet well attested. The works of Charles Fort are startling to the eye; nightmarish to the mind.

Of course, they may not all be true, those amazing peeople, things, and occurrences which were the delight of Fort's life. Indeed, there is strong evidence that Fort himself did not actually believe all of them, or the theories he drew from them. Many are unquestionably hoaxes, arising from the most gargantuan sense of humor in modern letters.

PHYSICALLY, Fort was an almost exact double for the screen comediant, Chester Conklin. And he was also, pure Mack Sennett in mentality. His books were written with a slapstick more so than with a pen, and are one long guffaw from start to finish, interlarded with conceits and wisecracks to a degree which sometimes offends the serious reader.

Still, Fort himself invented nothing. He simply set down what had previously been recorded by thousands of observers all over the world. This would seem to mitigate against hoaxing in any marked degree by Fort himself. Certainly there is nothing *obviously* faked in his books. No complete check of Fort's works has ever been made of course. It would take a lifetime. But spot checks have been made, and all details, as set down by Fort, have been found to be correct. The phenomena were observed—or at least vast numbers of disinterested persons believed they observed them. Moreover, evidence continues to pour in that the phenomena have continued since Fort's death.

The number of Fortean occurrences in recent years has been startling. Certainly his books would have been hugely expanded had he lived on. In one department alone —the flying saucers—more phenomena have accumulated in the last four years than in the preceding century.

At the time Fort wrote *The Book of the Damned,* no one but he himself believed in flying saucers. Now it is safe to say that a vast minority —possibly even a majority—of people do believe in them, though they may have varied theories of explanation.

So, at the very least, Fort's theories deserve investigation. And it is highly unlikely that they will get it from the orthodox scientists. Science has become a bit more broad-minded since Fort's day, what with Einstein and the atomic bomb. Still, the scientific attitude remains pretty much that of a prominent physicist who made assertion that while a certain dogmatism may have existed once, it has vanished forever; that today, savants are wholly open-minded, and ready to investigate anything without preconceptions. "Do you mean," he was asked, "that if a werewolf were brought into your laboratory, you would investigate it without prejudice?" The physicist shrugged. "Oh well," he murmured, "of course there *are* no werewolves."

Hence, an organization wholly

dedicated to the collection and investigation of Fortean phenomena is not only desirable, but necessary if anything is ever to be learned at all. It is clear, however, that the present Fortean Society is *not* that organization and shows no sign of so becoming.

It would appear that the group is in the hands of the wrong people —or rather, the wrong person. Even that group of original founders, though admittedly eminent, were not fantasy or science fiction writers; nor were they even students of the subjects. Of the lot, only Woollcott and Hecht dabbled in the field of fantasy.

A FEW stf and fantasy writers have joined the society since the enrollment of the original roster. A. Merritt belonged until his death, and Ivan T. Sanderson, the "weird naturalist" who discovered evidences of many strange creatures, is a present member. But such men are few in the Fortean ranks and have nothing whatever to do with running the society. Indeed, they do not even seem to be welcomed.

The whole organization has gravitated into the hands of one man, the original secretary, Tiffany Thayer. Six of the founders, beginning with Dreiser, edited one issue each of the society's publication —*Doubt*—then gradually dropped out. Thayer has edited all subsequent issues of the organ, collects the money, and handles all the correspondence. To all practical purposes, he *is* the society.

Nor, so far as can be learned, has Thayer much in the way of qualifications for that role apart from having taken it over. He was a professional writer, but not in the least along Fortean lines. Now, he apparently uses the society as a vehicle for his own ideas and promotions with no check whatsoever upon his authority.

The members of the San Francisco branch discovered this last, much to their sorrow, a couple of years ago. The chapter, made up largely of writers, artists, students of bizarre subjects, and all Fortean devotees, was not only the second largest in the country, but the first to hold regular meetings and investigate phenomena as a group. Meeting in the Writer's Workship of Kenneth MacNickoll, on Lombard Street, its gatherings often numbered fifty or more. It gathered and forwarded large amounts of data, none of which ever appeared in the Fortean magazine.

Thayer was critical of the chapter from the beginning, since it insisted on following straight Fortean lines. "Most of the members," he complained in a letter, "are not so much concerned with two-headed calves as with other rebellions."

Finding the chapter adamant, Thayer resorted to stronger measures. He simply excommunicated the entire unit, forbidding it to use the society's name in research, or to hold further meetings. Seeking to appeal his decision, the chapter found that there was no one to appeal to. The original founders are all either dead or quiescent, and Thayer rules alone.

Virtually all the local membership resigned in a body, and will in the future have nothing to do with the society, although it retains enthusiasm for Fort and his ideas.

Thayer, (riding high in the saddle, publishes the society organ—*Doubt*—and is complete master of its policy and content. Apart from advertising Fort's works, it blurbs, chiefly, two totally un-Fortean tomes, entitled, *America Needs Indians,* and *Raped Again!* The latter is described as "a blueprint for enslaving whole populations."

So far as is known, Fort wasn't interested in enslaving populations.

In an appended list of some twenty publications offered for sale by the society, only one—a tiny pamphlet on an alleged sea-serpent off the New England coast—remotely resembles Fort.

THE editorial tone of the magazine is a far cry from the lusty and lamented Fortean days. Filled with sophomoric humor, continual reference to newspapers is made by using the term "wypers". Irony is laid on with a trowel. Good taste goes by the boards.

The pretense is consistently maintained that the formation date of the society was the year One, and all items are double-dated in order to add to the confusion. Thayer seems to write most of the material himself, although an occasional article creeps in by other authors—mainly mathematical and usually unintelligible.

Extracts from the notes of Fort are published in a special section in the rear of each issue. Thus has the old master been relegated to the morgue. And the worse, because the notes are usually meaningless, the references done in a cryptic sort of shorthand, and no attempt made to translate or develop them.

An occasional note on phenomena occurs now and then, but is usually slanted to make political preachment. A sad irony, since Fort eschewed politics wholly and never wrote a line in that direction.

Thayer, during World War II, sniped at the allied side in every issue, violently attacking Civil Defense among other things. Later he hailed the escape of Gerhardt Eisler as the "most Fortean event" of its period. Garey Davis, the curiously deluded young man who renounced American citizenship and became a "world citizen," was made an Honorary Fellow of the Society for his action. Davis has since recanted his action and has applied for reinstatement.

When the atom bomb first appeared, Thayer denounced it as a hoax—a deception of the American government. For months he denounced also, those silly enough to be taken in. He quieted down, finally, under a deluge of protest, but he has never officially retracted the absurd view.

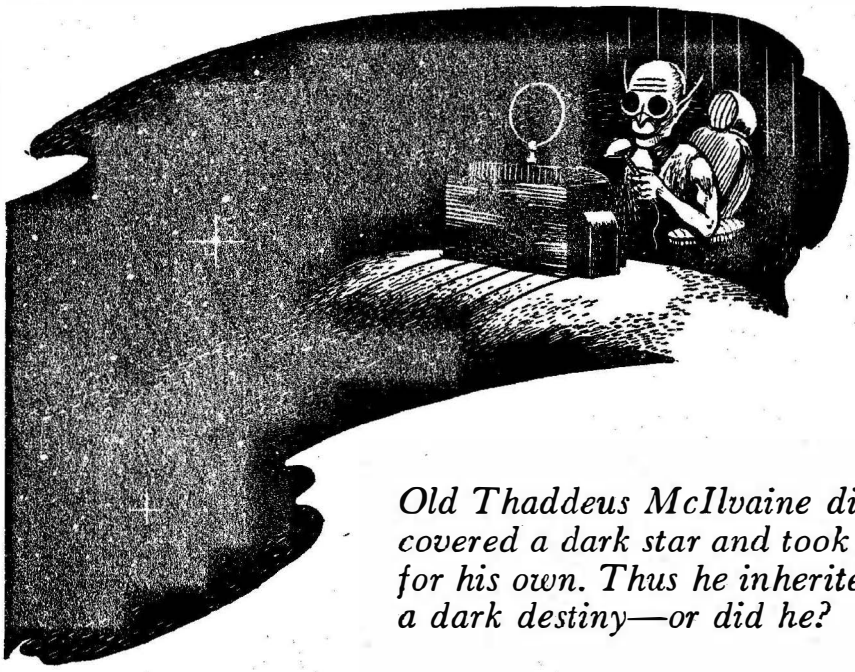
He reacted likewise in the matter of the flying saucers. Here, truly, was the unkindest cut, as Fort himself wrote of them twenty years before Kenneth Arnold told of seeing the covey. Thayer claimed the saucers were another fraud of the government, this time to stimulate re-

(Continued on page 151)

McILVAINE'S STAR

By August Derleth

McIlvaine sat down to his machine, turned the complex knobs, and a message flamed across the void.



Old Thaddeus McIlvaine discovered a dark star and took it for his own. Thus he inherited a dark destiny—or did he?

"CALL THEM what you like," said Tex Harrigan. "Lost people or strayed, crackpots or warped geniuses—I know enough of them to fill an entire department of queer people. I've been a reporter long enough to have run into quite a few of them."

"For example?" I said, recognizing Harrigan's mellowness.

"Take Thaddeus McIlvaine," said Harrigan.

"I never heard of him."

"I suppose not," said Harrigan. "But I knew him. He was an eccentric old fellow who had a modest income—enough to keep up his hobbies, which were three: he played cards and chess at a tavern called Bixby's on North Clark Street; he was an amateur astronomer; and he had the fixed idea that there was life somewhere outside this planet and that it was possible to communicate with other beings—but unlike most others, he tried it constantly with the queer machinery he had rigged up.

"Well, now, this old fellow had a trio of cronies with whom he played on occasion down at Bixby's. He had no one else to confide in. He kept them up with his progress among the stars and his communication with other life in the cosmos beyond our own, and they made a great joke out of it, from all I could gather. I suppose, because he had no one else to talk to, McIlvaine took it without complaint.

Well, as I said, I never heard of him until one morning the city editor—it was old Bill Henderson then—called me in and said, 'Harrigan, we just got a lead on a fellow named Thaddeus McIlvaine who claims to have discovered a new star. Amateur astronomer up North Clark. Find him and get a story.' So I set out to track him down. . ."

It was a great moment for Thaddeus McIlvaine. He sat down among his friends almost portentously, adjusted his spectacles, and peered over them in his usual manner, half way between a querulous oldster and a reproachful schoolmaster.

"I've done it," he said quietly.

"Aye, and what?" asked Alexander testily.

"I discovered a new star."

"Oh," said Leopold flatly. "A cinder in your eye."

"It lies just off Arcturus," McIlvaine went on, "and it would appear to be coming closer."

"Give it my love," said Richardson with a wry smile. "Have you named it yet? Or don't the discoverers of new stars name them any more? McIlvaine's Star—that's a good name for it. Hard a port of Arcturus, with special displays on windy nights."

McIlvaine only smiled. "It's a dark star," he said presently. "It doesn't have light." He spoke almost apologetically, as if somehow he had disappointed his friends. "I'm going to try and communicate with it."

"That's the ticket," said Alexander.

"Cut for deal," said Leopold.

That was how the news about McIlvaine's Star was received by his cronies. Afterward, after McIlvaine had dutifully played several games of euchre, Richardson conceived the idea of telephoning the *Globe* to announce McIlvaine's discovery.

THE OLD FELLOW took himself seriously," Harrigan went on. "And yet he was so damned mousy about it. I mean, you got the impression that he had been trying for so long that now he hardly believed in his star himself any longer. But there it was. He had a long, detailed story of its discovery, which was an accident, as those things usually are. They happen all the time, and his story sounded convincing enough. Just the same, you didn't feel that he really had anything. I took down notes, of course; that was routine. I got a picture of the old man, with never an idea we'd be using it.

"To tell the truth, I carried my notes around with me for a day or so before it occurred to me that it wouldn't do any harm to put a call in to Yerkes Observatory up in Wisconsin. So I did, and they confirmed McIlvaine's Star. The *Globe* had the story, did it up in fine style.

"It was two weeks before we heard from McIlvaine again. . ."

That night McIlvaine was more than usually diffident. He was not

like a man bearing a message of considerable importance to himself. He slipped into Bixby's, got a glass of beer, and approached the table where his friends sat, almost with trepidation.

"It's a nice evening for May," he said quietly.

Richardson grunted.

Leopold said, "By the way, Mac, whatever became of that star of yours? The one the papers wrote up."

"I think," said McIlvaine cautiously, "I'm quite sure—I have got in touch with them. Only," his brow wrinkled and furrowed, "I can't understand their language."

"Ah," said Richardson with an edge to his voice, "the thing for you to do is to tell them that's your star, and they'll have to speak English from now on, so you can understand them. Why, next thing we know, you'll be getting yourself a rocket or a space-ship and going over to that star to set yourself up as king or something."

"King Thaddeus the First," said Alexander loftily. "All you star-dwellers may kiss the royal foot."

"That would be unsanitary, I think," said McIlvaine, frowning.

Poor McIlvaine! They made him the butt of their jests for over an hour before he took himself off to his quarters, where he sat himself down before his telescope and found his star once more, almost huge enough to blot out Arcturus, but not quite, since it was moving away from that amber star now.

McIlvaine's star was certainly much closer to the earth than it had been.

He tried once again to contact it with his home-made radio, and once again he received a succession of strange, rhythmic noises which he could not doubt were speech of some kind or other—a rasping, grating speech, to be sure, utterly unlike the speech of McIlvaine's own kind. It rose and fell, became impatient, urgent, despairing—McIlvaine sensed all this and strove mightily to understand.

He sat there for perhaps two hours when he received the distant impression that someone was talking to him in his own language. But there was no longer any sound on the radio. He could not understand what had taken place, but in a few moments he received the clear conviction that the inhabitants of his star had managed to discover the basic elements of his language by the simple process of reading his mind, and were now prepared to talk with him.

What manner of creatures inhabited Earth? they wished to know.

McIlvaine told them. He visualized one of his own kind and tried to put him into words. It was difficult, since he could not rid himself of the conviction that his interlocutors might be utterly alien.

They had no conception of man and doubted man's existence on any other star. There were plant-people on Venus, ant-people on Andromeda, six-legged and four-armed beings which were equal parts mineral and vegetable on Betelguese—but nothing resembling man. "You are evidently alone of your kind in the cosmos," said his

interstellar correspondent.

"And what about you?" cried McIlvaine with unaccustomed heat.

Silence was his only answer, but presently he conceived a mental image which was remarkable for its vividness. But the image was of nothing he had ever seen before—of thousands upon thousands of miniature beings, utterly alien to man; they resembled amphibious insects, with thin, elongated heads, large eyes, and antennae set upon a scaled, four-legged body, with rudimentary beetle-like wings. Curiously, they seemed ageless; he could detect no difference among them—all appeared to be the same age.

"We are not, but we rejuvenate regularly," said the creature with whom he corresponded in this strange manner.

Did they have names? McIlvaine wondered.

"I am Guru," said the star's inhabitant. "You are McIlvaine."

And the civilization of their star?

Instantly he saw in his mind's eye vast cities, which rose from beneath a surface which appeared to bear no vegetation recognizable to any human eye, in a terrain which seemed to be desert, of monolithic buildings, which were windowless and had openings only of sufficient size to permit the free passage of its dwarfed dwellers. Within the buildings was evidence of a great and old civilization. . .

YOU SEE, McIlvaine really believed all this. What an imagination the man had! Of course, the boys at Bixby's gave him a bad time; I don't know how he stood it, but he did. And he always came back. Richardson called the story in; he took a special delight in deviling McIlvaine, and I was sent out to see the old fellow again.

"You couldn't doubt his sincerity. And yet he didn't sound touched.

"But, of course, that part about the insect-like dwellers of the star comes straight out of Wells, doesn't it?" I put in.

"Wells and scores of others," agreed Harrigan. "Wells was probably the first writer to suggest insectivorous inhabitants on Mars; his were considerably larger, though."

"Go on."

"Well, I talked with McIlvaine for quite a while. He told me all about their civilization and about his friend, Guru. You might have thought he was talking about a neighbor of his I had only to step outside to meet.

"Later on, I dropped around at Bixby's and had a talk with the boys there. Richardson let me in on a secret. He had decided to rig up a connection to McIlvaine's machine and do a little talking to the old fellow, making him believe Guru was coming through in English. He meant to give McIlvaine a harder time than ever, and once he had him believing everything he planned to say, they would wait for him at Bixby's and let him make a fool of himself.

"It didn't work out quite that way, however. . ."

"McIlvaine, can you hear me?"

McIlvaine started with astonish-

ment. His mental impression of Guru became confused; the voice speaking English came clear as a bell, as if from no distance at all.

"Yes," he said hesitantly.

"Well, then, listen to me, listen to Guru. We have now had enough information from you to suit our ends. Within twenty-four hours, we, the inhabitants of Ahli, will begin a war of extermination against Earth. . . ."

"But, why?" cried McIlvaine, astounded.

The image before his mind's eye cleared. The cold, precise features of Guru betrayed anger.

"There is interference," the thought-image informed him. "Leave the machine for a few moments, while we use the disintegrators."

Before he left the machine, McIlvaine had the impression of a greater machine being attached to the means of communication which the inhabitants of his star were using to communicate with him.

"McIlvaine's story was that a few moments later there was a blinding flash just outside his window," continued Harrigan. "There was also a run of instantaneous fire from the window to his machine. When he had collected his wits sufficiently, he ran outside to look. There was nothing there but a kind of grayish dust in a little mound—as if, as he put it, 'somebody had cleaned out a vacuum bag'. He went back in and examined the space from the window to the machine; there were two thin lines of dust there, hardly perceptible, just as if something had been attached to the machine and led outside.

"Now the obvious supposition is naturally that it was Richardson out there, and that the lines of dust from the window to the machine represented the wires he had attached to his microphone while McIlvaine was at Bixby's entertaining his other two cronies, but this is fact, not fiction, and the point of the episode is that Richardson disappeared from that night on."

"You investigated, of course?" I asked.

Harrigan nodded. "Quite a lot of us investigated. The police might have done better. There was a gang war on in Chicago just at that time, and Richardson was nobody with any connections. His nearest relatives weren't anxious about anything but what they might inherit; to tell the truth, his cronies at Bixby's were the only people who worried about him. McIlvaine as much as the rest of them.

"Oh, they gave the old man a hard time, all right. They went through his house with a fine-toothed comb. They dug up his yard, his cellar, and generally put him through it, figuring he was a natural to hang a murder rap on. But there was just nothing to be found, and they couldn't manufacture evidence when there was nothing to show that McIlvaine ever knew that Richardson planned to have a little fun with him.

"And no one had seen Richardson there. There was nothing but McIlvaine's word that he had heard what he said he heard. He needn't have volunteered that, but

he did. After the police had finished with him, they wrote him off as a harmless nut. But the question of what happened to Richardson wasn't solved from that day to this."

"People have been known to walk out of their lives," I said. "And never come back."

"Oh, sometimes they do. Richardson didn't. Besides, if he walked out of his life here, he did so without more than the clothing he had on. So much was missing from his effects, nothing more."

"And McIlvaine?"

Harrigan smiled thinly. "He carried on. You couldn't expect him to do anything less. After all, he had worked most of his life trying to communicate with the worlds outside, and he had no intention of resigning his contact, no matter how much Richardson's disappearance upset him. For a while he believed that Guru had actually disintegrated Richardson; he offered that explanation, but by that time the dust had vanished, and he was laughed out of face. So he went back to the machine and Guru and the little excursions to Bixby's . . ."

WHAT'S THE latest word from that star of yours?" asked Leopold, when McIlvaine came in.

"They want to rejuvenate me," said McIlvaine, with a certain shy pleasure.

"What's that?" asked Alexander sourly.

"They say they can make me young again. Like them up there. They never die. They just live so long, and then they rejuvenate, they begin all over. It's some kind of a process they have."

"And I suppose they're planning to come down and fetch you up there and give you the works, is that it?" asked Alexander.

"Well, no," answered McIlvaine. "Guru says there's no need for that —it can be done through the machine; they can work it like the disintegrators; it puts you back to thirty or twenty or wherever you like."

"Well, I'd like to be twenty-five myself again," admitted Leopold.

"I'll tell you what, Mac," said Alexander. "You go ahead and try it; then come back and let us know how it works. If it does, we'll all sit in."

"Better make your will first, though, just in case."

"Oh, I did. This afternoon."

Leopold choked back a snicker. "Don't take this thing too seriously, Mac. After all, we're short one of us now. We'd hate to lose you, too."

McIlvaine was touched. "Oh, I wouldn't change," he hastened to assure his friends. "I'd just be younger, that's all. They'll just work on me through the machine, and over-night I'll be rejuvenated."

"That's certainly a little trick that's got it all over monkey glands," conceded Alexander, grinning.

"Those little bugs on that star of yours have made scientific progress, I'd say," said Leopold.

"They're not bugs," said McIlvaine with faint indignation. "They're people, maybe not just

like you and me, but they're people just the same."

He went home that night filled with anticipation. He had done just what he had promised himself he would do, arranging everything for his rejuvenation. Guru had been astonished to learn that people on Earth simply died when there was no necessity of doing so; he had made the offer to rejuvenate McIlvaine himself.

McIlvaine sat down to his machine and turned the complex knobs until he was en rapport with his dark star. He waited for a long time, it seemed, before he knew his contact had been closed. Guru came through.

"Are you ready, McIlvaine?' he asked soundlessly.

"Yes. All ready," said McIlvaine, trembling with eagerness.

"Don't be alarmed now. It will take several hours," said Guru.

"I'm not alarmed," answered McIlvaine.

And indeed he was not; he was filled with an exhilaration akin to mysticism, and he sat waiting for what he was certain must be the experience above all others in his prosaic existence.

"McIlvaine's disappearance coming so close on Richardson's gave us a beautiful story," said Harrigan. "The only trouble was, it wasn't new when the *Globe* got around to it. We had lost our informant in Richardson; it never occurred to Alexander or Leopold to telephone us or anyone about McIlvaine's unaccountable absence from Bixby's. Finally, Leopold went over to McIlvaine's house to find out whether the old fellow was sick.

"A young fellow opened up.

" 'Where's McIlvaine?' Leopold asked.

" 'I'm McIlvaine,' the young fellow answered.

" 'Thaddeus McIlvaine,' Leopold explained.

" 'That's my name,' was the only answer he got.

" 'I mean the Thaddeus McIlvaine who used to play cards with us over at Bixby's,' said Leopold.

"He shook his head. 'Sorry, you must be looking for someone else.'

" 'What're you doing here?' Leopold asked then.

" 'Why, I inherited what my uncle left,' said the young fellow.

"And, sure enough, when Leopold talked to me and persuaded me to go around with him to McIlvaine's lawyer, we found that the old fellow had made a will and left everything to his nephew, a namesake. The stipulations were clear clear enough; among them was the express wish that if anything happened to him, the elder Thaddeus McIlvaine, of no matter what nature, but particularly something allowing a reasonable doubt of his death, the nephew was still to be permitted to take immediate possession of the property and effects."

"Of course, you called on the nephew," I said.

Harrigan nodded. "Sure. That was the indicated course, in any event. It was routine for both the press and the police. There was nothing suspicious about his story; it was straightforward enough, except for one or two little details.

He never did give us any precise address; he just mentioned Detroit once. I called up a friend on one of the papers there and put him up to looking up Thaddeus McIlvaine; the only young man of that name he could find appeared to be the same man as the present inhabitant's uncle, though the description fit pretty well."

"There was a resemblance, then?"

"Oh, sure. One could have imagined that old Thaddeus McIlvaine had looked somewhat like his nephew when he himself was a young man. But don't let the old man's rigmarole about rejuvenation make too deep an impression on you. The first thing the young fellow did was to get rid of that machine of his uncle's. Can you imagine his uncle having done something like that?"

I SHOOK my head, but I could not help thinking what an ironic thing it would have been if there had been something to McIlvaine's story, and in the process to which he had been subjected from out of space he had not been rejuvenated so much as just sent back in time, in which case he would have no memory of the machine nor of the use to which it had been put. It would have been as ironic for the inhabitants of McIlvaine's star, too; they would doubtless have looked forward to keeping this contact with Earth open and failed to realize that McIlvaine's construction differed appreciably from theirs.

"He virtually junked it. Said he had no idea what it could be used for, and didn't know how to operate it."

"And the telescope?"

"Oh, he kept that. He said he had some interest in astronomy and meant to develop that if time permitted."

"So much ran in the family, then."

"Yes. More than that. Old McIlvaine had a trick of seeming shy and self-conscious. So did this nephew of his. Wherever he came from, his origins must have been backward. I suspect that he was ashamed of them, and if I had to guess, I'd put him in the Kentucky hill-country or the Ozarks. Modern concepts seemed to be pretty well too much for him, and his thinking would have been considerably more natural at the turn of the century.

"I had to see him several times. The police chivvied him a little, but not much; he was so obviously innocent of everything that there was nothing for them in him. And the search for the old man didn't last long; no one had seen him after that last night at Bixby's, and, since everyone had already long since concluded that he was mentally a little off center, it was easy to conclude that he had wandered away somewhere, probably an amnesiac. That he might have anticipated that is indicated in the hasty preparation of his will, which came out of the blue, said Barnevall, who drew it up for him.

"I felt sorry for him."

"For whom?"

"The nephew. He seemed so lost, you know—like a man who wanted

to remember something, but couldn't. I noticed that several times when I tried to talk to him; I had the feeling each time that there was something he wanted desperately to say, it hovered always on the rim of his awareness, but somehow there was no bridge to it, no clue to put it into words. He tried so hard for something he couldn't put his finger on."

"What became of him?"

"Oh, he's still around. I think he found a job somewhere. As a matter of fact, I saw him just the other evening. He had apparently just come from work and he was standing in front of Bixby's with his face pressed to the window looking in. I came up nearby and watched him. Leopold and Alexander were sitting inside—a couple of lonely old men looking out. And a lonely young man looking in. There was something in McIlvaine's face—that same thing I had noticed so often before, a kind of expression that seemed to say there was something he ought to know, something he ought to remember, to do, to say, but there was no way in which he could reach back to it.

"Or forward," I said with a wry smile.

"As you like," said Harrigan. "Pour me another, will you?"

I did and he took it.

"That poor devil!" he muttered. "He'd be happier if he could only go back where he came from."

"Wouldn't we all?" I asked. "But nobody ever goes home again. Perhaps McIlvaine never had a home like that."

"You'd have thought so if you could have seen his face looking in at Leopold and Alexander. Oh, it may have been a trick of the streetlight there, it may have been my imagination. But it sticks to my memory, and I keep thinking how alike the two were—old McIlvaine trying so desperately to find someone who could believe him, and his nephew now trying just as hard to find someone to accept him or a place he could accept on the only terms he knows."

THE END

SCIENCE BRIEFS

By Ezra Shaw

The Mastery of Fire

THREE hundred and fifty thousand years ago, prehistoric man already had the ability to make fire and fashion rude stones to help him in his fight for survival. His control of fire was probably the first great step in his freedom from his environment. Now, man was no longer restricted to a limited range of climates; his activities no longer depended only on the sun's light.

At the beginning, man's effort was only to control and keep alive the fires that resulted from nature's forces—as from lightning. But in tending and preserving the flames, he kept adding to his store of knowledge. The sacred fires that even today must never be allowed to die out—as the fire of Vesta at Rome — were also undoubtedly tended to by many of the ancient tribes. They are survivals of a time before man had learned to produce fire as he desired it.

Together with the fossils of Pekin man and other extinct animals, very crude flakes of quartzite and other stones have also been found. These tools show that a man-like type of animal was adapting stones to assist in gaining his rudimentary needs. What the tools were made for, can only be guessed at. Most probably they served a multitude of purposes. Early man had to learn by dint of hard experience what stones were suitable for the making of tools, and how to chip them correctly. In the course of making tools, the earliest communities had to build up a scientific tradition, noting what the best stones were, where they could be expected to be found, how they should be handled. Man could not successfully start making special tools for each individual operation until he had mastered the technique of manufacture.

Symbol of Progress

THROUGH the years, mankind has reached developments which have both helped and hindered him—as science and superstition, materialism and asceticism, romanticism and classicism. But always there has been progress and this progress of man as a social human being has always been symbolized by his participation in the arts.

The story of the discovery of the first prehistoric painting is one of the strangest incidents in the entire history of the arts. In 1879, the Marquis de Sautuola was exploring the cave of Altamire in the Cantabrian Mountains in the northern part of Spain. His little four-year-old daughter accompanied him on the outing. Not interested in her

father's search for fossils, the little girl went on an exploring trip of her own. Crawling into a part of the cave that was so low that an adult would have normally passed it by, the child played for a while among the rocks by the light of her candle. Suddenly, she screamed. She had found a painting of a bull on the cave wall—so realistically done that it frightened the child.

When the Marquis announced his discovery to the scientific world, he was immediately denounced as a faker and an imposter. The art experts who examined the pictures insisted that it was impossible that such magnificent work could have been done by prehistoric savages. The Marquis was accused of having the painting done by a modern, talented artist.

Fortunately, similar pictures were eventually discovered in the valley of the Dordogne in southwestern France, and the reputation of the Marquis' artistic honesty remains unblemished. Since then, pictures belonging to this same school have been found in caves all over southern France and northern Spain, and southern Italy.

THE question arises as to why prehistoric men painted their pictures in these dark and for the most part inaccessible caverns. Why did they invariably paint animals? There are several reasons for this. If you feared an enemy, you made for yourself an image of your enemy, stuck it full of pins to cause pain and death. Before going out on a hunt, the hunter invariably indulged in this practice to insure a successful chase. Primitive man's whole philosophy of life revolved around these animals. They were food—life itself. Small wonder, then, that he resorted to all sorts of magic tricks to help him gain the upper hand. This type of superstition is still practiced today among many of our uncivilized tribes.

Since primitive man's entire religion was shaped around animals, perhaps these dark caverns where the walls were covered with reproductions of bison and wolves were places of worship—ancient temples where the elders of the tribe came together to bewitch the images so that food would be plentiful. No daylight ever penetrated the deep recesses of the limestone caves. No families ever lived there. Most of the caves were difficult of access, and the artist had to adopt the most uncomfortable positions to execute his art, sometimes lying flat on his back, sometimes standing on another's shoulders. The light was always artificial. Stone lamps, probably using fat for fuel and moss for wicks, have been found. All this pretty much points to the fact that there was a magic purpose to the art. Each creature so faithfully reproduced must have had a counterpart in the outside world that could be tasted as well as seen. As surely as the artist drew a bison in the dark cavern, so surely would there be a living bison in the steppes outside to be killed and eaten. To make sure of success, the artist occasionally drew his bison transfixed by a dart.

At any rate, out of this strange

wizardy came the first school of painting from men who were artists of the first order.

The statuary which is today produced by the witch doctors of many of the African and Pacific island tribes, is very similar to that which has been handed down to us from prehistoric times. Invariably obscene and repulsive, the images depicted have unusually fat bodies, with the sexual features exaggerated, and faces blank. Probably they indicate the fertility of the females —the sexual charms of the men. According to authorities these figurines are completely lacking in the qualities which make us rate the work of the caveman painters and draftsmen with the best that has ever been done.

The Early Sculptors

AFTER the Ice Age, the style of painting changed. The artist no longer tried to portray—for instance—an individual living stag. He was content now to use the fewest possible strokes in indicating the essential attributes by which a stag may be recognized. He seemed to have found that a shorthand sketch was just as effective as a life portrait in multiplying edible stags in the real world. And he seemed to suddenly have absorbed—even if unconsciously—the idea of abstract thinking.

But this school of painting completely disappeared. Thousands of years passed before the world would again see art showing such an uncanny gift for observation. And it was during the ensuing thousand years that the human race learned the use of metals and fire for the purpose of changing lumps of clay into lasting pieces of pottery.

The earliest pieces of bronze that have been so far discovered were in the central court of the ancient palace of Cnossus in Crete. They were done about fifteen centuries before the birth of Christ. Bronze had already been brought to Crete by the Phoenicians. It had already found its way to Egypt.

But hardly had bronze appeared, when iron came into the picture. For all practical purposes, it soon became the leading metal, since it was much harder, and much easier to convert into steel. Yet, surprisingly enough, the ornaments of the Iron Age were inferior artistically to those of the Stone Age.

The anthropologists have stated that the skulls found in the earlier graves seem to have belonged to a much more intelligent race of people than those who date back to a more recent age. This is borne out by the fact that the artists of the Stone Age showed a much greater deftness and much more imagination in the way they solved their problems than the men of the Iron Age who lived thousands of years later. Evolution does not necessarily mean that the superior types will always survive. From the point of view of civilization, the superior types are quite often completely exterminated by their inferior neighbors who happen to be less civilized but are much better at the art of war. In this case, the facts

seem to hint at some such development. After the late Stone Age there was a very definite and very sudden slump in the artistic output of the human race.

ALL art reflects not merely the economic surroundings of the artist but also his geographical background. An Eskimo may have a profound natural gift for sculpture, but during the greater part of each year he will have to content himself with cutting his monuments out of ice. An Egyptian, on the other hand, was not so restricted.

Prehistoric man must have been a most unappetizing looking individual judging by the standards we have today. Yet, in the field of art, he achieved results which show him to be not only a superior craftsman, but to be endowed also with a tremendous amount of imagination.

Art is as old as the human race. It belongs to no particular period or group. There has never been a race that was completely without artistic expression.

Personalities in Science Fiction

(Continued from page 137)

cruiting of air raid wardens of which Thayer does not approve. Thayer's fight with the air raid wardens seems almost a fixation. He calls them "pismires in white helmets"; advocates rebellion against civil defense by urging the membership to turn on lights during blackouts and to refuse to cooperate generally.

The whole thing would be amusing, were it not so serious. Surely, the memory of Charles Fort deserves better. His was one of the most original minds of this era; one which evolved some fascinating concepts. Evidence of the things of which he wrote continues to pile up. It all goes on as before, but now, no one is looking. The society which was founded to carry on after Fort is snarling at air raid wardens and pursuing cheap political ends.

So the prophet is without honor in his own society. The "gargantuan laughter" is stilled, and Fort's name declines in the West.

—ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

Have you ever written science fiction? Have your stories been rejected? Herein may lie the reason.

The Smiler

By Albert Hernhunter

"YOUR NAME?"

"Cole. Martin Cole."

"Your profession?"

"A very important one. I am a literary agent specializing in science-fiction. I sell the work of various authors to magazine and book pubishers."

The Coroner paused to study Cole; to ponder the thin, mirthless smile. The Coroner said, "Mr. Cole, this inquest has been called to look into the death of one Sanford Smith, who was found near your home with a gun in his hand and a bullet in his brain. The theory of suicide has been—"

"—rather hard to rationalize?"

The Coroner blinked. "You could put it that way."

"I would put it even stronger. The theory is obviously ridiculous. It was a weak cover-up. The best I could do under the circumstances."

"You are saying that you killed Sanford Smith?"

"Of course."

The Coroner glanced at his six-man jury, at the two police officers, at the scattering of spectators. They all seemed stunned. Even the reporter sent to cover the hearing made no move toward the telephone. The Coroner could think of only the obvious question: "Why did you kill him?"

"He was dangerous to us."

"Whom do you mean by *us*?"

"We Martians, who plan to take over your world."

The Coroner was disappointed. A lunatic. But a lunatic can murder. Best to proceed, the coroner thought. "I was not aware that we have Martians to contend with."

"If I'd had the right weapon to

use on Cole, you wouldn't be aware of it now. We still exercise caution."

The Coroner felt a certain pity. "Why did you kill Smith?"

"We Martians have found science-fiction writers to be our greatest danger. Through the medium of imaginative fiction, such writers have more than once revealed our plans. If the public suddenly realized that—"

THE CORONER broke in. "You killed Smith because he revealed something in his writings?"

"Yes. He refused to take my word that it was unsalable. He threatened to submit it direct. It was vital material."

"But there are many other such writers. You can't control—"

"We control ninety percent of the output. We have concentrated on the field and all of the science fiction agencies are in our hands. This control was imperative."

"I see." The Coroner spoke in the gentle tones one uses with the insane. "Any writing dangerous to your cause is deleted or changed by the agents."

"Not exactly. The agent usually persuades the writer to make any such changes, as the agent is considered an authority on what will or will not sell."

"The writers always agree?"

"Not always. If stubbornness is encountered, the agent merely shelves the manuscript and tells the writer it has been repeatedly rejected."

The Coroner glanced at the two policemen. Both were obviously puzzled. They returned the Coroner's look, apparently ready to move on his order.

The thin, mirthless smile was still on Cole's lips. Maniacal violence could lie just behind it. Possibly Cole was armed. Better to play for time—try to quiet the madness within. The Coroner continued speaking. "You Martians have infiltrated other fields also?"

"Oh yes. We are in government, industry, education. We are everywhere. We have, of course, concentrated mainly upon the ranks of labor and in the masses of ordinary, everyday people. It is from these sources that we will draw our shock troops when the time comes."

"That time will be—?"

"Soon, very soon."

The Coroner could not forebear a smile. "You find the science fiction writers more dangerous than the true scientists?"

"Oh yes. The scientific mind tends to reject anything science disproves." There was now a mocking edge to Cole's voice. "Science can easily prove we do not exist."

"But the science fiction writer?"

"The danger from the imaginative mind cannot be overestimated."

The Coroner knew he must soon order the officers to lay hands upon this madman. He regretted his own lack of experience with such situations. He tried to put a soothing, confidential note into his voice. "You said a moment ago that if you'd had the right kind of weapon to use on Smith—"

Cole reached into his pocket and brought out what appeared to be a

fountain pen. "This. It kills instantly and leaves no mark whatever. Heart failure is invariably stated as the cause of death."

The Coroner felt better. Obviously, Cole was not armed. As the Coroner raised a hand to signal the officers, Cole said, "You understand, of course, that I can't let you live."

"Take this man into custody."

The police officers did not move. The Coroner turned on them sharply. They were smiling. Cole pointed the fountain pen. The Coroner felt a sharp chill on his flesh. He looked at the jury, at the newspaperman, the spectators. They were all smiling cold, thin, terrible smiles . . .

A short time later, the newspaperman phoned in his story. The afternoon editions carried it:

CORONER BELL DIES
OF HEART ATTACK

Shortly after this morning's inquest, which resulted in a jury verdict of suicide in the case of Sanford Smith, Coroner James Bell dropped dead of heart-failure in the hearing room of the County building. Mr. Bell leaves a wife and—

THE END

THE *Postman* COMETH . . .

OF LOVE, APPLE PIE, AND NO SERIALS

Dear Paul:

Though we have only just met, I feel as if I'd known you all my life, etc.

If that salutation and first sentence sounds like the beginning of a love letter, well, why not? It is. To quote a famous love song: "IF" I Loved You.

Of course you couldn't have missed, for the great god, Big Name, was on your side, and the biggest names I've seen in stf were all there together. However, in all fairness, let me say that these authors have given you the cream of the stuff that made them worthy of their big names.

I trembled in the aspect of Howard Browne's story. I kept waiting for Kirk to come crashing back through space in time to arrest the hand of the man at the switch, and when he didn't I felt as though I'd been punched in the belly . . .

The Stowaway struck a responsive chord in me. I'm always hoping a flying saucer will land plop in front of me some day and take me off into space and I will be the very first to see what's up there. I'd even like to go with the big brass, but I'd only be in the way, for I have no special skills or knowledge that would help except I bake a mean apple pie. Would that help?

Bitter Victory was interesting since I too am a telepath. I say to my husband on Wednesday night, "Dear ——" and he says, "Okay." Then he takes down the garbage. I must develop it for distance.

Never Underestimate. What happened to Jenny should happen to me!

Black Eyes and the Daily Grind was highly improbable and I didn't believe a word of it but I thought it was cute.

Of Stegner's Folly was okay. If my seven-month-old daughter starts pushing around pianos, I might go back and read it again.

The Hell Ship. Orchids to this. I'm always happy to see the maligned and oppressed get the upper hand, foil the villians, and get their just rewards.

The Old Martians presented no triple problem to me. The ending was definite enough. However, if Herb had escaped, then I would have had my choice. I really felt all along that Joe believed Herb was not insane. Am I supposed to wonder if Herb was an old Martian. Well, maybe.

On to the departments! Here is where you really shine, and your magnitude will, nay must, increase with every issue. Do you know that I read everything else in a magazine first, before I read the stories? This is so those little notes about any certain story will increase my enjoyment of same.

I start off by seeing what the editor has to say and, Paul, you said it and I'm glad. I'm happy

that you don't intend to bow to the great god Plot. Tragedies, Comedies, bring 'em on. My jaws are slavering to devour them. But no serials, please.

The Guest Editorial was interesting and the Citation timely, for just as I put down the book, *Tales of Tomorrow* came on and I did what you said and didn't miss it. It was *Dune Roller* and I'd read it in ASTOUNDING. (What have I said!)

The science briefs were of interest to my husband who doesn't like stf, but who does like the gurruls on the covers of stf mags.

This brings us to *The Postman Cometh* and the very thought of winning an original MS makes little shivers go up and down my back. . . .

Besides the fact that yours is a fine magazine there is the thrill for me of being in on the ground floor of something big. When a convert to stf tries to catch up on the classics and back issues of various stf mags, he usually finds it a hopeless and expensive job. For instance, it would be quite a feat to acquire every issue of *Amazing* from Vol. 1, No. 1 on up to today. But readers of IF will find no such strain on their budget and resourcefulness. They can start this very minute. I for one am going to serve noodles instead of meat to my family until I've salvaged the subscription price to your mag. Then, twenty-five years from now, I'll be 50, but my library of IF will be priceless and this March 1952 issue will be a golden possession among my souvenirs. And if I'm lucky enough to win an original MS! ! ! !

I'll close now, although I hate to go. I can't promise to wait on the sidewalk wrapped in a blanket for your next issue, but I'll get it, never fear. Anyway, I'll probably have subscribed by then. Well, darn it, I can't wait! Here's the egg money, boys, that old hen must still be around someplace.

Did I keep you in suspense? I was gonna send it all the time.

—Mrs. Francis Huber
Irvington, N. J.

* * *

FAIR ENOUGH

Dear Sir:

I will most certainly try two or three (of your issues) on for size; and if they prove to be comparable in quality to *Galaxy* and *Astounding,* I'll subscribe.

—W. Boyd
Wichita, Kansas

* * *

RASH STATEMENT

Dear Ed:

I have just finished reading your first issue and am very satisfied with it. The small size, the cut edges, along with the fine stories, make it unusual in its field.

Howard Browne's *Twelve Times Zero* was excellently done, although the use of outside watchers as a main theme is becoming too common. The front cover which illustrates a scene from this lead novel is well done, the only fault being

the shape of the ship which should have been round.

The other stories were all good, especially *The Stowaway* and *Black Eyes and the Daily Grind.* The plot of *Never Underestimate* was very good, but the story seemed to fall short of Sturgeon's standard.

I like your feature, *Personalities in Science Fiction,* and hope it will continue. Your mag is the only one with this topic among the prozines and it fills a particular need, as does the review of fanzines in other publications.

In discussing Howard Browne, you state that *Amazing Stories* was the best science fiction magazine that money could buy. This is certainly a rash statement. I, and I'm sure many other fen, consider *Galaxy* and *Astounding* superior to it in content and format. It is a well known fact that circulation is a good standard of popularity only, not of intrinsic value.

—Richard C. Spelman
Cambridge 38, Mass.

* * *

FROM A SHAVER FAN

Dear Mr. Fairman:

Congratulations on a really welcome new addition to the growing ranks of stf mags! . . . . One look at the contents page of IF and I knew that here was no fluke. Yours is the only first issue I have ever seen. Was that line up—Phillips, Shaver, Sturgeon, Palmer, Lesser, and Browne, merely the result of a polite send-off by those illustratrious figures of the stf world, or will each issue be as good as the first. Half as good would be terrific!

Somehow, when I looked at your cover, it seemed like a pocket novel instead of a periodical mag. I would suggest an opaque band across the top, with your words, "Worlds of Science Fiction," so it would be more noticeable.

Of Stegner's Folly, I think, was the best in the book. Browne's detective was excellent. . . .

I hope this reaches print even though it's hand written, and in case you only get two other letters, besides mine (not very likely I'd say) you can send me Shaver's manuscript.

—Marc Caplan
Lebanon, Penn.

* * *

PROUD EDITOR

Dear Ed:

Your magazine, IF, could be one of the best in the field with the array of writing talent displayed in your first issue, however it is not.

The lead novel by Howard Browne, *Twelve Times Zero,* of which you are so proud, seemed to be cut short at the end and suffered because of it. With a little more length, it would have been an excellent story, despite the fact that it had for a plot, the well-worn watchers over earth theme . . .

The Hell Ship, your novelette, was a wonderful story and partially made up for the lead novel, although the illustration was horrible . . .

The rest of the stories were bet-

ter than average but still not of the quality one would expect of Phillips, Sturgeon, or Shaver. The only completely good parts of your magazine are the features. They are wonderful.

—Martin Lewkowicz
Fair Lawn, N. J.

* * *

A WELL-WISHER

Dear Sir:

Thought I'd drop you a line and tell you how your mag stacks up with the rest . . . With stories by Browne, Palmer, Shaver, Phillips, and Sturgeon, how could it miss? Most magazines have one or two good names in them, but your first issue had five . . .

You were smart to leave out the books and the reviews, as you say, they are well covered. *Personalities in Science Fiction* is a honey of an idea . . . The title, IF, is better than BEYOND TOMORROW . . . Your art work could be improved.

I hope to say I am the first to congratulate you on a very fine magazine. If I am not the first I certainly won't be the last.

—Basil Guiley
Warren, Penn.

* * *

OUTSIDE THE FOLD

Dear Paul:

Your letter and IF received . . . The magazine is pretty good. I'm not familiar with this type of stuff, but I read it through and found it held my attention with no effort on my part. No need to comment on each story because I'm no judge. Would have enjoyed *Never Underestimate* immensely, if properly done. *(Ed. note: You listening, Ted?)* The idea had such possibilities—too good to be written down.

Your editorial was okay and follows the pattern of editors in the pulp, Ellery Queen's mag. *(Ed. note: ?????)* which we get through the generosity of some guests we had last summer.

Am interested in learning how many of your readers will write to remind you that Romeo really *did* get there in time. If enough of them catch you on that one, you might try "writing up" a little. Also, the word "gotten", is obsolete in any form.

The cover. The picture contains four focal points of interest—too many for its purpose. Two at the most, because you must realize the necessity of centering the interest of a prospective reader. This is the purpose of the picture on the cover . . . *(Ed. note: Yes sir—sorry sir; we'll do better next time, sir.)*

All in all, though, a very good book.

—Joseph E. Fairman
Benedict, Nebraska

The above came from the editor's younger brother—the only real "brain" in the family.

* * *

FROM A DISAPPOINTED READER

Dear Mr. Fairman:

My first impression of IF as I leafed through it . . . was an excellent one . . . I thought your editorial policy was wonderfully well put and your *Personality, Guest editorial,* and *Citation* were interesting. I settled down to read Howard Browne's *Twelve Times Zero* with pleasant anticipation. Then it happened.

I hadn't previously noted the boxed-off comment on the second page of his story, so before proceding further, I read it. And the excellent first impression you created, went right out the window. I just can't believe that the same person who wrote the excellently thought out editorial, penned the —I almost said, asinine—statement that *Amazing Stories* is the best stf mag your money can buy . . .

All I can say is that if your plug of *Amazing* was part payment for *Twelve Times Zero,* you got the zero . . .

—Richard H. Jamison
St. Louis 23, Mo.

(We hasten to reassure Mr. Jamison on two points: Howard Browne was paid in cash for his lead novel—not partially in plugs. Also, the same person who wrote the editorial for the first issue of IF, did write the boxed-in comment on page two of the story.)

* * *

MYSTIFYING

Sirs:

I wish you luck in the field of stf. (It) can stand new publications. Your stories are good, they hold my interest. However, I'm betting you don't enjoy wide popularity. Why? It's hard to say. Only that your mag leaves a feeling of having read a collection of good stories, but not a collection of good stories published by IF. I might say you don't impress me as having a personality. Perhaps you will develop one. . . .

Charles Recour, in *Science Briefs,* quotes the hydrogen atom as reversing its spin and thus emitting a radio impulse. Why? Where can I find out about this?

Guess that's about all. Again wishing you luck.

—Harold V. Anderson
Philadelphia 41, Pa.

* * *

THE LINE-UP

Dear Ed:

Congratulations on a fine first issue. I enjoyed all your stories. I ask no more than that you keep up to the standard you set in this issue. Here are my ratings:

1. *The Stowaway* by Heiner. More . . .
2. *Never Underestimate* by Sturgeon. Nice twist.
3. *B.E. and the D.G.* by Lesser. Funny.
4. *Twelve Times Zero* by Browne. Good, but not his best.
5. *Of Stegner's Folly* by Shaver.

This is the man to round out a mag.

6. *The Hell Ship* by Rap. 'Nough said.

7. *The Old Martians* by Phillips. Could have been further developed.

8. *Bitter Victory* by Miller. Last but not least.

Suggestions:

Inside covers are nice for some sort of picture article on the authors and some sort of technical article.

Get a cover by Cartier, Bok, Orban, or Bonestell.

Get a story by Bradbury, Heinlen, de Camp, Brown.

Don't have your magazine mixed up with the sexy cover arguments. They have special magazines for people who go for that stuff. Nuff said.

With great expectations for the future,

—William J. Doherty
Cambridge 39, Mass.

* * *

FROM AN OLD FRIEND

Dear Paul:

This is my first letter to any magazine. Feel flattered? My husband and I are avid stf fans. Read *Amazing, Fantastic, Other Worlds, Imagination,* and *Galaxy.*

Imagine my surprise to see a new mag on the newsstand yesterday. Further surprise—edited by you—and all my favorite authors except two, Bradbury and Heinlein . . .

Truthfully, it's hard to decide which story I liked best. They were all good . . . So I'll end with congratulations on the birth of IF, and may it enjoy a long and fruitful life.

—Lucretia Laflin
Somerville, Mass.

* * *

OUR THANKS to Kenneth Deuel, Robert Katson, Richard Hadden, Horace Christopher, and the many, many others who took the trouble to write us. Their letters are no less appreciated than those published. But there just isn't room for more in this issue.

ABOUT OUR manuscript contest: the judges had a tough time and frankly I'm glad I wasn't one of them. They have awarded the original manuscript of Phillips' *The Old Martians* to Terry Carr of 134 Cambridge Street, San Francisco, California.

Of Stegner's Folly by Shaver goes to Lewis Merkelsan of 10135 Hillhaven Avenue, Tujunga, Cal.

Sturgeon's *Never Underestimate* was won by Thomas Reamy of Route 8, Box 183-E, Ft. Worth, Texas.

I know the judges worked hard, because I spent a little time watching them work, and I know their efforts were sincere and conscientious. To those who didn't win, thanks for your letters. I wish we could award a manuscript to everyone.

—PWF

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