SPACE
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JULY

IN THIS ISSUE • LET 'EM BREATHE SPACE BY LESTER DEL REY

SPACE SCIENCE FICTION JULY 1953

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SPACE SCIENCE FICTION

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A N E D I T O R I A L O N

Character Development

For a good many years, all serious reviewers of science fiction have been agreeing that one of the defects of science fiction as a whole has been the lack of sound character development in the stories. And for years, the ardent fans have been pointing to this or that character in some story or other and screaming against the critic.

Leaving out the question of the stock figures in the detective stories, the cliche frapperies in the light slicks, and the monolineal stupidities of many of the so-called quality stories, who's wrong? Obviously, if you look carefully, both sides are wrong.

Science fiction hasn't had a fair chance to develop many first-rate human characters. There are no Lord Jims in it, to my knowledge. When you sit down to tell a story that involves a world not yet in existence, you have to make it credible in so many other ways that there simply isn't time and space for a fully rounded handling of character. And even the current rates won't justify the work that might overcome this difficulty.

Furthermore, one of the methods of making the story more convincing is to use a trite character in your unusual situation, and then alter him only enough to fit his background. If there were a genuine science of psychology, capable of predictions, we might be able to go into greater detail about what the effect of environmental changes might be—but psychology still isn't that exact. So the extrapolation must either be rough, or else almost non-existent.

Also, it's in the daily living habits of a human individual that much of his character is developed. But these are generally not the habits which science-fiction writers are interested in; they have to choose situations which are not typical of normal living. You can't win—if you make the man a fully believable individual of today, you're probably making him ridiculous in his own background. If you try to match him to his background, you run the risk of what normal critics would consider extreme and unjustified distortion.

Nevertheless, there are characters in science fiction. You will find them whenever a good writer runs up against a situation where he has

to use a fuller characterization, and to understand his character's viewpoint more completely. You can throw stock hero A-2 into a story, and give him a slight switch; it will do. But you can't throw in a stock alien, a traditional robot, or a typical animal without cramping your story and making it unbelievable.

So we get Martians like Weinbaum's Tweel—which is a character that extends far beyond the limits of the story, to fit the standard definition of fine characterization. You get a robot who is pathetically trying to fit his robot existence into a world where he is outdated, or who romantically regards extinct man as something to look back on. You get the old robot of Clifford Simak's superb City series.

That takes more characterization than does the page after page detailing of some of the old stories—and certainly far more than the tricks of character tags used by such men as Dickens. It takes the ability to adopt and to project an attitude which is definitely alien. Granted, these characters are still basically human, no matter whether they're called that or not. But they're humanized beings with certain attitudes which would not be found in a human—and with a consistency of attitude which is often lacking in more serious work.

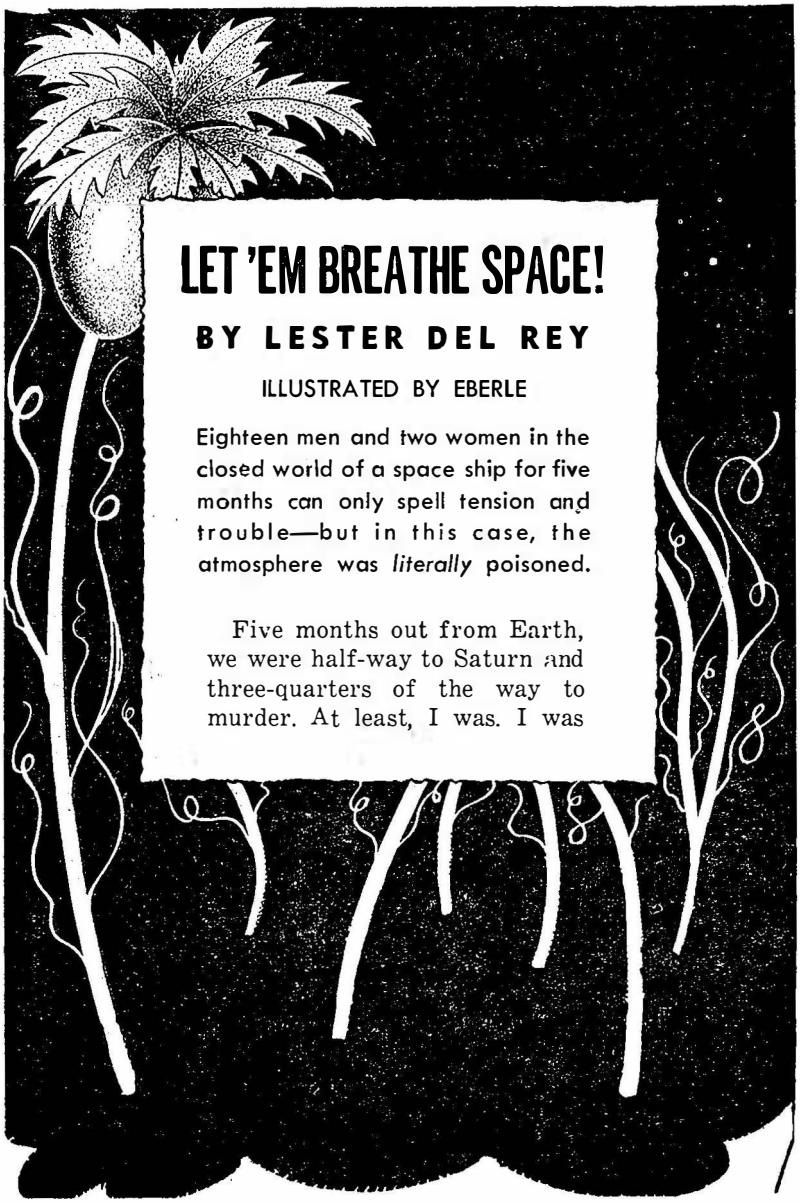
You won't be able to convince the critics of this, however. This is a puzzle which took some time to answer; but it now seems that the serious men attacking science fiction for the first few times simply don't have the mental flexibility to adjust to such characters!

And when all is said and done, an author can only do fifty per cent of the characterizing of any character. In the case of a reader who will not identify with such a character under any circumstances, a super-Conrad would be licked from the start. Most of us recognize that we can't identify with a superman; but we're not used to recognizing how little the average man can identify with anything except himself.

Gentlemen, I suggest that the one real virtue of science-fiction is that it broadens the horizons within by creeping up on us and teaching us that we aren't the only possible sentient beings with the only possible attitudes in this smallest of all possible worlds. And if it does that, then it needs no other defense or justification.

Anything which can broaden our outlook can stop blushing at the word "pulp," because it is intrinsically literature. And no amount of analyzing defects will change that.

LESTER DEL REY



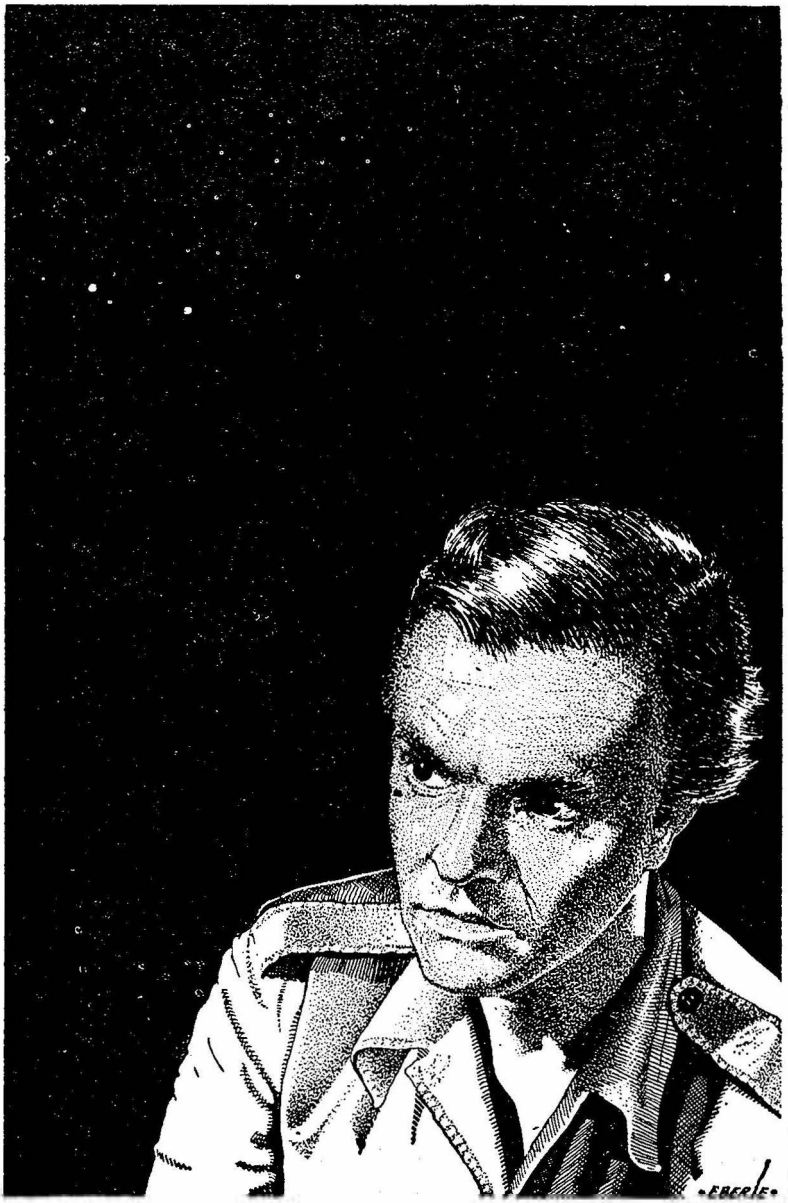
LET 'EM BREATHE SPACE!

BY LESTER DEL REY

ILLUSTRATED BY EBERLE

Eighteen men and two women in the closed world of a space ship for five months can only spell tension and trouble—but in this case, the atmosphere was *literally* poisoned.

Five months out from Earth, we were half-way to Saturn and three-quarters of the way to murder. At least, I was



sick of the feuding, the worries and the pettiness of the other nineteen aboard. My stomach heaved at the bad food, the eternal smell of people, and the constant sound of nagging and complaints. For ten lead pennies, I'd have gotten out into space and tried walking back to Earth. Sometimes I thought about doing it without the pennies.

But I knew I wasn't that tough, in spite of what I looked. I'd been built to play fullback, and my questionable brunet beauty had been roughed up by the explosion years before as thoroughly as dock fighting on all the planets could have done. But sometimes I figured all that meant was that there was more of me to hurt, and that I'd had more experience screaming when the anodyne ran out.

Anyhow, whole-wheat pancakes made with sourdough for the ninth "morning" running was too damned much! I felt my stomach heave over again, took one whiff of the imitation maple syrup, and shoved the mess back fast while I got up faster.

It was a mistake. Phil Riggs, our scrawny, half-pint meteorologist, grinned nastily and reached for the plate. " 'Smatter, Paul? Don't you like your breakfast? It's good for you—whole wheat contains bran. The staff of life. Man, after that diet of bleached paste . . ."

There's one guy like that in every bunch. The cook was mad at us for griping about his coffee, so our group of scientists on this cockeyed Saturn-Expedition were getting whole wheat flour as punishment, while Captain Muller probably sat in his cabin chuckling about it. In our agreement, there was a clause that we could go over Muller's head on such things with a unanimous petition—but Riggs had spiked that. The idiot liked bran in his flour, even for pancakes!

Or else he was putting on a good act for the fun of watching the rest of us suffer.

"You can take your damned whole wheat and staff it—" I started. Then I shrugged and dropped it. There were enough feuds going on aboard the cranky old *Wahoo!* "Seen Jenny this morning, Phil?"

He studied me insolently. "She told Doc Napier she had some stuff growing in hydroponics she wanted to look at. You're wasting your time on that babe, boy!"

"Thanks for nothing," I muttered at him, and got out before I really decided on murder. Jenny Sanderson was our ex-

pedition biologist. A natural golden blonde, just chin-high on me, and cute enough to earn her way through a Ph. D. doing modelling. She had a laugh that would melt a brass statue and which she used too much on Doc Napier, on our chief, and even on grumpy old Captain Muller—but sometimes she used it on me, when she wanted something. And I never did have much use for a girl who was the strong independent type where there was a man to do the dirty work, so that was okay.

I suppose it was natural, with only two women among eighteen men for month after month, but right then I probably liked Doc Napier less than the captain, even. I pulled myself away from the corridor to hydroponics, started for observation, and then went on into the cubbyhole they gave me for a cabin. On the *Wahoo*, all a man could do was sleep or sit around and think about murder.

Well, I had nobody to blame but myself. I'd asked for the job when I first heard Dr. Pietro had collected funds and priorities for a trip to study Saturn's rings at close hand. And because I'd done some technical work for him on the Moon, he figured he might as well take me as any other good all-around mechanic and technician. He hadn't asked me, though—that had been my own stupid idea.

Paul Tremaine, self-cure expert! I'd picked up a nice phobia against space when the superliner *Lauri Ellu* cracked up with four hundred passengers on my first watch as second engineer. I'd gotten free and into a suit, but after they rescued me, it had taken two years on the Moon before I could get up nerve for the shuttle back to Earth. And after eight years home, I should have let well enough alone. If I'd known anything about Pietro's expedition, I'd have wrapped myself in my phobia and loved it.

But I didn't know then that he'd done well with priorities and only fair with funds. The best he could afford was the rental of the old Earth-Mars-Venus triangle freighter. Naturally, when the *Wahoo's* crew heard they were slated for what would be at least three years off Earth without fancy bonus rates, they quit. Since nobody else would sign on, Pietro had used his priorities to get an injunction that forced them back aboard. He'd stuffed extra oxygen, water, food and fertilizer on top of her regular supplies, then, filled her holds with some top level fuel he'd gotten from a government assist, and

set out. And by the time I found out about it, my own contract was iron-bound, and I was stuck.

As an astrophysicist, Pietro was probably tops. As a man to run the Lunar Observatory, he was a fine executive. But as a man to head up an expedition into deep space. somebody should have given him back his teething ring.

Not that the *Wahoo* couldn't make the trip with the new fuel; she'd been one of the early survey ships before they turned her into a freighter. But she was meant for a crew of maybe six, on trips of a couple of months. There were no game rooms, no lounges, no bar or library—nothing but what had to be. The only thing left for most of us aboard was to develop our hatreds of the petty faults of the others. Even with a homogeneous and willing crew, it was a perfect set-up for cabin fever, and we were as heterogeneous as they came.

Naturally the crew hated the science boys after being impressed into duty, and also took it out on the officers. The officers felt the same about both other groups. And the scientists hated the officers and crew for all the inconveniences of the old *Wahoo*. Me? I was in no-man's land—technically in the science group, but without a pure science degree; I had an officer's feelings left over from graduating as an engineer on the ships; and I looked like a crewman.

It cured my phobia, all right. After the first month out, I was too disgusted to go into a fear funk. But I found out it didn't help a bit to like space again and know I'd stay washed up as a spaceman.

We'd been jinxed from the start. Two months out, the whole crew of scientists came down with something Doc Napier finally diagnosed as food poisoning; maybe he was right, since our group ate in our own mess hall, and the crew and officers who didn't eat with us didn't get it. Our astronomer, Bill Sanderson, almost died. I'd been lucky, but then I never did react to things much. There were a lot of other small troubles, but the next major trick had been fumes from the nuclear generators getting up into our quarters —it was always our group that had the trouble. If Eve Nolan hadn't been puttering with some of her trick films at the time—she and Walt Harris had the so-called night shift—and seen them blacken, we'd have been dead before they discovered it. And it took us two weeks of bunking with the sullen crew and decontamination before we

could pick up life again. Engineer Wilcox had been decent about helping with it, blaming himself. But it had been a mess.

Naturally, there were dark hints that someone was trying to get us; but I couldn't see any crewman wiping us out just to return to Earth, where our contract, with its completion clause, would mean he wouldn't have a dime coming to him. Anyhow, the way things were going, we'd all go berserk before we reached Saturn.

The lunch gong sounded, but I let it ring. Bullard would be serving us whole wheat biscuits and soup made out of beans he'd let soak until they turned sour. I couldn't take any more of that junk, the way I felt then. I heard some of the men going down the corridor, followed by a confused rumble of voices. Then somebody let out a yell. "Hey, *rooob!*"

That meant something. The old yell spacemen had picked up from carney people to rally their kind around against the foe. And I had a good idea of who was the foe. I heard the yell bounce down the passage again, and the slam of answering feet.

Then the gravity field went off. Or rather, was cut off. We may have missed the boat in getting anti-gravity, if there is such a thing, but our artificial gravity is darned near foolproof.

It was ten years since I'd moved in free fall, but Space Tech had done a good job of training good habits. I got out of my bunk, hit the corridor with a hand out, bounced, kicked, and dove toward the mess hall without a falter. The crewmen weren't doing so well—but they were coming up the corridor fast enough.

I could have wrung Muller's neck. Normally, in case of trouble, cutting gravity is smart. But not here, where the crew already wanted a chance to commit mayhem, and had more experience than the scientists.

Yet, surprisingly, when I hit the mess hall ten feet ahead of the deckhands, most of the scientists were doing all right. Hell, I should have known Pietro, Sanderson and a couple others would be used to no-grav; in astronomical work, you cut your eye teeth on that. They were braced around the cook, who huddled back in a corner, while our purser-steward, Sam, was still singing for help.

The fat face of the cook was dead white. Bill Sanderson, looking like a slim, blond ballet dancer and muscled like an apache expert, had him in one hand and was stuffing the latest batch of whole wheat biscuits

down his throat. Bill's sister, Jenny, was giggling excitedly and holding more biscuits.

The deckhands and Grundy, the mate, were almost at the door, and I had just time enough to slam it shut and lock it in their faces. I meant to enjoy seeing the cook taken down without any interruption.

Sam let out a final yell, and Bullard broke free, making a mess of it without weight. He was sputtering out bits of the biscuit. Hal Lomax reached out a big hand, stained with the chemicals that had been his life's work, and pushed the cook back.

And suddenly fat little Bullard switched from quaking fear to a blind rage. The last of the biscuit sailed from his mouth and he spat at Hal. "You damned hi-faluting black devil. You —*you* sneering at my cooking. I'm a white man, I am—I don't have to work for no black ni . . ."

I reached him first, though even Sam started for him then. You can deliver a good blow in free-fall, if you know how. His teeth against my knuckles stopped my leap, and the back of his head bounced off the wall. He was unconscious as he drifted by us, moving upwards. My knuckles stung, but it had been worth it. Anyhow, Jenny's look more than paid for the trouble.

The door shattered then, and the big hulk of Mate Grundy tumbled in, with the two deckhands and the pair from the engine room behind him. Sam let out a yell that sounded like protest, and they headed for us —just as gravity came on.

I pulled myself off the floor and out from under Bullard to see the stout, oldish figure of Captain Muller standing in the doorway, with Engineer Wilcox slouched easily beside him, looking like the typical natty space officer you see on television. Both held gas guns.

"All right, break it up!" Muller ordered. "You men get back to your work. And you, Dr. Pietro—my contract calls for me to deliver you to Saturn's moon, but it doesn't forbid me to haul you the rest of the way in irons. I won't have this aboard my ship!"

Pietro nodded, his little gray goatee bobbing, his lean body coming upright smoothly. "Quite right, Captain. Nor does it forbid me to let you and your men spend the sixteen months on the moon—where *I* command—in irons. Why don't you ask Sam what happened before you make a complete fool of yourself, Captain Muller?"

Sam gulped and looked at the crew, but apparently Pietro was right; the little guy had been

completely disgusted by Bullard. He shrugged apologetically. "Bullard insulted Dr. Lomax, sir. I yelled for someone to help me get him out of here, and I guess everybody got all mixed up when gravity went off, and Bullard cracked his head on the floor. Just a misunderstanding, sir."

Muller stood there, glowering at the cut on my knuckles, and I could feel him aching for a good excuse to make his threat a reality. But finally, he grunted and swung on his heel, ordering the crew with him. Grundy threw us a final grimace and skulked off behind him. Finally there was only Wilcox, who grinned, shrugged, and shut the door quietly behind him. And we were left with the mess free-fall had made of the place.

I spotted Jenny heading across the room, carefully not seeing the fatuous glances Pietro was throwing her way, and I swung in behind. She nodded back at me, but headed straight for Lomax, with an odd look on her face. When she reached him, her voice was low and business-like.

"Hal, what did those samples of Hendrix's show up?"

Hendrix was the Farmer, in charge of the hydroponics that turned the carbon dioxide we breathed out back to oxygen, and also gave us a bit of fresh vegetables now and then. Technically, he was a crewman, just as I was a scientist; but actually, he felt more like one of us.

Lomax looked surprised. "What samples, Jenny? I haven't see Hendrix for two weeks."

"You—" She stopped, bit her lip, and frowned. She swung on me. "Paul, have you seen him?"

I shook my head. "Not since last night. He was asking Eve and Walt to wake him up early, then."

"That's funny. He was worried about the plants yesterday and wanted Hal to test the water and chemical fertilizer. I looked for him this morning, but when he didn't show up, I thought he was with you, Hal. And—the plants are dying!"

"All of them?" The half smile wiped off Hal's face, and I could feel my stomach hit my insteps. When anything happens to the plants in a ship, it isn't funny.

She shook her head again. "No—about a quarter of them. I was coming for help when the fight started. They're all bleached out. And it looks like—like chromazone!"

That really hit me. They developed the stuff to fight off fungus on Venus, where one part in a billion did the trick. But it was tricky stuff; one part in ten-million would destroy the

chlorophyll in plants in about twenty hours, or the hemoglobin in blood in about fifteen minutes. It was practically a universal poison.

Hal started for the door, then stopped. He glanced around the room, turned back to me, and suddenly let out a healthy bellow of seeming amusement. Jenny's laugh was right in harmony. I caught the drift, and tried to look as if we were up to some monkey business as we slipped out of the room. Nobody seemed suspicious.

Then we made a dash for hydroponics, toward the rear of the ship. We scrambled into the big chamber together, and stopped. Everything looked normal among the rows of plant-filled tanks, pipes and equipment. Jenny led us down one of the rows and around a bend.

The plants in the rear quarter weren't sick—they were dead. They were bleached to a pale yellow, liked boiled grass, and limp. Nothing would save them now.

"I'm a biologist, not a botanist—" Jenny began.

Hal grunted sickly. "Yeah. And I'm not a life hormone expert. But there's one test we can try."

He picked up a pair of rubber gloves from a rack, and pulled off some wilted stalks. From one of the healthy tanks, he took green leaves. He mashed the two kinds together on the edge of a bench and watched. "If it's chromazone, they've developed an enzyme by now that should eat the color out of those others."

In about ten seconds, I noticed the change. The green began to bleach before my eyes.

Jenny made a sick sound in her throat and stared at the rows of healthy plants. "I checked the valves, and this sick section is isolated. But—if chromazone got into the chemicals . . . Better get your spectroanalyzer out, Hal, while I get Captain Muller. Paul, be a dear and find Hendrix, will you?"

I shook my head, and went further down the rows. "No need, Jenny," I called back. I pointed to the shoe I'd seen sticking out from the edge of one of the tanks. There was a leg attached

I reached for it, but Lomax shoved me back. "Don't—the enzymes in the corpse are worse than the poison, Paul. Hands off." He reached down with the gloves and heaved. It was Hendrix, all right—a corpse with a face and hands as white as human flesh could ever get. Even the lips were bleached out.

Jenny moaned. "The fool! The stupid fool. He *knew* it was dan-

gerous without gloves; he suspected chromazone, even though none's supposed to be on board. And I warned him . . ."

"Not against this, you didn't," I told her. I dropped to my knees and took another pair of gloves. Hendrix's head rolled under my grasp. The skull was smashed over the left eye, as if someone had taken a sideswipe at Hendrix with a hammer. No fall had produced that. 'You should have warned him about his friends. Must have been killed, then dumped in there."

"Murder!" Hal bit the word out in disgust. "You're right, Paul. Not too stupid a way to dispose of the body, either—in another couple of hours, he'd have started dissolving in that stuff, and we'd never have guessed it was murder. That means this poisoning of the plants wasn't an accident. Somebody poisoned the water, then got worried when there wasn't a report on the plants; must have been someone who thought it worked faster on plants than it does. So he came to investigate, and Hendrix caught him fooling around. So he got killed."

"But who?" Jenny asked.

I shrugged sickly. "Somebody crazy enough—or desperate enough to turn back that he'll risk our air and commit murder. You'd better go after the captain while Hal gets his test equipment. I'll keep watch here."

It didn't feel good in hydroponics after they left. I looked at those dead plants, trying to figure whether there were enough left to keep us going. I studied Hendrix's body, trying to tell myself the murderer had no reason to come back and try to get me.

I reached for a cigarette, and then put the pack back. The air felt almost as close as the back of my neck felt tense and unprotected. And telling myself it was all imagination didn't help—not with what was in that chamber to keep me company.

II

Muller's face was like an iceberg when he came down—but only after he saw Hendrix. Before then I'd caught the fat moon-calf expression on his face, and I'd heard Jenny giggling. Damn it, they'd taken enough time. Hal was already back, fussing over things with the hunk of tin and lenses he treated like a newborn baby.

Doc Napier came in behind them, but separately. I saw him glance at them and look sick. Then both Muller and Napier began concentrating on business. Napier bent his nervous, bony figure over the corpse, and

stood up almost at once. "Murder all right."

"So I guessed, Dr. Napier," Muller growled heavily at him. "Wrap him up and put him between hulls to freeze. We'll bury him when we land. Tremaine, give a hand with it, will you?"

"I'm not a laborer, Captain Muller!" Napier protested. I started to tell him where he could get off, too.

But Jenny shook her head at us. "Please. Can't you see Captain Muller is trying to keep too many from knowing about this? I should think you'd be glad to help. Please?"

Put that way, I guess it made sense. We found some rubber sheeting in one of the lockers, and began wrapping Hendrix in it; it wasn't pleasant, since he was beginning to soften up from the enzymes he'd absorbed. "How about going ahead to make sure no one sees us?" I suggested to Jenny.

Muller opened his mouth, but Jenny gave one of her quick little laughs and opened the door for us. Doc looked relieved. I guessed he was trying to kid himself. Personally, I wasn't a fool—I was just hooked; I knew perfectly well she was busy playing us off against one another, and probably having a good time balancing the books. But hell, that's the way life runs.

"Get Pietro up here!" Muller fired after us. She laughed again, and nodded. She went with us until we got to the 'tween-hulls lock, then went off after the chief. She was back with him just as we finished stuffing Hendrix through and sealing up again.

Muller grunted at us when we got back, then turned to Lomax again. The big chemist didn't look happy. He spread his hands toward us, and hunched his shoulders. "A fifty-times overdose of chromazone in those tanks—fortunately none in the others. And I can't find a trace of it in the fertilizer chemicals or anywhere else. Somebody deliberately put it into those tanks."

"Why?" Pietro asked. We'd filled him in with the rough details, but it still made no sense to him.

"Suppose you tell me, Dr. Pietro," Muller suggested. "Chromazone is a poison most people never heard of. One of the new *scientific* nuisances."

Pietro straightened, and his goatee bristled. "If you're hinting . . ."

"I am *not* hinting, Dr. Pietro. I'm telling you that I'm confining your group to their quarters until we can clean up this mess,

distil the water that's contaminated, and replant. After that, if an investigation shows nothing, I *may* take your personal bond for the conduct of your people. Right now I'm protecting my ship."

"But captain—" Jenny began.

Muller managed a smile at her. "Oh, not you, of course, Jenny. I'll need you here. With Hendrix gone, you're the closest thing we have to a Farmer now."

"Captain Muller," Pietro said sharply. "Captain, in the words of the historical novelists—drop dead! Dr. Sanderson, I forbid you to leave your quarters so long as anyone else is confined to his. I have ample authority for that."

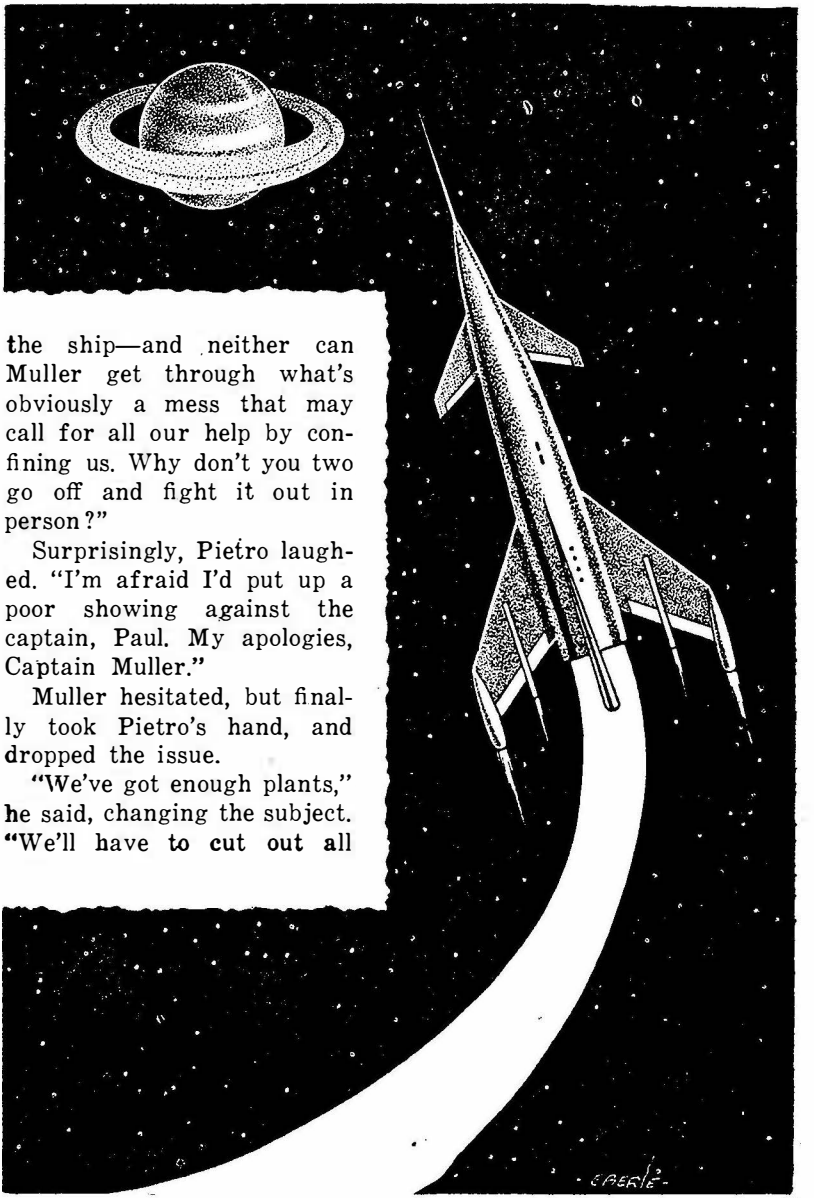
"Under emergency powers—" Muller spluttered over it, and Pietro jumped in again before he could finish.

"Precisely, Captain. Under emergency situations, when passengers aboard a commercial vessel find indications of total irresponsibility or incipient insanity on the part of a ship's officer, they are considered correct in assuming command for the time needed to protect their lives. We were poisoned by food prepared in your kitchen, and were nearly killed by radioactivity through a leak in the engineroom—and no investigation was made. We are now confronted with another situation aimed against our welfare—as the others were wholly aimed at us—and you choose to conduct an investigation against our group only. My only conclusion is that you wish to confine us to quarters so we cannot find your motives for this last outrage. Paul, will you kindly relieve the captain of his position?"

They were both half right, and mostly wrong. Until it was proved that our group was guilty, Muller couldn't issue an order that was obviously discriminatory and against our personal safety in case there was an attack directed on us. He'd be mustered out of space and into the Lunar Cells for that. But on the other hand, the "safety for passengers" clause Pietro was citing applied only in the case of overt, direct and physical danger by an officer to normal passengers. He might be able to weasel it through a court, or he might be found guilty of mutiny. It left me in a pretty position.

Jenny fluttered around. "Now, now—" she began.

I cut her off. "Shut up, Jenny. And you two damned fools cool down. Damn it, we've got an emergency here all right—we may not have air plants enough to live on. Pietro, we can't run



the ship—and neither can Muller get through what's obviously a mess that may call for all our help by confining us. Why don't you two go off and fight it out in person?"

Surprisingly, Pietro laughed. "I'm afraid I'd put up a poor showing against the captain, Paul. My apologies, Captain Muller."

Muller hesitated, but finally took Pietro's hand, and dropped the issue.

"We've got enough plants," he said, changing the subject. "We'll have to cut out all

smoking and other waste of air. And I'll need Jenny to work the hydroponics, with any help she requires. We've got to get more seeds planted, and fast. Better keep word of this to ourselves. We—"

A shriek came from Jenny then. She'd been busy at one of the lockers in the chamber. Now she began ripping others open and pawing through things inside rubber-gloves. "Captain Muller! The seeds! The seeds!"

Hal took one look, and his face turned gray.

"Chromazone," he reported. "Every bag of seed has been filled with a solution of chromazone! They're worthless!"

"How long before the plants here will seed?" Muller asked sharply.

"Three months," Jenny answered. "Captain Muller, what are we going to do?"

The dour face settled into grim determination. "The only sensible thing. Take care of these plants, conserve the air, and squeeze by until we can reseed. And, Dr. Pietro, with your permission, we'll turn about for Earth at once. We can't go on like this. To proceed would be to endanger the life of every man aboard."

"Please, Danton." Jenny put her hand on Pietro's arm. "I know what this all means to you, but—"

Pietro shook her off. "It means the captain's trying to get out of the expedition, again. It's five months back to Earth—more, by the time we kill velocity. It's the same to Saturn. And either way, in five months we've got this fixed up, or we're helpless. Permission to return refused, Captain Muller."

"Then if you'll be so good as to return to your own quarters," Muller said, holding himself back with an effort that turned his face red, "we'll start clearing this up. And not a word of this."

Napier, Lomax, Pietro and I went back to the scientists' quarters, leaving Muller and Jenny conferring busily. That was at fifteen o'clock. At sixteen o'clock, Pietro issued orders against smoking.

Dinner was at eighteen o'clock. We sat down in silence. I reached for my plate without looking. And suddenly little Phil Riggs was on his feet, raving. "Whole wheat! Nothing but whole wheat bread! I'm sick of it—sick! I won't—"

"Sit down!" I told him. I'd bitten into one of the rolls on the table. It was white bread, and it was the best the cook had managed so far. There was corn instead of baked beans, and

he'd done a fair job of making meat loaf. "Stop making a fool of yourself, Phil."

He slumped back, staring at the white bun into which he'd bitten. "Sorry. Sorry. It's this air—so stuffy. I can't breathe. I can't see right—"

Pietro and I exchanged glances, but I guess we weren't surprised. Among intelligent people on a ship of that size, secrets wouldn't keep. They'd all put bits together and got part of the answer. Pietro shrugged, and half stood up to make an announcement.

"Beg pardon, sirs." We jerked our heads around to see Bullard standing in the doorway.

He was scared stiff, and his words got stuck in his throat. Then he found his voice again. "I heard as how Hendrix went crazy and poisoned the plants and went and killed himself and we'll all die if we don't find some trick, and what I want to know, please, sirs, is are what they're saying right and you know all kinds of tricks and can you save us because I can't go on like this not knowing and hearing them talking outside the galley and none of them telling me—"

Lomax cut into his flood of words. "You'll live, Bullard. Farmer Hendrix did get killed in an accident to some of the plants, but we've still got air enough. Captain Muller has asked the help of a few of us. but it's only a temporary emergency."

Bullard stared at him, and slowly some of the fear left his face—though not all of it. He turned and left with a curt bow of his head, while Pietro added a few details that weren't exactly lies to Lomax's hasty cover-up, along with a grateful glance at the chemist. It seemed to work, for the time being—at least enough for Riggs to begin making nasty remarks about cooked paste.

Then the tension began to build again. I don't think any of the crew talked to any of our group. And yet, there seemed to be a chain of rumor that exchanged bits of information. Only the crew could have seen the dead plants being carried down to our refuse breakdown plant; and the fact it was chromazone poisoning must have been deduced from a description by some of our group. At any rate, both groups knew all about it—and a little bit more, as was usual with rumors—by the second day.

Muller should have made the news official, but he only issued an announcement that the danger was over. When Peters, our

radioman-navigator, found Sam and Phil Riggs smoking and dressed them down, it didn't make Muller's words seem too convincing. I guessed that Muller had other things on his mind; at least he wasn't in his cabin much, and I didn't see Jenny for two whole days.

My nerves were as jumpy as those of the rest. It isn't too bad cutting out smoking; a man can stand imagining the air is getting stale; but when every unconscious gesture toward cigarettes that aren't there reminds him of the air, and when every imagined stale stench makes him want a cigarette to relax, it gets a little rough.

Maybe that's why I was in a completely rotten mood when I finally did spot Jenny going down the passage, with the tight coveralls she was wearing emphasizing every motion of her hips. I grabbed her and swung her around. "Hi, stranger. Got time for a word?"

She sort of brushed my hand off her arm, but didn't seem to mind it. "Why, I guess so, Paul. A little time. Captain Muller's watching the 'ponics."

"Good," I said, trying to forget Muller. "Let's make it a little more private than this, though. Come on in."

She lifted an eyebrow at the open door of my cabin, made with a little giggle, and stepped inside. I followed her, and kicked the door shut. She reached for it, but I had my back against it.

"Paul!" She tried to get around me, but I wasn't having any. I pushed her back onto the only seat in the room, which was the bunk. She got up like a spring uncoiling. "Paul Tremaine, you open that door. You know better than that. Paul, please!"

"What makes me any different than the others? You spend plenty of time in Muller's cabin —and you've been in Pietro's often enough. Probably Doc Napier's, too!"

Her eyes hardened, but she decided to try the patient and reason-with-the-child line. "That is different. Captain Muller and I have a great deal of business to work out."

"Sure. And he looks great in lipstick!"

It was a shot in the dark, but it went home. I wished I'd kept my darned mouth shut; before I'd been suspecting it—now I knew. She turned pink and tried to slap me, which won't work when the girl is sitting on a bunk and I'm on my feet. "You mind your own business!"

"I'm doing that. Generations should stick together, and he's old enough to be your father!"

She leaned back and studied me. Then she smiled slowly, and something about it made me sick inside. "I like older men, Paul. They make people my own age seem so callow, so unfinished. It's so comforting to have mature people around. I always did have an Electra complex."

"The Greeks had plenty of names for it, kid," I told her. "Don't get me wrong. If you want to be a slut, that's your own business. But when you pull the innocent act on me, and then fall back to sophomore psychology—"

This time she stood up before she slapped. Before her hand stung my face, I was beginning to regret what I'd said. Afterwards, I didn't give a damn. I picked her up off the floor, slapped her soundly on the rump, pulled her tight against me, and kissed her. She tried scratching my face, then went passive, and wound up with one arm around my neck and the other in the hair at the back of my head. When I finally put her down she sank back onto the bunk, breathing heavily.

"Why, Paul!" And she reached out her arms as I came down to meet them. For a second, the world looked pretty good.

Then a man's hoarse scream cut through it all, with the sound of heavy steps in panic flight. I jerked up. Jenny hung on. "Paul . . . Paul . . ." But there was the smell of death in the air, suddenly. I broke free and was out into the corridor. The noise seemed to come from the shaft that led to the engine room, and I jumped for it, while I heard doors slam.

This time, there was a commotion, like a wet sack being tossed around in a pentagonal steel barrel, and another hoarse scream that cut off in the middle to a gargling sound.

I reached the shaft and started down the center rail, not bothering with the hand-grips. I could hear something rustle below, followed by silence, but I couldn't see a thing; the lights had been cut.

I could feel things poking into my back before I landed; I always get the creeps when there's death around, and that last sound had been just that—somebody's last sound. I *knew* somebody was going to kill me before I could find the switch. Then I stumbled over something, and my hair stood on end. I guess my own yell was pretty horrible. It scared me worse than I was already. But my fingers found the switch somehow, and the light flashed on.

Sam lay on the floor, with blood still running from a wide

gash across his throat. A big kitchen knife was still stuck in one end of the horrible wound. And one of his fingers was half sliced off where the blade of a switch-blade shiv had failed on him and snapped back.

Something sounded above me, and I jerked back. But it was Captain Muller, coming down the rail. The man had obviously taken it all in on the way down. He jerked the switch-blade out of Sam's dead grasp and looked at the point of the knife. There was blood further back from the cut finger, but none on the point.

"Damn!" Muller tossed it down in disgust. "If he'd scratched the other man, we'd have had a chance to find who it was. Tremaine, have you got an alibi?"

"I was with Jenny," I told him, and watched his eyes begin to hate me. But he nodded. We picked Sam up together and lugged his body up to the top of the shaft, where the crowd had collected. Pietro, Peters, the cook, Grundy and Lomax were there. Beyond them, the dark-haired, almost masculine head of Eve Nolan showed, her eyes studying the body of Sam as if it were a negative in her dark-room; as usual, Bill Sanderson was as close to her as he could get. But there was no sign now of Jenny. I glanced up the corridor, but saw only Wilcox and Phil Riggs, with Walt Harris trailing them, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

Muller moved directly to Pietro. "Six left in my crew now, Dr. Pietro. First Hendrix, now Sam. Can you still say that the attack is on *your* crew—when mine keep being killed? This time, sir, I demand . . ."

"Give 'em hell, Captain," ape-man Grundy broke in. "Cut the fancy stuff, and let's get the damned murdering rats!"

Muller's eyes quartered him, spitted his carcass, and began turning him slowly over a bed of coals. "Mister Grundy, I am master of the *Wahoo*. I fail to remember asking for your piratical advice. Dr. Pietro, I trust you will have no objections if I ask Mr. Peters to investigate your section and group thoroughly?"

"None at all, Captain Muller," Pietro answered. "I trust Peters. And I feel sure you'll permit me to delegate Mr. Tremaine to inspect the remainder of the ship?"

Muller nodded curtly. "Certainly. Until the madman is found, we're all in danger. And unless he is found, I insist I must protect my crew and my ship by turning back to Earth."

"I cannot permit that, sir!"

"Your permission for that was not requested, Dr. Pietro! Yes, Bullard?"

The cook had been squirming and muttering to himself for minutes. Now he darted out toward Grundy, and his finger pointed to Lomax. "He done it! I seen him. Killed the only friend I had, he did. They went by my galley—and—and he grabbed my big knife, that one there. And he killed Sam."

"You're sure it was Lomax?" Muller asked sharply.

"Sure I'm sure. Sam, he was acting queer lately. He was worried. Told me he saw something, and he was going to know for sure. He borrowed my switch-blade knife that my wife gave me. And he went out looking for something. Then I heard him a-running, and I looked up, and there was this guy, chasing him. Sure, I seen him with my own eyes."

Eve Nolan chuckled throatily, throwing her mannish-cut hair back from her face. She was almost pretty with an expression on her countenance, even if it was amused disgust. "Captain Muller, that's a nice story. But Dr. Lomax was with me in my darkroom, working on some spectroanalysis slides. Bill Sanderson and Phil Riggs were waiting outside for us. And Mr. Peters saw us come out together when we all ran down here."

Peters nodded. Muller stared at us for a second, and the hunting lust died out of his eyes, leaving them blank and cold. He turned to Bullard. "Bullard, an explanation might make me reduce your punishment. If you have anything to say, say it now!"

The cook was gibbering and actually drooling with fear. He shook, and sweat popped out all over him. "My knife—I hadda say something. They stole my knife. They wanted it to look like I done it. God, Captain, you'da done the same. Can't punish a man for trying to save his life. I'm a good man, I am. Can't whip a good man! Can't—"

"Give him twenty-five lashes with the wire, Mr. Grundy," Muller said flatly.

Pietro let out a shriek on top of the cook's. He started forward, but I caught him. "Captain Muller's right," I told him. "On a spaceship, the full crew is needed. The brig is useless, so the space-enabling charter recognizes flogging. Something is needed to maintain discipline."

Pietro dropped back reluctantly, but Lomax faced the captain. "The man is a coward, hardly responsible, Captain Muller. I'm the wounded party

in this case, but it seems to me that hysteria isn't the same thing as maliciousness. Suppose I ask for clemency?"

"Thank you, Dr. Lomax," Muller said, and actually looked relieved. "Make it ten lashes, Mr. Grundy. Apparently no real harm has been done, and he will not testify in the future."

Grundy began dragging Bullard out, muttering about damn fool groundlubbers always sticking their noses in. The cook caught at Lomax's hand on the way, literally slobbering over it. Lomax rubbed his palm across his thigh, looking embarrassed.

Muller turned back to us. "Very well. Mr. Peters will begin investigating the expedition staff and quarters; Mr. Tremaine will have free run over the rest of the ship. And if the murderer is not turned up in forty-eight hours, we head back to Earth!"

Pietro started to protest again, but another scream ripped down the corridor, jerking us all around. It was Jenny, running toward us. She was breathing hoarsely as she nearly crashed into Dr. Pietro.

Her face was white and sick, and she had to try twice before she could speak.

"The plants!" she gasped out. "Poison! They're dying!"

III

It was chromazone again. Muller had kept most of the gang from coming back to hydroponics, but he, Jenny, Pietro, Wilcox and myself were enough to fill the room with the smell of sick fear. Now less than half of the original space was filled with healthy plants. Some of the tanks held plants already dead, and others were dying as we watched; once beyond a certain stage, the stuff acted almost instantly—for hours there was only a slight indication of something wrong, and then suddenly there were the dead, bleached plants.

Wilcox was the first to speak. He still looked like some nattily dressed hero of a space serial, but his first words were ones that could never have gone out on a public broadcast. Then he shrugged. "They must have been poisoned while we were all huddled over Sam's body. Who wasn't with us?"

"Nonsense," Pietro denied. "This was done at least eighteen hours ago, maybe more. We'd have to find who was around then."

"Twenty hours, or as little as twelve," Jenny amended. "It depends on the amount of the dosage, to some extent. And . . ." She almost managed to blush.

"Well, there have been a lot of people around. I can't even remember. Mr. Grundy and one of the men, Mr. Wilcox, Dr. Napier—oh, I don't know!"

Muller shook his head in heavy agreement. "Naturally. We had a lot of work to do here. After word got around about Hendrix, we didn't try to conceal much. It might have happened when someone else was watching, too. The important thing, gentlemen, is that now we don't have reserve enough to carry us to Saturn. The plants remaining can't handle the air for all of us. And while we ship some reserve oxygen . . ."

He let it die in a distasteful shrug. "At least this settles one thing. We have no choice now but to return to Earth!"

"Captain Muller," Pietro bristled quickly, "that's getting to be a monomania with you. I agree we are in grave danger. I don't relish the prospect of dying any more than you do—perhaps less, in view of certain peculiarities! But it's now further back to Earth than it is to Saturn. And before we can reach either, we'll have new plants—or we'll be dead!"

"Some of us will be dead, Dr. Pietro," Wilcox amended it. "There are enough plants left to keep some of us breathing indefinitely."

Pietro nodded. "And I suppose, in our captain's mind, that means the personnel of the ship can survive. Captain Muller, I must regard your constant attempt to return to Earth as highly suspicious in view of this recurrent sabotage of the expedition. Someone here is apparently either a complete madman or so determined to get back that he'll resort to anything to accomplish his end. And you have been harping on returning over and over again!"

Muller bristled, and his heavy fist tightened. Then he drew himself up to his full dumpy height. "Dr. Pietro," he said stiffly, "I am as responsible to my duties as any man here—and my duties involve protecting the life of every man and woman on board; if you wish to return, I shall be *most* happy to submit this to a formal board of inquiry. I—"

"Just a minute," I told them. "You two are forgetting that we've got a problem here. Damn it, I'm sick of this fighting among ourselves. We're a bunch of men in a jam, not two camps at war now. I can't see any reason why Captain Muller would want to return that badly."

Muller nodded slightly. "Thank you, Mr. Tremaine. However, for the record, and to save you trouble investigating—

there is a good reason. My company is now building a superliner; if I were to return within the next six months, they'd promote me to captain of that ship —a considerable promotion, too."

For a moment, his honesty seemed to soften Pietro. The scientist mumbled some sort of apology, and turned to the plants. But it bothered me; if Muller had pulled something, the smartest thing he could have done would be to have said just what he did.

Besides, knowing that Pietro's injunction had robbed him of a chance like that was enough to rankle in any man's guts and make him work up something pretty close to insanity. I marked it down in my mental files for the investigation I was supposed to make, but let it go for the moment.

Muller stood for a minute longer, thinking darkly about the whole situation. Then he moved toward the entrance to hydroponics and pulled out the ship speaker mike. "All hands and passengers will assemble in hydroponics within five minutes," he announced. He swung toward Pietro. "With your permission, Doctor," he said caustically.

The company assembled later looked as sick as the plants. This time, Muller was hiding nothing. He outlined the situation fully; maybe he shaded it a bit to throw suspicion on our group, but in no way we could pin down. Finally he stated flatly that the situation meant almost certain death for at least some of those aboard.

"From now on, there'll be a watch kept. This is closed to everyone except myself, Dr. Pietro, Mr. Peters, and Dr. Jenny Sanderson. At least one of us will be here at all times, equipped with gas guns. Anyone else is to be killed on setting foot inside this door!" He swung his eyes over the group. "Any objections?"

Grundy stirred uncomfortably. "I don't go for them science guys up here. Takes a crazy man to do a thing like this, and everybody knows . . ."

Eve Nolan laughed roughly. "Everybody knows you've been swearing you won't go the whole way, Grundy. These jungle tactics should be right up your alley."

"That's enough," Muller cut through the beginnings of the hassle. "I trust those I appointed—at least more than I do the rest of you. The question now is whether to return to Earth at once or to go on to Saturn. We can't radio for help for months

yet. We're not equipped with sharp beams, we're low powered, and we're off the lanes where Earth's pick-ups hunt. Dr. Pietro wants to go on, since we can't get back within our period of safety; I favor returning, since there is no proof that this danger will end with this outrage. We've agreed to let the result of a vote determine it."

Wilcox stuck up a casual hand, and Muller nodded to him. He grinned amiably at all of us. "There's a third possibility, Captain. We can reach Jupiter in about three months, if we turn now. It's offside, but closer than anything else. From there, on a fast liner, we can be back on Earth in another ten days."

Muller calculated, while Peters came up to discuss it. Then he nodded. "Saturn or Jupiter, then. I'm not voting, of course. Bullard is disqualified to vote by previous acts." He drew a low moan from the sick figure of Bullard for that, but no protest. Then he nodded. "All those in favor of Jupiter, your right hands please!"

I counted them, wondering why my own hand was still down. It made some sort of sense to turn aside now. But none of our group was voting—and all the others had their hands up, except for Dr. Napier. "Seven," Muller announced. "Those in favor of Saturn."

Again, Napier didn't vote. I hesitated, then put my hand up. It was crazy, and Pietro was a fool to insist. But I knew that he'd never get another chance if this failed, and . . .

"Eight," Muller counted. He sighed, then straightened. "Very well, we go on. Dr. Pietro, you will have my full support from now on. In return, I'll expect every bit of help in meeting this emergency. Mr. Tremaine was correct; we cannot remain camps at war."

Pietro's goatee bobbed quickly, and his hand went out. But while most of the scientists were nodding with him, I caught the dark scowl of Grundy, and heard the mutters from the deckhands and the engine men. If Muller could get them to cooperate, he was a genius.

Pietro faced us, and his face was serious again. "We can hasten the seeding of the plants a little, I think, by temperature and light-and-dark cycle manipulations. Unfortunately, these aren't sea-algae plants, or we'd be in comparatively little trouble. That was my fault in not converting. We can, however, step up their efficiency a bit. And I'm sure we can find some way to remove the carbon dioxide from the air."

"How about oxygen to breathe?" Peters asked.

"That's the problem," Pietro admitted. "I was wondering about electrolyzing water."

Wilcox bobbed up quickly. "Can you do it on AC current?"

Lomax shook his head. "It takes DC."

"Then that's out. We run on 220 AC. And while I can rectify a few watts, it wouldn't be enough to help. No welders except monatomic hydrogen torches, even."

Pietro looked sicker than before. He'd obviously been counting on that. But he turned to Bullard. "How about seeds? We had a crop of tomatoes a month ago—and from the few I had, they're all seed. Are any left?"

Bullard rocked from side to side, moaning. "Dead. We're all gonna be dead. I told him, I did, you take me out there, I'll never get back. I'm a good man, I am. I wasn't never meant to die way out here. I—I—"

He gulped and suddenly screamed. He went through the door at an awkward shuffle, heading for his galley. Muller shook his head, and turned toward me. "Check up, will you, Mr. Tremaine? And I suggest that you and Mr. Peters start your investigation at once. I understand that chromazone would require so little hiding space that there's no use searching for it. But if you can find any evidence, report it at once."

Peters and I left. I found the galley empty. Apparently Bullard had gone to lie on his stomach in his bunk and nurse his terror. I found the freezer compartments, though—and the tomatoes. There must have been a bushel of them, but Bullard had followed his own peculiar tastes. From the food he served, he couldn't stand fresh vegetables; and he'd cooked the tomatoes down thoroughly and run them through the dehydrator before packing them away!

It was a cheerful supper, that one! Bullard had half-recovered and his fear was driving him to try to be nice to us. The selection was good, beyond the inevitable baked beans; but he wasn't exactly a chef at best, and his best was far behind him. Muller had brought Wilcox, Napier and Peters down to our mess with himself, to consolidate forces, and it seemed that he was serious about cooperating. But it was a little late for that.

Overhead, the fans had been stepped up to counteract the effect of staleness our minds supplied. But the whine of the motors kept reminding us our

days were counted. Only Jenny was normal; she sat between Muller and Pietro, where she could watch my face and that of Napier. And even her giggles had a forced sound.

There were all kinds of things we could do—in theory. But we didn't have that kind of equipment. The plain fact was that the plants were going to lose the battle against our lungs. The carbon dioxide would increase, speeding up our breathing, and making us all seem to suffocate. The oxygen would grow thinner and thinner, once our supplies of bottled gas ran out. And eventually, the air wouldn't support life.

"It's sticky and hot," Jenny complained, suddenly.

"I stepped up the humidity and temperature controls," I told her. She nodded in quick comprehension, but I went on for Muller's benefit. "Trying to give the plants the best growing atmosphere. We'll feel just as hot and sticky when the carbon dioxide goes up, anyhow."

"It must already be up," Wilcox said. "My two canaries are breathing faster."

"Canaries," Muller said. He frowned, though he must have known of them. It was traditional to keep them in the engineroom, though the reason behind it had long since been lost. "Better kill them, Mr. Wilcox."

Wilcox jerked, and his face paled a bit. Then he nodded. "Yes, sir!"

That was when I got scared. The idea that two birds breathing could hurt our chances put things on a little too vivid a basis. Only Lomax seemed unaffected. He shoved back now, and stood up.

"Some tests I have to make, Captain. I have an idea that might turn up the killer among us!"

I had an idea he was bluffing, but I kept my mouth shut. A bluff was as good as anything else, it seemed.

At least, it was better than anything I seemed able to do. I prowled over the ship, sometimes meeting Peters doing the same, but I couldn't find a bit of evidence. The crewmen sat watching with hating eyes. And probably the rest aboard hated and feared us just as much. It wasn't hard to imagine the man who was behind it all deciding to wipe one of us out. My neck got a permanent crimp from keeping one eye behind me. But there wasn't a shred of evidence I could find.

In two more days, we began to notice the stuffiness more. My breathing went up enough to notice. Somehow, I couldn't

get a full breath. And the third night, I woke up in the middle of my sleep with the feeling something was sitting on my chest; but since I'd taken to sleeping with the light on, I saw that it was just the stuffiness that was bothering me. Maybe most of it had been psychological up until then. But that was the real thing.

The nice part of it was that it wouldn't be sudden—we'd have days to get closer and closer to death; and days for each one to realize a little more that every man who wasn't breathing would make it that much easier for the rest of us. I caught myself thinking of it when I saw Bullard or Grundy.

Then trouble struck again. I was late getting to the scene this time, down by the engine room. Muller and Bill Sanderson were ahead of me, trying to separate Hal Lomax and Grundy, and not doing so well. Lomax brought up a haymaker as I arrived, and started to shout something. But Grundy was out of Muller's grasp, and up, swinging a wrench. It connected with a dull thud, and Lomax hit the floor, unconscious.

I picked Grundy up by the collar of his jacket, heaved him around and against a wall, where I could get my hand against his esophagus and start squeezing. His eyeballs popped, and the wrench dropped from his hands. When I get mad enough to act that way, I usually know I'll regret it later. This time it felt good, all the way. But Muller pushed me aside, waiting until Grundy could breathe again.

"All right," Muller said. "I hope you've got a good explanation, before I decide what to do with you."

Grundy's eyes were slitted, as if he'd been taking some of the Venus drugs. But after one long, hungry look at me, he faced the captain. "Yes, sir. This guy came down here ahead of me. Didn't think nothing of it, sir. But when he started fiddling with the panel there, I got suspicious." He pointed to the external control panel for the engine room, to be used in case of accidents. "With all that's been going on, how'd I know but maybe he was gonna dump the fuel? And then I seen he had keys. I didn't wait, sir. I jumped him. And then you come up."

Wilcox came from the background and dropped beside the still figure of Lomax. He opened the man's left hand and pulled out a bunch of keys, examining them. "Engine keys, Captain Muller. Hey—it's my set! He must have lifted them from my

pocket. It looks as if Grundy's found our killer!"

"Or Lomax found him!" I pointed out. "Anybody else see this start, or know that Lomax didn't get those keys away from Grundy when *he* started trouble?"

"Why, you—" Grundy began, but Wilcox cut off his run. It was a shame. I still felt like pushing the man's Adam's apple through his medulla oblongata.

"Lock them both up, until Dr. Lomax comes to," Muller ordered. "And send Dr. Napier to take care of him. I'm not jumping to any conclusions." But the look he was giving Lomax indicated that he'd already pretty well made up his mind. And the crew was positive. They drew back sullenly, staring at us like animals studying a human hunter, and they didn't like it when Peters took Grundy to lock him into his room. Muller finally chased them out, and left Wilcox and me alone.

Wilcox shrugged wryly, brushing dirt off his too-clean uniform. "While you're here, Tremaine, why not look my section over? You've been neglecting me."

I'd borrowed Muller's keys and inspected the engine room from top to bottom the night before, but I didn't mention that. I hesitated now; to a man who grew up to be an engineer and who'd now gotten over his psychosis against space too late to start over, the engines were things better left alone. Then I remembered that I hadn't seen Wilcox's quarters, since he had the only key to them.

I nodded and went inside. The engines were old, and the gravity generator was one of the first models. But Wilcox knew his business. The place was slick enough, and there was the good clean smell of metal working right. I could feel the controls in my hands, and my nerves itched as I went about making a perfunctory token examination. I even opened the fuel lockers and glanced in. The two crewmen watched with hard eyes, slitted as tight as Grundy's, but they didn't bother me. Then I shrugged, and went back with Wilcox to his tiny cabin.

I was hit by the place before I got inside. Tiny, yes, but fixed up like the dream of every engineer. Clean, neat, filled with books and luxuries. He even had a tape player I'd seen on sale for a trifle over three thousand dollars. He turned it on, letting the opening bars of Haydn's Oxford Symphony come out. It was a binaural, ultra-fidelity job, and I could close my eyes

and feel the orchestra in front of me.

This time I was thorough, right down the line, from the cabinets that held luxury food and wine to the little drawer where he kept his dress-suit studs; they might have been rutiles, but I had a hunch they were genuine catseyes.

He laughed when I finished, and handed me a glass of the first decent wine I'd tasted in months. "Even a small ozonator to make the air seem more breathable, and a dehumidifier, Tremaine. I like to live decently. I started saving my money once with the idea of getting a ship of my own—" There was a real dream in his eyes for a second. Then he shrugged. "But ships got bigger and more expensive. So I decided to live. At forty, I've got maybe twenty years ahead here, and I mean to enjoy it. And—well, there are ways of making a bit extra . . ."

I nodded. So it's officially smuggling to carry a four-ounce Martian fur to Earth where it's worth a fortune, considering the legal duty. But most officers did it now and then. He put on Sibelius' Fourth while I finished the wine. "If this mess is ever over, Paul, or you get a chance, drop down," he said. "I like a man who knows good things—and I liked your reaction when you spotted that Haydn for Hohmann's recording. Muller pretends to know music, but he likes the flashiness of Möhlwehr."

Hell, I'd cut my eye teeth on that stuff; my father had been first violinist in an orchestra, and had considered me a traitor when I was born without perfect pitch. We talked about Sibelius for awhile, before I left to go out into the stinking rest of the ship. Grundy was sitting before the engines, staring at them. Wilcox had said the big ape liked to watch them move . . . but he was supposed to be locked up.

I stopped by Lomax's door; the shutter was open, and I could see the big man writhing about, but he was apparently unconscious. Napier came back from somewhere, and nodded quickly.

"Concussion," he said. "He's still out, but it shouldn't be too serious.

"Grundy's loose." I'd expected surprise, but there was none. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Muller claimed he needed his mate free to handle the crew, and that there was no place the man could go. I think it was because the men are afraid they'll be outnumbered by your group." His

mouth smiled, but it was suddenly bitter. "Jenny talked Pietro into agreeing with Muller."

Mess was on when I reached the group. I wasn't hungry. The wine had cut the edge from my appetite, and the slow increase of poison in the air was getting me, as it was the others. Sure, carbon dioxide isn't a real poison—but no organism can live in its own waste, all the same. I had a rotten headache. I sat there playing a little game I'd invented—trying to figure which ones I'd eliminate if some had to die. Jenny laughed up at Muller, and I added him to the list. Then I changed it, and put her in his place. I was getting sick of the little witch, though I knew it would be different if she'd been laughing up at me. And then, because of the sick-calf look on Bill Sanderson's face as he stared at Eve, I added him, though I'd always liked the guy. Eve, surprisingly, had as many guys after her as Jenny; but she didn't seem interested. Or maybe she did—she'd pulled her hair back and put on a dress that made her figure look good. Either flattery was working, or she was entering into the last-days feeling most of us had.

Napier came in and touched my shoulder. "Lomax is conscious, and he's asking for you," he said, too low for the others to hear.

I found the chemist conscious, all right, but sick—and scared. His face winced, under all the bandages, as I opened the door. Then he saw who it was, and relaxed. "Paul—what happened to me? The last I remember is going up to see that second batch of plants poisoned. But—well, this is something I must have got later . . ."

I told him, as best I could. "But don't you remember anything?"

"Not a thing about that. It's the same as Napier told me, and I've been trying to remember. Paul, you don't think—?"

I put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him back gently. "Don't be a damned fool, Hal. I know you're no killer."

"But somebody is, Paul. Somebody tried to kill me while I was unconscious!"

He must have seen my reaction. "They did, Paul. I don't know how I know—maybe I almost came to—but somebody tried to poke a stick through the door with a knife on it. They want to kill me."

I tried to calm him down until Napier came and gave him a sedative. The doctor seemed as sick about Hal's inability to remember as I was, though he

indicated it was normal enough in concussion cases. "So is the hallucination," he added. "He'll be all right tomorrow."

In that, Napier was wrong. When the doctor looked in on him the next time, the big chemist lay behind a door that had been pried open, with a long galley knife through his heart. On the bloody sheet, his finger had traced something in his own blood.

"*It was* . . ." But the last "s" was blurred, and there was nothing more.

IV

I don't know how many were shocked at Hal's death, or how many looked around and counted one less pair of lungs. He'd never been one of the men I'd envied the air he used, though, and I think most felt the same. For awhile, we didn't even notice that the air was even thicker.

Phil Riggs broke the silence following our inspection of Lomax's cabin. "That damned Bullard! I'll get him, I'll get him as sure as he got Hal!"

There was a rustle among the others, and a suddenly crystallized hate on their faces. But Muller's hoarse shout cut through the babble that began, and rose over even the anguished shrieking of the cook. "Shut up, the lot of you! Bullard couldn't have committed the other crimes. Any one of you is a better suspect. Stop snivelling, Bullard, this isn't a lynching mob, and it isn't going to be one!"

"What about Grundy?" Walt Harris yelled.

Wilcox pushed forward. "Grundy couldn't have done it. He's the logical suspect, but he was playing rummy with my men."

The two engine men nodded agreement, and we began filing back to the mess hall, with the exception of Bullard, who shoved back into a niche, trying to avoid us. Then, when we were almost out of his sight, he let out a shriek and came blubbering after us.

I watched them put Hal Lomax's body through the 'tween-hulls lock, and turned toward the engine room; I could use some of that wine, just as the ship could have used a trained detective. But the idea of watching helplessly while the engines purred along to remind me I was just a handyman for the rest of my life got mixed up with the difficulty of breathing the stale air, and I started to turn back. My head was throbbing, and for two cents I'd have gone out between the hulls beside Lo-

max and the others and let the foul air spread out there and freeze . .

The idea was slow coming. Then I was running back toward the engines. I caught up with Wilcox just before he went into his own quarters. "Wilcox!"

He swung around casually, saw it was me, and motioned inside. "How about some Bartok, Paul? Or would you rather soothe your nerves with some first-rate Buxtehude organ . . ."

"Damn the music," I told him. "I've got a wild idea to get rid of this carbon dioxide, and I want to know if we can get it working with what we've got."

He snapped to attention at that. Half-way through my account, he fished around and found a bottle of Armagnac. "I get it. If we pipe our air through the passages between the hulls on the shadow side, it will lose its heat in a hurry. And we can regulate its final temperature by how fast we pipe it through—just keep it moving enough to reach the level where carbon dioxide freezes out, but the oxygen stays a gas. Then pass it around the engines—we'll have to cut out the normal cooling set-up, but that's okay—warm it up . . . Sure, I've got equipment enough for that. We can set it up in a day. Of course, it won't give us any more oxygen, but we'll be able to breathe what we have. To success, Paul!"

I guess it was good brandy, but I swallowed mine while calling Muller down, and never got to taste it.

It's surprising how much easier the air got to breathe after we'd double-checked the idea. In about fifteen minutes, we were all milling around in the engine room, while Wilcox checked through equipment. But there was no question about it. It was even easier than we'd thought. We could simply bypass the cooling unit, letting the engine housings stay open to the between-hulls section; then it was simply a matter of cutting a small opening into that section at the other end of the ship and installing a sliding section to regulate the amount of air flowing in. The exhaust from the engine heat pumps was reversed, and run out through a hole hastily knocked in the side of the wall.

Naturally, we let it flow too fast at first. Space is a vacuum, which means it's a good insulator. We had to cut the air down to a trickle. Then Wilcox ran into trouble because his engines wouldn't cool with that amount of air. He went back to supervise a patched-up job of split-

ting the coolers into sections, which took time. But after that, we had it.

I went through the hatch with Muller and Pietro. With air there there was no need to wear space suits, but it was so cold that we could take it for only a minute or so. That was long enough to see a faint, fine mist of dry ice snow falling. It was also long enough to catch a sight of the three bodies there. I didn't enjoy that, and Pietro gasped. Muller grimaced. When we came back, he sent Grundy in to move the bodies to a hull-section where our breathing air wouldn't pass over them. It wasn't necessary, of course. But somehow, it seemed important.

By lunch, the air seemed normal. We shipped only pure oxygen at about three pounds pressure, instead of loading it with a lot of useless nitrogen. With the carbon dioxide cut back to normal levels, it was as good as ever. The only difference was that the fans had to be set to blow in a different pattern. We celebrated, and even Bullard seemed to have perked up. He dug out pork chops and almost succeeded in making us cornbread out of some coarse flour I saw him pouring out of the food chopper. He had perked up enough to bewail the fact that all he had was canned spinach instead of turnip greens.

But by night, the temper had changed—and the food indicated it again. Bullard's cooking was turning into a barometer of the psychic pressure. We'd had time to realize that we weren't getting something for nothing. Every molecule of carbon-dioxide that crystallized out took two atoms of oxygen with it, completely out of circulation.

We were also losing water-vapor, we found; normally, any one of our group knew enough science to know that the water would fall out before the carbon dioxide, but we hadn't thought of it. We took care of that, however, by having Wilcox weld in a baffle and keep the section where the water condensed separate from the carbon dioxide snowfall. We could always shovel out the real ice, and meantime the ship's controls restored the moisture to the air easily enough.

But there was nothing we could do about the oxygen. When that was gone, it stayed gone. The plants still took care of about two-thirds of our waste—but the other third was locked out there between the hulls. Given plants enough, we could have thawed it and let them reconvert it; a nice idea, except that we had to wait three

months to take care of it, if we lived that long.

Bullard's cooking began to get worse. Then suddenly, we got one good meal. Eve Nolan came down the passage to announce that Bullard was making cake, with frosting, canned huckleberry pie, and all the works. We headed for the mess hall, fast.

It was the cook's masterpiece. Muller came down late, though, and regarded it doubtfully. "There's something funny," he said as he settled down beside me. Jenny had been surrounded by Napier and Pietro. "Bullard came up babbling a few minutes ago. I don't like it. Something about eating hearty, because he'd saved us all, forever and ever. He told me the angels were on our side, because a beautiful angel with two halos came to him in his sleep and told him how to save us. I chased him back to the galley, but I don't like it."

Most of them had already eaten at least half of the food, but I saw Muller wasn't touching his. The rest stopped now, as the words sank in, and Napier looked shocked. "No!" he said, but his tone wasn't positive. "He's a weakling, but I don't think he's insane—not enough to poison us."

"There was that food poisoning before," Pietro said suddenly. "Paul, come along. And don't eat anything until we come back."

We broke the record getting to the galley. There Bullard sat, beaming happily, eating from a huge plate piled with the food he had cooked. I checked on it quickly—and there wasn't anything he'd left out. He looked up, and his grin widened foolishly.

"Hi, docs," he said. "Yes, sir, I knowed you'd be coming. It all came to me in a dream. Looked just like my wife twenty years ago, she did, with green and yellow halos. And she told it to me. Told me I'd been a good man, and nothing was going to happen to me. Not to good old Emery Bullard. Had it all figgered out."

He speared a big forkful of food and crammed it into his mouth, munching noisily. "Had it all figgered. Pop-corn. Best damned pop-corn you ever saw, kind they raise not fifty miles from where I was born. You know, I didn't useta like you guys. But now I love everybody. When we get to Saturn, I'm gonna make up for all the times I didn't give you pop-corn. We'll pop and we'll pop. And beans, too. I useta hate beans. Always beans on a ship. But now we're saved, and I love beans!"

He stared after us, half coming out of his seat. "Hey, docs, ain't you gonna let me tell you about it?"

"Later, Bullard," Pietro called back. "Something just came up. We want to hear all about it."

Inside the mess hall, he shrugged. "He's eating the food himself. If he's crazy, he's in a happy stage of it. I'm sure he isn't trying to poison us." He sat down and began eating, without any hesitation.

I didn't feel as sure, and suspected he didn't. But it was too late to back out. Together, we summarized what he'd told us, while Napier puzzled over it. Finally the doctor shrugged. "Visions. Euphoria. Disconnection with reality. Apparently something of a delusion that he's to save the world. I'm not a psychiatrist, but it sounds like insanity to me. Probably not dangerous. At least, while he wants to save us, we won't have to worry about the food. Still . . ."

Wilcox mulled it over, and resumed the eating he had neglected before.

"Grundy claimed he'd been down near the engine room, trying to get permission to pop something in the big pile. I thought Grundy was just getting his stories mixed up. But —pop-corn!"

"I'll have him locked in his cabin," Muller decided. He picked up the nearest handset, saw that it was to the galley, and switched quickly. "Grundy, lock Bullard up. And no rough stuff this time." Then he turned to Napier. "Dr. Napier, you'll have to see him and find out what you can."

I guess there's a primitive fear of insanity in most of us. We felt sick, beyond the nagging worry about the food. Napier got up at once. "I'll give him a sedative. Maybe it's just nerves, and he'll snap out of it after a good sleep. Anyhow, your mate can stand watching."

"Who can cook?" Muller asked. His eyes swung down the table toward Jenny.

I wondered how she'd get out of that. Apparently she'd never told Muller about the scars she still had from spilled grease, and how she'd never forgiven her mother or been able to go near a kitchen since. But I should have guessed. She could remember my stories, too. Her eyes swung up toward mine pleadingly.

Eve Nolan stood up suddenly. "I'm not only a good cook, but I enjoy it," she stated flatly, and there was disgust in the look she threw at Jenny. She swung

toward me. "How about it, Paul, can you wrestle the big pots around for me?"

"I used to be a short order cook when I was finishing school," I told her. But she'd ruined the line. The grateful look and laugh from Jenny weren't needed now. And curiously, I felt grateful to Eve for it. I got up and went after Napier.

I found him in Bullard's little cubbyhole of a cabin. He must have chased Grundy off, and now he was just drawing a hypo out of the cook's arm. "It'll take the pain away," he was saying softly. "And I'll see that he doesn't hit you again. You'll be all right, now. And in the morning, I'll come and listen to you. Just go to sleep. Maybe she'll come back and tell you more."

He must have heard me, since he signalled me out with his hand, and backed out quietly himself, still talking. He shut the door, and clicked the lock.

Bullard heard it, though. He jerked to a sitting position, and screamed. *"No!* No! He'll kill me! I'm a good man . . ."

He hunched up on the bed, forcing the sheet into his mouth. When he looked up a second later, his face was frozen in fear, but it was a desperate, calm kind of fear. He turned to face us, and his voice raised to a full shout, with every word as clear as he could make it.

"All right. Now I'll never tell you the secret. Now you can all die without air. I promise I'll never tell you what I know!"

He fell back, beating at the sheet with his hand and sobbing hysterically. Napier watched him. "Poor devil," the doctor said at last. "Well, in another minute the shot will take effect. Maybe he's lucky. He won't be worrying for awhile. And maybe he'll be rational tomorrow."

"All the same, I'm going to stand guard until Muller gets someone else here," I decided. I kept remembering Lomax.

Napier nodded, and half an hour later Bill Sanderson came to take over the watch. Bullard was sleeping soundly.

The next day, though, he woke up to start moaning and writhing again. But he was keeping his word. He refused to answer any questions. Napier looked worried as he reported he'd given the cook another shot of sedative. There was nothing else he could do.

Cooking was a relief, in a way. By the time Eve and I had scrubbed all the pots into what she considered proper order, located some of the food lockers, and prepared and served a couple of meals, we'd evolved a smooth system that settled into

a routine with just enough work to help keep our minds off the dwindling air in the tanks. In anything like a kitchen, she lost most of her mannish pose and turned into a live, efficient woman. And she could cook.

"First thing I learned," she told me. "I grew up in a kitchen. I guess I'd never have turned to photography if my kid brother hadn't been using our sink for his darkroom."

Wilcox brought her a bottle of his wine to celebrate her first dinner. He seemed to want to stick around, but she chased him off after the first drink. We saved half the bottle to make a sauce the next day.

It never got made. Muller called a council of war, and his face was pinched and old. He was leaning on Jenny as Eve and I came into the mess hall; oddly, she seemed to be trying to buck him up. He got down to the facts as soon as all of us were together.

"Our oxygen tanks are empty," he announced. "They shouldn't be—but they are. Someone must have sabotaged them before the plants were poisoned—and done it so the dials don't show it. I just found it out when the automatic switch to a new tank failed to work. We now have the air in the ship, and no more. Dr. Napier and I have figured that this will keep us all alive with the help of the plants for no more than fifteen days. I am open to any suggestions!"

There was silence after that, while it soaked in. Then it was broken by a thin scream from Phil Riggs. He slumped into a seat and buried his head in his hands. Pietro put a hand on the man's thin shoulders. "Captain Muller—"

"Kill 'em!" It was Grundy's voice, bellowing sharply. "Let 'em breathe space! They got us into it! We can make out with the plants left! It's our ship!"

Muller had walked forward. Now his fist lashed out, and Grundy crumpled. He lay still for a second, then got to his feet unsteadily. Jenny screamed, but Muller moved steadily back to his former place without looking at the mate. Grundy hesitated, fumbled in his pocket for something, and swallowed it.

"Captain, sir!" His voice was lower this time.

"Yes, Mr. Grundy?"

"How many of us can live off the plants?"

"Ten—perhaps eleven."

"Then—then give us a lottery!"

Pietro managed to break in over the yells of the rest of the crew. "I was about to sug-

gest calling for volunteers, Captain Muller. I still have enough faith in humanity to believe . . ."

"You're a fool, Dr. Pietro," Muller said flatly. "Do you think Grundy would volunteer? Or Bullard? But thanks for clearing the air, and admitting your group has nothing more to offer. A lottery seems to be the only fair system."

He sat down heavily. "We have tradition on this; in an emergency such as this, death lotteries have been held, and have been considered legal afterwards. Are there any protests?"

I could feel my tongue thicken in my mouth. I could see the others stare about, hoping someone would object, wondering if this could be happening. But nobody answered, and Muller nodded reluctantly. "A working force must be left. Some men are indispensable. We must have an engineer, a navigator, and a doctor. One man skilled with engine-room practice and one with deck work must remain."

"And the cook goes," Grundy yelled. His eyes were intent and slitted again.

Some of both groups nodded, but Muller brought his fist down on the table. "This will be a legal lottery, Mr. Grundy. Dr. Napier will draw for him."

"And for myself," Napier said. "It's obvious that ten men aren't going on to Saturn—you'll have to turn back, or head for Jupiter. Jupiter, in fact, is the only sensible answer. And a ship can get along without a doctor that long when it has to. I demand my right to the draw."

Muller only shrugged and laid down the rules. They were simple enough. He would cut drinking straws to various lengths, and each would draw one. The two deck hands would compare theirs, and the longer would be automatically safe. The same for the pair from the engine-room. Wilcox was safe. "Mr. Peters and I will also have one of us eliminated," he added quietly. "In an emergency, our abilities are sufficiently alike."

The remaining group would have their straws measured, and the seven shortest ones would be chosen to remove themselves into a vacant section between hulls without air within three hours, or be forcibly placed there. The remaining ten would head for Jupiter if no miracle removed the danger in those three hours.

Peters got the straws, and Muller cut them and shuffled them. There was a sick silence that let us hear the sounds of the scissors with each snip. Muller arranged them so the visible ends were even. "Ladies first," he said. There was no expression

on his face or in his voice.

Jenny didn't giggle, but neither did she balk. She picked a straw, and then shrieked faintly. It was obviously a long one. Eve reached for hers—

And Wilcox yelled suddenly. "Captain Muller, protest! Protest! You're using all long straws for the women!" He had jumped forward, and now struck down Muller's hand, proving his point.

"You're quite right, Mr. Wilcox," Muller said woodenly. He dropped his hand toward his lap and came up with a group of the straws that had been cut, placed there somehow without our seeing it. He'd done a smooth job of it, but not smooth enough. "I felt some of you would notice it, but I also felt that gentlemen would prefer to see ladies given the usual courtesies."

He reshuffled the assorted straws, and then paused. "Mr. Tremaine, there was a luxury liner named the *Lauri Ellu* with an assistant engineer by your name; and I believe you've shown a surprising familiarity with certain customs of space. A few days ago, Jenny mentioned something that jogged my memory. Can you still perform the duties of an engineer?"

Wilcox had started to protest at the delay. Now shock ran through him. He stared unbelievingly from Muller to me and back, while his face blanched. I could guess what it must have felt like to see certain safety cut to a 50 per cent chance, and I didn't like the way Muller was willing to forget until he wanted to take a crack at Wilcox for punishment. But . . .

"I can," I answered. And then, because I was sick inside myself for cutting under Wilcox, I managed to add, "But I—I waive my chance at immunity!"

"Not accepted," Muller decided. "Jenny, will you draw?"

It was pretty horrible. It was worse when the pairs compared straws. The animal feelings were out in the open then. Finally, Muller, Wilcox, and two crewmen dropped out. The rest of us went up to measure our straws.

It took no more than a minute. I stood staring down at the ruler, trying to stretch the tiny thing I'd drawn. I could smell the sweat rising from my body. But I knew the answer. I had three hours left!

"Riggs, Oliver, Nolan, Harris, Tremaine, Napier and Grundy," Muller announced.

A yell came from Grundy. He stood up, with the engine man named Oliver, and there was a gun in his hand. "No damned big brain's kicking me off my

ship," he yelled. "You guys know me. Hey, *roooob!*"

Oliver was with him, and the other three of the crew sprang into the group. I saw Muller duck a shot from Grundy's gun, and leap out of the room. Then I was in it, heading for Grundy. Beside me, Peters was trying to get a chair broken into pieces. I felt something hit my shoulder, and the shock knocked me downward, just as a shot whistled over my head.

Gravity cut off!

Someone bounced off me. I got a piece of the chair that floated by, found the end cracked and sharp, and tried to spin towards Grundy, but I couldn't see him. I heard Eve's voice yell over the other shouts. I spotted the plate coming for me, but I was still in midair. It came on steadily, edge on, and I felt it break against my forehead. Then I blacked out.

V

I had the grandaddy of all headaches when I came to. Doc Napier's face was over me, and Jenny and Muller were working on Bill Sanderson. There was a surprisingly small and painful lump on my head. Pietro and Napier helped me up, and I found I could stand after a minute.

There were four bodies covered with sheets on the floor. "Grundy, Phil Riggs, Peters and a deckhand named Storm," Napier said. "Muller gave us a whiff of gas and not quite in time."

"Is the time up?" I asked. It was the only thing I could think of.

Pietro shook his head sickly. "Lottery is off. Muller says we'll have to hold another, since Storm and Peters were supposed to be safe. But not until tomorrow."

Eve came in then, lugging coffee. Her eyes found me, and she managed a brief smile. "I gave the others coffee," she reported to Muller. "They're pretty subdued now."

"Mutiny!" Muller helped Jenny's brother to his feet and began helping him toward the door. "Mutiny! And I have to swallow that!"

Pietro watched him go, and handed Eve back his cup. "And there's no way of knowing who was on which side. Dr. Napier, could you do something . . ."

He held out his hands that were shaking, and Napier nodded. "I can use a sedative myself. Come on back with me."

Eve and I wandered back to the kitchen. I was just getting my senses back. The damned stupidity of it all. And now it

would have to be done over. Three of us still had to have our lives snuffed out so the others could live—and we all had to go through hell again to find out which.

Eve must have been thinking the same. She sank down on a little stool, and her hand came out to find mine. "For what? Paul, whoever poisoned the plants knew it would go this far! He had to! What's to be gained? Particularly when he'd have to go through all this, too! He must have been crazy!"

"Bullard couldn't have done it," I said slowly.

"Why should it be Bullard? How do we know he was insane? Maybe when he was shouting that he wouldn't tell, he was trying to make a bribe to save his own life. Maybe he's as scared as we are. Maybe he was making sense all along, if we'd only listened to him. He—"

She stood up and started back toward the lockers, but I caught her hand. "Eve, he wouldn't have done it—the killer—if he'd had to go through the lottery! He knew he was safe! That's the one thing we've been overlooking. The man to suspect is the only man who could be sure he would get back! My God, we saw him juggle those straws to save Jenny! He knew he'd control the lottery."

She frowned. "But . . . Paul, he practically suggested the lottery! Grundy brought it up, but he was all ready for it." The frown vanished, then returned. "But I still can't believe it."

"He's the one who wanted to go back all the time. He kept insisting on it, but he had to get back without violating his contract." I grabbed her hand and started toward the nose of the ship, justifying it to her as I went. "The only man with a known motive for returning, the only one completely safe—and we didn't even think of it!"

She was still frowning, but I wasn't wasting time. We came up the corridor to the control room. Ahead the door was slightly open, and I could hear a mutter of Jenny's voice. Then there was the tired rumble of Muller.

"I'll find a way, baby. I don't care how close they watch, we'll make it work. Pick the straw with the crimp in the end—I can do that, even if I can't push one out further again. I tell you, nothing's going to happen to you."

"But Bill—" she began.

I hit the door, slamming it open. Muller sat on a narrow couch with Jenny on his lap. I took off for him, not wasting a good chance when he was handicapped. But I hadn't

counted on Jenny. She was up, and her head banged into my stomach before I knew she was coming. I felt the wind knocked out, but I got her out of my way—to look up into the muzzle of a gun in Muller's hands.

"You'll explain this, Mr. Tremaine," he said coldly. "In ten seconds, I'll have an explanation or a corpse."

"Go ahead," I told him. "Shoot, damn you! You'll get away with this, too, I suppose. Mutiny, or something. And down in that rotten soul of yours, I suppose you'll be gloating at how you made fools of us. The only man on board who was safe even from a lottery, and we couldn't see it. Jenny, I hope you'll be happy with this butcher. Very happy!"

He never blinked. "Say that about the only safe man aboard again," he suggested.

I repeated it, with details. But he didn't like my account. He turned to Eve, and motioned for her to take it up. She was frowning harder, and her voice was uncertain, but she summed up our reasons quickly enough.

And suddenly Muller was on his feet. "Mr. Tremaine, for a damned idiot, you have a good brain. You found the key to the problem, even if you couldn't find the lock. Do you know what happens to a captain who permits a death lottery, even what I called a legal one? He doesn't captain a liner—he shoots himself after he delivers his ship, if he's wise! Come on, we'll find the one indispensable man. You stay here, Jenny—you too, Eve!"

Jenny whimpered, but stayed. Eve followed, and he made no comment. And then it hit me. The man who had *thought* he was indispensable, and hence safe—the man I'd naturally known in the back of my head could be replaced, though no one else had known it until a little while ago.

"He must have been sick when you ran me in as a ringer," I said, as we walked down toward the engine hatch. "But why?"

"I've just had a wild guess as to part of it," Muller said.

Wilcox was listening to the Buxtehude when we shoved the door of his room open, and he had his head back and eyes closed. He snapped to attention, and reached out with one hand toward a drawer beside him. Then he dropped his arm and stood up, to cut off the tape player.

"Mr. Wilcox," Muller said quietly, holding the gun firmly on the engineer. "Mr. Wilcox, I've detected evidence of some of the Venus drugs on your two assistants for some time. It's

rather hard to miss the signs in their eyes. I've also known that Mr. Grundy was an addict. I assumed that they were getting it from him naturally. And as long as they performed their duties, I couldn't be choosy on an old ship like this. But for an officer to furnish such drugs —and to smuggle them from Venus for sale to other planets —is something I cannot tolerate. It will make things much simpler if you will surrender those drugs to me. I presume you keep them in those bottles of wine you bring aboard?"

Wilcox shook his head slowly, settling back against the tape machine. Then he shrugged and bowed faintly. "The chianti, sir!"

I turned my head toward the bottles, and Eve started forward. Then I yelled as Wilcox shoved his hand down toward the tape machine. The gun came out on a spring as he touched it.

Muller shot once, and the gun missed Wilcox's fingers as the engineer's hand went to his hip, where blood was flowing. He collapsed into the chair behind him, staring at the spot stupidly. "I cut my teeth on *tough* ships, Mr. Wilcox," Muller said savagely.

The man's face was white, but he nodded slowly, and a weak grin came onto his lips. "Maybe you didn't exaggerate those stories at that," he conceded slowly. "I take it I drew a short straw."

"Very short. It wasn't worth it. No profit from the piddling sale of drugs is worth it."

"There's a group of strings inside the number one fuel locker," Wilcox said between his teeth. The numbness was wearing off, and the shattered bones in his hip were beginning to eat at him. "Paul, pull up one of the packages and bring it here, will you?"

I found it without much trouble—along with a whole row of others, fine cords cemented to the side of the locker. The package I drew up weighed about ten pounds. Wilcox opened it and scooped out a thimbleful of greenish powder. He washed it down and wine.

"Fatal?" Muller asked.

The man nodded. "In that dosage, after a couple of hours. But it cuts out the pain—ah, better already. I won't feel it. Captain, I was never piddling. Your ship has been the sole source of this drug to Mars since a year or so after I first shipped on her. There are about seven hundred pounds of pure stuff out there. Grundy and the others would commit public murder daily rather than lose the few ounces a year I gave

them. Imagine what would happen when Pietro conscripted the *Wahoo* and no drugs arrived. The addicts find out no more is coming—they look for the peddlers—and *they* start looking for their suppliers . . ."

He shrugged. "There might have been time and ways, if I could have gotten the ship back to Earth or Jupiter. It might have been recommissioned into the Earth-Mars-Venus run, even. Pietro's injunction caught me before I could transship, but with another chance, I might have gotten the stuff to Mars in time. . . . Well, it was a chance I took. Satisfied?"

Eve stared at him with horrified eyes. Maybe I was looking the same. It was plain enough now. He'd planned to poison the plants and drive us back. Murder of Hendrix had been a blunder when he'd thought it wasn't working properly. "What about Sam?" I asked.

"Blackmail. He was too smart. He'd been sure Grundy was smuggling the stuff, and raking off from him. He didn't care who killed Hendrix as much as how much Grundy would pay to keep his mouth shut—with murder around, he figured Grundy'd get rattled. The fool did, and Sam smelled bigger stakes. Grundy was bait to get him down near here. I killed him."

"And Lomax?"

"I don't know. Maybe he was bluffing. But he kept going from room to room with a pocketful of chemicals, making some kind of tests. I couldn't take a chance on his being able to spot chromazone. So I had Grundy give him my keys and tell him to go ahead—then jump him."

And after that, when he wasn't quite killed, they'd been forced to finish the job. Wilcox shrugged again. "I guess it got out of hand. I'll make a tape of the whole story for you, Captain. But I'd appreciate it if you'd get Napier down here. This is getting pretty messy."

"He's on the way," Eve said. We hadn't seen her call, but the doctor arrived almost immediately afterwards.

He sniffed the drug, and questioned us about the dose Wilcox had taken. Then he nodded slowly. "About two hours, I'd say. No chance at all to save him. The stuff is absorbed almost at once and begins changing to something else in the blood. I'll be responsible, if you want."

Muller shrugged. "I suppose so. I'd rather deliver him in irons to a jury, but . . . Well, we still have a lottery to hold!"

It jerked us back to reality sharply. Somehow, I'd been fighting off the facts, figuring

that finding the cause would end the results. But even with Wilcox out of the picture, there were twelve of us left—and air for only ten!

Wilcox laughed abruptly. "A favor for a favor. I can give you a better answer than a lottery."

"Popcorn! Bullard!" Eve slapped her head with her palm. "Captain, give me the master key." She snatched it out of his hand and was gone at a run.

Wilcox looked disappointed, and then grinned. "Popcorn and beans. I overlooked them myself. We're a bunch of city hicks. But when Bullard forgot his fears in his sleep, he remembered the answer—and got it so messed up with his dream and his new place as a hero that my complaint tipped the balance. Grundy put the fear of his God into him then. And you didn't get it. Captain, you don't dehydrate beans and popcorn—they come that way naturally. You don't can them, either, if you're saving weight. They're seeds—put them in tanks and they grow!"

He leaned back, trying to laugh at us, as Napier finished dressing his wound. "Bullard knows where the lockers are. And corn grows pretty fast. It'll carry you through. Do I get that favor? It's simple enough—just to have Beethoven's Ninth on the machine and for the whole damned lot of you to get out of my cabin and let me die in my own way!"

Muller shrugged, but Napier found the tape and put it on. I wanted to see the louse punished for every second of worry, for Lomax, for Hendrix—even for Grundy. But there wasn't much use in vengeance at this point.

"You're to get all this, Paul," Wilcox said as we got ready to leave. "Captain Muller, everything here goes to Tremaine. I'll make a tape on that, too. But I want it to go to a man who can appreciate Hohmann's conducting."

Muller closed the door. "I guess it's yours," he admitted. "Now that you're head engineer here, Mr. Tremaine, the cabin is automatically yours. Take over. And get that junk in the fuel locker cleaned out—except enough to keep your helpers going. They'll need it, and we'll need their work."

"I'll clean out his stuff at the same time," I said. "I don't want any part of it,"

He smiled then, just as Eve came down with Bullard and Pietro. The fat cook was sobered, but already beginning to fill with his own importance. I caught snatches as they began to discuss Bullard's knowledge of growing things. It was enough

to know that we'd all live, though it might be tough for a while.

Then Muller gestured upwards. "You've got a reduced staff, Dr. Pietro. Do you intend going on to Saturn?"

"We'll go on," Pietro decided. And Muller nodded. They turned and headed upwards.

I stood staring at my engines. One of them was a touch out of phase and I went over and corrected it. They'd be mine for over two years—and after that, I'd be back on the lists.

Eve came over beside me, and studied them with me. Finally she sighed softly. "I guess I can see why you feel that way about them, Paul," she said. "And I'll be coming down to look at them. But right now, Bullard's too busy to cook, and everyone's going to be hungry when they find we're saved."

I chuckled, and felt the relief wash over me finally. I dropped my hand from the control and caught hers—a nice, friendly hand.

But at the entrance I stopped and looked back toward the cabin where Wilcox lay. I could just make out the second movement of the Ninth beginning.

I never could stand the cheap blatancy of Hohmann's conducting.

H. Beam Piper's story, *Ullr Uprising*—which was our first highly popular serial—is now appearing between hard covers. The book is *The Petrified Planet,* published by Twayne Publishers as one of their "Triplets," and in addition to the Piper story there are two other novels, one by Judith Merril and one by Fletcher Pratt, as well as an introduction by Dr. John D. Clark, all dealing with the planets Ullr and Niflheim. As was intended, the book is a fine example of how differently three authors will construct stories around the same background.

To those who read *Ullr Uprising* in this magazine, it should be pointed out that the book version is a much longer one, and that it's well worth reading in this version. Much of the material on the planet and the native race and its customs had to be deleted for magazine use; but here it will be found complete. Piper has built up one of the most consistent worlds we've yet seen, as well as a darned fine story. The book should make a fine addition to any library.

EXPLOSION DELAYED

BY WILLIAM VINE

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

Everyone knew what happened when an Earthman married a Martian. The results—or lack of them—were completely sure. But when Peter and Luara broke the rules, they threatened two worlds.

Uncle George said flatly: "It won't work out."

"It isn't even going to start," his father said grimly.

Beyond the transparent side of the house, the air was a slowly churning cauldron of yellow. The dust storm was at its height. From the weather reporter in the wall a voice said monotonously: "Storm center passing Aurialis: leading edge making south. Recommended to take cover in the belt between Nagaha and Bartonsville."

He said wearily: "We've been over it all before. I'm sorry about this. You don't think I enjoy causing trouble, do you? But it's no good talking. We've made up our minds."

Uncle George said: "You've been out a long time. Two years here, at your age—it's bound to be a strain. My idea is you should take a holiday back home. . . . In the Tyrol, maybe. Mountain air, and springtime. And the loveliest girls on earth, I always thought. Out here . . . you get to brooding. You see things a different way."

"Look," he said. "I'm twenty-four. I know my own mind. And I want to marry Luara. I don't mind taking her back to Austria with me, if that'll help."

His father, taking the sugges-

tion seriously, threw up his hands.

"Damn it, Peter, you know as well as I do that's impossible. Martians aren't allowed on the planet except in reservations. And a good thing, too, to my way of looking."

Peter said dangerously: "I think we'd better keep our private opinions out of it, don't you?"

"No," his father said, "I don't. When your son comes to you in twenty-five years' time and tells you he wants to marry a slave, a Martian, you'll know how important it is."

"I might consider him the best judge of the way to run his own life."

"But there won't be a son, will there?" Uncle George said. "Not if you marry Luara. The unions are sterile. And that's another good reason for thinking carefully. It may seem unimportant now, but I can tell you that later one misses the kids that were never born. I've got a right to tell you that. If I could live my life again . . ."

"It's no good," Peter said doggedly. "I know what I want." He looked at his father directly. "You know Luara. Give me an honest answer. Have you ever known a human woman with her sweetness, her goodness?"

Their glances levelled and locked.

"No," his father said at last. "I'll admit that. But I don't admit that it alters my case. Love isn't everything in life. Even if it were, the kind of love that can't find a natural fruition—in children—carries its own destruction with it. I have to ask you to take that on trust. For the last time, Peter, I want you to accept my judgment."

He turned away. The dust storm was dropping, the yellow thinning out, becoming streaked with the sky's dark blue.

"I'm sorry," he said. "No."

His father said: "Now I'm going to ask you a question. Have I been a reasonably good parent?"

Peter nodded. "Yes."

"I've tried to be. And when you come to your senses I will try to be again. When you get tired of this folly, come back and everything will be as it was before—no reproaches, nothing. Keep that in your mind. You are welcome at any time—without the Martian woman."

"The Martian woman will be my wife."

"Not by human law. The Martians may recognize the marriage. Or they may not. They're funny creatures."

Peter stared at him. "I know

you mean well," he said. "I'm keeping that in mind, at least, but it isn't easy."

His father looked away. "All right. We won't labor it. Will you tell your mother?"

He went through to the little room at the end of the ranch that was his mother's retreat. She was sitting weaving, the electronically guided shuttle flicking to and fro in front of her. He came up quietly and stood behind her. She looked up, but did not smile.

"Mom," he said.

She smiled then, with difficulty. "Come to say goodbye, Petey?"

He nodded. "Pop thinks I'll come running back in a few months. I don't want you to be deceived about that."

"No, Petey. I won't be. Don't think too hard of your father. It might have been easier for him if your brother had lived. Now . . . we're at an age where you think of grandchildren."

"I'm sorry."

"Never mind. But don't blame him, either. There is nothing else he could do, you know. You can't take Luara to Earth, and if your father agreed to her coming here it would be only a few weeks before it was reported. He would have to go back, and lose his colonial pension rights. So he hopes . . . in time . . . you will change your mind."

"Mom," he said, "how did things get this way? I mean—treating the Martians as though they were animals, enslaving and segregating them?"

"Men who go long journeys get strange ideas of grandeur. They always have done. The Vikings . . . the men who went across the western ocean to America. But going across space was something so much greater than all those. We haven't got over it yet. I don't know if we ever will."

"We've got to," Peter said, "if we're going to be human beings."

He bent down and kissed her.

" 'Bye, Petey," she said. "Give my love to Luara. I hope you'll be very happy. Try to get back here to see us now and then."

"No, Mom, best not to. I've got to make a new life; one that will stand on its own. You understand?"

"Yes. I understand."

The wind was steady from the east. The sand yacht picked up quickly and was soon clipping over the desert at more than thirty knots. Looking back, he saw them waving from the loggia, and saw their figures dwindle into small dots. Soon the ranch itself was a dot, and then lost in the yellow distance.

After half a Martian year Peter still did not know what the Martians really thought of him. He was sure of Luara but the others—the men he worked with and the women of the village—puzzled him. There was no hostility; rather they were friendly, but in a strange impassive way. Walking home now from the fields, in the early dusk of a fall evening, they were singing together one of the high-pitched native songs. He could glimpse melody in it now, where before it had been only a screech to his human ears. Perhaps other understandings would come in time, too.

He shifted the pack onto his other shoulder. He was stronger than he had been, much stronger, but only the human heritage of a body bred for the heavier gravity of Earth enabled him to hold his own with the gliding, almost tireless Martians. The winter would soon be here, and for him it would be a hard one.

The path they were following wound down the side of the hill. Beyond the next spur they would see the village, its lights very sharp against the hastening dark. He waited. The spur—and the whole company of Martians raised their voices in the cry that the sight of their homes always evoked from them.

His home, too. Luara would be there, standing just inside the door. He knew just how she would welcome him, with pain in her eyes for the tiredness she would sense in him. He was glad that she never said anything, never reproached herself, when he was there, with the hardships of the life he had taken when he married her. But he knew that she did reproach herself.

He wished he could explain to her how unnecessary the reproaches were. All his past life—all that he had given up, family, comfort, prospects—were nothing to the peace and joy he now had. He had tried to explain that to her, in his still halting Martian, but it wasn't easy. And every day he found the work in the fields less arduous. The first few months had been terrible, but the worst was over now. If only he could make Luara see that.

The others went their own way to their homes in the village. His own cottage was on the outskirts; Luara was waiting outside for him, and even in the darkness he felt there was something strange about her—a kind of excitement. The Martians did not display their emotions in a way that humans could easily observe; it was a sign of the closeness that their

relationship had achieved that he could detect it now.

He embraced her, and drew her with him inside the door. The globe of lumin-insects glowed brightly on the table, its soft light flickering out to the pressing stone walls of the tiny room.

She said: "Peeter, it is good that you are home again."

He smiled. "Yes. Very good."

His eyes rested on her. Small for a Martian woman, she was only a couple of inches shorter than he was. Her body had the sinuous grace that they all had, but in her, he felt, it became something more—a rare and compelling beauty. Her eyes were a soft dark blue.

"I love you, Luara," he said.

She rested against him.

"Peeter, was it hard today?"

He shook his head. "We cleared the north slope. Another two weeks and the harvest will be in."

"Then the dancing," she said. "And the rest time."

The rest time, he thought. Five days before the labors began again. He would need that rest.

"It will be good to see you dancing again," he said.

She had been dancing when he first saw her, admitted, as a special favor, to the native festival. The dances were wild and graceful, and in the flickering white light from the globes of lumin-insects set round the circle she had been a dark flame that had drawn his eyes, and kept them.

She said: "I shall not dance this year."

He said quickly: "You must! Because I don't? But I only want to watch you. My human body will not let me join you, but I can watch."

She smiled. "No. Not that."

"Then what?"

She said: "Today I went to visit Estro."

He knew Estro vaguely; one of the old women of the village, very tall and quiet.

"She would not believe it at first," Luara said, "but then she was sure."

"Sure of what?"

She smiled again, and he remembered why the women of the village visited Estro. But Luara . . . It wasn't possible.

"It can't be. . . . It can't happen."

"But it has! Estro is quite sure. Towards the end of the winter, he will be born."

He put his hands on her shoulders and drew her towards him.

"He?"

"Of course."

"Of course," he said, and kissed her.

Now that the Martian population trend, recovered from its brief upswing following the first colonization, was back in the decline that would mean the end of the race within a thousand years, two clerks at Nagaha were able to handle the census routines. Of the two, Lief Knutsen did his job efficiently and with speed. The pregnancies report came in to him on an afternoon when the belated sirocco common to this part of the planet was throwing dust into Nagaha beyond the power of the extractors to handle. It eddied outside, and drifted into the office.

He whistled briefly at seeing the entry under the column reserved for "Tribe of Father": *Human father.* He called across to Ted Ashton at the other side of the room:

"A cross-marriage and it's pupped."

"Like hell," Ashton said lazily. "You mean she's gone back to her old boy-friends."

"Human standards," Knutsen told him. "Martian women don't go on the loose. They never have done. Don't you read your 'Martian Behavior Patterns'?"

Ashton flicked the stereo onto another channel.

"The cross-marriages don't pup, either. Don't you read your 'Study in Martian Biology'? I'll take the biologists rather than the behavior boys any time. You know I thought of making biology, one time?"

"The only thing you were ever keen on making was outside the curriculum."

He wrote on the form: "Formal notification to Genetics, Washington." Then he threw it over to be snapped by the magnets that clipped onto the iron particles in the paper and drew it down into Ashton's in-tray.

"To you, for action," he said.

Watching the stereo, Ashton said: "To think that little number is a cool seventy million miles away. The colonial life . . . What's a fat pension? It isn't worth it."

It was three Martian months later before he reached the bottom of his in-tray, picked out the form and, after scanning it curiously for a moment, pushed it in the file for Genetics Division.

Estro said: "It will be today," and Peter did not go out to the fields with the others. He sat outside the cottage, his mind busy with the apprehensions of parenthood, the terrors of uncertainty and waiting. He had thought, in marrying Luara, that he was renouncing this. But what was supposed to be impossible was happening now,

only a very little way off both in space and time, and it had taken his beloved into pain and perhaps into danger. He never thought of the child.

It was a good birth. Estro called him in. He saw first that Luara was all right, and then permitted the old woman to show him the child. It looked at him with the steady blind gaze of the new born.

"Strong," Estro said, "and of grace."

The baby had the great chest of its Martian ancestry but it was stockier than the purely Martian babies were, with strong thick legs.

Luara said weakly: "Let me see him."

He held the child to show her.

"You were right," he said. "A boy."

She smiled. "I knew."

From somewhere outside, swelling as the singers came nearer, there was the chanting of the men coming back from the fields. They stood outside the cottage, singing the traditional Martian paean of birth. He smiled back at Luara, and went to the door.

"A boy," he called. "Come and see."

They crowded into the little room. Okron, the leader of the village, knelt down, signifying, by his homage, the dependence of the old generation on the new. He placed by the child's crib a coat made from the fabric woven from the dried leaves of the tull plant, and a fleecy hood. Wrapped in these, the child would be secure against the worst of the planet's winter.

"Our gifts," Okron said.

"We thank you," Peter replied.

They went, still singing, to their own cottages. It was no more than half an hour later when they heard the noise of a rocket-plane overhead, and then the louder noise of its landing, somewhere near the village. Okron came back a little later.

"Humans," he said. "They wish to see you."

"Let them come in," Peter said.

There were three of them. A Negro was the party's leader.

"Jomo Tangito," he said. "I guess you won't know me though, unless you happen to be a geneticist? No, I thought not. This is Charles Lecourbet, who's the best X-ray biologist in the system; and Ni-Tung, who re-bred Eohippus."

Lecourbet was a little man, looking even smaller beside the bulk of the Negro. Ni-Tung was Japanese, of middle height and quiet reflective appearance.

Peter said stiffly: "Peter Awkright. This is my wife, Luara."

Tangito said, genially sharp: "And this? Your baby?"

"He was only born an hour ago. I would prefer not to have him disturbed."

"But the importance of this," Tangito said, "—it's tremendous. Even if it's . . . from any point of view, it's incredible!"

"Come back tomorrow," Peter said.

"We must see him," Lecourbet said. He spoke in a dry voice, touched with the dialect of France.

"Tomorrow," Peter said.

Ni-Tung looked at him. "We will be very careful of the babe. Not a full examination. Just to see him."

Peter warmed to the genuine sympathy in this man's voice. He took the child, and showed it to them.

Lecourbet said, almost under his breath: "It is true. I would not have believed it. But the balance of characteristics . . ."

"A true cross," the Negro said. "My God!"

Peter took the child back and wrapped it up again.

"You can't have any idea, young man," Tangito said, "of the importance of this."

Peter said: "I've heard . . . that marriages similar to ours have been infertile."

"*Have* been? Must be! That's what I would have said until now. Now—" he shrugged—"quite a lot of ideas will have to be revised."

"How did you find us?" Peter asked.

Lecourbet said: "The report went through the usual channels. We had to investigate it, of course." He tittered slightly. "Though, perhaps naturally, we thought we might be on a wild goose chase—that it might be a job for Martian Culture Section, not for us."

Without knowing what Lecourbet meant by the remark, Peter resented it. He felt that it was important not to antagonize these men, though.

"We'll be getting along," Tangito said. His white teeth flashed. "We'll be seeing you again, I hope. You and the baby." He half-turned to go. "Oh, I guess . . ." He found his wallet, and from it pulled out a thousand sterling note. "This should come in useful."

"Thank you," Peter said.

Ni-Tung looked back as the others went.

"He's a handsome son. Look after him."

They heard the rocket engines coughing overhead on the long flight back to Nagaha. Estro went, and Peter and Luara were left alone with the incredible, the ordinary baby.

The biggest building in Nagaha is the one built for Martian Administration; a monument, perhaps, to good intentions. The monument, as commonly happens, had stayed to outlive the purpose of the builders. Somerest Murphy, as head of the Administration, had the great corner office on the top floor. He sat back in his chair, studying the three biologists who were sitting on the other side of his desk.

He said: "As far as I understand it, you claim that one of these cross-marriages has resulted in fertility. I thought it was you people who have been telling us for the past century that that was something that couldn't happen?"

Tangito said: "To the best of our knowledge, it was. Revision of existing theories is something that happens in the best-regulated scientific circles."

Murphy flicked a spoon through the small pool of liquid set into his desk, and a cloud of fragrance-bubbles shivered up through the air, fluorescing in different colors and casting their strange scent round about them.

"So," Murphy said, "we have the added complication of possible half-castes in these wretched cross-marriages in the future. It's annoying." He looked at them thoughtfully. "I don't quite see that it justifies this ceremonial visit with which you are honoring me. Surely it would have been simpler to send in a written report?"

"No, it's not quite so simple," Tangito said. He glanced at Lecourbet. "Explain things, Charles."

Lecourbet leaned forward. "This child," he said drily, "is the most explosive thing that has happened since space was crossed. The results are impossible to gauge."

Murphy said easily: "I think I know the Martians better than you do. There won't be any explosion. They haven't got the concept of racial pride in their make-up, and the fact that one of their women has had a child by a human isn't going to give it to them. You think he'll lead a Martian revolt when he grows up? Even if he turns out to be Charlemagne, Genghiz Khan and Hitler rolled into one, he won't get the Martians on the move. I know them."

Lecourbet had been listening with a thin smile on his lips. When Murphy finished, he said softly:

"You talk to us, Director, as though we were Martian Culture. We're not. We're Genetics. We don't profess to know how Martians will or will not react to

any given stimulus. But we do have a very good idea of the genetic characteristics both of humans and Martians. On Earth, as you know, we have for some time been sterilizing in cases where unsuitable stocks mated. We know what stocks are unsuitable."

Murphy said sharply: "You can spare me the routine stuff. I know all that."

"Do you know the von Heller factor?" Murphy shook his head. "Von Heller was the best geneticist of the last century, if not the best ever. He made the first charts of genetic characteristics. He lived long enough to be able to include the Martians in his work. I can't go over the work that took him forty-five years, in a few minutes and in language suitable for a layman. All I can tell you is this: the patterns for human and Martian, straightforward and homogeneous in themselves, turn into a genetic nova—an atomic explosion—when they are conjoined. Since then, Von Heller's work has checked in every last detail. There is no reason to doubt this extrapolation, when all the others have come off."

"Strange," Murphy said, "that I haven't heard of this before."

"Why should you?" Lecourbet challenged him. "It's something people in our field have always known but it has remained no more than a technical fantasy—because the unions between Martians and humans were invariably and, apparently, inevitably sterile."

"And now you find they're not? What if you are wrong there. The Martian woman . . ."

Tangito waved him to silence. "We've seen the child. It's a cross, all right."

Murphy flicked more fragrance-bubbles into the air: he concentrated his gaze on their shimmering dance, ignoring the three men. At last, he said:

"Have you any suggestions?"

Lecourbet smiled. Tangito said:

"Not our job. Our job is simply to tell you what has occurred, and the little we know of what it means. As I've said, that is very little. We just don't know—except that we know it is tremendous."

Murphy looked at them. "Society does not like tremendous and unpredictable phenomena. Neither do I."

"Well?" Lecourbet asked him.

Peter said: "I don't believe that. I met Director Murphy once, at a reception in Bartonsville. He isn't the kind of man who would murder a child."

Ni-Tung bowed his head. "A human child, possibly, but your

son, in the eyes of him and of people like him, is a Martian. I have told you what we reported to the Director: that your son is likely to grow into a person of incalculable power. It is true that he threatens the stability of the system's society. Under that threat, any action can be made to seem justified."

"But murder!"

"Yes—even that."

Peter looked across the little room to where Luara, who did not understand human speech, was nursing the baby.

"And if I believe you. What can we do?"

Ni-Tung smiled. "I have an old friend, who has a space yacht. He will put down, not here but in the hills. Evelyn's Plateau, twenty kilometers beyond the village of Uskutt, to the north. You must make your way there; and you must start at once."

"An uncle of mine went into the sun in a space yacht. Their generators are barely adequate. It's a risk. And then, where do we go?"

"It's a risk," Ni-Tung conceded. "If you stay here, your child's death is a certainty. Where will you go? There is only one place—to Earth."

Peter laughed bitterly. "To Earth! Do you think they won't know what Luara is—what the boy is? Or should we apply to be taken in on one of the reservations?"

"The Earth," Ni-Tung said, "is very big. There are places where you can have hundreds of square miles to yourself. Leave it to my friend."

"And if all this comes off? What do we do then?"

"You are wardens. Wardens of the strange creature that is your child. Guard him well, and try to prepare him for what must come."

"And that is . . .?"

"We don't know," Ni-Tung said gently, "but perhaps we can guess."

The rocket-plane circled over the small huddle of stone huts that was Uskutt, and something parachuted down. The cylinder crashed against the roof of one of the huts, and was brought to the slightly larger building in the middle of the village that was the house of Pellinn, the leader. He read the scroll inside, his brow furrowed, and after a moment passed it to Peter. The message was brief:

To All Martians

A child has been born of a human-Martian mating, at the village of Tafassa. This child is genetically undesirable, and it is necessary that it should be eliminated. It has been found, however, that the parents have

removed the child from Tafassa. It is clear that they have taken refuge in some other village. The inhabitants of that village are commanded to detain the fugitives and inform the human authorities.

There can be no refusal of this command. Should the child not be surrendered, the authorities will necessarily fall back on the only alternative, which is to eliminate the possibility of its survival by large-scale action. Should the information required not be received within two days, all male children under half a year old, in villages within a range of fifty runs of Tafassa, will be collected for elimination.

By Order
Martian Administration.

Peter gave the scroll back to Pellinn.

He said listlessly: "I had not expected that."

Pellinn said: "They place great importance on killing your son."

"Yes."

He looked at the child that lay in its cradle near his feet. There was another cradle on the other side of the room.

Pellinn said: "You must leave early in the morning. We will take you to the plateau."

Peter said: "They will do what they say. I believe that now."

"Yes," Pellinn said, "that is true."

Peter glanced at the second cradle.

"Your grandson . . ."

Pellinn smiled sadly. "In a sense one is always at the mercy of wickedness. In another sense, not. It is only possible to do what is right."

"No!" Peter said. "We cannot accept that."

"You have no alternative."

The place where the space yacht landed was a green valley in the midst of wooded country. They came out and looked around them. Peter saw Luara straining to hold herself erect against the heavier gravity: his own limbs, after a life on Mars broken only by holidays on the home planet, felt the new strain.

Ni-Tung's friend, a wild cheerful man called Tom O'Connell, gestured towards the surroundings.

"You should manage well here. There's good game; I'm leaving you a Klaberg, and enough charges to last a couple of lifetimes. You can do some cultivating under the spur of that hill; it's safe enough from the kind of aerial surveys they make of this part of the world. Nearest habitation is two hundred kilometers to the north. I think

you will get on all right."

Peter said: "It's difficult to believe what has happened. You have risked a lot for us."

O'Connell pointed to the boxes that he and Peter had unloaded.

"There are your stores—including grain. Risk? I've enjoyed it. The system needs a bomb under it. Tung says your kid will provide it: that's enough for me."

"And now?" Peter said.

"Now I'm going to take off, and spend the rest of my life forgetting you and your family ever existed. I doubt if I'll be alive when the kid grows up. But I hope I am."

They saw the jets flare, and watched the space yacht lift into the air and bucket away to the north. Peter turned to Luara.

"We are alone now."

She smiled and nodded. She held the baby in her arms. He came over and stood beside her.

"What will become of him?" he said softly.

She looked at the child, her face very tender.

"The things will happen that must happen," she said, "but not yet—not for many years."

They looked together at their son.

He was sleeping, and in His sleep, He smiled.

It looks as if there will be a huge turnout for the Eleventh World Science Fiction Convention (to be held in Philadelphia, September 5, 6 and 7). Since past experience proves that the best way to be sure of getting all the fun is to stay at the official hotel, it might be a good idea to get reservations in early. There will be no advance in prices, but getting the best accommodations may prove difficult later on. Details on this can be had from either the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, or from the Membership Committee, Box 2019, Middle City Station, Philadelphia, Penna.

Even more information about everything can be had by sending the Committee a dollar for membership in the Convention. This will bring the bulletins being issued to you regularly, complete with information on transportation, reservations, and progress being made. At the same time, the membership fees will furnish the necessary working capital to insure that this Convention will be one of the best ever.

INFINITE INTRUDER

BY ALAN E. NOURSE

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

When Roger Strang found that someone was killing his son—killing him horribly and often—he started investigating. He wasn't prepared to find the results of another investigation—this time about his own life.

It was the second time they tried that Roger Strang realized someone was trying to kill his son.

The first time there had been no particular question. Accidents happen. Even in those days, with all the Base safety regulations and strict speed-way lane laws, young boys would occasionally try to gun their monowheels out of the slow lanes into the terribly swift traffic; when they did, accidents did occur. The first time, when they brought David home in the Base ambulance, shaken but unhurt, with the twisted smashed remains of his monowheel, Roger and Ann Strang had breathed weakly, and decided between themselves that the boy should be scolded within an inch of his young life. And the fact that David maintained tenaciously that he had never swerved from the slow monowheel lane didn't bother his parents a bit. They were acquainted with another small-boy frailty. Small boys, on occasion, are inclined to fib.

But the second time, David was not fibbing. Roger Strang *saw* the *accident* the second time. He saw all the circumstances involved. And he realized, with horrible clarity, that someone, somehow, was trying to kill his son.

It had been late on a Saturday afternoon. The free week-ends that the Barrier Base engineers had once enjoyed to take their

families for picnics "outside," or to rest and relax, were things of the past, for the work on the Barrier was reaching a critical stage, demanding more and more of the technicians, scientists and engineers engaged in its development. Already diplomatic relations with the Eurasian Combine were becoming more and more impossible; the Barrier *had* to be built, and quickly, or another more terrible New York City would be the result. Roger had never cleared from his mind the flaming picture of that night of horror, just five years before, when the mighty metropolis had burst into radioactive flame, to announce the beginning of the first Atomic War. The year 2078 was engraved in millions of minds as the year of the most horrible—and the shortest—war in all history, for an armistice had been signed not four days after the first bomb had been dropped. An armistice, but an uneasy peace, for neither of the great nations had really known what atomic war would be like until it had happened. And once upon them, they found that atomic war was not practical, for both mighty opponents would have been gutted in a matter of weeks. The armistice had stopped the bombs, but hostilities continued, until the combined scientific forces of one nation could succeed in preparing a defense.

That particular Saturday afternoon had been busy in the Main Labs on the Barrier Base. The problem of erecting a continent-long electronic Barrier to cover the coast of North America was a staggering proposition. Roger Strang was nearly finished and ready for home as dusk was falling. Leaving his work at the desk, he was slipping on his jacket when David came into the lab. He was small for twelve years, with towsled sand-brown hair standing up at odd angles about a sharp, intelligent face. "I came to get you, Daddy," he said.

Roger smiled. "You rode all the way down here—just to go home with me?"

"Maybe we could get some Icy-pops for supper on the way home," David remarked innocently.

Roger grinned broadly and slapped the boy on the back. "You'd sell your soul for an Icy-pop," he grinned.

The corridor was dark. The man and boy walked down to the elevator, and in a moment were swishing down to the dark and deserted lobby below.

David stepped first from the elevator when the men struck. One stood on either side of the door in the shadow. The boy

screamed and reeled from the blow across the neck. Suddenly Roger heard the sharp pistol reports. David dropped with a groan, and Roger staggered against the wall from a powerful blow in the face. He shook his head groggily, catching a glimpse of the two men running through the door into the street below, as three or four people ran into the lobby, flushed out by the shots.

Roger shouted, pointing to the door, but the people were looking at the boy. Roger sank down beside his son, deft fingers loosening the blouse. The boy's small face was deathly white, fearful sobs choking his breath as he closed his eyes and shivered. Roger searched under his blouse, trying to find the bullet holes—and found to his chagrin that there weren't any bullet holes.

"Where did you feel the gun?"

David pointed vaguely at his lower ribs. "Right there," he said. "It hurt when they shoved the gun at me."

"But they couldn't have pulled the trigger, if the gun was pointed there—" He examined the unbroken skin on the boy's chest, fear tearing through his mind.

A Security man was there suddenly, asking about the accident, taking Roger's name, checking over the boy. Roger resented the tall man in the gray uniform, felt his temper rise at the slightly sarcastic tone of the questions. Finally the trooper stood up, shaking his head. "The boy must have been mistaken," he said. "Kids always have wild stories to tell. Whoever it was may have been after *somebody*, but they weren't aiming for the boy."

Roger scowled. "This boy is no liar," he snapped. "I saw them shoot—"

The trooper shrugged. "Well, he isn't hurt. Why don't you go on home?"

Roger helped the boy up, angrily. "You're not going to do anything about this?"

"What can I do? Nobody saw who the men were."

Roger grabbed the boy's hand, helped him to his feet, and turned angrily to the door. In the failing light outside the improbability of the attack struck through him strongly. He turned to the boy, his face dark. "David," he said evenly, "you wouldn't be making up stories about feeling that gun in your ribs, would you?"

David shook his head vigorously, eyes still wide with fear. "Honest, dad. I told you the truth."

"But they *couldn't* have shot you in the chest without breaking the skin—" He glanced down

at the boy's blouse and jacket, and stopped suddenly, seeing the blackened holes in the ripped cloth. He stooped down and sniffed the holes suspiciously, and shivered suddenly in the cold evening air.

The burned holes smelled like gunpowder.

"Strang, you must have been wrong." The large man settled back in his chair, his graying hair smoothed over a bald spot. "Someone trying to kill you I could see—there's plenty of espionage going on, and you're doing important work here. But your boy!" The chief of the Barrier Base Security shook his head. "You must have been mistaken."

"But I *wasn't* mistaken!" Roger Strang sat forward in his chair, his hands gripping the arms until his knuckles were white. "I told you exactly what happened. They got him as he came off the elevator, and shot at him. Not at me, Morrel, at my son. They just clubbed me in the face to get me out of the way—"

"What sort of men?" Morrel's eyes were sharp.

Roger scowled, running his hand through his hair. "It was too dark to see. They wore hats and field jackets. The gun could be identified by ballistics. But they were *fast*, Morrel. They knew who they were looking for."

Morrel rose suddenly, his face impatient. "Strang," he said. "You've been here at the Base for quite awhile. Ever since a month after the war, isn't that right? August, 2078? Somewhere around there, I know. But you've been working hard. I think maybe a rest would do you some good—"

"Rest!" Roger exploded. "Look, man—I'm not joking. This isn't the first time. The boy had a monowheel accident three weeks ago, and he swore he was riding in a safe lane where he belonged. It looked like an accident then—now it looks like a murder attempt. The slugs from the gun *must* be in the building—embedded in the plastiwork somewhere. Surely you could try to trace the gun." He glared at the man's impassive face bitterly. "Or maybe you don't want to trace the gun—"

Morrel scowled. "I've already checked on it. The gun wasn't registered in the Base. Security has a check on every firearm within a fifty-mile range. The attackers must have been outsiders."

Roger's face flushed. "That's not true, Morrel," he said softly, "and you know it's not true."

Morrel shrugged. "Have it your own way," he said, indiffer-

ently. "Take a rest, Strang. Go home. Get some rest. And don't bother me with any more of your fairy tales." He turned suddenly on Roger. "And be careful what *you* do with guns, Strang. The only thing about this that I *do* know is that somebody shot a pistol off and scared hell out of your son. You were the only one around, as far as I know. I don't know your game, but you'd better be careful—"

Strang left Security Headquarters, and crossed across to the Labs, frustrated and angry. His mind spun over the accident —incredulous, but more incredulous that Morrel would practically laugh at him. He stopped by the Labs building to watch the workmen putting up a large electronic projector in one of the test yards. Work was going ahead. But so slowly.

Roger was aware of the tall thin man who had joined him before he looked around. Martin Drengo put a hand on his shoulder. "Been avoiding me lately?"

"Martin!" Roger Strang turned, his face lighting up. "No, not avoiding you—I've been so busy my own wife hasn't seen me in four days. How are things in Maintainance?"

The thin man smiled sadly. "How are things ever in Maintenance? First a railroad breaks down, then there's a steel strike, then some paymaster doesn't make a payroll—the war knocked things for a loop, Roger. Even now things are still loopey. And how are things in Production?"

Roger scowled. "Let's have some coffee," he said.

They sat in a back corner booth of the Base Dispensary as Roger told about David. Martin Drengo listened without interruption. He was a thin man from top to bottom, a shock of unruly black hair topping an almost cadaverous face, blue eyes large behind thick lenses. His whole body was like a skeleton, his fingers long and boney as he lit a cigarette. But the blue eyes were quick, and the nods warm and understanding. He listened, and then he said, "It couldn't have been an outsider?"

Roger shrugged. "Anything is possible. But why? Why go after a kid?"

Drengo hunched his shoulders forward. "I don't get it," he said. "David has done nothing to give him enemies." He drew on his cigarette. "What did Morrel have to say?"

"He laughed at me! Wouldn't even listen to me. Told me to go home and go to bed, that I was all wet. I tell you, Martin, I *saw* it! You know I wouldn't lie, you know I don't see things that don't happen."

"Yes," said Martin, glumly. "I believe you, all right. But I can't see why your son should be the target. You'd be more likely." He stood up, stretching his long legs. "Look, old boy. Take Morrel's advice, at least temporarily. Go home and get some sleep now; you're all worked up. I'll go in and talk to Morrel. Maybe I can handle that old buzzard better than you can."

Roger watched his friend amble down the aisle and out of the store. He felt better now that he had talked to Drengo. Smiling to himself, he finished off his coffee. Many a scrape he and Martin had seen through together. He remembered that night of horror when the bomb fell on the city, his miraculous rescue, the tall thin figure, reflecting the red glare from his glasses, forcing his way through the burning timbers of the building, tearing Roger's leg loose from the rubble covering it; the frightful struggle through the rubbish, fighting off fear-crazed mobs that sought to stop them, rob them, kill them. They had made the long trek together, Martin and he, the Evacuation Road down to Maryland, the Road of Horrors, lined with the rotting corpses of the dead and the soon-dead, the dreadful refuse of that horrible night. Martin Drengo had been a stout friend to Roger; he'd been with Martin the night he'd met Ann; took the ring from Martin's finger when they stood at the altar on their wedding day; shared with Martin his closest confidence.

Roger sighed and paid for the coffee. What to do? The boy was home now, recovering from the shock of the attack. Roger caught an out-bound tri-wheel, and sped down the busy thoroughfare toward his home. If Martin could talk to Morrel, and get something done, perhaps they could get a line. Somehow, perhaps they could trace the attackers. In the morning he'd see Martin again, and they could figure out a scheme.

But he didn't have a chance to see Martin again. For at 11:30 that night, the marauders struck again. For the third time.

Through his sleep he heard a door close down below, and sat bolt upright in bed, his heart pounding wildly. Only a tiny sound, the click of a closing door—

Ann was sitting up beside him, brown hair close around her head, her body tense. "Roger!" she whispered. "Did you hear something?"

Roger was out of bed, bounding across the room, into the hall. Blood pounded in his ears

as he rushed to David's room, stopped short before the open door.

The shots rang out like whip cracks, and he saw the yellow flame from the guns. There were two men in the dark room, standing at the bed where the boy lay rolled into a terrified knot. The guns cracked again and again, ripping the bedding, bursting the pillow into a shower of feathers, tearing the boy's pajamas from his thin body, a dozen blazing shots—

Roger let out a strangled cry, grabbed one of the men by the throat, in a savage effort to stop the murderous pistols. The other man caught him a coarse blow behind the ear, and he staggered hard against the wall. Dully he heard the door slam, heavy footsteps down the corridor, running down the stairs.

He struggled feebly to his feet, glancing at the still form on the bed. Choking back a sob he staggered down the hall, shouting to Ann as he went down the stairs, redoubling his speed as he heard the purr of autojets in the driveway. In a moment he was in his own car, frantically stamping on the starter. It started immediately, the motor booming, and the powerful jet engines forced the heavy car ahead dangerously, taking the corner on two of its three wheels. He knew that Ann would call Security, and he raced to gain on the tail lights that were disappearing down the winding residential road to the main highway. Throwing caution to the winds, Roger swerved the car across a front lawn, down between two houses, into an alley, and through another driveway, gaining three blocks. Ahead, at the junction with the main Base highway he saw the long black autojet turn right.

Roger snaked into traffic on the highway and bore down on the black car. Traffic was light because of the late hour, but the patrol was on the road and might stop him instead of the killers. The other car was traveling at top speed, swerving around the slower cars. Roger gained slowly. He fingered the spotlight, preparing to snap it in the driver's eyes. Taking a curve at 90, he crept up alongside the black car as he heard the siren of a patrol car behind him. Cursing, he edged over on the black car, snapped the spotlight full in the face of the driver—

The screaming siren forced him off the road, and he braked hard, his hands trembling. A patrolman came over to the car, gun drawn. He took a quick look at Roger, and his face tightened. "Mr. Strang," he said sharply. "We've been looking for

you. You're wanted at Security."

"That car," Roger started weakly. "You've got to stop that car I was chasing—"

"Never mind that car," the patrolman snarled. "It's you they want. Hop out. We'll go in the patrol car."

"You've got to stop them—"

The patrolman fingered his gun. "Security wants to talk to you, Mr. Strang. Hop out."

Roger moved dazedly from his car. He didn't question the patrolman; he hardly even heard him. His mind raced in a welter of confusion, trying desperately to refute the brilliant picture in his mind from that split-second that the spotlight had rested on the driver of the black car, trying to fit the impossible pieces into their places. For the second man in the black autojet had been John Morrel, chief of Barrier Base Security, and the driver had been Martin Drengo—

The man at the desk was a stranger to Roger Strang. He was an elderly man, stooped, with graying hair and a small clipped mustache that seemed to stick out like antennae. He watched Roger impassively with steel gray eyes, motioning him to a chair.

"You led us a merry chase," he said flatly, his voice brittle. "A very merry chase. The alarm went out for you almost an hour ago."

Strang's cheeks were red with anger. "My son was shot tonight. I was trying to follow the killers—"

"Killers?" The man raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, killers!" Roger snapped. "Do I have to draw you a picture? They shot my son down in his bed."

The gray-haired man stared at him for a long time. "Well," he said finally in a baffled tone. "Now I've heard everything."

It was Roger's turn to stare. "Can't you understand what I've said? *My son was murdered.*"

The gray-haired man flipped a pencil down on the desk impatiently. "Mr. Strang," he said elaborately. "My name is Whitman. I flew down here from Washington tonight, after being called from my bed by the commanding officer of this base. I am the National Chief of the Federal Bureau of Security, Mr. Strang, and I am not interested in fairy tales. I would like you to come off it now, and answer some questions for me. And I don't want double-talk. I want answers. Do I make myself quite clear?"

Roger stared at him, finally

nodded his head. "Quite," he said sourly.

Whitman hunched forward in his chair. "Mr. Strang, how long have you been working in the Barrier Base?"

"Five years. Ever since the bombing of New York."

Whitman nodded. "Oh, yes. The bombing of New York." He looked sharply at Roger. "And how old are you, Mr. Strang?"

Roger looked up, surprised. "Thirty-two, of course. You have my records. Why are you asking?"

The gray-haired man lit a cigarette. "Yes, we have your records," he said offhandedly. "Very interesting records, quite normal, quite in order. Nothing out of the ordinary." He stood up and looked out on the dark street. "Just one thing wrong with your records, Mr. Strang. They aren't true."

Roger stared. "This is ridiculous," he blurted. "What do you mean, they aren't true?"

Whitman took a deep breath, and pulled a sheet of paper out of a sheaf on his desk. "It says here," he said, "that you are Roger Strang, and that you were born in Indianola, Iowa, on the fourteenth of June, 2051. That your father was Jason Strang, born 11 August, 2023, in Chicago, Illinois. That you lived in Indianola until you were twelve, when your father moved to New York City, and was employed with the North American Electronics Laboratories. That you entered International Polytechnic Institute at the age of 21, studying physics and electronics, and graduated in June 2075 with the degree of Bachelor of Electronics. That you did further work, taking a Masters and Doctorate in Electronics, at Polytech in 2077."

Whitman took a deep breath. "That's what it says here. A very ordinary record. But there is no record there of your birth in Indianola, Iowa, in 2051 or any other time. There is no record there of your father, the alleged Jason Strang, nor in Chicago. No one by the name of Jason Strang was ever employed by North American Electronics. No one by the name of Roger Strang ever attended Polytech." Whitman watched him with cold eyes. "To the best of our knowledge, and according to all available records, *there never was anyone named Roger Strang until after the bombing of New York.*"

Roger sat stock still, his mind racing. "This is silly," he said finally. "Perfectly idiotic. Those schools *must* have records—"

Whitman's face was tight. "They do have records. Complete records. But the name of

Roger Strang is curiously missing from the roster of graduates in 2075. Or any other year." He snubbed his cigarette angrily. "I wish you would tell me, and save us both much unpleasantness. *Just who are you, Mr. Strang, and where do you come from?*"

Strang stared at the man, his pulse pounding in his head. Filtering into his mind was a vast confusion, some phrase, some word, some nebulous doubt that frightened him, made him almost believe that gray-haired man in the chair before him. He took a deep breath, clearing his mind of the nagging doubt. "Look here," he said, exasperated. "When I was drafted for the Barrier Base, they checked for my origin, for my education and credentials. If they had been false, I'd have been snapped up right then. Probably shot—they were shooting people for chewing their fingernails in those days. I wouldn't have stood a chance."

Whitman nodded his head vigorously. "Exactly!" he snapped. "You *should* have been picked up. But you weren't even suspected until we did a little checking after that accident in the Labs building yesterday. Somehow, false credentials got through for you. Security does not like false credentials. I don't know how you did it, but you did. I want to know how."

"But, I tell you—" Roger stood up, fear suddenly growing in his mind. He lit a cigarette, took two nervous puffs, and set it down, forgotten, on the ashtray. "I have a wife," he said shakily. "I married her in New York City. We had a son, born in a hospital in New York City. He went to school there. Surely there must be some kind of record—"

Whitman smiled grimly, almost mockingly. "Good old New York City," he snarled. "Married there, you say? Wonderful! Son born there? In the one city in the country where that information *can never be checked.* That's very convenient, Mr. Strang. Or whoever you are. I think you'd better talk."

Roger snubbed out the cigarette viciously. "My son," he said after a long pause. "He was murdered tonight. Shot down in his bed—"

The Security Chief's face went white. "Garbage!" he snapped. "What kind of a fool do you think I am, Strang? Your son murdered—bah! When the alarm went out for you I personally drove to your home. Oddly enough this wife of yours wasn't at home, but your son was. Nice little chap. He made us some coffee, and explained

that he didn't know where his parents were, because he'd been asleep all night. Quietly asleep in his bed—"

The words were clipped out, and rang in Roger's ears, incredibly. His hand shook violently as he puffed his cigarette, burning his fingers on the short butt. "I don't believe it," he muttered hollowly. "I saw it happen—"

Whitman sneered. "Are you going to talk or not?"

Roger looked up helplessly. "I don't—know—" he said, weakly. "I don't know."

The Security Chief threw up his hands in disgust. "Then we'll do it the hard way," he grated. Flipping an intercom switch, his voice snapped out cold in the still room. "Send in Psych squad," he growled. "We've got a job to do—"

Roger Strang lay back on the small bunk, his nerves yammering from the steady barrage, lights still flickering green and red in his eyes. His body was limp, his mind functioning slowly, sluggishly. His eyelids were still heavy from the drugs, his wrists and forehead burning and sore where the electrodes had been attached. His muscles hardly responded when he tried to move, his strength completely gone—washed out. He simply lay there, his shallow breathing returning to him from the dark stone walls.

The inquisition had been savage. The hot lights, the smooth-faced men firing questions, over and over, the drugs, the curious sensation of mouthing nonsense, of hearing his voice rambling on crazily, yet being unable in any way to control it; the hypnotic effect of Whitman's soft voice, the glitter in his steel-gray eyes, and the questions, questions, questions. The lie detector had been going by his side, jerking insanely at his answers, every time the same answers, every time setting the needle into wild gyrations. And finally the foggy, indistinct memory of Whitman mopping his forehead and stamping savagely on a cigarette, and muttering desperately, "It's no use! Lies! Nothing but lies, lies, lies! He *couldn't* be lying under this treatment, but he is. *And he knows he is!*"

Lies? Roger stretched his heavy limbs, his mind struggling up into a tardy rejection. Not lies! He hadn't lied—he had been answering the truth to the questions. He couldn't have been lying, for the answers were there, clear in his memory. And yet—the same nagging doubt crept through, the same feeling that had plagued him throughout the inquisition, the nagging,

haunting, horrible conviction, somewhere in the depths of his numb brain that he *was* lying! Something was missing somewhere, some vast gap in his knowledge, something of which he simply was not aware. The incredible turnabout of Martin Drengo, the attack on David, who was killed, but somehow was not dead. He *had* to be lying—

But how could he lie, and still know that he was not lying? His sluggish mind wrestled, trying to choke back the incredible doubt. Somewhere in the morass, the picture of Martin Drengo came through—Drengo, the traitor, who was trying to kill his son—but the conviction swept through again, overpowering, the certain knowledge that Drengo was *not* a traitor, that he must trust Drengo. Drengo was his friend, his stalwart—

HIS AGENT!

Strang sat bolt upright on the cot, his head spinning. The thought had broken through crystal clear in the darkness, revealed itself for the briefest instant, then swirled down again into the foggy gulf. Agent? Why should he have an agent? What purpose? Frantically he scanned his memory for Drengo, down along the dark channels, searching. Drengo had come through the fire, into the burning building, carried him like a child through the flames into safety. Drengo had been best man at his wedding—but he'd been married before the bombing of the city. *Or had he?* Where did Drengo fit in? Was the fire the first time he had seen Drengo?

Something deep in his mind forced its way through, saying NO! YOU HAVE KNOWN HIM ALL YOUR LIFE! Roger fought it back, frantically. Never! Back in Iowa there had been no Drengo. Nor in Chicago. Nor in New York. He hadn't even known him in—IN NEW ALBANY!

Roger Strang was on his feet, shaking, cold fear running through his body, his nerves screaming. Had they ruined his mind? He couldn't think straight any more. Telling him things that weren't true, forcing lies into his mind—frightening him with the horrible conviction that his mind was really helpless, full of false data. What had happened to him? Where had the thought of "New Albany" come from? He shivered, now thoroughly frightened. There wasn't any "New Albany." Nowhere in the world. There just *wasn't* any such place.

Could he have two memories? Conflicting memories?

He walked shakily to the door, peered through the small peephole. In the morning they would try again, they had said. He shuddered, terribly afraid. He had felt his mind cracking under the last questioning; another would drive him completely insane. But Drengo would have the answers. Why had he shot little Davey? How did that fit in? Was this false-credential business part of some stupendous scheme against him? Impossible! But what else? He knew with sudden certain conviction that he must see Martin Drengo, immediately, before they questioned him again, before the fear and uncertainty drove him out of his mind. He called tentatively through the peephole, half-hoping to catch a guard's attention. And the call echoed through silent halls.

And then he heard Ann's voice, clear, cool, sharp in the prison darkness. Roger whirled, fear choking the shouts still ringing in his ears, gaped at the woman who stood in his cell—

She was lovelier than he had ever seen her, her tiny body clothed in a glowing fabric which clung to every curve, accenting her trim figure, her slender hips. Brown hair wreathed her lovely face, and Roger choked as the deep longing for her welled up in his throat. Speechlessly he took her in his arms, holding her close, burying his face in her hair, sobbing in joy and relief. And then he saw the glowing circle behind her, casting its eerie light into the far corners of the dark cell. In fiery greeness the ring shimmered in an aurora of violent power, but Ann paid no attention to it. She stepped back and smiled at him, her eyes bright. "Don't be frightened," she said softly, "and don't make any noise. I'm here to help you."

"But where did you come from?" The question forced itself out in a sort of strangled gasp.

"We have—means of going where we want to. And we want you to come with us." She pointed at the glowing ring. "We want to take you back to the time-area from which you came."

Roger goggled at her, confusion welling strong into his mind again. "Ann," he said weakly. "What kind of trick is this?"

She smiled again. "No trick," she said. "Don't ask questions, darling. I know you're confused, but there isn't much time. You'll just have to do what I say right now." She turned to the

glowing ring. "We just step through here. Be careful that you don't touch the substance of the portal going through."

Roger Strang approached the glowing ring curiously, peered through, blinked, peered again. It was like staring at an inscrutable flat-black surface in the shadow. No light reflected through it; nothing could be seen. He heard a faint whining as he stood close to the ring, and he looked up at Ann, his eyes wide. "You can't see through it!" he exclaimed.

Ann was crouching on the floor near a small metallic box, gently turning knobs, checking the dial reading against a small chronometer on her wrist. "Steady, darling," she said. "Just follow me, carefully, and don't be afraid. We're going back home—to the time-area where we belong. You and I. I know—you don't remember. And you'll be puzzled, and confused, because the memory substitution job was very thorough. But you'll remember Martin Drengo, and John Morrel, and me. And I was your wife there, too— Are you ready?"

Roger stared at the ring for a moment. Where are we going?" he asked. "How far ahead? Or behind—?"

"Ahead," she said. "Eighty years ahead—as far as we can go. That will bring us to the present time, the *real* present time, as far as we, and you, are concerned."

She turned abruptly, and stepped through the ring, and vanished as effectively as if she had disintegrated into vapor. Roger felt fear catch at his throat; then he followed her through.

They were standing in a ruins. The cell was gone, the prison, the Barrier Base. The dark sky above was bespeckled with a myriad of stars, and a cool night breeze swept over Roger's cheek. Far in the distance a low rumble came to his ears. "Sounds like a storm coming," he muttered to Ann, pulling his jacket closer around him.

"No storm," she said grimly. "Look!" She pointed a finger toward the northern horizon. Brazen against the blackness the yellow-orange of fire was rising, great spurts of multicolored flames licking at the horizon. The rumble became a drone, a roar. Ann grasped Roger's arm and pulled him down to cover in the rubble as the invisible squadron swished across the sky, trailing jet streams of horrid orange behind them. Then to the south, in the direction of the flight, the drone of the engines gave way to the

hollow boom-booming of bombing, and the southern horizon flared. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the rumble died away, leaving the flames licking the sky to the north and south.

Roger shivered. "War," he said. "Eurasia?"

She shook her head. "If only it were. There is no Eurasia now. The dictator took care of that. Nothing but gutted holes, and rubble." She stood up, helping Roger to his feet. Together they filed through the rubbish down to a roadway. Ann dialed a small wrist radio; in a few moments, out of the dark sky, the dimout lights of a small 'copter came into view, and the machine settled delicately to the road. Two strange men were inside; they saluted Ann, and helped Roger aboard. Swiftly they clamped down the hatch tight, and the ship rose again silently into the air.

"Where are we going?" asked Roger Strang.

"We have a headquarters. Our data must be checked first. We can't reach a decision without checking. Then we can talk."

The 'copter swung high over the blazing inferno of a city far below. Strang glanced from the window, eyes widening at the holocaust. The crater holes were mammoth, huge spires of living flame rising to the sky, leaving mushroom columns of gray-black smoke that glowed an evil red from the furnace on the ground. "Not Eurasia?" Roger asked suddenly, his mind twisting in amazement. "But who? This is America, isn't it?"

"Yes. This is America. There is no Eurasia now. Soon there may not be an America. Nor even an Earth."

Roger looked up at Ann, eyes wide. "But those jet-planes—the bombing—*who is doing the bombing?*"

Ann Strang stared down at the sullen red fires of the city for a moment, her quiet eyes sad. "Those are Martian planes," she said.

The 'copter settled silently down into the heart of the city, glowing red from the flames and bombing. They hovered over the shining Palace, still tall, and superb, and intact, gleaming like a blood-streaked jewel in the glowing night. The 'copter settled on the roof of a low building across a large courtyard from the glittering Palace. Ann Strang stepped out, and motioned Roger to follow down a shaft and stairway into a small room below. She knocked at a door, and a strange man dressed in the curious glowing fabric opened it. His face lit up in a smile.

"Roger!" he cried. "We were afraid we couldn't locate you. We weren't expecting the Security to meddle. Someone got suspicious, somewhere, and began checking your references from their sources—and of course they were false. We were lucky to get you back at all, after Security got you." He clapped Roger on the back, and led him into the room.

John Morrel and Martin Drengo were standing near the rounded window, their faces thrown into grotesque relief against the red-orange glow outside. They turned and saluted, and Roger almost cried out, his mind spinning, a thousand questions cutting into his consciousness, demanding answers. But quite suddenly he was feeling a new power, a new effectiveness in his thinking, in his activity. He turned to Martin Drengo, his eyes questioning but no longer afraid. "What year is this?" he asked.

"This is 2165. March, 2165, and you're in New Albany, in the United States of North America. This is the city where you were born, the city you loved—and look at it!"

Roger walked to the window. The court below was full of people now, ragged people, some of them screaming, a disconsolate muttering rising from a thousand throats—burned people, mangled people. They milled about the mammoth courtyard before the glorious Palace, aimlessly, mindlessly. Far down the avenue leading from the Palace Roger could see the people evacuating the city, a long, desolate line of people, strange autos, carts, even animals, running down the broad avenue to escape from the flaming city.

"We're not in danger here," said Drengo, at his elbow. "No fire nor bomb can reach us here—that is the result of your mighty Atlantic Coast Barrier. Nothing more. It never was perfected in time, before the great Eastern Invasion and the second Atomic War. That was due to occur three years after the time-area where we visited. We were trying to stem it, to turn it aside. We don't know yet whether we succeeded or not."

He turned to the tall man standing at the door. "Markson, all the calculations are prepared. The Calc is evaluating the data against the Equation now, figuring all the variables. If our work did any good, we should know it soon." He sighed and pointed to the Palace. "But our fine Dictator is still alive, and the attack on Mars should be starting any minute— If we didn't succeed, nothing in all Time will stop him."

Roger lit a cigarette, his eyes questioning Drengo. "Dictator?"

Drengo sat down and stretched his legs. "The Dictator appeared four years ago, a nobody, a man from the masses of people on the planet. He rose into public favor like a skyrocket, a remarkable man, an amazing man—a man who could talk to you, and control your thoughts in a single interview. There has never been a man with such personal magnetism and power, Roger, in all the history of Earth. A man who raised himself from nothing into absolute Dictatorship, and has handled the world according to his whim ever since.

"He is only a young man, Roger, just 32 years of age, but an irresistable man who can win anything from anybody. He writhed into the presidency first, and then deliberately set about rearranging the government to suit himself. And the people let him get away with it, followed him like sheep. And then he was Dictator, and he began turning the social and economic balance of the planet into a whirlwind. And then came Mars."

Martin stretched again, and lit a cigarette, his thin face grave in the darkened room. "The first landing was thirty years ago, and the possibilities for rich and peaceful commerce between Earth and Mars were clear from the first. Mars had what Earth lacked: the true civilization, the polished culture, the lasting socio-economic balance, the permanent peace. Mars could have taught us so much. She could have guided us out of the mire of war and hatred that we have been wallowing in for centuries. But the Dictator put an end to those possibilities." Drengo shrugged. "He was convinced that the Martians were weak, backward, decadent. He saw their uranium, their gold, their jewelry, their labor—and started on a vast impossible imperialism. If he had had his way, he would have stripped the planet in three years, but the Martians fought against us, turned from peace to suspicion, and finally to open revolt. And the Dictator could not see. He mobilized Earth for total war against Mars, draining our resources, decimating our population, building rockets, bombs, guns—" He stopped for a moment, breathing deeply. "But the Dictator didn't know what he was doing. He had never been on Mars. He has never seen Martians. He had no idea what they think, what they are capable of doing. He doesn't know what we know—that the Martians will win. He

doesn't realize that the Martians can carry out a war for years without shaking their economy one iota, while he has drained our planet to such a degree that a war of more than two or three months will break us in half. He doesn't know that Mars can **win**, and that the Earth can't—"

Roger walked across the room, thoughtfully, his mind fitting pieces into place. "But where do I come in? David—Ann—I don't understand—"

Drengo looked Roger straight in the eye. "The Dictator's name," he said, "is Farrel Strang."

Roger stopped still. "Strang?" he echoed.

"Your son, Roger. Yours and Ann's."

"But—you said the Dictator was only 32—" Roger trailed off, regarding Ann in amazement.

Martin smiled. "People don't grow old so quickly nowadays," he said. "You are 57 years old, Roger. Ann is 53." He leaned back in his chair, his gaunt smile fading. "The Dictator has not been without opposition. You, his parents, opposed him at the very start, and he cast you off. People wiser than the crowds were able to rebuff his powerful personal appeal, to see through the robe of glory he had wrapped around himself. He has opposition, but he has built himself an impregnable fortress, and dealt swift death to any persons suspected of treason. A few have escaped—scientists, technologists, sociologists, physicists. The work of one group of men gave us a weapon which we hoped to use to destroy the Dictator. We found a way to move back in Time. We could leave the normal time-stream and move to any area of past time. So four of us went back, searching for the core of the economic and social upheaval on Earth, and trying to destroy the Dictator before he was born. Given Time travel, it should have been possible. So we went back—myself, John Morrel, Ann Strang, and you."

Roger shook his head, a horrible thought forming in his mind. "You were trying to kill David—my son—" he stopped short. "David *couldn't* have been my son!" He whirled on Martin Drengo. "*Who was that boy?*"

Martin looked away then, his face white. "The boy was your father," he said.

The drone of the jet bombers came again, whining into the still room. Roger Strang stood very still, staring at the gaunt man. Slowly the puzzle was be-

ginning to fit together, and horror filtered into his mind. "My father—" he said. "Only twelve years old, but he was to be my father." He stared helplessly at the group in the room. "You were trying—to kill him!"

Martin Drengo stood up, his lean face grave. "We were faced with a terrific problem. Once we returned to a time-area, we had no way of knowing to what extent we could effect people and events that had already happened. We had to go back, to fit in, somehow, in an area where we never had been, to *make* things happen that had never happened before. We knew that if there was any way of doing it, we had to destroy Farrel Strang. But the patterns of history which had allowed him to rise had to be altered, too; destroying the man would not have been enough. So we tried to destroy him in the time-area where the leading time-patterns of *our* time had been formed. We had to kill his grandfather."

Roger shivered. "But if you had killed David—what would have happened *to me?*"

"Presumably the same thing that would have happened to the Dictator. In theory, *if we had succeeded* in killing your father, David, both you and the Dictator would have ceased to exist." Drengo took a deep breath. "The idea was yours, Roger. You knew the terrible damage your son was doing as Dictator. It was a last resort, and Ann and John and I pleaded with you to reconsider. But it was the obvious step."

Ann walked over to Roger, her face pale. "You insisted, Roger. So we did what we could to make it easy. We used the Dictator's favorite trick—a psycho-purge—to clear your mind of all conscious and subconscious memory of your true origin and environment, replacing it with a history and memory of the past-time area where we were going. We chose the contact-time carefully, so that we appeared in New York in the confusion of the bombing of 2078, making sure that your records would stand up under all but the closest examination. From then on, when Martin carried you out from the fire, you stored your own memory of that time-area and became a legitimate member of that society."

"But how could we pose as David's *parents*, if he was my father?"

Ann smiled. "Both David's parents were killed in the New York bombing; we knew that David survived, and we knew where he could be found. There

was a close physical resemblance between you and the boy, though actually the resemblance was backwards, and he accepted you as a foster-father without question. With you equipped with a complete memory of your marriage to me in that time, of David's birth, and of your own history before and after the bombing of New York, you fit in well and played the part to perfection. Also, you acted as a control, to guide us, since you had no conscious knowledge beyond that time-area. Martin and Morrel were to be the assassins, the Intruders, and I was to keep tabs on you—"

"And the success of the attempt?"

Ann's face fell. "We don't know yet. We don't know what we accomplished, whether we stemmed the war or not—"

The tall man who had stepped into the room moved forward and threw a sheaf of papers on the floor, his face heavy with anger, his voice hoarse. "Yes, I'm afraid we do know," he said bitterly.

Martin Drengo whirled on him, his face white. "What do you mean, Markson?"

The tall man sank down in a chair tiredly. "We've lost, Martin. We don't need these calculations to tell. The word was just broadcast on the telecast. Farrel Strang's armada has just begun its attack on Mars—"

For a moment the distant bombing was the only sound in the room. Then Martin Drengo said, "So he gave the order. And we've lost."

"We only had a theory to work on," said Morrel, staring gloomily at the curved window. "A theory and an equation. The theory said that a man returning through time could alter the social and technological trends of the people and times to which he returned, in order to change history that was already past. The theory said that if we could turn the social patterns and technological trends just slightly away from what they were, we could alter the entire make-up of society in our own time. And the Equation was the tool, the final check on any change. The Equation which evaluates the sum of social, psychological and energy factors in any situation, any city or nation or human society. The Equation has been proven, checked time and time again, but the theory didn't fit it. The theory was wrong."

Roger Strang sat up, suddenly alert. "That boy," he said, his voice sharp. "You nearly made a sieve of him, trying to shoot him. Why didn't he die?"

"Because he was on a high-

order variable. Picture it this way: From any point in time, the possible future occurrences could be seen as vectors, an infinite number of possible vectors. Every activity that makes an alteration, or has any broad effect on the future is a high-order variable, but many activities have no grave implications for future time, and could be considered unimportant, or low-order variables. If a man turns a corner and sees something that stimulates him into writing a world-shaking manifesto, the high-order variable would have started when he decided to turn the corner instead of going the other way. But if he took one way home instead of another, and nothing of importance occurred as a result of the decision, a low-order variable would be set up.

"We found that the theory of alterations held quite well, for low-order variables. Wherever we appeared, whatever we did, we set up a definite friction in the normal time-stream, a distortion, like pulling a taut rubber band out. And we could produce changes—on low-order variables. But the elasticity of the distortion was so great as to warp the change back into the time-stream without causing any lasting alteration. When it came to high-order changes, *we simply couldn't make any.* We tried putting wrong data into the machines that were calculating specifications for the Barrier, and the false data went in, but the answers that came out were answers that *should* have appeared with the *right* data. We tried to commit a murder, to kill David Strang, and try as we would we couldn't do it. Because it would have altered a high-order variable, and they simply *wouldn't be altered!*"

"But you, Morrel," Roger exclaimed. "How about you? You were top man in the Barrier Base Security office. You must have made an impression."

Morrel smiled tiredly. "I really thought I had, time after time. I would start off a series of circumstances that should have had a grave alterative effect, and it would look for awhile as if a long-range change was going to be affected—and then it would straighten itself out again, with no important change occurring. It was maddening. We worked for five years trying to make even a small alteration—and brought back our data—" He pointed to the papers on the floor. "There are the calculations, applied on the Equation. Meaningless. We accomplished nothing. And the Dictator is still there."

Drengo slumped in his chair.

"And he's started the war. The real attack. This bombardment outside is nothing. There are fifteen squadrons of space-destroyers already unloading atomic bombs on the surface of Mars, and that's the end, for us. Farrel Strang has started a war he can never finish—"

Roger Strang turned sharply to Drengo. "This Dictator," he said. "Where is he? Why can't he be reached now, and destroyed?"

"The Barrier. He can't be touched in the Palace. He has all his offices there, all his controls, and he won't let anyone in since the attempted assassination three months ago. He's safe there, and we can't touch him."

Roger scowled at the control panel on the wall. "How does this time-portal work?" he asked. "You say it can take us back —*why not forward?*"

"No good. The nature of Time itself makes that impossible. At the present instant of Time, everything that has happened has happened. The three-dimensional world in which we live has passed through the fourth temporal dimension, and nothing can alter it. But at this instant there are an infinite number of things that could happen next. The future is an infinite series of variables, and there's no conceivable way to predict which variable will actually be true."

Roger Strang sat up straight, staring at Drengo. "Will that portal work both ways?" he asked tensely.

Drengo stared at him blankly. "You mean, can it be reverse-wired? I suppose so. But—anyone trying to move into the future would necessarily become an *infinity* of people—he couldn't maintain his identity, because he'd have to have a body in every one of an infinite number of places he might be—"

"*—until the normal time stream caught up with him in the future!* And then he'd be in whatever place he fit!" Roger's voice rose excitedly. "Martin, can't you see the implications? Send me ahead—just a little ahead, an hour or so—and let me go into the Palace. If I moved my consciousness to the place where the Palace should be, where the Dictator should be, then when normal time caught up with me, *I could kill him!*"

Drengo was on his feet, staring at Roger with rising excitement. Suddenly he glanced at his watch. "By God!" he muttered. "*Maybe you could—*"

Blackness.

He had no body, no form. There was no light, no shape,

nothing but eternal, dismal, unbroken blackness. This was the Void, the place where time had not yet come. Roger Strang shuddered, and felt the cold chill of the blackness creep into his marrow. He had to move. He wanted to move, to find the right place, moving with the infinity of possible bodies. A stream of consciousness was all he could grasp, for the blackness enclosed everything. A sort of death, but he knew he was not dead. Blackness was around him, and in him, and through him.

He could feel the timelessness, the total absence of anything. Suddenly he felt the loneliness, for he knew there was no going back. He had to transfer his consciousness, his mind, to the place where the Dictator was, hoping against hope that he could find the place before time caught him wedged in the substance of the stone walls of the Palace. He reached the place that *should* be right, and waited—

And waited. There was no time in this place, and he had to wait for the normal time stream. The blackness worked at his mind, filling him with fear, choking him, making him want to scream in frightened agony—waiting—

And suddenly, abruptly, he was standing in a brightly lighted room. The arched dome over his head sparkled with jewels, and through paneled windows the red glow of the city's fires flickered grimly. *He was in the Palace!*

He looked about swiftly, and crossed the room toward a huge door. In an instant he had thrown it open. The bright lights of the office nearly blinded him, and the man behind the desk rose angrily, caught Roger's eye full—

Roger gasped, his eyes widening. For a moment he thought he was staring into a mirror. For the man behind the desk, clothed in a rich glowing tunic was a living image of—*himself!*

The Dictator's face opened into startled surprise and fear as he recognized Roger, and a frightened cry came from his lips. There was no one else in the room, but his eyes ran swiftly to the visiphone. With careful precision Roger Strang brought the heat-pistol to eye level, and pulled the trigger. Farrel Strang crumpled slowly from the knees, a black hole scorched in his chest.

Roger ran to the fallen man, stared into his face incredulously. His son—and himself, as alike as twin dolls, for all the age difference. Drengo's words rose in Roger's mind: "Medicine is advanced, you know. People don't grow old so soon these days—"

Swiftly Roger slipped from his clothes, an impossibly bold idea translating itself into rapid action. He stripped the glowing tunic from the man's flaccid body, and slipped his arms into the sleeves, pulling the cape in close to cover the burned spot.

He heard a knock on the door. Frantically he forced the body under the heavy desk, and sat down in the chair behind it, eyes wide with fear. "Come in," he croaked.

A young deputy stepped through the door, approached the desk deferentially. "The first reports, sir," he said, looking straight at Roger. Not a flicker of suspicion crossed his face. "The attack is progressing as expected."

"Turn all reports over to my private teletype," Roger snapped. The man saluted. "Immediately, sir!" He turned and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Roger panted, closing his eyes in relief. He could pass! Turning to the file, he examined the detailed plans for the Martian attack; the numbers of ships, the squadron leaders, the zero hours—then he was at the teletype keyboard, passing on the message of peace, the message to stop the War with Mars, to make an armistice; ALL SQUADRONS AND SHIPS ATTENTION: CEASE AND DESIST IN ATTACK PLANS: RETURN TO TERRA IMMEDIATELY: BY ORDER OF FARREL STRANG.

Wildly he tore into the files, ripping out budget reports, stabilization plans, battle plans, evacuation plans. It would be simple to dispose of the Dictator's body as that of an imposter, an assassin—and simply take control himself in Farrel's place. They would carry on with *his* plans, *his* direction. And an era of peace, and stability and rich commerce would commence at long last. The sheaf of papers grew larger and larger as Roger emptied out the files: plans of war, plans of conquest, of slavery—he aimed the heat-pistol at the pile, saw it spring into yellow flame, and circle up to the vaulted ceiling in blue smoke.

And then he sat down, panting, and flipped the visiphone switch. "Send one man, unarmed, to the building across the courtyard. Have him bring Martin Drengo to me."

The deputy's eyes widened on the screen. "Unarmed, sir?"

"Unarmed," Roger repeated. "By order of your Dictator."

BOOK REVIEWS:

SCIENCE: Fact and Fiction

by

GEORGE O. SMITH

I think that the hardest part of writing a science-fiction juvenile must be finding a plausible reason for inserting a youthful character into a plot that is basically of an adult background. Since it takes about twenty-two years to produce a junior engineer who understands what is going on but lacks the experience to direct the operations, it is extremely hard to find a niche that fits a boy of sixteen-odd. Eliminating as undesirable material the genius-type who steps into the picture to solve a problem that has been baffling elderly scientists for years, the writer's problem gets harder and harder.

The rules of the juvenile are simple. The main character must be a youth of about sixteen. Or the novel must revolve about such a youth. If the story is not told from the standpoint of the youth himself, it must then be told about him. This youthful character must be so important to the plot and the unfolding of the novel that the story could not be written without him.

These rules are easy enough to follow when the whole cast of characters are juvenile, as in the old Roy Blakeley Boy Scout series, or the Bobbsey Twins, et al. But in the world of science, to produce the science-fiction novel aimed at the youth, the main character must move in a world presided over by men who have lived long enough to know what they are doing.

Tales of an earlier age, such as *Treasure Island,* offer some position in which a youth can plausibly fit. Hawkins was the cabin boy, as I recall. But today there is no place for a youngster excepting school. They do not run off to sea at twelve because sea captains wouldn't have any use for them. As for running off to space, spacemen for a long long time are going to be a select group who possess more than one well developed talent or skill.

Happily, this is a problem that can be and has been solved, without making the youth a stinking little genius or a headstrong know-it-all. The ways are several and many, all the way from the plausible fluke

to the well-planned entry of the youth into the story.

For instance:

ISLANDS IN THE SKY, by Arthur C. Clark. (Winston, $2.00) • This one contains one of the neatest dodges for getting a kid deeply involved in an adult setting as I have ever seen. Since space and fuel are going to be very important factors in space travel, the chances of a youth getting invited to go along on a space trip are rather minute. However, this particular youth wins a radio quiz contest, the first grand-prize of which is an all-expenses-paid trip to any place in the world. According to some legal hair-splitting, the Inner Orbital Station has been ruled as "Part of Earth" and our young hero elects to go there. After several attempts to talk him out of his decision, Roy Malcolm is finally taken to the Orbital Station, where he has minor adventures proper to his age.

The tone of the book is more of the "travelogue" type of story rather than high adventure, but since Dr. Clarke is Chairman of the British Interplanetary Society, this description offers a ring of authenticity that cannot be found in any of the other travelogue stories where the description is created out of the author's imagination. (The Martian Odyssey, for instance).

MISTS OF DAWN, by Chad Oliver. (Winston, $2.00) • Mark Nye is precipitated into the adventure by accident (the fluke technique) when he is upset by the blast of a nearby explosion and grabs the first thing he can latch onto. Since this happens to be the GO button on a time machine, Mark Nye finds himself back in the days of the Neanderthal, at a time when the Cro-Magnon is beginning to rise. As I have mentioned in a previous review, no one in his right mind would stay in an awkward, dangerous situation if he could get out of it, and so Mark Nye is kept in the Past because the time machine must have a certain length of time to build up a charge. Also, being without food, Mark has to forage, where he meets a Cro-Magnon tribe and is accepted by them. With the Cro-Magnons Mark fights the Neanderthal men, helps in a mammoth-kill, and generally has a robust time.

One very excellent point: Our hero does NOT introduce the domestication of animals, the cultivation of crops, and/or the invention of the wheel—or turn up later as a pre-dawn God. Not that he didn't try. But the Cro-Magnon could not grasp the concept of harnessing one of the

less violent animals to help him in haulage. Mark gives up after recalling his uncle's statement that inventions and discoveries are made and accepted only when the culture has risen to the point where it can grasp the new idea.

Eventually the time machine has charged up enough to try the return trip, and Mark sets the machine to return fifteen minutes after his take-off, which gives his uncle a shock because in fifteen minutes Mark has changed by several months of hard living in the great outdoors. He also stepped out of the machine carrying a heavy hunting bow and a batch of nasty looking arrows and wearing the pelt of an animal that he had killed. Furthermore he probably needed a bath (in chlorophyll!).

Chad Oliver, former s-f fan, is now an anthropologist, which tends to give this pre-dawn story an authentic ring.

SONS OF THE OCEAN DEEPS, by Bryce Walton. (Winston, $2.00) • Joe West is flunked out of Spacemen's School, and so he enlists in the ranks of the "Deepsmen" rather than go home. The Deepsmen work on the ocean floor, all the way down into the cavernous depths, for some reason. This submarine culture and background are a bit contrived and most of the situations feel a bit artificial, sort of like a man explaining to a Martian why a certain joke is funny. However there is action a-plenty in this artificial background.

And here I get out my portable soap-box. I don't mind squaring the speed of light or having adventures on Pluto so long as everybody knows that this is just the standard literary license used with science fiction. But a man who makes statements of fact in a foreword should take a look at a chemistry text before he attributes the green color of chlorophyll to the chlorine contained in the formula. ($C_{55}H_{72}MgN_4O_5$).

THE CURRENTS OF SPACE, by Isaac Asimov. (Doubleday, $2.75) • Without a doubt, Isaac Asimov possesses a craftsmanship and polish that few writers of science fiction have. Here also is a novel gimmick, not used before to my knowledge. Furthermore, the book is attractively bound, has a neat dust jacket, and is nicely printed on fine paper. The plot—

Now, if Isaac Asimov would only let Trantor and the Galactic Empire come unglued quietly, let the Three Foundations fall in ruin, and put some cyanide in Hari Selden's preprandial cocktail so we'd hear no more about psychohistory and/or its galactic background prior or

following, then we would howl with glee. I'll bet a hat that Isaac could knock us all for a row of uranium cans if he wrote about something a leetle more familiar to us poor planet-bound humans. This massive sweep of millions of light years and thousands of centuries away was hot stuff fifteen years ago. Isaac, please come home, all is forgiven.

Otherwise I am moved to remark: "Seldom has such excellent writing been used on such unconvincing material."

JUDGEMENT NIGHT, by C. L. Moore. (Gnome Press, $3.50) • This is a collection of several long novelettes, started off with the title novel which appeared in Astounding almost ten years ago. This is a sort of vintage mood-music, at which C. L. Moore excels. The far-away and long-hence background was popular at the time it was written; it is almost impossible to see anybody in this kind of story that you know, or may even be remotely familiar with. However, this is mood-music and not adventure.

Furthermore, to make my attitude clear, I like vintage stuff old and rare, but I prefer my current stuff fresh and new. *Judgement Night* is to be read with a dash of nostalgia, otherwise you will wonder where you've been and why you ever went.

The non-fiction section this time deals with a labor of love. It is not "Science—Fact" but more a case of Science-Fiction Fact:

INDEX TO THE SCIENCE-FICTION MAGAZINES, 1926 to 1950. Compiled by Don Day. (Perri Press, $6.50) • Mr. Day, once one of the more active fans, one-time publisher of the excellent little fanzine *Fanscient,* has turned his card files and his library into a real work. The book contains a cross-indexing of authors and their stories and in which magazine the story appeared. To top this off there is a listing of pen names and what titles these pen names used. If nothing else it will tend to stop a lot of damfool arguments as to whether Jack Vance is or is not Henry Kuttner, or whether H. B. Fyfe and H. Beam Piper are not "pun" names of the same guy. (All right, officer, I'll go quietly!) There are some pardonable errors, no one can wade through twenty-four years of magazines without slipping here and there. Also, there may be a few characters who did not tell the truth to Mr. Day regarding their nefarious activities in the use of pen names; the same may be true of the publications that used house names.

Mr. Day and the Perri Press request that any errata be called to their

attention. This seems to indicate that future editions, or addenda volumes are being contemplated. I hope I am right, because this is a fine reference work. I have one simple suggestion, that the original be appended with a "Yearbook" sort of thing that will bring the whole up to date. Maybe the things could be sold on a subscription basis. At any rate I am willing to take a good look at the years from 1950 to the current date.

To wind this colyum up, I must say that I've been requested to review a book called *I Go Pogo*. Sorry. I can't. Walt Kelly's superb satire is incapable of being explained to any satisfaction. If you're sane, you roll in the aisles unable to talk. If you're not sane, you don't understand him. However, I must admit that Albert is my favorite alligator.

COMING EVENTS

As you may have noticed, we've tried to use only two-part serials, and to avoid unnatural demands for ending an installment on a cliff-hanger. We've long thought that there was no need to keep teasing the readers with an infinite number of artificial climaxes to keep him reading, and we intend to go on with that policy. This, however, brings up something of a problem next issue when we begin a novel by Poul Anderson which is longer than many books today. We've finally decided, however, that we'll pack in the whole first half in the one issue, rather than switching to more and shorter installments.

It's entitled THE ESCAPE, and Anderson has a nice situation here. We know, for instance, that the human brain works at a pretty low efficiency—and there's every indication that the same applies to animal brains. There's no logical reason for this—it looks purely accidental. Now, suppose that accident were removed, and our low-level brains (which can learn to handle such concepts as the unified field theory, incidentally) begin to hit on all cylinders?

What happens to our dumb animals, our morons—and our geniuses? And what is the necessary result of an organism that had to evolve under the worst possible conditions, once those conditions are improved? It makes for a nice situation—and also for the need of some of the trickiest handling of type we've seen to do the idea justice!

COLLECTIVUM

BY MIKE LEWIS

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

The Oren were one and their strength was legion. They had it all figured out, in their own parasitical, cold-blooded way. But they'd neglected one she-cat of a girl. . . .

He crossed the rickety bridge at sundown and saw the squat, fat fellow whipping the girl with a board. His mind leaped to a conclusion: *an Orenian prowler, convincing his victim to hold still.* He clubbed the fat fellow with a rock and toppled him over the seawall into the lagoon where he floated face-down.

"Are you stung?" he asked the girl.

She picked herself up weakly, and she was a gold-bronze beauty with a black mane of hair and long, narrow eyes. She shook her head to his question and whimpered slightly while she examined her bruises.

"He was my husband," she explained.

"Not an Orenian?" he gasped.

She shook her head. "But he was going to kill me."

Morgan shot a horrified glance at the body floating far out on the swift tide. Three sharks were circling lazily. He looked around for a boat, saw none. He swiftly estimated his chances of swimming out after the fat man and towing him in. The chances appeared to be nil. Nevertheless, he began stripping off his shirt.

"Don't bother," said the girl. "He was stung last week."

Morgan stared at her silently

for a moment. She seemed not in the least perturbed. If the man had been stung by an Orenian, he was lost anyway. Ruefully, he rebuttoned his shirt.

"I leapt to a bad conclusion."

"That he was an Orenian? He would have been, soon. Besides —you *have* to leap to conclusions nowadays, to stay alive."

"You don't seem to worry."

"I told you, he was going to kill me."

"Why?"

"Because—" She paused and stared out across the twilight water, gathering a slow frown. "Because he was crazy."

Morgan's eyes flickered over her trim figure, and he thought —*maybe*. She had a trace of Seminole blood, he decided— with the quiet sultriness that it leant to her face.

"I'm heading west," he announced.

"To the cypress?" She cooly inspected his sturdy arms, clipped features, and the hatchet in his belt-rope. She nodded faintly to herself. "Want company?"

He shrugged and turned half away. "It's okay with me." He set off down the road and she followed a few feet to the rear.

"Florida coast's getting to be lousy with them," she called.

"Orenians?"

"Yeah. Whole truckload of them passed through yesterday. On their way to Miami, I guess. One man said he saw an airplane yesterday."

"They must be reviving the industry up north."

"Yeah. Trucks by the dozen. Say—where've *you* been hiding?"

"Mangrove island. Been there six months."

"Get lonesome?"

"And tired of sitting still. Small island."

"You should have stayed—but I'm glad you didn't."

He shot her a sharp glance. She failed to look bereaved at the loss of her mate. But that was not unusual. Most marriages nowadays were contracted by brute force—and dissolved the same way. She probably felt that rolling the fat one in the drink gave her a claim on him.

When the last trace of gray fled from the west, they walked westward along the old highway beyond the limits of the coastal town which was now nearly deserted. They talked softly as they trudged along, and he learned that her name was Shera and that she had been a dancer in a small Miami nightspot, before the Orenians came. She had joined the fat one a year ago—because he owned a gun, and was therefore good insurance against wandering Orenians. But when the ammunition was

gone, she tried to leave him, which resulted in the incident by the waterfront.

Morgan was irked that he had blundered into a family affair, and troubled that he had relieved the fellow of all worldly cares. Nevertheless, if the man had been stung, the free world would say—"job well done." For in a few weeks he would have ceased to be strictly human, becoming a dangerous threat to his fellows. And if the girl had been unable to escape from him before that time, she would have been subject to the same plight. Morgan decided that he would have done the same thing if given time to weigh the situation beforehand.

"How far are we going?" she asked.

"We're turning off on the next side-road," he grunted.

"You know the country?"

"I used to." He waved his arm to the south. "Road winds through a swamp, then climbs to high ground. Ends in a spruce forest."

"Got any food?"

"Will have, tomorrow. Ditches are full of warmouth perch. Plenty of swamp cabbage, wild oranges, bull frogs, papaya."

"I'm hungry now."

"That's tough."

She whimpered a little but soon fell silent. He saw she was limping, and he slowed his pace. Pity was a lost emotion in an age of chaos; but she was strong, healthy, and appeared capable of doing a day's work. He decided to humor her, lest she decide to trudge alone.

When they reached the swamp, branches closed over the narrow trail road, screening off the sky and hiding the thin slice of moon. The girl hung close to his elbow. A screech owl hooted in the trees, and a thousand frogs clamored in the blackness. Once the scream of a panther split the night, and the girl sobbed as if echoing the cry. They hurried ahead through the overgrown weeds.

"Drop flat!" he hissed suddenly.

She obeyed without a sound. They crouched together at the edge of the road, listening. A distant rustling came from the roadway to the south.

"Orenians?" she whispered.

"Orenians."

"How many?"

"Can't tell. They always march in step. Keep quiet."

Morgan gripped the hatchet and set himself for a quick spring. As they drew nearer, he decided that there were two of them. Their movements were perfectly coordinated, since they were of one mind, one conscious-

ness—that of Oren. The girl tapped his arm with the blade of a knife.

"I'll take one," she breathed.

When the footsteps were almost upon them, Oren halted. There was no outcry; the Orenians had no need for vocal communication; their thought-exchange was bio-electromagnetic.

"Now!" howled Morgan, and launched himself at the enemy.

His hatchet cleft the face of the nearest foe, and he turned instantly to help the girl. A pair of bodies thrashed about on the ground. Then she stood up, and he heard her dry the knife on some grass. It was over in an instant.

"Not stung?"

"No."

"That was too easy," he said. "I don't like it."

"Why?"

"They don't ambush that easy unless they're in rapport with another group someplace close. We'll have some more of them after us if we don't get away."

They hurried about the unpleasant task of splitting open the once-human skulls to remove the legless parasite-entities that filled the bony hollows where brains belonged. The Oren creatures lived in their stolen homes long after the borrowed body died, and they could signal others to the vicinity. Morgan tossed the globular little creatures in the ditch where they lay squeaking faintly—helpless, once-removed from the body of the host who had long since ceased to exist as a human being.

"Let's go!" he grunted.

"Same way?"

"Yeah."

"But they *came* from that way!"

"Have to chance it. Too dangerous, hanging around the highways. Out here we can find places to hide."

They set off at a trot, chancing an ambush in reverse. But Morgan reasoned that the Orenians had been returning to the highway after a day's exploring on the side-roads. After plunging for half-an-hour through the darkness, the road began winding upward. The cypress archway parted, revealing star-scattered sky. They slowed to a walk.

"Can't we sit down to rest?" she panted.

"Can if you like. Alone."

She shuddered and caught at his arm. "I'll stick."

"Sorry," he murmured. "We can stop soon. But they'll be chasing along the road looking for us. I want to get into the spruce forest first."

She was silent for a time,

then said; "With Earlich, it was the other way around."

"Earlich? The fat boy? What do you mean?"

"I always had to wait on him."

"Did you wait?"

"Until he ran out of bullets."

Morgan clucked in mock disapproval. But he was not in the least shocked. In the flight from Oren, it was devil take the hindmost. Weaklings, and people who paused for pity, had long since been stung. After several weeks of agony in which the brain became the nutrient fodder of the growing Oren embryo, they were lost in the single communal mind of Oren, dead as individuals. The adult parasite assumed the bodily directive-function of the brain. The creatures so afflicted became mere cells in a total social organism now constituting a large part of humanity.

Shera suddenly whistled surprise. "Is that a *cabin* there?—through the trees?"

They had penetrated several hundred yards into the spruce. A black hulk lay ahead in a small clearing.

"Yeah," Morgan grunted. "I'd hoped it'd still be there."

She nudged him hard. "Close-mouthed, aren't you?"

"If I told you it was here, and then it was gone—how would you feel?"

"You think about things like that?" She stared at him curiously in the faint moonlight. "Nobody else does. Not now."

"Come on," he growled. "Let's see if it's occupied."

The door was locked. Morgan chopped it open without ceremony. The cabin was vacant except for a corpse on the floor. The corpse was of ancient vintage and slightly mummified. He noticed that it had killed itself with a shotgun—possibly because of an Oren-sting. He caught up the scarce weapon lest the girl grab it and run. Then he dragged the corpse out by the foot and left it under an orange tree. The oranges were green, but he picked a few to stave off the pangs of hunger.

When he returned, Shera had found matches and a lamp. She sat at a table, counting twelve-gauge shells.

"How many?"

"Even dozen." She gazed greedily at the gun. "I won't steal it."

He pitched her an orange and propped the gun in the corner. "If you did, it would be a mistake."

Her eyes followed him about the room as he inspected the meagre, dust-laden furnishings.

"I like you, Morgan," she murmured suddenly.

"Like you liked fat-boy?"

"He was a pig."

"But you liked his gun."

"You'd do all right without a gun."

"So?"

"Why don't we team up?"

"Whoa! We may not be looking for the same things."

She shrugged and toyed with the shells while she stared thoughtfully into the lamplight. "What's there to look for? Besides escape from Oren."

"Nothing maybe."

"But you think so, huh?"

He straightened suddenly and waggled a pair of cans over his head for her to see—beans, and a tin of tobacco. He set them aside and continued searching the cupboards.

"But you think so, huh?' she repeated.

"Shut up and heat the beans."

Shera caught the can and speared it with her knife. It spewed. She sniffed, cursed, and threw them out. "We eat oranges."

"But what *are* you looking for, Morgan?"

He rolled himself a cigaret with the aged tobacco which was little more than dust. He came to the table and sat facing her. She had placed an orange before him. Almost absently he laid the blade of his hatchet atop it. The weight of it split the fruit neatly.

"Sharp," she muttered.

"Sharp enough to split Oren skulls."

"And that's all you're looking for?"

"I don't know. Ever hear of the Maquis?"

She hesitated. "Two wars ago? The French underground? I remember vaguely. I was a *little* urchin then."

"They had a goal like mine, I guess. To harass. They couldn't win, and they knew it. They killed and wrecked and maimed because they hated. I want to organize a band of Oren-killers —with no purpose save to ambush and slaughter. I sat on that island and thought and thought—and I got disgusted with myself for hiding."

The girl munched a cheekful of bitter orange pulp and looked thoughtful. "Wish I had some clothes," she muttered indifferently.

He shot her a hard glance then stood up to pace the floor. "Ambush, slaughter, and *rob*," he amended, and looked at her sharply again.

"Rob?"

"Oren's taken our cities. He's reorganizing industry. With individuals coordinated by a mass-mind, it'll be a different kind of industry, a more efficient kind.

Think of a factory in which a worker at one position shares consciousness with a worker in another position. Does away with control mechanisms."

"You said 'rob'."

He grinned sourly. "When they get production started, there'll be plenty to steal. Guns, explosives—clothes."

She nodded slowly. "Trouble is: every time you kill an Orenian, they all feel him die. They come running."

"Sometimes. Unless they're too busy. They don't care too much about individual deaths. It's the total mental commune of Oren that matters. Like now. They could find us if they really tried. But why should they? They'd come as recruiting agents—with bared stingers—if they came."

"They'll come tomorrow," she said fatalistically.

"We'll try to be ready."

She inspected him carefully, as if weighing his size and strength. "I still want to team up with you."

He recalled how quickly she had knifed the Orenian to death on the road. "Okay—if you'll follow me without argument."

"I can take orders." She folded her arms behind her head and leaned back with a grin. Her breasts jutted haughtily beneath a torn blouse. "*Most* orders, that is."

"Hell, I'm not marrying you!" he snapped.

She laughed scornfully. "You will, Morgan, you will."

Morgan lashed the shotgun to a chair, aimed it at the door, and ran a length of cord from the trigger to the shattered lock. "Don't trip over the cord in the night," he warned as he blew out the lamp. Then he bedded down in the corner on the floor.

A short time later he heard her sobbing softly. "What the devil's wrong?" he snarled disgustedly.

"Thanks, Morgan—thanks," she whispered.

For a moment he felt sorry for her. Apparently she was thanking him for the bed. Fat boy had evidently taken the best of everything and given her the crumbs of Lazarus. Such were the mores of chaos. But Morgan quit congratulating himself. He had chosen the floor because it looked cleaner than the bed.

He was awakened before dawn by the rapid sputter of rain on the roof. It dribbled through several holes and spread across the floor. He sat up shivering. Shera was a glowing cigarette near the window.

"Can't sleep?" he asked.

"I'm scared," she answered.

Faintly he could see her profile silhouetted against the pane. She was watching outside the cabin.

"I've got a funny feeling—that something's out there."

"Heard anything?"

"Just a feeling."

Morgan felt ice along his sides. "Shera—do you get hunches, feelings, intuitions very often?" His voice was hushed, worried.

"Yeah."

"Have you always?"

"No—I don't think I used to."

He was silent for a long time; then he hissed, "Are you *sure* you haven't been stung recently?"

Another brief silence. Then the girl laughed softly. A wave of prickles crept along his scalp.

"I've got the shotgun in my lap, Morgan."

"How long?" he whispered in horror.

"Six months."

"*Six months!* You're lying! You'd be fully depersonalized! You'd be in complete liaison with Oren!"

"But I'm not. Sometimes I can feel when they're near. That's all."

"But if it were true—your brain would be replaced by the parasite!"

"I wouldn't know. Apparently it's not."

Morgan couldn't believe it. But he sat stunned in the darkness. What was this thing in the cabin with him? Was she still human? He began inching along the wall, but a board creaked.

"I don't want to shoot you, Morgan. Don't rush me. Besides—there's something outside, I tell you."

"Why should *you* worry about that?—if you've really been stung."

"The first sting evidently didn't take. The next one might. That's why."

"You weren't sick?"

"During the incubation period? I was sick. Plenty sick."

Morgan shook his head thoughtfully. If she had been through the violent illness of the parasite's incubation, she should now have one of the squeaking little degenerates in place of a brain. The fibers of the small animals grew slowly along the neural arcs, replacing each nerve cell, forming a junction at each synapse. There was reason to believe that the parasite preserved the memories that had been stored in the brain, but they became blended with all the other individualities that comprised Oren, thereby losing the personality in the mental ocean of the herd-mind.

Was it possible that if one invader were out of mental contact with the herd-mind, that the individual host might retain its personality? But how could she be out of contact?

"They're getting close to the door," she whispered.

Morgan gripped his hatchet and waited, not knowing who would be the greater enemy—the girl or the prowlers.

"When the door opens, strike a match. So I can see to shoot."

Morgan crouched low. There came a light tapping at the torn screen, then several seconds of silence. Someone pushed at the door. It swung slowly open.

"Jerry?" called a faint voice. "Jerry—thet you in theah?"

Morgan breathed easily again. An Orenian would not have called out. "Who is it?" he barked.

There was no answer. Morgan groped for the lamp, found it, and held the match poised but not lighted.

"Come in here!" he ordered. "We've got a gun."

"Yes, suh!"

A shadow appeared in the door frame. Morgan struck the match. It was an ancient Negro with a burlap sack in one hand and a bloodstained pitchfork in the other. He stood blinking at Shera's shotgun and at the lamp as Morgan lit it. His overalls were rainsoaked, his eyes wild.

"Come in and sit down."

"Thankya suh, thankya." He shuffled inside and slumped into a rickety chair.

"What're you doing wandering around like this?"

"Been a hunting. Yes, suh, been doing me a little hunting." He sighed wearily and mopped the rain out of his tight coils of graying hair.

Morgan eyed the burlap sack suspiciously. It was wet, and it wriggled. "What's that?"

"'Ass my night's work," said the man and jerked a corner of the sack. It opened, and three Oren parasites spilled out with weak squeaks of anguish.

The girl gasped angrily. "They're still in contact with Oren. Kill them!"

"Yes'm, they're in contact—but without eyes, how're they gonna know wheah they are?"

Morgan made a wry mouth at Shera. The old man was smart—and right. But he felt another uneasy suspicion. The old man said "hunting." Hunting for what—food? The idea twisted disgust in Morgan's stomach.

"What're you going to do with them?"

"Oh—" The oldster kicked one of them lightly with his toe. The pink thing rolled against the wall. There were

vestigial signs of arms, legs, but tiny and useless, grown fast to the body. The visitor glanced up with a sheepish grin.

"I feed 'em to my dawgs, suh. Dawgs like 'em. Getting so my dawgs can smell the difference twixt a man and an Orenian. I'm training 'em. They help me with my hunting."

Morgan sat up sharply. "How many dogs you got, and where do you live?"

"Fo' dawgs. I live in the swamp. They's a big hollow cypress—I got my bed in it."

"Why didn't you move in here?"

The old man looked at the place in the center of the floor where the dust outlined the shape of a human body. "Suicide," he muttered. Then he looked up. "'Tain't superstition, exactly. I just don't—"

"Never mind," Morgan murmured. He glanced at the girl. She had laid the shotgun aside and was lighting a cigarette. He tensed himself, then sprang like a cat.

The gun was in his hands, and he was backing across the room before she realized what had happened. Her face went suddenly white. The old man just sat and looked baffled.

"Can you call one of your dogs?"

"Yes, suh, but—"

"Call one, I want to try something."

Shera bit her lip. "Why, Morgan? To see if what I said is true?"

"Yeah."

"I'll save you the trouble." She stared into his face solemnly and slowly opened her mouth. From beneath her tongue, a barb slowly protruded until its point projected several inches from her lips. Morgan shivered.

The Negro, who was sitting rigidly frozen, suddenly dove for his pitchfork with a wild cry. "Witcherwoman! Orenstinger!"

Shera darted aside as the pitchfork sailed toward her and shattered the window. She seized it quickly and held him at bay. The old man looked startled. Orenians tried to sting, not to fight.

"Hold it!" bellowed Morgan.

Reluctantly, the oldster backed away and fell into the chair again. But his eyes clung to the girl with hatred.

"She stung ya, suh?"

"No, and she won't sting you." He gazed at Shera coldly. "Drop that fork."

She propped it against the wall but stayed close to it. "Okay, Morgan," she purred. "It's your show."

"It's going to be yours. Sit down and tell us everything that happened before you were stung and after. I want to figure out what makes you different from the others, and why you aren't in liaison with Oren."

She smiled acidly. "You won't believe it."

"You'll tell it though," he growled darkly.

She turned to gaze at the door. "Earlich had a little girl —by his first wife. She got stung eight months ago. Before she ran away, she stung her pet kitten. I didn't know it. The kitten stayed with us. *It* stung me." She paused. "Here's the part you won't believe: before Earlich killed it, I was coming into liaison with the cat."

"*God!*"

"It's true."

"Have you ever stung anyone?"

"No. Earlich didn't even know."

"Any desire to?"

She reddened slowly and set her jaw.

The old man giggled. "Wants ta sting a cat, ah bet, suh."

She shot him a furious glance, but didn't deny it. They sat for a long time in silence. Morgan lowered the shotgun, then laid it aside.

"Thanks," she murmured, and looked really grateful.

But Morgan was staring thoughtfully at the oldster. "Your dogs ever tree a panther?"

"Yas, *suh*, they're good at that!" He grinned and waggled his head.

"Many panthers in the swamp?"

"Lo'dy, yes—" He paused. His eyes widened slightly.

Both of them looked suddenly at the girl. Her eyebrows arched, her mouth flew open. She put a frightened hand to her throat.

"Oh *no!* Oh God, *nooo!*" she shrilled.

Morgan glanced at the window, sighed, and stood up.

"It's getting light outside. We better hunt some food."

Morgan and the old man, whose name was Hanson, went out to prowl along the outskirts of the swamp. They returned at mid-morning with a string of perch, a rabbit, and a heart of swamp cabbage. The girl cooked the meal in silence, scarcely looking at them. Her face was sullen, angry. Morgan turned while he was eating and saw her staring contemplatively at the back of his neck—where the Oren-sting was usually planted.

"Nobody's going to force you into anything, Shera," he said quietly. "We won't mention it again."

She said nothing, but stopped glaring at him. He wondered how much the Oren organ had affected her personality.

"Do you still feel the same—as you did a year ago?" he asked her. "Any difference? Any loss of memory? Loss of function?"

"No."

"That means the alien organ exactly duplicates the neural circuits it supplants."

"So?"

"So the rapport is the only special feature. Without it, you're apparently still human."

"Thanks." It was a bitter, acid tone.

"I can't understand why the cat-business caused . . . unless . . . rapport is achieved by a sort of resonance—and you couldn't get it with a cat and with humans too—"

"Drop it, will you!" She turned and stalked out of the shanty. At the doorway, she broke into a run.

Morgan looked at Hanson. Hanson waggled his head and grinned ruefully. "That—uh—lady likes you, suh."

Morgan snorted and went to the door. She was just disappearing into a tangle of weeds that had once been an orange grove. He set off after her at a quick trot. "Shera, wait—"

He caught up with her at the edge of the swamp, where she was backing quickly away from a coiled water-moccasin. He tossed a stick at the snake, and it slithered into the shallow water. Then he caught her arms, and she whirled to face him with defiant eyes.

"You think I'm a—a—"

"I don't."

"You act like I'm barely human."

"I didn't mean it that way—"

"You don't even trust me, and you want me to—"

"I *don't*."

"Trust me." She nodded.

"I do."

She stamped her foot in the soft muck. "Then kiss me."

A grim possibility occurred to him, and he hesitated an instant too long. She wrenched herself free with a snarl and bolted back toward the shanty. "I *could* have done *that* last night," she snapped over her shoulder, "while you were asleep."

The chase led back to the house. When he burst back inside, she was already panting over the sink, scraping plates. When he approached her from behind, she whirled quickly, clenching a platter in both hands. When she brought it down across his head with a clatter of broken china, Mor-

gan gave up. He retreated, nursing his scalp, then stalked angrily out to join Hanson. Dogs were baying to the north. The old man looked worried.

"They're comin', suh. Must be a lot of 'em. I got my dawgs trained so they don't bark less they's a bunch of 'em."

Morgan listened for a moment. "I hear a truck."

"That's so?" Hanson shook his head. "They ain't never come in a truck before."

"Truck—must be a dozen of them at least." He eyed Hanson sharply. "Run or fight?"

The old man scratched his toe in the dirt. "Ain't never yet run from a fight."

Morgan turned silently and strode back in the house for the gun. Shera ignored him. "Orenians coming," he grunted, and went back out to join the oldster.

Morgan and Hanson trotted through the scrub spruce, heading for the roadway. But they turned short and cut north through the edge of the brush. Morgan caught a glimpse of the truck far ahead. Hanson's hounds were snarling about the wheels and leaping up toward the bed. The road was soft sand to their right. Ducking low, they darted ahead until it appeared firm enough to admit the truck.

"We want them to get past us," he hissed to Hanson. "When they do, you stand up and show yourself. When they start piling out, I'll start shooting. Okay?"

"Yes, suh." He patted his pitchfork and grinned. They stopped and crouched low in the brush."

"Please, suh—don't hit my dawgs."

"I'm counting on them to help."

The truck grumbled slowly past them. The hounds were snapping furiously as they tried to leap over the tailgate. Morgan caught a glimpse of white faces, staring fixedly at nothing. Then he nudged the oldster.

Hanson stood up, shaking his pitchfork and shrieking hate at the occupants. The truck moved on a few yards, then ground to a stop.

"Come and join us," thundered a collective voice. *"For we are Oren, who is one."*

Morgan could see nothing through the screen of foliage. But the old man was still howling invective.

"From the stars comes Oren. To the stars he goes. Come and join us."

"Come get me, you devils. I'll kill ya!"

"Oren is millions. He cannot die. We come."

Hanson's foot nudged Mor-

gan's nervously. Still he lay under cover, waiting for their advance. Feet shuffled on the bed of the truck. The hounds were going wild. There was something weird about sounds of Orenian movement. It was always coordinated—so many marionettes with one set of controls. But they could shift from parallel coordination to complementary, dovetailing each set of movements to achieve the common purpose.

Morgan burst forth from the brush and fired at the tight group of bodies near the back of the truck. They were packed in a circle to protect the group from the slashing fangs of the dogs. Two of them fell, without outcries. He fired three times before they broke apart. There were still at least eight of them, but the dogs had two down.

"Oh, God! Children!" Morgan bellowed. "Call off the dogs!"

"Not *human* children."

"Call them off!"

Hanson obeyed reluctantly. A pair of calm-eyed child-things scrambled to their feet and began advancing with the group of adults. The Orenians fanned out and began closing in like the fingers of a giant fist. Morgan shot four of them before the circle closed to hatchet range. He and Hanson stood back to back, slashing out at the ring of fanged faces.

The attackers were weaponless. They cared nothing for individual bodies. The collectivum swayed, writhed, darted in—and fell in blood. The wounded crawled close to their ankles, barbs protruding from their lips. They roared constantly, *"Oren is paradise. Come to Oren."*

A child, who had been rescued from one of the dogs, crawled among the legs of the adults and lunged for Morgan's feet. He was forced to kick it back with a hard heel.

Suddenly their ranks broke. There were only four of them left standing. They backed away and stopped—three men and a middle-aged woman. *"Oren will return."* They turned and marched toward the truck.

"We need the truck," panted Morgan.

Hanson flung his pitchfork and caught the last one in the center of the back. The others moved on unheeding. Morgan sadly lifted the shotgun.

When it was over, they went to look at the two child-things. One was unconscious, but not badly wounded. The other had a broken arm. It shot out its fang and circled. With a sick heart, Morgan lashed out and

caught it by the hair, before it could sting him.

"See if there's pliers in the truck," he muttered.

Hanson returned with them after a moment's rummaging. They jerked out its fang and let it go. It walked calmly to the north, purpose defeated. They did the same to the other.

"It's crazy," he was gasping. "Stark crazy. They spend over a dozen Orenians just to get two of us. And they didn't want to kill us at that."

"Lo'dy, suh! Who *is* Oren? You know?"

Morgan shook his head. "He's the collectivum, Han."

"But suh—he had to come from some place. People weren't like this—"

"Yeah. I guess he came from space, like they say."

"Just them little pink brain-gobblers?"

"Uh-uh! Scientists figure they came in some alien host. The hosts couldn't take Earth conditions. They stung a few humans and died."

"Anybody ever see 'em?"

"Not that I know of. Nor found their ships."

"O Lo'dy, I'm sick, suh."

"Let's go back to the shanty, Han."

"Yes, suh. Look on the back o' my neck, will you suh?"

Morgan looked, then turned slowly away.

"Is it, suh?"

Morgan took a deep breath. "I—I—guess—"

"I stumbled once. I guess he got me then."

Morgan laid a hand on the old man's arm. There was nothing to say.

"Mistuh Morgan—would you do me a favo'?"

Morgan knew what he wanted. "I can't shoot you, Han. I'll leave you the gun, though."

"No, suh, that ain't it. I was wondering—could you help me catch a painter tonight—before I go?"

"A panther?" Morgan squeezed his arm and blinked hard. He grinned. "Sure, Han."

"Guess it'll be two, three days afore it starts happening to me."

"Yeah. Will you want the gun?"

"No, suh, don't think much of suicide. I'll just go out and wrestle me a 'gator in the swamp."

They went back to the house. Shera was sitting on the step.

"I've made up my mind," she said dully.

"About what?"

"I'll do it."

She got up and walked away. When Morgan tried to follow, she turned and flicked out the barb at him, then laughed cold-

ly. Shivering, he turned away.

That night the dogs treed a panther, and Hanson died. It happened while he was climbing with pole and rope, angling to get a noose on the lithe beast while Morgan waited with another rope below. The lantern was hung from a branch while Hanson inched out on the limb. When he thrust the noose forward, the panther brushed it aside with a quick slap. It leaped. Hanson lost his balance and crashed to the ground with a howl. The panther slapped a dog spinning and darted away in the night with three dogs following.

Morgan knelt quickly beside the old man. His back was broken.

"Please, suh—don't move me. The Lo'd's a-comin' fo' old Han."

"Hush, fellow," Morgan murmured.

"Suh, that painter's a she. And they's cubs somewheres."

"Cubs?"

"Yes, suh. She's spooky-like. Cubs. You stay with my dawgs. Take care of 'em, suh."

"Sure, Han."

"You lemme be now, suh. Lemme be alone." His voice was a faint whisper. "I gotta die by myself. Man oughtn't to have company then."

Morgan hesitated. He sighed and climbed slowly to his feet. He stumbled away, leaving the lantern hanging overhead. He sat a hundred yards away in the shadow of a gaunt cypress, listening to the baying of the hounds, the moaning of the old man, and the croaking of the swamp. When he returned, the oldster was dead.

Morgan returned to the shanty at dawn, carrying a pair of whimpering panther cubs and the skin of the mother. He exchanged a dark glance with Shera at the door. She took them silently and fondled them for a moment.

"Hanson's dead."

She nodded gravely. "Soon there'll be no one but Oren."

"The collectivum."

They went inside and sat facing one another. His eyes moved over the dark slope of her shoulders, the proud set of her breasts, and back to the sweetly sullen face with its narrow eyes.

"I'm going to join you," he said.

The eyes widened a little. She shook her head quickly. "In a liaison of two? No. It might spread, get linked up with Oren."

"Not if it's through these." He stroked one of the cubs. It snarled.

"It's a chance."

"We'll take it." He leaned forward to kiss her . . .

A year had passed since the night of Hanson's death. A freight train dragged southward in the twilight, wending its way through pine forest and scrubland. Oren was its crew. It crossed a trestle and moved through a patch of jungle. A sudden shadow flitted from the brush, leaped the ditch, and sprinted along beside the rails. Another followed it, and another. The low-flying shadows slowly overtook the engine. The leader sprang, clung for a moment by its forepaws, and pulled itself aboard. Brakes howled on the rails as Oren stopped the train. Two man-figures leaped from the cab—and into the jaws of a killer-cat.

Another cat scrambled upon the tender, leaped to the top of a box-car and sped backward along the train to seek the rest of the crew. The bodies were left in the ditches.

When it was over, the cats collected in a group on the roadbed. They sat licking their forepaws while a dozen shabbily dressed guerrillas moved out of the jungle in a disorderly band.

"Joe, have your bunch unload the dynamite!" bawled a burly leader. "We'll take the tank-car. Emmert, get the packs on those carts."

"I wonder," said a voice to a comrade, "who's controlling those animals. You'd think they were Oren. Why don't they sting?"

"Stingers ripped out, chum. Why ask questions? They're on our side. And we'll win, eventually—if this keeps up."

As a group, the panthers looked at the two men as they passed. One of them shuddered.

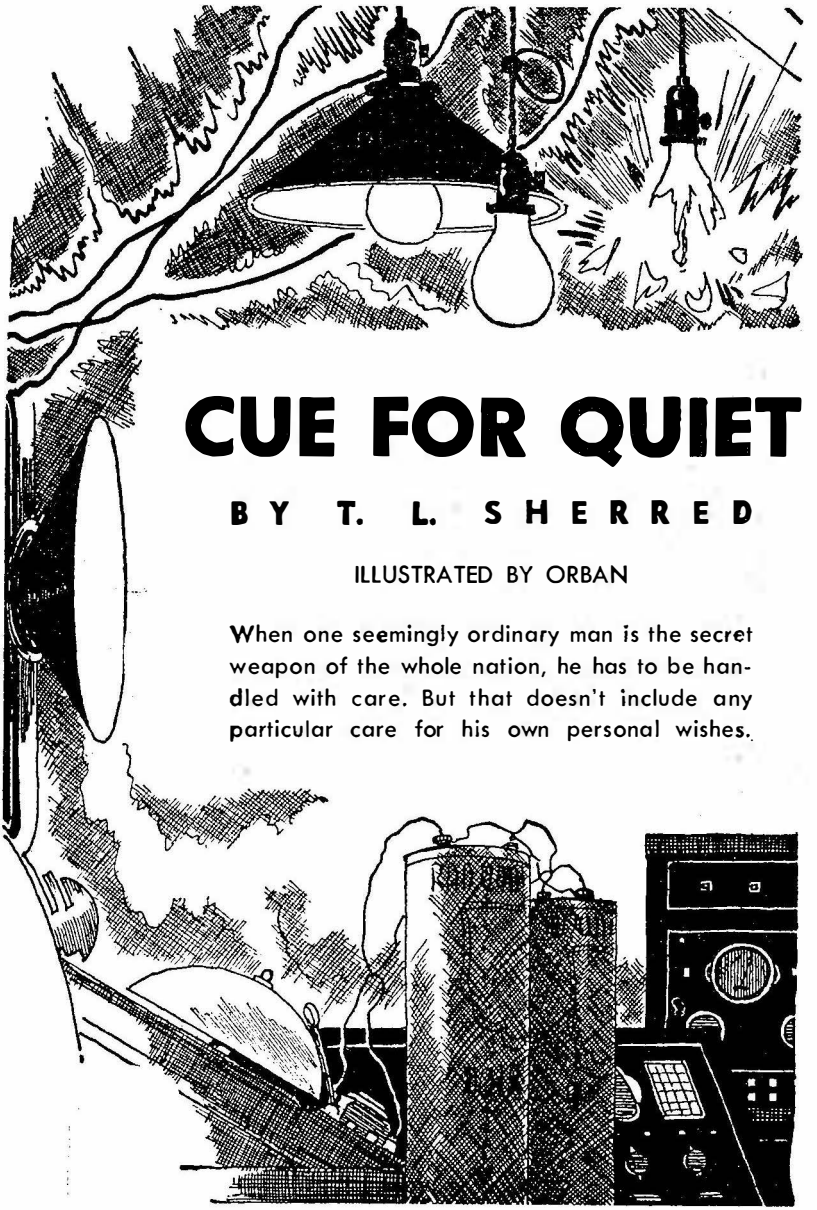
"Lordy! I'd swear those cats were grinning!"

STRAIGHT, PLACE AND SHOW

Results on the March issue show that James E. Gunn's story was almost universally liked. It drew a lusty chorus of raves, to lead off the readers' preference.

1. BREAKING POINT, by James E. Gunn
2. ULLR UPRISING, by H. Bean Piper
3. THE WORSHIPPERS, by Damon Knight
4. STOP, LOOK AND DIG, by George O. Smith
5. DIVINITY, by William Morrison

As usual, the short stories are handicapped against the fuller development of the novelettes.



CUE FOR QUIET

BY T. L. SHERRED

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

When one seemingly ordinary man is the secret weapon of the whole nation, he has to be handled with care. But that doesn't include any particular care for his own personal wishes.

SYNOPSIS: *When PETE MILLER develops a tearing headache and can't stand the din of a television show, he finds he has a strange new ability. The television set burns out; the same happens to a jukebox. In fact, after a little testing, he discovers he can ruin any piece of machinery by simply thinking against it. And for awhile, Detroit suffers a wave of wrecked radios, autos, and other noisy machines.*

As a result, the FBI moves in, suspecting sabotage. They trace the trouble to Pete, and pick him up. When they find he can stop an electric fan by mental control, they begin to get even more excited. The military men are called in, and more tests are made. As a result, he's turned over to a body-guard named BOB STEIN and told that he's being tested as a "secret weapon." An older man named SMITH explains that he isn't exactly a prisoner—but that his wife, HELEN, has been given a pension of some sort, and informed that Pete is now dead! He's to be kept from roaming around until certain tests are made, on the theory that (a) a man with such power might be useful in war; (b) such a man can't be permitted to roam around loose; and (c) that no matter how patriotic he might be, he could fall into enemy espionage hands, with tragic results.

He's flown across the country and then hustled into a Navy ship, where he's treated well, but kept under wraps. Finally, he is informed that the big test is about to begin. It's obvious that they have to find out whether he can also wreck the atomic bomb!

Pete isn't sure himself—but he has to try. And he finds he can detonate an A-bomb. It will go off, of course—but at a height and distance which he chooses. He can simply draw an imaginary boundary in the air and say to himself, "So far, and no further." And as it reaches the boundary, the bomb explodes.

He could also detonate bombs in their storage depots. With him around, all modern mechanized armies are totally useless —weapons are dangerous only to their owners. Pete is now the major item of National Defense. He isn't a person, any more; he's an institution. He's so super-top-secret that they'd have to find new words to fit his case.

After the return from the tests, Bob Stein is forced to admit Pete is "in" for life. They'll give him everything to make him comfortable—except freedom.

PART II

Smith knocked early the next morning when Stein was still clearing the breakfast coffee. For that time of day he was disgustingly happy.

"The customary greeting, I believe, is good morning, is it not?"

I gulped the rest of my cup. "Yeah. What's on your mind?"

He sat down and waved away Stein's wordless offer of a cup. "How would we like to take a little trip?"

We. The editorial we. "Why not?"

"This little trip—how would you like to go back home for awhile?"

"Home?" I couldn't believe my ears, and I stared at him.

He'd made a slip, and he was sorry. "I meant, back Stateside."

I slumped back in my chair. "Then you heard me the first time. What's the difference?"

"Quite a bit of difference. No, Stein, you stay here. We're all in this together."

"Sure," I said. "Stick around. I'm the last one to find out what's going on around here."

He didn't appreciate my sarcasm. "I wouldn't say that, Peter."

"Forget it. What's the story?"

"We want you to go back where we can run some tests, this time as comprehensive as we can arrange."

I couldn't see why what we'd done wouldn't be enough. "Don't tell me you have more than the Bomb up your sleeve."

No, it wasn't like that. "There aren't more than four or six that know anything but that the Bomb was set off prematurely because of motor failure on the drone. The general knowledge is that it was just another test in routine fashion. But, as I said, there are a few that know the truth. They think it desirable that you be examined scientifically, and completely."

"Why?" I felt ornery.

He knew it, and showed a little impatience. "Use your head, Peter. You know better than that. We know you're unique. We want to know why, and perhaps how, perhaps, your ability can be duplicated."

That appealed to me. "And if you can find out what makes me tick I can go back to living like myself again?" I took his silence for assent. I had to. "Good. What do I do, and when?"

He shrugged. "Nothing, yet. You'll go to . . . well, let's call it college. It shouldn't take too long. A week, maybe, maybe two, or four, at the most."

"Then what?"

He didn't know. We'd talk

about that later. Okay with me. If a doctor could find out how I was whistling chords, all well and good. If not—could I be any worse off?

"Then it's settled. We'll leave today, if it can be arranged, and I feel sure it can. Robert—" to Stein—"if you'll come with me we'll try to make the necessary arrangements." Stein left, and Smith left, and I got up and looked into the mirror. I needed a shave again.

My college didn't have a laboratory worth counting when I went to school. We'd had a stadium, and a losing football team instead. Now the balding, bearded physicists sat in the front row when the appropriations were spooned out. I suppose that's all for the better. I really wouldn't know. The old fellow that met us at the front door looked like an airedale, and like an airedale he sniffed all around me before getting into combat range.

"So you're Peter Miller!"

"That's my name," I admitted. I wondered what all the dials and the gadgets were for. It looked to me like the front end of one of these computers I used to see in the magazines.

"I'm Kellner. You must be Stein, right? Never mind your coats. Just follow me," and off he trotted, and we trailed him into a bare office with what looked like the equipment of a spendthrift dentist.

"You sit here," and he waved at a straightbacked chair. I sat down, Stein shifted nervously from one foot to the other, and in a moment Kellner came back with a dozen others. He didn't bother to introduce any of them. They all stood off and gaped at who'd killed Cock Robin.

Kellner broke the silence. "Physical first?" There was a general nod. "Physical, psychological, then—we'll come to that later." To Stein: "Want to come along? Rather wait here? This is going to take some time, you know."

Stein knew that. He also wanted to come along. Those were his orders.

I felt self-conscious taking off my clothes in front of that ghoulish crew. The sheet they left me kept off no drafts, and I felt like a corpse ready for the embalmer, and likely appeared one. Stethoscope, a scale for my weight, a tape for my arm and the blood pressure, lights that blinked in my eyes and bells that rang in my ear . . . when they were finished with me I felt like a used Tinker-Toy.

"Do I pass? Will I live?"

Kellner didn't like juvenile humor. He turned me over to

another group who, so help me, brought out a box of children's blocks to put together, timing me with a stopwatch. They used the same stopwatch to time how long it took me to come up with answers to some of the silliest questions I ever heard outside of a nursery. Now I know why they label well the patients in an insane asylum. The man with the watch galloped off and came back with Kellner and they all stood around muttering. The sheet and I were sticking to the chair.

"Kellner. Doctor Kellner!" They didn't like me to break up the kaffeeklatch. "Can I go now? Are you all through?"

"All through?" The airedale changed to a cackling Rhode Island Red. "Joseph, you are just beginning."

"My name isn't Joseph, Dr. Kellner. It's Miller. Peter Ambrose Miller."

"Excuse me, Peter," and he cackled again. "Nevertheless, you're going to be here quite awhile."

Peter, hey? No more, Mr. Miller. Pete to my wife, Peter to my mother, and Peter to every school teacher I ever had.

They conferred awhile longer and the party broke up. Kellner and a gawkish Great Dane led me sheet and all to what I thought would be the operating room. It looked like one. I found a chair all by myself this time, and watched them hook up an electric fan. They were hipped on fans, I thought.

Kellner trotted over. "Stop that fan." Not, please stop that fan. Just, stop that fan.

I shivered ostentatiously. "I'm cold."

Kellner was annoyed. "Perfectly comfortable in here." Sure, you old goat, you got your pants on. "Come, let's not delay. Stop the fan."

I told him I was still cold, and I looked at the fan. It threw sparks, and the long cord smoked. I was going to fix those boys.

The other man yanked the cord from the wall, and from the way he sucked his fingers, it must have been hot. Kellner was pleased at that. He ignored the man's sore fingers and snarled at him until he brought out some dry cells and hooked them in series to a large bell, almost a gong. He pressed the button and it clanged.

"All right," and Kellner motioned imperiously to me. "No point in fooling. We know you can make it stop ringing. Now, go ahead and ring the bell."

I looked at him. "Make the bell ring what?"

"What?" He was genuinely puzzled. "What's this?"

"I said make the bell ring what?" He stared blankly at me. "And you heard me the first time!" He shot an astonished glance at Stein. "Oh, hell!" I got up and started out, trailing my sheet. I almost stumbled over Stein, who was right at my shoulder.

"Here, what's this?" Kellner was bouncing with excitement.

I turned on him. "Listen you; I said I was cold. Not once, but twice I said I was cold. Now, blast it, I want my clothes, and I want them now. Right now!" The airedale became a fish out of water. "Do I look like a ten-year-old in to get his tonsils out? I ask you a civil question and you smirk at me, you tell me to do this and you tell me to do that and never a please or a thank you or a kiss my foot. Don't pull that Doctor write the prescription in Latin on me, because I don't like it! Catch?" Stein was right on my heel when I headed for the door.

Poor Stein was wailing aloud. "Pete, you can't do this! Don't you know who Doctor Kellner is?"

"One big healthy pain!" I snapped at him. "Does he know who I am? I'm Pete Miller, Mister Miller to him or to anyone but my friends. I want **my** pants!"

Stein wrung his hands and slowed me down as much **as** I would let him. "You just can't get up and walk out like that!"

"Oh, no?" I came to a full stop and leered at him. "Who's going to stop me?"

That's the trouble with the doctors and lawyers and technical boys; they're so used to talking over people's heads they can't answer a civil question in less than forty syllables. Keep all the secrets in **the** trade. Write it in Latin, keep the patient in the dark, pat his head and tell him papa knows best.

When Kellner caught **up** with us he had help. "Here, here, my man. Where do you think you are going?"

I wished he was my age and forty pounds heavier. "Me? I'm getting out of here. And I'm not your man and I never will be. When you can admit that, and not act like I'm a set of chalkmarks on a blackboard, send me a letter and tell me about it. One side, dogface!"

One big fellow, just the right size, puffed out his cheeks. "Just whom do you think you are addressing?"

Whom. I looked him over. I never did like people who wore van Dyke goatees. I put whom and van Dyke on the floor. It was a good Donnybrook while it lasted. The last thing I remember was the gong in the

next room clanging steadily while Stein, good old Stein, right in there beside me was swinging and yelling, "Don't hurt him! Don't hurt him!"

I woke up with another headache. When I sat up with a grunt and looked around I saw Stein and his nose four inches from a mirror, gingerly trying his tongue against his front teeth. I snickered. He didn't like that, and turned around.

"You don't look so hot yourself."

He was right. I couldn't see much out of my left eye. We grinned at each other. "Right in there pitching, weren't you?"

He shrugged. "What did you expect me to do?"

"Run for help," I told him. "Or stand there and watch me get a going over."

"Sure." He looked uncomfortable. "I'm supposed to keep an eye on you."

"So you did." I thought back. "What happened to Whom when I addressed him properly?"

It must have hurt his cheek when he tried to smile. "Still out, at last report. You know, Pete, you have a fairly good left —and a lousy temper."

I knew that. "I just got tired of getting pushed around. Besides, with no pants I was stuck to that chair."

"Probably." His tongue pushed gently against his sore lip. "You think that was the right way to go about making things better?"

Maybe not. But did he have any better ideas?

He wasn't sure, but he didn't think a laboratory was just the right place for a brawl.

"Just why I started it. Now what?"

He didn't know that either. "Kellner is having hysterics, and I just made some phone calls."

If the Old Man showed up I had some nice words ready to use. "Now we might get some action."

Stein gave me a sour look. "Not necessarily the kind you'll like. I'll be back after I try to talk some sense into Kellner."

"Hey!" I yelled after him. "Where's my pants?"

"Back in a few minutes," he tossed over his shoulder; "make yourself comfortable," and he left.

Comfortable with a cot and a mirror and a washbowl. I washed my face and lay on the cot with a washrag soaked in cold water on my throbbing eye. I must have dozed off. When I woke the Old Man was standing over me. I sat up and the rag fell off my eye.

"What's cooking, Bossman?"

I don't think his frown was completely genuine. "You, apparently."

I swung my legs over the edge of the cot and stretched. "Have a seat and a cigarette."

He sat down beside me and reached for his lighter. "Peter, I wish—"

I cut in on him. "Item one, I want my pants."

He gestured impatiently. "You'll get them. Now—"

"I said, I want my pants."

He began to get annoyed. "I told you—"

"And I told you I want my pants. I don't want them later or in a while; I want my pants and I want them now."

He sat back and looked at me. "What's all this?"

I let fly. "For the record, I want my pants. I'm certainly no patient in this morgue, and I'm not going to be treated like one, so whatever you or anyone else has got to say to me is not going to be while I'm as bare as a baby. My mind's made up," and I scrunched together ungracefully on the little space that remained on my end of the cot and pulled the sheet over my head. Kid stuff, and we both knew it.

He didn't say anything, although I could feel his eyes boring through the flimsy sheet, and I lay there until I felt the springs creak as he got up and I could hear his footsteps retreating. When he came back with my clothes over his arm I was sitting up. While I was dressing he tried to talk to me, but I would have none of it.

When I was dressed I said, "Now, you were saying—?"

I drew a long speculative stare. "Peter, what's eating you?"

I told him. "I just got tired of being shoved around. With the physical exam over with you give me one reason why I should sit around in my bare hide. Am I a machine? My name's Miller, not the Patient in Cell Two."

He thought he was being reasonable. "And you think you get results by knocking around people that are trying to help you?"

"With some people, you do. I tried talking, and that didn't work. I got action my way, didn't I?"

He sighed. "Action, yes. Do you know what Kellner said?"

"Not interested. Whatever he's got to say to me is going to have a please in front and a thank you after."

Wearily, "Peter, must you always act like a child?"

"No, I don't," I blazed at him. "But I'm damn well going to. I'm free, white and a citizen, and I'm going to be treated like one, and not a side-show freak!"

"Now, now," he soothed. "Doctor Kellner is a very famous and a very busy man. He might not have realized—"

"Realize your hat! He's so used to living in the clouds he thinks the world is one big moron. Well, I may be one, but no one is going to tell me I am!"

"I see your point," and he stood up. "But you try to be a little more cooperative. I'll see Kellner now," and he started out.

"Cooperative?" I bellowed at his back. "What do you think I've been doing? What do you—"

He must have read the riot act. When they took me in to Kellner and his crew it was "please, Mr. Miller" and "thank you, Mr. Miller." The place didn't seem so cold and bare so long as I had my pants. I didn't see Whom and his van Dyke, but I hoped it was the tile floor and not me that gave him the concussion.

The rest of the tests, you can imagine, were almost anticlimactic. I stopped motors, blew tubes, turned lights off and on, rang bells and cooked the insulation on yards and yards of wire. My head they kept connected with taped terminals and every time I blew a fuse or a motor they would see the dials spin crazily. Then they would stand around clucking and chattering desperately. They took X-rays by the score, hoping to find something wrong with the shape of my head, and for all the results they got, might have been using a Brownie on a cue ball. Then they'd back off to the corner and sulk. One little bearded rascal, in particular, to this day is certain that Kellner was risking his life in getting within ten feet. He never turned his back on me that I recall; he sidled around, afraid I would set his watch to running backwards. You know, one of the funniest and yet one of the most pathetic things in the world is the spectacle of someone who has spent his life in mastering a subject, only to find that he has built a sled without runners. Long before we were finished I thought Kellner, for one, was going to eat his tie, stripes and all. Running around in ever-widening circles they were, like coon dogs after a scent. They didn't get a smell. The medico who ran the electro-cardiograph refused to make sense, after the fifth trials, out of the wiggly marks on his graphs.

"Kellner," he stated flatly, "I don't know just what your game is, but these readings are not true."

Kellner didn't like that. Nor

did he like the man who wanted to shave my head. I wouldn't let them do that. I look bad enough now. I compromised by letting them soak my head in what smelled like water, and then tying or pasting strands of tape all over my scalp. A pretty mess I was, as bad as a woman getting a permanent wave. Worse. One whole day I stood for that. This specialist, whatever he did, had Kellner get me to run through my repertoire of bells and fans and buzzers while he peered nearsightedly at his elaborate tool shop. When the fuse would blow or the bell would ring, the specialist would wince as though he were pinched. Kellner stood over his shoulder saying at intervals, "What do you get? What do you get?" Kellner finally got it. The specialist stood up, swore in Plattdeutsch, some at Kellner and some at me and some at his machine, and left in all directions. The gist of it was that he was too important and too busy to have jokes played on him. Kellner just wagged his head and walked out.

The Old Man said, "You're not one bit different from anyone else."

"Sure," I said. "I could have told you that long ago. It shouldn't take a doctor."

"Miller, what in blazes are we going to do with you?"

I didn't know. I'd done my share. "Where do we go from here?"

The Old Man looked out the window. The sun was going down. "Someone wants to see you. He's been waiting for Kellner to finish with you. We leave tonight."

"For where?" I didn't like this running around. "Who's 'he'?"

"For Washington. You'll see who it is."

Washington, more than just a sleeper jump away. Washington? Oh, oh . . . Well, let's get it over with. We did. We left for the capital that night.

We slipped in the back door, or what passed for the back door. Pretty elaborate layout, the White House. Our footsteps rang as hollow as my heart on the shiny waxed floors.

The Old Man did the honors. "Mr. President, this is Mr. Miller."

He shook hands. He had a good grip.

"General Hayes, you know. Admiral Lacey, Admiral Jessop, Mr. Hoover you know, General Buckley. Gentlemen, Mr. Miller."

We shook hands all around. "Glad to know you." My palms were slippery.

The President sat, and we

followed suit. The guest of honor. I felt like my head was shaved. and I had a slit pants leg. You don't meet the President every day.

The President broke the ice. It was thin to begin with. "You have within yourself the ability, the power, to do a great deal for your country, Mr. Miller, or would you prefer to be called Pete?"

Pete was all right. He was older, and bigger. Bigger all around.

"A great deal of good, or a great deal of harm."

No harm. I'm a good citizen.

"I'm sure of that. But you can understand what I mean, by harm."

Likely I could, if I really wanted to. But I didn't. Not the place where you were born.

"Naturally, Pete, it makes me feel a great deal better, however, to hear you say and phrase it just like that." The light of the lamp glittered on his glasses. "Very, very much better, Pete."

I was glad it was dark beyond the range of the lamp. My face was red. "Thank you, Mr. President."

"I like it better, Pete, because from this day on, Pete, you and I and all of us know that you, and you alone, are going to have a mighty hard row to hoe." That's right; he was a farmer once. "Hard in this respect—you understand, I know, that for the rest of your natural life you must and shall be guarded with all the alert fervor that national security demands. Does that sound too much like a jail sentence?"

It did, but I lied. I said, "Not exactly, Mr. President. Whatever you say is all right with me."

He smiled. "Thank you, Pete . . . Guarded as well and as closely as—the question is, where?"

I didn't know I'd had a choice. The Old Man had talked to me before on that.

"Not exactly, Pete. This is what I mean: General Buckley and General Hayes feel that you will be safest on the mainland somewhere in the Continental United States. Admirals Lacey and Jessop, on the other hand, feel that the everpresent risk of espionage can be controlled only by isolation, perhaps on some island where the personnel can be exclusively either military or naval."

I grinned inwardly. I knew this was going to happen.

"Mr. Hoover concedes that both possible places have inherent advantages and disadvantages," the President went on.

"He feels, however, that protection should be provided by a staff specially trained in law-enforcement and counter-espionage."

So where did that leave me? I didn't say it quite that way, but I put across the idea.

The President frowned a bit at nothing. "I'm informed you haven't been too . . . comfortable."

I gulped. Might as well be hung for a sheep. If the Boss likes you, the Help must. "I'm sorry, Mr. President, but it isn't much fun being shifted around pillar and post."

He nodded slowly. "Quite understandable, under the circumstances. That, we'll try to eliminate as much as we can. You can see, Pete," and he flashed that famous wide grin, "it will be in the national interest to see that you are always in the finest physical and mental condition. Crudely expressed, perhaps, but the truth, nevertheless."

I like people to tell me the truth. He could see that. He's like that, himself. On his job, you have to be like that.

"Now, Pete; let's get down to cases. Have you any ideas, any preferences, any suggestions?" He took a gold pencil out of his breast pocket and it began to twirl.

I had an idea, all right. "Why not just let me go back home? I'll keep my mouth shut, I won't blow any fuses or raise any hell, if you'll excuse the expression."

Someone coughed. The President turned his head out of the circle of light. "Yes, Mr. Hoover?"

J. Edgar Hoover was diffident. "Er . . . Mrs. Miller has been informed of her husband's . . . demise. An honorable one," he hastened to add, "and is receiving a comfortable pension, paid from the Bureau's special funds."

"How much?" I wanted to know.

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well . . . a hundred a month."

I looked at the President. "Bought any butter lately?"

The President strangled a cough. "Have you, Mr. Hoover, bought any butter lately?"

J. Edgar Hoover couldn't say anything. It wasn't his fault.

I flicked a glance at General Hayes. "How much does it cost the Army for an antiaircraft gun?" I looked at one of the admirals. "And how much goes down the drain when you launch a battleship? Or even a PT boat?"

The President took over. "Rest assured, Mr. Miller. Your wife's pension is quadrupled, effective immediately." He

swung his chair to face Hoover; "Cash will be transferred tomorrow to the Bureau from the State Department's special fund. You'll see to that?" to the Old Man. So that was what he did for a living. That State Department is a good lifetime job, I understand.

That took a load from my mind, but not all. I spoke to Hoover directly.

"How is my . . . widow?"

As tense and as bad as I felt just then, I was sorry for him.

"Quite well, Mr. Miller. Quite well, considering. It came as a blow to her, naturally—"

"What about the house?" I asked him. "Is she keeping up the payments?"

He had to admit that he didn't know. The President told him to finish the payments, pay for the house. Over and above the pension? Over and above the pension. And I was to get a regular monthly report on how she was getting along.

"Excuse me, Mr. President. I'd rather not get a regular monthly report, or any word at all, unless she—unless anything happens to her."

"No report at all, Pete?" That surprised him, and he eyed me over the top of his bifocals.

"She's still young, Mr. President," I said, "and she's just as pretty as the day we got married. I don't think I'd want to know if . . . she got married again."

The quiet was thick enough to slice. If they talked about Helen any more I was going to throw something. The President saw how I felt.

"Now, Mr. Miller—Pete. Let's get back to business. You were saying—?"

Yes, I had an idea. "Put me on an island somewhere, the further away the better. I wouldn't like being around things without being able to be in the middle. Better put me where I can't weaken, where I can't sneak out a window or swim back." Everyone was listening. "Keep the uniforms away from me, out of sight." The Brass didn't like that, but they heard me out. "Feed me a case of beer once in a while and a few magazines and some books and right boys to play euchre. I guess that's all I want."

The gold pencil turned over and over. "That isn't very much, Pete."

"That's all. If I'm going to do the Army's and the Navy's work they can leave me alone till they need me. If I can't live my life the way I want, it makes no difference what I do. My own fault is that all my family lived

to be eighty, and so will I. Is that what you wanted to know?"

The gold pencil rolled off the table. "Yes, yes, Pete. That's what I wanted to know."

I tried once more. "There isn't any way I can just go home?"

A slow shake of his head, and finality was in his voice. "I'm afraid there isn't any way." And that was that.

The President stood up in dismissal, and we all rose nervously. He held out his hand. "Sorry, Pete. Perhaps some day . . ."

I shook his hand limply and the Old Man was at my elbow to steer me out. Together we paced back through the dark hall, together we stepped quietly out into the black Washington night. Our footsteps echoed softly past the buildings of the past and the future. The car was waiting; Stein, the driver. The heavy door slammed, and the tires hissed me from the pavement.

The Old Man's voice was gentle. "You behaved well, Peter."

"Yeh."

"I was afraid, for a moment, that you were going to kick over the traces. The President is a very important man."

"Yeh."

"You are, too. Right now, probably the most important man in the world. You took it very well."

"Yeh."

"Is that all you have to say?"

I looked out the window. "Yeh," and he fell quiet.

Stein got us to the airport, and there was waiting an Army ship for the three of us. I might have been able to see the Monument or the Capitol when we were airborne. I don't know. I didn't look.

Later I asked Stein where we were going. He didn't know. I prodded the Old Man out of a doze. I wished I could sleep.

He hesitated. Then, "West. Far west."

"West." I thought that over. "How much out of your way would it be to fly over Detroit?"

"You couldn't see much."

I knew that. "How much out of your way?"

Not too much. He nodded to Stein, who got up and went forward. After he came back and sat down the plane slipped on one wing and straightened on its new course. No one said anything more after that.

We hit Detroit about five thousand feet, the sun just coming up from Lake Ste. Clair. Smith was right. Although I craned my neck I couldn't see much. I picked up Gratiot, using the Penobscot Tower for a landmark, and followed it to Mack,

and out Mack. I could just pick out the dogleg at Connors, and imagined I could see the traffic light at Chalmers. I had to imagine hard. The way we were flying, the body and the wing hid where I'd lived, where—the cigarette I had in my fist tasted dry, and so did my mouth, so I threw it down and closed my eyes and tried to sleep. Somewhere around Nebraska we landed for fuel.

Maybe it was Kansas. It was flat, and hot, and dry. The Old Man and Stein and I got out to stretch. There was no shade, no trees, no green oasis for the traveler. The olive drab tanker that pulled up to pump gas into our wing tanks was plastered with "No Smoking" tabs, and we walked away before the hose was fully unreeled. Off to our right was the only shade, back of the landing strip, a great gray hangar glutted with shiny-nosed, finny monsters. Out of the acrid half-pleasant reek of high-octane, we stood smoking idly, watching the denimed aircrews clamber flylike over the jutting wings. From the post buildings off to the right jounced a dusty motorcycle. We watched it twist to a jerking stop at our refueling ship, and the soldier that dismounted bobbed in salute to the two pilots watching the gassing operation. Two motions only they used; one to return the salute and another to point us out in the shadow of the hangar. The soldier shaded his eyes from the sun to peer in our direction, calculated the distance with his eye, and then roared his motorcycle almost to our feet.

"Post Commander's compliments," he barked. "And will the gentlemen please report at once to the Colonel's office?"

The Old Man eyed the motorcycle and the empty sidecar. He looked at Stein.

"Better stay here," he said thoughtfully. "If I need you, I'll come back." He climbed awkwardly into the sidecar, and the soldier, after a hesitant acceptance, kicked the starter. The Old Man gripped the sides firmly as they bounced away in the baking breeze, and Stein looked absently at his watch. It was close to noon.

At twelve-thirty the gas truck rolled ponderously back to its den. At one, our two pilots struck out across the strip for the post buildings, shimmering in the heat. At one-thirty, I turned to Stein, who had been biting his nails for an hour.

"Enough is enough," I said. "Who finds out what—you or I?"

He hesitated, and strained his

eyes. The Old Man, nor anyone, was not in sight. The post might have been alone in the Sahara. He chewed his lip.

"Me, I guess." He knew better than to argue with me, in my mood. "I'll be back. Ten minutes," and he started for the post. He got no further than half the distance when an olive sedan, a big one, raced toward us. It stopped for Stein, sucked him into the front seat, whirled back past me to our plane standing patiently, and dumped out our two pilots. A final abrupt bounding spin brought it to the hangar. The Old Man leaned out of the back door.

"In, quick," he snapped.

I got in, and the soldier driver still had the sedan in second gear when we got to our ship. One motor was already coughing, and as we clambered into the cabin the starter caught the second. Both propellers vanished into a silvered arc, and without a preparatory warmup we slewed around and slammed back in the bucket seats in a pounding takeoff. Stein went forward to the pilot's cabin, and I turned, half-angrily, to the Smith. His face was etched with bitterness. Something was wrong, something seriously wrong.

"What's up?" I asked. "What's the big hurry?"

He flicked a sidelong glance at me, and his brows almost met. He looked mad, raving mad.

"Well?" I said. "Cat got your tongue?" I noticed then that he was fraying and twisting a newspaper. I hadn't seen a newspaper for what seemed years. Stein came back and sat on the edge of the seat. What in blazes was the matter?

Smith said something unprintable. That didn't sound right, coming from that refined face. I raised my eyebrows.

"Leak," he ended succinctly. "There's been a leak. The word's out!"

That was a surprise. A big one.

"And it's thanks to you!"

"Me?"

He flipped the newspaper at me. I caught it in midair, and there it was, smeared all over the face of the Kansas City *Sentinel*. Great, black, tall shrieking streamer heads:

AMERICA HAS ATOMIC DEFENSE!

I scanned the two columns of stumbling enthusiastic prose that trailed over on to Page Two. Stein came over and leaned over my shoulder and breathed on my ear as we read. He hadn't seen the sheet, either. It ran something like this:

America, it was learned today, has at last an absolute defense, not only to the atomic bomb, but to every gun, every airplane, every engine, every weapon capable of being used by man. Neither admitted nor denied at this early date by even the highest government officials, it was learned by our staff late last night that America's latest step forward . . .

Column after column of stuff like that. When the reporter got through burbling, he did have a few facts that were accurate. He did say it was my doing that set off the last atomic bomb test; he did say that I was apparently invulnerable to violence powered by electrical or internal combustion engines; he did say what I could do, and what I had done, and how often. He didn't say who I was, or what I looked like, or where I'd come from, or what I did or didn't know.

Sprinkled through the story —and I followed it back to Page 32 and the pictures rehashed of the traffic jam in Detroit—were references to T. Sylvester Colquhoun, the boy who dumped the original plate of beans. He attested this and swore to that. Whoever he was, wherever he got his information, he—there was his picture on Page 32, big as life and twice as obnoxious; Mr. Whom and the van Dyke.

Guiltily I handed the paper over to Stein, who turned back to the front page and started again from the beginning. I tried to carry things off in the nonchalant manner, but I couldn't. I had to watch the Old Man light a cigarette with fumbling fingers, take a few snorting puffs, and crush it viciously under his heel. Miller and his temper.

Whom—or T. Sylvester Colquhoun—had, quite obviously, a grudge against the short left that had given him his concussion. According to the *Sentinel*, he had babbled a bit when he was released from the hospital, and an alert newshawk had trailed him to his home and bluffed him into spilling the whole story. He had sense enough, at that late stage of the game, to keep my name out of it, if he ever knew it. The reporter had gone to his editor with the story, who had laughed incredulously at first, and then checked Kellner at the laboratory. Kellner had clammed up, and when the now suspicious editor had tried to check Colquhoun's tale personally, Colquhoun had vanished. A snooping neighbor had noted the license of the car that had taken

him away. The Highway Department—the editor must have moved fast and decisively—showed the license plate as issued to a man the editor knew personally as a special agent of the Kansas City Branch of the FBI.

Then hell began to pop. Repeated long-distance calls to Washington ran him up against a stone wall. The answers he got convinced him that there was something to Colquhoun's wild tale, something weird and yet something that had a germ of truth. (Half of this, understand, was in the *Sentinel*. The other half I picked up later on, adding two and two.) As he was sitting mulling things over it was his turn to get a call from Washington. The State Department was on the line; Morgan, the Under Secretary.

Morgan fairly yelled at him. "Where did you get that information? What's the idea?" and so on. That clinched it for the editor. Then it was he knew.

Morgan made his mistake there. He began to threaten, and the editor hit the ceiling. Hit it hard, because he stretched things a little. He stretched it more than just a little.

He said, "Furthermore, that's on the street right now—this is a newspaper, not a morgue!"

It wasn't on the street, the editor knew. Perhaps he wanted to throw a scare into Morgan, perhaps— But Morgan!

Morgan gasped, "Oh, my God!" and hung up with a bang.

The editor flipped a mental coin. His circulation was not what it should be, the boss had been riding him lately, his job might be where a beat would tilt the balance up or down. The national safety that Morgan had shouted about—well, if we had the perfect weapon and the perfect defense, what was there to fear? And this *was* a newspaper, not a morgue! They replated, and the first extras hit the street to wake up half the city. The wire services had the story and extras were rolling throughout the country, or the world, about the time I was watching the sun over Lake Ste. Clair.

Neither the State Department nor the FBI were on their toes that day. Instead of denying everything, or instead of laughing heartily at the pipedream of an editor trying to sell an extra edition or two, whoever was pulling the strings behind the scenes demanded flatly that all wire services kill and disregard all references to Colquhoun. No one ever made a newspaperman do what he really didn't want to do. The very fact that the government was so eager to kill the story made

every newsman worthy of his salt all the more eager to break the paper-thin shell around the meaty yolk. By noon, the time we landed for fuel, every Washington correspondent for every news service had a little different story for his boss, the White House was practically besieged at the mere rumor that the President was to issue a statement, and the State Department was going quietly mad.

"Not so quietly, at that," the Old Man said sourly. "One hour straight I stayed on that telephone. One hour straight I talked to one bunch of raving maniacs, and all the common sense I heard would go into your left eye."

By that time his temper had cooled below melting, and we were again on reasonably good terms. I was curious to know just who the Old Man had talked to.

He grunted. "Just about everyone in Washington with any authority at all. No one with any intelligence."

I could appreciate that. I have a very low opinion of anyone who stays in Washington any longer than necessary.

I asked him, "We're apparently heading back there. Why? Where were we going when they stopped us?"

He wasn't sure. "I wanted to keep on going," he said, "and get you out of the country. I still think that would have been best. There was to be a cruiser waiting at Bremerton for a shakedown cruise. But whoever is running all this—and I don't think that the President has thought too much about it—wants us to get back to Washington for another conference."

"Another meeting?" I was disgusted. Washington political rashes manifest themselves most often by the consistent eruption of conferences in which nothing is said, nothing decided, nothing done. "What does who think what?"

He blinked, and then smiled. "I couldn't say. I've been in this game only twenty years. At any rate, you can see who's worried."

I didn't see, exactly.

"No?" He was amused. "Don't you remember the discussion we had about who was going to watch the watchers? Now that there's been a leak, the Army is going to blame the Navy, the Navy is going to blame the FBI, and I take punishment from all three." He sighed. "My department seems, invariably, to be in the middle."

I let it go at that. I didn't have the heart to remind him that a good portion of the trouble and friction this country has

had in its history has been because the State Department has been sitting on the water bucket when it should have been playing deep centerfield. No use worrying about things until the fuse is burnt half its length, I thought. That might be, for me and all of us, a good policy to adopt, for the time being. Let the boys at the top fret and worry; let them wrack their brains and beat their heads against the wall. I'd do what they told me, if I could. The man that pays the salary worries about the unemployment tax.

"Stein," I said, "are there any more of those sandwiches?"

The Old Man settled back in his seat and began to read the Kansas City *Sentinel* all over again. He was still worried when we landed in Washington.

He left in a waiting black sedan, and Stein and I stayed in the ship until it was yanked into a dark hangar by a tiny tractor with great rubber tires. We slid out the back of the hangar when the wary Stein thought it was safe, and a taxi rolled us to the Mayflower. There we registered, I was told, as James Robertson and William Wakefield, Wisconsin Dells.

"Milwaukee," I suggested, "has better beer."

He took the hint, and when the waiter brought our late dinner, the ice bucket had eight frosty bottles. They practically sizzled when they went down. Bob Stein, at times, had some earmarks of genius, even if you had to lay them bare with an axe.

The first day wasn't bad; we sat around, drank beer and ate huge thick sirloins on the swindle sheet, and told all the stories we knew. The radio was blurting either soap operas, hillbilly music, or lentil-mouthed commentators. The story broken in the *Sentinel* was gathering momentum, by what we read and heard, and that was too close to home. So we made a pact to turn off the radio and keep it that way. We never missed it.

The second day the beer tasted as good as ever. The steaks were just as thick and just as tender, the hotel service just as unobtrusive. Stein was just as cheerful and as pleasant company. But I spent a lot of time looking out the window.

"You know, Bob," I said thoughtfully, "how would you like a big plate of spaghetti? Or ravioli? Maybe some pizza?"

He came out of the bathroom wiping his face with a towel, his hair wet and frizzled.

"Am I going to have trouble


ORBAN

with you?" He was pessimistic. "Aren't you ever satisfied?"

I turned away from the window and let the curtain flap in the breeze. "Who wants to be satisfied? How about some subgum war mein, or chicken cacciatora?"

He tossed the towel back through the open door. "Now, look here," he protested.

I laughed at him. "Okay, but you get the point."

He did, but he didn't know what he could do about it. "We were supposed to wait here until—"

That one I'd heard before. "Until the hotel freezes over, sure. But I don't want to freeze. Do you?"

No, nor to rust. You could see that he liked his job of bodyguard and factotum, and yet . . .

I pushed him over the edge. "Tell you what to do," I said. "You call up and say that I'm getting restless. Say that you're afraid I'll ease out of here when your back is turned. Say anything you like, as long as you lay it on thick, and I'll back you up. Okay?"

He weighed it awhile. He liked inaction, no matter how sybaritic as much as I. Then, "Okay," and he reached for the telephone.

The number he gave answered the first ring.

"I'm calling for Mr. Robertson," he said. "This is Mr. William Wakefield. W. W. Wakefield." He paused. Then, "Ordinarily, I wouldn't, but Mr. Robertson felt that I should get in touch with you at once."

The other end squawked, nervously, I thought.

Stein thought so, too. "That's quite possible. However, Mr. Robertson feels that his time here in Washington is valuable. So valuable that he thinks that his business is soon going to call him back to Wisconsin Dells, if the merger referred to is delayed any longer. I beg your pardon?"

He twisted to throw me a wink over his shoulder as the telephone chattered frantically.

"That's exactly what I told Mr. Robertson . . . Yes, he knows of that . . . Yes, I have assured him that, in these days of business uncertainty and production difficulties, mergers are not as easily arranged as—" That Stein had a sense of humor when he wanted to use it.

"Is that right? I'm glad to hear it. One moment, while I check with Mr. Robertson." He held his hand over the mouthpiece and grinned at me. "They are ready to have a stroke. This man I'm talking to has no more authority than a jackrabbit, and

he knows it. He wants to check with his boss, and call us back later. All right with you, Mr. Robertson?"

I laughed out loud, and he clamped the mouthpiece tighter. "I think so, Mr. W. W. Wakefield. As long as he puts the heat on that merger."

He went back on the telephone. "Mr. Robertson thinks he might be able to wait a trifle longer. He asked me to warn you, that as he is a very busy man, every minute of his time can cost a considerable amount of money and goods . . . Yes, I'll tell him that . . . I'll be waiting for your call . . . Yes, I will. Thank you, and good-bye." He hung up the telephone with a flourish.

"Satisfied, Mr. Robertson?"

I was satisfied. "Quite, Mr. W. W. Wakefield. Wouldst care for ein bier?"

Ein bier haben. He would.

The telephone rang about an hour later, and I answered it. It was the Old Man's voice.

"Mr. Robertson?" he said cautiously.

"Mr. Robertson speaking," I said. "Yes?"

"I'm calling," he told me in a voice that said he was annoyed, but didn't want to show it, "in reference to the Wisconsin Dells merger."

"Yes?" I gave him no help.

"You understand, Mr. Robertson, that such an important merger can hardly be arranged at a moment's notice."

Yes, I understood that. "But two days notice is more than sufficient, even allowing for an enormous amount of red tape." I put real regret into my voice. "It is not that I wouldn't like to let nature take its course, but other things must be taken into consideration." I hoped I sounded like the busy executive. "I believe that Mr. Wakefield, Mr. W. W. Wakefield, has explained that I am a very busy man, and that I can hardly be expected to wait indefinitely in even such a pleasant atmosphere."

The Old Man forced a cheery —and false—heartiness. "There are, or there might be, Mr. Robertson, other things that might induce you to stay. Many other things."

Threaten me, would he? "That, I doubt very much. I'm afraid I must insist—it's now two-twenty. If a merger, or at least a meeting cannot be arranged by tomorrow at the very latest, the reason for having a meeting will, for all practical purposes, have ceased to exist. Do I make myself clear?"

I certainly did. With a short-tempered bang, Smith hung up, after saying that he would call back later. I relayed the conver-

sation to Bob Stein, and we sent down for lunch.

The Old Man called back about seven, when I was washing up, and Bob answered the telephone. By the time I came out he had all the information we needed, and was calling room service to clear the dishes.

"Meeting tonight," he said when he was finished. He was pleased with himself.

"Good." It was getting a little tiresome being cramped up. "When? Where?"

He shrugged. "Where? I couldn't say. Someone will call for us, somewhere between nine and ten. And," he added slowly, "it might be a good idea to wear the best bib and tucker, with Sunday School manners."

"Oh?" I said, "that kind of a party? Fine. I'm all ready now. Better get your hat."

At ten-thirty, the telephone rang. I answered it.

"This is the desk," it said. "Mr. Wakefield?"

"He's here," I said. "Wait a minute," and I passed the phone to Stein.

"Wakefield," he said. "Yes?"

The receiver chattered briefly.

"All right," and he waved at me. "Be right down." He turned. "Car waiting." It didn't take us long to get downstairs.

It was a sedan with a neat little drive-yourself tab on the right-hand door. Before we got near the car, Stein was careful to see who was the driver. He evidently was someone he knew, so Bob nodded curtly, and we got in and pulled away from the curb.

I don't know Washington at all, so I can't say where we made port. Not too far a drive, I imagine, if we had gone there directly. It was a good forty-five minutes before we ended our erratic turning of corners and sped up a long tree-bordered driveway.

"Nice place," I said to Stein as we braked to a stop in front of a long white-columned Southern portico. "Who lives here?"

He smiled and shook his head. "That's something I don't know. Does it matter?"

It didn't.

As we strode up the steps the Drive-Yourself pulled away, tires crackling on the white gravel. We both reached for the knocker at the same time, but before we had it, the door swung open. Stein recognized the young fellow who opened it and took our hats. A message passed between their eyes, and the young man almost imperceptibly shook his head in negation.

"Will you come this way, please?" and he led us down the hall.

The house was smaller than the outside had led me to expect. The builder had gone whole hog on the giant Greek columns and the wide sweep of the porch, and the inside of the house showed the results of the skimping. Not that it wasn't a far bigger and a far more expensive house than any average man would hope to have, but the limited space inside didn't go with those sweeping curves of the drive. I wondered who lived there.

The room where the doorman left us went with the inside of the house. So small it reminded me of the times when I tried to sell brushes during the depression, in Grosse Pointe, I expected every moment to have an underpaid maid, laundress, and butler come in to tell me that the lady of the house was out. In keeping with the faded appointments of the tiny room, a Chinese table held, for those who wait and read, an ancient collection of "Spur" and "Town and Country." As we sat and smoked, far off through the thin walls we could hear the soft rumble of voices. Occasionally a bass would rise above the sound, and a baritone would slide softly and soothingly across the pained roar. The front door opened and closed twice during the fifteen minutes or so we waited, and the footsteps that came in went past our room and pattered further down the hall. Each time, when the steps were out of reach of hearing, another door would open, and the distant voices would become almost distinguishable until the door again was shut. I looked curiously around the walls. Decorated with prints and pictures they were, yes, but with that faded permanency that to me spells the furnished house. The rugs were worn, worn to the shredding point, worn until the spurious Oriental design seemed an eerie Dali drawing. All it needed was the faroff smell of secondhand ham and cabbage.

The doorman slipped in and beckoned to us, a grim conspirator if ever I saw one. We followed him back to the entrance hall, back, back, to where the voices grew louder at every step. A double door—golden oak, or I don't know wood—barred the end of the hall, and the young fellow preceded us to throw it open with a semi-flourish. We walked in.

The place was blue with smoke. That was the first thing we saw. Lights there were in plenty, hanging around, hanging over the great oval table in the center of the room in a fiery glitter of glassy brilliants. The

room was enormous, and I began to realize why this house was still in existence. Who cares about rugs if there is just one single room in the house where a ball or a party could be comfortably accommodated. Or a conference. I didn't know whose name appeared on the tax bills, but I would bet that it would be any other name besides the United States Government.

No group of men or women could produce that much smoke in a short time. That meeting had been going on for hours. As we stepped in through the double doors I tried to pick out anyone I knew, but the glare flickered in my eyes and I saw no face as more than just a pale blur against a background of tenuous blue. Tentatively I got inside the doors and they shut behind me with an abrupt finality. Two steps forward, three, four, five, and Stein drifted away from my side, away from the eyes that grew in size as I got closer to the table rim, toward the vacant chairs I saw slightly pulled away and ready for occupants. I stumbled over nothing and a reassuring hand touched mine. I felt callow, self-conscious, awkward. I never thought I'd be so glad to see Old Man Smith.

He stood alongside me as I sank gratefully into my ready chair. "Gentlemen," he announced quietly, "Mr. Peter A. Miller."

I half-bowed automatically, the proper thing to do, and the Old Man gave me his moral support by sitting next to me. He leaned over to say, "I won't introduce you formally. Point out who you want to know and I'll tell you who he is."

"Okay," I muttered, and felt in my pockets for cigarettes. I had to do something with my hands. I blew a cloud into the air and felt better. Settled back into the chair, I sent my glance around the table. Did I know anyone there?

At my right, the Old Man. His suit was wrinkled and his eyes were red-rimmed and tired. The large paper pad in front of him was covered with crisscross lines. On his right, a quite old man, bald and beetle-browed. His collar was open and wrinkled, his vest twisted under the lapel of his coat. I leaned toward Smith, and indicated his companion with my eyes.

"Morgan, Undersecretary of State," he said softly.

Morgan heard his name spoken, and shot a questioning glance my way. He realized what had been said and the beetlebrows slid upwards in a movement meant to be conciliа-

tory. He bobbed his head with a cursory jerk and went back to staring across the table. I followed his glance.

The object of his affections seemed to be—yes, it was. Five-Star General Oliver P. Legree, not so affectionately called Simon by the men who served under him. I had been one of them. Trim and rigid and oh, so military he was, the very figure of a modern five-star general. His poker-stiff back thrust the tiers of ribbons to a sparkling glitter under the tinkling glare of the massive chandelier overhead. His face—well, it's been in enough rotogravures worldwide. The cigar was there, the big black cigar he never lit and never lost. His trademark was that cigar; his trademark was that and his jutting jaw that to everyone but his compatriots spelled determination and grit. To his staff and his men—me—it meant an ill-fitting lower plate.

That prognathous jaw was tilted, aimed at Morgan, and Morgan knew it. What had gone on just before I had come in? Just as I started to turn my glance away, the General threw his famous scowl directly at me. For one long second our eyes clung, almost glared. Then, without a sign of emotion or recognition he went back to staring at the Undersecretary with an intensity almost violent. Shaken back into self-consciousness by that grim stare I tried to fit together some of the other faces about the table.

Admiral Mason-Nason-Lacey —Admiral Lacey. I'd met him just a few days before, in that ill-fated conference in the White House. What was the other name? Jessop. He was there, too, alongside Lacey. But where was the Army, outside of Simon Legree? That was like Simon, at that. Let the Navy stick together; Legree was the *General,* and as such was himself the Army.

Who were the others? I knew none of them, certainly, although some trick of memory made me sure that I had seen or heard of them before. Like faces in an old school album they presented themselves to me, and for a long fraction of a minute I delved deep, trying to recall. A voice, that deep barking bass I had heard while waiting, boomed across the table.

"Mr. Morgan!" and the table seemed to quiver. "Mr. Morgan!" and the tenseness seemed to flow back into that huge room like a warm current. The Old Man leaned over and answered my unspoken question.

"Senator Suggs, Foreign Affairs Chairman."

I eyed the redoubtable senator. Short, swarthy skin that belied all his ranted racial theories, hair that straggled by intent over his weak green eyes, and a chin that retreated and quivered and joggled in time with his twitching adolescent eyebrows. Six solid terms in the Senate; six solid terms of appealing to the highest in theory and the lowest in fact; six terms of seniority for the chairmanship of committees far too important for a bigot; six terms of Suggs, Suggs, Suggs. The bass rumbled on.

"We're no further ahead, Morgan, than we were two hours ago. This, definitely cannot go on, if it has to be taken to the people themselves."

Morgan pondered well before he answered, and the room stilled.

"Senator," he said at last; "this is right now in the hands of the people, if you consider that you are one of the elected representatives, and the rest of us are chosen, with one exception, by those same elected representatives. The exception, naturally, is Mr. Miller."

Five Star Simon snorted. His nasal voice carried well. "People?" and that brittle snap was only too familiar to me. "What have the people to do with it? This is no time for anything but a decision, and a quick one!"

Morgan agreed with that. "Correct, General. The question, I believe, is not that a decision be made, but the wording and definition of that decision."

"Bah!" and the cigar jumped to the other side. "Words! Definitions! Decisions! Words, words, words! Let's decide what's to be done and do it!"

The Undersecretary coughed gently behind his palm. "Unfortunately, General Legree, for the sake of speedy action, and as unfortunately for the sake of all concerned, words mean one thing to one man, and another thing to a second."

A fine party this turned out to be. In the dark as to what happened before I came in, and equally at sea as to what was going on, I leaned toward the Old Man.

"What's this?" I whispered.

He shot a quick retort. "Keep your mouth shut for the time being." He paused, and then bent in my direction. "You'll get your chance to talk." He grasped my extended arm tightly. "I'll nudge you when the time comes. Then talk, and *talk!* You know what I mean?"

Did I? I didn't know. He saw my indecision and motioned for quiet. Evidently he was expecting me to catch the trend if I

waited long enough. I waited, and I watched, and I listened.

Simon had been right about one thing. Words, words, words. But I began to get some of the drift. They'd already settled the part of the problem I thought was supposed to be bothering them. They'd decided that since the news on me was out, the facts had to be faced—the way they understand facing them.

I should have been reading the papers or listening to the radio. It must have been something to hear when the news that I was a new secret weapon to end them all was confirmed; but they'd confused the issue by indicating that I was just one of the men with the new power, and that the country was now practically blanketed with it.

It was fine for them. It meant that the people were happy, and that Army, Navy and all the other departments were being openly and publicly adulated for the fine thing they had done for everyone.

The Undersecretary made an answer to one of Simon's remarks. I hadn't been listening for a few seconds while the scheme sank in, but this registered.

"You're right, of course, General. Certain foreign information bureaus won't be deceived by the confusion we've created. And that still leaves us with the unfortunate need for speedy action on the case of Mr. Miller."

Suggs rolled his bass across the room. It was the only characteristic he had favorable to eye or ear.

"Unfortunate, Mr. Undersecretary? Unfortunate is hardly the word to describe an event so favorable for the fortunes for all."

Favorable. Me? Was I good or bad? I came in just in the middle of the picture. Keep your ears and your eyes and your ears open, Miller, and catch up on the feature attraction.

Suggs licked his razor-sharp lips and hooked his fingers in his stained vest.

" 'Unfortunate,' Mr. Undersecretary? Hardly!" He loved to hear his own voice. "This country, these great United States, these states have never in their existence been in such a favorable position as today . . ."

I would rather have read the Congressional Record. That, at least, I could have discarded when I became bored.

"No, never in such a favorable position; diplomatically, economically . . ."

The Undersecretary coughed politely. It's nice to be tactful and know how to break in.

"To use your own words, Senator. 'Hardly!' Diplomati-

cally we are at the brink of one of the worst imaginable pitfalls."

The medals on Five Star clinked. "Bosh!"

Morgan went on. "Where would you like to live, gentlemen?" and his glance flicked around the table; "in the best liked or most hated country in the world?"

It mattered not to Five Star, nor to Suggs.

"What difference does it make, Mr. Undersecretary? Speaking for myself and my constituents, I can truthfully say that the opinion of the world matters not one good solitary damn. Who cares what some other country has got to say, if words can't be backed up with action? Right now, and you know it as well as you're sitting there, Mr. Undersecretary, right now Uncle Sam is known all over the world as Uncle Sucker, and Uncle Shylock. Europe and Asia have had what they wanted over my protests and those of my constituents, and now Europe and Asia can go hang, for all I care. That's what they want us to do!"

He gave Morgan no chance to break in. That rolling bass rattled off the walls and crinkled my ears.

"Europe and Asia and the rest of the world could never affect us one way or another, favorable or otherwise, if it weren't for the ninny-headed mouthings of a few influential morons. Fight, Mr. Undersecretary, fight and murder and declare war and blow up millions of people and then run to Uncle Sam to pay the bills. I say, Mr. Undersecretary, I say what I've said before and what I'll say again; if Europe and Asia and the rest of the world don't like what we do here in these United States, let Europe and Asia and the rest of the world go to hell!"

Suggs wasn't a bit excited. Those grand, those mellifluous and rotund phrases rolled out of those skinny lips at a mile-a-minute pace with never a flicker of emotion but a nervous twitching of the drooping eyelids. If that was the way he talked when calm, I could see why he had been sent back and back to the Senate time after time.

The General deliberately tossed his cigar on the floor and pounded his fist on the table.

"Well said, Senator! My sentiments exactly. If Europe and Asia and the rest of the world don't like what we do here, let 'em all go to hell, or better yet, let's send them there in a handbasket."

Bloodthirsty old bat. I never

remembered seeing him any too close to the jumping-off point. That's what generals are for, they tell me.

"I say to hell with them all, and the sooner they know about it, the better for all concerned." His gaudy gold case, the gift of a grateful staff, was on the table in front of him, and he jerked out a cigar with a flourish. A light with a gold lighter, and he puffed thick clouds.

Morgan coughed politely. "Regardless, Senator, of what has or what is happening, we're concerned at present with what might happen."

Suggs opened his mouth like a thirsty carp and closed it again as Morgan went on.

"Call it what you like, Senator; General Legree will agree with me that this perfect defense—if defense is the word—is equally well the perfect weapon. Right, General?"

Legree pursed pontifical lips for a reply and was annoyed when Morgan paused only momentarily.

"Perfect defense means the nullification of an opposing weapon. Obviously, a weaponless army is no longer anything but a disciplined mob. In correlation, Senator, *our* arms and weapons are still effective, and —you mentioned the distrust (or dislike, or hatred, or whatever you will) held for us by Europe and Asia. Now, Senator, think of yourself and your constituents: is it not far better that Europe and Asia and the world be solaced and comforted by the announcement that we would use our . . . Iron Curtain only in our own defense? Would it not be better—how many years, Senator, have there been recorded of universal peace? How many years?"

Some men can sit poker-stiff, yet give the impression of teetering slowly on their heels, slowly counting the horses' teeth. Suggs was a horse trader from away back.

He said, "Mr. Morgan, I say I can appreciate your viewpoint. I can even appreciate the fact that you mean exactly what you say. But—!"

Sharks must have teeth like that; broken and yellow, and razor-keen. The smile of the Senator fascinated me.

"But—! Mr. Undersecretary, who's been doing all the fighting, and who's been starting all these wars? The United States? No, sir! We just get in them too late to do anything but pay all the bills!" He leaned forward and fixed the tabletop with a piscine stare.

"Look at it this way, the only way. When this whatshisname dies, all these countries look at

the map and start mobilizing the Guards. How do we know how long he's going to live, or how long he's going to keep this magic head of his?"

My magic head itched, and I rubbed it.

"Now, here's what I've said before, and here's what I say now—we can't let the world get away with murder—'murder' is what I said, Mr. Undersecretary, and 'murder' is what I mean. Didn't you say—now, tell us the truth, now—haven't you always said that it would be just a question of time until just about anyone has the secret of the atomic bomb? Didn't you say that?"

Morgan nodded. "Quite often I've said that, Senator. Too often for some."

Suggs was triumphant. "All right, now. You've hung yourself on your own rope and you don't know it. Answer me this; now, what's to prevent anyone who has the bomb from coming over here and using it on us? What's to prevent them?"

They had been all through that before, and Morgan knew it was no use to answer.

Suggs was his own echo. "Nothing's to prevent them, not a thing in the world. How many times have I come right out and said in public that the only way to keep the world where we want it is to just make sure that no one else is going to get it? How many times?"

Morgan rubbed his cigarette in the ashtray and spoke to the table. "You've said that many times, Senator. That's true, too true. I, on the other hand, have asked you many times if you've thought that the only way to make sure no other nation gets the bomb would be to go right in and make *sure*. You agreed with me that *that* would mean force. Force, meaning war. Right, Senator?"

And the Senator, champion of Man and Humanity and Right said, "Right, Mr. Undersecretary. Right. We have the bomb, haven't we?"

Morgan didn't say much in answer to that. I don't think there was much he could find to say. Psychologists claim there is hardly anyone, anyone with a modicum of logic in a brainpan, who cannot eventually see the light of reason. Maybe. Maybe calm logic could force Senator Suggs and his brainpan off his muddy detour. Maybe humanity and decency and all the other things that complement the civilized man to this day lie submerged in that pithecanthropic skull. Maybe, but I hated his guts then, and I do now.

I cleared my throat, and it must have been louder than I thought, because all the eyes swung my way. Well, so what? If I had anything at all to say about what was going to happen, or if I was ever going to be more than just a rubber stamp, now was the time to find out. After all, I'd been asked to bring my harp to the party, and I was going to play.

So I said, "Senator. Senator Suggs!"

He was a little taken aback. Like having the sweeper talk back.

"Senator," I said, "you talk big. Let's get right down to rock-bottom, and let's stay there until we're finished. Okay? . . . All right; in words of one syllable, you want us to do what amounts to declaring war on the rest of the world, winning the war and then running things our way. Right?"

The Senator teetered on those mental heels again. His lips sucked in and sharp hollows formed in his cheeks. I could see his mind reach all the way across the table and throw face-up the cards, one by one.

"You're Mr. Miller, I presume, although we haven't been formally introduced." His eager eyes flickered over me. "You haven't said much so far, and it's just as well that you spoke when you did."

Legree groped for his cigar case, and Suggs rumbled on.

"You said I talk big, Mr. Miller, and I'm going to take that as a compliment. Yes, I do talk big. And you talk plain. I like men who talk plain. We're going to get along well together." And he paused to let his thoughts catch up.

I gave my needle a little push. "You're still talking big, Senator," I reminded him.

He resented that, and tried to hide it. "Hardly, Mr. Miller. Hardly. But you asked a question, and I'll try to talk plain, like you do. If we have to fight the rest of the world to do things our way, the American way, then my answer is yes. Yes!"

Legree grinned his saturnine smile through a blue wreath of smoke and Morgan sat back in his chair with an almost silent exhalation. The rest of the group seated around that great table affected me hardly at all one way or another. Suggs was the spokesman for one faction and I—well, Morgan was willing to let me talk; the Old Man was sunk in the dumb obscurity of his chair, and who else was there to speak for me? Who else?

All right, Miller. Take it slow and easy. Watch your temper.

Say what you have that's important, and let it go at that. But —say it!

Now, there's one thing I learned long ago; you get a lot further if the other loses his temper first, and the best way to pry the lid of a temper is the use of the unexpected. The man who is handy with his hands will crack wide open with ridicule, with words used as the lever. The man who is handy with words is a different nut to crack; slap him down with insults while his verbal guard is down. If his temper doesn't snap in the first two minutes, it never will.

So, because I thought it was the right thing to say, and because I didn't like the Senator anyway, I said, "Senator Suggs, you talked plain. That's good. I like men who talk plain. Let's have some more of that talk. Let's get this right on the record for everyone here to see and hear.

"I don't like you, Senator. I like neither you nor your ideas, nor anything about you or your thoughts. How long has it been, Senator, since anyone has told you right to your face—not in a newspaper—that you're a self-convinced liar and a hypocrite, and that you and your ideas and everything about you stink to high heaven?"

"Stink" was the word that got him. He'd expected a nice gentlemanly quarrel with gentlemanly words above the table and rapiers below, and instead had walked around the corner and taken a barrel-stave across the mouth. His face flushed in an instant to a livid unhealthy red, his lips pulled away from his yellow teeth, his eyes seemed to protrude visibly. A beautiful sight.

It took him long seconds to throttle his gasping shock. I gave him just enough time to inhale for a long tirade, just long enough to open that fish-like mouth for words that might have been anything, then I let him have it again. And I don't know whether or not I told you, I was a sergeant before I got busted back to private, first class.

"Shut up!" I bellowed, and my roar boomed back at me from all those startled, those stunned faces. Shut up shut up shut up shut up . . .

I'm certain that those walls had never heard anything above a quiet murmur before that night. I just shocked Suggs and the rest into a panicky silence while I ranted. I had to talk fast, because while volume and violence are a good temporary substitute for brilliance, I knew

I wasn't going to have the floor forever.

"Let's talk straight, Suggs. Get this once, because I'm not repeating it, and get that silly look off your face—" I'd heard he was vain—"you and your constituents and your Army and your Navy can go to hell, as far as I care for any of them. I'm the man you want to keep your shirt clean while the rest of the world wallows in filth; I'm the man that's supposed to let you and your type, God forbid, rule the world; I'm the man—" I leaned over the table as far as I could, as far as I dared.

"Suggs," and I poured venom down his shirtfront, "the only thing that keeps me from despising the Government of the United States and the people in it is the fact that I know you're not typical. You're a freak, a monster!" And I threw in another to keep him off balance. "You even *look* like a fish!

"Remember this, Senator. Remember this one thing; if I ever see, if I ever hear as much as one word from you about war or bombs, in private or public, you'll live just long enough for me to hear about it!"

I threw a disgusted glance at the rest of the table. "One thing you don't know, Senator, is that I can kill you where you sit. Smith!"

The Old Man was astonished as the Senator, who sat with gaping piscine mouth and pop eyes. "Yes, Peter?"

"Tell him," I snapped. "Tell him how Kellner found out that I can stop a heart just as fast as I can a truck. And you'd better tell him while you're at it that Kellner thinks I'm emotionally unstable, subject to fits of temper. Tell that to the Senator. Tell him what Kellner said about me."

Smith coughed. "I think you all agree that Mr. Miller is a trifle upset. You can form your own opinion as to his temper. As to the other . . . well, Dr. Kellner is the top man in his field. He tested Peter—Mr. Miller—very thoroughly. I would give very careful consideration to whatever he says about Peter's capabilities."

Now you can see what makes a diplomat. When Smith was finished talking it sounded as though Kellner had actually said that I could murder someone. And yet Smith hadn't told even a tiny bit of a lie. Lying, as any married man knows, is knowing what to say and what not to say at the right time. But to get back to the rest. I dismissed Suggs. I ignored him for all the rest of the time he was there. Even when I looked directly at him, and that hurt

him. I have hopes, high hopes, that might have brought on the real heart attack he had the next day.

"So," I said generally to the rest of the table, "let's just assume from now on that you're dealing with a homicidal maniac with unlimited power. Is that the phrase you were thinking of, General?"

General Legree jumped as though he had seen me pull the pin on a live grenade.

"Forget it, General," I told him kindly. "I just read a lot of your speeches. Now you, Mr. Morgan, you're apparently having a meeting. I got here a little late. How about telling me the score?"

The tension seemed to seep out of the room as tangible as a stream of water. Suggs shrank up in his chair like a little old kobold, the Generals shifted into easier positions with the old familiar creak of expensive leather, and the man Smith looked right at me with his right eye closed. I'd said what he wanted me to say, but now what? Where did we go from here?

Undersecretary of State Theodore Morgan was one of the career men to be found in State Departments throughout the world, if by that you mean someone who has had the same job for years. The newspapers liked to tee off on him occasionally, using his pseudo-British mannerisms and habits for caricature. And the great American public, I suppose, considered him pretty much as a jerk, as the public is most apt to do when regarding a man who wore striped pants and a top hat in public and apparently liked it. But the Old Man, Smith—and I never did find out if Morgan was Smith's boss or vice versa. —set me straight on a lot of things about Morgan. He had a fairly rough job, as jobs are when you do something you dislike merely because policy has been set by higherups. Let's just say he did the best he could, and let it go at that.

He was in charge of the meeting, all right. He knew just how to handle Simon Legree, and without Suggs things went fairly smooth—on the surface.

"Mr. Miller," he said, "you made a rather abrupt entrance into the conversation. I think it better if we have it understood right now that we prefer to use reason instead of volume."

"Call me Pete," I said. I knew, somehow that he hadn't disapproved too much of what I'd said, and he was cracking down at the outset just to show the rest that *he* wasn't intimidated. "Pete is all right with me, since

I'm sure that this is all among friends." I looked around, and they were all friends. Especially the two generals that had seen me stop the trucks from the Federal Building window. I don't say they were actually afraid; just cautious. Just friends.

I went on. "Maybe I can help break the ice. I suppose you were talking about what you were going to do about things in general, and in particular, me. Well, go ahead."

So they did.

I won't bother with the details of the rest of the meeting or conference, or whatever you want to call it, because I don't think the details are too important. For one thing, when the first flush wore off, and I began to realize the colossal bluff I'd gotten away with, I got a little weak in the knees. For another, Morgan and Smith did all the talking to amount to anything. Legree, who seemed to be the self-appointed spokesman for the Army, really didn't have much to say when he knew that the State Department had all the cards, with me the joker. The Navy played right along when it was tentatively agreed that it was to be an island where I would be "stationed," as they euphemistically called it; they knew that islands are surrounded by water, and who sails on the water? The FBI got in their little piece when they were made responsible for general security. My contribution was that I was to be responsible to State, in the person of Smith, and Smith was to be the boss as far as conditions were concerned. When I brought that up I knew the Old Man was thinking of all the times I'd complained about his guardianship, and wrote him a tiny note so he wouldn't get too pleased with himself.

"The lesser—or the least—of many evils. Don't get swellheaded." He just grinned when he read it, and stuck it in his pocket to save for Morgan, I feel sure.

Smith and Bob Stein and I were the last to leave, and Morgan's grip for an old man was firm as we shook hands. "You did an excellent demolition job on the Senator," he said. "You know, Pete, there is one of the few people that have made me regret the job I have."

"Forget it," I told him. "You can get fired. Me, I got seniority in a lifetime job. As far as that carp is concerned, you can consider me your chief steward. I'll run ten miles to take up your grievance with Suggs."

Morgan smiled politely as he ushered us to the door, but I don't think he knew what I

meant. They don't have unions in State.

The island isn't too bad. I swore, years ago, with the first cold I ever remember having, that I would never care if I ever saw snow again. And where I am, there isn't any snow. The beach is yellow as gold, the sun comes up every day in the east and sets in the west, and I've got for my personal use the biggest, shiniest bar you ever saw in all your life. They ship in draft beer for me all the way from La Crosse, Wisconsin, and Munich, Germany. Every month I get a four-quart keg from Belfast in Ireland, and I've got all the gadgets I need to mix anything a barkeep could dream up. The ice I get from what probably is a six-hundred dollar refrigerator that makes nothing but ice cubes. I have a subscription to practically every magazine I ever heard of, and I get daily aerial delivery—that's right. A little Piper Cub with floats drops the New York *Times*, the *Monitor*, and a couple of others every morning—of the newspapers with the least amount of junk. I used to get the Detroit papers, but I found out it took too much mental effort to avoid looking at the Vital Statistics, where they record the marriages and deaths.

I finally learned to play bridge. Euchre doesn't seem the same without a barful of people, and pinochle is not the game that Stein is good at. Bob Stein, the poor guy—although he never says one word about it—takes everything in his stride. He spends six weeks out of every eight here with me and the others that form the crew of this little island afloat in the Southern Sea. The food is good, and with no limit to variety and type. We can't be too far from somewhere, because every once in a while we hear a rattle and banging somewhere out to sea. Once we heard what sounded like a full scale battle. I pried it out of Bob Stein that it was just maneuvers, as he called it. I know better. I see nothing but naval craft, and I suspect that they're not always just at the horizon for practice.

National affairs? Well, they're not too bad. The big noise came when the UN wanted my custody and didn't get it. The Old Man once asked me why I wasn't in favor of it, and I told him. In theory, yes: in practice, the UN was too dangerous. Personally, I felt that I could trust very few, and none that I hadn't known before all this happened. UN supervision meant that I would serve too many masters, and that I didn't like. And too,

there are too many people in the United States that don't believe in the UN, and might be tempted to do something about it if they thought I owed allegiance to someone else besides the United States. I couldn't stir up anything like that, I told him. Deep down in my heart, I wanted people to like me, to admire me, to think that I was their hero, and no other country's. I think I can see admiration and affection in the eyes of the civilians and sailors that supply me the food and the other things I ask for. They ask me every once in a while if I'm all right, if I need women. I tell them I don't, that I'm reconciled with living like I am. And that's true; I want no other woman except Helen, and her I can't have, for devious reasons; my name is just anonymous to the world. Smith talked me into that—his idea was that if no one knew who I was, I'd be just that much harder to find. He explained that there are several other islands set up the same as mine, with almost the same conditions and the same surroundings. He calls it camouflage on a grand scale, and he's the boss. I know I'm not very smart; just smart enough to know that the reports in the *Times* about other people in other parts of the world with my capabilities are some of the grand-scale camouflage started by Smith's agents. I'm all alone, and I know it. But sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and go for a walk along the beach and kick up a little sand with my bare feet like Helen and I did on our honeymoon. They asked me once if I really had to do that. I told them I felt like it, and they asked me why. I didn't tell them I was just lonesome.

CONFIDENTIAL MEMO

FROM: Morgan
TO: Smith
MESSAGE: I don't care how many plants got hit. Draft another plant. Draft the Times *itself. But get those special editions to Miller and get them there today. Repeat, today! You've already one day late in getting started on those hints of probable attack. Better rush the softening up. The way things are going, all plans are off, and we may need him in a hurry. And that means we'll need cooperation. You know Miller. You saw those reports on the Suggs post-mortem. Do I have to draw diagrams for you? You've got unlimited authority. Use it. I'm serious about drafting the* Times *if you have to. But GET THOSE PAPERS PRINTED AND GET THEM TO HIM TODAY . . .*

TAKE-OFF

Where the Readers take over and anything goes.

Dear Lester:

The fifth issue of SPACE, for my taste, is far and away the best of the lot, and a very good best that is. I don't even mind the usual peculiarity of your cover proclaiming that in this issue we have "The Worshippers" by that dauntless author, Damon Knight William Morrison.

Best, in number one place, and moreover my nomination for the best story of 1953, was "Breaking Point," by James E. Gunn. I'm a sucker for this type of story, even when it isn't too well done, as is usually the case; this time, I thought the characterization, motivation, etc., was splendidly handled—without interrupting the action of the story. Second and close to the tops on its own merits was "The Worshippers." The fact that I was sure that there was some gimmick behind the acceptance of our pure and mighty hero didn't interfere with the fun a bit; nor was the gimmick a letdown when revealed. "Ullr Uprising" struck me as a fitting conclusion to a very good serial.

George O. Smith's book reviews, which continue to be most interesting, tie with his "Stop, Look and Dig," for fourth place. My dislike for the Mickey Spillane type in itself keeps me from rating it any higher, even though I must admit that, in this particular instance, there was good reason behind the treatment. "Divinity" was by no means poor—the kind of a story that's needed for leavening, and always a relief when the reader finds that it's readable.

But where, good sire, was the letter department? I like to see what other readers think of an issue, and what the editor has to say that's printable in reference to aforementioned readers. By me, I would that you had lost the article rather than the letters, and hope that if you have to make such a decision again, you'll let the article go!

Glen Monroe
Bronx, New York

You can stop worrying about those multi-handled authors, Glen—we've finally decided you were right all along, and have tried to make our covers a little clearer. Okay? As to "Breaking Point"—I heartily concur; I thought it was terrific, and still do. On the other hand, Smith's esper yarn struck me as an un-

usually good piece of writing—so I'll go on disagreeing with you a bit, just to maintain my independence. As to the letters—well, the letter-section is the last part of the magazine made up, since it's more flexible than the rest. In this case, it simply got crowded out. I'll try to do better in the future. And on the articles, we've decided to take it easy; when a really good one for a science-fiction magazine comes along, we want it. But there'll be no articles just for the sake of having articles.

L. R.

Dear Les:

THAT COVER on the May issue! This is the best S-F cover I've seen in ten years of reading S-F! I've seen a few of Ebel's paintings here and there, but I never thought that he'd produce something like this in such a short time. I'm going to make a request—probably not unusual in view of this picture. Would I have to pay more than one head, three arms and a leg to purchase it? What are the chances?

If it isn't for sale, or would be too expensive, what about reprints suitable for framing? If you could get enough people interested, it should be a good idea.

Incidentally, I just read the heading above your story in *Star Science Fiction Stories* put out by Ballantine. What, if I may ask, are the names of the other magazines you're editing? Also, how in hell do you get time to write 50,000 words over a week-end?

I'm in Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin; think I can start an interesting discussion by that admission? I'm ready to discuss almost anything under the sun—and some things that aren't found under the sun. Any takers?

Ted K. Wagner
2005 Jefferson Street
Madison 5, Wisconsin

I'm afraid we'll have to disappoint you, Ted—and all the others who wrote in about Ebel's May cover. It isn't for sale. We like it too well ourselves! And if we can ever pry it out of our office, the only fair thing would be to turn it over to the boys at Philadelphia for the Convention. I'll try to do that, but can't promise. To get a reproduction suitable for framing would be a fairly expensive job—considering the cost of making up plates, etc., nowadays. But if enough people are interested, we'll be happy to consider it. That's strictly up to the readers. At any rate, there's not much question about it being

our most successful cover to date! Thanks for all the kind words on it.

I knew I'd be in trouble over that Star Science Fiction *introduction! But okay—the magazines are SPACE, of course; SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, ROCKET STORIES, FANTASY FICTION, and two others in the works. It's a little too complicated to explain, but that's the list. As to the fiction output—well, I have to confess that I don't do anything a lot of week-ends; the case of the fifty thousand words—should be fifty-five thousand—was a stunt of simply sitting down for seventeen solid hours and writing copy cold in final form. I don't recommend it, but sometimes work has to be done that way.*

And here's hoping you find plenty of takers!

L. R.

Dear Lester:

We're holding the Fourth Annual Midwestcon at Indian Lake on May 16 and 17. Arthur C. Clarke promises to be on hand, as well as Bloch, Tucker, Eshback, Kyle, Greenberg and Larry Shaw. How about coming on out?

Donald E. Ford
129 Maple Avenue
Sharonville, Ohio

Don, I'd love to come—but it looks impossible now. I hope you won't mind my using your letter instead as a chance to let some of the readers know about the shindig. This, from all accounts, is one of the best and most enjoyable regional conferences in science fiction. Everyone who has attended the previous ones has come away glowing and loaded with enthusiasm. I'd like to suggest that anyone interested will probably get all the dope if they'll drop you a card at the address above.

L. R.

Dear Les:

While we were all crowing about SPACE becoming a monthly so soon, a dirty trick has been pulled on the contents page: "published bi-monthly . . ." I can only hope and pray that this was a typo.

Henry Moskowitz
Three Bridges, N. J.

I'm sorry to say it wasn't a typo, Hank. It's just that we decided it was better to do it that way than to have a monthly that continually came out late, or one that had less than the best stories we could find. We all wanted it to be monthly—and the response of the readers made monthly publication more than justifiable. But in the current market, the top stories are

spread out pretty thin. Realistically, we had to change back, since there was no question of using stories just to make up an issue on time in our minds.

Subscriptions, of course, have been extended—you'll notice that we've now listed them by the number of issues, instead of by the year, so there'll be no confusion. And meantime, we're still planning on an early return to monthly schedule. Sometimes there is a lag between supply and demand—but we're sure that the writers will soon catch up with the magazines.

On the other hand, we've expanded in other ways. Just as one example, SPACE is now appearing regularly in an English edition, published by the Archer Press. And I notice from the fan-mail that we're even getting good display in Argentina!

L. R.

As we go to press, we've just learned of the death of James A. Williams, chairman of the Eleventh World Science Fiction Committee in Philadelphia. We'd like to express a deep regret at the loss of a man who fought hard for the success of science fiction when it was still only quasi-respectable, and to regret even more that he couldn't see the story of its current success in his home city this September.

Jim, as most of us knew him, was long active in the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society, serving in many capacities, including that of chairman. He was also one of the founders and guiding hands of Prime Press, one of the first publishing houses to bring out regular hard cover editions of our favorite stories. As a genuine authority on rare books, he naturally coupled his love of science fiction with his liking for permanent and worthwhile books.

He is survived by his wife and two daughters—and by a host of friends.

The Convention will go on, now with Milton Rothman as its chairman. Rothman and Williams had been working together closely, and Milt has already proved once that he can skipper a first-rate program.

But we remember how hard Jim worked to get the Convention for Philadelphia during the hectic days at Chicago. It just won't seem right not to have him there.

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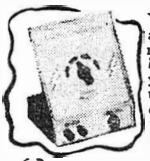

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WHAT TO PAY FOR TUBES

What should you be charged for a little tube, picture tube inside your set? Tubes can cost from 79c at the wholesale level to $101.00! How much should you pay for tubes? See page 139 and be safe! Included is a full listing of standard and reasonable charges for every type of television service and repair job. No longer need you be in the dark when it comes to knowing what a job should cost. Now you can make your own minor repairs and in addition know just how expensive "expensive" repairs should really be.

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- Picture blurred and not clearly focused
- Shadow in corner of screen
- Dark bars across picture
- Picture weak, gray
- Pattern over up and down
- Nothing on screen but thin white lines
- Small picture
- Picture tear
- Twisted picture

and many, many other faults, flaws & troubles!

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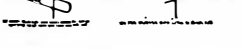

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Turn your set around. You will find in the back of it an arrangement of "rear controls." Now, if you are troubled with these zags on your screen, locate Hor. Syn. on the rear panel. Turn control slowly back to left. Zags will disappear and you will have a perfect picture on your screen. That's all there is to it. You have made a $5 repair in less than 5 min.

ZAGS ON YOUR SCREEN

A few other repairs that you can make yourself without tools, without any special knowledge, just with the help of this new TV Owner's Self-Repair Book.

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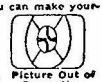

Picture Out of Proportion Vertically

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Mason picks up the phone. A voice says: "See Carlin tonight. Tell him to get another partner. *Matter of life and death!*" But Carlin never HAD a partner! Yet he's MURDERED!

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Belle Adrain, Mason's client, is pale as a ghost. A witness SWEARS he saw her at the scene of the murder. And Exhibit "A" — the *murder* weapon — is Belle's OWN GUN!

5 The Case of the NEGLIGENT NYMPH

Mason sees a girl escaping from George Alder's estate. She hands him a letter. "Alder will do ANYTHING to get this letter!" she says. "You *must* stop him!" But someone else beats Mason to it — *by killing Alder!*

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Perry's client is on trial for murder. The D.A. flings a package in front of the accused woman. She collapses. The jury is ready to send her to the chair — but Perry comes up with a surprise package of his own!

— Continued on inside cover

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