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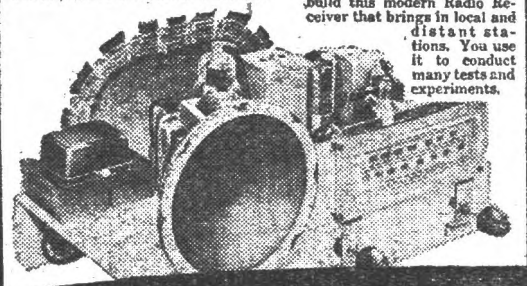
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WARRIOR- MAID of MARS

By ALFRED COPPEL

The Terran Barbarians have landed! Already they plunder a dying, helpless planet! And a whisper rustles through the cold, thin air, across the rust-red sands: "Give us a leader—and we will fight! Give us back our ancient glory!"

THE SMALL ROOM WAS DARK but for the flickering light of a single ef-lamp that burned on the bare table between the two long rows of black-hooded figures. The thin dry air was surcharged with the tenseness of a tautly drawn cord . . . a strangler's cord. A sentence of death had been passed in silence. Now, the executioners balloted, still in silence, to select from their number a leader.

The High Council of the Maldia was in session. Behind the dark, enigmatic sable masks and robes lurked all the might and hate of a proud, ancient and dying culture. The might of a warlike world's aristocracy. The hate that was the unreasoning, distilled essence of a doomed world's bitterness . . .

Beneath the black cowl that shadowed his face young Telis of Lars' eyes showed fierce pride as member after member pointed silently toward his end of the table. It seemed that the vote would be overwhelmingly in his favor, and a tremor of anticipation ran through him. At the far end of the board he could see his rival candidate's eyes glittering furiously. The Maldia would not be led by Brand, that much was certain. The assembled nobles were quite plainly repudiating his leadership for that of the young Lord of Lars.

Then the cannibal-people were upon them—a savage, shrieking horde.

Outside the tower room, the icy wind shrieked and gamboled through the crenels of the ancient fortress like a harbinger of doom. The draughts set the candle flame to dancing crazily, and long shadows leapt from wall to wall.

Telis stretched his long legs out under the table. To him, the voting seemed unnecessarily prolonged and ritualistic, but he knew better than to voice opposition to customs that had been accepted in the Maldia since long before the Laurrs, the dictator-kings who took the name of the very planet for themselves, had driven the society underground.

The young warrior was forced to admit that ritual and trappings were an important part of the superstitious hold the Maldia had on the great masses of Laurr. And, with the populace cowed, anything was possible. Even the Laurr himself would not care to face the unanimous disapproval of this masked heirarchy. Too many Laurrs, down through the aeons of the planet's history, had fallen before the blades of Maldia assassins.

Telis watched the glittering eyes that peered out from behind the peaked mask that hid Prince Brand's handsome face. The man knew he was defeated, and rage seemed to surround him like a malign auriole. Brand would never be satisfied with the deputy command that would be his for having been second in the balloting. The man wanted full authority, not command of troops in the field as Telis had had. Brand was far too concerned with his own safety for that; he wanted command of the striking force of assassins that would murder the handful of invaders out in the desert. The victory over a few scientists from another world would give Brand the renown he craved and at negligible risk, for all his dark talk about mystery weapons and his pleas for caution.

The only need for caution that Telis could see was the possible intervention of the Temple or the Laurr. And the Temple knew nothing. And the Laurr could be handled . . . by Telis.

Telis looked around him, wishing the masked nobles would have done with it. It would not be a safe thing to have the Temple learn that the Maldia met in Telis'

own palace quarters. He noted with satisfaction that the voting had ended.

The shrieking wind outside died suddenly, leaving a thick silence.

A black figure arose from either side of the table. The one on the right turned toward Telis, and its voice had a strange and disembodied timbre in the stillness.

"Telis of Lars," it said, "you lead."

Telis inclined his head in acceptance. Taciturnity was part of the ancient tradition of the Maldia.

The figure on the left turned toward Brand. "Brand, Prince of Laurr, you follow."

Brand heaved himself to his feet. "I protest this insult!" he said thickly. "Why am I to follow him? He is not even of royal birth!"

The robed figure on the left seemed to tense. Its voice sounded suddenly almost metallic. "You follow," it repeated deliberately.

Brand stood irresolutely, two solid rows of shadowed faces turned toward him. Then Telis spoke up softly, almost casually.

"A challenge, Brand, to decide?"

"I follow," muttered Brand, sinking into his chair sullenly.

Telis smiled to himself. If ever a coward like Brand should pick up a flung challenge, surely the Water Goddess would throw down the moons!

Slowly, the hooded men filed from the room, leaving Telis alone. For a moment Brand paused by the door, and Telis could see that he fingered his sword hilt under the sable robes. But he stood so, glaring at Telis, for only a minute. Then he was gone.

From the darkness of the courtyard beneath the tower window came the sound of a whistle, and Lord Telis relaxed. The bribed guardsman's signal indicated that the last member, of the Maldia had mounted his sith and was safely away.

TELIS felt a stirring of pride. Any victory was a pleasing thing to him; but tonight's smashing triumph over Brand was a thing the renegade princeling would long remember! The Maldia had chosen to forget that he, Telis, came only from

the lower nobility.

His position as Captain-General of the Laurr's armies, as well as the real affection the ruler had for him, had been a large factor in the selection, Telis knew. The Maldia was certain that the old Laurr was fond enough of his young Captain-General to overlook the breach of faith contemplated for the morning . . .

Telis doffed his robes and dressed himself with care. Always fastidious about his appearance, he knew that this night his dress must be impeccable. The Laurr of Laurr was very particular about such things.

With a last hitch at his jewelled harness, Telis stationed himself before the polished onyx mirror. The image that gazed calmly back at him from its dark surface was sufficiently imposing, he reflected, even for the Laurr of Laurr. He was tall and well-knit; the war harness, bright with gems, hung low on his hips; his long legs were bare, and his chest covered only by the crossed straps that supported his weapons.

The black sith-leather was studded with battle-decorations. It would be well, Telis reasoned, to remind the Laurr of his many services to the throne. Tacitly, perhaps, but nonetheless firmly.

All the gems won in the Guski campaigns and in the last Water War were there, as was the golden cross of the Laurr's own Knighthood . . . presented to Telis by the hand whose blessing he planned to seek this very night.

Glancing at his chronometer, Telis turned away from the mirror. Through the high, narrow window of his palace quarters, the light of the nearer moon streamed in golden glory, shaming the feeble light of the ef-lamp. Telis stepped to the window, his gaze seeking the low hills beyond the still, shallow waters of the Grand Canal. The beauty of the night caught at his breast, for, even as he watched, the great orb of the farther moon was rising sedately to add its light to the already fulsome glory of her racing sister.

Below and across the palace grounds, the flickering lights of the city spread like a web of living beads in the moonlight.

As always, Telis felt a rush of pride as he contemplated the beauty of his world.

A great sadness filled him then, for he knew that such beauty could not last much longer. Soon now, the sun would rise on a planet of death . . .

Telis shuddered and turned away. The beauty of the night faded, leaving only reality. And reality was stark and deadly on Laurr. The water was vanishing, and the great plains that had once been green and fertile were now oxidized wastelands. Lars, far to the north, was deserted now, for the canal had silted up and life had become unbearable. And now the great deserts of iron oxide stood at the very shores of the Grand Canal, and what did flow down from the pole was barely enough to keep the watercourse free of red silt.

Aeons ago, before the great Wars that had almost wrecked the planet, the ancients had seen the drought coming. They had known that the air and the water would steadily unite with Laurr's thirsty iron, leaving the planet barren and desiccated beyond belief.

They had tried to plan for that day and had built the great waterways as part of their conservatino program. Other projects had been started; mysterious power plants far out in the deserts with walls of foot-thick pund had been built. But somehow, nothing good had come from these mysterious Temples. The first of the Ten Great Water Wars had begun even then, and the warring people of the planet had demanded weapons from these strange plants.

For many generations the engineer-priests had refused the pleas and demands, but, as the steadily diminishing water supplies had caused war after war after war, they relented.

From the pund-lined Temples had come a steady flow of ghastly weapons. Weapons that left Laurr's cities shattered piles of rubbish to be covered by the drifting sands. Weapons that had destroyed forever the once flourishing culture that might have saved the world from its inexorable doom.

The secrets of the past were forgotten . . . or covered with legendary dross. But the wars went on and on and on.

Telis knew, staring out across the rusty sands, that Laurr was doomed to a quick

death. It would not come in his lifetime . . . but soon . . . soon . . .

And then the Tellurians had come! To gloat and exploit. To steal the iron of the deserts and drain away the last of the planet's resources to their wantonly wealthy world! Even the Laurr of Laurr had given them safe-conduct . . . on the basis that their expedition proved some of the Temple's favored dogma concerning the origin of the race!

Weakness! thought Telis savagely. It fills us as life slips away from our planet. But it would not be so! The ancient, dreaded Maldia would see to that! If Laurr must die, then at least she could die upright and untrammelled by ghoulish invaders!

In sudden fury, Telis snatched up his cloak and strode from the room. The jewelled glyph of the Water Goddess, Mother of Laurr, gleamed fiercely for a moment on the hilt of his short-sword in the feeble light as Telis sought the long winding ramp that led to the lower levels and the audience chamber of the Laurr of Laurr.

Along endless corridors, eflit and lined with rigid guardsmen, Lord Telis of Lars made his way. Underfoot, the ever-present drift of reddish sand gritted as he walked.

Turning into the main passageway that led to the inner courtyard, Telis heard the sound of his name . . . softly spoken, but demanding. Stopping, he looked about him. A dark-robed figure beckoned to him from the shadow of a huge stone buttress. It was Gorla, First Cycle Priest of the Temple, and Telis' long standing friend at court. His eyes were sombre in his round, good-humored face.

"I have met you just in time. You are on your way to see the Laurr, friend Telis?"

Telis nodded. "Of course. I am already keeping him waiting. I'll see you in the morning, friend Gorla." He made a move to slip by the young Priest and be on his way.

"A moment, Telis!" Gorla's voice was suddenly sharp. "You are about to ask the Laurr to break his word to the outlanders, are you not?"

Telis' eyes narrowed. "Perhaps . . ."

GORLA laid a hand on his arm. "Telis, I have known you for many haads. As children we played together on the fields of Lars. Believe me, I wish nothing but the best for you. Why are you involved with this bloodthirsty madness of the Maldia?"

Telis withdrew his arm as though the Priest had stung him. Only the strength of a lifelong friendship kept him from striking Gorla, for the Priest's words had hit a deep-seated prejudice. The Maldia was of the nobility . . . and Gorla was a Commoner.

Gorla went on slowly, emphasizing his words carefully. "Dorliss knows of your plan to break the Laurr's pledge and attack the Tellurian camp."

Telis stiffened. How was it possible? He had told no one!

The Priest divined his thoughts. "The Temple has ways, Telis, of knowing such things. The Maldia can bribe a guard . . . and the Temple can bribe him again. You should have thought of that tonight."

Telis drew himself back. "So?"

"You are foolish, my friend. And it is the duty of the Temple to see that Laurr does not suffer for your foolishness. The Maldia is a fearful thing, Telis, a creation of senseless hate. Why do you hate the Tellurians? You have never even seen one. They are but men like ourselves, and they bring gifts of great promise to Laurr. It is not fit that such as you should be joined with a renegade like Prince Brand . . . a craven and a lying usurper . . . and for the purpose of attacking those who have come across to seek knowledge and friendship!"

Telis pondered. What Gorla said about Brand was largely true. The man was untrustworthy and underhanded, a blind seeker of power. But prejudices of caste and upbringing were too much to combat. And to renege now would be to mark himself a coward in a world that lived by the sword. It was unthinkable!

"You, Gorla," Telis said pointedly, "should limit yourself to scientific and theological matters and leave matters of state and policy to those better equipped to handle them."

Gorla shook his head sadly. "Foolish

friend!" Then his voice took on the unmistakable tone of command. "In the name of, and by the authority of the Temple, I demand that you abandon your projected attack on the Tellurian camp."

Telis threw back his head and laughed. "Demand, is it? I know of no plan to attack the foreigners, friend Priest, now or in the future! Now kindly step aside. I cannot make the Laurr of Laurr wait on me while I argue senseless points with you . . ."

Gorla sounded defeated. "Then you refuse?"

Telis frowned at his friend. "Of course, I refuse! And you may carry that message back to Dorliss . . . if there is such a place!"

With that he turned away, but not before Gorla laid his hand on Telis' arm and said: "Then forgive me, old friend . . ."

Telis wondered at that. Forgive? Forgive what? Then other matters forced that question from his mind. So the Temple knew of the Maldia's plan to massacre the aliens. To what extent, he wondered, would the Temple go in striving for its own inscrutable purpose to save the Tellurian scientists? And why? In spite of himself, Telis could not suppress a shudder, for the Temple was powerful . . . perhaps the most powerful thing remaining on the desiccated planet of Laurr.

The ancient order of the Temple Priests dated to far before the Ten Water Wars that had so devastated the globe with their atomic fury. Its beginnings were lost in the dim mists of antiquity, even antedating the building of the waterways. The membership was perhaps the one body selected for any purpose on Laurr without consideration of family or background, and this fact accounted for the fierce loyalty of such able young Commoners as Gorla.

The long wars and the struggle for survival had destroyed much of the ancient science, and what remained lay within the jurisdiction of the Temple. As it so often happens in times of great stress, science on the world of Laurr had taken on the vestments of religion in order to survive. A benevolent, scientific hierarchy, the Priests of the Seven Cycles spent their cloistered hours delving into the great

knowledge of the ancients, seeking the answers to riddles solved long ago and forgotten in the fratricidal wars that were the direct result of the dwindling water supply. Ostensibly, the Temple conducted the world-wide worship of the Water Goddess, principal deity in the Laurrian Pantheon, but actually the Priests were scientists striving frantically to salvage what little they could from the wreckage of the ancient civilization on a doomed and quarrelsome planet.

ALL this Telis of Lars knew only vaguely. He was a soldier, and little concerned with the ins and outs of the scientific theocracy of the Temple. His life up to now had been spent largely in wars and tourneys, in love-making and the less exacting pastimes of the hedonist. Only the coming of the Tellurians had stirred him to take a more direct part in the doings of the court circles, for above all he loved Laurr, and in the outlanders Telis saw the final, insupportable insult to his beloved, prostrate home-world.

The government of the Laurr of Laurr and the Temple seldom clashed. Each remained within its proper sphere, and both were content. But into this peculiar age-old arrangement the Tellurian spaceship had fallen like a disrupting bolt from the sky. And men—men like the men of Laurr—had emerged from the vessel . . . seeming to prove the Temple's much-doubted hypothesis that both Laurr and the planet the aliens called Terra had been colonized by a great race of interstellar travelers. How much more could be proved or done with the Tellurians' aid remained to be seen. The Temple was already calling them the Redeemers of Laurr, and through its good offices a safe-conduct had been granted by the Laurr of Laurr himself.

They had come seeking iron. They wanted to mine and later, perhaps, to colonize, though Laurr was uncomfortable for them. But this the Maldia found unthinkable. The Tellurians were barbarians, and the ancient nobles of Laurr raged at their intrusion.

Telis found himself among these objectors. For many haads, Laurr had known

of its approaching doom and it wished to die, Telis thought, as it had lived—proud and unconquered. The Tellurians were outsiders who had no place on the barren face of his Laurr . . . and it was Telis' intention to drive them away or destroy them. For this he had been chosen leader of the attack that the Maldia planned to mount in the morning.

Already agents had been sent out to agitate among the degenerate tribes of the desert—the cannibal Guski—and the Maldia was assured of at least four thousand tribesmen in arms in return for food and plunder. The power of the Maldia, five hundred sith-mounted nobles, added to the mass of Guski seemed more than enough to handle a small scientific expedition from space.

Now, as he left the guest wing of the palace and strode across the dark courtyard that separated him from the household quarters of the ruler's family, Telis smiled to himself. The intruding Tellurians were due for a shock. Their safe-conduct would be voided within the hour and Laurr would be free of them before the sun set again!

He was almost across the yard and into the gate of the household wing when something made him pause. He had the feeling of being watched . . . followed. His sharp eyes swept the whole of the courtyard. It was walled and heavily planted with desert shrubs so that his inspection told him nothing. He shrugged and turned again toward the gate.

One step he took, and no more. From overhead came the low whirring of an airsled's idling motor. He stopped short, searching the sky for the craft. A sled in the air low over the Laurr's palace at this time of night could mean nothing good.

The sharp clank of metal behind him made him swing around, his sword hissing from its scabbard. Three hooded figures were almost upon him, naked steel in their hands. Telis thought wildly of calling for aid, and then he realized that these men would never dare to attack him if they had not either bribed or killed the household guards. Instinctively, he thought of Brand. Was this the renegade's doing? By killing

him and spiriting his body away, Brand could contend before the Maldia that Telis had lost courage at the last moment and fled rather than lead them in an overt act against the Tellurians . . .

There was no more time for thought, for the three men were upon him. He slipped his second sword free and stood facing them, searching for some hint as to their identity. Overhead the airsled hovered, waiting . . .

With a cry, Telis lunged forward and caught one of the attackers on his point. The man doubled up and fell to his knees as his two companions closed in. The courtyard now echoed the ring of steel on steel, and the labored breathing of men fighting.

Telis fought fiercely. He was fighting for his life—and for what was even more important on Laurr—his honor as a warrior.

His blade wove a deadly, glittering web in the darkness, but his two assailants closed in steadily. The whirring sound of the airsled was nearer now, and Telis glanced upward to see if he could catch a glimpse of the aircraft. His heart sank.

The ship was a dark blot across the stars, but he could see that a rope ladder hung down into the court and more men were pouring down, swords in hand.

Desperately, Telis pressed forward, trying to rush the attackers and gain a brief respite. One of the men feinted in the low lines and followed with a thrust at the head that caught Telis a glancing blow on the temple and set the stars to dancing before his eyes.

The fellow rushed in eagerly and Telis heard his companion hiss: "Careful, you fool!"

Telis' attack stalled under the concerted rush of the masked man, and he was forced to retreat until his bare back touched the roughness of the courtyard wall. There could be no further retreat.

The assailants separated now, so that Telis was forced to strike wildly from side to side to avert being hit. His sword made a glittering arc as he parried a near thrust and a lightning riposte pierced the swordarm of his nearest attacker.

Before the others who had dropped

from the sled could close in on him, Telis whirled and ran along the base of the wall. If he could reach the gate of the household wing he would be safe, for no assassins would dare follow him into the inner sanctum of the Laurr himself.

He heard a voice shouting hoarsely in the darkness, and other voices replying angrily, impatiently.

"We've lost him!"

"The devil's wounded Marl and Varo!"

"Find him, you fools! He must be taken."

Telis ran breathlessly along the wall, hoping against hope that the gate would not be covered. It was a vain hope. As he broke out of the shrubbery, the shouts began again and he was forced to retreat into the shelter of a towering desert plant.

He waited there, breath coming in long rasping gasps, and his head singing from the blow he had taken.

With pounding heart he listened to the attackers beating the bushes for him and shouting commands and advice to one another. More men must still be coming down from the airsled, for there were fully ten in the dark courtyard now.

"He can't have gotten far!"

"See that the gate is covered—"

"How the young devil does fight!"

"Pierce that bush there! I saw something move!"

Telis tried to smother his labored breathing as the group drew nearer to his hiding place. His hands cradled his two swords lovingly as the searchers spread out into a semicircle and moved steadily towards him.

Telis tensed himself to leap. Within seconds, they would be upon him and assassins on Laurr showed no mercy, particularly to one who had wounded two of their craft. He doubled his legs under him and waited.

"There he is!"

Telis burst from hiding and braced himself for the rush. His back was once again against the wall and this time, he knew, there would be no escape.

A glittering circle of naked swords surrounded him and he lashed out furiously, driving the attackers back by the main force of his charge.

Then it was that a stray beam of light from the closely guarded gate caught a

jewelled glyph on the harness of one of the assassins and Telis' heart froze. The insignie was the Sword and Atom—the ensign of the Secular Guard of the Holy Temple!

The disclosure was like a blow. It was Gorla rather than Brand, who was trying to kill him! The bitter understanding seemed to sap his strength. When he felt the stun-gun's tingling impact, it was almost a relief. Blackness came . . . darker than the primeval night, and he felt himself falling . . .

II

THERE WAS WIND ON HIS face, and the air was bitterly cold. Telis stirred. His harness covered him only slightly, and his bare limbs and naked chest stung under the lash of the icy night air. From somewhere, muffled by the roaring of the wind, Trellis could hear the familiar heat of a multiple-pulse jet engine. Under his questing hands lay the caulked deck of an air-sled, and he realized that the aircraft was under way and that he was lashed to rings in the afterdeck.

With a shuddering sigh, he forced himself to relax. Since his abductors so obviously had the better of him at the moment, there was little he could do other than watch and wait.

For what seemed to be several hours, he lay quiet and watched the endless procession of the stars overhead. Finally, as the last effects of the stun-gun's bolt wore off, he lifted his head to get a look at his captors.

In the greenish glow of phosphorescent light that emanated from the instruments on the sled's panel, he could see two figures seated at the controls. The dim light gleamed for a moment on an insignie—the Sword and Atom. He had not been mistaken back there in the courtyard. He was in the hands of the Temple.

The nearer man glanced in his direction and, seeing that he had awakened, leaned forward to speak. There was no surprise in Telis as he recognized him. Only a hot anger. For the man was his friend Gorla.

"Telis! Are you all right?" Gorla had to shout to make himself heard over the

rush of the wind.

Telis felt his anger increase. Here was Gorla, who had had him attacked, stunned, and finally kidnapped. And now, it seemed, he was concerned over the state of his health and general condition! It did not matter that Brand would within hours be convincing the gentlemen of the Maldia that Telis of Lars was a faint-hearted coward who disappeared in the eleventh hour before the attack on the aliens' camp! What mattered to Gorla was simply: "Telis, are you all right!"

Getting nothing but a scowl from Telis, the young Priest sat back, a half smile on his round, pleasant face. He could well imagine what Telis' thoughts were about now. Hurt pride and mortified anger were apparent in every line of the Lord of Lars' tense body.

For hour after hour the air-sled sped along through the smooth night air. The farther moon set and the madly racing nearer moon rose again in the west and charged insanely across the backdrop of the eternal stars. Telis could not see his chronometer, but he estimated that they had been travelling almost all night at the highest speed the sled could handle. The pulsing of the jet was a smooth, continuous purr. They were heading in a westerly direction, and after a bit of mental mathematics, Telis estimated that they must be very near the heart of the Great Red Desert and a long, long way from the capital.

As he struggled to keep from freezing, the young noble estimated his chances for survival on this strange flight. He found them dishearteningly slim. For some reason, the seemingly benevolent Temple had intervened harshly and forcefully in the plan to destroy the Tellurians. But it should have been apparent to the Priests that his abduction would not stop the attack. There were plenty of men to take his place. Brand, surely. Then why was he being held?

Perhaps the Temple did not wish that he should gain the sanction of the Laurr of Laurr for the Maldia's plan. But why abduction, then? Why not merely hold him prisoner until the attack was begun? The events of the night showed a great

deal of careful planning and organization. Such things took time. And again, why? Telis had a strong suspicion that in some way the great fondness that the Laurr of Laurr had for him, and the correspondingly large influence he wielded because of it had more than a little to do with these strange and dangerous doings . . .

The motion of the air-sled as it slanted sharply downward interrupted his reverie. They were nearing their destination, and whatever was in store for him would not be long in materializing.

Gorla arose from his seat at the panel and cautiously made his way across the precariously canted deck. Reaching Telis' side, he knelt and brought his lips close to the young warrior's ear.

"We near our base, Telis, my friend," he shouted. "I beg of you to be prudent and to contain yourself when you are interviewed. The Temple elders are wise men and you will do well to listen and learn when they speak with you . . ."

Telis made an angry retort that the wind snatched from his lips and whirled away into the night.

"I know you are angry with me, Telis," the young Priest continued, "but you have made all this necessary. Remember, it is for Laurr!" He laid an arm across the prisoner's shoulders that Telis could not find the heart even in his anger to shrug off. "And," the Priest was smiling now, "you shall see Dorliss, Telis. Few laymen ever do . . ."

Dorliss! Then there *was* such a place! The legends told of it—a fabled city hidden from the sight of men by some mysterious power, where the Priests of the mighty Seventh Cycle cloistered themselves to study the oldest of the ancient riddles. Dorliss! Even the name had a magical sound! It was here that the Temple's finest minds were said to struggle in their quest to reclaim Laurr's air and water from the sea of rust that surrounded them . . .

Gorla squeezed the young lord's shoulder in an impulsive gesture of friendship and returned to his place at the sled's panel. Telis stared out into the night, his eyes trying to pierce the darkness. The idea of actually seeing Dorliss still enchanted him and, even though he was arriving

trussed up like a fowl for the slaughter, the experience promised to be a rich one. He recalled many arguments with Gorla about the probable existence of the Temple City. He had contended that invisibility was impossible, and Gorla in his young scientist's enthusiasm had covered sheets and sheets of vellum with strange mathematical symbols to prove that a light-shielding field could be created.

Telis smiled thinly. If Dorliss was near, and it seemed to be, then a light shield must surely exist . . . for he could see nothing but desert below in the moonlight.

The aircraft trembled slightly as the pilot flared out his long glide, and with a breathtaking suddenness, the stars and the moon vanished, leaving only a sable blackness around them. Down again, the sled plunged, and after several moments, the glide flattened again. For a minute it hovered, and then it dropped sharply, and there was a hissing sound as the runners touched the ferric sand. They were down.

A company of Temple Guardsmen bearing torches appeared out of the darkness, and Telis was freed from the deck-rings. Respectfully, but firmly, he was taken into custody and marched across the gritty soil of the landing field toward a lighted gate in the distance.

The light shield must have been impervious to moonlight, or perhaps it was made transparent during the hours of daylight. Telis never knew. But as they made their way toward the gate, the sun rose with its usual, breathtaking suddenness. The thin air of Laurr precluded any dawn or twilight and, when the sun burst over the horizon, the transition from blackness to day was done with shocking speed. It was a phenomenon that Telis had seen every morning of his six haads, but this time the effect was different. For never before had Telis seen such a city as marvelled Dorliss!

AND, as though created in a trice out of the very stuff of darkness, Dorliss sprang into being before his astounded eyes. The flood of golden light from the sun touched the spires and minarets of an enchanted city, casting shards of amber light into the deep canyons between

the slender towers. Unable to help himself, Telis paused to wonder. His gaze found the great golden dome that housed the Mirror of the Sky . . . fabled place where legend said that a man might sit and see the glories of the heavens reflected on a monster glass of polished obsidian, figured by the cunning hands of artificers dead over eight thousand haads!

Telis had long been a scoffer . . . but here was proof! And farther off, basking in the warm morning light, there was the Fist of the Goddess . . . a great spire capped by a mammoth sphere. This was the machine that the stories claimed could shatter even the smallest particles of matter and suck out of them the pure force that was the essence of their being, even as had the ancients long ago. It was from a similar machine, the Temple Priests avowed, that the hellish missiles of the first eight Water Wars had been fashioned . . . the terrible weapons that had left the once great cities of Laurr in molten, ghastly heaps of slag, later to be covered over and obliterated by the steadily rising tide of rust from the deserts.

And here it all was before him! Here was Dorliss, City of the Temple!

Stunned by beauty and overwhelmed by nearness to the might of the ancients, Telis stumbled along toward the gate. For the moment, his own plight was forgotten in the singing glory of seeing fabled Dorliss and knowing that there was truth in the tales the Priests told to the people who cried for life in a world slated for death.

Surely, Telis thought, if Laurr can be saved from extinction, the workers of such miracles as these could save it!

The thought of Laurr brought him up sharply. It brought back a cold awareness of his purpose . . . of his will to escape and rejoin the Maldia in its attack on the invading Tellurians. The attack that should at this moment be under way!

Whatever happened to him in this fairy city, Telis swore by the Goddess herself that he would not allow himself to forget his duty. Surely, such wonders as these were not meant to be shared with the barbarians from across the void!

The thought remained with him as he was escorted into the city, and along wide

thoroughfares heavily travelled with sith-drawn traffic. Above, an occasional air-sled passed, but in the main the city's travelling was done on foot or by means of the ubiquitous sith . . . a six-legged, docile, great-hearted beast that was the sole remaining animal of its size left on Laurr.

Telis was taken first to the anterooms of the Central Temple, where a kindly-faced Third-Cycle Priest assigned him quarters. From there, he was taken to the tall spire apparently reserved for sudden guests of the Temple.

In respectful silence, he was freed of his bonds and left alone in a room such as he had never dreamed of occupying in his own border fortress . . . or even in the palace of the Laurr of Laurr himself.

One curving wall was made entirely of glass, and it faced the city to the west and the desert to the north, so that the whole magnificent panorama stretched out before him like a framed picture. And the furnishings! By the Goddess! He had not dreamed that the sombre scientist-priests of the Temple did themselves so well! Suspecting the presence of listening devices or peep-holes, he snooped. He found nothing. A soft canopied bed waited invitingly, reminding him that the only rest he had had had been the stupor induced by the stungun; and a table laden with refreshments and wines stood in the center of the deep-pile carpet. What a difference from the stone floors and the draughty keeps to which he was accustomed!

Recalling that he had not eaten for some time, he fell to on the laden table. And then, as weariness stole over him, he laid himself fully dressed on the wide bed to rest and await whatever came next. Telis was a soldier and, like all soldiers everywhere, he ate first, rested next, and was content to await developments in all the comfort that his surroundings could afford him.

For a prisoner, he thought with a wry smile, I am certainly being treated royally. By the Goddess! How would I be treated if I were a friend?

At last the strain of the night's events took its toll of him, and the young Lord of Lars slept as the Temple City of Dorliss awoke to its many and varied tasks . . .

THE pointer on his chronometer stood at the twenty second hour and the sun was low on the horizon when Telis was awakened by a liveried escort at his bedside.

With a respectful bow, the man indicated that Telis should follow him, and the young lord trailed him through the door, satisfied that within a very short time he would be before someone in authority here. His mind was full of thoughts concerning the attack on the camp that by this time the Maldia must surely have completed, unless . . .

Unless his disappearance had disrupted the carefully laid plans that had taken the secret organization so long to complete. In that case, agents would have to be sent out again among the Guski desert tribesman to instruct the chieftains concerning a later date to be used for the attack, and a different leader would of course have to be picked. Telis grimaced. It would be Brand, naturally. And all the high officers of the Maldia would be convinced that Telis had defaulted, for they had no inkling that the Temple was involved or that it even knew of the projected attack. One way or another Telis of Lars would be the scapegoat . . . Prince Brand would see to that!

Telis' guide led him out of the spire and into a sith-drawn car. The great beast stepped smartly along, its six padded paws soundless on the verdant moss of the thoroughfare.

As they neared the center of the city, Telis saw that he was being taken to the Central Temple, a graceful structure of alabaster whiteness. The guide halted the sith before the Temple and Telis alighted. An attendant came forward to take charge of the sith, and the escort motioned Telis into the building.

They passed the portal and entered into a fairyland within a fairyland, for the inner rooms of the Central Temple were by far the most wondrous in all Dorliss. There were panelled walls of purest quartz crystal, faceted to reflect the light in enchanting beams of polychromatic loveliness. And the mosaic floors depicted in silver and gold the scenes of historical significance from the long life of the Temple.

A thousand other things there were that filled the young warrior with awe . . . for mere beauty per se had long ago passed the surface of Laurr, and only here in the inmost sanctum of the Temple could such things survive and be cherished.

Another thing Telis noticed also. Though guards abounded *outside* the city, he had seen but a handful within the walls. He remembered something Gorla had told him long ago: that science could not really thrive against a militaristic background, and that was why so much of the ancient lore was lost when the planet became nothing more than a battleground. Plainly, the city of Dorliss was not ruled by force, and—a break for freedom might not be the impossible achievement that he had begun to imagine it.

Now they were within a long hallway, bare but for the crystal panelling. From somewhere came the whispering of plaintive music. It tinted the air with a gentle nostalgia that found a strangely responsive chord in Telis. He was told that the sound came from another chamber where a Priest was engaged in research on sounds and their effect on human emotions. It had been so long since music existed on Laurr that even this knowledge had been forgotten . . .

The guide led Telis on and on, past the long hall and through many portals that opened at last into a small circular room devoid of any sort of ornamentation. In the center of this room, a man sat at a table that rose in graceful lines out of the floor itself. He was old, old.

Telis stared at the man. He wore the sable robes and the insigne of the Seventh Cycle, the topmost rank of priest-scientists. Recognition came, too. This man was not merely a Seventh Cycle Priest . . . he was actually the High Superior of the Temple. The old eyes and kindly face, the long white beard and sable robe were the same as he remembered from a hundred solideo-graphs in a hundred provincial Temples.

Telis would have thrown himself to his knees before the spiritual head of all Laurr had he not suddenly remembered that he was a prisoner here, abducted like any thieving Commoner.

He looked stolidly around the room

then, and for the first time he saw the girl.

A noble of Laurr had plenty of opportunity to become something of a connoisseur in the matter of woman flesh, but the moment that Telis' eyes found the girl's he knew that here was something special.

Her hair was black and her skin fair, a combination seldom found on this side of the planet where bronze skin and brown hair were almost universal, but Telis had heard tales of such women from brother officers who had carried the Laurr's battles of unification to the southern hemisphere. The clothes this woman wore were strange . . . a blouse covered her where most Laurrian women went nude, and a short skirt descended from a harness not unlike Telis' own. Her belt was hung with various pouches and holsters. And over all, she affected a transparent jumper of stuff like flexible glass that covered her from neck to ankles like chrysalis. Her eyes were deeply shadowed, and she seemed either ill or terribly disheartened . . . or both.

SHE stood in silence, a liveried escort at her side, to all intents and purposes a prisoner like himself, for she wore no swords and to be disarmed upon Laurr was to be a prisoner . . . even the peace-loving Temple Priests packed their full complement of weapons.

There was an air about the girl that touched Telis deeply, a deep-seated strength and quality, even through her obvious illness or discomfort. He wondered at her crime. Heresy, perhaps? He had never heard of the Temple arresting heretics . . . the Water Goddess was more a wishful personification than a demanding deity. But perhaps this girl was something special in the matter of heretics as she obviously was in the matter of beauty.

But the explanation was not a satisfying one. There was something more. Then it came to him like a swordthrust. Could the girl be . . . a Tellurian? Was it possible?

The intoned words of his escort interrupted his thought.

"Reverend High Superior, here is Lord Telis of Lars, Captain-General of the

Laurr of Laurr's Armies."

The Superior inspected him kindly enough. "I have heard that two of our guardsmen were injured in taking young Telis. How are they now?"

"They suffered wounds, one critical," reported the escort, "Both will live, Reverend Superior."

The old man nodded. "It is well." Then he turned to Telis and he added: "How well you fight for your prejudices, my son!"

Telis remained stiffly erect and silent, his eyes hard on the unknown girl. For the moment all he could do was watch and wait for an opportunity to escape.

"You will be interested to know, My Lord of Lars," said the High Superior mildly, "that the scheduled attack on the Tellurian camp was not launched this morning . . ."

Telis relaxed slightly. Then there was a chance to redeem himself in the eyes of his fellow nobles. Perhaps soon.

". . . but you are no longer chieftain of that abominable organization, the Maldia, for which you should give thanks to the Goddess! At the moment your so-called friends are meeting to replace you with one Prince Brand," the High Superior continued. "They have declared at his instigation that you are a coward and a traitor. Those are the actions of your fine friends. What do you think of them?"

Telis felt a stirring of anger. "If what you say is true, Reverend Superior, I have the Temple and you to thank for my disgrace."

The High Superior looked reproachful. "Like the rest of your caste," he sighed wearily, "you are blind. I suppose it will be an impossibility to convince you that your Maldia is doing infinitely more harm than good with its senseless code of slaughter and more slaughter. That is all it will ever succeed in bringing to our suffering planet!"

Tellis held his peace. There was nothing he could say to refute the High Superior that was not based on obedience to life-long prejudices, and he somehow felt that those arguments would be wasted on such a man as now sat before him.

"Yet I must try," the old priest contin-

ued, "to teach you the difference between rightful pride and sinful, destructive arrogance. I must try to make you see that these Tellurians you profess to hate so . . ."

Here Telis' eyes sought the girl, but her expression told him nothing. He looked back at the High Superior.

". . . that you profess to hate so are now Laurr's only chance for survival."

"Words," Telis said coldly.

The old man nodded slowly. "But true words. Words that can bring life instead of death. Better words than you will ever hear in that barbaric Maldia!" His old eyes seemed to bore through Telis now, stripping him bare of intellectual barriers and misunderstanding. "We could," the priest mused, "turn you over to our psychologists and let them drive the devils out of your mind . . ." He paused thoughtfully. "But no. That would not be the same. You, yourself, must come to understand. You must be allowed to learn of your mistaken ways without interference."

Telis frowned. "Abduction, then, is not interference."

"We regret the necessity. But the lack of time made it necessary. The attack on the camp had to be delayed and the Maldia chose to act almost too quickly," said the High Superior. "At least we have been able to cause a delay of that wanton act."

"Now or later," said Telis carelessly. "It will come."

"And with it death to those who offer us redemption and life?"

"Redemption?" asked Telis hotly, his eyes full on the girl. "Slavery!"

The High Superior sank back in his chair wearily. "I should have known," he muttered disgustedly. "Well, so be it, then. You will remain here in Dorliss until we are able to evolve some scheme for the protection of our friends. In time even you will see that we act for the best good of Laurr.

"These other-worldlings have narrowly averted on their own world the catastrophe of atomic war that wrecked ours. Hence, they are no longer a warrior race. They have devoted themselves to science in ways that we never knew even in the golden

haads. Their technics can be our salvation, if we are only intelligent enough to accept their offered hand of friendship!"

Telis was listening with only half an ear now. A plan was forming in his mind. A plan of escape.

"... remember that the races of both Terra and Laurr are sprung from the loins of a single great transgalactic people," the High Superior was saying, "and together they might one day rule the Solar System. Think of it, Telis of Lars! Even the knowledge of interplanetary travel will be ours if we join in brotherhood with Terra! All the might of our Temple science could not achieve that in the short haads left to us . . . but the Tellurians offer it *now!* And the only payment they ask is some of the deadly iron that eats away our atmosphere and drains us of our precious water!

"Think of these things, young sir, until next we speak."

The old man sank back, exhausted by his speech and made a sign that the audience was over. He knew somehow that he had failed . . . and that other measures were now in order.

III

AN HOUR BEFORE SUNRISE, Telis was awake and ready for action. He arose and dressed himself, broke his fast on the remains of his late evening meal, for he dared not guess how long it would be before he ate again. He banged at the door of his apartment until an attendant appeared, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

Telis made a long face. "I—I must see Brother Gorla," he demanded, "the Priest who brought me here. I—I feel the need of spiritual guidance."

The attendant, a Temple novice, showed benign pleasure at his words.

"Could I not be of service, my son?"

Telis shook his head. "The words of the High Superior have caused me to reweigh the values of my long and sinful life. Brother Gorla has long been my spiritual father and counsellor. I must see him." It was not altogether a lie. The kindly old

scientist's words had made him think a bit, in spite of himself. The old man had seemed so sure. And Gorla had long been his source of advice and even companionship for a good five haads.

The novice was disappointed, but understanding. He departed to waken Brother Gorla.

Three quarters of an hour of darkness remained when Gorla appeared at the door. Telis met him, looking carefully up and down the hall to see that they were alone. How careless these Temple people were with their prisoners!

"Telis, my friend! What is it? Brother Alto said that you needed some . . ." Gorla began.

Telis measured him carefully and swung. With all the power and co-ordination of a soldier's superbly conditioned body behind it, Telis' fist caught the Priest on the point of his jaw and knocked him sprawling to the thick carpet. Quickly dropping to his knees, Telis relieved the fallen man of his two swords and stungun. He strapped them to his own harness and looked about for a means of reviving the Priest. Taking the wine bottle from the table, he splashed some of the dark fluid into Gorla's face. For a moment, Telis had the feeling that it had all been too easy. But he drove the misgivings from his mind and concentrated on the next steps in his break for freedom.

The young Priest sat up fingering his jaw gingerly. There was a reproachful look in his eyes.

"Telis, you can't escape if that's what you intended by striking me. Give me back my weapons."

Telis smiled savagely. "Oh, no, my good and faithful friend. Now get up. Up I say, or I'll spit you where you lie!"

Gorla gave him a rueful smile. "By the Goddess, I believe you'd do it, too."

"There is a girl here," Telis snapped. "What do you know about her?" If the girl actually were a Tellurian, she would be an invaluable hostage.

"Girl?" Gorla looked puzzled.

"Quickly!"

"It's true that there is a girl here, but—"

"Who is she? Why was she brought here?" demanded Telis.

"She was found by one of our patrol sleds . . . lost in the desert and near dead. They picked her up and brought her here. Since then she has remained . . . voluntarily."

Telis gave a short, hard laugh. "You can do better than that, Gorla!"

The Priest shrugged. "Then why ask me if you don't intend to believe the truth?"

"I'll hear it from her. We are leaving, friend, and she goes with us!"

Gorla shrugged again. "As you wish, Telis. There seems to be nothing I can do to stop you."

"Then lead me to her quarters, and not a sound out of you, do you understand?" Telis prodded the Priest gently with the short-sword.

"But command me, lord," muttered Gorla sarcastically. He picked himself up off the floor. Telis snatched the cloak from his cassock and wrapped it around the gleaming blade of the short-sword, still keeping the point at the base of the Priest's spine.

"Don't force me to use this, Gorla," he hissed in the other's ear.

Gorla shook his head silently and led the way off down the corridor. The early hour was well chosen, for the whole towering edifice seemed to be deserted. Somehow, Telis felt, *too* deserted. The whole magnificent megalopolis that was Dorliss seemed to sleep serenely under its mantle of invisibility.

In a tight silence, Gorla led Telis until they stood before a closed door near the ground level.

"Open it," commanded Telis.

"I have no key," Gorla protested.

Cursing under his breath, Telis tried the doorknob. To his surprise, it gave easily and the door swung open. Telis lifted his sword, half-expecting a trap, but no attack came from the darkness beyond the portal. He shoved Gorla through and closed the door, the dark closing in around them.

"A light," whispered Telis.

Gorla touched a switch on the wall and light flooded the room. On the great bed near the far wall, the girl sat, bedclothes held to her breast, staring at them curiously. It was strange, thought Telis, that she showed no fear. And stranger still was the

fact that her face was encased now in a bag-like contraption made of the same unusual material as the jumper he remembered seeing her wear. It was stretched tight by internal pressure that apparently came from a small cylinder at her bedside and connected to the mask by a flexible metal tube.

Some new and strange addiction, wondered Telis? It was not unknown upon Laurr for some to succumb to the lure of narcotics, what with the incessant warfare jangling the nerves and the ever-present spectre of doom hanging over the whole planet. Telis himself had tasted gas from a similar contraption on one of his hedonistic revels . . .

Whatever the drug was, he had seen her without the bag-like helmet in the Central Temple. Addiction might account for her seeming illness that he so well remembered from the previous day.

There was no sign of illness about her now! He stared at her, his breath catching in his throat.

Exotic woman!

NEAR at hand, her beauty was almost a living, tangible thing. Her hair gleamed, and her skin was palely translucent, like purest alabaster. The refraction of the light through the transparent mask surrounded her face with a glowing nimbus that made Telis think of the solid-eographic icons of the Goddess. Her lips were full, almost sensuous, and her great dark eyes looked at him quizzically but unafraid.

"There is no time to explain," he said rapidly. "We are leaving this place. Now."

She nodded without surprise, as though she had known exactly what he was going to say.

Telis motioned for her to get up. For a moment she waited, but when Telis showed no sign of turning around, she slipped out of bed and covered herself quickly with the blouse and harness that lay on a chair nearby. As she did so, she slipped the transparent mask off and, even as Telis watched her appreciatively, he could see the illusion of health fade from her face. A pinched look appeared, and a thin line of blue formed around her mouth. She

seemed short of breath.

The girl adjusted her harness about her, making sure that the contents of each pouch were there. Then she slipped herself into the transparent jumper and reached for the mask.

Telis caught her arm. "The mask stays here."

The girl looked perplexed. She looked to Gorla for aid. The young Priest moved to intervene, but Telis motioned him aside. "No," Telis spoke sharply. "You may have to fly an airsled . . ." He paused. "You can fly one, can't you?"

The girl nodded. "I have learned to fly one," she said. "But my mask . . . I need it!"

The girl's face looked stricken at the thought of leaving her precious mask behind. But Telis hardened himself. He could not let this escape be risked by her unpredictable actions. Besides, he had seen her in the Temple without the mask, so it was not a matter of life and death for her.

"The mask stays," Telis said flatly.

For a long moment there was something like sheer terror on the girl's face. Then, as though by an effort of the will, she composed herself and nodded her agreement. Telis was forced to admire her courage.

Gorla seemed to realize that any comments that he might make concerning the mask or the girl Telis would not believe, since for the moment they found themselves enemies. He decided to maintain a discreet silence and hope for the best.

"And now, friend Gorla," ordered Telis, "lead us to the landing field and get us an air-sled. It is a long way back to the capital and I have no intention of trying to make it on sith-back, not as long as your Temple Guards are so handy with the aircraft."

Like a bemused sleepwalker, Gorla led the way out of the building and through the dark streets. No beam of light now penetrated the light shield surrounding the Temple City, and Telis found the protecting darkness much to his liking. The drowsy guards at the gate looked curiously at the trio, but, recognizing Brother Gorla, made no effort to stop them.

Soon they were at the landing field and Gorla had run out the very air-sled that had brought Telis to the Temple City. Telis stepped into the forward cockpit and tested the jet. It came readily to life under his practised hands, and he motioned Gorla and the girl in beside him.

"Fly low," the girl said almost pleadingly.

He laid the stun-gun within easy reach and turned to Gorla. "Not that I don't trust you, my old friend," he said with a thin smile, "but I will feel much more comfortable if you are well-behaved while I am flying."

Gorla made no reply. He merely shrugged and wrapped himself in his cassock as best he could.

Telis glanced around at the sleeping field. Far across the landing area lights were flashing on. The sound of the airsled's jet had awakened the attendants, and soon they would be giving the alarm. But there was no chance for anyone to stop them now. Almost disdainfully, Telis shoved the throttle forward on the quadrant and the jet roared. With a hissing of runners, the sled moved swiftly across the red sand and into the air.

Zooming low over the buildings at the far end of the field, the sled drove out into the blackness. Then with breathtaking suddenness, it slashed through the light shield and the lights of Dorliss vanished while the heavens came alive with the early morning stars.

Telis pointed the sled's blunt nose at the hatefully beautiful morning star that was Terra riding low on the eastern horizon. Presently, he levelled the craft and reduced his speed to maximum cruising power. Just skimming the reddish dunes, they sped eastward, into the sudden glory of the desert dawn . . .

IV

AT NOON, TELIS TOOK TIME to search the sled's storage locker. Turning the controls over to the girl, he crawled across the bare deck into the rear cockpit. Most sleds that were used for over-desert flying carried emergency rations and weapons for the use of anyone

unfortunate enough to need them. In the matter of weapons, he was doomed to disappointment, for this particular sled carried none. But there was a small packet of concentrates, and a flask of precious water. Telis gathered the packet in his arms and turned to start back toward the forward cockpit.

He stopped short. From his vantage point behind her, Telis could see that the girl had taken a small cube from her pouch and was holding it to her ear. For several seconds she sat quite still, as though listening, then she turned the cube, held it to her lips for a moment, and returned it to the pouch at her belt.

He scrambled back to his place beside her, demanding, "That cube. What was it?"

"Cube?"

"In there." Telis touched the pouch that hung at her side.

"You must have been mistaken. There is no cube," she said, "Perhaps you saw me checking my compass . . ." She reached into the pouch and drew out a small magnetic compass in a square metal case. "You see?"

Telis frowned. It was possible that he had been mistaken . . . but he was inwardly almost certain that the compass he held in his hand was not the cube he had seen the girl using. For a moment he toyed with the idea of searching her, but reconsidered. The sled would not touch the ground again until it landed in the capital near the Grand Canal. There was no possible way that the girl could harm him or interfere with his plans now. And perhaps the cube was a happy-gas inhaler . . .

He looked searchingly into the girl's face. She looked as though she could use some stimulant. The blue about her mouth and the tight, pinched look in her face seemed to have worsened since leaving Dorliss. She actually looked ill. She gave him a wan smile, and he decided to question her no more for the present.

Opening the packet of concentrates, he offered her one and passed the pack to Gorla. Then he passed the water flask around, cautioning them to drink sparingly.

As the hours passed and the sun began

to slide down toward the western hills, Telis began to worry about their navigation. Not knowing the exact location of the Temple City, he could only guess at the proper course for the capital; and the low altitude made navigating very difficult. Telis decided to climb higher and see if he could not catch a glimpse of the Grand Canal or some other familiar landmark. He nosed the sled upward slightly and edged the throttle forward, sending the sled upward toward the cobalt sky.

The girl was looking down over the side at the desert rushing by. Though there was nothing to be seen but rust-red sand, something about the desolate waste seemed to please her.

Telis touched her arm to attract her attention. "We've been together almost all day and I don't even know your name," he said. "I am Telis of Lars . . ."

The girl smiled back at him. "My name is Leslie Karr," she returned.

Leslie. Telis turned the name on his tongue. It had a foreign flavor. As exotic and lovely as the girl herself. And two names. Leslie and Karr. Telis found the last hard to pronounce. Now, he wondered, why two names? She must be a person of consequence in her home land.

Telis thought of the cube. Perhaps a signalling device. A thought struck him. The Temple? No, it was not likely. A nagging doubt remained. He recalled uneasily how simple the escape had been. Too simple. Was this girl an agent of the Temple? Or had his first suspicion—that she was a Tellurian—been right?

"Telis," Gorla broke the silence, "can you tell me where we are?"

Telis shook his head.

"Why are we climbing?" Leslie asked. She looked afraid. "Please—I-I asked you to—"

Telis cut her off almost sharply. "I know what you asked me. But we must get high enough to have a look around us. To be lost out here would mean the end for all of us; an unpleasant end, too. It will only be for a short time."

Leslie dropped into an uneasy silence. Higher and higher the air-sled climbed until at last Telis levelled the aircraft off and began a systematic search of the

horizon to the east. There was no sign of the greenery that edged the great waterway.

"Telis!" Gorla's shout cut across the roaring of the wind. "Leslie! Look at her!"

TELIS whirled to look at the girl. The strange malady from which she suffered had chosen this moment to strike her down. For a moment Telis was shocked. Never had he seen a happy-gas addict react in this way! The thin line of blue that surrounded her mouth was deeper, staining her lips and spreading to tinge her whole face with azure. Her eyes were closed and her breath came in huge rasping gasps. Gorla was cradling her in his arms, chafing her wrists and trying to force water through her slack lips. He looked up at Telis, shouting frantically!

"Down! Down, Telis! We have to get her down low!"

For a moment Telis did not understand, then he realized what was meant and shoved the sled over into a steep dive. The girl was suffering from oxygen-starvation. She seemed to suffer from it chronically, and if the sled did not reach denser air soon she would die! That was the reason she had feared altitude and had begged that the sled be kept low.

And Gorla knew!

Suddenly the whole improbable picture of the escape flashed before Telis' eyes, and a sick feeling swept over him.

In a panic Gorla whipped out a transmitter and began to shout into it. Fearing the girl's death, his instructions were forgotten and he began broadcasting for help. Telis stared for a moment, not understanding. The radio devices used by the Temple were unknown to him, but he knew with an instinctive certainty that Gorla was making contact with the Temple Guard back in Dorliss. The rumors he had heard of the Temple's methods of quick communication seemed to ring in his ears and fury took him by the throat. Why hadn't Gorla used the radio before? Was it because the whole escape was a monstrous hoax, engineered by the Temple for the purpose of somehow shattering the Maldia and what it stood for? The answer was a blazing, irrevocable

yes!

And to what extent was Leslie Karr involved? In his fury, Telis could not think clearly enough to guess. He had the helpless feeling of great wheels containing smaller wheels and all spinning and whirling for some darkly unknown purpose . . .

He snatched the transmitter from Gorla's hand and slammed it over the side. Sick anger filled him. The Temple must at this very moment know their exact location from that tell-tale signal that Gorla had sent in his panic for Leslie! What a fool he had been with his escape and his cleverness! How they must be laughing at him back in Dorliss!

"May the Goddess damn you!" he gritted at Gorla.

"You fool!" the Priest retorted, his round face livid. "You've killed her with your stupid plottings and your . . ."

"She will live," snapped Telis. He knew how to deal with anoxia. Long campaigns in the air forces of the Laurr had taught him. But the rest of it . . . the debt to be settled with Gorla . . . that was something else!

His fury made him careless, and as the sled touched the sand, it almost overturned, skidding and careening over the red sand until at last it came to rest at a crazy angle on the slope of a low dune. The jet coughed and died, its nozzle jammed with sand.

Quickly, Telis lifted the insensate girl in his arms and laid her on the sand at full length. For just a moment he wondered at her weight . . . she seemed almost twice as heavy as she should be for her size . . .

Then the urgency of the moment was upon him, and he knelt at her side, placed his lips on hers and began forcing air into her lungs with his own. Presently she stirred and Telis knew with a feeling of great relief that she would recover.

He wrapped her in Gorla's cloak, for the sun was sinking low and the night chill was already in the air.

Then he turned to face the Priest, memory rekindling his fury. He caught the man by his cassock and pulled him close. "Now, Gorla, you'll tell me the whole story—all of it!" His voice was icy with suppressed anger.

But Gorla's eyes were not on him. Instead they seemed centered on something above and behind him. The Priest's features contorted with a sudden fear, and he twisted around, pulling Telis with him. "Look out!"

THE warning came too late. The sudden twist had saved Telis' life, but the flashing missile caught him in the shoulder. A searing pain blazed through Telis, and he spun around, staggered by the impact of the thrown short-sword that had pierced his shoulder.

Through a dancing haze of agony, Telis could see a ragged line of naked men and women on the crest of the dune. Each carried a short-sword and a long-sword, and the bodies were filthy and covered with rank hair.

Guski!

A lank woman lifted her arm and pitched her short-sword. It struck in the sand near Leslie Karr's prostrate body. Telis threw himself on the girl, protecting her body with his own. With pain lancing through him from the blade that still impaled him, he freed one of his swords and his stun-gun, throwing them to Gorla. Their personal quarrel was forgotten in the heat of the attack.

Blood was flowing out of him. Gritting his teeth to keep from crying out, Telis twisted the imbedded sword free. With a sobbing moan he dropped it to the sand. He fought back the blackness that threatened to engulf him. Gorla must not fight alone!

The Priest had sought the shelter of the air-sled and was shooting handily at the attackers on the crest. Already he had accounted for three men and a woman, and several of their companions, not knowing or caring that the stun-gun did not kill, had withdrawn from the fray to butcher the fallen ones into long strips of bloody meat which they stuffed hungrily into their mouths.

Telis felt Leslie stir, and he struggled to his feet and helped her to the sled.

With surprising quickness she adapted herself to the necessities of battle. She took a peculiar looking pistol from her pouch and levelled it at the attackers.

A sharp report burst from the weapon in the girl's hand and, on the crest of the dune, a Guski woman shrieked and pitched to the sand. Twelve times this process was repeated, and Telis began to have hopes that the battle would be won before he, himself, collapsed from loss of blood.

It was a vain hope. After the twelfth explosion, the weapon fell silent, and the strange performance was over.

There was a tense lull during which the Guski butchered their dead, and Gorla tried fruitlessly to start the dead motor of the sled. Then the Guski began to close in, and Gorla and Telis both were forced to leave the sled and advance to meet them. Leslie stayed near the aircraft, digging frantically at the jammed jet.

To Telis, his sword seemed suddenly very, very heavy. He touched Gorla on the shoulder. "At least . . . we'll die . . . friends . . . together," he muttered.

Gorla's face contorted with grief. "Friends . . . always, Telis. I never felt any other way," he said simply.

There was no time for more. The Guski were upon them—a savage, shrieking horde of vile-smelling beasts, hungering for the taste of human meat.

Time seemed to stand still. Telis thrust and slashed, cut and parried endlessly. Pain was his only reality. Faces appeared before him, and vanished into gouts of red as his blade found marks. Steadily his strength failed and finally he dropped to his knees, still lashing out feebly with his weapon.

Suddenly the cacophony of battle was overwhelmed by the jerky, uneven barking of an ailing jet. Leslie had cleared the nozzle! Startled and fearful of the jet flame, the Guski shrank back momentarily. In that moment, Gorla half-dragged, half-carried Telis to the sled. Telis could feel the movement of the sled as it coursed lamely across the sand, trying to gain flying speed. He heard Leslie gasp:

"It's no use, Gorla. It can't lift the three of us with the jet half-clogged."

Gorla's voice came sharp and clear. "Then I stay. Take him on. That's the important thing. He must be made to see. . ."

Telis realized with agonizing helplessness that since the sled could not lift three

persons Gorla was remaining behind. To face the Guski!

He tried to cry out his protest, but he was too weak to do more than moan.

"Can you find the way?" Gorla asked the girl.

"I have maps. There's the transmitter, too. I can come in on D-F fixes. But what about you?"

"Never mind me . . . remember, the fate of my world goes with you . . . and with Telis. Explain that to him . . . after he knows . . ."

Telis heard the motor speed up again, and he felt the bumping of the runners on the sand. But he was unconscious before the sled lifted into the air . . .

V

FOR WHAT SEEMED A LONG time, Telis floated in throbbing darkness. Pain spun in little wind-devils of fire across the surface of his mind and it was not physical pain alone. Two thoughts tortured him constantly. He had failed the Maidia and he had deserted his friend, leaving him to die at the hands of the cannibal tribesmen.

Aeons swept by in that timeless, vitalizing darkness, and at last Telis opened his eyes.

For a moment he thought that he was back in the Central Temple of Dorliss, but as his eyes focused more clearly, he saw that he was in a small, neatly bare room. The walls were white, and one of them seemed to curve gently overhead until it met the first plane of the ceiling.

A cool hand was stroking his forehead, and Telis turned to meet the eyes of Leslie Karr. She sat at his bedside watchfully, and somehow he knew that she had been there for a long time.

Her clothing was different than he remembered. Her harness was gone. Now, her supple figure was clad in a straight tunic of dark metallic cloth that hung from her shoulders to the middle of her thighs, caught at her small waist by a linked belt. Her dark hair was swept back from her face, exposing her small, elfin ears. There was a look of health and vitality about her that was amazing when Telis recalled her

condition in the air-sled.

"Wh . . . what magic is this?" he asked.

Leslie smiled. "No magic," she said. "Only some decent air."

Telis drew a deep breath. It was true. The air was different . . . and wondrous. Vitality filled him and with it came a thousand questions. Where was he? What was this place? What had happened after the fight on the desert? And the question he most wanted answered—what of Gorla?

Leslie laid a warning hand over his lips and cautioned him against spending his new found strength too prodigally. He was healing, she told him, and within a very few days he would be able to be up and around. At that time, all his questions would be answered. This last she told him with something like reluctance in her voice.

Plainly, wherever they were, Leslie was at home here.

The days passed almost too swiftly. Strange men came and went, giving him odd medications and dressing his wound. All his questions were tactfully avoided. Yet their concern for a stranger was confusing to Telis. By the code that Telis had lived his six haads with, a stranger was ipso facto an enemy. According to that tenet he had lived and had become a great soldier and a high officer of the Laurr of Laurr himself. Now here were strangers treating him with kindness . . . and their kindness was striking at the roots of everything he had ever believed. And there was Leslie. She remained with him constantly, tending him and comforting him with her presence. Telis felt himself losing his heart to this exotic girl with her kindness and her breathtaking beauty.

FOUR days passed and then his confinement was over. He was able to rise from his hospital cot. His harness was brought to him, and even his weapons. If proof were needed, Telis thought, the act of returning his weapons proved that he was among friends. And true friends they must be, for they had nursed him and fed him, and he could not forget that his friend had been willing to remain behind alone to face the Guski so that he, Telis, might be brought here. And that recalled the burning question mark. *Why?*

When he had dressed himself, Leslie came into the room. Her face was sombre. "Telis," she began, "I have something that I must tell you before you leave this room. Believe me, it is not easy. You see, I . . . I have not been honest with you . . . Not that I have lied. Believe me, I haven't. But . . ." She broke off momentarily in confusion. Her face was flushed. "I have let you mislead yourself, and that's very like lying, isn't it?" She did not wait for a reply, but rushed on. "Now I have to stand by and watch you find out who and what I am. Oh, believe me, I have no wish to hurt you or your people, Telis. I couldn't . . . now . . . because I . . . I . . ." She bit her lips. "All this is necessary. You had to be convinced, you see, because of your great influence with the Laurr . . ." She gave a short, nervous laugh. "All this isn't making very much sense, is it?"

"No," replied Telis, puzzled.

"You know by now that you were tricked into coming here. It was all planned by us and by the Temple . . ."

Telis felt the blood drain from his face. He knew exactly what was coming next. The whole incredible picture was clear.

"Oh, Telis," cried Leslie. "Please understand! Gorla understood . . . and he gave his life so that we could make *you* see! Can't you see what I am trying to tell you? Can't you see that if you help us we can bring life back to Laurr? And that if you won't it might mean ages of senseless warfare? Telis . . . *try* . . ."

Telis of Lars stared. It all came flooding back to him. All the tiny, irrelevant pieces of the puzzle. The mask back in Dorliss! A respirator! Her need for oxygen . . . the anoxia that struck her down in the air-sled . . . the rich air of this room! Her weight . . . the greater density of a heavy gravity planet's evolution! Alien, alien!

Leslie Karr could feel the barrier rising between them and she cried out against it. Tears streaked her face, and even that added to Telis' sense of alienage. Laurrians did not weep. The water in their bodies was far too precious for that. It was all too grotesque! He, the former leader of the Maldia, beholden to the invaders for his very life!

Then the shock began to wear off, and his mind to function more clearly. This place with its sloping wall was a compartment in the Tellurian spacecraft, that much was now obvious. Yet they had trusted him within it . . . armed. And they had been kind to him, they had nursed him back to health after the Guski's wound almost killed him. Why? It was not enough that he had great influence with the Laurr. He had had the feeling that they *liked* him. Could it be, he wondered, that the whole basic philosophy of the Maldia was in error? The Temple spoke of mighty Tellurian science. Could it actually do what the High Superior of Dorliss claimed? Redeem the planet and give it hope again?

And there was Leslie. In that moment of introspection, Telis knew with a distinct shock that, Tellurian or not, he loved her. Telis of Lars, peer of the ancient realm of Laurr, member of the dread, anti-Tellurian Maldia, was in love with an alien woman! Creature of another world—different and strange—and yet he loved her! Standing there, watching her tears course down her cheeks, he felt his heart constrict, and he knew that she had won.

"Please, Telis—my Telis—let me show that we can be friends!" she cried.

Telis stared at her. "Friends?" he asked thickly.

Leslie took a step nearer, her eyes suddenly wide, almost afraid. It came to Telis in a blinding flash of insight that she too was feeling the soul-wrenching conflicts of love for an alien creature. To her Telis was the exotic, the outlander.

Then like the snapping of a steel wire, the barrier was broken, and she was in his arms, returning his kisses with an almost desperate abandon . . .

THE Tellurian camp was a revelation to Telis. Guided by Leslie and a group of Tellurian scientists, he beheld machines such as had not existed on the surface of Laurr for ten thousand haads. Here, among the squat, pressurized domes of the camp were the end-products of all the theories the Temple had salvaged from the lost books of the ancients.

Power was drawn from the destruction

of infinitesimal particles of matter by a mysterious process the scientist referred to as "fission," and Telis found to his surprise that Leslie was not a noblewoman as he had supposed, but something called a "metallurgist." These terms meant nothing to him, but the teaming activity of the camp and the matter of fact way in which miracles were daily performed made him begin to understand what the High Superior had meant when he had said that together the races of Terra and Laurr might one day rule the solar system. The machines and the magnificent, graceful projectile that was the spaceship fired Telis' imagination.

If any doubt remained in his mind, it was shattered irretrievably when Leslie showed him the mining operations. Thus far, they had begun only on an experimental basis, the Tellurians wisely wary of extending themselves before permission to remain was granted by the Laurr. But, even on a small scale, what Telis saw stirred him more deeply than had any of the other wondrous things he had been shown.

Since the deserts of Laurr were almost pure iron oxide, it was explained to him that they were the result of the ubiquitous iron's propensity for uniting with oxygen. The result, after many aeons, was that the air was actually rusting away. By the marvelous miracle of Tellurian chemistry, the iron oxide was broken down into its constituent elements. This resulted in a stream of iron ingots, and . . . free oxygen!

Telis was quick to realize what this process would mean to Laurr over a period of time if it was made universal. Great quantities of the precious oxygen would be released into the air to revitalize it, and later to combine with the large amounts of hydrogen in Laurr's atmosphere to form water!

The Tellurians had in fact already set up a pilot plant where oxygen and hydrogen were mixed to make the water they needed for their own purposes. Part of it was used for drinking and bathing, and part was used for puddling the iron oxide before it was passed through the separation process. Great pressure hoses washed

the impurities from the ferric oxide even as Telis watched, astounded. Never had a Laurrian seen precious water treated so carelessly, but with a great effort he was able to acclimate himself finally to an economy of plentiful water, and the sight of great streams of it churning the desert to reddish mud shocked him less and less as the days passed.

Only two thoughts marred Telis' happiness during these days spent in the camp. First the thought of Gorla's fate remained with him always, and he resolved that his friend's sacrifice should not be for nothing. And, second, there was the Maldia. Now, with Prince Brand at its head, it was more than ever a threat to the safety of the people from the third planet, to himself, to the Laurr and by extension to the world of Laurr itself.

Telis resolved that he must return immediately to the capital and lay his findings before the Laurr. Only in that way could the danger of the Maldia be removed. With the safe-conduct from the supreme ruler confirmed publicly, the Maldia would not dare to attack the camp.

The air-sled was repaired, and Telis made ready to leave the following morning over the protests of Leslie and the camp medical staff who contended that his wound was not yet sufficiently healed.

But Telis' resolution had come too late. Even as the sled was loaded, a shout from the watchtower brought the whole camp out into the streets. With sinking heart Telis heard the words of the camp guard. The Maldia had come, and the camp found itself surrounded.

VI

TELIS HURRIED WITH LESLIE to the watchtower and his horrified eyes looked out over the surrounding desert. Fully five thousand Guski men and women surrounded them, led by at least five hundred well-armed and sith-mounted warriors. Telis recognized many of them as his former comrades of the Maldia. And Prince Brand was there. Telis felt a hot wave of hate for the man.

Thus far, they had made no move to attack, and that in itself showed the char-

acteristic mark of Brand's leadership. With a force of fifty five hundred fighting men against an even two hundred poorly-armed men and women, mostly elderly scientists, Brand still chose to proceed with caution lest the unexpected defeat him . . .

Telis started. The unexpected!

He let his mind harken back to the stories the older Temple Priest told of the mythical coming of the Water Goddess. And he thought of the books he had read dealing with the forgotten science of weather on Laurr . . .

Quickly he called a meeting of all the department heads. Leadership fell on his shoulders like a cloak, for among all these learned men and women he was the only warrior.

One woman suggested that all the personnel of the camp move into the spaceship and that they lift the craft into the air, spraying the attackers with the deadly radioactive exhaust gases. But the ship's navigator vetoed that idea quickly. There was fuel enough only for the return flight to Terra when next the two planets came into conjunction. Moreover, such a move would destroy the camp and all its machinery, negating the entire purpose of the expedition.

It was then that Telis stepped forward with his plan. The Tellurians seemed doubtful that it would work, but Leslie who had been among the Laurrians more than the rest of them, convinced them that they could lose nothing by trying.

"Telis is of Laurr," she said to them, "and he knows the ways and beliefs of his people. I, for one, think that his plan is our only hope. Outnumbered as we are, and by savage fighting men and women, our only chance is fear. It saved our lives before, and can again!"

When the technicians had left to modify the necessary equipment, Telis summoned the non-essential able-bodied men. Arming them with the few Tellurian powder-guns that were available and with whatever cutting weapons came to hand, he made ready to lead them out to meet the attackers. Time was needed. Telis and his respirator-masked, make-shift company determined to gain that time.

He stationed his men near the main gate to the camp and walked slowly out toward the masked attackers, tensely aware that at last Prince Brand had him at a real disadvantage.

Knowing that to convince these caste-ridden fanatics and savage cannibals that the attack should not be launched, would be next to impossible, Telis evolved a stratagem that might save a few precious moments. The warlike society of Laurr had developed a very strict code duello. As it was among most warrior civilizations, "honor" or "face" were of the utmost importance. He, himself, by disappearing on the eve of the Maldia's planned attack had lost face. Now, he resolved to turn this fact into a weapon against his attackers.

"Ho! Brand, there!" he hailed. "Come forward!"

Prince Brand squinted across the distance to see if he could recognize the speaker. Slowly, recognition came, and with it a fulsome satisfaction. This was better than he could have hoped for!

"So it is my Lord Telis returned from the realm of the Goddess to guide our hand against the invaders!" he smirked. "Come! Join us, illustrious phantom. We are about to complete the work you so nobly began the night you decided not to risk yourself!"

FOR a moment there was a silence among the noblemen of the Maldia, and then the laughter started. It was what Telis had expected. It was ironic, bitter laughter for one who had failed the warrior's code. To these men he was a coward. Even the naked savages laughed, though they did not understand the reason for it.

Telis' fury rose under the goading mirth, but he knew with some satisfaction that all the palaver was taking up precious minutes, stalling the attack that he could hold at bay only with his wits.

"You, Brand," said Telis slowly and distinctly, "are a usurping rogue. Your mother was a she-sith and your father a Guski slave of questionable ancestry. You are a coward and a pandering lackey!"

A sudden quiet settled on the serried

ranks and Telis continued with his insulting monologue.

"I challenge you to fight me here and now—so that I can strip the harness from your puffy carcass and throw it to the siths! Refuse, and I will come and get you!"

A low moan of rage rose from the ranks of the nobles. Never had a high-born prince been so grossly and deliberately insulted. According to their code, there was only one possible answer, and they awaited it with eagerness. Brand must fight.

But Prince Brand was no fool. He knew Telis for a swordsman, and he strongly suspected some sort of trickery from the too-silent camp. Still, he knew that Telis must be punished and before the troops or his hold over them would fail. It could be done without placing himself in jeopardy for the sake of a gallant gesture.

He turned to an equerry. "Bring him to me. Dead or alive."

Telis heard, and gave an insulting laugh. "Preferably dead, eh, Brand?"

The equerry looked pained. He turned to Brand. "Sir, he has offered a challenge. It would be in very bad form to . . ."

"Bring him!" Brand snapped testily. "If you are afraid, take a company . . ."

The officer stiffened. "I am not afraid, sir—though others are!" He wheeled his sith and trotted toward Telis.

"Get back, Captain," ordered Telis. "My quarrel is not with you!"

"Ride him down!" called Brand.

The officer unsheathed his lance and laid it in rest. Levelling it at Telis, he dug his booted heels into the sith's flanks and thundered across the sand, leaning low in the saddle.

Telis stood braced and, just as the animal came abreast of him, he stepped aside, catching the tip of the lance under his arm and whirling. The movement of the weapon overbalanced the officer and he tumbled from the saddle to sprawl in the sand. With a mortified howl of rage, the man was on his feet and upon Telis, but his fury made him careless. Telis' sword flashed out and the point found the officer's sword arm, piercing it neatly and

ending the encounter with a flourish.

Telis turned to face the attackers once again. "Now Brand," he taunted, "will you come out to do your own dying? Or will you send another lackey to take the steel meant for you?"

Brand's heavy face darkened. For answer he raised his hands to the buglers.

"Attack!"

The force swept forward like a great tawny wave, shrieking and cursing. Telis stared aghast. An attack he had been expecting, and even the possibility of the Maldia finally taking the camp had occurred to him. But that fifty five hundred roaring madmen would attack one man was more than he had prepared himself for.

Death seemed a certainty, and a fleeting image of Leslie swept across his mind. He lifted his futile swords and murmured a prayer to the Goddess . . .

IT was answered. The rain came like a gift from heaven. From the nozzles of the camp's pressure hoses there poured a great effluvium of pure, cold, water. It rose in a graceful curve high into the air and spilled down to lash the red sand into a morass and spray the attackers.

Telis himself was caught up in the wonder of it. And the effect on the Maldia's fighting force of Guski was nothing short of miraculous. The charging savages pulled up, faces lifted to the sky in mute amazement. Then came fear—shrieking, mad, insensate terror! Rain was falling where no rain had fallen for ten thousand haads! The Goddess had opened up the flood gates of heaven and the stuff of the sky was falling down on a sinful Lurr! Dropping their weapons, they fled out into the desert—away from the accursed place that the Goddess had chosen to enchant! And, in their flight, they carried the mounted nobles of the Maldia, cursing, shouting, trying to regroup their shattered cohorts.

Telis stood in the downpour, his body tingling to the touch of the precious water. He was thinking not that this trick of Tellurian technics had saved his life; rather he was thinking of Lurr and what this could mean to the planet. The deserts

could be conquered, the world could be redeemed!

Presently, the water stopped and a Tellurian from his company ran forward to shout: "Telis! Look there! Aircraft!"

Telis looked skyward, and the door to the future seemed to slam shut in his mind. Fully two hundred air-sleds were beating rapidly toward them. The Maldia again . . . more of them?

Telis looked out into the desert. The mounted force had abandoned the attempt to regroup the demoralized Guski, but it had formed into a phalanx and was returning to the attack.

Automatically, but without real hope, Telis motioned his men into extended order. They were caught between two forces, helpless between the sith-mounted Maldia and the airborne contingent. The irony of it caught at his breast painfully. It was bitter hard to die just at the brink of a golden age . . . a golden age that would never come now.

Now he could make out Brand's face far to the rear of the mounted column. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the sleds were almost upon them, too. Telis braced himself for the attack.

Then, with a roar of jets, the air armada passed low over his head and began disgorging warriors onto the rapidly narrowing strip of sand between him and the Maldia. For a moment Telis was stunned by the strangeness of the maneuvers . . . and then his astonished eyes caught the gleam of the device blazoned on the grounded sleds. It was the Sword and Atom of the Temple!

With a glad cry he leaped forward to greet the Temple Guardsmen. Snatched from the brink of disaster, the camp now revelled in a surfeit of friendly warriors! The Maldia halted in confusion and air-sleds moved out to cut off their escape.

Telis searched the ranks of the Temple troops for some explanation of this seeming miracle . . . and his eyes found a familiar figure. It was battered and bandaged but unmistakably . . . Gorla!

He caught the priest by the arm and spun him around with a shout. The familiar round face reddened with pleasure and he threw his free arm around Telis.

"You've healed, Telis!" he cried. "And in more ways than one!" he added significantly. "I see you leading the defense instead of the attack!"

"I've been a thick headed fool, Gorla! But you . . . how are you here? I—"

"You thought me meat for those Guski back on the desert that night?"

Telis nodded.

The Priest laughed. "By the Goddess! I thought you were going to get up and give us trouble that night! I suppose I should be thankful for your wound. You never would have left me otherwise!"

"But, how did you . . ." Telis began.

"The Temple takes care of its own, Telis, my friend," said Gorla. "We were being followed at a distance all the way from Dorliss by a guardship. Of course, when you threw my transmitter over the side, they lost us. But you were the one who had to be convinced about these Tellurians. So I stayed. There were a few bad moments . . . once or twice I thought the Guski had me cold, but the guardship was searching and it found me before the brutes could finish me off. Since then, we have been standing by at Dorliss, waiting for the Maldia to move."

"And here you are, thank the Goddess!" breathed Telis.

They stood surrounded by Temple Guardsmen and Tellurians watching the air-sleds break up the sith-mounted force of the Maldia. The back of the assault was broken. Riderless animals careened about wildly through the confusion, and people were pouring out of the camp to greet their liberators.

"Who led them?" asked Gorla indicating the sullen nobles.

Telis looked around for Prince Brand, but he was nowhere to be seen. Then his sharp eyes caught a cloud of dust moving rapidly across the desert. It would be Brand. He alone, of all the Maldia, was cynic enough and coward enough to throw over the battle-to-death code at the first sign of opposition.

With an oath, Telis caught at a sith and swung into the saddle. "There!" he shouted to Gorla, pointing. "If he escapes the Maldia will form again!" Telis kicked the sith savagely, and the animal plunged

off in pursuit of the fleeing renegade.

At full speed the sith carried Telis out into the desert. For half an hour, there was no loss or gain, Prince Brand's animal holding its lead tenaciously. Already, the Prince had turned to see that he was being followed. But Telis' beast was fresher, and now began to narrow the distance.

They were well away from the camp when Telis caught up. Riding in, he cut across the path of Brand's animal, forcing it to break step. Brand slashed wildly at him but Telis parried and dodged in under the other's guard. Then, hooking his knee under that of the struggling Prince, he heaved upward and dislodged him from the saddle so that he tumbled to the sand.

Telis reined in the sith and leaped to the ground. Brand was already on his feet, sword in hand, his face contorted with fear and rage. Telis advanced steadily, hate coursing through him.

IF Brand had been a faintheart before, he was not now when his life depended on his skill and cunning. Even as their swords crossed, Telis knew that his wound was cut out for him. There was no sound but the clash of steel and the labored breathing of the two men as they locked in combat. For almost a quarter of an hour they fenced without appreciable gain on either side. But Telis was younger, and the strain was beginning to tell on Brand. He knew that he must win quickly or die.

Stepping back, Brand snatched the helmet from his head and threw it full at Telis' face. Telis' sword made a glittering arc in the sunlight as it caught the missile and knocked it aside. But for the moment he left himself unguarded, and Brand lunged in to sink his point into Telis' naked thigh.

Telis staggered but did not fall; the painful wound stung him, and Brand, thinking that he had scored a telling blow, launched a furious attack. Telis backed steadily across the sand, leaving a trail of blood. He measured the pace carefully and, when Brand paused to catch his

breath, Telis fainted at his head. Brand's blade came jerkily up to meet the thrust, and Telis stooped, whirled his point under Brand's guard and lunged with all his force.

The blade sank deep into Brand's chest. Telis stepped back and slipped it free. The renegade stood for a moment, staring unbelievably at the wound in his chest that bubbled a bloody froth. His arms stiffened and the swords he held dropped noiselessly to the sand. Very deliberately, he sank to his knees, still staring at the wound, then he pitched forward into the sand face-downward. He was dead.

Telis sought his sith wearily and mounted. He turned back toward the camp without another look at Brand. All the fury and excitement of battle was washed out of him, and he felt very tired.

The gentle movement of the sith's gait helped to steady him. He rode slowly along, looking out over the wastes of the Great Red Desert, envisioning the land as it would be one day . . . green and fertile, alive under a sky no longer starkly clear, but laced with clouds that would bring soft rains and stirring life from the land.

He topped the final rise and before him was the Tellurian camp and the tall, beautiful projectile of the spaceship. The throngs of mixed Laurrian and Tellurians were shouting and cheering the end of the struggle.

Now the future seemed assured. Telis promised himself that the future of the Tellurians on Laurr would be one with his own. And someday, he thought, perhaps he would see Terra—or even the stars!

It would be a great task, he reflected, this changing the face and fate of a dying world. But together the redeemers and the redeemed could work it out. Telis knew somehow that the thing would be done.

A figure detached itself from the crowd and ran towards him, calling his name. It was Leslie. With a quickened pace he made his way toward her. The door to the future opened, and he stepped through without looking back.

Flowering Evil

by MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Like all her other plants from far-off worlds, Aunt Amy hoped the Venusian Rambler would win a prize. It hoped so too.

CAPTAIN BJORNSON SHOOK A grizzled head. "I never saw a plant I liked the looks of less," he said. "I don't know how he got it through the planetary plant quarantine. You take my advice, Amy, and watch out for it." He took another of the little geela nut cookies from the quaint old lucite platter, and bit into it appreciatively.

Mrs. Dinsmore sniffed. "I don't know what you're driving at," she said coldly, "or why you're so prejudiced against my poor little Rambler. You know perfectly well that Robert would never send me anything the least bit dangerous."

Captain Bjornson paused with another cookie half-way to his lips and looked at her. "Wouldn't send you anything dangerous!" he exclaimed. "Why, Amy, have you forgotten how your face was swelled up for two weeks from that tree cutting he sent you? The doctor said it was a contact poison worse than sumach, and he tried to get you to go to the hospital. What about the time that cactus from the Blue Desert went to seed, and I spent thirty-six hours picking spines out of you? What about—" Mrs. Dinsmore gave a warning sniff.

"Well, all right," Bjornson said. "I know how fond you are of Bob, and I know you don't like me to mention his mistakes. I'll grant you he means well. So what? He's flighty, scatter-brained, and brash. To use an expression that was current when I was a boy, Bob is a twerp."

Mrs. Dinsmore pulled the lucite platter so far over to her own side of the table that Bjornson couldn't get another cookie from it without getting up and stretching out along the table cloth. "I don't agree with you," she said distantly. "Robert is a splendid fellow, so thoughtful and considerate. He takes a real interest in my

soap carvings, and how many young men with an important position like his, third mate on a space freighter with a regularly scheduled run, would remember to send back plants from every port of call to an aunt on earth? I shouldn't be surprised if I won a blue ribbon at the flower show again this year; my Golden Rain plant is about to bloom. Robert tells me it's a lovely thing."

The captain cast a wistful look at the cookie plate. "Well, don't say I didn't warn you," he replied. "When's Bob due in port?"

Mrs. Dinsmore's face relaxed. "Around the twenty-fifth," she said, "he sent me a 'gram. Here, have another cookie. I must think up some little thing to cook for him as a surprise."

The captain snaffled a handful of cookies from the plate and stood up to go. "Your ordinary cooking's good enough for me," he declared, "but, if you mean something like those little shrimps fried in batter you had the last time he was here, go ahead. And watch for that plant." He stalked off across the lawn.

He's getting old, thought Amy Dinsmore, watching the gruff old codger limp around a flower bed (Bjornson had had prosthetic surgery after he lost his foot and, though it had been successful, grafts were never as flexible as natural members), positively old. He ought to see a geriatrician right away. She'd tell him so the next time he came to see her. Talking about Robert that way!

She set the dial on the robot gardener on the front lawn to "Weeding: dandelions" and started along the path that led to the little hothouse where most of the plants Robert had sent her were growing; even in the deep tropics Terra was, with few exceptions, too cold and dry for them.



She knew exactly what was going to happen.

The Martian subjects, on the other hand, were in a psychroplex lean-to, with hygrosopes and a battery of infra-red lamps to keep the temperature up during the day.

The heavy moist air of the hothouse made Amy Dinsmore pant a little as she entered it—but how *interesting* it was! Even the leaves of her Venusian plants were fascinating, thick and leatherlike, thin and dry and hard like parchment, hanging in heavy serpentine coils or bristling pointed and sharp as so many spears. And their coloring ranged from cerise through a silky taupe and indigo around to an angry bright metallic blue. As for their flowers—oh, my. Amy Dinsmore had never seen anything like them. All you

could do was stand in front of them with your mouth open and stare. When she wasn't looking at her Martian succulents, they were her favorites of anything she grew.

She halted in front of the plant Robert had sent her last. Yes, Hjalmar Bjornson was getting definitely senile. How could anybody think that this poor little dried-up thing could be harmful? It was a mere bundle of desiccated stems, with only a tiny new leaf or two to indicate that it was alive. It looked a little better than it had yesterday, though; the colchine solution must have been good for it. Amy brushed a few dead flies from the ledge behind it into her hand and threw them

into the composter. She liked to have things neat.

Now, what should she cook as a surprise for Robert? He was fond of sweet things, of course, but it always seemed to her that he praised her meat dishes and entrees most. He liked her cooking so much because her roast turkeys and grilled steaks had a crust on them; electronically cooked food was quick to prepare and it might be as good for you as they said it was, but the outside looked like the inside, and it all tasted flavorless and grey. What was the use of saving time in cooking if you ended up with food that wasn't any fun to eat?

“YOU aren't looking well, Amy,” Captain Bjornson said three or four weeks later. He looked at her with the critical attention of an old friend. “You've got on a lot of cosmi-lac, but you still look peaked. What's the matter, worried about Bob? Ships don't get hurt in meteor swarms any more.” He looked down at his grafted foot reminiscently. “Not like it was when *I* was a third mate.”

Amy Dinsmore shook her head. She picked up one of the brightly-colored hexagons—they had been playing a desultory game of Maroola in the airy coolness of the side stoa—and fiddled with it.

“I haven't been sleeping well,” she confessed at last. “I've had such unpleasant dreams. Horrid things.”

“What about?” Bjornson asked. “That blasted plant? Honestly, Amy, it looks like some kind of spider to me.”

“No! I don't know why you can't leave my Venusian Rambler alone! Robert told me it was a very valuable plant, rare even in its own habitat. It's doing so nicely, too. A spider! I wish you'd stop trying to spoil it for me.”

“I'm sorry,” Bjornson apologized. “Forget it. Go on, tell me about your dreams.”

“Well, on Tuesday—or was it Wednesday?—no, it must have been Tuesday because that was the day after I flew over to Hartford—I was down by the hothouse and I found the most unpleasant thing beside the path.” She shuddered. “I've been dreaming about it ever since.”

“What was it?” Bjornson urged.

“Oh, a—I guess it must have been a rabbit once. One of the wild ones. Only it was nothing except some fur and some bones. Not decayed, Hjalmar, you understand, just gone. I can't imagine what had happened to it.”

“Better see a mental hygienist,” the Captain advised after a pause. “Nightmares can be very serious.”

“I suppose so. I really dread going to sleep.”

THE next morning, very early, Amy turned on the fluor with unsteady fingers. What a horrid dream it had been! She could hardly believe that it hadn't been real and that she was safe and sound in her own bedroom after all.

Outside, the noise that had wakened her—the jagged, unearthly caterwauling of a couple of tomcats promenading in the moonlight—came again. Ordinarily it was a noise Amy disliked very much—the poor things always sounded as if they were in deadly agony—but now she was glad to hear it. Heavens, if it hadn't been for those cats crying and waking her up, she might still be asleep and dreaming. Dreaming about—about—*blood* . . .

She turned the ceiling selector to “summer sky,” lay back on her pillow, and tried to relax. It was her favorite of all the ceilings her bedroom had, so lovely and calm and blue, and right now she needed something lovely and calm. One thing was sure, she wasn't going to stand this much longer. She didn't believe in pampering herself, but, if she had that dream once more she was going to take Bjornson's advice and see a mental hygienist.

She'd think about something pleasant. Amy tried to fix her mind on her gardening, on how well her plants were doing, but it wasn't a success. When she tried to keep her thoughts on her Venusian Rambler (why did they call it a Rambler?—it was turning into a large, stocky, compact bush more like an outsized Camellia than anything else Amy Dinsmore could think of), they kept veering back to her dream and all that—all that—

Well, then she'd think about Robert. She was a lucky woman to have a nephew like him. She'd worked out several menus,

all the things he liked best, but she wished she could think of something a little different. There were so few kinds of meat, when everything was said and done. Lamb and beef and musk ox and bollo and pork. And she always thought bollo was stringy and tough.

Gradually Amy's nerves began to quiet. The cats had grown quiet too, except for an occasional outburst that sounded like lightning made audible. Her thoughts drifted lazily from Robert to her soap carving. After a while she went to sleep . . .

The morning was sunny and bright, and she felt almost ashamed of herself for having let a dream affect her so seriously. She had finished her matutinal inspection of the hothouse and the succulent growing-shed and had started back to the house when she came on a bundle lying by the hothouse wall. At first she didn't recognize it for what it was, and stooped over it, poking at it with a stick.

After an instant she straightened, nauseated, remembering where she had last seen that ginger-colored fur. The bundle was the not very bulky remains—bones, and some patches of hide—of a cat. Hadn't there been some pieces of white fur too?—of two cats.

She'd better call Hjalmar. It might be dangerous. There must be some wild animal living near her hothouse, a lynx or ferret or wildcat or stoat. Mrs. Dinsmore wasn't strong on zoology, but she knew exactly what sort of an animal she had in mind—something lithe and dark and blood-thirsty. Goodness. It was quite frightening.

On the other hand, Robert would be in port in a couple of days. If she asked Hjalmar to help her, he'd either make an enormous masculine fuss over it (she still remembered the time she'd asked him to put up a towel rack for her and he'd arrived with a set of socket wrenches, a hand electric drill, four pairs of pliers, and a portable arc welding outfit) or he'd pooh-pooh and pish-tush her into silence. Either way, it wouldn't be satisfactory. She'd wait for Robert; Robert was so comforting. If only she didn't have more of those dreams!

3—Planet—Summer

DESPITE her apprehensions, her next night's slumber was profound and sweet. She hadn't felt so rested and refreshed in weeks. She put the somni-spray (maybe if she'd thought to use it before she wouldn't have had those horrid nightmares) back in the closet and decided that she'd do some soap-carving after breakfast. She felt in the mood for it, and Robert would be disappointed if she didn't have something new to show him that she'd carved since he had last been in port. Besides, she might be able to think of the special dish she wanted to make for him while she was working: she'd found from experience that some of her best culinary ideas came to her while she was making a statuette or plaque out of soap.

The meal concluded, she got out her set of modeling knives and a couple of cakes of soap. Soap was rather hard to get, since most people used synthetic detergents nowadays, but she knew a little store in Perth Amboy that carried it. This last batch had a lovely texture.

Amy rotated the living room on its axis until the light was exactly right, and then sat down in front of her carving desk. What should she make? A statuette? A plaque? A plaque in low relief, a plaque of a flower. Somehow, she didn't want to think about animals right now.

She had sketched in the conventionalized *Hermodactylus* and was beginning to pick it out carefully from the background when it occurred to her that she hadn't been down to the hothouse this morning to see her plants.

Why, that would never do, she mustn't neglect them, it was terribly important. Important. (Her head hurt; how dizzy she felt!) She'd better go at once, she'd better . . . go . . . Cake of soap in one hand, knife in the other, panting a little, Amy set out toward her plants in a stumbling run.

She was half-way to the hothouse before it occurred to her to question the impulse which had taken her incontinently from her carving and set her in blind motion toward the hothouse, and by then it was too late. She was no longer a free agent in any sense of the term. The mental grip which had taken the rabbit and the cats to their death had tightened on her inescapably.

Remote from her body, in a glassy paralysis of fear and impotence, Amy watched her feet moving briskly down the path.

Oh, if she could only cry out, call Hjalmar! She felt the muscles of her throat straining, but no sound came. And now she was standing before the hothouse, and her hand had opened the door.

The Rambler was waiting for her. Very slowly, like a man flexing his arm, it reached out one of the stocky branches toward her. Amy saw that at the end of the branch, well hidden under the dark green, glossy leaves, was a slender, translucent, hollow thorn. It was about the size of the hypodermic needle the doctor had used when, in her last year's physical examination, he'd taken a sample of blood.

Amy knew exactly what was going to happen. First the hollow thorn, until her veins were dry, and then the slowly opening maw, gaping above the big, swollen, meter-wide base the thick leaves of the Rambler had served to conceal. It would take a long time, but Hjalmar would never miss her before it was too late.

The Rambler's branch moved delicately over the surface of Amy's right wrist, the one with the modeling knife. The other branches were drooping limply away from the purple-pink of its swollen base, waiting, while it hunted the exact spot. It hesitated for an instant and then—Amy's mouth drew into a soundless Oh of pain—struck home.

A dark fluid began to stain the hollow thorn. For just a fraction of a second the Rambler's mental grip on Amy Dinsmore relaxed; she could feel its blind concentration on its own black enjoyment. And in that fraction of a second Amy threw the cake of soap in her left hand straight into the Rambler's fleshy maw.

The Rambler gripped at her mind again, but it was a disturbed and feeble grip. Its branches began to move around the fleshy bole they had shielded, slowly, and then in a furious heaving. The thorn which had entered her wrist was jaggedly withdrawn. Amy, her wrist streaming blood, stared at the Rambler for a moment and then lunged

at it with the menacing knife

SITTING outside on the ground beside the hothouse afterward, her forehead on her hands, feeling sick and faint, Amy had an idea. At first she pushed it from her; it was far-fetched, silly, even a little repulsive.

But was it so silly after all? And as to being unpleasant, well, bollo meat commanded enormous prices in the market and, from everything she'd ever heard, the bollo was the very reverse of a fastidious feeder. Even pigs certainly weren't dainty in their eating habits. If she parboiled it in several waters and then braised it slowly, with a hint of ginger in the sauce . . . Well, after all, why not?

Amy, the modeling knife in her hand, went into the hothouse again . . .

. . . "Gee, Aunt Amy, this meat's good," Robert said. He was talking with his mouth full. "I've eaten indigenous chow on three planets—four, if you call the stuff they serve you on Uranus food—and it's my opinion that there isn't a better cook anywhere in the system than you. Fact. How do you do it, anyhow?"

Amy Dinsmore lowered her eyes. She could feel herself blushing through her cosmi-lac. "Oh . . . thank you, Robert."

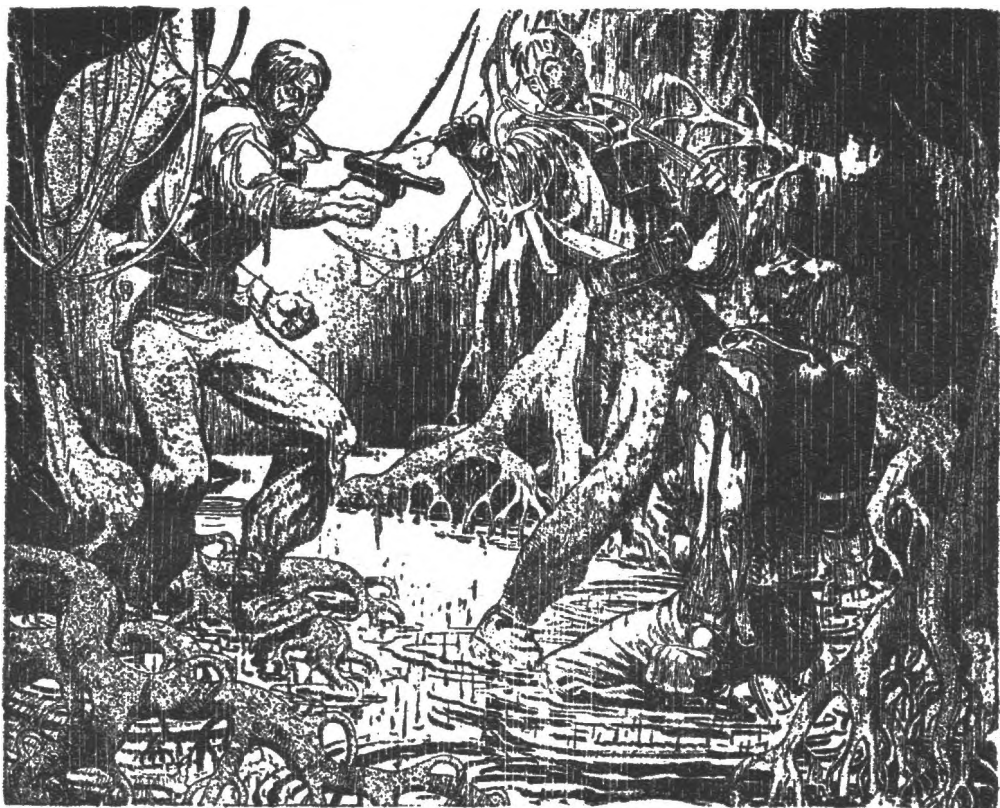
"She sure is, Bob," Hjalmar Bjornson said expansively. "That gravy! She's the best cook on Terra all the time, but when you're in port she gets sort of inspired."

"What kind of meat is this, though, Amy? And could I have some more?"

"Of course," Amy said. She refilled Hjalmar's plate. "It's something new I found in the big auto-market in the city," she said vaguely.

"By the way, Aunt Amy," Bob said, laying down his fork, "after I sent you that plant I heard it was supposed to be carnivorous. I forgot to mention it in my last 'gram. You didn't get into any trouble with it, did you?"

"No, it died," Amy said smoothly. "I had to throw it out. Too bad." She brightened. "Pass your plate, Robert dear," she said.



"I'll show you what to do with him," said Simmons.

DEATH-BY-RAIN

By RAY BRADBURY

Four men, crash-landed on Venus, world of eternal rain. Three men, slogging through drenching gloom. Two men, staggering senselessly on. One man, battering at the endless curtains of rain, RAIN, RAIN!

THE RAIN CONTINUED. It was a hard rain, a perpetual rain, a sweating and steaming rain; it was a mizzle, a downpour, a fountain, a whipping at the eyes, an undertow at the ankles; it was a rain to drown all rains and the memory of rains. It came by the pound and the ton, it hacked at the jungle and cut the trees like scissors and shaved the grass and tunneled the soil and molted the bushes. It shrank men's hands into the hands of wrinkled apes; it rained a solid glassy rain and it never stopped.

"How much further, lieutenant?"

"I don't know. A mile, ten miles, a thousand."

"Aren't you sure?"

"How can I be sure?"

"I don't like this rain. If we only knew how far it is to the Sun Dome, I'd feel better."

"Another hour or two from here."

"You really think so, lieutenant?"

"Of course."

"Or are you lying to keep us happy?"

"I'm lying to keep you happy. Shut up!"

"I'll shut up."

The two men sat together in the rain.

Behind them sat two other men who were wet and tired and slumped like clay that was melting.

The lieutenant looked up. He had a face that once had been brown and now the rain had washed it pale, and the rain had washed the colour from his eyes and they were white, as were his teeth, and as was his hair. He was all white. Even his uniform was beginning to turn white, and perhaps a little green with fungus.

The lieutenant felt the rain on his cheeks. "How many million years since the rain stopped raining here on Venus?"

"Don't be crazy," said one of the two other men. "It never stops raining on Venus. It just goes on and on. I've lived here for ten years and I never saw a minute, or even a second, when it wasn't pouring."

"It's like living under water," said the lieutenant, and rose up, shrugging his guns into place. "Well, we'd better get going. We'll find that Sun Dome yet."

"Or we won't find it," said the cynic.

"It's an hour or so."

"Now you're lying to me, lieutenant."

"No, now I'm lying to myself. This is one of those times when you've got to lie. I can't take much more of this."

They walked down the jungle trail, now and then looking at their compasses. There was no direction anywhere, only what the compass said. There was a grey sky and rain falling and jungle and a path, and, far back behind them, somewhere, a rocket in which they had ridden and fallen. A rocket in which lay two of their friends, dead and dripping rain.

They walked in single file, not speaking. They came to a river which lay wide and flat and brown, flowing down to the great Single Sea. The surface of it was stippled in a billion places by the rain.

"All right, Simmons."

THE lieutenant nodded and Simmons took a small packet from his back which, with a pressure of hidden chemical, inflated into a large boat. The lieutenant directed the cutting of wood and the quick making of paddles and they set out into the river, paddling swiftly across the smooth surface in the rain.

The lieutenant felt the cold rain on his cheeks and on his neck and on his moving arms. The cold was beginning to seep into his lungs. He felt the rain on his ears, on his eyes, on his legs.

"I didn't sleep last night," he said.

"Who could? Who has? When? How many nights *have* we slept? Thirty nights, thirty days! Who can sleep with rain slamming their head, banging away . . . I'd give anything for a hat. Anything at all, just so it wouldn't hit my head any more. I get headaches, my head is sore, it hurts all the time."

"I'm sorry I came to China," said one of the others.

"First time I ever heard Venus called China."

"Sure, China. Chinese Water Cure. Remember the old torture? Rope you against a wall. Drop one drop of water on your head every half-hour. You go crazy waiting for the next one. Well, that's Venus, but on a big scale. We're not made for water. You can't sleep, you can't breathe right, and you're crazy from just being soggy. If we'd been ready for a crash, we'd have brought waterproofed uniforms and hats. It's this beating rain on your head gets you, most of all. It's so heavy. It's like BB shot. I don't know how long I can take it."

"Boy, me for the Sun Dome. The man who thought *them* up, thought of something."

They crossed the river and in crossing they thought of the Sun Dome, somewhere ahead of them, shining in the jungle rain. A yellow house, round and bright as the sun. A house fifteen feet high by one hundred feet in diameter, in which was warmth and quiet and hot food and freedom from rain. And in the center of the Sun Dome, of course, was a sun. A small floating, free globe of yellow fire, drifting in a space at the top of the building where you could look at it from where you sat, smoking or reading a book or drinking your hot chocolate crowned with marshmallow dollops. There it would be, the yellow sun, just the size of the Earth sun and it was warm and continuous and the rain world of Venus would be forgotten as long as they stayed in that house and

idled their time.

The lieutenant turned and looked back at the three men using their oars and gritting their teeth. They were as white as mushrooms, as white as he was. Venus bleached everything away in a few months. Even the jungle was an immense cartoon nightmare, for how could the jungle be green with no sun, with always rain falling and always dusk? The white white jungle with the pale cheese-coloured leaves, and the earth carved of wet Camembert, and the tree-boles like immense toadstools, everything black and white. And how often could you see the soil itself? Wasn't it mostly a creek, a stream, a puddle, a pool, a lake, a river, and then, at last the sea?

"Here we are!"

They leaped out on the farthest shore, splashing and sending up showers. The boat was deflated and stored in a cigarette packet. Then, standing on the rainy shore, they tried to light up a few smokes for themselves, and it was five minutes or so before, shuddering, they worked the inverted lighter and, cupping their hands, managed a few drags upon cigarettes that, all too quickly, were limp and beat away from their lips by a sudden slap of rain.

They walked on.

"Wait just a moment," said the lieutenant. "I thought I saw something ahead."

"The Sun Dome?"

"I'm not sure. The rain closed in again."

Simmons began to run. "The Sun Dome!"

"Come back, Simmons!"

"The Sun Dome!"

Simmons vanished in the rain. The others ran after him.

They found him in a little clearing and they stopped and looked at him and what he had discovered.

The rocket ship.

IT WAS lying where they had left it. Somehow they had circled back and were where they had started. In the ruin of the ship, green fungus was growing up out of the open mouths of the two dead men. As they watched, the fungus took flower, the petals broke away in the rain, and the fungus died.

"How did we do it?"

"An electrical storm must be nearby. Threw our compasses off. That explains it."

"You're right."

"What'll we do now?"

"Start out again."

"Good Lord, we're not any closer to anywhere!"

"Let's try to keep calm about it, Simmons."

"Calm, calm! This rain's driving me wild!"

"We've enough food for another two days if we're careful."

The rain danced on their skin, on their wet uniforms; the rain streamed from their noses and ears, from their fingers and knees. They looked like stone fountains frozen in the jungle, issuing forth waters from every pore.

And, as they stood, from a distance they heard a roar.

And the monster came out of the rain.

The monster was supported upon a thousand electric blue legs. It walked swiftly and terribly. It struck down a leg with a driving blow. Everywhere a leg struck a tree fell and burned. Great whiffs of ozone filled the rainy air, and smoke blew away and was broken up by the rain. The monster was a half-mile wide and a mile high and it felt of the ground like a great blind thing. Sometimes, for a moment, it had no legs at all. And then, in an instant, a thousand whips would fall out of its belly, white-blue whips, to sting the jungle.

"There's the electrical storm," said one of the men. "There's the thing ruined our compasses. And it's coming this way."

"Lie down, everyone," said the lieutenant.

"Run!" cried Simmons.

"Don't be a fool. Lie down. It hits the highest points. We may get through unhurt. Lie down about fifty feet from the rocket. It may very well spend its force there and leave us be. Get down!"

The men flopped.

"Is it coming?" they asked each other, after a moment.

"Coming."

"Is it nearer?"

"Two hundred yards off."

"Nearer?"

"Here she is!"

The monster came and stood over them. It dropped down ten blue bolts of lightning which struck the rocket. The rocket flashed like a beaten gong and gave off a metal-ringing. The monster let down fifteen more bolts which danced about in a ridiculous pantomime, feeling of the jungle and the watery soil.

"No, no!" One of the men jumped up.

"Get down, you fool!" said the lieutenant.

"No!"

The lightning struck the rocket another dozen times. The lieutenant turned his head on his arm and saw the blue blazing flashes. He saw trees split and crumple into ruin. He saw the monstrous dark cloud turn like a black disc overhead and hurl down a hundred other poles of electricity.

The man who had leaped up was now running, like someone in a great hall of pillars. He ran and dodged between the pillars and then at last a dozen of the pillars slammed down and there was the sound a fly makes when landing upon the grill wires of an exterminator. The lieutenant remembered this from his childhood on a farm. And there was a smell of a man burned to a cinder.

The lieutenant lowered his head. "Don't look up," he told the others. He was afraid that he might run, himself, at any moment.

The storm above them flashed down another series of bolts and then moved on away. Once again there was only the rain which rapidly cleared the air of the charred smell, and in a moment the three remaining men were sitting up and waiting for the beat of their hearts to subside into quiet once more.

They walked over to the body, thinking that perhaps they could still save the man's life. They couldn't believe that there wasn't some way to help the man. It was the natural act of men who have not accepted death until they have touched it and turned it over and made plans to bury it or leave it there for the jungle to bury in an hour of quick growth.

The body was twisted steel, wrapped in burnt leather. It looked like a wax dummy that had been thrown into an incinerator

and pulled out after the wax had sunk to the charcoal skeleton. Only the teeth were white, and shone like a strange white bracelet dropped half through a clenched black fist.

"He shouldn't have jumped up." They said it almost at the same time.

Even as they stood over the body, it began to vanish, for the vegetation was edging in upon it, little vines and ivy and creepers and even flowers for the dead.

At a distance, the storm walked off on blue bolts of lightning and was gone.

THEY crossed a river and a creek and a stream and a dozen other rivers and creeks and streams. Before their eyes, rivers appeared, rushing, new rivers, while old rivers changed their courses, rivers the colour of mercury, rivers the colour of silver and milk.

They came to the sea.

The Single Sea. There was only one continent on Venus. This land was three thousand miles long by a thousand miles wide, and about this island was the Single Sea, which covered the entire raining planet. The Single Sea which lay upon the pallid shore with little motion.

"This way." The lieutenant nodded south. "I'm sure there are two Sun Domes down that way."

"While they were at it, why didn't they build a hundred more?"

"There're a hundred and twenty of them now, aren't there?"

"One hundred and twenty-six, as of last month. They tried to push a bill through Congress back on Earth a year ago to provide for a couple dozen more, but oh, no, you know how *that* is. They'd rather a few men went crazy with the rain."

They started south.

The lieutenant and Simmons and the third man, Pickard, walked in the rain, in the rain that fell heavily and light, heavily and light, in the rain that poured and hammered and did not stop falling upon the land and the sea and the walking people.

Simmons saw it first. "There it is!"

"There's what?"

"The Sun Dome!"

The lieutenant blinked the water from

his eyes and raised his hands to ward off the stinging blows of the rain.

At a distance, there was a yellow glow on the edge of the jungle, by the sea. It was, indeed, the Sun Dome.

The men smiled at each other.

"Looks like you were right, lieutenant."

"Luck."

"Brother, that puts muscle in me, just seeing it. Come on! Last one there's a son-of-a-sea-cook!" Simmons began to trot. The others automatically fell in with this, gasping, tired, but keeping pace.

"A big pot of coffee for me," panted Simmons, smiling. "And a pan of cinnamon buns, by Joe! And just lie there and let the old sun hit you. The guy that invented the Sun Domes, he should have got a medal!"

They ran faster. The yellow glow grew brighter.

"Guess a lot of men went crazy before they figured out the cure. Think it'd be obvious! Right off." Simmons panted the words in cadence to his running. "Rain, rain! Years ago. Found a friend. Of mine. Out in the jungle. Wandering around. In the rain. Saying over and over, 'Don't know enough, to come in, outa the rain. Don't know enough, to come in, outa the rain. Don't know enough—' On and on. Like that. Poor crazy fool."

"Save your breath!"

They ran.

They all laughed. They reached the door of the Sun Dome, laughing.

Simmons yanked the door wide. "Hey!" he yelled. "Bring on the coffee and buns!"

There was no reply.

They stepped through the door.

THE Sun Dome was empty and dark. There was no synthetic yellow sun floating in a high gaseous whisper at the center of the blue ceiling. There was no food waiting. It was cold as a vault. And through a thousand holes which had been newly punctured in the ceiling, water streamed, the rain fell down, soaking into the thick rugs and the heavy modern furniture and splashing on the glass tables. The jungle was growing up like a moss in the room, on top of the bookcases and the divans. The rain slashed through the holes

and fell upon the three men's faces.

Pickard began to laugh quietly.

"Shut up, Pickard!"

"Ye gods, look what's here for us—no food, no sun, nothing. The Venusians—they did it! Of course!"

Simmons nodded, with the rain funneling down on his face. The water ran in his silvered hair and on his white eyebrows. "Every once in awhile, the Venusians come up out of the sea and attack a Sun Dome. They know if they can ruin the Sun Domes they can ruin us."

"But aren't the Sun Domes protected with guns?"

"Sure." Simmons stepped aside to a place that was relatively dry. "But it's been five years since the Venusians tried anything. Defense relaxes. They caught this Dome unaware."

"Where are the bodies?"

"The Venusians took them all down into the sea. I hear they have a delightful way of drowning you. It takes about eight hours to drown the way they work it. Really delightful."

"I bet there isn't any food here at all," laughed Pickard.

The lieutenant frowned at him, nodded at him so Simmons could see. Simmons shook his head and went back to a room at one side of the oval chamber. The kitchen was strewn with soggy loaves of bread, and meat that had grown a faint green fur. Rain came through a hundred holes in the kitchen roof.

"Brilliant." The lieutenant glanced up at the holes. "I don't suppose we can plug up all those holes and get snug here."

"Without food, sir?" Simmons snorted. "I notice the sun machine's torn apart. Our best bet is to make our way to the next Sun Dome. How far is that from here?"

"Not far. As I recall, they built two rather close together here. Perhaps if we waited here, a rescue mission from the other might—"

"It's probably been here and gone already, some days ago. They'll send a crew to repair this place in about six months, when they get the money from Congress. I don't think we'd better wait."

"All right, then, we'll eat what's left of our rations, and get on to the next Dome."

Pickard said, "If only the rain wouldn't hit my head, just for a few minutes. If I could only remember what it's like not to be bothered." He put his hands on his skull and held it tight. "I remember when I was in school, a bully used to sit in back of me and pinch me and pinch me and pinch me every five minutes, all day long. He did that for weeks and months. My arms were sore and black and blue all the time. And I thought I'd go crazy from being pinched. One day I must have gone a little mad from being hurt and hurt, and I turned around and took a metal tri-square I used in mechanical drawing and I almost killed that stinker, I almost cut his lousy head off, I almost took his eye out before they dragged me out of the room, and I kept yelling, why don't he leave me alone, why don't he leave me alone. Brother!" His hands clenched the bone of his head, shaking, tightening, his eyes shut. "But what do I do *now*? Who do I hit, who do I tell to lay off, stop bothering me, this damn rain, like the pinching, always *on* you, that's all you hear, that's all you feel!"

"We'll be at the other Sun Dome by four this afternoon."

"Sun Dome? Look at this one! What if all the Sun Domes on Venus are gone—what then? What if there are holes in all the ceilings, and the rain coming in!"

"We'll have to chance it."

"I'm tired of chancing it. All I want is a roof and some quiet, I want to be let alone."

"That's only eight hours off, if you hold on."

"Don't worry, I'll hold on all right." And Pickard laughed, not looking at them.

"Let's eat," said Simmons, watching him.

THEY set off down the coast, southward again. After four hours they had to cut inland to go around a river that was a mile wide and so swift it was not navigable by boat. They had to walk inland six miles to a place where the river boiled out of the earth, suddenly, like a mortal wound. In the rain, they walked on solid ground and returned to the sea.

"I've got to sleep," said Pickard, at last.

He slumped. "Haven't slept in four weeks. Tried, but couldn't. Sleep here."

The sky was getting darker. The night of Venus was setting in and it was so completely black that it was dangerous to move. Simmons and the lieutenant fell to their knees also, and the lieutenant said, "All right, we'll see what we can do. We've tried it before, but I don't know. Sleep doesn't seem one of the things you can get in this weather."

They lay out full, propping their heads up so the water wouldn't come to their mouths, and they closed their eyes.

The lieutenant twitched.

He did not sleep.

There were things that crawled on his skin. Things grew upon him in layers. Drops fell and touched other drops and they became streams that trickled over his body, and while these moved down his flesh, the small growths of the forest took root in his clothing. He felt the ivy cling and make a second garment over him; he felt the small flowers bud and open and petal away, and still the rain pattered on his body and on his head. In the luminous night, for the vegetation glowed in the darkness, he could see the other two men outlined, like logs that had fallen and taken upon themselves velvet coverings of grass and flower. The rain hit his face. He covered his face with his hands. The rain hit his hands. He turned his head. The rain hit his neck. He turned over on his stomach in the mud, on the rubbery plants, and the rain hit his back and hit his legs.

Suddenly he leaped up and began to brush the water from himself. A thousand hands were touching him and he no longer wanted to be touched. He no longer could stand being touched. He floundered and struck something else and knew that it was Simmons, standing himself up in the rain, sneezing moisture, coughing and choking. And then Pickard was up, shouting, running about.

"Wait a minute, Pickard!"

"Stop it, stop it!" screamed Pickard. He fired off his gun six times at the night sky. In the flashes of powdery illumination they could see armies of raindrops, suspended as in a vast motionless amber, for an instant, hesitating as if shocked by the

explosion, fifteen billion droplets, fifteen billion tears, fifteen billion ornaments, jewels standing out against a white velvet viewing board. And then, with the light gone, the drops which had waited to have their pictures taken, which had suspended their downward rush, fell upon them, stinging, in an insect cloud of coldness and pain.

"Stop it, stop it!"

"Pickard!"

But Pickard was only standing now, alone. When the lieutenant switched on a small hand lamp and played it over Pickard's wet face, the eyes of the man were dilated, and his mouth was open, his face turned up, so the water hit and splashed on his tongue, and hit and drowned the wide eyes, and bubbled in a whispering froth on the nostrils.

"Pickard!"

The man would not reply. He simply stood there for a long while with the bubbles of rain breaking out in his whitened hair and manacles of rain jewels dripping from his wrists and his neck.

"Pickard! We're leaving. We're going on. Follow us."

The rain dripped from Pickard's ears.

"Do you hear me, Pickard!"

It was like shouting down a well.

"Pickard!"

"Leave him alone," said Simmons.

"We can't go on without him."

"What'll we do, carry him?" Simmons spat. "He's no good to us or himself. You know what he'll do? He'll just stand here and drown."

"What?"

"You ought to know that by now. Don't you know the story? He'll just stand here with his head up and let the rain come in his nostrils and his mouth. He'll breath the water."

"No."

"That's how they found General Mendt that time. Sitting on a rock with his head back, breathing the rain. His lungs were full of water."

The lieutenant turned the light back to the unblinking face. Pickard's nostrils gave off a tiny whispering wet sound.

"Pickard!" The lieutenant slapped the face.

"He can't even feel you," said Simmons. "A few days in this rain and you don't have any face or any legs or hands."

The lieutenant looked at his own hand in horror. He could no longer feel it.

"But we can't leave Pickard here."

"I'll show you what we do." Simmons fired his gun.

Pickard fell into the raining earth.

SIMMONS said, "Don't move, lieutenant. I've got my gun ready for you too. Think it over, he would only have stood or sat there and drowned. It's quicker this way."

The lieutenant blinked at the body. "But you killed him."

"Yes, because he'd have killed us by being a burden. You saw his face. Insane."

After a moment, the lieutenant nodded. "All right."

They walked off into the rain.

It was dark and their hand lamps threw a beam that pierced the rain for only a few feet. After a half-hour, they had to stop and sit through the rest of the night, aching with hunger, for the dawn to come, and when it did come it was grey and continually raining as before, and they began to walk again.

"We've miscalculated," said Simmons.

"No. Another hour."

"Speak louder. I can't hear you." Simmons stopped and smiled. "By Joe," he said, and touched his ears. "My ears. They've gone out on me. All the rain pouring, finally numbed me right down to the bone."

"Can't you hear anything?" said the lieutenant.

"What?" Simmons' eyes were puzzled.

"Nothing. Come on."

"I think I'll wait here. You go on ahead."

"You can't do that."

"I can't hear you. You go on. I'm tired. I don't think the Sun Dome is down this way. And, if it is, it's probably got holes in the roof, like the last one. I think I'll just sit here."

"Get up from there!"

"So long, lieutenant."

"You can't give up now."

"I've got a gun here that says I'm stay-

ing. I just don't give a damn any more. I'm not crazy yet, but I'm the next thing to it. I don't want to go out that way. As soon as you get out of sight I'm going to use this gun on myself."

"Simmons!"

"You said my name. I can read that much off your lips."

"Simmons."

"Look, it's a matter of time. Either I die now or in a few hours. Wait'll you get to that next Dome, if you ever get there, and find rain coming in through the roof. Won't that be nice?"

The lieutenant waited and then splashed off in the rain. He turned and called back once, but Simmons was only sitting there with the gun in his hands, waiting for him to get out of sight. He shook his head and waved the lieutenant on.

The lieutenant didn't even hear the sound of the gun.

HE began to eat the flowers as he walked. They stayed down for a time, and weren't poisonous, neither were they particularly sustaining, and he vomited them up, sickly, a minute or so later.

Once he took some leaves and tried to make himself a hat, but he had tried that before, the rain melted the leaves from his head. Once picked, the vegetation rotted quickly and fell away into grey masses in your fingers.

"Another five minutes," he told himself. "Another five minutes and then I'll walk into the sea and keep walking. We weren't made for this, no Earthman was or ever will be able to take it. Your nerves, your nerves."

He floundered his way through a sea of slush and foliage and came to a small hill.

At a distance, there was a faint yellow smudge in the cold veils of water.

The next Sun Dome.

Through the trees, a long round yellow building, far away. For a moment he only stood, swaying, looking at it.

He began to run, and then he slowed down, for he was afraid. He didn't call out. What if it's the same one, what if it's the dead Sun Dome, with no sun in it, he thought.

He slipped and fell. Lie here, he thought. It's the wrong one. Lie here, it's no use. Drink all you want.

But he managed to climb to his feet again, and crossed several creeks, and the yellow light grew very bright, and he began to run again, his feet crashing into mirrors and glass, his arms flailing at diamonds and precious stones.

He stood before the yellow door. The printed letters over it said **THE SUN DOME**. He put his numb hand up to feel it. Then he twisted the doorknob and stumbled in.

He stood for a moment looking about. Behind him, the rain whirled at the door. Ahead of him, upon a low table, stood a silver pot of hot chocolate, steaming, and a cup, full, with a marshmallow in it. And beside that, on another tray, stood thick sandwiches of rich chicken meat and fresh cut tomatoes and green onions. And on a rod just before his eyes was a great thick green Turkish towel, and a bin in which to throw wet clothes, and to his right, a small cubicle in which heat rays might dry you instantly. And upon a chair, a fresh change of uniform, waiting for anyone, himself, or any lost one, to make use of it. And further over, coffee in steaming copper urns, and a phonograph from which music was playing quietly, and books bound in red and brown leather. And near the books a cot, a soft deep cot upon which one might lie, exposed and bare, to drink in the rays of the one great bright thing which dominated the long room.

He put his hands to his eyes. He saw other men moving toward him, but said nothing to them. He waited, and opened his eyes, and looked. The water pooled at his feet from his uniform, and he felt it drying from his hair and his face and his chest and his arms and his legs.

He was looking at the Sun.

It hung in the center of the room, large and yellow and warm. It made not a sound, and there was no sound in the room. The door was shut and the rain only a memory to his tingling body. The sun hung high in the blue sky of the room, warm, hot, yellow, and very fine.

He walked forward, tearing off his clothes as he went.

THE ENORMOUS WORD

By WILLIAM OBERFIELD



The effect was amazing.

The blue men had ravaged Terra and reduced Winston Eberly to a contemptible insect. Now here he was, complaining of indigestion!

HURRY! HURRY! Run as fast as you can go to the big tree! Crouch beneath its branches and hide, staring up through its open spaces to see if anything is glinting in the clear sky. Anything there? Oh God, yes! No, its only a bird, a small cloud drifting. Now! Dash madly, crawl on your belly, fight on to the next place of concealment!

Winston Eberly knew he was talking to himself, but he didn't give a damn. He was sweating and sick from exertion, half

mad with burning thirst and bleeding from an unknown number of cuts and scratches, but that didn't matter either. The only thing that had any real meaning or value was the stuff in the box in his pocket.

He slapped the pocket with a dirt-encrusted hand. "Good old box! Good old U-235!" he mumbled feverishly. "You'll pull us out of this mess we're in. You'll show the blasted men from space they're not playing with children!"

Pausing in shadows he looked again at

the sky. All blue and quiet. Nothing stirring up there, nothing glinting. But they were there all right; they were always there. Maybe they were in the stratosphere, maybe above it, or about to streak low across the sky from horizon to horizon in the twinkling of an eye.

Men from space. Hateful, sadistic, repulsive men from outer space! Oh, how overbearing they were; how greedy and cruel and how sure of themselves! They had reason to be confident, of course. They had simply stood far off in space and shrouded the entire world in a terrible radiation that brought unconsciousness to all and death to many. And something in that radiation had sought out every particle of refined Uranium and Hiroshimaized the world.

One had to respect that power, if not admire it. Even now, they could bring quick death to every single Earthman by simply pressing a button somewhere in their one established city, in the Sahara Desert. Clever. It seemed they could do anything. Why wouldn't electric and internal combustion motors run since the coming of the space men? More important, how could their high-flying ships detect even the slightest unauthorized action on the ground below?

They had the world in their power, right enough, and even darkness brought the Earthmen no chance to strike back. The invaders called their ships back to the Sahara at dusk and at dusk all good little Earthmen went to bed, or went strangely to sleep where they stood.

Eberly called an end to his watchful reflections and darted into the open again like a frightened doe. This was the only chance and here, between the hidden place where determined men had worked tirelessly and ingeniously to refine only a small capsule of pure Uranium in a year and the hidden place where other learned men waited to incorporate the product into an atomic bomb that could destroy the city of the invaders completely, lay the greatest danger of defeat.

As he stumbled on toward his goal he cursed the power that made all modern conveyances impossible. This snail's pace across open country, under the cosmic mi-

croscope of the alien invaders, was maddening, with so much at stake. But it was no more so than the task of mining and refining ore or that of constructing an atomic bomb without the aid of modern machinery, no more so than being forced to live practically like wild animals as all must now do.

He swore to himself that a way would be—had to be—found to get that weapon across to the enemy once it was constructed. The steam engine had not been in use for years, but it would still work, and balloons, dirigibles, would still rise into the air. It might take another year or two years, but the invaders would learn that Earthmen don't give up easily. A way would be found!

Then it happened; the thing that made Winston Eberly curse and sweat and retract his noble thoughts. There would be no pitiful steam-powered dirigible or any other weapon carrier. What need for one, when the bomb, itself, would never be completed? The men waiting for the Uranium were never going to see it!

Without warning, something tugged at him, passed away and returned, unseen and weird. He took one straining step—two, and knew that he wouldn't take another. Like the petrified terror of dreams he strained against his unseen bonds, unable to lift or swing an arm.

Above his head a branch of a tree twisted and snapped, pulled away and hung suspended in mid-air. The branch remained the same distance above him as his feet left the ground. Its shadows still fell across him as the tops of trees swam below him.

Yes, it was the invaders. Up there, somewhere above him—he was unable to move his head to see where—they hovered safely out of reach of the fanatic hate of Earthmen and drew him up to them like a fish on a hook. He didn't mind for himself, but the U-235, a whole year of back-breaking work for his fellows, the very life and freedom of Earth was being offered up to sad memories with him!

He choked back curses and sobs of frustration while he soared higher and tried to think. They would get the Uranium, those parodies of organic life, and that wasn't right. He had to get rid of it,

hide it, throw it away! But how? How, when he was rising up through open air, unable to move a finger, could he dispose of it?

A dark shadow fell over him. An opening suction-cupped down around him and clanged shut. Only then did the terrible force that held him in its embrace subside. Only then was he able to move freely and his first thought, his first action, was to snatch the small box from his pocket and pry it open with shaking fingers.

He couldn't let the invaders profit in any way from the sweat of Earthmen. He had to dispose of that precious capsule at once! But—how? There were only smooth metal walls around him; no holes, no ledges, not a single hiding place for it and no way to get it out of the ship!

There was a whirring sound and a thin slit of light showed from inside the ship, widened. Suddenly, impulsively, he thrust the capsule into his mouth, swallowed, gagged and gulped it on down. Not a very good hiding place. It might make him sick. But the invaders would never get it. If they did they would have to dig for it.

The blue-skinned man from space seemed to be having trouble with the English language. Evidently it bore absolutely no relation to his native tongue. The combination of his serious, arrogant manner and his distorted speech was almost humorous.

"Give me why you have with that emotion we pick up on ours detector," he barked harshly. "At ones! Or I take you in torture to tell!"

"Go to hell!"

"What was that box around? Where did you do with the inside-of-box thing? Give reply! Quickly at ones!"

"I don't hear you."

The blue skin of the man from space turned purple. "I am in soft talking for you now," he thundered, getting his language a little more confused in his anger. "In the later it is much harder with you to be so when you do not give now! Maybe it is be you hear we are only survivors of a race that is boom out by other-race nations on world home of us. Yes, you know this? You maybe think it is why we are in running here from there because we

are little in courage and you are bigger, so you can say Hell to us without hurt. Yessir? Then why we are able of holding all of you in sleep at dark times? Now! We are so little in all that we are able to make each of ten zones sleep as soon when dark comes to each zone and can keep all Earthmen down under with only five ships at a time to watch the five zones that are light at a time! See! You will see when you don't hear talking and are saying Hell!"

Eberly shook beads of perspiration from his face. It was unbearably hot inside the ship. He forced a grin.

"Well, Windy," he addressed the space man defiantly, "I see that the art of bragging isn't strictly confined to Earth. Thanks for the information anyway. I might be able to use it some day."

The purple face blanched to powder blue. The owner spouted a stream of his native language that sounded to Eberly like nothing recognizable and threw up his hands in resignation.

Only five ships out at a time, Eberly thought as two hefty space men prodded him back toward the air-lock. All but a few of the invaders huddled together in a single city that could be utterly destroyed by the blast of one atomic bomb. Such a blast would also destroy the great radiation generators that held Earthmen in sway and the few remaining invaders would soon be overcome or driven away. And he was walking around with the only fuel for such a weapon in his stomach!

They were crowding him into the air-lock now. What were they going to do? Not turn him loose. Dump him into space?

A moment later, he knew. In only a few minutes they had come all the way from America to Africa! These men from space had science, all right. They must have learned how to overcome inertia somehow without giving the sensation of change in motion. He hadn't been aware of the slightest motion, yet he saw their city as soon as the outer seal of the lock opened and there was no mistaking that city.

He was out of the ship and onto the rubbery surface of a street, being hurried, pushed along it toward some unknown destination. His captors bullied him along

between tall, smooth buildings that seemed to be constructed of solid expanses of plastic, broken only by the unrevealing doors and windows.

The people in the streets didn't jeer at or mock him. They only looked at him as one might look at a stinking, stray dog or simply ignored him completely. That was worse.

He was suddenly pushed into a flight of steps and stumbled over them, in through broad doors. There were more steps and endless halls and elevators that took you up or down with no sensation of motion and finally a room, a laboratory of some sort it seemed.

The one who had tried to question Eberly aboard the ship had followed along. He spoke to the man they found in the room. He might have been speaking mainly for Eberly's benefit, because he spoke in what he called English.

"This one is in need to explain some things, but is not willing to say those thing," he sneered. "You are for making him hear what is say to him and to reply with not insults. Make it at once."

Eberly was feeling a little ill. A diet of U-235, he realized, was not so good. He just couldn't help it. He belched loudly.

Eyes turned toward him; puzzled eyes with questions in them.

"What is that big word you are make? What it does mean?"

"It has been called a 'burp,'" Eberly said. "As far as you are concerned, you can think of it as the worst insult you know of." The Uranium capsule was a hard lump in his stomach. He didn't know much about Uranium—whether it was some effect of the Uranium or just the indigestibility of it—but he was feeling sicker by the minute. Pain stabbed across his chest and he burped again.

Evidently, the space men could think of some pretty raw insults, judging from the expressions on their faces.

"Silent, dog you!" he shouted, purple-faced. Then, to his two bullies, "Make him tight with chains to the wall! He must be teach not to make burp of us and to give true talk when told! When I am return he is to be made talking!" He slammed out of the room as if he were ready to take

off for America without his ship.

A number of the space men had crowded into the room to watch the torture of an Earthman. Their eyes, small sadistic eyes, glistened with the interest of bad boys watching a fish drown with a stick propping open its mouth or the antics of a frightened dog with a can tied to its tail. Or maybe it stirred some hidden emotion within them that would drive a bad boy insane.

Winston Eberly had felt hideous insects swarming over his body and gouging at his flesh, had turned numb under heat extracting beams followed by heat rays that sent agony racing through his every nerve. They wanted him to scream with pain. They wanted him to be the perfect slave, bowing and scraping and speaking softly and obediently. He wouldn't give in, damn them! He hadn't yet given in and he wouldn't, ever! Let them torture him to the death, and then, what more could they do? What could they do except realize that Earthmen would fight to the end?

"You make good talk now?"

Eberly lifted his head weakly, stared his hate at the questioning eyes that pressed close in front of him, struggled to put unfelt strength into his voice.

"Don't you know an Earthman is ready to suffer anything for honor? Don't you realize that none of us will rest until an atomic bomb has sent all of you drifting with the wind? No! I will not bow to you! Kill me and you gain nothing."

His head drooped again as giddy grayness fogged his eyes. Faintly, he heard something akin to laughter from the hateful creatures around him. Laughing! What were they laughing about? What had he said?

"So! The little Earthdog has exploded the fine particle!" His torturer answered his unspoken question. "The childish scum of this world are done things that ours great science cannot do. Fools! You are base your hopes on a dream, a deception! Those enemy of us are reach you with message. Those enemy that drive us from home world are inform you that we come this way before we are come. Then you make many big explodes to scare us from

here with thought of exploding particles atoms. Ha! We are not fool to come convince of the impossible!"

The import of the words cleared Eberly's head a little. What was this? Was it possible that the great science of this race had never discovered atomic power? Maybe there was some condition in their distant system that prevented nuclear fission or perhaps they had never found a suitable substance for experimentation. So the men from space thought nuclear fission impossible, did they?

His thought was almost a voice, and the voice said. "Here in your intestines lies a glass capsule and that capsule contains pure Uranium! enough to blast this city from the face of the earth, and the invaders are unsuspecting!"

The torturer had gone aside to talk to another. Eberly looked toward them. "Why not kill me and have it done with?" he shouted. "You know now that you can't subdue an Earthman. Your methods are all weak. Even the radiation with which you took Earth could not kill all of us. It's as weak and faulty as everything else you have."

His torturer took the bait. He came to where Eberly hung in his chains. "It are weak, is it so?" he sneered. "It are so weak you would how like to make squirm under such radiate?"

Eberly let fear show in his eyes. "I—I didn't mean it that way," he stammered. "You can't really use it here, can you—on me?"

"Yes. Oh yes but yes!" The other seemed pleased. Now, he thought, he was getting some results. "We can make little or much radiate. Just right for make scream from you, maybe yes. You are in fear from that? I think you are make good talk by some time."

It was with mixed emotions that Eberly watched the camera-like device being wheeled into the room. He was filled with elation and hate and noble thoughts all at the same time. And there was doubt, too. What if the torturer should somehow realize what he was trying to do? What if some other torture were used before the radiation and would result in death? He

had to prevent that. He would have to make their overbearing pride work for him.

"No!" he protested as the projection rods of the radiation generator were turned toward him. "Please, don't use that on me. I'll—I'll do anything you want, only don't turn that on me."

The torturer brightened while murmurs of self-praise rose from the watchers. "Oh, you are not think us are so weak now! Then say to me why you are in the emotion we are detect and bring you here against." He bent his head close to Eberly's, better to hear the sweet music of this Earth fool's whining.

Eberly belched in his face.

"Burp, burp, burp?" the torturer shouted foolishly, stepping back. "You try make fool with us, oh? Very and well! We see how you say burp when you get this!" He made a final adjustment on the radiation generator.

It was working! Anger flared in the eyes of the torturer, in the eyes of the watchers. Eberly fed it. "I'm not afraid of you," he taunted. "Why should I fear cowards who run from their home world because they haven't the guts to stay and fight?"

The effects of his words were amazing, cutting sharply at a sore spot in the minds of the space men. The watchers growled oaths, some of them leaping to their feet. The torturer, his face nearly black with anger, reached up and depressed a lever on the radiation generator, spitefully.

Winston Eberly burped for the last time. It was a terrible, frightening, destructive, big burp. It could be felt for miles. The force of it knocked gulls from the sky over the Mediterranean. It shook buildings and rattled windows in Italy. And, when the smoke cleared away, there was not the slightest doubt that the mighty expulsion of Winston Eberly had done its work well.

Soon the few remaining space men returned to look down with troubled eyes upon that boiling crater. They circled and puzzled and spoke sad words. Then they pointed the noses of their ships up toward open space and proved once more that they were brave only when they held the upper hand.

COLLISION ORBIT

by CLYDE BECK

The tiny asteroid with the frightened girl and the wrecked spacer with the grim young man slowly spun closer and closer . . . but the real danger came after the crash!

THERE'S ONE GOOD THING about a blowout. You don't need a mechanic to tell you what the trouble is when it happens. This was the first blowout I ever had, but as soon as I heard that explosive pinging whistle and felt the floppy jolting and the terrifying sensation of a vehicle out of control, I knew what was wrong. I reached forward and cut the power.

When I leaned back in my seat I was sweating and my stomach was pushing my tonsils around, and not only on account of the sudden switch from one and a half G's to free fall. I was in a jam, and I didn't need a mechanic to tell me that, either. Spaceships don't carry spare drive tubes.

Not little wagons like the Aspera, anyway. If you could get a spare inside the hull you would have to leave out the air plant or the groceries or else stay home yourself, and even then there would be no room for the tools to make the change. Retubing is a dock job, and the nearest docks were a million miles away on Phobos and getting farther fast.

And besides, you never need a spare. Tubes don't blow in space. Diamondized graphite is tough—you caliper the throat every time you dock, and after a few thousand G-hours you find enough erosion to cut down efficiency to the point where it's a good idea to put in a new liner.

I knew all this, but at the same time I knew the main tube had blown. What I didn't know was what I was going to do about it. I lit a cigarette and took a deep drag, just in case the stimulating effect of the quabba smoke would give me an inspiration.

It made me sneeze.

I threw the butt on the deck and mashed it with my heel before it could bounce off and go adrift in the cabin. I never had

liked the taste of the weedy stuff anyway. Smoking quabba is the prime attribute of a spaceman—it has the reputation of being a specific against spacesickness, toughening the cerebral meninges against high acceleration, cutting down reaction time when you have to act fast in a meteor field. Maybe it's all true. One thing it really does is make your clothes smell like a vacant lot on fire so people can say, "Ah, he's a spaceman," without having to ask.

No inspiration. Okay, Denby, think it out with your own brains. You've got a brain, haven't you?

Not being very eager to do any thinking about the situation I was in, I dragged the bulger out from under the seat and crawled into it. I had a vague idea that I might fake up some sort of patch for the tube and maybe limp back to Mars. I wasn't proud of it, but it was the best I had at the moment. I checked to make sure there was nothing on the screens, and then pulled myself over to the air lock, sealed the inner door, and started the pump.

While the chamber was exhausting, I tested the lubber line and snapped the end of it to a ring on the inner skin of the hull. When the lock clicked I pulled the hatch open and hooked it back. Then I took a short hold on the lubber line and stepped out into space.

For a minute I wished I had finished the quabba. This was not the first time I had been in open space, but the circumstances had not been so impressive before. Free fall had never bothered me particularly, but it bothered me now, with millions of miles of empty space under me in all directions and nothing in the sky but the tiny hard bright stars looking very far away. And the realization that I was alone, with a crippled ship, and a very good chance that the situation would be perma-



Vesta

ment, made me feel that an antidote against spacesickness would be a handy thing to have.

After a while the muscles of my forearm began to ache from gripping the lubber line so hard. I let go of it and took hold of a hand rail and crawled back to the stern.

IT WAS a blowout, all right. The liner was completely gone and the jacket was a fused lump of slag. All I would need to patch it up was a week in the shops and a three-man crew. I crawled back along the hull and went through the hatch like a rabbit going down its hole.

I stowed away the suit and belted myself in the seat. So I would have to think anyway. I got out a pencil and reeled the tape out of the accelerometer and began figuring.

It took me an hour, which was not very good. Neither was the answer. I pushed the papers away and started all over again. The answer was still the same. The Aspera would miss the orbit of Jupiter by more than fifty million miles, and my nearest approach would occur about three and a half years after Jupiter had passed my intended point of tangency.

Of course these figures were only rough, and would be revised one way or the other after I had time to make a few triangulation shots. But I couldn't hope for much encouragement from any such revision. The Aspera, the ship my father had used to make the first landing on an asteroid ten years ago, was going to end up as an asteroid herself, and I would have the honor of being sole inhabitant—as long as I lasted.

I grabbed a sheet of paper and began figuring again. It took me only a minute or two this time. The period of the Aspera's orbit was seven and a half years, and seven and a half years Earth time make four Mars years within a few days. That was how much hope I had—in seven and a half years I would be back in the immediate vicinity of Mars, and I might have enough power in the steering jets to claw my way in to one of the moons. If I didn't bump into an asteroid. If Jupiter didn't pull me too far off course. If I

didn't go star-happy in the meanwhile, or starve. Before seven and a half years were up I'd be eating the air plant.

I threw down the pencil, caught it on the first wild bounce, and stowed it away in my pocket. I felt like a fool.

With reason. It takes a very fancy kind of fool to rot four years in the Girdle swamps on Venus, getting drunk only every second month so he can save up enough of his pay to put himself through Space Tech, and then, when he has graduated second in his class, to throw away a plushy job with Translunar and go barging off into space in an ancient can and get himself wrecked just because he lets a girl talk him into making a magnificent gesture.

That's what I told myself. It didn't help any, but I had it coming. I was a worse fool than that, even. Betty Day hadn't talked me into this. I had thought the whole thing up with my own little brain. The germ of the idea was hers, though, or rather the inspiration for it.

II

FOR THAT MATTER, Betty Day inspired a lot of my ideas, ever since my first opening day at Space Tech. The first task they put us to on the opening day was to sit through a welcoming address from the President of the Institute. Maybe it was a good speech if you happened to be a kid fresh out of school, like most of the class, with your head full of the ideas of romance and glory that the tridim space operas pump into the cash customers, but when he began to talk about our "mission" and being "pioneers of the new frontier" it got a little too thick for me.

I hadn't come to the Institute of Space Technology to look for glory. I had come for the excellent if commonplace purpose of qualifying for a well-paid job. My father's happy-go-lucky space-ratting was not for me. I intended to do my planet-eering with the resources of a nice fat soulless corporation behind me. Four years in the Girdle of Venus—which name, in case you are wondering, is a neat little piece of irony—had left me very sane and practical and disenchanting about the whole

matter.

I let the President gabble on and began to glance around the auditorium.

I didn't glance far. As I turned my face toward the girl sitting at my left, she turned hers, and our eyes met. I managed a smile and cocked an eyebrow toward the speaker's stand. She smiled back with her eyes and crinkled her nose. It was a smooth straight nose, and the eyes on each side of it were a clear cool gray, set well apart under level brows. That was Betty—level and straight, and cool, too, for that matter. I didn't realize all this at once, of course. Just now I only knew that she was calmly and compellingly beautiful, and that I didn't feel sane and practical any more, and certainly not disenchanted.

There was a spatter of mildly enthusiastic applause, and I noticed the lecture hall again and saw that the President had finished and a youngish instructor was taking the stand to give out information about programs and class assignments. I got down enough to keep from getting lost. I heard him say the sections would be arranged alphabetically. That scared me—suppose this girl was named Wigglesworth or Zilch or some such and I would never see her again! I drew a circle around my name on the class roster they had given each of us at the beginning of the festivities and handed it to her. She smiled again and drew a circle around the name right next to it. Betty Day. So that was all right.

THERE is no time for social life at Space Tech. You go there for the training and you get your money's worth. Not that I cared—the work was hard, but it was exciting, and you could see the purpose of it as you went along. I would have worked even harder and not minded, because Betty Day was alongside in every class I had. After a few days we were eating lunch together every day in the campus sloop shop, which arrangement I liked. It took my mind off the sort of food they served there.

Every two or three weeks we found or took time to see a tridim together, since there is not much else in the way of extracurricular diversion at Tech. It was a

very slight intimacy, but it meant a good deal to me, and I believed that it did to Betty too. She was always pleased to have me around, and she crinkled her nose at my jokes in a special way that she did for no one else's, and my jokes were not much better than the average, either.

It was a long time before I tried to tell her about the way I felt. It was not until the three years at Tech were over and the Institute was letting down its hair to the extent of sealing our brow with the traditional farewell party for graduates known as the Blastoff.

By the time I got there the revelry had already started. I made a couple of passes at the punch bowl and looked around for Betty. She was out on the floor; I pried her loose from the Joe who was trying to dance with her, and we made one eccentric ellipse around the hall and headed for the terrace. It was cool out there, the unostentatious coolness of an early summer evening that has not quite forgotten the heat of the day, and there was a bright wash of moonlight on the bay beyond the lights of the town. There was a lot of stardust around.

Betty must have seen it too. She turned toward me, and the solemn look on her face and the way her shoulders glowed in the moonlight and the moonlight gleamed in her hair was enough to make your breath come short. My breath, at least. It came right up in my throat and stuck there, and I reached out and we sort of melted together. It was the first time that had happened. That's how hard they work you at Tech.

After a little while we separated and I opened my eyes and they still worked well enough for me to see a bench not far away and we walked over and sat down.

Betty sighed and leaned toward me and I moved my arm out of the way to make room. The skin of her shoulder was smooth to my hand, and cool the way the evening air was cool.

"It's been fun, Tom, hasn't it?" I knew she meant the last three years and not just the last three minutes.

"Lots of work and lots of fun," I agreed. "That's why space work gets in your blood, I think. It's fun even when

it's hardest. My hitch in the Girdle even seems like fun now that it's over."

"I can see how planet work must be a thrill, even if I haven't ever been beyond the moon. I will be though—I'm going out with my uncle's Vesta expedition in a couple of weeks, you know."

I HADN'T KNOWN. I knew she had been talking about it, but I had hoped Ed Day would have sense enough to say no. I wasn't altogether selfish about it. I did want her closer in, nearer where I would be, but a big part of the reason was that the asteroid belt was the Edge, and the Edge has always been a rough place for women, even when it was at the moon.

I started to tell her this, but she interrupted. "How did you make out with Translunar? The man must have had a lot to say to keep you this long."

"I get the money all right. And a job."

"A good one?"

"Six thousand."

"Yes, but what and where?"

"Luna City. I'll be port engineer."

"Oh, Tom!" I didn't think she had to put so much disappointment in her voice. It was practically disdain. "I should think Translunar could do better than that. It's practically landlocked. You aren't going to take it, are you?"

"Why not? Six thousand is a nice sackful of cash, and besides, I get a piece of the company. Not a very big one, but it will grow."

"Oh, Tom!" It was pure disdain this time. "It isn't the money! You should have a ship. You should be out doing things. They can't make you into a glorified slug monkey on the moon!" She pulled away from my arm and looked at me again. The solemn expression on her face was somber now, or maybe sullen; anyway I didn't like it.

"For six thousand they can do worse than that," I said. "It's more than the captain of a liner gets. And, anyway, Translunar's ships are all staffed. There wouldn't be a place for me even if I wanted one, and I'm not sure I want one. Maybe there's more glamour in being a deep-space man, but you can't call the job the engineers do trivial. The idea of being a slug monkey

doesn't bother me at all at that pay. It's better than being a swamp hog on Venus."

"But it's such a waste, Tom! Anyone can be an engineer. You should be in research or exploration, and you know it. It's a crime to waste your talent in a dock job. You belong out on the Edge."

"Look, Betty—there are three sorts of Edge jobs: in the Patrol, on some sort of an expedition, or as a spacerat. The first two don't pay and, as for the third, even if I liked the idea of prospecting the planets, it takes money to outfit for it, and it took all I had to finish Tech."

"But you have the Aspera, and the Translunar prize would be enough to get her into shape again and buy supplies."

"I was given to understand this afternoon that it would be considered very unconventional to take the money and not take the job. And anyway, what would I do then—hunt for thorium in the asteroids? No thanks. I'll take the slug monkey job and the salary. And I think you ought to do the same. You could get a job closer in that would pay a lot more than going off to the Belt on a wild goose chase. When you graduate first in your class at Tech you can take your pick."

"Wild goose chase!" She sniffed. "We are going out to get data on the Warp at close range. We might even find out the way to get around it and open up the outer planets to exploration."

THE WARP was supposed to be a sort of fourth-dimensional wrinkle in space somewhere beyond the asteroids that swallowed ships and accounted for the fact that out of three expeditions that had tried to reach Jupiter, three had not returned. I knew better.

"There isn't any Warp," I told her. "My father proved that eight years ago when he made the swing around Jupiter."

"But he never published any proof, Tom."

"No, all the proof he had was in his log book, and that went with him on his last trip. But I read the log. He sighted the pirate camp on Callisto, and would have had pictures to prove it if all his film hadn't been raystruck. Maybe he could have got somebody to listen to him anyway

if he had tried a little harder, but he wanted to make a research job of it. He sold out all his claims and built the Astra and loaded it up with equipment to bring back all the proof that even the Patrol could ask for. Then he blasted off and no one ever heard of him again."

"But the idea of pirates doesn't make sense, Tom. There are no cargoes worth stealing beyond the Belt. On the Venus run, yes—but why should there be pirates out where there are no ships?"

"Okay, no pirates, then. What they really are is Hassley and all those hangers-on of his that were never accounted for after the Polar War. One of the moons of Jupiter would make a fine hideout for them. Air, water, and a livable climate. When any one comes snooping around, they see to it that they never get back. We blame it on the Warp and stay away and leave them alone."

"They would never get there in the first place. The Warp isn't just somebody's wild guess, you know. It follows from Heuvelstad's work. He derived Bode's law from quantum theory, and showed that a warp in space is the only explanation for the family of asteroids between Mars and Jupiter where there should be a single planet. No one can doubt it."

"I can. No one used to doubt that the earth was flat, or to bring it a little more up to date, that the craters of the moon were volcanoes, or that the red shift in the nebular spectra meant that the universe is expanding. A theory is good only as long as it explains all the facts, and Heuvelstad overlooked the fact that my father circled Jupiter and came back. He will just have to revise his mathematics."

"Maybe we'll know more about that after the Vesta expedition comes back." She sighed and looked out over the glittering bay.

I sighed too, and took my arm away from the back of the seat. I didn't quite know how the conversation had wandered so far from the point. I had felt quite set up about everything when I came to the party. I thought Betty would be glad about the Translunar offer, and maybe remark that six thousand credits was a remarkable salary for a fresh graduate, and I would

suggest that it was enough to get married on. And here we were arguing.

She turned and looked at me again. "Tom," she said softly; maybe I was going to have my chance after all.

"Yes?" I answered.

"Are you really going to take that engineer job? Couldn't you talk Translunar out of something that would give you the chance to do the things a Denby ought to be doing?"

"Maybe I could. But look—I've sweated out the last seven years just for the chance I've got right now, and I mean to take it. My father spent all his life chasing a dream, and what did it get him? The one great discovery he did make no one will even believe."

"I never met Lance Denby, but I know he was a great spaceman, Tom, even if you do seem to have forgotten it. I never thought a son of his would ever turn out to be a company man. Let's go inside."

We went inside, and I went home. The punch bowl was empty by now so I didn't even stop.

IT WAS probably a mistake, but I flew down to Mojave Outport the day the Vesta Expedition blasted off. Betty was very friendly when we said goodbye, and her hand in mine was small and firm, and the fingers were quite cold. I don't remember what I said. It couldn't have been much. There was a stiff feeling around my lips that it was hard to push any words through.

Betty was last on board. She turned and looked back for a few seconds before they closed the hatch, and it seemed to me that there was the same solemn expression on her face that I had seen that night on the terrace. I was too far away to be sure.

My interview with the Western manager of Translunar was scheduled for the next day. I'm afraid I made a poor impression from the very start. I wasn't feeling very sharp; instead of sleeping I had spent a good part of the night wondering about that look in Betty's eyes. That and a few other things.

Elkins, the manager, was the sort of man who wears a nice sharp crease in his pants and his hair brushed carefully over

his bald spot and calls everyone heartily by his first name.

"Well, Tom," he said expansively, after the formalities of introduction and exchange of cigarettes were out of the way, "let's get to business. First of all, this, ah—token."

He held out a check. The four figures on it were even prettier than the pretty-colored ink they were printed in. That was for me. Legally, by the terms of their prize offer. I had checked on that.

"Thank you," I said.

"And now, as concerns your place with the Translunar organization—"

I interrupted. "I'm sorry, Mr. Elkins. Personal plans make it impossible for me to accept the position you have so generously offered me."

That rocked him. Why not—it rocked me. He still smiled with his lips, out of habit, but his eyes weren't smiling. He pulled an ash tray to him and crushed out his cigarette—the one I had given him.

"But—! You realize this is most irregular, Mr. Denby! And unexpected."

"I do. I didn't know it myself until a little while ago."

"Is this decision final, Mr. Denby?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"Very well. I'm sorry to hear it." His tone meant that I would be sorry too. "In that case there is nothing further to say."

He pushed a button and a flunky came in to sweep me out. As I left I could as good as see him writing down my name on a sheet marked Blacklist in 72 point caps.

III

IT TOOK THREE MONTHS TO make the Aspera spaceworthy again, and when I had bought the shielded tele-camera, vitanalyzer, and the other little toys I would need to prove that there was a pirate hideout in Callisto, my bank account was within saluting distance of absolute zero. This was space-rattling for fair, without even a chance for paydirt at the end of the orbit. And Translunar, or any other outfit, wouldn't have me even as a swamp hog after this. I was the smart Joe who was going to have me a Career.

You never know.

I stopped at Phobos to fill up on reactant. I didn't mean to land on Callisto. I didn't even mean to be seen if I could help it, but still I might have some dodging to do, and full tanks could be nice to have. For the same reason I put in a new power slug, because the emission had begun to go a little soft on the way out from Luna City. With the salvage of the old one, that left me just enough for a couple of high-balls at the port canteen. I thought I needed them more than two loose coins. I left the slug monkey grumbling about having to root around among the obsolete parts to find a Group VI slug, and headed for the bar. Let him grumble. The Aspera was still a good ship, even if she didn't have the tungail tubes it takes to handle Group IV fissionables.

Wait a minute! Maybe he got tired of rooting and put in a Group IV slug just out of laziness and ignorance. I made my way back to the power shack, cracked the case, and took a look through the periscope. The IV on the can was as big as a house. Well, when I got back I would be able to prove to Betty that I was right about trained personnel not being wasted in the engineering department. If I got back.

Seven and a half years in a space can is a horrible thought, but to do it in free fall is out of the question. I swung a pair of steering rockets to tangent position and cranked up enough rotation to give me a few pounds of weight. That made a mess out of the visual screens, but the radek would still let me know if anything came close enough to worry about, and this way a cup of coffee would at least stay in the cup. I brewed a pot of it, stuffed a pipe full of tobacco, and started to settle down to do my time.

I don't know how many days later it was that the radek began to groan. I quit counting days after the first week—if I needed the date I could get it off the chronograph. The signal was feeble, but I took the twist off her to get a fix on what it was. The radek gave the range as extreme—nearly a million miles—and anything that would trip the relay at that range must be big. After a few sweeps I found it in the scope, and it showed a perceptible disk. That meant an asteroid. I didn't know

which one—the General Emphemeris of the asteroids hasn't been published yet.

DURING the next day or two I spent a good deal of my time at the scope, and most of the rest figuring orbits. It was pleasant to have something to do to keep my mind off my predicament. I hardly minded even when it became obvious that I would come so close to the asteroid as to be perturbed out of all possibility of making the contact with Mars that I had projected. I hadn't really believed in that anyway. And, when I discovered that I was in a collision orbit, it was more of a relief than otherwise. Get it over with in a hurry. Starvation is a slow and tedious way to blast off. A short life and a merry one, Denby, that's what you always said. Or did you? Well, it doesn't matter, you're going to get it anyway.

It was a fine sight. I don't know anything more impressive to watch than a planet, even a little two-hundred-mile chunk of rock like this one, swinging up out of empty space and taking on size and form. White and round as a snowball, and spinning lazily like a snowball thrown through the air. This one was going to hit me right on the knob.

The twelve-hour rotation of the asteroid must have swung the spot past me three or four times before I paid any attention to it. A black smudge it was, round, but with ragged edges like a starfish. A jet scorch if I ever saw one. I swallowed my stomach on the third gulp, and as soon as I stopped being dizzy I looked again. A jet scorch it was, and a few hundred yards away the sunlight glittered on a round lump that couldn't be anything but a Mitchell blister. Of all the rocks in the Belt, I would bump into one with a station on it. Nice catch, Denby!

I crawled into the bulger again in case I might set her down a little heavy, and got at the controls. Landing on the steering jets is tricky, especially when there is no atmosphere. To help you brake down. I never would have made it if it had been a full-sized planet.

I set her down heavy, all right, but I'm not ashamed of it. Try it yourself some time. We crashed in a gully some sixty

feet deep, about a mile from the station. The shock broke my belt and threw me against the control panel, and I felt a couple of ribs crack. That was cheap. When my head cleared a little I could hear rocks rattling on the hull and air whistling out through a hole in her somewhere. I made a dash for the lock and kicked the emergency hatch release and blew outside with the rest of the air.

Just in time. Looking up, I could see the whole side of the cliff coming loose and toppling toward me like the crest of a breaker. I gritted my teeth and jumped. When I looked back there was nothing to see but a heap of rock.

Under this light gravity, the leap took me well above the cliffs. I could see a glint of sunlight on the Mitchell in the distance, and a spacesuit-clad figure coming over the surface in long leaps. One jump had been enough for me—I hung onto my ribs and did my best to walk. That isn't easy with a gravity a couple of hundredths Earth normal, but at least when you fall you don't hit very hard.

In a minute or two I came up with my rescuer, and we touched helmets to talk. I stared through the faceplate of the other suit. "Hello, Betty," I said. Then I passed out.

WHEN I woke up someone was swabbing my face with a damp cloth. It was very pleasant. I opened my eyes, and it was Betty, all right.

"Hello yourself," she said, and smiled. It was the old smile, crinkled nose and all. I took back what I had told myself about being a fool. I sat up and reached out my arms, but the ribs got in the way.

"Tom!" she cried. "What's the matter?"

"I bent a couple of ribs a little too far," I answered. "Nothing vital."

"Here, let me help!"

Between us we pulled the bulger off me and got rid of my packet and shirt. Betty crossed the room and began to rummage in a locker. I looked around. I was on a folding cot in one of the sleeping cubicles of a Mitchell. Apparently Betty had carried me in after I collapsed. That was not as bad as it sounds—I only weighed three or four pounds here, and I was light-

headed besides. The old girls with the spinning wheel seemed to have changed their minds after they blew my jet for me. They send me an asteroid, and it comes near enough to land on more or less and there is a party on it, and it is the Day expedition, including Betty. Thanks, girls! I would have bowed to them, but on account of my ribs I only nodded.

Betty came back with a pair of scissors and a roll of plaster, cut loose my undershirt, and began building a straightjacket. I averted my attention from the fact that it would have to come off some time.

"Where's your uncle and the rest of the crew?" I asked.

"Everyone but me is off on a field trip to Thule. Opposition was a week or two ago, and they're due back any time. Thule seems to be our last chance. We haven't found out a thing so far. But Thule is half-way to Jupiter from here and right on the edge of the Warp, or where the Warp ought to be. If they don't bring back some significant data from there we may begin to think you are right after all and there isn't any such thing."

"I knew it all along," I informed her. "Not that I'm likely to have a chance to prove it, with the Aspera dead and buried."

"Be still a minute—how am I going to tape you up if you keep on talking? Blow out your breath." She ripped off half a meter of tape and slapped it onto my side.

Presently she stepped back to inspect the job. "It'll do, I guess," she said, frowning critically. "For the time being, anyway. Uncle Ed will be back in a couple of days, and he can fix it right."

"Oh no he can't. When this comes off it stays off."

"Why Tom! Are you afraid of a little tape?"

"You bet I am. Give me a ray-burn any day."

"All right then." She picked up my shirt and began helping me into it. "But if you grow up lopsided or chicken-breasted, don't blame me!"

I didn't pay any attention. I tried my arms again, and they reached out all right. It was a good job of taping.

She pushed me away and stood up.

"Careful of your ribs, mister," she warned. "Come on, you don't belong in here anyway—this is the women's side."

I hunched myself into my jacket and followed her through the door and down a short passage which led into a sort of utility room in the midsection of the blister. One end was taken up with shelves and cases of food and other supplies, a diatherm cooker, distillation unit, mess table and the like; at the other, to the sides of the air lock, were two or three desks with books and papers. One of the desks held a periscope which reflected the star-speckled black of space and a small bright ball which was the distant sun. A row of thick glass portholes at each end of the room let in a fair amount of light.

OUT in the center of the floor were several chairs which looked almost comfortable, and a large table with a ping-pong net on it. The thought of trying to predict the behavior of a ping-pong ball under gravity of point-o-two or thereabouts made me dizzy again.

I sat down in the easiest-looking chair and Betty took a seat opposite me. The solemn look was on her face again.

"I should have mentioned it before," she apologized, "but I am glad to see you, Tom. And amazed, of course. What happened to your job at Translunar?"

"Translunar doesn't like me any more. I took the prize money to fit out the Aspera and sneered at the job."

"Oh, Tom!" I liked the way she said it this time. "Then you are free-lancing?"

"Free is the word for it. The list they put me on is black as the night side of Pluto. No outfit in space would hire me for a swamper after this. And you can't space-rat without a ship to rat in. As a matter of fact, I have a great future behind me. All because I had a great idea."

"What was the idea, Tom? I know you didn't come all the way out here just to talk to me."

"Well, it would have been worth it, but that wasn't it. I was on my way to Jupiter to prove once and for all that there isn't any Warp and that there are pirates on Callisto. Then I broke down a few hours out of Mars, with too much velocity to

get back on the chemicals. After a while you came along, and I saw the camp, and managed to set her down. I didn't know this was your rock."

"You have the craziest ideas, Tom!"

"All right, let it go. I'm done with crazy ideas. The wildest one I have at the moment is to talk your uncle into thinking that I can earn my keep here and a passage back to Earth."

"Good—and I'll talk him into not sending you back with the Patrol."

"The Patrol?"

"Yes—our time here is half gone, and they are due any day to pick up our data and preliminary report. They're overdue right now, as a matter of fact. I thought you were the Patrol cruiser at first. Our figures are hardly worth coming after, unless they've got some good readings on Thule."

I had stopped listening. Patrol regulations make the rescue of distressed spacemen mandatory. They would take me to Earth and turn me loose with a hundred credits bonus, and I could look for a job as a shoe salesman. Or write my memoirs. The Tale of a Disappointed Space Hound. That ought to sell. Back to Earth. I wasn't happy about it. I had crossed four hundred million miles of space to find Betty and I wanted to stay.

I looked at her. She crinkled her nose at me and stood up. "Come on, Tom, don't look so glum. How about something to eat? If you're not hungry I am."

She crossed to the galley end of the room and I followed. Cooking was simple—stick a couple of cans in the diatherm and wait until the signal beeped. It tasted better than what I had had on the Aspera, though. I told her so, and Betty laughed. Then suddenly she jumped to her feet.

"Look, on the screen, Tom!" She pointed. There was a bright streak half filling the field of the periscope. Betty hurried across the room and I got up as quickly as I could and followed her.

"It must be the Patrol ship!" she cried. "They will have letters aboard, and newspapers!" She was practically dancing with excitement. I wasn't so happy.

We watched her come in. She was a small ship, not much larger than the As-

pera, but it was a spectacular sight at that. An atom-jet blast in space is quite a blaze of glory.

They had a sharp lad at the controls. He had to be—I could tell from the shape and color of the blast that the emission was soft as a raw egg. He must have had twenty percent fluctuation. That was queer—you'd think the Patrol would have brains and money enough to put in a new power slug when it was needed. That one could go dead any time. But the pilot was good. He set down easy, right in the center of the scorch.

As soon as she was down the hatch swung open and half a dozen men in bulgers stepped out and floated to the ground. Betty had the outer air lock door open for them already. They crossed the ground quickly, in the long leaps of men accustomed to low gravity.

I noticed suddenly that the palms of my hands were damp. That made me wonder. It wasn't so much that I was scared by the idea of going back to Earth with the Patrol. Something was wrong with the set-up somewhere, and I couldn't place it. Then it hit me. That ship out there was no Patrol cruiser—she was the Astra! My father's ship! It had been years ago and I was just a kid at the time, but there was no chance of a mistake—I had practically lived aboard that wagon all the while she was on the ways. That meant my father had found the hideout on Callisto again, and hadn't got away this time. The Astra had been captured and converted to a pirate ship. As for my father, there was no doubt now about what had happened to him. Lance Denby would never have been taken alive.

These six men crossing the ground toward us were a bunch of Hassley's cutthroats.

"Betty!" I yelled. "Shut the lock quick!"

She threw me a startled look, but sprang to obey. It was too late.

IV

THEY WERE IN. ALL big monks with their helmets peeled back, and every one with a blaster in his hand you could put your thumb in. They came

in fast and fanned out to cover the room in a way that showed they knew their business, and the muzzles of their weapons never wavered an inch. I looked at Betty. She was quite pale. It didn't matter about the lock. We couldn't have kept them out anyway.

I didn't have a chance to tell her so. The boss of the show spoke. "Over against the wall," he said. Quietly, but we went. It was that kind of voice. There was no tone to it, and not much volume. It reminded me of the noise we used to make by rubbings rocks together under water when we were kids. He grinned, exposing thirty or forty grayish teeth shaped like old-fashioned tombstones. His whole face was grayish and stony, with heavy brows and a thick jaw. The 20 cm blaster in his hand looked like a water pistol. I might have called it a slight case of acromegaly, but I was not interested in diagnosis at the moment. I was busy getting mad. That was easy enough with such a subject, but I didn't see what I was going to do about it.

He followed us over to the wall, walking slowly, not cautiously, but as if he knew there was no need to hurry.

"Where's the rest of the crew?" he asked. He looked at me.

"That's all there is," I said. "There isn't any more." I didn't see any use in lying to him, but I didn't see any use in telling him the truth, and I would sooner lie to him than not. That's the way I felt about it.

"Wise, huh?" he said. His expression didn't change. He didn't have any expression.

He turned to Betty. "Where's the rest of the crew?"

"There aren't any more. There's just the two of us." Good girl. She was going to back my play. If I had any play. I was trying, but looking at that face slowed my mind down into first gear.

Back to me again. "Where's your ship?"

"Ship?" I asked. The innocent line. "We don't have a ship."

He looked toward the rest of his gang. Two of them came up alongside of me and grabbed my elbows.

"Do you hear that?" he complained. "They don't have any ship. They walked all the way out here." He moved in close

to me. His face wasn't really rock or I could have seen the moss on it.

"Look, chum," he said. "Do you have to get wise? This ain't no game of marbles. I'm telling you."

"Take it or leave it," I cracked. "What would we want with a ship? They bring us out here and leave us, and a year later they come back to get us and drop off the new crew." It sounded like a good way to run an asteroid station at that.

He cursed. It had a horrible sound, in that muted rocky voice of his. He faced Betty again. "That true?"

"Of course it's true!" The contempt in her voice would have withered him, only stones don't wither.

I still couldn't see where we were getting. Hold him here until the Patrol cruiser came in? That wouldn't work. If the Patrol boat came in first they would think the Astra was the expedition ship, and Ed Day would think it was the Patrol. And Stoneface here would sit back just like a hunter in a duck blind and wait for an easy shot. If we could figure out some way to signal. Come on, Denby, think it out. There's an answer to everything.

He was talking again. "How long have you been here?"

"Six months."

"When's that ship due?"

"In six months more."

"How long?" This was to Betty.

"Five months and twenty-three days, to be exact," she told him. "Earth time."

He cursed again. I was sweating. The way Betty was following my lead, she must think I had a plan. Maybe I did, at that. It was pretty hazy, but the way Stony kept worrying about a ship made me think. That, and the wobbly jet I had seen.

"Six months, huh?" he mused. "Well, we can wait. It won't be bad. Not with the company we'll have." He put one of his big shovel-shaped hands on Betty. "No, not bad at all."

I jerked one elbow loose and swung at his jaw. I might have done better if it hadn't been for the ribs, but as it was I felt it all the way up to my shoulder. His head snapped back but his feet never moved. The two gunsels grabbed my hands and twisted them up under my

shoulder blades.

OLD Stony stood for a minute rubbing his jaw and looking at me. Just looking. It was a look like you might see in the eye of a snake. Then he hit me in the cheek with the flat of his hand. It wasn't a slap. I tasted blood. He swung his foot at my ankles, and I hit the floor. He swung it again. I felt another rib let go.

"Pick him up," he said. "Tie him in that chair." His boys did as they were told.

He came and stood in front of me. "I told you this wasn't no game of marbles. Now look, chum. You're going to be a good boy and keep your trap shut and do like I tell you or I'm going to take you apart. That's going to be fun, too, only not for you." I didn't say anything.

Stoneface ground around on his heel and began grating out orders. "Slats and Joker, you tie up the girl till I decide what to do with her. Tubby, see what they've got to eat in this shack. Trigger—back to the ship and tell the boys we'll relieve them in an hour and they're to keep their eyes open in the meantime. Bring back a couple of bottles of juice with you. Karns, you keep a rod on this monkey in case he didn't understand what I told him."

In a few minutes they were all sitting around the mess table washing down about a week's supply of Expedition rations with raw juice. When they had finished Stony belched vigorously, stood up, and walked over to look out of one of the portholes. I followed him with my eyes, and was surprised to see that it was night outside. I hadn't realized how short these six-hour days would be. Stony began talking again.

"Slats, you and Karns get back to the ship and let the other boys come over here and stretch their legs and get some chow. After that we all got to get busy and ditch the ship and set up the artillery on the ground to get ready for that Patrol boat when it shows up. Me, I got some other business on hand."

He walked over to Betty and picked her up under one arm, chair and all.

"Put the girl down!" I told him.

He set her down on the deck again and came at me, balling up one of his cobblestone fists. "I said I was going to take you

apart if you didn't act nice," he snarled. "Well, here goes!"

"Wait a minute," I said. "I know what you want and I know where to get it."

That stopped him. "What do you mean?" he growled.

"I mean a new power slug. I saw how sloppy your jet was when you came in. You haven't got one G-hour left. You might take off from a little rock like this, but you'd never make Venus again and you know it. That's why you're willing to wait around here for six months on the slim chance of being able to shoot down a Patrol cruiser and salvage a slug out of it."

He blinked when I mentioned Venus, but I didn't let him see I noticed it. My mind was beginning to click now. This wasn't the way I would have preferred to handle the matter, but I didn't see anything else to do.

Stony ground his teeth at me. "Well?"

"I know where you can get a new slug just for picking it up."

One of his hands reached out and wrapped around my neck, and he started shaking. "Where is it then!" he gritted. "Out with it!"

"I didn't say I was going to tell you," I reminded him, as soon as I started breathing again. "I'm willing to talk about it, though."

"I'm listening. But talk fast, chum."

"Cut the girl loose, and me too."

Stoneface waved a command, and in a moment we were rubbing the circulation back into our wrists. Betty wasn't looking at me.

"Here's my proposition," I said. "I'll trade you the slug for the girl. You give her a suit with full tanks and rations and turn her loose now. That will give her enough head start so you won't be able to find her. Then in the morning I'll show you where this slug is, and as soon as you get it you take off and we'll all be happy. That saves you a six months' wait and a fight with the Patrol."

"Tom!" Betty broke out. "You're not going to let these apes get away!"

"Sorry, Betty. It's the only way."

"Oh, you—!" She stamped her foot. She was crying. I couldn't blame her for being mad. She was not the kind to stop

fighting anywhere this side of the last ditch. Well, for me it was the last ditch when he put his hand on her.

"Can the chatter, you two," Stony gritted. "Look, how do I even know you got a slug?"

"You don't," I agreed. "That's the chance you take."

"Yeah. And you know the chance you're taking if you don't produce?"

"I can imagine," I assured him.

"Okay," he decided. "I'll play. But I'm warning you, chum, if you're trying to run a bluff—you'll be sorry!" He turned to Betty. "Come on, babe, climb into your rubber pants and scam!"

Betty didn't even glance in my direction while she was putting on her space-suit. She gave me one look as she went out through the air lock, and one was enough. It was pure poison.

V

I WAS GLAD BEFORE MORNING that the nights on Vesta were only six hours long. Soon after Betty left, a couple of Stony's gorillas went over to the ship and sent back the two that had been left on watch. The new ones weren't any prettier to look at, and they scoffed up just as big a share of rations as the others had, and with even less manners, if possible. After that one of them got out a deck of mouldy-looking cards, and the whole crew sat down to a game of poker.

They had me tied down on the chair again by this time, and after the second bottle of juice had been around once or twice they hit on the quaint idea of using me for stakes. Each winner of a pot was to have the right to choose which portion of my anatomy he would separate from the rest of me by force and violence in case I didn't come through with the power slug in the morning.

By the time they had reached the stage of marking out their respective territories with chalk, Stony made them quit. He told them that when he got through with me there wouldn't be enough left for them to argue about.

My ribs weren't doing me any good, either . . .

Someone was cuffing me on the head. I opened my eyes and it was bright day.

"On your feet," Stony gritted. "You and me have got a date for a little game of truth or consequences. Remember?"

I staggered up and scrubbed some of the fatigue out of my face with my hands. Someone shoved a bulger at me. I saw that it was mine, and the tanks and ration kits were full. I crawled in and clamped down the fishbowl.

I led the way into the lock, with Stony and several of his lads at my heels. In a minute the lock clicked and I opened the door and stepped outside. The sun was only a couple of degrees high and the long shadows of the blister and the ship lay sharp and dark across the gray-white terrain. The stars burned against the black sky, very remote and indifferent. I tried to swallow the dryness in my mouth and throat, but it wouldn't go down.

A nudge from the muzzle of a blaster brought me back to the business in hand. I set off across the rocks, taking it as easy as I could without making my convoy too impatient. I headed straight for the Aspera. No need stalling now. Either Betty had had time to hide herself by now or it didn't matter.

When we pulled up at the scene of the wreck and I pointed to the pile of boulders and gravel that hid the remains of the ship, I thought Stony was going to share me out among his men without stopping to argue. I managed to show him a corner of bent hull plate sticking out of the rubble just in time. He put the boys to work tossing rocks.

It took a long time. I had counted on that. By the time the air lock was clear the sun was half-way down the sky again. Jockeying the slug out of the reaction chamber and getting it into its lead case was slow work, too. While it was going on Stony and I waited in the cabin, along with Karns. It seemed the boss fancied him as a gun-pointer.

I had a hard time to manage to retrieve my hand sextant from the corner where it had fallen without attracting their attention, but I made it. I stuffed it into my possum pouch and nobody made any objection.

Except for that, Stony had played it smart all along. The only other mistake he made was at the end, when his gang came back into the cabin with the slug all snugged down in its shield. He let me crawl out first. It was black dark outside by now, and I jumped without even waiting to get to my feet. And this time I kept on jumping.

THEY didn't spend much time trying to find me. I was out of range of their headlights in two leaps, and why would Stony think it made any difference to have me floating in the dark, with no weapons? Of course he would have blasted me down before he took off if I had been on hand—I wasn't fooling myself about that—but he had too good a head for the main chance to waste time on such a minor pleasure. The way he had it figured, Betty and I would both be dead long before another ship touched Vesta, and even if we weren't, we would say we were raided by Venusian pirates, and he would be long gone.

They headed straight back to the ship, and Stony put as many of his crew as weren't need for changing slugs to looting the blister. I could see their lights going back and forth for an hour, and then they all crawled into the ship and buttoned down.

I figured they wouldn't leave the blister standing, and I was right. One HE shell took care of that. Then they blasted off. I had my sextant and watch on them, and was writing down data on my knee-pad as fast as I could take them. I was using Altair and Vega for a fix, and throwing in Polaris every now and then for good measure. I kept it up most of the night. Their jet-flare winked out suddenly just before I lost them over the horizon.

After that there was nothing to do but go back to where the blister used to be and wait.

Betty came in just after the sun lifted over the horizon. She wouldn't let me get close enough to touch helmets so that I could explain. I gave up after a few attempts and we just sat.

It was a long wait. I rummaged around in the debris and rigged up some fair-

sized sheets of dural to keep off the sun—one for me and one for Betty. At least she was willing to use it. After a while I poked around some more and found a copy of Spatial Navigation Tables that wasn't completely reduced to confetti, and started trying to work up my figures.

About noon the next day, Vesta time, we picked up the jet-flare of a ship breaking in. She came in fast, under about three G's of acceleration. That looked like Patrol style to me, and sure enough, as soon as the dust settled I could see the blue star on her nose. That was good. I was afraid it might be the expedition ship coming back, and guns were indicated for the next hand in this game.

We didn't even wait for them to get out the ladder. Betty leaped for the port as soon as they cracked the hatch, and I was right after her. I slammed the hatch shut and motioned the landing party back inside. The shavetail in charge wasn't happy about it, but I didn't give him a chance to object. In a minute he got the idea that I meant business, and opened the inner door.

I peeled back my helmet. "Where's the CO?"

"Right here!" said a voice at my elbow. I turned and looked. He was only medium-sized, but he had a hard jaw and a hard eye. "What's going on here?"

"Plenty is going on!" This was Betty. "Pirates took over the expedition base, and this man gave them a power slug to make their getaway."

"Shut up!" I told her. "Let me tell this so it makes sense."

"Makes sense! Does it make sense to let those thugs off scot-free, with eighteen hours head start? We'll never catch them!"

"Yes we will. And besides, if I'd let them stay, they would have blasted this ship out of the sky. And besides that, I had to give them something to let you loose—"

"Suppose you both shut up," the CO suggested, "and come up to the bridge and let me have the straight of this."

The three of us went into the control cabin which was unoccupied at the moment. The CO motioned us to chairs.

We peeled off our bulgers and sat down. "Now—Miss Day, I believe? I'm Allison, Commander, in charge. Let's have your version."

BETTY gave him the story of all that had happened since I landed on Vesta, and enough of the background to make the story clear as far as she knew it. Allison buzzed for the medical officer when she got to the part about my ribs, and I was untaped and taped again. I was glad enough by now to have someone else worrying about them for awhile besides me.

Aside from that he made no comment until Betty had finished. Then he turned on me, and his eye was harder than ever.

"Well, Denby? I realize that you're not sworn in as a Patrolman, and I suppose you thought you were acting chivalrously. But it's rather a tradition that all spacemen consider themselves unofficial deputies of the Patrol when the occasion arises, and it seems to me that even a civilian might have kept his mouth shut about that slug. As for their shooting us out of the sky, we would have something to say about that. We know how to operate against land batteries."

"I don't doubt that," I assured him. "But I think you'll agree that a ship in space with no drive is an easier set-up."

"No drive? What do you mean?"

"Just that. Stony and his boys are sitting out in space with a blown tube waiting for you to come along and pick them up. If you want to know exactly where give these figures to your navigator and let him finish them on the computer. I've got a fix on them for every ten minutes from blastoff to the time their main drive tube blew four hours and forty-three minutes later."

"How do you know their tube blew? I never heard of such a thing."

"Brother, I did! And if you don't know how fast a Group IV slug can chew the guts out of a graphite liner, just ask me. But those lads didn't know. When they left Earth at the end of the Polar War, Group IV fissionables weren't heard of, nor tungsil. When I gave them the Group IV slug that the ground crew gave me by

mistake on Phobos, they didn't know the difference."

I looked at Betty, and so help me, she was crying again.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I couldn't tell you what the score was before without tipping them off."

She came over and took hold of my hand. She didn't say anything, but then she didn't need to.

Allison was pushing buttons like mad, and the bridge began to look like a sub-sea train at rush hour. When the navigator came in the CO handed him my notes.

"Figure an interception orbit from these observations. Blastoff in twenty minutes.

"Here, sergeant, take a detail and lay out a signal panel for the Day Expedition when they return, and this message to tell them what happened and where we've gone. Quigley! (this was the exec, I gathered) all hands to space stations—blastoff at once.

"Denby, I think you and Miss Day had better come along with us. I imagine you've both had enough of bulgers for a while, and I think you might like to be in on the end of this. Right?"

I pushed some of Betty's hair out of my eyes and looked up.

"Right!" I said. "I have a personal matter to settle with Stoneface. And anyway, I want to be along to see you don't shoot up Astra too bad. She was Lance Denby's ship, you know, and she's mine now, and I'm going to need her if I'm going to be the first space rat on the ground in the moons of Jupiter."

Allison goggled at this, but made a quick recovery. "Okay, Denby. And you know there's a reward out for Hassley or any of his group. I think that will take care of any repairs."

The navigator came back from the computer and handed Allison a sheet of paper. "Here's your course, sir. Quickest interception in thirty-three hours. They were headed for Jupiter, all right."

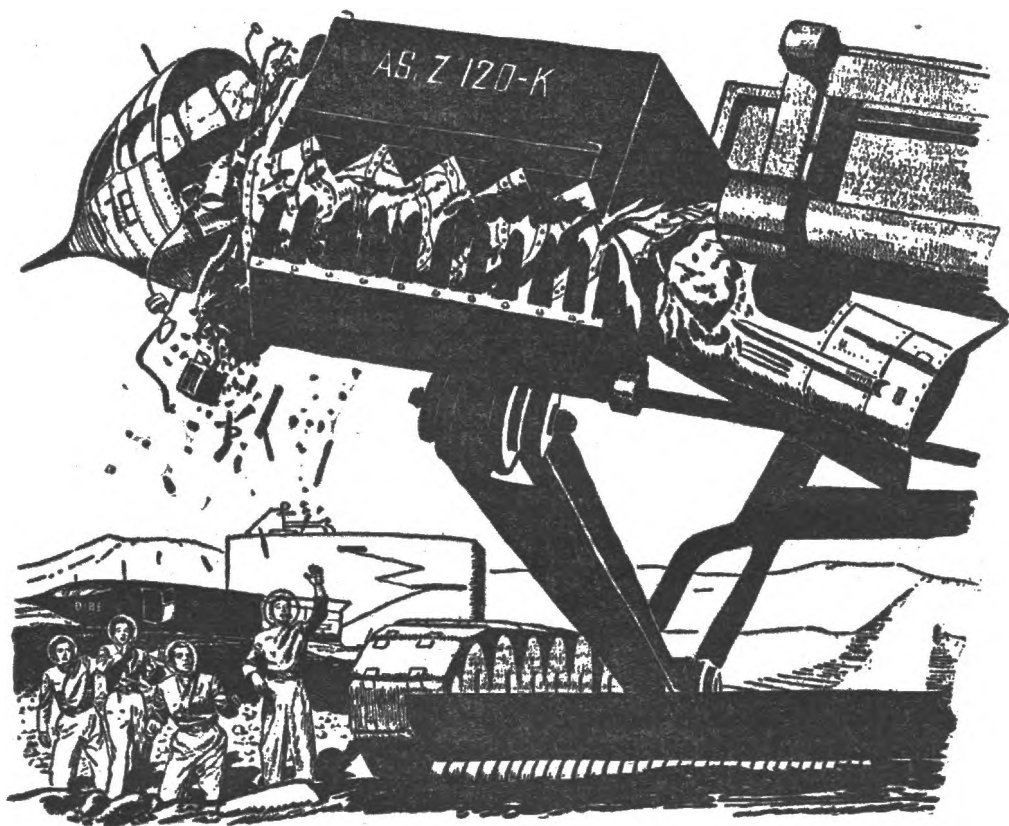
"There goes your Warp," I gloated.

"Looks like it," Allison agreed. "Here, have a cigarette."

I took it and lit up. It was quabba, and it tasted great.

Alpha Say, Beta Do

by ALFRED E. MAXWELL



"There goes our ship!" Kay screamed.

Precise Doyle Tindar and prim Kay Kanton had themselves duplicated, standard practice for trouble-shooting in space. But the duplicates fell in love—and what happened then was neither practice nor standard!

DOYLE TINDAR WAS AWAKENED by the urgent buzzing of the visor-phone by his bed. He grumbled, rolled over, glanced at the viewplate and winced as he saw the fat, grim face of the Control Board Director, Sam Penset. He sat up, yawned, and snapped the set on. "Yeah?"

"Listen, Tindar," Penset boomed and Tindar turned the volume down. "We've got a large pile of trouble. No reports from the mines on Bolus last night. Automatic radio communication absolutely dead. Power plant may have caught a meteor, but it

would have to be a large one. Telescope won't tell us anything. Get out there, will you?"

"Say, I'm on vacation, if you don't mind," Tindar said. "What about Bedding? Or Teppen?"

"Bedding's on a honeymoon, damn him," Penset growled, "and Teppen's getting some new teeth planted. It has to be you."

"Miss Kanton's going out there tomorrow," Tindar insisted, not relishing a space trip since he was on his first vacation in a year.

"I've thought of that," Penset boomed

back. "She couldn't report fully on the state of affairs. She's a meter-reader. Strictly a control-room worker. Nothing to do with the power plant or the actual mines."

"Okay," Tindar sighed, "I'll get on it. I'll leave Hessing Field this afternoon. Do I get a bonus?"

"Yeah, you thief," Penset smiled, "but get duplicated. You'll have enough work for two men."

"Okay."

"And, Tindar—" Penset signaled him to stay on the air—"I've just thought of something. Miss Kanton had better go to Bolus with you. Might as well clean up the whole mess at once."

"Okay," Tindar said, waved and shut the set off.

He climbed out of bed very slowly and shuffled across the room in a pair of frayed slippers. He went to the bathroom, mixed and drank a stimulant to snap him out of his stupor. He lit a cigarette and rummaged around in his closet until he found his space-suit.

Since Miss Kanton was going to be on the trip with him, the job was more attractive. He mused about the very nice-looking Miss Kanton for a moment, then began dressing hurriedly. He'd have to get down to the duplication labs before the noon rush.

WASHED, attired in the space suit he wanted his duplicate to wear, and considerably more awake, Tindar stood before the reception desk of the Central Commercial Duplication Laboratories of North America with his governmental certificates of permission for his "duping." The white-uniformed woman receptionist studied his certificates, handed him an identification disc and waved him on. She pressed a button on the desk and the information about him was wired to the other stations.

An attendant met and ushered him down a long, cool, white corridor to the section of the building devoted to the duplication of living matter. Another attendant took him from the first and whisked him up in an elevator to the floor where, as the somber sign stated, "Duplication of the

Human Being" was carried on. He was directed to a pneumatic chair in the waiting room and he sat down.

Tindar had never ceased to wonder at the startling work done in this massive building, which most people, over the course of the last hundred years of its use, had come to consider a natural part of the bustling, scientific worlds. C. D. Labs, holding a benevolent monopoly on the process, could duplicate anything composed of atoms and smaller than a three-storied dwelling in a matter of minutes. The products of such duplication existed only for a period of about eighty hours, but it had proved to be a tremendously utilitarian device in duplicating oil and coal for immediate use; in duplicating the bodies of persons undergoing operations for dissection before the operation; for creating microbes of diseases and studying their effects upon the body, after which they would conveniently disappear, and for duplicating persons whose talents or brawn were needed briefly for special problems. This last use had been a great aid to industries by providing living, breathing, duplicates of specially trained men in times of need; which times were frequent since the peoples of earth were spread so thinly over seven planets and thousands of asteroids.

A nurse came into the waiting room with a glass of brown fluid on a tray. Tindar, no novice at duplication, smiled at the nurse in recognition, took the glass and drank it down. It was a sedative that would put him deeply to sleep in a few minutes, so that he could be pleasantly oblivious to the slight discomfort of the duplication cell.

He followed the nurse into the "Dupe" room and ran a familiar eye over the shining and ponderous equipment. He knew the theory vaguely. Space, warped, formed positive and negative fields. These fields, subjected to warping and energy changes, formed nascent matter, unstable and simple. Warped again, the inchoate matter formed into molecular substances identical with the pattern electrically projected into it. Whatever was placed in the primary chamber was pierced back and forth at every possible angle by a thousand different

types of rays and emanations from the energy sources about the primary chambers. These rays were then the energy directed into the swirling haze of nascent matter. An identical object would take form in about five minutes time and the product's differences from the "pattern object" could not be detected by the strongest microscope.

"Simple," the man in the street might say. Tindar, more familiar with the theory of operation, was also more conscious of the hundreds and hundreds of years of research upon which the theory was based. He had always held a tremendous respect for the scientists who fathered the amazing invention.

Tindar climbed up onto the pneumatic cot and was slipped into the primary cylinder. He was slipping slowly into the mist of sleep as the door of the primary chamber clanked softly behind him. He gazed for a moment at the thousand lenses on the curving walls about him. The eyes suddenly shown with all the colors of the spectrum and bathed his body in a weird and twisted rainbow of heterogeneous rays . . .

TWO Tindars awoke abruptly and sat up on the pneumatic cots. They saw that the cots had been moved and rested against another in a corner of the room. They looked at one another.

"Who's who?" one of them asked.

"We'll have to wait for the attendants," the other shrugged. It was odd. That was practically all you ever had to say to yourself.

Down the hall feet slapped rapidly on the floor and approached the "Dupe" chamber. A taut-faced attendant looked into the room and waved at them frantically with a trembling hand.

"Don't get off your cots, please, sirs," he quavered and was gone.

The Tindars stared at one another.

"Something novel," they both said.

"Listen to the hell they're raising in the other room," one said, breaking the identity of their thought streams.

Visor-phones were buzzing; at least a dozen voices were raised in a furious dis-

ussion. Another voice could be heard, pleading and distraught. More attendants ran up and down the hall before the "Dupe" chamber. Three uniformed men with faces as white as their uniforms rushed through the waiting room and faced the Tindars.

"Dr. Bronsky will be here in a moment, sirs," one of them said.

"What's the matter?" one of the Tindars asked.

"Dr. Bronsky will be here presently, sirs," the attendant repeated.

Dr. Bronsky came into the room with a retinue of flustered assistants. He nodded to the Tindars and worked his lips around as he waited for a pale little man to shuffle nervously into the room.

"Now, Endicott, how did you move the cots around? Try to remember," The doctor spoke with a fatherly air to the little man.

"I don't know . . . I was thinking of something else," Endicott whined. "I was polishing the floors. They have to be cleaned by ten o'clock. I was working with the sterilizer on the floors. I moved the cots to get them out of my road. I thought they were identified."

"Thought!" snorted Dr. Bronsky. "Since when does a damned fool think!"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Bronsky," the little man pleaded. "It's a rule. The floors have to be cleaned . . ."

"It is also a rule—a primary rule, Endicott, that identification of the 'pattern' is second only to the welfare of the 'pattern'," the doctor stormed. He gestured wildly in silence for a few minutes, then burst out again. "Get out! I will not have asses in my ward! Get out! You're fired!"

The little man shuffled abjectly out. One Tindar turned to Dr. Bronsky.

"What's the fury about?" he asked.

The doctor gestured the rest of his assistants and attendants out and closed the door. He worked his lips nervously for a few seconds.

"An unprecedented occurrence has blackened the record of Commercial Duplication. You shall have a perfect right to sue, but I'm sure that President Histar will settle satisfactorily with you out of court." He paused as if it were painful

to go on. "That attendant—that double, double damned fool has mixed you up before you were stamped. One minute the controller is out of the room and he does it! We have no means in our power now to tell which of you is the duplicate and which is the original. We have one hope. Perhaps one of you woke up before you were removed from the chambers? Perhaps one of you remembers which chamber he was in?"

"The last thing I recall is dozing off in the primary," one Tindar said.

"Same here," the other said.

"This is indeed regrettable!" boomed the doctor. "It's unheard of!"

"It's not that serious, doctor," one of the Tindars said. "We can still do our work. One of us shall disappear on the way back, that's all. The only inconvenience shall be having to bring the duplicate part of the way back."

"But who shall be your pilot?" the doctor mused, "if on the way back the one piloting the ship were to disappear . . ."

"We have another person with us," a Tindar said. "I think that everything will be quite all right."

"Well, we shall see. Apologies will be made to your corporation and a settlement of some kind, of course," Dr. Bronsky shrugged. "There is extremely little else that we can do. Until one of you dissipates, I suggest that you—" he indicated one Tindar—"be Alpha Tindar, and you—" he indicated the other—"be Beta Tindar. It might simplify matters."

The doctor himself checked them out at the desk and followed them to the door full of regrets at the event.

ALPHA and Beta Tindar ate a hearty meal at a cafe, then phoned Miss Kanton and felt better seeing her face in the view-plate. It was a nice face, a bit solemn, but nice. She had brown eyes and a burnt-honey mass of hair. They found that she was already out of the Dupe Labs and was waiting for them.

An electric car whisked to the place where Miss Kanton stayed. They liked Miss Kanton, but her coolness and aloofness they did not like. She was a woman technician, a capable intelligent young wo-

man who, the Tindars privately thought, could be an extremely nice person to have around if she would cease playing the part of the scientist for a few minutes. Her smile, her figure, her face all checked perfectly. But her mind was as sexless as an adding machine that had been left out in the snow.

She came down the walk towards the car with her dupe, each with a brief-case under one arm. The Tindars glanced simultaneously at her ankles, but found them covered by the leather boots of her space suit.

"This is my dupe," Miss Kanton said as she came up to the car, indicating her duplicate who had a white top to her suit collar.

"Hello, muscles!" greeted the dupe of Miss Kanton. "Call me Kay, will you?"

Miss Kanton looked startled and the two Tindars quietly gulped a greeting.

"I'm afraid I have a rather wild replica of myself," Miss Kanton said with surprise. "I'm glad she's only good for eighty hours. But she could ruin my reputation in thirty seconds."

"Quit worrying about your reputation," scolded the merry dupe. "Get those meter-readings out of your mind and think more about these two exciting hunks of masculinity here in the car."

"Katherine!" Miss Kanton shrieked. "I will not tolerate any such inopportune mouthing. Behave yourself!"

"It's just your inner self speaking, sister," the dupe replied with a chuckle.

"Katherine!" Miss Kanton gasped. "Mr. Tindar, you will ignore this, please?"

Miss Kanton and her dupe climbed into the car and Alpha Tindar pressed a button, sending them purring quietly down the street towards the rocket port.

"Which of you is the dupe?" Miss Kanton asked.

"We don't know," the Tindars answered.

"What!"

Together Alpha and Beta explained the unusual situation. Miss Kanton was shocked by the freak accident, but she smiled. Her dupe laughed and quickly sobered.

"Hell!" she said, "If I knew which was

the dupe we could have a wonderful eighty hours!"

The quartet arrived at Hessian Field a few minutes later and Alpha Tindar went into the Rocket Dispatcher's office to check on the ship. He came back and threw his hands up in the air.

"Another dilemma!" he exclaimed. "No four seaters. Just those damned two-seaters. We'll have to take two of them."

"Well, get a couple of Armstrongs," Beta said. "They're about the best."

"I'll take a Boison, myself," Miss Kanton said. "Armstrong's have a shimmy when they're a couple of years old."

"The strong-willed woman scientist!" her dupe sneered. "Armstrongs are the better ships."

"Katherine!" Miss Kanton ejaculated. "I'll have you dissipated if you continue this! I shall not tolerate much more!"

"You haven't time, granny," her dupe replied blithely.

The field pilots jettied the small two-seater ships out onto the field and into the launching cradles. When they were readied and equipped, the pilots signalled the Tindars and the Kantons.

"Beta, you and Miss Kanton's dupe take one," Alpha Tindar said. "Miss Kanton will drive me in the other. If there is a preliminary dissipation of one of us, no one will be hurt that way."

Beta nodded and Miss Kanton's dupe grabbed his hand and ran for one of the ships.

"I honestly believe she's been drinking," Miss Kanton murmured, watching her duplicate laughing as Beta helped her into the ship.

Alpha walked in a slow and stately manner to the other ship and opened the air-lock for the girl.

The ships flashed jets out of their rear tubes and rose slowly from the ground cradles. A thunderous roar sent them both soaring into the stratosphere, where the ships veered together and rocketed out of sight towards the band of transplanted asteroids that swung in an orbit around the earth two hundred thousand miles beyond the moon.

Alpha Tindar settled himself deeper into the tight, sponge spring chair by Miss

Kanton's side and watched with admiration the magnificent piloting job his "atomic brother" was doing. The other ship was keeping exactly abreast of Miss Kanton who was setting the pace.

Tindar was falling asleep when Miss Kanton switched on the intership radio. She called the other ship over the phones and all that came in answer were giggles. Miss Kanton quietly replaced the microphone and stared straight ahead on her course with a slightly red face.

TWENTY hours later they were circling Bolus preparatory to landing. As was the policy when dropping down upon open land, they switched on the anti-gravity fields, blasted themselves to a dead stop and sank slowly down onto the furrowed land of the asteroid mine.

The ships thumped down within three hundred feet of one another. Miss Kanton hurriedly snapped on her oxygen helmet, and Alpha followed her through the air-lock. Instead of going towards the control tower, which rose from the blue land like a pale yellow candle, Miss Kanton ran to the other ship and pounded on the door until Beta Tindar and the girl-dupe opened it and stepped out.

"What have you been doing, Katherine?" Miss Kanton asked over the helmet radio.

"Telling secrets to each other, granny," the dupe laughed. Alpha Tindar was a trifle envious of the smile on Beta's face.

Miss Kanton flushed and turned away towards the Central Tower. The other three caught up with her and four abreast they walked lightly over the rough plain. Through the thin atmosphere and over the helmet phones they heard the crashing drone of the mine in operation. To the Tindars it did not sound right. There was too much noise. The robot-diggers and refiners were supposedly working far below the ground.

Ahead of them, over the close horizon, sprang a great, looming metal shape that filled the air with the roar of its engines. It rushed towards them with a flat, toothed platform lowered slightly into the ground. The platform was nearly twenty feet in length, with a thousand metal claws above

it hungrily scooping the soil up into the black maw of the storage bin that swelled from it like a monstrous belly.

"It's a digger!" Alpha cried. "Get out of the way!"

In the weak gravity they were able to move by bounds out of the path of the mining machine. It roared past them, tearing up the ground in a dumb frenzy.

"The ships!" Miss Kanton shouted, screaming above the roar of the Digger.

"Too late!" Beta gasped. "It has one!"

There was a crashing clank and the cry of twisted steel as the machine grabbed the small rocket ship up and crushed it in its jaws. The ship vanished into the bulging bin that followed the mouth on swiftly spinning wheels. The digger growled over the other horizon, leaving in its wake a shallow, wide furrow.

"I'll get the other ship to safety!" Alpha cried and ran towards it.

"What are the Diggers doing on the surface?" Miss Kanton asked Beta. "They're supposed to be underground."

"Something is all wrong," Beta said. "The Controls are obviously scrambled. Radio guides the diggers, keeps them underground until they're full, then lets them come up to empty."

"Do you think you can fix it?" Miss Kanton's dupe asked.

"If it's external trouble, yes," Beta said. "But if it's inside the seals, we'd never be able to get at it. Everything is sealed against tampering. The controls are in vaults. How they ever got scrambled, I can't imagine."

"No wonder there weren't any radio reports," Miss Kanton said. "This place is a madhouse! Look, here comes another one!"

Another Digger appeared on the horizon but it was far to one side, a moving shape against the stars.

"We'd better get into the control tower," Beta said. "It's probably the only safe place on this rock."

They were illuminated momentarily by the blasting jet of the ship as it arced upwards from the uneven ground. As they hurried towards the tower, the ship blasted past them and whistled to a halt near the door of the tower.

The quartet gathered together near the door and watched with amazement as six more of the huge diggers appeared, grunting and rooting at the soil like mammoth pigs. Two crashed together with a terrific clank of metal and their wheels dug up the ground as they hung locked together, whirling thunderously.

The four went into the tower, down the metal corridors to the elevator which took them to the floor with the control boards. Beta pressed a combination on the buttons of the door which shut off the room with the central boards. The door whined slowly open.

"The door's warped," Alpha observed. "There must have been an explosion inside."

They entered the room and at first nothing seemed wrong. The great metal vault in the center of the room seemed intact, the walls were whole. Beta walked around the vault, which rose like a fat column from the metal floor to the ceiling. Alpha came to his side when he heard him exclaim.

"Look at the wall," Beta said.

THERE was a hole the size of a basketball in one side of the wall. The metal about it was melted, bulging out in a fringe around the hole and running down the wall to the floor. Alpha traced the probable trajectory of the missile which had made the hole and found another hole, much smaller, on the face of the vault. The walls of the vault were buckled slightly inward.

The two Tindars stared from one hole to the other in amazement. The Kantons came to their side.

"No meteor did that!" Miss Kanton's dupe said.

"It's hardly possible, unless . . ." Beta paused. "Power was packed into it, whatever it was!"

"It penetrated three feet of tension steel at the very least," Alpha said. "Nothing as small as this meteor seems to be could have done that."

"Unless . . ." Beta paused again. "The momentum is what counted. Suppose that the mass was terrific, the speed equally terrific?"

Alpha and Beta snapped their fingers at

the same instant. "Neutronium!" they said.

"We've found several bits of it already in space," Alpha added. "Terrific mass. That's the only possible solution."

"A piece of neutronium, of high velocity, accelerated by the gravity of Bolus, plus opposite velocities. That would have done it," Miss Kanton said.

They were speaking quickly, their keen minds suddenly tearing the veil from the problem with a scientific hunger.

"That's that, then," Alpha sighed as if it had been too easy.

"Wrong," Miss Kanton's dupe interposed. "Look at these meters!"

The other three went to her side. The meters were jumping crazily from maximum to minimum, their needles bent and twisted. Another type was rapidly clicking off numerals on its way down to zero. Miss Kanton tapped it.

"That's the fuel tanks," she said.

"They're draining somewhere!" Alpha said.

"Down, naturally!" the girl-dupe said. "The engine room covers the whole underground floor! If—"

"If the sparks from the engines touch that fuel—!" Beta cried. He turned to the door and ran from the room with the others on his heels.

The elevator dropped them to the lower floor. The corridor was filled knee-deep with a pale, bluish fluid—explosive fuel! It poured like a blue waterfall down the steps leading to the engines. Alpha opened the doors of the elevator and the syrupy liquid flooded in upon him. He waded into it and to the steps where he stumbled to the lower floor. The others were right behind him.

"What about friction?" Miss Kanton asked, conscious of the metal studs of her suit clicking against each other.

"Have to chance it," Beta snapped.

They went into the engine room, wading carefully through the azure fluid. In the main room they saw the fuel slowly creeping up the fat legs of the whirring engines towards the network of sparks that could be seen through the ventilator grills.

"Isn't there anyway to shut them off?" Miss Kanton gasped.

Alpha shook his head grimly.

"No. All controls are sealed. Can only be manipulated by Cooperation Engineers," he said.

"Six inches more," Miss Kanton said, looking at the fuel flowing beneath the engine.

"We'd best get out of here fast!" Alpha said. "In ten minutes the Corporation is out one asteroid."

They were running up the stairs, pushing into the elevator. Beta shoved the door slowly against the pressure of the blue syrup. He shot the car back to the ground level. Here there was no sign of the fuel which was pouring down a stairs around a turn in the corridor. They ran down the hall to the door, the Tindars each gripping the arm of a Kanton.

"Wait!" Miss Kanton was crying, "wait! The ship. We've only got one! We can only take two persons back. And you . . . which of you . . ." She stopped, aghast and panting, looking from Alpha to Beta.

The Tindars stiffened and gasped as the full implication of what she meant hit them.

"Take the ship!" Miss Kanton was sobbing. "Both of you! Go on!"

"Don't be foolish!" Beta snapped. "Get into the ship and get the jets warm. We'll be there in a minute."

"But if you get the wrong one?" Miss Kanton said, trembling.

"The right one will be left back here," Alpha snapped. "Now get into the ship. We've only got a few minutes!"

Miss Kanton turned and ran. She climbed into the two-seater and jettied the rockets. As the tubes roared out a tongue of flame, over the horizon came a Digger, eating the soil, dashing towards the control tower.

"We both might be able to get into the ship . . ." Beta said.

"No. The seats are tailor-made. We'd never cram into them together," Alpha said. They stood looking at one another, wasting valuable seconds in their consternation. The Digger was looming larger and larger, roaring in a straight line for the control tower.

"Oh, Doyle . . ." Miss Kanton's dupe said, tears in her eyes.

"Shut up!" Alpha snapped. He whirled

towards the thunder of the Digger. It was very near, swerving, slowly turning away from the control with a ponderous gyration.

"It's going to hit!" Alpha cried, leaping back.

The edge of the huge metal mouth struck the corner of the control tower, shaking the entire building and sending an avalanche of concrete down from the facade. Alpha was struck by pieces of the debris as he bounded away from the door of the building. The debris piled into the doorway, jamming it. Beta's head rose over the pile.

"Beat it!" he screamed, "I'll never get past that Digger!"

Alpha ran towards the ship and climbed into it. Crazy thoughts ran through his head as he squeezed himself into the seat. It was a one to one bet. A fifty-fifty chance. Better than some odds he had had. It was a decent gamble, but the stakes . . .

He sealed the door and Miss Kanton sent the rocket spiraling up into the clear sky. She drew out of the range of the imminent explosion and circled the little asteroid, waiting.

INSIDE the control tower, Beta brushed the dust of the wreckage from him and hurried down the corridor, pulling the girl dupe by the arm.

"What are you doing? What if you're the real one? Oh, Doyle . . ." she moaned irrationally.

Beta went back to the engine room. He waded through the fuel with the girl dupe behind him.

"We have another bet, just in case," Beta said. "Those hoses . . ." He pointed at the wall above the humming engines.

The dupe's eyes brightened.

"If only we have time!" she said. "I'll get them. It's dangerous up there. You might be electrocuted. It doesn't matter with myself."

Beta started to protest, then he saw the logic of the girl's suggestion. He nodded curtly, and helped her climb upon the engine. She teetered precariously, slipping on the slime of the fuel which was on her feet.

She reached up and twisted the nozzle

of a hose, unscrewing it from the engine. Her face was twisted awry with effort, her slim body bent in straining against the stubborn threads. It loosened and she dropped it down to Beta who was standing in the swirling blue fluid, waiting.

He snatched it up.

"Get the others, quick!" he shouted, watching with horrified fascination as the fuel crept up to meet the network of sparks.

The girl struggled silently. Beta could hear her quick breathing in his head phones. The engines whirred, the sparks flashing down towards the explosive fluid.

She dropped another of the hoses to Beta. The third one was free and in his hands when she began working on the fourth. She slipped; the sparks danced up, touching the legs of her suit. The lower part of her suit burst into flame, soaked as it was with the fuel. She watched the flames, her face blanched white, as they ate into her suit.

"Katherine!" Beta gasped. This was no duplicate, he thought frantically; this was Katherine, blazing, burning. She would die; he knew that. If she fell back into the fuel, both of them died. He started climbing the engine, reaching for the girl as she hung onto the hose, her gloved hands frozen to it in a rigid grip.

"No!" she screamed. There was a plea in the voice that stopped Beta, brought him back to sanity. He dropped to the floor, watching her . . .

IN the ship that circled the asteroid, there was silence. Alpha sat in the seat by Miss Kanton, a hand gripping his knee, feeling it, waiting for it to disappear beneath his fingers—watching his fingers, lest they disappear if he looked away.

Miss Kanton was frozen in her seat, gripping the guide-triangle until her knuckles were white spots on her hand. She looked straight ahead, afraid to look at Alpha.

They circled the asteroid; again and again they rounded it.

"They must have stalled the blast," Alpha said hoarsely. "They can't stop it. They must have put it off someway."

His words echoed within the ship above

the buzzing of the rockets. Miss Kanton said nothing. Her lips moved slightly, but no sound came.

She turned to speak to Alpha, conquering her emotion, bright tears in her eyes.

The seat beside her was empty, except for a crumpled space suit that slithered to the steel deck before her dilating eyes.

Miss Kanton's hand went to her face. She screamed. It was one, brief cry of utter horror.

IN the engine room Beta labored. The hoses were sucking at the fluid. The hoses were there actually to suck away the gaseous waste of the engines. Now they were sucking away the fuel with thirsty, slurping sounds, pouring it out onto the soil outside the tower.

The fuel was sinking slowly, drawing away from the sparks in the engines. The girl was nowhere around. Near the fat legs bracing the engines from the floor, the transparent sphere of a space helmet swirled and rocked with the motion of the fuel. It was the only proof that the girl had ever existed; the sole thing about her that had been real.

Beta watched the hoses and studied the transparent sphere that was floating towards him, drawn by the suction of the wide mouths of the hoses.

"You were a great girl, Katherine," he said. He sighed. He felt weariness growing inside of him.

The fuel coming down the steps into the engine room was a mere trickle. The tanks above were drained. The level of the fluid was dropping down towards his ankles.

Beta walked carefully through the fuel to the steps. He looked back, watching the

hoses. Confident that they could do the job, he mounted the stairs and reached the long corridor to the rubble-blocked doorway. He left wet, oily prints behind him as he walked. He entered the radio communication room.

The dials of the radio glowed warmly before him. He adjusted the frequency to that of the ship of Miss Kanton.

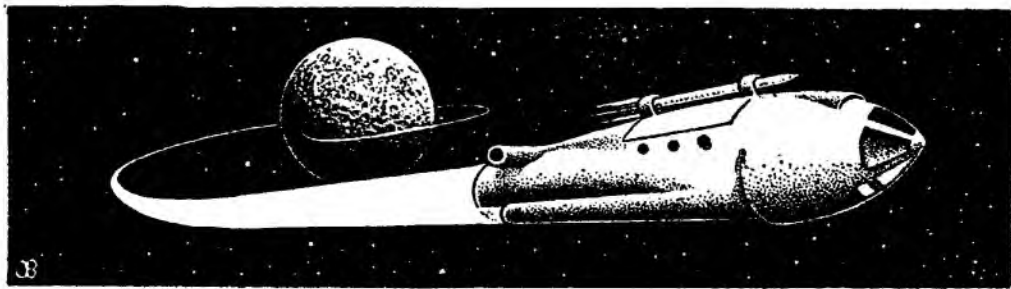
He helloed for five minutes before Miss Kanton's voice came in answer. He told her that everything was all right. She sobbed for a long time. Then she told him that he was the real one. He felt a faint quail of belated fear that was over-ridden by his weariness.

"You are a great girl, Katherine," he said. "You hung onto the hose, burning, wrapping yourself around it so that you wouldn't fall into the fuel. It's one of the greatest things I've seen. You smiled when you were disappearing. You knew that everything was all right then."

The girl on the radio was still sobbing. He told her to land. He walked out of the room into the corridor and pushed his way through the hole above the rubble pile. He saw that the Diggers were still racing around on the horizon.

The little ship came spurting into sight under full speed. It swooped recklessly within feet of the ground before the anti-gravity field crackled on and lowered it gently. A slim figure bounded out of the ship and came running towards him. He ran to meet it.

He grabbed it up into his arms and stood on the weird plain holding it to him. Together, they walked to the ship and climbed into it. There was a flash, a roar, and the ship shot up into the clear stars.



Moon Of Treason

by EMMETT McDOWELL

Branded an outlaw by the ISP, hated and feared as a mutant, Clyde Vickers stalked his quarry in impotent rage. His kind, it seemed, was always wanted for the dirty work . . .

CLYDE VICKERS shuffled awkwardly down the gangplank. After two years on Jupiter he felt buoyant as a toy balloon in the mild gravity of Earth's satellite. Every step he expected to go sailing over the heads of the other passengers—up, up into the vast booming reaches of Luna City's airlock.

The line jammed, came to a fuming stop. Vickers found himself wedged between a woman who had boarded the liner at Mars and a bearded Plutonian explorer. He craned his neck, peering over their heads to see what had caused the bottleneck.

An officer of the ISP, in a blue uniform, was standing at the foot of the gangplank, examining passports. Vickers cursed under his breath.

"Damn them," he thought, "damn them."

Behind him, the black spaceliner made sudden pistol-like reports as it expanded in the warm air. It had brought some of the cold of outer space along with it, and hoar frost stood out on its sides a foot thick. It was rapidly exhausting the heat in the airlock. Vickers shivered as the cold struck through his ill-fitting gray suit.

"Papers," the ISP man said and held out his hand.

With a start Vickers realized that he had reached the end of the gangplank. The ISP man took one look at Vickers' little green book and his face hardened.

"Parolee!" he said.

There were whispers from the crowd. A little boy said: "What's he done, momma? What's he done?"

"Hush!" she bade him.

Vickers gave no sign that he'd heard.

"Two-time loser, eh?" the ISP man went on and ran his eyes over Vickers. He saw a tall man with huge shoulders, the muscle bulging the cheap gray cloth—muscle that could be acquired only in the

killing gravity of Jupiter's penal mines. Then he saw Vickers' eyes, and he looked startled.

Vickers had his nictitating lids lowered; his eyes seemed almost normal. Almost but not quite!

"What the devil!" the ISP man wet his lips. "Vickers! By God, I should have recognized the name. Vickers, eh?" He seemed about to say more, then changed his mind. "Move along. You're holding up the line."

"My passport."

"Pick it up at the parole board. If you don't report there in twenty-four hours, you'll be picked up yourself and shipped back to Jupiter. You're a two-time loser, Vickers; you can't afford to get into trouble again."

Vickers regarded him with open dislike, then turned on his heel, started across the spaceport at a cautious shuffle.

Freedom!

He couldn't leave the moon. He had to accept whatever work the parole board secured for him—more than likely some stinking job deep in the moon pits. He must report for a check-up and a psychotherapeutic treatment every four weeks. He couldn't marry or hold property or change jobs.

And if he fell from grace again, it meant sterilization and a life sentence on Jupiter.

Freedom. What the hell had he to look forward to?

ALL his life Vickers had been lonely. His parents, horrified at having produced a monstrosity, had placed him in a home and washed their hands of him.

Not that Vickers' abnormality was disfiguring or particularly noticeable even—you had to look closely at his eyes to recognize the nictitating lids—but he was a freak, a mutant, and the sight of him had



Mayson

been a constant reminder of their shame.

At the home, Vickers' playmates had quickly discovered his queerness and had taunted him about it with the cruelty of children. His attempts at friendship were met with rebuffs. He might have been able to adjust but he was never allowed to forget that he was different.

Later when the peculiar power of his eyes became known, he was feared a little, resented and cordially hated. Vickers was forced in on himself. He built a shell, a hard flippant armor against the senseless antagonism he met everywhere.

In spite of hysterical predictions and a flood of stories in the science-fiction magazines, the Atomic Age had not ushered in a wave of mutants—at least not radical mutants. Vickers was practically unique.

And alone.

Nevertheless Vickers experienced an odd tingling excitement as he emerged from the lock into Luna City. Beneath his thick layers of protective indifference, he was eager as a boy, friendly, sensitive. A starved gregariousness looked out of his eyes in unguarded moments.

He stood with his back to the wall of an export firm, breathing deeply of the warm, artificially earth-scented air. Through the soles of his feet he could feel the pavement vibrating faintly, as deep inside the bowels of the moon, the mechanical mining worms gnawed out the ore, chewed it, digested it, spat it out as metal ingots.

The voice of the city rolled over him, deafened him. His eyes were bewildered at the crowds jamming the pavement. His pulse leaped. He was like a blind man who has just had his sight restored.

Someone said: "Hello, Vickers," and struck him on the shoulder. "Glad to see you out."

Vickers brought his eyes down. He stared at the man who had addressed him. The look of exaltation slowly faded from his face to be replaced by a puzzled frown. "I don't know you."

"Oh, come now, surely you recognize me." The man was as big as Vickers, exactly, and the same build. He was clad in a shabby gray suit. There was something tantalizingly familiar about him. Vickers wrinkled his forehead in concentration.

"I must remember that," said the man, and wrinkled his forehead exactly like Vickers.

They were standing in a doorway out of the stream of pedestrians. Suddenly Vickers' mouth fell open. He stared at the man in startled disbelief.

It was himself!

The resemblance was too perfect. The same close-cropped black hair and Jupiter-enlarged muscles. The same short, straight nose, wide, thin-lipped mouth, square jaw. Even the same transparent inner lids lowered over pale gray eyes. It was like looking into a mirror.

Vickers felt his mouth go dry.

"Who are you?" he demanded harshly.

"You recognize me? Good."

The man grinned, began to edge away.

Vickers lunged for him. But the fellow eluded his grasp, slipped into the stream of traffic like an eel. He was rapidly being swallowed up by the crowd. Vickers ploughed after him.

There was something afoot—something dangerous to himself, he felt. He was determined not to lose sight of his double and opened his nictitating lids . . .

Instantly, the scene about the busy spaceport changed. It took on a vaporous unreality like an x-ray photograph. The people, the buildings, even the pavement underfoot became tenuous as smoke. He could see right through them.

It always frightened Vickers a little to use his full vision, taking him a second to adjust. Then he located his double about ten steps ahead.

He could make out the misty outlines of elevators in the man's flashing heels. So that was how he'd given himself the necessary height. Pads filled out his frame reproducing Vickers' Jupiter-trained muscles. The nictitating lids had been cleverly simulated by contact lenses.

But why?

Why should anyone go to all that trouble to disguise himself exactly like Vickers—even to the ill-fitting gray suit? There was something sinister about the whole affair.

Just then Vickers tripped, lost his precarious balance and fell sprawling.

He scrambled to his feet in time to see

the stranger leap into an air taxi.

"Look at his eyes!" a woman cried out at his elbow. "Look at his eyes!"

VICKERS hastily lowered his inner lids, cursing under his breath. There wasn't another cab in sight. He'd better clear out before he was the focal point of a riot. Normal humans weren't fond of mutants.

Already a crowd was collecting. Vickers heard angry mutterings. He forced his way through the press bull-like. Suddenly he found his path blocked by two determined-looking men.

"Hold on," said the man on the outside and put his hand on Vickers' chest. He was blond with cold, pale blue eyes. "What's your hurry?"

Vickers started to thrust them aside when he felt the second man jam a gun into his ribs.

"Vickers, aren't you?" asked the blond man.

"What of it?"

"Come along." He jerked his chin toward an air taxi. "Don't make a fuss."

"Where?"

"Headquarters." The man produced an ISP card. "We tried to catch you at the ship, but you'd left."

Vickers hesitated. Despite the pistol in his ribs, he thought he could take the two plainclothesmen. It would be a futile move, though. The ISP would throw out the net for him, and this time he would be sent back to Jupiter for life.

He sighed, "All right," and climbed into the cab.

He wondered if there could be any connection between the incident outside the spaceport and this visit to ISP headquarters, but he knew it would be useless to ask. He stared silently out the cab window at the polyglot crowd, drawn from three worlds.

The moon was international. It was governed by a board of seven delegates, one each from the seven great nations of Earth. They were known simply as "The Seven" with headquarters in the moon-tower near the center of Luna City. The ISP offices were located there too as well as all government bureaus.

All at once Vickers realized that the cab was headed in the wrong direction.

"Where are we going?" he demanded, jarred out of his stoical calm.

The ISP agents had taken seats one on each side of him. He could feel their guns prodding his ribs, sleek automatics with built-in silencers. Wicked things that could tear half his guts out.

"Shut up," the blond man said.

Vickers lapsed into silence again. He was more bewildered and angry than alarmed. Try as he would, he couldn't guess who'd want him badly enough to snatch him.

There had been no rivals in Vickers' line of work. Samuels and Rebkia, his partners, had both been killed in the ISP trap two years ago. There was no one left who had any interest in him. Unless—

He said suddenly: "You're not ISP agents."

"That's right."

"What's the idea then?"

"You ask too many questions," said the blond man.

"An' that's a fact," the other agreed.

Vickers' mouth set. He still thought he could take the two gunmen, but his curiosity had the best of him. He sank back in the cushions and waited.

The cab had gone about three kilometers when it pulled up at the curb.

"All right, Vickers," the blond man said; "here's where you get your answers."

He crawled out, straightened. The cab had stopped before a door of opaque blue plastic. Above it in letters of electric blue light was the inscription:

INTERNATIONAL SPY RING
INCORPORATED
Secrets Bought and Sold

Vickers stared at it in disbelief. There was just the plain blank door squeezed between a theatre on the right and a travel agency with posters of the Martian deserts in its windows on the left. The blue door was hard to focus on—like a slightly blurred picture. He opened his nictitating lids.

To his utter bewilderment, he found himself looking through the door into the

theatre lobby. The blue door didn't lead anywhere. It wasn't even a door, he realized, but an illusion!

VICKERS had been examined many times. "The peculiarity of your vision," one eminent psycho-biologist had told him, "lies in your ability to see matter as it actually is. Tenuous unmaterial energy. There's more space between the nucleus of an atom and its electrons in proportion than between the sun and its planets. It's like looking at the stars"—and he had waved his hand at the sky—"you can see them but they don't obstruct your vision."

It was a strange world that Vickers could see with the nictitating lids raised—a fairy-like insubstantial world, beautiful and shocking. A glass world without secrets.

But his eyes never lied to him. And the door didn't exist in fact. There was only a blank theatre wall where he had seen it.

Then the blond man stepped forward and went through the motions of opening the door.

"Inside," he said and walked through and vanished!

Vickers knew he had vanished, because he could still see the misty outlines of the wall where the door should have been and the interior of the theatre. He felt his stomach go hollow. "In you go," the other man said and nudged him with the pistol.

Vickers allowed his nictitating lids to close.

At once he could see the door again, standing open, and a reception room beyond. The blond man was just inside motioning for him to enter.

Vickers drew a deep breath and stepped across the threshold.

There was a moment of abysmal darkness, a giddy sensation, then Vickers found himself standing in the reception room, ankle deep in carpet. He felt unaccountably heavier—not as much as he would weigh on Earth but more than he should weigh on the moon.

A girl was approaching him. She said: "Go right in, Mr. Vickers," indicating a door across the room; "they're waiting for you."

"Who's waiting for me?"

"Mr. Thorpe. The president of International Spy Ring, Inc. Right in here, sir."

The utterly absurd title of the company struck him anew. The seven great nations would no more permit such a business to exist than they would sit supinely by and allow an armed invasion.

In the first place they all maintained their own very efficient espionage and counter espionage systems. They couldn't afford to let one nation grow more powerful than the rest. At any costs they had to preserve the status quo.

He didn't voice his doubts, but followed the receptionist into a large, sparsely furnished office. There were no windows, the room being lit by soft yellow light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. The top of a huge desk of purely functional design was littered with gadgets, and behind it sat a bald, pink-faced man, wearing a pleasant expression.

There was one other person in the room—a girl—and she was crying softly.

"Mr. Thorpe," the receptionist said, "Mr. Vickers to see you," and withdrew.

The girl turned her back quickly to Vickers so that he couldn't see her face, but he could watch her hands worrying the material of her dress.

It was an expensive dress, Vickers recognized, an exclusive Venusian creation of green gossamer that was very nearly transparent even to his normal vision. He was a little shocked and looked away.

The man called Thorpe beamed at him. "Glad to see you, Vickers," he said and made it sound genuine. "Won't you sit down?"

Vickers let himself sink into a chair across from the girl. He couldn't keep from studying her. Her brown hair was done in a sort of halo effect and she wore wedge type sandals that must have added three inches to her height and made her feet look tiny.

Thorpe cleared his throat.

"We had a good reason for bringing you here," he said; "I hope it didn't inconvenience you too much."

"Get to the point," said Vickers.

Thorpe looked startled.

"Vickers, we can use a man with your

unique talents. In fact, there's a job that no one but you—"

"Sorry."

Vickers was on his feet, starting for the door to the reception room.

"Don't be hasty," Thorpe said in an agitated voice. "I really can't let you go until you hear me out."

VICKERS caught the veiled threat in his words, swung around. Thorpe's finger was resting on a button. The girl had begun to sniff audibly.

"All right," said Vickers, "but make it short. I have to register at the Parole Board office before the expiration of twenty-four hours."

"No hurry," Thorpe said, waving him back to his chair. "You met your double on the street. He's gone to the board to register in your place. He'll also fill any job they see fit to assign you. So you see, Vickers, you're quite free. You're even supplied with a perfect alibi."

Vickers did see. He saw a number of things, none of which reassured him. He said: "Fingerprints?"

"They'll check. He's wearing tips with your prints. So will his height and weight. He's a fine actor, Vickers, one of the best."

"How did you get my prints? My record is in the ISP secret file, but—"

"But that's our business. Secrets, Vickers. Any secrets. State secrets, scientific secrets." He chuckled. "We make no secret about it."

Vickers looked skeptical.

"Do you mean to tell me that you could steal the plans, say, of the USSE's new space drive?"

Thorpe rubbed his hands together, his grin broadening.

"We sold them the plans. In fact, we sold those same plans to the Black Republic, the Arab Federation, China and New Spain as well. The only reason we didn't sell them to the United States is because they happened to be the ones who had developed them."

He paused to let his words sink in. "That may seem unethical, but it's our policy. In our small way, we feel that we help to preserve the status quo."

"Rubbish!" said Vickers. "If you'd done

that, they would have sent the lot of you off to Jupiter."

"They try." Thorpe looked at his watch. "In fact, Vickers, we have information that the ISP plans to raid us in exactly twenty-three minutes."

Vickers stiffened. "Is that straight?"

"Quite. But don't alarm yourself. They'll never get past the blue door."

Far from being soothing, Thorpe's reassurance had just the opposite effect on Vickers. For the first time, he began to doubt that he could get through that blue door himself. There was something so damned complacent about the man behind the desk—

In sudden alarm, Vickers opened his nictitating lids, flicked a quick glance around.

The room was quite real, but there was no sign of Luna City nor of the moon's desolate surface. He sucked in his breath.

The office seemed to be part of a large windowless structure. He could see, through the walls, a restless ochre sea outside and a red pebble beach. Strange, sinuous vegetation cloaked the shore.

"Where are we?" he blurted out. "How did I get here?"

"I'm sorry," said Thorpe, "but that's one secret that isn't for sale."

Vickers closed the nictitating lids and the office recovered its solidity.

"What's your proposition?"

Thorpe gave him a shrewd look. "This is Tani Fralick," he introduced the girl. "I'm sure you've heard of her father. He's the physicist . . ."

VICKERS sat bolt upright. Fralick was probably the most renowned man on Earth, Mars or Venus. He certainly was the Systems greatest physicist. Fralick was head of the United States' Bureau of Research. It was practically treason for his daughter to be in the offices of such an organization as "International Spy Ring, Inc."

Thorpe said: "Tani's father has been abducted by the Arab Federation."

The girl gave a muffled sob, buried her face in her hands.

Vickers yelled: "What!" Then in a lower voice, "But there's been nothing on

the newscasts."

"Of course not. The U. S. is hushing it up. They don't want it broadcast that their top experimental physicist has been stolen. They don't even know who has him or where he is. Tani has asked us to get her father back."

"Where is he?"

Thorpe didn't look so cherubic as he drummed on the desk top.

"Here. Luna City. He's being held in the embassy of the Arab Federation."

Vickers said: "Why don't you turn your information over to the U. S.?"

"It's not as simple as that. The Arabs would kill him before they'd give him up."

Vickers shrugged. "If the U. S. with all its resources can't release him, I don't see how you expect me to do it."

"You can, though. In fact you're the only one who can. The question is, will you?"

"No!" said Vickers flatly; "I won't."

"But—"

"No buts about it. With my record, it would be poison for me, if my name ever became associated with anything like International Spy Ring, Inc. I'm through, Thorpe, I've quit. I can't afford to be sent back to Jupiter."

Tani Fralick suddenly burst into a flood of tears. Vickers clenched his fist. At that instant a bell began to ring insistently.

"The raid," Thorpe said. "What say we watch it? Anyway, Vickers, you can't leave 'til it's over."

Vickers grunted, sank deeper into his chair. Tani's soft child-like crying was getting under his skin, but he steeled himself against it.

Thorpe pressed a button on his desk, and a huge television screen on the wall behind him glowed into life. The multiple noises of Luna City rolled into the office shattering their isolation. The tri-dimensional effect was so real, that it was as if the wall itself had been removed and they were peering directly into the street outside the blue door. Vickers could read its idiotic sign.

INTERNATIONAL SPY RING
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All at once he frowned as he discovered the silent men converging on the entrance. They were dressed in civilian clothes, threading their way unobtrusively through the press. ISP men, Vickers recognized, with a thrill of alarm.

One of them reached the portal, put out his hand for the knob.

The blue door vanished.

It simply went out like a light, leaving the ISP man staring stupidly at the blank wall of the theatre.

Thorpe snapped off the television. Vickers could see that he was chuckling.

"The fun's over," he said. "But they'll be nosing around there for a week. There's really no door there, you know."

"Yes, I know. But I'll be damned if I understand."

"You will," Thorpe said cryptically. Then he switched on the inter-office com. "Miss Stevens, see that this memo is circulated throughout the organization. 'Due to a police raid, the new offices of International Spy Ring, Inc., are located at B624½ Water Street, Level Three.'"

HE clicked it off, stared at Vickers coldly. All the friendliness was gone.

"Suppose we quit fencing. We know your history, Vickers. You used to claim that you could arrange the escape of any prisoner, no matter where he was being held—for a price. You made monkeys out of the ISP for a while. How many men have you broken out of the Jupiter Penal Mines and readjustment camps?"

"I don't know," said Vickers. "It was a good racket while it lasted."

"But you couldn't finagle your own escape, could you?"

"It's easier to work from the outside," Vickers rejoined laconically.

Thorpe said in a nasty voice: "That's just the point I'd like to make. Either you help us release Fralick, or we'll frame you and turn you over to the ISP."

Vickers' eyes narrowed. He leaned suddenly across the desk, hit Thorpe on the chin with his balled fist!

There was a "crack!" as Thorpe's jaw bone snapped. He was bowled over backward to lie in an unconscious heap against the wall.

Tani screamed. She tried to reach the desk, but Vickers grabbed her off her feet, thrust her under his arm.

"Put me down! Put me down." she cried furiously, kicking, squirming. Vickers paid no more attention to her frantic wriggling than he would have to a kitten. His inner lids were raised and he was staring with a strange fixity at the alien world visible through the walls.

"What are you going to do?" Tani gasped. "Are you crazy? You can't walk out of here. The blue door isn't operating. Besides, even if you did get away the Ring would have you framed."

"I'm not going back to Luna City," Vickers said tersely. "I'm going outside."

"Outside!"

"Yes." He started for the reception room. "I don't know where we are. Another world, another dimension, it's all the same. I'll be free of the ISP. I'll find a way out if I have to break through the walls."

"But you can't!" she wailed. "The atmosphere outside it! It—it's chlorine!"

Vickers felt as if someone had kicked him in the belly. He set Tani on her feet.

"How do you know?"

"Thorpe showed me. He—he—" she straightened her skirt managing to look flustered—"he's been very friendly."

"Where are we?"

"In another dimension, I think. The blue door is a—a stasis, Thorpe called it. Don't ask me how they do it. They came through in space suits and built this hermetically-sealed fortress."

Vickers was silent. After a moment, he said: "All right, you win. I'll break out your father if it can be done."

VICKERS sat in a chair facing a blank wall; his nictitating lids were raised the pupils of his eyes like lambent flame. Beyond the wall lay the embassy of the Arab Federation.

"What do you see?" demanded Tani in a suppressed voice.

Vickers and the girl were in the house of Seth Adda, an ex-senator and a friend of Tani's father. He had been happy to lend Tani his house, which was on the eighth level flush against the Arabian Embassy.

Vickers was dressed in a snuff brown burnoose, the national Arab costume. He said:

"There's a sleeping room just beyond the wall. This part of the embassy must be the private quarters of one of the officials. The room opens on a hall. There are six-seven-eight other bedrooms along it. I think it's the harem. There's a swimming pool to the left."

"Can you see him?" Tani pleaded.

"Yes. But not very plainly. He's in a tiny cell almost in the center of the embassy. There's a guard in front of the door."

"Is—is he all right? They haven't hurt him?"

Vickers concentrated on the vague outlines of the man lying on his bunk. A thin man, elderly, with hollow cheeks. "So that's Doctor Fralick," he thought, "greatest theoretical physicist since Einstein."

He said aloud:

"He seems okay."

Tani expelled her breath in relief. Vickers looked at her suddenly and saw that tears were running down her cheeks. Involuntarily he started to reach out his hand to comfort her, remembered the repugnance normal humans felt toward him and let his hand drop to his knee.

The girl disturbed him. She was wearing practical gray coveralls instead of the filmy creation she'd had on yesterday. She was beautiful even in the baggy garment, but it wasn't altogether that. With the strides that had been made in eugenics, an ugly man or woman was the exception and, perversely, often had more appeal than the uniformly handsome ones.

No, he was hungry for a woman, hungry for companionship and admiration.

He frowned, catching himself up with a jerk. Self pity! He'd better watch himself. That way led to neurosis, manic depression and insanity.

He wished Tani would go away and leave him alone. He worked better alone. But he knew she'd been set to watch him. The Ring probably thought she'd do a better job of it since it was to her interest to see that he didn't double-cross them.

She said, "Clyde."

"Yes?" He was startled and dropped his

nictitating lids. She'd never called him by his first name before.

"You resent being forced into this job, don't you? I'm sorry. Honest I am, Clyde. But it was father's life or—or . . ."

"Or mine," he supplied dryly.

"That isn't fair."

"Isn't it?"

"No. You'll be protected and alibied—"

He said: "How much do you know about International Spy Ring, Inc.?"

She looked startled, her eyes widening. "Not—not very much, I guess. I've heard father speak of them. They're big, Clyde. You don't know how big. They've offices on Earth and Mars and Venus, too. The ISP can't do a thing. They can't get past the blue doors. You can't fight the Ring. They're invulnerable."

"Nothing's invulnerable."

"Clyde!" Her hand started towards him, dropped.

She can't bring herself to touch me, he thought. They're friendly now—because I'm necessary; they can't do without my help. But what about afterwards? What then?

If he were lucky, he'd be set free, to work in the moon pits where his double was now. If he were lucky! He shivered a little. He knew too much about International Spy Ring, Inc. As soon as he was of no more use to them, they'd dispose of him. Permanently. Probably in that dimension where their office was located. That beautiful little world with the atmosphere of chlorine.

"Clyde," Tani repeated. "What are you going to do? You're not planning to double-cross the Ring, are you? Not that, Clyde?"

"No." But he filed the idea away. The ISP might be willing to forget his record, let him start out with a clean slate if he could deliver the Ring into their hands.

"Why did the Arabs kidnap your father?" he asked Tani suddenly.

THE girl hesitated. "He—he was working on teleportation. And somehow they got wind of it. It would have made space ships outdated. Armies could be transported instantly behind enemy lines. It would have made the United States su-

preme. He was about to succeed." She shook her head. "But I don't see how the Arabs learned about it."

"Don't you?"

"No." She looked puzzled, then her brown eyes widened in comprehension. "The Ring! But they're helping to rescue him."

"Why not? They're getting paid by both sides. You heard Thorpe admit that they'd sold the space drive to every one of the seven countries."

"No. I can't believe it, Clyde." She bit her lip. "They're not like that. Not really."

"Rubbish."

The girl's face had grown very white. "You won't let me down, Clyde. You'll get father out, whatever you do?"

He opened his nictitating lids, peered through the wall into the embassy. There were two women in the swimming pool. The sleeping chamber was empty. So was the hallway.

He said, "Yes." Then, "Check the route. This is it."

He heard her gasp. Then she began to talk hurriedly into a tiny radio strapped about her wrist.

Vickers looked up and down through the various floors of the embassy next door, checking the position of the guard details, the officials and their families. It was going to be tricky, he saw, a matter of split second timing.

He got up and examined the sleek air taxi. It was a transparent plastic tear drop and filled a fourth of the room.

One outer wall of the room had been removed outright. It had been simulated with cloth flats like stage props so that it looked normal enough from the outside. But when the time arrived, the air taxi could burst right through it into the street.

The Ring was thorough, Vickers had to admit. And ruthlessly efficient.

He said: "Get in the taxi and start the motor. Tell them we'll crack out of here in exactly fifteen minutes."

He heard her catch her breath and wheeled on her suddenly.

"What's wrong?" he demanded sharply. "Good Lord, don't go into a funk now!"

"Hold it!" she said, the radio to her ear. He saw the blood drain out of her face as

she listened. Then she clicked it off, turned frightened eyes on him.

"It's your double." Her voice sounded lifeless. "The ISP has discovered the substitution. They have the net out for you now. You couldn't get a block without being caught."

Vickers could feel his stomach knot with shock. He stared at her, his blazing eyes probing straight through her. Anywhere else in the system, he might have been able to escape.

But Luna City! It was like a hermetically sealed gold fish bowl with the ISP blocking all the exits. Sooner or later they'd dig him out.

Sterilization and a life sentence to the Jupiter Penal Mines! There was no leniency shown third offenders, no matter how minor the infraction.

He got a grip on himself with an effort. "Tell them," he said to the girl, "we'll crack out of here according to schedule."

Her mouth made a soundless O.

"Get in the taxi and start the motor," he said with a grim sparkle of humor. "I might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb!"

"But how'll we slip through the ISP net?" Tani protested.

"Get in there," Vickers said in a voice that brooked no questions. He swung back to the wall separating them from the Arabian embassy. The adjoining bedroom, he saw, was still empty.

HE DREW the atomic knife from its holster beneath his burnoose, pressed the stud. A long blade of coruscating atomic energy shot from the handle.

The blade went into the wall as if the tough plastic had been butter. With infinite caution, Vickers cut a four foot window into the next building, lifted out the block.

"Don't fumble your part," he said over his shoulder. "We may be in a hurry when we come back this way."

Without waiting for a reply, he stepped through, fitted the block back into place.

His last glimpse of Tani revealed her crouched in the transparent plastic air taxi, her eyes round and frightened as two new moons.

VICKERS didn't hurry. Hope for success lay in two factors: audacity and his peculiar vision which allowed him to see what his opponents were doing and so keep a number of jumps ahead.

The Arabs were a mixture of the old and the new. Scientifically, they were on a par with any of the seven great nations, but they clung with superstitious fanaticism to the old customs, the old way of life.

The harem was still inviolate, and Vickers knew there would be a guard outside its door.

He located him through several walls that acted like layers of cheesecloth to his eyes, dimming the guard's figure but not obscuring it. He found the women. There were four, and half a dozen servants besides. But they were congregated at the pool and in two of the rooms.

He could watch them laughing and chatting or swimming in the limpid water. Dark-eyed houris with slender waists and full hips and breasts. It was like a silent film of the ancients. But infinitely more real.

And deadly.

There was no one in the hall. Satisfied, Vickers left the bedroom, walked swiftly down the carpeted hall until he reached the door at the end.

He could see the harem guard leaning against the wall, a burly bearded figure with a hawk nose and a hawk's fierce eyes. An automatic was belted outside his blue and white striped burnoose.

Without hesitation or haste, Vickers ran the atomic knife through the lock, forced open the door.

The guard spun around, gaping in surprise. He caught sight of Vickers, reached for the automatic.

"By Allah!" he began.

Vickers cut off his head.

The head hit the floor with a thump, rolled a little, came to rest on its stump, staring at Vickers out of open, startled eyes.

It upset Vickers, made him a little sick at his stomach. He swallowed, glanced about quickly.

Three men, he discovered, were approaching around a bend in the corridor. He had perhaps a minute or a minute and a half before they came into sight.

He stuffed the guard's body into a closet, threw the head in after it. He covered the bloodstains with a carpet, welded shut the harem door with the tip of the atomic knife. Then he ran up the corridor away from the approaching men.

This whole wing must be the living quarters of the embassy staff. It was preternaturally quiet like the upper floors of a hotel. He could see a few people in their rooms, one or two in the corridors, which he avoided automatically.

The cell block where Fralick was being held was located in the main building. The traffic was considerably heavier there, and Vickers' eyes were never still. They darted here, there, watching one person's progress, judging how many seconds it would take another to reach a certain intersection.

His ears were alerted for the first outbreak of the alarm bell. He didn't have time to notice the antique hangings, the exquisite decorations, though he did catch an impression of sumptuousness.

The rear of Fralick's cell butted against the back of an office. In advance Vickers had determined to cut through the wall between office and cell and so avoid killing the guard. If he were lucky, he would avoid detection for precious minutes also.

He had almost reached his objective when a heavy-set bearded official entered the office and sat down behind the desk.

Vickers could see him mistily as he set to work with some papers. He swore furiously under his breath, but didn't pause. Throwing open the door, he jumped into the chamber.

In the feeble gravity of the moon, Vickers' leap carried him across the room to the top of the Arab's desk.

The official gasped, tried to rise and call out. His face was turned up to Vickers—a long frightened face with skin like yellow leather.

Vickers kicked him on his pointed chin.

The Arab went over backwards with a crash. Vickers didn't glance at him, but shut the door, attacked the far wall with the atomic knife.

He lifted out a four foot segment. Fralick was on the other side staring at the opening like a startled cat.

"What—" he began, catching sight of Vickers.

Vickers said low voiced: "Shut up. Come on!" Holding out his hand, he half-helped, half-yanked the physicist from the cell.

"Who are you?" Fralick's clothes were wrinkled and he needed a shave. He was gaunt, pale, excited. "I know! You're Vickers!"

Vickers' eyes narrowed in surprise, but he only said: "Hurry!"

The passage outside was still deserted, thank the gods. He pulled the physicist after him, sprinted toward the living quarters in the wing.

There were voices ahead. Two men going in the same direction they were, Vickers saw. He slowed down in order not to trample their heels.

He was nervous now. He could feel the time running through his fingers.

Still no alarm! They burst out of the corridor into an enormous hall, crossed it swiftly, ducked down another passage. Damn place was a rat run. Fralick was panting. "Hold out, old man!" Vickers thought. "Hold out!" Still no alarm. They were going to make it. They had to—

All the bells in the world seemed to cut loose at once!

VICKERS jumped as if he'd been shot. Fralick clutched his chest. For a moment Vickers was afraid the scientist would pass out.

The bell rang frenziedly.

Hundreds of bells! Everywhere. Bells and shouts and trampling feet. Through the misty walls Vickers could see running soldiers, frightened officials, women and children. A vast terrifying pandemonium like a disturbed ant nest—like a glass ant colony kept for observation.

Then the doors began to whoosh shut. Automatic doors closing off the passages. Blocking escape! One rammed shut just behind them.

A party of guards caught sight of them. Steel jacketed bullets ricocheted and whined down the corridor.

Vickers threw a gas grenade. The guards were blotted out by a fountain of pale green mist. It wasn't deadly, but it would knock out the Arabs, close off the

passage temporarily.

Fralick was sobbing for breath. Suddenly Vickers grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Here! This way! Through the harem."

With the atomic knife he freed the door which he'd sealed a few minutes before. A few minutes! He glanced at his watch. Eighteen minutes exactly; it seemed like hours! He was over his time. He put his shoulder to the door, threw it back with a crash.

There was a cluster of frightened women in the corridor. When they saw Vickers and Fralick, they began to scream and fled screaming like chickens from a hawk.

Vickers paid no attention to them, but rushed to the bedroom where he had cut through the wall. Kicking out the segment he almost hurled Fralick through the opening.

Tani was waiting in the air taxi with the door open. A white, strained Tani with a face like a mask.

"Dad," she cried.

Fralick tumbled into the taxi. Vickers started to shut the door, but Tani held it open.

"Get in," she begged in a tight voice. "Quick!"

"No," he said. "The ISP would spot me in that air taxi and stop us. You can get through all right by yourselves."

Consternation mirrored itself on Tani's waxy features. She shook her head. "We're not going without you."

"Yes, you are!" he said; "no time to explain. I'll meet you at the blue door."

She was almost in tears. "Clyde, we're not going to leave you behind!"

Through the gaping hole in the wall behind them, Vickers could hear the sounds of pursuit closing in, but he didn't look around.

"You little fool!" he said brutally, "do you want to get me killed? Do what I say. This is my kind of work!"

Suddenly she leaned from the air taxi, kissed him hard on the mouth. Her eyes were wet.

"I'll be waiting," she said, catching her breath; "you crazy Quixotic idiot. I'll wait forever."

Then she slammed the door. The taxi roared, bull throated, and leaped forward,

bursting a hole in the false wall.

Vickers stared after the diminishing air cab, rubbing his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I'll be damned," he said softly; "I'll be damned." Then he turned around.

He was just in time to see the first of the Arab guards lunge through the hole in the wall of the embassy.

Vickers hurled his other gas grenade. The egg-shaped glass bomb smashed against the floor. Plumes of the pale green paralysis gas shot upward. But Vickers didn't wait to see its effect.

He left through the hole torn by the air taxi, reached the pavement, began to walk rapidly toward the corner, the snuff-brown burnoose flapping about his ankles.

He had seconds only before the pursuit would develop again. The bomb was a delaying action, no more.

UP ahead he could see a road block, and pedestrians milling around in the street. A net hung from the level above, halting the air traffic. The ISP was on the job.

"Out of the frying pan into the fire," he thought grimly. He glanced back toward the house, although the Arabs couldn't possibly come through the room until they'd procured a fan and blown the fumes clear.

An ISP patrol boat was gliding slowly up the street behind him. It was manned by two men and was traveling just above the surface traffic. A shallow, heavily armed and armored craft, it reminded Vickers of a giant ray as it floated lazily through the air.

He jumped to the edge of the pavement, waved the patrol boat down frantically.

It gave a low moan on its siren, swung in to the curb. The door opened.

The two men inside wore uniforms—smart blue breeches and blouses trimmed in gold with the ISP insignia—three interlocking worlds representing Earth, Venus and Mars—emblazoned on their shoulders. They were both young and clean cut. Only their eyes looked old and hard.

"What's the trouble?" the officer nearest Vickers asked shortly.

"I saw him!" Vickers sounded excited.

"I saw him!"

"Saw who?"

"The mutant!"

The ISP agents exchanged glances. At that instant Vickers hit the one on the outside in the temple. He hit him with the handle of the atomic knife. The man slumped forward, bumped his head against the slanting windshield. Vickers was already sliding in beside him.

He shoved the unconscious agent to the floor boards, pressed the stud on the knife handle. The blade of sparkling flame glittered into life.

"Take us up!" he said to the startled man at the controls; "and don't touch the radio!" Almost as an afterthought he added softly: "I'm Vickers. I'd just as soon die now, all at once, as be sent back to the Jupiter Mines to die by degrees."

The ISP man blanched. He lifted the patrol boat into the air, sent it scooting down the street. He kept dropping his eyes to the shimmering blade of flame.

"Don't get that thing too close," he pleaded hoarsely.

Vickers said: "B624½ Water Street, level 3. And I won't get the blade too close if we get through without trouble."

"But suppose I'm ordered in?"

"That's your tough luck."

The ISP man was sweating. But he didn't dare remove his hands from the controls. Beadlets of perspiration rolled down his cheeks and chin unheeded.

As they approached the roadblock, he touched the siren. At its eerie wail, a man hauled up the net, and the patrol boat slid beneath it.

Vickers let his breath escape. He was sweating too, he realized. His forehead felt clammy as a dead fish.

They reached the blue door without being bothered, though. Vickers stared at the sign:

INTERNATIONAL SPY RING,
INCORPORATED
Secrets Bought and Sold

It was the one place in Luna City where the ISP couldn't reach him. But would the ring give him sanctuary? He didn't know.

"They will," he thought; "they will, by

Heaven, or take the consequences!"

He said: "Here's where I leave you, officer. Thanks for the lift," and slid out of the patrol boat.

The ISP man had guts. Vickers had taken his automatic, but the agent reached for the emergency guns in the locker. Before he could shoot, though, Vickers had disappeared through the blue door.

He sprang from the patrol boat, started after him. He was three feet from the blue door when it vanished.

INSIDE the reception room, Vickers balanced on the balls of his feet, the ISP agent's automatic in his hand. His mouth was a thin line. Except for Vickers, the room was empty.

He was about to raise his nictitating lids when the door of the inner office opened and Tani flew to meet him. Involuntarily, he jerked up the automatic, but the girl didn't even notice it.

"Clyde!" she said, and threw her arms about him, clinging desperately as if she were afraid to turn loose. "I've been so afraid." There was a funny little catch in her voice.

Vickers stared down at her, refusing to believe his senses. Then she tilted her head back, and he could see the relief and happiness shining in her eyes—and something besides.

Vickers kissed her. All his doubts were suddenly swept away and somehow the old hurts along with them.

"Mr. Vickers," the receptionist said.

He hadn't noticed her enter the room. But he looked up and she was smiling too. There was no repugnance in her eyes.

He said: "Yes."

"They're waiting to see you, Mr. Vickers. If you'll just step this way."

He glanced questioningly at Tani, who nodded. Together they entered Thorpe's office.

Fralick was there, looking old and tired and a little messy. He was sitting behind the big desk with Thorpe at his elbow. There were two others in the office, a tall, parchment-faced Chinese, obviously of Manchu descent and an Arab with the features of a Biblical patriarch. They were smiling, all except Thorpe, who

couldn't very well with his jaw in a cast.

Doctor Fralick put the palms of his hands on the desk and leaned forward. He said, "I'm very glad you made it, Vickers. I haven't had a chance to express my appreciation."

Vickers wrinkled his forehead. There was an air of hopeful friendliness tinged with awe in their attitude that puzzled him. He didn't say anything.

Fralick looked vaguely embarrassed. "I—we've another favor to ask you, Vickers. We want you to come in with us."

"What?" said Vickers in a stunned voice.

"We want you in International Spy Ring, Inc. Need you. We—well, we wouldn't expect you to accept a minor position of course. Not a man of your calibre. If you'll join us, Vickers, you can take charge of the field work. None of us is so well fitted for active duty as you with your enviable vision, your resourcefulness."

Vickers didn't know what to say. That anybody envied him, wanted him around, considered him an asset, knocked a hole in his armor. He had no defenses against friendliness.

"But you," he said; "Doctor Fralick, you're head of the U.S. Bureau of Research—"

"I'm also the head of International Spy Ring, Inc."

At Vickers' expression, Fralick allowed a smile to flit across his visage.

"Don't judge us too harshly. Science is international, not the property of one individual or one nation, even. It must belong to everybody.

"We don't want power. We're after peace and tolerance and the dissemination of knowledge. We're united, Vickers. The scientists, the technicians, the engineers of the seven great nations. Not all of us, but enough of us."

He gave Vickers a shrewd penetrating look. "Our way may not seem ethical, but it works. When there are no secrets between countries, war is almost impossible. And there are no secrets anymore; we see to that.

"If the Arab Federation discovers a new gas, we sell the formula to each of the other countries. If the Black Republic or China starts a program of military training or lays the keel of a new battleship, in a week everyone of the other countries has the complete details.

"We don't sell the information for profit, Vickers, but to finance the organization."

VICKERS was stunned. The realization that the Ring was not a hard grasping organization of thieves, spies and traitors; but an international group comprising the finest minds and bent on preserving the peace, left him completely bewildered.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "Of course I'll join you."

"Good." Fralick jumped up, came around the desk with his hand out. "We'll get you a pardon. It wouldn't do for my son-in-law to be a fugitive from the ISP." He winked at the others who had crowded about Vickers, pumping his hand.

It occurred to Vickers that these men were pleased to have him—not in spite of his mutation, but because of it! They'd even been a little afraid he might turn them down.

It was a new experience for him, a good experience. He had the sudden conviction that at last he'd found his place in the world. It made him feel warm.

The Chinese was saying: "You're a violent man, Vickers, a dangerous man. We were afraid that you might not see eye to eye with us in our aims."

"No," Vickers protested, really shocked. "No, I'm not a violent man. I do what I must and do it as quickly and effectively as I can. But I'm not violent."

Thorpe's eyes twinkled. Seizing a pencil he wrote something, held it up for them all to see, at the same time tapping the cast on his jaw.

Vickers couldn't repress his grin. Tani squeezed his hand.

Thorpe had written: "The gods help us all, if he ever does get violent!"



The place was an inferno. "She's going!" Norman yelled.

SUICIDE COMMAND

by **STANLEY MULLEN**

The rookie astrogrator's fingers itched for the controls of a ship. But he never asked for the privilege of riding an atomic bomb into the heart of hell!

MESSAGES CRACKLED through the black gulf of space—the Interplanetary Distress Call. Blaze Norman, navigation officer of the ISP cruiser *Scorpio*, came out of his space-fog and stared at the helioflash board which was suddenly ablaze with light. Harald, the operator, grunted and spun dials as the frantic messages clicked off.

"What's up, Harald?" Norman asked.

Harald waved him away impatiently and crouched over his helio receiver board. He was a grizzled old spacehound and hated working with rookie officers. Good kids all right—the examinations saw to that—but

you never knew how they were going to react, how much you could depend on them in an emergency. And this was an emergency—

Out in the bleak void between the orbits of Jupiter and Saturn, the spaceliner *Tellus* was breaking up. Half of her starboard batteries had fused and exploded, that was just the beginning. Before needle-valves could be shut off, streams of free neutrons ran up the fuel lines into the secondary bank of preparation tanks. Radiation counters buzzed angrily as primary degeneration spread through the masses of fuel in the leaden containers. The lead

walls buckled and gave way. Tons of molten magna deluged all of the after compartments of the titanic luxury liner. Inferno.

Tellus jerked like a nervous racehorse as the rest of her stern rocket tubes froze and exploded. The after third of the ship was blasted out of existence. Heaven knew what would happen when the rest of that degenerating metal reached the stage of instantaneous disintegration.

"It's the spaceliner Tellus," Harald snapped. "She's in trouble outside Jupiter. Position 9—84—7. Two degrees N. Ecliptic. Range 11/4.7. Get on your charts and find out what's out there. I'll buzz the old man."

Captain Fries' face appeared on the television screen. "Never mind the details," he snapped. "We got part of it up here. Too faint for the audios, of course. What ships are in that sector?"

Lieutenant Blaze Norman glanced up from the chart panel. "Nothing of any kind closer than Ganymede, sir. And only some slow ore-freighters there. If there's anything else, my records don't show it."

Captain Fries' face looked suddenly old and tired. He sighed. "I guess we'll have to go, but I don't know what good a ship this size will do if they have to be taken off. Anything more from the Tellus?"

"Not much, sir," Harald told him curtly. "They seemed to be breaking up fast. Half the crew are already dead. No telling about the passengers. Operator thinks they may last five or six hours, but no more. If degeneration spreads through the whole ship, it won't be as long as that."

"I know. I know. What about lifeboats?"

"Nine of their ten are gone. The other won't hold a third of the survivors."

"Tell them to hold on. We're coming. Hang onto your hats, and don't forget the acceleration cushions."

Harald set his helioflash transmitter on the automatic relays and sent the message repeating endlessly across the darkness. He shot a calculating glance at Norman and wondered if he'd hold up in the mess that lay ahead. You never knew about these new men.

Scorpio had been inbound for Callisto.

Alarms shrilled all through her slim torpedo shape. Acceleration warning. The two men in her communications room buckled on their shock cushions and braced themselves. The obsolescent cruiser groaned and began to labor as the standby batteries of rockets let go at full power. A drumming vibration beat through the ship. Indicator needles jerked past painted numerals. Barely perceptible at first, the steadily rising curve of acceleration built into nauseating paralysis.

Norman's face was pale and drawn. Harald grinned apishly, enjoying his companion's discomfiture. "Think she'll hold together at twenty Martian gravities?" he asked.

Norman realized he was being razed, and by a subordinate, but he could only smile feebly. "This is one way to find out," he gasped. "How long d'you think it'll take us to get there?"

Harald shrugged. "Six hours. Maybe seven. Why'd you join up if you can't stand acceleration?"

"I didn't. They transferred me into it. They say you get used to it."

"Some never do. The old man's a killer that way."

Norman set his teeth grimly. "I'll get used to it."

Exactly five hours and twenty minutes later (Earth Time) a fleck of mirrored sunlight in the star-sprinkled darkness ahead gave evidence that the Tellus was still holding out. The Scorpio hammered up in a long, staggering glide, forward rockets bathing her nose with lurid glare at full negative acceleration. Weak and haggard from their incredible run, the ISP crew crawled to stations as the emergency alarms screamed.

The Tellus was in a bad way. The shattered hull was still spinning dangerously like an unbalanced top. Fiery drops of molten, disintegrating armor plate whirled into space in deadly showers. Crewmen of the spaceliner waged a losing battle to damp-out the holocaust raging in her stern compartments, and knots of men in clumsy space-suits clustered about the collapsing hull, deluging the plates with Rayburn's Isotope. But the cold of space was too great, and most of the liquified stabilizer

dispersed in frost-flakes before it could act on the degenerating metal. Radiation from the masses of spitting magma astern went through the after half of the crippled liner like storms of deadly invisible bullets, striking down the men at their work through weak joints in their armor.

The Tellus was doomed.

It was ticklish work maneuvering close to the immense hulk, but Captain Fries ran the Scorpio alongside and made fast with magnetic grappels. ISP men in grotesquely robot-like space-armor ran out the jointed airlock tube and attached it to the main hatch of the liner. Valves opened automatically as the pressure equalized.

Captain Fries and Lieutenant Norman were the first to board the doomed liner. They were met by a blood-spattered second officer.

"I'm Lore," he said. "The ranking officers are all dead. I'm in command."

"How many people have you?" Fries asked savagely.

Lore smiled grimly. "I was afraid you'd ask that. Too many for you, I'm afraid."

"We'll do all we can," Fries promised. "We've jettisoned everything we could spare. There's ammunition spread from here to .54, not to mention bedding, supplies, tools, spare parts and all but the bare minimum of fuel. At a squeeze, we can get about a hundred and forty people on the Scorpio besides our complement of twenty-eight men. I don't know what we'll do about the others."

Lore shook his head. "I can't tell you exactly how many are left. There's no use taking the ones who are too seriously burned. We have one lifeboat left. By jamming, we can get about eighty in it. You can tow it to Callisto."

"Any other officers left?"

"Merrill, our third . . . if he's still alive. The last I saw, he was outside with the others, trying to damp-out the stuff. No use, of course. I guess you'd better take over. I've got mine."

Lore staggered and fell back against a bulkhead. Norman caught him and lowered him gently to the floor. Lore fought his blistered lids open, murmured, "Radiation burns," with lips that were strangely thickened. He jerked spasmodically, then

a glaze of agony masked his eyes as he shuddered and lay still.

The main salon of the spaceliner was a charnel house. Dead and dying lay in rows, many of them in horribly grotesque attitudes reflecting the agony of their passing. A harried doctor was doing what could be done to relieve the unrelievable suffering. A group of passengers were huddled into a corner. Most of them were pale and dull-eyed, a few sobbed hysterically, some prayed. Norman began sorting them out.

"Women and children first. Married men next. We'll go over the injured while the rest of you get aboard the Scorpio. Any that have a chance to recover, we'll take. No crowding."

Fries shouted orders, then stood back out of the way while a stream of beaten and hopeless humanity filed through the airlock toward the Scorpio. One woman clung to her husband, screaming, until Norman took her gently by the arm and led her away. She moved like a sleep-walker and, though her lips twitched as if in speech, no sound came.

"Check everyone for radiation," Fries ordered gruffly. "We can't be too careful."

Merrill, the third officer, came in and started shedding his space-armor. He was lean, hard-looking, with a twisted, humorous face. "Anything I can do?" he asked curtly.

Fries stared at him blankly. "Get your burns taken care of, then get some of these people into the life-boat if you're able."

Merrill shrugged and laughed. "Why bother to patch me up? There won't be room enough for all of us. I'll take care of it now; the life-boat's ready."

Harald felt like a recording angel as he stood in the airlock counting off the people coming through. It was hideous.

"One-forty," he told Fries.

Most of the injured had gone into the life-boat, but some of the men-passengers still remained in the saloon. Norman stared about him, estimating. One of the men was the husband of the woman who had refused to leave without him.

"Full up?" the man asked. Norman nodded. The passenger tried to smile, but his lips trembled.

Captain Fries stood by the airlock. Nor-

man strode up to him, lips set in a thin line.

"I'd like permission to stay here and let someone have my place," he burst out. "There are other single men in your crew."

Captain Fries had aged years in that half hour. Soberly, he nodded. "Permission granted. But I haven't the right to ask the others. In fact, I haven't the right to grant your request but, unofficially, I'm proud of you."

"I'll ask them."

Harald ambled out of the airlock and made a weary gesture. "You won't have to. I've already done it. The men are ready soon as you give orders for the rest of the passengers to come aboard."

Captain Fries gave the necessary commands, then turned to his own crew as they filed out of the airlock. His eyes glittered fiercely, as if a core of ice splintered the light within them. He tried to speak, but there was nothing more to do or say.

Merrill came back from supervising the loading of the life-boat. "Oh, we've got company," he said roughly. "We'll be a cozy little group. I hope some of you can play cards. Any hope of other ships getting here?"

Fries shook his head. "Not in time. Some ore-freighters have left Ganymede, but it'll be two days before they can get here. I'm sorry, but I've done all I can . . ."

"I know. I'm glad you got all the passengers aboard. It's not so bad for the rest of us. That old black devil out there gets all of us spacerats sooner or later. Thanks for coming . . ."

Fries turned to his men and tried to speak. Harald shut him off roughly. "Sure, skipper, it's been nice knowing you. But no heroics. Hell ought to be cool after what this ship will be like when that stuff reaches critical mass. Now get the hell out of here before we blow . . ."

From the control room of the Tellus, Norman, Harald and Merrill watched the pinkish dot which was the Scorpio's rocket exhaust dwindle into the jet immensity of sky. Off there—somewhere—was the point where Jupiter's orbit would intersect the long curve of the cruiser's course. Jupiter. Ganymede. Safety.

"Well, I've always wanted to tell the

skipper to go to—" Harald said lamely. "Now I feel somehow let down. How long do we have?"

"That depends. I'm no radiation engineer, but Failles says there are three possible routes of breakdown. If the ship holds together until then, we can expect to be blown to whatever you like in from six to ten hours. I'd say the ship will fall apart first, probably in less than three hours. Are you in a hurry?"

Harald was watching Norman, wondering how long it would be before the kid cracked. The lieutenant was trembling, skin seemed to be drawn tight over his cheekbones, and a hot light burned in his eyes.

Norman sat down nervously by the chart panel. In his nervous state, the touch of something familiar gave him a feeling of solidity. The voices of the others irritated him.

"What do we do now?" he asked. "Just sit around and wait for it to happen?"

Merrill laughed bitterly. He and Harald exchanged amused glances. "Any better ideas, Mister?" Merrill asked ironically.

"Maybe I have," Norman snapped. "We might better do anything than just sit here."

Merrill got up and moved over to stare out the spaceport. His burns were paining him horribly; even the slight effort of limping across the control room was almost more than he could bear.

"Well, do something then. It's your baby. I'm resigning as of now . . . in your favor."

"Do you mean that?"

Merrill nodded. Lines of repressed suffering marked his lean, wolfish face. "I don't think I'll be here long. Someone will have to take over. There's nobody else to rank you. Just a couple of radiation engineers and those armchair astronauts in our so-called crew. It's all yours, kid. But don't let it worry you too much."

Norman straightened and shook off his jumpiness. He looked around the control room and a ripple of sardonic amusement crossed his face. "My first command," he said. "A coffin ship full of corpses and doomed men. I'm sorry you're so—"

"It won't matter long," Merrill interrupted.

"Maybe it will. I think I have an idea. Can you maneuver this crate at all?"

"I guess we could. The forward propulsion jets are still all right. But the slightest acceleration might wreck things aft."

"What have we got to lose?" Harald asked. "What's on your mind, kid?"

If Norman was aware of the breach of discipline, he did not show it. His body leaned tensely over the chart panel as he pressed button after button, studying sheet after sheet. At last he raised his head. On his face was the expression of a small boy who has made an important discovery.

"Hidalgo," he said. "I was trying to remember what I knew about its orbit."

"Hidalgo? You mean that rogue asteroid which wanders as far out as Saturn's orbit?"

"Nobody ever goes there," Merrill put in. "There's some mystery about it—"

"We're going there . . . if the ship holds together long enough. Just a minute and I'll figure your course. Sure you're in shape to handle the controls?"

Merrill limped to the instrument panel and began closing switches. "I hope you know what you're doing," he said roughly. Currents of vibration pulsed through the ship. With maddening slowness, the liner came out of her spinning drift and began to pick up speed. Norman ran through a list of figures and the third officer set the automatic controls.

A grotesque figure in radiation armor stood in the doorway.

"We're moving," it said through its amplifiers.

"This is Failles—radiation engineer—in charge of the men aft. We're trying to make Hidalgo."

"You'll never make it," Failles prophesied. "I came to report that the bulkheads are giving way."

Norman barked orders. "Merrill, keep an eye on the controls. Harald, you keep one on Merrill. And try to make contact with Scorpio. Tell them we're trying to make Hidalgo, to pass the word on to those freighters. Failles, I'll go with you and see what's up."

As Norman followed the nightmarish

figure of Failles down the spiralling companion ladder, his mind worked feverishly to remember what he knew about Hidalgo. It was one of the minor planets, probably of the Trojan group originally, but its eccentric orbit and extreme inclination to the ecliptic stamped it as a rogue. At aphelion its distance from the sun was $9\frac{1}{2}$ units (nearly the orbit of Saturn) and its inclination $43\frac{1}{2}$ degrees. Three and a half years after perihelion it approached Jupiter's orbit closely. Astronomical speculation was that its perturbations of orbit were caused by this near approach to Jupiter.

Norman came out of his reverie. Failles had stopped at a locker and gestured toward it. Radiation armor. Norman got the bulky garment from the locker and struggled into it.

They went down and down and down. A dizzy catwalk took them through the engine room where power was generated for the giant rocket ship, then down again, past passenger compartments into the waist hold, where the fantastic struggle against atomic degeneration was going on.

The microphone in Failles' helmet distorted his speech. "I don't think we can hold out much longer," he said. "The walls are so hot they're buckling and beginning to split."

"I don't understand all this," Norman said. "What's going on exactly?"

"Free radiation got into the fuel tanks," Failles explained. "You know that, of course. It started a chain reaction in the liquified fuel. The stuff degenerates slowly until it reaches a critical stage, then goes all at once. About a billionth of a second. Worse than that, it spreads through the rest of the metal parts. They begin to break down slowly, releasing energy in the form of heat or light, sometimes both. The light radiation kills, the heat corrupts the metal until it gives way, melting or crumbling depending upon its nature. Unless it hits a certain isotope first. In which case, blooey."

The scene was an inferno. Dark figures stumbled back and forth in the murk, armored men clumsily struggling with hoses and hand-pumping apparatus. The atomic-powered pumps had long since

failed due to wild radiation. The threatened bulkhead was a mighty backdrop of pinkish coppery metal. An eerie radiance played over the surface of the laminated plates. The men worked like maniacs deluging the walls and floor with liquified Rayburn's Isotope (a stabilizer) to damp out the degeneration, but already the plates were so hot that the stabilizer vaporized and was instantly dispersed through the room in sparkling clouds.

Even filtered by the Conklin glass of his helmet faceplate, the murky glare of the hold made Norman's eyes ache.

"How long do we have?" he asked.

The speaker in Failles' helmet rattled with a grunt. "That depends. The degeneration period varies according to the route it takes. There are three, possibly four routes in this case. I don't know which it will take. At the outside, five hours."

"We'll need at least three hours to reach Hidalgo," mused Norman.

"What good will it do to reach Hidalgo? We're taking an atomic bomb with us. If we land with this ship, it'll go with enough power to wipe Hidalgo out of existence and blow a hole in space to boot."

Norman frowned. "I thought of that. We won't try to land the ship. We'll have to abandon her and work our way down with the jet cartridges in our space suits."

Failles grimaced inside his helmet. "You can get awfully hungry in a space-suit, even if we can take enough spare tanks of air to hold out."

Norman nodded.

A figure detached itself from the huddled groups working the pumps and shuffled to the foot of the ladder. He pointed silently. Following his gesture, the pair looked at a corner of the bulkhead wall. A tear appeared, widened and ran down diagonally across the metal. Plates peeled off and fell like wax-paper crumbling in heat. Great blisters were rising on the surface of the wall. One broke and gouts of molten metal streamed down and splattered in a puddle. An uneasy suggestion of flow, of readjustment, of movement ran over the metal facing. More plates were grunting and buckling. They fell softly inward. More followed, dissolving rapidly as they came pelting down.

"Watch yourself!" Norman screamed. "She's going."

Liquid metal bubbled and spit. Runnels of magma pursued the retreating crewmen. A fiery surface lapped at the foot of the ladder.

Failles made an aimless gesture. "Get your men out of here," rasped Norman.

The huddle of dark figures broke and ran for the ladder. Air was blowing out of the hold in a shrill, whining scream. Norman was the last out. He slammed and clamped the door just as a rush of molten metal crashed against it.

"Keep fighting it," Norman ordered. "Compartment by compartment."

Walking was easier now that acceleration had begun to build into an approximation of normal gravity. Norman made his way back into the control room.

Crankily, the wreck of the Tellus swung through space. The forward drive jets were still functioning. Merrill shook his head as the framework and bulkheads creaked and groaned under the strain of acceleration.

"It'll be a miracle if she holds together an hour," he ground out.

"If it doesn't, we can stop worrying," Norman told him bluntly. "Have you an Interplanetary Astronaut for this sector?"

Merrill nodded toward the shelf where books were clamped.

Norman unsnapped Volume IV, and opened it to HIDALGO. Most of the information, especially astronomical data, he already knew; but a line at the bottom of the page caught his eye.

It is recommended that spaceships avoid this asteroid. Exploration has been impossible, for a number of reasons, and official charting expeditions have failed to return. No data available.

He read the notation aloud to the others.

"What do you suppose it means?" he asked.

"Could be that rough terrain and unstable rotation make a take-off impossible," Harald suggested.

Merrill's eyes narrowed. "I don't think so. Some of the other asteroids have been difficult enough that way. No, there's something different about Hidalgo. Maybe it's

some kind of deadly radiations. I've thought a lot about it."

"You knew this all the time? Why didn't you say something about it?"

Merrill's habitual shrug was expressive. "It couldn't have mattered. Where else is there to go? I didn't think of it before you mentioned Hidalgo because I had no idea where it would be. In a way, I'm glad we're going there. You see . . . my father commanded that charting expedition which was never heard from again. Now maybe I'll find out at last what really happened."

NORMAN lost all sense of time. The flight through space assumed the elastic dimension of nightmare.

He went aft again and checked with the radiation-fighters. There, the fight was going on in the engine room. It was at best a delaying action. Men dropped where they stood and were carried out. The lucky ones died of frightful burns where radioactive metal had spit through joints in their armor.

The speaker rattled inside his helmet as he addressed Failles. "If it spreads to the outside armor plates of the hull, we're done," he said.

Failles cackled. "It's already spread. They're glowing and beginning to buckle."

"Keep fighting it down."

"We can't. We're running short of Rayburn's Isotope."

"When it's gone, get your men into the dome-hold. There's an escape hatch there."

Harald looked up as Norman returned to the control room.

"I finally got Scorpio. These tubes are nearly burned out. I guess there's enough free radiation loose in this ship to fry eggs. The old man said they'd relay our message to the freighters. They'll check by Hidalgo to see if we made it."

Merrill was staring out the spaceport at the glittering darkness ahead.

"It's been nearly two hours," he said. "D'you think we'll be able to see it soon?"

"I doubt it. We're coming up on darkside. Perhaps a faint radiance. Put everything on automatic, you two, and get into space suits. The others will meet us in the dome."

"Hull armor's going. We'll have to

abandon ship. I hope we can raise Hidalgo. If not——"

Norman bent over the chart panel and checked his figures. He glanced at the indicator board. "I still get 11.18/4. And we're making incredible time. Maybe we'll make it——"

In the vast dome-hold at the nose of the hurtling liner were a group of burned and battered men. They grumbled hopelessly. Most of them were in bad shape.

Failles was at the spaceport. "No sign of Hidalgo," he reported.

"There won't be much to see," Norman warned him. "Try the magnascope."

Radiations were so powerful now that it was impossible to take the armor off the badly burned men long enough to tend their injuries. Thirty-one men still lived, but seven were seriously burned, at least one dying.

Time dragged hideously. In spite of the insulating layers, released energy from the degenerating metallic armor struck through the hold and built up heat alarmingly. Thermal indicators registered the temperature of a blast furnace. Automatic thermal adjusters inside the cumbersome armor could not react rapidly enough to keep up with the rising temperature.

Harald nudged Norman. He tried to look at his wrist-chron, but it had stopped from the heat.

"Better start negative acceleration," he said.

The lieutenant nodded. He and Harald fought their way back to the control room. Passageways were glowing, and metal rods felt pulpy even through their heavy gloves. The switches swung over to negative acceleration. The trip back to the dome was even more difficult.

The negative acceleration was taking its toll. Two of the injured men died.

Around the edges of each fused quartz spaceport was something like a rime of frost. It spread as they watched, spider-web feelers reaching out across the circular panes. The faint starlight clouded and infinitely tiny points of radiance formed patterns within the crystalline surface.

"I'm going to open the airlock. Check your space suits."

One of the spaceports burst suddenly.

Quartz-crystals showered into space. Air shrieked through the shattered port, freezing as it contacted the intense cold. Clouds of frost flecks formed and were instantly dispersed.

With the release of pressure, the airlock door came open easily. "There's a grey smudge down there," Merrill screamed, balancing precariously in the outer doorway. "Could that be Hidalgo?"

Norman was giving orders in a crisp, level tone. "Get the liquid-air tanks over-side. Failles, you take care of the casualties. Three of you should be enough. Harald, your job is to get the portable helioflash there safely. Merrill and the rest of you try to maneuver the air tanks down to Hidalgo. Use your jet cartridges sparingly, men, but—get there."

A shriek of terror came from Failles at the magnascope.

"The forward rocket tubes are fusing! They'll blow any time!"

"Abandon ship!"

In orderly fashion, the men lined up and went through the airlock. Norman went last.

Norman closed his eyes and shoved hard as he made the leap into space. The night seemed to open and swallow him. Impetus of his shove carried him away from the hurtling liner.

He opened his eyes as the giddiness of floating free in space swept over him. The nauseating agony of weightlessness wrenched at him. He retched painfully, but clenched his lips till the spasms died down. Fumbling, his fingers found the button which controlled the jet cartridges. With them, a spaceman has a limited maneuverability and control, even away from his ship. As he pressed the button, he prayed. They worked.

There was no sound, but a jarring vibration went through his body. It seemed an incredible distance to the air-tanks. Eight others were clustered around the bulky tanks when Norman reached them. Merrill was close behind him. Not far away was Harald, clutching the portable helioflash box to him.

Far below, slowly turning over as it came toward them, was the titanic wedge of barren rock which was Hidalgo. Then

began a weary, heartbreaking task of jockeying the air-tanks into position and towing them to intercept the jagged wanderer of space.

Twenty men lived to reach it.

Failles and his helpers brought in all the injured, but only one was alive.

There was practically no gravity, so little that the centrifugal force of the spinning asteroid would have hurled the men back into space but for the magnetic soles of their armored shoes. Magnetic grapnels were attached to hold down the tanks. To make sure, lashings were run, to up-thrust fingers of rock and everything loose made secure.

Clinging to a rope, Norman stood up and tried out the magnetic soles. They held, but it was necessary to shamble along without raising the feet any more than could be avoided. He looked about and his heart sank. No more eery and desolate place could be imagined. A ragged and uneven surface of bare rock and brittle obsidian-glass ended suddenly in a serrated horizon of ugly needle-point peaks. The horizon was disturbingly close. Overhead, the eternal stars moved in slow parade—but discernible motion—against the black vaults of space.

Just above the horizon was the sun, shrunken till its disk was barely perceptible as a disk. It shone feebly, but with harsh brilliance, casting solid shadows which moved like live things over the rough rocks.

Suddenly, Norman became conscious of something else. Another object moved swiftly out in space. A torpedo shape, faintly luminous.

Failles was pointing toward it. "The Tellus," he said grimly. "It's circling Hidalgo like a moon, coming down in a long spiral orbit. As its momentum decreases, it will come closer and crash. Looks as if we still have our wildcat by the tail."

Norman groaned. "When that stuff blows, it'll take this whole end of space with it."

Harald was crouching over his helioflash, working awkwardly at the dials with his heavy gloves.

"I'm trying to get Scorpio," he ex-

plained. "Tell them to warn off the freighters. No luck so far. These tubes are about shot. I can get a faint signal, but can't make out anything."

"Keep trying. We've got to warn off the freighters."

"I know. In spite of that faintness, the signal sounds as if it might be from fairly close."

Merrill came up. "I've been exploring," he said. "There's the wreck of a spaceship just over that ridge. Some sort of shaft close by it. I'm going over and look around."

He wandered off across the desolate stretch of rock. Norman watched him go, then turned to Harald. "You'd better follow and watch him. He's ready to crack. I'll take over the helio."

Failles shuffled up as Harald disappeared around a harsh shoulder of volcanic rock.

"Got through yet?" he snapped.

Norman shook his head. "I get a signal but they don't answer. It's too faint to make out."

"Let me try."

Norman gave way and Failles crouched down adjusting dials. He replaced a tube. The helio squawked savagely. The engineer fumbled over the knobs. The message clacked into his earphones.

"It's the freighter Dekorus," he shouted. "They're two days ahead of the others. Were on their way to Callisto when they got our distress helio from the Tellus. Couldn't reply. Their sender was out of order. They'll be here any time."

"For God's sake, stop that ship!" Norman screamed. "They'll get here just as that stuff blows. . . ."

"I'm trying. They don't acknowledge my signals."

Like a racing moon, the wreck of the Tellus shot below the horizon. It seemed much closer than before.

"Calling Dekorus. Why don't you answer, Dekorus? Calling Dekorus. . . ."

Two hours later, a solitary figure stumbled into the group around the helio. The intrument was silent. Men sat or crouched in stolid hopelessness. They had just pronounced sentence of death on themselves.

"We got through," Norman told Harald.

"They aren't coming. Where's Merrill?"

Harald staggered and would have fallen, but Norman gripped him roughly.

"Merrill's dead," he said. A glaze of horror went over his face. "We found the ship. It was the one all right—his father's—the charting expedition. There was nothing in it—no bodies, nothing. We looked around. There was a hole there, a sort of shaft. It led down at a steep angle. A rough sort of ladder had been hacked into the rock, niches and pegs. We had a time getting down, but Merrill thought we might find something. He said he wanted to know before he died.

"We went down and down. And at the bottom was a door. It was a wooden door, of some wood I don't know, black and shiny with pinpoints of color here and there. And it was *carved*.

"While we stood there, it began to swing open. Slowly open. I was scared, frankly and honestly scared, but not Merrill. He strode up to it, shoved it open the rest of the way and went inside. I tried to follow, but my feet refused to move. I was rooted to the spot. I couldn't go in and I couldn't leave. It seemed hours. Then he came out. He came out running.

"I caught up with him and tried to hold him, but he struck at me and tried to kill me. When I looked in his eyes, I saw why. He was mad. Stark, raving mad. He broke away and ran to the foot of the stairs. But he didn't try to climb. He just kept banging his helmet face-plate on one of those rock pegs till it smashed. Have you ever seen a man smash his face plate in space? The horror of eyes squeezed out, flesh bursting to bloody pulp from the pressure of liquid blood inside, then in a second frozen steel-hard from the cold. It makes you all sick inside and you dream about it the rest of your life. But that wasn't the worst.

"I got curious about what he'd seen back there. I went back to have a look at it myself. The door was closed, but I pushed on it and it opened. . . ."

"One look was enough for me. I wish I could tell you what it was, but there aren't any words. Have you ever seen anything that made you want to die? I did. I took my look, then I got back here as fast

as I could."

Norman stared into Harald's eyes, wondering if Merrill were the only one who had gone mad. Harald read the look and laughed bitterly.

"I wish I could go crazy," he said. "It might help. But I just want to die. After that, I couldn't go on living."

Norman glanced up as the Tellus, wreathed in eery radiance, shot above the horizon.

"It looks as if we'll all be dead soon enough to suit even you," he observed.

Harald came suddenly to life again. "The rest of you don't have to die," he shouted. "Contact that ship and tell them to wait for you. There's a self-propelled life boat intact in that wreck. It's not even dusty. Get going, man! . . ."

As the lifeboat roared out from Hidalgo Norman was busy at the controls, maneuvering carefully to avoid the hurtling bulk of the derelict Tellus. He did not even realize what had happened till he heard the blast of air released from the airlock and someone raise a cry of "man over-

board!"

It was Harald. From the ports, Norman could see him working the jets of his space-suit to intercept the racing bulk of the Tellus. Automatically his hands reached for the control bars, but Norman caught himself. He and Failles exchanged glances.

"It's a hard decision, lieutenant," Failles said. "But there isn't time. He said something about making sure, but I didn't know then what he meant."

"We know now," Norman gritted.

He shoved the switch-bars and gave the lifeboat full power. It roared into the darkness ahead.

Miles later, he and Failles stood by the stern ports and watched a fan of terrible lights spread across a quarter of the sky. Soundless, brilliant as the day-star, its glare struck through the ports like a solid force.

"Goodbye, Hidalgo," Norman mused aloud. "Goodbye, Harald. I wonder what he saw there that made him feel like that?"

"No one will ever know," Failles said.





Then terror struck!

Unwelcome Tenant

by **ROGER DEE**

The first Earthman to hit deep space discovered what was so terribly wrong with the world he had left behind. Why couldn't he turn back?

IT HAPPENED JUST BEFORE HE reached the zero point, the no-man's land in space where the attenuated gravity fields of two planets meet and cancel out.

Maynard was dividing his attention equally between the transparent bubble that housed the Mainz pendulum and the two ports, forward and aft, that broke the steel panelling of the control cubicle. He listened critically to the measured clicking of the

Geiger counters and the quiet sibilance of the air purifiers, and in spite of his weightlessness and his total loss of equilibrium he was quite calm.

But deep inside him, under his trained calmness, Maynard felt a steadily growing triumph, a swelling exultation that was a thing quite apart from scientific pride. The feeling that he was a pioneer, an advance guard for a conquering people, elated him and multiplied the eagerness in him when

he turned his eyes to the forward port where Mars hung, full and ruddy, a spotted enigmatic disc of promise.

Earth hung in the after port behind and below him, a soft emerald crescent in its first thin quarter. A warm green sickle that was home, a hustling verdant young world impatient to push its way across black empty space and satisfy its lusty curiosity about its cosmic neighbors.

He was at the end of his second day out, and he had covered roughly half of the distance he must travel. The atomic jets had cut off long ago, at escape velocity, and would not come on again until they were needed to slow his approach. The midpoint lay just ahead; in a matter of minutes now he would leave Earth's waning field and fall free into the grasp of the red planet.

He was watching the cobalt ball of the Mainz pendulum quiver on its thin quartz thread with the first fluttering release of Earth's gravity when the fear came.

Terror struck him suddenly, galvanically, blanking out all reason and all sensation. The control cubicle whirled giddily before his eyes, and the abysmal panic that gripped his mind was a monstrous thing boiling up out of unguessed subconscious depths. It froze him, breathing, like a man paralyzed under an overwhelming electric shock.

It was not fear of death. It was not even his own fear.

It was the blind panic of Something inside him whose existence he had never remotely suspected, Something that shrieked soundlessly in senseless maniac terror and fought to tear Itself free of him.

He was torn by the struggle for an interminable instant, and then it was over. He felt it writhe loose from the encumbrance of his mind, like a madman writhing out of a strait-jacket, and then It was falling back toward Earth, away from him. He could sense It plainly, once It was outside him—a malevolent, intangible Thing that fell back swiftly toward the emerald crescent of Earth.

He sat for a moment dazed while breath came back into his lungs and the steel-panelled cubicle grew steady again before

his starting eyes. And, when It had gone in the distance and he could no longer feel the frenzy of Its terror, he felt the swift unbounded freedom that a spirited horse feels when it has, unexpectedly, lost its rider.

He was still Robert Maynard, but with a difference.

He was free.

THE feeling of utter freedom staggered him. For the first time in his life he possessed himself entirely, without doubt or reservation, a complete and serene entity. He could feel his consciousness still expanding, reaching into every hidden corner of his mind and taking control of functions he had not dreamed of before.

An analogy occurred to him in perfect exactness of detail: he was like a man waking from a vague world of sleep to find that what he had thought a single small room was in reality a spacious house. There were other rooms than the cramped chamber he had lived in all his life—rooms that had been tenanted a moment before by Something else, but which lay open and ready for his own use now that their Tenant was gone. A moment before his ego had occupied a meager one-twelfth of his brain; with Its departure the whole of his mind was his.

As suddenly as that he knew what had happened to him and why, and his incredibly-multiplied intelligence arranged the details of it precisely for his consideration.

He had been host to a parasitic intelligence, without knowing it, all his life. He had moved at Its dictates, following his own will only when It slept or tired or was distracted, never succeeding fully in any endeavor of his own because It was in control and must be obeyed. He knew when he had explored the vacated premises of his newly freed mind that It was only one of many, that all earthmen had Tenants like It, intangible parasitic entities subsisting upon and controlling the human life force.

He thought: *No wonder we have wars on Earth! We have no common ground for agreement because we are under Their compulsion. They know our inherent abili-*

ties and keep us at each others' throats lest we learn of and destroy them. Everything that man has accomplished has been done in spite of Them.

He looked with new eyes at the instrument panel under the forward port and was astonished at the crudity of the engines it controlled. He was primarily an astrophysicist, and his understanding of atomic propulsion had been negligible; now its every function was clear to him at a glance. Experimentally he drew a graph of the arc he described through space, and knew to a minute how long it would be before the braking jets slowed his speed for landing.

He raised his eyes to the forward port where the ruddy disc of Mars hung framed against the black velvet backdrop of space like a red jewel burning dully among a random display of lesser brilliants, beckoning him on with the future's illimitable promise.

HE SAT quite still for a time on the padded control couch, thinking intently, testing the new powers of his mind as he might have flexed a newly discovered limb.

His first conclusion was inescapable: his Tenant had left him because It could not exist outside Earth's gravity. It had been forced to quit him or perish, and Its departure had made him the first really free man.

They were not invincible. They were not even particularly intelligent, in spite of Their gift of parasitic control, or his own Tenant would have known Its danger. The fact that They were gravity-bound entities gave him the first vulnerable chink in Their armor, an Achilles heel that offered eventual salvation for men. There would be other ways to be rid of Them, and it was his responsibility as the first free man to see that others of his kind were freed as he had been.

He pictured the harmonious integration of an Earth peopled by free men and saw clearly the heights men might reach unhampered by their Tenants. His own possibilities, when he had summed them up, awed him in their extent. There were no limits to what he could do, no bounds to

the knowledge he could accumulate and use.

This is what being a man is really like. I can liberate a world. Like Moses, I can set my people free.

The thought set his face shining, suffused him with a glow of anticipated triumph. It was all so simple, now that he was free . . .

In a few hours he would land on Mars, and in a matter of minutes he could set up a beam transmitter to report back to the scientific foundation that had sent him out. He could not tell his fellows the truth because they were still captive, and their Tenants must not be warned; but he could invent a plausible story of easily acquired wealth on Mars that would bring other and larger commercial expeditions swarming after him. With the help of other freed men he could found a new civilization on the red planet, develop means to carry the fight back to Earth and exterminate the Tenants utterly. It would take time, but in the end men would be free.

The Mainz centrifuge spun slowly, and with the swing of its cobalt ball Maynard felt the shift from terrestrial to Martian gravity. He felt the first tiny tug of weight and the slow returning of equilibrium as his body oriented itself to the growing pull of the new attraction.

With the return of equilibrium he suddenly realized that he was upside down and turned to the control board for correction. The cubicle righted itself, rotating gently until the ruddy expanding disc of Mars hung below and ahead of the forward port. The Mainz pendulum ceased to oscillate, the little cobalt ball hanging stiffly at the end of its taut quartz filament.

He was well into the Martian attraction field by now. He made a quick calculation (which once would have taken painstaking hours) and knew that he would release the first braking blast from his forward jets in precisely ten hours. The little ship would nose into a slowly tightening spiral, avoiding the odd-planed orbits of the two tiny moons and, within minutes of establishing his declaration track, he would be ready to land.

He watched eagerly as the red disc of Mars swelled to a mottled globe, blurred

already at the edges by atmospheric refraction. Down there on the dead ground of that ancient world he would set up his equipment and flash back his triumphant message to Earth, a fabulous exultant lie that would bring other men like him swarming to the red planet.

Free men! Supermen, really, in a new free world. Nothing impossible, then!

LATER, he shut off the braking blast of the forward jets and felt the soft rubber-foam padding of the couch rise gently under him as deceleration ceased. He was well into his landing spiral, eating up the paltry thousands of miles that lay between him and the shining future.

He lay back on the couch, smiling, his mind busy with the message he would beam back to Earth, planning already the campaign he would carry out. Years must pass before men were freed completely of their Tenants, perhaps decades, but time did not matter. It was essentially a simple task because he and those to come after him would be free of Their compulsion—serene unhampered supermen to whom time was nothing.

In the end they could not fail . . .

Something impinged sharply upon his new perception, a chill groping tentacle of questioning intelligence. The smile froze on his face; he sat up stiffly, numbed with the unforeseen horror of what was happening to him. The groping ceased, and the hungry Intelligence from outside poured into his mind like smoke into an empty room, smothering his feeble attempt at resistance.

He rose and went to the forward port, staring dully down at the uprushing sandy wastes and trying to recall what glorious thing it was that he had been thinking. Or had it been only a dream? Somewhere in the farthest recess of his blunted consciousness a thought formed and floated like a bubble up into his awareness; but like a bubble it burst, and its meaning was lost on him.

There were Tenants on Earth, it said. Why not on Mars, too?

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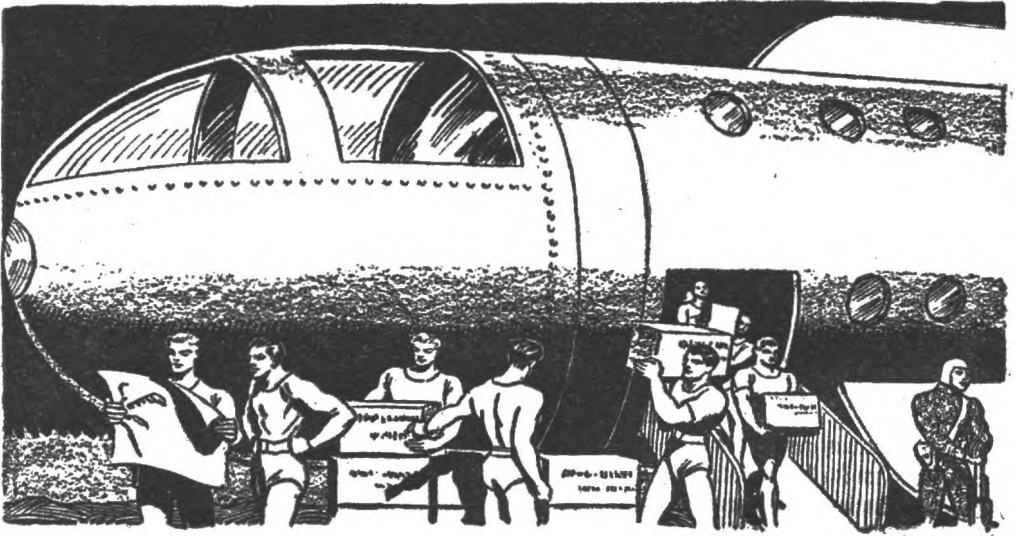
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THE VIZIGRAPH

A LAS, it has happened again! Nearly four years ago a man named Whitehorn, then acting as editor of PLANET STORIES, contracted virus *scientifictionitis*. With soft giggles, he fell to tinkering with his typewriter, telling all who queried him that he was building a "psychometric transsubstantiator." Whatever the foul machine was, it suddenly erupted in a blue flash, and nothing has been seen of the poor man since.

Once again this tragedy has struck within our sacred precincts. One Paul Payne, inheriting the chair and mantle of PS editorship, was lately seen making strange motions at his desk. He would vouchsafe no explanation, but the motions resembled those peculiar to manipulating wrench, screwdriver and micrometer.

Then the spectacle took a grisly turn. Payne's right arm was no longer visible! It just—*wasn't!* Then the left leg above the knee disappeared. Payne seemed at ease, but we hardly dared to look. Gradually, bit by bit, member by member, he—*went*—somewhere.

Finally, we had to face the fact that there was no longer anybody—as we understand the term "body"—at Payne's desk.

Then it was that I knew true horror! For eyes turned to me, hands fell upon me and I was dragged, screaming, through the halls and flung down in THAT chair, before THAT desk—and chains were brought, shackling me forever to this post of unguessable evil . . .

Is there no escape? Can no one tell me what to do? No?

Then I'll tell you what to do. Ed Cox, pick a pic. Marvin Williams, pick two. Wally Weber, you ran a close, panting third.

. . . Your new Editor,

—JEROME BIXBY

DEFY THE FOUL FIEND

568 Audubon Avenue
New York 33, N. Y.

DEAR MR. PAYNE:

It's been more than four years since I last sent a letter to an sf magazine, and in all likelihood it will be four more before I send another. What roused me was a letter in the Viz. The contents of the Spring issue left me cold.

I dislike fanaticism of all kinds, and especially religious fanaticism. It seems to be one of the most narrow-minded kinds. And I would like ever so much to explode a fanatic right in our own little Vizigraph.

Firstly, our wee Mr. Lucifer (could be editor with tongue-in-cheek?) starts off on the assumption that science cannot explain creation. This I will obligingly grant him. However, if one has any sort of mentality at all, one must agree that neither science nor metaphysics *nor* religion can explain creation. All three studies can only conjecture as to *how* creation took place. All three must start with the assumption that *something* existed before creation took place. In religion, we must start with the assumption that God existed before creation. But who created God? In scientific theory, matter or energy or some equivalent (analogous, I suppose, to God) must have been present before creation. But who created the matter and/or energy? God? But who created God? In metaphysics (to choose, as a simple example, the metaphysics of mechanical dialectics) we may start off with atoms and a void. But who created the atoms? God? And the rather boring question by now, who created God? I think by now it is rather clear that, using any field of study, we must answer the basic question of the creation of a supreme being, if any exists, and in

turn the question of which superior being created the superior being, ad infinitum. And it is also clear that this reasoning leads us round and round in circles. Since we must therefore accept the proposition that *something* existed before creation, or give up in disgust, who is to say that any of the propositions listed above is wrong or right? That *something* could have been God, it could have been energy, and for all you know it could have been me. (No, I am not paranoid. It is just the aftermath of too many philosophy courses.) Immediately we have left no assumption for wee Mr. Lucifer to rest his red hot fanny on.

His attack on the theory of evolution is just a little bit childish and naive. No scientist in his right mind would claim to know all there is to know about such a subject. Science has just barely dented the dermis of this field. How old is the theory of genetics? And better still, if Mr. Lucifer has even the faintest idea of the science of biology, he will note that old Charley Darwin's quaint ideas that things were not just "created" but evolved has been corroborated a thousand times by modern research. I refer our ignorant Mr. Lucifer to any standard text on general biology for proof, if he likes. If he writes me I shall even send him a list of these books for his perusal, and I am not bluffing. (He could also use a stiff course in genetics and paleontology.)

As for the opinions of Einstein et al, they are opinions, and no more. The men quoted were known most well for their scientific endeavors, for their search after knowledge, for their contributions to that detestable thing, science. Their opinions on theology were personal, and not objective. And even for their great minds, their opinions must be weighed as such. Great minds have held differing opinions on a great variety of things far simpler than theology, or metaphysics. You may take if you like Fechner as opposed to Freud, though that is a rather poor analogy. Both differed radically, even in their approach to the same problem; the study of the behavior of man. And both were in some ways right and in some ways wrong. In the same way, Einstein may be right in his opinion, and he may be wrong, or he may be both. We shall most likely never find out. It is still a matter of opinion. We cannot state yes or no to the question of the existence of God.

As the (ho ho) clincher to his argument, Mr. Lucifer says, "Science, on the other hand, creates such useful contrivances as atomic bombs, and guided missiles, so indispensable in thinning our overpopulated little world." Firstly, in a laughing sort of way, our world wouldn't be overcrowded were it not for science. There's an odds-on chance that our wee Mr. Lucifer would have died before he was five or six, were it not for the miraculous advance of medical science in the last century or so. Even if he survived his extreme youth, he probably would have departed for his comfortable Hades before he was 35. His detestable science has given him an added thirty years in which to mouth his poor, stillborn thoughts.

To list the boons of science to mankind would be an endless job. Surely Mr. Lucifer can think of some on his own.

I think it is plain to Mr. Lucifer by now that, though science has in some instances been put to very sorry use, its advantages far outweigh its

disadvantages. Yes, siree! Science is here to stay! Why, they're even trying to put atomic energy to good use! Imagine! This horrible instrument may some day cure cancer!

Ah, yes. I nearly overlooked another contention of his, and I quote: "All religion does is set up a moral standard for society to follow, so that there are less of such necessary and enjoyable practices as lying, cheating, stealing and murdering." Ah, yes, the age-old, dog-eared argument used by fanatics on street corners. First, Mr. Lucifer, study your history. How many wars were religious in nature? Second, Mr. Lucifer, study your sociology. How well has religion worked in putting a halt to these "enjoyable practices?" In our modern society, hasn't religion become a little outmoded, a little useless in trying to stop them? If one is to eventually bring these evils under control, it will only stem from hard, exhausting scientific work in getting to the root of what causes them, and not by asking the murderer, "Why did you kill? Don't you know you'll wind up in hell?" In other words, we must find the cause (and stamp it out) of the reason why people break the Ten Commandments. But it is not religion that will do, or possibly can do, the job. It is up to science and science alone!

I am not an atheist. I have my own definite god, and that god is Science. And I defy anyone to tell me that his God is better than mine!

Very sincerely yours,

AL WEINSTEIN

MOON ROCKET

Tare Division
U.S.S. Pasadena (CL-65)
c/o P.S.N.S.
Bremerton, Wash.

DEAR MR. PAYNE:

In The Vizigraph of the Spring Issue of PLANET STORIES is a letter signed by one "Lucifer Sathanas" and because of that letter I'm writing you. There is one sentence in that letter that caused me to see red. In the next to last paragraph: "Science, on the other hand, creates such useful contrivances as atomic bombs, and guided missiles, so indispensable in thinning our overpopulated world." That is a slur to scientists and science as a whole, and, what is worse, is strictly a half-truth.

Oh, it's true enough as far as it goes, but it doesn't give an inkling of the rest of the matter. Yes, science is responsible for the development of the technology that enables the military to make atomic bombs and guided missiles, but the very same technical knowledge could also be used to build those long and eagerly awaited spaceships, and the first Moon Rocket could have been an established fact by 1950.

I have on good authority, from one of the Los Alamos scientists (during 1946), that a spaceship capable of going to the Moon, or even Mars or Venus, could be constructed. It would be driven by atomic power, and would carry a small crew. With the necessary shielding from the drive and the thick hull to turn meteors it would weigh up in the thousands of tons, and the cost would be well into the tens of millions of dollars range. When completed it would stand roughly two-thirds of the height of the Empire State Bldg. But it is possible NOW!

As for the stories, here is my opinion. THE

ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS tried hard but didn't make the grade. The impact it should have had was missing, but all in all, it was fair. **FLAME-JEWEL OF THE ANCIENTS** was excellent. I especially liked the concept back of the "Flame-Jewel". **FOREVER AND THE EARTH** was refreshingly different and good too. **THE FIRST MAN ON THE MOON** I thought was poor. It would have been much better if it could have been longer, as it was jerky and disconnected from too much briefing. **MADMEN OF MARS** was good, and the idea that the Martians failed to learn to cease depending on the machine made a fine ending. Too many stories would have the aliens change immediately, but this ending was more satisfying. **WHO GOES THERE** was poor, as the same idea has been used too often recently. **ULTIMATUM** was good, with the sudden change in character of the Martian being nicely balanced by the unexpected change in the "Earthman".

And now to the remainder of *The Vizigraph*. I hope you have enough definitions of science fiction to satisfy you now. R. A. BRADLEY's letter was excellent and well deserves an illustration. Second choice should go to BRUCE HAPKE and ED COX gets third. I agree closely with the expressed opinions of GARLAND M. ROBERTS, except that I don't need a subscription, as I catch *PLANET STORIES* as soon as it appears on the newsstands.

I've been reading your magazine since 1943, and excluding a few issues I missed while overseas, have always found it between good and excellent. I've been an avid science fiction fan since 1939, but I still feel it necessary to hide the lurid covers when there are friends of mine around. The covers always draw too many questioning stares to make me happy. Oh well, I guess I'll have to grin (feebly) and bear it. How about leaving a few of the story advertisements off the cover? The advertising on the edge of the magazine has always been a good idea, especially for finding a particular story in my files, but the cover blurb is not so useful. Trimmed edges maybe, too? (*Nope.—Ed.*)

Thanks for listening,
WILLIAM KIESOV, JR.

TERRIBLE, HE SAYS!

186-29 Avon Road
Jamaica 3, L. I.

DEAR MR. PAYNE:

Your Spring issue was terrible. Out of the whole magazine, there were only seven stories that were any good at all. The others were so bad that I didn't bother reading them.

THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS: magnificent, an epic. But why shaggy ears? The only part of the story that mentioned them was the song.

THE FLAME JEWEL OF THE ANCIENTS: shades of Edmond Hamilton (now editor keep your hair on, I know it's not Hamilton writing under a nom de plume), it bears a strong resemblance, at least superficially, to the old universe wrecker himself. The story is not exactly a classic, but it is better than average science fiction.

FOREVER AND THE EARTH: hooray! Bradbury rides again! There isn't much one can

add to that, except that Bradbury would give his third eye for an opportunity like Thomas Wolfe's.

THE FIRST MAN ON THE MOON: all right. Nice ending.

MADMEN OF MARS: very okay, and very unusual.

WHO GOES THERE?: this type plot admits of very little variation and when you've read one, you've read 'em all. The last story of that type I read, was in the July issue of another magazine. Save for minor variations such as whether the aliens are air or water breathers, and how they met their end, the similarity is astounding. This story was not too good.

ULTIMATUM: fair, but rather inconclusive.

When do we see Brackett again? It's been six months since her fair name has graced the table of contents. Something must be done about this sad state of affairs. (*Coming up.—Ed.*)

Concerning the letters, the best one was that masterly satire on Lewis Sherlock's missive, signed Lucifer Sathanas. Second came Ed Cox the Lubec Maine-iac, and third, Van Jenrette.

It seems to me that La Vizi is not the place for a discussion as to the validity of the assumption of the existence of a Supreme Being, and after I contribute my two cents worth I'll endeavor to keep quiet. In part one, question two, article three of the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas, "The Prince of Philosophers", outlines his five ways of proving the existence of God, the most manifest of which is the argument from motion. However as I said before, this is not the place for such a discussion, and Lucifer said all that I could hope to say in so short a space (in reverse English).

The cover this issue is an immense improvement over last month's. In fact it's actually good. The inside illos are always, on the whole, very good.

See you in February,

KERAN O'BRIEN

WE LOVE OUR COVERS!

308 West Clinton Street
Elmira, N. Y.

DEAR MR. PAYNE:

I have just finished reading the Spring issue of PS and I have a few hundred words of comment to submit. Primarily this letter is an attempt to bring you into the feud I have been having with the other editors of S-F mags. This feud concerns the covers which are found on all but one of the magazines I could not do without.

This issue's cover is a horrible example of the situation which drives me nuts when I look at it after reading the story concerned. I could find no story other than "Flame Jewel" which had a scene remotely resembling the cover so I am assuming that was the cover story. The scene concerned is described on Page 96 and very carefully also. In the lead sentence of the third paragraph, Mr. Graber tells us that the girl is helped into a spacesuit probably because he knows that humanoids seem to require air in order to stay alive. Also on that page, he tells us of the almost unbearable gravitational force exerted by the Tane Jewel. So what happens? We take a look at the cover and what do we see? A strained looking individual wearing a playsuit decorated with lots

of fruit salad, floating through space along with a very good looking babe in what could very easily be an evening gown instead of the space-suit so definitely required. To top everything, though, she seems to be carrying some sort of jewel very lightly in her hand. Now I ask you, how silly can a cover get?

The only story that rates a comment from me is that extremely readable lead story about the creation of a legend. This, although not especially well-written, was a joy to read because the plot was a real whing-ding. The takeoff on the Engineer Corps was very well done and I really enjoyed it. The other stories were uniformly good PS material but not exceptional.

The only letter that I will recommend for a picture is that erudite missive of Bradley's, a very well done attempt to define science-fiction and the rules by which it is written. I wish your cover artists would read the third from last paragraph in this letter and take its precepts to heart.

This is the first or maybe the second letter I have written to you and I hope it is the last that will be concerned with covers.

Sincerely,

LARRY ROTHSTEIN

ULTIMUM BEM

Box 1296
Levelland, Texas

PLANET'S LALLYGAGGING PERIWINKLE:

Pardon me while I say huzzah. (HUZZAH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)

The reason for this admittedly exclamatory opening is the advent of a story which for once belies the FICTION HOUSE tradition of Thud, Blunder, BEMS and sirens. Naturally, I am speaking of that sterling yarn THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS. Permit me to remark, dear Literary Pulpster, that in printing this story you have come up with that dubious blessing, a classic. From this on out your doors will be besieged with anthropologists, newspaper photographers, and the would-be-literary efforts of every budding James Norman Hall in the business . . . or Talbot Mundy . . . or fictionalized Richard Halliburton. This, oh this, is fiction! THE ROCKETEERS may not be science—but it is fiction, and oh, what wonderful fiction!

Sir, in my opinion, the purpose of PLANET, or any magazine, is or should be to provide entertainment. If I wish to be edified, I will proceed to discourse mentally with Einstein (providing I have the basic intelligence, which admittedly I don't) or I will send for a correspondence course. If I wish to learn about Science, I will consult verified textbooks dealing with the matter in hand. No one I know ever learned any straight science from the perusal of science-fiction, except such odd facts as may be incidental to the story.

This being so, since science-fiction carries little science, it must certainly not fail to provide the fiction, or it loses all the reason for its label!

Well—PLANET STORIES has never failed the fiction—but to date the fiction published has been of a very ephemeral and momentary nature, concerning itself mostly with the love affairs of rocket pilots or of strong-and-silent spacemen marooned on alien worlds, and invariably alone with a luscious femme whose clinging gown re-

vealed every one of her gorgeous curves. (Only believe me, if such a gown was ever designed, it would take some doing! We women have a lot of curves! Just ask my husband!) (Just sent a letter, airmail!—Ed.)

However, dear old PS has finally come up with THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS, in the best tradition of adventure. The struggle of man against the elements and against his own innate cowardly nature never fails to make a splendid story. What I have been saying, in this long and roundabout fashion, is that you, dear Payne, have at one blow wiped out your past record of a literary Payne-in-the-neck, with the publication of this one darn-near-perfect story. Frankly, you've only published one other which can anywhere touch it—Bradbury's ASLEEP IN ARMAGEDDON—so chalk up one thousand very loud Huzzahs! (Huzzah to the 1000th power, if you just *must* be scientific—) (and not too mathematic . . . But seriously, M., we second your commotion.—Ed.).

One very minor gripe—wha'hoppen to your BEMS? You haven't had a good BEM on the cover in ages! Come on—if you can't find a niieee horrible BEM, I'll send you my picture and you can print it with your own, and we'll have the real BEM to end all BEMS. Can't have a stfmag without BEMS!

Vizi, old thing, is getting tame! What with all these little devils writing letters allatime, how are we supposed to compete? Give a pic to dat ole devil Lucifer and let him go to Hades. He won't be able tokeep it, anyway; your artists don't draw on asbestos. Nyaaaaaaaaa!

To be serious for a minute (if we can keep our faces straight that long), I think it is definitely unfair to make us sign our names and full addresses, and then permit letters from people who write under such Pseudonyms as this "Lucifer Sathanas", the recent B.E.M., and etcetera. It makes me Szimmer! (Shades of the old Mad Martian!) Well ole pulpster, give one pic to Ray Nelson, one to Wallace Weber, and the third to Robert Bradley (that means I'll get it, of course!) (No—that is *not* voting for myself!) Whaddya mean! I didn't even have a letter printed—I didn't even write in—hey, hey, quit shovin—quit it—quit it I say—oh, aw right, aw right, give the third picture to the devil and to Hades with your old originals! So there!

Your little old Mad Martian,

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

SAME OLD INTERSTELLAR WAR

44 Caruth Avenue
East Paterson, N. J.

DEAR E.D.DIE:

Last night I bought the Spring issue of PLANET. One thing I *must* say is that there is a tremendous improvement in the cover. I stayed up almost until dawn, practically reading the print off the pages. I will now rate the story content in the order of my choice:

1. THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS **** I can't see what the title has to do with the story, unless it is derived from the unprintable little ditty in the novel. Nevertheless, it was the *best* story in the book.

2. **THE FIRST MAN ON THE MOON** ***
Very appropriate title. Also *very good* story. Nice plot, but not a very nice character.

3. **FLAME-JEWEL OF THE ANCIENTS** **
Same old stuff! An interstellar war. Fairly good though.

4. **FOREVER AND THE EARTH** * Nice plot, well written. Coppel really knows his stuff. (*Yup, shore does . . . only one minor flaw in his personality. He thinks he wrote THE FIRST MAN ON THE MOON!—Ed.*)

5. **WHO GOES THERE?** This was a very outstanding story, even if I didn't rate it very highly. Good idea, those squids.

6. **MAD MEN OF MARS** Pooo! Fennel is definitely not up to par!

7. **ULTIMATUM** Why the !**(:;?&c) did you print this story?? in the first place? You could have filled its space with a few more letters like mine. (No modesty!)

On the whole, this issue was far better than the last. How about some cut edges!

Horribly yours,

WILLIAM R. HARVEY

FOREVER BRADBURY

DEAR PAUL:

Just one word that probably won't see print. Spring issue, author Bradbury, story **FOREVER AND THE EARTH**.

It may not be science-fiction, but so help me, it's the best damn thing I've ever seen in *any* sf magazine. (*If you're in the mood for a tingle, just spell out its initials.—Ed.*)

If Bradbury hit this height in every story, he'd be the highest-paid and highest-rated author in any field—and rightly so.

Sincerely,

ALAN JONES

ONE MAN REVOLUTION

RFD No. 1

Chagrin Falls, Ohio

DEAR SIR:

I have been reading science-fiction for ten years and I have never before written a letter to a magazine. However, in your Spring issue of **PS** was the most fascinating story I have ever read, and if it is not nominated for the **stf Hall of Fame** I shall create and cause a one-man revolution. The main thing however is the lines of the song:

"The Rocketeers have shaggy ears,
They're dirty....."

It intrigued me, so I completed the chorus and added three verses, and hope you print this letter and the song as I would also like to hear from other **stf** fans.

- I. Mars was met and conquered,
Venus also fell—
But still it's ever onward,
Into the gates of Hell.

CHORUS

The Rocketeers have shaggy ears,
They're dirty sons of Space

They drink and smoke and fight and swear,
They're the strongest of our race!

- II. Mercury, Neptune and Saturn's rings
Resound to the rocket's song—
The Milky Way and all Beyond
To the Rocketeers belong.

- III. Men of Terra, all of them,
Leaders of their race—
A legend blasting onward,
The Rocketeers of Space!

Thank you,

CONRAD W. T. JOHNSON

(*Thank you, Conrad . . . and don't wait another ten years before writing again!—Ed.*)

STF . . . FRESH OR FOUL?

226 West 60th Street
Chicago 21, Illinois

DEAR EDITOR:

Well, boy, now you've probably started something, this talking about "what is science-fiction" business. Everybody who doesn't read science-fiction knows what it is and can give you a synopsis of the same old plot, i.e.: Mad scientist wants to try out some disgusting experiment, (*That's a NEIV plot!—Ed.*) on a lovely thing, preferably young and innocent. Hero arrives just in time. In other words science-fiction to anybody looking at the covers (this month's isn't so bad, really) is old time horror fiction, which, remember, was finally ruled off the stands. The reader who has looked into science-fiction knows what it really is, but may find it hard to explain. Science-fiction can be separated into comfortable compartments—and a lot of stuff called **sf** can be ruthlessly eliminated as such. The situation seems to indicate a man who loves science-fiction loves it very much, and I would gamble that many a wife has kept a lonely vigil while the thoughtless dope read the latest issue into the small hours.

I don't think fantasy is science-fiction or can be classed with it. Fantasy deals with the possible, science-fiction deals with the obviously impossible. I don't want to bother explaining here what probably sounds nuts, but I will say everybody believes inside that there are such things as spirits, life after death, etc. On the other hand everybody knows too, that mankind will never set foot on another world, travel in space or in time. Everybody knows what will happen to mankind, the same thing that's happened to it uncountable millions of times. It will blow itself to nothing and start crawling again. The ageless things will survive—we hope.

So science-fiction pictures a world, a condition we'd like to attain. Utopia—the world we could attain and can't. Here we deal with the futuristic, far futuristic type of science-fiction: Space-travel science-fiction.

Science-fiction includes the story detailing the interesting aspects of experimentation, a story sometimes laid in the present. Odd machines producing strange results. Here anything can happen, depending upon the novelty of the idea and the imagination of the writer. Present or future, however, this story also must deal with the completely impossible. (*You mean like . . . whatchacallit? . . . atomic power?—Ed.*)

Science-fiction is a story first and above all things, just a story, like any other story. Hero, heroine and heavy seem to fit in unobtrusively, don't they?

This is going too far astray. What is science-fiction? Science-fiction is a story about what the reader would like to do if he could. Now, what would we all—that is everybody, demmit—like to do if we could? We would all like to be he-men adventurers, with brilliantly educated minds, with the entire universe to adventure in. (I mean *everybody*, not only science-fiction readers!) Now, the difference between the science-fiction reader and the desultory reader is—science-fiction readers take their adventure undiluted with symbolism.

By the time you read this I'll have an entirely different idea on why we read science-fiction. Vote: Campbell, Beck, Mead.

Sincerely,
RODNEY PALMER

YIPE! EDITORS NITWITS?

1135 South 19th Street
Salem, Oregon.

DEAR SIR:

Just as an aside to the blazing adventures that the heroes of science-fiction undergo, I have always wondered why they were never awarded decorations by their grateful home planets and nations. This has been of particular interest to me as it is rather a hobby of mine. Aside from those I earned in combat, I have a very nice little set of the medals and ribbons that are awarded by the nations of this globe. With that as an introduction, you can perhaps understand why I was quite delighted to see the front cover of your Spring, 1950 issue; to note the chap there with a chest full of ribbons. First time on any cover I believe.


I would like to state that I enjoy PLANET STORIES very much. I enjoy the aura of "the good ol' days" of science-fiction, that seems to exist in its pages. There are many of us fans who really enjoy the stories that are slanted towards life on other worlds and not devoted to high-science or deep mysteries.

However, I am happy to state that you evidently do not lean upon the "Vizigraph" for reader appeal. Such complete collections of asinine, childish letters I have never come across before. When I read such signatures as BEM, Sathanas, etc., I get that same feeling in my stomach I did when as a child I ate too much candy. Straighten that up and consign such stupid trash to the proper waste basket and you will have a truly fine magazine.

I have often wondered what the mental age of such people can be. I would like to meet a couple of those who write such letters and see if they talk the way they write. Impossible!

In the Spring, 1950 issue, eleven pages were given over to this trash and advertising. The advertising I have no quarrel with, I realize the freight that it pays, however with the present rates that you can pay for authors, use it. (As an experiment?—Ed.) Better yet devote the space to the efforts of rebuffed science fiction starters. Give a few eternal rejects a chance to see their wares in print and it STILL won't cost you any-

BE A WINNER AT NOTHING YOU DO WITH PROGRESSIVE POWER



WILLIAM


WOMEN, THAT'S ALL! DON'T PICK ON ME ABOUT IT!

YOU WOULD NEVER BELIEVE I'M ABLE TO DO A GOOD JOB. YOU GARNERED YOUR PROMOTION!

Amazing get-acquainted offer
Years for only
10c
instead of \$1
for all 5 courses

Let's Go, Pal! I'll prove I can make YOU An "ALL-AROUND" HE-MAN

Part—or No Cost! says George F. Jowett, World's Greatest Body Builder



Enjoy My "Progressive Power" Strength Secrets! Give Me 15 Easy Minutes A Day—Without Strain!

I'll teach you the "Progressive Power Method" through which I rebuilt myself from a physical wreck the doctors condemned to die at 15, to the holder of more strength records than any other living athlete or teacher! "Progressive Power," has proven its ability to build the strongest, handsomest man in the world. And I stand ready to show you on a money-back basis that no matter how scabby or puny you are I can do the same for you right in your own home. Let me prove I can add inches to your arms, broaden your shoulders, give you a masculinized chest, powerful legs and a Rock-like back—in fact, power back your whole body so quickly it will amaze you! Yes, I'll jam you with power and confidence to master any situation—to win popularly—and to get ahead on the job! Through my proven secrets I bring to life new power in you inside and out, until YOU are fully satisfied you are the man you want to be.

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Send only 10c for my 5 easy-to-follow, picture-packed courses, now in 1 complete volume "How to Become a Muscular He-Man." Try it for one night—experience the thrilling strength that surges through your muscles.

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Jowett Institute of Physical Culture Dept. FM-06
230 Fifth Avenue, New York 1, N. Y.

Dear George—Please send by return mail, prepaid, FREE Jowett's Photo Book of Strong Men along with all 5 Muscle Building Courses: 1. Molding a Mighty Chest, 2. Molding a Mighty Arm, 3. Molding a Mighty Grip, 4. Molding a Mighty Back, 5. Molding a Mighty Leg—Now all in One Volume "How to Become a Muscular He-Man." Enclosed and 10c. NO C.O.D.'s.

NAME _____ AGE _____
(Please Print Plainly, Include Zone Number)

ADDRESS _____

thing. Make a few constructive editor's remarks on how to improve, tell why you didn't pay for it. Do the same thing for budding young artists. Do ANYTHING with the space but refrain from that hogwash that you do fill it with.

Yours truly,

FREDRIC FILO

P.S.—I don't have much respect for the editors nitwits either, any editor that would devote his time to such pap, should have his head . . . etc. . . . etc. . . .

ATTENTION: W. WEBBER

1618 McFarland Avenue
Gastonia, N. C.

DEAR PAUL:

Mein Gott!! Great guns!! Balls of ghu grease!! I won an original! Thanks alot to all the guys and/or gals who voted for my letter!

Now to the Spring issue of PLANET . . . one of the best yet. The cream of the current crop was Bradbury's jewel, "Forever and The Earth." Gad, how that lad can write. Tom Wolfe was actually alive again as one lived the pages, caught by Bradbury's magic spell. And when one reached the climax, one tingled and felt good all over—the rare feeling of supreme pleasure that one gets all too seldom in a lifetime of reading—the feeling that here is something superbly great . . . here is something that will live for ever and a day. Yes, "Forever and The Earth" is truly a great story . . . a fitting memorial to the most magnificent writer America has yet produced! (If Tom Wolfe had written science-fiction . . . wow!)

Your definition for science-fiction comes as close to actually defining it, tersely, as any I have ever seen. I'd like to come up with my two cents' worth: "Science-fiction is the magic of fantasy woven into realities of yesterday, to-day and tomorrow."

To the Vizigraph: Bruce Hapke, pick one, Ed Cox, two, and Marvin Williams, three.

Shame on Wally Webber! He didn't like my little poem. He actually said so in print. I should go out to Washington and kick his teeth down his frog-like throat. But I won't. I'll do even worse—oh, much worse!—than that. I'll compose another little ditty and dedicate it to Wally! Here and now, I offer a little poem written especially for dear old Wally. We all know how well he will enjoy it:

Silent Sam was a spacing man
With bright blue eyes and brilliant tan.
He had muscles that bulged and brains to boot,
He wowed all the girls in his fine space suit.
He often boasted no man alive
Could out-fight him in any space dive.
And he often proved this saying was true
From Alagam to Sidamroo.
But now shed a tear for Silent Sam—
For tho' he feared no living man
His wife caught him out with the girl called
Fan.

In cold, bleak space, they buried him deep—
And the asteroids guard him in his last, long
sleep.

(Which goes to prove eternal femmes
More deadly than infernal Bems!—Ed.)

Enjoy it, Wally? Ah, but I know you did! So, if you'll just be patient, I'll write you another. (Over Payne's dead body!)

Sincerely yours,

WILKIE CONNER

IF A HONEY ANSWERS, HANG UP . . .

Staten Island
New York, N. Y.

DEAR PAIN:

PLANET! It's ter-r-rific!—it's won-n-derful!—it's almost good! Try it! . . . yo-o-u'll LIKE it! (*Hoo, ha.—Ed.*)

Two stories in the present (Spring) ish have served to bring me to this pinnacle of ecstasy, to wit: THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS and FOREVER AND THE EARTH. Each is the best of its type I have ever read. The convincing atmosphere of ROCKETEERS, its sensible characterizations and readable narrative technique, put it head and shoulders above the ordinary space opera. Matter of fact, it wasn't strictly opera—thepoint or theme, so unobtrusively slipped in toward the last (the creation of the legend), has delayed-action impact. It's a Thought. It gives ROCKETEERS a significance that to me seems more important than many of the grandiose concepts of your most elite competitor. Someday, people and bureaucrats being what they are, this story may come true . . .

As for the other stories—well, none were bad, several were quite good. Oh yes, back to Bradbury's masterpiece. It was—I mean to say—I—you know, I started to cry on the last page? "It's like parting with my son . . ." Oh gee, let's talk about something else, huh? To be objective, I was glad to see RB get out of the realm of imagery for a spell. I feel that at times in his attempt to humanize, he goes overboard into stuffed, glittering humanoidness, a striving to express the (invariably reeking) quintessence of humanity. And in doing this, he often loses sight of the fact that our frailties are in themselves a very wonderful thing. Isn't it wonderful to pick up your phone to call your girl, dial the wrong number, hear a honeyed voice, make a blind date with it and have yourself a hell of a wonderful time, all by accident? In a Bradbury story, the honeyed voice would too likely turn out to be Dracula's anima.

Anyhoo . . . cover better than usual. Cockeyed (with regard to the story) but I suppose you have to merchandise PLANET with an eye to the non-stf-pulp-reader as well as us fen. Illustrations hokay, with the exception of those little horrors spotted through the Fennel yarn. Their grue was prosaic, the imagination shown childish. Gah!

So . . . why keep talking, if nothing more to say?

Goodbye now,

DAVID BURKE

DISCUSSIONS OR THE DEAD

760 Montgomery Street
Brooklyn 13, New York

PLANET'S LAMPOONED PARANOID:

The Spring issue, 1950, arrived and was duly snapped up by this reader. Strange, buying a Spring issue with the temperature at 25 degrees . . . well, I'm a publisher myself (a fanzine), so

I won't kick about publication dates.

Now for some mention of the issue at large: **THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS**—very, very good. Who's Keith Bennett a penname for? (*A guy named Bennett—we forget his first name.—Ed.*) This story really rang nicely about the pride of Terra's rocketeers—it reminded me in a way of Russell's **SYMBIOTICA**. Mc-William's pic was a bit too bright for these eyes, but I like his style.

WHO GOES THERE—Oh, PLP, how could you do it? Have not your author nor your editorial staff ever heard of a classic novel and a book of the same name by one John Campbell? This Campbell, I hear, has achieved a small reading public in his magazine, you-know-what. Seriously, a slip like this is almost unforgivable. A title duplication involving a little-known story is not too serious, but one concerning one of the immortal pieces of stf by its most noted editor (excuse, please, its **SECOND** most noted editor) does not leave a good impression. However, the story at hand wasn't bad, though a thousand times inferior to the other. (*No slip, Bob . . . Campbell's quick-frozen queasy is well remembered in these parts. We just callsum as we sezsum.—Ed.*)

ULTIMATUM—nice twist at end, though I've seen it before. "Dee" should write longer stories.

FLAME-JEWEL OF THE ANCIENTS failed to impress me, despite the promising title and nice cover Anderson spun around it. The story was rough reading for me—after losing interest many times I gave up.

FOREVER AND THE EARTH—well, Bradbury certainly gets original ideas, if not good ones. I thought that this story, while well-done, was in frightfully bad taste. Maybe I'm the only one that thinks so, but I'm entitled to an opinion.

THE FIRST MAN ON THE MOON—hack. Hack. Hackhackhack. Corny title, crummy plot. 'Nff said.

MADMEN OF MARS—a "cute" story. Could have been much, much longer. The interesting character of Burke could have been expanded, and I was interested if not informed too much about the Complex. I liked this one.

THE VIZIGRAPH—best story in the mag. The characterization of—oops, wrong shpiel. I'm sorry—I forgot. Give pics to Campbell for an interesting discussion, to Cox because he's a fellow-member of FAPA, to Nelson for a real switch on the fundamentals of letter-hacking. Honorable mention (you ought to give original cuts of the "Are you Lonesome?" adverts for these) to Bradley, who might have won if he had written in words of less than seven syllables, to Hammond and to Williams. Some of the letters said absolutely nothing—Grant's, for example. We could have more lovelorn ads in place of that sort.

Some time ago, there was a discussion of whether or no to drop the Vizig. A few years ago, a similar insurrection arose. I'll now add my two inter-stellar credits to the slush-heap:

A letter column is an invaluable part of a magazine. Look at the decline of one of your "non-existent" competitors into an occultist mag since the removal of its letter-column, while its sister-mag, still with one, prospers. In two magazines, its editor, although anonymous, main-



The Dark Continents of Your Mind

DO YOU struggle for balance? Are you forever trying to maintain *energy, enthusiasm, and the will to do*? Do your personality and power of accomplishment ebb and flow—like a stream controlled by some unseen valve? Deep within you are minute organisms. From their function spring your emotions. They govern your *creative ideas and moods*—yes, even your enjoyment of life. Once they were thought to be the mysterious seat of the soul—and to be left unexplored. Now cast aside superstition and learn to direct intelligently these *powers of self*.

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Let the Rosicrucians, an age-old fraternity of thinking men and women (not a religion), point out how you may fashion life as you want it—by making the fullest use of these little-understood *natural faculties* which you possess. This is a challenge to make the most of your heritage as a human. Write for the Free Book, "The Mastery of Life." Address: Scribe Q.M.C.

The ROSICRUCIANS

San Jose

(AMORC)

California

tains friendly and sometimes personal relations with his readers through the letters. The column of Campbell's mag is a place for scholarly scientific discussion, chiefly. The Vizigraph's main function is to serve as a hall-of-fame for the disappearing letter-hackers, who see print without saying anything sensible or important, and who are still an integral part of fandom. I do not wish to see this spread over all mags—the "Sergeant Saturn" junk nearly ruined two of your competitors. But I think that the letter-backers, like the Indians, should have reservations (La Vizi, for example) to raise discussions or the dead. Here's another vote for the Vizigraph. And here's another vote for the regular Vizigraphers: long may they rave!

Sincerely,

ROBERT SILVERBERG,
Visiting Venusian (Age 14).

SHORTS WONDERFUL!

1455 Townsend Avenue
New York 52, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Coward!!—"Your Editor"—Bah!

What has become of the hallowed words which were once found in their accustomed corner of La Vizi? What has happened to the vivid nouns and adjectives which followed the initials of PLP in the days of yore? Gone forever? It was only an issue ago that you were PLANET's lint-headed pterodactyl, and a mere six months past "PLANET's little pundit" followed the hallowed letters. So bring back the good old days when the xeno was heady, the gals were luscious, and Paul L. Payne was the PROPHET OF THE LUNATIC PHRINGE!!!

Despite the disappearance of PLP, PS for Spring—50 (Where I am in the time-stream it isn't even Winter—49) was almost terrific—almost. I say almost because the longer stories continue to be cheap hack—the plots timeworn and handling shabby. But the shorts—wonderful!

Best in the mag is "Forever and the Earth."—Why does Bradbury always write his best for PLANET STORIES? "Forever and the Earth" is a story to rank with "Pillar of Fire," "Asleep in Armageddon," and "Million Year Picnic." I would rate these among the 100 best sciencefiction stories ever written.

Second comes "The First Man On The Moon" by Alfred Coppel, who is a good writer, though not in Bradbury's class.

Third—"Who Goes There," a well-done yarn, but that title is familiar.

From then on, it's about a tie; the shorts being just a little ahead of the novelet and novel.

The illustrations are getting a bit shoddy. McWilliams in particular isn't as good as he used to be. A friend of mine said that he's switched from dry brush to pencil, but I wouldn't know.

Pics to Ed Cox, Paul Ganley, and Wally Weber.

I wish the fans wouldn't be so hard on the ads. Of course, from the advertising in PS you'd think the typical fan is jobless, a physical wreck, and a sex maniac, but the reason ads are run is not because of their literary value—\$\$\$\$\$.

I, too, think that you should have a fanzine

review. This sentence is intended to give me a reason to plug my fanzine, "Transgalactic." TG is a quarterly, 15¢ each, 50¢ a year. Free in direct trade for any other current zine, and to contributors. We need stories, articles, and artwork.

Sincerely,

MORTON D. PALEY.

P. S. What's this? Mail? Don't bother me now, I'm typing a letter to PLANET STORIES. A letter? WHAT'S THIS? PAUL L. PAYNE no longer editor of PS!!!! New ed is JE—4c"&#==3XZYnnmmMrrglshlrn. (Now, now, Mort . . . stop banging your head against your typewriter! You'll make holes in the ribbon!—Ed.)

PROGRESS IS . . . ?

DEAR EDITOR:

There was nothing very discussible in the spring issue of PS, at least insofar as concerns stories. I found all of them enjoyable, with the exception of the Bradbury. Apparently even the wind that blows between the worlds is insufficient to clear away that graveyard odor which emanates from everything Bradbury writes. That title, "Flame-Jewel of the Ancients," very nearly dissuaded me from reading the story (which proved to be good). If I wanted a collective parody on PLANET STORIES titles, that is exactly the one I would choose.

The Vizigraph, however, contained a few points which interested me. For example, the matter of the name Rhiannon, which Marvin Williams traces to an earlier novel by Brackett. In the old Welsh mythology, Rhiannon is mentioned as queen of Dyved and consort of King Pwyll. If any cribbing was one in the obtaining of this name, it was not from a copyrighted source.

I disagree with Campbell's contention that progress has been hindered by religion. The evidence seems to me to be no more than circumstantial. True, certain specific religious groups have in times past been guilty of fostering reaction, and organized religion as such may today be lagging in certain fields which might be considered to represent progress, but I don't feel that these facts justify the generality referred to above. Then, too, Campbell's statement opens the question of just what constitutes "progress," which contains considerable material for debate.

It seems no more paradoxical to me that a scientist should have religious beliefs than that he should have political convictions, which also are generally of emotional appeal and not subject to tangible proof. It depends, of course, upon what is meant by "religion," which is a pretty elastic term. I readily concede that a scientist could hardly be a Seventh-Day Adventist or a follower of Winrod.

To tackle another subject, I am not going to attempt a definition of science fiction, but I believe that those who do should take into consideration the limited number of sciences which seem to be accepted as fictional material—astronomy, physics, biology insofar as it deals with possible life-forms on alien planets. There are all manner of sciences which are seldom or never treated. Anthropology, for example, is represented by a few stories about mutants.

Psychology, too; why have so few writers been struck by the possibility that future human beings may think and behave in entirely different ways from those of today? What few stories there are of this kind are invariably written from the point of view of a time traveller or a poor unfortunate atavism, and depict the world of the future as hell on earth. I would like to read a tale of the normal men and normal life of a radically reoriented humanity, with no implied comment of "Wouldn't it be awful to live like that?"

There are also the social sciences, which are treated fictionally, as regards their possible future developments, either to provide the setting for a routine adventure or gadget story, or for propaganda purposes, with modern analogies. I am strongly in favor of propaganda fiction, but it seems odd that the possibilities of future societies have never been exploited. I might also mention the science of musicology, my chosen field of work. There are all manner of potential plots to be found there. Some day I may write up some of them.

Which brings me to the question of sex in sci. Some day someone may turn out a good story based on the scientific aspects of reproduction, and such a story should be published. But as regards sex added for rib-tickling purposes to interplanetary adventure stories, I can't see it. I don't believe that anyone's morals are likely to be impaired by Brackett's disrobing ladies, but sex has been allowed to infiltrate and dominate every other form of fictive literature to the nuisance point, and I fail to see why it should be allowed to do so in science fiction.

I suggest that you award an illustration to Garland Roberts for his radically new approach, and particularly for his letter's lack of adolescent attempts to be funny.

RAY H. RAMSAY

STF BY HENDERSON

Wichita, Kansas

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

Well, well, well, well . . . so PLANET has another new editor. Best of luck, my boy . . . keep your blue pencil sharpened and your temper. But what of PLANET's Lecherous Poodle . . . ? Did he gallop wildly off, chasing flying disks? Is he even now being punished for his sins in some obscure dero cavern? Maybe he decided the hell with editing . . . he'd like to write the stuff! (Wanna know his pseudonym?—Ed.) Come on now, give us a break . . . what happened to PLP?

Anyway, welcome . . . may the curse of an illustrious predecessor not crush your psyche. Let's see now . . . can you give us an idea of what we may expect of PS under your budding guidance? Trimmed edges? (No—Ed.) Improved covers? (Hmm—Ed.) More pages? (HA!—Ed.) Better stories? (Impossible!—Ed.) Bi-monthly? (Possible—Ed.) Stories by Henderson? (GAH-HHHHHH!—Ed.) Stories by Miss Henderson, that is--s-s . . . (GAHH-h . . . huh?—Ed.)

To the stories: THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS. A peach, uh dilly! Who is Keith Bennett? . . . what color, what characterization, what realism!

FOREVER AND THE EARTH. Beautiful story . . . I don't quite hold with RB's insistence

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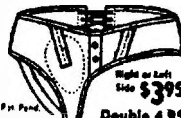
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that Wolfe must be returned to '38 to die (although it was, of course, Bolton's insistence, with RB in the background gently aware of story values). Nevertheless, I wish Wolfe hadn't had to go back, so there!

FLAME JEWEL OF THE ANCIENTS.

Fair space opera, kinda plumph on its science.

THE FIRST MAN ON THE MOON. Okay, not up to Coppel's best.

MAD MEN OF MARS. Liked this one.

WHO GOES THERE? Ho-o-old on, bub . . . your title, or Payne's? . . . or John Campbell's? Story, fair.

ULTIMATUM. Nice short short. Dee, I betcha, is a sodynym . . . whose?

Now, to la Viz. And to . . . wotinhell is stf? Well, I don't know who . . . PLP or JB (PLP —JB) . . . wrote the Viz editorial in Spring PS, but I feel that "Your Editor" has not quite hit the apple with his definition. To only dream is a little sick . . . to dream too much about tomorrow is bait for analysis. I think stf, the best of it, is more hardheaded than this . . . more objective, what with trained minds extrapolating their various fields in fictional form. In other words, to dream and visualize is okay . . . then you must point your oxford in the direction of the vision and start plodding. Seems to me that stf is a stimulus to a certain type of person or personality . . . a stimulus, not to dream, but to work for, have faith in and think out clearly what has already occurred to them as vision. The best of stf, I repeat . . . not space opera, which is adventure and escape (I love it), nor the gadget story, which is often liable to tweak a scientific chord, but must still remain classified as formula stf whether hack or Kuttner . . . no, I refer to "think stuff", the stuff of concept, the brain-child of a man's beliefs and fears regarding "If this goes on . . ." Therein lies the greatness and power of stf in its ideal form. It must be (and will be) written by a hybrid of philosopher and crusader, dreamer and scientist. Little of it is, nowadays, but its power is intrinsic to the form, and will, I believe, evolve a totally new species of writer whose work (although we might never recognize stf in a hundred years, and Lord knows what they'll call it) will have an important effect upon the development and maturation of humankind.

So I still haven't defined stf. All right: Stf is a state of mind.

Best wishes,

SHIRLEY HENDERSON

SOLID, GREEN-BLOODED PLANET

119 Ward Road

North Tonawanda, New York

DEAR PLP:

Ah, yes indeed. PLANET STORIES has arrived once more—and once again I turn my eyes from the usual, elite science-fiction literature to the old-type, slam-bang, space-pirates, to-hell-with-everybody - even - Lewis - Sherlock-and-especially-him kind of stfction. I read it and glory in it, and then am thankful it is printed only in PS because I'd go crazy if that were the only type there was. Don't enlarge, don't go monthly, don't put out a companion PS type of mag, Mr. Editor—a dash of seasoning hits the spot, but it is to

be sneezed at when in too-great quantity (especially if it happens to be pepper).

What I am trying to lead up to is this: (now what was I trying to lead up to!!?) Oh yes—PS is the only magazine of its type, not only with a name that is "solid, green-blooded, and truly science-fictional," but also with stories to match. And I'm glad of it! The loss of PS would be a great blow to fans everywhere . . . but so would more of it.

Mr. Weber, who for his letter may pick two, suggests I name a magazine that boasts of a name that is solid, green-blooded, etcetera. I could—but would anything come out after Payne got through with his blue pencil except * * * or * * * * (variety, you know . . .)

Unfortunately Editor Pain, I mean, Editor Payne, did not take your suggestion, Mr. Weber, and award pics to those whom you selected . . . The mailsack seems notoriously light this morning. Oh well, as the Dodger fan said to the Yankee fan, "NEXT time . . ."

Lucifer Sathanas, pick one, for your most brilliant satire; and let me add that I concur completely with your every word . . . every word but those last four . . . I'd rahly like to know what fan perpetrated this thing; couldn't have been Oliver, now, could it? . . .

I already said, Weber pick two; and for third slot (oh, the machines are outlawed, are they . . . well, let's see. I shouldn't vote for him, after what he said about me in Thr—that is, in * * * * * and after what I'M going to say to HIM in the next letter I write after this is completed, but . . . well, okay, Dave Hammond, pick three (and he didn't even vote for my letter, either, the BEM).

If Grant can do it, I can too. Hope he won't sue me for plagiarism, or even for PLAGIARISM, but here goes:

Why don't you start a fanzine department? Then you could review my own fanzine, entitled "Fan-Fare." (Don't excuse me while I get in a BIG plug.) It costs only one thin dime, and—uh—(here the script differs) the first issue, which may not be all gone when PS Summer 1950 appears on the stands, contains stories by authors old and new (not in years, in fandom activity), such as Sgt. Fred J. Remus, Jr., Toby Duane, Andrew Duane (two different ones), and Ray Rebel. It's hectoed, and (to get back onto the script), it's cheap, anyway.

Ere I get to the stories, a query: why sign yourself "Your Editor?" Gad, wasn't LEVIATHANIC POPINJAY good enough for you?

Remember what I was saying in my first paragraph? (If not, go back and read, stupid!) Well, THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS fits beautifully into that category. The biurb was good, too. So good that I saved the story for last. 'Twas, however, but the second-best in the issue.

Bradbury—, ah Bradbury! How can he do it, how can he? At least 50% of everything he does is worth the overworked nomen, "classic." This was no exception. I rate it as good as any he's done—better than MILLION-YEAR PICNIC—better than HOMECOMING—better than AND THE MOON BE STILL AS BRIGHT. As good as PILLAR OF FIRE. Bradbury is the greatest practicing science-fiction author. And the greatest weird writer of ALL

TIME! When, oh when, is Ray going to write a novel? A GREAT novel! One to be remembered for all time, and yet to be enjoyed during the reading. One never to be forgotten!

Okay, Mr. Payne, you've given all of the girls a break by publishing a pic of Ray; how about printing a picture of Brackett, who Sneary says in a fanzine looks like her heroine. (*We got one, but it's ours, OURS!—Ed.*) And while your working on that one, how about some of her writing? It's appearing regularly in—well, in the two present publications of a company which plans to add a third science-fiction reprint quarterly magazine to take care of the great stf tales of yesteryear. (Anybody who's a fan at all should know whom I mean because they read said publications, while anybody who is not a real fan, or is just discovering fandom, won't, so it isn't advertising and you can print it.) Brackett is second only to Bradbury, and tops among active adventure-stf authors. (Burroughs for all time.) When cometh another N'Chaka yarn, eh? Tinkling bells of old Martian cities, slime of Venus, and all that. Pure adventure, but adventure drama is escapist literature as much as a fictionalized treatise on some scientific revelation, and I cannot understand the people who disparage it.

FLAME-JEWEL OF THE ANCIENTS was also an excellent story. The other four shorts were average shorts, but oh boy what I would give to write that well!

The definitions of science fiction (most of them), including your own, PLP, are somewhat lacking. How much stf takes place in the future? Most of it, but some in the past and a lot in the present. Well?

PIC (ahem)turesquely,
W. PAUL GANLEY,
(Snazzy Skyrocket Fan-Publications)

THE ARCHETYPE TO PAY!

Box 1296
Levelland, Texas

DEAR EDITOR:

It occurred to me, after reading the letter signed with the pseudonym of Lucifer Sathanas, that people who insist upon living in glass houses . . .

I have heard it said that man's most formidable opponent is man; not because of his weapons (which are indeed terrible), nor because of his ingenuities (which are truly astonishing), but because of his memories, which are inexplicably deathless.

Everything else in Nature, when the cause and effect has run its course, forgives and forgets. The tree grows new bark to replace that which was, torn away, and has never been known to lie in wait for that individual who caused the injury. The dog forgets the beating received at the hand of its master and returns to its normal attitude of worship and devoted service. Earth makes place for the meteors which fall upon it from the heavens, and the stars continue shining from their accustomed places once the dark clouds drift away to other regions.

But with man this is not so. In man the memory rankles, and festers, and continues to burn slowly long after the cause and its effect has passed into oblivion. Man lies in wait for his adversary, and sometimes the waiting extends over so many gen-

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crations that the effect of a cause often falls upon people living in complete ignorance of the motivating injury. This creates a new injury to be redressed, a new retribution which may conceivably fall upon the otherwise innocent head of some unwitting descendant of the perpetrator, who may or may not be expiating his crime in those infernal regions ruled over by one we have learned to call Lucifer because of his inability to effect the restitution of a forgotten cause. Lucifer, as we know him, is that factor of first guilt for which there can be no forgiveness. Those who continue the practice of unprovoked assault are his servants, stewing in their own juices because Lucifer has hopes of uncovering the true reason for his own predicament in the uncoverings of their tormented souls.

Yes—man's memory is a much more potent and terrifying weapon than his atom bomb will ever be. For his bombs we can build protective shelters, but from his memory there is never an effective barrier because we are without knowledge of those who were injured by our ancestors. To uncover the first cause we must uncover Lucifer, and to uncover Lucifer is to release him from the pit without a bottom. The scorpions who accompany him in the smoke from the pit carry the sting of conscience—that consciousness of personal guilts we are all so anxious to keep covered throughout eternity.

Frankly, I'd rather argue the point of racial supremacies. My own conscience is squirming so horribly I'm afraid its chains might snap at any moment—and I'd hate to be called upon to join Lucifer right at this time!

Sincerely,

ROBERT A. BRADLEY

MOON MADNESS

109 East End Avenue
Waterloo, Iowa

DEAR EDITOR:

I got the Spring issue of PLANET STORIES yesterday as I always do when I see a new issue. (That figures.—Ed.) I finished it this morning (not enough time last night, and I like to make it last longer) and decided to break a tradition and send my thoughts (?) in to the Vizigraph.

The short stories were fair, nothing extra special. FLAME-JEWEL OF THE ANCIENTS was very good. The cover of the mag has me slightly puzzled. I take it that the picture is supposed to illustrate FLAME JEWEL? What is the dame holding in her right hand? Did I miss part of the story or did the artist read nothing but the title?

Top story in the issue was THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS. How about a follow-up story? I hope you don't intend to leave the black city unexplained! Who built it? What happen to them? Come on, give us a break. (Mr. Bennett? . . . Ed.)

Last, but far from least:

BRING BACK BRACKETT!

ROD SELBY

P.S.—Please, no more moon-madness. Does everyone who lands on the moon with just one person with him have to be killed or go as stark

raving mad as many of the PS readers? (No. A third, infinitely more horrible course is left to them . . . they can go as stark, raving—mad—as—PS—EDITORS!—Ed.)

LATE BUT NICE

47 Moonpark Road, Northfield
Birmingham 31, England

DEAR OLD EDITOR MAN:

Hows about lettin' a Britisher chip in with an opinion of the old mag? Huh?

But first, you will be wonderin' perhaps, how come so late?

I read PLANET, and other mags, through the good offices of the British Fantasy Library's Magazine chains, and have to wait until each magazine gets around to me. I am number 65. (When you get around to THE ULTIMATE SALIENT, let us know what you think of it —Ed.) (It's a non-profit organization run by fans for the benefit of fans, and it's the only way we can get to read U.S. stf.)

Hence the lateness of this letter.

I have just finished reading the Fall issue '49, and here goes to say my piece.

My vote for number one place goes to ACTION ON AZURA, the only one I really enjoyed out of 'em all.

Number 2 goes to CAPTAIN MIDAS, which gives a new twist to the idea of contra-terrene matter.

Place 3, THE GIANTS RETURN, not bad at all.

Place 4, ENCHANTRESS OF VENUS. I had a scrap with myself about whether to give this place 5.

THE WHEEL IS DEATH, but we ain't destroyed ourselves; yet.

SIGNAL RED, I think this theme's played out. ORDEAL IN SPACE, likewise.

Hadda chuckle in my beard about 'Doc' Smith's letter. Some guys over here, who think they are above the Doc's type of stf, have been calling it 'corny space opera'. So what? I think it's highly enjoyable, and (at this point was inscribed a scribble which neither we nor the printers were able to decode—Ed.) is good space opera.

Finally, I'd like to hear from any U.S. fans who care to write, and would swap mags, tho we have not a lot of choice here, NEW WORLDS being our only prozine (No. 5 came out last month; all five copies available for swaps).

Hoping this belated screed arrives in time for next PLANET Vizi (?hint? cor, not a broad un!) and will prove of interest whether or no.

Yours aye,

RON. H. GREAVES

(This Vizigraph must, we regret to say, end on a melancholy note. Grit your teeth, gang, and better sit down if you faint easily . . . particularly Messrs. Cox, Williams and Weber. All set? Okay. THE PICS FOR "FOREVER AND THE EARTH" AND "DEATH-BY-RAIN" ARE, BY SPECIAL REQUEST, THE PROPERTY OF MR. RAY BRADBURY period)

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