ANC

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

SCIENCE FICTION

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A Short Novel—**SHADOW ON THE STARS by ALGIS BUDRYS**

Short stories by THEODORE R. COGSWELL • HENRY HASSE • HAL K. WELLS
ROBERT F. YOUNG • LEN GUTTRIDGE • ROBERT SHECKLEY and many others

ALL STORIES IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

THE STORY BEHIND THE COVER

The giant computer or cybernetic brain fascinates thoughtful minds in a more paradoxically frightening way than any other twentieth century invention of roughly corresponding scope and power. It is the great mystery gadget of our age, the mechanical bugbear that casts a shadow across all ideally conceived Utopias, the symbolic cipher, indeterminate and unknown, which may well decide the course of human destiny for generations to come. Do "big brains" really think? Can they formulate independent judgements? Do their intricate relays and tiers of memory banks give an actual emotional coloration to their replies to the questions put to them?

It is most unlikely. The human brain is not a machine, and it does not even remotely resemble a machine in any of its machinations—Machiavellian or otherwise. But consider for a moment what a metal tape recording of a scientifically correct answer to any given question could mean in terms of human happiness, or human misery. A computing machine that is, by its very complexity, as accurate in its replies as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle will permit, *can* pass judgements—if there are human agents to do the enforcing. It can pass judgements simply by punching out one or more unassailably accurate scientific facts—and letting human nature do the rest.

In this month's dramatically prophetic cover illustration we see a "big brain" of the future which has done just that—condemned two young people desperately in love to a life of enforced celibacy by informing the ruling caste of an easily imagined regimented state that they are biogenetically unfit to marry. *Unfit,* UNFIT. If the machine had spoken in a voice of thunder it could not have condemned the terrified and despairing young people more irrevocably.

Their struggles cannot save them. Human reason, sympathy, compassion must be held in abeyance, for the giant computer has punched out on a two-inch strip of gleaming metal a scientifically accurate reply to the data presented to it.

Is scientific accuracy, then, the only yardstick by which the genius of man, with all of its shining, many-faceted explorations of reality, has the right to be measured? Don't you believe it. It is man himself who decides precisely what data shall be fed into a machine, and human dignity and the skeptical spirit, laughter and joy and grief, are beyond the scope of a machine's computations.

FRANK BELKNAP LONG

How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey

The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right there.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to finish high school.

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., back in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it *fast* or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my bell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. Here, it said, is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics included. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

Came week-end liberty, I studied. Came a holiday, I studied. Came the end of the six weeks, I was top man in the class. Within six weeks I had mastered two years of high school math, thanks to the training I'd gotten.

I.C.S. made the impossible—easy!

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shadow on the stars

by . . . Algis Budrys

Dark, brooding, and terrible was the empire of the Farlans—and where suns never set it is always day. But ever the mad court ruin.

AT THE BARREN heart of midnight, at the precise stroke of twelve, the Farlan Empire—Henlo's empire—would be dying.

Henlo looked forward to death with distaste. But being a realist, he accepted personal extinction as he accepted the death of his entire, tremendous creation. And there was no longer anything he could do to stop the Earthman.

At midnight, the implacable statistics of his birth would shunt him aside, forever stripped of his leadership. Worse, the Earthmen would have a free hand while he lived along uselessly, somewhere, with his books and courtesy guards. And the guards would be fiercely single-minded young men with no ears for anything he might say, dedicated to nothing but the continuance of his life at the new ruler's whim.

He doubted very much that the fierce young men could save the empire that had once been his pride and his glory.

He was senile. No one would talk to him, or listen to him,

H. G. Wells once coined a shining phrase to shadow forth the splendor of man's eventual conquest of the stars: "The Earth is mankind's footstool." He was thinking of stellar conquest in humanistic terms—of a golden dawn of science and progress charting a lifeline to the stars. But gifted young Mr. Budrys, already a name to reckon with in science fiction, has presented here a more startling and somber interpretation, in a story of tomorrow as tautly prophetic as it is dramatically stirring in scope.

though everyone would be most respectful. How ironic that he could still be respected and accorded every courtesy despite his statistical senility.

It did not matter that only he was equipped, and that by luck, to recognize the deadly, never-ceasing danger and take steps to prevent it. No matter how brilliant his successor—no doubt long-since picked and impatiently waiting—he could not understand about the Earthmen. And Henlo could not tell him. They would never even see each other, and any memoranda Henlo left behind would be discarded without being read. What purpose could there be in listening to a replaced Empire Builder, or reading his words? He was senile and the verdict could not be reversed.

He watched the shadows sweep along the avenues of Farla City, and reflected with bitterness on the laws and customs of Farla. They determined inexorably that a man, on reaching the age of one hundred, became automatically senile. Well, the rule had doubtless served its purposes in the past.

Farla turned, and the years followed. There were customs which were honored in the breach, and his personal list of these was longer than most. But not even he could prevent Farla from revolving only two hundred and seven times before it went once around the sun. He was trapped by the unalterable fact of his birthdate.

Laws. Customs. Only once in his life had he met a man who understood their basis completely.

Henlo looked out in complete frustration at the city that was no longer his. And even more vividly than before the years began to unroll backwards in his mind's eye vision, coalescing into patterns of long ago. It seemed only yesterday somehow . . .

I

Captain D' Henlo of the Farlan Starfleet sat in the cabin of his first fleet command, trying desperately to sleep. Around him, echoing through the companionways and vibrating from the plates, were the thousand and one sounds of fitting-out.

Hurried footsteps bounded through the companionways, and auxiliary motors throughout the ship rumbled with overload or howled at sudden slack as supplies were hoisted aboard and dispersed into bunkers, and loading chutes. At intervals, the open circuit of the ship's Intervoice rattled the cabin speaker's grille with tinny messages.

A small part of Henlo's mind monitored this babble, precisely as a musician's ear studies the notes of a tuning orchestra. But only a small part—and only the sudden emergence of a false note brought the constant noise to the full attention of his thoughts. Ship's noises had long since ceased to interfere with Henlo's natural

ability to snatch a few moments of sleep from the rigors of his routine.

It was the thought of death and defeat—of the destruction of his fleet, and of the inevitable end of the Farlan Union—which now kept him in a state of constant, chill apprehension, and denied him all repose.

The Vilkai controlled the Galaxy. They had driven the Earthmen back to the Rim before that pale, furless race had even fairly begun the burgeoning rush of expansion which seemed its sure, remorseless destiny. They had scoured the universe clean of opposition, controlled its commerce, and levied their supplies from the shadowy remnants of a dozen lesser empires which were now mere puppet districts in the greater domain. Only Farla stood in their way, and that only for as long as it suited their predatory plans.

Theoretically, they were not all-powerful. They were over-extended, and they were barbarians. The over-extended barbarian invariably tends to go home and return at a later date, when he has seen to the conception of a new generation of barbarians and filled out his lean ribs. He is, moreover, given to quarrelling and dissension within his own ranks, and the pursuit of loot in preference to the more exacting demands of strategy.

The primary objective of a barbarian is not the conquest of territory for its own sake, or the prosecution of some political dogma. It is individual power and individual glory. That is his weakness, and a well-led, well-disciplined professional military force can cut him to ribbons, no matter what the size of his horde.

Unfortunately Farla, unlike Earth, which had simply been unprepared, was not well-led, or well-organized.

Captain D' Henlo's short, almost vestigial tail lashed nervously. He had no desire to see his career cruelly interrupted by the sawing of a Vilk trophy-knife. Possibly, had he been a few years farther along in the ranks, he might have attempted to engineer some pressure at the capital. It was barely possible that he might gain something there, knowing as he did that the admirals of war are rarely the same men as the admirals of peace.

But the possibility was only an improbability. He knew his own worth and talents, and his contacts at the capital were rightly suspicious of his political ability. There were certain things beyond the pale of custom, and promotion over the heads of half the Fleet priority list was one of them. It might very well have caused a general mutiny.

Not in the ranks, perhaps, for the ranks no longer cared who led them. But the officers would be furious, and the officers could

smash the government immediately. Governments being covetous of governing, it followed as a logical premise that D' Henlo, genius or not, was doomed to be just another ship commander involved in the last, gasping flicker of life in the race of Farlans.

He bared his teeth in a snarl at the inevitable, but he recognized that inevitable for what it was.

Grimly, he tried to bore himself to sleep by recounting the various incompetencies of his staff-level superiors, the ministers of state, and the ruler himself. He reasoned, with absolute assurance, that this amusement could easily still be incomplete at the time when his fur would be flapping from some Vilk rooftree.

The Intervoice put a sudden, loud quietus on his hopes of sleep.

"With the Captain's pardon, a Fleet Messenger requests permission to call and deliver."

"Granted," Henlo said, and, scratching his thigh with annoyance, unlatched his door.

II

The messenger handed him the usual sealed letter, saluted, and withdrew to the companionway. The message was brief—a few lines directing Henlo to report immediately to the Port Director's office for transportation.

Henlo looked at it with narrowed, speculative eyes. Tapping its folded length against his hip, he paced softly back and forth.

It meant something important, certainly. The bare word 'transportation,' without further amplification, conveyed as much. But what, precisely, *did* it mean? A secret conference of some kind, apparently—too secret to be entrusted to a Fleet Messenger.

He throttled the impulsive thought that it might, against all logic and reason, be his promotion to admiralty. He had not achieved his present status by acting against logic. It followed, then, that he was either being court martialed for some unknown offense, or was being entrusted with a special mission. Of the two possibilities, the latter seemed the more likely. His last intelligences from the capital had indicated only growing strength among his contacts.

Still, he hated uncertainty. He called for his personal vehicle with a rasp in his voice, and stalked up the companionway at a pace that forced the messenger to bound.

Ten minutes later he sprang from his vehicle, the messenger having peeled off to go it afoot, and marched into the Port Director's office, whence, shortly, he emerged by way of the rooftop platform. There he stepped into an official flyer, and was blasted across the sky at a screaming pace which almost, but not quite, matched the janglings galloping through his nerves. By the time he arrived at the capital he was still

outwardly cool, as befitted his position, but he would have attacked mountain sajaks barehanded.

From its very beginning, the conference strained his nerves even more intolerably. It soon became evident that he was to be interviewed by the complete cabinet, and, when he finally entered the presence of the twelve men, he found himself confronted by a long table behind which they stood and stared at him silently.

He sat down and waited, his eyes slowly traveling up and down the table, his mental catalogues spinning as he tried to determine what course of conduct to pursue from his information about each man individually.

Finally, the Minister for Preparedness picked up a file—Henlo's own Fleet dossier—opened it, studied it for a moment, and put it down. With that formal signal that the hearing had begun, the Minister for the Fleet began to speak.

"You are Captain D' Henlo," he stated.

Henlo nodded. "I am."

"In command of *Torener,* City-Class sub-battleship, Fleet, currently fitting out at Port Terag."

"Yes."

The Minister for the Fleet nodded, and turned D' Henlo over to the Minister for Preparedness.

"Captain Henlo," the minister said, "we'll begin by assuming that only the passage of time lies between you and important commands. Your record indicates as much, and your decorations bear it out."

Henlo could see no advantage to himself in permitting the Minister to continue to believe that flattery could in any way alter his ingrained habits of caution and reserve.

"That is correct," he said coldly and matter-of-factly. The Minister for Preparedness grinned with one corner of his mouth, and nodded a brief acknowledgment of the situation.

"Let us, then, proceed in accordance with that appraisal," he said, this time sounding far more sincere.

"Captain Henlo," he continued, "I am sure you realize that the Fleet is totally incapable of prosecuting a successful defense of the Farlan Union against the Vilkai hordes. I believe, too, that you are perfectly aware of the factors which create that incapability. But I shall not compromise you—or ourselves—by asking you to confirm this belief. Let it suffice for me to tell you that we are about to appoint a new Admiral-in-Chief."

Inasmuch as Henlo had been keeping his features and bodily posture carefully inexpressive, he did not betray himself. But the tension of his nerves very nearly touched the danger point.

And still, something—some firmly-rooted, stubborn belief in

his own thought processes—did not permit him to hope that the impossible gift was about to be given.

"Moreover," the Minister for Preparedness went on, "we are about to appoint to this high position a man who is a completely unknown and obscure officer in the Reserve."

Henlo's tail jumped once, quivered, and lashed out again in a vicious blow at the unheeding air. Then he had control of himself once more.

"Allow me to congratulate you on your composure," the minister said. "I hope it is indicative of the attitude with which other officers will greet the news."

Inwardly, Henlo was a riot of triggered emotions and flashing thought. He, too, congratulated himself on having lost control where it would not be noticed. But that was the only crumb of comfort he could offer himself.

A Reserve officer! Well, perhaps—just perhaps—that might not be the mortal insult a line officer's jump would have been. Paradoxically, Reserve officers were so far beyond the pale that most line men considered them incapable of affecting a regular fleet man enough to insult him. It remained to be seen how they'd react to following a pariah's orders.

But to have that as yet unnamed man do the very thing that Henlo had decided was impossible for himself! Henlo could not, honestly, decide whether to chuckle at such audacity or be overwhelmed with resentment. In either case, his emotional attitude would have no effect on the plan which he was already beginning to formulate for the man's eventual removal.

He returned his full attention to the Minister of Preparedness.

"The officer," the minister resumed, "is L' Miranid, and I assure you that he is a military genius. We are fully confident that, under his command, the Fleet will be able to defeat the Vilkai hordes.

Ah? And where had they found this paragon? But that was relatively unimportant. Probably he'd been instructing in tactics at some insignificant school. Offhand, Henlo could recall no one named Miranid, but it was a likely-enough name. He pried at its etymology and decided that it probably derived from the occupational cognomen "ranis," or metalworker. Which, of course, meant smith, and was at least of some use as an insight on the man's hereditary character. Most descendants of smiths called themselves by the plain 'Kalvit.'

There was the faint possibility that Miranid might suffer from the fatal weakness of pretentiousness. With that theory as a tentative start, Henlo was able to give part of his mind something with which to occupy itself while he outwardly

devoted all his attention to the minister.

"Therefore," the minister was saying, "we have assigned your ship, *Torener,* to his flag. You will make the requisite preparations to quarter him in accordance with his station."

Henlo nodded.

"And, you will serve not only as ship commander under his direction, but will be his aide for the duration of hostilities."

Henlo nodded again, inwardly glowing with satisfaction. He'd have the man where he could observe his character—and learn from him.

The Minister for Preparedness picked up Henlo's dossier again, leafed to the very last page, and extracted the flimsy.

"I will now read the following officer's dossier copy of orders as issued by the Minister for the Fleet and endorsed by the Minister for Preparedness:

"Subject: Elevation in rank.

"A vacancy for the position of Admiral-in-Chief of the Grand Farlan Starfleet exists due to the death in battle of Admiral L' Miranid.

"Vice-Admiral D' Henlo is therefore directed to assume command of the Grand Farlan Starfleet with the title and permanent rank of Admiral-in-Chief.

"As signed, endorsed and executed this day . . ."

The Minister for Preparedness stopped reading at that point, and returned the flimsy to its place in the file.

"The date, unfortunately, is yet to be determined," he said, staring fixedly at Henlo. "It will coincide with the date of that battle which, in your judgment, determines the issue beyond doubt in Farla's favor. Have I made myself clear?"

Henlo nodded. "Yes, sir, very clear." As Henlo spoke he sent a quick look up and down the ministerial ranks. The thought struck him that the ministers might be incapable of educating good line officers, but that they were certainly nonpareils at picking assassins.

"I may assume," he said, "that my elevation to the rank of Vice-Admiral will come at some convenient time during the next year?"

"We had thought," the Minister for the Fleet said, "to implement it as of this date."

"I would respectfully suggest that it be withheld until I have furnished a convenient pretext in the form of significant battle action," Henlo replied.

The Minister for Preparedness nodded slowly. "An excellent suggestion." He looked at Henlo shrewdly. "May I say, Captain Henlo, that you are an even more remarkable man than your record would indicate."

Henlo accepted the compliment gracefully. He hated equivocal situations. Now he could be sure that he would also have to guard

against the Ministry's attempts to assassinate *him*.

All in all, it had been a nerve-wracking but remarkable and satisfying session.

III

Henlo returned to *Torener* with his nerves in the fine, whetted condition which had always produced his best thinking. He called in his Executive Officer immediately, and issued orders for the provision of admiral's facilities aboard ship.

"Are we going to carry Rahoul's flag, sir?" the exec asked.

"That's right," Henlo said, and grinned nastily at his subordinate's disconcerted expression. He had fully expected the story of Miranid's promotion to become current almost immediately. It only remained for him to discover just what, in the exec's estimation, constituted subtle probing.

"Ah—I meant Admiral Miranid, of course, rather than the late Commander," the man said hastily. "A mistake of the tongue."

"Undoubtedly. A bit character revealing, wouldn't you say?"

The exec departed in hasty confusion. Nevertheless, Henlo reflected, he would have used exactly the same approach himself, three years earlier. In about six years, that officer might require judicious attention.

Every carefully analyzed little fragment of psychological data helped keep a man's fur on.

But all this was merely automatic routine. What mattered now was Miranid. What manner of man was he? Henlo had no intention of following his carefully implied orders until he'd had a chance to suck the ephemeral admiral dry of any useful political techniques he might have developed.

And, for that matter, precisely *why* did Miranid have to be removed?

Miranid did not arrive before *Torener* was completely fitted-out and ready to take her place with the fleet. In that interval, Henlo managed to keep his own tensions from showing, and was also able to get a fair idea of the reactions his subordinate officers would manifest.

Heaven only knew what the regular officers in the remainder of the fleet were thinking. Aboard *Torener,* Henlo awaited his arrival with a mixture of curiosity and amusement. The admiral would find it rough going.

Miranid arrived at night. A thin, close-packed man with thick but dull fur, he marched up the lowered ship's ramp with a lithe grace and quickness to his movements that reminded Henlo of something wild.

The formalities were short, as usual, since the admiral was presumed competent until proved otherwise. As a matter of fact, Henlo had arranged it nicely, with the ship's officers lined up in order of rank and with himself at their

head, of course. The required minimal exchange of salutes finished the entire ceremony in a quarter of an hour.

Rahoul, who had set something of a standard for incapability, had been welcomed to the Ministerial Office Building with three full hours of music, saluting, and drill, during the progress of which he had grown increasingly restive. At the conclusion, he had taken the un-subtle hint, and not even presented himself at the Ministry before going home and suiciding.

"My compliments on your evident good health," Miranid said, in the usual formula.

"And mine on yours," Henlo replied neutrally enough.

They exchanged no further amenities. Miranid assumed command immediately, and, with a startling familiarity for the more esoteric flight characteristics of the City Class, had *Torener* blasted up to spearhead the formation in which the remainder of the fleet lay.

Henlo wondered, briefly, whether he was going to make his command address to the fleet immediately, or wait until all ships had acknowledged *Torener's* arrival. Apparently, some of them were being deliberately laggard in so doing.

Miranid threw a quick glance at the Admiral's Plot board which had been installed in one of the control room bulkheads. The white lights marking the positions of friendly ships were only sparsely modified to pink by the brilliant red "Your Position Determined and Acknowledged" lights.

He grunted, and for a moment Henlo thought he was going to turn the ship back to Captain's command and make the bold stroke of beginning the customary address immediately, regardless of whether those ships pretended not to know of his presence.

Miranid was across the compartment in three strides, and in the Master Navigator's chair. "Grab holds," he lashed out, and Henlo got a palm around a stanchion just as *Torener* spurted ahead.

The Plot board went crazy. His head spinning, his free arm busy fending off loose equipment that came flying at him, Henlo realized dimly, and with horror, that Miranid had interlocked all of the fleet's navigators with his own controls.

It was over in a third of an hour. Unspeaking, his hands flashing over the navigation board, and with the same highly unexpected familiarity with the capacities of even the most inconsequential Fleet vessels, the new admiral had the entire armada whipped into a compact group along unfamiliar but, to Henlo, brilliant organizational lines. And the entire Grand Farlan Starfleet was leaving the home system rapidly behind, pursuing a course which

Henlo recognized as being the most deceptive possible while still permitting rapid diversion toward the very part of the Vilkai territories which Henlo had long decided was ripest for attack.

So much for Miranid's first move. When he flicked the switch that unlocked the other ships' navigating computers, the second began almost instantly.

The admiral threw a look over his shoulder at the Plot chart. In the same motion, he scooped up an Intervoice microphone.

"Gunnery."

"Gunnery here."

"Coordinates as indicated—" He punched out a position for the gun computers. "Fire!"

And *Regra,* an off-screen destroyer that had instantly attempted to go into turnover and return to the home system, burst apart.

Then, at last, Miranid switched over to General Comm and made his command address to the fleet. It was this:

"Have I made myself clear?"

He switched off, got out of the chair, and stalked by Henlo.

"Your ship, Captain," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Henlo said unsteadily, and Miranid clanged the airtight hatch behind him as he strode away toward his cabin. In the control compartment, officers and men with anomalous expressions began picking up the loose gear they had assumed it was safe to unlatch once *Torener* had rendezvoused with the fleet.

IV

Once again, Henlo sat in his cabin, trying to sleep. And, again, it was not the innumerable creakings and drummings of a ship running under constant acceleration that kept him from succeeding. His thoughts were in a hopeless muddle.

Where had they found Miranid —or, rather, and with much more apparent logic—where had Miranid been before he chose to reveal himself?

Point Number One: No officer in the fleet—and Henlo had checked thoroughly—had ever heard of any officer, Reserve or no, named L' Miranid. Most of them had simply shrugged their ignorance off, and none of them were actively curious. This despite the fact that Henlo would have wagered heavily on the fleet's containing so thorough a cross-section of all Fleet officers that, between them, they must have met or heard of everyone who had ever held a relatively minor post.

Point Number Two: The Fleet was Miranid's, pin, stock, and barrel. Not one of the line Fleet officers would now dream of challenging his authority. Apparently, Henlo was the only one who still questioned its validity.

Point Number Three: The reason behind the sudden switch in the officers' attitudes was painfully apparent—painfully because

Henlo had to admit that it was also the cause of his own unaccustomed confusion. Miranid had over-awed them all.

In a society based on the supremacy of the strong over the weak, that had been an audacious maneuver. And Miranid had carried it off without a flaw.

What hurt was that Henlo was himself over-awed, a totally unfamiliar sensation, and one which sat badly on his stomach.

In the first place, Miranid had followed what was, in retrospect, the most logical and effective plan. He had acted in a manner so dramatically ruthless that he had made the Fleet understand that he was capable of besting it single-handed.

Now that he had seen the triumph demonstrated, and felt its effect, Henlo had to admire it. But he could never have initiated it, or, having thought of it, dared take the risk.

Miranid *was* a genius!

Well, he'd planned to learn from the man, hadn't he? Apparently, Miranid was going to be his post-graduate course.

Henlo felt a surge of returning confidence. Of all the Fleet officers, only he had a powerful shield against Miranid's awe-inspiring strength.

The strong man dies as easily as the weak, and Miranid's life was in Henlo's hand.

That, above all other things, was Henlo's source of hidden—and therefore even stronger—strength.

Once again, D' Henlo was not given his sleep. Once again, the Intervoice called him.

"Admiral's request and wish: Captain D' Henlo to report at once to Admiral's cabin."

Henlo stood up, grunted, "Complying," and, his tail not quite bar-steady, walked down the companionway to Miranid's cabin.

When he knocked, he heard Miranid pushing back a chair before his voice came through the door. "Will you enter?"

"With your permission," Henlo replied, according to formula. Apparently, Miranid was going to maintain his advantage by standing in Henlo's presence—which would, most probably, be a seated one.

"Granted," came from beyond the door.

Henlo shrugged. He felt no qualms about the traditional position of inferiority. It meant nothing. But it might be advantageous to pretend otherwise.

He stepped in, and Miranid turned away from his desk. "Please stand," he said briefly, spreading a star chart on the desk. "I'd like you to know my plans for the next few days."

"Of course, Admiral," Henlo said, moving forward to the chart and grimacing briefly behind Miranid's back. The man was thoroughly unpredictable.

He comforted himself with the thought that persistent unpredictability was predictable.

"I assume, Captain, that you've had time to decide against opposing me," Miranid said casually, touching the fleet's present position with one point of his dividers.

Henlo's whiskers quivered in the general ripple that crossed his facial fur.

"Therefore," Miranid went on in the same tone, "here's our plan for the time being." The dividers twirled from point to point, like a dancer describing an involuted spiral, and one point sank into the chart at Ceroii, a Vilkan holding some light-years within their ragged frontier. "So. Three days under acceleration, two in braking. We come out of hyperspace three Standard hours before we reach there. Can you tell me why I'm giving them that much warning?"

Henlo had recovered by a considerable application of will. He decided to play Miranid's game for the time being.

Moreover, the admiral was using substantially the same tactics he had himself planned, but never, of course, hoped to see executed.

"I would say, sir, that your plan is to make Ceroii a diversion. Three hours' warning will permit them to call for help, but not to mount a substantial defense. I suggest, respectfully, that you then intend to move rapidly to some other sector—Ganelash, or Dira, either of which is liable to be left open by the Vilkan rush to defend at Ceroii—or perhaps even to split the fleet and attack both. Your subsequent maneuvers would depend on what sector would next be left vulnerable by the inevitable rushing-about which these tactics will produce among the enraged barbarians."

Miranid nodded. "Quite correct, Captain. I congratulate you as an apt strategist. A quality which," he added dryly, "seems to be rare in the Grand Farlan Starfleet."

Henlo could not decide exactly how the remark was meant—whether as an observation that it was remarkable for anyone to be as good as Miranid, or simply as the normal Reserve officer's opportunity to make some pointed observations.

Miranid held up a finger. "One correction. I *will* split the fleet after Ceoii—but into three parts. Some Vilkan sub-chief may just keep his head sufficently to launch direct retaliation at Farla. We'll need some ships to delay any such move until we can catch him from behind. I plan to use Vice-Admiral Y' Gern. Does this agree with your estimation of him?"

"Your grasp of the characters of your officers is remarkable," Henlo managed to say.

It was quite true. Gern was perhaps the one Vice-Admiral in the fleet who had any stomach to him, together with the strength to

command such an action. But the important part of that last announcement had been Miranid's revelation of his intention of attacking Ganelash and Dira with only one-third of a fleet at each vital point. It just might be done, but it would be hot work. And the casual manner in which the man had provided for the englobement of any possible retaliators was an even more astonishing indication of just how Miranid's tactical mind worked.

It was the same basic principle which had given him the fleet within an hour of his first setting foot on his flagship. He outthought his opponents completely, and then let their own efforts provide him with the means for unfolding his tactics.

Where, *where* had they found Miranid?

"I'll ask you, as my aide, to draw up the detailed battle plan, Captain Henlo," Miranid said.

"Yes, sir," Henlo replied. It was a plain indication that their conference had ended. "With your permission?"

"You may leave."

Henlo returned to his own cabin, and once more tried to find an hour's time in which to sleep.

V

Ceroii was, effectively speaking, dust, and Ganelash flamed under Henlo's guns. Four parsecs away, he knew, *Larharis,* temporarily carrying Miranid's flag, was giving Dira the same breakfast.

Henlo's original thesis—and Miranid's, obviously—was being proved correct. The Vilkan horde was not a homogenous body, and the Vilk forces, though numerous, were not organized. They could roll up empires like a pack of sajaks stampeding cattle, but they were highly vulnerable to the rush-and-slash tactics that Miranid was using.

Particularly were they vulnerable when inter-tribal jealousies did more to help than another fleetful of guns. A half-day's travel from Ganelash, for instance, was a numerous force of Vilks. If Henlo knew of them, they assuredly knew of Henlo and what he was doing. But those ships were busy idling, waiting until the Farlans were through. The Vilk commander was a sworn blood-enemy of Ganelash's defender, and he preferred to wait and then move in to finish the job—and pick up the loot. Whether he would even bother to swipe at the Farlans was problematical.

And as far as Henlo knew, Vice-Admiral Gern's detachment had yet to detect even one Vilkan ship blazing toward Farla.

Henlo surveyed the ruined planet below and signaled for the action to be broken off. It might be just as well to leave those hungry Vilks some unbroken loot to occupy them.

The fleet rendezvoused around

Gem, and Henlo noticed that there had been few casualties—fewer even than he'd anticipated. Once he'd listened to his brother officers, he discovered the reason. They were almost unanimous in their nearly un-Farlan admiration for Miranid, and were working with a coordination no previous Admiral-in-Chief had been able to beg out of them.

Henlo scratched the side of his nose, telling himself that if he were the Minister for Preparedness, he would most certainly have the man killed the instant victory was assured.

But how could anyone have anticipated this development? It had so come about that the man had been wise beyond his knowledge. However, the final battle was still a good time away and might never come. He had leisure in which to investigate—and meanwhile there was a war to prosecute . . .

The war continued in much the same pattern as before, at least in its early months. Miranid was continually nipping at soft spots, then gouging away the even softer areas which their defense would expose. It was Miranid's initiative at every battle, and he carried it off well.

He persistently refused to close with Vilkan fleets in space, where the only available loot and glory would be in the destruction of his own fleet, and thus he avoided overwhelming opposition. Instead, he attacked planetary bases, which were difficult to defend but easy to destroy. He attacked with utter ruthlessness, devoting no thought, apparently, to the fact that the bases were almost completely inhabited by subject nationals of former independent empires, and only garrisoned by Vilks.

There was logic behind that, too. Each planet constituted the loot and physical embodiment of glory belonging to some Vilkan war-prince. His cousin princes were invariably only too glad to assign that loot to their own coffers after the Farlans had left. Then, with their ships crammed, they would retreat to their faraway home planets to celebrate before returning to the now perceptibly diminishing frontier. If they returned at all, for, after all, they had anxious heirs at home.

The Farlan power was not in their guns—it was in Miranid's phenomenal mind.

VI

Once again, the fleet rendezvoused, and once again Miranid conferred with Vice-Admiral Henlo. Henlo had his own flagship now, for the fleet had been reinforced to almost half-again its original strength, and functioned as a loose group of semi-autonomous units.

Henlo's old executive officer had *Torener* now, and Henlo occasionally wondered what inspirations the man drew from pacing the same bridge that Miranid

had trod. Grandiose ones, probably, for he noticed that *Torener* was constantly being crippled in over-audacious actions. Well, so much the better. Perhaps, someday, *Torener* might not rendezvous at all.

His Vice-Admiralty, Henlo reflected, together with the fleet's strength being so augmented as to give him a substantial command, was strongly indicative of sentiments in the ministries. They looked for a speedy end to the fabulously successful war—and to L' Miranid. To hasten the day, Henlo's own position was being strengthened.

That reckless gamble with the unpredictable might yet prove the costliest mistake their august ministerial ambitions could make. The over-paid assassin might sometimes thus be provided with the price of empire.

But that was for another, albeit hastened, day, he reminded himself as his aide knocked on Miranid's door.

There was the usual exchange of formulas, and then Henlo, leaving his aide in the companionway, entered Miranid's cabin.

"Henlo, I compliment you on your evident good health."

"And I you on yours, Admiral," Henlo replied. Miranid, as usual, was alone in his quarters, and the chart in his hand, and the desk on which he laid it, might have been the same as those aboard the now-forgotten *Torener*.

But the situation, Admiral, Henlo commented to himself, is not precisely the same.

Miranid had not changed. The thick fur was just as thick—and just as lifeless in sheen—and the tail was as stiff and rigidly unmoving as ever. It was Henlo who had changed—Henlo, whose horizons became more glowingly attainable with every planet that marked the smoking, death-blazoned track into Vilkai.

"Well, Henlo, it seems we constantly meet in situations which are superficially the same, but fundamentally different," Miranid remarked, and for a moment Henlo's heart stood still. He'd been away from the admiral too long. He had forgotten the man's almost terrifying perception of mind.

Not for the first time—but for the first time so strongly—Henlo wondered if that perception could possibly be so limited as not to fully comprehend what the ministries had in mind for him—and whom they had chosen to supplant him.

But Miranid, apparently at least, was referring to something else.

"As you've no doubt realized," he said, "we can no longer hope to capitalize so successfully on the inherent barbarian weaknesses of our enemies. Up to now, we have been operating entirely outside their actual borders. But the day the first Vilkan females and pups

die will be the day the entire horde forgets everything but the preservation of the communal hearth.

"We shall then see," he added drily, "which among all our heroes of the Grand Farlan Starfleet are merely men."

"I've been thinking along much the same lines," Henlo agreed.

Miranid nodded. "A happy faculty."

And again, Henlo could not determine within himself just how the admiral had intended the comment to be taken.

"Did you know, Henlo, that certain eminent military tacticians have proved to my satisfaction that war in space is impossible?"

Henlo arched the fur over his eyes. "I haven't heard the theory."

"No, I didn't think you had," Miranid said in a rambling tone of voice. "However, our present situation is a splendid example.

"Consider. If you picture the present Vilkan holdings as a solid sphere in space, bristling with weapons pointed outward, and our own fleet as a hollow sphere designed to contain and crush it, then you must allow that all Farla with half the Galaxy to help it could not supply us with enough strength to keep our sphere impenetrable from the inside at all points. With the further problem of uncertain ship detection in hyperspace we could not prevent repeated breakthroughs from the inside.

"Once our hollow sphere is broken it is caught between two fires, and gradually decimated if it does not withdraw into a larger, and even more porous, sphere—which can again be broken. Thus, stalemate, eventual disgust, and, finally inconclusive peace at an inconclusive price.

"Now, since we are not going to be foolish enough to form such a sphere the only alternative is to attempt an attack by a knife-like method. We can spit, split, slice, or whittle.

"Spitting is out of the question. If we try to drive through, we expose ourselves to attack from all sides. The splitting procedure gives rise to the same objections. This leaves slicing or whittling—and since a whittle is only a small slice, or a slice a large whittle, let us discuss them simultaneously."

Miranid looked steadily at Henlo.

"I will not whittle if I can slice, but I cannot slice, and for the same reason, I cannot whittle. For this is not a clay sphere, Henlo, but a steel ball—and red-hot, to boot. With every stroke I make, I will lose a greater percentage of my available ships than the enemy will.

"His supply lines are short—I've shortened them for him. His ships can land, be repaired, refueled, and re-armed, their crews

replaced by fresh men, and sent back into battle a hundred times for each new ship that can reach me from Farla. I have a limited supply of men, equipment, and food. With every stroke, I wear down my sharpness a little more."

He paused an instant, then went on, "Until, finally, I attack the sphere for one last time and my dull, worn knife slips off the surface without leaving an impression. So, again, stalemate, eventual disgust, and no true peace—that is, no peace which will not leave conditions immediately ripe for another useless war.

"I would say, as a matter of fact, that this same theory makes true peace impossible so long as any wars are attempted."

Miranid grinned at Henlo, his professorial mood abruptly ended. "Fortunately, in this special case, we can do the impossible on both counts."

Henlo granted that it all seemed to make sense—and that Miranid was holding some effective strategy between his ears. It was less easy, however, to understand why the lecture had been launched in the first place. After all, if Miranid had his strategy carefully planned, all the situation required was for him to simply lay that strategy out, and have Henlo execute it.

It could only mean that Miranid's purposes extended far beyond the mere winning of a war—a fact which Henlo naturally assumed in connection with anyone engaged in any sort of activity. But this was the first time that Miranid had ever revealed his thoughts so candidly.

Was Miranid, too, conscious that things might come to an unexpectedly large head at that last battle?

Henlo noticed with a start that Miranid had deliberately been giving him time to arrive at his conclusions. The admiral grinned again, but now resumed the thread of the discussion without making any comment.

"Our barbarian friends have another weakness, which we have up to this point not been able to utilize without compromising its existence. I've carefully saved it until now, and they have considerately not discovered it within themselves.

"The Vilks, of course, were able to make war quite successfully. Since they were operating as a horde of mobile independent principalities, and since they were after loot and glory only, they were never forced to gain what civilized nations would term 'victory,' or 'conquest.'

"They were reapers, harvesting the same field again and again, and gradually extending their borders. They had no time for the re-education of subject peoples to their own ideals or patriotic causes—a fact further implemented by their total lack of such civilized appurtenances. They merely informed their vassals that

they had become the property of whatever Vilk it happened to be, and levied tribute accordingly. They left it to the natural fertility of the Vilk soldier to gradually erase all traces of independent nationality among such nations as could interbreed, and to the natural inertia of generations of slavery among such as could not.

"The result has been the gradual accumulation, in Vilk ranks, of a number of Vilks who are not Vilks."

Miranid seemed anxious to stress the point.

"And these Vilks may be good, barbarian Vilks like all the rest of them. But some of them inevitably feel that their *particular* kind of Vilk is better fitted to rule the communal roost.

"A situation, you will agree, which does not apply among such civilized communities as Farla, which may have its internal dissensions, but no special uniforms of hide-color, limb-distribution, or digital anomalies around which infra-nationalistic sentiments may be rallied."

Miranid stabbed the chart with his dividers. "We will slice here, here, and here, with most of our lighter units supported by some heavier groups. You and I, Henlo, will take the remainder of the main fleet and spit right through to Vilkai, where we will crown some highly un-Vilkish Vilk king of the Vilks, and then leave him to perish.

"The entire sorry mess will slash itself to suicide in the petty nationalistic squabbles which are sure to follow the precedent we set them. We will be enabled to do so quite easily by the allies which our housewifely intelligence corps has neatly suborned for us."

Miranid stared down at the chart, his weight on his spread arms.

"Henlo," he said thoughtfully, "I think we may have come, finally, to our last battle."

VII

The deceleration of apparent time had begun for Henlo a few moments before, when he had reached that same conclusion. He realized, on the level of cold reason, that it was not time which was slowing. It was his own thoughts which were speeding, driving through his brain so fast that they tricked the time-sense geared to his normal thinking pace. But, nevertheless, it seemed to him that the world was drowned in glue through which only he moved with ease and fluidity.

It was a phenomenon of mind that came to him in battles and conspiracies, and he enjoyed it, in one special part of his mind, whenever it came. And it was a paradox of the situation that he thereby enjoyed it less, for he arrived at his inevitable conclusion sooner, and thus ended the moment stolen from mortality.

"It would certainly seem so,"

he said calmly, in agreement with Miranid's conviction. "But we can still lose the war. Something can go wrong. And if it does, every other battle will have been wasted."

Miranid nodded. "You're quite right. But I don't think anything disastrous will happen. So plan this battle as though it were the last, definitely."

He grinned. The lopsided expression was known throughout the fleet, and the men—officers and crew—had long ago nicknamed him "The Laughing Genius."

"Because," he said, "even if it isn't, we'll never plan another."

No, thought Henlo, we never will. Even if it is.

"Your permission?"

"Granted."

Henlo turned to go, and was at the door when Miranid called him back. The admiral was looking at him cautiously, as if trying to decide how far he might go. Finally he seemed to come to a conclusion, for he spoke abruptly.

"Henlo," he said, "you're a first-class phenomenon, for Farla. Somehow, you got by the System probably by being infinitely superior in your special kind of politics to the people who administer it. But are you phenomenon enough to have figured out what your rapid promotions are leading up to?"

"Admiral?" Henlo looked puzzled. He was not, but he looked it, which, among Farlans, amounted to the same thing for conversational purposes.

Miranid looked at him shrewdly. "I thought so." He shook his head, his eyes enigmatical with an emotional shading which just might have been admiration.

"One favor, Henlo."

"Surely, sir. What is it?"

"Would you repeat, for what you may classify as my whimsical amusement, the standard Farlan textbook definition of paranoia?"

"Paranoia, sir? Why, I believe paranoia is that form of psychosis which is characterized by delusions in the subject of benevolence toward the world in general and of his almost certain inferiority to all other individuals. It's accompanied by an irrational persistence in believing only good of others.

"It is most easily detected by the manifestation of the following symptoms: incurable addiction to literal truth in the transmission of information, and an unshakable conviction that the method of success is the commission of as many genuinely altruistic favors as possible to as many individuals as possible. The altruism is coupled with the expectation of genuinely reciprocal action on the part of other individuals."

"Thank you, Henlo," Miranid said, as if chuckling at some secret joke. "I just wanted to hear it again."

Henlo ended the conversation

with a few neutral conclusion-formula phrases, and left to plan his battle.

His battle, not Miranid's. It was obvious, now, that Miranid knew that there was something strong and sinister upwind. But he only knew it in the same manner that Henlo was cognizant of something similar planned for himself. Logic dictated that no man as powerful as either of them had become could be permitted to live.

But while Henlo could be almost certain that none of his subordinates would dare take the risk, Miranid must, this near the end of his extraordinary appointment, be trying desperately to determine who it was that had been given the orders for his assassination.

Come to think of it, Miranid had just as many reasons—just as many *identical* reasons—for believing that none of *his* subordinates woud dare . . . Including Henlo . . .

Including Henlo!

Suddenly, Henlo found himself wondering desperately who *his* unobtrusive executioner might be. And very shortly thereafter realized just how shrewd and sharp a parallel Miranid had drawn between them. For there could be no doubt that Miranid understood completely that his own sudden promotion could only result in assassination, once his usefulness had come to an end.

He realized, too, the significance of Miranid's request for the definition of paranoia. Only the insane could expect anything else. And both he and Miranid were eminently sane men. Too sane, perhaps, to let themselves be murdered and murdered murderer in turn?

Miranid had wondered how close to death he had stepped, and then had stepped safely away, by expressing his conclusion that this might not be the last battle.

And he had been right. It would be the last against the Vilks, perhaps, but not their last. Not their last together.

Cold logic drove Henlo to the conclusion that he could not let Miranid die, if he himself hoped to live.

He began to reason accordingly. Once more he spent his alloted nap-time in thought, but the sacrifice was worth the price. By the time he was ready to begin particularizing Miranid's general plan for the conquest of Vilkai, the far more important plan was carefully drawn up and filed safely in his brain.

VIII

The lesser plan worked perfectly. While the lighter part of the Farlan fleet chopped at one side of the tight Vilk sphere, Miranid, with Henlo on his bridge, led the stabbing force that hissed toward Vilkai.

They met no serious opposition. With every solar system their forces left behind them, their fleet

grew in groups of eight ships, twelve, or twenty, each led by a fierce-visaged nominal Vilk who was actually a Ganelash, or Diran, or Tylhean, or whatever other kind of Vilk by adoption he might racially be.

A few of them stayed with their ships, but most of them turned command over to the fleet's general control, and came to Miranid's flagship. There they and the admiral and Henlo stood and plotted out each new contact with each successive race of 'Vilks,' each of whom, of course, were convinced that in their people rested true Vilk destiny.

Still, they got along well enough together aboard the ship. They and the Farlan admiral seemed to understand each other, despite the language barriers. Henlo appraised them all for first-class fighting men, as good as anything Farla was likely to turn up, and in far greater numbers.

He suspected strongly that Miranid's quoted theory might well have proven correct in the case of the Vilks, at least. And he made the first move of the greater battle. Somehow, in the course of an otherwise unimpressive battle, *Torener,* still fighting with Henlo's old executive officer still commanding, was "accidentally" caught in the flagship's gunfire and completely destroyed.

Henlo felt easier in his stomach. But, of course, it had only been a move directed by the logic of probabilities, which had never yet in the history of man been so acted upon as to produce more than a probable certainty.

"Most regrettable," Miranid had commented when Henlo reported the accident to him. His whiskers had twitched, and Henlo felt sure that, though there had been no actual exchange of plans between them, Miranid's own moves would mesh neatly with his own, once they had been decided on.

To guard against the outside contingency that they might, at this point, mesh too neatly, he took every possible precaution against being so far physically from Miranid as the battle progressed that any accident to himself might not be mutual.

More and more, Henlo realized, the pressure of events and actions was welding them together into a tacit alliance—an alliance that was not so much the product of mutual desire as the result of their sharing a common, deadly danger.

They were well-matched, but they were, nevertheless, peculiar bedfellows.

"Odd people, these, to be working together," Miranid commented casually one day when he and Henlo were standing some distance away from the allied chiefs. Henlo, of course, saw the actual meaning behind the parallel, and nodded.

"And yet, similar," Miranid went on. "Nature seems to have

chosen the symmetrical quadruped as the basic form with which to supplement most of her intelligences. Some of them she has turned into bipeds by making them walk erect, and others she has tilted onto their forelimbs. But they are all basically the same, and one intelligence is basically capable of understanding another."

"I see your meaning exactly, sir," Henlo replied, and Miranid grinned his trademark laugh . . .

Vilkai was almost an anticlimax. It fell without serious opposition to half the spearheading segment, while the remainder of the heavy fleet formed a sphere around the system and then expanded outward, relentlessly crushing Vilk ships against the bottom of the hollow globe which the lighter ships had formed from outside.

The formation was, of course, extremely porous. But the surviving Vilks were successfully scattered and thus broken up into the small tribes which Miranid desired—to trouble whatever king sat on the sham throne at Vilkai.

Now, Henlo knew, he and Miranid had been set free to fight their personal war with the Farlan ministries. Taut, keyed-up to fighting pitch, he hurried down the companionway to Miranid's quarters.

IX

"Well, Henlo, the fleet celebrates," the admiral said drily while the sounds of men savagely drunk with joy and victory, glory and alcohol, according to their weaknesses, echoed through the ship's gaping metal corridors.

Henlo smiled. "Sir, I compliment you on your evident and *continued* good health," he said.

"And I you on yours," Miranid replied. "So it *was* you they detailed." He grinned. "A poor choice, as they'll find out." He took a small flask of amber fluid out of a cabinet, poured it into a cup, and stood looking at it thoughtfully.

"I'd offer you some of this, Henlo, but I don't think you'd like it. It's an acquired taste, for all the merchants say. For that matter, I don't even know if I'll like it, with these taste buds."

He raised the cup to his mouth, and took a sip. Then he threw his head back and said something with a ritual ring to it, but in a language so foreign that even Henlo could understand that his tongue and vocal cords had difficulty in forming the sounds properly. Then he drained the cup and shook himself with pleasure. It was the first time Henlo had ever seen him display normal gratification at some appealing vice.

He set the cup down and grinned at Henlo. "That's my genuine trademark, Admiral-in-Chief D' Henlo. One toast in skaatch to the Agency when I

finish a job. But you wouldn't know."

Henlo looked at him with complete mystification, and Miranid widened his grin. "You *were* going to suggest your announcing to Farla that I had died in battle, weren't you. In accordance with the orders handed you by the Minister for Preparedness. A most engaging rascal. But he should have done something about his inability to recognize superior talent—meaning yours, not mine."

"Substantially, that was my plan, yes," Henlo said, still trying to glean all of Miranid's implications from his almost incomprehensible remarks. "The next step, of course, would have been to play on your remarkable popularity with the fleet. We would have jointly revealed the entire plot to them, declared that no such government was fit to rule, and staged a coup."

"Thereafter ruling together in prosperous harmony, eh, my *Machiavellian* comrade?"

Henlo tried to find some meaning for the exotic word, as he had tried for *skaatch,* and similarly failed.

"Well, that's precisely what we shall do, up to a point," Miranid assured him. "But with one modification. Just before we reach Farla, I shall die most convincingly—and most, to remove all doubts from the minds of the fleet, naturally. My dying wish shall be to be buried in space, in a lifeboat. That lifeboat, conveniently enough for me, shall be pointed toward Earth.

"I might hastily add, at this point, Henlo, that my fur may be grafted and my tail false, but the weapons built into me are far from imitations. I should not advise your indulging your natural instincts when I tell you, as I tell you now, that I am an Earthman."

Henlo's tail lashed violently, and his eyes dilated. He had not lost control of himself so thoroughly since his youth. He stared at Miranid for several silent moments, then moved his hand slowly toward his sidearm.

Miranid chuckled. "I didn't think you'd bluff." He flexed his shoulders and something small and glittering pushed its nose out of the thick, dead fur at the base of his heavy pectorals. "That's one of them, Henlo. Just one, and don't make me stretch any farther, or it will go off." The glittering thing was pointed directly at Henlo's skull. "Besides, you need me. You need me right up to the last, when I chug off valiantly in my steel mausoleum. You'll never get the fleet to accept your succession to leadership unless I pass it to you."

Henlo stared malevolently at the Earthman, and his lipless mouth compressed until it almost disappeared. But he took his hand away from the sidearm.

"I am, as I've said, an Earthman—a hired soldier, if you'll

believe there are such people. And believe me, the Minister for Preparedness was only too glad to get me—neglecting to realize that I had his little schemes figured out before he even conceived them.

"After all," he said depreciatingly, "We've got paranoids on Earth, too."

Henlo failed to understand the reference.

"And, for what it's worth as a compliment—a genuine, sincere, altruistic compliment, Henlo—even if I could, I wouldn't take my chances with you, on Farla. After all, I'm getting old, and you're bound to improve over even the remarkable standard you now maintain."

Maranid *really* smiled then, with the mellow warmth of an undefeated soldier-philosopher cheered by wine.

"Can an entire society be psychotic and not realize it? Apparently it can. All of you Farlans have passed over the borderline. You are all paranoids. You are all twice as mad as March hares. But you have a beautiful way of rationalizing it—exemplified in the Farlan definition of paranoia. So long as you hold fast to that definition, which is the exact opposite of the truth in all respects, you will continue to believe that black is white, and white black!"

X

Henlo walked slowly away from the window.

The years he had bought so painfully were gone, dribbled away in hours here and half-hours there, and now suddenly it was as though that half-century had never been, except in the memory of a senile old man.

Slowly, through the spinning of the years, he had put the structure together, guessing what he must and confirming when he could, until he could see it, looming over Farla, casting shadows deeper than the night.

For one man—even the Laughing Genius the fleet still remembered so fondly and so erroneously—could never have arranged so complicated a negotiation, or had himself so well disguised and indoctrinated. And Miranid—the Earthman, rather, an Earthman named Smith—had just once, in one cryptic phrase, mentioned an agency. *The Agency.*

There were agencies of various kinds on Farla, dealing in services and commodities, and collecting their percentages. A pity, he thought, that none of them dealt in years. But it was The Agency which would have the necessary facilities for locating, offering, and indoctrinating the required talent.

Smith. Smith, and how many more like him? The leaders of the Vilk tribes that had allied themselves with the fleet? Yes . . . and the others. The others he *knew* were agents. The great leaders of the hundred empires that had sprung remarkably to life from the

blasted ashes of the Vilk's captive nations, all squabbling among themselves, all fighting stalemate wars—and all hating Farla, for it had been Farlan ships and Farlan guns that had systematically scoured their planets.

The barbarian empire was gone, collapsed in its own blood, as Smith had predicted. In its place were a hundred civilizations, pressing close to Farla's borders.

Bit by bit, he had given his frontiers away to them, rather than fight. Piece by piece, they had tattered Farla's hide. For he did not dare leave Farla to lead the fleet—he had too many heirs at home. And the fleet, in any case, was weaker than ever. He had not dared leave it intact, or permit it to have able officers.

Governments were covetous of governing, he had once told himself.

He laughed bitterly. Here, in this impregnable fortress-dungeon that was his capitol, *he* was the government. And his heirs had waited patiently, once he'd taught them its impregnability. But now it was over. They'd waited patiently, as the Earthmen were waiting.

Wars in space were impossible. But the strength of Farla's fleet had not been in her guns, but in Smith's mind. An Earthman's mind.

And he wondered now, as the darkest shadows fell, how much was in the minds of the Earthmen. Had they, as he himself once had, chosen the definite situation in preference to the equivocal? Had they deliberately given him all these hints, knowing that he must act as he had, stripping Farla's strength in exchange for her life, rather than ever hire an Agency hero to give Farla another poison dose of treacherous strength?

Certainly, they had never even attempted to contact him. But were they waiting now, only until his successor took his place, to offer pat salvation to the bleeding Farlan Empire? Waiting for this new opportunity?

They had used Farla to destroy Vilkai, and Farla to destroy Farla. Would they use Farla again, to sub-divide space into smaller and smaller empires until there were no longer any foes to throw their ships back to the piddling solar system from whence they came?

He did not know. But he suspected.

He suspected. But he did not know.

And there had been nothing for him to do but follow either one track or the other, and both roads led to Earth.

Soon, he suspected, all roads, all over the Galaxy, would lead to Earth. To wily, scheming Earth.

The die had been cast.

miss katy three

by . . . Robert F. Young

He had lived all of his young manhood in a gray world—cut off from joy and beauty. Then, in an android's eyes, paradise flamed.

The problem of stewardesses dates back to the middle of the twentieth century when flight was confined to atmospheric levels. Tradition insisted that they be beautiful, but time would not cooperate. They grew old like everybody else, and since they could not be prematurely retired, it was inevitable that tradition should suffer.

At first, space flight presented the same problem, but a parallel technological development soon resolved it. It was only natural that the first space-line stewardesses should be androids, and, conversely, that the first androids should be space-line stewardesses. But like many another technological solution to a problem, the human element was ignored. Despite the historical fact that men had fallen in love with Cadillacs and Fords, and women with washing machines, it never occurred to anyone that a man might fall in love with an android.

—Viellieu's
MID MILLENIUM JOURNEY

An editor has to maintain a certain measure of critical sobriety even when he has an impulse to stand up and shout. But for once we stoutly refuse to be restrained by any ordinary yardstick. You can't be analytical about a story like this, with its high poetry, and the singing flame of its human warmth, and its great and memorable beauty. Ray Bradbury once moved us in much the same way, with a story of robots who were very nearly human in a fashion strangely wondrous. Accept, Robert Young, Bradburian laurels!

SHE WAS THE first stewardess Arnold had ever seen and he fell in love with her instantly.

She was quite tall, and she had short coppery hair that curled at the ends, and large china blue eyes. She appeared just before blast-off to make sure that everyone was properly strapped into the adjustable acceleration couches, and later, when the ship was being readied for transphotic, she came around again, saying reassuring words to each of the passengers.

"Now don't you worry one bit, sir," she said to Arnold. "Everything's going to be all right."

Of course she said precisely the same thing to the man on the couch ahead of him, and to the man on the couch behind. But still it was the nicest thing that anyone had ever said to him in all his life, and it marked the beginning of a new phase in his existence.

The previous phases had been rather gray ones: First childhood-school-college (a not too oppressive gray) and then the long years imprisoned behind the bars of the teller's window, obeying the edicts of Mr. Fenton. Mr. Fenton functioned as both jailer and bank president, and he would have made an excellent commander of some peace-time army post had he chosen a military instead of a financial career.

Exceeding that grayness in drabness were the nights in his room above the noisome delicatessen, watching the antics of anamorphic entertainers who sometimes seemed to step right out of the screen and into the room, but who never seemed to make the room any brighter. No wonder he had sometimes left his room in despair, and walked alone along crowded empty thoroughfares, glimpsing pretty faces. . . .

Finally there was the Sunday afternoon when, unable any longer to endure the confines of his room or the too-familiar patterns of a nearby park, he had walked to the outskirts of the city, and seen the shining ship that stood like a brave promise in the sun. Then and there he had decided that the hardships of a colonist's life, no matter how rigorous, would be vastly preferable to the changeless security of the gray maze in which he had been wandering all his gray miserable life . . .

The name of the shining ship was the *Capella Queen* and her carefully charted trajectory was supposed to terminate on Alpha Aurigae Six where the new colony was. However, transphotic was still relatively new, and precalculated trajectory promises did not always coincide with actual terminations. The *Capella Queen* ended her career on a Terran-type planet of an uncatalogued Go star where there wasn't any colony at all.

The transphotic interval was misleading. It had all the aspects of a pleasant dream. Stars misted

and coalesced on the viewers, and the objective years scampered past like frightened deer. Ever so often a goddess in a star-stippled uniform walked through the dream and said kind things to you and brought you coffee, if you asked, and a little straw to suck it through.

But pleasant dreams have unpleasant awakenings. There was the timeless moment when the *Capella Queen* returned to *a priori* space, and then the swiftly mounting panic in the passenger compartment when the big planet that had abruptly appeared on the viewers began to grow like a malignant green cancer on the ebony breast of space. Finally there was the chaos of the crash—

Arnold lay unmoving for a long time, listening to the record. It was a horrible record that someone had left on the automatic record player and it kept playing over and over.

Its *leitmotiv* was a chorus of dissonant screams repeated against a cacophonous background of metal grinding against metal, of metal being torn and jack-knifed and twisted. Arnold hated the record and he tried again and again to turn it off, but he could not find the switch in the darkness. Presently he realized that his eyes were closed. When he opened them the record stopped.

At first the silence seemed absolute. Then, gradually, two sounds manifested themselves. Something close to his ear was going *drip-drip-drip,* and somewhere behind him there was a peculiar scraping noise.

Sunlight seeped through a great rent in the *Capella Queen's* side, lay in a ragged pattern on the warped deck. In its unmerciful radiance the passenger compartment took on some of the characteristics of an abattoir. An unmoving passenger was sprawled across Arnold's legs and there was an incarnadine bundle of rags crumpled against the bulkhead that looked horribly like the remnants of another. Looking closely he discovered that the bundle was the source of the dripping sound.

He shifted his legs tentatively. They were numb, but they still were functional. After a long time he managed to extricate them, and after an even longer time succeeded in standing up. His head pounded, and raising his hand he found that his hair was matted with blood.

The compartment spun, steadied, then spun again, and he nearly fell. A steel rib protruded grotesquely through the twisted deck and he collapsed against it, hanging on grimly and fighting back his vertigo.

"Can I be of assistance, sir?"

He realized that he had closed his eyes again. With an effort he opened them.

They filled with mist when he saw her. She was on her hands and knees in the grisly aisle,

laboriously dragging herself towards him. Her star-stippled stewardess uniform was half torn from her body, her beautiful face was bruised, and one of her legs was broken. Sobbing, his vertigo forgotten, he picked her up and carried her down the aisle, through the rent in the *Capella Queen's* side, and out into the sunlight.

The leg was broken at the knee, badly broken. But there were sturdy saplings in the summer valley and he was able to fashion a splint of sorts. He bound it tightly with copper wire salvaged from the ship. The bruise on her face distressed him. A quantity of the synthetic tissue of her left cheek had been torn away, exposing the tiny reinforcing wires just beneath, and there was nothing he could do about it.

However her memory banks were still intact and her reactions still perfectly synchronized, for when he finished binding her leg and helped her to her feet, she said quite naturally:

"Thank you, sir. I'm sorry to be so much trouble."

"But you're no trouble at all," Arnold said.

"Stewardesses are created to serve, sir, not to be served. It is our function. And since you are the only surviving passenger I shall have to serve you until I am otherwise assigned . . . Can I get you something now, sir? A container of coffee, perhaps?"

Tears had come into his eyes again and he could not see her very well. It was like looking at a woman through a diaphanous curtain and seeing her tall and shimmering, as poignant as spring. A fragrant wind blew down the green valley and ruffled her coppery, hair, stirring the valley grass around her into gentle waves and eddies. The alien sunlight caught her face and glimmered on her cheek where the silvery wires showed.

"I asked if you would like some coffee, sir," she insisted.

"I'm Arnold," he said. "Not 'sir.' Not ever 'sir.' "

"Would you like some coffee, Arnold?"

"No, not right now," he said. "Later perhaps . . . Do you have a name?"

"Just a number, homonymic of course. KT-3."

Katy Three, he thought. Beautiful, broken Katy Three. He stepped forward diffidently and touched the bruise on her cheek.

She regarded him enigmatically with her china blue eyes. "Now don't you worry one bit, Arnold," she said. "Everything's going to be all right . . ."

On that first day he buried the dead and said the Twenty-Third Psalm over each new-turned grave. Katy Three stood beside him with bowed head. That night he made a new and better splint for her leg, shaping it to fit the contour of her knee. But she still limped when she walked and sometimes she

fell, and he had to lift her back to her feet. At such times he kept his eyes averted so that she would not see the tears in them.

On the second day he began construction of a cabin at the end of the valley, utilizing whatever material he could salvage from the ship but depending mostly on the forest. Katy Three hobbled beside him, helping him with joints and braces, handing him nails when he needed them, and even picking up his tools when he dropped them.

By the end of the second month the cabin was finished. It nestled at the base of a steep hill, facing the forested floor of the valley, and about it the autumn leaves fell like slow golden rain, covering the ground with magic carpets that rustled when you walked on them, and flew away when the wind grew stronger. A little later the first snow fell.

Arnold spent a full week carrying in supplies from the ship. The *Capella Queen* had been provisioned for a round trip, and there were enough rations scattered through the wreckage to last two people half a lifetime. Since Katy Three did not eat, the food problem was no problem at all.

But there was the very real problem of the long winter evenings with only the sound of the wind in the eaves and the crackling of the fire in the hearth to break the monotony. He would say, "Listen to the wind, Katy!" and she would answer, "Now don't you worry one bit, Arnold. Everything's going to be all right."

Then he remembered that the *Capella Queen* had a complete micro-film library, and an equally complete collection of micro-record albums. Several of the battery-fed film projectors were still intact, and one of the record players. He carried them carefully back to the cabin. The films and the albums required several trips. Katy Three helped him, hobbling beside him through the snow.

And then in addition to the wind in the eaves and the crackling of the fire in the hearth there was the deathless music of Mendelssohn and Beethoven and Beiderbecke, but even better than that there was the music of Katy Three's lovely voice reading to him from the screen. Reading and retaining all that she read, her memory banks filling with the worlds of Dickens and Hardy and Maupassant and Hemingway; with the fine shining brightness of Shakespearean structures; with the sensitivity of Keats and Shelley, and the noble passion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Her mind grew. In the spring she said, "The poetry of earth is never dead." Early in summer when they were walking in the woods she said:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the
world, which seems

To lie before us like a land
of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so
new,
Hath really neither joy, nor
love, nor light—

And once, when a bird soared over them in the blue summer sky,

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou
springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou
wingest,
And singing still dost soar,
and soaring ever singest.

As the soil of Alpha Aurigae Six was identical to Terran soil, the *Capella Queen* had carried a sizeable shipment of seeds. The soil of Arnold's planet was identical to Terran soil too, and he spaded up the clearing in front of the cabin and taught Katy Three all he knew about vegetable gardening. He discovered that he knew very little, but that little turned out to be enough. Katy Three had a green thumb.

Her corn was magnificent, her string beans gold and crisp, her radishes and onions burst the soil around them, and her beets grew as large as pumpkins. She spent each summer morning in the garden, weeding, hoeing, watering, babying each maturing plant the way a mother babies a favorite child, seeking nothing in return.

Arnold approached her one morning, intending to tell her not to overdo. But when he touched her shoulder and she looked up at him, and he saw the new quality in her china blue eyes he only smiled instead, patted her shoulder and walked away.

Happiness in any form is a miracle, he thought, and man certainly has no exclusive right to miracles. For all we know a stone in the sun can be happy, or a hillside in spring.

For there was no doubt about it! Happiness had come to Katy Three . . .

Autumn arrived again, with its mists and mellow fruitfulness. The nights were cool and the stars stood out, sharp and clear, undimmed by the presence of a moon. One of the stars was Sol, but Arnold did not know which one, and sometimes he did not care.

He got into the habit of walking alone evenings, down the valley to where the ship lay, overgrown by the forest now. Down to where the mounds of the graves were, covered by grass and windblown leaves, and then back up the valley to the cabin. Before leaving he always instructed Katy Three to sit in the window by the lamp, so that when he returned he would see the light first, shining through the trees, and then Katy's head and shoulders in the warm yellow radiance.

Suddenly a new quality would be added to the quiet night, and he would walk proudly up to the door and knock. When she answered the door he would see her quick smile, and the little dancing stars in her china blue eyes.

Once, just before leaving for his walk, he inserted a Strauss album in the record player, and left to the strains of "Artist's Life." Returning, he saw that the window was empty. Alarmed, he ran up to it and peered into the cabin. The little room was overflowing with "Tales from the Vienna Woods," and Katy Three was whirling over the floor, as graceful as a nymph despite the stiffness of her leg, and quite utterly beautiful . . .

Winter again, with the wind in the eaves and the fire in the hearth, and Katy Three lending the beauty of her voice to the rhymes of Byron and Wordsworth, of Tennyson and Longfellow, of Sara Teasdale and Edna St. Vincent Millay, driving the shadows of the room into the corners where shadows belong . . .

Arnold had ceased to believe that a rescue ship would ever come, and when one did come, during the second winter, he could hardly believe his eyes. He opened the door one bright morning and there it was, a glittering shard of light in the distant deeps of the blue sky.

A heavy snow had fallen during the night, ceasing with the dawn, and the valley slept beneath a thick white counterpane with its contours softened beyond recognition. At first he thought, *they won't be able to see us, we'll be stranded here forever!* So thinking, he nearly ran out into the snow, intending to wave his arms and shout, do anything at all to attract attention—

And then he paused.

Behind him in the snug little room Katy Three was preparing breakfast. There was the pleasant clatter of dishes and the sizzling sound of frying bacon. There was the familiar broken sound of her footsteps as she hobbled between the stove and the table, and the sweet sound of her voice raised in diffident imitation of one of the little tunes she had heard from the Pop album they had played the night before.

He wondered suddenly what the reaction of modern civilized society would be to an android whose face was scarred, who walked with a limp, who recited classical poetry and who tried to sing. He shuddered involuntarily.

Even as a human being Katy Three would have been a misfit.

He shrank back into the cabin, out of sight of the approaching ship.

He thought of Terra, of the gray maze that once had constituted his life. He thought of the drab bank, and the militant Mr. Fenton, of his small gray room and the gray streets, and the over-

crowded airbuses. He thought of the people with bleak faces who looked at you and never really saw you, of the pretty women he had glanced at shyly, hoping they would not see his ugliness. He remembered his dream-courtships of the 3-D goddesses.

He recalled the bars he had stood alone in, sipping lonely beers, and the crowded empty streets and the stars diminished by the flamboyant city lights, or lost behind smaze or smog or smist or whatever other name you cared to coin to identify a factor that robbed man of his birthright.

He shut the door, tightly. He went over and closed the damper on the stone chimney so that no telltale wisp of woodsmoke would give his hiding place away.

The ship passed high above the counterpaned valley and disappeared into the azure distances. It never returned . . .

The seasons flickered by like the colored pages of a book: the poly-chromatic page of spring and the green page of summer, the golden leaf of autumn and the white leaf of winter. The years were like exquisitely written chapters, and the heroine of the book was Katy Three.

Her garden grew in summer and her mind grew in winter, and throughout all the pages she remained beautiful and kind, moving through the years on her broken leg, the silvery bruise on her cheek subtly becoming a part of her, just as her leg had become a part of her, as the prose and poetry of the micro-films and the music of the albums had become deathlessly a part of her.

Arnold walked down the valley every night, and then back again along the well-worn path between the trees. As the years went by he walked slower, and his shoulders became stooped, his breath short. But at the end of the valley the light was always shining and Katy Three was always waiting, in the window, or dancing in the secure little room, listening for his knock to sound above the strains of Strauss, or in the midst of a delicate Debussy.

One night in spring he walked in a cold rain and the next day he began to cough. The following day the cough was still with him, and his body grew alternately hot and cold with fever. He lay on a couch that once had graced the *Capella Queen's* lounge, and Katy Three sang for him, and recited *Sonnets from the Portuguese.* She no longer needed the projector or the films. All the beautiful words were in her mind now.

The fever grew worse and a tightness settled in his chest. Katy Three brought him food, but he could not eat. She stroked his hot forehead, looking down at him with her clear blue eyes.

The days sped by, past and present intermingling. Sometimes he was back in the maze again, back in his little teller's cage

counting credits and smiling wearily at the gray people who kept coming in to raise or lower their little heaps of security. More often, though, he was walking up the valley and seeing the yellow light shining through the trees, and the little head sunning over with coppery curls in the window.

The tightness in his chest increased and each breath he took became a searing torture, and finally he knew that he was going to die . . .

The room was a little ship in space, drifting amid misted stars. Katy Three was the stewardess, sitting by his couch, her hand upon his forehead, her blue eyes trying to cry. He reached up and touched the silvery bruise on her cheek.

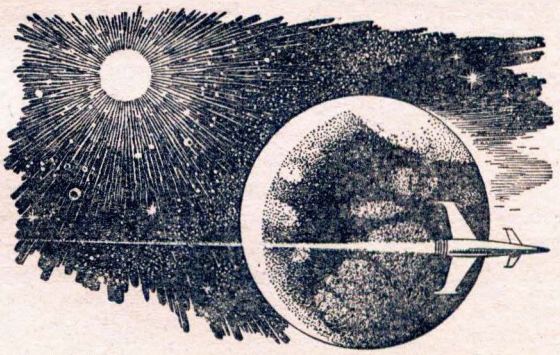
"Katy Three," he whispered. "How much do you love me, Katy Three?"

" 'How do I love thee?' " Katy said. " 'Let me count the ways.

" 'I love thee to the depth
and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when
feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and
ideal Grace—' "

Her soft voice filled the ship. His hand fell away from her face and she enclosed it with her own, her eyes still trying to cry. He heard her words only faintly now, and they were the last words he ever heard, or ever needed to hear,

" '—I love thee with the
breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!
—and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better
after death—' "



subject for today

by . . . Henry Hasse

Society is wise when it entrusts its future to the shining courage of the very young. But what viper's brood of schoolboys were these?

JONHI SQUIRMED impatiently in his seat. He knew that Teach was watching him, her eyes cautioning, a bit puzzled at his eagerness.

Oral composition had always seemed silly stuff to Jonhi. Handicraft was more to his liking, or that swell new class in *Security*. But today's subject in Oral was "Show and Tell," and he had come prepared! He fairly trembled with eagerness as he touched the hard metallic lump concealed in his blouse.

Would that stupid Karyl never be through? She'd been up there five minutes already showing the object she'd brought from home, all dials and buttons and gadgets, while her high-pitched little girl's voice explained the "Kitchen Autocrat."

"It's easy once you know the wave-lengths. Infra-red's the main thing. Now you just turn this dial here for roasting . . . It understands recipes too, but you've got to have all the ingredients in the storage units, else it gets mixed up . . ."

Henry Hasse lives in sunny California. His strikingly original and compassionately human stories of the bewildered younglings of tomorrow have graced the pages of many science fiction magazines. But seldom has he probed with such devastating penetration into the secret recesses of a schoolboy's mind on a plane of such intangible dimensions. You'll be so startled when you finish this story we predict you'll read it again!

Stupid, Jonhi thought, *everybody knows that.* He fidgeted, glared at Karyl and wished she'd hurry up. He never had liked her anyway, the stuck-up little—

"Fine, Karyl, that's just fine," Teach broke in at last. "Your exposition was very clear, your poise excellent, and the choice of subject most adequate. I can give you Top Grade."

Top Grade! For *that?* Jonhi's lips pulled up in a sneer as Karyl flounced past him to her seat. Just wait!

"And now—" Teach surveyed the room. She gave the hint of a smile as her gaze fastened upon Jonhi, who was half out of his seat. "Yes, I think we'll hear from Jonhi now, since he seems prepared."

Jonhi strode to the front of the room, fumbling at his blouse. Teach was watching curiously but that didn't bother him now. He'd prepared well for this. For the very first time, he felt a dawning awareness of the possibilities in Oral Composition.

Perfect theme! It had hit him suddenly last night. His older brother had arrived home from maneuvers, bright and resplendent in his hero's uniform. With growing excitement Jonhi had plied him with an entire gamut of questions, and now he had it all—the drama and the data and particularly all the technical terms, so fascinating in their implications.

For a moment Jonhi faced the class, exultant, aware that the other boys were watching. Then he pulled from his blouse the long heavy weapon. Its hand-grip nestled into his palm. He could almost feel the aliveness of it.

The lense-studded length was sinister, while the stud beneath his fingers led directly to the *duralum* coils that fed from the power-packs. All this he had learned, as his brother had answered his questions in the amused way that older brothers have.

"This is called an *energast,*" Jonhi began. "It's one of the real genuine weapons the Invaders used! My brother got it from one of their spaceships that crashed over in the mountains. It's called an *energast* because it has power-packs that hold the unleashed atomic quantities."

Jonhi straightened, feeling prouder by the minute. "It's really like a small atomic pile, but the —uh—what is called critical mass is handled through these coils here, see? They're called tamping coils. They send the implosion beam through the lenses right here . . ."

Jonhi warmed to his subject, aware of the fascinated gaze of the boys in the first row. He was *not* aware of the strangling gasps coming from Teach, the horror on her face as she edged toward him.

"Don't you see how it works? it's easy! This is how the Invaders did it. This stud right here is what

makes it—" He waved the weapon at arm's length, thumb moving toward the release stud.

Jonhi heard a shriek to his left. A blurred figure sprang at him, and then he was staggering back as the *energast* clattered to the floor. It was Teach. She scooped the weapon up and whirled toward him, her face gone deathly pale.

"You . . . you . . ." She seemed to strangle on the words. Holding the weapon clumsily in both hands, she whirled again and was gone from the room, her heels clattering down the hall . . .

Jonhi's gaze widened at the consternation about him. Most of the girls had left their seats and were huddling in a frightened group. But the boys came crowding around him, eager with questions.

"Is it a real *Invader* weapon?"

"How'd you get it, Jonhi?"

"D'you ever fire it yourself, Jonhi? Zowie! I bet it's tremendous!"

"Ah-h, it belongs to his brother. Jonhi wouldn't fire it, he'd be scared to. Bet he don't even know how it works!"

"I do too know how it works," Jonhi drew himself up proudly. "I guess my brother knows, and he told me all about it. The Invaders ever come back, you'll *see* whether I use it!"

Harl remained skeptical. "Well, my uncle helped drive 'em off, and he says the Invaders *never will* come back. Not after they lost two of their big spaceships here."

There was a moment of awed silence. The little group shifted uncomfortably, and the boys avoided looking at each other.

Finally Jonhi turned, spoke up grimly: "Harl, we could report you to Security Council for talking like that!"

"Serve you right if we did," agreed another boy. "Haven't you learned anything in Security class? Because we drove 'em off don't mean they won't be back!"

"Three years back to their base," Jonhi quoted. "A year to prepare a real invasion, three years for return. We must be ready in seven years. Council has said it!"

Harl looked around helplessly. "I know, Jonhi. I—I didn't mean anything by it, I just—"

"Then watch your tongue in the future, unless you want Council to hear of it!" Jonhi drew himself up and glanced around at the others, who nodded agreement.

"Jonhi!" One of the boys gestured from the door, where he had kept guard. "You're in for it now. Teach is coming back, and she has the Coördinator with her!"

There was a mad scramble back to their seats, as footsteps approached in the hall.

The Coördinator of Classes strode into the room. He was a tall man, stern of manner and visage. He stepped to Teach's desk and placed the *energast*

there, handling it very gingerly indeed.

He surveyed the class for one awesome instant, then turned to Teach, who was still trembling.

"Which one is it?"

"That's the boy," she lanced a finger at Jonhi. "I tell you, sir, never in all my experience—It's criminal, downright criminal! He should be removed at once! I won't have him in my classes!"

The Coördinator crooked a finger at Jonhi. "You, boy. Come up here."

Jonhi marched to the front of the room. His knees were shaking, and there was an awful pit in his stomach. A deathly quiet had settled over the class.

"Yes, sir?"

"Your name, boy. Speak up!"

Jonhi told him. He made his voice loud, knowing he mustn't appear scared in front of the other boys, and he added quickly, "The assignment was 'Show and Tell,' sir. We had to bring some object and—"

"I'm quite aware of that! What do you think of Oral Composition as a subject? Don't lie to me!"

"Yes, sir—I mean no sir! I think it's silly, sir." Jonhi gulped and added hastily, "But I liked it today."

"So you liked it today." For a long moment the Coördinator pierced Jonhi with his eyes. "Teach is right. It's a criminal thing you did! You realize, of course, the possible consequences."

Was he supposed to answer? Jonhi wasn't sure. He couldn't have answered anyway, his throat was suddenly too dry. He could only nod dumbly.

"Very well, boy. Now about this *energast.* I understand it belongs to an older brother, who seized it from the Invaders. You sneaked it from home without his permission, isn't that right? Or let's say you borrowed it."

And then—Jonhi couldn't believe his eyes—the Coördinator turned slightly away from Teach and *winked* at him!

Jonhi suddenly found his voice. "Yes sir, I really only borrowed it! I didn't mean to—"

But the Coördinator was conferring with Teach in a whisper. He seemed trying to soothe her protests.

"I assure you, I'll take full responsibility . . . Yes, I'm very familiar with the name. I tell you Jonhi's brother was one of the heroes! Yes, the weapon belongs to him by right of seizure . . . The Council *has* permitted it . . . Very well, I'll see it's returned to him and rendered harmless . . ."

Jonhi gazed across the room. One of the boys gave him the signal which meant "Courage, Jonhi," and he gestured in reply.

The Coördinator was saying: "It's been a fortunate incident. We must turn these things to advantage! After all, the lads must

know and be alert and ready."

He turned and held up a hand. "Attention, please! Class in Oral Composition is now over. We shall devote the remaining time to a subject of far greater consequence in your young lives. A forum on *Ultimate Security—Precaution for Future.*"

He turned to Jonhi. "Suppose you begin, and I'll be moderator. Remember! It's absolutely essential that we know the Invaders . . . who they are, why they came."

Jonhi was in his element! How could he ever forget those tremendous events of I-Day, the excitement of waiting, the planet-wide telecasts and the furious week that followed. Where to begin?

"Well, sir—they came about a year ago, but you can't say we weren't ready. Our tele-magnums picked them up and trailed them in. We knew they must be from another star-system, because of how their spaceships were built. Sort of crazy—not like our spacers at all!

"I guess we were pretty suspicious all right. We had a right to be, the way things turned out. We tried to communicate, but it didn't work. I—I don't think *they* even tried!"

He glanced up at the Coördinator, who nodded. "Yes. Go on."

"We told them not to land, we even beamed it in mathematical code which anyone ought to have understood! We only wanted to know about 'em first. But first thing you know they were trying to land, like they wouldn't even listen to us—"

"Very good, Jonhi. But this is a forum and we must give the others a chance." He nodded to a boy in the first row who was waving excitedly.

"I know the rest of it, sir! They had five ships, but only two of 'em came clear in. They were awful fast! Our Advance Unit brought one of 'em down, but the other one got through and made surface. That's when the trouble really started—when they came out of their ship with those weapons!"

The new speaker seemed even better than Jonhi. "I saw the pictures of it! Zowie! They were alien, all right. They sure must of come from another galaxy! But we were ready for 'em. We lost a lot of men I guess, but we sure killed the aliens off, every last one."

"Bet they'll think twice before they come back *here* again!" he finished defiantly.

The boys were on their feet, chattering excitedly about the things they had seen on the News-Transmit. Since that memorable week a year ago reports and speculation about the Invaders had run high, even among the top military scientists. A lot of it had filtered through to the general public. It had been meant to filter through. No one felt safe . . . and even though the Invaders had

gone, both government and military were swinging toward high preparation.

The Coördinator rapped for order. "Quiet, now! I can see that you boys are well versed on the subject. But now we must have questions and answers."

A long silence, then: "Well, sir, they still had three big spacers, fifty thousand miles out! When *they* took off for home how come we didn't follow them?"

"Ah-h, that's easy," another boy spoke up. "We knew we had 'em licked, that's why."

"You're crazy! We didn't follow because our ships don't *have* galactic drive. Everybody knows that!"

"That's correct," the Coördinator nodded. "As yet our spaceships are not capable of galactic ventures. And now I have a question, a most important one. See who can answer. How long before we can expect the Invaders to return?"

It was Jonhi who answered quickly: "I know, sir! I heard it on the science-cast last week. Three years for them to reach their home base, a year to prepare, three years for return. Seven years, sir. We must be ready in that time!"

"That's fine," the Coördinator favored him with a congratulatory glance. "So you listen to the science-casts?"

"Most of the time, sir. It's fun!"

"Fun. Do you understand it?"

Jonhi hesitated, but his eyes were aglow. "Well, *most* of it. One thing, though. Our scientists say they know exactly where the Invaders' base is, and have it pinpointed. How can that be possible? It must be light-years away!"

The Coördinator looked out over the class, at the eager faces. Seven years! Could they grasp it, could they really know the urgency? He must make them understand!

"That's easy, Jonhi. You know the ship that crashed? Our scientists found tapes there, sort of sensitized telector-tapes full of code, that led to the galactic drives. Our methematicians have been working on them night and day. The data was fed to our big calculator—and you know what *it* can do. In that way they've traced every mile of the Invaders and transferred it to our Star Charts."

"Wow! You mean clear back to their Base?"

"That's right. We've *pinpointed* them." Again he watched the eager faces. Seven years to prepare! Seven years in which these lads would have grown to young manhood and must be made ready, imbued with the idea. These lads and thousands of others like them. Already *Jonhi* was giving attention to the science-casts, and it was easy to see that the boy was a leader.

The fate of the world! But

would the Elders be ready in time —the Scientists, the Engineers, the Space-Technicians?

He decided to tell them now. Only a matter of time before they knew. He spoke slowly, distinctly: "One other thing, boys. You won't find this on the science-casts—not yet, but we hope soon. It's more than the directional-tapes we're working on. Much more. Our Space Technicians are busy trying to—"

"Galactic Drive, sir? Is it Galactic Drive?"

"Zowie! I knew we could do it!"

"Hey, I bet we even improve on it, once we figure it out!"

The Coördinator could not speak. He could only shake his head in amazed wonderment, as the excitement of the boys flowed around him. How could he ever have doubted?

At last he restored order. "We haven't solved it yet!" he told them severely. "It's a long time away. Years, perhaps."

"Three years, sir? Four?"

"Ah-h, we'll have it in two years easy. If those Invaders could figure it out, we sure can—"

"Wow! Galactic Drive! *Now* just let them try anything—"

"Hey, you know what? We could even go there!"

Through it all Jonhi was strangely silent. His eyes held a faraway look, an impatient look, a look beyond his years. "I wonder," he whispered, "what their worlds are like?"

One of the boys heard him and answered. "They sure have funny names for their ships! You know the one that crashed, over in the mountains? I heard that our experts have figured out the symbols. It's called the *Earth Starflight II.* And the other one, the smaller one, is named . . ."

He raised a tentacle in an amused gesture, his pointed beaked lips twisting as he tried to apply their sibilant language to the alien symbols. "Is named *The —The Pennsylvania.* Some names, huh?"

Jonhi's protuberant stalk-eyes curled upward in exasperation. "That doesn't tell us anything!" He gazed through the window at the rolling plains, the rearing peaks of Rhima and the yellowish sky beyond. Rhima was all right, he supposed . . . but after all! With Galactic Drive!

"I wonder what their worlds are like? he murmured again. "I wonder . . ."

the killing winds of churgenon

by . . . Evelyn Goldstein

On the high Martian peaks howled winds no man could long endure.

THE LEADING veedu lurched heavily. Yoru Dar, the solitary rider, clucked his caravan of three pack animals to a halt and leaned ahead to gently stroke the bulging sides of the beast.

"Easy, Qyra, Little Mother," he soothed in the fluid archaic Martian of the mountainmen.

His slanted topaz eyes looked with sympathy from the three-legged animal to her frisky melding. It was nursing time and Qyra was too full of milk to continue the pace much longer.

"Only two piels more and we will be on the flatlands." He spoke to his creatures in the habit of men who travel alone.

A gravel storm had delayed them on the black gorge side of the terrible Churgenon range. If the Earth rocket unloaded and departed before he got there it would mean a wait of two dry-sand seasons before supplies for his mountain village would come through.

Qyra turned her face toward him. The look was full of trust. With a sigh, Yoru Dar slid from

In our last issue Evelyn Goldstein made her first appearance in our pages with a story of such heartwarming tenderness and lyrical beauty that we counted on an enthusiastic reader response as an inevitable corollary. We were not disappointed. In this new story she has chosen to let her unusual writing talents carry her in directions quite different, by instilling into the bright magic of her prose an exciting out of space quality.

his mount, the sire of the caravan, and grasping the melding by his ruff, pushed him to the belly of his mother.

As the young one drank, Loru Dar unclasped from his tunic the beads of Zau, Keeper of Travelers, and prayed that they be in time for the rocket.

The melding finished, and backed away with the ungainly gait natural to the single long foreleg and two shorter hindlegs. Yoru Dar further relieved the mother by filling his parchment sac. Veedu milk was all the sustenance mountainmen took on their journeys. He remounted and they started again.

A turn brought them suddenly out of the pebbled gorge onto the yellow flatlands. Yoru Dar pushed ahead till they reached the plateau's edge. Down in the cup of shadows was Korimir II, the earth station. It lay like an iridescent moon-jewel, its internal lights radiating against the translucent dome.

The rider set his beasts into the shifting down path. He could see the silver .black ellipse of a rocket behind the station, and hurried the pace till they were abreast of the building.

The round door opened. A giant of a man stepped out. Loru Dar, devoid of hair like all Martians, was startled to see the other's cropped black hair and beard. Perhaps it was the beard that gave him such a fierce look. Quickly Yoru Dar twirled his black button amulet prayfully. But the giant's words were friendly enough.

"Greetings, Friend," he said in Simeon, the compulsory interplanetary language.

Yoru Dar dismounted and followed him into the station.

As they entered the communications room another man rose from a seat beside the Vidar panel. He was small and wizened, with hair and eyes so light as to seem colorless.

Both these men were strangers to the Martian.

"Are you replacements?" Yaru Dar ventured in polite tones. Korimir II was a solitary outpost, and it was not unusual for the mountainman to find new faces.

The short man gave a laugh, which was cut short by a look from the black-bearded one.

"You might say that," said the giant.

Often had Yoru Dar sat in this room chatting with the rangers. Yet this was the first time he felt uneasy, as though somewhere the picture was out of focus. He suddenly wished to get his supplies and be gone.

From his tunic he extracted the supply list of provisions and grain fertilizers.

"Please give this to the navigator," he said. "Neither man made a move. "It is for the supplies he must bring on his return trip." But still the two made no

move. A feeling of dismay flooded the Martian. "Am I too late? Has the rocket come and gone again?"

The wizened man laughed shortly: "Nope. Hasn't arrived yet."

Yoru Dar was relieved. He touched the spring-type amulet on the shoulder of his tunic and muttered a swift prayer to Cleno, Guardian of the Two Times—Darktime and Lightime.

The wizened man's eyes narrowed and he made a crouching move toward the Martian.

"Cut it!" the blackbeard's voice was rough. "He's only praying to one of their gods. These mountaineers have more gods than there are crags in their blasted ranges. They're the most superstitious race in the Galaxy."

The man spoke the Earth tongue. Yoru Dar did not by the slightest change of expression indicate that he understood. He had never, in his contact with men, betrayed his knowledge of the language. But Norays had taught him, and he understood it well.

Quietly he asked, "May I place my sleep pack in your quarters?"

"Afraid not," the big man said. "None of us will do much sleeping tonight. We're heading back to your village—right now."

Yoru Dar did not understand. The man held out his hand. In the palm glittered two small stones. They had no high lustre and an amateur might have been unimpressed. But Yoru Dar knew well the turbid quality of the gems of Phobos. Fright seized his vitals, but the eyes he lifted toward the Earthmen were expressionless.

The Earthmen were watching him intently. "Recognize them?"

Deep-rooted Martian ethics did not allow him to lie. He parried the question: "Should I?"

"You should. *You* gave them to the supply ship two years ago."

How well Yoru Dar remembered. How bitterly he had repented the exchange. But there had been little choice. Drought had withered the buds on the stalks. The village needed fresh seedlings for new crops. Norays had taken, from around her neck, the pouch of gems she always carried, and insisted he buy seeds.

At first he had refused. But her insistence, coupled with sight of the gaunt hungry faces of his people, finally made him chose two—the very tiniest and least precious of the collection. The jewels had accomplished their work. The last supply ship had brought grain and fresh seeds which had driven hunger from the village. But now these same tiny jewels taunted him from the palm of the black-bearded man.

"Siden and I want you to take us to Norays," he said. For all his voice was soft, there was menace behind it. "We've been a long time looking for her—and the jewels."

There was no threat in the tone, but the black eyes were cold

and menacing, like the winds that lorded the heights of Churgenon.

"If you cooperate we'll take only the jewels. If you don't we'll get to the village and burn it down —with slow death for everyone in it."

Often had Yoru Dar hunted in the wild hills, and once had seen the steel talons of the dreaded Ua-bird pierce the body of his friend. Straight to the heart had gone those monster claws. And yet it was a clean strike, delivering none of the torturous burning of the black giant's words.

"But," Yoru Dar faltered, "the supplies . . . I *must* wait for the supplies."

The other smiled thinly. "You'll be back." He took the supply list from the other's limp grasp and placed it on the Vidar board. "Your supplies will be waiting on our return trip, when we bring the jewels with us. We'll still need a guide."

The Martian might have objected, but with surprising litheness the big man drew a small gun from his belt. Yoru Dar recognized it. The deadly H-Ray gun that could kill at once or make a man linger in horrible agony.

Siden said in Earth language, "Are you sure we need him?"

"You're a blasted fool, Siden. Haven't you heard enough about the killing winds?"

Now Yoru Dar understood! They needed him, not so much to find the village, but to guide them safely past the winds.

"I know they're just legends, Rory."

"Legends!" Rory bellowed. He turned to the Martian: "Ever hear the winds?"

Yoru Dar shuddered: "Hear the winds? I have been *touched.*"

Siden asked: "What do you mean—*touched?*"

Simply the Martian explained: "As a youth I was caught in a wind-storm. Fortunately, I was on the fringes, where the force of the pitch was less. I am alive today, but I was touched."

"Why do you keep saying that?" Siden snarled.

The Martian would have explained. He would have told how, on the heights where centuries ago snow and jagged ice had carved whorls and cavelets and minarets into the rock, the winds blew. Their torturous route caused diffusions in sound, so weirdly distorted, and in so keen and ghastly a pitch that human ears could not endure it, and minds snapped under the sound. Only a Martian, sensitive to stirrings in the air, could safely skirt the area of the winds. He would have explained, but the big Earthman was fiercely impatient.

"Forget the winds," he said. "Let's start."

Yoru Dar darted a look of appeal toward the sleeping room. The Earthmen intercepted the look.

"Don't expect help from the port agent. He's out putting our rocket in the hanger. We're here on official business. We're looking," his words were fraught with sinister meaning, "for a criminal. *Now move!*"

Yoru Dar moved, hopeless and heavy of heart. He mounted Qyra. The black giant rode the sire. In the rear, Siden rode the frisky melding, cursing all the way at the unfamiliar mount. A number of times he was unseated, and the caravan had to wait till he remounted.

The Martian offered him the little leather talisman from the breast of his tunic. "This is from a saddle of veeduhide. It has been blessed for safe riding. Wear it."

But Siden cursed him off with bitter invectives.

They traveled under the dark veil of the mountains, winding, at a slow rise, to the cold reaches.

Yoru Dar murmured silent prayers to Tryvyn, Mother Goddess of the Mountains. He knew these men. Long had their shadows lain acrouch in Noray's eyes. Often had he seen her fearful glance toward the pass that led out of their village.

Terror of them had ridden her from that day, five years before, when he had found her, a frail, broken doll, beside the wreckage of her life-ship. In her delirium during the time of healing she had muttered their names. And, when the fever left her and her mind grew clear she told him the story.

She had been one of a group of five on an archaeological expedition to Phobos. They had discovered the lost temple of Rhygnon, with the jewels of the goddess in a bowl at her feet. Rory, navigator of the rocket, and Siden, co-pilot, had murdered the two leading members of the group.

Norays, geologist and only woman of the expedition, had been left alive to be shared with the treasure. But, in a victory celebration, both men had gotten drunk. Norays had managed to sever her bonds, and escape with the jewels in the small life-ship.

Unfamiliar with the rudimentary controls she had cracked up against one of the wicked crags of the Churgenon on the mother planet Mars. Her recovery had taken months, and when she was well enough, it had been Yoru Dar himself who had to tell her she was now a fugitive with a price on her head—dead or alive. He had learned, from news at Korimir II, that Rory and Siden had charged her with the double murder and theft of the jewels. Her own disappearance had convicted her. And it would be the word of two against hers.

So she had stayed in the pass, the formidable mountains her protection, ministering to the people of the village in their sickness, and teaching them Earth's more advanced methods of husbandry and

medicine. She had become their priestess—nay, more—a living embodiment of the mother goddess Tryvyn. Was not Noray's hair the color of unharvested golden grain, her eyes the blue of heaven and her lips the blossoms of the scarlet gayor fruit?

But now the evil had found her. And Yoru Dar who loved her better than all, must betray her, or see his village and people destroyed.

Bleak and dismally barren was the landscape. Gray stones went up to a lost height, and sunlight could not touch here, for an angry red mist hung over the prominences. Only the feet of the veedu, unfailing and untiring, could keep to the true path.

With a terrifying suddenness, the wall of rock fell away to a sheer dizzy drop. Siden cried out in fear, and flung his arms about the neck of his beast, hanging on with eyes averted. But the melding, with instinct wonderful to the breed, no longer frisked, but trod with careful gait, so close to the left escarpment that quartz abraded the thick boots of the man.

The march was slow, fraught with constant peril. A shelf, smoothed cold by weather, offered temporary relief. With almost a sob Siden slid off the melding, and huddled on the blank rock floor.

"That beast. That filthy beast!" he muttered, over and over.

The others dismounted and looked at him, Yoru Dar with understanding, Rory with harsh eyes. Veedu were tricky to ride.

"She'll throw me," Siden cried. "When we come to a cliff she'll rear up and turn ugly. I won't ride the filthy beast."

"You'll ride," Rory said, frozen as the core of space. He turned to the Martian. "Is this a good place to camp?"

Yoru Dar nodded. Silently they unstrapped their sleep packs, and unrolled them on the ground.

"We'll take turns on watch," Rory told Siden. "We can't have him running out. You take the first sleep."

When thin light pierced the rusty mists they started on their way again, after breakfasting on veedu milk. The second day was increasingly hard, for soon there was no path, only a plateau of rocks that rolled beneath the hooves of the pack animals. Siden was the most distressed.

It was worse the third day, for they came into the territory of the low winds, forerunners of the killing winds. Here vengeful gusts blew gravel in all directions, so they had to protect themselves with cloths tied over their faces. Veedu hide was tough, and nature had provided nictitating membranes to guard the eyes of the beasts.

At one point they rounded a turn where an invincible hand had cleft apart the mountain. A bot-

tomless crevice wide enough to swallow a man and his mount, opened before them. With the ease of long riding Yoru Dar sailed his mount across. Without hesitation Rory followed.

Not Siden. He gazed with horror at the black pit.

"Jump!" Rory yelled, his voice reverberating against the rocks like the echoes of a deep gong.

Siden might have been carved in granite, so still he remained.

"Jump! Or we leave you and ride!"

The small man drew a shuddering breath, and gave his mount a slight kick. The melding needed no urging. It leapt forward, sure and graceful. But at that instant Siden's courage failed. He cried out, and pulled back on the rein.

The little beast, hindered in mid-stride, fell short, pawing at the edge of the precipice. Under its hooves the rock crumbled and fell away, soundless to the pit without bottom. Its rider slipped, falling under the desperately pawing hooves, but clinging with death-grip to the rein.

A small outjut of rock saved them. One hind hoof found support, and with a bound the melding gained safe ground, dragging the man after it.

It took Yoru Dar minutes to pry Siden's fingers from the reins. He was numb with horror, and his colorless eyes stared into abysses unimaginable.

A quick examination by Yoru Dar showed that Siden's left leg had been broken. He looked up at the giant, and told him.

The thick lips inside the beard tightened. "Get on your beast," he ordered. "Let's go."

"But he cannot ride. He is in shock and . . ."

"I know," was the impatient reply. "We're leaving him."

"Leaving him? But he will die!"

Rory's eyes did not flicker. They met the Martian's and he was shaken by the cruel touch of malevolence. Before Yoru Dor could move the Earthman had picked up Siden in his mighty grasp. He held him a moment over his head, then flung him, like some loose-limbed, stuffed toy, down the crevice he had just escaped. There was a long wailing cry that sickened the soul. Then —silence.

Gently, as though he had not just murdered a man, Rory took the strickened Martian by the hand, and led him to his mount. Easily, as a parent might a child, he helped him into the seat. Smiling, his voice soft, he said:

"He would only have suffered if we'd left him." But his eyes were like the stone peaks of Churgenon.

Yoru Dar's fingers were icy on the amulets of safety, and his prayers were whispered through stiff lips. He knew now what manner of man was riding with him to the village—Ghourny, Devil-God Incarnate. Surely no one in the

village would live when he left with the jewels.

"We're nearing the wind country!" Rory said, his voice harsh and compelling.

Yoru Dar wondered how Rory knew. Perhaps a man who lived dangerously could sense danger, and did not need to be warned of its approach.

Bleak the terrain had been before, but now it lay shadowy before them. They were in the red-mists, high where the cold hung, and where the rocks had been eaten into weird shapes by the elements. Even the veedu walked slower, uneasy, and ready to shy at a sound.

It was strangely quiet. The winds were asleep—or lurking in mockery around the minarets of rock. Only Yoru Dar knew. And Rory, watching his closely, knew he knew.

Once the mists parted, and a thin ledge of rock, no wider than a man's foot circled the sheer face of the mountain.

Yoru Dar turned to his companion. "We must go back," he said. "There is another turn we should have taken."

"How far back?"

The Martian told him.

The eyes of ice regarded him. "We will lose a day?"

Yoru Dar nodded.

Rory stared at the ledge of rock. "And, if we take that, when will we reach the village?"

"Tonight."

"Then that's the turn for us."

The Martian hardly breathed. "But the beasts cannot pass."

"Then we'll leave them."

Silently Yoru Dar dismounted. Carefully he tethered the three beasts in the safe shelter of a shallow cave further back. Rory watched him with careful, but impatient gaze. When the Martian appeared ready the Earthman passed a rope around his waist and tied it to his own.

"Any tricks now," he reminded, "and we go together." Then he grinned, and brought a knife close to the rope. "This has cut a man in half. It will take far less time to cut a rope, and you will fall alone. Understand?"

Yoru Dar understood only too well. But to show his good intentions he offered Rory his most important amulet of safety, his black button amulet. Rory refused it.

"You're all the talisman I need," he said.

Yoru Dar twirled the black button. He closed his eyes and breathed a prayer, and when he opened them he saw Rory's sardonic smile.

There was no breath of wind. They inched out on the ledge, their backs to the wall of rock, their palms against the rough surface. They did not look down, for there was no bottom to the abyss, and the mists now swirled below them. They inched forward

cautiously, two rashes on the hide of a Titan.

Time stopped, and then, all at once, they were safe—off the thin ledge with their feet firm-planted on ground worn smooth by the winds. It was then that Yoru Dar turned to face Rory. He saw him grin, and unfasten the rope. Even as the rope fell away, Yoru Dar saw the Earthman's expression change.

First there was a listening look, and then a startled backward glance as though something followed from the ledge they had left. He turned to Yoru Dar, with a sudden awareness, a sudden twist of suspicion to his mouth. Perhaps he said something. Yoru Dar could never be sure, for just then a wind came at them with a mighty blow, and the Martian flung himself face down on the rock.

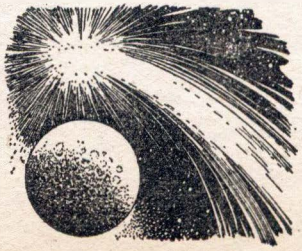
So he did not see the Earthman's face turn ashen with fear, and then slacken with horror. He did not see him clap his hands to his tormented ears, and zigzag wildly back and forth seeking escape, his giant body bent in torment, his voice hoarse with screams to drown out other sounds.

And, finally Rory ran, doubled up against the heavy gusts. Straight over the edge he went, plummeting down through the angry red mists, twisting and turning as he fell.

When there was no longer the feel of the wind about him, Yoru Dar raised his head. He was not surprised that Rory had gone.

Carefully he edged back along the ledge, down to the cave where his beasts waited in safety, out of reach of the winds. He would go back now and take the other turn. It would lose a day for him, but what did a day matter. It had gained Norays a lifetime.

Thankfully he twisted the black button amulet—the one Norays had made him order from Earth on the supply ship, her second year at the village. For Norays had known how her friend had been *touched*. And the black button was a hearing aid amulet which he could turn on to hear everything, or turn off—to hear nothing.



the briscoe bolt

by . . . Len Guttridge

Sir John, like Jove, had an urge to hurl thunderbolts. And the stars were his proving ground.

It is a matter of public record that Sir John Briscoe's contributions to scientific knowledge were substantial indeed. But that they were incidental to a somehow stranger purpose was suspected only by his closest friends.

They knew the great man regarded each product of his workshops as an extension of his own personality. The unmanned missiles he dispatched to various parts of the Solar System soon escaped our most powerful telescopes. But the mark, seen or unseen, left on each distant world, was in a sense Sir John's own distinctly individual imprint.

His tendency to anthropomorphize the projectiles followed two important events. First, the Briscoe Proving Ground grew from four modest workshops and a patch north of Pottingham, Bucks, to a multi-acre crescent closing on the town itself.

Second, a Briscoe missile reached the moon.

Its take-off clashed with the heartening climax to the Paris Peace Conference, and the an-

Len Guttridge, who is British and ex-RAF, currently works at the Indian Embassy in Washington. He was born in Wales, a country which, he reminds us, has not only produced good prizefighters and politicians, but carries a high degree of corpse candles, cwn annwn *(spirit hounds!) and similar unearthly manifestations. This might account for his feeling more at home with the f in sf, and the eerily compelling magic of this fine story.*

nouncement of an East-West Pact evoked such a universal sigh of relief that the goings-on outside Pottingham were overlooked.

Sir John, however, deftly linked his venture to the Paris news by saying that the Pact signified the close of man's long and painful maturing. The growing pain stage, in other words, was over and with confidence he could now reach for the stars. Naturally, the moon should be reached for first.

"It is with high hope and deep humility," Sir John admitted, a tremor to his voice, "that I now take the first step."

And he pressed a button.

"X minus sixty seconds," screamed a voice from everywhere. In the Control Room the frock-coated and gold-braided dignitaries looked startled in perfect unison. Then they stared fixedly through a glass wall.

"X minus thirty . . . X minus twenty-five . . ."

From the launching platform the rocket ascended until it was tilting pugnaciously at a fleet of clouds. The familiar Briscoe trademark, a boy aiming a catapult at an unseen target, was visible on the missile's hull.

"X minus fifteen . . . X minus ten . . ."

TV cameras hummed, the watchers' hands dampened and Sir John leaned foward smiling. From the bright arena of sky above his Proving Ground the clouds respectfully withdrew. All but one fat and foolish rebel wisp which rose unexpectedly from behind the rocket, and hung there like a gray ball poised on a seal's nose.

"Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . ."

Less than a week later the Mount Everest Observatory recorded a tiny white spray which flashed in the full moon's middle, and then expired, like a firefly rudely crushed by a human thumb.

Briscoe exulted. The tetryl compound in the warhead had obviously exploded upon impact and, as planned, scattered its phosphorescent "bomb" over a wide lunar area.

Sir John was showered with awards. A few uncharitable gibes about eccentric tycoons using the moon as a heavenly dartboard were ignored and his country, unable to knight him twice, conferred a Distinguished Order. The press called him a Cosmic Columbus—by proxy, if not actually. And he was immortalized in a popular song which ran:

Something's happened to our love,
Since Briscoe punctured the moon above.

Briscoe acknowledged these tributes with characteristic modesty. He stressed, however, that success could not have been possible in a world where individual enterprise was fettered.

This was no idle platitude, for his colossal fortune, which per-

mitted him to employ the finest engineers, had resulted from extensive speculation on the Exchange. It alone had enabled him to indulge his hobby on a leisurely, and highly spectacular scale.

Yet he displayed little interest in the complex problems of trajectory, mass and velocity. Such headaches were for engineers. The Briscoe enthusiasm centered exclusively on the end product—hurling power through space.

He himself would have called his approach romantic rather than technical. A reporter friend once suggested it stemmed from a purely sensuous desire to *throw things.*

"Perhaps," Briscoe conceded. "After all, in everyone's lifetime comes an impulse to throw something farther than ever before."

The reporter looked doubtful. Sir John was weighing a steel rocket paperweight in his palm. "What man never stood on a high bridge or river bank, and tossed stones?" He smiled. "I spent a whole summer at Whitby Beach once, hurling flat pebbles across the waves."

He took a photo from his desk. "Did I ever show you this?"

It was the well-known picture of the boy with the catapult.

"The original photo," Sir John explained. "It's *me,* you know. An uncle took it."

His friend said, "What or whom were you aiming at?"

Sir John frowned. "Does it matter? I've forgotten anyway. The thing is, young man, I was full of the urge to *throw.* The impulse is in all of us."

A year later, a chunk of metal that was forever Briscoe plunged to the surface of Mars.

Sneers about luxury stunts were silenced, for the Mars missile carried the most advanced telemetering equipment. Outward bound it broadcast a constant stream of impulses. Receiving stations on earth translated them into invaluable interplanetary data.

With painstaking skill Briscoe's radar men tracked the rocket to its destination. But signals kept coming in. They registered temperature, pressure and humidity. From the degree of each plus the fact that certain instruments continued to function *after* impact, it was concluded that the missile was buried in a Martian polar cap. Snow had softened the blow of landing, obviously.

This unique example of bull's-eye scoring was universally applauded. After all, interplanetary radio-guidance was as yet beyond even Briscoe's scope and severe mathematical planning had been required to ensure so perfect an orbital rendezvous.

The result, it seemed, was an achievement above reproach or ridicule.

When Sir John announced Operation Jupiter it was abun-

dantly clear that he was not concerned with sending fellow creatures into space. He was content to stay at home, on Earth, just hurling his missiles one by one.

The Mars journey had occupied a year, and Mars was Earth's planetary first-cousin. Jupiter was a far more distant, if larger, relative. Achieving a greater escape velocity was only one of the many fresh problems which had to be surmounted.

But one morning Briscoe's engineers presented him with a huge shining bullet bearing a ten times enlarged image of the lad with the catapult. And in due time the new rocket vanished in the general direction of Jupiter.

En route for almost two years, it supplied an army of scientists with continuous readings. The homing carrier wave agitated a thousand counters on earth until, in a final convulsion of distant alien forces, it died.

Meanwhile, Sir John had retreated from public life. Rumors of ill health gave way to wilder stories of secret preparations for a bigger-than-ever thrust into space.

At last he called a press conference. Gravely, proudly, he announced the completion of a missile which he planned to hurl beyond the Solar System and out to the very stars. A barrage of questions arose. Sir John hastily summoned his technical advisers.

"Escape from the Solar System," said a reporter skeptically, "will require for its accomplishment a more powerful fuel than escape from the earth."

"That is true. We've found a method of accelerating an ionic beam to almost the speed of light. The beam will form our rocket jet."

"Ah, yes. And how long will it take to reach—"

"The nearest star? About five years."

"Then what?"

"Enormous gravitational pulls will struggle for it. We believe its velocity will be sufficiently constant to enable it to escape, and travel on."

Sir John stepped forward. "Travel on," he emphasized solemnly, "into an infinity of stars. On to perhaps the very source of life itself."

His audience shuffled like a cleverly manipulated pack of cards. Sir John continued, "You doubtless know that recent genetic research confirms the long-suspected relationship between cosmic radiation and life's unfolding. This silent bombarding force influences our innermost *being*. Now my colleagues have invented such a sensitive development of the cosmic radiation meter it can truly be called a meter of life."

This was just a little too much for the newsmen. The technical advisers offered further amplification but without noticeable effect.

The meter was photographed from every angle and securely

housed within a stout metal ball. Someone called it a bolt and the name stuck. It was placed in the nose of the latest Briscoe missile and the whole world, via TV, attended its departure.

The rocket leaped into the sky, the earth pulsed and jerked like a missed heartbeat, and several nearby buildings collapsed.

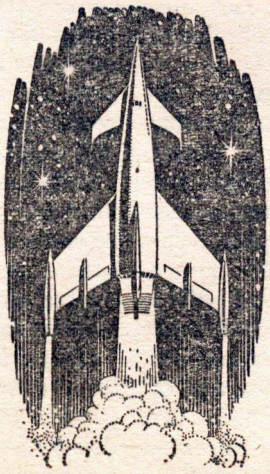
This time Sir John's return to seclusion was not to plan afresh. He seemed tired, but satisfied. He had hurled a projectile which might very well wander for eternity. No one could throw farther.

Scientists, though, kept ceaseless watch on their instruments, gauging and preserving the stream of knowledge beamed back from the Bolt.

Then, one unusual day every instrument in trans-galactic contact with the Bolt registered a cataclysmic surge of energy, and blew up. Months later, on a summer evening, Sir John was found dead in his library. The cause of death was a severe cerebral concussion.

The doctor who examined Sir John was amazed to see a plaster-shredded hole in the ceiling. Peering through it, he saw another in the ceiling of the room above. And so on right up to the roof.

Then he stumbled over a round gleaming object. It was the Briscoe Bolt. Someone, with superlative aim, had hurled it back.



mr. hoskin's blasting rod

by . . . Theodore R. Cogswell

Professor Hoskin was in serious trouble. Should he, as a peruser of Mickey Spillane, call on "that Hammer chap?"—or go it alone?

ALBERT HOSKIN'S seminar in Medieval Backgrounds had only four members, but Albert was used to that. He had long ago reconciled himself to the unhappy realization that even a large university with hundreds of graduate students moving down its intellectual assembly lines seldom produced a degree candidate who had an honest interest in the middle ages.

Donald Futzel, a prematurely bald young man who was on leave from Small Forks State Teachers' College for the purpose of getting an ill-earned doctor's degree was reading a paper on medieval sorcery. As usual, the report was a hodgepodge of poorly digested paragraphs selected almost at random from three or four books, and altered only enough to spare the young fool the embarrassment of being admonished for plagiarism.

"And this," said Futzel listlessly as he chalked a figure on the board, "is a pentagon."

Albert could restrain himself no longer. "A potent name, Mr. Futzel, and a potent figure. But I'm afraid the two don't go to-

Few writers of science fiction have achieved such spectacular first story fame as did Theodore Cogswell with the publication of his many-times anthologized magazine yarn, THE SPECTER GENERAL. *Since then he has become one of SF's top ten. We're extremely pleased to welcome him to our pages for the first time in a satirically brilliant fantasy.*

gether. I believe the term you want is pentagram."

"Okay," said Futzel, "it's a pentagram. Anyway . . ." His voice droned on and on and Albert, after setting his ear to catch any particularly gross error, retired to a consideration of his own troubles.

In spite of being a recognized authority on the Cotton manuscript of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Mr. Hoskin had troubles in plenty. Promotion time was coming around, and though he had assiduously mined the dissertation that had won him his Ph. D. and published in the most respectable of scholarly journals the department grapevine had it that he was about to be passed over in favor of a tweedy young man from Harvard named Lippencott who wrote articles for the little magazines.

To make matters worse, Lippencott seemed to be getting the inside track with Priscilla Yergut, a comely, though somewhat emaciated, teacher of Freshman English whom Albert had been escorting to the annual English Department tea for the past several years.

Something that Futzel was saying tripped a relay and Albert started listening actively rather than passively.

". . . then the magician would take this brass rod and stick it in the fire and—"

"One moment please," said Albert. "Are you referring to the piece of magical apparatus that was commonly known as a 'blasting rod'?"

"Sure," said Futzel. "Why?"

"It's a matter of minor importance. But just to avoid any misconceptions I had better point out that blasting rods were made of ash with a metal tip at each end. You may proceed."

Futzel didn't. Instead he stuck out his jaw pugnaciously and said, "They were so brass rods. I saw a picture of one. It was brass all the way. It looked like a curtain rod."

"And where did you see this picture?"

"In a book. I got it right here. The librarian got it out of the locked case in the library for me."

Unzipping his brief-case, he produced a small vellum-bound volume, and handed it over triumphantly. Albert opened it, took one casual look, and then whistled. It wasn't too early—the title page said 1607 which explained why Futzel was able to read it—but it was evidently a copy of a much earlier manuscript work on black magic. Just then the bell rang and, with a sigh of relief, the class began to wriggle around in its chairs.

"My apologies, Mr. Futzel," said Albert. "Would you mind if I kept this over night? It's a work that is new to me."

"Help yourself," said the other generously.

Albert dropped the small black book into his own brief-case and

started across the campus toward the apartment he shared with his Aunt Agatha. He walked faster than usual because half way through the class hour he had suddenly remembered that he had left a luridly jacketed copy of *The Big Kill* in plain sight on the coffee table right beside his facsimile edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*

Aunt Agatha did not approve of a private investigator who went around shooting lovely ladies in the stomach on little or no provocation, and she was not a person whose likes and dislikes could be lightly disregarded.

He was panting slightly from his unaccustomed exercise when he reached up to the ledge over the apartment door to see if the key was still there. He gave a slight exclaimation of pleasure when his fingers encountered it. Aunt Agatha wasn't home yet.

He put the key in the lock and turned, but the mechanism stuck a little, as usual. As he struggled with the refractory lock, he sternly resolved for the hundredth time to write a stiff letter of protest to his ancient enemy, the janitor. An uncouth and hairy individual who paraded around all day in a dirty undershirt and smoked a vile-smelling pipe could at least attend to a rusty lock.

"Having trouble, Mac?"

Startled, Albert swung around. A hard-faced gentleman with the build of a mature gorilla was standing in the shadows watching him.

"Why, yes," said Albert. "The key, it sticks."

"Your name Hoskin?"

Albert nodded.

"Good," grunted the burly stranger and hit him on the head with a blunt object.

When Albert woke up again he was tied to a chair in a dusty apartment that didn't have that lived-in look. A second stranger, somewhat gone to fat, but even bigger and uglier than the first, stood looking down at him.

"So you're the creep that's giving us all the trouble."

"Beg pardon?" said Albert.

"I shouldn't have had to send Gutsy after you. Your school spirit should have fixed things up before we had to step in."

"That's right," said Gutsy sternly. "Cosmo shouldn't a had to send me after you."

Albert looked up at them in honest confusion. "I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about."

"The game Saturday, what else? You got a kid named Martinelli in one of your classes, haven't you?"

Albert gave a puzzled nod.

"Well, word's come down the grapevine that you turned in a flunk for him. That makes him ineligible for Saturday's game. And with him out, State doesn't stand a chance. Do you get me?"

Albert didn't. He was busy trying to think of a protest that

wouldn't give too much offense.

"Listen, knucklehead," said Cosmo angrily. "There's people in this town with a lot of money down on State at eight to five. They can't sit back and take a loss. So they asked me to talk to you about changing Martinelli's grade so he'll be able to play." His jaw went out. "So you're going to pass this cookie—or else!"

"Are you suggesting that I falsify a grade report?" asked Albert in a horrified voice.

"Or else," continued the big man as if he hadn't heard Albert's protest. "I personally am going to bust you in the snoot so hard you'll be breathing through a hole the shape of my fist the rest of your life!"

He paused and then said softly. "My friends wouldn't like it if I had to tell them you refused to cooperate. So—I'm not going to." He reached down suddenly, grabbed Albert by his lapels, and jerked him roughly into the air, chair and all. "Am I?"

"I'd be sorry to cause any discord between you and your friends," said Albert bravely, "but—"

He never finished the sentence. Something hit him. Hard. His head snapped back, his chair hit the floor with a thump and a small trickle of blood started at one corner of his mouth. He recoiled as he saw Cosmo pull back his fist again. He was frightened, frightened sick, but from somewhere within himself he dredged up enough strength to shake his head. Cosmo shrugged and went to work.

"You try for a while," he panted to the gentleman known as Gutsy. "I'm plumb fagged out."

"Me, too," said Gutsy a half hour later. "For a scrawny little son-of-a-gun like that he sure can take it."

It was an overstatement. For twenty-five of the thirty minutes the pounding hadn't been bothering Albert. He had been out cold.

A hurried council of war was held that didn't get anywhere until Gutsy had a sudden flash of inspiration.

Look," he exclaimed, "in the third grade the teacher is telling us about a character named Achilles."

"So?"

"He was top man with the Greeks because he was bullet-proof. They'd open up on him, and the slugs would just bounce off. That was because when he was just a kid his old lady went and dunked him in something that made him like he was covered with armorplate."

"You find what it was, I'll buy it," said Cosmo, who was a practical man with an eye to the future.

"There was a catch to it. When his old lady dunked him in that stuff, the part of his foot where she was hanging on to him didn't get covered. So some character

finds out about it and lets him have it where it hurts—in the heel."

"So how's shooting a guy in the heel going to pull down the curtains for him?"

Gutsy shrugged. "Maybe they put something on the slug that gave him blood poisoning. Anyway, they got him."

"So they got him, so they got him," said Cosmo in exasperation. "What's that got to do with cracking the prof?"

"So maybe he's got a soft spot, too. You put pressure on there and he gives. All we got to do is find out where it is and then we got him."

"You find out, it's your idea."

Gutsy went over and shook Albert until he had partially regained consciousness, pulled back one ham-like fist, and aimed it at his midriff. Albert fainted.

"We got to think of something different," he muttered.

"Yeah," said Cosmo sarcastically, "we sure got to."

He looked at Gutsy and Gutsy looked at him and then they both got the same idea at the same time.

"MacGruder!" they breathed in unison.

Cosmo was the first to snap back to reality. "If we can get him sobered up in time, that is."

"You get him and I'll go hit the old doc up for some bennies," said Gutsy. "Seventh sons of seventh sons what was born with cauls just don't grow on trees."

II

There was nothing about Rick MacGruder that would suggest he had any special psychic powers. He was a small weedy man with a large thirst, and a perpetually wistful expression that was due in part to the fact that at stated intervals he wasn't able to do anything about it. MacGruder was a periodic drinker.

Every six months or so he would be seized by a sudden compulsion that would paralyze his will and find himself on the wagon in spite of himself. For two or three weeks he would wander around white-faced and shaking, unable to touch a drop, a pariah in the warm convivial world in which he ordinarily lived. In spite of all this, however, he was the seventh son of a seventh son and he had been born with a caul.

"Maybe I'd better have just another one to lubricate my powers," he said hopefully, gazing greedily at the bottle that stood upon the rickety kitchen table.

"Afterwards," said Cosmo. "We got a job to do and we don't want you popping out in the middle of it. Let's go, we ain't got all day."

"Okay," said MacGruder unhappily, "but first you got to get the shades down and douse that glim. The chief don't like a lot of light."

The unshaded flyspecked bulb

that hung from the ceiling was turned out and the dark window-blinds pulled down. Except for a faint trickle of light from around their edges that made MacGruder's face dimly visible, the room was in darkness. Albert was given a few slaps for the purpose of clearing his head and plunked down on a chair.

"Now everybody grab hold of the other guy's hand and we'll get this show on the road."

Albert's right hand was taken by Gutsy and his left by the gang chief. They in turn each took one of MacGruder's.

"Here goes," said the little man and started in to croon.

"Oh spirits! Oh dwellers in that great beyond whence all dwellers on this mortal coil must someday wend, listen to my call."

"Pretty classy patter, ain't it?" whispered Gutsy. "Just to look at him you'd never know that a bum like that could talk so good."

"You want conversation?" said MacGruder. "All right, go ahead make conversation. When you've said all you got to say, let me know so I can go ahead with this here seance."

Cosmo said a few choice words that had the effect of reducing Gutsy to speechlessness and then the little man continued.

"Oh, spirits, bear from us a plea to Chief Whooping Water that he come from his happy hunting ground to give us light and guidance." There was a long silence and then MacGruder jerked convulsively. His head came stiffly forward and his eyes opened and stared blindly around the table. As the others watched in the dim light, his features seemed to change as if an inward force were moulding them. His nose assumed a hawk-like shape and his cheekbones seemed to become more prominent. Albert began to be impressed in spite of himself.

MacGruder's mouth opened and a strange guttural voice came forth.

From the land of sky blue waters
Comes the chieftain Whooping Water
Comes across the vasty darkness
Comes to speak through Rick MacGruder
Left his tepee and papooses
Left his squaw and council fires
Came to answer to the calling
Left the braves and mighty warriors
Left the council of the chieftains
Left the forest and the woodlands
Left the mink and beaver playing
Left the tomtoms and—

What else was left was never known because Gutsy suddenly interrupted.

"How's Bosworth? Is he still sore at me for what I done?"

"Bosworth heap hot," grunted Whooping Water enigmatically,

irritated by the interruption.

Left the mink and beaver playing

Left the tomtoms and—

This time Cosmo broke in.

"Excuse the interruption, chief," he said apologetically, "it isn't that we aren't interested in where you came from, but MacGruder isn't good for much longer and there's something we got to find out."

MacGruder obviously wasn't good for much longer. He had a faint white froth on his lips and he seemed to be having trouble breathing.

Gutsy leaned over and whispered to Albert.

"Ya don't bust in, ya never find out nothing. That 'mink and beaver' routine of his can keep going all night."

"What I want to know is just this," continued Cosmo. "We got a guy from the U that . . ."

"Throw some water on him," said Cosmo.

Gutsy did and MacGruder came to with a start.

"Did he come through?" he asked groggily.

"He sure did, boy, he sure did. We found this Hoskin character's heel," said Cosmo triumphantly. "It's a tomato named Priscilla Yergut what teaches over at the University. I'm sending Gutsy over to put the snatch on her."

MacGruder reached out automatically for the bottle that was sitting in front of him and then recoiled as if it had suddenly become red hot.

"Oh, no!" he whispered, his face a mask of horror.

"No what?" asked Gutsy.

"No nothing for two whole weeks!" said MacGruder brokenly. "One of my periodicals just hit me!"

Without a backward glance he pulled himself to his feet and staggered from the room.

III

"Albert!" shrieked Priscilla as Gutsy dragged her into the room, "What have they been doing to you?"

Before Albert could answer, Cosmo cut in. "What's been done to him, lady, ain't nothing to what's going to be done to you unless he starts doing like he's told."

Albert blanched, and for the first time that day he felt his resolution slipping. "Don't you dare touch her!"

"I ain't," said Cosmo. "Gutsy here is the boy that'll handle the job. Take off your shirt, Gutsy, and show the lady what a real man looks like."

He grinned. "Take it off."

Bashfully, Gutsy did. He had a torso like a gorilla and just as much hair. Albert took one look and shuddered in revulsion. Priscilla shuddered too, but with something else.

"Make your choice, prof. Either you walk out of here with your

lady-friend on your arm or Gutsy gets her."

Gutsy, rather pleased at the second prospect, threw out his chest, and clenching his fists, held out his arms to exhibit his biceps.

Priscilla gasped again and then she let out a little whinny. She looked at Albert sagging in his chair and then back at Gutsy strutting up and down like a bull ape in mating season.

"Albert," she said in sudden decision, "I don't know what they want you to do, but whatever it is, remember that your integrity must come first."

Cosmo didn't like the way things were going. "Get her out of here," he shouted to Gutsy. When she was gone he turned ferociously to Albert. "It ain't as simple as you think," he growled. "First he's going to . . ."

When he had finished with his enumeration, Albert was white-faced.

"Think it over, punk," said Cosmo. "I'm giving you exactly half an hour to make up your mind."

As he headed for the door he gave Albert's briefcase a kick that sent it sailing into the far corner. As the lock on the door clicked behind him, Albert slumped down and buried his face in his hands. Then he straightened up again. The pressure of his palms on his swollen cheeks hurt too much.

"Got to think," he muttered to himself. "I've got to think fast."

His thoughts led him in a weird direction. When he finished them he found himself with a small black vellum-bound volume in one hand and his watch in the other. He kept looking back and forth from one to the other.

He didn't believe in the supernatural. No intelligent young Middle-English teacher did. But after his experience with MacGruder he found himself filled with serious doubts.

Twenty-four minutes left. There wasn't any use in prolonging Priscilla's agony. He dragged himself to his feet again and tottered toward the door. But . . . He looked at the book again.

On page 87 he found something he thought might work.

Chalk he had of course. The janitors were supposed to see that each class room had plenty, but they were all secret drinkers and never did. Albert was a man who was tongue-tied without a blackboard to doodle on, and as a result he always kept a private stock in his pockets. He fished out the longest and chalked a pentagram on the floor, feeling rather foolish as he did so.

All that was left after that was the fire and the blasting rod. The fire was easy to provide. Albert didn't smoke but he always carried matches for the benefit of full professors who did. Taking off his undershirt—which fortunately was rather frayed anyway—

he tore it into little strips and crumpled them in an old glass ashtry which he placed in the middle of the floor.

A piece of the tubular brass from which the curtains hung was taken down to serve as a blasting rod and he was finally ready to go. He ran through the incantation he had selected from the little black book until he was satisfied he had it letter perfect, and then touched a match to the scraps of undershirt.

Staring intently into the little pile of smoldering rags that served as his fire, he whispered: "Aglon, Tetragram, vaycheon stimulamaton ezpahers retragrammaton olyaram irion esytion existion eryona onera orasym mozm messias soter Emanuel Sabaoth Adonay, *te adoro, et te invoco!*"

With that he spit into the fire.

"Venite, Venite, Submiritillor Lucifuge, or eternal torment shall overwhelm thee, by the great power of this blasting rod."

Grabbing the brass tube firmly in both hands, he waved it over the smoldering rags and waited. He didn't have to wait long.

There was a sudden popping sound and a small brown figure materialized in the middle of the room. His eyes were closed and he was swaying back and forth as he chanted:

From the land of sky blue waters
Comes the chieftain Whooping Water
Comes across the vasty darkness
Comes to speak to—

"Oh, no!" moaned Albert.

The little Indian slowly opened his eyes. "Great White Father has look on face like brave who dial wrong number on talking machine."

Albert looked down at the black book and then back at Whooping Water.

The little Indian followed his glance and then snorted. "That thing! That's a pirated edition. Both the editor and the compositor were illiterate idiots. You would be lucky to raise a ninth order elemental with anything in there. I wouldn't be here myself if I weren't bored still with just sitting around the office waiting for a call. The one from MacGruder was the first this week. What's happened over on this side? The D.A. been closing up all the joints?"

Albert sat silent for a moment, trying to adjust to the new reality.

"Then none of this hocus-pocus really works?" he asked finally.

"Well," said Whooping Water slowly, "you did open the gate. But that can be done in a dozen different ways."

"What about this?" said Albert, picking up the blasting rod and jamming it suddenly into the smoldering rags of his little fire.

Whooping Water let out a sudden yell, and leaping to his

feet, clapped both hands to his posterior.

Albert jerked the rod out of the fire. "Sorry," he said. "I was just trying to find out if I had any control over you."

"Next time you want to find out something, ask!" said the little Indian bitterly. "Now I'm here, what do you want?"

"Out," said Albert briefly.

"How?" asked the Indian with equal brevity.

Albert thought for a moment.

"I suppose the easiest way would be for you to transport Priscilla and me to the nearest police station."

Whooping Water shook his head. "Wish I could, old man, but I'm just not up to it. The only person I can directly affect is the one who calls me up—and even then my powers are extremely limited."

Albert took a quick look at his watch. He didn't have too much time left.

"Then what can you do?"

"I might temporarily superimpose a new character on your old one. Alexander, Napoleon, Julius Caesar—anybody at all."

"People get shock therapy for that in this world," said Albert. "What's the point?"

"A rather obvious one. Suppose you wanted to play the stock market. I could give you the attitudes and responses of an Insull or a Rothschild. By following the imposed set of impulses you'd know just what to do and when."

"I don't want to play the market," said Albert plaintively. "All that I want to do is rescue Priscilla before it's too late!"

"Then think of somebody who was an expert at the rescuing business."

"Well . . ." said Albert, and then suddenly smashed his right fist into his left palm in the most virile gesture he'd made in years. "Sir Gawain!"

"Beg pardon?" said Whooping Water with a start.

"Sir Gawain. He was King Arthur's nephew and one of the greatest knights of the Round Table."

There was a strange expression on Whooping Water's face as he shook his head vigorously. "You'd be making a terrible mistake," he said. "You see, actually the popular image of Gawain doesn't correspond at all to the real man. In fact—"

"For your information," interrupted Albert stiffly, "the Gawain myths happen to be my special field of study. In the first place, he had no actual existence. He was a folk hero who embodied all the characteristics of the ideal knight. And in the second—" He stopped suddenly as he realized that he was automatically swinging into the Gawain lecture that he always gave during the first week of his survey course.

"And in the second," he snapped, "I'm giving orders

around here. You will go immediately to my apartment and skim through the manuscript that is sitting on the coffee table. That will give you an excellent picture of Gawain's character."

"But . . ."

"Get going!"

Whooping Water got.

Ten seconds later he was back. His face was perfectly blank but there seemed to be a look of secret amusement in his eyes.

"Mission completed," he said. "All set?"

Albert nodded nervously.

"Go ahead," he said.

The little Indian held two fingers up to his forehead like horns and pointed them at Albert. They wriggled slightly and then a fat green spark jumped from each of them. Albert winced as a sudden convulsive shock ran through him.

"I hope I made the right choice," he muttered as he waited for the change.

"You didn't," said Whooping Water cheerfully, "so I took the liberty of making another selection."

Before Albert could answer, the change hit him. He felt himself being swept by surges of strange raw emotion such as he had never felt before. There were gongs beating inside his head and he wanted to smash somebody—hard. The part of him that was still Albert fought desperately for control.

"I'm not turning into Gawain!" he gasped.

Whooping Water grinned. "Heap sorry, boss. But I got reasons. Good reasons."

The air around the small Indian suddenly turned opaque.

IV

When it cleared Whooping Water was gone and in his place stood a skinny and buck-toothed young man whose first words betrayed his English origin.

"Never did like that get-up," he said. "But for some reason or other most of the local mediums demand Indians. Anyway, the reason I was so set against your patterning yourself on Sir Gawain was that"—his voice dropped to a confidential whisper—"I am, or at least I was, the one and original Gawain. And frankly, old man, I'm the last person in the world I'd recommend to a man in your predicament as a model."

"You're *the* Sir Gawain?" whispered Albert. "The one who triumphed over the Green Knight."

"I'm the Sir Gawain all right, but I didn't do any triumphing. That's just a bit of propaganda Uncle Arthur put out after I got my head whacked off. What happened was that one night when we were all at dinner a drunk wearing green armor came staggering in looking for a fight.

"He was so old and feeble that the king didn't feel right about

matching him with any of the regulars so he picked on me. I'd had a couple of drinks myself or I'd never have gone through with it.

"As it was, I didn't go very far. It was the shortest fight in the history of the Round Table. The old boy let fly with his battle axe and I ducked. Wasn't fast enough. The head that came off was mine. Arthur hushed things up as best he could for the sake of the family name, and then a couple of years later when he got news that the Green Knight had lost the decision in a bout with the D.T.'s, he had one of his bards cook up a story that didn't make me look so silly.

"Anyway, after taking a quick look at that manuscript I decided you needed somebody else, so I used the guy in the other book."

"What other book?" demanded Albert, a horrifying suspicion forming inside his head.

"Something called *The Big Kill.* That Hammer chap was quite a lad. He got himself out of worse spots than this in every other chapter."

"Turn me back," gasped Albert. "That character is a moral cesspool."

"Why not just give him a try?"

Albert felt himself being more and more lost in the new growling stranger who was taking over his body.

"I'll take care of you later!" he snarled. "Right now I'm going to smoke out some of the vermin that have been lousing up my city!"

Swinging the brass curtain rod like a war club, he stalked purposefully to the door and began to pound on it. A moment later Gutsy's voice was heard on the other side.

"What's going on in there?"

"Open up and you'll find out," growled Albert.

"Are you ready to talk business?"

"Yeah!"

There was a sound of a key turning and a little popping came from behind Albert as Whooping Water prudently removed himself from sight. Then the door swung open and Gutsy stepped in. There was an expression of deep disappointment on his face. He had been looking forward to his intimidation session with Priscilla with a great deal of anticipation.

Albert took one step forward and let loose a sudden swing of the blasting rod that caught Gutsy square on top of the head. Then he stepped back quickly and waited for the giant figure to go crashing to the floor. It didn't. It just shook its head and said plaintively, "Now what did you want to go and do that for?"

Albert let out a snarl of rage as the gongs in his head suddenly crescendoed and let loose a right hook that smashed Gutsy full in the face. There was a splintering —but not of teeth. Albert howled in pain and began to hop up and

down, cupping his broken knuckles in his left hand.

"You keep that up, you're going to hurt yourself," said Gutsy.

"Get out of here before I—" The other suddenly stopped as the part of him that was still Albert realized that there wasn't anything he could do.

"Before you what?" asked Gutsy curiously.

"Oh, nothing," said Albert. "Just go away. I got some thinking to do."

"Then you don't want to talk to Cosmo?"

"No!"

"Okay!" said Gutsy as he lumbered out the door. "But remember that you only got ten minutes before that tomato of yours starts to get it."

As the lock clicked shut on the door again, Albert turned toward the center of the room and growled.

"All right, punk, turn yourself on again."

Whooping Water materialized. Only this time he was back in his Indian form again.

Albert picked up his blasting rod and advanced purposefully toward him. "I feel like bashing somebody!" he snarled, "and it might as well be you."

The little Indian took one good look at the advancing figure of wrath, jerked his hands up to his head, and wriggled them in a reverse direction. Albert stumbled to a stop as the alien character who had been controlling his nerve ends suddenly vanished.

"Easy does it," said Whooping Water consolingly. "It's all my fault and I apologize. I forgot that a disposition like Hammer's needed more beef to back it up than you've got. If you were up against a couple of amateurs, they'd run screaming. I've got another idea, though. How about this—"

"Shut up!" said Albert in a most unAlbertish voice. "I've got some thinking to do."

The Indian opened his mouth to protest but a threatening twitch of the blasting rod closed it again.

"I'm getting something," said Albert at last, "but I'm having trouble pinning it down." He ruminated in silence for a moment and then asked suddenly, "Who was that Bosworth that Gutsy was asking about during the seance?"

"An old pal who got the inside track with a woman Gutsy wanted. He got part of his head taken off with a .45 slug."

"Got it!" exclaimed Albert.

"Got what?"

Albert explained and the little Indian let out a whistle of admiration.

V

Once Gutsy was safely tucked away in the closet, his hands and feet tied with strips torn from the curtains and a crude but effective gag in his mouth, they were ready for Cosmo. Whooping Water

flicked out of sight and then materialized as a large block of dripping and barnacle-encrusted concrete. Albert started toward the door but just as he got to it it swung open and Cosmo came storming in.

"Where in the hell's Gutsy?" he demanded. "And what's that?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Albert. "One minute it wasn't and the next minute it was. It talks."

"You're crazy!" snorted Cosmo.

"Maybe so, but just go up to it and listen."

Cosmo approached the dripping block cautiously and bent over it.

"Let me out," said a muffled voice.

Cosmo jumped back in fright and then suddenly turned to Albert.

"Funny guy, eh? Trying to make like a ventriloquist, eh? Well, I don't scare, punk."

"It's not me," protested Albert. "Listen."

A chanting voice came from within the block.

Got a clock to fix,
Got a watch to stop,
Got a bone to pick,
Got a floor to mop.

Going to break some bones,
Going to suck some blood,
Going to spill some guts,
Someone's name is mud.

Before the gang chief could make another accusation of ventriloquism, the block began to rock back and forth like a gigantic Mexican jumping bean. Then, as Cosmo watched wide-eyed, there was a splitting sound and a large fissure opened. A scrabbling sound came from inside and then slowly a hand appeared, a hand with swollen purple fingers that plucked at the edges of the split as if they were trying to force it open wider.

Cosmo had long prided himself on being a man of action. Now, if ever, action was called for.

"I'm getting out of here," he said.

"Not yet, my friend."

A soft voice from inside the block of cement froze him in his tracks. As he stood paralyzed, there was a sudden splintering crash and the whole block disintegrated into a pile of jagged shards.

Something moved in the debris, moved and then slowly squirmed out toward the shaking gangster. It was a man, a long dead man with his hands and feet wired together.

"I've been waiting for you, Cosmo," it croaked. "I've been waiting for you a long, long time."

Cosmo tried to raise the .45 that his reflexes had pulled out of its shoulder holster, but it hung limply from nerveless fingers.

"I've been wanting to ask you why you went and did it, pal. Me

that gave you your start and was like a father to you. It weren't friendlylike to sap an old pal and put him in a box of wet concrete while he was still alive and then toss him in the bay. It weren't friendlylike at all. That's why I've come to take you back with me."

The bloated fingers curled around the gangster's ankles. He tried to raise his automatic again but it slipped from his fingers and went crashing to the floor. Then something snapped inside him. He let out a high-pitched scream and, kicking loose the clutching hands, dashed whimpering out of the room.

The swollen-faced man looked up at Albert and grinned.

Albert pointedly looked the other way.

"If you don't mind," he said. "Your Bosworth was bad enough, but this one—ugh!"

"All clear," said Sir Whooping Water Gawain.

Albert turned and greeted the sight of the little brown Indian with a sigh of relief.

"Thanks a million!"

"Really wasn't anything, old man," said Whooping Water with a depreciating gesture. "What time is it?"

Albert glanced at his watch. "Two forty-five. We made it with three minutes to spare."

"It's later than I thought," said the other. "Now that I've got all your troubles straightened out, I guess I might as well toddle on back. I'm due to go off shift at three."

Albert's momentary feeling of elation vanished. "What do you mean, 'all straightened out'? I'm no better off than I was this morning." Unable to restrain himself, he launched into a long narration of his woes.

"I don't get it," said Whooping Water when he had finally finished. "You let those thugs beat you unconscious rather than give up, but over at the University you let everybody and his brother shove you around."

"I just can't help it," said Albert miserably. "It's not that I'm a coward. It's just the way my glands work. Every time I start to stand up for myself, something triggers them off and they all let loose at once. I get so much adrenalin in my blood that all I can do is stand there and shake. And so I'm not getting promoted and I'm losing my girl and there isn't anything I can do about it."

Whooping Water looked dreamily at the ceiling. "You know," he said at last, "Mike Hammer's glands let loose too, but he knows how to use them. And against a couple of amateurs . . ."

Albert let out a sudden squawk of protest but he was too late. Two fat green sparks came arcing across and caught him square in the middle of the forehead . . .

For some strange reason Priscilla wasn't so thrilled at being

rescued as might have been expected. The look of eager anticipation that was on her face as the door opened was replaced by one of annoyance when she saw who had opened it.

"It took you long enough," she snapped pettishly as Albert undid the ropes that bound her to the chair. The old Albert would have quailed and begun to stutter apologies, but this wasn't the old Albert.

When he dropped her off at her home she was breathing hard and there was a strange new look in her eyes.

"Won't you come up?" she whispered. "There's nobody home."

Albert wanted to but Hammer wouldn't let him.

"Got a couple of rats to take care of first," he growled. "After that . . ." He ran his hand up and down her back and she melted against him. He gave her a sudden shove.

"Beat it, kid. I got work to do . . ."

When Albert swaggered into his office, Lippencott was in the middle of the fifteenth reading of his latest essay in TENSION, *A Quarterly Journal of New Criticism.*

"Easy does it, old man," he said lazily as the door crashed shut. "I take it that Dr. Quimbat finally broke the news to you about the switch in courses."

"What switch?" growled Albert.

"Next fall I'll be giving a seminar in the New Criticism and a graduate course in James. I'm afraid that means that you are going to have to take over my two sections of Freshman English. Tough luck, old man, but I know that when you think it over you'll realize that it's for the good of the department. And now if you'll excuse me, I'd better be taking off. Priscilla and I are going out tonight and I have a bit of work at home I want to get out of the way first."

"Not just yet, junior." Albert turned and clicked the lock on the door behind him. "You and I got a little talking to do first. For one thing, I ain't giving up my seminar or my Chaucer course for you or nobody else. And for another, you go woofing around the department head any more sticking knives in my back and you're going to find out all of a sudden your ears ain't mates!"

Lippencott grinned and blew a puff of tobacco smoke in Albert's face.

"Anything more, little man?"

"Yeah," said Albert in a soft voice. "I got Priscilla staked out. You come poaching and you're going to end up minus a head, not that you'd miss it none."

Lippencott stood up and flexed his muscles. "Albert," he said, "I've been wanting to paste you for a long time. But my conscience

wouldn't let me because you were too little and too weak. But now I can do it with no regrets."

Proudly conscious of his beautifully muscled body, he stalked toward Albert.

"Put 'em up," he said, assuming the stance that had made him runner-up for the base middleweight championship during his wartime tour of duty as P.T. officer at Smutney Field.

Albert didn't cooperate. Instead one hand suddenly snaked out and grabbed an empty coke bottle that was sitting on the window sill. With a practiced twist of the wrist he smashed it against the floor.

"Pretty boy," he hissed as he advanced slowly forward, the jagged edges held at ready, "you ain't going to be any longer."

Lippencott stood his ground, but not very long. "Listen, Albert," he said nervously as he recoiled a step. "You're not acting like a gentleman."

"There's a good reason for that," said Albert, sidling closer with a horrible grin on his face. "I ain't no gentleman."

Without warning, his arm flashed out. It was only by grace of excellent reflexes and a great deal of luck that Lippencott was able to preserve his nose. It was too much. He let out a frightened howl and turned to run, but there wasn't any place to run to. The door was locked and Albert had him backed into a corner.

"You touch me and I'll report you to the administration," he whimpered as the jagged edges of the broken bottle came closer and closer to his face.

Albert chuckled. "Who'd believe you? Everybody knows what a mouse of a guy I am."

That did it. Lippencott cracked completely and sobbed promise after promise. Albert waited until he'd heard the words he wanted and then tossed the bottle end crashing against the wall.

"Just don't forget," he said as he swaggered out. "There's a coke machine in every building on the campus."

VI

When Albert came into the English office, the gongs were still beating inside his head. He was informed by the secretary that the chairman was in conference—which meant that he was taking his daily two hour nap on the rather bumpy divan he had brought back from his student quarters at Oxford. Albert didn't say anything, he just slapped her attractive posterior in a flattering way and, as she stood gasping, barreled into the inner sanctum and slammed the door behind him.

Ten minutes passed before he emerged. When he did the secretary was waiting for him with a melting smile. He gave her another spank and gestured toward the inner office.

"Boss man wants to see you,

kiddo. He's got a few memos to dictate. He's changed his mind about dropping my Middle English courses. The one I want you to get right out, though, is the recommendation for promotion." He flicked again and she ran squealing into Dr. Quimbat's office.

Dr. Quimbat was somewhat the worse for wear. He started to babble something about a coke bottle but then regained enough of his senses to think better of it and dictate what had to be dictated.

There was company waiting for him in Albert's own office. As soon as the door was shut, Whooping Water gave the little finger wiggle that was necessary to banish Mike Hammer.

"Want another shot before your date tonight? Mike's been doing all right by you so far."

Albert shuddered and shook his head. "No thanks! Every time she cuddles up to me I start getting ideas."

"What's wrong with that? You're a big boy now, and she isn't exactly a spring chicken."

"It's not that I'm objecting to. These ideas involve an erotic transference from the usual areas to her stomach. And that isn't all. I keep wanting to go out and buy a big .45."

"I see what you mean," said Whooping Water.

"So, thanks for everything. I'm going to be needing your help later today but there's no use your hanging around here until then."

"I'm dismissed?"

"You're dismissed."

When Whooping Water disappeared this time, he did it by slow stages. First his epidermis became transparent, and then bit by bit the rest of him faded out until there was nothing left but a stomach, a pair of lungs, and an intricately coiled large intestine, all hanging motionless in mid-air.

Without Hammer to back him up, Albert found himself growing nauseated. "Please," he gulped. "I've had about all I can take for one day."

The lungs contracted and a little snicker came from the air above them. Then slowly, much too slowly, the viscera faded from sight.

Albert had just put his feet up on his desk for the first time in his academic career when there was a knock on the door and Dick Martinelli, State's star quarterback, came diffidently in.

"No!" said Albert before the football player could get in a word.

"Wait a minute, doc," protested the other in an injured voice. "I ain't asking for no free ride. I just want one of them there re-tests."

"You want what!"

"A re-test. I went and read the book."

"I don't believe it."

"Well, I did. I'm going over to the drug store to see if there's any

new Spillane in, but there ain't. And while I'm looking over the pocket book rack to see if there's anything else that looks interesting, I sees a picture on a cover that makes me damn near drop my teeth. So I grabs it, and you know what?"

"What?" said Albert obediently.

"When I gets home I find I went and bought a copy of this here *Canterbury Tales* which I'm supposed to be reading for your course but don't because I take a look the first day and it's full of funny words. Only this time I start looking through to see if I can find the part they got the picture on the cover from and WOW!"

"Wow?"

"Yeah, WOW!" Martinelli sniggered. "There's stuff in there that I don't see how they ever let it get printed. Like for example there's one place where a guy climbs up a ladder to try and make a gal whose husband is supposed to be out of town and—"

"I have a certain familiarity with the story in question," said Albert. "Suppose you let me ask the questions."

"Sure thing, doc. Shoot!"

"Give me a precis of "The Reeve's Tale."

Martinelli gulped. "A *what?*"

"A precis—an abstract, a summary, a . . . well, just tell me what happened."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place. Well, there were a couple of guys who were going to Oxford or some place like that and they got a couple of days off. So they're hitch-hiking around and they happen to bump into this miller, see? And he's got a good-looking wife and a daughter who's really stacked. So that night while the old man's asleep, these guys . . ."

When Martinelli came back there was a happy smile on his face.

"I took your note about my grade change by the Dean's office and he says I'm eligible again. Then I went over to the library for the book you wanted but the gal at the desk couldn't help me. She said one copy was lost and the other was at the bindery."

"Oh well," said Albert. "I'll find a copy some place. At least you finally did find out where the library was."

"But I got it anyway," said Martinelli triumphantly. "There was something about the title that stuck in my head so I went over to the drugstore and looked. Sure enough, they got it out in pocket book. Here." He tossed the small paper-backed volume on Albert's desk. "From the cover it looks like hot stuff. Maybe there's more to these here classics than I thought. Anything else I can do for you?"

"Just a second," said Albert and made a quick check of his briefcase. He had chalk, a piece of brass tubing, and a small quantity of charcoal.

"I guess not," he said. "You run on back to the practice field. I have an engagement for this evening—I suppose you'd call it a heavy date—and I've got to get ready for it."

"Okay, doc. I'll be seeing you." His hand was on the door knob when Albert stopped him.

"I have thought of something else. Will you scout around and see if you can find me a fire extinguisher? I've got to build a small fire in here shortly and I don't want to take any chances of it getting out of hand."

Martinelli looked bewildered, but he obeyed without question. "I got one in the car," he said. "I'll bring it right up."

As the door shut behind him, Albert picked up the pocket book and examined the provocative scene on the cover with a great deal of interest. It showed two god-like young creatures engaged in some sort of a wrestling match on an Italian Renaissance bed. Albert eyed the male figure with a certain amount of envy—and then shrugged. Even if he were no physical prize, Priscilla's dimensions were also several inches short of those of the impossibly curved and scantily dressed female who was sprawled out with a dreamy smile on her face.

"Aglon, Tetragram, vaycheon," he muttered to himself and then settled down to wait Martinelli's return with the extinguisher. With a sigh of anticipation, he flipped open the pocket book and began to read the first of *The Adventures of Casanova.*

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minority group

by . . . Robert Sheckley

The girl and the man wanted to belong . . . to be a part of the big majority. Why was hating hard?

STEEF SAID, "Remember, you have to watch what you say very carefully."

Veri nodded, watching the water glide past the bow of their rowboat. They were approaching the shore of Yawk now, and Steef paddled more rapidly, his young muscles rising and stretching with every stroke.

"Do you remember all the hate-words?" Steef asked. Veri nodded again, trailing her hand in the water, watching the ripples. From her expression, Steef knew she was daydreaming. He frowned.

"Please, Veri. You know this is probably our last chance. If they don't accept us this time, they never will."

"I know, Steef. I'll try." But she was looking back now, at the little island in East River where Steef's father had built his house.

"You'd better repeat some of the words," Steef said, knowing they would be needed as soon as they landed. "The hate-words first."

Veri shook herself out of her dream and tried to think of the

Take a flying seminar in comparative ethnology, borrow a futurescope and stare through it long and steadily, and imagine yourself on an island torn by the stress and strife of fifty centuries of topsy-turvy living and something of the magic that is in Robert Sheckley's hilariously satiric yarns will flow into you, and you'll understand why they are now appearing everywhere—in the slicks and on TV, radio and the silver screen.

ancient words. She began haltingly, "Hate-words—louse, dog, pig—"

"Go on," Steef said.

"I can't think of them," Veri said mournfully, her pale face turned away.

"Veri! You know how important they are! Have you memorized the insult list?"

"Some of them."

"Remember," he told her. "Don't show them you're nervous. We're still the Minority, and they'll call us Commies and Negroes, and Catliks and Jews, and Soshulists and Griks. But we deny everything."

"I know."

"We're Good Guys, just like everyone else, and don't you forget it. What do you say when they ask us what we are?"

"I say we're Good Guys," Veri said. "Pals . . ."

"Chums, Buddies, Friends," Steef filled in for her. "You should be able to reel them right off." He paddled harder, trying not to show his annoyance. He knew that she hadn't been studying. In his father's old house on the island, Veri had been looking out the window too often when she should have been learning the ancient words, the all-important words.

But sometimes the girl acted as if she didn't even care if they were the Minority. She reminded him of his poor crazy father; completely indifferent if he was called a Catlik or a Soshulist, or any of the other terrible Minority names.

Sometimes he suspected that she didn't even want to be what everyone else in the world was —a Good Guy.

The reached the shore and pulled the rowboat up on the bank.

"Come on," he said, taking Veri's hand and helping her up the refuse-strewn bank. "And please remember—you have to *hate* to be a Good Guy."

He hoped she wouldn't let him down. She had been acting so funny of late—sometimes gay, more often sullen and dreamy, like now.

Well, she'd have to snap out of it. Their whole future depended on what the Good Guys thought of them. And he was so tired of being the Minority.

They walked down the crumbling street. On either side were the great buildings of Yawk, which had once been filled with people, according to legend. But that, Steef knew, was back in the times when there actually were such detestable people as Demcrats and Anarkists, and other strange tribes.

Before they had gone a block, the Good Guys found them. A mob gathered, packed as tightly together as they could get. They were cursing and shouting at each other, in true Buddy fashion, and Steef felt a pang of regret at not being a part of them.

"Hey you worms, look at this!" one of the Good Guys shouted. "It's that Commie guy!"

"He's no Commie, you pig! He's a damned Roylist!"

It was impossible to see who was talking. The Good Guys always shouted from the middle of a crowd.

"He's a Commie and a Roylist, horseface! And a Demcrat!"

"The girl's a Zarist!"

Steef's face went white while the ancient, terrible names were hurled at them. The Good Guys were soon quarreling among themselves, screaming ancient, meaningless curses at each other.

"Brother of a rat!"

"Cousin of swine!"

But *Commie, Roylist, Catlik* —the really bad names—were reserved for the hated Minority.

"I'm a Good Guy," Steef shouted above the din. "We want to join you, Veri and I."

The mob backed away a few feet, keeping well away from Steef. They were uniformly small and brown-haired. All of them had narrow brown eyes and wide mouths filled with decaying teeth. It was impossible to tell one ragged man fron another.

"Lookit how funny he looks!" one of them screamed.

Steef flushed, bitterly asharned of his blonde hair and Veri's black curls. They were too tall, also.

"I can't help how I look," Steef said. "But I don't want to be the Minority. I'm not a Soshulist or a Zarist or a Demcrat, or anything else. I'm a Good Guy, a Chum, a Buddy."

The sweating, close-packed mob roared with laughter.

"Him! A Good Guy!"

"I guess I know an Anarkist when I see one!"

"He's the son of that organizing guy, isn't he? The crazy one?"

"Stop shoving, you miserable worm."

"Stop it yourself, you dog, you louse, you rat."

"Let me join," Steef said. "I'm tired of being alone. I want to be just like everyone else, really I do."

"Aaaah," one of the Good Guys said. "You'd probably want to be a Leader. A Genral, a Dictator, a Presdent." He spat out the hate-names venomously.

"No I wouldn't," Steef said. He was beginning to have hopes. The last time they had just ignored him. Now, at least, they were talking to him. "I want to be a Good Guy, like everyone else."

"How about her?"

"She's Regular, too," Steef said. "She damned well is." He used the ancient word hopefully. "Aren't you, Veri?"

"What?" Veri said. She had been staring at the great buildings, lost in her dream again. "Oh yes, yes, I certainly am."

"You should have said I damned well am," Steef whispered. He feared she wasn't mak-

ing the right kind of impression.

More Good Guys were coming, little brown-haired men, pushing and crowding their way into the crowd, snarling and shouting and cursing each other.

"I don't think he's Regular!" someone said.

"I am!" Steef cried.

"We'll have to talk it over," a man said. "Won't we, fellas?" Everyone agreed that they would have to talk it over.

"We'll see ya tomorrow, yellow-belly," another man said. "But don't get your hopes up."

The mob wandered off, but Steef and Verdi could hear them, shouting and screaming, for a long time.

They found a ruined building, and camped on the bottom floor. Veri had brought some food for their supper. A Good Guy wouldn't have thought of that, Steef told himself disapprovingly. But he ate.

"Look, Veri," Steef said, after they had eaten and stretched out on the floor. "You'll have to speak up more. Use the hate-words. Swear. Show them that you're regular. Otherwise—"

"Steef—" Veri began hesitantly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Don't you think—wouldn't it be possible for us to go away somewhere and find other Minorities? There must be a few others left."

"Go away?" Steef asked. "But aren't you sick of being hated?"

"It wouldn't bother me if we were someplace else," Veri said shyly.

"No," Steef said flatly. That was the sort of talk Veri's father had used before he died, and Steef's father also, and the other men who had come to the house. And that was why they were a Minority.

He remembered his father explaining to him about the wars, and how they had killed off most of the intelligent people, the honest ones, the courageous ones. His father had told the lie with a perfectly straight face.

And then, according to his father, the inferior stock had bred and bred. Cowards begot knaves, and fools spawned idiots. Everything worthwhile was bred out of the race over a thousand generations of hatred. And after a thousand more, all that was left was the slag of mankind, the homogenous Good Guys.

The Good Guys, looking alike, thinking alike, swearing alike, running in packs, detesting each other but needing the herd-security. Incapable of leading (and here his father's face had become really stern), but unwilling to be led. Too cowardly to fight, too stupid to stop-arguing.

The Good Guys. Starving, dying like flies in the midst of honey, because they were too busy to plant, unwilling to cooperate and share.

But they were united by a

common bond of hatred for the Minority, a hatred that superseded even their detestation for each other.

The Good Guys.

His father had been quite mad. He had told Steef that he and Veri were the hope of the future, and that they must go out and find others like them. He had even tried to preach to the Good Guys, but they wouldn't listen, naturally.

But why, Steef wondered, hadn't his father seen how wrong he was? The few other men with his father had seen it. One by one they left, sneaking away to join the Good Guys. They couldn't stand being a Minority, when everyone in the world was a Good Guy. Everyone! That proved how wrong his father was.

"Can't we try to find some people like us?" Veri asked.

"No!" Steef said again. "They'll probably take us if we just show we're Regular."

She probably still believed some of the things his father had said. Well, he thought, she'd learn, once they were accepted by the Good Guys.

The Good Guys had forgotten about them the next day, and Steef and Veri roamed through the broken, deserted streets until noon. They found them, several hundred strong, in Centrul Park, farming. At least, that was what they called it. They were scratching at the ground, every man watching his neighbor to see how much work he was accomplishing.

"Hi, Friends," Steef said, walking up to them.

"It's the Anarkist," one of them said.

Instinctively the Good Guys huddled into a mob.

"If I'm an Anarkist, you're a Pluterkrat," Steef said boldly. He had decided that the best way to get along with the Good Guys was to act like one.

"You still look funny," an anonymous voice from the crowd said.

"He sure does. He don't look like no Good Guy I ever saw."

"I am, though," Steef said. "She is too. And if you take us in, we can help you."

"How?" several of them asked.

"Tell them, Veri," Steef said.

"Well," Veri began hesitantly, "On our island—Steef's and mine, I mean—we were planting vegetables, and we found that they grow better if you take out the weeds. We know you're always short of food, so if you took out all the weeds here, you'd—"

"I thought so!" one of the Good Guys shouted. "The scum want Progress!"

Steef realized that they had said the wrong thing.

"They 'll want to lead us next!"

"Want to be Presdent, you vermin?"

"I'm sorry," Steef said, perspiration rolling down his face. "She was lying, she didn't mean it. Take us in, please. We won't

bother anyone, and we won't try to change anything. We hate everyone, just like you. We even hate each other."

"You do?" A man asked.

"Sure we do!" Steef said. "We don't want to lead anyone, or be led. We just want the right to hate as we please, just like all the Good Guys. That's all we want."

The Good Guys talked and shouted and screamed it over. Steef couldn't make out whether it was going good or bad for them. So many people were talking at once that he couldn't make out any sort of trend.

After half an hour someone yelled, "Are you *sure* you ain't an Anarkist?"

"I'm sure!" Steef said.

"Livin' alone on that island, you might be a Pluterkrat, or a Catlik."

Steef shook his head. It was unfair to accuse him of being any of those ancient races of people. They were so old that their origin had been forgotten, in most cases. But they were still hated. Steef remembered that his poor father had been proud—*proud* of being called names.

"It is true," his father had said. "We few are the Catholics and the Negroes, the Poles and Italians and Germans. We are all the people who have ever been hated. We say this proudly!"

Steef wasn't proud of it. He thought pityingly of his father's insanity, and the insanity of anyone, anywhere, who wasn't a Good Guy.

The Good Guys seemed just about ready. Steef felt a thrill of expectation run through him. It would be so wonderful for both of them if they were accepted. Then there would be no more Minority. They would be just like anyone else, hated like brothers instead of outsiders. They would *belong.*

"Hey, Guy," one of the Good Guys said, "We made up our minds. Didn't we, vermin?"

"Yeh, you moron, we made up our minds," someone said. "I'll tell him."

"The hell you will," another answered. "Who do you think you are? A Dictor or something?"

"I'm no bloody Dictor," the man said, "but you can't stop me from talkin' if I want to. You greasy blob."

"You hairless hog!"

Steef listened in admiration to the ancient, powerful names. He wondered if he would ever be able to reel them off with such proficiency.

"You pushed me, you toad!" A man shouted. He swung his fist at the man behind him, taking care to miss.

"Why, you slime!" The man behind him swung back, missing by a foot. Immediately, five more men were swinging at each other, flailing the air wildly. None of the Good Guys ever hit each other, Steef knew, for fear of being hit

back, perhaps injured fatally.

"Anyhow," a man shouted out of the melee, "you're in!"

Steef let out a yell, leaping in the air for joy. That was all it took. Just that one little word made all the difference between being a detested outsider, or a hated, friendly insider. He was *in*.

He started forward, to take his rightful place in the pack, beside the sweaty Good Guys.

'Come on," he said to Veri. "Hurry up before they change their minds."

"Hold it!" a man shouted. "You're in, guy, but she's not."

"What?" Steef said, stopping.

'She ain't Regular," one of the men said. "You can see that for yourself. She ain't swore once."

"No, and I'll bet she don't hate nobody, neither."

"That's a lie!" Steef shouted, tears in his eyes. "Tell them, Veri. Tell them how much you hate them. Tell them. Tell them you hate me."

Veri turned her face away. Steef grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Tell them!"

"I—I—" Veri began. "I can't, Steef. I don't hate anyone!"

The colossal stupidity of women, Steef thought. After all the time he had spent with her, explaining how important hate was. How they couldn't be accepted into the Good Fellows unless they hated, hated, hated. And now she did this to him.

"Besides," one of the Good Guys said. "We thought it over, and if we take both of you, we ain't got no Minority. That's no good."

"There's always been a Minority."

"So we gotta keep her out. She's a Catlik, anyhow."

"The hell she is! She's an Anarkist!"

"Pluterkrat!"

"Grik!"

"She's all of them. She's the Minority! Come on, guy."

Steef looked at the Good Guys, in their sneering, cursing pack. He longed to go with them, to be alone no longer. But Veri was standing there, her pale face turned away.

"Show them, Veri," Steef pleaded. "Swear at them. Call me a pig. Prove you're a Good Guy."

"I can't," she said, crying.

"You must!"

Suddenly she faced him, and her back was erect. She wiped her eyes with her forearm and looked at him intently.

"You—are—wrong," she said in a low voice, pronouncing the words very carefully. She turned and walked off.

"Veri!" Steef didn't know what to do. This was the moment he had waited for, the acceptance. He could belong to the Good Guys—

But Veri was walking off.

"Forget the pig," a man counselled him, grinning.

"She's a Grik. Forget her, Chum," another said.

"She's not a Grik," Steef said.

"Whatsa matter with you, rat?" one of his new friends asked. "You sound almost as if you don't hate her."

"You gotta hate her. She's the Minority!"

Steef hesitated for another long second, then ran after Veri. Behind him, the Good Guys screamed and shouted, waving their arms but not hitting anyone.

"Where are you going?" he panted, catching up with her.

"To find the others," Veri said.

"You don't know where any others are."

"I'll find them."

He walked with her to the boat.

"Why not back to the island?" Steef asked, glancing back over his shoulder at the Good Guys.

"We'll never go back to the island," Veri said.

She had said "We." How had she known he was going with her, Steef wondered.

"But how about the books? The books with the ancient curse-words?"

"We won't need them," Veri said.

Steef helped her push the rowboat into the water, and climbed in after her. He shook his head sadly, looking back at the Yawk shore. It had been so close! Now his chance for belonging was gone, and nothing would turn out right.

But looking at Veri's determined face, he wasn't sure. And suddenly, he wasn't sure about anything.

man of distinction

by . . . Frank Belknap Long

The stranger's wit and wisdom seemed distilled from the finest flowerings of the human spirit. Could such a man lie about Mars?

"Do you believe the stories?" he asked.

I stared at him. "What stories?"

"Oh, you know what stories. People claiming they've been to Mars. People claiming the Government has built a rocket ship and is keeping it quiet. Top priority stuff—classified."

"Utter nonsense," I told him. "How about another beer?"

"Another beer would be fine. You know, it *is* kind of funny. You sit down at a table and you see a stranger standing at the bar with a faraway look in his eyes. Without really seeming to see you he comes over, and starts talking to you."

I looked him straight in the eye. "Like I did, for instance."

"All right—like you did."

"So you think I've been to Mars."

"I didn't say that."

"But you've been thinking it. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

He screwed up his eyes, studying me cautiously. He was looking at a gray-templed man in

Frank Belknap Long may not be a prophet exactly. But as early as 1940 he began to respond to the vigorous new breezes from beyond space and time which were soon to blow so gustily through the science fiction firmament, and trimmed his sails accordingly. His earliest short stories show as keen an awareness of the vital new trends as this, his latest one, and in his unusual choice of themes he was something of a pioneer.

his late forties wearing a pin-striped gray suit unobtrusively blending with a repp stripe tie, and argyle anklets. I wouldn't have said he was seeing a man of distinction straight out of the whiskey ads. But there was nothing to stop me from thinking it.

I was seeing a quite different sort of human being—a ruddy-cheeked, perpetually fidgety little table-sitter with high blood pressure tensions threatening his very existence. Dark of brow and bright of eye—an eager beaver if ever there was one.

"Try relaxing," I whispered.

"What's that?"

"I guess you didn't hear me. I said I'd like to know you better. If you'd just answer a few questions—"

"All right. Ask them."

"If you went to Mars, if you actually had a chance to be on the first rocket ship, would you go humbly or proudly?"

"Hell, proudly. I'd have a right to feel proud."

"Good. If you met a Martian you wouldn't take any nonsense from him. Correct?"

"Correct. No nonsense at all. Let's have another beer."

"You'd treat him rough if he got in your way. You'd pin his ears back, show him the error of his ways. Only a man has the sacred right to get skizzled and swagger a bit, woo a blonde, and lay down the law to lesser breeds without the law. Correct?"

"I'd never deny it. You're quoting Kipling, aren't you?"

"Correct. You are obviously a man of literary discernment. Let's take it from there. Suppose you were actually standing on the rust-red sands of Mars. The sun is beating down unmercifully, and the heat is so intense it makes your eyeballs crawl. I'm quoting Kipling again."

"Go right ahead. I'm listening."

"Say, there's nothing wrong with this beer! Well, you're standing there with your throat so parched you can hardly swallow and your eyes are burning holes in your face. You'd give anything for a drink of cool, sparkling water.

"You're miles from the rocket ship, understand? You've gone exploring, and it's hard to judge distances on Mars because the glimmer is so frightful and the miles so deceptive. You see mirages in the sky."

"You do, eh? What kind of mirages?"

"The worst kind. Visualize a mirage in technicolor in the most realistic kind of cinemascopic Western."

"Like in Shane?"

"Shane wasn't in cinemascope, and there were no mirages in it. But yes . . . you get what I mean. Take that kind of mirage, and add to it. Visualize a crater lake of crystal clear water, gleaming entrancingly under the cloudless

Martian sky. The water comes down from the poles in the bright springtime of the year, through an intricate network of canals. It collects in crater lakes, and when you see a mirage there's beauty in it and wonder and strangeness and glory."

"You said it was the worst kind of mirage."

"What is worse than a glimpse of an illusionary paradise? You can establish the most destructive kind of Freudian complex in a child by holding out to it a promise of bliss labeled: *For adults only.* A Martian mirage is for adults only, and the first Earthmen on Mars will hardly be adults by any yardstick you may care to measure them with."

"I don't see why."

"When an adult is dying with thirst, and realizes that he has only himself to blame he doesn't fall down and grovel in the sand like a tormented animal when he sees a mirage in the sky."

"What does he do?"

"He faces up to it like a man. He keeps right on walking, refusing to even look at the mirage. When he can't stand it any longer he'll rip off his oxygen mask and put a quick end to his torment."

"And this man you're talking about—he didn't do that?"

"No, he didn't. He went down on his hands and knees on the sand, and groveled. He cursed and groaned and cried like a baby. He kept rubbing his eyes, staring up at the mirage as if pleading with it not to go away. As if it could help him, as if the shining bright water wasn't just an optical phenomenon produced by a stratum of hot air mirroring the inverted reflection of an incredibly distant crater lake.

"He wasn't an adult, and he could actually feel the coolness of the water against his parched flesh. He clung to the illusion as he might have clung to a rubber nipple on an infant-feeding bottle. He made a hideous spectacle of himself. Did you ever see a grown man babble and mew like that plucking infant in Shakespeare? You remember the passage. 'Plucking and mewing in its nurse's arms.'"

"I do—and it always seemed a little revolting to me. I've seen drunks carry on that way, though. What do you say to another beer?"

"Okay, if I can catch the waiter's eye. Meanwhile, suppose you let me finish. This poor fool was down on his hands and knees, thinking the jig was up for him with a vengeance. He hadn't given a thought to the possibility there might actually be life on Mars. The rocket ship had landed in a wilderness of blowing sand and for three days sand was just about the only thing that really threatened his sanity.

"A hundred years ago Thoreau walked the length and breadth of Cape Cod. He wrote a book about

it all filled with sand—bright and continuously blowing sand by the glorious deep blue sea. But the man I'm talking about wasn't a poet. He didn't want to write a book about Mars. He just wanted to stay alive. He felt all hollow inside like a drum, with sand-grains whistling through him and turning him into the kind of musical instrument you visualize when you think of the Danse Macabre."

"You were saying something about life on Mars."

"You're right—so I was. He couldn't believe there could be any life on Mars. A few low-grade lichens might have managed to survive on a world so bleak and inhospitable. But a man dying of thirst does not go in for biological hair-splitting. He was in agony, understand—at the end of his tether."

"Here comes the waiter. Hey, waiter! Over here. Two more beers."

"Just a minute, please. Make mine a whiskey-and-soda. Beer for this gentleman."

"You were saying?" came from a wet whistle, the instant the drinks had been set before us, and I was in a position to go on.

"I was saying it was tragic, horrible, pitiful, ugly. He was down on the sand, expecting that every breath he drew would be his last. Thirst is far worse than hunger. If you've ever experienced it you won't doubt that for an instant."

"I don't doubt it. You make it seem hideously real."

"It was real, believe me. The man was close to death. The fact that he was a coward, and mentally immature had nothing to do with the situation itself—the starkly desperate plight in which he found himself. Without water he could not have survived another hour."

"Did he find water? Did he manage to save himself? You make it so real I can almost see him, tugging at his throat, dragging himself along."

"This whiskey has the right kind of smoky flavor. Heaven protect me from some of the Scotch you get nowadays."

I tapped my glass for emphasis and tried to sound casual. "No, he didn't find water," I said.

"He died then—there in the desert? God, man, don't keep staring at me like that. What's wrong, what's the matter with you? Just who are you, anyway? How can you make it sound so real?"

"The truth always sounds real," I said. "Even to reluctant and unwilling ears."

"Stop being literary. It isn't funny any more."

"I'm not trying to be funny. I'll tell you exactly what happened. He didn't find water, but water was brought to him. Out of the sun-reddened sand blanket, out of the throat-parching mist, and the hollow-drum rattlings

came a Martian walking upright, with a water jug jogging at his waist.

"He was a lowly Martian, a desert outcast. He was weary unto death and he still had a desert to cross. Perhaps the water in the jug wouldn't have held out until he reached his home village. He might even have perished with thirst notwithstanding. But with the water he had a fighting chance to survive.

"Let me describe him. His high bulging forehead was pale-green and veined like an oak leaf. His ink-black eyes were completely pupilless, and his nose so sharp and narrow that it divided his features in a repellently unnatural way. If you hurled a knife at a man and it came out through the front of his face you'd have the groundwork for a mind's eye visualization of the Martian countenance."

"Why are you telling me all this? What happened when he saw the man?"

"He squatted down on the sand and he gave the man half his water to drink. Remember Kipling? 'Squatting on the coals, giving drink to poor damned souls.' Kipling's immortal water boy simply risked his life under fire. A bullet finished him, but he had a fair chance to survive. The Martian had really no chance at all. By letting the man on the sand half empty the jug he was making his own death certain.

"He was making his own death certain—but he was a good guy. A terribly good guy. He was human too. By keeping half the water he could pretend to himself that he *did* have a chance. He didn't want to appear noble in his own eyes, and the flesh being weak—whether it be flesh of man or Martian—having a little water left gave him a certain comfort. He was a terribly good, human guy, believe me."

"What happened? If I was in that man's shoes I wouldn't have cared much whether he was good or bad—not right at that moment. I'd have grabbed that water jug and—"

"I'm sure you would have drained it to the last drop. After all, a man dying of thirst—"

"Yes, that's it. Men come first, you know. After all, I mean—"

"I know exactly what you mean," I told him.

"Why are you looking at me like that? When you described that Martian to me do you know what I thought? I'll tell you. I thought: *Ugh, a primitive savage creature, almost an animal.* How do you know he wasn't an animal. How can you be sure? Because he carried a water jug? I read somewhere in a scientific journal that there was an extinct species of ape—a big-brained gibbon—that actually mastered the use of fire. Its bones were found in a kitchen midden."

"You're right about that. But

would an ape share its last jug of water with a man?"

"That's a silly question. How do we know what an ape might do on Mars?"

"I think you know very well what an ape would do. But you'd have shut your eyes to it if you'd been in that man's shoes. You'd have taken all of the water and you'd have killed the 'animal.' Isn't that so?"

"I might have killed it, yes. A man comes first. A man has a right to survive."

"That's exactly what the man on the sand thought. He half-drained the jug, and handed it back to the 'animal', thinking through the red haze of his torment that the 'animal' was a man. Then his vision steadied a little, and he saw the Martian clearly. He saw the strange repulsive face, the thick covering of body fur.

"He was still thirsty and squatting on the sand before him was an 'animal' with a water jug only half-emptied. In the Martian's eyes was a kindness beyond all human understanding. *This I do gladly for my brother in misery.*

"But the man shut his own eyes firmly, and he whipped out a knife and he killed the Martian."

"Oh."

"You understand now? You understand a little?"

"What—what is there to understand? If I had been in that man's shoes—"

"You would have killed too?"

"If I had been in that man's shoes—"

"Yes, so it was feared. But perhaps I had better explain. All men on Earth are not the same. Some are simple primitive husbandmen living in jungle colonies, well content with the simple joys which nature affords. Others ride the wild stallions at the atom's core. The Martian who gave all that he had to give to his human brother was a desert nomad who hardly understood the rudiments of phonetic language. His great and shining gifts were of the heart.

"But there are other Martians who have freed the energies at the core of suns and who have reached the stars."

"Other—Martians."

"Many others. What if I told you they were waiting on Mars for the first man to arrive? What if I told you that the man on the sand was as real as the poor desert nomad he killed? What if I told you there actually was a rocket ship built, and the project labeled by your Government 'Top Secret,' as you surmised?

"What if I told you that the Martians are the heirs of a culture that antedates all human knowledge, and that Martian ships have long flashed in cometary splendor across your skies? What if I told you that all human knowledge is an open book to Martians, even your Mr. Kipling, and your Shakespeare, that white-throated

swan? And Shelley and Keats.

"What if I told you that Martians can appear before you clothed in all the artificial dignity of a post-hypnotic command, even assuming in your eyes the aspects of men of distinction for an hour or a day?"

"You must be quite mad to say such things."

"Oh, no, my friend. Martians are not mad. We are very wise."

Stark terror flared in his eyes. I knew what he was seeing, for I had dissolved the hypnotic illusion with a single flicker of my *temitis* faculty, as easily and quickly as I had imposed it when he had first seen me.

I knew that without hypnotic deception or illusion of any kind he was looking straight at my high, bulging forehead, pale green, and veined like an oak leaf, and must have seen his own death appallingly foreshadowed in my ink-black, completely pupilless eyes.

"We must immunize, cleanse and disinfect," I said, "whenever we encounter an Earthman who would applaud and approve the behavior of the man on the sand. For such a one would kill Martians in blind rage."

Almost sadly I drew the ultrasonic pistol from my body pouch and shot him through the heart.

an old, old friend

by . . . David Lewis Eynon

In all of Europe there were no vintages so ill-flavored as those of the Marquis—until his genius encasked the dark wine of death.

"CHATEAU REDINE '46!" de Laittre raised the glass between his thin face and the candleflame and sighed. "It's like a friend—an old, old friend."

MacGregor smiled, and glanced up from his notes. The old Count looked like one of the family portraits in his own gallery, wrinkled, dim, varnished in the weaving shadows of the cellar.

Last of the grand seigneurs, thought MacGregor, who was already forming the phrases in his mind for the magazine article he was writing on rare wines. This old noble, the last of his line—probably the last of his *type,* the writer thought sadly—had agreed to an interview, and had already spent a weekend briefing MacGregor on the best vintages of Europe.

The Count had retired to the Aisne province, alone in his crumbling chateau, with his memories, and his wines. The rows of casks behind him leaned forward out of the shadows, and the dusty bottle on the table wore a veil of cobwebs over the bright

We won't deceive you. This story is distinctly on the gruesome side, a horror fantasy in the grand and shuddery tradition of Wilkie Collins, Poe, Bierce and the late great Howard P. Lovecraft. Like the wines of Provence it has a flavor all its own—dark and heady with a whimsical touch of sprightly Gallic modernity to enrich its inimitable bouquet.

face of its illustrious label.

"Voila!" de Laittre thrust the glass across the table for MacGregor, and set it down in front of him with the gestured eloquence of a jeweler displaying a flawless gem. MacGregor smiled again at the Frenchman. De Laittre might be old, and the last of his kind, but he still had power, and the sense of it heightened his prestige as a connoisseur.

For the Count's recommendation of a wine meant its immediate success. If he tasted and nodded, the vintage automatically became a collector's item, the target of lesser gourmets the world over.

If he shrugged, or if he—God forbid—frowned, however slightly, the dealers immediately began to think in terms of exporting the whole crop to America. An assumed name might even become expedient, for the Count's reputation was international.

"Bon, n'est-ce-pas?" The connoisseur chuckled as MacGregor's face broke into admiration at a sniff of the glass. He sipped it gingerly, shaking his head in wonder.

"Flawless," the writer agreed, and sipped again.

"It is." The Count refilled MacGregor's glass, then relaxed in his seat. "A fitting conclusion, V'espere, to our interview." He raised his glass to the writer, and bowed gravely.

MacGregor folded his notes and slipped them into his jacket. He shifted slightly in his chair as he felt the dampness creeping into his bones. The mustiness of the dungeon, mingled with the bouquet of resting vintages, lulled his senses gently.

"There's only one other thing," he said, looking up suddenly at the Frenchman, "if you don't mind another question?"

The sweep of the Count's hand invited him to ask away.

"Your chief pleasure, I gather, is in passing judgment on the new wines each year. You've told me about all the great years—'37, '49. What about the bad ones?"

"The bad years?" the Count's mouth wrinkled and his eyes had a look of pain.

"Yes, sir, the seasons when none of the wines are very good. What do you do for amusement then, sir?"

The Count brought his finger tips together and considered for several moments. Then his face became sly and his eyes twinkled in the candlelight.

"For those who know, mon ami," he shrugged as if those who did know were few indeed, "it is never a bad year. There are places, you understand. There are ways!"

"Really?" MacGregor lowered his glass and reached for his notepaper.

"Ah, non, mon enfant," de Laittre protested, raising his hand, "this cannot be for your story, you understand? But if you will be

patient, as one gentleman to another I will tell you something of my—what does one say?—my resources!"

MacGregor was flattered by the confidence, and his curiosity leaped at the promise of a story from the Frenchman. He spread his elbow and leaned across the table.

"There was once an ancient family that found its end not unlike my own," de Laittre began, "in a single man. A Marquis, with all the tastes and fancies of his kind. Rash, but not without breeding. He had faults, but one excused them for his stimulating, reckless noblesse oblige.

"As the last of his line, he found amusement in dissipating the family fortune. There are many ways, of course, all delightful—but some quicker than others.

"The Marquis chose gambling. Quick, stimulating, and always with the possibility of acquiring an even more substantial fortune. But he had no luck. He had started too young, you understand, so that he finally found himself without means. Too young to die, too old to take any occupation, even had the wild thought entered his head."

"Suicide?" suggested MacGregor.

"Nothing quite so gross." De Laittre shook his head and refilled their glasses. "He only tried to make a living for himself—which is, I admit, nearly as drastic as suicide for such a man.

"His only remaining asset was a small chateau and a few acres of vineyard—a tiny place on the edge of Provence. You know Provence?" de Laittre cocked his eyebrows and glanced up at MacGregor.

The writer shrugged, and the old man accepted his ignorance with tolerance.

"It is called 'Provence' since it was once a Roman colony, or 'Province'. In point of fact, this very chateau was said to date from Roman times.

"It was almost a ruin, this place. The walls were crumbling, the vineyards untended for years. But the vines had sunk their roots deep among the rocks, down to the waters that made a tiny lake in the center of this estate.

"The Marquis returned in his poverty, to this family stone pile, and with a few remaining men hoped to stimulate the vines into production. It was useless," the Count snorted. "The vines were old. Some said the vines themselves had been planted by the Roman governor, hundreds of years before. In any case, they were worked out, beyond use. Such little wine as the Marquis squeezed from his grapes was an atrocity. Acid, pure acid!

"He was reduced to near starvation. The grapes had been his last chance. It was almost like a curse, he told me later. He was a

superstitious man, you understand. As a gambler, he believed heavily in omens and charms.

"So as the vines failed, his feeling grew that somehow his misfortune could be broken, if only he knew the proper charm. Listlessly, he wandered the old estate, turning up an ancient statue here, a weed-covered grotto there. And always his feeling grew on that somewhere, somehow, if he could please the right gods, his luck would change.

"When he found the Roman temple, it was like an omen. Yes," de Laittre nodded at MacGregor's surprise, "there was even a Roman temple still standing on his estates. Oh, it was nearly gone. Only the altar and a few columns remained. But it was unmistakably a place of worship.

"The Marquis sat down, in the late afternoon sunlight, and in his reverie came the conviction that here, of all places, a proper sacrifice could change everything. But what to sacrifice?"

The Count raised his palms and the candle stretched the shadows of his hands across the flagstones.

"A life," said MacGregor, shifting uneasily in his seat. "It's usually a life."

"Certainment! But whose?" The Count raised the thin-necked bottle and poured until the glasses brimmed with gold. "One of his retainers? They would be missed. A guest? One has one's code, after all!

"But his problem was solved quite neatly, in the end. As he sat thinking, a snore intruded on the quiet of the early evening. The Marquis, startled, rose, and investigated. He found a sleeping tramp, curled against the warmth of the sun-washed altar.

"To a man of the Marquis' temperament, this was a hint not to be overlooked. It was a simple matter to tap the tramp with a loose piece of paving and roll him into the old well.

"Nothing messy," the Count raised his hand abruptly. "Nothing gauche. A simple tap, a slight tug, and—zut!—down the well!" The Count folded his hands and nodded.

"You approve?" MacGregor was shocked.

"The vines improved," the Count cautioned quickly, as if this were an extenuating circumstance of the highest order. "A man lost his life, it is true," he added judiciously. "But the results, mon ami, the results!" He kissed his finger tips and spread them wide.

"The next season, the vines of the Marquis produced a wine—such a wine!—that one would not hastily accuse him of acting wrongly. Crime, after all, is relative, is it not so? One must always ask, 'What are the final effects on society?' And if one can answer, 'Chateau Redine '36!' "

The Count smiled sagely and looked around at MacGregor with twinkling eyes.

"Then this?" MacGregor paused with his glass half-way to his lips and stared at it with sudden suspicion.

"*Exactment!* The Marquis had changed his fortunes. Each year a superb new vintage, and each with a distinct character. The first had a light, carefree, almost *vagabond* air. It made him famous. *I* endorsed it immediately," he added, to remove all doubt.

"The '37 was a moody wine, at times light, gay—often sombre and melancholy—but always delightful," the connoisseur stared at the vaulted ceiling as he mused.

"The sacrifice," MacGregor asked wonderingly, "was it . . ."

"Repeated? But of course!" the Count chuckled. "A gypsy who wandered on the estate."

'Then each year," MacGregor started.

"True," the Count agreed. "But the fact of importance, the vital moral of the situation, is that there was *never a bad year.* None." He rapped the table sharply.

"Even when the season was impossible everywhere else," he grimaced at the memory of bitter wines, "Chateau Redine could be depended upon." He spoke as if he were recommending someone for a large loan.

"The Marquis *always* produced. His selection of character for the wine," the Count suggested delicately, "was above reproach. Except once." He sighed sadly and looked down.

"The Marquis was a patriot, you understand. A good Frenchman, even if France had conspired to destroy his very class. During the occupation, as a good Frenchman, he decided that it would be a shame to sacrifice a French life, even for a good vintage." The Count seemed to doubt the Marquis' judgment, but was prepared to be liberal.

"He managed to lure a German officer to his temple. The German was an amateur archeologist, you understand. He was never missed." The Count spoke the last words with a tone that implied that no German ever could be missed.

"The wine that year was . . . regrettable. A heavy, stiff bouquet, pedantic and cold. It traveled well, but that was hardly of interest, since it had no other virtue.

"The Marquis toyed with the idea of an Italian," the Count explained with distaste. "Perhaps he was right. It was possible, you understand, that his sacrifices had no real effect on the crop. His estate *was* laid out in a bowl-shaped depression, which some said kept the bad weather out, even when it ruined the other crops in the neighborhood.

"But no matter. The Marquis had his fancies, and who is to argue them?" The Count smiled indulgently and poured the last

of the bottle into the two glasses.

"He was sitting in the temple, early one spring, pondering his next crop. The choices were few, by now. Travel was difficult, strangers were rare, and the village had but several people who could be spared.

"The schoolteacher often went for walks alone, but she was, it is said, a virgin," the Count's tone dismissed her. "The war was just over. There were many Americans, but a brash, presumptive wine never sells well.

"The Marquis was in a serious position. The vines would be out soon and time was short. Even as he sat there, the sky darkened and the wind rose, almost as if the gods were frowning at his tardiness."

"That was in 1946?" asked MacGregor, studying the label on the empty bottle.

"Precisely," the Count said. "It was important to the Marquis to have an especially good wine that year. Export was about to be resumed.

"But he waited too long," the Count continued. "As he sat thinking, the wind toppled one of the old pillars. His crushed body had been in the well several days before the authorities found it."

"But what's happened since then?" MacGregor asked, seeing the old nobleman's face in a blur through the guttering candle.

"Since then?" The Count picked up the empty bottle and gently brushed the cobwebs from its label. "Chateau Redine '46 has become my favorite year.

"It's the last from that Chateau, you know," he added sadly. "A rash wine, but not without breeding. It has faults, but one excuses them. And it possesses a stimulating, reckless, noblesse oblige.

"I drink it often, when I'm lonely," de Laittre said fondly, letting his eyes review the line of casks running back into the darkness. "It's like an old, old friend."

the tormented ones

by . . . Richard R. Smith

He was a coward—but the aliens had strange and terrifying ways of testing the mettle of a man.

The three months search had ended.

Now, he stood face to face with the man he wanted to kill or be himself the victim, the hopeless, vanquished one. Other men filled the street, their eyes gleaming and lustful for the sight of blood. No one would stop them. On the frontier planets there was no law to enforce.

Their knives flashed in the bright sunlight. Their breathing was a labored, harsh thing in the silence of the street.

The duel lasted five minutes—five minutes that seemed hours.

His knife was knocked from his hand. He fell and in an instant his enemy was on him, pinning him to the ground. His adversary held a knife against his throat.

He looked up at the victor and smiled. "Kill me," he said.

The victor rose and sheathed the knife. He stared at the eyes of the man he had almost killed. "I told you I hated cowards. Only cowards. Get up. I'll buy you a drink."

If you liked Richard R. Smith's exciting, first-published story in a recent issue, prepare yourself for another thrill. He's done it again—woven his Korean war experiences as a G. I. Joe into as stirring a cosmic yarn as you're likely to encounter this side of Betelgeuse. As we said last time, it's quite a leap from Korea to the shining stars, but Richard Smith has his own patented brand of space equipment, and knows how to use it.

THE SHIP hurtled through the dark night of space, an insignificant mote in cosmic vastness.

The storage compartments were filled with tons of rare metals and the rocket tubes roared with a fury that made the ship tremble from bow to stern.

The metal deck beneath Quentin Myrick's feet trembled slightly and the vibration made his body tremble. But he was trembling more than the others, more than he should be because of the ship's engines, and as he looked from one face to another, he could tell that they *knew*.

The muscles in Warren's face twitched and twisted, contributing an aspect of viciousness to the perpetual snarl. His eyes beneath the bushy eyebrows were wild, and they gleamed with fury.

"Nobody calls me that, Quentin," he said between tight lips. His hands became fists as he spoke and he stepped forward.

Quentin felt his self-control vanish. Before, he had been able to keep his face calm despite his inner tremors. Now, he knew his face showed all the fear he felt of Warren . . . the fear he had kept hidden for so long.

"I was only kidding, Warren!" he pleaded. "Lots of guys call other guys that name when they don't mean it. I didn't mean it. I—"

A large scarred fist moved with startling speed and Quentin found himself rolling across the floor. He collided against a wall and scrambled to his feet. His jaw ached dully. He felt blood trickle down his chin.

Warren walked toward him.

"*Stop him!* He's drunk. He doesn't know what he's doing. He —" He faltered abruptly as he realized his plea to the other men would fall on deaf ears. Their expressions seemed to say, *You're the one that called him a schnife. Fight your own battles!*

Fight?

Quentin turned and ran.

When he reached his compartment, he was totally exhausted and crying like a child. He fell on his cot, trembling.

Now he had done it! *Now* the other men would know he was a *coward!*

He lifted his trembling, soft hands before his eyes. Fight? He had never fought a man in all his life. How could he fight when he didn't want to be hurt? How could he fight when it was always easier to run than to stand and—

The door opened.

A large man with sloping, powerful shoulders filled the doorway and glared at the trembling man on the cot.

"Come on, Quentin." He nodded his head toward the door and swayed drunkenly.

"Warren, I—"

"*Come on!*"

Quentin followed Warren's staggering form down the corridor. Somehow, he managed to stop

crying and the trembling of his body was not quite as violent as before. But the fear was still there. It still churned sickly in his stomach. He knew what Warren could do to him with his hard fists or the shiny knife he always carried and he was still *afraid.*

Warren stopped before the air-lock and nodded at Quentin's spacesuit on the rack. "This is my ship, Quentin. I'm your employer. You're fired. Get off my ship."

"Warren, you're drunk! I told you I didn't mean what I said. If—"

The hard face was thrust so close to his own that he could smell the odor of whisky mingled with the man's breath. A burly hand raised a shining knife and flourished it before his eyes. "Would you rather get off my ship voluntarily or otherwise? I'll give you a choice."

He turned the knife over and over. The light from the ceiling lamps glinted on the smooth metal.

Quentin remembered the many times he had seen Warren use the knife in duels. The weapon seemed to be a part of the man . . . a deadly, lustful part of the man's body and mind.

Quentin donned his spacesuit with trembling, clumsy hands.

But that was as far as he could go. The terror in his mind would not let him fasten the helmet in place or step into the waiting air-lock. He kept thinking: *Maybe he'll sober up. Maybe he'll realize I didn't intend it as an insult. Maybe the other men will stop him.*

Warren shoved him into the air-lock and he struck the outer door with a dull thud.

"I've hated cowards for a long time, Quentin. It might sound strange but a coward was responsible for the death of my wife and I've hated cowards—"

Quentin did not hear the rest. The door slid shut, cutting Warren's sentence off, blocking him from view.

He beat at the door with his gloved fists.

A reddish glow filled the small cubicle.

The warning signal. The button had been pushed. In a few minutes, the air-lock's outer door would open.

He barely had time to secure his helmet.

Air left the compartment like jets of helium from a burst balloon. It rushed into the black void and carried Quentin with it.

Seconds later, he was spinning aimlessly in the vast emptiness of space.

With the spacesuit's small jets, he stopped the spinning and stared at his surroundings. He had seen the stars from ships but now, they looked both more cosmic and more intimate. Fascinated, he stared at the myriad islands of light and energy. The farthest ones were like diamond dust sprinkled

across soft, black velvet. The nearer ones were like jewels of frozen white flame. Some of the stars would have planets. Machines in the suit would purify the air he used, and he could utilize the same supply of air over and over until the purifying machines broke down.

He estimated that the oxygenating machines would last for a few months. He had enough concentrated food rations for a week. *If* he was drifting in the right direction—toward the nearest star—and used the suit jets, and *if* that star had a planet, it would take several thousand years to reach his destination. But what good would it do him to miraculously reach a planet? He would vaporize from friction as he passed into its upper atmosphere.

On the other hand, it wasn't altogether impossible that another spaceship would pass within a few hundred thousand miles of him. The spacesuit contained a small interstellar radio capable of sending messages that far. And if he was lucky, he estimated roughly, a spaceship would pass in a few years.

There was another possibility. *If* Warren informed the Interstellar Police of his predicament and *if* they used every ship they had to search for him, they would find him in a few months.

In the confines of the plastic helmet, his ears rang with his screams.

Consciousness returned slowly.

He was lying on something smooth and soft. Where was he? He tried to remember what had happened. He remembered eating sparingly of the spacesuit rations in an attempt to sustain his life as long as possible. He remembered eating the last piece of sickly sweet chocolate. He remembered the pains in his stomach and the weakness that had grown with each passing day . . .

He tried to open his eyes. The eyelids seemed to be glued together. The sensation was vaguely familiar, and he recalled how he had often cried himself to sleep as a child. Upon awakening, his eyes had been glued together by the dried teardrops.

Slowly and painfully, he opened his eyes.

It was not a room. It was unlike anything he had ever seen before. He was inside a spherical compartment! He was lying on the floor, if it could be called a floor, for it consisted solely of a soft blue substance that curved to the domed ceiling high above. At various spots, the blue substance seemed to pulse rhythmically and his nostrils were assailed by a sweet, exotic odor.

Where was he? How long had he lain inside the featureless globe?

His eyes burned, and a few weeks' growth of coarse blond hair covered his chin and cheeks.

Suddenly as he stared a section

of the spherical above him burst into brief silent flames, and a small opening appeared.

The opening dilated, and something entered the compartment.

Quentin stared at the strange creature.

It was roughly oval in shape. The entire surface of its body, except for a narrow area around its middle, was covered with small antennae that wriggled spasmodically. Quentin watched in amazement as the green, translucent creature reached out with its tentacles and *rolled* down the wall.

The creature stopped a few feet away and he was aware of the unpleasant acrid odor of its alien body.

He tried to rise but found that he could not move his legs. In growing terror he turned his head to face the alien. The moist, green tentacles reached out again and explored his body. With the contact, he felt a soft, intangible voice in his mind. "How do you feel?"

He ignored the question and asked aloud, "Where am I?"

"Aboard our ship. I am speaking directly to your mind. I can read your thoughts, but speak if you wish. It may help you."

"How did you find me?"

"We have machines that receive and translate thoughts over great distances. We knew that you were alone and in danger."

"Who are you?"

"Your race does not know of us. For a number of reasons, we have not made contact with your race. But we have no animosity toward you. We have rescued you from your danger and we will heal your body."

A question burned in his mind, "Why hasn't your race contacted my race?"

The moist, stubby antennae seemed to wriggle more violently. "Because the economic and sociological changes that would result in our civilization would be harmful, perhaps disastrous."

"Will you take me to Earth?"

But the alien had withdrawn his tentacles and the question was not answered.

Quentin watched as the creature propelled itself up the inclining wall and disappeared through the opening. The passage in the blue substance closed silently.

He felt a surge of elation. Rescued! Rescued by an alien race with sufficient scientific knowledge to make its promises convincing. But what was wrong with him? Was he sick? Was his body damaged in some way? The alien had said, *We will heal your body.* Tentatively, he concentrated on various parts of his body. There was no pain, no sensation of physical illness. He could not move his legs and arms but no pain accompanied the immobility. He was completely relaxed.

He laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks. What luck! He had lost his job with Warren Mining Corporation, but did that

matter so much? A good space technician could always get a job. Maybe he would even try some other kind of work.

At first, going to different planets, searching for valuable ores and carrying them back to Earth had been interesting. But during the past few months, he had felt tired . . . weary unto death of the endless planets, and the traveling. It would be nice to settle in one place and raise a family. Should he prosecute his employer when he returned to Earth? No, Warren would testify about his cowardice, and to have that fact made public in the newspapers would not be worth the satisfaction of seeing Warren in prison for attempted murder.

Machines clicked and cackled from somewhere beyond the walls. Strange, alien machines, making sounds he had never heard before.

Something reached out and touched his brain. It was not the alien. It was invisible, cool and mechanical—*a machine.*

The soft blue spherical vanished in a flood of darkness.

His name was John Benson.

He was forty years old, the father of three children and the first man to attempt the flight to Mars alone.

His ship, Astra, floated aimlessly. The engine room had been wrecked by meteorites and after days in space, waiting for an almost impossible rescue, another meteorite had struck the shattered vessel.

He watched as air rushed rapidly through a small opening in the bulkhead opposite him. One small meteorite, traveling at incredible speed through space would cause his death.

He was too exhausted to repair the damage.

Air whistled through the torn metal and gave a high, shrill scream as if reluctant to be dispersed in the empty void outside.

He inhaled.

The pain in his lungs told him there was not enough oxygen.

He inhaled again.

There was *no air.* His lungs labored furiously and fought to suck in air that didn't exist. They became heavy, leaden weights in his chest.

He sank to the cool metal deck and waited.

His skull seemed to expand with the pressure. His heart throbbed violently and seemed unable to pump blood through his body. He gasped for air and received none.

His lungs exploded with pain and a warm darkness spread rapidly over him. As if they were faraway, unreal things, he felt his lungs and heart lose their battle to function. There was a sticky wetness in his throat. Blood? And then the darkness became more dense until it blotted out the pain and even his own thoughts . . . And so, John Benson died.

Quentin regained consciousness and heard a man screaming. The cold sweat on his body seemed to chill his flesh, and he trembled uncontrollably.

Tears mingled with the sweat and trickled down his face, and into his mouth. He tasted the salty flavor and concentrated on its reality.

A dream. A very realistic dream.

The terror inside him diminished slowly and he waited for the alien egg-shaped creature to return. He wanted to tell it about his strange dream . . .

Machines clicked and cackled beyond the soft, pulsating wall of the spherical.

He was Bill Wilson.

He stood by the largest canal on Mars and his friend raised a camera to take his picture. The sun was small and dim, the air cool and intoxicating. The strange Martian grass rustled in the slight breeze. In the canal behind him and hundreds of feet below, muddy water gurgled frantically as it struggled to sustain the life of a dying planet.

He glanced at his wife as she stood by the car. She wore a bright formfitted dress that made no effort to conceal her willowy body. He felt the familiar urge to take her in his arms, and feel the warmth of her, the yielding sweetness of her.

Carl dropped the camera, and in one swift motion, a knife appeared in his hand.

And for the first time, Wilson realized how blind he had been not to see with their true meaning, the smiles and glances that had passed between his wife and Carl for the past few months.

He raised an arm to stop the flashing knife. The cold steel slashed into his wrist. Instantly, he felt the difference in blood pressure throughout his body.

He did not look at the blood that spurted from his wrist. If he did not see it, perhaps he could stay on his feet longer. He swung at Carl clumsily. The man dodged and slashed with the knife again . . . and again.

They left him in the rustling Martian grass by the big canal.

He heard the car as it headed across the desert.

Warmth left his body and his skin turned pale. He felt cold and sleepy. He felt as if he could sleep for eternity . . .

Quentin awoke bathed in cold sweat. This time he cried but he did not scream.

Once more, the alien machines churned audibly.

In the dream, he was Harvey Judson.

He was burned alive and his flesh was like a cloak of broken glass and the pain throughout his body grew and grew until it was no longer pain but a soft warmness that made him scream with joy.

Quentin Myrick did not scream or cry after the last dream. He felt exhausted.

The procession of nightmares that followed seemed endless.

In the fleeting moments between the dreams, he wondered why the aliens were torturing him. It was evident that their machines somehow planted the horribly realistic dreams in his mind. But why should they *want* to torture him?

What had he done to harm them? What did they gain by tormenting him? The alien had rescued him and promised to heal his body. Were the aliens basically sadistic? Did they derive pleasure from seeing him suffer? It was possible.

He slept at times and lost all sense of time. Had they tortured him for days or weeks?

After dying a dozen ways in the strange dreams, the machines were silent.

Quentin waited patiently.

The passage appeared again in the blue spherical and the oval-shaped alien glided down the inclining wall toward him.

A green tentacle reached out and touched his forehead exploringly.

"Why did you torture me?" he asked.

The alien body seemed to emit a different odor when it answered the question. "We did not torture you."

An alien equivalent of laughter swirled through his mind. "Perhaps I should explain. My race is inherently compassionate toward sentient creatures. That is why we cannot afford to make contact with your race. Being compassionate—more than you can possibly imagine—my civilization would attempt to help your civilization if a general contact were made. Such inevitable efforts on the part of my civilization would help your race. But my race and civilization would suffer great economic and sociological damage. Do you understand?"

Quentin did not understand but he said, "Yes."

"Because we are compassionate, we rescued you from your danger and cured your disease. We can do this in isolated cases like yours when there is no danger of your race discovering and contacting us."

"Disease?" he queried. "What kind of disease?"

"Humans call it *fear.*"

"Fear?"

"In your race, fear is an instinctive reaction necessary for survival. But we have noticed that in some individuals, as in yourself, the instinct has *overgrown* and is no longer a necessary instinct but a psychological disease. We have cured you."

He fumbled for words to express his thoughts but could find none.

The alien continued, "We have machines that record human

thoughts over great distances. We have dozens of recordings of humans that have died. With our machines, we implanted the dying sensations of these men in your mind.

"After the first dream, you screamed and cried like an infant of your race.

"After the second dream, you did not scream. *The psychological impact of the dream was lessened because you had experienced death once before.*

"Your reactions after the third dream were even better: you did not cry.

"Your reactions to each successive dream were progressively better until the last dream we implanted in your mind. Tell me how you felt before and after the last dream."

Quentin recalled his sensations with amazement, "I wasn't afraid!"

"Your race fears the *unknown.* Now, you have known a dozen deaths intimately. Your mind has withstood the psychological shock of pain and death. It has no reason to be afraid of death. When death comes in reality or merely threatens, you will not be afraid. It will not be a new experience for you. It will be a familiar experience and you will know what to expect. You will know how to prepare your mind to receive the shock of death or pain.

"We have taught you how to strengthen your mind against the psychological impact of pain and death. When you experienced the dreams, you *had* to strengthen your mind and ignore the fear."

Quentin laughed with joy. "A psychological antitoxin!"

The alien's antennae seemed to wiggle with less violence. An alien expression of joy and satisfaction? "Fear of death is the root of all fears in an individual of your race. When a human does not fear death, he *cannot* fear anything else. Because, fear of death is the greatest fear of the human mind. Many humans do not realize they have such a fear—they force it deep into their subconscious—but it is there and when a human does not fear death, he does not fear anything."

"I don't know how to thank—"

But the alien had withdrawn contact and was climbing the wall of the spherical toward the waiting passage.

Quentin watched the alien's departure with tears in his eyes. Compassionate race. They would not even wait for him to thank them. Galactic Good Samaritans!

He wondered what faraway planet they inhabited. Or did their civilization spread across uncharted galaxies? How advanced was their civilization? It seemed to be more advanced than his own. How much more advanced?

He wondered what their spaceship looked like. Was it tremendous or smaller than the average Earth ship? He would never know.

He would never see beyond the blue spherical.

There was a chill in the air and the stars shone bright and clear through the thin Martian atmosphere. He wondered how long he had been asleep and how he had gotten to Mars. His last memory was that of being in a spacesuit, drifting aimlessly between the stars.

He felt different. Why did he feel different? What was different about him? What had changed?

A Martian *Schkal* howled in the distance. It was a weird sound, only faintly resembling that of wolves on Earth.

And then he knew what was different about himself. There was no fear in him. He searched his mind and soul and with a surge of awe, found that he had no fear of *anything* or *anyone.*

He headed toward the lights of the distant city.

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give a man a chair he can lick

by . . . Hal K. Wells

Mr. Adkins had trouble with a good many things beside chairs. But when a chair turns ugly mean—

IT WAS THE chair's fault, of course, and that hurt Mr. Adkins deeply. Mr. Adkins had long since become accustomed to being browbeaten and imposed upon by people, but up until then he had always gotten along reasonably well with chairs. What made the matter still worse was the fact that it was a chair of which Mr. Adkins had been particularly fond. The chair was the principle reason that he had rented the room from Mr. Balberg in the first place.

Mr. Adkins was a small man with one of those bland, timid faces that seem born to anonymity, and usually achieved it. His hair was a sparse fringe of brownish-gray with a tattered look like that of the worn fringes on the rugs in the long succession of cheap furnished rooms in which Mr. Adkins lived. The fact that he moved so frequently was not a matter of his own choice.

He was a home-loving body who would much rather have remained in the same quarters indefinitely, but the exigencies of his work seemed to make that

Hal K. Wells' fiction has been published in over forty different magazines of national circulation. He is predominantly an idea writer, with the kind of lively, thought-provoking style that science fiction writers sometimes attribute to Martians on a literary spree. Being partial, we like Hal K. Wells' science fiction stories best of all, and we like this one especially.

impossible. Sooner or later, something always happened. Such had been the case with Mrs. MacDarwell, his most recent landlady prior to Mr. Balberg.

Mrs. MacDarwell was willing to tolerate a reasonable amount of personal idiosyncrasies from her tenants as long as they paid their rent promptly. When the spinster in the small room next to Mr. Adkins complained that her pet goldfish were suddenly starting to grow a luxuriant crop of what were unmistakably black whiskers, Mrs. MacDarwell paid very little attention.

The spinster was a notorious bargain hunter. Mrs. MacDarwell merely figured that she had probably got hold of some off-brand goldfish somewhere that had a little channel cat in their ancestry. But a short time later, when the irascible old gentleman who had the big corner room on the other side of Mr. Adkins joined the complaining chorus, that was a different matter.

Most of Mrs. MacDarwell's rooms had painted walls, but the old gentleman's room was papered. It was wall-paper with an old-fashioned design that featured flocks of sheep in a pastoral setting. These sheep had started to leer at him in a hostile and menacing manner, the old gentleman complained bitterly. They were also going "Ba-a-ah!" in the middle of the night, a time when respectable elderly citizens should be allowed to get their rest in peace.

The big corner room rented for ten dollars a week, which was exactly twice what Mr. Adkins was paying. Mrs. MacDarwell knocked upon Mr. Adkin's door.

"I've no way of proving it's you," she said, "but I have been keeping roomers for thirty years and until I got you in my house I never had any trouble with the wall-paper talking back to my tenants. You and that radio of yours!"

She bobbed her head toward the neatly wired set of tubes and condensers upon Mr. Adkins' worktable. "If it really is an ordinary, respectable radio," she commented, "which I very much doubt. Anyway, you are doing something and whatever it is you can go and do it someplace else!"

Finding a room that would fit within his rigidly restricted rental budget was always a tough problem for Mr. Adkins. It was late in the afternoon when his quest finally brought him to the somewhat untidy frame residence of Mr.Herman Balberg.

Mr. Balberg was six feet seven and weighed two hundred and forty pounds in his stocking feet, which was what they were in when he answered the door.

"Yes, I have a very nice little room for rent," he said. "Unless you are one of those no-good low-lifes who does not like good music."

Music was a thing regarding which Mr. Adkins was absolutely neutral. He neither liked nor disliked it any more that he liked or disliked the Himalayan Mountains.

"You see, I play," Mr. Balberg explained. He gestured with one massive arm toward a huge gleaming grand piano visible through the open door of the music-room.

"Your playing would not bother me in the least," Mr. Adkins said.

"Good!" Mr. Balberg boomed. "Come right on in."

The room was on the second floor, and that was good. The hair still rose eerily on the back of Mr. Adkins' neck when he remembered what had happened to him one night in a ground floor room. The grass had not been too bad, but Mr. Adkins was quite sure that he would never care very much for lilac bushes again.

Mr. Balberg's room was miserably small even for a five-dollar-a-week room. There was a rickety bed with a lumpy and discouraged mattress, a battered dresser with a cracked mirror, and a wobbly-legged bridge-table that was sway-backed in at least four different dimensions.

Then Mr. Adkins saw The Chair, and the rest of the furniture no longer mattered. Only a man who had spent his life in cheap furnished rooms could appreciate why this magnificent piece of furniture rated the accolade of capital letters.

Mr. Adkins had often reflected that there must be a secret factory tucked away in a cave somewhere in which leering little workmen with barb-tipped tails built chairs solely for use in furnished rooms in the lower rental bracket. It seemed incredible that any mere earthly geometry could ever produce those bone-hard wooden implements of torture in which a sitter, no matter what his physique or what position he assumed, still always found a sharp corner viciously prodding him some place.

There were no corners on this Chair to jab even the most sensitive of anatomies. There was nothing but plumply overstuffed arms and back, and a huge, deep cushion into which a man could sink in ease and relaxation.

It was not new. The fabric of its cover had long since faded to an indeterminate shade of brownish mauve. Occasional tufts of stuffing showed through its seams. But the years had brought a mellow ripeness and a genial tolerance that age can bring only to a basically sound character.

"It's a lovely room," Mr. Adkins said happily. "I'll take it."

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Mr. Adkins curled up in The Chair. He burrowed deep into its plump cushions. He squirmed ecstatically into every position a human body can achieve in a chair, and they were all comfortable. Mr. Adkins felt like

purring in serene contentment.

His relations with the rest of the furniture were not so pleasant. The bed creaked and groaned lugubriously through both the small hours of the night and the medium-sized ones. The dresser drawers stubbornly resisted being pulled out, and fought just as bitterly against being pushed back in again. The bridge-table had a congenitally mismatched set of legs that, no matter how carefully Mr. Adkins stuffed folded newspapers under them, still always ended up with one leg short.

But these were minor irritations that Mr. Adkins was willing to endure patiently. He had a feeling that it would not be long now before he would be far above such drab economies as five-dollar-a-week rooms.

When Mrs. MacDarwell's wallpaper had started to go "Ba-a-ah!" Mr. Adkins had for the first time seen a promising possibility of turning his epochal scientific discovery to real financial gain. Before that, he had been able to figure no practical way of cashing in on his little apparatus' startling ability to receive and re-broadcast certain cosmic rays.

At least, Mr. Adkins thought they were cosmic rays. He had never done any reading on the subject of cosmic radiations, and he had no particular wish to do any. But the rays that his set tuned in were obviously of a sort never known on earth before, so Mr. Adkins simply assumed that they must be cosmic in origin, and let it go at that.

When the thing started originally, Mr. Adkins had had no idea whatever of prying into any cosmic secrets. The cosmos had always let Mr. Adkins alone, and he was willing to do the same by it. He was merely tinkering around with a superhetrodyne radio hook-up with a vague idea of trying out a few new ideas he had regarding pentode grid voltages.

Then, midway through wiring the detector circuit, he had suddenly stopped with the soldering-iron poised in his hand and a dreamy look in his eyes.

"I wonder," he had murmured thoughtfully to himself. "Instead of making this connection here, I *could* make it over there. And instead of hooking this condenser in here, maybe I could hook it up there. If I did, I wonder what would happen?"

Inventors who ask themselves that fateful question sometimes get their answers the hard way. It is quite probable that a number of luckless pioneers once asked themselves what would happen if saltpetre, charcoal, and sulphur were combined in certain proportions before one of them finally survived the experiment in a sufficiently intact condition to announce the discovery of gunpowder.

Mr. Adkins came perilously near suffering a similar fate the

first time he turned his new apparatus on. By then, the original small changes in the detector circuit had led to a long succession of radical changes throughout the entire set until the altered apparatus bore no resemblance whatever to any known radio circuit.

For that matter, it bore no resemblance to any other kind of circuit that Mr. Adkins had ever seen, either. And yet, in spite of its bewilderingly different assembly, there was a certain look of functional *rightness* about the complex maze of wiring and tubes that made Mr. Adkins think that maybe he had something. The only thing that remained was to find out just what it was that he had.

It was twelve o'clock of a warm Summer night when he soldered the last connection and prepared to snap the switch that would send current flowing through the tubes for the first time. In view of later developments, it was a moment in the world's scientific history that should by rights have been accompanied by a mighty fanfare from golden trumpets, while rich velvet draperies swept majestically apart to reveal a brilliantly spotlighted marvel in the center of a darkened stage.

The nearest thing to a fanfare around the premises, however, was a radio nasally moaning a hillbilly dirge through an open window of the house next door, and rich velvet draperies did not come as standard equipment in the five-dollar-a-week furnished room—ground floor, rear—that Mr. Adkins occupied at the time. Mr. Adkins' fingers fumbled nervously for the switch and snapped it on.

There was a resonant little *ping*, followed by a low humming sound that had a curiously hiccoughing rhythm like the song of a slightly intoxicated bumblebee. From somewhere deep within the maze of coils, a pale green illumination spread outward from the set like a tenuous emerald-tinted fog.

Several minutes passed without event while the set ticked groggily away. Then Mr. Adkins became aware of another sound. It was a low, sibilant hissing that came from the backyard outside the room's single window. He went over and looked out.

There was a gaunt old lilac bush close beside the window, and beyond it an unkempt stretch of six-inch-high grass. The hissing came from the grass. Every stalk and blade was twisting and writhing in a serpent-like dance. Here and there a few scattered white clover blooms arched above the rest like tiny albino cobras. Mr. Adkins gasped, and leaned out through the unscreened window to observe closer.

It was fortunate that the branches of the lilac bush beside the window were old and brittle. Otherwise, the Homicide Squad would have found itself faced with

the baffling case of a small male corpse with the limb of a lilac bush coiled in lethal snugness around its neck.

As it was, things were touch and go for several desperate minutes before Mr. Adkins finally wrenched himself free, and snapped the switch off. The green fog vanished, and with it all trace of the strange pseudo-life it had brought. The lilac bush was again nothing by shrubbery, and the grass was merely grass. Mr. Adkins massaged rubbing alcohol into his aching neck, and abandoned further experiments for that night.

Next morning, when his landlady at that time, a gauntly angular woman by the name of Mrs. Glidden, knocked on his door with indignant queries as to the cause of the commotion the night before, Mr. Adkins did not even try to explain. Mrs. Glidden was not the sort of a person who would be likely to listen sympathetically to any tale of a midnight battle to the death with a berserk lilac bush.

Mr. Adkins wanted to move, anyway. The next time he turned his apparatus on, he wanted to be high enough above ground level that his neck would be safely beyond reach of any homicidally inclined pieces of shrubbery.

He found a small room located over a kitchen. The landlord assured him that in Winter the heat coming through the floor made it so warm and cozy you wouldn't believe it. He neglected to add that in Summer it also made the room a place well suited for baking bread. Mr. Adkins disregarded the heat, and set to work to see if he could duplicate under less hazardous conditions the startling botanical phenomena of the first test.

The ideal subjects for the experiment would have been some potted plants small enough to be safely handled if they became belligerent, but potted plants were expensive and fresh tomatoes were cheap, with the added advantage of being edible after the experiment was over. Mr. Adkins bought a pound of fresh tomatoes.

He put one of the largest on the table near the set, and snapped the switch on. The tubes glowed, and the pale green mist spread outward. For a moment, the tomato remained motionless. Then it quivered slightly. Mr. Adkins leaned forward for a closer look.

The tomato bobbed up and down a couple of tentative little bouncing motions. Then it gave a third and prodigious bounce. Mr. Adkins ducked too late. The hurtling vegetable caught him squarely between the eyes.

He snapped the switch off, and wiped the tomato juice and pulp from his drenched eyebrows. It was a fortunate thing he congratulated himself, that he had not tried the experiment with a coconut.

He was reasonably certain now as to just what it was that he had. His apparatus was tuning in a hitherto unknown cosmic ray, then amplifying and re-broadcasting the ray in a manner that had a strong, though temporary, effect upon all vegetable life within the set's immediate vicinity. The effect was twofold. It brought an enormously increased power of movement, and to some degree the power of conscious thought.

Mr. Adkins decided to explore the matter a little further. Then on the second evening of his experiments an untoward development occurred. He had overlooked the fact that his apparatus broadcast not only in outward direction, but also upward and downward. His landlord had selected that particular evening to have a group of his cronies gathered around the kitchen table for a watermelon feed.

Mr. Adkins turned his set on just as the host was starting to cut a forty-pound watermelon. The stories of the bedraggled and somewhat hysterical survivors differed as to the details, but they were unanimous in one thing. Everyone agreed that just before the cataclysm occurred a faint greenish haze had come streaming down through the ceiling.

Next day Mr. Adkins moved again, this time to the rooming-house of Mrs. MacDarwell. He thought things over, and decided to try a little remodeling on his set. The results that he had obtained so far had been interesting from a scientific point of view, but they showed too little promise of any personal profit.

A process that endowed vegetable growth with a pseudo-life whose principle quality seemed to be a violent hostility to the human race offered very few commercial possibilities, considering the hazards involved. Mr. Adkins shuddered at what might happen if his set were to be tuned on within range of a large specimen of *Saguaro* cactus.

It seemed reasonable to assume that there might be other rays available in adjacent frequencies of the cosmic wave-band that would produce effects equally potent but better adaptable to pracitcal use. Mr. Adkins made several basic changes in his detector circuit.

His theory proved correct. When he turned the set on again, there was the same greenish haze, but the effects indicated the work of a brand-new ray. This one affected only animal life, and its effects were permanent. The spinster's bewhiskered goldfish were among the first products of the new ray.

Mr. Adkins had other examples in his own room. One was a plump house spider that grew a large pair of gauzy purple wings upon which it flittered gracefully, though a bit erratically, about the room. Another was a small fuzzy

caterpiller that began growing a set of long, gleaming white tusks.

Mr. Adkins surveyed the tusked caterpillar in some consternation, and hastily abandoned any further experiments with that particular ray. He re-wired his circuits to get into another frequency, and turned the set on again. The ray that he tuned in this time resulted in the unseemly behavior of the old gentleman's wall-paper.

The old gentleman's claims that the pictured sheep were leering at him and bleating in the night were absurd, of course. All that had really happened was that the wall-paper, in those places where it was not pasted too firmly to the wall, had stirred in slight movements. The movements had been accompanied by faint rasping sounds, the old gentleman's imagination had done the rest.

Mr. Adkins was jubilant. The animated wall-paper resulted in his enforced departure from Mrs. MacDarwell's, but that was a minor inconvenience. For the first time since his experiments with the rays began, Mr. Adkins saw the promise of potential pay dirt.

The ray to which his apparatus was tuned now differed from its predecessors in affecting dead, instead of living, animal and vegetable matter, and it was also very highly selective. It apparently acted only upon the particular variety of processed wood-pulp used in the manufacture of wall-paper.

It was an extremely fortunate choice as far as the commercial possibilities were concerned. A device that would endow wall-paper with a sentient life of its own that would enable it to practically roll itself into place upon a waiting wall was something that could not help but find a prompt and lucrative market.

All that was needed was a little more work in perfecting the thing, and Mr. Balberg's was an excellent place in which to do the work. There were no papered walls anywhere in the house, so the effects of Mr. Adkin's ray could be confined to small experimental pieces in his own room.

Mr. Adkins could see why Mr. Balberg had probably had some difficulty in keeping this particular room rented. It was located directly above the downstairs music-room, and Mr. Balberg's piano playing was as Herculean as his physique. He favored the works of the world's more muscular composers, and when in full action he gave no quarter and expected none.

Mr. Adkins' long years of experience with the varied sound effects incidental to life in cheap rooming-houses had left him with nerves that were immune to any outside disturbance short of nuclear fission. Mr. Balberg's music bothered him not at all.

Several connections in his receiving set had been broken during the move from Mrs. MacDar-

well's. He soldered them in place again, and made a final check-up of all the circuits, tightening a connection here, and sharpening an adjustment there.

It was ten o'clock of a warm humid evening when he was finally ready to turn the set on again. Downstairs, Mr. Balberg was furiously engaged in slugging it out with one of the more robust works of Herr Wilhelm Richard Wagner. At the moment, Mr. Balberg was slightly ahead on points.

The receiving set was in the center of the bridge-table. Grouped around it were half a dozen small free samples of wall-paper that Mr. Adkins had secured from a neighborhood home furnishings store. He snapped the switch on.

The tubes glowed for several minutes before the wall-paper began stirring in a slight, jiggling movement. Mr. Adkins leaned over them, then disappointedly straightened up again.

The apparent movement of the wall-paper was merely the shimmying of the wobbly legged bridge-table. With an exclamation of annoyance, Mr. Adkins stooped down to readjust the folded newspapers that were chinked under the spindly legs.

Something brushed heavily against his shoulder. From the corner of his eye he glimpsed what looked like a thick, brownish-mauve arm reaching past him toward the set.

"Don't bother that!" Mr. Adkins snapped crossly. "Let it alone!"

Then realization hit him, and his jaw popped slackly open. He was supposed to be alone in the room!

He wasn't alone now. There was someone with him—or maybe it was Something. Whatever it was, it was alive and in purposeful action. A hand-like protuberance at the end of the brownish-mauve arm was fumbling clumsily with the set's volume control.

Mr. Adkins leaped instinctively forward to stop it. Another thick arm came from somewhere behind him, curled firmly about his middle, and swept him off his feet. The events of the next few seconds were a mere kaleidoscopic blur to Mr. Adkins' reeling conciousness.

When his senses cleared, he found himself flat on his back, and pinned immovably to the floor by the rib-crushing weight of the big armchair. There was a curious fluid motility about the outlines of the chair like that which might be displayed by some giant, upholstered ameboid. There were no actual facial features but the entire ensemble seemed to have an expression as it gazed down upon Mr. Adkins, and the expression was not benign.

"Ow-w-w!" The wheezing wail was remarkably like a human voice, yet it obviously came from the bridge-table. "My aching

back! Get this thing off me, will you, pal? It's broiling me alive!"

"Quiet, Junior!" the armchair growled. "If anything happens to that thing on your back, you won't be alive any more. And neither will I. You leave it where it is."

"Oh, yeah?" the bridge-table queried. "You should have this collection of hot tubes burning a hole in *your* sacroiliac! You either lift it off, or I'll shake it off"

The spindly legs shimmied flexibly. The set slid slightly toward the edge of the table top.

"All right, keep your varnish on!" the armchair said hastily. "I'll lift it off for you."

One of the chair arms again elongated into a thick pseudopod-like member. It lifted the set off the table and carefully deposited it on the floor. The tubes, turned up to maximum volume, blazed with a baleful brilliance that made Mr. Adkins blink.

He must have overdone things a bit in those last adjustments, he reflected dazedly. Instead of tuning in the wall-paper ray again, the set was now bringing in an entirely different ray that affected the various component parts of furniture. And this ray brought not only the power of movement and conscious thought, but also the power of fluent conversation.

"Whew! What a relief that was!" the bridge-table sighed. It teetered back on two legs, and luxuriously crossed the other two. "Let me have him a while, will you? I want him to see how he likes having somebody stuffing junk under his feet and keeping him tipped off balance all the time."

"You wait your turn," the armchair said. "I've got business of my own with him first." It rocked back and forth, and Mr. Adkins felt his ribs starting to give.

"How do *you* like it, huh?" the chair demanded. "Haa-ha-haa!" There was an unmistakable neighing quality in the laughter.

"You don't have to give me the horse laugh," Mr. Adkins sputtered indignantly.

"I'm stuffed with horsehair, you know," the chair retorted. "What do you expect me to laugh like, a nightingale?"

It settled its massive weight with smothering force upon Mr. Adkins' midriff. "Oh, brother!" it chortled. "How I have been looking forward to this!"

"Why be so vindictive?" Mr. Adkins protested plaintively. "All I ever did to you was sit on you. Or maybe in you is the correct phrase."

"All over me is the right phrase, Buster. Every time I got halfway comfortable under you, you squirmed around and prodded me in a new place."

"Don't hog the guy, Fatso." That rasping voice came from the bureau. "Give me a shot at him. I want to stand him up in a corner here and pull his drawers like he's been pulling mine."

The armchair groaned. "If there is anything I hate, it's a lousy pun."

"Ah, don't pay any attention to that character," the bed creaked disgustedly. "He's got more than a crack in his mirror. Under that thin oak veneer of his he's got plenty of common, ordinary chestnut, if you ask me."

"And phooey to you, grandpappy!" the bureau snorted. "You're not so strong in the old headboard yourself any more, you know."

It popped open a top drawer into which Mr. Adkins had packed a miscellaneous tangle of spare coils, loose screws, and wire. It unceremoniously dumped the assortment out on the floor, then slid the drawer back in.

"That's better!" it remarked contentedly. "That junk has been scratching and tickling my insides till I thought I'd go nuts."

The armchair shifted uneasily around on Mr. Adkins' chest. "I cant get comfortable," it grumbled. "The man feels like he's all lumps and corners."

"Try punching him into shape," the bed creaked. "That's what he does to my mattress."

"Good idea," the armchair grunted.

It raised one leg ponderously and brought it down on Mr. Adkins' hip. Then it raised the other one and prodded him in the solar plexus. Mr. Adkins groaned. About one more punch like that would be all that he could take.

One of the legs lifted again. Mr. Adkins twisted frantically to one side. He did not get entirely loose, but one foot was momentarily free. He lashed out in a desperate kick at the glowing apparatus on the floor.

There was a blinding flash of incandescent green. The tubes shattered, and the circuits fused.

The weight upon Mr. Adkins' chest was suddenly no longer a living monster, but merely a shabby and quite lifeless old armchair. The bridge-table teetered momentarily with two of its legs still crossed, then toppled inertly to the floor.

Mr. Adkins wriggled painfully out from under the armchair and staggered to his feet. He was battered in every bone, but he forgot his aches and pains as he stared down at the wrecked set with a beatific smile upon his face.

It should not be too difficult a task to rebuild the set and again find the ray that he had tuned in this last time. And when he did find it again, he exulted, he would have something that would make the idea of living wall-paper seem like peanuts.

"I've got it this time!" he mused happily. "Yes, sir, I've really got it!"

Furniture endowed with the power of moving itself around a room, able to perform simple functional tasks of its own voli-

tion, able even to talk to you if you were lonesome! The possibilities staggered the imagination. There could be millions in it. Maybe even billions.

Mr. Adkins' rosy dreams were rudely interrupted by the thunderous rapping of heavy knuckles upon his door. He went over and opened it.

It was Mr. Balberg. Mr. Balberg's massive physique was in as advanced a state of disrepair as the human body can sustain and still remain in walking condition. He glared around the room with a pair of the most thoroughly blackened eyes that Mr. Adkins had ever seen.

"So!" Mr. Balberg grunted through puffed lips as he noted the wrecked apparatus beside the overturned bridge-table. "It was you. I thought so. There was a sort of a green light came down through the ceiling. Then it happened."

Mr. Adkins stared in awed fascination at Mr. Balberg's incredibly battered figure. "What —what happened?" he faltered.

"What happened, he asks," Mr. Balberg repeated. "Listen, Mister," he said tautly. "Let me ask you just one question. Have you ever been played by a grand piano?"

Mr. Adkins' mouth opened. It wavered momentarily, then slowly closed again. He silently went over and hauled a pair of decrepit suitcases out from under the bed.

"Fine!" Mr. Balberg said. "You took the words right out of my mouth. Take all the time you want. So long as it is not over ten minutes." The door slammed behind him.

Mr. Adkins wearily started the much too familiar task of packing, then paused for a moment to stare back over his shoulder at the armchair. It is axiomatic that there is no hatred as bitter as that which has once been love. Mr. Adkin glared balefully at the big, hulking piece of shabbily upholstered furniture.

With luck, he reflected, just one more five-dollar-a-week room should be his last. For the brief time that he would have to be in it before his furniture-activating ray put him forever above such tawdy lodgings, he was willing to tolerate about anything.

The room could be above a kitchen again, or even above a boiler-room. It could have only one window, or none at all. Its furniture could be strictly from the Spanish Inquisition.

In every respect but one, the room could have anything in it that it pleased. But there was one item upon which Mr. Adkins intended taking no chances whatever.

The only chair in it, he assured himself grimly, was going to be one that he was quite sure he could lick.

a lion in your lap

by . . . Frank Doty

The death star was sweeping close and no man or woman on Earth could stay its remorseless coming.

EVERY MAN, woman and child on Earth was watching the sky. In London and New York, in Paris, Rome and Moscow. At the crossroads of East and West, where the trade winds are like a dirge, and from junks in the China Sea, and in Tibet on the high mountain passes.

There are secrets which cannot be concealed even from savages and the blind. The blind watched inwardly, but all watched and waited, numb with terror, while a beautiful, shining, cool star swept Earthward across the dark night of space.

Carol's hand was tight in mine, and she was staring up at a brightness which outshone the noonday sun. It is not easy to wait calmly for a sunset gun to boom farewell to a lifetime of happiness. To know yourself to be under sentence of death, to stand in the shadow of eternity, is never easy. Yet there is a dark agony in waiting for the flame of life to go out that makes for remembrance and warmth.

Remembrance and warmth!

Frank Doty is a native New Yorker with a recently published novel and a collection of short stories to his credit. His work has appeared in well over a hundred magazines in the United States and in Canada. It seems to us that in some ways this little story tops all of his shorter tales of science-fantasy, the field in which he has ever been most completely at home.

Tingling song, and bright awakenings, laughter, joy and grief. Woodsmoke in October, tall ships and the planets spinning—and hurdy gurdies in June.

"We've been happy, haven't we?" I whispered. "We've had the best of everything."

"Some people I know would call it living," Carol said.

The star was coming fast. Minute by slow minute—an eternity each minute seemed—we had watched it sweep across the shining immensity of the Milky Way, growing ever brighter and more dazzling as its shadow lengthened on the minds and hearts of men.

A light star, a cool star, and yet we had watched it blot out the familiar constellations one by one, and become a terrible, glowing eye smouldering in the depths of the night sky.

Vacuum stars are the rarest of celestial freaks, and the one that now like a vast Polyphemous moth was fluttering straight toward the plus-infinity times magnified candleflame brightness of the Sun was no more than a traveling mass of rarefied gases, and pulsing light, its density being less than one one-millionth the density of air at Earth's surface.

No vacuum ever created on Earth could compare with it in thinness and the Sun would merely shiver at its touch. Yet from Yerkes had come the grim pronouncement that it would sweep the planets like a fiery broom, raising vast tidal waves, and flurries of incandescent dust.

On Earth the mountains would melt, the oceans and rivers seethe and boil over. But human life is far frailer than a slab of stone, and for us the quick, brief agony had already begun. We could hear the cries of perishing multitudes as we sat waiting in the darkness for the end to come.

It came with appalling suddenness. The brightness increased until it seemed to burn through our eyelids into our brains. Carol cried out as the intolerable agony of it brought her head against my shoulder, and then, in utter abandonment, her lips found mine.

I shut my eyes, and opened them on total blackness. There was a continuous roaring in my ears, and a screaming, and I could hear the distant patter of running feet. The contamination of utter panic, of complete demoralization, spreading like a destroying virus from mind to mind—two billion human minds agonizing together. Then—light again. Light and warmth and a reassurance so startling and unexpected that I felt like the first man in Eden, standing naked and unashamed in the long shadow of the sun.

"Oh, my darling!" I breathed.

The light filled the entire theater. It danced on the drawn, tight-lipped faces of two thousand men and women, picked up the

glimmer of rustling silks and nylons.

For a moment we stared up at the silent, empty screen, and so incredibly deep-seated is the human need for fellowship in danger that for an instant I almost found myself wishing that I could return again to the sheltering darkness.

Then we were getting shakily to our feet, and Carol was laughing in wild relief.

"It seemed terribly real for a moment, didn't it, darling?" she asked.

"Yes, the illusion was perfect," I conceded. "There wasn't a false note. You can't just throw together a picture like that. It has to be directed by ear, by a genius who knows how to make every dramatic incident count."

"We seemed to be actually standing with the terrified, despairing crowds in the streets."

"That was the most realistically brilliant part of it," I said. "Remember how they used to advertise the first Three-D pictures."

"I think I do."

"This *is* Africa," I improvised from memory. "So real you'll find yourself dodging the spears of the natives. Thrill to a lion in your lap, a man-eating shark swimming straight at you!"

I squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Fortunately for us it was only the destruction of the world that ended in our laps," I said. "Instead of a lion—a vacuum star. A catastrophe that big would never become voracious in a personal way like a lion, not even if you twisted its tail."

"I guess you're right," Carol laughed. "But I do know that East Indian scene wouldn't have been half as convincing in an old-style, two-dimensional movie. When those hysterical women hurled themselves into the Ganges—"

Her hand tightened abruptly on my arm. "George, let's get out of here. I want to look up at the sky, and see the stars again—the *real* stars."

"That's natural enough," I said. "Come on—let's make it snappy."

"George."

"What is it, Bright Eyes?"

"I read somewhere that the chances of another star actually colliding with our sun could only be expressed by a mathematical figure trailing off into more zeros than there are grains of sand on all the beaches of the world. Do you agree with that."

Startled, I turned and looked at her. "I'm not so sure," I said. "There may be laws at work in the universe which would lop off most, if not all, of those zeros."

It was her turn to look startled. "What kind of laws, George?"

"Well, to cite just one example, a law of probability based on infinity," I told her. "The law of probability is pretty flexible right here on Earth. It has been scientifically demonstrated that a flipped coin can come heads forty

or fifty times in a row. Theoretically, there's nothing to prevent that coin from coming heads fifty billion times."

"But it just wouldn't," Carol said.

"It might," I told her. "Look at it this way. According to Einstein and De Sitter, the universe of stars may be just one tiny fragment of a larger, completely unknown universe. In that larger universe there may be cycles of lucky runs beyond our comprehension—flipped coins coming heads again and again.

"In a way it could be like Eddington's amusing little theory about the monkey. Set one monkey before a typewriter, and give him all eternity in which to pound away, and he would eventually write all of Shakespeare's plays."

"I still don't see—"

"Listen carefully, Bright Eyes. There's a larger universe stretching away into infinity which contains so many random variations, so many cycles of lucky runs, that every possible combination would be hit upon eventually by that monkey."

I straightened Carol's hat in playful fashion, caressing a spun gold curl with my forefinger. "Say the Milky Way and all of its stars passes into such a cycle. What happens? Two suns separated by immeasurable gulfs of space collide when it's a trillion to one shot against their doing so—the grain of sand improbability you mentioned."

I nodded sagely. "I claim it *could* happen. In a cycle of probability zigzagging back and forth through the mysterious universe for as long as *forever* is, the lucky runs might occur all at once, might shower down in nightmare fashion. Don't you see?

"What might seem like an incredible coincidence within a limited framework of space and time would not be a coincidence at all if our sun passed into, or through, an infinity cycle capable of telescoping a host of improbable events together in a kind of cosmic meteor shower."

"Before I accept it," Carol said, caustically. "Suppose you give me a more dramatic example."

"All right, I will. We could sit in a movie theater and see the end of the world. Then we could go out into the street, and—"

I tightened my grip on her arm. "Come on," I said. "We'll have a boiled lobster and some tawny port at Carco's Grille."

"Suits me," Carol said.

It was raining when we hailed a cab in front of the theater, a fine drizzle that misted the store windows on both sides of the street.

The roar of the traffic was so loud in our ears it almost drowned out the distant shouts of newsboys.

"Destruction of Earth feared! Mount Wilson astronomer predicts newly discovered star will collide with the sun!"

universe in books

by . . . Robert Frazier

An authority of lively acumen reviews an unusual variety of new trends in a timely survey of science fiction in hard covers.

THE EXPLORERS by Cyril M. Kornbluth. Ballantine Books. N. Y. 35c.

Cyril Kornbluth, once an active fan, has risen to science fiction prominence with his novels and collaborations. Among the better-known are "Mars Child," "Take-off," and "Gravy Planet." In this, his first collection of short stories, he displays a fine story-telling technique, but we could wish that his outlook were just a little less pessimistic. Yet we were truly fascinated by "Mind Worm," despite the fact that it displays a greater morbidity than most of the others. But you must own this inexpensive book.

THE FORGOTTEN PLANET by Murray Leinster. Gnome Press. N. Y. $2.75.

He's back again—the one and only Murray Leinster. He's often been called "the Dean of Science Fiction," has been a top writer in the field since the First World War. In the twenties he wrote "Red Dust" and "The Mad Planet" which have been reprinted

Robert Frazier's background as an editor, author and teacher supplies him with a discerning springboard from which to appraise the best of the newly-published SF and fantasy books. He has contributed articles to COSMOPOLITAN *and* CORONET, *acted as the science editor of* PARADE, *and is just starting his third highly successful term as instructor at the City College of New York's science fiction writing course at the Needles Trade High School.*

and eulogized many times since. Recently he added a third to the series, "The Forgotten Planet"—and thereby got himself another book and this is it. We found it richly rewarding reading with an underlying serious philosophical note which rescues it from the less mature and realistic category of straight science fiction adventure. We think you'll like it as much as we did.

THE SCIENCE-FICTION SUB-TREASURY by Wilson Tucker. The Rinehart Co. N. Y. $2.75.

In place of his customary annual science fiction novel from the Rinehart presses, Tucker has turned his hand to a short story collection. The contents of this volume date from the very beginning of his writing career to his more recent efforts. And why not, it's his first collection of short stories?

Though "Exit" is one of his oldies, it packs considerable dramatic punch. Of nearly the same vintage, "Gentlemen—The Queen!" seems to us somewhat on the mediocre side. There is a lightness and readability to these stories, but the majority of them do not rise above the general average of un-anthologized magazine stories.

THE GIANT ANTHOLOGY OF SCIENCE FICTION, Edited by Leo Margulies and Oscar J. Friend. Merlin Press. N. Y. $3.95.

"Hey, say, what am I supposed to do with this?" Look who one of the guys is that edited this massive tome. The publisher of FANTASTIC UNIVERSE no less! Even in this day and age, the adjective "giant" is no misnomer for this bulky anthology running to 580 pages, and containing ten short science fiction novels.

Probably the best and most distinguished of them is "By His Bootstraps" by Robert Heinlein, which is to our mind the most ingenious time-travel paradox novel ever written. Almost equally impressive is A. E. van Vogt's "Rogue Ship," a superlative story of faster-than-light travel. This has long been overdue for book publication.

Some may consider the inclusion of "The Girl in the Golden Atom" by Ray Cummings a bit startling, but upon consideration it must be realized that this world-famous classic has never before been anthologized and deserves preservation. There are other short novels by Leigh Brackett, Fredric Brown, Edmond Hamilton, Henry Kuttner, Murray Leinster, Manly Wade Wellman and Jack Williamson. They are all highly entertaining, and on the basis of its size and relatively moderate price alone this volume is a splendid value on today's crowded market.

In fact, we know of no other collection quite as representative in its coverage of the field.

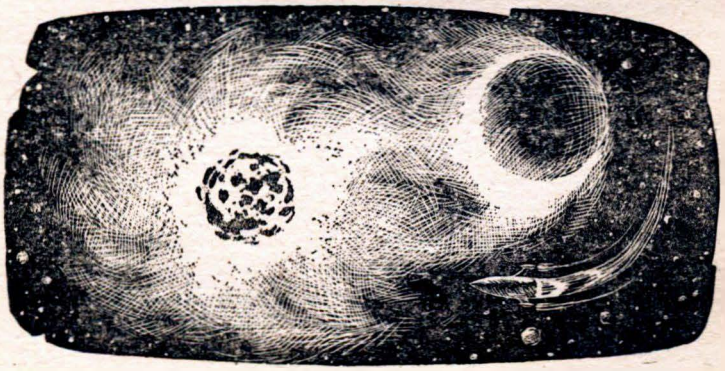
THE IMMORTAL STORM—A HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION FANDOM by Sam Moskowitz. The Atlanta Science-Fiction Organization Press. Atlanta, Georgia. $5.00.

In his introduction to this book Dr. A. Langley Searles says: "As Ben Johnson once remarked, 'The reading public are the ultimate judges. If they are pleased, all is well. If they are not, there is no point in telling them *why* they should have been.' All we can add to that is that if the fans are not pleased with Sam Moskowitz' achievement they are somewhat less than human."

This volume contains a 200,000 word history of the science fiction FAN, and science fiction magazine movement. It can only be described as monumental, the research involved being truly incredible. If there is any professional who emerged from the fan ranks to wider recognition, his story is told here in more detail than he himself could have recounted it, and with careful documentation.

There are fourteen pages of photos of famous authors, editors, fans and artists in the fantasy field, and an index of thousands of names making this one of the best basic reference *musts* in the science fiction world. Thousands of new words of text have been added to this volume from its previous editions. It has an excellent jacket by Frank R. Paul.

As fascinating reading entertainment or as an invaluable reference aid it is most strongly recommended.



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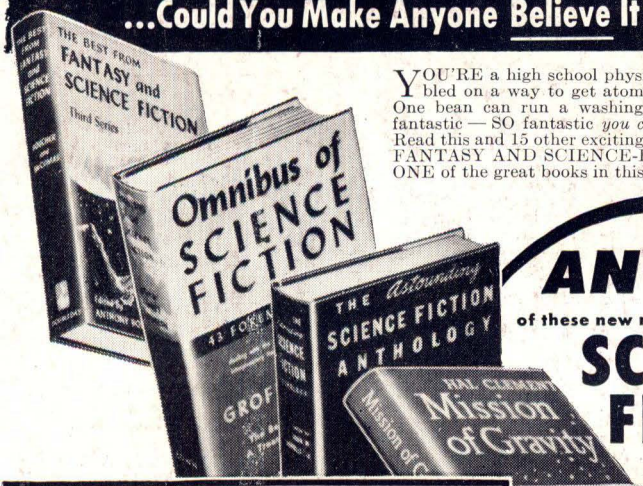

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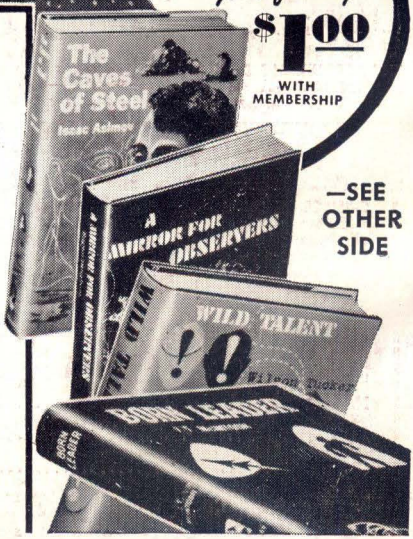

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