

SUPER-SCIENCE

JUNE

35c

FICTION

WORLD OF A
THOUSAND COLORS

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

DESIRE WOMAN

by HENRY SLESAR



LOOK AT TOMORROW

One day this winter a signal will be given, a switch will be thrown—and a gleaming gold-jacketed space satellite will thrust its way upward from earth. It will be the first of a dozen or more that will ring our planet by mid-1958. Project Vanguard it's aptly called. The Vanguard satellite will be the first step for mankind on the great journey outward.

But such things as space satellites are old stuff to Science Fiction fans. Stories dealing with orbital satellites were common in the pages of science fiction ten and even twenty years ago—just as the atomic bomb, atomic power, television and scores of other modern wonders were first foretold in science fiction.

The science fiction fan knows the wonder of deep space; and when man gets there sometime in the next few decades he won't find the face of the moon nor the sands of Mars unfamiliar, thanks to science fiction. Again it's old stuff. Science fiction told what it would be like years before.

In SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION you'll be reading about the wonder world of tomorrow. Today's fantasy is tomorrow's reality. The stories you'll read here vividly portray the coming marvels in the true tradition of science fiction. Just as the Vanguard satellite and uranium fission were foretold, so, perhaps will the stories in this issue be news items on the front pages in 1967 or 1997 or 2997.

But *YOU* can read them NOW.

W. W. SCOTT

SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 1 — No. 4

June, 1957

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SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION is published bi-monthly by Headline Publications Inc., at 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial office at 1799 Broadway, New York 19, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Holyoke, Mass., August 21, 1956, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copy, 35c. Subscription rate, \$4.00 for 12 issues. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts, and all such material must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All stories printed in the magazine are fiction, and any similarity between the characters and actual persons is coincidental. Copyright 1957 by Headline Publications Inc. All rights, including translation, reserved under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in the U.S.A.

WORLD OF A THOUSAND COLORS

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

illustrated by EMSH

Winners of the "Test" on the World of a Thousand Colors were granted the soul's utmost dream. Was this mysterious award worth the killing of a man?

WHEN Jolvar Hollinrede discovered that the slim, pale young man opposite him was journeying to the World of a Thousand Colors to undergo the Test, he spied a glittering opportunity for himself. And in that moment was the slim, pale young man's fate set.

Hollinrede's lean fingers closed on the spun-fiber drink-flask. He peered across the burnished tabletop. "The *Test*, you say?"

The young man smiled dif-

fidently. "Yes. I think I'm ready. I've waited years—and now's my big chance." He had had a little too much of the cloying liqueur he had been drinking; his eyes shone glassily, and his tongue was looser than it had any right to be.

"Few are called and fewer are chosen," Hollinrede mused. "Let me buy you another drink."

"No, I—"

"It will be an honor. Really. It's not every day I have a



chance to buy a Testee a drink."

Hollinrede waved a jewelled hand and the servomech brought them two more drink-flasks. Lightly Hollinrede punctured one, slid it along the tabletop, kept the other in his hand unopened. "I don't believe I know your name," he said.

"Derveren Marti. I'm from Earth. You?"

"Jolvar Hollinrede. Likewise. I travel from world to world on business, which is what brings me to Niprion this day."

"What sort of business?"

"I trade in jewels," Hollinrede said, displaying the bright collection studding his fingers. They were all morphosims, not the originals, but only careful chemical analysis would reveal that. Hollinrede did not believe in exposing millions of credits' worth of merchandise to anyone who cared to lop off his hand.

"I was a clerk," Marti said. "But that's all far behind me. I'm on to the World of a Thousand Colors to take the Test! The Test!"

"The Test!" Hollinrede echoed. He lifted his unpunctured drinkflask in a gesture of salute, raised it to his lips, pretended to drain it. Across the table Derveren Marti coughed as the liqueur coursed down his throat. He looked up, smiling dizzily, and smacked his lips.

"When does your ship leave?" Hollinrede asked.

"Tomorrow midday. It's the *Star Climber*. I can't wait. This stopover at Niprion is making me fume with impatience."

"No doubt," Hollinrede agreed. "What say you to an afternoon of whist?"

AN hour later Derveren Marti lay slumped over the inlaid card-table in Hollinrede's hotel suite, still clutching a handful of waxy cards. Arms folded, Hollinrede surveyed the body.

They were about of a height, he and the dead man, and a chemotherm mask would alter Hollinrede's face sufficiently to allow him to pass as Marti. He switched on the playback of the room's recorder to pick up the final fragments of their conversation.

"...care for another drink, Marti?"

"I guess I'd better not, old fellow. I'm getting kind of muzzy, you know. No, please don't pour it for me. I said I didn't want it, and—well, all right. Just a little one. There, that's enough. Thanks."

The tape was silent for a moment, then recorded the soft thump of Marti's body falling to the table as the quick-action poison unlatched his synapses. Smiling, Hollinrede switched the recorder to *record* and said, mimicking Marti, "*I guess I'd better not, old fellow. I'm getting kind of muzzy, you know.*"

He activated the playback, listened to the sound of his voice critically, then listened to Marti's again for comparison. He was approaching the light, flexible quality of the dead man's voice. Several more attempts and he had it almost perfect. Producing a vocal homologizer, he ran off first Marti's voice, then his own pronouncing the same words.

The voices were alike to three decimal places. That would be good enough to fool the most sensitive detector;

three places was the normal range of variation in any man's voice from day to day.

In terms of mass there was a trifling matter of some few grams which could easily be sweated off in the gymnasium the following morning. As for the dead man's gesture-complex, Hollinrede thought he could manage a fairly accurate imitation of Marti's manner of moving; he had studied the young clerk carefully for nearly four hours, and Hollinrede was a clever man.

When the preparations were finished, he stepped away and glanced at the mirror, taking a last look at his own face—the face he would not see again until having taken the Test. He donned the mask. Jolvar Hollinrede became Derveren Marti. The corpse at the card-table did not protest its loss of identity.

Hollinrede extracted a length of cotton bulking from a drawer and wrapped it around Marti's body. He weighed the corpse, and added four milligrams more of cotton so that Marti would have precisely the mass Jolvar Hollinrede had

had. He donned Marti's clothes finally, dressed the body in his own, and, smiling sadly at the convincing but worthless morphosim jewels on his fingers, transferred the rings to Marti's already-stiffening hands.

"Up with you," he grunted, and bundled the body across the room to the Disposall.

"Farewell, old friend," he exclaimed feelingly, and hoisted Marti feet-first to the lip of the chute. He shoved, and the dead man vanished, slowly, gracefully, heading downward toward the omnivorous maw of the atomic converter buried in the deep levels of Stopover Planet Niprion.

Reflectively Hollinrede turned away from the Disposall unit. He gathered up the cards, put away the liqueur, poured the remnant of the poisoned drink in the Disposall chute.

An atomic converter was a wonderful thing, he thought pleasantly. By now the body of Marti had been efficiently reduced to its component molecules, and those were due for separation into atoms shortly after, and from atoms into sub-

atomic particles. Within an hour the prime evidence to the crime would be nothing but so many protons, electrons, and neutrons—and there would be no way of telling which of the two men in the room had entered the chute, and which had remained alive.

Hollinrede activated the tape once more, rehearsed for the final time his version of Marti's voice, and checked it with the homologizer. Still three decimal places; that was good enough. He erased the tape.

Then, depressing the communicator stud, he said, "I wish to report a death."

A cold robot face appeared on the screen. "Yes?"

"Several minutes ago my host, Jolvar Hollinrede, passed on of an acute embolism. He requested immediate dissolution upon death and I wish to report that this has been carried out."

"Your name?"

"Derveren Marti. Testee."

"A Testee? You were the last to see the late Hollinrede alive?"

"That's right."

"Do you swear that all infor-

mation you might give will be accurate and fully honest?"

"I so swear," Hollinrede said.

THE inquest was brief and smooth. The word of a Testee goes without question; Hollinrede had reported the details of the meeting exactly as if he had been Marti, and after a check of the converter records revealed that a mass exactly equal to the late Hollinrede's had indeed been disposed of at precisely the instant witness claimed, the inquest was at its end. The verdict was natural death. Hollinrede told the officials that he had not known the late jewel trader before that day, and had no interest in his property, whereupon they permitted him to depart.

Having died intestate, Hollinrede knew his property became that of the Galactic Government. But, as he pressed his hand, clad in its skintight chemotherm, against the doorplate of Derveran Marti's room, he told himself that it did not matter. Now he *was* Derveran Marti, Testee. And once he had taken and passed

the Test, what would the loss of a few million credits in baubles matter to him?

Therefore it was with a light heart that the pseudo-Derveran Marti quitted his lodgings the next day and prepared to board the *Star Climber* for the voyage to the World of a Thousand Colors.

The clerk at the desk peered at him sympathetically as he pressed his fingers into the checkout plate, thereby erasing the impress from the doorplate upstairs.

"It was too bad about that old fellow dying on you yesterday, wasn't it, sir? I do hope it won't affect your Test result."

Hollinrede smiled blankly. "It was quite a shock to me when he died so suddenly. But my system has already recovered; I'm ready for the test."

"Good luck to you, sir," the clerk said as Hollinrede left the hotel and stepped out on the flaring skyramp that led to the waiting ship.

The steward at the passenger's hatch was collecting identiplates. Hollinrede handed his over casually. The steward inserted it tip-first in the com-

puter near the door, and motioned for Hollinrede to step within the beam while his specifications were being automatically compared with those on the identiplate.

He waited, tensely. Finally the chattering of the machine stopped and a dry voice said, "Your identity is in order, Testee Derveran Marti. Proceed within."

"That means you're okay," the steward told him. "Yours is Compartment Eleven. It's a luxury job, you know. But you Testees deserve it. Best of luck, sir."

"Thanks." Hollinrede grinned. "I don't doubt I'll need it."

He moved up the ramp and into the ship. Compartment Eleven *was* a luxury job; Hollinrede, who had been a frugal man, whistled in amazement when he saw it. It was nearly eight feet high and almost twelve broad, totally private with an opaquer attached to the doorscope. Clinging curtains of ebony synthoid foam from Ravensmusk VIII had been draped lovingly over the walls, and the acceleration

couch was trimmed in golden bryozone. The rank of Testee carried with it privileges that the late Derveran Marti certainly would never have mustered in private life—nor Jolvar Hollinrede either.

At 1143 the doorscope chimed; Hollinrede leaped from the soft couch a little too nervously and transluced the door. A crewman stood outside.

"Everything all right, sir? We blast in seventeen minutes."

"I'm fine," Hollinrede said. "Can't wait to get there. How long do you think it'll take?"

"Sorry, sir. Not at liberty to reveal. But I wish you a pleasant trip, and should you lack for aught hesitate not to call on me."

Hollinrede smiled at the curiously archaic way the man had of expressing himself. "Never fear; I'll not hesitate. Many thanks." He opaqued the doorscope and resumed his seat.

AT precisely 1200 the drive-engines of the *Star Climber* throbbed heavily; the pale green light over the door of

Hollinrede's compartment glowed brightly for an instant, signalling the approaching blastoff. He sank down on the acceleration couch to wait.

A moment later came the push of acceleration, and then, as the gravshields took effect, the 7g escape force dwindled until Hollinrede felt comfortable again. He increased the angle of the couch in order to peer out the port.

The world of Niprion was vanishing rapidly in the background: already it was nothing but a mottled grey-and-gold ball swimming hazily in a puff of atmosphere. The sprawling metal structure that was the stopover hotel was invisible.

Somewhere back on Niprion, Hollinrede thought, the atoms that once had been Testee Derveran Marti were now feeding the power-intake of a turbine or heating the inner shell of a reactor.

He let his mind dwell on the forthcoming Test. He knew little about it really, considering he had been willing to take a man's life for a chance to compete. He knew the Test was administered lustrally—once eve-

ry five years, that was—to candidates chosen by Galaxywide search. The world where the Test was given was known only as the World of a Thousand Colors, and precisely where this world was no one was permitted to know save a few spacemen pledged to secrecy.

As for the Test itself, by its very nature it was unknown to the Galaxy. For no winning Testee had ever returned from the World of a Thousand Colors. Some losers returned, their minds carefully wiped clean of any memories of the planet—but the winners never came back.

The Test's nature was unknown; the prize, inconceivable. All anyone knew was that the winners were granted the soul's utmost dream. Upon winning, one neither returned to his home world nor desired to.

Naturally many men ignored the Test—it was something for "other people" to take part in. But millions, billions throughout the Galaxy competed in the preliminaries. And every five years, six or seven were chosen.

Jolvar Hollinrede was convinced he would succeed in the

Test—but he had failed three times hand running in the preliminaries, and was thus permanently disqualified. The preliminaries were simple; they consisted merely of an intensive mental scanning. A flip-flop circuit would flash “YES” or “NO” after that.

If “YES,” there were further scannings, until word was beamed through the Galaxy that the competitors for the year had been chosen.

Hollinrede stared moodily at the blackness of space. He had been eliminated unfairly, he felt; he coveted the unknown prize the Test offered, and felt bitter at having it denied him. When chance had thrown Testee Derveran Marti in his path, Hollinrede had leaped to take advantage of the opportunity.

And now he was on his way.

Surely, he thought, they would allow him to take the Test, even if he were discovered to be an impostor. And once he took it, he knew he would succeed. He had always succeeded in his endeavors. There was no reason for failure to happen now.

Beneath the false mask of

Derveran Marti, Hollinrede's face was set in a tense tautness. He dreamed of the Test and its winning—and of the end to the long years of wandering and toil.

THE voice at the door said, “We're here, Testee Derveran. Please open up.”

Hollinrede grunted, pulled himself up from the couch, threw open the door. Three dark-faced spacemen waited there for him.

“Where are we?” he asked nervously. “Is the trip over?”

“We have come to pilot you to the Test planet, sir,” one of the spacemen told him. “The *Star Climber* is in orbit around it, but will not make a landing itself. Will you come with us?”

“Very well,” Hollinrede said.

They entered a lifeship, a slim grey tube barely thirty meters long, and fastened acceleration cradles. There were no ports. Hollinrede felt enclosed, hemmed in.

The lifeship began to slide noiselessly along the ejection channel, glided the entire length of the *Star Climber*, and

burst out into space. A pre-set orbit was operating. Hollinrede clung to the acceleration cradle as the lifeship spun tightly inward toward a powerful gravitational field not far away.

The ship came to rest. Hollinrede lay motionless, flesh cold with nervousness, teeth chattering tensely.

"Easy does it, sir. Up and out."

They lifted him and gently nudged him through a manifold compression lock. He moved forward on numb feet.

"Best of luck sir!" an envious voice called behind him.

Then the lock clanged shut, and Hollinrede was on his own.

A riotous blaze of color swept down at him from every point of the compass.

He stood in the midst of what looked like a lunar crater. Far in the distance on all sides was the massive upraised fissured surface of a ringwall and the ground beneath him was barren red-brown rock, crumbling to pumice here and there, but bare of vegetation.

In the sky was a solitary sun, a blazing Type A blue-white star. That sun alone was

incapable of accounting for this flood of color.

Streamers of every hue seemed to sprout from the rocks, staining the ringwall olive-gray and brilliant cerise and dark, lustrous green. Pigments of every sort bathed the air; now it seemed to glow with currents of luminous pink, now a flaming red, now a pulsing pure white.

His eyes adjusted slowly to the torrent of color. World of a Thousand Colors, they called this place? That was an underestimate. *Hundred thousand. Million. Billion.* Shades and near-shades mingled to form new colors.

"Are you Derveran Marti?" a voice asked.

Startled, Hollinrede looked around. It seemed as if a band of color had spoken: a swirling band of rich brown that spun tirelessly before him.

"Are you Derveran Marti?" the voice repeated, and Hollinrede saw that it had indeed come from the band of brown.

It seemed a desecration to utter the lie here on this world of awesome beauty, and he felt the temptation to claim his

true identity. But the time for that was later.

"Yes," he said loudly. "I am Derveran Marti."

"Welcome, Derveran Marti. The Test will soon begin."

"Where?"

"Here."

"Right out here? Just like this?"

"Yes," the band of color replied. "Your fellow competitors are gathering."

HOLLINREDE narrowed his eyes and peered toward the far reaches of the ringwall. Yes; he saw tiny figures located at great distances from each other along the edge of the crater. One, two, three . . . there were seven all told, including himself. Seven, out of the whole Galaxy!

Each of the other six was attended by a dipping, bobbing blotch of color. Hollinrede noticed a square-shouldered giant from one of the Inner Worlds surrounded by a circlet of violent orange; to his immediate left was a sylph-like female, probably from one of the worlds of Dubhe, wearing only the revealing token garment of

her people but shielded from inquisitive eyes by a robe of purest blue light. There were others; Hollinrede wished them well. He knew it was possible for all competitors to win, and now that he was about to attain his long-sought goal he held no malice for anyone. His mind was suffused with pity for the dead Derveran Marti, sacrificed that Jolvar Hollinrede might be in this place at this time.

"Derveran Marti," the voice said, "You have been chosen from among your fellow men to take part in the Test. This is an honor that comes to few; we of this world hope you appreciate the grace that has fallen upon you."

"I do," Hollinrede said humbly.

"We ourselves are winners of the prize you seek," the voice went on. "Some of us are members of the first expedition to find this world, eleven hundred years before. As you see, life is unlimited in duration in our present state of matter. Others of us have come more recently. The band of light purple moving above you to

the left was a winner in the previous competition to this.

"We of the World of a Thousand Colors have a rare gift to offer: total harmony of mind. We exist divorced of body, as a stream of photons only. We live in perfect freedom and eternal delight. Once every five years we find it possible to increase our numbers by adding to our midst such throughout the Galaxy as we feel would desire to share our way of life—and whom we would feel happy to welcome to us."

"You mean," Hollinrede said shakily, "that all these beams of light—were once *people*?"

"They were that—until welcomed into us. Now they are men no more. This is the prize you have come to win."

"I see."

"You are not required to compete. Those who, after reaching our world, decide to remain in the material state, are returned to their home worlds with their memories cleared of what they have been told here and their minds free and happy to the end of their lives. Is this what you wish?"

Hollinrede was silent, letting his dazzled eyes take in the flamboyant sweep of color that illuminated the harsh, rocky world. Finally he said: "I will stay."

"Good. The Test will shortly begin."

HOLLINREDE saw the band of brown swoop away from him, upward to rejoin its never-still comrades in the sky. He waited, standing stiffly, for something to happen.

Then this is what I killed a man for, he thought. His mind dwelled on the words of the band of brown.

Evidently many hundreds of years ago an exploratory expedition had stumbled over some unique natural phenomenon here at a far end of the universe. Perhaps it had been an accident, a stumbling into a pool of light, that had dematerialized them, turned them into bobbing immortal streaks of color. But that had been the beginning.

The entire Test system had been developed to allow others to enter this unique society, to

leave the flesh behind and live on as pure energy. Hollinrede's fingers trembled; this was, he saw, something worth killing for!

He waited.

Finally the brown band descended from the mass of lambent color overhead and curled into a tight bowknot before him.

"The Test is about to begin, Jolvar Hollinrede."

Use of his own name startled him. In the past week he had so thoroughly associated his identity with that of Derveran Marti that he had scarcely let his actual name drift through his mind.

"So you know," he said.

"We have known since the moment you came. It is unfortunate; we would have wanted Derveran Marti among us. But now that you are here, we will test you on your own merits, Jolvar Hollinrede."

It was just as well that way, he thought. The pretense had to end sooner or later, and he was willing to stand or fall as himself rather than under an assumed identity.

"Advance to the center of

the crater, Jolvar Hollinrede," came the command from the brown band.

Leadenly Hollinrede walked forward. Squinting through the mist of color that hazed the view, he saw the other seven competitors were doing the same. They would meet at the center.

"The Test is now under way," a new and deeper voice said.

SEVEN of them. Hollinrede looked around. There was the giant from the Inner World—Fondelfor, he saw now. Next to him, the near-nude sylph of Dubhe, and standing by her side, one diamond-faceted eye glittering in his forehead, a man of Alphe-raz VII.

The selectors had cast their nets wide. Hollinrede saw another Terran, dark of skin and bright of eye; a man of Deneb IX, squat and muscular. The sixth Testee was a squirming globule from Spica's tenth world; the seventh was Jolvar Hollinrede, itinerant, home world Terra.

Overhead hung a circular

diadem of violet light. It explained the terms of the Test.

"Each of you will be awarded a characteristic color. It will project before you into the area you ring. Your object will be to blend your seven colors into one; when you have achieved this, you will be admitted into us."

"May I ask what the purpose of this is?" Hollinrede said coldly.

"The essence of our society is harmony—total harmony between us all, and inner harmony between those groups which were admitted at the same temporal juncture. Naturally if you seven are incapable even of this inner harmony, you will be incapable of the greater harmony of us all—and will be rejected."

Despite the impatient frowns of a few of his fellow contestants, Hollinrede said, "Therefore we're to be judged as a unit? An entity?"

"Yes and no," the voice replied. "And now the Test."

Hollinrede saw to his astonishment a color spurt from his arm and hang hovering before him—a pool of inky black-

ness deeper in hue than the dark of space. His first reaction was one of shock; then he realized that he could control the color, make it move.

He glanced around. Each of his companions similarly faced a hovering mass of color. The giant of Fondelfor controlled red; the girl of Dubhe, orange. The Alpherazian stared into a whirling bowl of deep yellow, the Terran green, the Spican radiant violet, the Denebian pearly grey.

Hollinrede stared at his globe of black. A voice above him seemed to whisper, "*Marti's color would have been blue. The spectrum has been violated.*"

He shrugged away the words and sent his globe of black spinning into the area between the seven contestants ringed in a circle. At the same time each of the others directed his particular color inward.

HOLLINREDE waited breathlessly, watching the others. His color of black seemed to stand in opposition to the other six. Red, orange, yellow, green, violet. The pearl-

grey of the Denebian seemed to enfold the other colors warmly—all but Hollinrede's. The black hung apart.

To his surprise he saw the Dubhian girl's orange beginning to change hue. The girl herself stood stiffly, eyes closed, her body now bare. Sweat poured down her skin. And her orange hue began to shift toward the grey of the Denebian.

The others were following. One by one, as they achieved control over their Test-color. First to follow was the Spican, then the Alpherazian.

Why can't I do that? Hollinrede thought wildly.

He strained to alter the color of his black, but it remained unchanged. The others were blending, now, swirling around; there was a predominantly grey cast, but it was not the grey of the Denebian but a different grey tending toward white. Impatiently he redoubled his efforts; it was necessary for the success of the group that he get his obstinate black to blend with the rest.

"The black remains aloof," someone said near him.

"We will fail if the black does not join us."

His streak of color now stood out boldly against the increasing milkiness of the others. None of the original colors were left now but his. Perspiration streamed down him; he realized that his was the only stumbling-block remaining to the seven's passing the test.

"The black still will not join us," a tense voice said.

Another said, "The black is a color of evil."

A third said, "Black is not a color at all. Black is the absence of color; white is the totality of color."

A fourth said, "Black is holding us from the white."

Hollinrede looked from one to the other in mute appeal. Veins stood out on his forehead from the effort, but the black remained unchanging. He could not blend it with the

From above came the voice of their examiner, suddenly accusing: "Black is the color of murder."

The girl from Dudhe, liting the ugly words lightly, repeat-

ed it. "Black is the color of murder."

"Can we permit a murderer among us?" asked the Denebian.

"The answer is self-evident," said the Spican, indicating the recalcitrant spear of black that marred the otherwise flawless globe of neat-white in their midst.

"The murderer must be cast out ere the Test be passed," muttered the giant of Fondelfor. He broke from his position and moved menacingly toward Hollinrede.

"Look!" Hollinrede yelled desperately. "Look at the red!"

The giant's color had split from the grey and now darted wildly toward Hollinrede's black.

"This is the wrong way, then," the giant said, halting. "We must all join in it or we all fail."

"Keep away from me," Hollinrede said. "It's not my fault if—"

Then they were on him—four pairs of hands, two rough claws, two slick tentacles. Hollinrede felt himself being lifted aloft. He squirmed, tried to break from their grasp, but they held him up—

And dashed him down against the harsh rock floor.

He lay there, feeling his life seep out, knowing he had failed—and watched as they returned to re-form their circle. The black winked out of being.

As his eyes started to close, Hollinrede saw the six colors again blend into one. Now that the murderer had been cast from their midst, nothing barred the path of their harmony. Pearly grey shifted to purest white—the totality of color—and as the six merged into one, Hollinrede, with his dying glance, bitterly saw them take leave forever of their bodies and slip upward to join their brothers hovering brightly above.

THE END

FINAL TROPHY

by HARLAN ELLISON

illustrated by EMSH

No matter how tough a hunter may be, there's always a souvenir of the safari that costs too much. — Trapped on Ristable, Derr found to his horror — he had to pay!

IT was the strangest trophy of them all. Hanging there in the main club room of the Trottersmen, it was a grim reminder that the members were not *all* idle playboys who had bought their memberships with lackey-shot hides from Africa or the mild blue mist-jungles of Todopus III. It was a strange trophy, very much out of place —yet not at all out of place, somehow—plaque-mounted between a hardeebeast and a szlygor.

It had been Nathaniel Derr's final grant to his club. The visitor (invited down for the weekly cocktail party) to the

Trottersmen's gallery, could walk through room after room, filled to taxidermiously bulging degree with the booty of two hundred hunting expeditions Derr had engaged. The visitor (whether he be hip-booted spacer or effete dignitary) could marvel at the degree of wildlife Derr had mastered. The photoblox showed him straddling dead gorilla and lion, butchered gazelle and puma. The skins with the Derr emblem burned into them ranged from cheetah and javelina to deeler and ferri-cat. The mounted heads were awesome: bull elephant, and prest-



asour, king cobra and desert wolf. Derr had been more than a hunter, that was obvious.

Derr had been something of a fanatic about hunting; perhaps even a butcher, though no one would say out loud about a man who had left the Trottersmen almost a million dollars.

And that trophy.

But if the visitor was in particularly well with his hosts, and if they had all taken one stingeree too many, and if the visitor pumped assiduously, the Trottersmen might just tell him the story behind that final trophy.

The story about Derr's last conquest. And of his visit to the planet of Ristable.

THE day, like all the days since he had arrived on Ristable, was too placid for Derr. Had the planet sported twenty-mile-an-hour gales, or freezing snowstorms, or unbearable heat as in the veldt . . . then he would have gladly suffered, and even reveled in it. For that was the hunter's environment.

But this baby-bath of a

world was serene, and calm, and unflurried.

Nathaniel Derr was a man who liked his hunter status to be unchallenged, even by the climate.

He stared out of the slowly-moving half-track truck, watching the waist-high, unbroken, ever-and-ever-as-far-as-the-eye-could-see, plains of dull russet grass whisper past. He felt the faint stirring of the vagary winds as they ruffled his thick, clotted grey hair.

Derr was a big man. Big of chest. Big of hand. Big even in the way he watched, and the way he fondled the stet-rifle. As though the gun had been born, grafted to him, when he had been born.

His eyes had the tell-tale wrinkles around them that labeled him a watcher. Either in a stand of grass, or in the bush, or waiting for a flight of mallards to honk overhead, he was a watcher. Again, there was something else, less simple, in his face.

A hunter's face . . .

. . . but something else, too.

"Ayyy," he chivvied the nut-brown native who drove the

half-track. The native's oblong head turned slightly, inclined an ear, and Derr asked, "What is this we're going to?"

The native's voice was deep and throaty, a typical Ristabite tone. "Ristable, *shasir* Derr," the native answered, turning back to the driving.

Derr let his heavy features settle down into a frown. The word "ristable" seemed to mean many things on this planet. First it meant "home" as the name of the world, and now it was the name of a ceremony or something he was about to attend. He had heard it used in several other ways, also, during the past week.

Nathaniel Derr turned his thoughts inward momentarily, as the half-track rolled over the grassland. The past week; he dwelled on it sequentially.

When he had applied to the Mercantile System for supercargo passage on a liner out to the stars, he had hoped for bigger hunts, better kills, finer trophies. But though it had cost him more for this one trip than all the safaris he had staged on Earth—and they were many, many—so far he had landed **nothing but a bust.**

Oh, it had been exciting, of course. The Mercantile System had complete jurisdiction out here (had had it, in fact, for over eighty years) and he was lucky to be one of the first persons allowed on their exclusive guided tours, but for that much money...there should have been something spectacular. The szlygor he had bagged on Haggadore was a puny thing...even though it had ripped three of his bearers before he'd gotten the 50.50 charge into the beast's brain. The prestausor was big, but too cumbersome to have been any real threat. The ferrl-cat and the dealer had been the roughest. The dealer was more an asp than a spider, but there had been the deadliest facets of both before he had slit its hood with his vibro-blade, and immobilized it. The ferrl-cat had dropped from a feathery-leafed tree on Yawmac, and it was proof indeed that his age was no deterrent to great strength, that he had strangled the fearsome yellow feline. Even so, the vibrant surge of the real thing had been absent. Perhaps he expected too much.

But Ristable was just too

dead, *too* boring, *too* unexciting. He knew the regular stops on his hunting tour were the same as the merc-ship's trading stops, and he had to take pot-luck from that planet's wild-life. . . but Ristable was a total loss.

THE planet was an old one.

So ancient, all mountains had long since flattened away. Now the oceans were broken by undisturbed grassland, swaying from one continent end to the other. The natives were simple, uncomplicated agrarian folk, who just happened to produce from their grasses a salt-substitute much enjoyed by gourmets on Earth, and worth all the plasteel hoes and rakes the merc-ships could trade.

So he was here on Ristable, where the rubble of the glorious ancient cities lay at the edges of the grasslands, cared for by the natives, slowly joining the dirt from which they had come. While the universe swirled silently.

The past week had been one of utter boredom, while the natives went about their haggling, the merc-ship's crew stretched

and mildly leched, and the big red sun Sayto undulated across the sky.

No hunting, too much sleeping, and a growing disgust at the slothful natives. It was true they were anxious to learn about civilization—take the driver of this half-track—but though they mimicked the Earthmen's ways, still they were farmers, slow and dull. He had watched them all week, tending their farms, having community feasts, and taking care of the animals that lived out on the grass plains.

In fact, today had been the first break in the monotony. Nerrows, the Captain of the merc-ship, had come to him that morning, and offered him a chance to see a "ristable."

"I thought that was the name of the planet?" Derr had asked, pulling on his bush-boots.

Nerrows had thumbed his cap back on his crewcut head, and his slim face had broken lightly in a smile. "When these people come up with a good word, Derr, they don't let it go easily. Yeah, that's right. The planet *is* ristable, but so are the animals out there," he

jerked a thumb at the outside lying the other side of the hut, "and so is the ceremony they have once a week...ristable, that is."

Derr had perked up sharply. "What ceremony?"

Nerrows smiled again, and said, "You know what the word 'ristable' means in this usage? I didn't think so: it means, literally, 'Kill Day'. Want to take it in? The ship won't be unsaddled here more than a couple days, so you'd better take in all you can."

Derr stood up, smoothing out his hunt-jacket, slipping into it, sealing it shut. "Is it safe? They won't try to lynch me for observing the secret ceremony, or anything?"

Nerrows waved away the worried comment. "Safest planet on our route. These people haven't had wars since before man was born. You're completely safe, Derr."

The hunter clapped the captain on his thin shoulders, wondering inwardly how such a scrawny sample could get to be a merc-ship officer...he'd never make it where it counted...as a hunter. "Okay, Captain, thanks a lot. Got someone

who can direct me out there?"

So here he was, with a nut-brown native, whose unpronounceable name was as fantastic as the "kill-day" he was about to witness.

Derr tapped the native again. "How much further?"

The native's horny shoulders bobbed. "Ten, 'leven mile, *shasir* Derr. Big ristable today."

Derr pulled a black cigar from the cartridge ring, one of ten, that were rowed across his jacket. He lit it. Drew deeply. He never kept extra cartridges in the rings; if he hadn't bagged the quarry by the time the stet-rifle was empty, Derr felt he deserved to die. That was his philosophy. He drew down on the black cigar, let a heavy cloud of smoke billow up over his head, lose itself mistily in the clear blue day.

THEY drove silently, half-smoothly, as the merc-ship's half-track eased steadily out into the grasslands. At one point they passed a tumbled pile of rubble, and Derr recognized it as another of the lost cities of Ristable. The faintly pink columns rose spiralling.

then broke with ragged abruptness. Strangely-pyramided structures split down the middle. Carved figures with smashed noses, broken arms, shattered forms...forms which could not really be understood...humanoid or something else?

The ruined city with huge clumps of grass growing up in its middle, settled past, and Derr crossed his legs in the back seat. "Those cities," he said to the native driving, "who made them?" It was reasonably obvious these semi-savages hadn't done the intricate crafting of those figures.

The native shrugged. "Don't know. Ristable."

Ristable again. Were these people so devoid of ingenuity, they had to repeat the same word over and over again? What, he asked himself, could their ceremony be expected to prove if they were so disgustingly unimaginative even in their language...

He found out soon enough, for the half-track passed walking natives, heading toward a plume of grey smoke that twisted out of the grasslands ahead. Eventually, they drew

up on the edge of a widely-cleared dirt area. Surrounded by the waist-high russet grass on all sides, it was like a bald spot on someone's head. The dirt was packed solid and hard with the footprints of a hundred thousand natives. Even as Derr watched, the crowd that had gathered already, swelled at its edges.

Strangely enough, a path quite wide and straight was left in the circle of natives, leading out to the grasslands.

"What's that?" Derr asked the driver, motioning to the circle, to the path, to the natives watching at nothing. The native motioned him to silence, and Derr realized, for the first time, that there wasn't a sound in the crowd. How unnatural it was; the dead nothing that rode the wind sounds. The natives, male and female, children and old dark-brown crones, stood silently, shifting foot, shifting eye, but not speaking.

"Come on, boy, open up," Derr prodded the native angrily. "What's this whole thing...what's that path there...?"

The native spun around, looked at Derr for a moment

in annoyance and high anger, and then vaulted out of the half-track. In a moment he was lost in the crowd. When he said "quiet" he meant just that.

DERR had no other choice: he slung the stet-rifle to his back, and slid up onto the separating bar between the driver's cab and the back seat, getting a better view of what was happening.

What was happening, as he settled himself, was that a medium-sized animal—the ones taken care of by the natives, and labeled, inevitably, ristables—was loping in from the grasslands, on six double-jointed legs.

It was the size of a large horse, or small black bear. It was dull grey in color, mottled with whiteish spots along the under-hide. It was massive chested, and built the way a dinosaur might have been. Smooth front that rose straight up to a triangular head with huge, pocketed eyes set far on each side of the head. The back sloped down sharply at 45 degrees, ending in a horny-tip. The head was darker grey, and

had one gigantic unicorn-like horn protruding from a space midway between the eyes. No... as Derr watched it coming closer, he saw that the horn was not single; following the laws of nature, there was a smaller, less apparent horn stuck down near the base of the first.

The beast also had two groups of vestigial tentacles, appearing to be six or eight to a cluster; one on either side of its body, halfway up the massive neck.

This was a ristable. As everything was ristable.

The beast charged down the path between the natives, much like a bull entering a Spanish arena, and stopped in the center, its little red eyes glaring about, the two front paws clopping at the dirt, leaving furrows.

Abruptly, a native stepped out of the crowd, and removed all his clothing—little enough to begin with—and called to the animal (Derr continued to think of it as a bull, for no good reason, except this seemed to be a bullfight), clapping his hands, stamping his feet.

Bullfight, Derr thought

startledly. *This is more like it. And, I'll get one of those animals for the collection, I've got to have it, somehow.* Then he thought, *Ristable. Kill Day.*

The native moved slowly, letting the beast edge in on him, pawing and snorting through a pair of breather holes below the horns. Then the native leaped in the air, and chanted something unintelligible. As he came down in the dirt, the animal moved sharply, and charged across the cleared space. People in it's line of charge stepped back quickly, and the native moved aside quickly, also.

It went that way for over an hour.

The ristable charged, and the native leaped out of its path. Then, when Derr was convinced it would go on this way till darkness fell...the method changed. Radically.

The native settled down in the dirt, and clasped his hands to his chest. He settled down, and the bull charged. He settled down...and...

Great God! thought Derr in horror, *he's sitting there, let-*

ting it gore him. He's, he's, he's...

Then it was over, and they carried the native away, as the ristable loped back down the human-sided path to the grassland.

Derr slipped back into the half-track, bewildered; and sometime later, though Derr was unaware of it, the native came to the truck, stared at him silently for a few seconds, then vaulted over the low door, and started the engine.

Derr stirred slightly as the half-track rolled away from the cleared space. His eyes registered that the dirt was wetter than when they had come, and darker, and that the rest of the natives were walking swiftly back toward the village...c a r r y i n g something sodden...but he seemed to be far lost in thought.

It seemed ridiculous. The native had gone out to fight the ristable. But the ristable had won. For no apparent reason. And the hunter that was more Nathaniel Derr than he knew, was forming a plan.

The half-track passed the natives, and arrived in town an

hour before the sodden cargo was brought in, finally laid to rest, alongside hundreds of other such graves.

"I'M not going on with you, Nerrows," Derr said.

The merc-ship's captain, worried, replied, "You know we'll be heading out to the next worlds—Artemis, Shoista, La-look, Coastal II—and we won't be able to pick you up for almost three months." He stared at Derr with a complexity of annoyance mirrored in his eyes.

"I know that."

"Then why do you want to stay?"

"There's a trophy here I want to get."

Nerrows' eyes slitted down. "Watch that stuff, Derr."

"No, no, nothing like that. The ritable."

"You mean the animal out there in the fields, the one they go to fight every week?"

Derr nodded, checked the stet-rifle, though he was not going hunting for a while yet. "That's it. But there's something those natives don't know."

"What's that?"

"How to kill it."

"What are you talking about?"

Derr settled back on the cot, looked at Nerrows carefully, "I talked to some of the natives when I got back yesterday from that ceremony. You know something, they go out every week, to fight the ritable."

"So?"

"The only thing wrong with it is that they always lose."

"Always?"

"Every damned time. They haven't won a bout with the beast for as long as they can remember. Do you know that they plant their dead in rows of two hundred?"

The captain nodded, "Yes, I've noticed that."

Derr pulled a cigar loose, lit it, smiled grimly: "But there's something you *didn't* know... namely, they plant rows on *top* of the rows. What's out there now," he waved at the native cemetery, "is the five hundredth generation, or something like that. They've been fighting the ritable, dying regularly, and being planted for time beyond memory."

The captain looked bemused, more than confused. "The best fertilizer, they tell me."

"Ah, that's just it," Derr waved the cigar melodramatically. "They've been winding up like that for centuries...without once winning."

"Don't they *want* to win?"

Derr looked perplexed for a moment, spread his hands in absence of logic. "From what I can tell, from what I was able to get out of the Headsman, they just don't know any other way. They've been doing that way, *just* that way, since before they can remember, and they don't know why. I asked the Headsman, and he stared at me like I'd asked him why he breathed.

"Then he answered me that it was just the way things were; that's all."

NERROWS scuffed his feet at the hard-packed floor of the hut. He looked up at Derr finally, "What's that got to do with you?"

Derr grinned widely, then ran a hand through the heavy clog of his white hair. "I want to kill a pack of wolves with one charge, so to speak."

Nerrows cocked an eyebrow at the hunter in confusion.

Derr went on, "I came out here to bag game that tops all the game on Earth. This is the first planet I've hit where there's any real excitement. Just think—I can be the first man to kill a ristable. I'll have a photoblok made up, and I'll have the pelt preserved, stamped with my crest...I'll have the head stuffed.

"But more than just the pleasure of killing a ristable—when I think of that charging horn, I get a jump in my belly like the first time I faced a half-crazy bull elephant—I'll show these stupid natives something. They've been letting themselves get killed for so long, they just take it as destiny now. When I show them how to kill one of those filthy beasts—I think I'll just take it with a bush-blade—they'll realize there's another end to the sport."

"But," Nerrows interrupted, noticing with unease the gleam of the hunt in Derr's eyes, "if they keep getting killed, why do they continue to go out there every week, and offer

themselves up? Is it ritual?"

Derr shrugged. "I suppose so. But it doesn't really matter. Ristable one of these days is going to be different; I got the permission of the Headman to go into the cleared space, in place of a native some week soon. He thought I was nuts, but he'll soon see how an Earthman fights!"

Nerrows stood up, extended his hand. "Well, we'll be back along this trail in three or four months, depending on the loading conditions along the line.

"Take care of yourself, Mr. Derr, we'd have a hard time explaining to Earth what happened to its favorite White Hunter."

Derr gripped the spacer's hand for a moment, grinned at him roughly, and shoved him toward the hut's opening with friendly heaviness.

"Don't worry about me," he reassured the merc-ship's captain, "I'm out to get myself a real trophy.

"And I will, too, you wait and see." He fingered the knife in its sheath at his left armpit. He patted it with assurance.

"Yes sir," he repeated at the retreating back of the spacer, "a real, honest-to-God trophy!"

OBSERVATION had proven the case: They never won. They seemed to *allow* themselves to be gored. For ten weeks Derr had watched them getting mauled and bloodied and ripped and killed. He had seen ten new graves laid in line, and now *his* week was here. Stripped to the waist, clad only in a breechclout, the ornately-carved bush-knife in his thick, square hand, Nathaniel Derr moved into the cleared space to face his first ristable.

He didn't have long to wait, as the natives before him had not had long to wait.

The beast loped in from the grasslands almost immediately, passing down the human-sided path without touching anyone. *Strange how it seems to know who it's to fight, and not bother any others,* he thought, hefting the razor-bladed weapon. Sweat had begun to stand out on his face, and the smooth handle of the knife felt slippery in his grip. He dried his

hand quickly on his breech-clout, and took the knife again. In killer's grip. In upward-slash grip.

In ready grip, to win grip.

The ristable lumbered into the clearing, and Derr made note that it was not the one he had seen the week before last, nor the week before that, nor last week. Each week seemed to bring another beast—at some unknown, unbidden signal—ready to gore a nut-brown native with that deadly, alabaster horn.

Derr circled around the edge of the clearing, feeling the heat-stink of the natives behind him. The beast pawed and circled, too, as though uncertain.

Then it charged. It shot forward on six double-jointed legs, its tentacle clusters flailing, its head lowered, the breath snorting from its breather holes furiously.

Derr spun out of the way. The beast pulled up short before ramming the crowd.

It turned on him, stared with red little eyes.

Derr stared back, breath coming sharply, shortly, with-

out that much difficulty that another leap could not be effected. He felt good; he felt fine; he felt the kill coming. It was always like this. This was the good thing. The hunt feeling.

The ristable lurched forward again, this time seeming to make a short, sharp, ballet-like sidestepping movement. Derr had to be quick. He managed to twirl himself past the beast with only a scant inch between his Earthman flesh and that bone-white horn of flesh as hard as bone.

The ristable brought up sharply, stopped, passed its own end, turned, and glared at Derr.

This was the *pojar*, the way the natives called it. The time to stop and sit down and be killed. So Derr sat down, in the manner he had seen the natives do it. . .and oddly, the crowd exhaled with relief.

The ristable pawed, snorted, charged.

It was coming, coming, coming, larger than the world as it speeds toward its own sun, larger than life, larger than the universe which contained it,

and suddenly, Derr was up, thrusting himself from the dirt with the strength of his legs, and the ristable could not stop its movement, and it was past the spot where Derr had squatted, its horn brushing the air viciously where Derr's chest had been a moment before.

But Derr was not there to die.

He was whirling, clutching, and in a stride and a breath, he was on the ristable's back, and the knife hand came up, with a slash and the blood, and down with a thud and the blood, and back again with a rip and more blood, and three times more, till the ristable convulsed and failed to get off a bellow, and tipped over, its legs failing their precision step.

Derr leaped free, as the ristable collapsed to the dirt. He watched in silence and power, the awe and fury of the triumphant hunter flowing in him like red, rich wine, and watched as his trophy bled itself to death on the sand.

It died soon enough.

The natives seized him.

Then when they had him tied in the hut at the edge of

the village, and he knew he was to die, the Headsman told him...

"You have killed the ristable. You will die."

HE called for the Headsman, the day he was to go to the ristable, to die, tied between two poles set deep into Ristable's soil. He called, and the Headsman thought it was for a final wish, a boon. But it was not, for this was not a Ristabite, this was the Earthman who had not known the way of it, and who had killed the god ristable.

"Look," Derr tried to be calm and logical, "tell me why I'm to die. I don't know. Can't you see, if I'm to die, I must know *why!*"

So the Headsman drew from tribal legend, from memories buried so deeply they were feelings in the blood without word or meaning actually, but which made up "the way of it."

And this was it...this was the secret behind it, that wasn't really a secret at all, but just the way of it:

Who rules who? Take the blood in your veins. How do

you know that at one time the blood was the dominant life form of Earth, ruling its physical bodies, using them as tools. Then, as time and the aeons passed, the blood turned its thoughts to other things, maintaining the bodies merely as habitations.

It could be so. . . if the blood ruled you, and not you the blood, it could be so. The last thing you would do, under any circumstances, is spill your blood. Don't you wince when you bleed, when you cut yourself, and you rush to bandage yourself. What if it were so, and you had lost the racial memory that said I am ruled by my blood. . . but you would know the way of it.

That was how it was on Ristable. At one time the bulls, the ristable beasts, ruled the natives. They built the cities with what were now atrophied tentacles. Then as the aeons passed, they turned to the higher things, and went to graze in the fields, and let the natives feed them, and the cities rot into themselves.

As time passed, the memories passed—oh, it was a long

time; long enough for the mountains of Ristable to sink into grasslands—and eventually the natives had no recollection of what they had been, not even considering themselves ruled, so long and so buried was it. Then they took care of the ristables, and one last vestige of caste remained, for the bulls accepted sacrifices. The natives went to die. . . and one a week was put beneath the sod. . . and that was the way of it.

So deep and so inbred, that there was not even a conscious thought of it; that was simply the way of it.

But there was a stupid Earthman who had not known the way of it. He had won. So he had killed a god, a ruler, deeper than any rule that ever existed. . . and he must now die in only partial reparations.

"So if there is anything I can grant," said the Headsman of the natives, in true sorrow, for he bore this Earthman no malice, "just name it."

And Nathaniel Derr, the great white hunter from Earth, thought, and the bitterness of his life with gun and knife

came to wash his mouth with the sourness of waste.

Finally, as they untied him, taking him to the cleared area outside the village where he had killed the god ruler, the final twist came to him. Then he made his request, knowing the Mercantile Ship would come months too late, and there was nothing to be done.

He made his request, and they tied him between the posts, and finally the new ristable came, with its snow horn lowered, and fire in its eyes.

He watched the ristable pawing and snorting and charging, and he knew his request would be carried out.

How strange, he thought, as the tip of the horn plunged deep to the softness that lies within all hard men. *Of all the trophies I've gathered, I should be the final trophy.*

Then there was no thought of trophies...

SO there it is, hanging between the hardeebeast and the szlygor in the Trottersmen's room. There was no choice about hanging it; after all, a million dollars *was* a million dollars. But it did give the members a chill of hell.

Still, there it hung, and usually the room was closed off. But occasionally, if drinks were many, and wit was abundant, the tale would be told. Perhaps not always with accuracy, but always with wonder.

Because it *was* a marvelous job of taxidermy.

There were even members who were willing to pay to find out how the Ristabite natives who had done the job were able to retain the clean white color of the hair...

...and that damned *watchfulness* of the eyes.

THE END



DESIRE WOMAN

by HENRY SLESAR

illustrated by ORBAN

What is a man's desire? Sometimes it's something that his wife doesn't guess and at the same time something that she actually ought to have known very, very well

SHE had heard nothing but ugly rumors all week, and Clarissa was determined to forget them. On the second day of Mack's return from Tradeport Four in the Andromeda Group, she cornered her husband and said:

"Mack, darling. Let's celebrate tonight. It's been a whole year. . ."

"I thought we'd stay home," Mack grunted. "I'm not used to Earthways yet, Clarissa. I have to acclimatize."

She pouted. "I was planning such a fun evening. I thought we'd go to the Pantheon Club. Remember how you used to love Rome?"

"I want to stay *here*." He was frowning; the frown hadn't left his face since his return, except for the one wan smile he had given his wife at the spaceport.

"Space hasn't changed *you*," she said unhappily. Then she said a great deal more, and Mack's long face, with its deeply-etched lines stretching elastically from eyebrows to chin, grew sad and distant. Clarissa's arguments continued, while her eyes studied their effects upon the revealing motions of his wide mouth.

She won, of course. They would go to the Pantheon, and dine and dance amid the ruins



of Santa Maria Rotonda. They would have a perfectly marvelous time, and their gay attitudes would be evidence to the social world that Mack Mahon's journey to Tradepost Four had not been a suspicious failure.

At six-thirty, she seated herself at the elaborate dressing table and made preparations. As she rubbed Scalp Cream over her smoothly shaven head, she thought of the morning's visiphone call from Sherry Meredith.

"Clarissa, darling? I just heard that Mack's home..."

"Why, yes, sweet. It's so wonderful to see him again."

"Oh, I'm sure. I understand that his partner hasn't returned. Lewis. Has he told you what happened?"

"No. I stay out of my husband's affairs."

"Yes, of course. But you know, dear..."

"Let's have it, darling. I'm sure you're dying to ask the question everyone else has."

"Well, you have to admit. I mean, gone a whole year and not bringing back *anything*..."

CLARISSA spread the X Hormone Cream violently over her cheeks, her mouth thin and angry. But it wasn't just Sherry's curiosity which angered her. It was her own.

Gone a whole year. A ship laden with Earth valuables. A Tradepost planet famous for its wealth and gullible inhabitants (at least, that's what Crowe had reported, and it was Crowe who had made a fortune before selling out to Mack). Yet her husband returns to Earth *sans* valuables, *sans* partner, *sans* everything but a battered spacer and an older face.

Clarissa shrugged, and slipped the emerald green contacts over her eyeballs, blinking in the Truedepth mirror and smiling with approval at the effect. Then she put the golden-arched wires of the Dul-Set into her mouth, adjusting the device to the contours of her palate. She cleared her throat, and said:

"How now, brown cow..."

She smiled contentedly at the smooth sound.

Next she applied tooth-paint, rubbing her tongue over the surface to remove the ex-

cess. Then she sprayed her cheeks with Velvetsheen, adding a dash of Highlight Crimson to complete the job. Her lips needed nothing, having been permanently reddened in a rather costly bit of surgery that year (Mack hadn't yet seen the bill). Then, her make-up task concluded, she pondered over an assortment of hairpieces, specially grown for her by Maximus of Dallas, and selected a raven-black page-boy to harmonize with the silver sheath dress she planned to wear.

From a closet, she wheeled out the Foundation Analyzer, plugged it in, and stepped into the cabinet. As usual, it was a bit too warm for comfort. After a while, a bell rang and she stepped out, removing the newly-shaped garment the Analyzer had produced to give her figure perfection.

Mack appeared in the doorway.

"Clarissa. . ."

"Yes, dear?"

"I know it's late, but—can I possibly convince you to change your mind? About the Pantheon?"

She smiled indulgently, and spoke like a wise parent. "Now, Mack, you get dressed. You'll see how much good it does you to see people again. I mean, you've been living with absolute savages for so long. . ."

His voice was a cracking whip. "You don't know anything about it."

"Whatever you say, dear. But it's much too late to cancel our reservation now. . ."

His shoulders slumped. "Then I better get started."

In the jet-taxi, halfway across the Atlantic, Clarissa finally broached the subject on her mind.

"I know you don't like to talk about it, darling. But what did you say 'happened to Lewis?'"

"I didn't say anything *happened* to him. I just said he didn't come back. I'll see him in a couple of months, when I go back."

"Was he ill? Is that why?"

"No."

"Was there something he didn't want to come back *to*?"

"Perhaps." The ocean was glittering like coruscating

gems, but Mack's eyes were on the clouded skies.

"Well, you're not being very helpful."

"He didn't *want* to come back. What could be plainer?"

"Was it because of the trading? Because you weren't coming back with anything?"

He didn't answer.

"Mack!" Even the Dul-Set couldn't keep the shrillness out of her voice. "Is that all you're going to say about it? Am I supposed to keep my mouth shut and let people laugh at us? Am I?"

He didn't answer.

CLARISSA had a wonderful time at the Pantheon Club.

As for Mack, he got sickeningly drunk.

At first, his wife was disgusted at the spectacle, but as his limp form was deposited in an awkward heap in the rear of the jet-taxi, she recognized an opportunity.

"Mack. Mack, wake up! Wake up, you pig!" There was something oozing out of the side of his mouth, and his thin sandy hair was tumbled over his forehead. He looked rather

like an unhappy child at the moment, but the resemblance evinced no maternal feeling from Clarissa.

"For God's sake, Mack!" She slapped his cheek.

"What is it? What is it?" he mumbled.

She thought shrewdly. "Finish what you were saying."

"'Bout what? Saying about what?" He tried to close his eyes, but she was shaking him now.

"About the trading. You were telling me about what happened on T-4."

"Trading..." His head bobbed. "Made a good trade... bargain..."

"What kind of a bargain, Mack? What did you get for all you gave? Mack!"

"Wonderful bargain. Best bargain I ever..." His head dropped to his chest, but Clarissa was relentless.

"Mack! What did you get for everything? Where is it? Did you bring it back?"

"No. No," her husband said. "Couldn't bring it back... had to leave it... best bargain I ever had..."

"You left it? Left it on

Trade-post Four?" Her voice was climbing an hysterical ladder. "Are you crazy? Did you go out of your mind up there?"

But he was asleep, and the pilot of the jet-taxi was watching.

"Poor darling," Clarissa crooned. "Poor tired darling..."

She put him to bed when they arrived home, almost tenderly, suddenly pleased by the utterly simple explanation. Why, the trading had been a success after all. It was simply a matter of transport...

But before he went off to sleep, Mack Mahon's eyes opened and regarded her for a moment of chilling clarity. And the look he gave her was like a door closing permanently between them.

A week later, she got Sherry Meredith on the visiphone, and asked a casual question.

"Sherry, dear. Remember when you got your divorce? The first one, I mean. From Harold."

Sherry wasn't pleased at the reminder. "What about Har-

old?" she asked frostily.

"I seem to remember something about a Private Hy you used. You know."

"The hypnotist? But that's so long ago, honey. You can't expect me to—" Then she smelled scandal. "Why, dear? You having doubts about Mack?"

"Maybe." Clarissa was smiling; this was going to be easy. "I mean, that fellow you hired found out all about that Corrigan woman so easily... I was wondering if you remembered his name."

The woman in the visiplat gasped. "Why, Clarissa! You mean Mack is playing around? He's been away a whole year. I mean, how did he ever find the time—"

"His name, darling."

"Simon," Sherry said, leaning forward confidentially. "T. Frederick Simon. He's *very* good."

"Thanks, honey," Clarissa said sweetly. "Thank you very much..."

She found Simon listed openly in the Directory, merely as a Private Investigator, with no mention of his particular meth-

od or talent. She buzzed him on the visiphone, and after a brief conversation, realized that he was willing to accept the assignment right then and there.

"You will be discreet?" she said.

The man in the image had a jolly, rubbery face, and he contorted it into a look of dignity.

"Discretion is our way of life, Mrs. Mahon. You can rest assured. Your husband will never know he's been probed. We'll give you a detailed report within the week."

Simon was as good as his word. He called at her home four days later, on a morning when Mack was out. He looked bigger and jollier than he had on the visiphone, and he seemed proud of the sizeable pouch that preceded him.

"Here's exactly what happened," he told her. "First, I sent my assistant to, er, determine your husband's diurnal habit patterns. That's a technical process I won't trouble you with. . ."

"You mean you trailed him?" Clarissa said.

The big man bristled. "It's a

great deal more scientific than that. After we had determined the best point for the initial contact—it happened to be a lunch counter—I personally went on the job, and made casual conversation with him. I found him rather phlegmatic, and appraised him as Type Three. That means, in our business, that he is a rather difficult subject for hypnotism. But we have our methods. . ."

"Dope in his coffee?"

"Mrs. Mahon!" The Private Hy was shocked. "You make it sound very crude. At any rate, I managed to make the first contact, and left him with a post-hypnotic suggestion to call at my office at four. He did so.

"The rest, of course, was simplicity itself. I merely completed the hypnotic probe, got him to answer our questions, and sent him off convinced that he had spent the last hour watching a construction job on Lower Broadway."

Simon folded his hands over his stomach, and smiled like a satisfied Buddha.

"Well?" Clarissa said harshly. "What did you find out?"

"You'll get a complete writ-

ten report. All file copies will be destroyed; have no fear of that. But I can give you an informal recap of the situation."

"You do that," the woman said acidly.

He fingered some notes. "We don't know her name, I'm afraid. At least, we couldn't make out the name he gave us. He wasn't too cooperative about the details. But we have a general description, and we believe we can. . ."

"*What?*" Clarissa was on her feet.

"...tell you what you want to know," the man finished lamely. "Is there something wrong, Mrs. Mahon?"

"What are you talking about? I asked you to find out about my husband's trading activities on T-4. I wanted to know what he's keeping up there. . ."

Simon blinked. "But Mrs. Mahon. That's just what I *am* telling you. He's keeping a woman up there."

She sat down again, heavily.

"As a matter of fact," the investigator said blandly, "that's what he *traded* everything for."

SHE spent an hour with Simon, learning everything he had probed out of her husband's mind. Most of it was unsatisfactorily vague, but there was enough to make her reach a decision.

"Mr. Simon," she said abruptly. "A man in your business must know a lot of things."

"Well, yes, I suppose you could say that."

"Could you get someone—a woman, I mean—up to a Tradepost?"

"Well, that's a poser." Simon scratched his chin. "I never did anything quite like that. But I imagine with enough—ingenuity—it could be done. Why?" he finished naively.

"I'm sure you know what I'm talking about."

"Maybe. But something like that can be expensive. . ."

"I didn't ask your price yet. I want to know how it might be managed."

The investigator thought for a while. "Only one thing comes to mind, off hand. And you probably won't like the idea."

"Let me judge that. What is it?"

"Well...there's the so-called bum boat, of course."

Clarissa's hand went to her throat, and her cheeks reddened even further under the makeup. "You've got your nerve."

"You'll have to admit that's the easiest way. I mean, you don't have to be one of the..." He rubbed his mouth. "Well, you know what I mean. One of *them*. You can simply use the bum boat for transportation. Once you get to Mars, or the satellite station on Jupiter, you can...well, I think I know the right people to see after that."

"All right," Clarissa said, her eyes shut. "When can I start? Could it be in the next two weeks? My husband is leaving for T-4 in three days."

"It'll cost," the big man warned. "It's not the most accessible place in the universe. Except for Crowe, and your husband, I don't think anyone's bothered setting up a trading schedule there."

"I don't *care* what it costs."

"Then let me see what I can do. I'll keep you posted. All right?"

"All right," Clarissa said.

MACK departed on the sixth of the month. Ten days later, Clarissa Mahon packed a trunk, secreted a large amount of money in a hidden compartment, and removed any symbol of wealth or class from her person.

It had been easy to locate the advertisement in the local paper, the cryptically-worded classified whose purpose was recognized readily by a large group of women. An "Interplanetary Service Company" had available "selective positions" with an opportunity for "travel and adventure." The Earth's law agencies, and the newspapers themselves, knew full well the purpose of the "service company," and knew the kind of women who would respond to the lure. But it was a necessary evil in a universe where men were far-flung, and women too far away.

Clarissa was accepted readily, without questions about "previous experience" or "qualifications." She was a woman, and attractive, and relatively young. The bum boat welcomed her.

She kept apart from her fel-

low passengers throughout the long voyage to Mars. Hers was a different errand, of course; she had nothing but contempt for theirs. But her greatest source of annoyance was that these women of doubtful morality so easily accepted her as one of their own.

At the Martian spaceport, she was met by a sallow-faced man who introduced himself as Smith, and mentioned that Mr. Simon had asked him to see to her welfare.

She spent two frustrating weeks underground on the cold planet, waiting for Mr. Smith to make the necessary connections. Finally, word came through. A lightship was making a journey to the Andromeda group, and after certain technical difficulties were removed ("How much?" Clarissa asked coldly) they would be on their way.

THEN all terms were agreed upon, and she was on her way to Tradeport Four.

The pilot, a gruff, one-eyed veteran named Briggs, said:

"You Mahon's wife?"

"Yes. Listen, I don't want

him to know about this. It's a sort of—surprise visit."

"Don't worry. I got the story straight from Snotty. I plan to arrange an 'emergency' stop on T-4. Nobody'll know."

He handled it well. When they approached the minor planet, and radioed for landing instruction, the inhabitants expected nothing more than a trader in trouble. And in the anonymous space gear, Clarissa Mahon could have passed easily for Briggs' male partner.

The natives of T-4 were humanoid. The curious group at the jerrybuilt spaceport watched the arrival of the lightship with wide-eyed interest. They were impossibly thin, hairless, and the color of damp stone. Their flesh was shiny, and stretched drumskin tight over their narrow bone structure. None of them spoke an Earth tongue, but the pilot called upon a lifetime of experience and made himself understood.

Finally, they secured an audience with a stooped specimen who was obviously an Elder of the small world.

"You speak Earth talk?" the pilot said.

"I speak," the Elder nodded. "Crowe teaches, and brings us Earth things. Man Mahon come, and teaches as well. You will trade with us?"

"No," Briggs said. "I don't trade. I had some trouble with my ship. Forced to land. Where is Trader Mahon?"

The old man waved an arm. "On the other side of long land stretch. In Earth house, he live with the woman Esara."

Clarissa gasped, and clutched the pilot's arm.

"Tell him we want to go there!"

The Elder shrugged when he heard the request, as if it mattered not at all to him.

"Ask him who the woman is," Clarissa urged. "Is she from Earth?" She looked at the natives with evident loathing. "Mack couldn't be living with one of *them*..."

"Who is the woman?" Briggs asked. "Who is Esara?"

THE squad found the herd tain gesture with his hands. "Esara," he said, having difficulty making the explanation.

"Desire-woman. We did make her for Trader Mahon, for his Earth things. We did make desire-woman for Trader Crowe, and for Trader Lewis." His old eyes gleamed. "You will make trade, and we will make desire-woman for you."

"What does he mean?" Clarissa said.

"What is a desire-woman?" the pilot asked.

The Elder moved his hands helplessly, as if the Earth words he knew were incapable of explanation.

"From river that lives," he said falteringly. "We grow. You give wish, we grow desire-woman..."

"Oh, God!" Clarissa groaned. "He can't mean that. They can't *make* people, Briggs. Can they?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Mahon. I've seen nuttier things than that..." He raised his arm. "You take us to Trader Mahon? You take us now?"

The Elder looked shrewd. "You give us Earth things?"

"Well, I dunno..."

"Tell him yes!"

"All right," Briggs said. "We'll give you Earth things.

But you must take us to Trader Mahon now."

The old one nodded with satisfaction. "Land ship will come. You will wait."

When he left them, Clarissa said: "It can't be true, Briggs. Can it? Could such a thing be?"

"I dunno, Mrs. Mahon. It could be some sort of an illusion they create. It may even be a drug they give your husband. Esara may only be in his mind..."

"I hear the inhabitants of Callisto grow new arms and legs," Briggs said grimly. "Nature has some funny tricks up her sleeve. Be ready for anything."

An odd vehicle seemed to be approaching them. It appeared to be a flat slate of some grayish substance, raised only inches from the terrain, moving without evidence of mechanical equipment. The Elder was sitting cross-legged on top, and some smaller members of the race were chasing after him, making clucking noises that might have been jeers and laughter. They were instructed to climb aboard.

THE journey was brief, and oddly terrifying. The "ship" moved smoothly over the flat plains of the planet, and then seemed to distort and bend as they approached a hilly area, molding its gray shape over the swelling surface. Briggs suggested that the thing was organic, and Clarissa shuddered.

Then they saw the house.

It might have been made of wood. There was a flat roof, and one curved transparent window extending three-quarters of the way around the building. A metallic edifice on the right side of the house indicated the presence of an oxygen supply being fed into the structure. As they came closer, they saw a fence, and Clarissa would have sworn that there were wild roses interwoven through the slats.

When the vehicle stopped, she ran towards it.

"Mrs. Mahon!" Briggs cried out a warning. "Better wait for me."

"Stay out!" she cried. "I'm going in alone!"

She went through the doorway.

When the door slammed behind her, she found herself facing a steel partition. A motor whined, and the change of pressure inside her helmet told her that oxygen was being pumped into the small enclosure between outside door and partition. She glanced at the gauge on her space suit, and then lifted off the helmet, gasping.

She touched the partition, and it slid upwards.

It was a living room.

They were standing by a window, their fingertips barely touching. Mack, and the girl, merely talking, quietly.

A torrid embrace couldn't have angered her more. The scene was far more intimate than that.

"Mack!" she shrieked.

They turned.

She saw Mack's face first. It was a terrible mixture of rage and surprise.

Then her eyes went to the girl, and she shook her head in wonderment. Was this her husband's desire-woman?

She wore a gray dress, naively simple, with a high-cut neck and wrinkles—actual wrinkles

—on the skirt. Her legs were bare, and not even depilated. There were slippers on her feet, low-heeled things of brown leather. Her hair was mousey blonde, and obviously home-grown, thrown back carelessly over her shoulders. Her lips were red enough, and there was a soft glow on her cheeks. But she wore no makeup, and you could actually see a sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her nose. And a blemish (God!). Actually a blemish, right on her chin!

Mack was aghast. "Clarissa! How in the world—"

"How could you?" she said, feeling sick. "How could you, Mack?"

ESARA turned frightened eyes on his drawn face, and she clung to his side. His arm went about her, protectively.

"Is this your treasure?" Clarissa said. "This—*thing*?"

The girl began to cry.

"Clarissa—you must leave. You must go away!"

A motor sounded again, and the partition behind her opened. It was Briggs. He

stared at the tableau, and his mouth dropped.

"Get out of here!" Clarissa shouted.

The girl stepped forward, her cheeks wet, her eyes suddenly clear and hard.

"No," she said. "You go. You go now!"

"I don't get it," Briggs said softly.

The girl came closer, and bared her teeth.

"You go—*now!*"

"My God, Mrs. Mahon!" Briggs touched her arm. "Don't you recognize her? Don't you see who it is?"

"What?" Clarissa glared at the girl, and then stepped back. "What do you mean?"

"It's *you*, Mrs. Mahon! Can't you see that?"

She stopped, and her hand flew to her mouth.

"Oh, God," Clarissa said. "It is! It is me!"

"You go now!" her double said.

"Mack! Mack!" Clarissa cried. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you let me know?"

"I couldn't, Clarissa. You wouldn't have understood—"

"You can't have *two* of us!" Her voice creaked. "You can't!"

Before their startled eyes, the girl in the gray dress made a blurred motion. Something was plucked from a table, and it glittered in a high arc as her arm swooped down. Briggs swore, and dove for her, but it was too late to halt the girl's onslaught. She thudded against Clarissa, and the two women fell to the floor. One of them screamed.

Esara dropped the metal object to the floor, and rose.

She looked at the two men, defiantly.

"There can't be two," she said.

THE END

PUSHOVER PLANET

by DON BERRY

NOVELETTE

illustrated by ORBAN

The new planet was a cinch, earth-type and ready for colonists. Then why couldn't they complete their task and blast off? Well, there was just one little thing

IT was an O.K. planet up to a point, was Macaulay's opinion. Up to when the kid got killed, everything looked real good. After that the whole trip just went to hell, and Macaulay went along, wondering why.

It wasn't the death that panicked everybody. Macaulay, for example, had been working Prelim for twelve years. After that long, a guy's seen strange planets kill lots of people, and come pretty close to getting killed himself, unless he's been luckier than he's got any right to be. After a while, a professional Prelim

worker develops an attitude of respectfully ignoring death. Death was just a thing that was around most of the time, you know, but you couldn't talk to him or anything, so you just politely ignored him and tried not to step on his toes.

Macaulay was pretty well set up for ignoring most anything he wanted. He was a big bull of a man, heavy bodied and strong. He shouldered past dangers like a man making his way through a crowd of woman shoppers, careful, but resolute. And he never could really understand why there had been so much trouble on that parti-



color Survey. The Captain was green, sure, it was his first command. But after all, the planet itself was such a push-over that Macaulay figured *anybody*, no matter how green, could have handled it. Now if it had been a real tough one, He say that Antares IV job, it would have been different, but Fennel II was as close to perfect as any Preliminary Survey Team was likely to find. Better than Terra, almost.

They had set down in a gigantic meadow, dayside. It was a real nice meadow, a gentle place, with hip-deep grass rippling slightly in the wind. From the lock it had looked like a brilliant emerald lake being stirred by a soft, fall breeze. It was probably eight or nine miles wide, with rugged mountains shooting up on the east and a thick rain forest on the west. Looking at the meadow you couldn't believe there could be much wrong with a planet that had a meadow like that on it.

In the Labs, deep in the belly of the huge ship, all the little gauges swung their point-

ers around to 1.0 Terrascale. There wasn't any significant difference until maybe two or three decimal places. It was going to be a milk run.

In the Unskilled quarters, Macaulay informed the crew of his own personal opinions, while they packed their gear.

"Six months," he said. "Six months at most. Catalogue everything we can get our hands on, figure out the ecology pattern, and go home. Paid vacation, boys."

"Maybe," said one sour individual. "I seen planets in my day looked easy, too, but you can't always tell. How the hell you know that grass ain't full of little poison things, just waiting for some Earth meat?"

"Oh, for Chrissake!" said Macaulay. "You were born with a suspicious head. You're always *looking* for trouble. You wouldn't be happy if you couldn't find something wrong, and if you couldn't find anything, you'd make something up. That right boys?" He turned to the rest of the Unskilled crewmen for confirmation. They generally agreed that was right, largely because

Macaulay had more Prelim service than any of the rest of them, and they paid their respect to his seniority. He also stood a head higher than the tallest of them.

"You just wait and see," continued Macaulay cheerfully. "Man, when you guys run into some damn clinker of a planet you have to change the whole ecology around, you'll be plenty glad to remember this one. I tell you, it's a paid vacation."

ISTRUMENT testing had been completed. The planet was as close to Terra normal as anyone could wish. The speakerbox in the crew quarters sputtered once and emitted the thin, distorted voice of Captain Thomas Penny.

"Crewmen will proceed to set up encampment around the ship." It clicked off.

Macaulay was vaguely bothered that the Captain had forgotten the usual high-flown pep-talk. E v e r y b o d y just laughed at it anyway, but still, it was part of the routine. Kind of a little courtesy, and he shouldn't have left it out. That

Captain Penny was a strange one, keeping to his cabin the whole three month trip, never talking to anybody except to give direct commands. Oh, well. He was new. He'd learn fast enough.

The crew trooped out of the lock single file, carrying their gear on their backs. They formed a precise square at the nose, and stood at attention while the 'bridge' poked its way out of the hull. Penny entered the glassene dome, accompanied by some of the higher-ranking people from the Science Contingent. He picked up the hand mike and stood for a moment dispassionately surveying the assembled crew.

"Very well, gentlemen," his amplified voice came to them. "We are here. Clear the area and set up your tents." He turned and left the bridge abruptly, and the dome retracted slowly into the hull, buzzing quietly.

"Well, for—"

"Relax, buddy," snapped Macaulay. "What did you expect him to do, wish us happy birthday?"

"What a cold sonofabitch."

"I said relax!" repeated Macaulay. "Cap'n Penny's got better things to do than stand around and make small talk with you. Now get this goddam area clear. Hop!"

As he went about his own duties, Macaulay was irritated by the Captain's shortness. His own half-official straw boss position in the crew meant that if anything happened, he would very likely hear the brunt of it. It would be more troublesome if the Captain were going to treat the crew as a bunch of voice-controlled machines. Well, maybe he'd warm up after the operation got under way.

THE next two days were routine. The crew gathered samples of everything. Grass, dirt, rocks, flowers, everything. It all disappeared into the belly of the ship where the Science Contingent figured it out. As more and more samples were classified and analyzed, it went faster. Some small varieties of insect were found, and an animal about the size of a large mouse which lived on the

tender roots of the meadow grass.

Scout planes reported seeing herds of large, apparently herbivorous animals at some distance, but none had been seen within the meadow.

The third day, toward evening, Watch spotted them from his station atop the hull.

"Hey! Cows!" he shouted.

Macaulay wanted to ask where, but Watch couldn't hear him through the dome. His binoculars were pointed toward the forest less than a mile away. Macaulay watched the dome and saw Captain Penny enter from below. The Captain took the powerful binoculars and fixed them on the edge of the forest. He watched silently for several minutes before he returned the binoculars and picked up the hand mike.

"Crewmen attention," he said. "A herd of approximately thirty to forty large animals has appeared at the edge of the forest. On seeing the ship, they milled about and re-entered the forest. I want a five man squad ready to leave at dawn tomorrow and secure a

specimen. Equip yourselves with paralyzers for obtaining the specimen and heatblasts in the event the animals should prove hostile. Macaulay will command, and will report the selection of his squad to me."

"All right," said Macaulay when the Captain had left the Watch dome. He quickly surveyed the knot of crewmen. He would want two old heads to handle the job, and he could give two of the new kids their first patrol. "Mason, Bartley, you're on, take care of equipping the party, and I'll take you, Hammond is it?—and you there." He pointed at a young man standing at the edge of the crowd. "What's your name, son?"

"Fritch, sir," replied the youngster.

"All right, Fritch, you'll go along, too."

When the men had dispersed to their own tents, Fritch approached Macaulay.

"Mr. Macaulay, sir."

"You don't have to call me 'sir,' kid. I'm no officer or anything like that. What's your trouble?"

"No trouble, Mr. Macaulay,

I was just wondering if someone else couldn't take my place on the squad tomorrow. Fellow in the tent next to me said he'd take it."

"Why?"

"Well, no reason really," said the boy, rubbing his cheek with the back of his hand. "I just—well, I'd rather wait a little while, that's all."

"You'll have to learn sometime, boy," said Macaulay. "It might as well be now. There won't be any trouble. You better come along."

"But—well, couldn't I—"

"No," said Macaulay.

"All right, Mr. Macaulay. I just thought I'd ask."

"That's O.K., kid," Macaulay said. "Everybody's a little nervous first time out. Don't let it worry you." He clapped the boy on the shoulder as he left. Then he went into the ship to report the selection of the squad to Captain Penny.

Naturally, it was Fritch the Rider killed the next day.

THE squad found the herd of animals gathered just inside the fringe of forest. Watch's description had been

apt, they were much like cows. Not so full in body, and a little longer, they still exhibited many of the characteristics of the domestic cow. They were uniform tan in color, except for a jet black furry ruff around their necks. They were placidly browsing the forest floor, occasionally emitting low rumbling sounds which were apparently what passed with them for a contented moo.

The five men entered the forest quietly and separated, remaining within sight of each other. They were strung in a rough half circle along the edge of the herd. Macaulay didn't know whether the beasts had any sense of smell or not, but he kept the group upwind just in case.

The phone plug in his ear buzzed, and Bartley's voice said: "Mac, look over there by that big tree. There's one of them cows without his fur collar."

"I don't see it," said Macaulay. "Yeah, now I do, there was one of them in the way. Maybe it's a female or something."

"Could be," agreed Bartley.

Mason's voice came low over the phone. "Think we should try to get one with and one without?"

"We better," Macaulay replied. "The science crew'll—he-y, look!"

The bare-necked 'cow' had stopped beneath the tree. On a low branch directly above it, the men could see movement. A thick, furry object began to lower from the branch, slowly, swaying gently. When it was stretched out full length, the men saw that it was like a huge, black caterpillar, perhaps three feet in length and proportionately thick. It dropped from the branch and curled its furry body around the cow's neck. The cow seemed to take no heed of its rider, but moved contentedly on, now exactly resembling all the others.

"Well, I'll be damned," whispered Macaulay. "Those collars aren't part of the animal at all! They're some other animal entirely. They hide up in the trees and drop down on the cows. I wonder what—" He broke off as he glanced across the space between himself and Fritch. The boy's pale

face stood out clearly in the dark forest. Above his head dangled the slowly swaying body of one of the huge riders.

"Fritch!" shouted Macaulay. But as he shouted, the black furry creature dropped.

Fritch screamed just once, and fell back, out of sight. The harshness of his voice startled the grazing herd, and they stiffened. Slowly, every animal turned in the direction of the scream, like so many compass needles. There was dead silence in the little clearing, and no further sound came from the spot where Fritch had fallen. The cows were rigid, staring impassively, seeming statues.

Macaulay hesitated. The animals dispassionate gaze seemed somehow menacing. They might suddenly break from their frozen trance and stampede in that direction. Well, the hell with it. He ran toward Fritch, shouting. The cows did not move, but watched fixedly.

THE four men reached the spot where Fritch had fallen in time to see the furry

animal drawing itself rhythmically away from Fritch's fallen body with a sluggish, snake-like motion. Macaulay fired on the run with his heat-blast, and the creature sizzled and exploded. Fritch was dead. The animal had apparently landed directly on the back of his neck, for there were two parallel lines of tiny punctures there.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" said Bartley, scanning the low limbs of the trees around them.

"Yeah," said Macaulay. "Mason, you and Hammond bring the kid's body. I'll go first, Bartley bring up the rear. Come on!"

They made their way rapidly to the edge of the forest and out into the deep meadow grass. Macaulay fired an emergency signal and they were met by a heavily armed party of experienced Prelim men. Thus escorted they returned to the ship. Fritch's body was immediately taken into the ship for examination, and Macaulay reported to Captain Penny.

Penny's quarters were spare

and hard. The Captain himself sat expressionless at the metal desk and listened, his hands clasped together on the desk.

"And that's about the story, Captain," said Macaulay.

"Cigarette, Macaulay?" asked the Captain, extending an open box.

"Thank you, sir, I don't smoke."

Penny lit one, blew a long plume of blue smoke at the ceiling. "Very interesting, Macaulay," he said evenly. "You say these—Riders, as you call them—were around the necks of all the cow-like animals?"

"Yes sir," said Macaulay, "Except for the one we saw where the Rider dropped on him."

"And the cows froze when the—ah, emergency startled them."

"Yes, sir."

"Hmm." After a momentary pause, Penny said abruptly, "You didn't get a specimen, Macaulay."

"No, sir. What with the poor kid and all, I decided to—"

Penny waved him to silence, and deliberately crushed his cigarette.

"Well, Macaulay, you were sent to get a specimen of the large animal and you did not bring one back. It will be so noted in the log."

Macaulay looked at the Captain's lean, hard face. A real cool one.

"Yes, sir."

"That will be all for now," said Penny, watching him with a casual, disinterested air. He remained seated while the crewman rose and turned to go. "Macaulay," he said quietly.

"Yes, sir?"

"Tomorrow you will replace Fritch in your squad and obtain specimens of the cows *and* riders."

"Yes, sir."

WHEN Macaulay had gone, Captain Thomas Penny sat staring at the blank bulkhead until, by an effort of will, he could unclench his hands. He lit another cigarette, but the hot dry smoke irritated him, and he crushed it out.

So the Fritch boy had been killed, he thought. Captain Penny's first mistake. He wondered if any of the rest of the

crew knew the boy had come to his quarters last night. He decided not. When a man turns coward, he wants as few people to know as possible. Penny knew that very well.

Fritch had been, in Penny's eyes, despicable. His thin face was pale as he pleaded to be excused from the patrol. Penny looked at him with disgust.

"You're behaving like a child, Mr. Fritch," he said coldly. "If you're not big enough for the job you hired on to do, you never should have come. The first necessity for any Prelim man, from cook to Captain, is to know himself, and his own capabilities." Suddenly, Penny had felt the whole scene to be familiar, *deja vu*. He was playing out a scene already played before. The sensation made him acutely uncomfortable.

He had dismissed Fritch abruptly, then, giving him the dubious choice of going on the patrol as ordered, or being taken off the payroll and held in custody until the return to Terrabase.

Now why, thought Penny, had the scene been so distaste-

ful? It was, after all, not terribly unusual for a crewman to freeze on his first trip. And why had it all seemed so familiar? There was something in that familiarity, something more than the common *deja vu* experience, but he could not place it.

THAT night, as he began to drift into sleep, random images and phrases flitted across his mind, and suddenly, there it was. *You're not big enough for the job. Not big enough for the job. Not big enough.*

Betty. Betty had said that, when she called the night before takeoff. Penny sat suddenly upright, remembering the shock of being awakened by the visi from a shallow, troubled sleep. He had not heard from Betty since the divorce six weeks earlier.

"Good evening, Thomas," Betty said sweetly. "Did I wake you?"

"Yes, you did," said Penny.

"I'm sorry. I called to congratulate you on your new command."

"Thank you," said Penny.

"You know it'll probably be a colossal failure, don't you?" she continued dispassionately.

"Betty, for God's sake—"

"Now don't get excited, Thomas. It's just a calm, unemotional statement. You're very fond of calm, rational statements, remember? Efficient analysis of the situation and all that. Well, that's it. You will undoubtedly make a horrible mess out of this command, Thomas."

"You little bitch," said Penny.

"Why, Thomas! That's not a rational thing to say. You don't want to let your emotions affect you like that. You want to keep things under firm intellectual control. That's what you live by, Thomas, remember?"

"I don't have to listen to—"

"Ah, but you will," said Betty. "You'd listen to anyone who was talking about you, no matter what they said. Because underneath that impassive mask, Thomas, the only thing you really care about is what people think of you."

"There's nothing abnormal about that."

"When you pretend to be completely independent? When you wave your self-sufficiency like a flag? Thomas, do you know why you wear that mask? Have you ever really thought about it? I'll tell you why. Because you're desperately afraid of being found out. You're convinced if people knew you for what you are, they'd reject you, and that's one thing you can't stand. I guess I proved that, didn't I? I got behind your mask, and I couldn't live with what I found there. And now you're running away from me, because I'm the one person who knows what you really are."

"That's ridiculous, Betty. I asked for this job because I wanted it."

"And you never would have gotten it without your father's political influence. Not with your record of petty failures. You always back out in the clutch, Thomas, you always make the coward's choice. And enough of those choices begin to make themselves obvious, even on a cool, impersonal record. Little things, Thomas, but they trap you, because

every one you make adds up, until eventually you can't make anything *but* the coward's choice.

"You're not big enough for the job, Thomas. When you take a man's job, the first essential is to know yourself, and your capabilities. And you'll never do that because you're afraid to know. You don't want to know what you really are, Thomas. I've got bruises to prove that. You're afraid to know, and you'll go to any lengths to keep from finding out. You're not big enough—"

Penny reached forward and shut off the set with a vicious swipe of his hand. God! How typical of Betty to do a thing like that! Calling the night before takeoff to needle him. He wondered what she expected to gain from it. A woman's malice. Simple malice.

His forehead was damp, and he went to the bathroom and sponged it off. No use getting excited about it. There was really no point to it. She was just trying to get back at him for some fancied wrong, he decided. There was really noth-

ing to it at all. He turned out the light and pulled the covers up.

Big enough. Big enough. Big enough.

He had forgotten all about it next day, in the bustle of departure, the thousand details of takeoff. And now Fritch's death had brought it back to him. It angered him that he had used Betty's words in talking to Fritch. Surely Betty's feminine viciousness hadn't made that deep an impression. It was simply coincidence, he decided. A common phrase. Not big enough for the job. He had probably heard it used in one context or another a thousand times without thinking any more about it. It was purely coincidental that he had used it talking to Fritch.

That, he thought, was the trouble with knowing a little about psychology. You looked for hidden meanings in the simplest coincidence of phrasing. *Big enough. Big enough. Big enough.* Shut it off, he thought angrily. It was like some idiotic song rolling in his head. Nonsense syllables that insist on repetition. Nonsense.

WHEN Macaulay's team brought back a Rider that afternoon, dead, it was turned over to Marie Homan for examination. The biologist went about her business quietly, preparing the creature for study. Macaulay remained in the laboratory briefly, watching her work. It was certainly not through any romantic interest that he remained. Even without that new hypoconditioning, Macaulay would have been little interested in Marie Homan, his taste ran to more spectacular specimens of femininity.

She was small and slight, with undistinguished brown hair pulled tightly back in a bun. She was young, though, Macaulay thought, in her later twenties, perhaps. Her face was well modeled, but lacked any distinguishing feature, any focus. There was an aura of neutrality about her. She moved neither with grace nor awkwardness, she was neither ugly nor pretty.

Mousy was the word, Macaulay decided. She was like a little gray mouse moving inconspicuously in the white

laboratory. If she were happy, one could not tell; it would be private. If she were unhappy, one would never know, for her unhappiness would be on a small scale, like a drawing of the real thing.

"What do you think it's all about?" asked Macaulay.

"The animal? I don't know." She looked at the big crewman leaning casually against the vacuum hood. He seemed a pleasant enough sort, though probably not much above a child, mentally. "You say these are always found in conjunction with another species?"

"Yeah," said Macaulay. "At least the only separate ones I've seen was the one that dropped onto one of the cows and the one that killed Fritch. This one here was riding a cow, but when we paralyzed the cow he started to crawl away. That's how we got him."

"It was alive, then," said Marie.

"Oh, sure, he was alive, all right," replied Macaulay. "But I guess he must've died on the way to camp. What d'you make out of that?"

"I don't know," repeated Marie. "It could be some form of symbiosis. We'll be able to tell more about it after examination."

"Well, that's your job," said Macaulay. "I got to get back to work now. We'll see you later, take care of yourself."

"I will," she replied.

AS she watched Macaulay's heavy body move easily through the door, Marie Homan briefly entertained an old regret that men should have such an overwhelming physical advantage over women. Well, there was nothing for it. That was the way things were, and you had to put up with it. She turned back to her subject—what had that man called it?—a Rider, that was it—and began the dissection. As she worked swiftly with the knife, her mind roved over the possibilities inherent in the information the crewman had given her.

Symbiosis or parasitism was certainly very possible. But then, in one sense, the entire ecology of a planet might be

considered a complex symbiosis. The planet one member, the delicately balanced pattern of life on its surface the other. Both elements, giving and receiving in turn what they mutually need for life.

Sometimes, in the lab, that sense of unity haunted her. In the midst of work, even when it was going well, she would suddenly be seized with a conviction of her own inadequacy. No matter how hard she worked, no matter how thorough the job, she could never *know*. She could never understand one animal fully, in itself. To understand, she must look at the animal in relation to its world, how it lived, how it died, how it reproduced. There was nothing complete in itself, nothing you could take and say 'Here! Here is Truth!'. All things were dependent in the world of nature, dependent on some certain relation to the world about them, and that relation was seldom clear.

The world of men, the social world, was the same, and it frightened her, for she could never see clearly her own relations to that world. Depen-

dence was an ignoble thing, somehow, demeaning. Marie had never been able to understand how a woman could become dependent on a man. Her own sister's marriage had been like that, a thing of dependence. The husband never giving, always demanding, harsh, cruel; and yet her sister seemed happy. Why, she could not say.

Society was not fair to a woman, forcing her always to submit, to surrender, to become something secondary to her husband. Marriage was a trap, baited with a simple biological need, for which a woman was forced to sacrifice her independence. Well, Marie Homan was not going to fall into that trap. She, at least, had her profession, and there was a strength in that.

SHE knew she was not pretty, in the ordinary sense. But that was because she refused to paint herself like other women in their desperate scramble for a mate. She was Marie Homan, *Doctor Marie Homan*. She was independent, she was her own woman, in perfect possession and control of herself.

She did not need a man. She could even remember clearly the very moment in her life when she had decided that men were always going to be secondary to her.

It had been just after that distasteful affair at the Senior Class dance when she had *eavesdropped*—that was wrong, but after all, it was accidental—and heard her date offer a pimply-faced boy five dollars to take her home. That night, when tears would no longer come, she had decided firmly. Never again would she be put in a position of dependence on the unpredictable, selfish whims of a man. When and if she ever married, it would be on her own terms, as equals. And it had worked out exactly as she had planned. Now she *was* independent, respected in her field. She was a good technician. No biological genius, of course, but a sound, competent worker. The very fact that the most difficult problem of the Survey, the Rider, had been turned over to her was proof of that.

She was suddenly aware that her hands had stopped moving,

that she was sitting at the benches with the shining scalp-el hanging idle, staring unseeing at the furry body before her. With an angry shake of her head, she returned the glittering blade to the incision she had begun.

The next few hours went swiftly, without her being aware of the passage of time. She found the entire ventral surface of the Rider to be a sheet of unstriated, contractile muscle. If one could draw an analogy with Terran organisms, that would mean it was an involuntary mechanism, actuated in some way automatically. Imbedded in the slab of muscle were two rows of tiny barbs, hollow and retractible. In relaxation the barbs should be withdrawn into the 'belly.' A violent spasmodic contraction of the ventral sheath would extend them. Each barb ended in a membranous sac within the sheet of muscle. The same contraction that extended the barb would also squeeze the contents of the sac down the hollow channel. It was a poison mechanism, of the simplest kind. But if the unstriated

muscle was any indication, it was involuntary. How was it triggered? Setting that problem aside for the moment, she examined the circulatory system.

It, too, was remarkably simple, a fairly common single auricle type heart. Hardly even a heart, but a simple tube with a succession of enlargements separated by valves. The respiratory system was equally uncomplicated, about on a par with that of a frog. It was surprising that a land-going animal could attain such a respectable size with such primitive biologic equipment.

The nervous system was another question entirely. Here she found incredible complexity. The more closely it was examined, the more she realized that the scope and purpose of such a nervous system was totally beyond her comprehension. Where the Rider's other functional systems were almost ludicrous in their simplicity, its nervous system was incredibly well-developed. But to what purpose? There was no need for such a complex control system on such a sim-

ple organism. It was like using the ship's computer to turn on a light switch. And besides, as far as she could see, very little of that complexity was actually used for control and regulation of the animal's body. What unknown use the rest served she did not know, and could not guess.

As she sat in growing excitement and bewilderment, she heard the lab door open behind her.

CAPTAIN Penny's intention in going to the Biolab had been simply to check on what progress had been made with the Rider. When he opened the door, he stopped short, with a sudden pounding in his chest, which slowly died. Looking at the back of the woman at the workbench, he had thought for a sudden shocked moment that it was Betty. While Betty's hair was several shades darker than that of Marie Homan, she sometimes wore it pulled back in the same way, and the similarity had caused the uncomfortable moment of misidentification.

"Good evening, Miss Ho-

man," said the Captain as the woman turned. "You're working quite late, aren't you?"

Marie glanced in confusion at the wall clock. "Why, yes, I mean—I didn't realize—"

"It's certainly nothing to be ashamed of," said Penny, amused by her obvious confusion in his presence. "On the contrary, it's highly commendable. I shall see that mention is made in the log."

"Well—thank you, Captain," she said, gesturing aimlessly at the laboratory. "I became absorbed in—I mean, this problem is—" She broke off, profoundly embarrassed. Inwardly, she was furious with herself for her confusion. You would think she was some flighty college girl, the way she was acting. And the fact that the Captain himself was so cool and efficient made it all the worse.

"Well, what kind of progress have we made?" asked Penny. His first impression had been that his mistake in identification was a trick of the light. Betty and this woman seemed nothing alike. And yet, their eyes were much the

same. If Homan used a little makeup they would probably look exactly like Betty's.

"A little, Captain," said Marie, regaining her composure. "The basic structure is quite primitive, and nothing at all unusual. But the nervous system is more complex than anything I've ever seen. It's easily the equal of man's."

"Oh?" said Penny, moving over to the bench. "In what way?" The woman had the same slightly too-full lower lip as Betty, and the same high cheekbones.

"Well, I haven't had time to make an exhaustive examination yet," she said, "But it almost looks as though the other systems were almost entirely neglected, and the nervous system built up entirely out of proportion." She went on, explaining the rudimentary nature of the circulatory and respiratory systems, and how out of balance they seemed with the complex web of neurons and ganglia. The Captain was only half listening. He was wondering if the hypno-conditioning against sexual desire should not have been ex-

tended to the commander of the Prelim Team, too.

But it was too new, too experimental. Only after the near fatal fracas on Linder IV, had the psycs thought it necessary to put some artificial curb on man's passions. It was not known what the long range effect would be. Leashing a drive as strong as that could raise all sorts of havoc over a period of time, and the Captain was left unconditioned in case there were seriously adverse effects.

"—and it seems altogether too much for the job it has to do." The woman was bent in concentration, pointing to a rough diagram she had drawn.

PENNY bent over to look at the diagram, and his shoulder brushed hers. He felt her stiffen abruptly, and then relax as she moved enough to take her shoulder away.

"Yes, I see," said Penny, looking at the diagram. "Very interesting."

"The anterior end of the spinal column is surrounded by huge nodes. Not really a brain, of course, they're too widely

distributed for that, but they show a remarkable development." She turned her head to look at him.

Her eyes are exactly like Betty's, Penny thought. Almost without realizing it, he took her shoulders in both hands and pulled her erect.

"Captain—"

Penny bent to kiss her, and was met by a stinging slap. She twisted loose from his grip.

"Get away from me!" Her voice was shaking.

Penny raised his hand to his face, where the sting of the blow still lingered. "For God's sake," he said, "you don't have to—"

"Get out of the lab, or I'll—I'll—"

"Now wait a minute, I'm not—"

"You're just like all the rest," she said. "You think a woman should fall into your arms just because you're a man! Get out of here! Go away and leave me alone!" She buried her face in her hands.

Penny was dazed by the violence of her reaction. "It's not that serious," he said, "for

God's sake, woman. it's not that serious."

"Please leave! I can't stand it, I just can't!" Her shoulders were shaking and Penny suddenly became furious. The little bitch! Slap *his* face! As if he were some fresh punk!

"All right," he said viciously, "I'll leave, but let me warn you, Homan. If anyone on this ship ever hears about this, I'll kill you! I mean it, I'll kill you!" He left, slamming the laboratory door.

As he blindly made his way to his quarters, Penny's mind was surging like a heavy sea. She couldn't stand *him!* That plain little mouse couldn't stand *him!* Vaguely he realized that he had made a serious mistake, but the fury, and the violence of her rejection were too strong in him to heed that realization. She was small, and petty, and weak, she was not even a woman. She was not big enough to be a *real* woman. And he was stung to further anger as the words repeated themselves endlessly in his mind. *Not big enough, not big enough, not big enough.*

THE weeks passed, and Penny found it not difficult to avoid the Homan woman. He found it less easy to avoid his own shame-tinged memories of the incident. He prodded it with his mind, as automatically as a child prods an aching tooth with his tongue. The vividness of his mental images did not diminish, and were augmented by his imagination. Though he knew it was caused, at least in part by the hypnoconditioning the woman had received, the sting of her rejection lingered in his mind long after the physical memory of her slap had disappeared.

With the rest of the crew, he maintained his usual aloofness. His communication with them was limited to direct orders and the receiving of reports. He dined alone, in his own quarters, and spent the evenings studying progress reports.

It was, as Macaulay had predicted, a milk run. The ecology of Fennel II was relatively simple, with the single still-unexplained exception of the Rider's function. As a whole,

the planet could accept the arrival of Man without serious disruption of its normal pattern.

Gradually, the huge jig-saw puzzle that is the life pattern of a planet was filled in. After a certain point, results were predictable with a fair degree of accuracy. An animal of such-and-such characteristics would be needed here, to complete the balance, and it was usually found within days. The Riders were the only element which did not seem to fit the overall pattern. Their function remained obscure.

Study of the problem was hindered by the inability to secure a live specimen. Autopsy examination can go just so far, and then a live, functioning subject is needed.

Examination of the Rider's nervous system indicated that, while living, it should be a strong transmitter of encephaloid radiation. But while such radiation in a human is centered in the brain itself, there was no such center of activity in the Rider. It was like an amplifier without an input circuit, capable of amplification and emis-

sion all through the encephaloid spectrum, but with nothing to amplify, no signal source.

It was found that the only way to get a Rider into camp alive was by capturing a cow together with its Rider, and examining both at the same time. It was futile. Encephalograms of the cow produced only the relatively uncomplicated patterns of the typical ruminant herbivore. If the Rider was emitting along the encephaloid spectrum, as its structure indicated it should be, it was undetectable.

The Unskilled crewmen's work load was cut down as the pattern filled in, until each man worked only two hours per day, and that at routine maintenance jobs. Macauley, as spokesman for the men, requested Captain Penny for permission to organize hunting trips, hikes, and other recreational activities outside the camp. Permission was denied. The Regulation Handbook decreed otherwise, it was too dangerous. The Handbook had been written with harsher planets in mind than Fennel II, but Captain Penny was

too keenly aware that bending one regulation could lead to breaking another, and another, until he had lost control of the men. He was not keenly enough aware of the potency of *ennui*.

SO the men played cards and whittled, and grumbled. They watched the ship's movie tapes until they had seen them all three times. A half-hearted attempt was made to organize a baseball team, which failed through inability to get enough men interested.

Their work, as far as they could see, was over. But they were not going home. Because the Science Contingent could not solve the single remaining problem of the Riders, they were kept sitting on a dull, unexciting planet with nothing to do. The few who tried to sneak out of camp for no other reason than to be doing something, really, were caught, and confined to the ship's brig, which was only slightly more dull than being free.

Macauley was beginning to feel the pinch. He could handle men, and had handled them, in almost every circum-

stance. He had led crews on the most dangerous planets the Prelim Teams had ever contacted. He could bring them through hazards, and mistreatment, and every other sort of annoyance, but he had never before had to deal with a crew of bored men. It was not the usual hazard of a Prelim Team. And it is one thing when you are bored, but there is an end in sight. It is another to be bored "Until—"

"For Chrissakes, why can't we go home?"

"Because our job's not done," snapped Macaulay, "That's why."

"The hell you say! If we got work to do, what're we sitting around on our duffs for?"

"Buddy," said Macaulay, "You're just one guy in a big team. As long as some of that team got work to do, you'll sit and like it. Hear?"

"What's the scoop, Macaulay? You're close to that coldfish Captain. When're we going home?"

"In the first place," said Macaulay, "I'm not close to the Captain, he keeps to himself. And in the second place,

like I said, we'll go home when the job we came here for gets done."

"So what's holding up the parade?"

"You know as well as I do," said Macaulay. "Those Riders. I guess they just can't figure 'em out."

"One stinking oversize caterpillar out of a whole planet, and they keep us all here sitting on our hands! What difference does it make?"

"Listen, Mister. When you been on as many of these little joyrides as I have, you'll know goddam well how much difference it makes. That Rider already killed one man, remember? And if we don't know why and how and all that, we can't go telling Colonists to come in."

"If you ask me," muttered one man, "it's that Captain holding us up. He don't know crap from applebutter."

"You know any better, brain?" asked Macaulay. "Sure, Cap'n Penny's new at this game, an' maybe he goes a little too much by the numbers, but he's done a pretty damn good job. And he's the Captain, and don't you forget

that for a minute. He's the Captain." Privately, Macaulay was far from convinced that Penny had done even a passable job. In fact, he didn't see how it was possible for a Captain to know so goddam little about his men. But what could you say? He was the Captain, after all.

Penny, for his part, was aware of the growing restlessness, and responded by clamping tighter and tighter restrictions on the men. There was nothing else he could do. He based his authority on the Handbook, and all his strength lay there.

"Macaulay," he said, "what do you mean in this report 'dangerously low morale?'"

"Well, Captain. I don't know, it's kind of hard to say. I mean it's not the sort of thing a fellow should tell the Captain about, if you know what I mean, sir."

"I know what you mean, Macaulay. I know the men are restless, and they want to go home. It's been like that for nearly two months. But what is this 'dangerously?'"

"Well, sir, frankly—I mean,

to really lay it on the line, sir, I'm afraid I can't be responsible if this goes on too much longer."

"Be specific, man!" snapped Penny.

"Well, all right, Captain, if that's the way you want it. The men don't like you sir. They think you're too cold. They think you don't give a damn for them at all. They don't like the way you've handled things."

"I'm the Captain, Macaulay."

"Yes, sir. I've told them that, sir. But you know how these things are, there's not much you can do about them."

"I disagree, Macaulay, but that's beside the point. By 'dangerously' you mean—?"

"Mutiny, sir. Maybe. I don't know. But even maybe is too much."

Penny looked at the massive crewman, shifting uneasily in the chair. When the silence had become uncomfortable, he spoke quietly.

"All right, Macaulay. Dismissed."

Macaulay stopped at the door and turned. "Something

else you maybe should know Captain. The men are saying you got this command through political pull, and you can't hack it. They say you're not big enough for the job."

THAT night Captain Thomas Penny raped Marie Homan. He could not have explained it. He found her in her own quarters, though he could not remember going there, and attacked her. He remembered nothing of going to her quarters, little of the attack, and nothing of returning to the bridge, where he sat all night. His mind was a churning mass of thought and images like heat waves, insubstantial, impermanent and transient. The images of Betty and Marie Homan swirled, and merged, and separated in a frantic dance. The black, ominous bulk of a Rider seemed to hang above him, swaying rhythmically. Macaulay, the ship, the crew, his father, his apartment on Terra; all inextricably jumbled in a wild, uncontrollable melange. He sat on the bridge until daylight, staring blankly at the reflections of instru-

ments in the glasséne dome.

When he had gone from her tiny room, Marie Homan sobbed until the tears of anguish and shame dried on her face. Then she lay in unnatural quiet, the sound of the world was turned off, and there was only the harsh sound of sudden, spasmodic intakes of breath. When hysteria passed, it left an emptiness in her mind that refused to be filled. The calm of despair settled over her like a heavy cloak, smothering the frenzy, damping out the misery and pain. She was conscious only of a huge uncleanness, a leprosy so vile as to be beyond comprehension. In the medicine cabinet of the sick-bay she found sedatives, a half-full bottle. These she took without volition, and dropped the empty bottle to the floor, where it shattered into a hundred crystal shards. In the mirror her face shifted and wavered, and she gave up trying to see. Listlessly she moved out of the room and down the long, metal corridor.

Her footsteps echoed softly, and the corridor was long with-

out end, the inadequate night-lights glowing feebly in the dark, reflecting from the cold metal as gently as the sound of her footsteps.

Opening the airlock and descending the ladder, she was conscious of a light breeze, cool and soft. When she reached the ground, she stayed close beneath the swelling curve of the hull, and she walked slowly toward the stern, touching the cold metal of the hull occasionally, as if to affirm that it existed.

The hip-deep grass was swaying in the gentle breeze, and she felt detached from her body, as if she were watching some sea spirit moving slowly across an ocean of grass. A single thing had held her attention for months, and it was to this she unconsciously moved now. The Riders. The Riders were in the forest, but she was not sure. It did not matter if she could see it, she could walk toward it and eventually she would find it. In the forest waited peace, and she would find it if she kept on walking. It was not far.

AT the abrupt edge of the forest she stopped, and watched it. It was dark, it was black, a mystery and a secret. A mystery within a mystery, a depth and a darkness. A darkness without limit, profundity without end. A sleeping peacefulness, deep, solemn; a long slow song, a blackness more than night. She moved past the first trees.

The trunks of trees moved past her like ghosts, insubstantial things, moving of themselves, behind her, surrounding her, enclosing her in a soft darkness until she could not see where she had entered. She reached out as she moved, and touched a tree. It was solid, and she was almost satisfied that it was real. Now she began watching the lower branches of the trees, watching for the black fruit hung suspended there, dormant, receptive, waiting to give her peace.

When she found the Rider, she stopped. "Up there," she said, looking at the dark form against the dark limb. "It's me." The Rider made no response. She was disappointed that it would not speak to her.

"It's me," she said again. "I've come." She spoke softly, quietly, as a mother waking a sleeping child.

She moved beneath the limb, and sat on the grassy forest floor. "I'm ready," she whispered. "Why don't you come to me?"

She did not see the Rider begin to sway above her, but she heard the brushing of a leaf, and she felt the soft impact of the furry body on her shoulders.

Her first feeling was of relief, a gentle, easy relief, a peace. And she felt it echo in the chambers of her mind, that peace, and re-echo stronger, and stronger again, like a pendulum in ever increasing arcs. And she felt warm satisfaction replace the deadness in her mind, a fullness and a contentment.

Soon she knew she would not die, and it made her glad that she would not die, and her gladness was returned to her increased and replenished.

And she knew the nature of the Riders that her scalpel had never given her, for it was knowledge only a Rider could

give. She stood, and began to walk out of the forest toward the ship.

MACULAY downed another straight shot of liquor. He looked out the broad window of the Portside Inn at the huge metal ships waiting at the take-off docks.

"Yeah," he said to the bartender, "that was the damndest trip I ever ran, that one to Fennel II."

"Heard something about that," the bartender admitted. "Scuttlebutt, mostly. Didn't know you was on it, though."

"Oh, I was on it O.K.," said Macaulay. "There were times I wondered if I'd ever get off it."

"Pretty nasty planet?" asked the bartender obligingly.

"Hell, no," said Macaulay. "A peach of a planet. But the damndest Captain I ever shipped with. Penny was his name. John Penny, Thomas Penny, something like that, I don't remember. He was a cool one, all right. You know, one of these 'touch-me-not' superior bastards. I swear to God I never saw a crew so close to

mutiny in my life. It was just a lousy trip all the way around."

"Say," said the bartender, "what's the straight dope on these here Psychomirror things you picked up?"

"Well, we called 'em Riders then, you know, we didn't know what the hell they were all about. What they do is take the feelings, you know, emotions and all, of whatever they happen to be Riding, and bounce them right back, only stronger. Like a magnifying mirror, sort of. They mostly ride these 'cows' on Fennel II, big, calm, peaceful things. The Riders like peaceful things best, they tell me. I guess it must tickle their insides or something, I don't know. But if they *do* get onto something that's all excited, they know it's not going to be a good thing to Ride, you know, automatic like, so they kill it, and go off and wait for something better to come along. Lost a man, that way, as a matter of fact. Young kid, name of Fritch, he was all shook up scared and a Rider hit him and bounced the fear right back and all. Must've been some

jolt. So I guess the Rider decided the hell with it, it wasn't for him. Just tightened up and shot the kid full of poison." Macaulay shrugged.

"Now, how the hell would anybody figure out about a thing like that," asked the bartender.

"You don't want to sell these science babies short," said Macaulay. "I'll tell you, guys like you and me, we don't think cool enough. Get all excited and you don't think straight, you know, that's a fact. But these science guys, they *never* get excited. They just sit down and think for a while, and up they come with the answer. There was a woman scientist on that trip, frigid, mousy little type, if you know what I mean. Real cold babe. Well, she was the one found out how the Riders worked. Took one of them apart, and sat down and thought about it, and after a while, there you are. Took her a little while, but what the hell. Rational, that's the point, cool, no panic, you see? That's the way those guys are, they got practically no feelings at all, just like that Captain. And now

that woman's got that big prize and all, and people working for *her* for a change, she's really got a set-up now."

"What happened to this Penny fella? Still on Prelim?"

"Naw, he's on a desk job Terraside someplace," said

Macaulay. "They took him off Prelim after that, his first trip, too." Macaulay shook his head. "He just couldn't handle it, that's all. He just wasn't big enough for the job."

THE END

ELECTRONIC LIGHT

The first full-scale presentation of man's newest light source, electronic light, was made several months ago in Pittsburgh when Westinghouse unveiled a complete room lit entirely by electroluminescence.

Electroluminescence is light emission by suitable phosphor powders, embedded in an insulator and activated by an AC electric field. When it's commercially available, experts predict, it will rapidly outdistance both incandescent and fluorescent lighting in popularity. One interesting advantage

of electroluminescence, aside from its attractive indirect-lighting effect, is that the *color* of the light may be controlled with ease. In the Pittsburgh demonstration, one hundred twelve glass panels, each a foot square and $\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch thick, were used to cast a soft green light. But emitted color of the electroluminescence varies with the frequency of the current that passes through it, and can be altered at the flick of the knob. Thus a housewife of the future will have complete control over her lighting, with one switch to adjust the brightness and another the hue.

NEW MEN FOR MARS

by CALVIN M. KNOX

NOVELETTE

illustrated by BOWMAN

The cold nitrogenous air of Mars was not breathable by earthmen. They just weren't built to take low pressure. Hence they were but guests on the planet, not residents

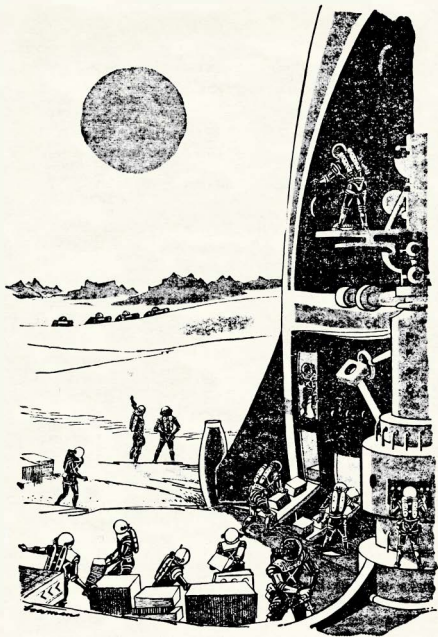
THE interplanetary ferry *Bernadotte* quivered in space and began the long, slow turnover motion that was bringing it inexorably closer to the cold, slumbering, oxidized wastes of Mars. Aboard the ship, UN man Michael Aherne, making his first trip to the red planet, stared anxiously through the rear viewer, searching for some sign of life.

There was none. The Dome that housed the Mars Colony was not in sight, and all Aherne could see was the bleak, barren sand. He was nervous—as, indeed, a spy whose ostensibly secret mission was known

openly to everyone should be. He had been pitchforked into a nasty job, and he knew a stern test lay ahead of him.

Aherne heard a noise somewhere in the back of the cabin, and whirled to see the captain of the little vessel enter—Juri Valoinen, a tall, balding, annoyingly banteresome Finn who had logged more hours in space than any other living man.

“Just another hundred minutes or so,” Valoinen told him. “You ought to be able to see our dome pretty soon—we’ll be coming down right next to it, practically. I’m always afraid we’re going to land right *on* it



one of these days, and that'll shoot the UN budget completely to blazes."

Aherne forced himself to grin, and turned away from the viewer to walk toward the captain. Aherne was a man of middle height, stocky, sandy-haired; as Special Attache-at-Large for the United Nations, he had been on a number of far-flung investigations, but this was about as far as he had ever been flung in the name of the UN—forty million miles, across the gulf of space—to spy on the Mars Colony. *Spy*.

Some spy, he thought bitterly.

He looked at his watch. They were right on schedule.

"They know I'm coming, don't they?" Aherne asked, voicing his fears.

The Finn nodded, smiling knowingly. "Indeed they do. And what's more, they know *why* you're coming. I don't doubt they'll have the plush carpet rolled out for you for sure. They're going to want to make a good impression on you."

"That's what I was afraid of," said Aherne. "I'd have preferred to go among them

cold and take a look around. That way my report would be genuine."

"Who needs genuine reports?" Voloinen demanded sardonically. "My friend, it's time you learned that our organization thrives on misconception and blunder. Facts are its deadly enemies."

Instantly Aherne's face darkened. "Let's not be flip-pant, Valoinen. The UN is responsible for a good many things we ought to be thankful for—including the preservation of your own insignificant country," he snapped. "Not to mention the handsome salary you get for ferrying this boat back and forth between Mars and Earth."

The space captain backed off, holding up a hand to check the flow of Aherne's anger. "Take it easy, son. I think it's a wonderful organization too. But I'm old enough not to take it as seriously as all that."

"Well, maybe when you're even a little older you'll learn that the UN *has* to be taken seriously," Aherne grunted, and turned his attention back to the viewer. He narrowed his

eyes, staring into the blackness at the dim, coppery globe half-visible below.

After a moment he turned once again: Valoinen was still standing behind him, arms folded, thin lips twisted in a wry grin. "Well?"

"I think I see the Dome," Aherne said.

"I congratulate you."

"No, don't joke." Aherne frowned, glanced back for a moment to verify what he had seen, and scratched his head. "But—why are there *two* domes? There seems to be another one, about ten miles from the first. How come? I'm sure the UN only built one."

Valoinen showed white, even teeth in a derisive smile. "Exactly right, my friend. Only one of those is the UN dome."

"But the other?"

"You'll find out soon enough. I don't want to—ah—prejudice you. I want your report to be—ah—*genuine*." He spun on his heels and moved toward the door. "And now, if you'll excuse me."

The bulkhead door clanged closed, and Aherne was left alone—staring out in bewilderment at the *tr*in domes.

CHAPTER II

"PUT the gyroscopes over there," Valoinen ordered, and three members of his crew hove to, dragging the crates to the designated spot.

"There—that finishes it," the captain said. The cargo crates were arranged in a neat semicircle outside the ship, a waiting pickup. Valoinen glanced over at Aherne, who was standing idly to one side. Aherne was feeling exceedingly uncomfortable, partly because he was bundled up in the unfamiliar bulkiness of a spacesuit and partly because he had had nothing at all to do during the unloading.

"You all right, Aherne?"

The UN man nodded, moving the helmet of his suit stiffly up and down. "Just fine," he said. The portable air generator was a dead weight hanging down his back, seemingly at the point of ripping his deltoid muscles out bodily. He felt anything but fine, though he had no intention of telling the captain that.

"They'll be here to get you any minute," said Valoinen.

"I've radioed the colony that there's a cargo pickup, and they're sending a fleet of sand-crawlers out. They said they're very anxious to meet you."

Aherne tensed. It was going to be a difficult, tricky mission. Sent here to determine if the tremendous expense necessary for continuance of the Mars Colony was justified by the results produced so far, Aherne was going to have to remain dispassionate, aloof to the very last. He was here to pass a sentence of life or death on the Colony.

The UN would rely on his report. They always did. Aherne had proved his impartiality time and again. He knew just one loyalty: to the corporate, many-headed creature known as the United Nations. A second-generation UN man, Aherne was the ideal observer.

But yet he hoped the colonists wouldn't make his task any more difficult than it already was. Aherne recognized the fact that he had a considerable natural sympathy for the Martian pioneers, a personal desire to see the Colony continue and prosper. It was part

of his deepest body of beliefs that man should go out, conquer the other planets.

Still—if the Colony were inefficient, badly directed, poorly designed, it would be Aherne's duty to report it. If the Colony were barely clinging to survival, if further progress seemed completely out of the question, Aherne would have to say that, too—and, saying so, kill the Colony.

He hoped the colonists would not play on his sympathies and urge him to whitewash any of their deficiencies; it would set up a painful inner conflict in him. He could not falsify his report—but he was anxious to see the Colony survive.

And a man like Aherne—monolithic, unswervingly loyal, firm in his beliefs—would fall apart completely in a situation of immediate inner stress of that sort. Aherne knew that—and, as the low-slung fleet of sandcrawlers purred along the desert toward him, he felt a tiny pulse of fear starting to thud in his chest.

HE watched the steady approach of the crawlers.

The air was cold and clear—his suit-thermometer, embedded in the heel of his left glove, showed a comparatively mild temperature of Minus Twenty-Two Centigrade, and the external-pressure needle was wavering at about six pounds per square inch; internal pressure, he noted reassuringly, was maintained at a comfortable sea-level fourteen pounds.

Valoinen and his men were sitting on the unpacked crates, waiting patiently. Aherne walked over to join them.

"The Dome's out that way," Valoinen told him, pointing in the direction from which the crawlers were coming. An upthrust, jagged range of dark mountains cut off vision about four miles in the distance. "Behind those hills," Valoinen said. "The Dome's right back there."

"And the other one?"

"That's a little further on," said Valoinen.

They fell silent—Aherne felt unwilling to prod for information about the second dome—and waited for the colonists to arrive. The sun, a sickly, pale green object, was high over-

head, and the tailstanding *Bernadotte* cast a long, straggling shadow over the levelled, heat-fused sand of the landing clearing.

The crawlers were getting larger now, and Aherne could make them out clearly. They were long, ground-hugging vehicles with caterpillar treads spread out over a lengthwise grid, with room for a couple of passengers in a plastic bubble up front, and a cargo hold aft. There were six of them, rocking gently from side to side as they undulated through the shifting red sand.

Aherne could hear the grating, feathery sound of their treads sliding over the sand toward him. At length, the convoy breasted the final dune and pulled up in front of the *Bernadotte*.

A figure dropped lightly from the leading crawler and trotted toward them. Aherne could just barely see the man's face behind his helmet—blond hair swept back over a high forehead, and piercing blue eyes. His body, concealed by the spacesuit, seemed long and rangy.

"I'm Sully Roberts," he announced. "Hello, skipper."

"Here's your cargo, Sully." Valoinen stretched forth his arm in an expansive gesture. "You'll find it all recorded on these invoices as usual."

Roberts reached out and took the sheaf of invoices, carefully avoiding looking at Aherne. The colonist rifled quickly through them.

"Humm. Well, at least the externals match. I can't guarantee that you've actually got gyros in those boxes, and not toy teddy bears, but it won't do to open 'em now, I guess."

"Don't you trust me?" Valoinen asked sharply.

"Of course," said Roberts. "But this is the UN's money we're spending, and we don't want to waste any of it. We have to be very careful with our appropriation, of course."

"Of course," said the captain lightly.

That was for my benefit, Aherne thought. They're so terribly anxious to show me what good little boys they are.

"Oh," Valoinen said. "Silly of me—I clean forgot to introduce you. Sully, this is Michael

Aherne of the United Nations. He's come to stay with you for a while."

Roberts took a couple of steps forward and shook Aherne's hand. "How d'ye do! I'm Sullivan Roberts, District Overchief for the Colony. I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Aherne, and I hope to be seeing a lot of you while you're here."

"Glad to meet you, Roberts," Aherne replied. He was determined to remain detached, at all costs.

Roberts waved an arm and his men dismounted from their crawlers. Assisted by Valoinen's crew, they quickly loaded the crates into the cargo holds.

"You can ride with me, Mr. Aherne," Roberts said.

"Fine." Aherne clambered up into the fore bubble of the sandcrawler, and Roberts got in beside him. Slowly, without any perceptible gradation between motionlessness and motion, the crawler began to move.

Aherne saw Valoinen grin and wave as he pulled out. Then, as the crawler started to surmount the hill, Valoinen climbed the catwalk of the

Bernadotte and disappeared inside. His men followed, carrying the mail pouches from the Mars Colony, and the lock of the small space ship slowly closed.

Aherne was on his own now, with no contacts with Earth. He was here, and he had a job to do.

CHAPTER III

THE shining surface of the Dome loomed up before them like a yellow bubble extruded from the desert. Within the gleaming, high-arched curve of plastic, Aherne could make out a dim but busy world of buildings and people. The Dome rose to a peak height of nearly five hundred feet. Within the artificial atmosphere was warm and breathable; outside, the cold, nitrogenous air of Mars offered little to Terrestrial lungs.

"We go in this way," Roberts said, pointing to an airlock at the base of the Dome. The lock opened at the approach of the sandcrawler, and they rode in. The other crawlers followed and the lock

swung slowly shut behind the last one. Air came hissing in.

At Roberts' signal, Aherne got down from the cab of the crawler and stretched his legs. The journey across the sand had been slow and racking. The crawler had spun through the desert like a refractory camel, and Aherne found himself woozy at the end of the ride. Still, he admitted, it was the only efficient way of covering that sort of terrain.

He saw busy, efficient-looking men bustling around the crawlers, unpacking the cargo holds, carrying the crates through the lock inside. Following Roberts, Aherne moved through the inner door.

Mars Colony was spread out before him.

Aherne felt a warm sensation of pride, of admiration, run through him, but he squelched it. It was a forbidden emotion; much as he admired the hardy men and women who had erected this dome and built a city on inhospitable Mars, he was there as their judge now, and would have to put those feelings aside.

"There's a committee waiting to see you," Roberts said.

"We've been looking forward to your visit ever since we found out you were coming."

"Lead on," Aherne told him.

THE committee that was waiting was assembled in a squat, unfancy corrugated-steel hut located at a crossroad near the center of the Colony. Most of the buildings, Aherne noticed, were constructed of this cheap, unattractive material. The accent was on economy in Mars Colony, not esthetic appeal.

The committee consisted of six. Sully Roberts introduced them hurriedly.

There were three District Overchiefs, and Roberts was the fourth. Aherne shook hands with them in turn—Martelli from the North Quadrant, Richardson from the East, Fournier from the West. Roberts represented the Southern sector of the Colony. Judging from their names and physical appearance, Aherne concluded that they each represented, not only a geographical district of the Colony, but one of the major population blocs as well. For the Colony, despite all talk

of assimilation, was very much the product of a group of loosely federated nations rather than of a unified world. Each country, clinging to the last remnants of its sovereignty, had insisted on representation in the Colony, and so Mars was populated by a curious racial hodgepodge which only the passage of time and the succession of generations would efface.

If, Aherne thought, there *were* any succeeding generations on Mars.

The fifth member of the committee was Dr. Raymond Carter, General Coordinator of the Colony—a forty-ish, bespectacled man whose name had been in the headlines often before the Colony had actually been planted, five years before. He had been the guiding spirit in the long crusade to build the Colony on Mars.

The sixth was Katherine Greer, introduced as a delegate-at-large, chosen by popular vote of the colonists to serve on the welcoming committee. She was a young, slender girl in her middle twenties.

"Well, Mr. Aherne," Carter

said—and the tone of his voice was unmistakable—“what do you think of the progress we’ve made?”

Aherne paced edgily up and back in the little room, darting nervous glances at the six colonists who hung, poised, on every word.

“I’d prefer to reserve judgment on such a sweeping statement, Dr. Carter. After all, it’s to determine the extent of your progress that I’m here—and I’d rather not be required to state my final conclusions ten minutes after my arrival.”

“Of course not,” Carter said, apologizing hastily. “I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Aherne said. He was surprised and relieved to find that these people were, if possible, even more tense than he. They were desperately anxious to make a good impression on him.

“We’ve arranged for your quarters to be set up in my district,” said Richardson, the East District Overchief. Richardson was a slim, lithe Negro whose precise British accent hinted at a West Indian ancestry.

“Fine,” Aherne said.

“I suppose you’d like to rest for a while now,” Dr. Carter continued. “You must have had a long, trying trip.”

“Excellent idea. I am pretty beat.”

“Mr. Richardson will conduct you to your quarters, and your meals will be taken care of. We’ve made considerable strides in developing synthetics—until the Martian soil is sufficiently re-nitrogenized to be capable of harboring vegetables, of course.”

“Of course,” Aherne said wearily. He foresaw several weeks of uneasy verbal fencing, and decided that the eagerness of these colonists to impress him was going to become tiring.

“After you’ve rested,” Carter said, “we’ve scheduled a tour of the Colony for you. Miss Greer has been assigned to you as your guide.”

He glanced at Miss Greer. She was dressed in the utilitarian, unattractive singleton tunic that all the Colonists seemed to adopt, but her face was bright-eyed and interesting, and beneath the shapeless garment Aherne’s critical eye detected what probably was a much

more than passable figure.

He felt himself relax. This survey trip wasn't going to be as much of an ordeal for his conscience as he had been expecting.

HIS room was comfortable, if hardly luxurious, and he made himself at home immediately. He noticed several Colony tunics hanging in the clothes-closet, and he stripped his rumpled business-suit off and slid easily into one of the soft, clinging uniforms.

And then, just as he was beginning to loosen, to wriggle out of the tensions that had gripped him since the Security Council had given him the assignment, he remembered the Other Dome.

What was it? Who had built it? Everyone connected with the Colony here carefully avoided all mention of it, as if it were something shameful, something to hide from sight.

Aherne knew that he'd have to find out all the details before he committed himself on any final decision about Mars Colony. No matter how promising the Colony seemed, and no matter how many Miss Greens

they threw in his way, he'd have to be in control of every information-factor before he could allow himself to file his report.

The Colonists had given him a pleasant room, with a soft-looking bed and attractive furnishings. There was a book-case, in which half a dozen scarlet-bound volumes leaned at an angle against one wall, and when he drew the first out he saw it was a novel by a colonist, published there in the Colony.

They don't miss a bet, he thought, feeling another forbidden tingle of pride go through him. It wouldn't be hard to recommend continuation of a colony that showed such enterprise and such drive—provided everything else held up. So far, so good.

Aherne slept soundly that night for the first time in weeks.

CHAPTER IV

HE expected the guided tour first thing in the morning—in fact, was positively looking forward to it. And so,

when he heard a soft, gentle rapping at his door the next morning, he rolled out of bed and tried to look wide awake. He was almost positive that it was Miss Greer at the door.

He was wrong. He threw the door open and was confronted by a small, swarthy, almost copper-colored man, with deep-set eyes and jet-black hair.

"Good morning, *senor*," the stranger said blandly.

"Good morning," Aherne replied, somewhat taken aback.

"I have been sent to get you," the small man said. Aherne noticed, as the other stepped into the room, that he had an enormous barrel of a chest—the chest of a six-footer, not a man barely five-two in height. He spoke with a distinct Spanish accent.

"To get me?"

"*Si*. Please come quickly."

Too puzzled to protest, Aherne dressed, washed up—the colonial plumbing, he noted, was none too good—and followed the small man out on the street. It was still early in the morning, and few of the colonists were to be seen.

"Where are we going?" Aherne asked.

"With me," the other said noncommittally.

Aherne wondered vaguely just where he was being taken, but decided to follow without argument. It was just possible that he might find out something about the Colony that he might not have known otherwise, had he limited himself to the official guided tour.

He patted the cold butt of the Webley blaster, nestling safely in its shoulder-holster. He could hold his own with that, in case of trouble.

THE little man seemed to be in a considerable hurry. He led Aherne speedily through the streets toward the outer edge of the Dome—toward the airlock.

Several of the colonists he passed on his way smiled at him, but no one seemed to want to stop him, to find out where he was going. It was just as well, Aherne thought.

They came to the airlock, and Aherne saw a sandcrawler parked outside. The little man

had not said a word during the entire walk.

Now he indicated rack of spacesuits hanging invitingly at the entrance to the airlock. "Take one," he said. "Put it on."

Obediently, Aherne did so, and his strange guide climbed into one of the smaller suits. Together, they passed through the airlock and outside the Dome.

"We go in this," the other grunted, and got into the sand-crawler. Aherne, suspecting at last where he was being taken, got in also, and the vehicle rocked smoothly to life and started to undulate away.

The crawler slid through a gap in the hills, and followed a twisting, sharply-banked sand path in the desert. An hour later, they arrived at their destination—the second Dome.

It seemed to be constructed along the lines of the other. Aherne stared around curiously as he and his silent companion went through the by-now familiar process of passing through the airlocks. At last, he was out of his suit, and within the second Dome. It looked much like the first, inside and out.

But after a few steps, Aherne found himself panting for breath, and a few more and he could sense his pulse quickening. There *was* a difference: the air-pressure here was considerably lower than earth—normal. He felt his body gasping to take in the quantity of oxygen to which it was accustomed, and he swallowed hard to relieve the pressure on his eardrums.

As he stood there, reeling slightly from the change in pressure, he saw another, more familiar face approaching. It was another small, swarthy, Spanish-looking man, but this time it was one that Aherne knew well.

"You'll get used to the low pressure soon, Aherne," the newcomer said as he drew near. "We maintain it here for the benefit of our colonists." He extended a box of tablets. "Here," he said. "Aspirin. It'll relieve the reaction a little bit."

Aherne took the box, fumbled out one of the white tablets and swallowed it, dry. He waited a moment while the pounding in his head subsided

a little, and then looked at the other.

"I'm in better shape now. I think," he said. "But what are *you* doing here, Echavarra?"

"You haven't missed me, Aherne? You haven't noticed that I've not been expounding my crackpot ideas at the United Nations these past three years?"

"No," Aherne said slowly, "Ever since the defeat of your proposal. I'd assumed you were off doing private research somewhere."

The man addressed as Echavarra grinned broadly. "Exactly right. I *have* been doing private research." He put an arm around Aherne's shoulder. "Come," he said. "Let us go to my home. The pressure is easier to take there."

AS they walked into the heart of the colony, Aherne discovered it was populated almost exclusively by the small swarthy men, none of whom seemed at all bothered by the low pressure. The picture was starting to take shape.

Jose Echavarra had been a

storm-center at the United Nations Headquarters during the days of the hot debate over who should build the Mars Colony, and how. Echavarra, a Peruvian geneticist, had bitterly opposed the American, Carter, who seemed to have the inside track on the coveted UN appropriation.

Carter had favored building pressurized domes on Mars, in which Earthmen could live in comparative comfort. Echavarra, raging, had declared that this was the wrong way to go about it—that man should adapt himself to fit the planet, not adapt the planet to fit himself.

He put forth as an example Andean miners who had been studied by Peruvian scientists. These miners lived all their lives at altitudes of 10,000 to 15,000 feet above sea-level, where the air was thin and the air-pressure low—and they had *adapted*. They were capable of existing comfortably with a pressure of only eight pounds per square inch. Echavarra had proposed to establish a colony composed of these hardy Peruvians, and gradually to breed

them further along the lines they were already heading, until they were capable of living comfortably in the thin air of Mars.

Aherne remembered clearly what had happened. The volatile Dr. Echavarra had spent long hours explaining his plan, and then it had been turned down flat. After all, one delegate remarked, the Echavarra plan meant that only one nation—Peru—could send men to Mars. Other peoples, raised on the customary 14-pounds-per-square-inch air pressure, would be incapable of surviving.

That ended the discussion. Echavarra was rejected firmly, and Raymond Carter had been chosen to head the pioneer expedition that would build the pressure-dome and establish the UN Colony, with the colonists, of course, to be chosen from all nations.

Echavarra had disappeared from sight. Now, here he was—complete with his colony of Peruvians, after all. And the air pressure was low, all right. Aherne, weakening, dragged one leg after the other painfully as he followed Echavarra through the streets.

“IN here,” the Peruvian said. Aherne stumbled ahead as he was told, and entered a small, austere-furnished room whose warm, rich atmosphere struck his lungs with jarring force.

“I like to keep one room at normal pressure,” Echavarra explained. “I’m still not completely used to the stuff these Andeans breathe myself, and I like to relax in here from time to time.”

Aherne flung himself down on a hammock stretched tautly from wall to wall, and waited for his metabolism to return to normal.

“Whew!” he managed to say after a moment. “I’m not built for these pressure changes.”

“You’re suffering from anoxia,” Echavarra said. “Lack of oxygen. The decreased pressure in this dome makes it harder for your lungs to get oxygen, and the quantity of red cells in your blood increases to compensate. It’s rough for a while, but you’ll adjust.”

Aherne nodded. “I’ll say it’s rough.”

“I’d say you’d passed into the second threshold of anoxia,” the Peruvian comment-

ed, bustling around nervously. "Which is about what I expected would happen."

"What do you mean?"

"We grade the levels of oxygen need on three thresholds," Echavarra explained. "The first is the *reaction threshold*. On Earth, it's generally encountered above 6,000 feet altitude. Pulse quickens; capillaries relax, allowing more blood to reach the cells. Some dizziness. And then comes stage two, as you go a little higher—*disturbance threshold*. You were just passing over that level when I got you in here. Characteristics are fuzziness of sight, dulling of the senses, slowness of muscle reaction. You know what it's like. It's unpleasant, but not dangerous."

"I see," said Aherne. He was still recovering his strength, and lay there unmoving. "Is there a third stage?"

"There is," Echavarra said. "*Critical threshold*. It's encountered when the pressure gets down to about one-half atmosphere. Loss of vision, pounding of heart, nosebleed, loss of muscular coordination, blackout of consciousness. Possibly convulsions. The ultimate

crisis is death. Men just aren't built to take low pressure. Mars is a critical-threshold area at all times; on Earth, it's generally encountered only above 16,000 feet—such as in the Peruvian Andes," Echavarra concluded pointedly.

Aherne was feeling much better now. He swung himself to a sitting position and glared sharply at the Peruvian, who was toying with his stiff, black mustache.

"All very interesting, Echavarra, though I suspect you didn't smuggle me out here just to lecture me on high altitude conditions. How about the information I want to hear?"

Echavarra smiled urbanly. "Just what would you like to know?"

"First: what are you doing here? Who financed you?"

The small man's countenance darkened. "It is a sad story. After my unhappy rejection at the hands of the General Assembly, I travelled from country to country, seeking backers for my project. Finally I raised the necessary minimum, with the generous help of my own countrymen. Naturally we could not work on the sea-

Dr. Carter did, but we did manage to get together enough cash to transport several hundred Andean families here and build a fair-sized dome."

"Why?"

The other smiled. "I disagreed with the basic premise of Carter's project, and I wanted a chance to try it my way. My men are already acclimated to one-half atmosphere. They work and play happily in an environment that would kill a normal man. They've been living that way for generations. Genetically, they've been bred to survive in thin-air conditions.

"I'm reducing the pressure in this dome, ever so gradually. They don't notice it—but their bodies adapt to the slight changes. Eventually I hope to get it down to where it approximates that of Mars. I won't be here to see it. It won't be with these people, nor with their children—but somewhere along the line it'll happen. And then—poof! No more domes!"

"Interesting," said Aherne coldly. "Just why did you pull this little trick this morning and spirit me away, then?"

The Peruvian spread his dark-skinned hands. "You're here to decide on the fate of the Carter colony, are you not?"

Aherne nodded. "What if I am?"

Echavarra brought his bright-eyed, eager face close. Aherne noticed that it was lined with a fine purple network of exploded capillaries. "I brought you here to show you how I'm succeeding with my genetics program. I want you to vote against Carter—and transfer the appropriation to me!"

Aherne recoiled instantly. "Impossible! The U'N has already voted to support Carter. I can't see any reason to countermand their decision. Your work has some curiosity value, I suppose, but we can hardly give serious—"

"Not so fast," Echavarra said. "Don't leap off so blindly. You're here for a while. Take your time; consider the relative merits of the two colonies. See for yourself which one is fitter to work and live on Mars."

Aherne shook his head. "I'm willing to abide by the decision

of the General Assembly," he said. "Thanks for the offer, but I think I'd better get back to the UN Colony now, Echavarras."

"Stay a little longer," the Peruvian urged.

Aherne started to say no, but suddenly there was the sound of scuffling outside, and the sound of loud, angry shouting. And then the door burst open, and Sully Roberts, wearing a plastic oxygen-mask, strode into the room, half a dozen men behind him.

CHAPTER V

"YOU'LL pay for this, Echavarras!" Roberts snapped angrily. His men formed a ring around Aherne; in the background, Aherne could see two or three puzzled-looking Peruvians standing on tiptoe trying to see into the room.

"What do you mean, Mr. Roberts?"

"I mean you've kidnapped this man!" Roberts turned solicitously to Aherne. "They haven't harmed you at all, have they?"

Aherne shook his head. "No, I've—"

"There seems to be some misunderstanding," Echavarras said mildly. "Mr. Aherne was not *kidnapped*. He came here voluntarily, earlier this morning, to inspect our colony. Is this not correct, Mr. Aherne?"

The UN man saw the faces of the six men from Carter's colony go tense. They were worried now; perhaps Echavarras had succeeded in seducing him over to his side? Aherne decided to remain noncommittal for the moment.

"I wouldn't say I was kidnapped," he replied, smiling. "I did, indeed, come here voluntarily."

"You see?" Echavarras said.

Roberts' face was a mask of anguish and turmoil; apparently Echavarras's intentions were known to all.

"But—"

Roberts was almost in tears, and on a man that size his facial expression was remarkably incongruous.

"I want to assure you that Mr. Aherne has not been harmed," Echavarras said. "And now, if you'll excuse us while we finish our discussion—"

"We're expecting him to take part in some functions at our Dome," Roberts said. "We'd be very disappointed if he remained here with you."

Careful use of the third person in speaking about me, Aherne noted. *They're afraid of seeming to be controlling me.*

"I think they're right, Senor Echavarra," Aherne said. "I do have a responsibility to the Carter Colony at the moment."

"I hope you'll give careful consideration to the matter I mentioned, Mr. Aherne."

"I'll think about it," Aherne promised. It was the diplomatic thing to say. "But as of now, I intend to rely on the earlier decision of the Assembly."

"Very well," Echavarra said, half-frowning and bowing politely. "But I do hope to see you again before you leave Mars—and perhaps you'll have changed your mind."

"Perhaps," Aherne said. He turned to Roberts. "I think it's time to go back now," he said.

WHEN they were outside, walking briskly through the thin air of the Peruvian colony on their way to the air-

lock, Roberts allowed some of his anxiety to escape.

"We were sure worried there, Mr. Aherne. As soon as we found out you'd been seen leaving the colony in the company of one of these little Indians, we lit out after you."

"How come you were worried?" Aherne asked, trying to be conversational, as they reached the airlock. He flicked off the oxygen mask Roberts had given him, and climbed into a suit as quickly as he could, anxious to avoid a repetition of his previous experience with the low pressure of the Peruvian Dome.

"Well, sir, you didn't leave any message, and we were sure you were kidnapped. Of course, we didn't know you had decided to visit the Peruvians without telling us," Roberts said.

Implied in that, thought Aherne, is veiled criticism. What he's hinting at is that I had no business running off like that—or that perhaps I really was kidnapped, and won't admit it.

"Echavarra and I are old acquaintances," Aherne said. "I had a good deal of contact with him in the days before his

project was turned down by the UN."

"He's a crackpot, of course," Roberts asserted quickly. The big man boosted Aherne lightly up into the sandcrawler and followed him in. "This idea of breeding people to breathe Martian air can't possibly work, can it?"

"I'm not so sure of that," said Aherne. He saw the immediate expression of despair reflected on Roberts' open face, and rejoiced just a little in his own wickedness. He was baiting Roberts, taking advantage of the colonist's desperate desire to win Aherne's approval, and while he knew it was unfair it was also a little enjoyable.

After a long silence, during which both men had kept eyes fixed firmly and uncomfortably on the trackless wastes ahead, Roberts said, "You don't mean you'll consider giving them our appropriation, will you?"

The question was a blunt and direct one. Roberts was obviously not much good at diplomatic indirection, despite his earlier slyness in the encounter with Valoinen over the invoices.

Roberts wanted to get straight to the heart of the problem that so disturbed him.

Aherne considered possible answers for a moment or two—and then, seeing no real justification for allowing Roberts to worry over the possibility of an outcome that Aherne himself had already rejected, said, "No, of course not. The UN's already voted to support the Carter Colony, and I don't see any reason for bringing Echavarra back into the picture."

ANXIOUS faces greeted him as he clambered through the airlock of the UN Dome and re-entered the colony. He spotted the remaining members of the committee of six, and a handful of other worried-looking colonists.

Dr. Raymond Carter was the first to come up to him. But before anything could be said, Roberts interposed himself and explained where Aherne had been, and why.

"Visiting Echavarra, eh?" Carter said. "That crank? Did he have anything interesting to say? Last I heard, he was

working on some plan for making those Indians of his survive on Jupiter—or was it the photosphere of the sun?”

Aherne smiled at the exaggeration, but ignored the comment. “I’m sorry for the delay,” he said. “I felt it was necessary to examine the Peruvian colony as well as yours—as a sort of control to use in judging your own Dome.”

Carter eyed him uneasily. “You weren’t taken in by Echavarra, were you?”

“No,” Aherne said. “At least, I see no reason to reverse the decision of the General Assembly in regard the appropriation.” He saw Carter relax visibly, and immediately added, “I do, of course, want to examine your own colony in detail before reaching any decision on your progress and future potentialities.”

“Naturally,” Carter said uneasily. He turned and gestured to Miss Greer. “You can proceed with your tour of the Colony at once, if you wish. Miss Greer will be happy to accompany you wherever you would like to go.”

Carter appeared almost ab-

surdly grateful that Aherne had not deserted to the camp of the Peruvian geneticist. As he walked away toward the heart of the Colony with the voluble Miss Greer, Aherne found himself wishing he could be in a position to be honest with these people—to tell them how much he admired their accomplishments, to tell them how badly he was hoping to be able to put through a positive recommendation for continuation of the colony.

But he had to be sure, first. An emotional identification with these pioneers was dangerous, threatening to undermine his judgment. Aherne knew his appraisal would have to be cold, rational, and remorseless. The outcome was still in doubt, so far as Special Attache Michael Aherne was concerned.

CHAPTER VI

MISS Greer was tall, slim, attractive, and ready to do almost anything to win Aherne’s approval. Aherne wondered, in a detached sort of way, just how far that attitude could be carried. He had

no serious intentions, of course; UN men on special assignments have various strict prohibitions designed to keep them more efficiently at work.

"You're unmarried?" Aherne asked, wondering why such a handsome girl would have felt any urge to uproot herself from Earth and join the Colony.

She lowered her eyes. "My husband's dead," she said. "I've resumed my maiden name. It's the custom here."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that," Aherne said lamely, as they turned down the long row of low-lying little houses that were situated between the airlock and the school building, which was their first stop.

"He was killed during the building of the Dome," she said. "There were eleven casualties during the time we cast it. He was one of them. I came here because of him—but I'm staying now for myself. I feel I belong here; I have work to do. Doing something important—not just for myself, but for the world."

Aherne grunted something unintelligible; he wanted to keep the discussion away from

sentiment, pinned down on a level of fact. "You say there were eleven killed during the building of the Dome?"

She nodded. "A section fell on them. It's the only major accident we've had."

"The Colony has a low hospital record, then?"

"Fairly low. We've had plenty of minor troubles, though. Before we started posting guards at the airlock, we'd have children wandering through and outside the Dome—but we stopped that quick enough. And then we had a spell of ptomaine last year; no deaths, but we were all pretty sick for a while. And there's been a lot of gravity sickness—that's our biggest problem."

"How so?" Aherne asked.

"Well, of course you know the gravity here is only about 40% of Earth's, and it takes a little while to get adjusted to it. Some people had digestion problems—the food wouldn't go down properly. And one problem we haven't licked yet is pregnancy. Women just aren't built to deliver children in less than one-half grav. The muscles can't manage it."

That was one factor Aherne hadn't considered. "But children are born here, aren't they?"

"Oh, yes!" Miss Greer said, her face brightening. "Wait till you see our schoolroom! But it's risky, of course. We've built a small grav chamber in which all our deliveries are made. The problem is to keep a close check on all expecting mothers, and make sure they're within reach of the grav chamber when labor begins. Occasionally someone will premature, and there's no time to get her to the chamber. It's very complicated then."

Aherne nodded. He was noting all these things carefully. Miss Greer, he reflected, was an ideal guide. Not only was she attractive to be with, she was neither as self-conscious nor as tight-lipped as the men seemed to be, and she was revealing all sorts of facts about the Colony that Aherne might never have found out otherwise.

Facts which needed to be evaluated, to be fitted into the problem of, *Is the Mars Colony promising enough to be worth continuing?*

THE schoolroom was a delight. Aherne saw two dozen scrubbed, sprightly youngsters go through drills in arithmetic and spelling with about as much accuracy as could be expected, and then, at dismissal, go tumbling out of the classroom with an appealingly coltish agility. There didn't seem to be an unhappy child in the lot, nor a selfconscious one, nor a homely one. The psychologists who had chosen the colonists for the trip had chosen well.

The children ranged from three to ten years in age, with a big gap in the five-to-seven group. That was easily explainable, of course; the colony had been planted five years ago, and no pregnant women nor children under two had been allowed to go. So there was a definite hiatus in the procession of age; children who had gone on the original ship were now eight and above, while those born in the Colony were no older than four.

The youngsters moved with more assurance and poise than their parents, Aherne noticed. It made sense; they had been

bred in the Martian gravity; their muscles were not previously trained by a lifetime spent on Earth, and so they were able to cope with Mars' light pull more easily. *They are adapting*, Aherne thought.

He moved on, from the schoolroom to the local library, from the library to the printshop where Mars' one daily newssheet was turned out. There, he was shown with pride the unfinished, unbound copy of Dr. Carter's history of the Mars Colony, from its inception right through to the conclusion of its fifth year of activity. Aherne, looking at the contents page, noticed that the book was inscribed, *Volume One*.

Carter was anticipating a long series of further volumes.

Miss Greer was a pleasant and affable companion, and she never failed to be a source of diverting and informative conversation, as they moved on. She showed him the central telephone switchboard, then the building that housed the atmosphere-generator, and then the small theater in which a band of amateurs were rehears-

ing a performance of *Twelfth Night* to be given that evening.

Shakespeare on Mars? Why not, Aherne thought, as he watched the rehearsal unfold for a while. The Colonists were capturing the Bard's smoothly-flowing poetry with rare skill and insight. Aherne sat entranced in the small, cushionless-seated theater for over an hour, and asked to meet the director afterward.

It turned out that the director was also the tall, deep-voiced man who had played Malvolio. His name was Patchford. Aherne complimented him both on his performance and on his directing.

"Thank you, sir," the colonist said. "You're planning to attend our performance, aren't you?"

"Certainly," Aherne said. "Have you been doing much Shakespeare?"

"No, unfortunately," Patchford said sadly. "Our Complete Shakespeare was destroyed somehow in transit, and we haven't been able to get a replacement from Earth yet. It was sheer luck that I had ap-

peared in a small stock-company that was doing *Twelfth Night*, not long before I left Earth. I copied all the parts from memory, and that's the version we're doing."

"It sounded accurate enough to me," Aherne said.

"I hope so," said the other, grinning. "Until the UN gets around to microfilming another Shakespeare for us, it's the best we can offer."

"I'll be looking forward to seeing it tonight," Aherne said sincerely, and he and Miss Greer moved on.

The next stop was the town hall, a rugged-looking, half-finished auditorium. From there, it was over to the hydroponics plant, where Aherne talked learnedly with a couple of the boys working there. He saw that his 'ponics-talk made a tremendous impression on Miss Greer, and he didn't care to disturb her belief in his omniscience by telling her that he had been a hydroponics technician himself for a while before entering UN service.

Aherne noted that the 'ponics plant was admirably set up, and he sampled some of its products—radishes, which

seemed just a little underfurnished, and tomatoes, which tasted fine.

And then, at last, Miss Greer decided that Aherne had seen enough of the colony for one day. She accompanied him to Carter's house, where they were scheduled to eat dinner, with a visit to Patchford's Shakespeare production slated for later in the evening. Aherne felt tired, excited, pleased, and very much less in doubt about his eventual decision.

CHAPTER VII

BUSY days followed, as Aherne, always the center of interest, was given a thoroughgoing look at life in the Colony. The colonists were all unfailingly polite and helpful; they were aware that they were on trial, and they were trying to live up to whatever standards Aherne could possibly set for them.

Life under the low gravity was awkward, at times, and the artificial atmosphere's faint staleness made Aherne long for the fresh air of Earth. But otherwise, the technical end of the

Colony seemed to be well under control.

They were far from being self-sufficient, of course; food shipments from Earth were still of vital importance, to supplement the diet turned out by the hydroponics and the budding synthetics factory. The plan was to convert Mars' arid land into fertile soil once again, but that would take years, perhaps centuries.

Psychologically, the Colony seemed beautifully balanced. The men who had chosen the colonists had chosen wisely, despite the handicap of having to follow a prearranged nationalistic plan of choice, and the eleven hundred inhabitants of the UN Dome were as sane an assortment of people as Aherne had ever seen gathered together in one place.

The Colony had, in general, lived up to expectations. And, on the morning when Jose Echavarra came to visit him, Aherne had just about made up his mind about the sort of report he was going to turn in.

THE little Peruvian appeared suddenly, unexpectedly,

while Aherne, enjoying a moment of relaxation, was reading a reasonably good novel written by Roy Clellan, a colonist, and published at the Colony printshop.

He looked up in surprise as Echavarra entered.

"Hello, Aherne."

"Echavarral How'd you get past the airlock guard?"

The geneticist shrugged. "There is no law against my coming here, is there? Besides, I told the guard outside that if he didn't let me through, I'd simply radio over from my Dome and tell you that I'd been turned away. He was in a cleft stick, and all he could do was let me in."

"So here you are," Aherne said. "What do you want?"

Echavarra took a seat on the edge of Aherne's bed, and folded his thin, dark fingers into a complex pattern. "You remember our earlier conversation?"

"I do," Aherne said. "What of it?"

"Are you still of your former opinion?"

"If what you mean is, do I intend to squash Carter's colony and turn the appropriation

over to you, the answer is no."

Echavarra frowned. "Still no, eh? That means you must have been impressed with this little colony here."

"I was," said Aherne. "Very highly."

The small man scowled expressively. "You still do not understand," he said. "These people here—they are only guests on Mars! They are temporary visitors, staying here by sufferance of their Dome. But they will always be outsiders, always be dependent on artificial atmosphere!"

"I told you I don't care to discuss it," Aherne said stiffly. "These people have set up a truly wonderful social organization. Can you say the same of your high-altitude Andeans?"

"No," the other replied. "Not yet. But we will be able to breathe the air of Mars, one day. The social organization can come later, once the physical handicaps are overcome."

"I don't agree," said Aherne. "You've taken men acclimated to high altitudes, low air pressure—but what kind of men are they? Do they represent the best of humanity. No. They're just ignorant, primitive people

who happen to have developed a certain kind of physical endurance. You can't build a world out of them."

"You can't build a world out of people who must hide beneath a dome," Echavarra retorted. "But I see I will get nowhere with you. I trust you'll have the kindness to inform the United Nations of my whereabouts, though, and of the success of my project?"

"I'll do that," Aherne said. "For what it's worth."

Echavarra dropped a thick sheaf of papers on the bed. "Here's my report. I've analyzed the tolerance of my men to low pressure, discussed the integrated adaptations that will be necessary to produce a fully Marsworthy race, and included some details of the biochemical analyses of muscular tissues that my associates have been making. One of them has been studying myoglobin, a form of hemoglobin which is particularly useful in governing the rate of oxygen-unloading in—but there's no point in telling this to you, is there? If you see fit, turn these papers over to the interested parties."

"I'll do that," Aherne said.

"Look, Echavarra—I'm not trying to be deliberately cruel about this. I'm not here to decide whether your setup is more worthy of development than Carter's; so far as I'm concerned, that's been decided long ago. All I wanted to do was to see if the Carter colony is working. And it is. I'm satisfied."

"You're filing the report, then?"

"I am," Aherne said. It was the first time he had voiced the decision aloud, and now he was more certain than ever that it was the proper decision.

"Very good," Echavarra snapped. "I won't attempt to persuade you any further."

"It won't help," Aherne said. He felt genuinely sympathetic toward Echavarra, but as things stood there was nothing he could do. Carter's colony deserved support. Even discounting the fact that they were probably putting on a special demonstration for Aherne's benefit, the colony seemed to be the first true example of cooperation between human beings on every level Aherne had ever seen.

Aherne picked up Echavar-

ra's papers and tidied them into a neat stack. "I'll take care of these," he said.

"Thank you," the Peruvian said simply. He stared searchingly at Aherne for a moment, and then turned and left.

AHERNE made his decision known publicly later that day. In a short, tersely-worded statement which he handed silently to Dr. Carter, he told of his great delight in seeing how the Colony functioned, and stated definitely that he planned to support continuation of the appropriation on an indefinite basis.

Carter read the statement through and looked up at Aherne. "Thanks," he said bluntly.

"Don't thank me," said Aherne. "It's your own hard work that's done this. I'm one-hundred-percent sold on your colony here, Dr. Carter."

"I'm glad to hear that," the graying leader said. "For a while, at the beginning, you seemed very dubious about the way things were doing here."

"It was just a pose," Aherne confessed.

"That was obvious. I could

tell how much you really liked the things you were seeing. Miss Greer reported that you were just bubbling with enthusiasm."

"I was," said Aherne, privately annoyed that he had not managed to conceal his feelings better. "I'm firmly convinced that you're on the right track here."

"I'll go announce this to the Colony at large," Carter said. "They'll be glad to know our life's been extended a while longer."

Aherne watched him leave, and pictured the jubilation there would be when the news got around that the strain was over, that the test had been passed.

My work is done, Aherne thought. It would be good to get back to Earth, to the UN, now that the pressure of decision was ended.

He felt relieved that he had been able to square his decision with his conscience. It was a good feeling.

He turned to his desk, and began to make some tentative notes toward the final report he would have to file. He start-

ed sketching out a preliminary outline of Colony life.

After two sentences, he halted, disturbed. Echavarrá's harsh words were echoing in his head, seeming to mock him and stamp him for a fool. "*These people—they are only guests on Mars!*" he heard once again. And: "*You can't build a world out of people who must hide beneath a dome.*"

The Peruvian's dry, incisive voice needled into his brain, and refused to be forgotten. Aherne chewed the end of his stylo reflectively for a moment or two, while the tenor of his mind swayed. He pictured Echavarrá, punctuating each word with a jab of his forefinger against the air—the artificial air of the Dome.

Am I right? Who knows? Aherne asked himself, and slowly, with not as much inner conviction as he had felt a moment before, he began to fill out his report.

CHAPTER VIII

DEEP in the cold, frozen ground, a long, fine line cut through the desert—a fault-line, far below the sur-

face. A dark slit that indicated the end of one geological formation and the beginning of the next.

Along the fault-line was exerted the pressure of the tons of sand and mountain above. Gradually, slowly, over a period of centuries, that fault began to slip. One side depressed; the other inexorably raised. The process continued imperceptibly, until the day when the ground shivered, the final barriers broke and a pit yawned where no pit had been before.

An entire geological formation—a block of granite some hundreds of miles square—went rearing up like a singed stallion. The broken desert shuddered. And catastrophe struck the unsuspecting Domes planted square athwart the fault-line.

Aherne had been planning to leave that day. Valoien and his ship were scheduled to make their regular appearance the following morning, and Aherne was in the process of saying his goodbyes when it happened. The ground seemed to scream in pain, and then everything tipped sideways. The moorings of the Dome broke loose from

the land, stresses that had not been planned for rippled through the Dome, and a jagged split ran through the gleaming plastic from end to end.

Aherne felt the cold come rushing in. The atmosphere, so carefully generated, fled in an instant, and the harsh, nitrogen-laden air of Mars came swooping down.

"Spacesuits!" someone screamed, and the panic was on. Eleven hundred people, dashing for spacesuits at the same moment. Children underfoot, screaming adults, frightened women.

Aherne gasped for breath; his head spun, and his eyes bugged wide. What had the Peruvian said? This was *critical threshold*—this was the moment from which there was no escape. The faint glimmer of the sun drifted mockingly through the rent Dome. This was it, now: the air of Mars. The unbreathable, cold, biting air of Mars. *Critical threshold.*

Somehow he found a spacesuit, and somehow he made his leaden fingers go through the motions that would get him inside the suit. He could barely

see; his cold-nipped hands would not respond. But finally he was inside it, with air—real air—surging up around him.

Aherne leaned against the cold, corrugated-steel wall of a building for a moment, dazed, unable to understand what had happened. One moment he had been chatting amiably with Kate Greer and Sully Roberts; a moment later the sky had split, and he was fumbling to safety in the dark.

He sucked in air, gulped it down and let it warm his lungs, while his body slowly returned to normal. And then he looked around.

The scene was frightful. Wherever he looked, there were colonists. Most had managed to find spacesuits; those who hadn't, and that included a handful of children, were huddled in unconsciousness on the ground, blue-faced from oxygen loss.

Sully Roberts was next to him, folded up in a heap along the wall near the open chest where the emergency spacesuits were stored. Roberts had managed to get himself inside a suit in time, but passing the critical

threshold of anoxia had been too much for him; the big man was unconscious.

"Sully! Sully!"

After a moment, Roberts looked up. He struggled to his feet, shook his head tentatively, and clawed for his balance. Aherne steadied him.

It was like moving in a nightmare world.

Roberts pointed to a body lying a hundred yards away. A colonist who hadn't made it.

"Let's get going," Roberts said hoarsely. "Maybe we can save some of them."

LATER, when everything was calm and a measure of order had been restored, the shattered colony tried to take stock. A general meeting was ordered in the central auditorium, and slowly the dazed, spacesuited figures filtered in.

Aherne took his seat at the side. It was only now that the reaction was starting to hit him. He felt overwhelming bitterness, anger at this cosmic joke—for now they knew that the Marsquake had wrecked the Dome. The report was written, the future of the Colony assured—and now, this.



william bowman

He heard Carter's voice dully calling the roll.

"Anderson, Leroy and Joan."

"Here."

"Antonelli, Leo, Marie, and Helen."

"Here."

And then the dead silence after a name, and the repetition, and then the checkmark made on the long sheet that told of the dead. The toll-taking continued through the day, until finally the extent of the damage was known.

There were sixty-three dead, Carter announced, and fifty-seven in critical condition. The backlash of the quake had shattered the Dome beyond repair. Otherwise, the Colony had not been harmed badly—but it would have to start from the beginning, now. If there was to be any starting over at all.

Sully Roberts was despatched to the Peruvian Dome to find out how things were there. Aherne watched the big man go, out through the useless airlock and into his sandcrawler.

It was a tragic situation, Aherne thought. And then, slowly, he came to see that it was not. The quake could have

happened at any time—but, as if some Power were guiding it, it had burst at the very moment of Aherne's decision. It had waited until the returns were in, and then had unleashed its fury to show Aherne the fatal weakness in the entire Dome setup.

They had planned and planned—and yet not figured on an upheaval of the ground a hundred miles away. They could never have planned on it.

Now, and only now, was Aherne sure of what had to be done.

THEY remained in the meeting hall, sitting quietly, waiting for Roberts to return. Aherne studied the faces of the men near him—faces that reflected the dream that had turned into a nightmare in a sudden single unforeseen moment.

Abruptly the door opened and Sully Roberts burst in, hardly ten minutes after he had left.

"What's the matter, Sully?" Carter called from the dais. "Didn't get there?"

"No need to," Roberts said.

"I met the whole batch of them on the way. Their Dome was smashed too, but they got things under control quicker than we did and the whole Peruvian colony set out *en masse* to see if we needed help."

Roberts stepped to one side and Echavarra entered the hall, clad in a brightly-colored space-suit that looked oddly out of place in the drab assembly. Behind him, Aherne could see a swarm of small, spacesuited figures—the Andeans.

"We've come to see what we could do," Echavarra said. "The quake got our Dome too—but naturally my people didn't feel the effects of the sudden change in air as much as yours did, since we were conditioned to something almost as bad."

Of course, Aherne thought. The Peruvians would simply have moved in a leisurely fashion toward the nearest space-suits. No panic, no casualties.

Aherne stood up. "Dr. Carter?"

"Yes, Mr. Aherne?"

"Would you mind calling a recess of the meeting for a

while? I'd like to speak to you and Dr. Echavarra privately."

AHERNE felt as if he held the future of Mars in his hands as he looked across the table, flicking anxious glances from sad-eyed Carter to Echavarra and back.

"I'll put it bluntly," Aherne said to Carter. "I'm going to have to rescind my earlier report. Your colony is definitely not suited for continuation."

Carter went white. "But we can rebuild the Dome! You said—"

"I know what I said," Aherne cut in smoothly. "But it's all been voided by this quake. Dr. Echavarra put it very nicely for me during one of our meetings: you and your colony are only guests here. You're subject to the whims of the landscape for survival. It can't work on any longrange basis. You can't pin all your hopes on a fragile dome, and expect to build a lasting colony."

Carter seemed to shrink in on himself. He bowed his head. "Then I was wrong," he said. "The quake proved it."

Echavarra's beady eyes lit up. "Does that mean you're shifting to my side, Mr. Aherne?"

"Not quite," Aherne said. "You have part of the right answer: your men were adapted enough to be able to ride with the blow when the Dome was destroyed, and in a couple of generations they won't even need the Dome. But they're not material for building a new world with. They're ignorant, primitive men with low cultural possibilities, coupled with high survival quotients."

He turned to face Carter, sensing now that the situation was completely in his grasp for the first time since he'd left Earth. Now he understood the entire picture, and now he knew what his report would say.

"Dr. Carter, you've got the other side of the coin. High cultural level, low survival factor. Everything about your colony was marvelous—except the fact that it would fold up like a paper bag at the first crack in the Dome."

Carter nodded grimly. "So we've discovered."

Aherne leaned forward.

"Now—does what I've just said suggest a solution?"

"Could we—build one big Dome for both colonies?" Carter asked hesitantly.

"Exactly. One Dome. Assimilate. Mingle. Combine the hardiness of your Peruvians, Dr. Echavarra, with the all-around ability of your men, Dr. Carter. Breed a new race from the two stocks," Aherne said triumphantly. "A new race—capable of living on Mars and *belonging* there!"

"The pressure—" Echavarra said.

"Keep it at ten pounds for a while. It'll be uncomfortable for both groups, but not for long. Eventually Dr. Carter's group will develop the same kind of strength Dr. Echavarra's men have. It may take a couple of generations, but it'll work—eventually!"

The two leaders were glowing. "You'll recommend this to the UN?" Carter asked.

"If you're both agreed," said Aherne.

They nodded as one.

"Let's go back inside and announce the decision, then," Aherne said. "Because you'll

have to get right to work building the new Dome. You can't live in spacesuits for long, you know."

"Right," Carter said. He rose and led the way back to the meeting-hall, where the colonists were waiting impatiently for word on what was happening.

Aherne took his seat at the side again. This was strictly Carter's and Echavarra's show, and he intended to remain completely detached.

As Carter began to speak, outlining the new plan, Aherne let his eyes wander around the auditorium. It was crowded—crowded with the tense-faced UN Colonists, and with the Peruvian men as well, garbed in their bright-colored spacesuits.

Aherne saw his report taking shape now—the memo that

would set the pattern for man's future conquest of the planets. Thankful that he had seen the rightway in time, he sat back, relaxing at last, and listened to Carter's enthusiastic voice as it rolled out majestically.

Then he looked down. Almost at his feet, he saw a Peruvian boy of about nine, round and awkward in his lemon-yellow spacesuit, and one of the UN colonist children, a pretty blonde girl of four. They were staring shyly at each other in mutual curiosity.

Aherne watched them. They were the forerunners, the founders of the race of the future, the new men.

No. Not men, Aherne thought. Men are creatures who belong on Earth. Not men. Martians.

THE END

THE WELL-FED BIRDS

by RICHARD R. SMITH

The Martian science was advanced and the Martians had a wonderful machine. It solved every problem for the planet-stranded earthmen — every problem, except one

THEY stacked their supplies near the canal and then, as if a single person with a single thought, they sat on the sand and watched their ship.

From that distance, the *Star-master* appeared intact although it was actually badly damaged and the engine room hurled deadly radioactive rays for a radius of a mile.

"The first landing on Mars," Marvin commented bitterly, "a flop!"

"A complete flop," Scott echoed.

Houghton was the optimist of the group. During the long voyage from Earth he had been liberal with optimistic quotations and now he offered another well-worn phrase: "It could have been worse." His

lean face paled visibly at the resultant expressions and he explained defensively, "Look at the supplies we salvaged." He waved a slender hand at the items as if his friends had forgotten them. "Food rations, weapons, clothes, pre-tab shelters—"

"What are you, a supply clerk? We know what we got!"

He closed his mouth with a firmness that indicated it would stay closed for awhile.

Scott thrust his hand into the red sand, lifted a handful before his eyes and let it trickle between his fingers. "Martian soil," he murmured. "Harry brought us all the way from Earth and never lived to touch it."

"It was a good landing,"

Marvin complimented the dead pilot. "A good landing, but the ship wasn't good enough... wasn't strong enough. Next time, they'll build the ship better."

Scott rose abruptly. "Let's get to work. The next ship won't land until three years from now and we've got a lot of things to do."

"*Work?*" Marvin's dark features twisted with sardonic amusement. "What work have we got to do?" He waved an arm at the barren terrain. "We've done our job. We've reached Mars. That's all they care about back on Earth—they don't care what sort of planet Mars is; they don't care if we explore or sit here and die. They just wanted us to be alive when we reached here. They—"

Scott turned and walked toward the canal. Houghton hesitated briefly, then followed.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked when he reached Scott's side. "The medics gave him a high stability rating—one of the highest."

"He's probably suffering from shock. He'll snap out of it."

THEY stopped at the edge of the canal and stared thoughtfully at the muddy water hundreds of feet below. Beneath their feet, the stone that formed the top tier of the canal wall was covered with deep grooves carved by centuries of relentless wind, rain and sand.

For several minutes, they studied the canal, the silence broken only by the sluggish water as it echoed feebly between the ancient walls.

"I wonder where the Martians are who made this."

Scott grunted. "I wonder *how* they made it. Each stone on the walls must weigh tons and—"

A shrill whistling sound interrupted him, and they turned to see a glittering object fall from the sky and land near their supplies.

When they returned, they found Marvin gesturing frantically at a strange creature. Several yards to one side, a featureless metal globe glistened in the faint sunlight.

The Martian did not correspond with Scott's preconceptions: it stood on three

stalk-like legs, its body was no larger than a basket ball and the thin tentacles fluttered weakly as if a strong wind would break them. There were no eyes, mouth or nose, but clusters of antennae were directed toward them and Scott felt as if the Martian had a thousand eyes that were watching his every movement.

"Welcome," a voice whispered in his mind. When he looked at the others, he knew by their expressions that they had also received the telepathic message.

He concentrated on the thought, "We are from Earth; we come as friends."

The Martian answered, "I also come as a friend and anxious to help you in any way within my power."

"Our ship is badly damaged. Is there anything you can—"

"I am sorry," the alien replied. "There is nothing I can do that will repair your space vessel. Our scientists have not explored the problems of interplanetary travel."

A soft breeze whispered over the red desert while the three

Earthmen stared thoughtfully at the Martian.

"*I would like to exchange knowledge with you.*" It was a concept transmitted from the Martian's mind, and for the first time, Scott realized that the alien had spoken to them before by telepathy but with English sentences. Somehow, unknown to them, it had searched their minds and learned their language!

Immediately after he replied affirmatively, he received a flood of mental images. He closed his eyes and saw Mars when it was a young planet, green and filled with energetic life. He saw great Martian cities like clusters of jewels reaching toward the sky and millions of Martians who lived in a pattern similar to that of Earthmen.

As the centuries passed, the cities slowly dwindled in size, the green fields became barren plains and the populations decreased after repeated wars, epidemics and famines. The last image depicted Mars in its present state: a dying planet inhabited by only a few dozen members of a once great race.

Next, delicate mental tendrils proved his mind. Like instruments wielded by an expert surgeon, they skimmed lightly over a multitude of irrelevant facts, located and extracted essential information concerning Earth. When the Martian was satisfied, Scott glanced at his watch. The exchange of background had taken two hours. . . two hours that seemed like seconds.

"I cannot repair your ship," the Martian stated abruptly, "but there is another way in which I can help you—" He gestured with a tentacle and a small angular machine appeared by his side. "This machine was developed centuries ago by our scientists and is perhaps their greatest achievement. It can convert matter into kinetic energy and then back to matter with different shapes and substances."

He pressed a lever on the machine and as they watched in fascination, the desert sands before them moved violently as if driven by a dozen invisible bulldozers. In a few minutes, a twelve foot mound was formed.

The Martian pointed at Scott. "Think of what you desire most, and the machine will rearrange the atoms in the sand."

SCOTT almost choked on his repressed laughter, but as instructed, he closed his eyes and concentrated. He thought of Mary and Johnny, a six-room stucco house and a grey Chevrolet.

When he opened his eyes, he still saw the stucco house encircled by the white picket fence. On the driveway was a familiar grey Chevrolet. . .

The front door opened. Mary held Johnny in one arm and waved at him with the other.

He went toward the house, not running or even walking fast, but stumbling slowly like a man in a dream.

He walked up the sidewalk, the sound of his boots on the concrete ringing in his ears, the odor of fried chicken from the kitchen teasing his stunned senses.

If this is a dream, he thought, it's damned realistic!

His wife set Johnny on the

ground and was suddenly in his arms. Her lips were soft and warm, and he felt her tears as they touched his cheeks.

His mind screamed, *It's real! She's real!* but, he asked the inevitable question, "Is it really you, Mary?"

She pulled away from him and searched his eyes. "Of course it's me."

He glanced uneasily over his shoulder. Marvin and Houghton were watching him, their jaws sagging ludicrously. The Martian waved several tentacles at him—probably intended as a friendly gesture but in the now bizarre surroundings, it seemed a weird, frightening gesture from an unreal creature.

"Let's go inside."

Once inside the house with the familiar blond mahogany furniture around him, it was hard to believe that he wasn't in his house on Gerald street in Chicago.

A duplicate house, a duplicate wife, he thought wildly. None of it is real!

"Supper's ready," Mary said. "We've been waiting."

She was like he remem-

bered: Her hair as dark as the darkest night, her soft, oval face accentuated by her twinkling eyes and crimson mouth.

"I'm not hungry." He went to the kitchen, reached inside the cabinet above the refrigerator and found the fifth he had left there. "You go ahead and eat."

She looked at the bottle and frowned, her lips quickly forming a firm line as if to keep from trembling. He ignored the expression. If she was a figment of his imagination or a transformed pile of sand, she had no right to condemn his behavior.

He settled in a chair in the living room and took a long drink from the bottle. The liquor burned his throat and stomach, but he soon felt muscles relax throughout his body.

HE awoke the next morning with a trip hammer pounding in his skull and a dozen butterflies playing in his stomach. Resisting an impulse to wake his wife and see if she was as real as she had been the night before, he remained still and listened.

The house was realistic in every detail, but as he listened, he could not hear the familiar sounds of Gerald Street. There were no sounds of traffic, distant radios, birds and dogs. Only silence.

He rose quietly and went to the living room where he opened the front door with trembling fingers.

A hundred yards to one side, a tremendous castle-like structure towered above his stucco house. An equal distance to the other side, a weird conglomeration sparkled in the sunlight.

When he reached the castle, he paused to touch one of the huge stones in a wall. It was rough and firm beneath his fingers—as real as anything he had ever sensed in his life.

He wandered through a labyrinth of rooms, corridors and winding stairs and was awed by the brilliant tapestries, statues and luxurious furnishings. He didn't know who had obtained the castle from the Martian's scientific marvel but whoever it was, he had made him seem a piker by requesting a six-room house!

He eventually found Marvin in a tremendous room sitting

before an ebony table covered with various foods and liquors. Perched on billowy cushions on either side, a dozen half-naked women watched him like animals eager to pounce on a willing prey.

Marvin's deepset eyes widened at the sight of Scott and he self-consciously stroked his growth of beard. "Hi! I was just thinking about you. I intended to visit you last night but I—uh, somehow, I never got around to it."

"I wonder why," Scott replied and grinned at the dark-skinned women who surveyed him coldly as if he were an infidel in a holy place.

Marvin gestured and the women departed with a flurry of diaphanous skirts.

He sat on a pillow beside Marvin and sampled a bottle of wine. It formed a comforting burst of warmth in his stomach and he reflected that this situation could easily turn him into a drunkard.

"Help yourself," Marvin offered. "Some life, huh? Women, wine, song. Everything a man could want, and all from a handful of sand." he chuckled, his eyes wild as he sur-

veyed the luxurious room. "That crazy Martian. That stupid, crazy little Martian gave me all this!"

WITHOUT warning, Scott seized his shoulder and expertly twisted certain ligaments. Marvin winced with pain and pulled away. "What's the big idea?"

"I was trying to sober you up a little."

He removed a cigar from his multi-hued tunic and lit it carefully. "I'm sober."

Scott rose and paced the floor nervously. "Listen. For a few minutes, forget—" He waved an arm in a circle. "—all this. *Think* and tell me: why should a stranger do this for us?" He paused, and when Marvin didn't answer, continued, "It must be a trap. Can you understand that? The Martians are probably afraid we'll exploit their planet and this *must be* some sort of fancy, gold-plated booby-trap!"

Marvin grinned foolishly. "How?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Maybe the Martian hypnotised us. Maybe we're actually on the desert

starving to death and dreaming this. Maybe—"

He was interrupted by Marvin's raucous laughter. "I knew it. *I knew it!*"

"Knew what?"

"You're a worry-wart. A damned, incurable worry-wart! All the time during the voyage, you had something to worry about. Sometimes you'd tell us what it was and sometimes you'd keep it to yourself. But, even when you kept quiet, I knew you were worrying." He slapped the table, and the sharp sound echoed through the room. "Here we are... on Mars... safe and sound. We stumble on a good deal. A super-duper civilization with super-duper hospitality and you look for a flaw, a *gimmick!*"

"I—"

Marvin leaped to his feet, his face flushed and his eyes like cold stones. "Get out of here."

"But—"

Marvin screamed, and two men with gleaming swords entered the room.

"*Get out of here!*"

The swords looked real enough so he left quickly.

ENTERING Houghton's private world was like stepping into a kaleidoscopic abstract painting. A smooth expanse of glittering marble stretched as far as he could see in every direction. Tall, colorful plants set in the smooth surface produced exotic odors and music that drifted lazily on gentle breezes. Sparkling waterfalls fell from the empty air and disappeared into nothingness while angular statues of apparently meaningless but symmetrical forms pulsed with varicolored lights.

It was fully two hours before he spotted Houghton wandering aimlessly among his new possessions.

"Scott!" Houghton ran to meet him and shook his hand warmly. "How do you like my new world?" he asked, his face glowing with pride as he looked at their surroundings. "It's the kind of place I've dreamed of. Different and perfect. There's no flaws here, Scott. No crime, no ugly noises, no conflict, no filth. Only beauty and peace.

"How do you like it?" he repeated.

"Nice. Very nice. You're right, it is peaceful here." He

walked a short distance and realized that even their footsteps were silent.

"I just saw Marvin," he blurted. "I tried to explain to him, but he couldn't understand. Can you understand that there must be a gimmick in this set-up?"

"Gimmick?" Houghton pursed his lips and shook his head thoughtfully. "I don't think so. I think the Martians are tremendously more advanced in certain sciences than we are. The machine that makes all this possible is as simple to them as a television set is to us. Giving us all this is probably equivalent to one of us giving an African aborigine a room in a fancy hotel..."

He paused abruptly, his eyes widening and wrinkles forming in his forehead. "You think this is some sort of trap, don't you?"

Scott shrugged his shoulders. "It must be. Why would an alien—"

Houghton turned and walked away.

With a sinking sensation, Scott realized he had accomplished nothing. Both were too

content with their new toys to even *consider* his viewpoint.

And now, what was he supposed to do? Walk out on the desert by himself? Survival on a strange planet required teamwork. He might survive physically...but mentally? He knew he wasn't built for endless days and nights of solitude...

FOR NINE months, Scott lived peacefully with his artificial wife and son. At times he even forgot that his house was situated on an arid desert. Occasionally he visited Marvin or Houghton, but they were strained, brief visits born from curiosity rather than a desire for companionship.

Eventually he was convinced that it *wasn't* a trap and that he would continue a fairly normal life for years with a wife and son and house that were as real as himself.

And then, shortly after his change of mind, he awoke one morning and felt sand beneath his body.

He leaped to his feet like a poised steel spring that someone had triggered. Houghton

and Marvin stood nearby, their faces pale and worried.

He opened his mouth to shout, *Where's the Martian? What happened?* and then hesitated when he noticed their expressions. They didn't know...

They examined their supplies and discovered to their dismay that the food rations had rotted, the weapons and other machinery had rusted beyond repair during the months of exposure to sand, sun, wind and rain.

"The seed!" Houghton exclaimed after opening a package. "The seed's in perfect shape. We can plant—"

"And what will you eat while you're waiting for the seed to produce food *if* you find fertile land?" Scott asked as he gingerly opened an odorous package of spoiled rations.

They speculated for hours: Had the Martian died? Had he moved to another location and forgotten them? Had he purposefully left them stranded with useless supplies?

"My wife once fed some birds," Scott said tonelessly, his eyes blank as if seeing something invisible to the oth-

ers. "She fed them everyday from the day they were pushed out of the nest. When we returned from our vacation, we found the birds in our back yard... dead. They'd been fed so much, they hadn't developed their natural instinct and learned how to find food."

Marvin screamed, "*You're crazy! Why would the Martian do that to us?*"

Scott shrugged his shoulders. "How would I know? Maybe the Martian considered us in-

vaders, trespassers. Maybe the Martians did away with their weapons after their last war. Maybe the only way they could kill us was with *kindness.*"

Their laughter seemed a small, lost thing on the vast desert. "He'll come back. You'll see."

They waited. They waited day after day, while the feeble sun gently burned their faces, the coldness at night tore at their flesh and the emptiness in their stomachs grew...

THE END

OBEY THAT IMPULSE

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THE DOPE

by O. H. LESLIE

The Time Machine was a marvelous invention from a most wonderful century. The trouble was that the man inside it was just a dope and far from wonderful or marvelous

WHEN THE arrival of the Time Machine interrupted their chess game, Hubert Adams rose from his chair so rapidly that the board was upset and the pieces scattered.

"How fortunate!" he cried, going to the window where the glowing globe was clearly to be viewed.

"Fortunate is right," grumbled Dr. Peterson, picking up his fallen Queen. "Another move to checkmate."

"No, no!" said his friend. "Fortunate that he landed *here*. It's obviously an outer space Visitor, or a Time Traveler. Why, he might have landed in *anyone's* back yard!"

The doctor joined him at the window and puffed reflectively on his pipe. "Well, what of it?

One place is as good as another, if you're a Thing."

"You see what I mean?" said Hubert. "You immediately assume it's a Thing. Had he landed in *your* back yard, you would have greeted him with horror, loathing, panic!"

"Buckshot, probably."

"What he needs is *understanding*," Hubert said. "Sympathy. Friendship."

The glowing object outside had now clearly settled down for the night on Hubert Adams' well-tended grass. The aurora which surrounded it diminished somewhat, and the two men at the window could clearly discern a figure at the controls.

"Well, he's a human Thing, anyway," said the doctor.

"Shall we call somebody? Police? Civil defense?"

"Don't be silly."

"Well, there must be somebody to call. Perhaps if we consulted the phone book—"

Hubert ignored him. "It's our duty to greet him," he said stiffly. "Will you come, or must I go alone?"

THE FIGURE inside looked out. He nodded at Hubert, rather curtly, and seemed to be swearing under his breath. Finally, he had himself disengaged from the network that held him, and he started for the door. He had a little trouble with the opening mechanism, but soon the globe released him.

"Beastly cold," he said, looking around and rubbing his arms.

"Greetings!" Hubert said.

"What?" The Visitor blinked. "Oh, yes. Greetings. I say, you wouldn't have a cup of Chew inside?"

"A cup of what?"

"No, wait a bit." The Visitor looked thoughtful. "This is mid-century nineteen hundred, isn't it? Don't suppose you

drank Chew then. Well, make it coffee then." He stared at Hubert. "You *did* drink coffee?"

"Oh, yes!" answered Hubert eagerly. "We *do*. Dr. Peterson and I were just about to have a cup."

The Visitor walked past Hubert to the screen door. He wore a tight-fitting suit of what looked like gray silk, with dun-colored shoes of some metallic substance.

"Dr. Peterson's an old friend," Hubert explained. "But come inside. I suppose you have a lot to tell us."

The Visitor frowned. "I don't know about *that*," he said. "Frankly, I was hoping the Machine would take me *forward*, not backward. This historical stuff bores me."

They went inside. The doctor was at least courteous enough to rise as the Visitor entered the room, but he didn't offer to shake hands.

"How do you do, sir," said the doctor, reseating himself. "And what fine century are *you* from?"

"Twenty-fourth," said the Visitor, settling himself heav-

ily into Hubert's favorite chair. He sighed and kicked off his metallic shoes. "Good century, too. Didn't live in cold little wooden boxes, anyway." He spotted the chessboard. "Well! Two-dimensional chess! How quaint."

Hubert drew up a hassock and sat himself in front of the Visitor. "Tell me!" he said. "Tell me all about it! Is it wonderful?"

"Didn't you say something about coffee?"

"I'll get it," Peterson volunteered. "Cream and sugar?"

"Cream and a sweetstick, please."

"Sorry," said the doctor. "We're all out of sweetsticks. Will sugar be all right?"

The Visitor groaned. "Anything will do. What are you *staring* at?" he said to Hubert.

"Nothing, nothing!" Hubert got up hastily and went over to the fireplace. He lit a cigarette with anything but casualness. The Visitor closed his eyes and appeared about to fall asleep.

"Ahem!" he said.

The Visitor's eyes snapped open. "Sorry," he said. "But I

am tired. Four working hours in the laboratory, and now *this*. You can see why I'm exhausted."

"Of course," Hubert agreed. "Er—I haven't introduced myself. My name is Hubert Adams. I'm not a scientist, but I do know a great deal about this sort of thing. You see, I read quite a bit—"

"I know," said the Visitor. "You people *did* read, didn't you? Curious bunch."

THE DOCTOR came in with the coffee. The Visitor made a face as he tasted it, but then gulped it down. Hubert returned to the hassock, rubbing his hands briskly.

"Now!" he said. "Tell us all about it. What's been happening for the last few hundred years?"

The Visitor giggled. "Be a good fellow, can't you? I was a terrible History student. No memory at all for dates and things, you know." Hubert looked so disappointed that the Visitor added: "Well, of course there was the War."

"The War?" Hubert gulped. "What war?"

The Visitor looked blank. "You mean there were two?"

"What about Science?" the doctor asked. "Tell us about your marvelous new inventions."

"Well," said the Visitor, thinking hard, "there's the Time Pulse Machine, of course. That's a fairly recent one. In fact, my laboratory has been responsible for its construction," he told them proudly.

"How does it work?" asked the doctor.

The Visitor shrugged. "Haven't the faintest."

"There must be other great inventions," pressed Hubert. "What about Television? Is it three-dimensional?"

"Four. We can pick up any program every broadcast that way. Gives the viewer a much better choice."

"Do you know how *that* works?" asked the doctor.

"Certainly."

"Ah!" said Hubert.

"You turn on the switch, adjust the rectifier, and focus. Really very simple."

"Yes, but what goes on *inside*?"

"Oh, lights and things go on. Sort of a humming noise. Great jumble of transistors and stuff. Most boring."

The doctor snorted and settled back in his chair. Hubert looked over at him and had a sudden thought.

"Medicine!" he cried. "Must be *great* strides in medicine!"

"Very," said the Visitor. "Pills for everything nowadays. I mean," he corrected, "in *my* day."

"Have they cured *everything*?"

"Everything *you* people had," said the Visitor, with some disgust. "Of course, we have some new ailments..."

"What about atomic energy?"

"Oh, that." The Visitor waved his hand airily. "Gave that up long ago. Solar energy's the thing these days. They have something called the Solarizer; no bigger than your hand. Supplies enough power to light a large city."

"Amazing!" applauded Hubert. "What a great age! And how does the solarizer operate?"

"Never saw one of the

damned things," the Visitor yawned. "Except on TV, of course. Didn't look like anything much to *mc*, but they seem to set great store by it."

THE DOCTOR said to Hubert: "Maybe you better try a simpler subject."

Hubert scratched his head. "Automobiles?" he said. "Do you still use autos?"

"*Ra-ther!*" said the Visitor, brightening. "You ought to see my little Rocketeer! Bright red—two-wheeler—does five hundred on the straightaway—only two million dollars with accessories—"

"What does it use for fuel?"

"Petrolon, of course. Stuff comes in little vials. Snap it in two. There you are."

Hubert stood up in exasperation.

"For the love of Heaven!" he cried. "Don't you know how *anything* works?"

"You needn't shout." The Visitor looked miffed. "I've got enough to keep me busy without learning how everything *works*. Labor four hours a day—mucking it up around the

laboratory all the time—hardly any time for fun—"

The doctor made a suggestion. "Well, he did run that Time Machine."

"That's right!" said Hubert joyfully. "What about the Time Pulse? You must understand it!"

"Oh, that." The Visitor held up his empty cup. "Don't suppose you have any liklum? No? Didn't think so."

"Well?" said Hubert, almost threateningly. "What about the Time Machine?"

"Guess that was some sort of mistake," said the Visitor, sheepishly. "Don't suppose I should have been fooling around with the silly thing after hours. Thought the dials were set forward. Mistake, no doubt."

"Then you don't know how to operate it?"

"Oh, it's simple enough. Strap on safety belt. Press button. That seems to be all. Must be jammed someplace, however."

"*Doctor!*" Hubert looked grim.

"What is it?"

"This opportunity is too

great. We can't let it slip by us, just because of this—this—DOPE!”

“Really!” said the Visitor.

“What do you propose to do?”

Hubert squared his shoulders.

“I'm going into the Time Machine!”

“Really, old boy!”

“Better think it over,” the doctor said mildly. “You may not get back.”

“I must,” said Hubert. He went over to the fireplace, and looked up at the framed portrait of a crusty old gentleman with hoary moustaches. “Father would have done the same.”

“But you can't take *my* Machine—”

“Hubert, this is crazy,” Peterson said. “What about your job? Your future?”

“My future is out there,” said Hubert, pointing to the window. “I'll go to the twenty-fourth century and find out about these great inventions myself. From people,” he added spitefully, “who *know* something about the world they live in. People who don't just press

buttons and snap tubes and watch television.”

He strode to the door, flung it open, and turned once more to the two open-mouthed men in the room.

“Hail and farewell!” he cried.

HUBERT went out into the yard, almost colliding with a clothesline. He approached the Machine slowly, then slid back the plastic door and stepped inside.

He unscrambled the jumble of straps by the seat, and managed to fit them awkwardly around his body. He looked at the control panel, and was pleased at its simplicity. There was a button marked Forward. There was a button marked Backwards.

He pressed the first button, his jaw set grimly. It was stuck, so he pushed harder, then harder still.

The globe slowly became phosphorescent.

Then—

Whiz! CRACKLE!
FLASH!

Blackness! Tumbling, whistling, screaming, soaring—!

Dazed, Hubert Adams lifted himself from the wreckage of the Time Pulse Machine.

He fumbled with the straps and disentangled his arms and legs. He stepped out of the debris and surveyed it sadly.

"Guess I pushed too hard," he said mournfully.

He looked around him. The sky was almost whitened by a huge, burning sun overhead. Great bleached mountain peaks rose everywhere. Otherwise, there was nothing.

"Where am I?" he said aloud.

Then he found out.

Off in the distance, he saw a group of moving figures. He leaped atop a boulder to obtain a closer view. They were short and squat, ape-like in appearance, and they carried great clubs of gnarled wood over their hairy shoulders.

"Cavemen!" Hubert gasped.

He hid himself behind the

rock until the procession passed him.

"Cavemen!" he said again, trembling. "The Visitor was right. The Machine was jammed. It sent me back into the past!"

He wheeled about him wildly.

"*I'm in the Stone Age!*" he cried.

He sat down on a flat, hot stone, too stupefied to shed tears at his misfortune. His mind began to work. He must *think*, he told himself. He must find a way out of this!

But he knew there would be no way. He knew he would have to make his life right there, in the world of primitive man.

"My God!" Hubert said, his fingers in his mouth. "How do you make a wheel?"

THE END



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