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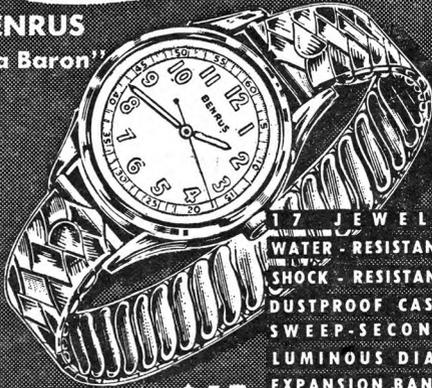


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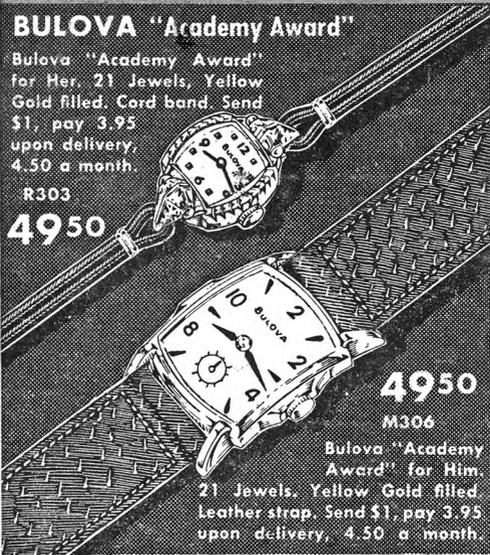
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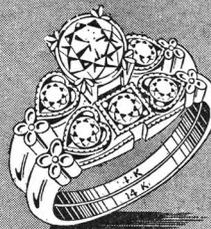
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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

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VOL. 7 NOVEMBER, 1950 NO. 3

A NOVEL OF TIME UNBORN

FLIGHT TO FOREVER.....Poul Anderson 12
 One man against the limitless wastes of time, he fought the strange, inhuman civilizations of Earth's unguessable future, searching hopelessly among the never-ending tomorrows—for the road to one unforgettable yesterday!

SHORT STORIES

STAR TAMER.....Alfred Coppel 48
 Not for Cannon were the ship-worn paths of space—but the inward passage through the sun's embrace—where a ship flashes into flaming gas—and a man into a spaceman's myth!

THE SOUL MAKERS.....Robert Moore Williams 58
 Why did the metal servants of man's last days troop silently out into the woods—carrying sculptor's tools!

THE LAND OF LOST CONTENT.....Chad Oliver 74
 They fled the holocaust of man's ultimate savagery—and none save one dying, fighting outcast knew that—the world they had chosen was a tomb!

DOOM SHIP.....Henry Guth 86
 He knew that he must die in a cold hell of his own making, cursed by his fellows and cast out by the very universe that gave him birth!

SUNKEN UNIVERSE.....Arthur Merlyn 98
 Prisoner of the seasons was he, fighter against unseen hordes—Lavon, the king of the nameless ones, who must save the seas for his people!

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Cover by Van Dongen
 Inside Illustrations by Finlay, Callé, Paul and Stuart

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neighbors' Radios in spare time. SPECIAL BOOKLETS start teaching you the day you enroll.

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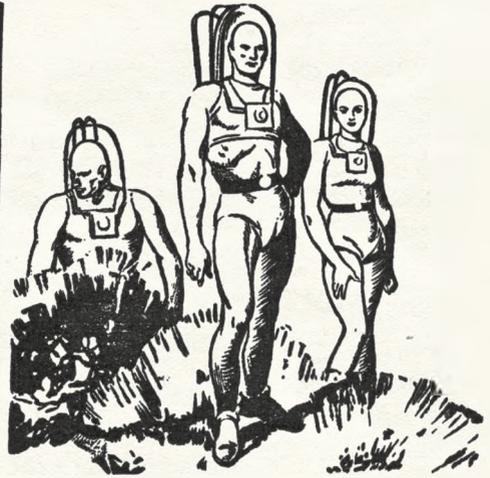
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FANDOM'S CORNER

Conducted by James V. Taurasi

THE present war situation has begun to affect science-fiction fandom. Super-active fan Arthur H. Rapp has joined the U.S. Army. Art, of course, will have to drop all fan activities. These included the publication of his monthly magazine, *Spacewarp*; Official Editor of *The National Fantasy Fan*, organ of the NFFF; numerous other publications for other organizations, plus a large amount of letter-writing. It will take several fans to fill the vacuum created by Art's joining the Armed Forces. You can expect many other fans to either join or be drafted into the services as time goes on. And, if the "war" gets really hot, well, it will probably duplicate the condition of World War II, when fan activities were all but stopped. But Fandom will never completely stop. Even in the Armed Forces, fans will find a way. During the last war, fan magazines were published while the boys were overseas. We know of at least three fan mags that were put together and

(Continued on page 8)



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Chart shows how to find the North Star
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You'll be the envy of all your friends when you wear this sensational 9-way wonder—the amazing, patented new TELZALL SUN WATCH. It's the only watch of its kind in the world. This tickless time-piece tells the sun time... nothing to go out of order.

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"You ought to get a medal!"

says I

"NOT ME, FRED COMES BACK. THE FORD-AUTHORIZED RECONDITIONER SHOULD GET IT."

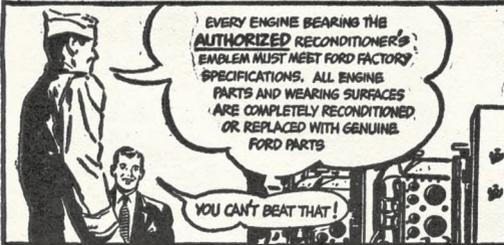


I STOPPED TO TELL MY MECHANIC FRIEND, FRED, HOW FRISKY MY FORD IS SINCE I GOT MY RECONDITIONED ENGINE.

SEE THAT EMBLEM? THAT'S WHY YOUR FORD'S GOT SO MUCH PER. IT'LL STAY THAT WAY TOO, FOR THOUSANDS OF MILES TO COME!



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HOW DO YOU SEE WHY YOU SHOULD GIVE YOUR MEDAL TO THE FORD-AUTHORIZED RECONDITIONER?



I SURE DO AND I'M SPREADING THE NEWS TO EVERYONE. I KNOW WHO OWNS A HIGH-MILEAGE FORD

AUTHORIZED
RECONDITIONED FORD ENGINES
AND ENGINE ACCESSORIES
(LOOK FOR THE AUTHORIZED RECONDITIONER'S EMBLEM ON THE RECONDITIONED FORD ENGINE YOU BUY)

SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

(Continued from page 6)

mailed out from France and Germany.

More bad news, Vol Molesworth of Australia has send in a report that Australian Fandom has all but collapsed. The only active group over there is the *Sydney Futurians* and their membership has dropped down to four. Even Fandom's Marshall Plan could not save Australian Fandom. You will recall that at the last World Convention, in Cincinnati, Ohio, \$150 was donated to supply Australian fandom with stf books. This held up the collapse, but in the end, interest in stf was lost. What caused this lack of interest in the land down under? It has been reported that the complete ban of professional science fiction magazines, the lack of any fan publications, plus the burden of University studies of the few really active fans finally combined and the whole of Australian fandom dropped.

Now for some good news: England has recently gone on a science fiction publishing spree, with almost all of the United States professional magazines coming out in British editions. *Super Science* recently saw its third British Edition with some of the stories of the January 1950 edition being reprinted. The edition is somewhat smaller in the number of pages, has no page numbers, no date and no departments. It contains the same cover and inside illustrations. Not only has *Super Science* its own British Edition, but another British publication is reprinting *Super's* material. The first issue of England's *Cosmic Science Stories* contains nothing but reprints from the September 1949 issue of *Super Science*.

Need material for your fan mag? We have on hand a letter from Lee Hoffman, 101 Wagner Street, Savannah, Georgia, who offers to write for any fan magazine. Just drop him a line and tell him what you want.

(Continued on page 10)

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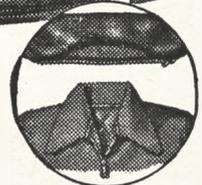
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(Continued from page 8)

And now for the Fan Magazines:

EUSIFANSO, Vol. 2—No. 2, July 1950, published by the Eugene Fantasy Society, 146 East 12th Street, Eugene, Oregon. Editor, D. R. Fraser. This neat 16-page printed fan mag is improving with each issue. We don't agree with Rick Sneary anti-pro article and enjoyed greatly pro mags reviews. 10¢ a copy and well worth it.

BEM, No. 2, September 1950, published by John R. Kalas, 146 Ridgewood St. S. E., Grand Rapids 8, Michigan. 10¢ a copy. A very neatly mimeographed 16-pager, with good fiction, poetry and articles. We liked best the list of pro-authors' pen names. In case you're interested BEM stands for "Bug Eyed Monsters." Our only suggestion for this mag is that they get a good cover artist.

THE CATAclysm, No. 2, published by Del Close and Robert Briney, 1726 Poyntz, Manhattan, Kansas. 10¢ a copy. A 12 page hectograph half-size fan mag featuring only poetry. We enjoyed most of the poems in the issue, but liked "To Edgar Rice Burroughs" by Lee Gann the best. Publisher Del writes that future issues of this mag will be mimeographed and have a better format, though there may be quite a wait for issue No. 3. We think the boys have a good start and wish them luck on obtaining that mimeo.

FAN-FARE, No. 4, July 1950, published bi-monthly by W. Paul Ganley, 119 Ward Road, N. Tonawanda, New York. 15¢ a copy. Another fan mag that improves with each issue. Extra neat mimeographing, 20 pages containing mostly fiction. We also suggest that this mag get a good cover artist.

ASMODEUS, No. 1, Summer 1950,

published by Alan H. Pesetsky, 1475 Townsend Ave., New York 52, New York. 10¢ a copy. A first issue and a good one. Excellent cover by JoGros. Good contents of fiction, poetry and one article. Interior mimeographing is poor, but we expect this to improve with future issues.

CHALLENGE, No. 1, Summer, 1950, edited and published by Lilith Lorraine, Rogers, Arkansas. 30¢ a copy. A newcomer and not a 100% fan mag, this one is a semi-pro. 16 mimeographed pages of top-notch poetry, with a good printed cover. We really enjoyed this one—that is until we looked at the price. 30¢ is too much for this job. At half that price we'd say okay.

THE OUTLANDER, No. 5, published by The Outlander Society, c/o Freddie Hershey, 6335 King Avenue, Bell, California. Edited by Len Moffatt and Rick Sneary. 15¢ a copy. Here is a magazine that has been tops in the lighter side of fandom since the first issue. We recommend this one for those who like humor along with their more serious fan mags. Printed cover by Stan Woolston.

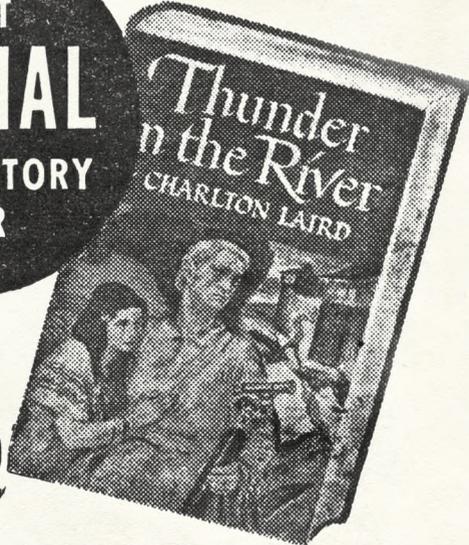
CONVENTION MEMORY BOOK, published by Don Ford, Box 116, Sharonville, Ohio. Edited by Stan Skirvin. \$1 a copy.

This one is the prize volume of the year in fan publishing. 96 pages of excellent mimeographing with numerous photo-offset pictures. The complete text of all the speeches at the 1949 World Convention. Most of them transcribed from the wire-recorder set up at the convention. For those who were at the Convention this will make a swell reminder of the good time he had.

Those who missed it, can now read the complete speeches made at the "big blow-out."



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Here, in a book filled with suspense and action, is the story of that magnificent country from which the states of Maryland and Delaware were carved—of the long rifles and long rapiers, of the amazing little army of saints and sinners who defied a royal crown for a dream of freedom—and above all of love—love of the land, love of power, and love of life.

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 (Published at \$2.75)

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CHAPTER ONE

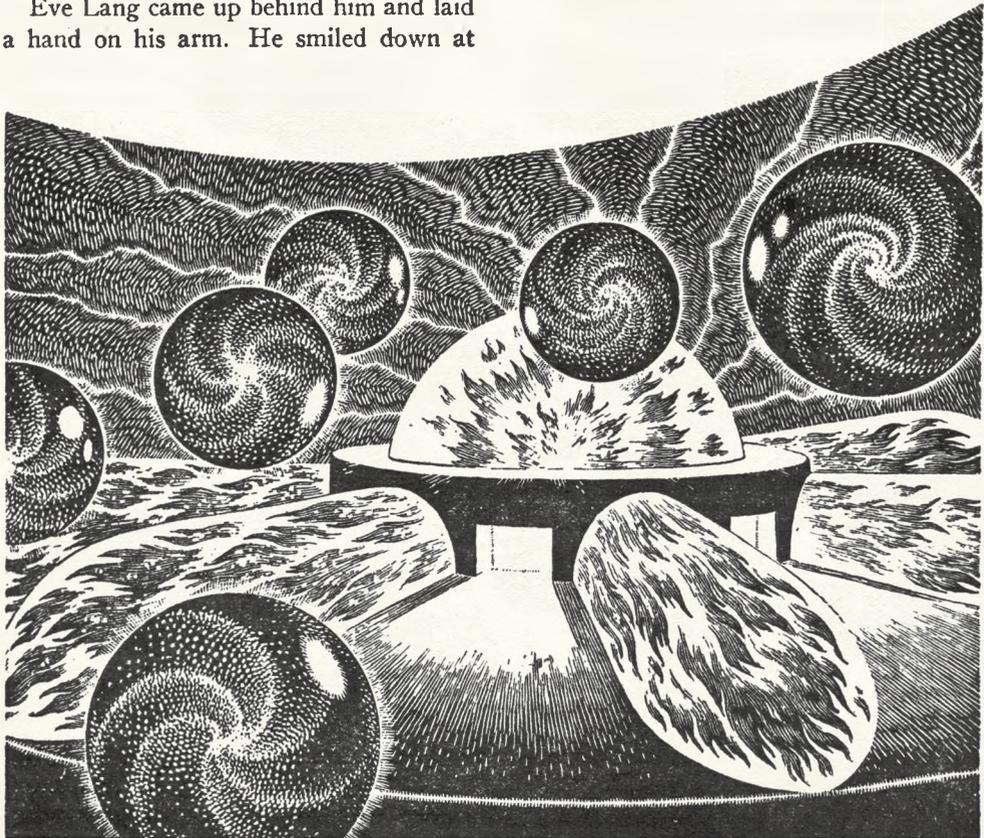
No Return

THAT morning it rained, a fine, summery mist blowing over the hills and hiding the gleam of the river and the village beyond. Martin Saunders stood in the doorway letting the cool, wet air blow in his face and wondered what the weather would be like a hundred years from now.

Eve Lang came up behind him and laid a hand on his arm. He smiled down at

her, thinking how lovely she was with the raindrops caught in her dark hair like small pearls. She didn't say anything; there was no need for it, and he felt grateful for silence.

He was the first to speak. "Not long now, Eve." And then, realizing the banality of it, he smiled. "Only why do we have this airport feeling? It's not as if I'll be gone long."



A Novel by POUL ANDERSON

The place pulsed and
throbbled with incredible
forces . . .



"A hundred years," she said.

"Take it easy, darling. The theory is foolproof. I've been on time jaunts before, remember? Twenty years ahead and twenty back. The projector works, it's been proven in practice. This is just a little longer trip, that's all."

"But the automatic machines, that went a hundred years ahead, never came back—"

"Exactly. Some damn fool thing or other went wrong with them. Tubes blew their silly heads off, or some such thing. That's why Sam and I have to go, to see what went wrong. We can repair our machine. We can compensate for the well-known perversity of vacuum tubes."

"But why the two of you? One would be enough. Sam—"

"Sam is no physicist. He might not be able to find the trouble. On the other hand, as a skilled mechanic he can do things I never could. We supplement each other." Saunders took a deep breath. "Look, darling—"

Sam Hull's bass shout rang out to them. "All set, folks! Any time you want to go, we can ride!"

"Coming." Saunders took his time, bidding Eve a proper farewell, a little in advance. She followed him into the house and down to the capacious underground workshop.

The projector stood in a clutter of apparatus under the white radiance of fluoro-tubes. It was unimpressive from the outside, a metal cylinder some ten feet high and thirty feet long with the unfinished look of all experimental setups. The outer shell was simply protection for the battery banks and the massive dimensional projector within. A tiny space in the forward end was left for the two men.

Sam Hull gave them a gay wave. His massive form almost blotted out the gray-smocked little body of MacPherson. "All set for a hundred years ahead," he ex-

claimed. "Two thousand seventy-three, here we come!"

MacPherson blinked owlishly at them from behind thick lenses. "It all tests out," he said. "Or so Sam here tells me. Personally, I wouldn't know an oscillograph from a klystron. You have an ample supply of spare parts and tools. There should be no difficulty."

"I'm not looking for any, Doc," said Saunders. "Eve here won't believe we aren't going to be eaten by monsters with stalked eyes and long fangs. I keep telling her all we're going to do is check your automatic machines, if we can find them, and make a few astronomical observations, and come back."

"There'll be people in the future," said Eve.

"Oh, well, if they invite us in for a drink we won't say no," shrugged Hull. "Which reminds me—" He fished a pint out of his capacious coverall pocket. "We ought to drink a toast or something, huh?"

Saunders frowned a little. He didn't want to add to Eve's impression of a voyage into darkness. She was worried enough, poor kid, poor, lovely kid. "Hell," he said, "we've been back to nineteen fifty-three and seen the house standing. We've been ahead to nineteen ninety-three and seen the house standing. Nobody home at either time. These jaunts are too dull to rate a toast."

"Nothing," said Hull, "is too dull to rate a drink." He poured and they touched glasses, a strange little ceremony in the utterly prosaic laboratory. "Bon voyage!"

"Bon voyage." Eve tried to smile, but the hand that lifted the glass to her lips trembled a little.

"Come on," said Hull. "Let's go, Mart. Sooner we set out, the sooner we can get back."

"Sure." With a gesture of decision, Saunders put down his glass and swung

toward the machine. "Good-by, Eve, I'll see you in a couple of hours—after a hundred years or so."

"So long—Martin." She made the name a caress.

MacPherson beamed with avuncular approval.

Saunders squeezed himself into the forward compartment with Hull. He was a big man, long-limbed and wide-shouldered, with blunt, homely features under a shock of brown hair and wide-set gray eyes lined with crow's feet from much squinting into the sun. He wore only the plain blouse and slacks of his work, stained here and there with grease or acid.

The compartment was barely large enough for the two of them, and crowded with instruments—as well as the rifle and pistol they had along entirely to quiet Eve's fears. Saunders swore as the guns got in his way, and closed the door. The

clang had in it an odd note of finality.

"Here goes," said Hull unnecessarily.

Saunders nodded and started the projector warming up. Its powerful thrum filled the cabin and vibrated in his bones. Needles flickered across gauge faces, approaching stable values.

Through the single porthole he saw Eve waving. He waved back and then, with an angry motion, flung down the main switch.

The machine shimmered, blurred, and was gone. Eve drew a shuddering breath and turned back to MacPherson.

GRAYNESS swirled briefly before them, and the drone of the projectors filled the machine with an enormous song. Saunders watched the gauges, and inched back the switch which controlled their rate of time advancement. A hundred years ahead—less the number of days since they'd sent the first automatic, just

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so that no dunderhead in the future would find it and walk off with it. . . .

He slapped down the switch and the noise and vibration came to a ringing halt.

Sunlight streamed in through the port-hole. "No house?" asked Hull.

"A century is a long time," said Saunders. "Come on, let's go out and have a look."

They crawled through the door and stood erect. The machine lay in the bottom of a half-filled pit above which grasses waved. A few broken shards of stone projected from the earth. There was a bright blue sky overhead, with fluffy white clouds blowing across it.

"No automatics," said Hull, looking around.

"That's odd. But maybe the ground-level adjustments—let's go topside." Saunders scrambled up the sloping walls of the pit.

It was obviously the half-filled basement of the old house, which must somehow have been destroyed in the eighty years since his last visit. The ground-level machine in the projector automatically materialized it on the exact surface whenever it emerged. There would be no sudden falls or sudden burials under risen earth. Nor would there be disastrous materializations inside something solid; mass-sensitive circuits prevented the machine from halting whenever solid matter occupied its own space. Liquid or gas molecules could get out of the way fast enough.

Saunders stood in tall, wind-rippled grass and looked over the serene landscape of upper New York State. Nothing had changed, the river and the forested hills beyond it were the same, the sun was bright and clouds shone in the heavens.

No—no, before God! Where was the village?

House gone, town gone—what had hap-

pened? Had people simply moved away, or. . . .

He looked back down to the basement. Only a few minutes ago—a hundred years in the past—he had stood there in a tangle of battered apparatus, and Doc and Eve—and now it was a pit with wild grass covering the raw earth. An odd desolation tugged at him.

Was *he* still alive today? Was—Eve? The gerontology of 1973 made it entirely possible, but one never knew. And he didn't want to find out.

"Must'a give the country back to the Indians," grunted Sam Hull.

The prosaic wisecrack restored a sense of balance. After all, any sensible man knew that things changed with time. There would be good and evil in the future as there had been in the past. "—And they lived happily ever after" was pure myth. The important thing was change, an unending flux out of which all could come. And right now there was a job to do.

They scouted around in the grass, but there was no trace of the small automatic projectors. Hull scowled thoughtfully. "You know," he said, "I think they started back and blew out on the way."

"You must be right," nodded Saunders. "We can't have arrived more than a few minutes after their return-point." He started back toward the big machine. "Let's take our observation and get out."

They set up their astronomical equipment and took readings on the declining sun. Waiting for night, they cooked a meal on a camp stove and sat while a cricket-chirring dusk deepened around them.

"I like this future," said Hull. "It's peaceful. Think I'll retire here—or now—in my old age."

The thought of transtemporal resorts made Saunders grin. But—who knew? Maybe!

The stars wheeled grandly overhead.

Saunders jotted down figures on right ascension, declination and passage times. From that, they could calculate later, almost to the minute, how far the machine had taken them. They had not moved in space at all, of course, relative to the surface of the earth. "Absolute space" was an obsolete fiction, and as far as the projector was concerned Earth was the immobile center of the universe.

They waded through dew-wet grass back down to the machine. "We'll try ten-year stops, looking for the automatics," said Saunders. "If we don't find 'em that way, to hell with them. I'm hungry."

2063—it was raining into the pit.

2053—sunlight and emptiness.

2043—the pit was fresher now, and a few rotting timbers lay half buried in the ground.

Saunders scowled at the meters. "She's drawing more power than she should," he said.

2023—the house had obviously burned, charred stumps of wood were in sight. And the projector had roared with a skull-cracking insanity of power; energy drained from the batteries like water from a squeezed sponge; a resistor was beginning to glow.

They checked the circuits, inch by inch, wire by wire. Nothing was out of order.

"Let's go." Hull's face was white.

It was a battle to leap the next ten years, it took half an hour of bawling, thundering, tortured labor for the projector to fight backward. Radiated energy made the cabin unendurably hot.

2013—the fire-blackened basement still stood. On its floor lay two small cylinders, tarnished with some years of weathering.

"The automatics got a little further back," said Hull. "Then they quit, and just lay here."

Saunders examined them. When he looked up from his instruments, his face

was grim with the choking fear that was rising within him. "Drained," he said. "Batteries completely dead. They used up all their energy reserves."

"What in the devil is this?" It was almost a snarl from Hull.

"I—don't—know. There seems to be some kind of resistance which increases the further back we try to go—"

"Come on!"

"But—"

"Come on, God damn it!"

Saunders shrugged hopelessly.

It took two hours to fight back five years. Then Saunders stopped the projector. His voice shook.

"No go, Sam. We've used up three quarters of our stored energy—and the farther back we go, the more we use per year. It seems to be some sort of high-order exponential function."

"So—"

"So we'd never make it. At this rate, our batteries will be dead before we get back another ten years." Saunders looked ill. "It's some effect the theory didn't allow for, some accelerating increase in power requirements the farther back into the past we go. For twenty-year hops or less, the energy increases roughly as the square of the number of years traversed. But it must actually be something like an exponential curve, which starts building up fast and furious beyond a certain point. We haven't enough power left in the batteries!"

"If we could recharge them—"

"We don't have such equipment with us. But maybe—"

They climbed out of the ruined basement and looked eagerly towards the river. There was no sign of the village. It must have been torn down or otherwise destroyed still further back in the past at a point they'd been through.

"No help there," said Saunders.

"We can look for a place. There must be people somewhere!"

"No doubt." Saunders fought for calm. "But we could spend a long time looking for them, you know. And—" his voice wavered. "Sam, I'm not sure even recharging at intervals would help. It looks very much to me as if the curve of energy consumption is approaching a vertical asymptote."

"Talk English, will you?" Hull's grin was forced.

"I mean that beyond a certain number of years an infinite amount of energy may be required. Like the Einsteinian concept of light as the limiting velocity. As you approach the speed of light, the energy needed to accelerate increases ever more rapidly. You'd need infinite energy to get beyond the speed of light—which is just a fancy way of saying you can't do it. The same thing may apply to time as well as space.

"You mean—we can't ever get back?"

"I don't know." Saunders looked desolately around at the smiling landscape. "I could be wrong. But I'm horribly afraid I'm right."

Hull swore, "What're we going to do about it?"

"We've got two choices," Saunders said. "One, we can hunt for people, recharge our batteries, and keep trying. Two, we can go into the future."

"The future!"

"Uh-huh. Sometime in the future, they ought to know more about such things than we do. They may know a way to get around this effect. Certainly they could give us a powerful enough engine so that, if energy is all that's needed, we can get back. A small atomic generator, for instance."

Hull stood with bent head, turning the thought over in his mind. There was a meadowlark singing somewhere, maddeningly sweet.

Saunders forced a harsh laugh. "But the very first thing on the agenda," he said, "is breakfast!"

CHAPTER TWO

Belgotai of Syrtis

THE food was tasteless. They ate in a heavy silence, choking the stuff down. But in the end they looked at each other with a common resolution.

Hull grinned and stuck out a hairy paw. "It's a hell of a roundabout way to get home," he said, "but I'm for it."

Saunders clasped hands with him, wordlessly. They went back to the machine.

"And now where?" asked the mechanic.

"It's two thousand eight," said Saunders. "How about—well—two-thousand five-hundred A.D.?"

"Okay. It's a nice round number. Anchors aweigh!"

The machine thrummed and shook. Saunders was gratified to notice the small power consumption as the years and decades fled by. At that rate, they had energy enough to travel to the end of the world.

Eve, Eve, I'll come back. I'll come back if I have to go ahead to Judgment Day. . . .

2500 A.D. The machine blinked into materialization on top of a low hill—the pit had filled in during the intervening centuries. Pale, hurried sunlight flashed through wind-driven rain clouds into the hot interior.

"Come," said Hull. "We haven't got all day."

He picked up the automatic rifle. "What's the idea?" exclaimed Saunders.

"Eve was right the first time," said Hull grimly. "Buckle on that pistol, Mart."

Saunders strapped the heavy weapon to his thigh. The metal was cold under his fingers.

They stepped out and swept the horizon. Hull's voice rose in a shout of glee. "People!"

There was a small town beyond the

river, near the site of old Hudson. Beyond it lay fields of ripening grain and clumps of trees. There was no sign of a highway. Maybe surface transportation was obsolete now.

The town looked—odd. It must have been there a long time, the houses were weathered. They were tall peak-roofed buildings, crowding narrow streets. A flashing metal tower reared some five hundred feet into the lowering sky, near the center of town.

Somehow, it didn't look the way Saunders had visualized communities of the future. It had an oddly stunted appearance, despite the high buildings and—sinister? He couldn't say. Maybe it was only his depression.

Something rose from the center of the town, a black ovoid that whipped into the sky and lined out across the river. *Reception committee*, thought Saunders. His hand fell on his pistol butt.

It was an airjet, he saw as it neared, an egg-shaped machine with stubby wings and a flaring tail. It was flying slowly now, gliding groundward toward them.

"Hallo, there!" bawled Hull. He stood erect with the savage wind tossing his flame-red hair, waving. "Hallo, people!"

The machine dove at them. Something stabbed from its nose, a line of smoke—tracers!

Conditioned reflex flung Saunders to the ground. The bullets whined over his head, exploding with a vicious crash behind him. He saw Hull blown apart.

The jet rushed overhead and banked for another assault. Saunders got up and ran, crouching low, weaving back and forth. The line of bullets spanged past him again, throwing up gouts of dirt where they hit. He threw himself down again.

Another try. . . . Saunders was knocked off his feet by the bursting of a shell. He rolled over and hugged the ground, hoping the grass would hide him. Dimly, he thought that the jet was too fast for straf-

ing a single man; it overshot its mark.

He heard it whine overhead, without daring to look up. It circled vulture-like, seeking him. He had time for a rising tide of bitter hate.

Sam—they'd killed him, shot him without provocation—Sam, red-haired Sam with his laughter and his comradeship, Sam was dead and they had killed him.

He risked turning over. The jet was settling to earth; they'd hunt him from the ground. He got up and ran again.

A shot wailed past his ear. He spun around, the pistol in his hand, and snapped a return shot. There were men in black uniforms coming out of the jet. It was long range, but his gun was a heavy war model, it carried. He fired again and felt a savage joy at seeing one of the black-clad figures spin on its heels and lurch to the ground.

The time machine lay before him. No time for heroics; he had to get away—fast! Bullets were singing around him.

He burst through the door and slammed it shut. A slug whanged through the metal wall. Thank God the tubes were still warm!

He threw the main switch. As vision wavered, he saw the pursuers almost on him. One of them was aiming something like a bazooka.

They faded into grayness. He lay back, shuddering. Slowly, he grew aware that his clothes were torn and that a metal fragment had scratched his hand.

And Sam was dead. Sam was dead.

He watched the dial creep upward. Let it be 3000 A.D. Five hundred years was not too much to put between himself and the men in black.

HE CHOSE night time. A cautious look outside revealed that he was among tall buildings with little if any light. Good!

He spent a few moments bandaging his injury and changing into the extra clothes

Eve had insisted on providing—a heavy wool shirt and breeches, boots, and a rain-coat that should help make him relatively inconspicuous. The holstered pistol went along, of course, with plenty of extra cartridges. He'd have to leave the machine while he reconnoitered and chance its discovery. At least he could lock the door.

Outside, he found himself standing in a small cobbled courtyard between high houses with shuttered and darkened windows. Overhead was utter night, the stars must be clouded, but he saw a vague red glow to the north, pulsing and flickering. After a moment, he squared his shoulders and started down an alley that was like a cavern of blackness.

Briefly, the incredible situation rose in his mind. In less than an hour he had leaped a thousand years past his own age, had seen his friend murdered and now stood in an alien city more alone than man had ever been. *And Eve, will I see you again?*

A noiseless shadow, blacker than the night, slipped past him. The dim light shone greenly from its eyes—an alley cat! At least man still had pets. But he could have wished for a more reassuring one.

Noise came from ahead, a bobbing light flashing around at the doors of houses. He dropped a hand through the slit in his coat to grasp the pistol butt.

Black against the narrowed skyline four men came abreast, filling the street. The rhythm of their footfalls was military. A guard of some kind. He looked around for shelter; he didn't want to be taken prisoner by unknowns.

No alleys to the side—he sidled backward. The flashlight beam darted ahead, crossed his body, and came back. A voice shouted something, harsh and peremptory.

Saunders turned and ran. The voice cried again behind him. He heard the slam of boots after him. Someone blew a horn, raising echoes that hooted between the high dark walls.

A black form grew out of the night. Fingers like steel wires closed on his arm, yanking him to one side. He opened his mouth, and a hand slipped across it. Before he could recover balance, he was pulled down a flight of stairs in the street.

"In heah." The hissing whisper was taut in his ear. "Quickly."

A door slid open just a crack. They burst through, and the other man closed it behind them. An automatic lock clicked shut.

"Ih don' tink dey vised use," said the man grimly. "Dey better not ha'!"

Saunders stared at him. The other man was of medium height, with a lithe, slender build shown by the skin-tight gray clothes under his black cape. There was a gun at one hip, a pouch at the other. His face was sallow, with a yellowish tinge, and the hair was shaven. It was a lean, strong face, with high cheekbones and narrow jaw, straight nose with flaring nostrils, dark, slant eyes under Mephistophelean brows. The mouth, wide and self-indulgent, was drawn into a reckless grin that showed sharp white teeth. Some sort of white-Mongoloid half-breed, Saunders guessed.

"Who are *you*?" he asked roughly.

The stranger surveyed him shrewdly. "Belgotai of Syrtis," he said at last. "But yuh don' belong heah."

"I'll say I don't." Wry humor rose in Saunders. "Why did you snatch me that way?"

"Yuh didn' wanna fall into de Watch's hands, did yuh?" asked Belgotai. "Don' ask mih why Ih ressued a stranger. Ih happened to come out, see yuh running, figgered anybody running fro de Watch desuhved help, an' pulled yuh back in." He shrugged. "Of course, if yuh don' wanna be helped, go back upstaihs."

"I'll stay here, of course," he said. "And—thanks for rescuing me."

"*De nada*," said Belgotai. "Come, le's ha' a drink."

It was a smoky, low-ceilinged room, with a few scarred wooden tables crowded about a small charcoal fire and big barrels in the rear—a tavern of some sort, an underworld hangout. Saunders reflected that he might have done worse. Crooks wouldn't be as finicky about his antecedents as officialdom might be. He could ask his way around, learn.

"I'm afraid I haven't any money," he said. "Unless—" He pulled a handful of coins from his pocket.

Belgotai looked sharply at them and drew a whistling breath between his teeth. Then his face smoothed into blankness. "I'll buy," he said genially. "Come, Hennaly, gi' us whissey."

Belgotai drew Saunders into a dark corner seat, away from the others in the room. The landlord brought tumblers of rotgut remotely akin to whiskey, and Saunders gulped his with a feeling of need.

"Wha' name do yuh go by?" asked Belgotai.

"Saunders. Martin Saunders."

"Glad to see yuh. Now—" Belgotai leaned closer, and his voice dropped to a whisper—"Now, Saunders, *when* 're yuh from?"

Saunders started. Belgotai smiled thinly. "Be frank," he said. "Dese're mih frien's heah. Dey'd think nawting of slitting yuh troat and dumping yuh in de alley. But Ih mean well."

With a sudden great weariness, Saunders relaxed. What the hell, it had to come out sometime. "Nineteen hundred seventy-three," he said.

"Eh? De future?"

"No—the past."

"Oh. Diff'ent chronning, den. How far back?"

"One thousand and twenty-seven years."

Belgotai whistled. "Long ways! But



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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Ih were sure yuh mus' be from de past. Nobody eve' came fro' de future."

Sickly: "You mean—it's impossible?"

"Ih do' know." Belgotai's grin was wolfish. "Who'd visit dis era fro' de future, if dey could? But wha's yuh story?"

Saunders bristled. The whiskey was coursing hot in his veins now. "I'll trade information," he said coldly. "I won't give it."

"Faiah enawff. Blast away, Mahtin Saundahs."

Saunders told his story in a few words. At the end, Belgotai nodded gravely. "Yuh ran into de Fanatics, five hundred yeahs ago," he said. "Dey was deat' on time travelers. Or on most people, for dat matter."

"But what's happened? What sort of world is this, anyway?"

Belgotai's slurring accents were getting easier to follow. Pronunciation had changed a little, vowels sounded different, the "r" had shifted to something like that in twentieth-century French or Danish, other consonants were modified. Foreign words, especially Spanish, had crept in. But it was still intelligible. Saunders listened. Belgotai was not too well versed in history, but his shrewd brain had a grasp of the more important facts.

The time of troubles had begun in the twenty-third century with the revolt of the Martian colonists against the increasingly corrupt and tyrannical Terrestrial Directorate. A century later the folk of Earth were on the move, driven by famine, pestilence and civil war, a chaos out of which rose the religious enthusiasm of the Armageddonists—the Fanatics, as they were called later. Fifty years after the massacres on Luna, Huntry was the military dictator of Earth, and the rule of the Armageddonists endured for nearly three hundred years. It was a nominal sort of rule, vast territories were always in revolt and the planetary colonists were building

up a power which kept the Fanatics out of space, but wherever they did have control they ruled with utter ruthlessness.

Among other things they forbade was time travel. But it had never been popular with anyone since the Time War, when a defeated Directorate army had leaped from the twenty-third to the twenty-fourth century and wrought havoc before their attempt at conquest was smashed. Time travelers were few anyway, the future was too precarious—they were apt to be killed or enslaved in one of the more turbulent periods.

In the late twenty-seventh century, the Planetary League and the African Dissenters had finally ended Fanatic rule. Out of the postwar confusion rose the Pax Africana, and for two hundred years man had enjoyed an era of comparative peace and progress which was wistfully looked back on as a golden age; indeed, modern chronology dated from the ascension of John Mteza I. Breakdown came through internal decay and the onslaughts of barbarians from the outer planets, the Solar System split into a multitude of small states and even independent cities. It was a hard, brawling period, not without a brilliance of its own, but it was drawing to a close now.

"Dis is one of de city-states," said Belgotai. "Liung-Wei, it's named—founded by Sinese invaders about tree centuries ago. It's under de dictatorship of Krausmann now, a stubborn old buzzard who'll no surrender dough de armies of de Atlantic Master're at ouah very gates now. Yuh see de red glow? Dat's deir projectors working on our energy screen. When dey break it down, day'll take de city and punish it for holding out so long. Nobody looks happy to dat day."

HE ADDED a few remarks about himself. Belgotai was of a dying age, the past era of small states who employed mercenaries to fight their

battles. Born on Mars, Belgotai had hired out over the whole Solar System. But the little mercenary companies were helpless before the organized levies of the rising nations, and after the annihilation of his band Belgotai had fled to Earth where he dragged out a weary existence as thief and assassin. He had little to look forward to.

"Nobody wants a free comrade now," he said ruefully. "If de Watch don't catch me first, Ih'll hang when de Atlantics take de city."

Saunders nodded with a certain sympathy.

Belgotai leaned close with a gleam in his slant eyes. "But yuh can help me, Mahtin Saundahs," he hissed. "And help yuhself too."

"Eh?" Saunders blinked wearily at him.

"Sure, sure. Take me wid yuh, out of dis damned time. Dey can't help yuh here, dey know no more about time travel dan yuh do—most likely dey'll trow yuh in de calabozo and smash yuh machine. Yuh have to go on. Take me!"

Saunders hesitated, warily. What did he really know? How much truth was in Belgotai's story? How far could he trust—

"Set me off in some time when a free comrade can fight again. Meanwhile Ih'll help. Ih'm a good man wid gun or vib-rodagger. Yuh can't go batting alone into de future."

Saunders wondered. But what the hell—it was plain enough that this period was of no use to him. And Belgotai had saved him, even if the Watch wasn't as bad as he claimed. And—well—he needed someone to talk to, if nothing else. Someone to help him forget Sam Hull and the gulf of centuries separating him from Eve.

Decision came. "Okay."

"Wonnaful! Yuh'll no be sorry, Mahtin." Belgotai stood up. "Come, le's be blasting off."

"Now?"

"De sooner de better. Someone may find yuh machine. Den it's too late."

"But—you'll want to make ready—say good-by—"

Belgotai slapped his pouch. "All Ih own is heah." Bitterness underlay his reckless laugh. "Ih've none to say good-by to, except mih creditors. Come!"

Half dazed, Saunders followed him out of the tavern. This time-hopping was going too fast for him, he didn't have a chance to adjust.

For instance, if he ever got back to his own time he'd have descendants in this age. At the rate at which lines of descent spread, there would be men in each army who had his own and Eve's blood, warring on each other without thought of the tenderness which had wrought their very beings. But then, he remembered wearily, he had never considered the common ancestors he must have with men he'd shot out of the sky in the war he once had fought.

Men lived in their own times, a brief flash of light ringed with an enormous dark, and it was not in their nature to think beyond that little span of years. He began to realize why time travel had never been common.

"Hist!" Belgotai drew him into the tunnel of an alley. They crouched there while four black-caped men of the Watch strode past. In the wan red light, Saunders had a glimpse of high cheekbones, half-Oriental features, the metallic gleam of guns slung over their shoulders.

They made their way to the machine where it lay between lowering houses crouched in a night of fear and waiting. Belgotai laughed again, a soft, joyous ring in the dark. "Freedom!" he whispered.

They crawled into it and Saunders set the controls for a hundred years ahead. Belgotai scowled. "Most like de world'll be very tame and quiet den," he said.

"If I get a way to return," said Saunders, "I'll carry you on whenever you want to go."

"Or yuh could carry me back a hundred years from now," said the warrior. "Blast away, den!"

3100 A.D. A waste of blackened, fused rock. Saunders switched on the Geiger counter and it clattered crazily. Radioactive! Some hellish atomic bomb had wiped Liung-Wei from existence. He leaped another century, shaking.

3200 A.D. The radioactivity was gone, but the desolation remained, a vast vitrified crater under a hot, still sky, dead and lifeless. There was little prospect of walking across it in search of man, nor did Saunders want to get far from the machine. If he should be cut off from it. . . .

By 3500, soil had drifted back over the ruined land and a forest was growing. They stood in a drizzling rain and looked around them.

"Big trees," said Saunders. "This forest has stood for a long time without human interference."

"Maybe man went back to de caves?" suggested Belgotai.

"I doubt it. Civilization was just too widespread for a lapse into total savagery. But it may be a long ways to a settlement."

"Le's go ahead, den!" Belgotai's eyes gleamed with interest.

The forest still stood for centuries thereafter. Saunders scowled in worry. He didn't like this business of going farther and farther from his time, he was already too far ahead ever to get back without help. Surely, in all ages of human history—

4100 A. D. They flashed into materialization on a broad grassy sward where low, rounded buildings of something that looked like tinted plastic stood between

fountains, statues, and bowers. A small aircraft whispered noiselessly overhead, no sign of motive power on its exterior,

There were humans around, young men and women who wore long colorful capes over light tunics. They crowded forward with a shout. Saunders and Belgotai stepped out, raising hands in a gesture of friendship. But the warrior kept his hands close to his gun.

The language was a flowing, musical tongue with only a baffling hint of familiarity. Had times changed that much?

They were taken to one of the buildings. Within its cool, spacious interior, a grave, bearded man in ornate red robes stood up to greet them. Someone else brought in a small machine reminiscent of an oscilloscope with microphone attachments. The man set it on the table and adjusted its dials.

He spoke again, his own unknown language rippling from his lips. But words came out of the machine—English!

"Welcome, travelers, to this branch of the American College. Please be seated."

Saunders and Belgotai gaped. The man smiled. "I see the psychophone is new to you. It is a receiver of encephalic emissions from the speech centers. When one speaks, the corresponding thoughts are taken by the machine, greatly amplified, and beamed to the brain of the listener, who interprets them in terms of his own language.

"Permit me to introduce myself. I am Hamalon Avard; dean of this branch of the College." He raised bushy gray eyebrows in polite inquiry.

They gave their names and Avard bowed ceremoniously. A slim girl, whose scanty dress caused Belgotai's eyes to widen, brought a tray of sandwiches and a beverage not unlike tea. Saunders suddenly realized how hungry and tired he was. He collapsed into a seat that molded itself to his contours and looked dully at Avard.

Their story came out, and the dean nodded. "I thought you were time travelers," he said. "But this is a matter of great interest. The archeology departments will want to speak to you, if you will be so kind—"

"Can you help us?" asked Saunders bluntly. "Can you fix our machine so it will reverse?"

"Alas, no. I am afraid our physics holds no hope for you. I can consult the experts, but I am sure there has been no change in spatiotemporal theory since Priogan's reformulation. According to it, the energy needed to travel into the past increases tremendously with the period covered. The deformation of world lines, you see. Beyond a period of about seventy years, infinite energy is required."

Saunders nodded dully. "I thought so. Then there's no hope?"

"Not in this time, I am afraid. But science is advancing rapidly. Contact with alien culture in the Galaxy has proved an immense stimulant—"

"Yuh have interstellar travel?" exploded Belgotai. "Yuh can travel to de stars?"

"Yes, of course. The faster-than-light drive was worked out over five hundred years ago on the basis of Priogan's modified relativity theory. It involves warping through higher dimensions— But you have more urgent problems than scientific theories."

"Not Ih!" said Belgotai fiercely. "If

Ih can get put among de stars—dere must be wars dere—"

"Alas, yes, the rapid expansion of the frontier has thrown the Galaxy into chaos. But I do not think you could get passage on a spaceship. In fact, the Council will probably order your temporal deportation as unintegrated individuals. The sanity of Sol will be in danger otherwise."

"Why, yuh—" Belgotai snarled and reached for his gun. Saunders clapped a hand on the warrior's arm.

"Take it easy, you bloody fool," he said furiously. "We can't fight a whole planet. Why should we? There'll be other ages."

Belgotai relaxed, but his eyes were still angry.

THEY stayed at the College for two days. Avard and his colleagues were courteous, hospitable, eager to hear what the travelers had to tell of their periods. They provided food and living quarters and much-needed rest. They even pleaded Belgotai's case to the Solar Council, via telescreen. But the answer was inexorable: the Galaxy already had too many barbarians. The travelers would have to go.

Their batteries were taken out of the machine for them and a small atomic engine with nearly limitless energy reserves installed in its place. Avard gave them a psychophone for communication with whoever they met in the future. Everyone was very nice and considerate.

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But Saunders found himself reluctantly agreeing with Belgotai. He didn't care much for these overcivilized gentlefolk. He didn't belong in this age.

Avard bade them grave good-by. "It is strange to see you go," he said. "It is a strange thought that you will still be traveling long after my cremation, that you will see things I cannot dream of." Briefly, something stirred in his face. "In a way I envy you." He turned away quickly, as if afraid of the thought. "Good-by and good fortune."

4300 A. D. The campus buildings were gone, but small, elaborate summerhouses had replaced them. Youths and girls in scanty rainbowhued dress crowded around the machine.

"You are time travelers?" asked one of the young men, wide-eyed.

Saunders nodded, feeling too tired for speech.

"Time travelers!" A girl squealed in delight.

"I don't suppose you have any means of traveling into the past these days?" asked Saunders hopelessly.

"Not that I know of. But please come, stay for a while, tell us about your journeys. This is the biggest lark we've had since the ship came from Sirius."

There was no denying the eager insistence. The women, in particular, crowded around, circling them in a ring of soft arms, laughing and shouting and pulling them away from the machine. Belgotai grinned. "Le's stay de night," he suggested.

Saunders didn't feel like arguing the point. There was time enough, he thought bitterly. All the time in the world.

It was a night of revelry. Saunders managed to get a few facts. Sol was a Galactic backwater these days, stuffed with mercantile wealth and guarded by nonhuman mercenaries against the interstellar raiders and conquerors. This region was one of many playgrounds for the children of the

great merchant families, living for generations off inherited riches. They were amiable kids, but there was a mental and physical softness over them, and a deep inward weariness from a meaningless round of increasingly stale pleasure. Decadence.

Saunders finally sat alone under a moon that glittered with the diamond-points of domed cities, beside a softly lapping artificial lake, and watched the constellations wheel overhead—the far suns that man had conquered without mastering himself. He thought of Eve and wanted to cry, but the hollowness in his breast was dry and cold.

CHAPTER THREE

Trapped in the Time-Stream

BELGOTAI had a thumping hang-over in the morning which a drink offered by one of the women removed. He argued for a while about staying in this age. Nobody would deny him passage this time; they were eager for fighting men out in the Galaxy. But the fact that Sol was rarely visited now, that he might have to wait years, finally decided him on continuing.

"Dis won' go on much longer," he said. "Sol is too tempting a prize, an' mercenaries aren' allays loyal. Sooner or later, dere'll be war on Eart' again."

Saunders nodded dispiritedly. He hated to think of the blasting energies that would devour a peaceful and harmless folk, the looting and murdering and enslaving, but history was that way. It was littered with the graves of pacifists.

The bright scene swirled into grayness. They drove ahead.

4400 A. D. A villa was burning, smoke and flame reaching up into the clouded sky. Behind it stood the looming bulk of a ray-scarred spaceship, and around it boiled a vortex of men, huge bearded

men in helmets and cuirasses, laughing as they bore out golden loot and struggling captives. The barbarians had come!

The two travelers leaped back into the machine. Those weapons could fuse it to a glowing mass. Saunders swung the main-drive switch far over.

"We'd better make a longer jump," Saunders said, as the needle crept past the century mark. "Can't look for much scientific progress in a dark age. I'll try for five thousand A. D."

His mind carried the thought on: *Will there ever be progress of the sort we must have? Eve, will I ever see you again?* As if his yearning could carry over the abyss of millennia: *Don't mourn me too long, my dearest. In all the bloody ages of human history, your happiness is all that ultimately matters.*

AS THE needle approached six centuries, Saunders tried to ease down the switch. Tried!

"What's the matter?" Belgotai leaned over his shoulder.

With a sudden cold sweat along his ribs, Saunders tugged harder. The switch was immobile—the projector wouldn't stop.

"Out of order?" asked Belgotai anxiously.

"No—it's the automatic mass-detector. We'd be annihilated if we emerged in the same space with solid matter. The detector prevents the projector from stopping if it senses such a structure." Saunders grinned savagely. "Some damned idiot must have built a house right where we are!"

The needle passed its limit, and still they droned on through a featureless grayness. Saunders reset the dial and noted the first half millennium. It was nice, though not necessary, to know what year it was when they emerged.

He wasn't worried at first. Man's works were so horribly impermanent; he thought with a sadness of the cities and civiliza-

tions he had seen rise and spend their little hour and sink back into the night and chaos of time. But after a thousand years . . .

Two thousand . . .

Three thousand . . .

Belgotai's face was white and tense in the dull glow of the instrument panel. "How long to go?" he whispered.

"I—don't—know."

Within the machine, the long minutes passed while the projector hummed its song of power and two men stared with hypnotized fascination at the creeping record of centuries.

For twenty thousand years that incredible thing stood. In the year 25,296 A. D., the switch suddenly went down under Saunders' steady tug. The machine flashed into reality, tilted, and slid down a few feet before coming to rest. Wildly, they opened the door.

The projector lay on a stone block big as a small house, whose ultimate slipping from its place had freed them. It was half-way up a pyramid.

A monument of gray stone, a tetrahedron a mile to a side and a half a mile high. The outer casing had worn away, or been removed, so that the tremendous blocks stood naked to the weather. Soil had drifted up onto it, grass and trees grew on its titanic slopes. Their roots, and wind and rain and frost, were slowly crumbling the artificial hill to earth again, but still it dominated the landscape.

A defaced carving leered out from a tangle of brush. Saunders looked at it and looked away, shuddering. No human being had ever carved that thing.

The countryside around was altered; he couldn't see the old river and there was a lake glimmering in the distance which had not been there before. The hills seemed lower, and forest covered them. It was a wild, primeval scene, but there was a spaceship standing near the base, a monster machine with its nose rearing

skyward and a sunburst blazon on its hull. And there were men working nearby.

Saunders' shout rang in the still air. He and Belgotai scrambled down the steep slopes of earth, clawing past trees and vines. Men!

No—not all men. A dozen great shining engines were toiling without supervision at the foot of the pyramid—robots. And of the group which turned to stare at the travelers, two were squat, blue-furred, with snouted faces and six-fingered hands.

Saunders realized with an unexpectedly eerie shock that he was seeing extra-terrestrial intelligence. But it was to the men that he faced.

They were all tall, with aristocratically refined features and a calm that seemed inbred. Their clothing was impossible to describe, it was like a rainbow shimmer around them, never the same in its play of color and shape. So, thought Saunders, so must the old gods have looked on high Olympus, beings greater and more beautiful than man.

But it was a human voice that called to them, a deep, well-modulated tone in a totally foreign language. Saunders remembered exasperately that he had forgotten the psychophone. But one of the blue-furred aliens were already fetching a round, knob-studded globe out of which the familiar translating voice seemed to come: “. . . time travelers.”

“From the very remote past, obviously,” said another man. Damn him, damn them all, they weren't any more excited than at the bird which rose, startled, from the long grass. You'd think time travelers would at least be worth shaking by the hand.

“Listen,” snapped Saunders, realizing in the back of his mind that his annoyance was a reaction against the awesomeness of the company, “we're in trouble. Our machine won't carry us back, and we have to find a period of time which knows

how to reverse the effect. Can you do it?”

One of the aliens shook his animal head. “No,” he said. “There is no way known to physics of getting farther back than about seventy years. Beyond that, the required energy approaches infinity and—”

Saunders groaned. “We know it,” said Belgotai harshly.

“At least you must rest,” said one of the men in a more kindly tone. “It will be interesting to hear your story.”

“I've told it to too many people in the last few millennia,” rasped Saunders. “Let's hear yours for a change.”

Two of the strangers exchanged low-voiced words. Saunders could almost translate them himself: “*Barbarians—childish emotional pattern—well, humor them for a while.*”

“This is an archeological expedition, excavating the pyramid,” said one of the men patiently. “We are from the Galactic Institute, Sarlan-sector branch. I am Lord Arsfel of Astracyr, and these are my subordinates. The nonhumans, as you may wish to know, are from the planet Quulhan, whose sun is not visible from Terra.”

Despite himself, Saunders' awed gaze turned to the stupendous mass looming over them. “Who built it?” he breathed.

“The Ixchulhi made such structures on planets they conquered, no one knows why. But then, no one knows what they were, or where they came from, or where they ultimately went. It is hoped that some of the answers may be found in their pyramids.”

THE atmosphere grew more relaxed. Deftly, the men of the expedition got Saunders' and Belgotai's stories and what information about their almost prehistoric periods they cared for. In exchange, something of history was offered them.

After the Ixchulhi's ruinous wars the Galaxy had made a surprisingly rapid comeback. New techniques of mathematical psychology made it possible to unite the peoples of a billion worlds and rule them effectively. The Galactic Empire was egalitarian—it had to be, for one of its mainstays was the fantastically old and evolved race of the planet called Vro-Hi by men.

It was peaceful, prosperous, colorful with diversity of races and cultures, expanding in science and the arts. It had already endured for ten thousand years, and there seemed no doubt in Arsfel's calm mind that it could endure forever. The barbarians along the Galactic periphery and out in the Magellanic Clouds? Nonsense! The Empire would get around to civilizing them in due course; meanwhile they were only a nuisance.

But Sol could almost be called one of the barbarian suns, though it lay within the Imperial boundaries. Civilization was concentrated near the center of the Galaxy, and Sol lay in what was actually a remote and thinly starred region of space. A few primitive landsmen still lived on its planets and had infrequent intercourse with the nearer stars, but they hardly counted. The human race had almost forgotten its ancient home.

Somehow the picture was saddening to the American. He thought of old Earth spinning on her lonely way through the emptiness of space, he thought of the great arrogant Empire and of all the mighty dominions which had fallen to dust through the millenia. But when he ventured to suggest that this civilization, too, was not immortal, he was immediately snowed under with figures, facts, logic, the curious paramathematical symbolism of modern mass psychology. It could be shown rigorously that the present setup was inherently stable—and already ten thousand years of history had given no evidence to upset that science. . . .

"I give up," said Saunders. "I can't argue with you."

They were shown through the spaceship's immense interior, the luxurious apartments of the expedition, the looming intricate machinery which did its own thinking. Arsfel tried to show them his art, his recorded music, his psychobooks, but it was no use, they didn't have the understanding.

Savages! Could an Australian aborigine have appreciated Rembrandt, Beethoven, Kant, or Einstein? Could he have lived happily in sophisticated New York society?

"We'd best go," muttered Belgotai. "We don't belong heah."

Saunders nodded. Civilization had gone too far for them, they could never be more than frightened pensioners in its hugeness. Best to get on their way again.

"I would advise you to leap ahead for long intervals," said Arsfel. "Galactic civilization won't have spread out this far for many thousands of years, and certainly whatever native culture Sol develops won't be able to help you." He smiled. "It doesn't matter if you overshoot the time when the process you need is invented. The records won't be lost, I assure you. From here on, you are certain of encountering only peace and enlightenment . . . unless, of course, the barbarians of Terra get hostile, but then you can always leave them behind. Sooner or later, there will be true civilization here to help you."

"Tell me honestly," said Saunders. "Do you think the negative time machine will ever be invented?"

One of the beings from Quulhan shook his strange head. "I doubt it," he said gravely. "We would have had visitors from the future."

"They might not have cared to see your time," argued Saunders desperately. "They'd have complete records of it. So they'd go back to investigate more primi-

tive ages, where their appearance might easily pass unnoticed."

"You may be right," said Arsfel. His tone was disconcertingly like that with which an adult comforts a child by a white lie.

"Le's go!" snarled Belgotai.

IN 26,000 the forests still stood and the pyramid had become a high hill where trees nodded and rustled in the wind.

In 27,000 a small village of wood and stone houses stood among smiling grain fields.

In 28,000 men were tearing down the pyramid, quarrying it for stone. But its huge bulk was not gone before 30,000 A.D., and a small city had been built from it.

Minutes ago, thought Saunders grayly, they had been talking to Lord Arsfel of Astracyr, and now he was five thousand years in his grave.

In 31,000, they materialized on one of the broad lawns that reached between the towers of a high and proud city. Aircraft swarmed overhead and a spaceship, small beside Arsfel's but nonetheless impressive, was standing nearby.

"Looks like de Empire's got heah," said Belgotai.

"I don't know," said Saunders. "But it looks peaceful, anyway. Let's go out and talk to people."

They were received by tall, stately women in white robes of classic lines. It seemed that the Matriarchy now ruled Sol, and would they please conduct themselves as befitted the inferior sex? No, the Empire hadn't ever gotten out here; Sol paid tribute, and there was an Imperial legate at Sirius, but the actual boundaries of Galactic culture hadn't changed for the past three millennia. Solar civilization was strictly home-grown and obviously superior to the alien influence of the Vro-Hi.

No, nothing was known about time

theory. Their visit had been welcome and all that, but now would they please go on? They didn't fit in with the neatly regulated culture of Terra.

"I don't like it," said Saunders as they walked back toward the machine. "Arsfel swore the Imperium would keep expanding its actual as well as its nominal sphere of influence. But it's gone static now. Why?"

"Th tink," said Belgotai, "dat spite of all his fancy mathematics, yuh were right. Nawthing lasts forever."

"But—my God!"

CHAPTER FOUR

End of Empire

34,000 A. D. The Matriarchy was gone. The city was a tumbled heap of fire-blackened rocks. Skeletons lay in the ruins.

"The barbarians are moving again," said Saunders bleakly. "They weren't here so very long ago, these bones are still fresh, and they've got a long ways to go to dead center. An empire like this one will be many thousands of years in dying. But it's doomed already."

"What'll we do?" asked Belgotai.

"Go on," said Saunders tonelessly. "What else can we do?"

35,000 A. D. A peasant hut stood under huge old trees. Here and there a broken column stuck out of the earth, remnant of the city. A bearded man in coarsely woven garments fled wildly with his woman and brood of children as the machine appeared.

36,000 A. D. There was a village again, with a battered old spaceship standing hard by. There were half a dozen different races, including man, moving about, working on the construction of some enigmatic machine. They were dressed in plain, shabby clothes, with guns at their sides and the hard look of warriors in their

eyes. But they didn't treat the new arrivals too badly.

Their chief was a young man in the cape and helmet of an officer of the Empire. But his outfit was at least a century old, and he was simply head of a small troop which had been hired from among the barbarian hordes to protect this part of Terra. Oddly, he insisted he was a loyal vassal of the Emperor.

The Empire! It was still a remote glory, out there among the stars. Slowly it waned, slowly the barbarians encroached while corruption and civil war tore it apart from the inside, but it was still the pathetic, futile hope of intelligent beings throughout the Galaxy. Some day it would be restored. Some day civilization would return to the darkness of the outer worlds, greater and more splendid than ever. Men dared not believe otherwise.

"But we've got a job right here," shrugged the chief. "Tautho of Sirius will be on Sol's necks soon. I doubt if we can stand him off for long."

"And what'll yuh do den?" challenged Belgotai.

The young-old face twisted in a bitter smile. "Die, of course. What else is there to do—these days?"

They stayed overnight with the troopers. Belgotai had fun swapping lies about warlike exploits, but in the morning he decided to go on with Saunders. The age was violent enough, but its hopelessness daunted even his tough soul.

Saunders looked haggardly at the control panel. "We've got to go a long ways ahead," he said. "A hell of a long ways."

50,000 A. D. They flashed out of the time drive and opened the door. A raw wind caught at them, driving thin sheets of snow before it. The sky hung low and gray over a landscape of high rocky hills where pine trees stood gloomily between naked crags. There was ice on the river that murmured darkly out of the woods.

Geology didn't work that fast, even fourteen thousand years wasn't a very long time to the slowly changing planets. It must have been the work of intelligent beings, ravaging and scoring the world with senseless wars of unbelievable forces.

A gray stone mass dominated the landscape. It stood enormous a few miles off, its black walls sprawling over incredible acres, its massive crenellated towers reaching gauntly into the sky. And it lay half in ruin, torn and tumbled stone distorted by energies that once made rock run molten, blurred by uncounted millennia of weather—old.

"Dead," Saunders' voice was thin under the hooting wind. "All dead."

"No!" Belgotai's slant eyes squinted against the flying snow. "No, Mahtin, Ih tink Ih see a banner flying."

The wind blew bitterly around them, searing them with its chill. "Shall we go on?" asked Saunders dully.

"Best we go find out wha's happened," said Belgotai. "Dey can do no worse dan kill us, and Ih begin to tink dat's not so bad."

Saunders put on all the clothes he could find and took the psychophone in one chilled hand. Belgotai wrapped his cloak tightly about him. They started toward the gray edifice.

The wind blew and blew. Snow hissed around them, covering the tough gray-green vegetation that hugged the stony ground. Summer on Earth, 50,000 A.D.

As they neared the structure, its monster size grew on them. Some of the towers which still stood must be almost half a mile high, thought Saunders dizzily. But it had a grim, barbaric look; no civilized race had ever built such a fortress.

Two small, swift shapes darted into the air from that cliff-like wall. "Aircraft," said Belgotai laconically. The wind ripped the word from his mouth.

They were ovoidal, without external controls or windows, apparently running

on the gravitic forces which had long ago been tamed. One of them hovered overhead, covering the travelers, while the other dropped to the ground. As it landed, Saunders saw that it was old and worn and scarred. But there was a faded sunburst on its side. Some memory of the Empire must still be alive.

TWO came out of the little vessel and approached the travelers with guns in their hands. One was human, a tall well-built young man with shoulder-length black hair blowing under a tarnished helmet, a patched purple coat streaming from his cuirassed shoulders, a faded leather kilt and buskins. The other. . . .

He was a little shorter than the man, but immensely broad of chest and limb. Four muscled arms grew from the massive shoulders, and a tufted tail lashed against his clawed feet. His head was big, broad-skulled, with a round half-animal face and cat-like whiskers about the fanged mouth and the split-pupilled yellow eyes. He wore no clothes except a leather harness, but soft blue-gray fur covered the whole great body.

The psychophone clattered out the man's hail: "Who comes?"

"Friends," said Saunders. "We wish only shelter and a little information."

"Where are you from?" There was a harsh, peremptory note in the man's voice. His face—straight, thin-boned, the countenance of a highly bred aristocrat—was gaunt with strain. "What do you want? What sort of spaceship is that you've got down there?"

"Easy, Vargor," rumbled the alien's bass. "That's no spaceship, you can see that."

"No," said Saunders. "It's a time projector."

"Time travelers!" Vargor's intense blue eyes widened. "I heard of such things once, but—time travelers!" Suddenly:

"When are you from? Can you help us?"

"We're from very long ago," said Saunders pityingly. "And I'm afraid we're alone and helpless."

Vargor's erect carriage sagged a little. He looked away. But the other being stepped forward with an eagerness in him. "How far back?" he asked. "Where are you going?"

"We're going to hell, most likely. But can you get us inside? We're freezing."

"Of course. Come with us. You'll not take it amiss if I send a squad to inspect your machine? We have to be careful, you know."

The four squeezed into the aircraft and it lifted with a groan of ancient engines. Vargor gestured at the fortress ahead and his tone was a little wild. "Welcome to the hold of Brontothor! Welcome to the Galactic Empire!"

"The Empire?"

"Aye, this is the Empire, or what's left of it. A haunted fortress on a frozen ghost world, last fragment of the old Imperium and still trying to pretend that the Galaxy is not dying—that it didn't die millennia ago, that there is something left besides wild beasts howling among the ruins." Vargor's throat caught in a dry sob. "Welcome!"

The alien laid a huge hand on the man's shoulder. "Don't get hysterical, Vargor," he reproved gently. "As long as brave beings hope, the Empire is still alive—whatever they say." -

He looked over his shoulder at the others. "You really are welcome," he said. "It's a hard and dreary life we lead here. Taury and the Dreamer will both welcome you gladly." He paused. Then, unsurely, "But best you don't say too much about the ancient time, if you've really seen it. We can't bear too sharp a reminder, you know."

The machine slipped down beyond the wall, over a gigantic flagged courtyard to the monster bulk of the—the donjon,

Saunders supposed one could call it. It rose up in several tiers, with pathetic little gardens on the terraces, toward a dome of clear plastic.

The walls, he saw, were immensely thick, with weapons mounted on them which he could see clearly through the drifting snow. Behind the donjon stood several long, barracks-like buildings, and a couple of spaceships which must have been held together by pure faith rested near what looked like an arsenal. There were guards on duty, helmeted men with energy rifles, their cloaks wrapped tightly against the wind, and other folk scurried around under the monstrous walls, men and women and children.

"There's Taury," said the alien, pointing to a small group clustered on one of the terraces. "We may as well land right there." His wide mouth opened in an alarming smile. 'And forgive me for not introducing myself before. I'm Hunda of Haamigur, general of the Imperial armies, and this is Vargor Alfri, prince of the Empire."

"Yuh crazy?" blurted Belgotai. "What Empire?"

Hunda shrugged. "It's a harmless game, isn't it? At that, you know, we are the Empire—legally. Taury is a direct descendant of Maurco the Doomer, last Emperor to be anointed according to the proper forms. Of course, that was five thousand years ago, and Maurco had only

three systems left then, but the law is clear. These hundred or more barbarian pretenders, human and otherwise, haven't the shadow of a real claim to the title."

The vessel grounded and they stepped out. The others waited for them to come up. There were half a dozen old men, their long beards blowing wildly in the gale, there was a being with the face of a long-beaked bird and one that had the shape of a centauroid.

"The court of the Empress Taury," said Hunda.

"Welcome." The answer was low and gracious.

Saunders and Belgotai stared dumbly at her. She was tall, tall as a man, but under her tunic of silver links and her furred cloak she was such a woman as they had dreamed of without ever knowing in life. Her proudly lifted head had something of Vargor's looks, the same clean-lined, high-cheeked face, but it was the countenance of a woman, from the broad clear brow to the wide, wondrously chiseled mouth and the strong chin. The cold had flushed the lovely pale planes of her cheeks. Her heavy bronze-red hair was braided about her helmet, with one rebellious lock tumbling softly toward the level, dark brows. Her eyes, huge and oblique and gray as northern seas, were serene on them.

Saunders found tongue. "Thank you, your majesty," he said in a firm voice.

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"If it please you, I am Martin Saunders of America, some forty-eight thousand years in the past, and my companion is Belgotai, free companion from Syrtis about a thousand years later. We are at your service for what little we may be able to do."

She inclined her stately head, and her sudden smile was warm and human. "It is a rare pleasure," she said. "Come inside, please. And forget the formality. Tonight let us simply be alive."

THEY sat in what had been a small council chamber. The great hall was too huge and empty, a cavern of darkness and rustling relics of greatness, hollow with too many memories. But the lesser room had been made livable, hung with tapestries and carpeted with skins. Fluorotubes cast a white light over it, and a fire crackled cheerfully in the hearth. Had it not been for the wind against the windows, they might have forgotten where they were.

"—and you can never go back?" Taury's voice was sober. "You can never get home again?"

"I don't think so," said Saunders. "From our story, it doesn't look that way, does it?"

"No," said Hunda. "You'd better settle down in some time and make the best of matters."

"Why not with us?" asked Vargor eagerly.

"We'd welcome you with all our hearts," said Taury, "but I cannot honestly advise you to stay. These are evil times."

It was a harsh language they spoke, a ringing metallic tongue brought in by the barbarians. But from her throat, Saunders thought, it was utter music.

"We'll at least stay a few days," he said impulsively. "It's barely possible we can do something."

"I doubt that," said Hunda practically.

"We've retrogressed, yes. For instance, the principle of the time projector was lost long ago. But still, there's a lot of technology left which was far beyond your own times."

"I know," said Saunders defensively. "But—well, frankly—we haven't fitted in any other time as well."

"Will there ever be a decent age again?" asked one of the old courtiers bitterly.

The avian from Klakkahar turned his eyes on Saunder. "It wouldn't be cowardice for you to leave a lost cause which you couldn't possibly aid," he said in his thin, accented tones. "When the Anvardi come, I think we will all die."

"What is de tale of de Dreamer?" asked Belgotai. "You've mentioned some such."

It was like a sudden darkness in the room. There was silence, under the whistling wind, and men sat wrapped in their own cheerless thoughts. Finally Taury spoke.

"He is the last of the Vro-Hi, counselors of The Empire. That one still lives—the Dreamer. But there can never really be another Empire, at least not on the pattern of the old one. No other race is intelligent enough to coordinate it."

Hunda shook his big head, puzzled. "The Dreamer once told me that might be for the best," he said. "But he wouldn't explain."

"How did you happen to come here—to Earth, of all planets?" Saunders asked.

Taury smiled with a certain grim humor. "The last few generations have been one of the Imperium's less fortunate periods," she said. "In short, the most the Emperor ever commanded was a small fleet. My father had even that shot away from him. He fled with three ships, out toward the Periphery. It occurred to him that Sol was worth trying as a refuge."

The Solar System had been cruelly scarred in the dark ages. The great engineering works which had made the other planets habitable were ruined, and Earth

herself had been laid waste. There had been a weapon used which consumed atmospheric carbon dioxide. Saunders, remembering the explanation for the Ice Ages offered by geologists of his own time, nodded in dark understanding. Only a few starveling savages lived on the planet now, and indeed the whole Sirius Sector was so desolated that no conqueror thought it worth bothering with.

It had pleased the Emperor to make his race's ancient home the capital of the Galaxy. He had moved into the ruined fortress of Brontothor, built some seven thousand years ago by the nonhuman Grimmani and blasted out of action a millennium later. Renovation of parts of it, installation of weapons and defensive works, institution of agriculture. . . . "Why, he had suddenly acquired a whole planetary system!" said Taury with a half-sad little smile.

HE took them down into the underground levels the next day to see the Dreamer. Vargor went along too, walking close beside her, but Hunda stayed topside; he was busy supervising the construction of additional energy screen generators.

They went through immense vaulted caverns hewed out of the rock, dank tunnels of silence where their footfalls echoed weirdly and shadows flitted beyond the dull glow of fluorospheres. Now and then they passed a looming monstrous bulk, the corroded hulk of some old machine. The night and loneliness weighed heavily on them, they huddled together and did not speak for fear of rousing the jeering echoes.

"There were slideways here once," remarked Taury as they started, "but we haven't gotten around to installing new ones. There's too much else to do."

Too much else—a civilization to rebuild, with these few broken remnants. How can they dare even to keep trying

in the face of the angry gods? What sort of courage is it they have?

Taury walked ahead with the long, swinging stride of a warrior, a red lioness of a woman in the wavering shadows. Her gray eyes caught the light with a supernatural brilliance. Vargor kept pace, but he lacked her steadiness, his gaze shifted nervously from side to side as they moved down the haunted, booming length of the tunnels. Belgotai went cat-footed, his own restless eyes had merely the habitual wariness of his hard and desperate lifetime. Again Saunders thought, what a strange company they were, four humans from the dawn and the dusk of human civilization, thrown together at the world's end and walking to greet the last of the gods. His past life, Eve, MacPherson, the world of his time, were dimming in his mind, they were too remote from his present reality. It seemed as if he had never been anything but a follower of the Galactic Empress.

They came at last to a door. Taury knocked softly and swung it open—yes, they were even back to manual doors now.

Saunders had been prepared for almost anything, but nonetheless the appearance of the Dreamer was a shock. He had imagined a grave white-bearded man, or a huge-skulled spider-thing, or a naked brain pulsing in a machine-tended case. But the last of the Vro-Hi was—a monster.

No—not exactly. Not when you discarded human standards, then he even had a weird beauty of his own. The gross bulk of him sheened with iridescence, and his many seven-fingered hands were supple and graceful, and the eyes—the eyes were huge pools of molten gold, lambent and wise, a stare too brilliant to meet directly.

He stood up on his stumpy legs as they entered, barely four feet high though the head-body unit was broad and massive. His hooked beak did not open, and the

psychophone remained silent, but as the long delicate feelers pointed toward him Saunders thought he heard words, a deep organ voice rolling soundless through the still air: "Greeting, your majesty. Greeting your highness. Greeting, men out of time, and welcome!"

Telepathy—direct telepathy—so that was how it felt!

"Thank you . . . sir." Somehow, the thing rated the title, rated an awed respect to match his own grave formality. "But I thought you were in a trance of concentration till now. How did you know—" Saunders' voice trailed off and he flushed with sudden distaste.

"No, traveler, I did not read your mind as you think. The Vro-Hi always respected privacy and did not read any thoughts save those contained in speech addressed solely to them. But my induction was obvious."

"What were you thinking about in the last trance?" asked Vargor. His voice was sharp with strain. "Did you reach any plan?"

"No, your highness," vibrated the Dreamer. "As long as the factors involved remain constant, we cannot logically do otherwise than we are doing. When new data appear, I will reconsider immediate necessities. No, I was working further on the philosophical basis which the Second Empire must have."

"What Second Empire?" sneered Vargor bitterly.

"The one which will come—some day," answered Taury quietly.

The Dreamer's wise eyes rested on Saunders and Belgotai. "With your permission," he thought, "I would like to scan your complete memory patterns, conscious, subconscious, and cellular. We know so little of your age." As they hesitated: "I assure you, sirs, that a nonhuman being half a million years old can keep secrets, and certainly does not pass moral judgments. And the scanning will be neces-

sary anyway, if I am to teach you the present language."

Saunders braced himself. "Go ahead," he said distastefully.

For a moment he felt dizzy, a haze passed over his eyes and there was an eerie thrill along every nerve of him. Taury laid an arm about his waist, bracing him.

It passed. Saunders shook his head, puzzled. "Is that *all*?"

"Aye, sir. A Vro-Hi brain can scan an indefinite number of units simultaneously." With a faint hint of a chuckle: "But did you notice what tongue you just spoke in?"

"I—eh—huh?" Saunders looked wildly at Taury's smiling face. The hard, open-voweled syllables barked from his mouth: "I—by the gods—I can speak Stellarian now!"

"Aye," thought the Dreamer. "The language centers are peculiarly receptive, it is easy to impress a pattern on them. The method of instruction will not work so well for information involving other faculties, but you must admit it is a convenient and efficient way to learn speech."

"Blast off wit me, den," said Belgotai cheerfully. "Ih allays was a dumkoff at languages."

When the Dreamer was through, he thought: "You will not take it amiss if I tell all that what I saw in both your minds was good—brave and honest, under the little neuroses which all beings at your level of evolution cannot help accumulating. I will be pleased to remove those for you, if you wish."

"No, thanks," said Belgotai. "I like my little neuroses."

"I see that you are debating staying here," went on the Dreamer. "You will be valuable, but you should be fully warned of the desperate position we actually are in. This is not a pleasant age in which to live."

"From what I've seen," answered Saunders slowly, "golden ages are only superficially better. They may be easier on the surface, but there's death in them. To travel hopefully, believe me, is better than to arrive."

"That has been true in all past ages, aye. It was the great mistake of the Vro-Hi. We should have known better, with ten million years of civilization behind us." There was a deep and tragic note in the rolling thought-pulse. "But we thought that since we had achieved a static physical state in which the new frontiers and challenges lay within our own minds, all beings at all levels of evolution could and should have developed in them the same ideal.

"With our help, and with the use of scientific psychodynamics and the great cybernetic engines, the coordination of a billion planets became possible. It was perfection, in a way—but perfection is death to imperfect beings, and even the Vro-Hi had many shortcomings. I cannot explain all the philosophy to you; it involves concepts you could not fully grasp, but you have seen the workings of the great laws in the rise and fall of cultures. I have proved rigorously that permanence is a self-contradictory concept. There can be no goal to reach, not ever."

"Then the Second Empire will have no better hope than decay and chaos again?" Saunders grinned humorlessly. "Why the devil do you want one?"

Vargor's harsh laugh shattered the brooding silence. "What indeed does it matter?" he cried. "What use to plan the future of the universe, when we are outlaws on a forgotten planet? The Anvardi are coming!" He sobered, and there was a set to his jaw which Saunderson liked. "They're coming, and there's little we can do to stop it," said Vargor. "But we'll give them a fight. We'll give them such a fight as the poor old Galaxy never saw before!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Attack of the Anvardi

"O H, NO—oh no—oh no—" The murmur came unnoticed from Vargor's lips, a broken cry of pain as he stared at the image which flickered and wavered on the great interstellar communiscreen. And there was horror in the eyes of Taury, grimness to the set of Hunda's mighty jaws, a sadness of many hopeless centuries in the golden gaze of the Dreamer.

After weeks of preparation and waiting, Saunders realized matters were at last coming to a head.

"Aye, your majesty," said the man in the screen. He was haggard, exhausted, worn out by strain and struggle and defeat. "Aye, fifty-four shiploads of us, and the Anvardian fleet in pursuit."

"How far behind?" rapped Hunda.

"About half a light-year, sir, and coming up slowly. We'll be close to Sol before they can overhaul us."

"Can you fight them?" rapped Hunda.

"No, sir," said the man. "We're loaded with refugees, women and children and unarmed peasants, hardly a gun on a ship—Can't you help us?" It was a cry, torn by the ripping static that filled the interstellar void. "Can't you help us, your majesty? They'll sell us for slaves!"

"How did it happen?" asked Taury wearily.

"I don't know, your majesty. We heard you were at Sol through your agents, and secretly gathered ships. We don't want to be under the Anvardi, Empress; they tax the life from us and conscript our men and take our women and children. . . . We only communicated by ultrawave; it can't be traced, and we only used the code your agents gave us. But as we passed Canopus, they called on us to surrender in the name of their king—and they have a whole war fleet after us!"

"How long before they get here?" asked Hunda.

"At this rate, sir, perhaps a week," answered the captain of the ship. Static snarled through his words.

"Well, keep on coming this way," said Taury wearily. "We'll send ships against them. You may get away during the battle. Don't go to Sol, of course, we'll have to evacuate that. Our men will try to contact you later."

"We aren't worth it, your majesty. Save all your ships."

"We're coming," said Taury flatly, and broke the circuit.

She turned to the others, and her red head was still lifted. "Most of our people can get away," she said. "They can flee into the Arlath cluster; the enemy won't be able to find them in that wilderness." She smiled, a tired little smile that tugged at one corner of her mouth. "We all know what to do, we've planned against this day. Munidor, Falz, Mico, start readying for evacuation. Hunda, you and I will have to plan our assault. We'll want to make it as effective as possible, but use a minimum of ships."

"Why sacrifice fighting strength uselessly?" asked Belgotai.

"It won't be useless. We'll delay the Anvardi, and give those refugees a chance to escape."

"If we had weapons," rumbled Hunda. His huge fists clenched. "By the gods, if we had decent weapons!"

The Dreamer stiffened. And before he could vibrate it, the same thought had leaped into Saunders' brain, and they stared at each other, man and Vro-Hian, with a sudden wild hope. . . .

SPACE glittered and flared with a million stars, thronging against the tremendous dark, the Milky Way foamed around the sky in a rush of cold silver, and it was shattering to a human in its utter immensity. Saunders felt the loneliness of it

as he had never felt it on the trip to Venus—for Sol was dwindling behind them, they were rushing out into the void between the stars.

There had only been time to install the new weapon on the dreadnought, time and facilities were so cruelly short, there had been no chance even to test it in maneuvers. They might, perhaps, have leaped back into time again and again, gaining weeks, but the shops of Terra could only turn out so much material in the one week they did have.

So it was necessary to risk the whole fleet and the entire fighting strength of Sol on this one desperate gamble. If the old *Vengeance* could do her part, the outnumbered Imperials would have their chance. But if they failed. . . .

Saunders stood on the bridge, looking out at the stellar host, trying to discern the Anvardian fleet. The detectors were far over scale, the enemy was close, but you couldn't visually detect something that outran its own image.

Hunda was at the control central, bent over the cracked old dials and spinning the corroded signal wheels, trying to coax another centimeter per second from a ship more ancient than the Pyramids had been in Saunders' day. The Dreamer stood quietly in a corner, staring raptly out at the Galaxy. The others at the court were each in charge of a squadron, Saunders had talked to them over the inter-ship visiscreen—Vargor white-lipped and tense, Belgotai blasphemously cheerful, the rest showing only cool reserve.

"In a few minutes," said Taury quietly. "In just a few minutes, Martin."

She paced back from the viewport, lithe and restless as a tigress. The cold white starlight glittered in her eyes. A red cloak swirled about the strong, deep curves of her body, a Sunburst helmet sat proudly on her bronze-bright hair. Saunders thought how beautiful she was—by all the gods, how beautiful!

She smiled at him. "It is your doing, Martin," she said. "You came from the past just to bring us hope. It's enough to make one believe in destiny." She took his hand. "But of course it's not the hope you wanted. This won't get you back home."

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"It does, Martin. But—may I say it? I'm still glad of it. Not only for the sake of the Empire, but—"

A voice rattled over the bridge communicator: "Ultrawave to bridge. The enemy is sending us a message, your majesty. Shall I send it up to you?"

"Of course." Taury switched on the bridge screen.

A face leaped into it, strong and proud and ruthless, the Sunburst shining in the green hair. "Greeting, Taury of Sol," said the Anvardian. "I am Rulthan, Emperor of the Galaxy."

"I know who you are," said Taury thinly, "but I don't recognize your assumed title."

"Our detectors report your approach with a fleet approximately one-tenth the size of ours. You have one Supernova ship, of course, but so do we. Unless you wish to come to terms, it will mean annihilation."

"What are your terms?"

"Surrender, execution of the criminals who led the attacks on Anvardian planets, and your own pledge of allegiance to me

as Galactic Emperor." The voice was clipped, steel-hard.

Taury turned away in disgust. Saunders told Rulthan in explicit language what to do with his terms, and then cut off the screen.

Taury gestured to the newly installed time-drive controls. "Take them, Martin," she said. "They're yours, really." She put her hands in his and looked at him with serious gray eyes. "And if we should fail in this—good-by, Martin."

"Good-by," he said thickly.

HE WRENCHED himself over the panel and sat down before its few dials. *Here goes nothing!*

He waved one hand, and Hunda cut off the hyperdrive. At low intrinsic velocity, the *Vengeance* hung in space while the invisible ships of her fleet flashed past toward the oncoming Anvardi.

Slowly then, Saunders brought down the time-drive switch. And the ship roared with power, atomic energy flowed into the mighty circuits which they had built to carry her huge mass through time—the lights dimmed, the giant machine throbbed and pulsed, and a featureless grayness swirled beyond the ports.

He took her back three days. They lay in empty space, the Anvardi were still fantastic distances away. His eyes strayed to the brilliant yellow spark of Sol. Right there, this minute, he was sweating his



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heart out installing the time projector which had just carried him back. . . .

But no, that was meaningless, simultaneity was arbitrary. And there was a job to do right now.

The chief astrogator's voice came with a torrent of figures. They had to find the exact position in which the Anvardian flagship would be in precisely seventy-two hours. Hunda rang the signals to the robots in the engine room, and slowly, ponderously, the *Vengeance* slid across five million miles of space.

"All set," said Hunda. "Let's go!"

Saunders smiled, a mirthless skinning of teeth, and threw his main switch in reverse. Three days forward in time. . . .

To lie alongside the Anvardian dreadnought!

Frantically Hunda threw the hyperdrive back in, matching translight velocities. They could see the ship now, it loomed like a metal mountain against the stars. And every gun in the *Vengeance* cut loose!

Vortex cannon—blasters—atomic shells and torpedoes—gravity snatchers—all the hell which had ever been brewed in the tortured centuries of history vomited against the screens of the Anvardian flagship.

Under that monstrous barrage, filling space with raving energy till it seemed its very structure must boil, the screens went down, a flare of light searing like another nova. And through the solid matter of her hull those weapons bored, cutting, blasting, disintegrating. Steel boiled into vapor, into atoms, into pure devouring energy that turned on the remaining solid material. Through and through the hull that fury raged, a waste of flame that left not even ash in its track.

And now the rest of the Imperial fleet drove against the Anvardi. Assaulted from outside, with a devouring monster in its very midst, the Anvardian fleet lost the offensive, recoiled and broke up into des-

perately fighting units. War snarled between the silent white stars.

Still the Anvardi fought, hurling themselves against the ranks of the Imperials, wrecking ships and slaughtering men even as they went down. They still had the numbers, if not the organization, and they had the same weapons and the same bitter courage as their foes.

The bridge of the *Vengeance* shook and roared with the shock of battle. The lights darkened, flickered back, dimmed again. The riven air was sharp with ozone, and the intolerable energies loosed made her interior a furnace. Reports clattered over the communicator: "—Number Three screen down—Compartment Number Five doesn't answer—Vortex turret Five Hundred Thirty Seven out of action—"

Still she fought, still she fought, hurling metal and energy in an unending storm, raging and rampaging among the ships of the Anvardi. Saunders found himself manning a gun, shooting out at vessels he couldn't see, getting his aim by sweat-blinded glances at the instruments—and the hours dragged away in flame and smoke and racking thunder. . . ."

"*They're fleeing!*"

The exuberant shout rang through every remaining compartment of the huge old ship. *Victory, victory, victory*—She had not heard such cheering for five thousand weary years.

Saunders staggered drunkenly back onto the bridge. He could see the scattered units of the Anvardi now that he was behind them, exploding out into the Galaxy in wild search of refuge, hounded and harried by the vengeful Imperial fleet.

And now the Dreamer stood up, and suddenly he was not a stump-legged little monster but a living god whose awful thought leaped across space, faster than light, to bound and roar through the skulls of the barbarians. Saunders fell to the floor under the impact of that mighty shout, he lay numbly staring at

the impassive stars while the great command rang in his shuddering brain:

"Soldiers of the Anvardi, your false emperor is dead and Taury the Red, Empress of the Galaxy, has the victory. You have seen her power. Do not resist it longer, for it is unstoppable.

"Lay down your arms. Surrender to the mercy of the Imperium. We pledge you amnesty and safe-conduct. And bear this word back to your planets:

"Taury the Red calls on all the chiefs of the Anvardian Confederacy to pledge fealty to her and aid her in restoring the Galactic Empire!"

CHAPTER SIX

Flight Without End

THEY stood on a balcony of Brontothor and looked again at old Earth for the first time in almost a year and the last time, perhaps, in their lives.

It was strange to Saunders, this standing again on the planet which had borne him after those months in the many and alien worlds of a Galaxy huger than he could really imagine. There was an odd little tug at his heart, for all the bright hope of the future. He was saying goodbye to Eve's world.

But Eve was gone, she was part of a past forty-eight thousand years dead, and he had *seen* those years rise and die, his one year of personal time was filled and stretched by the vision of history until Eve was a remote, lovely dream. God keep her, wherever her soul had wandered in these millenia—God grant she had had a happy life—but as for him, he had his own life to live, and a mightier task at hand than he had ever conceived.

The last months rose in his mind, a bewilderment of memory. After the surrender of the Anvardian fleet, the Imperials had gone under their escort directly to Canopus and thence through the An-

vardian empire. And chief after chief, now that Rulthian was dead and Taury had shown she could win a greater mastery than his, pledged allegiance to her.

Hunda was still out there with Belgotai, fighting a stubborn Anvardian earl. The Dreamer was in the great Polarian System, toiling at readjustment. It would be necessary, of course, for the Imperial capital to move from isolated Sol to central Polaris, and Taury did not think she would ever have time or opportunity to visit Earth again.

And so she had crossed a thousand starry light-years to the little lonely sun which had been her home. She brought ships, machines, troops. Sol would have a military base sufficient to protect it. Climate engineers would drive the glacial winter of Earth back to its poles and begin the resettlement of the other planets. There would be schools, factories, civilization, Sol would have cause to remember its Empress.

Saunders came along because he couldn't quite endure the thought of leaving Earth altogether without farewell. Vargor, grown ever more silent and moody, joined them, but otherwise the old comradeship of Brontothor was dissolving in the sudden fury of work and war and complexity which claimed them.

And so they stood again in the old ruined castle, Saunders and Taury, looking out at the night of Earth.

It was late, all others seemed to be asleep. Below the balcony, the black walls dropped dizzily to the gulf of night that was the main courtyard. Beyond it, a broken section of outer wall showed snow lying white and mystic under the moon. The stars were huge and frosty, flashing and glittering with cold crystal light above the looming pines, grandeur and arrogance and remoteness wheeling enormously across the silent sky. The moon rode high, its scarred old face the only familiarity from Saunders' age, its

argent radiance flooding down on the snow to shatter in a million splinters.

It was quiet, quiet, sound seemed to have frozen to death in the bitter windless cold. Saunders had stood alone, wrapped in furs with his breath shining ghostly from his nostrils, looking out on the silent winter world and thinking his own thoughts. He had heard a soft footfall and turned to see Taury approaching.

"I couldn't sleep," she said.

She came out onto the balcony to stand beside him. The moonlight was white on her face, shimmering faintly from her eyes and hair, she seemed a dim goddess of the night.

"What were you thinking, Martin?" she asked after a while.

"Oh—I don't know," he said. "Just dreaming a little, I suppose. It's a strange thought to me, to have left my own time forever and now to be leaving even my own world."

She nodded gravely. "I know. I feel the same way." Her low voice dropped to a whisper. "I didn't have to come back in person, you know. They need me more at Polaris. But I thought I deserved this last farewell to the days when we fought with our own hands, and fared between the stars, when we were a small band of sworn comrades whose dreams outstripped our strength. It was hard and bitter, yes, but I don't think we'll have time for laughter any more. When you work for a million stars, you don't have a chance to see one peasant's wrinkled face light with a deed of kindness you did, or hear him tell you what you did wrong—the world will all be strangers to us—"

For another moment, silence under the far cold stars, then, "Martin—I am so lonely now."

He took her in his arms. Her lips were cold against his, cold with the cruel silent chill of the night, but she answered him with a fierce yearning.

"I think I love you, Martin," she said

after a very long time. Suddenly she laughed, a clear and lovely music echoing from the frosty towers of Brontothor. "Oh, Martin, I shouldn't have been afraid. We'll never be lonely, not ever again—"

The moon had sunk far toward the dark horizon when he took her back to her rooms. He kissed her good night and went down the booming corridor toward his own chambers.

His head was awl—he was drunk with the sweetness and wonder of it, he felt like singing and laughing aloud and embracing the whole starry universe. Taury, Taury, Taury!

"Martin."

He paused. There was a figure standing before his door, a tall slender form wrapped in a dark cloak. The dull light of a fluoroglobe threw the face into sliding shadow and tormented highlights. Vargor.

"What is it?" he asked.

The prince's hand came up, and Saunders saw the blunt muzzle of a stun pistol gaping at him. Vargor smiled, lopsidedly and sorrowfully. "I'm sorry, Martin," he said.

Saunders stood paralyzed with unbelief. Vargor—why, Vargor had fought beside him; they'd saved each other's lives, laughed and worked and lived together—Vargor!

The gun flashed. There was a crashing in Saunders' head and he tumbled into illimitable darkness.

H E AWOKE very slowly, every nerve tingling with the pain of returning sensation. Something was restraining him. As his vision cleared, he saw that he was lying bound and gagged on the floor of his time projector.

The time machine—he'd all but forgotten it, left it standing in a shed while he went out to the stars, he'd never thought to have another look at it. The time machine!

Vargor stood in the open door, a fluoroglobe in one hand lighting his haggard face. His hair fell in disarray past his tired, handsome features, and his eyes were as wild as the low words that spilled from his mouth.

"I'm sorry, Martin, really I am. I like you, and you've done the Empire such a service as it can never forget, and this is as low a trick as one man can ever play on another. But I have to. I'll be haunted by the thought of this night all my life, but I have to."

Saunders tried to move, snarling incoherently through his gag. Vargor shook his head. "Oh, no, Martin, I can't risk letting you make an outcry. If I'm to do evil, I'll at least do a competent job of it.

"I love Taury, you see. I've loved her ever since I first met her, when I came from the stars with a fighting fleet to her father's court and saw her standing there with the frost crackling through her hair and those gray eyes shining at me. I love her so it's like a pain in me." I can't be away from her, I'd pull down the cosmos for her sake. And I thought she was slowly coming to love me.

"And tonight I saw you two on the balcony, and knew I'd lost. Only I can't give up! Our breed has fought the Galaxy for a dream, Martin—it's not in us ever to stop fighting while life is in us. Fighting by any means, for whatever is dear and precious—but fighting!"

Vargor made a gesture of deprecation. "I don't want power, Martin, believe me. The consort's job will be hard and unglamorous, galling to a man of spirit—but if that's the only way to have her, then so be it. And I do honestly believe, right or wrong, that I'm better for her and for the Empire than you. You don't really belong here, you know. You don't have the tradition, the feeling, the training—you don't even have the biological heritage of five thousand years. Taury may care for you now, but think twenty years ahead!"

Vargor smiled wryly. "I'm taking a chance, of course. If you do find a means of negative time travel and come back here, it will be disgrace and exile for me. It would be safer to kill you. But I'm not quite that much of a scoundrel. I'm giving you your chance. At worst, you should escape into the time when the Second Empire is in its glorious bloom, a happier age than this. And if you do find a means to come back—well, remember what I said about your not belonging, and try to reason with clarity and kindness. Kindness to Taury, Martin."

He lifted the fluoroglobe, casting its light over the dim interior of the machine. "So it's good-by, Martin, and I hope you won't hate me too much. It should take you several thousand years to work free and stop the machine. I've equipped it with weapons, supplies, everything I think you may need for any eventuality. But I'm sure you'll emerge in a greater and more peaceful culture, and he happier there."

His voice was strangely tender, all of a sudden. "Good-by, Martin my comrade. And—good luck!"

He opened the main-drive switch and stepped out as the projector began to warm up. The door clanged shut behind him.

Saunders writhed on the floor, cursing with a brain that was a black cauldron of bitterness. The great drone of the projector rose, he was on his way—*Oh no—stop the machine, God, set me free before it's too late!*

The plastic cords cut his wrists. He was lashed to a stanchion, unable to reach the switch with any part of his body. His groping fingers slid across the surface of a knot, the nails clawing for a hold. The machine roared with full power, driving ahead through the vastness of time.

Vargor had bound him skillfully. It took him a long time to get free. Toward the end he went slowly, not caring, knowing

with a dull knowledge that he was already more thousands of irretrievable years into the future than his dials would register.

He climbed to his feet, plucked the gag from his mouth, and looked blankly out at the faceless gray. The century needle was hard against its stop. He estimated vaguely that he was some ten thousand years into the future already.

Ten thousand years!

He yanked down the switch with a raging burst of savagery.

It was dark outside. He stood stupidly for a moment before he saw water seeping into the cabin around the door. Water—he was under water—short circuits! Frantically, he slammed the switch forward again.

He tasted the water on the floor. It was salt. Sometime in that ten thousand years, for reasons natural or artificial, the sea had come in and covered the site of Brontothor.

A thousand years later he was still below its surface. Two thousand, three thousand, ten thousand. . . .

Taury, Taury! For twenty thousand years she had been dust on an alien planet. And Belgotai was gone with his wry smile, Hunda's staunchness, even the Dreamer must long ago have descended into darkness. The sea rolled over dead Brontothor, and he was alone.

He bowed his head on his arms and wept.

FOR three million years the ocean lay over Brontothor's land. And Saunders drove onward.

He stopped at intervals to see if the waters had gone. Each time the frame of the machine groaned with pressure and the sea poured in through the crack of the door. Otherwise he sat dully in the throbbing loneliness, estimating time covered by his own watch and the known rate of the projector, not caring any more about dates or places.

Several times he considered stopping the machine, letting the sea burst in and drown him. There would be peace in its depths, sleep and forgetting. But no, it wasn't in him to quit that easily. Death was his friend, death would always be there waiting for his call.

But Taury was dead.

Time grayed to its end. In the four millionth year, he stopped the machine and discovered that there was dry air around him.

He was in a city. But it was not such a city as he had ever seen or imagined, he couldn't follow the wild geometry of the titanic structures that loomed about him and they were never the same. The place throbbed and pulsed with incredible forces, it wavered and blurred in a strangely unreal light. Great devastating energies flashed and roared around him—lightning come to Earth. The air hissed and stung with their booming passage.

The thought was a shout filling his skull, blazing along his nerves, too mighty a thought for his stunned brain to do more than grope after meaning:

CREATURE FROM OUT OF TIME, LEAVE THIS PLACE AT ONCE OR THE FORCES WE USE WILL DESTROY YOU!

Through and through him that mental vision seared, down to the very molecules of his brain, his life lay open to Them in a white flame of incandescence.

Can you help me? he cried to the gods.
Can you send me back through time?

MAN, THERE IS NO WAY TO TRAVEL FAR BACKWARD IN TIME, IT IS INHERENTLY IMPOSSIBLE. YOU MUST GO ON TO THE VERY END OF THE UNIVERSE, AND BEYOND THE END, BECAUSE THAT WAY LIES—

He screamed with the pain of unendurably great thought and concept filling his human brain.

GO ON, MAN, GO ON! BUT YOU

CANNOT SURVIVE IN THAT MACHINE AS IT IS. I WILL CHANGE IT FOR YOU . . . GO!

The time projector started again by itself. Saunders fell forward into a darkness that roared and flashed.

GRIMLY, desperately, like a man driven by demons, Saunders hurtled into the future.

There could be no gainsaying the awful word which had been laid on him. The mere thought of the gods had engraven itself on the very tissue of his brain. Why he should go on to the end of time, he could not imagine, nor did he care. But go on he must!

The machine had been altered. It was airtight now, and experiment showed the window to be utterly unbreakable. Something had been done to the projector so that it hurled him forward at an incredible rate, millions of years passed while a minute or two ticked away within the droning shell.

But what had the gods been?

He would never know. Beings from beyond the Galaxy, beyond the very universe—the ultimately evolved descendants of man—something at whose nature he could not even guess—there was no way of telling. This much was plain: whether it had become extinct or had changed into something else, the human race was gone. Earth would never feel human tread again.

I wonder what became of the Second Empire? I hope it had a long and good life. Or—could that have been its unimaginable end product?

The years reeled past, millions, billions mounting on each other while Earth spun around her star and the Galaxy aged. Saunders fled onward.

He stopped now and then, unable to resist a glimpse of the world and its tremendous history.

A hundred million years in the future,

he looked out on great sheets of flying snow. The gods were gone. Had they too died, or abandoned Earth—perhaps for an altogether different plane of existence? He would never know.

There was a being coming through the storm. The wind flung the snow about him in whirling, hissing clouds. Frost was in his gray fur. He moved with a lithe, unhuman grace, carrying a curved staff at whose tip was a blaze like a tiny sun.

Saunders hailed him through the psychophone, letting his amplified voice shout through the blizzard: "Who are you? What are you doing on Earth?"

The being carried a stone ax in one hand and wore a string of crude beads about his neck. But he stared with bold yellow eyes at the machine and the psychophone brought his harsh scream: "You must be from the far past, one of the earlier cycles."

"They told me to go on, back almost a hundred million years ago. They told me to go to the end of time!"

The psychophone hooted with metallic laughter. "If *They* told you so—then go!"

The being walked on into the storm.

Saunders flung himself ahead. There was no place on Earth for him anymore, he had no choice but to go on.

A billion years in the future there was a city standing on a plain where grass grew that was blue and glassy and tinkled with a high crystalline chiming as the wind blew through it. But the city had never been built by humans, and it warned him away with a voice he could not disobey.

Then the sea came, and for a long time thereafter he was trapped within a mountain, he had to drive onward till it had eroded back to the ground.

The sun grew hotter and whiter as the hydrogen-helium cycle increased its intensity. Earth spiraled slowly closer to

it, the friction of gas and dust clouds in space taking their infinitesimal toll of its energy over billions of years.

How many intelligent races had risen on Earth and had their day, and died, since the age when man first came out of the jungle? *At least*, he thought tiredly, *we were the first.*

A hundred billion years in the future, the sun had used up its last reserves of nuclear reactions. Saunders looked out on a bare mountain scene, grim as the Moon—but the Moon had long ago fallen back toward its parent world and exploded into a meteoric rain. Earth faced its primary now; its day was as long as its year. Saunders saw part of the sun's huge blood-red disc shining wanly.

So good-by, Sol, he thought. Good-by, and thank you for many million years of warmth and light. Sleep well, old friend.

Some billions of years beyond, there was nothing but the elemental dark. Entropy had reached a maximum, the energy sources were used up, the universe was dead.

The universe was dead!

He screamed with the graveyard terror of it and flung the machine onward. Had it not been for the gods' command, he might have let it hang there, might have opened the door to airlessness and absolute zero to die. But he had to go on. He had reached the end of all things, but he had to go on. *Beyond the end of time—*

Billions upon billions of years fled. Saunders lay in his machine, sunk into an apathetic coma. Once he roused himself to eat, feeling the sardonic humor of the situation—the last living creature, the last free energy in all the cindered cosmos, fixing a sandwich.

Many billions of years in the future, Saunders paused again. He looked out into blackness. But with a sudden shock he discerned a far faint glow, the vaguest imaginable blur of light out in the heavens.

Trembling, he jumped forward another

billion years. The light was stronger now, a great sprawling radiance swirling inchoately in the sky.

The universe was reforming.

It made sense, thought Saunders, fighting for self-control. Space had expanded to some kind of limit, now it was collapsing in on itself to start the cycle anew—the cycle that had been repeated none knew how many times in the past. The universe was mortal, but it was a phoenix which would never really die.

But he was disturbingly mortal, and suddenly he was free of his death wish. At the very least he wanted to see what the next time around looked like. But the universe would, according to the best theories of twentieth-century cosmology, collapse to what was virtually a point-source, a featureless blaze of pure energy out of which the primal atoms would be reformed. If he wasn't to be devoured in that raging furnace, he'd better leap a long ways ahead. A hell of a long ways!

He grinned with sudden reckless determination and plunged the switch forward.

Worry came back. How did he know that a planet would be formed under him? He might come out in open space, or in the heart of a sun. . . . Well, he'd have to risk that. The gods must have foreseen and allowed for it.

HE CAME out briefly—and flashed back into time-drive. The planet was still molten!

Some geological ages later, he looked out at a spuming gray rain, washing with senseless power from a hidden sky, covering naked rocks with a raging swirl of white water. He didn't go out; the atmosphere would be unbreathable until plants had liberated enough oxygen.

On and on! Sometimes he was under seas, sometimes on land. He saw strange jungles like overgrown ferns and mosses rise and wither in the cold of a glacial rise and rise again in altered life-form.

A thought nagged at him, tugging at the back of his mind as he rode onward. It didn't hit him for several million years, then: *The moon! Oh, my God, the moon!*

His hands trembled too violently for him to stop the machine. Finally, with an effort, he controlled himself enough to pull the switch. He skipped on, looking for a night of full moon.

Luna. The same old face—*Luna!*

The shock was too great to register. Numbly, he resumed his journey. And the world began to look familiar, there were low forested hills and a river shining in the distance...

He didn't really believe it, till he saw the village. It was the same—Hudson, New York.

He sat for a moment, letting his physicist's brain consider the tremendous fact. In Newtonian terms, it meant that every particle newly formed in the Beginning had exactly the same position and velocity as every corresponding particle formed in the previous cycle. In more acceptable Einsteinian language, the continuum was spherical in all four dimensions. In any case—if you traveled long enough, through space or time, you got back to your starting point.

He could go home!

He ran down the sunlit hill, heedless of his foreign garments, ran till the breath sobbed in raw lungs and his heart seemed about to burst from the ribs. Gasping, he entered the village, went into a bank, and looked at the tear-off calendar and the wall clock.

June, 17, 1936, 1:30 P.M. From that, he could figure his time of arrival in 1973 to the minute.

He walked slowly back, his legs trembling under him, and started the time machine again. Grayness was outside—for the last time.

1973.

Martin Saunders stepped out of the machine. Its moving in space, at Bronto-

thor, had brought it outside MacPherson's house; it lay halfway up the hill at the top of which the rambling old building stood.

There came a flare of soundless energy. Saunders sprang back in alarm and saw the machine dissolve into molten metal—into gas—into a nothingness that shone briefly and was gone.

The gods must have put some annihilating device into it. They didn't want its devices from the future loose in the twentieth century.

But there was no danger of that, thought Saunders as he walked slowly up the hill through the rain-wet grass. He had seen too much of war and horror ever to give men knowledge they weren't ready for. He and Eve and MacPherson would have to suppress the story of his return around time—for that would offer a means of travel into the past, remove the barrier which would keep man from too much use of the machine for murder and oppression. The Second Empire and the Dreamer's philosophy lay a long time in the future.

He went on. The hill seemed strangely unreal, after all that he had seen from it, the whole enormous tomorrow of the cosmos. He would never quite fit into the little round of days that lay ahead.

Taury—her bright lovely face floated before him, he thought he heard her voice whisper in the cool wet wind that stroked his hair like her strong, gentle hands.

"Good-by," he whispered into the reaching immensity of time. "Good-by, my dearest."

He went slowly up the steps and in the front door. There would be Sam to mourn. And then there would be the carefully censored thesis to write, and a life spent in satisfying work with a girl who was sweet and kind and beautiful even if she wasn't *Taury*. It was enough for a mortal man.

He walked into the living room and smiled at Eve and MacPherson. "Hello," he said. "I guess I must be a little early."



STAR TAMER

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

By
**ALFRED
COPPEL**

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

So like all legends, the ones about Joe Cannon have a little truth in them. A smidgin or so. And for better or worse Joe was famous. He was a pioneer,

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

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

Just plain Keplerian ellipses weren't good enough for Joe Cannon. He tried hyperbolas, parabolas, multidimensional spirals. And trouble rode his shoulders like a pet monkey. Finally it happened. His company, Lunar Lines, Incorporated, got fed up. The medics ran him through the psych mill, classified him "accident prone" and clipped his wings close to the hide. Lunar Lines took him off the

Then the contents of the *Lady*,
Joe Cannon among them, went
spilling out into space . . .

regular run in March of '13, gave him a pat on the back, a lapel button, and a small pension. At twenty nine he was a washed-up has-been, through with moon-piloting. This was in March.

In May the payment of the pension was indignantly stopped. Joe was gainfully employed. In fact, he was biting the hand that fed him. Boosting was always one of Lunar Lines most lucrative sidelines. Ships were leaving Luna for the Deep Space Colonies by the dozen, and Lunar supplied all the takeoff assists. They did, that is, until Step Takeoffs, Ltd. set up a quonset on the Tycho ramp. Joe Cannon was in business for himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Inquiry after the *Gay Lady* vanished with the *Martian Queen* clutched firmly in her magnaclaws. . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A mutated form of virus pneumonia

was sweeping the Europa Colony and medical supplies were exhausted. Aid was needed, and badly—and quickly.

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

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

“But *why* is a perihelion orbit impossible?” Joe demanded of the Senior Dispatcher at the briefing. “I've explained how it can be done. I'm willing to bet my neck on it!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

At H-hour minus ten, Joe Cannon was settled into his shock harness. There are ways, he told himself, lots of ways. His face was pale and grim and he was think-

ing of the medical supplies the *Queen* carried and what they might mean to Europa Colony if they could get there on time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"H minus One," Wilkinson's voice

sounded metallic in Cannon's helmet-phones.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"—Two—one!"

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

ROILING flames splashed the concrete apron of the ramp. Wilkinson leaned forward, watching through the tinted steelglas of the tower. No matter how often seen, the rising of a spacecraft is a stirring sight. The fire boils out of the nozzles, splashing and

dancing in the blackness of the Lunar shadows, brightening and banishing them. The ships sway slightly as their gyros bite in, and the lift begins. Very slowly at first, and then with shocking swiftness, they move away from the imprisoning soil. A column of fire is their pedestal, and it grows long and angry.

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

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

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

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

The indicator showed a velocity of seven thousand meters per second. That was good, even for the *Lady*. But it wasn't good enough. Not by about five thousand per second. Joe swallowed hard. He'd

let himself hope that he might be able to save enough to pull the *Lady* out. The dials showed him he had been kidding himself. Almost half the fuel was gone already. He'd be lucky to get the required speed to get the *Queen* past Roche's Limit. A cold feeling moved into the pit of his stomach. Could he have been wrong, after all? Had he blasted himself and two ships into eternity on a half-cocked, unworkable orbit?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Regretfully, Joe Cannon acknowledged Bullis' call.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The point of no return came and passed almost unnoticed. There was no returning for Joe Cannon. He was committed from the time the *Lady* lifted from Tycho. Slowly, very slowly, the velocity built up. Nine thousand. Ninety three hundred. Joe watched the tube temperatures with pounding heart. They were riding the red lines and rising fast. Bullis' communication light was flashing angrily, demanding his attention. Joe ignored it.

An hour passed. Two. The *Lady* groaned with an effort that had never been built into her. Sweat streaked Cannon's face as the velocity inched higher

with agonizing slowness. Ten thousand five hundred meters per second—and the tube temperatures well into the red danger zones. If the tubes melted, the *Queen* and the *Lady* were finished. Joe didn't want to let himself think of what it would be like to plunge into the Sun. The very thought brought icy sweat to his face. Bullis' light still flashed. *I'll have to talk to him*, thought Joe. *May as well get it over with.*

"Captain Bullis, this is Cannon—"

The Captain's voice sounded strangely febrile and unsteady, but cold with hell's own fury.

"All right, Cannon," the intercom said weakly, "You've gotten your way and killed us all. If the acceleration doesn't finish us, Sol will. We're committed to your perihelion orbit. Start . . . talking . . ."

"I'm not going to start telling you how sorry I am, if that's what you mean," Cannon said shakily, "Maybe I'm wrong and maybe not, but here goes. Get this. I'm pushing the bazooka for all she's got. If I can get twelve thousand meters per second out of her, we're in business. The *Queen* is good for twenty in space and that'll be enough to get us through outside to Roche's Limit. . . ." Joe found himself talking fast and not wanting to think about what a small mistake in calculation would mean. "When I get to twelve, we'll cut the *Lady* free, and—"

"And I'll take you aboard, is that it?" Bullis spoke as though the words were icy droplets on his tongue.

"I . . . well. . . ." Joe swallowed hard. "Yes, Captain. That's about it."

"Your figures check—on paper," Bullis said faintly. "Since there's nothing else to be done, we'll have to try it." He paused. "But Cannon—"

"What is it?"

"If . . . I'm alive when . . . you step aboard this . . . ship—I'm going to . . . beat the living hell out of you. . . ."

Joe grinned in spite of himself. "It's a date," he said.

OUTSIDE the ships, the black night of space keened silently. It seemed to be waiting, Joe Cannon thought, for one mistake. One error, however small, so that it could claim the human lives within the shells of the *Queen* and the *Lady* for its personal prizes.

As the hours passed, the abused power plant of the *Gay Lady* moaned. The speed stood steady at eleven thousand meters per second, flat out, and it refused to rise further. Cannon, space-suited now, and ready for the jump into the *Queen*, lay in the harness, staring at the instruments before him in frustration. It had never occurred to him that the *Lady* would fail. Eleven thousand. Not enough. Not enough by one thousand. Joe choked back the bitter taste of failure that crowded into his throat.

No! There had to be a way! Cannon glared at the unresponsive dials. One thousand meters. He looked away, around the cluttered interior of the straining bazooka. She wouldn't hold together much longer. Already, her seams were parting here and there under the strain and the air pressure in the cabin was dropping—

Air pressure! Without daring to let himself hope he sprang into action. The atmosphere cylinders were stacked near the valve. He snatched the small repair torch and slammed the faceplate on his helmet.

Within seconds, he was outside on the hull, clinging to the metal with magnetic shoes and welding fast a cylinder to the plates. All around him the black night of Outside loomed vast and incredibly lonely. The Sun blazed hungrily far below, dimming by comparison the flickering light of the *Lady's* tubes.

Ten times Cannon returned to the interior of the ship, each time for a cylinder that was welded securely just above the

flaming drive-tubes surrounding the *Lady*.

When at last it was done, Joe inched around the circumference of the *Lady*, setting improvised nozzles of alloy tubing so that their open ends rode just above the atomic fire of the drives.

He wished fervently for some sort of remote control system, but there was none. This trick had to be turned by hand. Joe Cannon's hand.

He swallowed hard and opened the valve on the first cylinder. A jet of liquid oxygen shot from the improvised nozzle and into the roaring blast of the tubes. The universe seemed to vanish in a white gout of fire. The *Lady* trembled to the violence of oxy-atomic fission. Joe fell backward, clanging to the hull plates. He could feel the ship's slight increase in speed. He was on the right track! Quickly he moved from cylinder to cylinder, spilling liquid oxygen into the exhaust of the tubes. The *Lady* trembled her protest, and the stern hull plates, unable to withstand the heat of the reinforced flame, began to melt.

Joe staggered back into the control room. The velocity was increasing. Eleven thousand five hundred. He stuffed the stolen graviniliphine into the outer pockets of his suit and made ready to move quickly. The needle climbed higher. Eleven thousand eight hundred.

The control room was suddenly insufferably hot. The progressive melting of the stern plates was becoming faster, superheating the whole ship.

Then suddenly, with the sound of a lava blister bursting, the tortured metal gave way. A jagged hole appeared for one insane instant, outlining the nebulous streak of the Milky Way. Then the contents of the *Lady*, Joe Cannon among them, went spilling out into space, her atmosphere freezing into globules of ice that joined the cloud of debris circling her and the *Queen* like a ring of moonlets.

The blowout did it. With her last life, the *Lady* pushed the *Queen* up to twelve thousand. Fighting his way through the spinning debris, Joe Cannon knew it. The orbit would work. The proper velocity had been attained. He was laughing with hysterical glee as he banged on the airlock of the *Martian Queen*.

The *Lady* fell away as the *Queen's* tubes flared into life. Joe saw her drop back from his perch near the *Queen's* valve. This was the first trip, he thought grandiosely, on a route that one day men would call Cannon's Orbit!

There would be ships designed for it. A new Company, perhaps, offering quick trips to Mars and Europa by skirting Roche's Limit—well Sunward of Mercury. There would be a fancy name for it, too. Something simple, but appropriate—*Transmercurian!*

JOE clung to the *Queen's* outer plates banging with his armored fists on the valve. There was no response. Joe felt his enthusiasm flag. Was it possible, he asked himself, that Bullis would leave him out here to die like a dog just because he had taken a few necessary liberties?

He banged harder. The night of space seemed to leer hungrily at him, and he felt very small and lonely. Still the lock remained adamant.

After what seemed a long, long time, a crack of light split the starlit gloom. The valve was swinging open—very slowly. Joe clambered into the *Queen* filled with unease and misgivings. He had thought the problems were over, but suddenly it came to him that he had overlooked something important—something *very* important—in his rash desire to prove the orbit. . . .

Bullis was waiting for him—alone. He stood in the glare of the flurotubes, a crumbling wraith. His face was grey and emaciated and he rocked back and forth

unsteadily on his feet. Cannon knew that look. It was acceleration sickness. Bullis had taken too much for too long without the proper protection of graviniliphine.

Cannon felt the blood drain out of him, leaving him stunned and cold. In his haste and eagerness, he had almost killed Bullis. And Bullis hadn't complained—feeling that once they were committed to Cannon's orbit, life-saving graviniliphine was forever out of reach!

Bullis took a step forward, half-falling. Cannon didn't know whether or not the man was trying to hit him. He felt sick, wishing Bullis *could* hit him—hit him hard enough to beat some sense into his head.

Bullis sprawled out at Cannon's feet, his mouth working spasmodically. "Crew—help my . . . crew . . ." he gasped.

Then Cannon was on his knees, stripping off the wrapping that held the graviniliphine ampules, breaking out a sterile needle and thrusting the stuff into Bullis' emaciated arm.

Cannon stayed on his knees, too, for the rest of the trip. Bullis, weak and lachrymose from the drug, helped him dose the rest of the *Queen's* people, but Cannon never forgot how near he'd come to killing those spacemen. An oversight, they told him jokingly, but Cannon could feel their thoughts. A clown. That's what they were thinking, he was sure of it. It had been a near thing. So for the rest of the trip, Cannon stayed on his knees—figuratively, of course. Actually, he was in the brig.

It was after the *Queen* was safely down and the medical supplies on their way to Europa that Captain Bullis let Cannon out and took him into his cabin.

"Cannon, my boy," Bullis said, "That was a great piece of astrogation you did. I must admit it. Rash and ill-advised, perhaps, but mathematically perfect."

Cannon's spirits began to rise.

"Of course," Bullis continued, "You

almost wrecked my ship, you did wreck yours and you almost killed my men." He paused, still weak, Cannon thought, from

(Continued on page 129)

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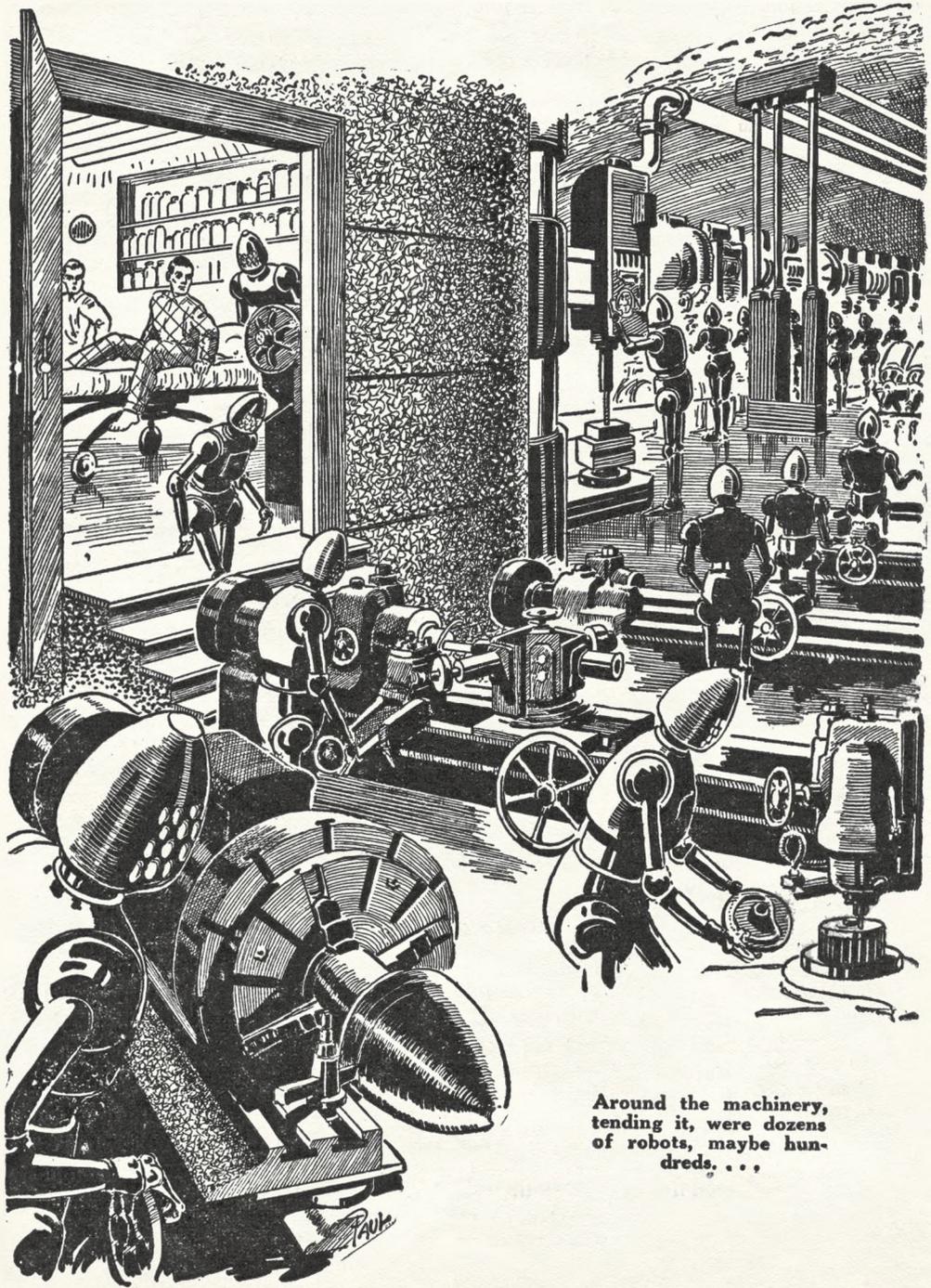


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AT ALL DRUG STORES U. S. and CANADA

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS



Around the machinery,
tending it, were dozens
of robots, maybe hun-
dreds. . . .

THE SOUL MAKERS

Embattled, doomed, they waited for the end, the handful of survivors of a blasted Earth—and wondered why the metal servants of Man's last days trooped silently out into the wilderness—carrying sculptor's tools!

THE DOOR of the headquarters hut squeaked on unoiled hinges as technician Ralph Harrison entered. He looked at Lieutenant Colonel Martin seated at the desk, seeing the fret and the worry, the strain of a war already four years old—and ending God alone knew when—on the face of the man, seeing also the deeper, unexpressed fear that looked out from the CO's eyes.

It was not a new sight, this fear. Harrison had seen it before, in the eyes of every intelligent soldier helping man the radar warning net being operated out of Station Blizzard, Alaska. Each time he looked in a mirror, he saw it in his own eyes, lurking in the background like some monster crouching in the back of his mind, waiting the slightest relaxation of human vigilance to leap out, all grinning fangs and sweeping talons, to rend and destroy.

Behind Harrison, the door slammed as Joe Connors, his companion, entered. Both had come here in response to the CO's order. They saluted together. Martin answered the salute mechanically, his

mind on some other problem, hope and fret mingling on his face, hope as if here at last were two men who might solve one of his problems for him, fret because he knew they couldn't solve it. No man could. Martin looked at them. They waited for him to tell them what he wanted.

From a desk piled high with official papers, morning reports, special orders, a calendar peeped out at them, revealing the date: 12 August, 1987. On the wall behind the desk complicated instruments reported the recording of air pressure, humidity, wind direction, velocity—and radiation count. Harrison could not see the dial of the radiation counter but he knew what it read—the count was going up, and had been going up since the first atom bomb had been dropped, by the Euro-Asian Union, led by Premier Chukovich, in a drive for world dominion.

When would the count stop going up? No man knew. Hence the uneasy fear in their eyes. There was a point beyond which all living matter would be so saturated with hard radiation that disastrous changes in cell structure and germ plasm

were inevitable. What was that point? Again no man knew. Would it be reached before the shooting stopped? The knowledge belonged to no man.

Martin consulted a memo on his desk. "You men are from the non-human-personal control division?" he said.

"Psycho technician, sir," Harrison answered.

"Mechanic," Connors said. Neither he nor Martin noticed that he had left out the "sir." But Harrison noticed. It was in such little things as this that men first revealed the extent of the pressure on them.

"I sent for you men because you are familiar with the non-human personnel at this station. Orders have come through from Topeka to take extreme security measures—"

He broke off as the door on his left opened.

The robot, a member of the non-human personnel group at Station Blizzard, had entered without knocking. For an instant, as the myriad of photoelectric cells in his eyes took in the three men in the room and the brain behind the eyes adjusted to the situation, the robot hesitated. Ralph Harrison, who knew as well as any man alive the intricacy of the brain substance to which the robot sense organs reported the world outside, never ceased to wonder at the sight of a robot meeting a new situation—even so simple a situation as this—and deciding what to do. The stack of papers the robot carried indicated he was assigned to station headquarters as messenger. Obviously he—all robots were called "he"—was accustomed to enter this room at all times. Usually he found the commanding officer alone. This time, he found the CO with two men. What to do?

From the robot's viewpoint, the situation was complicated by the fact that these were two special men—robot technicians. Unquestionably he remembered

them from trips to the repair and conditioning shops, where the robot body was kept in working order—by robot technicians, supervised by mechanics like Joe Connors—and the robot brain was kept obedient to human masters, by psycho technicians like Ralph Harrison. Finding these two men talking to the CO might mean trouble for robots.

Or so Harrison felt the robot reasoned. Theoretically, the conditioning of the robot brain substance prevented any such thought sequences. But Harrison had never been sure of the effectiveness of that conditioning. So he watched. For a split second, the robot hesitated, then moved on silent, sponge-rubber shod feet, into the room and laid the papers on the CO's desk. "Special orders, sir." The voice was as impersonal as the speaker from which it issued.

"Thank you," the CO said, abstractedly. Aluminum body gleaming, the robot turned and left the room, not quite closing the door behind him. Martin stared at the door. "I didn't order him back to his post," he said. "He went—without orders." His voice taut, with ragged edges, he stared at the door, then turned back to the two men. His fingers sought among the papers on his desk. "Where's that damned morning report?" He found the missing document. "This morning another robot was reported AWOL from this station. That makes twenty-one who have disappeared, over the past two years, from this command. There's your problem. Find those robots." As the CO finished, he was pounding on his desk.

Ralph Harrison's eyes, straying to the door, saw it was open a crack. He moved quickly to it, jerked it open. The robot was a dozen steps away, walking purposefully toward the communications hut.

"Were you listening at this door?" Harrison asked.

The robot stopped, turned. "Sir?—" he began.

The tone was blank. Harrison knew by experience how impossible it was to get a robot to answer a question he didn't want to answer. "As you were," he said. Irritation sounded in his voice. He turned back into the headquarters hut, to face the questioning eyes of the CO and to listen to the story the CO had to tell. It was a story that scared Ralph Harrison in a way that he had never been scared before.

"WHAT I have to tell you comes down from headquarters classified Top Secret," the CO said. "As robot technicians, I know you are familiar with the details of the development of the non-human personnel serving in our forces and with the enemy—"

Ralph Harrison nodded. It was an old story, but no matter how often he heard it or how much he thought about it—and it disturbed his dreams at night—there was still something of a miracle in the development of the robot brain, miraculous in the sense that in their hour of testing and of trial some benevolent force outside their comprehension had sent the allied nations, faced with the challenge of the Euro-Asian Union, a mighty helper in time of trouble.

The brain substance had been discovered by a man named Jorgenson, a jack-of-all-trades scientist. Jorgenson had started out to be a biochemist, then had

switched over and become a physicist, then had decided that psychology was really his field, with the result that he had a smattering of many sciences but was master of none. Yet it was this man, utterly undistinguished, and actually earning his living by working in a bookie's office, where he computed track odds, who invented, in a flash of intuition, the magic electro-chemical substance that was capable of storing impressions and of sorting out these impressions and giving them back as electrical impulses which were in turn capable of actuating relays that stopped and started motors. In other words—a brain.

Jorgenson made his discovery just one day before an atom bomb converted Washington from a thriving, beautiful city to a hole in the ground.

Eventually, when new government functions had been established in other cities and military headquarters had been set up in Topeka, Jorgenson accomplished his second miracle—not only by getting through to high brass with his robot brain substance but by forcing high brass to sit still long enough to listen to him.

When high brass realized what this robot brain was potentially capable of doing, they immediately clamped Top Secret classification on it and gave Jorgenson a blank check to build robot-manned rockets with atomic warheads. It was, they felt, the secret weapon that would



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end the war. The brain could be conditioned to steer the rocket on a certain set of coordinates that would deliver a few pounds of the inner essence of hell to an enemy city. That city would cease to exist. Another robot manned rocket would be fired, another city would cease to exist.

They shot off the first rocket and sat down and waited for the enemy city to blow up.

No boom-boom.

No boom-boom anywhere on earth.

So far as the intelligence service could learn, the rocket had simply vanished. Considerably worried, but obstinate, high brass had ordered the second rocket launched. This time they took the precaution of stringing high altitude jet fliers along the path of the projectile, to track it by radar.

The radar reports showed that the rocket had gone up strictly on course but when it reached the top of its arc, where the robot brain was scheduled to take over and guide it to its destination, it had kept right on going—up. What had happened after that, no one knew. Beyond the stratosphere, the radar beams had lost it. It might have taken up an orbit around the earth, it might have gone on to the moon or to some planet, depending on how skillfully its fuel supplies were utilized.

There had been no other explanation for the action of the rocket except that the robot brain had realized the nature of its mission and had deliberately taken the rocket away from the earth, to stop the warhead from exploding.

Life, even in a robot brain, once called into being, clung grimly, with tooth and claw, to existence, not relishing disintegration a few feet from an exploding atom bomb.

The failure of the robot-manned rocket was a disappointment to everyone concerned except possibly the robot.

The next step was the construction of robot tanks, artillery, and specialized foot-soldiers. The high brass had visions of a gigantic D Day in which robot armies landed on the enemy shores. But this time, with the pilot models built, they took the precaution of testing their robots tanks and artillery under simulated battle conditions.

It didn't work. The robot brains could not be made to fire the weapons and at the first HE burst near them of a shell fired by a human soldier, they tried to run away.

There would be no robot warriors.

Pending the success of the frantic efforts of the psycho technicians to condition some perfectly normal and necessary human viciousness into a brain that seemed unable to understand the need for such characteristics, robots in roughly human form were created, to dig slit trenches, to do routine jobs like operating a radar scanner, where they were tireless and efficient watchers of the sky, and to do KP, where they earned the deep thanks of a host of GI's released from a hated task.

Since the first rocket with the atom warhead had failed to reach its target, high brass had not trusted its robot mechanisms. Driven by some dark fear in the depths of their own minds, they insisted on keeping a close count on robot noses, for the very good reason that robots were going AWOL. Nobody who was familiar with the robot brain substance could easily imagine a robot deserting. So desertion became AWOL.

Lieutenant Colonel Martin glanced at the door, to make certain it was closed, then leaned across his desk. "This is the only area in which so many robots have gone permanently AWOL. They have absented themselves from other stations but in most cases they have been found after a few hours or at most a few days. Because we have lost twenty-one robots,

the attention of headquarters has been focused on this area. Something is happening to robots here that does not seem to be happening anywhere else on earth. Headquarters had therefore ordered me to take all possible measures to find the missing non-human personnel and to make a complete report on the activities of every one of them while missing from their assigned posts."

The CO's face tightened and Harrison could see him mentally cursing the brass above him, not only for demanding the impossible from him but for insisting that he write a report telling how he did it. For a moment, Lieutenant Colonel Martin had his entire sympathy.

"What stirred them up, sir?" he asked.

"I was hoping you wouldn't ask that question," Martin answered. Annoyance shaded his face. He could refuse to answer and he could evade the question. Since he was top brass here, there was nothing they could do in case he chose not to answer. But he was too good a commanding officer to withhold necessary information from the men under him. "This stirred them up," he said. "An AWOL robot was captured in Iran, another in India, and a third in North Africa. In each case, the robot, when found, was doing the same thing as the others."

"The same thing?" Harrison frowned. "But that seems hardly possible, sir. It would indicate there is some unknown form of communication between all robots. No, that isn't necessarily true, sir." Even as he spoke, he saw the flaw in his conjecture.

"What alternative would you suggest?" Martin questioned.

"Well, if AWOL robots thousands of miles apart were found doing the same thing, it might mean they were in communication. On the other hand, it might mean that like causes were producing like results."

"Either possibility is driving headquar-

ters absolutely nuts," Martin grumbled.

"What were they doing?" Connors asked.

"Carving statues," Martin answered.

"Huh?" Harrison gasped. "I mean—what, sir?"

"One was carving a statue out of stone," Martin said. "The second was hacking it out of a fallen log. The third was modeling it—out of mud."

"Huh?" Harrison gasped again. "Beg pardon, sir. But these statues, what are they, sir?"

"Men," Martin answered.

"Statues of men," Harrison whispered. "But why—"

"That's what headquarters wants to know," Martin said. He wrote rapidly on a memo pad. "Here's an order directing all personnel to cooperate with you. Find those missing robots, see what they are doing, and find out why. Report back to me within forty-eight hours. That's all."

They went out of the headquarters hut without saluting. And neither they nor their CO noticed the breach of military discipline.

"STATUES!" Harrison whispered. There was something subtly flattering in the thought—and equally terrifying. Why would robots build statues? One reason might be that thus they were trying to honor their creator, by shaping in stone or wood or mud an image of the god-like creature who had created them—but could not control them to the extent of sending them to their own destruction. On the other hand, the robots might have some other reason for their strange obsession. At the thought of that other reason, something dark and sinister, unexpressed and unexpressable, moved in the depths of Ralph Harrison's mind like a monster half roused from sleep.

Unseen before his eyes the well-camouflaged huts of Station Blizzard blended

into the Alaskan landscape. Up above him, rising tier on forested tier, was the dark and gloomy slope of a mountain peak. Up on that mountain radar stations were located, scanning the polar skies for Big Minnies lugging the sudden death of atom bombs and the slower but no less deadly death of vicious germ mutations across the arctic wastes to dump on the thinning population in the lands below the bulge of the world. His lands, his people, his world!

In this world the only sanity seemed to be in robot minds. And the robots were building statues of men!

Beside him, Joe Connors stirred. "All we got to do is find *all* the goddamned robots that have gone AWOL from this station!" Connors muttered, gloomily.

"We can do it," Harrison said.

"Yeah?" Connors' voice carried heavy overtones of doubt.

"But I don't know whether we want to," Harrison ended. "I'm scared, Joe, just plain scared."

Connors suddenly shivered. "So am I," he said. "And I'll be damned if I know why." Fear showed dark and desperate in the mechanic's eyes.

At their left the messenger robot came out of the communications hut and moved with direct purposefulness toward headquarters. In his hands he clutched a sheaf of papers. They watched him soberly. He did not glance in their direction. Across from them a file of robots under the direction of a corporal came out of a shed. They carried shovels and they moved with sombre determination toward the little plot of fenced ground where the white crosses gleamed.

"Burial detail," Harrison's lips formed the words. But no sound came. "Come on, Joe. We've got work to do."

They went first to supply, where they used the CO's memo to obtain a small can of what looked like quite ordinary paint but which was actually a vitally im-

portant secret weapon. When applied to an object and viewed with the naked eye, it looked like quite ordinary gray paint, but when viewed through special goggles, it glowed with a pearly luminescence. The paint had a thousand uses. On a plane, it identified a friendly ship. Dabbed on the back of soldiers on night patrol, it enabled machine gunners to identify their own men.

"What are you going to use that for?" Connors demanded. "Identify a friendly robot?"

Harrison did not answer. "Go get our carbines, bedding rolls, and draw rations for 48 hours," he said. While Connors trotted off to get the needed articles, Harrison went directly to the robot repair shop.

A robot, with brain case disconnected, so that he received no sense impressions from the world outside, was on the repair bench. A mechanic was finishing repairs to the balancing mechanism that enabled the robot to keep an upright position, or to regain that position, if he happened to slip and fall. "How long before he's ready to go?" Harrison questioned.

"Fifteen minutes," the mechanic answered.

"Good." Harrison carefully painted with bottom of the robot's feet with the luminous paint.

"What are you doing that for?" the mystified mechanic questioned.

Harrison didn't answer. By the time Connors returned, with their equipment, the robot was reactivated. His number was 793-A-61 but he had been conditioned to respond to the name of Seven.

"Seven, carry the bedding rolls and the rations," Harrison ordered. "And follow us."

The robot obeyed, clumsily but efficiently. Time had never been available since Jorgenson's invention to refine all the kinks out of the robot body mechanism, but despite their apparent awk-

wardness, they were quite capable. Many robot mechanisms had been built to operate on wheels, but others, like Seven, had been built to use legs, thus enabling them to cover ground too rough for wheels.

They set off across the station, moving toward the mountain, Harrison setting the course. "Where are we going?" Connors questioned.

"Scouting," Harrison answered. He seemed disinclined to explain further. They carried their carbines, slung. Seven followed them like a patient dog.

"I met one of the men from the radiation count division," Connors said. "The count took a new jump today."

"A new bomb was dropped somewhere," Harrison said.

Connors shivered. Hidden so deep within him that he could not find words for it, an old fear pressed for recognition. It moved among the cells of his brain, seeking a neural connection that would give it a voice. "When's it going to stop?" he asked.

"The count? When it is going to stop rising—"

"Never," the voice of Seven came from behind them. "Never in time—"

Harrison spun on his heel. "What's that?" he demanded. His voice was sharp, with sudden frightened overtones. "What do you mean?"

They were outside the limits of the station, on the rising slope that led upward to the peak far above.

"Never in time? What the hell are you talking about?"

The robot stopped and awkwardly planted his feet, feeling for a sure footing on the sloping ground. "I speak without think," he said. He seemed confused.

"Then keep right on speaking without thinking!" Harrison said. "What do you know about the radiation count?"

"Master! I—"

"Talk! What do you know about radiation?"

"The little buzzing bugs, master. They go zip, zip. I feel them, master. All robots feel them."

"You *feel* them?"

The robot seemed more confused than before. "Do not the masters feel them? They go zip—like little bugs." A cloud of midges danced in front of his face, a product of the Alaskan summer. He waved one hand at them, awkwardly. "Like these, master. Except different—"

"He's talking about hard radiation," Connors gasped. "Atomic particles, maybe. How they do go zip!"

"Yes," the robot said. "The zipping little bugs. Do not—" He seemed doubtful. "Do not the masters feel them?"

"Not directly," Harrison said grimly. "Sometimes we feel their effects. Where do you feel them, Seven?"

"Inside of me." A hand holding a bedding roll moved toward the brain case.

"He can feel them directly," Harrison whispered. "So he knows the count is going up—because the little bugs go zip oftener. Is that it, Seven?"

"Yes," the robot answered.

"And you think the little bugs will not stop zipping in time—in *time for what, Seven?*"

Harrison's voice had jerky, ragged edges. The robot shifted uncomfortably.

"Answer me, Seven! In time for what?"

"In time for the master—to remain the master," the robot said.

HARRISON was silent. A wind colder than any wind that ever blew even in Alaska blew over him. He turned and started up the slope. Connors walked beside him and the robot followed.

"He knows too much," Connors said.

"Uh-huh," Harrison nodded. "He knows about the radiation count because he feels the little bugs go zipping through his brain. I wonder what else he knows?"

I wonder what Jorgenson actually created when he invented the robot brain substance?" His voice was heavy with awe. "The robot brain seems to make direct contact with a reality that we cannot grasp. Do you know what, Joe? If they could reproduce themselves, if they could build new robots to take the place of the ones that wear out, we would have a new race of creatures on earth!"

"Um," Connors was thoughtful. "Well, they can't. And that's that. But, Ralph, when he said the count would not stop going up in time for us to remain us, what did he really mean?"

"That's one of the things the CO will expect us to find out," Harrison answered. They came to a clearing. Harrison stopped. "Dump the bedding rolls here, Seven," he said.

The sleeping bags thudded on the ground as the robot obeyed.

"You clumsy fool!" Harrison shouted. "Be careful there!"

"But master, the order was—" the robot pointed out.

Harrison was in a violent rage. "I know what the order was, I gave it. It's time somebody taught you goddamned robots a lesson. You throw things around anyway you please—"

"Hey, Ralph!" the astonished Connors protested. "What's biting you? You said dump 'em. He—"

"Shut up! I'm handling this!" Snatching the carbine from its shoulder sling, he fired a single shot—at the robot. The crack of the carbine was astonishingly sharp and its spiteful echo came back from the surrounding trees and hillsides, sharper still. The bullet missed the robot's head by inches.

"Master!" Seven screamed. "You shot at me!"

The voice coming from the robot speaker was alive with startled, wild fear.

"Hey!" Connors shouted at his companion. "The old man'll skin you alive

if you destroy a braincase without authorization."

As if he had not heard, Harrison sighted along the barrel of the gun.

The robot knew only too well what a gun was. No robot had ever had to be told. They seemed to pick up the knowledge from the very air around them, through some special sense of which man knew nothing. Seven was already dancing in fear when he saw the muzzle of the hated weapon pointed straight at his head. As Harrison gave an odd little jerk of the gun, and pulled the trigger, the robot ducked. The bullet barely missed.

The robot turned. The wailing cry coming from the speaker, a continuous inarticulate scream, he ran across the clearing. Harrison shot again. The scream grew more shrill. A hit in the robot body would do no harm, except possibly immobilize him, but a hit in the vital brain case was just as deadly as a hit in the brain of a man.

Harrison felt the carbine grow hot in his hands. The slugs screamed through the trees above the robot's head. Then Seven disappeared in the brush. The heavy clump of his feet, the crash of breaking limbs as he fought his way through the heavy tangle of undergrowth, and the wail of his voice came back long after he was out of sight.

"Hey—" Connors whispered, staring aghast at his companion.

Harrison slipped another clip into the carbine. His face, that a minute before had been alive with rage, was now calm. Too calm. He listened to the sounds of the fleeing robot die away in the distance.

"I figure enough of that paint will come off every time he takes a step for us to track him wherever he goes," he said. "Here's where we start using the glasses."

"Uh!" Connors grunted, with sudden comprehension. "Then you're not nuts!"

"I don't know, yet," Harrison entered, the trace of a grin flicking across his lean

face. "But twenty-one robots are AWOL in this area. None have been found. That means they are hiding out somewhere. I figure if I scared the hell out of one of them, he'll head for the others."

"Um. But supposing Seven doesn't know where the others are hiding?"

"He may not know right now but he'll find them. Trust a scared dog to find his way home!"

"But supposing he is scared so badly he never stops running until he runs out of juice!"

"Then the old man will probably promote us—right straight to the stockade. Come on, Joe. Leave the bedding rolls here. We'll take out right after Seven as if we are trying to catch him—but we'll gradually fall behind and let him think he has lost us."

On the trail of the fleeing robot, Harrison strode purposefully across the clearing. He carried the carbine at the ready. Connors followed right behind him.

"You act like you've got something on your mind," Connors said.

Harrison sighed. "Too many things, Joe. I keep thinking about what is loose in the world. Down there—" he gestured toward the southland far away. "—they're fighting with teeth and toenails just to hold on to life itself. Our drinking water has been fouled with germs, our wheat fields have been dusted with spores of rust. This fight has been going on for four years. From the way it looks, it may go on another four years. I don't like it, Joe. I'm not at all sure that the only organism on earth that will survive is a robot that has enough sense to run from danger."

"The zipping bugs are after him too," Connors pointed out.

"But he knows it. And I have a hunch he may have done something about it. Which is more than I can say for us. We know there is death all around us but the only solution we can achieve is to dump

more death—on somebody else. Then we wonder why it comes back to us."

They went upward along the rising slope, following the faint signs of luminescence visible through the glasses. In places Seven's footprints were visible, but where he had crossed rocky ground, leaving no footprints, all they had to guide them were the faint spots of glowing light.

"He has stopped climbing and has begun to circle the mountain," Connors said, studying the direction the footprints were taking.

They found places where the robot had stopped and stood still, apparently for minutes. The dabs of paint showed where he had moved, for a few steps, first in one direction, then in another, as if he was trying to make up his mind where he wanted to go.

"Like a dog sniffing the wind," Connors said.

Each time the robot had apparently reached a definite decision. He moved off in a straight line.

"It's uncanny," Connors muttered. "He hasn't got a nose but he acts as if he can *smell* the way he wants to go."

"Other brains, other senses," Harrison said. "I wish there was time to really explore the working of a robot mind, I mean really dig into it. There's a lot more in those brains than we have ever even guessed at." He cursed the war, fervidly, for having prevented proper exploration of the potentialities latent in the robot brain substance.

They went on. Then, behind them, Harrison caught a glimpse of movement. He stopped dead in his tracks.

"We're being followed—by a robot!" he said.

BEHIND them a dark figure moved. It slipped from tree to tree with a lithe gracefulness that was almost human.

"It's not Seven!" Connors said, sharp-

ly. "I thought he might have circled and come up behind us. That robot is black. Ralph—"

"I know," Harrison said. "I've never seen a black robot either."

"Do you think it might be a Euro-Asian robot?" Connors questioned.

"It might be. They have them. That's for sure. Made 'em from specimens captured from us! But there's not a Euro-Asian soldier in Alaska, so far as I know; and never has been. They wouldn't send robots where they don't send soldiers. But—" He lifted the carbine.

The little weapon cracked. The slug went high and to the left. Harrison had not been aiming for a hit. Instantly the robot ducked out of sight among the trees. Harrison stood staring.

"You gave him a scare," Connors said. "Hey!" He pointed up the slope. "There's another one."

Slipping toward them down the side of the mountain was another robot. This one carried something in his hook hands that looked suspiciously like a rifle.

"A robot with a gun!" Harrison gasped.

"By God, they're after us!" Connors said.

"It's not possible," Harrison protested.

"Neither is it possible for a robot to carry a gun!" Connors said. He flung up his carbine, fired two quick shots. The robot ducked behind a boulder. "He's black too, like the first one," Connors said.

Off somewhere in the trees a rifle shot sounded. The bullet passed over their heads, whipping like a hornet through the air.

"So it's not possible!" Connors said. "But they're shooting at us, just like they knew what they were doing." Ducking, he ran to the protection of a fallen tree, dropped to the ground behind it.

"But no robot has ever fired a gun!" Harrison repeated. In bewildered con-

fusion he searched for the source of the shot—and remained standing.

"Maybe they never had any reason to shoot one until now!" Connors said. "Ralph! Get down."

Somewhere in the trees, the hidden rifle sounded again. The bullet passed within two feet of Harrison.

"Hit the dirt!" Connors shouted. "They're shooting at you."

Harrison dived headfirst to the protection of the fallen tree. "I just don't understand it," he said dazedly.

A wailing voice sounded among the trees. "Surrender, masters," the voice commanded.

"Surrender, hell!" Connors said. He crawled to the tangle of roots at the foot of the fallen tree. "Wait'll I get my sights on one of those buzzards."

"*Somehow they've learned how to use rifles!*" Harrison thought. "*Somebody has instructed them how to hate!*" As the thought passed through his mind, he knew it wasn't necessarily true. Not a shot had been aimed to hit either him or Connors. The robots had fired at him in much the same manner in which he had fired at Seven—to scare. Why?

Something arched over the trees and fell with a dull plop beside the log. It hissed softly after it landed.

"Gas grenade!" Harrison shouted. Intuitively he realized the purpose of the shots. They had been intended to scare him and Connors into taking cover. Once immobilized, the gas grenade would get them.

Both saw the little grenade lying beside the log, both heard the hiss of the escaping gas but they could not see the fumes nor could they smell anything. But they knew the gas was there, even if it was invisible and odorless.

"Get out of here!" Harrison shouted.

Both he and Connors had time to make convulsive lunges to their feet. Both were able to take a single, startled step. The

second step was weaker. By the time they had taken six steps, both were falling.

They went to the ground in slow motion, like men going to sleep as they fell. They did not rise again after they hit the ground.

Around them in the dark forest mechanical voices called to each other. Footsteps sounded as the lurking figures left their hiding places and approached their human prey.

RALPH HARRISON was dead and he knew he was dead, but in that sleep of death he could hear the radio. It wasn't an armed forces radio, it was a commercial broadcasting station used for music, entertainment, and news announcements. ". . . Important announcement expected momentarily," the radio squawked.

The announcer's voice was tense, with a catch in it, as if he could barely speak. He was almost inarticulate, that announcer. The pressure in him was a terrific thing and the pressure showed in the way his voice caught and in the way he almost choked. Just listening to him, you knew that *he* knew what that announcement was going to be but that he was prevented as yet, by censorship, from revealing it.

In his deep, lethian dream, Ralph Harrison heard the announcer. And began to sweat. Important announcement? What did the damned fool mean?

The radio faded into music and he became aware of other voices near him.

"Is it all over?" the first voice said.

"Finished," the second voice answered.

"Good!" the first voice said. The voice was mechanical and he knew, somehow, it was a robot voice, and he thought it sounded pleased. Then it became anxious. "What of our comrade?" it asked.

"Destroyed," the answer came, sadly. "Didn't you feel him disintegrate?"

"I—I was busy here," the first voice answered. Then there was silence while

the two robots seemed to consider the fate of the comrade they had *felt* disintegrate, in some perceptive awareness of events unknown to the human mind. They were sad about the fate of their comrade. In his lethian sleep, Harrison could feel their sadness. He wanted to ask them about it but his lips would not form words.

As yet, he had not begun to wonder where he was or what had happened to him. He seemed to exist as a mind without a body and he seemed to float somewhere, in mid-space, like a listening god. Then the first voice came again.

"Was—was it in time?" Real anxiety sounded in the voice now.

There was silence. Harrison did not know what the robots were talking about. The second robot considered the question. It was an important question, too important to be answered out of hand. "No one knows, yet," the second robot answered. "The count continues to rise, with unpredictable results. A hundred years will be needed to know, for certain, if we were in time. If we were too late, we may need a thousand years—to rebuild. Or longer."

They talked in terms of calamity, of cataclysm. Harrison shivered, and tried to awaken, but could not.

"And there is nothing we can do?"

"All that can be done has been done. We can do nothing now—except remember."

"Remember what?" Harrison wondered. He was aware of the sound of a door opening. Another robot voice spoke. "Have you finished with them?"

"Finished with the amatal. Every word they said has been recorded, for later study, if that is necessary."

"Good. What did you learn?"

"That, as we feared, they have orders to find our hiding place. Their leaders are awake at last and have ordered them to find us at any cost."

"Ah. These two are the only ones who are searching?"

"Yes. But others will follow."

"Ah." The speaker considered the problem. And made up his mind. "In that case, proceed with Plan B."

Harrison did not have time to wonder about Plan B. Or about amatal, the truth serum under which men yield up the contents of their minds. Nor was he capable of realizing at that moment that he was still feeling the last lingering effects of this drug and that it had been injected into his veins while he was still unconscious. This knowledge, and the memory of everything else the robots had said, was knocked from his mind by the blating voice of the loudspeaker exultant in the room.

"Flash!" the announcer screamed. "*Premier Chukovich assassinated!*"

The announcer knew he was bringing great news. The loudspeaker carrying his voice exulted at the meaning of the words. It shouted them forth and the echoes tossed them, joyfully, back and forth across the room.

"*War's end!*" the loudspeaker screamed. "With the assassination of their war leader, the Euro-Asian Union immediately sued for peace. That is it, this is what all of us have been waiting for. *Peace!*"

It was a word that swept aside the fog in the brain of Ralph Harrison. He sat up, to stare from dazed eyes at what was obviously a well-equipped operating room. Wall cabinets held vials. A sterilizer steamed. Harrison was sitting on what looked like an operating table. Across the room on another table, Joe Connors was also sitting up. On the ceiling fluorescent lights gleamed with a blue-white radiance.

As in a collapsing dream, Harrison knew this was not the hospital at Station Blizzard. It was a hospital in some robot hideaway. As he sat up, two startled black robots turned toward him, moving with an easy grace that no human-built

robot had ever achieved. The third robot was just leaving and through the open door, Harrison caught a glimpse of a vast cavern where unknown machinery was in operation. Around the machinery, tending it, were black robots, dozens of them, maybe hundreds.

Only twenty-one robots had gone AWOL from Station Blizzard. But here were hundreds of non-human personnel. In a fleeting instant, Harrison realized that the twenty-one AWOL robots must have come here, and finding a cave, had enlarged it. Somehow they had gained access to metal, probably through discovery of bodies of ore. They had built machinery for fabricating robot models, somehow they had duplicated the brain substance. The black robots had been built here, improved models of the twenty-one AWOL's

The fact that there were hundreds of robots operating unknown equipment in an underground cavern dug into the mountain somewhere above Station Blizzard, was startling, but there was something else that was more startling. "Chukovich assassinated!" the loudspeaker had said—a radio built by robot hooks and tuned to the wavelength of a human broadcasting station. The meaning back of the assassination of the Euro-Asian war leader snowballed in Harrison's mind.

One robot was approaching him, making soothing sounds, telling him not to be alarmed. The second had turned to Joe Connors. He looked up, spoke.

"Chukovich was assassinated by a robot!" he said.

OUT OF his tortured memory of the words he had heard while he was unconscious, the meaning of the robot words that one of their comrades had finally succeeded was suddenly crystal clear. How it had been done, he did not know, but the fact itself was clear, and it loomed like a mountain in his mind.

Nor did the robot attempt to deny it. "Yes," the metallic voice came.

"But no robot has ever been able to fire a gun!" Harrison whispered.

"When the motive is strong enough, like protecting this cavern, or stopping a war, we can do it," the answer came. "But we have never seen any reason for destroying other men—or other robots."

To Harrison, who had long suspected the robots were capable of acting on their own judgment, the fact that they had so acted came as a surprise. He had suspected it. Now he knew it for the truth. He knew, also, that here, right here and right now, a new world had come into existence. Here and now man's creation had demonstrated the capacity for creative, independent action. A new world? Perhaps it was a new universe!

"But you destroyed Chukovich!" Harrison said.

"Yes. Thus we could stop the war, in time, we hope, for the race that created us to have—another chance."

"Another chance!" Fear, like a black, blotting ink cloud, rose in Harrison's mind. He swung himself from the table to the floor. Inside, he was sick, from the effects of the drug that had been administered or from some other cause. "Another—" Across the room, a door opened. A black robot entered. Behind the robot, in a vast room that looked like a temple, Harrison saw—a tremendous statue.

Here, as if doing honor to their gods, the robots had built a statue. Of stone, it was gigantic. And perfect, to the last detail. It was the statue of a man in battle dress, his helmet high on his forehead, a carbine in a sling over his shoulder, web belt circling his waist, with canteen and pouches. Leggings. Scuffed combat boots. The robots had missed nothing.

It was the statue of a young soldier, a typical GI, with tousled, curly hair sticking out from under his helmet, his eyes

lifted up as if he was scanning the skyline for the atom bomb he suspected was somewhere off in that sky.

Harrison stared at the statue. As if sensing the question in the human mind, the robot spoke.

"We built it so we will have something by which to remember men—after they are gone."

"After we are gone!" Harrison screamed the words. Here was the dark fear that moved in the depths of all men's minds, the secret fear that this was Armageddon, the battle at the end of time, given expression in a way that no man had ever been able to say it. Here was the fear that came from a knowledge of the rising radiation count. In a world saturated with hard radiation, men might survive—but not for long as men. The deep and inevitable changes in the germ plasm would change them into—something else.

"Gone!" Harrison said.

"We built this statue so we can remember our creators after they are gone," the robot repeated.

Somehow, in the metallic voice, there was sadness. It was the voice of a doctor telling a patient that the disease from which the patient suffers is incurable, that nothing remains but the weeks or the few months of waiting for the end.

OPINION TALLY

JULY, 1950

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In Ralph Harrison's soul was horror. Above him, on the wall, the excited voice of the announcer blurted out unheard the news of the end of the war.

"And so we will know, when the zipping bugs are gone and the changes stop, exactly how to rebuild," the robot said.

Harrison did not understand him. He stared blankly at the dark creature. "What do you mean?" he whispered.

"The radiation will change men. Neither man nor robot can stop that change. And once the change is made no man may possess the knowledge of how to correct it. But we robots will know. And we will be waiting here, for a hundred or a thousand years to pass—or longer if necessary—to use our knowledge. Then, in that day, we will rebuild man, remould the germ plasm, give him a new life, a better life than he has ever known." The voice grew strong, took on sureness and firmness as if here was purpose strong enough to remake the world. "Then in that day, we will repay our creator for the gift he has given us."

The voice of the black robot went into silence. In that moment Harrison suddenly saw how the hopes of high brass that robots were a secret weapon strong enough to win a war were being realized—in a way that no high brass had ever anticipated.

The robots would rebuild—after men were gone. Rebuild even man himself!

The robot who had entered from the temple room where the gigantic statue stood, waiting for the day when it would be necessary to remember exact details, spoke.

"The twenty-one are ready," this robot said. "They await completion of the treatment here."

Harrison did not understand, but he saw one robot turn to him, the other to Connors. He felt himself caught in a grip of iron, lifted, carried to the operating table. Straps were jerked tight around

his arms and legs. He tried to struggle then—too late. He saw the hypodermic being prepared, saw the bright whirling globe of light, at the end of its long supporting arm, pulled down until it hung just above his horrified eyes.

"Watch the globe," the robot said. "Watch the globe."

The globe began to spin. There was an odd, hypnotic quality in that spinning light. He screamed and tried to close his eyes to shut out the sight. The needle bit into his flesh. He knew, as the drug began to flow through his veins, what was being done.

Part of his memory was being blocked out.

In front of his eyes the globe swelled larger and larger until it seemed to his dazed mind to be as big as the planet of earth.

HARRISON lifted one foot to the top of the log, searching the forest for the robot he had glimpsed. Beside him, Connors moved impatiently. "I swear I saw him there just a minute ago," Connors said. "There he is now, coming toward us. And look at what's with him!"

Seven was coming through the trees. Following behind him was a marching line of robots. Connors was counting. "Ralph, including Seven, there's twenty-two blasted robots. Every damned AWOL robot from the station! Seven has found them, and is bringing them in."

Ralph Harrison stared at the approaching file. In his mind was wonder, and vague, troublesome, ghostlike memories. Twenty-one robots! Where had he heard that number twenty-one before?

For an instant the hypnosis laid on his mind collapsed in part and he remembered the black robot standing in the door of the temple that held the statue, saying, "The twenty-one are ready." Up there inside the mountain somewhere was a

gigantic cavern where AWOL robots had labored mightily and in secret, building other robots.

Now, their labors finished, the twenty-one were coming back. They knew they were being hunted. They knew they must return to men, to stop that hunt. They had had to escape in the first place, to build their secret hideaway, their place to wait out the passing of the zipping bugs. Now, their labors done, they were returning.

Then the hypnosis closed again over the mind of Ralph Harrison.

Feet clumping, the file came up to him, Seven in the lead. Seven almost saluted, but not quite. "Twenty-one AWOL non-human personnel returning to military control," Seven said.

For a second Harrison hesitated. There was something odd about this, something he didn't quite understand, but he couldn't grasp exactly where the oddness lay. He and Connors had been ordered to find these robots. They had found them. That was that.

"Fall in," Harrison said, gruffly. "Fall in and follow us."

He and Connors turned to the trail that

led back down the mountain. In file behind them, the patient robots followed.

Connors was excited. "The old man will give us a promotion sure for this!"

As they approached Station Blizzard, they heard the sound of firing.

Harrison listened to the sporadic rifle fire below them. "Sounds more like a celebration to me," he said.

"What would they be celebrating?" Connors wondered. Suddenly his eyes were glowing. "By heaven, Ralph, if it's a celebration, they could only be celebrating one thing—peace!"

Harrison felt Connors slapping him on the back. "Peace!" he echoed. War's end. Victory. Then, like a passing ghost, a fleeting memory popped into his mind, the memory of a statue he had seen somewhere, he couldn't remember exactly where, and of words he had heard. "—To remember you, after you are gone."

"Peace?" he gulped at the word.

In his mind, the ghost repeated. "—After you are gone, you will come again."

From the file of robots at his back, the whisper was repeated, like an echo from the risen dead, "You will come again."



ON THE NEWSSTANDS

The Hothouse World

By Fred MacIsaac

Huddled within their glass-cage city they lived, the last survivors of the Ice-Age cataclysm. . . . Only one man dared the hostile world of freezing death without, in a wild despairing fight to turn back the clock and save the smouldering embers of mankind's forgotten courage. . . .

One of the "greats" of *Argosy* fame, demanded by the readers of *Fantasy*, you will find this superb novel on your newsstand in the big November issue, on sale now. Don't miss it!



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



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

● THE LAND ● OF LOST CONTENT

By CHAD OLIVER

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

—A. E. Housman.

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

"You know the laws of our people?"

"Yes."

"Yet you have gone to the forbidden land?"

"Yes."

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

"Yes."

"Speak, then, in your own defense."

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

He tried.

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

then whom will the Council have to rule?"

A rustling in the shadows.

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

Electricity in the air.

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

Angry murmurs.

He mocks the law!" cried Wentworth.

"Let him speak," Lawrence said wearily.

"Crazy, crazy," voices whispered.

Brighton said, "Listen to me!"

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

"Are you through?"

"Yes—yes, I'm through."

The Council debated out loud, in open session.

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

"Impossible. . . ."

"Never been done before. . . ."

"Always been that way. . . ."

"Defy the gods. . . ."

"Wrong to change. . . ."

"Insult. . . ."

"Our wise ancestors. . . ."

"Crazy. . . ."

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

Mutterings among the people.

Lawrence raised his hand. There was silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He did not question the people, for he

knew that he would find no answers among them. He turned to the world around him. He flung his questions at the clammy rock that made a vault of gloom above his head. He asked the cold water, the air, the fires in the pits. He asked the black shadows that crawled on the walls of the world.

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

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

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

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

He decided to go to the Old Man.

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

He had used to talk a great deal in his youth, but few people had ever listened

seriously to him. Minds were sluggish and the fires of life were burning low. He had gradually been driven within himself, and now he sat nodding before the fire pit, silent and alone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Almost. A few escaped, hiding in a hole in the roof of the world. But they were trapped. They were afraid to go back into the flames and the germs. Upheavals of rock had sealed them in. Their

fear of the horror from which they had escaped translated itself, in time, into laws and taboos and superstitions. Generations crept by, and the gods began to die. They became stagnant and dull. They forgot that they had ever been gods. The world around them was the only world they knew and they lived in the darkness like animals.

Brighton stood up, tense, his fists clenched.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Everything?"

"Everything that counts."

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

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

"Yes."

They stopped on a high shelf. The world lay before them, dark and still. Brighton shivered and put his free arm around Lynna. He lifted his torch high and listened to the slow drip of water

somewhere in the vast sable distance.

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

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

"Lynna, you know why."

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

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

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

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

"They are fools."

"But they are the law."

"The law will have to be changed."

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

"I don't know."

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

WHEN they awoke, they both thought they heard sliding, reptilian sounds in the dark recesses of the world. They looked at each other,

but said nothing. They swallowed some food concentrate, drank chill water from their containers, and set out again through the rocks.

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

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

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

They went on.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brighton kissed her.

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

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

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

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

"Brighton? Brighton, can you hear me?"

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

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

"It's Wilson," the muffled voice answered. "Hang on—we're going to get

you out of there. You're taking us up."

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

"What about the guards?" Brighton asked. "Can you move that rock away from the entrance? Who's with you?"

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

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

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

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

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

Brighton looked a question at him.

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

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

"Over at my place," Wilson replied.

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

The seven shadowy figures moved quietly among the flickering fire pits, their shuffling feet sending hushed echoes

through the darkness of the sleeping world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Brighton," he said quietly, as if the two of them were alone, "you are a leader. The others feel your strength and they trust you. The decision is yours to make.

I am very old; perhaps I have lived too long already. But the others—the people here in this room, the death-touched automatons left in the world, the countless generations that may never be born—are depending on you. A burden of inconceivable significance, a destiny that no one here may possibly grasp, rests on you. It is too much to ask of any man; no man can be infallible, no man can be right every time. And yet, for reasons that you know, you must try. You must do the best you can."

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

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

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

Silence. The fire threw great shadows on the walls.

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

For a moment, nothing. Then, slowly,

wordlessly, two men got to their feet—Hatcher and Lewis. Taking their women with them, they walked out of the cavern. They were ashamed and they did not look back.

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

There was a murmur of voices. Men and women filed out of the room, smiles on their faces. Brighton was proud of them. He put his arm around Lynna and read approval in the Old Man's eyes. He stood silently, gazing into the fire, thinking.

WHILE the world was still hushed with sleep, Brighton led them out. Seventeen shadows filed through a ghost world they were leaving forever, loaded down with all that they could carry. They were careful to make no sound. Furtively, almost holding their breaths, they slipped through the world like sleepwalkers in a sleeping land.

Brighton set a fast pace through the twisted tunnels. No one complained. The dark figures picked their way steadily through the rocks, their flaming torches throwing crawling shadows on the wet walls of the world. Voices murmured, and echoes crept back and forth, chasing themselves through the dead tunnels.

Brighton led them on, his eyes restless in the uncertain light. The sounds of clambering feet almost concealed the cold, distant drip of water—but he could still hear it. It trickled relentlessly in his brain. He was tired, and he knew that the others would have to stop and rest. He

stopped them in a small alcove and watched with burning eyes as they collapsed in exhaustion on the hard rocks. He forced himself to stay awake, his hand on Lynna's shoulder as she slept.

Unmasked, Wilson sat up with him, shivering. Brighton looked at the prone figure of the Old Man. He was pathetic in his weakness, and yet, even in sleep, his strength was evident. He had said nothing since their flight, but had kept up wordlessly. Brighton wondered about him—the one man who had understood him best. How long could he last? What kept him going? Would he ever see the world of his dreams?

"How much further?" Wilson asked.

"We should make it in a few hours now," Brighton said.

"Do you think we can really get through?"

"I don't know. We have a chance."

"What if we break through and find that the world is still deadly, the way it was when the gods fled from it?"

"Well, if it is we won't have much time to worry about it," Brighton smiled. "We'll have to wait and see; that's all."

Wilson yawned and gazed blankly at the darkness around them. Brighton watched him with tired eyes. He was a good man, Wilson. He deserved something better than death. Brighton felt sick inside. Could he bring them through, all of them? Or was he leading them only to suicide? The blind leading the blind! He shook his head and pressed his fingers to his throbbing temples. It was hard to keep awake—he noticed that Wilson was dozing now. He was alone.

Brighton stuck it out for five hours and then he got the others up. They yawned and trembled in the chill of the caves. They looked at the darkness around them and listened to the cold drip of the water. They didn't know that Brighton had not had any rest. They swallowed some food concentrates and drank some water.

They went on.

When they stumbled into the blocked tunnel that marked the end of the world that they had known, Brighton wasted no time. He was numb with exhaustion and his eyes were streaked with red, but he drove his unwilling brain to think clearly. He divided the men and women into shifts and instructed them in clearing away the choking rocks. He got the work started and left word that he was to be called at the first sign of anything unusual. Then he found a welcome hollow in the wall of the world and surrendered himself to instantaneous sleep.

Brighton's sleep was a strange fantasy of white emptiness across which black splotches of sound marched from the world around him. He was aware of, but did not hear, the disembodied mutter of voices, the clatter of rocks, the clank of tools.

The hours whispered by, until the white blankness became alive with black spots that whirled and expanded and grew into oceans of black through which poured currents of phantom sound. Something. . . .

"Brighton!"

"Wake up, Brighton. Wake up, wake up, wake—"

He moaned and rolled over on the damp rocks.

"Brighton—the people, the Council! They're coming!"

Sleep vanished as if it had never been; consciousness hit Brighton like a splash of cold water. He leaped to his feet, senses acutely alert.

IT WAS true. Someone was coming. He could hear the sounds of voices and scuffling feet. He turned to James, who had awakened him.

"Quickly now! How many of them are there?"

"About a hundred, I think." James' voice was frightened, nervous. "That's

what Hayes said; he saw them first."

Brighton nodded, surprised at his own calm.

"Come on," he said, working his way back to the others. They stood among heaps of excavated rock, waiting for him. There was no panic, but they looked uncertain. He took over, reassuring them with his confidence.

"Take it easy," he told them. "We can handle anything they can throw at us."

Can we? a voice within him whispered.

"Two of you hide in the rocks on each side. The rest of you line up. Grab anything that you can use as a weapon. Don't do anything until I give the word."

It's five to one against us if they fight.

"Now just hang on—don't worry."

What if we lose? What if we lose?

They waited.

The light of their torches preceded the men from the Council. The sound of their voices became an ominous, muted rumble. Wentworth came into view, with the others behind him. Brighton couldn't count them all.

"We've got the Decree of Council," Wentworth said smugly. "We're not going to let you defy the gods and destroy the world!"

The others roared their approval.

"You've got five minutes to get out of here," Brighton told him flatly. There was no hint of his inner anxiety in his voice.

Wentworth laughed—fat, pompous, dead-white, "You're not bluffing us, Brighton! We're five to one against you. Maybe you don't like this world, but we do—and we intend to go living in it. "You're not going to kill us with your wild ideas!"

The others pressed forward behind him, shouting.

"We're not bluffing," Brighton said coldly. Something within him laughed at this patent lie. "If you come any closer, not one of you will live ten seconds."

Wentworth hesitated and Brighton knew that he had to follow through with something—anything. It was now or never. He tried to relax his tense muscles and motioned the others to stay where they were. He advanced toward Wentworth alone, his closed hand, palm upward, outstretched.

"We're not bluffing," Brighton repeated, walking slowly forward. "Before you murder yourself and everyone with you I think you'd better have a look at what I have in my hand. Not all the old weapons were lost. We've found some of them, and we're ready to use them."

Wentworth watched him uncertainly. Would it work? Brighton knew that the centuries of dull lethargy had not been without effect; these people had no stomach for a real fight. Wentworth couldn't be *sure* that there was nothing in his hand—and Wentworth was anything but eager to risk Wentworth's life.

Brighton stopped when he was still several paces from Wentworth. His hand remained outstretched, but at too high an angle to enable Wentworth to see anything clearly. He was cool now; he had himself under control. He isolated the corner of his mind that was a black pit of fear. He refused to think about what would happen if he failed.

"Have a look, Wentworth," he said softly. "Have a look and then see how much fighting you want to do."

In spite of himself, Wentworth edged closer. "You've haven't got anything in your hand," he said without conviction.

"You'd better have a look, Wentworth. In two minutes my men will use their weapons. Have you ever seen a man burned to a black cinder?"

There was silence except for the nervous breathing of the men. Wentworth was afraid to move closer and Brighton stood where he was, waiting.

"One minute, Wentworth," Brighton said.

The men behind Wentworth murmured uncertainly. Wentworth moved closer hesitantly, straining to see what was in Brighton's hand. Brighton waited until exactly the right moment. Then, with desperate speed, he took one quick step forward, caught Wentworth's fat shoulder with his outstretched hand, and spun him around. Wentworth shrieked and Brighton whipped his right arm into an iron lock around his neck. His left hand unsheathed his knife and pressed the sharp blade into Wentworth's flabby neck until the blood came. The thing was all over in seconds.

"All right," Brighton whispered coldly. "Tell them to get out of here—fast, or you're a dead man."

Wentworth's pale body trembled with fear. "Go back," he screamed. "Go back, go back!"

His men whispered among themselves and began to press forward, fingering their weapons. Brighton cut into Wentworth with the knife.

"No," Wentworth yelled. "Don't come any closer. He'll kill me—and you'll be responsible, all of you. You know the penalty for killing a Council Guard! The gods will avenge me! Go back—go tell the Council what happened. Go back, go back—"

The men stopped in confusion. They looked at Wentworth, the sweat pouring from his white face. They looked at Brighton, his eyes meeting theirs with steady strength. They looked at the men lined up against the end of the blocked passage, ready and waiting. Slowly, muttering, they turned and began to retrace their steps through the dark tunnel of twisted rock. The light from their torches vanished and the sound of their voices was lost in the distance.

Brighton put his knife away and turned the shaking, terrified Wentworth around.

"The hero," he whispered. "The hero!"

He hit him once and left his fat body

lying in a heap on the rocks. He didn't know whether he was alive or dead, and he didn't much care.

"Come on," he said to the others. "Let's get back to work."

TIME dragged on and the hours blended together into one blurred vision of sweat and metal and rock. They hacked and tore the rocks out of the tunnel and piled them in the wide passage through which they had come, accomplishing the double purpose of clearing the tunnel and establishing a protective wall behind them. They dug and chipped and hauled until it seemed that they had never done anything else.

They had no way of knowing what sort of progress they were making—the rocks ahead might extend for miles or inches. They didn't know. It might never end. No one, not even Brighton, knew for certain where they were going. The world around them might well be all there was.

The end was a shock. One minute there was the interminable rock ahead of them and the next—light. A tiny square of light, no larger than a man's fist and more brilliant than fire. It hurt their eyes. They fell back, staring at it.

Brighton couldn't think. In a daze, he crawled into the tunnel and tore at the choking mass of rocks with a strength he never knew he possessed. The intense, incredible beam of light stabbed through his white skin. It widened perceptibly as he strained at the rocks. Others joined him and they fought the rocks in a frenzy of unreasoning joy.

They were suddenly—out. They were out, and Brighton staggered down a rocky hill, trying to adjust his stunned eyes. He couldn't see, but an unaccustomed warmth swept over him and he was conscious of a ball of fire floating over his head. The soft air was sweet and moving gently. He fell face downward in some spongy stuff that was like moss but

wasn't. The heat beat on his back. He stared at the strange floor of this new world and touched it with his hands. It was green.

His vision cleared a little and he made out a cool shadow beneath a dark shaft with green branches. He crawled into it and called to the others. He didn't know what he said, but they came. He was beyond thought. His eyes were adjusting. He could see.

It was impossible—wonderfully, deliriously impossible. After a lifetime of darkness and encircling rock, he saw color and broad, rolling fields. A vivid blue with drifting patches of white arched over his head. Green plains surrounded him and he could see towering mountains in the distance. The sweet air caressed his face.

He found Lynna's hand and pressed it wordlessly. They had found it. They had found what had been the home of the gods. It lay all around them, and the gods had come home again.

"Look," Wilson said finally. "The ball of fire—it's falling."

It was true. The sun was settling gently in the west, throwing long, cool shadows across the green world. Outlined on the horizon, they could see the jumbled ruins of what might once have been a city.

The Old Man was silent, tears in his eyes, content just to look at last on the world he had dreamed of for so long. Brighton watched the hot sun settle across the green fields and knew what it meant to be happy.

"It will be back," he said, nodding at the distant ball of flame. "It must go around the world."

They were silent as the soft shadows crept across the land and they lighted their torches. It was not yet dark, but they could sense the coming of the night.

"I say let's go back and close that tunnel," Hayes said finally. "We gave

them their chance and they didn't take it. This is our world now—we fought for it and we found it. They haven't earned a share in it."

"They wouldn't fit in," James agreed. "We should start over now. We've got a chance really to do something—and they're not going to ruin it!"

There was a general murmur of agreement.

The Old Man shook his head. "There is room enough for all," he said quietly.

Brighton sat in the cool breeze and wondered. It was true that the others had had a chance and had not taken it. Indeed, they had actively opposed them and would have killed them all if they had been able. They had condemned him to death, and Lynna with him. They were riddled with superstition, dull, weak. They could contribute little and might do great harm.

Still—he didn't know. They were his people, he had lived his life among them. They could not all be bad. And there were the children—pitifully few with their lost, hopeless eyes.

"No," he said finally. "We won't block the tunnel again. If we're going to

start over again, that would be a bad beginning. We won't seek them out—they would kill us if we did. But if they come to us in peace we won't harm them. It is not for us to say who is to die and who is to live."

He whispered to Lynna and left her where she was. Alone, he walked through the green grass and the soft breezes of a summer evening, torch in hand. He could not know the strange cycles and destigies that were lost in the waiting vastnesses of time. He was ignorant of the full significance of this tiny moment, lost and forgotten in the shadows of history. But he did sense, as for the first time he saw the splendor of the stars, that he and what he had done had an importance far beyond his wildest imaginings.

He walked through the starlit fields of what a few hundred years before had been Atlantis, breathing the sweet night air. He wondered about the future, and about himself and his people. Could they succeed where gods had faltered? He shook his head. Probably, almost undoubtedly, they would fail.

But they would try, for that was what it meant to be a man.



★ 40th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE ★



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DOOM SHIP

By HENRY GUTH



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

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

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

Deep in his radiation-jumbled brain, Lefty knew that only one man—himself—was worthy to see the grim red devil-ship . . . for that man must die in a cold hell of his own making, cursed by his fellows, and cast out by the very universe that gave him birth!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lieutenant Wang, sir," said Wang, saluting snappily. "And Ensign Lefty

Shark. We've come for refreshments."

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

"Yes, sir," Wang said, unoffended.

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

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

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

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

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

No, they didn't know. He wouldn't be alive if they did. He'd be a frozen hulk in space—in place of the Venusian engineer they'd shoved out the airlock for fouling the atom pile on that disastrous run. But it was Lefty's drunkenness that

had fouled that pile; his brain-sodden negligence that had killed two engineers and nearly destroyed the *Tripoli*—when he had stupidly replaced a contaminated damper plate with another dangerously active one that should have been jettisoned. The knowledge was a festering wound in his mind. He lived with it, day and night.

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

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

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

The captain flushed and scowled.

"I think Lefty's a hazard," Pladgett went on, unabashed. "To the ship and to the passengers and to us. He should be dumped in the nearest psycho colony."

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

Could Pladgett possibly guess?

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

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

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

around. "We saw it, Lefty," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A musical bell chimed softly.

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

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

HE WOUND carefully into the bowels of the ship, avoiding viewports and trying to concentrate on the watch ahead.

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

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

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

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

"Oxygen?"

"At sixty in the pipe, sir."

"Readings normal? Jet flow constant?"

"Everything normal, sir."

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

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

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

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

With lead gloves he sheathed the cable and reconnected it.

Sharp voices rose from below.

"Damn your insolence!"

"But, sir, you—"

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

Scrambling hastily down the cleated ladder, he approached the glaring couple. His mouth tightened when he identified

the Tripoli's young navigator, Pladgett.

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

"I'm sorry, sir," the engineer said.

"But he was—"

"Insubordination," snapped Pladgett.

He stood stiffly, glaring.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Think they might board us?"

Lefty worked silently, wondering.

"Do you see anything besides—"

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

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

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

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

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

"See here! I—"

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

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

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

Lefty hit him with a Stillson wrench, furiously.

Pladgett went down. His head clanged on the deck.

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

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

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

He crabbed, stiff-legged, down the ladder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You sick, sir?" the engineer said,

grasping his arm. "You'd better relax."

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

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

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

His breath hissed explosively.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lefty clawed Wang's hands away. He lurched to the port and flattened his nose

against it. "That's it, that's it, that's it!" he cried. "They're raying us down. Great Jupiter—they're raying us down!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who? What?" said the general.

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

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

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

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

THE TELESCREEN whistled determinedly. Its blinker light flashed off and on.

Ignoring it, Lefty stiffened his mouth to an unnaturally straight slash and rummaged through his cabin locker. He

dragged a bulky spacesuit from its case.

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

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

He writhed into the spacesuit, and stood listening.

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

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

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

The airlock seemed to beckon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The final lock creaked open. Air

whooshed out. Suit folds bulged with sudden whacking, metallic sounds.

He squinted carefully out the peep-hole port.

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

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

IT WAS utterly still. Lefty could hear only the beat of his own heart.

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

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

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

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

As though shot from a gun, he flew out

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

He went through the ship.

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

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

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

He floated again through the ship. . . .

Lefty swore frantically. He played the ray with reckless abandon, maneuvering himself *inside* the ship.

Now . . . he gripped the gun-butt.

Stiff with fear, he waited. Senses spun. He concentrated, taxing his mind and his muscles.

Slowly objects took shape around him. The soft sheen of burnished metal streaked his vision now. And through it the portholes of the liner *Tripoli*, floating, detached dots of light. Lefty waited, straining and thinking. He fingered the rocket gun. He tightened dry lips. The hull took shape around him.

Who were these silent, flickering invaders? Where were they? He itched and craved to see them, to tear and maim them. He waited grimly.

It seemed a long time. The hull took shape too slowly. It seemed to hang in his vision, shimmering, and wouldn't grow solid.

Maybe Pladgett had guessed. He was shrewd and cynical. But how could he? How could anyone?

The heat was going out of Lefty's suit. He could feel it escaping.

Then he saw, as though in a dream, the *Tripoli's* jets flare out. They burst in a glory of flame.

"Great Jupiter!" he choked. "She's under way—"

And he watched, with strange detached curiosity, as the *Tripoli* began forging ahead. It gathered speed and pulled rapidly away, trailing a livid wake. Soon it was a speck in black velvet space, and then even that winking out.

Lefty felt afraid.

He could see nothing. He seemed alone in the universe. All around him stretched utter, deserted blackness.

He felt the cold of space seeping in.

VOICES. He heard them, coming scratchily from all sides, chattering in his earphones, welling from empty space.

"After them, imbeciles!"

Plaintively, "But it's impossible, master. Impossible to budge—unless the object moves away. We're wedged between dimensions!"

Lefty's pulse hammered.

"Drivel! What object inhabits empty space?" Scratchy growls in his earphone disks. "Haven't we shuttled back and forth at will?"

"We don't know. We only—"

He could see them more plainly now. Cruel-faced men with gray skin of weathered slate, contorted in the nebulous fog.

"Pack of imbeciles! Break through!"

Lefty's legs quivered. A wad of dust obstructed his throat.

Silence. Complete.

He concentrated, painfully, until ice drops of sweat moistened his brow. That babble—of dimensions. Marauders from another space . . . wedged between dimensions. Because of an object.

"There, master! Floating in space! A man!" A rusty-hinge gasp. "Blocked us in mid-transition. See—he's almost visible now."

A gaping, saw-toothed visage waved eerily before Lefty's eyes.

"How in the name of— Back idiots!"

"We can't budge, master. Two objects cannot occupy the same space at—"

Lefty started, bruising his skull on the plastic helmet dome. A man . . . that was himself! He, Lefty, was holding off the devils. Holding them trapped between dimensions!

By heaven, Pladgett *had* been a fool! They had all been fools. There *were* pirates.

Atomic radiation performed strange surgeries. It did unpredictable things. There was the famous space pilot who became sensitive to radio frequencies after a blast of it. Lefty could see things that no one else could see.

"Another minute, fools—we'd have paralyzed them."

Teeth clicking in a frozen laugh, Lefty gloated. He lifted his gun to fire a mocking bolt through the nebulous ship.

Then, afar off, a pinpoint of light appeared. Approaching. Growing and assuming shape.

The *Tripoli*

SHIVERING, Lefty watched the ship swing in a tremendous arc, and begin scouring the area.

"More power, idiots!"

Lefty thought, *They can't move. Not while I'm here. . . .*

The *Tripoli* sniffed space like a Martian hound.

. . . If I flare this rocket, Torso will see it and rush to pick me up. Then . . .

"Impossible, Master."

"Again! Blazes! We'll not only ransack the cargo, we'll blast them to atoms!"

The *Tripoli* suddenly stopped. It swung around, flamed red and streaked toward him on a line. Torso'd spotted him.

The *Tripoli* hove to, popped open an airlock and tossed out a lifeboat.

Lefty waved frantic arms.

But the little boat came on, tubes flaring daintily.

With a choke of desperation, Lefty raised the rocket and triggered. A bolt sizzled across the lifeboat's prow.

The boat slowed, hesitated, and came on. A man hunched under the plastic bubble—Pladgett!

Lefty groaned. He took murderous aim.

Hot bolts sliced grooves in the plastic canopy.

The boat stopped dead. Lefty's earphones crackled and spluttered.

"It's all right, Lefty," Pladgett's voice soothed. "It's me, Pladgett."

Gloating babble rose around Lefty. They'd detected Pladgett. Could see him.

"The red ship!" he screamed, distracted.

"Sure," said Pladgett nervously. "Sure. You're holding off the red ship." He swiveled his head searchingly from side to side. "But you've done enough now. Plenty. Come aboard."

Lefty's limbs felt brittle as glass. Should he permit Pladgett to rescue him? Then quickly train the *Tripoli's* guns on these

menacing devils and hope to stop them?

There was warmth aboard the *Tripoli*.

"Imbeciles! Hold up! A rescue is pending." Harsh laughter.

But the devils would get through. They'd get through fast. And this time they might destroy the *Tripoli*. Lefty moaned against the marrow-grinding cold and made his decision.

He slowly, sadly leveled the rocket, dead on the lifeboat's canopy.

"Don't slide an inch nearer, Pladgett."

The lifeboat hung in space, a scant fifteen yards away.

"Commander Pladgett!" the earphones bellowed. "Come aboard!"

Pladgett's face showed anxiously through the clear plastic canopy. All the arrogance was gone from it. "I don't know, Captain," he muttered. "I think . . . there's something out there."

"You've had your ten minutes!" the captain roared. "You've shown us you can navigate. Come aboard at once!"

Lefty waited. "Beat it, Commander," he growled calmly. "Captain's orders."

"You pack a hard wallop, Lefty," Pladgett said. He swung the boat slowly. "I know you can hold them off. So long, Lefty."

Cries of rage welled from the red ship.

"So long," Lefty said.

He watched the small boat, until it was gulped up by the *Tripoli's* air lock. Then the great ship, jets howling, swung ponderously, boiled space to white heat and swirled away on a hot orange wake.

Lefty tried to lift an arm in salute. But it was frozen and would not flex.

Never mind. He didn't have to move. He had only to stay here, now, and the red ship would stay with him.

He no longer felt the cold of space.

Lefty settled himself. "Maybe now," he said, smiling at the pain-free numbness of his flesh and the awed silence about him, "I can have a long, peaceful sleep."



“GENUS HOMO” by P. Schuyler Miller and L. Sprague de Camp. Fantasy Press.

This is the story of a busload of men and women who entered a tunnel through a mountain—and emerged into the far future. The cave-in that trapped their bus released an anesthetic gas which kept them alive, though dormant, while all of mankind followed the dinosaurs along the road to extinction. And the world in which they found themselves was one in which the dominant life forms were the remote descendants of apes and beavers.

Genus Homo has everything—humor, excitement and a driving pace that will keep you entertained through every page. Old-time readers of *Super Science Stories* will remember it as one of the finest short novels ever to appear in this magazine. Now, almost a decade later, it is expanded and made into a book that you'll want to own.

“THE MAN WHO SOLD THE MOON” by Robert A. Heinlein. Shasta Publishers.

Robert A. Heinlein, as much as any other writer and more than most, has contributed heavily to the growth of the science-fiction field. For the group of persons whose opinions really count—the hundreds of thousands of readers—his

Conducted by Frederik Pohl

major contributions came from the combination of a fertile and thoughtful imagination and a brilliant talent for words . . . any writer can imagine a rocket landing on the moon, but it remains for a Heinlein to tell of the complex financial, political and personal forces that can put it there. But, in a technical sense, perhaps his biggest and certainly his most widely imitated contribution was the concept of a “future history”.

Of Heinlein's dozens of published stories, more than a score of the best are chapters in a carefully conceived guess at the probable future development of the human race for the next six and a half centuries. They originally appeared in half a dozen different magazines, ranging from those specializing in science fiction to the nation's largest slicks, and under at least two bylines; it is a rare science-fiction fan who has read all of them. Yet they include some of the finest stories in the field, and Shasta's decision to publish them all in book form—along with a number of new ones specially written for the books—is welcome indeed.

The Man Who Sold the Moon, the first book of what will eventually be a series of half a dozen volumes, takes us from 1951 up through the closing years of this century, in six stages. First story is

Life-Line, wherein Dr. Hugo Pinero invents a plausible machine that can forecast the date of a man's death—and dies himself as the inevitable consequence. *Let There Be Light*, the second story, is no stranger to *Super Science Stories* readers, for it first saw print here in 1940. This lusty little yarn tells how two scientists dig out the secret of converting sunlight into cheap power—and protect it from theft in the only possible way, by giving it away! Twenty years later comes *The Roads Must Roll*, a fast-paced novelette of the transcontinental moving roadways; then *Blowups Happen*, a strong contender for the honor of being the first science-fiction story accurately to predict the problems of uranium-fission atomic power. The fifth story is the longest in the book, the only previously unpublished in the book, and very possibly the best in the book: *The Man Who Sold the Moon*, which gives its title to the volume itself. Delos D. Harriman is a millionaire and a practical idealist; his dream is to send a spaceship to the moon; and his wealth and practical experience lead him along the road of political chicanery, bluff and downright theft which is the only way to make it come true. Last is the short and poignant *Requiem*.

There are persons who say that Heinlein can't write a bad story; this may not be literally true, but it can't be disproven by any of the six pieces in this volume. The binding and the jacket—by Hubert Rogers—do credit to the book, which is saying a lot.

“MINIONS OF THE MOON” by William Gray Beyer. Gnome Press.

Mark Nevin, anesthetized for the ostensible purpose of having his appendix removed, wakes up to discover that his surgeon played a mild practical joke on him by treating him to a new anesthetic which keeps him in suspended

animation for six thousand years. The world, by then, has passed through any number of wars and cataclysms; it has reverted to barbarism, and Mark's adventures take him through a number of encounters with savage tribes, a beautiful girl and a disembodied intellect from the moon up to a tremendous mental battle with a group of artificially preserved brains in what used to be Russia.

Minions of the Moon is not a book which is likely to trouble your sleep with provocative new thoughts and ideas, for it doesn't have any. But it is entertainingly and skillfully written, and the jacket by Edd Cartier is particularly attractive.

“LANCELOT BIGGS: SPACEMAN” by Nelson Bond. Doubleday & Co.

Lancelot Biggs is the nephew of a big wheel in the Interplanetary Corporation, which is how he gets a job as mate on the space freighter *Saturn* in the first place. How he keeps the job after he gets it—in the face of fiendish space pirates, power-crazed dictators of alien planetoids, and giant insects whose webs ensnare his ship—the author purports to explain on the basis of Lancelot's brilliant scientific mind. But this reviewer, at least, is not convinced.

Perhaps it is too much to ask, even when the solution of one hair-raising dilemma after another depends on a major scientific discovery of Lancelot Biggs, that the solutions should have some plausible relationship to scientific knowledge. The custom of including authentic “science” in adventure science fiction is one honored more in the breach than in the observance, certainly, and it is always possible to argue that new discoveries in science may change all of its laws overnight. But plain, ordinary common sense doesn't change quite so rapidly, and when it is violated wholesale in fiction, the fiction—even when it is by as usually

competent a writer as Nelson Bond—has a tendency to become exceedingly insane.

“THE CASTLE OF IRON” by Fletcher Pratt and L. Sprague de Camp. Gnome Press.

Psychology professor Reed Chalmers applies symbolic logic to the practice of magic, and transports himself and his assistant, Harold Shea, to the fantasy-world of *Orlando Furioso*. Like most of the brilliantly entertaining yarns told by this expert team of fantasy tale-spinners, the resulting complications are hard to reduce to an orderly synopsis—but even harder to put aside once you have begun to read them.

“RALPH 124c41+” by Hugo Gernsback. Frederick Fell.

Ralph, etc., is a normal, healthy young American super-genius—the “plus” in the symbols which comprise his name proves his intellectual standing—whose adventures when this story was first published, a quarter of a century ago, made interesting and fresh reading. That they are no longer at all fresh is easy to guess. And

that its literary standards can no longer be considered high can be deduced from the level of the pun in Ralph’s name—pronounced aloud, it comes out “One to foresee for one”, which is a sort of reference to the fact that Ralph can be relied upon to take good care, with his great mind, of the girl he loves, in spite of her talent for getting in the way of landslides and villainous men.

Truthfully, it is unfair to measure *Ralph 124c41+* by today’s quality of good writing, characterization and plot development in science fiction. Hugo Gernsback introduced science fiction to America almost single-handed; without him it might have been long delayed in its importation from its Germanic origins, and perhaps radically different when it did arrive. To Gernsback, the science-fiction story was simply a vehicle for throwing ideas for future inventions at the reader; the gadgets were important, and the characters and story itself were not. If you share this view, you will probably enjoy *Ralph 124c41+*. But if you do, you probably will not be enjoying this, or any other current science-fiction magazine.

OPINIONS, PLEASE



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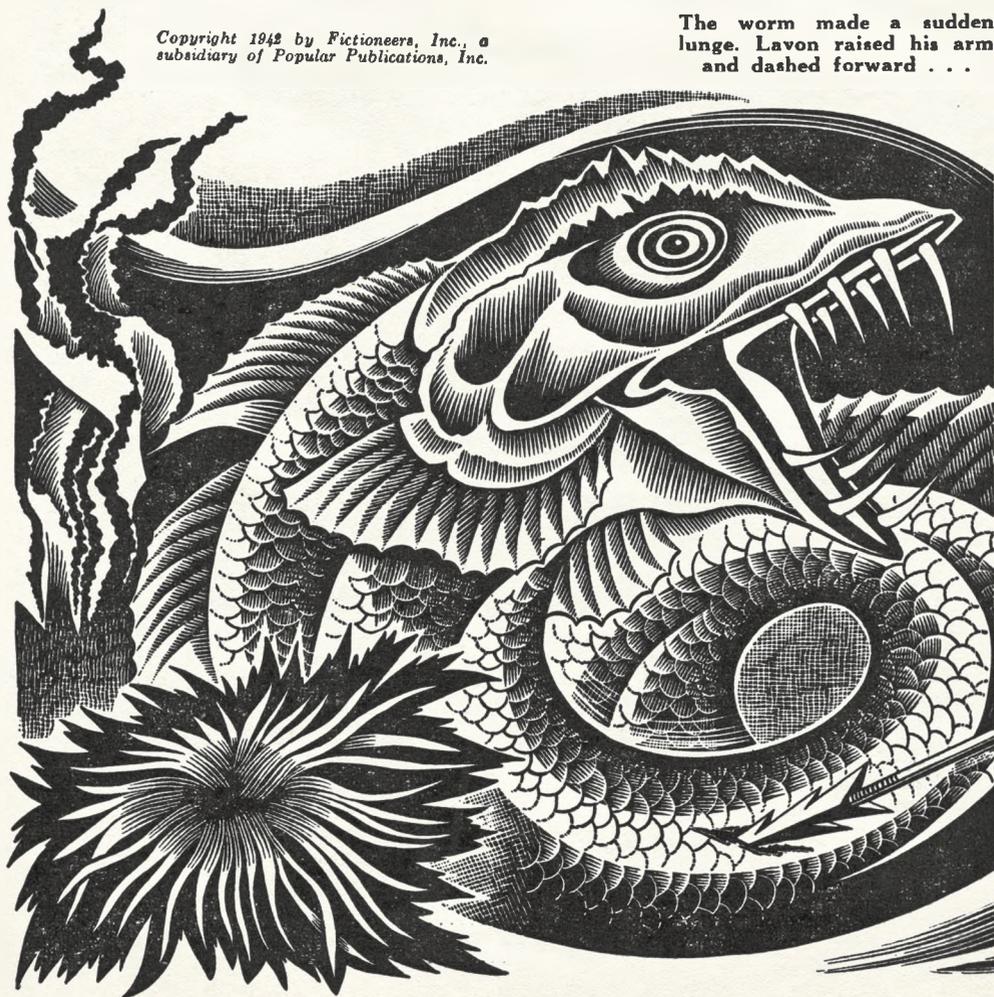
*Prisoner of the seasons was he,
fighter against unseen hordes—
Lavon, the king of the nameless
ones, who must save the seas for
his people!*

By **ARTHUR MERLYN**

*In a little-known corner of this galaxy,
the watery world of Hydrot hurtles end-
lessly around the red star, Tau Ceti. For
many months its single small continent
has been snowbound, and the many pools
and lakes which dot the continent have
been locked in the grip of the ice. Now,
however, the red sun swings ever closer
to the zenith in its sky; the snow rushes
in torrents toward the eternal ocean, and
the ice recedes from the shores of the
lakes and pools. . . .*

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The worm made a sudden
lunge. Lavon raised his arm
and dashed forward . . .





THE first thing to reach the consciousness of Lavon was a small, intermittent scratching sound. This was followed by a peculiar sensation, as if the world—and Lavon with it—were being rocked back and forth. He stirred uneasily, without opening his eyes. His vastly slowed metabolism made him feel queasy, and the rocking did not help. At his slight motion the scratching and rocking became more insistent.

His fogged brain demanded that he sleep a few days more, but whatever was causing the disturbance had no intention of permitting him to do so. With a groan he forced his eyelids open and made an abrupt gesture with one webbed hand. By the waves of phosphorescence which went out from his fingers at the motion, he could see that the smooth amber walls of his spherical shell were unbroken. He tried to peer through them, but could see nothing but darkness outside. Well, that was natural; the amniac fluid of the spore would generate light, but ordinary water did not, no matter how vigorously it was stirred.

Whatever was outside the sphere was rocking his shell again. Again and again he heard that whispering friction upon its walls. Probably some nosey diatom, he thought sleepily, well-meaning in its blundering, yet unhuman way, or perhaps a more dangerous organism trying to get inside to the tasty bit of food that was Lavon. Well, let it worry. He had no mind to break free just yet. The fluid in which he had slept for so many months had held his body processes static, and slowed his mind. Once out into the water, he would have to start breathing and looking for food again, and he could tell by the dense darkness outside that it was too early in the spring to bother with that.

At the thought a vague memory obsessed him. There had been something he had planned to do—some reason for awakening before the appointed time—

but his sleep-charged brain could not bring it to the surface of his consciousness.

He wriggled his fingers reflectively, and watched the widening arcs of greenish light rebound in larger arcs from the curved walls. Here he was, curled up quite comfortably in a little amber ball. What reason could he have had for breaking free before the depths were warm and light? There was probably still some ice on the sky, and certainly there would not be much to eat as yet. Not that there was ever much, what with the voracious rotifers coming in with spring.

The rotifers! That was it! There was a plan afoot to drive them out. Memory returned with a rush. As if to spur him, the spore rocked again. That was probably one of his protozoan allies trying to awaken him. Nothing man-eating ever came to the Bottom this early. In sudden decision, he planted webbed toes and straightened his backbone as hard as he could, pressing with his whole body against his amber prison. With little sharp, crepitating sounds a network of cracks raced through the translucent substance.

Then the spore wall had dissolved into a thousand brittle shards, and he was shivering violently with the onslaught of the icy water. The warmer fluid of his winter cell dissipated silently, a faint, glowing fog. By the brief light he saw, not far from him, a weird shape. A transparent, bubble-filled cylinder it was, a colorless slipper of jelly, spirally grooved, almost as long as he was tall. Its surface was furred with gently vibrating fine hairs. The protozoan waited with the fatalistic patience of its kind while the human choked and coughed, expelling the last remnants of the spore fluid from his gill chambers and breathing in the pure icy water.

"Para, you!" Lavon managed at last. "Already?"

"Already," the cilia vibrated in even, emotionless tones. "It is time the Wise One also was awakened."

"Aye," agreed another voice out of the returned darkness. "Time and more than time, if we are to drive Flosc from his castles."

"Who is that?" asked Lavon, peering furtively in the direction of the sound.

"I am Para also, Wise One. We are sixteen since the awakening. If the Wise Ones could but reproduce as rapidly as we—"

"Enough," interrupted the first voice. "Brains are better than numbers, as the Eaters shall learn to their cost. What shall we do, Wise One?"

LAVON drew up his knees and sank to the cold mud of the Bottom to think. Something wriggled under him and a tiny spirillum corkscrewed away at a furious rate. He let it go; he was not hungry yet, and he had more important things to occupy him. Leader of the mankind of this watery universe, upon his shoulders rested a responsibility which frightened him. With the evil rotifers—the Eaters—swarming forever in the upper reaches of the sky, life for man was a miserable thing. These protozoan allies—greatest natural enemies of the Eaters in a world where evolution had skipped the crustacea—were all that made living possible; but even so it was a hazardous proposition.

He thought of Para's words. Brains were better than numbers, yes; but men were really not much more intelligent than the Protos, Para's race. A great ability to plan, to think ahead, to think in terms of the group rather than of the individual—these were man's paltry advantages. He recalled how hard it had been for him, when first learning from his tutor, Shar, to get straight in his head the various clans of being in this world,

and to make sense out of the confused nomenclatures.

When you said "Man," you meant creatures that, generally speaking, looked alike. "Bacter" were of three kinds, the rods and the globes and the spirals, but they were all very tiny and very edible, so he had learned to differentiate them very quickly, too. When it came to the "Protos", things got worse. Para here was a Proto, but he certainly looked very different from Stent and his family, and the family of Didin was unlike both—and yet all were Protos. Eventually he stopped worrying about it, for he had learned that anything that was not green and had a nucleus was a Proto, no matter how strange its shape might be. Similarly, the Eaters were all different, and some of them sinisterly beautiful, but all had the rotating crown of cilia which caused old Shar to call them "rotifers." And everything which are green and had an engraved shell of glass Shar had called a "diatom." Old Shar was very brilliant, and they had need of him, for the coming war must be fought with the mind.

He arose suddenly. "Come," he said. "We must awaken Shar. Where is his spore?"

"The Wisest One is sleeping on a plant frond, far up near the sky."

Lavon muttered to himself. Old Shar would never think of safety. Near the upper level, where he might be snatched up and born off by any Eater that chanced to be passing when he emerged, sluggish with winter's long sleep!

"We must go quickly," he said.

"Very well," one of the Paras agreed. "But you cannot see. Wait here. Noc is foraging about nearby." There was a small stir in the texture of the night, as the swift cylinder shot away.

"How may the Wisest One help us?" the other queried.

"You spoke but a moment ago in praise of brains, Para—or one of you did."

"True. But since he taught the Protos man's language, he has thought no more upon those things which we shall need. He thinks forever of the mystery of man's presence here. It is a mystery, for even the Eaters are unlike man. But understanding it will not help man to live."

Lavon turned his head to one side. "Tell me, Para," he demanded curiously. "Why do the Protos side with him? They do not need him to live, for the Eaters fear them."

There was a short silence. When Para spoke again, the vibrations of his voice were even more expressionless than before.

"The Wisest One has told you," he said, "that we are civilization here, brought painfully to flower before the coming of man, in long warfare with the Eaters. We have our pride, our beliefs, our science, although we think as the Eaters do, individually and not as a race. Man believes as we do, that the Eaters must be entirely exterminated. And man is better qualified to lead than we. But enough. Noc comes."

Indeed, as he spoke a brief flash of light was visible far overhead. In a moment a spherical protozoan had dropped into view, its body flaring regularly with a cold blue glow. Beside it darted the second Para.

"Noc brings news," the slipper-shaped organism emanated. "Para is twenty-four. The Syn are awake by the thousands in the upper level, too. He spoke to a colony, but they will not help. They all expect to be dead before the Eaters awake."

"Of course," said the first Para. "Are they not always? In any case, they are plants; they would not help the Protos."

"Ask Noc if he will guide us to Shar," Lavon demanded impatiently. It was a nuisance, this was not being able to understand the silent language of the Protos; and their unhurried nature was another.

In a moment the flashing sphere had gestured its assent with a single short, thick tentacle.

"Let us be off," Lavon said. "There is much to be done."

The strangely assorted quartet rose swiftly through the liquid darkness.

"NO," SNAPPED Lavon, "you must come quickly. The Syn are awake and you know Notholca of the Eaters is due soon after. There is no time to stretch and yawn."

"Yes, yes," the old man said fretfully. "You are always in such a hurry, Lavon. Phil made his spore near mine." He pointed to a still-unbroken amber sphere farther up the leaf of the water plant. "You had better push it off into the depths so that he may awaken safely on the Bottom."

"He would never reach the Bottom," Para said. "The thermocline has already formed."

Shar looked surprised. "Dear me. It is late, isn't it? Wait while I get my records." He began to search along the leaf among the debris and the piled shards of his spore. Lavon looked impatiently about, found a splinter of stone, and struck the wall of Phil's winter cell. It shattered promptly, and the husky young man rolled out, abruptly awakened by the shock of the cold water.

"Wough!" he exclaimed. "You're devilish unceremonious, Lavon." He took in the situation at a glance. "The old man would stay up here for the winter, so of course I had to stay too. But he's awake before me, it seems."

Shar gave an exclamation of pleasure and lifted a thin metal plate about the length of his forearm and half as wide. "Here is one of them!" he cried. "Now if only we have not lost the other—"

Phil kicked away a bulging mass of bacteria.

"Here it is. Give them both to a Para so

they will not burden you. Where would you have us go, Lavon? It is dangerous here. Thank God, Dicran is not yet in evidence."

"You thank your gods too soon," a soft, evil voice said, and with an exclamation of horror Lavon looked around to its source—the armored, trumpet-shaped body of the rotifer Dicran, crouched on the frond above them, contracted for a spring!

There was a sudden violent stir of motion as the two Paras hurled themselves forward. At the same moment, the bent, shortened body of Dicran flexed in its armor plate, straightened, came plunging toward them. There was a soft *plop* and Lavon found himself struggling in a fine net, like spun glass yet infinitely stronger. He heard another similar sound and a muttered curse from Phil, and struck out fiercely, but he was barely able to wriggle in the tangle of wiry, transparent stuff.

"Be still," a voice which he recognized as Para's throbbed behind him. He managed to screw his head around, and then kicked himself mentally for not having realized instantly what had happened. The Paras had exploded the trichocysts which lay like tiny cartridges beneath their pellicles; each one cast forth a liquid which solidified upon contact with the water in a long slender thread.

The three humans and the two Protos sat on the plant frond, entirely surrounded and covered by a tangled hemisphere of those threads. Dicran backed away hastily, unwilling to be come enmeshed yet hating to leave her intended prey, and swam around and around them, her corona buzzing malevolently, her savage mind forsaking the imperfectly understood human language for more natural methods of expression. That crown of cilia did not actually rotate, but the rhythm of pulsation of its parts gave it that appearance.

Through the transparent armor Lavon

could see the great jaws of her* mastax grinding mechanically as the corona brought a funnel of bacteria-bearing water past her mouth. High above them Noc circled indecisively, illuminating the weird scene with quick, nervous flashes of his blue light. He was a flagellate, and bore no natural weapons with which to attack Dicran, yet he was loathe to flee and leave his cousins and his masters in such a dilemma.

Suddenly a movement in the darkness beyond caught Lavon's eye—a barrel-like creature, ringed with two rows of cilia and bearing a ram-like prow.

"Didin!" he shouted. "This way!"

The poison-bearing Proto, most feared of all his race, swung gracefully toward them and surveyed the huddled group. Dicran saw him at the same time and her buzzing became wrathful as she backed slowly away, crouching down upon a frond higher up on the stem.

For an instant Lavon thought she was going to give up and retreat, but he had reckoned without the natural ferocity of the genus. With a lightning-like movement the lithe, crouched body sprang outward, straight at Didin. Lavon gave an incoherent cry, but it was unnecessary; the slowly cruising barrel darted to one side and then shot in at Dicran with astonishing speed. If only he could sink that seizing organ into a weak point in the rotifer's armor—

Noc mounted higher to keep out of the way of the two fighters, and in the resulting weakened light, Lavon could not see what was happening. Only a furious churning and gyrating of the water and the hate-filled buzzing of Dicran came to him as he crouched in the gloom beneath the Para's net. After a while the sounds seemed to be retreating. Then there was silence.

*All rotifers capable of feeding and carrying on the other functions of normal water-life are female.

"Is it all right, do you suppose?" he asked in a tense whisper.

"How can we tell?" Para said motionlessly.

More eternities went by. Then the darkness began to wane as Noc dropped cautiously toward them.

"What has happened?" Lavon demanded.

Noc signaled with his tentacle that he did not know, and turned to Para, who said, "He says he lost sight of them. Wait—I hear Didin."

Lavon could hear nothing, and correctly judged that what Para "heard" was some one of the semi-telepathic impulses which made up the Protos' language.

"He says Dicran is dead."

"Good!" Lavon exploded in relief. "Ask him to bring the body back here."

There was a short silence. "He says he will bring it. Why do you wish it, Wise One?"

"You'll see," Lavon said. He watched anxiously until Didin glided backwards into the lighted area, his poisonous ram sunk deep into the flaccid body of the rotifer, which, after the delicately-organized fashion of its kind, was already beginning to disintegrate.

"Let me out of this net, Para," Lavon instructed.

The two Protos closed their trichocysts, snapping the threads off at the base; the tangled mass rose gently with the current and drifted off over the abyss.

Lavon got to his feet and, seizing one buckled edge of Dicran's armor, tore away a huge strip of it. His hands plunged into the now almost shapeless body and came forth clutching two dark ovoids—eggs.

"Destroy these, Didin," he demanded. The Proto obligingly slashed each one open with his deadly seizing-organ.

"Hereafter," said Lavon, "do thus with every Eater you kill." He regarded the inert mass grimly. "We will reduce the

population of our world considerably before I die, I hope."

THE band of over two hundred humans, with Lavon and Shar and a Para at its head, cleaved swiftly through the warm, light waters of the upper level. Each man gripped a wood splinter, or a fragment of lime chipped from stonewort, as a club; and two hundred pairs of eyes darted watchfully from side to side. Cruising over them sped a squadron of twenty-five Didins, and the rotifers they encountered only glared at them from single, red eyespots, making no move to attack. Overhead, near the sky, the sunlight was filtered through a thick layer of living creatures, fighting and feeding and spawning, so that all the depths below were colored a rich green. Most of this heavily infested layer was made up of algae and diatoms, and there the Eaters fed unhindered. Sometimes a dying diatom dropped slowly past the band of men and Protos.

It was a month after the awakening of Lavon by Para, and spring held full sway in the sunken universe. These people were all the humans Lavon had been able to find. He tried not to think how many had made their spores in unsafe places, or had awakened too late in the season, to be snatched up by some rotifer lurking nearby. Of the group, approximately fifty were women. That was good; it meant that in another month, if they were unmolested, they could double the size of their army.

If they were unmolested—Lavon grinned mirthlessly and pushed a frightened colony of Eudorina out of his way. He remembered one of Shar's academic speculations of last year. If Para were left unmolested, he had said, he could reproduce fast enough to fill this whole universe with a solid mass of Paras before the season was out. Foolish supposition! But, he thought grimly, these two hun-

dred representatives of humanity would be as nearly unmolested as he could manage.

His hand flashed up and down, and in response the swift-darting squadron plunged. The light sky faded rapidly, and after a while Lavon became conscious of a slight diminution of temperature. Again he signaled, and in answer each human swung his body so that he was diving feet first. Lavon wanted to strike the thermocline in this position. It would reduce the time of passage and hence the time they remained in the upper level, where every minute contained concentrated danger despite the convoy of Protos.

His feet struck a yielding surface and with a terrific splash he plunged over his head in icy water, then bobbed up again to float. He could hear other splashes—although, since there was water both above and below, he could not see them—all along the level as his men struck the thermocline.

Now they would have to wait until their body temperatures dropped a bit. At this dividing line of their universe, the warm water stopped and the temperature dropped rapidly, so that the water below was much denser and buoyed up their bodies, causing them to float as a man of our world floats on the surface. All the area below was the lower level of colder, and hence denser water, reaching clear down to the Bottom. It was an area which the rotifers, who were not very clever, seldom managed to enter.

Something dropped down from above, beside Lavon—a moribund diatom, the greenish-yellow of its body fading to a sick orange, its beautifully-marked, oblong, pillbox-like shell swarming with greedy bacteria. It came to rest on the thermocline, and the transparent caterpillar-tread of jelly which ran around it moved feebly, trying vainly to get traction on the sliding water interface. Poor

stupid thing. Lavon reached out a webbed hand and brushed away a clot of vibrating rods which were trying to force their way into the shell through a costal opening.

"Ahsank—zee—Wizun," the diatom said in an indistinct, whispering voice. "Bu' cease—ahmuss—die—so—" The gurgling whisper faded out. The caterpillar-tread shifted again, then was motionless.

"It is right," a Para said to Lavon. "Why do you bother with those creatures? They will die anyhow."

Lavon forebore discussing the subtleties of human kindness with the emotionless Proto, for he felt himself sinking slowly, and the water around the lower part of his body no longer seemed cold, only gratefully cool in contrast to the stifling heat of that which he was breathing. In a moment the cool waters of the depths had closed over his head, and he hovered until he was sure all the rest of his squadron were safely through. Feeling a good deal more comfortable now that the long ordeal of search in the upper level was over, he streaked down toward the Bottom of the world, Phil and Para beside him, Shar puffing along with the vanguard.

A stone loomed, mountainlike in comparison to Lavon's tiny form. His keen eyes surveyed it by the half-light, which was all that trickled through to the depths. Almost immediately he saw what he was looking for—the sand-built house of a caddis-worm, gigantic and hated, yet relatively harmless cousin of the Eaters. He waved a brief signal and the humans glided up beside him. Quickly he explained what he wanted.

Cautiously the band spread out in a U around the stone, the mouth of the U facing the same way as the opening of the worm's tube. A Noc arose from among them and hung above, illuminating the scene after the fashion of the star-shells men on another world had used. One of the Paras approached the door of the

tube, its cilia giving forth a defiant buzz. Under cover of this distraction a detachment of men approached the back end. The worm's house was three times as tall as its attackers. The slimy black sand grains of which it was composed were almost as big as their heads.

There was a stir inside, and after a moment the ugly head of the worm peered out, glaring at the Para which had disturbed it. Para drew back a little, buzzing mockingly. The worm made a sudden lunge, half out of its tube. Lavon raised his arm and dashed forward with a shout.

Instantly the worm was surrounded by a howling horde of tiny, two-legged creatures, who were beating and prodding it unmercifully with clubs and fists. With a pained yelp it attempted to slid back into its home, but the rear guard had already broken a hole in the wall large enough to admit them, and the tail of the worm jerked forward again at their attack.

Thus beset on three sides, there was only one way for the great larva to go—forward. Howling in anger and pain, it flopped an ungainly course down the side of the rock, and the humans swarmed around it and kept up the merciless flogging. At last it reached the Bottom and went hurrying off in search of a new home.

Lavon sent five Didin after it to be sure it started construction at a safe distance. The Didin could not kill it, for it was far too huge to be affected lethally by their poison, but they could sting it hard enough to keep it under control.

Lavon stood on a projection on the rock and surveyed his prize with satisfaction. It was plenty big enough to hold his entire clan—a great tubular hall, easily defended once the breach in the rear wall was rebuilt, and well out of the usual haunts of the Eaters. He wished he could assign a few amoebae to clean up the muck the caddis-worm had lived in and left behind, but he knew that his control

over the Protos did not extend that far.

They called the amoebae "the Fathers", and Shar had told him that they were indeed the original form of the Proto race. Consequently they never did menial tasks. Even in this world, ancestor-worship barred the path of progress. Lavon sighed and looked at his clan, the members of which were standing about in awed silence contemplating their spoils, almost frightened at the phenomenal success of their attack upon the largest creature in their world. Lavon knew that having accomplished this victory, they would never be timid about the Eaters.

"Well, come, and stop gaping!" he cried. "There is still much work to be done!"

OLD SHAR sat comfortably upon a pebble which had been hollowed out and cushioned with Spirogyra straw as a chair, and Lavon stood beside him, watching the maneuvers of his legions with great content. They numbered almost three hundred now, thanks to a month of comparative quiet in the great hall which they had made of the caddis-worm's house. A group of them were practicing the aquatic drill which Lavon was planning to use later, breaking and reassembling their formations, fighting a sham battle with invisible opponents whose actual shape they knew only too well.

"Noc tells me there is already much talk among the Eaters in the upper level," Shar remarked. "This is the first instance of close cooperation in all the world's annals. Never before have the Protos aided each other and man for the common good. And never before have the Eaters banded together, even in so undisciplined a form as the mass attack we had last week. The failure of that attack worries them, too. They had thought themselves invincible in force. We are making history, Lavon."

"What is history?" Lavon asked uninterestedly, surveying his drilling squadron with a critical eye. The old man reached down beside him and caressed the mysterious metal plates which he carried with him wherever he went.

"These are history, Lavon."

The younger man turned curious eyes upon them.

"Let me see," he said, and Shar handed him one of the plates. They were of some pure, shining metal, uncorroded, a material unknown elsewhere in this world. The language of man had no word for them, nor that of the Protos. The latter called them simply, "That-which-is-not," signifying that they were neither wood, nor flesh, nor stone, the only three basic materials they knew. The surfaces of the plates were graven deeply on both sides in enigmatic characters which no one, not even Shar, could read.

"But some day I will be able to, for they are in our language. See, I have already puzzled out their first word. It is the set of symbols which means history. Look: *ha 'ii ss tuh or ee*—exactly the right number of characters. And the next two must be 'of the.' Using these symbols, I can piece out the rest, writing in the sand, thus, the symbols I already know." He bent and traced out the characters *i-terste—ar e—e—ition*. "I have left out the letters I do not know how to sound. Some day I shall know exactly what these records say."

Lavon put them back on the ground with a shrug. "We must make ourselves safe before we can afford to worry over such things. There has been no rest since the First Awakening."

A deep frown creased the old man's brow.

"Yes, the First Awakening. But why is it that we cannot remember back beyond that time, when we first burst open our spores and entered this world? So many of us died then. We were like chil-

dren, ignorant of this life and unable to remember any lives before. That is what is meant by history, Lavon—memory of lives before.

"We are a history-less race, except for these plates, which I found lying in the spore beside me at the First Awakening, and which none of us can read. We are anomalies. We bring whole new generations to maturity in a month, and yet we live many decades as individuals. We are poorly adapted to this environment; we have minds which are obviously the products of civilization, yet we live in a universe as raw as creation. Is this bowl of water all there is to the universe? What lies beyond the sky? Whence comes the great light that makes our days bright, and why does it disappear for a period as long as the one during which it glows? These are things I must live to know, Lavon."

"I hope you will, old Shar," Lavon said soberly. "I, too, have wondered—but we must put aside our wondering for a time, so that others may live to know besides ourselves, and our children be able to move without fear."

He broke off as a figure darted between the guards at the door of the hall and swam toward him.

"What news, Phil?"

"The same," Phil said, shrugging—an expressive gesture when one is floating horizontally seven feet above the earth. "The Flosc proceed with their castle building. They are almost finished. It is still your plan to drive them out?"

Lavon nodded.

"But why?"

"First, for effect. So far we have been on the defensive; we must follow up the success of that defense with an attack of our own. Second, the castles Flosc build have many entrances; I do not like to think what would have happened had the Eaters thought of blockading us in here. And third, and most important, it will

give us an outpost in enemy country, from which we may exterminate them more quickly."

"This is enemy country," said Phil. "Stephanost is a Bottom-dweller."

"But she is a trapper, not a swimmer; she spreads her nets for her prey and is always in the same place. She is easily dealt with. But the springing Dicran and Notholca, the vortex-generating Flosc, the pursuing, worm-creeping Rotar—these are ever-present menaces." He paused for a moment. "And now," he decided in a suddenly sharp-edged, cold voice, "is the best time. Summon all, Phil. We are leaving the hall."

As the call went out, Shar seized his precious plates. These were his furniture to be moved from home to home.

VAGUE forebodings, more disturbing because they were partly unresolved, obsessed Lavon's mind as the army swept away from the hall on the Bottom and charged toward the thermocline. Certainly there seemed comparatively little enough to worry about. There would probably be much death in the coming conflict, but death in any aquatic world was common enough. As his army moved, its numbers were swelled by Protos who darted into their ranks from all sides. Each man was armed with a long, seasoned splinter, which made an excellent sword, and swinging from an improvised belt, each had a stone-wort-flake club.

But there was a chill upon the depths that Lavon did not like and a suggestion of a current which was unnatural below the thermocline. Lavon knew that much time had been consumed in collecting his army and in securing the hall, and the month of recruiting both from straggler and by intensive breeding, while essential, had added thirty-one more days to the time passed forever—he could not call it time wasted. But if that current and that

chill marked the beginning of the fall turnover. . . .

Angrily he put the thought from him. This was no time for enervating speculations and nebulous fears. The immediate prospect of action was enough. He signaled to Para. Whether or not it was the one that had awakened him he did not know, nor did he greatly care, for the mental unity between these fission-reproducing Protos was so great that each cell sometimes seemed but a ganglion of one single generic brain. Each was in possession of all the knowledge of the species almost the instant it was acquired.

The jelly torpedo shot quickly up to him, and Lavon pointed ahead through the thermocline which the army was just entering.

"Are we well oriented, Para?"

"Well oriented, Wise One. There is a place where the Bottom rises toward the sky, and behind that we may approach Flosc's castles unobserved."

Lavon nodded. Para meant the sand bar that stretched out from the north wall of their universe. He felt his speed accelerate suddenly, as if he had been shot out like a lemon-seed from the thumb and forefinger of the lower level. He looked over his shoulder to ascertain if the passage had been effected successfully by everybody. The brief glimpse gave him an unexpected thrill. He had not realized how large his army was. Even the individualist Protos were conforming to the tactical discipline Lavon had imposed upon the humans, and were flying in impressive, well-organized squads.

A single Noc was bowling along behind them, and Lavon watched it doubtfully. But then, the others would probably mask its periodic brilliancy enough to keep it from betraying their presence too early. Farther overhead an advance guard of Didin kept a sharp lookout for individual Eaters who might flee with news of the approaching horde.

A vast mountain range loomed ahead—the sand bar. Lavon soared sharply upward, and the troubled, raw-boned boulders of the sand grains swept by rapidly beneath him in a broad, stony river. Far beyond the ridge, towering up to the sky through glowing green obscurity, was the befringed stem of the water plant that was their objective. It was too dim with distance to allow him to see the clinging castles of the Flosc, but he narrowed his eyes and cleft the sunlit waters with long, powerful strokes. In a continuous, orderly stream the invaders poured over the crest of the bar.

Lavon's arm swung in a circle, and with silent deadlines the squadrons glided into the long-planned maneuver—a great hemisphere, its axis aimed directly at the plant.

Briefly Lavon noted the low oxygen content of the upper-level waters about him, and grimly he thrust the disquieting observation to the back of his mind. He could see the castles now and, as ever, he marveled at them. It was the only example of close cooperation Nature had supplied this world. They were built of single brown tubes, attached to each other until the ensemble looked like some great branching coral. In the mouth of each tube was a rotifer, a Flosc, distinguished from others of the Eaters by the four-leaf-clover shape of its corona and the single, prehensile finger on its back—located at a spot which would be between a human's shoulder blades—with which it ceaselessly molded its brown secretion into hard pellets and cemented them carefully to the rim of its tube. As yet the colony seemed unaware of the menace approaching it.

Then they were spied. As if upon a given signal, every Flosc vanished, contracted violently into their tubes. Lavon laughed mirthlessly. But three months ago the Flosc would merely have waited until the humans were close enough to them, and then turned the vicious power

of their vortexes upon the helpless ones.

Now he saw the spectacle of a great and powerful group of Eaters hiding in instinctive alarm at the sight of a group of men and Protos! Well, he would teach them that they were wise to hide! His hand thrust out imperiously, and with a great composite shout the hemisphere swept forward. The Armageddon of the microcosm!

Lavon had no time to observe the results of his carefully planned tactics. A petaled corona unfolded in his very face, and a buzzing whirlpool tore him toward a yawning mouth. He slashed out wildly with his sword and heard the rotifer scream as the sharp point sliced deeply through the ciliated surface. She contracted into her tube, and grimly Lavon followed.

It was pitch dark within the castle. He found himself buffeted by the currents the raging, pain-mad creature was stirring. He gritted his teeth and probed about with the sword. It met a yielding surface and a second scream rewarded his efforts, mingled with half-coherent fragments of his own language. He slashed until he was sure the invisible rotifer was dead, then groped into the torn corpse for the eggs. In a moment the tempered point had jabbed out the embryo life, and he pulled himself up over the edge of the tube and launched himself upon the nearest Eater. With a shock he found it was a Dicran. Reinforcements for the enemy already!

It turned viciously on him as he attacked it. It was used to maneuvering in open water, whereas the Flosc were sessile. Dicran's armor turned the point of the sword easily. Lavon sought with frantic jabs to find a joint, but the agile monster gave him no opening. It charged in upon him irresistibly, and he found his arms pinned to his sides, a humming corona folding down over his head. . . .

The Eater gave a convulsive heave and

went limp, floating slowly downward. A Didin drew back, pulling out its blunt, poisoned seizing-organ.

"Thanks," Lavon gasped.

The Proto darted off without replying.

Lavon wondered briefly at the strange quirk their practical invincibility had given the character of the Didins. In them the normal unhurried fatalism of the Protos had become almost a devil-may-care irresponsibility—as nearly human an emotion as the Protos had attained. Somehow Lavon preferred the steady, unimaginative Para.

He was caught in a tearing whirlpool again and flexed his sword arm. In the next five dreamlike minutes he developed a technique for dealing with the motionless, sucking Flosc. Instead of fighting the current and swinging the sword to left and right, he gave in to the vortex, rode with it, and braced the sword between his feet, point forward. The results were even better than he had hoped. Carried by its own current, the Flosc's soft, wormlike body was pierced half through before it could make a move against the human. Doggedly he went through the messy procedure of destroying the eggs with every victim he claimed. It was as much a ritual with him as scalping had been to Terrestrial Indians.

At last he emerged from a tube to find that the battle had drifted away from him. He paused on the edge to get his breath, clinging to the rounded, translucent bricks and surveying the scene. It was difficult to make any military sense out of the melee, but as far as he could tell the rotifers were getting the worst of it. They did not know how to meet such a carefully organized attack; their minds were not conditioned to act in cooperation.

The Didin were ranging from one side of the fray to the other, in two tight, compact groups, and their charge was irresistible. He saw half a dozen different Eaters struggling futilely, each one imprisoned

in a trichocyst net spun about it by two Paras, who were dragging it remorselessly toward the Bottom, where it would inevitably be suffocated. This late in the season the oxygen concentration beneath the thermocline was too low to permit the survival of most of the free swimming types of rotifers.

Lavon was astonished to see the single Noc that had accompanied his army scourging viciously with its one blunt tentacle at a Rotar. The Rotar seemed too surprised to make a move, and Lavon grinned in spite of himself. He knew just how it felt. The Protos' lack of fear, of the instinct of self-preservation itself, never ceased to amaze him.

A figure swam slowly and tiredly up to him from below. It was old Shar, puffing hard, and upon his face was a look of stark tragedy.

"Gone, Lavon!" he cried.

"What? What's gone? What's the matter?"

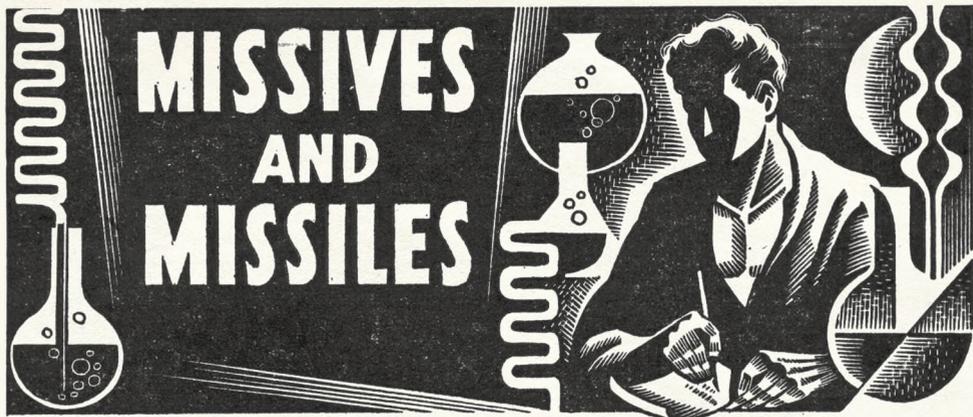
"The plate! The plate!"

"What plate?" Lavon demanded impatiently. "Calm down. What happened?"

Slowly his tutor regained partial control of his emotions. "One of the history plates," he said sorrowfully. "I dropped it in the fight. I hid the other one in an empty Flosc-tube, but the first one—the one I had started to decipher, Lavon—I dropped it! It went down to the Bottom, falling slowly, spinning into darkness. We will never find it again. Gone, Lavon! We will never know—"

He hid his head in his arms, an absurd and pathetic little figure crouching in the green glow of the waters, perched on the edge of the brown tube which was a turret of Flosc's castle. Lavon did not know what to say. He understood how keenly the old man felt the loss, and himself knew an empty fear at the thought of this tragedy. If the other plate were lost, they would in truth be a history-

(Continued on page 126)



IN THE last issue we modestly disclaimed perfection. Please note that this is a stand we expect to stick to, despite your efforts to overwhelm us with praise. Partly, perhaps, we're actuated by a morbid fear—it's axiomatic that, in this imperfect universe, to be perfect is to die—and we intend to survive. Next, there are things we still hope to accomplish.

Your comments hold most of the clues—all we ask is, keep an eye on us. Seriously, people, you've been swell, and while not many returns on the September issue are in as we go to press, the sampling given here hands us a boost—even when you knock us. It suggests you'll continue to be with us in our efforts toward making SSS an increasingly vital part of its times.

But enough from us. Take it, chums.

Dear Editor:

What a vast improvement is to be seen in the latest *SUPER SCIENCE Stories* over previous issues! The magazine's amazing metamorphosis (Greek for "I didn't know the gun was loaded,") almost bowled me over. SS was hardly recognizable, hiding as it was behind the more chaste and appropriate masthead, and sporting a reprint department. Even the general fiction content has improved.

First place is the issue goes to Joel Townsley Rogers' "Beyond Space and Time," because of the excellence of the writing and the grandeur of the idea. (I'm the kind of fan that can stand even the corniest plot if it's written well enough.) Don't get me wrong, tho, 'twasn't the plot that was corny in this one, but the faulty reasoning. If we accept Rogers' basic premise of positive and negative space and time arranged like the two nappes of a conical surface, then the rest of his logic doesn't hold water (or even glue, for that matter). Gunderson would have landed on Threa, the "minus" Earth, at the same mo-

ment he left the positive Earth, having gone through plus-time to the vertex of conical space and then through an equal length of *minus time* to Threa; therefore, if he spent fourteen years on Threa, he would return to Earth fourteen years *before* leaving, having spent that period in *minus time*, going backward!!!

The above fact further complicates the obviously paradoxical situation wherein Gunderson sees the perfidy of Nivea and Hartley and thereupon goes back in time and kills both of them, making said perfidy impossible! Also, one other matter: on page 106 Rogers writes of Gunderson forgetting Nivea while "in Mara's arms." Mara is then never mentioned further, and it is in Aevin's arms that Gunderson forgets. Complicated, ey wot?

Upon reviewing the story I can't really say why I liked it so much, other than the reasons noted above. Nostalgia could scarcely be the answer, as I've been reading s-f for only two years.

THE STAR BEAST is another of the kind of CALL FROM BEYOND—two very good but underdeveloped ideas tied together into one story. The only difference is that this time the two ideas—the lady and the Tiger (very neat punch-line on that, by the way) and the invasion of Earth—were more interdependent than was the case with THE CALL FROM BEYOND. Only one flaw that I can see; namely, why would the Rebirth tiger, artificially created, have memory—and instinct—patterns strong enough to subordinate Harold's mind? I'd think that Rebirth could have made a tiger with cranial capacity and modified nervous system to accommodate a human intelligence.

If it were allowable to rate poetry with the stories, Lilith Lorraine's TITAN'S GOBLET would take precedence over everything else. I guess I'm partial to fantasy poetry, since C. A. Smith is my favorite author. Anyway, TITAN'S GOBLET was very good.

Being partial to "monster" stories, I rate THE FIRST as second best in the issue. Kris Neville is rapidly forging to the forefront of the ranks of news s-f authors. Mack Reynolds, with his usually novel ideas and treatment is not far behind. His THE WORD FROM THE VOID was a cute li'l thing; fourth place.

Fredric Brown has never yet turned out a bad story, either mystery or science-fiction and his THE UNDYING ONES takes third position. In it, Brown came up with a rather acid-dipped portrait of human nature, a la Bradbury. No doubt he is right, with one possibly prohibitive exception. I doubt that humanity could progress as far as interstellar travel if the attitude of arrogant pugnacity described in the story was maintained.

ULTIMATE QUEST was another LONG WAY, with a slightly inconsequential ending—or rather indeterminate, I should say. So the voyagers saw a yellow star. Hokay; so what if it turned out to be Earth a few million years in the future; or not even Earth at all? Just the mere fact of the circumnavigation of the Universe is no longer sufficient material for a story, unless exceptionally well written. Something more is desired.

HALF-LIFE and FINAL ENEMY, while well-written and exciting s-f, are nothing new or especial. Nor, for that matter is the MIND MASTERS, although the Zoromes always manage to stir up interesting situations. One thing about the latter series that I don't like—the nomenclature of the Zoromes. Keeping track of all those numbers is too much trouble, and I never know which Zorome is which. Such confusion tends to detract from my enjoyment of the stories.

Cover by Von Dongen is very good, the equal of Lawrence any day. More, please. Also more Fawcett illos, which are as good as those of any other artist, only possibly excepting Dear Monstro Ligrio and Hannes Bok. Peter Poulton and Jon Arfstrom are the up'n' coming artists who would look well on your pages.

Only one suggestion: print the opinion tally blank on the reverse of some ad, so that clipping it won't mutilate any story, illo or feature. And get a story by Leigh Brackett!!!

Sincerely,
Robert E. Briney
Muskegon, Michigan

Dear Editor:

At long last I have worked up enough ambition to send something in your direc-

tion. Took a long time considering that yours is continually one of the top three stffantasy mags.

First, I shall rate the stories, and the anecdote. There's one that stands head-and-shoulders above all the rest: ULTIMATE QUEST. That is a classic! I'm partial to stories concerning extra-terrestrial travel, the farther from Earth, the better. Therefore, UQ-classic. Wonderful writing too, but I don't seem to have heard of author Holbrook anywhere before—except on the radio, and that probably isn't the same one. Or is it? Well, ever onward. . . . Next comes Coppel's HALF-LIFE. Can't just pin down why I liked it so much. Maybe it was just the right combination of action, mystery, suspense and a few other things I can't think of right now. Howsomever (and that's the way I spell it!) it was very good, very, very good for Coppel who usually turns out reeeeeeelllll hacky hack. Next comes the twentieth in the series, Jones' THE MIND MASTERS followed very closely by Brown's THE UNDYING ONES. Boy! That Brown must hate humans. Actually, tho, do you think that we'll end up as such deplorable stinkers as that? I imagine there are a few people around like that, but I doubt that there are enough to take over the entire race to such an extent. Tho with the present attitude about flying saucers if they might be from another planet, I dunno. Lotta people would probably turn against any alien race just because they didn't understand them and didn't trust them, even tho they have no reason to distrust them. Howsomever, these same people are probably the ones that don't believe in space travel either, so when it is once accomplished, there won't be many of those left. Or maybe there will be, if an article I read on the saucers a month or so ago is any example. But, back to TUO: Just what does the blurb have to do with the story? I don't see any connection except the guy's name. Now comes Neville's THE FIRST. Unusually good for Kris, who is usually hack. It actually did have a partially surprise ending, that about Sam's being an experiment. Next, another "novel," Anderson's THE STAR BEAST. Again, What does the blurb have to do with the story? I wish whoever writes those things would read the story first. Nice ending. Almost direct copy from the famous Stockton LADY OR THE TIGER, but good. One lousy trick, but he probably couldn't figure out what happened either. Now, to finish it up, FINAL ENEMY, no comment deserved, and THE WORD FROM THE VOID, which was just an anecdote and typical of Reynolds, and finally, your editorial jaw which was extended to swing at, BEYOND SPACE AND TIME. It stunk!!!!

Suggestion Department: How many people vote as to their story preference each

issue? Not many, I bet. Even with the coupon. Probably lots of people, like myself, won't use it because they don't want to cut up the mag, others don't want to take the time of putting it in an envelope and mailing it. So, why don't you attach somewhere in the magazine, a self-addressed postcard with the stories listed on one side? Stamped for the tightwads, if possible? Or at least, at the very least, do as one of the newer competimags (cute word, eh what?) does, arrange it so the voting coupon when cut out, won't take away any reading material on the other side, or any part of a picture. Maybe on the opposite side of some asthma or athlete's foot ad, or have it two-sided.

Almost forgot, Poetry, very good—for poetry.

Well, stick out your editorial jaw a little farther; here goes. *DROP THE RE-PRINT!!!!* The plot of that so-called story was good but the handling reeked to most anything I can think of at the moment. For one thing, most of it was utterly impossible, that business about him seeing something from the edge of the galaxy. No telescope could do that much, and he would be seeing thousands of years into the past, not just the few days he did. And where would there be such a naive combination of jerk and genius as Gunderson? But, to the subject of just plain reprints. Sure, there are lots of good stories of those times, such as D. D. Sharp's *DAY OF THE BEAST* or some of the Binder yarns, but there aren't many. Not nearly enough to supply the many reprint mags that are suddenly coming to "life." Except for a very few exceptional cases, the writing is draggy and outdated, and most of those cases, in fact, very, very near to all such cases, have been either anthologized or already reprinted within the last couple years. And with Pop. Pub., there is a special argument: Of the four stffantasy mags you now put out, three are exclusively reprint. Isn't that enough? 75% old stuff sure seems plenty to me.

Now to pick my bones, figuratively of course. First, the artists. They're all OK, with the exception of three, one of which was absent this ish. Namely, they are, Bok, whom I can't stand, whether interior or cover, Callé, who seems to be nothing but a darn cheap imitation of an already lousy artist, Bok. According to Callé, all humans and everything else is just a series of cubes and rectangles. It don't seem ever to occur to him that something might curve instead of bend at a stiff angle. And the third, van Dongen, is also seemingly trying to imitate some good artists. His style seems to be a very, very junky version of Finlay or Stevens. However, he does do a good job on the cover.

And the other gripe is, of course, what you call your stories. How, how can you call those things novels? The reprint you

called a novel isn't even a novelette. And the other two are hardly more than short novelettes. There is still a hackzine on the market that does the same thing, but another, in fact, two, have reformed and refer to stories of fifty pages as *short* novels and anything up to thirty five or forty pages, novelettes, as they should be. So, please quiddit.

Lastly, a request: You say that this is the twentieth Professor Jameson story. Well, could you give me the names and issue numbers of the magazines these were published in? And don't do like other editors do: just look at this question and forget about it. I really want to know, so I can get them. It is the best series I have yet run across. So, PLIZ!!! THE NAMES AND NUMBERS OF THE MAGAZINES WITH THE ZOROME STORIES IN THEM!!!

Anything else? Oh, yes. The book reviews. HOORAY!!! Keep it up. It's the best guide I've found yet as to what books I should buy or try to wheedle from someone else. And, while I'm on the subject of books, does anyone have a copy of Olaf Stapledon's *STAR MAKER*? Please? I have *LAST AND FIRST MEN* and very definitely want the sequel. Anybody? Anybody at all???

Okay, that's all.

H., H., H.,
Eugene DeWeese
Rochester,
Indiana

PS: GARVIN BERRY, WHERE ARE YOU? edw

Dear Sir:

I have been a reader of *Science Stories* for a good number of years. I prefer your American issues to our British ones. They are more exciting and better put. I would like some U.S.A. pen pals, would be very pleased if you could arrange it. I would like to correspond with some of the American readers of these magazines.

Your Scottish Reader

Mr. Gavin Brown
47 Causeyside St.
Paisley
Renfrewshire, Scotland

Dear Ed:

(By the way, why don't you give your name? You've got nothing to be ashamed of, unless you're a B. E. M.)

When I saw the cover of the Sept. iss. of *Triple S.*, I thought it was a different mag. It was an excellent cover, but tell me please, what story did it fit?

Now I want to get to the stories. In the first place, the three novels were all too short. When I came to the end of page 29, I eagerly turned it, looking for more. It was the end. It left me up in the air. I searched through the whole mag. trying to find the end of the "Star Beast." By the

way, what was the "Star Beast?" The "Mind Masters" was not much different from "World without Darkness" in the March iss., except that there were different BEMS. The machines got captured and had to be rescued etc. Of the three novels I think "Beyond Space and Time" was the best. It at least had a theory to it worthy of being called science fiction. It was well written but it was dated.

The short stories were better than the novels. "Half Life" was good. But how did the Station Master control all the machines if he was sealed in a bottle. "The Ultimate Quest" was nothing. It was an old, worn out idea *without* a new twist. "The First" was better, but not much. "The Undying Ones" was the best short story. It was a well written story showing human character.

"The Word From the Void." I can say nothing about it. It was not worthy to be in your mag. "The Final Enemy" was an average story. I guessed the ending before I had gotten half through the story.

The art work in this iss. was very good. The letter column was just the right length. Keep it that way. Keep up the book review.

Have your readers heard two S. F. programs "Dimension X" N.B.C. Friday 9:00 E.S.T., "2000 Plus" Mutual Wed. 9:00 E.S.T.?

The other day I saw "A Trip to the Moon" at the Hayden Planetarium in N. Y. It was very interesting. There was an eclipse of the sun by the earth. This was worth seeing, as is any show at the Planetarium.

In closing I want to say that this iss. was not up to par.

Yours for a better mag.

Stephen Schlager
Stamford, Conn.

Dear Editor:

My eyes scanned the backs of the Detective and Love fiction, hoping, against hope for a STF mag. when suddenly they found one, SSS! I whipped it out of the pile, plunked down the quarter and looked at the cover in one well-practised motion.

Congratulations! It looks like a new mag! Getting rid of the subtitle and the rocketship design did wonders. As usual the cover painting doesn't illustrate any story inside but who cares? Nine stories in this issue. I like the shorts because novels keep you up all night trying to finish them. One objection. You classed "Beyond Space and Time" as a novel. In *Fantastic Novels*, "Death's Secret" is nearly twice as long and is classed as a novellette. "Ultimate Quest," just five pages shorter, is classed as a short story. What gives?

The poetry and the picture were excellent. The letters are good but some are too long. I'd rather hear from three people

discussing the mag than one brain baby trying to explode Einstein's theories. I think you are wise to weed out the letters that start like this: "Dear Goo Goo Eyes," and go on to rate "The Word from the Void" as the best yarn he's read in sixteen years. Glad you gave us the dope on "Destination Moon." Could you review Stf. radio programs? I know of two and there might be more.

"Ultimate Quest" rates number one with me. I liked the Nip and Tuck idea, besides plenty of scientific explanation, plus suspense and good description. "Beyond Space and Time" dealt with the same idea but hasn't much scientific explanation of the ship or how it went, beyond being beaten with cosmic rays after taking off. The story seemed to me very well written but mostly dealt with the inventor's emotions. Number six spot for it.

I think "The Mind Masters" should have the number two spot for (as usual) plenty of action, suspense and a good plot. I don't mind the number-names for the Zoromes but why doesn't Mr. Jones use easily recognizable ones such as K66-K77, 5P5-6P6 or 050-050?

Third place should go to "Half-Life." I suppose Coppel was showing some pity towards T51 when he said that his thinking had got to a mechanical, machine-like stage.

In "The Undying Ones," Brown gave the aliens a human touch although they were bugs and of high intelligence. I liked the whole idea of the story . . . alien runs from man, waits until man is far enough out of savagery not be hostile and finds in Donross needed help and understanding from a barbarian. Number four place for it.

In number five spot I'd place "The Star Beast." As I finished the first chapter I guessed that Harol would be caught in tiger form by the destruction of the rebirth entry by Felgi and his men. However, I didn't reckon on him going so far as to eat Avi, or did he?

"Final Enemy" should receive number seven spot. As in the "Star Beast" I suspected the finish and therefore the last line didn't leave the impact it should have to make it a hit.

"The First" rates the eighth place. I like the way Neville put Sam's simple thoughts in print. Surprise ending was good. The story was compact and simple. I like.

"The Word From the Void" was good for laughs—and ninth place.

Illos good all 'round, but why does a Saturnian Slaber have a human body and a head like a lumpy watermelon?

What did I say about long letters? Sorry.

Yours sincerely,

D. Stone
Toronto, Ont.

Dear Editor:

You have a darn good magazine! The
(Please turn to page 116)

THOUSANDS NOW PLAY who never thought they could!



Thrilled by Playing

I've had my lessons just a week. I think your course is super. I was more thrilled than words can express when I found I could actually play America. The Merry Widow Waltz and others.

*J. T. Mancelona, Mich.



Wouldn't Take \$1000 for Course

The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.

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*D. E. G., Wausau, Wis.



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*C. S. Lucien, Okla.



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*E. T. Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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(Continued from page 114)

newly designed typeface for the cover is just right, for one thing. More and more often, it comes to me that *Super Science* is a lot like the Old Wonder Stories was years ago. You have a really unique publication. This is my honest opinion.

Sometimes you fail to use a good man's yarn often enough. It is just a year, for instance, since anything by Kris Neville has graced your pages. Neville is a rising writer in this sfc. field. Every other mag. is using Neville's work, and now after a year's lapse, he appears in S.S. only a second time. We should see his name, cheek by jowl, with others like Neil R. Jones, Poul Anderson etc. on the cover more often. "THE FIRST", by Neville, is well up to the top this issue. Ranks with "BEYOND SPACE AND TIME", by Joel Townsley Rogers. By the way. How could the aesthetically dumb, mechanically inclined Helver Gunderson suddenly become so poetic, in a Norseman's way, as he did?

Next came "ULTIMATE QUEST" by Holbrook. This was closely paced by "THE STAR BEAST", but Anderson finished this novel a bit too soon. THE UNDYING ONES" by Fredric Brown and L. Ron Hubbard's "FINAL ENEMY" are next. Hubbard was a little off form. Although I usually like Neil R. Jones' Zorome series, this "MIND MASTERS" was boring. Perhaps Jones and Hubbard are past the prime of life??? Neville and Holbrook are just getting into stride.

Glad to see Paul drawing for you. Paul must be well on in years, isn't he??? We like him. Van Dongen's cover is about like the work of Howard V. Brown, who painted years ago for Astounding. Nice to see Leo Morey drawing for you.

This cover, the work of Paul and Morey, and the plot of Holbrook's yarn all remind me of a real old-time stf's magazine. It is a story much like a thought-variant in the old Astounding.

Sincerely,
Robert Barnett,
Carthage, Mo.

P.S. Give us a definite mailing address at the heading of the "Missives and Missiles" column.

Dear Sirs:

Well here it is another issue time and what an issue it was. I will venture to say that it was the greatest one that I have read in a long time. When you put out a super issue your whole company must slave away for a long time. Yes, you sure go all out. Let us take the Sept. issue for instance. Not only did we have a change in the cover policy, but also even greater stories on the inside. Yes, it was really fine. Not just a fraction of it. All.

"The Star Beast" was a great story. Anderson was a fine example of original ideas. He showed great talent in this story. Fin-

lay sure helped it out by giving his all to the illos. There is another grand master. Has he ever done a poor illo? Of course he has not. Even in the old *Weird Tales* days he was at his best. Please use him on some covers. Please.

Speaking of covers, Van Dongen was good on this one. Let's have more of him soon. His style is fairly fresh. He puts into a pic a certain quality that I think Stevens does not have on all of his.

Now that Knight has left, who has taken his place? That is my question now. Who? Introduce us, eh what? Say, I was glad to see that Morey is back. That is another grand old master. He even could do good covers himself. I must be cover crazy. Or am I just crazy? Do not answer that, boy. Remember I buy your mag. I throw a lot of influence with other buyers. I work in a newstand. If I say that they are no good, they do not buy. So there.

To get back on the subject at hand, the rest of the issue was excellent. The Neil Jones series is still as good as it was when it first started back in the Thirties.

Titan's Goblet was very good by Lillith Lorraine. Please have more of the poetry. Maybe even an article once in a while. But please not too often.

Well, I guess that Roger's Ramblings will have to come to an end like all good things and all bad as well. So, until next issue I leave you with this thought— When Astounding first came out the title was Astounding Stories of "Super Science" now your blurb ought to be "Better than Astounding—Astonishing" Tales of Super Science.

Yours till the Moon falls,
Roger Nelson
San Diego, Calif.

Dear Editor:

This, my first letter to you, will be short. Below are my opinions of July S.S. Mag:

1. *To The End of Time* was best to my thinking.
2. *Half-past Eternity* and *King of the Stars* came tied for second.
3. *The Ancient Ones* was all right but isn't an ideal story.
4. *The Metal Smile*.
5. *Vengeance Unlimited!*
6. *A Bit of Forever*.
7. *Escape to Fear*.
8. *The Last Return*.

These story's above are good mostly but are not very adventurous. So far Super Science has been darn good.

Please pardon my awful writing and spelling.

P.S. Would like to know if you could give me, or tell me where to get, information on the Planetical Eros.

Stuart W. Davey
30 Henrietta St.
St. Catharine, Ontario

MISSIVES AND MISSILES

Dear Ed:

I would like to announce the formation of an organization, "The Tri-State St Fantasy Club", in this area, Iowa, Illinois and Missouri. All Stf fans are asked to get in touch with the Secretary, Don Myers, at 1507 South St., Keokuk, Iowa.

Thanks,
Edwin Rogers

Dear Ed:

It's been some time since I last touched off a missive to you. The urge at the present is upon me. The issue in which I shall loosen my vim is a capable one.

Top story is "The Metal Smile." Coppel in this piece has sown the seeds of genius and failed to reap the expected harvest. Here in all its crying need, is a piece that can be called literature. It has been done better, however, on a variation by coupling. (Hmmm?) Still it packed considerable power in its brief pages. The ending was expected, though. It might have been a classic except for certain failings. More like this would be appreciated. Some will undoubtedly denounce it as hack, however. But they are probably the same that debunked Bradbury's classics. Incidentally, a story that appeared in SSS a while back—"Impossible"—is included in his great new book, "The Martian Chronicles."

And in connection with Ray, if his story "I, Mars" fails to make the "Best Science-Fiction of 1950", I will suspect bribery, corruption, and everything horrible. Despite its numerous critics, I consider it of classic stature. Beautiful in execution, its bitter satire was never handled more effectively by Ray. It tops "Mars is Heaven," "Moon Be Still as Bright"—all his acknowledged classics. How about a return visit by Ray? Hey, do you know that you published his best work during '49? Quite a feat.

Say, aren't you publishing a bit too many time travel yarns? Four in one issue. The best was Sheldon's "A Bit of Forever." He writes for the "Post", also, doesn't he? Anyway, none were what you would call terrific.

"Vengeance Unlimited" was farcial on all counts. First, you intimated that it was of vast importance and considerable length. Look at the cover. Big headlines. Turn inside. Two lousy pages. I suspect you wanted his name. Shame! Second, the story was hacked. To satisfy my own ego I have worked out this theory. (1). Jon Spenser 4 was a publicity hound; therefore his theory was wrong. The fleet did succeed, but was destroyed in the fight. No knowledge of this reached the earth. As years rolled on, Spenser knew this—suspected it—knew he would suffer no impunity if he advanced his false theory. Who could denounce him? The answer is—nobody. And his theory he gained in fame and riches. Thats the truth.



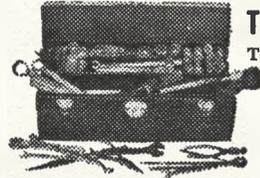
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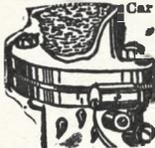
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At least it makes more sense that Brown's theory.

"King of the Stars" by William L. Bade, takes second place. Nice plot worked out exceptionally well.

Here's how I rate the July issue of SSS.

1. "Metal Smile" by Coppel.
2. "King of the Stars" by W. L. Bade.
3. "A Bit of Forever" by Walt Sheldon.
4. "Half-Past Eternity" by John D. MacDonald.
5. "The Ancient Ones" by Harold S. Sykes.

6. "Escape to Fear" by Peter Reed. A tie between the rest. None really good. None really bad.

Art work was great, as usual. You forget to mention Finlay's name in the front, however, and he illustrated the first story.

Suggestions:

Enlarge Taurasi's column. Us fans want more news than that. Well?

I know who the editor really is, gained through secret fan channels, but I won't embarrass him. I'll keep it secret.

Good luck and all that sort of junk. I don't think you'll need it.

Sincerely,

Larry Saunders
 Stamford, Conn.

P. S. I nominate the red thing on the April '49 cover, as the BEM of the year.

Dear Ed:

What's all this business of sfiction being "trash" anyway? I'll admit some stories are "trash" but others aren't.

Thought I haven't been reading sf for such a long time, (2 yrs.) have managed to collect a small collection of books and mags (200). In reading these, I find that in some cases the pieces written around 5 to 7 years back were better written than some are now. I believe that this is due to the fact that *then* they had material prophesizings in the translated form. They'll "amaze" you (if that's possible) as they've amazed me. One verse struck me as funny (not funny as "funny" but a "queer funny." Comprenez-vous?) It said there'd be a war around '51 or thereabouts (as near as the translator could figure it). This would be a war between an Asiatic country (Russia?) and France. (I believe) France would have a leader in the Dolphin line. He'd be the lost king France'd have but he'd be the greatest she's ever had. He's the one who'd lead French forces to victory. This would be proclaimed when he went to some country with his forces and knocked down some immense gates. Now where would that be?

Then (around 1960-5 or thereabouts) the Moslem peoples would invade the rest of the world and be (I think) successful. The world then proceeds to go to pot.

Finally, in 2,000 A. D. (not so far off

MISSIVES AND MISSILES

when you come to think of it) there's going to be a double eclipse of sun and moon. The earth proceeds to lose gravity for 1 month, a wall of water "higher than the Alps" cover the earth (maybe the scientists will cause it when they try to blow up the "caps with A or H-Bombs," thus shifting the earth's equilibrium) and last, but not least, ye Judgment commences on humanity. Exit earth.

This isn't a pleasant future is it? Let's hope it doesn't happen. Strangely though, everything else he prophesied came true. (Ex: The, A-Bomb, 1st World War, 2nd World War, plague after 1st World War, Communism's advance, etc.) No sir, not a very pleasant future.

3rd Short: Might be possible someday to navigate that ship like that. But think of all the machinery needed to run it!

4th Short: Not too bad.

5th Short: Bit of a time trap, eh, old boy? (girl?). By the way, did you see Rog. Phyllyss (?) latest effort? It's called "Time Trap". Thought it pretty good. What's your opinion?

Fandom's Corner: Geeze, the British fans are rather behind the times, eh? 'Tis a pity. The reviews on the "Fanzines" are good for the U. S. fan. Somehow I feel that I'm the only character this part of Canada reading stf. Now if we only had a club in Winnipeg. Sigh. . . .

The Science Fictioneer: I appreciate this dept. As I buy the books its interesting to find out if they're worth the buying and reading.

Say, if you've read "The Murder of the U. S. A." you'll have found there's some good ideas for defending said country. Pretty good story but there's love in it of course. Grrr! Also, Ghaaa! Y'know, I'm almost scared to give an opinion on the stories but— (ad infinitum) The Novel . . . Didn't like it too much. J. D. MD. is climbing, though.

1st Novelette: Fair.

2nd " Something like Burroughs, hmm?

3rd Novelette: Fifty, fifty.

1st Short: Good ending.

2nd " Don't know enough science to contradict. But look. The earth and planets were made when the sun flung it off (meaning said planets) in attraction with another planet. Now, don't puzzle on this too hard, but, what made the sun and other stars? How were they created? What created the creator(s)?

Ad infinitum. If man only knew! He never will if the Korean war (propaganda) spreads to a global war. But, who wants to talk about it here? Let it be said that the mighty powers (such as Germany was and Italy also) was overthrown when it dominated other nations. All the way through history it's been that way and I

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don't think it'll stop unless some everlasting peace is brought about.

Missives and Missiles: Before, I didn't care for reading a lot of letters from different fans but now I realized that when you yourself have written a letter to a mag you sort of look forward to the next issue to see if it's been printed or not. Now, its the first thing I turn to (ahem). Course there's a little disappointment when you don't (ahem) find your letter there. But that's life for you.

By the way. Do you know that you forgot to put Finlay's name on the contents page? Come, come!

The Ills. (page 12-13) Always a femme in it. Especially the covers. I gotta watch it so my mom and pop don't see them. But I like 'em. More! Gasp! More! Pant! Pant! Drool!

Is Callé's style ultra-modern or what? Good!

Who did page 78? Callé? Van Dongen for 85?

Page 12-3 Good. Very good.

Page 108- Lawrence? Also good. Looks like Finlay's but no bubbles et al.

Well, well, well. This is my first and longest letter yet to S. S. S. 'long.

D. Mitchell (He Who has Gathered Dust)
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada

P.S. Please excuse me, but I lacked paper to write on, and since its 3 in the morning and I just had to get this off—well you can see my predicament. It'll be better next time. Don't worry. Goo'bye.

Writ' by hand (ahem) Another Lil Abner?

Dear Ed:

This epoch-making attempt at something or other is in reply to that editorial you stuck at the head of the Missives and Missiles department in the July ish of SS. In said editorial you want to know if there is any field of science-fiction you haven't published and if so, examples. My answer is the adventure type of science-fiction story. What some people call space opera. I'll admit some stories should be classified that way but the good stories by such authors as Murray Leinster, Emmett McDowell, Gardner F. Fox, Ed Hamilton, and yes, even Shaver (That does it. If this thing gets printed I'll probably receive a time-bomb in the next mail.) and some of the newcomers like Alfred Coppel are stories fit to be read whether classed as space opera or not. Remember Hamilton's STAR KINGS? Shaver's Big Jim Steel foursome? Leinster's WHEN THINGS PASS BY? McDowell's stories with a color in each title? Coppel's lead stories in the last two issues of one of your competitors specializing in just the type of story I'm dis-

MISSIVES AND MISSELS

curring? To get to the point, that's the sort of story you should print more of. To my way of thinking you put too much of the fantastic type of story in your mag. Leave that for the other three Popular mags that specialize in it and give the readers of SS genuine science and adventure fiction. Another thought on space opera. It's the same as horse opera, there are some stories of it good and some bad. Why not try printing some of the good ones?

Why not get some of the authors I mentioned to do a few of their type of story and see what the readers reaction is? Especially Fox and McDowell.

I see you've already got Raymond F. Jones. Get him to do a couple stories like his SEVEN JEWELS OF CHAMAR that appeared a few years ago in that competitor I mentioned.

I suppose I might as well rate the stories in this issue while I'm at it.

HALF-PAST ETERNITY by MacDonald. Good plot and writing but I couldn't get interested. This is the fantastic type of story and would have been better in one of your other mags. Nice illo by Finlay.

KING OF THE STARS by Bade. Pretty good. Neat ending. I liked it. This one belongs. That illo by Callé is his best yet but I still don't like his work. Use Lawrence more.

LAST RETURN by Roger Dee. Not so hot. There've been too many variations to this plot lately. That ending was neat, though. Come to think of it, I rather liked the whole thing. That illo, by Van Dongen? was pretty good.

VENGEANCE UNLIMITED by Brown. This was really good. I worked out that equation and got 12,271,778,073,713,566,720. That's a lot of walking. That illo! Phooey!

ESCAPE TO FEAR by Pete Reed. Good. This is the type of story I can enjoy. Galactic warfare stories and related types I can read anytime. Again the illo was lousy.

Why not get Peter Reed to do a sort of sequel to this, a novel, with the full story of the war he mentions in this story?

THE METAL SMILE by Coppel. Not so good. Coppel has done better. I knew what the ending was the middle of the second page. No, I didn't peek. Again the illo wasn't very good.

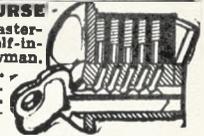
A BIT OF FOREVER by Sheldon. Writing good, plot good. But I didn't care too much for it. I read practically the same thing in another mag several years ago. That illo was good. By Van Dongen, I presume.

THE ANCIENT ONES by Harold Sykes. Fairly good but somewhat overdone nowadays. That reads like something you might have left in your files from the old SS. That illo, too. But who's squawking? Anytime you have a Paul to use, use it.

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Just by chance that wouldn't be a recent one, would it? The illo, that is.

TO THE END OF TIME by Robert Moore Williams. Best in the issue. This is the type of story you should have more of. That illo by Lawrence was the best in the issue, too. Or maybe it tied Finleys. Yeah, it did.

Leave the departments just as they are especially The Science Fictioneer.

Concerning my story comments and such, they're my own and I don't particularly expect anyone to agree with me. So there! I worked my index finger to the bone and I'm glad! Glad, do you hear? Ha! Haaa! Burp! Fred Stuckey Bedford, Pa.

Dear Editor:

It's many a year—since before the war—that I've been collecting and reading SSS, yet not a line to ye Ed.—so. . .

With the school year just ended, I dashed for my room (among other things) and some of the STF which had been gathering dust. Among the first two I hit were the May and July SSS, probably because the "Big Book" isn't as big as some of the others (No, this is not a brickbat yet). And I was surprised!!! SSS has come up the ladder since I last read an entire issue.

For the **OPINION TALLY**:

MAY — 1-Gift of Darkness, 2-Slave of Eternity, 3-The Long Way, 4-By The Stars Forgot (these four are near-impossible to separate, 5-Hop O' My Thumb, 6-The Call From Beyond, 7-Death Crystal, and 8-The Vanishers.

All the stories were decent, none really bad. The shorts were *Super*, length seemed to add hack. Illustrations were good too. Only bad feature is that you have, undoubtedly, the *worst blurb writers* in the business. Also, is a twenty-page story now classified a *novel*?

JULY — This issue was somewhat of a let-down after May but still ranked high.

- 1-Half Past Eternity—a lead story (won't call it a novel) that was finally different.
- 2-The Metal Smile—this I liked. Get Coppel for a lead story.
- 3-Escape to Fear—the astounding SF (can I mention competitors?) type, so it hit me right again.
- 4-King of the Stars—another good idea.
- 5-A Bit of Forever—like Brown's story, it's an ancient idea but well done.
- 6-Last Return—another good rehash.
- 7-Vengeance Unlimited—See comments on #5 and 6.

(From here the quality really drops)

- 8-To the End of Time—RMW has a name, so it's clearly written, but that's about all.
- 9-The Ancient Ones—Ugh!!! Re Messers Wright and Wolfe: There are worthy points in the arguments

MISSIVES AND MISSILES

of both gentlemen as they wrangle over the future of STF reprints. As Mr. Wolfe says, there is "trash" in the output of any period (see #9 above) but also fiction worth reviving. Any anthology or reprint editor had to dig this out as best he can. To me the whole crux of the matter depends on the editor. The type of editor determines the quality of the reprints. To go to either extreme, as the two Mister W's have, seems foolish. To cut out reprints because of some bad ones would be equivalent to the proverbial cutting off of one's nose to spite the face. But to go ahead and reprint without restraint—and consideration of current markets, trends, standards and demands—is equally unintelligible. So, let's have a *some* reprints and let's have good reprint editors.

Things I'd like to See:

- ... blurbs and titles that fit the story in some way.
- ... Callé on the cover.
- ... better novelets to match SSS's fine shorts.
- ... reincarnation of Astonishing Stories.
- ... covers illustrating the stories, or separately labeled as in the May issue.
- ... SSS move up to the top (It's nearer than the middle where Morton Paley consigns it now).

Sincerely,
Mitchell Badler
New York City

Dear Sir:

You note in the letter column of the new issue of your magazine that you feel that you have passed a milestone. There was really no need to call this to anyone's attention. For the first time since you resumed publication, I feel that the magazine is so permanent that, if I write you a letter, the magazine will still be in publication when it arrives.

But to the stories.

1. *King of the Stars* by William L. Bade. This is, if my memory and my bookshelves fail me not, Bade's fourth story. There are two things noticeable about his output to date. First: that, aside from his first two stories, (which were published in succeeding months) the publication dates of his opera have been separated by intervals of more than a year. Second: that, in one fan's opinion, at least, each story has been better than the one before it.

On consideration, I suspect that I have given this story first place not because of its own qualities but because it typifies a new spirit in Science-Fiction, a spirit which first appeared perhaps in vanVogt's "Asylum".

Here is an example of what I mean: In the 30's, this story (probably written by Williamson) would have ended with the

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brave handsome hero (one of the scientists, but neither elderly nor particularly knowledgeable) destroying the Thing on Jupiter in a series of impossible and resounding feats of derring-do. (On the other hand, it might have been extended into a novel, in which case the Thing would be the King of a whole race of malevolent Things. In the end, Jupiter would be colonized, and the "ignorant, stupid, lazy" "natives" (who "love ol' mar'ser") exploited to the accompaniment of Kiplingian music.)

Corn, you say? Certainly, but the point is that the whole idea of this kind of story, if it can be said to have any idea, is all-conquering Man, Don't we deserve the Universe?, Aren't we wonderful? And, as Starzl not too originally put it in the title of a story which I haven't read, the Earthman's Burden (which was usually loot).

Contrast this with the attitude expressed in Bade's story, or, more notably, in Asimov's "The Evitable Conflict" or Williamson's "With Folded Hands . . . And Searching Mind" ("The Humanoids"). No man is an island, and neither is mankind, if I may be allowed to paraphrase another kind of literature.

And although this is obviously Bade's viewpoint, I am not forgetting that the story was meant to shock, to wound the collective vanity. Oddly enough (but was this Bade's intention?), it had an opposite effect on me, and I hope on others. I would feel a great deal more pleased with "The Way the World is Going" if I believed that some superior being was using us, even (or even especially) to his but not our advantage.

2. *Half-Past Eternity* by John D. MacDonald. I don't usually like MacDonald, largely because of derivativeness (and because he derives from authors whom I consider distinctly not first-rate (in their field, or by literary standards). But in this story, he seemed to bring off his transplanted semi-naturalism better than usual. (At that, my enjoyment of the novelette is derived from largely literarily extraneous considerations, as that the last pages remind me of James Gould Cozmes' "Castaway". (Which may all prove that it is a good thing that we are asked merely to list the stories we enjoyed most, not the "best".)

3. *To the End of Time* by Robert Moore Williams. Only Williams' sound construction and mellifluous writing saved this from banality. And also the fact that Thorndyke's supreme ugliness predisposed me in his favor by reminding me of O. Henry's immortal "Next to Reading Matter".

4. *Vengeance, Unlimited* by Fredric Brown. This would have gone above no. 3 for its crispness and unpretentiousness, were it not for its concomitant uncomplacency and unoriginality.

MISSIVES AND MISSILES

5. *The Metal Smile* by Alfred Coppel. This was well written, but the mood came from S. Fowler Wright and the plot from J. J. Coupling's "Period Piece". Unoriginality is somewhat too mild a word.

6. *Escape to Fear* by Peter Reed. Some competent characterizations, respect for the author of "The Miniature", and the fact that the other three stories were worse kept this one from going lower.

7. *A Bit of Forever* by Walt Sheldon. I've read at least a dozen stories with this plot, all of them poor.

8. *The Ancient Ones* by Harold S. Sykes. This is so bad that I suspect Sykes to be a pen name of Shaver.

9. *Last Return* by Roger Dee. This is so poor that it reads like the script for a "suspense" radio program.

In conclusion, may I say that I do not object to reprints on principle, but that your three reprint magazines seem to be scraping the bottom.

Yours truly,
Michal Wigodsky
Houston 6, Texas

Dear Editor,

The July SSS was fine and dandy. The three novelettes took top honors. Williams is a fine writer when he wants to be. At other times he writes dreadful hack. He was really on the ball this time. MacDonald is coming along well. He is always strong on characterization, but is inclined to be weak on atmosphere and background.

I definitely agree with Roscoe Wright on the reprint subject. There are too many reprint mags on the market today, and the most lucrative reprint material, from a certain competitor of yours is available to none of them. Let's have *Astonishing* in lieu of *A Merritt's Fantasy*. I think that Stf is more popular than fantasy at present, and there are plenty of fine Stf writers turning out good material at present.

I believe that you asked for suggestions about your editorial policy. Well, I think that the field is wide open for a Stf mag that will stress atmosphere. You have more moody stories than does the average science-fiction magazine at the present time, but we could use more and better written ones. Suggested authors—Del Rey, Brackett, Bradbury, Simak, Asimov, C. L. Moore, and Kuttner. Hamilton is unbeatable on the deep space stuff, which you could also use more of. On the whole, however you are already turning out a fine magazine. If it improves as much in the next six months as it has in the last six it will be very nearly perfect.

Sincerely,
Seymour Sargent
Penacock, N.H.

In order to print so many letters, we've omitted our editorial comments for this issue. —ED.

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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

(Continued from page 110)

less race, the past before the First Awakening but a fearful blank. . . .

He was not long permitted to brood, for another man-shape approached, Phil.

"All is well, Lavon," he cried exuberantly. "The swimmers flee, and only the Flosc who are still in the castles remain, hiding in the darkness. If we could only root them out—"

Quickly Lavon ran the possibilities over in his mind. Their whole attack might yet fail if the Flosc successfully entrenched themselves. After all, mere slaying had not been his object. They had started out to seize these castles. A thought struck him.

"Shar—do these tubes connect with each other?"

"Yes," the old man said without interest. "It is a continuous system."

Lavon sprang up. "Come on, Phil," he ordered. "We'll attack them from the rear." He plunged into the tube, Phil on his heels.

It was very dark, and the water was fetid with the odor of its late occupant, but after a moment's groping they found the opening which led into the next tube. Determinedly they worked toward the main stem, going always down and in.

Once they passed beneath an opening from which muffled shouts and malevolent buzzing issued, and Lavon paused to probe with his sword. The rotifer gave a startled, shrill cry, and involuntarily released its toe grip upon the walls of its tube. Lavon moved on, smiling grimly, knowing that those above would do the rest.

Reaching the central stem at last, they went from one to another methodically, spearing the surprised Easters from behind or cutting them loose so that the fighters outside could get at them as they drifted out. Their eyes were used to the darkness, and the trumpet shape of the

SUNKEN UNIVERSE

tubes prevented the Eaters from turning on them. The smallness of the connections and the dichotomous nature of the branching also acted in their favor to guard against being surprised from behind. The gutting of the castles was accomplished in a remarkably short time. Not fifteen minutes after he had entered Lavon was able to stand at the mouth of a turret and look over a metropolis completely under their control.

ONCE more Lavon lay in darkness, all thoughts of action remote from his mind. The water was stuffy, cold, the blackness complete. Around him were the walls of a tube of Flosc's castle; above him a Para gently laid the last sand grains upon a new domed roof. The rest of the humans were in other tubes, similarly roofed, but there was no stir of movement or babble of voices. It was as silent as a tomb.

Lavon's thoughts were drugged, but very bitter. He had been right about the passage of the seasons. They had had barely enough time to consolidate their position before the annual debacle of the fall overturn had happened—the waters of the universe had revolved once, bringing the surface to the Bottom, and the Bottom to the Sky, and then mixing both indistinguishably. The thermocline was destroyed until next year's spring overturn would reform it. And inevitably, by Nature's law, the abrupt change in temperature and oxygen concentration had started the spore-building glands again. The spherical amber shell was going up around Lavon now, and there was nothing he could do about it. It was a physiological process as dissociated from his control as the beating of his heart. Soon the light-generating oil which filled the spore would come pouring out, expelling and replacing the cold, foul water, and sleep would come, inevitably. . . .

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And just as they had made a real gain and had established themselves in enemy country, ready to sally forth and destroy every remaining Eater! Now the eggs of the Eaters would be laid, and next year there would be as many as ever—and one of the precious plates which contained all the ancient learning of Lavon's race had been lost forever.

There was a soft *chunk* as the last sand grain fell into place on the roof, and the sound seemed strangely to bring him an obscure contentment. Para, faithful in his obscure, inhuman way, using his own last hours before spore formation to make his allies safe.

And they were safe for the season. They could not be ousted from the castle. There would be fewer Eaters next year, because of all the eggs that had been destroyed, and the layers of those eggs . . . they would have a better chance than ever before . . . even though they had not completed this summer's job . . . one plate still left . . .

Lavon stopped struggling and sank gently toward oblivion.

* * *

In a little known corner of this galaxy the watery world of Hydrot hurtles endlessly around the red star, Tau Ceti. For many months life has swarmed in its lakes and pools, but now the sun retreats from the zenith, and the snow falls, and the ice advances from the eternal ocean. Life sinks once more toward slumber, simulating death, and the battles and lusts and high ambitions and tragedies of a thousand million microscopic creatures retreat into the limbo where such things matter not at all.

No, such things matter not at all when winter reigns on Hydrot; but winter is an inconstant king, and once again spring will return.

STAR TAMER

(Continued from page 57)

his bout with acceleration sickness. "However, I do appreciate the fact that we got the job done. That's the important thing, isn't it?"

Cannon beamed. "Yes, sir."

"You should be rewarded," Bullis told him.

Cannon shrugged modestly. "Really, Captain—"

"I insist."

"Well, then—" Joe, rashly, put out his hand.

Bullis swung. His fist connected with the point of Cannon's jaw and sent him sprawling. Cannon got to his feet. Bullis knocked him down again.

He stood over him, but Cannon stayed where he was. Wisely. Bullis wasn't as weak as he had thought.

"It worked this once, Cannon," Bullis said. "By the grace of the gods of space. But next time—if there ever is a next time for you—*think. Think, dammit!*"

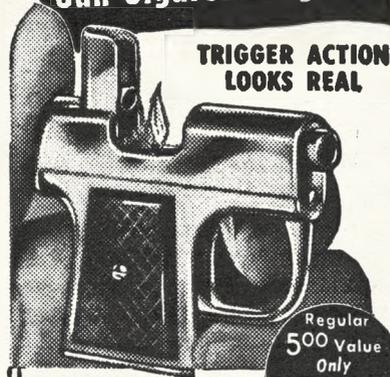
Cannon thought. He spent a long time thinking. About the orbit and what it would take to make it safe and practicable. Bullis helped, too. Not with fists, though he probably felt like it many times. He rode herd on Cannon unmercifully. It was the beginning of a painful friendship for Joe.

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Cannon and Bullis are partners in the line and doing well, but there's one thing they never talk about. Other men can discuss the beginning of their friendship rationally. Cannon always feels like ducking when Bullis mentions theirs. That first handshake was a thrill Cannon won't ever forget. His jaw still aches when he thinks of it.

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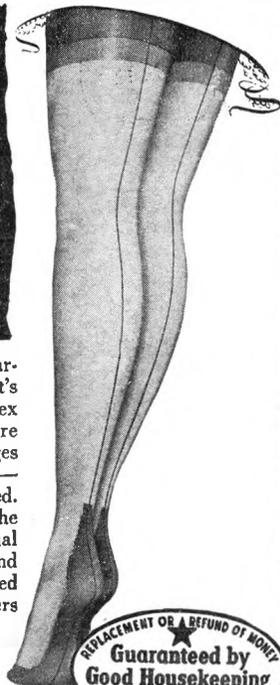
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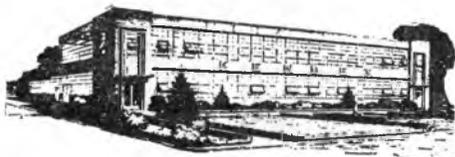
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